

## Introduction

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### “It’s Power without the Anger”: Spirituality, Gender, and Race in the New Age

I went to what I thought was a fairly innocent women’s weekend at a commune outside of Charlottesville, Virginia, because I needed a break from graduate school and thought it would be a lark. But the mud baths and spirit circles had far more in store for me than I could have anticipated. What I discovered was more informed by a conglomeration of spiritual practices that could be called “New Age” than anything feminist, yet many of the women that weekend found it fortifying in feminist fashion. The fireside dance and drumming rituals were as empowering to them as were the mud baths and health food. Wasn’t this what feminists longed for? Women healed their bodies, bonded, rebelled, expressed themselves, and communed, frequently in various states of disrobe around a fire. For me, this was the first of many such experiences in which the crossing of cultures—feminist and spiritual, academic and popular, public and private—proved fascinating, disturbing, and intriguing. It made me ask: why were New Age bookstores popping up everywhere I turned? Why did I always seem to know someone who was into crystals or Reiki or Goddess worship? And what was the appeal of these practices for white women, especially, and why were they turning to crystals when they could just as easily enact public forms of feminist protest? Where does a crystal get you?

#### **The Gender of American New Age Culture: Critics Meet the Public Sphere**

Some say that for the past thirty years the United States has been in the midst of a “spiritual revival” or another “Great Awakening,” as religious

historians call periods of extensive spiritual crisis and reorientation.<sup>1</sup> In every period of religious revival, there have been movements, credos, and rituals that are seen as bizarre by some critics but in retrospect can be recognized as generating important elements of American religious and cultural life. In the present instance, these various movements are often known by the umbrella term “New Age culture,” a term that names diverse spiritual, social, and political beliefs and practices that promote personal and societal change through spiritual transformation. Once relegated to the cultural fringe, the New Age movement is now at the cultural center in the United States: with a billion-dollar book industry, popular shows ranging from *Medium* to *Oprah*, and personal growth seminars in businesses and schools, New Age has become a synonym for a surprisingly popular form of spirituality that includes crystals, aliens, and angels. This explosion of New Age spirituality has baffled critics on both the Left and the Right who see the New Age as infantile, regressive, and superstitious. On the Right, many traditional religious thinkers scoff at the New Age as “spirituality-lite”; on the Left, few feminist academics, for example, have been willing to grant New Age practitioners any form of agency. Indeed, for those bemoaning the end of 1960s activism, it seems that “true” politics has turned into rampant individualism, and reason has turned into New Age quackery. In short, while immensely popular, the New Age is also critiqued and derided from all sides.

Skepticism toward movements such as the New Age one is not new. In 1848, when the Fox sisters supposedly discovered unaccountable “rappings” in their parents’ New England home, modern spiritualism was born. In spite of widespread popularity, a cynical counter-audience not only pronounced the rappings fake but also declared it improper for women to experience such spirits directly. Such opinions did not prevail: in fact, women have played an increasingly public role in alternative religions, spiritualism, and occultism in the United States—all practices that continue currently, though under different names. Clearly these spiritual practices hold a specific allure for women, who are drawn in record numbers to the “New Age.” But why? When one female practitioner says about her New Age beliefs, “It’s power without the anger,” what “power” does it provide that feminism does not (Robb 32)? While this particular project focuses on white women in New Age subcultures of the last forty years, it also seeks to answer a broader question relevant to the study of gender and American religious culture generally: exactly what kind of authority do white women find in the spiritual? Furthermore, in what ways is the New Age movement a continuation of earlier American religious and cultural “Awakenings,” and, more particularly,

why is it that white women are the leading figures and consumers of New Age culture and spirituality?

By illuminating why New Age beliefs appear so empowering to some, and so naïve to others, this project remedies the lack of scholarship on gender and American New Age culture. In the field of religious studies, New Age spirituality is frequently seen as emanating from the consumer market rather than from religious tradition. Consequently, critics such as Wendy Kaminer, Harold Bloom, and Gary Wills draw strict distinctions between established religions or even religious sects and a diffuse New Age spirituality. Thus the study of New Age culture frequently drops out of religious inquiry. Even within the handful of academic books that examine the New Age primarily, such as Paul Heelas's *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (1996) and *Spiritualities of Life: New Age Romanticism and Consumptive Capitalism* (2008), Wouter Hanegraaff's *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror or Secular Thought* (1996), Steven Sutcliffe's *Children of the New Age: A History of Spiritual Practices* (2003), David Tacey's *The Spirituality Revolution: The Emergence of Contemporary Spirituality* (2004), and Leigh Schmidt's *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (2005), gender is not considered integral to understanding the philosophical foundations or the practical demographics of the culture. While there are a few studies of New Age culture generally that include sections on gender—such as Sarah M. Pike's *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America* (2004) and Catherine L. Albanese's *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (2007)—it is not necessarily the central focus for what is usually a sociological and religious analysis rather than an interdisciplinary one. Though Paul Heelas notes perceptively that the lingua franca of the New Age can be summed up in the term “Self Religiosity,” he does not move on to point out that such a concept could be liberatory for women, who have struggled to have a self all along (*New Age Movement* 18).

