

**Healing in the Anthropause:
Reclamation, Resacralization and Anti-Vaccination in Aotearoa/New Zealand**

by

Sadie Rittman

B.A., Swarthmore College, 2016

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES
(Anthropology)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

August 2022

© Sadie Rittman 2022

The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommended to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for acceptance, the thesis entitled:

Healing in the Anthropause:

Reclamation, Resacralization and Anti-Vaccination in Aotearoa/New Zealand

Submitted by Sadie Rittman in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology

Examining Committee:

Sabina Magliocco, Professor, Anthropology; Chair, Program in Religion, Literature and the Arts, UBC

Supervisor

Tracey Heatherington, Associate Professor, Anthropology, UBC

Supervisory Committee Member

Leslie Robertson, Associate Professor, Anthropology, UBC

Examining Committee Member

Abstract

In a New Age community in Queenstown, Aotearoa/New Zealand, “healing” is a widely used term with spiritual, ecological and social implications that can be examined as a response to capitalism and climate change. It involves reclaiming and re-sacralizing connections and relationships towards re-enchantment. Participatory “connection,” with attending magical consciousness, is emphasized in opposition to the separations that are at the root of our climate crisis. In this context, and particularly as Aotearoa/New Zealand was spared the worst of the pandemic during my research, the social interruption presented by Covid-19 was widely understood as a time of hope and healing, accompanied by profound personal experiences. This understanding would come to clash with government solutions in the form of vaccinations, masks, and mandates, resulting ultimately in a protest at parliament taking shape as a festival. This thesis explores New Age responses to the pandemic in terms of myth, religiosity, and complex ontological dimensions of re-enchantment in the context of climate crisis, situating the conflict over healing as a problem for the Anthropocene. For this community, the pandemic as a cosmopolitical event offered an opportunity to protest “sick society,” its functioning and constructs for truth as nexused in the authority of vaccinations and mandates, in favor of a “new world.”

Lay Summary

This thesis examines perspectives towards the Covid-19 pandemic, and corresponding approaches to healing, in a spiritual community, roughly defined as “New Age,” in Queenstown, New Zealand. It examines anti-vaccination stances in terms of myth, religiosity, understandings of reality, and questions related to the Anthropocene and climate change. Ethnographic methods including participant-observation with fieldnotes, semi-structured interviews and auto-ethnographic reflection were used for research. The thesis finds opposition to vaccine mandates to be rooted in religious visions of a “new world,” towards which the pandemic is understood as a turning point for healing. In this way, re-enchantment and re-sacralization meets with anti-vaccination in community members’ stances towards the pandemic.

Preface

This thesis was written by Sadie Rittman, based on research conducted by the author, under the supervision of Dr. Sabina Magliocco. All data collection and analysis was performed by the author. Fieldwork was conducted in-person in Queenstown, New Zealand from July to December of 2021. Tracey Heatherington served as a committee member, and Leslie Robertson served as an external reviewer. Research was approved by the UBC Behavioral Research Ethics Board, certificate No. H21-01101.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Lay Summary.....	iv
Preface.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
Acknowledgements.....	vii
Thesis Body:	
Ora (Introduction).....	1
Enchantment, Healing and Research (Methods).....	4
The Energy is Shifting in New Zealand.....	10
A Bit Like a Phoenix.....	20
Clash of Healing.....	34
Feeling as Healing.....	44
Myth and Healing, Purity and Danger.....	56
Why Become a Toxic Wasteland When I Can be a Flower Paddock?.....	69
The New World (Conclusion).....	79
References.....	86

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Sabina Magliocco, for her comprehensive support. Thank you for being a wonderful teacher, an empathetic ear, an encouraging thinker and a creative problem solver in these challenging times!

Thank you to my committee member, Dr. Tracey Heatherington, for her thoughtful remarks and advice. I've felt encouraged and supported, as well as intellectually propelled, by your council.

Thank you to Dr. Leslie Robertson for examining this thesis with such generous, encouraging, and thoughtful engagement. Your feedback was indispensable.

Thank you to Luke Gajdus, my partner, who has been with me every step of the way.

Thank you to my family for believing in me.

Thank you to my field community, to all of the people who offered their time, thoughts, friendship and interviews with so much love and care. Thank you for participating in this research, and thank you for you.

Thank you to Ora, and the people who manage it. A powerhouse to the community. I'm forever grateful.

Thank you to the UBC Department of Anthropology, for the masters program producing this research.

Ora

The longest, darkest night of the year fell on my first week in Queenstown. When my partner and I moved down, from the north of Te Waipounamu, Aotearoa/New Zealand's South Island, I'd been sick, bedridden on-and-off for weeks. I knew it wasn't Covid. It was June 2021, and despite the fact that most of the world had been embroiled within the ongoing pandemic since early 2020, New Zealand had been Covid-free for just over a year. With its decisive six-week lockdown in 2020, and closed international borders, the country had "beat the virus." However, as I suffered from weeks of fatigue, nausea, and flu-like symptoms, I didn't know what was wrong with me. Eventually I'd learn that it was that strange phenomenon, breaking the mental-physical boundaries we might otherwise assume: burnout.

Though exhausted, I checked Facebook for winter solstice celebrations. One event advertised: *"Winter solstice has been celebrated in cultures the world over for thousands of years. The start of the solar year is a celebration of light and the rebirth of the sun. The shortest day and the longest night of the year inspire mystical celebrations, both old and new, in anticipation of the sun's return. Join us for an enchanted evening. A gathering of friends in celebration. A fire ceremony, drumming, dance, sharing of gifts, hearts and food."*

The event was hosted at a place called "Ora." Named for a Māori word translating roughly to mean "to recover or revive," or "to be alive, well, safe, cured, recovered, healthy, fit and healed" (Moorfield 2022), Ora is a beautiful residential home which triples as an AirBnB, retreat center, and gathering space for a community bound by "a loosely organized, nondenominational spirituality focused precisely on 'enchanted' practices such as magic, astrology, fortune-telling,

and paranormal powers,” “typically referred to as new age” (Asprem 2014: 32). More emic terms, all of which I was to hear that very first night, include “conscious community,” “tribe,” and “healers.”

Coming into Ora’s spacious living room from the wintry darkness, I was immediately embraced by a sense of warmth. A large fireplace emanated heat, and candles flickered around the room, surrounded by art, crystals and flowers. People lingered in long embraces, seemingly comfortable with each others’ touch as well as within their own skins, bodies and voices. They looked deeply into each others’ eyes, faces in close proximity, and seemed to speak with an intimacy unfrequented in outer day-to-day life, foregoing smalltalk for emotional honesty, spiritual perceptions, and invocations of ancestors. The night proceeded like an adult version of a children’s birthday party; we played “authentic relating” games, made music, ate a giant potluck meal, and even crafted “gifts of love and light” for each other, lanterns made from mason jars with sparkles, paints and dried plants.

In this space, I felt a sense of relief. I found my community, both socially and ethnographically, to not only study healing in a time of Covid, but also embark on a “healing journey” of my own, from the despair and physical illness with which I had started into an expansion I couldn’t have imagined before. Healing from my “burnout” ended up entailing a spiritual process closely dependent on events hosted and connections made through Ora. However, in developing the mystical connections that would constitute my “healing,” I’d come to find myself entangled in an ontological conflict when reclamation and resacralization met with anti-vaccination, in a clash of the course and meaning of “healing” in the pandemic.

The community, already preoccupied with “healing,” read the pandemic’s deeper meanings within a context of belief in a social, spiritual and ecological “urgent necessity of change” (Hanegraaff 1996: 348). “Healing,” for them, is a widely used term that can be understood spiritually, socially and ecologically, as well as physiologically. It involves reclaiming spiritual, social and ecological connections and re-sacralizing relationships that are human, nonhuman, more-than-human and transhuman. Participatory connection is emphasized in opposition to the separations at root of our climate crisis. In this context, and particularly as Aotearoa/New Zealand was spared the worst of the pandemic, the social interruption presented by Covid-19 could be widely embraced as a time of hope and healing.

Mainstream public health approaches to the pandemic, with recourse to secular medicine to protect not only human lives but also the sociocultural system in which its healing modality is located, represented the antithesis of healing in this community’s logic. This would lead them closer to “conspiratoriality,” a term denoting the merging of conspiracy theory and New Age thought, and protesting mandates to stand up for “rights and freedoms,” as the healing approach to what they understood as the larger illness underlying Covid-19. As a cosmopolitical event unfolding “an existential learning situation” “of how we live and how we wish to live” (Schillmeier 2020: 1), Covid-19 invited clashing courses for “healing.” Explored in terms of myth, religiosity, and complex ontological dimensions of re-enchantment in the context of climate crisis, this conflict may be a problem for the Anthropocene, as well as an important juncture in learning how we heal.

Enchantment, Healing and Research

Originally from the United States, but an expatriate around the world for most of my life, I moved to Aotearoa/New Zealand with my partner on a “working holiday visa” in November 2019. Months later, the world around us changed with Covid-19. New Zealand was a blessed place to be; by March we entered into a six week lockdown, which eliminated the virus from the community country-wide. Life in New Zealand quickly returned to “normal,” and we felt eerily fortunate to be safe in such a time of global upheaval and uncertainty. New Zealand closed its international borders, but those of us within the country were allowed to stay, our visas extended multiple times. As a result, I attended the first year of my masters in anthropology at UBC in Vancouver online, and conducted my accompanying fieldwork in New Zealand. By the time I was finished, New Zealand had come to feel like home. After all, it's the longest time I've spent in any one place, without getting on a plane, in my entire life.

As approaches to the pandemic took on narratives of healing, and were reclaimed within various worldviews with reference to climate crisis, I took interest in the cosmopolitical life of Covid. “Cosmopolitics” refers to a “politics” of the “cosmos,” “cosmos” designating “the multitude of beings - human and nonhuman, living and nonliving - that together construct reality and form a collective society” (Robbert and Mickey 2013: 1), reflecting “a negotiation between worlds that alters the ontology of modern politics” (Taguchi and De La Cadena 2017). Scholars have focused on cosmological questions surrounding disasters as a means for exploring climate change, decolonization and the Anthropocene to this effect, with the “Anthropocene idea” explored in anthropology as a “problem space” for “evolving notions of global change and human/nonhuman relations” (Moore 2015: 41). Nils Bubandt approaches an Indonesian volcano as a site of

“undecidability” (Bubandt 2017), unleashing “spirits” and uncertainty to characterize the “Anthropocene” in opposition to modernity’s disenchantment; Cecilie Rubow explores cyclones in the Cook Islands as “culturalnatural whirls” (Rubow 2018), entangling questions of “culture” and “nature”; and Marisol de la Cadena finds an Andean mountain to be a “site of equivocation,” wherein worlds are “partially connected” such that beings like sacred mountains are “more than one but less than two entities” (De La Cadena 2010: 351). When the pandemic was interpreted as a healing process for a sick earth - forcing us humans to change - in popular discourse in Aotearoa/New Zealand, I wanted to look at the pandemic in terms of its ecological, spiritual and ontological complexities. When these narratives intertwined with anti-vaccination and anti-mandate stances, I focused on working to understand this complex dynamic in my fieldsite.

Ora was the fieldsite connecting all of my interlocutors; essentially, it’s where I met all of them, and served as a uniting space for the “New Age” community. While “New Age” accurately describes the religiosity of the community within academic literature, it is fairly vague and unpopular emically, what with eye-rolling associations like “*woowoo*” attributed to the term. As mentioned, more emic terms include “conscious community,” “tribe,” and “healers,” with “conscious community” probably most popular, contemporary and apt in describing this specific strand of “New Age.” “Community” here is also defined loosely; many “community members” were transient, passing through Queenstown for only weeks or months. This was true of me, as I stayed for six months in Queenstown. However, this brevity and lack of formality does not prevent a feeling of deep closeness that can develop in a matter of minutes, days, months or weeks, given especially that the community emphasizes and prioritizes feelings and practices of connection, imbued with layers of spiritual meaning. Though I was new to this “community,” as

a traveler familiar and fairly at home with such a social and spiritual milieu, I felt a sense of relief and comfort within minutes of stepping into Ora, and quite soon came to feel part of the community.

Similar communities, classifying themselves as “conscious” and sharing values of reclamation and re-enchantment roughly categorized under “New Age,” exist around the world in various shapes and forms. While the communities are shaped by the places they are in, mobility as individuals flow in, out and between allows for similar cultures and worldviews in far flung locations. As one of my interlocutors told me, when comparing travel notes, “*the world is small for people like us.*” These communities appeal to travelers who have left their homes behind - or in my case, never really had one - in search of self, meaning, depth, reality and belonging.

That said, not all connected to Ora were travelers, with many born and raised in Queenstown, living long-term in Queenstown, or visiting from elsewhere in New Zealand for specific events. Some stumbled in unwittingly, never having interacted with “conscious community” before, and finding something resonant therein. At a given event, participants could range from elderly farmers up the road to cosmopolitan young travelers who had participated in similar communities in several other continents. Demographics of the community, particularly in its fluidity, are difficult to summarize. However at most events roughly two-thirds of participants were international, immigrants or long-term travelers, and were predominantly White but also included Māori, Asian and Latinx individuals as well. As was typical of my experiences in New Zealand, there was a high level of socialization between age ranges, with 25-year-olds regularly close friends with 65-year-olds. The most common age at events, though, was probably 25-35.

Whilst “dropping out” from upper-middle class socioeconomic expectations was a common trope within this community and others like it, many members also come from more working class backgrounds. In total, the community and its practices may fulfill spiritual longings and facilitate mystical expansion, accessible from various backgrounds and cultures and fairly flexible and eclectic, amidst disconnection and disenchantment.

Apart from the process of research, there was little to necessarily separate me or render me an outsider to this community in Queenstown. It became my community as well, with relationships that I hope can outlast and supersede research. These relationships were no doubt strengthened by the fact that I hadn’t seen friends and family outside of New Zealand for two years, a situation not uncommon at that point, and fairly bonding. Relationships are thus at the forefront of this work. While I hope this offers insight otherwise difficult if not impossible to attain, drawing from my own experiences as well as those garnered through close connection, it also means that it’s difficult to neatly extricate what constitutes “research” from my time in Queenstown, as my “research” was intertwined with personal, social and spiritual experiences within the community. Emphatically, I did not strive for “objectivity,” a notion I don’t believe in and that scholars have found particularly impossible in studying magic (Favret-Saada 1980, Stoller 1987, Magliocco 2004), but rather agree with my supervisor Sabina Magliocco who writes of the ethnographic perspective as “about containing within one body multiple, simultaneous frames of reference with which to interpret experience” (Magliocco 2004: 15). Frames of ethnographic observation and analysis, and religious participation, existed simultaneously within me, though sometimes at odds, I’ll admit.

I tried creative ways to hold this tension. I took inspiration from anthropologists who moreover harness it productively as an ethnographic method; for example, Yana Stainova's method of "enchantment," suggesting "creative tension" between "enchantment" and critical theory to inform fieldwork (Stainova 2019: 221), with "enchantment" referring to a "loosening" of "our analytic hold on social reality" (Stainova 2019: 219), and KJ Hernández's methodological "healing" as an "an ethnographic practice where one communicates with more-than-human beings with the help of their body as technology" (Hernández 2020). I tried using two journals for my two different "frames"; at the same time that I kept a private journal of field notes for my ethnographic observations, thoughts and analyses, I also kept a "sacred journal" which charted my spiritual journey, and which I shared freely with my friends in the field community, allowing them to contribute. The two journals represent the two experiences I held simultaneously, ethnographic and spiritual, and tell stories that, while separate, could not have occurred without one another.

This research in Queenstown was conducted from July to December of 2021, after moving down with my partner from the northern end of the island. During this time, Covid-19 came back to New Zealand, the country entered a brief second lockdown, and then rolled out vaccinations and mandates, all of which would influence the shape of my research. Through the duration of my research, the entire South Island of New Zealand - where Queenstown is located - remained Covid-free. This provided a level of insulation to inflect experiences of the pandemic recorded in this research. The virus did not reach the island until after I departed.

I deployed participant observation with fieldnotes, semi-structured interviews, and auto-ethnographic reflection as my research methods. I observantly participated in various events at and connected to Ora, from a Tibetan Buddhist retreat, to seasonal celebrations, parties, sound healings, ecstatic dance and other rituals created, observed and enacted by the community. Later in my research, this included anti-vaccination meetings and demonstrations, which blended seamlessly into these other aforementioned community events and spaces. At each event, I sought to balance my spiritual openness as a community member with my ongoing analysis as a researcher. Supplementing participant-observation, I conducted semi-structured interviews with individuals particularly prominent or vocal in the community, or who volunteered themselves upon hearing about my research, striving for a breadth of perspectives that could offer a fair representation of experiences and viewpoints. Some interviewees are amongst my close friends, while others I only met once or twice. Some interviews were daylong affairs, bookended by informant-led healing practices, oracle readings, and/or self-styled ceremonies and rituals. For analysis, I later transcribed these interviews and coded for themes and sub-themes. Though I received consent to include real names, I decided to use pseudonyms for all interviewees should they no longer wish to associate publicly with these views in the future. Meanwhile, I reflected auto-ethnographically on my own experiences as well, particularly in how difficult it was to hold a different viewpoint on pandemic response within this social context.

Though I share many worldviews with this community, viewpoints towards the vaccines explored in this research are not representative of my own. This was particularly difficult; while beliefs about the vaccines were not uniform in the community, those explored in this thesis dominated, and my fieldwork included participating in public street demonstrations on positions

I wasn't in personal agreement with, with not just interlocutors but friends with whom I felt deeply connected, and whom I wanted to support. On one such occasion, I could not bring myself to go; wracked with anxiety, I went for a run instead. I did not see it as my position as an ethnographer to moralize, persuade, vocalize or argue. Instead, I saw it as my role as researcher - and friend - to do what comes far more naturally to me, and listen respectfully, empathetically and deeply, taking viewpoints seriously and trying to understand so as to communicate with wider audiences. I did not volunteer my vaccine status unless asked - which I wasn't, for the most part. I worried that this silence may have led participants to assume that I agreed with their views, and conducted research from within this stance, despite my explanation of my research to the best of my ability and as per BREB protocol. However, my own views were not rigid, which was partly a decision in conducting this research, and partly from my ingrained perspective. Towards the end of my research, when my plans to travel to Canada raised the question of whether I'd been vaccinated, I revealed my status if asked. I communicated my truths in terms legible within the community, and within my own perspective within the community; if asked why I'd gotten vaccinated, I said that it "felt right," which was generally accepted. On such a polarizing issue, this has been an exceedingly challenging line to walk, but one that I hope can help both elucidate and complicate anti-vaccination dynamics for important nuance in critical pandemic discourse that goes beyond "right" and "wrong" and "us" versus "them."

