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Enchanted Entrepreneurs: The Labor of Esoteric Practitioners in New York City

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Enchanted Entrepreneurs:
The Labor of Esoteric Practitioners in New York City

by

Karen Gregory

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2014
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Abstract

Enchanted Entrepreneurs:
The Labor of Esoteric Practitioners in New York City

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Adviser: Patricia Clough

Through participant observation and in-depth interviews, this dissertation weaves portraits of urban esoteric practitioners together with contemporary social theories of labor in order to explore the embodied and subjectifying project of becoming a psychic or intuitive practitioner capable of offering emotional and psychological “support” to city dwellers. By placing this project in a larger, contemporary political-economic framework, this dissertation looks to explore how spirituality is “entangled” (Bender 2010) in both social structures and cultural practices, as well as shifting configurations of work and the nature of labor. Here, we meet a network of individuals who are predominantly Tarot card readers (although they also combine practices such as Spiritualism, Paganism, Ceremonial Magical practice, Astrology, Numerology, and Reiki into their work) who have come to study and use the cards not only as a part of a personal “quest” for meaning or experiences but also as an attempt to make Tarot “work” for them. This work is personal and subjective, taking the form of self-management (Rose 1989, 2006) and investing in the self (Fehrer 2007), as well as social, entrepreneurial, and increasingly digital in nature. This dissertation explores this spiritualized entrepreneurial project by tracing the ways in which the shifting nature of work and labor in the United States has been experienced by individuals as both destabilization and opportunity, or what has been called “precarity” (Precarias a la deriva 2004; Beradi 2009; Neilson and Rossiter 2005; Mitropolous 2006; Ettinger 2007; Dowling 2007; Berlant 2007, 2011; Gill and Pratt 2008; Hardt and Negri 2009). In the wake of market demands for increased worker flexibility, as well as the increased privatization of risk, these esoteric practitioners have repurposed “New Age” practices and older American metaphysical traditions as a way of recalibrating both the self and the structure and potential of their work life. Here, links between Tarot card flips, the affectivity of symbols, the desire to articulate or speak one’s “truth,” and marketing logics are entangled and seen as sites for the possibility of enchantment, as well as sites that invoke both subtle and overt forms of labor.
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I would also like to thank Dr. William Kornblum, who told me to “Go out and do it!” In many ways, it was this simple, but stern advice that redirected the dissertation away from a study of a domestic violence hotline and helped me to head out into a new ethnographic field. In addition, many thanks to Dr. Vincent Crapanzano for his erudite storytelling, whose written work and class lectures were a guide to the research process. And, I would be remiss not to thank Dr. Catherine Silver for her support and guidance in the early stages of graduate school.

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I must also, of course, issue a tremendous thanks to the Tarot Center and its students for their generosity and time and patience. This dissertation was dependent on your generosity and your willingness to take me in. Thank you for your teaching and for the gift that is Tarot.

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This dissertation is dedicated to my father, Robert Gregory.
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"The carrier of man's values is no longer the "general human being" in every individual, but rather man's qualitative uniqueness and irreplaceability. The external and internal history of our time takes its course within the struggle and in the changing entanglements of these two ways of defining the individual's role in the whole of society. It is the function of the metropolis to provide the arena for this struggle and its reconciliation. For the metropolis presents the peculiar conditions which are revealed to us as the opportunities and the stimuli for the development of both these ways of allocating roles to men. Therewith these conditions gain a unique place, pregnant with inestimable meanings for the development of psychic existence."

– Georg Simmel, *The Metropolis and Mental Life*
Introduction: Solves All Problems

The tavern’s costumers jostle one another around the table, which has become covered with cards, as they labor to extract their stories from the melee of the tarots, and the more the stories become confused and disjointed, the more the scattered cards find their place in an orderly mosaic. Is this pattern only the result of chance, or is one of us patently putting it together?

— Italo Calvino, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*

How inadequate is all this epistemology and transcendental phenomenology for understanding of the visions of visionaries and seers!

— Adolfo Lingis, *Dreadful Mystic Banquet*

Through participant observation and in-depth interviews, this dissertation weaves portraits of urban esoteric practitioners together with contemporary social theories of labor in order to explore the embodied and subjectifying project of becoming a psychic or intuitive practitioner capable of offering emotional and psychological “support” to city dwellers. By placing this project in a larger, contemporary political-economic framework, this dissertation looks to explore how spirituality is “entangled” (Bender 2010) in both social structures and cultural practices, as well as shifting configurations of work and the nature of labor. Here, we meet a network of individuals who are predominantly Tarot card readers (although they also combine practices such as Spiritualism, Paganism, Ceremonial Magical practice, Astrology, Numerology, and Reiki into their work) who have come to study and use the cards not only as a part of a personal “quest” for meaning or experiences but also as an attempt to make Tarot “work” for them. This work is personal and subjective, taking the form of self-management (Rose 1989, 2006) and investing in the self (Fehrer 2007), as well as social, entrepreneurial, and increasingly digital in nature.

In this dissertation, I explore this spiritualized entrepreneurial project by tracing the ways in which the shifting nature of work and labor in the United States has been experienced by
individuals as both destabilization and opportunity, or what has been called “precarity”
(Precarias a la deriva 2004; Beradi 2009; Neilson and Rossiter 2005; Mitropolous 2006; Ettinger
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wake of market demands for increased worker flexibility, as well as the increased privatization
of risk, these esoteric practitioners have repurposed “New Age” practices and older American
metaphysical traditions as a way of recalibrating both the self and the structure and potential of
their work life. Here, links between Tarot card flips, the affectivity of symbols, the desire to
articulate or speak one’s “truth,” and marketing logics are entangled and seen as sites for the
possibility of enchantment, as well as sites that invoke both subtle and overt forms of labor.

By tracing the material practices of this network of readers, I am able to show how
individuals embody and enact forms of spiritualized labor and, in doing so, conceptualize their
labor as “self-transformative” and socially “reparative” or necessary. It is through their work
with the Tarot as a “technology of the self” (Foucault 1988) that readers not only seek spiritual
growth but also to invest in their own spiritual “capital.” This double transformation occurs
through a narrative arc that entails a practice of study, the cultivation of personal intuitive and, at
times, psychic ability. This study and cultivation often leads to a proliferation of online activity,
the production of media artifacts such as blogs and websites, as well as the development of selfstyled workshops and classes and the ability to write and publish a book or a line of products.
For many readers the culmination of this work is the development of a personal brand. I argue
that this movement toward the development of an increasingly public, mediated presence brushes
up against the traditional Jamesian notion of spiritual experience as entirely personal: as James
wrote, “the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude” (1902, 32).
Here, Tarot work elides easy distinctions of public and private, echoing larger shifts in the very nature of work and life itself. Still, in as much as this case study points to the alignment of contemporary spiritual practices with market logics, it also points to the ways in which neoliberalism has mapped the economic notion of “human capital” (Becker 1962, 2009; Schultz 1961) to the very experience of what it means to live a “good” life. While the Weberian thesis holds that scientific rationality and bureaucracy “disenchanted” Western life (Gerth and Mills 1957, Bennett 2001, Morgan 2009), I would argue that entrepreneurialism fosters forms of labor that are felt not only to be spiritual but also to be enchanting, in that these forms of labor create unexpected “hybrid” connections between bodies and media as well as keep alive notions of transformation and possibility.

In this dissertation, I suggest that media such as social networking, blogging, digital publishing, and online radio, in tandem with the increasingly flexible nature of work, mingle with the metaphysical underpinnings of the contemporary spiritual landscape and collapse easy distinctions between private spiritual experience and public life. However, in doing so, they help foster public realms that are themselves infused with a particularly American spirituality that has historically promoted entrepreneurialism, women’s engagement in the public sphere, and the capacity for new political visions (Bender 2010, Braude 2001, Taves 1999, Albanese 1992, 2007, Horowitz 2010). Participants in my study conceptually link the public recognition that results from their Tarot work with the feeling of spirit and with “living their best life ever,” a phrase borrowed from media mogul and contemporary icon Oprah Winfrey (Lofton 2011).

While sociological studies have long noted the presence of such a “new age marketplace” (Lewis and Melton 1993, Roof 2001), they have also understood the proliferation of goods and services as a form of consumerism in disguise (Heelas 1996) or even as consumerism as religion
(Dechant 2008). In this dissertation, I suggest that such a critique misses how spiritual projects that are experienced as a form of “care of the self” (Foucault 1998, 2010) can come to embrace a public and mediated life. Care of the self and media production may even come to reside in a feedback loop that encourages individuals cultivate their intuitions more intensely once they begin to experience themselves as a public and unique persona. Furthermore, the “success” of one’s public life can come to be seen as confirmation of the success of personal spiritual practice, as well as the efficacy of underlying metaphysical systems, such as the power of “visualization” and “manifestation.” Additionally, such a critique is insufficient if we are to understand the intimate and compelling nature of media in spiritual experience and the ways in which “new” media are socializing a particular type of spirituality that has the capacity to produce what I refer to as enchanted entrepreneurs.

Solves All Problems

I was on a lunch break from the domestic violence support hotline where I worked part-time when I realized that I would write this dissertation. Day after day, I sat listening to women tell me their stories over the phone without being able to do much besides providing an ear and references to various shelters, most of which had waiting lists. There are only so many times you can tell a woman who has just been beaten up that her sole option is to take herself and her children to the PATH Office in the Bronx and sleep in what is the equivalent of a bus station before you start to wonder about how people cope with life, how they make up strategies to keep on keeping on, often in the face of insurmountable stress and crisis. Maybe because at that point I was getting daily confirmation that, to borrow a phrase from the current “Occupy Wall Street” movement, “shit” actually is seriously “fucked up and bullshit” (Wark 2012), particularly for women who find themselves outside of the economically legitimized structures of care and
support, such as a privatized nuclear family, I saw with a different set of eyes a psychic’s storefront sign, the sort that is near ubiquitous in New York City. It claimed to “solve all problems,” including “love, money, and health.” Despite the cynicism such claims would usually inspire, I was curious about the support psychic practitioners might provide to individuals. In addition, I was suddenly curious about what it might be like to make one’s living as a psychic or esoteric practitioner.

Given my experience at the domestic violence hotline, which, taking place mostly over telephones, forced a form of empathic listening and responding or what I think of as “technologically mediated care,” I was particularly curious about the ways women might speak to each other and one another in “psychic” spaces. What did they say and do there? Was it ever effective, given that “effective” need not be defined strictly by the sign’s promises? Could the conversations had in psychic spaces ever be more than the “most bullshit-like of vernaculars,” as a woman on Twitter recently told me? Moreover, beyond their words, could we consider the psychic’s work a form of care work, and, if so, for whom? What type of care might this be, and how might it transpire? More broadly, I was and remain interested in the “care” resources that individuals mobilize to maintain themselves in the wake of larger social and structural shifts. To me, the social figure of the psychic, as well as the very notion of psychic ability, seemed to me to be an over-looked case study for understanding one such resource.

Research for this dissertation initially began with me visiting storefront psychics. Yet it quickly became apparent that while storefront psychics are the most visible form of psychic labor in the city, they are also part of a heavily guarded social world. As Ruth Elaine Andersen writes her 1987 dissertation, “A Subtle Craft in Several Worlds: Performance and Participation in Romani Fortune-Telling,” Romani people from both the Machwaya and Kalderashi ethnic

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1 See “Appendix I” for an extended field note drawn from these visits.
groups (often referred to by the derogatory misnomer “gypsies”) have long practiced commercial
fortune telling in the United States. The question of how and why their practices persist “touches
the essence of Romani culture” (1987, 7) and, as Andersen explains, fortune telling has long
been considered a form of “women’s work” among these groups. Andersen suggests further that
Romani women take up the work of fortune telling out of financial necessity and because the
stores can be financially profitable. These stores represent the work of the businesswomen of
their communities, and their ability to run these stores confirms for the groups that there is a
demand for their services. Psychic shops also represent one of the relatively few public entry
points into these groups, and even there, outsiders are not particularly welcome beyond their role
as customer.

As Andersen writes, fortune telling was (and remains) part of an oral tradition of the
Rom, and as the groups migrated to American cities such as New York, women took up the
telling of fortunes in the back of blacksmith shops (a profession of which Marcel Mauss [1950,
36] writes, “virtually all doctors, all shepherds, and all blacksmiths are magicians”—for Mauss,
blacksmiths are magicians because they work with a substance universally considered
mysterious). Carol Silverman (1982) explains that as these women built a clientele of their own,
they slowly moved from the back rooms of the blacksmith’s shop to their own shops and stores.
Silverman suggests that the higher from the street the shop, the “more established” the reader,
with her shop commanding more respect within her community. As Rom fortune tellers found a
modicum of financial success in American cities by offering a combination of “magical,
therapeutic, medical, personal, intimate, and accessible: an approach not afforded by formal
Christianity” (Andersen 1987, 49).² Indeed, Romani fortune telling took seed in the both urban

² The word drambarimo comes from the Romani word “drab,” which can be translated as “medicine” (Andersen 1987, 52).
(and eventually suburban) settings “not because it was a backwards, backwoods survival from a superstitious, pre-Industrial age, but a syncretistic practice which persisted through the settlement of Pennsylvania, the Industrial Revolution, the Victorian Era, and finally into the twentieth century” (Andersen 1987, 51).

While the storefront often provokes what I have referred to elsewhere (Gregory 2011) as “folk ethnographies,” in which city dwellers narrate their curiosity about the shops and speculate about the nature of the urban psychic’s business, the stores are actually quite a difficult site in which to establish fieldwork. Ruth Andersen (1987) suggests that without a “coincidence” such fieldwork may be, indeed, difficult to establish at all (Andersen was invited into the life of a Romani family through two children who frequented the bookstore she worked in at the time). Entering into a psychic’s shop is to be immediately reminded that you are a customer, or one who is not encouraged to “hang out” in the shop or ask too many questions. As psychics are often suspected—by passersby, journalists, and police—they understandably want to protect themselves from surveillance, harassment, and legal prosecution. In my experience, in the initial phases of research, the storefront psychics tended to be abrupt in their interpersonal style, controlling and directing the nature of the conversation and leaving very little room for questions beyond the frame of the “psychic reading” itself.

Although I could take notes on the interactions I was having, the shops were inviting a different ethnographic project than the one I wanted to conduct. My primary interests were in the labor of the readers, by which I mean not only the ways in which readers work throughout the city and the ways in which this work is structured by a larger “spiritual marketplace” (Roof 2001, Moore 1994) but also the personal and subjective labor of self-development and performativity that I presumed were inherent to the work. Indeed, beyond studying the cultural
traditions that enable certain members of an ethnic group to engage in psychic readings, I was curious about how and why a person might “become” psychic, by which I mean come to feel that they are attuned to information or knowledge that either transcends or bypasses the conscious mind. What social conditions might make such a project of attunement seem desirable or possible? I was curious about the role of the body and, in particular, what is it like to live in and through a “psychic” body or within “psychic” environments, as well as how one might manage the stigma (Goffman 1951) associated with the word “psychic.” Without being able to participate more fully in the exchange between the psychic practitioner and myself (or to observe them as they worked with clients) and explore these questions, it seemed to me that even the most rich ethnographic telling of the work of storefront psychics would continually brush up against the problem of psychicness itself and the challenges that it poses to the models of bounded, personal individuals or the production of verifiable knowledge.

Yet it was that very personal (as well as intrapersonal and environmental) psychicness that I was interested in exploring, particularly as an overlooked form of “care work,” “emotional labor” (Hochschild 1983), and “affective labor” (Hardt 1999) in New York City, which has been called “the medium capital of the world” (Harney 2003) and where, as New York magazine claims in the article “Mystical City,” “psychics rival trainers and nannies as city dwellers’ indispensable support staff.” Early in my research, when I sat down with Sara, an aspiring professional Tarot reader, she told me about a corporate event she had worked at a swanky hotel in Manhattan: “In the morning, I read for the woman who owns the hotel. In the night, I read for the woman who cleans it.” For Sara, entrée to the city’s elite hotspots is part of the glamour of Tarot, but being able to use the cards to traverse social worlds is part of what she thinks of as Tarot’s strength, which she refers to as “sort of an equalizer of people… their lives.” For Sara,
Tarot facilitates both geographic and social entrée into the informal economy of the city. This means access not only to individuals from various socioeconomic backgrounds but also access to corporations who pay for functions and for “creative” consultancy workshops. As another Tarot practitioner, astrologer, and palm reader, Elaine, told me, if you can “read palms” you will never be out of work. In fact, Elaine likes to say, “let fate take a hand…” meaning that palm reading and psychic work can take a person all over the world.

**A Brief History of Psychics Practitioners in the City**

Historically, tarot card reading and fortune-telling has been associated with women’s work and a form of “pick-up” or temporary work that women would engage in to supplement a family or their own income. The practice of “fortune-telling,” however, long linked with the “gypsy question” and issues of religious freedom, goes in and out of legal attention. The state of New York has resolved the tension with fortune-tellers (as well as Spiritualists, Theosophists, and other religious groups who consider mediumship a form of religious practice) by making “fortune-telling” for the purposes of divination a class B misdemeanor offense unless it is “part of a show or exhibition solely for the purpose of entertainment or amusement.”

This has left the practice of tarot card reading in a grey zone with regard to state regulation. Still, despite such legal fuzziness, “the clairvoyant” is, as Robert Park suggested in 1925, a “characteristic product of the conditions of city life” (Park 1925).

The word “psychic” can refer to a number of social paranormal activities and is used as a synonym for medium, seer, clairvoyant, and fortune-teller, and they are perhaps another of “our

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3 See New York State law S 165.35. To distinguish themselves from “gypsy” fortune-tellers, many freelance tarot card readers join organizations such as the American Tarot Association and adhere the organization’s proscribed code of ethics.

4 Interestingly, the town of Salem, Massachusetts, the home of numerous working witches, has recently passed an ordinance that will allow witches to be licensed by the city. The witches themselves petitioned for this ordinance, seeking that the town protect them again the onslaught of “outsider” witches who descend upon the town at Halloween and other pagan holidays.
Psychic practitioners can be traced back to Greek and Roman civilizations, and accounts of miracles and prophecy can be found in most ancient religious texts (Wooffitt 2006). The Oracle of Apollo at Delphi, which was established in the eighth century BC, is the most famous example of the role and influence seers have played in development of the polis. Edith Hamilton writes that as an unrivaled site of pilgrimage, the Oracle was considered “the center of the world,” and the Pythia, the Delphic priestess, acted as prophet to both king and citizen (Hamilton 1942). In the Middle Ages, as the Roma migrated from India they brought with them a tradition of fortune-telling, which mingled with other forms of divination, witchcraft, and what are now considered “pagan” practices, the persecution of which Sylvia Federici (2004) has argued was an essential phase of Western capitalist development. Despite persecution and the increasing rationalization of capitalist society, psychic practices in all of their many forms have endured over centuries and, in America, go in and out of fashion with the public and the media.6

One such period of fashion was the latter half of the nineteenth century, during which the spiritualism movement captivated the attention of the American public and academics. Born in the 1840s in the “burned-over district” of western New York, spiritualism was a social phenomena that resulted from the paranormal claims of two young sisters, Kate and Margaret Fox, who maintained they could communicate with the dead through a series of raps and knocks. Although Margaret Fox recanted (after a public display of her abilities in New York City) in

5 Currently, there exist a number of paranormal services available and there are too many to list, but they include activities that can fall into the following categories: divination (using a device to interpret signs or omens, often in a ritualistic manner), fortune-telling, communication and mediumship, spiritualism, shamanism and witchcraft, magic, and healing. I am using Robin Wooffitt’s term “psychic practitioners” as an all-encompassing term, and, as this study will not attempt to prove or disprove the presence of psychic ability, I will consider a psychic practitioner to be anyone who considers themselves to have “psychic” powers.

6 Recent research suggests that there has been an a decrease in affiliation in organized religion (Pew Religious Lanscape Survey). Also see Karin Beeler (2008) for a comprehensive review of representations of psychics and mediums in contemporary media.
1888, the movement had already substantially grown, having followers in both American and Britain. These followers were drawn mostly from the middle and upper classes and included Arthur Conan Doyle among their leagues. By the 1920s, spiritualism had became several things: a form of fashionable entertainment, a progressive social movement with links to abolitionism and the women’s movement, and a religious organization in its own right (Spiritualist Churches are still present in the United States and Britain). In New York City, women in particular regularly engaged in séances, table turning, and other forms of mediumship in order to find communion with the dead. In New York City, as well as in Boston and other American and European cities, spiritualist photography was practiced by both earnest believers and fraudulent hoaxers. In 1869, William Mumler, an engraver and spiritualist photographer, was charged with fraud and taken to court in New York City for producing images that purported to show spirits and ghosts. Although the case against Mumler was eventually dropped for lack of evidence, his trial brought an aspect of spiritualism to national attention (Mumler photographed Mary Todd Lincoln after her husband’s death and produced a photograph of the ghost of the deceased Lincoln), which was the conflation between emerging technologies and their capacity to provide visible “proof” of the known, or to make visible that which is not readily apparent to the human eye.

Furthermore, the interest and fervor of spiritualism is often linked to the overwhelming death toll of the Civil War, which left many eager to believe that connection could be established with their lost loved ones, as well as sympathetic to the idea of a spiritual life after death not reduced to judgment or reward. One of the main tenets of the movement was “and there shall be

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7 These forms of mediumship often had an element of dramatic performances and included table turning, séances, and spiritualist photography.
8 For more on Spiritualist photographic practices see The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult (2005) by Clement Cheroux.
no more death,” and the movement stands as an early representative of the American quest for immortality, health, and agelessness (Schmidt 2005). Furthermore, the movement spoke to the ever-increasing American cult of individualism, in that it decreed all people were capable of divining their own esoteric knowledge, and it placed emphasis on the human sensory experience as a source of truth. What could be seen, heard, felt, smelled, or touched could be offered as valid “proof” of the existence of spirit. Additionally, it offered this power of experiential wisdom to men and women equally, and often times mediums, as well as spiritualist members, were women. Braude (2001) claims spiritualism and mediumship appealed to women because it gave them a legitimate public forum and (no pun intended) public voice. While spiritualism and its incumbent theatrics grew out of favor by the 1920s, its effects still lingered in New York City at the level of culture and social policy. By the turn of the century a new phenomena had taken over the media: the presence of the “gypsy” in the city. This gypsy was portrayed as a diabolical fortune teller, con artist, and huckster who preyed on innocent travelers, not so innocent men, and female “serious mental cases” (Mitchell 1993). The *New York Times* reports of a problem of almost epidemic proportions with “1,000 fortune tellers plying their trade in New York” in 1910 and a “conservative estimate of $10,000 being paid daily” for their services (*NYTimes* 1910). During these years, the *ofisa* or storefront fortuneteller, card reader, and general “psychic” was born. Essays such as Joseph Mitchell’s “The Gypsy Women” (1993, 164) tells stories of “bajour” women opening “ofisas” or storefront psychic shops in the city, where they then “wormed” city women out of money. Often considered a blight in neighborhoods, these shops took root in nearly every part of the city. Those whose clients could afford more expensive fees grew in

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9 William James was deeply interested in research into the paranormal, sitting on the board of the Psychical Research Institute at Duke University.
social status. Those that remained in poorer neighborhoods continued to be marginalized and associated with crime.\(^{10}\)

**Finding the Tarot Center**

Ultimately, this project led me to study for over two years at the “Tarot Center” in Manhattan and study with (and interview) a core group of Tarot Center students. At the Tarot Center, the cultivation of psychic ability is entangled in the study of Tarot cards—their history and symbolism, as well as how to use the cards as a tool for the cultivation of personal intuition and authority, for magical work, and for divination.\(^{11}\) As a result of focusing on the Tarot Center and its students, this dissertation evolved into a larger project of understanding not only the cultivation of a psychic self and psychic body as form of affective labor but a project of looking to the ways in which contemporary spirituality itself is entangled in the shifting political economy, particularly as new forms of digital labor come to take precedence in people’s lives.

As Steven Shaviro (2010, 2) has written, “digital technologies, together with neoliberal economic relations, have given birth to radically new ways of manufacturing and articulating lived experience,” and by situating my work at the Tarot Center, this dissertation became a case study for understanding contemporary spirituality as an example of what I will call an

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\(^{10}\) Also see Rena Gropper’s work *Gypsies in the City* (1975) for a comprehensive illustration of Romani life in the city.

\(^{11}\) To understand the layers of labor at play, I needed to become part of a more accessible world— a world in which I could fully participate, ask questions, and get to know people engaged in psychic work. This search led me to look for other forms of psychic practitioners in New York City, of which there are many. The psychic storefront, while visible, is just one type of urban psychic practitioner. When we look beyond the shops, we can see a larger, often invisible network of practitioners that ranges from the informal psychic working from her own apartment and who sees clients occasionally to the public “executive” life coach who has developed her own line of products and services tailored to the needs of a professional class. It may go without saying, then, that psychic practitioners work across a range of social spaces throughout the city, including apartments, hotlines, bookstores, corporate marketing events, bars and hotels, strip clubs, churches, and esoteric schools and institutes that offer a range of classes and workshops. Over the course of searching for a home for my research, I visited numerous psychic shops, psychic cultivation workshops, Spiritualist séances, and an *espiritualismo misa*, which took place above a well-known esoteric botanica in the Bronx.
“assemblage” of market logics and affects, bodies and labor, and objects and media. Within this assemblage, psychic ability (as it intermingles with its secular cousin “the intuition”) becomes a guide to narrating the contemporary lived experience.

At the Tarot Center, I was warmly welcomed by Warren and Rose, the husband and wife owners and founders of the school, and introduced to a community of “professional” Tarot card readers committed to studying Tarot with the school and who are members of what they refer to as the Tarot “Tribe”—an international network of Tarot practitioners that takes place mostly online, across websites, blogs, forums, Facebook, and Twitter. What I quickly found at the school was that although students and their extended network of Tarot readers spoke of themselves as a tribe, there was really no clear set of beliefs or standard practices that these individuals adhered to. Tarot itself is a hybrid object whose history lies in game playing but that crosses between the world of magical, occult, and pagan practice, psychotherapy, and self-help. While many individuals claim the cards are “special,” no one person has a fixed interpretation or the final word on how the cards work or, rather, what could be “at work in the cards”—in fact, this speculation is at the heart of the plethora of books, articles, and workshops that are developed—as well as, I would argue, the pleasure—around this particular topic. Therefore, rather than a doctrine that must be believed in, Tarot is best thought of as speculative, experiential practice through which one opens oneself up to the dynamism of matter and energy.

Given Warren and Rose’s emphasis on the associations between Tarot and Kabbalah as forged

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12 The Tarot Center took me in, in part, because they seem to take in almost anyone who contacts them. However, like many of their students, I am a straight, white woman in her thirties. In addition, I came with the promise that I would be writing about the school, which I think both flattered Warren, the co-owner, as well as intrigued many of the students, who are interested in both publicity and the legitimization of their work. Also, that the school is a “Tarot” School and not solely a place to develop psychic ability through a series of obtuse or obscure exercises that can be continually challenged seems to ground the work that Tarot students do. As opposed to practitioners who led Spiritualist séances, I found that Tarot Center students were genuinely open to a newcomer and seemed to be relatively transparent in their methods for working with the cards.
by ceremonial magicians in the nineteenth century, students at the Tarot Center are introduced to Tarot through a general framework of Kabbalistic metaphysics, which explore a multiverse of energies, elements, and entities. I explore Kabbalah more fully in Chapter 2. In their study of the cards, students fundamentally open themselves to the possibility that a deck of cards may be speaking, but they do this not only by embracing a Kabbalistic cosmology but also by opening themselves to the very dynamism of the cards, their symbols, and their images. Tarot “works” even without a fully developed esoteric, magical, or metaphysical body of literature to draw from.

For the individuals who give themselves the task of making a living by reading the cards (or cards in combination with other alternative practices), the cards become an aleatory, speaking oracle that one learns to trust, but Tarot as livelihood is also a project that demands a considerable amount of self-development and self-management in order to “manifest” that self in the world. Here, the deeply personal elements of the embodied practice of psychic cultivation and Tarot study are caught up in the production of marketable skills and services. Tracing this dual entanglement between the cultivation of psychic ability and market logics has been the guiding purpose of this dissertation. By tracing this labor, I hope to show how, despite intense stigmatization, the social figure of the psychic reader manages to persist in public life and to account for the ways in which this figure has adapted to the demands of economic restructuring under neoliberalism, including the privatization of risk, the push toward endless “flexibility,” and the embrace of the “entrepreneurial journey” as a model for human development and existence. In addition, I show this how figure has engaged the possibilities of new media and in doing so attempts to channel the “spirit” of the “new economy,” which is dependent on a surplus of exchangeable, freelance workers (Southwood 2010) or what we might have once called—even
tried to celebrate—as a “creative class” who was presumed to have found a synthesis of autonomy and creativity in the marketplace (Florida 2003).

Therefore, contrary to the ways in which sociology might want to consider the Tarot world and its inhabitants, this was not quite a bounded community or a “new religious movement” (Lucas 2004) that can be identified by its leadership, practices, or beliefs. Rather, this Tarot tribe is best understood as a network of entrepreneurial practitioners and affective laborers whose relationships with one another as well as with material objects such as the Tarot cards themselves inspire continual innovation, product development, and branding of spiritual identities. In this regard, it is the individual practitioners (rather than the tribe as a cohesive collective or social group) that are continually searching to find ways to increase their social relevance across both “real” and “online” spaces, linking Tarot with numerous spiritual and therapeutic services. Rather than a religious “fringe” organization or community seeking to legitimize their beliefs or practices, the Tarot tribe should be thought of as series of relationships that are forged between independent actors as they try to make personal and spiritual experiences “productive,” by which I mean public, networked, relevant, and lucrative.

However, as I kept track of the duration of these relationships what I saw were relations that came into being and then fell away: very few could hold up over time (or were even meant to hold up). A friendship might develop only to see it wither as one of the individuals took up the study of a different esoteric object. A website might be developed, but then it would sit dormant while the person tried to figure out their next steps. A book might be published by one of the readers, but its allure would fade within a few months. This sort of “card-flip” spatiotemporality, in which events unfold, carrying with them affective weight, but that do not necessarily build up to a “life,” played out throughout my research. It was as though the Tarot Center students were
continually working, studying, and hustling without a clear end in sight. However, it was also apparent that both the owners of the Tarot Center and the students were engaged in numerous creative projects. Their very hustle was generative—generative not necessarily of financial stability or long-term work but of “things” such as classes, teaching materials, websites, books, newsletters, social media networks, and, ultimately, of a public identity, which some students were able to parlay into “brand,” which, as Celia Lury (2004) suggests, is also an object or a “some-thing” to which feeling and thought has been attached. A brand is also as Arvidsson (2005, 2011) suggests a site of convergence between affect and value. Indeed, brands have become the predominant form of value in “informational capitalism” (Arvidsson 2012).

_A Shifting World of Work_

As I attended the Tarot Center, students continually told me that Tarot reading was a form of “women’s work” and that such a gendered moniker referred to the fact that Tarot work is a form of care work that would like to see itself aligned with other “helping” professions, particularly psychotherapy. In addition, readers were pointing to the supposedly “feminized” skills that Tarot reading is thought to foster—the passive skills of listening, responding, empathizing, and having compassion for others. In order to contextualize their own sense of their labor in this dissertation, I turn to a long line of sociological works that have examined the concept of care and that had flourished in the wake of the publication of Arlie Russell Hochschild’s _The Managed Heart_ (1983). These sociological studies drew from three distinct but overlapping fields: Marxist labor studies, following Hochschild’s concept of “emotional labor” (Wharton 1993; Holman, Chissick, and Totterdell 2002), feminist studies of an “ethic of care” (Noddings 1980, Tronto 1993, Kittay 1998), and psychoanalytic theory (Holloway 2007). With the notion of “emotional labor”—or a form of subjectivizing labor in which the individual is
encouraged and guided to manage one’s emotions as a way of adding value to a service or commodity—Hochschild forged a path between older feminist work that had scrutinized care work as “reproductive labor” (Federici 1974, Weeks 2001), that is, unwaged, domestic labor required to reproduced the (male, waged) laboring body, and a shift that was taking place in contemporary capitalism, which scholars came to call “the feminization of labor” (Standing 1989, 1999; Gregg 2013). This shift marked not only women’s greater entry into the labor force (Hochschild 2001) but also a shift in the very nature of work—toward what has been called “immaterial labor” (Hardt 2004)—as capital itself sought to shift from industrial relations to what David Harvey (1990) has called a “regime of flexible accumulation.”

As David Harvey charts in his often-cited The Condition of Post-Modernity (1990), by the mid-1970s the Fordist-Keynsian economic-political arrangement that had defined post–World War II American life began to give way to a new paradigm, which Harvey labels a “flexible regime of accumulation.” This regime, contra its Fordist precursor, was marked by both flexible labor practices and increasingly flexible markets, as witnessed in the birth of what is often referred to by the shorthand term “globalization.” However, the effects of this flexible regime not only broadened the reach of the market but also brought market logics into the domain of everyday and into the experience of “intimate life” (Hochschild 2003, 2013). Such movement of the market and its logics works to dissolve clear boundaries between public and private life or, as they had been marked by earlier, gendered Fordist logics, the public domain of work and the domestic sphere of “life.” This felt closeness of the market to daily life was not only made possible by new guiding logics of flexible capital but also by the advent of digital and mobile technologies, which also expanded the actual reach of the market but also modified the very nature of work itself by fueling the creation of a “knowledge” economy in the place of the
factory. As the sphere of “life” itself was being terraformed by the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism, not only did more women enter the workforce, but workers more broadly, particularly “professionals,” experienced a form of work “speed up” as digital technologies extended the time and space of work (Deuze 2007, Fuchs 2010). As a result of both women’s entry in the workforce and the extension of work hours, care work that had formerly belonged to the gendered sphere of the home needed to be “outsourced” to a cadre of support staff, with far-reaching effects on women’s lives and global economies. Barbara Ehrenreich and her co-authors trace this in the collected essays of *Global Woman* (2003). At the same time that scholars were charting the effects of these structural shifts, a new tenor of economy was being explored via the notions of “immaterial” and “affective” labor (Hardt 2004), which looked to theorize the full extent to which capitalist logics—indeed, capital itself—was at work colonizing, canalizing, and modulating the very experience of life.

This brief foray into the backstory of our contemporary political economy helps ground my sense that the social figure of the psychic and her forms of “hybrid therapy,” as Andersen (1986) has called it (and indeed the very notion of the “psyche” itself, which is at once private and social), as a site that would allow me to explore simultaneously the nature of care that proposes to have the “solutions to life’s problems, such as love, money, and health” and what it means to cultivate a psychic self and body. When I began this research, I did not quite realize to what extent the marginalized social figure of the psychic obscures or seems to discredit the social desire for psychic, telepathic, or instantaneous communication, a desire that has underscored the advancement of a form of capitalism, what Franco Beradi (2009) has called “semiocapitalism” or what others have called “bio-capitalism” (Morini and Fumagalli 2010), a desire that dreams of removing barriers between capital, technology, bodies, and matter, as well as the animating
energies of “life itself.” I also underestimated the role that “the future” itself plays in the production of new digital economies, which are becoming increasingly dependent on speculative and predictive algorithmic structures and which unpin the endless circulation, recalibration, and valuation of data production.

Indeed, what I have found over the course of my dissertation research is that the psychic practitioner is an ideal affective laborer who works to produce in another person the feeling that their life is interpretable and narrate-able and who can successfully adapt, or make productive, this “hybrid therapy” to meet the needs of new economic conditions and technological arrangements. However, beyond her capacity to labor affectively or “to care” for others, it is as though the presumed capacities of the psychic practitioner—the ability to bring precognitive affectivity into thought (akin to the Bergsonian notion of “intuition”), as well as her potential for matching thought to action (by way of her hybrid “magical” skills of “manifestation,” which I explore through Alfred North Whitehead’s theory of occasions)—have been taken up as the much more generalized conditions and skills required of contemporary labor, particularly as labor is drawn to digital labor and to the production of data itself. A shorthand, perhaps glib, way to say this is that we are all being asked to “get psychic” in the “new economy,” if not explicitly through an esoteric practice like Tarot then through what I have come to think of as “secular telepathy” or the cultivation of intuition as a guide through precarious political and economic times. Indeed it has felt at times during the course of this research that the “intuition” is what is left to individuals (as a form of the privatized capacity for attachment) as individuals find themselves caught in the throes of economic restructuring. The intuition, as a tamed, personal version of potentially wild psychicness, is what allows the individual to surf these precarious markets and to resituate a sense of self in what Giles Deleuze (1992) called “the control society.”
In this way, the intuition is a guide for those being pushed out of a “disciplinary paradigm” marked by the Fordist enclosures of family, factory, and school and pushed to raw market logics in search of elusive “value.” As the “regime of flexible accumulation” has worked to dissolve the very walls of disciplinary enclosures, the intuition becomes a guiding “spirit” of post-Fordist economic life.

As Randy Martin (2002) has shown in his work *The Financialization of Daily Life*, the North American financial boom of the 1990s brought with it a new economic terrain marked by fast-moving capital coursing through the veins of computerized networks. As Martin writes wealth was able to “ricochet around the globe, yet never sear the flesh” (13). Vast sums of wealth were accumulated, yet this growth occurred “without a generalized sense of expansion that seemed to be its rightful inheritance of past economic upturns.” Not only did this wealth not “trickle down” as famously promised by the Reagan administration; it seemed to disappear into the recesses of the “immaterial” digital domain. Rather than outrage on the part of those being disposed by financialization, the 1990s and 2000s saw the rise of an entrepreneurial sociality in which participation in the market became associated with self-development, self-growth, and personal well-being. As Martin writes, “daily life embraces an aspiration to make money… to invest wisely, speculate sagely, and deploy resources strategically. The market is not only a source of necessary consumables; it must be beaten. To play at life one must win over the economy” (2002, 17). Perhaps distinctly opposed to older notions of social solidarity, financialized daily life gave rise to a culture of economic and social “winners and losers,” and winning, it seemed, became intimately linked with the figure of the entrepreneur, who embraced the market as a way of life.
In the world of Tarot, the figure of the entrepreneur, who is capable of intuitively sensing opportunity, has become a protagonist whose journey is easily mapped onto the figure of the Fool, the only unnumbered card in the Tarot deck. It is the Fool who can move about the deck, encountering and learning from the other figures and environments. The Fool must continually, cyclically engage in a series of challenges and conversations, taking risks to step off his cliff (see image) to become one with the world, thus embracing a life of growth and discovery. When conflated with an entrepreneurial project, this spiritual journey of self-discovery moves beyond therapeutic insights to become a model for a self that is entangled in the very creation of things themselves. It is this entanglement—between market logics, the digital terrain of media production, and spiritual growth that this dissertation seems to untangle.

Precarity’s Charge

While this dissertation explores the relationship between the contemporary spiritualized philosophy of Tarot and the demands of the neoliberal market for personal adaptation to normalized conditions of insecurity (and we might also usefully read the history of capitalism as a history of destabilizations), I am situating my work against a more specific backdrop of what has been called “precarity” in which individuals who once considered themselves generally upwardly mobile and shielded from financial—as well as environmental—collapse are now experiencing what Berlant (2011) has called a “recalibration” to a set of new relations between their lives, the state, and the market. Precarity has often been theorized as a labor condition, what some call the “casualization” or “informalization” of labor (Ettinger 2007), which emerged as post-Fordist, postindustrial capital moved to a “new economy” of information, global networks, increasingly flexible work arrangements, and investment in “immaterial” forms of labor (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007; Harvey 1991, 2007; Sennett 2000, 2007; Lazzarato 1996).
Additionally, these shifts in the configuration of labor were accompanied by the reduction of state-sponsored social welfare programs and the increasing privatization of risk and insecurity (Beck 1992). In this regard, precarity has been understood as a labor relation that illustrates the dissolution of what was once presumed to be a “contract” between employer and employee and that suggests that opportunities for stable, long-term employment and security have disappeared (Benería 2001). However, following Berlant (2011), the condition of precarity moves beyond the realm of economic restructuring and exists as something much more ordinary and immediate: the textures and rhythms of daily life have been altered in the wake of this restructuring, and individuals are now charged with attuning themselves to these effects—as well as affects. Precarity, in this regard, is a demand for personal affective reorganization in order to take a next step and/or to continue to conduct the work of everyday life.

I situate this ethnography of Tarot card readers against this backdrop to suggest that the demands made for such affective reorganization can be seen in the language of contemporary spirituality and in the ways in which Tarot is currently being “put to work” as a tool for developing intuition, psychic ability, and for divining the immediate future. Tarot here, however, moves beyond self-help platitudes and even beyond being a psychologized prompt for self-awareness and becomes, to borrow Jane Bennett’s term (2004, 2009), a “vibrant” object, one with its own agency and capable of assisting with the project of attunement—a project that can be experienced as a spiritual journey that feels like nothing short of an alchemical transformation of the base self into a capable, and thereby valuable or merely “well-” being. This journey toward capacity mirrors the demands of neoliberalism’s shift toward what Foucault (2004, 226) suggests is “the replacement of homo œconomicus as partner of exchange with homo œconomicus as entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his
own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings.” As Burston, Dyer-Witheford, and Hearn (2010) write, “Additionally, as individuals are subject to precarious, unstable forms of employment that demand they put their personalities, communicative capacities and emotions into their jobs, they are encouraged to see their intimate lives as resources to be exploited for profit and, as a consequence, new forms of labour on the self are brought into being.” As Shane (2003) suggests, “At the heart of this logic is a faith in the individual economic actor, not least the entrepreneur, as a gifted individual with unique abilities. And it is evident that the current post-crisis discourse keeps its confidence in the emergent socially responsible economic actor who will contribute to the construction of a moral economy.”

Within this entrepreneurial mode of being, the development of laboring capacity, what Foucault calls “capital-ability,” is directly tied to the individual and his or her personal abilities and traits. Such abilities and traits, however, now become sites of increased investment, training, supervision, and care. Not just your self but your being—your very bodily, mental, and emotional energies—can be taken up as potential resources, if only you can synchronize to their rhythms or tap into their flows. The logic here presents its own metaphysics, a seemingly streamlined synthesis of energies: the more abundant the self, the more capital-able the individual—and the more abundant the wage. While such a project threatens to drain the individual or at least continually preoccupy them, the flip side is the notion of gaining power and perhaps even “freedom.” As one person recently commented on the blog “Practical Tarot”:

I do feel more empowered since I started my self-employment. I feel a greater sense of both purpose and adventure. This is kind of funny considering I used to yearn for the security regular employment provides, since during childhood my father’s self-employment created quite a lot of financial insecurity. It is all in the mind though. I believe it’s possible to FEEL free as an employee too. Self-employment is not for everyone… but abundance is! Also, these days there is very little job security anywhere really. We HAVE to change the way we think about abundance and security. Pluto in Capricorn, anyone?
It is within this quest to reorient and reorganize the sensorium to the possibility of abundant energy that Tarot cards can become enchanted, as individuals open themselves to them as an aleatory oracle that operates according to its own agency. The underlying or animating mechanism of the cards need not be pinned down for many Tarot students. In fact, as people learn to trust the deck of cards and its messages, speculation about its source of agency becomes part of the enchanting process. In this process of coming to trust the cards, the deck and its symbols and figures become a living companion for individuals searching for the energy to keep their entrepreneurial boat afloat. As Warren writes in his latest book, Tarot symbols become “like an electrical transformer” capable of directly transmitting power to the reader of the cards.

Professional or Entrepreneurial?

As recently as 2004, however, Karrie Ann Synder found in her work on routes to the “informal economy” that individuals who had once been employed in the formal economy seek out work as Tarot card readers (in the East Village) because they see Tarot reading as an opportunity to gain freedom to set their own working hours, shift career identities, gain a more expressive sense of self, and because these services could be considered “high end” and pay relatively well (upward of $200) per session, depending on the clientele. Sara, the aspiring Tarot reader that I discuss in detail in the chapters that follow, shares these values, she and students like her also have a sense that her work must be invested in, developed, and turned into a

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13 Theories of how or why the cards “work” are also wide ranging. It is often suggested that an unspecified “divine” energy is moving through the cards or, following a popularized Jungian psychology, that the cards are an oracle of synchronicity, whose archetypal symbols synch up to universal, human experiences. It is speculation about Tarot’s underlying metaphysics that prompts individuals to take up the cards as a site of study and personal reflection. The cards invite an intimate personalization of their meaning, and, as a result, there is a surfeit of Tarot decks, books, workshops, and accessories, each tailored to individual visions and theories of the cards. Speculation in Tarot becomes particularly productive when it links up with new social media that encourages the publication of personal writing, images, and creative work.
lucrative and fulfilling business. The routes to that business are spoken of in terms of “professionalizing” oneself or becoming a “professional reader,” and this language often alludes to the need for formal Tarot study and certification, establishing one’s self among a set of peers who share knowledge, becoming an author (or authority) on a particular Tarot subject, and charging fees commensurate with other “professionals” for one’s services. However, this process of professionalization—to which the fantasy of social mobility may still be attached—is also entangled in the process of becoming an affective, entrepreneurial laborer in an increasing digital and precarious economy.

For Sara, a young, white, married woman with one daughter—in many ways, an individual who fits the sociological profile of a “New Ager” who are profiled as urban, educated, middle-class and middle-aged, the majority being women (Possamai 2000), as well as an individual who identifies as “spiritual, but not religious” (Pew Forum 2013)—her project of working as a Tarot reader is entangled in three separate threads, and this project comes to look at her as if she is much more like becoming an entrepreneur than what is traditionally thought of as a “professional.” The first thread is social and requires Sara to seek out a community of practice, such as the Tarot Center, where I came to conduct my fieldwork. Sara feels she must acquire basic competencies or marketable skills and begin to formulate a network of peers, as well as a reputation as a “good reader” among those peers. Second, Sara’s “professionalization” is also deeply personal, requiring that she develop personal sensitivities, perceptions, and intuitions, as well as a properly “performative” demeanor to convey such information. Sara must engage in what sociologists have referred to as “emotional management” (Hochschild 1974). Such management has three forms—cognitive, behavioral, and emotional. In this way, the work that Sara aspires to has much in common with other care workers in the city, such as nurses

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14 Sara refuses the moniker “new age,” referring to herself and others like her as “the Oprah generation.”
(Berdes 2007), hotline workers (Muthyala 2011), wait staff (Dowling 2012), flight attendants (Hoschild 1984), fashion models (Wissinger 2007) and those whose work is in, in part, the management and production of other people’s “experiences.” Attempts to “professionalize” in these fields run up against a long-standing devaluation of the nature of their labor. This devaluation is often spoken of within a broader context of the “feminization” of labor (Standing 1999), which is a problematic term intending to suggest that some forms of labor—typically those associated with supposedly “feminine” traits such as care, emotion, intimacy, and inherent flexibility or passive accommodation—are naturalized or considered lesser forms of labor and are often unwaged or unrecognized.

Third and finally, as the professionalization to which Sara aspires is increasingly a private, subjective endeavor that charges the individual with the cultivation of personal, bodily capacities and sensitivities, it comes to share more in common with entrepreneurialism (or what I will refer to as “entrepreneurialism of the self”), which is not necessarily at odds with the notion of professionalizing but recasts emphasis onto the success of the individual rather than onto the legitimizing and status building of a collective group of practitioners.

While the course of this research moved away from the psychic shop itself, taking me to study at the Tarot Center in Manhattan, where students cultivate psychic ability in the practice of studying and learning to work with Tarot cards, the long social history of the psychic in the city continued to haunt the project. While capital would, perhaps, appreciate it if we could all embrace the energetic flows of porous, entrepreneurial subjectivity, the figure of the “gypsy” psychic, the con artist, and the fraud continually reared its head in conversations in and around the dissertation. This destabilizing figure, carrying with it racist and classist affectivity meant to cut the “legitimate” practitioners from the “illegitimate,” was continually being encountered,
poking itself right into the methodology of the dissertation. It quickly became clear to me that although Tarot Center students spoke of their work with the cards as “spiritual,” that word was a bit of a red herring. To try to understand the Tarot Center and the work of its practitioners as simply a spiritual practice in which people “believed themselves” to be psychic or “believed” in psychics would ultimately become a project that reified this long-standing hierarchy between legitimate and illegitimate practitioners. It would also obscure the almost Hermes-like or trickster-like god of “the con” that was dancing its way through the language and symbols of the cards, through the spaces in which Tarot is studied and read, through the practice of learning the cards, and through the very marketing that practitioners adopt and embrace as they look to establish their businesses. While this “con” could be disavowed or attempted to be warded off with language of therapy, self-help, life coaching, or spirituality more vaguely, the con continued to assert itself, as though to say: “What’s the real con here? Tarot cards, psychic ability, and telling the future—practices that have persisted for centuries? Or the long history of advertising and marketing that sells a vision of new selves? Is the real con a capitalism that sets life and labor on the same plane?”

While spiritualized psychic practitioners like to have it both ways—seeing themselves as legitimate practitioners as well as on the “fringe” of society (despite their rather mainstream practices of working, using credit, owning homes, having mortgages, driving cars, etc.), it seemed to me that if, methodologically, I could move away from an emphasis on spirituality as a “set of beliefs” to be either confirmed or debunked, it might be possible to see how these practitioners were both played by and how they played with these larger notions of the con. This method would need to play with the tensions inherent in the sociological study of spirituality, which attempts to define the murky subject—a subject the ethnographer and sociologist
Courtney Bender (2012) has suggested is akin “to shoveling fog.” Yet despite its notoriously murky or ethereal quality, traditional methodological rubrics still insist on approaching the study of spirituality as something that must be understood by delineating and categorizing beliefs and practices. For instance, under a rather traditional methodological rubric, I could ask: Are these practitioners “rational” actors who embrace Tarot practice because it empowers them? Or, perhaps: Isn’t this just the market talking through these people? Or, I could simply focus on the meanings and interactions that were shared by this bounded group or “new religious movement,” thus removing them entirely from the problem of contagion that “belief in psychic abilities” poses to other modern subjects.

