

How to manifest abundance: money and the rematerialization of exchange in Sedona, Arizona, USA

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Manifestation is a spiritual practice with material gains. It is a way for those involved with spirituality in Sedona, Arizona, to make money as required while maintaining a level of consonance between their economic life and spiritual path. Analysing the entwinement of economics and religion in everyday life, this article contributes to literature on spiritual economies and, more broadly, to the anthropology of money. Manifestation is a way of figuratively rematerializing exchange, mirrored in preferences for trade and barter and currency backed by gold. Dematerialized money – the stocks, bonds, and derivatives of high finance – is rejected as enacting a low vibration; it is negatively valenced in cosmologies of spirituality. Preferences for money forms reveal responses and reactions to neoliberal capitalism in an embedded, industrialized economy.

Amelia,¹ a white woman in her forties from San Francisco, called herself a shaman and held weekly journeying sessions on a donation basis in her home in Sedona, a small town in northern Arizona, about two hours' drive south of the Grand Canyon and north of Phoenix. The sessions began with setting our intentions, followed by lying down in the dark in Amelia's living room and going on a mental journey while listening to a drumming track played on an iPod. One week in January 2013, a man attended who called himself a 'shadow healer' because he worked unseen in the shadows. He meant that he worked on raising vibrations through his energetic healing practice without much publicity about what he was doing, although he admitted that this was not very profitable, so he expressed a desire to come out of the shadows. He announced that he was there to bring Sedona back to the light as many people in the town 'rape' others for money, by which he meant that financial exploitation was common in the community. After the journeying session, we all shared what we experienced, and the man shared that there was an 'I want my damn money' expression in his. Amelia corrected him, saying that this expression pushes money away. She advised him not to say 'I want' but to be grateful for the abundance he already had. Further, she advised him that the word 'damn' put an energetic block there, with the same effect as a physical dam; instead he

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should welcome abundance as if it had already occurred. She went on to give an example of when she wanted an iPod. She said to the universe that she was grateful for having an iPod, even though she did not have one yet. Later that day, a friend gave her an iPod for free that she had spare, without knowing what Amelia had put out there into the universe. She gave this as an example of the practice of manifestation.

Manifestation is a spiritual practice that reaped material rewards for people like Amelia who identified themselves as following a spiritual path. What is variously called the New Age Movement, new age spiritualities, or alternative spirituality by scholars, people in Sedona referred to as simply 'spirituality', and I use this native framing to refer to their practice (Bender 2010; Crockford 2021; White 2018). 'Manifesting abundance' required visualizing what was desired, such as an iPod in Amelia's example, and then thinking and speaking about the desired thing as if it were already attained. In spirituality, thoughts and speech created reality, which was why Amelia advised the man who came to her journeying session not to unintentionally create energetic blocks against receiving what was desired. The phrases 'I want' and 'damn' exuded negative energy that blocked the flow of abundance, a term which meant wealth in all its forms.

Sedona was a small, predominately white town of approximately 17,000 people, a tourist resort and retirement community, with approximately 3 million visitors coming to the town per year.² A subset of those visitors came to pursue spiritual paths that led them away from what they saw as the *modus vivendi* in America: earning significant amounts of money. Nestled within vibrant red rock canyons that contrasted sharply with the Arizona desert surrounding it, Sedona was said to have special energy. Energy is the central idiom in spirituality; everything is energy, and all energy vibrates at specific frequencies. Dense vibrations create the impression of solid mass, which is the form that reality takes in the third dimension (the term given by my interlocutors to the social reality they were present in). Sedona sat at an intersection of powerful energies; it was called a 'vortex', a location of heightened spiritual capacity. While the idea of vortexes is credited to vaguely referenced 'Native Americans' by local people and guidebook authors, it does not originate in local tribes' cosmologies. Rather the elaboration of Sedona's vortexes is the work of those engaged in spirituality as part of a way of naturalizing and indigenizing their claims in the context of settler colonialism. It has become a mecca for the new age in an act of appropriation of Indigenous lands (Ivakhiv 2001: 147). I entered my fieldsite of Sedona as another of these mostly white, mostly English-speaking visitors who came to learn more about spirituality, and my position as an anthropologist was easily assimilated over the nearly two years that I lived there as analogous to my interlocutors' spiritual seeking.³ What those engaged in spirituality found harder to reflect on was their position as beneficiaries of a system of racial capitalism that gave them the stolen land they were claiming as sacred. Instead, they tried to obscure or erase the structural forces that supported their existence through the concept of manifestation, and Sedona was considered a place where manifestation could occur fluidly and fluently.

In economic terms, Sedona had a high number of short-term visitors compared to a relatively low number of permanent residents, which drove up prices. As it was a desirable place to own property owing to its natural beauty and relative ease of access to transportation networks, real estate prices were high. Yet wages were low, as the economy was oriented around the tourist industry and there were no other significant economic activities in the area. Economically, Sedona represents a crystallization of the neoliberal service economy, in which the value of property is high and the value

of labour is low. This meant that for those without an independent source of income, such as inherited wealth, retirement income, a stock portfolio, or an established career that could be pursued remotely, it was difficult to live in Sedona and earn enough to pay living costs. As indicated by the concerns of the man who attended Amelia's shamanic journeying session, it was particularly hard for those trying to earn an income consonant with their spiritual path to live in Sedona. This economic context placed a particular emphasis on money and one's ability to access it when necessary, an emphasis which was expressed through the interlinked spiritual concepts of manifestation and abundance.

