

“Una Nueva Forma de Vida”:
Seeking “New Spiritualities” in Urban Mexico -
A Note on Research in Progress¹
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Consider that religion is not simply a set of beliefs or a set of dogmatic views, but a matrix for subject formation whose final form is not determined in advance; a discursive matrix for the articulation and disputation of values, and a field of contestation. Judith Butler (2008:13)²

1. A Brief Overview

Over the past twenty-five years, a flurry of economic, political, and social activity has transformed the religious landscape across Latin America (Berryman 1995; Garma Navarro 2002). Anthropological research³ among rural populations has documented these trends extensively in relation to the spread of Protestant, Evangelical, and Pentecostal Christianity. Although this focus has enriched our understanding of important socio-religious changes taking place, it offers a rather limited representation of the variety of spiritual expressions thriving throughout the region, particularly in urban areas. My research in Mexico focuses on what could be loosely categorized as “New Age” spiritualities, or what some scholars call “new forms of enchantment,” which have flourished predominantly in metropolitan centers within the context of a post-industrial service-oriented economy, a state discourse of “self-care,” and a social climate fraught with economic uncertainty (Lomnitz 2003; Comaroff & Comaroff 2000).⁴

Indeed, from Guadalajara to Mexico City, urban dwellers have been concurrently engaged in an amalgam of fee-based experiential healing therapies, Eastern traditions, and metaphysical practices that they often identify interchangeably as “new spiritualities,” “new age,” and “alternative therapies.” These range from astrology and angelology to yoga and reflexology; Reiki healing and energy channeling to Tarot and coffee readings; meditation and visualization to floral essences therapy.⁵ Through their economic and social investment in these spiritual labors, social actors throughout urban Mexico mobilize, consume, circulate, and contest various ideas about and representations of personhood, modernity, and the production of knowledge. In Mexico City, for example, practitioners generally refer to their embodied practices as opportunities to (re-)evaluate who they are, (re-)enact who they wish to be, and (re)claim a “new way/form of life” (*una nueva forma de vida*)⁶. Based in this megalopolis, my investigation will trace these embodied subjectivities in and across diverse communities in order to unravel the social, economic, and political dimensions that intersect both local and trans/local practices.

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2. Historical Threads

Some scholars refer to the transnational proliferation of New Age spiritualities as the “spiritual revolution” of late-modern times (Brown 2007; Heelas & Woodhead 2005). They characterize the emergence of New Age spiritualities on United States college campuses in the early 1970s as a “new revivalist religious impulse” that drew largely from the Human Potential and counterculture movements of the 1950s and 1960s, respectively (Melton 1992:18).⁷ As early as the mid-1970s, New Age literature and music flowed into Mexico alongside other U.S.-based alternative cultural expressions that were widely popularized through the use of radio, television, and print media, the counterculture hippie movement, the consumption of rock-and-roll music, and an interest in indigenous traditions (Gutiérrez Zúñiga 1996:35). Mexican scholars who have conducted extensive field research over the past decade in Mexico suggest that some of the first New Age groups there were founded by foreigners, mostly Americans, who travelled to Mexico with desires to spread “new knowledge and techniques” (De la Torre 2006:33)—specifically, a “do-it-yourself” ideology (Gutiérrez Zúñiga 1996:28)—that would offer individuals, mostly Roman Catholics, personal ways of creating meaning and spiritual fulfillment in their lives, thus providing a potential alternative to institutionalized religious traditions and doctrines. In her ethnographic study of Guadalupe New Age groups, Gutiérrez Zúñiga (1996) observed that those in Mexico who initially engaged with these self-help/self-mastery ideals were, much like their U.S. counterparts, primarily university educated middle-class youth. She claims that their access to educational and mediated forums granted these and other privileged Mexicans greater opportunities to distance themselves from an unstable political and economic climate and “insert themselves in a global and cosmopolitan culture, or, at least, [a] multicultural [one]” (ibid:12).⁸

Since the 1970s, the promulgation of New Age spiritualities has developed into a multi-million dollar commercial industry that influences millions worldwide through educational, business, and health care forums (Carrette & King 2005; Aldred 2002; Ramstedt 2007). Baer (2003) describes the increased visibility in terms of a “marketed social movement,” which does not make claim to any one founder, leader, institution, or any one specific body of knowledge that delineates its ideologies and practices to participants (Sarrías Mosso 1993:11). Instead, it draws upon a rather diverse milieu of philosophies, traditions, and activities that originate in different parts of the world and at different points in time. Despite how diffuse these engagements may appear superficially, a relatively cohesive discourse rests at the core of participants’ worldview: the idea of “self-spirituality”—that is, “the belief that the self itself is sacred” (Aupers & Houtman 2006:205).⁹ To this end, the self emerges as both the source of and site for making truth and meaning—“a sacred kernel, ‘unpolluted’ by culture, history or society” (ibid:204).