However, what I came to see was what I needed was a method that could start not from the inner working of the individual human actor but from the very basic experience of the card flip. Given that Tarot cards themselves seem to lure people to play with them, to talk about them, tell stories with them, I wanted to work with a method that could account not only for the practice of Tarot reading but for the way in which humans play with psychic capability and intuition through the very materiality of objects. In starting from the object and its effects and affects, it seemed possible to trace and illustrate the ways in which Tarot’s attendant spirituality actually flows between markets, bodies, selves, and environments and at times is literally “manifested” out of those flows. Such a method, I was hoping, would not reduce the Tarot Center students to a set of properties but rather allow us to see their work as a process that stands neither here nor there on the side of the con but instead dances with it, incorporates it, shuns and embraces it, and in doing so occasionally offering odd angles back to a capital that prefers smoothness and synthesis.

*Assembling the Spiritual*
In my research, a narrative arc emerged among the participants from the Tarot Center. This arc entailed an intense practice of study to cultivate personal intuitive or psychic ability, a proliferation of online activity and engagement with new media, the development of self-styled workshops and classes, and eventually the ability to write and publish a book or a line of products. Moving through this arc—from being a private student to being a professional teacher, public author (and authority), and “branded” entrepreneur—was often seen as a marker of spiritual progress, with successes or failures along the way being recast in language of spiritualized self-help (sometimes called lessons, opportunities, synchronicities, or even gifts). However, what is “spiritual” is not necessarily a new set of spiritual ideas or metaphysical insights but rather the conflation of entrepreneurialism, new media, and affective and flexible labor. That the contemporary psychic is encouraged to become a professional who invests in her esoteric pedigree and who aligns her personal senses (her vision, her clairvoyance, her sense of healing touch) with her work and with the development of new commodities and branded identities is yet another reason why continuity with the past seems severed and why the labor of the storefront psychic seems incommensurate with Tarot Center students.

Furthermore, if in the past we have conceptualized spirituality in the psychologized legacy of William James (1902) as a subjective, private, or inner experience, which struggles to make itself apparent or palatable to consciousness, now we must move to a different model, one of an affective assemblage—an assemblage where body, mind, cards, computer, the Internet, Oprah, historical spiritual figures, spirits themselves, blogging software, Facebook, and Twitter come together in what is more almost like a socket that an individual plugs into to find not just inspiration and experience but immediate energy that both compels and legitimizes a leap into productive, public, and ideally profitable work. I argue that it is this assemblage that is
experienced as spiritual, particularly when it intimates that there are opportunities for compassion or connection with others, when it promises that personal security is still possible, or when it seems to afford personal “well-being,” which is understood as a generalized notion of mental and physical health. In short, it is an assemblage that is experienced as spiritual when it suggests there is an unfettered supply of “love, money, and health” available for you, the affectively laboring body.

To develop this notion of spiritual assemblages, I draw from elements of Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network-Theory, Nigel Thrift’s formulation of “Non-Representational Theory,” and theories of affect itself (Clough et al. 2007). These theories allow for a decentering of the human in conceptions of spirituality, making room for the dynamism and temporality of objects, for a body that is opened to affective flows, and for the digital itself. Drawing from Actor-Network Theory, we are able to see the Tarot cards as social actors in their own right, carrying with them a living history and symbolic energy. From Nigel Thrift, I take the notion of “lures” in order to bring attention to what is being assembled together, as well as to what surpasses human cognition, namely affect. Through theories of affective labor and affect itself it is possible to revisit the literature of psychicness and to rethink notions of interpersonal communication, as well as the psychic body. Here, Lisa Blackman’s work (2001, 2012) on “hearing voices” and “immaterial bodies” has been invaluable. With these theories underscoring observation, it is possible to see how the labor of spirituality is entangled in an entrepreneurial project of manifestation as well as the ways in which that manifestation is lured to the digital and often “manifests” as a brand, an assemblage, as Celia Lury (2004) has it, of “feeling and thingness.” Cast against a backdrop of precarity, I am suggesting that spiritual assemblages are concurrent
with the feeling that “transformation” feels both upon us and imperative, or as Peter Sloterdijk (2013), quoting Rilke, has so aptly summarized, “you must change your life!”

**Enchanted Entrepreneurialism**

I used this theory and set of methods because I was interested in exploring the ways in which the very spirit of entrepreneurialism, which looks to embrace that which is called “spirituality” or, even still at times, “New Age” has mingled with a deep privatization. I wanted to understand how the intuition operated within this emerging spirit, simultaneously encouraging individuals to turn inward while at the very time attempting (via the entrepreneurial project) to establish social ties. By attending to the very material practice of the entrepreneurial project, I have been able to show how the dual nature of “spirituality” looks at the ways in which the ephemeral or seemingly uncapturable—indeed how the “uncapturable itself” as a site of fleeting, subjective experience—operates within contemporary political economy by becoming a site of investment and value. In addition, I have been able to see and trace how entrepreneurialism, in the face of precarity’s charge, becomes a deeply meaningful “choice” or option, even a “purpose” in life.

Ultimately, I have been hoping to show why entrepreneurialism has become such a dominant narrative across social institutions or why it has become a powerful subjectifying terrain. In order to understand why entrepreneurialism and its attendant investment in human capital has not been met with more social and cultural pushback, we will need to see what such a project does—not only for an economic system, but for selves, bodies, and a range of social actors. Indeed, by taking up these methods and theories I was able to open the range of social actors to see a much more entangled matrix of interests, with the human seeking divine guidance being modulated among this field of force.
Chapter One:
The Shifting “Spiritual” Marketplace

The old economy is not coming back.
—Bill Clinton speaking at the 2012 Democratic National Convention

Entrepreneurship is a magical tool.
—The Marketing Goddess, on Twitter

If you see dear Mrs. Equitone,
Tell her I bring the horoscope myself:
One must be so careful these days.
—T. S. Eliot, The Waste Land

If you are walking down Seventh Avenue in Manhattan, just south of Penn Station, you might look up and see a sign for “Sierra Psychic.” Her neon sign, which offers “Psychic Tarot Card Readings” glows next to a realtor’s sign, a sign for a passport photo services shop, and a “gourmet” deli. Like many city dwellers you might wonder how she stays in business or who among us ascends her staircase and pays for her services. You’ll probably continue walking as the more pressing or immediate issues of the New York City street confront you, but in those fleeting moments, the neon psychic’s sign has done its work. It’s offered up the simple reality that, regardless of how we feel about their services or the aura of illegitimacy that surrounds their practices, people work as psychics in New York City. Indeed, the social figure of the psychic has grown up with the notion of the modern city and, as Robert Park noted in his 1915 essay “The City,” her work is a “characteristic product of city life” (Park 1925, 40). The storefront psychic, with her glowing neon sign and dubious shops, happens to be the most visible form of this social figure, and she, in many ways, “takes the heat” as the illegitimate purveyor of psychic talk, even while networks of “legitimate” psychic practitioners multiply, often invisibly, throughout the city.
In this chapter, I will introduce you to one such network of “legitimate” psychic practitioners via the Tarot Center, which is also located on Seventh Avenue, just one block down and across the street from Sierra and her sign. Unlike the storefront psychic, the School is located on the top floor of a nondescript office building. You wouldn’t know it was there unless you went looking for it. Yet the School is an East coast hub for “professional” Tarot readers and has been in existence for over fifteen years. In this time, hundreds of students have passed through its doors. Many of these students go on to (or attempt to) develop sustainable careers as esoteric practitioners— as professional Tarot readers, psychic readers, mediums, and healers. Students also move into the worlds of therapy and incorporate their Tarot studies into work as psychotherapists and life coaches. Additionally, students take Tarot into the world of theater and the arts and use the cards to prompt creative work as writers, directors, and designers. Often, regardless of the path they take, Tarot Center students aim to write books, teach classes, and develop their own occult and esoteric objects (such as their own deck of Tarot cards, sacred jewelry, or crafts than be used in magical rituals) as well as their own personal take on spiritual practice. Today, given the prevalence of social media in their lives, such a “personal take” quickly blends into a process of finding one’s spiritual “brand” and marketing one’s services to a wider audience.

Much like what Jorgensen and Jorgensen (1982) found in their ethnography of an esoteric community, the Tarot Center and its students see what they are doing in sharp distinction from the storefront psychic. As Lisa, a long-time Tarot Center student told the class one night, “They (the storefront psychic) will curse you. I would never go to one of them.” Distancing themselves from a metaphysics of curses, which is associated with fraudulent forms of divination and con artistry, Tarot Center students align themselves with a heavily psychologized and spiritualized
study of psychic ability, which they see as an extension of a long and rich occult history as well as the inheritor of both the forsaken science of the past and contemporary scientific speculation and theory, particularly those of neuroscience and quantum science. As one Tarot reader (who is not a Tarot Center student but is affiliated with the larger Tarot “tribe”) recently wrote on her blog “Tarot Trends”:

I believe in the psychological and spiritual aspects of tarot. I believe that a tarot reading that does not include these components is less than what is possible. I believe that tarot helps us tap into our subconscious mind. I believe that tarot can reveal to us the behavioral patterns that no longer serve us, and offer solutions to help us change those patterns… Tarot is a practical tool as well as a mystical one. Tarot can show us our best options and point us in the directions that serve us best. Tarot can help us understand the people around us. Tarot can find ways for us to solve our most mundane problems. (http://tarottrends.com/content/modern-face-tarot-predictions-healing-and-divination)

In this quote we see that the Tarot has become a hybrid object—at once both practical and mystical, psychological and spiritual. But what does that spirituality entail, and how and why does it become the very marker of “legitimacy”? This chapter attempts to answer that question by taking into considerations the shifts that have taken place in what has been called the “spiritual marketplace.” Moving the sociology of spirituality from individualist and consumerist narratives, I explore how the social figure of the psychic, along with psychic ability and intuition itself, are being legitimized at a much broader scale, even being valorized as desirable and marketable skills in what is continually referred to as the “new economy” (Alexander 1983; Boltanski and Chaipello 1993; Henwood 2003; Neff, Wissinger, and Zukin 2003; Sennett 2006; Schor 2013). Indeed, taking up the relationship between spirituality and the “new economy” will require an understanding how both of these words have been constructed and entangled in each other and then moving the discussion forward. By turning to theories of entrepreneurialism and the role that affective labor plays in the “new economy,” I explore how the social figure of the
psychic and her version of what I think of as “secular telepathy” is becoming the very model of the entrepreneurial, affective, digitized laborer.

**Spiritual Marketplace**

In the 1990s scholars (Ellswood 1997, Bowman 1999, Roof 2001, Turner 2004, Aupers and Hautman 2006) began to use the phrase “spiritual marketplace” to designate a type of market that offered spiritual goods and services that could meet the demands of spiritual seekers “questing” for meaning through the practice of consumption. This marketplace was predominantly defined by a discourse of individualism. On the one hand, private selves went searching for meaningful experiences that could help them find a sense of identity or authenticity. On the other, those offering the services were engaged in acts of self-aggrandizement through the activity of legitimizing their work, credentialing themselves, and looking for ways to expand the spiritual marketplace to new audiences (Bowman 1999).

While this narrative of a “questing” individual among a plethora of services, practitioners, and beliefs, or what is often referred to as the “hodge-podge” (Bender 2007) of contemporary spirituality, has remained quite strong, this marketplace undergone major transformations with the introduction of digital and mobile technology and the advent of social media platforms. In this chapter, I suggest that the phrase “spiritual marketplace” be reconsidered in light of broader shifts that have been brought about by what is generally referred to as the “crises of post-Fordism,” and I suggest that the spiritual marketplace has been replaced by what Kathryn Lofton (2011) has called “spiritual capitalism,” in which life itself is recast as a “journey” of simultaneously personal transformation and financialization. By taking up the Tarot Center and its students through the framework of spiritual capitalism and its attendant forms of

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15 For example, Tarot students do come to classes looking for support along what they refer to as a “spiritual journey,” and the Tarot Center, as I describe below, did indeed fashion itself in this model of credentialization, offering degrees and certifications to students attending their courses.
labor, I am able to move beyond the narrative of individualism and its congruent consumerist critiques of spirituality.

There are several reasons why such a critique needs to be updated. The first is that sociology has more or less struggled to make sense of the rise of a new demographic category—the “nones,” those individuals who report that they have no religious affiliation. In tandem to the rise of the “nones,” the category of “spiritual but not religious” has also become a census phenomenon (Social Science Research Council 2012, Pew 2013). In response to these demographic shifts, sociology has suggested that the category of “spiritual but not religious” reflects the trend of individuals shunning external authority and hierarchy and placing greater value on their own “individualism” and their ability to make choices, as well as their comfort in having that choice satisfied by the market (Bender 2010, Zinnbauer et al. 1997, Ellwood 1994). Sociological investigations of this “new” spirituality attempt to explain the personal “meaning” that such individuals develop in and through their spiritual practice and spiritual beliefs (Albanese 2006, Bender 2007). However, such investigations remained very much committed to the individual and to individual, personal experience as the unit of analysis. As such, they fail to see the ways in which contemporary social forces—both economic and political forces, or what Foucault (2010) has called “governmental” forces—are pressuring, recasting, and limiting this presumed individuality.

While we may look back and see such an oversight as a sort of generous blindness on the part of academic researchers who simply couldn’t conceive of life outside of the normative and relatively protective structures of individualism, to remain fixed to the individual as the sole unit of social analysis is to miss the ways in which people are themselves caught up in what feels like “transformation” toward the postdisciplinary society, or what Deleuze (1992) called a “control
society,” a society in which the development of the “disciplined” individual, shaped within the institutional enclosures of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth, can no longer be assumed to be goal of governmental forces.\textsuperscript{16} Rather, for Deleuze, past disciplinary structures such as the family, the school, and the factory have all but crumbled, exposing human life to new series of forces, modulations, and logics. The logics work to eradicate the disciplinary boundary between the “individual” and the “mass.” For Deleuze, a new word is necessary to capture the sociality of control societies. He writes,

> Individuals have become “dividuals” and masses, samples, data, markets, or “banks.” Perhaps it is money that expresses the distinction between the two societies best, since discipline always referred back to minted money that locks gold as numerical standard, while control relates to floating rates of exchange, modulated according to a rate established by a set of standard currencies... The disciplinary man was a discontinuous producer of energy, but the man of control is undulatory, in orbit, in a continuous network. Everywhere surfing has already replaced the older sports. (1999)

Here, the Tarot Center, its students, and their practice become a case study for understanding this shift and for seeing the ways in which “spirit”—or what we can think of as energy and affect, but also the capacity to labor under a new paradigm and terrain of economic “flow” or global exchangeability—is a key component of this emerging sociality. While I hope this dissertation makes a valuable contribution to the sociological studies of spirituality and labor, I am most interested in tracing out the assemblage as a way to follow the energy at play and the effects it creates. In this first chapter, I trace the shifts that have taken place in the spiritual marketplace, and I explore the transition to “spiritual capitalism.” I examine how digital

\textsuperscript{16} The deep tie between spirituality, religion, and individualism has a long intellectual history, which has sought to locate and protect religious “experiences” as a subjective, inalienable property of the individual human being. The right to such a private, subjective experience is at the heart of notions of democratic pluralism and legal protects of “belief.” As Bender (2012) suggests, the study of spirituality is often cast in the shadow of these frameworks through which religion is understood and, as such, spirituality too has been seen as a sort of poor cousin of religious experience and belief, yet nonetheless tied to the figure of the autonomous, even rational, individual. Spiritual experience may be seen as a break from such perceived “rationality,” but the spiritual individual still remains a figure of contract society, protected by rights.
technologies, the rise of the media-mogul Oprah Winfrey and her trademarked “best-life-ever” philosophy, and shifts in the labor market have repositioned esoteric practitioners as affective, entrepreneurial laborers who themselves become (as intuitive, psychic practitioners capable of intuiting the market, tapping into their “true” selves, and staying “flexible”) the very model of successful labor in post-Fordist economies. In this work, the line between authority, intuition, and affect are blurred as they become part of Tarot’s material and performative practice of “reading,” the act of becoming a reader or diviner, and the experience of spirituality. While on the one hand deeply privatizing, this Tarot practice also begins to inform a laboring body capable of “going with the flow” and “weathering the storm” of current economic conditions. As such, we can see Tarot practice as sitting at the intersection of both personal “transformation” (toward one who can interpret the cards and who trust their personal intuition and/or psychic ability) and social and economic change.

Moreover, the notion of the psychic’s legitimacy—a notion that still raises strong feelings about what’s right, and real, or true—becomes folded into a labor process that encourages the development of what I think of as “secular telepathy,” which is often spoken of in the language of “intuition” and “well-being.” As a result of the economic sweeps of the past thirty years, which encouraged the professionalization of work, psychic abilities have been repositioned as “intuitive” skills that can be systematically developed, studied, and certified. Sara, a Tarot student and author, told me during my research that she and her peers should be considered “the Oprah generation,” as they align their esoteric work not with fortune telling but with the broader and more lucrative worlds of therapy, counseling, and life coaching. “Being psychic” has shifted away from the notion of being in possession of a supposed esoteric skill and has instead been folded into a more general sense of applied intuition. Indeed, skeptics who want proof of the
existence of telepathy or other psychic abilities are in some ways attacking a straw man: the 
validity or proof of existence of psychic phenomena is not really the point for the Oprah-
generation psychics.\textsuperscript{17}

Hardly fraudulent, the contemporary psychic practitioner performs an increasingly 
pervasive form of labor in American society. Part life coach, part spiritual mentor, their work 
capitalizes on the conditions of everyday life, particularly as the quest for personal well-being 
comes to stand in for more structural promises of long-term security. They may, perhaps, be the 
quintessential affective laborers: those who sell their very capacity to produce in you the feeling 
that you exist—that you can be recognized, read, interpreted, and advised. A contemporary 
psychic practitioner is the ideal and idealized mother-witch-wisewoman for a population raised 
on the promise of unique selfhood, a population now being abandoned by that same disciplinary 
project. Against a backdrop of limited opportunity and the increased perception that the future is 
precarious and risky, these practitioners offer the simple reassurance that a life has meaning, 
perhaps even a destiny, and that you, as an autonomous self, are a source of agency and 
potential.

In many ways, the intuitive practitioner is herself a model for the development of such 
agency and for the forms of work it may inspire. Members of the Oprah generation take classes, 
read books, and attend conferences. They hone their vision of the self along with a very clear 
intention of becoming a professional who participates in the spiritual marketplace. This allows 
them to add to “all the physical and psychological factors” that help an individual develop what 
Michel Foucault (2010) called “capital-ability”: the ability to earn a wage under neoliberalism. 
Often, the explicit goal of aspiring esoteric practitioners is to forge a link between personal,

\textsuperscript{17} Nevertheless, such psi investigations, such as the recent controversial study conducted by Dr. Daryl 
Bem of Cornell University, do continue (see Bem 2011).
intuitive development and this capital-ability. With that in mind, they not only professionalize their work but devise personal brand strategies. While we may be tempted to cast aspersions on this kind of neoliberal spirituality or look upon it with cynicism, consider what it might feel like to be a person who has been pushed out of formal work arrangements, perhaps through downsizing or layoffs, and who may be fending off homelessness.

While we’ve long thought that spirituality comes about as individuals consciously reject religious organizations (Bender 2012), in my research I have seen a series of social and economic forces encouraging individuals to become, often against their wishes, *Homo economicus*, who, as Foucault suggests, “is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself … being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings.” Such becoming is both precarious and transformative, and its power is such that it can be experienced as a spiritual journey. Negotiating neoliberalism’s insistence that market forces be drawn into the deepest recesses of our lives becomes the substance of spiritual transformation for prospective psychics as well as the basis for advising their clients. Spirituality, here, is neither a simple reduction to market logic, nor can it be seen as reliable source of resistance. Rather, the spirituality of *Homo economicus* might be thought of as a form of resilience. As Mark Neocleous (2013) has written, “resilience is thus presented as a key way of subjectively working through the uncertainty and instability of contemporary capital.”

Moreover, such spiritual resilience becomes a productive terrain of new and often weird assemblages, or what Brian Massumi (in the following interview: http://www.international-festival.org/node/111) has called “variety” or niche markets. This terrain is most clear when we see that along this transformative journey, social media wait to hear your story. Since they depend on our very personal experiences for the development of their content, social media
present themselves as tools for savvy individuals to maximize their available resources. To understand the seemingly natural way social media have entered the project of spiritual entrepreneurialism, I think of Shawn, a student at the Manhattan esoteric school, who had written a lengthy, wide-ranging book about Tarot during his time at the school. Lugging the large manuscript to class with him, it naturally became an object of interest among the other students, and Shawn became a well-respected authority on the subject of Tarot among his classmates. But his pointed disinterest in monetizing his Tarot skills marked him as in some way deficient in the eyes of his classmates. (Shawn will be discussed in more detail below.)

*The Spiritual Marketplace of the “New Age”*

When Warren and Rose Anderson began the Tarot Center fifteen years ago they were considered pioneers in the world of Tarot. While Tarot cards and Tarot practice where interwoven among the broader new age scene of the late 1990s, a school dedicated specifically to Tarot study did not exist. Warren, Rose, and two other women, who had been studying Tarot through the Open Center, a non-for-profit organization that offers a broad range of spiritually inflected holistic and esoteric classes and in Manhattan, felt that Tarot (as a historical subject as well as a spiritual practice) invited deeper and more concentrated study. When books on Tarot existed at the time, many provided only cursory glosses of the meaning of the

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18 The Open Center offers a diverse range of courses such as Reiki, Yoga, Feng Shui, and meditation, as well as workshops such as “Being at the Bedside of the Dying,” “Living with Intention,” and the “Sacred Geometry of Islam.” The Center was founded in 1984 as “a single forum for ideas and experiences at the forefront of a shift in society's awareness that many aspects of life are not separate but profoundly connected” (http://www.opencenter.org/chakras-samskaras-and-addiction-a-psychospiritual-approach-to-healing-addictive-behavior). Warren and Rose found that the Open Center was too rigid in its programming to meet their desire to teach there as well too focused on making money, yet they credit their time as students at the center with giving them the impetus to start their own school. The Open Center, as well other institutions such as the Omega Institute, which was founded in New York City in 1977 and expanded to Rhinebeck, New York, in the early 1980s, often charge several hundred dollars for their courses. These institutes are geared toward a middle- and upper-class demographic, something that Warren and Rose grapple with in their own business model. On the one hand, they are seeking paying clients but, on the other, are aware that they need to keep classes, workshops, and conferences affordable for “average” people.
cards, and many continued to rely on false histories of the cards, such as the notion that the cards were of Egyptian origin and were carried to “the new world” by gypsies. Eden Gray’s popular and now classic work *The Tarot Revealed* (1960) suggests, with emphasis in the original text, that such accounts add “depth and interest to the cards and none of them can be denied.” Since Gray’s publication several Tarot scholars, including Michael Dummett (1996) and Stuart Kaplan (1978, 1986, 1990, 2005), have sought to deny these historical claims and clarify the history of the cards.

However, when Warren and Rose set out to start the school, such historical work was only beginning, and knowledge of the cards—their history, symbolic meanings, and the metaphysical systems that have been attached to them—was relatively unique and rare. Seeing themselves as both researchers and teachers who would work to “bring Tarot to the public” (Tarot Center website), Warren and Rose began the Tarot Center at a time when “the spiritual marketplace” (Roof 2001) looked much different. Bookstores were the primary source for esoteric information, but even these stores carried limited works. To gain in-depth knowledge of an esoteric subject such as Tarot, individuals would indeed need to seek out a school, institute, or teacher. This means that expertise in esoteric subjects was relatively rare, resulting from a personal determination find the materials or a willingness to commit to a potentially stigmatized group or to undergo the challenges of initiation into a more formal community (see Luhrmann 1989 on secrecy and *Persuasions of the Witches’ Craft* for a detailed account of such initiation processes). While the Tarot community still considers itself to be a “tribe” drawn together by a common interest in Tarot cards, the boundaries of such a community, as well as the way information is shared, has been dramatically altered via the proliferation of digital technologies, and Internet platforms have worked quickly and broadly to disseminate what was once “esoteric”
knowledge. As I suggest below, the Internet brought with it new faces and potentially new clients for the Tarot Center, but it also brought challenges to the ways in which authority was conferred among esoteric practitioners.

While Tarot cards have a much longer social history than their associations with the New Age movement of the 1980s and 1990s, which I discuss in Chapter 2, when Warren and Rose began the Tarot Center they had been active members of the new age scene in New York City. Rose saw her participation in various esoteric classes and workshops as a continuation of her interest in folk music and meditation and Warren as an extension of his interest in ceremonial magic and the occult. Very broadly, their separate interests in Tarot mirror a larger gender breakdown within the Tarot community—a breakdown that Tarot readers often comment on themselves—women come to Tarot through a nonhierarchical and seemingly “less academic” interest in Tarot’s ability to foster intuition and personal creativity, while men are ascribed as the “historians” who are concerned with Tarot’s rich histories of occult writing, ritual, and initiation into a hierarchy of knowledge. While this gender dichotomy can become a site of personal tensions for Warren and Rose (and I say more about the larger frame of race, gender, and sexuality in Chapter 3), it has also been rolled into their conceptions of “the spiritual” itself, and both understand Tarot as a unique object whose proper use can help synthesize what are perceived of as opposing male and female energies. In this regard, Tarot became a site for both Warren and Rose to create their own social identities as well to begin to carve out a niche market among the other esoteric organizations, nonprofits, and societies that existed.

At that time, the idea for a school devoted to Tarot also seemed to capitalize on the interest and commoditization that they were witnessing in the new age publishing boom of the 1990s. The Tarot Center, they believed, was a bit of a risky venture, but both Warren and Rose
assumed that a market for esoteric classes, workshops, and products would only continue to grow. In addition, they imagined themselves as part of a nascent strata of care workers or practitioners whose school would meet the needs of a city searching for spiritual and/or “authentic” experiences. Warren, in conversation, had stated that he sees his school as part of the luxury-services market of the city, offering a service to those who can afford to pay. As I discuss later in the chapter, this positioning has left the school in a relatively precarious position, dependent on a clientele that may not be as “questing” for spiritual meaning as sociologists once thought (Berger 1999, 2011, Roof 2001, Bender 2010, 2012, Bellah 2007,) nor as able to part with their disposable income. However, in developing a school, not only would Tarot be brought to a public audience, but it could be linked up with the then emerging market for diverse forms of therapeutic self-help, a market that as Micki McGee (2005) shows in her work *Self-Help, Inc.* has a long and rich history but that bloomed in the 1990s. As McGee notes, the trade publication *American Bookseller* reported that self-help book sales rose by 96 percent between the years 1991 and 1996 (11). It was this renaissance of the self-help industry that gave the Tarot Center its initial impetus, and it is more or less this self-help market that sociologists refer to when they note the deep links between new age spirituality and commoditization (Mears and Ellison 2000).

During this height of therapeutic self-help publishing, Tarot (both as a set of cards and a metaphysical system) was heavily commodified and psychologized through a proliferation of Tarot books and Tarot decks, many of which sought to connect Tarot to the notions of “self-discovery” and “self-transformation.” Books such as Rachel Pollack’s *Seventy-Eight Degrees of Wisdom* (1980) and Mary K. Greer’s *Tarot Constellations: Patterns of Personal Destiny* (1987) and *Tarot Mirrors: Reflections of Personal Meaning* (1998) translated the dense metaphysical history of Tarot into practical, everyday language and the Tarot itself into something that could
be “used” by individuals in relatively ordinary and mundane ways to find their inner voice, creativity, their sense of purpose or direction, or their own personal connection to “the divine.”

James Wanless, the creator of the Voyager Tarot Deck (1986) and who bills himself as a “futurist and pioneer of new thinking,” suggested that his work was to bring Tarot “out of the occult closet and into the twentieth century,” where it could be synced not only with therapeutic possibilities but also scientific discoveries and the most recent theories of physics and communication. Carolyn Giles, in her work *Tarot: History, Mystery, Lore* (1992), suggests that Tarot can be seen through three phases—from historical card game, to esoteric and occult object, to contemporary psychologized object, with the last phase of Tarot drawing heavily from the occult past, particularly from the structure of the popular Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot deck that emerged out of the occult work of the Golden Dawn in England in the late 1800s.

In addition the milieu of commodification and a cultural push toward the therapeutic sensibilities of the “new age,” the Tarot Center also picked up on notions of professionalization, seeing itself as a source of Tarot “certification,” conferring “degrees of completion” to its students depending on the length of their study with the school. This element of professionalization is what distinguished the Tarot Center from its “institute” predecessors such as the Open Center, where clients would pay for single courses or workshops, as well as from “mystery schools” or schools that operated as a collective committed to exploring mysticism or the occult through initiation and experience. Rather, the Tarot Center would operate as a night school for interested students. It would not demand ceremonial initiation or allegiance to the group. Interested students could come and go through the school and would be able to engage in a course of study that would lead to a degree recognized by the Tarot Community, with Warren and Rose functioning as Tarot mentors sharing their “expertise.” As opposed to initiation in a
mystery school based on experience, the Tarot Center degree would be based on a number of hours of class time. While other Tarot certification services now exist online (such as the Tarot Certification Board of America), the Tarot Center would offer personalized instruction as well as the opportunity to study Tarot in a social setting, rather than solely through correspondence. In this regard, Warren and Rose imagined that they were starting a unique endeavor that would allow them to combine their mutual love of the cards with the facilitation of a social scene all their own. And to some degree they have succeeded. While they have always described the school as a “labor of love,” the Tarot Center has allowed both Warren and Rose a relatively stable income—until recently. Today the school has found itself a bit unmoored among the fast-moving, affective, technologically (or digitally) mediated capitalism of the city, which is pressuring their business model, leaving them to ask what it is that they are selling and how they can remain relevant in the contemporary “spiritual marketplace,” a sociological term that now needs to be updated to take into account current shifts in both the nature of labor as well as the intimate location of digital technologies.

Master of Your Own Ship…

It’s just a little before 6:00 p.m. on a Monday. I’m running late, rushing down Sixth Avenue, weaving in and out of the tourists of Herald Square, trying to cut over to Seventh Avenue. The workday has let out, and I’m annoyed at the traffic and annoyed at myself for being annoyed. “What do you expect? It’s rush hour, Karen,” but the thought floats through my mind that New York City might be taking whatever there is of my “soul,” remembering a friend who didn’t want to move here because he feared that the conditions in the city—overcrowding, competition, a perceived lack of community—would wear on him and eventually “corrupt him spiritually.” “It’s a possibility,” I think to myself, but the thought takes a backseat to the rest of
my mind, which is coping with the crowds by silently wishing for everyone to disappear and filling my field of vision with a fury of aggression and complaint. Look to the left. “What the hell, people?” Look to the right. “Lady, those shoes scream office-life misery.” Straight ahead. “Goddarn it. Move it, man. Are you really just going to dash out in the street like that?” Whatever the soul may be up to, there are times in New York City when it can’t escape the realization that it is also embodied in a being that was just clipped in the shoulder by an oversized purse trying to make its way to Penn Station on the shoulder of another harried individual. This little dance of the street has been my routine for almost a year and a half. Every Monday evening, I lurch my body through the rush-hour streets, work myself into a state that forces to me to question the quality of my life, arrive on the corner of Twenty-eighth Street and Seventh Avenue, realize I haven’t eaten dinner, examine the street’s bleak food options, and sigh.

I try to use the elevator ride to the sixteenth floor to catch my breath and remember that I am going to a Tarot class, a place where “the cards are here to help you.” Tarot, I’ve been told several times, will “change my life.” No more sighing on the street corner, I imagine. “If only Tarot cards would help me stop rushing or help me feel less distracted,” I think to myself, and it wouldn’t be terrible if they could also help me write, keep the writing going, and help me find a job. It’s a lot to ask a deck of cards, but every Monday I find my concerns and my desires no more or no less imploring than the rest of my fellow classmates, who have each come to the school for different reasons but are drawn together by a common interest in the Tarot and a desire to become “a reader,” or one who interprets the meaning and rich symbolism of the Tarot but also works with their intuition and their psychic ability to feel what the cards are saying. Like a reader of a book, a Tarot reader must not only be familiar with the language and grammar of
the text; they must also work to develop a feel for meaning, as well as a capacity for translation between Tarot’s metaphysical language and the often ordinary and quotidian concerns of their querents. Becoming a reader is an art of balancing the information that Tarot cards present with a personal sensibility, continually attending to the idea that the divine “is speaking” through both the cards as well as the human. To want to become a reader is, then, a desire to be in touch with what is speaking. As Tarot readers will tell you, it is the experience of touching such a presence that will, in theory, change you because such a presence can become an invaluable and wise companion. And so I go to class every Monday to understand the practice of reading and the “learning-to-touch” that Tarot seems to offer.

Exiting the elevator, I arrive at LifeQuest, an informal conference center that takes up the entire sixteenth floor of the building. The place is a maze of rooms where classes ranging from real estate licensing to spiritualist séances take place. They also seem to run an antique store of sorts. On your way to the Tarot classroom, you pass a glass room full of tea pots, china dolls, and costume jewelry. In all the time I have been attending classes, I have never seen that room open, nor have I seen anyone purchase an object. Is the collection attended by someone, or have these bits of life been abandoned to this strange glass room, where they must sit silently and watch us come and go? Sometimes, I try to sneak up on the room to test my fantasy that the tchotchkes come alive when LifeQuest is closed and all the séances have ended, filled with the spirits and ghosts that humans only mistakenly believe they failed to conjure because they could not see them or make them productive.

The cluttered and mysterious knickknacks of the abandoned shop, for me, set the mood for arriving at the Tarot Center, which rents a room at the end of the hallway and consists mostly of a long conference table and an erasable whiteboard. Warren and Rose take up their seats at the
head of the table, beneath the whiteboard, often after driving in from Queens, where they live.
Rose usually arrives first, as “Warren is still parking the car,” and while we wait for him to arrive
Rose sets the school in motion. A reading cloth covered in stars emerges from her bag. A brown,
ornate wooden box that holds her Tarot cards and additional decks is set upon the cloth. A
metallic money box is also set out, as the school charges thirty dollars per session, which is
collected at the beginning of the class. The evening’s handouts, if there are any, are also set out.
And, finally, Rose places the ceremonial bell on top of her Tarot cards. This bell, which reminds
me of something a town crier might shake through the streets, is used to mark the beginning of
the class, as well as to start and stop any meditations that we might be guided through. Its dull
“ding” is thought to clear the room’s energy, transforming the bare and secular conference room
into a space in which “sacred” work can be done. Writing the words “The Suit of Cups” on the
whiteboard, Rose indicates that we should remove the entire suit of Cups from our Tarot decks
while we wait for Warren. Tonight’s class will be based on these cards, exploring their
significance as the “suit of water, the suit of the unconscious, and the suit of emotions.”

I take my seat at the table, often sitting closer to the door, not wanting to take the seat of a
Tarot “regular,” like Lisa, a woman in her fifties from the Bronx, who without fail sits in the
chair directly to Warren’s right, or Shawn, a retired school teacher who lives in Brooklyn
Heights, who sits to Rose’s left. Her seat is symbolic, as Lisa, who has been attending the school
for over six years, acts as Warren’s right-hand woman, often offering answers to his prodding
questions or parroting back the factual or historical information that he has laid out. Shawn, on
the other hand, is often a champion of Rose, who has a tendency to hang back and let Warren
instruct the classes, and her more intuitive take on the cards. Shawn, who has written what
amounts to his own Tarot book (which I discuss later in the chapter) often takes issue with
Warren and his at times guru-like style of instruction. Sitting at the back of the class, the four of them create a panel of gendered forces and voices that can guide the tenor of each night’s class. Tonight, in addition to Shawn and Lisa, other school regulars have arrived. Sara, an energetic former B-movie actress in her thirties who seems to gush love for the cards, has taken a seat across from me, spreading out her glittered “reading cloth” which she will lay her Halloween-themed deck upon. Deana, another woman in her thirties who is a mother and self-professed “go-getter,” has also arrived. Deana describes the classes as “her therapy,” and she often arrives with a salad in hand and ready to “do some work.” Glenda, a middle-aged Caribbean woman who speaks almost indecipherably quietly, often takes the seat next to Lisa, spreading a yellow pillowcase underneath her Tarot cards. Glenda often is one of the few people of color at the Tarot Center (or in this Tarot community more generally, as I discuss in Chapter 3) and even though she was a regular student during my time at the school, she is a bit of an outlier among the regulars because they quite openly suspect that she may be mentally unstable.19 In addition to this cast, Meryl and Jill have also arrived. Meryl is a retired woman, heavy-set and brash; she considers herself an astrologer rather than a Tarot reader. She reads entirely “by feel,” she tells me, and she seems possibly to hate Warren or to find him tiresome. She has a quick temper, and over the course of my time with the school she abruptly stopped attending classes. She takes a seat to my left, while Jill, a woman in her fifties, an accomplished media professional who is often traveling overseas as just as often entangled in financial or legal disputes, takes a seat next to me. She is still wearing her office clothes, her starchy white collar popped up over the lapels

19 During classes, Glenda often speaks in short bursts of words that other students, including myself, have a hard time understanding. There are times when she seems to be suggesting that Tarot is working with “evil” forces, although this is not clear to me. These theories aside, Glenda grew more suspect to the class after she quietly but pleadingly implored Sara to speak with her after class one night. She told Sara that a vague but dangerous “they” were out to get her, leaving her threatening messages on pay phones throughout the city, but that Sara could help her intercept these calls.
of her suit jacket. A thick multicolored chain necklace rests on her chest. I feel decidedly small and quiet sitting between these two women. As we, a group of mostly women, take our seats and fidget with our cards, Warren walks into the room in his jeans and button-down shirt. His shoulders are back, and he holds himself quite upright, giving off a proud aura, but Warren also looks tired. Still, without fail he energetically asks, “how is EVERYONE doing?” in his unique, drawn-out, pedantic drawl and takes his seat at the front of the room. With Warren’s arrival, the class may now begin.

**Shawn and the Book**

An evening at the Tarot Center almost always begins with a round of hellos and any news that Rose might have to share (perhaps they received a call from someone looking to do a party, and if so, does someone want the job?). After this, however, is Warren’s time to shine, and for a good half hour to forty minutes, Warren will embark on a Tarot monologue, weaving together his own Tarot philosophy, references to Ceremonial Magic, the Golden Dawn, the history of Tarot, and Kabbalah. In these monologues or lectures, Warren displays a unique ability to weave together ordinary life and the possibilities of magic, questioning at times what it means to be a human being and whether or not we can ever “know” the truth. While Warren does believe that a human being’s capacities to see/hear/feel/know are limited, he sees Tarot as a powerful tool or key that can lead to accurate insight. Often using curiously phrased questions in a quasi-Socratic style, Warren will leap from his both hypnotic and engaging monologues suddenly to ask a student a question. Questions such as “Karen, can you *truly* define what an archetype is?” have caught me up, because I am often not sure what Warren is asking, but such a hesitation or pause is taken as an entrée into an often long-winded speculation in which Warren works the class
toward the answer to his own question. While some students find Warren’s oratory style to be less than accommodating, Lisa has told me that she could “listen to him all day.”

The written-up lessons of the cards, which are sometimes handed out on thick, glossy white sheets that Rose has typed up by transcribing Warren’s notes at home, seem a little flimsy, but these sorts of accessories are what they offer their students. If they were handed out more regularly, an avid student could collect and combine all of the sheets, effectively producing a bare-bones Tarot book. Indeed, in addition to paying the fee for the class and taking notes during the classes, several students also purchase the various books and audio courses (ten- and even twenty-CD sets) that the Andersons offer. The purchase of this material is not necessary, but it is part of the scene. People want more information than the class can provide in a single night, yet it is often the case that people will buy the books and not read them or “not remember” what they read. This lack of a baseline of knowledge for the group is compounded by the general message of every class, which is often “to go with what you think is right” and to find a way to blend “book knowledge” with the intuitive, psychic, and emotional information that an individual brings to a reading.20

Often, this approach causes tension in the class. Shawn, among other students, feels frustrated that he pays money to be told to look “within” to find the meaning of a card or a spread, when what he is looking for is “information and knowledge.” Shawn is a retired public school teacher who lives in Brooklyn Heights, “in the same building for over twenty-five years.” He prides himself on his meticulous appearance, and he enjoys doing things very well. He is often searching “for an outlet for his expertise,” and Tarot is a site that has allowed him to study, master the cards, and “help others” through readings. Shawn told me that the heart of Tarot for

20 The continual juggling of information is also a successful business strategy. There is always more to say, read, and know about Tarot—and conveniently another book to be bought or class or workshop to be taken.
him is “compassion” and that while he may feel lonely at times in his own life, Tarot allows him to feel for others and to help them with the weight of life. After getting to know Shawn through the weekly classes (despite his frustration with the teaching style, he is one of the core students who returns week after week, although he has recently ventured out into different networks through classes taught by another well-known Tarot author), I was surprised one night when he pulled a big, brown, leather-bound book out of his bag. “Ah, is that the book?” I asked, because I had heard others in the class mention that his notes were like a “book.” I thought they meant that he took copious notes from the Andersons’ lectures or from class readings. I was only partially correct. For months, Shawn had been in the process of collecting and systematizing what he had heard and read about Tarot. What resulted was a rather comprehensive reference book of card meanings, combining astrological, numerological, and kabalistic associations as well as his own spin on these materials. He had actually been writing a book, but he dismissed it as “a work in progress.” It was not finished, and he wasn’t sure it was ever going to be, but I began to notice that when he did bring it to class, he used it like a tome, looking up information to counter a point that the Andersons had made or to consult during readings. The book began to mark him in the class as someone who “knows his stuff,” and while it was a way of marking his progress in Tarot, it also established him as someone interested in “learning” Tarot, not just “experiencing” it.

This desire to know and not just experience was also reflected in Shawn’s approach to the book itself, which was written “for him.” Despite bringing it—lugging it—to class, he did not want to share it with others, despite continual pressure from the Andersons and other students. The Tarot world is replete with authors and Tarot decks, and to publish material in this world, as I will discuss in the next sections, is seen as the appropriate “next step” after Tarot study and
then conducting readings for money.\textsuperscript{21} Shawn had been working intensively with some of the readers in the class through different Tarot readings to identify what the “next thing for him should be.” Often (especially in reading in the round, where the entire class conducts a reading for an individual), the message to Shawn was to “take it to the next level… teach classes… write his own Tarot book… and share himself with the Tarot community.” While in class Shawn seemed to listen to this advice, in personal conversations told me that he thought the push to publish “everything” reflected shallowness on the part of the Tarot world. He was interested in doing something that brought him respect and authority, as he felt he had when he had been a teacher, and the personal work that he was doing with Tarot, such as his daily card readings for himself, daily writing, weekly readings for others, and intensive study with another Tarot author, he saw as a substantive investment of his time and money. For Shawn, “going public” with his work would only be possible once he had attained the appropriate (as he saw it) level of mastery, and for him, “the book” and the act of writing was part of a larger project of personal interrogation to “discover the next phase of life.” In this regard, it became “a technology of the self” (Foucault 1988): it was a tool through which he intended to transform himself from Tarot student to Tarot authority, but he had to make sure that such a move was commensurate with the image he has of himself as substantive and legitimate.

However, Shawn’s reticence to share his knowledge and go public with his skills continued to mark him in the classes as someone who still “needed to learn confidence” and as someone who was being “held back” from their full potential. It was through listening to several

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\textsuperscript{21} The world of Tarot is saturated with decks. The website aeclectic.net, which maintains an online collection of decks, currently displays and reviews over a thousand decks, and Amazon suggests over ten thousand books exist on the subject. It is probably not possible truly to account for how much money is made from the sale of these materials or how much royalties individuals see from their sales. Several authors have told me “they make nothing” from the sale of their books. For individuals, the money to be made comes from workshops and classes, which a book helps advertise and facilitate.
of the readings Shawn received that I began to realize to what extent the model of entrepreneurialism has entangled itself into the “spirituality” of the Tarot world. In these readings, it became apparent that the model of the self who properly “cares for itself” is not a private self but rather one who emerges from the spiritual project into public life and who is able to receive public recognition for both their personal “work” and wisdom as well as for the “work” they have put into producing the accompanying objects—often a book, but I have also seen this same push for those contemplating the production of their own deck or other types of Tarot-related artwork, starting up a business—or, most personally, trying to write a dissertation.22

The students who come to the Tarot Center, then, are not only “questing” for personal experience; they are looking to “do things” with that experience. This doing of things often takes the form of writing but also teaching or simply making something “real” (as we will see with Chelsea later in the chapter). Such a doing requires going into the self in order to discover not only who the self “is” but what the self desires. In this regard, it requires moving beyond the self, tangling the self up in a creative process, and it is this entanglement that leads students almost immediately to “the market” via digital and online labor. During the course of my studies at the school, I made a note the following note to myself:

> What students are looking for is less ‘feel good’ and more ‘do more’… People are looking to ‘manifest,’ which is a word they keep using. They want to make something, connect to some-thing, and being sent back onto the self feels repetitive, dulling, boring. They want to feel something more than themselves, I think. And I’m not sure this is something that Warren and Rose can provide.

At the Tarot Center, it seemed that providing self-discovery was simply not enough of a business model. Several factors contribute to this pressure on the model. First, the esoteric

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22 My own work is like a pet project of this group of people, and my dissertation and what it should be about and how I can get it done provides an endless source of material for Tarot-related readings and advice.
information that Warren is selling now can easily be acquired via the Internet, as we will see in the following section. Beyond this, and indeed because of the Internet, the very spaces in which esoteric practitioners practice has changed. As the landscape of the spiritual marketplace changes and bookstores and psychic fairs give way to digital locations, it is no longer that easy to get a gig reading Tarot throughout the city (although locations, of course, still do exist. Some Tarot students find that restaurants and bars are looking for readers and work there in the evenings). However, and perhaps most importantly, it is that the tenor of work itself has shifted. Personal quests for a self are not hobbies for many students but rather attempts to restart a life or a career that has for one reason or another left them. As work has shifted way from long-term stable configurations toward casualized, informal, or precarious labor, personal “quests” for a self are indeed personal quests to find a way to make ends meet.

From Books to Blogs (and Back Again)

While the growth of the Internet infused life into the Tarot Center (the majority of its students find them through a Google search), the Internet and its proliferation of information has also left the school in a bit of a quandary with respect to what it is selling. While the consumerist boom of the 1990s made Tarot accessible in bookstores, with the arrival of Amazon.com as well as eBay and other online booksellers, the Internet brought the bookstore into people’s homes. While Tarot Center students often suggest that they learn more through their class participation than they would if they were to read the (often muddled) work of occultists, any student who desires can acquire and read the principal works that Warren often references, such as Paul Foster Case’s (2006) The Tarot: A Key to Wisdom of the Ages or Robert Wang’s (2004) Qabalistic Tarot. And, even if they are not inclined to become esoteric scholars, many of the students do arrive with some basic grasp of the cards, having read more recent Tarot “classics”
such as Rachel Pollack’s (2007) *Seventy-Eight Degrees of Wisdom*. These works have made them familiar with basic interpretations of the cards and with the basic history of the cards and can make students resistant to rethinking such interpretations, particularly if they have been reading for clients and relying on these introductory texts.

The challenge that Warren and Rose face is how to remain relevant in age of easily accessible and often free information. While they have always wanted the school to bring Tarot into the public eye, the Internet is doing some of that work for them by making metaphysical texts, books, and Tarot decks easily available as well as creating discussion forums and numerous blogs devoted to analyzing both Tarot history and Tarot use in daily life (for example, the website Aeclectic Tarot is also a vibrant and growing community of Tarot enthusiasts who research and write about Tarot but also regularly develop and sell new Tarot decks. Still, while the texts that underpin Tarot use are being disseminated (as well as continually created and recreated) online, Tarot itself has not quite been drawn into the mainstream, in, say, the same way that astrological horoscopes can be found in a daily newspaper.\footnote{In the US, Evangeline Adams (1865–1932) is generally regarded as the first astrological columnist as well as being a serious astrological practitioner. Her columns and articles ran for over thirty years. She was famously put on trial for fraud but found not guilty. The trial made her columns even more popular. R. H. Naylor, in the United Kingdom, first wrote in the *Sunday Express* in 1930 with a horoscope for the infant Princess Margaret. Asked to provide a second article, he did so and predicted that an English aircraft might be in danger—and on the day of publication the R-101 airship crashed in France. Since then horoscopes in one form or another have been an essential feature of the UK press.}

Additionally, the Internet and the proliferation of books and materials also gave rise to a world of minor “celebrities” (some who are more well known than the Andersons) whose books and workshops have had some crossover success to a general spiritual audience—authors such as Rachel Pollack, Mary Greer, Robert Place, and James Wanless. These Tarotists have not only written books and designed decks but are also considered to be historians, mythologists, or artists who work via the
medium of Tarot. Given Tarot’s convoluted history, these authors had a wider field of materials, myths, and practices to cull from as they developed their own personal “takes” on Tarot.

However, over the last fifteen years, a healthy number of these books have now been written, and the general history of the Tarot has been more or less settled (even if not well-known by all students when they first arrive at the Tarot Center, it does exist and can be agreed upon, which was not the case in the 1970s or even 1980s, when Eden Gray and others such as Michael Dummett were writing). Ironically, even though the history has been more or less agreed upon, the idea that you could make a living as a Tarot reader and author has only come about recently, as Tarot became more accessible not only through the dissemination of information but through various web publishing tools that have worked to blur the boundary between consumer and producer of information.