Manifestation and abundance are conceptualizations of economic actions, an examination of which reveals interlinked dynamics of preferences for and attempts to establish alternative economies in Sedona. Taking Bill Maurer's work on Islamic banking as a starting point, alternative economies remain entwined with global financialization, always operating in response or reaction to dominating forms of capital accumulation and commodity exchange, and, despite desires for alternatives, cannot separate from neoliberal capitalism (2005: 9-10). In line with Viviana Zelizer's (1994) work on late nineteenth-century America, which pushes back against assumptions that money is depersonalized, asocial, even corrosive of social relations, I chart how money is socially embedded and personalized among those engaged in spirituality in Sedona. Money was viewed as a form of spiritual energy, and acquiring it was cosmologically framed as a process called manifestation. As an attempt to incorporate religious concerns into economic activity, this case contributes to the anthropological literature on spiritual economies (Rudnyckyj 2009; Zaloom 2016). Following Caitlin Zaloom (2016: 336), a central dynamic is the transposability of the spiritual and the economic, which I argue is expressed through an emphasis on the materiality of money.

For those involved in spirituality in Sedona, money was energy and as such it lacked materiality. There was a hierarchy of money forms where those that were closer to immateriality were deemed to have a lower vibration of energy. Cash was preferable to credit cards, the gold standard was seen as superior to fiat currency, and trade and barter were valued highest of all. Despite identifying money as being in its essence without form or materiality, my interlocutors in Sedona idealized the direct exchange of material goods. There is a curious inversion of the logic of energy here, in which denser forms have a lower vibration. When it came to money, my interlocutors preferred more tangible forms. The materiality of money forms relates to its visibility. When money, or its operation, is invisible, its power is concealed. Following Michael Taussig's (1977) and Anthony Pickles' (2019) focus on the visibility of money, I examine what the doubt over the reality of abstract currency does in the context of American neoliberal capitalism. The materiality of money, and therefore its visibility, is key in the performance of power, concealing the influence and importance of race and class in economic outcomes.

Manifestation: a spiritual practice of material gain

Among those engaged in spirituality, manifestation is a term used to describe the way people can affect and even determine the things that happen in their life; the way they create their own reality. Manifestation occurs when you align yourself with the energy of the universe. To manifest something is to focus attention, time, and effort on that thing until it happens. Manifestation is like a black box between desire and actualization that previous studies have identified as working in gendered and colonialist ways (Aldred 2002; Ganga Kieffer 2020). Among white evangelicals described by Zaloom (2016:

329-30), prayer might occupy this space. Or in a more normative American framing, it might simply be called 'hard work'.

However, among my interlocutors, there was an awareness that you can work hard to achieve your desires and still fail. The difference they identified was in a clarity of purpose, a frame of mind that they called 'consciousness' or 'awareness', which had to be aligned with the energy of the universe for desire to be actualized. In Sedona, manifestation was conceived of as a magical process even if it occurred through mundane actions like selling goods or receiving gifts from friends and relatives. It was commonly used in conjunction with the term 'abundance', a word that connoted wealth but more generally things that held value. Shifting emphasis from defining wealth purely in financial terms, people talked of abundance of love, or community, or laughter. It was about spiritual as well as material wealth. However, saying 'I'm working on my abundance' was often a code for trying to make money.

Ben lived in the same neighbourhood as me in Sedona, in a cosy one-floor single family home with his three dogs, a collie and two wolf-hybrids, and a rotating series of guests. Originally from California, Ben had experienced periods of homelessness and therefore always allowed friends and casual acquaintances to stay for short periods in his home as they needed. He identified his occupation as musician, and his home was filled with *jimbe* drums, didgeridoos, and other assorted musical instruments. Without acknowledging the structural differences, he rejected wage labour as a form of slavery. Instead, he made his money as a self-employed trader in a variety of items, including musical instruments, marijuana, tie-dyed clothing, crystals, and hand-made jewellery. In November 2012, Ben told me about his ongoing legal problems, a medical marijuana farm he had worked on a year prior in California had been raided by the Drug Enforcement Agency. The charges were 'bullshit', he told me, and stemmed from the fact that agents had found his medical marijuana card on the farm. Subsequently, he received a letter advising him of imminent prosecution.

Ben participated in a sweat lodge to deal with the stress this caused him. The sweat had been run by a local self-described shaman whom Ben knew and trusted, and he did it 'because that's my church'. As he lay on the floor bathed in exceedingly hot steam, he had prepared himself mentally to 'manifest abundance', in his words. He had to return to California and surrender himself to the authorities there, and then pay \$5,000 to retain legal counsel and fight the charges. He did not have this money; such a large lump sum was beyond his ordinary means as the money he earned was normally just enough to cover his daily expenses. After preparing himself mentally through the sweat lodge, he proceeded to sell off his goods for cheaper than normal, repeatedly offering them to anyone he met, posting numerous daily updates on his Facebook page with the latest discounts. I bought a *jimbe* drum from him for \$20 less than what he told me was his normal asking price, but then he talked me into adding a strap for the drum for an extra \$20. After several weeks of this intense economic activity, he had raised \$5,000 to pay for his lawyer. The case was eventually dismissed by a judge.

Ben manifested the money he needed through preparing himself so that his thoughts and words had an appropriately positive frequency, then taking the actions necessary to raise the sum; this was the essence of aligning the self with the energy of the universe. When in alignment with the energy of the universe, everyday life flowed smoothly because everything that happened was what was 'meant' to happen. As another interlocutor put it to me, the universe flowed through him. When he – 'Marc' – tried to do anything, it did not work. Yet when he allowed the divine to flow through

him, it worked, because he allowed the universe to work through him. Money was another form of this energy that composed the universe, and that, too, he let flow through him; he did not 'earn' money. There was what he called a 'spiritual economy'.

In her analysis of evangelical financial ministry, Zaloom (2016) recounts how 'Christian budgets' are created so that household finances are managed in a way that reinforces religious commitments. For Ben, working in wage labour would undercut his commitment to spirituality, whereas being self-employed and trading only in goods that he considered ethical and valuable (crystals, marijuana, musical instruments) allowed him to support himself financially in a way that was consonant with his spiritual path. The shortfall of this economic activity in a time of need, when he needed a lawyer, was bridged using the practice of manifestation. Manifesting allowed him to maintain a higher vibration of energy than if he had exchanged his labour for money in the form of wages, incorporating his religious commitments into his household finances in a similar way to the 'Christian budgets' that Zaloom describes.

