

Spiritual Economy:
Resources, Labor, and Exchange in Glastonbury and Sedona

by

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A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Approved May 2018 by the
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ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

August 2018

ABSTRACT

Current data indicates that a growing number of individuals in the English-speaking world are identifying as “spiritual, but not religious” (SBNR). Using ethnographic data collected at two important sites of spiritual pilgrimage and tourism—Glastonbury, England and Sedona, Arizona—this project argues that seekers at these places produce spirituality as much as they consume it. Using the lens of economy, this project examines how seekers conceptualize the (super-) natural resources at these sites, the laborious practices they perform to transform these resources, and the valuation and exchange of the resultant products. In so doing, the project complicates prevailing notions, both among scholars and the public, that contemporary unaffiliated spirituality is predominantly an individualistic consumer process.

For my parents, who taught me the virtue of asking questions...

...and for Ryan, who is patient enough to entertain most of mine.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A special thank you to the seekers, mystics, teachers, and friends who participated in this research. Your insight, keen observations, humor, wisdom, and generosity made this possible.

Thank you to my committee—Tracy, Linell, and Jeff—who offered their knowledge and time to see me through this process. And thanks for writing all those letters—it paid off!

My appreciation to the entire Religious Studies faculty at ASU, and the broader University community, without whose financial support these trips would not have been possible.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

I arrived for the first time to the Church of the Golden Age in Sedona on a bright and brisk January morning. Tucked away behind a small strip mall, the church occupies a relatively nondescript space in central Sedona. I introduced myself to the minister, Arianha, with whom I had previously corresponded, and she smiled as we shook hands, saying, "you've been called to be here on a special day". I found a seat toward the back of the room, meeting a few people in the process, as Arianha made her way to the front of the room. The church is a light and open space, with wooden floors and pale walls. Folding wooden chairs are used for services, and a large library and reading area provide a cozy space toward the back of the building. The front altar, with its soft pinks and blues, small statues of goddesses, and rotating iconographic images acts as a focal point in the space. The dominating figure of the watchful Essene (how the members refer to Christ) adds to the ambiance, and provides a cosmological and theological center to the Church's ideology.

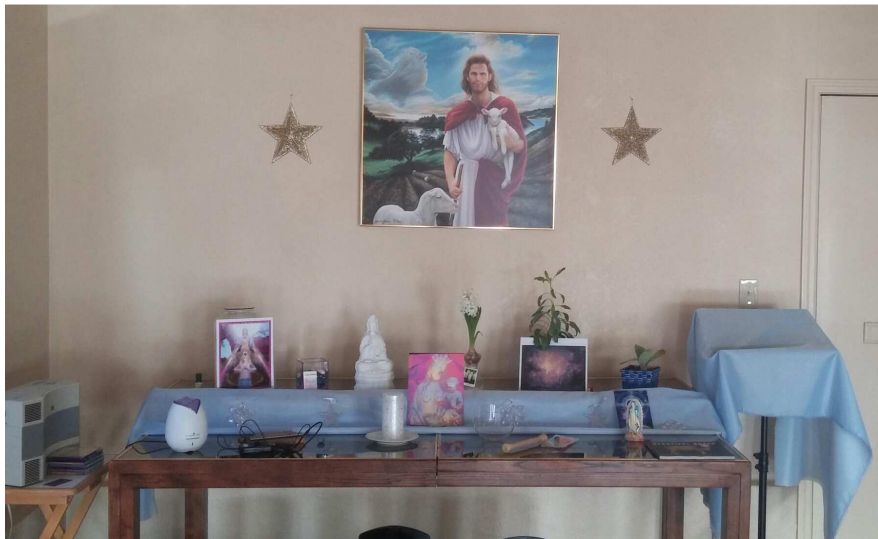


Image 1: Church of the Golden Age, Sedona, front altar. Photo by author, January 2015.

On the walls, several massive paintings by a local artist (and congregant), Blue Star Child Ha-Ru-Ko, were displayed¹. Next to my seat, a massive image titled Stargate of 2012 drew my attention constantly. I later learned that this work, and all her others, was done freehand, without any rulers or instruments—a fact that belies the incredible intricacies and angles of her art.²

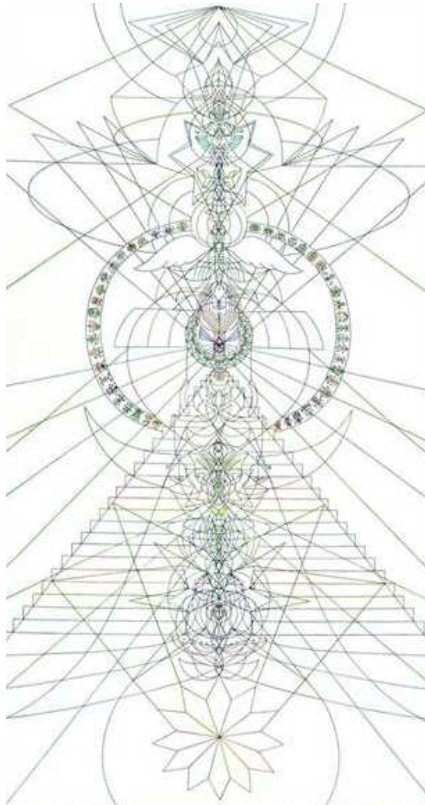


Image 2: Stargate of 2012, by Blue Star Child Ha-Ru-Ko. Original 42x77 inches. Used with permission.

¹ The church acts as a kind of informal art gallery, allowing both congregants and local artists (often being one and the same) a place to display their work. Generally reserved for work with spiritual themes, the displays are both a kind of advertisement (the work is often for sale), and a chance for the church to benefit from the spiritual beauty and power of the pieces.; see chapter 5 for more on this.

² Ha-Ru-Ko describes her art as an attempt to make visible to others the world she inhabits regularly; she considers herself a multi-dimensional being and explains that "she connects with her Future Self and bring inspirations from the 5th and above Dimensions. When she draws, she also consciously merges with the Source and Mother Earth in order to co-create our ultimate dream to bring joy, peace, and harmony on the Earth through her artistic expressions and creations." For more, see bluestarchild.com

After a few minutes, Arianha stood at the front of the room, and began the service. She led the congregation in an *invocation*, asking for guidance and wisdom from the universal Source. Together, we recited a prayer for abundance, asking the universe to bless us all with the necessary resources to accomplish our life's goals, and to bless others in turn.³ Finally, Arianha explained the day's special agenda. She told attendees that she had received a message from Supreme Creator Mother the night before while preparing for Sunday's service. This divine entity, an apparently rarely channeled one, had asked Arianha to perform an anointing.⁴ At this, the regular congregants responded with obvious and vocal enthusiasm. Arianha continued, describing how, during the message she felt her fingers elongate, mimicking those of the Mother. As she described her experience, Arianha closed her eyes, her head tilting slightly, as if she were listening to someone speak from above. She explained that attendees could ask her to anoint any part of their bodies they felt needed healing, but suggested that the hands, feet, and temples might be the most powerful places, since these were not only symbolic of Christ's wounds, but the most nerve-dense places on the body, allowing for quick transmission of the energies she would channel.

³ This is a subtle indication of what I refer to "abundance theology" within spiritual circles. Somewhat akin to prosperity gospels within Christian Evangelicalism, abundance theology is rooted in the idea that there is a financial and material (as well as spiritual) reward for those who act according to the grand cosmic plan. Such blessings are evidence of a life well-lived. There is, however, a strong emphasis on sharing and disseminating any such blessings. Because although they are deserved, the blessed should not hoard them, but use them to bless others. On the other hand, people whose lives are difficult, and without financial and other surpluses are seen as benefiting from these difficulties by being given the chance to learn important lessons—about the impermanence of things, or about how to deal with hardships.

⁴ I later learned that Arianha channels mostly Christ, "the Essene" as he is usually referred to, and his mother, Mary. On only very rare occasions does she receive messages from others, including the Supreme Creator,

One by one, the twenty or so participants went from their chairs to the front of the room. Each one presented to Arianha various body parts, which she anointed with rose oil. Most people presented their hands and heads, but a few removed shoes to expose their feet, or pulled away clothing to reveal a knee, shoulder, or chest that required attention. Resting her hands against each person's head, and her forehead against theirs, she bestowed a personal blessing upon each individual. She spent at least two or three minutes with each supplicant, and longer with some. Through the process, a soft instrumental music played, and the lights were turned off and the window shades closed so that the room was lit only with candles and the occasional sunbeam.

When my own turn came to receive the blessing and anointing, I made my way up to the front of the room, and offered Arianha my hands. She took them in hers, dabbing the oil on my palms and wrists gently, then placing her hands on either side of my face, she leaned forward, our foreheads touching. Quietly, she asked if I had any questions, or needed any particular healing. I responded, telling her that I was happy to receive any blessing that was offered. I felt her smile. *Your being here with us on this special day is a blessing. You have gifts to share with us, as much as we have for you. Spirit wants you to remember that, to remember your true soul purpose. You were brought here for a reason.*

After the ritual wrapped up with a final prayer of thanks, we gathered around lunch and discussed the experience. Many people talked about how they had felt Arianha's hands change shape and size, taking the subtle bodily form of the divine Mother she had channeled. They compared experiences, describing in detail how those hands felt against various parts of their bodies. One woman described the hands as simultaneously hot and cold; another said that they felt slightly electric. A man offered up

that he had seen rays of light extending from Arianha's fingers, changing color with each person she blessed. This was essentially, a process of conceptualizing the ineffable experiences in a way that articulated them within a familiar and accessible language—that of feeling and value. With each description, others nodded along, showing their acceptance of these diverse experiences as valid. Some offered interpretations, for example, that the colors corresponded to weaknesses in each person's aura, or that the buzzing electric feeling was a result of strong energy that comes from divine communication with humanity. No experience was questioned as authentic; no interpretation was rejected as invalid. Instead, each person was encouraged to seek their own understanding, and each individual experience contributed to the assessment of overall meaning.

For Arianha and the members of her congregation, the shared experience is a vitally powerful one. That I chose to attend (or was called to attend) on this particular day indicated to many present that I was a special part of the experience, and I found myself the center of much curiosity and attention during the post-service potluck and fellowship period. My willingness to participate certainly helped those present to accept me, and my adequate engagement with their emotional discussion afterward signaled that I could be included; by listening to their re-telling of their experiences during the ritual, I showed myself to be open and trustworthy—my participation garnered me a degree of cultural capital. Somehow this exchange authenticated the experience overall. By allowing that the experience had been a powerful one for everyone, myself included, many attendees took my participation as an indication that my stated academic goals were not my only reason for being there. Like others throughout my research, they demanded that I

recognize the divine or cosmic purposes for my attendance, particularly on that day.⁵

Instead, they articulated the value of my participation through their own spiritual lenses.

This short vignette sets the stage for this project's central argument: that seekers at the key spiritual sites of Sedona and Glastonbury are as much producers of spirituality as they are consumers. Practitioners, whether residents or visitors, formulate and enact spirituality through engagement with the landscapes, each other, and the various energies that are understood to enliven these spaces. The processes through which spirituality is produced, enacted, and made visible are complex mechanisms that transform supposedly natural (and supernatural) resources into valuable knowledge and usable goods through labor—in other words, they are economic processes. In this example, the spiritual realm into which Arianha reached in her channeling provided a wealth of resources, which she (as the channel and refiner) distributed amongst her members as valuable knowledge and meaningful experience. In so doing, these seekers were not merely consuming a ready-made spirituality, but shaping and refining it through their practices as part of an on-going process of defining themselves as spiritual, but not religious.

Introduction

This project analyzes the ways in which spirituality in Glastonbury, England and Sedona, Arizona is conceptualized, produced, preserved, and made valuable. I argue that these sites act as crucibles—places in which raw materials and natural resources are manipulated, changed, and shaped into certain kinds of spiritual products, including stories, gnostic truths, and material goods which are exchanged. Using the concept of

⁵ This sense, that even the most mundane experiences and events have a deeper, more spiritual value as well, was common.

economy, I trace the processes and practices through which spirituality becomes visible and stable in these places. The materiality of the landscapes, the bodies of people who inhabit them, and the goods that these people exchange is essential to understanding spirituality at these sites. In other words, spirituality at these places is in many ways an economic endeavor, but not in the shallow way that some scholars have argued. It is not only (or even primarily) consumed as a kind of sacralization of the capitalistic self, but it is produced through meaningful practices and exchanges.

These are places where the raw materials of latent energies are transformed into powerful affective experiences. Where embodied practices allow for direct access to divine truths. Where stories about past lives give individuals authority to make cosmic claims in this life. Like Arianha, who spoke of her past lives with various important religious figures as a way to authorize her current spiritual leadership. Or Amayra of Angel Valley near Sedona, whose channeling of cosmic entities allowed her to stake claim on the landscape itself.⁶ Or Brenna in Glastonbury, who advocated for an engagement with the energies of Avebury as a way to uncover truths, to answer questions.⁷ In each case, the ways in which spirituality is articulated, conceptualized, enacted, and (re)produced can be understood as an economic process.

Spirituality is not something that is *discovered*, but something created, shaped, and managed by people. These places and the people who occupy and value them have a stake in their continued reputations as sacred sites—seekers see these towns as sites of

⁶ See chapters 3, 4, and 6.

⁷ See chapter 2.

production, refinement, and exchange of spirituality. Whether it is because they have financial and commercial investment in the tourist trade, or because of identity-shaping mythologies and experiences, both residents and visitors are highly invested in maintaining the on-going economies of spirituality. I am concerned with how this process is enacted—that is, how spirituality is cultivated and inculcated through practices at these sacred sites. Whether seekers conceptualize spiritual powers in these sites through vortexes, ley ⁸lines, or other means, they understand them as natural resources. And the processes for refining these resources requires labor—whether that be walking a labyrinth or an all-night meditative dance party. The resultant goods (which often include spiritual insights) are exchanged as both financial and cultural capital. The concept of economy implies not only the kind of commercial exchanges that are obvious in tourist and pilgrimage towns like these, but the manipulation of raw materials, the labor that produces goods, and the distribution and consumption of said products.

The "Spiritual, but not Religious" Trend

In the U.S. and Britain, a growing minority of people are identifying as "spiritual, but not religious."⁹ These individuals range in age, socio-economic class, and occupation, but a large proportion are educated middle and upper-middle class Whites between 18 and 45. There is a good deal of variety in the ways and degree to which seekers engage with the spiritual domain, from yoga and alternative healing practices, to positive affirmations, to fully invested "whole life" seekers who make up the majority of this

⁹ Although this trend is not isolated to these places, the two case studies that are the center of this project are American and British. For more on the growth of spirituality in Asia, for example, see van der Veer 2014.

project's participants. While there is no single clear definition of spirituality, "social scientists frequently juxtapose spirituality to religion and identify the former by way of what it lacks in comparison to the latter"—a sentiment commonly found amongst seekers themselves, particularly in the "spiritual, but not religious" claim.¹⁰ Defining spirituality as "not religion" relies on an understanding that religion is dogma with a particular history or genealogy that coalesces into institutionalized, socially-organizing communities. Implicitly then, spirituality is *not* these things—at least in the imaginations of seekers.¹¹ Instead, it is articulated as something natural and innately human, something universal and perennial—an innate drive to connect with the divine.

Many arrive at the SBNR identity on moral grounds. They are dissatisfied or uncomfortable with the perceived social conservatism and individual restrictions of traditional religious options, and spirituality is seen as the solution. Personal narratives of *leaving* are common, with political, gender, sexuality, and other issues all being incorporated into the explanations of why religion (viz. institution and dogma) is a problem. Like Ranjita in Sedona, who spoke of her leaving her nascent Catholic tradition as a rediscovering of her true spiritual self, free from the rigid dogma and social conservatism she experienced with the Church. And yet, these people do not become fully secularized or non-religious. They continue to hold ideas and engage in practices that have deep cosmological, ethical, and theological meaning and implications—very often because of powerful emotional experiences that provide them incontrovertible

¹⁰ Bender and McRoberts 2012, 2.

¹¹ For more on the competing definitions of spirituality, see chapter 2.

evidence of their conviction that the universe is a meaningful place, and that their lives within it are comprehensible and valuable. They explain that *religion* is stifling, overly politicized, and subject to corruption—it is unnatural. *Spirituality*, on the other hand, is conceptualized as the innate, *natural* capacity for engaging with ultimate truths—and the various eclectic practices and ideologies that facilitate and make viable such a perspective.

Spirituality is also perennialist. Most seekers point to the vast variety of religious, cultural, ideological, and spiritual systems in the world as evidence of two facts: first, that no single system could possibly have all the answers, and second, that there must be an underlying truth that all of these systems aim at engaging.¹² The very nature of the contemporary world has contributed to and facilitated the development and growth of spirituality.¹³ With increased access to religious options, along with a pervasive emphasis on choice and individuality, a space has opened within the religious landscape to allow for (and indeed perhaps encourage) the proliferation of spiritualities. The supposed universal quality of spirituality as such leads to eclecticism; seekers generally feel free to incorporate from diverse sources without much regard for their histories, contexts, or conflicts. Seekers tend to (whether intentionally or otherwise) occlude the structured systems from which they borrow. Instead, they emphasize the similarities among competing systems, and articulate spirituality as something that exists in, but is not restricted to, a variety of religious traditions.

¹² What some traditions refer to as "god", but often conceptualized within SBNR circles as "source"; see chapter 3 for a discussion of this particular usage.

¹³ This issue is explored in more detail below; see also chapters 5 and 6 for discussion of globalization and neoliberal mechanisms of value exchanges.

I saw this clearly on my first trip to Glastonbury in 2012. I was exploring the town's many small shops with a young Dutch student who was sharing the hostel. After the fifth or sixth store, I was increasingly interested in the vast array of eclectic offerings. On one shelf, small statues of angels sat beside stone Buddhas. A cabinet to the side held books from New Age channelers (like *The Secret*) and texts on witchcraft and the occult.¹⁴ Woven tapestries depicting colorful Hindu deities hung from the ceiling, while boxes of small crystals were crammed into seemingly every available empty space. I asked Judith, my companion, how so many different things could be found together. She looked vaguely confused, before responding that *all of these things belong here. There's room for everything in Glastonbury. Some people might like angels. Some might like Buddha. Some may want both. That's good. Whatever helps someone on their path belongs here.*

While the understanding within most spiritual circles is that spirituality is timeless, eternal, and universal, this project takes as its starting point that the contemporary spirituality is a social phenomenon, informed by historical trends, shaped by current concerns, given definition, form, and content by particular contexts. I argue that that spirituality is cultivated, inculcated, and reproduced by practices through which seekers engage special places, themselves, and one another. By locating spirituality both in these physical sites, and in the economies that define them, I isolate these as examples, while avoiding the reification of spirituality as something that exists *out there*. These understandings—of spirituality as both natural and perennial—obfuscate the genealogies,

¹⁴ See chapter 5 for a discussion of the canon of spirituality.

historical contingencies, social structures, and cultural mechanisms by and through which spirituality exists and becomes valuable. These are the subject of this project.

The 1987 Harmonic Convergence and the Making of Power Centers

While a majority of seekers understand Glastonbury and Sedona as inherently (viz. *naturally*) sacred, the fact remains that the identities and characteristic elements of the SBNR movement at these sites have been shaped and popularized by on-going historical and cultural processes of interpretation and valuation. One of the most recent and important events in the development of the current SBNR trend was the 1987 Harmonic Convergence. Organized to coincide with a particular alignment of planets over August 16 and 17, 1987, the Convergence consisted of a series of synchronized meditations aimed at bringing peace and prosperity to the globe. Importantly for the sake of this project, the Convergence also grounded this conversation in *places*, and encouraged the practices that would turn these latent cultural sites into centers of spiritual economy. Essentially, the ideology (and attendant practices) associated with the Convergence articulated a particular SBNR worldview in which latent spiritual resources require human labors in order to be brought into fruition. This notion is at the heart of this project.

The Convergence was inspired by Tony Shearer's interpretation of Aztec cosmology. In his 1971 book, *Lord of the Dawn*, Shearer calculated 1987 as the end of a 52 year cycle, at which the mythical Quetzalcoatl would return. He combined a reimagining of ancient Mayan prophecy with classic folktales and a healthy dose of countercultural apocalypticism. The book is written as a kind of epic poem, intended to encourage emotional responses from readers. The text deals largely with the supposedly

forgotten, natural wisdom of the ancient mesoamericans. Shearer urges a return to awareness of the power of cosmic cycles in order to unlock the mysterious truths of the universe. In other words, he portrays indigenous spirituality as a kind of deeply buried natural resource that need only be tapped into to be made available for humanity's betterment.

Fifteen years after the initial publication and success of Shearer's book, New Age author and artist José Argüelles took his ideas and put them into action. According to Argüelles, the cosmic alignment that had been predicted by the ancient Mayans and explicated by Shearer to occur first in 1987 and again in 2012, coupled with global intentionality, would usher in a major energy shift that would bring a universal spiritual awakening.¹⁵ In his organizing and advertising the event, Argüelles pointed to more than a dozen locations around the world as "power centers".¹⁶ These places, he argued, are cosmic energy access points. They are places where the boundaries between realities are blurred and permeable, where the illusory matrix of the supposedly objective material world breaks down, and the spiritual reality is revealed. Over the course of these two days, he explained, the planetary alignments would allow for the intentional harnessing of powerful, paradigm-shifting energies. He called for at least 144,000 people to gather at

¹⁵ For more on 2012 Convergence, see chapter 6.

¹⁶ Argüelles, who held a PhD in Art History from the University of Chicago and taught at Princeton, the University of California at Davis, and the Naropa Institute, among others, is the founder of The Foundation for the Law of Time. This registered non-profit, inspired by his book *Time and the Technosphere* (2002), aims at educating people about the harmful construction of the current Gregorian calendar, and advocates for a 28 day month and 13 month year in order to realign humanity with the natural "synchronic order" of the cosmos. There has been very little academic research on this influential figure, or on this event he organized.

these places, and meditate on positive change for the coming era. These people would act as a conduit system, gathering and then sending out this propitious power across the globe; only with conscious action could the propitious cosmic potential be brought to fruition.¹⁷ The objective of the Convergence, Mr. Argüelles said, was "to create a field of trust, to ground the new vibrational frequencies."¹⁸ Thousands responded to his call, and flooded into these areas— many of them never left.

In a radio interview on July 12, 1987, just a few weeks before the event, Argüelles described the process like this:

"These 144,000 will form a planetary human-to-human power grid that will ground the new frequencies coming in at that time. They will catalyze these frequencies by remaining in their integrity...Through them and those attuned to them, there will be an awakening kind of experience that will catalyze a positive vision of our common destiny into being. The world will be different as a result...and everybody will know it."¹⁹

In other words, the natural potential had to be harnessed and refined through a laborious process in order to be transformed into a usable good. Argüelles tapped into emerging spiritual themes like personal empowerment, direct experience, cosmic awakening, and global change, and tied these to the durable, accessible powers of place. He introduced a kind of teleological naturalism—an ideological framework in which the material world is both meaningful *and* manipulable, a telos that requires human interaction to reach its full potential. This is how Argüelles could speak simultaneously of a destiny (that is, telos), and of the necessity for intentional community action.

¹⁷ That is, the conscious, active intention of mental powers

¹⁸ http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/03/us/03arguelles.html?_r=1

¹⁹ Excerpt from radio conference with José Argüelles regarding Harmonic Convergence (July 12, 1987)

At the heart of the events was the popular spiritual understanding perhaps best summed up in Carl Sagen's claim that "the cosmos is also within us. We're made of 'star stuff'", or perhaps the popular SBNR refrain of "as within, so without". As Argüelles explained "we are holograms of the earth, as the earth is of us, and of the solar system and galaxy as well."²⁰ In other words, the embodied person is seen as a microcosm of a cosmic reality made material in the physical world—one person can literally change reality. The astronomical alignment was interpreted as a sign of spiritual potential that could be brought to fruition by conscious action of embodied people acting together in these designated places that facilitated access to these cosmic powers. The Convergence did not create the idea that humans shape the world through their spiritual labors, but it did accomplish two important shifts: 1) it articulated spirituality as a kind of natural resource that requires refinement, manipulation, and human participation to be transformed into something usable; and 2) it grounded spiritual powers in specific places. Together, these two articulations shaped the spiritual economies that continue to define both Sedona and Glastonbury today.

The Convergence had broader impact as well. It became part of the public consciousness through celebrities and other popular figures, including Shirley MacLaine, who described it as a "window of light"; counter-culture guru Timothy Leary and musician John Denver were also publicly involved, lending their celebrity to the event's media coverage. TV host Johnny Carson even led his studio audience in a collective chanting of "Om", though in this case, it was certainly in jest. The event was publicized

²⁰ Radio conference with Dave Peyton, July 12, 1987. <http://www.lawoftime.org/infobooth/hc24.html>

in such prominent news sources as *The New York Times* and *CBS*, and worked to popularize various notions that had previously existed largely on the margins of Western religious thought. But for all the excitement the Convergence brought to people within the spiritual milieu, there was an equally vocal population expressing criticism and outright derision of the event, the people who participated, and its various ideologies. Doonesbury artist Garry Trudeau voiced his criticism very publicly in his nationally syndicated comic. Over the course of more than a week, the eponymous character and his wife discussed the event, with the former referring to it as the "moronic convergence", and describing it as "a national fruit loops day. Lots of wind chimes."²¹ Mrs. Doonesbury, on the other hand, expresses intense interest in the possibilities that the Convergence presents, and anticipates the coming age of enlightenment. She explains that the purpose is to gather at "sacred place[s]" to connect with spiritually resonant energies; it is described as a global, transcultural, universal event tied to natural phenomena.

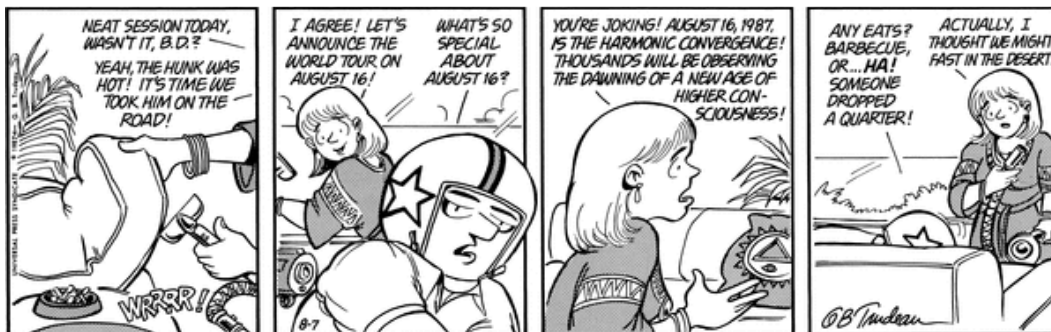


Image 3: Doonesbury, Garry Trudeau. August 7, 1987. Used with permission.

²¹ See image #4, from Aug. 8, 1987.

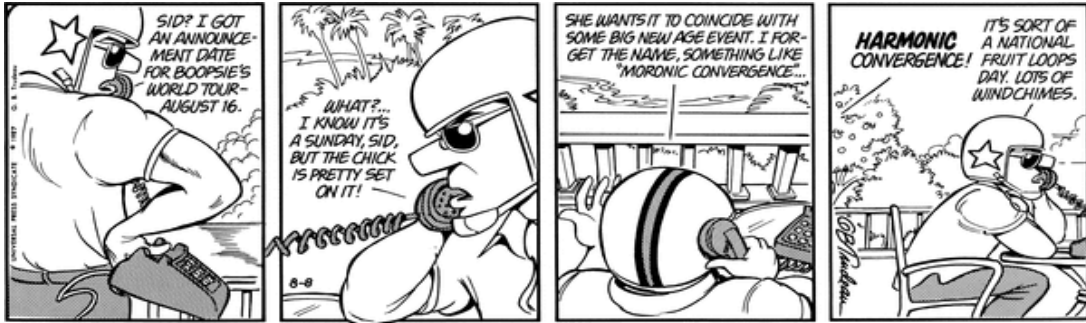


Image 4: Doonesbury, Garry Trudeau. August 8, 1987. Used with permission.

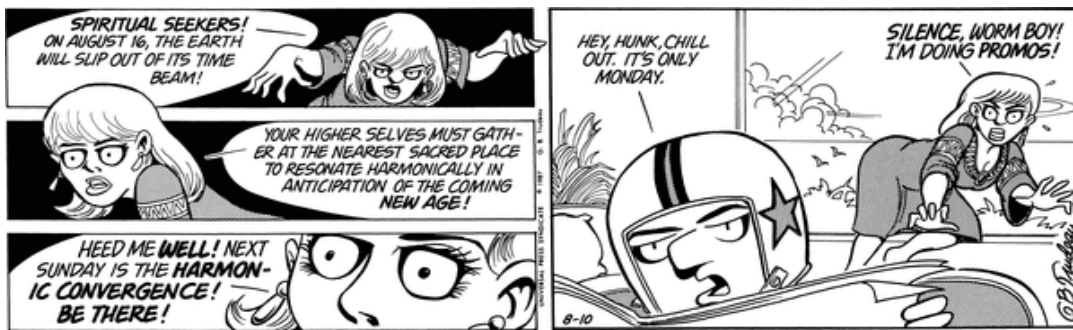


Image 5: Doonesbury, Garry Trudeau. August 10, 1987. Used with permission.

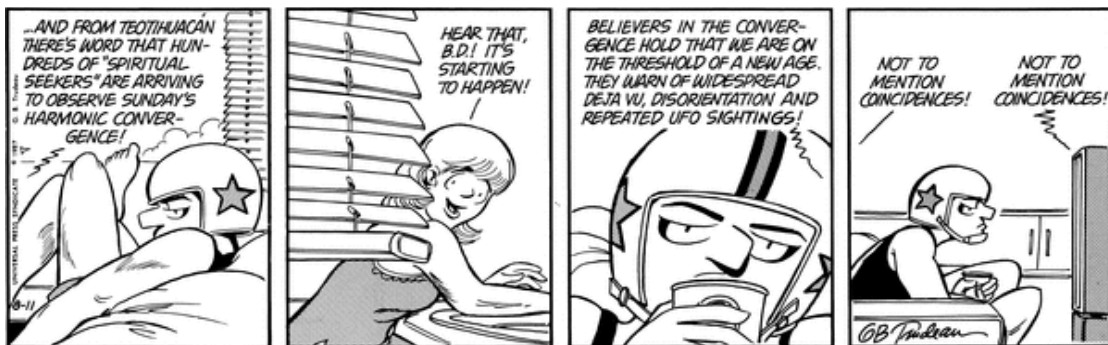


Image 6: Doonesbury, Garry Trudeau. August 11, 1987. Used with permission.



Image 7: Doonesbury, Garry Trudeau. August 12, 1987. Used with permission.

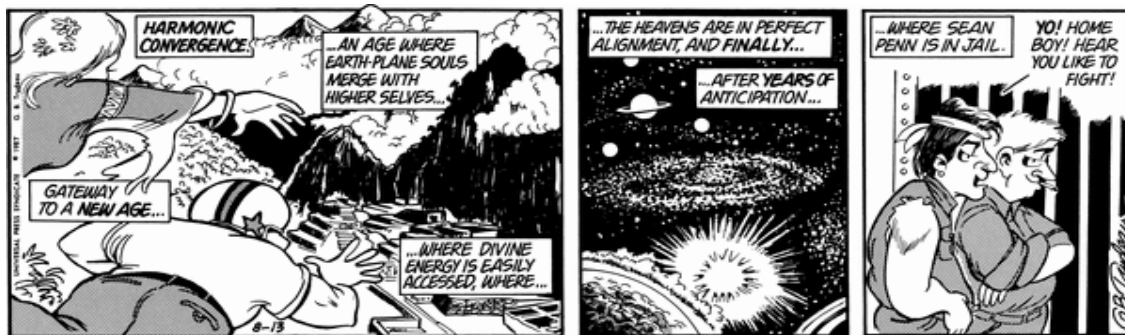


Image 8: Doonesbury, Garry Trudeau. August 13, 1987. Used with permission.

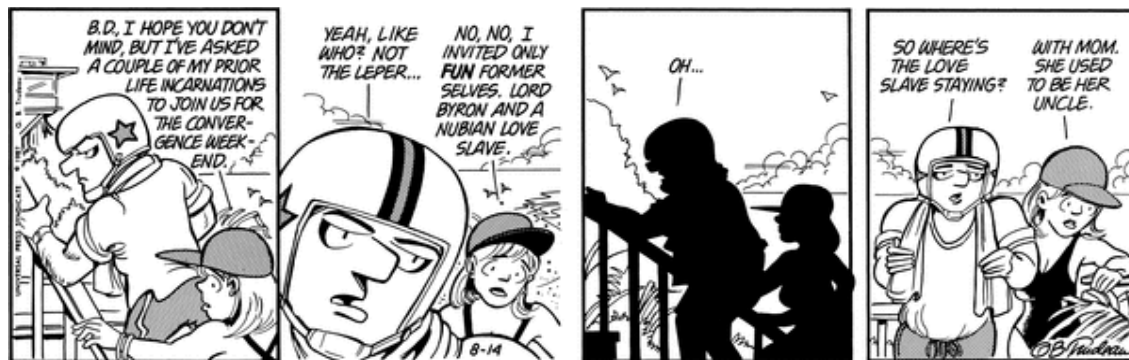


Image 9: Doonesbury, Garry Trudeau. August 14, 1987. Used with permission.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect is the fluency with which Trudeau speaks the language of spirituality²². He expertly, if sardonically, employs such terms as "higher

²² For more on language and knowledge acquisition, see chapter 5.

selves", "higher consciousness", and "divine energy". And he demonstrates at least a basic understanding of spiritual notions like resonance, coincidence and synchronicity, and past lives. For all his obvious cynicism of the Convergence and its associated concepts, his use of the particular verbiage of spirituality demonstrates just how mainstream and familiar many of the terms and concepts had already become by the end of the 1980s. He presumed that his readers would understand both the particular references and his critiques of the subculture's ideas and terms that he so acutely employed. These ideas had become part of public discourse, and were evidence of a shifting cultural rhetoric around religiosity and selfhood.

Just as with Trudeau, many publishers, reporters, and writers demonstrated a healthy level of ambivalence toward the Convergence and its associated ideas. A *People* magazine article published at the end of August 1987 began with a mock lament:

"Bummer, man. Maximum bummer. The big Sunday came and went. And the dead were not raised. The UFOs did not land. Mother Earth was not wracked by devastating quakes. Quetzalcóatl, the Aztec god, did not reveal himself. And the world as we know it did not end—amen."²³ The Orlando Sentinel described a Winter Park, Florida gathering much like any outdoor summer event, referring to the gathered as "rainbow humans"; "They spread out blankets, bed sheets and beach towels....They brought children, dogs, and

²³ Jack Friedman, *People Magazine*, vol 28, no 9, Aug 31, 1987 <http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20097000,00.html>; this clear reference to Shearer is an indication that there was a broad understanding of the ideological and historical forces behind the event at the time.

musical instruments."²⁴ For many, it was the cultural event of the summer, one approached with diverse levels of interest, investment, and broad understandings—even when they did not "buy" into its ideas. For all their criticism, the event occupied large portions of media for the weeks before, during, and after. A *Los Angeles Times* article, referring to Arguelles as "prophet of the New Age", described the author as "articulate, patient, and gracious", and used flowery language and much of the movement's own particular verbiage to present a sensitive view of the Convergence. And the impact has continued; when Arguelles died in 2011, *The New York Times* ran a featured story, recalling with a clearly respectful tone the Convergence, Argüelles, and his role in the broader SBNR community.

However much spirituality had become mainstream, these criticisms illustrate that there was (and still is) a limit to the public acceptance of its ideologies. Focusing on and visualizing a positive outcome for a personal problem is acceptable and rational; traveling across the world to meditate with others for a more positive global future because of planetary alignment is suspect and hokey—popular discourse implicitly asserts that spirituality is supposed to be internal and individual.²⁵ But for those involved in the event, and for the people who continue to occupy these power centers, the notion that their intentional practices can have real, positive impact is both compelling and empowering. For the spiritual seekers involved in the Convergence, it *was* successful,

²⁴Moira Bailey; August 17, 1987; http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/1987-08-17/news/0140120133_1_harmonic-convergence-mead-convergence-activities

²⁵ For more of some issues related to the limits of spiritual acceptance, see especially chapters 5 and 6.

because there was real impact on the hearts and minds of participants—and therefore in the ways in which they understand themselves and engage one another.²⁶ One participant quoted in the *People* magazine article summed up his views on the event: "It doesn't really matter if it's real or not," says Boettcher, a theosophist who has a healthy supply of crystals arrayed next to the TV, "because it's made these people happy."²⁷

While most SBNR seekers agree that "everywhere is sacred in some way,"²⁸ certain places on the globe are treated as *more* sacred, or with certain attributes that contribute to their sacredness. Argüelles named these places, labeled them as power centers, and described their sacrality as a kind of as-of-yet unrealized natural potential for creating a better world. In so doing, he claimed them and marked them as sites of SBNR practice. Ostensibly then, the Harmonic Convergence *did* in fact usher in a major shift, though not perhaps in the way Argüelles and participants expected. Instead, these places were reframed within this context, and experienced a sharp uptick in population.²⁹ The communities grew, and their enterprises flourished, allowing for spiritual ideas and practices to develop and disseminate. They became, in other words, sites of spiritual economy.

²⁶ See chapter 6, *25 Years Later: The 2012 Harmonic Convergence* for more on this topic.

²⁷ Jack Friedman, *People Magazine*, vol 28, no 9, Aug 31, 1987
<http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20097000,00.html>; note once again how the social impact and contexts of spirituality are largely ignored, in favor of emphasizing the individual and person value.

²⁸ Trevor

²⁹ See chapter 2.

Summary of the Project

This project began with a desire to know why and how people choose unconventional religious paths. Early in my ethnographic research, I was often frustrated by how negative were peoples' reactions to my introduction as a scholar of religion. I had potential participants react with anything from a brief clarification of their identity as SBNR, to a quick and awkward refusal to engage in conversation, because, after all, "there is no overlap between religion and spirituality, so obviously we have nothing to discuss".³⁰ What they do is "spiritual, but *not* religious", a phrase that has been repeated so often as to become trite. And yet, for the people who continue to make this claim, it retains real, vital, and identity-making importance—significance that scholars are just beginning to fully explore. The claim itself says something of value—that spirituality, whatever it is, is more compelling as a way to articulate identity (*viz*, posture *viz-a-viz* some ultimate reality) for many people than is any traditional religious affiliation. People speak about spirituality as a fact—eternal, with no context, and without the need for explanation; it is self-evident. This notion troubles me, so I sought out places where spirituality is visible—where it exists not on the fringes, but as a central characteristic of the culture. I did so in hopes of uncovering some of the roots and structures that make the SBNR claim both compelling and viable.

The value of spirituality in Glastonbury and Sedona lies in the processes of production and consumption that define these spaces as spiritual economies. In other

³⁰ This reaction was much more common in Sedona; in Glastonbury, people seemed to be more comfortable with plural identities, and many identified as still officially members of the Church of England or other familial Churches. Most explained this as a quaint cultural vestige, rather than the ordering structure of their lives, as SBNR might be considered.

words, the value has a social genesis—it is produced through interaction and exchange, rather than existing a priori. There is a collectivity to spirituality in these places that defines them as sacred sites. I argue here that spirituality in these places is a kind of commodity in and of itself. The claim to be spiritual holds a certain kind of social capital, and marks one as appropriately placed within the network. Furthermore, the ways in which spirituality is conceptualized and produced mimics other processes of cultural economy. Production and consumption here are one and the same, and the exchange happens at all levels of the economic process. In other words, spirituality is produced as it is consumed, and constructed as it is practiced. In this project, I analyze the spiritual economies of these sites, including the (supposedly) natural resource management, laborious practices of refining these resources into commodities and other goods, and the exchange of said products.

In the first matter, I am concerned with the ways in which seekers conceptualize and encounter the material and cultural landscapes as naturally spiritual resources to be exploited. Many describe spiritual energies as residing in the land itself, particularly the landscapes of places like Sedona and Glastonbury. Ideas about ley lines and vortexes are common. Spirituality is also conceptualized as an inherent human capacity for divine knowledge—a sort of occult consciousness waiting to be (re)discovered. And this happens through various practices, what I refer to as spiritual labor. This includes embodied and affective practices such as labyrinth walking, meditation, and other means through which individuals "tap into" and transform these dormant powers into usable goods. The modes of exchange, and the social structures that facilitate them, are vital to this project. It is through these exchanges that what "counts" as spirituality becomes most

visible. Whether individuals "buy into" a particular ideology, explanation, or practice indicates the value of that element within the broader spiritual economy.

