Home altars and sacred atmospheres: living spirituality in the domestic space. An ethnography with practitioners from Argentina.

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ABSTRACT

The present work invites the reader to immerse into the intimate worlds of contemporary spiritual practitioners from urban centres of Argentina as they engage with their home altars. By means of ethnographic research we explore the process of creation of domestic altars, the spiritual practices conducted with altars and the effects altars have on spiritual practitioners. The notion of *bricolage* is useful to grasp the process of altar creation, and we will argue that this creation involves multiple forms of sociality. Localising the practices done with the altar in the everyday, we argue that the relationship people have with their altars disrupts the ordinary. Their intimate relationships, linked to modes of action that span from fleeting daily interactions to rituals, become part of a spiritual mode of life. We introduce the concept of atmospheres into the study of contemporary spirituality and material religion to account for the ongoing effects of the relationship and to address the transformational potential of altars, both on the spiritual subjectification and on practitioners' relations with others and their environment. Sacred atmospheres are experienced with intensity, charged with affects and emotions, and are inextricably linked with notions of well-being, intimacy and protection. Through altars practitioners open themselves to connect with a greater whole in the intimacy of their homes, inviting others to partake in their atmospheres physically and virtually.

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Table of Contents

Table of Figures

Introduction

Behind the walls of a house in the city of Buenos Aires, a woman lights a violet candle on her altar, allowing herself a moment of intimate connection. Whenever she feels the need, she goes to her altar. Sometimes she lights a candle, other times she burns scented herbs, or just rearranges some of the objects that compose her altar: there are crystals and stones, miniature statues of deities, images of popular local saints and photographs of her ancestors, among other objects collected throughout her life. Sometimes, just looking at the altar is enough to make her feel with intensity. The type of relationship that she cultivates with her altar is singular but resonates with that of others, as they are enmeshed in the fabric of contemporary spiritual practices. In this thesis, we will examine the phenomenon of domestic altars ethnographically, looking into the relations that people who consider themselves 'spiritual' have with their altars as they go about their lives, in the context of the isolation measures due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The study of contemporary spirituality has aroused considerable interest among anthropologists, sociologists and scholars of religion over the last three decades as an increasing number of people identify themselves with the category of spiritual versus religion. A significant proportion of the studies focus on understanding the emergence of the phenomenon in the contemporary Western milieu and explaining its local articulations. Some attention has been devoted to researching the material dimension of spirituality since the 'material turn' shook the study of religion. But few directly engage with the phenomenon of contemporary domestic altars (with the exception of McGuire, 2008; Turner, 2008; Morello, 2019; de la Torre Castellanos, 2020; Monjeau et al., 2020). Therefore, we ask: How do spiritual practitioners[1] relate with their home altars in the everyday? To grasp these relations at the heart of my research, this question compels me to also ask how altars are composed and what the effects of having an altar in the domestic space are. By examining these questions, we attempt to show that by relating to their altars in the everyday people cultivate a spiritual mode of life. By echoing recent local calls, we approach the material dimension of spirituality from a situated and relational perspective (Viotti, 2018). With this focus we intend to explore the character of these particular modes of life with the hope to contribute to both the understanding of contemporary spiritual subjectivation in urban

[1] While some scholars use the term 'believers' and 'practitioners' interchangeably (de la Torre Castellanos, 2021; Viotti & Seman, 2018; Wright and Ceriani, 2018) we use along this thesis the term 'spiritual practitioners' (Carozzi, 1999; Fedele & Knibbe, 2013), as we wish to focus not on the beliefs of people but on their everyday spiritual practices.

contexts of Argentina and the links between anthropological theory and spirituality studies. In a broader sense, we endeavour to bring forward the prominent role of materiality in everyday spiritual experience and the potential of transformation elicited by engaging with the material world in the everyday. The study of home altars is an instantiation of this, and allows us to understand the ways in which people practise and experience their spirituality in the domestic space.

Arrival to the field

The altars addressed here, and the relationship that people establish with them, are found within the confines of the home and they are considered part of what could be called the order of the intimate. My curiosity regarding these intimate worlds was sparked a few years ago when I was visiting a friend in Buenos Aires and she introduced me to her altar, located in a corner of her bedroom. I remember her lighting scented herbs in a ceramic burner while walking me through the history of some of the curious objects she had collected throughout her life. Some of those objects were familiar to me by common cultural references, like holy cards of popular saints and small statuettes of traditional deities. I was absorbed by the arrangement of the objects, following an order that I could not understand but that conjured up the feeling of being carefully laid out. That day, I felt that she was allowing me access to her most personal hideaways in an act of sharing her intimacy. Shortly after the outbreak of the pandemic and as we were thousands of kilometres apart, my friend approached me with a proposition: we would ask people on social media to share photos and videos of their altars and create an audiovisual project. This resulted in a collaborative short film about domestic altars in Buenos Aires. While this is not part of this thesis, my involvement on that project gave me privileged access to the 'field' as I met many people who had domestic altars, willing to share their perspective on the subject with a curious researcher. But perhaps most importantly, the experience triggered questions that aroused my anthropological curiosity about everyday ways of inhabiting spaces and living a life, especially in the context of an unprecedented pandemic.

During my preliminary exploration of the 'field' I found on the social media account of one of the spiritual practitioners the promotion of a workshop that was about to start: "How to create your magic altar". This three-hour workshop was targeted to people who wanted to learn

how to start the process of creating an altar at their home. Alma, a 35-year-old tarot reader and 'influencer' about spiritual matters, was facilitating the course which she decided to create in response to the requests from many of her 50k *followers* on Instagram. During the workshop she explained to us in detail how to create an altar representing the four elements of nature (air, fire, earth, water). In the context of the lockdown, the participants of the workshop, most of them from Buenos Aires, were curious by my virtual presence from Canada, a place that in the local imagination is pictured through its excesses: too cold and too far away. During the round of introductions, I disclosed my position as an anthropology student interested in spiritual practices, even if at the time I was not conducting research for the thesis. But this workshop was a turning point in the decision to embark on this project. It revealed to me some of the ways in which what seems to be a rather eclectic and individual experience is interwoven with instances of social encounter. Right after the course I was added into a WhatsApp group with the other participants where we began to share images of the process of creation of our home altars, exchange ideas and commentaries.

"No need to run now to buy objects to put in the altar," I remember Alma saying to us as she was showing to the camera some of the objects of her personal altar. Even if the workshop exposed me to a vast market for spiritual objects, we were encouraged to create something of our own with objects more 'special' and personal. And even if the course was instructing us on what type of objects to add, there was an emphasis on following our own intuition, instead of copy-pasting what others were doing. We were told to experiment and let ourselves be carried away by the things that catch our attention in the everyday. As this project was beginning to take shape I created a small altar in the top shelf of a bookcase, assembling objects of different nature that were for some reason singular to me: an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, a volcanic rock, a necklace that belonged to my grandmother, a set of seven chakra stones that a dear friend gave me as a gift and the *pañuelo verde* (green scarf) symbol of the feminism movement in Argentina and Latin America.

The process of creating my own altar along with others was as a preliminary immersion on the 'field' that gave me a sense of what it is to create an altar in your domestic space. But this thesis is not about my experience. I did not completely dive into the practice as an apprentice, and rather found in this subject matter a fertile ground for participant-observation, balancing my distance from 'spiritual practitioners' for the sake of my anthropological curiosity. This thesis is

about the experience of 'spiritual practitioners' (usually already experienced) who engage with their home altars as they express, practise and live out their spirituality in the everyday. In the course of this chapter, I endeavour to approach the intimate experiences of spiritual practitioners to learn about them rather than to elucidate them. This involves recognizing that the people we work with are critical thinkers in their own right and not the mere objects of anthropological research (Taussig, 1980 as cited in Burman, 2018). If this project is about me to any extent, it is about an intimate encounter with others and with anthropology. An intense experience of learning that has been transformative as it gave me the chance to reflect on other ways of feeling and thinking and to question my own. This has been for me a joy of learning experience and for that I am grateful.

The context of contemporary spirituality

The term spirituality has a novel recurrence. Since the last decades of the twentieth century a significant portion of people in the Western context recognize themselves as 'spiritual' beyond their religious identification. The boom of spirituality has led some authors to speak of a "spiritual revolution" (Heelas & Woodhead, 2008) and a "spiritual turn" (Houtman & Aupers, 2007). The vast body of work on spirituality deals with the issues of defining 'spirituality' and with the determination of the boundaries with the category of religion.

The forms of contemporary spirituality encompassed in this study have been originally clustered under the umbrella of the so-called "New Age" spirituality. But the term "New Age" has been abandoned to some extent in recent analysis as it fails to capture the complexity of the contemporary spiritual milieu. On one side, individuals who consider themselves as spiritual do not identify with the category of "New Age", and the majority actively reject the label for being connected to ideas of superficial consumerism (Heelas, 1999; Carozzi, 1999). On the other, the popularization of these ideas and practices beyond the alternative microcosm where they used to circulate collaborated to the abandonment of the term (Frigerio, 2016)

Attempts to define these forms of contemporary spirituality have given rise to a plethora of terms to name the phenomenon, such as "self-spirituality" (Heelas, 1996), "reflexive spirituality" (Besecke, 2001), "holistic spirituality" (Heelas & Woodhead, 2008), "post-Christian spirituality" (Houtman & Aupers, 2007) and "spirituality of life" (Heelas, 2008), just to name a few. Paul Heelas (1996) pioneering work, studies the "New Age" spiritual subject in connection

with the emergence of the modern secular individual. For Heelas, the "New Age" spirituality is a form of "*internalized* religiosity" in which "*autonomy* and *freedom* are highly valued, and authority lies within the experience of the *self*, or more broadly, the natural realm" (Heelas, 1999). One of the implications of this type of spirituality would be the shift in the source of *authority*: from being transcendent, located in the exterior, in God, to being immanent, located in the interior, in the self. Another of the characteristics is the *holistic* orientation related with body, mind and spirit as a whole and "the self in relation to greater wholes, ranging from intimate others to the whole universe" (Woodhead, 2010, p. 38). Authors connect these points with a process of "sacralization of the self" (Heelas 1996, Carozzi 1999, Barker 2004, Houtman & Aupers 2004, Woodhead 2010), in which the sacred is understood to be "hidden deep within each single person" (Barker 2004 as cited in Houtman & Aupers, 2010). People can access the sacred through spiritual work, which involves a series of practices to develop a particular sensibility. The sacred ceases to be transcendent, and becomes layered within the individual, who begins a committed spiritual journey to uncover it. This phenomenon coexists with the attribution of sacredness to the totality of experience, from the self to the cosmos (Viotti & Seman, 2018). In this thesis, we show how this singular experience is made present in the everyday engagement with home altars.

The academic image that represents much of the descriptions about contemporary spiritual practitioners is as follows: an individual who after freeing himself from the clutches of religious institutions, can borrow from different traditions to create a unique *bricolage*[2]. This has been called by Champion and Hervieu-Léger (1990 as cited in de la Torre Castellanos, 2020) "spirituality a la carte", as individuals pick what suits them best. Some voices within academia, while validating the aforementioned characteristics, show a more nuanced picture sustained in ethnographic registers that put into question the overemphasis placed in individual and subjective experience. These authors criticize the blind eye to the social component of contemporary spirituality in many of the studies, for what they understand to be an excessive reliance on the narratives of 'autonomy' of the interviewees (Carozzi 1999; Knibbe & Fedele 2013). Through local Argentine ethnographies, Carozzi (1999) and Frigerio (2013) argue that these 'discourses of

[2] The notion of bricolage has been introduced in anthropology by Claude Levi-Strauss in *La Pensée sauvage* (1962) to describe the character of mythological thought. It refers to the selection and recombination of fragments of cultures and traditions. In a recent study Veronique Altglas (2014) recuperates the original conceptualization of the term to detach it from a purely individualistic conception, see Véronique Altglas (2014) 'Bricolage': reclaiming a conceptual tool, Culture and Religion.

autonomy' are in themselves learned by practitioners in social environments, for example through workshops and other shared activities.

The complexity of the relations that shape contemporary spirituality cannot be reduced to an individual that exercises freedom of choice (Altglas, 2016), as we will see across this thesis. Particularly in the first chapter, we will show how a practice that appears to be an individual affair is actually enmeshed in multiple instances of sociality[3]. What appears to be an individual phenomenon begs to be connected with the situated socio-cultural and historical context. Incorporating a historical perspective allows us to find continuities and discontinuities that can help better understand the experience of contemporary spiritual practitioners. It is for this reason that we dedicate a great deal of the first chapter to present the nuances introduced by the localization of the phenomenon. In the face of the heterogeneity of the social articulations and definitions of spirituality, we present the interplay between the category of 'spiritual' and 'religious' from an *emic* and situated perspective. But this thesis focuses on the everyday experience of people that practise alternative spiritualities, rather than concentrating on a discursive or identitarian level. The heart of the analysis shifts from being concerned with categories and approximates spirituality as a "process that cuts across religious denominations" (Viotti 2018: 23). We turn away from the academic mania for classification and approach spirituality in its complexity, as it is experienced and practised by people in the everyday.

Research questions and theoretical framework

In anthropology, the 'material turn' arose in dissent to the 'linguistics turn' and post-structuralism, with the intention of repositioning the significance of the material (i.e. objects) in ethnographic and theoretical analysis. The scholars at the heart of the field of material culture approach ethnographically the material world not as mere receptacles of meaning but as 'constitutive of our humanity' (Miller, 2005, p. 34).

These premises have spilled over into the field of religion, where a history of contempt for the material dimension of religious experience relegated the material to a function of

[3] We will present the concept of sociality with more detail but as a general level the term refers to multiple forms of relatedness. The capaciousness of the concept allows us to explore the various instances of social engagement contained in the altar, including (but not limited to) the forms of relatedness with material objects (Cetina, 1997).

contextualizing the spiritual, rather than as relevant in itself. The privilege given to the immaterial over the material, the inner over the outward, and thought/mind/soul over body have biased scholars' research practice (Meyer, 2010; Miller, 2005). More than a decade ago, the editorial statement of the Journal of Material Religion made a call for a serious focus on "the evidence and insights offered by bodies, things, places, and practices" (Meyer et al., 2005, p. 209). If we want to understand the way people experience their religion and their spirituality in their everyday lives, we can no longer hold to the pretense of studying their beliefs, as if they were a set of given rules. Instead, we have to understand what others believe as enmeshed in a network of relations with human and 'non-human' actors.

Studying how "religion happens materially", Meyer maintains, "is not to be confused with asking the much less helpful question of how religion is *expressed* in material form" (p. 209). In this thesis we focus on the case of domestic altars not to show how people *express* religion in objects but to show how their engagement with objects in the everyday is constitutive of their spiritual experience. We change the focus of analysis to the everyday along with scholars that approximate spirituality as practised and lived out in the quotidian (Ammerman, 2007; McGuire, 2008; Meyer, 2010). We argue that the relationship with the altar disrupts the ordinary but is part of the everyday of spiritual practitioners.

The study of home altars is relevant as it is one of the material instances of the ways in which people practise and experience their spirituality in the domestic space. In her work about home altars among heterodox Mexican believers, Renee De la Torre (2020) considers altars to be "material assemblages of the experience of the sacred *that create spatial and temporal predispositions* for personal spiritual worship and practice" (p. 4). Altars are important because they are the material gateway to the way in which religion and spirituality is actually lived in peoples' everyday lives. The author traces the connection of the objects in the altar with the biography and trajectory of the person and argues that altars are "the material objectification of believing subjectivities" (p. 5). In this thesis, we follow the trace of De la Torre but push the analysis further by asking: How can we avoid reducing the experience of people to narratives? What do the everyday engagement with altars may reveal apart from being the "material support of daily spirituality" (p. 20)?

We ask: how do spiritual practitioners relate with their home altars in the everyday? To approximate this question we are inspired by scholars who propose a relational approach to the

study of human experiences. The analysis of Daniel Miller (2005) on the dialectical nature of our engagement with the material world serves us as a point of departure to study the engagement with the altar as mutually constitutive as we observe both a process of objectification and of subjectification taking place. But to understand how this transformative dynamic happens in the everyday we focus on exploring the multiplicity of ways of relating to the altar in the domestic space. The analysis of Marylin Strathern (2020) of the use of the concept of 'relation' in ethnographic practice guides us to approximate the heterogeneity of meanings and uses of the concept in our ethnographic material. Strathern unpack how the concept has been differentiated in anthropology and calls on studies that advance the importance of distinguishing 'relationships' (as in social relationships between persons) to the more capacious term 'relation', which is most often used by academics to talk about 'relationality', about "beings inevitably enmeshed in a relational world" (p. 11). In this thesis, we explore both how people relate to the altar (in the epistemological sense of the word) and the character of the relationship that they cultivate with the altar (in the sense closer to an interpersonal relationship). In line with the author, we approximate the variety of meanings and uses of the concept of 'relation' as generative to understand the complex experiences of practitioners. Our endeavour to grasp the character of the relationship with the altar obliges us not to turn a blind eye to the instances where there is disconnection and absence of relation. We argue that the relationship with the altar is an intimate relationship that encompasses varying degrees of intensity and density.

At the local level, the studies of the anthropologist of religion Nicolas Viotti (2018) serve as a major inspiration for this thesis as it brings forward the importance of focusing on the material and relational dimension of spiritual experience. His ethnographic research shows that the mode of relationship that people establish with objects is one of *mediation* as it is by engaging with objects that people tap into the sacred. The examination of his ethnographic material leads him to argue that the idea of mediation can be challenged by the particular relationship that people establish with objects. These relationships are complex as they are not circumscribed to being the medium to connect with the sacred but they have the potential to "affect people, mobilizing emotional responses, generating ideas and provoking a variety of social actions and processes" (p. 33). The author conceives them as part of a "specific mode of life" (p. 18) that he sees intrinsically linked to the pursuing of a spiritual well-being.

We build on the study of Viotti and the aforementioned scholars to reflect on the character of the relationship that spiritual practitioners have with their altars and attune ourselves to the potential of those relations to transform their lives. We argue that people cultivate an intimate relationship with the altar that becomes part of a 'mode of life'. We follow the traces of spiritual practitioners that together with altars "*transmutate*[4]", to feel something, to change something. Spirituality happens in "real bodies", as McGuire suggests (2008), bodies that breathe, that eat, that suffer, that get sick and heal. Hence, studying the engagement of people with the altar requires us to ask: What are the *effects* of relating to the altar in the everyday? How can we grasp what emerges from engaging with altar in the intimacy of the domestic space? We argue that the notion of atmospheres is a fertile ground to start exploring these questions ethnographically.

There has been an increased interest in atmospheres within social sciences. Despite the diversity of views, the majority of scholars refer to some kind of relation between humans, objects and environment. The philosophical reflections of Bohme (1993) on the use of atmospheres in everyday life are taken as a point of departure in most of the discussions. For Bohme atmospheres are like a haze, a quality that emerges in the co-presence of subjects and objects. Even if they are ontologically vague, as Bohme suggests, they do not emerge from a mysterious source but there is a 'making' involved, which "does not really consist in producing a thing, but in making possible the appearance of a phenomenon by establishing conditions'" (Bohme 2013: 4 in Pink). In this thesis, we are concerned by the character of the atmospheres that people generate as they engage with objects in the intimacy of their domestic space, and the experience of those atmospheres in the everyday.

Without digging into aesthetics in link to a theory of perception as a focus of this project in the spirit of Bohme, we do draw inspiration from recent works that articulate his philosophy with ethnographic practices. In particular, we use studies on the emergence and experience of atmospheres in the domestic space (Bille, 2013; Daniels, 2015; Pink & Mackley, 2016) and the analysis of scholars that put in the centre of analysis the affective qualities of atmospheres (Anderson, 2009; Stewart, 2011). What appeals to us about the concept of atmospheres is its capability to "mix together narrative and signifying elements and non narrative and asignifying elements" (p.80). Considering the atmospheres that are composed in the everyday engagement

[4] Term used by spiritual practitioners to refer to body-mind-soul changes (which in native terms is differentiated from 'transformation')

with the material world allows us to grasp *both* the affective and emotional qualities of our ethnographic material.

The nuances of the localization of this phenomenon are important to understand the relationship of practitioners with the altar but they do not foreclose the possibilities of transformation that emerge in the affective encounter of practitioners with the altar. These atmospheres exert a pull in the practitioner because they elicit sensations and memories, trigger emotional responses, and provoke feelings that can be felt in the body with intensity. This is why we are concerned by the affective quality of atmospheres as much as we are for understanding how people *feel* about them. Not to put the focus merely on the subjective but to try to grasp what they generate on spiritual practitioners and how they take part in the transformation of their lives, understanding that their experiences are inserted in the fabric of contemporary spirituality.

Methodology

The restrictions imposed by the pandemic forced us to embrace virtual media to continue our research endeavours. The impossibility of being physically present on the field site to do participant observation led me to try other ways of connecting with people and to interrogate the very notion of the "field". The people we work with in this thesis were also in the process of migrating many of their activities to the digital, fact that allowed me to empathise on shared challenges upon forced contextual changes, and draw parallelisms between my ethnographic practice and their spiritual practice, both practices historically tied to "bounded localities" (Postill & Pink, 2012).

