

# Reflections on the Ethnographic Study of Contemporary Ritual Magic

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## **Abstract**

This article identifies and engages with the complexities of conducting ethnographic research in the hard-to-access field of Western esotericism, referred to here as “modern ritual magic”. Rather than simply studying magic in terms of how it is understood in the abstract and reacted to by outsiders, I argue that the analytical focus should shift to how it is enacted and becomes meaningful for practitioners. To achieve this, the primary research question focuses on how practitioners use distinctive modes of performance to produce, represent, and experience magic as a participatory process transitioning from an “ordinary” to a “magical” worldview of meaning and effect. Participant observation is employed to gain access to such participatory accounts. Theory from both anthropology and Western esotericism is engaged with to emphasise the problems of entering and portraying this “hidden population”, as well as the role of social media as an additional ethnographic site. I also refer to my own theoretical reflections as an “observing participant” with slight “insider” experience in various ethnographic case studies of modern magical ritual. Finally, to capture the experiential events that define modern magical ritual in terms of shaping one’s perception and cognition as a modern Western magician, I discuss the possibility for studying Western esoteric performances through what Shaun Gallagher refers to as “enactive phenomenology”. This, I suggest, is a promising method for capturing data on how the subjectivity of the “magician” is moulded, experienced, and self-portrayed.

## **Keywords**

Magic; ethnography; embodied cognition; Western esotericism; reflexivity movement

## A Preliminary Reflection on the Ethnographic Study of Modern Western Magic

In their introduction to *The Metamorphosis of Magic: From Late Antiquity to the Early Modern Period*, Jan Bremmer and Jan Veenstra define “magic” as a field of inquiry “commonly used to designate a whole range of religious beliefs and ritual practices, whereby man seeks to gain control over his fate and fortune by supernatural means”.<sup>1</sup> Despite all forms of authority – religious, legal, and intellectual – presenting their own ideologically driven forms of definition,<sup>2</sup> in some contexts certain individuals have self-designated as magical practitioners promoting “their image as a practitioner of powerful rites or a possessor of occult knowledge as a social identity”.<sup>3</sup> Whether defined in terms of foreign rites of “otherness”<sup>4</sup> or private rituals, as opposed to public and communal ceremonies, magical beliefs and practices comprise “a shadowy and tenuous, but still often carefully constructed, realm that helps shape a society’s basic conceptions about both spiritual and natural forces that imbue the world with meaning”.<sup>5</sup> According to Michael Bailey the reason for this persistence of reference is that:

In its rites, rituals, taboos, and attendant beliefs, magic might be said to comprise, or at least describe, a system for comprehending the entire world. It provides a means for navigating among the varied forces that comprise and shape material creation, and promises its practitioners methods of controlling or at least affecting those forces. In certain circumstances, magicians claim that their rites can elevate them to a higher state of consciousness, allowing them to perceive occult aspects of nature or enter into communion with preternatural or supernatural entities.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jan N. Bremmer and Jan R. Veenstra, “Introduction: The Metamorphosis of Magic”, in *The Metamorphosis of Magic: From Late Antiquity to the Early Modern Period*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer and Jan R. Veenstra (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2003), ix–xv.

<sup>2</sup> Michael D. Bailey, “The Meanings of Magic”, *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 1, no. 1 (Summer 2006): 2.

<sup>3</sup> Bailey, “Meanings of Magic”, 9–10.

<sup>4</sup> For how this process of exclusion and opposition developed historically in ancient Greece influencing consequent attitudes to magic see Georg Luck, “Witches and Sorcerers in Classical Literature”, in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 91–158; Richard Gordon, “Imagining Greek and Roman Magic”, in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 159–275. For a more recent and cohesive overview of this old-age troublesome affair see Bernd-Christian Otto and Michael Strausberg, ed. *Defining Magic: A Reader* (Oxford: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Bailey, “Meanings of Magic”, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Bailey, “Meanings of Magic”, 1–2.

In response to this perception of magic being a systematic method for traversing, comprehending, and even manipulating esoterically inclined worldviews, I examine *how* and *why* contemporary Western esoteric practitioners self-identified as “magicians” come to produce and experience magical worldviews. More importantly as the objective of this paper, this examination introduces a discussion on how to access contemporary solitary practitioners of modern Western magic through ethnographic fieldwork. To approach magic as a participatory worldview, along with how it might inscribe with meaning and power the material and physical dimensions of practice, I pursue an anthropological and phenomenological course of investigation. Rather than simply studying magic in terms of how it is understood and reacted to, analytical focus shifts to how it is enacted to become a meaningful “lived phenomenon” for practitioners. This approach demands that the practitioners themselves become the focus of inquiry, as it is their inclination to espouse certain narratives objectified by acting in certain ways to produce the conditions for participating in a magical worldview. In particular, the primary research question is how practitioners by means of distinctive modes of embodiment and cognition produce, represent, and experience magic as a participatory process transitioning from an “ordinary” to a “magical” worldview of meaning and effect. As a process of self-transformation, whether temporary or permanent, I examine how practice produces the subjectivity of the “magician” as comprising a “ritual body” of a lived nexus of symbols, gestures, and narratives constructed in reference to magical narrative and enactment in order to participate in a magical worldview. This approach also calls for an investigation into how the magician’s ritual body serves as the locus of interaction with esoteric forces and entities present in certain magical worldviews, thus expanding scholarly knowledge regarding the use of the body in ritual and how the physiological and psychic, corporeal and incorporeal merge in the ritual act as the experience of a multidimensional body.

To investigate ritual and the body as an interdisciplinary interface for the study of a distinctive expression of Western esotericism I conducted five ethnographic case studies of contemporary self-identified “magicians”.<sup>7</sup> This identity formation was the product of their ritualisation of certain textual sources, which they identify as relating to the concept of “magic”,<sup>8</sup> along with other clusters of texts and rituals that have entered the domain of Western magic, such as

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<sup>7</sup> For the importance of such self-reference for any study – both historical and contemporary – of “magic”, or “western learned magic”, see Bernd-Christian Otto, “Historicising Western Learned Magic”, *Aries* 16, no. 2 (2016): 163–65.

<sup>8</sup> Otto, “Historicising Western Learned Magic”, 173.

astrology, divination, the Qabalah, yoga, etc.<sup>9</sup> In addition, regarding the historico-geographical arbitrary term “Western”, it may still be useful as a designatory framework of investigation. As Christian-Bernd Otto writes:

Apart from the fact that it helps to demarcate our object of research from the former, anthropological literature on ‘magic’, it depicts specific historical continuities on the object level, namely, the ongoing transmission and reception of ‘learned magic’ texts and techniques across a contingent and limited set of geographical regions, cultural contexts and religious traditions.<sup>10</sup>

These case studies drew upon a diversity of genres of modern Western magic, such as Thelemic magick, grimoiric conjurations, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, and a runic working. Despite the diversity and the fact that the semantics and practice of Western magic continuously change and adapt, each ritual was related in a non-homogenously coherent and repeatedly broken continuum with certain identifiable textual-ritual traditions, whether pre-modern or modern.

My first case study was a Thelemic magician based in Scotland, whom I refer to as the Thelemite.<sup>11</sup> He performed a series of Thelemic rites culminating with *Liber V vel Reguli* to enforce the ongoing realisation of his True Will. Richard Sutcliffe explicates Crowley’s conceptualisation of True Will as “a cosmic force which permeates the entire universe [...] Magick is less about exerting one’s egoism than about transcending the ego in order to align oneself with the harmony of the cosmos”.<sup>12</sup> This ritual was designed by Aleister Crowley as “an incantation proper to invoke the Energies of the Aeon of Horus, adapted for the daily use of the Magician of whatever grade”.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See Otto, “Historicising Western Learned Magic”, 179.

<sup>10</sup> Otto, “Historicising Western Learned Magic”, 180.

