The Authentic Self and Holistic Healing Practitioners in the USA:
A Psychocultural Approach

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Abstract

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In the United States, there is a cultural narrative that motivates individuals to cultivate the self, a project in which the authentic self is a central concept. Influenced by the prevalent psychotherapeutic discourse, the quest for authenticity is understood as self-fulfillment, self-development, and self-help, all grounded on individualism. In this context, holistic healing provides an extra layer of meaning to the secular search for authenticity and personal success, with the addition of a spiritual understanding of life.

By interviewing 11 holistic healing practitioners based in the United States, and analyzing their professional websites and social media pages, this study examines how being a holistic healing practitioner impacts their perception of the authentic self. Holistic healing practitioners share a common understanding of their practice, which is centered on the connection between mind-body-spirit. It is an approach to health that considers physical, emotional, and energetic factors, and focuses on nature and spirituality. Holistic healing has also been influenced by the

psychotherapeutic tradition in the United States, which is reflected in the abundance of coaching services offered by the majority of holistic healers.

The practitioner's socialization in the holistic healing field familiarizes them with spiritual concepts, marked by holistic spirituality. It was found that the informants shared similar pathways to become healers, which included going through an individual healing journey and learning healing modalities. It is important to note that, according to the holistic worldview, healing does not simply mean curing an illness, it is a concept also used to describe one's journey towards authenticity and the unlearning of social conditionings.

The spirituality present in the holistic healing milieu influences the practices of healers, and many of these spiritual concepts have their origins in the New Age movement. However, holistic healers do not identify themselves with the term "New Age" and prefer to be addressed as "spiritual," especially due to the criticism the New Age movement received in relation to cultural appropriation. Nonetheless, it is discussed in this thesis how an uncritical approach to holistic spirituality can lead contemporary healers to a similar pattern of appropriation.

Analysis reveals that the concept of authentic self is interpreted by holistic healers as the spiritual concept of the "higher self." This concept represents an aspect of the individual that is in direct contact with the divine

and that holds one's true essence unspoiled by society, which is considered to be their true self. Hence, living in alignment with one's higher self is believed to be a way of embodying their authentic self and fulfilling one's life purpose. For the holistic healing practitioners, their choice of becoming healers is already considered an expression of their authenticity, since it is a marginalized field that includes spirituality, centrality of emotional care and other elements traditionally deemed "feminine." Thus, the most prominent way in which practitioners express their authentic self is by adopting and performing the persona of the healer as their primary identity in all areas of their lives.

Key words: holistic healing, authenticity, self, spirituality, performance, US society

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I. Introduction

1. Study Background and Purpose

> A big window on the left allows subtle sunlight to brighten the room. Seasonal flowers in vivacious tones of orange, pink, and yellow embellish the background. A floor to ceiling shelf is filled with color schemed books, plants, and candles. In a temple-like division on the shelf, a golden head of Tara Bosatsu - the female Buddha - stands alone. The white cushioned leather sofa and the foliage hanging from the ceiling make this room feel particularly cozy and welcoming. It is a personal space that matches the young woman in front of me.
>
> Her white silk blouse matches the color of the sofa and the two thick golden chains, the longer one holding a polished clear quartz, bring a personality touch, just like the decorative objects in the room. She teaches me and other dozens of people Emotional Freedom Techniques, also known as "tapping."
>
> She is in a live stream on Instagram, we are all simultaneously connected on the platform. I missed one step of the tapping practice, but I don't mind, I know it will be available for replay on her IGTV or at least on her stories for the following 24 hours. As she taps the outer part of her hand and I tap my own hand, our tactile senses synchronize. As her voice guides my thoughts and intention in this practice, not only my vision and audition are tuned to hers, but, for a moment, I seem to be more connected to her space than my own surroundings. More in a bright living room in San Francisco than in a one room apartment in Seoul. [Fieldnote, October 9, 2020]

"Healing" does not remind me of private clinics or sterile hospital rooms.

"Healing" reminds me of people, those who have crossed my path or whom

I went searching for guidance, whose wisdom allowed them to pour from

their full cup into mine. "Healing" takes me back to childhood memories of sage women known as "benzedeiras," a Portuguese word for "the one who blesses," also known as "faith healers." These were women who combined Catholic prayers and herbs used in local medicine to create unique treatments for ailments of the body, mind, and soul; from a baby that refused to drink breast milk, to individuals who had caught the "evil eye," they would pray your problems away. Thus, healing has presented itself to me as a tradition, but also as a seed to nurture, and a path. The concept of holistic healing came into my awareness years later; however, it resonated with me due to its reverence to nature, the centrality of women in its practices, and my own curiosity towards spirituality.

In this research, I intend to analyze how, in the contemporary United States, being a practitioner of holistic healing impacts their perception of the authentic self. The authentic self is a concept that exists in the US society, and is heir of a legacy of modern individualism and a psychotherapeutic discourse on self-development and self-help (Illouz 2008, Taylor 1991). Analyzing holistic healing practices, I note that the practitioners incorporate psychotherapeutic elements in their healing modalities, including a narrative that reinforces the need to "work on the self." In this context, I state that holistic healing is not only as an alternative approach to healing, but a framework for the understanding of the authentic self. In this field, this

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search for an individual's authenticity is centralized in the concept of the "higher self," which is a spiritual interpretation of the authentic self. Thus, I investigate in this thesis how one's socialization in the field of holistic healing, which introduces them not only to healing practices, but also to spiritual concepts, shape their perception of the authentic self.

In order to answer the research question "how does being a holistic healing practitioner in the US impact their perception of the authentic self?," I present a literature review on the topics of self, authenticity, ritual, and performance in everyday life. Initially, I examine the development of the concept of self in the field of anthropology, which helps to analyze the centrality of the self in contemporary US society, and the meaning of the authentic self. The discussion on the authentic self leads to the second theoretical point, which is the concept of authenticity, which I introduce from the standpoint of anthropology and social sciences. Lastly, I present a theoretical foundation on ritual in order to analyze ritual elements in holistic healing practices, and performance in everyday life to interpret how the authentic self is performed by the practitioners.

Furthermore, I trace the historical backgrounds of holistic healing in the United States, focusing on its relation to biomedicine, psychology, and the New Age movement, since these areas influenced holistic healing's

position in the healthcare field, as well as they shaped the practices of holistic healing to be centered on talk and imbued in holistic spirituality.

After laying the foundation of this study with the literature review, methodology, and the historical backgrounds of holistic healing, in the fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters, I draw on original data to answer the research question. In chapter 4, I explain the meaning of holistic healing and how the interviewees apprehend this field. In chapter 5, I present how spiritual concepts are included in holistic healing practices. These chapters lay the necessary foundation to explain what is the authentic self for holistic healers, which I explain in chapter 6 with the concept of the "higher self."

I start analyzing my data presenting the practitioners' understanding of the concept of holistic healing and how they incorporate the principles of holism, interconnectedness, and spirituality in their practices. I provide examples of healing modalities and emphasize how the centrality of talk is reflected in the abundance of therapeutic and coaching modalities in the holistic healing field. Additionally, analyzing the informants' life stories, I indicate common reasons that led them to this career and how they support the narrative that an individual must heal oneself to be able to heal others.

Moreover, I present the manner spirituality is incorporated in holistic healing practices by introducing spaces where practitioners produce and reproduce spiritual concepts, providing examples of spiritual practices, and

presenting a ritual structure that is common to most healing sessions. In addition, I examine how spiritual concepts originated in the New Age movement, known as holistic spirituality, still impact spiritual beliefs shared by most holistic healers, and how uncritical approaches to it can result in acts of cultural appropriation.

After adding the foundation of holistic healing and spirituality, I discuss the practitioners' perception of the authentic self as the spiritual concept of the "higher self" and how authenticity arises not solely to a connection to divinity, but it also involves sociocultural factors that are mainly visible in the healer's performance and portrayal of the healer persona as their main identity.

With this research, I aim to contribute to an anthropological discussion on holistic healing, authenticity, and spirituality. Also, I hope this thesis will lead to new analyses of the holistic healing field that go beyond comparisons with the biomedical field, and discussions on contemporary expressions of spirituality in the context of the New Age movement.

2. Literature Review

This chapter will draw on a theoretical framework mainly based on the anthropological scholarship of self, authenticity, and performance, in order to provide a foundation upon which the holistic healers' perception of the authentic self can be posteriorly discussed.

2.1. Self

This study deals with the concept of the self in its various facets, such as authentic self, "higher self," self-development, among others. Thus, I find it necessary to start this discussion approaching the concept of self in anthropology. The self is a complex concept that has been given multiple meanings and associations throughout time, not only in the field of psychology, but also anthropology. However, one agreement in all fields is that the self is related to inner processes, the physical body, and sociocultural influences.

In the history of anthropology, the study of the "self" has been mostly connected to other "umbrella concepts." Between the 1930s and 1950s in the Culture and Personality school, self was studied under the

theme of personality; in the 1960s and 1970s the concept of self was associated with identity studies, such as personal identity and ethnic identity. It was only in the 1980s that the concept of self was studied on its own, and together with the theme of "person," they opened doors to studies related to emotion, meaning and experience (Csordas 1994, 331-332). Hallowell (1955, 80) suggests that "self" is a better concept than "personality" or "ego," because personality is part of a technical psychological vocabulary, which includes ego, superego, and id. "Self," on the other hand, is a general concept not shaped or restricted by one field, and it has a reflexive connotation, indicating that a person can see oneself in the world as an object among other objects.

Early discussion done in the 1950s on the concept of identity also included the self, which can be seen in Erik Erikson's (1950) work on "ego identity," in which he connected identity to a coherent sense of self, in other words, the same identification of self by oneself and others. In the structural-functionalist tradition, identity was understood as the self-image of a group; hence, individuals' identities and their group identity were deemed the same, which implies an assumption of sameness and stability. However, this coherent understanding of identity and culture was challenged by the dynamic of globalization that, since the 1970s, enhanced multicultural environments. As societies grew increasingly complex, culture

began to carry multiple definitions that no longer represented a reified essence (Van Meijl 2008, 170 - 173).

Recently, especially with the postmodern turn, researchers have been discussing not solely the existence of a divisible self, but also of a non-cohesive self. Ewing (1990) contributes to this debate presenting that a person might experience the self as a timeless whole; yet, in actuality, a person projects multiple and possibly inconsistent self-representations, depending on the context in which they find themselves in. The construction of this "wholeness" is a semiotic process, and this can be achieved through the use of external symbols that give a sense of stability to the self, like religious symbols. Ewing defends a theory of multiple selves, and she suggests that the inconsistency of the projected selves can be understood as reflections of inconsistencies of the cultural system itself.

Ewing (1990) is not the only author that analyzes inconsistent selves. Van Meijl (2008, 166) observes that, in an increasingly globalized and multicultural world, the availability of multiple identifications can lead one to have conflicting aspects of the self. The author introduces a contribution of Stuart Hall (1996) to this debate with his view of identity as a construct, a temporary intersection of discourses and practices, which allow various constructions of self to coincide or collide. Postmodernism also led to a deconstruction of the dichotomy between the "western self"

seen as a unique, integrated universe, from the "non-western self" seen as having a socio-centric worldview, and being a non-individuated self. For Van Meijl, the self, in all contexts, is disunited, relational, and constituted by culture and society (2008, 174-177).

Van Meijl (2008, 179), faced with the non-cohesive self, proposed the use of Hubert J. Hermans' theory of the dialogical self. This theory analyzes the dialogical interactions between various internal and external I-positions, or the metaphor of "unitas complex." When these I-positions are more cohesive, the individual has a more balanced personality; however, unity is just an ideal and the balancing of I-positions is a continuous process, especially for people with multicultural identities or for migrants. In this context, "identification" seems a more appropriate concept than "identity," since it better indicates how contemporary identities are processual and not fixed, and it includes multiple positions an individual can have in society, even when they are contradictory.

In the field of psychological anthropology, another approach to the self was presented by Irving Hallowell and Jerome Bruner, who discussed the relationship between self and narrative. Hallowell (1955), in order to explain the self, presents "self-awareness" as a universal psychological human trait, which means that a person can recognize oneself as an object among other objects. However, only through speech and social interactions,

self-conceptualization is formed, which is a culturally shaped notion of self that guides a person's understanding of their actions and experiences. Hallowell also uses the concept of "behavioral environment," instead of "social" or "cultural" environment, as an attempt to emphasize the structure of a person's psychological field, providing an "inside" view of a culture. This anthropological approach to the self allows the recognition that in certain societies, what is delimited as "reality" and "dream" are actually part of a continuum (Hallowell 1955, Goulet 1993). Different cultures constitute different behavioral environments, and these can include people as well as spirits and entities that are not seen as qualitatively different.

Following the dialogical aspect of the self's construction, Bruner (2002) presents self-making as the creation of a narrative guided by cultural models of selfhood that involves inner (memory, feelings, beliefs, etc.) and outer influences. Bruner utilizes the theory of the psychologist Ulric Neisser about the self and reinterprets selfhood as a plot or a storyline, establishing a connection between narrative and self-making. Bruner emphasizes that autobiographies are examples of an individual's creation of a narrative for the self. One important aspect of self-making emphasized by Bruner is the balance between autonomy and commitment, one representing the individual's will, and the other representing the collective's expectations for this person. Self-making is a constant dialectical process and an attempt to

find balance between both. Bruner presents how the self is relational, a product of our telling, and how narrative allows people to use memory and imagination to build new possibilities for the future.

Apart from a psychological and a dialogical perspective on the self, there is also an embodied one. The physical condition of a person impacts its social treatment and it is a source of personal subjective experience. Physical body development is usually marked by cultural interventions and social norms, which can be interpreted as formal ways of socializing an individual in a new phase of their life. Some examples are rites of passage, like menarche and other puberty related developments. This presents how culture, society, and biology play a central role in the evolution of the "self" and on the understanding of a personal development history that connects aging and body maturation to cultural significance (Worthman 1992, 156-159).

The concept "body-self" is utilized by Van Wolputte (2004, 252) to explain an "incarnate subjectivity," considering that "the body" in anthropology had always maintained a close dialogue with the concepts of self and subject. Van Wolputte states that the individual is shaped by social norms and by various symbolic representations formed in the collective body. Moreover, he refers to Csordas to present that embodiment is a lived experience, not just a discursive situation, it is a process of making sense

that is presymbolic, but not precultural. Csordas (1990) understands the self undergoes two important simultaneous dynamics: one is the embodied process of "becoming," the "self-making"; and the other is the representational self, a socially constructed self-image. One example of embodiment is how witchcraft and arts of divination, which are present in many African societies, is a type of embodied epistemology, in which knowledge and action work together and influence social practices as well as interpretations and "meaning-making" of the world (Van Wolpute 2004, 258-259).

Csordas, through the analysis of religious experiences, apprehended the self as an "indeterminate capacity to engage or become oriented in the world, and it is characterized by effort and reflexivity" (1994, 340); thus, reinforcing the interpretation of the self not as an entity, but as a process that is objectified as a "person." Similarly, Geertz (1983, 59) discusses the self as a concept that varies among cultures. He criticizes the Western creation of the "bounded person," which is the understanding that a person has a cohesive motivational and cognitive universe of their own, separate from the "universe" of others, as well as their social and natural surroundings.

In resonance with interpretations of the self as a process, studies in the field of anthropology have shown the connection between identity

formation and learning processes, in which an individual's identity is socially organized and reproduced in diverse activities and social engagements. This can be seen in the way social interactions make individuals improvise, and the results of these social encounters, whether positive or negative, shape the way they will interact with others in the future. This process shows how previous experiences generate individual perceptions that might constrain or enable future participation. Additionally, these encounters create new understandings of one's identity as individuals adapt and learn how to relate to others (Holland et al. 1998; Powell 2012, 101).

This presentation aimed to clarify how the self is not a fixed concept, instead, one's sense of selfhood is influenced by their social and cultural environment. The field of holistic healing is a specific milieu that shapes its practitioners sense of selfhood. In the following analysis, I present theories about the relation between self-making and narrative, as presented by Hallowell (1955) and Bruner (2002), to explain how certain exercises in the holistic healing field involve the rupture of a narrative of selfhood in order to transform a client's perspective on themselves and the prospects they have for their lives. Furthermore, I use the theory presented by Holland and colleagues (1998) and Powell (2012) on identity formation and learning processes to indicate how the learning process of healing and spiritual

concepts generate a change in the informants self-perception as "healers" and how it impacts their social interactions.

2.2. Authenticity

Authenticity is a polysemic concept which can be used to determine or explain truthfulness on an outer, physical level, or on an inner, psychological level. While in medieval societies, authenticity was determined by social hierarchies, in the seventeenth century, this concept took an inward turn in philosophical traditions that saw authenticity as a representation of the inner self. This tradition influenced Western scholars to find "authenticity" in societies that did not have contact with the "Western world," and following Rousseau's idea of uncorrupted natives, authenticity became a concept that referred to the self and to the exotic Other (Theodossopoulos 2013, 342).

Authenticity is a broad term that can be applied to objects, places, cultural regalia, traditions, as well as the self. This thesis will not focus on authenticity of materials and authenticators, but on the connection between the concept of authenticity and the self. Theodossopoulos (2013, 344) identifies as one of the dilemmas connected to authenticity the sense of

singular authenticity that lies beyond the social level of reality. This conceptualization can be applied to analyze the self, seeing the authentic self as not "contaminated" by modernity; in this approach, materiality or superficialities of social life are dismissed as inauthentic.

Moreover, an author who assists in the analysis of self and authenticity is Charles Taylor (1991). Taylor started a discussion about the meaning of authenticity in the context of modernity, understanding it beyond its usual meaning as avoidance of falsehood or being truthful. Taylor sees authenticity as an ethics, which means a guiding principle for moral ideals related to self-fulfillment, but in his view, it is also a central malaise of modernity.

In his research, he identifies individualism as one of the main malaises of modernity. Taylor connects individualism with the development of a moral idea of self-fulfillment that is related to "being true to oneself." Authenticity is apprehended as a moral force that supports a "liberalism of neutrality," meaning that there are various understandings of what a good life is and all of them are valid, which results in a moral subjectivism (Taylor 1991, 15-18). Taylor finds the beginning of the ethic of authenticity in early forms of individualism, such as Descartes' disengaged rationality, Locke's political individualism, and the Romantic period's atomism or the lack of interest in community ties. Furthermore, the eighteenth-century idea

that humans naturally have a moral sense, which indicates an intuitive feeling of what is correct and what is not, created an inner morality. This morality differs from a previous moral understanding that was external to the individual and had God as its source. This shift made "being true to oneself" highly important, since one's life purpose and originality would lie within each person. This inner guidance reinforces the moral force of authenticity and endorses goals of self-fulfillment (Taylor 1991, 25-29).

Marcon and Furlan (2020), discussing the work of Charles Taylor, comment that identity is seen as an orientation in a moral space. This creates a scenario where the self is not a set of positive statements about individuality, but a search. As the authors put it: "The notion of identity as orientation presupposes this search, and to be a *self* is thus to be in this constant search for a way of living well." (Marcon and Furlan 2020, 5). In this individualistic social structure, people are expected to choose seeking self-fulfillment as a value. This moral value has a great impact on contemporary individuals who feel the need to move away from the external world in order to reach authenticity, under the risk that if they do not realize their unique potential, they will have wasted their lives and be an "existential failure" (Marcon and Furlan 2020, 7).

As presented so far, self and authenticity are two concepts closely related in contemporary societies. Rebecca J. Erickson (1995, 123-124)

incorporates postmodern discussions to the concept of self, which acknowledges its complexity and possible inconsistency, in order to explain authenticity in terms of a system of self-values. First, it is important to make a differentiation between sincerity and authenticity; sincerity refers to an exterior appearance, whether an individual represents oneself truly to others. Authenticity, on the other hand, is a self-referential concept that refers to a relationship one has with oneself, or to the adherence to the laws of its own being, as presented by Trilling in the book "Sincerity and Authenticity" (1971).

Erickson (1995, 131-133) presents a reconceptualization of authenticity as originated from acting according to one's self-values, instead of keeping a commitment to role-identities. In other words, a sense of relative authenticity emerges from the fulfillment of commitments one has to oneself. Thus, self-values are standards for representations of the self socially and for self evaluations. However, people can be committed in different levels to each self-value and the most prominent ones tend to appear across identities, since they enable not only external appraisal, but self-appraisal. The implications for identity theory would be that the self has the ability to take itself as an object and as a perspective from which to act. For instance, if a person has "honesty" as a core value in their system of self-values, they might be more committed to honesty than other values,

such as "rationality" or "lovability"; thus, honesty becomes a pattern of central self-meaning across identities.

This approach sees the self not so dependent on social roles and not just as reactive, for it considers inner sources of motivation and restraint. Erickson tries to present a concept of self that combines multiple relationships and self-values: "It is no longer a question of being 'true to self' for all time, but rather of being true to self-in-context or true to self-in-relationship." (1995, 139). Thus, inauthenticity must be seen as a facet of the self in conflict, not as the violation of a comprehensive and total moral value.

Narrowing down to the context of the United States, the culture of authenticity that emerged in the 1960s with the counterculture movement, impacted the "revolutionary" foundation of selfhood and political consciousness. The postmodern generation wished to move away from the culture of rationalism by embracing subjectivity and expression of emotions; however, they were faced with the rise of individualism. Emotional disconnection caused by the individualist scenario made individuals feel more disconnected than before, leading to an increase in the demand for professional therapists (Jung 2011, 283).

As presented by Jung (2011), there has been an increased interest in themes of personal growth, self-realization, psychological well being, and

search of the "authentic self" among Americans from the baby boomers generation. Jung points out that the "subjective turn" is simultaneously a continuation and a rupture of modernity. It is a continuation of the tradition of self-transformation, but postmodern selfhood is trying to break free from the "iron cage" of rationality. The postmodern generation, in the context of a market economy, can purchase psychotherapy that fits their personal projects of self-realization. Additionally, the decontextualized expression of emotions in a psychotherapeutic setting shows an attempt of emotional control. This model of emotional control is connected to Max Weber's Protestant work ethics that values hard work, emotional restraint, and self-discipline, and also a modernist approach to self-transformation (Jung 2011, 287-294).

This literature review aimed to highlight the importance of the search for authenticity in the US society. Imbued in this social context, the holistic healing field adds a spiritual layer to this secular search, reframing the authentic self as the "higher self." The historical background of authenticity provided by Taylor (1991), allows an analysis of the concept of the higher self as a continuation of projects of self-development and self-fulfillment within what he named as the "ethics of authenticity." Moreover, applying the concept of authenticity as actions in alignment with one's self-values, as presented by Erickson (1995), I analyze how holistic healing

practitioners understand and express their "authentic selves" in their careers and identities as healers.

2.3. Ritual and performance in everyday life

Holistic healing includes a variety of healing modalities, among them I noticed that sessions of energy healing are often structured as a ritual or a ceremony. I find it fruitful to employ Turner's (1982) reflection on ritual to analyze such sessions. Although ritual was usually associated with the maintenance of a certain social order through its continuous reproduction in symbolic form, Turner saw in the process of ritual the potential for change on a psychological and social level (Kapferer 2004, 38). For Turner, liminality represents the dissolution of a normative social structure, also known as "anti-structure." Liminality can be seen in rites of passage, since such rites evoke the experience of the liminal stage of transience of the self. These are moments of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty for what the self might become. When this experience happens on a collective level, it can be described as "communitas." Thus, liminality and communitas compose "anti-structures," because they have the potential to rearrange an existing social structure. Even though ritual action and ceremony are structured

processes, what differentiates them is that ritual involves liminality, meaning the potentiality for self-transformation or social transformation; however, both are a declaration against indeterminacy (Turner 1982, 54-58; 83).

Considering Turner's analysis, it is possible to understand that ritual connects the spheres of experience and expression. Like play, ritual happens within a set frame of space and time in which symbols are manipulated to generate not simply change, but transformation. The meaning of transformation is the rearrangement or reordering of a particular set of elements and their existing relations into a new form (Kapferer 1979, 4). According to Kapferer, the efficacy of a ritual lies in its performance, because it involves the use of particular symbolic formations that influence an individual's perception, allowing the experience of transformation. Performance is considered a medium that involves symbolic objects and action, such as dance, music, song, and drama. As Kapferer explains "ritual moves its participants, it organizes their emotions and experience, it questions those taken-for-granted elements of cultural life and holds them up for inspection." (1979, 6).

As presented, performances are constitutive parts of ritual; however, they are also central elements of people's everyday lives. In order to understand performance and social interactions, Erving Goffman in the book

"The presentation of self in everyday life" (1959) presents a dramaturgical analysis of human social interaction. He finds that people try to control the outcome of their actions and the impressions they make on other people by performing different roles in their daily lives. Social interactions are a balancing of performances and interests in which one tries to convey a specific impression knowing that it will shape how people interact with them (1959, 9).

Another important element of performance presented by Goffman is the "first impression," since it shapes how one is perceived by others, their future interactions, and it determines what image they will have to sustain in order to avoid conflicting actions (1959, 11-14). He stresses the importance of "belief," since observers are requested to believe in the performance and to take the impressions as reality, and one must believe in their own performance, otherwise they are considered cynical. In matters of socialization, Goffman says that the performer might offer an idealized impression to the observers in order to fulfill their expectations, incorporating socially accredited values, which he denotes as "front." Also, performers might maintain social distance, since it causes a sense of awe in the audience, what he calls a "state of mystification" (Goffman 1959, 67).

Additionally, it is possible to see in people's interaction a constant negotiation between commitment and autonomy, as presented by Bruner

(2002) on the description of self-making through narrative. This happens because an individual will try to control the situation and act in a way to produce the outcome that best fits their volition, expressing their autonomy; however, social rules and the desires and intentions of others with whom they interact shape the possible outcomes, representing the side of commitment, in which one has to act within an accepted set of actions and behaviors. It is also possible to say that people understand the implicit social rules of performance because they share a similar behavioral environment (Hallowell 1955) that is kept by a constant reproduction of social norms through the performance of shared meanings and values.

According to Alexander (2004, 529), cultural performance is the process by which actors present their social situation to others, and shape their interactions according to how they would like to have others believing in them. A successful performance convinces others of its truthfulness, which can also be denominated "aesthetic truth." Alexander points out that success or failure of performance is also connected to authenticity, because an action seems real if it is *sui generis* to the actor, which means that they were not controlled by society and did not act in a way that is self-conscious or shaped by others expectations. A successful performance will denote sincerity, while its failure will indicate the motive to manipulate the audience (Alexander 2004, 548). Moreover, Illouz (2008, 184) emphasizes

how the performative act is important for the experience of self-change, which is present, for instance, in "self-development." This type of work on the self is one of the main sources of contemporary moral worth, which shows how performance is closely related to the themes of self and authenticity discussed previously.

This background on performance theory allows the analysis of the informants' online self-presentation as holistic healers and how social media creates a scenario that allows a process of mystification to take place as well as the formation of first impressions of these individuals as healers. Moreover, it enables an analysis of how a coherent and believable performance is connected to a sense of authenticity for the interviewees.

II. Methods

This is an anthropological qualitative study that aims to provide a deep understanding of holistic healing practitioners' perception of the authentic self based on an empirical analysis. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and government measures of social distancing, I relied on online resources to conduct this research: the video conferencing platform Zoom was used to conduct individual semi-structured, in-depth interviews, holistic healers' public social media accounts and their professional websites were used in the process of fieldwork to better understand their identities, public presentation, and practices.

I initially employed the use of purposive sampling to select practitioners who were well informed on the topic of holistic healing and practiced different holistic healing modalities, and who were living in different states of the United States, in order to provide information-rich cases and, consequently, generate a deep dataset. Snowball sampling was also used, and interviewees were asked to indicate other practitioners who they thought would be interested in participating in the study, and interviews ceased when saturation was reached.

In this study, I interviewed 11 holistic healing practitioners, practicing 32 different healing modalities. All reside in the United States in

the following states: New York (5), California (2), New Mexico (1), Georgia (1), Maine (1), and Washington (1). Concerning ethnicity, they were African American (2) (one informant was born in Cameroon), Caribbean American (2), white (5) (one informant was born in Iceland), Japanese (1) (born in Japan), and Mexican American (1). The age of the practitioners varied between 35 to 48 years old, and the time they have been working as holistic healing practitioners ranged between 2 to 24 years. The sample of this research reflected well the gender composition of the holistic healing community, among the participants there are 10 women and 1 man. There is a prevalence of women as practitioners and as clients in this field, which is a topic that will be analyzed in this research.

