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ABSTRACT:

New Age practices and their ritualized actions have been primarily based on the creation of sacred spaces through immediate interaction, proximity, affect, healing, bodily engagement, and emotional exchange. In the COVID-19 pandemic context, however, such spiritual intimacy has been challenged if not compromised and New Age practitioners have faced the necessity to become ritually and spiritually innovative and establish new forms of sacred spaces to accommodate their performances. Drawing on long-term fieldwork on the theme of New Age spirituality and healing in Lisbon, Portugal and Athens, Greece, this paper offers an account of how New Age spiritual creativity is performed in the context of the pandemic, while exploring how different yet intertwined sacred spaces are created, and the role that (auto)ethnographic embodiment and research knowledge plays in this process.

KEYWORDS:

New Age spirituality, COVID-19, auto-ethnography, sacred space, Portugal, Greece, remote spirituality, spiritual proximity

Since the first COVID-19 pandemic-related lockdown in Portugal and Greece, which began in March 2020 for both countries, practices of New Age spirituality and healing have maintained their popularity within the Portuguese and Greek landscape of contemporary religiosity.¹ These practices range from yoga, exchange of healing energy, collective meditation, and reiki, to spiritual meetings with shamanic drumming, ecstatic dancing, sound therapy sessions and East Asian healing practices such as tai chi and qigong, among others. It is mainly those practices of non-institutionalized, individual-based forms of religiosity, which can be perceived as “spirituality” and characterized as “spiritual,” that individuals in my two field sites of Lisbon and Athens, the capital cities of Portugal and Greece respectively, have continued to frequent and perform. Amidst the pandemic and due to the actual and symbolic requirements concerning sensory and embodied proximity, New Age practitioners faced the need to adapt the format of their spiritual attendance. Such revisions principally occurred by placing more emphasis on “homemade spirituality,” namely spirituality that is practiced in one’s own private space, and by moving their ritual and spiritual performances online.

At the same time, for the anthropologist who studies New Age spirituality and healing during the COVID-19 global pandemic crisis, one of the main methodological tools is auto-ethnographic narratives. According to anthropologist Deborah Reed-Danahay,

auto-ethnography synthesizes both a postmodern ethnography, in which the realist conventions and objective observer position of standard ethnography have been called into question, and a postmodern autobiography, in which the notion of the coherent, individual self has been similarly called into question. The term has a double sense—referring either to the ethnography of one’s own group or to autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest.”²

When dealing with New Age practices that are physically embodied and spiritually engaged, and which also involve the creative negotiation of ritual performance, emotions, and sensory perception, anthropologists frequently need to use their own bodies, minds, and spirits to understand profoundly the practices they study. With the usual ethnographic methods compromised because of COVID-19, auto-ethnography can replace “anthropological detachment with engagement and embrace the understanding that comes through surrendering to the unknown.”³ Having cancelled the fieldwork plans I had scheduled before the pandemic outbreak, I initially felt frustrated that I could not keep up with my anthropological flow of duties. I realized that I needed to follow my interlocutors’ paradigm, adapt to the new circumstances accordingly, and move my ethnographic research online by observing and participating in virtual groups in which New Age healers and spiritual teachers offer their services and help. At the same time, I knew that I also had to draw on my own auto-ethnographic experiences with New Age spirituality, keeping always in mind that, as social anthropologist Judith Okely put it, using auto-ethnography in one’s writing draws on self-awareness and not on self-narcissism.⁴

Based on (auto-)ethnography carried out between March 2020 to February 2022, one of the main objectives of my comparative study has been to study the role of New Age spirituality in two countries where Christianity (Catholic in Portugal and Orthodox in Greece) is the denominational religion, and which have in recent years gone through socio-economic crises. The scope of this article is not to provide a comparative account between the two cities where I conducted my anthropological fieldwork *per se*. The practice of New Age spirituality is surprisingly similar between Portugal and Greece, therefore the variability in spiritual attitudes regarding COVID-19 that are mentioned in the article are not grounded on differences concerning my interlocutors’ national identities but rather on distinctions of personal beliefs and practices. Moreover, the ethnographic present utilized in this article coincides with the period when the pandemic was at its peak in both Portugal and Greece and, consequently, the article demonstrates

the different types of sacred spaces created by New Age practitioners through auto-ethnographic narratives of experiences within that particular period. During that time, I managed to speak with and/or observe virtually about fifty Portuguese and Greek individuals and ten New Age groups in Lisbon and Athens, equivalently. These were either contacts I already knew or new spiritual practitioners and groups I discovered ethnographically during the pandemic, both men and women, with an age range between their late twenties and early seventies, with a mostly middle-class background, and who have been practicing New Age spirituality actively.

