

A Mercury Retrograde Kind of Day Exploring Astrology in Contemporary New Age Spirituality and American Social Life

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Abstract

Astrology is a feature of everyday conversation and the local spiritual scene in Sedona, Arizona, a small town renowned for its “vortexes”. As part of a variegated new age spirituality, astrology “works” in three main ways that are examined in this article. It is an explanatory model for misfortune; a symbolic system; and a source of epistemic capital. A series of well-known ethnographic studies of African divination are used to contextualise astrology as an American form of divination. Based on almost two years of participant observation fieldwork in Northern Arizona, the ethnographic material presented in this article illuminates the question of why astrology continues to be a relevant and useful practice for Americans, despite its widespread rejection by political and scientific authorities.

Keywords

Astrology; United States of America; Ethnography; Esotericism; New Age Spirituality; Divination

Introduction: Mercury Retrograde

In the summer of 2012 in the Uptown district of Sedona, Arizona, in a small apartment with walls lined with bookcases of CDs by the Grateful Dead and other 1960s artists, Jack was holding a tutorial class in Western astrology. Two cats inhabited the room; Buddha, a fifteen-year old with a kidney problem who sat almost motionless casting a disdainful look over the room, and Kama, a very playful kitten who spent the evening jumping around the furniture and disrupting the altar of candles and crystals on the floor. Jack opened the class with a joke about Mercury Retrograde, then by way of validation he told a story about an airport worker he met who had heard of it and acknowledged that there were many more flight delays and problems during that time. I was unfamiliar with the term “Mercury Retrograde” at this time, only a month into my fieldwork, so I did not understand the reference. Throughout my twenty-two months’ ethnographic fieldwork in Northern Arizona from July 2012–April 2014, the phrase Mercury Retrograde appeared frequently in everyday conversation, in the same manner as Jack used it, without explanation as to what it was and as a quick explanation for misfortune. A barista in the central coffee shop in town described a day when they only had coffee and juice on offer as a “real Mercury Retrograde day”. During a conference about aliens and ascension, technical difficulties with the live feed transmitting the proceedings online, which left the organisers reliant on cell phones for a wifi signal, were ascribed to Mercury Retrograde. Towards the conclusion of my fieldwork, at the end of a week that included heavy monsoon rain and thunderstorms, a near-miss head-on collision on the road, and an encounter with a venomous brown recluse spider lurking on a garden chair, I even found myself suggesting to an acquaintance that perhaps Mercury Retrograde did have a negative effect on earthly events.

Planets in the solar system at certain times of the year appear to move in the opposite direction to the other planets in the system when perceived from the perspective of the Earth. Mercury Retrograde occurs when Mercury is observed in this way. Retrograde refers to the appearance of the motion of the planet and is contrasted to prograde motion. However, the direction of planetary motion never changes, there is only the appearance of a change in motion caused by the change in the Earth’s position relative to the sun and the other planets. Mercury Retrograde is an observable astronomical phenomenon that occurs approximately four times a year, which has acquired a social meaning in Sedona derived from astrological lore that this phenomenon is a cause of misfortune, particularly in terms of travel and communications.¹

¹ “Mercury Retrograde: 2017”, *The Old Farmer’s Almanac*, accessed 13 October 2017, <https://>

Jack's reference to the airport worker evoked this emphasis: as a hub of travel and communication in contemporary American life, if Mercury Retrograde did have these effects they would be felt most acutely at an airport.

Astrology was pervasive in everyday discourse in Sedona, a small town renowned as a “new age mecca”.² It was common for people to know their sun signs, and in many cases their moon signs and rising signs, according to the Western, also known as tropical, astrological chart.³ Comments, stories, and jokes involving Mercury Retrograde were common throughout the year, occurring whether, astronomically, Mercury was in retrograde motion or not. It was not a comment that reflected the actual position of the planet; it was a comment that expressed a generalised sense of misfortune, akin to saying one was having a “bad day” or had woken up “on the wrong side of bed”.

This pervasiveness contrasts with the status of astrology in America more generally. Astrology is not part of a “culture of accepted claims”.⁴ It is not used for political decision making without controversy, for example.⁵ Astrology is a form of “rejected knowledge”, on which Wouter Hanegraaff bases his well-known account of esotericism.⁶ Yet in Sedona, Mercury Retrograde was an ordinary expression, so ordinary it was often deployed without any further explanation or contextualisation, indicating an assumption on the part of the speaker that it would be received and understood. In other words, it was accepted to the point of normativity. On the one hand, astrology is outside of the culture of accepted claims, a form of rejected knowledge, yet during my fieldwork it was clearly present and accepted as part of everyday sociality, even operating as an explanatory model for misfortune.

www.almanac.com/content/mercury-retrograde. “Mercury Retrograde: how to survive a 3-week communication crisis”, *Astro-Style*, accessed 13 October 2017, <http://astrostyle.com/mercury-retrograde/>.

² Adrian Ivakhiv, *Claiming Sacred Ground: Pilgrims and Politics in Glastonbury and Sedona* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 147.

³ This means the position of the sun and moon in the zodiac, the band of twelve constellations used in Western astrology, at the date of their birth. The rising sign is also called the ascendant, which is the sign and degree ascending on the eastern horizon at the specific time and location of birth.

⁴ Olav Hammer, “Astrology V: 20th Century”, in *The Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 137.

⁵ Nancy Reagan consulted astrologer Joan Quigley when she was First Lady, to help protect her husband; this was revealed later and proved controversial. See “Nancy Reagan turned to astrology in White House to protect her husband”, *Los Angeles Times*, accessed 6 March 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-nancy-reagan-astrology-20160306-story.html>.

⁶ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

In his overview of contemporary Western astrology, Olav Hammer remarks that the literature on it tends to be written by uncritical proponents or sceptical opponents motivated by the desire to undermine it empirically; what is lacking is a treatment of “contemporary astrology as a culturally constructed divinatory art”.⁷ Kirstine Munk’s work on contemporary astrology in Denmark provides a strong contribution to developing this approach.⁸ In considering astrology in religious terms, even if her informants often explicitly denied this interpretation, Munk analyses modern astrology as a symbolic system, as ritual practice, and as a cosmological framework that provides a creative and productive forum for clients to think through their “self” and life path. In this article I continue this approach, framing astrology in Sedona as a culturally constructed American form of divination, one that has a level of acceptability in new age spirituality and thereby provides a source of epistemic capital and social power to those who engage with it. Astrology is also a part of the general culture in Sedona; it contributes to the way spirituality is expressed, developed, and defined in both individuals’ lives and on a wider, social level.

In this article I seek to analyse astrology as a form of divination through engagement with theories of esotericism and with anthropological theory. The latter is well developed on the subject of divination, particularly in relation to African societies, and anthropological works referred to in this article provide cross-cultural comparisons through which we can see contemporary American astrology from different perspectives. The first section advances the idea that astrology in Sedona operates as an explanatory model for misfortune, and engages with the ethnographic material by E.E. Evans-Pritchard on the Azande, which is the foundational work in anthropology linking divination to theories of causality. The second part expands the analysis to consider aspects of Western astrology in terms of a symbolic system, with reference to Victor Turner’s work on the Ndembu. Finally, the third section suggests that in the particular cultural context of Sedona, astrology can grant social power and epistemic capital as a specific form of knowledge that is highly valued within new age spirituality; this point is illuminated through a comparison with astrology among the Merina people of Madagascar, as outlined by Maurice Bloch. Using these well-known examples of anthropological analyses of African divination as comparisons brings out the ethnographic data on astrology in Sedona to reveal how esotericism plays out in a contemporary social milieu.