Four informants (Jasmine, Liam, Madison, and Megan) worked together at the healing center A, and three informants (Abigail, Madison, and Rosalie) worked at the healing center B, both in New York city. Nevertheless, when they were interviewed for this study, all of them were working autonomously or connected to these healing centers solely online. The following table presents more details about the informants:

Table 1 - Demographic data of the informants

Name	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Country of origin	State of residence	Time practicing holistic healing (years)
Abigail	43	Female	Euro-American	USA	Maine	20
Alexa	36	Female	Mexican American	USA	California	13
Audrey	38	Female	Euro-American	USA	New Mexico	10
Emma	40	Female	Black (African American)	USA	New York	24
Jasmine	43	Female	European	Iceland	California	9
Liam	35	Male	Euro-American	USA	New York	16
Lucy	39	Female	Euro-American	USA	Washington	2
Madison	48	Female	Japanese	Japan	New York	2
Megan	41	Female	Black (Caribbean American)	USA	New York	3
Nichole	44	Female	Black (African American)	Cameroon	Georgia	23
Rosalie	40	Female	Black (Caribbean American)	USA	New York	7

The interviews lasted between 60 to 150 minutes between February 14 and March 19, 2021, and one informant (Alexa) was interviewed two times. I elaborated semi-structured interviews, following an interview guide that included questions related to the practice of holistic healing, the practitioners' life path, spirituality, their understanding of the New Age movement, and business aspects of the practice. The questions asked were open-ended, which allowed the interviewees to elaborate on topics relevant to their work, especially spiritual concepts recurrent in their practices. Additionally, I gathered demographic data and, when necessary, I contacted the informants via email to further clarify topics that were unclear or not covered during the interviews.

I transcribed the audio of the interviews using the software Otter.ai and I coded the transcripts in order to make a comparative analysis of the interviews, with the intent to draw differences and similarities across the data set, which led to the revision and development of new codes and categories as needed.

Most importantly, the life stories collected allowed a broader and deeper understanding of holistic healing practitioners, enabling the creation of a grounded theory that counts on an inductive method of analysis. In an inductive process, the data set is analyzed to produce codes that are further

filtered into more general categories, until they reach central themes and, finally, assertions or theory (Saldaña 2016, 14).

Using this approach, I started coding concurrently with the interviews in order to highlight possible missing data, and to determine when saturation was reached. Thereafter, I organized codes in categories, and produced a codebook based on the main codes recurrent in the interviews. Moreover, I produced fieldnotes of interviews, which helped to gradually establish connections and comparisons across the dataset. Fieldnotes were also used for the analysis of websites and social media accounts. In order to protect the privacy of the research participants, all identifiable characteristics and details have been changed, including their names, which were substituted by pseudonyms.

Concerning online analysis, I chose Instagram as the primary social media platform of analysis due to its dynamic nature and the high level of daily participation from holistic healing practitioners and possible clients. It is a medium where healers promote their services and inform people about their craft, and where they can build a trusting relationship with anyone interested in their healing modality. Furthermore, holistic healing practitioners often offer their services in person and online. However, in 2020 and 2021 their services were almost exclusively online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, eliminating the need for a specific physical

location for their practices. Thus, the internet (social media, websites, online conference platforms) was the primary place to analyze the healers' practices, discourses, and self-presentation.

The usefulness of Instagram as a source of data was highlighted by Geismar (2017, 334), who suggests that besides the formation of social networks of appreciation, Instagram is also a unique archive. It has characteristics of short temporality, low centralization, and it is able to record not only visual content, but the process of archiving in itself. Even though the field of anthropology praises fieldwork offline, considering the current need of online research, Gray (2016) and Postill (2017) offer relevant examples of remote anthropological research. The authors show that it is possible to achieve thick ethnographic description without resorting to traditional fieldwork, especially using social media, because it introduces an element that was not available in the past: temporal copresence (Gray 2016, 508; Postill 2017, 65). This concept was framed by Özkul as "virtual travel," referring to temporal simultaneity that transcends physical distances (Özkul 2017, 224). The fact that an event can be attended online simultaneously to its unfolding somewhere else in the world, allows a feeling of presence on a bodily level. In addition, researchers can revisit moments and access digital content as needed in the course of the research, as online platforms function as archives.

It is important to consider that anthropological research methods change as society changes. Nowadays it is rare to find a research subject that does not require some level of digital analysis, as most people have access to the internet and their practices online are a significant part of their lives (Gray 2016, 506). Doing research online allows for many possibilities of observation and interaction. Online conferences can be seen as particular ethnographic sites, social media archives can be understood as records of the past that help to formulate a fuller picture of the informants, and the following of hashtags and tagging systems on Instagram also opens doors to find groups of people with similar interests. This study will then use the internet - websites and social media platforms as sites of analysis to understand the self-presentation of holistic healers.

III. Historical backgrounds of holistic healing in the United States

In this chapter, I analyze the historical backgrounds of the holistic healing practice, connecting it with the fields of biomedicine, psychology, and the New Age movement. These highlighted areas provide an understanding of some contemporary characteristics of the practice: the marginalization of holistic healing in the healthcare system, the similarity of some healing modalities to psychotherapy, the gendered aspect of holistic healing practices, and the spiritual component of the holistic healing field.

1. Holistic Healing and Biomedicine

Holistic healing is one of the oldest modalities of healing that has its center in the concept of holism, it is as diverse as its practitioners, and it exists all over the world. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 65% to 80% of the world uses holistic medicine or therapies (Dunn 2019, 4-5). Moreover, it is shown that holistic healing is becoming increasingly popular in the United States, according to the 2011 survey of the American Association of Retired Persons/National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, 53% of people over 50 years old had used alternative

medicine, and more people look for holistic health practitioners than medical doctors (Dunn 2019, 4).

Holistic healing is in the category of traditional and complementary medicine (T&CM), and The WHO defines indigenous traditional medicine as follows:

> Indigenous traditional medicine is defined as the sum total of knowledge and practices, whether explicable or not, used in diagnosing, preventing or eliminating physical, mental and social diseases. This knowledge or practice may rely exclusively on past experience and observation handed down orally or in writing from generation to generation. These practices are native to the country in which they are practised. The majority of indigenous traditional medicine has been practised at the primary health care level. (World Health Organization 2019, 8)

Analyzing the WHO's definition of indigenous traditional medicine, it is possible to see that there is an inclusion of non evidence-based explanations and practices. This shows how local epistemologies influence healing practices, which may include spiritual elements in their healing system. Moreover, the WHO recognizes the importance of T&CM in primary health care, which was made explicit in the Global Conference on Primary Health Care held in October 2018 and in the strategy to increase the use of T&CM, known as the WHO's Traditional Medicine Strategy 2014-2023 (World Health Organization 2019, 10).

"Alternative healing" has existed as long as the need for cure. It is a much older phenomenon than modern biomedicine. One of the most ancient ways of healing has been herbal healing, mainly practiced by lay women healers. Kheel (1989, 96) remarks that herbal healing is part of a holistic worldview that flourished especially in matriarchal societies that honored the interconnectedness of all parts of nature in the "sacred Mother Earth." The holistic tradition that included herbal healing respected not only the power of the body to heal, but also the mind or spirit. Herbs were ingested in a ritual context that included prayer, chants, and incantations (Kheel 1989, 97).

Holistic healing incorporates diverse modalities of healing that have some common principles, one of them being the belief in the healing power of nature and that all humans have recuperative powers. Thus, alternative therapies aim to aid this inner ability of healing and recovery (Park 2008, 14). The "healing" aspect of holistic healing refers to a return to balance. Differently from the biomedical system that focuses on curing a disease in the physical body by means of external treatments, holistic healing centers in the prevention of illnesses and in bringing balance to one's life. Moreover, it acts on the belief that people have the capacity to heal by themselves or in a collaborative relationship with nature and society (Dunn 2019, 14).

Another central concept of holistic healing is holism. The ontology of holism can be found in Aristotle that praised the understanding of larger wholes, instead of individual parts. This perception was challenged in the scientific revolution, influenced by Descartes' dualism, the separation of the mind and the body, the cartesian method in science, and atomism (Dunn 2019, 7). The scientific approach proposed by René Descartes and Francis Bacon saw nature not as a source of knowledge, but as something to be conquered and subdued by a rational and masculine mind. Descartes approached nature with mechanical laws, as if it was a machine and removed from it any sense of rationality or soul. The same logic was applied to the body, seen as a machinery, its disruption by illness was interpreted as being caused by an external source that had to be removed (Kheel 1989, 98). However, holism present in holistic healing goes against these principles that have long structured the Western scientific thought.

Although the philosophical idea of holism dates centuries back, the term "holism" was only coined in 1925 by the South African philosopher Jan Christian Smuts, who used the Greek word "holos," meaning whole or entire. This philosophical idea envisaged understanding a whole system, going against the tendencies of fragmentation in Western science (Dunn 2019, 7). Additionally, Dunn (2019, 10-13) identifies connection, interdependence, integration, reciprocity, wholeness, balance,

and social change as the main principles of holism. Holism seen in holistic healing also integrates the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual spheres of one's life.

It is hard to define holistic healing by only utilizing biomedical terminology. Egnew (2005) carried out a qualitative study with the purpose to define healing and to operationalize its mechanisms, in order to allow the identification of actions that can assist physicians in promoting holistic healthcare. The study showed that healing was associated with wholeness, narrative, and spirituality. Biomedicine developed effective treatments for diseases and injuries, but it underemphasized elements that are central to alternative medicine, such as nutrition, self-care, lifestyle, and relaxation. Both healthcare systems are relevant, and recently there is a tendency of turning complementary medicine into integrated medicine, thus, traditional and complementary medicine can be applied together with biomedicine as equally valid (Dunn 2019, 14).

However, in order to understand the reasons why traditional and complementary medicine became marginalized in the field of medicine, a retrospective is necessary. Even before the marginalization of holistic practices from the medical field, women, who have been healers of communities for centuries, were the first ones to be excluded from the institutionalized medical system. This exclusion happened because in the

thirteenth century, laws that demanded physicians to have licenses and medical training were implemented, while the access to universities was kept exclusive to men, which removed women from the legal practice of medicine. Additionally, between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, the Catholic and the Protestant Church led witch trials that condemned a number close to nine million people, mostly women, to execution. "Herberia" was one of the names used for witches, which means "the one who gathers herbs"; the rage of the church turned towards nature worshipping religions and even traditions that were passed down over generations among peasants (Kheel 1989, 99-100).

Although women were removed from the professional medical field, in the 1800s it was still possible to find a wide range of healing practices in the US, which are in today's terms chiropractic, homeopathy, naturopathy, and many other folk remedies. These were practices from various cultural groups, including the ones brought with the immigration to the country. It was only with the foundation of the American Medical Association (AMA) in 1847 that a boundary work was established between professional medicine and other types of healing. Since all the healing practices were relatively accepted and had to compete for clients, the AMA not just labeled competing practices as irregular and quackery, but also set jurisdictional boundaries and established professional dominance. This also

led to the structure of a formal body of knowledge for medical education that dismissed other medical practices as unscientific (Park 2008, 26).

Another central element to this scientific transformation of the medical field was the report on "Medical Education in the United States and Canada" commissioned by the Carnegie Foundation and written by Abraham Flexner in 1910. The Flexner report evaluated education, training, and certification of competency in medical schools. It demanded all schools to adhere to protocols of mainstream science and to impose higher standards on admission and graduation. The recommendations of this report were adopted by all medical boards, which led to the closing of various medical schools, especially those that taught alternative therapies. Biomedicine then became the standard, the scientific, and the consolidated medical profession, casting aside alternative practices from the healthcare field (Park 2008, 27).

Throughout many decades alternative medical treatments were marginalized from the medical field, but they never disappeared. A unique moment in history that brought back the interest in alternative medicine and played a central role in disseminating various practices of healing was during the counterculture movement in the 1960s. This decade in the United States was marked by the international events of the Cold War and the Vietnam War, and internally by a civil uprising against political conservatism and military action. People also started to vocalize issues

related to women's rights, racism, and LGBT's rights. This scenario led to a rising interest in philosophical and religious traditions from various parts of the world. In the 1970s, together with diverse self-care movements, the word "holistic" gained popularity due to its broad meaning that could embrace physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of healing. Other factors that supported the growth of alternative medicine was the inability of conventional biomedicine to cure chronic illnesses, the professionalization of alternative medicine practitioners, as well as market factors, including the media (Park 2008, 28-29).

The search for holistic healing practices can be attributed to multiple factors, not only to the rise of the counterculture movement. Holistic healing expanded especially due to an increased dissatisfaction with the biomedical system, which is seen to compartmentalize the body and to give little to no space for patients' life stories and their relation to illnesses. Kleinman (1988) shows that there is a profound difference between the terms "illness" and "disease." "Illness" is related to "how the sick person and the members of the family or wider social network perceive, live with, and respond to symptoms and disability" (Kleinman 1988, 3). This definition includes patients' perceptions of bodily processes and their decision about when to reach out to treatments that may include biomedical or alternative practices, placing patients as active agents of their own care.

Furthermore, the cultural orientation of the patient shapes their understanding of the illness, as well as its treatment; thus, illness is a culturally shaped experience. Disease, on the other hand, is a much narrower technical term; it transforms the patient's complex understanding of illness into a technical issue that fits the biomedical model (Kleinman 1988, 5).

Facing this disconnection between real life experiences, in which an illness affects not solely the body of the person, but also their social interactions, emotions, and future perspectives, holistic healing opens possibilities of healing on a physical, psychological, social, and spiritual level. Moreover, holistic healing's openness to the spirituality of patients is an important factor to create culturally competent care. It deals with the whole meaning of illness, empowering the patient to be an active participant in the healing process, as well as, it improves the physician-patient communication (Baer 2003, 235). Kheel (1989, 105) argues that holistic healing has reverence to nature, it envisages to empower the client, and recover their health in a deep and long lasting way, which, in her view, is different from a biomedical approach that has a mechanistic and heroic orientation that desires fast changes and the restoration of the appearance of health. One example of this surface level treatment is the use of chemical "solutions" to treat depression, anxiety, and grief.

Ross (2012, 91) indicates that in the Western field of health and healing, concerns with mind, emotions, and spirit seem to be growing, which can be seen in the work of physicians who are spiritually-oriented, such as Deepak Chopra, Bernie Siegel, and Andrew Weil. Furthermore, some medical schools in the United States are now incorporating techniques of yoga, relaxation, as well as cultural competency courses that aim to bring awareness to the spiritual and emotional needs of patients. Nonetheless, it is important not to neglect the fact that the access to holistic health services is limited in the United States, since those are not covered by insurance companies. Thus, most people who seek these services are upper and upper-middle-class, often Euro-American individuals, or those who are members of the counterculture that have opted to invest their financial resources in alternative medicine (Baer 2003, 243).

This retrospective shows how the marginalization of holistic healing practices from the healthcare field is a long process that is correlated to the institutionalization of biomedicine. This information is important to understand how holistic healing practices are carried out in the preset, which is still marked by a lack of institutionalization, a majority of women practitioners, and the existence of a low barrier for healers to learn different healing modalities, which is reflected in the way most practitioners offer a variety of services, instead of focusing in one healing technique.

2. Holistic Healing and Psychology

Holistic healing aims to balance mind, body, and spirit, which indicates its concern with individuals' psychological and emotional states. This approach to healing was developed within a context in the US that saw the rise of the therapeutic and the self-help culture. Thus, it is relevant to delineate how this cultural scenario influenced the holistic healing field and its connection to psychotherapy.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Samuel Smiles' book "Self-help" (1859), which introduced stories of men who rose in social status via work and "character," resulted in the popularization of the idea that moral strength and volition could change an individual's social position. However, it is important to note that this ethos of self-help went against Freud's psychoanalytic understandings, especially his argument that psychic development in adult life depended greatly on childhood events. Moreover, Freud did not share the belief that psychic development could be altered by will power, since the subconscious would overthrow any plan that the conscious mind could formulate (Illouz 2008, 153).

Nonetheless, it is interesting that even though self-help and psychoanalysis held opposite visions, in contemporary American culture they merged into a hybrid cultural system. This connection was able to

happen because the psychotherapeutic language moved away from the realm of the experts into popular culture, which was already imbued with ideas of perfectibility of the self, pursuit of happiness, and self-reliance. Another factor that helped in the popularization of psychoanalysis was the lessening of Freudian determinism; other psychologists presented a more flexible view on the psyche, making psychology more compatible with American values. Erik Erickson's studies on childhood development presented that the child's ego was influenced by historical context and changeable social institutions, which is a more flexible view on the ego than Freud's perspective. Erickson also indicated that the ego could develop throughout life, giving an optimistic premise that the self could improve, being compatible with the ethos of self-help (Illouz 2008, 152-159).

The psychological discourse gained strength along the twentieth century and became a central element in contemporary narratives of selfhood, autobiographical discourse, and people's understanding of identity. Cultural platforms, including television talk shows, were central in the diffusion of the therapeutic thought in the US society, which is now part of the cultural and moral universe of middle-class Americans. Illouz argues that it became an invisible symbolic system and a knowledge system that shapes and organizes individual's conduct and their understanding of "self" (Illouz 2008, 5-7).

Sollod (2005, 271-275) presents how spiritual traditions have influenced the development of psychotherapeutic practice. A few examples are relaxation techniques, analysis of dreams, and hypnosis. Another similarity between both approaches is that psychotherapy has a structure that emulates the structure of traditional healing: a person in search of help, the "healee," goes to a qualified individual, the healer, in order to receive some support or remediation for their problems. Within this structure, it is possible to say that the psychotherapist embodies the archetype of the healer, which is characterized by the capacity to change people's lives due to their own training and experience, to access an inner experiential world of their patients, and to have awareness of one's own challenges, which could be described as the "wounded healer." Recently there are some psychotherapists trying to incorporate spiritual healing in their practices, in this approach, the psychotherapist is encouraged to see their clients as empowered and whole, instead of deficient and diseased.

Holistic healing practitioners tend to mention the "healing journey," which apprehends healing as a path to reach a connection with one's "true self," also referred to as the "higher self." "True self" is a terminology originated in the field of psychology to explain the locus of identity. Winnicott (1986) presented the "true self" in opposition to the "false self," meaning that when children experience a wound or trauma to their true self,

they develop the false self as a defense mechanism to protect the true self from the world. The true self preexists the false self, which was created post social interactions. Another psychologist who contributed to the discussion on the true self was Alice Miller (1979), who presented a similar approach to childhood development as Winnicott. She expressed that the true self is the authentic core of emotion and needs. Miller understands that parents reject certain parts of the child's true self, and these parts are internalized and cause a distancing of the child from their authenticity. In this sense, psychology and holistic healing share an understanding that individuals are living in misalignment with their true selves, and in this scenario, holistic healing offers a path to a "healing journey" towards one's true or authentic self (Eskenazi 2010, 234-235).

This overview allows an understanding of similarities between the field of holistic healing and psychology. The popularization of a psychotherapeutic discourse in the US affected multiple areas of society, including practices of holistic healing, which is reflected in the centrality of the talk element in healing sessions, as well as the abundance of coaching and psychotherapeutic practices within the holistic healing milieu. Furthermore, the concept of the "true self" in psychology has similarities with the holistic healers' concept of the "higher self," being both connected to the concept of authenticity.

3. Holistic Healing and the New Age movement

Previously I presented some of the reasons why alternative medicine, later known as holistic healing, lost and regained centrality in the healthcare system. The growing use of alternative and complementary medicine portrays a change in beliefs around health and illness in the US, and members of the counterculture movement were drivers of this change. This movement encompassed an array of social groups with different demands, including the New Age movement[1]. People who embraced a holistic approach to health and saw the interconnectedness of mind-body-spirit were drawn to the New Age movement, as it valued diverse ways of knowing and healing (Poulin and West 2005, 257).

The New Age was a boiling pot where opposition to capitalism, materialism, war, environment destruction, and questioning of institutionalized religion met a revival of Paganism, adoption of non-Western spiritual and wellness practices, exploration of altered states of consciousness, and the beginning of humanistic and transpersonal psychology. The New Age is known as a psychospiritual revolution that combined healing, growth, and spirituality. The search for an authentic path

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[1] As presented by Wood (2007, 18), in the literature and field of studies of New Age there is no solid position whether it should be considered a movement, however, New Age is usually referred as "New Age movement" or "New Age spirituality," thus, in this thesis both terms will be used as the context demands.

by members of this movement led to the spiritual syncretism that New Age is known for, integrating teachings of various religious traditions, channeled texts, and divination practices (Poulin and West 2005, 258).

Originally, spiritual communities in the 1970s used the term "Aquarian Age" instead of "New Age." The concept was popularized by David Spangler (1945-), who joined the Findhorn community in Scotland and started to implement programs and seminars of creative writing, yoga, healing, personal development, among others. He and his community believed that people were undergoing a "paradigm shift," in which humanity would evolve into a new culture of oneness and human spirituality would thrive. And this new era of human consciousness was coined the "New Age" (Chryssides 2007, 9).

Chryssides (2007, 22) affirms that the New Age is not a religion and it should not be considered a collection of multiple new religious movements. Given the polysemic meaning of New Age, the author identifies the following as beliefs shared by its members: an optimistic view of the self, considering it divine; focus on healing practices on a spiritual, mental, and physical level; the potential to develop personal skills and a positive mindset; questioning of traditional authority, especially the male centered and dominant Christian Church; and emphasis on intuition, creativity, healing, and other qualities considered "feminine." York (2001, 354) adds to

the common beliefs the credence in an evolutionary process of the soul, which includes successive reincarnations, and an understanding of interconnectedness between all beings.

The New Age's seeking for truth and an authentic path based on inner guidance matched with holistic healing's principle of self-healing and inner wisdom. One example of an esoteric teaching that was transposed to a healing technique is the assessment of subtle energetic bodies, which can be etheric and astral bodies, and energetic centers, known as chakras. Considering that imbalance and illness can affect the physical and the energetic level of an individual, some holistic healing modalities, such as shiatsu, acupuncture, and qigong work on clearing and balancing the energetic body (Poulin and West 2005, 260).

Even though New Age spirituality and holistic healing opened doors to non-invasive, patient-centered, holistic, and culturally diverse approaches to healing, they have also faced criticism. Some of these critiques were related to the emphasis on elements of the free market society, such as individualism and self-centeredness, which emphasizes the individual's responsibility for their health, wellness, and spirituality. Another critique is that these movements do not respect the tradition of many indigenous and folk medical systems, but attempt to create a neoshamanism using elements

derived from various shamanic traditions, especially from Native Americans, in the case of the US (Baer 2003, 234).

According to York (2001, 361), the spiritual pluralism present in the New Age movement is a proof of the perception that spiritual traditions are displaced from religious institutions; that, they have become public property that can be bought, sold, and consumed following the principles of the free-market. York criticizes the narcissism and the "commodification of religion" seen in the New Age, especially its tendency to participate in the "contemporary spiritual consumer market" and to appropriate spiritual practices and ideas from various traditions, working within the neoliberal capitalist logic of unrestricted global trade. To York, New Age does not reject the free market, but includes spirituality in the list of marketable goods (2001, 364-367). Additionally, this appropriation process can lead to a loss of private practices, traditional sites and knowledge, as well as cultural artifacts, which is happening to American Indigenous nations, South American ayahuasca, Chinese Tai Chi, Qi Gong, and many other traditions (York 2001, 368). As holistic healing practices grew in popularity and visibility within the New Age tradition, these pieces of criticism to New Age members are also posed towards holistic healing practitioners who utilize healing techniques from various backgrounds.

One of the common denominators of holistic healing and the New Age movement is spirituality. According to the historian Catherine Albanese (1990), spirituality is related to means of knowing the divine, and it can also be interpreted as the personal aspect of religion. Some people might describe themselves as religious and spiritual, or not religious but spiritual. However, spirituality combines action, devotion, and theology; and the understanding of what "being spiritual" means is shaped by religious teachings, rites, and other structures that model spiritual practices and identities (Bender 2007b, 3).

Bender (2007b, 4) explains how spirituality has a long history in the United States, being part of a religious tradition and not a consequence of a "spiritual marketplace." Bender says that this spiritual tradition dates back to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with liberal Protestants, Transcendentalists, New Thought groups, and Christian Science that believed in the power of the mind for healing. Bender explains that even though spiritual seekers do not follow a religion, they are part of a theological lineage and institutions that structure their experiences. Moreover, "seeking" is part of a tradition in the United States that praises self-reliance and perfection.

The discourse of being spiritual, but not religious implies a desire for an unmediated connection with the divine, showing a rejection of

institutions and organized religions. This can be seen in sections of the environment movement and in the alternative health movement, also known as holistic healing movement. Bender describes that they embraced "'spirituality' that was counter to organized religion's non-organic, non-holistic, materialist foundations, and urged an alternative, countercultural spirituality" (Bender 2007b, 6).

Although spirituality reclaims a personal connection to divinity, it is not a solitary path, but one mediated by social interactions. Aupers and Houtman (2006) present how behind the apparent eclectic and extremely personalized packages of meanings and beliefs, people who identify with New Age spirituality share an ideological coherence centered on the doctrine of self-spirituality. The authors propose that self-spirituality simultaneously provides coherence and diversity to the spiritual practices, and it is reinforced by a process of socialization.

The "ethic of self-spirituality" is based on a perennial philosophy derived from esotericism, in which it is believed that all religions have in their essence a credence in the same divine source. Thus, perennialism can be seen as the underlying spiritual center of the New Age movement, instead of the concept of "bricolage," as presented by Aupers and Houtman (2006). The spiritual community also share the belief that "in the deeper layers of the self, one finds a true, authentic, and sacred kernel, 'unpolluted' by

culture, history or society, which informs evaluation of what is good, true, and meaningful" (Aupers and Houtman 2006, 204). There is a sacralization of the self and a parallel rejection of social institutions as evil, creating a dualistic worldview. Also, this perennial perspective allows people to search for various paths and religious teachings to find their "deeper selves."

Paul Heelas (1982), one of the most influential scholars in the field of New Age studies, highlighted the authority of the self and that new religious movements that appeared in Europe and North America were "self-religions" that had influences of Californian psychotherapeutic concepts. The sacralization of the self is a common language shared among members of the New Age community, as well as the shared belief that humanity is evolving to a new era and people must work towards setting themselves free from the "ego" to allow the "self" to come to the front. The existence of this common language shows that the New Age is not incoherent; it has an organizing principle, even though it might not be considered an organized entity (Wood 2007, 18-19).

Reinforcing the aspect of cohesion in the New Age movement, Aupers and Houtman show that there is a similarity in the biographies of spiritual trainers. Most of them were introduced to spirituality due to identity issues, especially strong identification with professional roles, which led them to an incapability of answering the question "Who am I,

really?" The questioning of one's true self often appeared after a conversation with a coach, who presented them the need of being "true to oneself" and introduced the spiritual path as a possible route to find answers to their existential questions. The search for an authentic self is triggered by a socialization process that gives individuals a new cognitive framework for interpreting reality and new experiences that reinforce this new worldview. The initially secular desire to understand their identities meets the New Age market, where new structures of understanding are available (Aupers and Houtman 2006, 206-208).

Aupers and Houtman provided a significant case of how shared beliefs impact individual's perspectives on themselves and their interpretation of life events. Another illuminating example of community formation centered on shared beliefs was provided by Bender's ethnographic study about past lives beliefs in a Cambridge community. Contemporary practices related to past lives and reincarnation in the United States were found to be connected to a longer tradition that dates back to the nineteenth-century metaphysical practices, which might contradict the accounts that New Age has no tradition (2007a, 609). Bender presents how past lives and other metaphysical ideas create a different layer of time that is mystical, ahistorical, and universal, in contrast to the material, genealogical history (2007a, 591). The tradition of American reincarnation practices did

not develop itself as a religion. Instead it became a tradition by the reproduction of practices, including history making. In the nineteenth-century the arguments on reincarnation were varied. However, some common beliefs were progressive or evolutionary reincarnation, scientific truths behind reincarnations, and soul mates. It is important to note that, Eastern religions' beliefs on interspecies reincarnation were considered an impossibility to the US believers, who considered that the human ego would not retrograde incarnating in other animals (Bender 2007a, 593-594).

Bender's fieldwork among spiritual practitioners presented how beliefs in past lives and the connection with a spiritual community, especially through the concepts of "soul mates" and "soul clusters" impacted family relations of the participants. Past lives are a social phenomenon that connected individuals in mystical historical links, which resulted in a sense of responsibility, closeness, and framed their understanding of personal relationships and their own mission in this lifetime (2007a, 601). The nineteenth-century tradition of practices of past-making present in American reincarnation beliefs, still influences contemporary understandings of reincarnation and the New Age view on past lives. This can be seen in the beliefs in progressive reincarnations, the existence of soul clusters, the influence of the past in the present, and the

reliance on inductive approaches, such as hypnosis, to access past lives (2007a, 608). This information can be extended to holistic healers interviewed in this research, given that all of them shared the belief in past lives.

Another aspect that must be noted about the connection between the holistic healing practitioners and the New Age movement is their understanding of the meaning of healing. According to Eskenazi (2010, 233-234), healing to New Agers has two definitions: one refers to resolving a physical or emotional problem; the second one refers to the process of personal transformation on a physical, emotional, and spiritual level. These different meanings to healing are also shared by holistic healers, which entails that the journey to authenticity that one undergoes is an attempt to restore balance between their authentic self and their inauthentic life.

Eskenazi (2010, 130-131) presents that having a healing journey as the guiding principle of one's life is a process that resembles the Romantic search for self-actualization. This healing journey has its roots in a novel style from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries named "Bildungsroman." This is a storyline in which the protagonist goes through a process of maturation that is centered in their emotional and spiritual orientation. The narrative includes a moment of rupture within one's self and conflict with the outside reality. The journey back to internal and

external unity includes trusting their own personal values and not following social expectations. The guiding light of this journey is self-reliance, self-discovery, and ultimately self-development. There is also a similarity between a personal healing journey and biblical themes: "the journey of personal healing is a transition from the exile of alienation to the return of integration; from the slavery of conformism to the freedom of self-actualization; from societal norms to Self-Reliant values." (Eskenazi 2010, 132).