Social theorist Paul James defines economy as "a social domain that emphasizes the practices, discourses, and material expressions associated with the production, use, and management of resources."³¹ This definition highlights the social dimensions of economy, and allows that economic systems are as much about discourse and practice as they are about *things*. Within the context of Glastonbury and Sedona, while the material characteristics of landscape, bodies, and artifacts work to stabilize and make visible some of the more esoteric and ephemeral ideologies, a majority of the economic exchange I analyze in this project is the exchange of the non-material. Labor itself is a commodity. Stories become products traded as cultural capital—proper affective displays admit one into the body economic. However much seekers assert the universal, timeless quality of spirituality, it does have a long history. And as much as scholarship has emphasized spirituality as a socially-disengaged series of eclectic practices, within the particular ontology of the SBNR worldview, these practices *do* have broad impact. Whatever contestations might be made against this fact, spirituality is rife with dogmas, structures, and particular commitments that shape what is allowed or disallowed within its boundaries—though those boundaries are constantly shifting, and are often highly individualized by context and person.

One of the unique cosmological notions common amongst seekers at these sites is the idea of a malleable reality. For most seekers, and certainly those I met in Sedona and

³¹ 2015, 53.

Glastonbury, the visible world is only a minor aspect of the cosmos—a necessary, if not sufficient tableau upon which the drama of human life unfolds. But that drama can be manipulated through intentional action, often combining mental and physical practices (ie, labors). Reality itself, and the spiritual energies that enliven it, are resources that can be refined and manipulated into particular shapes and goods. This is the notion that former Dominican priest and prolific SBNR author Matthew Fox captures in his "Creation Spirituality", and the powerful ontological metaphor describing the shift "from cog to creator". It is what Rhonda Byrne called "The Secret" in her best-selling book and film of the same title. And it is what famous channel Edgar Cayce referred to in his central argument that "thoughts are things"—that ideas are products, and reality is a product of our ideas.³² It is this idea that New Thought pioneer Emma Curtis Hopkins expressed with her statement "the day is plastic to you". And it is the idea that contemporary Shaman and dowser Patrick MacManaway invokes in this colorful description:

Earth is a smooth pond which is imprinted by and reflects the web of planetary influences, as soft putty carries the imprint of a gently-pressed finger. We humans are as water spiders on the surface of the pond, weaving into physical form the web that we see and feel reflected from above. There are reflections also from the sand on the bottom of the pond which are felt and woven on the surface, and in this way the stars hear not only their own echo from earth, but the music of Gaia's own sphere intermingled with their sweet symphony. Incarnate humans thus can be the creators of a heavenly web on the spherical surface of the earth, attuned simultaneously to the above and below, swimming in the ecstasy of creation.³³

³² For more on Byrne and Cayce, see chapter 5.

³³ MacManaway. "A Definition of Geomancy." Mid-Atlantic Geomancy: Mag E-Zine. No 4: Winter Solstice, 1996. <http://www.geomancy.org/index.php/mag-e-zine/mag-e-zine-1996/no-4-winter-solstice/a-definition-of-geomancy>

On-going creation is an important SBNR idea. It is the notion that seekers must work to produce their realities—that these are not given a priori, but must be refined and shaped through the conscious manipulation of raw materials. This idea is inculcated through practices that cultivate a sense of holism, connection, and social connection that can only be facilitated by embodied people acting as social beings within particularly powerful landscapes of energetic powers, and supported by communities of people who "get it". This intense and unique kind of spiritual labor is common in practices at these sites—practices that "link the world of external events, many of which may appear chaotic or incomprehensible, with the experiential worlds of individuals and communities".³⁴ There is with the SBNR worldview little distinction between the internal and external worlds; in fact, the experiential reality of the internal self is confirmed by, and enacted through external (viz. material), durable elements. Only by assuming this perspective can we begin to understand how spirituality is constructed.

Economies are systems that organize engagement with natural resources, facilitate their refinement, and regulate the exchange of these products. The ways in which seekers in Glastonbury and Sedona conceptualize, practice, and enact their spirituality, both individually and in communal settings, forms a particular kind of economy. One in which God (or Source) is accessed as a potent resource.³⁵ And in which emotional experiences are evidence for an almost alchemical transmutation of latent resources into usable and

³⁴ Bender and McRoberts 2012, 11.

³⁵ See chapter 3 for more on God as "Source".

exchangeable goods.³⁶ These goods, which include material items, stories, and ambiguous truths among other things, are valuable within the spiritual marketplaces that dominate and define these locations as sacred sites.³⁷

Thesis

This project is organized around answering three central research questions: 1) how and why have Glastonbury and Sedona become centers of contemporary spirituality?; 2) how is spirituality encountered, practiced, and reproduced in these places?; and, 3) what role do tourism and spiritual pilgrimage play in shaping both the identities of these places, and the people who live in or visit them? In answering these questions, I argue that Sedona and Glastonbury are sites of spiritual economy, where spirituality is produced as its products are exchanged and consumed. Approaching these places in this way highlights the structures and logics that allow spirituality as an ideological and practical reality to flourish. I argue that these two locations serve as crucibles for spiritual identity; they are intense and dynamic places wherein spirituality is forged through a series of practices, exchanges, and meaningful experiences. Spirituality here is a marketable good—it is an exchangeable commodity, sometimes for money, but often for prestige or acceptance. These places and the people who inhabit them are constantly engaged in creating spirituality through these economies.

Economy also carries a secondary definition that speaks to techniques of careful preservation and efficient modes of management. The claim itself, to be "spiritual, but not religious", is a complex, but efficient way of articulating certain ideologies, and

³⁶ See chapter 4.

³⁷ See chapter 5.

especially of certain critiques about the nature of religion per se. However, this concision not only belies the variety of ways in which people are spiritual, but it obfuscates the complex systems and contexts that have facilitated the growth of spirituality as a compelling and viable identity claim. Thinking about spirituality in these sites as a series of mechanisms aimed at carefully managing expectations and experiences allows me to critically engage how various elements which are often understood as natural or obvious, are in fact manipulated to achieve certain ends. In this way, the economies I examine are polymorphic and complex, requiring examination from multiple angles.

This project is responsive to Bender and McRoberts' call for "situating spirituality within particular configurations of space and place (in opposition to its conventional connotation of something ethereal and pneumatic, lacking social and spatial specificity)...focus[ing] attention on the ways in which spiritual discourses and practices accrue power and authority across different contexts."³⁸ These places and the people who inhabit them are empowered with spiritual significance not simply because of the consumptive possibilities, but of their productive. Within the contexts of these particular sites, discourses and practices become powerful and authoritative through exchange. The ways in which spirituality is produced and practiced at these power centers illuminates the structures that both facilitate SBNR as a viable identity, and the ways in which spirituality shapes the cultures of these towns. Spirituality is both a domain of discourse, and a spectrum of practices that aim at negotiating a complex and diverse cultural

³⁸ 2012, 7.

landscape. It is fundamentally a particular dynamic posturing toward the self and the world—both real and in the process of becoming real.

While many seekers argue that spirituality is a natural, inherent, and universal way of approaching a meaningful world, I argue that, like other ideological systems, it is one that is learned, and whose characteristics are incorporated into individual identities through various processes. Inculcation requires persistent instruction, and the durability of the material world (including landscapes and human bodies) helps to ground the more theoretical aspects of spiritual speculation. Embedding ideologies in places and other material elements makes spirituality something that exists not only within, but *out there*—but it is latent, and requires an intentional consciousness (ie labor) to catalyze its power. In other words, the materiality of these specific places, their unique characteristic spaces, and the bodies of those that inhabit them make the nebulous, often shifting domain of spirituality both more visible to scholars, and more accessible for seekers. At these places in particular—these power centers—seekers participate in the production of spirituality, as they explore and consume its various ideologies and practices.

Since 1987 sites like Glastonbury and Sedona have served as sites of spiritual economy—places where seekers encounter resources, and work to transform these resources into usable (and therefore exchangeable) goods. They are essentially sites of pilgrimage; and like their counterparts in more traditional religions, offer both the consumption of goods, and the acquisition of truths through embodied and mystical experiences. Materiality, for a majority of the seekers who participated in my research, is best understood as an heuristic—it is real to the extent that it illuminates or facilitates access to and understanding of deeper, higher, or realer truths. Materiality is a tool that is

used to explore reality, and ought not be taken as data in itself—though here, that data is vital to the analysis I provide. I analyze the practices through which seekers engage with the material world, and by which their particular epistemologies and ontologies are articulated. In so doing, I shift the conversation away from what spirituality *lacks* toward what it *provides* an increasingly large number of contemporary people.

Importance

Data in both the U.S. and Britain indicate that a quickly growing, and often diffuse minority are identifying as religiously "other" or "none".³⁹ "None" should be read as "not one", but certainly not as nothing—there is still something of interest to Religious Studies scholars here. For example, of the 38.6% of Americans who identified as "none" or "nothing in particular" (ie, "other"), only just over 13% are unsure about belief in God or do not believe.⁴⁰ Deductively then, more than 1 of every 4 Americans is unaffiliated with a religious institution, but participates in some kind of religious thinking (ie, ideas about God), or identifies with alternative religious identities. Of these same groups, approximately 37.4% consider religion very important or somewhat important.⁴¹ Without getting mired in a complex bog of demographics, survey collection materials, and other statistical minutiae, it is not outside of the realm of empirical data to assume then that at

³⁹ This "none" category is especially slippery. Pew shows, for example, that only about 30% of these (or about 7% of the total U.S. population) unaffiliated people consider themselves atheist or agnostic; a further 16% of the population says they are "nothing in particular", or "don't know" how to identify. Thus, while self-identifying adherents of the New Age account for less than 0.5% of the total U.S. population, the impact of the SBNR trend reaches well beyond that.

⁴⁰ Pew Religious Landscape Survey 2014; 13.07% to be exact

⁴¹ Pew 2014.

least 30 million Americans are influenced by spirituality to an appreciable degree—this is not an insignificant number. Data in Britain suggest similar trends, though the particulars of national and regional contexts impacts the ways that spirituality takes its diverse shapes.⁴²

Spirituality is an increasingly compelling identity marker, and one that shapes how contemporary people live their lives as moral, socially-engaged individuals, and as members of diverse networks and communities. As Bender and McRoberts argue, spirituality "appears as a technique, or rather a range of techniques, for interpreting, negotiating, and responding to complex conditions and challenges of contemporary society."⁴³ These techniques—these modes of production, consumption, and exchange—are at the heart of this project. Looking at concentrated sites where spirituality flourishes, particularly the communities that scaffold spirituality, helps to illuminate the processes by which spirituality is encountered, mediated, and reproduced. It helps us understand, beyond the quantitative data that most surveys presents, why and how non-religious spirituality is growing.

Dissertation Outline and Chapter Summaries

This project is an analysis of the individual and communal practices, structures, and ideologies that form the spiritual economies in Glastonbury and Sedona. Instead of considering spirituality, especially in its "not religious" instantiations as a kind of ephemeral sacralization of individualism, I am concerned with tracing and mapping the

⁴² <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion>;
<http://natcen.ac.uk/our-research/research/british-social-attitudes/>

⁴³ 2012, 11.

ways in which residents and visitors cultivate spiritual identity in these places through economic practices, most often in community. I take economy here in its most expansive sense—as both the careful management of resources, and the systems of interaction that facilitate the refinement and exchange of these resources. These resources and goods are both material and immaterial, both physical and discursive. There is also implied here a certain kind of careful efficiency—these systems and practices are intentional. The experiences that seekers have in these places are shaped by existing expectations, and by cultural mechanisms that value certain kinds of experiences and goods over others. Importantly, economies require communities and networks of exchange; I use these two important centers of spiritual tourism as comparative case studies. Using this lens to analyze spirituality in these places, I argue, highlights the structures and processes by which spirituality is conceptualized, practiced, and inculcated as a cultural norm. In so doing, my goal is to avoid both the naturalization of spirituality that so often occurs when it is conceptualized as a universal and perennial human characteristic, and the dismissive tendency to presume and emphasize spirituality as antisocial and fleeting.

In chapter two, I provide a brief overview of the growth and development of these towns, with special emphasis on their genealogies as sites of pilgrimage. In both cases, the towns experienced massive growth in population and tourism after the 1987 Harmonic Convergence, which solidified their reputations as spiritual sites in the public imagination. These places act as crucibles—where resources are refined through various manipulations and practices, in order to create of them usable, exchangeable goods. I introduce the project's key participants, focusing in particular on how each one is situated within the geographical and cultural frameworks of these towns. Finally, I provide a brief

overview of the current state of scholarship, and outline the space into which this project fits. I pay particular attention to how scholars have investigated spirituality, and the competing definitions (both implicit and explicit) of it that shape approaches to the subject. I also highlight some of the scholarship on social and cultural economies, and the various ways in which production and exchange of commodities has impacted social scientific and humanistic understandings of religion.

I explore the ways in which the supposedly natural spiritual resources of Glastonbury and Sedona are conceptualized in chapter three. Sacred spaces (of which these "power centers" are distinct SBNR examples) are given boundaries through processes that define them against their foils—in this case, the "normal" mainstream world. I turn my attention to the ways in which these landscapes, and their shared and unique features, are conceptualized as natural resources to be "tapped into", magnified, or otherwise exploited. Whether these are energetic ley lines, vortexes, or specific entities occupying specific locations, these resources are presumed to be both natural and raw—that is, they require human intervention to be made into viable goods. These spiritual resources are not just in the landscape, but in the cosmos; the central ideology of the Convergence is a perfect example of this, as are the imagined spiritual places like Shambhala I explore in this chapter. For many seekers, they are also inside people themselves—a kind of dormant spiritual power just awaiting ignition and utilization. The notion of *source* is essential here; sometimes used as an alternative to the institutionally-laden *God*, or to describe the vast body of spiritual knowledge so rarely defined in either text or discourse, *source* is a vital, flexible idea within SBNR conceptions of reality. In

all cases, these resources are conceptualized both as natural and latent—reserves of raw material that requires conscious labor to come to fruition.

This is where chapter four begins—with the practices of refining these supposedly natural resources into goods, products, and commodities. For many seekers, the body is understood as an essential tool for this process; in particular, the epistemic value of the bodies' affective responses is central. Several seekers in both places described emotion as "energy in motion"; this sentiment, that emotion is evidence of a kind of alchemical process that transforms latent energies into spiritual goods, was common even when not expressed this explicitly. These practices include meditation, walking, dance and other movement like yoga, and various intellectual endeavors like reading. Seekers generally understand these experiences as natural outcomes of engaging with the energies of these places, but I analyze the ways in which expectation and cultural norms work to elicit certain experiences (and interpretation thereof) rather than others.

These experiences not only provide important spiritual goods, but are themselves commodified and exchanged as cultural capital. In chapter five, I examine how seekers engage with one another in communities, networks, and groups, to exchange the commodities of stories, experiences, and spiritual expertise. This exchange is sometimes facilitated by money, but just as often, through what is commonly referred to as "energy exchange". This can include manual labor (such as cleaning or cooking services), a direct barter (as in trading a tarot reading for a brief energy healing), or other kinds of indirect commodity transaction. In certain contexts, spiritual power, knowledge, or experiences are also commodified and become part of the complex system of exchange. I also address the issue of commerce in these towns—both of which are sustained by tourist activity.

The objects they buy and sell indicate much beyond simple capitalist consumption. Instead, these choices illuminate how economic structures work to shape identity-creation in these towns. There is a tendency for social movements to coalesce into communities and networks, and these communities are sustained and defined by the variety of economic exchanges that happen amongst their members.

In the final chapter, I turn to the 2012 Harmonic Convergence, which coincided with my first research trip to Glastonbury. This event marked the 25th anniversary of the first Convergence, and was for seekers the end of an important cosmic cycle. The visible growth and expansion of spirituality over this period has been interpreted by many seekers as evidence of the success of the first Convergence. This provides me an opportunity to look back at this short history, and forward to the potential future of spirituality, and the scholarship thereof. I argue that a comprehensive history of the Harmonic Convergence will be essential to our understanding of the rise and growth of SBNR as a cultural phenomenon. I also analyze what I refer to as "unsold goods." Using the example of the 2009 sweat lodge tragedy in Sedona, at which event three people died and many more injured and traumatized, I explore what responsibility scholars have to treat all spiritual practices and ideologies uncritically or objectively. In other words, how do we, if such an approach is even possible or preferable, deal simultaneously with the buying and selling of crystals and other seemingly harmless spiritual practices, and the dangerous, sometimes deadly and often extortive practices of charlatans and opportunists. My goal in this final chapter is not to offer any summative or conclusive statement, but to articulate some of the arenas where research into spirituality in its diverse presentations

and dimensions will help scholars develop a paradigm that takes seriously, without reifying, these on-going shifts in the contemporary religious landscape.

CHAPTER 2: MAPPING THE TERRAIN

A landscape is a series of named locales, a set of relational places linked by paths, movements, and narratives. It is a cultural code for living, an anonymous "text" to be read and interpreted, a writing pad for inscription, a scape of and for human praxis, a mode of dwelling and a mode of experiencing. It is invested with powers, capable of being organized and choreographed...and it is always sedimented with human significances. It is story and telling, temporality and remembrance.

-Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape*

On a cold, grey morning in September, I drove to Avebury with Brenna, the American woman who was living in an adjacent flat in Glastonbury for six months as part of her journey through Britain to "find herself". She had been before, and thought that a visit to this largest surviving stone circle in Europe would be beneficial for my research.⁴⁴ The trip took about two hours, heading northeast on the winding country roads of Southwest England. As I drove, Brenna talked. She encouraged me to "be still, just try to feel something"; like others, Brenna refused to accept that my journey was entirely (or even primarily) an academic one. Instead, she urged me to reflect on the "deeper meaning" of my trip, and to tap into the powers of Avebury in order to do so. She told me stories of her previous experiences there and at similar places, and outlined some of the truths these experiences had revealed. *I like to use these special places to help me work out big questions, or to think through problems. Somehow being in the space helps. I think the energies in those places allows me to tap into the universe in a different way.*

⁴⁴ Avebury is owned and managed by the National Trust, and has been designated a Schedule 1 Ancient Monument and a World Heritage Site, along with several other Wiltshire sites including Stonehenge; like its more famous neighbor, Avebury is a popular tourist attraction, and a site of much (contested) SBNR activity, particularly by Druids and other contemporary Pagans, and dowsers; see chapter 3 for more information on the issue of land management and access at these sacred sites.

*You should focus on a question; just put it out there into the universe, and see what answers you get. Pay attention to how you feel. Your body, your mind will feel different when you get your answer. You're really just a conduit here, for truth and Spirit.*⁴⁵ "Let the place do its thing."

I obliged her, and once we arrived at the stone circle, I did as she suggested and picked a stone that "called to me", one I "felt drawn to". I spent the next three cold, wet hours leaning against my chosen rock, watching Brenna and a few other people who braved the particularly stormy day. Most wandered through the open fields, pausing occasionally at various stones. Many were in groups of two or three, but several were alone. One brave young man lay himself down in the center of a small grouping of stones wearing only a pair of ragged shorts. I pondered my project, and used my time to organize some thoughts in my ubiquitous notebook. I practiced, like Brenna encouraged me, focusing on how everything felt: the rock was rough and had patches of fuzzy lichen in its many crevasses; the rain was cold and misty, the kind of rain that soaks into the skin and chills down to the bone; the slippery, cool, slightly gritty mud was not unpleasant against my bare feet—I had taken off my rain boots and socks so that I could, as Brenna suggested, "get into direct contact with the earth...really *feel* it".

⁴⁵ I capitalize Spirit here to indicate a subtle conceptual difference between spirit as a noun and Spirit as a kind of shorthand for God, thus a proper noun; see chapter 3 for a more in-depth analysis of God as Source.



Image 10: Avebury, England. September 2015. Photograph by the author.

And I certainly did feel something. A quiet peacefulness settled over the field, and those few hours were productive; I managed to fill more than 10 pages with notes and outlines. But whether this was due to the spiritually enlightening energies of the place, or a matter of time, expectation, and mental preparedness, I am not sure—though I suspect the latter. Was this the "power" of the place that Brenna had described, and herself experienced? Was the stillness and heightened sense of bodily awareness what Brenna meant by encouraging me to "feel" something spiritual? Absolutely Brenna's encouragement to engage with Avebury in a particular way shaped my experience, as did the many stories I had heard about pre-Christian practice at this and related sites. Many would later explain that this expectant, relational approach is part of what makes these places special—conscious intention and interaction matter. Engaging with these sites from the proper framework is essential to their value—my willingness to do so, for Brenna, indicated that I was to an acceptable degree, part of this community.

On the drive home, Brenna confessed to me that she has what she referred to as "special senses"; she communicates with "angels", though she explained that these beings were not the popular, feathery-winged variety. In fact, she admitted that she was not sure exactly what the nature of these entities is, but offered that they may be extraterrestrial, ancestral, or psychological—herself, in other words. In any case, she explained, while she can receive messages and insight anywhere, at any time, she finds that the lines of communication are *most* open at places like Avebury, or at Chalice Well or Glastonbury Tor. These places, she said, function as both amplifiers and intensifiers for her abilities; they empower her innate capacity for spiritual engagement, and provide an environment in which it flourishes. I wondered what Brenna was trying to do in explaining this all to me, at that particular moment. What was the relationship between her idea of angels and the place of Avebury? And what was the point in telling me? What did she imagine my response to be? And how, exactly, did wandering around a wet, cold field full of giant stones facilitate some spiritual enlightenment? What knowledge or perspective was I missing, and how did Brenna acquire it?

Introduction

This project analyzes spirituality through the lens of economy as a way to complicate and refine existing theories of the spiritual marketplace. I argue that these sites act as crucibles—places in which raw materials and natural resources are accessed, manipulated, and then exchanged as spiritual goods. Using the concept of "economy", I am able trace the processes and practices through which spirituality becomes stabilized in these places through the materiality of the landscapes, practitioners' bodies, artifacts and souvenirs, and the commercial enterprises in these towns. However, this is not the limit

of spiritual economies. Instead, I argue that seekers at these sites are as much producers of spirituality as they are consumers, and that a majority of the spiritual goods produced through their labors are *not* entirely material or commercial. These include powerful stories and personal biographies, cosmological truths, and other invisible (but not less valuable) goods, which are often exchanged within the existing networks of community. In other words, spirituality at these places is an economic endeavor, but not in the shallow way that some scholars have argued.⁴⁶

One of the important concerns in this research is how to pin down spirituality enough to examine it, but not so much that we reify it? I would argue that we can do so by going where it is *already* pinned down. Although more than five thousand miles separate Sedona and Glastonbury, they are ideal locations for this inquiry for three related central reasons: 1) each was identified as a "power center" for the 1987 Harmonic Convergence; 2) each is home to relatively stable and accessible spiritual communities and networks; and 3) each sustains an economy that is based mostly on spiritual enterprises.⁴⁷ Many tourists and pilgrims visit both places, often for similar purposes. In both places, participants were quick to ask if I had visited or done research about the other. There is a fundamental connection between the two places, at least in the imaginations and practices of spiritual seekers, who, like other contemporary people, are "actively mapping the world in spiritual terms, seeking out and identifying spirits and

⁴⁶ For a more in-depth discussion of current and existing scholarship, see section below.

⁴⁷ Operating costs for both towns support this claim; in addition, an informal survey of businesses at both sites indicates a thriving commercial trade in spirituality.

spiritual energies in various places and articulating their respective religious and spiritual orientations...in ways that reinforce or reconfigure boundaries"⁴⁸

There is something compelling about being surrounded by people who "get it"—intentional communities facilitate this kind of productive engagement with spiritual ideologies. The continued (if sometimes exaggerated) historical presence of people in these spaces also contributes to their being understood as special. As Kurt, a spiritual healer in Sedona explained to me, "if lots of people think a place is sacred, if they have for eons, it is, through energy." Kurt told me that his Native American teacher taught him about the ancient history of Sedona, and taught him how to use particular tools, like the medicine wheel and sweat lodge ceremonies, to tap into the energy that is, in part, a result of centuries of indigenous spiritual practice. In other words, the fact that these places have played host to communities who understood them as sacred in fact enhances their sacred energies. The accretion of energy through peoples' intentional spiritual practices in these spaces works to further add to their power and appeal. Several people described the experiences in these places as *being bathed* in these energies.

Immersion is conducive to inculcation. Glastonbury and Sedona are not average towns, and, in general, the individuals who visit and (especially) those who stay, display a particular form of spirituality. These are not the same people whom Courtney Bender found in her examination of spirituality in Cambridge, nor is their practice and experience of spirituality the same as a San Francisco yoga teacher's, or that of a recovering addict who participates in the New Thought brand of therapeutic spirituality in Alcoholics

⁴⁸ Bender and McRoberts 2012, 14; I explore this notion of boundary- and place-making below.

Anonymous.⁴⁹ These are places where the mundane world gives way and makes space for spiritual realities. These are places for people in crisis, for those who work within the spiritual commerce industries, and for those are uncomfortable within the mainstream culture in which they find themselves struggling to make meaning. These are people who relocate their lives to these places for a reason; I did not speak with a single person who was born or raised in either Sedona or Glastonbury who identified as SBNR. In fact, the spiritual communities and whatever mainstream locals inhabiting these places often find themselves in tension.

For all their similarities, Glastonbury and Sedona are distinct, and each have unique characteristics. In general, Sedona attracts both visitors and residents of a higher socio-economic status, though both towns struggle with significant homeless and unemployed populations.⁵⁰ The Sedona communities also include more "casual" and "weekend" seekers, while a majority of both residents and visitors in Glastonbury are "whole-life" SBNRs. Sedona is mostly American, while Glastonbury has a more international population of both residents and visitors. One of the most significant differences between the two towns, for the purposes of this project, is how individuals and the communities writ large responded to two key terms/ideas in the course of my research: "New Age" and "religion". Participants in Sedona were more likely to adopt the self-classification of New Age than were people in Glastonbury, and were much more likely to have a strong negative reaction to the domain of religion. It was in Sedona that I

⁴⁹ Although there are commonalities in many of their ideas and practices. See Bender 2012, Horowitz 2014.

⁵⁰ See chapter 5.

first encountered vehement rejection of religion as a description for practices, ideas, and identity. In fact, I had several people walk out of conversations once I introduced myself as a Religious Studies scholar, and nearly everyone I spoke with clarified their own ideological and practical distinction between religion and spirituality, and located themselves firmly in the latter camp.

Of course, it matters that these two towns are located in significantly different national and regional contexts, and with very different topographic and climate characteristics. Glastonbury lies in the fertile green farmland of Southwest England, while Sedona is situated amongst the bright red rocks of Central Arizona. The impact of American notions of religion as a matter of individual choice and conviction has clear implications for spirituality in Sedona. On the other hand, religious affiliation as a kind of national or familial association in Britain, shapes spirituality in Glastonbury. Plenty of seekers in Glastonbury have no issue identifying as "Anglican" or "Catholic" by birth, but SBNR by choice and in practice. Sedonan seekers are much more likely to identify as "previously Catholic", or "raised Baptist", but have no current ties to those identities. In both cases, while many seekers attend various meetings, classes, gatherings, and events, few identify solely with those communities; however, this lack of fidelity to a single group or system should not be interpreted as wholly individualistic, or as indicating a lack of commitment. Instead, a flexible "belonging" through SBNR identity is a kind of currency in these places; avoiding strict adherence to a particular dogma or tradition is cultural capital that allows seekers to "buy into" multiple valuable spaces. This is particularly true of visiting seekers, many of whom articulate eclectic exploration as an explicit goal of their visits.

Ivakhiv introduces the notion of "spiritual immigrants" to describe people who begin as spiritual tourists and become permanent residents. Just as immigrants of other sorts carry their own histories into new settings, which then impact those new homes, so do spiritual people both take from and contribute to the on-going processes of spiritualization. In other words, spirituality is created through collective efforts. Some scholars have correctly observed that community is as vital to spiritual seekers as it is for practitioners of other, more traditional religions. As Partridge explains, "there seems to be a strong tendency for even diffuse cultic spiritualities to coalesce into networks and organization."⁵¹ While these organizations may not look like the churches our discipline is used to, that is not a valid reason to not take them seriously as meaningful communities. These two towns, along with other sites of pilgrimage and concentrated spirituality provide relatively stable spaces to create, preserve, and distribute spiritual ideas and practices.⁵²

Red Rock Country: Sedona

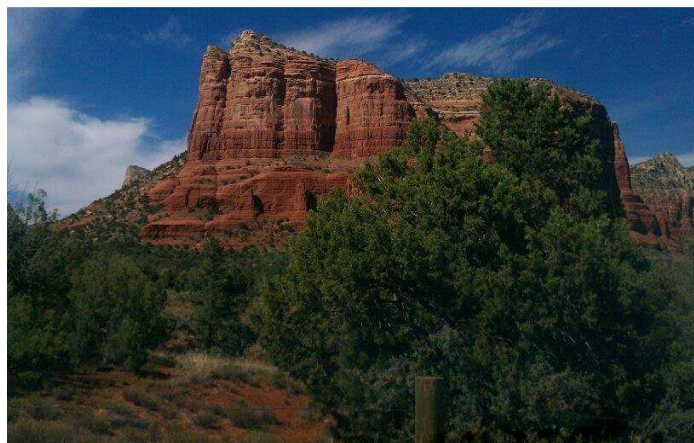


Image 11: *Courthouse Butte, Sedona, Arizona. Photograph by the author. June 2013.*

⁵¹ 2004a; 62

⁵² For more on the communities in these places, see chapter 5.

"Sedona is the land I love the most on this earth. Whatever place I'm coming from, when I head back to Sedona and start to see its red rocks in the distance, my heart and breath open up and my mind becomes calm as though I've come home... This arid land that pours out such a primordial power has a unique ability to awaken within us the greatest of spirits. "

—Ilich Lee, The Call of Sedona: Journey of the Heart 2011

Driving north from Phoenix toward Sedona for the first time, I passed through the Verde Valley, with its sparse and prickly vegetation acting as a buffer zone between the desert and what can only be described as a Martian landscape of red rock country. Sedona confronts visitors with its distinct color and shapes, and immediately I understood how so many believe this to be a special place. Scrubby green plants cover the floor of its many valleys, canyons, and low places. Its monumental rock formations rise above, their striated layers of red and rust and brown catching the perpetually bright sunlight. At nearly 5,000 feet, Cathedral rock is one of the most photographed sights in Arizona—a symbol of the rugged West, untouched by the industrialization and excess of modern American civilization.

The Sedona post office was established in 1902, when the town claimed only 55 residents. The population remained well under a thousand at least until the mid-1950s, with parts of the town not being tied into the power grid until the 1960s. It was not incorporated until 1988—that is, immediately after the Harmonic Convergence contributed to the population reaching more than 5,000.⁵³ In 1970, Sedona was home to just over two thousand; by 2014, that number had multiplied five-fold to approximately 10,281. The village of Oak Creek, where Ranjita's house is located, remains officially

⁵³ <http://www.visitarizona.com/places-to-visit/north-central-arizona/sedona>

unincorporated, though it is a significant part of the broader Sedona community.⁵⁴ While officially documented settlement in Sedona is very recent, there is evidence—often cited by seekers—of long-standing Native American presence. Palatki, an ancient heritage site with rock art dating back 12,000 years, points to the presence of humans in the area.⁵⁵ Currently, members of Yavapai, Apache, and Hopi nations conduct rituals in and around Sedona, including especially medicine wheel and sweat lodge ceremonies.⁵⁶ Several organizations, including Sedona's Ringing Rock Foundation, the Institute of Ecotourism, and the Institute for Cultural Awareness celebrate Sedona's Native American history and continued presence.

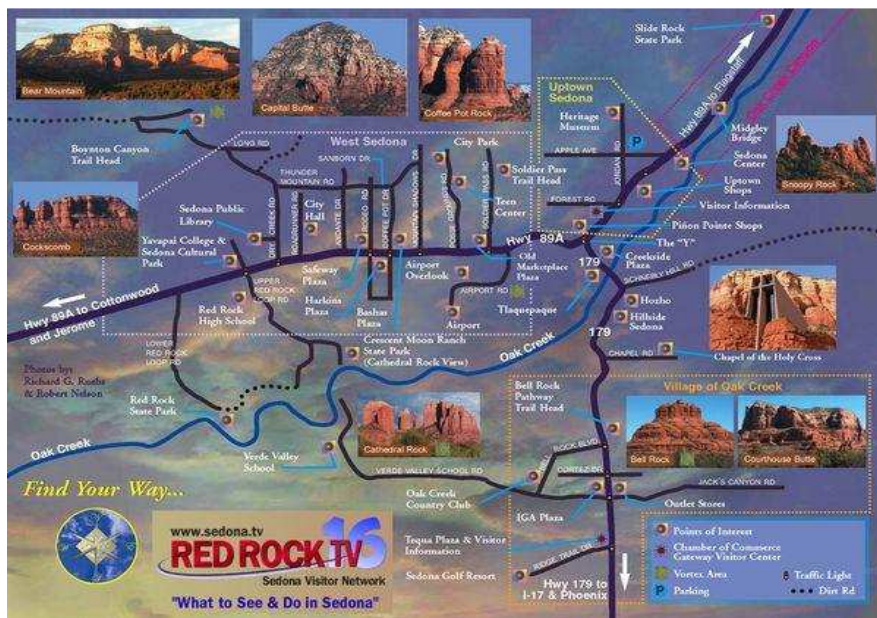


Image 12: Map of Sedona with important monuments marked. Used with Permission from the Sedona Visitor Information Network at www.Sedona.tv

⁵⁴ Many participants also include the surrounding Verde Valley (including Prescott, Jerome, and other outlying towns) as part of the spiritually-powerful Sedona area.

⁵⁵ Sedona Verde Valley Tourism Council; this site is located just south of Sedona under what is now Federal Bureau of Land and Agriculture property; see chapter 3 for more on land management issues.

⁵⁶ For a discussion of the area's most infamous sweat lodge ceremony, conducted by James A. Ray, see chapter 6.

This emphasis on indigenous culture, especially spirituality, continues to be a major contributing factor for tourism, and was a common topic throughout my conversations with both visitors and residents of Sedona, whether they were members of these groups or (more likely) not.⁵⁷ Many, like Kurt, explained that Natives recognized the innate spiritual powers of the landscape, and have contributed to that energy over generations and centuries. He explained it through the metaphor of a pearl—a kind of natural process whereby a tiny grain of sand is covered in countless layers, over time, to become brighter and more visible. In this case, the natural energies of Sedona act as the sand, and the continuous human engagement with those energies through various practices has only enlarged and enhanced those powers.⁵⁸ For most seekers, there is a kind of symbiotic relationship between themselves and the land—as long as people engage the places "intentionally and with an open, loving heart", Ranjita told me, they will always get what they need, and both will be refreshed and fulfilled.⁵⁹

Residents of the town are largely White (92%), predominantly female (100 females for every 88 males), and with a median age of 50 (with more than 60% of the population being over 45).⁶⁰ According to the official Sedona Chamber of Commerce, the target demographic of tourists are aged 35-54, with a household income of more than

⁵⁷ See chapters 5 and 6 for more on appropriation.

⁵⁸ For more on the naturalization of indigenous spirituality, and the problems with this tendency, see chapter 3.

⁵⁹ See Chapter 4 for a discussion of "work".

⁶⁰ U.S. Census Bureau

\$100,000, and with a college education.⁶¹ The same organization describes Sedona's brand simply as "unique natural beauty meets breadth of amenities"—it offers, that is, both innate and community-based attractions. While it is difficult to pin down a precise number of visitors, especially Arizonans who may not spend the night, the Chamber of Commerce estimates about 3 million annually. These visitors spend an average of \$500 per day while in Sedona, generating more than 65% of the city's operating costs.⁶²

Spirituality is a major factor in the tourism and commerce of Sedona; the Sedona Metaphysical Spiritual Association is an affinity group of the Chamber of Commerce, and the section on Spiritual and Personal Enrichment is the largest on the Chamber's website.

Sedona's official tourist site claims it to be, "The Most Beautiful Place on Earth: In So Many Ways".⁶³ The emphasis on art and spirituality is clear in the description of the monthly First Fridays in the Galleries event:

The last rays of sun streak the red rock cliffs with a glossy sheen and a dreamy light washes over the town as the fast-falling dusk bruises the sky in shades of burgundy, blood orange and plum. Into this radiant color palette, patrons move from gallery to gallery, food is nibbled, wine is sipped and inspiration is inhaled... The raw physical beauty of Sedona lures artists, ignites their passions and often provokes their best work... a special magic exists... There's a palpable energy as so many like-minded people gather in the twilight and admire the textures, colors and details of these vibrant one-of-a-kind expressions of art.⁶⁴

⁶¹ http://sedonachamber.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Sedona-2014_2015-Annual-Report-Viewer-Friendly.pdf; it should not be surprising that this is, in fact, one of the demographic sectors with the highest concentration of "other" or "none" affiliation according to Pew's 2014 Religious Landscape Survey.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ <http://visitsedona.com/>

⁶⁴ Sedona Tourism Board, at Visitsedona.com

This is no mere tourist destination. This is a place meant to be experienced through all the senses, a place to be *felt*. It is a place to be *experienced*, with like-minded people. It is a place to engage with the material realities, both natural and cultural, in a way that evokes emotional response. It is a place steeped in spiritual energies—a place where people explore their innate capacity for spiritual growth by encountering and engaging with divine powers that inhabit or are reflected in the landscape. It is a place of raw power, just waiting to be transformed into art (*viz* a commodifiable good). In none of the tourism materials is this notion of Sedona’s *natural* spirituality ever challenged or complicated. Indeed, visitors are inundated with the idea that, whatever Sedona’s charms, powers, and attractions, they are innate, eternal, and equally available to all visitors. While there is a clear implicit emphasis on Sedona’s commercial offerings (including art, food, and wine), these are doubly valuable when consumed against the backdrop of Sedona’s magic and energies.

The Isle of Avalon: Glastonbury



Image 13: Glastonbury Tor, Glastonbury, England. Photograph by the author. April 2012.

"There is on the confines of Western Britain a certain royal island, called in the ancient speech Glastonia, marked out by broad boundaries...and dedicated to the most sacred of deities..."

-Saint Augustine of Canterbury⁶⁵

The morning of my first trip to Glastonbury in April 2012 was predictably rainy. An hour bus ride from Bristol through the lush green reminded me constantly that I was no longer in Arizona. We traveled through narrow streets not wide enough for two cars, let alone buses, between hedgerows and crumbling stone walls, past wide rolling fields. After a brief stop in nearby Wells, the bus made its way slowly down High Street to the town cross, and I realized I had arrived in an unique place. Surrounded by crystal shops, metaphysical bookstores, and vegan cafes, with people strolling the winding cobbled streets in everything from top hats and cloaks, to bare feet and homespun dashikis, to sensible tourist-wear, the town felt, at first, like a baffling mix of Renaissance Faire, Pagan festival, and hipster hangout. Shops like The Green Man and Cat and Cauldron, sit alongside more traditional English pubs and the ubiquitous fish and chip restaurants.

About thirty miles south of Bristol and 130 west of London, Glastonbury had approximately 8,900 residents during the 2011 census.⁶⁶ Although the village lacks a railway station (a true rarity in that part of the world), the economy is based largely on tourism and religious pilgrimage. Glastonbury is perhaps most widely known for its eponymous music festival; in 2014, one million people worldwide registered for a chance

⁶⁵ Several websites, books, and other documents cite this quote, but I have not been able to locate the original source; its continued and consistent usage, however, provides a point of inquiry relevant here.

⁶⁶ Office for National Statistics; current estimates indicate very little change since that time.

at 120,000 tickets.⁶⁷ The director of the Glastonbury Pilgrim Reception Centre estimates that its documented figure of 30,000 annual visitors accounts for only 10% of the actual figure.⁶⁸ Aside from the visible presence of alternative spiritual options, the town is also a site of Christian pilgrimage. While it has always been a small town, records indicate a thriving medieval pilgrim industry supported by a local market economy specializing in cider, cheese, leather goods, and wool.⁶⁹ This history of commerce and trade remains a vital part of Glastonbury's identity; regular markets and street fairs pepper the town's annual calendar. Spatially, if not ideologically, it is dominated by Catholic presence; the Glastonbury Abbey, founded in the 7th century and in ruins since the 16th, provides an impressive focal point for both regular pilgrimages, and for discourses on the ancient sacrality of the area. The abbey is a registered historical building, and hosts both Catholic and Anglican pilgrimages, as well as a busy educational calendar.