Energy is one of the central organizing concepts of spirituality.⁴ The word 'energy' resounded through everyday conversations, featured centrally in the marketing of spiritual business owners, and operated as a floating signifier with specific moral connotations. In the argot of spirituality, the solid states of forms that we perceive are illusions created by frequencies of the vibration of energy in the dimension in which we find ourselves incarnated. The frequencies of energy give flavour and texture to moral judgements. The dimension in which life on earth unfolded, called 'the third dimension', has a dense frequency of energy (White 2018: 301-8). A dense frequency is a heavy drag upon spirit; we reside in one of the least spiritual levels of incarnation. To raise the frequency of the vibration is a form of spiritual development. Higher frequencies are less dense. They are lighter, more uplifting; the 'good vibes' inherited from the sixties counterculture predecessors of spirituality.

Emotions have different frequencies: sadness, anger, bitterness are heavy and dense, whereas happiness, love, and trust are lighter and higher. Performing positive emotions is a moral and spiritual imperative. Being happy, being loving, being honest, is part of ascending through the progressive levels of spiritual development called dimensions. The ultimate aim of ascension is to achieve oneness with the universe, which is sometimes also called source or spirit. Those languishing in the third dimension must work on their individual spiritual paths to elevate themselves, and by extension the planet. The third dimension is characterized by a string of negatives – war, pain, hunger – which simply do not exist in higher dimensions. The density of the third dimension is also evinced by the existence of money.

Money has a low frequency because it is entangled with negative actions and emotions such as greed, exploitation, and environmental destruction. Yet as a form of energy, money can have a good or bad vibration. It can be clean or dirty, depending on its form of exchange. The emphasis on the power of human subjectivity on the flow of money recalls Pickles' ethnography of Gorokan gambling in Papua New Guinea, in which the unhappy thoughts of others can cause one to lose the game (2019: 59). For my interlocutors such as Ben, wage labour, particularly in the employment of a large corporation, was the worst way to earn money because it had no beneficial consequences spiritually. Such jobs were seen as both bad for the soul and bad for the planet. Those at the head of large corporations were responsible for such a wide range of low-vibration actions that they were often considered to be part of a 'dark cabal' of Reptilians, lizard-like aliens, whose sole purpose in this incarnation was to

hold people and planets in the third dimension for their own profit (Robertson 2016: 139-44).

Spirituality was permeated with what could be called conspiracy theories surrounding the actions of financial elites and governmental agencies, and making large quantities of money was viewed through this conspiratorial lens. Conspiracy theories diagnosed the problems of the third dimension – it was controlled by ruthless lizard people who only wanted to enrich themselves – to which spirituality offered the answer: ascending to a higher dimension of existence through which the power of the dark cabal would be broken. Such theories gesture towards the prevalence of socioeconomic inequality in the United States, and position those involved in spirituality as unfairly disadvantaged.

Among those involved in spirituality in Sedona, there was an ambiguity surrounding money. It was both a neutral form which could be imprinted either negatively or positively by the medium of exchange and also a necessary evil required by third-dimensional living but kept at as much distance as possible whilst still securing the basic necessities. Such moral quandaries with money have a long history in Western discourse (Parry & Bloch 1989: 2-4). Aristotle was suspicious of money's fertility; he considered it unnatural for an inanimate object to be able to reproduce. For Christian theologians such as Thomas Aquinas, money was the root of all evil and avarice was a mortal sin. However, a second tradition epitomized in the work of Adam Smith finds money as the root of liberty; only with sufficient money can the individual truly be free. Economic wealth and personal freedom are powerfully linked in American popular discourse, with the manner in which money is earned, particularly the extent to which government should provide money directly to citizens who are unable to work, the subject of fraught political contention.

It was against this discourse that my interlocutors explicitly set themselves. They rejected the moral imperative to earn money through wage labour. Still, very few were able to extricate themselves from the monetary requirements of the capitalist economy, so they tried to find some way of making money that they felt was consonant with their spiritual paths. This compromise bred a deep ambivalence about money. Such an ambivalence is similarly located by Filip De Boeck in (the former) Zaïre and Angola among diamond smugglers facing a sudden monetization that they called 'dollarization' (1998: 798). It is also found by Sharon Hutchinson among the Nuer, where money was associated with taxes and slavery as it was introduced by the British colonial authorities, and even after currency became more prevalent, cattle exchanged for money were distinguished from cattle exchanged for women (1996: 60-6). However, in both situations fiat currency was a recent, colonial imposition disrupting previous systems of gift-based exchange and special-purpose money. The history of the imposition of state fiat currency in the United States is longer, occurring after the end of British colonial rule as part of the establishment of the independent American state. The form of money continued to evoke ambivalence, I argue, because of its gradual detachment from visible, material forms.

Akin to the assertion that money is energy, in the anthropological literature money is theoretically delineated as an immaterial, formless abstraction. It is a sign or signifier for something else, most often social relationships. In describing money as a measurement of value, David Graeber posits that value is creative action (2001: 46-7). Money signifies the social relationships through which creative action is enacted; moreover, it creates those relationships. In his later work, Graeber (2011) identifies money as a way of

signifying debt relations. It is what stands for the relationship between creditor and debtor, which he identifies as a crucial relationship constituting social life cross-culturally and historically. In a similar vein, Nigel Dodd (2014) calls money an idea, an illusion, albeit a socially necessary one, both not a thing and also not nothing. Keith Hart elucidates the ambivalence between money 'as an aspect of relations between persons and a thing detached from persons', using the metaphor of two sides of the same coin (1986: 638-9). To act in concert requires an accounting of who owes what to whom, signified by tokens that are simultaneously commodities. Money as a universal equivalence allows this, operating as a way of measuring the value of any particular action on an agreed-upon scale. It is a middle step between creative actions, but an invisible one.