This journey in search for one's self-actualization is similar to the "healing journey" that holistic healers state that they need to undergo in order to become healers and to be in alignment with their authentic selves. They also express a similar need to remove layers of social conditioning in order to find one's authenticity and their true essence, which will be explained as the concept of the "higher self," which is a spiritual interpretation of the authentic self.

The background information on the New Age movement is central to understand the formation of a holistic spirituality, which represents the belief that all religious and spiritual traditions have the same source of divinity, which is widely adopted by holistic healers. The field of holistic healing is popularly associated with practices from the New Age movement. Nonetheless, the contemporary healers do not associate themselves with it

and criticize practices of cultural appropriation done by members of the New Age movement and the use of spirituality as an escapist mechanism not to face social issues. Moreover, the analysis provided by Aupers and Houtman (2006) and Bender (2007a) allows an understanding that holistic spirituality is created in a social setting and that the socialization process that happens in the field of holistic healing shapes not only the informants' practice of healing modalities, but also their shared spiritual concepts, such as the view of the authentic self as the "higher self."

IV. Holistic healing through the lens of its practitioners

Holistic healing is an umbrella concept that includes healing practices developed across societies and has its origins prior to the institutionalization of Western biomedicine (refer to chapter 3, section 1). This field continues to evolve, incorporating new healing techniques as well as establishing links with Western psychotherapeutic practices. Holistic healing incorporates alternative healthcare modalities that work on the levels of mind, body, and spirit, and it is centered on the principles of holism, interconnectedness, and spirituality. This triad shapes not only the healers' practices, but also the way they perceive the world, bestowing spiritual meaning to everyday life occurrences.

The majority of studies about holistic healing are focused on its connection to the areas of biomedicine (Dunn 2019, Egnew 2005, Kheel 1989, Park 2008), psychotherapy (Moodley and West 2005, Poulin and West 2005, Sollod 2005), the New Age movement (Aupers and Houtman 2006, Baer 2003, Chryssides 2007, Eskenazi 2010, Wood 2007, York 2001), and spirituality (Bender 2007, Ross 2012). Adopting a different perspective, alternatively to making comparisons with other social fields, I aim to examine holistic healing and its modalities from the viewpoint of practitioners working in the US.

I intend with this approach to present in the subsequent sections the practitioners' inside perspective on the holistic healing field, emphasizing the three following topics: 1. practitioners' shared understanding of the concept of holistic healing; 2. modalities of holistic healing and the centrality of coaching in this field; 3. common reasons that led the informants to the practice of holistic healing.

1. Practitioners' understanding of holistic healing

The comprehensiveness of the concept of holistic healing might generate different interpretations depending on the length of time one has been exposed to and familiarized with holistic healing practices, and whether they are healers or clients. Thus, I aim to investigate how the healers themselves define holistic healing, which is the foundation on which they establish their work. Analyzing the data gathered in this study, I found that the key elements of the practitioners' understanding of holistic healing are the principles of holism, interconnectedness, and spirituality, which will be presented below.

The interviewees indicated that holistic healing focuses on the connection between mind, body, and spirit. This represents a triad of the

human system, thus, in their perspective, one element cannot be changed without affecting the other. For instance, they called attention to the relation between suppression of emotions and its manifestation as an illness or discomfort in the physical body, which shows how the body can be affected not solely by physical elements, such as external pathogens, but also by the individual's own emotions. Based on the triad of the human system, the practitioners considered illness a state of imbalance and were informed by the belief in the self-healing ability of the human body, which can be enhanced by non-invasive practices available in the diverse modalities of holistic healing.

Given the principle of holism from which this field is established, the informants emphasized differences between holistic healing and biomedicine[2]. Although both are healthcare systems, they approach treatments in distinct ways. The biomedical system adopts a compartmentalized outlook on the human body, addressing specialists to each part of the physical system that has fallen ill, diseased or that presents

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[2] I find it necessary to state that the differences highlighted by the informants were between holistic healing and biomedicine, not a dichotomy between Euro-American healing practices and holistic healing. In Europe and in North America many folk healing traditions are also excluded from the biomedical system, which was a topic brought up by Jasmine in her interview, when she, as a person born in Iceland, discussed some practices of Icelandic shamanism.

Holistic healing is different from the biomedical system in various fronts that will be discussed along this thesis. Some of these distinctions are based on the following characteristics of the holistic healing field: emphasis on the entire person (mind-body-spirit), non-invasive procedures, non-allopathic treatments, female-centered care, centrality of affective labor, openness to healing traditions from varied backgrounds, and welcoming of spiritual beliefs.

malfunctions, which is contrary to a holistic view of the human body. For instance, informants criticized that biomedicine mainly treats symptoms that appear on the body, whether holistic healing, in their view, aims to treat the causes of illness or suffering in a holistic manner, not only the physical body. Based on this overview, some of the interviewees' definitions of holistic healing were the following:

> The word holistic has its roots in whole, wholeness. And so I really look at it as we don't heal in isolation, we don't heal our mental health or physical health only, or just certain parts of our body or our mind. It's all linked together. And then, of course, you have the layers of emotion, and then the layers of energy and spirit. [Lucy, 39, 2 years of practice, March 19, 2021]

> Our wellness is not just, I have a cold because I have a cold. I can have a cold, because I've had a fight with my husband four days ago, and I didn't say what I needed to say. And so it's manifested in my body now as a cold. Whereas it can also be I was in the street, and I picked up bacteria. [Rosalie, 40, 7 years of practice, February 14, 2021]

Lucy confirmed the principle of interconnectedness, especially her mention of "we don't heal in isolation" reinforces holistic healing's approach to health as a balancing of all internal and external layers of an individual, seeing a person as a whole that cannot be dissociated. Holistic healing, in the informant's perspective, besides promoting physical wellness, also provides emotional care.

Kleinman's (1988) discussion on the importance of sociocultural definitions of illness (refer to chapter 3, section 1) is reflected in holistic healing practices. Holistic healers understand individuals as active agents of their healthcare and they accept their narratives of illness or imbalance, which are shaped by the individuals' cultural backgrounds and spiritual beliefs. For instance, Lucy's mention of "layers of energy and spirit," presents that the holistic healing field allows the incorporation of one's belief system in their healing process, giving them more agency.

In Rosalie's account, she highlighted the centrality of holism and interconnectedness in a holistic approach, presenting how emotional states can be translated into illness manifested in the physical body. Rosalie stressed that with a holistic approach, it is not tenable to assume that a health imbalance is coming only from pathological sources, such as viruses and bacteria. Physical distress might also be a manifestation of mental or emotional burdens, as Rosalie mentioned in the example of a non-resolved argument that could lead to a cold.

Lucy and Rosalie practice different modalities of holistic healing. Lucy is a psychotherapist and tarot reader, and Rosalie is a flower essence therapist. Still, both incorporated tangible aspects of holism into their practices, helping their clients identify the sources of their malaise. This is done mainly by assisting the client to connect apparently unrelated areas of

their lives in a sequence of possible causalities or providing a new framework to interpret their emotional, energetic or physical symptoms. Once healer and client understand the possible causes of discomfort, they can work together to restore balance applying the holistic healing modality of their expertise.

The majority of the interviewees shared their view that, based on information provided by clients, a healer looks for imbalances in all areas of a client's life to address root causes, not just symptoms of an illness or discomfort. These areas range from lifestyle and interpersonal relationships to emotional states and subconscious patterns. Lucy offered an example of healing subconscious patterns employing a holistic psychotherapeutic approach, in which she guides her clients to find their balance by uncovering traumas:

> There are psychotherapy approaches that deal with the self like, Internal Family Systems[3] is a whole approach that is about integrating the multiple parts of your inner self and revealing back to your sort of pure center self that isn't coping or adapting to interrelational traumas. So, I see a lot of overlap [between

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[3] Internal Family Systems is an integrative model of psychotherapy developed by Richard C. Schwartz. It explains the mind as composed of an undamaged core Self, which is the essence of an individual, and sub-personalities that function as members of a family, which are the wounded parts of the mental system. The goal of this model is to bring mental balance by resolving the discord among the Self and the sub-personalities.

Available at: <https://ifs-institute.com> and <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapy-types/internal-family-systems-therapy>. Accessed: June 10, 2021.

psychology and holistic healing]. And I actually see a lot of therapy kind of moving, bringing in some of those ideas from the spiritual world about the self that isn't our body or mind, but unites the two. [Lucy, 39, 2 years of practice, March 19, 2021]

Lucy's psychotherapeutic approach presents the elements of a holistic practice, since it is centered in integrating fragmented aspects of the self to restore one's inner balance. The Internal Family Systems (IFS) model of psychotherapy has the concept of an undamaged core Self, which can be described as a center that holds an individual's true essence, what Lucy called "pure center self." She associated this aspect of the self with a spiritual perspective, seeing it beyond the division of body and mind, which indicates an openness of certain psychotherapeutic modalities to spiritual concepts.

Discussing the main reasons why clients search for holistic healing, the informants often pointed to the need for support after traumatic life events, mental health issues, struggles with self-worth, or the need for guidance during a transitional phase of life. This indicates that individuals seek holistic healing when they sense their psyche or self is "ill" or "imbalanced." Apart from these, a few practitioners mentioned the case of clients searching for holistic approaches to heal physical health conditions, most notably cases of infertility in women who had no improvement with allopathic treatments.

Alexa, a reiki practitioner and tarot reader, explained that most of her clients are searching for emotional support, a safe space, and guidance to heal. She stated: "I've worked with sex trafficking survivors, I've worked with people who have been in very abusive relationships, or PTSD, or trauma of some form. . . . People always come after something pretty traumatic, like a really trying time, like grief, emotional frustrations, loneliness." [Alexa, 36, 13 years of practice, February 18, 2021]

The emotional care present in holistic healing draws a resemblance with psychotherapy. Both see the client as a unique individual that requires an individualized treatment, they are concerned about the client's emotional health, and utilize conversation as one of the main tools to understand and interact with them. However, concerning the cultural backgrounds of practitioners and clients, holistic healers perceive their practices as more inclusive than conventional psychotherapy. The informants mentioned that they are not only welcoming to the religious or spiritual beliefs of their clients, but also to their cultural backgrounds, as clients tend to search healers with whom they identify with on all these levels.

Emma, who is a somatic and dance movement therapist, has a trauma informed approach focused on psychological identity issues related to the African diaspora. She remarked that mainstream ways of healthcare are not helping underrepresented communities that have specific needs, as

she stated: "The term cultural competency is no longer used, but if you're not capable of like, affirming someone's culture, then you need to consider referring out to another practitioner." [Emma, 40, 24 years of practice, February 27, 2021]. This statement shows how in certain modalities of holistic healing, cultural and ethnic identification play a significant role in the relation between client and practitioner. This practice allows individuals, especially from minority groups, to have representation and to abide by their cultural and spiritual heritage. The informants of this research reinforce this statement of diversity, since there are individuals with family backgrounds from Africa, the Caribbean, Central America, North America, North Europe, and Japan.

It is necessary to add that the inclusivity of this field also lies in its lack of institutionalization; first, holistic healing practices are not accredited by university education, access to which is limited by high tuition costs; second, it does not have a professional board that establishes standards of certification and regulates the entrance of individuals in the field. As a result, these elements facilitate the access of minority groups, that usually are socioeconomically marginalized, to enter this field. Acknowledging that individuals of low socioeconomic status also search for holistic services, in order to facilitate financial access to healing, some practitioners offer discounted prices, the payment modality of "sliding scale," which is a

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system where the client can choose the price they want to pay from a range of prices for the healing service, donations based payments, trade, or community offerings with no monetary charge.

The claim of cultural inclusivity made by holistic healing practitioners is in line with findings by Moodley and colleagues (2008, 155-161). They assert that, especially in multicultural contexts, there are healers and clients who are immigrants or whose family backgrounds are from other countries. These individuals are highly benefited from having the support of a healer who understands their language, ideas concerning illness and health, and spiritual and cultural beliefs. Once the client learns about the healer's past of having struggles and suffering, but being able to overcome them, an empathic connection is established between them, which is a process expressed in the concept of the "wounded healer[4]." They also states that, although this empathic connection applies to all clients regardless of cultural background, in the case of minority groups, the personal relatability between client and healer adds an extra layer of trust and understanding.

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[4] The wounded healer is an archetype created by Jung, and it indicates that the healing power of a healer emerges from their own wounds. It indicates the ability of a healer or a psychotherapist to draw on their wounds to enhance empathic connection with the client. This archetype also helps to break the dichotomy between the healer as "the healed one" and the client as "the wounded one" (Zerubavel and Wright 2012, 482).

2. Holistic healing modalities and coaching services

In the previous section, I discussed the meaning of holistic healing for its practitioners, delineating its foundation on the principles of holism, interconnectedness, and spirituality. These broad principles are incorporated in a gamut of healing modalities, some related to energy healing, others more centered on movement, or talk, such as coaching and counseling. In this section, I envisage to draw connections between healing modalities practiced by the interviewees, granting special attention to the popular therapeutic and coaching modalities.

Although holistic healing draws on healing traditions from various places, the data I collected shows that in the context of the United States, this field has a prominence of therapeutic and coaching modalities. This indicates that holistic healers shape their practices in order to fit them in a model that is talk-centered, which is an influence of the psychotherapeutic narrative embedded in the North American society (refer to chapter 3, section 2). Thus, since the US clientele has a demand for talk centered practices, the healers adjust their services accordingly.

The 11 informants interviewed for this study practiced a variety of 32 modalities of holistic healing. The most recurrent practices were: coaching or psychotherapy (8), reiki (7), tarot (4), and breathwork (3).

Among all modalities, 15 practices focus on the mind, which are seen in therapeutic modalities, coaching services, and practices of divination; 15 practices focus on the body, including energy work, and movement or other body-centered practices. The following tables clarify the participants' practices according to the five aforementioned modalities of healing.

Table 2 - Mind centered practices

Therapeutic modalities	Clinical psychology, Ecotherapy, Somatic Psychotherapy, Creative Arts Therapy, Psychotherapy, Hypnotherapy, Retreat
Coaching services	Life Coach, Creative Empowering Coach, Spiritual Coach, Empowerment Counseling
Practices of divination	Soul Reading, Tarot, Astrology, Akashic Records reading, Channeling

Table 3 - Body centered practices

Energy work	Reiki, 13th Octave LaHoChi, Energy Work, Access Bars, Access Consciousness, Integrated Energy Therapy, Sound Healing, Flower Essence Therapy
Movement or body-centered practices	Breathwork / Pranic Work, Wu Tao Dance, Dance Movement Therapy, Burlesque Therapy, Massage Therapy, Alchemy, Herbalism

The above categorization merely provides a didactic structure to understand the holistic healing modalities. However, holistic healing practices cannot be faithfully divided between mind and body centered practices. As informants

emphasized, holistic healing includes the interconnection between mind, body, and spirit in the process of healing. Thus, one component of this triad cannot be changed without affecting the others. The separation between "mind centered practices" and "body centered practices" are based on the immediate vehicle of healing, indicating whether the focus of the practitioner, while performing a specific healing modality, is on the physical body of the client or on psychological or emotional aspects. Nonetheless, the informants reiterated that the result of all the above mentioned practices is to bring balance to mental, physical, and spiritual dimensions of a person. Emma, a practitioner of somatic psychotherapy and dance movement therapy, offered an example that clarifies the interconnectedness of these elements:

> I do this thing where I ask for someone to just remember a time where they felt powerful. . . . And that may be in school, it may be in your professional setting. It may have been when you were a little girl, just that moment when you felt powerful. And then I'll ask you to develop a power pose. And so what did that memory, where did it land in your body? did it land in your heart, did it land in your gut, did it land in your head? And then think about all the sensations that happen around that moment. And to create a pose . . . so I ask people that when they're having a difficult time, to just remember how to access that, if it's going into the bathroom for a minute when your boss has stressed you out and access your power pose. But then also in the work of the power pose, I ask people to think about a time. And for some people, it's coming to a therapist and feeling like they are stressed or having anxiety, think about a time where they felt oppressed, or they felt anxiety. And then what does that feel like? Where does it land in your body? What does it look like? And to

give me that movement or gesture, and then we examine like, what? How far off your power pose is from where you are and who you are right now? And if it's really off, what do you need to do to maintain that balance? And so we work through that in a session or sessions. [Emma, 40, 24 years of practice, February 27, 2021]

This example of an exercise that Emma does with her clients in somatic psychotherapeutic sessions shows how memories and emotions can manifest in the body, and how the positioning of the body can send back a stimulus that goes from the physical to the emotional level. In the power pose exercise, Emma asked where the memory of feeling powerful landed on the client's body, the sensations it evoked, and how they would express it in a power pose. She proceeded to ask the same about a memory of feeling oppressed or anxious. According to the generated movement or gesture, the client can know the extremes of emotions on a physical and psychological level, which allows them to understand inner states analyzing their own body language, and to realize their own power to change their emotions through their bodies. As Emma complemented: "I think that [our body] it is our first language . . . we're always using our bodies, but we forget that it can be a resource as well. And that's the part that I'm into the reclaiming of using our bodies as a healing resource." [Emma, 40, 24 years of practice, February 27, 2021]

The connection of mind, body, and spirit present in the core of all holistic healing practices can lead its practitioners to explore an array of

modalities, mixing mind-centered and body-centered practices. The following table displays all the modalities of holistic healing practiced by the informants:

Table 4 - Modalities of holistic healing

Practitioner	Holistic Healing Modalities
Abigail	Breathwork, Wu Tao Dance, Reiki, 13th Octave LaHoChi, Empowerment Counseling, Burlesque Therapy
Alexa	Energy Work, Pranic Work, Soul Reading, Reiki, Tarot, Life Coach
Audrey	Clinical psychology, Ecotherapy
Emma	Somatic Psychotherapy, Dance Movement Therapy, Creative Arts Therapy, Retreat
Jasmine	Access Bars, Access Consciousness, Reiki, Akashic Records reading, Creative Empowering Coach, Retreat
Liam	Breathwork, Tarot, Reiki
Lucy	Psychotherapy, Tarot
Madison	Reiki, Sound Healing
Megan	Intuitive Astrology, Akashic Records reading, Integrated Energy Therapy, Channeling, Tarot, Spiritual Coach

Practitioner	Holistic Healing Modalities
Nichole	Massage Therapy, Reiki, Sound Healing, Hypnotherapy, Life Coach, Spiritual Coach
Rosalie	Flower Essence Therapy, Reiki, Alchemy, Herbalism

Analyzing this table, it is visible that all informants provide more than one type of healing service, being able to apprehend that holistic healers tend to expand their knowledge towards a variety of practices, rather than specializing in only one healing modality. Additionally, it is possible to note that some practitioners offer services that are largely distinct from each other. For instance, Alexa, Jasmine, and Megan combine energy healing modalities, divination practices, and coaching services. The interviewees expressed that this diversity of practices is not only a result of personal interest, but a result of pressures exerted by other holistic healing practitioners and a demand from clients for healers to continuously expand the modalities of healing they offer. The diversity of practices performed by healers also shows how practitioners are exposed to different healing

techniques, and the existence of minimum to no barrier to exploring different aspects of this field[5].

A prominent characteristic of the holistic healing field seen in table 4 is the abundance of coaching and therapy modalities. Coaching stands out for its malleability in how the practitioners shape it according to their healing expertise. According to the informants, coaching allows them to personalize their services to attend a client's needs over an extended period of time, providing a support system for their healing process, instead of offering only individual healing sessions. In the case of Jasmine, she created a coaching service called "creative empowering coaching" after she had one client who needed support and a structured approach to healing, as she explained:

> When I talk about myself as creative empowering coaching, if you have creative blocks or issues, I can help you to overcome it. By using the Akashic [Records], using [energy] clearings, the clearing system that I have, asking questions and giving you homework. I put it [coaching service] on there [Jasmine's website] because I had one person that would come to me for sessions, and I could sense that she needed more. So I had a whole month or six weeks, I think, we were together. And every day I would be in connection with her and ask her questions to keep her busy. Because she would go really low, she would fall and she needed to have me to kind of push her and lift her. [Jasmine, 43, 9 years of practice, February 26, 2021]

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[5] The only informant who expressed a need for an extended learning period to practice healing was Rosalie, who came from a Yoruba tradition in which she explained there are three stages in learning: repetition, apprenticeship, and mastery. A student can only evolve to another level of learning by receiving the approval of their master teacher, and she stated that this is usually a lifelong learning process.

Jasmine does not have a background in psychotherapy; however, she employed the structure of talk therapy, that is pervasive in the US culture (refer to chapter 3, section 2), and combined it with her expertise in certain areas of holistic healing, in her case Akashic Records reading and Access Bars, in order to attend to the needs of clients who demand continuous attention and assistance. Most practitioners mentioned that their coaching services were built in a similar fashion. They created a unique set of exercises that incorporate all their healing modalities, tailoring it for each client, and they keep regular contact with them to assess their progress. This shows how coaching services follow a style of "learning by doing," in which the healer through repeated interaction with clients learns their needs and how they can better utilize the holistic "tools" they possess in order to assist them. Megan's description of her "spiritual coaching" service follows this pattern:

> So having one off clients was helpful, but it was like, I kept getting the same people coming back. So I thought, okay, well, if I just kind of help them and coach them through it, it's still providing that same [result], it's almost like having three or four sessions over time. So I can give them kind of a homework and make sure that they're doing it. . . . I have an individual program for each person. So this way, I can see, okay, this person needs more Shadow Work, which means that they're really working through and contemplating things that they're not confronting, so we have to work on that to figure out what those things are. While another person, it's all about self-love,

so we'll focus on that. Another person could be inner child stuff, they've never been, you know, get that affection when they were younger . . . Another one can be past lives, which I love working a lot with past life energy. Because it's stuff that is almost like, where it can be some things that you're out of control, where you just feel really guilty, feel a lot of shame, feel anger, you don't know where it's coming from. They are just like "There's nothing in my life that would bring this up." A lot of times that shows up, so I work with them [clients] energetically for that [finding past lives' influences]. [Megan, 41, 3 years of practice, February 20, 2021]

The informants' coaching sessions may resemble talk therapy due to the centrality of conversation and guidance for clients, but the holistic approach englobes psychological and spiritual concepts, like the ones proposed by Megan. She presented to her clients exercises of shadow work[6], inner work focused on self-love, and inner child work[7]. These activities are markedly psychological in nature, which encourages clients to "work on the self," whether by confronting thought patterns that are hindering their development, or by "reparenting" themselves through practices centered on self-love to replenish the lack of affection they experienced as children. This

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[6] Shadow work is a common concept among holistic healers, it has its origins in the analytical psychology term of "shadow archetype," which indicates the unconscious side of an individual's personality. Practitioners of holistic healing encourage their clients to do "shadow work," which is an exercise to discover the unconscious parts of themselves that might be hindering their development, bringing to light their insecurities, analyzing situations that make an individual emotionally reactive, in order to understand their emotional triggers and work to resolve them. The topic of shadow work will be further discussed in chapter 5.

[7] Inner child work is a practice inspired by psychotherapy, in which clients, with the support of the holistic healing practitioner, uncover unresolved experiences and emotions from childhood, with the intent to heal trauma, such as rejection or abandonment.

focus on an individual's "inner work" demonstrates that these types of coaching services promote the centrality of the self and foster a sense of authenticity that emerges from the clients' connection to the emotional and spiritual side of themselves.

Due to the private nature of coaching sessions, I could not have access to them as an observer; nonetheless, the practitioners described that in these sessions, the client is welcomed to talk about their struggles, and together they find the client's sources of limiting thought patterns, and emotional blockages. The practitioners mentioned that, as coaches, they guide their clients in online sessions, assigning to them daily practices to change these negative patterns, and encourage them to find and express their talents.

The names of the coaching services provided by the informants varied: spiritual coach, creative empowering coach, life coach, empowerment counseling[8], and coaching for manifestation. Although each practitioner coined their coaching service in a different way, the principle of this practice remains the same, which Nichole, a hypnotherapist, explained in the following excerpt of her interview:

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[8] According to Abigail, empowerment counseling is a technique developed by Ron Baker to help individuals move through emotions using breath, sound, and movement. It is a modality of counseling that combines somatic and psychological processes.

Even in the hypnotherapy work, there's a lot of coaching, there's a lot of support. I really look at a coach as someone who holds space for another person to find their footing, to find their talent, to find their ability, and break through their obstacles. So if you think of a sports coach, like a football coach, or a basketball coach, or tennis coach, they get all these students or one student, and they observe what they're doing. And then they give them feedback. And they assess their speed, their gait, their this, their that, and then they're giving them feedback constantly. So, a life coach would be doing that, maybe helping someone with their goals or things they want to accomplish. And I think a spiritual coach, or mentor, again, I don't know if that's the right term, would be doing the same thing. But from the perspective of helping them with internal stuff, thought patterns, belief systems, emotional blockages, phobias. [Nichole, 44, 23 years of practice, February 23, 2021]

Nichole highlighted that the role of the coach is to observe, give feedback, and help clients to reach the goals they have for themselves. Analyzing the informants' coaching services, it is perceptible that the improvement they desire to see in their clients is mostly related to their mindsets, since the practitioners expressed that changing thought patterns and belief systems can transform the way an individual copes with life events. For instance, the informants shared the opinion that coaching sessions can work on limiting beliefs of unworthiness or incapacity to reach one's goals, replacing these thoughts with ideas of confidence and capability. In the case of Nichole, she mentioned that she uses her expertise in hypnotherapy to find her clients' hidden layers of thoughts and emotions, from which she can shape the exercises of her coaching sessions.

Among the interviewees, Audrey and Lucy are licensed psychotherapists. Audrey offers a coaching service focused on holistic maternal wellness, and the transitional period of matrescence, dealing with perinatal anxiety. Lucy also focuses her practice on motherhood, working with Birth Story Medicine[9] and trauma work. These practitioners come from a psychotherapeutic background. By approaching their work in a holistic way, however, they demonstrated a desire to incorporate elements of spirituality in their coaching sessions. Lucy, especially, demonstrated her intention to move away from conventional psychotherapy and delve into energy work, including quantum healing hypnosis, Jungian based dreamwork, and astrology. She indicated that this shift in her career has been necessary to include the spiritual aspect and to have more freedom in ways of offering support and healing that traditional psychotherapy does not allow.

The therapeutic culture and a collective morality that encourages projects of self-development are ingrained in the American society (Illouz 2008). It is understandable that holistic healing includes a therapeutic aspect, even when practitioners are not formally trained in any modality of psychotherapy. In fact, the counseling ability of these practitioners, even

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[9] Birth Story Medicine is a narrative therapy technique developed by Pam England that helps individuals to process unresolved emotions and trauma around birth. Lucy explained it as a gentle trauma work centered on birth experiences that is done through storytelling, which may involve the use of Jungian archetypes, such as the hero's journey, but in this case, the heroine's journey.

without training, confirm how rooted the therapeutic discourse is in the United States. It is appropriate to note that, although not all practitioners offer coaching or therapeutic services, all of them include talk elements in their work, including energy healing sessions that traditionally did not involve conversation with clients, such as reiki, breathwork, Access Bars, and sound healing. The informants conveyed that conversation is included because talking gives agency to clients in their healing process, allowing them to process the changes that healing generates in their lives.

The importance of verbal communication in the transformation of an individual corroborates with a theory about the dialogical aspect of the self, presented in chapter 1, section 2.1, in which Bruner (2002) elaborates on the role of narrative in self-making. Bruner presents that the narrative about the self is usually bounded to one's memory, social expectations, structures of space and time, among other elements that lead to a continuity of this sense of selfhood (Bruner 2002, 65). However, one exercise proposed by many holistic healers includes the breaking of this coherent narrative in order to introduce new possibilities in one's life. This exercise is related to the Law

of Attraction[10], which is the construction of positive affirmations in the present tense utilizing the structure "I am." Even though an individual might be distant from their ideal situation, they find power and prospects of a better future by affirming that their reality and themselves are already different, describing their ideal situation, which is an example of the power of narrative in transforming the self.

It is possible to understand the efficacy of therapeutic narrative in the holistic healing practice applying the concept of split model of responsibility, which Illouz (2008, 185-186) presents as a new cultural form of selfhood. This model explains that psychological language combines private emotionality with public norms. An individual in a therapeutic setting is encouraged to articulate their private suffering through speech, and by exposing their wounded self to others, this individual becomes a public victim. According to the author, this speech allows the individual to gain symbolic reparation and motivates them to change their victim condition. In this scenario, the individual takes responsibility for their future, but not for

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[10] The Law of Attraction is a common belief shared among the holistic spiritual community. It is a law considered part of the laws of the Universe, and it rules that similar energy attracts similar energy. Thus, if one has a positive energy or mindset, they will keep attracting experiences that reinforce positivity. The same is applicable for negativity, if one only has negative thoughts, they will keep attracting negative events into their lives that reinforce that feeling. For example, if one wants to live an abundant life, but has a lack mentality, these two experiences clash. However, if one sees prosperity even in small things, they are open and in alignment with abundance, which attracts more opportunities and experiences that reinforce that energy.

their past; thus, one becomes responsible for their self-transformation without having to morally answer for their past deficiencies.