⁶⁷ The festival actually takes place about 7 miles from Glastonbury, in Pilton; <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/glastonbury-2014-numbers-facts-figures-374186>

⁶⁸ This accounts only for visitors who register at the Centre, whether on official, church-sanctioned pilgrimage or otherwise.

⁶⁹ This tradition continues today; nearby Street is the international headquarters of Clarks Shoes. Cheddar Gorge is about 15 miles away.



Image 14: Nave from the High Altar with King Arthur's supposed grave in the foreground; Lady Chapel, a site venerated by many different groups with feminist spiritualities, including Catholic Marian groups and the local Goddess Temple affiliates. Glastonbury Abbey. Photographs by the author. April 2012.

In the early 20th century, a young, wealthy, and eccentric resident of Bristol named Wellesley Tudor Pole had a vision of himself as a monk at ancient Glastonbury Abbey. Inspired by this experience, Tudor Pole visited the town, and used dowsing to locate a mysterious blue bowl near the Chalice Well, which he claimed was the famed Holy Grail. While this claim was quickly and convincingly refuted, the story remains a vital part of Glastonbury lore; people continue to assert claims that tie both Jesus and Joseph of Arimathea to the area.⁷⁰ One legend explains that Joseph brought a young Jesus to the area to build Britain's first church. He later returned with the Holy Grail after his

⁷⁰ In fact, the bowl was Italian-made, and modern. See Benham 2006.

nephew's death. Upon arrival, he climbed a hill—what is now known as Wearyall Hill—to survey the land. He thrust his walking staff into the ground, where it took root to become what is known as the Glastonbury Thorn. This tree—a graft from which also grows on Abbey grounds—flowers twice a year, and a sprig is sent to the British monarch every year at Christmas.⁷¹



Image 15: Glastonbury Thorn on abbey grounds. July 2015; photograph by the author.

By 1959, Tudor Pole had purchased the property on which the bowl has been found, and created the Chalice Well Trust, which continues to own and operate the grounds as a garden and tourist site. A student of diverse and esoteric mysteries, Tudor Pole wrote extensively on the Baha'i tradition, angels, and spiritual experience. He emphasized the

⁷¹ Even non-Christians point to these stories, in part to support the claim that this is a special and sacred place, and has been for many people throughout history.

gnostic power of visions, and the cohesive interrelations of religious histories. As an influential founder of the modern Glastonbury, these notions remain part of the characteristic spiritual culture of the place.

The *Visit Britain* website maintained by The British Tourist authority describes Glastonbury today as:

small in size, but rich in offerings, this Somerset town is a centre of New Age culture, and is rumoured to be the final resting place of King Arthur...Glastonbury is a joy to visit any time of year with its incense-scented mix of English charm, alternative culture and eye-opening spiritual history. Explore the offbeat, independent shops selling everything from healing crystals to organic beauty products. Make sure you climb Glastonbury Tor to take in the views and feel the good vibrations, then visit the holy Chalice Well, which is surrounded by peaceful gardens.⁷²

Like the marketing of Sedona, Glastonbury is portrayed as offering both natural and community assets, and an emphasis on the available emotional experiences dominates the tourism literature. Also like Sedona, the commercial opportunities, especially in its many "offbeat, independent shops" is also emphasized. Visitors are encouraged to engage in commercial exchange (ie, shopping), but also in meaningful labor (ie, hiking), and the natural energies of the space. The line between tourism and pilgrimage is blurred in this quest for valuable experience.

For the people who live in Glastonbury, it is a special place, even and perhaps most especially in its most eccentric ways. A local Druid leader, Tim explained with his characteristically offbeat charm that:

There are something like five shops dedicated to 'healing' crystals, two apothecaries, several healing centres, retreat centres and 'holistic' B&Bs. It

⁷² <https://www.visitbritain.com/gb/en/england/southwest/glastonbury>

probably is one of the main ways that residents earn a living off tourists. The main reasons why people move to Glastonbury are either some kind of spiritual seeking or a need for healing, which kind of amount to the same thing. It is by no means the whole story; Glastonbury has many layers - radical eco-politics, Christian pilgrimage, shoe-making (Clarks), cider-drinking and 'alternative' spirituality all add to the mix.

He went on to explain, however, that the very aspects of Glastonbury that make it appealing as a spiritual tourist destination also impact day-to-day life in unique and potentially problematic ways: "What it means for locals is that you can't buy socks or underwear anywhere in town. It also results in this rather cynical counter-culture (sic) reaction with jokes about yoghurt-weaving and crystal suppositories being de-rigueur. It also means we have more than our fair share of mental-health issues, as not everyone finds healing here." For Tim and others engaged in the spiritual life of Glastonbury, these sardonic critiques are not uncommon. In fact, few people I spoke with did *not* have some kind of criticism for Glastonbury's eclectic culture—whether it was the apparent consumerism that dominates much of the town's visible culture, or the fact that mentally-ill or socially unstable people come to Glastonbury for healing without being willing to "do the work" required to heal themselves.⁷³ In any case, what Tim's description illustrates is that, good and bad, Glastonbury is a place set apart—a place defined by its SBNR culture, and the visibility of its many diverse spiritual options.

Who are these people?

This project is aimed at spirituality in its more concentrated and extreme modes, or what I think of as "whole life" SBNR; the people with whom I engaged during the

⁷³ For more on the topic of "work", see chapter 4.

course of research were those for whom spirituality is a full-time (pre)occupation. These people, particularly in places like Glastonbury and Sedona, are producers of the SBNR domain as much as (if not more than) they are consumers. The constant flows of tourists and visitors ensures that the ideas and practices developed in these concentrated centers becomes distributed and dispersed into the broader global spiritual networks of exchange. By situating my study within two central sites of spiritual exchange, I am able to consider spirituality as articulated through economic processes, rather than as some free-floating ephemeral phenomenon. I am also offering a complication to the notion that spirituality is religion found in secular spaces, or, alternatively, that it is a fundamentally personal and socially detached process.⁷⁴

It is important to note that virtually every resident of these towns is somehow engaged with spiritual commerce, whether that be healing, retreats, working in any of the many alternative shops, or tourism more broadly. Also important is the fact that every key participant is white. In fact, nearly all seekers I encountered in any meaningful way were at least evidently white, with the exception of Sedona artist Ha-Ru-Ko, who is a Japanese immigrant, and Shekinashram's co-manager Radhe, who is Argentinian-born. The question of why this is the case is a subject for another project, but there is clearly some element of social power dynamics (and globalized migration of peoples) at play in this. To whom spirituality is appealing (and accessible) reveals much about its mechanisms and construction. Here, I provide a brief introduction to the main

⁷⁴ See Bender 2010, Bellah 1985, etc.

participants of my project, putting them into their particular contexts, and outlining key characteristics and importance for each.

Ministers and Healers: Key Participants in Sedona

Ranjita, the owner and manager of Your Heart's Home retreat sanctuary in Sedona, refers to herself as a "portal of permission". Her job, she explained to me, is to provide a safe space for people to explore their own spirituality. She is a guide, and a facilitator of that work, but each person must do the work for themselves. Alternatively self-styled as "Faery Godmother", "Spiritual Midwife", and "transformational healing artist", Ranjita's specialty is in so-called "body work". Comprising massage, reiki, and other forms of practice that emphasize the mind-body-soul connection, many practitioners, like Ranjita, are certified as ministers rather than massage therapists or similar. Having lived in Sedona for more than 30 years (that is, from almost precisely the time of the 1987 Convergence), Ranjita considers herself a healer and caretaker of the land and those who visit it. She explains that she *is here to guide people, to help them find their own experiences. They come to me wounded by religion, and they need someone to show them it's ok to leave the safety of that structure. I guess I help them jump off that ledge, but they don't fall...they fly toward truth, toward God.*

She describes herself as a child as incredibly curious, with a close connection to God. But by the age of six, she had suffered what she refers to as "Catholic indoctrination." During her childhood, she continued to ask profound questions of the (mostly Catholic) adults around her, whom she says were "unsettled" by her queries. Their tendency to dismiss difficult and puzzling theological issues with the doctrine of

Mystery was unsatisfying for Ranjita; she explained that she quickly realized that the Catholic God "isn't the God I know, the God I understand". She cultivated her personal connection to God, and spent a lot of her youth researching non-Christian traditions. When she arrived in Sedona, things "just fell into place", and all of her confusions about God and herself were clarified. She describes her personal spiritual journey as a process of undoing the false religious, cultural, and ideological baggage that she had acquired in her early life. She explains her belief in spirituality as a natural birthright—a kind of innate power that needs to be preserved and cultivated. Although she sees spirituality as something accessible to all, she was careful to always emphasize that each person must "do the work" for themselves.

The minister of the Church of the Golden Age in Sedona, Arianha, leads a regular congregation of more than thirty members. A native New Yorker, Arianha has traveled around the world collecting wisdom from a variety of cultures and traditions. She describes her particular gifts as a channel. She explains that she often had visions and prophetic dreams as a child, and understands her talents to be natural. As she grew up, influenced by the broader culture's disregard and distrust of such abilities, she ignored and repressed them. At thirty, she finally gave in, and began formalized training as a channel, cultivating and encouraging her latent abilities through practice.⁷⁵ She believes herself to have access to multiple dimensions, and direct contact to many important personages, including Christ, the divine creator mother, and others. The notion of

⁷⁵ That she specifies 30 is important; she often articulates her own spiritual journey in ways that parallel other important religious figures, including Jesus and the Buddha.

"soulmates" figure prominently into her identity as well. Rather than the popular romantic understanding, her version describes embodied people whose current soul contains elements or aspects with which her own soul once co-embodied. One such living person today, as she understands it, is Richard Gere, who confirms her claim, according to Arianha.

The Church's members also figure prominently in this project. Their collective participation provided me a context within which to examine how creation, refinement, and exchange of spiritual goods and ideas happened within a very small and well-defined community. Although there were always visitors at church events, a majority of participants were regular congregants, many of whom are ordained through the church's minister program. This allows them, like Ranjita, to perform certain kinds of healing and other practices that might otherwise be subject to medical or professional certification procedures. I once asked Arianha and one of the regular members about the "church" designation. They gave each other a meaningful look, and laughed, before Arianha explained that *there was some push-back initially. People hear the word church and immediately their hackles are raised. But, in the end, we decided that it was a meaningful designation. There's a lot of baggage in the word, but there's also a lot of history and meaning. And, it means that people are able to find us a lot easier. There's some level of legitimacy with being called "a church".*

I met Bryce, at one of my first weekly services. A Canadian in his early 50s, he visits Sedona regularly; during this time, he was on a contract to restore and sell a house while occupying it. He is also a writer and entrepreneur, exploring a variety of self-improvement techniques including fitness and nutrition alongside more explicitly

spiritual modes. While in town, he immerses himself in its spiritual offerings, attending classes, visiting metaphysical healers, and hiking the vortexes. While he does not choose to make Sedona his permanent home, he tells me that it feels like his "soul's home", and he tries to visit at least twice a year to "recharge [his] spiritual batteries". He explained that, as a gay man, he feels uncomfortable with most institutional churches, but needs "more" than a life of modern disenchantment. Sedona, for him, is a powerful place, where "emotions are magnified"; it is a place, he tells me, where visitors cannot deny the "something more" he seeks—it is self-evident, visible in the landscape, and experienced in the soul and body.

At another important Sedona congregation, the Unity Church, I met Bryan, who is one of the community's chaplains. A medical doctor by training, he became involved with spirituality and Unity when he began to recognize the gaps in his secular understanding of the world. He explained that "lots of people are allergic to church. There's so much wounding around religion." He moved to Sedona when he realized that he wanted to dedicate more time to exploring the connections between mind and body. Now, he spends his time counseling seekers, and exploring the area's spiritual powers. He is particularly interested in how the energies of the land mimic and coordinate with those of the human body. As a Unity Chaplain, Bryan understands his role as one of spiritual Apostleship; he provides prayer, healing, and spiritual counseling for congregants, visitors, and any interested seekers.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Such services are offered for free up to 15 minutes, and for a "love offering" for longer sessions. This is a common form of economic exchange within SBNR circles, and describes a donation or payment of whatever the consumer deems appropriate.

As an official Church, Unity has a special place within the Sedona SBNR network. Literature describes the church as "a New Age spiritual center, New Thought church, and energy vortex...[it is] a hub for spiritual travelers...on their path to remembrance that Love (Christ) is who we are...God's presence then wells up in us and overflows as a life of celebration and abundance."⁷⁷ Like other Unity congregations, Sedona's church emphasizes the ideology that reality is created and shaped through our individual and collective thoughts and intentional practices. Members interpret the Bible and other texts metaphorically, and argue that Christ is not unique, but an example; we are all divine, and just need to work to remember so.

Finally, Kurt owns and runs a healing retreat center called Inner Journeys. Like Ranjita, they offer a variety of services, including body work, medicine wheel ceremonies, and angel healing. He moved to Sedona to work as a tour guide, and because he loves the outdoors. He says that he spent most of his early years in the area *smoking a lot, and working, and not doing much with life*. After a while though, the stories he was telling to tourists began to take on a new, vibrant quality. He began to feel the energies he described to people at the vortexes, and started having a powerful sense of presence in the landscape. He married a fellow seeker, and founded his retreat center to help guide others through the changes that being in a place like Sedona facilitate.

Kurt uses many practices and images that have their roots in Native American cultural practice. I asked him how he learned them, and he laughed: "you mean because I'm a white guy?" He explained that he had been adopted by a local full-blooded Native

⁷⁷ <http://unityofsedona.com/about-us/>

man, who trained him, and authorized him to use certain tools. *Some people in the tribe had an issue with it. But my teacher never did, so I didn't. These tools were developed in this landscape, so they're often what works best here. You have to work with the place to facilitate healing, both of the people and the land itself.*⁷⁸ Along with his wife, Mariposa, Kurt envisions his work as a process of creating a better reality through the employ of these various tools. Their website explains that "by becoming aware of the Energetic web of life, honoring our past and embracing the present we can truly become stewards of the Earth and co-create a beautiful future."⁷⁹

Mystics and Gatekeepers: Key Participants in Glastonbury.

Trevor owns a prominent shop in the center of Glastonbury. His partner, Liz, is a prolific and popular science-fiction author. He is rather brash and cynical, with a sharp sardonic wit; she is brainy and perceptive, but with a similarly skeptical outlook. Trevor describes himself as a curious child, with an insatiable appetite for the weird, and an obsession with fantasy and science fiction books. He attended one of the few remaining High Anglican churches with his family in the 1960s, and valued the highly ritualistic aspects of the liturgy. The theology, particularly the reliance on clergy for access to God, he explains, he "always knew was bullocks". He wanted something more real, more direct, and began researching various branches of esotericism and magic. Now, he calls

⁷⁸ For more on the issue of indigeneity and authenticity questions, see chapters 3 and 5.

⁷⁹ <http://www.sedona-spiritualretreats.com/about.html>

himself "mostly an occultist, or Pagan, or witch, or druid, depending on who I'm talking to."⁸⁰

Within the broader community network, Trevor sees himself as a keeper of knowledge. He often refers to himself as the shop's USP, or "unique selling point".⁸¹ For the many pilgrims and tourists who find their way into The Cat and Cauldron, he functions as a kind of esoteric clergyman, doling out magical remedies and occult tools alongside his seemingly encyclopedic knowledge. While he makes a living dispensing both material goods and information, it is the latter that he sees as his contribution to Glastonbury's "scene". He explains that *a crystal is just a rock until its properties and capacities are explained and understood. A bundle of sage does little good if the buyer does not know how to use it effectively in meditation. Knowledge is no good unless it is used, and waving around a stick does not do a thing unless there is conscious intention behind it.*

Trevor introduced me to Michelle, an American woman who had recently moved to Glastonbury. She had recently left her spiritual community on the east coast, along with her husband, after coming to the conclusion that both were toxic. She became interested in Reiki and other forms of healing because, she explains, "[she] was interested in healing [herself]. [She] had to recover from real trauma." This trauma was largely the result of a charismatic but corrupt leader of a "destructive" religious community that

⁸⁰ This flexibility in self-identification depending on situation is one subtle way in which seekers like Trevor articulate the importance of cultural capital; see chapter 5 for more.

⁸¹ This notion of the self, and one's experiences and knowledge as spiritual goods, often traded or exchanged, will be explored more fully in chapters 4 and 5.

rejected her unique viewpoints that occasionally ran contrary to the status quo. She tells me that she used to be able to communicate with bees, birds, and other animals, but that this ability waned as she grew up. Whether this was due to natural aging processes, or displacement of these capabilities by social norms and expectations, she is not sure.

Part of her journey, and her reason for relocating to Glastonbury specifically, was that she found a teacher she felt could help her reclaim these innate spiritual abilities and knowledge. She explained at our first meeting in a small cafe frequented by local Druids: *I came here for a workshop last year. I was always sort of off-put by the crazy expense of classes and things. Some of these charlatans charge five or six hundred dollars for a weekend workshop. But I heard about my teacher, and I just knew he was the real deal. Real enough for me to move here after only spending a couple of days. I just knew...he knows how to access the truth, and I need that.* Although she critiques the consumer culture of spirituality, when I asked her if her teacher charges, she admitted that he did, and a similar amount; but she clarified again that "he actually knows what he's doing, so it's worth any cost. And this is his full time occupation, so it's practical." Michelle, when I was spending time with her, was well aware of the practical costs of spirituality; she did not yet have legal rights to work, and was constantly concerned with how she would continue to fund her spiritual journey.

Just next door to my flat lived Arianna, an older Australian who has lived on and off in Glastonbury for several decades. An artist by trade and profession, her favorite subject is angels. She had visited Glastonbury initially because of its reputation as a spiritual center, and because she found it a productive environment for the creation of her art. She explained, however, that more recently, she had retreated from the town proper,

and chose to mostly stay at home and paint. *There's too much business down in town. It's become frantic, especially during the summer. So, I mostly stay on the outskirts. I walk to town as often as I can, but I avoid town during the crowded time. It just doesn't feel the same with so many people.* She later implied that the visible consumerism in town made her uncomfortable, and lamented the shift in spirituality as a tourist trade. Although she largely makes her home in the UK, she also has strong familial and spiritual ties to both the U.S. and Australia.

Brenna, a middle-aged American who was on a six month spiritual sojourn, moved into another flat attached to the main house at the foot of Glastonbury Tor. She had visited the town a decade before, and when she found herself in a time of major transition after a divorce and career change, she sold her home, packed a bag, and returned to Avalon. She spent most of her time "just being" in the space, wandering the hills and paths, and "absorbing the energies". She had planned to stay only a month before traveling through the UK, but ended up remaining for more than three. When I asked her what she wanted to gain from her travels, she explained that she wasn't sure. *I just know I need to be here. My angels, my Self keep telling me to stay. When they tell me to leave, I'll leave and go wherever I'm drawn to...it's not an exact science, and I can't put a timeline on it. I just know I have more work to do here.* She had come to Glastonbury to utilize its many resources, both natural and commercial, and did not plan to leave until she had acquired what she needed.

The house I occupied in Glastonbury is owned by Anna and Simon, an incredibly open, friendly couple who relocated from London in order to give their (now grown)

children a quieter, less chaotic life.⁸² They were supportive of my project, and occasionally hosted dinners to which they invited people they thought might be helpful for my research. They shared their love of wine, farmers' markets, and music graciously with anyone lucky enough to pass through their doors. While Simon is more cynical (and more interested in motorbikes than crystals) I spoke with Anna on many occasions about spirituality in Glastonbury. She understands herself to be gatekeeper to a powerful force, and explained it like this: *when I bought the house, I knew that I was also inheriting this role. The energies of the Tor all run down this backside and through the property. So I have a responsibility to act as a kind of gatekeeper. It's an honor, but it's also a difficult job. I feel all of the energies stronger than others, and in Glastonbury those energies are already powerful. It's particularly hard when it falls to me to keep the shadows at bay. So many people only see the light, airy-fairy side of Glastonbury. But underneath all of that, there is a lot of darkness. And that's just as powerful. It takes a lot of effort on my part, and lots of other guardians around here. It's a labor of love though.*

I met Eloise when she moved into the main part of the house, using the large space as a retreat center while Anna and Simon were away for a few weeks. She is an Angel Reiki specialist, and has organized workshops and retreats around the UK, and in Greece. She describes herself as an "indigo child", a common term used to describe children who are particularly sensitive and spiritually advanced.⁸³ She says she never

⁸² The schools in Glastonbury are quite good, and so the area does attract a certain population of families.

⁸³ Often diagnosed with ADHD and similar disorders, many seekers claim that, in fact, these children are simply more attuned to the invisible realities than the rest of us. See Carrol and Tober 1999.

played the way other children do, and had a hard time connecting with people her own age. Instead, she preferred the company of adults, and spent her time developing rituals in her garden, and reading about diverse cultures and religious traditions. She was never satisfied with her parents' version of Christianity, and explained that she always "wanted more"—more connection, more experience, more freedom to explore and integrate.

Elahn is the founder and spiritual leader of Shekinashram, a Bhakti yoga center at the foot of Glastonbury Tor. He is soft-spoken, but open and friendly in conversation. Having established the ashram in 2003, Elahn and his wife Radhe continue to run it as an important center in Glastonbury. He explained that he had explored many different religious options before honing in on yoga and Hinduism. When he discovered Bhakti, he didn't feel the need to have any of his former, more eclectic practices. As he describes it, *Bhakti is open, and there is room for everything. But it's also specific, and gives us some really powerful, beautiful images and ideas to work with. This is my dharma—being here in this place, now, and providing a space for others to come and worship the godhead.* Elahn travels regularly, but always returns to this site to oversee the thriving, volunteer-run community.

I met Claire, a young French woman, at Shekinashram on an unusually warm summer evening in Glastonbury. A professional harpist, she was in the process of trying to relocate to Britain permanently, but found herself traveling across the channel almost monthly in the meantime. When I asked her why she wanted to move, she explained that *in France, there is too much conflict. Too much anxiety between the secular people and the religious people, mostly the Muslims. I feel like England has a better way of thinking about it. And Glastonbury is a holy place for everyone. It doesn't matter what you*

believe, there is a place for you here. It became evident that for Claire, like for many others, spirituality is a solution to the problems of modernity. Furthermore, it is presented as a natural solution, one devoid of the baggage and human error that plagues religion in its ecclesiastical formations. This naturalization of spirituality is essential to understanding how the spiritual economies of these sites work to infuse their goods with value.

Defining Spirituality

Spirituality is often described as a process of individualizing ultimate concerns, as a kind of side-effect of modernity's emphasis on self-improvement and internalized valuation.⁸⁴ Heelas and Woodhead argue that the on-going shift away from religion and toward spirituality is best described as a shift away from "life lived in terms of external or 'objective' roles, duties, and obligations, and a turn towards life lived by reference to one's own subjective experiences."⁸⁵ In other words, religion is implicitly defined as an external (viz. communal and institutional-oriented *practice*) system, while spirituality emphasizes the internal, emotional *experience* of ultimate realities. Heelas further differentiates between religion as "obedience to a transcendent God and a tradition that mediates his authority" and spirituality as "experience of the divine immanent in life."⁸⁶ The emphasis here is on the immanent, internal aspects, while the mediating structures and modes of commitment and affiliation are deemphasized.

⁸⁴ See, for example, Bellah 1985; Bruce 1996, 2002; Giddens 1991; Heelas 1996.

⁸⁵ 2005, 2.

⁸⁶ 2002, 56

As Bender and McRoberts point out, "spirituality...is challenging to study, not so much because it lacks definition...but because it suffers from an excess of definitions."⁸⁷ Like its oft-cited (especially within the specific "spiritual, but not religious claim") counterpart *religion*, the way in which spirituality is defined shapes our analysis. And while scholars have grappled with how (and indeed, whether) to define spirituality, so have practitioners, seekers, and critics. Some have identified spirituality as a universal characteristic of human yearning, often reflected *within* religious structures.⁸⁸ Others have defined it as a kind of ethical orientation, especially as it relates to ultimate truths, whether within religious institutions or outside of them.⁸⁹ Spirituality's most critical scholars have defined it as a largely individualistic identity marker, indicative of modern culture's emphasis on narcissism, and devoid of real stabilizing or structuring social value.⁹⁰ It has been alternatively defined as a socially disengaged, individual identity claim, as not quite religion, nor quite secular, and as the perennial, universal desire for uncovering ultimate cosmic truths.⁹¹

In any case, it is clear that "the question of what is religious, what is secular, and what is spiritual is not simply a matter for scholars".⁹² I am less concerned with defining spirituality as something that can be isolated as a particular domain, and more interested

⁸⁷ 2012, 2

⁸⁸ See, for example Berger 1979

⁸⁹ e.g. Roof 1993, 1999.

⁹⁰ e.g. Aupers and Houtman 2010.

⁹¹ e.g. Heelas 1996.

⁹² Taves and Bender 2012, 2.

in how the economic structures and processes of these two towns help seekers articulate and enact their spiritual identities in context. Spirituality exists in these places—because it is discussed, practiced, and shared through a variety of means. By focusing on these sites as crucibles wherein these processes (literally) *take place*, I am able to analyze spirituality as a real social phenomenon without reifying it as an a priori object. Instead, it is created through the various processes that claim it. It is defined as it is practiced, and I take these seekers at their word that what they are doing is, if only in their own heuristic framework, qualitatively different from religion.

The SBNR claim tells us as much about claimants' views of religion as of spirituality. Religion is the foil against which spirituality is defined and understood by both scholars and practitioners. Taves and Bender have pointed out that "any who say that they are 'spiritual not religious' within the United States and Europe, however, use spirituality to designate something that is not religious", yet certainly not wholly or even primarily secular.⁹³ For most seekers, religion and science (ie, the secular) are both equally suspect for their rejection of personal and experiential data, as well as their reliance upon what is commonly viewed as dogma. Spirituality, some have argued, both borrows from and critiques these domains. Hanegraaff argues, for example, that esoteric "gnosis tends to be presented as a 'spiritual' *alternative* against the misleading claims of faith...and reason."⁹⁴

⁹³ 2012, 6.

⁹⁴ 2013, 93; see also Bender 2010.

Some have argued that the same shifts that have facilitated the growth of secularism, both as an ideal and as a practical reality, have also contributed to the rise of spirituality.⁹⁵ These changes—perhaps better understood as a series of shifts—Frisk argues, include a focus on "*eclecticism* and syncretism; emphasis on *personal experience* at the expense of ideology or dogma; uninstitutionalism or religiosity in the *private* mode; radical *egalitarianism* or recognizing each person as his/her own spiritual authority; *self-spirituality* or a shift from God to human being; and emphasis on *this-worldliness* rather than emphasizing life after death."⁹⁶

Once again, experience is highlighted; and once again, the social scaffolding that elicits and shapes experience, as well as the shared ideologies that make those experiences both intelligible and meaningful are ignored. It appears as if spirituality is a free-floating, unstructured, uninhibited domain that requires nothing more than a single person for its existence. I agree that all of the above characteristics are common amongst various conceptions of spirituality, but scholars have widely neglected the structures and processes by which this occurs. Part of the issue here, as Bender and McRoberts point out, is that scholars have paid little attention to the genealogies that have facilitated spirituality, or the way in which spirituality coalesces into networks, communities, and sites of circulation and reproduction.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ e.g. Hanegraaff 1996; Partridge 2004; Rothstein 2001.

⁹⁶ 2009, iii.

⁹⁷ 2012.

Duncan argues that "This ['Nones'] trend represents neither gradual secularization nor a completely new phenomenon of religious expression, but rather a contemporary example of the rejection of institutionalized religion that has ebbed and flowed throughout American religious history."⁹⁸ In the British context, this rejection of institutional religion has more recent roots; scholars have pointed out how the social programs of post-WWII Britain reoriented people's lives away from religious structures and toward more secular ones.⁹⁹ Likewise, Partridge's argument that "secularization and the rise of new religiosity are...simply two aspects of the same process...a fundamental process of cultural change in which identical forces can be seen to be responsible for the decline of one and the emergence of the other" is compelling.¹⁰⁰ In any case, it is clear that, whatever practitioners may articulate to the contrary, spirituality is shaped both by modern concerns, and by the continued presence of religion against which it is defined.

Taves and Bender presume that pluralism is a necessary consequence of modernity, and that "the most important consequence of the shift to modern, secular life is the resituating of religion as one option among many, in other words, highlighting religious belief as a choice rather than something accepted."¹⁰¹ But if Latour is correct in pointing out that modernity as a system of discrete domains (of which religion is but one example) has never been achieved, then perhaps the growth of spirituality is best

⁹⁸ 2015, 46; see also Schmidt 2012.

⁹⁹ See, for example, Davie 1994 and Woodhead et al 2012.

¹⁰⁰ 2004, 43.

¹⁰¹ 2012, 8.

understood as a product of that failure.¹⁰² Rather than successfully separating the various domains of knowledge, he explains, modernity has only managed to muddle them further, while insisting on their fundamental and logical distinctions. This has opened up possibilities for new hybridities, of which, I would argue, spirituality is an important example. The result is something that simultaneously borrows from and rejects both traditional religious and secular worldviews. A dynamic both/and notion is vital in understanding spirituality within the framework of secularity and religious change. As Kripal points out,

such a both/and move should not be construed as a simple compromise, as an act of practical diplomacy, or as an easy abstract solution without real costs...the truth is that such a both/and reading comes with a heavy cost for both the traditionally religious and the traditionally scientific readings. Specifically, the epistemology of faith would have to surrender its common literalisms and the epistemology of reason would have to surrender its absolute commitment to materialism and recognize, fully, that rationalism and materialism are not the same thing at all.¹⁰³

In the end, spirituality is a mode of engaging with a complex contemporary world that relies on particular understandings of both religion and secularity, but which often obscures or occults this conceptual and practical relationship.

Religious Studies "scholars have engaged in the quest for a unique and definitive *sine qua non*, the 'that without which' religion would not be religion but rather an instance of something else"; spirituality is often identified as this element, finally freed of its institutional structures, and flourishing as the natural, unfettered capacity for accessing

¹⁰² 1999.

¹⁰³ 2012: 240.

ultimate truths.¹⁰⁴ This notion, which is explicitly articulated by seekers, and often implicitly by scholars, could only emerge from a context of religious diversity and pluralism. For "it is characteristic in a globalized world that many different belief systems and ideologies coexist side by side...as a consequence, for the individual the plausibility of *all* belief systems is undermined...the ideological dimension loses importance and...the subjective experience dimension stands out as the most important aspect of contemporary religion."¹⁰⁵ As many SBNR claimants argue, if no religion has sole access to comprehensive truth, but we admit that several religions have some piece of truth, or that all religions are essentially different versions of a universal truth, it becomes possible, or perhaps even necessary, to blend elements together into a kind of cosmological bricolage. As some have pointed out, "spirituality is eclectic; some regard everything from near-death experiences, spirit guides, and books about angels, to meditation and prayer fellowships, as types of spirituality."¹⁰⁶ This kind of eclecticism relies on an understanding of spirituality as universal and timeless; it is the *sine qua non* scholars had been searching for, or so it would seem.

Scholars, like the seekers they examine, have continued to understand "the spiritual either as the truth of religion that is 'beyond' the history of religious traditions or as the constant, ahistorical quality of searching for the divine."¹⁰⁷ As Schmidt argues, with the advent of nineteenth century religious literacy and increasingly progressivism,

¹⁰⁴ Smith 1982, 5.

¹⁰⁵ Frisk and Nynäs 2012, 3.

¹⁰⁶ Ecklund and Long 2011, 255; see also Wuthnow 1998.

¹⁰⁷ Taves and Bender 2012, 6.

"religion could be saved only if it became spirituality" by locating its universal essence, and separating itself from problematic institutional and dogmatic structures.¹⁰⁸ There is a deep and tangled relationship between the rise of the liberal academy and the growth of spirituality. Hanegraaff argues that the academy and esotericism function as mutually constitutive domains, with the former rejecting and demarcating the content of the latter in attempts to define itself within the confines of modern liberal expectations for knowledge.¹⁰⁹

Much of this understanding of spirituality is implicit. That is, scholars do not often articulate spirituality as such, but their projects often rely on this presupposition. They do so through research that emphasizes the internal, mental, and individual modes of spiritual engagement, and by deemphasizing its genealogical, emplaced, embodied, and communal modes.¹¹⁰ While I acknowledge the importance in understanding how spirituality is discursively oriented, I reiterate that looking at its particular material and social contexts contributes a valuable dimension to our broader understanding of the contemporary religious (and spiritual, and secular) landscape.

While an examination of spirituality's ideological and notional contours has been valuable in establishing a field of inquiry, scholarship on the trend must consider spirituality in its entangled, embedded, emplaced, and embodied social realities. Some have analyzed the ways in which communities and networks contribute to the inculcation

¹⁰⁸ 2005, 228.

¹⁰⁹ 2013, 2014.

¹¹⁰ e.g. McRoberts 2004.

of alternative religious and spiritual identities; they have emphasized the ideological and theological dimensions (viz. psychological) of coalescence.¹¹¹ Mercadante presents a detailed and systematic account of SBNR ideologies and notions, but couches it within a Protestant-tinged framework that relies on "belief" as the fundamental mode, implicitly arguing, once again, that spirituality is best understood as an internal, mental mode of engagement.¹¹²

The Spiritual Marketplace

The explosion of religious options has opened up not only new ways of being religious, but ways of engaging with moral and cosmological questions outside traditional religious institutions. Some of these new ways of being religious and spiritual are in fact revitalized, reorganized, and reimagined forms of other systems. Schmidt pointed out at "seeker spirituality...is an artifact of religious liberalism", further highlighting the connections between American disestablishment and the proliferation of SBNR trends.¹¹³ Partridge introduces the notion of occulture, working in part from Campbell's concept of the cultic milieu,¹¹⁴ to describe specifically those trends, communities, and movements that originate or have roots within occultism, esotericism, and Eastern traditions, including New Age, Contemporary Paganism, and various magical groups such as the

¹¹¹ See, for example, Eller 1995 , Luhrmann 1989, Pike 1990, and York 1995.

¹¹² 2014.

¹¹³ Schmidt 2005, 6-7.

¹¹⁴ Campbell coined the term to describe the various eclectic and diverse elements of religiosity that have been "othered" through the secularization process, and which are often seen in opposition to the dominant cultural norms. This milieu, inhabited by what he terms a "society of seekers" represents the heterodox, sometimes deviant aspects of modern culture for Campbell.

Order of the Golden Dawn. Campbell included in his explanation "the worlds of the occult and the magical, of spiritualism and psychic phenomena, of mysticism and new thought, of alien intelligences and lost civilizations, of faith healing and nature cure."¹¹⁵ It is made up, in other words, of what Kripal calls "damned data" and Hanegraaff, "rejected knowledge", and forms the "other" against which modern, rational secularity defines itself. Occulture, Kripal argues, echoing Partridge, "represents a dialectic, a 'confluence of secularization and sacralization', not a final victory of one process over the other."¹¹⁶ Its continued, necessary presence demands that we reconsider what it means for people to claim to be secular, religious, spiritual, or all (or none) of these. It is perfectly logical to examine this triad through social scientific methods, as it seems to me to be a reformulation of the classic anthropological triad of magic, religion, and science, reimagined for a contemporary context.

Scholars of contemporary religion recognize the impacts of a religious marketplace, with all of its diverse options. Partridge argues that "individual believers are constantly aware that their faith is a *chosen* worldview from a spectrum of worldviews on offer."¹¹⁷ This appears particularly the case in the U.S. with its official disestablishment, but the mechanisms that allow for religious pluralism (and the resultant religious plurality) to flourish have become instated in much of the developed West. This has meant, for many scholars, that spirituality as a diverse and flexible category of expression

¹¹⁵ 1971, 122.

¹¹⁶ 2009, 29.

¹¹⁷ 2004, 15.

and identity within this framework, is best understood as a sort of by-product of the visible presence of religious options. Partridge argues that "consumerist and pluralist democracies encourage the turn toward essentialism, relativism, and epistemological individualism", which has, in turn, influenced the rise of alternative religiosity.¹¹⁸ Similarly, as Kripal points out, "modern capitalism tends to transform traditional religious beliefs and practices, which were originally based in tight-knit communities, into free-floating products available for purchase and consumption by individual consumers."¹¹⁹ I would argue that, at certain places, these communities continue to be central, although they are not perhaps as rigidly constructed to maintained as their more traditional ecclesiastical counterparts. And yet, this consumption happens within strong networks, and with both social structuring and implications.

Simmel argues that economy as a social structure "consists not only in exchanging *values*, but in the *exchange* of values."¹²⁰ It is this complex system of exchange, valuation, and commodification of spirituality that this project analyzes. As Hanegraaf explains, the contemporary esoteric milieu, or spirituality, is largely a "continuous process of recycling, repackaging, and creative reinterpretation of more or less all the esoteric and occultist materials."¹²¹ I want to reiterate here that while spirituality does rely upon commercial enterprise and consumption practices for its

¹¹⁸ 2005a, 33.

¹¹⁹ 2008, 400.

¹²⁰ 2011, 84.

¹²¹ 2013, 43.

perpetuation and viability, it is no more the case than with more traditional religions. In fact, I would argue, the SBNR ideology of on-going reality creation and the necessity for intentional practices may indicate that spirituality is *less* about consumption, and more about *production*, particularly in these pilgrimage and tourist centers.

Anthropologists have long acknowledged the social dimensions of religious perpetuation. Evans-Pritchard noted that "once brought into existence by collective action, religion gains a degree of autonomy, and proliferates in all sorts of ways which cannot be explained by reference to the social structure which gave birth to it."¹²² In other words, we cannot understand spirituality by examining its origin—the classical anthropologists demonstrated the folly of attempting to trace the cultural evolution of religion. Instead, by recognizing religiosity's social and collective dimension, we are better equipped to examine it in its many and varied instantiations. Importantly, scholars who explore economy as a social enterprise recognize that scarcity, difficulty of acquisition (including the degree of sacrifice required), and the social capital of the persons involved in the exchange have direct impact on the value of the commodity in question. Such a theory is critical of the simple explanation of spirituality is a consumerist trend. Instead, spirituality is as much created by these exchanges as it is consumed. Appadurai provides the example of a wedding ring, which begins its life as a commodity, but through social interactions, is withdrawn from the marketplace, takes on

¹²² 1965, 56.

unique qualities, and holds its own memory and discursive value.¹²³ These commodities, in other words, lose their fungibility—and through this process, become enlivened.

While the term commodity has been largely used to describe material artifacts, I use it more broadly to indicate any goods (including ideological goods) that are exchanged within a particular economic structure. Whether there is any valuable distinction between commodities and goods, products, artifacts, or gifts, scholars do not agree.¹²⁴ While it is true that materiality often facilitates exchange, I want to demonstrate that within the context of Glastonbury and Sedona, stories, behaviors, affect, and other non-objects are commodified and exchanged. Commodities, in my estimation, are those elements that produce social value—it is in the exchange that this value is produced. It is not in the private, invisible space of individuals in their solitude where spirituality is born and thrives, but in the interstitial spaces between institutions, communities, and individuals. As Appadurai reminds us, "demand, that is, emerges as a function of a variety of social practices and classifications, rather than a mysterious emanation of human needs, [or] a mechanical response to social manipulations..."¹²⁵ I would argue that the demand for spiritual resources is what allows Glastonbury and Sedona to thrive. These demands are driven by the desire for contemporary people to construct themselves, their communities, and their lives in meaningful ways.

¹²³ 1986.

¹²⁴ See Appadurai, Sraffa 1961, Seddon 1978, Perlin 1982

¹²⁵ 1986, 29; see also Baudrillard 1981

Although the notion of marketplace is helpful in thinking through the consumptive aspects of spirituality, and provides us a clear set of ideas and terms with which to operate, it does not always emphasize the production phase of the market, and that is an essential at these sites of spiritual economy. To neglect that important aspect is to reaffirm the common sense that seekers themselves perpetuate of spirituality as a natural phenomenon. My goal here is to analyze the structures, mechanisms by which spirituality *takes place*, and the processes through which seekers gain conviction in their identities as "spiritual, but not religious".

