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Edinburgh Research Explorer

Pushed and pulled to the Internet

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Published In:
American Behavioral Scientist

OPEN ACCESS

Pushed and Pulled to the Internet: Self Employment in the Spiritual Marketplace

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Abstract:
Drawing from participant observation and in-depth interviews, this article illustrates how esoteric practitioners (mainly Tarot card readers) come to see themselves as "self-employed" or entrepreneurs and take up the labor of brand building. These individuals study and use the cards not only as part of a personal "quest" for meaning or experience but also as an attempt to "make a living" from their work. This labor is personal and subjective as well as increasingly digital in nature, occurring through blogs, websites, and other media. Despite the relative ease of Web 2.0 technologies, this process nonetheless poses serious challenges for individuals and, in contrast to websites depicting "a best life," the process of building a personal brand can be fraught with hesitation, speculation, and failure as well as confounded by issues of access to technology. As I chart in this article, this tension makes many readers "reluctant entrepreneurs" (Boyle 1994) who often feel that they have no choice but to engage with the internet.

Introduction:

It's just a little before 6:00 pm on a Monday. I'm running late, rushing down Sixth Avenue, weaving in and out of the tourists in Herald Square, trying to cut over to Seventh Avenue. As I enter the nondescript office tower, I try to take advantage of the slow elevator ride to the sixteenth floor to catch my breath and remember that I am going to a Tarot class, a place where "the cards are here to help you." Tarot, I've been told several times, will "change my life." "If only Tarot cards could help me cook dinner or stop rushing," I think to myself—nor would it be terrible if they could also help me write and find a job. It's a lot to ask of a deck of cards, and every Monday I find my concerns and my desires no more or no less urgent than those of my fellow classmates, who have each come to the Tarot Center for different reasons but who all share a common interest in the Tarot and a desire to become "a reader," someone who has not only learned the meaning and rich symbolism of the Tarot but who also works with their intuition to *feel* what information the cards may be offering. I go to class every week to be trained in the mechanics of reading as well as to understand how and why individuals come to work as Tarot card readers in New York City.

While Tarot card reading has a long history in the city (Park 1925, Gregory 2012), it is relatively understudied, particularly in sociology. While work has looked at the language of psychic readings (Woofit 2006), little attention has been paid to Tarot reading as a form of labor. As Sosteric (2014) writes, "the lack of sociological interest in the tarot represents a significant theoretical and empirical lacuna" (358) This article aims to help fill that lacuna by drawing on ethnographic and participant observation as well as on in-depth interviews with Tarot card readers in New York City in order to trace the relationship between Tarot practice, self-employment, and social media use. Given the Tarot's broad history as an art object, object of magical practice, and therapeutic object (Giles 1996, Farley 2009), individuals come to reading Tarot in a number of ways, some of which (but not all) may be

informed by spiritual or magical practice. Individuals also come to the Center for many reasons, ranging from a curiosity about the history of the cards to a desire to develop one's "psychic" ability.

As the individuals in my study attest, the idea of making a living solely through Tarot-related work (such as Tarot reading, teaching classes, publishing books and other media) is something that becomes an increasingly appealing (and even sometimes necessary) project as other forms of stable work are lost or become difficult to find. While Tarot may earlier have been seen as pick-up work or as a "passion project," something engaged in while one is earning income via other avenues, interest among readers in exclusive Tarot self-employment grows as those other avenues of income run dry. Much like Duffy (2017) found in her work on social media influencers, Tarot readers turn toward their passion projects as sites of investment, enacting what Duffy has termed "aspirational labor," that is, labor that they hope will eventually pay off in the form of clients, book contracts, and other media gigs. While face-to-face connections and referrals still remain a vital component of Tarot readers' lives and livelihoods, social media platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter and blogging platforms play a strong role in facilitating the embrace and possibility of self-employment. In addition to helping establish a digital presence and, in some cases, a digital brand, these platforms also work to network readers to one another and to build spaces where readers share, support, teach, and learn from one another. In so doing, they encourage and promulgate the notion that lucrative, self-employed Tarot work is possible.

In this article, I situate Tarot reading in an increasingly digital "spiritual marketplace" (Roof 2001), which takes place across web forums, blogs, websites, and social media. Work in the digital spiritual marketplace now requires new forms of digital labor: individuals curate their social media presences, using those platforms to network themselves, market their services, and, in some cases, develop a branded identity. While digital platforms offer access and relative ease of use, the labor that occurs online must also be learned, usually from peers. While such digital labor is often embraced with interest and enthusiasm and described by readers in the language of entrepreneurialism, as I will suggest in this article, the demands of digital work highlight existing divides among readers, such as lack of access to technology, lack of access to stable housing arrangements, and a lack of access to networks of wealth. These divides inform how one can participate in the spiritual marketplace and, crucially, are exacerbated online.