<sup>11</sup> Modern magicians who adhere to the esoteric musings and practices of the English ceremonial magician Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) tend to self-identify as “Thelemites”. Thelema, which derives from the Greek word for “will”, is the initiatory vehicle for Crowley’s reception of *Liber AL vel Legis*, or otherwise known as *The Book of the Law*, during a magical working in Egypt in 1904. According to Crowley’s account he was visited by an entity called Aiwass, which Crowley claimed was his Holy Guardian Angel. Aiwass dictated to him *Liber AL vel Legis* over three days with Crowley acting as the scribe. The central message of *Liber AL vel Legis* proclaims Crowley the herald of the Third Aeon of humankind – the Aeon of Horus – the modern Aeon beginning with the reception of *Liber AL vel Legis* and characterised by the need for spiritual self-realisation and individualism.

<sup>12</sup> See Richard Sutcliffe, “Left-Hand Path Ritual Magick: An Historical and Philosophical Overview”, in *Paganism Today: Wiccans, Druids, the Goddess and Ancient Earth Traditions for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Charlotte Hardman and Graham Harvey (London: Thorsons, 1996), 124.

<sup>13</sup> Aleister Crowley, *Magick: Liber AB4, Book Four, Parts I-IV* (Boston, MA: Red Wheel/Weiser, 2004), 573.

In the following I conducted ethnographic fieldwork with two other magicians in England. The first was a grimoiric magician – the Conjuror – who performed a Solomonic style conjuration of the Archangels Gabriel and Levaniel from the *Ninth Key of Gabriel and Levaniel* into a scrying mirror with the purpose of gaining further insight into the influences of the Moon. This ritual derives from a collection of manuscripts known as *The Treatise of Angel Magic* from the very early eighteenth century,<sup>14</sup> and in particular is adapted from *Dr Rudd's Nine Hierarches of Angels with Their Invocation to Visible Appearance* and is described as: “Moving & Calling, forth, to Visible Appearance, the Celestial Hierarchy Of Angels of the Order of Angels; whose principal governing Angels or Blessed Intelligences, bearing rule are, Gabriel, & Levaniel; & Residing In the first Orb, Mansion or Sphere, being the Orb, Heaven, or Sphere, of the planet Called Luna, or the Moon”.<sup>15</sup> The second was a runic magician – the Runer – who, employing esoteric ideas and techniques from the Rune-Gild and the writings of Edred Thorsson (1953–),<sup>16</sup> performed an invocation of Wōðanaz to bless a sacrificial offering for ritual consumption for the purpose of personal theurgic empowerment.

I also conducted an ethnographic fieldwork on a Greek island in the Aegean studying a rite derived from *The Greek Magical Papyri*, which Hans Dieter Betz describes as “a body of papyri from Greco-Roman Egypt containing a variety of magical spells and formulae, hymns and rituals. The extant texts are mainly from the second generation B.C. to the fifth century A.D.”<sup>17</sup> The rite is referred to as the “Apollonian Invocation” and was performed by the Theurgist for the purpose of summoning Apollo’s assistance to evoke a spirit of Hades for an oracular purpose. My last ethnographic case study case study, carried out in England, was of a rite again deriving from *The Greek Magical Papyri*, known as the “Mithras Liturgy”.

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<sup>14</sup> See Adam McLean, ed., *A Treatise on Angel Magic* (York Beach, ME: Weiser Books, 2006). For further reference see David Rankine and Stephen Skinner, *The Keys to the Gateway of Magic: Summoning the Solomonic Archangels & Demon Princes* (London: Golden Hoard Press, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Rankine and Skinner, *The Keys to the Gateway of Magic*, 207.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Flowers, also known by his pen name Edred Thorsson, founded the Rune-Gild in 1980. Thorsson is reputed to have been involved with various occultist and Asatru/Heathen movements in the United States of America, and especially with the Temple of Set established by former members of the Church of Satan in 1975. Thorsson is also a recognised scholar of old Germanic language and mythology, having received his PhD at the University of Texas in Austin in 1984. Central to the strand of Asatru/Heathenism perpetuated by the Rune-Gild is the adoption of Guido von List’s esoteric Armanen-level interpretation of the runes. See Kennet Granholm, *Dark Enlightenment: The Historical, Sociological and Discursive Contexts of Contemporary Esoteric Magic* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 98.

<sup>17</sup> Hans Dieter Betz, ed., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation Including the Demotic Spells* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), xliii.

My informant – the Magos – engaged this rite to gain a theophanic vision of Helios-Aion-Mithras for personal esoteric empowerment and an oracular purpose.

My selection of rituals was illustrative, rather than representative, of the spectrum of modern Western magic, but it nevertheless incorporated some central types of Western esoteric ideas and practices. The focus of these ethnographic case studies was directed towards ideas and methods my informants employed to self-legitimise and self-represent as “magicians” seeking to obtain communication with forces and entities of a participatory magical worldview. In addition, the historico-cultural backgrounds and cosmological structures that define the nature and objectives of each ritual were discussed in depth, followed by extensive portrayals of their enactments by selected ethnographic informants. These portrayals also incorporated my informants’ own explanations for the selection and approach to their genre of Western magic, along with their own personal testimonies regarding the experiential outcomes of their magical rituals.

### **“Disembedding” and “Reembedding” the Landscape of Western Esotericism**

Prior to entering the ethnographic field of Western esoteric practices, one must examine how certain factors and mentalities that postulate the existence of a polythetic class of esoteric phenomena, such as “magic”, initiate a specific mode of mentality in a participatory worldview of cause and effect shaping conceptions of both spirit and natural forces. Furthermore, due to the development of the academic discipline of Western esotericism and some areas of anthropological and cognitive research, such phenomena traditionally described within the academy as either “primitive” and “irrational”, and therefore the “Other” in contrast to progressive and secular modern Western society, must be scrutinised, and even challenged. More specifically, Wouter Hanegraaff argues from the perspective of the academic study of Western esotericism that esoteric phenomena, such as magic, can be seen as rejected knowledge and a “shadow side of our own official identity”.<sup>18</sup> Henrik Bogdan further clarifies this argument:

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<sup>18</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Foreword: Bringing Light to the Underground”, in *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism*, ed. Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), vii–xi.

The term magic has typically been used to describe non-mainstream beliefs and practices – non-Christians, heretics, non-Westerners, indigenous, ancient or ‘primitive’ cultures – any that might be considered ‘Other’. The image of magic as inherently linked with the Other has functioned as an important factor in the construction of the self-identity of Western culture, for by defining magic as something alien, exotic, primitive, evil, deviant or even ridiculous, our society also makes a tacit statement as to its self-perceptions.<sup>19</sup>

Olav Hammer observes that strategies of legitimating esoteric positions in modernity consist of an appeal to tradition; an appeal to science; and an appeal to experience.<sup>20</sup> Regarding the appeal to tradition, Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm view this notion of “tradition” as constructed around emic claims to “hidden” or “perennial” lineages of esoteric thought and practice. Central to legitimating these claims, Asprem and Granholm, emphasising the “inventedness of tradition” drawing on Eric Hobsbawm’s critical theory,<sup>21</sup> argue from the perspective Paul Heelas’ concept of “detraditionalized religion” that modern esotericists also turn to subjective experiential validations as means of legitimating strategies in response to the societal and philosophical transformations of modernity.<sup>22</sup>

Reflecting on the tendency of contemporary esoteric practitioners, such as magicians, to legitimise their ideas and practices as continuities of historic paradigms of esoteric practices, Asprem writes:

Despite what some contemporary practitioners might say, there is no evidence of an unbroken tradition of ritual magic from ancient times until today. That, however, does not mean that there is no continuity whatsoever: certain sources and ritual liturgies have indeed inspired similar practice throughout the past two millennia. But we must be clear about what we are dealing with: namely, a number of different sets of ritual practices, codified in ritual texts and liturgies authored in different centuries and cultural contexts, that have been subject to loss, rediscovery, reinterpretation, innovations, and abridgements, and which have furthermore inspired and spawned new literature as centuries have passed.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Henrik Bogdan, “Introduction: Modern Western Magic”, *Aries* 12 (2012): 2.

<sup>20</sup> See Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> See Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions”, in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1–15.

<sup>22</sup> For a critical examination see Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, “Constructing Esotericisms: Sociological, Historical and Critical Approaches to the Invention of Tradition”, in *Contemporary Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Oxford: Routledge, 2014), 28–30.