In Michael Taussig's discussion of *el bautizo del billete* in the Cauca Valley of Colombia, the magical reproductive nature of money in capitalism is supernatural, even demonic to peasants recently introduced to cash and wage labour (1977: 137-8). Significantly, the baptized money remains invisible and is only known through the losses it accrues. As something that translates material forms into one another while remaining immaterial, there is something mysterious and even transgressive about money. Writing about the causes of the 2008 financial crash, Arjun Appadurai identifies in derivatives and similar financial products a regenerative capacity, 'the production of money by means of money' in a Weberian space of magic (2016: 5). The reproduction of something immaterial and formless from itself seems to transgress both common sense and physical laws, and again the monetary forms of high finance only became visible through the spectacular losses of the 2008 crash. In analysing capitalist exchange relations, Graeber, Appadurai, and Dodd use the term 'magic' figuratively as a way of identifying the process of formless, immaterial equivalence granting access – unequally – to material forms: goods, services, food, shelter, and so on. Martijn Konings identifies this as a paradox: 'money is both a complex, relational construction and a solid, objective fact', and attempts to resolve it by calling money an iconic sign (2015: 17-20).

The paradoxical quality of money as both material and immaterial is apparent in calling money 'energy'. Doing so attempts two sequential operations. The first is to appropriate or even control the intangible immateriality of money in a way familiar to the anthropological literature about societies where state fiat currency is weak and/or a recent introduction (De Boeck 1998; Foster 1998; Hutchinson 1996; Robbins & Akin 1999; Taussig 1977). Money as energy that can be manifested to create abundance at will posits agency behind the magical regenerative capacity of money in neoliberal capitalism. My interlocutors could thus claim access to the potential to accumulate capital, which a class-based production view of money would exclude them from. This is to say that they took the metaphorical language of 'magic' in theories of money seriously, even literally. They incorporated capitalist accumulation into their cosmologies of spirituality.

The second operation is to subvert the inequality of the distribution of money and resources. In reference to Melanesian cargo cults, Robert Foster argues that what is unclear is the inequality of distribution not how money is produced (1998: 61). Manifesting abundance can be seen as akin to Melanesian cargo. It is a focus on the materiality of currency over its signification, a way to reverse the 'erasure' of money (1998: 82). Manifestation is a resubstantiation or rematerialization of money, a way of addressing doubt over the reality of abstract currency, a desire to see that an immaterial

sign has materiality, and that materiality is within grasp. This manoeuvre occurs in a context in which the use of a single state-controlled fiat currency, and its associated banking and savings accounts as well as other financial products, has been promoted as politically and economically superior for the last 200 years (Zelizer 1994: 13-16). It is significant that my interlocutors in Sedona wanted to elevate direct exchange of material goods over immaterial credit relations and preferred monetary forms backed by the gold standard, drawing on the history of bimetallism and anti-statism in America. Despite the long history of state-promoted immaterial fiat currency, my interlocutors preferred forms of money that were visible and material.

Return of the fetish

The ambivalence of being obliged to utilize fiat currency while simultaneously trying to keep it at a distance was evident at a conference I attended in 2012 that was organized to discuss the ascension to the fifth dimension. There were many questions about money from the audience. What form will cash take in a higher dimension? What would happen to the financial system and the stock market after the ascension? Should they spend their retirement savings now? The speaker was Dave Schmidt, a former state senator for the Republican Party and an ordained Christian minister, who left a career in banking and finance to follow his spiritual path as a motivational speaker on spirituality. Schmidt advised that the stock market was run by the 'dark cabal' who falsely inflated it to create fear and panic, which would work against ascension. The current financial system was third-dimensional and therefore it would end with the ascension. Some who had individually ascended to higher dimensions already had no need for money. The lack of attachment to money was a sign of spiritual development. Since spiritual development varied with individuals even during the time of ascension, Schmidt advised that the audience keep hold of their retirement savings for now.

However, Schmidt told the audience he still made his living financially as a day trader on the stock market, including trading derivatives. His mission in this dimension was to 'hold and release' that energy, by which he meant money. The financial products he traded were the lowest vibrational money form, and almost entirely intangible. Appadurai (2016: 7) identifies derivatives as verbal contracts, having little essence beyond a promise between two traders. Schmidt positioned himself as able to appropriate these intangible money forms, a type of money that Appadurai characterizes as reproductive, money that begets more money, 'as if magically' (2016: 10). If I were to hypothetically put Schmidt in conversation with Appadurai, he would likely agree to this characterization but remove the 'as if'. Money magically grows more money when you allow the energy of the universe to flow through you. Spiritual practice could also be a route to material gain.

Schmidt also ran something called the Hope Chest, which he promoted during the conference. It was a non-profit fund to help those involved in spirituality who were in financial need, which the questions at the conference indicated was a common problem. Schmidt made clear that the Hope Chest was a stopgap, however, until NESARA occurred. NESARA stood for the National Economic Security and Recovery Act; it was a set of economic reforms proposed by Henry Francis Barnard in the 1990s that were released on the internet, including abolishing compound interest and returning to bimetallic currency. Barnard had no professional position in economic policy, and his reforms were never implemented. After the Act was published online in 2000, forums concerning the reforms produced a swarm of theories that amounted to the abolition

of all personal debt, abolition of the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), and declaration of world peace. Schmidt and others at the conference in 2012 talked about it as a millenarian event after which all debt and financial scarcity would be ended.⁵ The popularity of NESARA has increased since as it was taken up by the QAnon movement, which saw Donald Trump as a messianic figure fighting a Manichean battle against the 'dark cabal'.⁶ Significantly, part of the economic reforms through which this financial utopia would be achieved was the return to the gold standard as a basis for currency.

Awaiting financial relief through NESARA prompts another form of rematerialization of money: a desire to make money visible and tangible. This desire continues the fraught relationship between inscription and substance in American monetary policy, evidenced in the paper money versus gold debate that dominated political discourse from 1825 to 1875 (Shell 1982: 6). In the arguments of so-called 'gold bugs', gold was a material substance with tangible value, whereas paper was insubstantial. Bimetallism continues discourses on certainty in American religion and law that Vincent Crapanzano (2001) calls literalism, an interpretive style that uncritically affirms knowledge through reading specific texts as fact. The preference for the gold standard can be read as a literalist interpretation of money. The continuing support for the gold standard among my interlocutors also suggests a certain level of fetishism, a valuing of the material form over the exchange relationship it embodies.