Additionally, some readers express frustration with the impetus to market themselves and to embrace social media as a means of building their Tarot practice, feeling that the language of networking and marketing contradicts what they see as the personal, intimate, spiritual, and "healthy" elements of Tarot work. As I chart in this article, this tension—along with the material obstacles readers face—makes many readers "reluctant entrepreneurs" (Boyle 1994) who often feel that they have no choice but to engage with the internet. Readers try to negotiate and contextualize this tension with the language of "right livelihood" or of "living one's best life," as well as with references to Oprah, spiritual media figures, and marketing gurus, from whom they take both inspiration and media and branding guidance. Yet, while talk of self-employment and entrepreneurialism is often linked with self-growth, transformation, and living the good life, this article suggests that

such language masks the social divides between those who are able to market themselves and those who cannot or will not.

A Digital Spiritual Marketplace

Sociological studies have long noted the presence of a "new age marketplace" (Lewis and Melton 1992, Redden 2006), but by the mid-1990s scholars (Moore 1995; Ellwood 1997; Bowman 1999, 2004; Roof 2001; Aupers and Houtman 2006; Einstein 2007) began to use the phrase "spiritual marketplace" to designate a type of market that offered spiritual goods and services that could meet the demands of spiritual seekers "questing" for meaning through the practices of consumption and consumerism (Heelas 1996). This marketplace was mainly defined by a discourse of individualism. On the one hand, private selves went searching for meaningful experiences that could help them find a sense of identity or authenticity. On the other hand, those offering spiritual services were engaged in acts of self-aggrandizement, for example, by working to legitimize the practice of Tarot reading, credentialing themselves and creating credentialing institutions, and looking for ways to expand the spiritual marketplace to new audiences (Bowman 1999). While this narrative of a "questing" individual among a plethora of services, practitioners, and beliefs—what Bender (2007) calls the "hodge-podge" of contemporary spirituality—has remained quite strong, the marketplace has in fact become more visible and accessible. Although Tarot still is neither a mainstream spiritual practice nor a profession, finding a deck of cards today is considerably easier than it would have been in 1975.

Tarot's popularization can be attributed to several forces. Beginning with the rise in the publication of Tarot books, the twenty-first century has seen the rise and flourishing of web forums, such as Aeclectic.net; platforms such Tarot.com, which automate Tarot readings; and readers' personal blogs and websites. Numerous books been written that popularized Tarot, such as Rachel Pollack's *Seventy-Eight Degrees of Wisdom* (1980) and Mary K. Greer's *Tarot Constellations: Patterns of Personal Destiny* (1987) and *Tarot Mirrors: Reflections of Personal Meaning* (1998), and more recently digital spaces have helped situate Tarot as a hybrid of art, magic, and self-help practices that can be remixed online for a number of purposes (Farley 2009). Digital spaces from social media to online markets such as Etsy have allowed readers to develop all manner of Tarot-related content, such as newsletters, Tarot decks, and art, while at the same time offering and selling their reading services. In this regard, the spiritual marketplace is now a place of "prosumer capitalism" (Ritzer 2015) where individuals both produce and consume spiritual goods and services. Furthermore, as brick-and-mortar occult bookshops have closed and psychic fairs have become less common, individuals seeking Tarot products and services have had to turn to the internet for information.

At the "Tarot Center" in New York City where I conducted my fieldwork, the Internet has led to an influx of new students and has produced new reasons for why people seek out Tarot practice. In the past, the Center had been able to market itself as a repository of "occulted," that is, relatively difficult to acquire, information. Today, however, students arrive with their own preexisting understandings of the cards, which they have frequently gleaned off the internet. Online, students have encountered the cards as art objects; objects of magical/ceremonial practice; objects of self-help, therapy, and self-growth; objects meant

to cultivate intuitive or psychic ability; or simply objects of fascination. All of the students I met in the course of my fieldwork mix and match these practices. Yet, such background knowledge has meant that students are less willing to pay to hear the owners of the Center lecture—they are less willing to pay for information they could easily get online. What was common to all students who came to the Center, however, was an explicit interest in monetizing their particular Tarot interest and reading practice.