This article discusses the ritual and spiritual creativity of New Age practitioners in Lisbon and Athens in relation to the pandemic, and the multiple dynamic physical, ritual, digital, spiritual and/or ethnographic sacred spaces involved. The digitalization of spirituality as well as new forms of spiritual proximity are examined, while thinking about how ethnographers need to re-configure their research, taking into consideration the sometimes-conflicting COVID-19 beliefs, stances, and practices between themselves and their interlocutors. Through mainly auto-ethnographic examples and virtual anthropological observation and participation, I demonstrate why and how these spaces are inhabited, explore the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic in Portugal and Greece forced New Age spiritual practitioners to renegotiate, readapt and create new sacred spaces, and analyze the resulting transformations of how both the New Age practitioners and the ethnographer conceive of and ritualize (sacred) space.

The main thesis of the article, consequently, which is developed more thoroughly in the following sections, is that the COVID-19 pandemic compelled the practitioners of New Age spirituality and healing in Lisbon and Athens, as well as the ethnographer, to be creative in how they approach and handle their rituals, spirituality, and methodology, through generating and moving in-between and beyond (sacred) spaces, and trying to live with a different and more complex proximity – or lack of. More specifically, I identify the existence of four spaces – and have structured the article accordingly – which may appear unrelated at first, yet they are in fact

intertwined in this process of creativity and transformation of New Age practices within the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first space is the one of “nature” and of “home”. These two are placed together as a process of continuity but also rupture since, especially during lockdowns, the ritual performances of New Age spirituality and healing moved from natural landscapes to people’s houses. The space of home, that is, was infused with a sacredness that was previously mainly acquired through being in touch with the spirituality found in nature – a popular belief among New Age practitioners. The second space is what I identify as “remote”: this is a more symbolic space that is directly linked to the issue of sensorial proximity, or to be more precise, to the physical, affective, and emotional distance created between New Age healers and their clients amidst the pandemic. This remoteness is incorporated in both homemade spirituality and space, as well as in the third space analyzed below, the digital one. Digital space incorporates practicing New Age at home, while being physically and sensorially isolated from other practitioners. In this case, as in the homemade and remote spaces, it is the creative adaptation of spiritual proximity that renders New Age practitioners capable of ritually performed, spiritually feel, and affectively embody more efficiently, under the conditions imposed by COVID-19. The last space is the auto-ethnographic one. This is a space the permeates all the above, through the interactions between the ethnographer and the research collaborators within homemade, remote, and digital spaces. This auto-ethnographic space challenged methodological approaches of individuals and their practices, pointing out to an urgent need for auto-ethnography in the study of rituals, spirituality and creativity during the pandemic, while re-establishing the importance of the status of auto-ethnography, a methodology which is still undervalued if not ignored by many scholars to date. Ultimately, it is the flexible mobility among those four spaces that signify the creative turn of New Age spirituality and healing towards a transformation of practices, sacred space, and proximity.

HOMEMADE AND NATURE SPIRITUALITY: RE-INVENTING SACRED

SPACE

It is a fieldwork afternoon in Lisbon, some years before the pandemic, and I am witnessing one of my main Portuguese interlocutors, Maria, a woman in her forties and very active in the New Age scene of Lisbon, perform one of her typical face-to-face ritual healings.⁵ She prepares the room by burning incense and lighting a candle in front of the image of one of her shaman teachers. Having asked the healing recipient to bring a water bottle with her, she puts it next to the photo, the candle, the burning incense, the energy stones, and the images of angels that are all on a table. Then, she invites the angels and other spiritual guides to help during the healing. While the healing recipient rests on a massage table, she performs her bioenergetic and shamanic healing, as she calls it, passing her hands around the recipient's body in soft movements. At the end, she asks the person to drink three times from the water, which has in the meantime been ritually sacralized, as Maria explains, and to repeat this at home every morning, until the water is finished.