<sup>23</sup> Egil Asprem, “Contemporary Ritual Magic”, in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge (Oxford: Routledge, 2015), 382–83.

Examining how modern Western magic has evolved in response to certain sociocultural and political developments, Aspren further observes:

Although it is tricky to periodize the contemporary, it makes sense to start in the early 1990s: the Soviet Union has collapsed, the cold war ended, Western capitalism and consumerism reign supreme, and the great ideologies of the twentieth century die as postmodernism goes mainstream. Meanwhile, a communications and media revolution is underway that rapidly changes the rules of the game: the emergence of the Internet and the development of the World Wide Web have had a remarkable effect on the production and dissemination of ritual magical texts, but also on the actual *practice* of magical ritual.<sup>24</sup>

Aspren distinguishes the emergence of “scholar-magicians” who began visiting the archives of the British Library and the Bodleian Library in Oxford to discover and publish old magical manuscripts. These texts were disseminated online from 1994 onwards providing a plethora of resources on esoteric ideas and practices. Access to this information challenged the old initiatory structure of late-nineteenth century and early-twentieth century magical orders, as the novice magician was not required to have direct involvement with the social space and dogmatic commitments of such institutions. This gave birth to a whole new generation of solitary practitioners with the freedom to choose resources and recreate accordingly, where “one could easily be an unaffiliated magician, aiming to reconstruct Elizabethan ritual magic, goetic demon conjurations, or rituals from the Greek magical papyri”.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, Aspren also makes reference to the emergence of a strand of “magical purism”<sup>26</sup> advocated by some contemporary practitioners who claim authority from their engagement with specific textual resources deriving from periods prior to modernity. Despite their apparent differences, both of these approaches can be understood as processes of “disembedding” certain esoteric ideas and practices from one historico-cultural context, and “reembedding” them in new ones.<sup>27</sup>

This process of disembedding and reembedding is characteristic of Western esoteric narrative referenced in both etic historiography and emic applications, exhibiting a pragmatic merging of a diversity of cosmological motifs, esoteric

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<sup>24</sup> Aspren, “Contemporary Ritual Magic”, 384–45.

<sup>25</sup> Aspren, “Contemporary Ritual Magic”, 386.

<sup>26</sup> For “magical purism” see Egil Aspren, *Arguing with Angels: Enochian Magic & Modern Occulture* (Albany: Suny Press, 2012), 80–81.

<sup>27</sup> For further discussion see Aspren and Granholm, “Constructing Esotericisms”, 4–6.

discourses, and ritual performances into an operational system.<sup>28</sup> An example of this, which acts as the foundation for my ethnographic case study of the conjuration of the Archangels Gabriel and Levaniel from the *Ninth Key of Gabriel and Levaniel* into a scrying mirror, is a collection of manuscripts known as *The Treatise of Angel Magic* that demonstrates some of the definitive disembedding and reembedding temperaments of Renaissance and early modern magicians. *The Treatise of Angel Magic* is effectively an attempt to correlate more or less coherent magical theologies and technologies described as a synthesis of Kabbalistic designations, Renaissance renditions of Hermeticism and Neoplatonism, ceremonialism from medieval grimoires, Agrippa's *De Occulta Philosophia* (first printed in 1531), and the Enochian elements received through John Dee's (1527–1608) and Edward Kelly's (1555–1597) angelic conversations.<sup>29</sup>

To present Western esoteric ideas and practices as an amalgamation of diachronic sources, symbols, and practices set within a worldview determined by events of synchronic reception is to acknowledge these sources, symbols, and enactments also as synthetic and dynamic prior to their reconstitution. Such a methodological approach, though, must also take into account emic attitudes that may not necessarily view this process as the creation of a “new” system, but rather as a natural process of continuity and development of ideas and practices already present and familiar. The Runer made explicit reference to the definitive status of Germanic and Norse deities and spirits, along with runic alphabets as authoritative and potent symbolic representations within the esoteric configuration of the Rune-Gild.<sup>30</sup> As he explained, although Asatru is polytheistic,<sup>31</sup> this is not a defining characteristic of the Rune Gild. Edred Thorsson does acknowledge the existence of many deities of pre-Christian Germanic and Old Norse religion, yet the focus of the Rune Gild is on the high god Ódhinn. However, the Rune Gild does not promote the worship of Ódhinn, but rather advocates the embodiment of this god as the fundamental inspirational deific prototype for personal evolution and transmutation of the self.<sup>32</sup> In his own words:

Many runic magicians, like myself, draw on what we now refer to as the ‘Northern tradition’, but bearing in mind this is very much a construct, yet dynamic and

<sup>28</sup> Further examples will be treated in my ethnographic case studies employing these sources.

<sup>29</sup> Egil Asprem, “False, Lying Spirits and Angels of Light: Ambiguous Mediation in Dr Rudd’s Seventeenth-Century Treatise on Angel Magic”, *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 3, no. 1 (Summer 2008): 58.

<sup>30</sup> For further information see Kennet Granholm, “The Rune-Gild: Heathenism, Traditionalism, and the Left-Hand Path”, *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 1, no. 1 (2010): 103.

<sup>31</sup> See Graham Harvey, *Listening People, Speaking Earth: Contemporary Paganism* (London: Hurst, 1997), 117.

<sup>32</sup> Edred Thorsson, *Rune Lore: A Handbook of Rune Magic* (San Francisco: Weiser Books, 1987), 214.

ongoing. What we have got now can be traced back at best to ... the nineteenth century and it is a construct based on a rediscovery of the magic of Northern Europe as we believed it existed in the pre-Christian era.

Therefore, it is essential to recognise both the diachronic and synchronic dimensions of Western esoteric practices and ideas in emic perceptions on the legitimacy of self-designations and what this might imply for current reconstructions of such practices and ideas.

Taking into consideration these theoretical and methodological vantage points, addressing the synchronic dimensions of esoteric practices requires the identification of how variants of ideas and performances become distributed through discursive networks that practitioners renegotiate. Regarding the diachronic, this implies investigating how historical Western esoteric elements are received and adapted in synchronic settings to meet the objectives of ethnographic inquiry. With this contextual approach, the ethnographic researcher can provide full potential for expression, remaining as faithful as possible to representations of emic narrative and performance to develop a sensitive but critical ethnographic and phenomenological study of why and how subjects evoke and partake in esoterically inclined worldviews.

### **Towards an Ethnographic Study of Magic**

Regardless of recent developments in the academic study of contemporary Western esoteric ideas and practices, such as magic, ethnographic investigations utilising participant observation of solitary practitioners of modern Western magic, or, as previously mentioned, what Otto refers to as “western learned magic”, remain infrequent. Tanya Luhrmann’s and Susan Greenwood’s ethnographic studies of contemporary magical practitioners are rare exceptions.<sup>33</sup> However, their selection of informants limits their documentation of modern Western magic to a certain ideological and performative orientation. Luhrmann dismisses magical practices other than those which her subjects are engaged with, explicitly fearing sinister overtones in practices referred to as Left-Hand Path and often characterising aspects of Aleister Crowley’s esoteric philosophy and ritual propositions as violent and destructive.<sup>34</sup> Greenwood’s

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<sup>33</sup> Tanya M. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Susan Greenwood, *Magic, Witchcraft and the Otherworld: An Anthropology* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2000).

<sup>34</sup> See Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft*, 97. For a critical overview of the philosophy

ethnographic data is entirely drawn from magical groups nearly identical in ideology and performance with those of Luhrmann's study, with an emphasis on Western mystery schools and Wicca.

A more recent study of modern magical practitioners employing ethnographic tools is Granholm's monograph *Dark Enlightenment: The Historical, Sociological and Discursive Contexts of Contemporary Esoteric Magic*.<sup>35</sup> Granholm limits his empirical scope to a single magical order – the Stockholm-based Dragon Rouge – in which Granholm became an initiate. He adopts as his central method a discursive approach<sup>36</sup> to comprehend ways in which historical and contemporary reflections on esoteric knowledge and identity form within the Dragon Rouge. Rather than argue that modern Western esotericism is a response to “disenchantment”<sup>37</sup> Granholm contends that the hallmark of modern Western esotericism is “eclecticism” in the relationship of the individual to religious institutions.