The advent of “blogging” in the late 1990s, which brought web-publishing tools to a wide audience, made it possible for lay individuals unfamiliar with coding languages to easily post content to the Internet. Blogs introduced new individuals to what had formerly been more discrete online communities. As Rose, an “early adopter” of technology recalls, the Internet initially worked to maintain the secretive knowledge of Tarot, as aficionados and students gathered in chat rooms and where the hierarchy of knowledge was often maintained through “flaming” each other or insulting people for their lack of esoteric knowledge. In pagan and neopagan circles, such newbie status is referred to as being a “fluffy bunny” or an “instawitch” (Coco and Woodward 2007). These are pejorative terms for people who are adopting magical practice as a lifestyle or aesthetic choice and who have not studied or practiced their craft. Being a “newbie” in the world of Tarot, then, could feel overwhelming, embarrassing, or even shaming. While Tarot forums still exist (such as Aeclectic.net, which the larger Tarot community still
regards as cliqueish), the advent of blogging meant that anyone with an interest in the cards and a willingness to publish their writing could begin their own Tarot conversations. Additionally, public blogs, as opposed to private forums, could promote a Tarot enthusiast’s work to a broader audience as well as link Tarot readers with other esoteric practitioners, psychotherapists, self-help authors—not to mention prospective clients. What “web logs” or blogs made possible was a public-facing portal on the Internet that could either act as a static webpage through which to offer one’s services or be an online, dynamic site of personal content development. While Tarot students embraced both online capacities, that blogs could be personal journals matched up well with the needs of nascent Tarot students, who could use the blog to work their way through a study of the cards. Blogging, in essence, turned the “newbie” into a transparent learner—one whose learning process could become the content of a site itself.

This shift from the newbie who must learn from others to “expert of one’s own life” is perhaps the greatest challenge that the Tarot Center faces because, while Warren may fashion himself to be a guru who can initiate individuals into the mysteries of Tarot and in doing so reveal the mysteries of the self and human experience, his students arrive looking to be given something else. Students do not necessarily arrive at the school willing to sit and listen to Warren for two hours. Rather, as Deana has said, they wish he would “speed it up a bit” and “get to the facts.” While Warren may have intentions of teaching his students through experiences of listening, reading, and being corrected, students would prefer a faster or more effective method of learning the Tarot. This tension is present in almost every Tarot class, and while some of this tension has to do with personalities and a struggle for “teacherly” authority on Warren’s part, what the students are asking for is interesting to analyze.
Students like Deana are looking to be given both information as well as novel experiences that can repeatedly confirm the student’s nascent expertise. Often they would like the information conveyed in the most “effective” way possible so that, as Deana has suggested, she can “use it.” Using information here means being able to understand the basic card meanings (students often get frustrated that Warren meanders in his explanations of the history of the meanings of the cards) but also in being shown how to translate the “here and now” into a card reading. This means that a card reading should not only make sense to a querent but that it should also provide “productive energy” or actionable suggestions. Cultivating this productive energy—which is tied directly to the capacity for labor or “manifesting”—sits at the heart of contemporary Tarot study and indeed seems to undergird entry into the spiritual market.

**“I miss the psychic fair…”**

In addition to an online world of more easily accessible knowledge, there has also been a change in geography of esoteric labor and the spaces in which Tarot reading takes place. While the storefront psychic persists with her visual street-level presence, for Tarot Center students discrete locations where readings can regularly be held are less common. While some of the younger students, like Geena and Evan, have found paying gigs at restaurants and bars throughout the city, many of the older students like Lisa lament the general loss of the “psychic fair” as a place where one could set up a table and make a few hundred dollars over the course of a day’s worth of Tarot readings. While such fairs still take place throughout the city, they are less frequent or often set up by a closed community, such as the psychic fair that is run by the Spiritualist Church in Manhattan.

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24 I attended this psychic fair in 2010, where I had my aura photographed by a man named Kenneth who then interpreted the photo through a series of numerological phrases that seem to indicate that I would be lucky with money. Kenneth had made this “aura camera” (also known as Kirlian photography) himself. It consisted of a black cardboard box and some Polaroid film.
Additionally, Tarot readers lament the loss of occult bookstores, which would employ several regular readers a week to conduct readings. When I first met Chelsea, another Tarot Center student, she had been conducting astrology readings at East/West Books one night at least night a week, building up regular and new clients. A good evening at the bookstore could bring in a few hundred dollars for a couple hours of work in a relatively pleasant and safe environment. Such a bookstore gig was a helpful and, at times, necessary supplement to her income at the time. In addition, working at the bookstore made Chelsea feel like she belonged to a community of practitioners.

While the Internet has on the one hand expanded the terrain of esoteric conversations and the potential for work, it has also replaced some of the face-to-face, physical locations that readers relied upon. Additionally, a shift to having an Internet presence rather than a psychic fair presence or a bookstore gig has brought with it new demands for online skills and a new set of public aesthetics. For example, although Lisa worked in academic editing when she was employed and is familiar with the basics of the computer, she currently does not have an Internet connection in her home, and the task of designing and maintaining a website or blog is all but impossible for her, as she is often relying on the library for her Internet access. She is aware that work is being done on the Internet, but for her the skills needed to access this work feel prohibitive.\footnote{Most recently, Lisa designed a set of business cards and established a Tarot-related e-mail address. While business cards and e-mail are common parlance, this marks a major investment for Lisa in her own Tarot business and in the belief that she can make money from the practice. She has also now been unemployed for almost two years and has little hope of being reemployed in her former job or in a comparable field.}

“The Oprah Generation”
When Jorgenson and Jorgenson (1982) conducted their ethnographic study of a Tarot community, the landscape of the spiritual marketplace not only looked different, but they were able to delineate three “distinct” segments:

1. a “spiritual” segment concerned with the moral condition of humanity and the supernatural in which liberation, salvation, enlightenment are emphasized;
2. an “esoteric” segment emphasizing scholarly study, physical well-being, healing, or what outsiders might call “medicine”; and
3. a “psychic” segment involving an essentially secular focus on exploring the human mind’s particularly hidden or concealed senses, where by occult knowledge is viewed as a path to personal power and success. (381)

In my work, Jorgenson and Jorgenson’s distinction would be impossible to make. Students at the Tarot Center collapse these distinctions between spiritual, esoteric, and secular. For them, “spiritual” is used as a term that links the physical and the mental or the material and immaterial. Additionally, spirituality here is not necessarily seen as something concerned with salvation or enlightenment but precisely with the well-being that is assumed will result from an integration and transformation of the body and the mind. As such, this spirituality is, as Courtney Bender (2010) suggests, deeply “entangled” in the secular, social, and quotidian pursuits. It cannot be separated out from the contexts in which it is experienced. Although Webb Keane (2010) appears to be criticizing such an approach to understanding spirituality in his review of Kathryn Lofton’s work *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*, when he writes that it seems that the spiritual is “what remains once the impediments” of religion, by which he means “exclusive rituals, legislating hierarchies, codes of membership,” have been removed, Keane is actually pointing toward a relatively good definition of contemporary sensibility that sees ordinary life as a terrain of spiritual possibility. Much like Oprah and her viewers, for the readers in my study, “life itself” is what they are seeking to understand, and, as such, the orDeanary—the types of things that appear on a storefront psychic’s sign: “love, money, health”—become a site of synchronicities,
insights, symbolic meanings, things that were “meant to happen,” gifts, blessings, challenges, and life lessons. This sensibility is deeply open to seeing the self as implicated in and shaped by the material world and values “creation,” or what is referred to by the magical word “manifestation.” This spiritual sensibility is then linked to a sense of craft and the processes by which “things happen” or are “gotten done” in the world. Additionally, for these readers, it is through the alignment of self with the expression of self (often through conversation but also through the writing of books, the illustration of new decks of cards, the development of workshops, and so on) that the spiritual project is known more fully.

Before I started attending the weekly Tarot classes at the Tarot Center, I sat down with Sara, a woman in her late thirties who has been reading Tarot for money in the city for several years. Her five-year old daughter joined us, slightly sapped from the playground around the corner and happy to enjoy a slice of pizza while we talked about what had brought Sara to Tarot and what she thought of working as a reader. Sara had been referred to me by the instructors at the Tarot Center as “one of their best students,” and she had been enjoying Tarot as a form of pick-up work, reading at corporate parties, baby showers, strip clubs, hotels, theme parties, and for friends and strangers. She got these jobs through a word-of-mouth network that kept her reading for money at least once a week. While I had planned to have a general interview about Tarot and work, Sara was intent on interviewing me, and one of the first things she excitedly asked me was, “are you writing a book?” “Not exactly, er… uh… well, I’m just gathering preliminary research,” I replied. “You’re writing a book,” she said, staring intently. “Uh, well, it might…” She repeated it again: “You are writing a book.”

26 However, it became clear within a

26 At this point in the conversation, I thought to myself, “okay, this is what it’s going to be like to interview Tarot readers, psychics, and ‘fortune-tellers.’” And it has. These people are experts at “answering” questions and very often are able to turn a question you ask into a question they are asking
few moments of talking that although Sara was a bit guarded about telling me too much about
herself, she was also interested in speaking with me for two reasons. First, “all publicity is good
publicity.” “Use my name! Tell people about me!” is a phrase she used in a subsequent
interview, and, as a businesswoman, Sara was interesting in drumming up business. Her long-
term goals were (and still are) to work for herself and to have Tarot provide the kind of income
that will allow her to live “like these women you see in the city,” gesturing at the street through
the pizza-shop window, who have a house in the country and a “beautiful life”—nice clothes,
good skin, fit bodies, and happy families. “Think Sex in the City. Think fabulous.” It came as no
surprise when Sara told me that she is a former B-movie actress who still maintains many
friendships with makeup artists, photographers, and models. The idea of life as something that
happens as though it were a movie (or should happen on the screen) is one she takes pleasure in;
she thinks that such dramatization is “delicious.”

Alongside this larger-than-life fantasy self, Sara also has a family that gets by mostly on
freelance work. Her husband is a freelance photographer, and she has been supporting them with
her Tarot work. Her daughter is enrolled in a school in midtown Manhattan where she regularly
encounters wealthier families. (She often reads for the wives and maintains that she knows “the
dirt” on several of them.) To her, Tarot and her work are part of the way into that world, and
when I asked her what she really wanted to be doing she said, “live well… living well is what
matters.” For Sara, living well means eating well, being healthy, and “like, doing yoga and being
refreshed and feeling wonderful.” When I asked her if she considered any of those practices, like
eating organic or doing yoga, to be “new age,” or if Tarot was a “new age” practice to her, she
replied, “no.” The two older owners of the Tarot Center might be a bit “hippyish” to Sara, but

you. Elsewhere, I address the conversational style of the readers and the difficulty that I have had getting
“straight answers” from individuals.
she considers herself to be something else—a blend of interests that fall under the general heading of “well-being.” For her, the “psychic hits” that she receives and the intuitive work that she does with the cards become part of a larger project of imagining what this well-being can be and how to attain it. She mentioned another woman at the school who is also young and who has a successful professional career, two young children, and a well-paid husband and said, “we’re really not New Age; we’re more like the Oprah generation of readers.”

In addition to wanting the publicity that might lead her to some version of fortune and fame, it also came out in our conversation that Sara was an aspiring writer who felt that Tarot offered her an opportunity to write. Sara had studied anthropology and mythology in college and enjoyed school, but she didn’t consider herself a scholar, even though she is drawn to scholarly works and enjoys Tarot because it feeds a desire to learn about art, history, mythology, and esotericism. Her interest in writing was twofold. First, it would mark her as a professional reader, which would allow her to charge more for readings and build her client base, and second, it would also allow her to fulfill her dream of herself as a writer and to incorporate what she had learned during her Tarot studies. For Sara, the production of a book was (at the time when we spoke) a deeply desired object that would represent not only success in the world but also the success of disciplining herself and watching herself attain a goal.

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27 When Sara told me, this I thought to myself that anything I wrote would have to take the phenomenon of Oprah into account. Thankfully, Kathryn Lofton has recently done much of this work for me. The publication of Oprah: The Gospel of a Religious Icon is a timely and extremely helpful work. It’s what Tarot readers would refer to as a “wonderful synchronicity.”

28 Sara is now a published author.

29 The idea that the self can direct the production of an object capable of transforming your life or moving your life in a certain direction is a very common notion among Tarot readers. Occasionally, they explicitly link this idea to positive psychology or to “The Secret,” a popular “documentary” that purports to explain the secret law of attraction and that claims that the human mind is made of energy capable of calling into being those things that it thinks, imagines, or envisions. More often, individuals roll this sensibility into how they work with the cards themselves and do not acknowledge that they are drawing from the ideas of a controversial media product.
for Sara is not merely an act of self-aggrandizement and publicity but a project that literally inscribes well-being into her life. The act of the production and writing, which Tarot is “there to help with,” is what she thinks of as spirituality—the act of linking the self and its immateriality to the materiality of life and, in the process, literally making a life for herself.

Unfortunately, the tendency to see spirituality as something that can link up with objects has been mistaken for simple materialism, which is often cast as the result of the narcissistic push of a consumer society (Bellah 2007). When a Tarot reader suggests that “the Oprah generation” is a descriptive and valid moniker in and for her circle, it is easy for a sociologically trained mind to think of such a move as naïve and consumerist. Admittedly, after meeting Sara and hearing about her Sex and the City–style goals, I too felt this way for several months while conducting preliminary research. Only later did I realize that it was a viewpoint that did not fully take into account the shifting conditions of people’s lives and the precariousness that they were experiencing. The spiritual “best life ever” project that I argue leads in a narrative arc toward entrepreneurialism is not simply a story of consumption or of developing an appropriately “authentic self” who is up to the task of continual consumption but is rather a profound story of production in which people are trying to know and rewrite the metaphysics of security by becoming “professional” readers and “branded” entrepreneurs.

**From Spiritual Marketplace to Spiritual Capitalism**

When Wade Clark Roof wrote *The Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (1999) he was working with the general thesis that religion was being remade by a generation of “seekers,” individuals who had left the church and were questing for community, spiritual experience, and meaning in a disenchanted world—a world simultaneously being washed of meaning via encroaching bureaucratic logics as well as made
unstable and ever-changing by the vicissitudes and exploits of global capital. Such spiritual seeking was also representative, Roof argued, of the boomer generation’s questioning of authority, a seeming remnant from their “countercultural” past and their disaffection for rigid hierarchy. This simultaneous search for meaning and disavowal of traditional structures of authority then led boomers “to the market,” where they according to Robert Bellah (2007) could “pick and choose” among various services, products, and identities, giving rise to what scholars often saw as a “hodge-podge” of beliefs and practices that came to embody the New Age ethos and social identity.

In such a formulation of spirituality, however, religion is ultimately the guiding unit of analysis, and spirituality is something to be understood in relation or comparison to such “churched” rituals and communities (Houtman and Aupers 2007). Because of this dichotomy between official religion and the much murkier and private spirituality that emerged in the process of questing for meaning and experience, participation in “the market” was seen as something that would diminish, if not corrupt, the already diluted religious experience. In this regard, the market (which seems to stand in for an undertheorized notion of capitalism itself) is seen as a separate public sphere bracketed from personal and private life and toward which individuals are lured. While sociologists of new age spirituality were particularly attentive to

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30 The “spiritual marketplace” is also used by Ellwood in his work “The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace: American Religion in a Decade of Conflict” (1997), which argued that even more traditional religious institutions competed for attendees in what can be seen as a “supply-side” free market. In addition, Lawrence Moore traces a American legacy of “selling religion” in his work Selling God: Religion in American Marketplace (1995). Moore sees the consumptive tendency serving conservative fundamental religious ends, particularly as he witnesses the embrace of television and radio by a host of televangelists political personalities.

31 Conversely, we also see, for example in the work of Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983, 1997, 2001, 2003), the theory that rather than being lured toward the market, market forces are being drawn into our intimate lives through a process she calls the “commercialization of intimate life,” in which the boundaries between work life and personal life are increasingly erased by the demands of a rapacious capitalism. This type of directionality becomes problematic in the study of spiritual experience because it
the ways in which consumerism and commoditization informed the spiritual experience, including facilitating personal and diverse notions of the divine, which was seen as fostering a form of religious and democratic pluralism, such scholars also feared that “new age” spirituality was also really market logic in sheep’s clothing, or a sort of duping of the individual into a set of beliefs and practices that privileged notions of a divine self, or the self as the source of meaning and the site of continual investment to the detriment of both local and political communities. Christopher Lasch famously dubbed America a “culture of narcissism” in 1979 and his basic premise—that the interests of the personal and private self had come to overshadow communal values—was for the most part confirmed by scholarship of new age spirituality.

So, while scholars were aware of the role of market forces, scholarship around what was considered “new age” spirituality also tended to foster a critical, if not outwardly contemptuous, tone toward such spiritual consumers whose practices were seen as diminishing community overall and encouraging a cultural of privatization (Putnam 2001), diminishing the role of “the Church” (Bellah 2007), and obscuring the social (and occasionally radical) social history of American metaphysical religion (Albanese 1993, 1999, 2000, 2007).32 And, while some scholars, such as T.M. Luhrmann in her now classic work Persuasions of the Witches Craft (1988), would take seriously new age and neopagan “practices,” such work saw its mission as explaining how it was possible for “rational individuals” to participate in these practices and how they were able to hold such “irrational” or magical personal beliefs. For Luhrmann, it was clear:

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is often as a way to explain “what is really going on,” with individuals being lured, drawn, driven, colonized, or possessed by market forces, when in reality we might put spiritual practice, belief, and the market on a much flatter ontology and then attend to the relationships that emerge and dissipate between them.

32 The Frankfurt School (see Adorno 2001) saw spirituality, particularly astrology, which was fed to people in the newspaper, as the darkest form of alienation and duping of the individual.
magical practice afforded such individuals a source of agency and power, as well as a site of escape and release from the ever-encroaching forces of the market.

In my time with the Tarot Center, it became apparent that notions of bracketing of “the market” would not work. Here students had come with the explicit purpose of learning Tarot in order to put it “to work” for them both personally and professionally. As I’ve mentioned, the school itself was intended to confer degrees (regardless of the validity of that degree in the market), and talk of reading “for money” was apparent from my first visit to the school. Additionally, finding fulfilling and lucrative work through the Tarot—either using the Tarot to enhance one’s ability to find such work or by becoming a Tarot professional able to sustain a personal Tarot-related business—was a theme of my initial conversations with students. Here the consumerism of Tarot (purchasing books, decks, workshops, services) was already entangled with visions of economic production or affective fantasies of how an individual could be more “productive.” It appeared to me that “the market” was already present, then, in the practice of Tarot as economic pressures, personal fantasies, and dreams of work, as well as in criticisms of the nature and configuration of work and money all surfaced at the school in and through our Tarot readings.

Because of this already intimate and often “felt” relationship to market forces (by “felt,” meaning that people such as Sara spoke of it through various affective states such as wide-eyed enthusiasm or anxiety), I want to suggest that we need to move away from the idea of a spiritual marketplace toward which individuals are lured and take up the a notion of what Kathryn Lofton, in her recent work *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* (2011) has called “spiritual capitalism” and that she defines as “a redundancy, not an irony of history” (23). Here Lofton points back to the fundamental Weberian thesis that the development of capitalism is inherently tangled in spiritual
beliefs and practices. Capitalism, argues Lofton, is “simultaneously millennial, charismatic, and relentlessly quotidian” (25), and in her analysis of the social phenomena that is Oprah, both as a person and a commodity, Lofton argues that bracketing consumerism and commodities from an understanding of contemporary spirituality will surely miss the point entirely. Oprah is a paradigmatic icon of spiritual capitalism in that she suggests that a synthesis between the ineffable spirit and the material world is not only possible but that it will have joyful and transformative social effects. In that Oprah manages to update and rebrand a Protestant ethos via a range of older metaphysical traditions (for example, see Travis 2007 for a discussion of “New Thought” in Oprah’s book club), Lofton argues that the history of American religion and spirituality land us firmly at her door and that she presents a relatively coherent case study of for understanding the matrix of metaphysics informing “spiritual capitalism.”

While Oprah may implicitly take the self as the basic unit of conversation, she also continues to sell a world of possibility—of personal mobility or freedom coupled with the fantasy that such personal exploits will bring about a more harmonious and truthful social world. In the world of Oprah, Lofton suggests, crafting a personal vision via the market becomes a way of understanding the self and the world. Shopping, in particular, can take on hues of a feminist practice in the language of Oprah as she “sells the wise liberation of women unafraid of facing their financial problems, corporate logos in tow” (36). Lofton’s formulation of spiritual capitalism does not bracket the market but rather understands—in an almost sympathetic way—that what people experience as the spiritual (as well as how they experience it) is tangled in what Kathleen Stewart (2007) calls “the orDeanary,” or the taken-for-granted environments that we move through everyday. What Lofton is pointing us toward in her analysis of Oprah is that, both as a person and a brand, Oprah offers her viewers a valuable feeling that they are capable of
managing, effecting, and participating in those lived, everyday environments. To the extent that advertising, commodities, and consumerism suffuse our daily lives they will be companions, guides, or even enchanted entities that individuals encounter as they attempt to put into practice the ordinary magic of fashioning and sustaining a human life. And I would argue that this insight forces us to reconfigure the long-standing sociological project that would like to debunk spiritual practice as simply misguided consumerism. It forces us to look to the ways in which “the spiritual” is deeply productive—of personal, subjective experience but also of forms of sociality and relationships between human and nonhuman entities, including but not merely limited to commodities and technologies. In this regard, the spiritual is entangled in assemblages that move us beyond easy confines of “the individual,” and it from this position that sociological analysis and critique need to be made.

Throughout my fieldwork, Oprah continued to make appearances. Sometimes she was a phenomenal model of American success, other times a scorned exemplar of “fluffy bunny” talk, positive psychology, and naked ambition. At other times she was simply someone to pray to for guidance.33 As Lofton also notes, Oprah is all and none of these things, even though individuals

33 “Praying to Oprah,” a field note from the Reader’s Studio 2010: I almost spit out my coffee when she said it. We five volunteers were sitting around a conference table in the LaGuardia Courtyard Marriot Ballroom, and I had started to get the existential tremors that make me ask myself, “Karen, what are you really doing here?” “Well, Karen, you’re waiting for a middle-aged man to arrive so that you and three other women and can start setting up a makeshift bookstore in the corner of a giant ballroom,” the mind shoots back sarcastically. I know that if I looked at a map it would tell that we’re on the outskirts of New York City, in a hotel out by the airport. Beige walls, forest-green chairs rimmed with fake gold metal, large circular tables that are too big really to hear the person sitting across from you, illuminated by oversized “chandeliers” that are more efficient than elegant. This is the type of place that makes you feel the corporate decisions that went into its existence. It’s a place you can’t really “warm” up, but that’s exactly what we’re going to try to do with the space in preparation for The Reader’s Studio, the annual Tarot conference that is attended by approximately two hundred and fifty people.

We were just sitting, waiting with our coffees, when Sara burst out, “yeah, you know, I think I would pray to Oprah if I thought it would help.” “What the hell does that mean?” another woman asked. “It means I would friggin’ pray to Oprah if I really thought it would help—yeah, you know with everything.” The reason I almost spit out my coffee was because this wasn’t the first time I’d heard Sara announce her love for all that is Oprah™. For Sara, Oprah’s advice quite literally becomes both the magic
take her to be a dynamic companion who is instructing them back to that “expert-of-your-own-life” position, if it is through what Eva Illouz (2003) has called “the glamorization of misery.” For Oprah and her viewers, it is comfortable to stand not Hegel but C. Wright Mills on his head. Here social problems are personal troubles, which must dealt with through personal transformation. Developing one’s intuition, broadening one’s affective register, and learning to bring these capacities to the market are the mechanisms of this transformation.

**Intuition and Affective Labor**

Intuition has a long genealogy, having its own definition and use in mathematics, philosophy, neuroscience, psychology, and education. We can briefly look at how intuition became a staple not only of spiritual self-help literature but of a moment in capital when such “fast thinking” (Thrift 2007) has been touted as good business practice and business acumen—as well as a moment in governance when “gut instinct” is (supposedly) perceived as desirable, masculine, and the mark of leadership. To some degree, an inversion has occurred for such a link to be made, as intuition has long been considered the weaker, more passive, and feminized counterpart to rational analytic thinking or reasoning. Bruner (1960) writes that the intuitive process is one in which:

> The thinker arrives at an answer... with little, if any, awareness of the process by which he reached it. He rarely can provide an adequate account of how he obtained his answer, and he may be unaware of just what aspects of the problem situation he was responding to. Usually, intuitive thinking rests on familiarity with the domain of knowledge involved and with its structure... (57)

of the High Priestess and the wisdom of the Empress set to practical tasks, diet regimes, home decorating, medical advice, love life, friendships, and family matters. This is why Sara would pray to her for help with “you know, everything.” It struck me that what Oprah™ is primarily selling, along with her numerous product recommendations, is a generalized and vague notion of intuition, which suggests the possibility that within each one of her viewers resides a capacity not only for self-knowledge but also for affective, fast, social knowledge— the ability almost immediately and naturally to tell the difference between a dream opportunity or soulmate, as well as detect the best pair of pants for the money.
Intuitive processes, then, are fast, taking into account nonconscious elements of surroundings, often gathered from experience, and offered up to consciousness without the individual being quite aware of the discrete steps that led to a judgment. Intuition in its traditional context is a theory of the mind, composing half of a dichotomous model of mind sitting at the heart of dual-process models of cognition and social cognition (Lieberman 2000).

However, in the realm of spiritualized self-help literature, intuition has come to stand in for a form of human knowledge that is not often heard, respected, or trusted. Entering into the lexicon through a long lineage of spiritualist writers such as Emanuel Swedenborg, Madame Blavatsky, and Rudolph Steiner, Carl Jung popularized the notion of a “intuitive type” of person, a person for whom the intuition was a predominant mode of perception guiding their behavior. Jung’s typological system of human behavior made room for, and gave legitimacy to, inner, mystical and psychic experience. It would be Jung and not Freud who would be embraced by a generation of female writers in the 1970s and 1980s, women looking to explain “women’s ways of knowing” (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule 1997), which was formulated as an entire history of knowledge and experience not given authority by patriarchy, science, or the market. Recovering this lost wisdom became one of the dominant themes of late second-wave feminism, unleashing a torrent of therapeutic writings inside and outside of academics, as “finding one’s voice” became a goal for a generation of women.

This notion of voice is still prevalent in self-help and spiritual literature, where the intuition is described as a “guiding voice” or as connection or link to a higher self or even the divine, to various Gods and Goddesses, as well as to cosmic matter or “the universe.” Such intuition is understood as a universal aspect of human existence that all people have the capacity

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34 Micki McGee, in her work Self-Help, Inc. (2005), traces the link between self-help’s emphasis on discovering the creative self to the Romantic ideal of the artist.
to connect with, if they so choose. However, this seemingly natural ability also requires work and at the minimum some form of practice (like Tarot), meditation, or deep listening, and the ability to trust the information that is perceived through this facility. Often, the last step is posited as the most crucial element on the path to self-growth. This step is what Warren refers to as “becoming a master of your own ship.” In this regard, the intuition is not merely a connection to immediate information but is a source of personal authority. While the intuition is often championed as the oppressed, feminized underdog of human knowledge, having been linked in the dual model of the mind with the passive and the nonrigorous—according to Lieberman, Freud quipped that it is “an illusion to expect anything from intuition” (2000, 109)—it is actually the authority gained from intuitive ability that is experienced as powerful, therapeutic, and potentially productive. I want to suggest that once this link between intuition and authority is made, authority begins to shape the intuitive experience, opening itself up to an affective terrain. Here, we see the legitimized “fast thinking” that Nigel Thrift suggests is demanded by full-palette capitalism. This is the appeal of books like Blink, a bestseller written by Malcolm Gladwell, or Bill Gates’s seminal work Business @ the Speed of Thought. Here the intuition is freed from the personal journey of learning to trust and instead becomes a fast, go-to resource capable of fueling innovation. As Brian Massumi writes:

It’s no longer disciplinary institutional power that defines everything, it’s capitalism’s power to produce variety—because markets are saturated. Produce variety and you produce a niche market. The oddest of affective tendencies are okay—as long as they pay. Capitalism starts intensifying or diversifying affect, but only in order to extract surplus-value. It literally valorizes affect. The capitalist logic of surplus-value production starts to take over the relational field that is also the domain of political ecology, the ethical field of resistance to identity and predictable paths. It’s very troubling and confusing, because it seems to me that there’s been a certain kind of convergence between the dynamic of capitalist power and the dynamic of resistance.

(2002, 224)
As Massumi suggests, the “oddest of affective tendencies are okay—as long as they pay.” Payment, or “capital-ability,” or the ability to generate a wage underscores and rationalizes all attempts to tap into the “irrational” intuition. Indeed, tapping is merely the first step in an entrepreneurial practice because it is the ability to listen to the intuition that becomes a guide as one enters the flows of the market. One’s own intuition is the link between surfing and, as Chelsea suggests below, “getting real.”

**The Flexibility of the High Priestess**

I’ve come to the food court of the Citicorp building on Fifty-Third Street and Lexington Avenue in New York City to interview Chelsea, a professional Tarot card reader and astrologer, and attend her weekly class, which takes place here. The grey-white walls, black metal tables fixed to the floor, and hazy fluorescent lighting chill the space and lend it a dystopian feel. This is what the cafeteria of a working-class spaceship might be like. I note the presence of security guards. This is a private space, despite being open to the public, and I am curious how the Tarot readings are received here. While Tarot is essentially a pack of playing cards whose images draw heavily from Christian iconography, the cards are most often associated with the esoteric, the occult, Paganism, and magic. While these connotations alone can cause some individuals to react inhospitably to the cards, as well as to the Tarot readers, “fortune-telling” for the purposes of divination is a class B misdemeanor offense in New York State, unless it is “part of a show or exhibition solely for the purpose of entertainment or amusement.” While I am aware that the

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35 A standard Tarot deck is made up of twenty-two cards, called the Major Arcana or trumps, and four suits (Cups, Wands, Pentacles, and Swords) of fourteen cards each called the Minor Arcana, or pip and court cards. These cards originated as a game of chance in fifteenth-century Italy and have evolved into a tool for divination as well as self-help, psychotherapy, meditation, and problem solving. The history of the cards and an introduction to their meanings will be taken up in the next chapter.

36 See New York State law S 165.35. Many readers refuse to claim their work is done for amusement and instead opt to see their work as spiritual or religious. The word “fortune-teller” is also considered to be a pejorative term. As the Jorgensons (1982) describe in their research of a Tarot community, “professional”
work Chelsea does in this space is more akin to therapy and counseling, through the eyes of an unsympathetic security guard she may also be breaking the law. As we sit and talk for over an hour, the security guards eye us, and Chelsea tells me that this space is a temporary location. She has charmed the evening guard with small talk over the weeks, but he still asks us to move to a more discreet location once the Tarot class begins. Her plan is to move the classes out of the food court and into a private location once she can afford to rent one.

As we talk, Chelsea explains to me that her weekly Tarot classes—she offers both introductory and advanced courses, for which individuals pay between fifteen and twenty-five dollars a session—started when she moved back to New York City from California and she became comfortable calling herself “a practitioner of the esoteric arts.” In contrast to what she refers to as popular “New Age-ism,” which she associates with “an intense form of hucksterism that takes advantage of people in need,” in New York she encountered “a certain seriousness in one’s (esoteric) studies.” In New York, “there is a certain, having to, really pay your dues, really know what you’re doing and be really good at what you do.” It was the notion that her work would be respected here, along with the hope that it might provide her with a stable income that inspired Chelsea to establish a Meetup group online. Within a few weeks, she had a regular group of about five people that would meet with her in the Citicorp building.

While she found the class rewarding and enjoyed teaching, as well as the small community that was fostered, the classes were not providing enough money for Chelsea to pay her bills. It was time “to take the business to the next level.” Having been laid off from her work in 2008, money and housing had become urgent issues for Chelsea, who had been slowly selling readers try to distance themselves from the “gypsy fortune-teller.” I have also heard this term in my work, and it operates as a blatant stereotype that my primarily middle-class readers employ to give themselves legitimacy. Storefront reading is also seen by these readers as potentially “harmful” and, occasionally, as outright “theft,” whereas their work is “therapeutic” and meant to “help” others.
off her possessions, including her art supplies, and accumulating debt to try to stay afloat.

Eventually, she had been forced to give up her apartment, and when we met (in 2009, when the initial interview was conducted), she was living with a friend in a temporary housing arrangement until she found work. The job search was unsuccessful, however, and Chelsea felt the market no longer had room for someone like her—a person with only some formal work experience and few contacts. She had been working as an informal accountant for a record company, but this experience didn’t lead to other accounting jobs in the city, nor did it qualify for her for administrative jobs. In the wake of the 2009 layoffs that were then occurring, Chelsea felt particularly uncompetitive in the job market. When the topic of money and the future of her business was discussed in our interview, I could see the pain of this story in her eyes, along with a willfullness to not be considered a victim. Rather, Chelsea insists hers is a story of spiritual growth and personal development, countering the frustrations of the job market with an optimism that is intent on finding a more “rewarding” employment path, one that syncs her interests in spirituality with a capacity to generate income. Toward the end of our interview, she asked me if I would do her a favor. Would I do a Tarot reading for her about this question: Where should she direct her energies—to finding a full-time job (what she called “corporate”), or to her Tarot and astrology business?37

Using her own deck of Rider-Waite-Smith cards, we decided to a very simple reading. Two cards: one placed on the right to tell us about her prospects on the job market, and one card on the left to address prospects of her esoteric practice. Using a common method of “charging the cards,” which means tuning the cards to the personal energy of the querent, Chelsea shuffled ________________________________

37 In order to conduct research for this dissertation, I studied Tarot weekly at the Tarot Center, read numerous books on the history, symbolism, and practice of Tarot, and informally gave readings to friends and family (never for money) in order to practice reading. I do not consider myself a psychic or an intuitive, but I can read the cards according to both the “popular” and “esoteric” interpretations, having learned the basic Kabalistic, astrological, magical, archetypal, and therapeutic associations of each card.
the entire deck numerous times while focusing her mind on her question and her situation. She then handed the cards to me to cut into two piles. I took the top card from each pile and flipped it. As I turned the right card over, her mainstream job prospect became symbolized by the image of the Three of Swords—three metal swords piercing a red heart against the backdrop of grey, raining clouds. As I turned over the left card, the High Priestess emerged from the deck—a woman dressed in white and blue robes, crowned by the Goddess’s triple crown, seated on a throne between two enigmatic pillars. Chelsea let out a sigh as she looked at both cards side by side, and we laughed a little at how direct the Tarot can be in its symbolism. The Three of Hearts, also referred to by its esoteric title “Lord of Sorrow,” seemed to hit right at the heart of Chelsea’s pain regarding the market, with each attempt to get back on her feet financially breaking her heart a little bit. The death by a thousand cuts of resume building, interviewing, and rejection letters seemed to be contained in the card. “I don’t want to go there,” Chelsea said, pointing. The job-seeking avenue, the cards seemed suggest, had been painful and may continue to be so, although typically it is understood that a single card is only speaking to an immediate situation and is not a fixed prognosis. However, when placed next to the High Priestess, a calm and contented figure, it seemed like the red heart was like a stop sign, its very message saying “look no further in this direction.” The High Priestess is the card representing the unconscious, intuitive, felt, and affective, and the card seemed to be indicating that Chelsea look deeper into her esoteric practices. Follow your intuition, the card seemed to be saying, and Chelsea eagerly embraced this interpretation. Looking at me imploringly, she asked, “Yes, yeah, I know all this, but how? How to turn this [her ongoing meditation practices and her sense of connection to deeper knowledge] into something real?” I did not have an answer for Chelsea, as I stared at the two cards, perhaps half-wishing that the High Priestess would speak for herself and answer. The
gap between this powerful symbol, its affects, and the reality of job market feels unbridgeable to me, yet I’m aware that these cards make up the bulk of Chelsea’s support system. I am left wishing the magic of Tarot’s card flip were more durable, most sustainable, more capable of weaving human desire into an object.

While Angela Mitrapoulous (2005) reminds us in her article “Precario-us” that the feeling of precarity that has accompanied this shift away from stable, formal forms of work to an affective, “immaterial,” and informatic capitalism has been the norm on a global scale, she also concedes that groups of people who formerly felt protected from instability no longer feel this to be the case. In this regard, the conditions of life under neoliberalism arrive, for some, as a dire spiritual injunctive: You must change your life—particularly if you want to live. For Chelsea, the spiritual quest cannot be disentangled from the structural shifts that have happened beyond her control. In fact, positioning the reconfiguration of her life as a spiritual journey of growth allows her some degree of reclaiming that lost power. Tarot cards, the stars of the Zodiac, crystals, and other materials become enchanted oracles that can help divine the correct path for the spiritual self, not just the material body.

When we meet again, almost a year later, Chelsea tells me, “I’m exhausted. I really need to find my own place. It’s time.” She starts to tell me about the housing arrangement that she has found in Philadelphia. She is renting a room in a house with several much younger people, and just before she left for New York, where she had a Tarot gig lined up that would pay her a couple hundred dollars, one of them approached her and told her they no longer wanted to her to live there and that she had two weeks to find an apartment. “It’s so tiring. You don’t know which to do—look for the job, look for the apartment. You need a job to get an apartment, an apartment to get a job.” Chelsea goes on to tell me that she has been sending out applications but with little
luck when she arrives at the interview. “Young people don’t want to work with someone my age.” I look a little askance, because Chelsea looks very young for her age, and I’ve only known her to be quite vivacious despite her stress. “No, really, people take one look at me and it’s like I’ve got three heads. They find a reason—I’m overqualified, unqualified. I really think they don’t want to work with someone who is older than they are.” I’m not sure what to say to her, but I offer “well, you have been doing this for a while, you know what the deal is…” Chelsea smiles and starts to laugh, “You know, I really think people like me are becoming the vanguard of society. No, really. There are more and more people like me… People living with less. I can get by with nothing. You know why? Because I’m flexible. I can adapt… and I’ve been adapting.”

_Conclusion_

This shifting terrain of the spiritual marketplace has brought with it new demands for how to work and, as such, has brought with it new opportunities for the spiritualization of such work. Fast thinking, or “the intuition,” getting flexible and staying open to new opportunities, being pushed into the market or “having to “get real” are all features of this new spiritualization. Particularly, this shift has brought about an emphasis on cultivating the intuition as a guide to the market and learning to “get flexible” in order to seize opportunity, as well as the cultivate the ability to work across both digital and face-to-face spaces. The Tarot then becomes a companion to cultivating both intuitive and psychic ability but also a companion to investing in the self and developing these “productive” skills. In the following chapters, I will suggest that the very object of the cards helps individuals manipulate and organize this project. In addition, as the cards themselves become a “speaking” object, capable of helping and working with an individual, they also facilitate a relationship with all “objects”—the world as an environment or ecology of things.
opens itself up as a resource for inspiration, for innovation, and for the personal intuition, creating a feedback loop between the individual, the environment, their intuition, and the market.
Chapter Two:
Social Actors Beyond Belief

There is nothing in the world pertaining to games as odious to God as this game of triumphs…
—From the Steele Sermon (possibly 1470), given by a Franciscan Monk near Ferrara, Italy

We who read the cards know that the cards don’t lie. Sometimes we doubt them. Sometimes we hesitate. Sometimes we don’t see how they can possibly be telling the truth. But deep down, we know.
—Barbara Moore’s Practical Tarot Blog (2011)

But do you… like, believe in psychics?
— From a conversation with a social psychology graduate student after the Qualitative Inquiry conference, Illinois (2009)

Tarot cards, as we will see, are many things at once—a game, an esoteric repository, and a therapeutic or creative prompt. Today, there is a sense among students of the Tarot that the cards have entered into what they refer as a “psychologized” phase (Giles 1996), which positions the individual and private “self” at the center of the work that may be done with the cards. In many ways, this sense of the cards as an object of self-development or self-growth is in line with the narrative we saw in Chapter 1, in which the “spiritual marketplace” tailored itself to individuals questing for personal meaning and experience. In this chapter, however, I want to look to the Tarot cards not only as a site of personal development but as an object of material culture (Meyer et al. 2010, 209). Here, I consider the Tarot to be an aleatory technology that keeps alive an archive of symbols and metaphysical traditions. Here, we look to the divinatory nature of cards themselves and their history as an instrument of chance (and, by extension, probability), luck, and enchantment.

In looking to the cards as a material object, in this chapter I sketch a brief history of the cards and their metaphysical and symbolic systems. I suggest that thinking of the cards as an
evolving “assemblage” (Latour 2007) of these systems helps us understand how it is that the cards are capable of “speaking” to those who encounter them—either in the form of an “oracle” or a “speaking book.” The cards’ history and layers of symbolism are contained within each card, which operates as an index and synecdoche to this powerful archive. To understand more fully this speaking as an enchanting encounter, I follow Jane Bennett and her work on “vibrant matter” (2009) to move toward an aesthetics of the card flip. Using the Whiteheadian concepts of a “lure for feeling” and prehension, I suggest that Tarot’s “divination” and readers’ attendant interest in “manifestation” (see Chapter 5) are entangled in the very card flip itself, which in turn can “open” a body to the “vibrancy” or capacity of objects and environments.

Such an opening lays the groundwork for understanding how it is that individuals come to develop “psychic” sensitivities, proclivities, or inclinations. As the introductory field note below from Warren’s Readers’ Studio class suggests, Tarot cards invite individuals into a practice of listening to information. Such listening or “attuning” the body prepares the ground for becoming a reader, a process I explore in the follow chapter. Furthermore, the framework of the assemblage will enable us better to see (in this chapter and subsequent chapters) how the Tarot has entered into not only a psychologized phase but is also a laboring object—a companion that currently encourages forms of affective, entrepreneurial, and digital labor. In this chapter, I suggest that the Tarot has not only been taken up as a prompt for personal, individual “self-growth” but is also entangled in an emerging form of entrepreneurial sociality. Its enchantment is being kept alive today, not necessarily by ceremonial magicians seeking the astral plane but by the logics of human capital, marketing, and digitality.

The Reader’s Studio
It’s just before 5:00 p.m. on Thursday, and the majority of the attendees of the Readers’ Studio have already made their way to the registration table, where I am volunteering with two other Tarot Center students. With the day’s final wave of registrants over, we’re just about to head into the larger conference room at the LaGuardia Airport Sheraton and settle in for the evening’s “master class,” which will be conducted by Warren and Rose. Tonight’s theme for the master class is “listening to the oracle,” and Warren promises that we are all in for a radical new way of approaching the Tarot cards. This is my first time attending the Readers’ Studio, and I’m not quite sure what to expect, but everyone I’ve met through the registration table has been overwhelmingly friendly, enthusiastic, and welcoming, arriving as though the annual conference were their home. Many tell me that “RS” (as it is often abbreviated) is their homecoming reunion. It is their annual gathering of the “Tarot tribe,” and they look forward to the conference throughout the year. The Readers’ Studio draws almost two hundred professional Tarot readers, newcomers, and esoteric practitioners from across the world to this airport hotel for four days of intense Tarot study, reading, and networking. While other Tarot conferences are beginning to crop up in California and Texas, the Readers’ Studio has been able to maintain itself as the premier event for professional readers, hosting well-known authors to conduct innovative workshops and evening classes, as well as using its proximity to Manhattan as a tourist draw.  

38 Still, keeping the Readers’ Studio exciting and appealing has been a challenge for Warren and Rose, who use the event to subsidize their weekly classes’ overhead. While the conference’s energetic and welcoming atmosphere is often a unique and affecting experience for newcomers to Tarot, for those readers who attend every year, the workshops can grow repetitive or inapplicable to their practice. The conference costs $295 to attend, plus the costs of travel and accommodations. For many attendees, attending is a stretch and a sacrifice. My first year at RS, one male attendee spoke in the conclusion of the conference about not having enough money to attend but “miraculously” receiving a check a few days prior that allowed him to come. In his speech, it came across that prioritizing the conference is something that even those without ample funds will do because many readers feel the space is unique, that it reenergizes them, and allows them to connect with their “tribe,” which does not happen in their day-to-day worlds. Many professional readers feel alienated, often working alone or only meeting other readers online.
As the last administrative bits of the registration tables are put away, I find myself staring into the grand conference room, where vendors make last-minute adjustments to their merchant tables and where an impromptu bookstore has been established in the corner of the room, offering a range of old and new Tarot classics, prominently displaying new books from any authors who are attending the conference. In the middle of the room a large dais has been set up. It is the performance stage that will host the conference speakers. Tonight, two large throne-like chairs have been placed on the stage, awaiting Warren and Rose and evoking their roles as the respective King and Queen of Tarot. Rose and Warren will be our guides during the four days of Tarot and “transformation.” According to Warren, the Readers’ Studio will “touch my life,” and already I can feel, from the crowd that is gathering in the room, waves of excitement and exuberance. In addition to the Tarot Center students attending the conference, many of whom I have gotten to know and feel comfortable with, Tarot attracts a number of “big personalities” who are performative and irrepressible in their manner, in their dress, and in their interactions with other people. As I watch the room fill up, I feel rather small and quiet and wonder if Tarot practice will draw out some of my own performativity. I can see in others that such a drawing-out is the part of Tarot’s “lure” and why people cherish their relationships with what is essentially a deck of seventy-eight illustrated cards. As authors such as Ann Taves (1999) and Molly McGarry (2008) have shown with respect to mediumship and spiritualism, women, in particular, have found a source of social and personal power through their participation in “marginal religious movements.” As McGarry writes, “personal and corporeal spiritual

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39 The experience of the Readers’ Studio is notoriously overwhelming and draining. The confirmation letter that is mailed to participants warns attendees: “Attending The Readers’ Studio can be a wonderful, thrilling and sometimes life-changing event. It’s a ton of fun, too! But for some people, the swirling energy (psychic and otherwise) can be a bit overwhelming.” The letter contains tips for “surviving” the conference, such as taking advantage of the meditation room that Rose and her staff set up, “grounding” oneself through food and naps, staying hydrated, and “finding an energy worker” to help rebalance yourself.
experiences obviate the need for a learned clergy to mediate that experience, rendering religious practice open to women in ways that a more structured, hierarchical religion might not be” (2008, 45).

As I suggested in Chapter 1, the study of Tarot is framed not only as a spiritual journey but as a process of finding one’s voice and personal sense of authority. Given shifts in the spiritual marketplace, which have made esoteric knowledge more accessible, finding one’s voice or authority has become a more easily rendered personal project. However, the distribution of esoteric knowledge via accessible networks is brushing up against the very business model of the Tarot Center, which tends toward privileging Warren and Rose as unique sources of esoteric information. The creation of the Readers’ Studio conference is an attempt to buffer the ill effects the market has had on the School. As one reader told me, “this is where Warren and Rose break even for the year.” Indeed, the weekend event is designed to fully maximize the “experience” of Tarot, with classes and workshops scheduled from nine in the morning until ten at night. Warren’s opening night ceremony is a bit of a teaser for what’s to come—a weekend of personal exploration, Tarot study, and opening one’s self to the enchantment of the cards.40

As Warren and Rose take the stage, people settle in their chairs around the circular conference tables, placing notebooks, coffee cups, and Tarot cards on the table. Some people have brought decorative and quite beautiful “reading cloths” to place on top of the hotel’s muted

40 In The Enchantment of Modern Life (2001), Jane Bennett proposes that enchantment is something we encounter, often in surprising and unexpected ways that can strike or shake us. In such shaking, enchantment has the capacity to disrupt what she calls our “default sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition.” Enchantment entails here an involuntary suspension of belief. It is a state of wonder that disorients as much as it (potentially) orients a human to a world that is happening both with and without us. For Bennett, enchantment is something she would like to see as positive, something orienting humans to an ethical subjectivity. I am not as sure that enchantment’s capacities can be so harnessed, although I am interested in the language that she is attempting to develop, which might help us speak about a life enmeshed in a world not necessarily given to humans.
burgundy tablecloths. Some are establishing their place at the tables with little magical odds and ends, such as candles or crystals or bells. Bit by bit, the conference room is beginning to take on the personalities of its inhabitants and reflect back, quite literally, the “colorful” world of Tarot, with its rich art, symbols, and mythological figures. The vendors, who are set up along the edges of the room, help fuel this decoration, each bringing their own brand of Tarot crafts and wares. One woman sells magical crystals and handmade wands; another sells beautifully woven throws and shawls; another couple sells magical, hand-poured candles that can be used for rituals and spells. Artistic versions of the Tarot abound. One woman is selling a hand-made, abstractly collaged deck of Lenormand cards, another male artist sells his famous deck of lovely woodcuts, another woman a deck illustrated by watercolors and populated by fairies and childlike figures.41

*Listening to Tarot*

Once the crowd has settled in, Warren begins his workshop entitled “The Wall of Silence.” He asks the crowd to remove a single card from their Tarot decks. In this workshop, we are going to learn how to listen to what the Tarot, as a complex object, is saying. Beyond being a metaphor for language, Warren is explicit that he intends to teach us to hear the “voice” of the cards. This may be the voice of the actual figures of the card; for example, we may hear the voice of the figure of Justice (Trump XI) or the female figure in the Strength cards (Trump VIII) or even the voice of an angel, such as the angel Gabriel, who is blowing his horn of resurrection in the Judgement card (Trump XX).42 This may be the voice of the “symbolism” of the cards.

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41 Lenormand cards are their own distinct style of divination cards and are named after the well-known French professional fortune-teller Anne-Marie Lenormand. The cards seem to be based on “The Game of Hope,” a German racing game. Around 1850, the German game was adapted to the deck called “The Petit Lenormand,” which became more popular in Germany than in France because of the postrevolutionary prohibition on fortune-telling and divination. Both activities, however, remained popular despite the ban. See Harvey (2005).