The Energy is Shifting in New Zealand

On a Friday night, Queenstown is bustling with bars, nightclubs and restaurants. A picturesque mountain town nestled on the shore of Lake Wakatipu in Aotearoa/New Zealand's South Island,

Queenstown is one of New Zealand's most popular tourist destinations. It is known for adventure sports, such as skiing and snowboarding, bungee jumping, skydiving and hiking, and also draws both short-term and long-term migrants, such that the small town is considerably international.

It was Friday the 13th of August, and behind closed international borders, life was still relatively "normal." Even without incoming tourists, the town was busy and vibrant. I wound my way through its festive rowdiness to arrive at an old stone church. It crafted its own little spot of darkness, with a small lawn free from lights. Opening the heavy church door, the mishmash of loud electronic beats from outside gave way to acoustic voices, singing:

*"Mama, I feel you under my feet,
Mama, I feel your heartbeat"*

In the center of the church's small function room, thirteen people sat arranged in a circle. As they sang they held hands and kept their eyes closed. When the song finished they chanted three long "oms," and then descended into a thick, reverberant silence. When gradually they opened their eyes, they looked around the room and exchanged enormous, shining smiles.

Welcome to "Blank Canvas." At the time of my fieldwork, Blank Canvas was a loosely structured event held roughly every other Friday night, often at this church but occasionally in other venues such as Ora. It was the brainchild of two Irishmen in the community, Phil and Sam. Both in their mid-thirties, I see Sam and Phil like a yin and yang, opposites essentially the same, fitting together perfectly. Phil is from a rougher side of Dublin, while Sam comes from more

rural Western Ireland. Phil is covered in colorful tattoos, a formidable martial artist with a warm laugh and kind heart. He has the soul of a leader, seeing the best in everyone and working to raise them up, helping everyone around him to shine. He speaks and walks with gravitas. Sam, meanwhile, feels to me as light as a leprechaun. Between ourselves, I call him “the druid” and he calls me “the fairy,” and we briefly dreamed of co-creating childrens’ books after a joint, informal oracle reading at a birthday party suggested as much. During my fieldwork, Sam was working as a plumber and Phil as a construction worker. They’d only just met in Queenstown the year prior, but have a connection that feels as though it spans lifetimes. One night, months before I arrived in Queenstown, they decided within their creative frisson to get together with instruments and blank pieces of paper, and simply see what arises. “Blank Canvas,” as a regular gathering that carves out space for spontaneity, affirmation, connection, growth and magic, was the result.

Blank Canvas and similar events serve a “healing” purpose within the community. A ubiquitous term with multiple, interrelated layers of social, spiritual and ecological meaning, “healing” could be inhabited as an identifying practice within the community, both collectively and individually. In his work on New Age religion, Wouter Hanegraaff identifies that the “central feature” of New Age healing, “from which the rest follows, is the relevance accorded to the whole context (physical, psychological, spiritual and religious) of illness rather than only to the disease” (Hanegraaff 1996: 45). He distinguishes “disease” and “illness” in medical anthropologist Arthur Kleinman’s terms, such that where “disease” refers to “biophysical conditions,” that which medical practitioners are concerned with “curing,” “illness” is the domain of traditional and New Age healing and refers to “the complex social, psychological, and

spiritual condition of the sick person” (Hanegraaff 1996: 42). Moreover, “concerned with more than just ‘fixing’ isolated problems,” as biomedical “curing” might, “healing is regarded as promoting harmony in the world” (Hanegraaff 1996: 45). Against climate crisis and late-stage capitalism, this is a meaning and purpose with which to orient life.

“Healing” in this way can be considered religiously, as well as in opposition to mainstream society. Wouter Hanegraaff argues that “the link between religion and healing is undoubtedly a natural one. Both domains, after all, share a concern with providing alternatives to human weakness and suffering,” such that “religious salvation in fact amounts to a radical form of ‘healing’” (Hanegraaff 1996: 44). Meanwhile, he frames New Age religion as “a manifestation of popular culture criticism, defining itself primarily by its opposition to the values of the ‘old’ culture” (Hanegraaff 1996: 331). As such, New Age healing occurs by way of a mystical orientation reclaiming and re-sacralizing what capitalism might stifle. In doing this, it challenges the dominant epistemological and ontological frames, as well as social and ecological implications, of capitalist society.

In this way, the all-encompassing “illness” that healers “heal” from is contemporary mainstream society itself, understood as sick. Phil, co-founder of Blank Canvas, illustrated this to me during our interview out on his deck. *“The amount of absolute horrendous slaughtering that has happened, all in the name of desire and indulgence, it’s an absolute fucking disgrace,”* he said. *“Excuse my language, but yeah. We’ve abominated the forests, the animals. The lands have been poisoned, communities have been poisoned, controlled... The whole thing is wrong. Our society is a consumer-based society, not a love-based society... Gluttony and desire is running the world.”*

People's desire for money, people's desire for power, is taking away from the more subtle, more beautiful energies, such as just taking care of each other and loving." For him, this is the context, *"fucking disgrace,"* from which we must heal.

Events and spaces such as Blank Canvas facilitate healing in these terms. They create space for reclamation and re-enchantment, sharing characteristics typical of folk healing traditions including an understanding of "complex interrelatedness of body, mind and spirit" (O'Connor and Hufford: 19) and an emphasis on "various kinds of energy" (O'Connor and Hufford 2001: 22). As Phil explained of Blank Canvas, *"When we get together for our Blank Canvases, or whenever we get together, collectively what we're doing is... keeping the vibration and frequency high for all of the world. We are raising that light for everything, for everyone. This is our duty."* Sam, Blank Canvas's co-founder, similarly described in our interview, *"When we heal ourselves, we heal our family, we heal our lineage and we heal our mother earth. It's huge. Us having this conscious talk is also resonating and vibrating out to Mother Earth. Every action, everything we do is vibrating out to her. And it's very beautiful, very loving. And the more of us that are waking up and doing this, the better for all."*

As Sam spoke to me, cross-legged on his bedroom floor, a ceremonial hawk's wing lay between us, offering strength. Phil had harvested it from roadkill, keeping the other wing for his own altar. During my interview with Phil, meanwhile, a hawk circled above us almost the entire time that he spoke. I noticed it with wonder, and he responded, *"Yeah the hawks are watching, make no mistake about it. The eye of the hawk. You know... You'll never obtain the eye of the hawk"*

peeing and farting around the pubs, put it like that. I'll tell you that for sure." He knew from personal experience.

On a personal level, "healers" are themselves healing from "sickness" they source in the imbalances of society. The process of healing society, in this way, comes directly from a process of healing the self. Wouter Hanegraaff describes how healing in New Age religion is closely intertwined with "personal growth" and "developing our human potential," towards closer connection with divinity (Hanegraaff 1996: 46). This development rests on a "widespread dissatisfaction with the way most of us live our lives in modern society," as "the price we pay for social acceptance is the impoverishment of our inner life and the repression of abilities which are our natural birthright. Modern society, in particular, produces lonely and alienated individuals who have lost touch with their inner selves and are at a loss to find deeper meaning in their lives" (Hanegraaff 1996: 48). Whether manifesting in alcoholism, stress, overwork, structural violence, intergenerational trauma, or more, the healers work on themselves through a spiritual approach to the deeper roots of "illness." Both Sam and Phil, for example, began their healing journeys with recovery from the alcoholism deemed "normal" in their Irish culture. Sam described, *"I was very much lost and I was trying to find myself through drink. It was only ever a momentary pleasure, but that was I guess my identity. I was constantly trying to fit in through drink."* Healing, meanwhile, occurs in expansion. Sam illustrates this in describing a pivotal, psychedelic moment of his healing, when *"the four walls were still in my room, but the ceiling was now blown off the hinges. The stars, the galaxies, light, soul, everything! So much more than I'd been led to believe had been opened up."* For Sam, this marks a turning point, from "lost" and alcoholic, victim of mainstream society, to now becoming a healer.

Event spaces like Blank Canvas facilitate collective co-creation and expansion. Participants are greeted into such spaces with phrases like “all of you is welcome here,” allowing them to shake off the outside world - its ways of relating and strictures for reality, what Sam referred to as what we’d “*been led to believe*” and popularly termed “conditioning” - and drop into a sense of deepened and expanded connection with ourselves, each other and divinity.

Blank Canvas could draw anywhere between ten to fifty participants. On this Friday the 13th there happened to be 13 of us, a synchronicity we deemed significant. We ranged from our mid-20s to mid-40s, and came originally from Brazil, Ireland, the US, India, Germany, France and New Zealand. After singing, the floor was open and around the room, people began to share what a difficult time they’d been going through. To my surprise, everyone seemed to be going through eerily similar processes; each of us had been unwell in some way, suffering from an illness, setback or injury, and we were all tired and emotional. Tears were shed around the room as people described what they’d been going through. One man had recently lost his grandmother, and his grieving process had led him to a question which he posed to the group: “*If you only had three years to live, what would you stop doing?*”

We decided to take out our pens and journal an answer. Too quickly, I filled an entire page with what I’d *stop* doing if I were to die in three years. When we went around the circle and shared what we’d written, common themes emerged. The first was that everyone said they would quit their jobs. As one man put it, “*What I do is useful for society, but not useful for me, today, to grow.*”

This tension between society and self, work and growth, was not surprising, given the relationship between “growth” and healing in opposition to contemporary “society.” What *was* surprising, though, was the second theme that emerged during this sharing session: everyone said that if they only had three years left to live, they’d leave New Zealand. This shocked me because the sentiment we normally echoed to each other was very different; how lucky we were to be safe from the pandemic, or the “madness” around the world, inside this beautiful country. As Phil put it that night, not without gratitude and wonder, “*The world is going bananas and we’re sitting here in paradise.*” I voiced my confusion; in fact all day I’d heard people suddenly talking about wanting to leave New Zealand, even before coming to Blank Canvas, and the sentiment was entirely new and strange to me. To this a woman in the circle replied: “*The energy is shifting in New Zealand. It shifted yesterday.*” Someone agreed, saying, “*Our bodies know.*”

Conversation meandered deeply. Phil spoke about what a powerful time we are in, inviting us all to experience our various individual sufferings in greater spiritual and global interconnective context. As Wouter Hanegraaff writes, “both traditional and New Age approaches to healing share a concern with meaning” (Hanegraaff 1996: 44), such that “the individual is challenged to find the deeper meaning of his/her illness and thus to use it as an instrument for learning and inner growth instead of taking the passive role of the victim” (Hanegraaff 1996: 54). In this way, Phil’s injured knee was a growth process. A martial artist and construction worker, he’d been used to living his life at lightning speed. But his forced slowdown opened him up to parts of himself he hadn’t explored, allowing him to focus on arts, creativity, music-making and mindfulness practices that had been suppressed within his normal, active pace; all this was an

important process in his healing, essential for him to discover. In sharing this, he invited us to consider our own trajectories similarly, in a context of greater healing.

Our challenges were moreover not to be understood in isolation. Our healing processes were manifestations of larger global dynamics, explaining the parallels of our experiences. Against global context, our personal experiences were formulated as symptomatic of larger collective processes of reckoning, purging and healing, representing a pivotal moment, chapter or turning point, as represented by the global challenges posed by Covid-19 and the climate crisis. This concept of a “turning point” is typical of the millenarianism of New Age religion, believing in and emphasizing “the urgent necessity of change” (Hanegraaff 1996: 348) towards which healing is directed. Phrases bandied about the circle that night included: *“The whole lie is about to crumble”*; *“Humanity is waking up”*; and *“The whole frequency is out of tune with the earth. We’re going to be the ones to bring it back in tune.”* To each of these formulations, the rest of us nodded in agreement, feeling these understanding within our bodies.

Eventually, after hours of conversation had flown by, threaded with laughter and tears and touching upon astrology, numerology, and other esoterica, we clasped hands again and closed our eyes. When there was nothing left to say, we sang, improvising harmonies which, to me, behind closed eyes, felt interdimensional, as though we were co-weaving a sonic texture. I felt like I was traveling within the melodies, into a faraway interdimensional space. At various beats, people around the circle took turns calling out phrases like: *“You are loved,” “You are love,” “You are everything... and nothing,” “You are the earth,”* and *“I love you.”* As we had opened the circle,

so it closed; we descended back into three “oms,” then kept our eyes closed and hands clasped, reverberating in the silence.

I felt heat vibrating from each of the hands I was holding, as though the circle was charging itself. When we opened our eyes, a woman said: *“I don’t know if you could see it, but there was a crystal at the center of the circle coming from each of our third eyes.”* We all nodded in agreement, open to this as truth. Though I hadn’t seen the crystal, the visual matched how I felt.

It was hard to eventually leave the room. Back outside, in the rowdy Friday night, people were getting drunk, vaping, and looking down into the shocking brightness of their phones. The streets felt illusory, even grotesque, compared to what we’d experienced together in the church.

The energy did shift in New Zealand. Merely days later, an alarm rang out on every cell phone in the country; Covid had arrived. We had only one community case in the country, and it was far away on the North Island, but as per New Zealand’s elimination strategy we’d go into a countrywide lockdown at midnight, indefinitely.

In the dread and uncertainty that came with the long-awaited arrival of the pandemic, perhaps we were also buoyed by an optimism. Our previous lockdown - more than a year ago - had been entirely successful. On the first day, my partner and I cleaned the house and then went for a walk on our local trail, up a hill behind town. It felt like “everyone” was out; bubbles maintained social distance but sat out enjoying free time and sunshine. Down below, town was empty; no

cars, no constant sounds of jet boats shuttling tourists across the lake. On our way back down the hill, my partner and I paused to watch the sun setting brilliantly behind the mountains. “*Ah, the lockdown feeling again,*” my partner said. I asked him what that meant and he said, “*Peace and calm. A magical time.*”

As a social disruption, the lockdown created the same kind of space, a break from societal structure, that Blank Canvas facilitated. In town, without cars and businesses, people gradually took back the streets. They tossed frisbees and flew kites, played music and watched sun sets. Time fizzed into something different. I wrote in my field notes: “*It makes you realize how, normally, people are rushing from place to place. It’s not possible to just be. Now people are just being. It feels good to be in town without the pressure of businesses urging me to spend my money - capitalist life filling me.*”

A Bit Like a Phoenix

Members of my community probed into what Covid-19 and its accompanying lockdowns *meant*. As “symptoms of underlying imbalances that require redress” (O’Connor and Hufford 2001: 22), diseases invite such an approach in New Age healing. However, beyond that, disasters in general arguably “challenge us to explain the cosmological order, raising profound philosophical and ethical questions pertaining to God, human agency and the material world” (Ahmad 2019: 311). Sociologist Michael Schillmeier argues that Covid-19 in particular represents a “cosmological event by which a nonhuman actor politicizes, i.e. unbuttons the normalcy of the ‘cosmos’ of shared living spaces,” such that “the dynamics of infection unfold an existential learning

situation not only of how we live and how we wish to live, but also how we may compose modes of counter-infections to become better ‘equipped’ to keep living well with others” (Schillmeier 2020: 1). As a “cosmological event,” members of my community interpreted the pandemic within the frame of societal imbalance, and the need to change and heal. This would lead them towards understandings and approaches to the pandemic necessarily divergent from the mainstream.

In a deeper view, and framework in which the spiritual, ecological and social are necessarily interconnected, the pandemic was interpreted as a “symptom” of our sick society, out of balance as it is. Michelle, a Māori immersion teacher from a city in the North Island, expressed this to me in an interview in Ora’s backroom. We met during a Tibetan Buddhist retreat Ora was hosting. The managers of Ora also manage a Tibetan Buddhist center on the North Island, from which resident monks travel to host teachings and retreats once or twice per year. Michelle participates in such retreats often. Washing dishes together after a lentils lunch, she asked about my research and expressed eagerness to participate. Energized from the morning’s fire purification ceremony, the monks’ mantras blessing us, Michelle spoke with generosity and enthusiasm as ashes continued to fall like snow out the window behind her.

“Definitely there’d be more diseases if the world lacks balance. It happens in your body when you lack balance,” she theorized. Drawing from both Buddhist and Māori teachings, Michelle said:

“Even that whole idea of breaching a tapu¹, like breaking something sacred, has an effect. So when you break the tapu then these kinds of things can happen. And I guess you could look at Covid like that. Maybe we’re breaking the tapu of what’s happened in the land? You know, how

¹ A spiritual restriction

we disrespect. And I think a Māori take on it would be quite bang on with Buddhism. So in Buddhism it would be there's been a breach somewhere, a breach of ethics... The ethic breach for us is mankind, we are trashing the planet."