⁷ Hammer, “Astrology V”, 136–41.

⁸ Kirstine Munk, *Sign of the Times: Cosmology and Ritual Practice in Modern, Western Astrology* (Copenhagen: Forlaget Museum Astrologicum, 2017)

An ongoing anthropological concern is looking at how things that seem irrational have a purpose and therefore make sense within the social context in which they are present. The most recent anthropological theorising on divination, particularly the work of Martin Holbraad on Cuban Ifá, has moved on to questions of truth.⁹ Ifá divination is true because it is powerful; it grants privileged access to a specific conceptual universe. Divination creates its own “world” that is irrevocably different from the empirical worldview of observing ethnographers. In this latter worldview, divination is not, indeed cannot be, true. Divination must be “explained away” by the ethnographer in order to make sense to Western audiences.¹⁰ Working within the recent trend in anthropological theorising called the ontological turn, Holbraad suggests that the question of truth in divination does not trouble those who use it; the gods grants them ample evidence.¹¹ In a different world, evidence of the efficacy of divination is plentiful, the question of whether the pronouncements of the diviner are true is therefore irrelevant.

In Sedona, there was equally little interest in the question of whether astrology was true. It was an accepted and useful part of the general spiritual culture. This is very different to the wider culture in America, where astrology is not held to be true. Is Sedona a different “world” from the rest of American society? What the ethnographic material I present here focuses on is how the stigmatised knowledge of astrology interacts with the epistemic orthodoxy beyond spirituality in Sedona. In this article I argue that astrology “works” in three distinct forms: as an explanatory model of causation, as a symbolic system, and as epistemic capital within a specific religious framework. The wider context in which it is rejected by the dominant culture in America is a necessary part of how astrology is a special form of knowledge. It is not a separate world with its own conception of truth, it is an enclave that defines its truth in dynamic contrast with the wider epistemic claims of American culture.

⁹ Martin Holbraad, *Truth in Motion: The Recursive Anthropology of Cuban Divination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

¹⁰ Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell, “Introduction: Thinking Through Things”, in *Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*, ed. Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell (London: Routledge, 2007), 1.

¹¹ Martin Holbraad, “Definitive Evidence, From Cuban Gods”, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14, no. s1 (April 2008): S94.

I. Explanatory Models

While making a case for the significance of astrology among people engaged with new age spirituality in Sedona, it is important to note that this social group is not the dominant one in the town. Sedona is a small town of approximately 17,000 people.¹² It is said to be home to a number of “vortexes”, sites of spiralling spiritual energy that draw in seekers. It is also a tourist resort and retirement community; not all of its residents subscribe to the idea of vortexes or new age spirituality in general; indeed those that do are a numerical minority in the town. However, the vortexes and Sedona’s spiritual reputation are part of its draw for tourists, with local guides giving tours of the four main vortex sites, and numerous new age stores in the Uptown shopping district selling crystals, psychic readings, and other spiritual goods and services. The new age is therefore a significant and visible part of the culture of Sedona with influence beyond the number of people who would self-identify as “new age”. Sedona is a town of many faces: Uptown is dominated by upscale resorts, restaurants, and timeshares; West Sedona has the services such as the schools, shops and post office; the Village of Oak Creek is populated mainly by retirees. The social power in the town is held more by the retirees than those interested in spirituality. It is an expensive place to live; the only significant source of employment is tourism, and many who come to Sedona on a spiritual journey stay for only a few months or years before moving on. Those that stay and own property tend to have already made their money elsewhere, and settle down in Sedona for its beautiful landscape and tranquil pace of life.

Thus, while Sedona is renowned as a “new age mecca”, in Adrian Ivakhiv’s phrase, it is not dominated by new age as Mecca is by Islam. During my fieldwork, I observed that new age spirituality was an aspect of the town that coexisted uneasily with the tourist industry, the snowbirds (people who travel south for the winter, especially retirees) and second home owners. The city council passed ordinances specifically aimed at keeping the “hippies” out of their charming resort town, such as banning camping within city limits and turning a trailer park into timeshares. There was a corresponding attempt by many who were

¹² The city of Sedona had 10,397 people as of the 2010 census (see <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/sedonacityarizona/PST045216>); however, the nearby community of the Village of Oak Creek is often included when local people talk about “Sedona”. It is only six miles to the south of the Sedona city limits, but it is in unincorporated Yavapai County and so counted separately on the census. It had a population of 6,147 as of 2010 (see <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/villageofoakcreekbigparkcdparizona/PST045216>). The estimate of 17,000 is the aggregate of the two communities’ populations.

engaged with new age spirituality not to call themselves “new agers”. Indeed it was more common for people who worked as psychic readers, or spent their time channelling alien consciousnesses from other dimensions, or liked to hike up to vortexes to meditate and contact their higher self, to tell me that they were not “new agers”. They called what they did “spirituality”, and I will use this emic term when referring to their practice. Through my fieldwork I came to understand spirituality as a constellation of beliefs and practices clustered around the central concept of “energy” as an all-pervasive force; “the universe” as a pantheistic conception of divinity; progressive stages of enlightenment described as a “spiritual path”; and a millenarian belief in a “new paradigm” replacing the “old paradigm”. The new paradigm is a reformulation of what was once called the imminent “new age” of peace and spiritual enlightenment. There are many treatments of new age that define the term differently, placing different emphases on whether it is a religious tradition or a form of spirituality, a well-defined movement or an amorphous trend, centred on the self or centred on millenarianism, from scholars differently placed in disciplines of history, sociology, and religious studies.¹³ Astrology played a significant role in the heterodox culture of spirituality in Sedona. Mercury Retrograde was part of everyday discourse on causality; people also consulted professional astrologers, had natal charts drawn up, and used these charts to help make decisions and interpret their personal trajectories and their sense of self.

Western astrology has a long history dating back to the second millennium BC in Mesopotamia, where it was used as a means of understanding the messages believed to be sent from the gods to the king about affairs of state.¹⁴ Astrology permeated European antiquity as both a form of science and of faith; the fate of humans was perceived to be absolutely determined by the laws of planetary movements.¹⁵ During the Middle Ages, there was some conflict between astrology

¹³ See Steve Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age: A History of Spiritual Practices* (London: Routledge, 2002); Ingvild Sælid Gilhus, Siv-Ellen Kraft, and James R. Lewis, eds. *New Age in Norway* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Steve Sutcliffe and Ingvild Sælid Gilhus, eds. *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion* (Abingdon: Acumen, 2013); Daren Kemp and James R. Lewis, eds. *Handbook of the New Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1996); Paul Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life: New Age Romanticism and Consumptive Capitalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008); Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010).

¹⁴ Kocku von Stuckrad, *Geschichte Der Astrologie: Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2003); Kirstine Munk, *Sign of the Times*, 82–101; Michael York, “Contemporary Academic Study of Astrology”, in *The Astrology Book: The Encyclopedia of Heavenly Influences*, ed. James R. Lewis (Canton: Visible Ink, 2003), 170–79.