One reason for the students' explicit interest in making money is that the spiritual marketplace has found footing in the experience economy (Pine and Gilmore 2011) and the personal service economy (Sherman 2010, Cohen 2010, George 2013, Hochschild 2005), in what one reader calls "the new New York City," a city flush with investment money, new wealth, and its attendant demands for personal care and emotional labor (Brash 2011). Here at the Center, apprentice readers are quite aware that there is a market for their services, particularly if they can distance themselves from the "illegitimate" storefront psychic (Gregory 2013). Positioning themselves as offering life coaching, advising, counseling, or therapy, a reader with a good reputation can charge upward of $250 for an hour-long reading. Much like George (2013) found in her study of life coaches, "a cadre of self-employed workers, life coaches among them, has reinvented themselves as advisors to their anxious middle-class peers, ready to channel their concerns toward life-improvement projects" (179). As a result of trying to tap into this personal service economy and wealth of the city, work in the spiritual marketplace has begun to look much more like other forms of self-employment, where work is driven by an enterprising individual, contingent, flexible, often precarious, and dependent on networked arrangements (Fenwick 2002, 2012).

Indeed, as labor markets beyond the spiritual marketplace have grown unstable and precarious (Cowles 2017, Milkman and Ott 2014, Gill and Pratt 2008), readers at the Center have often experienced set backs in the "formal economy," either through layoffs or downsizing. As I have suggested elsewhere (Gregory 2012), readers use the cards to "negotiate" precarity, consulting the cards for information, inspiration, and guidance with respect to work and opportunity. As such, Tarot practice becomes an ongoing set of conversations (and card flips and intuitions and interpretations) *with* the cards about how to attune one's personal interests and personal strengths with the capability to earn money or capitalize on opportunities. The goal for many readers is to become a *spiritual entrepreneur*, someone who can successfully monetize their Tarot work as well as take some control over their financial future and the use of their time and energy. While such an entrepreneurial project can be seen as deepening the individualism and privatization of the spiritual marketplace, desires for financial control and autonomy are, in reality, predicated on the formation of new social relationships, new networks, and, as I will suggest here, the generation of new media. As Worth (2016) has suggested in her work with millennial women, part of feeling precarious is the recognition of the self as social and as fundamentally interdependent on others. It is precisely here that a key tension arises for readers: while the image of the spiritual entrepreneur is positioned as a common, attainable, and desirable goal, such an image does not free individuals from the material constraints of their lives; additionally, few individuals can (or want to) master the new social skills required in this market.

Spiritual Self-Employment

Tarot reading has long been a form of women's pick-up work in the city (Andersen 1987, Silverman 1982). While contemporary readers go to great lengths to distance themselves from storefront readers, they nonetheless continue this form of gendered pick-up work. As Snyder (2004) suggests in her work on the informal economy in New York City, women such as "Maya, an African American woman in her forties," conduct Tarot readings "on the side" of corporate work. For Maya, "the informal economy is a way to fulfill her self-image as a spiritual person with psychic abilities, an identity she cannot explore at her nine-to-five job" (222). Here, pick-up work is classified along with other services purchased by high-end clients, such as dog walking and personal training. While such an arrangement, where one has permanent or stable work and reads "on the side," may represent how much Tarot reading takes place in the city, for the students at the Center, such an arrangement was rare. Only one of the regular readers held an ongoing, full-time job with benefits. For her, working with the cards was her connection to the Tarot "tribe," an established group of readers, and she would have preferred to work as a full-time reader. Another reader, Deana used her reading to make "pin money," for example, to pay for her child's birthday party. While several of the readers occasionally picked up Tarot gigs at bookstores, bars, restaurants, hotels, strip clubs, marketing events, and corporate holiday parties, much of their work is done off the books and informally.

That informal labor is often conducted for free and conceptualized as a "passion project." Warren and Rose, who own, administer, and teach at the Tarot Center, refer to their work as a "labor of love." Running the center, its website, and annual conference is their life's work and their sole source of income. Both report that they would prefer not to have other jobs. Such work, however, is a continual financial struggle for Warren and Rose, as well as for many readers. As such, the spiritual marketplace brings together people who are both questing for personal meaning but also questing for meaningful and sustaining work at the same time. The work that readers take up throughout the city and online can be described as a form of "hope labor," which Kuehn and Corrigan (2013) define as "un- or under-compensated work carried out in the present, often for experience or exposure, in the hope that future employment opportunities may follow." Relatedly, we might also think of this work as "aspirational labor" or what Duffy (2017) defines as "a mode of (mostly) uncompensated, independent work that is propelled by the much-venerated ideal of getting paid to do what you love" (4).