This kind of understanding was shared by many in the community. Ronnie, an ethereal musician, grew up in the suburbs of Montreal, and was studying to be a lawyer until she discovered yoga, quit school for a gap year, went traveling and never really came back. She found her way to New Zealand through a four-year course in naturopathy, and during my fieldwork was living in her van, stationed for a time outside of Ora. Not inconsistent with Michelle's analysis, she concluded, *"We're fucking up the planet and we can't just continue to be like this, so it's very natural and normal that a disease wipes out a bunch of people on earth."* As Phil put it, *"People aren't looking after their bodies, they're not looking after their minds, and they aren't looking after their lands,"* with the three inextricably interconnected in the balance that constitutes health. Mia, a Māori healing practitioner, referred to a popular Māori proverb, saying, *"I've always lived by the saying that if we look after the land, the people are okay."*

Within these frames of understanding, the pandemic could actually be harnessed positively for deeper healing. This is because, as Wouter Hanegraaff writes, in New Age healing "suffering is not felt to be a pressing problem requiring an explanation, but is accepted as a necessary aspect of life and evolution" (Hanegraaff 1996: 280). Suffering therefore is part of the healing process, and the pandemic could be understood in these terms. As Sam put it, *"You have to go through the darkness in order to embark on the hero's journey, in order to go through to the light."* Ronnie similarly summarized, drawing from personal experience, *"When you allow the space to go into those dark parts of yourself, that's when you heal."* Phil meanwhile colorfully described, *"From my experiences of healing, and purging, and deep traumatic healing is that it's not pretty. It isn't*

pretty, like a spiritual awakening was never going to be a game of tiddlywinks. It was going to be, you know, horrendous fires, floods, the whole shebang, the people arising, all of this, all the stuff rising to the surface. You know, and there's so much stuff." Healing comes from moving through darkness, bringing it to the surface to heal. In this way, the pandemic could be seen in terms of an immense planetary darkness, a "disease" resulting from the "illness" of societal imbalance. Given that moving through such darkness is part of the healing process, as a cosmopolitical event, the pandemic offers a healing opportunity for the planet.

For all its suffering, difficulty and darkness, the pandemic is therefore embraced in terms of the massive healing required in the world. In the cosmology of healing, Phil assessed that *"the whole situation is actually a gift. It's a gift of awakening, you know, and it's healing. The earth is healing and the people are healing. The people are sick. Mentally, physically sick, from disconnection to spirit, to their own spirits and to their own souls. And it's really as simple as going back to nature, connecting back to nature."*

Cat had healed herself in this way, *"going back to nature."* *"Disconnected"* in her marketing career in Germany, Cat quit fifteen years ago to travel to New Zealand *"to connect with the elements."* She now tends a wondrous, vibrant garden atop a hill, down the lake from Queenstown. I first met Cat during a ceremony in which she introduced the group to *"rosemary,"* making the herb come to life with all its spiritual and healing properties, as Cat herself felt and honored them. From then on, rosemary became a fixture in the community, infused in water, brewed in tea and affixed in hair. Community members from Queenstown often visit Cat to help with the garden, taking some time-off from town to connect with the spirits of

the plants. I went to the garden for our interview, spending a day in slow pace with Cat, her plants, cats and two-year-old daughter. When the sun was setting, we sat outside her small tin house and Cat shared her understanding on balance with regard to Covid-19. *“For us to become so sick,”* she said, *“as a collective consciousness to create this expression of the sickness, it’s really sad. But on the other side, because the vessel is turning so sick, the self-regulation of healing is getting activated, which is beautiful. Never before has the earth had so many healers on a global scale.”*

I met Caleb at the Buddhist retreat as well, and felt drawn to speak with him because the questions he posed to the monk were so thoughtful and original. At the time of my research, he was making money performing magic to people waiting in lines at ski resorts; he is also a yoga teacher and artist, with practices ranging from playing guitar to writing a novel to shaping skateboards. When I told him about my research, he responded with surprise, as he had a project of his own collecting personal stories from the pandemic, with the intention *“to just kind of understand, at this deep level of personal experience, what this is all about.”* Caleb himself used the analogy of a purge and “shake-up” to describe the social changes accompanying the pandemic, explaining, *“It’s like there was a whole lot of marbles in a jar that just got shaken up. And now what’s been available is there’s all kinds of space in between for the right marbles... to attract where they need to be. So I believe that we’re all moving. We needed to just cut a whole lot of stuff off, purge the dross of life, and then continue on with our intuition, and with our upgrades.”*

As a process of “awakening,” “activation,” or “purging the dross of life,” the pandemic allows an opportunity to enter into our own collective darkness, in order to heal. In interrupting the sick social life that we knew, we’re allowed space for new visions, changes and connections. Healers are activated, connection is demanded, and we’re allowed space for movement from the patterns of the larger illness. As such, in an ailing world, it could be understood in terms of healing.

A similar sentiment was shared beyond just my community. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, the lockdowns were popularly interpreted against climate crisis in terms of healing; mother earth was forcing us to slow down. As *maramataka*² practitioner and university professor Ayla Hoeta expressed on *Planting Seeds Podcast*, Covid-19 was *Papatūānuku*’s³ way of “sending us to our rooms for a time out” so that the world could have “time to just rejuvenate” (Rewiri and Hoeta 2020). This understanding was compatible with the term *rāhui*, which was widely applied to frame the lockdowns within a Māori worldview. A polynesian resource management practice embedded in epistemologies of interrelatedness, a *rāhui* is a ritual prohibition of an area or resource for purposes of conservation, replenishment and sacralization. Serving as an “invitation to recast the lockdown through Māori tikanga (customary practice)” (Trnka 2020: 12), the lockdowns as *rāhui* may invite a cosmopolitical reading of the pandemic, with “divergent worlds as a decolonial practice of politics” (De La Cadena 2015: 281). This interpretation of the lockdowns is compatible with that of my field community, in terms of sacralization and healing.

The lockdowns as *rāhui* can also be applied productively alongside the vernacular term “Anthropause.” With the “Anthropocene” as “the geological period in which human activity

² A Māori system of keeping time by the moon

³ Mother earth, the land, primordial earth mother

exceeds the forces of nature” (Bubandt 2017: 122), the term “Anthropause” was proposed primarily by environmental scientists and refers to “the dramatic slowdown in human activity caused by the pandemic” (Stokstad 2020: 893). Against the “Anthropocene,” the “Anthropause” may serve as more than just an interruption, but also a subversion to the concept of human domination implicit in the term. As cultural ecologist and philosopher David Abram describes, within “the Anthropause” “our arrogant species receives this collective slap-in-the-face reality check, waking us two-leggeds up to the simple truth that we are not at all in control, have never really been in control, that we live at the behest of powers—of a complex interplay of powers—far beyond our ability to fully fathom, to predict, or to steer” (Abram 2020). Compatible with my field community’s understanding of the larger illness, both *rāhui* and “Anthropause” suggest a profound interruption to contemporary social life, and an opportunity for social, spiritual and ecological healing beyond just preventing the spread of the virus.

These interpretations informed how community members responded to the pandemic. As Hanegraaff writes, in New Age healing “whatever happens to us can be welcomed as a learning task offered to us.” However, “everything that happens in our life is fully meaningful and right only if we react to the ‘lessons’ in a positive way and absorb what they have to teach us. We are perfectly capable of missing the opportunities offered to us, or of reacting to them in a negative and non-constructive way” (Hanegraaff 1996: 268). My informants thus echoed sentiments like Sita’s, a holistic therapist with a background in rehab therapy, originally from a small village in Germany, who told me during our interview, “*How you use your time in lockdown, it’s your own decision, and that’s the most important message from me.*” As Phil put it, “*You can’t change*

what's happening, all you can control is your reaction." Reclamation and resacralization, necessary to healing, was contingent on how we respond.

Reactions therefore looked like Sam's, who said of the lockdowns: *"Time to self is what I like to say when that occurs. In that time is when I've gone deeper on my spiritual journey; studied, learned, sang, played the musical instruments, got down with nature, meditated, drummed with the waters. I have to say that my time was very beautiful."* Phil similarly described the lockdowns as *"very, very, very powerful. Looking inward, doing the work, studying. Getting stronger... Physically, mentally, emotionally stronger. I've really grown immensely every time. And it's just like cutting back all the crap. Go out into nature and just be."*

In each of my interviews, I was told stories of profound transformation in response to the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021, seven and three weeks respectively. During the first lockdown in 2020, for example, Phil quit drinking; Michelle quit her fast-paced traveling, constantly back and forth to India for spiritual and romantic purposes, and learned to appreciate where she is and what she has to offer back to her local Māori community; Sita, who had once given all her energy away to a job as a rehabilitation therapist, discovered self-care and grew her own healing business with her own modality; Caleb ended a co-dependent relationship, moved off-grid, and as he tells it, *"developed a lot stronger faith in a divine presence in my life during that."*

The most powerful story I heard, though, came from Mia. Mia grew up in Queenstown, and is a practitioner of traditional Māori healing modalities. She lives in a small, pale-colored house right on the lake, from which she also engages her healing practices. She found her way to Ora at a

turning point in her life, when in a very dark time she was transformed during a buddhist teaching. I didn't know her well, but when I approached her I was met with total warmth, openness and kindness. We sat together outside her house, by the lake, for her interview, and she told me, *"When New Zealand went into level four lockdown [in 2020] and everything became very heavy, really suppressed, really scary for a lot of people, I was a bit like a Phoenix in the sense that everything had burnt down and I was like 'Cool! Let's rise up and do something amazing!'"* Over hours that flew by, she explained to me how she ended up reclaiming an ancestral practice of *rongoā*, traditional Māori medicine with native plants, which was in turn to have deep implications.

During that first lockdown, Mia was helping a friend who was worried about how the "Anthropause" would affect his honey business. Drawing from a background in beauty therapy, Mia suggested creating a product from leftover beeswax. This is how she found her way towards the native plant *kawakawa*, searching for local, natural ingredients to mix with beeswax. Though she says *kawakawa* is *"quite dear to Māori people, we call it the pharmacy of the forest because it is good for anything and everything,"* she hadn't known what it was before. When she and her friend set off into the forest, during that first lockdown, to find it, she describes:

"As soon as I arrived [in the forest], this pīwakawaka, fantail, came flying down and landed right in front of me. I was like 'kia ora!' and just started talking, and I went into this really strange sense, my inner child just came out and I started just talking and playing and having fun. I was talking to this bird, which I don't normally do or hadn't done before, and it was just talking back, and then I started walking into the bush. It followed me the whole entire way.

So I was walking through and it was dense, lush bush and I was thinking to myself 'where's the kawakawa?' To be fair it was probably around me the whole entire time, but at that moment I couldn't seem to see it anywhere... We were walking and I literally started having a karakia, I started praying... I started praying and just acknowledging everything around me and I asked out loud, 'where's this kawakawa?' On the footpath there was a tree root, and I literally tripped over it, and like in a movie I pushed myself up and there's this light coming through the trees, illuminating all this beautiful kawakawa!"

She correctly intuited how to harvest it, and though the product with the beeswax didn't work, *"it started something beautiful."* She began working regularly with the *kawakawa* in *rongoā* practice, the *pīwakawaka* continuing to serve as her guide, creating a final product in the form of a healing balm that she makes in her living room and sells in small batches. When I asked what the balm could be used for, she said *"everything,"* and gifted me a jar. In addition to this *rongoā* practice, in this time she also embraced other Māori healing modalities including *honohono*⁴, *mirmiri* and *romiromi*⁵, all of which, she describes:

"use the body as a metaphysical bodymap. So we believe that the left side of the body is our divine feminine, or wahine⁶ energy, and the right is the masculine. The front of the body represents the present, and the back of the body represents the past. We use the lower parts of the legs, the neck and the body as like a timeline... I can basically work through the body and find energies, or dense energies, or anything that may be stored in a part of the body that will represent something, and it's quite specific. So I work with the body and I help people to be able to bring past situations or traumas or experiences that might just be still sitting in the body up to the surface so they are able to acknowledge it and then potentially move through it in a way, instead of ignoring or pushing it to the side."⁷

Developing these practices, Mia was soon recognized by her *iwi*⁸ back home as a *tohunga*, an expert practitioner. This was particularly significant because Mia had grown up far away from her North Island *iwi* in Queenstown, after a murder-suicide of her grandparents had driven her family into exile. Recognized as a *tohunga* though, Mia was formally invited back by her *iwi* to ritually and radically heal the intergenerational trauma of her grandparents' murder-suicide within her community. Drawing upon the gifts she'd been born with, and cultivated through traditional practice, she was able to lead her community to the neglected gravesite of her

⁴ Like a Māori reiki - body energy work

⁵ Forms of Māori massage.

⁶ Female

⁷ This echoes my other informants sentiments, previously described, that moving through the dark, rather than ignoring or avoiding it, is how we heal

⁸ Māori tribe

grandparents, and lead a ceremonial community healing. When this was successfully completed, to Mia's surprise, she was offered back her family lands. In every way, then, the break from social life afforded by the pandemic allowed for a deeply decolonizing and healing journey, wherein Mia could reclaim practices, identity and land.

All of these processes were taken to be more than just an opportunity to grow and heal during the "Anthropause," as though afterwards we'd just press "play" and resume our lives. Rather, these reclamation and resacralization responses occurred within the framework of a millenarian belief in the urgent necessity for change. Such darkness as a global pandemic had in fact been anticipated in this way, with the "system" seen as doomed to fail. As Ronnie explained, *"For me it just felt very aligned because I was kind of seeing it coming... I just had this big intuition that things were gonna crash and that I needed to be somewhere with just food and water and independence, you know, from the system."* For this reason, she'd lived off-grid in the past, and shared that that lifestyle made her the happiest she'd ever been. Caleb similarly expressed that he'd been "vying" for such a "crash," and responded accordingly:

"In those early stages of the COVID crisis we didn't know what was going to happen. Not that we know now. But there was a very real conversation going on that this might be a major collapse of society. So, I've been vying for this for years. I've been waiting for it. But for the first time in my life it was actually present as a possibility. And so I thought 'alright, what does that look like for me? How capable am I of withstanding something like that? Well I'm not really that strong. I'm skinny as a pole, so I'm not gonna last the winter here. I don't have any fat reserves. I get my food from a supermarket. Yeah, and my body, my internal energetics are a bit low. I need to figure out a way to get physically healthy and emotionally, mentally and externally sorted. Get my foundations laid so if it does crash, we've got a resilient kind of community here."

In the long-awaited "crash" or "collapse" of the old, healers would have the opportunity to radically embrace the "new" towards which they'd long been healing.

A commonly shared guiding dream, which I've heard all over the world by now, is to live in magical, closer connection with the earth, ourselves and each other. The dream is mystical and unspecific, but more or less takes the form of small, land-based subsistence communities with an active practice of magic; sharing land, growing food, and basically divested from "the system," occupying instead our own reality. A shorthand term for this goes along the lines of "*new world, old ways,*" requiring reclamation, resacralization and change. This is the direction that the pandemic, in terms of healing, would point us towards.

The pandemic indicated an urgency in the need to make these changes, given impending societal collapse in the process of healing. Not only did we have to urgently divest from society, but further the task of "healing" - actualizing dreams - was more important than ever, as the "*vessel*" was "*turning so sick.*" As Sita expressed, "*I believe we have to make it happen soon. It will change a lot in the next few months, in the next year, we have to make it happen soon. We have not much time.*" After the first lockdown, therefore, she and friends began looking for land together to co-create a "*holistic healing center with intercultural healing, diversity, with modern coaching and mindset work and inner work, but as well ancient Māori, and other therapies from around the world. Bring original people there and teach other people, heal other people, and live in tiny houses and have organic veggie gardens, have a meditation center, bring everything together, have our own world. Our own reality.*" A "new world" according to "old ways."

For Mia, meanwhile, moving to her ancestral lands, gifted back to her as a result of her healing process, could achieve this. As she describes:

"I've literally been looking for land, or like land-share options, especially since Covid's happened because again I've just got that fire in my tummy that's telling me to go get out of town

and go to the land. So when I went home it was quite interesting, it was just gifted to me on a silver platter. We have everything we need... Everyone looks after each other, it's only family that live there. It's like 50-something hectares so it's just like all our family only. All of them are hunters and gatherers, we have two rivers on our land, and they have a trout breeding program so there's always lots and lots of trout, we're the only ones that fish from there. It's the whanau⁹, we're the only ones that hunt. My family looks after the forestry trust as well, so they all look out for the forest."

For each of my interviewees, whether decolonial, New Age, in between or both, the response to the pandemic was re-connection with the land, creating a "new world" from "old ways."

In his recent work, *After Lockdown: a Metamorphosis*, Bruno Latour also tracks the lockdowns in terms of such a transformation into re-connection. Whereas Mia took the opportunity of the lockdown to become "like a phoenix," Latour draws from Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* to become like a cockroach. Not too dissimilarly from my field community, Latour used *The Metamorphosis* to argue how the pandemic and its accompanying lockdowns invite us back "inside," into interrelationship, from the "outside" with which humanity set itself in modernity. This could happen, firstly, through liberating us from "the economy," as "during the lockdown, it was inevitable that every one of us began reflecting on what could possibly replace the Economy, suspended as it was for a time. Hence the questions we asked ourselves: why continue this or that activity, why not come up with something different?" (Latour 2021: 69). He describes how we are transformed from "economized" - suspended from the earth and living instead inside of the "economy" - to animal, unable to escape our intimate more-than-human relations. In this way, we have traded one "imprisonment" for another, as "it's the episode of the pandemic that has had the effect of freeing the minds of the locked-down and allowing them to emerge from this long imprisonment in the 'iron cage' of the 'laws of economics' in which they were rotting away" (Latour 2021: 59). Caleb illustrates such a "metamorphosis" perfectly when he reflected that the

⁹ Family

pandemic and lockdowns was *“like a trigger... first of all to get a bit more real with my own connections to earth and my smaller world rather than the big world.”* He explained:

“Basically it just switched me on to actually thinking about base level reality, rather than thinking about ‘I wonder what kind of art work I’m gonna do, or what’s the latest movie that comes out’... rather thinking about ‘okay, how am I physically placed for life as an animal? How’s my community? It really just pulled the world real close, rather than being able to just float on, have a job, you know, doing something weird, selling coffee to people, making dollars to give to the supermarket to get your food... kind of disconnected.”

Like Latour’s cockroach, he therefore turned from “economized” and “disconnected” to “animal,” re-connected.

Latour sets up a distinction between those who transform like Gregor Samsa, and the pre-lockdown “old-fashioned humans,” or “unhappy moderns.” These “old fashioned humans” of modernity were “liberated from all ties, on the road to progress, breathing at the top of your lungs, outside, yes, outside!” (Latour 2021: 117). For them, “as these particular animals don’t exist on Earth, we can understand how deeply perplexed the pause imposed by Covid-19 made the hapless economized” (Latour 2021: 75). Caleb again illustrates this “perplexion” of the “hapless economized,” in contrast to those who metamorphosed whether into cockroaches or phoenixes, as he reflects:

“I feel for the people up there [in Auckland] because of what it’s doing to their consciousness. Because they’re not surrounded by [nature]. You know like I can go for walks; trees, mountains, fresh air. You’re in the middle of a city and you’re locked down, you don’t have access to [nature]. Very few people are studying religion probably, or have an active practice of it, of spirituality. So all they’ve got is consuming. Okay, so they can watch more TV. They can play more games, maybe work out, do some exercise. Um, read books and stuff. But what’s the content being put in them? A lot of the stuff on Netflix is not positive content. So it’s like, the consciousness of all those people in cities is being weirdly altered.”