In more recent studies of various aspects of New Age culture, such as Michael Brown's *The Channeling Zone: American Spirituality in an Anxious Age* (1997), Kimberly Lau's *New Age Capitalism: Making Money East of Eden* (2000), Sarah Pike's *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community* (2001), and Jeffrey J. Kripal's *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (2007), gender is once again examined briefly but is not the focus of a sustained account. Catherine Tumber's *American Feminism and the Birth of New Age Spirituality: Searching for the Higher Self, 1875–1915* (2002) is the lone full-length monograph that begins to demonstrate the interconnectedness of

New Age culture and feminism but limits its analysis to the turn of the century. "Self-help" is the only area of New Age culture where gender has been examined in depth, though interestingly Micki McGee observes in *Self-Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life* that "among the most striking features of the 'unisex' literature of self-improvement is the poverty of the solutions offered to women in their quests for self-made success" (79). In spite of this, Wendy Simonds and Elayne Rapping argue against the popular belief that women simply consume self-help ideologies uncritically, and believe that self-help aids women in making nascent feminist claims—even if ultimately they are contained by individualistic rhetoric. Simonds and Rapping see women as not simply passive consumers, and read New Age culture as neither entirely hegemonic nor entirely liberatory.<sup>2</sup>

However, other than in discussions of self-help books, most examinations of gender in New Age practices are both cursory and bleak. Kimberly Lau, for example, believes that women, along with everyone else, are duped into purchasing New Age products by the illusory promise that such products will change their identity; for Lau, women are simply shifting their consumption habits from buying products sold in women's magazines or at perfume counters to New Age products. Lau argues that New Age practices such as macrobiotics, aromatherapy, yoga, and t'ai chi "push women into the modes of consumption required to sustain New Age capitalism" (45). Essentially, she makes the case that New Age culture is entirely commodified and thus entirely inauthentic; the final commodity is the self, or, as she says, in New Age cultures "identities become commodities to buy" (13). Moreover, Lau argues that purchasing products that are marketed as politically or spiritually radical signals a threat to the health of American democracy because it channels desires for change into further consumerism (14). While Lau is right to some extent that New Age culture sells identity, I disagree with her assumption that women are the mindless pawns of New Age commodification; she overlooks the ways in which women consume products for their own spiritual satisfaction. However, Lau's negative assumptions about the New Age movement and New Age consumption are typical of most critics. Trysh Travis notes that "few observers are so foolish as to blame the recovery movement outright for the 'postfeminist' turn of the late 1980s and 1990s," but it is clear from her statement that there are those who are at least tempted to do so (189). Travis explains why "recovery" gets blamed for ruining future feminist empowerment this way:

In part because it still bears the traces of feminist consciousness-raising, but seems not to push its devotees toward collective

action for social change, recovery has become a favorite scapegoat, seen as a narcissistic consumer lifestyle that lured women away from the movement and/or a corrupting virus that undermined it from within. (189)

Beryl Satter raises the stakes further: “Self-help and New Age writings are attacked as an escape from rationality and critical thinking, and as a mind-numbing form of self-indulgence that signals the end of America as an enlightened democracy” (252).

In this book, I aim to not only observe how the New Age movement configures gender but to also move beyond observation to interpretation. In my extensive reading on New Age culture, I have found that there are three common gender beliefs: (1) Women and men are essentially different from one another and act out of these cultural/biological differences (as in “difference feminism,” where women are held up as superior because of innate spiritual and emotional sensibilities); (2) Women and men need to integrate their masculine and feminine sides to be whole, or to reach the goal of “divine androgyny”; and (3) Women and men should move “beyond gender” to inhabit a spiritual plane devoid of these “earthly” distinctions. What seems like a contradiction between a desire for gender balance here on earth and a longing to leave gender behind is better described as a tension—a tension common to New Age culture, where practitioners try to bridge the gap between the material plane of everyday life and the more ethereal plane of the spiritual one.

To illustrate how these beliefs play out in New Age culture, I briefly look at two studies that show gender dynamics at work. In his book on channeling, Michael Brown observes that either channelers appeal to “notions of inherent differences between the sexes,” or “they emphasize the important role that spiritual gender-crossing can play in broadening people’s views of their own internal multiplicity” (95, 93). That is, while channelers believe that those with “feminine qualities” are superior, more receptive channelers, they also believe that channeling one’s “opposite sex” gives one an experiential sense of another gender that helps balance one’s own gender. The latter practice leads to “sacred androgyny,” where “highly developed spiritual beings encompass male and female principles in fruitful complementarity” (103). Finally, some channelers wish to bypass gender altogether to channel “genderless spirits” who may even be from “different dimensions or galaxies that have either evolved past gender or never experienced it in the first place” (104).

In contrast to the channeling world, with its emphasis on the body as a conduit for a numinous spiritual presence, Sarah Pike’s book on neo-pagan rituals examines how practitioners foreground the body as a site of

play and gender experimentation. Neo-paganism is defined as “a return to pre-Christian ideals and religious practices characteristic of several branches of thought including primarily witchcraft, nature religion, and earlier occult traditions” (Campbell and Brennan 159; Pike xiv). Neo-pagan practitioners try to get “beyond gender” through costuming the body: from medieval, science fiction, and fantasy costuming to animal heads, body paints, and piercings, neo-pagans purposefully create visually ambiguous and mysterious creatures that are not always identifiable by species, let alone gender (198). Pike notes in her ethnography that “more than anything else, Neopagans use appearance to raise questions about their nature—who they are in terms of gender and religious identity” (202). And yet Pike finds that in the moments where gender is challenged, it is also reified. For example, at the important ritual space of the “festival fire,” neo-pagan men and women “play with gender distinctions, reveal tattoos, cross-dress, exaggerate femininity and masculinity, or try to look androgynous” (202). However, these ritual fires also “replicate gender roles in the outside society”: “Men tend to be more aggressive dancers and drummers, dominating ritual space and taking more risks, such as jumping over the fire, while women dance more slowly and sensuously” (206). Just as in the nineteenth century, when particular “feminine traits” such as purity and goodness became a vehicle for women to enter religion with greater authority, so too do neo-pagans play on gender stereotypes of the woman as more “sensuous” and “earthy” and the man as more “aggressive” and “primal” while enacting their spiritual experience (206).