However, while individuals often speak of their "love" for Tarot cards and for their work (Gregory 2016)—and they do "hope" and intend to be paid for their labor—readers also have a complicated relationship to making money from Tarot. Much like Freida Hilts (2009) found in her dissertation, which explored the concept of money among Reiki practitioners, money is a complex, symbolic, and emotionally charged social object for Tarot readers. Despite occupying a central place of concern in their lives, many readers actively debate the role that money should play in their Tarot practice. For some readers, Rose, for example, money is considered a form of energy that needs to be exchanged in order for her to continue working. Yet, practitioners wondered if money would "corrupt" a transaction, and they asked how precisely their time and energy could be valued. Almost all the readers that I studied agreed that getting comfortable with charging and receiving money was in some

way an essential to becoming a professional "reader." Yet, for readers like Bruce, a Hispanic reader in his forties, taking money is a conflicted interaction. While he could use the extra income and would like to be recognized for his skills, money feels like it obfuscates the generosity that Bruce feels he brings to the work, and he is made uncomfortable by marketing language. Relatedly, Bruce has not made the leap into the digital marketplace, despite encouragement from other readers.

Almost all Tarot Center students agreed that getting comfortable with charging and receiving money was in some way essential to becoming a professional reader. However, money is also the subject of many Tarot readings among the readers themselves, as they discuss how best to value their services, time, and energy. While discussions of "wealth" permeate the Tarot community, readers reflect what Fenwick (2002) found in her study of women's self-employment, which is a general resistance to the idea that self-employment must be driven by market logics of competition and profit. In this regard, earning money as a professional Tarot reader is by no means a straightforward conversation but rather an ongoing set of discussions about how best to work, where to work, how to network, whom to work with, and how to work legitimately.

As Jorgensen and Jorgensen (1982) note in their study of a Tarot community, "almost anyone may begin an occult practice" (378), but readers engage in an extensive process of legitimizing their work. This process of legitimization entails gaining recognition for one's work, gaining entry into esoteric circles, developing a good reputation among other readers, distancing oneself from storefront readers, credentialing oneself, and being seen as a serious and competent reader. Attending classes at the Tarot Center, for example, allows students to earn certifications of completion and to begin to identify as a professional reader. Much like George (2013) found in her work among life coaches, individuals actively attempt to capitalize on their personal qualities and distinguish themselves among their peers as well as distinguish themselves from those seen as unprofessional. For Tarot readers, this can mean adopting the language of "life coaching," "therapy," or "counseling" to define their services. Furthermore, individuals work very hard to establish themselves as part of the Tarot "tribe," which is a group of readers who often vouch for and recommend one another for various opportunities.

If one is going to make a go of Tarot work as a form of self-employment, as in any other freelance capacity, a word-of-mouth network and a good reputation among that network is essential (Fenwick 2012). For a Tarot reader, such a reputation might entail that you are honest, that you know the cards and their histories, and that you are capable of giving a meaningful reading. While such meaningfulness is deeply subjective and open to interpretation, it fundamentally means that a reader is able to translate the symbolism of the Tarot cards into an understandable and relevant narrative for a "querent," as customers are called in the trade. It is here, in negotiations over the meaningfulness of a reading, that Tarot readers distinguish themselves from "con artists" or "scams." Furthermore, as the spiritual marketplace becomes increasingly digital, building one's reputation online becomes a necessary step in shoring up one's reputation and of creating an archive of testimonials (often directly taken from clients and querents who can attest to a reader's talents). These testimonials are seen as essential for building a client base, building up one's ability to

charge higher fees, and establishing one as a professional. As such, they are a necessary stepping stone to putting oneself to work, or back to work.

From Blog to Brand?

While much work has considered the nature of self-branding as a purposive project of working on the self (Hearn 2008, Van Nuenen 2015) or as a "set of marketing strategies applied to the individual" (Marwick 2013, 166), Tarot readers take a more circuitous and social route to developing their personal brands. Rather than setting out explicitly to brand themselves, they pick up social media practices from one another, learning to use platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, and are often encouraged by one another to get online and to "get real" about their work or take seriously their ability to make money from Tarot practice. Here, Gandini's (2016) work is particularly useful. He argues that self-branding practices, particularly as they occur in social media, emerge from "performative practices of sociality that exist around a shared notion of reputation as the cultural conception of value" (124). Online and offline professional worlds are deeply entangled via a "web of ties" (135), which facilitate both competition and cooperation as well as the notion of expected returns. People self-brand by drawing on their social positions and social capital but also through ongoing conversations with others, which, in turn, allow them to develop reputations.

For Tarot readers, developing a good reputation online means participating in social media conversations, particularly on Facebook, as well as contributing to conversations through relatable, readable, and reliable content. This might entail posting about Tarot reading, Tarot history, art, books, or other esoteric topics, and much like other bloggers it also entails documenting one's "authentic" daily life (Banet-Weiser 2012, Van Cleaf 2014). Readers explicitly discuss the importance of coming across to their peers as being authentic and "real," in contrast to being seen as "networking," and as I discuss below, this is a line that is negotiated between readers both online and off. Coming across as too interested in networking can mean that, while a reader may be developing a personal brand, they are tarnishing their reputation.