Importantly, Caleb distinguishes between “consuming” and “spirituality and nature” in how people respond to lockdowns, whether “hapless economized” or transformed. Elaborating further

on this spiritual distinction, he said, *“I’ve been lucky enough to have spiritual teachers around me... so at least now... if I was in solitary confinement I could at least find something else to focus on that would be a positive growth thing, rather than people who are more or less still in the cave, looking at shadows.”* This would become a fundamental distinction in pandemic response, setting the conflict in healing that would lead eventually to “pro-fest.” Along the lines between “cockroaches” and “old-fashioned humans,” “phoenixes” and “unhappy moderns,” “awakened” and “hapless economized,” we can begin to trace divergences that would lead to profound schisms not only in understandings of the pandemic, but also how we heal.

Clash of Healing

The public health approach to the pandemic sought to address the disease, Covid-19, so that we could return to “normal.” This is the “normal” of the “hapless economized.” However, for my community, this “normal” was the underlying illness of the disease itself, and New Age healing calls to treat the illness rather than the disease. Indeed, more pandemics, as well as fires, floods and other global catastrophes, will be symptomatic of the “normal” if we don’t respond to climate crisis. As such, returning to “normal” in the form of “sick society” was not an option for healing within the community. As Sam said, *“People say we want to go back to normal, but that normal was never the right normal. We want to move forward.”* Sita similarly proposed, *“The world will change. There is no ‘back to normal.’ There’s a new way of living, and a new way of interaction. A new way of community life.”* True healing would be the opposite of returning to “normal.”

After the second lockdown ended, in September 2021, I caught up with the community at Ora. We met for our Sunday morning live-streamed dharma teachings - transmitted from the Tibetan Buddhist Center on the North Island - and potluck lunch. Afterwards, we sat in a small cross-legged cluster outside on the deck, overlooking the mountains and lake. Socializing again for the first time in weeks, I felt overwhelmed with a sense of peace and gratitude for the beautiful people, weather and views around me. Everyone remarked on how we all seemed to look “lighter,” particularly striking in comparison to the “heaviness” we’d shared at the last Blank Canvas before lockdown. Our “healing” seemed to appear visible as a glow.

A short-term resident at Ora brought out a homemade granola desert, fresh from the oven, adorned with fresh-picked wildflowers and sliced kiwi fruit. We held hands around the circle and thanked the food, the hands that had prepared it, each other, abundance, and the moment we were in together. Then we sliced the desert, and passed it around.

Another short-term resident returned then from the grocery store. As he sat to join us, he said with a humble pride, *“I was the only one in the shop smiling.”* He was the only one not wearing a mask. He explained that he put one on to enter the store, as was required, but then quickly took it off. Gentle debate bubbled up on the deck. Someone responded that he shouldn’t even have done that much; they shouldn’t lie or pretend, but rather fully align beliefs and actions. Refusing to submit to fear tactics and government control, they should keep eye-contact, keep connection, stand firm in truths, and keep on smiling. That would be healing.

Conversation turned quickly to vaccines. The lockdown had ended not because New Zealand succeeded in eliminating Covid-19 - though it still hadn't spread to the South Island at this point - but because the new strategy was to get the entire country vaccinated. It became immediately clear to me, out there on the deck, that this strategy was met with deep distrust. Conspiracy "ideas" were shared, like Ronnie's that *"there's definitely an agenda, like I studied politics long enough to know everything is so fucked up that there's definitely something really big happening,"* or Sam's, who cited a video of "an aboriginal elder" *"talking about the DNA and that this vaccine is about closing off the DNA, manipulating our DNA."*

"I got vaccinated," a lone voice volunteered, hunched over across our circle. He would be moving internationally the following week for a job as a musician, which required him to get vaccinated. He shrugged with a grimace-like smile. *"I didn't want to but I had to,"* he said. This was met with a respectful, somber silence. I felt lead-heavy in this moment, and said nothing. I'd received my second vaccine the previous day. I did not want to share this information.

It wasn't necessarily the content of conspiracy ideas that mattered. Each idea was met with the same openness and nodding, an affective response of feeling, with which we shared spiritual experiences such as the "light emanating from our third eyes" at the last Blank Canvas. Nobody expressed a deep commitment to the *content* or veracity of any one theory, and indeed voiced that it can be messy and dangerous to get too bogged down in this, to go *"too far down the rabbit hole."* Instead, they responded to each idea with noncommittal openness. Phil illustrated this dynamic when he shared with me, *"Do I believe there's an infection out there? Yeah, probably. Is it natural? Maybe. Is it manmade? Probably... You never really know what to believe, so I don't*

think too much into it.” Caleb similarly expressed, “Everything’s a bit cloak and dagger at the moment. There’s all this conspiracy about covert operations happening. And what this pandemic’s all about, it’s hard to see it at this stage. So there’s a growing kind of awareness that maybe there’s some power being manipulated.”

The main point emphasized, and responded to affectively, was that you can’t trust what you hear in the news or the intentions of the government, especially when it comes to injecting something into every human body on the planet. An older woman spoke at length about her experiences growing up in apartheid South Africa, where she was often the only White child to sit in Black compartments of trains, and danced with communitas at Nelson Mandela’s release from prison. On the deck, everyone nodded along in affective agreement, aligning a shared moral compass to point in the same direction against contemporary government mandates and apartheid. The logic applied to the Covid-19 mandates was that we must not uncritically comply, but rather feel for what’s right. This would lead community members closer to conspiracy beliefs than trust in public health authorities. However, it would also lead them perhaps closer to their intentions to treat the “deeper illness” underlying the pandemic, rather than just the biomedical “disease.”

The relationship between esotericism and conspiracy thinking is tricky and porous, as both concern knowledge “hidden” by mainstream society. As such, scholars of religion Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dryendal argue that “there really ought to be no surprise at the confluence of conspiracy theories and spiritual agendas” (Asprem and Dryendal 2015: 373). As we have seen, the healing process in New Age religion entails a direct movement or growth away from societal strictures and “programming,” into higher truths and expanded awareness. Through seeking out

what mainstream society suppresses, individuals “wake up” and become “conscious.” With “esotericism” referring to a “set of practices and discourses on the intersection of European religion, philosophy, and science that have, historically, come to be rejected by the institutions that decide what counts as real knowledge” (Asprem and Dryendal 2018: 208), spiritual reclamation and resacralization processes actively draw from this “rejected” pool to contest “official” reality. In this way, Asprem and Dryendal argue that since the 19th century “people who were discontented with the rapid social, political, and religious upheavals that followed in the wake of the revolutions and the industrialisation of society, found a useful resource for opposition in this body of rejected knowledge” (Asprem and Dryendal 2018: 211). This process of seeking out the “hidden” or rejected, with its implied distrust and opposition, may create a slippery bridge between esotericism, New Age healing, and conspiracy thinking, as for each, the truth is “hidden.”

Sociologists Charlotte Ward and David Voas coined the term “conspirituality” in 2011 to refer to this meeting place between New Age spirituality and conspiracy thinking. They draw from political scientist Michael Barkun to argue that both share a common baseline in holistic thinking, each holding “that nothing happens by accident, nothing is what it seems, and everything is connected” (Ward and Voas 2011: 104). As a result, “conspirituality” emerges as a “politico-spiritual philosophy based on two core convictions, the first traditional to conspiracy theory, and the second rooted in the New Age: 1) A secret group covertly controls, or is trying to control, the political and social order 2) Humanity is undergoing a ‘paradigm shift’ in consciousness, or awareness, so solutions to (1) lie in acting in accordance with an awakened ‘new paradigm’ worldview” (Ward and Voas 2011: 104). Phil perfectly illustrated these two

convictions, showing the bridge from the mystical to the conspiratorial, when he said to me in our interview: *“We live in a world where birds swim and fish fly, you know, so nothing is as it seems. And I really understand that, and I trust the process and all of this. The system is crumbling right in front of our eyes in many ways.”* Drawing from such a perspective in their efforts to understand and respond to the pandemic, I found many in my field community nestled right in this meeting place of “conspirituality.”

“Conspiritually,” the community supported each other in defying mandates, refraining from masks, and avoiding vaccination, all in the course of battling for the larger healing they wish to bring to the world. In this positioning, they identified as “warriors of love.” Such a “war” could be set because, as Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dryendal elucidate, “when claims are criticized and practices slated for regulation, control, or even prohibition by authorities... It becomes evidence of the Establishment’s attack on an entire worldview, reinforcing the shared identity of ‘noble/heroic victims’ of persecution. Such circumstances may, moreover, call for ‘theodicy,’ a meaningful narrative about why evil occurs, which is one of the primary functions of conspiracy theory” (Asprem and Dryendal 2018: 219). This is exactly how conspirituality was to function in the community. When control was imposed in the form of mandates, resistance, even to the effect of losing livelihoods, allowed for identification as “noble/heroic victims,” or warriors. This in turn placed the healers exactly within their larger narrative, working to heal sick society, as well as live out and act on their understandings of good and evil. In this way, in their response to the mandates, they could understand themselves as healing.

As such, conspiracy thinking is importantly generative. Anthropologist Elisa Sobo argues that conspiracy theories can function as “communally held resources for meaning making” (Sobo 2021: 62), which not only resonates with the New Age approach to seeking meaning in illness, but also makes sense in the context of capitalism. In capitalism, “*nothing is as it seems*”; as Sobo writes, “it is common US knowledge that, driven by greed, corporations may make false claims; control certain markets unfairly, and manipulate government support” (Sobo 2021: 63). As such, “the infrastructure of doubt provided by late-stage US capitalism” makes it an “excellent generative matrix of conspiracy theories of all kinds” (Sobo 2021: 64). Arguably, this has never been more true as now, with the recent emergence of surveillance capitalism, our phones mining our data as they ride around in our pockets, making the “infrastructure of doubt” more intimate than ever. In such conditions, Charles Briggs draws from Frederick Jameson’s suggestion that conspiracy thinking may represent “a process of cognitive mapping in which people attempt to relate local experiences to the global system of late capitalism” (Briggs 2004: 175; Jameson 1992). Against capitalism’s conditions of obscurity, conspiracy theory can be generative in piecing together meaning and action, at least symbolically.

When the government responded to the pandemic with vaccinations produced by big pharma and promoted by mainstream media, it proposed a treatment plan firmly embedded within its institutions of relational authority. Belief in, and adherence to, such a plan would rely on a certain degree of trust in this authority. However, within the “infrastructure of doubt,” this relational authority corrodes, in turn reciprocally contributing to the “matrix of conspiracy theories” (Sobo 2021: 64). Medical folklorist Erika Brady writes that “allopathic medicine enjoys all the privileges of what social scientists label ‘formal’ or ‘elite’ institutions. It is

administered by a limited number of carefully credentialed specialists... and the whole is supported by complex interrelationships with similarly 'formal' institutions such as the legal, medical and economic systems" (Brady 2001: 4). Ronnie expressed a vernacular understanding of this when she said to me, "*The pharmaceutical industry, the government, the media, all the big people are all one big family connected.*" Furthermore, "the healing practices and customs supported by relational authority represent just a portion of the affective linkages that bind a community through many shared forms of expression... These expressive forms derive strength not only from the ways in which they fulfill the needs of community members, but also from the ways in which they embody larger patterns of shared beliefs and values" (Brady 2001: 7). Beyond the normal level of distrust in capitalism, a divergence of belief and values, such as those posed within "conscious community," weakens the affective linkages and corresponding relational authority upholding mainstream medical practice. As Ronnie went on to say, of our dependence on this "*big family*" of relational authority, "*When it comes to money, when it comes to being in contact with our loved ones, when it comes to everything, you know, we're so dependent on this system that to me holds a lot, a lot, a lot of darkness.*" What with the pandemic's deeper "illness" in sick society, true healing could not come from this "*darkness.*"

This dynamic of distrust impacted the community's ability to believe in public health approaches. As Phil summarized, "*At base, the starting point of what I'm being told I don't believe, because I don't believe what the media says, first and foremost.*" He attributes this baseline distrust back to the sickness of society, saying:

"I don't trust what we're being told, I certainly don't at all, like not one second of it. Because look, look at the nature of man right now on this earth. We're spending all our resources, all our alchemy, all our magic, on creating war! You know, the funds go to creating new war machines,

which makes absolutely no sense, instead of creating an abundant society where everyone can be fed. It's very obvious that it's actually sick. The system is wrong in general."

Summarizing the profound clash between society's "truths" and values and his own, as well as the corresponding draw towards the "hidden," he told me, *"Most of history is a lie. Absolute lies. It's only a fictional story that the winning side told. We're not taught how to grow food, we're not taught how to really practice compassion or love, we're not taught any of the necessities of life."* From this perspective, true healing comes not from submitting to relational authority, entangling ourselves further in the enmeshment of sick society, but rather in breaking from it.

On a religious level, mainstream medicine also can't be disentangled from the "secular space" it creates. This means that the deeper web underlying relational authority is one of modernity and its corresponding knowledge paradigms, which the healers also work to protest by way of religion, through reclamation and resacralization. Trust in mainstream medicine and its healing is tied up in the projects of "rationality, objectivity and universality" (Stengers 2018: 87) that define modernity and its truth claims. As Erika Brady writes, mainstream medicine has "achieved a superorganic mystique, as though it exists outside the social, cultural, and historic contingencies that shape other aspects of custom and practice" (Brady 2001: 5). This is the same "mystique" that Bruno Latour argues characterizes modernity: not scientific thinking itself, but rather the separation of "science" and "culture" (1991). Anthropologist Charles Briggs summarizes this, writing "science was deemed to be derived from a sphere of nature that existed apart from humans; Enlightenment thinkers viewed society, on the other hand, as constructed by humans" (Briggs 2004: 173). Within this schema, allopathic medicine as a scientific healing practice is arguably "integral to crafting a secular space from which those practices categorized as 'religious' might be distinguished by their 'cultural' trappings"

(Whitmarsh and Roberts 2016: 204). Denaturalizing this “mystique,” or “de-secularizing” medicine, we can perhaps further follow why those religiously oriented to re-enchant a “sick” society can in turn find themselves disenchanted by its healing practice, particularly in the larger “healing” context that the pandemic represents. As philosopher Isabelle Stengers writes, “we, citizens and doctors, are engaged in a tradition that invented rationality as a gage, as a discriminating reference for the futures that we are constructing” (Stengers 2003: 35). Contesting this future, rationality, and its associated healing practice may all be intertwined.

To elaborate, the public health response to Covid-19 is a distinctly modern medical approach to the pandemic. As Egil Asprem writes, in modernity “what science, technology and industry did was to promote a new way of thinking, a new mentality” in which “any phenomenon is in principle intelligible” and “any force in nature can be tamed and controlled by calculations and instruments” such that “natural forces, no matter how unruly, can be turned into a (profitable) technology” (Asprem 2014: 31). This is the “way of thinking” we can detect in public health strategies towards the pandemic; the population awaits vaccinations as the scientific and technical solution to “tame” the “unruly” problem of Covid-19. Meanwhile, the pharmaceutical industry, as the second richest industry in the world after oil and before tobacco, profits. For the healers, occupied with “healing” from the capitalist system as well as its associated “way of thinking” by way of religion, this may not be an approach they can believe in.

At the meeting place of knowledge paradigms, secularism, relational authorities and capitalism, the pharmaceutical industry incites deep distrust. In capitalism’s “infrastructure of doubt,” “nobody has been astonished by confirmations that ‘big pharma’ fuelled the US opioid crisis

through dubious marketing and sales practices” (Sobo 2021: 63). Illustrating this distrust, Ronnie shared *“I know how the pharmaceutical industry lies about so many things, and they’ll go and kill people that talk loud about what they’re doing, you know, they don’t give a fuck.”* Cat echoed this, and reflected on the relationship between pharmaceuticals, capitalism and government saying, *“There is competition between the countries. You know, one country has to be faster than the others, the first on Mars, has to have the vaccine first on the market. With this they’re taking shortcuts because it’s all about the money, and the empire, and the face of leadership. It’s bollocks!”* Sam pointed out, *“It’s funny they could roll out this thing to vaccinate the whole world, but they couldn’t roll out something to feed all of the homeless in the world. You know, it’s all power, fear, and greed.”* If the pandemic is understood also to result from this *“power, fear and greed,”* recourse to the pharmaceutical vaccinations as a healing practice deeply embedded in “sick society” is not how we heal from the “larger illness.” True healing could not come from and maintain the disease’s societal source. Instead, in its position of relational authority and crafting secular knowledge at this “pivotal moment” of healing in terms of re-enchantment and re-sacralization, the public health approach to Covid-19 could serve as a powerful nexus point for protest of “sick society” in the larger course of New Age healing.

Feeling as Healing

Importantly, in protesting and resisting public health approaches, my field community did not turn to facts, figures, research and data, but relied on “feeling” as a primary way of knowing. This was the defining characteristic of “conspirituality” in the community; not a strong commitment to any one theory or idea, but rather a turn to inner feeling as a way of knowing.

This makes sense as a form of healing in itself, divesting from modernity by opposing its knowledge paradigm. “Feeling,” after all, is the direct opposite of the “rationality, objectivity and universality” (Stengers 2018: 87) that makes what Isabelle Stengers calls “Science with a capital S” (Stengers 2012) modernity’s “royal-road-to-truth” (Eisenstein 2018), as well as the vaccines the royal-road-to-healing for the pandemic. In opposition to modernity, inner feeling emerges as my community’s own “royal-road-to-truth” in the reclamation and re-enchantment process, charting a healing process highly divergent from that authoritatively proposed.