42 In the Rider-Waite-Smith deck, one of the most popular, “Judgement” is spelled in the British manner, and even many U.S.-produced decks and Tarot books by American authors retain that variant spelling.
For example, the voice of the “Sun” itself speaking through the image or symbol of the sun in the Major Arcana. This may be the voice of the “elements” contained in the card, for example, the voice of “fire,” as understood in the system of the four-fold elements of Earth, Water, Air, and Fire, which are believed to be invoked by the deck’s four suits. This may the voice of the card itself or deck itself as a physical object, independent from specific image depicted on that card or the cards as a whole.

The twenty-two cards of Major Arcana of the Rider-Waite-Smith Deck

Source: US Games ©1971
To begin, Warren encourages each person to spread out their cards in front of them and to see which card “resonates” or “feels like the card that wants to work with you.” We are simply to sit “with” the cards and “feel” what they are saying. Growing quiet, both physically and mentally, and being as meditatively “silent” as possible is central to Warren’s exercise. While we are sitting quietly, Warren gently suggests that we open our “hearing” and reminds us that is not just the anthropomorphized, allegorical figures of the cards that may “speak” but any element of
the card, by which he means any image abstract or figurative (for example, any of the animals or plants of the deck may speak), as well as any “information” contained in or represented by the card such as the card’s suit, or perhaps the card’s astrological associations (the Sun or the Moon are associated with those respective Major Arcana cards and are the most obvious examples, but more subtly each card is associated with a particular astrological feature), or even the card’s colors (in some decks the colors have been chosen for their qualities, such as the warmth of the color red, and some decks have become notable simply by being “recolorings” of other decks). Any of these elements of the cards may “speak to us loud and clear,” according to Warren. And, as Warren explains, if we can learn to sit quietly enough, “turn off the thinking brain” for long enough, the card will “speak” through a quiet voice or through a vivid mental image—an image that speaks so fully that it can be felt. In this way, Warren is suggesting that the full materiality of the card, its symbols, and its elements can communicate. In my e-mail to another Tarot Center student who had asked me how Warren’s preconference workshop had gone, I wrote the following:

…the central part of it (the workshop) was the idea of getting beyond normal perception and using a technique called “da-shan” to ask questions of objects. W’s guiding question was “how do you speak to a coffee cup (or a tarot card)?” Using the technique of Da-shan, you sit quietly, creating a silent space where you can ask a question (of anything really, an object or a concept) and where you wait quietly for an answer. The process is to listen and wait (with the possibility that you might then “hear/understand.”) The trick seems to be to trust that what you’re hearing or to go with that reality that what you’re hearing is really coming from the object rather than simply being a projection of your own mind or biases. In order to get to this place, the answer is to practice meditating. I thought it was a cool exercise and got me excited to sit with myself and to let the answers from things flow in. What does the tree want to tell me? What is the computer saying right now? I thought it was a fun exercise—fun to see that the world is so very alive.

The idea that the world itself is alive and speaking is central to the work that Tarot Readers engage in and, indeed, is central to the very notion of magical practice (Pike 2001). In this chapter, I do not focus on magical practice per se but look to the cards themselves and to our
sense of what an object is or can do (Harman 2009, Latour 2007, Bennett 2009). Here, I will look to what has been called speculative realism, new materialism, and the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead in order to explore the Tarot and to consider what Jane Bennett has called “thing-power” or “the strange power of ordinaryman-made objects to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience” (2009, xvi). Truly to understand how Tarot readers work with Tarot cards, we will, as Bennett would, allow that the cards and the elemental energies contained and evoked by the cards are functioning in a “lively” manner. Tarot cards themselves point toward a “vital materialism” in that they involve the recognition that “vitality is shared by all things” and not limited to ourselves alone (Bennett 2009, 89).

Tarot cards manifest these traces of independence or aliveness through their enigmatic symbolism, their underlying metaphysical and magical associations, and through their aleatory nature. As the philosopher Inna Semetsky (2012) writes, “Tarot ‘speaks’ in the universal language of images, signs and symbols, and represents the long forgotten ‘lost speech.’ Tarot helps in discovering meaning and purpose in our individual and collective experiences and a deep sense of value both inside and outside ourselves.” While the symbolism of Tarot is deeply powerful (I explore how these symbols are understood and engaged in the following chapter), here I want to suggest that we refocus our attention just slightly beyond the representational schema of the cards and look to the ways in which the cards—as social actor—function. Another way of saying this is to ask the question: What happens when a deck of cards begins to speak to an individual? How can we trace the social effects that Tarot both helps produce and which keep the Tarot circulating?

**What Is Tarot?**
Tarot is essentially a deck of playing cards, but it is a deck that has been associated with a long and rich esoteric and occult history (Dummet, Decker, and Depaulis 1996). A contemporary standard Tarot deck is made up of seventy-eight cards, twenty-two of which are called the Major Arcana, or trumps. In addition, the Minor Arcana comprises four suits (Cups, Wands, Pentacles, and Swords) of fourteen cards numbered from ace to ten along with four “court” cards (usually Page or Princess, Knight, Queen, and King). While Tarot emerged in fifteenth-century Italy as a trick-taking game (the game of Hearts is a modern example of this family of games) whose images even at that time drew heavily from Christian iconography, the cards were “rediscovered” in the eighteenth century by the French theologian Antoine Court de Gébelin. Gébelin believed the cards were of Egyptian origin and that they contained secret symbolic wisdom. In the late 1700s, this mistaken belief was expanded by of Gébelin’s followers, Jean-Baptiste Alliette, who claimed that Tarot was associated with the Hermetic tradition and the Egyptian god of wisdom Thoth. Alliette also encouraged use of the cards specifically for divination or fortune-telling. While Gébelin and Alliette brought the cards to the attention of French society, it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that the ceremonial magician Eliphas Lévi made connections between Tarot cards and Jewish mysticism, claiming that the cards represented a secret alphabet and that the twenty-two cards of the Major Arcana could be directly linked to the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. In making this connection, Lévi also associated Tarot with the Kabbalistic Tree of Life. It is this association that laid the groundwork for occultists such as A. E. Waite (the co-designer of the most popular Tarot deck, the Rider-Waite-Smith or RWS deck). Waite and his peers Samuel Liddell MacGregory Mathers, Aleister Crowley, and other ceremonial magicians of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn went on to link the cards to notions of meditative and energetic portals capable of producing in the
individual a transformative trance to unknown worlds, making the cards a powerful tool in the development of an individual’s “magical will” or higher spiritual purpose. The literature here is vast, but several works are useful in tracing this history of the cards, including Helen Farley’s *Cultural History of Tarot* (2009), Dummett and Decker’s *History of the Occult Tarot* (2002), Stuart Kaplan’s multiple *Encyclopedias of Tarot* (1978-2005), Nevil Drury’s *Stealing Fire from Heaven* (2011), Cynthia Giles’s *The Tarot: History, Mystery, and Lore* (1996), and Rachel Pollack’s *Seventy-Eight Degrees of Wisdom* (2007).

In this chapter, I discuss this history at length, considering the work of fifteenth-, sixteenth-, and seventeenth-century card makers, the magical investments of the French and English occultists, as well as the psychologizing labor of esoteric and self-help authors in the late twentieth century. However, in considering this history, I am more interested in what Bruno Latour would call acts of “translation,” or the work that allows an object to become socially meaningful, relevant, or “compatible with social skills,” as well as, conversely, made “seemingly foreign to any repertoire of human action” (2007, 194). Tracing out such acts of translation allows us to see how the cards have been kept in social circulation for over five hundred years (becoming on the one hand an extremely successful social actor, even if a “weak” one that currently lives on the fringes of society). The framework of translation then allows us to see how a seemingly antiquated object of the Western Renaissance managed to resituate itself as an oracle of “everyday problems” and how it is possible for the contemporary Tarot to sit at busy crossroads between the personal spiritual and magical pursuits of individuals, the social and cultural terrains of self-help and therapy, and the technological realms of media, in particular, social media that encourage the presentation, distribution, and branding of the self.
To see the history of Tarot as a series of translations is to adapt a vocabulary that moves us away from the Tarot as something that must be “believed in” and away from seeing those who live with the cards as either irrational or naïve and toward an understanding of the cards as a social actor in their own right, capable of acting on, mobilizing, assembling, and affecting other social actors, which may include both human beings drawn to the cards and their use but also nonhuman actors such as spirits, quantum particles, and astral planes. Affording the cards their own role as a social actor allows us to think about the history of the cards as truly innovative, linking together the material and immaterial, the social and the spiritual. I find this view, which moves us away from the sociologically dismissive category of “new age” spirituality not only more productive but also more intellectually honest. Through this view, it becomes possible to understand how a group of men and women find themselves gathered in a conference room in an airport hotel in 2010, listening what Tarot cards have to say and putting those voices to work for them.

Social Actors Beyond Belief

While Latour’s Actor Network Theory (ANT) has been very useful for thinking through the history of the cards, my thinking here has also been inspired by my fieldwork experience, which bore out that people “bumped into” Tarot, getting “hooked” on it for a spell of time and then and moving in and out of practice with the cards, as well as the networks and communities of Tarot. In attempting to make sense of such “bumping into,” the work of Kathleen Stewart (2007) has been helpful, particularly her use of Eve Sedgwick’s “weak theory,” in which thought is allowed to follow what it encounters in a way that is not quite knowing but perhaps more humble or at least less completely certain where such a line of thought will ground itself. Sedgwick positions such weak theory as an alternative to “strong” or what she calls “paranoid” theory, which seeks perfect alignment between subject and object. Weak theory is a style of thought that allows vignettes of sociality to form that may never quite, as Stewart puts it, “add up” to a definitive image or narrative of the social. Such weak theory allows for bumps and bumping into, for objects and practices that can be quite meaningful but that never quite add up to a coherent social identity, stable community, or fixed belief system. Whereas ANT allows us to see the complex web of social relations that are continually unfolding and affecting one another, weak theory suggests that thought itself (and perhaps beliefs by extension) “bumps into things,” not quite knowing where it is going or how it will be put to use.
In his essay “Belief,” Robert Orsi (2011) writes of a small, chipped statue of the Virgin Mary that sits on his desk. Before it arrived there, the statue belonged to his mother, and it “would have been privy to everything my mother thought, felt, and imagined for most of her seventy-nine years on earth (the statue was a gift to my mother in her early twenties).” Orsi writes that his mother “knew how to speak to Mary, what to say to her, how to frame her requests, and what to promise the Blessed Mother in return for her assistance” (2011, 12). Yet, he wonders, does such a practice or does such knowledge “add up to believing in Mary?” For Orsi, it does not. He goes on to suggest that the concept of belief is an inadequate description for his mother’s relationship with Mary and with the statue, tracing out the concept of belief to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the notion of religion was linked to belief as a way to establish a universal account of religion that could untangle itself from the (often violent) encounters between Catholicism and Protestantism. Aside from untangling the notion of religion from Catholicism’s political hierarchy and proliferation of punishments and proscriptions, Orsi writes that the notion of “religion as belief” was attempting to free itself from was the “Catholic experience of the presence of the holy in matter, in things—first of all in the consecrated Host, and also in relics, in features of the natural environment (in grottos, rivers, stones, and trees), in statues, images, in the movements and gestures of bodies, in oils and water.”

Orsi does not go far enough, however, in his understanding of embodied and material religious practice resituating it as a relationship between body, mind, and social context, writing “moving beyond static notions of belief we can develop dynamic and fluid understandings of the routes of understanding, imagination, memory, desire, fear, conscious and unconscious, that circulate among people and between humans and their special beings, say, on the banks of the Yamuna or in the great pool of miraculous water at Lourdes, constituting the reality of religious events. The primacy of the one—the single believing individual—is replaced by an understanding of the inevitably relational nature of these operations of mind and body in religious contexts” (2011, 13). While this expands the notion of belief, it does not quite extend agency to those “special beings” or to matter or objects that may be part of their practice. Orsi stops short of granting an autonomous life to his mother’s statue of the Virgin Mary, falling back within the precept of the very social taboos he is writing about, asking “how many moderns, anywhere in the world, would look without condescension or judgment, or at least bemusement, upon a person feeding a
belief relocated religious experience away from the environment and into private states of mind, it also recast social and political notions of “true” religion, constructing a powerful (and once again violent) social hierarchy of religions with religion-as-belief deemed the most “true” and legitimate. Exporting this hierarchy of belief and its proscriptions against embodied religious practice and enchanted matter (or proscriptions against what can be believed “in”), the colonial world was tormented into conversions of both the natural environment and human perception.

As Bruno Latour writes in his work *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, when the Portuguese arrived on the western coast of Africa (covered in their own amulets of saints and the Virgin Mary), they accused the native Africans of worshipping fetishes. Latour writes:

> When the Portuguese demanded an answer to their first question, “Have you made these stone, clay, and wood idols you honor with your own hands?” the Guineans replied at once that indeed they had. Ordered to answer the second question, “Are these stone, clay, and wood idols true divinities?” the Blacks answered “Yes!” with utmost innocence: yes, of course, otherwise they would not have made them with their own hands! The Portuguese, shocked but scrupulous, not wanting to condemn without proof, gave the Africans one last chance: “You can’t say both that you’ve made your own fetishes and that they are true divinities, you have to choose: it’s either one or the other. Unless,” they went on indignantly, “you really have no brains, and you’re as oblivious to the principle of contradiction as you are to the sin of idolatry.” Stunned silence from the Blacks, who failed to see any contradiction, and thus proved by their own confusion how many rungs separated them from full and complete humanity. Bombarded with questions, they persisted in repeating that they did make their own idols, and therefore these were indeed true divinities. Confronted with such blatant bad faith, the Portuguese could only respond with jeers, derision, and disgust. (3)

While Latour has taken poetic liberties to recreate these primal scenes of violence, he is pointing toward a rupture between the “primitive” and foolish mind that “believes” that the world is not reducible and the modern, human mind that “knows” the world to be free of such superstitions.

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piece of candy to a river thought to be a goddess?” I would suggest that some moderns may be able to accept “nature” as a goddess more easy that they can a statue, for granting life to objects is really the ultimate taboo, challenging the very ontological ground of Western epistemology. Suggesting objects do more than simply exist or represent ideas to be known to the mind is to tread dangerously away from reason and knowledge and into the realms of mystification, anthropomorphism, solipsism, and even madness itself.
and external agencies. This long history of colonialism and its relationship to “truth” and legitimate knowledge is far too extensive to rewrite here, but its effects of erasing the agency of all things nonhuman are long-reaching. This history and its violence still inform a rather ordinary taboo against the agency of matter or objects as well as quite prevalent social stigma against those who simply say, “this deck of cards speaks to me.”

While acknowledging this history, the discipline of sociology would still perhaps be most comfortable confining its inquiry of Tarot and its attendant spirituality to these very questions of belief and to explaining why seemingly rational actors take up the practice of reading, possibly as part of a “new religious movement” (Saliba 2003) or “new religious possibilities” (Bender 2010). Here I am more interested in way in which an object, something as seemingly simple as a card, can work as a social lure, bringing together a field of social actors that are human and nonhuman, both profane and sacred, and from a range of traditions and historical moments. In other words, not only the humans gathered to work with and learn from the cards that night at the Sheraton airport hotel but social actors such as the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, the Cardinal Virtues of the Renaissance, modern quantum physics, a host of Goddesses, the ceremonial magicians of the Golden Dawn, as well as Thoth, Hermes, and countless other figures whose presence continues to be encountered in the Tarot were brought together. It is this assemblage of figures and of histories that comes together in the contemporary spiritual marketplace to animate and make lucrative the spiritual practice of Tarot. As I suggest later in the chapter, it is these social actors that readers rediscover, research and argue about, and bring back into life to readapt to the demands of current social conditions through new decks and related Tarot products and personal brands. Here, belief in the cards (either as an effective divinatory device or as a spiritual system)
can ebb and flow as individuals speculate about what may be at work in the cards and as they develop their own personal style and brand of Tarot reading and Tarot knowledge.

**Flat Ontologies and Vital Materialisms**

This chapter, then, employs a rather particular understanding of objects, or things, one mainly drawn from the works of Bruno Latour and Jane Bennett but also from the recent “speculative turn” in continental philosophy, which is often linked to the works of Graham Harman, Levi Bryant, and Steven Shaviro and which seeks to recuperate a “realist” or materialist empiricism that is informed by both metaphysics and ontological inquiry, or as Steven Shaviro (2012, 289) writes, “a robust philosophical realism, one that cannot be dismissed (as realism so often is) as being naïve.” Here all objects become what Bruno Latour would call “black boxes”—entities that exist but whose composition remains unknown until the work of tracing its elements and its relations is completed. As Latour would suggest, this materialist sensibility does not seek the supernatural but rather wants to understand how objects themselves come together, as well as hold together over time, and in doing so produce our very sociality. This means looking for the often invisible action(s) that makes “things” part of the tangible and social world. As Graham Harman writes of Latour, “actors become more real by making larger portions of the cosmos vibrate in harmony with their goals, or by taking detours in the goals to capitalize on the force of nearby actants” (2009, 19.)

This search for invisible actors, particularly when looking to trace the lives of esoteric objects, is challenging, yet I take confidence in Latour’s insistence that all thinkable “objects” be allowed to exist on equal or “flat” ontological footing, creating what can feel like an enchanted menagerie of social entities, often written as something Ian Bogost (2012) has called “a Latour litany”: crucifixes, telephones, cars, animals, bacteria, atoms, quarks, hats, ghosts, unicorns,
pens, bacteria, flowers, books, goddesses, and gods. In a Latourian analysis, all of these exist and coexist (although not all are equally “strong” in the ability to endure), with the human living among them, rather than as products our own making. These social actors, both the nonhuman and “un-real,” often do the very work of building the social through alliance, or what Latour would call an “assemblage,” and they are responsible for the mediation that can alter, for example, a makeshift laboratory into a field of public health policy (see, e.g., Latour 1982), an ordinary playing card into an oracle—or even an ordinary person into a magician. In this regard, to think of Tarot cards as an assemblage formulated via an ontological democracy of other objects and actors poses a challenge to sociologists who would typically explain Tarot readers through a narrative of non-normative beliefs, in particular through a narrative that would view them as individuals searching for something to believe in or, as Courtney Bender has written, “cultural and theological orphans adrift in fragmented, post-religious worlds” (2010, 3).

To take up a flat ontology as a method for understanding spiritual actors is do something unique in sociological research, which is to refuse to relegate magical actors to the fringe of society but take them up as a case study for understanding how the social itself comes together and is spiritualized in the making. As Latour suggests, this is an inversion of the notion of the social as a stabilized state of affairs, a specialized domain, or a “bundle of ties” (2007, 1). Rather, Latour’s approach reinvigorates Gabriel Tarde’s work, which points toward the infinite societies contained within “every thing” (2007, 14). This perspective does not want to bracket out the biological, the natural, or “un-believable” elements form social analysis, or, as Latour suggests, it

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45 Quoting Tarde, Latour writes, “instead of explaining everything by the supposed supremacy of a law of evolution, which compels collective phenomena to reproduce and repeat themselves indefinitely in a certain order rather than explaining lesser facts by the great, and the part by the whole—I explain collective resemblances of the whole by the massing together of minute elementary acts—the greater by the lesser and the whole for the part. This way of regarding phenomena is destined to produce a transformation in sociology similar to that brought about in mathematics by the introduction of infinitesimal calculus” (Latour 2007, 15; Tarde 1899/2000, 35).
has no need to “purify” the realms of the social or cultural and keep them safe from irrational actors that threaten to overwhelm the categories.

As a Heideggerian reader of Bruno Latour, Graham Harman has repositioned the sociological Latour as a metaphysical philosopher. Harman (2000), working through Latour’s early work *Irreductions*, writes that through Latour “everything will be absolutely concrete; all objects and all modes of dealing with objects will now be on the same footing.” This is the very heart of the notion of a flat ontology, yet for Harman it will also become the basis for a philosophy of objects themselves, what Harman calls an Object-Oriented Philosophy. While Latour will be equally interested not only in “actors” (or objects), as well as the way each actor operates as a “medium” or “mediator” that translates “forces from one point of reality to the next” (Harman 2009, 15), Harman will place his emphasis on the inherently “withdrawn” nature of objects. As Timothy Morton (2011) writes of Harman’s Object-Oriented Philosophy, here referred to as Object Oriented Ontology:

**OOO is a form of realism that asserts that real things exist—these things are objects, not just amorphous “Matter,” objects of all shapes and sizes, from football teams to Fermi-Dirac condensates or, if you prefer something more ecological, nuclear waste and birds’ nests. To this quite Aristotelian view OOO extends Husserl’s and Heidegger’s arguments that things have an irreducible dark side: no matter how many times we turn over a coin, we never see the other side as the other side—it will have to flip onto “this” side for us to see it, immediately producing another underside. Harman simply extends this irreducible darkness from subject-object relationships to object-object relationships.**

In placing his focus on object-object relationships, Harman pushes Heidegger’s tool-analysis to an extreme, claiming that when we make “use” of things, employing them as tools, we are really allying ourselves with them (Harman 2009, 19). Such an alliance is made possible, for Harman, by “allure,” which, as Robert Jackson (2013) writes, “Right from the start, allure is not an experience in which humans, animals or inanimate objects directly interact with the objects or things in themselves, as for Harman (and for Heidegger) this is fundamentally impossible.”
inherently withdrawn nature of all objects undergirds the project of Object Oriented Ontology and works to remove the possibility that the social is merely the work of human meaning and experience. Rather it extends the terrain of social activity to a world of nonhuman actors. For Harman, the question will not only be how do “things” come together or why do “things” exists but also how things change over time. In his article “On Vicarious Causation,” Harman develops his concept of “allure,” which he describes as “a special and intermittent experience in which the intimate bond between a thing’s unity and its plurality of notes somehow partly disintegrates” (Harman 2005, 143).

And, as Bennett argues in her work Vibrant Matter (2009), it is possible to become “attuned” to this “vibrancy of objects.” For Bennett, the attunement entails two moves. The first is a sort of “awakening” to the power of things, which she relates to Spinoza’s notion of the “conatus,” the power inherent in all things and every body to “persevere in its own being” (2). Things exist and, in their tendency to persist, affect all beings, if not craft the very terrains of existence. When such thing-power is realized, the human is relocated into a much more dynamic ontological flux or “wildness.” Selves, if we are still to think in these terms, become instantaneously porous, not only open to but perhaps even constituted by the workings of innumerable agents, none of which can be reduced to the singularity proposed by the notion of the individual.

Materializing the Spiritual; or, The Card Flip

During my first month of attending Tarot Center classes, Warren and Rose invited me out to dinner with them. They wanted to talk about my project, and I was eager to hang out with them outside of the class, so off we went in their minivan to a restaurant in the East Village that stays open late and has relatively cheap vegetarian food. Lisa, who often operates like Warren’s
shadow, was also eager to see what I was up to and invited herself along for the ride and the
diner. As we made our way downtown, I tried explaining my sociological background and
how—coming out of my work at a domestic violence hotline—I was interested in the way that
(often) women spoke to one another in times of crisis, about the possibility of caretaking through
such conversation, and what it’s like to do that very work of taking-care. Explaining that the
hotline had taken a toll on me, I was wondering if I could translate some of my sociology theory
and fieldwork skills to a dissertation about psychics and alternative practitioners, who I wanted
to consider as affective laborers in the city’s informal economy. I told Rose in all sociological
earnestness that I was working on a mapping project that was trying to locate these workers
throughout the city. Almost immediately she said, “but that’s not possible. You’ll never know all
the places that Tarot is being read. It’s everywhere!” and as we drove she casually pointed to
apartment buildings suggesting that Tarot readings could be taking place in any of these
buildings, even now. Asking me if that type of “work” was what I wanted to map, she promptly
told me that I was in for a very difficult time. It was my first inclination that trying to find the
world of Tarot by looking for people, rather than for objects and their traces, was a mistake.

Later, once we got settled in the restaurant, I talked with Warren about the energy in his
classroom that evening and how the students seemed really to love not only learning about the
Golden Dawn’s (the British magical occult organization responsible for “illustrating” the Tarot)
associations with the cards, taking avid notes as Warren lectured, but also seemed truly to enjoy
reading for one another. Warren interrupted me and said, “I’ll tell you why people love Tarot.
It’s because they love cards.” Warren’s abrupt pronouncement seemed to me then a little bit
crude, as though my grander scheme of affective labor and care work could and should be
reduced to a card. It is striking to me how much I kicked against this statement in the initial
months of fieldwork, not wanting to focus on the cards themselves but remaining fixed on finding someone who could explain to me the way in which they used the cards or the card meanings or the conversations that the cards could facilitate. Only months after getting such a wide variety of responses from my initial questions that I worried I would never be able to organize the data into meaningful interpretive frames did I come back to Warren’s simple pronunciation: people love cards.

Accepting this as a better starting point for understanding what I was encountering in my fieldwork, a seemingly uncontrollable world of card proliferation and card reading, led me to read about the material study of religion, which, as Brigit Meyers writes, “means asking how religion happens materially, which is not to be confused with asking the much less helpful question of how religion is expressed in material form. A materialized study of religion begins with the assumption that things, their use, their valuation, and their appeal are not something added to a religion, but rather inextricable from it” (Meyer et al. 2010, 209). Therefore, it would need to be the cards themselves that would help make the connections between the stories and interviews I was collecting.

Finding a Tarot Deck

Not that long ago, it wasn’t easy to find a deck of Tarot cards, and it was unlikely that if you found them you would think of using them to become a “professional” Tarot card reader. Many of the older members of this study recall being given a deck of cards as if it were an act of “the Tarot choosing you” and being initiated into a something that felt like a secret and existed under the radar of mainstream society. Today, you might not have to be so chosen but rather can walk into almost any bookstore and encounter a wealth of cards and books; even more immediately, you can type “Tarot” into Google and receive “about 41,800,000 results” (as of
May 1, 2011). The styles of Tarot one can encounter can range from the classic Rider-Waite-Smith (RWS) deck or Aleister Crowley’s Thoth deck, which was illustrated by Frida Harris, to feminist-inspired decks such as Vicki Noble’s MotherPeace deck or Kris Warldherr’s Goddess Tarot, or Eastern-thought decks such as the Osho Zen Tarot, or more thematic decks such as Tarot of the Fairies, The Teen Witch’s Tarot Deck, Tarot of Cats, or even geographically inspired work, such as the recent Tarot of the Boroughs, which was made by a New York pagan with the help of numerous New York celebrities. (For a very thorough collection of contemporary Tarot decks, see AcleticTarot.net. The Museo de Tarot in Madrid also produces a comprehensive paper catalogue of available decks.)

But what are you looking at when you encounter these decks? I suggest you are looking at a historical and evolving assemblage that affectively lures individuals to its use, which, in doing so, has become an extremely successful, if not particularly strong, social actor who has managed to persist for over five centuries, reorienting itself to the culture of its times but also continually offering the possibility of enchantment through its own obscured history.

But more immediately, when you encounter Tarot you are essentially looking at a deck of cards, a pile of card stock, often professionally printed with various images, cut into a 2.76-inch x 4.72-inch rectangle. As a physical object, all cards are a standardized device that are two sided, portable, small, and impermanent. And, importantly, they can be flipped. In this regard, you are looking at a very old and very simple machine or mechanism for engaging change and chance that works via the elegant gesture of the card flip. Regardless of their design or imagery, their internal structure or hierarchy, or the philosophies espoused by the deck, humans have found this type of object captivating since their evolution from Korean divinatory arrows in the sixth

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46 For a very thorough collection of contemporary Tarot decks, see AcleticTarot.net. The Museo de Tarot in Madrid also produces a comprehensive paper catalogue of available decks.
century (Schwartz, 41). The poker historian James McManus (2009) imagines the story went something like this:

One possibility is that it gradually dawned on one of the shamans that the random fall of sacred arrows—arrows unguided, the Koreans believed, by human will—could be achieved more efficiently by mixing up pieces of silk marked with the same insignia the arrows bore, then turning over the silks one by one. This would save him the steps of going outside, launching arrows skyward, and scurrying around to read and interpret which one had landed where, at what divine angle, and so forth. One frigid January morning, our shivering but imaginative soothsayer must have returned to the hearth of his cozy shelter, set down his quiver and bow, shuffled some previously marked pieces of silk, and dealt them out on a table. “Stay inside, fool,” he might have interpreted them to advise (30.)

Although this story is facetious, historians and anthropologists agree that playing cards emerged in a synthesis of play and divinatory pursuit (as well as boredom and obsession), as cards worked as simple source for the controlled production of randomness. Such a machine, whether it was composed of silk, wood, or (eventually) paper could provide potentially valuable, divinable patterns from which to detect the hidden meaning of the fates, or they could be elaborated into a game of “chance,” where the uncertainty of a card flip could be engaged through play and rule making. This synthesis of divinatory capacity and play, neatly present in the gesture of the card flip, sits at the heart of the love story between humans and cards, which have allowed humans to ask big questions in, literally, a way they can handle and manipulate: Does fate exist? If so, how might we know it? What of chance? Does luck exist? If so, can it be cultivated? Is there a structure or knowable pattern underlying what appears to be randomness? As Jackson Lears has so attentively traced in his work Something for Nothing: Luck in America (2003), these questions course through and helped define a particularly American sensibility that seeks both to engage and control chance. For Lears, chance has never quite been tamed and so continually resurfaces in the market, in cultural sensibilities about the value of risk, in entrepreneurial language, and in the ethic of success. “Despite fresh evidence that hardworking people can easily lose everything
to corporate confidence mean, the insistence that ‘you make your own luck’—that you are personally responsible for your own economic fate—remains a keystone of our public life,” writes Lears (2003, 20).

As Steven Conner (2011) writes in work *Paraphernalia: The Curious Live of Magical Objects*, “cards are the visible sign of communication between an unordered and ordered world, a world of mingled and overlapping hybrids, a world sorted into categories” (52). Conner writes that is the very materiality of the card—its “flatness” and its “stiffness”—that in part lend the card a liveliness. Flatness (to have only width and breadth but not height) is, according to Conner, “is one of the strangest and the most exotic of conditions” (53) and a geometric conundrum. Yet flatness inheres in paper—as well as the page, the canvas, and the screen, to name a few. Such flatness of an ideal surface can be a site projection, but, as Conner suggests, such surfaces also act as tables or places to lay out, organize, and reorganize things (or concepts). Tables help order and reconnect. As such, a card, through its flatness, is also a table or a tabulator. Conner does not mention this, but flatness is also, physically, an enabler of movement and mobility. Cards can be shuffled, reshuffled, packed, and carried. This simple fact most likely accounts for both their popularity and their perseverance throughout history. The stiffness of cards, suggests Conner, operates as a “special kind of ambivalence” (55). Stiffness suggests “deceptiveness,” as in “to stiff someone,” yet “there is a kind of uprightness, a quasi animate erectness in the card, that, in standing up for itself seems to distain and redeem the flimsy ductility of paper. In the card rigor mortis can suddenly spring into vigor mortis” (56). Conner further writes:

Playing cards are also magical partly because they are meaningless in themselves; their power comes only from the signs they carry, and the meaning of those signs in relation to other signs. The meaning of the card is in part its arbitrariness, its flatness, its lack of intrinsic life or meaning, the fact that no card means anything on its own. Its flatness
signifies this dry semioticity. Its life comes from the contingency and adjacency, from what occurs when it is laid next to another card (58).

While it is true that cards “speak” through the symbols or signs that they carry, we can also look to what cards can “do” or what can be “done with” cards, and we can see that a card is not entirely meaningless outside of a semiotic context. Cards, most basically, can be flipped. They can also be used, as Ian Hacking (1988) has shown, as agents of randomization, and simple playing card were not only employed in the history of the search for telepathy, but cards as an “organizational system” (Hayles 2005, Wendy Chun 2005) played an important role in the history of computing, making possible serial functions and memory.

The card flip, however, is not only an evocative gesture that individuals have found compelling; it is also an extremely successful social actor. Through this simple gesture (as well as the throwing of dice or the invocation of those objects that have an aleatory capacity), we see not only the link between divination and games of chance but the development of the study of probability, as gambling games flourished throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and efforts were made to develop a mathematical theory of odds. By 1560, Girolamo Cardano, a self-confessed chess and dice addict, had begun his work Liber de Ludo Alea, a written investigation into the nature of luck and the mathematical principles associated with random events. By the mid-seventeenth century, the general outline of probability theory was known, linking card play with a form of productivity and giving the often-condemned act of gambling a chance to enter into a scientific discourse. This linking of aleatory objects with statistics and probability demarcated the once blurry line between divination and games, with the latter being fully indoctrinated into Western European philosophical discourse as well as into the support of the state via sponsored lotteries (games, gambling, risk and chance now seem to form the very structure of global finance, oddly rejoining the open-endedness of divinatory practice via
speculative finance). As Ian Hacking, quoting Walter Benjamin, writes, “The proscription of gambling could have its deepest roots in the fact that a natural gift of humanity, one which, directed toward the highest objects, elevates the human being beyond himself, only drags him down when applied to one of the meanest objects: money. The gift in question is presence of mind. Its highest manifestation is the reading that in each case is divinatory.”

The entanglement of play, gambling, and divination is at the heart of the basic pleasure associated with cards, and proscriptions against the use of cards only helped them spread within a culture of widespread game playing and fascination with the link between mathematical and philosophical insight. The card flip, therefore is not only at the heart of the Tarot love story that I will tell, but it is at the heart of the assemblage of Tarot—a assemblage of game playing, magical innovation, con artistry and illusion, and, eventually, therapeutic capacity.

**Tarot as an Assemblage**

Many Tarot authors note the evolution of Tarot card symbolism. Stuart Kaplan (1978), the publisher of the RWS deck and author of four volumes of his famed *Encyclopedia of Tarot*, has noted that there are four “stages” of Tarot. Cynthia Giles (1992) suggests that it could be understood in three progressive developments. These changes in the design and content of the cards do not, however, end with Tarot’s presence in contemporary “New Age” or spiritual markets. Rather, this “evolution” of the cards still informs the work of contemporary in that the first move the cards made—from a game to a repository of esoteric teachings—actually obscured the history of the Tarot. In other words, this move indefinitely cast the cards as “a mystery” to be

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47 From Kavanaugh’s (2005) *Dice, Cards, and Wheels*: “Writing in the dark days of the Occupation, Georges Bataille included in his *Le Coupable* of 1943 a chapter titled ‘On the Attraction of Gambling.’ Positing gambling as the revelation of a force that strips away humankind’s most cherished pretensions, Bataille claims that ‘of few things does man have more fear than gambling.’ For him, gambling reveals in its purest form a frightening liberty, a universal contingency that, as ‘the vertiginous seduction of chance’ (313), brings with it ‘the suicide of knowledge’ (310). To gamble, for Bataille, is to recognize a dimension of experience where ‘being loses itself in what is beyond being’” (327).
solved, and numerous Tarot readers and scholars continue to attempt to trace this origin (Dummett 1996, Moakley, 1966, Giles 1996, Farley 2009). Michael Dummett, who referred to the esotericization of Tarot as “the most successful propaganda campaign ever launched” (1996, 27), is well known for trying to settle the mystery of the cards, but it has become the case that any account of cards becomes fodder for critique. It is this speculative energy—set in motion with the first move from game to esoteric device—that enabled Tarot’s adaptation to a contemporary spiritual milieu in that it became a prompt not just for personal use but for theorization. Tarot became an object not only through which any number of personal insights could be found, but also an object through which almost any philosophical or spiritual claim could be made.

Today, Tarot readers themselves are aware that the cards they are using are a rather jumbled, historical object, although that history is not always clear to them. Much like the individuals that Courtney Bender encountered in her work The New Metaphysicals (2010), the readers that I have hung out with in New York City also have what might seem like a convoluted sense of history, perhaps leading academics to criticize the “hodge-podge” of spiritual ideas, ideas that might be tamed with an appropriately thorough history lesson. Yet this desire to “school” metaphysical practitioners—a desire that courses through the Tarot community itself and is notorious among pagan, magical, and other metaphysical communities (Luhrmann 1989)—I suggest misses the way in which history actually remains vibrant for Tarot readers.48

The history of the cards is a site of speculation, innovation, and (as I suggest in Chapter 3) the

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48 This desire for “schooling,” which I use here as a pun, suggesting both the colloquial use of the word, which means to shame an individual by correcting them, as well as the notion of schooling as formal education, is something I address in Chapter 3 when I examine the process of “becoming a reader” and look at questions of skill, legitimacy, and authority. Also see Coco and Woodward’s “Discourses of Authenticity Among a Pagan Community” (2007) for a discussion of the “fluffy bunny” phenomena, or the individual who has purchased, rather than practiced, their way into esoteric circles.
source of much productivity and material production. I would not go so far as to say that the contemporary Tarot reader is always living in a Bergsonian notion of time, but I would argue that many are working with the cards as something that is a dynamic assemblage of times, places, actors, and materials. The cards carry the auras of their histories and, to the degree that the reader is aware of those histories, they become part of the reader’s toolkit and part of the card’s effectiveness. In this way notions of Kabbalah mix with the pleasure of card playing, which keeps alive talk of secret societies, which brings historical actors and locations to life in ordinary Tarot readings, allowing the cards to cue a unique form of conversation, where the stuff of ordinary life can become enchanted by putting it in tension with the seemingly convoluted history of the cards.

The relationship readers have with the cards is also a result of the nature of the spiritual market—the very market that speculation produces has resulted in a surfeit of Tarot books, each often with its own “take” on Tarot that promises to enlighten the reader. As a researcher of Tarot, I have found the history confusing and contradictory, and, as such, if your goal is to “use” the cards rather than “study” them (an interesting division in itself, but one that clearly exists among the readers), then the history can become a laborious, not to mention expensive, task. As a result it is often the case that Tarot readers seem to develop their own historical understanding that they are then slow to modify as new information arises. That said, everyone with whom I worked was deeply eager to receive new information about Tarot. Part of the pleasure of the world is the ability to debate the merits of new readers, theories, decks, books, and classes.

Yet rather than see the cards as something that needs to have a definite history in order to be useful, I suggest we think in terms of assemblage, which means to think in terms of composition or the act of being composed. This is a manner of thought that recognizes there are
no “singular” or stand-alone entities. Such a “compositionalist manifesto” (Latour 2010) has the effect of exposing the layers of history and labor contained in even the most ordinary object, and it also has the effect of producing what Latour has referred to as “hybrids”—or things that live between the worlds of the natural and social. In the case of Tarot, the object has come to live across the worlds of secularity and spirituality, disenchantment and enchantment. Hybrids, however, are far from being rare, and such a way of thinking forces one to understand that hybridity is perhaps the state of being of all things, drawing across what we like to consider stable and distinct worlds for inspiration and sustenance. It may be that most things do not care what forms of sociality sustain them and that they are highly adaptable to environments and influences. This seems to be the case with Tarot.

As I will explain, the cards have been maintained since their inception in the fifteenth century through a series of “translations” that carried the cards from the game tables of Italian aristocrats, to the salons of Revolutionary France’s “fortune tellers,” into the hands of secret magical societies, and on to the Americanized search for self and business. In this regard, Tarot is a phenomenally successful, adaptive actor, and we can think of it as an assemblage of forces at two levels. The first is the actual materiality of Tarot. The second is its symbolism, which coevolved with playing cards but was recast in the eighteenth century by esoteric scholars who saw in the cards a wealth of “secret teachings,” linking the Tarot to Egypt, the Roma (then referred to as gypsies), as well as to Jewish mysticism. By the late nineteenth century, this mythical yet compelling history had been set in motion, and Tarot become yet another site of innovation, this time through esoteric secret societies who redesigned, or “corrected,” the cards as well as their meanings. This what contemporary readers inherited in the 1970s when Stuart Games and U.S. Games republished the now famous Rider-Waite-Smith deck—an obtuse object
replete with myth, fantasy, magic, and endless theories of its existence and use. As such, Tarot was a fertile ground for the New Age investments and commodifications of the 1980s and 1990s.

The Game of Tarot

As an object that exists in the world, Tarot can be seen as an elaboration of traditional playing cards. While it is unclear exactly how playing cards entered in Europe, there is evidence that cards moved quickly across land and sea, being carried by merchants, sailors, and soldiers. Additionally, card games were an extremely popular pasttime of the nobility. By the mid-fifteenth century in Italy a series of “trump” cards, or trionfi, had been added to the traditional playing cards’ fifty-two-card structure. These additional cards essentially produced a new game called Tarocchi, in which the cards were understood in a hierarchical series, with each card higher in the series being able to “trump” the card that came before it.

Public records, as well as a Milanese fresco depicting five young “Tarrochi” players, suggests that the trump cards emerged from the royal courts of Milan or Ferrara, perhaps as a gift or as a commissioned artwork. The oldest known decks of cards with trumps that we are currently aware of were commissioned or gifted to the Visconti and Sforza families, and the oldest known surviving deck was created for Francesco Sforza and his wife Bianca Visconti, who ruled Milan from 1440 to 1465. (The cards that still exist are currently housed in the Morgan Library in New York City. Morgan is said to have kept the cards on his desk while he was alive.) These trump cards, which depict several of the figures found in a contemporary deck (The Fool, and nineteen other trumps) are delicate works of craftsmanship—hand-painted, detailed, and inlaid with gold. When I visited the Morgan Library with a group of contemporary

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49 Just how playing cards entered in Europe is not definitely known. Some suggest that sailors brought the cards from China, where cards are known to have existed at least two hundred years prior to their arrival in Europe. This theory suggests that cards were brought through the port of Venice. Other, more substantiated theories suggest playing cards are of Arabic origin and could have entered Europe through Italy or Spain. See Dummett (1996) for a discussion of the origin of playing cards in relation to Tarot.
Tarot readers, the archivist pointed out to us that several of the Visconti cards were punctured at the top with a pin hole, as though they had been hung on a wall. Although no one is sure when the cards were punctured, this hole suggests that these particular cards were most likely designed to be admired rather than used in a game.

While there is symbolic continuity between the Visconti-Sforza deck and later trump cards, scholars are not certain if these art decks are really “the first” instance of Trumps. Card playing was already flourishing in Europe by the late 1300s, with cards being printed via xylography, wood cutting onto pasteboard that was made from gluing several layers of paper together. These popular and cheaper versions of playing cards deteriorated over time, however, leaving card historians unsure of the relationship between the existing trumps and popular decks. Did trumps exist in a popular deck that has been lost to time, perhaps inspiring the Visconti and Sforza decks, or did the artful noble decks inspire the popular production of decks with trumps?50

In her 1966 work *The Tarot Cards Painted by Bonifacio Bembo*, Gertrude Moakley suggested that the trump cards and their imagery were inspired not by the pastimes of the wealthy but by Carnival, the period of time between Ash Wednesday and Shrove Tuesday, in which revelry and ribaldry overtook the normative social order. Moakley suggested that it was the processional parades of Carnival, which often represented the Cardinal Virtues, the four Elements, as well as figures from mythology and legend, that inspired the trumps’ images. Here,

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50 Writing in 1816, Samuel Weller Singer suggested in his work *Researches into the History of Playing Cards* that if card makers could be shown to have invented the process of woodcut printing, then it was to them that we owed the “rise of this art, which ‘breathes a soul into our silent walls.’” The role that boredom played in the innovation and adaptation of cards probably cannot be overstated. Cards, it seems, have been well loved if only because they literally help “pass time.” And if the royals themselves designed the cards and were themselves inspiration for the figures, then perhaps Tarot might be considered the Facebook of its day, allowing people not only to play a game but to comment on their very lives as they played. It is unclear what the role of gossip was in the development of the Tarot.
the trumps would have been developed in a spirit of parody, potentially mocking the notion of social order and hierarchy. If this is the case, then it is possible that the first printed trump cards were made for a popular audience rather than for nobility. However, as Helen Farley (2009) suggests in her *Cultural History of Tarot*, Moakley’s argument, which tied the imagery of Carnival to a popular poem of Petrarch—“I Trionfi,” written between 1340 and 1374, in which Petrarch describes a triumphal procession of allegorical figures, each one overtaking the next (Love was overtaken by Chastity, which was then overtaken by Death, Fame, Time, and Eternity, suggesting the triumph of eternal life)—cannot be substantiated and remains speculation.

What is known is that the imagery of the early trump cards can be found in medieval literature, theater and pageantry, and art, and that by the 1500s the imagery of the cards was relatively fixed, becoming a strange pastiche of competing doctrines, which Cynthia Giles (1992) lists as Gnosticism, Magia, and Neoplatonism, as well as Christianity. The symbolism of the cards had taken on its own commentary on life itself, with an emphasis on the notion of life “ever lasting,” while at the same time engaging in conversation with the persistence of death (perhaps inspired by the “Dance of Death” processionals of the Great Plague), as well as importance of virtue, the possibility of the magic of the natural world, and the indiscriminate nature of chance. In that they are such a symbolic amalgam of their time, it is astounding that cards were ever created. Card playing, while popular, was also deeply condemned by the Catholic Church, and their trade was often regulated by various localities that sought to protect their own nascent printing industries. In this regard, it is impressive that a set of cards that might allow individuals to mock the nobility and perhaps persist in non-Christian theologies would have spread across Europe as quickly as it did. Yet, this very tension—that the cards are
something condemned by established religion, are capable of commenting on the course of daily life, and are entertaining and fun—persists today and it is what allows the cards to keep one foot in a secular, humanist world while interpretations of its symbolism are allowed to roam through more enchanted pastures. As will be see, esotericists of the eighteenth century came to see in the cards something more than ribaldry; they saw a “key” to the secret “wisdom of the ages.”

**Tarot as a Magical System**

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, a standardized pack of Tarot cards and images had been established. These types of cards are known as the Tarot of Marseille after the French card makers responsible for their production (a name, however, not applied until the 1930s; Farley 2009, 94). It was this work that solidified the images of The Fool, The Hermit, The Star, and The Moon, as well as introduced labels at the bottom of the cards. Tarot was extremely popular in France throughout the seventeenth century but had apparently fallen out of favor in Parisian society by 1700. Therefore, in 1775, when Antoine Court de Gébelin, a French Freeman and student of mythology, archeology, and linguistics, encountered the cards (while visiting a Swiss or German friend), the history of the cards had been all but forgotten. Gébelin, in a fateful mistake, mistook the cards to be an “allegory” representing ancient wisdom forming the lost Book of Thoth. Gébelin suggested that this book had been brought to Europe from “the gypsies” of Egypt and that it had been translated into a card game to protect its secrets. Hence, the Tarot became a site of investigation that sought to discover this exotic and esoteric, if incorrect, past, rather than simply an object of consumption and play.

Helen Farley, in her work *A Cultural History of the Tarot* (2009), provides a succinct summary of the intellectual milieu of Gébelin’s time, which gives some sense of why such a

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51 The following is a necessarily abbreviated history. See bibliography for complete and original works. My goal here is to sketch the broad moves that Tarot has made in order to show that these elements are still “alive” in the contemporary deck and in the decks usage.
transformational mistake was possible. In the wake of the French Revolution, there was a rather powerful backlash against the Church as well as an interest in humanist schools of thought that sought to rewrite the relationship between humans, nature, and the existence of God. Notions of a Great Chain of Being were coupled with a Romantic sensibility that saw divinity as something hidden within nature, radiating through living beings, and while not fully knowable, still speaking through universal “correspondences” between God and Man, as well as God and Nature, a notion made popular by Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), a scientist, philosopher, and mystic. Swedenborgian “Illumism” prepared the French for a number of esoteric movements, which would in the nineteenth century include Spiritism (via Alan Kardec), or communication with the dead; Martinism, a French-born movement carried by Martins De Pasqually and Louis-Claude Saint-Martin; and Theosophy, the school of thought brought to Europe via New York and India by Madame Helena Petrova Blavatsky. However, the most influential figure of Gébelin’s time was Anton Mesmer, the experimental physician. Gébelin was a client of Mesmer, having sought treatment for his legs. Mesmer’s work with magnets and magnetic healing introduced a notion of “animal magnetism,” a vital, invisible energy that flowed between bodies (Darton 1968). This work made him the subject of a royal investigation, instigated in 1784 by Louis XVI, which found that “magnetism” and its healing properties could be explained by suggestion. Isabel Stengers (2011) writes that this “trial” of science marked the end of the Enlightenment and a shift from a science of experimentation that can make room for wonder and imagination to a science that must see itself as “guardians of an infantile public” (The Speculative Turn 375).

In addition to these esoteric schools of thought, artifacts from Egypt flooded into France, via the exploits of Bonaparte and his armies. As a result, a pre–Rosetta Stone (1822) fascination
with Egypt set in motion considerable speculation about the meaning of hieroglyphs and the
information that they contained. Esotericists, as they seem wont to do, took up this speculative
work, imagining themselves as great mediators of the lost wisdom. Farley suggests that men such
as Gebelin saw themselves as disseminating such information in a spirit of humanistic
development rather than “ruling and dominating” the texts (2010, 97), but already here we begin
to see how a contemporary Tarot deck emerged within the fantasies of an exoticized and
romanticized Other. Egypt (as well as, later, India, through the work of Blavatsky and Olcott)
became a particularly fertile site for reconnecting in the eighteenth century what was actually a
Renaissance misconception. Renaissance magicians such as John Dee and Giordano Bruno had
traced their own magical heritage to a collection of Greek writing known as the Corpus
Hermeticum, a collection of writings that developed under the name Hermes Trismegistus or
Hermes the “Thrice Great.” These writings, which investigated astrology, the healing nature of
plants, as well as the production of talismans, also become a style of philosophical, or Hermetic,
inquiry. When they were taken up by Renaissance magicians, they were seen as a repository of
“pure” and ancient information handed down from Thoth himself, thus erroneously positing
Egypt as a land of magical knowledge in the minds of generations of esotericists. In 1614, Isaac
Casaubon debunked the notion that Corpus Hermeticum was as old as been presumed. The texts
are now dated to approximately 100 to 300 CE.