¹⁵ Kocku von Stuckrad, “Jewish and Christian Astrology in Late Antiquity: A New Approach”,

and the Christian Church; the magical applications of astrology became seen as heretical while the use of astrological calculations in prediction and interpretation of astronomical events continued, and was seen as a way back to God.¹⁶ The early modern period in Europe saw a resurgence of astrology socially, alongside and part of the developments that were later called the “scientific revolution”.¹⁷ Johannes Kepler was an astrologer as well as an astronomer and mathematician, and it is unlikely that he would have developed his laws of planetary motion, which later underpinned Newton’s theory of universal gravitation, without his astrological interests. However, during the “Enlightenment” of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was excluded as unscientific and fraudulent. This low social status is part of the construction of scientific knowledge as excluding “the occult” that has come to define “the modern”.¹⁸ In the early 20th century, Theosophist Alan Leo formulated modern Western astrology, linking personality types to the position of the twelve zodiac constellations at birth in what became known as sun sign astrology.¹⁹ Its popularity rapidly expanded and astrology became the “lingua franca” of new age spirituality and the 1960s counterculture.²⁰ While there is much more that could be said than this brief resumé of astrological history, the important change is from institutional divination for political and religious matters of state to personal divination for matters of self and life-course. There is also an important link between astrology and the new age. The millenarian concept of “the new age” as prophesied by Theosophist Alice Bailey was based on astrological cycles; the new age was the change from the Age of Pisces to the Age of Aquarius.²¹

Numen 47 (2000): 1–40; Joelle-Frédérique Bara, “Astrology II: Antiquity”, in *The Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 110–119.

¹⁶ Kocku von Stuckrad, “Astrology III: The Middle Ages”, in *The Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 119–28.

¹⁷ William R. Newman and Anthony Grafton, “Introduction: The Problematic Status of Astrology and Alchemy in Premodern Europe” in *Secrets of Nature: Astrology and Alchemy in Early Modern Europe*, ed. William R. Newman and Anthony Grafton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 1–15; Nicholas Popper, “‘Abraham, Planter of Mathematics’: Histories of Mathematics and Astrology in Early Modern Europe”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67 no.1 (2006): 87–106.

¹⁸ On the problems with Weber’s “disenchantment thesis” of how magic and the occult disappeared in modernity, see Egil Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment: Scientific Naturalism and Esoteric Discourse, 1900–1939*, (Leiden: Brill: 2014); Jason Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

¹⁹ Nicholas Campion, *Astrology and Popular Religion in the Modern West: Prophecy, Cosmology and the New Age Movement* (London: Routledge, 2016); Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 360–66.

²⁰ York, “Contemporary Academic Study in Astrology”, 172.

²¹ Sarah Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 146; Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 302.

In Sedona, this change was more often called the ascension or the shift or the new paradigm rather than the “new age”. It retained an astrological correspondence, however. Jack, the professional astrologer mentioned above, told me that the shift is a change from brain- or intellect-centred action to heart- or intuition-centred action, which would increase social justice and general consciousness. It would not happen on a specific date though; at the time we first spoke in August 2012 many in Sedona were speculating that the shift would occur on 21 December 2012, which for some corresponded with the end of the Mayan Long Count calendar.²² Jack told me it would happen in the period from 2012 to 2015, when there would be a Uranus/Pluto convergence, the same as had occurred in the 1960s. This meant there would be a world revolution and a change in the economic structure. Banks would be run by the people and not for profit and there would be a single world currency. There were imminent mass arrests, which would mark the beginning of the end of the current system. On 4 August 2012 there would perhaps be some kind of announcement, possibly concerning disclosure of government knowledge of aliens. Jack was incorrect in this prediction but it illustrates the role astrology played in spirituality, combined with ideas about aliens, new economic systems, and the superiority of indigenous knowledge. Astrology provided a divinatory framework, a way of plotting when the expected large-scale social and spiritual changes would occur.

Western or tropical astrology focusing on sun signs was the most common form of astrology in Sedona. Other astrological charts were used less frequently. Vedic astrology uses the sidereal chart, which gains a degree every 72 years in order to account for the precession of the equinoxes. There is a certain amount (usually between 23 and 27) of degrees difference between the Vedic and Western astrological charts depending from which date the difference is calculated. The location of planets in the constellations is important in Vedic astrology; for this reason it is also called constellational astrology. The chart is still based on the position of the planets and constellations at birth, as in Western astrology. Also present were Chinese astrology, based on different animal signs assigned to different birth years; Mayan astrology utilising the Mayan astronomical calendar; and shamanic astrology, which uses practices derived from Harnerian core-shamanism for divination.²³

²² Anthony Aveni, *The End of Time: The Maya Mystery of 2012* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2009); Joseph Gelfer, *2012: Decoding the Countercultural Apocalypse* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2014).

²³ James R. Lewis, ed. *The Astrology Book: The Encyclopedia of Heavenly Influences* (Canton: Visible Ink, 2003); Daniel Giamario, *The Shamanic Astrology Handbook: The Archetypes and Symbols of the*

During my fieldwork, I conducted in-depth interviews with four different astrologers representing the Western, Vedic, Mayan, and shamanic schools, and had readings of my birth chart from three of them. Astrologers were not restricted to one type of astrology; they used different charts for different reasons or to answer different questions. Some drew “event charts”. For example, I was shown the chart for the USA on 11 September 2001, which Jack used to support 9/11 truther conspiracy theories that the attack on the World Trade Center was an “inside job”.²⁴ These different practices were not seen as in competition or mutually exclusive; as a Vedic astrologer called Michael told me; they were “different facets of the diamond” and each had something to contribute. There was not one that was better than the others. One of Michael’s best readings of his own chart came from a Chinese astrologer, who worked in a basement while smoking Lucky Strike cigarettes like something out of a Charlie Chan movie. The Vedic chart that Michael drew up for me looked very different from the Western astrological chart drawn up by Jack. Michael emphasised that the Vedic chart does not contradict Western astrology, it was just another way of looking at the same thing.

Michael worked in a small one-room office in a squat single-floored building in West Sedona constructed in the locally mandated adobe-coloured brick. It was located in a block beside a yoga studio, a massage therapy spa and a U-Haul rental centre. I had sent my birth details in advance by email when arranging the appointment: date, time, and location. He had my chart printed out when I arrived. He told me that he used a computer program to draw the chart, as he did not want to spend the hours required to do the math himself. No astrologer I spoke to worked out the calculations by hand anymore. To do so when computers could accomplish the same thing far quicker was seen as unnecessary. The aim of the reading was to give people possibilities and potentials rather than certainty. An astrologer needed a good “chart-side manner”, by which he meant presenting challenges in an amenable way. Sometimes a

Signs and Planets and Their Role in Shamanic Astrology (Tucson, AZ: JC Assoc Unlimited, 2014); Bruce Scofield and Barry C. Orr, *How to Practice Mayan Astrology* (Rochester, NY: Bear, 2006); José Argüelles, *The Mayan Factor: Path Beyond Technology* (Rochester, NY: Bear, 1987). Core-shamanism was elaborated by Michael Harner from the 1980s onwards as the “core” principles of shamanism that he claimed could be found in different cultural and historical variations, see Susannah Crockford, “Shamanisms and the Authenticity of Religious Experience,” *Pomegranate* 12, no. 2 (2010): 139–58.