When questioned, none of my informants offered any data, research or specificities about the vaccines. Instead, they offered what the community values more highly: feelings. Caleb said, for example, *“I’m not really the person to ask [about the vaccine], I’ve not done my research. All I can go on is my feeling about this situation rather than the actual, whatever’s in the vaccine.”* Phil, who spent the second lockdown on a “vision quest,” where he went into the forest to fast, meditate, and “look within” because “all the answers lie within,” described, *“I don’t believe what we’re being told, I’m just going off what my basic intuition is and my intuition is very strong. I’m a grown man, I’m 33 years old and I can read situations, and I can read myself, and I know myself. So I’m basing everything off what my intuition is telling me and not what other people are telling me.”* Ronnie referred to this process as a “life calling,” saying *“for me there’s just a big intuition that is like ‘never get this vaccine, no matter what.’ That’s just my life calling.”* Cat shared, *“It’s nothing that comes from a good source of origin, if I feel into it.”* And Mia, the *tohunga*, said, *“I don’t get too involved with what’s in it because I don’t understand... But for me I just work out of a space where I just know what I feel, and that’s never, ever, ever been wrong for me.”*

Mia illustrated this primacy of feeling in approaching pandemic information in an anecdote she shared. Under societal pressure - unable to qualify as a first responder, for example, without the vaccine - Mia found herself considering getting vaccinated, and seeking out public health advice. She called “Healthline,” a service provided by the Ministry of Health for information and advice about Covid. As she tells it:

“I was like ‘do I get this vaccine,’ so I rang the Healthline because I wanted a non-biased opinion, because when you’re talking to your friends or people they all tell you what you want to hear. So I rang them and the information that I got wasn’t actually... It sounded great. Didn’t feel right. Just, it didn’t feel like there was 100% truth to the information coming through. Going back to me doing what I do and who I am, I just know what I feel and it felt like bullshit, to be honest. It just felt like bullshit.”

Mia distinguishes between the information conveyed and its feeling, and chooses to follow feeling. This has important ontological implications, as it is this same trust in feelings as a way of knowing that has allowed Mia to work as a *tohunga* and Māori healer, in turn facilitating deep healing of intergenerational trauma and returning her to her lands. She wasn’t about to stop following her feelings now, guiding her in both a spiritual and decolonial journey.

Anthropologist Giovanna Parmigiani identified this same dynamic of “deep inner feeling” in conspiracy-believing in her work with neopagans in Italy. She analyzes that through this recourse to feeling, conspiracy believing functions as “an affective, sensory, aesthetic, ‘participatory’” practice (Parmigiani 2021: 14), consistent with re-enchantment. Referring to religionist Kennet Granholm, Parmigiani defines “participation” as a “tendency toward emotive, analogical, non-reasoning thought and action,” such that “re-enchantment in post-secular esotericism can be defined as an active effort to acknowledge, embrace, and seek affective and analogical thinking

and action” (Parmigiani 2021: 15, Granholm 2008: 62-63). In inviting participation and feeling, conspiracy-believing thus can become a practice of re-enchantment in itself.

Moreover, this re-enchantment practice builds community. Parmigiani analyzes “conspirituality” as a practice of community building in “dissensus,” where “the tensions between mainstream and marginality, and between ‘stigmatized knowledge’ and hegemony, are played out as an aesthetic (sensory and artistic) enterprise” (Parmigiani 2021: 18). Applying a Rancieren reading, she argues that this “dissensus” facilitates in turn a “community of sense,” as a “community that revolves around shared affects and feelings” (Parmigiani 2021: 6). For Parmigiani, this “community” is one that “wants to feel and be fully acknowledged, recognized and legitimized for their ‘participatory’ - or ‘magical’ - way of inhabiting the world” (Parmigiani 2021: 4). Conspiracy believing thus becomes a dual process, in which a “commonality of feeling works as a validation of the ‘truth’ of conspiracies themselves,” while also strengthening “a bond between members of a similar community of sense” (Parmigiani 2021: 16), people who feel together. In the same way that participants of Blank Canvas could “feel” the crystal at the center of the room emanating from our third eyes, co-creating in connection, so too could they share the “feelings” not to take the vaccine, and grow closer in dissensus.

However, more than just aesthetic, performative, or “seeking recognition,” I will argue that this process of community building in feeling - as creation in connection - has profound ontological implications, critical to consider in understanding New Age healing and its clash with mainstream healing in response to the pandemic. This is because pursuing “feeling” as a way of knowing directly opposes the knowledge paradigm that upholds what Philippe Descola calls the

“naturalist” ontology of western modernity. In a Cartesian order, a naturalist ontology has humans and nonhumans sharing materiality, but differing in interiority (Descola 2013), leaving us with a world in which only humans act as subjects, the rest available as resource. This in turn relies on what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro terms the “objectivist paradigm,” wherein “to know is to objectify by distinguishing between what is intrinsic to the object and what instead belongs to the knowing subject” (Viveiros de Castro 2014: 60). In this knowledge paradigm, the scientific method, with its strivings towards “objectivity,” reigns supreme, and furthermore allopathic medicine as “scientific” is the highest, most trusted form of healing. Personal “feelings,” meanwhile, are subjective, imaginative, and therefore untrustworthy; they lead to conspiracy beliefs, and danger. In the “objectivist paradigm,” we should listen to how information “sounds,” trust science, and take the vaccination. Following “feeling” instead is therefore an epistemological challenge to an ontological order. In this way, re-enchantment by way of feeling may entail challenging the knowledge paradigm on which capitalism, and its corresponding reality, rests. In this capacity, it may be, by necessity, both dangerous to societal order, its knowledge paradigms and corresponding systems, and “healing.” In its epistemological challenge to mainstream society’s naturalist ontology, feeling is healing. It opens up other worlds.

“Feeling” is another word used ubiquitously in the community, to multiple, interrelated effects that work to divest us from “sick society” on various levels in favor of “the new world.” For example, due to this role of “feeling” in the community, I was being polite when I began each of my interviews with: “please introduce yourself *however you feel*.” Unwittingly, the phrasing cast a simple spell that evinced self-introductions like:

“I am awake, I am the creator of universes. I am in control of my conscious abilities now, and I choose to use them for the betterment of all in this life and beyond. I am pure essence of love, creator of love, giver of love, receiver of love. I am believer, creator, warrior, and nothing will step in my way between me and my higher self. I am you, and you are me. We are one, and we are everything, and we are nothing. The form and the formless.

I go by Sam, these days. I was christened Samuel, which is my birth name... I’m a man on a path of self-discovery, understanding the connectedness to all, and very grateful for my being, for my journey, and for my healing, and just a student of pachamama.”

“My name is Ronnie and I’m from French part of Canada. I’m an exploratress of the world and myself and consciousness and dimensions, and yeah, mother earth.”

“Well, I’m Cat. From Glenorchy in New Zealand. I have become an earth mother I think, within the last ten years of living so closely to the environment, and within the environment, and with the plants. So I think, I’m not sure if this is a legal occupation, but I think it’s the best description of what I do.”

These introductions exhibit an ideological power of the word “feel.” Louis Althusser argues that ideology transforms individuals into subjects through “interpellation or hailing” (Althusser 1970: 118). Therefore in the ideology in which “man is dominated by the making of money” (Weber 1930: 18), we generally introduce ourselves by name and occupation, how we make our money. Sam is a plumber, Phil is a construction worker, and Ronnie teaches yoga; these are the types of “interpellations” expected in our society. However, through introducing themselves *“however they feel,”* interviewees were able to “hail” themselves entirely differently - and hardly ever mentioned what they do for work, their capitalist interpolation.

On an ideological level, “feeling” thus works in the community to carve out space for an entirely different truth. In the capitalist ideology, wherein “when someone demands we be realistic, often they are referring to money, or to scientific fact” (Eisenstein 2018), my interviewees’ introductions may sound unrealistic, fanciful, or childish. As Max Weber wrote of capitalists, “religion appears to them as a means of drawing people away from labour in this world” (Weber

1930: 32). Be *realistic* now, they might say - Sam is a plumber, not a “*creator of universes.*” Sam’s face darkens if you call him a plumber, though. I have a similar reaction, within the community, when referred to as a “student” or “researcher”; the same identifier that makes sense of me in one system, allowing society and my parents to breathe a sigh of relief because I have an “occupation,” makes non-sense of me in another. In what Parmigiani calls a “community of sense,” through feeling we are able to create in connection, inhabiting a different shared ideology and corresponding reality; consistent with the healing injunction, we co-create a new world as we divest from another. We are, if we feel, “*creators of universes.*”

It may be easy to dismiss the ontological significance of “feeling,” or else treat it with “the indulgence that adults who ‘know’ reserve for naive children” (Stengers 2015: 57). However, as anthropologist Frederique Apffel-Marglin writes, “the world bequeathed to us by the advent of the scientific revolution” - the world of those who Stengers writes “know better” - “is not the world as it really is, but rather the world as it was invented and enacted for certain purposes and not for others” (Apffel-Marglin 2012: 65). She deconstructs how “the first conceptualization of the market economy in the seventeenth century” necessitated a “disentanglement of the individual from a web of community and spiritual obligations,” giving rise concomitantly to the “the individual subject” and land as “economic resource” (Apffel-Marglin 2012: 36). In turn, this separation could only be enabled by the Cartesian split between “the thinking mind, which had a soul, from mechanistic soulless matter” (Greenwood 2009: 136), a “radical separation” that was “a prerequisite for the Industrial Revolution, which treated every earthly being as a natural resource to be exploited” (Apffel-Marglin 2020: 19).

This world order must be complicated by both climate crisis and decolonization. As Stengers writes, “Gaia’s intrusion questions the theories that armed this ‘adult’ knowledge, which was supposed to provide a compass for struggles” (Stengers 2015: 57); the Anthropocene ushers doubts as the systems upheld by modernity’s knowledge claims reap mass destruction. Further, these knowledge paradigms have been historically mobilized in the colonialist project, as “for colonialism to operationalize itself, it must attempt to make Indigenous peoples stand in disbelief of themselves” (Watts 2013: 32). For example in New Zealand, the Tohunga Suppression Act of 1907 banned the practices of *tohunga*; “the Crown realized that *tohunga* were able to retain precolonial metaphysical belief systems through practices, ritual and systems of knowledge transferral that set them beyond the imperial scope of the colonizing machine and, hence, employed sovereign power to banish the crucial tie between knowledge and power” (Hokowhitu et. al. 2022: 109). The mandates that overlay her own authority and ways of knowing as a *tohunga* with that of “Science” thus reminded Mia of the Tohunga Suppression Act. She said, “*The Tohunga suppression act was mainly targeted at Tohunga, or experts in the field, because they actually had an alternative way to help people get through really tough times and that was taken away from them, so they weren’t able to practice, they weren’t able to teach, they weren’t able to do the things that made them strong. You know? As an individual and as a people. And this is what it feels like now,*” she describes, as she must choose between following her feelings, or continuing to legally work. Both in the context of the Anthropocene and decolonization, we must necessarily lack modernity’s simplicity in distinguishing between “children” and “adults,” those who “feel” and those who “know.”

Freed from secularism's "certainty," we may argue that religions create in connection. The healers make assertions like Phil's, that "*anyone who has a deep understanding within themselves, you notice that what you believe affects reality.*" Anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann finds something along these lines in her recent work *How God Becomes Real*, where she argues that religious practitioners learn how to experience, and in turn receive affirmation and response, such that Gods, spirits and religious realities "become real" by way of reciprocal relationship. For Luhrmann, this occurs through an "ontological attitude" she calls "the faith frame," and a process of "real-making" she calls "kindling." While "the faith frame" refers to "the way one thinks in relationship to gods and spirits," "kindling," as "micro processes of attending - socially shaped, locally specific" (Luhrmann 2020: xi), allows for the "felt realness of gods or spirits" (Luhrmann 2020: 136). When taken together, the result is that Gods and spirits respond to their worshippers; "the invisible world comes close to humans and looks back, alive" (Luhrmann 2020: 184). Frederique Apffel-Marglin, meanwhile, deploys feminist physicist Karen Barad's theory of "agential realism" to posit that "matter (materiality/physicality) and human discursive practices are always entangled" (Apffel-Marglin 2012: 56), such that religion becomes a radically creative process wherein rituals function as "intra-actions that enact different agential cuts and thus different realities" (Apffel-Marglin 2012: 63). In these terms, we can view secularism - and its corresponding reality - in terms of religion. Rather than offering an alternative to religion, "truth" instead of faith, with ontological offerings like Luhrmann's and Apffel-Marglin's, "secularism" may represent a frame for reality alongside those of other religions. The mainstream, dominant ontology represented by naturalism, in its ties to capitalism, secularism and science, may thus be examined alongside religions as a frame for reality. The New Age, meanwhile, may proffer an opposing religion, an opposing experience of what is real.

Here is where my fieldwork became challenging, socially, ontologically and ideologically. New Age religion is deeply embedded within secular tradition, “the mirror of secular thought” as Wouter Hanegraaff suggests. Therefore, I do not wish to conflate it with other religions, or fully separate it from the “secular” “world.” However, in its opposition to modernity, the community co-creates reality in connection, divergent from secular experience. This requires a certain level of openness. For example, the crystal emanating from our third eyes during the Blank Canvas could not be verified empirically. However, leaning into “deep feeling” allows for profound transpersonal experience, making the experience real to practitioners. Because of this dynamic, of a community that creates in connection, out there on the deck at Ora after lockdown, I felt that I could not share that I had been vaccinated the previous day. In the same way, I could not say that any of the conspiracy ideas were “not real.” The correct way to respond was the same ways with which the community co-wove its shared reality, by way of shared “*feeling*.” And I was deep within the effects of this process, in my own “healing.”

Soon, Ora hosted a celebration for Spring Equinox. At the winter solstice, where I’d first met the community, I’d been physically, emotionally and mentally exhausted, as well as shy and socially anxious. Now, with the blossoming of spring, I was coming out of my shell, feeling more alive and at ease at the same time that I was growing closer with the community. In the courtyard, we mingled around the fire and under the pink cherry blossoms. There was face painting, light conversation, laughter and hugging, everyone dressed in spring florals, until a young woman called our attention. She formally opened the event with a prayer she’d written, expressing that “*all of us is welcome here*” - all we’d had to reject in society, our inner children, was free and

welcomed in this space - while her friend, a two-spirited Indigenous Igorot musician visiting from the North Island, played along on guitar. Listening intently, I *felt* a sudden sensation in the back of my head, like a large vein or vessel suddenly unclogging. This was accompanied by a new, ineffable expansion; as I looked at the faces around the fire, I could suddenly see *more*. Not visually, but with a different, vague, indescribable sense, I was able to “see” what I understood to be small windows into past lives. Focusing on faces one by one around the fire, I could glimpse what seemed to be their souls in other lifetimes. All night, I received mystical affirmations of this in the form of synchronicities.

I *felt* a need to share what I saw, as though if I didn’t I’d go back to being “blocked,” clogged like a sink. Over the coming weeks, carefully and tentatively, I began to do so in one-on-one moments of connection. Each time, it felt like opening up a deep trench of truth between us. The person to whom I shared would invariably immediately flow with tears. Whatever I shared with them seemed to be exactly what they needed to hear. This “unblocking,” and sharing, also “unblocked” me in other ways; I loosened up, I began to sing and dance again, and I felt much more *myself*, as well as connected with the world around me, human, nonhuman and more-than-human. I felt myself in deep, co-creative and mystical relationship with the community, as well as the earth. On a human level, it’s also the happiest and most “balanced” I had felt in years.

This co-creative experience deeply challenged my ability to maintain a belief *in* the vaccine, when the rest of the community *felt* against it. Within the community we co-create by way of connection, with ideological and ontological consequences felt as true beyond mere “subjective

imagination”; crystals have powers, energy heals, the mountains talk, we share past lives, we meet as souls. But as Isabelle Stengers expresses, within secular society “those who oppose modernization” in such a way are taken as “‘backward’ or ‘misled’,” such that “the agents of modernization do not wage war against such ‘bad pupils’ and cannot imagine a peace settlement with them. At best they will tolerate them up to the point when they make real nuisances of themselves” (Stengers 2018: 86). Now, in the context of the pandemic, they “make real nuisances of themselves.” Driving to a reiki healing with a close friend, I heard radio announcers on RNZ discuss whether the “anti-vaxxers,” like my friend who would perform the reiki, are “crazy,” “stupid,” “selfish,” or all three. Whether to take the vaccine then becomes a larger issue; beyond just biomedical consequences, the choice was a question between two camps, two ways of knowing and being, two worlds. However, it was exactly in this way - as an issue with the ability to split worlds - that the question could serve New Age healing.

At this juncture, I do not wish to argue that a co-creative reality makes “conspiratorial” ideas or feelings factually correct. In a cosmopolitical order, as Charles Eisenstein eloquently writes, “there is a mysterious way in which it is true that the world rests on the back of a turtle, and in which it is not true that the flying Spaghetti Monster created the world. Truth is discovered or revealed, not made” (Eisenstein 2020). However, I will also not submit to the argument that the dynamic of “feeling” in New Age healing primes people to just “feel” willy-nilly, allowing the healers to be just as “lost” as the “agents of modernization” would have them. Nor will I simply cherry pick what I like and don’t like from my field community’s truths for my own purposes, such that past lives are “true” and conspiracy theories “aren’t.” Rather, I will read the conflict in terms of religion, in that “it isn’t a revolt against truth we are seeing; it is a crisis in our

civilization's primary religion" (Eisenstein 2018), represented by the complicity between secularism, naturalism, the "objectivist paradigm" for knowledge, and capitalism. While not perhaps factual, the "feelings" of conspirituality may be deeply true, indeed working towards "healing" the "larger illness" of Covid-19 on a plane more appropriate to the "healer" than biomedicine - on the spiritual plane at which they operate in what Phil calls "*the labyrinth of reality*": that of myth.