Another more recent study of individual Western esoteric practitioners using some ethnographic methodology is Gerhard Mayer's research published in English as “Magicians of the Twenty-First Century: An Attempt at Dimensioning the Magician's Personality”. Unlike Luhrmann, Greenwood, and Granholm, Mayer broadens his range of case studies by interviewing practitioners from Western mystery schools, Thelemites and magical Gnostics, chaos magicians, and Satanists. His conclusions emphasise how certain individuals adopt magical beliefs and practices by focusing on the biographies of practitioners through a series of guided interviews. Regarding the complexities of conducting ethnographic research with contemporary magicians, Mayer introduces a critical observation:

One reason [for the complexities] may be that such definitions [i.e. occult] often depend on the individual worldviews and the cultural backgrounds of the scholars who formulate them. Another lies in the almost omnipresent assumption that magic does not work, in a literal sense. If a magical practice shows effects, this can be explained by numerous well-known psychological and sociological mechanisms that do not challenge the rationalistic ideology of science.<sup>38</sup>

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of Left Hand Path magical groups see Sutcliffe, “Left-Hand Path Ritual Magick”, 109–37.

<sup>35</sup> Kennet Granholm, *Dark Enlightenment: The Historical, Sociological and Discursive Contexts of Contemporary Esoteric Magic* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

<sup>36</sup> See Kocku von Stuckrad, “Discursive Transfers and Reconfigurations: Tracing the Religious and the Esoteric in Secular Culture”, in *Contemporary Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Oxford: Routledge, 2014), 226–44.

<sup>37</sup> For an introduction to the theoretical approach to the study of the impact of secularisation and disenchantment see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “How Magic Survived the Disenchantment of the World”, *Religion* 33, no. 4 (2003): 357–80.

<sup>38</sup> Gerhard Mayer, “Magicians of the Twenty-First Century: An Attempt at Dimensioning

As Mayer observes, obtaining ethnographic data from contemporary practitioners of magic can indeed be a complex and cumbersome affair. He also presents another factor that may be an obstacle for the ethnographer. This he identifies as emic commitments, both ideological and social, to “secrecy”<sup>39</sup>:

In this particular field [...] many individuals and groups value secrecy for a variety of reasons. Some of these are inherent to the system, while others depend on the social taboos that still exist regarding magic and occultism.<sup>40</sup>

Acknowledging these factors, an important criterion for any ethnographic study of Western esoteric practitioners, would be to locate hard-to-find informants, referred to as “hidden populations” in anthropological literature in the sense that they are “neither well defined nor available for enumeration”,<sup>41</sup> who would be willing to establish a relationship of trust with the researcher by feeling comfortable and being familiar with the objectives and methods of research. Particularised as an ethnographic study of modern Western magic, the second step would be to comprehend how and why selected informants self-identify as “magicians”. As a precondition for such identification in my own ethnographic study, the criterion of selection was that the informants must have had several years of engagement and experience with the study and praxis of magic. The methodological rationale for this was to firmly establish that their identity as magicians consisted of a serious and decisive framework for their personal narratives and ritual performances. Taking into consideration these ethnographic complexities, the selection of informants can be shaped by purposive sampling to achieve maximum variation of expertise and experience in ritual magic. To meet the requirements for ethical clearance my informants were selected as consenting adults participating in a transparent research project. In order to ensure the rights of the participants they were

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the Magician’s Personality”, *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 4, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 176–77.

<sup>39</sup> Hanegraaff refers to the notion of “secrecy” as a form of knowledge reserved only for an elite: “In this typological sense, the term ‘esotericism’ can be applied freely within any religious context, for concerns with secret knowledge reserved for elites can be found throughout history, and all over the world... The same is true for another, related typological understanding of the term, that associates it with the deeper, ‘inner mysteries of religion’ as opposed to its merely external or ‘exoteric’ dimensions”, Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Esotericism”, in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Roelof van den Broeck and Jean-Pierre Brach (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 337. Also for further reference see Henrik Bogdan and Christian Giudice, ed., *Paganism, Initiation, and Ritual*, special issue of *The Pomegranate: International Journal of Pagan Studies* 14, no. 1 (2013): 181–328.

<sup>40</sup> Mayer, “Magicians of the Twenty-First Century”, 181.

<sup>41</sup> M.S. Braunstein, “Sampling in Hidden Population: Noninstitutionalized Drug Users”, *AIDS Education and Prevention* 5, no. 2 (1993): 132.

each verbally and contractually informed of their entitlement to anonymity, agreement of consent, and ability to withdraw participation at any point in the study.

To establish connections and build relationships with potential ethnographic informants, self-reflexivity and recognition of one's status prior to entering the field should be addressed. In my case I employed my previous status of someone with a personal interest in one particular historico-cultural genre of Western learned magic for securing entry as an ethnographic researcher and forming a relationship of trust with most of my informants. For some years prior to this research project I began engaging the study of *The Greek Magical Papyri* through personal research and various non-academic publications. I also publicly expressed my interest in the worldviews and practices of *The Greek Magical Papyri* at both formal and informal gatherings of practitioners and scholars alike, where I established a positive reputation and befriended some of the practitioners. Prior to this research project I was acquainted with two of my informants. Our paths had met at various talks and events on Western magic. We maintained contact from time to time via email and socialised at times with the main intent of discussing our shared interests in Western magic. The other informants of this study were introduced to me either by mutual friends or from them seeking contact to inquire about some of my ideas presented in my non-academic publications.

Conversing in social media groups dedicated to the study of Western esotericism introduced me to potential and current informants. In particular, my research was referred to the Conjuror by a mutual acquaintance. The Conjuror then contacted via Facebook and we began conversing about my research and a mutual interest in the *Lemegeton Clavicula Salomonis*<sup>42</sup> and the nature of the spirits contained within. These discussions led to an online friendship, then a few social meetings, finally culminating with the ethnographic study of the *Ninth Key of Gabriel and Levaniel*. For the location of hard-to-find individuals, especially those such as esoteric practitioners, the internet can prove to be an essential ethnographic tool. Christine Hine explains that “[u]sing the Internet in this way is akin to hanging out in a public setting, catching the prevailing cultural currents, and listening to the way that people talk about a topic when, unlike in an interview, they are not being asked to generate a formal account of their relationship with that topic”.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> According to Joseph Peterson: “The *Lemegeton* is a popular handbook of sorcery known from the 17th century [1641] in more or less the same form [...] Most of the material, however, is found in varying forms in earlier manuscripts, and some of the material dates back as early as the 14th century or earlier”. See Joseph H. Peterson, ed. *The Lesser Key of Solomon: Detailing the Ceremonial Art of Commanding Spirits Both Good and Evil* (York Beach, MA: Red Wheel/Weiser, 2001), xi.

<sup>43</sup> Christine Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 165.

Social media platforms can also act as fruitful resources for gathering ethnographic data, as they provide a platform for hidden populations to discuss and interact with the ability to remain socially anonymous under pseudonyms and physically removed from any social context of immediate recognition. Daniel Miller finds evidence that Facebook creates a medium for efficient interactions and indeed even more intense friendships because of the frequency and ease of interacting.<sup>44</sup> Social media has provided a platform for simultaneous multiple interactions that can be revisited, and which allow for a “more creative or extravert public presence, which may previously have been much more restricted”.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore:

Most people feel awkward in the company of people they barely know, self-conscious about the possible effect of their words and actions. Facebook provides an attractive buffer in this regard. It helps us to find out a considerable amount about potential friends, without requiring any awkward face-to-face interaction.<sup>46</sup>

Facebook users can reveal “unintentional truths” and the things they post, share, and create are a part of a truth of their identity, even if that truth is an aspirational one.