The split model of responsibility shapes selfhood not only in a psychotherapeutic environment, but also in a holistic healing setting, since the discursive process allows clients to make sense of their healing journey, and their "awakening" to a worldview that includes spirituality. The self-transformation is present in the shared discourse among the holistic healing practitioners on "forgiving the younger self," that is, the "non-awakened" self. The practitioners encourage clients to honor their journey, not having to morally be responsive for who they were, but taking responsibility for who they want to become. This understanding of selfhood is presented to holistic healing clients, because most of their practitioners adopt this perspective. Jasmine's story greatly exemplifies how she transitioned from one sense of selfhood to another by reframing her past experiences through the lenses of holistic spirituality. In the following excerpt, Jasmine follows the split model of responsibility; she recognized the hardships she went through, manifested as a disease, but she moved past it, vehemently choosing to live and taking full responsibility for the creation of her future, while embracing spirituality.

Once I was diagnosed with cancer, they said, her [spirit guides of Jasmine's healer] guides or my guides, that I did not know that I

have a choice. So the choice thing, that was where I was like, wow, because I was being a little bit caught up in maybe this idea that everything happens to you. So I would be a little bit used to being in the victimhood of like "Oh, if something happens to you, it's because it's for you," right? But there I had to step up and look into creation of life and what I have chosen. I had to realize also that I had actually chosen the cancer, which is something that's not talked about a lot in the usual world, right? It's kind of a "woo-woo" and we don't go there. But from a higher perspective, I can totally see. And it's never cognitive, it's never cognitive. It's never like I want to be evil to myself. But we have curiosities in this life. And I had to start to look back and see, wow, I had been asking curiosity questions about like "Oh, I wonder how it is actually to not be able to have children," stuff like that. You know, I had been, because I would always wonder, "I wonder how it is actually to have cancer." So, looking into this, I started to realize, wow, the universe is just receiving information from you all the time. . . . But from this place, I started to realize, I had to work with why I chose the cancer, right? It's like, that was a biggie, and then I had to learn to really enjoy and live my life. If I was going to stay here, which I did, I chose to stay really, I was really firm and I also chose really firmly to, or clearly, with my guides, and God consciousness, I was just like, I'm done with this cancer. Okay, I will lose my uterus, but it's done, take it out of my body completely. [Jasmine, 43, 9 years of practice, February 26, 2021]

Jasmine, acquiring the holistic spiritual worldview, reinterpreted her past experiences as choices that she unconsciously made and as a co-creation with the divine. The awareness of the power of choice and co-creation did not make Jasmine blame her past self for the illness she had. On the contrary, it propelled her to recover autonomy over her life and to take an all-encompassing responsibility for her future, learning to appreciate her life. Holistic healing practitioners share the belief that in order for an

individual to become a healer, they have to heal themselves first. Hence, before entering the holistic healing career, informants went through a personal healing process and applied to their lives the exercises they currently recommend to their clients, as it was presented in Jasmine's example of reframing her life experiences through spiritual concepts of guidance from God consciousness and spirit guides, and the power of co-creation of life experiences with divinity.

Complementing the conceptual definition of holistic healing presented previously, in this section I aimed to provide the informants' inside perspectives on holistic healing as their occupation. Here, I presented some of the healing modalities performed by the informants and stressed the centrality of therapeutic and coaching modalities in holistic healing practices. I presented the way healers develop coaching practices in a particular way, discussing the importance of talk elements, and explored how the healers themselves incorporate their teachings in their own lives. In order to further develop a discussion on how the informants were introduced to healing and its subsequent spiritual concepts, I discuss in the succeeding section the practitioners' path to working in the field of holistic healing.

3. Practitioners' path to the field of holistic healing

While holistic healing is not a usual career choice for most people, it gathers individuals from diverse backgrounds. Before becoming holistic healers, the informants had different levels of exposure and proximity to holistic healing practices and spiritual concepts, varying mainly according to their family upbringing. In order to understand the reasons why informants chose this occupation, in this section, I examine their paths to become holistic healers by drawing parallels between their life experiences.

Even though one's journey to become a healer is particular to each individual, there are a few similarities in the life stories of the informants that led them to this field. By analyzing their personal stories, I observed four main ways they were introduced to holistic healing: 1. Direct or indirect introduction to the field by a family member, especially grandmothers, who presented to the informants modalities of healing, holistic spirituality or a spiritual view on nature; 2. Formal training in a healing modality or psychotherapeutic studies; 3. The experience of a traumatic life event that led individuals to search for support in a holistic manner; 4. A search for a holistic approach to treat mental health issues.

In the first way presented, I use the expression "direct contact" to indicate individuals whose family members introduced them to any

modality of holistic healing (refer to the previous section for examples of healing modalities), and "indirect contact" to designate cases when the individual was presented to characteristics of holistic healing, notably the principles of holism, interconnectedness, and spirituality. For instance, "indirect contact" could be the introduction to spiritual concepts or a holistic view of the world by elderly women who have the ability to know the medicinal properties of plants and cultivate a holistic approach to health and wellbeing, even if it is done in a lay manner.

Among the eleven informants, four indicated that their grandmothers introduced them to some element of holistic healing. Among them, the families of Rosalie, Megan, and Emma are from Trinidad and Tobago, an island in the Caribbean. Rosalie explains that her grandmother had a "green thumb" and that she was an "earth worker," expressions used to indicate her natural talent to cultivate plants and to use them in home remedies. Rosalie recalled a time in her childhood when she used to visit her grandmother in Trinidad, describing how her grandmother grew a plethora of plants in her garden, and how she used to prepare homemade concoctions that helped Rosalie to alleviate skin sensitivity issues that used to afflict her. Rosalie stated that the presence and guidance of her grandmother allowed her talents in the holistic use of plants to flourish, which later on was manifested in her work as a flower essence therapist and herbalist.

Emma shared that she was also influenced by her grandmother in her spiritual and holistic path, since her grandmother introduced her to the Baptist church and the Pentecostal church, which she denominated as the "black church." Emma described that her experience in both churches were similar, mentioning that these were spaces where she learned to connect with her body and her community through songs and dance, as presented in the following quote:

> It always makes me smile because it was a lot of singing, dancing, and community, and I often say like, this is an example of what has been left over from our ancestors, that we commune through music, through song, through dance, through movement. And when you look at a lot of spiritual traditions, that lineage is from the African diaspora. That is the way you commune with the ancestors, that is the way you commune with a higher power. [Emma, 40, 24 years of practice, February 27, 2021]

Emma no longer attends these churches, but she recalled the experience in a positive manner. Note that the religious content of the church services was not the focus of her attention. Rather she focused on how these churches were spaces of congregation of individuals from the African diaspora, places where they could share their culture and spirituality. She affirmed that the early introduction to an environment that fostered her spiritual and emotional expression through body movement influenced her in becoming a somatic and dance movement therapist.

Megan was another practitioner who had support from an elderly female kin to enter the world of holistic healing. Megan described that, from early childhood, she was highly sensitive to the spiritual realm, which caused her to have paranormal experiences that made her feel constantly scared as a child. Megan's great-grandmother, nonetheless, was acquainted with spirituality, and offered her guidance in how to face her mediunic (communication with spirits) and psychic encounters in a non-scary way, and introduced her to psychic readings, as Megan explained:

> My family is from the Caribbean, it doesn't mean that that is a given, but my great-grandmother was very much involved in like spiritualism. So when I was kind of having these psychic, kind of medium encounters as a child, she was able to help me through this and to help me to know how to connect with spirits in a way that wasn't scary. I had a lot of insomnia as a child, because I was just really afraid to go to sleep, because these people kept showing up and it was very noisy and I was like five or six [years old]. So that was really my experience with that side, the esoteric, I guess, aspect of it [holistic healing]. And as I began to kind of go with her to get her psychic readings on Sundays after church. We would go to a Botanica[11] to get her readings there. And yeah, I got my first tarot deck when I was about seven or eight. So then from there, astrology kind of came in, and then I started learning about other different fields [of holistic healing]. [Megan, 41, 3 years of practice, February 20, 2021]

Another mention of a grandmother's influence came from Abigail, who shared that her grandmother went to India on a Fulbright scholarship to

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[11] Botanica is a shop specialized in herbs, traditional remedies, and religious or spiritual items.

study color therapy around the 1950s and 1960s. Even though Abigail has other family members who work in the medical field, her grandmother was the first person to introduce her to an aspect of holistic healing in a time when practices of complementary and alternative medicine were not popular in the United States.

The last mention of family influence was done by Alexa, who has Native American and Mexican family backgrounds. She discovered that her family lineage has female healers and tarot readers dating back to six generations; however, the transmission of this knowledge was interrupted and discouraged by her grandmother who converted to the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses. Due to her family lineage, Alexa affirmed that she and her sisters were born with natural psychic abilities; thus, even though she did not have formal training in any healing modality until her 20s, Alexa affirmed that, from a young age, she was capable of doing energy work, such as channeling, spell work, and automatic writing (channeling spirits through writing). According to Alexa:

> So my great, great, great, great grandmother, she was a Native American. She was a healer, as a medicine woman, you know, herbs and things like that, her daughter did that too, but her daughter was also a medium. So she spoke with spirits and she did house cleansings and tarot cards, and her daughter also did house blessings and tarot cards and speaking with those who passed, and her daughter, and her daughter, and her daughter. [Alexa, 36, 13 years of practice, February 18, 2021]

It is relevant to note that, in the case of the informants, the family members who transmitted knowledge and interest in holistic healing and spirituality were women, especially grandmothers. As the aforementioned work of Kheel (1989) (refer to chapter 3), women have historically occupied the role of healers in their communities; thus, it is no surprise that one of the major influences in the field of holistic healing are women, which is a topic that will be further examined in chapter 6, discussing the gendered aspects of holistic healing.

The second way of introduction to holistic healing, mentioned by two informants, was through formal training, indicating that the first contact with this field or holistic concepts was through classes, workshops, or other modality of learning or training. In Liam's case, he shared that he used to be a dancer, which led to his interest in yoga and, subsequently, to the meditative aspect of the practice. He mentioned that yoga opened his world to Hinduism and a spiritual perspective on life, which was his first step into holistic healing. In addition, Liam remarked that, when he was younger, he used to experience anxiety and depression, and learning healing techniques that are bodily oriented, such as yoga and breathwork, helped him to improve his mental health condition without the use of medication.

Audrey is the second informant who was introduced to holistic healing through formal training. She learned about holistic healing approaches to healthcare while training to become a clinical psychologist, because she desired to include in her practice topics related to environmentalism and feminism that were not directly connected to the "traditional" psychology curriculum. Audrey, then, shaped her PhD in women's studies to include psychology and environmentalism. Her current practice focuses on motherhood and ecotherapy, which combines her initial main concerns (environmentalism and feminism) with the psychotherapeutic practice, as she explained:

> I was in a PhD program for feminist theory, and my line of study is eco feminist theory. And so then I needed, you know how they do, I needed an elective, and I needed to "be professional." So I went into psychology as my elective, and I loved it. But I was always weird there. Because I'm in there talking about white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy, and people were like "Ahh," so I always wanted to decenter myself as an authority. My perspective is always about, we can't just heal ourselves, because it's not going to be enough. We live in these systems that are hurting us. And so we also have to have something else in terms of advocacy. So going within and then going without. . . . So I was always a bit of a misfit. But I used my theory background to try to have a therapeutic practice that made sense to me. [Audrey, 38, 10 years of practice, February 15, 2021]

Audrey affirmed that adopting a holistic approach to her psychotherapeutic practice allowed her to incorporate spiritual elements that she could not

openly talk about in the past, such as animism, and her spiritual view on nature.

The third way people were introduced to holistic healing was in search of support after a traumatic life event. Three informants shared having experienced the suicide of a close family member, a terminal illness, and the miscarriage of a child, which were experiences named as traumatic. These events led them to search for holistic healing, first to heal themselves, which later developed as a "calling" for them to work in this field and continue to help others heal. These painful moments were described as events that led them to undergo a process of "awakening" that transformed their view on life and made them recover hope to continue living.

The last way of introduction to the holistic healing field was described by two informants as their search for holistic healing to treat mental health conditions in a comprehensive and non-allopathic way. In the case of Jasmine, she explained that from her youth, she struggled with mental health issues, and the practice of yoga helped her to deal with anxiety and depression; however, Jasmine described that only after undergoing cervical cancer, and surviving it, she gained a deeper understanding of spirituality and embraced the path of holistic healing.

> I had a lot of depression and anxiety as a young woman, in my early 20s. . . . and I think it was because I was actually very sensitive, and

I was suppressing it [emotions], I thought there was something wrong with me. So eventually, I would start to learn to do yoga. And that helped me a lot. I could sense I was like, wow, stretching in a way that is different, breathing and all that stuff. And I would be, wow, kind of blissed out after yoga classes. But I honestly, I didn't really go deep into this kind of [holistic healing] work and spirituality in this way until I actually had a very severe experience with a disease. That was 11 years ago. Yeah, 2009. So at the end of this year, it's going to be 12 years ago, where I actually got diagnosed with cervical cancer. And then like, three weeks, they diagnosed it, they removed it, they removed the uterus also. So it took away my ability to give birth to children, and in that process, which was utterly painful, and transformational in all ways, because, I was no longer who I thought I would be. Identity crisis, basically. But I realized at that point that I was actually really connected [to spirituality], I was really spiritual. [Jasmine, 43, 9 years of practice, February 26, 2021]

Jasmine, faced with the possibility of not being able to continue living, went through a reexamination of her life and identity, what she called an "identity crisis." This extreme circumstance propelled her into a direction of self-healing, and simultaneously to her health recovery, she embarked on a spiritual self-discovery, which were key elements in her choice to embrace holistic healing as a career.

Madison also talked about a deeply painful, but transformative time in her life, which was the death of her husband. She explained how this life event led her to the path of holistic healing, first as a way to feel emotionally stable without antidepressant medication. Posteriorly, feeling the positive effects of energy healing in her own life, she felt "called" to

offer the same emotional and energetic support that she once received, by becoming a reiki healer. An interesting aspect of Madison's account is that, even though she was born and raised in Japan, only when she moved to the United States did she learn and experience reiki healing, which is an energy healing modality originally from Japan.

> I've been studying as a reiki practitioner since 2018, the reason why I'm into like positive healing is because I had a life tragic event in 2016. My husband, he committed suicide. So at that point, of course I went into some psychosis, and I did some therapy and I took antidepressants, so many stuff I've done, because my body couldn't hold the grief. Then after I quit my antidepressants, I still needed something to help, but I didn't want to take any [medication], to continue with the antidepressants. So my friend told me that, maybe I should do a reiki session. Then I took the reiki session for the first time, like in 60 minutes. . . . but it was life changing. . . . I had an amazing reiki session and my mindset was completely different after my first reiki session. Then I Googled it, "What is reiki?." Then it became a "Maybe, yeah, I can practice on my own." I practiced and right now I'm a Reiki Master, and I've been teaching, and I've been healing so many people. It's been my pleasure. That is like how I got into the reiki. [Madison, 48, 2 years of practice, February 16, 2021]

A significant part of the informants went through a difficult, but transformational life event that propelled them to enter the world of holistic healing. In Madison's case, she affirms that she was not aware of holistic healing before the loss of a family member, and that reiki was one of the ways she found to cope with grief, depression, and suicidal ideation. She denoted energetic healing as "positive healing," which can be interpreted as

the opposite from what she was experiencing solely with a psychiatric remedies-based treatment. Later in the interview, Madison talked about how reiki helped her to re-signify her loss, saying "If he [Madison's husband] was not dead, I was not going to be a reiki practitioner." [Madison, 48, 2 years of practice, February 16, 2021]. She expressed that this healing work gave meaning to her life and an opportunity to heal and uplift others, which can be seen not only in her energetic work, but also in her support for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. Holistic healing offers human support, in the form of practitioners guiding their clients through phases of hardship, as well as energetic and spiritual support, which seem greatly helpful for individuals who have experienced loss or trauma.

In this chapter, I aimed to present the field of holistic healing through the lens of its practitioners. First, I described how they share a similar understanding of the concept of holistic healing, showing that the practitioners have a compatible view on the fundamental aspects of the practice, which includes the centeredness on mind-body-spirit, and the principles of holism, interconnectedness, and spirituality. Second, I presented the diverse modalities practiced by the informants, revealing the importance that the practitioners give to talk elements in their work, which is reflected in the offerings of therapeutic and coaching modalities. Third, I presented the practitioners' journey to the holistic healing field, illustrating

how different pathways led them to this career. The connection to holistic healing was oftentimes driven by the individuals' will to heal (as seen in the cases of Liam, Jasmine and Madison). And all the examples of life experiences described above had an underlying spiritual element that deserves further attention. In the next chapter, I explain in more detail how spirituality is employed in holistic healing practices.

V. Spirituality in holistic healing practices

Holistic healing, as I discussed in this research, has one of its foundations in spirituality. As it is considered an intrinsic element of the human experience, the practitioners incorporate this concept in every modality of healing they perform. In this chapter, with the intent to understand how spirituality is incorporated in healing practices by the informants, first, I introduce spaces where spiritual concepts are produced and reproduced by holistic healing practitioners; second, I look into common spiritual practices performed by the informants; third, I discuss how spiritual concepts originated in the New Age community still impact spiritual beliefs shared by most holistic healers; fourth, I present the possible discordance between holistic spirituality and efforts against cultural appropriation in the holistic healing field.

1. Spaces of formation of shared spiritual concepts

Since the counterculture movement in the 1960s and 1970s, the US society has shown a gradual opening to holistic healing. This was emphasized by the fact that all informants who were born outside the United States first heard about holistic healing and learned its modalities when they were

living in the US. The practitioners shared that the learning process of holistic healing modalities usually happens in group settings led by a teacher who has already mastered the healing technique and is able to convey the knowledge to new apprentices; also, many interviewees shared that, as their careers evolved, they became teachers themselves.

This communal aspect of learning is an important factor in the holistic healing field. Interactions in this learning environment structure the way healers conduct their practices, perfect the use of a vocabulary that is specific to this field, shape their choices of self-presentation as "holistic healers," and create a shared understanding of spiritual concepts. Some spaces of encounters of holistic healing practitioners are classes, workshops, seminars, gatherings, social media platforms, and podcasts. These are spaces where the spiritual worldview connected to holistic healing is formed, shared, and consolidated. Furthermore, as these spaces are not restricted to practitioners of holistic healing, they also welcome their clients, since these social settings provide opportunities to introduce anyone who is interested in the field to concepts employed in holistic healing sessions, such as spiritual concepts, bridging conceptual gaps between clients and healers. In an interview with Alexa, she explained how she connects with other individuals in the field of holistic healing:

I think we [holistic healers] support each other, for me, I can only speak for myself and I don't know millions of people, but there are people who inspire me and who I resonate with, like on Instagram, especially Instagram, I don't really go on Facebook at all. Instagram and YouTube. And usually it's by commenting like what I loved about your work, your energy was amazing. And then you build these relationships. I've actually built friendships through Instagram . . . I really feel that people [who] are meant to be drawn to [you], you'll meet, and I met a lot of people in person too, like, it's [holistic healing] studios that I work at, or events that I go to, that's the best way in my opinion, of course, 2020 really screwed that. But for the most part, I meet a lot of people in person, you'd be surprised who you run into, and who you meet, and who they know. I really believe that you're meant to meet the people that you're meant to meet, . . . set the intention that it tends to just happen, at least for me. [Alexa, 36, 13 years of practice, March 04, 2021]

As Alexa described, there are several places where holistic healing practitioners connect and make themselves acquainted to each other, she emphasized the platforms Instagram and YouTube, where individuals can interact especially via comments, which allows fast communication; Alexa also mentioned the importance of spaces where practitioners can physically gather, such as social events and studios of holistic healing.

Analyzing the online presence of the informants, I noticed that many of them, besides establishing their private practices, also offer their services in private healing centers. These healing centers were highlighted by the majority of the informants as places where they can connect with other practitioners and expand their clientele. Usually the websites of these centers are organized in a way that the client can search the service they

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desire by modality of healing, thus, they are able to encounter an array of suitable practitioners. From the main catalogue of healing modalities, clients can select healers' individual pages where the practitioners describe themselves, their training, experiences, practices, the price of their services, testimonials of previous clients, and usually provide links for their social media page or personal website.

This structure encourages clients to interact with different healers they did not know previously, rather than going back to the same practitioner for every healing session. Additionally, these healing centers usually offer classes of certain healing modalities, thus, the students who have finished their training have the opportunity to offer their services on the healing center's platform, which is one of the best ways for new practitioners to have their first clients.

Although the websites of healing centers can be a great lever to new practitioners, most of the informants indicated the importance of building their own websites and having the autonomy to work for themselves as they advance in their careers. Among the interviewees, Megan was the only one who did not have a professional website, but she informed me that building it was her priority, since she felt that she was "spreading herself thin" on other places, as she explained:

I worked with so many different places that I didn't want to put one over the other. So I kind of just left myself . . . like a freelance person at different places. But now that, especially with COVID everything shifting, I realized that I had to put myself out there more as like, "This is my work" and I happen to work here, rather than being associated with these places. So yes, this is something I'm working on. I'm hoping by the end of this month, I can get something out there that represents me. [Megan, 41, 3 years of practice, February 20, 2021]

A scenario heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, created a demand for practitioners to transition to a full-time online practice. In this context, Megan stressed her desire to build a website that shows "This is my work," which reflects her will to establish herself as a holistic healer and to build her personal brand. Furthermore, Megan's eagerness to build a practice that reflects herself is not only a way to present her uniqueness as a healer, but also to have the freedom of not having to mold her practice according to the work environment in which she finds herself. Megan noted that the clients she attracts vary greatly according to the place or platform in which she is offering her services. When I interviewed her, she was working in three healing centers in New York and a "witch bookstore."

X bookstore[12] is like a witchy bookstore. So it's more like a little bit darker energy, [it] is like more witch oriented. So I see different clients from there. And then healing center A, of course, is very different. So I've noticed the different places I work at, I attract

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[12] The name of the bookstore and the healing centers were not disclosed in order to keep the anonymity of the informant.

different clients, but it's always very interesting to see like, who I attract. I also work, I do workshops, collaborations with people. So if someone has like a coaching program, or I have been doing a lot of podcasts lately, so people just find me and then I kind of work with them. [Megan, 41, 3 years of practice, February 20, 2021]

The healing centers and the witch bookstore do not have the same profile of clients, since the products and services they offer are different. The online image these spaces portray to the public is also distinct. The healing centers' websites use light colors and reinforce themes of healing, personal development, and spirituality, while the witch bookstore's website uses mainly the colors white and black, and deals mainly with themes of witchcraft and divination. Although Megan offers tarot readings in all these places, her healing practices are solely directed to the healing centers.

Besides the difference in environment, Megan provided further examples of spaces where she interacts with individuals in the field of holistic healing, which were workshops, coaching programs, and podcasts. These encounters allow practitioners to share and to reinforce the conceptual framework of their practices. The constitution of a cognitive framework that includes spiritual elements is a central aspect of the holistic healing milieu. Once one enters the world of holistic healing, they step into an environment that propels them to learn more about different healing modalities and they become acquainted with diverse concepts and practices, even when these are not part of their area of expertise or training. Some of

the topics that are part of a common understanding among holistic healing practitioners are beliefs in spirit guides, angels, higher self, soul mates, karma, and a central divine consciousness, oftentimes referred as "Source" or "the Universe." The definitions of these concepts vary, since they do not constitute a fixed set of ideas that are scientifically proven or described in official spiritual texts, such as religious scriptures. According to the interviewees, one can understand these concepts by allowing the rational mind to give space to intuition that is an inner source of guidance, from which they can gain their own awareness around these concepts. This can be done, for instance, in meditative states, which is a process that I will further explore in the next chapter.

Moreover, this spiritual cognitive framework is relayed to the healers' clients. Once a client goes to a healing session, even if they are not familiar with spiritual terminologies or how that healing modality works, they are introduced by the practitioner to a facet of the holistic worldview. The healing session usually generates a positive imprint on the client, seen in the reviews present on the healers' websites, which can promote their interest in spiritual and holistic practices or in other modalities of holistic healing.

2. Common spiritual practices of holistic healers

Holistic healing is a field with a plethora of healing modalities, but in the midst of its diversity, I call attention to similarities in the way most informants structure their healing sessions and how they employ common spiritual concepts in their practices. First, I discuss the connection between energy healing practices and intuition, as both are connected to the healer's strong connection with their senses and their receptivity to energy. Secondly, I describe practices of energy cleansing. Lastly, I analyze a ritual structure that is common to healing sessions.

Some informants highlighted that in energy healing sessions, the healer's body becomes a conduit for healing energies, which is possible through the connection of the energetic field of the healer with the energetic field of the client. This energetic link can make the healer feel in their physical body where the energy is stuck in the client's body and needs to be cleared. Some examples of this connection can be seen in Megan's description of her Integrated Energy Therapy[13] practice, a healing modality

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[13] Integrated Energy Therapy is a modality of healing that combines energy healing (angelic energy), hand positioning, and acupressure with the intent to remove negative "cellular memory" and energy blocks from the client. Available at: <https://www.learniet.com/what-is-an-iet-session/>. Accessed May 16, 2021.

that involves channeling angelic energy, and Alexa's reiki healing practice, which is a type of energy work that channels Universal Life Energy[14]:

> So for me, I'm clairsentient and clairaudient. I have all of them [ability to perceive psychic or energetic information via all senses]. But those are my two strongest ones [senses]. So I tend to feel it [energy]. So I'll feel it [energy] in their [client's] body. It'll [energy] translate to me. So I can feel like, if it's their heart, I'll start to get heart palpitations or foot heavy, so I'll know and I feel it [physical symptoms] on myself. I know that person's energy is cleared for that chakra. Clairaudient, so sometimes I'll get messages coming through that I'll hear. [Megan, 41, 3 years of practice, February 20, 2021]

> I'm what's called a kinesthetic healer. So, a physical medium, whatever you want to call it. So, in the beginning I'd work on somebody, I would know it [energy block or physical condition] hurt them because it would begin to hurt my body. Back pain, neck pain, even one time was halitosis. . . . And it [physical symptoms] would stay with me for about 45 minutes. [Alexa, 36, 13 years of practice, March 04, 2021]

In Megan's quote, she initially stated her abilities as clairsentient and clairaudient, which denotes that she receives messages or information from the spiritual realm or energetically from other individuals, mostly by means

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[14] According to the website PeaceHealth, "Reiki means 'universal life energy.' It's an ancient healing method that manipulates energy flow in the body. Reiki practitioners believe there is an energy force in and around the body. They believe that there is a flow of energy between the reiki practitioner and the receiver of the treatment. It is thought that reiki releases energy flows and allows the body's own natural healing ability to work." Available at: <https://www.peacehealth.org/medical-topics/id/ty6223spec>. Accessed: June 5, 2021.
The definition of "Universal Life Force" is vague in most websites that explain the practice. The same was reflected in the definition given by the informants who are reiki healers. Most of them expressed that reiki is difficult to intellectually explain, instead it is a healing modality that must be "felt."

of feeling and hearing. The centrality of intuition and trusting in one's senses is observable in Megan's mention that by clearing a client's chakras (energy centers of the body), she feels the release of physical symptoms in her own body. Similarly, Alexa as a "kinesthetic healer," indicated that she relies on her body to direct energy in her healing practice. She described how she feels the physical distress of her clients in her own body during the healing session, which often leaves lingering effects. Through the sensations in her body, she is able to direct the healing energy to the areas the client needs the most, showing how the healer becomes a channel of healing energy.

Each healer mentioned a different way of "knowing," which is the manner they are naturally open to receiving information from the spiritual realm. In the case of Megan, it was feeling and listening, and for Alexa it was through physical sensations. This shows how intuition and trust in their "inner knowing" are essential elements of a healer's work. I note that self-identification with an acute development of certain human senses is a common way healers tend to differentiate themselves from "ordinary people." Although some informants said this sensitivity is a "natural gift," in order to receive spiritual and energetic information, their intuition and connection to spirituality have to be continuously exercised. This demonstrates how even the development of senses in a holistic setting is

connected to a narrative of "work on the self," since they endorse that the more dedication an individual puts on their being, the better energy channeler they can become.

Although not all informants described having heightened senses through which lingering energy from clients can affect their bodies, all of them engaged in practices to clear their energetic field. The informants stated that in order for healers to become clear channels for messages from the spiritual realm, healing energies, or to connect to their intuition, they need to undergo their own healing processes and engage in regular practices that harness focus, such as meditation, and energy clearing, which can be regarded as types of purification practices. The practitioners mentioned that it is central to clear their energetic field and establish energetic boundaries, since they connect with their clients' energy on a regular basis while performing healing sessions, which can cause them to feel energetically drained or to carry remnants of their clients' physical or emotional states.