²⁴ On 9/11 “truther” conspiracy theories see Peter Knight, “Outrageous Conspiracy Theories: Popular and Official Responses to 9/11 in Germany and the United States”, *New German Critique* 35, no. 1 (2008): 165–93.

difficult chart can mean an extraordinary life bred from struggles, whereas an easy chart can mean a dull, average life.

From interpreting my Vedic chart, Michael informed me that I would like working with my hands, in an occupation such as healing or gardening. My rising sign was Virgo, which was good for education, research, and healing. The moon was in Capricorn on my chart, and my sun sign was Aquarius. There was a Jupiter cycle in the chart that was going to keep me safe; it was good for research, education, and publishing. There was a lot of good fortune in my chart. My relationships should go slowly; if they moved too quickly this could cause problems. I was going to have a big relationship in the next two years. I would have two significant relationships or “marriages” in my life, although he stressed this did not necessarily mean legal marriage. A relationship with a controlling person would not work for me. Be careful of having children: if they came at the wrong time I could feel burdened. There might be a problem for my brother, maybe in four and a half years. I had good energy for teaching, counselling, or consulting. He recommended Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of arts, music, nature, and wisdom, as a good goddess for me to connect to.

Michael also practiced astrocartography, a locational astrological system that correlates elements of the natal chart with a map of the world to chart “personal geographic power zones”. It provided suggestions for the best places to go for various purposes, such as spiritual growth, career development, and success in relationships. This was also drawn up with a computer program. He gave me the printouts of the maps, which had lines that showed places I had been or could go. There was a Jupiter line through Sedona in 2016, meaning I might return to the town then. There was a moon line through Boston, which was associated with relationships, family, and home. A Mercury line was moving away from the UK towards Ireland, suggesting a possible relocation in that direction.

This reading provided a series of potential future situations for me, mostly revolving around my romantic relationships and my career prospects. This suggests that these are common topics of concern for those seeking information from astrologers, which is not surprising as these address the fundamental cultural concerns of love and money. Who will I spend my time with and what will I spend my time doing? Consistent with American cultural norms, these concerns are constructed as choices, as such they are seen as being open to change, fluctuating based on personal decisions yet affected by circumstances both within and beyond individual control. Divination grants another means of thinking through one’s choices in these pivotal matters. The addition of astrocartography added the dimension of travel to the list of concerns. Where

will I live and where will I go? Michael did not provide certainties, as he told me from the outset, but a range of possible futures. Will I go to Massachusetts? Will I become a gardener? Will I get married twice? These possibilities create space for imaginative and playful interpretation by the client, a way of thinking about their life path and sense of self in a new way, or perhaps even just from a slightly different angle. Munk's data on clients of astrological readers also showed that they adopted an adaptive approach, taking onboard what they wanted and ignoring what they did not want from a reading.²⁵ Much of the reading was couched in generalities that could apply to any person: who would want a relationship with a controlling person after all? I was fairly passive; in Munk's interviews with astrologers this was also raised as an issue, that a more active engagement by the client produces a more specific reading.²⁶

Michael grew up a Southern Baptist, but he said that he no longer believed in any religion. He had lived in Sedona and worked as an astrologer for over 20 years. He earned his living from astrological readings and leading spirituality-focused tours to Egypt, Greece, and Peru. He had a PhD in counselling psychology from the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco and had published articles, book chapters and books on astrology, and worked as a paid public speaker. His three children grew up in Sedona. He said that he practiced astrology because it helped people. He charged \$195–\$345 for a reading, but he also accepted barter or trade with locals in Sedona.²⁷ This was a common practice among people engaged in spirituality; they saw money as having negative energy whereas barter and trade had a higher energetic vibration. I saw Michael in the popular vegan restaurant in West Sedona after he had given a reading to one of the artisanal raw chocolate makers who worked there in exchange for a “Buddha's Yang” chocolate and a bag of cacao beans, which he said were good for sleep.

What this means is that Michael was successful, unusually so, for an astrologer and a spiritual practitioner in Sedona. He was by no means representative, as will be discussed further below; many astrologers found it very hard to make a living from their practice. Astrology was interwoven with the concerns of spirituality, it was one modality among many. A reading could be valued at hundreds of dollars or a bag of chocolates. It was the energy of the practice or object that mattered,

²⁵ Munk, *Sign of the Times*, 209.

²⁶ Munk, *Sign of the Times*, 191–93.

²⁷ I should note that I did not pay; he offered me a free reading, which I accepted without understanding the implicit expectation of a tip. He made no mention of a tip and offered the reading for free so as to help with my research, in which he expressed curiosity. When discussing this with others in Sedona later, they confirmed that he was likely expecting a tip of the same amount as he would normally charge or perhaps even more.

and astrology was credited with a high vibration. Michael also had more traditional institutional accreditations from astrological societies, a private “holistic” university, and publications in his field. This enabled him to live for a relatively long time in Sedona and he was able to support himself and his family consistently.

Despite Michael’s unusual level of success, the reading was typical in other ways. It took place in an otherwise nondescript office in a strip of commercial real estate. As mentioned above, he followed the ubiquitous practice among astrologers of setting up the appointment via email and using a computer program to draw up the chart. In ritual terms, it was not who did the calculations that was significant but the interpretation made from the chart. These interpretations did not give clear or direct predictions, but rather a frame of possibilities for me to imaginatively construct my present and future, specifically in terms of my emotional and work life. This frame could be used to explain what might happen in my life and why.

The deployment of cosmological frames of causality has been noted by anthropologists for many years. In the 1930s, Evans-Pritchard used ethnographic material on the Azande people of North Central Africa to describe how it was common to consult a diviner to find out the reason for misfortune, which was invariably attributed to witchcraft.²⁸ Witches were envious, socially outcast persons who exacted retribution through spells. Witchcraft was the reason why a granary fell on a specific person on a specific day, even if the direct cause was still understood to be termites destroying a strut. Evans-Pritchard’s theory was that witchcraft and divination formed an explanatory model for the Azande, a reckoning of causation. The Azande were able to use rationality based on empirical observation, but understood that such explanations could only answer the how of causality, not the why. This, for Evans-Pritchard, is why beliefs in witchcraft and divination persisted: to answer the why.

In Sedona, astrological readings presented possibilities that allowed clients to make their own explanations for causality. They provided a cosmological framework for ordering events in their life, observations about their character, and potentials for the future. Readings were descriptive rather than prescriptive. For the Azande, witchcraft was a way of making misfortune understandable. Astrology in Sedona also operated this way. The example presented in the introduction makes this clear. Mercury Retrograde was deployed as an explanation of why a day was going badly — why the wifi or the coffee machine was not working. A revealing difference is the agency attributed to misfortune; for the Azande it was personal, there was a witch casting spells that caused

²⁸ E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976).

misfortune, whereas in Sedona astrology granted causality to impersonal forces emanating from the celestial sphere. Agency in spirituality was attributed to all beings, human or not, because of the energy that constituted them. The energy of the planets was particularly significant, and it granted an extra layer of interpretation. Instead of simply shrugging that a day seemed to be going badly, people in Sedona used an additional explanatory model derived from astrology. It was not a “belief”, as such, it was taken as an accepted part of reality. It was not something one needed to have faith in. Likewise, whether they believed in it or not, the Azande said witchcraft happened, an impression Evans-Pritchard momentarily shared when his own misfortune was attributed to witchcraft and he found himself taking it seriously, however fleetingly.²⁹ I had a similar moment myself at the end of the week that involved storms, a vehicle collision, and a venomous spider.