From my perspective, both the historical background and societal realm of modern Western magic were not entirely alien. The advantage of the status of a sort of “insider” can be beneficial for ethnographic access and interpretations, as “insiders studying their own cultures offer new angles of vision and depths of understanding. Their accounts are empowered and restricted in unique ways”.<sup>47</sup> For example, my acquaintance with the Theurgist was due to a shared interest in *The Greek Magical Papyri*. Upon expressing his attraction to the Apollonian invocation,<sup>48</sup> I immediately emailed him some scholarly studies on the Apollonian invocation and Neoplatonic theurgy. According to his own account, this gesture allowed him to refine the execution of the Apollonian invocation, especially concerning the ritualisation of his *augoeides*<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Daniel Miller, *Tales from Facebook* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 167.

<sup>45</sup> Miller, *Tales from Facebook*, 169.

<sup>46</sup> Miller, *Tales from Facebook*, 165.

<sup>47</sup> James Clifford, “Introduction: Partial Truths”, in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 9.

<sup>48</sup> PGM I. 262–347.

<sup>49</sup> A Neoplatonic term for the “luminous body”. According to Gregory Shaw, a principle of theurgy concerns the idea of the *ochēma*, “vehicle of the soul”, which is a kind of luminous body that both humans and the gods have. Theurgists conceived this body in the sense that souls have an etheric vehicle that animates the body with *pneuma*, “breath”, and coordinates sense impressions when our physical existence is immersed in the luminous world of gods and daimons. Furthermore, this body also functions as a vehicle of *phantasia*, “imagination”, acting as an intermediary subtle

and the evocation of the spirit of Hades into the firepit, thus further enriching his own esoteric system of Greco-Egyptian magic and Hellenistic Theurgy. This also draws attention to the fact that ethnographic researchers are fluid individuals, representing multiple selves, which are reflected throughout interactions and then interpretations of these interactions.<sup>50</sup> However, I must stress that it would be impossible to classify oneself as a “strict insider” when observing or participating in a diverse number of magical rituals defined by different historico-cultural and cosmological backgrounds. In relation to my own ethnographic studies the reason for this argument was that each case study selected was highly individualistic in terms of objectives, personal narrative, and drawing upon different elements of performance of Western magic. Some of these were unknown to me both in content and performance prior to my ethnographic engagements, and thus required on my behalf extensive research into the textual sources informing the worldviews and performances of these case studies, along with lengthy discussions with the practitioners to confirm the representations of their performances in my research.

Depending on the ethnographic objectives, any study of the enactment of Western esoteric practices requires direct observation and participatory reflection. Acknowledging the ambiguity, fluidity, and complexity of self-representations of Western esoteric ideas and performances, the data acquired should be designed to portray each practice in relation to relevant detail without distorting emic explanations. Hence, the benefits of direct observation and participatory reflection can be summarised as follows:

Participant observation opens things up and makes it possible to collect all kinds of data [...] reduces the problem of reactivity [...] helps you ask sensible questions, in the native language [...] gives you an intuitive understanding of what’s going on in a culture and allows you to speak with confidence about the meaning of data.<sup>51</sup>

Accepting the nature of this style of ethnographic inquiry, and in my case the status as a sort of “insider”, the ethnographic researcher of Western esoteric practices should be prepared to engage the methodological reality of themselves

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organ for communication and revelation between material and immaterial realms. See Gregory Shaw, “Theurgy and the Platonist’s Luminous Body”, in *Practicing Gnosis: Ritual, Magic, Theurgy and Liturgy in Nag Hammadi, Manichaean and Other Ancient Literature. Essays in Honor of Birger A. Pearson*, ed. April D. DeConick, Gregory Shaw, and John D. Turner (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 544–45.

<sup>50</sup> See Lisa Adkins, *Revisions: Gender and Sexuality in Late Modernity* (London: Open University Press, 2002).

<sup>51</sup> H. Russell Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology*, 4th ed. (Oxford: AltaMira Press, 2006), 354–55.

being an “observing participant” in the sense that “participant observers can be insiders who observe and record some aspects of life around them”.<sup>52</sup> As my style of ethnographic inquiry did not consist of me “becoming a member of a group without letting on that you’re there to do research”, I did not qualify as a “complete participant”, or a “complete observer”, which “involves following people around and recording their behaviour with little if any interaction”.<sup>53</sup>

Upon clarifying the objectives of research, the selection of ethnographic informants, and possible entry routes to gain direct access to witness why and how certain individuals and groups self-identify as Western esoteric practitioners, the next methodological step is to gather as much data as possible regarding the informants’ perceptions and engagements with their esoteric practices. This methodological approach can be pursued through lengthy informal discussions, both in person and via email correspondence, and by witnessing performances other than the ones documented in this ethnographic study. Upon being informed about the proposed performances to be documented ethnographically, it would be necessary for the researcher to then examine the textual sources informing the cosmological structure and methods of performance defining each esoteric practice.

To fulfil the requirements of an observing participant, I travelled to the locations where the rituals were to be performed and stayed for some time with my informants, both prior to and after the rituals. During these stays we would socialise on a friendly level, discuss Western magic, and engage in leisurely activities, such as visiting local attractions, public houses, and so on. On the day of the ritual I was provided with detailed notes articulating each part of the ritual. To direct and develop my methods and results of ethnographic research my informants would spend time informing me, both casually and during an extensive on site pre-ritual interview, about the nature, performance, and objectives of their ritual, whilst also discussing previous experiences and certain expectations. Here the informant would respond to various inquiries of mine regarding self-representations of magical ideas and practices, the purpose of ritual, and the notion of the body in their respective paradigms of Western magic.

I observed my informants setting up their ritual space and preparing themselves for the ritual before joining them in the demarcated ritual space. For my ethnographic study of the *Ninth Key of Gabriel and Levaniel*, after witnessing him purifying himself with water and robing, we entered the candle-lit ritual space and sat inside the magic circle derived from the *Lemegeton Clavicula Salomonis* on

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<sup>52</sup> See Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology*, 347.

<sup>53</sup> Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology*, 347.

the planetary hour of the Moon. I observed the Conjuror place a low stool before the altar and begin contemplating in silence. I sat behind and to the side of him. Surrounded by magical paraphernalia drawn from the medieval and the Renaissance eras, the ritual landscape represented a historical portrayal of theologies and ceremonial behaviours from the past, yet manifesting within a contemporary space and time negotiated by the Conjuror's presence. After some time dwelling in deep contemplation he raised his head and began staring into the scrying mirror, reciting with precision and eloquence "A Prayer to be said before the moving & Calling forth any of the Celestial Intelligences, to Visible appearance, by the following KEYS Or Provocations". The Conjuror then began to list the angelic hierarchies and the names of those who presided over them, followed by more recitations in praise of God and requesting his assistance. The Conjuror cast his shadow across the circle as he sat in silence and what appeared to be an entranced state of meditation brought on by gazing intensely into the Seal of Gabriel. Inhaling deeply, he began to execute the *Ninth Key of Gabriel and Levaniel*: "O you Glorious, Great, Sacred, & Celestial Angels, or Blessed Intelligences, called Gabriel & Levaniel, & all other", followed by a verbal presentation of the angels' appointments as servants of God and their cosmological stations, "in the Order or Hierarchy, of Angels, Called Angels, & Residing in the first Heaven, & Bearing office, Rule & power in the Mansion, Orb, or, Sphere, of the planet, Called, Luna".<sup>54</sup> The ritual intent began to formulate with the Conjuror declaring in a soft yet commanding voice, "Do call upon you, & humbly Request, & Entreat you, & move you to Visible appearance".

Throughout each ritual I acted as a passive observer and participant, carefully noting and absorbing the ritual settings, motions, and gestures. Upon being informed that the ritual had ended, I quietly waited as my informants performed various relaxation and meditative exercises before reflecting on the events and experience of their ritualisation with a post-ritual interview. Both the pre-ritual and post-ritual interviews can be described as "unstructured interviewing" based on a pattern of inquiry relating directly to the objectives of this study, yet characterised by a minimum of control, allowing the informants to express themselves on their own terms and at their own pace.

