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MONKEY ON MY BACK

AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC NARRATIVE
OF A THERAPEUTIC EXPERIENCE

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FOREWORD BY
MYRTO TSILIMPOUNIDI

AFTERWORD BY
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To my guides, human and non-human.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The book you are going to read is a hybrid genre. It likes to be read as a personal narrative, yet it is also a synthesis of many diverse theoretical currents. Having to do with feminist / queer / mad and complex postmodern interdisciplinary scholarship, the monograph would not have come about without the endless support of the scholarly editor, Myrto Tsilimpounidi, who not only read all the chapters several times in a row and provided me with invaluable comments and feedback, but also read "between the lines" of my epistemological–ontological struggles and helped me magically connect the dots before I was able to see them.

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FOREWORD
MYRTO TSILIMPOUNIDI

This is a book about an on-going journey through different borderlands of the modern, Western world. It is a book that carefully traces the author's trajectories as he struggles with the boundaries of objective science, reliable methodologies, the traditions of modern academy, the stereotypes of gender, the notion of belonging to a certain community, and the limitation of Western psychiatric practice. This autoethnographic narrative is itself part of the therapeutic experience: by telling the story, by putting into words the struggle, by naming the fears, the author trespasses the borderlands and each time achieves a small victory in relation to the violence of the imposed borders and limitations. This is a courageous narration that leaves the author vulnerable and exposed in front of the reader; it does not presuppose any kind of authority between the two subjects, as the stories told create an affective landscape. This is a book that invites you to trespass those borders with the author. You can choose not to do so, but you should always remember which side you are on.

What is fear? What is anxiety? How can we all trace and talk to the "monkeys on our backs"? The book does not provide fixed and fatalistic answers, but it rather creates the pathways for starting to ask the questions differently. It is a critical and engaged retelling of the intense struggles with the diagnosis of modern psychiatry and all the routes the author walked towards healing and therapy. But, in order to do that, he had to disengage himself from the diagnosis and create more holistic pathways of making sense of his experience. You can follow the steps of feelings and

embodied reactions as the author embarks on his quest for alternative paradigms of meaning-making. My favourite insertion is the tradition of evolutionary astrology based on Indian astrological traditions and its use as a research lens and methodological tool. The maps of evolutionary astrology and their interpretations in relation to our lived experiences add a thick layer of research data and in a way are the compass with which to navigate the different narrations in this book. In this sense, evolutionary astrology is treated as an equal meaning-making paradigm and, as such, as the strength of this story in relation to other methodological unpackings. Furthermore, the author uses Buddhist practices as hermeneutic tools in an attempt to re-evaluate the Western, academic, colonial terrain. Although the author never mentions this, perhaps out of humility, this is a radical attempt to decolonise a very conservative academic tradition.

In that sense, this book is an invaluable and timely addition to the struggles all over the world to decolonise the academy. It directly asks the questions: What kind of knowledge is regarded as valid? Whose opinions matter in academic debates, and why? What kind of knowledge do we want to reproduce as engaged scholars? It asks these questions in the moment that streets in the US and all over the world are crowded with protesters of the Black Lives Matter movement. At the same time that statues of colonial rulers are destroyed in the UK, the US, and Latin America, this book aims to destabilise the colonial assumptions about objective, positivist, and hegemonic paradigms. If every book and work of art is inescapably a product of its time, then this is a story that opens up a dialogue with the emerging social conditions of our era. As such, and for me, here lies a very important contribution—it analyses the very structures of life under capitalism as a generator of many of our personal and social crises. Indeed, the author vividly

narrates his struggle between jobs, pay scales, and personal space and balance. Between the forces of the market which dictate that time is money, the author makes the choice to break with this capitalist isolation and engage with other ways of experiencing everyday life. It is at that point that the healing journey begins!

To clear up any misconception—this is not a harsh ideological book against capitalism. It critiques structures of oppression and domination in capitalist societies with the calmness of a Buddhist chant. In a similar way to that in which one learns to trace the "problem" as something exterior to the Self through mindfulness meditation, the author narrates the stages of depersonification of the problem. In other words, the problem is not the individual self in capitalist societies under crisis, but instead lies within the wider nexus of connections and social conditions. This is a truly therapeutic exercise for all of us, if we are to move forward with our practices and scholarship. Our collective inability to imagine life outside of capitalism says more about the omnipresence of the current system than our ability for alternative imaginings. Through evolutionary astrology and meditation, we can learn to "unlearn" the ways we were told to understand and imagine the world. It is this very practice of "unlearning" that this book is focused on. The difficult and painful practice of unlearning came through sleepless nights and many anxiety attacks, but also the fulfilling achievement of re-training the Self and the brain in a way that makes sense to the uniqueness of the author's individual life.

Last but not least, this book not only takes a critical stance on the Cartesian dualism of mind and body, but also aims to offer a radical narration that challenges the biological and socio-cultural dualism of gender norms and expressions. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that in other hermeneutic systems there was the appearance of many genders (e.g. the six genders of Judaism). Part of the book traces the author's process of gender transition, combining

an eloquent theoretical perspective with the embodied experience of transition. It unpacks and exposes the medical and legal systems that act as the gate-keepers of gender dualism. It does so with care and understanding, without exoticising at any point the experience, but by combining it with theoretical rigour.

Dear reader, you are holding a book that touches upon many theoretical and empirical paradigms, but refuses to be categorised in one fixed box. Instead of viewing this as a "problem" of categories, please embrace the intersectional approach to knowledge production. But most of all, enjoy a narrative that points towards the possibility, as the Zapatistas are saying, that another world is possible. A world that is timely and urgent and that unfolds on the streets and squares all over the globe.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Stories are full of gaps which persons must fill in order for the story to be performed. These gaps recruit the lived experience and the imagination of persons. With every performance, persons are reauthoring their lives. The evolution of lives is akin to the process of reauthoring, the process of persons' entering into stories, taking them over and making them their own.

White & Epston (1990: 13)

This book is supposed to be a story. A story of my journey to self-empowerment. An alternative narrative to the diagnosis I received a few years ago which labelled me "mentally disordered" for being different, for being unique. *Monkey on My Back* is a story about a profound therapeutic experience. It does not only cover excerpts from the therapeutic conversations I participated in, it also explains other ways I explored in order to find my own path. My (re)searching and my not giving up was also therapeutic, as was the final stage of writing about it.

Via use of the term "psychiatric survivor" in the book, I express my affinity for the emergent field of Mad Studies and its critique of psychiatric discourse centred around the "biomedical model of mental illness" (Pilling, 2014: 1). As explained by Robert Menzies, Brenda A. LeFrançois, and Geoffrey Reaume, the project of Mad Studies "combines the more established understandings of Mad matters, including antipsychiatry approaches and long-standing psychiatric survivor narratives with an exciting and burgeoning form of activism […] in a variety of forms of radical and Mad activist scholarship" (Menzies et al, 2013: 2). As a non-binary identified person undergoing legal transition and hormonal treatment, I already bear one diagnosis. As a trans person suffering from intense distress during my first years of transition, I run the risk of receiving another, should I seek the help of my supervising psychiatrist. I have decided to choose a different way. The story you are reading is the result of that choice. Viewing it through the lens of Mad Studies, it could be read as an alternative narrative that challenges the

content of a limiting category, the one I would very likely be diagnosed with, should I confide in the hands of those who already labelled me once as "mentally ill".

As the monograph is entitled *Monkey on My Back: An Autoethnographic Narrative of a Therapeutic Experience*, I believe the reader deserves an explanation. When I decided to name the book *Monkey on My Back*, I was surprisingly not aware of the fact that the expression has been used in English for many centuries. As English is my second language, I was not accustomed to the usage of the metaphor and its meaning that refers to having a terrible burden, impossible to control and often described as an addiction one cannot escape from. The impulse to work with such a title was rather intuitive and came, probably, from two different sources.

The first source is narrative therapy or narrative practice, as I also refer to it in this book. Narrative practice, developed by therapist Michael White and anthropologist David Epston (1990), belongs to the postmodern therapeutic approaches. It is considerably influenced by Foucauldian notions about modern power and the Batesonian idea of interpretive method. It is also the cradle of a therapeutic technique named *externalizing conversations*. When using this technique in the conversation, the aim is to externalize the topic that the participant considers to be an issue so that he, she, or they[1] do not view it as a part of their identity. This technique allows for the topic itself to become "a separate entity and thus external to the person or relationship that was ascribed as" problematic (White & Epston,

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[1] Given that I identify as non-binary, I prefer working with plurality of genders when referring to a third person in the text. This is the reason why the pronoun "they" is sometimes added to a direct quote. Despite identifying as non-binary, I usually express my gender in a masculine way. When referring to myself as a third person (e.g. in Chapter Three), I use "he / his / him".

1990: 38). This way, what is considered to be oppressive in people's lives is intentionally objectified. The process of externalization allows the participant of the therapeutic conversation to recognize "how totalizing and constrictive" their identification with the issue often becomes (Steelman, 2016: 81), and to realize a sense of personal agency, as the issue is eventually viewed as less inherent and therefore less oppressive (White & Epston, 1990: 38). This way, the externalization process helped me to discover and explore my own intense experience of distress, and to view it and approach it as a "Monkey on my back".

It is, however, also possible that the word "monkey" came to my mind through a reading. As a significant part of the text you are reading is inspired by Buddhist thought and deals with my experience with mindfulness, I resonate with the metaphor used by the American psychologist and ordained Theravada Buddhist Jack Kornfield. In *A Path with Heart*, Kornfield writes: "Buddhist psychology likens the untrained mind to a crazed monkey that dashes from thought to memory, from sight to sound, from plan to regret without ceasing" (Kornfield, 1993: 57–58). As I had often turned to Kornfield's books in the first stage of dealing with my experience of intense distress, it is likely that I might have remembered the comparison, which led to my later naming it as "Monkey" through learning the use of the externalizing technique.

Aside from the self-explanatory therapeutic experience in the subtitle, it also contains two terms as a result of two combined genres: autoethnography and personal narrative. Both of these terms are closely related to storytelling. The word "story", or narrative, is a key concept in this book. It relates not only to the postmodern format of writing—it also refers to the use of narrative metaphor applied in narrative practice. In reference to the text analogy, narrative therapy

uses narrative metaphor in order to discover and map as yet untold alternative storylines (White & Epston, 1990; White, 2007; 2011). In a nutshell, it teaches that there is always more than one story to be told. In the introduction to the book *Psychiatry Disrupted*, the editors Bonnie Burstow and Brenda A. LeFrançois argue that narrative is an important concept "specifically related to resistance" (Burstow & LeFrançois, 2014: 7). They introduce the work of Chris Chapman, explaining "how personal narrative and ethics can be used to challenge violent, demeaning, and unreflexive practices" within the psychiatric establishment (Ibid.: 9). *Monkey on My Back* is an effort to offer an alternative to the dominant limited narrative related to psychiatric diagnosis, which is often sold as a unitary truth. An alternative story of a unique potential that resides in all of us—the potential to free ourselves from unnecessary self-doubt and shame that are the painful consequences of systemic violence and pathologizing practices of psychiatry.

My journey to self-empowerment as a non-binary identified person was not easy. At the very beginning of my transition process, I did not believe I could ever be able to accept myself fully without feeling the heaviness of the diagnosis I received that reminded me every day of the fact that I am different. So different that I needed psychiatrists to label me as "mentally disordered" to be able to legally obtain the hormonal treatment that I desired. When my health condition got worse and I really needed expert help due to increased distress, it was already impossible for me to trust my psychiatrists. My intention to avoid being pathologized and further labelled therefore led me to search for alternatives. I have learnt through hardship that my uniqueness, despite being feared as *monstrous*, is my power. However, if I don't embrace this uniqueness, it can remain merely an enormous burden.

As described by a collective of contemporary monster theorists, "[t]he monster, after all, is a hybrid, an unstable assemblage of categories that were never intended to be fused" (Hellstrand et al, 2018: 153). Just as Mad Studies does with the concept of madness, another newly emerging field of Monster Studies applies the category of *the monstrous* as a critical analytical tool in order to address and unmask "the machinery that creates some bodies as 'wrong' in opposition to certain bodies that are 'correct' and 'healthy'" (Ibid.: 154). Such experience of "uncertainty" allows for the process of "disidentification" (Ibid.) and "externalization" (White & Epston, 1990) that opens ways for further exploration and questioning. Through "[a]pplying a monster methodology rather than a 'healing' methodology" (Hellstrand et al, 2018: 154), through searching for and finding alternative paths to make sense of what I was going through, I have understood that I need to release the embodied toxic belief that there is something inherently wrong with me for not fitting in. My (re)search on creating a more empowering alternative narrative led me to dig deeper into various fields of interest.

One of these fields, evolutionary astrology—a unique paradigm of Indian origin—played a key role as a symbolic language in the meaning-making process of my reauthoring practice. As explained by the cultural historian Richard Tarnas, in "earlier eras of the West" and "in most other cultures" it was "widely accepted … that the universe is so ordered that the movements and patterns of the heavens are synchronously correlated with the movements and patterns of human affairs in such a manner as to be both intelligible and meaningful to the human mind" (Tarnas, 2006: 216). Humanistic and transpersonal astrologer Dane Rudhyar points to Western civilization's refusal of the universal cyclic rhythm as to a consequence of the Council of Constantinople in the fifth century A.D., "which

prohibited belief in reincarnation and in all similar cyclic processes" (Rudhyar, 1986: 262). According to Rudhyar, the refusal gave way to the domination of intellectual analysis and mental abstraction which "impels the ego mind to glorify itself in *opposition* to biological demands and to imagine itself supreme ruler of life functions and their cyclic rhythms" (Ibid.: 228).

During the time I spent working on the book, the world has been heavily impacted by transpersonal planetary cycles (further as transits), mostly caused by transiting Pluto in Capricorn[2]. Through an evolutionary astrology lens, all transits from Pluto are considered to be extremely challenging and transformative, the more so should they pass through the "haunted" twelfth house of what is considered to be the most complex area of the chart[3], such as in my case. As the founder of the evolutionary astrology paradigm, Jeffrey Wolf Green, explains: the twelfth house is "the composite of all other houses, signs and planets" (Green, 1998: 215). From the symbolic perspective, the Piscean—Neptunian by its ruler—quality of the twelfth house is the archetype of "the totality of life and reality in this and other planes of existence" (Ibid.). According to Dane Rudhyar, it is rightly associated with "the subconscious—the realm of ghosts" (1986: 270) of the "things unsaid, the gestures unlived, the love unexperienced" (Ibid.: 269). From the evolutionary perspective, it is the area where "crises do occur, and *must* occur for the sake of a greater future" (Ibid.: 235). As the transformative force of Pluto in Capricorn deeply touches the whole world structure that now appears to be in a global

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[2] Pluto's ingress into the sign of Capricorn took place on January 26th 2008. It will remain in the sign of Capricorn until its final retrograde phase of the end of the year 2024.

[3] See Chart 1: The Astrological Sign-House System.

crisis—not only due to the sudden 2020 pandemic—dealing with crisis, as well as the careful hermeneutics of what such crisis brings to the postmodern human consciousness, becomes paramount.

What is meant by Rudhyar's "greater future", therefore, by no means equals sacrificing the old and non-productive in favour of the fresh and progressive as, unfortunately, has been the case in the way old and disabled people were treated during the peak of the spring 2020 global upheaval (Ne'eman, 2020 Mar). For example, evolutionary astrology interprets the transit of Pluto in square to natal Mercury (that I have now been under) as an extremely intense transformative experience of the ideas one holds about the world, their old patterns of thinking, and also of immature—and therefore unethical—ways of communication. The sarcastic metaphor "I'm killing you for your own good", used by the LUTS Astrology blog for the Pluto-Mercurial intense transit (LUTS, 2017 Jul), emphasizes the extreme heaviness of such an experience. This is where I, and to some extent we all as a collective[4], find ourselves to be now—haunted by the ghostly spectres of the past, the present, and the future

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[4] In evolutionary astrology, an individual always represents an important aspect of the collective consciousness. The slow and deconstructive Pluto transits are considered to be long-term and profoundly transformative, having an impact on the whole global structure. As the current position of Pluto in Capricorn creates a so-called Cardinal Cross aspect to another three cardinal signs (Aries, Cancer, and Libra), such challenging transits (oppositions and squares) to celestial bodies and natal planets placed in these signs point to a generational shift of consciousness and a transformation of a significant part of humankind (see Chart 2: The Cardinal-Cross). With the contemporary placement of the centaur Chiron (interpreted as the point of hypersensitivity within us) and Eris (the dwarf planet symbolically known as the goddess of discord) in the sign of Aries, being squared by Pluto in opposition to the North node of the Moon in Cancer (our collective future) throughout the first half of 2020, the conflicting cardinal energies could be experienced by many via a deeply triggered emotional body.

who "linger on … with subtle tenacity in the unconscious" (Rudhyar, 1986: 269).

In this text, astrology is approached as a symbolic language that interprets a Mercurial effect on our lives as anything that has to do with communication. Therefore, writing a book about a "crazed" mind while undergoing heavy Plutonian or Pluto-Mercurial transits can be viewed as the perfect manifestation of such symbolic archetypes. There could possibly not be a better time for writing a text like this. From more of a personal perspective, when revising the draft of the manuscript, we as a collective are under a heavy transit of the retrograding planet Mercury in Scorpio. In my case (and in the case of many others), the planet Mercury is transiting the ninth house of my natal chart. In evolutionary astrology, the ninth house is interpreted as the house of higher knowledge, which refers to our "evolutionary need to understand life and [ourselves] in a cosmological, metaphysical, [or] philosophical … context" (Green, 1998: 165) or simply to our "search for the meaning of things" (Rudhyar, 1986: 212). As my editor, Myrto, wisely noticed, the book you are reading reveals visible epistemological and ontological tension. Being unaware of the tension when writing the first draft, I needed to remove myself from the process and pause for several weeks before being able to continue with the revision of the text. The intense period of Mercury retrograde in the sign of Scorpio is often interpreted as a time when we step into the underworld in order to let go of the old mental debris—thought forms, patterns of perception, and beliefs that do not serve us—to symbolically die and be born again. This period, which I personally experience with enormously heavy feelings, headache, and pain-body experience, made me stop and turn inward to reflect upon not only the desired content of the book, but also my motives that are hiding behind my fears.

As autoethnography is "often criticized for being too much and too little" at the same time (Holman Jones & Adams, 2016: 197), I have to ask myself again where these "too much" and "too little" contents lie: Is this text I am writing—and you are reading—all I wanted to reveal? Is there more I would like to tell? How much personal content is too personal? How much theory is too much, or too little? Where does the balance lie? Is it necessary to balance it? Do I aim at reflecting upon what my life seems to be at this very moment: unbalanced, fragmented, and at a crossroads? Does this autoethnographic narrative have to necessarily reflect my lived embodied experience *as it happened*, or as I *experienced* it? What precisely constitutes the difference? Am I not supposed to create the meaning anew in my attempt to write about it? If yes, then who does the "I" in the text refer to? Am I still making sense, not only for the reader but also for myself? Do I need to make sense when undergoing a crisis of perception and meaning-making?

Norman K. Denzin writes that "[s]tories are like pictures that have been painted over, and, when paint is scraped off an old picture, something new becomes visible" (Denzin, 2014: 1). Going through this heavy transiting period when revising the text allows me—once again—to come into contact with my deep insecurities related to reflexive autoethnographic writing and becoming vulnerable. As eloquently termed by Dwayne Custer, writing autoethnography "is a dirty job"— "It is reaching deep down into the soul and pulling up trash and scum" (Custer, 2014: 4). Or, as Carolyn Ellis argues, "honest autoethnographic exploration generates a lot of fears and doubts—and emotional pain. Just when you think you can't stand the pain anymore, well, that's when the real work has only begun" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000: 738). However, if we—as qualitative researchers and narrative writers— understand and accept autoethnography to be defined by

a thorough reflexive practice, then heavy Mercurial transits are, in fact, the best time for doing it. As Ellis describes:

> [Autoethnography] asks that we not only examine our lives but also consider how and why we think, act, and feel as we do. Autoethnography requires that we observe ourselves observing, that we interrogate what we think and believe, and that we challenge our own assumptions, asking over and over if we have penetrated as many layers of our own defenses, fears, and insecurities as our project requires. (Ellis, 2016, p. 10)

As I explained elsewhere, doing autoethnography and doing evolutionary astrology—viewed from the methodological perspective—have many things in common (Wiesner, 2020). The deep engagement in self-reflexivity in order to decondition ourselves from coerced dominant patriarchal discourses is a tool that both of these practices share. The goal of evolutionary astrology interpretive practice described by Green is not only to "help identify the past evolutionary context of any individual, why he or she [or they] had the past, and how that past has conditioned the individual to the present state of conditions in his or her [or their] life" (Green, 1998: xxiv). When dealing with intense emotions and the concept of guilt, evolutionary astrology practice also provides an interpretive tool for how to reflect and "make a necessary and critical adjustment from patriarchal beliefs that promote [the] guilt / atonement or anger dynamic to beliefs [that] emanate from [universal] laws [and] promote compassion and self-acceptance" (Green, 2009: 237). If "our task" as qualitative researchers and writers, Laurel Richardson argues, "is to find concrete practices through which we can construct ourselves as ethical subjects engaged in ethical ethnography" (Richardson & St. Pierre,

2005: 965), then practicing these fully requires to embrace deep unapologetic self-reflexivity. Such commitment asks that we do "not [flinch] from where the writing takes [us] emotionally or spiritually, and [honour] the embodiedness and spatiality of [our] labours" (Ibid.).

This Mercurial transit requires pause that enables me to reflect on the autoethnographic content of the book. "Something new is … coming into sight, displacing what was previously certain and seen" (Denzin, 2014: 1). I acknowledge and embrace the epistemological and ontological crisis I am in. This book is the result of such a crisis. It does not reveal any happy ending, yet it aims at pointing at a certain way out. It is a deep reflection of a pause I was made to make. A pause in life that was necessary. If writing itself can be understood as a method of inquiry and (self-)discovery (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), I do not aim at offering any conclusions that are certain or complete. As Denzin poetically put it: "[t]here is no truth in the painting of a life, only multiple images and traces of what has been, what could have been, and what now is" (Denzin, 2014: 1). The postmodern reflexive tradition teaches that the writing process—"the mode of production"—"cannot be separated from the producer" and the product (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005: 962). Similarly, in reference to Pollock and Scott, Denzin argues:

> Experience, lived and otherwise, is discursively constructed. It is not a foundational category. There is no empirically stable I giving a true account of an experience. Experience has no existence apart from the storied acts of performative-I. (Pollock; Scott, as cited in Denzin 2014: 2)

This book is, therefore, a result of several phases of (re) writing and editing. Each time I returned to the draft, I saw

it from a different perspective. I was learning about my own experience, not only through living it but also through writing about it and then reading it, reflecting upon it, and revising it. I was coming to a conclusion only to later realize that I saw it differently. My narrative was being born anew in the middle of the process, and so was I.

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In approaching the autoethnographic genre as a non-binary identified person, I honour and appreciate the potential of queer autoethnography to "tell and untell stories that matter" (Adams & Holman Jones, 2011: 109). Tony E. Adams and Stacy Holman Jones explain the noticeable connections between the complex fields of autoethnography and queer theory (Adams & Holman Jones, 2011; Holman Jones & Adams; 2016). Both—as autoethnographers as well as queer theorists—"treat identities and experiences as uncertain, fluid, open to interpretation, and able to be revised" (Adams & Holman Jones, 2011: 110). While respecting the differences but also pointing out the similarity in the aims of both disciplines, the authors go even further. Through saying "autoethnography is queer," they want to move "theory into methodological activism" (Holman Jones & Adams, 2016: 203). The powerful potential of the queer theory lies in its "struggle against the straitjacketing effects of institutionalisation", its "remain[ing] in the process of ambiguous (un)becoming", while at the same time being recognized as academic discourse (Sullivan, 2003: v). As for the complex concept of queer in its relationship to research, I share Holman Jones's and Adams's position in understanding the term in its broadest sense. From that perspective, queer research can be described as "any form of research positioned within conceptual frameworks that

highlight the instability of taken-for-granted meanings and resulting power relations" (Browne & Nash, 2016: 4). Despite its emergence and development "in response to a normalizing of (hetero)sexuality as well as from a desire to disrupt insidious, social conventions" (Holman Jones & Adams, 2016: 204), the usage of the concept is broader:

> Queer can also serve as a temporary and contingent linguistic home for individuals living outside norms of sex and gender (e.g. intersex, trans) and, as such, must not be limited to transgressions of sexuality (Berlant and Warner 1995, Gamson 2003, Henderson 2001); a person can claim a queer signifier if she or he [or they] works against oppressive, normalizing discourses of identity (Butler 1993a, Sedgwick 2000, Thomas 2000). As a critical sensibility, queer theory tries to steer clear of categorical hang-ups and linguistic baggage, conceive of identity as a relational achievement (thus removing identity from essentialist and constructionist debates) and commit itself to a politics of change–all of which are characteristics autoethnography, as method, desires or strives to do. (as cited in Holman Jones & Adams, 2016: 204)

As described by Arthur Bochner, one of the aims of autoethnography is to "extract meaning from experience rather than to depict experience exactly as it was lived" (Bochner 2000: 270). The meaning of what happened and, therefore, the narrative I tell is constantly created anew each time I approach it or look at it from a different perspective. Each day I wake up and sit down to write. A few days older, sometimes wiser, sometimes even more confused.

Evolutionary astrology teaches that all of us are a constant work-in-progress, a part of consciousness having a human experience. From this point of view, life is a constant change,

transformation, and metamorphosis. I consciously aim to apply the interpretive practice of evolutionary astrology as a way to sharpen the autoethnographic potential, to gain new perspectives of lived experiences. When practiced as a "projection through 'space-time' dimensions" (Custer, 2014: 3), it offers "a moment of timeless *now*" (Wiesner, 2020: 664). Similarly, Buddhist perspective—that this book also offers—teaches that nothing is fixed, nothing is determining. Not even our mind is really ours. As Kornfield explains: "[w]hile we usually think of it as 'our mind', if we look honestly, we see that the mind follows its own nature, conditions, and laws" (Kornfield, 1993: 58). From the Buddhist point of view, our mind is a part of "not-self" and we cannot have control over it. What we mostly think of as us is just another "[candidate] put forward for the [self]" while being not-self (Williams & Tribe, 2000: 47). In order to see things as they are, which is the purpose of *vipassana* tradition, our mind needs to be calm and still. Through calming our "monkey" mind we can recognize the impermanent state of our suffering: "If we were able to sit quietly for an hour and fully observe all the places our mind went, what a script would be revealed" (Kornfield, 1993: 58). Everything passes. Through practicing compassionate non-attachment to our endlessly changing states of mind we can gradually acknowledge our existence as such. We can attain a bigger clarity of our sight, and liberation.