A week later, Maria invites me to the Convento de Capuchos, a former monastery turned into a cultural space on the periphery of Lisbon, which she has been visiting frequently for her ritual healing sessions, as she considers it a sacred space. We arrive there, and we sit close to a mosaic icon depicting the Virgin Mary, with whom she feels a strong spiritual bond. She closes her eyes, while inviting her spirit guides, and asks me to do the same: in that way, she clarifies, we can create a protecting ritual circle around us. We finish the ritual with Maria singing one of her favorite mantras: she always tries to be creative and combine a variety of spiritual traditions with artistic means of expression, such as spiritual painting, New Age singing and shamanic drumming.

Since the pandemic started, healing rituals such as the above were mostly compromised. Maria, however, continued to visit green spaces and practice her spirituality, either by herself or in the company of other New Age healers and friends of hers. At the same time, she utilized virtual means, frequently organizing Facebook live sessions on various New Age themes. She advertised, for example, on her Facebook page a workshop on the ritualism of the uterus and motherhood she later organized with another spiritual healer and friend. The advertising text included phrases such as: “your interior space is sacred”, addressing the workshop “for you who want to embrace Love, Creativity and Happiness. In nature, honoring the familiar divine bond.” She also shared videos on her YouTube channel, in which she usually performed her shamanic drumming while singing. In her own words, taken from an interview I conducted with her long before COVID-19, but which belief she still holds to date: “I have always facilitated sacred spaces, and I use shamanic drumming, mantras and other creative means, to accompany the rituals, to heal people”.⁶ For Maria, before but also during the pandemic, the creation of sacred space has been crucial; and since she considers nature to be sacred, she has always tried to utilize spaces outdoors to perform her ritual healing. The only difference during the pandemic period is that due to people’s hesitation for direct personal contact, sometimes her ritual sessions have moved online, creating a different form of sacred space that escapes the boundaries of social proximity and becomes, according to her, “more energy-related and spiritual.”⁷

As with Maria, most of the New Age practitioners I talked to in both Lisbon and Athens during the COVID-19 crisis placed emphasis on the importance of creating sacred spaces, since they facilitated their rituals, therapeutic or otherwise. Due to the restrictions in social mobility, especially during the stricter period of the pandemic lockdowns, visiting places in natural environments had become difficult. Instead, homemade spirituality, which had already been practiced extensively before the pandemic, gained greater popularity. Homemade spirituality holds the literal significance of practicing spirituality within the private boundaries of home.

Therein, my interlocutors felt socially and spiritually secure and free, as I have been told many times, to innovate, give and receive energy and healing, amalgamate different New Age practices, and produce their individualized sacred itinerary without any fear of being infected by COVID-19 due to potentially dangerous physical proximity.

Homemade spirituality and homemade sacred space can be considered to be directly linked to and be part of what scholars have characterized as vernacular religiosity.⁸ Individually, as part of their homemade ritual and spiritual New Age routines, the majority of my interlocutors began to incorporate New Age spirituality more intensely during their everyday routines. They meditated as often as they could, practiced yoga, tai chi and qigong, read mind-body-spirit books, used objects such as crystals and spiritual charms, applied the feng shui principals in their house for positive energy, burned incense and *palo santo* sticks, and listened to New Age music. They also created, as Angelos, a Greek fifty-year-old New Age practitioner in Athens explained, “little ritual corners at home, with crystals, a Buddha wooden little statue, and tarot cards; I have been going there to feel better, to heal, to pray, and to be in touch with my spiritual guides and forget all about COVID-19.”⁹ Judging from my interlocutors’ similar attitudes towards homemade spirituality during the pandemic, such vernacular ritualistic performances aided them considerably with regard to their mental health state, boosted their immune system and made them feel more bodily shielded against a potential attack from any type of virus, “including the one that wears a corona” as Helena, a Portuguese woman in her forties, jokingly put it.¹⁰

Cultural theorist and ecophilosopher Adrian Ivakhiv has defined sacred space as:

a space through interaction, over time, between humans and specific extra-human actors and processes; [moreover] . . . sacred places, like all places, are not empty vessels or voids. . . . Rather, places and landscapes are constituted in and through histories of human-nonhuman interaction in specific biophysical and material topographies and ecologies.¹¹