Chapter 3

Spiritual Landscapes: (Super) Natural Resources

I drove north out of Sedona toward Oak Creek Canyon on a warm autumn morning, headed toward "Your Heart's Home", a retreat center I had found online. When I had emailed the owner, Ranjita, she was friendly, enthusiastic about my project, and immediately invited me for a visit. The bright, shockingly red rocks were slowly eclipsed by the increasingly dense greenery of the canyon as I drove the ten miles out of town. The roads became narrow and winding, running parallel to the canyon. I passed the busy Slide Rock State Park, and turned down a private gravel dirt road that crossed Oak Creek before looping back around southward.

I pulled into the driveway at the bottom of a steep slope. The house, with its cedar siding and wrap-around porch were, somehow, exactly what I had expected.¹²⁶ From the bottom of the hill throughout the property, little shrines with angel statues, goddess figures, and garden art offered places for quiet reflection. The tall trees provided shade, and the air was filled with the smell of pine pitch and rich greenery and the light tinkling sound of several wind chimes. The house was situated so that it jutted over the canyon slightly. Ranjita's dog greeted me first with a friendly nudge of my hand and a tail wag before she turned and started up the flagstone path toward the house, glancing over her shoulder to make sure I was following. Before I reached the patio, Ranjita herself emerged. A thin, lithe woman in her late 50s, wearing jeans, a crocheted tank top, and

¹²⁶ This is, perhaps, telling of my own expectations and preconceived notions of SBNR seekers.

sandals, she greeted me with a hug that lasted just a moment beyond what might be called "socially comfortable".¹²⁷

We sat down at a small iron table on the wooden deck, under a tall fir tree, and Ranjita brought out a couple glasses of her "special tea"—a surprisingly refreshing blend of green tea, fruit juices, and various herbal and vegetable supplements. I quickly learned that she is a warm, open, and generous woman. She told me about why she came to Sedona, and how her life had changed for the better since she had settled into this property. She explained her lifetime of seeking—in various religious sects, in many failed relationships—and described her life in Sedona as a kind of productive culmination of that seeking. We talked for more than two hours, before she interrupted our conversation. *Before we continue, I need to introduce you to someone. I think it will help you understand what I do here*, she explained. She led me to the far side of the house, where the wooden deck extended over the canyon, and pointed north toward a cleft in the rocks, where the creek flowed into the hillside.

That's Canyon Mama. When I first visited this house—when my friend owned it—I heard this voice calling to me. And she introduced herself as Canyon Mama. You see where the rock splits open, and there are two mounds on either side. That's the sacred yoni, with her legs bent up, like she's giving birth. And that way, she continued, indicating a rock mound toward the south of the house, *is Canyon Papa. Because that rock formation is phallic. At least, that's what I call him; he doesn't communicate with me like Mama does. And the movement between that and Canyon Mama, it's this amazing*

¹²⁷ This, I learned, was common amongst SBNR people, and I encountered what I began to refer to privately as "the long hug" many times over the course of my research; for more on this, see chapter 6.

flow of energy. Can you feel it? It's such a creative energy. People who come here, whether they consciously realize it or not, benefit from that energy—it moves things in them. Sedona is full of these energies flows, these rivers of potential waiting to be tapped. And that's part of what I do—I provide a space for people to feel safe tapping into these reserves, which are also inside them. I guess the landscape is a kind of mirror that reflects the truth inside everyone. The energy flows from the land, awakening the flows inside. Canyon Mama talks to me, and I talk to her. She helps me understand, to work through things. And it's my job now to take care of this place. It's a huge responsibility, but a great honor.

She continued, turning to a massive red boulder on the lawn about 10 feet from the house. I had noticed the odd placement of the rock, which was nearly cleft in two. Ranjita pointed up the side of the cliff face that ran along the back of the house. *A few years ago, there was a huge storm that blew through here. Several houses in the area were heavily damaged by mudslides and falling rocks. This huge boulder rolled down the hill, and just stopped, up on its edge like that. And see how it's split partway? It looks like a heart. If that wasn't a message, then I don't know what is. It shouldn't have just stopped like that. And it shouldn't be able to just rest there. But it is. I think it means Canyon Mama is protecting me, and that she approves of my work here. And I think she did that to prove the power of this place. It's a miracle.*

Ranjita understands the powers of Sedona to be real, vital, and intentional. They are agentive, perhaps conscious, and evidenced in the landscape and in particular events. In a video on her website, she explains that

people come to Sedona, it's a Mecca, that draws people from all over world. Because people want to receive something very, *very* real. People come here to connect to the beauty of the land. They come here to connect with their true self, their true nature....I came to Sedona to heal, to wake up, and to discover who I truly was...I have the honor of being the steward of a private retreat sanctuary. The space here is created to reflect back, to each and every person that comes, the beauty of who they are. You cannot deny the beauty...of the sacred mountains...that beauty that you see all around you here is a reflection of the same beauty that's right in here [inside you].¹²⁸

Many seekers and residents imagine these power centers to be populated by spiritual powers both latent and active. The landscapes are often understood as reflections or refractions of this underlying reality. There is a realness to the physical reality, but it is also a tool that allowed for examination of otherwise invisible resources by embodied physical people.

In this chapter, I analyze the ways in which residents and visitors to Glastonbury and Sedona conceptualize these places as power centers—that is, places where cosmic, divine, or spiritual powers are accessible. Seekers visit or inhabit these sites in order to "tap into" and utilize these powers. They engage with these landscapes as reflective tools for discovery of both the self and of the divine—a distinction often murky in both practice and discourse. I argue that SBNR conceptions of the spiritual resources in these places are naturalized through discourse and practices that articulate the essence of these energies and entities. The material reality of the landscapes, coupled with the invisible realities that enliven these sites for seekers can be understood as natural resources—elements that are vital to understanding both individual and collective SBNR identity and economic practices at these power centers.

¹²⁸ <http://www.yourheartshome.com/home.html>

I analyze the ways in which seekers describe their relationship to these towns (and the energies that define them), particularly in how they feel "drawn to" or "called by" these locations. The spiritual resources of these places, often legitimated through claims (real and imagined) of indigenous religious value, serve to authorize and authenticate the current ideologies and practices that define these communities. I consider how these spaces are managed, and the mechanisms that facilitate and restrict access. Many of the specific sites in both areas are owned and managed by government or non-profit organizations. Who, when, and under what circumstances individuals are allowed into these spaces, and what practices they are allowed to perform therein, provides a glimpse into the power dynamics of these sites, as well as the logistics of their maintenance as sacred places. Then, I outline some of the diverse ways in which seekers quantify and conceptualize the divine energies understood to inhabit the physical (and often parallel metaphysical) landscapes in and around these sites. Processes of imagining and conceiving these energies as organized, definable, and relatively stable systems provides the mechanisms necessary for these spaces to be considered sacred sites—these mechanisms are processes of boundary-making. I explore, in particular, the notions of ley lines and the zodiac in Glastonbury, and vortexes in Sedona, and how competing mythoi work to explain or authorize these places as important sacred sites. In both places, seekers often imagine various places to be inhabited or enlivened by particular entities, like Canyon Mama. The self, as a kind of spiritual site, is also understood as a resource that can be "tapped into". Overall, I argue that the ways in which seekers at these places conceptualize the central features of these sites as power centers can be understood through the lens of natural (and supernatural) resources. It is vital to understand the

SBNR concept of Source within this paradigm. For most seekers, the distinction between any divine entity and themselves is illusory at best.

Here, I emphasize spirituality in its most vocal "not religious" instantiations. Of course, the difficulty here is that this process relies on a reified definition of religion *as such* that does not exist; and spirituality certainly has dogmas, communities, and history. For all its diversity and fuzziness, contemporary SBNR discourse and practice commonly relies on a few key notions. First and foremost, the SBNR world is one awash with resonance. It is a world made holistic by a complex series of sympathies—a world enchanted by "energies", whether understood to be material, magnetic, or spiritual, to which and through seekers seek connection to one another and their ultimate realities (ie, God, or some variation thereof). These are forces, as Bender and McRoberts point out that are "at once concrete and efficacious as well as anonymous and atmospheric."¹²⁹ While I acknowledge the difficulty in pinning these powers down, by examining the places where and landscapes and bodies through which these powers are manifest, such a task becomes more tenable.

Conceptualizing Natural Powers: Creating Sacred Space

While the natural landscapes of Sedona and Glastonbury provide the stage upon which spirituality is enacted, their valuation as sacred spaces is shaped by collective ideologies. With this recognition, "space no longer exists as a neutral grid upon which culture happens but is rather something produced transnationally by a range of actors.

¹²⁹ 2012, 15.

Space became an object of study—not something assumed but rather constituted by social relationships"¹³⁰ This complicates how many seekers imagine the powers of these sites to be innate and inherent. Bryan, the chaplain in the Unity Church of Sedona, explained that "spirituality is not about belief. It's about reality. About understanding nature, which science has now proved we're a part of." A doctor by trade, Bryan lamented the masculinization and over-rationalisation of the contemporary knowledge system. He argued that a more balanced, more holistic approach is necessary, if people want to heal their ills. *There's a reason it's called the sympathetic nervous system. Because it's connected, it's all one system. And that system connects us to each other, and to nature.*¹³¹ This tendency to conceptualize all of reality from the meaningful framework of individual human perspective—to tie reality to the self—is one way in which seekers value both of these elements.

While most seekers agree that "everywhere is sacred in some way," certain places on the globe are treated as *more* sacred, or where creative cosmic energies are more concentrated or more accessible.¹³² In Glastonbury, these are most often described through a system of globally-connected energetic veins known as ley lines, the (in)famous Glastonbury Zodiac, and through place-specific mythoi particularly related to high and low places, like the Tor and Chalice well respectively. In Sedona, the vortex is the most common way of conceptualizing the energies present, but notions of extraterrestrials (often referred to as "space brothers") and anthropomorphized energetic

¹³⁰ O'Neill, *Beyond Broken*. 1100

¹³¹ For more on the sympathies between place and the body, see below, chapter 4.

¹³² Anonymous participant.

consciousnesses like Ranjita's Canyon Mama are also readily visible. While my focus here is on *natural* sacred spaces, with particular emphasis on landscape features, I want to reiterate that the structures and ideologies that allow for these places to be taken as sacred are *always* social, historical, and cultural. Seekers generally de-emphasize these processes or reinterpret them through a lens of universalism and perennialism. For example, rather than framing the Glastonbury Zodiac as something that Katherine Maltwood created or developed, most seekers describe it as a system she *discovered*. They do so by pointing to the *fact* of the evidence for such a system in the durable landscape itself. In doing so, they further naturalize their understanding of spirituality by tying it to the materiality of these places.

The fact is, these "natural" resources require intentional, culturally-structured ideologization to frame and make them meaningful. The landscape *becomes* sacred through progressive, collective practices of valuation. Although Glastonbury Tor exists in a physical, geographic sense, there is little in its material reality that sets it apart as special, other than the mythic framework that imbues it with spiritual significance. Seekers, generally speaking, understand these organizing frameworks as heuristics. While they are useful, and help to explain and organize notions that support the valuation of these as sacred sites, they do not encompass *all* of the truth. They are, in other words, necessary but not sufficient. Just as Brenna clarified her mention of angels by recognizing that the concept is only a shorthand for much more complex ideologies, many seekers see these notions as ways to facilitate understanding, if only in a limited human way. Here, I outline some of the common and important ways in which seekers demarcate particular spaces, or describe the specific energetic structures of the places. In so doing, they are

both marking it as sacred and tying their worldviews to the physical reality of these sites, naturalizing spirituality in the process.

Vortexes

The most famous of Sedona's sacred places are its vortexes. There are four major vortexes, but countless smaller ones scattered throughout the area, on both public and private land. There is no consensus about the *source* of the energy, but there was broad agreement in the *fact* of the energy. While some described the vortex sites as intersections of the planet's meridians, others explained that the presence of various minerals impact the magnetic fields around these sites. Bryan believes that physical elements are the largest contributor to this attraction, especially the impact of large deposits of iron and quartz creating energy flows that cause a thinning of the veil between the physical and the spiritual. While this appears to be a very nebulous sense of energy, it is most often manifested and visualized through the twisted junipers that are easily found throughout Sedona. For many seekers, these trees act as physical evidence for the energetic phenomena they experience at these sites; the trees bolster their claims that these are sacred places by making the invisible phenomena visible.



Image 16: Twisted juniper tree and detail of twisted root. Airport Vortex, Sedona, Arizona, June 2013. Photographs by the author.

During my many trips to the various vortex sites, I encountered a good number of individuals who understand these places to be areas where energetic healing occurs. A middle-aged man named Joe had had a stroke, and lost the feeling in and use of one of his arms. He visited airport vortex, and spent some time meditating on its healing powers. He visualized himself having use of the arm, and imagined how it would feel. He visualized the vortex energies as light, and saw them enter his body. He imagined the roots of the powerful trees entering his body and healing him. This process, of visualization, imagination, and feeling, is common amongst SBNR seekers. This process, they explain,

has real effects. In Joe's case, he was healed through the process; the vortex energies were able to undo the damages caused by his stroke in ways that medical doctors could not explain. As he said, *the energy here will heal you. If you let it...*

The Angel Valley retreat center just outside of Sedona proper claims to have an "unusually high number of energy lines...as a result there are many vortexes"¹³³ I met with one of the founders and owners, Amayra, on a bright morning in June. When I asked her what made this area, and this particular piece of land especially, sacred, she pulled out a map of the property. *See these spiral markers? Those are all the vortexes we have on this land. We had a specialist come out and identify each one, sort of like dowsing. Each of them has a different energy; some are more in tune with our bodies and chakras, and others more connected to our levels of consciousness.* When she paused, I asked if she could clarify what she meant by "energy", and she sat quiet for a moment, before continuing. *I understand it as electromagnetic forces, as well as subtle energies, that are provided to us by Gaia to use as a way to connect with the universal life force. They are powerful currents we can tap into for our spiritual healing and growth.*

It is common, in both Sedona and Glastonbury, to hear the earth articulated as a kind of entity or personage. The planetary body is described in ways parallel to the human body, especially its nervous and circulatory systems—like Brian's explanation above of the *sympathetic nervous system*. This energy, Amayra explained, amplifies what is already in our bodies and spirits; it magnifies ourselves so we can better progress along our spiritual paths. I had been visiting each of the vortexes in the couple of weeks prior,

¹³³ <http://www.angelvalleyседona.com/pages/sacredsites/energysites.html>

and had intended on going to Cathedral Rock the previous day. I told Amarya that my visit had been interrupted when I became suddenly ill as I pulled into the parking area at the trailhead. She smiled, shaking her head, and explained that *Cathedral Rock is a powerful feminine energy. You probably felt sick because you already have a high level of that female power. Listen to your body; it's often more in tune with the natural rhythms of these places that let you learn something important. Unbalanced energy can be very harmful, so use the tools here to work toward balance.*

This was not the first (or last) time that one of these seekers had given me advice that had little to do with my project, and more to do with my own presumed spiritual journey. The gendering of both the landscape and, more particularly, the energies within it, also emerged as a common trope. This is yet another way to order, classify, and conceptualize the energies in these spaces. Claiming that certain places are energetically feminine is a sort of generally intelligible shorthand. It provides a clear (if sometimes contested) benchmark for understanding the specific qualities of the place. In this case, Amarya's explanation of my reaction (which I had attributed to an unusual breakfast of cheap coffee and hotel oatmeal) to the space's particular feminine source led her to assume something about me and my state of being. Namely, that I have a tendency to focus on others, rather than myself, and that this may result in allowing my own personal energies to be depleted. Her urging of me, like Brenna's, to pay attention to my own responses to the space, hint at the implicit agency of these energies within the SBNR worldview. They are *potentially* powerful (viz. useful), but only if we engage and interpret them correctly. Frameworks like these, while grounded in these complex notions

of energy, serve to organize and make sensible the material and social worlds that seekers inhabit and make meaningful.

Zodiac

Since Glastonbury's reinvigoration as a site of spiritual tourism first in the early 20th century and again in the 1980s, many attempts to classify, quantify, and map out Glastonbury's powers and energies have become part of the way in which current seekers understand the place. One of the most popular among these is the Glastonbury Zodiac. First proposed by Katherine Maltwood in 1935, the Zodiac theory asserts that an ancient Sumerians mapped the stars into the landscape around Glastonbury in about 2700 B.C. Known as "The Temple of the Stars", the theory provides evidence that many people point to for proving Glastonbury's ancient and innate spiritual and cosmic value. A writer and student of all things esoteric, Maltwood brought together such influences as Theosophy, Rosicrucianism, and Masonry together with the Arthurian legends, and postulated a cohesive system of signs imbedded into the very landscape of the Glastonbury area.

Maltwood had set out to illustrate a Medieval text of unknown origin called *The High History of the Holy Grail*.¹³⁴ She mapped the mythologies of the King Arthur legends around Avalon, and realized that the locations of important events within the stories were etched into the landscape, mimicking the constellations overhead. For example, she traced the nearby river Cary and an ancient road to form the outline of a lion. She, and subsequent students of the Glastonbury Zodiac mystery argue that the

¹³⁴ Often presumed to have been written at Glastonbury Abbey by an anonymous figure.

Arthur legends have both literal and spiritual interpretations. They describe the exploits of a group of ancient seekers, and provide symbolic exploration of the quest for spiritual insight. The zodiac is both a literal mapping of the cosmos into the landscape, and a tool for organizing and understanding the area as part of a greater spiritual reality.

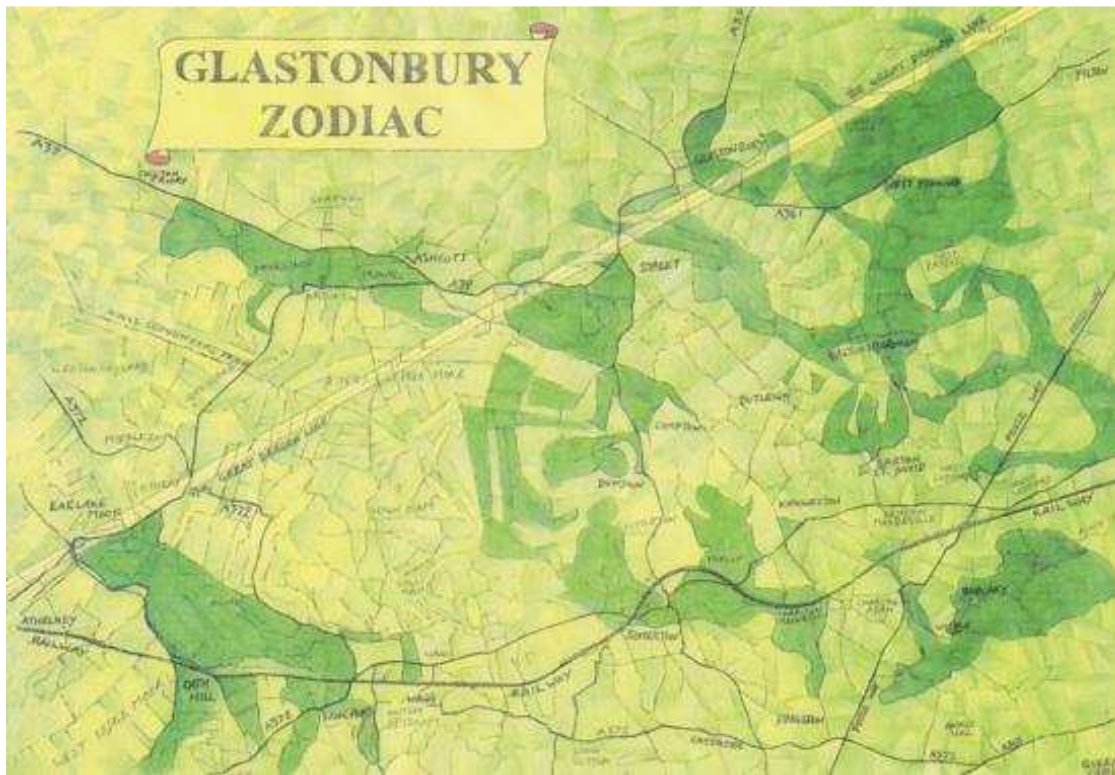


Image 17: Glastonbury Zodiac Map. By Yuri Leitch, local artist and author. Used with permission.

Like Arguëlles' logic behind the Convergence, Maltwood's theory reflects the common desire amongst many spiritual seekers to tie human affairs to the movement of the stars. Interestingly, the zodiac is constituted not only with rivers, streams, and other natural features, but roads, tracks, and a variety of manufactured landscape features. There is in this an implicit assertion that the value and power of the zodiac as an heuristic for framing and accessing spiritual energies in the place requires both natural and created

elements. The assertion that the conscious self has both the ability and responsibility to literally shape reality through intentional practices facilitated by the innate and powerful connection between the human self and the cosmos is an extension of the pervasive seeker tendency to read teleological and sympathetic meaning into their understanding of the world.

Others, however, are critical of Maltwood's claim, just as with Tudor-Pole's insistence on Glastonbury as the site of the Holy Grail. Aside from several formal investigations into Maltwood's claims, many locals do not take the zodiac as a literal cosmic reflection. As Trevor's partner and science fiction author Liz explained, "if all it is is a metaphor, it's as good a metaphor as any." And Trevor agreed, in his characteristically blunt style, saying, "of course it's all a coincidence, but it's a hell of a coincidence. It's valid because it works. It's true because people are doing it."¹³⁵ In other words, the value of the zodiac, for Liz, is not in that it proves some fundamental spiritual or cosmic importance lies in Glastonbury, but that it provides some people one way of conceptualizing and ordering the nebulous sense of importance that Glastonbury has for all SBNR seekers. It may not be real in the literal sense of being a millennia old Sumerian star map, but it is real because it provides a real function for SBNR seekers to understand and order their physical world in a way that is spiritually meaningful.

Ley Lines

Similarly, ley lines offer seekers a kind of global orientation system that is both physical and spiritual. Michelle says that one of the reasons why she feels she belongs in

¹³⁵ For more on practices that "work", see chapter 4.

Glastonbury is because, "I have good lines here. I have Venus, Saturn, Uranus in Glastonbury." This claim reflects, once again, the tendency to interpret teleological value in the movement of the cosmos. While the originator of the ley line theory, Alfred Watkins, aimed to uncover and identify ancient trackways through Britain, the theory is more commonly understood in John Michell's 1969 reconceptualization that posited the lines as mystical networks of energy. He blended Watkin's information with a variety of esoteric and New Age ideas, and argued that the global network of ancient sites and monuments forms a system of archaic scientific exploration. They are, in other words, evidence of prehistoric recognition of latent energies along various lines. Michell went so far as to claim that the material marking of these lines was undertaken by the mythic civilization of Atlantis.

These ley lines are said to run through most important sacred sites, including a major intersection in Jerusalem, and several through both Stonehenge and Avebury circles. In Glastonbury, the most famous line is named for Saint Michael, and is traced through several points associated with the figure, including the remnants of an eponymous medieval church that stands on top of the Tor. This line, like others, is sometimes traveled as a path by pilgrims. In fact, several important sites, including the Tor, are situated at intersections of multiple lines, which is interpreted as an indication of their exponential power. Arianna sums up the common understanding of the role of sacred sites for seekers: "I feel into things. And I visit sacred sites to feel it." In other words, the truth is something that is accessed through feeling, and this feeling is most accessible at particularly sacred and powerful sites, like Glastonbury.

Like with other notions, it is not often clear what ley lines actually *are*. Most seekers I spoke with agreed that they mark lines of energy, but there was little agreement or detailed description beyond that. Michelle explained that they are like the veins and arteries of the planet—they carry life force around the globe. Brenna similarly described them as the planetary chakras, marked by ancient peoples who recognized their power. One anonymous seeker said that *they are basically cracks in the tectonic plates where magnetic energy from the earth's core is released. That energy is a powerful tool, especially where multiple lines intersect*. The consensus lies in the fact that the visible demarcation of the lines indicates a deeper, more fundamental (if invisible) resource. The tracks, walls, mounds, and other monuments that mark the ley lines are but an indication that ancient humans were more in touch with the spiritual realities of these places. They recognized the energies, and marked them for unknown, but presumably spiritual, purposes.¹³⁶

One morning as I sat on the top of the Tor, huddled against the wind and my own acrophobia at the base of St. Michael's tower, I was approached by a couple of young Dutch women, who asked if I would take their picture. I obliged, warily following them as they walked toward the grassy slope. As I lifted the camera, one of the girls called out to me: "make sure you get the lines behind us!" After a few shots, I asked her to explain the importance of the lines. She pointed along the St. Michael's line, stretching out in the distance toward Burrowbridge Mump. Another prominent place on the line, the Mump also has the remains of a church dedicated to St. Michael at its top. *You can't see it, but*

¹³⁶ An alternate explanation, which is compelling though not as common, is that it was extraterrestrials, not humans who recognized and marked these energetic lines.

the line goes for miles and miles, in both directions. That way, it stretches all the way to St. Michael's Mount off the coast. And further, to Mont St. Michel in France. The lines connect all these sacred places on the planet, and allow energy to move. They were marked by people who knew a lot more than we did. Because we've forgotten that this earth is a sacred place. When you're on the lines, and especially on the important places like the Tor, you can really tap into that divine earth energy. It's there, flowing along the lines. The St. Michael line is especially important because it runs parallel and often intersects with the St. Mary line. It crosses here on the Tor. So you get a balanced masculine and feminine energy, which is very powerful.



Image 18: View of the landscape from the top of Glastonbury Tor, with some ley line markers visible in the background. April 2012; Photograph by the author.

Like within other conceptual structures, this explanation blends the human and the natural into a usable heuristic for mapping out spiritual resources. Of course, cynics can

(and do) point out the fact that lines can be drawn showing a connection between virtually any sites—so long as the correct sites are chosen. In other words, choosing what sites are including, and which are omitted, allows seekers to see patterns where there are perhaps none, say some. And yet, mapping ideologies into the stable and visible landscapes continues to be compelling for many seekers, forcing us to consider with real seriousness the how and why of these conceptual tools.

The Unexplainable and the Weird

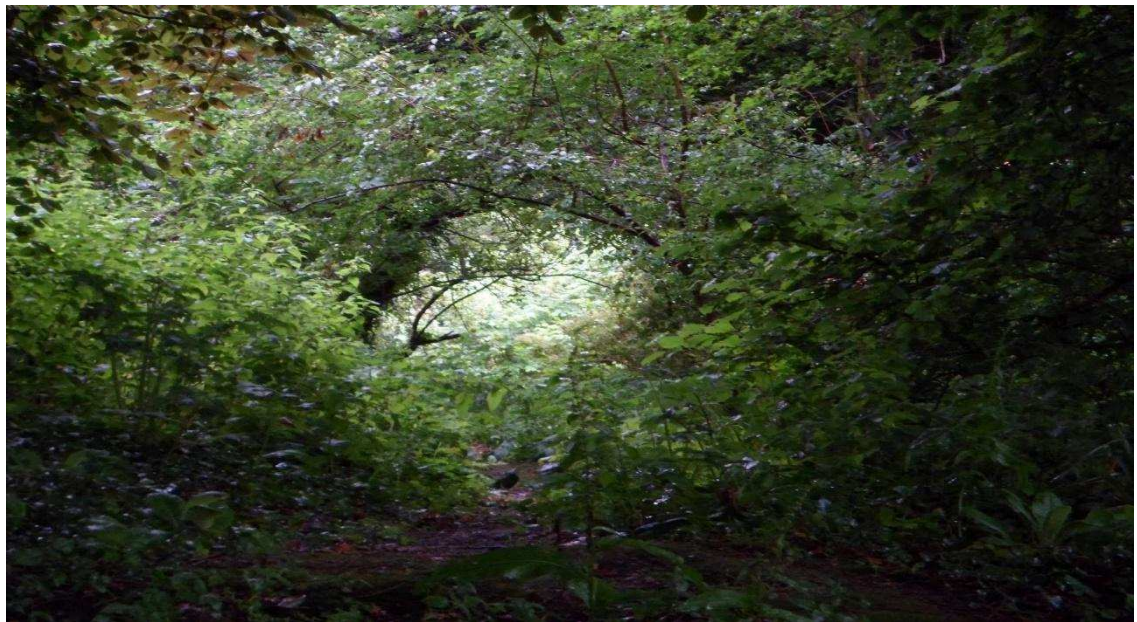


Image 19: Garden at Hillside House, looking down from tor-side. Glastonbury, England. July 2015. Photograph by the author.

During the July 2015 meteor showers, I spent a good deal of time out in the back garden of Hillside House, where I was living during my research in Glastonbury. While the house is situated at the foot of the Tor, the terraced garden extends up onto the hill, and becomes wilder and less manicured at each of three levels. One evening, as I lay in the grass on the curved slopes of the first level, I saw a bright blue light over the Tor. It moved slowly in a circle, its axis of rotation shifting so that it appeared to be moving in a

defined pattern. I watched for at least two or three minutes before I ran into the flat to bring my husband outside to confirm the sight. He saw it as well, though neither of us could determine what it was. We watched for several minutes as the light spun and moved slowly around the top of the hill, speculating as to its source.

A few days later, I asked Anna, the house-owner, about the blue light. She laughed and said that it was a common occurrence; a local man had a kite-like contraption that he took onto the Tor at night. This mostly satisfied me, though I felt like the steady, regular, and perfect movement of the light belied the explanation to a certain degree. Brenna, it turned out, had also seen the light. When I gave her Anna's explanation, she shook her head. *That cannot be it. I don't feel like that is what I saw. I feel like it was a message. I was inside, and I got this nudge to climb onto the toilet and look out the high bathroom window. Who does that? I don't usually go around climbing onto toilets...but I just felt the urge. It was weird, but so weird that I did it. It was definitely a UFO. I just can't accept that the light was human-made. It was too strange, it moved with such precision. It had to have been from somewhere else.* Brenna's refusal to accept Anna's explanation, which I later corroborated with several locals, demonstrates the Tor's power within local seeker imagination and mythos. The tor is a special (viz. sacred) place, and mundane explanations have no power there. The weird is often interpreted as a sign of this specialness.

Experiences, especially powerful, emotional spiritual ones, require a certain acceptance of the non-rational.¹³⁷ Part of the appeal, and the subsequent value of mystical

¹³⁷ For more on emotion and experience in these contexts, see chapter 4.

experiences, is that they reject simply material or rational explanations. They are meaningful because they are outside of the realm of the ordinary. Thus, when rational explanations are available, they are often rejected because to accept them would mean to reject the meaning already attributed to the event. Once a seeker has been convinced of the sacrality of a space, different logics of valuation dominate the interpretation of elements and experiences in these places. Practices of defining the boundaries of a space are essential for the process of sacralizing a place. There are a vast array of tools, metaphors, and instruments that seekers use to define certain spaces, and to explain the source of their sacred energies. Like Brenna's insistence that the light on the Tor *could not* be simply a man with a kite, these ideological devices provide a clear (if not always stable) mechanism through which engagement with the otherwise unknowable and ephemeral energies becomes tenable and meaningful. In other words, seekers develop a variety of ways to conceptualize the powers located in these power centers in order to access them. In so doing, they describe the qualities of those powers, and delineate various spaces as sacred.

Experiences, particularly strong emotional ones, are at the heart of contemporary spirituality, but these experiences have no meaning without interpretation. While spiritual seekers advocate for the mindless (that is, non-rational, non-filtered) experience of divine truths, these experiences require a hermeneutic structure, a grammar of interpretation, if they are to be made meaningful and incorporated into the individual's worldview. Indeed, there are a variety of structures that facilitate the experiences in the first place.¹³⁸

¹³⁸ See below.

Sometimes the weirdness, the strangeness, the utter non-rationality of an experience is enough to make it meaningful. Liz, who as a science-fiction author has plenty of experience with the weird, describes an experience she had had some years earlier while walking on the tor at night with some friends: *we saw winged things on the tor. Not sure what they were, but the experience was meaningful. I can't explain it, but it was still important.* For Liz, the ineffability, the total discontinuity with everyday reality, made the experience meaningful. It signaled a reality beyond the mundane that in itself is a valuable piece of truth. For her, and for many like her, these experiences work to further confirm that these places are teeming with potential sources of wisdom.

The Power of Place: Authenticity, Expectations, and Managing Experiences

In our first conversation, Ranjita explained how she had come to Sedona. *I visited several times when I was younger. I always thought I'd like to move here, but it never worked out. I would visit, fall in love with the place, and then something would force me out. I once moved here—about 10 years before I bought this place—set up a little house, and within two weeks, I had to leave. The timing wasn't right. It wasn't my time to be here yet; I still had lessons to learn out there in the real world. But then, when the time was right, everything clicked. I visited my friend who owned this property, and she was ready to move on. I didn't have the money to buy it, but she worked out a sort of lease-to-own deal, and within a few weeks, everything had just fallen into place. That's how Sedona works; it calls you, but you have to listen to its messages. If you try to impose your own will here, you will quickly learn—Sedona will chew you up and spit you out. But if everything is right, she'll open her arms to you. That's why I called this place Your Heart's Home. It's both a title and a reminder that Sedona can open up your heart like*

nowhere else. And I know for me, it really is where I am supposed to be now. Not just in Sedona, but in this exact place. I'm here doing my own soul's work, but also facilitating spiritual growth of other souls. And that is exactly right; that's exactly what I'm supposed to be doing now.

This was the moment in our conversation where Ranjita paused and introduced me to Canyon Mama. She knew that her story, her explanation for making her home (and business) on that precise property would not make sense unless I understood the power of the place—until I understood that her relationship to the landscape is more than of steward or caregiver. Instead, it is relational and intersubjective. Like many others in Glastonbury and Sedona, Ranjita sees a teleological trajectory to her personal spiritual biography. She is *meant* to be in Sedona, doing her spiritual therapy work. And the place itself has demonstrated, through a series of meaningful messages (or coincidences, we might say) that the sacred powers of the place support and affirm this interpretation.

The notion of "being called" to Sedona or Glastonbury is common. Seekers often explain that these places "speak to [them]", "pull" them, or otherwise communicate with intention and purpose. For prominent spiritual teacher and author, Ilchi Lee, these messages were clear, if not always sensible: "Sedona has spoken to me. The messages I received from Sedona were, at first, almost like fantasies, for Sedona always told me to dream dreams that seemed impossible...But I had to listen to those messages. When the messages of Sedona reverberated in the deepest parts of my heart, even if they seemed ridiculous things to do from a rational perspective, I just focused on them

unconditionally."¹³⁹ There is something agentive in how Lee talks about Sedona; many of my informants spoke of certain places—both broadly as in Glastonbury or Sedona, and more specifically as in particular hills or wells—in similar ways. The powers of these places are understood to act upon people through a series of energetic synchronicities and connections not often fully articulated. Often, making sense of these message requires, as it does for Lee, to pay attention to both the emotional tenor and the physiological impact of the information provided.¹⁴⁰

Glastonbury historian Patrick Benham explains that, "those who have not yet been [to Glastonbury] are forewarned about the spiritual power of the place and its ability to transform is favoured pilgrims."¹⁴¹ Many seekers explain that the place itself draws people to it who will benefit from its powers and energies. As Amayra of Angel Valley just outside of Sedona explains, "people come for reasons they don't understand; they're guided here." Certainly the marketing that includes an emphasis on the commercial enterprises available encourage people to visit Sedona, but seekers interpret this through a particular lens. As Bryan explains, some people come under the guide of commercialism, but have real experiences here. He argued that this was because there is a fundamental power in the place; people—including myself—may not always know their reasons for visiting, but those who need to visit Sedona will do so, and will have the experiences necessary to their spiritual growth.

¹³⁹ 2011, 2.

¹⁴⁰ For more on the role of the body in this process, see chapter 4.

¹⁴¹ 1993

Like the residents of Sedona, many people in Glastonbury told me that visitors may not always understand their real purposes for visiting. Donna, a local artist, describes the town as a spiritual estuary, and says "people might visit because a guide book or something told them to, but the experiences they have are genuine". When I ask Trevor what makes Glastonbury special, he points immediately to its history as a site of pilgrimage. The mendicant Celtic monk, Brigit, he explains, lived on Avalon island, when it still was an island. She was not the first to consider Glastonbury a sacred place, but she is one of the first important enough to record in history. Glastonbury, as one of the earliest places to convert to Christianity, was a site of official pilgrimage early in history. By their nature, pilgrimage sites are supposed to be difficult to reach, Trevor explains, and a small island surrounded by ocean and marsh land certainly would have qualified. When I mentioned that this remains true today because of the lack of train, he laughed, saying that this might be intentional, as it increases the mystical allure of the place.

Michelle, an American who had moved to Glastonbury not long before I arrived in 2015, says that lots of people, spiritual teachers, friends, and guides, told her that Glastonbury is where she is supposed to be. She left the U.S. and her previous spiritual community because she no longer felt a connection to either its cosmology or the community. Practically, she had just finalized a messy divorce, and wanted to get far away from the toxic situation. She had visited Glastonbury several times over the year prior, and finally made the decision to relocate long-term. She came first for a workshop, and knew nothing about the town itself, but describes herself as being "drawn" to the place. About her first visit she says, "it changed my life. I wasn't the same. As soon as I

got here, I was being worked on by the energies." These energies, she explains, are active, conscious, and intentional forces, that some people call God, the universe, or other terms. Michelle gives several reasons for why Glastonbury is a special place. Mostly, she explains, because of the medicine in the land. "The ley lines channel the energy, which is magnified and intensified here." Most people, she says, can't handle being here for long—they get sick. The community is supportive, and helps each other. And, perhaps most importantly, Glastonbury has a history of sacredness that is accessible to people who visit with the right heart-space.

During my time in Glastonbury Arianna, an artist, sound healer, and Australian expatriate to Glastonbury lived in a flat adjacent to mine on the same property at the foot of the Tor. On our first long conversation, she described how nature was always her church. She spent most of her time outside, playing with the gnomes and fairies, and would often spend all night in the garden with the moon. At nine, she decided to quit her mother's Roman Catholic congregation. She did not understand the emphasis on punishment, on hellfire and brimstone. For her, she explains, god is everywhere, but is most accessible in certain places. People have been praying in Glastonbury for millenia, she says, and visitors can feel that in the land. "That's what the soul feels here. All those countless prayers. The soul just knows." Like Kurt's analogy of the pearl in Sedona, Arianna understands that Glastonbury is naturally special, but that human interactions with the space have further added to its sacredness. The land itself is a kind of memorial to the people who have traveled to its rolling green hills, and it preserves the energetic

power of their practices in the landscapes. Their stories are preserved and written into these spaces.¹⁴²

Mythoi: Stories as Evidence and Resource

Many of Glastonbury and Sedona's sacred places are defined through stories. These include various personal stories—like those of Liz's and Brenna's strange experiences associated with the tor—along with many documented, longer-standing, and more widely known stories. The power of Glastonbury is in part bound up in the history of the town as a place of materiality—its mythos are written on and visible through a variety of material spaces and features. The stories about Joseph of Arimathea outlined above, along with the more popular Arthurian legends, are evidenced in the very landscape. Whether these stories are true in any kind of empirical sense is rarely questioned. In fact, throughout my research, I found that most seekers thought the question itself was irrelevant. I asked Ariana whether she believed that an historical Jesus had in fact visited the area with his uncle. She responded by explaining that, *really, there's no way to know. But the story makes sense with what I see around here. And it makes sense for what I feel about this place. I can imagine Joseph taking the young Jesus on a journey. I can imagine him crossing the channel, and following the sacred energies to this place. So yes, I do think the stories are real. Because they are to me. Because they make sense with what I know, and what I feel and imagine to be true.*

Situated at the foot of the tor, Chalice Well is another site steeped in mythological importance. As I briefly mentioned in chapter two, the well is believed to have

¹⁴² For more on the biography of these places, and the relationship to those of individual seekers, see below.

connections to the Holy Grail. Its blood-red waters are thought to symbolize the blood of Christ—at least, that's what the Christian version of the story says. Many seekers today argue that this was a later reinterpretation of the Well's powers within a Christian majority. The chalybeate waters run at a near constant flow and temperature, which many seekers interpret as symbolic evidence of the constantly of life force. A young couple, regular visitors from Birmingham to the main B&B at Hillside House, explained that Chalice Well is their personal sacred sanctuary, and the main reason for their frequent visits. *We always loved it. When we had a difficult time getting pregnant, we visited the well, and focused on the fecundity of the earth, replicated in us. For us, it is a symbol of the earth goddess, flowing with life-giving blood and water. And really, it worked. Within a week, we were expecting. We just needed to tap into that sacred energy.* No matter the mythological particulars, places like Chalice Well rely on stories to be made meaningful. The trust established by Tudor Pole that continues to oversee the site's maintenance claims as its operating motto: "Many paths, one source." There is in this a recognition that the Well provides a raw material. It is up to the individual seeker, and the various tools and practices that she brings to the site, that refine this source and transform its raw materials into spiritual goods.