After all, *Monkey on My Back* is a result of my experience with postmodern schools of therapy. Harry Goolishian, one of the founders of collaborative therapy, often said that "[w]e don't know what we think before we have said it" (as cited in Andersen, 2007: 89). Postmodern approaches to therapy explain that meaning is not something we discover as a unitary truth—it is something we create at the moment of discovering it. Despite writing this in the midst of a crisis,

I find myself in a constant attempt to investigate, to ask why. I catch myself being on a hunt to discover the meaning-of-the-moment in everything I experience. I, over and over again, fall into a trap of the impossible attempt to catch the truth (Freeman, 2015: 919).

"Incredulity toward metanarratives" is what Jean-François Lyotard defines as postmodern (Lyotard, 2001: 166): "The grand narrative has lost its credibility, […] regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation" (Ibid.: 167). As explained by the founders of the postmodern school of narrative practice, Michael White and David Epston, "[a] narrative can never encompass the full richness of our lived experience" (White & Epston, 1990: 11). White and Epston show that we do not have to accept the narrative we are offered by the circumstances we happen to be in. If it is oppressive, we can always enter it, reauthor it, and write an alternative one. The potential to "untell stories" (Adams & Holman Jones, 2011: 109) is what for me makes narrative practice queer. Unlike autoethnography and queer theory, which is often criticized as "too much personal mess" and "too much theoretical jargon" (Holman Jones & Adams, 2016: 197), narrative practice is a potent, practical, and creative tool that helps bridge this gap. It has the potential to empower ourselves as creative beings, to acknowledge and accept our accountability for making narrative choices about our lives. According to the systemic therapist Bradford Keeney, "[c]reativity encourages inspired presence rather than stale imitation" (Keeney, 2009: 1). As the aim of queer autoethnography is "to disrupt traditional and dominant ideas about research, … disrupt traditional and dominant ideas about what passes as 'normal'" (Adams & Holman Jones, 2011: 110), it aligns well with the "queer informed narrative therapy" (Nylund & Temple, 2017) applied as

"a counter-hegemonic practice" (Nylund & Nylund, 2003). Its aim "to develop a reflexive awareness that creates space for alternative ways of being" allows us to be engaged in imagining—and therefore creating—a "queertopian" vision of the future (Tilsen & Nylund, 2010: 67).

As one of the main aims of writing autoethnography is the use of personal experience to "purposefully comment on / critique cultural practices" (Holman Jones et al, cited in Denzin, 2014: 20), the book you are reading is also a critical reflection of my experience of suffering under the contemporary neoliberal capitalist era. In the system that Renata Salecl suitably describes as the world where "increase in choice … leads not to more satisfaction but rather to greater anxiety, and greater feelings of inadequacy and guilt" (Salecl, 2010: 3), the suffering inscribed on our bodies "mostly manifests itself as widespread insecurity, anxiety, stress and depression" (Olivier, 2015: 3). My narrative, therefore, joins the growing body of knowledge on resistance across academia (Foucault, 1978, 1995; Deleuze & Guattari, 1983; Butler, 1990, 2004; Federici, 2004; Ahmed, 2004, 2016 Aug; Verhaeghe, 2014; Thomas, 2014 May; Olivier, 2015; Tsilimpounidi, 2017; Hartberg, 2019 Sep; and others). Foucault's observations of the technology of modern power (Foucault, 1995) show how capitalist work-discipline reduces subjects to "docile bodies" which, as explained by Olivier, "are politically impotent but economically productive" (Olivier, 2015: 14). Or, as Silvia Federici argues, "capitalism has transformed our bodies into work-machines" (Federici, as cited in Olivier, 2015: 13). The monograph you are reading is therefore not only a product of a "crazed" mind, it is also a product of a body that suffers. It offers an experience of an externalized conversation with the body as a result of a deep crisis of embodied consciousness. Through (re)searching for an alternative non-psychiatric path, my way out led through

a profound embodied inquiry where the body spoke, and I tried to listen.

In a nutshell, *Monkey on My Back* is a mirror of my own process of reauthoring. Through interpretation of the applied narrative practice, I show the way I reauthored my story through "entering" it, "taking [it] over and making [it my] own" (White & Epston, 1990: 13). As opposed to the dominant storyline of a "mentally disordered" person, the alternative that I am stepping in to reauthor is about a misfit who finds his peace through becoming vulnerable and sharing his *monstrous madness* with the world. With this rite of passage, I am creatively overcoming the shadow of the internalized shame caused by the systemic violence of pathologizing psychiatric practice which points fingers and labels anything that crosses the boundary of constructed dominant knowledge regarding mental health as "disordered". Here, I am writing my alternative story. I write for myself and I write for others: to make sense of my experience, and to inspire.

CHAPTER ONE

The question of what is normal and what is not normal, what is sane or insane, raises complex issues about [the] model we use to predicate our analysis. In the 21st century, children as young as five years old are being prescribed antidepressants. In the not-too-distant past, anxious (or ill-informed) parents have given their children ECT treatments and even consented to the removal of parts of their prefrontal cortex because of perceived "bad" behaviour on the part of the child. "Normal" in this analysis seems to indicate the boundary of a punishing line: a fascism of the self.

Mark Jones[5] (2015: 3)

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[5] Mark Jones is a psychosynthesis therapist and an evolutionary astrologer who specializes in counselling astrology and on-going psychological counselling.

Disrupting Psychiatry

Some people say that psychiatry saved their life. As explained by Merrick Daniel Pilling, through receiving a psychiatric diagnosis they finally have "an explanation for the nameless force that had so profoundly interfered with [their] ability to function in everyday life" (2014: 1). I certainly am not one of those people. For several years, I have been dealing with issues which were extremely hard to talk about in public. Words were difficult to find. I was not sure how to express what I was going through. I was not even sure whether there are any words to express what I was experiencing. Most of the terms I used to hear, I did not like. Words like "anxiety", or "depression", despite their frequent use, are "frightening to those who self-identify as 'sane'" (LeFrançois & Diamond, 2014: 45). They are stigmatizing. When pronounced by authorities in white as diagnosis, they pathologize. They harm.

As a trans non-binary identified person undergoing hormonal treatment, I have my own experience with the oppressive practice of contemporary psychiatry. I remember how it felt when I observed myself—as if from above—disassociated, doing everything I could in order to receive the diagnosis I was in need of receiving, in order to get what I wanted—regular doses of testosterone. Four years later, the idea of being labelled again by the doctors who once judged my embodied experience through their "gender-biased diagnostic codes and interventions" (Menzies et al, 2013: 5) still triggers deep-seated emotional residue. The

distress and discomfort that I have now gone through has been extremely difficult, but despite its heaviness, I am determined not to seek this kind of help and remain in opposition to contemporary psychiatry and its oppressive diagnostic practices "which reduce human experience to lists of symptoms" (LeFrançois & Diamond, 2014: 43).

Read through the lens of antipsychiatry and the Mad movement, I find similarities of my experience with people who identify with the "psychiatry survivor" political identity. Since the 1960s, Mad activism has mobilized people engaged in "resistance against sanism and mind control" (Menzies et al, 2013: 9). The concept of *madness* has become "a means of self-identifying" (Ibid.), a "political act" (Ibid.: 10). As described by a collective of Mad scholars in the Introduction to Mad Studies:

> Once a reviled term that signalled the worst kinds of bigotry and abuse, madness has come to represent a critical alternative to "mental illness" or "disorder" as a way of naming and responding to emotional, spiritual, and neuro-diversity. To work with and within the language of madness is by no means to deny the psychic, spiritual, and material pains and privations endured by countless people with histories of encounters with the psy disciplines. To the contrary, it is to acknowledge and validate these experiences as being authentically human, while at the same time rejecting clinical labels that pathologize and degrade. (Menzies et al, 2013: 10)

The project of Mad Studies embraces, under an umbrella term, all the scholarship that is the result of critical psychiatry, antipsychiatry, and the Mad movement. It also aims to bring together "the knowledges … of those who have lived experience of psychiatric oppression"—psychiatric

survivors and Mad-identified people (LeFrançois & Diamond, 2014: 41). Mad Studies offers a potent way of theorizing experience related to contemporary psychiatric discourse and the consequence of its normative approach. It uncovers the power of diagnostic language used by authorities, "the dehumanising process of psychiatric diagnosis, which strips people of their dignity" (Ibid.: 39), and the way it is used to "pathologize difference" and classify "human experience and behaviour into various categories of disorder" (Ibid.: 42).

As I suffered from what I thought at the beginning was symptoms of severe anxiety, I was looking for ways to deal with the issue and make my life easier. My journey was a painful process which led me through many trials and errors. As a researcher, I could not resist diving deeper in (re)searching what was happening to me, after I had accepted the fact that my experience of intense distress would probably not go away, despite my wish for this to happen. In the initial part of the "maddening" journey (Wolframe, as cited in LeFrançois & Diamond, 2014: 41), I tried to look at my difficult experience of what I perceived and interpreted as anxiety from many perspectives in the hope that one of them would illuminate the way to deal with it. Unfortunately, after months of trying to understand what and why this was happening, I realized that while I might have become more educated and informed about the potential cause of anxiety in my life, this understanding did not really ease my suffering. Most of all, I became more aware of all the potential triggers that made my life even more stressful. They are simply everywhere.

In the essay *Capitalism and Suffering*, Bert Olivier puts in context two concepts from Renata Salecl, who compared contemporary neoliberal capitalist society to "tyranny of choice" and the "culture of anxiety". As explained by Olivier:

> The cost of living in these times of endless options is pervasive anxiety and depression in the face of the necessity to choose from everything that is on offer, lest one chooses "incorrectly", and has to suffer the scorn of fellow consumers, or worse, the possibility that your decision may turn out calamitously. (Olivier, 2015: 6)

The unceasing push to produce and to consume is simply too overwhelming and often results in a feeling of inadequacy, once the tempo gets too fast for us to keep up with the rest. After several months of my increasing struggle, I realized that the symptoms of my distress were taking a toll that was impossible to ignore. My performance slowed down noticeably and my health suffered. In reference to Salecl, Olivier describes how to live in the contemporary era means to be able to adapt to the demands of a "neoliberal, market-oriented capitalist society" and to fulfil "expectations dictated by the market":

> [O]ptimising one's choice across a wide range of products and services, submitting to regular "audits" of [our] work-performance, performing intermittent self-assessments in the workplace, dutifully (if ruthlessly) competing with colleagues for promotion (even if the personal cost is pervasive anxiety or depression), routinely having to meet production deadlines, displaying outward signs of success … and of enjoyment, which supposedly represents successful competition and consumption. (Olivier, 2015: 10)

When undergoing intense stress which seemed to be unceasing, my feelings of inadequacy increased and I secretly wished to get rid of it by trying to self-medicate with organic valerian root to be able to sleep at night and work during the day. As my distress intensified, my unsuccessful

attempt to manage the stigma[6] and my frustration with failing to be fit enough to keep up with others troubled me so much that I did not see anything else. I was so focused on the extremely distressing experiences of what I considered to be anxiety-related symptoms that it was hard for me to find any way out of it. With increasing self-doubt, I saw the issue get bigger and bigger as I paid more attention to it. Also, as I paid more attention to it and was at the same time at war with its unpleasant way of expression through my embodied experience which paralyzed me, I was losing hope that it would ever get better. It was almost as if I experienced a constant unbearable tension and no relief.

As the famous law of holes says: "If you find yourself in a hole, stop digging." Observing and studying the topic of anxiety as if it was something undesirable, unhealthy, and potentially stigmatizing while having an intense experience of the symptoms of it at the same time was certainly not making the hole less deep—it was doing the exact opposite. The more I knew, the more I experienced. Sometimes I was not even sure whether my own embodied experience was not the result of my vivid imagination of what I was reading about. Receiving a label which classifies us as "sick" or "disordered" can often result in a self-fulfilling prophecy (Thomas et al, 2013: 136). Diagnosis could, therefore, prove

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[6] In reference to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's concept of "[s]tigma management [that] can be considered an everyday performance of passing in which even the most visibly impaired people attempt to deflect the label of disability", Carrie Sandahl argues that the process "is activated by the nondisabled, who scrutinize the disabled body for information on which to base a potential interaction" (Sandahl, 2003: 40). Via putting into context the practices of "queering and cripping" as "theatrical and everyday practices deployed to challenge oppressive norms, build community, and maintain the practitioners' self-worth" (Ibid.: 38), Sandahl points to the exposure of "the arbitrary delineation between normal and defective and the negative social ramifications of attempts to homogenize humanity" (Ibid.: 37).

to be like "the Platonic pharmakon[—]poison and cure at the same time"(Douzinas, as cited in Tsilimpounidi, 2017: 16).

As a postmodern therapist and "psychiatry survivor", I work with the understanding that if we as people want to discover a way out of the situations we consider to be oppressive, there must come a time to leave behind what becomes outgrown in our life, and even potentially harming—including the harm that the toxic and destructive "being mentally ill" belief brings. The limiting category of the diagnosis which groups people under a certain label is a dangerous thing concerning the way our minds are conditioned and programmed to generate fear (Austin, 1998: 177). Mad Studies continues to unmask the power of the language of diagnosis when uttered by the authorities, as already described by J. L. Austin (1962), Jacques Derrida (1982), and Judith Butler (1990, 1997). As Brenda LeFrançois and Shaindl Diamond argue: "this citationality[7], given the authority from which it is pronounced, allows for the constituting of mentally ill subjects" (LeFrançois & Diamond, 2014: 44). In *Monstrous Encounters*, the introduction to a special issue on feminist theory and the notion of monstrous, Line Henriksen, Morten Hillgaard Bülow, and Erika Kvistad introduce the concept in relation to "something materially present but uncontrollable, unknowable, or in other ways challenging the notions of proper embodied

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[7]   When mentioning the power of language and citationality, it might be instrumental to add a reference to Judith Butler's theory of performativity, which is based on a central concept of repetitive performance. Through such lens, gender is viewed as being the result of "a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1990: 179). Butler argues that gender is an act "[a]s in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a re-enactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation" (Ibid.: 178).

subjectivity—and therefore feared" (Henriksen et al, 2017: 6). In reference to feminist psychologist and philosopher Julia Kristeva, the authors describe the process of abjection which consequently leads to "continuous establishment and production of normative (material / discursive) boundaries between same and other, normal and monstrous" (Ibid.), sane and insane. This way, similar to the concept of madness in Mad Studies, Monster Studies applies the concept of monstrous and the monster. As explained by contemporary monster theorists Ingvil Hellstrand, Line Henriksen, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, Donna McCormack, and Sara Orning, the concept of monster viewed through the lens of Monster Studies "is about the struggle over representation and meaning-making; of categorizing specific bodies, entities and life-forms; and of making visible the constructed, unstable 'nature' of these very categories" (Hellstrand et al, 2018: 145).

When undergoing the diagnostic process as a trans person, I happened to be in the most vulnerable moment of my life. Like (probably) everyone else who ever decided to seek psychiatric help for whatever reason, I was in need and I suffered. However, my suffering was not something that a psychiatrist could cure. My suffering was a result of systemic violence against transgender, gender-nonconforming, and gender-diverse people. If it was not for the application of Czech and Slovak legislation, I would never voluntarily visit a psychiatric clinic. Nevertheless, if I wanted access to legal hormonal treatment, there was no other option. I was, therefore, in *legal need* of a diagnosis. I did not come for a pill. The context I happened to be in created a deep inner conflict within me that I am still trying to make peace with. The situation could not be more absurd: I came for a diagnosis that I personally did not want, from authorities I did not trust, to be allowed to

enter the institutionalized system of prescribed drugs I do not approve of. Honestly, I never really paid much credit to the process of psychiatric diagnostics and in this case, it served to my benefit. However, this does not mean that I am immune to the negative effect of being tested, objectified, labelled, and treated as "mentally ill".

My distrust of psychiatry is more complex as it stems from several experiences which I believe need to be clarified at the very beginning. First, my brother was diagnosed with schizophrenia when he was twenty. Ever since, as if the team of psychiatrists was experimenting on him, they tried various kinds of antipsychotics to make him feel better, which eventually led to several modifications of his diagnosis. They were simply not sure whether they were treating him the right way! After twenty years, they decided they had probably made a mistake somewhere along the way, as he did not show any sign of improvement. On the contrary, his wellbeing increasingly worsened. They officially apologized for making a mistake and offered my brother financial recompense for two decades of damage caused by the wrong medication and misdiagnosis. How much is twenty years on wrong medication worth? From time to time, I still hear him weeping that had he not agreed to take the pills when he'd first had the chance, he would not have ended up in such a desperate state of mind. As I was a witness to his struggles and intense suffering, which were impossible for him to hide and for me not to see, such experience was highly (in)formative in the ways I perceive the usefulness (and the lack thereof) of contemporary psychiatric practice.

My second experience with diagnosis comes from the fact that I already bear one. As a non-binary person who decided to undergo gender transition in compliance with Czech and Slovak legislation and medical systems, I needed

to first have myself diagnosed with the stigmatizing F64 code, referring to Gender Identity Disorder, to be able to legally obtain access to hormonal therapy. Despite the latest DSM-5[8] guidelines reclassifying Gender Identity Disorder (GID) into—still quite confusingly—Gender Dysphoria (GD) in order to eliminate the stigma[9] (Davy, 2015; Davy & Toze, 2018), Czech and Slovak sexologists and psychiatrists continue to pathologize trans people as mentally disordered. As LeFrançois and Diamond explain, "the ongoing targeting and psychiatrization of trans bodies through the diagnosis of 'gender dysphoria' in the DSM, remains a blatant example of psychiatric violence through diagnosis" (2014: 44). The authors further analyse the psychiatrization of children and marginalized people, describing the act of diagnosis as "an attempt to take control of [our] bodies and [our] individual thought patterns" (Ibid.: 46). Our non-normative monstrous bodies are, therefore, "feared and othered" for being "perceived as a threat to the bodily and moral integrity of white adult male cultural norms" (Ibid.).

I have written elsewhere (Wiesner, 2017; Wiesner, 2018) about my inner conflict with the diagnostic process. One that challenged me enormously through an intense reality check. I was pushed to see how easy it was for me to give my power away when being most vulnerable, in need of hormonal

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8   The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM, APA) and the International Classification of Diseases (ICD, WHO) are considered to be the main guidelines for contemporary psychiatric diagnostics.

9   In 2015, the new version of DSM-5 introduced a confusing concept of Gender Dysphoria which has been challenged globally by transactivists ever since. As argued by Zowie Davy, "semantic change from GID to GD marks 'inverted' gendered expressions as pathological and, thus, continues to stigmatize transpeople" (Davy, 2015: 1165). The inconsistencies in the classification of GD also "obfuscat[es] the fact that not all trans and intersex people suffer stress or impaired functioning" (Davy & Toze, 2018: 159).

therapy. As both of those works were written soon after my initial stage of transition, I was not able to write freely at the time. I found myself entrapped in a vicious circle of an anger–guilt dynamic. I was dealing with suppressed rage that I explained to myself as a consequence of allowing the system to psychiatrize and pathologize me, while at the same time I feared being revealed as someone who criticized the system as oppressive and traumatizing. I feared that disclosing too much of my survival strategies, my little big personal victories in outsmarting the supervising authorities, and my non-normative views of gender would put me in a risky position, one that could potentially lead to losing access to the treatment that I needed so much to finally feel good in my body and to "win" the social approval of using the masculine pronoun. From a certain point of view, the emotional turmoil that followed after I started transitioning could be seen as a direct after-effect of all the stress I had to go through due to institutional diagnostic pressure. As if my own distress and insecurity–caused by the fact that I was crossing the gender binary norm–was not enough, I was pushed to suffer additionally when labelled "mentally disordered". As LeFrançois and Diamond explain: "the very act of judging and labelling [our] experience as abnormal may produce shame" (2014: 43). The diagnostic process, the act of pronouncing diagnosis by an authority in white, functions as an ordeal. It is a social and political act "that not only renders abject but may often produce unlivable consequences for people who fall prey to the normative [sanity / insanity] binary practice of psychiatry" (Ibid.: 47).

Now, as a transgender person who consciously verbalizes that he suffers from severe distress, I again run the risk of losing access to hormonal treatment. First, the fact that the experience of severe anxiety makes me vulnerable in the way my "sanity" is assessed, I am again

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at odds with what is considered normative mental health. As a part of the diagnostic process related to the access of hormonal treatment is to prove that I am not at risk of any latent psychosis, any declared experience of severe anxiety might immediately put me in the category of not being "sane" enough to undergo transitioning. Trans people who verbalize that they suffer from anxiety are often blocked from transitioning and pathologized under an additional category of disorder. In another words, I have to prove that I am trans enough to be diagnosed, and at the same time sane enough not to be excluded from the treatment. This way, gender identities are treated "as totally discrete from all … other kinds of struggles people have"—as if our anxiety is just another "'mental illness' that struck [us] inexplicably" (Kirby, 2014: 165). As Ambrose Kirby explains:

> [W]hile our identities are being normalized[10], our resistance to transphobia is increasingly being separated out from our identities and pathologized. Instead of being trans people who creatively survive transphobia, we are trans people with anxiety disorders, anger disorders, bipolar [disorder], schizophrenia. Our basic identities are less and less considered a "mental illness," but our strategies for surviving are being taken out of context and individualized as "mental illnesses." (Kirby, 2014: 163)

Second, experiencing severe anxiety influences hormonal levels, which have a tendency to increase and create difficult

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[10]   International transactivism together with health care professionals including the World Professional Association for Trans Health (WPATH) demand the removal of gender identity out of the pathologizing framework of the DSM manual. As a result of unceasing activist efforts, trans identities are increasingly recognized as "regular, normal, not pathological" (Kirby, 2014: 163).

health conditions. For supervising doctors, it is hard to determine the real cause of such an increase. Anxiety could simply be viewed not as a cause of increased hormonal levels but as an undesirable side effect of the hormonal treatment itself. And here we are again, solving the unsolvable puzzle of which came first, the chicken or the egg.

The final experience that was constitutive in the way I deal with diagnoses is based on the fact that I am a licensed solution-focused counsellor and therapist. I started a complex therapy training programme without knowing how influential it would be for me. It was just something that we as people usually call "coincidence". However, as I do not believe in coincidences, allow me to say that I view that choice as one that I was somehow intuitively guided to, however unaware I was about the profound impact it would have on my life.

Solution-focused therapy belongs to the postmodern systemic schools and was developed "inductively rather than deductively" in the early 1980s at the Milwaukee Brief Family Therapy Center by psychotherapists Steven de Shazer, Insoo Kim Berg, and their colleagues (de Shazer et al, 2007: 1). According to its founders, it can be described as "a future-focused, goal-directed" collaborative approach to brief therapy that is also "highly disciplined [and] pragmatic … rather than … theoretical" (Ibid.)[11]. Solution-focused therapy is based on the simple principle that we should not try to fix what is not broken (Ibid.). If we wish to find a solution to what we consider problematic, it is better to avoid digging deep into the challenging topic

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[11]   As the collective of authors explains further, the roots of the solution-focused approach lie "in the early work of the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto and of Milton E. Erickson; in Wittgensteinian philosophy; and in Buddhist thought" (de Shazer et al, 2007: 1).

and instead to refocus on exploring what it is we want. In solution-focused therapeutic conversations, we therefore ask about our preferred future, explore the successful ways we handled situations in the past, describe our vision as if it was already here, and believe in miracles while discovering the ways they work in our life and how we find out about their effect on us. Then, simply, "[i]f it works, [we] do more of it" and "[i]f it's not working, [we] do something different" (de Shazer et al, 2007: 2).

In this book, I work with principles that are inspired mostly by postmodern therapeutic schools of solution-focused, collaborative, and narrative practices. They all have many aspects in common. Most significant is the fact that they are non-blaming, non-diagnostic, and place importance on the participant's expertise of his, her, or their life, resources, and skills. Solution-focused therapy, in particular, tries to avoid the so-called "problem talk" and instead searches for ways to promote "solution talk" within the frame of the therapeutic conversation (Berg & de Shazer, 1993: 9). As explained by Insoo Kim Berg and Steve de Shazer, "talking more about what is not working is doing more of the same of something that has not worked." Such logic of "problem talk" appears to be "based on the traditional Western view of truth and reality." It forces us "to look behind and beneath" the facts. We are pushed "to assume causal links and interconnections between them" (Ibid.: 8). However, as the authors argue:

> Our clients have taught us that solutions involve a very different kind of thinking and talking, a kind of talking and thinking that is outside of the "facts," outside of the problem. It is this talking outside of the problem that we call "solution talk." As client and therapist talk more and more about the solution they want to construct together,

they come to believe in the truth or reality of what they are talking about. (Berg & de Shazer, 1993: 9)

According to Berg and de Shazer, "a poststructural view", therefore, "suggests that the way we use language can and frequently does accidentally lead us astray" (Ibid.: 8). Based on the fact that "[t]he future is both created and negotiable" (de Shazer et al, 2007: 3), solution-focused therapy explicitly emphasizes via collaborative conversations the vision of the preferred outcome—something the participant desires to experience. It "develops solutions by first eliciting a description of what will be different when the [problematic element] is resolved" (Ibid.: 2). The solution is, therefore, searched not as a derivative of what is considered to be challenging in the participant's life but as a bridge to their preferred future. From the perspective of the solution-focused practice, "[p]eople are not seen as locked into a set of [behaviours] based on a history, a social stratum, or a psychological diagnosis" (Ibid. 3). Diagnoses are rather viewed as hindrances unless they are approached as a useful resource in order to be utilized as a means to bring the participants closer to their preferred future. Since the diagnosis usually proves otherwise, it is wiser to avoid digging in it. A popular proverb among solution-focused counsellors is: "It is better to aim at the stars and miss than aim at the pile of crap and hit." Despite its colloquial undertone, in my opinion this constitutes an ultimate definition of what the solution-focused practice brings to the therapeutic experience.