Myth and Healing, Purity and Danger

Charles Eisenstein suggests reading the Covid-19 conspiracy theories as "myths." He roughly outlines the "arch-myth" that a "power-hungry cabal of insiders deliberately created the pandemic or is at least ruthlessly exploiting it to frighten the public into accepting a totalitarian world government under permanent medical martial law" (Eisenstein 2020) - an "arch theory" that my community members roughly "feel" to varying degrees. He distinguishes "myth" from "fantasy" or "delusion" as "myths are vehicles for truth, and that truth needn't be literal" (Eisenstein 2020), such that the "conspiracy myth gives narrative form to an authentic intuition that an inhuman power governs the world" (Eisenstein 2020). Akin to Frederick's conception of "cognitive mapping," he writes that while "the conspiracy myth locates that power in a group of malevolent human beings (who take commands, in some versions, from extraterrestrial or demonic entities)," we could alternatively locate the "'inhuman power' in systems or ideologies, not a group of conspirators" (Eisenstein 2020). These are the very systems and ideologies that New Age practitioners reject by way of religion. Therefore, on a religious level, they could perhaps "feel" the truths underlying such myths very deeply. This is why the vaccines could

become a religious issue, and also why the content of conspiracy ideas could matter less than feelings. Furthermore, this mythical quality could also allow for conspiracy theories to be deployed for New Age “healing.”

Afterall, healing functions on mythic levels in this community. In her study of magic, anthropologist Susan Greenwood describes “magical consciousness” as a “mythopoetic, expanded aspect of awareness that can potentially be experienced by everyone” (Greenwood 2020: 31). Magic thereby interacts with myth, with the “participatory mode” “an orientation to the world that can be expressed through mythologies and stories” (Greenwood 2020: 31). For example, in magical relationship, Sam and I see each other as “the druid” and “the fairy,” which in turn deepens and expands our relationship to healing effects. We can even suggest that the healers deploy myth in their reading of the pandemic in terms of hope and healing. Indeed, re-enchantment and re-sacralization works to increasingly open practitioners up to the mythopoetics of magical consciousness.

Within the “vernacular ontology” (Magliocco 2018) of the community, this level of myth is more than merely symbolic, emotive or playful. In ontologies other than naturalism, myth can be far more “real” than that. For example, in Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s conceptualization of “perspectivism,” a multi-naturalist ontology wherein beings differ in exteriority but share interiority, making reality inherently relative and relational, myth functions as an “absolute discourse,” a “a geometrical locus where the difference between points of view is at once annulled and exacerbated” (Viveiros de Castro 2014: 68). Within my field community’s ontological frame, also relative and relational, and opposed to that of modernity, myth is just as

important - more “real” than fact. In this way, conspiracy theories interacted with as “myth” can occur as part of magical consciousness, engaged differently than merely symbolic. In the slippery relationship between esotericism and conspiracy, this magical experience can enter tricky territory.

For example, one day the Druid, the Witch and the Fairy set off for a visit to an earth mother’s magical garden, to connect with spirits of the land and heal. Sam had invited me for a visit to Cat’s garden. I wasn’t sure if I would go, as I had other plans. I asked Sam what would be involved, and he said that he didn’t know, but he just knew it would be magical. He advised me to drop into my heart and feel for what is best. I did so, lying in bed that morning, trying to feel where my body wanted to take me; my body responded, rushing with an energy that pulled in Cat’s direction, towards the magical journey.

We squeezed into the front of Sam’s work truck, the back filled with plumbing equipment. “*I can feel myself moving out of it,*” he regarded the equipment, and shared his dream of eventually becoming a full-time nomadic healer instead, transforming the work van into a traveling living and healing space.

We drove along the lake, surrounded by mountains, a giggling lightness shared between us; a feeling of magic. Seamlessly, conversation slipped from astrology to vaccines, unleashing a fountain of conspiracy ideas. Sam shared what he’d read recently about Netflix; that its founder was evil, with a family history of rape and incest, and had created the platform with malicious intent. He’d read that TV was created during the cold war by the CIA for purposes of control,

and now with Netflix that control could be taken even further. *“Before, people used to sit together around the table for dinner, then they sat in front of the TV. Now we have Netflix,”* he described.

I didn't believe in everything Sam said on a level of fact, and recognized danger in ideas like the founder of Netflix coming from rape and incest. However, within the mythopoetics of magical consciousness, it's not easy to say “I don't believe,” moving from an openness to astrology and fairies to a concern with facts of conspiracy theories. Mythopoetic experience does not concern “facts,” but engages a different order of truth. I thereby found myself acknowledging that Netflix is indeed alarmingly addictive, facilitating binge-watching and hours wasted beyond what was possible before. I myself suffer from a vulnerability to this addiction. In this way, I could *“feel”* the truth of what Sam was saying, and engaged with the culturally correct level of openness. The closest I could get to saying “I don't believe” was *“I try not to get too bogged down in what's true and what's not,”* or “facts,” which was an attempt at cautioning against putting too much stock into the contents of these theories. This worked somewhat, as Sam responded, *“That's very wise and very helpful.”* He shared that he'd recently seen YouTube videos expressing ideas that the Flowers of Life he loved so much, a symbol of sacred geometry that he made a spiritual practice of drawing, actually coded evil, which had alarmed and distressed him. *“Not getting too bogged down”* could ease his heart from confusion about this symbol, and conversation from there lightened. From the Netflix ideas, to the Flower of Life, we turned attention again to the views all around us, esoterica and elements, and also friendly mundanities. Synchronicities and fate alighted our trip, making it indeed as magical as Sam had promised. Once we got to Cat's - a space that felt marked with sacredness, the plants all around us loved, alive and vibrant - Sam sat

under a hawthorn tree that centers the property, and played his flute for the fairies. The same frame that facilitated this magic, in fully lived experience, could also facilitate a trickiness over *“what’s true and what’s not.”*

As a cosmopolitical event, Covid-19 is particularly given to myth. What with Covid-19’s “sudden, catastrophic effects” that “cannot be compared with our prior experiences” (Canals 2020: 1) - unzipping the “normalcy of the cosmos” (Schillmeier 2020: 1) - anthropologist Roger Canals suggests studying the pandemic in terms of its myths, as they are “dispositive for generating alternative modes of explanation and action and possible future scenarios in times of radical incertitude” (Canals 2020: 2). Indeed, psychologist D. Ahmed draws from Carl Jung to write that “mythos is about ‘making sense,’ giving meaning to the impossible complexity of the range of emotional experiences we call life” (Ahmed 2020: 58). In a time of radical uncertainty, it provides “emotional containers, enabling us to ‘say’ what simply cannot be expressed in any other way” (Ahmed 2020: 58). Further, “since its meanings are ambiguous, multiple and subjective, mythos always contains an element of mystery, which at times we refer to as a ‘sense’ of the sacred. As such, mythos also points to a parallel, ‘higher’ plane of existence or transcendence” (Ahmed 2020: 58). In this ambiguity, emotion, mystery and transcendence, myth is the appropriate realm for our New Age healers. In confronting the pandemic, it would necessarily play an important role.

Moreover, as “myths,” we can understand why the specifics of conspiracy theories did not matter to the healers; what mattered was “deep feeling.” As Susan Greenwood writes, “myths have the ability to take us from the normal, everyday world into another place within the body - the

narratives and stories of myths are *felt*” (Greenwood 2009: 80). This reading of myths, and conspiracies as myths, could help explain why it was the feelings activated that mattered less than contents or facts. But I will argue that these conspiracy “myths” did more than just articulate the distrust in mainstream society that characterizes New Age religion, made especially relevant by Covid-19 as a cosmopolitical event. Unpalatable as they may be to the “adults who know better,” and potentially harmful from the perspective of public health, as a spiritual intervention in a pivotal time, they may also articulate New Age “healing.”

Arguably, myth is always important in healing. Studying shamanism, Claude Levi-Strauss analyzed that “in the shamanistic cure the healer supplies the myth and the patient performs the actions” (Levi-Strauss 1963: 201). Myth is engaged by the shaman in “making explicit a situation originally existing on the emotional level and in rendering acceptable to the mind pains which the body refuses to tolerate. That the mythology of the shaman does not correspond to an objective reality does not matter” (Levi-Strauss 1963: 191). Here it is important to intervene to critique the assumption of a privileged access to “objective reality” of the White ethnographer over that of the shaman. We can question the baseline of “an objective reality” in favor of an ontological approach. In doing so, we might follow Levi-Strauss in assessing myth as a form of meaning-making necessary in healing. Just as Levi-Strauss’s “sick woman believes in the myth and belongs to a society which believes in it” (Levi-Strauss 1963: 191), and thereby heals with it, we arguably live in a society which deploys its own myths for healing. As Charles Eisenstein creatively asks, “what is real in our own (mainstream) mythology? Viruses, for one thing -- accordingly, we enact a set of rituals to ward off the evil spirit we call a virus. We don that most primal of ritual gear, a mask... We are tempted to privilege our own by saying they aren’t rituals,

they are based on real cause and effect, verifiable through the Scientific Method, not realizing that we may be inhabiting a self-reifying mythology” (Eisenstein 2020). We can therefore understand “myth” in healing both in secularity, and its New Age “mirror.”

Eisenstein qualifies that to “de-secularize” medicine and equate our own mainstream healing practices with ritual, myth and religion should not be to disparage it, but rather to open up new approaches towards the present conflict. As he writes, “the point here is not to dismiss science on the grounds that it is, after all, nothing but a religion. To do so would be to commit a subtle error: adopting science’s own conception of religion as a term of critique. If, however, we reject the implicit devaluing of religion that comes from contradistinguishing it from science-as-the-royal-road-to-truth, then to name science as a religion is no longer to disparage it. Instead it opens up new questions” (Eisenstein 2018). These questions are appropriate in dealing with my field-community, as they religiously protest mainstream society, and its corresponding ways of knowing and ways of healing.

An important caveat is that members of the community usually believe in, and heal with, mainstream medicine. At the time of my fieldwork, for example, Phil had a knee surgery scheduled for later in the year; he was able to understand and respond to his knee injury both spiritually, and with recourse to mainstream medicine. Likewise, most from the community had taken vaccines in the past with no problem; Sam, for example, described himself as “*pro-vaccine, but just not pro-this one.*” However, belief against the vaccine occurs in “response to particular macro-contextual (i.e. historical, social, political, and cultural) and micro-contextual (i.e. unique to one specific performative context) forces” (Magliocco 2012: 7). With Covid-19 as

a cosmopolitical event unfolding “an existential learning situation” “of how we live and how we wish to live” (Schillmeier 2020: 1), it is understood as a large-scale healing process for the globe, under the New Age “arch myth” that “we are living at a crucial ‘turning point’ in the evolution of consciousness” (Hanegraaff 1996: 348). It would therefore activate an approach that targets mainstream society, operationalizing the required myth system required for doing so. As a nexus point of knowledge and capital, mainstream medicine and public health approaches would not be the appropriate myth-system with which to heal a sick society; however, they would be the appropriate myth-system to contest in the cosmopolitical conflict.

Within the “arch myth” of reclaiming and resacralizing towards a “new world,” there is a specific notion of “medicines” that heal, in contrast to biomedicine. Indeed, “medicine,” like “feeling” and “healing,” is another highly ubiquitous word in the community. There are “medicine drums,” “medicine flutes,” “plant medicines,” “medicine talks” wherein transformation, expansion or connection occurs; many healers call themselves “medicine people,” too. These medicines function within a New Age understanding of healing, as they work physically, spiritually, energetically and ecologically, re-enchanting, and are accessed by way of “deep feeling.” They actualize New Age healing; for example, Sam said of his plant-medicine experiences, *“It really opened up a lot of channels, opened up the heart, the soul.”*

Mia’s *rongoā* process can help elucidate the contrast in “medicines,” traditional or New Age and pharmaceutical. Her practice is rooted in Māori tradition but linked to my field community as well. This is evident in her explanation of the final product’s name, which incorporates the word “*Ora*.” She explains that while on one hand *Ora* means “*mind-body-and spirit, or well-being,*

one's well being,” “Ora is also a place that sort of changed my life, that was Ora retreat in Queenstown. And the owners of Ora retreat also are the people to, where I get my kawakawa from... I get it off their property.”

The entire process of her *rongoā* practice engages principles shared between Māori and New Age healing. From harvest to product, she describes:

“I work with my kaitiaki, or guides, which for me are the birds. So I enter a space and if one doesn't greet me, I don't go in. When I am greeted... I do a karakia¹⁰ and the process begins. So it's a very, it's an old traditional way of doing things. We do things with the utmost respect and the purest intention every time we go in... So we go in, and we do karakia, then we will set the intention and then we will find the plant. And when we find the plant, every single part that we take, we karakia for every single leaf... And then when we bring it back I wash and dry it, and when I do that I have to make sure that the space that I use is completely, not just clean, but it's about making sure the energy is set right and it's beautiful. So all of that, that we're creating, goes into the product. It's not just kind of throw some herbs in there, cook some stuff up, and chuck it in a jar, it's the whole process.”

Consistent from start to finish, the “whole process” emphasizes the ecological, physical, emotional and spiritual harmony, as well as sacralization and reclamation, required for healing. These kinds of medicines, rooted in Indigenous practices, are ones towards which members of my field community frequently turn for healing. They are “medicines” for the “arch myth” of change, reclaiming and resacralizing towards a “new world” according to “old ways” as we heal.

The “medicines” - top-down, allopathic, mechanistic, and profiting - proposed to counter Covid-19 by mainstream society couldn't differ more, and clashed head-on with the “medicines” my field community would apply towards reclamation and resacralization, given their understandings, cosmologies and myths surrounding the pandemic. As we have seen, on a deeper level, they understand the pandemic to come from a sick society. For Ronnie, who has a

¹⁰ Prayer

four-year degree in naturopathy, *“the body is so intelligent, and when there are symptoms it's not because the body is having a problem. It's a messenger basically, it's connected to your mind, your soul, there's something deeper inside and it's just there to show a red flag that you're out of alignment.”* So too on a collective scale with Covid-19, where *“we're going through this as a collective, like everything there's like a macro-universe and there's the micro, and everything is a reflection of everything, and it's like a big fractal... So I think it's just time for us to see how we've given our power away to corporations and government in order to just be comfortable, and that we're being taken advantage of.”* As she described, *“I think there's a lot of rotting shit going on in the core of our society, which is our government... You don't really want to have such darkness in power basically. And we all have our own darkness in power right now, because our subconscious, our traumas are guiding us until we become aware of them and then we can consciously make different decisions.”* In this reading of the pandemic, wherein giving our power away to the *“rotting shit” “in the core of our society, which is our government”* is the source of illness, the public health approach that asserts government control, both in the form of mandates and power-knowledge, is distinctly dangerous.

Indeed, while medicines like Mia's *rongoā* and Ronnie's *“sound healing”* work to sacralize, purify, and heal, the Covid-19 vaccination was perceived to do the opposite. It was experienced within the community, by way of *“feeling,”* as a pollutant. By Mary Douglas's logic that *“understanding rules of purity is a sound entry to comparative religion”* (Douglas 1966: 7), Phil equates purity, religion and healing when he told me, *“If you purify the body, purify the mind, you start to experience higher realities within yourself.”* While their medicines *“purify”* in this way, vaccines do the opposite; they do not fit within the community's notions of purity. Mia

expressed this when she shared with me, *“I’m getting my moko kauae soon... which is the tattoo just below the mouth... given to people who are tohunga or chiefs, who have responsibilities of mana or status... Where the vaccines come in is people who wear this, or wear them correctly, won’t put poisons into their body.”* Impure, vaccines were largely treated as polluting, or poison.

Several micro-myths, or theories, spread about the vaccines’ impurity, measured in veracity again by feeling. The vaccines change DNA; they affect fertility and menstrual cycles; “unvaxxed sperm will be the next bitcoin.” During my fieldwork, all of us women experienced stark irregularities in our menstrual cycle; this was widely attributed to the effects of the vaccines all around us, even if the women weren’t vaccinated themselves. One lazy afternoon at Ora, creating art on the livingroom floor, I shared that I was feeling “off.” Personally, I’d attributed this to the energies of the lunar eclipse. A friend, however, asked, *“have you been around anyone who’s had the vaccine?”*, implying that the vaccine energetically pollutes in proximity. This harkens to the principle of contagious magic, that proximity and contact influences. Principles of contagious magic already exist within the community. Indeed, all of these mini-myths of the vaccine’s impurity can find an inverse in New Age notions of purity and healing. Teachings from the Tibetan Buddhist monk who visited Ora, for example, were also said to “change your DNA,” but positively towards purification rather than negatively as pollution. Through the same principles of contagious magic, the Buddhist teachings change DNA positively, whilst the vaccines change DNA negatively. By the same mechanisms that make New Age “medicines” “pure,” the vaccine was experienced as impure. This makes sense in terms of the different realities into which they “heal.”

Meanwhile, unvaccinated people are in turn treated as “polluting” within mainstream discourse. Beyond biomedical explanations, Charles Eisenstein writes that “we hear in mainstream publications that anti-vaxxers are not only killing people, but are raging narcissist, white supremacists, vile, spreaders of Russian disinformation, and tantamount to domestic terrorists. These accusations are amplified by cherry-picking a few examples, choosing hysterical-looking photos of anti-vaxxers, and showcasing their most dubious arguments” (Eisenstein 2021). In associating with “anti-vaxxers,” he writes that it “reminds me of my school days, when it was social suicide to be friendly with the weird kids, whose weirdness would rub off on oneself,” such that “if I’m not an anti-vaxxer myself, I certainly have their cooties” (Eisenstein 2021). I certainly resonate strongly with Eisenstein’s experience. I’ve subjected myself to “cooties” on both sides, as during my research both the “vaxxers” and “anti-vaxxers” would give me the same side-eyed look, checking which side I’m on, whether I’m “pure” or “impure.”