This emphasis on the self has led some scholars to characterize New Age spiritualities as “fully privatized,” “purely individualistic,” and “socially

insignificant.”¹⁰ These renderings, however, deploy a particular taken-for-granted construction of the self, which is in fact linked historically, culturally, and socially to liberal Western discourses of modernity. What these authors implicitly assume is that *all* practitioners *everywhere* conceptualize the self in the same way—that is, as an autonomous, essentialist, and unchanging phenomenon. Such claims are largely the result of analytic inquiries that engage only *ideas* of New Age spiritualities—in the abstract—as opposed to their actual employment in *practice*. In order to elicit more nuanced meanings and representations of the self and the interrelated social processes involved in the practice of self-making, we are rightly advised by Heelas to direct further attention to the emotions, “experiences, and self-understandings of participants, their socio-cultural backgrounds, and the operation of the milieu itself” in and across specific social and cultural contexts (2006:238).

3. Research in Local Context: Mexico City

Though the production, consumption, and circulation of new spirituality/new age/alternative therapeutic practices have gained global attention through the use of mass-mediated technologies and social networks, their presence has gone virtually undetected in official statistics at the local level (De la Torre & Gutiérrez Zúñiga 2007). Mexico’s 2000 census returns, for example, indicate that approximately 9 out of 10 people living in Mexico City are Catholic (INEGI 2000). However, given that these surveys restrict the ways responses are elicited, such figures do not adequately account for those individuals who may engage simultaneously in multiple practices. Recent scholarship suggests that as many as 62% of the city’s self-identified Catholics pursue concomitantly these and other non-conventional forms of knowledge (Gutiérrez Martínez 2005, 2008).¹¹ Through word of mouth, the Internet, public and cable television, the radio, and free monthly distributions of magazines such as *El Buscador* (The Seeker) and *En Tiempo Presente* (In the Present Time), people learn about hundreds of costly seminars, conferences, and workshops held within commercial venues and “holistic” (i.e., “whole person” or “mind-body-spirit”) human development centers that dot middle-class and affluent neighborhoods throughout the city. In recent years, however, weekly programs in Tai Chi, Qigong, Kundalini and Hatha yoga, and Reiki have become readily available for a nominal fee in most of the state-subsidized “Cultural Houses” (*Casas de Cultura*) located throughout the city’s sixteen boroughs (*delegaciones*). These community spaces tend to be frequented by lower-income peoples who might not otherwise have access to such services in their neighborhoods.

In a statement issued in October 2008, commemorating the completion of an approximately US\$ 200,000 facility renovation of one of his borough’s *Casas de Cultura*, the Iztacalco leftist government head, Erasto Ensástiga Santiago, asserted that such spaces offered people “dignified” and “appropriate” forums for social and cultural development (*desarrollo social y cultural*), which in this *Casa* involved English and French language study, violin playing, and lessons in ballet, capoeira¹,

¹ An African-Brazilian tradition combining music, dance and martial arts (DJK).

origami, and yoga. Public officials like him, he argued, were responsible for creating these opportunities for their communities.¹² In his view, this type of “cultural” initiative was essential in enriching the surrounding urban area, countering drug addiction and delinquency, improving neighbor relations, and promoting higher standards of living among borough residents. Incidentally, during that same year, this *delegación* led all other boroughs in the Federal District in incidents of auto theft (Román 2009).