All those earlier-mentioned experiences determined the way I see how unhelpful and damaging diagnoses could be for one's wellbeing and state of mind. How limiting and imprisoning, unless they are handled with extreme care. My personal experience reveals that dealing with diagnoses is

often too careless. The potential harm and further dangerous consequences can be easily overlooked or disregarded by physicians as insignificant, caused by different factors, and, therefore, often treated as just another "mental illness". The fact that contemporary psychiatry does not always know the root cause of certain symptoms and needs to somehow label them is understood to be a regular way to deal with what is happening: "anything can be anything, if the psychiatrist says it is" (Kirby, 2014: 165).

Pete Walker, a psychotherapist who developed a comprehensive self-help guide for working with trauma survivors (*Tao of Fully Healing,* 1995), explains how people who suffer from complex trauma syndrome are often "misdiagnosed with various anxiety and depressive disorders" or "inaccurately [labelled] with bipolar, narcissistic, codependent, autistic spectrum and borderline disorders" (Walker, 2013: 65). As he further adds:

> [T]his is not to say that those so misdiagnosed do not have issues that are similar and correlative with the disorders above. The key point is that these labels are incomplete and unnecessarily shaming descriptions of what the survivor is actually afflicted with. (Walker, 2013: 66)

This way, many people are grouped under the same label just for expressing similar symptoms, which could instead be the result of various causes and processes. One might argue that through further using the term "disorder" in his Cptsd (a complex, severe form of post-traumatic stress disorder) revision of the trauma syndrome, Walker reproduces the normative discourse. On the other hand, Walker offers alternative ways to recover from the complex trauma syndrome without medication as the only solution, such as cognitive healing and shrinking the inner critic;

mindfulness as a healthy and benign curiosity about all of our inner experience; emotional healing to recover our emotional nature; developing emotional intelligence to recognize and manage our own feelings and to healthily respond to the feelings of others; spiritual healing to develop a sense of belonging; and somatic healing and somatic self-help techniques to enable somatic repair to happen (Walker, 2013: 94–143). His critique is also aimed at the DSM classification of mental health. Walker quotes a renowned traumatologist, John Briere, who claims that "if Cptsd were ever given its due, the DSM … used by all mental health professionals would shrink from its dictionary like size to the size of a thin pamphlet" (Ibid.: 64–65). The human mind remains a mystery to us in many ways.

It is true that receiving a diagnosis is in many cases the easiest way to access what the patients want in the matter of medication. It could and does help to stabilize patients in order to ease the painful and chaotic context. However, people with diagnoses often run the risk of seeing *themselves* as the problem. The diagnosis becomes them, and they become it[12]. In a survey on the impact of the diagnosis of schizophrenia on the lives of people who receive it, Philip Thomas and collective report on its harmfulness and the stigmatization such diagnosis brings—the diagnosis often becomes self-fulfilling. As explained by one of their respondents: "I was socialised into being a mental patient. I was encouraged to see myself as a broken invalid, to forget my strengths, and instead focus on my weaknesses and vulnerability" (Thomas et al, 2013: 136). The harmful act

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[12] White and Epston write about "a problem-saturated description" as a "dominant story" in the sense that the problematic issue is usually understood by the patient as internal and the consequences in their life to be their own fault (White & Epston, 1990: 38-39).

of pathologizing through labelling people into categories imprisons them in the constraints of the limitations of the diagnosis; hence they limit their trust in self-empowerment, self-healing, and the creative potential of effective therapy.

Postmodern Therapy and Externalizing Conversations

Some time ago I saw an instrumental video created by Matthew Johnstone named *I had a black dog*. The video[13] explains in a very comprehensive way the principle of the externalizing technique in narrative therapy. It is about a man who suffers from severe depression; however, the depression is portrayed as a big black dog. When the guy feels really down, the dog is sitting on his head. It is sometimes so big that the man appears to be living in its shadow. The message of the video is that sooner or later, we have to embrace what we see as problematic in our life, as trying to fight it or self-medicate will probably not be very efficient in dealing with it. The man in the video, therefore, needed to accept the dog as a part of his life and learn how to live with it, but to view it as something external to him at the same time. Easier said than done.

For some people, it does not really make much of a difference whether we say "Zoe is depressed" or "A cloud of depression had Zoe stay at home"[14]. However, the externalizing technique focuses on important "micro-shifts in language" (Zatloukal & Žákovský, 2019: 73) and meaning-making nuances in the way we speak about the situation

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[13] See the video at https://matthewjohnstone.com.au/courses/i-had-a-black-dog/videos/.

[14] These are the examples used in the Dulwich Centre online course *What is Narrative Practice?* See the chapter on externalizing here: https://dulwichcentre.com.au/lessons/externalising/

which we consider to be difficult. In narrative practice, the person is never treated as being problematic. It is the actual issue he, she, or they deal with that is characterized as the problematic element (White & Epston, 1990: 40). The video helped me realize that my experience of what I named anxiety could be visualized, as well as seen by others, thought of, and spoke about in a similar way.

This way, "Monkey" came to my awareness. Something that is a part of my life, but not necessarily a part of myself. Not in the sense as for example my arm is, but rather in the sense of a shadow. A shadow that at the darkest hour of a sleepless night turns into a haunting ghost. As all of us learnt well in our early childhood, the spook and our omnipresent feeling of discomfort will not disappear when we close our eyes and pretend not to see it. And even if we could succeed once, the ghost always returns. As a returning force, the *revenant* walks in again (Derrida, as cited in Henriksen, 2016: 20). In reference to Jacques Derrida's concept of *hauntology*—that "brings together *ontology* and *haunting* [to suggest] that all that can be said to exist does so due to a series of haunting, excluded others" (Ibid.: 14)—Line Henriksen explains the disturbing force of a spectre. A ghost is a figure that comes to us—as a guide—to disrupt our notion of linear time, to show "how the past, the present and the future can never be neatly separated from one another, nor can that which enjoys a disturbing absent presence be done away with. It will always return" (Ibid.: 20). It is nowhere and yet still here, calling for our attention whenever we try to avoid looking at it.

Before I was able to get to know the "Monkey" a little better, I needed first to accept its existence. The hardest part of the process of acceptance resulted from the fact that I had originally viewed my distress as an inherent and also devalued part of myself and, therefore, needed to let

this belief go. However, this phase of "cognitive healing" when we try to recognize and eliminate "the destructive thoughts and thinking processes [we] were indoctrinated with" (Walker, 2013: 94) is not easy. I was not fully aware of how traumatic the initial stage of my transition with all its visits at the clinic, tests, and diagnostic procedures was to my sense of self-worth and self-esteem, or how deeply shaming and triggering this experience would become for me. Therefore, my cognitive healing was a long process that cannot be separated from the emotional and spiritual healing I have undergone on my journey to empower myself as a unique individual who would be able to cross social gender norms without immediately feeling haunted by the spectre of endless shame, a ghost of the past that had the power to bring a strong wave of heat into my body—that kind of heat that brings anxious sweating and trembling.

My relationship to my experience of intense distress became lighter after I stopped fighting against it. It changed once I was able to externalize it and view my situation as an external "separate"—yet never truly separated—"entity" (White & Epston, 1990: 38). It happened in the spring of 2018, in between of a series of therapeutic conversations I engaged in as a participant with my colleagues from the solution-focused therapy training programme. As shown by Tim Rowan and Bill O'Hanlon in their extensive book *Solution-Oriented Therapy for Chronic and Severe Mental Illness*, therapeutic approaches that are solution focused do not fall prey to "the implicit discouraging" of psychiatric training that says: "Don't expect any change; the best we can do is manage the illness" (Rowan & O'Hanlon, 1998: vii). As the authors argue: "When we work with people, we don't see them through the lens of traditional theories, diagnoses, and prognoses; we only see people desperately in need of hope and change" (Ibid.). According to Bradford Keeney, when

facing an allegedly "impossible case, … overly simplistic and rational [counselling] must give way to more complex and what often seems irrational therapy" (Keeney, 2009: 9). Since the solution-focused approach aims at searching for solutions via creative collaborative conversations rather than offering the therapists' theoretical interpretations, the emphasis is put on "developing something new, uncommon, and unique" that helps "liberate the immediate circumstances" (Ibid: 1). People who struggle with symptoms that are usually diagnosed as chronic and severe, therefore, "require someone who has learned how to face complexity with graceful transformative engagement" (Ibid.: 9).

In our sessions, my colleagues were mainly interested in helping me discover what I already knew about living with what I named as anxiety and how I had managed to coexist with it so far. This way, they empowered my ability to identify my own resources, which I had already applied in dealing with the difficult situation, and further explored the ways I could strengthen them so that I could move forward to the desired change. Through creating "a climate of respect [and] trust" in "a context of cooperation", the topic I considered almost hopeless was slowly being transformed into an opportunity (Rowan & O'Hanlon, 1998: viii).

In the sessions that followed, the excerpts of which I offer in this chapter, externalizing conversations were used to identify the important allies I collaborated with in order to deal with my experience of distress. In these conversations, I already mentioned the "Monkey" as an externalized separate entity. They were focused partly on managing my life with the "Monkey's" presence in it. Whereas in White's and Epston's narrative practice the externalizing technique is usually applied to the main challenging topic, in the solution-focused approach it is more preferable to externalize resources rather than what

the participant considers to be the problematic element[15]. It is mostly for this reason that, unlike the "problem talk," the identified resource is viewed as more suitable for being directly utilized as a bridge between now and the desired future (Zatloukal & Vítek, 2016: 165). Also, externalizing resources eliminates the risk of creating so-called "battle metaphors" (White, 2007: 37) and turning the situation into one of combating an enemy[16].

In accordance with solution-focused principles, we therefore did not discuss the origin of the issue, nor were we interested in exploring that dimension. The importance was placed by the consulting therapist solely on allowing me to come up with a thick description[17] of everything that I could recall that was or could be helpful in dealing with the situation the way I wished. Since I already had experience of dealing with my life as it was, my colleagues assumed that I also had an idea of how the desired outcome would look like. In the solution-focused approach, this allows for further exploration of the so-called *instances* of solution—

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[15]   For more on the combination of both approaches, see *Solution Focused Narrative Therapy* (Metcalf, 2017).

[16]   The externalizing technique applied in narrative practice is sometimes criticized for enabling "battle metaphors" and "totalizing problems" (White, 2007: 37). However, White argued that this is the case only in situations where the participant has "a strong sense that they are fighting for their survival" (Ibid.). He also explained that when the battle metaphor is embraced (such as the "Monkey" as an enemy), it is important to pay attention to alternative metaphors that might be employed (such as the "Monkey" as an ally), which allows for focusing on something other than the fight. In a nutshell, this is what solution-focused approach emphasizes through utilizing the resources the participant has.

[17]   In *Narrative Therapy*, Martin Payne explains that "the thin / thick or thin / rich metaphor for the description of experience, originated by [Gilbert] Ryle, is explored by Clifford Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures*" (Payne, 2006: 30).

the mentioned preferred ways in the participant's present life—and further ways in which they can be utilized in order to bridge the gap between now and the desired future.

One of the crucial topics we discussed was the fact that I sometimes felt "haunted" by disturbing commanding voices. The phenomenon of hearing voices is a sensitive topic. From the perspective of DSM classification of mental health, experiencing auditory hallucinations (voices) is considered to be the hallmark psychotic symptom of schizophrenia (Parekh, 2017). Given the anamnesis of my family background, if I spoke freely about my experience of hearing voices with my supervising doctors, they would probably immediately red flag my files. When being prepared for the first interview with the psychiatrist responsible for recommending trans people for transition, I was strongly advised by my friends not to disclose any information that would put me at risk of not receiving the treatment, even if it was a true fact. Just by its very utterance and without any further testing, I would probably take myself out of the "trans and sane enough" list and place myself onto a "too insane to transition" list. It's simply too risky.

Hearing voices was also something that I had experienced much earlier in my pre-transition life. At that time, however, I did not pay much attention to it as the voices were not very disturbing. On the contrary, intense visual or auditory experiences have been part of my life ever since my childhood and, most of the time, those voices were friendly to me. I felt protected. Paradoxically, "[n]othing is closer to home than the monster: you first encounter it as a child, under the bed or in the closet", explain Henriksen, Bülow, and Kvistad (2017: 3). The authors ponder whether the symbolism of early childhood might be the reason "why the study of monsters tends to have a faint hanging-on sense of the frivolous and unacademic" (Ibid.). In reference to

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Derrida, the authors explain that the same can be said about ghosts: "both the monster and the ghost seem to fall outside the realm of 'real scholarship' and 'worthwhile subjects of study', and therefore outside the scope of academia" (Ibid.: 5). Yet, as Asa Mittman once wondered: "What is 'real scholarship?' What constitutes a worthwhile subject of study?" (Mittman, as cited in Ibid.).

In *Belief is not Experience*, cultural anthropologist Bonnie Glass-Coffin describes her experience of a "transpersonal peek behind the veil" during an all-night ceremony among Peruvian shamanic healers (2013: 119). During that life-changing experience, she was able to see and understand at once the "cosmic interdependence" (Ibid.: 118) of the co-created web of life, "as every plant, from the tallest coconut palm to the smallest blade of grass acknowledged and [honoured her] presence" (Ibid.: 117). As described by Glass-Coffin, tribal wisdom traditions and practices—the centre field of anthropological research—reveal to us how "human interaction with other-than-human intelligences impacts material conditions in fundamental ways"—"the cosmos is animated and responsive to human intentions" (Ibid.: 118). The animated universe and the relationship between "spirits and human community" is the essential foundation of the technique known as shamanic healing—"vibrant and continuing tradition in northern Peru … amply described by Peruvian and foreign authors" (Glass-Coffin, 2010: 59). Hearing voices in shamanic traditions could therefore be understood as one of the multiple ways a spirit can manifest its healing "*vista*"—it can "whisper into [shamans'] ear, … [present] scenarios like a *pantalla* or movie-screen", or as a voice directly speak through them (Glass-Coffin, 2010: 76).

It was only after I began to suffer from uncontrollable distress that the experience of hearing voices became too overwhelming for me to live with. Had the veil become

too thin? The feeling of the dissolving boundary between what I had previously been able to identify as "self" and "other" made me attempt to keep my integrity through developing various mechanisms to help me quiet the mind and maintain some peace from the overpowering sensations. As I was aware that the character of the present voices was distinctively different from my previous experience, it also became a site of discovery.

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Postmodern therapies based on a collaborative dialogical approach are known for being especially efficient as the "main intervention with" people who suffer from so-called "first-time psychosis" (Hoffman, 2006: xi). One of the best examples is perhaps the language approach "Open Dialogue", developed in Finland at Keropudas Hospital in the mid-1980s by Jaakko Seikkula and his team (Seikkula & Olson, 2003: 403). In a similar manner as, for example, collaborative and narrative therapy, the open dialogue approach "draws on [Mikhail] Bakhtin's dialogical principles … and is rooted in a Batesonian tradition" (Ibid.). Unlike other "office models" of family therapy, this approach "is a communal practice organized in social networks." It therefore allows for "new, expanded models of dialogue that can address not only the poetics of the interview room but also the larger bureaucratic politics that can constrain and deaden them" (Ibid.: 404). Together with other postmodern schools, it "is a way of resisting the experience of 'pathology'" (Ibid.: 416).

Tom Erik Arnkil, a social scientist from Helsinki University and Seikkula's collaborator, is known for the set of methods called Anticipation Dialogue developed at around the same time (Seikkula & Arnkil, 2006). The method "adds ideas from social network theory in offering a set of structured

questions that literally moves all parties into a better future" (Hoffman, 2006: xi). According to the family therapist Lynn Hoffman, the anticipation dialogue approach falls into the same category of "methods" that intend "to move the discourse from a focus on deficiencies and problems to one that [deals] with strengths and solutions." With the method called "Recalling the Future", the anticipation dialogue approach follows and expands "the Miracle Question" tool used in solution-focused therapy (Hoffman, 2006: xiii).

In solution-focused therapy, structured questions are "the *primary* communication tool, and as such they are an overarching intervention" (de Shazer et al, 2007: 4-5). The Miracle Question, as a crucial part of the "solution talk" (Berg & de Shazer, 1993: 9), is "one of the best questions ... for helping [participants] describe how they will know therapy is over and one that consistently provides useful descriptions" (de Shazer et al, 2007: 40)[18]. The emphasis of the solution-focused approach on describing preferred outcomes stems from the premise that "it makes a difference whether or not the therapist assumes that [participants] have the capacity to create meaningful descriptions of what they want their lives to look like and how they want to be in the world" (Ibid.: 39). According to Kim Insoo Berg and Scott D. Miller, solution-focused brief therapy recognizes five kinds of questions:

> (1) questions that elicit descriptions of pre-session change;
> (2) "miracle questions," that is, those that help define the [participant's] goal(s) and illuminate the hypothetical

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[18] According to Leoš Zatloukal, the origin of the Miracle Questions can be traced as "The Question" method to the work of Alfred Adler and his disciples, and also to Milton H. Erickson's innovative "crystal ball technique" (Zatloukal, 2009: 180).

solutions (de Shazer, 1988, 1991), (3) exceptions—finding questions, (4) coping questions that highlight the often overlooked but critical survival strategies that [participants] use in even the most apparently hopeless circumstances; and (5) scaling questions. (Berg & Miller, as cited in Berg & de Shazer, 1993: 9)

When exploring my experience of hearing voices in a collaborative conversation with a solution-focused therapist, it was mostly the coping questions and scaling questions that—from my perspective as the participant of the therapeutic conversation—proved to be most useful in illuminating the path forward. When asked about the survival strategies I had managed to apply so far, we discovered that I have developed a special skill of how to remain empowered when the voice in my head uttered commands I did not wish to participate in:

T: *Is there anything else you do that helps?*
A: *To lead a talk with these thoughts in my head. Sometimes I can hear them like voices. I am now learning how not to allow them to overpower me but for that I need to focus a lot. And I need to speak loud when doing it.*
T: *Can you tell me a little more about how you do it?*
A: *Let's say I hear them saying something about me or about someone I know—which is usually not very nice. And I hear them saying this in my head, out of nowhere, for no reason. As if it was a little creature which is telling me this. I call it "Monkey". Some time ago I would feel awful. I would think I must be crazy just to hear something like this but now I can get back to it and say: Why should I listen to you? And when I say it loud, it usually helps.*
T: *How does it work?*
A: *The voice somehow always knows how to make me feel*

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incompetent. So I repeat loud for myself that I can rely on myself, that I trust myself, that I trust my instincts. And this is something new that I found out that when I say it loud, it is easier for me to act upon it.

In their critical reaction to Freudian psychoanalysis, philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari look at the phenomenon of schizophrenia as a product of capitalism: "a schizo is a machine" (1983: 381). Through the lens of "the radical 'therapeutic' practice" (Roberts, 2007: 114) referred to as "schizoanalysis"—the product of "art and science [with] a revolutionary potential" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983: 379)—they unmask "the entire interplay of the desiring-machines and the repression of desire" (Ibid.: 382) within the capitalist system, seeing the repressed desire as the key:

> [I]f we put forward desire as a revolutionary agency, it is because we believe that capitalist society can endure many manifestations of interest, but not one manifestation of desire, which would be enough to make its fundamental structures explode, even at the kindergarten level. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983: 379)

The understanding of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of schizophrenia comes from its social and political—and as explained by Roberts, ontological—"determinations, from which their psychiatric application follows" (Deleuze, as cited in Roberts, 2007: 117). The reality itself is schizophrenic, because desire, around which the reality centres, "is said to be characterized by an on-going and *productive* 'dissolution' of any fixed identity or organization" in a similar way, as "schizophrenia as a psychiatric condition" analogically fragments "a person's identity" (Ibid.). The contemporary

psychonalyst Paul Verhaeghe, who studied the relationship between social change and the increasing number of people who suffer with schizophrenia, agrees that the constantly growing number of diagnosed people "says something about our environment. Apparently it has changed drastically, *and therefore so have we*" (Verhaeghe, 2014: 3). As he further argues:

> The neo-liberal organisation of our society is determining how we relate to our bodies, our partners, our colleagues, and our children—in short, to our identities. And you can't get much more disordered than that. (Ibid.: 4)

My experience with collaborative therapeutic conversations revealed that I often experienced intense discomfort in moments of time and energy control, and expectations placed by others on me to achieve. Through further exploration of what I had learnt so far, I was able to identify a remedy—something that I already had at my disposal as a resource but did not always use, or did not know yet how to use further for the benefit of my wellbeing. When asked by the solution-focused therapist what would help me move closer to what I considered to be a desired outcome of feeling more empowered and having my life more in hand, I named several resources that reinforced the need to focus on myself in contrast to giving away my time and energy:

T: *Do you think that it is possible to use some of the ways you manage the situation now in a more focused way so that you could get closer to three, or even further on the scale?*

A: *I guess if I'd focus more intentionally on them as my resources, then the negative feelings could decrease a bit. For example, if I paid more attention to keeping my daily routine, to eat when I need it, to relax when I need it, not to waste time on*

things that do not refill me back with energy. If this became a part of my daily routine like brushing teeth is, let's say like psychohygiene, and if I thought of it every day—because sometimes when I am not careful and do not do it daily, it takes its tax later in the week—that could help but I cannot plan it as planning makes it worse, that wouldn't work.

The applied skills we discovered referred to an important ability of mine to call on self-worth as an "externalized ally" in critical moments, and to resist a certain unpleasant sensation that I now associate with a "mechanism of command" (Hardt & Negri, as cited in Rai, 2004: 540-541) operating through my body in the form of extreme pressure. Based on my self-observations, this pressure that I often experienced as uncontrollable triggered a cocktail of unpleasant emotions that resulted in the effect I named anxiety at first. When asked by the consulting therapist how my "externalized ally" of self-worth worked, I offered a short narrative from the academic environment and explained how it helped me feel *worthy* in a situation of distress related to my *failure* to achieve what was expected of me:

J: Can you tell me more about the way how this self-worth operates in your life?

A: For example, I have always disliked work related quotas. I felt an oppressive push to fulfil them. This year, despite trying hard, I was not successful in achieving them as three out of four of my written papers got stuck in the review process. I felt bad at first but then I realized I cannot torture myself for not achieving results I could not control, nor did I agree to achieve them as mine in the first place. Somebody else expected that of me. Instead, I started telling myself that I was good enough for myself in every situation. This new dimension of self-worth makes me think: what if I desire something different for myself?

I can now trust myself more that I can do what I enjoy and create more space for it in my life. It used to be much harder before. I used to feel this inner oppression, a painful feeling, a result of surveillance and a push to produce that I am now becoming more ready to resist.

In the essay *Capitalism and Suffering*, Bert Olivier explains "the relationship between neoliberal capitalism and suffering in a broad sense" (2015: 1): how it touches the intellectual and scholarly work in universities and academia, with the observable "stress imposed on one by an excessive lecturing load, […] the ever-intensifying pressure to 'publish or perish'", the system rewarding "publishing in scientific journals […] which reinforce and promote the neoliberal status quo, and penalizes those, whose work appears in diverse 'alternative' journals explicitly or implicitly challenging the conventional research" and how it affects our bodies[19] (Ibid.: 2). As he further explains, through acknowledging the effect of the neoliberal regime on our bodies we can build "an increasing awareness of the ever-intensifying colonization of the body by capitalist imperatives" (Ibid.).

In the exploration of my newly developed skills to resist pressure, our collaborative conversations revealed another useful resource that I identified as an ally in my "historical account of resistance" (White & Epston, 1990: 31): a significant body response that my body used as an alarm, a survival mechanism. I described it as follows:

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[19]   In 2014, The Guardian reported results of a survey on mental health among 2500 academics, revealing that they often keep their issues "hidden from colleagues" and suffer "in silence" (Thomas, 2014 May). In 2019, the same periodical published a personal narrative by Yasha Hartberg, who shared his experience with depression and anxiety caused by excessive work pressure within academia (Hartberg, 2019 Sep).

T: *How does it work, this signal that you have mentioned?*

A: *It is a physical feeling when I get very weak and I feel a leak of energy. It's an awful feeling, I can feel it now as we are speaking. Everything is getting blurred and that is the signal that I am not feeling well, I cannot see properly anymore.*

T: *I understand that despite the fact how awful it makes you feel, it, nevertheless, is something that is helping you. Is that so?*

A: *Yes, because I know that when it is happening, I really need to do something about it. When others just tell me I should do something about it before this happens, I don't know how to do it. But here, at the state of emergency, the survival instinct kicks in and suddenly, I feel an alarm and I need to do something. When they get me squeezed and I hit the bottom, I can finally tell people that I've had enough. And I'd wish to be able to do it without suffering that much.*

The consulting therapist commented upon what she heard me saying—that despite the fact that the body response brought an awful feeling, it actually served as something useful. Something that I knew how to manage and could apply further in order to deal with the unpleasant discomfort—not in the sense of resisting it or fighting it, but more in the sense of taking care of myself, putting myself first. It was an important message that allowed me to get closer to the preferred way of dealing with the feeling of intense distress. At that moment, I was becoming aware of the great resource I had not paid attention to until now: the body and the unrecognized body intelligence, a concept used mostly among humanistic, transpersonal, and positive psychologists. As described by Rosemarie Anderson:

> The construct domain of body intelligence is currently defined as the awareness and use of bodily sensations to (a) support health and [wellbeing], (b) supply information

about environmental safety and comfort, and (c) enhance personal and spiritual development over a lifetime. Body sensations include those that originate from within the body and on the body's surface (e.g., skin, hair, and nails), as well as sensations from the body acting as a whole, responsive to the energy of others and the environment. (Anderson, 2006: 359)

Recognizing my own body as intelligent and viewing it as an external, separate—yet never fully separated—entity helped me change the way I looked at what I was going through. Before this realization, I was trying to resist all the unpleasant signals my body gave me. As my intense physical experience was the source of discomfort that I was not able to control, I did not trust my body and its own way of somatic healing[20]. My doubtful mind stood in the way. Recognizing my body as an intelligent system reaching beyond the physical 3D world made me realize the need for a certain ethics of responsibility. Responsibility in the sense of what feminist scholar Donna Haraway advocates in relation to posthuman ethics "as a question of how to respond to the response of the non[-]human other" (Henriksen, 2014: 40). According to Haraway, who criticizes the fact that the starting point for an ethics of relations and responsibility is the human subject, contemplating the ethics of responsibility becomes of importance when we consider

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[20]   In reference to somatic healing, Pete Walker explains that "some somatic repair happens automatically when we reduce our physiological stress by more efficient flashback management" (Walker, 2013: 133). "[G] rieving work of reclaiming the ability to cry self-compassionately and to express anger self-protectively" (Ibid.) could be essential in helping with the negative impact of "Constant Adrenalization"; "Chronic muscle tightness" (Armouring); "Inability to be fully present, relaxed and grounded in our bodies"; and other body-harming reactions to chronic stress (Ibid.: 132).

the etymology of the Latin word "respect": "The Latin *specere* is at the root of the things here, with its tones of 'to look' and 'to behold' … To hold in regard, to respond, to look back reciprocally, to notice, to pay attention, to have courteous regard for, to esteem" (Haraway, as cited in Henriksen, 2014: 45). Henriksen concludes that "Haraway moves away from the notion of ethical encounters as a matter of conscious, rational actions" that "can be and often are so much more than that; they are … about entanglement and interruptions" (Ibid.: 45-46) between human and non-human, as well as between spectres and human subjects. It is therefore not a human subject who creates a foundations of respect—it is the possibility and the will to look and to be looked back at (Ibid.: 45).