My field site is not my home, or the desk from which I do ethnography. It's not my cell phone either, but the intimate spaces of spiritual practices in Buenos Aires, accessed through and mediated by screens. To follow the traces of these spaces of intimacy, my research engages with the scholars of digital anthropology that grapple with the openness and mobility of "ethnographic places" (Pink, 2009). My field takes shape as I follow the connections between altars and people, across spaces and platforms. As I scroll through profiles on Instagram and become a follower myself. As I get in and out of live stream sessions to learn about peoples' spiritual experiences and their relationships with altars. As I meet them in interviews. And as I engage with "the materiality of information" (Miller, 2012) in the multiple ethnographic registers of images,

audiovisual content and texts that circulate between people's accounts. It is through following particular connections that I become a participant observer of peoples' experience with altars, traversing the internet and their domestic space. The boundaries of these connections are set up initially by a pragmatic delimitation of my study's reach. Limiting myself to a virtual space that was circumscribed to specific physical places, Buenos Aires and other urban centers from Argentina, allows me to better grasp local dynamics and sociocultural aspects of the use of altars.

This project combines social media ethnography with ethnographic interviewing. The research relies heavily on a series of interviews and observations that were conducted from September 2020 to February of 2021. By combining social media ethnography with more conventional ethnographic methods this project endeavours to grasp the online/offline mobility of the everyday (Postill & Pink, 2012). Taking as a starting point social media ethnography I immerse myself in daily observations on the main platform used by spiritual practitioners in Argentina to spread these practices, Instagram. I become a *follower* of people of "influence" within spiritual practices, or at least with a clear public exposition of the centrality of these practices in their lives. This allows me to take part of what appears to be central nodes of "communities of practitioners" in the local contemporary spiritual milieu. Doing ethnography in a social media platform involves being attuned to the "shifting intensities of the social media landscape" (p. 125). I regularly observe the activity of spiritual practitioners on their social media accounts, such as the upload of images and videos and the interactions they have with their audience (from likes and comments in publications to responses to online surveys and other types of engagements that are of public access). I interact with practitioners as a member of the audience by regularly answering their questions, or commenting, as a way to cultivate our relationship across distance. And I participate in some of the online events of public access that they organize, such as livestream sessions. But my study is not at all limited to these "influencers". It is through them that I get more easily submerged into the ecosystem and get in touch with more people who have an altar at their homes, even if they do not share it in their social media accounts.

In addition to the observations conducted in social media, we conducted 22 in-depth interviews with spiritual practitioners by video call to get a better sense of their relationship with their altars. Sometimes the online/offline division helped me learn about these interactions. But

virtuality is just one of the aspects we look into amongst many, since I tried to be faithful to what showed up in my interactions with spiritual practitioners about altars, rather than purposefully redirecting the analysis to an area of preference. There are some inclusions of personal experiences in the thesis that are not intended to be autoethnographic accounts, but as a strategy for participating in the field by means of doing with others, mindful of the limitations it entails. After all, as David Howes (2020) suggests, inspired by Laplantine, "it is by sensing and making sense along with others that the world of material comes alive for us".

Participants were contacted through diverse mediums, from a private message on their public Instagram profile to email and a message to their phone number. The first couple were approached directly by me, but that also opened up some practitioners to direct me to others. I conducted voluntary, unpaid and confidential interviews through a video-communication software previously agreed with the research participant[5].

Organization of this thesis

A threefold approximation is proposed to structure my thesis chapters: the emergence of these relations, the practise of these relations and the effects of these relations. These are not to be understood strictly from a temporal perspective of one following the other, but rather one that allows me to better grasp my object of study.

In the first chapter, we address the process of creation of a contemporary home altar. We begin by introducing the context of creation as we invite the reader to immerse themselves into the singular universe of contemporary spirituality in Argentina's urban centres. We hold that incorporating a historical perspective is relevant to identify some of the continuities and discontinuities with past traditions to grasp the phenomenon in its complexities. Then, we will briefly discuss the interplay between the categories of 'spiritual' and 'religious' from a native point of view to understand the local articulations of these forms of spirituality.

[5] The aims of the study and the intended use of the information were fully disclosed at the beginning of the interview. All personal identifiable information was removed from this thesis, so the identities of participants remain anonymous. The content published on social media is included only if it is of public access. The screenshots of the images of social media that are included on this thesis cannot be traced back to the Instagram accounts of participants, since they were uploaded to the platform with the feature called 'Instagram stories', which allows users to share content for a maximum time of 24 hours after which it is automatically deleted of the profile.

The second part of the chapter zooms into the objects and its social trajectories to sketch the skeleton of the altar. With a more narrative tone we follow some ethnographic fragments to trace the composition of the altar. By doing so we can see how the process of creating altars is not purely individual but involves multiple forms of sociality. We show how contemporary spiritual practitioners creatively and aesthetically intervene their domestic space to compose material sites to practise their spirituality in the everyday. We sustain that they create home altars in the course of their spiritual trajectories by combining a multiplicity of objects in the manner of a *bricolage*. But we claim the notion of *bricolage* stressing its relational and social dimension, rather than its individual aspect. We show how a practice that belongs to the order of the intimate is actually enmeshed in various instantiations of socialites.

In the second chapter we change the focus of analysis to the practices and actions of spiritual practitioners to show how they relate to the altar in the everyday. To explore this we map some of the modes of action with the altar, that span from fleeting daily interactions to rituals. We present some of the modes of engagement and dis-engagement that make up the relationship with the altar and we hold that people relate to the altar with varying degrees of intensity. We begin by localising the altar in the everyday but as part of a relationship that disrupts the ordinary. By bringing a relational approach to the everyday engagement with the material world, we explore the character of the relationship with the altar in discussion with some of the uses and meanings of the concept of 'relation'.

To grasp the character of this intimate relationship, we attend to the role of the altar as the *mediator* with the sacred in the domestic space, where the sacred acquires a singular form that we unpack following our ethnographic material. We hold that the altar mediates the contact with the sacred while simultaneously incarnates the sacred. The experiences of practitioners show that the attribution of a sacred character to the totality of experience coexists with the maintenance (or creation) of boundaries between the sacred/profane in the actual practice.

As we are focusing on the doings of practitioners we explore their use of language by presenting the notion of intention as central in the relationship that they cultivate with the altar. We argue that the discursive dimension of everyday spiritual practices should not be dismissed on account of theoretical tendencies and we explore how they are discursive-material (Barad, 2003). In the final section, we explore the cleaning of the altar as one of the modes of action that

evidences the complexity of the relationship that practitioners have with the altar, in which the altar is taken to be an extension and reflection of the self in the everyday.

In chapter 3, we explore some of the effects of interacting with the altar in the everyday. We introduce the notion of atmospheres as generative to understand the everyday experience of spiritual practitioners with the altar and discuss some of the anthropological studies that grapple with the concept ethnographically. We hold that by relating to the altar in the everyday people create sacred atmospheres that they experience as an intense presence in their domestic space. We present how these atmospheres are charged with affects and emotions and how they are inextricably linked to notions of intimacy, well-being, protection and connection.

We attune to the potential of these everyday atmospheres to transform spiritual practitioners as they engage with the altar. We begin by showing how these atmospheres exude a feeling of well-being as they have the potential to *heal* spiritual practitioners and to help them cultivate a healthier relationship with the environment and with others. We then go on to show how people create atmospheres to feel protected and secure in their domestic space. Exploring the affective presence of these atmospheres across screens, we show how people share atmospheres in an act of opening their intimate worlds to others, both physically and virtually. We invite the reader to feel with intensity along with spiritual practitioners as they endeavour to put into words how they feel when they immerse into these sacred atmospheres. Our close reflection goes back to the effects of engaging with the altar to hold that over time people develop a singular way of feeling and thinking about the world and they make these practices with their altars a mode of life.

Chapter 1

Home altars: a bricolage of material and intimately woven relationships

A dim light of a candle envelops the corner of a room of an apartment somewhere in the neighborhood of Paternal in the centre of the city of Buenos Aires. Juana, a 31-year-old photographer and tarot reader, appears on my screen. The repetitive flicker of the candlelight provides the background to our video call conversation, in the context of the mandatory isolation adopted by the Argentine government in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. I am not *there*, yet, Juana's tone of voice and her setting embrace me. The position of her body with her back against her altar reveals the half-consumed candle amidst stones and crystals, herbs and incense, a golden statue of Shiva ornamented with a wooden japa mala, tarot cards and some small objects hard to distinguish at a distance. Her altar is composed of special objects that she has collected throughout her life: some she inherited from her family, others were gifts from friends and things she found as they "came to her". And though it is localized in one corner of the house, its form mutates, the color of the candles may change, some fresh flowers may be added, a newfound object may become part. The disposition of the object varies depending on Juana's intentions but she always makes sure to have the four elements of nature represented. There are other small altars in different parts of the house that she assembles and disassembles in particular moments, as when she needs to protect the space surrounding the computer during a video call session. It comes naturally to her, she assures me. Making altars. As if something in the practice of assembling significant objects together and creating altars would be inherently tied to her particular ways of inhabiting the world. In her words, the altars are the "reminder of her own presence".

In this chapter we address how contemporary spiritual practitioners create a physical space to connect with their spirituality in the intimacy of their homes. The practice of making altars to tap into the sacred is not novel, since it has continuities with past traditions. Altars have been present in different religions and throughout millennia. Yet altars are also tied to context, local culture and contemporary practices, infused by the imagination of today. The kinds of home altars that we study are evidence of a singular spiritual sensibility. Contemporary spiritual practitioners create altars in the course of their spiritual trajectories by combining a multiplicity

of objects in the manner of a bricolage. In this chapter, we explore how people creatively and aesthetically intervene their domestic space to compose material sites to express and practise their spirituality in the everyday. We claim the notion of bricolage stressing its relational and social dimension. By following some of the social trajectories of the objects that are selected to be part of the altar, we attempt to show how the extremely intimate practice of altar making is enmeshed in various instantiations of sociality. In what follows, we will dwell on ethnographic moments to immerse ourselves in the particular universe of altars in Argentina's urban centres. In its composition the altar materializes a singular spiritual sensibility that has to be understood in a historical and situated way. Hence, the first part of the chapter briefly contextualizes some of the discussions around the new spiritualities to localise the phenomenon. The second part zooms in on the objects and its trajectories to sketch the skeleton of the altar. By approximating home altars as material assemblages where spirituality is expressed, experienced and practised my research is indebted to scholars who take seriously the role of materiality in the constitution of human experience.

The altar: the materialization of spirituality

Some people create a space for worship in the intimacy of their domestic space as part of their spiritual journeys. The altar provides spiritual practitioners with a physical space to cultivate their spirituality in the everyday. Practitioners engage with their altars in multiple ways: some interact with the space on a routine basis, others only when they are performing specific rituals. But everyone who creates them develops an intimate and special relationship with them that is indissociable from their spiritual quest. "If people create altars it is because there is a need for connection" Feli says as she distinguishes the creation of an altar from decorations and other types of material interventions at home. As previously stated, this need to connect with the sacred is not exclusive to a particular religion and the practice of altar making in the domestic space is not novel. In the West, Key Turner traces the phenomenon historically to pre-Christian days, to the first registries of altars created by women to honor the act of creation (Turner, 2008).

Altars are a multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic tradition (de la Torre Castellanos, 2020), but even being widespread and common throughout history they have been seldom the interest of academic religious studies, as the sociologist of religion Renée de la Torre

(2020) suggests. A history of contempt for the material dimension of religious experience relegated the material to a function of contextualizing the spiritual, rather than as relevant in itself. In anthropology, the 'material turn' arose in dissent to the 'linguistics turn' and post-structuralism, with the intention of repositioning the significance of the material (i.e. objects) in ethnographic and theoretical analysis. These premises have spilled over into the field of religion, where the privilege given to the immaterial over the material, the inner over the outward, and thought/mind/soul over body have biased scholars' research practice (Meyer 2010, Miller 2005).

The study of home altars is relevant as it is one of the material instances that account for how people practise and experience their spirituality in the domestic space. In her work about home altars among heterodox Mexican believers, De la Torre Castellanos (2020) considers altars to be "material assemblages of the experience of the sacred that create spatial and temporal predispositions for personal spiritual worship and practice" (p. 4). The author's encompassing view allows her not to reduce her analysis to substantive definitions of altar and to focus on what people consider an altar. Altars are important because they are the material gateway to the way in which religion and spirituality is actually lived in peoples' everyday lives. Rather than focusing exclusively on what people believe from a cognitive point of view, the scholars of lived religion propose to focus on what people do in their ordinary lives with their bodies, as well as their mind and spirits (McGuire, 2016, p. 154).

The root of the word in the Latin *altare* references a space that is elevated and high, somewhat differentiated from the rest of the place. But this 'highness', though frequently physical, can be referred to in terms of the sacred-profane dichotomy. Usually altars are set up high, for example on tables and on top of shelves. But it is not always the case, some of the spiritual practitioners we work with set up altars on other spaces of the house, such as the floor, according to their needs of the moment. For instance, Juana, frequently assembles small-scale altars in her desk while she is working. The selection of the space of the house where the altar is set up varies. Some people place them in a hidden room, or their bedroom, as they consider it to be from the order of the intimate. There is a negotiation of individuals' intimacy in the domestic space that depends on the particular conceptions people place on both their intimacy and their altars. For example, some believe that people can *contaminate* the altar so they prefer to hide it when receiving visitors at home. While others explicitly invite people to interact with their home

altars. On a general level, since home altars are of the order of the intimate, the placement usually depends on their openness to share the intimate. Their own approaches to the significance of the altar and its workings, can also affect its placement, since they may consider it requires protection or secrecy. Such as Maru, a 35 years-old photographer, who decided to make an altar in their upstairs bedroom for her individual spiritual practices while leaving one in the living room that she considers to be *more public*.

"My first altar was my grandmother's trunk with a buddha on it and a couple of things" told me Feli, who created her first altar a few years ago when she started to meditate. People create domestic altars out of the need to have a physical space to connect with their spirituality in their everyday lives. They start by collecting a diverse array of objects that are meaningful to them in a selected space of the house. As an open-ended space, the altar is in ongoing transformation as spiritual practitioners add and remove objects according to their needs. It is through these objects that spiritual practitioners tap into the sacred in their daily lives. By doing so, spiritual practitioners "remember, create, adapt, mix, and share the 'stories' out of which they live" (McGuire, 2016, p. 154). Indebted to the research of the historian of religion Robert Orsi, De la Torre proposes that in the act of assembling the altar people fabricate "personalized narratives and self-explanations of their own spirituality" (Orsi 1997 as cited in de la Torre Castellanos 2020: p. 2). Though we are hesitant to reduce the experience of people with the altar as mere narratives by which they self-justify their understanding of the world, we do believe that altars are weaved with stories that are worth approaching ethnographically as they may tell us about the singular modes of life of contemporary spiritual practitioners.

Contemporary spirituality in Argentina's urban centres

The growth of new forms of spirituality combined with non-conventional or alternative therapeutic practices has intensified among urban middle classes in Argentina in recent decades. The fact that people seem more open to exploring alternative practices such as tarot and astrology owes a great deal to the reading of these practices in psychological terms. The fertile crossing between spiritual and *psy* categories repositioned these practices from being divinatory tools to discover the future to instruments of "self-knowledge" and reflection. This slippage between spiritual and therapeutic categories is not a solely local phenomenon and it owes much to the

spread of the ideas of the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung. But the great repercussions of psychoanalysis and its descriptions of the *psyche* in Buenos Aires has collaborated to its extensive expansion in the country (Plotkin, 2003 as cited in Battezatti, 2014). There is a neighborhood in Buenos Aires popularly called Villa Freud on account of the amount of psychoanalytic professionals in the area that serves as an example of the intensity of the phenomeno. The average Argentinean is familiar with psychoanalytical terms and uses them in common parlance. In particular, the notion of the "unconscious" as the idea that we have an unknown territory inside of us that conditions our existence and that may be unlocked with psychoanalytic techniques. Some studies in the region have shown how this notion is concurrent with the use of spiritual work to unlock the *truth* that lies within ourselves (Battezatti, 2014; Maluf, 2005).

Juana, the spiritual practitioner that introduces this piece, considers that this kind of knowledge has to be shared with others and she celebrates that more and more people are willing to teach and learn about these practices. "People are coming to realize that questions can be answered from a lot of perspectives" Juana remarks about the growth she notices in the number of people interested in her services. The reading of esoteric practices in psychological terms allows to reduce the social stigma of recurring to these practices, that conceived of as methods of divination are widely regarded as pseudoscience. The reframing of them as tools for thinking about the world, both in its subjective and social dimension, helps to dispel the negative connotations associated with these practices by removing them from the margins and rendering them accessible to an extensive audience. Social networks, in particular Instagram, play a central role in the rapid circulation of these contents that prompt people to reflect by means of "ancestral languages".

This language appeals to an urban middle class that is the token of a culture of well-being on account of "the processes of medicalisation, a secularised Catholicism and a significant centrality of the psi world" (Viotti, 2018, p. 43). The research of the anthropologist Nicolas Viotti on the religiosity of middle classes in Argentina contextualizes the emergence of these new *lifestyles* in a broader context of reassessment of "the secular and religious management of wellbeing" (p. 43). A set of changes that begins with the "processes of religious transnationalization" (Viotti & Seman, 2018) set the ground for the proliferation of holistic centres where body-mind-spirit are treated in an integrated way. The emergence of these

discourses and practices, grouped under the umbrella term "New Age", have been traced back by scholars to the expansion of the North American counterculture of the 60s. The historical study of Seman and Viotti (2018) show how local factors, such as the political and economic liberalization of the late 1980s, contributed to the rapid circulation of these new spiritualities among local urban dwellers. This means that the generation of our grandparents was already exposed to a diverse array of ideas that were expanding the religious field in the country. As these authors bring forward, a brief revision of the local history of the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century reveals that some religious and philosophical doctrines such as *spiritism* and *theosophy*[6] were already popular among the urban elite of Buenos Aires. This challenges the dominance of Catholicism in the country as it shows that there was always space for diversity in the periphery of the prevailing religion (Frigerio, 2007 as cited in Viotti & Seman, 2018).

The spectacular expansion of the new spiritualities in the country elicited loud reactions. The "spiritual revolution" (Heelas & Woodhead 2005) is readily dismissed as the product of its time by scholars, journalists and the general population alike. The commentaries on the negative character of these new spiritual expressions abound on account of their supposed correspondence with the values of modern individualism and radical consumerism. This relationship with individualism and consumerism made scholars of religion ignore this form of spirituality as a focus of studies, as well as a loss of interest in understanding it beyond these apparent features. As Viotti (2018) points out, there is a tradition of sociology of religion in Argentina that overlooks the new religiosities of the middle-classes as a result of a biased image of the middle-class individual as a urban, white, secular person. The usual ways of approximating the study of these spiritualities narrow down both the possibilities of understanding the contemporary configurations of the religious field and the singular modes of life of spiritual practitioners.

[6] Seman & Viotti (2018) bring forward a historical perspective to the study of the kind of spiritualities grouped under the umbrella term "New Age". They trace continuities with early social, cultural and economical changes happening in the country such as the 'early processes of religious transnationalization'. In particular, these authors show how the *Spiritism* of Allan Karden and the *theosophy,* "an eclectic current that integrates naturism, astrology, Gnosticism and Hinduism, promoted by the famous Helena Blavatsky" had a popular influence on the local scene (84).

Traces of the past

"I believe in the energy of people, in my own energy, in the energy of everything around me", I am told by Cami, a school teacher and *tarotista*[7] in her mid twenties from Villa del Parque, a neighborhood in the center of Buenos Aires. From a Catholic upbringing, Cami confesses that religion never appealed to her. She does not believe in one God but rather incorporates goddesses, angels, "spirit guides" and "teachers" to her spiritual repertoire. And though she considers herself spiritual she prefers "not to hold to any fixed label". In this section, we explore some of the continuities and disruptions with tradition that made themselves manifest in the creation of a contemporary altar by following some ethnographic fragments.

As our interview by video call begins, Cami tells me the story behind her Instagram account, where she offers tarot sessions and shares information with her more than 10,000 followers. She created the account following the advice of her teacher after completing her formation in tarot reading just before the pandemic. The name of her Instagram profile honors her grandmother[8] who introduced her to the esoteric world. "She gave me my first tarot deck", says Cami. However, it was only after her grandmother passed away that she started to immerse herself into the apprenticeship of a wide range of therapeutic practices, as she puts it, from reading coffee grounds to Reiki. Her grandmother was a believer in holistic therapies, not like her mother "who is afraid of these practices", says Cami while laughingly assuring me that "witchcraft skipped a generation" in her family. She is taking our call from her grandparents' house where she goes whenever she needs calmness. Whether it is to attend a session with a consultant or to reconnect with herself, Cami walks to her grandmother's studio where her belongings remain intact.

Right after our interview Cami recorded some videos to complement our conversation. In the first video, Cami slowly moves the camera over some of the objects that belonged to her grandmother placed on the top shelf of a bookcase. A portrait of the Virgin Mary stands out due to its larger size compared to the other objects: "She was very religious", says Cami while pausing for a few seconds on some stamps of Catholic Saints. But as she zooms in, I can see

[7] The translation would be "Tarot reader"

[8] Given that the generation of our grandmothers was already exposed to alternative ideas and practices, the fact that Cami's grandmother incorporated esotericism to her religious repertoire is not an abnormality. If any, it is evidence of the religious diversity that already existed vis-à-vis the dominance of Catholicism in the country.

stones inside a ceramic container next to a handmade essential oil burner and other things that would pass as decorations to an outside onlooker. A Christmas-like decoration light was zigzagging the objects. The space is evidently well cared for. Cami cleans it regularly to avoid dust accumulation, as for her her grandmothers' belongings "contain a bit of her grandmother's light". I play the video multiple times as a comment from Cami sticks with me: "I believe this would be the altar of my grandmother now that I think about it". How come she never thought about this, being that she regularly cleans that space? As if our conversation somehow elicited the perception of something new and prompted the act of naming the space as "altar" where there was no need of naming before. Perhaps, the extreme intimacy of domestic altars makes sense only to the person to whom it belongs.