In a country that has promoted the “cultural logics” of late capitalism since the early 1980s (Jameson 1991; Foucault 1991), it is not uncommon to hear people of diverse social and political positions explain increased outbreaks of crime in lower middle- and working-class Mexican boroughs like Iztacalco by pointing to the individual—and his or her supposed “cultural” deficits—as the bearer of responsibility and change, without considering, for example, some of the broader conditions that shape people’s behavior, such as poverty, low wages, and high unemployment (Novelli 1990; Arteaga & Yutzil González 2009; Encinas 2009).¹³ Albeit inexact, such accounts offer insight into the logics social actors deploy in perceiving, reasoning, and contesting the social worlds in which they live (García Canclini 1996:108). Thus, what makes Ensástiga’s commentary remarkable is not so much the fact that he recognizes the state’s role in mediating social inequalities through some investment in social services, but that he (and presumably others in similar political positions) would consider the presence (or absence) of alternative therapies and “new” spiritual modes of activity like yoga and Reiki indicative of whether (or not) residents had, in his words, “adequate” access to the “cultural” and “social” resources needed to develop and lead “dignified” lives.¹⁴ The fact that these deeply engrained (non-Mexican) practices are being mobilized to function as a discursive instrument of progress whereby subjects emerge as “culturally” re-formed and thereby “fully human,” speaks powerfully to the social, political, and moral significance they have come to occupy in Mexico.¹⁵

Interestingly, one of the few boroughs in Mexico City that does not offer these kinds of spiritual practices as a form of “cultural development” is Miguel Hidalgo. Known by its residents as “The Pride of the Capital” (*El Orgullo de la Capital*) and tagged as such by local officials,¹⁶ this borough is governed by the ruling right-wing conservative political party and provides residence to some of the most socio-economically privileged peoples living in the city. When asked whether activities like yoga or Tai Chi were offered in any of its “Cultural Houses,” one civil servant responded adamantly with a definitive “No”. *If*, he declared, the local government were to support such activities, the “Lighthouse of Knowledge” centers (*Faros del Saber*), which housed books and computers for public use, would have presumably been a more suitable venue. Though I have yet to verify his assumption, I was struck by his association of these spiritual practices with knowledge, literacy, and technology—enacted as a self-motivated enterprise of sorts—as opposed to collective and “dignified” engagements with “culture.”

The perception of this official is suggestive of wider social and economic currents in Mexico City. Not only does affluence abound in Miguel Hidalgo, but so do many of the holistic centers, new age bookstores, and other privately-owned establishments that cater specifically to these spiritual services and alternative therapies. Promoting a neoliberal economic discourse of free markets and free enterprise, the local governing body insists on minimizing the availability of public services that might potentially interfere with the day-to-day operations of these private businesses. Thus, what often results involves a convergence of public and private conceptual domains such that, as another civil servant intimated, public municipal space becomes readily available for rent to yoga instructors and the like who wish to impart private therapy sessions.

Some independent proprietors also employ this consumer capitalist logic in order to suggest that the “spiritual” spaces they operate are public forums, open and accessible to *everyone* wishing to enter. In this vein, the owner of a successful new age publishing center, vegetarian restaurant, and chain of bookstores informed me that, “Our mission is to offer good services and useful messages. We make information and options accessible to all, [but] the people ultimately decide what they like.” When I pressed her further to tell me about these “people” her stores and books generally attracted, she claimed that those individuals who were both “literate” and who had a “certain cultural level” (*cierto nivel cultural*) were most willing to seek the alternative ideologies she and her twenty-year old, family-operated company espoused.¹⁷ Other entrepreneurs who may be slightly more willing to acknowledge some of the social and economic constraints people encounter in their involvement with these “spiritual economies” (Rudnycky 2009) often offer free consultations to the public—what they call a “Day of Service and Healing” (*Día de Servicio y Sanación*). One woman I met travelled for more than three hours by bus each week from her shantytown community located on the outskirts of Mexico City to receive an hour of free care from a floral essence therapist who operated a holistic center out of his private home in Lomas de Chapultepec, one of the wealthiest and most exclusive neighborhoods in all of Mexico City. In order to better understand the dynamics involved in these public and private acts of care, it is necessary to explore what different social actors have at stake as they invest themselves, their families, neighbors, borough communities, and nation in these various modes of therapy—what most participants characterize as “a new way/form of life.”