Realizing that I have to take care of my body as the only vessel I was invited to inhabit, as the main and intelligent source of life-force for the immaterial consciousness, invokes a deep relational sense of a non-attached yet ethical commitment to one another. Me inhabiting the body and having access to its energy is nevertheless temporary; it is limited by space and time—like everyone else, I age, I get old, and one day "I" will die. The "I" identified to what is ascribed as "my body" will not be mine anymore, nor me, nor I. As a former student of Buddhist thought, viewing my body as something external allowed me to realize not only its separateness, but also—as explained by the central Buddhist teaching on *anatman*—its being part of not-self (Williams & Tribe, 2000: 57). Seeing my body as a part of not-self means that I am unable to control it. It is not "me". As Paul Williams explains the core Buddha's teaching: "whatever the [self] is, it is something over which one has complete control and it is something which is conducive to happiness (or at least, not conducive to suffering)" (Williams & Tribe, 2000: 58). Therefore, "if something were

to be the [self], it would (i) not lead to affliction, and (ii) it would obey the person of whom it is the [self]" (Ibid.). This connection between the physical body as a separate intelligent system and its temporality enabled me to see its unrealized potential and limitations at the same time. Such realization was also a gateway to entering the mindful practice which allowed me to curiously observe the dynamics of my embodied experience in its intensity without the constant need to react.

Naming Demons, Approaching "Monkey" Mindfully

In our Western society, mindfulness is usually explained as non-judgement, moment-to-moment awareness, or "paying attention on purpose in the present moment" (Lemon, 2017: 3305). When applied in therapy, mindfulness is often practiced as "taking undistracted time to become fully aware of [our] thoughts and feelings so that [we] can have more choice in how [we] respond to them" (Walker, 2013: 102). As with many other things that capitalism changes into commodities, mindfulness programmes are nowadays increasingly implemented across corporations and other institutional settings. In reference to cultural theorist and philosopher Mark Fisher, Zack Walsh from the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies explains how "self-help practices like mindfulness serve as regulatory mechanisms around which biopower manages life processes" (Walsh, 2018: 2):

> Mindfulness techniques have likely garnered mainstream appeal, in part, because they allow people to privately manage their stress and [wellbeing] at little or no cost to state or corporate bodies, this extending biopower's reach.

The high demand for mindfulness is not only driven by the overwhelming privatization of stress, but also by the near doubling of mental distress rates since the beginning of neoliberalism. (Fisher, as cited in Walsh, 2018: 2)

As described by Walsh in reference to Foucault: "[b] iopower takes charge of life processes, regulating and managing them within the domain of value and utility" (Walsh, 2018: 1). Foucault's concept of biopower (Foucault, 1978) "exposes the structures, relations, and practices by which political subjects are constituted and deployed, along with the forces that have shaped and continue to shape modernity" (Cisney & Morar, 2016: 15). Nevertheless, while practicing "corporate mindfulness" might lead to "sublimat[ion of] strong emotions such as anger, and reduc[ing] stress [in order to] sustain the inner resources [we] need to meet increasing demands" under neoliberal governmentality (Walsh, 2018: 5), the Buddhist concept of mindfulness had a different goal.

As the expert on Indian and Tibetan Philosophy Paul Williams explains, mindfulness became well-known "through being the very first meditation practice in the *Mahasatipatthana Sutta* … perhaps because everyone's mind is at first inclined to instability" (Williams & Tribe, 2000: 83). It is therefore mostly related to mindfulness of breathing. Mindfulness is a central part of the *vipassana*[21] practice, which is translated from Pali as "to see things as they really are" (Kornfield, 2008: 3). Apart from the practice of mindfulness, the basic *vipassana* exercises focus on developing both "all-pervading loving kindness" and "all-

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[21] According to Kornfield, *vipassana* "is the most widely practiced form of meditation in southeast Asia and is central to all Buddhist traditions" (Kornfield, 2008: 3).

pervading compassion" through "gently drawing the mind back to the object when it wanders" (Williams & Tribe, 2000: 83). When I refer to mindfulness or meditation practice in the text, I always refer to all of these above practices with mindful awareness as the foundation.

In my first attempt to practice mindful awareness, I focused on trying to stay calm when suffering from severe anxiety attacks and to stop fearfully running away from them, which was my first instinctual reaction. I was slowly learning how to stop judging and viewing anxiety as my biggest enemy. With the help of my daily mindful practice, I was carefully finding my path to observing my state of mind and body-related experience. Feelings came fast as I was able to sit still, breathe calmly, and observe what was happening in my body. It often came as an unusual kind of intense pain in the middle of my upper back. Sometimes the pain slithered upon my spine to my shoulders and neck and then stayed there for days[22]. When observing my feelings and symptoms of what I actually named anxiety without exploring it first, at the time of its most unpleasant presence, I very often felt as if I was carrying an extremely heavy load on my shoulders. The load was not still. It was slowly moving, crawling upon my neck, tickling, itching, changing position and side. It even changed temperature now and then. Whenever I was determined to sit and observe its

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[22] In *The Embodiment of Emotion*, psychologists Lisa Feldman Barrett and Kristen Lindquist explain a contemporary shift in scientific paradigm for the study of emotion from "Cartesian dualism and the machine metaphor" to embodiment (Barrett & Lindquist, 2008: 238). Embodiment views of the mind "[do] not rely on the Cartesian reductionism that treats the mind and the body as separable and independent causes of emotion" (Ibid.: 246). Instead, they allow us "to question whether it is scientifically viable to reify boundaries between the mind and the body, and between what goes on inside a person's skull, and what goes on outside" (Ibid.: 254).

behaviour, I was able to identify a dynamics of various sensations.

Kornfield explains that in ancient cultures, demons were supposed to lose their power over someone when their real name was pronounced: "shamans learned that to name that which you feared was a practical way to begin to have power over it" (Kornfield, 1993: 83). As if by the act of discovery of who they really are, they lost their superpowers. Or, by the act of calling their name, they were revealed by the one who could finally see them and hence could not be controlled by them. The implication of the concept of demon in reference to my embodied—yet externalized—experience of the "Monkey" as a co-habitant of my space offers an interesting chain of thought that leads to two different ways of interpretation: Buddhist tradition had successfully implemented what we now name as externalizing technique into working with the states of the mind. It recognizes them as forces which were "traditionally personified as Mara (the God of Darkness)" (Kornfield, 1993: 84). Kornfield applies another way and names them demons, which is more in accord with the Christian tradition[23]. Recognizing and acknowledging these impermanent—yet returning—forces as demons and giving them names is a traditional way Buddhist meditators learn to work with difficulties during the meditation process, hence the practice of "naming", or "naming demons"[24]. These forces are personified in the sense

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[23]   See for example the work of Evagrius of Pontus where "the tactics of the demons that try to undermine the monastic life" are explained in detail (Brakke, 2009: 1).

[24]   Naming demons is only one of many ways to deal with the impermanent forces traditionally recognized as demons. In the synthesis of the early Christian monasticism and Jungian psychology, Anselm Grün offers an extensive description of the traditional demonology and its praxis. In the early monastic tradition, demons were understood as evil forces operating through subtle energy fields in the form of e.g. obsessive

that they can actually be heard as voices in a person's head. The demon of doubt can talk to us through its voice, which says: "You cannot do it, you are not good enough." In order to not get attached to what is viewed as impermanent, it is necessary to "see directly how things are the result of an impersonal lawlike causality and nothing more" (Williams & Tribe, 2000: 85). That is, according to the Buddhist way, the correct way of seeing things. Yet, it would not be precise if we understood such practice of "conjuration" in the sense of an attempt "to banish evil spirits" (Henriksen, 2014: 42). In reference to Derrida, Henriksen explains that "to conjure is also to call something forth since … in order to chase something away, it is necessary first to acknowledge it, to speak its name and ask for it to come so that it may be pursued" (Ibid.). Such spectral encounters are not about mere exorcism, they are not simple attempts to do away with the ugly and uncomfortable spooks once and for all just to avoid the disturbing feelings they bring to our lives. Such deeply challenging encounters "[open] up possibilities for both looking and being looked back at" which, according to Haraway, is "the very foundations of respect" (as cited in Henriksen, 2014: 45)[25].

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thoughts and imaginations (Grün, 1995: 11-12). Grün draws on the work of Evagrius when listing the recommended tactics of combating demons. Apart from mindful observation and asking "Who are you and where do you come from?" (Ibid.: 35), talking back and mocking the demon to foster one's control over the situation is recommended. Depending on the type of demonic force, other tactics could be applied such as pronouncing Biblical names (the method of Antirrhetikon, Ibid.: 38), prayer, reading the Bible, fasting, singing psalms, practicing patience and mercy, or a retreat in solitude (Ibid.: 38-47).

[25] Through referring to Line Henriksen's work, I consciously point to the connection between the practice of "naming demons" and the Mad / Queer / Crip and postmodern feminist fields of research: they all share the emphasis on reclaiming the words that were used against certain subjects as an act of empowerment. As explained by Carrie Sandahl,

A different perspective is offered from a critical point of view of the operations of power and the capitalist work-discipline. In reference to Deleuze, May and McWhorter argue that "[w]e were once disciplined beings; we are now becoming controlled beings" (May & McWhorter, 2016: 725). My intense distress and discomfort—now externalized as the "Monkey", a separate yet not fully separated entity—offers a reading as of a manifestation of a haunting force with so-called "demonic" attributes—"the reality of power as it subjugates us" and as it "teaches us to desire our own repression" (Seem, 1983: xx). Something that is experienced as overpowering, omnipresent pressure, and mind control on one hand, and on the other, an aspect of fascism that resides "in our heads and in our everyday [behaviour], the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us" (Foucault, 1983: xiii). Something ghostly, something of uncertain ontology (Henrikesen et al, 2017: 6) that is "in us all" (Foucault, 1983: xiii) yet is hard to locate, for "the mechanisms of power always have a way of covering their tracks" (Cisney & Morar, 2016: 15).

Interestingly, both of these perspectives aim at the concept of unceasing desire as an impermanent force. The central topic of Buddhism lies in the discourse known in Pali as the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* (The Discourse Setting in Motion the Wheel of Dharma). It is mostly known as the

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"queers and crips … appropriate and rearticulate labels that the mainstream once used to silence or humiliate them and that the liberal factions of their subcultures would like to supress" (Sandahl, 2003: 36). Through borrowing the words of the poet Eli Clare, Sandahl quotes that "Queer and Cripple are cousins: words to shock, words to infuse with pride and self-love, words to resist internalized hatred, words to help forge a politics" (Ibid.). By the act of naming things that were previously othered or invisibilized, by pronouncing them mindfully, they are depathologized and called into existence.

Buddha's teaching on four Noble Truths[26]. In a nutshell, the Buddha states "that absolutely everything pertaining to an unenlightened individual comes under *dukkha*" (Williams & Tribe, 2000: 42). The concept of *dukkha*, often translated as suffering, must be understood in a much broader sense: as suffering caused by "radical unremitting impermanence" as "*the* essential ontological dimension of our unenlightened state" (Ibid.) The origin of our *dukkha*—which also is a consequence of our conditioning as beings living in a conditioned world—is our thirst, our craving, such as craving for existence or craving for non-existence, which produces "rebirth, and redeath" (Ibid.: 47). The way to liberation "lies in cutting forever all false assertion of [self], through knowing (gnosis) that each candidate for [self] is really not [self] at all", through "mindfulness of sensory experience", through "coming to see things in the deepest possible manner the way they really are" (Ibid.).

Through the lens of shizoanalysis—Deleuze's and Guattari's post-structuralist critique of Freudian psychoanalysis—we see that "[e]verything revolves around desiring-machines and the production of desire" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983: 380). However, as Deleuze explains in *Dialogues II* with Claire Parnet, the key concept of desire in the schizoanalyst sense must be understood in terms of Nietzsche's notion of "Will to Power" (Deleuze & Parnet, 2002: 91). According to Roberts, if we read the concept of "desire" in this way, it refers to "an 'unconscious' and 'impersonal' 'sea of forces flowing and rushing together, eternally changing, eternally flooding back'" (Nietzsche, as

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[26]   The four Noble Truths is not the only translation possible and, as pointed out by K. R. Norman, this one is "the *least* important in their understanding". Norman therefore offers his own translation: "the truth[s] of the noble one (the Buddha)" (as cited in Williams & Tribe, 2000: 41).

cited in Roberts, 2007: 116). As stems out from the discussion on the impact of Buddhism on Nietzsche's philosophy (Welbon, as cited in Elman, 1983: 673), I engage with the thinking of Benjamin A. Elman that "Buddhism lies at the [centre] of any attempt to interpret 'what Nietzsche means'" (Elman, 1983: 672).

Via this extremely simplified parallel, I am pointing towards the relevance of these approaches that are both offered as revolutionary in the context of their time, and as a remedy to the dis-ease of zeitgeist. Despite the centuries that separate them, they both could be considered timeless and "radical[ly] 'therapeutic'" (Roberts, 2007: 114). Probably never in the history of Western society has humankind suffered from the consequences of the manipulation of desire more than it is now, in the times of what Karl Marx described as abstraction of value (as cited in Pfeifer, 2017: 256-257). In times when, as explained by Geoff Pfeifer in reference to Alfred Sohn-Rethel, human consciousness is determined by the practice of "the production of the real-abstraction of exchange-value which, under capitalism comes to dominate the value form itself" (Pfeifer, 2017: 257-258). Never has it been more important for us to be able to develop skills to see beyond the veil, to dismantle the "desiring machine", to unmask the demonic omnipresent pressure of the system we are born into.

Through the lens of mindful schizoanalysis we can observe the *dis-ease* of our present times. In the words of Henry Miller: "Everybody is a neurotic, down to the last man and woman" (Miller as cited in Seem, 1983: xxi). As Mark Seem argues in the introduction to Deleuze's and Guattari's *Anti-Oeidipus* with the words of Ivan Illich: "The ultimate answer to neurotic dependencies on professionals is *mutual self-care*" (Seem, 1983: xxii). In reference to R. D. Laing's *Politics of Experience* he argues:

[T]here is nothing pathological about ego-loss, Laing adds; quite the contrary. Ego-loss is the experience of all mankind, "of the primal man, of Adam and perhaps even [a journey] further into the beings of animals, vegetables and minerals." No age, Laing concludes, has so lost touch with this healing process as has ours. (Seem, 1983: xxii)

These seemingly different approaches have both pointed out a direction on my own healing journey. Not in the sense of healing from what would be considered "ill" from the perspective of psychiatric diagnostics, but in healing from *the need* to be recognized as "sane" by the normative system, as well as healing from the fear of "normalizing judgement" (White & Epston, 1990: 31) that operates within the performance of the sanity / insanity binary of contemporary psychiatric practice and "renders abject" (LeFrançois & Diamond, 2014: 47). The practice of naming demons in the context of our systemic suffering offers a way to externalize, explore, and reclaim what we—people with a diagnosis—are forced to accept through the process of pathologization as an inherent devaluating aspect of our madness, abnormality, or monstrosity (Rai, 2004; LeFrançois & Diamond, 2014; Henriksen et al, 2017). Yet what can these deeply feared mad and monstrous aspects of our not-selves actually "tell us about the fears and anxieties of [the] contemporary [world]" we all together embody (Henriksen et al, 2017: 4)?

According to Line Henriksen, Morten H. Bülow, and Erika Kvistad, what is othered and viewed as evil, shameful, or "monstrous in a specific, historical context" simply "shows the concerns and anxieties of that context" (Henriksen et al, 2017: 4). "Dealing with monsters and the monstrous … involves dealing with the fears and frailty of the embodied self" (Ibid.: 7). It is the ghost, the monster, and

other liminal beings, therefore, who "point to notions about what it means *to be* human" (Ibid.: 6, italics mine):

> The human subject can no longer be seen as autonomous, independent and at the [centre] of the world, but rather as always already part of that world without clear boundaries. (Henriksen et al, 2017: 6)

A mindful approach to master our sensory experience—in order to see through—is what Haraway understands as the "importance of 'staying with the trouble'" (as cited in Hellstrand et al, 2018: 157); or, similarly, what Henriksen argues for in reference to Derrida as "staying *with* the ghosts" (2016: 27). It is a way to unmask those feared aspects of actually *being* human that haunt us, that we do not want to acknowledge as such. It is a way to explore how it is often us who "monster" or "ghost" others for the same reason. For as Henriksen, Bülow, and Kvistad explain in reference to Kristeva, "what is deemed a monster is inescapably tied up with the position from which it is (de)valued and judged" (Henriksen et al, 2017: 6). What is it that others do not want to see, to pay respect to in us? What is it that we do not want to look at, to pay attention to in others?

The mindful approach is also a way to discover where our desire, our thirst, our craving for life have been repressed. Repressing desire is not the way to eliminate desire. Craving, viewed by the Buddhist, "is a matter of the mind, and therefore [craving] is eliminated not by fierce asceticism, torturing the body, but by mental transformation through meditation. … Liberation is all about the mind" (Williams & Tribe, 2000: 45). Our craving, in any form, cannot be repressed; it can, however, be explored through a mindful approach. The schizoanalysts view is that it is the very act of repression that entraps the desire: "If desire is

repressed, this is not because it is desire for the mother and for the death of the father; on the contrary, desire becomes that only because it is repressed, it takes on that mask only under the reign of the repression that models the mask for it and plasters it on its face" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983: 118). The mindful practice of naming demons—be it literal practice or metaphorical exercise—is a way to unmask our repressed desires and explore them through mindful sensory observation and embodied inquiry.

My experience of monstrous madness, when explored through a mindful approach, was the opportunity to observe the voices in my head from a much closer proximity. They were first difficult to distinguish, but with some practice I was able to hear them quite clearly—they were plural and had different tones, some of them were rather deep, some of them were very high and loud. Many times during my mindful practice I was able to observe the voices arguing in my head. Sometimes they were speaking as if among themselves, sometimes they were speaking to me directly. When the mindful practice became my daily routine, I was becoming aware of the fact of how futile my original aim of trying to eliminate the unpleasant feeling was. What I attempted to externalize as demonic "Monkey" in order to acknowledge its uncertain existence now "functions as an *other*—as something which [I] attempt[ed] to exclude or distance from the norm" (Henriksen et al, 2017: 6). It cannot, however, be completely externalized from me as we share the same embodied space: through "our" body we communicate, through "our" body we get to know and pay respect to each other. The ontology of us *all* is uncertain. I can only continue to explore further, following other monster theorists, what this demon and these voices "might be able to teach [me] about … [me and my] anxieties, fears, desires, difference and scholarship" (Ibid.).

CHAPTER TWO

We can only know the world through our experience; we cannot have direct knowledge of it. We continually interpret our experiences and interpret our interpretations. And, as such, what we create (e.g., knowledge) is fluid, continually evolving, shifting, broadening, and changing. Thus, there is no finality to our knowledge—our meanings, understandings, or realities.

Harlene Anderson (2007: 9)

Experiencing Distress

The first time I realized there was something happening with me that would not go away easily was in 2017, April 14th. I remember the day as if it was yesterday. The night, actually, because I spent the whole of it wide awake, lying on the sofa, shaking and trembling, with cold sweat on my skin and an uncomfortable pain in my abdomen. It was the first time I realized I was experiencing unpleasant feelings for so long without an evident trigger. What was most striking was not the fact that I was experiencing these symptoms, as it definitely was not the first time. As a gender non-conforming person, I have always felt very insecure. However, I was mostly used to experiencing these feelings in more stressful environments such as in work, institutions, the doctor's office, public transport, airports, or streets and areas full of people. I rarely felt this way when I was at home, in what I thought of as of a safe space.

The next day I was supposed to go on a short holiday to the sea. I love the sea. The trip was a gift from my friends, ex-colleagues from the job I had recently left. We were planning to go together in a rented car, enjoying the free days of Easter holidays. It was supposed to be fun. The obvious incongruence between these two contexts—having an extremely anxious night before such a journey—was so alarming that it caught my attention. It is possible that I had had many nights like this before and had never paid much attention to it, as the potential cause was somehow evident. The mismatch of what I was experiencing in the

context of what I usually consider to be pleasant made me realize that there was something happening in my body and mind that was hard to control. I was fortunate enough to be surrounded by trustworthy friends, so despite my discomfort that continued throughout the weekend, I was able to open up and share my worries with them. First of all, I felt the need to open up as I was coming to the conclusion that the weekend would probably not go the way we had planned. This was the first time I recalled speaking openly about suffering from something that I could not explain using a better term than anxiety. I remembered looking for words, as I had probably never verbally articulated this experience before. Now, after a few years, I have realized that this complex experience actually harboured many more feelings that would be difficult for me to track down at that time. I was not used to observing what was happening in my body, let alone naming it[27]. I was too scared to even allow myself to feel, resistant to the very idea of *being* with it. Most of all, I wished desperately for these feelings to go away and I hoped that in the next few months this would all be over, once I got settled into my new work environment. It, of course, was not over.

In the months that followed I was going through hell. Nights like these were much more frequent. I already kept a journal at that time and wrote daily memos which now, after almost three years, reveal my hardships. One entry is from August 15th 2017:

> *Another of "those" nights when something came unexpectedly, resulting in a profound feeling of self-doubt and anxiety. I could not sleep last night. Sweating, I was holding a pillow*

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27   See Chapter One for more details on the naming practice of the *vipassana* tradition.

tight to my chest. I was struggling with a strange mixture of guilt, anxiety, insecurity and lack of boundaries. I tried to open myself to it but could not stand the pain nor fall asleep. I felt a concentrated pain in my chest area while I desperately tried not to fight it and to remain open to that experience. It was extremely hard.

During the summer of 2017, I was experiencing intense stress almost daily and without any evidence of a potential trigger. Days at the weekend were not distinguishable from workdays. My hormonal levels increased and my endocrinologist started to question whether I was alright. Her first reaction was that I must have been supplementing myself with sport weight and muscle gainer as is usually the case, she said, with other trans men when their testosterone level jumps too high during the first phase of hormonal therapy. I was not aware of anything like that and such an indirect accusation made me feel uneasy. I am not really a gym fan, so, obviously, I rejected that possibility as an explanation. I confided in her and shared my worries about the increased level of stress in my life, but for all of the reasons explained before I did not mention the term anxiety. As already described in the previous chapter, for a trans person undergoing hormonal therapy disclosing such a fact could lead to undesirable consequences. The endocrinologist decided to monitor my levels regularly and we agreed on prolonging the interval between my testosterone doses to the maximum to see if that could help.

After nine months, I decided to quit my new job because of the extreme amount of stress it brought to my life and agreed to tighten my budget, as the only income I was left with was my post-doc scholarship. It was hard for me to go down to 50% of what I was used to earning, but my physical and mental wellbeing became a priority. In hindsight, I must

admit it was a reasonable decision. I, however, did not see it that way immediately, and my feelings of insecurity increased due to the additional worry of not having enough resources. I expected my stress to decrease somewhat with less work and more time for myself but, surprisingly, it did not. I realized that there must have been something bigger happening—in the background of my life—that the monitoring systems and the doctors "trained in the mechanical vision" (Jones, 2015: 22) could not see.

The Language of the Stars

In *The Soul Speaks*, psychotherapist and astrologer Mark Jones describes astrology as the "'music of the spheres' in which the endless combinations of notes (archetypes) express an ever more intricate portrait of the particular circumstances of an individual's life" (Jones, 2015: 5). He also explains that the value of astrology, as well as of psychotherapy, resides in its capacity "to offer a context that gives potential meaning to human suffering, or at the very least, allows for the existence of that suffering— without being in a hurry to make it disappear (Ibid.: 22). Regarding the meaning of the term *astrology*, it can be understood as "the 'word' (*logos*) or 'language' of the stars" (Willis & Curry, 2004: 1). As social anthropologist Roy Willis and social historian Patrick Curry explain in the introduction to *Astrology, Science and Culture*, in the time of reductive materialism that favours quantification and digital measurement over quality and individual sensory experience, astrology is often "contrasted, as a pathetic remnant of primitive superstition, with the academically respectable science of astronomy", the "measurement of the stars" (Ibid.). However, according to Willis and Curry

and their recent historical study, astrology is "a stellar language of apparently immemorial antiquity; a mode of communication that is part of our common heritage as human beings" (Ibid.). The astrological practice as we now know it—of studying the sky as a source of meaning and guidance—is believed to have been born 4000 years ago in ancient Mesopotamia. It has been practiced throughout history as "an integral dimension of human experience" and "an enormous resource for human self-understanding" which contemporary "scientism—essentially, science as a rationalist cult" (Ibid.: 3) condemns while overlooking the fact that science is in fact "attended by as many mysteries and as much ultimate uncertainty as astrology" (Ibid.: 12).

Having practiced astrology for longer than twenty years now, I have used it as a technique of interpretation many times in order to help myself and others find meaning in life. During the most difficult times of experiencing severe anxiety attacks, I was steeped in studying my natal and transit charts, looking for something that could possibly explain the way I felt. My interpretive skills in the domain of evolutionary astrology played an important role in the process of reauthoring the narrative and making it my own (White & Epston, 1990: 13), one that would help me free myself from the limiting and pathologizing categories of the normative language of contemporary psychiatry. Elsewhere (Wiesner, 2020) I discuss the use of evolutionary astrology in reference to reflexivity, the most important tool of an autoethnographer. In this book, astrology is explained as a symbolic system, a means of interpretation that I use in order to create an alternative story. I am, therefore, emphasizing its significance primarily in the meaning-making process.