Because of the significance of the place, Cami decided to set up her own main altar there, next to her grandmother's belongings, in one of the shelves of a wooden library. She built her altar during the quarantine where she found the time to carefully arrange everything. In the next video she shares with me, Cami introduces me to her altar. By pointing the camera to the objects resting on top of a wooden shelf she briefly explains where they came from. Some small jars of flower water and a bunch of incense sticks that she bought online. A rose quartz stone holding the image of a Catholic Saint with a small rosary that her mother-in-law gave her. A red ribbon and scented oils that she uses to clean candles. A little coloured statue of Ganesha (the Hindu Elephant god) surrounded by leaves that she collects from her balcony when they fall. Some stones and crystals of different colours and sizes that belonged to her grandmother encircle a tarot deck. The contrast with the altar of her grandmothers' is palpable in the absence of a dominant religion imagery. Despite that Cami includes the image of a saint, her decision to include this image is closely tied to the affective and aesthetic value of the object. Her altar, and the diversity of objects and images that make it up, evidence a set of "cosmological relations" (Viotti & Seman 2018) that involves a singular mode of spiritual subjectivation.

"We all have an image of our grandmothers lighting a candle or carrying a flower to a specific corner of the house" I had been told previously by Juana, the spiritual practitioner that introduces this piece. Her allusion to a common frame of reference immediately transported me to my grandmother's house in the northern part of the province of Buenos Aires. The scene of my grandmother carrying a white candle to a marble shelf full of objects came along with a remarkable clarity. Pictures of her grandchildren and children surrounded by an image of her

favorite saint, St. Cayetano (the saint of labor), a bottle in the shape of the Virgin Mary filled with holy water, a wooden cross, some rosaries and fresh flowers. This space always caught my attention. Not so much because of my ability to understand what it meant to my grandmother. But the shelf was located next to the entrance door, on the way to the kitchen so one had to traverse that space of the house. During my visits, I would spend a few seconds contemplating some of the objects and complaining with my grandmother for having such outdated pictures of me. This ordinary scene of my past was a dormant memory that only resurfaced from my conversation with Juana. Her decision to introduce herself by alluding to a joint narrative is related to the perception of our sedimented generational experiences and to our shared culture and history.

The fact that spiritual practitioners compare themselves to their grandmothers reveals an acknowledgement of history in the practice of creating domestic altars, as an occurrence that is not wholly novel but in dialogue with traditions. Key Turner observes this "concern for legacy and allegiance" in her study with *altaristas*[9] among the Mexican population in Texas. The maintenance of relationships with ancestors that is embedded in the incorporation of images and heirlooms "affirm ties between the past and the present and project them into the future" (Turner, 2008). Feli, a 34 years-old elementary school teacher and yoga instructor, makes sense of her spiritual trajectory in dialogue with the practices of her ancestors. "Making altars" she explains "is not something I did all my life and at the same time yes, because I had grandmothers who practised Catholicism, so there was a question of ritual and religion in my life, but it was within a dogma or a structure". There is a sense of continuity with the past in the narrative of Feli that is transformed as she embarks on her own spiritual quest outside of established religious institutions and dogmas.

Rejecting labels, privileging experience

The vast majority of contemporary spiritual practitioners manifest a rejection of institutionalized religiosity in favor of a more fluid and subjective experience. From a native point of view, there is a privilege of a more intimate and "non-hierarchical relationship with the sacred" (Viotti & Seman, 2018). For instance, Juana considers herself a spiritual person, but not a religious one, a category that she feels associated with labels rather than experience, and with

[9] Women who create altars.

following a particular “dogma”. Cami also rejects the label of ‘religious’ to denote her practices for what she feels is a “damaged category associated with an institution”. In this section, we will briefly discuss the interplay between the categories of 'spiritual' and 'religious' from an *emic* point of view. We argue that the dichotomy between the two categories does not necessarily give us insight into the complex experience of contemporary spiritual practitioners. Rather, it leads us to a narrow understanding of spirituality which is misconstrued in a categorical relationship to long-standing notions of religion.

The polysemy of the term spirituality puzzles scholars of religion. Much of the research on contemporary spiritualities, particularly on the "New Age spiritualities", revolves around the complexities of understanding spirituality as a “significant ‘other’ of religion” (Knibbe & Fedele 2013, p. 7). While there is ongoing discussion about the usefulness of separating spirituality and religion in our analysis, the majority of scholars would agree that the vernacular use of the categories show particular features that divide them. This stems from the native “localization of religion and its followers in a concrete domain (the churches, the passive individual)” (Ceriani, 2013, p. 25). The association of religion to the “external” and the “outward” is contrasted to the “inner”, “subjective” and “emotional” qualities of spirituality (Woodhead, 2010, p. 38). This differentiation does not have a universalist pretension, but rather works to identify common patterns in the native uses of both categories. However, they are experiential categories that need to be studied in a situated way as their variations depend on the socio-historical context.

The massive expansion of the discourses and practices of spirituality in recent years conjures up some concerns for the spiritual practitioners we interviewed. Juana distances herself from “notions of spirituality that are currently in vogue” which she feels are more associated with "coaching"[10] and the idea of "constant optimism". She lives her spirituality as a daily labor that is inseparably bound to her “actions in the mundane world” and not only as a “empty discourse”. Diana, a tarotista of 35 years-old, goes a step further by completely moving away from the category of spiritual as she thinks that it is a loaded word with “unclear boundaries”. She would rather say she is a *creyente* (believer). With the exception of a few spiritual practitioners who adopt a more capacious understanding of religion, there is a rejection of the category of religion but a careful distance of the category of spiritual. This attitude of not wanting to be labelled has

[10] The notion of coaching in this context is associated with the spread of practices such as ‘spiritual coaching’ and ‘life coaching’, which combines elements from psychology and spirituality to help people to ‘discover their true potential’ and obtain results.

been explained by Paul Heelas (1996) as a result of a desire to escape the negative connotations that come with the label, coming from widespread views that connect these new spiritualities with modern individualism and radical consumerism. The research of the anthropologist Maria Julia Carozzi (1999) in Buenos Aires counter argues that this "absence of collective identification" among spiritual believers appears to be part of an "ubiquitous discourse" that negates the social dimension of spirituality (p. 31). The author's contributions show the existence of a bias towards 'autonomy' in their vernacular discourse by revealing how they systematically erase external influences of their spiritual journeys.

The people we work with show a similar attitude to the one described by Carozzi and they keep a careful distance from any identification that may impose a constraint on them. We find in the discourses of contemporary spiritual practitioners an intention of disidentification that seems to be more a result of the times than an emphatic negation of the social character of their practices. In fact, there is a conscious recognition by the majority of the interviewees of the institutional and hierarchical dimensions of contemporary spirituality, rather than a naive assertion of some authentic subjective experience. Scholars have already noted the "self-reflexive" character of contemporary spiritual practitioners. Our experience is concurrent with the assertion of Knibbe and Fedele in that the people we interviewed are "voracious readers" and they "integrate social, psychological and cultural theories into their discourse" (Fedele & Knibbe, 2013, p. 16). But rather than considering these self-reflections as ways of justifying the "individuality" and "authenticity" of their practices, as the aforementioned authors maintain, we prefer not to foreclose my analysis with any kind of unidimensional conclusion. Our concern has been to situate our object of study in the light of recent debates to trace some of the continuities and discontinuities with the past. This endeavour has less to do with advancing a conclusion and more about bringing forward the complexity of the modes of contemporary spirituality, without necessarily having to compartmentalize peoples' experiences in analytical categories with clear boundaries.

In the face of the heterogeneity of the social articulations and definitions of spirituality, Ceriani defines it as a "semantic space where styles and cultural changes are expressed" (Ceriani, 2013, p. 24). We focus here on the everyday experience of people that practise alternative spiritualities, rather than focusing on a discursive level or on identities. The heart of the analysis shifts from being concerned with categories and approximates spirituality as a "process that cuts

across religious denominations" (Viotti, 2018, p. 23). We turn away from the academic mania for classification and approach spirituality in its complexity, as it is experienced, practised and expressed by people in the everyday. Focusing on the altar gives us insight into spirituality as a mode of life.

The multiple instances of sociality weaved in the altar

Among the many objects that people come across throughout their lives, there are some that they choose to treasure. And only a few of these special objects are selected to become part of the altar. Home altares are populated with objects that people collect throughout their lives and that are significant to them for many reasons. The combination of a diverse variety of objects gives the altar an eclectic tone and may appear to be idiosyncratic to an outside observer, but it conjures up the feeling of being carefully arranged. No object is placed on the altar for the sake of it. In the words of one of the spiritual practitioners "if they go to the altar it is because they lead me to something". Following the trace of the objects that people place in the altar and the interactions they have with them is important because they are a constitutive part of their spiritual experience.

In the *Social Life of Things* (1986) the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai proposes to attune ourselves to the social trajectories and the uses of objects as they can shed light into our human and social context. Objects appear to have social lives of their own, with trajectories and biographies that can be apprehended anthropologically. Doing "social biographies of things", suggests Kopytoff, very much in the same as we do the biographies of people, could elucidate what otherwise would remain obscure (Kopytoff, 1986, p. 68). Owing to the work of these authors, we approximate objects as "congealed moments in a longer social trajectory" (Appadurai, 2006, p. 15).

What concerns us here is to focus on a number of objects to understand how they are selected to become part of the altar. We do not intend to trace the exhaustive trajectory of the objects as they move through people and places. But we try to catch them in some moments to understand how a practice as intimate as creating an altar is enmeshed in a complex process of sociality. The term *sociality* refers on a general level to the numerous modes of social relatedness among humans. In other words, the term articulates the multiple "social forms of binding self and

other" (Knorr Cetina, 1997, p. 1). Scholars have resorted to the concept as a preferable alternative to analyze the complexity of human social interactions than other sedimented terms in anthropology and sociology such as 'community' and 'network' (Amit, 2002; Postill & Pink, 2008). The capaciousness of the concept of sociality allows me to explore the various instances of social engagement contained in the altar, including (but not limited to) the forms of relatedness with material objects (Knorr Cetina, 1997).

The strong relation between people and the altar is not a closed loop, but rather involves always an exteriority, an environment that enables, through the porous limit of practitioner-altar, its continuation and transformation. What apparently happens outside the relationship can make its way into the relationship. Just to give two examples, a random encounter with an object on the street that caught the practitioner's eye can be, from one day to another, an essential element of the altar. Or a green scarf, which has become identified with the campaign to legalize abortion in Argentina, can give place to contemporary politics in the altar.

Contemporary altars are composed of a variety of objects that sometimes may seem to have no connection with each other apart from the person who assembles them. Some of them stay with people for a longer period of time and they may traverse generations. Others have a shorter lifetime as they are meant to be used, such as incense stickers or essential oils. There is a prevalent valuation of gifts, inherited objects, things collected during trips, random findings and handcrafts as they are thought to have something of the person who made them. But they are also populated by materials from nature (feathers, leaves, twigs, stones and plants) and other objects circulating in the local market of spirituality. During our conversations Juana elaborated on the composition of her altar:

> "I have objects that are purchased, inherited objects and pictures of my ancestors. I am a big fan of finding things on the street: I take what I find and I clean it before putting it on the altar. It is always *a mixture of things from my history*, things that have to do with me, with my ancestors, with something very particular of my life that I want to honor, to remember. And at the same time, all the little elements that I add that my friends give me as gifts are also like updating the altar."

The altar is an intimate space where spiritual practitioners combine a multiplicity of objects that are intrinsically tied to their spiritual trajectories. Many of the objects of the altar are special, since they connect spiritual practitioners with somebody, some place or some significant moment in their lives. These objects are weaved with a "social biography" that matters to spiritual practitioners. They trigger memories and sensations. They generate a predisposition to connect with the sacred in the everyday. In this section we sketch out the skeleton of the altar by following some of the trajectories of the objects culled as they were narrated by spiritual practitioners. By doing so we can see how the process of creating altars is not solely individual but involves multiple forms of sociality. In effect we can say that in the singular accumulation of the objects the altar condenses various levels of relationships, from the most micro to the cosmological.

From the market to the altar: beyond consumerism

Some of the objects that spiritual practitioners place on the altar are acquired in a vast local market of spiritual objects. The biggest esoteric shop in Buenos Aires has more than 120,000 followers on Instagram and offers a wide range of products to support spiritual practitioners with their spiritual work. Kits full of objects customized to particular issues provide practitioners with everything they need to conduct their rituals, such as the "Abundance Kit" or the "Gemini season kit". I remember being outside the shop in the line of customers waiting during my last visit to Buenos Aires when one of the women behind asked me "Do you know that they alchemize their candles?". One of the attractions of the shop is how they "prepare" the candles before selling them to "elevate their energy", as they explain in their website.

The people I interviewed do not deny the fact that they buy some of these objects. Cami tells me that she frequently buys floral water and essential oils: "I know they can be done at home but I am a bit of a disaster to do it myself, so I prefer to buy these things'". Candles of different colours and sizes, stones and crystals, incense sticks and herbs, floral water and essential oils are important elements of the altar for what they represent and for their uses. The smell of the incense, the feeling of the essential oils in the skin and the heat of the candle excite the senses and help to create the atmosphere that predisposes spiritual practitioners to have a moment of connection. In this sense, we embrace here a "sensori-social approach" insofar as we recognize

these objects both as “bundles of social relations” and as “bundles of sensory qualities or sensual relations” (Howes, 2020).

Even if spiritual practitioners recurrently purchase objects to consume while conducting spiritual practices in the altar, they distance themselves from the resort to consumerism to fulfill their spiritual needs. As Feli explains during our interview: "My altars have to do with me and with my history and with things that I collect from my passage through life. So there is no need to go shopping to have an altar, to buy things we have to have". The emphasis is put in the handcrafted part of the process of creation of the altar vis-à-vis the ready-made pieces that can be obtained in the market.

When we put a parenthesis to the native discourses, it is undeniable that contemporary spiritual practices are linked to the commoditization of social life. Extensive studies have shown how market structures endow religion and new spiritualities with new dynamics. The local studies of the Seman and Viotti (2015) contextualize how the massification of the New Age is tied to “market forces, consumption and pleasure”. However, the authors bring forward the importance of not resorting to simplifications that easily dismiss these new religiosities as “superficial” or “socially irrelevant” based on their connection with modern individualism and contemporary consumerism. This overlooks the complexity of the phenomenon that cannot be reduced to the image of a sovereign individual who cherry-picks from a wide market to create a personal spiritual synthesis. Even if “its market structure and the sovereignty of the individual spiritual consumer are central and uncontested features of the contemporary spiritual milieu” argue Aupers and Houtman (2010) “these thus cannot be taken to prove the absence of a coherent spiritual doctrine” (p.7).

While it is relevant to discuss the dynamics of commoditization in relation to these new forms of spirituality, we should not put at the heart of the analysis its connection with the market logic. This sort of one-dimensional explanations may lead us to lose sight of other modes of relating to objects that are not circumscribed to the dynamics of commoditization. We explore some of these trajectories in the following section.

When objects solidify relationships

The objects that are passed on from generation to generation are like a thread that prolongs relationships within a familial microcosm. Many of the objects that spiritual practitioners incorporate in the altar belonged to their ancestors. As we have noted earlier in the chapter, the material presence of these items in the altar provides a hint of a continuity with past traditions. These objects are special to spiritual practitioners as their trajectory is woven with the intimacy of kinship ties. The addition of the object to the altar is a way of honoring the ancestors and continuing the relationship with them in the afterlife. “The stones that are on the altar belonged to my grandmother, I have some there and I have some in my bookcase with my esoteric books. I feel that they have a very high vibration because, as I told you, she was light” tells me one of the spiritual practitioners, Laura. Many spiritual practitioners feel that objects preserve something of their ancestors. This is frequently expressed in the language of “energies”, a metaphysical concept widely used among spiritual practitioners to refer to a sort of undercurrent universal that traverses all bodies. This is also close to what Laura means when saying that the stones of her grandmother have a “high vibration”[11], regarding the energetic quality of the object[12]. The object is understood to preserve some of the energies of the person that passed away.

Inherited objects have the ability to conjure up memories and sensations that move people. The object biography connects generations and prolongs meaningful relationships. This feeling may be common to any person who possesses heirlooms of affective value. However, the act of placing the object on the altar along with other objects heightens the continuity of this relation and the act of remembrance, and makes it part of a media to tap the sacred. For instance, another spiritual practitioner tells me that she has a miniature rocket on her altar that belonged to her grandfather. She had brought the souvenir to him from her trip to the NASA facilities in the United States as he was a fan of space stuff. Her grandfather reappropriated the object by

[11] The language of “vibes” is not used so much anymore because it became unpopular..explain. In my conversations with spiritual practitioners there is often a need to differentiate spirituality from other forms of spirituality that circulate in the media that are understood as superficial or "empty of content". People cross their spirituality with the development of a social conscience that is not limited to personal improvement but to a work of increased consciousness that affects their relationship with the environment and with other people in a positive way.

[12] Add footnote on energies

covering the flag of a country that was foreign to him and treasure it with care. “He used to carry the rocket in his briefcase. It was like his talisman”. When the object came back to her hands, it had a history imprinted that was inextricably linked to the life of her grandfather. When she decides to place the rocket on the altar, there is an intention to honour, to remember and to connect spiritually with her grandfather. This transformation of a secular object into a means of connecting with the sacred is made possible by (but not exclusively)[13] the relationships imbued in the object and by the effects that the object produces in spiritual practitioners.

The same is true of gifts from significant others. Maru has a large Shiva in the middle of her altar that became part of her altar because it was given to her by close friends. “I don't really believe in deities even though I have a giant Shiva on my altar, the biggest contradiction” tells me Maru while nodding her head “I do not think too much about it”. Gifts from loved ones may become part of the altar. Some of the gifts are meant for the altar, as the Shiva that was gifted to Maru. Others are not particularly made with the altar in mind but they are significant to spiritual practitioners as they refer to some person and some moment of their lives that is significant. For instance, another spiritual practitioner (Feli) incorporated in her altar a gift that her friends gave her for good luck before her first solo trip. Gifts have a special character that allows them to transcend their commodity status. They have both “the quality of the giver and the receiver”, as anthropologist Michael Jackson observes in his reference to Marcel Mauss. What is essential is the type of relationships they solidify (Jackson, 2017). The affective value of the gifts and the kind of relationships they evoke outweigh the potential lack of coherence of incorporating the object to the altar. The object is not so much added by its most linear, iconographic or commonly shared representation, although such representation does not disappear completely.

That Maru does not think much about the potential contradiction of adding the image of Shiva to the altar may speak to the fact that people do not strive towards the coherence of their beliefs. As the anthropologist of religion Robert Orsi suggests, the study of the everyday ways in which people practise religion “makes us cognizant not only of the realities of contradiction and unpredictability in people's understandings and actions, but of the deep well-springs of such contradictions”. (Orsi, 2002, p. 173). Spiritual practitioners live their spirituality amidst deep-seated contradictions, which, far from questioning the truthfulness of their experience,

[13] Notion of the sacred.

reveal the importance of studying what people do much more than what people say that they believe.

Signs of magical encounters

A few years ago, in the streets of Rosario, capital of the province of Santa Fe in Argentina, Diana found something in the middle of the street. When she grabbed it from the ground, she saw what appeared to be “the holy card of a virgin" with the name of Iemanja. The 35-year-old tarotista, who was an undergraduate student of anthropology at the time, decided to keep the prayer card without giving it much thought. She would soon be leaving for Uruguay on holiday to visit a friend, unaware that she would arrive on time for the festival of the goddess Iemanja, the queen of the seas in Umbanda religion, held every second day of February in the country. "I could not believe that the rafts offered to the sea had the same image as the one I found in the street", Diana tells me as if reliving the astonishment. For her this providential event marked the beginning of the presence of the saint in her life and paved the way to the beginning of her “spiritual quest”.

There is something about these seemingly random encounters that fascinates spiritual practitioners. Whenever they find something that catches their attention and awakens a feeling that it could be a sign of something else they grab it and put it in their altars. Feathers, leaves, images, cards, books, all of them have the potentiality of communicating something meaningful if they appear in the way of believers. The source of these signs vary depending on the particular belief of the person: it may come from the universe, the cosmos, nature or any other entity with which they relate on their day-to-day, such as spirit guides, animals spirits and ancestors. People dwell on these encounters in spite of not being able to understand what they mean, and as Juana puts it, “sooner or later you end up understanding the reason”. They spark reflections about particular circumstances of their lives. Laura tells me that when she found a feather in the middle of the street some time ago, she immediately felt it was a sign addressing her concerns for doing well in a presentation she had to deliver. This is connected to her cosmovision. Among the four elements, air is related to the power of the mind. Laura usually incorporates objects to her altar to represent air whenever she needs to focus to complete a goal. For her, the encounter of the feather was a sign that she would find the courage to overcome her fears.