Some exercises shared by the informants that help them to maintain their energetic field clear are: regular meditation, prayers, visualization of energetic cords between them and others being cut, and adoption of an overall healthy lifestyle to keep the physical body strong. Some of these practices are present in Alexa's description:

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Learning energetic hygiene [is important]. So, [energetic] cord cutting and sea salt baths, and divine protection. And people get really "iffy" on the word divine. Divine, divinity and religion are not the same thing. Religion is manmade. Angels, they were there long before we can spell or make the fucking wheel, you know, they don't care. And I think, if you're going to do this [holistic healing] work, you have to have faith. I don't care what you have faith in, but you need to have faith in something. If you do not, the [negative] energy, man, so I'm a big believer on that [energetic] hygiene and I always call in archangels. That's what really helps to keep the [bad] energy away. Period. That's for me, people use the crystals. And crystals are okay, they have their own electromagnetic field, but they absorb [positive and negative energy]. [Alexa, 36, 13 years of practice, March 04, 2021]

Alexa highlighted the importance of faith for individuals working in this field, since holistic healing is based on a triad (mind-body-spirit) that includes spirituality. Among the informants, it was observable that most practitioners call upon spiritual entities or "divine protection," as Alexa mentioned, to help them to perform their healing practices and to clear themselves from any negative energy they might have come across while doing their work.

The healer's work is to a greater or lesser degree connected to spirituality, which explains why their purification practices are commonly achieved through faith. Alexa "calls upon" archangels, which is an example of direct connection with a spiritual source of protection, and it reinforces the definition of spirituality presented by Bender (2007b) as an individualized aspect of religion or a personal way of knowing the divine.

Moreover, in relation to the other practices above mentioned, prayer has the intent to establish a direct communication with the object of worship, and meditation is an introspective practice used by the informants to connect with their "higher self," which is the part of themselves that they deem to be in connection with the divine (explained in chapter 6).

Other ways of receiving spiritual cleansing or protection described by the interviewees were taking salt baths, charging crystals with their intentions, and smudging. These techniques employ physical objects, but they involve a level of spirituality. As the participants emphasized, these tools are physical representations that help to channel intention. For instance, smudging, which is the burning of aromatic plants and trees of medicinal use, is done with the intention to cleanse the mind, body, and spirit. An example of the spiritual essence of smudging that was incorporated in the holistic healing setting, was presented by Shawanda (2017). She described that in the Anishinaabe tradition (First Nations peoples of Canada), in smudging ceremonies, the smoke is infused in prayers so that, as it goes up, it can be received by the creator. The sacredness of the smoke can be seen in the teachings Shawanda received by her elders: "When we speak about smudging, when we pray the smoke carries our prayers. Like the eagle it flies the highest in creation and it carries up your prayer. Eagles take our prayers up to the Creator. Even in

ceremony we have pipe and tobacco, it is symbolic like the wine and bread. Incense has always been to done in the churches. There's no wrong way." (Shawanda 2017, 12). Holistic healing practitioners use "in their own way" a combination of prayers, intentions, and physical objects to attain the clarity of mind and purity of spirit they deem necessary for their work as healers.

Apart from daily "maintenance" practices, there are deeper processes healers undergo in order to improve their healing practices. The informants described this process as a healing journey that includes uncovering unconscious self-sabotaging patterns that might be hindering their development, a process they denominated "shadow work." One of the informants, Rosalie, described shadow work as "rewiring the brain," a process of uncovering unconscious conditionings and patterns of trauma that can rule one's life. Furthermore, exercises of "inner child work" are also encouraged to address emotional wounds from childhood, accessing the unconscious to discover which parts of the self were rejected or suppressed because they were deemed inappropriate by others (for further definitions of shadow work and inner child work refer to chapter 4, section 2). The informants said that only through this work on the self and freeing themselves from unconscious past conditionings, they are capable of advising and guiding their clients.

Shared spiritual practices by healers go beyond energetic cleansing practices and psychological work directed at perfecting the self, such as shadow work and inner child work. It also involves ritual practices, which are especially used during moments of transition. Transformational moments in an individual's life are often met with a social structure that guides them through this process of change, such as in rites of passage, birth and death rituals, marriage ceremonies, among others. Nevertheless, when a personal event causes a significant change in an individual's life, they usually have to undergo this change process on their own, which can generate feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. As presented in some examples in the previous chapter, people who search for healing are usually undergoing a stage of uncertainty or transience of self, which can be due to a traumatic life event, a loss, or a change in personal relationships. As some modalities of holistic healing have ceremonial or ritual elements, and rely on a structured guidance from a healer, they can provide a safe space for a liminal phase of transition in the client's life to be completed.

Applying some concepts presented by Turner (1982) (refer to chapter 1 section 2.3), ritual and ceremony are a declaration against indeterminacy, although only ritual involves transformation. Both follow a certain sequence, bringing structure to unstable situations, which allows individuals to complete the transition from one stage of indeterminacy to

another of integration. Turner's conceptualization on ritual derives from Van Gennep's (1960) introduction of the concept of "rites of passage" to the field of anthropology. Van Gennep identifies three stages in rites: separation, transition, and incorporation. The transitional stage can be identified as the liminal period, as a threshold between spaces, social status or relationships. Van Gennep uses the concept of transition to analyze an unstable social and magic-religious position of an individual who is undergoing a change (Chakraborty 2016, 145-147).

Through the analysis of holistic healing practices, it is possible to understand that they offer a structure that helps a client to transition from a state of uncertainty, suffering or pain into one of wholeness, clarity of purpose, and interconnectedness. Based on the observation of the informants social media and websites, I argue that the following sequence of actions are examples of ritual elements that aim to set the space and time for a healing session: the first step is the cleansing of the space from negative energies, which can be done by a) burning dried sage, which is a herb that represents protection and purification; b) burning palo santo, which means "holy wood," traditionally used by South American shamans and faith healers, to dissipate negative energies and purify the surrounding space; c) using the

frequency of the sound of a singing bowl to disperse negative energies; d) vocalizing or chanting "OM"[15] to remove negativity.

The second step involves the healer and client setting the intention for the session, and the summoning of the spiritual realm. The intentions are often spoken or expressed in thoughts as prayers, calling the four cardinal directions and its spirit animals (present in some shamanic traditions of the American continent), or summoning the "spiritual team"[16] of the client to assist the healing session. This phase might include visualization and breathing exercises to focus the energy and attention of the healer and the client in the present moment. The third step is the healing practice itself, which may or may not involve the use of objects, sounds, or movements. The fourth step is the closing of the ritual space, which is also a well delineated process, including mentions of gratitude for the spiritual realm, and in a shamanic session, there is the closing of the circle, calling and thanking the four directions once again.

These general steps of a healing session show how it follows a ritual structure with beginning, middle, and end. The central elements are the

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[15] "OM" is a mantra in Hindu tradition that comprises the Vedas, sacred revealed texts, and incorporates the holism of all reality, known as "brahman." In this tradition, OM is a liturgical syllable, used in mantras and recited in rituals (Gerety 2016, 185-189).

[16] "Spiritual team" refers to spiritual entities that are connected to the person undergoing healing. Most healers mentioned the presence of spirit guides, ancestors, angels, and the higher self.

cleansing of energy, the focusing of healing intentions, the summoning of spiritual elements, the healing practice, the expression of gratitude for the spiritual realm, and the closing of the healing session. Although the modality or the content of the healing might change, this structure sets the moment of healing as a "sacred space," as the informants usually name it, where the client can express their vulnerability and still feel safe and held by the ritual space and by the healer. The practitioners affirm that the openness and trust created in this space is not only necessary for the healer to connect to the spiritual sources of healing, but for the client to receive the healing.

In order to further illustrate the structure of a healing session and how spiritual elements are integrated in it, I describe a 15 minutes distant reiki healing session that Liam, a breathwork and reiki practitioner, uploaded on his YouTube channel. The way Liam connects visualization exercises with positive emotions and spirituality in the healing session is a representative example of online sessions done by holistic healers. Liam is a 35 years old Euro-American man, in the video he was wearing a sleeveless white shirt, styling a small earring on his left ear and, differently from the day I interviewed him, his hair was dark brown with the ends dyed blond.

Initially, Liam welcomed all viewers to the session of distance reiki and he expressed that the intention of that session was to raise people's vibration and to live in love. Liam described reiki as a gentle, loving energy

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beyond time and space. He explained that although he was doing reiki in Los Angeles, people who would watch it in another place or moment could also receive the reiki healing energy. Liam's introduction is a common narrative among holistic healers' videos, conveying that healing goes beyond time and space, and people just have to connect with the energy and intentionality of it.

In the video, Liam was alone surrounded by greenery, and he had some plants and flowers arranged in a bouquet. He said he would be working with some plant spirits: wild lemongrass, purple sage, roses, and rosemary; also with the flower energy of the pink rose and the white lily. Liam explained that he did reiki on the flowers previously to use them as transmitters for this energy, and as an offering to live in love. Liam invited people to find a meditative position that could be sitting or laying down, to close their eyes, and to get into a receiving mode. He instructed people to breathe in through the nose and breathe out through the mouth, feel grounded, be in the present moment and choose to connect to a positive energy. He continued saying that nature is love and the Universe is a loving place. Liam encouraged the viewers to choose as an intention for the session to live in love, and he instructed the viewers to release any toxicity, fear or doubts as they breathed; to feel the energy of their hearts lighting, opening, preparing for the transmission of soft loving energy.

Following the structure of healing that I presented earlier, in this initial stage, it is possible to note that Liam cleansed and prepared the space, since he did reiki on the plants that he introduced into the session, and he asked people to cleanse themselves from negative feelings through their breath; also, he focused the intention of all participants on love. Additionally, Liam emphasized that the viewers should be in a "receiving mode," which shows that although he is the one transmitting the reiki energy, the receiving end must be willing to accept the healing. In this way, the viewers become a continuity of the channel the healer established with divinity. I note that the manner Liam started the healing session is significant, because this need of the viewer's acceptance to receive healing is a statement shared by most healers, independent of the healing modality. I interpret it as a confirmation that both, healer and client, ought to share a similar spiritual framework.

Next, Liam had his eyes looking down as he moved his right hand in different movements forming reiki symbols. He explained that he was opening the reiki flow in long distance. Differently from a regular meditation, this healing modality requires a reiki master to open the channel of healing energy. Liam doing the reiki symbols was the step of summing the spiritual realm. Following along, after a few deep breaths, Liam initiated a visualization exercise as he asked people to imagine a reiki cloud that was

gently sprinkling down "little shimmers of awakening" and gentle loving energy. He guided people to ask their bodies where they needed that energy the most and to open that part of their bodies to receiving the soothing reiki energy.

Liam continued the visualization asking people to imagine that the reiki light was washing them from their heads to their feet, carefully describing the flow of light and for people to let it remove anything that needed to be released. Liam instructed the viewers to feel like they were a channel between the spiritual energy, the unseen world and the physical realm, to feel that they could bridge these two worlds. Liam asked people to call in the subtle energy flow of reiki to shift, heal, bring to wholeness any relationship they had with themselves, their inner world, their outer world, allowing more ease, more connection to the Universe, and to bring together the seen and the unseen world, as if they were dancing together.

In the healing practice, Liam not only transmitted the energy, but he instructed the viewers to take control over the process and find for themselves where the energy needed to be guided, and where their energy blocks were, which is different from a regular reiki session, in which the practitioner would find and solve the blockage without active participation from the client, apart from gaining their permission to heal. Furthermore, Liam instructed the clients to go beyond the physical level, to analyze their

emotions, their "inner world," and their connection to the spiritual realm, which combines all the levels a holistic healing practice addresses.

In the following part, Liam instructed people to move from the individual level of healing to the collective, as he asked the viewers to feel as if they were a vessel of light and love, to imagine they were all connecting together in a cylinder of light and that they could expand this light out into the world. As well as to imagine the energy they had generated and to open a door for other people to step into that "ease, gentleness, trust in life, and alignment with the unseen energy." He also directed people to imagine that this energy rippled out to their city, state, country; and asked them to pick a specific place they would like to direct some love. As they did it, Liam instructed people to feel that soft glowing light from their hearts washing over that place; he exemplified it as a magic wand transforming it from a grey photograph into a blooming colored photograph, and he said that was a way to offer energetic support to others in times of transition and change. Liam went on closing the transmission, he once again did the symbols of reiki with his right hand, finishing the session saying "When you're ready you can open your eyes. Blessings." In this last part, it is identifiable the closing of the healing session and the expression of gratitude, as described in the structure previously presented.

This distance reiki healing session illustrates how certain healing modalities resemble a ritual structure. It is also relevant to note that the holistic healing practitioner that is leading the session guided the viewers in physical, mental, and emotional levels. I interpret Liam's association of connection with divinity to positive feelings (love, connectedness, and gentleness) as a reinforcement of the link between spirituality, healing, and positive emotional response. This connection is evident especially when he identified the participants as a bridge between the physical reality and the spiritual realm.

This exercise of visualization allowed people to establish a connection with their own sense of divinity. Additionally, I interpret that Liam embraced the concept of interconnectedness and moved away from a self-centered concept of healing when he guided individual energies into a center of collective energy, in what he called a "cylinder of light" that could be expanded into the world, letting the viewers choose a place to send love and energetic support. The collective focus was also expressed when he asked people to "open a door" for others to enter in the gentle and healing energy of reiki.

The ritual structure of holistic healing practices contains frequent mentions of spiritual concepts, which might instigate questions related to how holistic healing modalities work in a multicultural society with

apparent diverse beliefs, cultural, religious, and ethnical backgrounds, like the US society. In order to solve this query, I asked the informants their view on the efficacy of holistic healing in multicultural contexts. They affirmed that healing happens independent of one's cultural and religious backgrounds, for in their view, healing energy is universal, which is based on a perennial philosophy shared in the holistic spiritual milieu that sees all religious traditions sharing the same spiritual principle (further discussed by Aupers and Houtman 2006).

The interviewees stated that even though all traditions derive from a single source of healing, the spiritual elements an individual feels comfortable working with may vary. For instance, Nichole mentioned that if a client has a Christian upbringing, they might feel more comfortable asking for spiritual support from archangels and "ascended masters," like Jesus, instead of working with Kuan Yin or Buddha. However, Alexa expressed that the opposite is also possible. In case a person grew up in a strict religious environment or experienced trauma in relation to it, they might have resistance to any type of healing that is based on that tradition. She noted: "So for instance, if you were raised in a religion that you really can't stand, if they [religious group] had any healing work, you would just be repulsed, because you already have a preconception [of that religion]. But if you go to Native Americans [healing], you have no preconception, so there's

no resistance to receptivity" [Alexa, 36, 13 years of practice, February 18, 2021]. Alexa connected the efficacy of healing with the client's receptivity to it and the spiritual context the healing was inserted. It was also possible to apprehend from her quote that some clients who search for holistic healing practices are seeking to connect with a spirituality that was not oppressive in their personal history.

The practitioner's reasoning about the efficacy of healing for clients from different cultural and religious backgrounds is based on their belief in a holistic spirituality that perceives the same source of divinity in all religions. Nonetheless, I suggest a non-spiritual interpretation to the efficacy of healing, centered on an understanding of self shared between holistic healing practitioners and their clients. Holistic healing often presents itself as a path for individuals who are interested in embarking on a journey of self-discovery, of reconnection with spirituality, and of living from their authenticity. Among healers and their clients, the concept of the "higher self" (further explained in chapter 6) is a central piece of their sense of self. This concept implies that the self is part of the divine, being an individual's kernel of truthfulness and authenticity. Thus, I propose that healing is possible in a multicultural context, not because it has a single source of healing and divinity, but because of the centrality the self has in the healing

process and the shared understanding of this self as divine among individuals connected to this field.

Although there is a possible shared understanding of the self between all the informants, it is important to acknowledge that identity politics is still central when clients decide which holistic healer they trust their vulnerabilities and healing process, which often includes an aspect of identification with the practitioner. Emma shared that most of her clients are black women with southern family background like herself. Emma said that her clients stated that when they found her profile, they saw someone they could relate, especially because Emma works with themes related to identity issues and the body. The same can be applied to Liam, who affirmed that, although 70% of his clientele are women, he shared that differently from other female practitioners, he tends to attract clients who are homosexual men like he is, as well as heterosexual men. Liam expressed that this happens because men might feel more comfortable with another man as a healer than with a woman. Also, Liam mentioned that women healers tend to present themselves in a way that already targets the female population.

3. The New Age influence on holistic healing

The holistic healing milieu not only provides a structure for healing practices and a framework for the development of the self, but it also offers a spiritual understanding of reality. As it relies on the belief in the existence of a spiritual and energetic realm that is in close contact with the physical reality.

Spirituality, according to the interviewees, can be defined as the belief in the divine, in something greater than the self. It may include the combination of beliefs from multiple religions, and it can be seen as a framework of understanding of life, which includes elements that are not in the physical realm of existence. Some recurrent topics connected to spirituality mentioned by the informants were the acknowledgement of angels, spirit guides, past lives, channeling, etc. It is possible to see how this spiritual perspective impacts one's social connections in the following example, in which Alexa explains the meaning of "soul family": "Soul family, it's actually not just your blood family. And when people say this word, soul tribe, I feel like those are souls collectively who are on your same, we'll call it, frequency or level of consciousness. So a soul family is selected prior to incarnation because there's karmic balancing, that's a soul family" [Alexa, 36, 13 years of practice, March 04, 2021]. In this example,

the belief in soul families can resignify existing relationships, imbuing them with a spiritual layer of meaning. For most holistic healers, a sense of family belonging arises not from common descent, but from feelings of closeness and spiritual identification.

Spirituality is related to forms of knowing the divine in a personal way. Being spiritual, as indicated by Bender (2007b, 3), is conditioned by spiritual practices and identities that an individual follows, which are constructed in ceremonies, rites, spiritual teachings, and I would add, holistic healing practices. Given the historical relation between holistic healing and the New Age movement (refer to chapter 3, section 3), the spirituality of the informants can be traced back to the development of this movement.

The loss of power of institutionalized religions and the growth in popularity of the counterculture movement gave space to the rise of the New Age movement, which embraces eclectic spiritual perspectives. Taking into account the connection between New Age, holistic healing, and religious syncretism, it is possible to say that what in the past was named "New Age" is now under the title of "spiritual" or "holistic spirituality." New Age and holistic spirituality are not necessarily the same, but the second has its roots in the first one. It is important to take into consideration that throughout time practitioners of holistic healing who follow holistic spirituality

incorporated more cultural awareness and critical reflections about cultural appropriation into the previous spiritual syncretism of New Age, which was described in chapter 3.

Cultural appropriation, according to Rogers, is the "use of one culture's symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture - regardless of intent, ethics, function, or outcome" (Rogers 2006, 476). Appropriation, however, varies in levels of voluntariness, symmetry of power relations, application in dominion or resistance, and nature of cultural boundaries. Thus, cultural appropriation can be further divided into exchange, dominance, exploitation, and transculturation (Rogers 2006, 478). Cultural exploitation shows the appropriation of elements of a subordinated culture by the dominant one without permission, reciprocity or compensation. This is the most common use of the term "cultural appropriation" in critical and cultural studies. This appropriation may appear as acceptance of a colonized culture. Yet, it still reinforces the dominance of the colonizing part, and one of the consequences includes cultural degradation, especially due to wrong representation of the appropriated cultural heritage (Rogers 2006, 486-488).

The New Age approach to spirituality was also criticized by the informants due to its endorsement of "spiritual bypassing," which was explained as the use of spirituality as a escapist mechanism, denying

unpleasant emotions and avoiding one's unresolved psychological or emotional wounds. Moreover, "spiritual bypassing" was said to stop individuals from facing broader social issues, such as social injustice, systems of oppression, racism, among others. The correlation of the New Age movement with spiritual bypassing and cultural appropriation was addressed by Liam and Megan as follows:

> I love looking back on those [New Age] books from the 70s and 80s. And I think they're just so innocent and creative, idealistic, but the actual putting it [New Age ideas] into practice did not work for me, because it did not have any shadow work or way to deal with like hard difficult things. Like, if you were to bring, like racism to New Age, they'd be like "Oh, well just, you know, just think positively." [Liam, 35, 16 years of practice, February 23, 2021]

> New Age times did do a lot of appropriation, like not giving the cultures that they were, you know, taking information from credit. . . . It is great, again, to start off at the ball rolling [sharing alternative healing and spiritual ideas], but it [New Age] kind of went more towards a self serving kind of very Western, you know, almost like colonial, this kind of lens they kind of took over. [Megan, 41, 3 years of practice, February 20, 2021]

Holistic healers have criticized the New Age use of traditional healing as well as the unrestricted use of spiritual traditions without accountability or recognition of the origins of these practices, as mentioned by Megan. It was also criticized for not being able to hold discussions and deal with social issues, as the case of racism presented by Liam. The interviewees

recognized cultural appropriation as the use or adoption of cultural, religious or identity elements by members of a different community, oftentimes in a way that is not reciprocal and can cause damages or disadvantages to minority groups such as BIPOC (black, indigenous, and other peoples of color) communities. This includes decontextualizing and disrespecting the original meanings of cultural practices, which the informants gave as examples the non-ceremonial use of ayahuasca (hallucinogenic plant medicine used in South American shamanism) and the misappropriation of sweat lodges (used in purification ceremonies among Indigenous peoples of the Americas). Cultural appropriation tends to reinforce stereotypes and target groups that have been historically marginalized or oppressed (Rogers 2006).

Looking at the current scenario of the holistic healing field, the informants debated issues related to cultural appropriation. However, it is important to keep in mind that the interviewees do not practice shamanism or any healing modality directly connected to indigenous populations. Taking this observation into account, Emma discussed how practices of traditional communities are being used in this field:

> I think that a lot of things [healing practices] have become appropriated. And so, the sad part about it is that the communities who developed a lot of these [spiritual and healing] concepts never see any of the funding or like benefits to grow their community

through their own healing practices, because they're never given credit. . . . That's one aspect of a community healing system that has been appropriated, that you don't necessarily really associate with the people who created it anymore more than it is fetishizing it. [Emma, 40, 24 years of practice, February 27, 2021]

People have drumming circles now and they're just like banging on these drums with no respect to where the drum, or even like the restrictions that came with drumming, because remember, my ancestors [from the African continent] could not drum freely without being killed or like arrested and all the things that came in now, you have people who are just like "Oh, I want to have a drum circle" with no respect to the power of the drum and what it took for us to have the drum. [Emma, 40, 24 years of practice, February 27, 2021]

Emma's speech illuminates that, in her perspective, spiritual and healing practices are being used in a disrespectful way, and that structures of knowledge and practices are being appropriated by individuals who do not give recognition back to their original source. Additionally, Emma emphasized that while certain individuals might be monetizing these elements in a decontextualized setting, the original holders of that tradition are not receiving any financial support or funding. Talking about the African diaspora, Emma mentioned that people outside that culture have been using elements of their community healing system without permission, respect or reverence, which Emma supported with the example of drumming circles.

The way Emma described the use of certain cultural practices shows that beyond the problem of cultural appropriation, there is also a growing preoccupation and demand from certain holistic healers for recognition of

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the historical and cultural backgrounds of their practices. Her speech shows a growth in awareness and a willingness to change the practices of appropriation that they identify to be, in great part, a legacy of the New Age movement.

The majority of the informants conveyed that they do not appreciate the term "New Age" and they do not desire to be associated with it. Some of the practitioners saw New Age in a caricature way, as Liam said, "New Age is when things get psychedelic. Far out. Creative. Sci-fi? New Age is the sci-fi fantasy of spirituality, it's really creative." [Liam, 35, 16 years of practice, February 23, 2021], and Jasmine stated: "To me, when you say New Age, I think crystals and ETs like alien, and tie-dye." [Jasmine, 43, 9 years of practice, February 26, 2021]. In the quotes by Liam and Jasmine, it is visible how the New Age movement became a topic of mockery in popular culture. Although it was responsible for the mainstream introduction of non-Western concepts and practices of healing in the United States, practitioners of holistic healing generally do not want their work to be associated with this stigmatized movement.

Alexa stated that, in her perspective, the term "New Age" gained a negative connotation in the US because it confronted people's prevailing worldview that was not receptive to foreign spiritual concepts or healing practices. She opined that the initial contrary reaction to the New Age

movement still impacts the population's view on holistic healing practices, as follows:

> New Age movement, that term, it's been beat up a lot. Because when people think New Age, they think Wiccans are witches, or if they think New Age, they think magic, or they think New Age, they think like "Woo-woo," and hippie, people have really unfortunately associated that term [New Age]. When that term came out, a lot of people were not into what we do [holistic healing]. So naturally, there was a negative connotation to the terminology despite that being inaccurate. [Alexa, 36, 13 years of practice, February 18, 2021]

Some informants who had a neutral view on the New Age movement, as Alexa, expressed that, because the concepts the New Age movement embraced, such as spirituality, alternative healing, and esotericism, were highly distinct from the rational view that dominated the US society, it was faced with antagonism, incredulity, and mockery; nevertheless, this movement was important to holistic healing because it introduced topics related to non-Western spirituality in the US, which were the initial seeds for the future development of the holistic healing field.

Most contemporary literature on spirituality and New Age studies do not present individuals' shift in identification from "New Age" to "spiritual," which causes the concept of New Age to still be used to describe members of spiritual communities, including holistic healers (Aupers and Houtman 2006; Heelas 2008; Moodley and West 2005; Wood 2007).

Responding to this deficiency, I inquired the informants about how they prefer to be identified. It was clear that, whether they agreed or not with the New Age movement, they did not identify themselves with that term, as mentioned by Liam: "New Age to me, it really does feel old. Like it is for [old] people, it is for like boomers, baby boomers. I don't think there would be anyone who's 30 who's like talking about being New Age. They would probably say that they're spiritual. Yeah. Or like, woke." [Liam, 35, 16 years of practice, February 23, 2021]. In agreement with Liam's comment, most practitioners identified themselves as "spiritual."

The informants also mentioned that the term "New Age" has changed throughout time, and initially it referred not to a movement or group, but to the "Age of Aquarius," which is a concept originated from the belief that the planet Earth is undergoing an energetic shift, which would mark a new era with traits of the astrological zodiac sign of Aquarius. Due to this second meaning to "New Age," a positive view on this phenomenon was expressed by Nichole: "New Age? Oh, I love it. The Age of Aquarius, the Age of Enlightenment, the age of our consciousness shifting, our evolution, our energetic evolution, you know, this is the time that I think was referred to a lot in biblical times." [Nichole, 44, 23 years of practice, February 23, 2021]. Nichole did not interpret the term "New Age" as the New Age movement. I found that the informants who did not grow up in the

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United States, like Nichole who was born in Cameroon, carried a positive or neutral view on the concept of "New Age." This happens because they only associated it with the Age of Aquarius or the hippie culture, not relating it to the New Age movement. Consequently, they also did not associate to this movement the criticism it received in regard to spiritual bypassing and cultural appropriation, as previously discussed.

4. Holistic spirituality and cultural appropriation

Holistic spirituality is based on the perennial philosophy derived from esotericism, which affirms that all religions have in their core the same principle, and that they worship the same source of divinity (Aupers and Houtman 2006, 203). The connection between the participants of the New Age movement and holistic healing practitioners is derived greatly from their shared belief in holistic spirituality. In recent times, the New Age approach to traditional healing has been scrutinized and criticized by holistic healing practitioners, as explained in the previous section, which indicates their concern with cultural appropriation. However, considering that the belief in holistic spirituality understands that all religions and spiritual traditions are different expressions of the same divine principle, it

can lead to a credence that every spiritual tradition is available to be learned by anyone who is interested in it. When holistic spirituality is adopted without proper discernment, it can dismiss ownership or belonging of certain cultural-religious practices to specific groups, removing the need from "outsiders" to gain permission to practice or learn their traditions. It also isolates spiritual beliefs as an element that can be incorporated into a set of spiritual traditions in which one has interest.

This uncritical approach to holistic spirituality was expressed only by two informants. But I believe they are not exceptions. In fact, they reflect the reality of other individuals working in the field of holistic healing. Examples of this approach can be observed in the following excerpts:

> I also do believe that there's a dualism going on, and the dualism is that you can't do this [healing practice], because you're not born into this tribe. I don't agree with that. I do agree that everything [spiritual practices] is available to everyone at all times. And if I would like to work with Voodoo, I could, because it's available. And I would have to just study that, right? Or get my own awareness around that. . . . [Shamanism] It's just an old practice of connecting with the land. And that became a religious practice. So it's like, you can be a religious shaman and you do it exactly by the book or by a lineage. I do believe we're all kind of shamans, we've all been [shamans], because I do believe we have been everything. We have this all in our energetic DNA. [Jasmine, 43, 9 years of practice, February 26, 2021]

> We've all been in every culture in so many incarnations. This is why people are drawn [to different cultures], you can be Korean and drawn to Native American or you can be Mexican and drawn to

Scottish, like I was. . . . But I'm saying when it comes to spirituality and a [spiritual] path, you don't need any formal training or permission, because it already is [universal]. [Alexa, 36, 13 years of practice, February 18, 2021]

Jasmine and Alexa presented that all spiritual traditions are available to all individuals who are interested in learning them, which denotes that spiritual knowledge is a "universal knowledge," instead of a historically and socially rooted practice. Moreover, Alexa's sentence "When it comes to spirituality and a [spiritual] path, you don't need any formal training or permission," corroborates her belief in the unrestricted accessibility of spiritual and healing practices. It also confirms the centrality of the individual over the social, whereby goals of personal self-development through spiritual practices seem to override posed social structures.