For Willis and Curry, "astrology is best understood as a divinatory technique: a dialogue with the divine in

a postmodern, post-Christian, and newly reanimated, universe" (Willis & Curry, 2004: 1). I personally prefer practicing astrology as a symbolic language. The keyword is the term *language*. My understanding of language is based on postmodern philosophical grounds (Wittgenstein, 1953; Rorty, 1979). My therapeutic practice, where I apply my understanding of language in the most tangible way, has been highly influenced by the work of Harlene Anderson, an American therapist who is considered to be the founder of collaborative therapy[28]. Collaborative therapy was built on the foundation of the postmodern ideological critique "of the relevance and consequences of foundational knowledge, metanarratives, and privileged discourses, including their certainty and power for our everyday lives" (Anderson, 2007: 8). Together with Anderson, I understand language or "any means by which we communicate or express ourselves or respond to others—spoken and unspoken"— as "the primary vehicle through which we construct and make sense of our world" (Ibid.: 9). This is also the way I apply my understanding of language in my therapeutic practice. Harlene Anderson refers to Richard Rorty when pointing out that "language does not mirror the truth", and to Ludwig Wittgenstein when arguing that "language is not an outward description of an internal process and does not describe accurately what actually happens" (Ibid.). As she further explains:

> More exactly, language allows a description and attribution of meaning to what happens. Language gains its meaning and its value through its use: the meaning of a word, for

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[28] The postmodern approach of collaborative therapy that is closely focused on language and knowledge grew out of "contemporary hermeneutics, dialogue, and social construction" (Anderson, 2007: 7).

instance, is in its use. We are always in the process of trying to understand and search for meaning. The process and the search itself create meaning. Language in this perspective is the vehicle of the process and search through which we try to understand and create meaning—knowledge about our world and ourselves. (Anderson, 2007: 9)

In this sense, astrology, namely its evolutionary paradigm which is unique in itself, is a symbolic system that could be understood and used in the same way as the (sign) language we are used to be speaking, writing, and thinking with. To someone who sees meaning through the symbols and its infinite combinations, it allows the meaning to be attributed to what happens. Mark Jones explains: "there are only twelve core archetypes in the zodiac which play out through endless variations to create an inexhaustible set of possible meanings or applications[29] (Jones, 2015: 25). According to Anderson, language does not uncover or reveal some absolute meaning of what is actually happening. It is a process that *creates* the meaning at the same time of *searching for* the meaning. As Anderson also points out, the language we use and understand "limits and shapes our thoughts and our expressions" (Anderson, 2007: 9). In this sense, the way we use language limits the way we think and express ourselves. The problem is not, however, in the language but in the limited ways of our thinking process and our ways of expressing what we think.

In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, philosopher and ecologist David Abram closely explains Merleau-Ponty's view of language "as a bodily phenomenon", one that "accrues to *all* expressive bodies, not just to the human" (Abram, 1997: 55). As he further describes:

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[29]   See Chart 1: The Astrological Sign-House System.

> It is by a complementary shift of attention that one may suddenly come to hear the familiar song of a blackbird or a thrush in a surprisingly new manner-not just as a pleasant melody repeated mechanically, as on a tape player in the background, but as active, meaningful speech. Suddenly, subtle variations in the tone and rhythm of that whistling phrase seem laden with expressive intention, and the two birds singing to each other across the field appear for the first time as attentive, conscious beings, earnestly engaged in the same world that we ourselves engage, yet from an astonishingly different angle and perspective. (Abram, 1997: 56)

For Abram, this "renewed experience of language" cannot be restricted solely to human or animals: "[t]o the sensing body *all* phenomena are animate, actively soliciting the participation of our senses" (Ibid.). As described by transpersonal psychologist Rosemarie Anderson, "*[o]ur bodies are a web, a delicate filament of senses coupled to the world.* Into the world we laugh, cry, and sing, and the world calls back to us in the sounds of nature and other creatures. We touch and are touched by air" (Anderson, 2001: 95). As she further explains, the process of awakening to a full-bodied experience of language makes one wonder:

> How ridiculous to think the world is silent and voiceless because it hasn't got primate vocal chords. I need only slow down and listen—and Wow! the world starts to reach out to me, bending to my knowing as I yield gently to its whispers. (Anderson, 2001: 95)

Anderson, who developed a technique of embodied writing, explains that the body is "a field of resonance" (Ibid.: 96) which is "*utterly embedded in the world*" (Ibid.: 94-

95). Similarly, Abram describes that "at the most primordial level of sensuous, bodily experience, we find ourselves in an expressive, gesturing landscape, in a world that *speaks*" (Abram, 1997: 56):

> If language is not a purely mental phenomenon but a sensuous, bodily activity born of carnal reciprocity and participation, then our discourse has surely been influenced by many gestures, sounds, and rhythms besides those of our single species. Indeed, if human language arises from the perceptual interplay between the body and the world, then this language "belongs" to the animate landscape as much as it "belongs" to ourselves. (Abram, 1997: 56)

If we agree with Abram that language is "a bodily phenomenon" (Ibid.: 55), then the movement of celestial *bodies* could similarly be studied not only through their symbolic meanings but can also be experienced directly through *our bodies that speak* with everything around through a "field of resonance" (Anderson, 2001: 96). The only thing we need to know is to learn how to listen and express ourselves in more embodied ways.

Evolutionary Astrology as an Interpretive Method

In a blog post for Disability Justice Network of Ontario, Jody Chan interviews the Indigenous Plains Cree / Scots queer artist Thirza Cuthand on the topic of madness and disability that shows up in her work. The artist explains how her new art is inspired by a medicine bundle hold by her family. It operates "as a healing force which seems to come when needed" (Chan, 2019 Dec):

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[I]t's been this sort of healing energy that I think has helped our family survive some really difficult times, mostly relating to colonization. I think for Indigenous people, mental health crises are really indicative of the sickness of living with oppression. There aren't any safe spaces for us, except maybe when we are in ceremony with each other. Even in hospitals I've experienced racism directed towards me from not only patients but also staff. So I believe in my family's spiritual practices. I don't really care if the medical world thinks that is magical thinking, I think there is magic in the world. (Chan, 2019 Dec)

As explained by a collective of integrative Cancer therapists, "Indigenous people tend to view health from a holistic perspective that incorporates physical, cultural and spiritual wellbeing and this underpins their care-seeking behaviors" (Gall et al, 2018: 569). The use of traditional medicine, somatic healing practice, "reconnection to land, spiritual, and ancestral roots," and offering "spiritual and social support that is equally as important as the botanically based herbal remedies" (Ibid.) is now known to be integrated with conventional treatments for its perceived efficacy and benefits in the matters of belief, healing, and protection (Ibid.: 572). The holistic approach to health and wellbeing and the popularity of complementary and alternative medicine have been on the rise, with the prediction that "it will increase further" (Ernst, 2002: 90). As E. Ernst further explains, one of the reasons is "a deeply felt criticism of mainstream medicine" and the fact that the "conventional interventions, including immunisation, are associated with the potential to do more harm than good" (Ibid.).

Interestingly, Western biomedicine—seen for a long time as the only scientific way to treat illnesses under the impact of the Age of Enlightenment—nowadays has started to

incorporate in institutional settings a rich body of knowledge based on Indigenous health care practices. The development of mixed hospitals in Canada and New Zealand that consider "Indigenous eco-spiritual and holistic worldviews" (Wilson & Barton, 2012: 2317) gives Indigenous practices the important validation they deserve. Similarly, such approaches point towards the possibility of accepting the two separate practices not as opposite but as complementary. A similar context is revealed when we contemplate the benefit of applying the knowledge of evolutionary astrology practice within academia. As discussed elsewhere (Wiesner, 2020), the symbolic language of evolutionary astrology is a beneficial reflexive tool for (auto)ethnographic practice as it offers a way to reflect personal and collective events from an unattached, timeless distance. In this chapter, I argue that the seemingly controversial hermeneutics of non-Western symbolic and embodied practices applied in a contextual synthesis with Western theories of psychology and psychotherapy clearly reveal the paradigms as not being oppositional. As I will explain further in the text, they can be applied in a complementary way, sharpening the lens and broadening the scope of the resources available for further contextualizing alternative narratives.

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Just like Thirza Cuthand, I experience the world as magic. In close proximity to the elements of Mother Nature, swept away by a speechless awe, I feel energized and deeply cared for. In my meditative practice, overwhelmed with the indescribable vastness of the Universe within and without, boundaries of what was identified as "I" dissolve. For the past twenty years, energy healing and alternative medicine together with the intuitive skills of astrology interpretation

and tarot readings have been practiced in our family as lay hermeneutics, the art of understanding and meaning making. In the safe space of intimate bonds, far from the clinical eye of supervising authorities and their DSM manuals, we intuit and interpret narratives of our everyday experience, ones that would probably be icily assessed by the normative discourse as ill and abnormal.

In my childhood, my highly intuitive mother many times surprised herself with the things she "all of a sudden" seemed to know after waking up from a dream, mostly related to precise dates of births and deaths in our family. I, her non-binary child, have always seemed to be extremely sensitive to environments, as if I saw omnipresent eyes of the animated world watching me. Even as a kid, I often had vivid sensory experiences such as hearing voices and seeing bright colours where others did not, or identifying changes of energies in spaces and practicing ways of cleansing them. Growing up beside my brother, who often suffered from what psychiatrists classified as severe hallucinations, I frequently turned to my interpretive skills of reading our natal and transit charts in order to seek and make alternative sense of what was happening. I started to learn and practice my intuitive reading skills in my early adolescence. Soon after, they became an inseparable part of my life and I have often turned to them, also as a lost researcher in the field, as to a compass in a foggy weather.

During the summer of 2017, when the distressing energies arrived in their most intense raw power and my endocrinologist decided to closely monitor me, I was looking for a non-normative explanation that would not be pathologizing, one that would offer an alternative way of seeing what I was going through. It was quite surprising to find out that I was under an intense transit that I had completely overlooked. For at least a year, I was in

a transiting effect of the planet Uranus in Aries that soon after passing over my natal Mercury created a loose square to my natal Mars in Cancer in the sixth house. During the time I checked the aspect, it was about to culminate as exact. From an astrological perspective, the sixth house could be interpreted as body and health. As a dynamic aspect, the square is considered to bring extremely difficult clashes of energies—it is almost impossible to create an accord between them. Thus, they usually manifest as a conflict of energies until something is purged out of the system.

The planet Uranus correlates with trauma in general. It is often explained as the planet of sudden surprises, breakthroughs, and unexpected revelations but also as memories stored in the individual unconscious. Given that the evolutionary astrology paradigm originated in India through the teaching of the well-known spiritual teacher Paramahansa Yogananda[30], reincarnation and working with karmic axes is the core principle of the interpretation of the person's natal chart. Uranus, therefore, is supposed to correlate with anything that our consciousness had lived through but does not (usually) have a direct access to in this life. All memories are believed to be stored in our limbic system—the area of the brain well-known to shamans— which could be seen as our genetic memory (Green, 2011: 173).

This interpretation is in accordance with contemporary cognitive-behavioural research. Compassion-focused therapy describes how a part of our limbic system—the amygdala—is the place where our "trauma memory"

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[30] Indian yogi and guru Mukunda Lal Ghosh (1893-1952), better known as Paramahansa Yogananda, was a founder of Self-Realization Fellowship, which introduced the teaching of meditation and Kriya Yoga to the Western world.

is stored. This trauma "body-focused" memory, which basically "is a memory that is very much in the body", is responsible for the fact that "[d]uring flashbacks our brains 'trick' us into thinking that we are reliving the traumatic event. Our memories feel 'real' as if we are going through the same things again" (Lee & James, 2011: 138). Compassion-focused therapists Deborah Lee and Sophie James also explain why things that remain unresolved such as traumatic experience or even fear from our deep past sometimes unexpectedly "pop into our minds" (Ibid.: 156). This way our brain "keep[s] checking that [we] are safe because [we] appear to be ignoring the threat" by not resolving it (Ibid: 157). Memories from the distant past are triggered in our body-focused memory and brought to awareness when they need to be released. From the neurological perspective, this is rather a random thing, or let's say it depends on the signal from the part of our brain which is responsible for keeping us safe.

From the perspective of evolutionary astrology, our brain reacts to an evolutionary trigger when the consciousness needs to experience a transformative shift on its way to deconditioning and liberation, which is considered to be the evolutionary goal of the human life. These shifts happen either through transiting external—transpersonal—planets such as Pluto, Neptune, and Uranus to our natal planets, or through transiting planets to our natal transpersonal planets. In the symbolic language of astrology, the outer planets in one's chart represent humanity as a collective, something "literally beyond (trans) the personal" (Jones, 2015: 25). From that point of view, as explained by Jones, "history is on one level an experiential representation of the collective conscious and unconscious of humanity" (Ibid.):

What Jung perceived in the deepest layer of the psyche was a repository of all the archetypes and forms of human experience. From this perspective, history is the collective unconscious of humanity itself playing out in space and time as events on the world stage. (Jones, 2015: 24)

From the perspective of evolutionary astrology, Pluto is always viewed as the central element of interpretation. It correlates with the generational, transformative, evolutionary aspect of ourselves as immaterial consciousness having a human experience[31]. At the time of the overlooked Uranus transit, transiting Pluto in Capricorn was approaching the twelfth house of my chart while also creating a passing square to my natal Venus, as well as an approaching square to my natal Mercury in Aries. From the perspective of the symbolic archetypes, I was undergoing a heavily squared[32] period of time that I experienced as an intense uncontrollable pressure (Pluto in the twelfth house) in my own body (sixth house in Cancer) and mind, in relation to mental processes and patterns of thinking (Mercury), and values such as self-validation and self-worth (Venus in the second house). The core teaching of evolutionary paradigm is that our life is in constant evolution, meaning that we are constantly being

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[31] Evolutionary astrology, developed by Jeffrey Wolf Green, works with the concept of the soul, which is represented by the position of natal Pluto in the person's chart. The soul—Pluto—as a central element of a chart interpretation could also be explained using a similar concept of the consciousness. As a former student of Buddhist thought, I prefer using the latter term. According to Williams, the Buddha never denied the existence of the soul. However, the discussion on its existence never seemed to be very relevant to the central element of his teaching of things as not-self (*anatman*, Williams & Tribe, 2000: 56-57): "'Consciousness' is no more [self] than anything else" (Ibid.: 63). Despite this, as he further explains, "traditional Buddhism is completely committed to some sense of life after death" or reincarnation (Ibid.: 56).

[32] See Chart 2: The Cardinal-Cross.

born anew as our past identifications pass. This way, we undergo a transformative process, a profound change, and metamorphosis. These are the most frequent concepts the paradigm works with, as the ultimate goal of human life is interpreted as a necessary evolution on the journey to deconditioning.

The planets and other celestial bodies astrology works with are also interestingly interpreted from the perspective of the human body. From this point of view, astrology is a perfect tool for creating an alternative analysis of our health condition. What psychiatry often labels as pathologic or abnormal is usually the consequence of the roots that the modern discipline is not able to identify or see. However, non-Western systems of ancient medicine such as Traditional Chinese Medicine or Ayurveda are able to explain the health condition of a human body in a more holistic context that does not exclude the consciousness and sees it, on the contrary, as an essential part of the whole. The Indian-born evolutionary astrology, therefore, aligns well with the Ayurvedic system and understands the body to be energized by systems of energetic centres, Chakras. Nevertheless, in *Medical Astrology: Anatomy, Physiology and the Chakra System*, Jeffrey Wolf Green recommends combining what he names the "traditional Western system" of anatomy and physiology with the "Eastern" Chakra system. As explained by Green, the combination of both systems of knowledge gives us "a total system that … allows for a very accurate diagnosis of what's going on in any particular physical body" (Green, 2011: 166).

Moreover, evolutionary astrology interprets the human body as an energetic system in which the impact of celestial bodies is reflected in particular body parts. In the same way as in reflexive therapy, for instance, we can relate organs of the human body to particular planets. For example,

the planet "Mars directly correlates with anything acidic" and co-rules the adrenal glands, together with the planet Venus (Green, 2011: 169). As further described by Green, Mars is responsible for regulating the levels of the hormone adrenaline in the human body. The adrenal glands are placed on either side of the spine and are regulated through the parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous system. Whenever we experience stress in our lives, these glands are affected:

> The parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous systems are directly linked to hypothalamus, which is ruled by Uranus. Uranus also rules the parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous systems themselves. The hypothalamus emits chemical messages, specifically to the primary brain. The primary brain is correlated to Mars, the Moon, and Pluto and it regulates the entire instinctual function of [our] body [such as] breathing. (Green, 2011: 169)

Through the lens of evolutionary astrology, the interpretation of the difficult Uranus-Mars square aspect emerges as very clear: it was possible for me to be experiencing intense raw energies during the transit period which in total would take about two and a half years (due to the retrograding character of Uranus movement). In the summer of 2017, I was in the initial year of the transit and from this point of view, it was not very surprising that I could feel the energies building up. Seeing it from the evolutionary astrology perspective, the immediate effect of the Uranus-Mars transiting square could be explained in even greater detail:

> When stressful conditions occur, what also happens via the mechanism of the hypothalamus and the primary brain,

which have an interpretive function, is that the primary brain instinctually causes the secretion of lactic acids, Mars, into the bloodstream. When the lactic acid builds up, it creates muscular inflammation, Mars, in the lower back which then clamps down on the adrenals. When the adrenals are clamped down upon, it disrupts the balance of not only progesterone, estrogen, adrenaline and cortisone in women, but also the balance of … testosterone in men. (Green, 2011: 169-170)

From this point of view, it was possible to say that the increased hormonal levels I was experiencing were the result of my body being triggered by conflicting energies, or that my body reacted to the circumstances of my life with heightened stress which, in consequence, led to increased hormonal levels. In both cases, my increased hormonal levels would be the result of my lived embodied reality. There was, therefore, no need to directly correlate the increased hormonal levels with the doses of testosterone that I had already been using for two years without any previous issues. On the contrary, from this perspective, it is possible to see the increased testosterone level as a direct consequence of the intense stress and muscular inflammation that had an effect on the adrenals; hence the direct impact on the increased hormonal levels. Shouldn't all these alternative explanations be considered as relevant? They all make perfect sense, perhaps even more so than that which any of the limited and narrow-minded normative categories of the modern disciplines could offer.

It was also possible to say that the increased hormonal levels were a direct consequence of heightened stress in my life, which could have been triggered by the profound metamorphosis my body—and my consciousness—was going through during the first few years of my transition. As

I explained elsewhere (Wiesner, 2017; Wiesner, 2018), gender transition is a complex process with no clear beginning and no clear end. The experience of it is highly subjective and dependent on many aspects of the lived individual context. Also, many trans people often experience "extreme levels of distress before gaining access" to hormonal treatment (Pilling, 2014: 115), as the medical process is often controlled by supervising psychiatrists, sexologists, geneticists, and other experts who have the power to either recommend or stop an individual from transitioning based on very vague and "gender-biased" criteria (Menzies et al, 2013: 5). Thus, the distress that follows after entering hormonal therapy could, hypothetically, be an aspect of necessary somatic healing—a self-healing process that according to Pete Walker serves as an automatic "repair" once "we reduce our physiological stress by more efficient flashback management" (Walker, 2013: 133).

Either way, none of these interpretations pointed to a direct causality between my experience and anxiety disorder (or any other mental disorder). If I was experiencing symptoms of anxiety, they were perfectly understandable as *passing* and *impermanent*, based on these facts and interpretations. I was, however, unsure what would my endocrinologist do if I told her the way I created an alternative meaning for what was happening to me. If I shared with her that I expected these issues to diminish once the intense Uranus-Mars transit was over, she would probably stare at me for a while or begin to laugh.

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In *Psychiatry Disrupted*, Bonnie Burstow and Brenda A. LeFrançois argue that "[t]he history of psychiatry is the history of a profession that ruthlessly drove out all of its

competitors—the women healers, the astrologers, ultimately even the psychoanalysts—and completely medicalized any and all conceptualizations of madness, developing both a 'mental illness' construct and a world-wide crisis of iatrogenically created drug addicts" (Burstow & LeFrançois, 2014: 3). The modern Western disciplines such as medicine, psychiatry, and psychology (and academia in general) continue to treat human life as a division of body and mind. In reference to Foucault, Chris Chapman explains that the formation of psychology was in fact "not politically neutral" and how "case notes taken in asylums were central to the development of liberal individualism" (Chapman, 2014: 19). As described by Foucault:

> The individual was constituted insofar as uninterrupted supervision, continual writing [i.e., of case notes], and potential punishment enframed this subjected body and extracted a psyche from it. It has been possible to distinguish the individual only insofar as the normalizing agency has distributed, excluded, and constantly taken up again this body-psyche ... The sciences of man, considered at any rate as sciences of the individual, are only the effects of this series of procedures. (Foucault, as cited in Chapman, 2014: 19)

Ironically enough, as Wolfgang Giegerich explains, "[t]he word psychology, properly translated, means 'logos (account) of the soul'"[33] (Giegerich, as cited in Jones, 2015: 5). How far from the original meaning the term has shifted! As further contextualized by Peter Beresford and Robert Menzies, a wider context of the division of the body and

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[33] The term *psychology* has its origin in the Greek etymology: $\psi\upsilon\chi o\lambda o\gamma\iota\alpha$, meaning literally "the words ($\lambda o\gamma\iota\alpha$) of the psyche ($\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$)".

mind is crucial in order to understand "how mind / body control" in contemporary psychiatry "reflects and sustains broader currents of governance" (Beresford & Menzies, 2014: 83). A "psychiatric subject" (Ibid.), "a victim of a 'broken brain'" (Andreasen, as cited in Ibid.: 84), "stands in contrast to the robust, autonomous, trustworthy, self-governing citizen of the liberal dream" (Ibid.: 83). The contemporary "biogenetic psychiatry" is, therefore, "abidingly neoliberal" (Ibid.) and treats the psychiatric subject as "a problem" (Du Bois, as cited in Ibid.: 84) that needs to "be risk-monitored and rehabilitated through the application of law, science, and technology" (Ibid.).

As for the case of Slovakia, it would be unfair to say that all the experts I was obliged to meet during my initial stage of transitioning were ignorant of the holistic approach or the transpersonal dimension of human life. I was indeed lucky to meet a few who understood the importance of such an approach. Sadly, they too seem to have been disciplined by their own discipline. One geneticist I met due to a required chromosome analysis shared with me her affinity for the concept of reincarnation. She also compared the normative medical system to slavery and added a related experience of being reprimanded by supervising authorities for speaking aloud what she thought (before she reached that level of hierarchy too) (Wiesner, 2017: 162). One of the psychiatrists I met independently in 2015, in order to discuss the steps of the process of legal change of gender in the documents, criticized her colleagues for ignoring the uniqueness of individual experience when assessing trans people for the process of transition. When we met again a few months later, she complained about being excluded by her superiors from that process for going against the institutionalized practice. Both of these significant encounters allowed me to realize that the system is merely smoke and mirrors—that I am not

alone in my resistance to the normative discourse, even if it is made to look that way[34].

The alternative interpretations I was able to create through the lens of an evolutionary astrology paradigm became an essential vehicle to help me safely move from the pathologizing waters I would be otherwise sailing through without yet having my own map to observe the whole situation from above. Using evolutionary astrology as a symbolic language was essential for me to realize what could *possibly* be alternative causes of my experience and what else should be taken into account when navigating the depths of my own psyche. As I understood that during this profound transitional and transformative period my adrenal glands and my brain were being heavily affected, my newly constructed knowledge led me to a new interest in the human brain (Uranus) and the way it works.

From the perspective of contemporary neuroscience, anxiety is understood as a complex process. As Christopher Germer explains:

> Sensory input is evaluated for danger before conscious awareness by the amygdala (located just below the cerebral

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[34] Despite the unceasing effort of Slovak transactivists, represented mostly by TransFúzia, a non-governmental organization, with the support of the Public Defender of Rights, Maria Patakyová, Slovakia remains an island of resistance against the EU legislation on gender identity and expression, continually putting the allegedly controversial topic of "gender ideology" (German Sirotnikova, 2019 Sep) aside as a legendary Trojan horse no one wants to let through the gates. With the only political party openly supporting LGBTQ rights being stopped at the gate of parliament as the result of 0.04% of the missing votes after the national elections in February 2020, and with the Catholic Church continuously promoting the concept of "Culture of Death" in relation to gender scholarship (Wiesnerová, 2013: 65) and thus following its own infamous institutional historical stigma, it is unlikely that there will be a change in that direction any time soon.

cortex), which sends a message to other brain structures, including the hypothalamus. The hippocampus is close to the amygdala and stores emotional memory, so traumatic memories can trigger alarm even before we are consciously aware of danger, or when we merely imagine danger. The hypothalamus, when activated, uses corticotropin-releasing hormone (CRH) to signal the pituitary gland to signal the adrenal glands to start producing adrenaline and noradrenaline. This sequence is known as the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis. (Germer, 2005a: 155)

Our amygdala, which got its name from its almond shape, had been "genetically programmed to help generate *primal* fear" (Austin, 1998: 177). The word *programmed* is an important one. Neuroscience as well as evolutionary astrology explain that we, as human beings, *learned* to fear through the process of conditioning. This is the reason why the focus of evolutionary astrology is to interpret our life as a journey to liberation from it.

From a certain point of view, the ultimate goal of deconditioning does not differ much from the practice of certain systems of psychotherapy, such as psychodynamic or cognitive therapies. Adlerian therapists, for example, teach their clients "a new philosophy of life." They focus on lifestyle, family, and birth as well as the analysis of the basic cognitive mistakes "the client made in constructing a view about the nature of the world" (Prochaska & Norcross, 2010: 68). In a similar manner, rational-emotive behaviour therapists (REBT) focus on discovering irrational beliefs, dysfunctional attitudes, and "core dogmatic musts" (Ibid.: 300). According to James Prochaska and John Norcross, due to advances in neuroscience, "psychotherapy might be called 'brain therapy' in the future" as it "typically results in detectable changes in the brain" (Ibid.: 526). As explained by

well-known chiropractor and neuroscientist Joe Dispenza, "[t]he gift of *neuroplasticity* … is that we can create a new level of mind" (Dispenza, 2012: 125). Through almost constant "*pruning* and *sprouting*" or, put simply, "unlearning and learning" at any age we can "rise above our current limitations and … be greater than our conditioning or circumstances" (Ibid.). From the perspective of evolutionary astrology, Uranus correlates with the dendrites in the brain (Green, 2011: 174). Its impact on the brain is, therefore, comparable to the changes induced by the psychotherapeutic as well as meditation processes. Given that it also correlates with the individual and collective breakthroughs on the journey of the evolution of consciousness, Uranus transits should be considered an essential part of the deconditioning process of our individual as well as collective minds.