The fetishism of money as a privileged commodity lay at the heart of Marx's analysis of capitalism, with a power that uproots and mystifies the social relations in embedded economies as it spreads (Hutchinson 1996: 59). Money in capitalist economies functions as a universal equivalence that is necessary for commodity exchange because it is anonymous; it can be detached from the owner and exchanged freely, thereby allowing market exchange. It is a general equivalent which signifies the value of commodities. Money is a thing that can stand for all other things. Here there seems to be a clear parallel with the concept of energy, which can stand for anything because it is everything: energy is a universal equivalence.⁷ It is a symbolic, abstract measure through which all other things can be defined. Georg Simmel (2004 [1900]: 82) called this the enigmatic quality of money, extending interdependence while removing the personal and specific. Everything can be converted into money but what money is remains elusive. Similarly, energy is an impersonal, unspecific, yet enigmatic way of conceptualizing money.

Joel Robbins and David Akin (1999: 4-5) argue that one of the most significant characteristics of money cross-culturally is that it cannot be consumed, only things it can be exchanged with are consumed, which means that money must be circulated constantly. Money is therefore something that permeates and flows. Similarly, energy in spirituality is understood as something that can be transferred but not destroyed; it cannot be used up or consumed. The flow of monetary exchange and the flow of energy are homologous forces, where money flow is a subset of energy flow and provides a model for understanding wider energy flows. Money gets you what you want when produced in the right context, something that Robbins and Akin say is seen as a magical power in the Melanesian societies they consider. Manifesting abundance is equally seen as a magical power in Sedona, a way of getting what you want in specific contexts while continuing to increase, rather than decrease, spiritual development.

There is a mysteriousness of money under neoliberal capitalism that the concept of energy carries. Graeber's (2011: 372) suggestion that 'money has no essence. It's not "really" anything' equally applies to energy in spirituality. Anything can be quantified in terms of energy, just as anything can be given a monetary value. Both money and

energy can stand for anything but have no essential 'thingness' themselves. They are immaterial. Yet money signifies something in particular for Graeber: it is a way of quantifying debt (2011: 214). He traces swings throughout a 5,000-history between periods of bullion money, where money has physical substance in the form of coinage, and virtual credit money, where money has no physical substance but rather takes the symbolic form of IOUs. Virtual credit money mystifies the workings of capital through symbolic power in which pieces of paper, plastic cards, or numbers on a screen are ascribed value. It is the lack of tangibility, and the seeming power of some to conjure money from nothing, that creates the aura of mystery that Graeber (2011: 363-4) compares to a wizard behind a screen.

The power to determine which currency is valid and which is not is the outcome of a historical process in America unfolding over decades from the end of the Civil War to the early twentieth century (Maurer 2015: 29-30). In the Revolutionary period, New England farmers bartered products between households rather than selling on the market for cash; indeed cash itself was an item for barter, rejecting capitalist monetized exchange on the basis of radical republicanism (Merrill 1977). During the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century, a variety of private organizations and individual states issued their own currencies before the federal government began the consolidation of the monetary system with the National Banking Act of 1863, which ended with the establishment of the Federal Reserve system in the early twentieth century. The post-Civil War period was thus animated by public debates over the form and function of money, as well as the legitimacy of its source, while the importance of gold continued on the West Coast (Zelizer 1994: 14-18).

The 1970s saw a swing to virtual credit money with the end of the gold standard. It is instructive that this same period is when spirituality emerged as a distinct religious form. Graeber (2011: 377) comments on the interconnection of American military imperialism, the global imposition of dollar-based debt, and the rise of the prosperity gospel of the evangelical right at this time. Money can be created out of nothing, a magic trick the belief in which is enforced by the threat of state-sanctioned violence and the beneficiaries of which are sanctified as fulfilling God's gifts. In spirituality, this linkage is translated through the idiom of energy: money is energy, belief in which is the outcome of an individual's level of consciousness, and the beneficiaries of which are aligned with the energy of the universe sufficiently to manifest abundance. However, in spirituality, money only exists in the third dimension; spiritual ascension would ultimately render it obsolete. The most spiritually advanced would not have money because they would not need it. What was holding most people back was the economic system in the third dimension, the virtual economy of dematerialized money, which my interlocutors identified closely with the federal government.

There remained a resistance to monetary uniformity in Arizona, and a dislike of the dictates of the federal government. Something about money itself seemed to inhibit the highly prized American value of freedom. Precious metal such as gold was seen as a safer store of value. My interlocutors in Sedona viewed the paper money circulated by the federal government as a fiction, spread to perpetuate a system of debt and exploitation, and the government itself was linked to ideas about Reptilians, the dark cabal, and the low vibration of the third dimension. As mentioned above, spirituality is permeated with conspiracy theories, to the extent that some analysts have named the conjunction 'conspirituality' (Asprem & Dyrendal 2015; Ward & Voas 2011). Theories spread by figures such as David Icke and Alex Jones about Reptilians and the New World Order

were popular among those involved in spirituality (Robertson 2016). Politically, many of my interlocutors expressed views on the radical responsibility of individuals that were in line with libertarianism, although many refused any engagement with electoral politics. The power to determine value that the federal government had assumed was seen as illegitimate. Robert Foster (1998: 81-2) explicitly parallels the fetishism of gold and silver as the only 'real' currency, as opposed to paper money, by the US militia movement with the scrutiny of 'the government's money' in Papua New Guinea.