In all of these various analyses—from those that ignore the centrality of gender to the New Age, to those that suggest that gender is solely a vehicle for New Age commodification, to those that examine different kinds of gender roles in New Age subcultures—the category “gender” is still conceived relatively narrowly, and almost always without the benefit of an intersectional lens that sees gender in relationship to race and/or other identities. While examining gender and interrelated oppressions is fundamental to feminist analysis, it is also important to examine the visual, cultural, and symbolic gender terrain, as well as the particular everyday life practices of millions of New Age women. Instead, the two main questions that have emerged thus far from critiques of gender and the New Age are: Do New Age women ultimately step outside of seemingly restrictive roles? Do the practices of New Age women translate into political activism? This project tries to go beyond these questions into a richer, more probing investigation of gender in New Age culture by applying an intersectional, interdisciplinary women’s and gender studies lens. And, as we shall see, while it is true that in the nineteenth century women’s rights and alternative religions overlapped extensively,

more overlap between feminism and New Age culture occurs in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries than has been previously perceived. Whether wearing an animal mask, channeling a spirit, or purchasing a crystal, New Age women are claiming spiritual desires unavailable to them elsewhere.

**Whiteness, Appropriation, and Intersectionality:  
The New Age Meets the Field of Women's and Gender Studies**

Given the centrality of gender in New Age culture, why haven't more women's and gender studies scholars investigated this phenomenon? I believe it comes down to one word: disgust. Feminist academics view the New Age movement as reviving essentialist notions of gender, supporting egregious ideas about race and primitivism, and promoting irrational, loopy practices that set women back. As a women's and gender studies scholar, I share many of these concerns. I came to this project in part because I watched the New Age bookstore in my town take over what had once been the feminist bookstore. In the 1980s and 1990s, I observed many white women turn toward spiritual exploration predicated on bizarre race fantasies and away from feminist protest. The more I asked why, the more I realized that I needed to complete a fair though critical study of New Age women. No one was asking: why angels and not activism? This study attempts to answer that question.

Still, when I would tell people my project, I could see them hold their nose and try to scoot away. It has not been popular party conversation. How could I blame them? But as I got this reaction, it made me even more determined to get underneath what feminist academics and others were finding so abject. So I began the nearly impossible task of trying to be fair to my subject knowing that my audience might be unwilling to entertain an evenhanded examination of the subject. Women's and gender studies as a field has been accused so often of being ideological that it does not bear repeating; I have spent my career defending the field against those accusations. And suddenly I felt that the unwillingness of gender scholars to even look at New Age practices seemed not just shortsighted but hindering. In order to understand better why some white women fetishize Native culture or black Goddess figurines or Orientalist diets, you have to grasp how these despicable practices work. To not understand how gender operates in appropriation is to lose an entire body of analysis central to the field.

I am an academic and also a spiritual seeker. I began this project asking why New Age practices matter to women, and to white women

in particular. My answers when I began my search are no longer the answers I posit now, by their publication. I began with more sympathy for white women's seeking (wasn't I like them?) and by the end of the project had to work hard to maintain a fair, critical lens when my patience had all but run out. While I am a bit younger than many of the women I study here, my own time line mirrors what first intrigued me: the rise of the New Age movement has run parallel to the rise of the second-wave feminist movement from the late 1960s to the 1990s. I have observed both movements in their later incarnations—I was a feminist activist in the early 1990s at the same time that I was curious about spiritual dabbling. I have been involved in women's and gender studies since 1988, when the field itself was undergoing interrogation for its whiteness, in particular. I have become a women's and gender studies scholar who is interested in the meta-critique of the field. Simultaneously, New Age culture has become a set of practices here to stay in American culture, though now sometimes called "New Spiritualities." Someone once said that all academic projects are autobiographical. The questions of this project have been deeply shaped by all of these locations. I believe that nothing is out of bounds in women's and gender studies scholarship; this project takes up a set of taboo or disdained practices to ask: why? Why spirituality and not feminism? Or why not recognize how they interrelate?

A central argument of this book is that white women participate in New Age culture in part to negotiate the long, complex, and some would say failed political alliances with women of color. Just when women of color challenged feminism and women's and gender studies for its racist foundations in the 1980s and 1990s, many white women turned toward New Age spiritual practices that "allowed" them to live out fantasy unions with women of color that were disrupted in the public, feminist-political sphere. The New Age spiritual turn toward a fantasy multiracial sisterhood occurred as that sisterhood was interrogated, dismantled, and reconstituted in the academy. I argue that the gendered racial formation of New Age culture has been unexplored and is essential to understanding the history of feminism in the United States.