After the completion of the Mithras Liturgy, I remained in the ritual space with the Magos. Immersed in clouds of burning incense and flickering candlelight, the Magos' testimony and performance professed to manifesting the worldview of the Mithras Liturgy by coalescing the heavens and the earth. Here, according to the post-ritual interview, was revealed to him through his

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<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Rankine and Skinner, *The Keys to the Gateway of Magic*, 208.

senses a host of deified abstracts and elements, the starry orb of the realms of the gods, the great god of the sun, the virgins and lords of the firmament, and the numinous presence of Aion. The chanting of the secret names of gods and the rhythmic and dramatic recitation of ritual verses, accompanied by both rehearsed and spontaneous bodily gestures, was like a metamorphic dance aspiring to transform the initiate. Despite being initially nervous due to my presence, he confirmed that the ritual was a success. In his own words, whilst pouring himself wine in abundance in a state of exhaustion:

It was a rite of initiation and rebirth to witness and experience the eternal foundation of the cosmos to self-transform myself, in which I could feel in a state of ecstatic seizure my luminous and physical body putting together the elemental and planetary forces of the ritual and creating a perfect body of the knowledge and power of my fundamental true self. It was a Dionysian moment, a personal imitation of Dionysus as god of death and rebirth.

This pattern of ethnographic research dealing explicitly with solitary esoteric practices is essentially defined by transitioning between informal data collection and more formal procedures of participant observation and interviewing to establish a flow of events that benefits both the researcher and the informant. Regarding the informant, it also allows them to remain at ease and in control of each ethnographic event. The researcher is able to orientate the focus of observation and data collection in relation to a sequence of performative events, which although organised in accordance with certain esoteric instructional sources addressed through pre-ritual methodological inquiry, are determined by the fluid nature of uncertain experiential outcomes that are addressed through post-ritual recollection. This approach takes seriously the first-person perspective and the data acquired and further analyses to bridge the gap between the “first-person subjective access to experience, and third-person, objective observation of physical and behavioral events”.<sup>55</sup>

Due to the fact that solitary esoteric practitioners are not always familiar with the presence of others during their rituals, the presence of the ethnographic researcher must be carefully scrutinised to ensure that it does not seriously hinder a genuine esoteric practice, forcing it to become staged for the purpose of the research project. In response to my presence as a participant observer during each ritual, my informants confessed that it did not act as a disturbance or affect the outcome. One reason for this was that I had already observed some of my

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<sup>55</sup> See Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 6, 30–31.

informants in other rituals, and therefore made sense as an organic development of my fieldwork access. Also, my informants did not consider me a passive observer unaffected and detached from the ritual events, as they believed that I too was being exposed to the effects of the entities and forces summoned through their ritual, and hence participating in their magical worldview. The Conjuror, for example, was adamant that I remain in the magic circle with him for protection whilst he conjured an angelic entity into a scrying mirror. Furthermore, due to my personal interest in *The Greek Magical Papyri*, my informants believed that I would appreciate and remain sympathetic towards their magical performances and worldviews, rather than pursue what they perceived as a reductionist agenda reflecting “social taboos that still exist regarding magic and occultism”.<sup>56</sup>

Apart from collecting data from the ethnographic sites of ritual, a large amount of information was also collected at informal settings. Here informants can present themselves at a pace of their own and also learn more about the research objectives of the ethnographer. On many occasions I would socialise with the Thelemite at his home, restaurants, and public houses discussing his interpretations of Thelema, the interrelationship of yoga and magick, the function of the Body of Light in his rites. In particular, his lengthy remarks on the Thelemic understanding of the Holy Guardian Angel and True Will enabled me to direct my research and ethnographic attention towards distinctive ritual representations of him seeking to embody his True Will throughout the performance of *Liber V vel Reguli*, along with further ethnographic commentary and phenomenological analysis. Despite gaining my informants’ trust and remaining transparent regarding my personal interests in Western magic and the aspirations of my research, admission into any ethnographic context involves the interplay of power relations of the researcher and the informant. How a researcher navigates through and attempts to break down this barrier of power and build a new barrier of trust is crucial to gaining insights into the participant’s life.<sup>57</sup> Exchanging personal stories and interests within a relaxed environment establishes a relationship of trust and vulnerability, which can provide for more open and honest discussions. However, a more formal process of interviewing can form the crucial stage for structuring the data collected from informal socialisation and the participant observation of enactments of esoteric practices.

To further ensure trust with informants, it is beneficial for the researcher

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<sup>56</sup> Mayer, “Magicians of the Twenty-First Century”, 181.

<sup>57</sup> For reference see William B. Shaffir, “Managing a Convincing Self-Presentation”, in *Experiencing Fieldwork: An Inside View of Qualitative Research*, ed. William B. Shaffir and Robert A. Stebbins (London: SAGE Publications, 1991), 78.

to clarify first-hand that the ethnographic representations of case studies of esoteric practices are to be produced as the relationship between first-person subjective access to experience presented in emic testimonies, and third-person objective observation of events presented through the researcher's own description and analysis. From an anthropological perspective, the overriding role ethics plays in ethnography is of paramount importance, yet as Pat Caplan argues:

Ethics of anthropology is clearly not just about obeying a set of guidelines; it actually goes to the heart of the discipline: the premises on which practitioners operate, its epistemology, theory and praxis. In other words, *what* is anthropology for? *Who* is it for?<sup>58</sup>

Alongside this approach to ethnographic representation, intensive study of the primary sources used to inform the character of each esoteric practice and the cross-examination of these materials with the informants could greatly assist in structuring the ethnographic framework for case study. The reason for advocating these two approaches to ethnographic representation is due to that fact that

once 'informants' begin to be considered as co-authors, and the ethnographer as scribe and archivist as well as interpreting observer, we can ask new, critical questions of ethnographies.<sup>59</sup>

The purpose of this ethnographic representation is the discovery of constructed emic "truths" conveyed through performative substantiations of individual narratives of Western esoteric practices.<sup>60</sup>

Unlike more traditional forms of anthropological research that focus on a single community, studying a diversity of contemporary Western esoteric practices may require the adoption of a specific mode of ethnographic conduct

self-consciously embedded in a world system, now often associated with the wave of intellectual capital labeled postmodern, [which] moves out from the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space.<sup>61</sup>

This form of "multi-sited ethnography" can act as a strategic method for relevant hard-to-find contextualised ethnographic data, since the nature of research

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<sup>58</sup> Pat Caplan, *The Ethics of Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 2003), 3.

<sup>59</sup> Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths", 17.

<sup>60</sup> See Norman K. Denzin, *Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century* (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), xv.

<sup>61</sup> George E. Marcus, *Ethnography Through Thick and Thin* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 79.

engaging multiple case studies of esoteric practices cannot just be accounted for ethnographically by remaining focused on a single site of investigation.<sup>62</sup> My collection of ethnographic data took place at various sites determined by the location and availability of the magicians who agreed to take part. The common denominator was my informants' self-legitimation as Western magicians through the process of ritualisation. However, due to the fact that the ideas and practices of my informants were not always bound by specific geographical locations, attention also focused on how these were informed and reproduced on macrolevels, accessing information through literature and cyberspace, along with interaction with likeminded practitioners.<sup>63</sup> In regards to the latter form of intercourse, this was initiated either through social media or irregular patterns of socialisation and attendance at public gatherings and events organised around a theme pertaining to magic or other esoteric interests.

Despite spending a year or more developing rapport with the informants, my method can be described as "rapid assessment".<sup>64</sup> This refers to the methodology of collecting data on the site focused entirely on the isolated space and time of the ritual enactments. The rationale for this methodology may suit a certain research objective investigating the formational dynamics of a certain common feature defining a variety of esoteric practices, such as grimoiric ceremonialism or a Thelemic eucharist, rather than the totality of one single practice exclusively studied within its own tradition. Ritualisation of the magician across various genres of Western magic emerged as the definitive feature of analytical reflections, with the locus of analysis being the ritual body during the space and time of direct performance and experience. This focused on the dynamics of the ritual performance emerging as a structuration of perception, affection, and cognition in which a meaningful and experiential embodied participation was produced.

Although a strategy of research in the ethnographic study of Western esoteric practices should acknowledge macrotheoretical concepts, another factor that may emerge after the purposive sampling is the solitary nature of the practices under scrutiny. Some of my informants belonged to esoteric organisations and magical collectives where initiations, instruction, and group rituals took place. However, these organisations were bound by high levels of secrecy in regards to their teachings and practices, and the identities of those affiliated. These organisations were officially unwilling to admit non-initiates, therefore the time limit of this study did not permit me to seek initiation into esoteric organisations to which some of my informants belonged.