Before the pandemic, there were two primary forms of sacred space in the context of which New Age practitioners in Lisbon and Athens used to perform their spirituality. First, the biophysical, material and spiritual topography of nature, where they performed their spiritual healing and established human-nonhuman interactions, since, to quote one of my interlocutors, “it is so important to create a ritual, a sacred space through nature... to have, in that sense, a special spiritual connection with this world that we live in, but also the spiritual world”.¹² Secondly, homemade spirituality, which has always been a popular pathway of practicing New Age spirituality at one’s own time and private space, creating zones of sacredness “at home.” Within the pandemic, at least initially, homemade spirituality became even more sought after, and visits to nature less frequent, while my Portuguese and Greek interlocutors were obliged to adapt their performative topographies and re-invent their sacred spaces and the boundaries in-between.

REMOTE SPIRITUALITY, SPIRITUAL PROXIMITY

It is a morning in late April 2020 and I am having a Facebook video chat with Fani, one of my most important Greek interlocutors in Athens. I had earlier received the awful news that a neighbor in my Greek hometown died of COVID-19 and I have been experiencing a strong anxiety attack, triggered by the news of COVID-19 arriving too proximate to home. Seeing me in this condition, Fani asks if I would like to try a virtual healing, although, she readily warns me, she is not certain if it will be successful: this would be the first time she performs it online, outside the usual ritualistic context of the special room in her house, where she performs all her therapeutic practices. I agree, and she performs her spiritual healing on me through our computer screens. I keep my eyes closed during the whole therapeutic session, which lasts quite as long as the usual sessions I have experienced in her house. Despite my full trust in Fani and her therapeutic abilities, I partially feel surprised as I realize that for the duration of the session and

afterwards, I go through almost all the healing sensorial effects: the at times bodily discomfort, the affective reactions, the communication with the spiritual world and the sense of serenity that I used to feel when my spiritual proximity with Fani was affectively personal and direct. To the slight surprise of both the healer and the ethnographer, Fani's spiritual healing, albeit performed with caution and some hesitation from both sides, has worked in its online version too.

One of Fani's key ritual healing practices is a combination of color therapy with *passe*, a Brazilian energy healing technique that is directly linked to Kardecist Spiritism, where the healer uses her hands to ritually cleanse the physical, ethereal, and spiritual body of a person, while receiving the assistance of spirits in the process. She practices it in a special room in her house, burning sage or incense oils, with New Age music playing in the background, and with the use of colorful lamps in the process. At the same time, she organizes weekly group classes of a practice that combines qigong with a form of energetic therapy and meditation techniques. When the pandemic began, Fani ceased to perform any form of ritual healing, individual or in groups, for many months. After she got vaccinated, she decided to slowly open her house, and that particular room where the individual and collective spiritual healing is performed. In autumn 2021, she resumed both the *passe* individual therapies and the qigong group classes that she offers in person, provided that the recipients of the therapy and the class participants are fully vaccinated and, if and when necessary, are willing to wear a mask.

In most ritual practices of healing, embodied and sensory proximity is important. All my interlocutors stressed the need to perform their ritual therapies while being in close proximity with the recipients of the healing, to feel their energy, to connect spiritually with them and activate their senses – by using, for example, their hands to discover the problematic parts of one's body and remove any energetic blockages; by burning therapeutic aromatic incense, while playing New Age music; meditating together while holding hands; chanting mantras and breathing in synchronization; performing ecstatic dancing collectively; exchanging tarot and

divination readings; or placing crystals in the chakra points of one's body. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the New Age practices I witnessed ethnographically were characterized by what anthropologist and scholar of the study of religion Pamela Klassen has called "ritual proximity"¹³, namely the blending of different religio-spiritual traditions in ritual performance, and, more particularly, in the innovative amalgamation of Christian and New Age ritualism, in two countries, Portugal and Greece, where religious identity has been linked to Christianity.

Agreeing with Klassen that ritual proximity "collapses time and space within embodied practice, conjoining disparate pasts from different places within a particular present"¹⁴, and inspired by the concept of "ritual proximity," I expand the latter analytically so that, in addition to amalgamating ritual performances of different forms of religiosity, it also incorporates spirituality, sensory perception and embodiment in its core more actively; and namely pass from "ritual proximity" and its emphasis on ritual action to "spiritual proximity": a concept that can still encompass the propinquity and affinity of different religiosities, while placing emphasis on New Age spirituality, on the embodied, sensory, ritual and spiritual closeness but also the potential instances of remoteness, and the creativity of everyday spiritual performance.