Based on the excerpts, it is possible to apprehend that, apart from the credence in holistic spirituality, another reason why these practitioners believe in a "universal knowledge" is their belief in past lives. As presented previously with Bender's (2007a) ethnography (refer to chapter 3, section 3), past lives are based on the idea that the human soul goes through a long process of reincarnations. In each life, one has a mission and different lessons to learn in order to propel the soul's development. The soul is a source of energy and consciousness that can incarnate in any human form, one can be a woman in this lifetime, but in a previous life, they could have

been a man. This diversity is also applied to place of birth. One soul could have incarnated in various places on Earth, and each life leaves an imprint on the soul. For individuals who share this belief, it is considered normal for a person to have interests in other cultures, because the soul recognizes that place and there is a sense of familiarity, curiosity, and remembrance. This perspective was reflected on the excerpts above, in which the informants expressed that all healing practices are available to all people, or the existence of a "universal knowledge" when it comes to spirituality, and that "we have been everything," as Jasmine said.

Notwithstanding the belief in past lives, the aforementioned practitioners did not seem to critically approach the consequences of their holistic spirituality. An important aspect of traditional healing is that it is part of a bigger socio-cultural structure, and historically many Indigenous Peoples were prohibited to perform their traditional practices, including traditional medicine, by colonial authorities. In the case of North America, as presented by Dunn (2019, 16), government policies, residential school system, the child welfare system, and other institutions tried to erase the identity of Indigenous Peoples; thus, a central aspect of decolonization for these peoples is the recovery of traditional healing as part of their root identity. Given this context, a healer who considers that spirituality has no

roots in a social system, consequently corroborates with a colonial structure that attempted to erase folk and indigenous traditions.

In the case of the US, there are "marketed versions" of traditional healing modalities. York (2001, 362) views that in a scenario of globalization under American imperialism, religion becomes a commodity, and spiritual traditions are taken as part of the public domain, meaning that they can be consumed following the free-market principles.

Liam, criticizing some practices of other holistic healers, called attention to how a marketed version can seem "better" than the original healing tradition in the wellness industry, and of how some individuals only desire their own self-fulfillment and wellbeing, unconcerned about the origins of their healing practices:

> When people package something in a new way to make it appeal to a certain demographic, it sets their brand apart from something that may be the traditional thing. . . . If, say, I took everything from yoga, for example. And I called it "Luka." And I created my own whole spiritual world around it, that if you did the research, you would understand it was exactly yoga, or maybe it was yoga and shamanism and reiki, and then I made it a whole new thing. I mean that is happening, people are doing that. [Liam, 35, 16 years of practice, February 23, 2021]

Liam pointed out an alarming practice that is taking place in the holistic wellness field. It not only removes healing practices from a community healing system, and does not disclose what are the original healing methods

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that originated this creation, but it also introduces this amalgamation of healing practices in a market environment, commodifying all its elements. As expressed by Rogers (2006, 488), commodification is a process that leads to cultural degradation, because it abstracts the value of cultural elements by removing it from its native context, and in fetishizing it and reifying artificial meanings, the historical and social relations connected to it are obscured as neocolonial relations are established.

Moreover, an aspect of cultural appropriation that was advocated by the minority of the informants was what Rogers (2006, 487) named as cultural exploitation under the claim of cultural preservation. For instance, Alexa, who has Native American heritage, agreed that market practices related to holistic healing might be impacting traditional communities, which, as she mentioned, is especially perceptible among Native Americans in the US. This happens due to the appropriation of their culture without alignment with their values and ethics, particularly in matters of spirituality. However, Alexa indicated that the growing interest in indigenous and traditional healing practices by the general population is bringing visibility to these cultures, as follows:

> In some ways, I think it's [popular interest in traditional healing] given a lot of cultures a voice. And I think it's given a lot of cultures awareness. . . . Now, people are going to Papua New Guinea, and Africa, and India to do these [healing] things and it's bringing

conscious awareness to these cultures and to these people who live, for the most part, in third world [countries] who were not valued. And it's helping us to save cultures that would otherwise disappear if we [Westerners] continue doing what the fuck we're doing, and knowledge would disappear, [healing] practice would disappear. So, while I think there are definitely some traditionalist in our cultures who don't like us [healers] appropriating, I think they need to change too a little bit. . . . I think it [use of traditional healing] does have its pros and cons. I think at first it was negatively impacting because people were doing [traditional healing practices] with disrespect. But I think now it's definitely more positive, because people are coming with a reverence and a consciousness that was not there before. [Alexa, 36, 13 years of practice, February 18, 2021]

It is possible to interpret Alexa's mention of ways people used to approach

foreign spiritualities as a reference to the New Age take on it. Alexa

established a dividing line between past unaware behaviors and the current

approach to spiritual and healing traditions that are done with "reverence,"

as individuals are going to different places to learn the healing practices

from local healers, the original holders of that medicine. Nevertheless, the

mention that without the Western "help" and interest in "traditional

cultures," they would disappear, is a clear colonial perspective, and it

evokes a memory of Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden."[17]

In the quote it is also possible to identify an essentialist model of

culture that sees it as bounded, singular, and distinct, instead of evolving and

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[17] "The White Man's Burden: The United States & The Philippine Islands, 1899." is a poem written by Rudyard Kipling in the context of the US colonization of the Philippines, urging for the US to bring "civilization" to the country that previously was a colony of Spain. The poem tries to morally justify American imperialism under a racist argument.

transforming with time, since the informant appears not to consider that traditions evolve together with its people. Moreover, it implies that the population from which the healing practices originated is not capable of continuing their traditions, showing how marginalized populations are often approached in an infantilized way. Although Alexa's quote is not in a colonial context, it carries a reasoning inherited from that period. It is possible to draw parallels with Studer's (2020) presentation that in colonial publications, the people of colonized countries were often portrayed as "children." The infantilization of the colonized not only suggests a difference in developmental level, but it also stresses a power imbalance between subjects. This power dynamic is still alive and reflected in the excerpt above.

It appears that the criticism posed to New Age's appropriation of spiritual practices can still be extended to some aspects of the contemporary field of holistic healing. The discussion above shows that although there is a desire among holistic healing practitioners to move away from cultural appropriation and what were deemed the "wrongdoings" of the New Age movement, as explicit in the previous section, there are some mindsets and practices that still require more critical rethinking.

This chapter intended to present how spirituality is incorporated in holistic healing practices. In the first section, I introduced the spaces of

formation of shared spiritual concepts, presenting online and physical spaces of interaction between holistic healers and their clients, highlighting them as spaces of learning and sharing information about the field of holistic healing and its spiritual elements. In the second section, I delineated a few common spiritual practices among holistic healers, noting the importance of intuition in their work, and the necessity of cleansing practices; followed by a description of a common ritual structure of healing sessions. In the third section, I analyzed how spiritual concepts utilized by holistic healing practitioners have their origins in the New Age movement, and how most informants are critically approaching this legacy, especially with regard to cultural appropriation. Moreover, I explained how the meaning of New Age has changed over time. In the fourth, and final section, I elucidated how an uncritical approach to holistic spirituality can result in negligence towards actions of cultural appropriation. In the following chapter, I will center the analysis on the concept of the "higher self," first defining its meaning in relation to holistic spirituality; secondly, correlating it with the authentic self, which will be examined based on the data from the online presence of the holistic healers.

VI. The higher self as the authentic self

1. The spiritual concept of the higher self

> We are souls, we're spirits, we're energy that comes into a bodily form. And our body is incredibly important as the home . . . And our mind is a tool, but our mind is not ourselves. And there is a more centered [level of our being, the] higher self. [Lucy, 39, 2 years of practice, March 19, 2021]

The concept of the authentic self comes from an understanding that each human being is unique, and has a special purpose in this lifetime. In the US and Western Europe, from the modern period onwards, as presented by Taylor (1991) (refer to chapter 1, section 2.2), self-fulfillment and the aim of truthfulness to oneself have become moral values, shaping individual's behavior and goals towards reaching personal authenticity that lies within one's self. Considering that for holistic healing practitioners healing means balancing all parts of an individual, including the physical, the mental, and the spiritual, and expressing one's self stripped of social constructs, healing can be understood as a journey towards the full expression of one's authenticity.

The authentic self can be translated into a spiritual jargon as the "higher self." According to the informants, this is a concept used to describe the human soul or an aspect of humans that is in connection with the divine.

This divinity is often perceived by the practitioners as the Universe, God, Goddess, spirit, nature or the collective energy. The informants believe that this divine part of the self is unspoiled by society and that it holds one's authenticity, talents, and life purpose. Hence, the higher self can be described as the true self or as the authentic self.

I argue that the informants' will to detach themselves from social constructs is not simply a personal desire. Instead, it comes from a long tradition of individualism. In chapter 1, I described Taylor's (1991, 25) historical construction of the ethics of authenticity, in which he identifies that the current understanding of authenticity, as it resides within an individual, originated in early forms of individualism. Taylor identifies the beginning of individualism in Descartes' disengaged rationality, Locke's political individualism, and the Romantic period's atomism and lack of interest in community ties. The Romantic period also consolidated the idea of healing as a journey of personal transformation towards authenticity, as expressed by Eskenazi: "The journey of personal healing is a transition from the exile of alienation to the return of integration; from the slavery of conformism to the freedom of self-actualization; from societal norms to Self-Reliant values." (2010, 132).

Moreover, Taylor stated that from the eighteenth century onwards, morality was internalized, thus, it was no longer placed outside an

individual and determined by religious figures. I would add to this affirmation that self-spirituality, or holistic spirituality, present among holistic healers, reinforces this inward turn of morality. Individuals who share this belief not only trust in their inner moral compass to reach their self-fulfillment, but they believe in the sacrality of their own self, epitomized in the concept of the "higher self."

A definition of the higher self as the bridge between divinity and one's mind and body can bee seen in Lucy's excerpts: "So [higher self] it's intuition, it's divine guidance, it's spirit guides, it's prayer, it's God talking to you, it's enlightenment, you know, all these words, to try to capture this huge thing we can't even fully understand" [Lucy, 39, 2 years of practice, March 19, 2021]. Lucy described getting in contact with her higher self not as a cognitive experience, but as one of a spiritual and intuitive nature. I apprehend from her speech a confirmation that the informants form an understanding that they have an inner moral compass, since "it's God talking to you," the individual would not need to search for outside sources of guidance.

Another approach to the higher self was the comprehension of it as a connection to nature, which was stated by Emma: "It is difficult for me to think of a tree, or the universe, or the Earth separate from me, if that makes sense. I do feel like they are all a part of me and I incorporate that in my

practice or how I engage with others from a sense of empowerment, so that this higher self can exist right where you are, right?" [Emma, 40, 24 years of practice, February 27, 2021]. In Emma's case, she suggested that her higher self allows her to feel as if nature and the universe itself are part of her. This feeling of interconnectedness and having elements of nature within her sense of self allows Emma to interact with others from a position of empowerment, and thus, being able to empower others. Moreover, I would add that Emma recovers her sense of authenticity by reconnecting with nature, since in the collective imaginary, nature has been depicted within the dualism nature-culture (Taylor 2011, 422). Thus, nature, similarly to the higher self, retains its pure essence, unspoiled by society.

Vidon (2019) provides an analysis of the connection between authenticity and alienation in an individual's search for connection with nature, which can assist in understanding Emma's statement about her higher self as a connection to nature. She presents that wilderness areas can generate introspection and connection with an "unalienated, whole self." (2019, 19). Vidon explains that for Lacan, alienation is a condition of all social subjects, since the separation from one's unconscious, "biological child" is a process necessary to enable an individual to live in society. Thus, social subjects are inherently "split subjects," and the contact with wilderness and nature can be perceived as a desire for connection with the

parts of the self that were alienated. Consequently, individuals perceive being in nature as a connection with their "biological child," which can generate feelings of authenticity (Vidon 2019, 20). Based on this explanation, I interpret that an identification with nature represents a search for their own authenticity and wholeness, since they are finding in nature a reflection of themselves. This mirroring process can be found in Emma's quote when she described that she does not perceive the Earth as separate from her.

There is no consensus on the understanding and definition of the higher self, and its diverse meanings reflect the self-referential nature of authenticity. This is so because each person experiences their own connection to this divine side of the self in an individualized way. Since holistic spirituality is not a religion, individuals are not guided to have one single perspective on God or other religious figures. Also, there are no sacred texts like the Bible or the Quran which convey a monolithic meaning of spiritual terminologies. Most spiritual practitioners learn about spiritual concepts through socialization in the holistic spiritual milieu or through lived experiences, which includes meditative states or direct contact with what they see as their spirit guides or higher self. This direct experience is relevant, especially because healers see themselves as channels for divine guidance. An example of a healing modality related to divination, whereby

healers can transmit to their clients messages from the clients' higher selves and that portrays how healers have a different understanding of spiritual concepts is the Akashic Records reading.

According to Nash (2019 109-114), the Akashic Records has its origins in the Indian word "Akasha." Although one of its original meanings were space, atmosphere or sky, various esoteric interpretations have been attached to it since the nineteenth century. "Akasha" gained a new meaning when it was adopted by the Theosophical Society that interpreted it as the "Akashic Records." The records represented in this tradition not only the place of conception of the universe, but an archive for this universe. Nash affirms that the transformation from Akasha to Akashic Records was influenced also by the fields of philosophy, quantum physics, and the Christian doctrine of predestination.

The access to the Akashic Records is an example of a holistic healing practice that embraces a non-mediated contact with divinity, reinforcing how spirituality is a personal lived experience (discussed by Bender 2007b, refer to chapter 3, section 3). The following cases present that, although healers have a common shared understanding of the Akashic Records, as it is a widely known practice in the holistic healing field, the specificities of the Records are apprehended differently by each practitioner.

Practitioners who do Akashic Records reading described the Akasha as an energetic library that holds all the information of one's soul, including their current and past lives. When the healer enters the Akashic Records of the client in a meditative state, they described having encountered the keepers of the records, which include Archangels, Ascended Masters[18], as well as one's higher self. Once the healer is inside the records, the client gets to ask questions about their life; for instance, they can inquire about their life's purpose, the best next step in their career, information about their love life, etc. This is an example of a practice in which the healer gets information from the spiritual realm with no physical intermediaries, showing that the type of knowledge they acquire is from "first hand experience."

Megan described the Akashic Records as: "It is pretty much the infinite library of all of our past lives. And we work with Ascended Masters when doing that work." [Megan, 41, 3 years of practice, February 20, 2021]. Jasmine explained it in a slightly different way:

> The Akashic Records is this field of information that is related to your blueprint, your individual blueprint. So we all have our own

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[18] Ascended Masters are believed to be humans who have spiritually evolved or "ascended," surpassing their karmic cycle of reincarnations, such as Jesus, Mother Mary, Gautama Buddha, among others.
Available at: <https://blog.mindvalley.com/ascended-masters/> and <https://tealswan.com/resources/articles/who-or-what-are-the-ascended-masters/>. Accessed: June 6, 2021.

individual energy, which is, of course, connected to everything and everyone, and all lives and dimensions all at once. And once I get the permission to open up your Records, which you will have to give me, I can get information that is available to you in that moment. And you can ask questions, you can ask like "What do they [Akashic Records' keepers] say about me being with this person?" or "I want to become a mother, is that possible?." Like, "What do they say about that? Where should I move? Am I on the right path?." All that stuff you can ask and usually they [Akashic Records' keepers] never say "yes" or "no," or like they're never in the polarity. They're always giving you options, so you can see and choose what would be of the highest benefit for you. [Jasmine, 43, 9 years of practice, February 26, 2021]

Jasmine's explanation of the Akashic Records reinforces the idea of the uniqueness of each individual, what she called an "individual blueprint." It is possible to correlate this individual trait with one's higher self, as it is deemed a person's true essence and source of authenticity.

I view that people who search for this type of service feel disconnected from their authenticity, so they need external guidance to confirm whether their personal choices are in alignment with their "authentic selves" or "higher selves." This is visible in the examples of questions posed for the Records that Jasmine presented, as they are mainly related to an individual's personal choice and their subjective perspective of their life circumstances. For instance, an answer to a question like "Am I on the right path?" demands introspection, because it involves a comparison between the current moment and other moments in the individual's life, judgement of what they deem right or wrong, as well as intuitive knowing,

or what is commonly called a "gut feeling," to "know" beyond the mental level that they are on the right path. The lack of self-assurance or the feeling of disconnection from their "authentic self" can make people unable to answer this type of question, which makes them search for a healer's assistance.

Alexa is another healer who practices the reading of the Akashic Records; however, she names her service as "soul reading," because she stated that she focuses more on delivering important messages that the client's spiritual team has for them in the moment of the session, rather than diving into a client's past lives that no longer impact their present situation. Alexa provided some insights about who are the guides that assist and give her answers:

> Archangel Michael keeps the Akashic Records. He's the archangel involved in your Akashic Records, and the Records hold all your incarnations. So he knows everything about everybody - why you're here, who you've been, who you're going to be - he knows it all. So I just talk to him, and I'm a channeler. So I call him, I ask permission of the higher self of the person, and I ask him to tell me. Some people actually read the [Akashic] book, I just ask him to tell me, because I'm auditory. And I always ask for the person's life purpose, service, and lesson and he talks to me, and then I ask questions. . . . And so I always ask, "What's your next best action? So what's best for this person to focus on right now for their highest good?." And then, at the very last, I ask that person's higher self and spirit guides "What would you have me tell them to help them or support them?." And I ask everybody [spiritual team], I'm just around having conversations the entire time and running energy and

cutting [energetic] cords. [Alexa, 36, 13 years of practice, February 18, 2021]

Differently from Jasmine, Alexa perceived specifically Archangel Michael as the keeper of the Akashic Records, and she does not only receive messages about the client's life and purpose, as most healers, but she also does energy work on the spiritual realm, as she said "Running energy and cutting [energetic] cords." Alexa also mentioned the centrality of the client's higher self in giving permission to open the Records and in offering a final word of guidance for the "physical self."

I note some differences: Megan described the Akashic Records as a "library," Jasmine named it a "field of information," and Alexa described it as a "book." Moreover, Jasmine named a variety of spiritual entities present in the Akashic Records "Guides, your [spiritual] teachers, your [deceased] loved ones, Akashic Records holder," while Alexa precisely named Archangel Michael as the keeper of the records. This exemplifies how spirituality is a personal lived experience, given that healers who offer the same service, apprehended the concept of the Akashic Records in such a diverse way.

On the individual's level, this practice expresses a desire for personal agency, in which a client, with the guidance of a healer, searches for information about their future, and most importantly, aims to gain a deeper

understanding of themselves. The knowledge provided by this "spiritual library" offers a sense of discovery of one's soul mission and the possibility of alignment with their "higher selves." Moreover, considering that most informants understand the higher self as constituent of one's self, the Akashic Records reading exemplifies how part of an individual's self is equated to divinity, considering that it is contacted in the same way as archangels and spirit guides and it is in the same spiritual realm as them.

Among the interviewees the higher self was often presented in opposition to the "ego," which resembles the framework of "true self" and "false self" explored by Winnicott (1986). Winnicott formulated the concept of "false self" to denote a defense mechanism originated when the "true self" was wounded in childhood (refer to chapter 3, section 2). This concept is similar to various informants' explanations of the differentiation between the true self, or the higher self, and the ego. Alexa's explanation of the ego connected it to individuals' fight and flight instincts, as follows:

> To me, your higher self is your soul self. The ego is necessary to survive, so it's our fight and flight instinct. . . . I know people are like "You have to fight your ego." [But] Would you fight a child? It's pointless, it doesn't reason, but when you bring conscious awareness to it [it changes]. Like when you want to get jealous, that's ego. But awareness is "I'm jealous, because I have low self-worth, and I'm insecure." And then you work on that. And then the ego ceases to affect you. . . . Ego is the mechanism that you've trained to try to protect, but at some point, it becomes less effective, it starts to attack

your development. And that is when the higher self needs to switch on." [Alexa, 36, 13 years of practice, February 18, 2021].

Alexa presented the ego in opposition to the higher self, saying that it was unconsciously created to protect an individual, but as it becomes detrimental to one's development, it is necessary to bring awareness and understand the reasons behind the situations the ego was triggered. Being able to act from conscious awareness was interpreted by Alexa as letting the higher self, instead of the ego, motivate an individual's actions.

It is necessary to present that in Freudian theory, the ego is a component of one's personality that balances the id, representing an individual's primal needs, and the superego, the socialized and moral part of the personality. The ego acts in the preconscious and the conscious level translating id impulses into socially accepted behavior. The ego can also act as a defense mechanism against anxiety generated by conflicts between the id, the superego, and the external reality. These defense mechanisms can take an unhealthy route and be expressed in the forms of projection, denial, and repression, or an adaptive route, allowing individuals to function under stressful situations (Lapsley and Stey 2011, Waqas et al. 2015). According to this explanation, it is possible to affirm that differently from the informants' description of the ego as solely a "defense mechanism" or a blockage to the

expression of an individual's authentic self, in a psychological jargon, the ego is a necessary component of the human personality.

The understanding of the dynamic between "higher self" and "ego," was also present in Abigail's interview, but she explained them as "conscious" and "subconscious" aspects of the self, also referring to a "wounded child mentality"[19]:

> There's a beautiful phrase, I'm sure you've heard it, which is "Shadows can only exist in darkness." And like, when we bring in light, if you shine a light on the shadow, it disappears. And so if you think about [it] as, like subconscious, unconscious stuff, until we go in and start to investigate or question some of the deeper beliefs we hold about ourselves that are in the subconscious, it's very much a wounded child mentality. . . . But I think there's something to be said about bringing things to consciousness, to awareness. Because when we can acknowledge things for what they are, like, we're so much further ahead in the path of healing. And if we don't, if we choose to, like live a life unexamined, those same unhelpful patterns will just continue, continue, continue. [Abigail, 43, 20 years of practice, March 09, 2021]

The concept of the wounded child as a defense mechanism, introduced by Abigail, is in alignment with Winnicott's (1986) theory above presented.

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[19] An author who popularized the concept of the "wounded child" was Caroline Myss, who specializes in the fields of human consciousness, spirituality, and energy medicine. She explains the wounded child as an archetype that holds childhood traumas that could have been caused by dysfunctional relationships of caregivers that generated situations of abuse or neglect. Myss states that this archetype has gained visibility in the field of psychotherapy since the 1960s, and it is used, in a spiritual perspective, to teach an individual about forgiveness. Available at: <https://www.myss.com/free-resources/sacred-contracts-and-your-archetypes/appendix-the-four-archetypes-of-survival/>. Accessed: June 9, 2021.

Healers share the understanding that the essence of an individual before being injured or experiencing childhood trauma is still present within themselves as the "inner child," which is a key concept to understanding the informants' perception of the higher self.

The concept of the inner child employed by holistic healers is not the same as the jungian divine child archetype. Carl Jung developed archetypes as an expression of the collective unconscious, which he believed to be a psychological structure shared by humans that could be seen in universal myths and dreams. One of the archetypes is the child, which oftentimes is related to the process of individuation as "the maturation process of personality induced by the analysis of the unconscious." (Jung 1984, 252) The striking difference between the Jungian archetype of the "child" or the "divine child," and the informants' concept of the "inner child" is that the child archetype refers to a general psychological structure present in all humans. Jung defines it as "the child motif presents the pre-conscious, childhood aspect of the collective psyche." (Jung 1984, 254). Differently, for the interviewees, the inner child represents an individual aspect of people's psyche, and it is a concept often used in psychotherapeutic settings to indicate a part of an individual's self that has the characteristics of a child, such as playfulness, creativity, and intuition (Capacchione 1991).

The informants recounted healing the inner child as a process that helps an individual to get in contact with their higher self and with the core of their authenticity. This comes from the idea that children are born with an intrinsic intelligence or an "inner-knowing," some interviewees described it as the phase in life when a person is the closest to "source." The informants expressed that the archetype of the inner child allows individuals to bring together different aspects of their fragmented selves, to access past traumas from an outside perspective and console their younger versions as a separate entity, which they called "reparenting." The informants mentioned that this healing process permits one to accept their natural talents and desires, allowing their "true nature," connected to the divine, to come forward and to be expressed.

The interviewees stated their belief that from the moment an individual is born, social conditionings start being imposed on them, from limiting beliefs carried within one's family line to social institutions that train the body and the mind to act, think, and behave in a certain socially acceptable manner. This conditioning is said to hinder the discovery and development of one's true potential, which is why some holistic healing practitioners talk about "unlearning" the social conditioning in order to connect to one's higher self, the source of their authenticity. Jasmin mentioned the following: "I do believe that we're all awakened, when we

were born, when we were babies. . . . When we're still Starseeds, or we haven't yet manifested in a body" [Jasmine, 43, 9 years of practice, February 26, 2021]. With these words, Jasmine presented that, in her view, the spiritual essence of an individual, or their soul, is already knowledgeable. Liam, Jasmine, and Lucy shared the idea that recovering a child's essence and going through a process of "unlearning" are necessary to get in touch with one's true essence. Lucy, nonetheless, explained it from a maternal wellness point of view, showing how having a child makes one remember who they were as a child and how motherhood asks of the individual an openness to relearning.

> True self, for me, is something that you knew when you were little, when we're little is where we are closer to the source, to the like, where we came from [as souls]. . . . Yeah, that is the inner child, it's your true self as a child . . . inner child is a concept of yourself or memory of yourself from that period, which has a lot of reminders and good qualities, and inner child also has, like, most of our difficulties. [Liam, 35, 16 years of practice, February 23, 2021]

> I think little babies come in with inner knowing. They know a lot. And then, once they start speaking, a lot of their knowing is going to be taken away, kind of turned down a little bit, as I believe. Because they're going to step into the game of not remembering necessarily and not knowing, and then we start school and we're like "Oh, I don't know anything, I have to go and learn" and then we learn all these ideas that are not necessarily soul evolving, but they help our brains to function. [Jasmine, 43, 9 years of practice, February 26, 2021]

And so I think it's very much of a remembering of who you really are, underneath all the conditioning and the traumas and the identities that you've adopted over these years. And having a child, a child, who, as they grow into their toddler years and start talking to you, and their child years. They communicate, they see you so purely, and they're such pure little beings that mothers are like, wait a minute, I think there's something of that in me too, like, what is that? How do we make sense of it? And where do I go from here? Because I want to be this great mother for my child, you know, so how can I be the most me? Maybe more me than I've ever been, since I was a child. . . . It's a remembering, really, of the things that we've just been conditioned and forgotten. [Lucy, 39, 2 years of practice, March 19, 2021]

In all these excerpts, the informants correlated authenticity and the "true self" with the initial stages of life, when the child carried an "inner knowledge" and was not influenced by social structures. Liam talked about his belief that in childhood people are closer to source or where the soul was before incarnation, and that connecting to one's inner child allows the individual to remember that state of authenticity. Jasmine agreed with Liam's view, adding that people forget their true essence as they are socialized, for example when they are introduced to the school system. Moreover, Lucy presented that the inner child can be "awakened" by the literal presence of a child. Hence, the process of reconnecting with the inner child, enabled by conscious efforts, or triggered by experiences of motherhood, is part of the process of finding their way back to the authentic self.

I also interpret that these understandings of inner child stated by the informants are embedded in a sociocultural background that connects childhood with purity. Affrica Taylor (2011, 422-423) argues that Rousseau's thinking marked the ideal of childhood as a pure stage of life, which was not tinted by the vices of the adult European society of his time. Rousseau praised nature and childhood and placed both in a dualistic opposition to culture, which challenged the conventional values of his period that valorized adult rationality. Thus, the imaginary of childhood as a reflection of one's "pure nature" is a legacy of the eighteenth century Romantic era. Additionally, an earlier argument that I presented about the connection between the authentic self and its reflection in nature also endorses this understanding of childhood, since nature and children are placed in a historic imaginary as pre-social and pre-cultural.

In the informants' interviews a recurrent theme was the polarity between individual and society, more precisely between an individual's authenticity and the social structures that constrict the expression of their "authentic self." Authenticity does not necessarily mean opposition to social systems, but in the case of holistic healers, the unlearning of social conditionings is part of their process of connection with their authentic selves. They perceive that the environment in which they are surrounded is hostile to the unrestricted expression of their authenticity. Thus, social

change, or as they call it "collective spiritual development," is deemed necessary to turn their society into a welcoming vessel for the expression of people's authentic selves. Most informants affirmed that healing starts as an individual process. However, they also explained that once an individual "awakens," they bring more awareness and healing to their surroundings, triggering collective healing, which shows a mirroring between the individual and the collective level. In their view, this entails the development of a cycle in which the more people embrace their higher selves and express their authenticity, the more the collective evolves, and the more it evolves, the easier it is for individuals to embrace their authenticity.

An example of collective healing was presented by Audrey, who is an ecotherapist for mothers. She posted on May 5th an IGTV video on her Instagram page related to the World Maternal Mental Health Day. In the video, she explained the importance of expanding the sense of community to include the living Earth, and to find support and guidance not only from humans and human created sources, but also from other beings, mainly from nature, introducing and encouraging an animist perspective that recognizes life in all its forms, presenting how nature mirrors our whole selves.