But how fortuitous are these encounters? Just as ethnographers refine their perception of their environment and discover things they would not have seen before, the development of spirituality gives way to a particular sensibility. As Diana puts it, it consists of "making room for things to manifest themselves" as if slowing down from the voragine of the day to notice what is actually happening around us. There is a clear intentionality towards attuning the perception to notice these signs and messages that populate the world. The research of local scholars Wright and Ceriani brings forward this point when outlining some of the characteristics of the '*pensée esoterique'* based on Levi-Strauss analysis of the '*pensée sauvage'*, and from the seminal study of the Azande people by Edward Evans-Pritchard. There is "global and integral determinism that denies chance, granting meanings and establishing correspondences between actions and fact" (Wright & Ceriani, 2018). Spiritual practitioners attach a magical character to their daily experience. The appearance of these signs connects them to something greater of which they consider themselves a part, from their immediate environment to the cosmos.

Between the *individual* and the *network*

The encounter with the holy card of the goddess Iemanja marked the beginning of Diana's spiritual work. However, Diana had a curiosity for esoteric and spiritual matters since she was young. She remembers her excitement when she found the I Ching in her parents' library and the thrill of getting her first tarot deck as a gift from her close friends. But she felt "too embarrassed" to publicly say that she read the tarot, and she had a hard time finding people with whom to discuss her ideas. For her, it was in part her transit through the university as a student of anthropology that gave her the tools to "come out". Diana tells me that one of her first "guides" was one of her anthropology professors, who would mentor her in regards to her curiosity for esotericism. "She knew how to read the tarot. She understood me', Diana assures me. She chose not to finish her degree, but her time at the university led her to take a reflective stance on her beliefs for the first time in her life. The encounter with other people, such as her Ayurveda therapist, would introduce her to the world of astrology and reveal a new way of understanding the world outside of canonical practices. Over time, she began to weave a close relationship with Iemanja, and she has incorporated two other "images" to her spiritual practices, the Gauchito Gil, a popular creolle saint from Argentina, and Buddha. Diana tells me that her altar is special

because she built it with her own hands to house the figure of the Iemanja in a wooden box, painted of the color of the sea, with pieces of mirrors glued inside and illustrations with green ink in each corner of the altar.

The story of Diana is in some ways a story of significant encounters. At the beginning of our interview Diana responded to my request for an introduction by recounting her trajectory as one of encounters with people who left a mark in her life. There is an acknowledgement by her of the instances of sociality that are part of her spiritual development. Far from hiding these external influences, they are strongly present in the narrative of spiritual practitioners. Perhaps a few years ago the scenario would have been different. Much has been written about the way in which New Age spiritual practitioners sacralize the individual and systematically erase all types of external influence of their trajectories (Heelas, 1996). Maria Julia Carozzi's (1999) local ethnography calls this phenomenon "*autonomy as religion*", insofar as spiritual practitioners perceive themselves as autonomous individuals making decisions based on what 'feels right'. While this kind of emphasis on an autonomous *self* picking up from different traditions and sources to assemble its own synthesis is still present in various ways, the spiritual practitioners I work with somehow highlight the multiple modes of sociality that are part of their spiritual experience. Even if they still preserve a discourse of the type "I did it my way", they recognize external influence, power and authority.

De la Torre Castellanos observes that believers "participate in networks around ceremonies that guide their learning and their identity" (de la Torre Castellanos, 2020). Laura, another spiritual practitioner, says that "people are portals". It was thanks to others that she got to know a Queros family in Peru who would teach her about the Andean cosmology and introduce her into shamanism. Laura explains that her spiritual work and the way her altar is crafted is very much based on this "ancestral wisdom". She does not intend to "replicate" the ceremonies of the community in the context of the city of Buenos Aires, but her goal is to treat the knowledge that was "trusted to her by the Queros people" with respect in her day to day. Laura gave shape to her spirituality from the relationship she developed with the Queros community. Laura and other spiritual practitioners include objects in their altar that were obtained from their passage through the courses or seminars where they were initiated in spiritual practices. In the case of Laura, she incorporated in her altar elements that she brought from her visits to the community, such as a piece of cloth that represents the worldview of Queros people and a bundle of herbs that she

received in a ritual. These *sacred objects* are placed next to other ones coming from diverse traditions and sources that she has incorporated in the course of her spiritual trajectory. In this sense, as De la Torre (2020) observes, the altar does provide "an autobiographical narrative" of the transit of spiritual practitioners within a diverse array of circuits.

These circuits are increasingly virtual. The expanded use of social networks by spiritual practitioners gives new dynamics to the sociality of spirituality. The role of teachers and guides is now complemented by the role of "influencers", individuals with thousands of followers on their social media accounts. The interaction with guides and teachers is no longer limited to in-person participation in courses or seminars, but rather mutates into a day-to-day dialogue that allows the circulation of information in a faster and broader way. Spiritual practitioners spend much of their time generating relevant content to share with their followers and answering questions. One example is Sofia, who shares information about "conscious esotericism" on her Instagram account. With more than 50k followers, the 36-years-old psychic from the banlieues of the city of Rosario is a person of influence in the local contemporary spiritual milieu. She began offering clairvoyance sessions online but her visibility grew exponentially thanks to an encounter she had with the owner of one of the most popular esoteric stores in Buenos Aires shortly before the pandemic. Since then, she offers courses on *mediumnidad*[14] in partnership with the esoteric shop and shares her experience with others in her podcast and her social media account. Many of the spiritual practitioners I interviewed know her, as a rapid inspection into our common followers unveils. Her expertise is evident in the naturalness with which she handles our conversation by video call, almost displacing me for my position as an interviewer. "I am a bit of a mother witch in my relationship with others" she acknowledges during our interview.

In the course of their spiritual trajectories people move through circuits of apprenticeship where they learn the discourses and practices that they incorporate into their spiritual repertoire. The people they meet within these circuits give shape to their spiritual path. Through an informal mechanism of recommendations, spiritual practitioners immerse themselves in the microcosm of contemporary spirituality. The diffuse character of the relationships that are woven within these circuits certainly difficulties the framing of them as authoritative relationships. From a native point of view, there is a minimization of the authority of the teacher, who is presented merely as a guide to help people to discover their own truths. "An apparently amorphous general opinion,

[14] The native term 'mediumnidad' is translated as mediumship.

friendly voices that affirm that we should trust our own experience and accept only what rings true to our own intuition" Olav Hammer observes, "are much less readily identified as loci of external authority" (2010, p. 88).

Juana tells me that spirituality has a complete individual axis that has to do with an arduous work of exploring the inward and an instance of deep introspection. But, as she explains, "if one does not put that into the network and into the whole, it does not hold up". Her spiritual trajectory takes shape in the encounter with others: in her participation in courses, seminars and discussion groups, and the multiple instances of exchange in social spaces. It was only through her involvement in groups that she could start to piece together some of the things she had been exploring on her own when she started to be interested in deepening her spirituality. For this reason, she considers spirituality in a back and forth movement between the *individual* and the *network*. In recognizing the importance of individual work, the people I work with do not systematically erase external influences from their personal narratives.

Political displays in the altar

Some spiritual practitioners add objects to the altar that integrate contemporary politics with their spiritual practices. These objects materialise on the altar a series of relationships that are not necessarily contained within the boundaries of 'the spiritual'. There is a widespread acceptance among scholars of the non-political and non-social character of the New Age spiritualities. Besides a few exceptions, studies have shown that "social grievances or conflicts with the state seldom become a focus of movement activities." (Brown, 2002, p. 103). These critiques typically allude to the ways in which the processes of sacralization of the self in these new spiritualities is incompatible with collective involvement. While emphasizing the centrality of the individual, Aupers and Houtman (2010) recognize that these new spiritualities "boost a networked form of sociality" that has collective expressions (p. 15). Spirituality is experienced and practised in multiple ways. There are some people that prefer to avoid mixing political affairs with their spiritual labor, which they consider to be sacred and located in a higher sphere in relation to other dimensions of their lives. But, the majority of the people we work with do not compartmentalize their lives in separate spheres and the objects and images that they include in the altar, and to which they relate in various ways, bear witness to this integration.

The most recurrent case is the presence of the *pañuelo verde* (green scarf) in the altar, symbol of the feminism movement in Argentina and Latin America. The incorporation of the *pañuelo verde* began as emblem for the 'National Campaign for Legal, Safe, and Free Abortion' and expanded in the region as a symbol of the fight for women's rights. My interviews with spiritual practitioners were conducted in the midst of the heated debate over abortion rights in Argentina that would lead to the passage of the law in December 2020, making the topic particularly present during our conversations. Some of them place the *pañuelo verde* in the altar. This varies depending on each person and the understanding they have of spirituality and politics, and the relation between the two. Others add the green scarf circumstantially, according to the need of the moment. Juana identifies as a feminist and she recently participated in the demonstrations for the approval of the Abortion Law: "I took my pañuelo verde and my candle and set up an altar in the square of the Congress to ask for the law to be passed". Her idea of spirituality is linked to her understanding of politics. For Juana, both her spirituality and her political ideas are two parallel paths that lead to the same point. Juana confesses to me that even her "most skeptical friends" approached her small altar to ask for the law to be passed. Matias, the 36 years-old and co-founder of a well-known esoteric bookstore in the northern part of Buenos Aires, tells me that he decided to put a statue of a virgin with a green scarf on his altar only when the law was approved. "I didn't want anger to be represented on my altar" explains me during our video call. As a political activist and social worker, Matias believes that for many years he privileged "outward change" and ignored the importance of "inner change". He regrets that these two dimensions of experience are often seen as incompatible. With his spiritual work Matias seeks to potentiate everything that generates *love* and he considers that this has a positive impact at a social level, on the relationships that he develops with others and with the environment.

Some of the many objects that compose the altar represent ideas with which spiritual practitioners identify, as we have seen in the case of the *pañuelo verde.* While these objects are not reduced to mere symbols, they materialize in the altar a particular mode of inhabiting the world that spiritual practitioners want to cultivate. In the case of Lucia, a 35 years-old astrologist by profession with a background in political science, the incorporation of the image of a goddess to the altar represents her political ideas on the connection of women with nature, as well as a critique to gender structures. "I have an image of Artemis, the Greek goddess, protector of forests, animals and births. I feel she represents my ecofeminist side, plus she lives in nature, something I

deeply long for and desire", told me Lu during our interview. The claiming of goddesses as political figures could be traced back to the 70s, to the spread of new forms of spirituality that integrate feminist ideas with spiritual practices. Susan Greenwood (2005) says that in the cosmovision of *feminist witches*, "the Goddess is seen to reflect women's experience and female aspects of divinity denied or repressed in patriarchal religions; she is personal and political" (p. 185).

In this section we have sought to show how people incorporate objects that refer to their political identifications within the altar, in an attempt to move away from the image that projects a sacralised individual disconnected from the surroundings. If these objects are congealed moments in a longer trajectory it is because they are traversed by forms of sociality that contain but are not limited to the territory of the individual and the intimate. In addition, in the case of contemporary spiritual practitioners, politics is often integrated into everyday spiritual practices, which speaks of a more encompassing way of living spirituality that expands beyond the individual self.

How objects are associated: an aesthetic intervention

The altar is an open space that is continuously changing according to the intentions of spiritual practitioners. Some objects are more permanent than others, but there are some patterns in the way in which objects are disposed of and associated in a relational manner. We have explored the social trajectory of some of the individual objects to provide context on why they were selected to become part of the altar and how they are enmeshed in processes of sociality that expand beyond the individual self. But, as Adorno observed, "the history locked in the object" can only be unlocked if we consider the "positional value of the object in relation to other objects" (Adorno, 1973 in Gordillo, 2014, p.20). The way objects are combined by spiritual practitioners does not only give an account of a subjective experience but it speaks about the cosmological relations that constitute the forms of contemporary spirituality. As Turner (2008) observes, "items of sacred and secular nature are accumulated. On the altar they stand in relation to each other and in the overall composition each item resonates with all the others" (p. 183).

The main assertion circulating in the social microcosm of contemporary spirituality is that there are no rules to assemble an altar. The main idea is to dispose of the objects in a way that *resonates* with the person who is creating the altar. To make something personal by engaging our

intuition and our imagination instead of copy-pasting other altars. The practice of creating the altar is presented in many ways as a form of creative play, in which each person brings together various types of objects of distinct nature that suit them best. Nevertheless, most of the altars of the people interviewed are composed with a certain degree of systematicity by following a criteria that gives centrality to nature. The mainstream manner of organizing the altar includes at minimum the four classic elements of nature[15]: air, fire, earth and water. Some people identify a fifth, the quintessence, aether or "primordial substance" depending on the beliefs and practices of each person. What they most frequently make sure of is to be representing the four elements of nature. This is rooted in the understanding of the altar as an extension of the inner world, not only on a metaphorical level but on an ontological one. For instance, Juana explains to me that "if the altar is an extension of us on an *energetic level*, working with the four elements of nature is working with those four aspects of us". When she goes to her patio to collect some twigs to add to her altar, she is working with her body insofar her body is perceived to be *matter and resource.* This may be read as an articulation of what Susan Greenwood calls "nature spiritualities" in which the practices of believers revolve around finding a unity with Nature[16]. These modes of religious expression locate the source of the sacred in nature which is "viewed as a source of emotional identification". In the next chapter we will look at the modes of interaction that people establish with the altar on the basis of an emotional correspondence with the four elements of nature.

While most of the people minimally intend to add the four elements on the altar, there is a great variability in the ways in which each person chooses to represent and distribute them. "On my main altar I have the four elements arranged in the form of cardinal directions", I am told by one of the spiritual practitioners as she explains this organization is based on the Andean cosmology. She generally has "feathers to represent the air, stones for the earth, shells for the water and some candles for the fire". There are some objects that are easily associated with an element of nature because of their specific physical character, for example a candle always represents fire and feathers always represent air. But people can choose among a wide array of

[15] The reference to the four elements of nature as conditions of the material world is present across traditions. In Western thought, Aristotle drawing from Empedocles conceptualized the four elementary types of matter. Some modern forms of alternative spirituality borrow from this philosophy such as Modern Paganism and Wicca.

[16] The idea behind "nature spiritualities" is that we became alienated from nature due to historical processes by which the dichotomies that structure the modern Western thought such as nature/culture and mind/body/spirit resulted in a distanciation of human beings from nature. (See Greenwood, 2005)

objects. For example, when Laura added to her altar a miniature plastic plane that she inherited from her grandfather she intended to represent the element air. The potentiality each object has for standing for something else is manifested in the personal intentions that endows values, representations or qualities to the object. Spiritual practitioners change the distribution of the objects according to their intention/desires/feelings of the moment.

The criterion for the arrangement of the objects is also aesthetic. People frequently make reference to the beauty of their altar and the positive feelings they get from contemplating their altar. This emphasis on the aesthetics of religious objects is not novel. "Religion is related to taste and to objects, i.e. the sacred is not indifferent to the system of preferences that people incorporate" (Algranti & Monjeau Castro, 2020). The aesthetics of the altar does not only account for its beauty. In its eclectic layout, the altar displays an aesthetic that manifests a particular spiritual sensibility. For Sofia, a 36-years-old spiritual practitioner and *influencer* in the contemporary spiritual milieu, the altar is an aesthetic space. During our conversation, Sofia elaborates that in its aesthetic, the altar "manifests and represents an idea and that idea, then, connects us with a sensorial, emotional, spiritual experience". Her appreciation of the aesthetics of the altar is more aligned with academic recuperations of the concept of aesthetics in its original inception of the Greek *aisthesis* to bring forward the sensuousness of the term and its relationship with the environment. The altar is infused by an "aesthetic imagination" (Classen, 2002, p. 2) that responds to particular modes of perceiving the world. If the altar functions as an extension of the person, whether metaphorically or literally, the aesthetics of the altar signals to a person's *state* of mind, body and spirit.

The owner of the esoteric store that I visited in Buenos Aires is a major influencer on spirituality and author of the book "La Bruja Moderna" (Walker, 2018). The cover of the book anticipates its content with the blurb "ritual techniques and tools to connect with the universal energy" and a variety of illustrations of objects and symbols. The book comes with a small altar made of cardboard together with instructions on how to start creating a domestic altar. One of the spiritual practitioners interviewed mentions that she built her first altar at the beginning of the pandemic with the guide of the book. Since there is no digital version of the book and it was out of stock I requested one of the spiritual practitioners to share photos of some of the pages with me. In the first part Dalia F. Walker (2018) presents an altar as a space to reconnect with our energies and guides the reader step by step on how to start. After choosing the space of the house

where the altar will be located and cleaning it energetically, the author recommends placing the objects in a *harmonic* way. The aesthetic dimension of the process takes a primary role. Once the arrangement of the objects is completed Walker suggests the reader to "sit down and look at the piece of art you have created with your faith" (p. 123). The altar is constituted through an aesthetic-creative intervention of the domestic space.

A relational bricolage

People who create altars at their homes began to do so early in their spiritual journey, as they immerse themselves in the apprenticeship of spiritual practices that encourage the creation of a sacred space at home. The type of altars addressed here have an eclectic tone that does not seem to respond to any logic but to the idiosyncrasy of the person who selects the objects. A closer look reveals that the objects are carefully chosen by the person who creates the altar by following a criteria that privileges intuition[17] over other methods coming from external sources of authority. The encouragement to follow intuition and listen to the 'inner voice' takes a central place in selecting the objects that become part of the altar[18]. The idea is that each person creates something personal by combining various elements into a package that 'feels right' to them. De La Torre observes the same pattern in the Mexican believers who creatively assemble a wide array of objects in the manner of "do-it-yourself" (de la Torre Castellanos, 2020).

A great deal of academics have used the notion of *bricolage*[19] to characterize the discourses and practices of these new spiritualities. This notion remains analytically useful to describe the experience of the 'New Age spiritualities' but its widespread use by scholars has been often criticized for overemphasizing the individual dimension of the process. Aupers and

[17] Hanegraaff (1997) describes this blurring as a "strong tendency towards a psychologizing of religion combined with a sacralization of psychology" (p. 197). New Age writings on intuition may reflect elements of Eastern mysticism, Western occultism, Freudian psychoanalysis and contemporary psychology. In New Age metaphysics, the entire body is imagined as inherently expressive, receiving, storing and transmitting information.

[18] It "is that what lies within – experienced by way of 'intuition', 'alignment' or an 'inner voice' – serves to inform the judgments, decisions and choices required for everyday life". Paul Heelas (1996, p. 23 as cited in Roeland et al., 2010)

[19] The notion of bricolage has been introduced in anthropology by Claude Levi-Strauss in La Pensée sauvage (1962) to describe the character of mythological thought. It refers to the selection and recombination of fragments of cultures and traditions. In a recent study Veronique Altglas (2014) recuperates the original conceptualization of the term to detach it from a purely individualistic conception, see Véronique Altglas (2014) 'Bricolage': reclaiming a conceptual tool, Culture and Religion.

Houtman (2010, p. 8) point to the ways in which the concept has been misconstrued to portray an autonomous individual with freedom of choice and instead, they link these "self-spiritualities" into webs of shared values that give them "ideological coherence". The characterization of this practice as a *bricolage* is useful insofar it involves both the individual dimension of creating something out of the exercise of the imagination, and the multiple socialites that infuse the practice. That is to say, even conceiving altar creation as a bricolage performed by an individual, it is never detached from its context, and it is never done *sui generis*.

Even if altars do not look the same nor are they used in the exact same way at a micro level, at another level they are overly similar. If we zoom in on the individual and compare their altar with others, they will be unique for they are composed of personal objects that people collect throughout their lives, such as heirlooms or souvenirs from travels. But as we zoom out we start to note the similarities in each *bricolage.* We note how the selection and association of objects is not random but is enmeshed in a fabric of relationships among things, sacred forces and people that outlines the particular universe of a spiritual experience. As Key Turner observes, "the home altars index a folk-religion ideal of relationship in its aesthetic of accumulation, layering, condensation, and integration" (Turner, 2008, p. 183 as cited in de la Torre Castellanos, 2020). The local ethnography of Maria Julia Carozzi (1999) revealed more than two decades ago how the discourses that put the accent into the "autonomy" of the individual are in themselves learned by spiritual practitioners in the course of their transit through circuits of apprenticeship. The sort of unidimensional explanations that portray an individual with freedom of choice that creates their own *bricolage* is insufficient to account for the complex relationships that spiritual practitioners develop with objects. We may miss the ways in which people interact with the many objects that circulate in their everyday lives.

If we want to understand how people live their spirituality we have to move beyond great narratives that attempt to contain them and pay attention to the mundane ways in which people put it into practise (McGuire, 2003). We have shown how spiritual practitioners recognize the sociality of their spiritual lives by constantly referring to the people who left a mark in their trajectory. Significant relations that trace their spiritual journey. In its composition the altar objectifies the trajectory of spiritual practitioners, though it does much more than that. The altar encapsulates autobiographical narratives but not in the rigid manner of language. At the altar,

spiritual practitioners condense multiple forms of sociality that are part of their daily spiritual experiences.