During preliminary fieldwork, many of my upper-class informants commented on their feelings of helplessness in the face of uncertainty and growing social misery. Some also spoke of the ridicule their partners directed towards them for engaging in such “foolish” pursuits. By contrast, my middle- and working-class informants spoke of joblessness, of their dependency on credit cards and other forms of debt relations, and of living in a systemic state of insecurity as their access to health services declines. The contemporary context in which Mexicans live has led me to question why some would tolerate disrespectful conditions at home and why others would be willing to accumulate financial and social debt in order to pursue these alternative

therapies and new spiritual endeavors.

4. Future Research in Motion: Multi-Dimensional Approaches and Contributions

Some scholars have rendered urbanites as consumers of spirituality, searching instrumentally through a basket of beliefs and choosing the ones needed to satisfy personal whims and needs.¹⁸ However, viewing this repertoire as a matter of preference does not consider the structural context within which those beliefs and the individuals who hold them are rooted. Other scholars have concentrated on issues of political economy and on large-scale processes like globalization, urbanization, and modernization, but have largely treated these as abstract and totalizing forces.¹⁹ Hence, their frequent positioning of subjects as agents of adaptation as opposed to agents of change.²⁰ Finally, neither of these perspectives analyzes the meanings and experiences participants themselves associate with such practices.²¹ Framed largely by an analytic tradition which, like Foucault's, "rarely construes the subject in relation to affective or emotional response", such approaches do little to engage "interest in the subject's inner life" (Bristow, cited in Wardlow 2006:18). In short, if our aim is to break from these overly deterministic conceptual models, not only must we interrogate timeless and lifeless renderings of dynamically lived trans/local processes like globalization and neoliberal capitalism, but we must also challenge, as Biehl points out, Western epistemological traditions of describing "the micro-arrangements of individual and collective existence...solely in terms of...power arrangements and rational choice" (2007:378).

Through ethnographic study in Mexico City, I will attempt to chart a course in between the foregoing approaches and refine our understanding of the complex interplay between trans/local structural transformations, social histories, experiential modes of knowing, and everyday practices of self-making. By attending to the interlocking associations between embodiment, experience, and intimacy, on one hand, and broader social forces on the other, I aim to unravel the personal and political relations through which contemporary forms of engagement with new spiritualities and alternative therapies are mediated. How these mediations inform and are informed by diverse social actors at different moments and in distinct, yet interrelated, spaces of operation—from state-funded Cultural Houses in low-income communities to multinational commercial forums in upper middle-class neighborhoods to private holistic centers and residences in more affluent locales—will figure as a further line of inquiry in my work. To this end, I will explore how supposedly personal engagements with the spiritual—framed by some actors as "culture" and others as "knowledge"—implicate interpersonal relations and different social configurations of power and personhood—hence, a "new way/form of life." In this process, as Heelas notes, acts like "sharing and caring," which figure prominently in what he identifies as "spiritualities of life" discourse and practice, function as "vehicles for the exercise of power" both in and between various sites of experience (2006:237).

Tracking the emotional terrains of public interaction, the political terrains of personal experience, and the dialogical intersections between the two (Bakhtin 1981), requires new ethnographic approaches. As an embodied “[discursive] matrix for subject formation” (Butler 2008:13),²² new spiritualities proliferating in Mexico must be charted both conceptually and methodologically in accordance with the ways they are mobilized in actual practice. We do a disservice to the vibrant processes constituted in their complex lived engagements by circumscribing our analysis around a fixed analytic field of observation and participation. Rendering their multiple, shifting articulations requires us to (re-)develop ways of conceptualizing “the field”; of working within and without its multi-dimensional axes of intimacy, abstraction, connection, and distance; and of representing these multiple scales in written form. To this end, my project calls for ethnographic experimentation—for *doing* what Comaroff & Comaroff denote as “ethnography on an awkward scale” (2003:154). This multi-dimensional approach is attentive to situated contexts, but not to the point whereby our ethnographic gaze is limited to *only* the concrete and particular. Rather, it involves an operation of multiple trajectories that captures in the study of new spiritualities the intersections between diverse interests, social relations, ways of knowing, and possibilities of being—in short, a “new way/form of life.”

In sum, this study complements the fine research that sociologists and others are conducting to further the exploration of similar spiritual expressions in urban Latin America. It attempts to unravel the ties between trans/local systems of meaning and the local social, political, and economic processes that shape them, thus contributing to recent scholarship of religion. Building on an emerging body of research in anthropology, my project also helps to advance a conceptual and methodological framework that I hope will bridge material and emotional domains of subjectivity. Finally, it broadens our understanding of religious expressions in an effort to limit the pejorative commentaries directed toward some practitioners in Mexico, and to explain why others sacrifice so much in order to participate.