In her message, she presented healing not as an individual process, but one that includes the collective, the environment, and the planet. The

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role of mothers for Audrey is deeply connected to a responsibility towards nurturing life in all its forms. She communicated that the sacred purpose of mothering is to support life on the planet, also meaning a responsibility to protect life, which is why she believes that nature centered spirituality offers support especially for mothers. Audrey mentioned in her interview that mothering is centered in an ethic of care that can be directed to various spheres of life, and her perspective includes mothering in different bodies, not just those of cis-gender women, as she explains:

> So, mothering is seen as this way of operating in the world with an ethic of care. And so you really center that aspect of feeling. Because so much in our culture, we have kind of the split of mind from body, we have the split of intellect from nature, all that kind of stuff. And so I've always thought of my work in the classroom as a teacher, as a mother, because I'm bringing to it an ethic of care that I would any kin, any relative. And so I did that with teaching. And then also, I was a small town politician, activist for the water. And I thought of it as mother[ing] our community. So, it's just a specific type of ethic of care where you interact with others, including non-human beings, as if they're related to you, because we have this idea of like nuclear family. . . . I think that we have to be open to other forms of connection, like spiritual connection even, and I do work with gay men who identify as mothers, anybody who identifies as mothers kind of really finds me, but I love working with mothering in different bodies. [Audrey, 38, 10 years of practice, February 15, 2021]

The expansion of the concept of mothering to suit a holistic practice, including all individuals who act from an ethic of care, presents how certain

practitioners are working towards not only healing the individual, but healing the collective, such as protecting their environment and caring for their communities.

Given that the practitioners of holistic healing believe that the collective and the individual level mirror each other, it is possible to say that engagement in actions towards improving the collective that are in alignment with the individual's values are expressions of one's authenticity. As presented in Erickson's study (1995), authenticity emerges from actions and decisions made based on one's self-values, thus, a person who acts accordingly to their beliefs feels like acting from a place of authenticity (refer to chapter 1, section 2.2). For instance, Audrey shared her involvement with environmental activism, and Madison talked about her volunteer work in hospitals doing free reiki and her support of suicide prevention groups. They shared these as actions in alignment with their values and concerns, and as ways to extend to the collective their support.

After the presentation of various interpretations of the higher self, and its connection to the authentic self and to the concept of the inner child, it is possible to summarize that holistic healing practitioners perceive the higher self as a fountain of inspiration and guidance, and as the immaculate source of personal authenticity that can be accessed by the individual and translated into actions in the world. Furthermore, holistic spirituality appears

to have introduced a new level of authority in relation to one's own spirituality and self-development, for it not only reclaimed the direct contact between the spiritual realm and humans, but it created the higher self as a projection of one's self as already part of the divine. In order to further this discussion, in the next section, I present how the practitioners express their authentic selves through their online presence.

2. The performance of the authentic self

Holistic healing practitioners, due to their spiritual beliefs, often define the authentic self as the higher self, as discussed in the previous section. This is not only a concept, but a lived experience, thus, in this section I will analyze the informants' performance of the authentic self. First, I examine their choices of online self-presentation and how authenticity is constructed from their coherent performance as healers. Secondly, I analyze their online profiles to understand how the persona of the healer is formed. Finally, I present how the performance of holistic healing is gendered.

2.1. Online self-presentation: authenticity as a coherent performance

Referring to Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model of everyday performance to interpret the practitioners' performance of the authentic self, it is possible to note that currently, a similar sense of social distance that is often established between performer and audience in a theatrical setting, can also be found in social media platforms. The content creator[20] is not in direct connection with their followers, except when live streaming videos[21]. Thus, followers are only able to observe and indirectly interact with the content creator's photos and videos through comments, which generates a sense of distance and mystification between them. The state of mystification was explained by Goffman (1959, 67) as the accentuation of aspects of a performance that are socially sanctioned to conceal dissonant characteristics of the performer that are not coherent with their social role or their "front" (see chapter 1, section 2.3). The distance created by online interactions allows the performer to accentuate or conceal characteristics of themselves as they desire, and with this impression management, they can produce a successful regulation of the information that they publicly display.

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[20] Content creator is a term used to define individuals who produce content, such as texts, videos, and audios in digital media contexts.

[21] Social media platforms allow users to do livestreams, which means the transmission of a live video over the internet. In platforms like Instagram, users can comment, react with likes, and even ask to join the transmission of other users.

Social media has a broad audience, which turns it into the main space of connection between many individuals. Consequently, it is in this online space where most first impressions are generated and, as Goffman (1959, 11) affirms, the importance of first impressions lies in its power to set the tone of how others will interact with the individual based on their projected identity. In this online scenario, the user is able to regulate the amount and type of information their followers receive, allowing not only the maintenance of the state of mystification, but also having the capacity to shape the first impression they leave on people, which will influence future interactions.

Authenticity, in a dramaturgical sense, can be understood as a coherent and credible performance. By analyzing the holistic healers' self-presentation on social media and on their professional websites, it is possible to observe an attempt to construct the persona of the healer through imagery, themes, and choices of vocabulary. Even though these practitioners have other role identities apart from being healers, such as in relation to their families and communities, most of them choose to emphasize the healer facet of their lives, which concurs with the healer's belief that spirituality and healing are more than a career or an intermittent practice; they are a lifestyle, a journey that is pervasive to all areas of life. The

predominance of the persona of the healer in most areas of a practitioner's life can be seen in the following case of Abigail.

Abigail is an Euro-American 43 year-old counselor, energy healer, and practitioner of breathwork and meditation. Abigail is also a burlesque performer, although the personas of "healer" and "performer" might initially be dissonant to some people, she blended this artistic expression with her healing work under a modality named "Burlesque Therapy." In Abigail's website, she introduces these modalities of healing in separate pages, employing different visual presentations of herself. In Abigail's portrait as a healer, she has a picture with a large inviting smile, round arched eyebrows framing her blue eyes, light brown hair styled in a pixie cut, light makeup with a touch of pink-colored blush on her cheeks, no colored nails, and a white long sleeved shirt. In the counseling page of her website, together with the description of a program centered on forgiveness, there is a picture of Abigail sitting down on the floor with her legs crossed, her hands placed on her chest, eyes closed, a soft smile and her head slightly leaned forward in a reverential stance. She wears a silver bracelet, small dark earrings and a deep blue japamala, or praying beads, around her neck falling down her torso.

In another section of Abigail's website, one finds her depiction as a burlesque artist. In her photograph in this page, she stands in front of a deep

red background, styling a pin-up inspired hairdo - the front section of the hair pulled back, thick curls down her neck, with a finishing touch of two red lilies on the right side of her head just above the ear. She has long eyelashes, black eyeliner, smoky eyes, a vibrant red lipstick, and contour sculpting her cheekbones. The look is complete with a long dangling earring encrusted with five red crystals and red plumage wrapped around her body, exposing her prominent collar bone. She exudes a powerful femininity in her image, which is complemented by a video next to her picture, describing how sensual female energy can seem taboo and how burlesque allows people to embrace their beauty, their bodies, and access a feeling of liberation. Abigail also wrote a book about her journey of deep self-acceptance and self-love through the art form of burlesque.

Even though her image as a healer might contrast with her image as a burlesque performer, the message and the principles of holism are carried throughout her practice, as Abigail weaves together the two side of her career as a lifestyle that carries a similar message of radical self-acceptance and the choice to live from her authenticity. Burlesque, as the art of the striptease (Ferreday 2008), in popular culture is not automatically connected with the idea of healing. Nevertheless, Abigail presents to her clients that healing can take the form of meditation and breathwork, as well as female empowerment through body acceptance and performance. Thus, the initial

impression of Abigail having two contradicting personas vanishes once she explains the transformational power burlesque had in her life and how it can also impact her clients' lives.

Abigail described in an interview that when she was younger she had a notably negative relation with her body, and the desire to gain validation from her external appearance led her to develop body dysmorphia and anorexia, which lasted an extended period of time. She mentioned that starting energetic healing work helped her shift her focus from her body to other aspects of life and to deepen her interest in spirituality. Nevertheless, Abigail stated that a central piece of her recovery from eating disorders and issues related to body image was burlesque, which is an art form highly centered on the body. Abigail described that the diversity of bodies performing on burlesque stages and the power they carry, evoked a transformation within her that she compared with a spiritual experience. According to Abigail, burlesque instigates an engagement between performer and audience, in which both experience transformation, which is especially felt as empowerment and utter acceptance. In the following excerpt Abigail talked about how her first reaction to burlesque was one of judgement towards the performer, which led to a realization that the judgement was, in reality, towards herself and her body. This awareness

allowed her to transform the judgement and the disapproval into a feeling of

acceptance towards not only the performer, but mainly towards herself.

When I got into burlesque, there was definitely that thing of like "Oh, who does she think she is stripping?" And the other part of me is like "Oh my God, I want to see that, okay, wait, wow." And the first time I ever saw [a burlesque performance] I actually had, I would call it kind of a spiritual experience watching a performer on stage. Her name is Dirty Martini. She got on stage, and she's a woman, she's a dear friend now. She's one of the physically most beautiful women I've ever seen. And she is not shaped like any woman I have ever seen before, she's short, she's extremely curvy, like tiny little waist, she's something that is out of classical art . . . And when I watched her on stage, all of my own judgments came up, and then they froze. Because it was like, all I could do is take in this amazing beauty I was watching on stage. And then something shifted, where I wasn't seeing her body anymore, I was seeing her soul. And seeing her just channel this beautiful movement, and art, and concept, and costuming, and the timing with the music. And it's just like this sacred intersection of time and space and everything. And my mind was blown, and that's when I realized, like, "Oh, there's something much deeper to this work than just putting on a pretty show." You know, and if that's all it is, that's also fine. But I think that there's much deeper possibilities within burlesque. And that's when I started doing it. Like, all of my stuff [self-judgement] came up. And I was like, "I think I'm ugly. I think I'm crazy looking, my legs are too white." . . . I could list everything, but none of that mattered. . . . What I learned was that, number one, I am not my body. . . . If there's a show with ten different people in it, like ten different bodies get on stage and just have fun. And there's something about that that changes people forever when they're in the audience. Like, I can't tell you how many times I've had people come up to me crying after a show being like, "Oh my God, what you did on stage, it made me realize that I'm okay, just as I am." And I was like, well, yeah, you are. But holy bananas. It took you to go to a burlesque show to realize that, like, cool, great, I'm glad you're here. Welcome. But it's a profoundly transformational dance form

that affects not only the performers, but also the audience very much so. [Abigail, 43, 20 years of practice, March 09, 2021]

Abigail's experience shows how healing opportunities can take many faces. By watching a burlesque performance that is markedly centered on the physical body, Abigail was triggered and faced her own fears and critical mindset, since her judgement towards another individual was mainly a reflection of the judgement she imposed on her own self. The efficacy of healing through burlesque was that this art form made her look at her body through different lenses, and the diversity of bodies and beauty standards within the burlesque community allowed her to absorb a new standard of beauty, in which she felt that her body was accepted. Furthermore, the mindset Abigail had from her previous training as a holistic healer, made her interpret the process of transmutation of inner judgment into utterly acceptance of herself and the other as a spiritual experience.

According to Féral (1982), performance is an interactive process that happens in a physical and imaginary space and has no predetermined structure. It allows the construction of the self through the interaction between the performer and the audience. Abigail considered burlesque transformational because her performance and her interaction with the audience worked as a catalyst for the discovery of a new dimension of her self, increasing her own self-acceptance.

The role of the healer goes beyond the holistic healing area. In the same way Abigail incorporated burlesque in healing, she also introduced healing in burlesque, which is seen in the title she carries among her performing peers as "the healer." Abigail explained that it all started in 2016, when a friend asked her to officiate their wedding, and in order to do so she bought an ordination online from the Universal Life Church. She explained that since she had already done extensive work with spirituality and healing, performing the wedding as a reverend made her feel a powerful energy of connection to the divine. This experience inspired her to incorporate the title "Reverend" in her burlesque stage name, which suits the name she had already gained in that community as "the healer," as she explained:

> I ended up incorporating Reverend into my stage name, because I'm also known in the burlesque community as "the healer." There's a huge convention every year called BurlyCon, which is the world's only burlesque educational convention. And I taught my first ever class there called "Healing your relationship with your body." Because the prior year I had gone and it was like how to do your hair, how to do a fan dance, how to come up with an act. And I was like, but nobody is taking care of their bodies, what about the relationship to your own body? . . . But I was just saying that it's like there's something so much deeper here, this is more than just burlesque. Also just like energetically the point that we are holding down in this corner of the universe like empowered, sensual, female energy that is celebrating, no matter the size, the age, the texture, the skin color, the gender expression, like, even if they're in a female body, maybe they identify as a man, maybe they don't identify as a gender at all. It doesn't matter when it's on stage, and it's just love,

on stage it's just love. And when people can sort of get out of their own ways and allow that artistry to pour through, that, to me, is an experience of God, because, again, it's the intersection between time and space. And like that center point is God. And so, I feel like it [adding "reverend" on her stage name] was just sort of a really natural thing, because there's a lot of like spoofy Reverend and ministers who sort of call themselves that, but are just like, caricatures of old southern ministers, or they're talking about sin and vice and all that. I'm like, no, I'm actually going to talk about love y'all. Like, we're talking about love. And there are going to be a bunch of stripping ladies, boom, done. You're welcome. Fifteen dollars, please. But for me, it does feel like a ministry, it really does feel like a form of calling too, because our world needs to start making peace with each other's bodies, we have to, and it starts with our relationship to our own body, because we can only see in others what's already present within ourselves. [Abigail, 43, 20 years of practice, March 09, 2021]

Abigail weaved in a coherent personal narrative the various events and identities that she acquired throughout her life, in the quote above it is possible to extract her identifications as "healer," "performer," and "reverend." The first observable point of connection is between "healer" and "reverend." The identity of "healer" originated in her practice of holistic healing and, as presented in the previous chapter, holistic healing is closely connected to holistic spirituality. This spiritual element merges seamlessly with the religious aspect of the identity of "reverend," which shows the non disruptive continuation between these identities.

The second point is the connection between "reverend" and "performer." Abigail decontextualized the title of "reverend" from its

religious setting, reappropriating it into a burlesque stage. In this transition of context in which the title was employed, Abigail kept its spiritual component. Nonetheless, she connected spirituality with the concept of love, and in her eyes, burlesque is an art form that induces self-acceptance and love in its artists and their audience, seen in her description of the moment on stage as "an experience of God." Moreover, Abigail made a critique of "traditional" reverends who, as she expressed, seem to be focusing their practices on "sin and vice," instead of love.

Heelas (2008, 25) affirms that spirituality can be found in one's subjective-life and in the experiences of what an individual values as "what it is to be alive." I interpret that Abigail, experiencing a positive reconnection with her body through performance, and allowing her creativity to flow in that moment on stage, is "feeling alive," thus, she is experiencing her spirituality. Moreover, as Taylor (1991, 14) argued that authenticity is connected to individual self-fulfillment, I link Abigail's burlesque performance with the expression of her authenticity.

The third point connects the identity of "healer" and "performer." This can be seen in Abigail's creation of the Burlesque Therapy healing modality, as well as in the title she gained within her burlesque community as the healer. By consequence of this recognition, she was able to extend her clientele as a holistic healer towards that group. Among the three identities,

the "healer" is the main expression Abigail carries throughout the different spheres of her life.

Applying Goffman's (1959, 22) concept of "front," referring to a performance that fulfills social expectations, I analyze that Abigail skillfully built her front as a healer, an identity that crossed both professional fields she works in. I argue that through the role of the healer, the practitioners express their sense of self and their self-values. As a sense of authenticity emerges from an individual acting in a way that is congruent with their personal values and desires, despite external coercion for compliance, the coherent performance as a healer can be seen as the practitioners' source of feelings of authenticity.

A recurrent theme among the interviewees was the self-narrative of "following their calling." Usually this "calling" can go against the common sense of what a safe career choice is. In Abigail's case, she felt like a "black sheep" in her family following a non-traditional career path; however, she expressed that this life energizes her and she feels like following the right path that is in alignment with her true self. Thus, adopting holistic healing as a career, being open about spirituality as well as the lifestyle that comes with it, are "proof" of the authenticity of those who decide to enter the path of holistic healing. However, this openness can cause inner conflict for

certain practitioners who are transitioning from "traditional careers" into the holistic healing work.

Although the practitioners convey the impression that embracing the expression of their true selves through the persona of the healer is a natural process, the transition in self-presentation from a "regular lifestyle" into one of a healer was described by some interviewees as a slow and cautious process. When individuals enter the world of holistic healing, they start a learning process of healing techniques as well as spiritual concepts that restructure their understanding of life. As expressed by Holland and colleagues (1998) and Powell (2012) (see chapter 1, section 2.1), there is a connection between identity formation and learning processes that can be applied to the learning period of healing modalities and the time necessary for a practitioner to publicly express their spirituality. Those individuals who receive positive feedback about their healing abilities or about their expression of spirituality from people connected to this field, gain reassurance and feel more comfortable exposing their identity as healers to people outside this milieu. This new self-presentation generates a new pattern of interaction with others, who start to perceive them as "healers."

For example, Nichole stated that she did not promote introspective hypnosis as her main practice on social media, as her wellness center is focused on yoga, massage, and other services. She thought that being

upfront about spiritual aspects[22] of her practice could drive certain clients away. Nonetheless, Nichole found a way to talk about the aspects of her career that involved spirituality via her podcast; in that platform, the listeners have autonomy to choose what spiritual topics they desire to learn, and they can process the information at their own pace. Nichole expressed that even though it demands courage to shift the image she was previously portraying online, she is willing to bring the spiritual side of her practice to her social media, which is her main marketing platform. She noted: "Because two years ago, I did not know that I would be as comfortable with, not talking about it [spirituality], I'm not afraid of it. [But] I was still in the place of conditioning, what do other people think?" [Nichole, 44, 23 years of practice, February 23, 2021]. Moving away from social expectations was also a way Nichole found to embrace her healing path, and the podcast acted as a buffer for her to express the spiritual side that comes with holistic healing, without having to drastically change her image and the perception her clients or kin had of her previously. This demonstrates how the "healing journey" that can be portrayed online by some healers as a linear path of full acceptance of spirituality is not always true. Rather, it is a process that evolves in phases of inner acceptance, which are later outwardly expressed.

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[22] Nichole's practice connects hypnosis and spirituality. It involves asking the assistance of the client's spiritual team, it may include past life regression, and the removal of energy or entity attachments.

2.2. Building the persona of the healer through social media content

In Mauss' discussions on the origin of "self" and "person," there is a retrospective of the historical transformation of the concept of self. Mauss presents that the Latin word "persona" originally meant "mask," more specifically, a mask that resounded the voice of the actor (Mauss 1985, 14). I use the term persona to indicate the public image of the healer that the informants built for themselves.

Some online spaces used by holistic healing practitioners to build their image as healers are their professional websites and their social media accounts. On social media platforms, holistic healers are able to find individuals interested in their services, and in order to introduce themselves and their practices, the healers usually post pre-recorded videos or live streaming, in which they make a demonstration of their healing modality or give talks about their work, their path as a healer or about spirituality. Some of the popular themes are tarot and astrology readings, and interviews with other practitioners of holistic healing; these are typically available in the format of IGTV on Instagram, YouTube videos or podcast episodes. Abigail was the only practitioner who mentioned the use of Facebook, where she did live streams every day during the first six months when the COVID-19 pandemic started in the United States.

Analyzing the public social media pages of the informants, I perceived a few elements on how the persona of the healer is built on social media platforms. First, the published content has a theme related to holistic healing, through which the practitioner can showcase their expertise and, as a result, gain work recognition. Second, the practitioners share their knowledge with the intention of improving the lives of their followers, which reinforces the benefits of holistic healing to their viewers. Third, recurrent posts on social media allow the healer to establish rapport with clients, since constant information about one's life generates a sense of familiarity, and can develop trust by the viewer. Fourth, the consistency of posts or Instagram stories provide an insight into the practitioners' lives, creating the idea that the persona of the healer is maintained even outside healing sessions, reinforcing the image that healing is a lifestyle, not solely an occupation.

Examining the participants' social media, there were three main types of stories that were recurrently shared. The first one is related to teachings on how to incorporate spirituality or aspects of healing into a person's life, providing a starting point to people who are curious about spiritual concepts or holistic healing practices; the second type is the explanation of the practitioners' healing modality or services that they are offering; the third type is about their life path, or that of another holistic

healing practitioner, and about important healing concepts that they incorporate in their practices and in their own lives. The following are examples of these narratives.

a) Healing in everyday life

Megan uploads weekly videos on Instagram in the format of IGTV videos named "Weekly Astrosations," where she reads tarot and explains the astrological transits and how they translate into energies that affect people's everyday life. In these short format videos, she can introduce potential clients to types of services she offers, and present viewers her way of interpreting cards or astrological configurations, providing an insight on how their future session might be like. In the description of the video, Megan writes a summary of the content of the video and leaves information about how people can contact her for a private reading, and for other services, which can be seen in the description of the video she posted on Instagram on February 10, 2021:

> ♒Aquarius energy!!! ♒ Preparing for the New Moon in Aquarius on February. 11th, working with the Waning Crescent 🌙 moons in Capricorn and Aquarius prompting us to MANIFEST at our highest potential! Let's get it people. This New Moon will help set the stage for the year to come. Dream big and allow Saturn 🪐 to help assist you.

If you would like a reading, Astrology, Tarot, Akashic Records or Numerology, hit me up at [website] or dm [direct message] me directly. It would be great to work with you.
[Megan, 41, 3 years of practice, February 10, 2021]

Although the post caption that Megan wrote implies a dominium of astrological terminologies, she explained in the video the meaning of the moon and Saturn in each astrological sign, and by elucidating these concepts, Megan introduced viewers who are new to her practice a vocabulary shared among many individuals interested in the holistic healing field. This explanation not only portrayed Megan's expertise as an astrologer, but it also presented her as a guide who helps lay people better use the energies of astral bodies to their advantage. Additionally, the weekly frequency of posts are building blocks for her online presence and for creating rapport with her viewers, which is also seen in the way she greets her viewers by name as they appear on screen during her live streams, as if they were long time friends.

In the comment section of her video, Megan's followers were praising her charisma and excitement, and one person asked about how they could book a reading with her. The way her viewers received the message with enthusiasm shows that some of them were already waiting for her weekly astrological prediction, which indicates that she successfully built a trusting relationship with them. Also, the request of information for a

session presents that her audience is receiving a kind of information they consider valuable, that they recognize her skills, and that they are willing to invest in a session to receive a personalized reading.

O'Donnell argues that individuals produce a personal-visual identity on Instagram. The photographs and videos chosen by an individual to be displayed on their profiles create a chronicle of their lives. Through mainly a visual narrative, users of this platform constantly engage in impression management in order to create their desired identities (O'Donnell 2018, 139). In Megan's case, the comment section proves that her image and identity as a healer are convincingly being conveyed to her followers.

Another example of tips on healing in everyday life is Alexa's YouTube video showing a morning routine to "raise your vibration." In this video, she invited people to start their mornings bringing awareness to their energetic level, instead of immersing themselves in their busy schedules. She explained the "ABCs of gratitude," based on the 26 letters of the alphabet, encouraging people to think about 26 different things they were grateful for, from A to Z, which may include people, experiences, and things in their lives. Alexa affirmed that this exercise helps to raise one's vibration, saying that energy follows intention, so wherever an individual puts their attention, energy will grow in that direction. As a consequence, focusing on

things one feels gratitude for will bring them more experiences to feel this way.

In this video, Alexa introduced the concept of gratitude, principles of the Law of Attraction (the more grateful one is, the more they will have experiences to be grateful for), and the importance of setting intentions for the day, all within a morning routine. In this case, Alexa established herself as a holistic healing practitioner by sharing her knowledge on how to use energy in one's favor with a simple practice. Nevertheless, it is implicit that this routine would be done by those individuals who are already aware of their levels of energy and desire to "raise their vibration." This shows that they are already acquainted with some aspects of holistic healing or potentially interested in the field.

The comment section of Alexa's video shows that her viewers were endorsing the teachings by expressing how powerful the exercise was. Some of them were explaining with their own words how positive thoughts led them to experience a better day. These comments demonstrate that the persona of the healer is being accepted by her audience, who are acknowledging her via comments as someone qualified to teach spiritual concepts and practices.

b) Explanation of a healing modality

An example of an explanation of a healing modality can be seen in a video posted by Jasmine in March of 2021 showing an Access Bars class. The room is bright and quiet; it has some colorful rugs on the floor, where the students left their belongings, such as bags and items of clothing. There are four students practicing, all women, keeping their eyes closed in concentration while placing their hands on other students' heads, applying pressure to specific points on the skull. There are three women and one man receiving this healing modality, they are laid down in stretchers that are covered in colorful tie-dye covers and their necks are supported by small pillows. Jasmine is the one recording the session, she moves around showing the participants and how they are placing their hands, ending with the camera pointing at a small dog wearing a purple bandana lying on the floor close to the first stretcher.

The video allows people to visually understand how this healing modality is performed. It gives possible clients or future students an example of what to expect from that experience. Together with this video, Jasmine wrote a long caption explaining how this healing modality has impacted her personal life, helping her to go back to "Who she truly is." Also, she extended an invitation for people who want to try Access Bars as clients or as students.

Just saying YAYYYY from Los Angeles, giving my gratitude to Access Bars, which is THE energy healing modality that has changed me the most! - aka [also known as]: bringing me back to who I truly am! Releasing all the unnecessary layers of social programming...

I've recently been so lucky to get some new clients reaching out to me here in Los Angeles asking for Access Bars in person. As we all know, this past year has been mostly limited when it comes to physical touch and so many people are deprived as hell!

Receiving is the fundamental element of a Bars session. It's like opening up portals of possibilities when it comes to receiving joy, abundance, sexual healing and so much more and I feel super honored to be able to do this work 🥲

This footage is from almost 2 years ago, from my time in [healing center name] where we would do these whole day classes teaching people how to do Access Bars on one another! Wow I miss that... AND can happily announce that I am ready to offer classes again!

So reach out in case you are in LA or Bay Area looking for a Bars class.

It's fun and it's life changing…

Love ya

💖

[Jasmine, 43, 9 years of practice, March 26, 2021]

Jasmine built the persona of the healer by presenting herself as a healer who has mastered the Access Bars healing modality, being someone skilled to teach others how to practice it. By allowing her followers to visually understand the healing session, and sharing her personal experience and positive results from this practice, she reinforced her professional image and, at the same time, gave an information that her viewers could relate to,

which is the desire to release "social programming" and to go back to who they "truly are."

The comment section supports her self-presentation, some individuals were commending how Jasmine was an important figure among practitioners of Access Bars in the previous city she used to live in, and others were praising her energy and how she was "unstoppable." From this feedback to her video, it is possible to apprehend that all individuals who commented were acquainted with holistic healing, and saw Jasmine as a knowledgeable healer.

c) Life stories of holistic healers

The holistic healing practitioners share their stories in order to create connection and empathy between healer and client, by relating their past with their client's present situation. The holistic healing practitioners build a narrative that presents their start in the self-development journey from a point where they were not "woke" and, like their clients, also faced discontentment with their lives, whether in the area of career, relationships, or health. However, they were able to go through a process of transformation and to embody their authentic selves, or higher selves, through the path of holistic healing. This narrative indicates that there is the possibility for all individuals to change their lives and embrace a path of

healing that is authentic to them, which will lead them to more happiness and fulfillment. Additionally, apart from the presentation of their life stories, the practitioners also present topics that they consider to be important in their current practice, including how the use of a concept or a modality of healing has benefited them and can do the same for their clients.

Some examples of these stories can be found in the podcasts hosted by Nichole and Audrey. Nichole hosts a podcast in which she talks about a variety of topics related to her work, especially addressing introspective hypnosis, and where she also invites guest speakers and clients to describe their experiences with spirituality and holistic healing modalities. In the case of Audrey, her podcast aims to introduce a new paradigm in holistic maternal wellness. She describes it as a "Podcast for soulful mothers to help us mother from our deepest wisdom, our vital energy, and our most authentic natures." Audrey structure her podcast episodes as interviews more than conversations, which allows her guests to have the full focus. There are two episodes in Audrey's podcast in which she interviewed Lucy (both are informants of this study) about her journey through her Motherline[23] after becoming a mother.

In the episodes, Audrey introduced Lucy as a holistic therapist and intuitive guide, who weaves the mystic into mental health, helping parents

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[23] Motherline is a concept created by the Jungian analyst and poet Naomi Ruth Lowinsky.

heal their generational wounds and claim their unique soul-aligned lives.The episodes recorded with Lucy allowed her to explain her life experience and they were dedicated to the concept of Motherline, which Lucy explained as a layered concept of the maternal lineage that acts on one's physical, energetic, emotional, and spiritual bodies. The biological aspect comes from the fact that all individuals are born of mothers, and they carry mitochondrial DNA that is inherited from mothers. Another aspect of the Motherline is the knowledge of one's origins, their family stories, cultural backgrounds, identity, and beliefs they have inherited from their mother's side of the family.

Lucy explained that becoming aware of one's Motherline allows a person to heal, to release inherited trauma, and discover untapped potential. She stated that she encountered this concept three years ago, towards the end of her pregnancy, making her deeply research her own heritage. Lucy especially learned more about the women in her family lineage, analyzing what was passed down to her from them and whether these traits were beneficial to her and the mother she envisaged to become. For instance, women in her family were said to be anxious; anxiety was considered a trait that was passed down generations. Nonetheless, with a holistic mindset, Lucy, instead of facing it as a weakness, understood where it came from and

reinterpreted it as the ability of being highly sensitive, which allowed her to reclaim that trait as a strength in her Motherline.