It was in Gebelin’s eighth volume of his “great work” The Primordial World or Le
Monde Primitif Analyses et Compare Avec Le Monde Moderne (1773–1782)—a work already in
process when he encountered the cards and that attempted to trace a universal heritage of
mankind—that Gebelin made his analysis of Tarot as the inheritor of this mistaken Egyptian

52 Hermes was conflated with the Egyptian god Thoth by the Greeks, and this conflation was carried
forward by the Romans.
magic. The Trump cards, he claimed, were representative of Egyptian gods and religious doctrine, and when he set about illustrating his text, working with the illustrator Jean-Marie Lhôte, Gébelin removed the Christian symbolism of the Marseille deck. For example, the “Pope” card became “The Hierophant,” the “Popess” became “The High Priestess,” and “The Chariot” became “Osiris Triumphant” (Farley 2009, 103). Gébelin imagined that the Tarot has survived the fires of Alexandria precisely because it had been put into card form—a lowly popular cultural object—and its images made less obvious. It was therefore, Gébelin felt, his own great honor to be able to recognize in the cards such a wealth of lost knowledge and translate the images back to their original state.

While Gébelin may be responsible for this erroneous correlation between Tarot as a game and Tarot as an esoteric repository, it was another man, Jean Bapiste Alietta (1739–1791), who went by the name Etteila and worked as a seed seller, as well as what seems like a professional fortune-teller, who popularized that concept. Etteila wrote a number of books—on algebra, as well as on Tarot cards, including a book titled *Egyptian Cartomania—Interpretation of the 78 Hieroglyphs Which Are on the Cards Called Tarot*. He became a Parisian card dealer for a time and made money offering his cartomantic services to the general population. In this regard, several scholars cite Etteila as the person responsible for linking Tarot cards with divination, although this link is impossible to substantiate. Etteila, however, created his own version of a Tarot deck (still published under his name) that also made links to Egyptian gods, as well as to astrology, which he believed the Egyptians had invented. His linking of the Tarot image, the card, and astrology allowed him to create a natal chart for his querent, thus personalizing the Tarot images in way that had not been done before. With Etteila we see a move toward linking
the macrosocial commentary of Tarot, or even its supposed “wisdom of the ages,” with immediate personal life and personal issues, a link that continues very successfully today.\textsuperscript{53}

While Ettiela popularized the Tarot as a divinatory device, Éliphas Lévi Zahed—the pseudonym of Alphonse Louis Constant who was born in 1810—moved Tarot beyond divination into the world of systematic occultism. Lévi himself coined the term “occultism,” or occultisme, in French.\textsuperscript{54} It would be Lévi who would make the connection between the Tarot cards and Hebrew mysticism, or Kabbalah, drawing linkages between the twenty-two Major Arcana trumps and the Hebrew alphabet. This linkage of the Tarot card with Kabbalah proved to be very powerful for Lévi, who reimagined the cards as a unifying magical system and reconceptualized the origin of the cards altogether. Lévi traced the origin of the Tarot to Israel and to the destruction of the Temple, during which certain sage Kabbalists inscribed the ancient mysteries on “ivory, parchment, gilt or silvered leather, afterwards on simple cards…” (Giles 1992, 29).\textsuperscript{55} By linking the magical alphabet to the cards themselves, Lévi transformed a divinatory tool into what he called a “philosophical machine” that is “mathematics applied to the Absolute, the alliance of the positive and the ideal, a lottery of thoughts as exact numbers, perhaps the simplest and grandest of conception of human genius” (Giles 1992, 30). Lévi seems to have meant the notion of machine in a somewhat literal sense because the Hebrew alphabet is, as Giles writes,

\textsuperscript{53} At the last Reader’s Studio, I attended a Tarot and Astrology workshop led by a well-known author in the Tarot community, Coreen Kenner. The community seemed eager for this knowledge, and the workshop was well attended, but it also became a contested terrain, with more seasoned astrologers weighing in on her Tarot-heavy interpretations and correlations. While professional readers feel that “supplementing” Tarot with astrology will make them more attractive on the market, this addition of skills also seems to present a challenge because, just as Tarot knowledge can be slippery and contested, so too is astrology, with little consensus on established interpretations or meanings.

\textsuperscript{54} As Giles (1992) cites, the term was first used in English by the Theosophist A. D. Sinnett in 1881. Mircea Eliade notes that the word “occult,” however, dates to the sixteenth century.

\textsuperscript{55} However, as Farley (2009) points out, given that Jews were forbidden to use representational images by the First Commandment, it is unlikely that they were responsible for Tarot’s iconography. Farley (2009, 126) writes, “this seemingly improbability was overlooked not only by Lévi himself, but also by his followers.”
“not just a system of writing, but an expression of all the fundamental facts and forces of creation—which are in turn organized in a complex image called the ‘Tree of Life.’” The Tree of Life would prove to be a powerful organizing symbolic system for the French occultists, becoming a literal map that synthesized connections between Tarot symbolism and Hebrew mysticism and numerology. With the Tree of Life informing Tarot symbolism, the cards became a repository of worlds or “Sepiroth” and the energetic connections that linked these worlds. The Tree of Life is both a map and a story of the creation of the Earth and of earth-bound creatures (what is known as the “path of descent.” The Tree also illustrates a “path of return,” in which the spirit of all matter returns to the primordial energies of the God-head.)

Borrowing from the work of Athanasius Kircher, Lévi designed a system of correspondences that associated each Hebrew letter with a Tarot trump. Farley (2009) explores
this system, and it is worth quoting her work at length in order to give the reader a real sense of
the complex entanglements and histories that Levi’s system invoked:

Lévi associated each Hebrew letter and the relevant correspondences from Kircher’s table
with a tarot trump, so that Aleph corresponded with trump I (the Magician), Beth with
trump II (the Priestess) and so on. Of the twenty-two letters, five also have “final forms”
when they occur at the end of words. Instead of associating a different trump with each
form, Lévi linked two planets to trump XIII (Death) but failed to maintain consistency by
only associating the Sun with Temperance. Trump XV (the Devil) was associated with
Mercury in this scheme and Lévi made this connection explicit by depicting the Devil
with a caduceus, generally associated with Mercury. In fact, Lévi’s depictions of the
Chariot and the Devil were particularly interesting examples of eighteenth-century
French tarot. Lévi became familiar with the doctrine of correspondences, which was
popularised by Emmanuel Swedenborg, while he was serving an eleven-month jail term.
Swedenborg was highly influential on French society during the Enlightenment and
especially so on Éliphas Lévi.

Here we begin to see the elaborate mapping of histories and traditions, as well as the link to the
doctrine of correspondences. Farley continues:

Lévi’s Devil was depicted as Baphomet, the demon allegedly worshipped by the Knights
Templar. The exact nature or even the existence of a belief in Baphomet has never been
conclusively demonstrated. The demon has been variously described as a cat, a skull or
even a head with three faces. On Lévi’s trump, it takes a humanoid form with a goat’s
head and cloven hooves. Ramsay and Love originated the idea that the Knights Templar
possessed secret knowledge from the Temple that they had discovered in the Holy Land.
This knowledge was said to have been suppressed by both the Catholic Church, who had
brought the Templars before the Inquisition, and the French Royal family, whose
antecedent Philip the Fair had instigated the Inquisitorial process in an effort to clear his
considerable debts to the military order. On the Devil card, the presence of Baphomet
suggested the idea of wisdom from the Holy Land. Baphomet pointed to the ground and
the sky, recalling the wisdom legendarily inscribed on the Emerald Tablet, “As above, so
below,” a direct reference to the idea of the microcosm echoing the macrocosm, an
allusion to the doctrine of correspondences. As mentioned previously, the caduceus was a
reference to Levi’s assignation of correspondences derived from Kircher’s, itself a
reference to the Corpus Hermeticum and Hermes Trismegistus; the caduceus being
associated with Mercury who was usually associated with Thoth. Lévi’s reverence for
Egyptian lore was further evidenced by his description of trump II (the High Priestess) as
Isis, his Wheel (trump X) being surmounted by a sphinx and the promotion of the Juggler
(trump I) to Magus, keeper of the doctrine of Hermeticism. As with the Devil, he pointed
to the sky and to the ground: “As above, so below.”
I quote at substantive length from Farley so that we can begin to get a fuller sense of tangled history and overlap of the genealogy of Tarot. In addition, I want to call attention to the notion of “correspondences” because it is this notion that we can pay attention to as a guiding metaphysic, one continually rediscovered by Tarot readers as a source of insight and power. Correspondences link the older work of these Hermeticists and the Renaissance with ceremonial magic and with the contemporary metaphysics of “the Secret,” as I will show in Chapter 4. This notion of the divine structure of the world, which can be understood and tapped in to, is essential for understanding the project of “manifestation” and the way in which such manifestation is itself a spiritual endeavor. The phrase “as above, so below” is not the collapse of the divine into the material realm but rather the essence of an enchanting perception. As Papus developed the concept, the phrase is the “energetic key” that can unlock the Tarot. Indeed, many contemporary readers continue to argue, as Papus did, that Tarot cards are “a book” written in card form specifically to disguise the powerful notion of correspondences.

While the work of French occultists did much to create the basis of the occult Tarot, it would be with the rise of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a Victorian Rosicrucian society that Tarot would become intimately linked with esotericism and the occult. Through the work of the Golden Dawn, Tarot symbolism would become linked to an even greater assemblage of metaphysical traditions. Here, a British fascination with Egyptian magic, as well as a British Celtic revival that brought interest in Celtic folklore and magic, would merge with Freemasonry and Hermeticism. It would be through the work of the Golden Dawn that the Tarot would be pictorially illustrated and the links between these traditions made figurative.

The Golden Dawn was founded in 1888 by three Freemasons—Samuel Liddel MacGregor Mathers, William Robert Woodman, and William Wynn Westcost. The legend of the
Golden Dawn suggests that Westcott had been in correspondence with a German countess who has access to secret, occult documents known as the Cipher Manuscripts. These documents are a compendium of magical traditions including Kabbalah, Hermetic magic, astrology, Tarot, geomancy, and alchemy. The documents also outline the ritual process of initiation into elemental magic based on the four elements of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water. Working with the power of these elements undergirds the Western Esoteric tradition. Lore of the Golden Dawn suggests that it was through the German countess, Anna Sprengel, that the British Freemason were granted permission to form their own esoteric society based on the teachings of the Cipher Manuscripts. However, given that much skepticism exists with regards to the manuscripts’ origin and validity, it is also possible that Mathers and Westcott (who are credited with helping with the translation of the documents) actually are the authors of the documents. Helen Farley (2009, 130) writes that the document was most likely penned by Kenneth Mackenzie, an editor of the Royal Masonic Encyclopedia, who had met with the French magician Eliphas Levi and who had studied Levi’s work.

While a full history of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn is outside of the scope of this dissertation, several good histories can be pointed to, and these include Paul Huson’s *The Mystical Origins of the Tarot*, Nevill Drury’s *Stealing Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Modern Western Magic*, Alex Owen’s *The Place of Enchantment*, Mary Greer’s *Women of the Golden Dawn*, and Alison Butler’s *Victorian Occultism and the Making of Modern Magic*. The brief history I will tell, I would like to highlight the way in which the Tarot became an innovative text for these Western magicians. Here, I will highlight the vocabulary of correspondences, the role the body played, and the role of visualization and imagination in the Golden Dawn’s rituals. It is
these elements that are often resurrected by contemporary readers in their current work with the assemblage that is Tarot.

Both Farley (2009) and Owen (2004) suggest that the rise and popularity of the Golden Dawn can be understood as a response to the end of the nineteenth century’s “strict scientific rationalism and shortcoming of conventional religion.” Farley suggests that the Order was a “crowning jewel” of an occult revival in Britain and that for seekers of the time, the vast systematic occult knowledge the Order purported to teach gave rise to the sensibility that the modern world was not only enchanted but that it could be understood and influenced. In this regard, the Golden Dawn was a paradoxical institution. On the one hand, it offered initiation into Mystery and Magic, yet it also offered a systematic and quasi-scientific approach to its esotericism. The organization was premised on a series of rigid “grades” or levels of initiation. The Tarot played a significant role in this grading system and the rituals of initiation. As Farley (2009, 131) writes, the initiation process through the grades of the organization were meant to symbolize an individual ascent within the Kabbalistic Tree of Life. At the height of the Golden Dawn’s popularity, the organization boasted an impressive roster of members, including the poet William Butler Yeats, the proto-horror writers Algernon Blackwood and Arthur Machen, the controversial figure of Aleister Crowley, as well as the artist Moina Berson (the sister of Henri Bergson), the artist Maud Gonne, the actress Florence Farr, the Irish theatrical figure Anne Horniman, and Violet Firth (later known as Dion Fortune).

Competency in the broad range of esoteric skills was required to ascend the initiation scale, and the Tarot as an innovative and incorporating text was fundamental to the project. Both Westcott and Mathers had been developing their own Tarot interpretations prior to founding the Golden Dawn. Mathers has even written his own book, entitled *The Tarot: Its Occult*
Signification, Use in Fortune Telling, and Method of Play (1888). The book was the first of its kind to be sold along with a pack of (imported) Tarot cards in England (Farley 2009, 129). However, during the first years of the Golden Dawn the founders began to elaborate on and complicate the “correspondences” between the symbolism of the cards, Kabbalistic Sephiroth (or levels of mystical consciousness), numerology, and astrology. The Golden Dawn made slight but lasting alterations to the order and significance of the cards and came to believe that the cards could not only be used to tell the future but also to alter future events through ritual practice. Initiates were required to copy the Tarot and to make their own decks, in the style of Mather’s (and his wife Moina Bergson) interpretations. The Tarot was to be used as a form of ritual mediation, in which the figures of the cards would be encountered as living beings. Fundamentally, the Tarot was to be used as a magical instrument for the engagement with spiritual beings and as a device that could facilitate mystical experience and spiritual growth. Mathers himself claimed to be in contact with highly advanced mystical “Secret Chiefs,” which in turn fueled his own authority within the organization. In theory, initiates were to receive “guidance” from the elders of the Golden Dawn as they too advanced toward contact with these mystical beings. Predictably, Mathers also used the narrative of the Secret Chiefs to fuel an autocratic authoritarian style of leadership, which, also predictably, conflicted with many of the members’ own desires for exploration and creative expression.

As Drury writes, “for the Golden Dawn magician the ultimate mythic attainment was to come forth ritually into the Light, for this was the essence of spiritual rebirth” (2011, 58). Here, creative visualization was the essential vehicle by which one attained such rebirth. As the complexities of correspondences were drawn between the Tarot, its numbering system, order, and symbols, the cards began to operate as a matrix through which it became possible
simultaneously to learn about a broad expanse of Western magic and metaphysical traditions as well as experience the very entities the cards were intended to invoke or conjure. Such “magical correspondences” between the cards, symbols, and magical deities were eventually extended to a wide range of objects, including stones, minerals, and plants. Such correspondences are often rediscovered in contemporary Tarot work and point us toward a sense of the enchanted materiality that Tarot readers aspire to work in and through.

As Drury charts, it would be the Golden Dawn’s most controversial figure, Aleister Crowley, who would articulate a fuller exploration of the role of magical “sense” in the use of Tarot. For Crowley, the entire human body was to be explored and compelled into magical practice. Sight, sounds, taste, smell, touch, and “the mind” were to be understood as sites of power or the “will,” which was according to Crowley the primary mover of all magical work. Within this framework of magical sense, both breath and language (or the logos) themselves were understood to be powerful actors. Magical utterance was linked not only to the power to will or influence events but also linked to a capacity to “unlock” the power of symbols. As Giles (1992) describes, engaging the cards through such an embodied approach to the power of symbols or into a “symbolic imagination” was at the very heart of the Tarot as a magical practice.

In 1910, Arthur Edward Waite published his work *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot*, which was meant to clarify misunderstandings that had grown up around the Tarot. In many ways, such writing was a continuation of the long project of magicians “correcting” the past while simultaneously repackaging a system of magic according to that particular magician’s proclivities. Waite’s writings, however, would come to inform much of what Tarot was understood to be throughout the following twentieth century. For Waite, Tarot functioned as a
collection of symbols of the universal mind. The book came complete with a new set of images, rendered by the illustrator Pamela Colman Smith, an American artist and set designer living in London.

**Tarot as Psychology**

As Cynthia Giles (1992) writes, despite Tarot’s storied and magical history, the cards entered into a “psychologized” phase when they were “rediscovered” in the 1960s and 1970s during the rise of the American countercultural scene, which set the course for the emergence of the “New Age.” Within this emergent cultural scene, the Tarot was embraced as a prompt for personal, individual growth or development. While not losing their earlier magical attributes, the cards become a prompt for the individual “self” and became associated with such “new age” priorities such as empowerment, finding one’s “purpose,” and self-healing and self-therapy. Cynthia Giles is not alone in recognizing this turn in Tarot. Indeed, it was one of the first things that Lisa, a Tarot student, mentioned to me when we met for an interview. Given that numerous books have now been written on Tarot as a means for self-exploration and personal growth, readers like Lisa and others (including Warren and Rose—this past year, the Reader’s Studio introduced a preconference workshop dedicated to “Tarot and Psychotherapy”) feel that the Tarot has come to a bit of an impasse. A subtext of this turn toward the therapeutic is a realization on the part of the Tarot community that regardless of the various histories of the cards and their potential for magical or occult ceremony, the cards are encountered by “individuals” who are looking to “use” what Tarot can offer. However, this “turn” toward the individual also has its own history, and we can look to that past through a couple of key developments in Tarot history to explore how these cards were contextualized (yet continued to maintain both their game-like and magical qualities).
While it would not be until the 1960s and 1970s that Tarot would be fully “rediscovered” by the counterculture, Tarot did undergo a major introduction into American esotericism in the 1920s and 1930s California. Paul Foster Case, who had been initiated into a Golden Dawn chapter in New York in 1910, developed his own esoteric community known as Builders of Adytum (or BOTA). BOTA was a major player in the West Coast occult scene, and Case himself went on to develop his own Tarot deck, the BOTA deck, which referenced the Rider-Waite-Smith cards but resurrected the early notion of the Golden Dawn that each individual who encounters the Tarot must fashion their own deck. To that end, Case developed a series of images, which he printed in black-and-white outline. Potential readers of the Tarot were to use these cards for mediation and were to color in the cards for themselves. These cards (along with BOTA) are still available. BOTA would, in Los Angeles, establish the Temple of Tarot and Holy Qabalah. Case was responsible for introducing the notion that “one’s own words are best and have the most power.” Already we are mingling to see the mapping of the individual to the magical and Kabbalistic associations of the cards.

Other esotericists such as Manly Palmer Hall, C. C. Zain, and Israel Regardie also played roles in the advancement of the American take on Tarot. Hall developed his own deck, illustrated by Oswald Wirth, in 1930. Hall, also believing in the power of personal connection with the Tarot, added “mediation symbols” to his deck, and in his book *The Secret Teaching of All Ages*, Hall wrote that “like all other forms of symbolism, the Tarot unfailingly reflects the viewpoint of the interpreter himself.” Zain would be responsible for forging a practical link between the Tarot and astrology. While the Golden Dawn had established this correspondence and Crowley had strengthened it in his own Thoth deck, Zain actually added astrological symbols to the cards themselves, encouraging their active use in reading and in mediation practice. Regardie, who had
been a member of the Golden Dawn and a student of Aleister Crowley, however, would do much to make public the esoteric Tarot. Regardie, starting in 1937, would go on to publish several Golden Dawn papers, which revealed the society’s elaborate (and until that point, secret) rituals and their magical system of Tarot use.

In 1960, the actress and writer Eden Gray, who given name was Priscilla Pardridge, published her work *Tarot Revealed: A Modern Guide to Reading the Tarot Cards.* Gray was the owner of a bookstore and publishing company called Inspiration House, which sold Tarot cards and offered Tarot classes. Greer writes: “Her customers complained that the available books were not easy to understand, so she spent weekends in the country coming up with a more accessible way of approaching the cards.” Gray’s son, Peter, helped illustrate the well-received book (which continues to be among the top-selling Tarot books). Greer also suggests that “Along with various editions of the Rider-Waite-Smith deck (de Laurence, University Books, Albano-Waite, Merrimack, U.S. Games, Inc.), Eden Gray’s tarot books formed the main impetus to the hippie adoption of the Tarot as spiritual guide for navigating a world-turned-on-its-head, leading directly to the booming Tarot Renaissance that began in 1969 and continues to this day.” While Gray also claimed that the Tarot had come from Egypt, which is untrue and perpetuated the myth of the Tarot as an exotic mystery, Gray is also responsible for repositioning the cards as a “journey of the soul.” While her notions of the soul did resonate with the older Christian mystical tradition of spiritual growth, the soul itself came to be associated with the personal self.

Through Gray individuals would come to see themselves as “the Fool” traveling through the Major Arcana as a series of encounters and spiritual lessons. In addition to recontextualizing the Fool as an individual—the querent him- or herself—Gray also provided advice to her readers about how to read the cards. It was here that the Tarot truly become repurposed as an oracle of
the orDeanary—not quite fortune-telling, nor magical ritual—but an oracle of divining “the higher good” of a situation. As Giles writes, it was Gray’s “sensible, easy-to-use” approach that brought the Tarot to a new, mass marketed audience and encouraged the publication of subsequent books on Tarot and its use.

The 1970s then saw the rise of numerous Tarot texts, which explored the cards as a form of psychospiritual development. Gray herself published another well-received book in 1971, known as *The Complete Guide to the Tarot*. In 1978, Stuart Kaplan would also do much to bring Tarot to a mass-marketed American audience. That year, he published his very thorough *Encyclopedia of Tarot*, which offered the first historical survey of the cards. In addition, as Kaplan was the owner of U.S. Games Systems, he was influential in printing Tarot cards for mass purchase as well as reprinting older versions of the cards such as the Visconti-Sforza deck in limited editions. As the Tarot became more public, the cards were continually adapted to different symbol systems. In addition, the cards were embraced by some feminists (as Crowley [2011] suggests, “the spiritual wing” of feminists who, much to the dismay of more political feminists, had begun to grow in influence in the 1980s) as a tool for empowerment. In 1977, Sally Gearhart published *A Feminist Tarot*, which was accompanied by a whole new style of card—round cards, rather than square, featuring almost entirely female characters, goddesses, and feminist imagery. The Motherpeace Round Tarot continues to be a popular version of these feminist cards. Again, as the cards and styles of decks multiplied, so did their attendant books. It was during the late 1970s and 1980s that writers such as Mary K. Greer would emerge, bringing Tarot to yet another wider audience of women. As Cynthia Giles (1992, 103) writes, “feminism, and, in particular, feminist-oriented Wicca, exerted a major influence on recent trends in Tarot,” bringing with it an interest in what Giles broadly labels “shamanism” or an interest in
“divination, healing, magical practice, and mystical alterations of consciousness.” Feminist interest in Tarot merged two essential features—a quest for personal empowerment with an interest in “divination” or marginalized “ways of knowing.” In addition, feminists would restore an interest in the body and in the power of sexuality. While Aleister Crowley had developed Sex Magick, this system was rooted in a deeply conflicted, binary system of gender, and the later “feminization” of Tarot slowly began to dominate the otherwise male history of Western magical practice. Women would introduce goddesses and nature rituals to the Tarot, and, in essence, they would integrate “ritual” into everyday and ordinary life. In this way, Tarot cards became an ordinary yet potentially powerful oracle and element of material culture.

In addition to a feminist recalibration of the Tarot, the cards would also merge with a scientific or “quantum” sensibility. This scientific sensibility has been used to legitimize the spirituality of the cards, much to the annoyance of skeptics. When I sat down with Evan, a Tarot Center student in his late twenties who was aspiring to write a screenplay, to talk about this use of the Tarot as a creative prompt, he was quick to explain to me that the cards operate according to what he calls “the quantum model, through which each card flip acts to alter the dynamics of time and space.” In the course of my field work, I heard several times that card readings act like “snapshots of the universe” at any given moment but that even by conducting the “reading” (flipping the cards and beginning to speak of and through the symbols) that universe was, in turn, being affected and effected. The cards, in this way, become for readers an orDeanary, yet “affective,” object capable of setting other “actants” in motion simply through their use. This quantum sensibility places the reader within a universe that is in process, is indeterminate, and to some degree, can be co-created.
What is perhaps most important to contemporary readers is that the entire history of Tarot “remain in play” and be part of the scope of their study and their readings. Beyond putting their presumed metaphysics or magical powers into operations, in a much more initial way the cards operate as an assembling agent that links these varied histories to the present moment. Playing with the cards keeps these histories alive and very much real (as sites of study as well as sites of inspiration) to contemporary readers. Each historical period is yet another rich avenue for exploration (both in terms of reading but also as site of systematic “knowledge” that can be incorporated into readings). However, it is precisely because the cards come with this assemblage of epistemological systems and connotations of legitimacy that readers get caught between different knowledge paradigms. Playing with the cards keeps alive the game-like magic of chance, the history of magic ritual, and the therapeutic capacity of the cards but also can be overwhelming.

At the level of language, Readers can get caught trying to explain the difference then between “psychic, intuitive, and therapeutic.” Mary Greer writes on her blog:

It is assumed that tarot readers use either psychic or intuitive abilities. In fact, these are, almost always, among their skills. Querents usually come for a reading because they are looking for information outside the normal, rational processes for obtaining it. They want that “something extra,” even if it’s just entertainment. What I want to query today is: Why are “psychic” and “intuitive” so often conflated into a single thing? (A web search on psychic + intuitive should convince you that the words often appear together to express the same thing.)

As tarot readers do we know when we are using psychic rather than intuitive faculties and vice versa? The terms psychic and intuitive actually describe two different processes that could be seen as opposite ends of a spectrum. One can even trigger another. By using both words together or interchangeably we attempt to cover all bases. Can we improve our skill in using these abilities? Yes. But it helps to differentiate between them—at least while developing them as skills.

Here we can see that while Greer is acknowledging the separate spheres of psychic and intuitive, they are also “skills” to develop. In the next chapter, I suggest that individuals “use”
the cards particularly to invest in the capacities of the body and the self. As they do this, the layers of the card’s history remain in play, becoming an object put to use for innovation and generativity. Understanding the cards as an aleatory assemblage is essential because it is this aleatory flipping (and revealing new sites of inspiration and innovation) that not only keeps past traditions alive but comes to inform (particularly in an affective economy, which valorizes innovation) a way or mode of laboring. In addition, such aleatory sensibility that can shift between paradigms of psychic, intuitive, and therapeutic “plays” well with the impetuses of entrepreneurialism: to be continually on the look out for new opportunities and, at a very personal and subjective level, to continue to find the energy to “hustle” and continue working.

Beyond their long history as a game of social critique, magical systems, or prompt for self-development, the assemblage of the cards operate as what Alfred North Whitehead (1979) would have called a “lure for feeling,” drawing bodies, selves, cards, symbols and affect together, inviting an opening not only to the energy of the cards but to the very ontology of change, of flips, of dynamism. Such a “lure,” like Harman’s concept of allure (2005), draws elements of what Whitehead called a “continuum” toward one another, momentarily giving rise to what are thought of as “occasions,” which merge together and fall away, dying back into the continuum out of which all “things” both come and return toward. Tarot is an occasion-generating technology that, with each flip of the card, opens the reader (and the querent) to the possible—the possibility of “knowing” across the paradigms of psychic, intuitive, emotion, and affect, as well as the possibility of developing the skill of “articulation,” which I take up in the next chapter.
Chapter Three
“Talkin’ Crazy”
From Fortune-Telling to Truth-Telling

To use the Tarot properly, however, requires a very great deal of preparation, and the preparation does not consist merely in knowledge of the significance of the cards, but in getting in touch with the forces behind the cards.
—Dion Fortune, Practical Occultism in Daily Life (1976)

A ritual is an organized plan to achieve a goal.
—Sheila Hite, Intuitive Counselor

In the last chapter, we saw that Tarot—as both a deck of cards and as a compendium of metaphysical traditions—can be considered a dynamic or “vibrant” social actor that is capable of “speaking” to individuals through its various roles as a game, a divinatory oracle, a magical object that can be put to use in rituals, and as a psychologized prompt for self-reflection or spiritual development. There, I suggested that Tarot is an evolving assemblage of traditions, fusing together powerful Renaissance symbolism, a fin de siècle occultism, and a genealogy of self-help, positive psychology, and quantum physics, and I argued that the very nature of the cards (and the card flip) keeps those histories alive, making Tarot an alluring object that invites individuals to use or to play with the cards. While individuals struggle to articulate and explain “how Tarot works” through a vocabulary of “psychic,” “intuitive,” and “therapeutic,” they also struggle with tensions of legitimacy within each of those frameworks. Here, I explore that tension in more detail, first looking to the practices of learning to work with and “trust” the cards as a “speaking” companion. It is through repetition and through practice with the cards that readers develop the skill of interpreting symbols as well as learn to use the cards to “structure” the flow of “information” (affect, thought, image, and emotion) they are receiving from the card, the querent, and the environment. Playing with the cards can set an individual on a course of exploring what it means to be psychic or intuitive, but such play, more simply, also exposes
individuals to a symbolic language. This language inherently invites speculation and attempts to, as I suggest in this chapter, “tell the truth.” It is within this space of speculation and truth telling that an individual learns not only to be a reader but blurs the lines between psychic, intuitive, and therapeutic readings of the cards.

While Tarot readers are not “mediums” in the traditional sense of the word (although some students also engage in Mediumship and/or Spiritualist study and may combine these skills in the services they offer), the project of becoming a Tarot card reader is a project of growing comfortable in one’s own subjective experience (as well as in one’s own body, as I discuss in the following chapter). Given that Tarot is a deck of cards, which can be manipulated, flipped, laid down, organized, etc., individuals will often come to the cards with the hope that the very structure of the cards can help them organize nebulous affectivity into “meaning,” either by helping them articulate “the story” the cards are telling (a story they are telling either about themselves or they are reading for another, the querent) or by giving them recourse to a system of esoteric knowledge to draw from. As we will see in the case of Bruce, individuals who experience themselves as psychic or “porous” often also struggle to articulate their experience and the knowledge they feel they want to convey. For many, “psychic” experience is not so much a question of mental health but an issue of “what to do with what they know.” The question many readers asks is how can “unprovable” information, or information with no direct source, be made useful to themselves (and to others?)

This work—of channeling affect into meaningful or “useful” language—sits at the heart of the reader’s intended work and is a delicate and complex project. To understand this project, I turn to Foucault’s work on “truth-telling” or “parrhesia.” Here, I look to tease out how the fine line between how a “good” reading and “bad” reading is perceived, created, and maintained, as
well as how and why it is that the group of Tarot readers I have studied see themselves as “legitimate” readers (as opposed to supposedly “fraudulent” storefront readers or “con artists”). It is along this line of “truth telling” that the dance between psychic ability (and its attendant social value) and intuition (and its attendant social value) is conducted. By tracing out what is entailed in a project of “truth-telling,” I suggest that we can see how the very personal, subjective, and affective work that readers do is actually guided by a larger social concern with living a “good life” and with cultivating a sense of “well-being.”

While I believe that the readers I have met are operating in good faith, attempting to speak their truth as a form of service or care work, we can also begin to see in this chapter the extent to which a market logic of “productivity” informs or undergirds this work. While all magic work, to some degree, desires a productive outcome (either through the imposition of the will or the productive conjuring of forces), the productivity of well-being makes the assumption that there is a private (and privatizing self) who desires to “reach goals,” “transform,” and “live in abundance”—to name a few of the common self-help-inflected sayings that accompany this logic—or to live in a productive state of normativity. Such as state is not necessarily absent of social criticism (many individuals in the Tarot world feel that “society’s problems” are endemic; indeed, such a sense fuels their turn toward the Tarot and toward an inward sense of self and authority), but it is a state that tries to make absent the feeling that one is “caught” in personal troubles. It is a state that not only tries to smooth the bumps of life with a logic that all such bumps can be made productive (as either an opportunity for self-growth or the cultivation of new social experiences) but that also searches for an endless source of energy so that one can continue to live in the more “effective” affective alignment. The possibility of such effective
affect seems to be the actual “secret” that is being circulated among esoteric practitioners today and functions as a form of elusive truth.

In the second half of this chapter, I consider how the elusive project of “truth telling” becomes the ground for investing in the self and embracing the risk of becoming “one who tells the truth,” or what I will call “self-appreciation,” borrowing the term from Michel Fehrer (2007). This portion of the chapter explores the problematic tension between what Foucault (1984) referred to as “care of the self” (or *epimeleia heatou*) and the entrepreneurial project, or becoming an “entrepreneur of the self.” Here, I show how investment in the capacities of the self (and the body, as we see in the following chapter) not only confirm the project of “truth-telling” but set in motion an entrepreneurial project that lures or encourages participation in the market, which as Foucault reminds us is “a place of veridiction.” The process of entrepreneurial investment, self-appreciation, and articulation, which entails a gradual arc of working toward a public as confirmation of the self’s ability, is felt as a spiritual project of growth and “well-being.”

Beyond the phenomenological experience of reading the cards and working to interpret their meaning, Tarot is also a subjectifying practice wherein a reader attempts to become one “who can speak the truth.” This project of truth-telling sets in motion a sense of “investing” in one’s self, and it is this investment that leads to blurring easy distinctions between developing psychic skills, intuitive skills, or therapeutic skills as a reader. The market, it seems, for human capital can make room for each of these paradigms. As I show in this chapter, the project of investing in the self often entails a dalliance with risk or with what readers suggest is a project of “talking crazy.” While such talk may feel like taking a risk, it can become the very site of investment and forms of value, particularly if the reader has aligned themselves (affectively)
with the logics of “well-being.” Whereas Jorgenson (1990) saw the need to explore Tarot readers through the framework of social interaction and explain their practices as “convincing performances,” I see what these readers are doing as a form of labor, which entails affective self-modulation, investment, and the cultivation of new skills that can open a self (or a body) to “information” across (or in spite of) epistemologies of what has traditionally been considered knowledge. Such labor is resonant with broader shifts (as discussed in the Introduction and Chapter 1) in the structure of work and the nature of labor that have occurred over the last thirty years.

“She just threw down the cards…”

I met Evan at a café in lower Manhattan to talk about his experience as a Tarot card reader and aspiring screenwriter. We each ordered a coffee and then proceeded to introduce ourselves. Evan had been a regular student at the Tarot Center since I started attending, and, in many ways—his performative personality, his good study skills and keen memory of card meanings, as well as his comfort with his own “psychic” ability—Evan seemed to be the apple of Warren’s eye, and often, in class, Warren would call on Evan or ask for his opinion, which Evan was often happy to provide. I had the sense that we were about the same age, and I was curious to hear more about what had brought Evan to the school. Rose had told me that he was writing a screenplay that featured the Tarot and that he was conducting research. Evan, it turned out, was also a competent student of parapsychological research and a dedicated spiritual seeker. In the 1990s, Evan was involved in a life-altering car accident, which left him in traction in the hospital for months. It was during this period of healing and constriction that Evan says he began to develop psychic insight or, rather, “telepathy”—a form of seeing at a distance. Following the accident, he spent a year traveling abroad to follow a “guru” and had engaged in deep,
concentrated mediation during that time as a way of understanding the telepathy he seemed to have developed. In this regard, his presence at the Tarot Center was not simply driven by a screenwriter’s interest in the cards but also as part of a much larger project of discovering the truth about his own “ability.” The study of the cards, Evan hoped, would bring about an ability to hone or direct the telepathy. Evan was also studying “remote seeing” during his time at the Tarot Center at a famous parapsychology ranch. He is also certain that remote seeing is used by the government intelligence agencies, as well as to manipulate the stock market.

When we sat down to meet, Evan had recently traveled to Coney Island, which was in the process of “renovating”—that is, the demolition of the old Coney Island attractions to make way for new development. That summer, Coney Island had experimented with creating a “craft market” in one the large beach parking lots. Evan thought that he might purchase a stall at the market and begin to read Tarot. He has approached a group of Tarot Center readers about establishing this stall, and several of us responded encouragingly about the prospect of a “Tarot by the Sea” mini-business. In an effort to “scope out his competition,” Evan has traveled to Coney Island to see if there were other readers out there. When he got off the train, he told me, he saw a storefront reader and went in for a reading.

“She just threw all the cards down and started talking. I didn’t tell her I knew how to read and so I sort of just let her keep going, but nothing she was saying really made much sense. I couldn’t figure out why she was making those connections to the Tower card,” Evan said. Like many of the Tarot Center students, Evan considers this form of reading fraudulent and “unhelpful.” While I do not know exactly what this woman said to Evan (or if any of her words rang true or were, in the end, helpful to him in some way), the reason he told me the story was to point out that her style of reading, which he considered inferior to his own style (and hence, he
did not consider her “real” competition for any future business endeavors in Coney Island), was 
unsystematic. This woman’s reading lacked an overt definable approach to the cards, and it also 
seemingly lacked the breadth and depth of working across the numerous metaphysical systems 
that we encountered in the last chapter and that are putatively compiled or indexed in the cards. 
Her reading had no way of being compared to other interpretations and was, therefore, open to 
suspicion. However, this line that can often be easily drawn between readers such as Evan and 
storefront readers, or rather the distinction between a “systematic” or “unsystematic” reading, as 
we will see, is almost impossible to police. Yet it is along this line that the dance of parrhesia, or 
truth-telling, takes place.

In this chapter, then, I look to the basic practices of becoming a “legitimate” reader. 
These practices include learning to trust the cards, giving a reading, working with symbols, 
structuring the psychic, and making a reading “meaningful.” At the end of this section, I consider 
how these practices might be understood through the Foucauldian notion of “truth-telling” and 
the idea that readers are simultaneously playing with the “con” of the cards, yet in good faith 
looking to make “truthful” or productive their interpretations of the cards. This affective 
alignment toward “truth-telling” is the way in which seemingly naturalized boundaries between 
“illegitimate” and “legitimate” work is created and maintained.

**The Cards as Companions: Learning to Trust**

We who read the cards know that the cards don’t lie. Sometimes we doubt them. Sometimes we hesitate. Sometimes we don’t see how they can possibly be telling the truth. But deep down, we know. And sometimes we are even freaked out by how true they are. Learning to trust the cards can be a long process, especially in terms of telling the future. I’ve had three very “in my face” experiences this week to remind me that there is truth in the cards. This is one reason I don’t ask clients “does this sound right to you?” Just because it doesn’t seem or feel true…or even if logically it doesn’t make sense…the cards still tell the truth. We all know that there were times when we “felt” sure that something was true, only to discover it was not. Feeling is not an indicator of truth. And
neither is common sense or logic. That’s one reason we come to the cards, isn’t it? Because we are having trouble discerning truth for ourselves? (Practical Tarot Blog)

Perhaps the first thing that a Tarot Center student must do is learn to trust that a deck of cards can speak to you and can be of assistance. As the quote above illustrates (and is echoed in many of the Tarot Center conversations), readers do not necessarily have to “know” how the cards work, nor does this unknowing challenge the legitimacy of the cards or the legitimacy of other religious beliefs. Lisa, the Tarot Center student that we met in Chapter 1, is a practicing Catholic who sees no conflict between her Catholic beliefs and her Tarot practice. Through her study of the Golden Dawn (via Warren’s lectures and home study that she has taken with Warren personally), Lisa takes comfort in the notions of Christian mysticism that informed the development of the Rider-Waite-Smith deck of cards. In addition, Lisa finds that Kabbalistic interpretations of Tarot even accommodate the figure of Jesus, as he is associated with the sixth Sephiroth (whose “function” is that of beauty and which sits at the center of the Tree of Life). Although I have never heard Lisa mention Jesus in her readings or make explicit references to Catholicism in her Tarot work, in our conversations she has been quite clear that she sees Tarot and its mysteries as linking her to the Divine. Tarot allows her, quite literally, to be in touch with what is speaking through the cards. For Lisa it may be the voice of God or the voice of the universe that “connects her to her higher self.” It is not necessary for Lisa to understand where the voice of the cards comes from, but she does believe that the cards themselves can become an invaluable and wise companion and that the very act of reading puts her in touch with this divine source of knowledge.

One thing that helps foster trust in the cards, regardless of the personal cosmology of the reader or their spiritual or religious beliefs, is that the cards “work”: they are simply cards, which
can be shuffled and, more importantly, flipped over. This simple “technology” of the cards, which guarantees that something (anything) will be revealed by turning them over, works independently of beliefs that are used to explain what is at work in the cards. Rather, the cards themselves foreground an ontological insight that easily links up with the feeling of eventfulness or the felt perception of dynamism as an organizing principle of how the universe (and our lives) are structured. The cards, in that they are cards, can begin to be trusted because, regardless of whether they are “right” or “wrong,” they nonetheless provided some information that was unknown before the flip, and in doing so, in providing that information, they have provoked a feeling. They have affected. Readers, then, are willing to accept the challenge that the card flip asserts: here is a mysterious communiqué from the card. Tarot work charges the individual with working through the complexities of the simple question: What does this mean?

While it true that some people are afraid of the Tarot cards—they have been called “a wicked deck of cards” (Dummett and Decker 1996)—they are also a relatively passive occult item that does not demand much more than attention from the reader. Consider them in distinction to Santeria’s living dolls who speak but also demand not only attention but sacrifice. In the course of my research, Christine W. a young pagan priestess and Tarot card reader (and designer who created the New York City Tarot with a photographer), introduced me to one such doll and told me that the doll was “particularly obnoxious during menstruation,” when the doll demanded that the blood be sacrificed to it. Christine explained to me that the divinity that the doll was channeling needed to be “put in its place” and that she worked to set boundaries on the demands that it placed on her. Tarot cards, and what may or may not be presence-ing itself through the cards, do not work in this way. They do not demand sacrifice or such boundary work, nor are they self-animating. The cards work in tandem with a human reader, who remains
an interpreter of their meanings or their intentions. By simply by putting the cards to use
individuals begin to develop personal relationships with the Tarot.

**Reading at the Tarot Center**

There are eight of us tonight at the Tarot Center. We’re sitting around the long, brown
conference table in a small, grayish white room. “How will the court case come out?” a woman
in her late forties wants to know. “Will it resolve well for me, or I am going to have to pay?”
Those sitting around the table stare at her intently, thinking about her question, despite not
knowing any more about her situation than what little she has told us. She and an unidentified
man are locked in an ambiguous case where she stands to make a considerable amount of money.
The case has been dragging; she is tired and would like the entire issue to be resolved so that she
can move on with her life. “Okay,” Warren, the co-owner of the school, says, moving us toward
the “reading practice” portion of the three-hour class. “Who would like to read for Jill? You’re
all accomplished readers, some with more knowledge than others, but all of you can answer this
question given what you know about Tarot. Who wants to try it? Sara? Sara… why don’t you
read the cards for Jill?”

Silence as Sara looks to Warren and then to Rose, the other co-owner of the school and
Warren’s wife, and she smiles a bit shyly, to convince herself that she is up to the task. “Okay,
let’s see what they say.” Sara “clears” her cards of negative energies by waving her hand over
the pile and then picks them up to shuffle her deck (hers is the “Universal Waite,” which is an
updating of the popular Rider-Waite-Smith deck, which is actually more often referred to simply
as the Rider-Waite, thus erasing the authorship of the woman who illustrated the cards, Pamela
Coleman Smith). Shuffling the cards deliberately, Sara then lays the deck face down in front of
Jill. “Please cut the deck into two piles using your left hand,” she asks. Jill does this, and as she
does Sara explains that she will do a spread with two columns—the left column will be the “yes” column, representing the expansive forces that are working toward a positive resolution for Jill, and the right column will be the “no” column, representing restriction, or the challenges that may be in the way of such a resolution.

I note to myself that this seems like a pragmatic way to hedge the divinatory challenge of “yes or no” that Jill is posing. Although many people at the school describe themselves as “intuitive” or report receiving unexpected “psychic hits” during the card readings, no one likes to be tested by a strict yes-or-no question. I feel the pressure of the question and wonder how Sara is feeling about the reading. A successful reading hinges on the ability to be, as Warren likes to say, “a master of your own ship,” which means someone who is in charge of the reading, who can integrate themselves into the reading, and who can tune in to the message the cards are sending. The mastery here comes in learning to choose your words properly but also putting the person receiving the reading at ease.

“Okay, let’s see what the cards say,” says Sara. “Let’s do the ‘yes’ column first,” she says as she flips over the card. “The Three of Pentacles, oh, a good sign. Now, for the ‘no.’” “The Nine of Wands. Okay.” “Well, the pentacles here seem like a very good sign that you will receive some money or that the case will go in your favor,” Sara says, as she points to the image on the card of three individuals consulting one another under the vaulted ceiling of a cathedral. “This card suggests there may still be some negotiation necessary, and perhaps you won’t receive as much money as you might hope for.” Jill smiles and nods her head. “The three is also known as the Lord of Material Works,” Sara says referring to the card’s esoteric title, which are additional attributes that the Golden Dawn associated with the cards in the late 1880s. “This seems to suggest that the business of the case will be handled smoothly and, ultimately,
everything will come together.” In the “no” column, however, stands a card depicting a man with a bandage around his head, bruised and leaning against a single wand, in front of a wall, behind which protrude the tops of eight other wands. Sara says, “well, in the other column, there is some work to be done or something that you still might have to fight for. I don’t think you can rest just yet, or perhaps you feel like you have been fighting forever, and this might mean making one last push.”

Jill looks around the room as the rest of us are staring at her two cards, putting our own versions of the story together. Sara says, “Ultimately, the case resolves, but you may need to draw on the Lord of Great Strength of the nine. There may be more proceedings, paperwork, a hassle, but since this is a nine, it’s pretty far down on the Tree of Life, so you’re almost there. The final stop would be the ten, but you’re not there yet,” Sara says and gestures around the room. “What do the rest of you think?” One by one, the rest of us offer our interpretations. Jill nods, listening and thanking us. Warren asks, “did this answer your question or help you to feel better about the situation?” “Yes,” Jill says, “because I’m going to try to remember the three and not focus too much on the nine. But sometimes it’s just funny how the cards reflect back to you what you already feel is going on. I had a feeling this is what they would say.”

It is through short readings in the round such as this that readers learn not only the mechanics of giving a reading and grow comfortable putting their range of Tarot knowledge into play, using the cards as a complex assemblage of metaphysical traditions and histories from which to answer—or make orderly through narration—a situation that is initially inchoate, perplexing, or troubling. Here, Sara is not only offering Jill (who had been visibly worried and harried with regard to the court case for weeks) a bit of comfort through the notion of drawing strength from both the figure and (the energy presumed to dwell within the figure of the card),
but Sara herself is growing in her confidence as a reader, learning as we will see to tell the
“truth” as she sees it presenting itself in the cards, their symbols, and the positions they are
placed on table.

**The Mechanics of Giving a Reading**

Most often, Tarot is read for another person, although “readings” can be given for one’s
self (some readers disagree with the idea that they can “read” for themselves, suggesting that
reading for yourself produces a confusing feedback loop of personal thought and the card’s
message) or even a group of persons. The point of any reading is often to learn something that is
unknown, such as future events, to gain insight into a problem or situation, or to heal emotional
or psychological trouble. As Rachel Pollack asks, “if you only learn what you know in Tarot
reading, then what is the point?” (1980, 267). Although each reader will personalize their style or
their habit of giving a reading, such as determining who shuffles and cuts the cards, how the
question is asked of the cards, and the shape and layout of the cards, the ritual of reading the
cards generally follows the same order. A question is developed (occasionally through
meditation), the cards are shuffled (again meditation, prayer, or a technique of “grounding
oneself” is often employed while shuffling in order to “invite the cards to speak”), and then the
cards are laid out in a “spread” or series of meaningful positions.56

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56 The classic Celtic Cross spread is a bit of a stereotyped convention and not typically used by professional readers, who see it as “too many cards and too much information.” Warren, for example, suggests laying out only three cards. “Everything can be answered in three, sometimes even one, card,” he reminds students during classes.
A basic five-card Tarot spread

Once the cards are in their position, the “reading” may begin. The reader may speak first, beginning with whichever card has been placed in a “central” position, or they may ask the querent if there is particular card that “speaks” to them. The key here, as Warren continually reminds students, is that they must be in control of the reading and within moments of putting down the card be looking for patterns, suggestions, feelings, or almost anything that can help them begin to string together what is essentially a story or an answer to the question being asked.

Often, and I can attest to feeling this way, new readers must work through the anxiety that the cards won’t make any sense. For example, a person might ask you a rather straightforward question about the success of an upcoming job interview, and the cards will turn over an image that bears, seemingly, no relation to the question. Getting from the card and its various meanings throughout history, its symbolism, the intuitive affects it gives rise to, the associations the querent has with the card, back the to question initially asked is the very labor the Tarot card reader is becoming skilled at, and striking the balance between the “book meanings” of the card and any “extrasensory” input sits at the heart of the Tarot reader’s skill.
Too much book meaning, and the reading will fall flat. Too much “wild” psychicness, and, as we will see, the reading can go “off the psychic rails.” What the reader is really going for, as Warren often reiterates, is to learn to speak your “truth” (which is understood as a combination of “book knowledge” and felt insight, intuitive voices, and psychic “hits”). According to Warren a good reading can be done in less than ten minutes because the cards are such effective messengers and prompts. In this way, learning to give a reading is really learning to see, listen, and speak all at once and to learn to trust this somatic alignment. It is a skill of speed and mental agility.

Tarot reading is also a performance of confidence because with each card flip, the reader gains a chance to test and develop this alignment. Some readers (perhaps because having too many cards on the table can actually create a runaway train of conversation) try to control the cards by shuffling themselves, placing the cards in a preselected layout, determining to some degree what the card placed in a certain position will mean. For example, one simple “spread” could dictate that all the cards placed on the left will mean “the past” and cards to the right “energies one can draw from to affect an outcome.”