Given the importance of such negotiations, blogs become an important entry point into digital conversations because they allow readers a space to define themselves and their approach to Tarot. These spaces are occasionally used to position oneself as an expert in Tarot history or esoteric practice, but more often blogs (as well as podcasts and newsletters) allow readers a space to grapple with defining their work as "life coaching," "therapy," or "magical practice" as well as a forum in which to debate the merits (or limits) of identifying as "psychic" or "intuitive." Additionally, these online spaces help link offline discussion and, as was the case for students at the Tarot Center, they help extend the classroom and the workshop discussions. Readers find and read one another's online texts with devotion, and these texts form a nexus around which social media discussions take place. Much like Van Cleaf (2015) found in her work on "mommy blogs," these ongoing discussions provide support and emotional validation to readers. It is through blogs and linked social media accounts that readers document their process of becoming "professional" readers; it is also where they share tips and tricks about how to put oneself back to work, often linking to more established marketing and wellness gurus. As Van Nuenen (2015) suggests, "the discourse of being or becoming oneself" (914) is deeply

entangled in the formation of marketing strategy. In the case of Tarot readers, I would argue the discourse of "going pro," or becoming self-employed, encourages individuals to attempt to brand themselves rather than being an explicit branding strategy. It is through continuous conversations with other readers, across online and offline spaces, that an individual's Tarot "brand" emerges, if it emerges at all.

Nonetheless, for readers in my study, social media is the lure that makes self-employment seem possible because it provides space for these "going pro" discussions; it is also where readers teach and model branding practices to one another. Social media provides a relatively low-cost infrastructure to begin visualizing oneself as self-employed or entrepreneurial. In this regard, Tarot readers have much in common with bloggers, vloggers, and other digital media personalities, who have taken to online platforms and networks in an attempt to make a living out of personal content creation (Duffy 2017; Duffy and Wissinger 2017; Neff, Wissinger, and Zukin 2005). It is through social media content that one's passion project, here, a "love" of the Tarot, is translated into a business plan. However, as I will describe, the lure of social media and the potential to brand oneself often falls short for many individuals, who struggle to translate their selves or their Tarot vision to the digital spiritual marketplace.

Methods

This article is drawn from participant observation and ethnography conducted at an esoteric center in New York City as well as from observations made online over the course of a year. Twenty interviews (both audio and video) were performed with men and women, ages twenty-three to seventy. These interviews took place across the city, in practitioners' homes, restaurants and cafes, and during the annual Reader's Studio (a convention), which I attended for four consecutive years and helped organize as a volunteer. As individual readers began to speak of their time spent on Facebook, I created my own personal Facebook account, which identified me as a researcher and fellow Tarot student. I was already well known to many of the readers in my study at this time as "the sociology student" studying the Center.

In total, I would spend almost three years hanging out with and interviewing these esoteric practitioners (mainly Tarot card readers, but some also combine practices such as spiritualism, paganism, ceremonial magic, astrology, numerology, and Reiki into their work). While weekly classes hosted a rotating cast of practitioners, the majority of whom were white and from a range of class backgrounds, I was able to identify a core group of approximately fifteen men and women, who ranged in age from twenty to seventy. These individuals devoted a substantial portion of their lives to working with Tarot both personally and professionally, using the cards as a companion, consultant, and oracle often in the service of searching for work, making money, and developing a professional reputation as a reader.

Several of the individuals in this core group of readers had been pushed out of formal labor arrangements, either through downsizing or layoffs, while others were involved in creative industries such as film, fashion, or trying to make a living as a writer. Others relied on freelance work in catering, book indexing, or web development. One individual in the core

group was permanently employed in full-time, corporate work. One was retired; two women were not employed in any capacity. All of the individuals, however, were trying to make money through Tarot work, such as readings, esoterically inflected life coaching or therapy sessions, entertaining at corporate parties, teaching classes, or via the publication of books or other media. Almost all individuals in the core group aspired to become a "professional" Tarot reader and would have preferred to make their primary income through Tarot work.