White New Age women have a deep investment in their "racial innocence" (Srivastava 30). In "'You're calling me a racist?' The Moral and Emotional Regulation of Antiracism and Feminism," Sarita Srivastava describes how "colonial and contemporary representations of virtue, honesty, and benevolence have been a historical foundation of whiteness, bourgeois respectability, and femininity," and adds that her goal "is to show further that the history of Western feminist movements adds another layer of moral imperative to these historical constructions of



*racial innocence*” (30, emphasis added). In New Age culture, white women report feelings of ennui, limitation, lack of immediate spiritual experience, emptiness, and inauthenticity. While these feelings are real, they are also predicated on a white culture that benefits from privilege and norms of universalism with one of the concomitant costs being the absence of specific ethnic/racial spiritual traditions. I cannot count the times my students have said to me, “But there is nothing interesting about my white background.” It is this presumed lack of anything “interesting” that sets the stage for future spiritual and cultural appropriation. Many white New Age women have had a rudimentary consciousness-raising that depends on socially constructed gendered notions of “relating,” “empathy,” and “dialogue” that they translate to identifying with, emulating, joining, and then ingesting the Other as the sign of ultimate respect. “Romantic racialism,” or romanticizing the Other, leads practitioners to recover their racial innocence through various New Age practices that bring whites “to life.”

My ideas about racial appropriation as they relate to New Age culture are indebted especially to Eric Lott’s groundbreaking study *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. Lott departs from the standard wisdom about blackface minstrelsy (a practice wherein whites caricatured blacks), which assumed that blackface was formed out of hatred and was purely agonistic. He suggests instead that “it was cross-racial desire that coupled a nearly insupportable fascination and a self-protective derision with respect to black people and their culture practices, and that made blackface minstrelsy less a sign of absolute white power and control than of panic, anxiety, terror, and pleasure” (6). To understand the full import of blackface minstrelsy on the color line demands “a much more sensitively historicist look at the uneven class, gender, and racial politics of forms such as the minstrel show” and “a subtler account of acts of representation” (8). For Lott, “the minstrel show was less the incarnation of an age-old racism than an emergent social semantic figure highly responsive to the emotional demands and troubled fantasies of its audiences” (6). While white women’s New Age practices may seem profoundly dissimilar to blackface minstrelsy, there are striking similarities in terms of appropriation, of “love and theft.”

White women’s participation in New Age culture is formed, most would argue, through racial appropriation. Simply put, appropriation is taking—taking another’s culture, beliefs, style, and/or ways of being. Appropriation is built on a complex set of popular practices related to essentialism and is often founded in longing for the Other. So far, accusations of appropriation have been the stopping point for most critics. For me, it is the starting point. Is appropriation always bad? Is it actually

stealing, or can appropriation have a mutually beneficial outcome? If we believe appropriation is always wrong, is that belief founded on an essence—that is, that something essential can be taken—or is it possible that the process of appropriation may involve more exchange, pastiche, and remaking? James O. Young and Conrad G. Brunk note that “we need criteria for distinguishing wrongful from benign appropriation” (5). For some time, theorists have broken down binary categories of insider/outsider and appropriator/appropriated. However, when we turn to white women’s participation in New Age practices, the consensus has been that white women are purely appropriative and steal practices as a mode of cultural imperialism. While I agree that white female New Age practitioners engage in colonizing acts of appropriation that are often shocking in their naïveté, I would argue that these acts are not simply theft, as they also involve affection, incarnation, and reattribution. That never means that racial appropriation is “okay.” But it does mean that white women simultaneously obtain “gendered satisfactions” from these New Age appropriations, and it is more fruitful to understand than to simply reject them.

White women’s longing for the female power that can be found in some cultures of color has many cultural antecedents. Margaret Jacobs indicates that by the 1920s in the United States, white women looked to Pueblo cultures because in Pueblo culture “women enjoyed high status and a great deal of power” (2). Jacobs explains:

Having rejected female moral reformers’ version of feminism and their vision of womanhood, [Mary] Austin and many other white women journeyed to the Southwest in search of a new womanhood. Here, as they attended Pueblo dances and purchased Pueblo arts and crafts, Austin and her friends concluded that they had discovered what writer Mary Roberts Coolidge called the “land of women’s rights.” Among the Pueblos, they shaped and articulated a new type of antimodern feminism. (2)

Antimodern feminism also describes what white women seek from New Age culture, a culture that they suppose to be, as the white women fascinated with the Pueblo named it, “far superior to modern American society” (2). This white spiritual longing is centered in the belief that these female cultures, based in the authenticity of people of color, offer white women a better gender identity than public forms of feminism. Indigeneity can save white culture from its own apocalypse. However, Jacobs notes that while American Indian policy during this time of white women’s fetishism “seemed to accord Native Americans greater self

respect and self-determination,” “the underlying assumption of many whites and of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)—that they knew what was best for Indians—remained virtually unchanged” (3, 4). The historical *déjà vu* is striking, though white women in the 1920s were obviously grappling with different feminist issues than white women of the 1980s and 1990s. Nevertheless, white women’s “good intentions” toward women of color do not lessen the pain of colonialism or alter material conditions of existence. Shannon Sullivan notes that even with “the conscious intent to honor . . . diversity is simultaneously a vehicle for white unconscious habits of ownership” (135).