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<sup>62</sup> See Marcus, *Ethnography Through Thick and Thin*, 95–97.

<sup>63</sup> See Asprem, "Contemporary Ritual Magic", 385–87 for further reference.

<sup>64</sup> Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology*, 352.

Anthropologists studying Western esoteric practices through participant observation, such as Luhrmann and Greenwood, have predominantly focused on collectives of practitioners. However, my own research led to investigation of solitary practitioners that provided certain benefits for a more in-depth exploration of the interrelationship of ritualisation and Western magic. This allowed me to produce a holistic ethnographic representation of the individual practitioner, which is a fairly common mode of Western esoteric performance – a tailored response to the difficulty of locating and working with other like-minded practitioners, along with some of the complexities that Mayer observes as mentioned above. Although some of my informants had worked in rituals with other practitioners, they primarily worked on a solitary basis. They shared with me their opinion that the experience of working as a solitary practitioner was far more constructive for their personal development as effective ritualists. My informants explained to me that the reason for this was that collective ritual diminishes the experience of the complete embodiment of the magician. For example, in collective ritual one might only be instructed to perform a preliminary rite of purifying and consecrating the ritual setting with water and burning incense and then retreat, be present purely as a chanter, or act only as a passive sayer for other ritualists. By working as solitary practitioners, my informants clarified that they could direct and experience the complete embodiment of their magical ritual and, more importantly, have personal control over the process of ritualisation. For this reason the study of the solitary practitioner became the principal area of ethnographic investigation. What I mean by “solitary”, though, was that the performance of the rituals was undertaken by a single practitioner. This does not imply that the ritual structures are to be understood as existing in a vacuum. Rather they are to be seen as informed through reference to a variety of sources and commentaries propounded by like-minded practitioners through primary and secondary sources.

Regarding the gender representation of Western esoteric practitioners as noted by Luhrmann, Greenwood, and Mayer, both genders actively pursue magical practices. Unfortunately, due to ethnographic circumstances, time limitation, and the inability to secure immediate access to case studies that met my criterion for ethnographic selection, male practitioners were predominant in my research. I did locate a female practitioner of Alexandrian Wicca, who admitted to casting “spells” through ritual procedures and performed other rites to “invoke the gods”, who was willing to be part in my research as an ethnographic informant. However, she refused to identify as a “magician” of Western learned magic as she self-identified as an “initiatory priestess”.

The theoretical objectives of my ethnographic study of modern Western magicians, though, did not aspire to a study of masculinity and gender, or universalisation of the male ritual body. Neither do I argue that men and their bodies speak for modern Western magic as a whole. The gender structure of my research is merely the result of pragmatic circumstances of ethnographic selection. This is a limitation, and based on this I cannot universalise male practitioners and their embodied experiences as solely representative of modern Western magicians because, as already noted above, it is well known that magicians today comprise differently gendered individuals. Instead, further research is needed to account for the gender aspect of modern Western magic in a wider context. In addition, from my previous interactions with both male and female practitioners I can safely argue that the male majority of my willing informants does not reflect the true gender ratio of contemporary magicians. The reason for the reluctance of more women to participate in this study may be due to the fact that I am male, or possibly, as Mayer speculates, that “female magicians avoid verbalizing and verifying magical practice to a larger extent than male practitioners”.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, in the ethnographic situation of researching the intimate spaces of solitary magicians, the gender of the researcher is likely to affect what spaces one can gain access to, as was the case with my own research.

### **A Possible Phenomenological Model for the Ethnographic Study of Western Esoteric Practices**

On a final but methodologically important note, it would be wise for the researcher to adopt a theoretical model that will navigate all ethnographic endeavours whilst remaining fluid enough to incorporate all data, in order to bridge the gap between first-hand access to subjective experience and third-person observation. Prior to the participant observation of my informants enacting their rituals, I came to the realisation through informal discussion and interview procedures that emphasis on the pre-eminence of praxis over an uncritical reception of belief prevailed. My informants also explicitly remarked that their ritual behaviour was distinct from other areas of “mundane” behaviour. They distinguished it in reference to precise canonical works, such as grimoires, and the desire to initiate specific experiential conditions, delineated by a prescribed space and time even within a spatial location of ordinary practice, such as a living room. In addition, the authority of the canonical sources served to legitimise the experiential dimensions of their ritual

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<sup>65</sup> Mayer, “Magicians of the Twenty-First Century”, 182.

behaviour, especially when construing the communicative nature of the ritual structures. Two of my informants – the Theurgist and the Magos – referred to the key function of their primary sources as methods of instruction on how to establish communication with the desired elements of their magical worldviews.

Despite my informants' unequivocal acceptance of the ontological existence of transworldly forces and entities, alongside a deep appreciation for transpersonalism, ritual as a method of communication was always defined as witnessing and conversing with these forces and entities in the ritual setting. They all agreed that a grave insult for any magician was the idea of an "armchair magician", or someone "who only reads about magic and believes in it without any experience", as expressed by the Runer. The Conjuror also asked rhetorically: "How can you believe in something you have not experienced?" Another informant – the Theurgist – was adamant about the historical character of magic as explicitly being intense praxis, "unlike emphasis on belief alone".

As a principal objective in all my informants' magical rituals was to communicate with either transworldly forces and entities, or transpersonal aspects of the self, it became apparent that a certain theoretical model would be required to bridge the gap between first-hand access to subjective experience and third-person observation, whilst remaining as faithful as possible to representations of emic narrative and performance. Hence, ethnographically speaking, rituals of modern Western magic are holistic practices that combine the canonical (i.e. the textual sources) with the self-referential (i.e. the subjective ritual self) to cause certain effects "in-the-world" as experienced by the magician. Considering how the worldviews of the rituals of modern Western magic derive from certain propositional cosmological narratives, the logic of ritual can be interpreted as a typology of practice to intervene in the ritualists' modes of embodiment and cognition. The aim is to prepare practitioners in the production of a participatory worldview in a demarcated space and time identified as the phenomenal field. If successful, this intervention will produce a meaningful and effective ritual event.

To argue the case for a phenomenological account of ritual intervening in the practitioner's experience of transitioning modes of embodiment and cognition, it is necessary to discuss how different states of embodiment and cognition are defined in the context of ritual. Referring to the *Ninth Key of Gabriel and Levanuel*, the following hermeneutic model can be constructed:

- i. Establishing the foundations for initiating transitive consciousness:
  - a. Designating ritual space, time, and aesthetics in accordance with the Conjuror's intention and the proposed reality of the grimoire.
  - b. Purifications and adornments to prepare the embodied vehicle of transitive consciousness.
  - c. Meditative exercises defining the precise object of transitive consciousness.
  
- ii. Preparatory bodily motions to initiate transitive consciousness:
  - a. Ceremonial acts to initiate a sense of intransitive consciousness as liberating the self from the restrictions of the mundane.
  - b. Stationing of the body before a scrying object to commune with the spirit entity as the object of transitive consciousness.
  - c. Extensive verbal invocations to manifest the object of transitive consciousness.
  
- iii. Manifestation of the object of transitive consciousness:
  - a. The request for the appearance of the spirit being in the scrying mirror.
  - b. The ritual process defined by the embodied presence of the Conjuror willing into existence a subjective condition of experience as a constituent of the perceptual openness to the worldview of the grimoire.
  - c. A period of concentrated communication with the spirit being, manifested through the scrying object.
  
- iv. Termination of the presence of the object of transitive consciousness:
  - a. A license to depart.
  - b. A silent period of reflective contemplation.
  
- v. Ethnographic analysis:
  - a. Formulation of the ritual intention as the object of transitive consciousness, validating the text of the *Ninth Key of Gabriel and Levanuel* as a legitimate textual account.
  - b. Ritualisation initiating a state of intransitive consciousness as a precondition for the object of transitive consciousness.
  - c. Manifestation of the object of transitive consciousness as a confirmation of the ritualisation process.
  - d. Return to pre-ritual conditions to assess the ethnographic account, without evaluating the permanency of the object of transitive consciousness for the ritualist.