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Notes

¹ “*Uná nueva forma de vida*” is a common refrain my informants use to describe what their “new spiritualities” mean to them. In English, this expression would be appropriately translated as “a new way of life.” In order to maintain the subtle reference to subject formation in the Spanish, I prefer the more literal English translation, “a new form of life.” As a way of compromise, I translate the statement in this report as “a new way/form of life.”

This report is based on library research I conducted during September–December 2007, while participating in a graduate scholar exchange at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana–Iztapalapa in Mexico City, and on two short-term field visits to Mexico in 2008 and 2009. Since submitting it for publication my interests have shifted towards medical anthropology. Based in Mexico City, my dissertation examines how an assortment of so-called “cultural therapies” is displacing biomedicine as the Mexican state’s prescription of choice to treat what officials call “culturally transmitted diseases” (like diabetes and hyper tension) among the urban poor. I investigate the social and political effects of programs that offer Mexicans state-subsidized yoga, tai chi, and qigong over biomedical treatment for their illnesses. In this process, I aim to explore the motivations for modernization among the state and populace that result ironically in citizens’ consumption of extra-medical practices, even as these campaigns blame them for their poverty and sickness.

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² Butler’s notion of religion as a “discursive matrix” is particularly helpful as I explore different ways to conceptualize the complex processes that shape social actors’ engagements with “new spiritualities” discourse in urban Mexico. McGuire (2007:69) suggests the importance of recognizing the ways in which these discursive articulations and contestations are “embodied, involving [peoples’] senses, emotions, and memories.” By attending to embodied practice in this way and to peoples’ “everyday experiences as whole, embodied persons,” McGuire offers us a lens complementing Butler’s for comprehending the “work” of religious discourse “at multiple levels” of interaction—that is, “on bodies, emotions, and social relations” (ibid:71;64). This perspective, as she concludes, offers a valuable heuristic tool to understand the “many practices today that are outside religious institutional contexts, yet may be equally important ways of being religious” (ibid:74).

³ See, for example, Gutiérrez Zúñiga (1996); Hernández Madrid (2005); De la Torre (2006); Carozzi (2007).

⁴ New Age spirituality exceeds and eludes analytic categorization, a fact reflected in the various descriptors scholars have used to characterize it—e.g., as a “world view” (Gil & Nistal 1994); a “religious innovation” (Hervieu-Léger 1996); a “metaphysical religion” (Albanese 2007); a “multi-religious phenomenon” (Masferrer Kan 2000); “neo-esoteric religiosity” (Dawson 2007); “spiritualities of life” (Heelas 2006); a “holistic milieu” (Heelas & Woodhead 2005); a “historically shaped tradition” (Schmidt 2005); and so on. The fact that such diverse representations abound encourages me to move beyond a singular account of New Age spirituality, and instead explore its plural manifestations—as New Age spiritualities—in specific cultural, social, and historical contexts.

⁵ In an effort to preserve some semblance of what I have observed “on-the-ground” in Mexico City, I employ the terms “new spiritualities,” “new age,” and “alternative therapies” interchangeably, just as my informants do. In this report I follow Freeman’s representational strategy of not capitalizing the term “new age” as a means by which to refer to current engagements with various non-conventional, intimate spiritual practices “intended to salve the stresses and struggles of contemporary neoliberal life” in specific situated contexts (2007:261). I only employ “New Age” to index the wider historical and transnational undercurrents with which many of these local manifestations are associated.

⁶ See note 1 above.

⁷ New Age spiritualities promote some of the same values that 19th century U.S. religious liberals (e.g., Transcendentalists, Spiritualists, Theosophists) advocated, including “individual aspiration after mystical experience...; the valuing of silence, solitude, and serene meditation; the immanence of the transcendent—in each person and in nature; the cosmopolitan appreciation of religious variety as well as unity in diversity;...[and] an emphasis on creative self-expression” (Schmidt 2005:12). In the most general terms, New Age practitioners encourage personal autonomy, “self-actualization,” and a balance of “mind-body-spirit”; highlight the teachings of non-Western philosophies; emphasize the need for emotional expression, physical awareness, and harmony with nature; and propagate the belief in universal divine energy that is located within each person (Carozzi 1999:23).