Image 20: Chalice Well Gardens, Blood-red water; Well cover with the Vesica Pisces, often described as a symbol of duality, including the human/divine nature of Jesus. Glastonbury 2012. Photographs by the author.

Like in Brenna's insistence that I listen to the stones at Avebury and allow them to speak to me, encounters with nature are both communicative and evocative. The central physical feature of Glastonbury, the Tor, is a place where SBNR seekers connect with their central deities and energies. Whether visitors believe the hill to be a portal to another world, the home of an ancient earth goddess, or King Arthur's burial mound, the tor looms over Glastonbury, and provides both a physical and mytho-ideological focal point. No matter its practical purposes now, the spiral-terraced Tor is understood largely to mark Glastonbury as a special place, and gives pilgrims (whether visitors or residents) a place to go for their vital experiences.¹⁴³ I ask Trevor about the King Arthur legends

¹⁴³ See chapter 4 for more on the practices aimed at facilitating these experiences.

that abound in Glastonbury, and he scoffs—"they've been living that fucking dream for 1000 years," he says. "It's magic that brings them here." He describes the people who claimed to find Arthur's tomb as "lying bastards." *This town has always run on tourism, on pilgrimage. What a great scam—a bloody ancient king would have brought in a lot of money. They were lying bastards, but they weren't idiots.* The non-reality of the myth, for Trevor, does not mean that the story is not valuable. He goes on to explain that "as a foundation myth, I buy into it. Arthur as a spiritual reality, a spirit of the place. He's in here." With that, he thumped his chest, indicating what is commonly referred to by seekers as his "heart space".¹⁴⁴

With his characteristic cynicism, Trevor articulated simultaneously a mistrust of the consumer-oriented aspect of Glastonbury's mythology, and an appreciation of these legends as potentially valuable heuristics. This notion of "truth", in which an imagined possibility is considered valid leaves a good deal of room for contestation. The mythos of Glastonbury is, in other words, flexible, even when tied to the durable evidence of the material world. For example, while there is a marker for King Arthur's grave on the Abbey grounds, many others believe he was actually buried in the tor. The imagined world and even imagined history (viz. mythos) of Glastonbury, even when multiples of each exist, do not present a *problem* for most seekers. The common SBNR refrain of "what's true is what's true for you" sums this up quite simply. Of course, for scholars, this presents a very particular kind of problem. How do we situate a movement historically, geographically, and ideologically when its participants do not take these

¹⁴⁴ For more on this topic of "heart space", especially in the context of "holding space", see chapter 4.

things as given or even fixed? I tried, in the course of my research, to keep one foot fully grounded in the empirical world that ethnography demands. The other, I allowed to wander over the murky, often shifting landscape of my research sites and those who occupied them, feeling out the contours and following threads of inquiry as they pulled and snarled against one another. As Trevor once quipped, "I try to make sense in a world that doesn't make sense. Then I take the magic anyway."

One key source for myth is in the supposed indigenous presence in both of these places. Their value as contemporary spiritual sites, in part, relies on the idea that previous (especially ancient) peoples also recognized them as important. In Sedona, that means Native American peoples, and in Glastonbury, Druids and pre-Christian Celts. Bowman has pointed out that "Much of the contemporary spiritual interest and pilgrimage activity in Glastonbury relates to the projection of Glastonbury as a sacred center far back into the pre-Christian past..."¹⁴⁵ The assertion that these places have been understood as sacred for millennia has two related ideological consequences. First, it naturalizes spirituality, and further serves to tie its energies to these places; and second, it authorizes contemporary claims by providing precedence for current valuation.

Kurt explained how Native Americans recognized the inherent spiritual powers of Sedona eons ago. *They discovered that when they performed their ceremonies here they were more effective. They most likely didn't live here full time, but they came back every year for spiritual purposes. And because they used the land for thousands of years as a spiritual place, that history, that power is infused here too. Which is why I like to use*

¹⁴⁵ Bowman, Flow. 241.

Native tools for healing. They developed them specifically to work with the land and energies here, so they seem to be more effective. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Kurt is well aware of the apparently conflict between his use of Native American healing modalities, and his position as outsider. The specific spiritual tools of local indigenous people, he argued, do not belong to the *people*, but to the *place*, and so they should be available for anyone trained to use them properly.

In Glastonbury, there is a good deal of early historical evidence of human presence in the town, but seekers also make less archaeologically-supported claims about ancient spiritual communities. The druids are an especially popular mode of authorizing current spiritual practices through indigeneity. There are specific communities and networks that imagine themselves to be reformulating the ancient traditions within a modern context, but it more commonly to vaguely point at the presence of Druids as a way to support claims about the inherent sacrality of the place.¹⁴⁶ Like the Native Americans in Sedona, the Druids in Glastonbury are assumed to have been more in tune with the spiritual energies of nature, and to have recognized the concentration of those energies around Avalon. Local goddess-spirituality seekers also claim that before the druids, there was a female-dominated (if otherwise vaguely articulated) form of paganism that recognized the particularly feminine energies of the area. Specific sites like the Tor, the wells, and other ancient monuments are pointed to as evidence of this recognition by both these prehistoric goddess-worshippers and the later Druids. In either case, the

¹⁴⁶ The Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids (OBOD) is one of these groups, and operates a regular ritual calendar in Glastonbury. See druidry.org for more information.

mythic fact of their presence provides contemporary seekers with source material for articulating and authorizing their current claims about the particular value of these sites.

The Role of Land Management: Preservation and Expectations

Practically speaking, the sacred landscapes upon and through which the drama of spirituality unfolds are regulated and managed by a variety of both private and public organizations. These institutions structure, both implicitly and explicitly, seekers' engagement with these spaces through a variety of ways. In both towns, the distinction between natural and manmade landscapes and other sites is not frequently fleshed out in either discourse and practice. Places like Chalice Well in Glastonbury, with its manicured gardens, sculptures, and ever-present staff is obviously managed. Others, like the vortex sites in Sedona, take the appearance of being naturally-occurring locales. And yet, I argue, *both* of these kinds are curated within the geography of spirituality. A significant aspect of this tension is that, in both cases, seekers imagine that the spiritual value of these places is natural. Those with man-made structures are often understood to be merely marking the powers that are inherent to the sites themselves.

In Glastonbury, the Tor is managed by the National Trust, and is free for entry (although a small donations box is situated at the bottom of the hill). This organization, while officially registered as a charity and therefore relying on donations, was incorporated and given powers through various Parliamentary acts.¹⁴⁷ The Tor has only been partially excavated, which lends an air of mystery to the site for most seekers, and allows for a variety of interpretations and understandings of its history and continued

¹⁴⁷ See, for example, National Trusts Acts 1907 to 1971, and Charities Order 2005.

importance. According to the National Trust, a major part of their work at the Tor is preserving St. Michael's tower "as [they] recognize the importance of the tower to so many."¹⁴⁸ They also aim to protect the wildlife that make their homes on and around the Tor. In other words, as the Trust expressively states, they aim to preserve both the man-made and natural characteristics of the Tor in order to continue its heritage as a tourist and pilgrimage draw.

Glastonbury Abbey maintains vague affiliation with the Church of England, but is a registered charity and receives no public funding. Over the last decade, the organization has raised more than a million pounds for conservation projects, both through entrance fees and appeals for donations and sponsorships. It does, however, hold a museum accreditation awarded by Arts Council England, which *is* publicly funded—through the National Lottery. It has also received a quality assurance badge from Visit England, the official tourism board. The Abbey has a well-documented history, and its grounds have been thoroughly examined and preserved. This documentation *proves* to many seekers that this is a valuable site. Even though the official history is largely Christian, spiritual seekers lay claim to the site as one whose importance pre-dates the importation of Christianity. The Church, they argue, was adept at christening sacred sites—essentially rebranding them within the superimposed religious paradigm.

While the majority of Sedona sites have no official religious designation or recognized history, their management is no less entangled with spirituality. As Mitchell points out in his exploration of spirituality at national parks, the supposedly natural

¹⁴⁸ <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/glastonbury-tor/features/our-work-at-glastonbury-tor>

landscape of publicly managed sites takes a good deal of intention and effort.¹⁴⁹ All of Sedona's major vortexes are located on public lands in the Coconino National Forest project, and managed through a variety of state and municipal parks. They are, in other words, public spaces that are preserved and made available through public funding. The experience of these vortexes is conditioned through a variety of means. The Sedona Visitors Center (affiliated with the Chamber of Commerce) illustrates this conditioning clearly in its website description of the vortexes.

Even if you have no particular interest in the metaphysical movement, plan on visiting Sedona's vortex sites. It is virtually guaranteed that you will leave feeling better than when you arrived. Your heart will be lighter, your smile will be wider and you will feel more energized. Because here's the wonderful secret: Vortexes are located at some of the most devastatingly scenic spots found among the towering red rock formations...Sedona has the ability to transform lives. That's its true power. The raw physical beauty of the landscapes automatically recalibrates your sense of wonder. Embrace the spectacular. Accept the astonishing. This is a place that inspires, recharges, uplifts, soothes, restores, and so much more. For many, the very act of being here provokes a spiritual awakening. No one leaves Sedona unchanged.¹⁵⁰

For all its insistence that the power of the vortexes is natural and "raw", this description relies heavily on the spiritual value of these sites as articulated through SBNR ideology and practice.

Visitors to these sites, in ways similar to Mitchell's National Parks visitors, are disciplined to experience these places in a particular way. Their experience is shaped by the powerful structures that value these sites, and organize their access. Very few

¹⁴⁹ 2016.

¹⁵⁰ <https://visitsedona.com/spiritual-wellness/what-is-a-vortex/>

people wander to these sites unaware of their reputations—their first encounters with the spaces are shaped by expectations and cultural knowledge. Again, as Mitchell explains,

The incommunicability of spirituality, its avoidance of self-definition [is] socially productive...the vagueness of spirituality allows different forms of social solidarity than those afforded by collective and conscious affirmations of group identity...individuals who describe themselves as spiritual while resisting further definition can recognize their experience as a shared one, even a universal one, without talking to or knowing their fellow visitors.¹⁵¹

There is an assumption that, because these sites are *natural*, their impact in visitors is (as Sedona's tourism board argues) "guaranteed". Spirituality is not easily delineated, nor does it have stable definitions. Instead, seekers insist, you must *experience* it, *feel* it. And the best circumstances in which to do that are those at sites like Glastonbury and Sedona, where your experience of the spiritual is assured by the mechanisms and structures that work to insure their continued presumed sacrality.

Source: God and the Invisible as Resources

At each Sunday service at the Church of the Golden Age in Sedona, the minister Arianha leads her congregation in a prayer of affirmation. The prayer, recited aloud in unison by everyone in attendance, is an adaptation of a common affirmation of abundance: *There is One Infinite Source, the source of life, knowledge, and energy. I call this Source God. I know that I am a creation of God, and the energy that flows through me, in me, as me is God energy. I know that God is the Source of everything, and everything else is just a resource. I know that the universe is an abundant place. My*

¹⁵¹ Mitchell 7

needs are met, and I have enough to bless others, and together we prosper. I am grateful, and affirm this truth that Source is all, and provides all.

This prayer succinctly clarifies how seekers generally think about the ultimate source of spiritual powers or energy, what some refer to as God. Literature at the Unity church similarly explains that "God is my unfailing Source". Other people or organizations may phrase it in a variety of ways: "The abundance of God is an infinite Source", "The flow of resources is unlimited", "I am open to receiving all the good that is manifest". Within this posturing, everything is a reflection or manifestation of this ultimate divine source—the energies and powers of sacred sites are no exception. As I noted in chapter one's opening vignette, there is a thread akin to a prosperity gospel in this emphasis on the abundant flow of resources, including money. However, it is not money that is the ultimate goal, but the possibility of serving as a conduit of blessings for the community, as well as for the self. This is a subtle and implicit enactment of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, where the highest spiritual fulfillment and self-actualization is only possible once material, emotional, communal, and other needs are met.

A key element in prayer within SBNR circles is that they rarely ask, beg, or beseech. Instead, prayers are phrased as statements of fact. When I asked about this unique characteristic, without exception, seekers gave me a standard response. As Arianha phrased it, *we don't ask God to be a source for good; he already is. Asking for things implies a lack, it's a negative process. Instead of begging for the financial resources to pay our bills, we affirm our trust in Source to provide what we need. It puts our minds in alignment with that reality. We focus on the good, and manifest the good*

through that intention. This notion of manifesting reality through conscious intention is essential in understanding SBNR ways of being in the world. This is only possible because of the underlying ideology of Source.

Much of the preceding chapter has been oriented around "energy" at these sites as an innate resource. But while the material and embedded realities of the landscapes in and around these sites provide vital resources for spiritual insight and power, their power is not generally understood as physically-based. Instead, their value is due to the emanations and reverberations of *Source* concentrated at these sites. That is, no matter the particular heuristics used to conceptualize and understand these energies, all of them are fundamentally emerging from the essential divine Source—the same source from whence emanates seekers themselves. SBNR concepts of God, or an ultimate reality, are generally monistic or panentheistic. They speak of Source as often as (or indeed, more frequently than) they do a specific god, goddess, entity or being. God is pervasive, powerful, and productive. In the next chapter, I explore the practices through which the SBNR self, reality, and spirituality in its broadest terms are constituted through practices, what I refer to as spiritual labors. All of these aim at engaging to manipulating Source into specific goods.

CHAPTER 4

ENERGETIC BODIES: LABOR AND PRODUCTION

*Spirituality takes work. It's a labor of love...but it is labor. We are in essence giving birth to our reality, and to a movement.*¹⁵²

I celebrated Krishna Janmashtami at Shekinashram in 2015, at the invitation of its founder and spiritual leader, Elahn, whom I had met for an interview earlier that week.¹⁵³ I arrived early, as is my habit, and found a place near the back of the room, also habitual. Although the meditation room is always a beautiful space, it had been decorated specially for the celebration. Fresh garlands of flowers draped across the walls and ceiling, and a massive painting of Krishna and his consort Radha dominated the front wall.

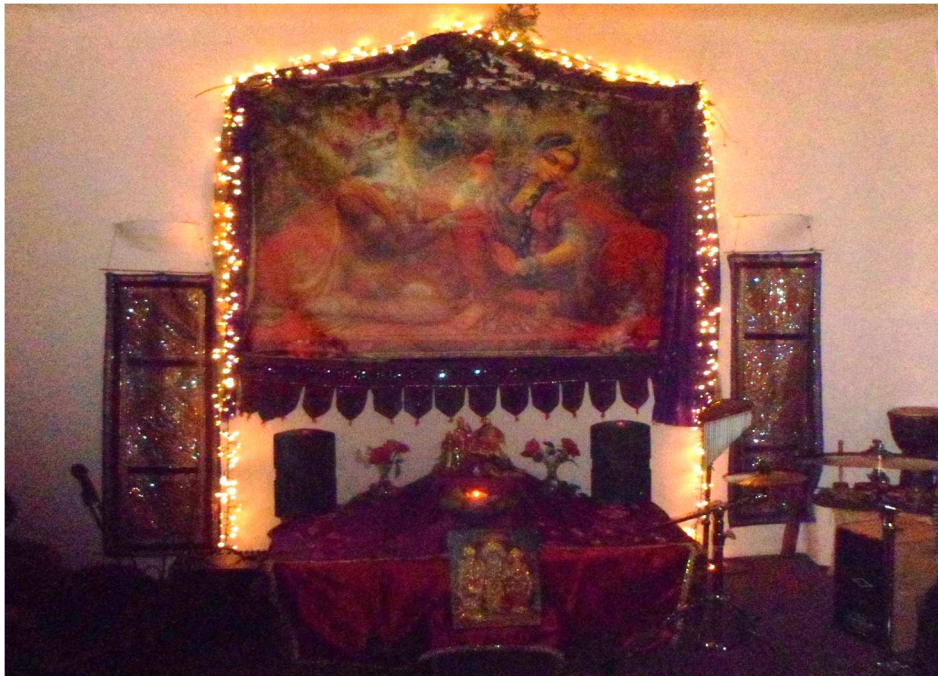


Image 21: Shekinashram altar, in preparation for celebration. Photo by author, September 2015.

¹⁵² Anonymous participant in Sedona.

¹⁵³ This holiday is commemorates the birth (or appearance) of Krishna.

Incense burned at several places around the room, both adding fragrance to the increasingly crowded space, and slightly obscuring the view with its hazy smoke. Elahn and his wife Radhe welcomed everyone and sat under the painting to begin the kirtan.¹⁵⁴

The participants sang and chanted, often in call-and-response format, with the leaders. It began slowly, quietly, with soft accompaniment from the instruments. Throughout the more than three hour celebration, we shifted from slow and contemplative to fast, loud, and enthusiastic, and back. About an hour into this, the room was stifling hot. People were either spread on the floor, tucked into yogic postures along the walls, or on their feet dancing. A crowd favorite song, a very simple repetition of several Holy Names, brought the focus back to a pinpoint with Elahn setting the tone as soft, delicate, and meditative. Over the next half an hour, he progressively increased both the volume and the tempo, which encouraged the crowd to increase their enthusiasm. Repeating the same simple words, though in Hindi, allowed people to focus on something other than pronunciation.

At the height of the song's frenzy, more than half of the crowd were on their feet, dancing, both individually and in small groups. Every face was lit up with a smile, and even those who remained seated were swaying, clapping, and otherwise physically engaged with the celebration. As the song slowed down once again, after a good period high-energy participation, most of the devotees lifted their hands in a clearly supplicative posture. Tears flowed down many faces, though the serene smiles remained. These people, whose bodies had been, only moments before, strained by intense exertion, were

¹⁵⁴ Kirtan describes a ritualized musical performance or worship that usually includes chanting, call-and-response, and recitation of holy names. Often associated with bhakti yoga; see below.

quieted and their minds intensely focused on the emotional experience of encounter with their divine—experiences that were visible in the affective displays of these same bodies.¹⁵⁵ Through their labors, both physical and emotional, they achieved their ultimate aim—the presence of God.



Image 22: Shekinashram, Glastonbury, England. Photo by the author, August 2015.

Shekinashram sits on the opposite side of Glastonbury tor from Hillside House. The owners describe it as "an ashram and holistic retreat centre with a difference".¹⁵⁶ The center provides daily kirtan and meditation, organic vegan meals, and is run largely through work-service volunteers. The particular focus of the ashram is on Bhakti Yoga, which is described as the yoga of loving devotion. According to their website, "Bhakti is

¹⁵⁵ Participants later described their experiences as such.

¹⁵⁶ <http://shekinashram.org/>

a beautiful path. It effortlessly *purified* the mind and *opens* the heart...it is also deeply satisfying as a *practice* and highly contagious...it is also an amazing way of *unifying* with others. Spending time in group *practice* such as praying, chanting, singing, playing sweet and rousing music together often *evokes transcendental states of consciousness*....Bhakti is only experienced when the practitioner is *absorbed* in the practice."¹⁵⁷ Seekers here are *absorbed* in their labor—this is inculcation through immersion. These practices are *only* emotional or spiritual, but are tied directly to bodies. Such entanglement provides a rich example to explore SBNR ideas about mind/body/spirit connections. In short, manipulating one of these is understood to have clear and direct effects on all of them.¹⁵⁸

The nine principles of Bhakti practice are described as *angas*, or limbs. Most of these include some kind of embodied or material practice, such as listening, singing, dancing, or prostrating. Each is further intended to create a specific feeling (*bhava*) for practitioners. For example, the sixth anga is *Vedana*—prostrating oneself before a chosen image or representation of the divine. This is both a physical act and a visual one—the body is required in both cases. Once again, the body, and the labors of which it is capable, is essential to the spiritual practice. It is through the use of the body, and the affective displays that accompany such labors, that spiritual truths are born or discovered. These labors work to transform the latent resources of both self and space into valuable goods.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid; emphasis added.

¹⁵⁸ See section on "Work" below for more on this relationship.

At the conclusion of the Krishna celebration, Elahn thanked everyone for their "lovely intentional participation" in the ritual as a bowl of date truffle prasad was passed around. Some attendees left quickly, others wandered off to the kitchen to talk over tea and a late dinner. A few stayed in the meditation room, some splayed out on the floor, others kneeling at the altar, but none merely sitting. Looking around, the physical impact of the night's events was evident; it was displayed clearly in the bodies of those who remained. These were bodies exhausted by their labors. These were people excited to action, in prostrating themselves before their god, or in taking meditative and yogic poses for a moment of reflection. These were embodied persons whose experiences were visible and incontestable. They were, as Elahn later explained, "overcome with *presence*".

In this chapter, I explore the ways in which a variety of practices, or labors, work to refine the resources at these sites into usable goods. Within the SBNR understanding, Source requires action to be brought into fruition. It is through intentional practices that the latent powers are brought to bear in *real* and visible ways. These labors refine energies into experiences; the embodied practices make the invisible and sometimes nebulous *real* and *present*. Emotion, and the visible affect that is its index, is key within this process. Here, I consider how both physical and mental labors (like walking and channeling) are transformative for both the people who perform them, and the spaces in which they are undertaken. I also examine how "work" is conceived in various rhetorical and practical dimensions within these communities. The common theme for this chapter is that the ways in which certain practices are conceptualized and performed at these sites produces a particular spiritual identity with a certain posture toward the ultimate reality.

The spiritual self is created through the practice of spiritual labors, and spirituality as a domain is shaped by these processes.

Practicing the Spiritual Self: Personhood as Process

The SBNR self in the world is simultaneously becoming and being rediscovered as a fundamentally spiritual entity. This happens largely through experience, especially emotional experiences facilitated by intentional practice. In order to understand seekers, we must imagine not only a self overwhelmed by affect, but a logic or grammar of subjectivity that treats an affective experience as its objective structure and basis. The seeker's reformulation of the Cartesian *Cogito* may well read "I feel, therefore I am." The self is both revealed and shaped by spiritual labors, especially those with emotion at their heart. As Elahn explained at a kirtan event in September:

We are taught [in the Vedic tradition] that actually we are not these material bodies. That actually we are spirit-soul...our very essence comes from the divine... Impression after impression is imprinted in the soul giving us experience of life. And as these [souls], we traverse from body to body through countless eons of time, in search of happiness. We're looking for it in so many places, but because we are so principally identified with these bodies, because of our senses, our portals to how we experience things. Because of these experiences we become very identified with our bodies, we forget that actually our nature is spiritual...and when we know when we belong, then naturally our soul is happy and content....And actually our soul is trying to evolve, it's trying to return home...Our soul is trying to return back to life, back to the source....All we have to do is sit and sing these wonderful mantras, and naturally our soul evolves, because our hearts are open, and gradually more and more love fills us. And this is the state of evolution, when a person is filled with pure love...

The process of becoming by re-becoming the divinely-sourced self is one that requires action oriented around emotional experiences. Seekers become their true spiritual selves, in part, through the manipulation of the body. I want to emphasize the need to "abandon all theories which explicitly or implicitly treat practice as a mechanical

reaction."¹⁵⁹ I argue that SBNR practices that engage with the materiality of the body and place are valuable to seekers primarily because of their intentionality—they are emotional, driven by ontological assumptions, and aimed at shaping both the self and the broader reality; these stabilize and make visible otherwise nebulous energies. The question I consider in this section is how seekers imagine practices to shape the self, and how notions of selfhood impact practices. Kripal argues that "we cannot outgrow the sacred and become purely secular...we *are* the sacred"¹⁶⁰ Most of my participants would agree with this; the notion that while we are *in* a body, while we may *use* it, we are not, as Elahn reiterates, "these bodies". We are spirit. As the often quoted saying goes, "you are not a human being having a spiritual experience, you are a spiritual being having a human experience."¹⁶¹ This mantra highlights the tension between the SBNR body and mind/spirit; while the former is essential, it is valuable only insofar as it is a tool for understanding the latter.

The Sympathetic Body: Emotion, Affect, and Practice

¹⁵⁹ Bourdieu 1977, 73

¹⁶⁰ Kripal, Impossible KL 5339

¹⁶¹ Pierre Teilhard de Cardin; a formidable Jesuit priest, philosopher, and paleontologist, de Cardin represents the very ideal of the spiritual seeker. This quote is contested, and is first attributed to Cardin in Robert J. Furey's 1993 book, *The Joy of Kindness*. Alternative attributions include G.I. Gurdjieff. Several secondary authors who cite as Chardin include Wayne Dyer, in various presentations, and Stephen Covey in *Living the 7 Habits: Stories of Courage and Inspiration* (2000). What is important for seekers is the sentiment expressed, rather than the original source of the idea; this tells us a great deal about the spiritual mindset. Intelligent, thoughtful, but a refusal to be confined to one domain of human thought and activity. De Cardin is also known for celebrating the feminine as a divine force, for stating that "Christ has a cosmic body that extends throughout the universe (*Cosmic Life*, 1916), and writing about the vibrations of love as a threshold to another universe ("*The Evolution of Chastity*, 1934)

I sat down with John, a retired computer programmer turned SBNR minister for a meeting over coffee. A warm and enthusiastic man in his early seventies, John had relocated to Prescott, a small town in the Verde Valley about an hour outside of Sedona, because of its powerful spiritual resonances. He explained that *Sedona has become too touristy, too crowded, and too expensive. The energies that are naturally all throughout this area are becoming weaker and more polluted there. But out here, on the edge of the valley, they're still strong. And practically speaking, it's much more affordable to live here. The people that I minister to in the area aren't here for the art or the expensive retreats—they're here for Spirit.* Like other long-term residents in these areas, John is critical about what he sees as the over-emphasis on consumer culture at these sites. And yet, he reaffirms their value as inherently or naturally sacred.

Our conversation eventually turned to his late wife, who had encouraged their move to Arizona. He recalled hearing his wife's voice soon after she died; during a subsequent meditation on this event, he was struck with an image of a cracked heart, with light pouring from the fissures. He put these two experiences together, explaining that his wife, in dying young, broke his heart so that more light would come through.¹⁶² Trauma, difficult emotional experiences, he said, are intended to open the heart, and allow for further spiritual growth. And emotion, he explained, is "energy in motion". Here, John broke down, weeping openly and without reservation. After a few moments, he paused, laughing quietly, and said, "these tears are good. they mean that what I'm feeling, what I'm saying is real, it's true." Emotion, in other words, is read as energies enlivening the

¹⁶² Whether it was conscious or not, this sentiment mirrors Leonard Cohen's Anthem, which was released in 1992.

systems—mental, spiritual, and physical—and providing wisdom as a result of its interpretation.

For John, and for many of the seekers I met in both Glastonbury and Sedona, affect is a sign of a real and undeniable presence. After his breakdown in telling me about his wife, he went on, explaining that after her death, he visited Stonehenge, where a photo taken showed an orb of light behind him. This was, he explained, a moment and a place where his reality and his wife's came together. Then he laughed, and went on, saying: *it's all about interpretation. It might be a shadow, or light, or something, but it's still more too! It could have been both natural and supernatural, since the supernatural can use natural elements to indicate their presence. It's really about perspective, and what you need to learn then, in that moment. Like a UFO can be a flying saucer or an angel, depending on your interpretation and perspective. It's actually both, and so much more.* This sentiment reiterates the idea that experiences require ordering hermeneutics for their decipherment, and yet the value of the experiences are inherent and undeniable for seekers.

Many seekers, like John, explained that the value or truth of an experience cannot be summed up in describing it as simply rationally or empirically true. The experience itself, and the impact it has upon the experiencer's depth and quality of understanding of reality is the most important element. That experience happens within the body is important; that experience often takes them out of the body is equally important. The ambivalence between embodiment and disembodiment is vital to an overall understanding of SBNR ontology. The body is the site for experiencing and understanding fundamental ontological truths; it is a vital—and perhaps the primary—

epistemic tool. In other words, there is no site for interpretation—and therefore no meaning—without the material body. But for seekers, the true self—that which is divine and eternal in nature—is the spiritual self.

This is where the notion of the *subtle body* helps to understand the relationship between body/mind/spirit within SBNR. Sometimes referred to as a "great chain of being", the subtle body is a complex, multi-constituent self that occupies the energetic spaces of reality. While it has roots and application across several Eastern traditions, including Hinduism and Buddhism, the SBNR understanding is, like other concepts, a pastiche incorporating from multiple sources. Common ideas such as chakras and energy channels are aspects of this notion. More directly, Blavatsky's Theosophical re-working of the idea, which she further demarcated into three aspects: the astral body, the illusion body, and the causal body. The first, referred to as the *Linga Sharira*, she described as the invisible double of the physical body—is in charge of "feeling", and is the location of emotions and desires.¹⁶³ It is, in various literature, described as the crucible or cauldron, where transformation and alchemical metamorphosis of self occurs; as a vehicle that carries Source energies; and as a conduit through which the same energies might flow. What is key is that this subtle body is understood to have real, often visible and always sensible effects on the physical body, and vice versa.

For seekers, the physical body is a grounding place for the subtle, both of which provide context for the spiritual self. It is not *other than*, but it is *more than*. Carrette

¹⁶³ See Collected Writings for more details.

explains that, "[William] James gives great emphasis to the fact that 'emotion dissociated from all bodily feelings is inconceivable', but to root emotion in the body does not necessarily...reduce emotion only to the body."¹⁶⁴ The body recognizes the presence of energetic spiritual truth before or in some cases to the exclusion of the conscious mind. This fact is indicative, for spiritual mystics, of the fundamental and intimate relationship between the physical and the subtle bodies, and between the body—taken as a whole—and the physical and non-physical realities with which humans are constantly engaging. The body is essential—its sensual capacities employed for the sake of discovery of self and divine realities. Its affective resonance—that is, the tendency for bodies to respond to and display feedback from emotional stimuli—is fundamental in all cases. The responses of the body—both visible and invisible—are interpreted as proof of the existence of the forces, energies, and entities imagined to populate these power centers. Practices like kirtan waken the sympathetic, affective self. Once again, the tension between the reality of a material world and the notion that such a reality requires constant making is evident in practices related to the body. In this case, it is the self being shaped through these processes. Thus another point of ambivalence within this tension: that between the embodied human self and the imagined ontological self.

Glastonbury historian Patrick Benham argues that Avalon is a feeling.¹⁶⁵ Paul, a Glastonbury farmer, and former employee of the British national rail, explained in a dowsing demonstration that "we're all made of vibration." The body, he explained, knows

¹⁶⁴ 2007, 423.

¹⁶⁵ 1993.

things that the mind never could, nor could we explain how it knows. He claims that the government employed him to visit sites along potential rail lines, and "feel" if there would be issues with building, like mineral deposits, excess magnetic fields, et cetera. The importance of encouraging people to (re)learn how to feel their way through reality, he argued, cannot be over-emphasized. Whether we consciously recognize it or not, we feel energy—wi-fi, radio waves, and other modern varieties—that can make us sick by disrupting our natural energies. Now, more than ever, he emphasized, people have to be aware, and practice feeling. What is required in our contemporary landscape is a conscious awareness of the body's—both subtle and physical—relationship to the invisible.

Bryan had a similar explanation of his embodied experience of Sedona's powers. He explained that "when I'm here [in Sedona], my body feels different." When I asked why he thought that to be the cause, he asked me to "let [him] sit and feel though this" question. He closed his eyes for several minutes, folding his hands in his lap, in a clearly habitual meditative gesture, before finally pointing to "energy flow, a magnification of whatever there is", as the source of this bodily feeling. The body here is itself an interpretive tool, speaking through flows and feelings, which the individual, in this case Bryan, interprets and verbalizes. *There's a reason scientists refer to it as the sympathetic nervous system. Our bodies react to stimuli before our conscious minds have the chance to. When we become in tune with these bodies, we're able to really tap into, and in some cases control, our relationship to these stimuli. It's no coincidence that the chakras identified by ancient cultures more or less match up with science's understanding of the nervous system. Our bodies are made to feel spiritual energies, to give us wisdom*

through felt experience. The energies in these power centers awaken the latent capacities for spiritual experience that exist in the body. The body, with both its physical and energetic qualities, operates for seekers as a kind of mediating force between divine and human consciousnesses which are, at their most basic, emanations of the same Source. It is a conduit, a tool for translating the transcendent into the immanent.

The notion of the human body as a site upon which ultimate realities are displayed is not new, nor perhaps unique amongst today's spiritual seekers. Closely tied to the historic concepts of animal magnetism and sympathies, the body as divining rod indicates the vitality of embodiment within contemporary spirituality. Arianna explains that she has been told her whole life that what she does, what she experiences isn't possible, isn't real. Her response has always been "but my whole body says it is." It is this same concept that seekers draw from when describing how they "feel pulled toward" or "feel drawn to" specific places, like Glastonbury and Sedona—we should take them at their word that these experiences are in part sensory and not just metaphorical or conceptual. There is epistemic value in bodily sensations, however much seekers articulate their ontological value of selfhood as distinct from their material selves.

As an early SBNR thinker, James provides a clear explanation of how he understands the dynamic relationship between individuals and their felt sense of connection to particular ideas, those which, for them, are luminous:

it is as if a bar of iron, without touch or sight, with no representative faculty whatever, might nevertheless be strongly endowed with an inner capacity for magnetic feeling; and as if through the various arousals of its magnetism by magnets coming and going in its neighborhood, it might be consciously determined to different attitudes and tendencies. Such a bar of iron could never give you an outward description of the agencies that had the power of stirring it so strongly; yet of their presence, and of their significance for its life, it would be

intensely aware through every fibre of its being.¹⁶⁶

The iron bar is akin to the notion of a divining rod, in which a physical implement is used to seek out the location of particular elements, including especially water and various mineral deposits. But using this metaphor to speak of individual search for truth is telling; the body, in the ways it responds to—turns to, is pulled toward, and repels against—various stimuli indicates, for the individual experiencing such sensations, the location of truth. And as Fuller explains in his examination of wonder, such an excitement of the body and "the human cognitive system [causes us] to seek the causal source of extraordinary phenomena at a more general level of existence." Seekers are compelled by extraordinary experiences, those that move them and excite their bodies, to consider what they tell them about the universe, god, and themselves.

As Brenna explains, "when something resonates, it is true. You feel the truth of something in your gut." This is not merely a metaphorical gut, but the physical center of the human experience. Popular spiritual guru Deepak Chopra reminds seekers that:

"The universe has no fixed agenda...only a series of possibilities that shift with each thought, feeling, and action that you experience...refer again to the body. Every significant vital sign- body temperature, heart rate, oxygen consumption, hormone level, brain activity, and so on- alters the moment you decide to do anything... decisions are signals telling your body, mind, and environment to move in a certain direction."¹⁶⁷

Within the context of spirituality, the body takes on a vital epistemic dimension as a kind of energetic divining rod. Human bodies are thought to be sensitive to the divine realities

¹⁶⁶ 1902, 55.

¹⁶⁷ For more on Chopra and other successful figures within the SBNR community, see chapter 5.

of the universe, and tuned to feeling. Bodies locate divine communication in a concentrated and visible way. Their physical reality helps to channel and focus cosmic truths into manageable and understandable phenomena. The body as a thing upon which felt experience is written is vital. It is a tool used to refine energies into knowledge. But while it is essential, the body is not sufficient.

Physical Labors: The Body as Tool for Refining Energies

The physical body is a site upon which spiritual realities are written and become accessible. Lessons learned through embodied experience *point to* fundamental truths underlying, but they are conduits for lessons to be learned. Bodies facilitate this learning; they are tools for refining spiritual energies into viable truths. Just as the forge is necessary for refining raw gold into jewelry, but cannot be conflated with either, so is the body essential for the important process of tapping into Source to attain spiritual wisdom. Energies are largely invisible, so their effects and the evidence for their reality are read onto the landscapes of these places and the bodies of seekers. Both of these material elements are natural resources for reflection and knowledge. Here, I explore some of the ways in which seekers at these sites use their bodies to "tap into" and refine the spiritual energies understood to enliven the places. I pay particular attention to walking labyrinths and yoga. In both cases, these labors are understood to allow the seeker to overcome the ambivalent reality of their physical bodies by utilizing them for spiritual insight.

In Glastonbury, most labyrinthine walks are practiced on the tor. An average person of reasonable fitness can expect the climb from foot to summit to take approximately 30 minutes, along either of two footpaths. However, seekers wishing to engage in more extensive contemplative practice, are advised at least 2 hours for walking

the labyrinth. The idea of an ancient walking maze was introduced by Geoffrey Ashe in his 1979 booklet "The Glastonbury Tor Maze", and has become one of the most popular activities for seekers in Glastonbury. Like other labyrinths, Ashe argued, that found on the tor would have been used by ancient peoples for connecting with the spirit of the landscape, and for contemplative purposes. He connected the Glastonbury example to allusions in early Welsh poetry to *Caer Sidi*, the "turning" or spiral castle. This place, he argued, was for pre-Christian inhabitants, the location of a magic cauldron.¹⁶⁸ Kathy Jones, founder and primary priestess of the Goddess Temple, describes it like this:

"Somewhere on the slopes of the Tor lies the entrance to the Underworld of Annwn and the Cauldron of the Dark Goddess. It may be near Her heart or through her Yoni. There are tales of subterranean tunnels and caves where strange apparitions lurk, of people who went into the Tor through the hidden entrances, only to return years later old and white-haired or mad. On the north side of the Tor is a manhole cover where the sound of continuously roaring water can be heard. Beneath this cover is a room belonging to the Water Authority, full of dials and wheels which control the water flow in the reservoir beneath the Tor. Seeing this room makes the idea of underground tunnels seem real."¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ This parallel rhetoric that allows both the landscape and the physical body to be understood through the same metaphors, in this case the cauldron, is not coincidental.

¹⁶⁹ <http://www.kathyjones.co.uk/the-goddess-in-glastonbury-2/2/>

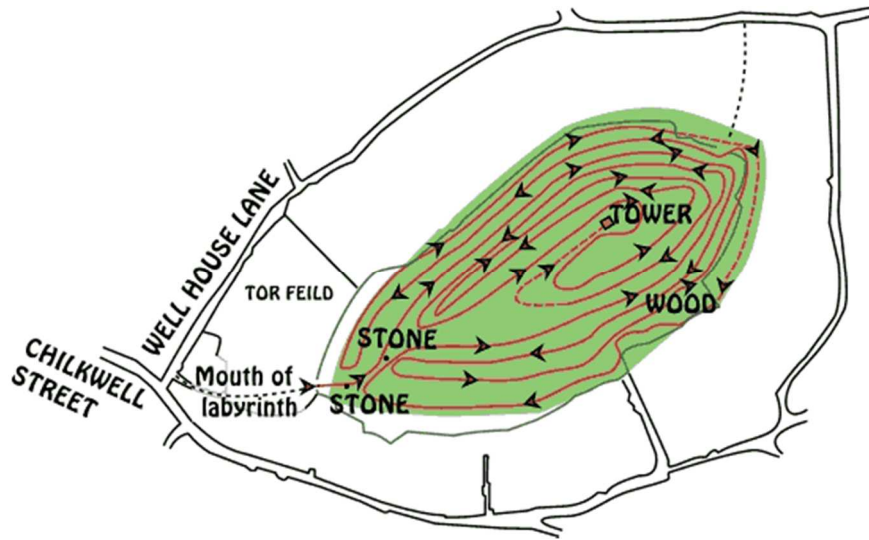


Image 23: Map of Glastonbury Tor Labyrinth. Image by Kathy Jones. Used with Permission.

The Tor, and the anthropomorphized energy that enlivens it, is read through the lens of *body*. The material, the physical is a necessary tool for spiritual awakening, but it is the stage upon which the more fundamental spiritual truths are enacted.

Many seekers walk this path regularly. My neighbor Brenna did so as often as her schedule and weather permitted, often spending an entire afternoon climbing up for meditation, and then returning back to her flat after sunset. She described the process to me as *a chance to just connect with the land. Labyrinths are great for meditation because you just walk. You can just turn off your rational brain, and tune into your consciousness. You just follow the path. It's a great way to refocus, to distract myself from the chatter that blocks out my higher thinking. I just walk, and let everything else fall away.* Brenna expresses clearly here the notion of the body as tool, particularly when it is engaged in intentional labors. Spiritual wisdom is attained by disciplining the conscious mind through embodied practices. By exhausting the body, the individual mind is quieted, and

the divine consciousness is brought to the fore. Once again, the dynamic relationship between mind/body/ spirit is essential.