We can understand how these ideas of purity and pollution function religiously, with “New Age” and “secular” as opposing “religions,” with help from Mary Douglas. As Douglas writes, “the quest for purity is pursued by rejection” (Douglas 1966: 199), and in the case of my field community the quest for purity, and healing, involves rejection of the vaccine and its corresponding mandates. More largely, it involves rejection of “sick society.” Douglas suggests that “as each culture has its own special risks and problems,” “to understand bodily pollution we should try to argue back from the known dangers of society to the known selection of bodily themes and try to recognize what appositeness is there” (Douglas 1966: 150). In this case, the dangers posed by Covid-19 are understood differently in each “culture,” secular and New Age. Within the New Age “culture,” the danger comes from society itself; for mainstream society,

meanwhile the danger comes from not only the biomedical virus but also its socioeconomic threats. The vaccine, as we have seen, is a solution derived from mainstream society, its “secular” logic and relational authorities, and corresponding philosophy of nature, to the “unruly” danger of Covid-19. To my field community, meanwhile, it injects the source of the problem, from levels institutional to ontological, into our very sacralizing skin. As discussed, the pharmaceutical industry is not only the second most profitable industry in the world, but also can be seen as a nexus point in the ontology that upholds capitalism, or the “religion” of secularism. With the body “a model which can stand for any bounded system” (Douglas 1966: 142), such that vaccines have always aroused suspicion (Kitta 2011: 80), the injection of the vaccine transgresses an important, multifaceted boundary, injecting the nexus point of “secular” religion into bodies sacralizing against it. Given the New Age reading of this pandemic in my field community, this approach would be distinctly *dangerous*. The vaccine is therefore polluting.

Continuing to read conspiratorially and healing in terms of myth, resisting the vaccine and government mandates in healing from the pandemic emerges as symbolically important. As Mary Douglas writes, “some pollutions are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order” (Douglas 1966: 4). Here, the pollution of vaccines and mandates analogize submission to sick society, with stark ethical implications. Caleb expressed this quite lucidly:

“It’s not even about the physical chemical components of what’s in the vaccine, but rather the psychological process of standing up for your integrity and your own power to heal and be in control, or take control of your own life. It doesn’t seem like too much maybe to take the vaccine, but at the same time you’re just going along with what everyone’s doing. So part of the challenge is actually in not doing that, because it asserts to yourself your own resolve to make decisions for yourself... It’s in that going along, it’s a good pointer to kind of almost what’s wrong with the system, how easy it is for people to go along with something that they don’t understand.”

Caleb states it clearly: the vaccines and mandates function analogically, or as a “pointer” of “*what’s wrong with the system.*” Rejecting them is a “*psychological process of standing up for your integrity.*” Moreover, analogical thought, characteristic of the participatory and magical consciousness that also harnesses myth, plays an important role in New Age healing. In this context, “standing up for rights and freedoms,” instead of submitting to mandates, emerges as the healing path.

Why Become a Toxic Wasteland When I Can Be a Flower Paddock?

To make sense of the discourse surrounding “rights and freedoms” that emerges from the clash in healing, we must examine New Age ethics, as well as return to the fact that Covid-19 is a crisis within a crisis, a problem for the Anthropocene. Against the larger illness of sick society, the correct response to the pandemic was to “wake up.”

The first Blank Canvas after lockdown was hosted at Ora. It seemed that the lockdown had supercharged us; in comparison to the previous 13 beleaguered participants, crying and trying to make sense of suffering, now around 30 or 40 participants crowded the room, brimming with laughter and palpable energy. After chanting “oms” and singing a few songs - like “*I release control and surrender to the flow of love that will heal me,*” and “*Shine on for everyone, it feels right in my soul*” - the circle was open for sharing, the “canvas” available for creation.

Sam played his medicine flute. A musician visiting from the north island played guitar and sang about swaying with willows. Phil shared a poem about an oak. Two men rapped about standing

up for rights and freedoms. One, by a gifted “ecstatic dance” facilitator from Australia, began with “*gotta watch out for that NLP,*” neuro-linguistic programming at work to manipulate in marketing as in media, using the same tactics to get us to spend and to get us to take the vaccine. The other, by a Māori healing practitioner, equated speaking personal truth, against power, to shining light. Phil soon shared another poem, this one about freedom. Some lines include:

“... All with no faith running jumping
Onto the floor rushing flocking
Panic buying toilet rolls
YES YES YES
The sheep get weaker
This is fact
But my friends
The WOLVES we get stronger
AND STRONG WE ARE
...
What a great mission or cause
The fight for freedom itself
True living believing standing for truth
This is the most honorable path
A person can choose
...
Your freedom is earth (body)
Your freedom is wind (mind)
Your freedom is water (emotion)
YOUR FREEDOM IS FIRE (WILL)...”

I shared a short story I’d written about climate change, featuring pilgrims climbing a holy mountain; Ronnie shared a reverie on accessing the outer, meditative space where we are the observer of our own consciousness; an American woman sang about community, which evolved into group harmonizing, toning, beating hands against the floor. Creating a sonic community together, I felt in our music as though we were corresponding directly with mother earth. A Brazilian woman voiced how painful it has been to watch beautiful, old trees coming down around town to make room for new development. She spoke about how she’d been

communicating a lot with the plants lately, and how *“they teach and give us so much, and the way we treat them, I’d just like to apologize, and invite everyone else to apologize.”* She cried, and deep, poetic and heartfelt apologies erupted around the room, addressing trees everywhere from Queenstown to the Amazon, and we broke again into music, music that felt to me, with inexplicable depth, to be apologizing to the earth.

It was clear at this Blank Canvas that vaccine resistance, as an analogy speaking to the larger social order, was intimately intertwined and aligned with understandings of fighting for rights and freedoms, societal distrust, divesting from “the system” and its manipulative tactics, richly animate relations with nature, oaks and willows, fire and wind, and healing in an ailing earth.

In a “sick society,” it is ethical to “wake up” and divest, to become “conscious.” If not, we contribute to the sickness. As Wouter Hanegraaff writes, in New Age religion “the fundamental duality is not between good and evil, but between spiritual insight and ignorance” (Hanegraaff 1996: 291), with “ignorance” referring to “a state of mind in which one is exclusively focused on ‘earth plane’ reality” - *“rushing flocking panic buying toilet rolls”* - “oblivious of ‘higher’ dimensions” (Hanegraaff 1996: 291). This is popularly referred to as “programming” or “conditioning,” and makes for an ethic along the lines of “sheep” and “wolves.” As such, in this view to be a sheep is to listen to the media and government and to get vaccinated, and is unethical. To tune into inner-feeling, take back personal freedom and authority, and be a wolf, meanwhile, is *“the most honorable path a person can choose.”*

It is “honorable” to “take back freedom” as “ignorance,” or “programming” and “conditioning,” is complicit with sick society. Phil explained:

“Wisdom is far greater than silver and gold, and silver and gold now runs the world, so it’s about coming back to actual wisdom. Really, really depending on people who’ve attained great states of awareness, more so than great states of wealth, because money is not proof of a practice of spirit or wisdom. It’s probably a practice of greed... We’re just told from the very start that we need to do this, get this, get a mortgage. That’s all wrong. That’s all completely wrong. So the whole system needs to change. That’s what I’m doing, change the system.”

Breaking from ignorance is ethical because it “changes the system,” starting by addressing “programming” within the self, thus facilitating divestment from sick society into higher truths and new possibilities. As Phil explained further, articulating a New Age ethic:

“Living in a state of ignorance for so long, you’re not living in a respectful manner... It’s just not a healthy ecosystem. So it’s really down to each person to just uproot all the weeds, you know. If you want to change the world you change yourself, and that’s my advice is really start working on yourself. Start studying some ancient texts, ancient books, and not the garbage. Just stop watching TV... These things aren’t out of your grasp, it’s down to each person to make the effort, to activate each light, to higher their frequency.”

Reclamation and resacralization is ethical; to be a “wolf” rather than a “sheep,” to take back your power, “make the effort,” and pursue a path of gnosis from ignorance. This ethic contextualizes the battle over vaccines as a spiritual war over good and evil, gnosis and ignorance. The sheep submit, and the wolves reclaim.

This ethical system, of sheep and wolves, must further be understood in terms of the New Age notion of reality as co-creative. This means that we can submit to top-down creation, which harms our souls and the planet, or create differently, on an ontological level. As Cat explains:

“The media, or whatever, that game that we created, I don’t like that. I don’t see any need for me to participate. But on the other side, it is the greatest evidence of how collective thought can move and create. Yeah? We can witness, what we talk right now in the media and what we penetrate will create itself, because we’re creating it all together. If we participate. So if we can use that knowledge for us and just step out, and create the other things, whatever you want to be different... I think it’s an opportunity.”

Within an understanding of co-creative reality, we must be careful, as Cat expresses, of what we participate in, as we co-create our reality. As Phil elaborates, *“If you’re living in fear, you’re not living your reality. You’re essentially living someone else’s consciousness. People aren’t living their own intuition, their own consciousness; they’re living what they’re being told. Not really living their own truth, you know. Just living a fear-based system.”* In this ethical framing, Sam explains, *“the more of us that are waking up... the better for all. But this is why we have, you see, you have comforts, you have the TV and the Netflix and the sports, everything is to control the people. If we had a stadium of eighty thousand supporters meditating on love and peace and healing, you know the world would really make a drastic, quick, beautiful loving change.”*

The pandemic, read as a pivotal moment of global awakening, makes this ethic more important now than ever. It is time to *“wake up.”* Rather than being a sheep in the *“fear-based system”* at work to try to encourage vaccinations, it is time to become a *“wolf,”* as independence and autonomy, *“freedom”* from *“the system,”* is critical to New Age healing at this time. Phil expresses this:

“We’re at a tipping point, an absolute tipping point. The world is in a state. And it’s gonna take good men and good people, living right, connecting back to the land, connecting to community, and really, you know, walking a certain path to change the world... because that’s what needs to happen. The world has to change, and I’m a man that’s not willing to sit by and just let this monstrosity of a train keep rolling. It needs to be torn down.”

Caleb similarly drew up an ethical choice at this time:

“This is a test. Either the world’s gonna burn, people are gonna be scared, Nukes are gonna be fired; or, we can band together as a single species, and actually do what needs to be done, and rise to the next level of evolution basically. Like this is an evolutionary leap basically that’s occurring, and it can go one of two ways... But I think part of that is being able to make decisions for yourself, not just waiting for the doctor to tell you what medication to take, waiting for the government to tell you what to do, waiting for the police to tell you what’s illegal.”

If the pandemic is rooted in sick society, the diagnosis for the “larger illness” is not to be a “sheep,” listening to society and injecting their “poison,” but to become a “wolf,” and as Ronnie puts it, *“realize that it’s fucking time to start caring, you know? Not everyone will wake up, but it’s part of this scenario at play... it’s just time that as a society we see our shadows and we see the darkness that is at the core of our foundation.”* This ethic aligns with the reading of the pandemic as a time of reckoning and change, requiring a purge of the old system in favor of the new, particularly on a mythopoetic level. To respond like a “sheep” represents fear, “ignorance,” and injecting society’s “poison,” whereas to respond as a “wolf” represents a process of awakening, gnosis, love and resistance.

The understanding of a choice between ignorance and awakening operationalized here is deeply integral to the process of healing, and the identity of healers; indeed it marks the “consciousness” of “conscious community.” Cat explained during our interview, *“If I would have always believed what people told me, I would have never been here in New Zealand today, you know?”* When I asked her where she would be, she responded:

“I don’t know, probably totally scared in Germany, in the system. Unable to function, like most of my friends from High School unfortunately, because the system has you in fear... But the world is too beautiful to participate in something that’s not necessary, you know? Why do I want to be a raincloud if I can be sunshine? Why do I want to become toxic wastelands when I can be a flower paddock? It’s what I can’t understand, why would I choose that if I have the choice?”

This schema of choices, between fear and love, selfhood and “the system,” flower paddock and toxic wasteland, is in turn integrated with the decision whether to take the vaccine, such that the decision becomes a matter of identity. As Cat said:

“I can’t make another choice. I would cheat! An oak tree can’t be a pine tree, you know? A sunflower can’t just suddenly turn into a rose. I am what I am, and I’ve been guided to be that so why should I be wrong? Do I rather listen to the media and the television? And the people who call themselves governments and politicians, world leaders and organizations? I’ve never spent

a day with them, why would I listen to them? But I spend, what, how many years now with nature, every day? Every time I'm confronted with eventually an illness or an accident, I'm healed within sometimes half a day, and that has become my norm, and that's what I trust in. So why would I change now?"

Cat's healing process has taken her from a marketing career in Germany to a life lived outside, tending her vibrant garden nestled in the mountains as what she calls an "earth mother." The same choices that facilitated this healing, and renewed identity and ontology in her shamanistic relationship with nature, is activated in choosing not to take the vaccine. When taken as a larger collective, this "choice" can be understood as something of a "war" or "battle" because, as Cat says, "there are many others of us, so that's what it is. We have two paths of consciousness. Which one do you feed? What do you create? Because we can't blame 'they,' 'they' don't exist. People are just doing their jobs..." People, in other words, are just "ignorant," cogs in sick society. On levels both personal and collective, "awakening" is the healing response to the pandemic.

"Freedom of choice" thus arises paramount, as it denotes the freedom to "awaken," divest and thus heal. As Caleb summarized of the pandemic, "It's definitely a time for individual growth. It's about becoming who you are." If Covid-19 disputes are, as Michael Schillmeier writes, "a fight of and over values... over what it means to survive, to heal, and to live well under conditions of social uncertainty" (Schillmeier 2020: 8), for my community it is a fight between sheep and wolves, light and dark, ignorance and awakening, programming and personal truth, a sick society or "the new world." Further, in allowing the healers to live out this tension and reckoning, we can penetrate statements such as Sam's when he says, "They want to push this out to the whole world and it's just another form of numbing us down, of not tapping into our DNA,

of closing off these channels. It goes a lot deeper.” Though the vaccine may or may not biomedically “*numb us down,*” it does so on a symbolic level in the conflict that it enacts for the healers. Within the larger understanding of the pandemic, a course is charted in which resisting mandates is healing.

We are now equipped to understand the course for healing drawn by a “conspiratorial” response to the pandemic, if read as myth and within the healers own spiritual orientation. For example, Sam summarized of the situation:

“There’s black magic on the go. So my understanding of this is that those people who are in power are so disconnected... so disconnected from the spirit, on such a low energy, that in order for them to feel above they have to bring everyone down, and keep everyone down. And keep them conformed. So that is through little messages, through movies, through TV, through poison water, poison food. It’s been going on for such a long time, a very long time.

And this is the path that I’m walking, working with the medicine, with the intention to awaken. Not even awaken, to help that person remember who they are, which is nature, love and light. Which is eternal love and light. That they are the healer, that they are the medicine, and the answer is them. The answer is you. And they are the creator. We are all powerful. Love is ever-growing. Remember the truth that only love is real.

So for me, yeah, it’s spiritual. Spiritual war that is going on with black magic. It’s right in everyone’s face but you’ve gotta choose to see it.”

He says it himself; he approaches the conflict as spiritual. On that level, the system functions with “black magic”; on that level, the vaccine is “poison,” and to awaken is healing. Embracing the spiritual, the magical and mythopoetic as more true than fact, “feeling” as a way of knowing in a mystical worldview, the “spiritual” matters more than the worldly. Divesting from “the system” to remember “*the truth that only love is real*” is the work of the healers, and denotes the “*spiritual war*” with which the clash of healing is treated.

Approaches to the pandemic have become a focal point for this “awakening,” or “dissensus.” It has worked as a line drawn in the sand in the “*spiritual war*” for healing, serving as an issue

with “the power to make concerned people think and act together, enabling each to connect with the ways others come to be concerned” (Stengers 2018: 93). As Elisa Sobo writes, “sometimes, cultural discourses that would speak truth to power, or elements within them, oppose scientific consensus” (Sobo 2021: 65), and perhaps this is by necessity in the relationship between science, power, knowledge and ideology. Isabelle Stengers identified this in what she calls the “before and after” of anti-GMO protests, which she situates within a conceptualization of “anti-sorcery” of capitalism (Stengers 2015). As she writes, “GMOs were supposed to happen without too much friction, in the name of the progress that the holy alliance between scientific research and human progress brings. Industrial consortia and their scientific allies noted, to their great consternation, that it no longer worked as a charm, that the reference to progress had lost (part of) its power” (Stengers 2015: 55). Of course, vaccination controversy is arguably far more sensitive. However, occurring years later and eons deeper into the crises “progress” has wrought, “conspiratorial” protest at the juncture of Covid-19 may represent another “before-and-after” in the course of capitalist “anti-sorcery,” in the “*spiritual war*” against “*black magic*.”

This may be far from comfortable, but such complexity may be expected within what Nils Bubandt calls the “mudscape” of the Anthropocene, as the “stinking, muddy and failed modern” and “inverse image of the shining cosmopolitan dream” (Bubandt 2017: 124). As the Anthropocene “sweeps us off the ladder” of modernity “and into the more-than-human sea” (Tsing et. al. 2017: 9), we can contrast modernity’s characteristic “certainty,” based on separations facilitating at once “Science with a capital S” and capitalism, with the Anthropocene’s “undecidability” (Bubandt 2017: 123). “Gaia’s intrusion” (Stengers 2015: 57), in conjunction with decolonial processes, forces on us new questions.

Not only is the pandemic met with the Anthropocene's characteristic uncertainty, but what with more plagues promised in a future of climate crisis, it cannot be viewed in isolation. As Bruno Latour writes, "things are panning out as if the lockdown imposed by the virus could serve as a model for familiarizing us slowly with the general lockdown imposed by what is called, in a mild euphemism, the 'environmental crisis'" (Latour 2021: 38). Viewed in this way, "the Covid-19 pandemic merely foreshadows a new situation from which you will never emerge" (Latour 2021: 47). Importantly, my generation has been taught since we were children in elementary school that our parents would hand us a vastly precarious earth. This is the unsteady ground with which we were prepared to meet the pandemic, particularly in the case of the healers, who have been working against modernity's destructive forces of separation, "objectivity," and "certainty," already in their re-enchantment and reclamation practices.