Many readers develop their own spreads, such as the one Warren and Rose have developed, which they called “The Elemental Array.” It is a four-card spread—one from each suit arranged from left to right in an order of preference by the querent. When organized in order of preference, Warren suggests the four cards can be read like a “snapshot” of the querent’s personality and their value system, and Warren has been workshopping this spread in various venues as a productive psychological and potentially therapeutic spread that can help diagnose a querent’s psychological orientation at a given moment, exposing their strengths, attachments, fears, and what they themselves feel they would like to improve in their lives.
Regardless of the spread, once the cards are placed in their positions the reader must then, quickly, look for patterns among the cards, connecting the card’s images to the question that has been posed, and, most importantly, tailoring all of this to the disposition of the querent. Every Tarot reading is a personal conversation between the reader and the querent in which the reader attempts to divine, not necessarily “the future,” but what is best to say to this particular person at this time. When this conversation “works,” meaning the reader “hits” upon meaningful topics for the querent, a reading can take on a rather simple magical feeling, as though the cards are, indeed, speaking to both people.

**Working with Symbols**

At a very obvious level, readers are learning to work with images and with symbols, “reading” these images and their multivalent meanings. However, working with symbols is a skill unto itself, akin to learning a new language and mode of speaking. A symbol is by definition a visual image or a sign representing an idea, a belief, an action, or an entity. Symbols are understood to be complex forms of communication or “powerful” signs whose meanings always exceed their direct referents. Rather than clarify, symbols can overwhelm, confuse, and flood an individual with both thoughts and feelings that don’t easily translate to words yet feel meaningful. Joseph Campbell (2008) suggested that symbols are “energy evoking, and directing, agents” and that a symbol differentiates between “meaning” and “sense,” writing

> A symbol, like everything else, shows a double aspect. We must distinguish, therefore between the “sense” and the “meaning” of the symbol. It seems to me perfectly clear that all the great and little symbolical systems of the past functioned simultaneously on three levels: the corporeal of waking consciousness, the spiritual of dream, and the ineffable of the absolutely unknowable. The term “meaning” can refer only to the first two but these, today, are in the charge of science—which is the province as we have said, not of symbols but of signs. The ineffable, the absolutely unknowable, can be only sensed. (153)
As a commenter to Andrew Sullivan’s blog recently wrote (in response to a recent *Mother Jones* article that lamented a Pew study that found an increase in the “belief” in astrology)

When I began to study tarot from a local teacher, I was immediately struck by the story-telling/metaphor/dream imagery of the cards and the narrative arc that a layout of cards would provide in response to someone’s question. I also felt like I was experiencing Jung’s concept of synchronicity in a powerful way—almost always the cards that come up in readings I do have very powerful metaphorical information about the question or situation being asked about.

I immediately began to see that the layout of cards almost always created the equivalent of a “short story” or a “dream-on-demand” about the person’s situation, both in terms of his or her psyche, and the outside situation. As I walk a person through my understanding of the images and metaphors of each card and how they might apply to the person’s situation or question, they often interrupt me to tell me that they’re seeing their situation much more clearly. They also tell me they see what’s holding them back, and what options and resources they have for moving forward. In other words, they’re getting useful “scientia” that resonates strongly with their situation and mind. I often use the term “a dream on demand” for a tarot card reading because they seem so helpful and appropriate to the question someone asks.

(https://dish.andrewsullivan.com/2014/02/18/how-scientific-is-astrology-ctd/)

When a reader sits down with a deck of Tarot cards, in addition to working with the aleatory technology of the cards (and regardless of the deck and its unique images), the reader is confronted with a series of symbols, which invite speculation. Like a dream, Tarot cards present or make present a string of symbols that evoke thought and feeling yet open themselves to interpretation and meaning. Essentially, the “work” of the reader or the service they are offering is to parse meaning from this symbolic world. In such parsing, study of the cards’ history is a guide, a set of references that can be consulted in order to make “meaning,” but as Warren and many other readers are quick to point out, the “book meanings of the cards” can only take you so far. The holistic self—the body, mind, and spirit working in tandem—are invoked by readers as the “real” place of study and reading skill, and the height of reading skill is imagined to come when a reader has conducted enough book reading to understand the cards’ vast history but is
also very comfortable and confident in their own sense of what the cards may be pointing toward.

In addition to the multivalent language of symbols, some readers also feel that when they are reading the cards they are in the presence of unknown energies. As Natasha, a Tarot Center student told me during one of our classes, “You’re reading the card’s image, but you’re not seeing what’s really there.” For Natasha, whose mother believes in what she calls “demons” (although she herself is unsure—she claims she “does not know what she believes”), Tarot has become a way of encountering these potentially frightening entities. The Tarot, for Natasha, is a way of parsing the real from the “unreal,” inviting speculation into otherwise untenable conversations. For Natasha, the symbolic language of the Tarot is an opening into the possibility that “something” is speaking through the cards—a something she can put herself in conversation with by working with the cards. Fundamentally, the Tarot—as both card and symbolic language—invite such engagement and speculation. As such, the cards can foster conversations that might otherwise be impossible for individuals to conduct independently of the cards.

**Structuring the Psychic**

It’s Monday night, and I’m at the Tarot Center. Students are milling in the small, grey room as Warren and Rose settle into their chairs at the head of the table. I’m glad to see a new face. His name is Bruce, and he’s a Hispanic man in his forties who lives in Brooklyn with what seems to be numerous animals (at the least there are a couple dogs but possibly also a ferret). The animals, and the care they require, have been the topic of a class Tarot reading. Apparently, the animals’ care prohibits Bruce from taking a proper vacation, although he dreams of going to Brazil and has been receiving psychic “messages” that he needs to travel south. In a “past life,” which in this instance actually means when Bruce was in his teens and twenties, he was a
Broadway dancer; he still carries himself with a dancer’s grace. The trip to Brazil has been discussed as a “dream” that would allow him to get in touch with elements of that former self (fitness and exercise) as well as his former, more glamorous lifestyle. Bruce is currently studying at the Spiritualist Church in Manhattan and is preparing for his ordination as a Spiritualist minister. He has only been coming to Tarot classes for a few weeks, and I can tell that he is holding himself back a bit, playing the role of novice Tarot reader and letting Warren dictate to him the meanings of the cards. However, while he initially seems shy, I have heard Bruce laugh, and it’s a fantastic, loud, giggling laugh that seems to betray a much larger personality.

Bruce has mentioned that the reason he has come to the Tarot Center is because he is hoping that working with the cards will help “structure” his psychic ability and help him more effectively “direct” the insights that he receives, often as “flashes of information” or “hits.” I have not heard Bruce use the word clairvoyant, although the phenomena that he describes sounds close to the definition of “clairvoyance,” in which an individual sees information that is not readily apparent. As Price (1940) writes, “clairvoyance is usually defined as the awareness of some approximately contemporary object or process in the material world without the use of the sense-organs or of rational inference.” Bruce experiences these hits at random times throughout the day, with little control over when or why they come. As discussed in his conversations with fellow Tarot Center students, Bruce explains that he simply “sees” or senses clips of fragments of images, but he’s not always sure what the source of this information is or what prompts the hit. Sometimes it’s an image, sometimes a smell, or sometimes it’s an object or just a person’s presence. He is hoping that by using the Tarot cards and their symbols, this ability will grow more consistent and more defined and that he might gain some control over this information. For Bruce as for many of the Tarot students, psychicness can be destabilizing and causes the
individual to wonder if they are going crazy or experiencing psychosis. However, the fear they experience is also tempered by having to live with the ability. Bruce is actively trying to embrace psychicness as a gift, rather than rejecting it or classifying it as a form of mental illness.

At this particular class, Warren and Rose ask students pair off to conduct a series of readings. Bruce has actually moved his seat closer to Rose than usual, so that when she abstains from the reading practice, Bruce and I are left sitting closest to each other. I have not had a reading with him before, and I’m a little anxious to hear how he will interpret the cards. I’ve been doing my own Tarot reading and have gotten relatively comfortable with the book meanings of the cards, their relationship to the Tree of Life, and their relation to basic astrological principles, but my own “psychic” ability has remained elusive. In the presence of a self-described psychic, I feel a little vulnerable despite my knowledge. Still, Bruce is friendly, and he himself seems to still be getting comfortable in the space, and I do my best to put him at ease. “Do you have a question?” he asks me. “Well, this is a bit of a crazy question, but I want to know if I’m going to have a baby,” I reply. “A baby? Oh, girl, you are asking the big questions.” Bruce shuffles his deck of Rider-Waite-Smith cards, the same deck all the students use to learn at the Tarot Center, and he closes his eyes, meditatively breathing while holding the cards. I sit quietly still, trying to be reverent of his space, and wonder what Bruce is going to say. This anticipation is at the heart of Tarot’s appeal. With a simple card flip, information or a possible answer or direction is provided, even if you choose to disregard what the cards seem to be saying. “Okay, well let me see what we got here,” as he lays down a single card: the Page of Cups. A boy wearing what looks like a costume that might be worn at a Renaissance court, is holding a golden cup in his right hand. From the cup, a tiny fish is emerging. He seems to be standing on a shore next to a flowing river or body of water. I know from my own reading that
the suit of Cups, with its attendant images of water, represents emotions, the unconscious, intuition, or even the development of psychic ability and that the character of the Page represents a childlike state in which the imagination and wonder play a key role. I think to myself, “this looks hopeful,” but for me this isn’t a direct answer, and I have no real means of confirming it in relationship to my answer. This card could mean “yes, you will have a baby” just as much as it might simply mean “yes, you are thinking about children” or even “you’re thinking about motherhood immaturely and not really thinking through the practicality of raising children” (perhaps confirming that asking a deck of cards, rather than your partner, about the prospect of children might not be the best way to proceed with the matter). To my mind, there is no easy way to interpret the card’s meaning, although this is precisely what the lessons at the Tarot Center are working toward with Warren’s “be the master of your own ship” advice.

Bruce, however, takes a look at the card and slaps both his hands down on his thigh. “Girl, do you want to have a baby? Because… I think you can if you want to, I mean I’m going to say what I feel her e.” Bruce closes his eyes and starts to talk. “I see you in a cab or something, driving? I don’t know, but you’re there’s a baby and his name is Paul or someone named Paul is there? Do you know anyone named Paul?” In my own field notes I wrote:

I really wanted to know the answer to this question, but Bruce started laughing in the middle of the reading and then I started laughing and it all sounded a little far-fetched that I would have a baby in a car. When he was talking I was thinking that not much was making sense. None of what he said removed the nagging doubt from my mind that there could be other possibilities to the card’s meaning. The words seem to come pouring out as though he were simply saying whatever came to mind. I couldn’t tell if he were nervous or if this was his process. Knowing that Bruce is a practicing Spiritualist, I wondered if this technique was part of that training of mediumship in which an individual attempts to become a medium or a conduit for a spirit—speaking the words as they do not belong to you. The point of this is that Bruce is avoiding the card, going on a personal and subjective “rant” of sorts that leaves me wondering what’s going on. He hasn’t done what he’s said he’s going to do, which is let the cards dictate what going on or what he’s going to say.
**Making a Reading “Meaningful”**

What Bruce has done “wrong” in that he hasn’t quite made the reading “productive” by creating a story that feels plausible to me, his querent. Instead, he has “gone off the psychic rails,” as he likes to say, and what he’s told me doesn’t quite add up to a story that can be understood (although, clearly, if one day if I have a baby in a cab, I will have to reconsider the scope of this Tarot reading). Such understanding is not the same as “believing” in Bruce. I (or any querent) may still believe that Bruce has a clairvoyant “gift” or “insight,” but if he does not deliver his reading in such a way that what he says can be followed, then the reading itself has fallen flat. As Robin Woofit (2006) has explored in his work on the communication of psychics and mediums, the “authenticity” of a psychic reading lies in language and is demonstrated through “everyday linguistic acts such as questions and answers, statements and reports” (37). As Jorgenson (1980) writes in response to his observations of an esoteric Tarot community and numerous Tarot reading interactions:

My analysis and interpretation supports the contention that the meaning and sense of occult practices like tarot divination are produced and sustained by societal members through a complex but otherwise ordinary process of social interactional negotiation. This documentary method of interpretation also applies to common sense activity, psychotherapy, and many other aspects of human existence, such as science. Because of the “magical” character of social interaction, serious occultists have little need for self-conscious trickery. If they perpetrate deceptions, these deceptions are part of recognizable strategies of impression management, and thereby routine features of human interaction. Clients and readers may exhibit gullibility and engage in “deficient” reasoning. Yet, these are not discriminating properties of occult practices. The supposed defects of tarot divination are pervasive features of face-to-face interaction. Occultists and common sense actors inappropriately use causal, probabilistic, and correlational thinking. But, truth and meaning are negotiated by these folks in spite of these defects.

Far from being deception for Bruce, what he is hoping is that the Tarot cards will give him a narrative structure for the seemingly wild flow of information that he receives and that his readings will begin to sound more plausible, more truthful, to his querents. It is actually
through his study and use of Tarot that Bruce is hoping to modulate or mediate the stigma attached to “psychic” (or “psychotic”) talk.

At the same time, however, Bruce also struggles against relying on the systems of information contained in the cards. Rather than working through the cards’ multilayered meaning or their “positions” in the layout of the cards, or even acknowledging which elements of the cards are inspiring his psychic hits, Bruce has simply started talking in a stream of language that seems to have no immediate referent and could veer off in any direction. While Bruce is comfortable with this form of speech, he has also sought out the cards to help direct or organize such speech, thus giving a form of “legitimacy” to his psychic stream. However, while the cards have meanings, for Bruce those meanings feeling “canned” or predetermined. How can one read a series of predetermined meanings meaningfully? Why does having the card as referent lend credibility to “psychic” talk? The answer here is that the card flip itself is an organizing or meaningful principle, which as we saw in Chapter 2, displaces responsibility for eventfulness onto the card and away from the individual. Bruce, by refusing to integrate his psychic ability with the information contained in the cards and the meaning of the card flips, has also refused to “trust” the cards. While balancing the multilayered meanings of the cards with one’s subjective experience may sound rather obvious, this is actually deeply subtle and philosophically problematic work that strikes at the heart of the notion of “truth” itself. The real challenge for readers here is how weave their own “knowledge” into the fabric of the card’s knowledge. This not does mean to repress the energy of the “psychic rails” but to “manage” it and put it into the service of narrative. This is a struggle for individuals like Bruce, who feel that they are “blessed and cursed” by their psychic ability. It is a practice of learning to get comfortable with what Bruce himself has called “crazy talk.” And, indeed, while mental health issues thread themselves
throughout the Tarot world, one of the most important unwritten rules of the Tarot tribe is that “crazy” is a social construction. In the following section, I will suggest that this project of weaving multiple “knowledges” together is done through an attempt to “tell the truth” and to be “true” to information.

While older studies of Tarot predominantly used the framework of symbolic interaction to study how it was that “the psychic” was created or performed, I am less interested in such a phenomenological analysis, looking rather to what the practice of reading does or is doing. I am interested the relationship these cards make possible, across bodies, times, and across consciousnesses. Of course language is essential here, as a Tarot reading is spoken (and words, of course, and the voice itself have a resonance and a power), but I am also interested in what is going on through that very language—or rather what is happening as someone takes up the role of the oracle. I am interested in what they think they are doing when they speak and in what is occurring between bodies and media.

**The Gendered Experience of “Talkin’ Crazy”**

While learning to trust the cards and learning to create meaning from their multivalent systems can be seen as a structuring project, it is also a project of letting oneself “talk” and talk freely. As Warren is often quick to point out, Tarot is a project of learning to trust not only the cards but essentially to trust one’s self and to explore the self as a site of knowing. Talking, then, freely, yet “in touch” with the cards and, ideally, also a wide range of knowledge about the metaphysical systems of the cards, is a goal that most Tarot Center students aspire to and conceptualize as a “freeing” project. For example, I met Kris, a very bubbly, friendly, white woman from Texas in her early forties during my attendance at my first Reader’s Studio conference. Kris, was then a beginning Tarot card reader attending the Readers’ Studio for her
first time, who told me that “she doesn’t quite know how she knows things.” Kris told me that she learned about the Readers’ Studio online and decided to come because “now that her son is in college and she’s at home alone,” she “figured it was time to figure out what she’s doing.” Figuring out what she’s doing has entailed accepting that all her life she has heard voices that she cannot explain but that “help her sometimes to just know what’s going on.” Kris has worked as an administrative assistant and as a substitute teacher at times in her life, and she’s never felt comfortable discussing her psychic ability at work or in public, although she says it’s been “helpful” at certain times in that she thinks it helps her “deal with people better than most others.” Like many of women who have children, Kris tells me that her son thinks “she’s crazy when she talks,” but he also seems to accept it about her. “Having a psychic mom is not always fun because he’ll be like, mom, are you going see me doing something wrong?” Kris tells me. But “it doesn’t work like that,” she tells me—even if she would like it to (and perhaps enjoys the maternal power it affords her). Instead, she just “gets messages” and doesn’t feel she has much control over when they arrive or when they depart. This is part of why Kris has sought out Tarot practice. Like Bruce, she is interested in a device that can help structure and clarify the messages, and she is also interested in getting comfortable in her own skin and in her own and finding a sense of confidence in her own prognostication.

For many women like Kris, working with the Tarot is considered a freeing experience in which they are encouraged to speak freely, sometime loudly and with abandon. At the same Reader’s Studio where I met Kris, I was invited to sit with her and a group of established readers during one of the weekend workshops focused on “enhancing psychic ability.” The group of women welcomed me to the table and as we were walked through the exercise of pulling out a Tarot card and allowing ourselves to speak the very word that came to mind, the group became
increasingly more bawdy. A narrative about one of the women’s “fantasies” and a theoretical lover that she might take in the near future started to flow from the “psychic” hits, and this just delighted the group. They were actually laughing so hard that by the end of the workshop were told to “quiet down” by other tables. But the experience was one of pure joy and hilarity. It was quite literally “fun” to be encouraged to talk. Indeed, that experience created an opening for me in the research because it established a common experience with some of the more experienced and connected readers. But it also made me wonder how silenced these women might be in other parts of their lives. After the “crack-up session,” they thanked one another and me and commented on wonderful it is to laugh. This experience is why readers return to the Readers’ Studio every year—because here there is no censor. Indeed, shedding the censor is a considerable part of the work.

However, finding that “freedom” to be less censored or “talk crazy” is a delicate terrain. For women like Kris, middle-aged white women, such an experience of being encouraged to speak freely is part of the draw to a scene like Tarot, or indeed many “New Age” scenes, as Karlyn Crowley (2011) has shown in her work *Feminism’s New Age: Gender Appropriation, and the Afterlife of Essentialism*. For Crowley, what is often disparaged as “new age” is a site where women participate in order to negotiate both gender and race, often in complicated yet failed ways. While Crowley’s work focuses on the appropriation of culture by white women within the broader “new age” scene, we can also see that for many women, like Kris, such gendered and racial work is occurring even at the level of articulation and who is allowed or encouraged to speak. Tarot is a very specific set of practices that enables white women, who have an expectation of “liberation,” to participate in their own resubjectification as a Tarot reader or, as I will suggest later in the chapter, “one who speaks the truth.” While the Tarot scene that I
studied with was, to some degree, a diverse racial scene that also embraced and celebrated queer and transgender readers, when we begin to look (in Chapter 5) to the marketing gurus that act as role models for readers, we will see the extent to which white women dominate the conversations around money, representation, well-being, and “truth.”

*Testing the Psychic*

While Tarot can be understood as a project of freeing speech, embracing confidence, however, can be difficult for a number of reasons, not least among them that clients will come to them explicitly to test them or play “test the psychic,” as they call it. Given that clients will often “test” readers (and that readers are very aware of the chances of this happening when they start to read in public or for money), readers to are trying not only to “grow comfortable in their skin” but also to protect one’s self by developing an embodied sense of authority. Consider the following note from Gina, a professional reader in Texas. Gina writes:

If you are like me, you love what you do as a reader and love to help whoever comes to you. The imagery of tarot has many layers of uses and meanings to help almost anyone, but who would best benefit from a reading? Before you answer “Everyone,” you may want to give it some thought. Often, people come to you seeking a way to resolve a painful or truly difficult issue through a reading. What the reading says may reveal illusions about their situation. In a situation like this, you may need to pass on doing the reading.

Your first goal as a reader is to bring about some sort of satisfaction for your client. But if you suspect or discover that you can’t, you might be well advised to pass. An alternative is to show concern and explain that your services or methods are limited. You may be able to offer them some help, but not be able to give them everything they need. With that caveat, you can still proceed with the reading. It is not always easy convincing persistent people that they need more help than you can give them. These are rare occurrences, but they do happen.

If they are contacting you just to play “test the psychic,” then yep, they don’t need to get a reading.

Here, as you can see, Gina is creating a boundary between the work she wants to do and the work she feels is important and those who will come to “test” her. She is reserving the right to
refuse to work, which is just as important as being able to allow the cards to encourage conversation or connection between individuals. As many readers suggest, not everyone is open to their work, and, if this is the case, speaking their “truth” to those individuals may mean standing up for themselves and refusing to work for the client.

**The Truth: Psychic, Intuitive, or Therapeutic?**

As we saw in the last chapter, readers negotiate the history of the cards in their work by recasting their work across different frames of legitimacy, often modifying their presentation across different audiences. The Readers’ Studio, for example, is a space in which all three frames of psychic, intuitive, or therapeutic are embraced and welcomed. Speaking across these frames at the Readers’ Studio is part of the project of releasing the self to speak its “truth.” The Readers’ Studio is a safe space to experiment and explore the Tarot as a site of building each of these skills or, as readers often call them, “muscles”—as though, akin to exercise, reading practice and letting oneself speak freely will build one’s psychic or intuitive “power.” As Mary Greer writes on her blog:

> Both psychic awareness and intuition communicate to us through symbols, sensory feelings and emotions, which is one reason why they may be so hard to separate. With intuition, however, we can sometimes justify our hunches by backtracking and discerning sensory input and mental connections that only make sense after the fact. By contrast, with a true psychic impression a direct connection simply doesn’t exist, except, perhaps, when interpreting feelings and symbols in which the psychic impression can be cloaked.

As Mary has questioned on her blog, it is interesting to ask why the categories of psychic and intuitive, despite being different processes (with different social values attached to either), have been mapped onto each other. On the one hand, we can argue that readers “code shift” (Woolard 2004) between these words as is needed. Sara, for example, often refers to herself as an “intuitive” reader for the majority of her clients but will also (when she feels comfortable with a client) allow herself to talk about the “psychic hits” she receives. During one of our interviews,
Sara received a call from a client that confirmed that one of her “hits” was “spot-on.” Beaming, Sara told me that it just that type of call that she loves to get—not only because it confirms for her that her work is helping other people but that she herself is growing more comfortable with her own psychic ability.

Rather than seeing psychic, intuitive, and therapeutic as frames to be rigidly maintained by codes, it is more helpful to see how the project of self-exploration undergirds the encounter with both the (secular and private) intuition and the (social and stigmatized) notion of the psychic, which suggests a porousness across and between bodies. As I discuss in the following chapter, this porousness becomes a site of value, rather than a site of stigma, and can be folded back into the larger project of healing (and investing) in the self. The self becomes a site of “truth,” which must be “freed” to speak, despite social stigma across a range of vocabularies or frames of legitimacy. To understand this project more fully, it is helpful to turn to Michel Foucault’s work on “parrhesia” or what has been translated into English as “free speech.”

*From Parrhesia to Care of the Self*

In a series of lectures in 1983, Foucault addressed the meaning of the Greek word “parrhesia,” which first appears in Euripides and has been translated into English as “free speech.” Foucault writes that parrhesia etymologically means “to say everything” but that one who uses parrhesia is “someone who says everything he has in mind: he does not hide anything, but opens his heart and his mind completely to other people through his discourse… the word parrhesia then refers to a type of relationship between the speaker and what he says.” According to Foucault, the parrhesiastes (or one who tells the truth) uses the “most direct words and forms of expression he can find.” Moreover, “in parrhesia, the parrhesiastes acts on other people’s minds by showing them directly as possible what he believes.” We see here that the notion of
“saying everything” then becomes an ethical relationship to the self—the parrhesiastes must not only “say” everything but show others what he “believes.”

However, not all individuals are capable of parrhesia. While it is a “speech act,” Foucault is clear to point out that there are two types of parrhesia. The first is “pejorative”—this is chattering or speech said without qualification. This form of “saying everything” lacks the effect of “truth.” While the parrhesiastes may say everything, the parrhesia that Foucault is interested in is the speech act wherein belief and truth are “an exact coincidence.” He suggests that after Descartes, such a verbal act is not longer easily translatable to a contemporary epistemological framework. However, the very possibility of a marriage between card flip, symbolic information, reader’s perception, and spoken word is precisely what is idealized as the work of Tarot reading. While on the one hand there is a liberatory aspect (for some—often, white, middle aged, women) to Tarot reading, there is also an underlying empiricism of truth-telling that informs the desire to take up the practice. In fact, as Foucault describes, parrhesia is a state that is free of doubt—the state of truth telling is “guaranteed by the possession of certain moral qualities: when someone has certain moral qualities, then that is proof that he has access to the truth—and vice versa. The ‘parrhesiastic game’ presupposes that the parrhesiastes is someone who has the moral qualities which are required, first to know the truth, and, secondly, to convey such truth to others.”

As I have suggested, Tarot is an assemblage that keeps alive a number of historical traditions, and, as such, the student of Tarot has access to wide range of “moral qualities” associated with the history of the cards. For example, to learn the history of the Renaissance Tarot can enable a reader to embrace an attendant sense that the cards are a form of social critique or social parody, highlighting or pointing to the inconsistencies or hypocrisies of social relations. To embrace the Golden Dawn as a site of study can confer on a contemporary reader
an alignment with moral qualities of the ever-diligent magician or occultist, taking responsibility for the occluded powers that the cards are thought to contain. Still, regardless of such identifications, to associate oneself with the Tarot cards (and its long historical assemblage of traditions) is to see oneself on the “fringe” of society, working then with the moral qualities of the “outsider” (despite any normative pretensions the reader may have). The cards, because of their history, confer on their student a sense that one is operating outside the normative frame of rational discourse. As I suggest below, embracing (and learning to trust) the cards is experienced as a social wager or a risk, but one that is outweighed by the potential investments in the self.

To return to Foucault, we see that the act of “truth-telling” is an act in which the speaker “says something dangerous”—they “take a risk.” They risk not only the fear of losing what Goffman (1951) might have called “face,” but as Foucault explains, beyond this loss, the parrhesiastes is able to speak “truth” to power (or at least this is the idealized form that Foucault seems to be interested in). For Tarot, such speaking to power is less about speaking to political or economic power but to the power of the individual. Readers feel they are disclosing “truths” that are occluded, denied, or not desired by their querents. This is a form of what I have thought of as “mom talk” or “straight talk.” From the perspective of the Tarot reader, they are telling the querent what is “best” for them to hear. Readers will try to modify something too painful or too “honest” or too blunt, but they ultimately think that their job is to tell the querent the truth that contains a transformative capacity. Such truth-telling is, however, a tricky business. Shawn, for example, found himself encouraging a female querent to “confess” her childhood sexual abuse during one of his readings. Despite the sense that his reading may have retraumatized the woman, he was still sure that the acknowledgment of such abuse was essential to this woman “moving on in her life.” This incident, which Shawn disclosed during a Tarot Center class, left
me unsettled and disturbed by the lack of clear ethical practices that might separate a Tarot reading from a psychotherapy session. Yet blurring the lines between reading for a person and conducting informal “therapy” is precisely what has come with the psychologized turn in Tarot (and perhaps in “New Age” practices across the board). Given that Tarot is embraced by readers as a tool for the production of their own “ethical” and productive subjectivities, the relational project of truth-telling is deeply entangled in the very “practices of the self” that Tarot fosters.

In his work on “Ethics” Foucault suggests that “games of truth” no longer involve coercion but rather are found in the practices of “self-formation.” While such self-formation should not be understood a liberatory project (i.e., that would lead to the “rise of a happy human imbued with a sexuality to which the subject could achieve a complete and satisfying relationship” 283), Foucault will emphasize the “practices of freedom,” which inform the “ontological conditions of ethics,” writing “ethics is the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection” (284). While Christianity brought with it a notion of self-renunciation, for Foucault, looking back to Greek and Roman practices, it is the interrelation of caring for/knowing the self (Foucault will later suggest that “knowing” the self will come to dominate “care” of the self as a mode of ethical subjectification) that sets the ground for “right conduct.” He writes, “taking care of oneself requires knowing oneself. Care of the self is, of course, knowledge of the self—this is the Socratic-Platonic aspect—but also knowledge of a number of rules of acceptable conduct or principles that are both truths and prescriptions. To take care of the self is to equip oneself with these truths. This is where ethics is linked to the game of truth.” For readers, Tarot is just such a game of truth. Tarot, as both a deck of cards and a compendium of metaphysical traditions, operates as a “technology,” which, as Foucault writes:

We must understand that there are four major types of these “technologies,” each a matrix of practical reason: (1) technologies of production, which permit us to produce,
transform, or manipulate things; (2) technologies of sign systems, which permit us to use signs, meanings, symbols, or signification; (3) technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject; (4) technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (18)

Looking at Tarot as a multifaceted technology in the Foucauldian sense, we begin to see how its use produces a double action. On the one hand, it operates as a subjectifying “game of truth” or practice of the self that creates opportunities for self-reflection, capacity building, and self-articulation. On the other hand, it becomes a ground through which to speak to others, a relational project crouched in the ethics of subjectification. It is from this ground that one speaks to others across the frames of psychic, intuitive, or therapeutic. As Foucault writes, “and the care of the self also implies a relationship with the other insofar as proper care of the self requires listening to the lessons of a master. One needs a guide, a counselor, a friend, someone who will be truthful with you. Thus, the problem of relationships with others is present throughout the development of the care of the self’ (287).

In this relational project, the role of questioning can’t be understated. People interrogate the cards, play with the con-game aspects, speculate, but also very literally they “ask questions” of the cards… and the cards answer. Learning to formulate a question is as important as learning to read the answer. This game of question and answer is the groundwork of the transformative project—the project of learning to question and becoming receptive to possible answers through a range of materials—cards, symbols, bodies, and environments, including the digital as an object to be listened to and learned from. Once you are in the thrall of such personal “transformation,” there is a lure to speak to others, not only face to face through readings, but also larger audiences. This is where the digital enters, where the project becomes something
more than a spiritual project of self-denial but also a site of macrosocial and economic investment. As we will see in the following chapter, a Tarot reader’s work tends to follow an arc of “care” that happens through a series of practices such as mediation, writing, teaching, charging money, and developing a public brand.

“Just How ‘New Age’ Are you Going to Get?”

I believe you can get a complete liberal arts education through studying Tarot. If you keep studying and want to learn everything that you can about it, you’re going to understand history in trying to understand how Tarot works, you’re going to look at probability theory, quantum theory, all the new physics… You’re going to look at psychology, art, literature and myth, just keeps going on and on… – Mary Greer, from an Omega Institute video

People who read Tarot cards for a living are used to being asked questions (indeed, this is part of their work, as I suggested above), and many are experts in presenting themselves, as well as in framing definitions of social situations and social conditions in general. As Mary Greer, the author and well-known Tarot expert suggests in the epigraph to this section, the Tarot is a site of learning and advancement—it can be thought of as a “complete liberal arts education.” In contrast to embracing the Tarot as a distinctly occult or magical or even “new age” object, readers such as Greer embrace the cards as site of learning and investment in the self. When I began this project, I was interested in the questions of what it meant to “go New Age” or if individuals saw themselves as slipping into irrational beliefs through Tarot. I was curious about if they reconciled Tarot practice with other forms of “prove-able” knowledge. To my surprise, the answers to the questions I had laid out were decidedly simple for many people: by using Tarot they were “improving their lives,” and this improvement left room for endless collections of knowledge and skills. If anything, they sensed that Tarot made them more amenable to information, new ideas and facts, as well as the development of a mind that can integrate them.
Rather than picking and choosing among religious affiliations and ideas, as Robert Bellah might suggest, individuals I spoke with are involved in a project of world-building that has much to do with the production of a very specific type of self—one who can work entrepreneurially, as well as surf the vagaries of contemporary social and economic life. This synthesis of self and world is actually in line with some of the original intentions of the term New Age, which imagined the unlimited potential of the self, as well as new social, environmental, and political possibilities. Most prominent among the ideas still maintained from the original sense of the New Age is the promissory notion of transformation and change. To invest not just “belief” but also energy, action, and work into these notion of change has become an aspect of what Kathryn Lofton (2012) calls “the religious now” as well as a thoroughly therapeutic tenet of self-help and perhaps what tenaciously remains of the concept of enchantment.

In the course of my fieldwork, however, it become apparent to me that while Tarot is often discussed as a form of self-growth and self-exploration, the process of becoming a professional Tarot card readers is experienced as a wager. Hedging themselves against the buffers of race, gender, and social class, several readers slowly embrace the notion that Tarot can become a source of income or professional identity. For example, we can look to Deana, who is employed as an employment recruiter and very much likes and is good at her job. For her, Tarot is a way that she balances the realms of the corporate world and her creative interests, and she often talks about the energy that she needs to keep up her life, especially with two small children. (Deana is a vibrant woman who looks like she’s in her late twenties, but is almost forty. She “loves” everything she talks about, and she “loves” to do things well.) She often feels like she gives “everything” to her work and to her family, and she wonders what she can tap into to find even more energy for herself. For Deana, Tarot cards and their attendant underlying
philosophies, such as Kabbalah, astrology, sacred geometry, color therapy, and numerology, have been potential sources of personal energy. Yet, as Deana has come to talk about her husband’s recent lay-off over the last few months, such energy is not only potentially therapeutic for her but also a source of security in the face of precarity. She may not be able to get her husband a new job, but she can take another class, meet some new people, do a couple readings, and pay for her daughter’s birthday party (which she seemed very proud of). The question for her is the duration of that security and the energy spent trying to secure it. For her, embracing the Tarot more publicly is experienced as a wager or a question of “just how New Age are you going to get?” For Deana, it’s a balance or a juggling act, and for the most part she tries to keep her “work life” separate from her “Tarot life.” Occasionally, the two will meet when a coworker discovers that she reads Tarot, but for the most part she hopes to avoid the mingling of these two worlds because she fears the stigma that comes with the Tarot. Specifically, Deana is afraid that her workers will think she’s “weird, you know like woo-woo weird.”

While “woo-woo” is a derogatory word for parapsychology and the occult, many readers use the phrase when they want to point toward a slew of magical, psychic, or ritual practices they may or may not participate in. Many readers use the phrase to mark a boundary (not in terms of what they believe or practice) between what clients or others will or won’t accept as part of the “truth.” At the same time, the phrase can be embraced as a moniker of self-identification, as though you realize that while others might consider a practice or belief to be irrational, you yourself are still a little “woo-woo.” Indeed, getting “woo” is part of the wager of Tarot. There is a sense that going “woo” can open doors to new experiences and to new ways of working with the cards. While there is the question of risk and stigma, embracing the “irrational” (which never has to be fully embraced but rather can be played with through the speculation that the cards
offer), there is also the wager that an individual will gain a new forms of social status or social standing (in the Tarot community, but also as we will see in Chapter 5 a new, emerging world of online marketing) by embracing the “weirdness” of new practices and other ways of “knowing.” The validation of woo comes through the extent to which these practice or ways of know can be put “to work.” These practices and ways of knowing that the Tarot invites through its speculative conversations can become the very basis for the labor of self-appreciation.

In coming into themselves as Tarot readers, individuals not only undertake a form of “care of the self”; they also explore their selves as sites of capacity (psychic or intuitive capacity, for instance) as well as sites of possibility. This is not only a form of caring for a self but of learning to appreciate and, quite literally, “value” the self. This project of self-appreciation takes through a series of practices, as well as by adopting a public identity as a writer, teacher, and finally learning to set one’s self worth through the language of money. Such self-appreciation is mapped on to the transformative sense that care of the self suggests, and it also seeds an entrepreneurial ground, which will eventually enable an individual to make a leap into the market, to “market” oneself and articulate one’s life via the aesthetics of the digital marketplace and the logic of branding. Working with the Tarot, in this regard, has become a project of developing what is known as “human capital,” which as Michel Ferher (2007) writes has become the “dominant subjective form… a defining feature of neoliberalism.” Writing on the early work of the Chicago economist Gary Becker, Fehrer writes:

The notion of human capital, initially, did not seem all that ambitious. It referred to the set of skills that an individual can acquire thanks to investments in his or her education or training, and its primary purpose was to measure the rates of return that investments in education produce or, to put it simply, the impact on future incomes that can be expected from schooling and other forms of training.
This notion of human capital, according to Fehrer, however, would eventually be broadened “so that its evaluation would include a multiplicity of factors: some innate (e.g., one’s genetic background and individual dispositions), others contextual (e.g., one’s social milieu, one’s parents’ ambitions and care) as well as collateral (e.g., one’s physical capital or psychological capital, ranging from one’s diet or sports regimen to one’s sex life or recreational activities). In short, the things that I inherit, the things that happen to me, and the things I do all contribute to the maintenance or the deterioration of my human capital.” Such a radical expansion of the notion of human capital points toward a radical territorialization of the practices that Foucault would have considered to be “care of the self” by capital.

Interestingly, for Fehrer, the expansion of human capital not only indicates a territorialization of the self in the present but also for future iterations of the self, or, as Fehrer writes, “not all investment in human capital is for future earnings alone. Some of it is for future well-being in forms that are not captured in the earnings stream of the individual in whom the investment is made… In other words, insofar as our condition is that of human capital in a neoliberal environment, our main purpose is not so much to profit from our accumulated potential as to constantly value or appreciate ourselves—or at least prevent our own depreciation.”
Far from fabricating out of fragments of the macrocosm a private domain in which the individual can take up his abode, the vision of the visionary opens up on immense spaces inhabited by vast populations of human and extrahuman beings. The visions of visionaries are open upon remote distances and vast depths with a singular intensity. They intensify with their light all things visible to perception. And they excite and exalt our emotional forces.

— Adolpho Lingis, *The Mystic’s Banquet*

In the last chapter, we looked to the ways in which the Tarot reading becomes a “truth-telling” project that can foster a sense that one is investing in and cultivating the self. In that chapter, I suggested that the dual and simultaneous project of aligning oneself (mind, body, self) with “the truth” of the cards, a querent’s situation, or an environment easily tips into a project of “self-appreciation” or investing in and valuing the capacities of the self. This dual project is the groundwork of entrepreneurialism. “Telling the truth” via the Tarot cards, as an aleatory chosen “snapshot” of a given moment, is less about divining the future than it is about reading or interpreting that image of the present moment. As such, Tarot in the mode of Foucauldian truth-telling draws futurity to the present moment, recasting the present as a space of “choice” as well as of possibility, hopefulness, imagined mobility, and potential action. To read in the mode of productive truth telling is not to predict the future but to offer the possibility of affecting future outcomes. Reading becomes a speculative but potentially “productive” relational space where, essentially, the labor of reading as a “legitimate” reader is the affective labor of producing such “pregnant” space. Affective labor here, quite literally, aims to “solve all problems” not through a prediction but through a truth of opening seemingly small snapshots of life to possibility. In this chapter, I will suggest that such affective labor not only blurs the categories of intuitive, psychic,
and/or therapeutic but that it can also valorize contested knowledge and encourage a relation where both reader and querent simultaneously teach each other to listen, see, or feel the truth.

In the first half of this chapter, I look to the Tarot Center students’ practices of self-investment through Tarot in more detail and consider the project of truth-telling as a series of embodied practices, such as meditation, cultivating “magical” senses, and writing. Here, I look to the role the body plays as individuals attempt to align themselves with information, as well as put that capacity to work, quite literally through teaching and the development of media artifacts such as websites, podcasts, and social media profiles. In the second half of the chapter, I turn toward theories of affective labor and affect itself to consider the ways in which the “psychic” body troubles easy notions of individualism yet at the same time can be put into the service of entrepreneurialism. I look at this channeling of the figure of the “more-than-individual” into the market through what I called “affective normativity,” which carries with it racialized, gendered, and classed prescriptions for what it means to live and work or to create “well-being.”

**Putting the Body to Work**

In her work, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (2010), Courtney Bender takes up the practices of contemporary mystics and explores what it means to live in a “metaphysical” register. Bender is interested in the category of experience and the ways in which this experience is “entangled” in everyday and ordinary practice. In interviews with her subjects, she explores bodily practices, writing that spiritual “experience does not just happen” but that “practitioners vigorous pursue, cultivate, and develop experience with the divine energy sources they believe underlie prior experiences and all of life” (2010, 90). Placing emphasis on the narrative or discursive practices of her subjects and the ways in which they explain in language what it means to connect to the divine, Bender’s
work is deeply informative and is a model for understanding the embodied experience of contemporary spirituality, and in this section I follow Bender’s hermeneutic of “entanglement” to think through the ways in which the Tarot cards themselves—as cards, as symbols, elemental energies, “portals” to other worlds, and prompts for rituals (as the assemblage that we encountered in Chapter 2)—are used in everyday and often mundane ways to hone and fashion bodily sensitivity and mental perception as well as cultivate energy. Cultivating energy and directing it toward purposeful outcomes is a major source of concern for Tarot Center students and, unlike Bender, here I am also concerned with the ways in which such embodied practice is made or felt to be “productive.” By productive, I mean that such embodied practice can be “used” or put to “work” rather than simply experienced for its own sake.

In my fieldwork, I observed individuals not only giving personal meaning to their subjective experience but also that a social pattern also seemed to be taking place, albeit unevenly among individuals. As students came to the Tarot Center and took up Tarot as a project of truth-telling and self investment, playing with and often embracing the idea of psychic ability and growing comfortable with intuition as a “guiding voice” or “becoming masters of their own ship,” they also began to do work—to conduct readings for other people, to blog or write, to teach—and they began to charge money for their services, understanding money as a form of cosmic energy that needed to be fairly exchanged. Very quickly what is often seen as a very personal, subjective spiritual practice becomes entangled in media and its creation. In this regard, I came to see that earlier critiques of spirituality that condemn spiritual practitioners as narcissistic, individualizing, and privatizing miss a certain mark. While neoliberalism’s reliance

57 Note every student of Tarot goes on to “brand” themselves. In fact, Shawn, who we met in the first chapter, actively rejects the push to make his work public. The logics of entrepreneurialism, however, operate as guides for students, sometimes pressuring them, sometimes creating opportunity. Even for casual students of the Tarot, these logics are in operation, making it difficult to parse a student from an “entrepreneur.”
on “human capital” is inherently privatizing, it can also blur easy distinctions between work you do on and for your “self” and the work you do for others, as well as the very “things” that such work creates. Indeed, neoliberalism’s broad embrace of human capital as a terrain of self-cultivation and value, as Foucault (2005) shows in the Birth of Biopolitics, was a double move. It attempted to relocate the value within the individual and its capacities or skills. At the same time, it moved to unhinge or free labor from the social (namely from the social demarcation of time, which was for Marx the basis for the wage) and to flatten or synthesize the activity of the self with the production of things in the world. In doing so, human capital intentionally obscures itself as a socially generative project, particularly as it encounters the digital and its abundance.

In the first chapter, we met Sara—a young dramatic woman who has been studying at the Tarot Center for several years and who is currently in the process of writing and publishing her first Tarot books. Sara is the woman who, while not identifying with the “new age,” thinks of herself as part of the “Oprah generation of readers.” For Sara, Tarot is a way of living and of finding an endless source of energy to keep up with the demands of freelance life and domestic responsibilities—as well as the energy needed to fantasize about social mobility. Sitting down at the Tarot Center one evening, Sara remarked, “You know, I think I like this ‘new’ New York.” Not being sure what she meant, I asked “what’s new?” She went on to tell me about her experience at the High Line, a public park that was built on the West Side of Manhattan, along a former Central Railroad spur. The park’s design employs a very architectural sensibility, and Sara thought it was sophisticated and nice to visit, inspiring a sense for her that gentrifying New York might not be all bad. As I had come to get to know Sara over the last few months, I was aware that she was not earning much money but that elements of the city such as the High Line could still inspire her to feel “wealthy” or like wealth could be a possibility in her life.
When I interviewed Sara (and tried to videotape her giving a reading) I asked her to explain how she used Tarot in her own life, not just as a tool for readings. She then talked about the special ritual spaces she creates in her everyday life. These rituals can be rather simple or straightforward but nonetheless powerful for her. Sara will meditate on her deck (she typically reads with a novelty deck, but in her own personal study consults the Rider-Waite deck), choosing a card from the deck that she wants to “embody.” Embody the card means seeing herself as an element of the card—its symbolic meanings, its colors, its elements, or its astrological associations. For example, Sara loves to pick the “Sun” card, a card in the Rider-Waite-Smith deck that depicts a small, naked child riding a white horse as a sun rises high in the sky. The card suggests “exuberance, enthusiasm, attainment, success, and material wealth” as well as “to cleanse, purify, enhance, to improve, and to illuminate” (MacGregor and Vega 1998, 73). Seeing the “Sun” in its full range of meanings, inspires Sara, who feels the card can give her a burst of positive or healing energy.

Many students like Sara refer to the cards as “portals” or “doorways” that can be entered and explored. Each card, then, offers a scene that can become a living terrain for the reader. By entering and “walking around” in these scenes, readers hone their understanding of the card’s meaning and the power of its symbols. While this sounds active, it is really a quiet, meditative practice that attempts to give both the body and mind over to the power of the cards in an effort to learn to sense what is hidden within the cards’ symbols, as well as what is most subtle about “the suit” of the card. For example, a student may spend time in the Rider-Waite “Cups” cards, such as the Three of Cups, which shows three women dancing, celebrating, and lifting their cups to the sky. A student of the cards will know that “Cups” are associated with all the flows, with water, and with the unconscious and so may spend time in the card contemplating the “subtlety
of water,” letting this insight “wash” over them, as it were, and attempting to let the figures within the card’s imagery speak to them. When taken together in this way as a portal (as image, symbol, element), the cards are best thought of as what William Connolly (2011) refers to as “haptic images,” or images that are capable of touching, affecting, or in-forming a body.

When Sara really wants to “tap into” the energy of the cards, she removes a card from the deck and places it on a windowsill above her bathtub. As she bathes and relaxes, she meditates on the card, visualizing the sun and “allowing the light to fill her body.” In doing so, Sara feels she becomes one with the card and synced to the sun “within her own self.” As she told me about this process, I kept thinking that the cards were like a battery for Sara, something she could use to recharge herself and find the energy to create the next “project,” which for Sara could be any number of things. At the time of our interview, she was considering the process of writing a book, which seemed deeply important to her. In addition, she was interested in creating a television show, creating a cookbook, starting a blog, and teaching her own Tarot classes. Sara, it seemed, did not lack for possible projects, but rather she needed direction and insight into which path to take. By sitting with the cards, aligning herself with the cards’ symbols and letting the Sun itself recharge and relax her, Sara was in process of finding direction, indeed perhaps trying to allow her very body to become like a compass.

In addition, in “vibing” with the Sun card, Sara is building her personal repertoire with the cards and with the symbols. This personal relationship with the card can, over the course of numerous readings, become invaluable. It helps build associations with the card that can be relied on, and it expands “book” interpretations. These personal workings with the cards, if built up over time, start to become one’s own “take” on Tarot. In the case of Sara, her sensuous body work went on to become the basis of workshops and the book she did indeed write (see Chapter
5). This bodywork set the tone for what would become her brand. Indeed, for many the brand is built out of “bathtub moments.” We might even think that such “symbol” work is, at the level of the image, deeply connected to reconceptualizing a self as an image itself. As I will suggest in Chapter 5, working with symbols and learning to “speak” symbolically as a Tarot reader can become a valuable skill when trying to articulate oneself via the aesthetics of digital, social media.

As we saw in Chapter 2, the Tarot has a long history of being associated with the cultivation of magical senses. Sight, sound, touch, and taste become potential terrains of connection to occluded knowledge. As Chelsea, the Tarot reader who is trying to find her niche in the market by embracing more “flexibility,” reports, her body is a site of both experience and knowledge. “Visual flashes, seeing a smell, it’s a mixed sort of thing,” she told me in the course of our interview. Chelsea believes that there are different types of intuition but said: “I’ll know something and it will just be a snatch of something and I won’t know what it meant until later and then I’ll be like, oh… That’s what that meant.” While she believes it is possible to heighten the psychic “sense” through practice and study, Chelsea also thinks that:

psychic ability is just another sense, when we go throughout our day and our work, we see a lot of things, but we don’t LOOK. Same with taste or touch, but we don’t FEEL them—on purpose, we filter out a whole lot of stuff. We choose what we focus on. Same is true with psychic ability. And you can overdevelop one of the senses. People are tempted to overdevelop psychicness, too much in the body of this world and it can be a distraction from spiritual path.

For Chelsea these “snatches” of information, which may or may not be correct, are a part of herself rather than coming from an external or supernatural source. They are, as she told me, “completely integrated” into her day-to-day life so much so that “I don’t think about it.” She fears that if she tries to build or capitalize on these skills too much that she will tip herself off her larger “spiritual path,” which she explained to me has to do with being true to herself as well as
doing “compassionate” work in the world because the world is in great need of healing. For Chelsea, then, developing her sensitivity is a delicate balance. On the one hand, as we saw in Chapter 1 in the section titled “The Flexibility of the High Priestess,” her heightened senses, along with the Tarot itself, are guides that Chelsea uses to try to make decisions or that she tries to use as a guide to her life. At the same time, it is important to Chelsea that her psychicness be “of” her self and that it must come and go without explicit cultivation or effort on her part.58

Still, developing such a sensitivity is also often spoken of as a “gift” or a “calling,” something that people are drawn to and desire to cultivate so that they can work with it and to help others by using their capacity. Using their own intuitive and/or psychic capacities to “connect” with others is how Tarot Center students understand the purpose of their work. Sara also told me that her work as a professional Tarot reader is to create “immediate intimacy” with her clients. Such “intimacy” is not only created through Sara’s sensual approach to understanding the Tarot (as we saw in the earlier chapter, Sara “vibes” with the cards and feels that her body is a key site for understanding the magical capacity of the cards) but through “really connecting” with another person. For Sara, this means making eye contact, making a person feel comfortable, and trying to offer something “valuable” to the other person in the course of the reading. As Sara was describing her sense of intimacy, I was thinking that such intimacy, which she tries to cultivate through her body, is something that “feels” like someone is not only taking care of you but that they know who you are and what is possible for you. It is deeply personalized care that Sara is offering her clients.