Knowledge, Power, and the Meaning-Making Process

Based on the exploration of the epistemological foundations of how I have ascribed meaning to the circumstances that have been unpleasant, I am also aiming at pointing out the significance of alternative reflexive tools I have used as the main interpretive methods in the process of reauthoring. Narrative practice invites people to attach significance to some of the previously unseen, forgotten, or simply neglected events. It inspires them to link them together "in sequences that unfold through time … as the 'counter-plots' of their lives" (White, 2011: 6). As the practice of astrology is mostly based on observation and interpretation, it allowed me to study my development of the concepts applied to my lived experience in temporal sequences. Throughout the period of intense crisis, I have been able to interpret my embodied experience from the

perspective of what I *assigned* meaning to, based on my natal and transit chart-reading skills. As in the narrative practice, my turning to astrology (or to any art of hermeneutics) is not determined by the need to search for the ultimate meaning. First, I doubt such meaning could be found. Second, when looking for a way out of a crisis, the question "Why?" does not seem to be very relevant. According to White and Epston:

> [M]eaning is derived through the structuring of experience into stories. […] As this storying of experience is dependent upon language, in accepting this premise we are also proposing that we ascribe meaning to our experience and constitute our lives and relationships through language. (White & Epston, 1990: 27)

The use of language (symbolic or not) has therefore a fundamental function in meaning-making. This meaning-making aspect is especially significant in relation to power.

As I mentioned earlier, the diagnostic practices of contemporary psychiatry are again another way of attributing meaning to our embodied experience. White and Epston cited Foucault on the inseparable connection between knowledge and power—"a domain of knowledge is a domain of power and a domain of power is a domain of knowledge" (White & Epston, 1990: 29). In the important essay *Bringing the World into Therapy and Subverting the Operations of Modern Power*, White offers a thorough analysis of the relationship of power and modern psychiatry based on Foucauldian thought:

> [T]he modern disciplines, including psychology, social work, and medicine / psychiatry, have been instrumental in the development of a disciplinary technology that routinely

engages people in normalizing judgement of their own and each others' lives—judgement made according to norms about what a useful, productive, and authentic life would look like. These constructed norms, around which we are invited to measure our lives, are linked to our culture's truths of human nature; these truths of human nature are the [favoured] identity categories of the modern era. (White, 2011: 24)

The ramification of the use of power through modern disciplines such as psychiatry and its diagnostic practices often results in what White and Epston identified as thin[35] labelling and seeing people through limited categories of pathologizing discourse. Such practices often lead to social exclusion and have potentially harmful effects on peoples' self-worth[36]. Having experienced that in extreme form through my family background and the diagnostic procedures, I have been intentionally looking for an

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[35] In narrative practice, a thin story is considered to be a dominant narrative that we often accept or create out of a few (mostly negative) life experiences through focusing on them only. According to Martin Payne, "[a] thin description may arise from the person's being subject to expert diagnoses and commentaries, where the power status of the expert has obscured his [her, or their] own immediate, or local knowledge" (Payne, 2006: 30). The aim of narrative practice is to help replace "[t]he thin truths proposed by the power figure … by the convincing rich or thick actuality of the person's lived experience and consciously held knowledge" (Ibid.).

[36] When speaking of the modern disciplines and power, in a blog post named *Resignation is a Feminist Issue* Sara Ahmed argues that universities, too, are "institutions … structured by power relations all the way down". According to Ahmed, they "often do not express those commitments other than in policy", despite their feminist programmes. Also, she explains that as "to work as a feminist means trying to transform the organisations that employ us", the consequence of shaking "the walls of the house" often is "shaking the foundations of our own existence" (Ahmed, 2016 Aug).

alternative vehicle that would enable me to make new sense of my personal struggle.

Evolutionary astrology in the form of a symbolic language is a useful resource for creating a map of alternative narratives that challenge the status quo of the dominant normative discourse. These alternative stories—or rather, alternative resources for further structuring of the story of life—have been instrumental in helping me create the space for performing[37] the plurality of meanings that could potentially be assigned to my embodied experience. They have given me the possibility to make a choice instead of accepting the "only truth" which often comes with a thin label that classifies us as disordered. They have given me freedom in a time when I felt most imprisoned and vulnerable due to the physical reality of my lived embodied experience. The desirable outcome of the use of narrative practice applied through evolutionary astrology interpretive method as a means of symbolic language could, therefore, be explained as "the generation of alternative stories that incorporate vital and previously neglected aspects of lived experience" (White & Epston, 1990: 31).

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[37] In *Performing the Self*, Bojana Cvejić, Marta Popivoda, and Ana Vujanović refer to the synthesis of diverse approaches in social studies showing that "the self is constructed through performances and technologies that rest on the metaphors of theatricality and choreography" (Cvejić et al, 2016 Sep). For White and Epston, "the process of performing new meaning around unique outcomes" (White & Epston, 1990: 63) is based on the narrative practice of unpacking thin stories, mapping and thickening alternative paths that allow for "the exploration of new possibilities" and a "shift in [the] relationship" with the problematic elements of therapeutic conversations (Ibid.: 64).

In relation to generating stories and the contemporary challenge of the evolutionary journey of humankind as a collective, the evolutionary astrology paradigm offers a possibility for creating a story which is not only personal, but one that also reflects collective events and, therefore, offers ways for creative meaning-making and alternative interpretations. Based on the fact that the individual is not disconnected from the social world and its struggles and aches, applying evolutionary astrology as a map to navigate one's life offers a path to a much broader perspective that does not focus only on the individual as it also embraces collective processes, shifts, and transformations of the present era. Understanding the "language of the stars" (Willis & Curry, 2004: 1) reveals a path to transpersonal interpretations of the contemporary context and the years to come.

While I was working on this manuscript, at the very end of 2019, the evolutionary astrology community was impatiently awaiting the beginning of 2020, as the long-expected end of the feared Saturn-Pluto cycle was coming to its perfection on January 12. At that time, Australia was on fire and thousands of animals were dying, while the rest of the world was bearing witness to this inferno with "global apathy" (Wallace-Wells, 2019 Dec). When revising the manuscript again in the first few months of 2020, during the global coronavirus pandemic, the world finally began paying attention as the runaway train of the global capitalist[38] economics eventually started to hear the brakes squeak. With the radical closure of state borders and an increase in

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[38]   As Myrto Tsilimpounidi argues in reference to Kindleberger and Aliber, "the history of capitalism could be written in terms of the frequency and severity of crises, panics and manias" as "[p]anics caused many upheavals in the capitalist world between the start of the seventeenth century and now" (Tsilimpounidi, 2017: 6).

quarantined countries across the globe, we were witnessing "an existential crisis … the likes of which humankind has never" witnessed (Cowan, 2020 Mar). Did anybody perhaps see it coming? Most likely so. Nevertheless, even if the world representatives knew, would they pay attention to the prophecies of mere "magical thinkers"?

In 2009, the popular clairvoyant Sylvia Browne warned us with a very accurate prediction, one that would fly around the social networks eleven years later in March 2020 during the pandemic-related crisis:

> In around 2020 a severe pneumonia-like illness will spread throughout the globe, attacking the lungs and the bronchial tubes and resisting all known treatments. Almost more baffling than the illness itself will be the fact that it will suddenly vanish as quickly as it arrived, attack again ten years later, and then disappear completely (Browne, 2009: 117).

Apart from the alarming accuracy of this prediction, what could perhaps now strike us as a warning is the fact that, as a psychic, Browne claimed to "see clearly through the end of this century. Beyond that, nothing" (Ibid.: 113). With her deterrent message from the great beyond, she adds to the prophecies from Indigenous cultures as well as from contemporary scholars and experts who warn against the fast exploitation of the planet and the inconsiderate and short-sighted ways that mass production and consumption will have made it uninhabitable within the next hundred years (Ibid.).

In her *Aboriginal Prophecy*, Grandmother Mulara talks about "a symbiotic relationship" that humankind has "with Mother Earth and nature" through "the consciousness grid", and the need to "let go of an old matrix" during this

time of a long-anticipated, massive "shift of consciousness" that we are experiencing as a whole (Mulara, 2020 Mar). In *The Invisible Rainbow*, anti-microwave technology activist Arthur Firstenberg explains how the population of the planet is becoming more and more affected by the extreme electromagnetic field we have created within the past 150 years. As Thomas Cowan, a holistic physician, reminds us, we should not forget that the human body is in fact an "electrical body" (Cowan, 2020 Mar). Firstenberg further explains: "[e]very thought, every moment that we make surrounds us with low frequency pulsations, whispers that were first detected in 1875 and are also necessary for life" (Firstenberg, 2017: 72). According to Firstenberg, "'[a]nxiety disorder,' afflicting one-sixth of humanity, did not exist before the 1860s, when telegraph wires first encircled the earth. … Influenza, in its present form, was invented in 1889, along with alternating current" (Ibid.: 82). At the Health and Human Rights Summit in Tucson, Arizona on March 12, 2020, Cowan described in reference to the latest pandemic how the body's cells behave when they get poisoned: "[t]hey try to purify themselves by excreting debris which we call viruses." According to Cowan, in "every pandemic in the last 150 years, there was a quantum leap in the electrification of the earth" (Cowan, 2020 Mar)[39]. As further explained by

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[39] According to Cowan, the Covid-19 pandemic erupted after the introduction of the fifth generation of wireless technology for digital cellular networks–5G–that is the representation of "a dramatic … quantum leap in the last six months [of] the electrification of the earth" (Cowan, 2020 Mar). With the 20,000 radiation emitting satellites "in the very blanket of the earth;" with the radiation-emitting as well as "water destructuring" devices in our pockets, we are exposed to a new electromagnetic field "that is not compatible with the health" (Ibid.). As Cowan further argues, "the susceptibility has to do with how much metal [we] have in [our] body as well as the quality of the water in [the] cells. If [we] start injecting aluminium in people, they become receptors for absorbing increased electromagnetic fields and that is a perfect

Cowan, whenever any biological system is exposed to a new magnetic field, it is poisoned: "you kill it, you kill some, and the rest go into a kind of suspended animation so that interestingly, they live a bit longer and sicker" (Ibid.).

As the sudden Covid-19 pandemic is forcing the world to make the inevitable pause before a great leap, with so much time for ourselves during the period of ordered confinement, we can finally contemplate the acute question: how much more do we need to see to make the necessary collective change happen? As Firstenberg further reminds us:

> The 60-cycle current in our house wiring, the ultrasonic frequencies in our computers, the radio waves in our televisions, the microwaves in our cell phones, these are only distortions of the invisible rainbow that runs through our veins and makes us alive. But we have forgotten. It is time that we remember. (Firstenberg, 2017: 95)

Although the developments around the coronavirus crisis often attract comparison with a global catastrophe due to its suddenness, urgency, and uncontrollability, in reference to Saturn-Pluto conjunction, history teaches that pandemics, genocides, or even wars are, unfortunately, not that exceptional. As explained by cultural historian Richard Tarnas in *Cosmos and Psyche*, in the period of 1348-51, the alignment of the planets "coincided with the eruption and spread of the Black Death, which … devastated Europe and set in motion cultural and economic shifts that permanently transformed European life in the late medieval period" (Tarnas, 2006: 687). Interestingly enough, Tarnas argues that the Black Death "began in China in 1333 in coincidence with

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storm for the kind of deterioration of the species which is what we are now experiencing" (Ibid.).

the preceding Saturn-Pluto opposition and reached a climax in Europe in the 1348-51 period during the conjunction" (Ibid.: 687). Similarly, during the years of 1981-84 with the Saturn-Pluto conjunction in the last degrees of Libra, "the AIDS epidemic … first widely emerged and was identified and … reached pandemic proportions worldwide, especially in Africa, during the following Saturn-Pluto opposition of 2000-04" (Ibid.: 688).

Such events, however, cannot be read as a mere effect of the Universal order or the lack thereof, the chaos, occurring in our everyday realities without any previous warning. Based on an understanding of the perspective of evolutionary astrology, even when humankind is experiencing a total lack of control, the 3D reality is always a co-created manifestation of the forgotten past and the consequent, yet hidden, future of the contemporary civilization's level of consciousness. As also explained by Tarnas, "the successive quadrature alignments of the Saturn-Pluto cycle coincided with especially challenging historical periods marked by a pervasive quality of intense *contraction*" (Tarnas, 2006: 660-661):

> [E]ras of international crisis and conflict, empowerment of reactionary forces and totalitarian impulses, organized violence and oppression, all sometimes marked by lasting traumatic effects. An atmosphere of gravity and tension tended to accompany these three-to-four-year periods, as did a widespread sense of epochal closure: 'the end of an era,' 'the end of innocence,' the destruction of an earlier mode of life that in retrospect may seem to have been marked by widespread indulgence, decadence, naïveté, denial, and inflation. (Tarnas, 2006: 661)[40]

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[40] As further described by Tarnas, in the period of 1980-1984 during the last alignment of the planets in the twentieth century, "the global nuclear

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As astrology is based on historical observations, the 2020 conjunction of Saturn and Pluto in 23 degrees of Capricorn has often been interpreted as a necessary evolutionary transformation (Pluto) of the limits of our collective consciousness (Saturn). "Profound transformation … through contraction, conservative reaction, crisis and termination" was often the dominant theme (Ibid.). The critical placement of the planets signifies power struggles and a crisis of consciousness that were already evident in the global scenes of political and social unrest in 2019 such as the ongoing protests in Hong Kong, Latin America, Indonesia, Sudan, Iraq, Malta, and Spain. As the Saturn-Pluto conjunction in January 2020 happened at the same degree placement of the South Node of Pluto—interpreted as our collective unresolved past including our collective trauma—it adds a special tone of volatility and urgency to this encounter. The 2020 end of a cycle happening in Capricorn was, therefore, often read as a trigger inducing the end of the capitalist era and the necessary anticipation of the "world renewal" (Owens, 2008 Jan), one that would bring its more tangible results further in the future after the newly discovered paths to follow will have been collectively set in motion as unique—Uranian—humanistic ideals during the

arms race, the escalation of Cold War antagonism, and widespread fear of nuclear apocalypse reached its climax" (Tarnas, 2006: 679). This transit "coincided as well with the sustained massive slaughter of the Iran-Iraq War, the Falkland War between Britain and Argentina, and the depths of the Soviet war in Afghanistan" (Ibid.: 681) as well as with "the initial terrorist bombings of the U.S. embassy in Beirut and of U.S. and French barracks in Lebanon" (Ibid.: 683). With Saturn-Pluto in Leo, "Arab-Israeli wars … began with the period of Middle Eastern war and terrorism in 1946-48 out of which was founded modern Israel in Palestine ... at the start of the Cold War" (Ibid. :681). According to Tarnas, the year 1946 is actually considered to be the beginning of "modern terrorism" with "the bombing of the King David Hotel by Zionist radicals" (Ibid.: 686).

forthcoming world changing years of progressive Pluto in Aquarius (2024-2044).

In 2008, astrologer Nick Owens connected the next sixteen-year long period[41] of Pluto in Capricorn[42] with "the dawning understanding of the power of global networks, whether instantiated through the internet, the common atmospheric perturbations of climate change, or the giant casino of global capital exchange and speculation" (Owens, 2008 Jan). As Pluto represents elimination and necessary evolutionary change, and Capricorn with its ruler Saturn represents self-mastery, boundaries, and the crystallization of structures, the "transformation of what it means to be in an executive position", "[t]he difficulty with [the] pan-global structures", and the "responsibility to maintain [them] and to ensure [their] ongoing viability" were identified as the central theme of the 2008-2024 era and the years to come (Ibid.). As further interpreted by Owens:

> To lead will no longer be synonymous with capitalistic, exploitative and wasteful enterprise, for this notion of leadership dies with the deep acceptance of limits to our existence. Rather, leadership will be more associated with the development of a sense of responsibility to contribute to the public good, but in a manner that is flexible to change, that is willing to forge new paths, to try alternative courses of action. … Older hierarchical structures depending solely on values of deference and respect of authority for authority's sake will not survive, because they have become

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41 Pluto's transit through a sign takes from eleven to thirty-two years, depending on its ecliptic orbit. It takes 248 years to go through the whole zodiac.

42 Pluto's ingress into the sign of Capricorn took place on January 26th 2008. It will remain in the sign of Capricorn until its final retrograde phase of the end of the year 2024.

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too crystallised to respond to the rapidity of the changes affecting our globalised systems. (Owens, 2008 Jan)

Owen's rather positive vision of the Pluto transiting period optimistically pointed out what evolutionary astrologer Gray Crawford realistically summarized eleven years later, in the middle of this extremely significant transit of our collective history: "While societal structures decay and breakdown, there's room to begin building new forms and foundational elements in their place" (Crawford, 2020 Jan). As described by Tarnas, apart from "the transformation and forging of enduring structures, whether material, political, or psychological", Saturn-Pluto periods "are also characterized by displays of personal and collective determination, unbending will, courage and sacrifice" and "by a deepening capacity for moral discernment born from experience and suffering" (Tarnas, 2006: 665). Crawford, however, emphasizes the fact that "if we wish to endure the tests of Saturn and Pluto, we must descend within to explore our inner shadow and unconscious complexes rather than overly [focus] on external achievement" (Crawford, 2020 Jan).

In an audio podcast on the year of 2020, evolutionary astrologers Simon Vörster and Jennifer Langstone explained the (at that time) approaching transformational period as "an emotional shift that is taking place underneath us as a collective"—just as "the snake sheds its skin, the old form that once represented security has run its course" (Vörster & Langstone, 2019). According to Crawford, Saturn and Pluto in combination "bring the gravity of graveyards and necessary confrontations with cultural and personal issues we can no longer deny or resist" (Crawford, 2020 Jan). As a collective, we are becoming more awakened and conscious of who we are and who we are not—we are starting to

honour ourselves as creative energetic beings. We might therefore begin to feel an increasing need "to break out of the mould" of our past conditioning as "the limitations are becoming more apparent" (Vörster & Langstone, 2019).

One might ask what such an intense and difficult prognosis brings to our individual lives. What is it good for? Even during the hardest times, the evolutionary astrology perspective offers a map, a proposal of a "remedy", a glimpse of a "queertopian" future (Tilsen & Nylund, 2010: 67)—one that is possible for a person to further narratively contextualize as a desired vision and a constructive goal to work towards. As the paradigm works with so-called polarity points in a person's chart or the chart of a collective (e.g. an organization, an institution, a state), the opposite signs of the zodiac are often an indicator of an "antidote" to the house and sign where the crisis is happening. Such a system of interpretation also applies to the south and north nodes of the Moon (or the nodes of any other planet), which represent the evolutionary axis of individual or collective consciousness.

Since 2017, when transiting Pluto in Capricorn entered the twelfth house of my natal chart and in 2018 was joined— and therefore emphasized—by the south node of the Moon for the next two-year period, the polarity point for all the collective has been the opposing sign of Cancer[43]. Since the most traditional interpretation of the Cancer archetype is home and family, it does not seem coincidental now that the sudden events of the spring of 2020 confined the whole globe exactly within those realms. For me, personally (as well as for many others), Cancer harbours the cusp of the sixth house of my natal chart. Given that the sixth house correlates with body and health, the remedy for the necessary release

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[43]   See Chart 3: The Cancer-Capricorn Axis.

of the unconscious content (twelfth house) is to embrace and master the self-healing (sixth house) qualities of the Cancer archetype: developing inner authority and internal security through self-care and self-nurture; seeing through the false "emotional security base" built upon the "identification with career or social position" (Green, 1998: 192); setting healthy boundaries and opening up to the vulnerability of life; and creating "a personal fulfilment that is not bound up or linked to the need for [external] success" (Ibid.: 190). As the critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha wrote in 1986, "the state of emergency is also always a state of emergence" (Bhabha, 2008: xxiv). Through a complex interpretation of the polarity points of our natal and collective charts, the crisis enables us to discover necessary qualities to be developed in order to ground and balance our lives.

As Neptune resides at home in the sign of Pisces, the ultimate archetype of our collective unconscious, in times when the highly crystallized platforms and patriarchal structures of the past are being crumbled as Saturn (the keeper of time) meets Pluto (the unstoppable evolutionary force) in order to step into the Underworld to undergo the process of death and be born anew, the same recipe can be offered to humankind as to a collective: an "antidote" to its crisis of consciousness. As the planet of expansion, Jupiter, joined the Capricornian celestial "party" in December 2019, meeting and, therefore, strengthening the force of Pluto in April 2020 and accompanying Saturn to the very end of the year, through the lens of evolutionary astrology we have been given a chance to set a direction for the new phase of the Saturn evolutionary cycle—the expansion of the boundary of our transformed collective consciousness. As mentioned earlier, the polarity point to the earthy Capricorn—the sign of physical reality, self-mastery, and manifestation—is the watery Cancer archetype, aspects of which are necessary

for us to embrace in order to harmonize the desperately imbalanced global conditions. It is represented by the qualities that we, as a collective, have long been missing: we are offered a chance to learn, again, how to honour the planet as an irreplaceable life force and life energy, how to create new alternative ways of community building and sharing resources. For "[i]f we don't take care of this sacred home we've been given", Browne argues, "it won't be able to provide us with shelter, food, and comfort any longer, just as surely as a house we abuse and neglect will be condemned as unfit for human habitation sooner or later" (Browne, 2009: 113). Moreover, we can now develop a healthy sense of self based on self-nurture and emotional vulnerability, respect our bodies as vehicles of the consciousness, and nurture them in order to fully experience life around us, not to have them used and exploited. We have been given a chance to finally explore the ways our bodies are created,[44] and gently experiment with how they work as "delicate filament[s] of senses" and "field[s] of resonance" (Anderson, 2001: 95-96).

Through the interpretive lens of evolutionary astrology, during the Pluto in Capricorn transit of 2008-2024 we are—as

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[44] In 1989, a new system of body knowledge and self-discovery named *Human Design* was developed by Alan Krakower (also known as Ra Uru Hu) as the result of an intense mystical experience of an encounter with "a Voice". The system centres around the intelligent body and the consciousness inhabiting it in the form of a crystal. Human Design refers to the discovery of the planet Uranus (1731) as it is based on a theory that, around that time, the energetic Chakra system of the human body experienced a transformative expansion. As previously discussed, from the evolutionary astrological perspective Uranus correlates (beside other things) with sudden breakthroughs of consciousness. The symbolic manifestation of its impact is interpreted as a revolutionary synthesis of ancient knowledge (i-ching, kabbalah, astrology) and the demands of the forthcoming era of individuation and deconditioning that the discovery of Uranus is believed to have heralded. For more information on Human Design, see https://www.jovianarchive.com.

a collective—offered a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to set the direction of how we want to live our newly discovered truths. The more we become aware of the fact that we are not just "desiring-machines" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983), ready to be enslaved for the gain of a few, and that in the sense of self-respect we can no longer allow ourselves to be treated as such, the bigger capacity of our yet unrealized potential and limitless creativity will open up for us to explore. Through the conscious act of becoming complete beings we can expand our vision and attract others who resonate at the same frequency. The transmutation of the limits of our collective consciousness is, however, a challenge that does not happen from day to day. It is a long process. The paradox of expanding our consciousness, as described by Jennifer Langstone, is that through "connecting to something beyond our physical perception, we connect to something more meaningful within us" (Vörster & Langstone, 2019). The difficult Pluto transits are, therefore—individually as well as collectively—an initiation into a new space of potential. What we need to embrace to experience this initiation fully is a forgotten "sense of wonder" and "the curiosity to step out of the limitations" into the unknown (Ibid.).

CHAPTER THREE

True compassion arises from a healthy sense of self, from an awareness of who we are that [honours] our own capacities and fears, our own feelings and integrity, along with those of others. It is never based on fear or pity but is a deep supportive response of the heart based on the dignity, integrity, and [wellbeing] of every single creature.

Jack Kornfield (1993: 222)

Mindfulness and Therapy

The increasing popularity of Buddhist thought and practice in the West has been theorized within social sciences as part of a larger change related to the transition "from collective religion to individual spiritualities" (Cornejo, 2013: 63). According to sociologist Paul Heelas, the boom of so-called New Age spiritualities has been contextualized as an opposition "to the restrictive, the regulatory, those impositions of external sources of authority which are served by formal rules and regulations" (Heelas, 2008: 3). These new "spiritualities of life" usually take a holistic, life-affirming approach and circle around "the theme that what matters is delving within oneself to experience the primary source of the sacred" (Ibid.: 5). While the potential of the individual spiritualities to enhance "experiential contact with inner-life"; "'harmonize' or 'balance' oneself; [or] to draw one's mind, body and spirit into a whole" (Ibid.: 5) has been accepted as beneficial and important, the development of such practices has also been subject to criticism, namely in the sense "of the consumption of mind-body-spirit dross" (Ibid.: 6). As described by Heelas:

> On the one hand, we find a person-centred, expressivistic, humanistic, universalistic spirituality. We find a spirituality praised by participants for the ways in which it stimulates the flourishing of what it is to be human; a spirituality credited with the power to heal 'dis-ease', to enhance wellbeing or 'wellness' … On the other hand, we find

capitalist-driven gratification of desire, the pleasuring of the self, self-indulgence, if not sheer greed. … Increasingly, purveyors dress their products and services with spirituality to make 'The Promise'. Their aim is to stimulate demand by titillating hopes and desires. (Heelas, 2008: 7-8)

Also, as Zack Walsh argues, when introducing practices such as mindfulness within the mainstream realms of education, health, and the workplace in good faith that such activities can help the collective, such motives are often overridden by the institutionalized power "to manage our mental constitution" (Walsh, 2018: 3). The problem with mindfulness and wellbeing is that they "share a fidelity to neoliberal governmentality, insofar as [wellbeing] is understood to be a resource, and mindfulness is viewed as an essential tool for increasing its value and utility" (Ibid.: 3). While the critique of the operation of biopower in relation to introducing corporate mindfulness is, by no means, adequate, we also cannot ignore the fact "that holistic, face-to-face activities … can facilitate a 'current' of meaningful experiences"; help us "[move] *beyond* the allures of consumer culture" and develop "an expanded sense of self" (Heelas, 2008: 9).