For white New Age women, spiritual transcendence may be easier to achieve than a difficult dialogue or a contested ideology. Jean Wyatt, in “Toward Cross-Race Dialogue: Identification, Misrecognition, and Difference in Feminist Multicultural Community,” explains how white women’s racial fantasies of black women create a false idealization:

The unconscious processes of idealization and identification can generate cross-race misrecognitions and misunderstandings. Idealizing identifications tend to obstruct a perception of the other as the center of her own complex reality—as, in a word, a subject. And as black feminists’ commentaries on white women’s idealizing fantasies of them make clear, they do nothing to change actual power relations or to bring about economic and social justice. Indeed, white feminists’ focus on the individual power of a black woman obscures and distorts the power differential between white and black women. (882)

Wyatt explains further, “When I idealize you, I see in you the qualities that I lack, the qualities that I would like to have” (885). One racial logic for white New Age women is that because white women feel they suffer through sexism, they analogize sexism to racism, which implicitly justifies spiritual appropriation. Again, Wyatt unpacks how white women’s fantasies of black women “have more to do with the ideologically constructed position of the white middle-class idealizer than they do with the African-American object of idealization” (884). From the perspective of the larger culture, I have sympathy for the spiritual longing and gender empowerment that white New Age women desire; but within New Age women’s culture, distorted cross-racial identification disrupts the potential political gains based on gender.

My argument is situated in critical whiteness studies and looks at how gender and race function intersectionally in these various New Age practices. Michele Berger and Kathleen Guidroz describe how scholars

who use intersectional methods “examine how both formal and informal systems of power are deployed, maintained, and reinforced through axes of race, class, and gender” (1). We need new terms to understand gendered participation in New Age culture. Spiritual terms change both gender identity and notions of appropriation. If feminist identity does not look traditionally “activist” or “overtly feminist,” then it is not read as a proper feminist subject. What if that identity looks different? Obviously, appropriation of the oppressed has radically different stakes. “The appropriation of one more remaining fragment—spiritual and religious practice and ritual—has an impact that it would not have if the appropriation acted in the reverse direction, from the dominant to the struggling, colonized culture” (Young and Brunk 94). Though intersectionality has become “*de rigueur* in feminist studies,” Rachel Luft warns that there is a “risk of flattening difference” if race and gender are analyzed without their specific historical underpinnings (100). She suggests that “today’s intersectional, tactical repertoire should include within it the periodic use of single-issue tactics” in order to not collapse some crucial race/gender distinctions because they have “different ruling logics” (101). Uncovering these various “logics” reveals new configurations of New Age white women’s theory and practice.

### **Fin de Siècle and Fin de Millennium: A Short History of Gender and New Age Culture’s Antecedents**

This project examines New Age culture as the most recent manifestation of a long history of women’s alternative spiritual expressions in the United States, particularly within the last two centuries. Alternative spiritualities and especially women’s role in them have usually been given short shrift by scholars. In the past, religious scholars have often either suggested that alternative religions are not a part of American religious history and therefore dismissed them entirely, or have seen the influence of alternative religions on mainstream religions as largely negative. New work in religious studies is changing both of these earlier views.<sup>3</sup> Scholars Harry Stout and D. G. Hart note that “one major theme in virtually all religious histories of the past two decades has been the discovery of religious ‘outsiders’” (4). Increasingly, scholars now argue that even the most established religions contain the seeds of later marginal practices, and vice versa. For example, scholar Brett Carroll makes the bold claim that Spiritualism, an occult religion in which one channels spirits, stems from Protestantism. Carroll says that Spiritualism fits within a reform tradition beginning with Puritanism in the United States because Spiritu-

alism “was an expression of a powerful restorationist or primitivist impulse by which many American Protestants of the early nineteenth century tried to revitalize Christianity” by “restoring its original purity and eliminating perceived institutional and doctrinal incrustations” (9). In this way, Carroll and other progressive historians of American religious history, such as Catherine Albanese, Stephen Prothero, Sally Promey, Leigh Schmidt, Robert Orsi, and Mary Farrell Bednarowski, argue that there is a more permeable barrier between “established” religions and “marginal” ones than previously realized.

The history of alternative religions has often been narrated as a story about how canonical Protestant religions became infected by marginal foreign influences such as Swedenborgianism, Asian religions, Theosophy, and mesmerism. Now, however, American religious history is reconceived as being mutually constitutive: the so-called marginal religions inform the canonical ones, even as the marginal religions are shaped by more traditional religious forms. “The language of outsiders-become-insiders, and peripheries-become-centers, is now a commonplace in the literature on religion in America,” note scholars Stout and Hart (4). Indeed, “marginal” religions have a long history within the United States, beginning in the seventeenth century with practices and traditions such as American Indian Sun Dances and African American spirituals—both of which were outlawed in certain states—to radical reformers of Christianity such as Baptists, Disciples of Christ, Shakers, Mormons, and, later, Spiritualists (Carroll 9). This shifting historiographical terrain opens up the possibility that women’s participation in marginal religions and spiritualities will begin to be considered not just as a curiosity but as essential to understanding how religion functions in the United States.

While alternative religions that came from outside the United States had a strong influence domestically, it was not until the 1840s, with the rise of transcendentalism, that America produced its own “homegrown” form of mystical, romantic, individualist spirituality. Though transcendentalism began as a “marginal religion,” it soon entered public philosophy and letters and affected established religions.<sup>4</sup> By now, transcendentalism is generally acknowledged as not only one of the most important religious and philosophical movements created in the United States but also as the “forerunner to several nineteenth-century occult and metaphysical movements, such as New Thought and Christian Science” (Kyle 66). Famous transcendentalists such as Emerson, Thoreau, Bronson, Alcott, and Fuller suggested that religion could be as much if not more a private experience than a public one, and they began to focus less on doctrines and religious institutions than on individual experience.