Initially, snowballing sampling was used, asking readers to recommend a fellow reader, but as I grew more comfortable in the community, I requested interviews with specific readers. Interviews were open-ended and used to fill in life details from observations or to follow up on issues that were present in class. The initial focus of the interviews was to gain a sense of how the reader was (or was not) working in the city, but often they ranged far afield, from discussions of raising children in New York City, to health issues, to broader philosophical or religious beliefs and how they connected to Tarot. Often these interviews included a Tarot reading: readers are quite good at turning the interview upon the interviewer, having extensive experience with being asked questions. Almost always the cards were present in our discussion, becoming a companion to interview questions and answers and offering their own interpretation or contribution. Card readers were often (although not always, if not permitted) photographed. The interviews were transcribed, and I coded and categorized the data qualitatively. All the names of interviewees have been changed here to protect anonymity.

Findings

I. Being Pushed and Pulled to the Internet

I am sitting down with Rose, a professional and well-established Tarot reader, author, and instructor, this evening in her apartment. I'm helping her prepare for the Center's upcoming Tarot conference, and the two of us get to talking about new books that have been published recently. Rose recalls a time when most readers did not write books, and she feels both happy that a market has grown up for Tarot books as well as annoyed by the shifts brought by digital media. Rose and her husband, Warren, have been Tarot ambassadors in the City, running a long-established Center for readers. The Center is their sole source of income, and they both take an entrepreneurial approach to running the business, yet when Rose and Warren started their school, the spiritual marketplace looked much different— both in terms of its geography as well as the services and information available. One had to know where to look for occult books, and the books that did exist may not have been credible. Although Rose describes herself as an "early adopter" of technology, she recalled how the internet initially worked to maintain the esoteric and hermetic nature of Tarot: aficionados and students gathered in chat rooms where the hierarchy of knowledge was often maintained through "flaming" one another—insulting people for their lack of knowledge.

The advent of blogging, however, which brought web-publishing tools to a wide audience, made it possible for lay individuals unfamiliar with coding languages to post content to the internet easily. Blogs introduced new individuals to what had formerly been more discrete

(and discreet) online communities and meant that anyone with an interest in the cards and a willingness to publish their writing could begin their own Tarot conversations. Additionally, public blogs, as opposed to private forums, could promote a Tarot enthusiast's work to a broader audience as well as link Tarot readers with other esoteric practitioners, psychotherapists, and self-help authors—not to mention prospective clients. Blogging, in essence, turned the "newbie" into a transparent learner—one whose learning process could become the content of a site *and* the basis for eventually publishing a book.

For Rose, this means there is pressure on her and her husband to distinguish themselves within a much more crowded marketplace, despite their extensive experience and having published their own books. It also means that Rose, who handles the "tech end of the business," struggles to find ways to reposition their Tarot school online. Having established an online store, which Rose manages, she is continually looking for ways to redesign and update their website and blog. Furthermore, as Rose told me rather condemningly that evening, "everyone writes a book these days," by which she meant to impugn the notion that publishing written work should come so quickly for some Tarot readers. Despite her experience, she and Warren have not had as much success branding themselves in the digital marketplace, and they feel they are tied to a slower notion of media. At times, as Rose told me that night, they feel frustrated that the online world is mostly "hype," although that hype is precisely why Rose feels compelled to work digitally, even though she does not see substantive rewards from this work. Between running the school, the online store, coordinating a conference, and working on their next book project, Rose told me she is "exhausted" by the amount of time and energy it has all required.

In addition to not buying into the hype of the world, not all esoteric practitioners have consistent access to computers and the internet. For example, Lisa, a white woman in her fifties who has been reading and studying Tarot for more than ten years, uses the computers at her local library because her husband, who has been unemployed for months, is on the computer at home. At the library, Lisa conducts research, sometimes about Tarot but also about science fiction, which she also writes and tries to publish online. Despite understanding that a website and a blog might help her establish a paying reading practice, which would help stabilize her household, it is much harder for Lisa to get "media savvy" and to embrace participating in online conversations. Even though Lisa feels pulled to the Internet, she is also pulled away by time pressures and by a lack of support. Like Rose, she has also described a frustration with the relationship between her experience and her ability to parlay that experience into a marketable or lucrative identity.

Lisa and Rose are not alone in their skepticism of translating their offline work and interests to the digital realm, yet as social media, particularly Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, have become part of daily life for many in the West, they have also become part of the discussion of Tarot work. In addition to feeling pressure to build a website or maintain a blog, readers also spend a good portion of time talking about social media and what happens there. Facebook, in particular, came to inform offline conversations among readers, with one reader referring to the "Facebook love affair" among the group. As Facebook conversations came to play a bigger role in their lives, it became popular for practitioners to begin to attend workshops aimed at helping them sort out their online identities. These workshops ranged from "How to Use Facebook," to workshops aimed at how to use the web to

"network" one's online existence, to workshops that were specifically geared at learning to brand and market one's self.