While those involved in spirituality were generally not part of a militia, they inhabited a similar anti-statist political position. Many of my interlocutors harboured a deep suspicion of the federal government and perceived its fiat currency as a trick to enslave them in a form of debt bondage. While claiming that his occupation was a film-maker, Simon identified as a tax protester, believing the IRS to be illegitimate and therefore he had no need to pay tax. He owed \$80,000 in back taxes, and regularly communicated with the IRS, challenging their laws and legitimacy. Anti-federalist, anti-statist, and tax-protesting rhetoric are permeated with, and euphemistic for, white supremacy (Haney López 2015). That such rhetoric should emerge among the inhabitants of a largely white town, whose economic choices are supported and maintained by white privilege, is no coincidence. The idea of radical individual responsibility, so popular among those involved in spirituality, is premised upon the material conditions that favour white people and systemically disadvantage others. Simon, for example, was able to withhold his taxes because he was supported financially by his family, enabling him to evade wage garnishment for repayment. Passive income streams, often the result of generational wealth, enabled anti-statist positions as well as manifestation as a concept.

When my interlocutors in Sedona equate money with energy, they claim the power to create value for themselves, not as a class as in orthodox Marxism, but rather as individuals with extraordinary abilities. A social relation is collapsed into an individual capacity. In outlining the social forms of money, each example that Dodd cites has some form of qualifier that denotes collectivity: 'the *universal* commodity form ... a claim upon *society* ... diffuse *social* media ... a *social* technology ... an instrument of *collective* memory ... a *generalized* symbolic medium ... a *social* process of commensuration ... a *communal* illusion' (2014: 8, emphasis edited). Money requires some form of consensus; it is an agreement. Those who use it agree that it can operate as a universal equivalence to store value, mediate exchange, and so on.

Agreements are not always and not necessarily voluntary or peacefully entered into. When governments change money, as the American federal government did after the Civil War, they need to be in a position to do so. Manoeuvring into that position means negotiating a vast, complex system, and it can take a long time for all parties to acquiesce to the agreement. In the United States, this acquiescence required legislation, imposition of new forms of taxation, imprisonment and fines levelled against resisters, and the establishment of new institutions (such as the Federal Reserve and the IRS) to regulate this system. Those promoting it portrayed this historical process as economic progress; the use of banks was a sign of civilization, a move away from the 'barbaric' practice of individuals hoarding gold and silver (Peebles 2008: 235). Gustav Peebles argues that as the nation takes over the international signifiers of gold and silver, banks circulate money instead of individuals hoarding it. Institutionalized credit-debt relationships become prioritized, which does not undermine hoarding but instead creates a socialized, collective hoard: 'one giant, national mattress' (2008: 236).

However, the mattress has no materiality, and the collectivized money is used for the enrichment of the financial elite. In calling money energy, my interlocutors were trying to gain access to the collective wealth of their society that seemed simultaneously to be everywhere yet frustratingly out of their reach. Through preferring visible forms of money, they were trying to lay claim to it.

Think yourself rich

Donna quit her job as an executive in banking technology a few months before moving to Sedona in mid-2013. She worked on online banking systems but told me that was all she understood; she did not understand the 'secret sauce' of the financial system or how the banks work out their margins. She developed a tumour that required a hysterectomy to remove, and at the same time she described how she lost '240 lb of husband'. Now she had moved to Sedona to take it easy, she knew it was time to live her life, and focus on her spirituality. Sedona either welcomes you or spits you out, she told me. If you stay, it will hold up each of your issues in turn and make you deal with them. She told me that the way to manifest anything is to know exactly what you want, believe that you want it, and know that you deserve it. She said she used this method to win around \$27,000 at a casino in Atlantic City on different slot machines because she believed that she could. Originally from New York City, she wanted to set up a foundation with an annuity to give grants to support people doing spiritual work so they did not have to get random jobs that sucked up their time and attention. Months later, Donna got involved in a dispute with another person in Sedona who followed a spiritual path, who went by the moniker Free Heart, and they levelled accusations of financial malfeasance and identity fraud at each other until Donna left town.

Donna's story followed a common narrative structure that I heard in Sedona: people visited on holiday and then felt 'called' to move there, often leaving behind an unsatisfying or stressful work or family situation. Doing so was aligning with the energy of the universe. Sedona called people in if that was part of their spiritual path. If not, the energy would 'chew you up and spit you out', in the popular refrain. It was a way of saying that if you were living there and you were successful, that meant you were meant to be there, but if you had to leave, then you were not. This sentiment blurred the importance of money in maintaining a residence in the town. Those who maintained themselves long term under such difficult economic conditions saw it as a sign that they were following the right spiritual path. They were aligned with the energy of the universe; they were meant to be there.

The structural conditions of exchange were mystified by talking about money as energy. A common saying in Sedona was that 'energy goes where awareness flows'. Paying attention to something manifests it; a particularly strong theme in some of the 'think rich', self-help literature popular among my interlocutors such as *The secret* by Rhonda Byrne (2006). This text uses the New Thought concept of the 'law of attraction' that suggests that 'like attracts like'. If wealth is a matter of mindset, then by the same token poverty is chosen; a sentiment that reinforces the political economic status quo and obscures structural inequality, reframing it in moral terms. One of my interlocutors, Jill, read *The secret* avidly, made daily affirmations, such as 'I am abundant', and created a vision board to manifest abundance.

Despite living in a small travel-trailer parked in someone else's driveway and supporting herself through occasional science tutoring and selling handmade jewellery, Jill said she was actively manifesting something she called 'the Creative Space'. She

imagined this would be the next big thing in arts and spirituality in Sedona and would lead to her getting a job as a dancer with Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas. To this end, she directed and produced a circus version of *The Nutcracker* ballet at a local restaurant, getting the other cast members to sell tickets on the guarantee that they would keep the money from any ticket sales after she had given a portion to pay the venue and kept a small cut for herself. According to cast members I spoke to, after the performance she kept all the money and used it to fund her return to Michigan, so she could live more comfortably in her parents' home. Accusations of financial malfeasance were common in Sedona. Dave Schmidt was also accused of embezzlement of campaign funds in his political career and in his work for the non-profit Hope Chest. However, despite the harm that these actions caused, the perpetrators often shrugged them off, since 'dollars are just energy anyway'. And while rumours of financial malfeasance spread, they often did not lead to any significant form of social ostracism.