Figure 1. Home altar on a ritual of *transmutation* shared by one spiritual practitioner

Figure 2. Home altar for the goddess Iemanja shared by one spiritual practitioner

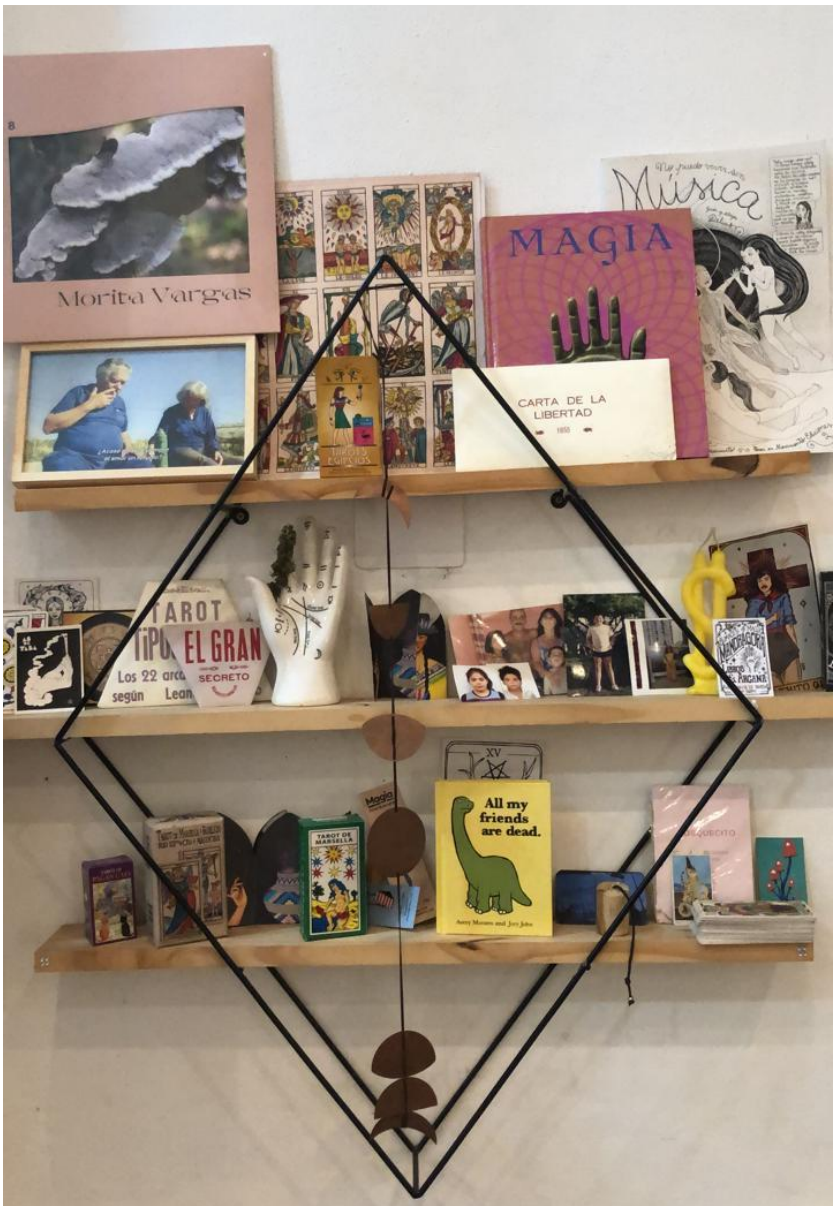

Figure 3. Home altar shared by one spiritual practitioner

Figure 4. Small home altar shared by one spiritual practitioner

Chapter 2

Disrupting the ordinary in the everyday: a relational approach to the altar

We have already explored at length the process of creation of the altar, by following pieces of the trajectories of the objects that are selected to become part of the altar. In a more narrative way, we went through ethnographic fragments to show how the altar is an intimate space interwoven with multiple instances of sociality. The question remains of how we can understand the relationship of spiritual practitioners with the altar beyond reducing these experiences to narratives. What might a focus on the everyday relationship with the altar reveal? In this chapter, we change the focus to the practices and actions of spiritual practitioners at/with[20] the altar. We explore how people relate to the altar in their homes as they go about their lives. We argue that the relationship with the altar disrupts the ordinary but is part of the everyday of spiritual practitioners. By bringing a relational approach to the everyday, we focus both on the instances of connection and disconnection that make up the intimate relationship of practitioners/altar. In order to capture the relationship in its complexity we discuss the role of the altar as the mediator of the sacred in the domestic space, where the sacred acquires a singular form that we endeavour to unpack. We include a section on rituals where we assess the use of the term from a native perspective and explore rituals as a distinctive mode of action that is done with/at the altar. We argue that the relationship with the altar is an intimate relationship that encompasses varying degrees of intensity and density. The people we work with cultivate an intimate relationship with the altar that is inextricably linked to the way they live their spirituality in the everyday. By attuning ourselves to the ways people engage with the altar we can grasp the character of this relationship and advance how it becomes part of their mode of life.

[20] We use throughout the chapter the propositions at/with to maintain the ambiguity in my writing with the intention of including the altar as a space and as a material body, in accordance with the ethnographic material.

The altar as a matter of everyday life

"The candle activates the energy of the altar and prepares me to start the day" I am told by Alma, a 35-year-old high school teacher and *tarotista,* during our video call conversation. Every morning, she goes to her altar and changes the disposition of the objects by following a particular criteria that responds to her concerns. She lights the candle, closes her eyes and sets her intention, allowing herself a moment of "spiritual connection" before the beginning of her *usual day*. As if what happens when she is connecting with her altar does not belong to the normal course of the day, but rather to a different temporality. In this section I explore the relationships with the altar as a matter of the everyday, in the sense suggested by Veena Das, as occurrences that "interrupt the ordinary but are still part of the everyday (Das, 2007, p. 7). Spiritual practitioners sustain practices at the altar that carve out a differential space/time in the course of their day. "The ideas underpinning the practices postulate a sacred inner self that is accessed through re-habituations" as the local scholars Seman and Viotti suggest "and a whole series of experiences that are disruptive to everyday life" (Seman & Viotti, 2015, p. 89). Many of these practices that bracket the ordinary happen at/with the altar.

Alma tells me that she cannot start her day without her *morning ritual* at the altar. Many of the practitioners interviewed tell me that they experience a feeling of incompleteness whenever they are unable to conduct their practices at the altar. Laura, the 32 years-old journalist and astrologist that we have met in the previous chapter, tells me that taking a moment at the altar is among her daily rituals, together with feeding her dog and preparing her morning coffee. She tells me, "I wake up and I *always* go to the altar and open the *sacred space* with a prayer. The house is protected, the energy flows around, and if I have to leave I close it, and then maybe before we go to sleep I open it again [the sacred space]". For those who relate with the altar on a daily basis, there is an organicity in the way these relations unfold in the course of the day. The degree of systematization and the nature of the engagement varies depending on many factors. Overall people relate with the altar in a rather flexible way (e.g whenever they feel they need it and/or when they have the time).

The concern for what people do in the everyday has been the focus of scholars of religion who reject narrowing the religious experience to its normative and institutional dimension. The

focus of analysis is redirected to how people experience, express and practise their spirituality in the everyday (Ammerman, 2007; McGuire, 2008; Meyer, 2010). We are indebted to these scholars that take the everyday "as a location where a sense of getting 'beyond the ordinary' is generated" (Meyer, 2012, p. 24). Many of the people interviewed do not practice their spirituality at the altar on a day-to-day basis. They are less methodical, and they prefer to approach the altar when they feel the need. They may go there when they are feeling anxious after a long day of work to connect with the four elements of nature or simply spend some moments in silence to feel calmer. But even if they do not carry out daily practices at/with the altar, their relationship with the altar is anchored in the everyday and it disrupts the ordinariness of life. How can we approach the multiple ways of relating with the altar?

An intimate relationship of various intensities

Feli assembled her altar on the top shelf of a sturdy wooden cabinet with etched glass doors in the main room of her apartment in the centre of Buenos Aires. A piece of furniture she inherited from her grandmother, along with many of the books that fill the bottom shelves. Some images and objects are hung all along the wall of his living room, giving a continuation to the altar beyond the wooden walls that house it. Feli describes to me her entire room, as a "power space", where she does everything, from lighting a candle and smoking incense to meditating and reading a book. The altar is the space where she goes "to be silent, to ritualize, to light a candle to burn intentions on the full moon and let go". She recognizes she has an "intense relationship" with the altar that has become part of her life. Feli uses the word *relación* in Spanish, which can be used both in the sense of relation and relationship in English, but in the context of our conversation appears closer to the word 'relationship'. She speaks about the nature of her relation with her altar in the same terms that we use it to refer to interpersonal relationships with other beings. Some time after our conversation I came across a sentence in a contemporary book about magic that is popular among spiritual practitioners, with the following phrase about the altar: "When you start using it, you're going to notice that it's like that friend you call when you're sad" (Walker, 2018, p. 122). Most spiritual practitioners expressed having an intimate relationship with the altar that they cultivated over time along their spiritual journeys.

What do we make of the aforementioned statements? Should they be understood as ontological propositions or as metaphorical ones?, interrogates the anthropologist Julie Archambault (2016) when the people of Mozambique where she was doing fieldwork said to her that plants were their lovers (p. 247). While situating her analysis within the posthumanist debates to recognize the importance of going beyond humans in our anthropological endeavours, and bringing forward the transformative character of the relationships of humans with 'non-humans'[21], the author claims the value of a human-centered approach that is not concerned with localising plants and things as selves[22] with a perspective on their own, but to value the experience of her human companions in regards to those relationships. Doing that, suggests the author, involves taking "both literally and metaphorically" the fact that plants are lovers. In the same spirit, we attend to the modes of relationship as they are lived and felt by spiritual practitioners. The intimate relationship that some people cultivate with their altars can be felt over time as intense and as necessary as interpersonal relations, even when the comparison bears some limitations.

In a recent analysis Marylin Strathern (2020) approaches ethnographically the concept of 'relation' to untangle the uses and meanings given to the term in anthropology. The author is concerned in understanding the multiple ways in which we imagine relations, what is that thing that binds us with others. By unpacking how the concept has been differentiated in ethnographic practice, Strathern calls on studies that advance the importance of distinguishing 'relationships' (as in social relationships between persons) to the more capacious term 'relation', which is most often used by academics to talk about relationality, about "beings inevitably enmeshed in a relational world" (p. 11). We use the concept of relation to refer to the relationship that people develop with the altar, mindful of the limitations of stretching this concept to the altar as a material assemblage. We do not intend to introduce the altar as a *selve*, that is, as an active agent able to 'recognize' another with whom it is relating (Pina Cabral, 2017 as cited in Strathern, 2020). Here it is worth exploring the case with an example.

[21] The category is used in the analysis of the author to refer to plants and things in dialogue with posthumanist critiques of the givenness of the category of 'non-human'. See (Archambault 2016)
[22] See the study of Eduardo Kohn for a posthumanist analysis on the relations of semiosis among living *selves* (Kohn 2013)

Laura shares that once she opens the sacred space "the altar is in constant operation all day long" as "things are happening inside there in a more spiritual dimension". According to some spiritual practitioners, the altar needs to be activated, otherwise it remains as a decoration. By means of certain actions, such as lighting a candle and focusing on an intention, the altar *begins to work*, for instance by *cleaning the energies* of the house. This does not translate to the experience of the altar as ontologically independent, as a pre-existent entity. This hints towards the fact that people experience their altar in movement ("things are happening there") as a result of their own engagements with it.

We are concerned here by the experience of spiritual practitioners as it attested by their practices and doings with the altar. We advance here some of the ways in which spiritual practitioners relate with the altar in the everyday, leaving the exploration of the effects of those interactions for the next chapter. There is no pretension of making an exhaustive presentation of all the possible relations that compose the relationship with the altar, as there are as many relations as comparing things together (Strathern, 2013). By doing so, we appeal to an epistemic use of the concept of 'relation' that is different to the aforementioned usage of the concept that is closer to interpersonal relationships. What are some of the most frequent ways of relating with the altar in the everyday? What can the doings and practices of spiritual practitioners tell us about the relationship with the altar?

In a preliminary way, we notice that there are different intensities in the relationship of spiritual practitioners with the altar. Practitioners can have recurrent daily routines at/with the altar, they can approach the altar for specific reasons, for example to "reconnect" after a long day of work. Even if some spiritual practitioners do not have daily practices at/with the altar, they sustain other types of interactions with the altar that are part of their relationship. The absence of daily rituals does not mean that people do not interact with the altar in other ways. Diana says that she frequently talks to the altar to make requests about mundane issues as she goes about her life. The interlocutor is not always the altar *per se* but it may be other entities with which people relate through the altar, as in the case of Diana where she makes requests and expresses gratitude to the goddess Iemanjá (sometimes without the need of approaching the altar). Other people tell me that just observing the altar as they pass by or stopping for a moment to touch one of the objects generates something in them, like a feeling of comfort and containment. These ways of

relating to the altar would be excluded if we focus solely on 'rituals', as they are as constitutive of the relationship as the other doings at/with the altar.

There can also be long periods of time where they do not engage with altars at all. For the absence of relation is also part of the relationship that they cultivate with the altar. Adopting a relational approach as the heart of the analysis does not involve focusing solely on the instances of engagement, but taking into account the multiple instances of detachment and disconnection that are also part of the relationship. A critique of the positive overtones of the concept of relation in most anthropological studies brings forward the "potential of disconnection, distance and detachment" in social life (Candea et al., 2015 as cited in Strathern, 2020). Even when people engage with the altar, they are demarcating a distance and detachment from other things. The altar is an intimate space that is rarely shared with others. The relationship with the altar is delimited spatially within the home in a negotiation with the other members of the household. Moreover, we could say that the altar is a gateway to disconnect from things happening in the immediate surroundings in order to effectuate a connection with 'the rest-of-what-is' (Mattijs van de Port, 2010 as cited in Meyer, 2012).

Mediating the sacred?

The conceptual framework of mediation has been used by scholars of religion to understand how the sacred is made present in the everyday (Orsi 2012, Stolow 2005, Meyer 2012, Viotti 2018). These authors have argued for an approximation to religion *as* mediation, based on an understanding of media that is more capacious in the sense of "transmitters across gaps and limits" (Meyer, 2012, p. 24). The very notion of 'religion' would not be possible without a process of mediation (Stolow, 2005, p. 125). The anthropologist of religion Birgit Meyer (2012) maintains that "religion may well be analysed as a technique of reaching out to - and by the same token generating a sense of - an 'otherworld' via various kinds of media" (p. 24). Meyer advocates for an ethnographic approach to the religious practices of believers in order to understand the process by which a "a sense of extraordinary presence" is generated in the everyday (p. 24).

The local ethnography of Nicolas Viotti (2018) argues that mediation is the mode of relationship that 'spiritual' people have with objects. Informed by the aforementioned

discussions, Viotti expands the notion of meditation to include not only objects that come from the circuits of the cultural industry (e.g. books, magazines) but also objects with less public significance that are constitutive of the spiritual experience of practitioners (e.g. such as gifts, inherited objects, crystals). Based on his participation in group activities in two spiritual centres of the city of Buenos Aires, the author observes that objects are "mediators and embodiment of a harmonious link with energy and that they produce specific social relations in the construction of the spiritual well-being" (p. 33). Viotti's proposition of adopting a relational perspective to study the practical consequences of relating with objects is productive to frame our analysis. The practices and doings of people at/with the altar can be thought as well as practices of mediation with the sacred, insofar as they mediate the relationship with 'the rest-of-what-is' (Mattijs van de Port, 2010 as cited Meyer, 2012). It is by engaging with the altar that the sacred is made present in the everyday. Home altars are material assemblages that mediate multiple relations with 'non-human'[23] entities in the everyday, the most prevalent in this ethnographic work being the undercurrent of energies that populates the cosmos but also other entities that are beyond the ordinary such as spirits, saints, gods and goddesses. The altar is such a special place partly because of this potential to be the mediator of the contact with what is felt to be sacred. In what follows we briefly go into an example that will help us to understand the singular character that the sacred takes on in the experience of contemporary spiritual practitioners.

Maru is a 35 years-old photographer and artist from Hurlingham, a neighborhood in the western part of the greater Buenos Aires. Some years ago she created her first altar seeking to have a space at home to connect with her spirituality and to meditate. She has a "very intimate" relationship with the altar, so much that recently she decided to move it to her bedroom, the more private space of her house. Her altar is one of the first things she spots when she wakes up. She does not have daily rituals with the altar. Rather, her engagements with the altar are subjected to her "mood". Whenever she feels anxious she goes there to slow down. She lights a candle, turns off the lights and sits there for a moment until "something happens" that makes her feel calmer. As if being there in silence would predispose her to ease her mind. Maru recognizes that she goes

[23] The studies of posthumanism bring forward the problem of the givenness of the category of 'human' and 'non-human', showing that the frontiers between the two categories are not stable and they are "always open to contestation" (see Barad 2012). Mindful of these discussions, we use the category of 'non-human' to include all the entities that are beyond the ordinary for spiritual practitioners. As one of my interviewees made clear, "what I cannot see or touch but that I feel". From a native point of view, this includes the energies of the cosmos but also other entities with which they weaved significant relationships (e.g. saints, gods and goddesses, spirits, animals of power, among others).

more often to the altar when she is not doing well, and that her practices at/with the altar are helping her to cope with pandemic-related stress. Sometimes, just observing the altar for a moment as she passes by gives her a comforting sensation. The altar is a sacred space where she can discover her 'truths':

> "I think the altar is sacred because I feel that when I go there I have the possibility of connecting with myself. You find yourself, with what you feel, with the truth, let's say my inner truth"

Maru considers the altar as both sacred and as a medium for the sacred. The fact that she feels the altar is sacred because of its potential to discover herself is connected with what scholars have identified as a process of 'sacralization of the self' (Heelas, 1996; Barker, 2004; Houtman & Aupers, 2004; Woodhead, 2010). Studies of New Age spiritualities show that the *location* of the sacred changes, from being transcendent to being "hidden deep 'within' each single person" (Barker, 2004; Heelas & Houtman, 2009 as cited in Houtman & Aupers, 2010). The sacred becomes layered within the individual, who begins a committed spiritual journey to uncover it. The altar is the central space where this spiritual work happens. In this sense, the doings of the practitioners at/with the altar and the objects used mediate a sacredness that is immanent. This movement in the context of contemporary spirituality is coupled with an holistic orientation, where the individual is conceived as part of a whole that extends beyond the self to the cosmos and forces beyond the human populate the universe (Woodhead, 2010). From here it follows that the sacred is not confined to the territory of the inner, but rather expands outwards, to the totality of the experience. This is the reason why any explanation that reduces the phenomenon to the psychological dimension is insufficient to account for the multiple cosmological relations that compose the contemporary spiritual experience.

A focus on the practises of spiritual practitioners reveal that the traditional idea of mediation seems to be insufficient to capture the multiplicity of ways of relating with objects in the everyday. This is what Viotti points in his analysis, inspired by the studies of Alfred Gell on the use of objects, as the "relative distance" (Viotti, 2018, p. 28) that is supposed to be found in mediation at times disappears. While the author observes how objects such as stones and crystals are more than mere material things to mediate the sacred, we may add that the altar too becomes

the embodiment of the sacred for some spiritual practitioners. The ethnography evidences that the attribution of a sacred character to the totality of experience coexist with the maintenance of boundaries between the sacred/profane in the actual practice. This is what allows spiritual practitioners to refer to the altar as "a space of communication with the sacred" and at the same time as a "sacred space". One of the frequent practices among spiritual practitioners that we have mentioned early is the opening of sacred space on the altar before the beginning of their rituals. Literally and symbolically, the trace of the circle that is made with the aid of a physical element (e.g. salt) or without it (e.g. as some people trace the circle in the air), is also the tracing of a frontier between the sacred and the rest. Even if some practitioners do not refer to their practices as sacred, they recognize a differentiation between their domestic altar and the rest of their homes.

A revision of the recent ethnographic studies about the new spiritualities reveals two experiences of the sacred that seem contradictory. For Aupers and Houtman (2012), “it is clear that a shared system of beliefs is present in the spiritual milieu that sets the sacred apart from the profane” (p. 14). Their analysis shows that the Durkheimian division of the sacred and profane is perfectly consistent with the discourses and practices of the New Age as a ‘religion of modernity’. An opposite position is accounted for in the local studies where their fieldwork evidences that practitioners “have a critical perspective on a dualistic conception of the sacred/secular" (Viotti, 2010, p. 60). The separation of sacred/profane is seen as unproductive as it pigeonholes the analysis into restrictive categories that do not reflect the experience of practitioners. The separation between what is sacred and what is not is not entirely clear, but rather fluid and layered, or continuous with spatial and temporary instances of higher densities or intensities than others. Matias, the 39-years-old co-owner of a popular esoteric bookshop in Buenos Aires and a teacher of philosophy, tells me something that resonates with these discussions: “The fact that people continue to maintain a sacred and profane space and at the same time no longer believe in it, because they feel something else, I think it's great, it seems to me that it has to coexist”.

Rather than needing to resolve what may appear to be individual incongruences between discourse and practice, we approach these tensions as productive, just as Matias. Our fieldwork material does not consistently show a theological approach that is completely shared across practitioners. Hence, there is no need to pick sides between, for instance, characterizing their

ideologies as immanent or transcendental or as monistic or dualistic. Nor it shows a clear tendency to be able to tie theory and practice in a complete manner. In addition, some practitioners dwelling in ambiguous positions might find the discussion of inconsistencies relevant, while others may not. For some it might be a 'problem to be resolved' towards a better spiritual practice, while for others it might not interfere with their spiritual practice at all. Whether it be that they consider these ambiguities an essential or productive part of spiritual experience or that they consider theory/conceptualization completely secondary to it.