⁸ De la Torre (2006:33) indicates that it was not until the 1980s that other activities were initiated in Mexico, combining New Age spiritual pursuits with Mexican cultural themes. *Neomexicanidad*, as this movement is known among scholars and participants alike, focuses predominantly on (re)discovering the traditions, knowledge, and wisdom of pre-Hispanic civilizations in an effort to commune with nature and achieve harmony with the universe.

⁹ See also Heelas (1996) and (2006).

¹⁰ See, for example, Bruce (1995) and (2002).

¹¹ See also Sánchez Hernández (2005); Gutiérrez Zúñiga (2000); Fortuny & De Mola (2000).

¹² <http://www.iztacalco.df.gob.mx/search.aspx?search=yoga&remarca=yoga>, Accessed 24 January 2009.

¹³ While most scholars recognize the challenges involved in quantitatively gauging levels of crime, insecurity, and violence that take place in Mexico City, they do not dismiss the fact that feelings of angst and impotency have been circulating among residents of various social class sectors since the late 1990s (Nivón 1998:150-151; Gutmann 2002:137-141; Alvarado Mendoza 2007). Gutmann, for example, suggests that “feelings of isolation and frustration” expressed among his working-class friends do not necessarily speak to official statistics, but rather to these peoples’ “perceived ability to control social events of any kind in their lives” (2002:140;137).

¹⁴ None of these new spiritual practices and alternative therapies I mention in this report are, in fact, “new” to Mexico. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, groups of young male artists and intellectuals convened regularly to express their contempt for the then ruling dictator, Porfirio Díaz, who they criticized for “lacking humanistic...values,” for remaining “rigid” in terms of public access to education, and for maintaining “metaphysical concerns” at the margins of public discourse (Monsiváis 1976:323). Subsequently, in 1909, “the first public center of culture” was founded “to give social formation to a new age [*nueva era*] of thought...[and] for the cultivation of new knowledge [*saber nuevo*]” (323). Monsiváis suggests that this elite intellectual organization “introduced distinct criteria” in its approach to understanding the importance and diverse meanings of culture—indeed, these young men “were the first to approach Buddha and oriental mysticism” (323). In light of the similarities between past and

present discourses on “culture,” it is possible that these early 20th century formulations might have served in some way as a precursory model to the *Casas de Cultura* existing today in Mexico. What we, then, might consider “new” today in Mexico is the greater degree to which both men and women of relatively modest means have access to different practices that were once only relegated to the elite. See also Krauze (1987).

¹⁵ For similar claims about the social and public significance of new age spiritualities in Western contexts, see Houtman & Aupers (2007), Aupers & Houtman (2006), and Heelas (2006).

¹⁶ <http://www.miguelhidalgo.gob.mx/>, Accessed: 24 January 2009.

¹⁷ My previous research among professional middle-class Mexico City residents indicates that the “culture” to which so many of my informants refer is not learned formally through any educational institution; rather, it consists of the models, manners, and values that are taught in the home and passed down over many generations (Maldonado 2007). In this manner, as Parker points out, “persons of wealth and power always construct the fiction of their inherent moral superiority. High culture, etiquette, and all the other classic hallmarks of status serve to...buttress the myth that some people are the natural better of others” (2006:6).

¹⁸ See, for example, Zaidman (2007), Siqueira (2005), De la Torre & Gutiérrez Zúñiga (2005a), Mendoza Álvarez (2003), Possamai (2003), York (2001), and Lau (2000).

¹⁹ See, for example, Dawson (2007), De la Torre & Gutiérrez Zúñiga (2005b), Giménez (1996), Hanegraaf (2001), and Pazderic (2004).

²⁰ But, see Lindquist (2006), Brown (1997), and Bender (2007) for more contextualized understandings of rather complex contemporary urban expressions of spirituality. Lindquist (2006), in particular, highlights quite effectively the ways in which participants of folk religions and healing practices in urban Russia shape and are shaped by local social conditions.

²¹ But, see Luhrmann (1989) for an ethnographic account that attempts to unravel the cognitive processes involved in becoming a practitioner of modern-day ritual magic and healing among well-educated middle-class British professionals.

²² See Note 3 above.