When Catherine Albanese notes that for transcendentalists, “external miracles . . . emanated from spirit powers within,” she marks an important national historical shift that would have profound gender implications (“Republic of Mind” 164). For many women who did not have a sustained way to participate in the religious public sphere, validating personal experience from “within” as religious experience made it possible at least to claim authority in a private arena. Susan Warner’s 1850 *The Wide, Wide World*, for instance, depicts a heroine whose “intense personal piety not only elevates private feeling as the primary source of genuine spirituality, but also allows her to triumph over an extraordinarily unpleasant domestic situation” (Lippy 97). It is this elevation and acceptance of feeling that critic Ann Douglas marks as leading to a “feminization” of religious culture.

As religion was “privatized” by moving out of the pulpit and into the heart and home, it provided a way for women’s voices, and those of white women in particular, to gain greater authority. Women’s voices were especially prominent in practices that involved contacting the dead, such as Spiritualism. Spiritualism, which was influenced by transcendentalism, Swedenborgianism, and mesmerism, is defined as “a belief in communication with spirits through human mediums” (Moore xii). Spiritualism has been vitally important in American religious history not only for its wide-reaching effect on many late nineteenth-century institutions such as abolitionism and suffrage but also for its influence on spin-off religious groups. The many spiritual practices that evolved from Spiritualism include Christian Science, Seventh-Day Adventists, the Oneida Perfectionists, and a wide range of occult practices, ranging from New Thought and Theosophy to divination, astrology, witchcraft, and Satanism (Kyle 67). Religious groups proliferated in the nineteenth century at a rate that would not be matched again until the end of the twentieth century. Although Spiritualism had a particular “middlebrow” appeal (similar to New Age culture), a number of prominent figures were involved in the 1850s: William Lloyd Garrison, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lydia Maria Child, William Cullen Bryant, and James Fenimore Cooper, among others, as R. Laurence Moore notes (3).

Politically, Spiritualism had a radical tendency and supported free love, feminism, and abolition. While these positions were not dominant within Spiritualism, it was often stereotyped as being composed of nothing but such radicals. Because “most radical reformers were intensely religious,” Spiritualism gave them a way to challenge both conservative religion and conservative culture at the same time (Braude 62). Not surprisingly then, Spiritualists were often portrayed in novels as those “aiding and abetting some radical social cause”—Orestes Brownson’s *The Spirit Rapper* (1854),

Bayard Taylor's *Hannah Thurston: A Story of American Life* (1863), John Hay's *The Breadwinners* (1884), and James's *The Bostonians* (1886) are just a few examples (Moore 72). In particular, Spiritualism attracted women's rights leaders, who were drawn to a religion that "reinforced the self-ownership of women" (193). Indeed, the experience and self-esteem gained in Spiritualism were crucial for the suffrage movement. As Ann Braude has pointed out in her groundbreaking study, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, "Woman suffrage benefited more than any other movement from the self-confidence women gained in Spiritualism. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Spiritualism and suffrage engaged in a two-way exchange" (193). Women gained their voices in Spiritualism and then continued to speak out on overtly political matters.

The most prominent women in Spiritualism, though, continued to be mediums.<sup>5</sup> As Ann Braude observes, "Spiritualism embraced the notion that women were pious by nature. But, instead of concluding that the qualities that suited women to religion unsuited them to public roles, Spiritualism made the delicate constitution and nervous excitability commonly attributed to femininity a virtue and lauded it as a qualification for religious leadership" (83). Though men were also mediums, the movement was perceived as entirely feminine, and male mediums were called "addle-headed feminine men" (Moore 105). By drawing on essentialist stereotypes of womanhood, women used their bodies as the spiritual message conduit. As Braude notes, female spirit mediums "bypassed the need for education, ordination, or organizational recognition, which secured the monopoly of male religious leaders" (84). It is notable that the reception and validation of the famous Fox sisters' readings came in part from the sisters' perceived feminine purity, goodness, and beauty. At a Spiritualism session with the Fox sisters, which included famous writers such as Horace Greeley, William Cullen Bryant, and James Fenimore Cooper, one of the striking comments is on the attractiveness of Kate and Maggie, who were "considerably prettier than the average" (Brown 116). However, even though the Fox sisters were described in the language of stereotypical femininity, they continued to claim power by channeling messages directly from the dead. Direct communication with spirits not only gave women an experiential and private sense of their own authority but also provided a way for them to gain public authority as well. Mediumship was "one of the few career opportunities open to women in the 19th century," claims Moore, while trance-lecturers took on anti-Victorian roles as they left the house for the public stage (106). Thus "spirit mediums formed the first large group of American women to speak in public or to exercise religious leadership" (Braude xix). While

this claim may seem overly bold, and while there are excellent studies that indicate that women did participate at earlier moments in public religious life (two good examples are Rebecca Larson's work on eighteenth-century Quaker women and Catherine Brekus's work on early American female preachers), it appears that Braude's assertion still stands: spiritualism was the first "*sustained* moment of public participation" by women in the religious public sphere (Braude xix, xx, emphasis added). Indeed, Spiritualism made it possible for the controversial Victoria Woodhull, who linked Spiritualism to communism (even suggesting to Marx that Spiritualism and communism were one and the same), to be the first woman to run for president in 1872 (Moore 71).