58 The idea of not overemphasizing or making too much of psychic ability is also a common theme among many of the Tarot Center students, who may have adopted such a demure approach so as to minimize the social stigma associated with psychicness. In the course of this study, several individuals also told me things like: I feel like I have some psychicness, but I don’t really talk about. One individual suggested that to explore her oddly prophetic dreams would be a “choice she didn’t want to make.”
This idea that Tarot work is essentially about connecting and helping others through “empathy” and “compassion” was echoed by Shawn, the Tarot reader who has been working on his “book” on and off again for more than a year. We were able to sit down one day for lunch at a Brooklyn diner. We talked about his interest in Tarot and his participation at the Tarot Center. Shawn, a former teacher and theater director, was drawn to Tarot because he was initially looking for a hobby after he retired. Contrary to what I thought (that Shawn was a core member of the Tarot Center students and was quite popular with other readers), Shawn told me that he doesn’t consider the other readers to be “friends” (they are “friendly,” but they don’t, for instance, spend time together outside of class). Instead, Shawn has found community working through the Tarot and learning to work, as he suggests, “compassionately” with others.

As Roger Luckhurst (2007) writes in his comprehensive study of telepathy, the word empathy was coined only a few years after the word “telepathy.” If telepathy was to mean “distant touch” (tele-pathos) or connection at a distance, empathy would extend perception through feeling and emotion. Edward Titchener, who was working on the psychology of perception at Cornell, coined the term “empathy” in 1909 as a translation of the German word *Einfühlung*, which was a term itself coined by Robert Vischer, a German philosopher, to indicate a form of “aesthetic sympathy.” As Lindsay Bell (2013) writes, “Einfühlung had been used since the second half of the 18th century to explain how spectators perceive aesthetic objects. The idea was that aesthetic perception involves projection of the spectator’s kinaesthetic experience into the object of perception… Early twentieth-century phenomenologists invoked Einfühlung to address the philosophical problem of solipsism: How do I recognize that there are minds besides my own?” As this chapter turns toward affective labor and affect itself, we will look more closely at the confluence of telepathy, empathy, emotion, and affect.
Writing the Self

In the course of my fieldwork, it became apparent to me that working in such a relational mode either through an intuitive/psychic continuum or as a project of empathizing with others is a form of labor that seems to lure a self out of the confines of the self. As we saw in the first and third Chapters, Tarot reading inherently provokes the need for a reader to speak and to grow confident in their ability to narrate the cards. In order to do this, readers work to align themselves with the cards, their symbols, the querent’s own affective or emotional state, or with environmental cues that help guide the reading. Readers will come to Tarot classes week after week just to practice this skill and to experience a relatively safe place to play with such relational skills. At class, which runs three hours a week, students can read for one another without fear of being “tested” or without fear of criticism more generally. However, for many students the class time is not enough time to work with the Tarot cards fully, and many take up the practice of writing as a way to learn the histories of the cards but also to grow more comfortable with their own sense of authority.

For Sara, particularly, writing has special significance: she has always wanted to write a book. For her, a book means being established as an authority. It means having the discipline to work on a project, “even when she didn’t feel like it.” Sara would “make herself” go to a bar around the corner from her apartment and write while drinking two pints of beer and then leave the bar, which I consider an inspired compromise of bribing the self to do something it is resistant to. Writing, for Sara, also means having a public, recognizable persona, which is important to her. This desire to write works across levels in Sara’s life. Personally, it sits her down, focuses her, and helps her feel like she is “creating and making something beautiful about Tarot.” However, the writing has also given her confidence socially. One of Sara’s biggest
milestones was introducing herself to a Lleweynn Publishers rep at the 2009 Reader’s Studio. This connection helped her secure a book deal for her work. Once the book deal was in place, this really “took off, and I had to sit my butt down,” as she told me. And, despite clearly having the attention and focus to write, when Sara speaks of her success she claims “it was really Tarot… Tarot giving the ideas for the books and, oh my god, just going up to [the rep] at the Reader’s Studio, which I thought I couldn’t do at all.” For Sara, the cards helped enable and inspire her writing, and they also provided encouragement and support throughout the process.

While there are numerous books published on the topic of Tarot and despite taking weekly classes at the Tarot Center, almost all of the students I met in the course of my fieldwork were engaged in either formal or informal writing practices. The most common practice among the students was the idea of taking “one card a day” and writing about the card’s possible meanings, associations, and symbolism. Students such as Deana and Sara would journal about the cards, writing out not only the “book definitions” of the cards but also personal, intuitive associations. Such a daily writing practice was understood as being part of Tarot study but also as part of the spiritual practice of coming to trust and rely on the cards. Writing about and journaling with the cards was able to bring the cards to life for some students, occasionally in unsettling ways.

For example, after interviewing Chelsea I sat in the informal class that she was going to conduct in the food court of the Citicorp building. A new student arrived at the class, a white man in his forties, and we were paired together. We talked briefly about my dissertation project, and he told me was just starting to learn to read the cards. He asked me “so, what do you think makes these cards work?” I said I wasn’t quite sure, but that their symbols have the capacity to speak to various elements of our lives. It wasn’t a great answer, and he continued to look at me a
little skeptically, then proceeded to tell me that recently he has been “pulling a card a day” and
the other day he pulled the Death card. Understanding that the card rarely means a literal death
but rather refers to change and transformation, he was shocked and scared when, later in the day,
he witnessed a cab hit a pedestrian. “Death! Was the card an omen? What did it mean? Did the
card predict the accident? Did it warn me? Was it just a coincidence?” he went on to ask me,
suggesting that the cards seem uncanny, yet it was precisely this that had “hooked” him on the
cards. I replied that I wasn’t exactly sure what “we’re playing with,” but that exploring this at
times uncomfortable relationship of not-knowing seemed essential to the process of learning to
read the cards. “To me, it has seemed like different people come to different conclusions…” I
suggested, based on the way in which the student works with the cards. Journaling can be a very
powerful way of making sense of the otherwise inexplicable or uncanny “vibrancy” of the cards.
As we saw in Chapter 2, there are different metaphysical systems that an individual can take
recourse to in order to explain their work with the cards, but it is often through daily writing (as
well as through the experience of reading) that students come to these conclusions. However, the
role of this writing (how it happens and where it happens) is important because this is not
necessarily private, reflective writing but rather writing that immediately happens “in public” on
blogs, as part of a newsletter than can be mailed to a mailing list, or as part of an overall website
development process.

To me, one of the most interesting developments within both the spiritual marketplace
itself, as well as within the experience of becoming a Tarot reader, has been the introduction of
blogs, which come to operate as simultaneously personal and public journals. I discuss this in
more detail in the following chapter, but this work of learning of the cards happens not only in
private but in tandem with semipublic platforms, not only blogs but also social media such as
Facebook and Twitter and online radio and podcasts. In their role as journals, blog writing functions as a space for a reader to grow comfortable with writing, and they operate as public forms of a notebook, which as Foucault (1998) writes in his essay *Self Writing*:

> Notebooks, which in themselves constitute personal writing exercises, can serve as raw material for texts that one sends to others. In return, the missive, by definition a text meant for others, also provides occasion for a personal exercise. For, as Seneca points out, when one writes one reads what one writes, just as in saying something one hears oneself saying it. The letter one writes acts, through the very action of writing, upon the one who addresses it, just as it acts through reading and rereading on the one who receives it.

Such writing for Foucault is yet another form of “care of the self” and beyond giving readers a more developed sense of their thoughts on the cards and how to use them (beyond working simply as a study tool), such writing brings with it an developed sense of confidence, which can in turn begin to position the reader as an “author”-ity or someone who can then turn toward others and begin to impart their knowledge or wisdom.

As readers build their comfort through journaling and blogging, the idea of becoming a teacher of one’s own class is usually discussed. I have seen that as readers begin to grow comfortable in their skins, they grow more comfortable with the idea of performance in general and that teaching becomes a desired and logical site for developing their performative repertoire. In addition to bringing with it a social established identity as a “Tarot Reader,” teaching also offers students a chance to earn a small but often important income. In fact, teaching often takes place in informal settings so that readers can keep down the cost of offering sessions. While some students will rent a space in one of the many conference room rentals available in Manhattan, other students, like Chelsea, whom we met in Chapter 1, offer courses in (semi)public spaces like food court or office building atriums. Lisa, who for many years put off teaching her own courses for a number of reasons, has recently started holding classes in the
basement of an Italian restaurant, where anywhere from three to ten women arrive in the evening to discuss and read Tarot. Informal Tarot classes may charge anywhere from nothing to twenty dollars a session.

Teaching classes can bring with it both financial gains and logistical headaches. For example, once a reader has established themselves as an informal teacher, new opportunities to for further teaching, such as teaching a workshop at the Readers’ Studio may be offered. These workshops are not only lucrative (participants pay forty-five dollars for a two-hour session, and a typical workshop can host anywhere between ten and thirty participants), but they are invaluable networking opportunities for the readers. A reader who establishes him- or herself at the Readers’ Studio will, in turn, make connections to new clients and to even more opportunities—such as the offer to write for a book collection, to publish one’s own book, or to develop even more teaching opportunities at the next “level.” Levels here refer to client’s pocketbooks and their ability and willingness to pay for services.

However, charging money for one’s services is a complex matter for Tarot readers. On the one hand, readers are interested in earning money; many of them could use the extra income. On the other hand, money is something that they have to feel out for themselves and come to feel that they are “worth.” Setting your fee can be directly related to feelings of worthiness and deserving. As such, this can be a very psychologically inflected conversation for readers. That said, it’s also a conversation that has much social support—workshops, conversations. Learning to use money to articulate one’s authority is an ongoing conversation. During downtime at the Readers’ Studio, Bruce (whom we met in Chapter 3 and is studying to become a Spiritualist minister) talked with another Tarot reader, Molly, and with about his hesitance to charge money for his Tarot readings. Taking money, Bruce, just didn’t feel right to him, but given that he was
regularly reading the cards, as well as starting to work as a medium in Manhattan, Molly encouraged him to “set a fee” because it was important to balance the energy that Bruce was putting into work. For readers like Bruce, taking money is a conflicted interaction. While he could use the extra income and would like to be recognized for his skills, money feels like it obfuscates the generosity the Bruce feels he brings to the work. However, Molly was quick to remind him that he can’t keep endlessly giving of himself. Both Bruce and Molly were in agreement that Bruce studies, practices, and invests his own time and energy into his work and that Bruce cares for his querents and that, as such, it would only be fair that querents show their appreciation through some form of transaction. As Freida Hilts (2009) found in her dissertation, which explored the concept of money among Reiki practitioners, money was a complex, symbolic, and emotionally charged social object—particularly as it entered in the notion of a transaction for Reiki services. For many of these practitioners, much like Tarot students, although money was actively distinguished from “wealth” and being “being rich,” it occupied a place of central concern. Practitioners wondered if money would “corrupt” a transaction, and they asked how precisely their time and energy be valued. Almost all Tarot Center students agreed that getting comfortable with charging and receiving money was in some way an essential to becoming a proper “reader,” and several readers (myself included) did Tarot readings to figure out our “relationship to money.” As Cathy, a young Asian woman in her twenties, told me during one such reading at the Readers’ Studio, “money is just a thing. In and of itself it can’t scare you… but it’s scaring you…” Considering my graduate school debt as she talked through the reading, I realized that I was indeed “scared” or at least worried about the role of money in my life. While Cathy’s Tarot reading did not alleviate this worry, I could hear that what she was saying was that a different, potentially more “productive” relationship to money was being
offered through the cards. Like the cards themselves, money could be seen as a “thing” to manipulate, speculate through, and attempt to affect.

One common solution to the “problem” of money, as Hilts also found, was that practitioners identified money identified with God or with energy itself (See also Aldred 2002 and Lau 2000 on the relationship between money and “spiritual energy). When money is conceptualized as “energy” or as a divine spirit, it is then possible, as Rose told me in a side conversation at her home, for money to become simply a way of exchanging one “energy” for another. For Rose, money actually becomes an objective object that must be exchanged in order for her work to continue. While it would be impossible to measure the labor of self-care, self-investment, and affective labor that Tarot readers conduct and truly to “value” that work, she is aware of the time it takes her to run the Tarot Center. This is time spent transcribing Warren’s notes, updating the school’s website, managing the online store the school runs, offering classes, and writing books. Warren and Rose feel that they charge a reasonable rate of thirty dollars for a class session, which runs three hours (indeed, this is really only ten dollars an hour split between the two of them). They feel, however, if they raise the rate this will put pressure on their clientele, even if they also feel they would like to be more generously compensated for their efforts. Warren once told me that a “good” Tarot reader, keeping busy, might draw in about forty thousand dollars a year.

“Doing Women’s Work”

Throughout the course of my fieldwork, it was often remarked by participants that reading Tarot is a form of “women’s work.” This was told to me by both straight and gay individuals and it was told to me not as a way of denigrating the work but of identifying the very nature of the work. Tarot is for those who read the cards not only a form of self-care and a
practice of investing in the self but a way of being of service to other people and offering them a mode of intimacy, care, and guidance. Identifying this work as “women’s work” is meant to point not only to the ways in which such service has historically been gendered, but it also means to point to the very nature of the work as affective labor, or a form of overlooked, often naturalized labor of care and connection.

When I suggest that the labor of the Tarot reader is affective labor, I am drawing on multiple genealogies of affective labor as well as on theories of affect itself. As Leopoldina Fortunati (2007) suggests, the concept of affective labor has always “involved women directly,” as it links us with the long history of cutting domestic or “reproductive” labor from the conception of “real,” “material,” or “profitable” labor—that is, labor that can produce material wealth. This reproductive work has often been understood as “care work,” which cuts across the realms of physically caring for other bodies and environments as well as caring for emotions and psychological states of being. Michael Hardt (2004) actually uses the words “kin work” and “maternal labor” to trace the history of “affective labor” to the home and to women. Hardt writes, “I use the term affective labor as a way to build on two rather disparate streams of research” (2007, xi). These two streams are the work that was done by feminists in the 1970s and 1980s that looked to the gendered division of labor and placed emphasis on the nature of unwaged, domestic labor as formation of gendered, racialized, and classed oppression. Writers such as Selma James (1972), Mariarosa Dalla Costa (1972), Silvia Federici (1974), and Leopoldina Fortunati (1981) would be instrumental in bringing about a “wages for housework” campaign and would undertake a feminist revision of Marx through an analysis of the home and its domestic and reproductive labor.
In 1974, Federici would write, “It is important to recognise that when we speak of housework we are not speaking of a job as other jobs, but we are speaking of the most pervasive manipulation, the most subtle and mystified violence that capitalism has ever perpetrated against any section of the working class.” Her manifesto “Wages for Housework” drew attention to the radical proposition that domestic work and its attendant forms of care were by no means “natural” and could therefore be rejected—not only as a way to demand a wage or access to a contract but to reconfigure the subjectifying experience of gender. Federici (1974) writes:

Some women say: how is wages for housework going to change the attitudes of our husbands towards us? Won't our husbands still expect the same duties as before and even more than before once we are paid for them? But these women do not see that they can expect so much from us precisely because we are not paid for our work, because they assume that it is “a woman's thing” which does not cost us much effort. Men are able to accept our services and take pleasure in them because they presume that housework is easy for us, that we enjoy it because we do it for their love. They actually expect us to be grateful because by marrying us or living with us they have given us the opportunity to express ourselves as women (i.e. to serve them), “You are lucky you have found a man like me.” Only when men see our work as work—our love as work—and most important our determination to refuse both, will they change their attitude towards us.

While feminist Marxist analysis embraced a radical vision of social reorganization, theorists like Michael Hardt would lift the concept of “care work” from this literature and reiterate it as the degendered notion of “service with a smile,” recasting the fully embodied work of reproduction, care, and domestic labor within the notion of “immaterial labor.” As Hardt (1999) writes

To one degree or another this affective labor plays a certain role throughout the service industries, from fast food servers to providers of financial services, embedded in the moments of human interaction and communication. This labor is immaterial [emphasis added] even if it is corporeal and affective, in the sense that its products are intangible: a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion—even a sense of connectedness or community. Categories such as in-person services or services of proximity are often used to identify this kind of labor, but what is essential to it, its “in-person” aspect, is really the creation and manipulation of affects. (xx)
In his essay “Affective Labor” (1999) Hardt suggests that affective labor, which had been related to kin work and care work, now needed to be resituated in a larger frame of a shifting political economy, which was recasting immaterial labor as a “pinnacle in the hierarchy of forms of labor” (90). Here, Hardt is pointing toward Italian theorists such Maurizio Lazzarato, Antonio Negri, and Paolo Virno and their development of the notion of “immaterial labor” as an extension of the “social factory”—a concept that aims to point toward the simultaneous degeneration of the manufacturing factory walls and the loss of manufacturing jobs alongside the advance of capital’s search for new forms of value and valorization. Lazzarato (1996) writes the activity that produces the “cultural content” of the commodity, immaterial labor involves a series of activities that are not normally recognized as “work”—in other words, the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion. Once the privileged domain of the bourgeoisie and its children, these activities have since the end of the 1970s become the domain of what we have come to define as “mass intellectuality.”… What has happened is that a new “mass intellectuality” has come into being, created out of a combination of the demands of capitalist production and the forms of “self-valorization” that the struggle against work has produced. The old dichotomy between “mental and manual labor,” or between “material labor and immaterial labor,” risks failing to grasp the new nature of productive activity, which takes this separation on board and transforms it. The split between conception and execution, between labor and creativity, between author and audience, is simultaneously transcended within the “labor process” and re-imposed as political command within the “process of valorization.”

As Fordist relations of productions gave way to what Harvey (1990) called a “flexible regime of accumulation” characterized by flexibility, hyperexploitation, and worker mobility, easy distinctions between work, leisure, and “life” itself became harder to parse and within a framework of immaterial labor and cognitive capitalism. As Hardt (2004) writes, “In effect, as industries are transformed, the division between manufacturing and services is becoming blurred. Just as through the process of modernization all production became industrialized, so too through the process of postmodernization all production tends toward the production of services, toward becoming informationalized.” Within this framework of immaterial labor and informatics
capitalism, affective labor then would be relegated to a “type” of labor, albeit a form of labor that is identified as “ontological.” Hardt (2004) writes, “What affective labor produces are social networks, forms of community, biopower.” Such biopower, for Hardt, while complicit in capital’s subsumption of life, nonetheless remains a potential site of autonomy and as even “liberation” (100).

Affect Itself

Through theories of affective and immaterial labor, academic attention has been drawn toward the nature of “affect itself” or have taken what Clough (2007) has called an “affective turn.” While, as we saw, affective labor had been linked with “biopower” or an ontological capacity and the formation of life, theorists such as Brian Massumi articulate a theory of affect that draws not from a political economy per se but from philosophical traditions reaching back through Deleuze and Guattari, Henri Bergson, and Spinoza. For Massumi, affect itself is “primary, non-conscious, asubjective or presubjective, asignifying, unqualified and intensive” (2002, 23). This primary affect is distinct from individual subjectivity and cannot be directly traced back to individual, human emotions. As Ruth Leys writes, “affect relates to all those processes that are separate from meaning, belief, or cognition and that occur at the level of autonomic, preconscious bodily reactions, responses, and resonances.” As Steven Shaviro (2010) writes, “emotion is affect captured by a subject, or tamed and reduced to the extent that it becomes commensurate with that subject.” While subjects may have or possess their own emotions, they are also transversed by affect, which as Melissa Gregg (2009) writes, “is found in all those intensities that pass body-to-body (human, non-human, body part, and otherwise).” This Massumian strand of affect theory links affect to a Spinozan notion of the “capacity to act and act upon.” However, as Clough (2010) writes,
Affect is not only theorized in terms of the human body. Affect is also theorized in relation to the technologies that are allowing us both to “see” affect and to produce affective bodily capacities beyond the body’s organic-physiological constraints. The technoscientific experimentation with affect not only traverses the opposition of the organic and the nonorganic; it also inserts the technical into felt vitality, the felt aliveness given in the pre-individual bodily capacities to act, to engage, to connect—to affect and be affected.

Affective labor and even affect itself are not quite “immaterial.” Indeed, theorists such as Clough situate affect at all levels of matter “such that the distinction between organic and non-organic matter is dissolved” (2007, 61). As Clough et al (2007) write, “the turn to affect is about opening the human body to its indeterminacy, for example the indeterminacy of autonomic responses… Affect is to be understood in terms of potentiality, indeterminate emergence and creative mutation—that is to say, in terms of the ontologically real virtual remainder that enfolds and unfolds space-times implicated in matter.”

Working through theories of affect, then, has led to a different notion of what a body is or can do. Lisa Blackman (2012) has suggested the “body is not a thing to retreat to, a material basis to explain how social processes take hold. The body has been extended to include species bodies, psychic bodies, machinic bodies, vitalist bodies and other-worldly bodies.” Drawing from Terranova and Parisi’s work Clough (2003) describes how the body-in-affect deviates from bounded conceptions of the body that developed via the rise of industrial capitalism and its ensuing paradigm of “discipline” (Foucault). As Clough writes:

In a disciplinary society, Luciana Parisi and Tiziana Terranova suggest, the organism is made “the ultimate definition of what the body is.” The body “becomes abstracted and organized so that it can be trained: trained to reproduction with a thermodynamic cycle of accumulation and expenditure; and trained to work” (Parisi and Terranova, 2000: 3). In control society, however, the solution to the problem of entropic energy is no longer provided in the labouring masculine body and in the female body, subordinated to the reproduction of labour and the restoration of equilibrium. In control societies, there is a move from the thermodynamic contrasting of energy and entropic heat-death in equilibrium-seeking closed systems, such as the organism. There is a move to understand
bodies, where the origin of life is defined as “turbulent rather than derived from entropic collapse” (Parisi and Terranova 2000: 5).

Seeking to theorize the body via its transformations to what Deleuze called a “Control Society” has led to understanding a body as “virtual” or caught in an “interminable readiness for individuation and activation against an affective background that has become our sociality, as fear, insecurity, and hope have done” (Clough 2007). Both the body itself at an organic level and the future are theorized as open, indeterminate, and being what Marc Hansen (2004) writes as “bootstrapped” into becoming. Clough (2007) writes:

> Here the future no longer is believed to be a linear extension of the past; the accurate prediction of probabilities through statistics is not imagined to provide wisdom. Instead, future probabilities are deployed to assure or agitate affectively in the present, letting power work on memory, tackling micro-temporalities, preempting the future. Preemption, that is, is the unceasing inviting of probabilities, but not to predict the future. Rather, probabilities are drawn immediately into the present and ongoing modulation of life capacities or affect in the circulation of populations through an informational milieu.

Taking this brief tour through affective labor, immaterial labor, and affect itself helps us return to the Tarot, to reconsider not only how and why their labor blurs the categories of intuitive, psychic, and/or therapeutic but how this work comes to be valorized in the shifting of Fordism into post-Fordism and into the very networks of communicative capitalism. Indeed, as the search for new terrains of value proceeds directly into the modulation of life capacities, it would seem that the dynamics of such a political economy are themselves being drawn into the very issues that the notion of psychicness has long presented—the problem of the “individual,” the porousness of bodies, the challenge of parsing information from “noise” or the overwhelming vibrancy of environments, and the very notion of “contagious communication” (Blackman 2012, Brennan 2004).

As Lisa Blackman’s work has shown, the psychic body has long troubled the notion of a bounded, individual self. Looking to Blackman’s work we see that throughout the nineteenth and
early twentieth centuries the question of “mental touch” or communication at a distance was investigated by philosophers and scholars such as Henri Bergson, William James, and Gabriel Tarde. While these theorists proposed theories of human sociality and human subjective life that were not “self” contained, the question of the boundaries of the individual nonetheless guided inquiry into what Blackman has labeled the “problem of the one and the many” (2012, 30; Blackman 2008). As Blackman suggests, through the establishment of the psychological sciences, questions of contagious communication (telepathy, hypnotic suggestion, contagion) were bracketed as abnormal deviations from model of private personhood—a model of personhood that would come to be founded on what Blackman identifies as “will” and “inhibition” (33). For a good amount of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the issue of how to control these excess forces of communication would guide inquiry into the boundaries of the individual. As Blackman writes, “Mesmerism, hypnotism, trance, and studies of psychic phenomena, such as telepathy, telasthesia, telekensis, rapping, séances and mediumistic practices, were all vehicles for exploring what were taken to be apparent breaches of bodily and mental functions” (2012, 34). Furthermore, “distinctions between the inner and the outer, the self and other, the private and the public, the human and the ethereal were sites of perplexity and undecideability.”

However, in this dissertation, we see that the firm boundaries between psychic ability, personal or subjective intuition, and therapeutic talk are slipping and have been deeply blurred. In this particular and emerging affective economy of communicative capitalism, what once was a scientific and philosophical project tangled in the emergent media of its time has morphed into a project of cultivating the “intuition” such that “being psychic” has shifted away from the notion of being in possession of a supposed esoteric skill or even a skill that could be observed,
measured, and tested. Indeed, for many Tarot readers the “validity” or proof of existence of psychic phenomena is not really the point of their work. Rather, what determines success here is the ability to fold Tarot and its ensuing conversations and affective connections to “work”—or to make them productive in a larger project of well-being. While the very process and project of learning to trust and work with “extra information” is a form of affective self-management—the cultivation of a form of affective normativity—this particular political economy also valorizes contested knowledge and encourages a rather interesting paradox, which the production not only of a feminized subject, but a porous one.

On the one hand, precarity has brought with it an increase in the privatization of risk and forced a reliance on the individual’s capacity not only to engage and manage risk but to invest in that capacity and cultivate one’s own reserve of human capital. On the other, communicative capitalism seeks to make the individual and indeed the generativity of life itself into new terrains of value, opening the body to affect and to the market. It is in this double-movement of privatization and exploded sociality that we find the Tarot Center students, oscillating between private selves learning to trust one’s “inner voice” precisely as that inner voice guides them to become ever more open and receptive and willing to make their lives “productive” by finding ways of applying, translating and surviving through Tarot. This is a form of entanglement not just of the spiritual into daily or ordinary life but of body, affect, energy, and media—a spiritual assemblage fueled by card flips, symbols, elements, and bathtub moments.

While we can look to the work that readers do to “care for themselves” as well as the work they do compassionately and intimately with others as forms of affective labor, shifts in political economy towards communicative and infomatic capitalism have also created new spaces for work, or new networks for the “flow” of affect (Castells 2000). As Minh-Ha T. Pham...
(2013) shows in her work on fashion blogger, Susie Bubble, the feminization of labor not only refers to the increasing service-like nature of work, but to a type of neoliberal subject—a feminized, flexible, and creative worker who is capable of translating their life to the digital realm. Such a model laborer, Pham suggests, is guided by a new emerging model or logic of success where, as Pham writes quoting social media consultant Greg Vaynerchuk, “Success will come through ‘outcaring everyone’” (252). And, as Pham writes, “Ironically, though success in the post millennium may be increasingly self-made it is also bound ever more to market-recognition” (262). It is precisely this double shift toward increasing individualism and market recognition that I am suggesting Tarot card readers find themselves in, whether they desire to “professionalize” or not. There is an entrepreneurial pressure, itself a series of affects, that presents itself as an opportunity to make the most of one’s self and one’s work. In the next chapter, I turn to that pressure and its logics, as well as its underlying metaphysics to suggest that both entrepreneurialism and financialized capital have brought with them their own sense of enchantment—an enchantment that is at once privatizing and reliant on notions of developing one’s human capital, yet at the same time tangled in the sense that “abundance” exists, if only one can make a leap into the market or an adaptation to the digital.
Chapter Five
Enchanting the Entrepreneur

...Those of us who live mainly on the material plane may be experiencing more concern about how to meet payments, survive, or just maintain a current lifestyle, [and] this month may be a good time to consider alternative or supplemental support. The idea is to take some time to be still, seek your inner compass or guide, think in a positive manner, and when you are ready, you will attract the people, circumstances, and resources to guide you on your path. THIS IS “the law of attraction.” All IS Well.
—From Laura’s e-mail newsletter announcing her upcoming workshop (2009)

Today, in the regime of neoliberal capitalism, we see ourselves as subjects precisely to the extent that we are autonomous economic units.
—Steven Shaviro, Post-Cinematic Affect

A queen is very good at self-management.
—Gina Devee, Divine Living

For the Tarot readers that I have met through my fieldwork, their spiritual projects are not only personal and subjective projects but are about, as Chelsea has said, “getting real” or, as Sara has suggested, “getting things done.” Elsewhere (Gregory 2011), I have referred to this project of “getting real” as form of “wise-womanhood” for a society caught in the throes of economic restructuring. In Chapter 3, I sought to illustrate how the Tarot operates as a technology of subjectivation, which enables an individual to become a reader—or one who is able to “tell the truth.” Here, however, I look to the larger culture of wellness gurus and marketing logics that inform and pressure the affective labor of reading the cards. Tarot readers turn toward these gurus, as well as online marketing logics, for inspiration and for guidance as they work. In this way, digital media ecology becomes a shadow companion to individuals learning and working with Tarot, encouraging them to work online and eventually to develop that online presence into a “brand.”
In this chapter, I take the “Marketing Goddess” as a case study for understanding the broad outline of marketing rhetoric within the Tarot community and then look to the more well-known “sub-Oprah” world of online “multi-passionate entrepreneurs,” such as Marie Forleo, Gabby Bernstein, Denise Duffield, and Danielle LaPorte to explore what I have dubbed the “manifestation manifesto.” This manifesto, which draws from a much older lineage of what Catherine Albanese (2007) has called American “metaphysical religion” (encompassing the field of “New Thought”) is examined in light of the neoliberal project of “enterprise” and its demands for “self-confident” (Fehrer 2007) subjects, market-based participation, and the embrace of risk.

Here, the metaphysics of “abundance” are analyzed and placed in conversation with the logic of the financialized derivative and the abundance that is the digital itself. I suggest that as one builds a brand, he or she comes to embrace the digital itself as a vibrant “object,” not unlike Tarot cards, which function as a recombinatory, assembling materiality. Personal brands are formed out of negotiating and experimenting with digital artifacts, platforms, and content production. Negotiating and experimenting in the digital through the building of an online brand allows individuals to accept what I have been calling “precarity’s charge,” which is to merge affect and emotion with behavior simultaneously as a means of crafting “a life” that can negotiate and, indeed, traffic in the uncertainty (and opportunity) of financialized capital. Accepting precarity’s charge undergirds the “feminist” entrepreneurial project. Such a project not only relies upon and valorizes affective labor but can be read as a biopolitical project that maps notions of “living” to one’s ability generate value in a world of fictitious capital.

**Manifesting with the Knight of Cups**

I’ve arrived at the Sheraton in Queens as part of the annual Readers’ Studio, a yearly conference organized by the Tarot Center. Over two hundred people will come for four days of
Tarot practice, workshops, and socializing. During the evening, specialty Tarot workshops are held, which participants pay an additional thirty-five dollars to attend. This evening, I’ve volunteered to collect money for Tessa’s workshop so that I can attend for free. Tessa, a professional reader from Pennsylvania, has advertised that her workshop will show us how to use Tarot for “conjuring and manifestation.” Intrigued by the possibility of using Tarot in magical ways, I arrive a little early to try to get to know Tessa. Unfortunately, she is flustered, running late, and doesn’t have time to speak with me. I take a seat at the round conference table and wait for the group to arrive, watching as Tessa removes Tarot cards, magazines, glitter, glue, and scissors from her bag. As the others begin to arrive, all of us women, Tessa seems nervous and unsure of what we’re about to do. “Take out your Tarot decks,” she says and tells us we’ll do a reading to find out what it is we’d like to “manifest.” The woman next to me grumbles, “why do I need a reading to tell me what I already know?” I don’t have an answer, but we do shuffle our cards and try to visualize “something we would like to do or have happen” in our lives. I pull the Six of Pentacles, with an image of man in robes offering coins to two mendicants. “Oh, I guess I could manifest some money,” I say, laughing. Waiting to Tessa’s instructions, I am wondering if it’s that simple: pull the card, want the money, get the money? What are we doing here? I am starting to feel the pull of the “etic” researcher (Morris 1999) who wants deeply to be on the other side of this social space. This pull, back to the world where the other’s beliefs can be held at a distance, is strong, and as Tessa goes on I try to stay open to what is happening.

Tessa asks us if we’re familiar with the movie *The Secret*. She’s holding the Knight of Cups in her hand, a card that suggests emotion and creativity but also romance and the possibility of travel. Some of us nod our heads, “yes, we know it.” “Well,” Tessa explains, I’m using the Knight of Cups to put *The Secret* to work for me.” She goes on to explain the general
premise of the movie, which tries to link Norman Vincent Peale’s power of positive thinking to contemporary quantum theory. “You see, how you think affects what happens in your life,” says Tessa. Some women are nodding their heads in agreement, and I start to feel uncomfortable.

“You see, I want my boyfriend to return to me,” she says, holding up another card, the Three of Cups, an image of three maidens dancing. “I want to get back together, so I’m using these cards to visualize that happening.” The woman sitting next to me is incredulous: “you what?” “I use the cards to visualize it, because if you can visualize it, it will come to you.” As Tessa, who is perhaps in her forties or early fifties, continues to explain this single point numerous times, much to the irritation of the woman sitting next to me, I feel a deep sadness. The magic she has promised is not flowing; rather, her message is on a loop. She seems caught in the notion that her intention will result in manifestation.

When the woman sitting next to me asks her about “conjuring,” Tessa continues apace, reaching for her magazine, glue, and glitter. “Well, sometimes we need some inspiration,” and she begins to hand out the magazines. It becomes clear we are to use them to find specific images that would help us conjure our vision. Cutting various images from the magazine, we are to create a “vision board” around the Tarot cards we had chosen earlier. I start to do this, but the magazine images are both too flat and too shiny, too real and too idealized. Yet advertisements are some of the most affecting and manipulative images in our society. I look around the table, and the women are laughing, cutting out pictures of “hunks” and “beauties,” creating vision boards of true fantasy. This ritual has become play, and the “real enchantment” that I came to see has failed, falling sadly into a willful and wistful insistence that things can be enchanted if we try hard enough. Another form of energy had moved around the table. The women were laughing,
cracking up even, awash in the pleasure of, for a moment, imagining that they could have whatever they wanted.

**The Secret**

The “secret” that Tessa is referring to is a best-selling DVD and accompanying book, both entitled *The Secret*. The DVD was released by Rhonda Byrnes, an Australian business woman in 2006. That same year, Oprah featured Byrnes on her show, ensuring the sales of the both products. The “secret” that Byrnes intends to reveal to her audience is known as “the law of attraction,” which Byrnes claims she traces to 3500 BC and can be defined by the simple principle that “like attracts like.” Byrnes (2006) claims this is “the most powerful law in the universe” and that “what we do is we attract into our lives the things we want, and that is based on what we’re thinking and feeling.” According to *The Secret* and its interpretation of the Law of Attraction, individuals create the material circumstances of their lives through the conscious (or often unconscious) choices they make. Choice, suggests Byrnes, is fueled by “thought,” and “thoughts” are “magnetic,” attracting the very objects they conceptualize or envision. While meditation and focusing the mind are spoken of within *The Secret’s* methodology, vision plays a key role in process of attracting material objects toward thought (and hence toward an individual) as it is the privileged mode of mental empowerment. While “The Secret” relies heavily on an extreme version of a model of rational choice, by which “choice” becomes an arbiter of human agency, it also deploys the capacity for “vision” in a manner that Jonathan Crary (1990) would see as a mode of lining up the perceptions of the body with the needs of machines and economies of perception. In the world of *The Secret*, to envision is an attempt to call into being material, technical, and economic assemblages.
In the world of the Tarot Center, acceptance of *The Secret* seems to play out across generational lines, with new students coming to class with a knowledge of the products but mingling uncomfortably with Warren’s sense of Tarot as a rigorous site of magical and metaphysical study. Warren has not come out and said this, but my guess is he would think the secret of *The Secret* is too easy and skirts the time and energy that a “real” ceremonial magician would need to commit in order to practice “conjuring,” which is what the Law of Attracting is ultimately selling under the veneer of secular “choice.” And, while Tarot work is heavily visual, relying on and working with and through symbols, Byrnes’ work comes across as a cheap gimmick or an open joke, even if elements of *The Secret*’s methods such as visioning, “calling in” energy, or believing that the individual (specifically via “the will”) is a powerful source of agency in the world, overlap with Tarot practice.\(^{59}\) Where *The Secret* and Tarot practice diverge has to do with *The Secret*’s perfect mapping of the individual’s desires onto the world. While Tarot could be used as banally, as Warren and Rose teach students, working with the cards is meant to be a process and practice of engagement with obscured or occulted elements and energies of the world and cosmos. While tapping into those elements and energies may enable a certain type of empowerment or agency, what is privileged—by Warren at least—is the engagement with a mysterious cosmic ecology rather than material outcomes.

However, as I suggested in Chapter 1, students who arrive at the Tarot Center want more than Tarot instruction and the continual titillation that they are engaging with mystery. Even

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\(^{59}\) What *The Secret* is selling at some level is a testament to the power of marketing. As Mikki McGee (2007) writes, “Many commentators have attributed Byrne’s success to viral marketing savvy: She took the novel approach of launching her message as a film that went direct to DVD and online download before going into print. Clever art direction added to the film’s appeal: Parchment backdrops and a red wax seal evoke *The Da Vinci Code*’s secrecy. Certainly Byrne’s know-how as a former television producer has served her well. With video clips at the ready and a cast of more than a dozen self-help gurus available for interview, *The Secret* has been a talk show producer’s dream. Television coverage, from The Oprah Winfrey Show to Larry King Live to Nightline and 20/20, continues apace.”
beyond desiring legitimacy and professionalization (such as the certification that the Tarot Center confers), the students are looking for, as Chelsea and others suggest, a way to “get real.” What “getting real” means may differ from student to student (perhaps some want to start teaching classes, some may want to write a book, others may want to transition from their nine-to-five jobs to a sustainable esoteric business), but what they share in common is a desire for agency and to believe that their efforts will be matched with successful outcomes. It is this desire that butts heads with Warren’s approach to learning Tarot, which repeatedly insists that individuals must study and learn and open themselves to a larger, more powerful universe with its own intentions.

In a spirit of merging these two approaches (as well as in an effort to build “the brand” of the Tarot Center) Warren and Rose became involved with the Marketing Goddess, a woman with connections to the larger pagan community in New York City and who, over the last five years, has built a supposedly “six-figure” business by selling her marketing advice to those seeking a “purpose-driven life.” Initially, the Marketing Goddess helped Warren and Rose reconceptualize their website layout and helped them write “content” for the site, and through her work with the Tarot Center she was eventually invited to host a workshop at the following year’s Readers’ Studio. The workshop was intended to help Tarot readers begin to develop their own

I was, at one point, asked to write a reflection of working with Warren and Rose as a testimonial for the site, which I did, writing the following “testimonial”:

A year ago, I came to the Tarot Center for two reasons: I wanted to learn tarot and I wanted to write a dissertation about tarot card readers. These two pursuits have tangled themselves into a jumble of questions and a jumble of interests that the Reader’s Studio helped me to sort through. In fact, the Readers’ Studio gave me a rare gift: a moment of silence. My brain moves fast, sometimes too fast. I tend to be an introverted thinker/world-watcher and it’s a bit beyond my control to see connections, possibilities, and meanings as quickly as they happen and as fleeting as they go. However, the “Wall of Silence” exercise quieted my mind and then opened it to a new way of seeing. I realized at the Readers’ Studio that I was in the midst of a loving, living, dynamic community and, if I could slow down my mind, not only would the answers to my questions emerge, but I might also find the right questions to ask.

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60 I was, at one point, asked to write a reflection of working with Warren and Rose as a testimonial for the site, which I did, writing the following “testimonial”:
sustainable business and to give the readers marketing tips and advice that would enable them to begin to conceptualize the nature of their work and their business model. Below is a writeup of my field notes from the Readers’ Studio, where I was volunteering with the Tarot Center and had been assigned to Elizabeth’s workshop.

**The Marketing Goddess: Readers’ Studio Workshop**

Tonight, at the Readers’ Studio, I have agreed to collect the money (thirty dollars per student for a two-hour workshop) for Elizabeth Purvis. Elizabeth has been working with Warren and Rose to help them build their Internet presence and market the Tarot Center. She has “written copy” for their website and has helped them reorganize information on their site, with some success. Tonight, she is offering a session on cultivating an audience and the goal of the session is to help spiritual entrepreneurs find their clients and start “earning their worth.” As I

Prior to the Readers’ Studio, I conceived of the dissertation as a labor study. More specifically, I was thinking of tarot card readers as a form of care work in the city that most people were not aware of or considered to be part of “the new age,” something outside the mainstream. I wanted (and in part still do want) the dissertation to illustrate how tarot card reading had moved beyond the limits of “the new age movement” and had become part of the contemporary ensemble of therapy practices. And, prior to the Readers’ Studio, I wanted to know how and why readers become “professional” tarot card readers. But Warren said something at the Readers’ Studio as he was introducing the interviews on stage; he said something to the effect of “I could ask you the same, boring question we all hear: how did you get into Tarot?” and that made me realize that I was sitting in a room full of people who are interested in thinking about “how they know what they know” and are actively creating a world for themselves, both personally and socially. I started to be fascinated by how this world comes together, what makes it tick, how people think/talk about money, identity, freedom, meaning, and “right livelihood.” These realizations, coupled with the Wall of Silence exercise, gave me pause and made me realize that I really had to go back and think through the questions I want to ask and the methods I want to use to ask them. There really is no reason “to ask boring questions.” The Readers’ Studio also made see that I could go deeply into and take seriously this school project (no small accomplishment) because it really is about finding answers to questions that I work through personally, not just sociologically. In Tarot, there is mirroring of the great existential conundrum: how do we know what we know? How do we learn to trust what we think we know and what type of life should that knowing lead to?
settle in to the round conference table in the back of the ballroom, Elizabeth arrives seeming nervous. (Rose later told me that she has “stress issues” and was ill the evening before the workshop, feeling anxious. I never learned quite what the source of her stress was. When I contacted Elizabeth for a follow-up interview she declined my offer “not because she doesn’t love my project” but because she was too busy and couldn’t spare the time.) At the time of the Readers’ Studio Elizabeth hadn’t yet fully established herself online as the Marketing Goddess or begun what she now calls the Goddess Business School.61 The premise of her business is to help “spiritual entrepreneurs make the money they DESERVE” and in the e-mails that her organization sends almost daily she promises to help turn your spiritual business into a six-figure business. Text on her website currently reads:

Are you ready to make the money you deserve—six figures or more—so you can be of the highest service to the greatest number of people, create your life exactly as you wish to live it, and become the divine feminine leader you’re destined to be?

That night at the Readers’ Studio, we don’t actually work with the Tarot. Rather we talk and write and “vision.” “Who do you really want to work with?” “Who are you called to?” The secret to Elizabeth’s marketing strategy is to get as “clear” or specific as possible about the ways in which women imagine themselves working, and with whom. Perhaps you are “called” to work with female divorcees or pregnant women in their late 30s? According to Elizabeth’s promotional materials, “the first step is learning how to position, price and package your services so you’re making great money for your gifts… no matter what stage of business you are in.” This approach to establishing a market encourages women to mine their own experiences in order to cultivate expertise and, in short, who you are (your race, class, sex, gender, education, life experiences) can become the grounds for the marketing of your work. It can establish your connection to a client base, who may even be people who don’t realize they need your services

61 http://marketinggoddess.com/
yet. “Establish a connection…” to those clients, even if they have not sought out your services. Elizabeth’s general advice can be summarized as: You are your work. You need to get clear on your vision. You are the engine of the business. You are in control.

And, while I am sitting there listening to her talk, it all sounds so empowering. I wonder about Elizabeth’s bigger business model. Surely, once you get the message to figure out your clients, you could move on and embrace this work on your own? Yet, with each of Elizabeth’s tips comes with a little teaser for “how much more you could learn,” if there was only more “time.” Time (and secrets to be revealed by time) are of the essence of value here. And, it seems there is actually always more time, but it comes with spending more money to access it. For anyone truly “serious” about getting into the marketing game, we’re learning in this workshop, it’s about taking more classes with the Marketing Goddess. And, “we only have two hours left, but if only there were more time” we might learn about how to streamline that audience.

Streamlining is essential here, apparently. We’d learn how to get our selves “out there” on their Internet and stop “undervaluing our worth.” Streamlined audiences apparently require streamlined content. It’s all about getting clear and also having a very streamlined newsletter.

**What Is Marketing?**

According to the American Marketing Association, “marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.” The history of marketing can be traced to the emergence of print technologies and is entangled in the very development of communicative technologies and their attendant practices. In general, marketing aims to garner or direct attention to products, services, to the media itself. Marketing has traditionally been linked with the development of “advertising,” but as media has evolved and distributed itself
throughout daily life, marketing principles have also adapted. Webster (2005) identifies four eras of marketing evolution:

- **Era One: Founding the Field 1900–1920**
- **Era Two: Formalizing the Field: 1920–1950**
- **Era Four: The Shift Intensifies—Fragmentation of the Mainstream 1980–Present**

Within the fourth era, Webster goes on to delineate a number of “environmental” forces that have reshaped the “function” of marketing. Webster’s forces broadly trace the outline of the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism:

- Evolution from bureaucratic to more flexible organizational forms
- Rapid diffusion of computer and telecommunications technology, including the Internet
- Dominance of large, low-cost retailers in most product categories
- The stock-market boom of the 1990s, followed by a dramatic decrease in stock prices
- Continued emphasis on quarterly earnings per share as a measure of business performance and company value
- Globalization and increased competitive pressures
- Outsourcing of many parts of value-creation and value-delivery processes

The shift in political economy, along with the incredible expansion of digital media, has brought marketing principles and practices much closer to daily life. This closeness is felt not only through the presence of the Internet with its endless advertisements (such as Google’s Gmail ads, which are targeted toward individuals based on the words those individuals have typed in their e-mails) but through the very realization that almost all online activity is now entangled in multiple third-party interests persistently mining that data in order to generated tailored profiles of consumption and behavior in order to market goods and services more “appropriately” to individuals. Beyond a series of practices, marketing has become a guiding logic of technocapitalism that sits well within the large post-Fordist collapse of the spheres of “production” and “consumption.” As Zwick, Bonsu, and Darmody (2008) have suggested, “co-creation,” or the sense that the user or consumer can be put to work (either in the development of
content) or can be in “control” of the very experience of consumption (such as determining which ad “experience” they would prefer before watching a television show) is a “new paradigm that has captured the imagination of marketing, management professionals and scholars” and that “we see a collective embrace of the idea of a newly empowered, entrepreneurial, and liberated consumer subject, presumably because of the promise such a consumer presents in creating ‘competitive advantage’ and market opportunities for the discerning ‘New Marketer” (2008, 163).

The paradigm shift to “co-creation” is also another way of pointing toward what Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) have called “prosumption.” Ritzer and Jurgenson borrow the word from Alvin Toffler’s *The Third Wave*, in which Toffler suggested that prosumption marked preindustrial societies (the first wave) and that it was only a “second wave” of marketization that had separated these spheres, giving rise to a world of “producers” and “consumers.” Ritzer and Jurgenson refer to this as an “aberrant separation” (17) and resurrect the word to suggest that a new “form of capitalism” (31) has been given rise to by the explosion of digital media and its facilitation and reliance on user-generated content. Ritzer and Jurgenson appear to believe the prosumption is “enjoyed” by individuals, writing:

> The fact is that many people seem to prefer and to enjoy prosuming, even in the cases in which they are forced into this position. Traditional prosumers being handed an empty cup and being forced to fill it—sometimes over and over—at the soda fountain in a fast food restaurant not only gives them the possibility of more soda at the same price, but also empowers them so that they can decide how much, if any ice, they want, as well as giving them the ability to create unique concoctions of various soda flavors (2010).

Yet despite all the ice you might want, they also write: “Prosumer capitalism is based on a system where content is abundant and created by those not on the payroll.” This little snag seems not to bother Ritzer and Jurgenson:

> On Facebook, empowerment lies in the fact that one can choose exactly how one wants to
present oneself and can alter that presentation at will. Further, many find Facebook an
effective social tool in building and maintaining contact with others. In addition to modest
 gains and empowerment, people can gain quite materially from being a prosumer. This is
most obvious on eBay, but one can profit by gaining recognition as a photographer on
Flickr, or as a journalist on a blog, and use those successes to become a paid “professional”
photographer or journalist. One can build professional computer programming networks
while editing Linux for no pay (2010).

Here we see the dreams of the “new marketer” merge with an entrepreneurial desire for control,
identity, and networked agency. This dream is often solidified through recourse to notions of an
“abundant” market of opportunities for “presumptive” participation. Ritzer and Jurgenson write:

The costs for companies to host vast amounts of digital content is dropping and the sheer
number of users creating content on sites such as Facebook is increasing, leading to a
market increasingly characterized by abundance (Anderson, 2009). We have argued
elsewhere that this abundance, this post-scarcity system, leads to less of a focus on
efficiency and rationality than is the case in traditional capitalism and capitalistic
organizations (Jurgenson, 2010; Jurgenson and Ritzer, 2009).