The tor is also used as the endpoint for many walks, parades, and marches in Glastonbury's spiritual calendar. At various points throughout the year, different groups wind their way through town, and climb the hill from the western side, which is a longer, but less steep path. Tim, my resident Druid expert on Glastonbury, explained that *we climb the tor on most holidays for several reasons. First, because it's a dramatic conclusion to any group walk, and provides a powerful and evocative setting for any rituals we want to perform. And secondly, it ties us to our spiritual ancestors. Ancient peoples knew this was a sacred landscape, and they treated it as such. We are so lucky we get to tap into that lineage here—it's a really powerful thing.* For Tim and many others, the imagined history and current powers provide a focal point for practices associated with the tor that rely upon but do not explicitly mention the materiality of the site, or of the bodies performing the rituals. The tor's status as a sacred place is supposed to be written into its physical presence; but that physical presence is only a mediation point—a tool to point toward a higher spiritual reality. As a unique landmark, layered with mythic importance, it elicits a felt response, an emotional recognition of its sacred powers that demands neither rationalization nor explanation. When seekers practice intentional labors, energy (viz. Source, God) moves, and the felt experience is the proof. In other words, the physical quality, the embodied practice, of walking is seen as a means to a disembodied experience. Pilgrims who walk the tor do so as a ritualized way to detach from the material nature of their human lives, and to connect with something *higher, realer, or deeper.* But, implicitly, the material is required, as much as it presents a

problem to overcome. These practices are valuable in the access they provide, in the ontological truths they reveal.



Image 24: Aerial view of Glastonbury tor, with the labyrinth path visible around the sides of the hill. Image from Google Earth.

And yet, seekers' rhetoric about these practices and these places obfuscates the complex historical, political, and material realities that make their ideological formations possible. This fact indicates the underlying ambivalence that is at the core of SBNR relationships with the material world, especially in its supposedly *natural* formations.¹⁷⁰ Seekers use these sites practically as vital tools in expressing and articulating their worldviews, while simultaneously discounting their empirical reality. They point with one hand to the tor in order to demonstrate the natural quality of the ideologies they reflect onto it ("see, the labyrinth proves this places' sacred history"), while gesturing

¹⁷⁰ Recall the previous chapter's discussion of land management and curating spiritual geographies.

toward an abstract and flexible reality with the other. This tension, between an as-of-yet-un-shaped reality that requires intentional consciousness to bring it into meaningful fruition and the material elements that facilitate and (literally) ground such an ideology, is fundamental to how seekers articulate their SBNR identity through practice at these power centers.

The context in Sedona is similar, though, once again, the particularities of the place and its communities matter. There are many labyrinths in the area, all of which are consciously made—that is, they are recent inventions, and there is no attempt to conceal this fact. They can be found at the Unity church, St. Andrew’s Episcopal church, and at many of the area’s hotels and resorts. Here, I want to focus on the massive labyrinth at Angel Valley, which is modeled off the famous Chartres example. When I visited the retreat center to meet with Amayra, she excused herself after a few hours for a Skype appointment.¹⁷¹ She invited me to walk the grounds, and provided me with a map that indicated the location of several vortexes, gardens devoted to particular angels, and the labyrinth. She asked me to take a couple of hours to explore, and suggested I walk the labyrinth and reflect on our conversation, to see if I received any further insight or questions.¹⁷²

I walked through the grounds from the main house, passing several small altars dedicated to various angels and other entities, before I made my way to the maze. This example is massive, with a 104 foot diameter—nearly three times the size of the original

¹⁷¹ She does readings and spiritual counseling worldwide through this mode.

¹⁷² This phrasing implies a "giver" of such knowledge; see below for more on the agency of these sites.

Chartres labyrinth, which measures just over 42 feet. It is built into a depression of red rock, and marked with a variety of stones along the path. At various places, semi-precious crystals are incorporated to "raise the vibrational frequency" of the area., Amayra had explained. It struck me that such a massive property in a tourism-driven area must cost a fortune to run, and realized that its offerings must appeal to a large number of people willing to pay a rather large amount for its various services.¹⁷³ I knew this was not the kind of reflection that Amayra wanted me to do in her sacred space, so I turned my attentions back to the content of our conversation.¹⁷⁴ It was hot, and the bright blue sky seemed endless; I did not for a moment doubt the sincerity of Amayra's worldview, and for a brief time, I could envision some kind of benevolent space angel watching me meander through the stone maze.

Before I realized how long it had been, Amayra had walked down to join me, explaining that her calls had finished early, so she wanted to see how I was enjoying the space. I asked if she could tell me more about the labyrinth—like why they had chosen to build it, and what purpose it served on the property. *We started building a smaller version a few years ago, but then we received the message that it should be this size. This isn't just a labyrinth, but a landing pad, and we needed the extra space so that we will be able to walk around the craft once it lands. For now, it gives us a space to be focused on raising our energies, to help us prepare for the E.T.s to arrive. They won't be able to*

¹⁷³ The retreat center offers day passes for \$20 per person, weekly free meditation gatherings on Sundays and Wednesdays, as well as various retreat and "experience" options, including \$188 for a guided "angel walk", \$133-\$333 per night stay in one of several overnight accommodations, and fully organized personal and group retreats for anywhere from 3 to 21 nights—the prices for which are not published.

¹⁷⁴ See chapter 5 for more on the commercial enterprises of Angel Valley and other organizations.

come until we raise our vibrational frequency up to a certain level. Walking around this space, visualizing their arrival, and intentionally focusing on our cosmic connection to them, and to one another—that's why we built this. It's a tool for spiritual growth. It helps us quiet ourselves and be present in the moment—and that's where truth comes from. Not only is walking the labyrinth here intended to provide a space for quiet reflection, but it is understood to be actively shaping the future of reality through the wisdom attained in this process. Labor shapes the world. Only through intentional meditation, enabled by the labor of walking, can Amayra and her fellow seekers shape the reality they hope for.



Image 25: Labyrinth and Landing Pad at Angel Valley. June 2013. Photograph by the author.

Just as the tor in Glastonbury, the Angel Valley labyrinth is intended to quiet the mind, allowing seekers to bypass the rational part of the brain in pursuit of something

more. Walking as a physical practice is de-emphasized, and seeker instead focus on the ways in which a repetitive, mindless physical action opens up consciousness to more subtle realities. The E.T. aspect of Angel Valley's labyrinth provides a unique example of the tension discussed above. While Amayra and many others argue that the E.T.s are, in some ways, active and present now, they anticipate a more direct (viz. material) presence in the future as an essential way of connecting with these beings, and with the higher spiritual reality they represent. But, in order to connect with these beings, seekers are encouraged to work to avoid the *distraction* of embodied material existence, and to engage in practices that make such an existential perspective possible. Walking the labyrinth allows seekers to forget, if only for a few moments, the laden, problematic physical reality of earthly human life, and to turn their consciousness toward the beyond, toward the really real.

Over the course of my research period, I visited each of the major vortex sites in Sedona many times. Nearly always, at least one person would take a meditative pose at some point during the day. Several organizations, both general tour companies and yoga or meditation groups offer coordinated gatherings at these locations. On one warm June morning, I encountered a group of about 8 practitioners preparing for an hour long yoga class at the Airport Vortex. I watched the group set up, laying their yoga mats in a tight cluster in one of the larger bare (but still rocky) patches of ground. They oriented themselves so that they all faced the impressive vista, their backs to the nearby road and small parking area at the base of the hill.



Image 26: Airport vortex vista, Sedona. February 2015. Photograph by the author.

I sat against a tree, taking notes and collecting general demographic data of visitors, while the class progressed. The instructor directed participants to *feel the energy flowing through [them]. From the bottoms of [their] feet touching this sacred ground, through [their] body, and into the heart space. Feel that energy tingling, awakening every cell to [your] divine purpose. Breathe in, and out, an acceptance of this life, and a ‘thank you’ for it. Look out into this space, and know that [you] are part of it—an essential part.*¹⁷⁵

One woman toward the back of the group noticed me, and walked over after the class had wrapped up. I stood and greeted her, extending my hand, which she shook with a smile. I explained that I was taking notes on how people engaged with the space, for a project on why Sedona is considered a sacred spiritual site. She nodded, assenting to the

¹⁷⁵ Emphasis added.

basic premise, and without any prompting, offered her own perspective. *I think this whole area, and these vortexes in particular, have a kind of concentrated power. I do yoga here a lot, not just with the group, but on my own as well. It's amazing how different it feels here, rather than in a studio somewhere. Yoga is always beneficial, but the energy here makes it even more beneficial.*

I asked her to clarify, to explain the benefits of the practice in general, and more specifically at these sites. She thought for a moment, looking over my shoulder at the red rock valley behind me. *You know, yoga is older than religion. It's an ancient practice that has been around for millennia, long before Hinduism or anything else. People have always acknowledged that in order to access spiritual truths, to really tap into Source, we have to discipline the body. And at these vortexes, when you move the body in ways that awaken the mind, it all comes together—spirit fires on all cylinders, I would say. It feels electric, but not just in the body—my soul sparks.*¹⁷⁶ One of the most popular companies that offers organized vortex yoga, describes the purpose like this: "Learn how to translate the energy into movement while cleansing and purifying, activating and energizing your chakras. The Sedona Yoga Tour is a whole new spin on power yoga. This is *sacred vortex power yoga!*"¹⁷⁷ Bodily practice "translates" the energies into movement, which allows seekers to experience these resources in important ways. They *feel* their

¹⁷⁶ This was one of the very few times a participant explicitly addressed the issue of historical and religious context for a spiritual practice; however, her response demonstrates a core idea of the SBNR trend—that spirituality is understood to be innate, natural, and independent of any institutional, historical, or cultural context.

¹⁷⁷ <http://www.sedonaredrocktours.com/sedona-yoga-tour/>

connection to these spaces and themselves, and ultimately to Source which flows through both.

What is key is that the place matters, and the body matters. And yet, their value is provisional, and tied directly to their capacity to act as tools for uncovering fundamental spiritual wisdom. Through manipulating their bodies with particular intentions, seekers *experience* the truth at the heart of SBNR ideology—that they, and all other parts of reality, are infused with divine energies. Labors that engage material bodies, particularly those at these sites of spiritual power, work to highlight and make accessible the otherwise latent and invisible energies that are necessary to spiritual awakening. Seekers understand themselves not to *be* material but to *have* (and use) materiality. The self is essentially spiritual, and the spirit’s embodied experiences are not to be understood indicating the limits of human existence. It is not the end, but the means to an end.

Mental Labors: Past Lives and Astral Engagements

While physical labors are implicitly defined by their entangled tensions between physical and spiritual realities, practices that rely upon mental labors are less ambivalent.¹⁷⁸ The SBNR self as a fundamentally spiritual being is never articulated solely within the confines of either this life, or this plane of reality. Instead, the self is expansive—a reflection or refraction of Source that comes into understanding through intentional labors. We cannot, I argue, recognize or understand spiritual practices as such without first recognizing the ontological flexibility that is core within the SBNR worldview.

¹⁷⁸ At least for many seekers; I recognize that, whatever seekers may articulate to the contrary, these practices are also embedded in the material and physical realities of self and society that allow for their valuation.

Seekers understand reality to not only be plural, but to be plastic. Practices that engage with these power centers derive from and are aimed at confirming the existence of a meaningful reality, while working to shape that reality through the seeker's intentional consciousness. In other words, SBNR practice relies on a dialectical feedback loop between the imagined and the real that uses the materiality of these sites to stabilize this tension. These sites, and the bodies that labor within them, are crucibles for forging spiritual identities *and* the reality that makes them meaningful.

There is a fine (and fuzzy) line between imagination and reality for many SBNR seekers. This is nowhere more evident and complicated than in notions of past lives. While many speak about past lives as fact, when pressed, they often admit the necessity of imagination. Arianha and the members of the CGA interpret a good deal of their current lives' problems and successes through the lens of past lives. When I asked Jan, one of the regular congregants at CGA, to explain more, she explained that *past lives provide a way for us to work through things now. If we know that in a past life we were, say, a disciple of Jesus, that helps explain why we feel connected to Christ now.* And yet, just as Trevor and Liz doubted the factual importance of Glastonbury's ley lines and zodiac while asserting its metaphorical and practical value, so do many seekers understand past lives. They may not be *factually* true (although they are often understood that way), but they are undoubtedly *meaningfully* true.

But this does not mean that we should read past-life notions and discourses as disingenuous or merely symbolic. Instead, we ought to recognize the complex and

dynamic fuzziness that defines an SBNR ontology.¹⁷⁹ Often past lives are pointed to as a mode for understanding a connection, a piece of knowledge, or an asserted truth that cannot be verified or explained in this life. Arianna explained that she feels an affinity for Christ now because she was with him in his first century Palestinian life. In fact, she explains, she traveled to Glastonbury with him then, and that is a large part of why she continues to feel drawn to the place. She also tells me that she was in Glastonbury with the Druids, further solidifying her "soul-connection" to Glastonbury. She argues that she continues coming here because she chooses to, "in a pre-life" consciousness. She believes that she and everyone else "are here to learn, and to do what [they have] committed to in previous lives and in-between lives." The self, in other words, can also be a resource; imaging past lives (particularly in ways that connect them to these sites) is a productive labor of self-formation.

While she was still living in her native Australia, Arianna became very interested in aboriginal and Native American religious practices. *I felt drawn to the ways that indigenous people understand the land as medicine, and how they use it to heal themselves.*¹⁸⁰ *During one past live meditation, I saw myself living in this scrubby place, with a mountain in the distance, and I knew, somehow, that it was in America. I was there with my mother, who was teaching me how to work with the land. It was amazing. I could feel everything. The sun, the wind. And I knew it was true.* She spent the next year or so researching and trying to locate the place she had seen in the vision. She took out a map

¹⁷⁹ One helpful way to think through this is to consider what "work" past lives are doing; see below for more on this.

¹⁸⁰ For more on the issue of appropriation, and the conflation of indigenous worldviews, see chapters 5 and 6.

of the U.S., and meditated, allowing her hands to roam over the surface. With her eyes closed, she followed a trail of warmth, and pointed to the hottest place on the map—a site just outside Billings, Montana. The same day, booked her flight halfway around the world because she "felt like there was something there for [her] to learn in this life, too."

She arrived blind, and began asking about the place, describing the landscape as it was etched into her mind. Her very first day someone suggested that she head toward a small outlying town, and seek out Tanna, one of the town's oldest and most prominent residents. As she drove, she felt, once again, the warm and tingling sensation that indicated that she was headed in the right direction. She arrived to Tanna's house, and immediately recognized it as home. When the older woman came to greet her, Ariana says she was struck by the realization that this was, in fact, her mother from the previous life lived in this place. Tanna welcomed her with a hug, and confirmed Ariana's feeling, saying, *you've come home, daughter. I've been waiting*. Based on nothing more verifiable than an experience, a feeling, and a whim, Ariana traveled more than 8,000 miles in search of her truth. And, according to her, she found it.

For past lives to contribute to the on-going formation of self, several common ontological assumptions are required. First, that a fundamental aspect or variation of the self exists without a body, usually conceptualized as both premortal and post-mortal. In other words, the vital spiritual self must exist both before and after its various embodiments for the logic of past lives to be intelligible. Secondly, the notion also relies on a universe that is holistic, connected, and above all, *teleological*. Coincidence, and chance have no place within this paradigm; instead, experiences must be meaningful, and the cohesion of reality must be valued. Finally, past lives demand a self that is

cumulative, if not always conscious of this fact. That is, the truths and experiences of one life are necessarily understood to carry over and impact the next. There is no *tabula rasa* with each incarnation. The presumption of *gnosis* underlies all spiritual experiences. Seekers may not articulate the value of past lives as such; indeed, there is little attention paid to the legitimacy or coherency of such ideas. Instead, they are meaningful because they *feel* real. Their value is equal parts self-articulation and subjective aesthetic judgment.

Yet while seekers may express past lives through this particular rubric, these underlying SBNR ideologies make such notions viable within the bigger picture of spiritual constructions of self. It may help here to consider Plato's *Phaedo* and the concept of *anamnesis*. This term refers to the notion that learning is actually remembering something from a previous existence, either embodied or not. The SBNR concept of past lives relies fundamentally on *anamnesis*; many seekers argue that we determine our lives before we live them, and a life well-lived is one in which we learn all the lessons we had previously set for ourselves. Furthermore, all different lives are compounded; while few are able to recall in detail the particularities of their past lives, the events, experiences, and lessons learned are well-preserved in the deepest, most fundamental aspects of the soul.

Past lives provide one mental labor for developing a valuable spiritual self, but not all of the processes for doing so are confined to the individual. Carl Sagan once famously stated that "the cosmos is also within us. We are made of star stuff. We are a

way for the cosmos to know itself."¹⁸¹ Although he most certainly did not intend the association, seekers often point to the process of channeling as one key practice through which Source can know itself. For most seekers, the ability to channel or embody spirits is innate. All people, Brenna explained, *can* channel, but some are more in tune, more practiced, and therefore able to do it more efficiently. *It takes a lot of work to be able to decipher messages. It's a lot of effort to slough off all the baggage and rational parts of yourself that try to inhibit your abilities. But, really, anyone can do it...they just have to want to.* Various channeled messages have been transformed into important SBNR books. One such text, *Messages from Michael*, simultaneously affirms the notion that humans should not fundamentally identify with their embodied selves, and encourages readers to embrace their embodied experiences.¹⁸²

For many seekers, like Brenna, channeling is a generally informal process. On our trip to Avebury, she explained that she *constantly talks to angels. I ask questions, and they respond. Or, they nudge my thoughts in new directions. It's a pretty constant thing. Sometimes I feel them more than others; at Avebury or the Tor, it's like they're right next to me. Which, of course they are. Next to, above, inside. Because really, on some level, it's just my higher self talking to this self. It's the connection between Spirit that makes it possible in the first place.* Again, the notion underlying this embodied practice is that the body is temporary—a sort of helpful, informative obstacle to overcome.

¹⁸¹ Cosmos Television Series, Episode 9: "The Lives of the Stars". Aired November 23, 1980.

¹⁸² Other notable channel/entities include JZ Knight's Ramtha, Lee Carol's Kryon, Jane Roberts' Seth, and Helen Schucman's Jesus found in A Course in Miracles. For a more detailed discussion of the texts common in the SBNR canon, see chapter 5.

Communities throughout Sedona, including Angel Valley, hold regular channeling events. One such available method they refer to as channeled writing. In their literature, they describe the process as "learn[ing] to keep your mind out of the way, with the help of a meditation technique".¹⁸³ Such a practice is intended to facilitate communication with the invisible world, "whether it be with the Angels, with our Extra Terrestrial family, or with departed loved ones."¹⁸⁴ The goal, in any case, is communication that results in answers (viz. Spiritual truths or wisdom). Most of the channeling done at Angel Valley, like in other organized settings, is intended to answer or explore profound ontological and existential questions. Such proposed questions include: "Do you want to learn to communicate with the invisible world?", "In your world and bubble reality, are you God, Manifestor of all things?", "Would you like to learn how to meditate, utilizing the vortex energy?", "Are you laboring to birth your Divine Self into the Light?"¹⁸⁵ Such questions can be explored through guided meditation and channeling, massage or reiki, and a variety of other sessions, a majority of which will cost seekers \$144 for an hour. At all of these sessions, Amayra explained, the practitioners (ie, those who are providing the service) call upon various entities to aid in the process. *It is a collective process. We are there to facilitate, but it's really Spirit that provides the energy. Together, whatever energies we bring into the space, be it Angels or E.T.s or Masters, they work through us, with the person we're healing. We all have to work together.* The practitioner in this understanding is a sentient conduit—a sort of

¹⁸³ <http://www.angelvalleysedona.com/pages/services/sessions/channeledwriting.html>

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ <http://www.angelvalleysedona.com/pages/services/practitioners.html>

intentional and knowledgeable instrument for a higher purpose. The emphasis on "work" as central demonstrates the rhetorical and ideological value of labor within this perspective.

The processes of channeling and embodiment offer an examination of transdimensional communication or travel in one direction. For many seekers, movement in the other direction is also possible. Often referred to as astral projection, this practice includes a meditation wherein the *spiritual self* (ie, subtle body) moves away from the material body and into parallel dimensions or realities. Like channeling, astral travel requires both a self and a universe whose boundaries are porous. After the regular morning service at the Church of the Golden Age one Sunday, Arianha asked her congregants if they might like to do a visit to the Crystal City the following week. They responded with an enthusiastic explosion of chatter, and the minister's face lit up with excitement. Everyone agreed that a visit to the healing chamber would be most beneficial to the group as a whole. The next week, I found my seat, and waited expectantly as the service began. Arianha asked us all to follow her guided meditation. Everyone present assumed their favorite meditative posture, either remaining in their seats with hands on knees or in laps, or else finding a place on the floor against the walls. I imitated them, closing my eyes as Arianha talked us through the journey. She began by asking us to take conscious inventory of our bodies, to turn awareness to various areas in turn, then forgetting them as we moved on to the next. Once we reached our heads, she had us focus on the third eye, and start to move away from our bodies entirely.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁶ The third eye, which is located at the center of the forehead, and is related to the brow chakra. Understood to be the gateway between planes for many seekers, this third eye is associated with

The Crystal City is emerging from the mist between planes as you move toward it. Infused with a soft blue light, sparkling with an otherworldly glow. Let's pass through the gates, and by the clear fountains, their tinkling sounds and the sweet scent of flowers filling the air. Pass by the buildings, and notice each one. Places for everything and everyone. A warm pink door leads to the dwelling place of love. A shimmering violet gateway leads to the hall of dreams and possibility. Let's pass them by, but take note of where they are for future visits. If you see anyone, acknowledge them. You may recognize your spirit guides, or angels, or Masters.¹⁸⁷ Turn down a pathway that's lit up, and move toward the shining gold door. This is the healing chamber. Let's spend some time here, however you like. When you're ready, return to our other reality.

The next few minutes passed in quiet, the soft background instrumental music punctuated by the occasional deep breath or sigh. One by one, the participants began shifting, stretching, and opening their eyes, glancing around the room. After ten minutes or so, everyone had returned, and Arianha opened up the floor for discussion. As I listened to participants describe their experiences, I was struck by the supposed materiality of these alternate planes of existence. This presumably astral plane that congregants discussed shared many of characteristics with the visible material world that we generally inhabit. People spoke about the buildings they visited, the colors they saw, and the bodies they inhabited. Even more striking was the fact that not a single person

clairvoyance and out-of-body experiences. It is also the path of connection between individual selves and Source, or the invisible energetic realms.

¹⁸⁷ Within SBNR pantheons, the category of Masters (which is heavily influenced by Theosophy and later variations) may include Buddha, Jesus, and a variety of other figures. Understood to be human beings who achieved enough spiritual enlightenment to reach a higher consciousness, these entities provide models for seekers.

spoke of the experience with anything other than conviction; there was no questioning of the City as real, no doubt of its existence.

During the post-service lunch gathering, I asked Arianha if she might explain how it worked. I was curious about the mechanics of the process, but also the content of the experience. How did participants travel to this alternate space, and how did they understand its alternate reality? She paused thoughtfully for a moment, before launching into her explanation. *I know it probably seems odd; we spend so much time focusing on this reality, on this self. But this kind of practice demonstrates the limitedness of that perspective. People can travel to the Crystal City because it exists. Yes, it exists in our minds, but that is where reality lives, where it's grounded. It's all connected, and only because of our limited consciousness do we think that reality is confined to this material world we can see and touch. The more we travel into different dimensions, into the astral planes, the more real it becomes and the easier the process is. We have to train ourselves to see, and to exist, beyond this world. Because, in the end, we're part of this expansive universe that isn't restricted to the material.*

As James argues, "as a matter of psychological fact, mystical states of a well-pronounced and emphatic sort are usually authoritative over those who have them."¹⁸⁸ That is, these experiences become the central feature from which the individual develops and organizes identity into meaningful, cohesive selves. They cannot be reasoned away, nor argued with through means outside of their own reality. They indicate truth, in its most meaningful most incontrovertible form. Truth that is accessed, or perceived, or

¹⁸⁸ 1902, 56.

indeed, given, in states of emotional experience empower the individual in the formation of their own meaningful understanding of reality. Kripal argues that "within such an immediate empowering experience, the author becomes, in effect, the model and extreme type of democracy itself, that is, his or her own author-ity."The self becomes, as Kripal says, written through the process of experience. And this self is both physical and spiritual, both material and immaterial, conscious and emotional. The boundaries between real and imagined are entangled and fuzzy within SBNR discourse and practice. Working within such a complex system is hard work. But it is this labor through which the self emerges as a comprehensible and cohesive identity. The intentional processes that engage the presumed powers at these sites work to define and refine the self as a spiritual being in all its complexity and nuance.

Not Remotely Sacred: Access and Disability

There are physical requirements to participate in many of the spiritual activities at these sites. The vortexes all require some element of hiking to varying degrees, as does Glastonbury Tor. The path up the Tor is a recent development. The National Trust explains that "we make sure that access to the Tor is always possible. We've recently installed a pathway, which leads up the Tor, made of concrete steps and a path. We'll renew the pathway every five years so it's always safe."¹⁸⁹ And yet, access is *not* always possible. In recent years, a small but rather contentious debate has become part of the public conversation on the limits of spirituality. Disability advocates argue that the Tor is

¹⁸⁹ <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/glastonbury-tor/features/our-work-at-glastonbury-tor>

highly inaccessible, and that its benefits are not available to those who are less able-bodied. As a sacred cultural site, they want the site to make accommodations in order to allow people of all abilities to engage its spiritual power. On the other side of the debate are those who argue that, as an historical site, the Tor is exempt from legislation that would otherwise mandate disability access. Furthermore, they claim that any apparatus necessary to make the hill accessible would necessarily impact its pristine natural and spiritual qualities. A sort of ski-lift was proposed at one point, but logistics and environment impacts deemed the project infeasible.

On my first visit to Glastonbury, I came across a woman at one of the few resting places on the far, steeper side of the hill, her braced leg stretched out in front of her. Taking a moment to rest and make a few notes, she struck up a conversation. When I asked about her injury, she shook her head, laughing as she adjusted her foot, explaining that she had broken it while climbing the tor a few months prior. *I slipped and took a tumble on those mossy steps on the other side. I was here on holiday, and my friends had to carry me down. I was so disappointed that I didn't make it to the top then, so I'm here now to finish the climb. I won't let a little something like a broken ankle keep me from experiencing this place fully.* This woman had first-hand experience of the ways in which the body (and its limitations) impacts access at these sites.

Indeed, because these sites are understood to have healing properties, many people visit them in less than perfect physical health with the intention of using their energies to improve their conditions. While most of the seekers I encountered at the more physically demanding sites appeared to be managing, there were a few instances when accessibility issues were evident. I witnessed an elderly woman whose companions

carried her in a wheelchair to the top of the Tor, struggling with their load on the steep path. In Sedona, the site of a visible injury or disability at the vortex sites was not uncommon: broken limbs and mobility issues were among the most common. Of course there were the invisible difficulties that seekers shared with me: from heart failure to asthma to bipolar disorder, the various maladies of mind and body challenge the pervading mechanisms by and through which seekers are *supposed* to engage with these spaces.

Within widespread rhetoric, inaccessibility is exclusionary: who *really* wants to be there? Especially in Glastonbury, where getting to the town is itself a trial, merely visiting indicates a level of investment. But this narrative does not apply when the access issue is one of physical disability. Visiting these sites takes financial resources, but can also take a mental and emotional toll on visitors. Some are disappointed when they discover that they do not have the means to access certain spaces or communities; many become disillusioned with the commercialism they perceive at these sites.¹⁹⁰ Spirituality, and access to its many ideas and practices, is limited in sometimes surprising ways. And yet, even for those whose engagement is a struggle, there is value enough to warrant the labor.

Good Works: Evaluating Polysemic Labors

Seekers in both Glastonbury and Sedona employ the rhetoric of labor often in three different modes of "work". They speak of "doing the work"; that is, in the necessity

¹⁹⁰ Indeed, the commercial enterprises are abundant and visible. There are certainly reasons to critique this, as scholars have done, but the practical mechanism of trade is essential to understanding the mechanics of spirituality at these sites.

of active engagement with their practices. They also refer to "being worked on"; in this case, related to being called to these sites discussed in the previous chapter, they are often conceptualized as the passive participants in relation to active energies or entities. And finally, they ask whether or not certain practices "work", as in whether they have the intended (or alternatively unintended but meaningful) consequence. In this section, I explore each of these in turn, analyzing how the dynamic usage of the term "work" is employed in various ways to emphasize the laborious processes of spiritual engagement. In all cases, the labor examined is directly tied to the valuation of these spaces as sites of spiritual power. Just as the yoga performed at the vortexes in Sedona is understood to be more impactful than yoga done at home in Iowa, so does the value of these "good works" increase because they are performed within these crucibles of spiritual energy.

Doing the Work: The Moral and Practical Value of Productive Labors

In one of his many books, spiritual guru Deepak Chopra explains to readers that "you just have to do it. Roll up your sleeves. Feel the connection to your spirituality, to nature, to life."¹⁹¹ This insistence that spirituality is something "done" highlights this first rhetorical use of "work" as labor—spirituality demands that energy be expended. Arianha explained this sentiment in her understanding of this embodied life. *This is not a time of relaxation or play. It's a time where we are called to work for the greatest good, the benefit of our highest selves, others, animals even, and the planet.* There is no distinction in this sentiment between doing good for the self, and for others or the world at large.

¹⁹¹ The Book of Secrets: Unlocking the Hidden Dimensions of Your Life. 2004.

Working again from the notion of the self as a microcosm reflecting the broader reality (and vice versa), improving oneself works to improve the world. And in similar ways, the spiritual degradation (or even stagnation) of individuals has widespread impact. She expressed a concern with the increasing population of homeless people. *We get a lot [of homeless people]. They come to services every week because we serve food. I know it's doing them good, but it can be hard to see the benefit for the community at large. I try to focus on the good.* Because these individuals, often with mental illness or spiritual issues (which are often understood to be related), come to *take*, but do not actively *contribute* to the community through their own efforts, Arianha sees them as disrupting a careful balance of consumption and production of spiritual goods—a balance that is essential to the continued growth and viability of the community and its various members.

In Glastonbury, Trevor lamented the fact that so many tourists come to the town with issues (especially mental health problems), and expected the place to heal them. One afternoon as we walked from his shop across the street to The George and Pilgrim, he groaned at the common sight of several buskers lounging on the plinth of the market cross. As we sat at our usual table, he complained that *this place is a magnet for the artsy, bohemian type. It gives Glastonbury some of its charm, but then you have these mentally ill, or even just lazy people, who flock here for some mystical experience, some nonexistent spiritual panacea.* "But it doesn't work like that. You have to do the fucking work", he explained. "Glastonbury and places like it, like Sedona, have reached critical mass. People come because they think it will do them good." *People come and suck all the energy out of the community here. They don't contribute anything back to it, and the shadowy side of Glastonbury—the underbelly—grows.*

Both of these sentiments express a common idea circulating amongst participants in both these towns: *as you give, so you receive*. Individuals, whether they are conscious of the fact or not, both draw from and contribute to the shared energies at these sites. Work, in this sense, is both production *and* exchange. Spirituality requires effort; it is, as Bender points out, "often instantiated in everyday work..."¹⁹² There are a few common explanations for why this is the case. For both Trevor and Arianha, people need to work for their spirituality because to do otherwise is to cause imbalance in the energetic realities of these communities and the sites upon which they are built. These communities rely on the combined efforts of everyone involved. When the networks are overburdened with people who do not (or cannot) pull their spiritual weight, it falls to others to overcompensate. Whether this strain is financial, as Arianha complained, or energetic as Trevor did, it can cause real damage to everyone in the community.

For others, the more immediate concern is that laboring for spiritual gains makes them more valuable. This is true of both physical and mental efforts, as Brenna explained on our trip to Avebury. *I feel like hills and high places, and also valleys and low places, are especially powerful because they require effort. Spirituality isn't supposed to be easy. I climb the tor, or Silbury Hill here, and it means something.*¹⁹³ *It's hard work, physically. Religion gives people clear rules and dogmas to follow, but in spirituality, you have to do the work yourself.* Brenna's explanation moves smoothly from the physical

¹⁹² Ecklund and Long 2011, discussing Bender 2010.

¹⁹³ Silbury Hill is near Avebury, and is part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Stonehenge, Avebury, and Associated Sites. An artificial chalk mound, the hill is 129 feet high, making it the tallest prehistoric man-made mound in Europe. It is a common start or end to a tour of Avebury, and presents a daunting physical challenge, made no less difficult by the seemingly incessant rain in the area.

labors of walking and climbing to the mental labors required for the formation of a spiritual self. In both cases, it is the individual responsible for the effort, and therefore deserving of the wisdom gained through such endeavors. Work is valued as both a practical and moral imperative for the development of spirituality.

Being Worked on: The Self as Object/Agency of Energies

While there is a strong emphasis that human people need to put in the effort required to operationalize the latent energies at these power centers, there is also a common understanding that conscious energies can only accomplish so much. One of the questions that shaped the earliest research of this project is why individuals who leave their natal religions not become wholly secular, but instead turn to alternative spiritual formations. As I explored this question in my field sites, the answer became quite clear. People who leave religion and come to identify as spiritual, rather than secular, do so because of powerful experiences. This variation of "work" is also fundamentally about labor, but it is the labor of spiritual energies (or entities), with the seeker as the object of that labor.

As Fuller points out, "experiences of wonder exert 'leverage' on our perception and cognition in ways that encourage the development of a distinctively religious posture toward life."¹⁹⁴ SBNR people do not leave their natal religions and become secular because they have had experiences that, to them, prove the reality of a cosmic truth. And those experiences are not easily rationalized away. Ranjita and Michelle both talked about how adults around them had done their best to force their childhood powers for

¹⁹⁴ 2006, 146.

communicating with the divine out of them. Michelle remembers being punished for having dreams that foretold events, though she never doubted her own abilities. These early experiences, for both of these woman and many other seekers, were formative in their cosmological worldviews, and are not easily discounted or dismissed. This notion that Source works in and through individuals, sometimes without their own efforts, speaks to a kind of agency, if not full consciousness, of these enlivening energies.

For Brenna, and for many others in both Glastonbury and Sedona, simply being in the space is meaningful as practice. This is particularly true for seekers who travel or relocate, often from the other side of the world, disrupting their lives and dislocating themselves for the sake of taking up residence, however long it might be, in the energetic spaces of these power centers. I asked Brenna on our first meeting why she had come to Glastonbury, and what she hoped to accomplish. *I came just to be here. I knew I needed to make a change. And this place is just powerful. You can feel it everywhere, but especially at the tor. Honestly, I spend most of my day just wandering around, writing, thinking, just being in the energies. I try to open my heart up. I know Glastonbury will give me what I need.* This kind of understanding requires a passive self and an active (viz. agentive) space, whether personified or not.

In Sedona, I encountered similar sentiments. Ranjita expressed a common understanding when she referred to the town as the "heart chakra" of the planet. *You just have to open yourself up. Religion teaches us that we have to change who we are, that we are sinful by nature. Spirituality is about letting go. It's about emptying out all of that to make room. Room to experience divine love. Room to remember who we really are. And Sedona just helps open that up; it helps people to get in touch with that heart space and*

just be *in every moment*. *To create moments that are full of love and truth and wonder.*

The tension between passivity and active creativity is obvious here. But this tension is not one that Ranjita found troubling. In these moments of *just being*, the conscious universe works through people, and the best reality comes into fruition. It is because these powers are more concentrated in places like Sedona that people come to hold space at these sites.

These moments are, paradoxically, actively sought by remaining passive—by putting oneself into the space where such events are more likely to happen, and then simply waiting. While it may appear at first blush that this is precisely the kind of expectant passivity that seekers critiqued above, there are subtle but key differences in this kind of intentional passivity.¹⁹⁵ Seekers who hold space are doing so with a particularly conscious effort; they work to develop certain emotional postures that are intended to elicit the experience of object for the meaningful and teleological efforts of the latent energies. They make of themselves conduits. The practice of channeling is an effective example of this kind of labor, although it is not the only way in which seekers make space for Source to work.

Holding space provides opportunities for meaningful experiences like synchronicity. This notion is a complex one that appears in many different forms and structures throughout SBNR discourse and writings. Jung described them as meaningful coincidences; more recently, the notion has come to be linked to such ideas as the New

¹⁹⁵ Of course, there may be disagreements about this; from the outside, many of these individuals "holding space" appear to be nothing more than consumers. However, it is important how seekers themselves articulate these practices of passivity as being a kind of intentional labor of waiting and receiving.

Age Law of Attraction, chaos theory, Einstein's theory of relativity. On his website, author Paul Levy describes synchronicity thusly:

synchronicities are those moments of 'meaningful coincidence' when the boundary dissolves between the inner and the outer. At the synchronistic moment, just like a dream, our internal, subjective state appears, as if materialized in, as and through the outside world. Touching the heart of our being, synchronicities are moments in time in which there is a fissure in the fabric of what we have taken for reality...they are moments in time when the timeless, dreamlike nature of the universe shines forth its radiance and only reveals itself to us, offering us an open doorway to lucidity.¹⁹⁶

These are not mere moments of coincidence, but ruptures in the illusory material world that allow for a glimpse at the ultimate truth of reality. For seekers who have such experiences, there is an element of intelligence to the way in which these truths are revealed; the agentive force of reality is apparent in the structure and timing of synchronicities. But these events require the connective and relational capacity of the human mind to bring them together into meaningful interpretation. Thus, this conscious and intentional passivity requires effort in the preparation and subsequent translation of these moments into comprehensible and valuable truths. Being worked on is a collaborative labor between individuals and the various energies or entities they imagine to inhabit these spaces.

Does is Work?: Efficacy of Labor

The value of labor often depends on its efficacy. In the previous chapter, Trevor explained that the Glastonbury zodiac is "valid because it works". In other words, the

¹⁹⁶ <http://www.awakeninthedream.com/catching-the-bug-of-synchronicity/>

zodiac is real because it produces real effects—whatever those effects are deemed to be. Occasionally, the impacts are not those that were expected, but that does not make the practice any less effective. Instead, seekers interpret such unintended consequences as bringing a necessary truth to them. Labors that cause effects, especially those interpreted by the seeker to signal connection to Source or that reveal important truths, are deemed valuable. These are the practices that bring pilgrims and tourists from around the world to these power centers. A seeker can climb a hill in many places, but can only walk Glastonbury Tor in Glastonbury.

Arianha explains in an online video that what works in certain circumstances may not work in others. "There are many different ways for different people to learn and to grow and to understand their spirituality...there are many different modalities that may work for some people and may not work for you...seek out many different forms of healing according to your needs at that time. It could be that you go to an energy worker...a massage therapist...a soma therapy...a person that does readings that are energetic in nature."¹⁹⁷ Efficacy, in other words, is situational— context matters. An individual seeker may use a variety of practices throughout her life to work toward spiritual awakening; different problems demand different solutions. What matters is that whatever work is done, good results are accomplished. I met a man at Airport Vortex who claimed that the energies had healed him of cancer. He visited regularly after his diagnosis, and within a few months, doctors found no trace of the disease. *That proved it*

¹⁹⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCcZ_NuTy48

to me, he explained. *No one can ever tell me that this place isn't powerful. I have proof; my life is proof.*

The effectiveness of practices is not limited to the individual practitioner. The spiritual experiment that began with the Harmonic Convergence in 1987 has been deemed successful because it *worked*.¹⁹⁸ Seekers point to the increased visibility of spiritual concerns as evidence that humanity is waking up and recognizing their true identities as powerful spiritual beings. Residents of Glastonbury and Sedona often take personal pride in what they see as incontrovertible evidence that their labors have paid off. Anna, the owner of the property on which I lived in Glastonbury, explained that *those of us blessed to act as caretakers of this land have a responsibility. We are charged with the sacred task of caring for this land, and managing the flows of its energies. And in the last few decades, I've seen how important that job is. The world needs a spiritual awakening, and we have the power to channel and use the energies here. I see people everyday who benefit from being in this place; and then they go home and carry that with them. That's how we're changing the world, changing reality.*

One of the most common pieces of evidence that seekers point to as proving the efficacy of their practices is affective response. As Fuller argues, "emotions arise when certain significant experiences—such as some object suddenly and unexpectedly appearing in our environment—disrupt this equilibrium between ordinary expectations and new perceptions."¹⁹⁹ This disruption provides an opportunity for examination of the

¹⁹⁸ For more on this explanation, especially in light of the 2012 Convergence, see chapter 6.