However, even as female mediums gained a certain authority, they were also trapped by Victorian notions that the "natural lot" of white women is "sickness, suffering, and self-sacrifice" and punished for assuming new roles (Moore 106). For example, if female mediums traveled and were away from their family temporarily, their children were sometimes taken away from them (Braude 124). When, years after their first popularity, the Fox sisters were exposed as complete frauds when one of the sisters confessed that they had made up their revelations from the dead, the media turned against them as "bad women" as eagerly as they had once lauded them as "good women." Their plight represents a textbook feminist "double bind": women are either pure vessels, ripe to receive a divine message, or corrupt containers, overly sexual conduits of the metaphysical. Still, in spite of such instances, Spiritualism provided "a model of women's unlimited capacity for autonomous action to the men and women of nineteenth-century America" (201). That model made it increasingly difficult for women to see men as the only source of spiritual authority.

After Spiritualism's heyday, it continued to influence other new religions such as the New Thought movement. New Thought, or "the power of thought to alter circumstances," like Spiritualism, was largely made up of women (Satter 6). As Beryl Satter observes in her excellent study, *Each Mind a Kingdom: American Women, Sexual Purity, and the New Thought Movement, 1870–1920*, "the majority of late-nineteenth-century New Thought authors, healers, teachers, patients, and congregants were white middle-class women" (8). These women imagined "themselves to be part of a women's religious movement that would herald a new 'women's era,'" and it is not surprising that many New Thought women were also women's rights reformers (8). By "purifying the self" through New Thought practices such as meditation, women believed that they could improve society by improving the self. Even into the twentieth century, the New Thought movement continued to



support new kinds of feminism even as that feminism changed. Whereas in the nineteenth century, New Thought women were also women's rights activists who emphasized how "womanly spiritual virtues" of "love, service, cooperation, and self-sacrifice" would heal society, by the beginning of the twentieth century, New Thought women and women's rights activists emphasized instead how men and women were similar, and "were equally fueled by desire and oriented toward growth, self-expression, and willful intelligence" (222, 233). For example, Satter notes that Helen Wilmans, a twentieth-century New Thought believer and women's rights supporter, believed that "true love and maternity were dependent upon strengthening the ego rather than sacrificing it" (233). Being involved in New Thought allowed white women to find both a private spiritual strength and a foundation for political action.

By touching on a few of the most important instances of the complex relationship between gender and alternative religions in the United States, we can begin to see a continuous history of white women's participation in alternative religions, from nineteenth-century practices such as Spiritualism to twenty-first century New Age religions. Suddenly, a feminist project emerges in which a number of fragmented and unrelated moments make sense under one narrative: women become empowered by moving from the private to the public sphere; women who have been socialized to be more intuitive, feeling, and empathic than their male counterparts make strategic use of these qualities to function as moral authorities; women create alternative models to the confining "cult of domesticity." Of course, the nuances of each historical moment as well as particular race and class antinomies factor into this narrative, and while white women have been consumers and producers in what can be seen as a continuous history of alternative religions, my aim is not to reify narratives that offer one image of "the spiritual woman." Instead, by focusing on gender, I wish to understand what Satter so provocatively notes:

Popular writers of self-help books are among the most aggressive participants in the complex process of fashioning new forms of gendered selfhood to fit a changing political and economic order. Future historians might find in the messy, ambiguous, unsophisticated but massively popular writings of today's self-help authors the clues to how gendered selfhood was renegotiated in the closing years of the twentieth century. (254)

Indeed, this project takes seriously the "messy, ambiguous, unsophisticated but massively popular writings" of New Age culture and examines

just what they tell us about the construction of gender at our current historical moment.

### New Age Culture as “Women’s Culture”

This book is divided into five topical chapters, each focusing on one facet of New Age culture and its particular appeal to white women. The initial theoretical chapter makes the claim for New Age culture as primarily a white women’s culture because it is constituted, produced, and consumed by white women. Because New Age culture is a women’s culture, it has been perceived as negatively feminizing American culture. Taking off from Ann Douglas’s landmark study on women’s influence on religion in the nineteenth century, *The Feminization of American Culture*, I claim that the fear of the New Age woman as a marker of ubiquitous irrational, marginal spiritual beliefs replicates an earlier fear about women’s involvement in religious culture. By examining critics of New Age culture, such as Harold Bloom, Andrew Ross, Elaine Showalter, David Brooks, Robert Bellah, and Mel D. Faber, this chapter uncovers just how women’s participation and influence in New Age culture are understood. These critics constitute a “reaction formation” in relation to New Age culture.<sup>6</sup> This “reaction formation” conceptualizes New Age culture as a negative feminizing influence and perpetuates egregious gender, cultural, and national ideologies, even while it misses exactly how women engage in New Age beliefs and practices. By looking at the construction of certain female types who present some of the most disarming aspects of New Age culture—from “Sheila” who names her religion after herself, to the female bourgeois bohemian or “Bobo” who buys her spirituality in the marketplace, to Carol White in Todd Haynes’s film *Safe* who contracts environmental illness (a New Age disease) that makes her allergic to the twentieth century—we discover just what it is these women articulate that critics find so alarming, titillating, and indicative of cultural decline.