Another journey driven by the concept of Motherline was Lucy's search for her genealogy, which led her to discover her Irish ancestry. She mentioned that she began to learn more about the pre-Christian era and the Celtic culture. Lucy found that in ancient Ireland, the feminine energy and wisdom were more honored than in the Christian period. This discovery of ancient roots made her feel like a "coming home." This also led her to learn more about the Celtic medicine wheel, which brought changes to her healing practice. For instance, she said that it felt more authentic to use mugwort instead of sage as a cleansing herb, as mugwort was used in Ireland and the use of sage is based on Native American traditions.

Lucy gained enlightenment beyond her individual experience, as she shared that the acknowledgement of her Celtic roots made her aware that all people come from indigenous backgrounds, and that this should be honored. She mentioned that this awareness also brought up feelings of displacement and grief towards the people who lived in the land she inhabits now in Washington. Audrey complemented saying that Motherline is connected to spiritual activism, the process of going within, gaining new awareness, and giving back to the community. In addition, Lucy and Audrey presented the view that Motherline is a concept suitable to everyone, because all

individuals are mothering something, whether it is a child or a new way of living.

In these episodes, Audrey guided Lucy into sharing her personal experience and how she applies concepts that she uses in her psychotherapeutic practice in her own life. The concept of Motherline allowed Lucy not only to present how she gained awareness about her family lineage, traumas, conditionings, and how she entered this new phase of life, of motherhood, but also how anyone can incorporate these psychological and spiritual concepts and practices into their personal healing journeys.

Furthermore, embodying the persona of the healer, Lucy proved her ability to bestow a different interpretation to "common narratives" about anxiety by applying a perspective and a concept she learned through the path of holistic healing, which was the concept of Motherline. The holistic healing framework allowed Lucy to make self-discoveries and participate in an ongoing healing process that connected her with her ancestry. The continuous work of self-development can be seen as a characteristic of her alignment with her self-values and the expression of her authenticity of living her life fully as a healer, for herself and for others. Furthermore, the ability Audrey demonstrated in guiding the interview, empathizing with

Lucy, and demonstrating her own domain of the concept of Motherline, also reinforced her identity as a healer.

2.3. Gendered performance of holistic healing practitioners

Among the eleven informants of this study, ten are women and one is a man. This gender ratio is not a surprise when analyzing the holistic healing field. Intentionally or not, many holistic healing practices are gendered, and as presented in the section about the history of holistic healing (see chapter 3, section 1), some of the possible causes for this gendering process involve women historically being the main actors in the healing of their communities, and holistic healing embracing affective labor and spirituality. Thus, I aim in this section to connect the gendered nature of this field, or more precisely its female prominence, with the expression of the healers' authenticity.

According to Trzebiatowska and Bruce (2013, 23-26), holistic spiritualities seem to attract women and men who do not fit in a dominant model of masculinity[24], and holistic healing is a milieu designed mainly by

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[24] According to Trzebiatowska and Bruce, the dominant model of masculinity has in its core homophobia and sexism, and it dictates how a man should be. This model is more than the "normal," it is normative, having its hegemony achieved via institutions, culture, and persuasion. (Trzebiatowska and Bruce 2013, 26).

women for women, which causes activities related to this field, such as courses, treatments, and workshops, to have a gendered nature. Furthermore, they mention that women have a lower risk of having social stigma if they openly associate themselves with holistic healing or spirituality, because these are already perceived as "feminine" areas by society. On the other hand, men who demonstrate interest in these themes would be socially identified with a non-hegemonic form of masculinity (Trzebiatowska and Bruce 2013, 38).

This research has shown that there is a prevalence of women working in the field of holistic healing, which is mirrored in their clients being mostly women. Additionally, many themes approached in holistic healing can be considered "feminine" by the US society, such as motherhood, Mother Earth, inner child, emotional work, divine feminine, dance and movement, among others. The informants shared that a possible cause for the gendered characteristic of the holistic healing field is that men do not feel comfortable communicating their emotions or feeling vulnerable, and the search for healing would be interpreted as a search for help in an emotional, psychological, and spiritual level, which is not accepted for men in a patriarchal society, where addressing these topics would be considered a "weakness."

The feminine or women-centered themes in holistic healing are clearly present in the speech of Rosalie when she addressed the divine feminine, as well as Lucy's creation of the concept of "MotherGround" that she uses in her practice to express mothers' needs for support:

> So, when we talk about divine feminine, I really talk about this ability for women to trust their intuition, to trust their bodies, to trust the medicine that comes from them, that can only come from them, as being portals, portals of bringing birth, and bringing life into the world, but also portals for creating businesses, and taking care of families, and taking care of communities, and finding a way out of no way, and manifesting things that most people think are impossible. [Rosalie, 40, 7 years of practice, February 14, 2021]

> I imagine it [MotherGround] as like the tree rooted in the ground there and the little seedlings are growing up, right? Like we're a mother, we're creating an environment, we are the first environment for our child. And so, what's the ground that we rest on? How does our environment inform the environment we're creating? And how can we become more conscious of that [our environment], instead of just like passive or disconnected from it, because it's going to influence our child regardless. . . . I also really believe in centering the mother in the family life, really not to elevate mom over dad, but just like, when a mother's needs are centered, she is holding the collective kind of consciousness of the family. Like, that's just how female and male brains kind of work a little differently, where by having a child, science has shown, we get rewired for thinking more collectively. . . . But most mothers are just giving, giving, giving, and not getting restored in a lot of ways. And so we need to find balance in that. And so, that's where the MotherGround comes in. It's like, just a reminder of nurturing your ground matters. Like, what went into it, where you grew up, how you're growing now it's gonna matter to the environment that you're creating for your family. [Lucy, 39, 2 years of practice, March 19, 2021]

The concepts of divine feminine and MotherGround, more than representing female-centered themes, carry a profound shift in power dynamics, being concepts from which women can restructure their interpersonal relationships, as well as in work and community relations, respecting their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. For instance, while in a male-dominated society individuals are taught to be rational and trust their minds (Kheel 1989, 2), Rosalie talked about the importance of trusting one's intuition and bodies. She stated that the power of women as bearers of life brings an innate wisdom and that this wisdom can be extended to the care of the collective, whether nuclear families or their surrounding communities. Rosalie's statement that women are "Manifesting things that most people think are impossible," hints that the use of an "intuitive knowing" instead of a "rational knowing," as a different thought process that engenders different actions, can create new social structures that did not exist before, implying that the wisdom women possess can be a catalyst for changing the system that is failing them.

Rosalie's opinion on the importance of women's intuition and wisdom is supported by the Jungian psychoanalyst Clarissa P. Estés (1997). In her discussion about the archetype of the Wild Woman. Estés provides insights on the power of intuition, claiming it as a part of a woman's

"instinctive psyche," and women who are not embracing their intuition are living detached from their inner nature, living "half-lives," as she stated:

> When we lose touch with the instinctive psyche, we live in a semi-destroyed state and images and powers that are natural to the feminine are not allowed full development. When a woman is cut away from her basic source, she is sanitized, and her instincts and natural life cycles are lost, subsumed by the culture, or by the intellect or the ego - one's own or those belonging to others. (Estés 1997, 8)

The acknowledgement that women are living in environments that are restrictive for their authentic expression, is present in Lucy's quote. Lucy mentioned that the current social and family structures are hostile for women, especially mothers, and this scenario tends to make one feel passive or disconnected. However, Lucy showed her efforts towards creating an environment that nurtures mother and children, which she denominated "MotherGround." This concept allows women to recenter their needs, nurturing themselves so that they are able to nurture others, and by consequence, it creates a propitious environment for their development into their fullest expression, in other words, to live in their authenticity, supporting and being supported by their environment.

As Erickson (1995) stated, authenticity can be conceptualized as an individual fulfilling commitments they have to themselves by acting according to their self-values. Thus, in my perspective, the practitioners are

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expressing their authentic selves by aligning their actions with their values and beliefs. Their alignment can be seen in the fact that, even in the face of an antagonistic male-centered system and a marginalized position in the healthcare system, holistic healers are giving centrality to women's needs in their practices, recognizing the power that comes from being a woman, and publicly discussing the changes they aim to see in the world to create a reality that is more welcoming to them.

As presented by Kheel (1989), in the tradition of holistic healing, women have historically been the primary healers, as it still remains so in the present; however, in the biomedical field, many healers are now in nursing professions, a subordinate role to the scientific medical elite that is male-centered. Additionally, in the field of psychology, the American Psychological Association's report on gender composition[25] (Keita et al. 2006) have shown that although women outnumber men in the workforce and in the educational system, they face wage gap and inequity in power positions, such as being underrepresented as full time professors and overrepresented in the positions of assistant professors and other temporary lecturing positions in universities in the US. Holistic healing, although it is an occupation that lacks an institutional base, it is a healthcare and

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[25] Women in the American Psychological Association: 2006.
Available at: <https://www.apa.org/pi/women/committee/wapa-2006.pdf> Accessed: June 8, 2021.

wellbeing centered field that attends to women's needs, and that enables more equitable work-related development.

The reclaiming of the importance of women's wellbeing is presented by Audrey, when she explained that her practice focuses on mothers who have to undergo the transitional phase of matrescence without communal or psychological support, due to the tradition in American psychotherapy of focusing only on children:

> I started calling it holistic maternal wellness, because I think mothers deserve [care]. Psychology, especially in the US, is very child centered. So, it's all about the child. Okay, and then the moms are kind of like pushed to the side as long as they're doing their work. So, I really think that my work focuses on it, recenters the mother and that the mother's health reflects the health of the system. [Audrey, 38, 10 years of practice, February 15, 2021]

Audrey named her practice "holistic maternal wellness," the "holistic" implies that the client's care goes beyond the immediate fact that as a mother, she has to care for a new life. It also includes the woman's transformation that goes together with maternity. In the interview, Audrey explained matrescence, the developmental period of a woman into motherhood, as a transitional phase of life in which the client discovers who they are as a mother. By comparing it to the adolescence phase that lasts a decade, Audrey stated that the "becoming a mother" should also be taken as

a process, and this perspective removes from them the burden of having to immediately understand and embrace their new identity.

Audrey's maternal centered psychotherapeutic practice might seem to reflect a normative affective care that is bestowed upon women. As Schultz (2006, 81) discusses, reproductive labor is a socially and financially devalued type of labor. This devaluation is a result of it being considered an unskilled and a "natural" labor that women are socialized to do. Thus, the feminine characteristics of the holistic healing field, as the one exemplified above, might appear to comply with traditional gender norms.

Although holistic healing is associated with femininity under traditional gender roles, it also challenges them. As presented by Keshet and Simchai (2014, 81), in holistic healing practices, the female-attributed role of caring is redirected from caring for the other to self-care. Thus, women instead of nurturing solely their families and communities, start to engage in self-caring practices, which can be seen in the excerpt above about Audrey's effort to make a traditional caring figure, the mother, not only the nurturer of her child, but to also put herself in the center of that care, attending to her psychological, emotional, physical, and spiritual needs. Moreover, Audrey denaturalizes motherhood when she explains that it is a transitional phase that might require professional psychotherapeutic help.

Moore (1999, 23) argues that a reconceptualization of gender, especially influenced by performative theory, apprehends gender as a "doing" rather than a "being." Trzebiatowska and Bruce (2013, 26) state that femininity and masculinity are not properties of individuals, but context-dependent interactions. Being aware of the problematic nature of a gender binary perspective, holistic healing practitioners state that they use the concepts of "feminine" and "masculine" not to refer to gender identity, but rather to "feminine energy" and "masculine energy." Although these concepts still reinforce binary qualities, the practitioners understand that every person, independent of their gender identification, has these two energies within themselves and the ideal is to have them balanced. The binary concepts of "feminine" and "masculine" are also used to describe ways of acting and being in the world, as well as lifestyles, as explained by Rosalie:

> When we say divine feminine, we're talking about the feminine energy or the Yin energy of the world, right? And so Yin energy[26], when you think about it, in the way in which things are manifested in the world, women give birth, so we hold what you call the

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[26] Yin and Yang are part of a concept present in Chinese philosophy that represents the paradox as interdependent opposites (Fang 2011). For holistic healers, Yin and Yang are energies that represent the duality of life. Yin is the symbol of earth, darkness, feminine energy, and receptivity; while Yang represents the sky, light, masculine energy, and action. These opposites do not exclude each other; on the contrary, they are complementary. The balance and wholeness represented by this concept and its symbol of a sphere that is half white and half black, are in alignment with the holistic approach.

Universe. We hold the understanding and the portals to life. The Divine Masculine is the one who witnesses the Universe. The man witnesses the birth, the man witnesses manifestation, the man takes care of. So those two energies, the yin and the yang, they have to work together, because in order for everything to work, it's about that balance. . . . The divine masculine is the energy that's necessary to push that idea into the world and make it work. Yin energy, like now when we're in winter is that idea of conception. [Rosalie, 40, 7 years of practice, February 14, 2021]

And so, Yang energy is what I think prior to COVID is what we've been used to, working all the time, that is a part of also how patriarchy has taken over, this idea that we always have to go. And so, because we hadn't sat with ourselves and [had not] been able to kind of tap into divine feminine energy, and tap into our intuition, and tap into the universe, and tap into creating new ways of building wealth with our families, that weren't us working 60 hours a week at a job that we may or may not have a retirement fund for, right?. [Rosalie, 40, 7 years of practice, February 14, 2021]

Understanding the necessity of balance between "feminine" and "masculine" energies, Rosalie and the majority of the informants conveyed that individuals need to recover their feminine energy, which is representative of intuition, stillness, receptivity, and creativity. They encouraged people to reconnect to aspects of themselves that have been pushed aside in a competitive masculine-centered world where these qualities are not always welcomed or appreciated. As Rosalie affirmed, people have been living in their "masculine energy," which represents an active, outwardly driven, and social energy. The excess of this masculine energy was correlated by Rosalie to a culture of overwork and the need to be

constantly active. Although Rosalie did not explicitly mention work balance between men and women, I find it significant when discussing women's situations of work, to keep in mind that many of them undergo a double burden with unpaid domestic labor, which is an additional element to their overwork.

Moreover, shifting one's perspective from a linear structure to a cyclical one, such as the one present in nature, forward motion and action cannot be constant, because everything has the right time to unfold. Like a harvesting cycle, there is a time to plant the seeds, to wait and to see them grow, and to harvest the fruits. These cycles also expand to women's lives, represented by the symbol of the Goddess. Christ (1982) presents that the Goddess is the personification of the divine feminine, legitimizing women's power, and ruling the cycles of life, death, and rebirth, as well as the cycles embodied by women, such as menstruation, childbirth, and menopause.

Embracing the characteristics of "feminine energy" described above is seen by holistic healers as a manner of recovering balance. Rosalie's mention of the need to "Sit with ourselves," indicates an introspective stance necessary to access one's intuition, or as she called "Tap into divine feminine energy," from which individuals can learn to live in a more balanced, and prosperous way. The efforts of achieving balance in one's life is an act of alignment with their inner needs and authenticity. Thus, the

holistic healers' embrace of the gendered label of their practice and of "feminine" themes in their lives and healing modalities are ways in which they express their authentic selves, even though, from a social perspective, these themes may contribute to their marginalization.

To summarize, holistic healing is a framework for healing mind-body-spirit, it is an opposing force to scientism and dualistic perspectives; it re-centers women as the main actors of healing on the giving and the receiving end; it brings back reverence to nature; and it produces and reproduces a metaphysical understanding of reality. Moreover, holistic healing embraces "feminine" qualities, such as intuition, sensitivity, and empathy; it values emotional labor and relational care work that traditionally have been part of feminine labor and identity (Keshet and Simchai 2014, 81). Nevertheless, by decontextualizing these types of labor that are socially devalued from the private sphere into the public sphere, holistic healing practitioners resignify them and turn them into their careers, which generates for them financial independence and autonomy.

In this section, I aimed to analyze the performance of the authentic self by holistic healing practitioners, mostly through their online self-presentation. Initially, I utilized Goffman's theory of everyday life performance to examine interactions on social media. This online space creates a sense of distance and mystification between the content creator and

their followers, which allows the content creator to portray the image they desire by controlling the information they make available to others, shaping how people will perceive them. Moreover, due to the wide number of social media users, this tends to be the space where first impressions are usually formed, which makes the holistic healer's curated image influence how people perceive and interact with them.

In the case of holistic healing practitioners, they shape their online presence to build the persona of the healer, which I explained by introducing the case of Abigail, as she carries the title of "healer" across different fronts in her life, including as a burlesque artist. The continuum of the image and the narrative of the healer across different spaces, creates a coherent performance that is believable and deemed authentic. Authenticity, then, is exhibited in the acceptance of one's life path as a holistic healer, openly expressing their spirituality, and in the coherent performance across online platforms of the healer persona as the informants' identity. Nonetheless, I observed that following their "calling" as a healer and fully embracing their occupation as their lifestyle in a public way, is a process that takes time and demands a change in the informant's self-presentation.

The second part of this section is dedicated to discussing the construction of the healer's persona on social media. In these spaces, they convey various messages that establish their identities as healers; the main

types of stories are related to a) healing in everyday life, b) explanation of a healing modality, c) life story of holistic healers. Through these stories, practitioners create rapport with their audience, who are possible clients, and introduce their audience to healing modalities and spiritual concepts that are constitutive of their practices, exhibiting their competence as healers.

The third and last part is dedicated to presenting the gendering process of holistic healing, as it is considered a predominantly feminine practice. Holistic healing is a field with a majority of women as its practitioners and clients. It embraces woman-centered themes, emotional labor, and relational care, which are forms of work that have been traditionally assigned to women.

This chapter, then, presented various fronts in which holistic healing practitioners perform their authentic selves, especially embodying the role of the healer in all spheres of their lives. The informants presented a common narrative of following their "calling," which represents their understanding of their occupation as a healer as their life purpose, and as an expression of their authenticity.

VII. Conclusion

This thesis aimed to analyze how being a holistic healing practitioner in the United States shapes their perception of the authentic self. Initially, in chapter 1, I drew on anthropological scholarship of self, authenticity, and performance to lay the theoretical foundation of analysis. In chapter 2, I explained the methods I employed, and in chapter 3, I presented the historical backgrounds of holistic healing in the United States in connection to the topics of biomedicine, psychology, and the New Age movement.

Building my analysis on the themes of holistic healing and the authentic self, and using original data, in chapter 4, I examined how the informants understand the field of holistic healing and in chapter 5, how spirituality is incorporated in their practices. These topics lay the groundwork for me, then, in chapter 6, to examine how the authentic self is understood by holistic healing practitioners as the higher self, which is the spiritual dimension of the authentic self.

First, I aimed to present the field of holistic healing through the lens of its practitioners. I gathered the opinions of the interviewees about the meaning of holistic healing, presenting that the practitioners have a common understanding that holistic healing is centered on mind-body-spirit and in the principles of holism, interconnectedness, and spirituality, which were

exemplified by the healers' descriptions of their practices. Also, I introduced diverse modalities of healing practiced by the informants, emphasizing the importance of the element of talk, which is reflected in the numerous types of coaching and therapeutic modalities offered by them. Analyzing the informants' life stories, I drew parallels between the informants' paths to entering the holistic healing career, which were compiled in four main ways: 1. Direct or indirect introduction to the field by a family member; 2. Formal training in a healing modality or psychotherapeutic studies; 3. The experience of a traumatic life event that led individuals to search for support in a holistic manner; 4. A search for a holistic approach to treat mental health issues. It was possible to observe that most individuals were seeking their own healing when they first got in contact with holistic healing and all of them had some connection with spirituality.

Having presented the practitioners' understanding of the holistic healing field, I followed with an analysis of how spirituality is incorporated in the healing practices. I introduced the spaces of formation of shared spiritual concepts, presenting online and physical spaces where practitioners and their clients can connect and share information about spirituality and holistic healing. Moreover, I discussed common spiritual practices among holistic healers, emphasizing how energy cleansing practices are central to their work and describing a ritual structure that is commonly performed in

healing sessions. Furthermore, I traced back the origin of some spiritual concepts to the New Age movement, presenting how most holistic healers are critical towards acts of cultural appropriation done by some members of that movement; also, I explained the changes of meaning that the concept of "New Age" underwent over time. Lastly, I assessed that the adoption of a holistic spirituality can lead certain healers to believe that spiritual and healing knowledge are part of a "universal knowledge"; thus, I elucidated that an uncritical approach to holistic spirituality can also lead to cases of cultural appropriation.

The previous analysis laid the foundation for the explanation of the concept of the higher self, which is a spiritual perspective on the authentic self. Discussing how the practitioners describe the higher self, I found that although the answers varied greatly, most individuals voiced that the higher self is a part of their self that is in direct connection with the divine. Thus, it is an individual's ultimate source of authenticity and guidance. Moreover, the higher self was often connected to the concept of the inner child, which reinforced the shared view among practitioners that one must remove social conditionings in order to return to their "true authentic essence."

In order to understand how the authentic self is performed by the informants, employing Goffman's (1959) theory of everyday life performance, I discussed authenticity as a coherent performance of the

healers' online self-presentation. Abigail's case was presented as an example of a successful construction of the persona of the healer, because she portrayed it as her main identity across multiple areas of her life, including as a burlesque artist. Moreover, I highlighted that the informants see holistic healing as more than a career, but as a "calling," which is aligned with their authenticity.

In addition, I analyzed how the informants built the persona of the healer through social media content, which was done mainly by sharing three types of messages: a) healing in everyday life, b) explanation of a healing modality, c) life story of holistic healers. These types of content allowed the informants to build rapport with their audience, introduce spiritual and healing concepts to them, and portray their skills and competence as holistic healers. Finally, I discussed the gender aspect of holistic healing and its performance by the practitioners. I stressed how this field has a majority of women as practitioners and as clients, it embraces relational care and emotional labor, and it values intuition, spirituality, and other themes deemed traditionally "feminine." Nonetheless, I discussed that, at the same time that holistic healers seem to comply to a binary division of gender, they remove the categories of "feminine" and "masculine" from the realm of gender identification and use them to explain "feminine energy"

and "masculine energy," which the healers interpret as complementary energies that exist within all individuals.

In order to answer to the question "how does being a holistic healing practitioner in the US impact their perception of the authentic self?," it was found that holistic healing practitioners are socialized in a milieu that introduces them not only to healing practices, but also to spiritual concepts, such as the higher self. The higher self is a spiritual jargon for the authentic self, which represents a part of one's self that is regarded as their true essence and is in direct contact with the divine. In this context, holistic healing is not only seen by the informants as a career, but as a "calling," and a lifestyle that is in alignment with their higher selves. Also, through this practice they express that their actions are aligned with their self-values, which brings a sense of authenticity. Thus, a way the informants express their authentic selves is by embracing the role of healer as their main identity and being open about their spirituality.

I found that holistic healing and holistic spirituality provide a framework from which individuals add a spiritual meaning to an already unfolding secular search for authenticity and personal success. Thus, this can be seen as a continuation of projects of perfectibility of the self. Moreover, the concept of the higher self reinforces a tradition of individualism, as it places the essence of an individual in a spiritual realm,

separate from society. Also, in order for a person to get in contact with this divine part of their self, they have to undergo a "healing journey" to remove layers of "social conditioning" that inhibit them from living in their authenticity.

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding on the meaning and expression of authenticity by the informants, I utilized Goffman's (1959) definition of authenticity as a coherent performance to analyze the level of performance, and Erickson's (1995) view on authenticity as actions in alignment with one's self-values to understand the healers' narratives. Thus, it was possible to understand that, although the informants state that authenticity arises from a connection with divinity, there are also sociocultural factors in the determinacy of authenticity. The holistic healers reinforce their identities as healers through narratives, autobiographical accounts, choices of self-presentation, choice of career path, and public expression of their spiritual beliefs. An example presented is that, although holistic healing is considered a feminine occupation and it is consequently marginalized in the healthcare field, the informants' efforts to have a healing practice based on values they cherish, such as holism, emotional care, and spirituality, elicit in them a sense of authenticity.

I find it necessary to acknowledge that this study has limitations due to the extraordinary condition I collected my data. The COVID-19

pandemic made it impossible to conduct traditional fieldwork. Also, holistic healing sessions, especially coaching and psychotherapeutic sessions, have a private nature, which shaped my decision to focus this study only on practitioners of this area and not include their clients in my analysis. This field of research would benefit from future studies that examine the perspective of holistic healing clients in order to understand whether the holistic spiritual framework is shared by all individuals who are engaged in the field of holistic healing, or whether it is particular to the practitioners.

In previous studies, holistic healing practices have been portrayed as connected to the New Age movement; however, as presented in this thesis, even though some elements of holistic spirituality were originated in the New Age movement, most holistic healing practitioners criticized it and did not associate themselves with the term "New Age," preferring to be identified as "spiritual." This shows the need for further studies in the area of holistic healing, especially empirical approaches that take into account how practitioners are referring to themselves, instead of using past labels to define them and their practices. Furthermore, the focus of this study was not on gender relations within the holistic healing milieu. A gender-focused approach to holistic healing, especially its relation to non-binary expressions of gender, would greatly enrich discussions in this field.

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Abstract (국문 초록)

미국 사회에는, 개인이 자아의 완벽성의 프로젝트를 배양하도록 동기를 부여하는 문화적인 서사가 있다. "진정한 자아"는 널리 퍼진 심리치료 담론, 자기 성취에 기초한 진정성의 윤리, 개인주의에 바탕을 둔 자기 계발과 자조에 대한 믿음으로 인해 이 사회에 존재하는 개념이다. 이러한 맥락에서, 전인적 치유는 삶에 대한 영적 이해를 추가하여 진정성과 개인적인 성공을 위해 이미 존재하는 세속적 탐구에 추가적인 의미를 제공한다.

　　이 연구는 미국에 기반을 둔 11 명의 전인적 치유사를 인터뷰하고 전문 웹 사이트와 소셜 미디어 페이지를 분석함으로써, 전인적 치유사가 되는 것이 진정한 자아에 대한 인식에 어떤 영향을 미치는지 조사한다. 전인적 치유사들은 마음, 육체 및 정신 간의 연결에 중점을 둔 자신의 수행에 대한 공통된 이해를 공유한다. 전인적 치유는 신체적, 정서적, 정신적 요인을 고려한 건강에 대한 접근 방식이며 자연과 영성에 중점을 둔다. 게다가 전인적 치유는 미국의 심리 치료 전통에 의해 영향을 받았는데, 이는 대다수의 전인적 치유사들이 제공하는 코칭 (coaching) 서비스의 풍부함에 반영되어 있다.

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전인적 치유 분야에서 잠재적인 치유사들은 사회화를 통해 그들에게 전인적 영성이 특징인 영적 개념과 친숙해진다. 정보 제공자들은 개인적 치유 여정을 거치고 치유 양식을 배우는 등, 치유사가 되기 위해 유사한 경로를 거치는 것으로 밝혀졌다. 전인적 세계관에 따르면, 치유는 단순히 병을 고치는 것을 의미하는 것이 아니라, 진정성을 향한 여정과 사회적 조건화의 탈학습을 설명하는 데 사용되는 개념이라는 점에 유의해야 한다.

전인적 치유 환경에 존재하는 영성은 치유사들의 관행에 영향을 미치며, 이러한 영적 개념의 대부분은 뉴 에이지 운동 (New Age movement)에서 유래되었다. 그러나 전인적 치유사들은 "뉴 에이지"라는 용어로 자신을 식별하지 않고 "영적"이라는 말로 언급되는 것을 선호한다. 이는 특히 문화적 전유와 관련하여 뉴 에이지 운동이 받은 비판 때문이다. 그럼에도 불구하고 이 논문에서는 전인적 영성에 대한 무비판적인 접근이 동시대 치유사들을 뉴 에이지와 비슷한 패턴의 전유로 어떻게 이끌 수 있는지에 대해 논의한다.

진정한 자아의 개념은 전인적 치유사들에 의해 "상위 자아" (higher self)의 영적 개념으로 해석된다. 상위 자아는 신과 직접 접촉하고 사회에 의해 손상되지 않은 자신의 본질을 간직하고 있는 개인의 한 면을 나타내는데, 이것은 그들의 진정한 자아라고 여겨진다. 따라서 자신의 상위 자아와 일치하는 삶은 진정한 자아를 구현하고 자신의

삶의 목적을 달성하는 방법이라고 믿어진다. 전인적 치유사가 된다는 것은 이미 그들의 진정성의 표현으로 여겨지고 있는데, 그것은 영성, 감정적인 보살핌의 중심성, 그리고 전통적으로 "여성적"으로 여겨지는 요소들을 포함하는 것으로서 사회적으로 주변화되는 직업이다. 그러나 치유사들은 자신의 진정한 자아를 표현하는 가장 두드러진 방법으로 삶의 모든 영역에서 치유사의 페르소나를 주요 정체성으로 채택하고 수행한다.

핵심 단어: 전인적 치유, 진정성, 자아, 영성, 퍼포먼스, 미국 사회

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