New Age practitioners, especially in the context of spiritual healing, became obliged, to a certain level at least, and due to the state-imposed legal requirements of social distancing to restrict the contagiousness of COVID-19 and its variants as much as possible, to keep further physical detachment. This fact, additionally, transformed the usual "polysensoriality" of their performance notably in relation to the sense of touch and embodied proximity – a key feature of New Age spiritual healing¹⁵. When Fani started her *passe* individual sessions and her qigong group classes again, for example, everyone was wearing masks, at the beginning. Despite only accepting vaccinated practitioners and keeping her groups much more limited in terms of participation, the fear of touch – a vital aspect of Fani's therapeutic practice – remained. Slowly but steadily the masks were removed; yet, a couple of practitioners ended up not attending the

group classes, as the spatial and sensorial proximity in the common spiritualistic space was too uncomfortable to handle.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began in Portugal and Greece, the spiritual, energetic and somatic proximity of my interlocutors has changed, and so have their sacred ritual spaces of healing performance. New Age practitioners have become compelled to adapt their inherently embodied, sensorial, and personalized practices, and transform them into much less direct and affective spiritual encounters. Spirituality became more remote. Zones of remote spirituality have since been created, especially during the first and more challenging phases of the pandemic and the constant lockdowns and physical distance regulations, where the relationship between sacred space and spiritual practice needed to be reinvented, in order to create a sacred space that would not simultaneously endanger one's physical health. What I call (zones of) remote spirituality is a symbolic and at the same time current sacred space, situated between the public and private sphere of spiritual performance, through an ambiguous proximity created by the pandemic and its restrictions on affective, embodied, and sensory encounters. It is a spiritual space, which allows New Age practitioners to move inside and outside of it more freely and creatively, according to their own sociocultural and embodied criteria, choosing how to pursue sacred itineraries and where, through physical contact or via the virtual cosmos of the internet, which has become a popular remote locus of spiritual practice.

THE NEW AGE OF DIGITALIZATION AS CREATIVITY

A week after the first pandemic lockdown in Portugal, Evelyn, the teacher of my weekly yoga group class got in touch with us. She suggested to continue with the yoga class online as, in such shocking and difficult times no one had experienced before, we should not abandon one of the few spaces that could – still – feel safe, even if our yoga practice was to be held remotely. I first started practicing yoga with Evelyn back in 2012 when, following the interview I conducted

with her for the needs of my research project on New Age spirituality, she invited me to try her yoga practice. Evelyn is an English woman in her early forties, who has been living and working in Portugal for more than a decade as a full-time yoga teacher and therapist, and whose specialty is mindful yoga: a combination of meditation and yoga positions, which is less physical and more directed towards the improvement of mental health. After I attended some private therapeutic sessions with Evelyn, I joined her permanent weekly yoga group. This is a group she created with the intention to be frequented by a limited number of individuals, both Portuguese and foreigners who have lived in Portugal for many decades. It is an intimate space that allows for discussing and negotiating any potential energetic, spiritual, mental and physical health issues, in an attempt to resolve them through mindful yoga. It is a space where, to quote Evelyn, “one can simply be held safely.”¹⁶ Although all my fellow practitioners have been aware of my profession and research on New Age spirituality and healing, this is a space I had always kept as part of my personal rather than professional/ethnographic vernacular routine. It was only after Evelyn asked us to participate in the yoga class via Zoom, a novel virtual platform I had never heard of before, and in our weekly yoga classes that have ever since been practiced exclusively online, that I realized the ethnographic significance of digitalizing spirituality.