The second chapter turns from the sympathetic investigation of misogynist rants against New Age culture as “women’s culture” to an examination of white women’s suspect racial fantasies inside New Age culture. It investigates why and how American Indian rituals, images, icons, and indeed personas have played such a foundational role in New Age culture. In particular, it is in the arena of New Age culture that Native wisdom and tradition have, however clumsily, been interpreted as canonical American sites of spirituality and healing. Whenever American Indian practices are at issue in popular or mainstream culture, valid charges of appropriation, distortion, and exploitation emerge. However,

simply assuming that New Age practitioners co-opt sacred American Indian spirituality for their own purposes ignores why white women emphasize the culture of a group that has been relatively powerless in American history. This chapter examines how women frequently use the trappings of “Indianness”—sage, drums, and feathers, for example—to gain “feminine power” as they usurp particular Native rites. Tracing cultural events, such as the American Indian movement’s blacklisting of best-selling authors Lynn Andrews and Mary Summer Rain, and also looking at a host of representations, references, and texts, the chapter uncovers how gender operates in the longing for indigenous spirituality.

The third chapter examines how New Age beliefs support certain ideas about the female body and its relation to diet and food. Several critics, including Caroline Walker Bynum, Joan Jacobs Brumberg, Rosalind Coward, and Carole Counihan, have written about the historical connection between diet, women’s bodies, and spiritual purification. Drawing on this work, the chapter concentrates on the New Age food cultures in the macrobiotic diet and asks why women believe that this “New Age diet” does not reinforce gender stereotypes but seems to offer a way out of them. For example, female macrobiotic practitioners believe in the diet’s spiritual philosophy, often grounded in Orientalist sensibilities, to such a degree that it changes not only their cosmology but their orientation to their gender. While New Age versions of diets are not a corrective to self-abnegating body images in Western religion, it is crucial to understand the way women’s bodies intersect with contemporary spiritual and religious discourse.

The fourth chapter explores Goddess worship, a subculture that arose in the 1970s from both the New Age and feminist movements. Goddess worshippers believe that roughly 10,000 years ago, women ruled the earth peacefully, and that in a future time, women will rule again. The Goddess movement and its literature, read by a larger audience than one might expect, have grown to such a degree that it has been called “one of the most striking religious success stories of the late twentieth century” (Davis 4). Goddess worship has created a space outside of mainstream religions for white women and lesbians to found their own “churches” and participate in alternative sacred commitments, such as marriage ceremonies. Though worshippers support the Goddess hypothesis by drawing on interpretations of prehistorical figurines, archaeological data, and mythology, many feminist scholars, such as Cynthia Eller and Micaela di Leonardo, argue that not only is there no proof of such a history but also that perpetuating this myth, founded on essentialist notions of gender and race, hurts contemporary feminism. Rather than argue about competing narratives of history, this chapter suggests ways

of rereading prehistorical accounts of the female body and its longings. My goal is to understand why Goddess worshippers go into the past to search for power rather than claim rights in the present.

In the fifth chapter I examine Oprah Winfrey's raced and gendered translation of the New Age. While Oprah has been written on from many different angles, few have remarked on her spirituality, which is a unique combination of New Age authors and beliefs mixed with historical gestures from African American church traditions. From this mix, she has come to a spirituality that works for her as a black woman and works for her audience, made up largely of white women. Thus Oprah is essential to figuring out just why and how middle-class white American women, in particular, have turned toward certain kinds of spirituality and turned away from certain kinds of feminism. Indeed, Oprah combines perfectly all of the things that New Age culture critics love to hate: she commodifies everything, even her own self; she draws on "feel-good" therapies with no sustained political action or critique of institutions; and it has been claimed that she lowers the aesthetic tastes of an American reading public through her book club choices. Yet white women in particular view her as a cult figure. Why? This chapter examines this phenomenon and analyzes the "empowerment" that white women feel; even as it is grounded in a suspect revival of essentialism and primitivism, it continues to be crucial to document as a particular spiritual articulation in this American popular cultural moment.

Clearly, feminism has not gone underground only to emerge as New Age culture. However, this book documents why and how white women are so captivated by the language and affect of New Age spirituality. While the New Age is critiqued for its hallmark "spiritual fluidity," or the facility to be both a part of and stand adjacent to more traditional religious affiliations, I argue that this fluidity enlarges rather than restricts the sphere of religious expression and the formation of democratic modes of worship for women. Practitioners see nothing contradictory in attending a Protestant service and having a healing altar in their home; indeed, in accounts of their spiritual journeys, New Age women narrate a conversion experience from feeling aimless and ineffective in traditional religions to feeling strong through their newfound ability to communicate with the "otherworldly" on their own terms. Though some feminists in the religious community, such as Rosemary Ruether and Mary Daly, say that one should transform traditional religious language to open churches to full female participation, other women are creating genuinely female-centered spiritual communities outside of traditional religions in New Age culture. Women have themselves devised the images, practices, rituals, and values of New Age culture. While one of

the most prevalent accusations against the New Age is that it is religiously vacuous, this book uncovers a genuine mode of spirituality that can foster agency and empowerment for women even as it rests on suspect racial logics. Ultimately, I propose that America's long-standing obsession with the religious fringe, in this case all things "New Age," reflects a powerful and intricate connection between white women's authority, race, and alternative spiritual expressions in America.