Today, marketing, in addition to being a series of practices that are deployed in the market, has
also become a guiding logic that not only marries the shift from Fordist to post-Fordist
production but also involves the entrepreneurial desires for control and to participate in the
generative “abundance” of prosumptive capital.

**Spiritual Marketing**

Translating contemporary marketing logic to the world of Tarot readers or esoteric
practitioners can be a delicate matter. On the one hand, readers come to Tarot out of a personal
desire to connect (to themselves, to their psychic ability, to other people, to the historical and
artistic text that is the Tarot) and to “experience” Tarot as a personal journey that at times is
described as spiritual but is almost always described as being personally meaningful and unique.
The logic of marketing then crashes into this feeling of “experience” by suggesting that the
experience in and of itself is not enough and that there is now something individuals must “do”
with their experience. In that regard, several readers are put off by the language and feel of
marketing, even if they themselves are interested in starting or sustaining a business. The other concern for readers is maintaining their image as a “legitimate” esoteric practitioner. Marketing language, if expressed too zealously, can ring of false intentions or even con artistry. Here again, the “con” haunts the work that readers do, and they might find ways to negotiate their identities as they learn to develop their business practices.

While the Marketing Goddess was fairly well received at the Readers’ Studio, even if she left them “wanting more,” as any good marketer is instructed to do, the following year a group called “Tarosophy” arrived at the Readers’ Studio to share with the Tarot community an Internet scheme called “Tarot Town: A Social Network for Tarot,” whose tag line is “a new way for sharing Tarot.” The idea behind Tarot Town was that the space would look and operate like an online “village” where Tarot readers would buy a “membership” that would enable them to set up a “shop” in the village. Those seeking Tarot readings would be encouraged to join (and pay for membership) and to take classes, as well as buy readings from the established readers in the village. However, as Chelsea pointed out to me, Tarot Town’s model essentially created a closed network. “They don’t understand that Tarot readers don’t pay each other for readings,” she told me before MK gave his presentation. Essentially, the scheme felt at best like a bad investment and at worst like a con to Chelsea. She had already heard that Tarosophy was working with a “crowdsourced” business model that left Chelsea, at least, feeling exploited. Katz, the founder of Tarosophy and a British ceremonial magician, was preceded at the Readers’ Studio conference by his reputation—not only for being a well-known Occultist but for having asked several well-known Tarot readers in the community to write for a publication that he edited and then published. The writers, I was told, were not compensated but rather promised “exposure” through the book publication as well as through association with the online “town” endeavor. To

Chelsea, this seemed dubious, fairly enough, as Katz was the one reaping the reward of being associated with the rather well-known authors he had cajoled into writing.

Although I tended to agree with Chelsea’s criticisms of Tarot Town, I was curious about the difference in reception from one year to the next. That next year, the Readers’ Studio audience was more stressed out, less interested in hearing about a new “scheme,” and a bit tired of all the “hyping” of enthusiasm. Tarot Town persists today, but it is my sense that it was not widely embraced by the Tarot Center readers. And, while the Marketing Goddess is no longer affiliated with Warren and Rose, the nature of her “advice” was more generally accepted, even if it was not uniformly put into action by all readers. Moreover, the advice that the Marketing Goddess had started to dispense during her workshop is by no means unique. Looking through the rhetoric of online marketing gurus we see the same advice repeat itself: You are creating a “life” and a business you deserve and love. It is through the merging of life and love and “worth” that both a life worth living as well as the possibility of running a rewarding business is created. For spiritual marketers, these principles are embraced as mantras for the soul, as “road maps for living…”

An Ecology of Marketing Gurus

The Marketing Goddess is only one of many “marketing gurus” who enjoy a state of what has been called “microcelebrity” (Senft 2010, Horning 2013, Marwick 2014) both on and offline. As Alice Marwick (2014) writes, “microcelebrity is the state of being famous to a niche group of people, but it also a behavior: the presentation of one’s self as a celebrity regardless who is watching.” There is an ever-emerging ecology of such gurus who take as their own life

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63 Footnote about the feeling of the last RS and the economic downturn. I overheard two women talking about the “economy” for the first time. Warren and Rose were visibly worried about the attendance at the event. And, this was the event that seemed to mark a turning point in the conversations about the future—in terms of how Tarot work would continue in the future, the future of the economy, the future of working for one’s self, the need for community and the hope for new and more sustainable systems.
the basis for their marketing business and their marketing advice. Often their messages to potential clients are very similar, writing as Rachel Cook, who goes by the moniker “The Yogipreneur,” does:

This is my personal mission—to help enlightened entrepreneurs to design businesses that love you back. To create a leveraged business that allows you to work when and where you want, that provides the lifestyle you wish for yourself and your family, that lets you hand-select the clients you want to work with {who you can serve with your whole heart, a lovely side-effect of a full inspiration tank}.

Or as online marketing guru Gina Devee writes:

It never feels good to wake up in the same place doing the same routine over and over again, literally and figuratively. Make the decision and commitment to never struggle again. Once you make the decision to commit to yourself the opportunities are endless. Choose to manifest your desires, not just to survive!64

Here we see that both women are offering potential clients a sense of “choice.” Creating a business that you “love” and “deserve” is a choice that one makes through “decision” and “commitment,” which is also the decision to “never struggle again.” The ability to choose also informs the ability to “manifest” your dreams and desires. As the online network “Spirit Alive” suggests on its webpage, entitled “The New Wealthy Woman Entrepreneur,” “Successful spiritual women are blazing a new trail and thriving with six- and seven-figure businesses... All while being true to who they are.”65 Spirit Alive encourages potential clients (and future marketers) to “Be the person you would invest in…” while suggesting that “you are meant to manifest your desires” and that “money shows up when you are ON purpose.”

In addition to inspirational language or “content,” sites such as these also offer snippets of advice (sometimes short video clips or embedded podcasts) coupled with the option of downloading newsletters that will tell you “more,” as well as short blog posts recommending their services. They also offer online or downloadable workshops, such as the “Become Your

64 https://www.facebook.com/ginadevee.
65 http://www.spiritalive.net/newwealthyentrepreneur.htm.
Own Business Adviser Live Preview Teleclass,” which promises to help a person “Meet the soul of your business. Learn how energy alchemy can help you grow your business sustainably, and successfully.” While “energy alchemy” could point to a number of practices, here I assume it points to a broader sense of affective investment, care, and concern for one’s business model. Energy alchemy points toward the necessary affective labor required to get clear in one’s “mission” and “manifest” their potential. It is through language such as this that we see the mingling of money, energy, and the self.

In addition to the language of living your best life ever™, what these marketers and microcelebrities share is a common aesthetic and commitment to presenting themselves as though they are, in the words of Marie Forleo, “rich, happy, and hot.” These microcelebrities are often white women seemingly between the ages of twenty and fifty (the element of “youth” is always present in their presentation—feeling alive, having energy, feeling “passionate”). Images of these marketers almost always portray them as carefree, laughing (head thrown back laughing is a common pose). A curated, professional headshot is an essential feature of all the sites that portrays the marketer as polished, poised, and confident. In addition, the aesthetics of these sites, in tandem with their language, suggest to the viewer that you are welcome to join their club. Much like the logics of women’s magazines, you (the reader) could be just like this woman, if only you were to apply the right logics, techniques, and practices. One such assemblage of logics and practice is one I call the “manifestation manifesto,” which promises to synthesize the self, desire, and materiality so that “energy” can be directed toward achieving one’s “higher purpose.”

**The Manifestation Manifesto**

In a recent online video entitled “How to Use Manifesting to Get Anything You Want,” “multipassionate entrepreneur” and “lifestyle expert” Marie Forleo asks her audience, “Are you

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only getting a fraction of what you want in your business and life? Are the things you’re looking to achieve taking way too long to come your way?” Presumably, you are watching the video because the answer to both questions is “yes.” And if so, you’re in luck. Marie, along with her interviewee, author Gabby Bernstein, who has been labeled a “zen bombshell” and “Dalai Lama for the Gossip Girl set” by the Huffington Post, are going to hook you up. Not just with some wishy-washy inspirational conversation about life and its struggles—these ladies have “the” answer. No more hoping for change, or wondering what’s wrong with you, or asking why you lack that extra cash or inspiration.

Sitting on a hip-looking couch with their legs tucked up in lotus-like positions, Marie and Gabby are so laidback yet pulled together; so excited, yet focused; so high-fivingly happy that it’s hard not to think, “Ah, okay. Lay it on me, sisters.” And they do. As they talk, the two women lay out the terms of a new reality, where the power to “manifest” your dreams sits in direct relation to your own capacity for “getting clear” about what you want, tapping into the abundance that awaits, and claiming it as your own. For the duration of the video, you are welcomed into the club, where taking part in Marie’s trademarked philosophy of being “rich, happy, and hot” is within your grasp.

Never mind if your bank balance forced you to decide between groceries and doing your laundry, or if you’ve been working so much that showering has fallen to last place on the to-do list, or if the thought of skinny jeans and high heels makes you want to tear the walls down. That’s all cool with Marie and Gabby. Taking their media cues from Oprah, who has mastered the art of making her audience feel she is speaking directly to them, the conversation plugs along, refusing to acknowledge any possible detractors or criticisms of their approach. As far as

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=12YscwHPxSU.
they are concerned, for as long as you’re tuned in, vibing along to the manifesto of manifestation and abundance, Marie and Gabby are your best friends. They know your troubles. They’ve been there, girlfriend. And they like you so much, they are going to let you in on the secret of their success.

Women like Marie Forleo and Gabby Bernstein are part of a growing number of female entrepreneurs who are linking together the role of therapist, life coach, and marketer. These are women like the author, therapist, speaker, consultant Lori Gottlieb, whose rather bleakly titled book *Marry Him: The Case for Settling for Mr. Good Enough* became a *New York Times* bestseller—if not for its content, then for the “controversial buzz” the banal book had generated. Recently, in a *New York Times* Sunday magazine article, Gottlieb herself lamented the plight of the new entrepreneur, who is pressured paradoxically to expand their services (for Gottlieb, this mostly meant adding the moniker “consultant”) while at the same time soliciting a more narrow clientele, often through the help of new media like Twitter. While Gottlieb ostensibly intends to lament the effect of this branding process with phrases like, “After all, I studied mental illness, not marketing,” in effect her article works as a plug for both her book and her services. This type of self-promotion is a cornerstone of the entrepreneurial project and, to some degree, Forleo and Bernstein are simply keeping pace with the new terrain of the market.

Yet both women are also spokespersons for a contemporary metaphysics of energy, objects, and networked life that exposes itself in the language of abundance and manifestation. Here, abundance is a vague yet veritable *élan vital* that, if accessed, can inform a holistic, integrated, and evolved self capable of manifesting a new job, a new love, a trip, or even, as Marie suggests in the video, a “new Macbook.” The loose moral catch here is that manifesting abundance must come from a place of ultimate sincerity and a rigorous process of “getting
clear.” As Bernstein explains in her video interview, it was only after she had “done a lot of work, cleaned up her own crap,” and come to “believe in herself” that she was able to “co-create with the energy around her” and attract the possibility of working with Forleo, as well as appearing on Oprah’s “Super Soul Sunday.” To manifest from a less-developed place in your life, or as Eckhart Tolle, the bestselling author of The Power of Now (2004), would say, “to manifest from ego,” is to tarry with the grandmotherly admonition to “be careful what you wish for because you just might get it.”

Rather than being a Santa on demand, the manifestation manifesto is a metaphysical claim that links the development of the personal, private self to an endless and comforting font of cosmic or divine energy that can be tapped through imaginative, meditative practices. In a recent e-mail newsletter from another female marketer, I was asked, “Did you know that everything you desire exists right now and claiming it is as simple as having a different awareness?” By raising my awareness, it would become possible to tap into the “universal supply of unlimited abundance,” and thus I could begin to channel that energy into my own mental life, health, and creative pursuits and business ventures. Here, there is very little, if any, separation between inner life, personal well-being, and financial success. As Forleo writes on her website, being “rich means unlocking your spiritual potential, nurturing your health and happiness and using your unique talents to change the world.”

On the one hand, this metaphysics of self appears to be an extension of the well-documented rise of the therapeutically driven, increasingly privatized, and potentially narcissistic American individual. Indeed, it draws from the same bodies of thought and literature that have long existed in “new age” circles, including Buddhist mindfulness and meditation, the human potential movement, New Thought, and positive psychology, all of which resonate with the
narrative of individualism. And, though it is easy to criticize any philosophy™ that links the normative ideals of “hot and rich” with “happy,” what I am interested in here is not the ways in which these women are selling an updated brand of consumerist or materialist spirituality or even that they encourage the “manifestation” of your dreams. Writers such as Barbara Ehrenreich (2010), Nina Power (2009), and Eva Illouz (2008 and 2003) have, respectively, taken positive psychology, consumer feminism, and Oprah and the culture of self-help to task.

Here, I would like to look at the ways in which the seemingly privatized individual is actually an affective laborer who, rather than going “bowling alone” (Putnam 2001), is caught up in the task of opening the social (both to objects and to media) and looking to connect, contact, and channel its energies. In this regard, the manifestation manifesto is simultaneously an embrace of market logics, labor exploitation, and expropriation while at the same time a form of resilience against the encroaching precarity of the market that continually pressures the possibilities of long-term security for many people. For many women, this paradoxically porous individualism, which situates the self as a mediator of energies and a manifester of objects, offers a sense of power. This power is both abstract and specific. It is the power to “envision” and to have visions, as well as the power to act or make a choice in the face of uncertainty and risk.

Abundance

See abundance, see honesty in all, embrace good healthy, emotionally healthy people, focus on the beauty and not the ugly. And for crying out loud fix what hurts you, heal what aches, mend your mind and restore it to perfection. You were born of perfection, it is your core, meditate, exercise, eat nutritionally and address what you are harboring, then you will attract lovely all day long.

—Ariaa Jaeger writing at her website: www.ariaa.com

To understand what informs the magic that Forleo and Bernstein are selling we will need to examine the notion of abundance. Emerging from the practices and philosophy of New Thought in the early 1900s, the notion of abundance made its way into the lexicon of American
metaphysical religion as a theory of mind that linked external, as well as bodily, conditions to mental practices. The mind, it was conceived, could work as a conductor of divine and subtle energies, capable of forging correspondences between the world of human concerns and the universal or cosmic energies of life itself. In this theory of mind, thought itself is a materializing energy that can be directed toward purposeful intentions or goals. To set an intention is to use the mind as a conduit and magnet capable of calling into being energetic resources that are, to some degree, waiting to be manifested. As Ralph Waldo Trine, a preeminent author of the New Thought movement, wrote in 1910,

He who lives in the realization of his oneness with this Infinite Power becomes a magnet to attract to himself a continual supply of whatsoever things he desires. If one hold himself in the thought of poverty, he will be poor, and the chances are that he will remain in poverty. If he hold himself, whatever present conditions may be, continually in the thought of prosperity, he sets into operation forces that will sooner or later bring him into prosperous conditions. The law of attraction works unceasingly throughout the universe, and the one great and never changing fact in connection with it is, as we have found, that like attracts like. If we are one with this Infinite Power, this source of all things, then in the degree that we live in the realization of this oneness, in that degree do we actualize in ourselves a power that will bring to us an abundance of all things that it is desirable for us to have. In this way we come into possession of a power whereby we can actualize at all times those conditions that we desire.

Via this theory of mind, which linked mind and matter through the law of attraction, a law of abundance was also theorized, which John Murray, founder of the Church of the Healing Christ, explained in his 1918 text *New Thoughts on Old Doctrines*: “I am living in the inexhaustible abundance of the Holy Spirit, I am not afraid. Depend, upon it, if you do this, you will find yourselves benefited mentally, physically, financially; it will be the beginning of an excellent habit, a habit which will make for the building up of legitimate, honourable prosperity.” In a later text (*The Realm of Reality*, 1922), Murray would go on to write:

When we learn that there are not two planes—the spiritual and the material—we shall not try to “materialize spirits” nor “spiritualize matter,” for we shall have learned that a thing can never be transformed into its opposite. Money is not, as some suppose, the
materialization of spiritual substance; rather is it the visible expression of Invisible Abundance.

While it is true that the law of attraction and its attendant practices work to canalize cosmic energies and encourage a deeply problematic privatization of poverty and hardship on the part of those who have not aligned themselves more correctly with the “Infinite Power” (Murray also wrote in *New Thoughts in Old Doctrines*, “Challenge the thought of poverty every time it comes to your door. You do not have to admit it to your mental household anymore than you have to admit a tramp of the road to your material household.”), I cannot help but linger on Murray’s formulation of money, which posits that money is not quite real. It is an *expression* of an immaterial abundance that waits in the wings for humans to call it into existence.

In spite of its troubling emphasis on self-reliance and mental entrepreneurialism, which you might think intelligent people would see through almost immediately, the tenets of New Thought that are reemerging in the works of women such as Forleo and Bernstein also resonate with the rapid developments of financial capitalism, in which “fictitious capital” seems to rule the day and, in particular, rule the work of Wall Street. As David Harvey (2012) has argued, this is a situation “where nobody knows what really grounds it [fictitious capital]. It’s magical, yet it produces this vast rate of return for all the people who are managing it.” In the face of such magical surpluses, much of which has been redirected away from the public and into the hands of private investors, one can’t but help realize that austerity and scarcity are lies. Abundance, it seems, actually seems to describe quite accurately a contemporary state of financial affairs.

Accessing such abundance, however, requires that a series of adaptations occur, not the least of which is adapting to the sense that long-term, waged, and more or less secure work is no longer a viable option for many individuals. As the world of long-term waged work has grown more difficult to access, even for those individuals with a college degree (or advanced degrees),
the wage as a path to “abundance” is no longer a clear path. And in the wake of such economic “restructuring,” the Internet and the digital itself have become sites that individuals are lured to, in the hopes that, there, new connections, new sources of income, or new opportunities can be found. For Tarot readers, social media, such as blogging platforms, Facebook, and Twitter, become ways of working that one is encouraged to adapt to and to use in order to build their business and client traffic. Where the wage has dried up, the digitality of the Internet still seems to suggest that abundance exists and can be tapped into. This promise of abundance (of connections, of “friends” on Facebook, of new information and new sources of inspiration, as well as new “opportunities” for work) via the digital places pressure on the face-to-face work that readers conduct throughout the city. Imagining that the Internet holds the keys to the ability to build a sustainable business (the one you’re life “deserves”) comes to pressure readers to try their hand at recalibrating their way of working.

Below I look at three aspiring Tarot readers as they attempt to move into the digital realm with varying success and then turn my attention to the “rules for branding” that these readers are employing. As Celia Lury (2004) has written, a brand operates as an interface, which can enable of flow (of money, of affects, of connections between disparate commodities or other brands) and it through a desire to build a personal brand out of the very affective capacity of the individual and to tailor the self to “the public” that readers aspire to articulate themselves “properly” on their sites and to inspire confidence in their potential clients.

Chelsea, whom we met in the first chapter, has been struggling financially and also has been struggling to find a permanent or even sustainable home. Moving between New York and San Francisco, she has found various living arrangements, but each one seems to end in a need to move rather quickly so that Chelsea can recoup from her losses. Along this rather tumultuous
journey, Chelsea has tried to establish a web presence—a website, an ongoing blog, and a more
general presence in social media. The website has gone through at least two iterations since I met
Chelsea, and often it seems she is struggling to find the right words to describe her services as
well as the right way to articulate her “take” or style of reading Tarot. In one of her attempts to
revamp her website and her business overall, Chelsea began referring to herself as an “erotic
Tarot reader” and on her blog she writes:

Many of the entries in this blog are erotic and about sexual matters. Sooooooo… if you
don’t like erotica, please skip the “Grown Up Story Times.” Heck, I’ll be talking frankly
about sex in other entries, too, so if you’re put off by such things, please don’t read this
blog, ok? And about the stories—they may or may not be true… and which are true…
I’m not telling!

The blog, which she set up on the free site Wordpress.com, is an attempt to bring together her
skills as a Tarot card reader, an astrologer, a pet astrologer, and a feng shui consultant. Clicking
through her site is like taking a walk through the history of her branding process, where each link
leads to a different version of Chelsea and her attempt to modify her online content. Knowing
Chelsea’s peripatetic personal life, I watch these websites and blogs come and go and realize that
each one represents a new beginning in the long process of transformation, as Chelsea carries her
possessions from one side of the country to another, looking for long-term work and stable,
affordable living arrangements. I know that these sites and attempts to pull the work together in
one place are the visual trace of a struggle between money and the self. In Chelsea’s Internet trail
is a journey of contemporary “rugged individualism” now taking shape through attempts to
brand a self in the wilds of various digital platforms, spurts of effort, and snapshots of the self at
its best.

While Chelsea struggles to find the right words on her website that might articulate her
services and her personal philosophy, Sara (the young woman we’ve met in Chapters 1 and 3) is
moving forward with a book project, and she is looking forward to its publication with Llewellyn Publishers. Sara has named the book “The Tarot Diva,” and when asked about the title of the book in a recent interview with an online site, Sara stated, “Honestly, I wanted to brand myself as the Tarot Diva. I wanted to reinvent the antiquated image of what a fortuneteller is… the title expresses that the book is full of power the reader can access for themselves.” For Sara, simply finding the word “Diva” has helped her define her Tarot work as well as her personal spiritual project of cultivating well-being. The actual publication of the book “proved... that my desire to create a book was based in truth,” and the confidence that Sara has found in being an author has translated into a proliferation of online work, including an updated website, a blog, semimonthly e-mail updates, and a flurry of activity on Facebook, promoting her upcoming classes, book signings, radio spots, and television appearances, including the filming of a reality TV show pilot. It is this media crossover into the (literal) liveliness of the market and the ease with which her brand can move, soliciting more clients but also more publicity, that is the goal of writing a book like *Tarot Diva*. When I spoke with Sara about the book and her promotional events, I got the sense that she was having a very fun time with the project, both aware that she had succeeded in publishing a book and in producing a public persona that she could live through. While her personal sensibility and aesthetic may not speak to everyone, it is hard not to see that she has also found “her voice” in her work and in the branding of her business. It is through the synthesis of personal voice and public, mediated brand that Sara feels that the spiritual project of Tarot has succeeded. With the publication of the book, Sara feels her “energized approach” to working with the cards is effective and that the cards and her self have formed a productive relationship that has allowed her to venture into the world of publication and self-promotion. In this regard, she has become an “enchanted entrepreneur” who will most likely continue to search for
“energy” while building her business and who will see her work as confirmation that she has figured out “how to get things done.”

By branding herself with the moniker “Tarot Diva,” Sara has found the allusive “alchemical” ability to manifest her visions, turning the immaterial affective energy of the Tarot into new material forms that can be circulated both on- and offline. In doing so, she has received confirmation that her rituals work and that her writing is the result of deep, personal truth. While the overall aesthetic of the Tarot Diva may not seem serious, Sara herself is quite serious about the personal work that she does to tap into the “abundance” that is available to her. Visioning, channeling, reading, writing, cultivating her own style and body, eating well, and living “fabulously” are forms of necessary effort for Sara. They have become synonymous not only with her labor capacity but with her understanding of the nature of life. As we saw in the first and third chapters, the process of writing a book is a meaningful process for Tarot Center students. On the one hand, this process has to do with learning the cards. We saw in Shawn, this practice, as a way to gain mastery and also to establish the reader as competent. On the other, the notion of book writing is part of an arc of becoming a professional reader. This is the model of slow media, in which writing is seen as a personal act that takes time and, like Shawn, is not necessarily something to be made public. This model of slow, personal media, however, is crashing into the “faster media” of the Internet, particularly social media such as blogging and Facebook that allow for quicker, more immediate, public writing to occur.

*Self Is Content Is Labor*

Much has been written about the “presentation of self” online (Papacharissi 2010, Hogan 2010, Senft 2012, Jurgenson 2012, Bullingham 2013, Marwick 2014). Indeed, Irving Goffman’s *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) has become a go-to reference those who
write about social media and online life, recasting the Internet as Goffman’s “front stage” or site of performance and cultivation presentation of self and life. Through the process of setting up website sites and domain names and beginning to write online (about the services one offers or through a regular blog, where an individual write shorter updates or “posts”) readers such as Chelsea and Sara are certainly attempting to re-present themselves to new audience and to even to themselves. These online endeavors are even experienced as necessary practices, if the reader is going to develop a sustainable business or income. Beyond this, however, the Internet and its artifacts are also seen as *an extension* of the self that goes beyond “presentation,” as though readers were living their “real” (or “backstage” as Goffman would put it) lives behind the scenes somewhere.

Both Chelsea and Sara are working and living through the possibility of branding themselves in the digital market. Such a project of branding (via domain names, color choices, in fonts, photos and images and text for the site), is not only by a set of marketing or presentation “rules” but also by the thought that such a synthesis of self and digital content can bring about an alignment of personal life (not even perhaps something as unified as “the self”) so that new forms of energy—namely affect and money—will flow. Scholars are now well aware that much of the labor of the Internet (the actual time and energy that it takes to create media artifacts, as well as time and energy and attention spent cultivating networks and relationships online) is a form of what scholars have called “free labor” (Terranova 2013) and bears a relationship to the feminized forms of affective labor that we encountered in Chapter 3. Free labor is often unwaged, overlooked, and naturalized, as well as seen as a form of creating, establishing, and maintaining relationships. Rather than presenting a version of their selves online, both Chelsea and Sara are engaged in this form of affective labor, which requires that the self and everyday
life be taken as site of productivity, inspiration, and innovation. Much like “mommy blogs” (Van Cleaf 2013) and tele-commuting (Gregg 2013) have been seen as “labors of love,” Tarot readers also imagine that the work they are doing on their personal sites and through social media is an act of building community.

As Van Cleaf (2013) suggests in her work on motherhood and blogging, such “free labor” has also been conceptualized as an act of women’s empowerment, particularly when women find that working online can provide flexible working hours and control over their time. For many Tarot readers who are looking to the ecology of marketing gurus, this flexibility is often linked to the notion of “passive income,” which is a marketing tool whereby visitors to a website or blog are encouraged to pay for services or minor products (such as a newsletter or access to a webinar). Often the cost of such services is minimal (a dollar or two), but the goal of passive income is to generate enough traffic so that such small fees add up over time. By serially releasing such content, it is hoped that a relatively steady flow of income can be generated “passively” or without having actually to clock into work or provide a follow-up service.

In addition to tricks such as passive income, there is also the underlying push of the manifestation manifesto that speaks the language of empowerment. Specifically, it says “stop procrastinating, learn to find your vision, and get working.” Much of this talk tells women to “get real” and devote time and attention to the creation of online spaces. Social media, while fun for some readers (during my fieldwork several Tarot Center students became involved in what they called a “Facebook: a love affair,” where they connected with other readers around the world, particularly those readers they had met at a Readers’ Studio conference), also requires attention, curation, and maintenance. Facebook, Sara told me while I was at her home speaking with her, “was taking all her time,” and indeed, as we talked over tea, she kept running back to
her computer to check her updates and likes. In this conflation of empowerment, we see an older notion of “women’s liberation,” as second-wave liberal feminism’s desire to access the market merges with a new age metaphysics of creation. Together they produce a spiritualization of labor, even if such free labor remains obscured to the individual, and there is an undeniable “valorization of the feminine” that attracts women to this work, even as it works through the feminization of labor.

To this end, there are numerous guides, or “social media boot camps,” that will encourage individuals like Chelsea and Sara to “get real.” One very popular such site writes:

I’m going to lay down some tough love:
I didn’t become a professional tarot card reader and yoga teacher – with a 25-year track record of service + serious profitability – by sitting on my (yoga-toned) butt.
Going pro as a mystic – or any kind of soul-based entrepreneur – is just like going pro in any other industry.
It takes discipline, focus, devotion and a willingness to innovate + grow.
Do you think Jay-Z got to the peak of the hip hop scene by signing up for an e-course that promised to build him a 6-figure business in 30 days, while snacking on gold-dusted bonbons? Hellz no!
He created his legendary success by working his talented butt off + taking small-but-focused steps every single day, with love + consistency.
That’s the kind of BO$$ING UP that I want to see a LOT more of, in the spiritual + personal development world.  

It is undeniable that such social media “encouragement” does work in the Tarot world to excite and motivate individuals to participate online. The underlying notion that tapping into the self’s uniqueness, combined with “small, but focused steps every single day,” does inspire some readers (albeit if only momentarily, as such encouragement needs to be reapplied semiregularly in order for it to “work”) to begin to hone their vision for their work both on and offline. However, this approach to life and business doesn’t work for everyone. As we saw with Shawn, being compelled to make productive his work was off-putting, and he rejected the very notion

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68 http://www.thetarotlady.com/professional-mystics-guide/.
that he should share or make public his personal work. And, as Rose told me rather
condemningly one evening, “everyone writes a book these days,” by which she meant to impugn
the notion that publishing written work should come so easily or so quickly for some Tarot
readers. In addition, now that “everyone” writes, Rose felt it was getting hard to “distinguish”
yourself in the market of goods. Rose, in particular, is in a unique position to criticize the “fast”
media of online writing and publishing. She has been in the Tarot world for many years, with
much more experience than new readers, and while she and Warren have published their own
book, they have not had as much success branding themselves in the digital marketplace. They,
like Shawn, remain tied to a “slower” notion of media and at times feel frustrated that the online
world is mostly, as Rose told me, “hype.”

In addition to not buying into the hype of online marketing, not all Tarot readers have
consistent access to computers and the Internet. Lisa, for example, uses the computers at her
local library because her (at times) abusive husband, who has been unemployed for months, is at
home. At the library, Lisa conducts research, sometimes about Tarot, but also about science
fiction. Lisa writes her own fan fiction, which she shares and publishes online. Still, her
relationship to the computer and to the Internet itself is strained by time pressures and by a lack
of support. It is much harder for Lisa to get media savvy, even if she wanted to use her
“discipline, focus, devotion and a willingness to innovate + grow” to begin to build a sustainable
online presence.

Furthermore, as one author and Tarot reader told me at the Readers’ Studio, “you don’t
make any money from writing, but you still have to write.” Much Internet “free labor” doesn’t
actually pay, despite its lures of passive income. And, even if the Internet work results in more
recognition or a book deal, this work doesn’t pay well either (at least not enough to live on).
While there is an impetus for Tarot readers to participate online, to share themselves and their lives through blogs, websites, and social media, and to cultivate an online persona or “brand,” there is very little financial reward in return. Rather, any “rewards” that are reaped from online marketing work are the rewards of articulating oneself and seeing the self as a “prosumer” of one’s own destiny.

While marketing has long tried to sell, as John Berger (1990) wrote, a sense of “glamour,” that glamour is no longer attached solely to commodities to be found in a market “out there.” As production and consumption collapse into each other, individuals are now pressured, through the logics of human capital and self investment, to articulate themselves in the market and, indeed, to participate in the production and circulation of their own glamour and therefore their own surplus and capture of value. And, while money doesn’t necessary flow through these endeavors, affect does, informing a feeling that one creates “value” by tapping into occluded abundance and attempting to embody the very precepts of “wealth creation.” For some, like Sara, the flows of such affect catch them and take them “surfing,” as Deleuze (1992) has suggested. For others, the flows wash over them, exhausting their efforts.

**Precarity’s Charge**

I normally meet Warren on Monday nights, on the seventeenth floor of a nondescript office building in midtown Manhattan, where he and his wife, Rose, teach Tarot classes for anywhere between three and ten students every week. Classes cost thirty dollars for a three-hour session that typically consists of Warren’s impromptu but passionate lectures on a Tarot card or set of cards as well as a full hour of Tarot-reading practice among the students. For the handful of regulars who attend the classes, the school is their community, what some call their therapy, as well as a site of pleasure and authority. It is a place where for a few hours, as seasoned Tarot
students and readers, they are, as Warren likes to say, “masters of their own ships,” capable of guiding the discussion or giving pointers to a newcomer. For other students who come and go, the school is a break from the workaday world—it’s a place where Tarot cards, psychic ability, and magical practice are uninhibitedly discussed as meaningful sites of personal power. Given the school’s warm community, it’s easy to see why Warren and Rose drive in each from week from Queens, rain or shine, and on most holidays. Creating this space has been their labor of love, and, socially, it rewards them with a revolving cast of friends, students, and interlocutors who share an interest in learning more about a deck of cards that has existed since the fifteenth century and that has evolved into a text that now counts astrology, neo-Platonism, Hermeticism, Kabbalah, Rosicrucianism, ceremonial magic, Goddess worship, Wicca, and neopaganism, as well as dash of contemporary quantum theory and geometry, as its bibliography.

Still, for Warren and Rose, the Tarot Center is their sole source of income, and over the course of the last year, the general economic downturn in the city has started to affect their business. Tonight, when I see Warren, the joy of class is decidedly missing. Sitting on the couch in their apartment cluttered with books, Tarot decks, and tchotchkes, Warren and I are talking about the future. “Everything decays, Karen,” he tells me in his characteristic slow and deliberate speech. “Everything falls away. It is the nature of things. We are in a period of decay… like all things it [the school] too will pass away. My struggle is try to find the energy to get up in the morning everyday and keep on going… You know, when the Titanic is sinking you have two choices: you can sink or you can get in the rowboat. The only problem is when you start rowing, you’re out there on your own.”

I know that there is considerable metaphysical study behind his words, and I realize Warren is speaking two languages at once. On the one hand, he is speaking the language of Tarot
and its fourfold system of elements, in which the element of Earth (or matter) represents the world of earthly, human, and material concerns. This element, which is associated with the suit of Pentacles in the Tarot deck, has a natural or essential tendency toward inertia, stillness, and decay. While such a toward-death ontology may sound morbid, even a nascent Tarot student will suggest that it points toward a larger cosmic balance, or a fourfold dance of elemental particles, with each element moving in accord with its nature and tendencies. In Tarot, to say that all is in decline is also suggest that other elements are at work and that transformation and rebirth will follow. However, Warren is also speaking a more ordinary language of financial crisis, which looms as a more “real” or immediate reality. Despite a metaphysics that can make room for the existence of multiple elemental worlds, Warren is not inured against the tendencies of global capital. On the contrary, he and his wife are skilled readers of the ebbs and flows of the city’s money, as they consider themselves members of the service economy, and their business depends on their intuitive ability to glean the excess. When times are tight for others, there is less to glean, and bills accumulate. At the moment, the business that Warren has spent his adult life building is in jeopardy of going under, and in very plain language he is really wondering what comes next when you decide to “start rowing.”

By branding herself, Sara has found the allusive alchemical ability to “manifest” her visions, turning the immaterial affective energy of the Tarot into new material forms that can be circulated both on- and offline. In doing so, she has received confirmation that her rituals work.

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While associations made with Tarot cards are essentially limitless and are open to continual personal and intuitive speculation, there are also associations with the cards that are the result of the work of the Golden Dawn, such as the linking of the Tarot cards with the traditional elements (Earth, Air, Water, and Fire) as well as their associations with Archangels, astrological symbols, and the Sephiroth of the Kabbalistic Tree of life. As Nevil Drury writes, the Golden Dawn saw the Tree of Life as a “matrix upon which the archetypes of the great Western mythologies could be charted and interrelated as a part of a sacred unity” (Drury 2011, 59). This matrix of “magical correspondences” was documented by members of the Golden Dawn in a manuscript known as The Book of Correspondences, which Aleister Crowley copied and published as his own work under the title Liber 777 in 1909.
and that her writing is the result of deep, personal truth. While the overall aesthetic of the Tarot Diva may not seem serious, Sara herself is quite serious about the personal work that she does to tap into the “abundance” that is available to her. Visioning, channeling, reading, writing, cultivating her own style and body, eating well, and living “fabulously” are forms of necessary effort for Sara. They have become synonymous not only with her labor capacity but with her understanding of the nature of life. If for Warren all is in decay, for Sara, the element of Earth and its materiality suggests that life is a source of abundant information, energies, and affects that must be tapped into, harnessed, focused, and ultimately used to find a way into the market, which will then sustain you. This work is an entrepreneurial hustle that produces an energized circuit or feedback loop between the self, objects, and market. It creates a spiritualized assemblage that starts to become its own entity, an entity directly tied into the abundant spirit of the neoliberal market. While the mantra of early neoliberalism—“society does not exist”—may have unevenly trickled down into popular consciousness, one of its paradoxical effects has been to encourage individuals to become great entrepreneurial, intuitive diviners of the next social connection or opportunity. In this regard, precarity, like a photographic negative, inverts the outline of the social and in doing so makes us more aware of its presence, desperate for new social possibilities and conditions, as well as desperate to believe that they will arrive.
Conclusion

As William Kornblum and his co-authors attest to in the book *In The Field* (1989), any researcher who has gone into “the field” knows that the process of finding an ethnographic “spot” or a place from which to conduct your fieldwork is a journey. In the course of this dissertation, there have many times that my own academic work felt was tracing the journey of The Fool, the unmarked card who is able to “move” about the deck, encountering and learning from fellow Tarot figures. For months, as this dissertation began, I walked the city looking for potential connections and conversations without necessarily knowing where these encounters or interactions would lead, trying my best to learn and integrate my thoughts. Before the dissertation truly began, I was curious to see the social figure of “the psychic” as a listening laborer, a “medium” through which to see “carework” in action and as I walked the city with a camera in hand, it became clear to me that, at the level of the street—a commons of the city—the very signage of the storefront psychic helps to keep alive the odd, the unexpected, the controversial, and the enchanting discourse of psychicness itself. Whether we “believe” in psychics or not, the signs can function as prompts for thought and the speculation that the word “psychic” invites.

As I write in the Introduction, these signs were both invitation and refusal—inviting an ethnography that seemed to lead me away from the question of labor and as I walked the city and searched the Internet for other possible connections or “ins”, the dissertation led to me to many overlooked sites in the city—a group devoted to psychic cultivation, to meet the owner of Brooklyn’s older running psychic “tea shop”, a séance in midtown, the Spiritualist church and their psychic fairs (where I had my aura photographed), and an espiritualismo misa in the Bronx.
above a well-known botanica. In each of these sites, I sat, I watched and I listened and tried to make sense of the range of activities and metaphysics that each site presented, feeling very much like the “outsider” that many ethnographers experience. It was only as I came to the Tarot Center, where I was warmly welcomed by Warren and Rose and their students—and where I could announce my status as a student, researcher, and writer—that the dissertation truly began to take shape. I am deeply grateful to Warren and Rose and to the students, particularly Sarah, Chelsea, Shawn, Deana, and Lisa, without whom this long journey of exploration would not have been possible.

It would be through their stories and their experiences, in addition to my own that I would struggle to make sense of the relationship between economic shifts, the nature of labor, the “feeling” of social transformation, and intimate relationship of the digital to that feeling. For many months, the process of gathering data for this dissertation took the form of listening and learning to craft and hone questions. Indeed, Tarot work itself is predicated on the ability to ask a question of the cards. But, in many ways it was also a process of searching for a method that would enable me to answer the questions I was formulating, which seemed as far ranging as trying to account for who was attending the Tarot Center and why to what role the affective economy with its demand for increased flexibility and innovation played in the desire to cultivate an esoteric business or brand. In the midst of these questions, there were endless card flips, Tarot readings, Tarot conversations that began to structure, in their own aleatory way, a sense that while I was growing closer to a core group of students and learning about their lives “duration” or consistency over time was not something I could necessarily trust. While the Tarot would remain, with its stoic figures staring out at me, individuals at the school would come and go. The people themselves would talk about being “in process”, often discovering new opportunities and
dealing with personal challenges simultaneously. Precarity was always in the mix seemingly shuffling our fates as, for example, the possibility of a TV would arise for someone only to have it not manifest through a series of disappoints. Book deals would be talked about, Internet “gigs” would arise and fall away, light would shine on a path and then fall away as another job was lost or a housing issue became traumatic or an illness would befall someone. It seemed to me, for months of researching, that rather than seeing individuals on a linear path of self-help or growth or development, individuals were bumping into both the Tarot, the market, and using the cards as guides to best “surf” both the challenges and opportunities that presented themselves. The cards were an active companion in the process of trying not only to find the “self” and its capacities, but to find ways in which to engage in social ties themselves. In this regard, digital technologies and online platforms also became companions and new sites of linking to one another.

In many ways, bringing attention to the cards themselves, as I do in Chapter Two, was an attempt to find one “thing” that was standing still (to some degree), rather than circling, circulating, and infused with affect. In doing so, I have hoped to show that the Tarot is an enchanting object—not necessarily in a magical or supernatural way— but through the very attunements of the body and, in turn, socializing relationships that the cards encourage and enable. To see this project of connection, tracing cards and their symbols and flip through visualizing practices and the cultivation of sense and speech to digital practices of articulation is to see that the sociological figure of the individual, the figure so often relied upon through the method of ethnography, is at once entangled in a world of materialities, as well as never quite articulated within those movements. I have found that looking through this lens of entanglement allows me to see that spirituality is not an individualizing project, but an assembling project—a project that is deeply productive, not only of subjectivities, but of things themselves. These
things trace the labor of human activity, but they also trace the labor of the social itself, remaking itself in the wake of crisis, collective traumas, digital technologies, and the yet unwritten codes of emerging socialities. In some ways, my dissertation suggests that Tarot is not quite an individualizing project, but rather a project that “lures” individuals to a digital and data-ified economy. As Clough et al (2013) have recently asked, “who” precisely is the subject of the emerging data economy remains to be seen, but we are sure that the data-ified life is not the life of the private, bounded, disciplinary subject, but rather something that looks more like distributed, algorithmic, and recombinatory. While the emerging data-ontology is highly terrifying (indeed, built in the wake of the endless War on Terror) the digital also brings with it a very subtle form of enchantment in that suggests that life can be lived in card flip bits of time, little bits buffering, reconfiguring and reconnecting. As my work with Tarot students has shown, women in particular, feel this emerging digital world as a place of expansion and abundance. It is a world to be surfed, tapped into, and energized by. It is a world that offers, in the face of austerity, a sense of endless care.

When I last spoke with Warren, via telephone, he told “America is tired, Karen. Everyone is exhausted.” The money is no longer flowing, the work is too hard, and the body is growing old, Warren told me. The Tarot Center itself has packed up its little meeting space and moved into Warren and Rose’s apartment where they now host informal salons one a week. Warren himself is tired, but he has also begun to dream of a new future. Next year, he hopes to travel with several other Tarot readers to China, where he believes that new markets and new energy await him. Will he get there? I am not sure, but I am certain that his words, much like many of his Tarot readings are uncannily accurate. As new markets “open”, American spirituality will
most certainly be on the move—assembling itself as it goes, folding labor, life and hope in its wake.
Appendix I

This is an extended footnote, but it suggests why the storefronts were not a viable entry point into this dissertation. Here, I draw on several experiences with storefront psychics in Manhattan and Brooklyn to create a pastiche of a psychic reading. All but one of the women I spoke with throughout the city told me “not to discuss the reading with other people.” One woman specifically told me “not to write about the reading.” In this way of creating a pastiche, or composite, I am hoping to respect their desires for anonymity but also explain what happens in a psychic storefront reading. In this section, I will explain how the conditions of the reading fail to offer “useful” information to a particular type of self, or what Elizabeth Povinelli calls the “autological self,” which she defines as the self-authorizing subject “who chooses her life” (2010 interview).

Before I begin, however, let me be honest, or, rather, let me explain some of what flows beneath this dissertation and these readings. On the one hand as I traveled throughout the city, I was a graduate student looking for someone to talk to me, initially pushed on by the desire to find a “contact,” someone who could tell me “what was really going on.” Yet on the other hand I was a childless female graduate student in her thirties, curious about the future, and with a mother who claims to have her own intermittent psychic abilities. On a family camping trip, she dreamt of my grandfather’s death the night he died and without the ability to call anyone to confirm—this is before cell phones—packed up and left for the hospital, where he had indeed passed. I was only eight when this particular event happened, and it, among other experiences with her, left me feeling that psychicness was a gift, or a mark of a special “weirdness,” whose messages required consideration. I think it is fair to say that I went to these shops with an open mind and a willingness to hear what the women had to say. I also went with a fair amount of
skepticism and the understanding that a psychic reading is a business exchange. Whereas “mom-talk” is usually offered free of cost and free of solicitation, walking into a psychic’s shop is akin to walking into a nail salon, a strip club, or even a therapist’s office. Here, time, talk, and attention are money, and profit is made through volume. The more money for less time, the better the psychic has done for the day. If you go to a psychic for a five-dollar reading, expect to be “up-sold” via a number of different tactics, the most obvious of which is “I can tell you more for more money…”

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It is an unassuming storefront. The only thing calling attention to it is a small sign that reads “Psychic Reader. Solves all problems: Love, Money, and Health.” I feel nervous and little bit odd approaching the store because no one else is around even though it’s the middle of the day and I’m not even sure that the psychic is in. I start wondering, “what does this say about me, that I’m coming to this shop? If other people see me, what will they think of me?” I get embarrassed, aware that I am doing something condemnable as “womanly”— joining the historical ranks of the “female mental cases” (Mitchell 1993). At the same time, I know that what I’m doing is out of the ordinary. I get a cinematic awareness of myself, uncomfortably aware that this brief sense of existential authenticity is mediated by untold mass media images and stereotypes of women, fortune-tellers, and city life. I hear a very annoying commercial for a cell phone play back in my mind… “this is the story of my life, told by me…” I feel foolish and curious and a little out of step with my body, but the feeling fades as I ring the buzzer and walk through the door.

Fantasy gives way to the textures of a beaten-up couch, a small table, and a couple folding chairs inhabit the small office space. A heavy curtain is hanging in a doorway, seemingly
blocking off additional rooms. I can hear a television just past the curtain. A young girl, maybe twelve or thirteen pokes her head out. She stares at me silently and as I’m about to ask about a reading, a large woman of indeterminate ethnicity, in her late thirties or early forties, in cut off jean shorts and yellow t-shirt pushes past her. “Uh…hi, do you read tarot cards?” I stutter awkwardly, feeling a flush of embarrassment rush over me. “Yes, fifteen dollars for a reading,” she says as she smiles widely.

“Sit, sit… let’s talk… what’s on your mind? You have a question?” As she asks I realize that my questions are rather generic. I feel a little pathetic, even. Put on the spot between confessing my academic interest and announcing a personal question, I say, “it’s almost my birthday and I was just curious what the cards have to say for the next year.” “Okay”, she says eyeing me gently and reaching for her cards. She is taking in my hair, my skin, my clothes, my purse, and my shoes. I start to feel like I am radiating social information through all the textures. Even though I am familiar with Tarot cards, I have never seen cards like she is shuffling. They are oversized, and, as I get a closer look, they are quite beautiful. When I ask her about them she tells me they are “giant” Tarot and that they were a gift from her grandmother. “You’ll never find cards like this in a store.” It doesn’t seem like she has a full set of cards (the deck I am used to has seventy-eight cards; there only seems to be about twenty cards in her giant deck), and the cards she is using are “pip” cards, meaning they are illustrated by symbols similar to images on playing cards—swords, batons, cups, and coins. Slowly and methodically, she pulls nine cards from the deck and arranges them in three rows of three on the table. Almost immediately she starts talking, telling me “there was a lot happiness around me, but a lot of negativity too.” She is speaking fast, almost too fast for me to think through what’s she saying, running her hands over the cards. “You are happy in love, you have a soul mate in your life. He’s a good man. This is a
good relationship and you are a very kind, loving person that likes to say things, but you have to say things directly. How come you don’t say things directly?” She pauses. I make an awkward face and hunch my shoulder. It’s unclear if I am supposed to answer her and before I can she starts talking again. “Someone in your family has cancer, but she’s better now, he or she is fine. Maybe in like three or four months things will get better for this person. Don’t worry anymore about that situation. You worry too much. There is negativity from a past life pulling at you. This negativity wants to pull you down. It’s very bad, this negativity.

“You’re going to have a long and healthy life and I don’t think you’ll be alone when you get old.” She lays down nine more cards over the original nine. Since I have no idea what the pips mean to her, I can’t tell how this overlay affects the information already contained in the first series, but the reading turns decidedly darker now. We’ll get money, but it won’t last. Jealousy is an issue in my relationship. Children are mentioned, and she asks me if I’ve had an abortion. I say “no,” but as I do I feel vulnerable and exposed, as though my brown hair and average body and middle-class looks bespeak a certain predictable sexual history. She tells me to beware of a person named Steve or John. “Do you know a Steve or a John?” I don’t, but apparently these potential foes must be guarded against for reasons that are not specified.

I need “research,” she tells me, “into the source of the problem.” She can do more research for me, but I would have to come back to see her again. This time, it would be better for me if I bought special bath salts from her to begin the process of “spiritual cleansing” I require. I tell her that I don’t think I can afford anything more than the reading and she presses me. “This negativity is very bad and it is coming from a past life. There may be someone from a past life who is attacking you with negativity.” She tells me that I need to meditate and that the bath salts will help. Additionally, she has crystals I could buy. I need to put these crystals under my bed at
night to ward off the negative energy that is being directed at me. I ask her how much the crystals cost and she tells me twenty dollars. In truth, I don’t have more money in my wallet aside from the cost of the reading and I use this as my excuse not to buy anything more.

The cards are scooped from the table. The entire reading has taken about twenty minutes and without indication that I will buy additional services or items from her, my time is up. I tell her “thank you,” and she says, “come back any time,” and that I should think about having her do some research because “it’s very important.” She hands me her business card, which simply reads “Lisa: Spiritual Advisor” and a phone number. There is no address on the card, and I ask her how long she’s had her shop. Curtly, she tells me “twelve years.” Months later when I check back for Lisa’s shop, the store is closed. The psychic sign remains, but it doesn’t look the shop is open for business.
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