Indeed, treating the "illness as a whole" rather than the disease, my field community approaches the pandemic by responding to larger, underlying questions posed by the Anthropocene. These are questions articulated by the anthropologists who wrote *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, such as: "How much longer will we agree to step aside in silence as masters of the universe turn us into property, write our contracts, rape our bodies, sell our histories? How much longer will you and I choose extinction?" (Tsing et. al. 2017: 4). The pandemic has been harnessed as a "battle," a violent protest of "sick society," its functioning and constructs for truth, as nexused in the authority of the Covid-19 vaccination during the pandemic as a cosmopolitical event. Reading conspiracy as myth, the "conspiratorial" approach to the pandemic has formulated its own myths with which to heal, in Levi-Strauss's sense when he writes "in the shamanistic cure the

healer supplies the myth” (Levi-Strauss 1963: 201). Viewing the conspiritual in terms of “myths” deployed by the healers, within the pandemic’s larger context, it has allowed for them powerful reckonings in their course for healing. It may not be pretty, but as Phil said, “*a spiritual awakening was never going to be a game of tiddlywinks.*”

The New World

By the end of my research, Phil was no longer working in construction, and Sam was no longer working as a plumber. Sam moved to Cat’s property, to learn and connect with the land, in pursuit of his dream of becoming a full-time traveling healer. Phil stood for his truths, even if it meant losing his secure paying job. He was prepared to risk it all for what he believed. Defying vaccine mandates called for him to do that.

I took the vaccines, but I engaged in many concerned conversations with friends as they confronted losing their jobs and livelihoods in defying mandates. Under vaccine mandates, they wouldn’t even be able to order a take-out coffee. Life as they knew it would change. Many, in a test of faith, would lose their income. During one such conversation, on a walk by the lake towards the end of my research, I stopped in my tracks. “*But this is great,*” I found myself marveling. “*We can finally live what we’ve always dreamed. We’re being forced!*” It’s the dream that binds the people at Ora, my field community, pursued by way of mysticism, religion and healing. My community’s approach to the vaccine, in their understanding of healing, brought them closer to it than ever.

The healers' stance towards mandates, and place in the "war," was arguably reified by the opportunity it created to divest further from "sick society" in favor of their own. As Aspren and Dyrendal find, "conflict severs ties to what becomes more and more of an 'outside,' leaving bonds on the 'inside' more important than before. The costs of adopting stigmatized positions are not merely something to be weighed against benefits; to some, the apparent costs are in fact benefits. This is particularly true of the millinarian segment of the milieu that presents a comprehensive vision for a completely different society" (Aspren and Dyerdal 2018: 222). Going "back to normal" was never an option, and all of my interviewees responded accordingly. If vaccine mandates prevented them from going "back to normal," it might force dreams into reality, therefore affirming their stance. As such Phil wasn't going to take a vaccine to go back to work, or order a takeaway coffee.

Excluded from mainstream society by vaccine mandates, the healers were confronted by the possibility of being "forced" to actualize their divestment from "sick society," in favor of creating "the new world." Cat echoed my own sentiments in saying, "*Yeah great! We have to! We finally have to... if we have to create a society within a society then we have to do that. How does that look? No idea, but I'm looking forward to it!*" Dreaming out loud, she said, "*Well most likely if you have a perception like this [anti-vaccine] you won't be working anymore from Monday onwards, because they don't want you in the workforce anymore. So why not be one of the workers who work alongside children in an active day community? Or why not be one of the teachers, and teach art and lecture about the moon. Teach sacred geometry. Do your offerings, and receive your rewards within a community.*"

This was the place I was offered in “the New World.” Knowing my academic background, “*Someone has to teach the children,*” Cat and others said. For a moment, I had a choice. I could stay in Queenstown, help actualize the magical community that the vaccine mandates would “force” us to create, and “*teach sacred geometry,*” or I could move to Canada, finish my masters and work as a teaching assistant at a major university instead. I could choose which world to believe in, which society to co-create. It felt like a choice between two separate realities. My worlds felt split apart.

I wasn’t having an easy time, at this point. Demonstrations against mandates were beginning to go public, threatening the neat compartmentalizations and privacy I was attempting for my research. One evening, Phil told me, “*It’s happening. We’re taking Blank Canvas to the streets.*” “*Oh really!*” I responded brightly. I was excited, until I realized that it implied a street demonstration for “freedom.” “*Shine the Light,*” it was called. Then I became scared.

I resisted going. Sharing in these discourses with openness and respect in private was one thing, but going public felt like a personal reckoning, threatening implosion. I tried not to go. I drove in the opposite direction to go snowboarding instead. But an “energy” pulled me, with strong force, right to town. I felt it with my whole body.

My friends, my field community, were drumming and singing, “*Fredo-o-om! Fredo-o-om!*” Phil stood on a chair, leading; it was the same throne that had hosted the visiting Buddhist monk, re-painted and re-purposed. “*It’s already blessed!*” Phil had said. I was greeted as though arriving home, everyone happy to see me; I flooded with warmth. I knelt down tentatively, trying

to smile, and was handed a maraca to shake. Most passersby kept a distance, avoidant of our “cooties.” “*Freedom of speech,*” I overheard some work out, reading our hand-painted sign, “*It’s about Covid.*” A notable few joined us, dancing. “*It’s the children and the dogs who stop,*” I heard one of us notice, “*They can feel it! They know!*”

Like all other Blank Canvases, the event turned out to be transformational. I felt so happy that I went. I found I needn’t have worried so much as, to my relief, vaccines were hardly overtly mentioned. Only once, a man handed out lyrics he’d re-worked to Bob Marley’s “Redemption Songs,” with lines like “don’t be afraid of Covid.” During that song, I slipped away to use the bathroom. By the time I came back, we’d moved on already to other, non-Covid related music; three-part harmonies to the word “*aroha,*” which means love, and other “medicine songs.” After meditating, holding a stone in each hand, Sam carefully unwrapped his flute from a beautiful green cloth. He played, and as I listened I felt both shot down to the earth and up to the sky, lightened and deepened at once; aligned. He then made a powerful speech advocating for the Amazon rainforest, where “*the lungs of the earth burn.*” The event finished with a closing circle, where we held hands and took turns to appreciate each and every one of us. I felt seen, connected, and loved. Afterwards, the hugs I shared felt expansive and interdimensional, as though spanning lifetimes. I did not want to disconnect.

By the time I left Queenstown, I had never been so spiritually, physically and emotionally balanced and well. The magic, mysticism and connection of the community is what healed me, the journey charted in my “sacred journal.” In Vancouver, turning focus essentially from my “sacred journal” to my “fieldnotes,” I fell into depression. With no one to freely share with -

though I did try! - the “vessel” which had “cleared” to show me past lives clogged back up. The “worlds” felt more bifurcated than ever, and the attempt to integrate, or bridge, was hard.

I watched from afar as many from my field community, meanwhile, went on to “pro-fest” vaccine mandates at the capitol. From social media, it looked like a scaled-up version of “Shine the Light.” Following a trucker convoy modeled after Canada’s, “pro-festers” from around the country came to Wellington and proceeded to construct their own mini-society right beside the parliament, informally named “Freedom Village.” For more than thirty days, they set up camp, planted vegetable gardens, practiced yoga, performed the *haka*, distributed free food, administered stick-and-poke tattoo ceremonies, massages and sound healings, cared for children, created art and performed music. Their voices rang in songs together, like “*Mama I feel you under my feet, Mama I feel your heartbeat*” and “*Te Aroha*”; they held hands and chanted “om”; they met each other affectively in “deep feeling,” and understood themselves as peaceful warriors in a larger story of societal healing. In protesting the mandates, they simultaneously modeled the changes they wished to see in the world, their alternate vision for healing.

Politicians were perplexed. The mainstream media “cherry-picked” “a few examples, choosing hysterical-looking photos of anti-vaxxers, and showcasing their most dubious arguments” (Eisenstein 2021), substantiating politicians’ claims that the protesters were dangerous and unwieldy. Though “pro-festers” sat on their steps and begged, no politicians came out to meet and speak with them. What I followed in the news, and what I followed in friends’ social media accounts, told two completely different stories. I watched as members of my community became leading members of the “pro-fest.” The same musician who played during the “unclogging” that

facilitated my past-life visions voiced the “pro-fest’s” anthems, such as “*We are the warriors, we are the warriors, warriors of love!*” Alone in Vancouver, a strong part of me longed to be there, dancing with my friends, living mystically, “feeling” and co-creating “the New World,” “*our own reality.*” For a mystical perspective, I found my university to be a very lonely and alienating place. Those who believed with me, believed against the vaccines, and it may have *felt* better - more “true,” though not “right” - to be dancing, in “pro-fest,” with them; to choose their world. I’ll continue to try my best to integrate though, to hold the tension, as this thesis attempts, in hopes of bridging both worlds. I feel my future depends on it.

I’m afraid I do not offer a “how-to manual” for mandating vaccinations, but instead insights into effects on “healing” when leadership is divested of its spiritual power - or when people stop believing in capitalism. In the cosmopolitical event of the pandemic, a crisis over healing, as a crisis of religion, ensues. While the “conspiritual” may not be factual - a “fact” that the healers evidently care little about - on mythological levels, it weaves its own course for healing against larger illness. In what Phil calls “*this mystical labyrinth of reality,*” this is after all where the healers place their spiritual war. Maybe we should attempt diplomacy. Maybe, given where present knowledge paradigms and corresponding structures have us careening, we should open ourselves up, for healing. Isabelle Stengers writes that “reclaiming means recovering what we have been separated from, but not in the sense that we can just get it back. Recovering means recovering from the very separation itself, regenerating what this separation has poisoned. The need to struggle and the need to heal, in order to avoid resembling those we have to struggle against, are thus irreducibly allied” (Stengers 2012). Addressing colonialism and capitalism - its interrelated knowledge structures and ecology to the effect of “*sick society*” - leads us into the

uncharted territory of opening ourselves up to new “normals,” different “worlds,” towards which we must both heal and struggle. Maybe then, *healing*, we could collectively face the coming pandemics, floods and fires. In other words, I suppose I’m saying that to overcome the “disease,” we must confront the illness.

References

Abram, David. 2020. "In the Ground of Our Unknowing." *Emergence Magazine*. April 7 2020.

Ahmad, Ali. 2019. "Disaster cosmologies in comparative perspective: Islam, climate change and the 2010 floods in Pakistan's Southern Punjab." *Journal of Historical Sociology*. 32: 311–330.

Ahmed, D. 2020. "Lost and Found: Gifts, Dreams and Sanity." In *Contemporary Voices from Anima Mundi*. Eds. Frédérique Apffel-Marglin and Stefano Varese. New York: Peter Lang.

Althusser, Louis. 2001 [1970]. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Apffel-Marglin, Frédérique. 2012. *Subversive Spiritualities: How Rituals Enact the Earth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Apffel-Marglin, Frédérique. 2020. "Western Modernity and the Fate of Anima Mundi: Its Murder and Transformation into a Postmaterial Ecospirituality." In *Contemporary Voices from Anima Mundi*. Eds. Frédérique Apffel-Marglin and Stefano Varese. New York: Peter Lang.

Asprem, Egil. 2014. *The Problem of Disenchantment: Scientific Naturalism and Esoteric Discourse, 1900-1939*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.

Asprem, Egil and Asbjørn Dyrendal. 2015. "Conspiritoriality Reconsidered: How Surprising and How New is the Confluence of Spirituality and Conspiracy Theory?" *Journal of Contemporary Religion*. 30(3): 367-382.

Asprem, Egil and Asbjørn Dyrendal. 2018. "Close Companions? Esotericism and Conspiracy Theories." In *The Handbook of Conspiracy Theories and Contemporary Religion*. Eds. Egil Asprem, Asbjørn Dyrendal and David G. Robertson. Leiden: E.J. Brill.

Barkun, Michael. 2006. *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bubandt, Nils. 2017. "Haunted Geologies: Spirits, Stones, and the Necropolitics of the Anthropocene." In *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*, Eds. Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan and Nils Bubandt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Brady, Erika. 2001. "Introduction" In *Healing Logic*. Ed. Erika brady. Logan: Utah State University Press.

Briggs, Charles L. 2004. "Theorizing Modernity Conspiratorially: Science, Scale and the Political Economy of Public Discourse in Explanations of a Cholera Epidemic." *American Ethnologist* 31(2): 164-187.

Canals, Roger. 2020. "Dealing with the Unexpected: New Forms of Mytho-Praxis in the Age of Covid-19." *Social Anthropology* 28(2):1-2.

De La Cadena, Marisol. 2010. "Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections Beyond 'Politics'." *Cultural Anthropology* 25(2): 334-370.

Le La Cadena, Marisol. 2015. *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Descola, Philippe. 2013. *Beyond Nature and Culture*. Trans. Janet Lloyd. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Douglas, Mary. 2002 [1966]. *Purity and Danger*. London: Routledge.

Eisenstein, Charles. 2018. *Climate: A New Story*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.

Eisenstein, Charles. 2020. "The Conspiracy Myth." May 2020.

<https://charleseisenstein.org/essays/the-conspiracy-myth/>

Eisenstein, Charles. 2020. "The Banquet of Whiteness." August 2020.

<https://charleseisenstein.org/essays/the-banquet-of-whiteness/>

Eisenstein, Charles. 2021. "Mob Morality and the Unvaxxed." August 2021.

<https://charleseisenstein.substack.com/p/mob-morality-and-the-unvaxxed?s=r>

Favret-Saada, Jeanne. 1980. *Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage*. Trans. Catherine Cullen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Granholm, Kennet. 2008. "Post-Secular Esotericism? Some Reflections of the Transformation of Esotericism." *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 20: 50-67.

Greenwood, Susan. 2020 [2009]. *The Anthropology of Magic*. New York: Routledge.

Hanegraaff, Wouter. 1996. *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.

Hernández, KJ. 2020. "Land and Ethnographic Practices - (Re)Making Toward Healing." *Social & Cultural Geography*. 21(7).

Hokowhitu, Brendan, John Oetzel, Anne-Marie Jackson, Mary Simpson, Stacey Ruru, Michael Caleb, Yingsha Zhang, Bevan Erueti, Poia Rewi, Sophie Nock, and Isaac Warbrick. 2022. "Mana Motuhake, Indigenous Biopolitics and Health." *AlterNative* 18(1): 104-113.

Jameson, Frederick. 1992. *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press.

Kitta, Andrea. 2011. *Vaccinations and Public Concerns in History*. New York: Routledge.

Latour, Bruno. 1991. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Latour, Bruno. 2021. *After Lockdown: a Metamorphosis*. Trans. Julie Rose. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Levi-Strauss, Claude. 1963. "The Effectiveness of Symbols." In *Structural Anthropology*. New York: Basic Books.

Luhrmann, Tanya. 2020. *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Magliocco, Sabina. 2004. *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neopaganism in America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Magliocco, Sabina. 2012. "Beyond Belief: Context, Rationality and Participatory Consciousness." *Western Folklore* 71(1): 5-24.

Magliocco, Sabina. 2018. "Beyond the Rainbow Bridge: Vernacular Ontologies of Animal Afterlives." *Journal of Folklore Research* 55(2): 39-67.

Moore, Amelia. 2015. "Anthropocene Anthropology: Reconceptualizing Contemporary Global Change." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 22: 27-46.

Moorfield, John. 2022. "Ora." *Te Aka Māori Dictionary*. <https://maoridictionary.co.nz/word/4791>

O'Connor, Bonnie and David J. Hufford. "Understanding Folk Medicine." In *Healing Logics*. Ed. Erika Brady. Logan: Utah State University Press.

Parmigiani, Giovanna. 2021. "Magic and Politics: Conspirituality and Covid-19." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 20(20): 1-24.

Rewiri, Raniera and Ayla Hoeta. 2020. "Ayla Hoeta - Maramataka Practitioner." 04 August 2020. *Planting Seeds Podcast*.

<https://plantingseedspodcast.libsyn.com/ayla-hoeta-maramataka-practitioner>

Robbert, Adam and Sam Mickey. 2013. "Cosmopolitics: An Ongoing Question." Lecture, the Center for Process Studies, Claremont CA. Oct. 25 2013.

Rubow, Cecilie. 2018. "Woosh–Cyclones as Culturalnatural Whirls: The Receptions of Climate Change in the Cook Islands." In *Pacific Climate Cultures : Living Climate Change in Oceania*. Eds. Tony Crook and Peter Rudiak-Gould. Warsaw: De Gruyter Open.

Schillmeier, Michael. 2020. "Counter/Infections: Dis/abling Spaces and Cultures." *Space and Culture*. 10 Aug 2020.

Sobo, Elisa. 2021. "Conspiracy Theories in Political-Economic Context: Lessons From Parents with Vaccine and Other Pharmaceutical Concerns." *Journal for Cultural Research* 25(1): 51-68.

Stainova, Yana. 2019. "Enchantment as Method." *Anthropology and Humanism*. 44(2): 214-230.

Stengers, Isabelle. 2003. "The Doctor and the Charlatan." *Cultural Studies Review* 9(2): 11-36.

Stengers, Isabelle. 2012. "Reclaiming Animism." *E-Flux Journal* 36.

Stengers, Isabelle. 2015. "In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism." Trans. Andrew Goffey. The Hague: Open Humanities Press.

Stengers, Isabelle. 2018. "The Challenge of Ontological Politics." In *A World of Many Worlds*. Eds. Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser. Durham: Duke University Press.

Stokstad, Erik. 2020. "Pandemic Lockdown Stirs Up Ecological Research." *Science*. 369(6506): 893-893.

Stoller, Paul and Cheryl Olkes. 1987. *In Sorcery's Shadow: a Memoir of Apprenticeship Among the Songhay of Niger*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Taguchi, Yoko and Marisol de la Cadena. 2017. "An Interview with Marisol de la Cadena." *NatureCulture*. <https://www.natcult.net/interviews/an-interview-with-marisol-de-la-cadena/>

Trnka, Susanna. 2020. "From Lockdown to Rāhui and Teddy Bears in Windows: Initial Responses to Covid-19 in Aotearoa/New Zealand." *Anthropology Today* 36(5): 11-13.

Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. 2014 [2009]. *Cannibal Metaphysics for a Post-Structural Anthropology*. Trans. Peter Skafish. Minneapolis: Univocal.

Ward, Charlotte and David Voas. 2011. "The Emergence of Conspiritoriality." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26(1): 103-121.

Watts, Vanessa. 2013. "Indigenous Place-Thought & Agency Amongst Humans and Non-Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European World Tour!)" *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2(1): 20-34.

Weber, Max. 2001 [1930]. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Trans. Talcott Parsons. New York: Routledge Classics.

Whitmarsh, Ian and Elizabeth Roberts. 2016. "Nonsecular Medical Anthropology." *Medical Anthropology* 35(3): 203-208.