Upon the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, a strategic mobility could be observed within New Age practice: from the physical space of practicing spirituality at home, in specific studios and at natural landscapes, to the virtual space of Facebook, Zoom and Skype, the negotiation of sacred space during my interlocutors’ spiritual actions and activities moved noticeably online. The pandemic “served to accelerate innovation in the form of a digital push, with activities shifting to online platforms, and this digital transition providing unexpected benefits.”¹⁷ Spiritual practitioners, for whom physical closeness is significant, especially when it comes to healing, were forced to practice their spirituality in a remote way and reside in a symbolic space that is less personal and embodied, but still infused with sacredness, energy and spirituality. This is not

to say that, in the wake of the first serious COVID-19 waves of lockdowns and strict socialization legal measures, from March 2020 onwards, New Age practitioners completely abandoned any form of physical proximity in their practice. Yet, even if my interlocutors would make an attempt to return to a pre-pandemic physical proximity while they engaged with their spirituality, the digitalization of New Age seemed to have grown into an intrinsic facet of their everyday practice.

The idea of “digital religion” and “religion online”, that is the study and the concept of the digitalization of religiosity, including New Age spirituality, is not new.¹⁸ What can be perceived as innovative, nevertheless, lies in the rehabilitation of digital space as sacred space in the context of a global health crisis. Digital forms of communication, through computers and laptops, phones and applications, and/or online platforms such as Zoom, Facebook and Instagram Live, Microsoft Teams and Skype, among others, have become sacralized. As scholar Gladys Ganiel observes:

The vast pandemic-fuelled move of religion online has increased interest in digital religion scholarship globally, renewing questions about whether it will revitalize religion, lead to fragmented individualization and decline, or challenge religious authority or bolster it, among other issues.¹⁹

The same questions can also be applied on the study of New Age spirituality, and whether its practice was, is and will be revitalized, challenging religious authority and institutional religions even more, and/or leading to a much more solidified spiritual individualization at the level of everyday vernacular practice.

Until enough research is conducted after the pandemic, analytical conclusions regarding similar questions to the above cannot but remain specific and limited, depending on the particularity of each ethnographic perspective. What it is certain with reference to the ethnographic contextualization of New Age practice in Lisbon and Athens, however, is the

creativity with which New Age practitioners have handled their spirituality during the pandemic. All the individuals I encountered ethnographically steadily learned how to transform the boundaries of their bodily selves and ritual, spiritual and energetic identities. Even though spiritual proximity became imperiled, creativity, in its quality of ritualistic actions, spiritual encounters, and quests for the sacred, has increased. My interlocutors learned how to be spiritually present online, while activating their senses and their affect in a way that does not compromise the lack of tactile proximity as much. They also re-learned, in face-to-face ritual performances, how to interact with each other so as not to jeopardize the health of their biological bodies because of COVID-19. If creativity is defined as an “activity that produces something new through the recombination and transformation of existing cultural practices or forms,”²⁰ and “as the capacity to respond imaginatively to new experiences – and thereby to find the ontologically new,”²¹ in the pandemic context, spiritual proximity and sacred space, but also the practice of ethnography itself, is being re-defined and re-adapted, in order to create a spirituality that is resilient and imaginatively corresponds to the socioculturally, ethnographically, and ontologically new that the pandemic has brought to the performance and the study of New Age practices.

RESEARCHING NEW AGE SPIRITUALITY AMIDST THE PANDEMIC: (AUTO)ETHNOGRAPHIC CHALLENGES

It is an evening of early February 2022, and I am attending an online seminar, organized by Cristiana, a New Age spiritual practitioner I had begun to follow through Facebook during the pandemic. She is the owner of a shop with esoteric objects in Lisbon; at the same time, she organizes a variety of spiritual workshops that range from crystal healing to systemic constellations, to which she frequently invites New Age healers and teachers to share their experiences publicly and offer private and group sessions of spiritual practices. Since the

beginning of the pandemic in Portugal, she has coordinated a retreat and a few group sessions with other New Age practitioners, yet, so far at least, most of her events are held virtually, usually through Facebook live meetings. The seminar I am watching is one of the live events on Facebook, where she has invited a spiritual healer, who defines himself as a spirit medium, to talk about spirituality and health. At the end, she urges the participants to book a consultation with her guest, and she logs off the live session by clarifying: “Hugs are also allowed and very welcome! He [the spirit medium] has recently passed COVID-19, so he is now safe to touch, to see in person, to hug!”²² When I hear these final comments, I immediately react negatively and I think to my ethnographic self that I just lost a few potential interlocutors, hearing both Cristiana and her guest speak about COVID-19 jokingly, and, seemingly at least, without any intention to be bodily cautious in terms of proximity. Although I have not yet met Cristiana personally, I have always enjoyed her deeper esoteric knowledge and variety of New Age themes during her online seminars and workshops. I have hence been thinking of passing by her esoteric shop, to meet her in person and hopefully gain a potential new interlocutor, considering that her New Age expertise and active involvement with contemporary spirituality would add rich ethnographic data to my research.