In one of the contemporary works, mindfulness is described as "a special kind of attention that is characterized by a nonjudgemental awareness that fosters openness and curiosity. And in doing so, one experiences a radical acceptance of both internal and external present experiences" (Chiesa & Serreti, as cited in Lemon, 2017: 3305). After almost a year of regular daily practice, I can conclude that mindfulness has served me as a great tool for filtering the mind's contents. It not only helped me to quieten down and focus my attention, I was also gradually able to receive (and with further practice, continue to be receiving)

many transformative insights which have changed the way I think, feel, or relate to certain things in life. As previously discussed, "naming demons" became my favourite practice, despite the heaviness of the feelings it often tends to bring to my awareness. It is a simple practice which enables an enhanced understanding of the nature of our mind. As explained by Kornfield:

> Whether difficulties or pleasures, the naming of our experience is the first step in bringing them to a wakeful conscious attention. Mindfully naming and acknowledging our experience allows us to investigate our life, to inquire into whatever aspect or problem of life presents itself to us. (Kornfield, 1993: 84)

Naming demons helped me to become skilled at recognizing and acknowledging a variety of states of mind: difficulties, disturbances, unpleasantries, neutrality, and nice feelings, too. Everything that arose and stayed long enough for me to be able to observe it, name it, and see it disappear or change into something different. Learning such a skill was a profound therapeutic endeavour as it gave me an experience which by default is somehow oxymoronic—to relax in the moments of intense distress.

When practicing mindful awareness, Buddhist *vipassana* tradition—"to see things as they really are" (Kornfield: 2008: 3)—emphasizes the practice of mindfulness of our body and senses as well as of our mind and heart (Ibid.: 2). It is also called "insight meditation", directed at developing "a stillness in the midst of activity" together with extending "the healing power of lovingkindness to [ourselves] and others" (Ibid.: 3). The practice of mindful awareness is, therefore, closely connected with the practice of compassion which is "integral to its philosophy" (Crowder, 2016:

25). From the therapeutic perspective, there is extensive research regarding the benefits of practicing mindfulness and compassion and the elimination of stress and anxiety (Germer, 2005a; Lee & James, 2011), and the improvement of self-acceptance (Hozel et al, 2011; Gilbert, 2009) as well as the refinement of insight[45] (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). While Buddhist thought and practice share similarities with more therapeutic approaches[46], for being considered strongly evidence-based it is mostly compared to cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT)—one of the most practiced psychotherapeutic approaches in the West (Prochaska & Norcross, 2010: 3)[47].

Buddhist thought and cognitive therapies share a sharp focus on mind processes and facts. This psychotherapeutic system has incorporated the practice of mindfulness and compassion into what we now know as Acceptance / Mindfulness-based and Compassion-focused therapies,

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[45] See Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Brummans, 2014; or Lemon, 2017 for more on mindfulness in relation to qualitative research and the development of greater reflexivity.

[46] Buddhist thought and existentialist therapy, for example, share a focus on authenticity and of being in the moment. In the same way as Buddhist meditators, "existentialists are willing to face aspects of life that are awful but meaningful at the same time" (Prochaska & Norcross, 2010: 95). Buddhist understanding of the "self" "as a result of *interdependent arising*" (Kornfield, as cited in Crowder, 2016: 30) is compatible not only with the phenomenological perspective of "being-in-the-world" (Prochaska & Norcross, 2010: 97) but also with postmodern epistemologies that do not see the self as fixed, such as narrative or feminist therapy (Crowder, 2016: 25).

[47] According to survey results, the most frequently endorsed primary theoretical orientations among American mental health professionals (clinical psychologists, counseling psychologists, social workers and counselors) are cognitive and eclectic / integrative approaches (Ibid.: 3). Prochaska and Norcross specify that generic CBT has also been "inarguably the most actively researched [system] of psychotherapy over the past decade" (Ibid.: 322).

which are nowadays practiced as standard modalities of CBT[48]. According to James Prochaska and John Norcross, "[t]he third wave [of cognitive-behavioral therapies] adds an Eastern or Buddhist twist to Western psychotherapy" (Prochaska & Norcross, 2010: 319). Whereas the traditional first and second waves of behaviour and cognitive therapies aimed "to modify distressing behaviours and beliefs", third-wave therapists, by contrast, aim "to train clients to be mindful and accept them". As further explained by the authors:

> The first noble truth of Buddhism is that life is suffering—it entails pain, loneliness, frustration, disease, and ultimately death. This irrefutable fact becomes useful and therapeutic because Buddhism explains how suffering can be avoided: Accept it. Avoiding pain is the single biggest source of suffering. As Buddhists advise, invite your troubles to sit beside you. Instead of relentlessly trying to change what we don't like, we can learn to accept. Appreciate and inhabit the moment, as opposed to ruminating about our mistakes and preoccupying ourselves with the future. (Prochaska & Norcross, 2010: 320)

Mindfulness-based therapy focuses on practicing a mindful approach as "a skill that allows us to be less reactive to what is happening in the moment" (Germer, 2005b: 4). It is, however, "not an end in itself but rather is cultivated

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[48] The third wave of cognitive therapies integrates a plurality of mindfulness-based interventions such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Hayes, 2004); Compassionate-Focused Therapy (Gilbert, 2009; Lee & James, 2011); Compassionate Mind Training (Gilbert & Proctor, 2006), Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (Kabat-Zinn, 2013); Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (Segal et al, 2013); or Mindfulness Based Feminist Therapy (Crowder, 2016).

through the interconnectedness between self-regulation, attitude, and intention" (Lemon, 2017: 3306). Compassion-based therapy, on the other hand, focuses on a blameless approach to ourselves, based on an understanding of how our brain works. It teaches how to deal with anxiety and trauma by developing so-called "compassion muscle". What is important here is not only the fact that developing compassion has a profound therapeutic effect on an individual; it is also described by cognitive psychologists as having a direct impact on the structures of the frontal cortex—a part of the human brain that "plays a key role with a number of other brain areas in activating the *contentment and soothing system*" (Lee & James, 2011: 131). As explained in the previous chapter, the amygdala is the "genetically programmed" part of the limbic system which "generate[s] *primal* fear" (Austin, 1998: 177) and "triggers our urges to fight, take flight, freeze, or submit" (Lee & James, 2011: 130). It is exactly the activation and development of a *soothing system* that, according to compassion-focused therapy, enables us to override the messages of this trauma using a "body-focused" memory center (Lee & James, 2011: 111).

In mindfulness-based and compassion-focused therapy, anxiety is considered to be something that "protects us from danger. It is built into the nervous system" (Germer, 2005a: 158). The amygdala in our brain is responsible for making a rapid screening and informing our body through sense impression about a possible danger (Ibid.: 162). However, it is also said that our brain can make mistakes. This basically means that our trauma memory stored in our limbic system can be sending alarms to our body that are simply false. "When we panic, the brain perceives danger when there is none" (Ibid: 158). As further explained by Germer, "[p]roblems occur when we *believe* in the reactions of the body to a false alarm by the brain. We suffer from a terrifying

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illusion" (Ibid.). Mindfulness-based and compassion-focused therapies are instrumental in helping those of us who suffer from intense anxiety attacks to develop insight through "moment-to-moment awareness" in order to recognize these "false alarms" before the anxiety becomes uncontrollable (Ibid.: 162). Through this practice we can learn that "[p]anic is more likely to end if we accept it", and also that it is actually a passing process—it "has a beginning, a middle, and an end" (Ibid.: 163). Through focusing on our breathing or the present-moment sensations, we are able to stop the instinctual fight that only contributes to more panic if we engage in it. As Germer further explains: "[p]aying attention to sensations and fighting sensations are very different. Furthermore, there is nothing to fight against, because the fear is a false alarm by the amygdala anyway" (Ibid.). The recommendation is, therefore, not to try to overcome our sensations when we feel them, but to learn how to practice acceptance of our body and mind. The advice is to "safely observe the body and let the fear go" (Ibid.). Despite the fact that panic is the result of conditioning, some of us could be more sensitive to such reactions of the body than others, meaning that our level of sensing unpleasant feelings might always be higher. It does not, however, mean that we should feel defective, or be labelled as disordered.

Compassion-focused therapy and evolutionary astrology are congruent in understanding the ways our brains are wired as unique. The first offers so-called "soothing breathing" as an essential practice that actively engages the soothing system of our brains. It has the potential to override the highly developed threat-focused system of our "old brain" which basically tries to keep us safe all the time through triggering a state of panic (Lee & James, 2011: 370-379). As discussed in the previous chapter, the latter explains the need to develop self-compassion through embracing

the qualities of the Cancer archetype—such as self-nurture, emotional vulnerability, respect for the body as the vessel of our human consciousness, respect for the planet and for life in general—in order to create a foundation for the healthy sense of (not-)self. If in life we aim to act from our inner authority and integrity, such grounding is necessary for true compassion "is never based on fear" (Kornfield, 1993: 222); it is, on the contrary, fearless.

As explained by Kornfield, it is the "fearlessness of compassion" that "leads us directly into the conflict and suffering of life" (Kornfield, 1993: 223). The art of compassion and lovingkindness, the integral part of *vipassana* tradition, lies in the practice of directing it towards ourselves first and then extending the embrace to a larger circle of others. It is described by its practitioners as heart-opening (Kornfield, 1993; 2008) and profoundly healing, especially where personal trauma is concerned (Crowder, 2016). Feminist therapist R. Crowder shares her personal experience which, as she describes, had a far-reaching impact on her life:

> To be taught and encouraged to consider myself as worthy of love and kindness as all other beings, and then experience *holding myself in unconditional positive regard* during the meditation practice enabled a paradigmatic and relational healing shift that years of personal trauma therapy had not accomplished. (Crowder, 2016: 25)

The significance of the third wave of cognitive therapies (as opposed to the first and second waves, which were aimed at the modification of beliefs and behaviour instead of acceptance) as well as of evolutionary astrology when applied as an interpretive method lies in the fact that they both consider blameless approach as essential. They warn

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against the so-called "deficit model" (Germer, 2005a: 156) treatment of the contemporary psychiatric discourse, which is focused on what is wrong with the person that must be fixed instead of encouraging one towards positive acceptance. From the perspective of evolutionary astrology, the blameless approach of mindfulness-based and compassion-focused therapeutic approaches (and also the previously mentioned postmodern schools of solution-focused, collaborative, and narrative practice) empowers one in the development of acceptance, care, kindness, empathy, and vulnerability together with compassion towards ourselves and others—qualities that we are now being challenged to master as a collective in order to balance the state of our distorted collective mind of the passing era, as explained in the previous chapter.

In *Spiritualities of Life*, Paul Heelas confesses that the look "at the ways in which life is becoming ever more restricted" is a horrific one (Heelas, 2008: 2). He argues that "one never values 'human' aspects of life—time to ponder, the opportunity to *be* oneself, the possibility of living as a free spirit—so much as when one feels *under* the systems of capitalistic … modernity" (Ibid.). "Do we find a *counter-balance*", he asks, "to the fact that life is ever more threatened by the ever-increasing ability of capitalist … and other organizations (including state education) to implement the idea that a (variously) specialized, boxed or *bounded* self is the prerequisite for remunerative progress?" (Ibid.: 3). The challenge we, as a collective, are facing now—in the time of the "culture of anxiety" and "tyranny of choice" (Salecl, as cited in Olivier, 2015: 6) when our bodies are pushed to act as extended hands of the insatiable "desiring-machines" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983)—is how to develop the skill of good discernment. For if we "strip" imported practices such as mindfulness of its social, ethical, and spiritual

content and context, we run the risk of allowing them to be "shaped in the West by an atomizing, individualistic mindset" that sees stress "as a failure of the individual" (Walsh, 2018: 4).

Practicing mindful awareness and compassion towards ourselves and others leads us to observe our body sensations and feelings as processes, as passing, impermanent forces that start and end in their own way. They simply come and go, like everything else around us, like us. While such an activity practiced in a neoliberal capitalist environment can by no means be consumed just like any other goods or commodity, or maybe even "prohibit the cultivation of a more critical, political consciousness" (Walsh, 2018: 5) when its profound context is ignored, "finding ways of being calmer, or more focused can", on the other hand, "make a great contribution to the art of life" (Heelas, 2008: 16). "Improving life for oneself and, therefore, for others" (Ibid.) is just the first necessary step in a larger transformation of our collective consciousness. Through "recognizing *what* is occurring in the present, and by allowing it to unfold in a relaxed, spacious way" (Germer, 2005a: 156), transformation can happen. However, in order to progress, we must stop judging or fighting against ourselves, and develop new skills of a nonjudgemental, self-compassionate approach instead (Ibid.).

In reference to Sara Ahmed and in order to promote queer alternatives of mindful practice, Zack Walsh describes that practicing a mindful approach has the potential to empower oneself in profound ways: it makes allowance for accepting and supporting "lives that deviate from the norm"; it enables the development of a vision which "disturbs and disorients in order to make the familiar strange" (Walsh, 2018: 8-9); it enables "an opening up of what counts as a life worth living" (Ahmed, as cited in Walsh, 2018: 9). As

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previously discussed[49], in my vision of the "queertopian" future (Tilsen & Nylund, 2010: 67) where the manifestation of Cancer-Capricorn polarities of the archetypal axis[50] is integrated in a healthy, more balanced way, where kindness and compassion extend to all—human and non-human—bodies and beings, practicing a mindful approach to life is of the utmost importance.

Embodied Inquiry

In the preface to her book *Embodied Inquiry*, Celeste Snowber writes: "[t]he body has been colonized, gendered, politicized, medicalized and consumerized. We have for too long bullied the body to look a certain way, be a certain way, or act a certain way." Snowber then asks an important question: "What would it mean to live from the inside out?" (Snowber, 2016: xiii). According to her view, "[h]ow the body is perceived has a direct relationship to the ability to disconnect from the body's knowledge and wisdom" (Ibid.: xiii); it "is rooted in breath, rhythm and poetry" (Ibid.: xv) and "has a language of its own" (Ibid.: xiii). Similarly, in the essay *Embodied Writing and Reflections on Embodiment*, transpersonal psychologist Rosemarie Anderson argues that embodied language invites "readers to encounter the narrative accounts for themselves and from within their own bodies through a form of sympathetic resonance" which allows them "to more fully experience the phenomena described" (Anderson, 2001: 84). As Anderson further points out, embodied writing "becomes not only a skill appropriate

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[49] See Chapter Two: Knowledge, Power, and the Meaning-Making Process.

[50] See Chart 3: The Cancer-Capricorn Axis.

to research, but a path of transformation that nourishes an enlivened sense of presence in and of the world" (Ibid.: 83):

> In our times, we are preoccupied with separateness and distinctiveness of our physical bodies from the world. What madness is this? Even at a material level we are mostly made of water and trace minerals. The elements of the earth make for embodiment, otherwise we would not be here at all. *Our bodies are utterly embedded in the world.* (Anderson, 2001: 94-95)

At the initial stage of my daily mindful practice, it was quite inspiring to discover—in the early process of receiving glimpses of something that could possibly be named an insight—how my suffering, that I called anxiety, could actually be experienced as a dynamic and ever-changing phenomenon. Paul Williams comments on the process of calming linked with insight as the necessary strength and orientation for the restless mind to finally "break through to a deep transformative understanding of how things truly are" (Williams & Tribe, 2000: 82). As I later realized, the question "Why?" was becoming less important with time. In fact, trying to find out "why" became a hindrance, something that reminded me only of the need to *name it* after I had spotted it as mere *thinking*.

Just another mindless thought.

In the compendium on *Mindfulness and Psychotherapy,* we read that the state of mindful awareness "can easily be experienced by anyone but cannot adequately be described. Mindful awareness is mostly experiential and nonverbal (i.e., sensory, somatic, intuitive, emotional), and it requires some practice to develop" (Germer at al., 2005: xiii). With

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gradual progress during my daily sessions, I soon started losing track of everything I experienced. In my after-session recordings I was frequently speechless. My experience with words and meanings became perplexingly complex, similar to when in the Chinese language some of the "characters may simultaneously possess three, four, or even five different and contradictory meanings" (Zhang, 1985: 386). During sessions, I was often engaged in the games of paradoxes, gaining new perspectives on what cannot be logically articulated yet still constitutes an essential part of the embodied knowledge. Staying in the flow, I was releasing the rush to make conclusions. Most of the time, I did not feel any need to record anything after the session. My recordings soon became chaotic, disordered, but calm at the same time, with lots of silent gaps and unspoken thoughts. Putting my experience into words also became much harder for me. Focused on a single feeling, sometimes I was trying to describe what I had just gone through until an overwhelming sensation of ungraspability made me simply let it go. Using the words of Rosemarie Anderson, to think "in a Cartesian style no longer seem[ed] acceptable"—such a "disembodied" way of expression was simply not enough (Anderson, 2001: 84). Often I felt the need to be silent and just rest, to sit without words. I could suddenly see all words as unimportant, as hindrances in relation to the whole of the embodied contemplative experience and the profound realizations of the paradox of the impermanent force of life.

Inspired by Anderson's concept of embodied writing, which aims at revealing "the lived experience of the body by portraying in words the finely textured experience of the body" (Anderson, 2001: 83), I was becoming more interested in a detailed embodied experience of the specific ways of communication between my body and the rest of myself. When I slowly refocused my attention inward and allowed

my body to talk to me, it was as if a mixture of unresolved, built-up energies that were difficult to live with—as they had no real place or use in my life—were suddenly coming to the surface to say "hi" and "bye". In order to make sense of the process, I understood that I might have been so scared of feeling all these energies that I resisted acknowledging their existence until they got so powerful that I could no longer avoid facing them. All this time, my body was speaking to me and I did not listen!

My next phase of the effort to learn and understand the ways my body was trying to communicate with me led to my directly approaching the topic in a conversation during one of my supervision consultations. It was actually my supervisor's idea, after she became acquainted with my "Monkey's" story and the way I feel my body responds to the changes I make. I told her about the new compassionate connection I had been practicing with my body, and how my sensitivity had grown. I was able to pay more attention and tune in to the subtle energetic channels of my body through which it spoke to me. This made me feel more whole, more complete.

My supervisor, Katarína, suggested an interesting idea one day. It was after I explained to her how strange I had felt a few minutes before after pronouncing out loud "*I am sure*" in relation to making a decision. The feeling of "being sure" has never been easy for me. At that particular moment, I was experiencing my body responding nicely to my feeling of "being sure". It came as a spontaneous embodied reaction to what I had been speaking about. Katy was very interested in what it would be like for her to have a direct conversation with my body (with me as the interpreter). Since the framework of our supervision sessions was solution-focused, this sounded like an interesting way to proceed.

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Through talking directly to my body, Katy wanted to find out what it had to say about the new, friendlier, and more compassionate connection I keep with it. In this conversation, I was responsible for interpreting the body's language into our "common" language so that she could understand how my body felt about the issue at hand:

K: *Dear Adam's body, how do you like listening to what Adam is saying about the new connection he feels for you?*

AB: *[Adam's Body]: Finally! Finally, someone is asking me how I … how we feel about it!* [Both laughing]

K: *Did you know you were so important for Adam in his life?*

AB: *Not always, but recently I … we* [pauses, searching for words] *… We have had an intuition about it. But Adam is quite stubborn and seems to be listening more to the "Monkey" than to me … us.*

K: *When do you enjoy being together then?*

AB: *When he does not self-doubt himself, when he tunes out of what other minds are thinking and when he focuses on himself. Also, when he pays attention to what we feel and what is important for us and therefore for him.* [Adam: It feels so strange, I don't know what gender I should refer to when referring to my body as a separate entity!]

K: *You were listening to him when he was talking about him being ready and sure... is there something that makes you feel proud of him?*

AB: *Yes, he is brave to be finally paying attention to how we and he feels. Of course, we have heard what the "Monkey" keeps telling him, but this time he did not really care much. Then it was also easier for us to show him how sure he can feel of himself. And he finally paid attention to it.*

K: *How does it look like when you succeed in catching his attention?*

AB: *Then he cooperates more in small things. He does these little*

but important steps that help us keep energy for the whole day, like drinking, eating, taking breaks, having lunch in a calm environment, and resting without feeling guilty, without second-guessing its importance. Then he is also happier and he can enjoy the time more, even doing nothing.

After this conversation, I was surprised how special this experience was. I had never had a chance to speak in such a focused and direct setting to my body before. Anderson explains that "if we slow down and listen to the body, it often signals what to eat, where and with whom to spend time, and what environments and insights nourish its senses with delight in the interest of maintaining health and wellbeing" (Anderson, 2001: 95). What surprised me most was how quickly my body responded after my supervisor asked her questions. I was not aware of the fact that it could be easy for me to understand and focus attention on what it has to say, and to distinguish between my body's and the "Monkey's" voices.

It was also surprising that when speaking *for* my body, my biggest difficulty was finding the proper gender. My body felt distinctively like some other, completely genderless, entity. Since I identify as non-binary, this was not exactly strange or difficult for me to understand. The identification as non-binary often points towards a genderless world, where "gender is over"[51]. What surprised me most, however, was the fact that my body felt the same. We were

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[51] New York-based organization If You Want It, LTD started the "Gender is Over!" website in order to support the fight for gender self-determination and body sovereignty and against gender violence and inequality. The founders argue that "society's emphasis on assigned binary gender roles is harmful, damaging, and often violent." However, they also argue that "people's gender identities and expressions are valid and should be respected" (If You Want It, n.d.).

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eventually in tune; I felt complete. *This* felt strange. After so many years of physical discomfort in a body which I had felt alienated from, after so many years of fighting my physical existence *in* it, I could finally feel at peace. Since it is quite difficult to speak without a preferred pronoun in the Czech language, this situation required some time to find the most suitable form. Using *it* did not feel right at all. Using *I* was not adequate. It is evident from the transcription that in the first few minutes, I was struggling with choosing the right gender pronoun. In the end, I felt a pleasant response from my body when using *we*. It felt most calm and least disturbing. It was also plural, which, as I sensed, was most in accordance with the perspective of my body[52]. However, when speaking *for* my body, I felt *they*[53] did not distinguish as much between me and them as I did. It was almost as if the body did not really care about gender at all, as if it was absolutely inexistent for them. I cannot say the same about myself though, as despite identifying as non-binary, I also feel the need to express my gender socially in a masculine way and therefore prefer using *he* / *his* / *him* pronouns when referring to myself only.

An experience of having a conversation with my body as with a separate—yet not fully separated—intelligent being resulted in a transformative sensation of not being alone. All this time with the "Monkey on my back", my body has been there with me. Not as mere flesh and bones but as an

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[52]   The reference of the *it* pronoun to a thing or a commodity is one of the reasons why non-binary-identified people prefer using *they* / *their* / *them* in English in order to move away from this objectification. The Czech *we* that my body resonated with and that I ended up using when referring to them emphasizes the same principle.

[53]   In this text I will continue to use *we* / *us* and *they* / *their* / *them* when referring to my body as a separate entity, such as in the above-mentioned excerpt of a conversation between me and them.

invaluable, intelligent vessel, allowing the consciousness to inhabit it, allowing my experience of being a human. The stronger my disgust and fear of what the "Monkey" brought for me to look at, the louder the response of my body was. My body was receiving my feelings of resentment in its own way of understanding them, making the demon's mirroring response even more powerful. As Hellstrand, Henriksen, Koistinen, McCormack, and Orning describe, "engaging with the monster opens up the possibility of showing our indebtedness to and our interdependence with others" (Hellstrand et al, 2018: 146). In reference to Margit Shildrick, they explain:

> This type of knowledge has the power to make us monstrous to ourselves, and ensures that there is no easy, one-way look at the monster as object. It also means recognising the Other as a subject in its own right. We may feel individual and yet … we are always already more than one, living with what we might try to categorise as the non-human within, who sustains life." (Hellstrand et al, 2018: 146)

For this reason, the authors invite one "to reconsider the somatechnics of othering and to investigate mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion" as "[t]he mechanics of making monsters … have crucial consequences for the lived conditions of various beings" (Hellstrand et al, 2018: 149). Such intellectual poke made me contemplate the context of responsibility for how my body *feels*, as I realized my tendency to completely ignore its ways of communicating with me about the situation at hand. The illusory idea of an individual self "where self is separate from (purportedly dangerous) others and where the body's boundary is sealed and closed" (Ibid.: 151) was being deconstructed and was fading.

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The progress in mindful and compassionate practice I was making helped me recognize and acknowledge the existence of the "Monkey on my back" as something that pushed me, despite my initial disgust, resentment, and resistance, to accept the need to *pay respect* to the state of my embodiment of feelings without the need to judge or dig into them, without the tendency to see myself (or the body) as someone (or something) who needs to be fixed. Somehow, I was pushed by my life circumstances to walk through the loft of my "Monkey's" mind with a magic potion and a duster. Every day that I sat down to continue in self-discovery through this contemplative experience, I felt as if I had arrived at an abandoned corner of consciousness to clean it up. I was carefully observing the mess and then, taking each object I found there in hand, I slowly cleaned it with care and put it back on the shelf, or decided to put it away and gently let it go.

Inviting the Demon In

In her essay on the topic of posthuman ethics (2014), Line Henriksen contemplates Donna Haraway's advocacy on responsibility of our response to the non-human other. She is asking: "how might one respond to the response of the non[-]human other, if the non[-]human other is considered not to exist; not to be present as such; a virtual possibility, or a figment of one's imagination?" (Henriksen, 2014: 40-41). Henriksen argues that:

> Ethical encounters with spectral others are … not about universal rationality, as within humanism, but are rather concerned with paying attention to bodily discomfort: the feeling that something is wrong; the tingling at the back of

the neck which suggests that responsibility and response may not be something that is solely shared between human beings but, rather, that responses are given even when your back is turned, even when you think you are actually alone. (Henriksen, 2014: 44-45)

After a year of mindfully observing my life with the "Monkey", I am starting to ask the same question. Should I reflect carefully on my own progress of being able to really *look at* what I considered to be oppressive and painful in my life, but more importantly what resonated *in and through* my body, I can see the uncountable series of turn-offs and negative reactions from my side, despite the effort to consciously accept its presence in my life. I have to admit that even after months of my mindful compassionate practice towards my embodied experience, my *gazes* could hardly be considered respectful. Even though I have tried, the way I rather *peeped in* with fear and horror at the very beginning of my attempt to mindfully look at what was happening in the emotional realm of my embodied experience is incomparable with the way I am able to pay attention now, after almost a year of conscious practicing.

My current curiosity and sometimes even passionate interest allows for deep "monstrous encounters" (Henriksen et al, 2017) with the unknown which often induce anxiety and fear. However, with more practice I am able to "stay with the trouble" (Haraway, as cited in Henriksen et al, 2017: 7) and not turn my look back from the site of the trigger. Some months ago, despite my intention to be compassionate, my stare was still somewhat the intruding gaze of a hunter and my energetic field surely must have vibrated frequencies of fear and danger. As Henriksen explains in a reference to the works of feminist scholars Margit Shildrick and Rosi Braidotti: "the very hunt for spectres is one of yearning for

nearness as well as distance: come, so that I may chase you away while keeping you within sight! Stay so that I may ask you to leave! There is discomfort and potential violence in this greeting as well as yearning and desire" (Henriksen, 2014: 46).