To recapitulate, the attribution of a sacred character to the totality of experience coexists with the maintenance (or creation) of boundaries between the sacred/profane in the actual practice. This is what allows spiritual practitioners to refer to the altar as "a space of communication with the sacred" and at the same time as a "sacred space". We have practitioners that talk about the altar as a way to connect with the sacred, to "transmute energy"[24], to clean their houses on an energetic level. As a means to make an intention for health, to remind themselves of their spiritual condition and to get in contact with otherworldly entities. This makes it helpful to approach the practitioner-altar relationship as one of mediation, since altars mediate the relationship with 'the rest-of-what-is' (Mattijs van de Port, 2010 as cited in Meyer 2012). At the same time, when sacredness is experienced to lie 'within', or the altar itself is considered sacred (or *done* sacred temporarily through opening practices) or when sacredness encompasses the whole of experience, mediation as a framework suddenly can appear to take an instrumentalist form, which does not fully describe the experience of spiritual practitioners.

The relationship with the altar can be categorised as one of mediation if it is possible to *collapse* this mediation, to merge means and ends, to consider how the "relative distance" (Viotti, 2018 p. 28) that is supposed to be found in mediation at times disappears. This is what the anthropologist Birgit Meyer (2012) suggests when saying that it is through mediation that "a distance between the immanent and what lies 'beyond' it is posited and held to be bridged, albeit temporarily." (p. 24) Now that we have characterized the relationship with the altar, we can get back to spiritual practitioners in a stricter manner in the sense of what is shared between them, their practice at/with altars, by presenting some of their ritual practices.

[24] The notion of *transmutation* is frequently used natively to refer to the change and/or alteration in the energies of the environment and bodies, as we will explore in the next chapter when we focus on what emerges from the interaction of practitioners with the altar.

A differential time: ritualizing with the altar

"Within the daily rituals, like these little things that one does every day, the altar appears as a key example" I am told by Juana at the beginning of our conversation as an introduction of her close relationship with the altar. She puts a lot of dedication into her spiritual practices to the point that she considers herself to be somewhat "fundamentalist". She explains that we should always have purpose when ritualizing at the altar as "a candle should never be lit just for the sake of it". Juana characterizes herself as a "very ritualistic person". She assembles some elements together next to her computer some time before her session with a client to "ritualize for protection", which usually consist of lighting a candle, smoking some herbs around her desk and praying to "open a sacred space". Since the pandemic she provides her services as a tarot reader by video call, but she assures me that she can feel the energies across the screen in spite of the physical distance. These small rituals get Juana ready for a demanding day of work. On special occasions, Juana enjoys doing rituals to connect with the *energies available* at the moment, usually in sync with the cycles of the moon and the astrological chart. Just at the time of our interview, Juana had recently done "many rituals to cut with unconscious repetitive patterns" in alignment with "the energies available in Scorpio season", using a wide range of elements tailored to her needs, such as white, violet and black candles.

The polysemous character of the term 'ritual' is evidenced by its discursive usage among spiritual practitioners. Both in the ways they express themselves in public and during our conversations, people use the notion of ritual to refer, on the one hand, to nearly all the actions that are carried out at the altar on a more or less regular basis, closer to its usage in layman's terms. On the other hand, it seems to adopt a more precise sense when they refer to the doings at/with the altar that are more ceremonial as they comprise a set of predetermined steps. Typically the latter comprises those rituals that are carried out on special occasions (e.g. once a month during the full moon). The problem of defining ritual has long been the subject of anthropology, sociology and religious studies. In her comprehensive study about ritual, Catherine Bell (2009) grapples with the problem of discerning ritual from other modes of human activity and argues that "ritual acts are not a clear and closed category of social behavior" (p. 74). Rather, we have to focus our attention on the ritual act in the context of other types of activities to understand how

that differentiation is made by practitioners. For the author, “ritualization” is essentially “a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities" (p. 74). This act of differentiation appears clearly in the ritual practices of spiritual practitioners, which as we have seen often involves the drawing of boundaries that demarcate the sacred from the rest.

We are indebted to Bell for the focus on the practical dimension and her insistence on zooming into the act to understand the situational meaning of ritual. If “people engage in ritualization as a practical way of dealing with some specific circumstances” (p. 93), as the author sustains, this is not to reduce rituals solely to its instrumental character, nor dive into psychological explanations of its workings. Even if engaging in these practices with/at the altar evidently has its effects, which will be explored with a larger focus in the next chapter. Ritualization “has to be approached not simply as a social phenomenon that reorders and integrates social relations” says the anthropologist Michael Jackson, but a “mode of action that plays upon the emotions, manipulates the body, and alters consciousness.” (Jackson, 2017, p. 56).

As I am scrolling through Instagram I come across a post shared by Cami with her more than 10k followers. The captions of the image announces: “Ritual of abundance for this full moon”. The elements required to carry out the ritual are listed in the form of a recipe:

-A clean glass jar
-Honey
-Some of these herbs: cinnamon/rosemary/laurel/tenderloin
-A piece of paper and a pen
-A green candle

A great deal of comments from users thank Cami for sharing the information, while others make questions about the proceedings. As I read the steps to complete the ritual, I wonder if trying it at home would make me feel more of a participant in my role as anthropologist. As night falls I am ready to begin the ritual with most of the required elements scattered on a piece of cloth on the floor. I grab my phone to read the instructions carefully once again. The first step instructs to burn the selected herb to “purify the space”. I place some sprigs of rosemary in a small ceramic

pot and try to burn them with a lighter. Even if they are too fresh the scent it releases impregnates the air with a smoky and stimulating odor that takes me back to my grandmothers' kitchen. I refocus and grab my phone to check what to do next: "Reflect on the kind of abundance you want to obtain. When you are ready, write your intention on a piece of paper". I take some minutes to envisage abundance as I struggle with competing ideas on the sort of abundance that I need. As soon as I write my intention in the small piece of white paper I fold it and I throw it inside the glass jar. Before doing something else, I check the instructions again to confirm the next steps. I have a desire to follow the steps to the letter as if a mistake could affect the chain of events of the ritual. I put the remaining rosemary inside the jar with a teaspoon of honey. I feel excited like a magician preparing a potion. I remember the image of the card of The Magician in tarot, represented as a person that has all the resources of the world at hand displayed on a table to create infinite combinations. I grab the lighter to melt the bottom of the candle to stick it in the jar with the rest of the elements. Once it's done I light the candle and go back to my phone to read the words I am supposed to utter: "may this honey and its sweetness serve to attract abundance and wealth". I felt the need to repeat the phrase two times as the first came out as a whisper. The second time I do it more firmly, increasing the volume of my voice and staring directly into the flame as if my words would be able to merge with the fire. The last step invites us to close our eyes and be grateful for the moment. I use the momentum to turn off the room light and let the candle be the only thing that illuminates the space. I do it gently as if an abrupt movement could disrupt the flow of the ritual. Once I am seated back with my legs crossed facing the rectangular cloth that I improvised on my wooden floor, I let go of my eyes, and I focus on the air coming in and out of my body as when meditating until my body can no longer endure the stillness. When I open my eyes I fall into a yawn so deep that my arms feel the need to stretch out pushing the limits of my body. I wonder what to do next: "Take the jar and place it as high as possible to prevent it from falling until the candle is completely consumed". I place the jar on the top shelf of a bookcase and I go outside with the hopes of catching a glimpse of the full moon.

Faced with the limitations imposed by the context on my involvement in the field, I recount my experience with the ritual not with the intention to jump into an autoethnographic analysis, but as a method of participating in the field by means of doing with others, mindful of the limitations it entails. Paul Stoller (2004) reminds us that even if we approach to fieldwork willing to immerse ourselves in the transformative experience that it implies, there are things we

may not be ready to “see”, “hear” or “feel”, as the master of sorcery told him in response to his disoriented questions during his early research among the Songhay people. I am therefore not changing the focus of the research to my personal spiritual practices, but using the 1st person register to guide the reader with a case in point of the path that spiritual practitioners may take when doing a ritual.

During our interview, Cami tells me that she is "a fan of doing rituals". She frequently shares with her followers rituals of all kinds, some that she finds and others that she creates herself. She decided to create the ritual of abundance for the full moon that I found on her Instagram account in response to the requests of some of her followers. The lunar cycles are used as a source of inspiration to reflect on the transformations that happen in the lives of human beings since ancient times. The rituals conducted by spiritual practitioners typically incorporate the symbolism of the moon as an extension to the human psyche, enabling a therapeutic reading that gives them an orientation to personal growth in their daily lives. The language of energies provides a ground for ritual experience which, from a native perspective, resonates at the level of the energies circulating in the universe, from the self to the cosmos. The inclusion of astrological references in most of the rituals contributes to the adoption of a reflexivity position about emotional-laden circumstances of life. Rituals demand practitioners to start a process of self-reflection, by which they are requested to identify areas of their lives that need to be improved and translate that into intentions.

These rituals are more systematic than other types of interactions with the altar as they involve the completion of a series of steps at a given time but there is a great variability in the form of the ritual among the people interviewed. During my research I have encountered multiple versions of the ritual of abundance, which is evidence of the flexible character of these practices. It is in this sense that the ritual can be understood as a creative process (Magliocco, 1996 as cited in Houseman, 2016) that involves the exercise of the imagination. Even if most of the rituals involve the presence of the four elements of nature there is a wide range of objects that may be used to represent them. The absence of an institutional authority to validate what counts as a ritual and the value placed in what ‘feels right’ to each person gives people the chance to create their own rituals and to share them with others. This leads to a multiplication of versions of the same rituals. For instance, Juana does another version of the ritual of abundance, which consists of preparing a glass of water with coarse salt and putting on it an intention before going to the

altar to “ritualize”. On the altar she lights yellow candles, as she explains, “yellow is linked to abundance”. She makes a small circle with a ribbon and she leaves the salt inside for some hours until the candles are completely consumed. To finalize she adds some offerings (e.g. a fruit, a coin, a bill), as she expresses, “whatever I have at hand”. There is a clear playful and improvisory aspect in these kinds of rituals. I felt that during my experience doing the ritual of abundance, even if I was carefully following instructions. The anthropologist Michael Houseman (2016) argues with studies that identify these kinds of rituals univocally as a form of play in his ethnographic study of the aesthetic of New Age and neopagan rituals. The versatility of the ceremonial dimension of these rituals, the artificiality and playfulness are part of a distinctive mode of ritualization that has an intention to act in the real world. As the author observes, in contrast to more canonical ritual practices, what counts here is not so much the doings of practitioners as what is generated by their doings. We will leave the exploration of what is *generated* for later but I am concerned here advancing how the practices at/with the altar are ritualistic as they carve out a differential space and time in the ordinary lives of spiritual practitioners and that have a practical orientation.

The people we work with hold these rituals in the intimacy of their homes at/with their altars. Sometimes they may even set up separate altars for the occasion, as when they conduct the ritual in their backyard by the moon. Though some spiritual practitioners participate from time to time in group rituals, due to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic on social events they either got canceled or they migrated to the virtual world. Some of these rituals were held by videoconference during the pandemic giving spiritual practitioners the chance to take part in live events from the safety of their houses. However, the participation in these events is rather sporadic and it varies greatly among spiritual practitioners. Most often, people do these rituals at home by themselves whenever they feel the need. This is not to say they are alone. Some days after doing the ritual of abundance a buzz in my phone notifies me that Cami was livestreaming on his Instagram account. As soon as I join the event, a woman's voice pulls me into the conversation. A wave of hearts spreads out in the right corner of the screen while comments scroll so fast that it’s impossible to read them all. These are signs of the presence of others, more than 200 people, all like me, all behind their screens. Cami reads some of the comments of her followers who are sharing their experience doing the ritual and thanking her for taking the time to share with them such valuable information. The existence of this moment of reflection signals the

importance of the instances of sociality involved in spiritual experience. Even if people are doing the ritual at home by themselves, there is a sense of togetherness that emerges as they are doing the same thing at the same time that surpasses the distance. The ritual is charged with "an emotional and intentional reverberation, by which each person can experience him or herself both as a distinct agent and as part of a same acting totality" (Houseman, 2016, p. 228).

Set an intention to the universe

"I believe in the word. I believe in naming
because as long as I name it it exists"
Diana, teacher and tarot reader

The notion of intention plays a central role in the relationship of spiritual practitioners with the altar. There is a widespread idea that everything that is done with/at the altar should be accompanied by a clear intention. The fact that most of the rituals instruct people to focus on what they want to accomplish and even write it on a piece of paper is indicative of the weight that is attributed to the personal intentions and desires within these practices. The word 'intention' came up several times in my conversations with spiritual practitioners, too many times to ignore the importance that is given to the concept as a source of 'power'. The idea of this section is to explore the role of intention in the everyday practices of people with the altar. In the studies that focus on the material aspect of religion and spirituality the question of intention seems to be avoided, perhaps to circumvent the problem of where to stand in relation to language, given that most of the scholars that raised their voice in favor of a serious focus on materiality did so in reaction to the 'linguistic turn' in anthropology. As the anthropologist Navarro Yashin argues, when reflecting what gets "mopped up" with the declaration of the theoretical turn to things, "Objects are not involved in relations with human beings in a linguistically or symbolically neutral arena. Objects are, rather, qualified through language." (Yashin, 2009, p. 9).

What do we make of the appeal to 'intention' by contemporary spiritual practitioners? The usage of the word 'intention' is closely linked to purpose. There is a teleological usage of the concept, in its orientation towards an end. For taking seriously the practices at/with the altar

involves having a clear purpose to guide our doings. This orientation leads people to adopt a highly self-reflective stand in their everyday life, that spills over the relationship with the altar and to other areas of existence. The set of intentions involves a process of identification of areas of their lives that need a change (e.g. the recognition of negative patterns of behavior). In this way, the practices of these forms of spirituality configure themselves as "practices of realizing desires for self-improvement on earth" (Viotti, 2015).

Cami tells me that her intention is what makes the ritual *powerful*. And Maru affirms that the set of an intention is what "ends up charging the objects" to the point that "they become amulets". A quick Google search with the keyword "the power of intention" reveals the popularity of the topic yielding more than 300 million results. In the context of contemporary spiritualities, there is a general belief that "our thoughts and words create reality", as one of my interviewees explained during our interview.

Saying that the objects of the altar are charged with intentions, is not to say that by means of a trickery of language objects are invested with power in order to reduce a complex phenomenon to the discursive. What my ethnographic material shows is that the relationship between words and things is important insofar the words are involved in the qualification of the object as a *powerful* object. This is how Diana describes the process by which she redefines the boundaries of the objects she uses at the altar:

"When I offer cinnamon bundles, it is the cinnamon that I use to spice things but when I take it out for the altar I take the most beautiful cinnamon branch, I tie it with a red ribbon, I talk to it, *I give it with the word what I want to mean*, this cinnamon is to bring abundance, this fire is for illuminate it".

In rethinking the relation between the discursive and the material, Karen Barad (2003) sustains that the material is always material-discursive, as discursive practices are "specific material (re)configurings of the world through which local determinations of boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted" (p. 828). Even in Barad's analysis "discursive practices are not human-based activities" (p. 828) and as a consequence the notions of intention and subjectivity are pushed away, thinking on discursive practices as "material configurations of the world" (p. 814) is fruitful to understand the role of the discursive and the material in the

relationship of practitioners with their altar. By grabbing from the kitchen a regular condiment and relating to it in another way, with a specific purpose, Diana participates in the redefinition of the boundaries and meanings of the object. The cinnamon becomes a *sacred* object that Diana deems worth to offer. By means of a set of techniques the object is “removed from the plane of the ordinary”.

The altar is special for it is weaved with the history and personal biography of spiritual practitioners, but also because it ‘contains’ their dearest intentions. The ethnography shows that people trust in the power of their intentions and desires to affect their reality and they enact them at/with the altar every time they go there. Words are not *merely* words but discursive practices that materialize into concrete doings as they engage with the altar. Spiritual practitioners approach the altar with respect, understanding that what they say and what they do matters. Viotti (2018) suggests that the prominent role of personal intention in these forms of contemporary spirituality may be related to the fact that in contrast to the Catholich religion where an intentional Saint Spirit is an agent in the world, here “it is an unintentional force of energy that animates the objects" (p. 32). In a sense, what spiritual practitioners are doing is to move those energies of the universe towards a definite purpose. They are not hovering in the ebb and flow of life waiting for some transcendental entity to act on their behalf. Even if they frequently request assistance from entities that are not human, they’re not idly waiting but are rather active. The relationship they cultivate with these entities requires activity and intention.

Maintaining the altar alive

Juana always puts fresh flowers on her altar. Sometimes she stops by the flower shop to buy a bouquet of white jasmine, an abundant flower in Argentina that fills the space with a sweet and intense perfume. Other times she gathers flowers that she finds on her way home. She is constantly renewing the elements of her altar to “keep it with vitality”. What is important, tells me Juana as our conversation unfolds, is not to let the altar fall apart. "What might happen if I don't clean it up?" I ask Juana with a tone of curiosity. She immediately replies that nothing bad would happen, but that the altar would not be the same. “It is not going to predispose you energetically to light a candle on an altar that illuminates dead flowers, right?”, says Juana

elaborating on her answer. For her, keeping the altar alive by adding fresh flowers and cleaning the dust is connected with the aesthetic dimension, with maintaining a beautiful space that inspires her.

Picture yourself the image of an altar that is visibly a mess: flowers are rotten, objects are full of dust, things are disorganized. Imagine what would you feel if you encountered a space like that in a home you are visiting. Perhaps you will wonder if the altar belonged to someone a long time ago, someone that is not present anymore to take care of the space. For cleaning the altar is a practice of care. The maintenance of the altar is an everyday practice that usually consists of changing of flowers, removal of the remnants of the melted candles and the ashes of the burnt herbs, and the washing of the cloth where the objects are placed. The fact that an 'unclean' altar may lose its potential to generate certain predispositions in spiritual practitioners is evidence of the importance of cleaning as a positive mode of relating with the altar, as a practice of care towards a space that is dear to them. The relationship of religion and cleanliness is not novel and has been studied in connection to the notion of purity. In most traditional forms of religion the rituals there is a link between the physical and spiritual purity (Preston & Ritter, 2012). The cleaning of religious objects emerges as a way of ensuring the purity of the space and the purity of the spirit. This is the same outside of the religious domain and into our most mundane actions as we typically "conflate order (things in the right place) with purity (being protected with danger)", even if it is an illusion (Jackson, 2017, p. 53).

What underlies the cleaning of the altar is a logic that proposes a symmetrical relation between the inner world and the external environment and vice versa. We have explored in the previous chapter how inclusion of the four elements of nature in the altar is rooted into this correspondence of the inner/outer and vice versa, insofar as working with the elements of nature at the altar is also working with some aspect of ourselves. If the outside is a reflection of the inside, the aesthetic condition of the altar speaks of the spiritual, psychic and physical world and conversely. If the altar is messy it may be a sign that something is going on in the practitioners' personal matters that requires attention, the same way that a disorganized house, with piles of clothes and dirty dishes may be a sign that we are not feeling well and vice versa. By this same logic, cleaning our house gives us a sense that we are putting our affairs in order. Cleaning the altar is not only a matter of removing the dust to make it look nice but it is also a ritualistic activity that can be understood as an intimate practice of self-care that has a transformative

potential. As the anthropologist Michal Jackson (2017) suggests, based on the analysis of Mery Douglas, in these ritualistic actions "transformations in one's inner experience are "induced" by turning one's attention to something in one's external environment that can be worked on or changed" (p. 63). As Juana elaborates on the importance of maintaining the altar alive she adds: "You have to take care of the altar as you take care of your own body, you won't let your body rotten, right?". In the act of cleaning the altar, as in other ways of relating to the altar, it is the very body of spiritual practitioners the one that may be "subject to ritualistic manipulation" (p. 63).

In some respects, the altar is taken to be an extension of the self, a self that expands into the environment and that puts in tension the very idea of the 'human', in the traditional sense of the category as an autonomous individual with definite boundaries. One of my interviewees suggested that the altar is an extension of ourselves "at an energetic level". The altar is an intimate space that 'contains' the energy of the person who creates it and maintains it alive. Not only because people add objects that are considered naturally energetic from a native perspective (e.g. crystals, stones, feathers, plants and flowers). The altar contains the energy of the practitioners because of the singular role of the altar to mediate the link with the energies of the universe, but also because people create their altar with pieces of their personal biography and history, they put their most intimate intentions, and they grow spiritually as a result of their relational involvement with the altar. By saying that the altar is lived by some of my interviewees an extension of their bodies (literally and/or symbolically), it is not my intention to overemphasize the 'subjective' experience of spiritual practitioners and explain the relationship of the altar as a pure reflection of their 'inner world'. This is one of the shapes of a multiform relationship. It is a way of relating to the altar that coexists with other ways of relating that may seem (and even are) contradictory with each other.