My hesitation to visit Cristiana’s shop for a personal encounter with her and her spirituality has not been the only occurrence that felt like ethnographic failure on my anthropological part. During the pandemic, I have consciously been avoiding direct physical contact with old interlocutors and I have not attempted to meet any new ones in person. All participant observation and interviews have been conducted online, through attending webinars and workshops organized by New Age practitioners, observing their performances virtually, and asking questions and having discussions with people in the digital world. As an anthropologist who believes strongly that research on New Age spirituality requires explicit auto-ethnographic involvement, through sensing, experiencing, performing, feeling and being in close proximity

with the practitioners and practices under study, this sudden deprivation of the affective and experiential interaction with the field felt personally and ethnographically alienating. This digitalized armchair style of anthropology, I have come to realize, had already inevitably become part of our (auto)ethnographic methodology.

I have also come to understand how the personal stance of anthropologists towards COVID-19 may considerably influence the ethnographic data collected but also, and perhaps most importantly, the relationship with our interlocutors. And here lies the significance of auto-anthropology and/or auto-ethnography amidst the pandemic, and the recognition of the ethnographer's personal limitations in relation to the field and the interlocutors. Of course, the idea of producing a self-reflexive ethnography, through auto-ethnographic narratives, is neither new nor is it considered as innovative these days. It is however very important to acknowledge its renewed popularity among anthropologists within the pandemic crisis, and the fact that it has even become, in many ways, a default criterion and decisive factor when it comes to current anthropological research.

The pandemic has forced anthropologists to reconsider their ethnographic status, goals, and positionality while researching spirituality within and/or in relation to COVID-19. The methodological choices to be made, which in this case cannot grow to be disengaged from personal belief, perception, and mindset, considering the gravity of the pandemic and the potential risk effects on the anthropologist's own health, need to be wisely devised. While studying New Age spirituality amidst a global pandemic but also after it, auto-ethnography, I argue, can serve as a valuable tool of exploring spiritual practices through creating an equivalent sacred space of ethnographic proximity with the field. The anthropologist's own embodiment can create research knowledge through comparative personal experience related to the people in the research field. Subsequently, it is an individual ethnographic choice to take the risk of

physical proximity with one's interlocutors, or work within the rapidly popular digitalized space of practicing spirituality creatively.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have explored the rituality and spirituality of New Age practices in direct relation to COVID-19. I have argued that the notion of “space”, and more particularly of “sacred space” – as a physical site, as a symbolic locus and as an analytical category – constitutes a crucial anthropological tool to understand New Age spiritual and healing performances amidst the pandemic. Nature, home and spiritual centers have been some of the most popular spaces where New Age practitioners in the Portuguese and Greek capital cities perform their spirituality. During the pandemic, these spaces, already infused with “sacredness,” have continued to be utilized, while a new form of sacred space has vigorously claimed a popular position in the practice of New Age spirituality and healing: the digital one. Performances of New Age spirituality and healing have, consequently, become readapted within this multiplicity of sacred spaces, in order to confront the changes concerning embodied and sensory perception due to the pandemic. Physical and spiritual interaction has shifted to include a spiritual proximity that may have grown to be more remote, especially through the digitalization of practicing New Age in pandemic times. And this remote spirituality and proximity is not only indicative of the creative transformations of sacred space, but, moreover, of an even sharper turn to the individualization and privatization of contemporary religiosity. At the same time, a new, symbolically sacred and ritualistic, (auto)ethnographic space has emerged, which is directly connected to the other spaces analyzed here—natural, homemade, remote, digital—while the researcher moves in-between them, understanding and experiencing New Age spirituality and healing in a way that distorts the margins between public scientific detachment and personal ethnographic engagement.