¹⁹⁹ 2006

self, particularly in relation to whatever the individual perceives as the divine, or ultimate truth. Affect is evidence of presence. I had countless seekers explain that some experience was meaningful, or some notion real because it *felt* real, because they experienced emotional responses. Affective reactions rely on a cause; the cause is proved because of its effect. In Sedona, Bryce used the familiar analogy of the wind to explain his understanding. *We tell our kids that even though we can't see the wind, we can see it rustle the leaves on the tree. We see the impact the wind has, so we know something causes it. It's the same, although more subtle and complex with Spirit. It's invisible, but no less real because of that. We know it's real because of the evidence we see and experience.* O'Neill argues that "affect excites the nervous system, making the body the very terrain upon which religious difference comes to be felt." When such impacts are felt, the practice that elicited them has *worked*.

Conclusions

For seekers at these sites, emotion indicates changes and shifts. It is a sign of growth, transition, and knowledge acquisition. As Corrigan argues, "to study religion without reference to [emotion] is to strip religion of one of its central components, and in so doing to render it motionless, inert, and monotonous."²⁰⁰ By tracking the phenomena of spiritual practices, and the role they play in articulating SBNR identity and ideologies, my goal here has been to take seriously how experiences work to shape reality for these seekers. Kripal argues that experiences tells us about ourselves *and* about the real world

²⁰⁰ 2007, 12.

outside of ourselves, however those two things and their relation are conceptualized.²⁰¹ It is a process of engagement and of intersubjectivity, made all the more compelling for SBNRs whose relational networks include but are not limited to places and people, both visible and invisible. The fact of people's experiences is central here: people have powerful experiences, and their existence is empirical; these experiences are building blocks, stories that provide proto-religious ideas, and often form the central core of SBNR identity. Experiences "prove" the power of thought by confirming the presumption that human intention can have real-world impact, and empower seekers by affirming their presumed innate abilities to do so. However much SBNR is perceived as an internal, personal system of thinking, and however much many SBNRs themselves contribute, whether consciously or not, to this understanding, I want to reiterate here that experience is *always* mediated. It is mediated through structures that allow or disallow certain kinds of experiences, and through the various structures by which these experiences are made meaningful.

Such experiences help to confirm a common essential theology of spirituality: that of a holistic and divine universe, humanity included. As Bryan explained, "when I experience my own divinity, I get to experience the divinity of everything, every particle of existence. There is no Bryan, just consciousness." At first blush this statement appears to conflict with Bryan's common emphasis on the bodily sensations of experience, but in reality, this paradox is only apparent. In fact, while the body is generally understood as a real tool, it is not the only or even primary element of the human character. The body,

²⁰¹ 2010.

instead is a site upon which spiritual truths can be displayed; the body makes visible and concrete the invisible and experienced truths of mystics, particularly through affective phenomena. The individual body is a location upon which and through which the complex holism of the universe can be examined and understood. But that understanding is always understood to be limited.

For Elahn, and a majority of the seekers who contributed to this project, the body is a tool for experience, but is neither sufficient, nor necessary, for an understanding of the self. Ranjita explains her mantra as "may my divinity embrace my humanity": Presence is universal—here within, but not *only*, this body. The self is within the body, but not defined by it. Within this concept, the body is something that is temporary, that provides a location for sensory input that helps human souls evolve. And yet, the body provides a tableau upon which spiritual truths can be displayed and interpreted. It is a visible representation, or reflection, of invisible realities. Klasse points out how anthropologies in particular have understood "ritual as symbolic action, [and] a distinction has been drawn 'between "feelings" as private and ineffable and "ritual" as public and legible'".²⁰² I would argue that affect—that is, the visible, embodied phenomena associated with felt emotion—allows us, to a certain degree, to bridge this gulf. The practices that "work" become those that thrive—and are incorporated into the consumption and exchange aspect of spiritual economies at these sites. In other words, people will buy courses with effective teachers, while simultaneously criticizing the commodification of knowledge by people they deem ineffective, and therefore valueless.

²⁰² Klasse 2007, 149.

As seekers at these sites engage in the various practices, both embodied and mental, that are understood to be part of the spiritual domain, so do their experiences further shape that same domain. They walk and hike, dance and do yoga, and they *feel* their connections to their higher selves and god. They become spiritual through these processes, and the practices are thereby confirmed as effective tools for engaging with these sites and their enlivening energies. It is through this dialectic feedback loop that spirituality as such emerges. It is produced by these seekers at these sites, working through what it means to be spiritual.

CHAPTER 5: SPIRITUAL EXCHANGE

On a Friday evening in August 2015, I visited the Glastonbury Goddess Temple for what was advertised as an "embodiment" ritual. The flyer invited attendees to "spend an evening in the presence of the Mother Goddess. Come and *receive* words of love and wisdom from the Goddess through her embodiment and *show Her your gratitude* for all She *gives*."²⁰³



²⁰³ See image; emphasis added.

*Image 27: Advertisement in Glastonbury Experience Grotto. August, 2015.
Photograph by the author.*

Around dusk, I walked down the quiet streets of town, and entered the courtyard through the Glastonbury Experience grotto tunnel where I had first seen the advertisement. Surrounded by a cafe, several small shops, and the Library of Avalon—full of rare and esoteric books—the courtyard is dominated by the Goddess temple, which sits on the second floor of one of the bordering buildings, overlooking the small, green area. I waited near the foot of the wooden staircase until a few others began to ascend for the ritual.



Image 28: Glastonbury Goddess Temple; the Library of Avalon is just visible on the left, and a statue of a female figure on the right. July 2015. Photography by the author.

I entered the main temple room, which was lit by candles and dim lamps draped in sheer fabric, so that the space was bathed in soft, diffused light. The attendees sat in a

tight circle, surrounded by tall wicker goddess figures, nearly life-size. Their faces, made of slightly transparent papier-mâché, glowed eerily, tilted up to catch the flickering light. The temple volunteers, referred to as Melissas, had draped the figures in gold garments, and the various altars around the room were appropriately decorated with symbols of the coming summer harvest celebration: corn in its husks, small gourds, and scattered grains.²⁰⁴ A thin veil separated the main room from the back chamber, from which emanated low murmurs, music, and slow-moving shadows. I had arrived early, and was quietly instructed to remove my shoes before entering the space. The petite Belgian Melissa who met me at the door gestured toward the circle of wicker goddesses, asking me to find a place to sit, get comfortable, and prepare for the ritual.



²⁰⁴ This usage of the word "melissa" is inspired by Porphyry's account of the priestess of Demeter, Mellisae, who was initiated into the mysteries by the goddess herself; it also evokes images of a queen bee surrounded by her helpers.

Image 29: Wicker figures decorated for Spring celebrations. Glastonbury Goddess Temple. Photo by Kathy Jones, founder and director of the Temple. Used with permission.²⁰⁵

The room slowly filled with people, crammed into the tight space between the imposing wicker figures. As more arrived, we were forced to rearrange our limbs, crowded together, pressed into contact in the warm, dark space. Without any preamble or explanation, the ritual began with a meditation, led by an unseen priestess, accompanied by drumbeat, humming, and rattles. She invited us to focus on the goddess, and to imagine her embodied in the priestesses present. She instructed us to turn our mind's eyes inward, searching for the questions or other needs that had brought us to this place.²⁰⁶ She asked us to "align our thoughts with those of the goddess, which are always loving". The drumming, rattles, and occasional vocalization of the priestess continued as, without any further explanation of the process, two Melissas invited attendees, one by one, to "meet the goddess".

I sat for nearly an hour waiting my turn, listening to the many and varied sounds drifting through the veil. Women laughed, or more often, cried, as they communed with the two goddesses seated in the small back room. Their voices were distinguishable from the low, breathy, refrains of "I will hold you", "I feel you", "let go", "tell me" from these two priestesses turned goddesses. Their visitors responded with questions, wails, and heavy sighs. Of about 30 attendees, only two were men—both of whom accompanied women. The music continued, in ebbs and flows, seeming to mimic the sounds of the

²⁰⁵ Photos are not generally allowed in the Temple, but Kathy has given permission for me to include this photo of the interior; while it was not taken at the event I attended, it gives a sense of the feel and style of the Temple.

²⁰⁶ This sentiment recalls the notion, introduced in chapter 2, of being "called" or "drawn" to these places.

supplicants. One woman wept for more than five minutes, while the priestess-cum-goddess soothed her; the drum beats were frantic as she wailed, and slowed to a heartbeat rhythm as she settled into a softer sobbing. Several women were so overcome that they had to be physically helped back to the main room; the Melissas were busy that evening. Returning to the antechamber after their encounters, people either gathered their things and left the temple quietly, or, more often, stretched themselves in various meditative poses around the room, dabbing at their eyes with tissues, euphoric or peaceful smiles on many of the dimly-lit damp faces.

When my own turn came, I felt unexpectedly anxious. After so long sitting in a crowded circle, my legs ached, and I was characteristically fidgety. All sense of personal space had been shattered in the cramped circle—the warm bodies of strangers pressed against me with seemingly little regard for maintaining normal socially-established personal boundaries. The invasion of space made me tense and uncomfortable at first—an undesired intimacy—but the seeming total disinterest of these co-bodies and the practical necessity of closeness soon rendered the other people simply objects of interest.²⁰⁷ The room was hot, and full of emotional women whose stories I did not—and could not—know, and I was more aware than usual of my own outsider status, and the reason for my presence. I was not sure what to expect, or what was expected of me. I was anxious that I did not have the knowledge necessary to participate appropriately. Guided

²⁰⁷ I do not say this to objectify the other people in the space, but to reiterate that my engagement with them, in this context, was largely as physical things, tactile and fleshy; this sense was enhanced by the lack of verbal interaction. An occasional smile, the meeting of eyes was the extent of the interpersonal engagement between attendees; for more, see chapter 6.

by the volunteer Melissa, I stepped through the veil and kneeled in front of the seated goddess, who took my hands in hers and stroked my hair gently, pulling me once again into a physical closeness so uncharacteristic of the broader culture in which I have my bearings.²⁰⁸ The priestess was draped in an array of colorful veils and shawls, a sheer purple cowl covering her head and face. Behind the cloth, she wore an intricately decorated mask, black and silver, with ornate curly cues surrounding the eyes that peered kindly, if keenly, at me.

Behind the veil, the space was quieter and darker— a single window made visible the night sky between sheer purple drapes. The floor was covered in pillows, and the goddesses sat on high-backed wooden chairs, looking down on their visitors from a vantage point clearly intended to evoke a sense of eminence. I smiled up at the woman, unsure of what to do. Sensing my hesitation, she leaned down, her forehead touching mine, and murmured softly, asking me to "let go", and "feel the moment". She urged me to ask any question that felt heavy in my heart, to offer up any problems or curiosities. When I asked her if my trip would be successful, she leaned back, smiled down at me, and whispered: "my dear, you're here, you're asking the right questions. You already know the answer...stop trying think so much and just know the truth; just feel it. You've been given gifts to use. So, use them." When I did not immediately respond, the goddess lifted my chin up, encouraging me to look into her face, a beatific smile lighting up her face. "Let it go. Just let go", she repeated. *You already know everything you need to know. You have everything you need to have. I am here to remind you of your gifts. Rest*

²⁰⁸ This is even more evident in Britain, where informal physical touching is less common in the U.S.

assured that you're getting what you need from this place. And know that everything is well."

After my encounter with the goddess, the same quiet Melissa led me back into the main room, where she offered me water and a small piece of chocolate. Taking my hand, she painted a red ochre symbol on the back of it, explaining quietly that this mark was a temporary reminder of the experience, and that I should use it as a focal point for meditation until it was no longer visible. *Even when you can't see it, you'll be able to feel it*, she explained, *once you recognize that the goddess is always within your body as well, no matter where you are. That power you feel tonight, that love, you can have that anytime, anywhere. This sign is a gift, a blessing from the goddess.* She explained that this was a symbol for me to reflect upon, and to mark the experience. She reminded me that this healing ritual was offered without cost, but indicated a small box near the door and reminded me that a "love donation" was requested, as she pointed me back to the circle.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁹ For more on this, see below.



Image 30: Author's hand with the mark of the goddess. August 2015. Photograph by the author.

I wound my way through the wicker figures, where about half the evening's participants remained. They sat in meditative poses, or lay prone. A few couples huddled together, but no one spoke. I returned to my place on the far side of the room, and folded myself between two silent women, both of whom turned and smiled at me before closing their eyes again. Once the last person had her encounter and returned to the circle, the musician began to play more quietly. After about five minutes, the Melissas came to the edge of the circle, thanked everyone for their participation, and invited us to enjoy a reflective walk through the now dark evening to wherever we were headed. As we headed out the door, one woman suggested a late night stroll up the tor, at which suggestion a few others who had come together nodded, exchanging glances. Without any framing or explanation of the night's events or purposes, we all went our separate ways.

This embodiment ritual is a key example of the processes of exchange that define the spiritual economies within Glastonbury. The specific community in which the exchange occurred was temporary, but stabilized by the surrounding social networks and organizations, ie the Goddess Temple. The value of the product (in this case, the wisdom and presence of the divine figure) relies heavily on its origin, place of acquisition, and the social capital of the producer or trader—the priestesses hold a certain kind of clout within the network. The individual exchanges between participants and goddess were not dictated by monetary exchange, but articulated as a process of gifting with a subtle nudge for donation. And while the emphasis was on wisdom or knowledge as the acquired product, the materiality and embodiment of those present and the space in which the exchange occurred were essential not only to the process, but to its interpretation and valuation. We were asked to "show [our] gratitude for all she gives", a clear emphasis on exchange as fundamental to this ritual.²¹⁰ Once again, the body here is a tool, but one which facilitates material as well as spiritual exchange.

In this particular ritual, the goddess may be seen to encompass the entire economic mechanism of spirituality in Glastonbury. As Albanese argues, "what the Goddess means is earth and its energies, but earth transformed and transfigured by its capacity for magic. For the Goddess exalts religious imagination and pushes it consistently into act."²¹¹ She is a figure that represents natural divinity (*viz. ultimate value*), but which power must be harnessed (through embodiment), and put into action.

²¹⁰ See advertisement, image 27.

²¹¹ Albanese, Nature 179.

There is, as I explained in previous chapters, an inherent *capacity* for power, creation, and change at these sites, but they require the intervention of intentional people to come into fruition. Thus, in a sense, the relationship between place, people, and any entities or powers presumed to inhabit these spaces, is a process of exchange.²¹² Visitors and residents take the raw materials, transform them into valuable goods (including wisdom), and bring them into the broader global exchange. Spirituality (and indeed seekers themselves) become commodified within this market network that both values and provides stability to the exchange processes.

In this chapter, I analyze the third major component in the spiritual economies of Glastonbury and Sedona—exchange. This is the aspect of spirituality that has been given most attention by scholars, who often see it as one of the defining features of the SBNR movement. A common theory is that spirituality is a kind of sacralization of capitalistic individuality that emerged with the development of neoliberal ideologies. As previous chapters demonstrated, seekers at these concentrated spiritual centers *produce* spirituality to a large degree. Indeed, the very processes of exchange, I argue here, work to further develop spirituality as a domain—it is shaped and given ontological content and existential value through exchanging practices. Consumption and production are often simultaneous processes, and are given value by their particular contexts in these places.

²¹² For more, see below.

Importantly, seekers do not understand what they are doing to be primarily about consumption.²¹³ The things they buy, and the knowledge they seek to acquire, are understood to be means to an end. I met an older man at one of the many shops in Sedona catering to various spiritual needs. I asked him about the provisions offered, and their purpose. He provided a metaphor that has become an essential part of my approach to this project. *These are all just tools. Creating a spiritual life is like building a house. You need tools, but you have to do the work.* This notion, that the material goods that have in some ways come to be the key characteristics of spirituality are valuable insofar as they are useful, has shaped this project in its entirety. There are many resources to help seekers achieve their goals of spiritual enlightenment—a wide array of tools to get the job done. But they are just tools. As Trevor explained, *a crystal is not going to make you a more spiritual person, but you can use it on your journey to become one.*

The central products of spirituality as it is practiced and produced at these sites are a particularly valued self, and a particularly dynamic reality for that self to inhabit. The self is shaped through the processes of consumption and exchange, and as the self is shaped, so too is spirituality as the domain so key to seeker identity. As seekers consume, they create. As they exchange, they shape. SBNR is valuable as an identity—and its products as goods—because they *become so* through culturally-constructed mechanisms. Spirituality does not exist a priori, to be bought and sold at a profit, but is instead given

²¹³ Scholarship that takes as valid only emic perspectives is weak, but the viewpoints and self-understanding of participants within the ethnographic context are vital to our overall understanding.

content and contour through these processes.²¹⁴ It is, in some ways, constituted by the web of seekers. Examining the economy of spirituality highlights, quite literally, the function of values. When seekers are willing to spend a week's wages on a single hour lecture, we should take seriously how that willingness reveals something about both the buyer and the seller, and the ideologies that both (e)valuate in the process. Exchange is rarely (and almost never in this context) a matter of simple needs being met.²¹⁵ Instead, it encompasses a wide and complex social grammar of value and power that cannot be ignored.²¹⁶ What we acquire—and why, and from whom—reveals a good deal about how we understand the world and ourselves in it. This is no less true of spiritual seekers at these power centers. By examining the mechanisms through which exchange happens and how products of exchange attain value (including financial, cultural, and ideological), our understanding of spirituality becomes more complex and fleshed out.

Processes like the goddess embodiment ritual provide clear examples of just such mechanisms. For such a ritual to be valuable, the community must buy-in to its premises—that these humans embodied the goddess in order to facilitate an exchange of ideas and knowledge. By articulating the event within the rhetoric of giving (of thanks) and receiving (of divine gifts), this ritual takes on a clearly economic tenor. Seekers who participated in this event had to consent to the fundamental ideological foundations that allowed the ritual to occur. Namely that there is a divine reality inhabited by energetic

²¹⁴ There are some challenging examples of charlatans and tragedies that force us to consider the boundaries of what is acceptable; see, for example, chapter 6.

²¹⁵ Consider Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

²¹⁶ See, for example Taves and Bender 2012 and Lofton 2017.

beings who may use material reality to dispense knowledge through either direct or experiential (viz. affective) means. And, that with this knowledge in hand, people (both individually and collectively) can participate in the manipulation and valuation of reality in meaningful ways.

Knowledge is (Spiritual) Power: Gnosis as Cultural Capital

During the goddess ritual I was uncomfortable with my lack of insider knowledge. Through the process, it became clear that those present knew something (perhaps many somethings) that I did not. And yet, through the ritual, I learned something about the ideological structure of the community—I became, at least in part, an insider through my participation. I had to acquiesce to the presumption of divine presence, and in that way, I became active in the ritual's effectiveness. Spirituality does not exist outside of the people who enact it, and the networks, communities, and spaces in which they do so. Those who shape spirituality may not have official status as clergy, and yet they fulfill many of the same functions. They provide continuity, explanations, counseling, ritual expertise, and similar community goods. While the seemingly democratic and egalitarian system of spirituality appeals to many seekers, there are power dynamics within the global networks, and the nodes of power reside at these key centers. The notion of cultural capital is helpful in fleshing out the processes and mechanisms through which exchange occurs at these sites. Of course, as with other forms of capital, there is an implicit power in either possessing or having access to cultural capital. In this section, I analyze some of the key products through which seekers gain knowledge about spirituality—including texts, teachers, and experiential storytelling.

Books and Texts: The Canon of Spirituality

Most seekers describe themselves as "voracious readers," and rarely differentiate between genres.²¹⁷ Fantasy and Science-Fiction are as commonly meaningful sources of spiritual wisdom as are *A Course in Miracles* or The Bible.²¹⁸ These texts provide inspiration, ideas, and models—they teach reader-seekers the language of spirituality, and introduce many of its key ideas. Trevor explains that "the books are not the magic—they are the conveyers of magic. Everything in them comes from nature, from experience." Like with other goods, the value of these books is in their usefulness as spiritual tools. There are three main genres of books that are often incorporated into the spiritual canon: channeled or revealed texts, practical philosophy (sometimes referred to in common parlance as "how-to" or "self-help"), and fiction. The key element, no matter the source, is that these texts are expected to speak to the innate, natural, and universal spiritual characteristic of the human person.²¹⁹ Any text that does that is fair spiritual game. Like with the way in which seekers use whichever conceptual structures are most appealing, or whichever rituals "work", emotional and aesthetic judgements are important in determining what counts as part of this spiritual canon. While there are a broad array of texts that seekers employ for various purposes, I want to focus on those that seekers at these sites most often engaged with directly (through classes or similar events), or cited as part of legitimizing particular ideas or practices. These texts, because they are

²¹⁷ Michelle, Glastonbury.

²¹⁸ Although several scholars have contributed to our understanding of the relationship between literature and esotericism, Paganism, and other related domains, more work remains to be done, particularly in regards to trans-genre source sampling. See Clifton's *Her Hidden Children*, Kripal's *Mutants and Mystics*, Sulak's *The Wizard and the Witch*, and Hanegraaff's *New Age Religion and Western Culture*.

²¹⁹ Even if just messages are heavily encoded through metaphor and parable.

presumed familiar within these networks, offer a kind of basic shared ideology.²²⁰ Thus, while many seekers I met mentioned books like Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* as part of their childhood interest with the fantastic, I do not include it here because it is most often cited as a kind of auxiliary text—a gateway text that sparked seekers' imaginations, but does not itself provide the kind of depth or clarity of wisdom that these others do.²²¹ I chose the books to include in this section through both empirical and informal data. These were the books that seekers had in their libraries, both personal and community.²²² These were the books that seekers suggested I read, or assumed I already had—this assumption is indicative of the presumed value of these texts within the canon.

Within the category of channeled or revealed texts, there are three key books or series that were ubiquitous in the lists that seekers provided me. These include *A Course in Miracles*, Jane Roberts' Seth Material, and the writings of Edgar Cayce.²²³ While the particular content of these texts is unique, there are several key characteristics they share. First, that they are understood to be gnostic revelations from superior entities or alternative planes of existence—the figures associated with them are understood to be recorders more than authors, according to most readers. Secondly, each of these emphasizes the ultimately divine nature of humanity, and presents various religious

²²⁰ I aim to avoid the term "belief" wherever possible. Seekers very rarely use this term for themselves, and see it as overburdened with religious baggage.

²²¹ Some readers also expressed ambivalence about Tolkien's religious convictions.

²²² Including physical libraries, like the Library of Avalon in Glastonbury, smaller collections found in churches and other organizations, and any other shared communal spaces.

²²³ Other candidates for inclusion here are J.Z. Knight's Ramtha books, Hicks' Abraham, the Kryon documents, and The Urantia Book.

figures (like Jesus, Krishna, and Buddha) as models for divine self-awareness, rather than uniquely endowed spiritual figures. This perspective is sometimes referred to as "Christ Consciousness."²²⁴ And finally, each understands reality to be formed through consciousness—as Roberts/Seth writes, "if you want to change your world, you must first change your thoughts, expectations, and beliefs."²²⁵

Dictated by Helen Schucman, which she claims to have received verbatim from Jesus of Nazareth, *A Course in Miracles* was published in final format in 1976.²²⁶ The book has been translated into more than twenty languages, and has sold more than three million copies.²²⁷ Organized as a series of lessons and meditations, the text encourages readers to move slowly through the book, mastering each section's mental and spiritual exercises before progressing to the next. The book includes both theological and ontological claims, and practical and mental exercises for developing a better understanding of these ideologies.²²⁸ The fundamental message at the heart of the text is that humans are essentially divine beings, co-existent with God. This is articulated through what is commonly referred to as Christ Consciousness, or the awareness that the divinity and humanity that Christ modeled are available to all people. Taking directly from Christian thought, *ACIM* reimagines the figure of Christ not as a unique being, but

²²⁴ Or, indeed, Krishna-Consciousness or Buddha-Consciousness—often interchangeably; for more, see below.

²²⁵ Roberts 1981, 295.

²²⁶ Schucman presents a complex character in the history of SBNR development. A clinical and research psychologist, she spent much of her career as a professor at Columbia University, from which she retired in 1976.

²²⁷ The largest surge in sales was in 1992, after SBNR writer Marianne Williamson and Oprah Winfrey discussed the book on the latter's national talk show.

²²⁸ In this way, reading is itself a spiritual practice.

as a model and teacher.²²⁹ Reality within the text is described as fully illusory—referred to as "the dream", this reality is a kind of collectively-constructed delusion that humans must recognize as such in order to become fully aware. It is through this recognition that the eponymous miracles become possible. The text explains that "miracles are a kind of exchange. Like all expressions of love, which are always miraculous in the true sense, the exchange reverses the physical laws. They bring more love to both the giver and the receiver." These miracles, often in the form of an exchange between human and divine, facilitate (and are facilitated by) a shift in perception that allows individuals to recognize their own divine nature.

In one *ACIM* reading group meeting in Sedona, we worked through lesson 124, which encourages readers to "remember that I am one with God, and with all my brothers and my Self, in everlasting holiness and peace."²³⁰ These lessons give readers key ideas to focus on—mantras that emphasize certain central ideological constructs. In this case, seekers are encouraged to spend half an hour a day meditating on the truth of divine unity. In time, the lesson assures readers, they will realize fully the implications of this message, and will experience "a love you cannot understand, a joy too deep for you to comprehend..." During the mental practice of meditation, the truth of this SBNR ideology will be confirmed through experience of Source. We also read through chapter 7, section 3, which outlines "The Reality of the Kingdom", and claims in its characteristic

²²⁹ There has yet to be a full length monograph detailing the New Age and alternative Jesus; there ought to be.

²³⁰ This distinction of the Self, as distinct from the "I" as the subject of the statement is telling. The Self in this context is the ego—the individual who experiences the world as a consciousness. And yet, the book teaches that this is merely illusion—that this self is part of the unity that comes with recognition of one's true nature as part of the divine whole.

first person voice of Christ: "I am with you always. Literally...you are the way, the truth, and the life." We were all asked to meditate on its meaning for ourselves silently for a few moments before attendees shared their various interpretations. One man explained his interpretation through the story of Prometheus, saying that he understood the text to be encouraging readers to seek out the truth, the light, as powerful, illuminating knowledge. Another said that he felt it meant that our task is to bring spiritual truth to the illusion; that transcendence happens here and now. Another man explained that our peak moments, our most profound experiences come involuntarily, when we stop striving. This, he says, is proof that grace *is*. He summed up this view, which I heard often in various versions amongst SBNR seekers—"the greatest lie we ever believe is the illusion that we are separate from God."²³¹

Like *ACIM*, the so-called Seth Material was supposedly channeled—in this case, from a discarnate entity called Seth. Over the course of twenty-one years, author and psychic Jane Roberts dictated messages from Seth in a non-conscious trance state. Key among Seth's messages were the idea that the self is a complex, multi-dimensional entity, and that individuals create their own realities within a shared material environment. Seth (through Roberts) reiterates that seekers should access and use their inherent power and wisdom, rather than relying on him or other teachers. Such figures are merely there to guide seekers to their own truths, but should not be taken to be fundamentally superior to anyone else. In a sense, other people are also tools for self-development. He argued that "if you do not like your experience, then you must change the nature of your conscious

²³¹ Participant at ACIM class, Sedona, March 2015.

thoughts"²³² The Seth Material became a cultural phenomenon, and brought the practice of channeling into broader consciousness in the 1970s.²³³ The texts became a major part of the self-described New Age movement, second in influence only to the work of Edgar Cayce.

Nicknamed "The Sleeping Prophet" because of his trance channeling, Cayce is sometimes referred to as a "founder" of the New Age movement, though his influence extends far beyond that category. A prolific writer, Cayce emphasized the unity of spiritual expression—that all religions work to express the same fundamental truth—and the cumulative (and accessible) wisdom acquired over successive reincarnations. Much of his work focuses on healing, and on utilizing the tools of previous generations (and indeed, civilizations) in order to do so. Like the seekers who read his books, Cayce argued that the world's cultures, both existent and extinct (like that of Atlantis), share many commonalities, and could be plumbed for deep spiritual truths.

Cayce's views on the human condition have proved to be foundational in SBNR thinking. He argued that "each soul in entering the material experience does so for the purposes of advancement toward that awareness of being fully conscious of the oneness with the Creative Forces." That is, the teleology of human life is this recognition of divine unity. Similarly, his commentary on the nature of reality, and its relationship to human consciousness has become part of the ideological framework throughout SBNR literature. He writes that "mind is indeed the builder...what is held in the act of mental

²³² Roberts, 1974, xviii

²³³ See Albanese 2007.

vision becomes a reality in the material experience. We are gradually builded into that image created in our own mental being." As Cayce outlined, the universe of the seeker is one that is always in flux, always shifting to reveal or conceal that which is most beneficial for spiritual growth. This process of give and take, of exchange, is characteristic of the SBNR cosmos.

Channeled texts as a genre within the SBNR canon reveal several key elements of the movement. First, they demonstrate the complex ontological reality that many seekers imagine themselves to be inhabiting. The plane on which we experience human life is but one facet or dimension of a larger reality. And secondly, the boundaries between these realities are permeable. It is possible, especially for more enlightened beings, to break through the barrier between planes. They do so, most often, to provide a fuller, meta-perspective to those operating within a limited scope of human experience. Taken collectively, these channeled texts demonstrate that, for many seekers, the human condition is one of limited awareness, but that wisdom can be received from beyond this realm. Exchange—especially of knowledge—can be interdimensional. The self, the nature of reality, and the relationship between these are the key pervasive themes.

A large body of SBNR canon is not understood to be received as such, but developed by conscious, living humans. Sometimes classified as self-help or how-to, these texts of spiritual philosophy outline various ideas and practices that have become standard fare within the SBNR communities in Sedona and Glastonbury. In addition to providing fleshed out theology and ontological theories, these books tend to emphasize the practical dimensions of SBNR living. The authors of this genre are authoritative not intrinsically, but because of the appeal of their ideas. A common theme in SBNR thinking

is a kind of aesthetic wisdom—that is, what feels right, what seems right, is taken as truth. The genre of SBNR philosophy relies heavily on this kind of value.

Since it was published in 2006, *The Secret* has sold more than 20 million copies worldwide.²³⁴ Pulling from sources as diverse as The Bible, Blavatsky, and Buddha, Rhonda Byrne describes the so-called "Law of Attraction", and argues that the most powerful and successful people in history have been those who understand and employ it. Byrnes does not (nor does she claim to) offer any new theories, but compiles so-called evidence from myriad sources to argue the universality of this *natural* law. "Everything else you see and experience in this world is effect, and that includes your feelings. The cause is always your thoughts." All powerful, successful people throughout human history, she argues, have recognized that "your imagination is a very powerful tool..."and have employed that tool for their benefit.

For Byrnes and millions of readers, a key element of this dynamic, powerful universe is the fundamental assertion of the permanence of existence. As she argues, "you are energy, and energy cannot be created or destroyed. Energy just changes form. And that means You! The true essence of You, the pure energy of You, has always been and always will be. You can never not be." This speaks to a common understanding within SBNR circles that, as emanations of the same Source, human souls are co-eternal with God. The boundaries between self and larger divine reality are blurred within this understanding, and the creative character of individuals is highlighted as a valuable

²³⁴ The book is based on a film of the same name.

power.

Both Eckhart Tolle and Deepak Chopra owe some of their success as prominent SBNR thinkers to their patron and most visible supporter, Oprah Winfrey.²³⁵ Their books, collectively, form a major strain of SBNR philosophy and practical guides, including *A New Earth* and *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success*, respectively. Both of these, like much of the canon, advocate for a shift in consciousness that allows seekers to utilize supposedly "natural" laws to live happier, more awakened lives. In doing so, they outline each author's (similar) visions of the nature of the self and reality, and the relationship between these. Common themes run through both author's writings, including an emphasis on the essentially divine nature of humanity and the connectedness of life and its valuable experiences.

Chopra, an Indian-American medical doctor, became involved with the Transcendental Meditation movement in 1985, and became increasingly interested in alternative healing. He left traditional medicine to research and write on what he refers to as "quantum healing"—a process that relies on the understanding of the human as composed of energy and information in which health is determined by one's state of mind. Like other spiritual thinkers before him, Chopra has spent his career exploring the complicated mind/body connection, which he sees as fundamental to understanding human nature.²³⁶

²³⁵ Oprah's impact on American SBNR reading habits cannot be over-emphasized. The commercial aspect of that fact does not allude me, and has certainly contributed to the reputation of spirituality as a capitalist endeavor.

²³⁶ Not surprisingly, former medical doctor and current Unity Chaplain Bryan, of Sedona, is a vocal fan of Chopra's writings.

This nature, he argues, is fundamentally one of creative consciousness. He implores readers to "never forget your real identity. You are a luminous conscious stardust being forged in the crucible of cosmic fire."²³⁷ This idea, heady and fantastic as it may seem, is a clear example of the way in which metaphor and hyperbolic imagery—especially in eliciting felt responses—has a powerful impact within SBNR literature. Humanity's connections are not just to the distant stars, but to the world around them as well. He poetically writes, "At this moment, you are seamlessly flowing with the cosmos. There is no difference between your breathing and the breathing of the rainforest, between your bloodstream and the world's rivers, between your bones and the chalk cliffs of Dover."²³⁸ He reminds seekers that "The most creative act you will ever undertake is the act of creating yourself."²³⁹ The self here is always in a process of becoming, and this is done through the intentional engagement of consciousness. In a clear commentary on human nature, he writes that "Each of us is here to discover our true selves; that essentially we are spiritual beings who have taken manifestation in physical form; that we're not human beings that have occasional spiritual experiences, that we're spiritual beings that have occasional human experiences."²⁴⁰

Although Tolle's writings are clearly influenced by Asian religious ideas, including an emphasis on detachment and mindfulness, his self-styling as Eckhart

²³⁷ Chopra, 2012, Tweet.

²³⁸ Chopra 2004.

²³⁹ Chopra 1995.

²⁴⁰ Chopra 1994.

indicates the influence of Western philosophy as well.²⁴¹ He has named amongst his influences such diverse texts as the Tao Te Ching, *A Course in Miracles*, and the Bible. After a period of searching while living in London, Tolle moved to Glastonbury for a period before settling in Vancouver, British Columbia in the mid-90s. He described his philosophy as "a coming together of the teaching 'stream' ...of [Jiddu] Krishnamurti and Ramana Maharshi."²⁴² In other words, he (and certainly many of his readers) see his work as a continuation or reformulation of prior spiritual content. Truth is understood as an on-going development.

Like Chopra, Tolle emphasizes the connection between people and their reality. He argues that "You are not IN the universe, you ARE the universe, an intrinsic part of it. Ultimately you are not a person, but a focal point where the universe is becoming conscious of itself. What an amazing miracle."²⁴³ This emphasis on the dynamic relationship between the individual and the cosmos is key for many seekers. The drama of spiritual knowledge unfolds within each of us, Tolle tells his readers. "I am not my thoughts, emotions, sense perceptions, and experiences. I am not the content of my life. I am Life. I am the space in which all things happen. I am consciousness."²⁴⁴ This tendency to center the individual within a meaningful reality has lead many (both scholars and the public) to assert that spirituality is therefore solipsistic, individual, and socially-detached. And yet, if we understand the underlying ontological framework of individual humans as

²⁴¹ Taken from German mystic Meister Eckhart, Tolle was born Ulrich Leonard, and changed his name in his late 20s after a series of spiritual epiphanies.

²⁴² Parker 2000.

²⁴³ Tolle 2005.

²⁴⁴ Tolle 2003.

emanations of Source, as many seekers do, this critique becomes more complicated.

Finally, fiction forms an accessible and influential stream of the SBNR canon. These texts not only provide more depth on key ideas, but elicit felt experiences in themselves that allow seekers to *feel* toward spiritual truths. In fact, they are flexible, and encourage readers to interpret their meanings in light of their own understanding, experiences, and particular needs. This process of encoding and decoding is explicit in many of these examples—they are written to be read as a kind of meditation. Readers use these texts as tools for reflection, focusing on the values they present.

In Glastonbury, Michelle recounted how, in reading Marion Zimmer Bradley's popular *Mists of Avalon* series, she was deeply moved, because "my story's in it."²⁴⁵ Bradley's series, which retells the story of Morgan le Fay (here, Morgaine) as the central heroine defending her way of life against the threat of Christianity, is particularly popular in Glastonbury.²⁴⁶ The series both valorizes an imagined ancient matriarchy, and romanticizes Druidic Britain as a fundamentally spiritual culture. Bradley's use of contemporary feminist ideologies, and anachronistic projection of the same into history reflects the common SBNR assertion of the universal and ahistoric qualities of ideologies. The story reimagines Glastonbury through this lens, and sacralizes it, particularly for women, by fleshing out the story in ways that encourage them to read the message of sacred feminine power into both the text and the space.

The Celestine Prophecy spent more than three years on the New York Times

²⁴⁵ Michelle.

²⁴⁶ The story is often understood as a metaphor for the battle between natural, empowering spirituality and dogmatic, patriarchal religion.

bestseller list, and tells the story of a seeker searching out spiritual insight in Peru.²⁴⁷ He discovers that various figures, including those in the Peruvian government and the Catholic Church, have been working to keep these insights concealed because of their power. Over the course of the novel (and its sequels), which can be accurately described as an extended parable, the first person narrator learns each of these insights as he hides from those who would subvert the lessons' power. Taken as a whole, the book is a fictionalized account of a spiritual journey that emphasizes the power of experience, and points to ancient sources of universal and perennial wisdom—in this case, the Mayans. Once again, with creative license, the author weaves common SBNR ideologies through a story influenced by historical realities. In this case, he uses the presumption of indigenous truth to articulate the universality of spiritual seeking at power centers.

The Shack, another bestseller whose popularity spread from the SBNR community to Evangelical Christians and beyond, tells the story of Mack—a father who is dealing with grief after losing his daughter to a serial killer. He receives a note from "Papa", and travels to the cabin where his daughter was tortured where he encounters God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit—who take the forms of an elderly Black woman, a Middle-Eastern carpenter, and a young Asian woman respectively.²⁴⁸ He also encounters Sophia, and through his conversations with all of these characters, he finds peace in his

²⁴⁷ Machu Pichu is often named as one of the globe's most important power centers.

²⁴⁸ Later, Papa manifests as an older Native American man when he leads Mack on a "quest" to locate his daughter's body in a nearby cave.

situation. This ethnic diversity is telling—it is indicative of the perennialism of spiritual truths that pervades SBNR thinking.

These texts provide language and grammar (or logic) of spirituality, access to particular theologies, and authenticate spirituality. They are often found in mainstream bookstores, and are not generally "occult" or "esoteric". Instead, they have become part of the common discourse of spirituality, both documenting its content, and shaping its continued relevance. They instruct seekers in how to perform SBNR identity, and equip them to engage with others through this shared body of knowledge. They romanticize a particularly valuable imagined history, and posit supposedly universal values into these diverse contexts.

Telling the Truth: Experiences, Gnosis, and Stories

Many seekers use stories of their own experiences to authorize their spiritual claims. Perhaps the most nebulous (and challenged) form of cultural capital at these sites is in the form of story. Employing many of the ideas and rhetorical devices learned from readings, seekers use their own experiences and knowledge as ways to authenticate their value within the communities. Experience of emotion—that is, feeling—is the lingua franca of spiritual seekers. A multiplicity of reasons, modes, and interpretations of feeling populate the spiritual domain, but felt experience is the common, unifying element. For seekers, emotion is read as the subtle self breaking through or using the physical one to communicate real spiritual (and sometimes cosmic) truths. At a Pagan meet-up—called a moot—in Glastonbury, Paul explained it thusly: *the way we experience things, the world, is through emotion, which isn't always objective. But that doesn't make it less true. How do we quantify the experience of love? Or the invoked feeling in ceremonial magic? It's*

real for you. It's the reality. You don't need to believe it. You experienced the truth. This emphasis on the experience of truth, and its felt reality is essential. This kind of rhetoric is common in the ways in which seekers recount their stories. Recall Brenna's insistence in a previous chapter that the lights on the tor *had to be supernatural*. No other explanation could compete, because they did not *feel* correct.