Workshops tended not to focus explicitly on branding oneself but rather on the power and pleasure of working in a networked community. For example, during a workshop devoted to networking one's digital media, it was assumed that practitioners had already begun using websites and blogs but were finding it hard to unify their digital media into an identity. Still, the language of branding was not used in this workshop, and the notion of "marketing" was discussed as being "annoying." As Julia, the workshop leader, claimed, coming across as trying to sell yourself is not the point. The point, here, was to engage in building "community" and in finding the right relationships and connections that could help one grow one's business. The "brand," it was suggested, should follow along from "doing the work," as Julia said. As workshop participants learned how to link their social media work and harmonize their aesthetic across these digital spaces, they also spoke of how important it was to not come across as "desperate" or to "self-promote" overly, which "puts people off," as workshop participants claimed. Furthermore, readers are also concerned with maintaining their image as a "legitimate" esoteric practitioner. The language of marketing and branding, if expressed too zealously, can ring of false intentions or even con artistry, from which these readers try hard to distance themselves.

II. Mentoring to Self-Employment

There is a fine line that practitioners must walk between learning to work in and through social media and navigating marketing and branding logics. And while an esoteric community does exist, which provides support and guidance for new practitioners, it is often the case that practitioners need a mentor, someone more established to help them make choices and get their businesses off the ground. While Rose and Warren have filled this role for many individuals, other practitioners have created formal mentoring schemes, which work to bridge the worlds of the esoteric bookstore and the new economy. In some cases, mentoring remains solely fixed on helping individuals hone their Tarot reading skills, but as the language of entrepreneurialism has become more prevalent among practitioners, mentoring schemes increasingly focus on business practices and business support.

Mentoring, as opposed to workshops, tends to be a long-term arrangement, with practitioners contracting with an individual for one-on-one sessions and in-depth support for attempting to establish a lucrative business. Mentees usually pay for mentoring services. Such services allow established practitioners to model their own career choices while at the same time encouraging the mentee to articulate or visualize the purpose of their enterprise. In the realm of mentoring, I started to see individuals explicitly embrace the phrase "metaphysical entrepreneur," and it is through mentoring relationships that conversations around "right livelihood" become conversations about one's branded identity. The guiding question during mentoring is: How can you translate your purpose-driven business to the market?

Take, for example, the mentoring scheme created by Andrea, a white woman in her mid-fifties who has been a full-time Tarot reader and yoga teacher for more than ten years. Andrea is an enthusiastic and passionate practitioner who prides herself on "getting shit

done." She has raised two children and managed to create a sustainable Tarot reading business in a large midwestern city. She travels to New York each year to participate in the Tarot conference and she's quite open about the fact that she is glad to live somewhere affordable and that allows her to take up Tarot work full-time. She is eager to share her experience with new readers, and she is digitally savvy, embracing social media, blogging, and podcasts, and she works regularly via email to conduct readers. To hear Andrea speak, it does indeed seem that she has crafted a life and a way of making a living that is both unique to her and that meets her needs. About a year after I met Andrea, she announced that she would be taking on one "lucky" mentee and that this would be a ground-up effort to take someone from beginner to established practitioner. Over the course of the year, this mentee would learn to develop a business plan, develop a digital identity and build their social network, and take steps to teach workshops and consider becoming a Tarot author. While entrepreneurial language and entrepreneurial marketing materials celebrate the individual as the sole agent of choice and change, my observations among Tarot readers suggest that making the leap into the spiritual market is a process that also requires good relationships in order for practitioners to get off the ground.

III. Reluctance and Gender

Andrea, the Tarot mentor, is a particularly good example of a practitioner for whom self-employment and branding go hand in hand. For her, the labor of curating and coordinating her website, social media and LinkedIn accounts, and podcasts seems to come with enthusiasm and a clear, stated commitment to her earning potential. Andrea, in conversation, clearly enjoys the work of honing her digital presence, and she has become particularly adept at her use of Twitter, where she schedules daily Tweets in both the morning and afternoon, driving traffic back to her website, where she blogs frequently, both about Tarot and business concerns. She is present on Facebook, where she maintains a business page and an individual page, and she is a frequent participant in ongoing Facebook discussions among readers, which tend to focus on daily life issues and personal matters. For Andrea, digital media has provided a hub where she lives quite publically, in doing so growing business and controlling the message of her brand.