Lisbeth Mikaelsson (2001), in her work on new age literature in Norway, notes the importance of the theme of wealth and success and calls it a mythologization of money that is framed as empowering the individual. She reflects on similarities with the networks of exchange in consumer capitalism, in which the processes that make some rich but not others are a mystery to many people. There are very few extremely wealthy individuals whose actual work remains oblique. Echoing Keith Hart (2000: 224-5), Mikaelsson argues that since wealth has become disconnected from production and commerce, it does not seem to spring from the exchange of physical commodities but from mysterious flows of capital. Those who harness these mysterious flows for their personal gain are viewed as spiritually virtuous. Mikaelsson calls this 'wealth consciousness', and it mirrors what is called the prosperity gospel in evangelical Christianity. Wealth is seen as God-given and deserved. It can reach grotesque proportions in the various scandals involving both televangelists and spiritual gurus. The vast wealth of those at the top dwarfs the level of wealth of most adherents who support them through buying their products. Yet it appeals to the poor in the same way as trickle-down economics does, as a form of sympathetic magic where associating with a quality grants you that quality; by associating with wealth you will become wealthy.

The assumption that wealth is not only individually earned but also a spiritual blessing is inseparable from whiteness as a process in the hierarchy of racial capitalism in the United States. Sedona, as noted, is a predominantly white town, and spirituality is also overwhelmingly demographically white. Whiteness has cash value, in that white privilege makes it easier even for those on low incomes to live (Lipsitz 2018). The rhetorical manoeuvres of Donna and Jill to manifest abundance erase their whiteness by calling prosperity a spiritual blessing, while simultaneously obscuring their negative reciprocity. While prosperity discourse is not solely inhabited by white people, what it does is erase the economic advantages of whiteness and reframe it as spiritual blessings. Money as an immaterial form that can be manipulated by the wizards of high finance similarly obscures the hierarchies of racial capitalism, which grant inequitable economic access and opportunity based on race.

How many sage bundles for that?

Abundance connoted wealth, yet it was specifically materialized wealth rather than wealth in the form of numbers in a bank account. Relations of credit and indebtedness that underlay capitalist exchange relations were avoided. Consumer debt was

third-dimensional, part of the dense, human existence in this world that my interlocutors were trying to ascend beyond. Maurer (2015: 129-31) observes how for the poor, cash economies persist not only due to lack of access to financial products but also because the systems that guarantee those products are viewed with suspicion. Cash under the mattress seems more safely kept than money in an account which the bank can arbitrarily remove with little warning through fees and fines. Yet for my interlocutors, this suspicion went further, casting the whole financial system of banking, speculating, and reproducing capital – Peebles' 'giant, national mattress' – into doubt.

Exchanges among those involved in spirituality in Sedona occurred most often through cash, yet there was a rhetorical preference for trade and barter. The direct exchange of material goods had the highest vibration for exchanges that took place in a dimension still characterized by density. (In the higher dimensions, there was no need for exchange at all, since manifestation could happen instantly, obviating all scarcity.) Trade and barter occurred between friends and acquaintances, especially those also identifying as being on a spiritual path, while cash was used for formal exchanges in shops and to pay rent. An established relationship, and a shared engagement in spirituality, was seen as a type of a social guarantee for an exchange that had no legal guarantee backed up by the state.

I witnessed a typical barter when meeting a Vedic astrologer, David, at the organic vegetarian restaurant in Sedona, which also sold artisanal raw chocolate. David arrived with Jimmy, one of the chocolate makers who worked in the restaurant, who went to the kitchen and returned with a bag of chocolates as payment for the astrological reading he had just received. The chocolates were called Buddha's Yang, dark chocolate shaped like a seated laughing Buddha, and there was also a bag of cacao beans, which Jimmy said were good for sleep and used by the Mayans and Aztecs for ceremonial purposes. It was a sacred product, with a positive effect on the frequency of one's energy when consumed. A 16 oz bag of cacao nibs had a retail price in the store of \$13.96, and a large bag of chocolates such as the one traded could be as much as \$50. An astrological reading from David was normally \$195. However, he said he did it to help people, and was happy to barter if that was what clients could afford. It was a preferable form of exchange because he received something of spiritual value and the form itself had a higher spiritual vibration.

The preference for trade and barter often presented a difficult choice for small business owners, however. My housemate, Michael, ran his own eco-friendly cleaning company that was popular in the town because the products he used were organic and therefore seen as having fewer 'toxins' than mass-produced 'chemical' cleaning fluids. He told me that his customers would consistently offer items for trade in exchange for cleaning services. One woman offered him a box of vegetables and Chinese herbs in exchange for him vacuuming her carpet because she had no money, but she did have a garden. Michael called this 'the Sedona way'. He accepted the vegetables because he said he did not mind getting paid in food. Yet he rejected many of these offers because it had to be something he wanted. Another customer offered him a massage in exchange for detailing their car. He refused because the job would place intense strain on his back, where he already suffered chronic pain. Michael's reservations about barter and trade were not uncommon.

It was a frequent complaint that people in Sedona always wanted to trade crystals or bundles of sage instead of paying for things. Many of the most important requirements for sustaining basic needs still had to be paid for using cash or cheque, such as rent

payments, or only accepted credit or debit cards as alternative payments, such as retail purchases. Most of the people I knew who made a long-term home in Sedona refused to engage in barter and trade, only accepted cash for their services, and often had some form of wage labour or passive income in the form of kin-network support, investments, or government assistance to supplement their income.

In denying the assumption of classical economics that money emerged from pure barter, Caroline Humphrey (1985: 49) calls barter a 'post-monetary phenomenon'. Barter occurs not in so-called primitive economies but in those that have money but have become decoupled from the monetary system for some reason. For the very poor, barter allows for exchange when access to money is extremely limited. This means payments can be made immediately, in discrete exchanges, that do not have ongoing conditions attached to them, as loans do. In Sedona, there was a desire to be post-monetary, an idealization of living outside the monetary system. And while my interlocutors had to some extent been pushed to the fringes of the dominant payment systems by economic marginalization, they were by no means at the level of extreme poverty that the Lhomi in Nepal, described by Humphrey, were. Sedonans were still fully integrated in an economy based on monetary exchange, as indicated by the fact that the material bases of their existence – food, shelter, clothing, and so on – still had to be paid for with cash or on credit. Money in the form of cash or credit remained their standard of value.