The ways in which seekers recount their stories, particularly those that they deem valuable, reveals much about the experience of spirituality at these sites. It is important to remember, however, that in order "to tell the story of an experience, one must distort, simplify, symbolize, compress the complex holism of daily life into a plot."²⁴⁹ How stories are told, and in which contexts, determines their value as commodities of exchange. Knowing the language is key, and sharing it within a network of other people who value the truths these stories reveal is even more important.

These stories are valuable because they are shared, and because the context in which they are shared invests them with given cultural value. A story is not valuable in and of itself, but because of the truth it reveals, and the ways in which certain experiences recounted imbue the storyteller with cultural capital. The willingness to share also ties the storyteller emotionally to the community. Like with all linguistic exchanges, "the constitutive power which is granted to ordinary language lies not in the language itself but in the group which authorizes it and invests it with authority."²⁵⁰ This is doubly true of non-ordinary language—that used to convey deep spiritual truths. The experience is

²⁴⁹ Luhrmann 1989, 14.

²⁵⁰ Bourdieu 1972, 21.

valuable, and its retelling gives the seeker cultural value. Being able to speak the language of spirituality indicates a level of enlightenment and involvement. This is the same language that is learned from text and other seekers, thereby reproducing spirituality through these personalized stories and histories.

The Global Network: Tourism, Pilgrimage, and (E)Valuating Commodities

Although this project focuses exclusively on these two spiritual sites situated within the Western, English speaking world, spirituality is certainly not confined to these places. Indeed, the 1987 Convergence that marked them as power centers also named Mount Fuji in Japan, Machu Pichu in Peru, Australia's Uluru, and the pyramids of the Yucatan peninsula as similarly spiritual charged locations.²⁵¹ In other words, spirituality has a global reach. Seekers visit these and other sites as part of their personal spiritual journeys, and to engage with like-minded people in the pursuit of higher truths. As Hedges has pointed out, in some ways, "pilgrimage is not clearly distinguishable from acts such as tourism"²⁵² Indeed, visitors may perform both functions simultaneously or move back and forth during the course of a single trip.²⁵³ What is key here is that no matter how the travel is ideologically valued by either the seekers themselves, or those who observe their activities, the process is one fundamentally about exchange.

This project is situated, both literally and figuratively, at the intersecting points of a complex network. These sites are nodes within the web of spiritual exchange that spans

²⁵¹ Other sites included Stonehenge, Mount Shasta, Mount John Laurie, and the Egyptian pyramids.

²⁵² Hedges 2014, 298.

²⁵³ There is on-going discussion about the distinction between pilgrimage and tourism, specifically religious tourism. See, for example Raj and Morpeth 2007 or Burns and Holden 1995.

the globe—carried by seekers and the goods they produce and transfer along these lines. Like Orsi's argument that "religious cultures are local, and to study religion is to study local worlds", I aim to demonstrate the value of situated ethnographies of spiritual communities.²⁵⁴ And yet, at the same time, I am compelled by Latour's question: "is anthropology forever condemned to be reduced to territories, unable to follow networks?"²⁵⁵ I would argue no; these two perspectives are not as contradictory as they may seem. The local, particular context is essential, but these communities do not exist in a vacuum. Instead, they are connected through the informational and tourist networks that are increasingly characteristic of the globalized economy.

As Bowman pointed out in her examination of Glastonbury as such a place, "pilgrimage centres worldwide traditionally often have been and continue to be places rich in material culture, with distinctive economies which have developed to serve both residents and visitors"²⁵⁶ While seekers may understand their spiritual exchange to take place on the existing sacred landscape, it is *through* exchange that these sites (and the people who inhabit them) become sacred. Exchange at these sites is fundamental to the ways in which they are made and understood to be power centers.

Souvenirs, Life Histories, and Spiritual Biographies: The Story of Things

Individual stories of experiences in Glastonbury and Sedona are often stabilized through moveable objects. Indeed, a vital aspect of travel to these sites includes the express purpose of consumption—many people visit so that they may buy things. This

²⁵⁴ Orsi 2005, 167.

²⁵⁵ Latour 1991, 116.

²⁵⁶ Bowman 2013, 211.

includes art, Native American artifacts, crystals, and other spiritual paraphernalia. This should not be viewed as mindless (or heartless) capitalist consumerism, but as a very important material aspect of SBNR practice, especially in its pilgrimage-taking forms. As Bryan says, *the experience people have in Sedona are real, and the objects they acquire there become part of how their stories are told and remembered*. In other words, these souvenirs relate directly to the individual spiritual biography of the seeker, as well as the larger mythos of these sites.

For many outside of the SBNR domain (including scholars) the prevalence and visibility of spiritualistic consumption is viewed as a problem—it is evidence that spirituality is, at heart, a system of superficial and selfishly individualistic consumerism. Yet, Bowman describes "spiritual commodification and consumption as expressions, enablers, or exploiters of contemporary spiritual seeking,"; such an understanding is helpful particularly at these sites.²⁵⁷ Commerce always emerges at sites of pilgrimage, but that does not negate the value of these places—no less of spiritual sites than traditionally religious ones. Buying and selling is a practical necessity—residents have to make a living—but it also has incredible ideological value. Buying something at a special place makes the thing more special; it is imbued with the sacred power of the place, and commemorates a part of the individual spiritual journey. The thing becomes part of how the story is remembered. In other words, pilgrimage is commemorated and remembered

²⁵⁷ 2016.

as part of spiritual journeys partially through the objects purchased, gathered, or otherwise acquired at sacred sites.²⁵⁸

The appeal of material objects from these sites is not in the inherent value of the items separate from their source. While a quartz crystal is always thought of as having healing powers, ones purchased on pilgrimage have an added dimension of power; they embody the spiritual power of the place and make it mobile—they tie the biography (viz. mythos) of the place to that of the seeker. Indeed, such souvenirs "belong to a particular economy of exchange and demand in which the life history of the particular relic is essential, not incidental to its value".²⁵⁹ It is this *life history* of souvenirs that invests them with particular value; the fact of their presence in the space of Glastonbury or Sedona imbues them with certain powerful affective and memorializing capabilities. These life histories converge through pilgrimage practices, and the interaction between the self and place is captured by the mnemonic object.

Seekers, in general, understand reality as a system of influences, causes, and effects. The material objects acquired during a pilgrimage are best understood within this framework. Souvenirs, especially once removed from the physical place of Glastonbury or Sedona, act as material connections to the sacredness that is imagined to be in that space; they embody that sacredness in a very real way. These objects allow individuals to

²⁵⁸ It is helpful here to point to the linguistic roots of the term "souvenir". In the French from which the word is taken, souvenir is a reflexive verb meaning "to remember". That is, the verb always refers to the subject of the clause. For example, "je me souviens la fête", translates to "I remember the party". More specifically, however, it may be read as "I remember myself in relation to the party". In other words, the memory is always explicitly in relation to the subjective self.

²⁵⁹ Appadurai 1986, 23.

re-live and re-imagine their pilgrimage, and also make their personal stories part of the meaningful biography of these sacred sites. This system of similitudes upon which seekers draw to formulate ideas about the relationships of value between material things (including places) is grounded allows for and facilitates notions of on-going mental creation processes that are so central to the SBNR worldview. The things that people acquire at these sites are subjects in a particular way. They embody Source, and facilitate the mental labor of remembrance. They are active in the formation of spiritual identity.

I agree that scholars "need to pay more attention to the phenomenological dimension of our interactions with the material world".²⁶⁰ That is, I am interested in how the experience of a material world shapes the construction of spiritual paradigms, and similarly, how spiritual ideologies impact the interpretation of materiality. This is especially important given the plastic quality of SBNR ontologies, where the relationship between spiritual and physical is not presumed, but created through interaction. The relationship between seeker and souvenir is not merely one of consumer and commodity. Instead, the object is encoded with both personal significance of an individual spiritual journey, and the collective mythic value of the place in which it was acquired. The material stability, for example, of a small crystal, provides a fixed space on which both of these stories can be written. But, as Foucault argues, the world of relations and similitudes "can be fixed only if it refers back to another similitude, which then, in turn, refers to others; each resemblance, therefore, has value only from the accumulation of all

²⁶⁰ Hoskins 3.

the others."²⁶¹ This accretion of values, layered one on top of another, crisscrossed in the landscape of these power centers, and articulated through both discourse and practice is the complex spiritual reality this project aims to unpack.

Appadurai explores the ways in which commodities may be said to have social lives. He argues that "Economic exchange creates value. Value is embodied in the commodities that are exchanged. Focusing on the things that are exchanged, rather than simply on the forms or functions of exchange, makes it possible to argue that what creates the link between exchange and value is *politics*, construed broadly...commodities, like persons, have social lives."²⁶² In other words, the commodities themselves, and the values with which they are imbued, provide an important place for analyzing social systems. What is exchanged, by whom, when, and in what contexts reveals the social values.

The self is worked out through engagement. At these sites, this often takes the form of engaging with material objects. Pilgrimage allows seekers to experience these sites, and the thriving economies at these places allows these experiences to be taken home in particular meaningful ways. As Bowman argues,

"pilgrimage is as concerned with taking back some part of the charisma of a holy place as it is about actually going to the place. One of the most characteristic aspects of pilgrimage art in all the world religions is the proliferation of objects made available to pilgrims and brought home by them as reminders and even as tangible channels of connection with the sacred experience. In this way, the influence of the site can be retained in the domestic or mundane context to which a pilgrim has returned"²⁶³

²⁶¹ Foucault 1966, 30.

²⁶² Appadurai 1986, 3.

²⁶³ Bowman 2013, 211; quoting Simon Coleman and John Elsner, *Pilgrimage Past and Present in the World Religions*. Cambridge, MA 1995, 100.

Souvenirs, in other words, are objects of remembrance and commemoration—they are literally objects in which the memory of these sites is fixed, and the powers of these places gains valuable reference. They are things valued only not for themselves, but because of the role they play in facilitating the seekers' development of a meaningful identity.

Structures of Exchange: Where Things Become Goods

In Glastonbury, those who have a following, or who are successful in selling their ideas, rely largely on charisma and the compelling quality of their ideas. Trevor's shop is ideally located at the central crossroads of town, making it a common stop for most tourists. His wares are certainly among the most unique. From homemade wands to esoteric books, to stylized taxidermy, Cat and Cauldron is an eclectic seekers treasure trove. An antique wooden cash box sits at the end of a long workbench, with the shop's mascot—a preserved fruit bat—keeping a watchful eye from above. Just around the corner, tucked into the back of the shop is his work area, where he grinds herbs, mixes incense, and puts together customized "spell kits". There is not an angel figurine or box of quartz healing crystals in site—Trevor caters to those seekers looking for Pagan and magical influence in their practice.

While his shop is unique, it is Trevor himself that provides the largest draw, particularly for recurring visitors and residents. A well-read polyglot with a Master's degree and seemingly boundless knowledge of history, Trevor himself is the most sought-after product in the shop. He often, only in partial jest, refers to himself as the shop's USP—or, "unique selling point". Although he presents a gruff and dour exterior,

Trevor generously shares his expertise with shoppers (and researchers) who show a genuine interest in his wares and knowledge. When he is not behind the cluttered front counter, or puttering between the crammed shelves of his shop, he can often be found across the street in the George and Pilgrim pub.



Image 31: George and Pilgrim Pub, Glastonbury. October 2015. Photograph by the author.

Much of our engagement happened at these creaky tables; the cost of Trevor's insights was generally lunch and a couple of pints of local beer. This medieval building, which he fondly refers to as "the office", provided the physical setting and practical mechanism through which Trevor and I performed many of our exchanges—though the particulars shifted over the course of several months. At our first meeting, I bought lunch and several drinks—a small price to pay for Trevor's keen insight into Glastonbury's spiritual network. After a few similar meetings, we began to split the bill, alternating drink-buying duties. By the time I left Glastonbury months later, our meetings had become friendly—

each of us insisting on treating the other to our customary sandwiches and pints. What began as a somewhat formal exchange of sustenance for time had become entangled with the social values of affection and friendship—complicating the exchange in the process. But as our relationship became more familiar and complex, so too did the information that Trevor provided me.

He has lived in the town since the early 1980s, and has watched its growth and development as a site of tourism and pilgrimage. Indeed his shops have supplied goods to the more occult-inclined visitors, and the popularity of certain goods at certain historical moments has given Trevor a unique way to track the shifts in alternative spirituality. At one point, he had two shops—one that was more "mainstream", and the other more esoteric. He discovered that there was too much competition for more basic fare, and decided to focus on his unique goods instead. *There's not a damn ceramic angel in site in this shop*, he tells me, with a hint of both pride and annoyance in his voice. *I know I could make more selling chachkies, but I just can't bring myself to do it. I can't stomach the idea of being surrounded by cheap, tacky souvenirs—real authentic Glastonbury souvenirs—made in China.* He recognizes that some seekers are happy to spend their money on such things, but insists that they can acquire them elsewhere while he caters to those who seek the "real" goods.

Shops like Trevor's are only one of the places where exchange happens. Many churches, tourist sites, and retreat centers have small gift shops where visitors can buy souvenirs and ritual items. More informally, exchange of spiritual objects (and ideas) happens constantly within the broader social contexts of these sites. As scholars have pointed out, "spirituality is often instantiated in everyday work and experiences outside of

organized religious contexts, although such practices rely on structures and grammar of historic religious impulses."²⁶⁴ The communities with which one initially connects has profound impact on the styles and varieties of practices and their interpretation, as does the religious background, if any, from which one is distancing oneself.

One of the most common critiques of spirituality lies in the understanding of spiritual people as individualistic to the point of disengagement. Spirituality, critics argue, cannot endure because spiritual people lack commitment, and the communities they build, therefore, are temporary, ephemeral, and lack depth. Many scholars argue that "unlike traditional religiosity, spirituality deemphasizes communal practices and encourages individuals to focus on themselves and their self-fulfillment, in effect diluting the socio-institutional commitments."²⁶⁵ However, as some have argued, "despite customized beliefs and practices, contemporary spirituality is ideologically coherent and transmitted through a process of socialization."²⁶⁶ Here, I explore some of the ways in which the communities, organizations, and networks in Sedona and Glastonbury function as socializing forces for seekers.

In her explanation of contemporary religiously, "Woodhead characterizes the 'turn to life' [of which spirituality is a primary example] as having two poles: one personal, living out one's own life in all its fullness, 'selfing' to do things 'my own way'—and one cosmic pole, turning to the life force, of which the small self is ultimately only an

²⁶⁴ Ecklund and Long. 2011. 256,

²⁶⁵ Oh and Sarkisian 2011. 300.

²⁶⁶ Oh and Sarkisian 2011. 300.

aspect."²⁶⁷ This helps explain the ambivalence of the complex relationship between individual and community within the SBNR domain. I explored above the idea that the human individual is often conceptualized as a microcosm; there is an element of sympathy and synchronicity to this idea. For many seekers, a shift within the self has real impact in the broader world. Each individual is connected to the larger reality, and there is a fundamentally sympathetic relationship between these two.

There is empirical evidence that suggests that community is vital to spiritual people. As Partridge explains, "there seems to be a strong tendency for even diffuse cultic spiritualities to coalesce into networks and organization."²⁶⁸ While these organizations may not look like the churches or other institutions our discipline is used to, that is not a valid reason to not take them seriously as meaningful communities. Ivakhiv introduces the notion of "spiritual immigrants" to describe people who begin as spiritual tourists and become permanent residents. Just as immigrants of other sorts carry their own histories into new settings, which then impact those new homes, so do spiritual people both take from and contribute to the ongoing processes of spiritualization. As O'Neil argues, "attention to the transnational production of affective spaces shifts the conversation [from either imagined à la Tweed or material à la Vasquez] by highlighting the social processes that constitute felt difference amid an unevenly interrelated world"²⁶⁹

Kermani considers that "if religious choice and personal spirituality are prioritized

²⁶⁷ Woodhead 2001, 111-113.

²⁶⁸ Partridge 2004a, 62.

²⁶⁹O'Neill 2013, 1096.

while theological commitment and religious tradition are deemphasized, then religious community and social legitimacy are secondary to the capriciousness of the personal spiritual path."²⁷⁰ This is a very big *if*. Certainly choice and individuality are highly valued, but the assumption that these elements are necessarily in conflict with notions of theological commitment, tradition, community, or social legitimacy is troubling. Indeed, if we take seriously the sympathetic relationship between individual selves and the cosmos, a commitment to the self can be read (and most often is) as a real commitment to cosmological truth. We run into issues, however, when we demand that this relationship, and the various ways it is understood, talked about, and made manifest, becomes stable. Spirituality refuses to be inert; it rejects any attempt to pin it down for the sake of our understanding. There is a constant feedback loop that reproduces spiritual ideologies. Communities hold knowledge, which can be accessed by seekers. But that knowledge adapts and changes to incorporate new perspectives, new truths brought into the marketplace by the flows of people. There is a constant give and take—that is, exchange—between individuals and the communities they form.

Goods and How to Get Them: Commerce and Practical Economy

The physical mementos of these sacred sites are encoded with complex ideological values in addition to their more direct economic value. The souvenirs of pilgrimage mark a pilgrim's identity as one who has made the journey. Each of these sites can be understood as "a specialized site of religious and spiritual consumption where...it

²⁷⁰ Kermani 2013, 45.

is assumed that the commercial transactions can have sacralised meanings and values."²⁷¹

I want to turn my attention to some of the key types of souvenirs or other items that are part of the vibrant spiritual market at these places, including art and images, found objects, and tools or ritual objects. In all three domains, the value of the thing is rooted in what it is, where it comes from, and what it does. This web of valuation is important if we are to understand the more nuanced cultural and economic values of things as they are exchanged and made meaningful.

Art and images, including both two and three dimensional art purchased or otherwise exchanged, form a vital domain of market goods at these sites. In part because of their reputations as both spiritual and economic centers, the towns attract a large number of both artists and art enthusiasts. Sedona has, at current count, twenty-four dedicated art galleries; that number does not include the various installations found at cafes, restaurants, churches, or other unofficial sites.²⁷² For a town of fewer than eleven thousand residents, this is an extraordinary number, and indicates how valuable such art is in the town. Arianna, the Australian artist in Glastonbury, created paintings both *as a meditation*, and to facilitate the same purpose for her buyers. She explained that *in Glastonbury, I have direct contact with the angels. It's almost mindless, this process of painting. I simply drop out and allow Spirit to use me. I think people feel that, and that's why I've been successful.* Like Ha-Ru-Ko in Sedona, Arianna's process is a spiritual one.

²⁷¹ Bowman 2013, 208.

²⁷² Recall, for example, the art of Ha-Ru-Ko displayed at Sedona's Church of the Golden Age at my first visit. The church often serves as an unofficial gallery, and rotates various artists monthly.

And the value of their works are not just that they are aesthetically pleasing, or that they were created within the crucible of these sites, but that they somehow capture that power and transform it.

Many seekers gather items, be they natural or created, that they find along their journeys at these sites. These can include rocks or small stones, leaves or flowers (often pressed into a book), flyers or pamphlets, or any other items that can be acquired without purchase. It is not uncommon to see a seeker stoop to pick up a pebble as she leaves a vortex meditation. I stopped one woman who spent more than ten minutes wandering across the rocky ground, pausing to gather multiple such stones. She explained: *I use them for meditation. Every time I come here, indeed whenever I do my practice outside, I like to have a memento. They remind me to stay grounded, to stay in touch with this place, even when I've left it.* While she may not have recognized this practice as a kind of sympathetic magic, there are clear reverberations of this classic anthropological idea here. Distance, for many seekers, is irrelevant in the grand scheme of reality. The memory and imagination work to preserve the presence of place, and these found things facilitate that in a particularly viable way.

A vast array of material goods that may be considered ritual items or spiritual tools are on full display in both of these towns. From books and crystals, to hand-carved wands, from Tibetan singing bowls, to American-grown sage bundles, a majority of the goods for sale serves a purpose beyond the merely commemorative or aesthetic. Eloise runs regular courses and seminars in Glastonbury. The topics range from angel healing to reiki to Tarot. I met with her one rainy afternoon to help her set up for one such class. We set out small prints with images of angels, masters, and other spiritual models, including

Jesus, Buddha, and Guan Yin. On the table, she arranged a dozen or so crystals of various sizes, shapes, and varieties. As we sat down to talk, I gestured to the selection, and asked her about their purpose. She picked one up, fiddling with it as she explained. *I've bought crystals for each participant in every class since the first once I did. I had this urging from Spirit that it would be helpful for them. I know who is coming ahead of time, so I wander through the shops, and ask for guidance on which crystals might help each person. Then, in the class, we use them, and everyone takes them home. They're charged with each person's energy, and our collective energies, and they can use them as they continue their spiritual growth.*

This explanation illustrates quite clearly that things for seekers are not just things. They are *things enlivened*. They are things made valuable because of the work they do, and the experiences they commemorate. They are things that tell a story, and things that can be leveraged in pursuit of spiritual wisdom. In the end, all of these objects are both agentive in some way, and tools to be used to achieve particular spiritual ends. I agree with other scholars, like Appadurai, that "we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things."²⁷³ Remembering that these things are made valuable by people in community is essential. No matter how seekers articulate their meaning as inherent, these are things with a history and a context.

Practically speaking, when goods are exchanged within the spiritual networks in

²⁷³ 1986, 5.

Glastonbury and Sedona, there are some key elements that facilitate this exchange. These include currency (as is common in many of the retail outlets), trades (including in-kind goods or services), and what is sometimes referred to as an "energy" exchange, which is often in the form of labor or other work. No matter the mechanism, the process of exchange highlights the values attributed to specific commodities. When Trevor offers an afternoon (often 3 hours or so) to discussion, the exchange is more complex than an equal valuation of time for food and drink. While I did pay for these items, our conversations included a deeper level of exchange as well. My interest in his expertise became currency, imbuing him with the value of authority. His knowledge and particular insight became commodities that I sought to acquire—we both valued each others' contribution to the exchange.

The use of local currency, including cash and cards, is the most common form of direct payment. Both of these sites are situated within broader cultures that are dominated by a capitalist ethos, and this reality impacts the structures of spiritual exchange as well. In Sedona, I was occasionally surprised by the predominance of capitalist goals. On my first trip to Glastonbury, I had found seekers to be open, friendly, and engaging—willing to share their perspectives freely (both literally and figuratively). However, that was not my initial experience in Sedona. Early in my research period, I had several potential interview subjects reject (or even leave) meetings when they learned that I would not be paying for their services or time. In all cases, these were residents who make their living in the purveyance of spiritual goods and/or services—including a shop owner, an aura-reader, and an ET tour guide. I was initially frustrated by their responses, but quickly learned a few things about myself and the project.

First, I was not articulating the *value* of my research adequately. These individuals did not see how speaking to me was worth their time. I was not offering them anything that they deemed valuable, especially when there are many visitors who *are* willing to pay (sometimes significant) fees for their time and expertise. They did not see a benefit in their participation of my research, and therefore were not willing to contribute something they did value (ie, their time) in exchange for something they deemed valueless. And secondly, a more subtle lesson—my refusal to pay for these meetings indicated to these individuals that I was undervaluing *them*. The aura-reader explained to me that I could not understand what she does without getting my aura photographed and interpreted. My insistence that I "just wanted to talk" revealed my lack of cultural awareness, and marked me as an outsider with insufficient values.

The distinction between gifting and commodity exchange is one that social theorists continue to debate. Bourdieu, for example, critiques the objectivist perspective of social action, and argues that every exchange, whether it is exchanged for money, a commodity, or the supposed gift, is a socially calculated act. Much of the rhetoric of gifts at these sites is oriented around spiritual or divine gifts. Recall the goddess embodiment ritual, where participants were asked to show thanks for the gifts of the goddess. Or Arianha's insistence on my first visit to the Church of the Golden Age that I recognize and share my gifts. Such articulations illustrate a particular posturing vis-a-vis the divine—one in which exchange is mandated by a presumed imbalance of power to a certain degree. But taken in light of underlying assertions of cosmic unity and a monistic reality, one in which the goddess who bestows such gifts is not essentially distinct from the self receiving them, this notion becomes more complex. It is a call for balance, a

gentle reminder that as a vital and conscious part of the universe, it is up to each individual to contribute something back to it.

The values the certain things are given, and in what context, is often contested. Recall Michelle's simultaneous critique of over-priced spiritual seminars, and grateful acceptance of the exorbitant cost (by my own standards) of her own teacher's courses. One was reasonable because she *valued* it more. This seems like an obvious economic reality, but such apparent discrepancies highlight the complexity of the spiritual economy in these places. The sub-communities at these sites often disagree about what should be admitted into the spiritual marketplace, and what its worth it. There is a common joke that I heard in both towns that illustrates this:

Q: What is the difference between a Pagan Tarot reading, and a New Age one?

A: About \$50!

This subtle slight against the so-called New Age demonstrates the tension within these communities. There is a good deal of push and pull, debate, and outright derision. Within these networks, there is not consensus about what "counts" as valuable, or even acceptable.

When Exchange is One-Sided: The Problem of Appropriation

There is no denying that many spiritual practices smack of cultural appropriation. When Kurt, a white man with no Native American ancestry, practices sweat lodge and medicine wheel ceremonies, we are (and ought to be) uncomfortable. And yet, the fact remains that he does so because there is a demand for these kinds of practices in Sedona. When I asked him about how he learned such practices, he laughed, and pre-empted my follow-up question in his response. *I learned from a local Native American man. He*

taught me how to work with the land here. These tools have been developed over centuries for the specific energies here. I know some people have an issue with a White guy doing a medicine wheel, but it just makes sense here. And I learned from someone who has the authority to teach. When I asked how others in his teacher's community felt about the situation, he sighed heavily, shaking his head before answering. Yeah, some of them don't like it. But they respect him, so they don't make too much of it. Honestly, I get it. A lot of people take advantage, and want to use Native medicine because it's cool or hip or whatever. But I learned how to do it right.

Although the cases of Native American appropriation may be the most politically fraught, the tendency to sample from a variety of sources means that there is a great deal of cultural borrowing within the SBNR communities beyond this. Use of elements from Eastern traditions is even more widespread throughout these networks, but it is somehow less visibly fraught with political or moral tensions. There is a fine line between appropriation and pastiche, and the distinction is always based on a variety of factors that include perspective, authority (viz. power), and values. Practices like yoga and ideas like reincarnation are pervasive through SBNR communities. Generally, they are taken out of their particular cultural and historical contexts, and used in new ways and new circumstances.

The visible presence of such influence encourages us to explore *why* these elements are in demand. I would be remiss in not discussing some of the reasons, both explicit and implicit for the demand of such goods and services that are (rightly) so often deemed as appropriative. Within SBNR theology itself, the notion that all spiritual expressions are manifestations of humanity's yearning to connect with ultimate reality is

key here. Many seekers take for granted that all religions reflect this innate desire. This is exacerbated by the globalized economy that makes trade of goods and ideas much more efficient and accessible.

More subtly, but no less importantly, is the impact of the contemporary rhetoric of global citizenship. The boundaries of cultural ownership are blurred within this narrative of one human race. If we are all presumed to be members of a unified humanity, the historic and cultural particularities lose some of their weight to divide and distinguish. Scholars are increasingly commenting on the relationship between SBNR and neoliberalism. While this is certainly a consideration, it is important to recognize that seekers themselves do not articulate this concern through such politicized language. While many do voice concerns over issues of appropriate use of cross-culturally sourced ideas and practices, they rarely recognize the impact of the globalized economy on such processes.

Some seekers are quite vocal about their discomfort with practices to which they feel they have no cultural claim. In Arizona, where the political implications of appropriation are more visible because of proximity, this tension is clearer. My instinct is that the remoteness of the culture being sampled allows for less anxiety about this process. And yet, for those like Kurt for whom proximity to the cultural landscape is essential to this practice, this relationship is reversed. What is certain is that there remains an ambivalence about the ways in which seekers sample, borrow, and adapt from cultures and spiritual traditions to which they make no ethnic or ancestral claim. Elements from non-Euro American cultures, whether that means Native American sweat lodge ceremonies or Indian-inspired bhakti yoga, are common in Western SBNR networks

because they are *valuable*. Their inclusion speaks to the universal and perennial nature of spiritual wisdom according to seekers, and is facilitated by a global network of exchange that defies cultural boundaries for the sake of a common humanity.

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSIONS: ACCOUNTING FOR UNSOLD GOODS

In October 2009, renowned spiritual guru James A. Ray held a "Spiritual Warrior" workshop at Angel Valley Sedona. At the conclusion of the now infamous event, Ray led attendees in a sweat lodge ceremony that went horribly wrong. Three people died, either in the lodge or of complications in the hospital, and the subsequent frenzy of lawsuits, fear, and necessary self-reflection rocked the spiritual communities of Sedona and around the world. Nearly four years later, in July 2013, I sat down with Amayra, one of the retreat center's founders and owners. Amayra and her husband, Michael, published a book about the incident in October 2012. About midway through our conversation, which had little to do with the events, she paused, and handed me a copy of the book.

Everything we do now is partially in response to the tragedy we had here a few years ago. You can't understand how we believe, what we do, if you don't understand that. The back cover of the book describes Amayra and Michael's stance:

"Transformation at Angel Valley takes you on a journey that Angel Valley founders Amayra and Michael Hamilton had to travel during and after the tragic incident. They share their experiences, the insights they gained of the deeper meaning of the event, and how they place it within the bigger picture of their lives. They also share what experiences in their own lives prepared them for what happened."

The emphasis on experience here is obvious; that these experiences brought insight, lucidity, and a deeper understanding of "the bigger picture" is of vital importance. That this description does not mention the victims says as much.

Amayra explained that she and Michael believe that their souls chose a certain path before they were born into their current bodies. When the tragedy occurred, they

examined the events as something both they and those involved had *chosen*—in full consciousness—in the primordial realm, and examined the incident as a learning opportunity. What were they supposed to learn from the tragedy? What lessons could be gained from it that contribute to the growth and development of the souls involved? At this point, Amayra quieted for a moment, shaking her head; "we're still working it out," she said. "But we know there is meaning here, so we keep struggling to figure out what it means." Within this conception, one shared by many—though few had such horrific events to examine in their own lives—the embodied human experience is one that is fundamentally aimed at learning and growing. The mortal, earthly lives that are lived by the eternal soul, are undertaken consciously, and with purpose. Every event, tragedy, victory, and experience is examined through this lens. *What can I learn here? What truth does this experience reveal?*

This tragic example is a helpful place to consider the limitations of spirituality under the guise of religious freedom. I am troubled by the tension between personal distaste and academic objectivity. And yet, whether it is in extreme examples like this, or in Kurt's obvious appropriation of Native American practices, or in Michelle's insistence that *her* teacher was worth the cost, I confronted the challenges of such balance continuously. I do not have the answers, nor do I think they are easily reached. Instead, I see the value in struggling with this tension—doing so illuminates the often competing expectations, commitments, and moral systems that enable or disable certain power dynamics.

Buying In: The Ethnographer's Dilemma

During the Goddess Embodiment ritual, and at several other moments during my fieldwork, I succumbed to the kind of existential discomfort that only ethnographic work can elicit. Surrounded by these women, the pressure to respond and demonstrate appropriately felt heavy. My unwillingness (or perhaps inability) to respond to the intentionally evocative tableau made me feel my outsider status even more than usual, and I worried that my apparent detachment would alert the others to this status. My personal discomfort at the physical closeness of strangers—and the professional distance it precluded—forced me to reflect on my own presumptions surrounding notions of selfhood, embodiment, and materiality. My own embodied materiality, as well as the complex and varied assumptions my own normative understanding of this reality entails, necessarily had impact on both my experiences in and interpretations of these places.

In a previous chapter, I describe that I began to refer to as "the long hug", which I experienced regularly in the U.S., and only slightly less often in Britain. I asked Brenna about the tendency for seekers to hug during introductions. She remained quiet for a moment, her eyebrows pulling together before she responded: *I've never thought about it. It just seems like a natural thing. Maybe it's a recognition of the connection between people? Maybe it's less formal, less cold than a handshake? I don't think people hug enough in general; it's sort of socially weird. But it's not weird. It's the most natural thing.* Ranjita offered a more specific perspective on the purpose of intimacy: *we're taught that these bodies are bad, or sinful, and that's what we are. I teach that these bodies are good—they're tools for learning, for connecting. Or, we think that bodies are*

only sexual—they are sexual, that’s true...and there’s a lot of truth there. But they are so much more. We are so much more.

These hugs, I noticed, were most common when first meeting someone, or at events that included some kind of overt affective quality.²⁷⁴ These events often included dance or other forms of movement, or took place in cramped quarters. Participants bumped into one another, or pressed against each other, moving apart and back together with seemingly little regard for the other. I first wondered if this demonstrated that participants were encountering one another as mere objects, as I initially did at the Goddess Embodiment evening. As I watched this happen again and again, I saw intimacy where first I saw disinterest. There was an implicit familiarity and comfort with co-practitioners in many of these events, whether attendees knew one another or not. This closeness happened intentionally as well as circumstantially; in several ritual contexts, we were asked to touch, or be touched, with specific purpose.

I grappled with how (or whether) to maintain the personal bubble to which I was accustomed, and the personal physical ontology it preserved for me. I eventually accepted this material closeness, even though I never became comfortable with it. I settled into an ambivalent compliance with the social norms of the communities I wanted to understand. In the end, I came to understand that, for most of the seekers I met, physical contact was a kind of prerequisite, or at least a facilitating factor, for spiritual intimacy—the kind that they wanted to cultivate in their collective practices. Once I began to recognize the SBNR body as a tool for accessing and interpreting spiritual truths, I saw these moments of

²⁷⁴ See, for example, the analysis of Krishna Janmashtami in chapter 4.

discomfort as learning opportunities; I turned awkward hugs into helpful research. I think the result is a project that can incorporate more visceral, more direct data in illuminating ways. I began to see the value of physical exchange; hugs became a form of currency, and physical closeness a sort of cultural capital.

At What Cost?: Articulating The Value of the Spiritual Self

The SBNR seeker imagines herself as a permanent—if unstable—emanation of divine consciousness. The body provides a temporary and problematic, but necessary heuristic for the conscious self; it is a tool for spiritual progression, for emotion-driven experience, and for reflection on the mimetic processes of divine be(com)ing. The body, especially the dislocated body of nomadic or immigrant seekers is a temporarily durable, visible, and tactile tool essential to human life—but always undermined by its transiency. The perennial spiritual self is what is essential for seekers. While the body is necessary for establishing a human self, it is *not* sufficient. As I heard continuously from seekers in both the U.S. and Britain, *we are not human beings having a spiritual experience, but spiritual beings having a human experience*. The self is conceptualized as naturally spiritual. Human life, and the lessons learned through it are not a process of discovery, but of remembering and acknowledging one's true nature, and practicing conscious, creative intention in this material plane.

One participant posted the following explanation on his social media:

"God is consciousness, not a creator. God is the Source of creation itself. Source is not independent of you. Source is the totality of everything. So when I refer to myself as God, I am not talking about my personal self. I am talking about the expression of the God self that rests inside of me & everyone. The verb, the ENERGY, not the noun. Once you think God is a noun, person, place, or thing, you separate yourself from Source and immediately become a limited being. That is what separated the believers (religious) from the knowers (spiritual)."



Image 32: Sign in Unity of Sedona church building. February 2015. Photograph by the author.

For seekers, there is a level of ontological certitude that I began to think of as a *spiritual cogito*. The self exists by virtue of consciousness, the exercise and awareness thereof which works to reinforce the fundamental reality of self. The image above, taken at the Unity of Sedona church, speaks to this important understanding. It can be understood thusly: I exist because consciousness exists. God is consciousness. I am conscious. Therefore my existence and God's are ultimately the result of the same thought. It is through the processes of thought (that is, of consciousness), that existence happens. Thus, as in the explanation above, the self is understood as an intentional expression of divine energy, of creative force. Understanding divinity as a verb here is helpful—God becomes, and I become, through divine consciousness manifesting as energy and matter. Human experience—that is, an embodied, problematic, and ambivalent experience—is an exercise in awareness. The task is to overcome the seemingly objective reality of the physical world, with all its vexing limitations, and arrive at a kind of anamnetic awakening of the divine consciousness. The goal, in other words, is *experience*.

That human experience for seekers, particularly those who have uprooted their practical lives to relocate (either temporarily or permanently) to power centers, is defined

by the epistemic value of emotional experience. It is often described as a kind of energetic lightning rod, attuned to the cosmic energies that populate the planet, especially in places such as these. The knowledge (and it is described as *knowledge*, rather than *belief*) that one accesses through bodily means is an indication of the essentially divine nature of our *really real* spiritual selves.²⁷⁵ And this reality, "is not an objective reality to reflect and describe fully. It is a participatory reality to engage and realize through social, ritual, and linguistic practices"²⁷⁶ Reality is not *there* to be discovered and understood, but shaped through the intentional practices of enlightened people who recognize their divine creative powers.

In the end, the products of the spiritual economies at these sites are a particularly creative self, and a valuable, dynamic reality for that self to inhabit. Glastonbury and Sedona, along with other power centers, operate as sorts of dynamic spiritual factories. Seekers, as laborers, travel to these sites to form themselves and their spiritual identities. They carry these products, often in the form of stories, experiences, and material commodities, onto the next legs of their journeys, spreading their newly acquired knowledge as they shape their world.

The Future of Scholarship: Tracking Trends and Historical Precedence

In the spring of 2012, I was fortunate enough to attend an Interfaith Celebration held at the Chalice Well Gardens. Representatives from more than 80% of Glastonbury's religious organizations and communities were present, dressed in plain clothes, suits,

²⁷⁵ The motif of belief is common in scholarship on the SBNR movement, but I do my best to avoid it. Like my participants, I see such the concept as laden with both Protestant theology, and with a pejorative assessment of spirituality's epistemic structure. For an example, see Mercadante 2014.

²⁷⁶ Kripal 2012, 237.

robes, and other garb. The area's most famous, and one of its most financially important events, the Glastonbury Contemporary Performing Arts Festival, was superseded by this Interfaith Celebration—further evidence that the tourism that spiritual diversity in Glastonbury generates a great deal of value for its residents and visitors.



Image 33: Glastonbury Interfaith Celebration, Chalice Well Gardens. Author's Photograph. Glastonbury, England: 2012.

The event was organized to commemorate the 1987 convergence, and to celebrate the period of enlightenment and spiritual awakening that the previous event had initiated. I spoke with one of the organizers after the formal service portion of the program, and asked him to speak on the event's purpose. *This is a celebration of Glastonbury, and of religious diversity. This is a place where we can all come together, even with our differences. We all recognize that, in the end, we're all trying to get closer to god...Twenty-five years ago, the Harmonic Convergence started us on this path, and just*

look around. More and more people are recognizing the humanity of other humans, and the value of other beliefs. There is more unity, and we're all moving together toward something better, something great.

Regardless of the myriad critiques that may rightly be levied against this explanation, what is key is that, for seekers at these sites, change is happening—powerful changes in which they have vested interest. They understand these broader cultural shifts, with more and more people becoming interested in alternative ways of conceptualizing reality and their place in it, as evidence that the spiritual awakening that was promised in 1987 is coming to fruition. Their labors have paid off, and collectively, humanity is moving in the right direction. Each individual's efforts have contributed to this shift; taken collectively, the impact is even greater. Within this collective domain of spirituality, "authors and practitioners can talk about divine realities while really meaning their own psyche, and about their own psyche while really meaning the divine."²⁷⁷ Grounding such an examination in these sites, which work to elicit certain postures toward reality, "foregrounding affective spaces yields a vision of religiosity that neither crosses nor dwells—that neither orients nor partitions—but rather *feels* the [these sites] into existence"²⁷⁸ Seekers describe their experiences through this language of feeling, and it is in the claim to be spiritual, but not religious that the domain of spirituality is born.

Since the trend gained prominence under the guise of the New Age movement in the 1980s, both scholars and the public alike have anticipated its demise. Because of its

²⁷⁷ Hanegraaff, *Esotericism* 137

²⁷⁸ O'Neill, *Beyond Broken*. 1102.

alternative modes of commitment and community structures, the SBNR movement has been difficult to track and predict under current social sciences models. Moving forward, scholars must pay more attention to the trends as they are, and perhaps even more importantly, *where* they are. An ethnographic history of the 1987 Harmonic Convergence and its impacts on the places deemed power centers is an ideal next step for this sort of research. It is vital to document this historic event while the seekers who made it successful are still able and willing to tell their stories.

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