This is not to say there were no dissenting voices in Sedona, however. Tom, who had worked in the military aerospace industry before moving to Sedona to work as a photographer and videographer, told me about Mercury Retrograde, accurately explaining the astronomical phenomenon, and laughing that people in Sedona actually thought this had anything to do with what happened in their day on Earth. Astrology was still a questionable explanatory model for many, a sign of the irrationality of “woo woo” Sedona.³⁰ Interestingly, this did not mean that they avoided it altogether. My landlady was a well-to-do nurse who owned a single-family home in Uptown with her cartographer husband, and considered herself nobody’s fool and definitely not “woo woo”. She still went for a reading, though, and took off any identifying symbols, such as her work ID card, so as not to give any clues away. Clearly she suspected that there was the chance of some level of fraud in the encounter. The reading produced the expected inaccuracies and generalities, but she was surprised that it correctly identified her occupation and said something was happening with her father and she should call him. Her adopted father and stepfather were both fine, but her birth father suffered a heart attack a few days later. Even though she did not believe in astrology, she was able to place the reading in the context of what happened next in her life. This produced a feeling of the uncanny; she could not explain this congruence between the reading and her subsequent life events. The outcome of a reading is often nothing more than this sense of potential, that perhaps there was something more going on. Readings work through infer-

²⁹ Matthew Engelke, “The Problem of Belief: Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner on ‘The Inner Life’”, *Anthropology Today* 18, no. 6 (2002): 3–8.

³⁰ “Woo woo” was a pejorative term used for spirituality in Sedona.

ence, with the client attaching meaning to the broad statements provided by the astrologer. Cosmological systems often operate by offering a means to inscribe meaning to experience through reference to a system of symbols.

II. Symbolic Interpretations of Reality

The astrology class introduced at the beginning of the article was held by Jack. He ran them for paying students, an eight week course to help them learn how to interpret natal charts in the Western astrological system. Each week he invited in a volunteer to have their chart read for free. This exchange was couched as mutually beneficial. The students got to practice on a live person who could respond to their tentative interpretations, and the volunteer got a free reading. In the parlance of Sedona spirituality, the energy was balanced, both parties gained and neither exploited the other. When I attended as a volunteer, the two students were four weeks into their course. Mine was the first chart they had read of someone not in the group, the first of a person they did not already know. This meant they were reading a chart with no prior knowledge of its subject, which would be more testing for beginning astrology students to accomplish.

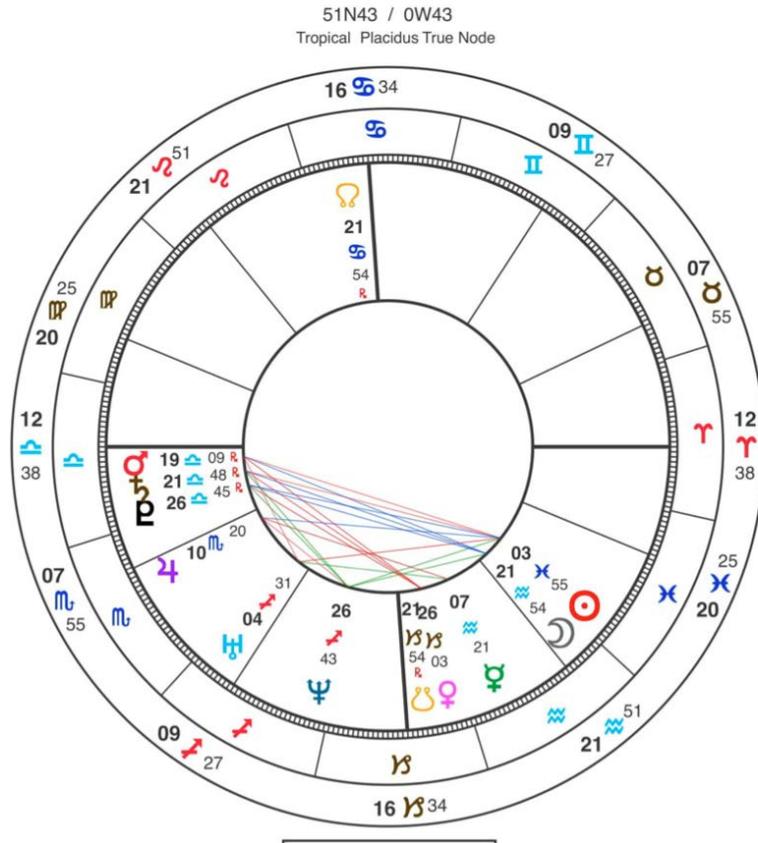
The two students were both women in their 30s or 40s. Susan worked as a receptionist in a meditation centre in Uptown; she got some free classes there but was not part of the group that ran it. Tammy had a day job that was not related to spirituality. Both women said they wanted to learn how to read astrological charts as part of their exploration of spirituality, neither seemed to think it would lead to employment as an astrologer. It was rather a form of spiritual development for them as individuals.

Jack advised his students on how to interpret the chart, counselling that it was important to be sensitive. They should be mindful to respect the “sacredness of the process”. It was a chance to validate and support a human being. It was okay to ask questions but he counselled the students to be sensitive to the flow of the energy. This seemed to mean that they should not ask me questions that I found upsetting or intrusive in pursuit of their astrological interpretation. It recalled Michael’s comment about having a good “chart-side manner”. In astrology, how an interpretation is made and put across to the client is as important as the accuracy of the interpretation. On the subject of accuracy, Jack added a caveat: Astrology cannot tell the future because you do not know where the person is in relation to what the birth chart tells you. The birth chart is a fixed map, it shows the person at their first breath, a new breath that needs to grow into a new body. The map contains the seed patterns for the potential for life, like the acorn has a possibility to bud and develop into an

oak tree. This recalled Michael's emphasis that astrology describes potentials, it does not make predictions. Jack said that the chart was based on the predictable mathematical calculations of where the planets were at the time and place of birth, but the circumstances of the person's life at the time of the reading were not necessarily known. The chart could show something that had already happened or was a long way off in the future. It was also not deterministic; people could choose to go against what their chart suggested.

They proceeded to go through the details of my chart. In Western astrology, the natal chart is divided into upper and lower and right and left hemispheres. In my chart, all the planets are positioned in the lower hemisphere, and then evenly distributed between the left and right hemispheres. The zodiac is divided into twelve houses, which represent life. Each sun sign is associated with a specific house. My sun sign is Pisces, which is corresponded with the twelfth house. When it is produced, a natal chart looks like a circle with dots and coloured lines. The coloured lines connect the dots, which are the planets; the lines are called aspects and they denote the kind of relationship between the planets.