Although there was a level of social atomization and an idealization of individualism that supported the preference for barter as direct, useful, and not creating further relationships or requiring further transactions, the economy was not atomized. While my interlocutors in Sedona were often poor relative to the average income in Arizona and to the well-heeled retirees and corporate businesses in the town, they were still integrated into the neoliberal economy of industrial capitalist America. They were able to live a frugal lifestyle because their racial privilege exempted them from the criminalization that communities of colour face when trying to make similar alternative economic decisions. The preference for barter was less fuelled by material need than it was part of a cosmological elaboration of alternative forms of exchange. Trade and barter granted a way to rematerialize exchange, albeit one that was limited by my interlocutors' embeddedness in the American economy.

Working on my abundance

At Amelia's shamanic journeying session, the self-described shadow healer told us that he was there to bring Sedona back to the light as many people in the town 'rape' others for money. This claim was immediately legible to those present because financial exploitation was a common story told in Sedona about those involved in spirituality. Dave Schmidt, Donna, and Jill each had accusations of fraud or financial malfeasance levelled against them. The equivalence of money and energy often undermined considerations of morality. Moreover, ideologies of money as immaterial or magical also conceal the influence of race and class on economic outcomes. Manifestation and abundance as concepts in spirituality support and reify individualism, obscuring structural conditions of white supremacy, as well as historical contingencies of financialization, in racial capitalism.

Ignoring the significance of passive income streams as well as economic privilege, my interlocutors assumed that each person gets what they need, without concern for wider collectivities, by focusing their personal awareness and attention on what is desired and

acting as if they already had it. As concepts, they are related to ideological preferences for trade and barter over cash transactions, and for gold-backed money over fiat currency. These preferences highlight the visibility of money. Manifestation is a resubstantiation or rematerialization of money, a way of addressing doubt over the reality of abstract currency, a desire to see that an immaterial sign has materiality. Through preferring money with material, visible signification, my interlocutors saw a way to claim the pervasive yet restricted American prosperity for themselves, like Melanesians waiting on airstrips for cargo.

For those involved in spirituality in Sedona, money was energy, the two were the same. The concept of energy allowed for a qualitative evaluation of money codified in terms of positive or negative vibration. Perhaps this better explains why my interlocutors preferred material, visible forms of money and exchange. The energy of state-issued fiat currency was negative. The state told them that it guaranteed money, so the form itself did not matter. However, the experiences of my interlocutors told them otherwise: that the form mattered a lot, and that there were forms of money and exchange that were less controlled, and therefore less liable to appropriation, by the state. The impacts of global financialization, in which everything is rendered exchangeable on the free market for a price and sudden crashes wipe out value, can be read in this hostility to an economic system that largely benefited them.

Informed by anti-statism and financial millenarianism, awaiting an end of the current economic system, my interlocutors questioned and challenged state institutions where they could, from disseminating conspiracy theories about NESARA to refusing to pay taxes. Their doubt over the reality of abstract currency formed part of a larger suspicion of institutions in the American state, a lack of faith and confidence in the system. Fiat currency is a commitment by the state that it will act as if money has value, requiring in return that the economic activity of citizens becomes part of the giant collectivized mattress. It is a commitment that my interlocutors, to varying extents, refused to honour as part of a larger erosion of trust in American social institutions.

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NOTES

¹ All personal names are pseudonyms.

² The Sedona and Village of Oak Creek populations combined to make approximately 17,000 people, with 10,339 within the city limits of Sedona as of 2019 estimates. The city of Sedona is 95.3 per cent white, with a median home value of \$507,400 and median rent of \$1,300. Data sourced from US census website (<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/map/sedonacityarizona>) and Sedona Chamber of Commerce for number of tourists per year (<https://sedonachamber.com/our-community/sedona-fun-facts/>).

³ This article is based on twenty-two months' ethnographic fieldwork in Sedona and the surrounding area from July 2012 to April 2014, with return trips of six months' duration in both 2015 and 2016. The research was funded by a doctoral studentship from the Economic and Social Research Council (UK).

⁴ This definition of spirituality is a gloss of a more substantive discussion (see Crockford 2021: 12-21).

⁵ NESARA was still promoted four years later by one of the conference participants, Suzy Ward, who channels her deceased son Matthew (see <https://higherdensity.wordpress.com/2016/04/21/message-from-matthew-via-suzy-ward-4-20-16/>).

⁶ NESARA has been a part of QAnon since at least 2020 (see <https://www.logically.ai/articles/nesara-and-the-business-of-false-hope>).

⁷ Energy was understood not within the parameters of the scientific concept of energy, such as efficiency and waste, but as a free-floating signifier.

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Comment manifester l'abondance : argent et rematérialisation des échanges à Sedona (Arizona, Etats-Unis)

Résumé

La manifestation est une pratique spirituelle apportant des gains matériels. À Sedona, ceux qui s'adonnent à la spiritualité y ont trouvé un moyen de gagner l'argent nécessaire tout en conciliant vie économique et parcours spirituel. Par l'analyse de cette intrication de l'économie et de la religion dans la vie quotidienne, le présent article apporte une contribution à la littérature sur les économies spirituelles et, plus largement, à l'anthropologie de l'argent. La manifestation est une manière de rematérialiser l'échange d'une façon figurative, qui transparait dans les préférences pour le commerce et le troc et dans les monnaies garanties par l'or. L'argent dématérialisé (actions, obligations, produits financiers dérivés) est rejeté car producteur de vibrations faibles ; sa valence est négative dans les cosmologies de la spiritualité. Les préférences pour les formes monétaires révèlent des réponses et réactions au capitalisme néolibéral dans une économie industrialisée intégrée.

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