Andrea has also embraced a polished look for her digital media, hiring a web designer to create a logo and a professional photographer to take media-quality images and headshots. Images of readers on professional sites tend to show the reader in the act of reading Tarot, or they position the reader in nature. These images mirror and mimic the visual aesthetics found on the marketing gurus' websites, where, in the words of the marketing guru Marie Forleo, one is "rich, happy, and hot." And, I would add, white, as these gurus tend to be white women somewhere indeterminately between the ages of twenty and fifty, as the element of "youth" is always present in their presentation. Feeling alive, having energy, and being "passionate" are key signatures of these images, which almost always portray women as carefree, laughing (head thrown back laughing is a common pose). These poses are copied by readers as they brand themselves. As Duffy and Prunchiewska (2017) found in their study of female digital entrepreneurs, "Many interviewees were compelled to develop and present online personae that conformed to traditional prescriptions for femininity" (843), and among female tarot readers this pressure was clearly present, also often masked in the language of "living one's best life." Digital progression into a polished website is seen

as an accomplishment among readers, with other readers often celebrating one another online when new images are created.

Yet for other readers, such as Chelsea, a white woman in her forties who has been struggling financially, trying to create such an ideal self online is a fraught process. Chelsea pushes back against the normative beauty aesthetics of Forleo and her ilk, while also trying to establish herself as an "erotic Tarot reader." On her blog she writes:

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

Chelsea has tried to establish a web presence—a website, an ongoing blog, and a more general presence in social media. The website has gone through at least two iterations since we met, and often it seems she is struggling to find the right words to describe her services as well as the right way to articulate her "take on" or style of reading Tarot. The blog, which she set up on the free site Wordpress.com, is an attempt to bring together her skills as a Tarot card reader, astrologer, pet astrologer, and feng shui consultant. Clicking through her site is like taking a walk through the history of her branding process, where each link leads to a different version of Chelsea and her attempt to modify her online content.

Yet, it as though her offline life continues to interrupt the process of branding, as Chelsea has been moving between the East and West coasts in search of a permanent housing arrangement. Knowing Chelsea's peripatetic personal life, I watch these websites and blogs come and go and realize that each one represents a new beginning in the long process of transformation, as Chelsea carries her possessions from one side of the country to another, looking for long-term work and stable, affordable living arrangements. I know that these sites and attempts to pull the work together in one place are the visual trace of a struggle between money and the self.

Discussion

While the relative ease of social media and blogging encourages Tarot readers to experiment with digital media and with branding practices, practitioners come slowly to self-employment and self-branding. Ongoing precarity, financial crisis, housing issues, access to technology, and frustrations with the normative, gendered aesthetics of marketing tactics each contribute to the production of Tarot readers as "reluctant entrepreneurs." Readers' already complicated relationships with money and with their desire to see financial rewards come from "right livelihood" rather than from networking and marketing practices further complicate the path to self-employment and to the development of a personal brand.

Still, readers often feel they have no choice but to engage with the internet if they are to stay relevant and connected to ongoing conversations and if they are to develop or maintain a "good reputation." While such pressure to develop a good reputation may be less acutely felt for already established readers, they too feel pressure to keep up with the competition

and to translate older business models to the web. All the readers I met are aware that digital platforms can enhance their earning potentials, but few feel confident enough to embrace platforms professionally. Hence, there is a market within this community of reluctant entrepreneurs for workshops, trainings, and other mentoring services, which not only model success but also teach readers how "get real" in the spiritual marketplace. In this way, the path to self-employment is a social one and requires support, assistance, and guidance.

Still, not all readers can or are willing to embrace marketing logic, instead rejecting the notion that they should turn their lives into content and pushing back against gendered and raced expectations of "happy and hot" lives. The impetus to present one's life as a perfect accomplishment is also met with criticism and hostility as readers experience ongoing, material crisis in their actual lives. While such crises can also make for readable, relatable, and "authentic" social media content, I did not witness any of the readers take this turn. Rather, it was Facebook that provided the space for ongoing, supportive discussions about day-to-day life, while blogs and branding projects were allowed to lie fallow while life was being attended to.

Overall, Tarot readers come circuitously to self-employment and to brand development. For many, this is an ongoing journey rather than a full arrival into a self-sustaining business, and it is a process that occurs through shared experience, learning from one another, and from encountering the possibilities of digital media, with a particular emphasis on the affordances of blogging and social media. In this regard, readers often see in themselves and describe themselves as the Tarot's Fool, the unnumbered card who is able to "move" about the deck, encountering and learning from fellow Tarot figures. The Fool must continually, cyclically engaging in a series of challenges and conversations, taking risks to step off his cliff and become one with the world, thus embracing a life of growth and discovery. Much like the Tarot reader seeking full self-employment, the Fool never quite arrives at his destination. Rather, "going pro" and "getting real" in order to make a sustainable living from the cards is a social process pitted with stops, starts, and failures. And, much like the Fool, what comes next for readers remains an unknown.

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