Each of the signs of the zodiac is symbolised by one of the four elements. On my chart, the planets were mostly in air and water signs at my birth. From this, Jack and his students interpreted that I was introverted and intelligent because air was the dominant energy, meaning that thinking and mental concepts were important to me. Air is associated with intellectual pursuits in this system. After air, the second most dominant element in my chart was water, which they related to emotions and feelings. Earth and fire were much less influential in my chart because so few of the planets were located in earth and fire signs at the time of my birth. This positioning led to an interpretation about who I was. My basic nature was to be a "feeling person" because at the time of my birth the sun was located in the constellation of Pisces, which was associated with water. However, because so many of the planets were located in air signs, including the influential rising sign in Libra, this encouraged me to have more of the characteristics associated with air signs. This observation in turn led to an interpretation about my life; my family did not understand my emotional side and so encouraged the intellectual side instead. My family encouraged me to be a Libra rising because they did not understand or were scared by the Pisces or "feeling" side of my character. This personal inference gave rise to a generalisation about society; the personality associations of air signs were more culturally valued than those of the water signs. Air and water are opposites; however, thinking and feeling can get tangled, the emotional and conceptual parts will get interwoven. From this symbolic association, I was given a suggestion: I could bring the emotion-



The author's natal chart from the Western astrological system

al or feeling side into my family more, which could be helpful in aiding us to get along. This advice was related to a spiritual aim; part of the new paradigm was embracing the feeling side instead of just the intellectual side, following “heart-centred” action not just “head-directed”. Doing so would help bring about a shift in consciousness, a new way of being in the world, with a higher spiritual vibration. This change would not just help me get along with my family, but help the ongoing shift towards higher spiritual vibration.

Divinatory systems are symbolic systems. In Western astrology, each of the twelve constellations of the zodiac is symbolised by a sign that corresponds to different aspects of personal character. Each is also assigned to one of four elements, one of three qualities, and a planet. Each is further signified by an image and a figure; for example, Pisces is signified by a fish and also a curved H shape. The semiosis of contemporary astrology focuses most acutely on aspects of

personal character, forming a language through which the individual can learn about the self. In the reading that Jack gave me, based on my natal chart in the Western zodiac, he interpreted my basic nature as a “feeling person” because my sun sign was Pisces. This suggested to him that I was more aware of my emotions than those not born under water signs. My chart had an Aquarius moon, meaning the Moon was in the constellation Aquarius at my birth, and this symbolised the mother connection. The associations of the sign Aquarius therefore provided information about the sort of relationship I had with my mother. My rising sign was Libra. The rising sign signified the way I was told to act as a child, and Libra signified the characteristics of being friendly, balanced, sociable, and a peacemaker. This association translated into the interpretation that I was encouraged to be friendly and sociable rather than emotional, which was my “basic nature” as a Pisces sun sign. Transits, nodes, and convergences of the planets and constellations also had different symbolic associations connected to different aspects of the self. The full reading provided by Jack and his students went through all of these different symbols and contained far more detail than there is space to convey here. What it provided was a thorough interpretation of my personality and my social relationships, especially familial relationships, and the possibilities for the future. It was a map of my character and connections with others, a guide to navigate these often fraught waters.

Dane Rudhyar, a friend of Alice Bailey, popularised the connection of personality traits with zodiac signs in his 1936 treatise that mixed astrology, psychology, and theosophy.³¹ A significant influence on Rudhyar was C.G. Jung and his theory of personality archetypes. Jung continues to be an important figure for contemporary astrologers.³² Jack read the work of Jung, and talked at length about the shadow, the unconscious, and spiritual alchemy, peppering his discourse with direct quotations. Hammer analyses twentieth-century literature on astrology as mostly coming from a psychological perspective. The astrologer uses the birth chart reading to help their clients to uncover their “hidden self” and the inner drives of their psyche, and to define themselves in terms of the “modern” individuated self.³³ It is a way of divining who one “really” is, with an emphasis on authenticity. The implication is that self-delusion is common; that the way one thinks of oneself is not how one “really” is. Society, family and external influences of all kinds confuse the conception of the self. The reading Jack gave of my natal chart, for example, revealed a mismatch between the rising

³¹ Hammer, “Astrology V”, 137.

³² Munk, *Signs of the Times*, 116–17.

³³ Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 362.

sign of Libra and the sun sign of Pisces, from which he interpolated conflict between my family's expectations and my "basic nature". This meant I subjugated my "true" self in favour of a side of me that was more amenable to others.

This focus on the self is what makes astrology such a prevalent practice in spirituality, where the individual is central, so much so that Paul Heelas defines the new age as a form of "self-spirituality".³⁴ For my informants in Sedona, the self is synonymous with the universe; each individual is a divine spiritual being. The universe experiences itself through incarnating as an infinite number of beings in the various dimensions. Earth, our planet, is in the third dimension. Souls are incarnated in the third dimension with a mission, which we forget due to the density and low vibration of this dimension. The spiritual path of each individual life is thus to uncover the "soul purpose" of the higher self; the purpose for their soul, or what they incarnated in this dimension to do.³⁵ Astrology in this context is a way of divining what that path is. It is a means to address central religious questions: Why are we here? Who am I? Astrology is a way of explaining the self to oneself. It is also a guide to the spiritual path, giving advice on how to raise one's consciousness and cultivate one's relationships in a positive way. This shows the way to a higher vibration. In my reading, embracing my emotional or feeling side would help my familial relationships, which in turn would create more peace and harmony on a personal level. Positive energy vibrates outwards as each individual that increases their vibration incrementally increases the vibration of the planet which achieves the shift incrementally. It is a sort of critical mass idea, whereby each individual following their spiritual path in small ways creates change on a much wider level.³⁶ As a symbolic system, astrology provides a cosmological frame through which one can orient oneself in new age spirituality.

In doing so, astrology works in similar ways to forms of divination analysed by anthropologists such as Victor Turner, who combined symbolist with structural functionalist theoretical models. He saw African divinatory models as functioning symbolically just as Western scientific models did, in a similar way to Evans-Pritchard.³⁷ However, he extended the analysis of Ndembu divination

³⁴ Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life*.

³⁵ This point was illustrated by two different astrologers with a popular quote from authors on spirituality: "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience, we are spiritual beings having a human experience", which was a common refrain in Sedona. It is variously attributed to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and G.I. Gurdjieff, and was popularised by Wayne Dyer.

³⁶ This is the "hundredth monkey" idea long present in new age millenarianism, that change occurs from individuals adapting, spreading through the whole population once a certain critical mass has done so. See Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 350–52.

³⁷ Victor Turner, *Revelation and Divination in Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 22.

to suggest that it operated as a complex system of symbols that explained social norms. As with Evans-Pritchard's analysis, divination contributed to the functioning of that society. The Ndembu were particularly concerned with self-serving or immoral thoughts that suggested private vices like hypocrisy, fraud, simulation, dissimulation, greed, and adultery. They used divination to discern who was sinning in secret, and how. The importance of this was that these private vices were seen as being socially toxic: "divination seeks to uncover the private malignity that is infecting the public body".³⁸ The interpretation of symbols by diviners revealed insights into social structure and human nature. Using a form of divination in which objects were thrown from a basket, the manner in which the objects fell was then interpreted symbolically by the diviner. The diviner interpreted what had already happened; they did not foretell future events. The aim was to detect lies and discover truth. It is a symbolic system that provided a way of talking about the nature of Ndembu society and people in general.