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ENDNOTES

¹ As defined in the article of Steven Sutcliffe and Ingvild Gilhus, “Introduction: ‘All Mixed Up’ – Thinking About Religion in Relation to New Age Spiritualities,” in *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion*, by Steven Sutcliffe and Ingvild Gilhus (Durham: Acumen, 2013), 3, “New Age spirituality and healing” is the “variety of ‘holistic’ or ‘mind body spirit’ phenomena, including astrology, tarot and other kinds of divination; practices of possession, channelling and mediumship . . . body practices like yoga, tai chi and ch’i kung . . . and forms of healing positioned as either ‘alternative’ or ‘complementary’ to biomedical healthcare, from Reiki to homeopathy.”. Despite this being the definition of New Age that I have found mostly useful, in relation to the practices I have studied, I need to clarify that not all the individuals in my research identify necessarily as “New Agers”. It is rather an etic choice I have made in this article, in order to refer to those individuals I have met in my field sites who are actively engaged with the practices described in the definition above. For further definitions and criticisms of the term see, among others: Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization*

of *Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); Steven Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age: A History of Spiritual Practices* (London: Routledge, 2003); Matthew Wood, *Possession, Power and the 'New Age': Ambiguities of Authority in Neoliberal Societies* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

² Deborah Reed-Danahay, "Introduction," in *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social*, by Deborah Reed-Danahay (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1997), 2.

³ Bonnie Glass-Coffin, "Anthropology, Shamanism, and Alternate Ways of Knowing—Being in the World: One Anthropologist's Journey of Discovery and Transformation," *Anthropology and Humanism* 35 no. 2 (2010): 215.

⁴ Judith Okely, "Anthropology and autobiography: participatory experience and embodied knowledge," in *Anthropology and Autobiography*, by Judith Okely and Helen Callaway (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 1-28.

⁵ For confidentiality purposes, all the names of my interlocutors given in this article are pseudonyms, to protect their personal and professional identities.

⁶ Maria, Convento dos Capuchos, Portugal, 17 September 2013.

⁷ Maria, Convento dos Capuchos, Portugal, 17 September 2013.

⁸ See Leonard N. Primiano, "Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious

Folklife," *Western Folklore* 54 no 1(2015): 37-56; Leonard N. Primiano, "Afterword.

Manifestations of the religious vernacular: ambiguity, power and creativity," in *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life: Expressions of Belief*, by Marion Bowman and Ülo Valk (Sheffield and Bristol, CT: Equinox), 382-394.

⁹ Angelos, Athens, Greece, 21 November 2020.

¹⁰ Helena, Lisbon, Portugal, 15 March 2021.

¹¹ Adrian Ivakhiv, "Orchestrating Sacred Space: Beyond the 'Social Construction of Nature'," *Ecotheology* 8 no. 1 (2003): 14.

¹² Artemis, Athens, Greece, 12 December 2021.

¹³ Pamela Klassen, “Ritual Appropriation and Appropriate Ritual: Christian Healing and Adaptations of Asian Religions,” *History and Anthropology* 16 no. 3 (2005): 377-391.

¹⁴ Klassen, *Ritual Appropriation and Appropriate Ritual*, 378.

¹⁵ David Howes, “Polysensoriality,” in *A Companion to the Anthropology of the Body and Embodiment*, by Frances Mascia-Lees (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 435-450.

¹⁶ Evelyn, Lisbon, Portugal, 07 October 2012.

¹⁷ Anna Halafoff, Emily Marriott, Geraldine Smith, Enqi Weng and Gary Bouma, “Worldviews Complexity in COVID-19 Times: Australian Media Representations of Religion, Spirituality and Non-Religion in 2020,” *Religions* 12, no. 6 (2021): 437.

¹⁸ See Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan, *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet* (London: Routledge, 2004); Heidi A. Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (London: Routledge, 2012).

¹⁹ Gladys Ganiel, “Online Opportunities in Secularizing Societies? Clergy and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Ireland,” *Religions* 12, no. 9 437 (2021):

²⁰ John Liep, “Introduction,” in *Locating Cultural Creativity*, by John Liep (London and Sterling, Virginia: Pluto Press, 2001), 2.

²¹ Kirsten Hastrup, “Othello’s Dance: Cultural Creativity and Human Agency,” in *Locating Cultural Creativity*, by John Liep (London and Sterling, Virginia: Pluto Press, 2001), 43.

²² Cristiana, Lisbon, Portugal, 09 February 2022, online session.