Connect and disconnect

We have changed the focus to the practices, doings and actions of spiritual practitioners to understand how they relate to the altar in the everyday carving out a differential space/time that disrupts the ordinary. We have explored the relationship with the altar from multiple angles to show how it is an intimate relationship that encompasses varying degrees of intensity and density,

that dialogues with concepts that traverse anthropology as a discipline such as religion, ritual, mediation, practices and relations. Some people have daily rituals with the altar, while others approach the altar to practice their spirituality whenever they feel the need. By putting relations at the heart of the analysis we could consider other ways of relating to the altar that are less evident but are part of the relationship, such as the cleaning of the altar and other quotidian interactions such as touching and observing the altar. What we have not noted so far is how a relationship that is grounded in the potential to attain a connection with that which is desired, whether it is ourselves or the whole universe, is replete with moments of disconnection that are also constitutive of the relationship. In the relationship with the altar, as in any other relationship, there are moments of connection and disconnection, of attachment and detachment, of closeness and distance. On the one hand the altar acts as a sort of gravitational field within the home that generates a predisposition in spiritual practitioners to connect with their spirituality on the everyday. As we shall explore in the next chapter the altar does exert a force of attraction in spiritual practitioners. Some have expressed that the altar is a constant reminder of what is truly important in their lives but can easily be forgotten in the hustle and bustle of everyday life (e.g. their intentions, their condition of spiritual beings, etc.). People go to the altar to take a moment to (re)connect in an act that brackets the turmoil of the day and disrupts the ordinary. It is during that time, whether it be 5 minutes or half an hour, that practitioners dedicate themselves to connect with their spirituality.

Equally interesting is that in order to generate these moments of connection, people have to disengage from the other things going on in their surroundings. This involves a negotiation with the other members of the household on spaces of intimacy. For instance, Alma tells me that her son and her partner "know that it [the altar] is something that is mine and they give me space". There appears to be a clear negotiation of individual space with the other dwellers, where her altar is an instantiation of the exercise of her individual intimacy within the household. Candea et al. pose a critique to the overemphasis in connection and attachment in the studies of relations and examine the "strategies of separation and distancing" as part of social life (2015 as cited in Strathern 2020, p. 13). The relationship with the altar allows people to disconnect from others in order to fully live their intimacy. People go to the altar as a strategy to distance themselves from what is going around them, they may want to take a moment away from their mundane obligations and disconnect from others, which involves both physical and virtual

distance (as they typically put away their phones when doing something at/with the altar). Of course, there are also times when practitioners distance themselves from the altar, either because they do not have the time to devote to it or because they do not feel like it. There are also occasions of greater disruptions in the relationship with the altar where circumstances may complicate the time and dedication given to the altar. This is what happened to Alma during the context of the lockdown in the country as having her kid at home all day long made it nearly impossible for her to disconnect from her surroundings to connect with the altar. The context of the pandemic substantially transformed the ways we inhabit our domestic space affecting the relationship with the altar in multiple ways.

As in all relationships that are parts of our lives, there are times of greater and lesser connection, as well as separation and distance. People relate to the altar with differential intensity in the everyday. The moments of encounter with the altar in the domestic space disrupt the ordinary in a gesture towards the sacred. They are part of the living of intimacy in the domestic space. “I can’t imagine a day without having a conscious spiritual practice” I am told by one spiritual practitioner as she explains to me the importance of the altar in her life. In time, the relationship with the altar may become as intense and necessary as an interpersonal relationship. The relationship with the altar, though practices and actions, is inextricably linked to the development of a mode of life.

Chapter 3

Sacred atmospheres in the intimacy of the domestic space: *the cultivation of a spiritual mode of life.*

We have explored at length in chapter 1 how people create altars in their domestic space out of the desire to connect with the spiritual at home. We have shown how this is more than an individual endeavour by presenting some of the instances of sociality that are evidenced in the trajectories of the objects of the altar. In chapter 2, we changed the focus to the doings and practices of spiritual practitioners to grasp the texture of their relationship with the altar in the everyday. We argued that the relationship that they cultivate with the altar is an intimate relationship that has various degrees of intensities.

In what follows we put at the centre of analysis the effects of interacting with the altar by asking, "What is generated when people engage with their altars in the domestic space?" We argue that the notion of atmospheres is productive to deal with this question anthropologically. By relating to the altar in the everyday people create sacred atmospheres in their domestic space. They experience those sacred atmospheres as intense as they are charged with affects and emotions, and they are inextricably linked with notions of well-being and the generation of a sense of intimacy and protection in the domestic space. The everyday potential of transformation of bodies that inhabit these kinds of encounters in the domestic space is what awakened my anthropological curiosity. In what follows, we discuss the concept of atmosphere inspired by recent anthropological endeavours to study their presence in the everyday. We present some ethnographic vignettes to explore the character of the atmosphere and conclude that they become part of a mode of life that is rooted in the fabric of contemporary spirituality.

On atmospheres

We are all well acquainted with the use of the term atmosphere as the layers of gasses on a planetary scale. We are also familiar with the meaning that equates atmospheres to ambience,

mood or tone, as when we enter a room and feel an atmosphere of tension, or when we read a book and we grasp the atmosphere of the epoch. In the latter, the term allows us to capture the feeling of *something* that is happening *somewhere*. In this sense, can we ethnographically grasp atmospheres? There has been an increased interest in atmospheres within social sciences, evidenced by a large number of recent publications. A relatively recent book "Exploring atmospheres ethnographically" (Schroer & Schmitt, 2017) collects essays about a wide range of topics and perspectives on the use of the concept. Despite the diversity of views, the majority of scholars refer to some kind of relation between humans, objects and environment. The philosophical reflections of Bohme (1993) on the use of atmospheres in everyday life are taken as a point of departure in most of the discussions, so we will introduce his take on atmospheres and subsequent takes on the topic that are relevant to our analysis.

For Bohme, atmospheres are like a haze, a quality that emerges in the co-presence of subjects and objects. They are "indeterminate above all as regards to their ontological status" as "we are not sure whether we should attribute them to the objects or environments from which they proceed or to the subjects who experience them" (Bohme, 1993, p. 2). This vague character of atmospheres does not impede people to experience them as real. Bohme endeavours to expand the concept of aesthetics to the everyday experience. Hence, for him atmospheres are "the *mediums* or the *elements* through which perception, and hence human action and understanding, takes place" (Böhme, 1995 as cited in Bille, 2013, p. 58). The sensuousness of atmospheres is felt in the body in co-presence with objects that expand beyond themselves into the space, a phenomenon that Bohme calls "the ecstasies of the thing" (Bohme, 1993, p. 121). Without digging into aesthetics in link to a theory of perception as a focus here, I am indebted to recent studies that articulate Bohme's philosophy with ethnographic practices to understand the creation and experience of atmospheres in the everyday.

The study of atmospheres rarely concentrates on the intimacy of the domestic space except for some studies (Bille, 2013; Daniels, 2015; Pink & Mackley, 2016). Pink and Mackley (2016) ethnographic study explores people's nightime routines to show how they make and experience atmospheres in the everyday through a set of doings. These atmospheres are not simply emanating from a mysterious source but there is a 'making' involved, which as Bohme suggests, "does not really consist in producing a thing, but in making possible the appearance of a phenomenon by establishing conditions' (Bohme, 2013, p. 4 as cited in Pink & Mackley, 2016)".

These authors put the focus on the mundane activities that we undertake everyday to show how people make atmospheres by manipulating elements of their domestic space, such as lighting, to create a certain affective and emotional feel in their homes. Hence, despite its indeterminate status, people intervene in their domestic space to generate certain atmospheres.

Other scholars put in the centre of analysis the affective qualities of atmospheres (Anderson, 2009; Stewart, 2011). These authors show how atmospheres emerge in the everyday from the encounter of "bodies - of multiple types - affecting[25] one another as some form of envelopment is produced" (Anderson, 2009, p. 80). Drawing from the reflections of Bohme, Anderson suggests that atmospheres are composed as all kinds of bodies come together in space. These atmospheres have certain affective qualities (e.g. intimate, romantic, peaceful) and they produce feelings and emotions in the person who perceives them. The author directly engages the debates that separate the concept of affect from emotion to argue that atmospheres have the capability of unsettling that divide. We have no intention to dig deeper here into the philosophical and theoretical discussions that set apart the two notions and we recognize that the invocation of "one or the other term has come to signal a basic orientation to the self, world and their interrelation (as well as in some cases a particular politics and ethics)" (p. 80). But what appeals to us is the ability of the atmospheres to "mix together narrative and signifying elements and non narrative and asignifying elements" (p.80). Considering the atmospheres that are composed in the everyday engagement with the material world allows us to grasp both the affective and emotional qualities of our ethnographic material. These atmospheres that saturate the everyday are *charged*, as Stewart (2011) suggests. They are not the "inert context" (p. 452) where events unfold. It is a "force field in which people find themselves" (p. 452). So, for Stewart changing the focus to atmospheres involves an attunement "to potential ways of living in or living through things" (p. 452).

[25] The author defines affect as "impersonal or transpersonal intensity" (McCormack, 2008; Stewart, 2007 as cited in Anderson 2009). The understanding of affect as 'intensities' comes from the work of Gilles Deleuze who recuperating the concept of affect introduced by Spinoza inspired the 'affective turn' across disciplines. See Brian Massumi's note on the prologue of the work of Deleuze for a definition of affect: "L'affect (Spinoza's affectus) is an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act" (2010). The fact that affect is pre-personal differentiates it from feelings and emotions, which are considered to belong to the territory of the personal and subjective. See Thrift (2020) for a further exploration of non-representational theory. See Navarro Yashin (2009) for an introductory trace of the concept of affect in the social sciences. These 'sensual intensities' (Yashin 2009) that are 'pre-discursive' generate feelings in people that we consider important to explore so as to understand the relationship they have with the altar.

To recapitulate, we have presented how atmospheres are generated as bodies of diverse kinds encounter each other in the everyday and how there is a 'making' involved in that composition. In light of our analysis, when practitioners engage with the altar everyday they are participating in the composition of the atmosphere in their domestic space by making certain things with the objects of the altar. We focus here on the practitioner, which is the subject that perceives and experiences the atmosphere, while acknowledging that the composition of the atmosphere happens in the interaction of practitioners with the altar.

By now we know that the altar is a differential space within the house that people create along their spiritual journey. They assemble together a diversity of objects, objects that are significant to them as they are marked by traces of sociality that left an imprint in their lives. They create the altar in a space of the house that they carefully select and to which they will go time and time again in the quest of connection, protection and intimacy. It is through these ongoing interactions that people gradually build a relationship with the altar and the domestic space is infused with a sacred atmosphere. When people interact with the altar they are generating sacred atmospheres that over time have the potential to pull people into action and to make them feel with intensity.

We have argued that practitioners develop an intimate relationship with the altar that is based on a multiplicity of forms of engagement. Some people have daily rituals while others have less structured ways of relating to the altar letting themselves be guided by their feelings. But every time spiritual practitioners interact with the altar these atmospheres are 'intervened', to borrow a term from Anderson. This is an important point because even if the atmosphere is a person generates the atmosphere in their encounter with other bodies, the atmosphere is not entirely reduced to that particular person. Though atmospheres are intimately connected to the person who composes them, they "exceed that from which they emanate" (p. 80). There is always an excess, something that remains longer than expected. If the everyday relations with the altar disrupt the ordinary introducing a sort of hiatus in the course of the day, the atmosphere that is created by these actions endures longer as "something pressing" (Stewart, 2011, p. 448).

This is evidenced in how people feel the presence of the altar as they go about their domestic lives. Some of my interviewees have expressed that sometimes they do not need to go to the altar to ritualize something but just noticing the altar is enough to make them feel

something, albeit for a transient moment. The altar generates that "feeling of something that feels like something" (Berlant, 2010 as cited in Stewart, 2011, p. 1) that resists being fixed with words.

Taking these discussions in mind we do not equate atmospheres to affect, following a caveat that is present in the work of Bille (2013). Atmospheres are not only affective, but rather, the affective is one dimension on the constitution of atmospheres. This emerges from a critique of purely phenomenological stances that seem to universalize the immediacy of sensory experience of individuals and omit the cultural specificities that inform their experience of the world. Hence, for Bille it is important to pay attention to the cultural shaped sensorium that is involved in the experience of atmospheres (Classen, 1993; Howes, 1991 as cited in Bille, 2013, p. 58). "People do not simply become immersed in atmospheres on a blank slate", sustains the author, "but are inherently attuned by the norms of what to expect and by events that have occurred previously" (p. 58). The anticipation of a feeling is part of the dynamic of immersion into the atmosphere that envelops the altar in the domestic space. For instance, some of my interviewees express to feel calmer when they are approaching the altar and this is clearly related to the anticipation of a feeling previously experienced as a result of the interaction with the altar.

In addition, the sacred atmospheres that spiritual practitioners generate when interacting with the altar remain *there*, somewhere within the walls of their house, but they are always intimately linked to them. We have already explored how the incorporation of some of the objects of the altar are cultural-specific. Such is the green scarf, symbol of the campaign for the legalisation of abortion in Argentina and the image of the Gauchito Gil, a folk religious figure popular in the country, that some of the spiritual practitioners have in the altar. More specific to the microcosm of contemporary spirituality, the incorporation of a violet candle for 'transmutation'. All of these things condition the experience of the atmosphere. There are not only cultural conditionings but even within the same household the dwellers may simply not be able to share the feeling of the atmosphere. The fact that the sacred atmosphere has such a pull on the practitioner is related to the development of a singular spiritual sensibility, a capacity to notice something that people not acquainted with contemporary spirituality and with local dynamics would not find moving at all. In the case of the people we work with, the cultivation of this singular manner of attending to the world goes along with their engagement with the altar. It is through immersing themselves in the sacred atmosphere that they cultivate singular 'ways of feeling and thinking' (Houseman, 2016).

The nuances of the localization of this phenomenon are important to understand the relationship of people with the altar but they do not foreclose the possibilities of transformation that emerge in the affective encounter of practitioners with the altar. If the atmosphere is a 'force field', as Stewart (2011) suggests, our goal is to grasp some of what happens when people are immersed *there* engaging with the altar in the intimacy of their domestic space. We want to present some of the affective qualities of these atmospheres and the feelings elicited by them in practitioners.

As de la Torre Castellanos (2020) observes in her work about home altars among Mexican believers, altars *predispose* people to connect with their spirituality in the everyday. The altar is enveloped by a sacred atmosphere that generates something intense in spiritual practitioners. It moves people to connect with their spirituality as they live their domestic lives. These atmospheres exert such a pull in the practitioner because they elicit sensations and memories, trigger emotional responses, and provoke feelings that can be felt in the body with intensity. It is in this sense that atmospheres are also emotionally-laden. They are intensely felt by the people who experience them. This is why we are concerned by the affective quality of atmospheres as much as we are for understanding how people *feel* about them. Not to put the focus merely on the subjective but to try to grasp what they generate on spiritual practitioners and how they take part in the transformation of their lives, understanding that their experiences are connected with those of others as they are embroiled in the new forms of contemporary spirituality.

Atmospheres of well-being

The atmospheres that envelop home altars exude a feeling of well-being in the domestic space. That people resort to the altar more when they are unwell evidences the *therapeutic* orientation of the practices and doings of spiritual practitioners at/with the altar. As it happens in most traditional forms of religion, these forms of spiritual expression incorporate notions of health and healing (McGuire, 1996). Local scholars ethnographically account for the centrality of well-being in the discourses and practices of these spiritualities, a well-being that is holistic in its orientation towards "physical, emotional, and psychological healing" (de la Torre Castellanos, 2020). In his study in holistic centres in Buenos Aires, Viotti (2018) shows that the objects used

in the course of the sessions have a clear therapeutic effect as they are understood to be 'sacred objects' that have the power to alter the circulation of energies of the environment.

The people I work with frequently use the term 'heal' to describe the result of engaging with the altar. Whenever they are feeling stressed and anxious, they go to the altar to (re)connect with their bodies. They may be in silence for a moment to slow down after a hectic day of work, physically and psychologically. They may conduct a more specific ritual to connect with the four elements of nature, lighting a candle, burning some incense, addings and subtracting elements and setting an intention to achieve the desired effect in the altar and in themselves. On some occasions, just having small interactions with the altar is enough to generate a comforting feeling on them that lasts for a while (such as when they touch a stone for a moment to 'recharge their energies' and go on with their days). The doings of the practitioners and the objects used are also oriented to what in native terms they call 'transmute energies' in a context where they feel that something is not properly 'flowing', in their bodies and the proximate environment. Objects of diverse nature are used to assist this process of 'transmutation of energies' being the most common the violet candle, used natively to symbolize change. During all these interactions something happens, something that practitioners often find difficult to describe with words but that 'feels good'.

Alma shares with me that whenever she feels in need of help she goes to her altar and tries to connect with some of the four elements of nature. Once, she was very anxious, in her words, "on the verge of a panic attack". She went to her patio to gather a handful of soil and a bunch of twigs, put the soil in a small jar and tied the twigs with a string. She went to the altar to place the elements, lit a candle, wrote down an intention on a small piece of paper and took a moment to breathe and to connect with the earth. "By doing this I was moving energy towards the ground, connecting with my body" she explains. She then felt better. When I asked for details of the episode, she was lost in trying to describe the feeling of the moment, and she ended up telling me that for her what happened was *magic*. In this story, Alma affected other bodies by removing them from their natural environment, by giving the soil a new place in the altar. She was affected by the materiality of the soil, in as much as she engaged with the soil and with the other non-human entities in an (at least natively) ontological sense, working with them to 'move the energies' of her body and feel better. By improvising a ritual with a combination of elements

that incarnate the sacred, Alma creates an atmosphere of well-being in their domestic space where she is able to 'heal'.

Whenever my interviewees approach the altar they immerse in a sacred atmosphere that discharges a feeling of well-being in them. This is closely connected to the potential of the altar to trigger an emotional response, a remembrance that pulls practitioners into continuing their spiritual work in the everyday. "El altar me recuerda el poder que habita en mi" (The altar reminds me of the power that dwells in me") I am told by Feli when I ask her to describe how she feels about the altar. This power that dwells 'within' her is experienced as sacred. This is translated into practical actions on a daily basis such as going to light a candle at the altar in the morning and remembering about the intentions you set for yourself in order to continue working on them. As an example, if during a specific month the person is doing rituals in order to change some negative behavior in her life, the altar triggers emotions and ideas that connect the person again with that desire for change and improvement in life and pulls them to keep working towards that purpose. It is through their spiritual practices and doings at/with the altar that this internal sacredness can be uncovered towards the attainment of the best version of themselves.

Some of the interactions of the practitioners with the altar are clearly oriented to generate an atmosphere of comfort, where the manipulation of objects, lights and smells excites the senses and induces a transition to a state of relaxation. When practitioners go to the altar to light a candle and burn some incense after a long day of work they are consciously creating the conditions to create a transition from one affective and emotional state to another. This is present in the study about domestic atmospheres conducted by anthropologist Bille in the intimacy of households in Denmark, where the dwellers use light to "shape the emotions *in* and *of* the home" (p. 57) and generate the feeling of comfort, well-being, intimacy and secureness.

There is not a clear-cut distinction between comfort and well-being as they are concepts which can overlap. Much of what is generated from the interaction with the altar is a feeling of relaxation, of peace, of connection that is intrinsically linked with feeling at comfort in the domestic space. Indeed, the doings and practices of spiritual practitioners incorporate a meditative aspect that is oriented towards generating a deep state of focus and relaxation. But it is important to bear in mind that when practitioners light a candle they do so not only to signify relaxation but to use the power of the candle (of the fire as a sacred element) to purposefully connect with their spirituality. This is evident in the use of the candle to 'activate' the altar and to

open ‘the sacred space’ before the start of each practice. Moreover, most of the people I interviewed regularly practise “velomancia” which is a divinatory practice that consists of finding signals in the movement of the flame of a candle. The candle is more than an object that assists in the generation of a cozy and intimate atmosphere, but it is the medium and incarnation of a link with the sacred.

The sacred atmosphere that envelops the practitioners and the altar is traversed by feelings of well-being, a well-being that strives to a ‘harmonious link with the energies’ (Viotti, 2018) of the universe and a balance of mind, body and spirit in the everyday. What is generated by being immersed into this atmosphere is not reduced only to the production of positive emotions at the moment of the ritual but with development of certain dispositions that become part of a mode of life, where the spiritual is not an area that is compartmentalized from other dimensions of existence, but that spills into them. Going back to the story of Alma, her daily rituals with the altar leave a mark on her body, not only due to its particular efficiency to reduce her anxiety and “heal”, but due to its potential to meaningfully alter her relationship with the environment and with the others. By being immersed in this atmosphere in the everyday Alma cultivates a *healthier relationship with nature*.

Feeling protected at home

“I realized that energy transcends and goes beyond the screen” I am told by Juana as we are having our interview by videoconference. Due to the circumstances of the pandemic, she had to migrate her services to the online world to be able to continue offering sessions to her clients. Being used to years of face-to-face encounters, she was afraid of not being able to ‘connect with the energies’ of the consultant due to the impossibility of physical contact However, session after session Juana began to notice that her practice was not affected by physical distance as she would have expected. All the more, doing virtual tarot sessions during the pandemic proved to be so emotionally intense to her that she had to increase her rituals of protection. Juana finds that the pandemic provided an opportunity for many people to slow down and reconsider core issues in their lives, such as who they are and who they want to be. All of this in a context of total uncertainty, fear and anxiety, the sessions with the consultants were so intense that she ended up exhausted. In her words, she was completely 'drained of energy'. Hence, she decided to take 30

minutes before each sessions to assemble a small altar on her desk, next to her computer, that is typically composed of: a white candle for 'clarity', an amethyst crystal for 'serenity', some scented herbs and her deck of tarot cards.