Divination in Ndembu society enabled people to understand where social relations were being undermined by private vices. Similarly, the astrological reading by Jack and his students aimed to explain how my social relations could flow more smoothly in the normative terms of spirituality. Rather than identifying self-serving thoughts, the reading identified disharmony in familial relationships and suggested ways to improve them. Divination provides a cosmological framework for analysing social relationships and bringing them into alignment with culturally specific norms. An important cultural norm in America is individualism. Americans have to make individual choices about jobs, romantic partners, childbearing, and so on. Understanding the self and seeking assistance on how to interpret when to make choices is of vital importance in this social context. The idea of a unique personality, the true nature of which is often obscured, speaks to the reification of the individual. Munk suggests that the transient nature of social life in contemporary Western societies makes astrology appealing; jobs, family, friends and location can change and the way in which these changes occur is often a matter of individual decision.³⁹ Having a symbolic guide to oneself as "an individual" is therefore helpful to some. This is very different to what Ndembu divination is trying to ascertain, which focuses on how people are acting too much like individuals and not enough in keeping with communal concerns of the social group. A symbolist theoretical model suggests that both operate to uphold social norms, albeit in different ways, by focusing on how divination can "work" on a social level.

³⁸ Turner, *Revelation and Divination*, 16.

³⁹ Munk, *Sign of the Times*, 294.

III. *The Power of Knowledge*

The idea that astrology could grant social power or status is odd if we accept without qualification assertions that astrology is a stigmatised discourse in American culture. If it is a rejected discourse, then it has no epistemic authority, so how could learning about it grant any kind of social power or status? This requires a closer look at exactly what is meant by “social” power and status and how it is related to different categories of knowledge. American society is highly differentiated along lines of class, race, religion, access to education, and so on, which means that different categories of knowledge will have different implications depending on their position relative to these social segmentations. Astrological knowledge will grant social power in some groups but not others. A comparison with astrology in Madagascar can perhaps illuminate this issue. Maurice Bloch describes how astrology among Malagasy speakers in Madagascar, also called the Merina, has a special status as a form of supernatural knowledge.⁴⁰ The role of Malagasy astrologers is based on their mastery of this high status knowledge. Astrologers work out the correct time for circumcisions and the best time for funerals, and they are consulted whenever danger is involved. They claim a combination of complex knowledge and supernatural powers. A lack of clear qualifications means that many people claim to be astrologer-diviners. Professional astrologers make their living through divining, healing, and discovering destinies, but are few in number. Amateur astrologers are very common, and practice the art for the sake of the prestige it gives them. Most of the older men are astrologer-diviners of this latter type.

Astrology is a form of social knowledge that grants prestige among the Merina. It is practised by powerful elder men to enhance their social power and status. Being a male elder means having knowledge of astrology, and using this to help social inferiors. In return, they receive fees, which form part of the constant flow of gifts from inferiors to important men. Those that read French can consult the many French works on sale about astrology and also the horoscope pages of old French newspapers used as wrapping paper. These works are seen as strange and exotic, which grants a certain kind of prestige. Yet Bloch cautions against assuming that astrology directs the actions that people take in any straightforward way: “astrology is best seen as a work of art which makes use of the basic categories of Merina culture, not in the normal way but by playing with them”.⁴¹ He concludes that astrology has a “social function”

⁴⁰ Maurice Bloch, *How We Think They Think: Anthropological Approaches to Cognition, Memory, and Literacy* (Boulder: Westview, 1998).

⁴¹ Bloch, *How We Think They Think*, 150.

in the status competition among elites, but its function is as an element in this competition, part of the game played to show who has the most knowledge. The content of the knowledge is not as important as having it and wielding it to one's advantage in gaining social status.

While the cultural contexts are very different, there are some illuminating points of congruence between Bloch's account of Malagasy astrology and astrology in Sedona. Professional astrologers who could make a living from divining were also rare in Sedona, as with the Merina. However, having some astrological knowledge was an important means of enhancing one's social status within the frame of spirituality. It meant one was "on the path" and had started to "do the work". These phrases referred to the spiritual path and the process of exploring one's individual spirituality and raising one's vibration to a higher level of consciousness. Bloch's caution against seeing astrology as directing action in a straightforward way is also appropriate to the use of astrology in Sedona. My informants rarely took directive from an astrological reading; instead it gave them a range of possibilities to play with imaginatively, and indeed the readings were explicitly framed in this way by the astrologers who gave me readings. What astrology provided in both cases was a form of capital.⁴² Capital grants social status and power within a certain field. Within the field of new age spirituality, David Robertson argues that epistemic capital is an important component; this refers to the source of the special knowledge.⁴³ In Sedona, knowledge that came from divine, cosmic sources was given a higher value than terrestrial sources, as Robertson argues is the case among new age spirituality more generally.

This moves us beyond the idea that people "believe" in astrology in an instrumental way, to make decisions or understand themselves, and suggests that the role played by astrology is analogous to any form of elite or specialised knowledge. Possessing these knowledges is often its own reward. What matters is that it is perceived as having prestige. In America, in large part because of the elite status of science as a form of knowledge, astrology does not have any prestige in many people's eyes. In Sedona, however, astrology does have social power and status because of its epistemic capital. It grants access to higher vibrational levels because it refers to the planets and cosmos. Knowing about astrology was part of being spiritually advanced, part of being on the path, and because of this,

⁴² Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital", in *A Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J.G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1985).

⁴³ David Robertson, *UFOs, Conspiracy Theories and the New Age: Millennial Conspiracism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 29.

part of interacting with others in that society. This questions the importance of “belief”, since it was not important whether you believed in it or not. Indeed I did not believe in the astrological chart reading I was given but often used it in social interactions with others in Sedona. Having at least a minimum of astrological knowledge made social interaction easier and more successful in Sedona. It could also grant social power and, sometimes, financial reward.

The ability to support oneself financially as a spiritual practitioner in Sedona is fraught with difficulty: it is expensive to live there due to high rents and real estate prices; it is already a crowded marketplace with many practitioners vying for clients; many move there to follow their spiritual path but find they are unable to maintain this financially. In this context, Jack was fortunate. Originally from Edinburgh, he came to the US thirty-one years ago when he overstayed a tourist visa and never legalised his status. He was, in the highly charged political vocabulary of Arizona, an “illegal immigrant”. He initially intended to come for three weeks. However, he stayed on in San Francisco before moving to Sacramento, and had been living in Sedona for eighteen years. Jack said he was “guided” to Sedona, something he understood from his interpretation of his natal chart. He was an astrologer before he left the UK, a member of the Scottish Astrological Association, a practicing diviner since he left school at age eighteen. He had always been an astrologer, and unlike many spiritual practitioners in Sedona he did not have a second or third, more secular, occupation (often in tourism or retail, as Sedona had few other significant sources of employment). Although he earned his living as an astrologer, he claimed that he did not like to profit from it. He offered classes, readings and courses, and had a DVD series of him teaching how to read astrological charts. Jack told me that he did not “sell readings”, as many in Sedona do, but he did charge. By this he meant that he did not offer readings only to make money. He did not advertise and got all his custom by word of mouth. Like Michael, he was open to exchanges or skills-trades for consultations (his preferred term for readings). He “lived between the cracks”, with no social security number, no green card, no driver’s licence, no car, and no medical or social benefits. He rented rather than owned his apartment.

Astrology provided Jack with a living, a means of employment, and enough social power to earn money from it and live beyond the legal structures of society. This is quite different from the opportunities available to many persons living without legal status in America. Arizona is a virulently anti-immigration state where law enforcement conducts raids looking for those without legal

status and then incarcerates them before deporting them.⁴⁴ While there were other forms of social power and status that Jack benefitted from, for example his ability to speak English, his inclusion in the dominant racial group of “white” people, and his male gender, astrology provided him with economic benefits that enabled him to sustain himself in a country that systematically denies economic benefits to people without a legal immigration status. It was also a form of knowledge that allowed him to claim a higher status than other Sedona spiritual practitioners, whom he looked down on as “selling readings” and profiting from their spiritual practice.