For this reason I adopted a theoretical model that Shaun Gallagher refers to as “enactive phenomenology”, in which the focus of inquiry is the assumption of an experiential marker of self-identification perceived as the “natural attitude” of the magician<sup>66</sup>:

<b>Ritualist</b>	<b>External Gesture</b>	<b>Internal Gesture</b>	<b>Metaexperience</b>
Magos: Encounter with Helios.	Breathing exercise to draw in the sun’s power, concentration of the flickering flame of the candle, and intonation of <i>vores magicae</i> .	Intense visualisation of the sun-disk amidst the starry heavens above and beyond the altar and willfully opening the fiery doors of the sun-disk.	Perceiving the sun-disk’s rays turning towards him, followed by a manifestation of Helios and sensing a surge of fire and spirit pouring forth from the altar; feeling overwhelmed by heat and light-headedness whilst thunder crackling and his surroundings slightly shaking.
Conjurator: Communing with Gabriel and Levaniel.	Seated before the scrying mirror, gazing into it whilst conversing with the angelic entity.	Intense concentration on the scrying mirror to avoid distraction whilst maintaining a mental dialogue with the angelic entity.	An initial sense of apprehension, followed by audible and visible revelations in the imagination, and the presence of a face and light in the scrying mirror.

From this perspective, enactive phenomenology seeks to understand consciousness in terms of “the subject actively perceiving or apprehending an

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<sup>66</sup> See Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind: An Introduction to Philosophy of Mind and Cognitive Science* (Oxford: Routledge, 2008), 22.

object”,<sup>67</sup> and thus directing subjective intentions towards an objective description of the phenomena of the world.<sup>68</sup>

Within the context of the perceiver and the act of perception, phenomenological inquiry posits that there are some natural events forming the ground of experience from which the concept of “sensation”, which Edmund Husserl refers to as “hyletic data”, may be abstracted. Gallagher contends that hyletic data indicates two general types of data:

Data that are the result of externally oriented sensing, and data that are associated with bodily processes and experiences, e.g., touch, pressure, warmth, cold, and pain sensations.<sup>69</sup>

From this description Gallagher argues that hyletic data are not perceptual objects, but rather the necessary operational conditions that constitute the properties of the perception of an object that enters into the intentional structure of consciousness. Gallagher also argues that the same theoretical approach can be applied to the notion of “qualia”, that is, “the qualitative or phenomenal feel of consciousness”.<sup>70</sup> Both hyletic data and qualia are understood to be a matter of pre-reflective phenomenal experience, involving sensory reactions. However, Gallagher also argues that to think about hyletic data and qualia in terms of phenomenal consciousness is an “abstraction mistaking objective/intentional qualities for internal or phenomenal”, and undermines the role of the body with respect to “what it is like” to experience a thing.<sup>71</sup> He contends that to ignore the body is to ignore a multitude of synaesthetic experiences of the lived body bearing on perception and cognition:

Here there is an important distinction between... the body-as-object – characteristics that I perceive as happening in or to my body, *versus* taking them as aspects of the body-as-subject – bodily experiences that have an effect on the way that I experience the world.<sup>72</sup>

The above statement implies that somaesthetic experience is the manner in which one perceives things qualified not only by the physical state of the body but, more importantly, the experience of being in a particular state of embodiment. Central to my informants’ performances was the assumption of the

<sup>67</sup> James L. Cox, *An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion* (London: Continuum, 2010), 27.

<sup>68</sup> See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “What is Phenomenology?” in *Phenomenology of Religion: Eight Modern Descriptions of the Essence of Religion*, ed. Joseph Dabney Bettis (London: SCM Press, 1969), 27–28.

<sup>69</sup> Shaun Gallagher, *Phenomenology* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 83.

<sup>70</sup> Gallagher, *Phenomenology*, 90.

<sup>71</sup> Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?”, *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (1974).

<sup>72</sup> Gallagher, *Phenomenology*, 95.

identity of the magician as a ritual specialist competent to negotiate and call forth transpersonal forces and transworldly entities. This identity had to be created through ritual. Although this process was situated as being-in-the-world, it was a world renegotiated in accordance with the natural attitude required by the ritual setting. Thus, to speak in terms of embodied consciousness in an embodied cognitive context is to evaluate how the phenomena that one engages with in the world affect and shape one's perceptual and cognitive life or, in my case studies, how one phenomenologically speaking "becomes the magician". Gallagher refers to this approach as "enactive phenomenology", addressing how experience of phenomena in-the-world may inform "not just the know-how of cognitive abilities (memory, imagination, recognition), but also the know-how (or the 'I can' or the affordances) of various action engagements with the world".<sup>73</sup>

Furthermore, to capture such data presented in ethnographic studies of Western esoteric practices as the first-hand subjective access to and understanding of experiential dimensions of esoteric practice, the phenomenological method of *epoché* could prove to be rather beneficial for the researcher. Here through a careful process of research "bracketing", the researcher performs "eidetic intuition", in which the essential structures of the phenomena are observed and intuited.<sup>74</sup> As an ethnographic tool of investigation, the objective of *epoché* in any study of Western esoteric practices reflects Shaun Gallagher's and Dan Zahavi's method:

Not to doubt, neglect, abandon, or exclude reality from consideration; rather the aim is to suspend or neutralize a certain dogmatic attitude towards reality, thereby allowing us to focus more narrowly and directly on reality just as it is given – how it makes its appearance to us in experience. In short, the epoché entails a change of attitude towards reality, and not an exclusion of reality. The only thing that is excluded as a result of the epoché is a certain naïvety, the naïvety of simply taking the world for granted, thereby ignoring the contribution of consciousness.<sup>75</sup>

This process of *epoché* could then be followed by "phenomenological reduction" in the hermeneutic configuration of ethnographic data on Western esoteric practices, in order "to analyse the correlational interdependence between specific structures of subjectivity and specific modes of appearance or givenness".<sup>76</sup>

In addition to the complexities in identifying and gathering ethnographic data from Western esoteric practitioners, from my own experience the method in

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<sup>73</sup> Gallagher, *Phenomenology*, 98.

<sup>74</sup> Cox, *Phenomenology of Religion*, 29.

<sup>75</sup> Gallagher and Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind*, 23.

<sup>76</sup> Gallagher and Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind*, 25.

which this data is organised and presented for the ethnographer as a meaningful worldview of esoteric ideas and performances worthy of research also poses a challenge. Although I do not infer that ethnographic studies of Western esoteric practices should adopt a phenomenological approach, a theoretical model apt for “fleshing” out those elements that determine and produce alterations in subjectivity through esoteric practices needs to be carefully designed and implemented to engage a thorough representation and analysis of how and why certain individuals pursue and embody an esoteric worldview.

Promisingly, current developments in the academic study of Western esotericism are beginning to adopt methodological tools and frameworks from other disciplines, such as sociology, and the cognitive sciences. The latter has recently featured in a special issue of *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* dedicated to introducing the cognitive science of religion to the study of esotericism, along with some of Asprem’s recent publications.<sup>77</sup> These approaches seek to further identify and interpret those ideas and practices that provide meaning and orientation in self-representations and self-legitimations of esoteric practitioners through strategies of negotiation of identity and performance. By identifying the meaningful dynamics of esoteric practice through ethnographic inquiry and phenomenological analysis, this academic field of inquiry can truly expand into a broader interpretative area in the study of religion, clarifying how and when certain dynamics of esoteric practices expand as experiential markers of alterations in subjectivity, in relation to canonical constitutions that both inform and distinguish Western esoteric ideas and practices.

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<sup>77</sup> See Egil Asprem and Markus Altena Davidsen, “Editors’ Introduction: What Cognitive Science Offers the Study of Esotericism”, *Aries* 17 (2017): 1–15; Egil Asprem “Reverse-Engineering ‘Esotericism’: How to Prepare a Complex Cultural Concept for the Cognitive Science of Religion”, *Religion* 46 (2016): 158–85; “Explaining the Esoteric Imagination: Towards a Theory of Kataphatic Practice”, *Aries* 17 (2017): 17–50.

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