By ritualizing with those elements Juana creates an atmosphere of protection that envelops her as she is connected with another person across the internet. This atmosphere acts as a sort of shield against the potential affection of strange 'energies'. It is curious how in spite of being isolated at home, the virtual encounters that she has with other people become a potential menace to her sense of well-being and secureness. This could be read as an extension of the feeling of intrusion that spiritual practitioners have when an outsider comes to their house and touches their altar as if they were affecting and unbalancing the 'energies' of the space. But it also has to do with the energetic cost (in the physical-psychological sense of the term) involved in relating to others even when we are kilometres apart and her practical ways of dealing with how these relations affect her.

The example of Juana illustrates well how spiritual practitioners create sacred atmospheres that exude the feeling of protection in the everyday. In a context where meeting the outside world involves a danger to security, these atmospheres that people create at home exude a feeling of "sheltered-ness, nested-ness and well-being" (Bille, 2013, p. 59). "I feel protected" assures me Feli, and the feeling "is sustained for a while".

Many of the elements that are incorporated to the altar are considered elements that grant protection to those who hold them. They are objects that have the potential to keep a singular 'energy' that differentiates them from other objects. People relate to these objects in the everyday infusing the sacred atmosphere with a feeling of protection and secureness. This charged atmosphere of protection that people generate in the everyday can be extended to others, through the incorporation of outsiders to their daily rituals. One of the frequent practices of spiritual practitioners is to include in their rituals of protection the name of a person who is in need of help in a written piece of paper and set an intention for them. The requests for protection circulate among spiritual practitioners by means of the circuits of sociality in which they are immersed. Since my participation in some courses delivered by spiritual practitioners, I have been added to Whatsapp groups that they use to share information but also to request the other spiritual practitioners to set an intention for protection for a person who is doing unwell.

Among all the effects that the pandemic may have caused on the relationship of people with their spirituality and with the altar, one of the consequences that comes up in the conversation with everyone is the need to increase their rituals of protection and cleaning of the space to restore a harmonious 'balance of energies' into their domestic space. Because of the long quarantine at her home, Juana realized that the physical space was abuzz in excess of her presence affecting their domestic life:

> "...we encounter ourselves with the same landscape with the same walls... something of the discharge we were doing outside, it wasn't happening anymore. Even things started to break in my house, like there was something of the reflection of my own energy locked up in here...imploding...how the faucet broke one day and the heater exploded another...I was like oh ok *I have to be much more attentive to all, I have to give it a healthier circulation*"

The atmosphere of her domestic space became 'denser' because of her continuous presence at home. She feels it. When unexpected things start to happen Juana identifies them as clear signs of something else, signs of the affection that her presence is having in the space she inhabits, her own awareness on how the physical space is affected by her constant interaction. The rituals of protection and cleaning of the space are a way of creating a smoother atmosphere, where she can feel safe and protected.

Can atmospheres be shared with others?

The buzz of my phone catches my attention. One notification reminds me of the start of the live stream event *Witches talking about magic*[26] in Alma's Instagram account. Alma shares content on a daily basis for more than 30k *followers*. As soon as I join the event, a woman's voice pulls me into the conversation. It's the voice of Maria, the guest to be interviewed by Alma. A wave of hearts spreads out in the right corner of the screen while comments scroll so fast that it's impossible to read them all. These are signs of the presence of other 203 people, all like me, all behind their screens. Alma begins the interview with her back against a wooden bookshelf, with

[26] The original in spanish is "Brujas hablando de magias".

some books arranged with their cover facing the camera, in the fashion of a bookstore display. The screen of my phone is divided in two: Alma is on top, Maria is on the bottom. Alma's indoor plants give a green hue to the upper half of the screen and her violet dyed hair contrast with the reddish colours that Maria is wearing. The complete image finds a certain harmony through complementary colours. Each one is at her own home, but the fluidity of the conversation gives the feeling that they are together, like two friends sharing a cup of coffee at a nearby table. But instead of just me straining my ear at a coffee shop, I am one amongst hundreds of people listening, peeping in and out of the live stream session.

Maria, a 32 years-old visual artist and a *tarotista,* is in her home located in the capital city of Buenos Aires. It is nighttime. The uncurtained window behind her reveals that it is fully dark outside. A warm light illuminates her and flickering candles add a glow to one side of her face. "I recreate throughout my house altars, or scenarios, or whatever you call them" she comments while moving the camera to the side. An ensemble of objects sorted out in the table where she is having the video call is revealed to us: a white and violet candle half consumed, a few crystals and stones surrounding some tarot cards, a transparent vase with fresh flowers and a small statue of a deity hard to distinguish at a distance. Maria holds the camera for a moment pointing to the small altar. I tried to take a screenshot but Maria's sudden movement to bring the camera back to its original position dragged the candlelight as if drawing beams in the air.

This particular event got me wondering if the sacred atmospheres that people create in their homes can be *shared* with others, even for a fleeting moment and even if the sharing happens across screens. When Maria leaves the camera on pause for a moment on her small altar some members of the audience comment below showing appreciation. Considering that the conversation was not centered on the subject of the altars, Maria's action was a small gesture of invitation to the audience to witness her intimacy. It is also a clear example of the sociality of contemporary spirituality and how the creation of atmospheres is infused with these instances of sharing. Can something of the affectivity of these atmospheres be transmitted across screens?

This is what Bille (2013) demands in his study of domestic atmospheres and concludes that when shared with others atmospheres keep some of its affective qualities, certainly in the context of his research. The author observes how a sense of belonging to a community emerges

from sharing the cozy atmospheres among neighbors. Even if they are at a distance, as each person is creating a cozy atmosphere at their place there is an instance of sharing with others that gives rise to a sense of culture belonging. And even if "it may not be qualitatively the exact same feeling that each individual has, the affective impact is still there, and people may share the verbal representation, as in this case, by qualifying the atmosphere as 'cosy'" (p. 58). Can a similar observation be applied to the sacred atmospheres that are shared across the network? If those connected to the livestream are spiritual practitioners themselves, even if they cannot feel the exact same thing that Maria is feeling, could not they experience albeit for a transient moment the feeling of the sacred?

Figure 5. Sharing the atmosphere. Screenshot of image shared in the public account of one spiritual practitioners

Figure 6. Sharing the atmosphere. Screenshot of image shared in the public account of one spiritual practitioners

During the months that I have been *following* spiritual practitioners on Instagram, I encountered many of these instances of sharing intimate atmospheres. What happens when the person is not able to physically enter into the atmosphere but is exposed to it through a visual and/or audiovisual register that seems to be inviting them to participate?

I found the photos 4 and 5 some time ago as I was scrolling on Instagram in the account of one spiritual practitioner. She frequently shares with her followers photos of her rituals. Sometimes her images zoom in on specific objects. Others, she registers the altar from a distance revealing the space in its total composition. But all her images convey an otherworldly-type of aesthetic and conjure up the feeling of a ritual in-the-making. As if it were something that can be shared across devices and screens, she invites her followers to experience a piece of the sensuousness of her altar. Indeed, most of the images generated me this feeling of the uncanny and mysterious because of the explicit focus on capturing the sensorial aspect of the altar, such as the camera magnifying the flame of the violet candle on the left and the register of objects completely enveloped by the smoke of herbs. The invitation to participate in the atmosphere is all the more palpable as the inclusion of the option to 'send message' allows people to comment, express thoughts and feelings, in other words, to start a conversation about it.

Even if people are not physically in the same place and immersed into atmospheres of their own they get to experience something in that flash moment, a reminiscence of the sacred atmosphere. We can say that when people encounter these kinds of images in their social media because they are following the spiritual practitioner who is sharing them, these images are no stranger to them as they are most likely able to relate to the scene based on previous experiences and feelings. The violet candle that may mean nothing to an outsider observer, conveys the feeling of something that is 'transmuting' in the course of a ritual. If the image resonates with their own experiences as spiritual practitioners, they are able to grasp at least for a brief moment the presence of the sacred mediated by their digital devices. In addition, the encounter of the image awakens the feeling of connection, of sharing the same spiritual practices and aspirations across distance, which shapes a sense of belonging and identity.

While this practice of sharing is common among some of my interviewees, others would never share an image of their altar in public, and that is based on personal notions of the public and the private. Some interviewees were even reluctant to send me photos of the altar in the confidentiality of our interactions. There was an explicit concern for the part of spiritual practitioners to have a register of such an intimate space circulating among near-strangers. In

these cases, the altar is usually located in the most intimate space of the house where no visitor normally would enter, such as in the bedroom, and they do not typically include others into their rituals with/at the altar. In the cases of practitioners that are more open to sharing the space, they not only share registers of the moment in the online world as we just explored. For instance, Feli tells me that every time she receives close friends at home (before the pandemic where visits were not forbidden), she lights some candles and burns some herbs to 'activate' the altar. Doing so is an act of welcoming others to be part of her intimate world and opening up to social encounter:

> "It is a space of encounter, with other people who may come to my house, and that is where I believe that the individual soul opens up to the social and collective soul, to put it in a way, sharing that sacred and intimate space."

The act of sharing the atmosphere is an act of opening the intimate to others that encompass both the physical and virtual plane. These intimate atmospheres should not be confined to the realm of the individual experience as the act of sharing demonstrates they have a social character. As we have explored at length, even for those spiritual practitioners more reserved about sharing the altar, the objects that they include in the final composition bear the traces of the encounter with others.

Feeling with intensity

During the interviews I did a short experiment and I asked people to close their eyes and take a moment to put into words how they feel when they relate with the altar.

> "Primero de todo, es de acá (first of all its from here)
> *Diana put her hand upon her chest on the side of her heart.*
>
> The idea.... the image... appears in my head, it is like… what you are asking me to say is difficult, but it's clear to me...

There is an idea of presence in that image. Not in the one I see, in the one that appears in my head in relation to what I feel...

There is a space of strong concentration
of silence
a micro thousandth of a second of total connection and separation of time and space"

Even if sensations are so ephemeral, they do leave traces in the body that we can endeavour to capture. This undertaking can be quite challenging as Diana confesses while diving into the intricacies of finding the right words to pinpoint feelings. All the more, since spiritual practitioners rarely are in need of putting into words these intense feelings, they belong to the order of the intimate and of the unspoken. "It is clear to me" says Diana but the intensity of feeling exceeds her efforts to put it down. And yet there is a sense of having complete clarity about what she is feeling.

The notion of clarity appears in one way or another in all the responses. The moment of encounter with the altar, the moment of encounter with the sacred, is lived as a moment of attainment of clarity in the everyday, even if that moment lasts "a micro thousandth of a second". That sense of clarity is linked to the experience of connection with everything in a frictionless act of surrender. This is evidenced in phrases that came out of the exercise, such as:

"the withdrawal of myself so that the other appears…"
"a feeling of dissolution of the ego"
"one connects with everything and everyone"
"absolute surrender and connection with the whole"

Even if people do not get to experience these feelings of connection every time that they interact with the altar, they are always present in the charged atmosphere that envelops them as they are practising their spirituality, as a pressing intensity, in the reverberations of memory, in the most profound longings. They may be alone at home living an intimate moment but they immerse into

a sacred atmosphere through which they connect with a greater whole, with 'everything and everyone'. It is through the sacred atmosphere that they get to experience the feeling of linkedness in their domestic space.

The cultivation of a mode of life

Through their engagement with the materiality of the altar, spiritual practitioners generate sacred atmospheres in their domestic space. These atmospheres do not vanish when the person ceases the practice but over time they linger in the space exerting an affective and emotional pull on them. They have the potential to transform. It is through experiencing those atmospheres as they ongoingly engage with the altar in the everyday that they "give concrete form to certain ways of thinking and feeling that they consider exemplary: an affinity with the natural world, a spiritual awareness, an openness to others, a sense of community" (Houseman, 2016, p. 219). By engaging with the altar in the everyday, practitioners enact a set of cosmological relations that they intend to cultivate (e.g. a harmonious connection with the energies of the cosmos, a holistic orientation, a spiritual well-being). This enables an experience of affection to take place as their lives are gradually transformed. The local author Nicolas Viotti observes something similar in his study of the relationship that spiritual people have with the objects they use during the spiritual practice. The author conceives these complex relationships as part of a "specific mode of life" (p. 18) that he sees intrinsically linked to the pursuing of a spiritual well-being.

It is by engaging with the altar that practitioners generate atmospheres where they transit through a singular experience of spiritual subjectivation, nurture their intimacy and well-being, find protection and security, and open themselves to connect with 'the rest-of-what-is' (Mattijs van de Port, 2010 as cited in Meyer, 2012). They feel *wholeness and linkedness*. These atmospheres are intimate as they are tied to their history and personal biographies and are charged with their dearest desires and intentions. Histories and biographies which are not confined to the territory of the individual experience alone, and can be shared in an act of opening of the intimate to the social. This opening, in the context of contemporary culture and the timeline of a global pandemic, is seen both physically and virtually. People live their spirituality not as a compartmentalized area of their lives, but rather as an experience that permeates other dimensions of existence and that is transformative of the ways they live out their lives. The

interaction with the altar and the sacred atmosphere that is generated in the intimacy of the domestic space are inextricably linked to the development of a spiritual mode of life, where the relationship with others and with the environment is fundamentally questioned and transformed.

Conclusion

"I live with these practices with a lot of dedication and a lot of love" I am told by Juana at the outset of our video call conversation. The spiritual practitioners we have met in this thesis live singular modes of life that are nourished by their everyday practices with the altar. People assemble altars in the intimacy of their domestic space in the course of their spiritual trajectories, and they establish meaningful relationships with them that have the potential to transform their lives. The altars and the relationship that practitioners have with them are found within the confines of the home and they are considered part of the order of the intimate. We have attempted to present how spirituality happens materially by using a framework of studies that values the prominent role of materiality and our relational enmeshment with the material world. We have found that home altars are inextricably linked to the way people practise and experience their spirituality in the everyday. The relationships that people have with altars and with the objects that are arranged are integral to the process of spiritual subjectivation and to the development of a singular 'mode of life' (Viotti, 2018).

This thesis shows that spiritual people establish relationships with objects that are complex and that cannot be reduced to one-dimensional explanations. The widespread image that portrays contemporary spiritual practitioners as individuals picking from various traditions and sources is not accurate to grasp the complexity of their spiritual experience. Spiritual practitioners assemble altars in the manner of a *bricolage*, but this is not a wholly individual activity as some studies seem to suggest, but one that is interwoven by multiple instances of sociality. That is, even conceiving the altar creation as a *bricolage* performed by an individual that exercises its imagination, it is never detached from its context, and it is never done *sui generis*. We note how the selection and association of objects are enmeshed in a fabric of relationships among things, sacred forces, and people that evidence a singular sensibility.

We found that home altars are not merely the material space where spiritual practitioners express their spirituality. We presented some of the cosmological frameworks that characterize contemporary spirituality but with no intention to pinpoint them to the category of belief. There is more than a set of beliefs consolidated in the altar and more than the objectification of their biographies and spiritual trajectories. The foregoing chapters made clear that spiritual

practitioners develop an intimate and intense relationship with the altar that unfolds in a multiplicity of ways. We have mapped some of the modes of action of people with the altar in the everyday, from ritualizing and cleaning to just noticing the presence of the altar as they go about their lives. The everyday actions of spiritual practitioners with the altar revealed that they disrupt the ordinary while simultaneously being part of the everyday. Their interactions with the altar upset the ordinariness and the habitual flux of life creating a different *space-time* in the course of the day. A focus on the actions and doings of the practitioners reveals that the altar is both the medium of the sacred and the incarnation of the sacred in the everyday. This thesis sustains that the attribution of a sacred character to the totality of experience perfectly coexists with the maintenance (or creation) of boundaries between the sacred/profane in the actual practice.

The question at the center of the analysis on how people relate to the altar demanded a great effort to join the many strands that compose the relationship. We found that spiritual practitioners relate to the altar from multiple perspectives: the altar a material space, as a representation, as a medium for the sacred, as *the* sacred, as an extension of the self, as a reflection of the inner and as an interlocutor in an intimately woven relationship. All of these manners of living their relationship with the altar are intertwined in the experience of spiritual practitioners and they are never fully one or the other.

The question of how people relate to the altar and its objects is inseparable from what is being *generated* out of those everyday interactions. We have found that what emerges is a sacred atmosphere that permeates the domestic space and acts as a sort of gravitational field that pulls people into action and reflection. These atmospheres are charged with affects and emotions that predispose practitioners to connect with their spirituality in the everyday. By immersing into these atmospheres, people get to experience the sense of themselves, as individuals apart from the rest, and the sense of being part of a greater whole (Jackson, 2020). The oscillation between these two poles is constantly present in the relationship between people and the altar, where the practise of spirituality at the domestic space is not wholly what is at stake but also the intimacy, well-being, security and the delimitation of their own singularity.

In the unsettling context of the pandemic where we were secluded to the confines of the home, these spiritual practices with the altar provided sustain, containment and a chance of feeling connected in the midst of a massive dissolution of previous connections. It is through immersion in the sacred atmosphere that they get to experience the feeling of wholeness and

linkedness in their everyday life, opening themselves to connect with something larger than themselves. The migration to the virtual world provided the chance to share the intimacy of these atmospheres with others. We sustain that if certain conditions are met these atmospheres can keep some of their affective qualities as people are able to grasp at least for a brief moment the presence of the sacred mediated by their digital devices.

These sacred atmospheres are an affective presence that triggers the senses and memories and elicits emotional responses. They have the potential to transform their lives. As they are immersed into these sacred atmospheres practising their spirituality they are opening themselves to *transmutation*, to change their form in *body, mind, and soul*. In the effort to follow the ethnography to present the elements that compound the experience of practitioners, we soon found ourselves at an impasse with the ethnographic material, apparently having to pick between two theoretical paths that seemed at odds with each other. In other words, there are "tendencies in knowledge production" (Navaro-Yashin, 2009, p. 10) that got us to a deadlock between affect and emotion, between affect theory and sensory studies. In this thesis, we chose to be as faithful as possible to the experience of the people we work with by creating a gateway between the two as we introduce the concept of atmospheres. Considering the atmospheres that are composed in the everyday engagement with the material world allows us to grasp *both* the affective and emotional qualities of experience. It is in this way that we chose not to jeopardize the ethnographic evidence, but rather to show how the discursive/non-discursive, personal/pre-personal aspects are both present and relevant to grasp the person-altar relationship.

In this work, we have focused on the actions and doings of practitioners with the altar, which involved dedicating some attention to the role of intention in the everyday practices with the altar. This is a question that seems to be avoided in the studies about material religion and spirituality, perhaps to circumvent the problem of where to stand in relation to language, given that most of the scholars that raised their voice in favor of a serious focus on materiality did so in reaction to the 'linguistic turn' in anthropology. As a preliminary conclusion, we notice that the use of language at a native level is relevant as it is thought to have the potential of creating reality (e.g. participating in the sacralization of objects). Even if we are tempted to leave this at the level of the native, it is worth paying more attention to the material dimension of the discursive in future analyses.

This work was mostly synchronic in its approach, mainly due to time constraints and the long processes spiritual practices demand to grasp perceptible changes in practices or behaviors. Expanding this research through a diachronic approach would allow me to, for example, gain knowledge of the process of learning spiritual practices, from the outset as people begin to assemble the altar to the growth of a spiritual mode of life.

Through this work, we also become interested in the process of sacralization or elevation of objects beyond religious or spiritual frameworks, and the relationship between people and sacralized objects beyond the assembly of an altar. People frequently have special objects that trigger intense emotional responses, memories or grant them protection or confidence (i.e. amulets). We are interested in exploring their continuities and differences with altars. That is to say, besides the declaration of the one who possesses these objects ("I have an altar" or "this is my altar"), deepen the question of what constitutes an altar and what does not, and ask more broadly what constitutes sacred objects.

Another question that remains to explore for future research is how gender intersects with these practices in the domestic space. It is no mere coincidence that most of the participants in this research were women, and usually in their 20s and 30s. Why are these forms of spirituality more attractive to women? Are these forms of spirituality subversive of gender or do they reproduce traditional gender roles? The language of gender is an integral part of these spiritual practices. We think there is still work to be done in this direction to understand how these dynamics play out in their local articulations[27].

This research has generated more questions than responses, a series of bifurcations that we could not possibly contain in such a short project. We put at the heart of analysis the everyday relationships that shape a singular spiritual experience to show how they become part of a mode of life. As researchers, we are exposed to only a fraction of what happens in the world of others. We approach the experience of others with a desire to understand the way they feel and think, bearing in mind that lives are always complex and layered, and they are entrenched in larger

[27] Most frequently, the person is taken to have a femenine and masculine side within themselves that correspond with different aspects of their personality. The attachment of certain features to the person based on this dichotomy could be an essentialization that naturalizes a social and cultural construct. The idea that women are more intuitive, perceptive and creative comes up several times in my conversation with spiritual practitioners. Likewise, in all my conversations with men, the development of a feminine side through spirituality is mentioned in some way. This way of living spirituality coexists perfectly with the cultivation of a feminist life that advoctes for the liberation of the constraints imposed by gender.

dynamics. For me, writing this thesis was also an act of dedication and love. I am grateful to the practitioners who opened up their intimacy to me, allowed me to experience moments of connection with them and gave base to my practice in anthropology. I now know how anthropology is also a transformative discipline that, as a bricolage form through socialities, will always be part of my home.

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