There were limits to the economic benefits he accrued from astrology, however. In 2013, Jack had to leave Sedona. He had been suffering from ear problems and a hernia for several months, but he had no health insurance in the US. He wanted to return to the UK and receive treatment for his medical problems from the National Health Service, which did not require individually purchased insurance plans. First, he had to raise \$20,000 through his consultation fees, gifts to his online donation account, and selling all of his accumulated possessions. After several months this effort garnered him enough money to return to the UK and establish himself back in Edinburgh. Once back in the UK, he was able to apply for disability benefits available to him as a citizen of the country. Astrology provided a form of epistemic capital that could be translated to economic capital in some ways but not others. As Jack put it at the time in an email: “I am sad to leave and especially to leave my beloved Sedona, but the lack of health care eligibility and the accumulative effects of living under the radar for all these years have exhausted me to the point where there’s really no other option”. He could raise funds to return to the UK but because of his legal status he was unable to get health insurance to stay in the country he had lived in for over three decades.

Social power and status in Sedona is different from that in, say, a gathering of astronomers. Astrology would have no social power or status there. But in Sedona it did. This is not equivalent to how Bloch described Malagasy astrology, but again those elder males would not be able to use their knowledge of astrology to impress, say, French colonial authorities. Astrology would not be a potent form of knowledge in that context. It was only powerful among other Merina. Astrology has a very low level of social power and status in elite American society, but much more social power and status in Sedona. Knowing astrology is a marketable

⁴⁴ Jason de León, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015); Mary Romero, “Are Your Papers in Order? Racial Profiling, Vigilantes, and ‘America’s Toughest Sheriff’”, *Harvard Latino Law Review* 14 (2011): 337–57.

skill in Sedona, a way to get money but also to be a spiritual expert. Astrology had a historical depth and cultural variety (with Vedic, Western, Chinese, Mayan, and shamanic forms) that granted it the status of special, spiritual knowledge. There was much concern among my informants in Sedona that the town attracted pretenders, charlatans, people with little “genuine” knowledge, who were selling something they just made up and passing it off as authentic spiritual wisdom. There were few with intensive knowledge from long-term study of a recognisable and complex system such as astrology, such as Jack possessed.

Astrology was a way of mobilising a particular form of epistemic capital within the field of spirituality in Sedona. Robertson outlines how those within this field tend to feel disenfranchised and excluded from more widely available economic and social capital, yet they can mobilise epistemic capital.⁴⁵ Egil Asprem notes that within a marginalised discourse, there is internal boundary work that differentiates different forms of knowledge in the discourse from each other as well as from the dominant orthodoxy.⁴⁶ He employs Marcello Truzzi’s concept of “credibility mobility” to suggest the ways in which this internal differentiation creates social hierarchies within marginalised discourses. Astrologers are able to mobilise more credibility than others in Sedona because astrology has some level of institutionalisation (societies, journals, accreditations, etc.) and it is closer to the dominant orthodoxy than many other spiritual practices in Sedona. Jack was therefore able to make a living solely from astrology, albeit for a limited time. Spirituality in Sedona is a counter-hegemonic field, rejected by and in turn rejecting elite discourses. Astrology exemplifies this characteristic; rejected as fraudulent by cultural elites, it is embraced as a form of special knowledge that grants access to higher spiritual levels of consciousness. It is still close enough to more mainstream forms of knowledge that it grants a high level of epistemic capital within the specific field of spirituality in Sedona.

IV. Conclusion

Astrology offers a view of contemporary esotericism that problematises the theory that it is a form of rejected knowledge. It may not be a part of the culture of accepted claims among scientific and political elites in America, but in Sedona it was accepted. Spirituality is a counter-hegemonic discourse, it em-

⁴⁵ Robertson, *UFOs, Conspiracy Theories and the New Age*, 207.

⁴⁶ Egil Asprem, “On the Social Organisation of Rejected Knowledge: Reassessing the Sociology of the Occult”, in *Western Esotericism and Deviance: Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism*, eds. Bernd-Christian Otto and Marco Pasi (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming), 22–25.

braces what has been rejected by elites to a certain extent because it has been rejected. Robertson's work on UFOs and conspiracy theories draws attention to how this dialectic of rejection and acceptance creates theodicy in new age discourse.⁴⁷ There are sinister forces at work that keep the truth from the people so as to maintain their own power. Access to suppressed special knowledge granted its own form of social power and status in Sedona. Astrologers commanded an accepted form of knowledge within the discourse of spirituality that enabled some, such as Michael and Jack, to support themselves economically. It gave them an enhanced level of social status as well. They were not part of the commercialised new age that catered to tourists in Uptown, they were not "selling readings", they were helping people on their spiritual paths.

Astrology was one modality among many in Sedona. It was not seen as deterministic or exclusive, it was used alongside other forms of knowledge and practice to enable individuals to explore their particular path to higher levels of spiritual development. There was no "right way" to do spirituality, it was up to the individual. There were, conversely, many wrong ways. Trying to make money from spirituality was not seen as spiritually elevating; this is why both Michael and Jack denied making money from their practice even though they both clearly did and their fees were substantial when valued in currency. This is perhaps why both accepted trades and exchanges as an alternative; this reframed their practice away from being motivated only by financial gain which they pejoratively called "selling readings". It also allowed them to engage in exchanges with those who did not have much in terms of currency. Barter was common in Sedona, and seen as preferable in terms of the energy of the exchange. The exchange relationships of astrologers and their clients illustrates how astrology played a role in the varied culture of spirituality in Sedona, taking its place among other forms of divination and spiritual practice, a form of special knowledge that "worked" in social terms.

Ethnography reveals astrology to be an open, accepted part of ordinary social life in Sedona. Sceptical commentators are often mystified by the prevalence of astrology in the face of a wealth of scientific studies indicating that it does not work.⁴⁸ However, they are examining it in a rationalistic frame; when examining it from an ethnographic perspective it does have social utility.⁴⁹ Astrology has social

⁴⁷ Robertson, *UFOs, Conspiracy Theories and the New Age*, 208–209.

⁴⁸ Geoffrey Dean and Ivan W. Kelley, "Does Astrology Work? Astrology and Skepticism, 1975–2000", in *Skeptical Odysseys: Personal Accounts by the World's Leading Paranormal Inquirers*, ed. Paul Kurtz (Amherst: Prometheus, 2001), 191–207.

⁴⁹ Munk, *Signs of the Times*, 24–30.

power and epistemic capital only in certain fields, those that define themselves, in part, in contrast to the dominant forms of knowledge in their social context.

Jack's position on astrology reflects the view of Ifá divination offered by Holbraad. Jack did not need to believe in astrology, he knew it worked. Yet he was aware of the critiques of astrology and explicitly gave evidence to combat those critiques, for example his interpretation of the event chart for 9/11. For those who used astrological readings, it also did not need to be true or believed in, it was just another perspective. Even to those like my landlady who were explicitly sceptical, it still offered an opportunity for imaginative interpretation of their character and possibilities for their future. This complicates interpretations of astrology as rejected knowledge, bringing into focus relationships of power and constructions of epistemic capital.

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