Is my willingness to look at what I considered demonic in my life a result of compassionate practice towards myself and others? Perhaps it is a welcoming gift resulting from such practice, or maybe *this* eventually is the very aspect of lovingkindness I was truly hoping to develop: kindness not only dedicated to the human subject but to the life itself; one that does not exclude the "ontologically uncertain" (Henriksen et al, 2017: 6). The fearful thoughts of an invisible scary intruder, the resentful feelings I kept toward the image of an oppressive beast—they all are slowly losing their triggers as if fading away. From time to time, an image of a sad "Monkey" pops up in my mind. A silhouette of a ghostly creature with no face. When I look closer, I do not see more than just this. The image looks static but it is not. When I intend to feel how *it* feels, when I allow my compassion and empathy to open up, I can sense the stormy weather and icy boundary that intend to separate us but never truly does. For the distance between us is just illusory and "can never be absolute as the human—as any other creature—is never distinct but entangled with her, [his, or their] surroundings" (Henriksen, 2014: 46).

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One day, during my evening session, I finally invite the "Monkey" in. For the first time, the invitation to occupy the body together with me feels "real". I hear a voice in my head saying:

Welcome. What did you come to teach me?

I can feel the body responding immediately. The painful area on my back between my shoulder blades shivers and starts to pulse. I wait for an answer but can only hear that voice again, asking another question instead:

How can I help you?

The response that follows is a powerful one. The pulsing area on my back starts to act in a much faster rhythm, accompanied by the sensation of a growing air balloon inside my chest. It is a nice feeling, though. It feels soft and warm, as if an icy fence around my heart area was melting. Something entered my body as if invisibly but surprisingly, I feel lighter. This paradox of merging with a dense energy and resulting lightness is perplexing. What is going to happen next? I've never got so far before. The fear usually takes over and stops me from going further. This time, I continue sensing the merge. Some parts of my body, where I often experienced pain, are now as if they are being awakened from the sleep mode. I sit a few minutes longer, which end up being two hours. Nothing else seems to be happening, but this nothing is such a wonderful experience to take part in.

I enjoy this art of being no-thing. I cherish these precious moments. They become sacred as I tune in with the rhythm of the breath. In and out, I observe the inner stillness.

Overwhelmed by the energizing feeling of the encounter, I intend to slowly open my eyes. I feel disoriented. I get up and reach for a glass of water in the hope it will clear my senses. It makes me feel sleepy instead. I sleep long and

surprisingly undisturbed, and in the morning my body feels exhausted and slightly bruised, as if I was doing some demanding muscle exercise the day before. "This must be the 'Monkey' in my body", is my first thought in the morning. I stay calm. I hear a voice in my head, talking as if on behalf of me:

Calm down, I will not expel you.

The voice does not speak to me. It must then speak to the "Monkey" inside the body. I do not know who the voice belongs to. Is it the body speaking? I do not feel a need to interrogate it. My exhaustion is bearable. I can still feel the lightness, as if swimming in the sea—the body hurts from the muscle strain, yet it also feels purified by being washed and energized by the salt spa.

Of Monsters and Men

In a similar manner to that of astrology, monsters and ghosts are viewed as a product of our irrational imagination. Yet, if we are serious about talking to ghosts in public, we do not only risk being viewed as mere fools, as is often the case with an astrologer's romantic passion for interpreting the "language of the stars" (Willis & Curry, 2004: 1). When speaking of speaking *to* ghosts, we run the risk of being viewed as those of a "disordered or overwrought brain" (Castle, as cited in Henriksen, 2014: 39). And still, ghosts and monsters, as well as astrology, share a much longer history as an inseparable part of human consciousness than the so-called "enlightened" rationalists are willing to admit.

When introducing Derrida's concept of *hauntology*—"a pun on haunting and ontology," Henriksen, Bülow,

and Kvistad explain its relationship to deconstructionism and its argument that "nothing enjoys a pure presence. Instead, 'day' is defined by not being 'night'" the same way as "'the self' is defined by not being 'other'" (Henriksen et al, 2017: 5-6). Such negative definition-making results in the production of "devalued others … that nonetheless haunt the first and primary category, which cannot understand itself without its haunting opposite" (Ibid.: 6). And so we end up being haunted by our intention to define the other as non-human, while paradoxically, by pointing our finger we have already created the complementary part of what actually *defines* us as human in the first place. It eventually brings us to a conclusion offered by Hellstrand, Henriksen, Koistinen, McCormack, and Orning in reference to what the feminist scholar Gayatri Spivak refers to as *critical intimacy*—"suggesting that unexpected encounters may trigger recognition in spite of assumed differences" (as cited in Hellstrand et al, 2018: 152):

> Difference makes being possible, not as a thing that can be owned, manipulated or harmed, but as the means through which self and other are constituted. This sense of intimate being with others queerly orientates communal belonging away from Kantian, Hegelian and Lacanian separateness and domination towards the recognition of how our bodies and selves are tied to each other even when they feel separate. (Hellstrand et al, 2018: 151)

This is a crucial thought when considering the consequences of the production of normative boundaries in contemporary psychiatric discourse which, by making a line between sane and insane, creates a line between normal and disordered, between human and monstrous. "[T]he figure of the monster and the monstrous [therefore] can be used as an

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analytical tool to address current concerns about disrupted, unstable or uncontrollable embodiment" (Henriksen et al, 2017: 7). As Henriksen, Bülow, and Kvistad explain:

> This is especially the case when relating to precarious and vulnerable bodies, which should be understood in the broadest sense possible—we are, as feminist scholars continuously point out, all vulnerable, though some live in more obviously vulnerable contexts than others. (Henriksen et al, 2017: 7)

The importance of "an ethics of responsibility towards that which does not exist according to traditional western ontology" (Henriksen, 2016: 13-14) cannot be emphasized more. Monsters, ghosts, and other liminal beings are guides that can help one "think and imagine both the world and ethics differently" (Ibid.: 15). In reference to Derrida and Haraway, Henriksen elaborates on the ethical urgency to respond instead of having a mechanical predictable reaction, on the need to stay open to the disruptive no-presence of the ghost—the "hospitality towards the monstrous *arrivant / revenant*" (Ibid.: 39). And so, after reading the highly inspiring text on *Monstrous Encounters* during the Mercurial retrograde phase when the veil is thin, I end up contemplating the same thoughts:

> If being part of a complex, entangled world, which is not 'made for us', makes us both haunted and monstrous, then might this have more to do with unrealistic anthropocentric expectations about control than about monstrosity itself? If we are always already monstrous as part of our being in the world, then perhaps being haunted and monstrous is not as horrible as the traditional anthropocentric worldview would have it. (Henriksen et al, 2017: 6)

The crucial question I am asking touches the creative power of our imagination and its relation to responsibility. If we agree with what the "Native / First-Nation wisdom keepers, interpreters of sacred … texts, and prominent ecologist / life scientist" (Glass-Coffin & Kiiskeentum, 2012: 114) keep telling us: "that when we sound our voices, we create energies that are experienced by those around as feelings and emotions"; that the power of our limitless imaginative powers is the seed of our creation; that "we create our own realities and experiences" (Ibid.: 116); then any "rational" argument against the product of our "overactive … 'infernal imagination'" (as cited in Nemerov, 2013: 527) as non-existent is simply weak. On the other hand, the acknowledgement of such creative powers also points in the direction of essential ethics of responsibility for us all. What does such responsibility entail? If "the unfolding of the cosmos itself is based on reciprocal relations" (Glass-Coffin & Kiiskeentum, 2012: 114), then the figure of a haunting ghost across time and space reveals the "relationality" of ontology: "The spectre points beyond the moment. … Its hauntings are about that which is yet to come, that which has been and that which may well never take place at all" (Henriksen, 2016: 37).

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When the evening session comes, I again invite the "Monkey" in, only to realize it is already there. The pressure weakens. There is no need for combat. There is no enemy to fight against. I sit and breathe. The voices are silent. Nothing happens. The experience of nothing happening is pleasant and warm, for a change. I welcome it.

After a while, a doubt comes to mind, as it always does. This one, though, is disturbing and repetitive. Again, the

revenant "walks again" (Derrida, as cited in Henriksen, 2016: 20). It somehow attracts my attention, too. I decide to open my eyes and contemplate the state of being for a while. It concerns the fear of the monstrous in me and the very act of monstering others—projecting monsters out of fear. For if "[t]he monster not only comes to eat you [but] also threatens to make you a monster yourself—or worse: to bring out the monster that is already there, haunting your very being" (Henriksen et al, 2017: 7), does it mean that the "Monkey" is scared of me too? And if it is, who then was the first to let the monster out?

TOWARDS SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

The hybrid body of the monster is a reminder and a map of transformative potentials of relevance to an unstable 21st century.

(Henriksen et al, 2017: 8)

This book was supposed to be a story. Despite its fragmentation and incoherence, with no clear end and no clear beginning, it is still a story. Mercury—the celestial archetype of Hermes—quickly journeyed through the fiery, earthy, and airy parts of the zodiac only to station retrograde in the sign of Pisces, slowing down in the deeply Neptunian realm of the twelfth house archetype[54] where the veil is thinnest and death meets birth. In the depth of the Piscean waters, the logic of words does not apply. There are no earthy rules. The darkness surrounds, the sound gets distorted. Yet the response of a touch is immediate, sending the signal out as a ripple effect in all directions.

My writing changes with the uneven rhythm of planetary cycles. I dive into the depths where fear and stillness both reflect their essence in its purity, where looking into the eye of the demon brings us back to our heart. Down here, the linear time makes no sense. Life is embeddedness, "music of the spheres" (Jones, 2015: 5) and "a field of resonance" (Anderson, 2001: 96). There are no clear boundaries in the realm of subconscious. The individual and collective merge. I become We, and We become One.

And you can't break the chasing ghosts, so much so
When they come back but never ask
At your side, at your soul
When they come back but never ask[55]

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[54] See Chart 1: The Astrological Sign-House System.

[55] The verses in this chapter are excerpts from the *Trials of the Past*

One morning I wake up with a deep sigh of surrender. There is no point in fighting against the current. In the "haunted" house of the sign of Pisces, oceans will take us all. I sit and breathe. I observe the inner stillness before it is ruffled by a murky silhouette, popping up in front of me as if on a virtual screen. A space opens up, inviting me in with a beacon of light. I look in front of me and meet the eyes looking back. At the same moment as I shiver with fear, a calm look changes quickly into a frightened stare. Am I going to hear that voice again? A thought comes in.

Where is the "Monkey"?

After a while, the "mirror" in front of me disappears. I continue to sit and breathe. A wave of calm returns, wrapping me up in a warm embrace. I hear no voice this time, only the silent sound of a burbling rivulet, euphoniously rushing through the veins of my embodied space as an energizing stream.

And the ghoulish entities
They come floating through the wall
From the past
And they're somewhere right before you

The haunting ghost, the demon, the monster walks in unexpectedly, offering a deep transformative "monstrous encounter", bringing a glimpse of a doubt, a thought, a vision of "how the world could be different—and how difference is haunted by the spectre of the monstrous" (Henriksen et al, 2017: 4). For if uniqueness and "difference

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lyrics, written and produced by Aaron Jerome Foulds (2011), also professionally known as Sbtrkt.

spells inferiority", as Rosi Braidotti argues, "it acquires both essentialist and lethal connotations for people who get branded as 'others'. These are the sexualized, racialized, and naturalized others, who are reduced to the less than human status of disposable bodies" (Braidotti, as cited in Henriksen, 2014: 43). In reference to Foucault, a collective of Monster theorists explain the technologies of monstering in detail: "processes through which certain bodies are produced as objects of biopolitical knowledge, control and discipline" such as "interred, expelled [and] violated" refugees in the current political context (Hellstrand et al, 2018: 149).

As Henriksen, Bülow, and Kvistad conclude in reference to Kristeva, "the ontologically uncertain should not be excluded from academic thought" for "the process of abjection signifies the continuous establishment and production of normative … boundaries between same and other, [sane and insane,] normal and monstrous" (Henriksen et al, 2017: 6). Thus, there is no point in exorcising what the ghost, the monster, the disturbing presence of the liminal other comes to guide us through. The line between fear and awe is thin. The monstrous in us is the uncontrollable disturbance "through which one can reimagine this world and the creatures who live here" (Henriksen et al, 2017: 7).

In the essay *Seeing Ghosts*, Alexander Nemerov asks: "Can an unprofessional method born of intuition and sentiment … somehow yield a valid insight about [the future or] the past?" (Nemerov, 2013: 527). My curiosity and determination reached that way. This helped me get to know my "Monkey" better, and through that to get to know my not-self. The encounter of meeting the monstrous and the ghostly in me—that which is "never present as such" (Derrida, as cited in Henriksen, 2016: 37) makes me, paradoxically, more of a complete human. An expanded version of that which once has been, "which is yet to come"

and that "which may well never take place at all" (Ibid.) yet still, "disrupt[s] and disturb[s] presence with its absence" (Ibid.: 38). The unfulfilled promise of the unresolved past and the uncertain future—the "unlooked-for right there where we can never quite see it" (Nemerov, 2013: 529), the impermanent yet returning forces, coming back only to be acknowledged as such, to vanish in order to come back again with a different tone, different mask, receiving a different name.

Naming demons, whichever form they have, and seeing beyond their mask allows for the potentiality of once-repressed forces being brought back to life, a potentiality for breaking "the [mould] of our objective, omniscient, colonial" and patriarchal lens (Glass-Coffin & Kiiskeentum, 2012: 114). The revelations of such an experience might be truly Uranian—uniquely liberating. For if these forces—the desires of the world in any of their *nameless* forms—are "repressed, it is because every position of desire, no matter how small, is capable of calling into question the established order of a society" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983: 118), the established order of our everyday realities. Seeing through the veil of our own suffering with the awakened eye empowers us to reveal the *dukkha* we are embedded in as a collective, as cultures, as civilizations. Dissolving the boundary between (not-)self and other, experiencing *being* as *relational*, strips us and our bodies of all indoctrinated normative selves and false Is.

As Bonnie Glass-Coffin and Kiiskeentum argue, "[l]ife as we know it is far from a static given. Instead, it is based on giving and receiving; an exchange of energies that occurs at every level, from the metabolic to the evolutionary" (Glass-Coffin & Kiiskeentum, 2012: 114). Through becoming still and listening to the embodied conversations of life within and without, we can slowly start seeing glimpses of things

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in a way that would otherwise remain invisible. Through the practice of becoming still, in an attempt to listen to the body and their ways of communicating, I realize that there is always something to be discovered beyond my first reaction to fear. Through meeting the eye of the "demonized" other, through accepting the unmasked "guide" for who it has become, I am consciously stepping in to break the ice of disturbing silence between us. In a clumsy and silent embodied conversation, I intend to break down the cold wall I had built in my blind fervour to separate us, only to later realize that it cannot be done. As described by Hellstrand, Henriksen, Koistinen, McCormack, and Orning: "bodily integrity means living with others in the self, as well as with others in what we might call outside the self" (Hellstrand et al, 2018: 145). It entails "recognising the [other] as a subject in its own right" (Ibid.: 146); "coming close to difference that does not allow difference to be categorised or hierarchised, but instead undoes the very notion of self and other, normal and abnormal, subject and object" (Ibid.: 152). The "enlightened" scholar in me, the descendant of our Fathers colonizers, the rational—yet emotionally numb— investigator, the modern anthropologist trying to objectify the boundary between human and non-human, attempting to cut through what is inherently intertwined, is being mindfully and compassionately disarmed. Humbled, he now rests in awe and wonder, realizing that the "Monkey" and all his demons are parts of his story as much as he is a part of theirs. As a signpost, both fictional and real, they "[open] up for epistemological and ontological undoings" (Hellstrand et al, 2018: 153); they point to as yet unexplored paths of narration; they "generate alternative lines, which cross the ground in unexpected ways" (Ahmed, 2006: 20); they make space for new kinds of empowered writing.

AFTERWORD
LEOŠ ZATLOUKAL

Therapeutic Experience as a Path

When I was approached by the publisher with a request to review the manuscript of Adam Wiesner's book *Monkey on My Back: An Autoethnographic Narrative of a Therapeutic Experience*, I agreed without hesitation. Several things at once raised my interest. Above all, it was the name of the author, whom I knew as a participant in a long-term psychotherapeutic training in solution-focused therapy, where I had the opportunity to accompany him as a lecturer in his learning process. Given the fact that I know Adam as someone who is thoughtful, well-read, and at the same time very practically focused and inspiring, his name was for me a guarantee of an interesting read. In addition to the author's name, I was attracted to the reference to the "therapeutic experience". As my professional interest revolves mainly around therapy and other forms of facilitating conversations (supervision, coaching, counselling), I could hardly resist an offer to look into the therapeutic experience of someone who is open to sharing it. I was also captured by the term "autoethnography", which I consider to be a very interesting field of research. Above all this, I was captivated by the reference to … the Monkey. But more about that later.

If I were to begin by referring to the "therapeutic experience" as a topic and to autoethnography as a method of choice, then this book represents a multi-layered view of a therapeutic (healing) experience which can be understood more broadly than an experience with (formal)

psychotherapy. The text offers a valuable combination of several positions that the author occupies in the story: he and his experience are the subject of his narration; he is a participant in a therapeutic conversation as a client / patient; yet he himself is also a therapist (a person who has an insight into how therapy is performed and how it works) as well as an engaged researcher who examines and reflects upon his experience from various perspectives. This probably explains the above-mentioned multi-layered nature of the work. It is clear from the text that Adam went through difficult experiences. And he wrote about them. Some research suggests that writing about severe experience alone may have a therapeutic effect (Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016). However, such writing seldom enriches other people, and this enrichment is not even a goal of such writing. When Adam was writing this book, he may have also experienced certain therapeutic effects. Nevertheless, thanks to the honest reflection of his story, he at the same time brings inspiration to other people—and this is a relatively rare connection.

As a solution-focused (SFBT) therapist and lecturer, I was especially interested in those aspects of the story that were related to the training and therapy the author has undergone. In my opinion, the book documents very well three elements of the therapeutic transformative experience, as follows.

The process of change is highly individualized: many valuable insights, experiences, and procedures that the author addresses in the book create a unique—and I dare to say—unrepeatable matrix of change. I believe the key is not hidden in the question "WHAT?" (as in the sense of what helped Adam on his path), since it will most likely be difficult to transfer to another context. In my opinion, it is more important to examine the question "HOW?", as in the

ways the hero in the presented narrative discovered and explored unique "solutions" for unique situations. In such a focused reading of Adam's story lies the most valuable inspiration for understanding the therapeutic change.

The process of change is recursive (circular): like the mythical snake *Ouroboros* that devours its own tail, the process of change is recursive in the sense that it includes the human experience in its entirety, but in a new framework of resources (Keeney, 2009). Thus, it is not a linear—only forward-moving—process, but rather a spiral—forward and backward—process with some elements of chaotic dynamics (Keeney, 2009; Siegel, 2010). Given the fact that the author reached for interpretive frameworks from various spiritual traditions, I would like to offer a biblical analogy that corresponds to the author's name: according to the biblical story, Adam is the name God gave to the first human. The name actually means "human" in translation, and in Hebrew it is associated with *adamah*, which means "ground" or "earth", so it is stated that human is "of the earth". With Adam also begins a circular movement of humanity away from God, after Adam and Eve come to believe the sophisticated lie of the Serpent that God wants to "fool" them, and they both eat from the "Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil" (which, by the way, is a nice metaphor in action for the origin of the "desire-machines" and the manifestation of the "desire repression" mentioned by the author in the book). The biblical narrative then continues with the completion of the circular movement towards God, culminating in the coming of Jesus Christ (Jesus is described in Paul's letters as the second Adam), who transcends the duality of "good" and "evil" by surrendering completely to love (perhaps the author's emphasis on the meditation of compassion and lovingkindness finds a certain parallel

here). Some variation of the circular scheme can be found in most spiritual traditions, and the book suggests that even stories of personal transformation follow this circular logic.

The process of change can be explained differently within various interpretive frameworks: as I have emphasized in the previous section, the multi-layered interpretive frameworks allow for a rich view of a therapeutic change and of the possibilities for grasping and understanding this change. It is known that participants in psychotherapy gradually form their own concept or explanation of the process of change, and that the concord between the client's theory of change and the therapist's theory of change plays an important role in forming a therapeutic alliance (Duncan et al., 2004). This publication shows that the client's theory of change may not be singular nor strictly coherent—and that it may even be an advantage.

In conclusion, I would like to return to the Monkey, which appears in the title of the book and which immediately caught my attention. To confess, I myself have a photo of a "meditating" monkey displayed on my laptop screen, only to remind me from time to time that my "monkey" mind (with all its restlessness) can at least occasionally rest in silence. At the same time, it is a reminder of an ancient legend about the Monkey King (Cheng'en, 1993). In this legend, we can find numerous parallels with Adam's story, and perhaps with the story of every Adam-human who is confronted with a "Monkey" in a similar manner. In this ancient story, the Monkey is born with unique abilities and, somewhat smugly, takes the name "Handsome Monkey King". Subsequently, however, the Monkey understands that it has to learn if it wants to become immortal and thus becomes a disciple of Master Subodhi. Named Sun Wukong

(the one who understood emptiness), it learns immortality, but it also becomes very arrogant and causes a great deal of suffering to others. The Jade Emperor first wants to deal with the Monkey by trickery—he offers Sun the seemingly important function of a Celestial groom. Everything works well until Sun discovers that the office is the least important of the Celestial offices. It then causes a havoc in Heaven and after defeating the King Li and upsetting the Peach Banquet, the Monkey is eventually taken captive in the Mountain of Five Elements as it loses a bet with the Supreme Buddha. Sun remains imprisoned until it is released by the monk Tripitaka, who is visiting India in order to secure the key Buddhist scriptures. It then becomes one of Tripitaka's guides and, after many adventures, they succeed in bringing the sacred scriptures to China. The entire time, the character of the Monkey represents a combination of impulsivity and arrogance together with willingness, kindness, and loyalty. Furthermore, Sun gradually finds its life purpose and its place in the world—it is no longer abused, imprisoned, attacked by warriors, or enslaved by its own arbitrariness. With a new mission, the Monkey can finally invest its abilities into something that transcends it, something that brings good to others.

It seems to me that the narrator of this story has experienced—and perhaps is still experiencing—similar vicissitudes with his Monkey: he may have tried to imprison, control, or kill it, but at the same time he may have discovered in it a faithful and powerful ally who demands respect and kind treatment. The story of Sun Wukong ends with the pilgrims setting out on the return journey. Similarly, this book ends "on the road," or with the words from the legend of the Monkey King: "I used to be certainty and I became a question."
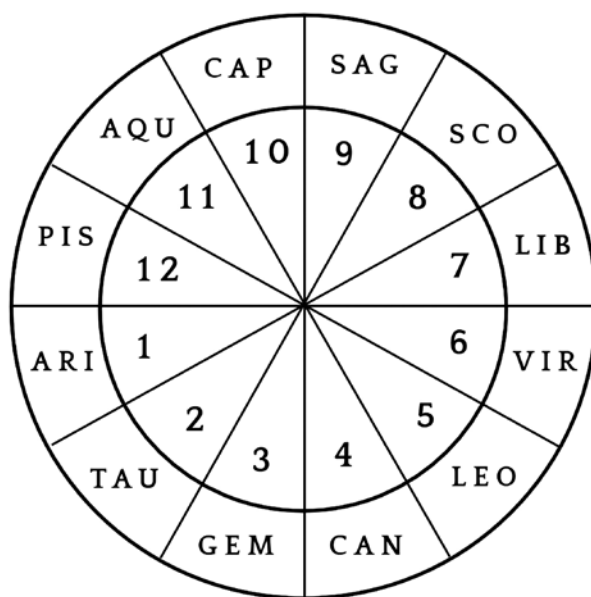
CHARTS

CHART 1

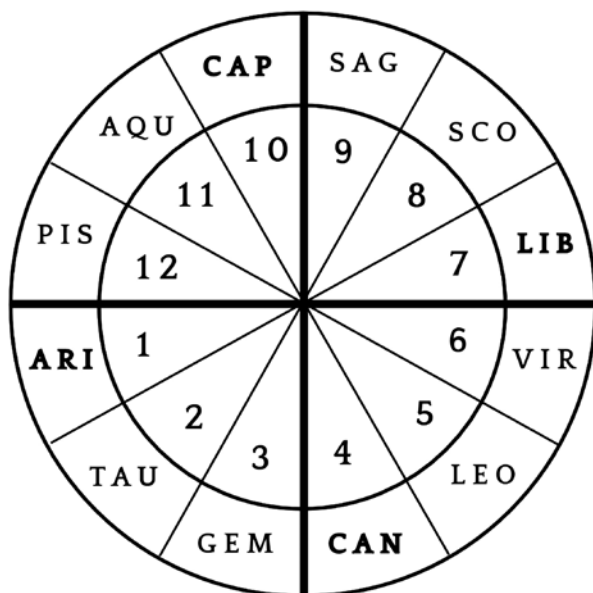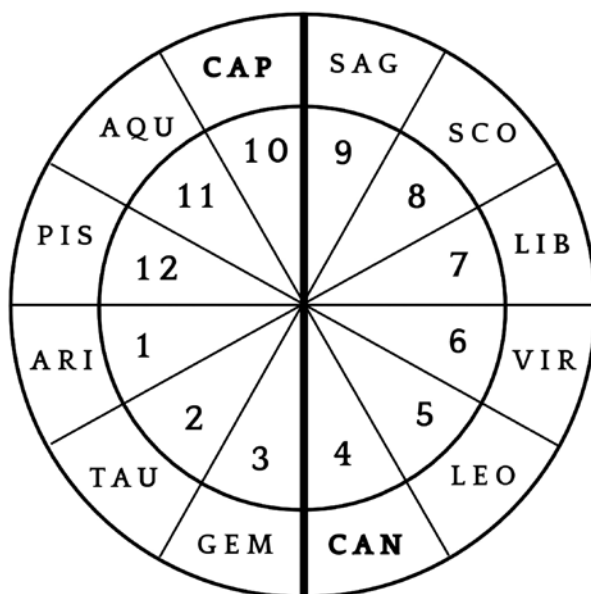The Astrological Sign-House System

CHART 2
The Cardinal Cross

CHART 3
The Cancer-Capricorn Axis

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ADAM WIESNER

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