

Communicating with the Divine: Techniques of Attunement and Practices of Subjectivation*

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(Abstract) This article analyzes the techniques of attunement and the practices of subjectivation employed by channelers, based on participant observation and in-depth interviews conducted at a channeling counseling center in Seoul. Channeling is a practice in which a human intermediary known as a channeler establishes an attuned relationship with nonhuman agents such as higher selves, deities, or the deceased and communicates messages through that interaction. The study first explores how genealogies of Western spiritual practices, including mysticism, spiritualism, and self-development discourse, have been adopted and reconfigured in the Korean context, giving rise to channeling as a distinct system of practice. Second, it examines the process through which channelers build a shared field of attunement with nonhuman agents, adjust their own modes of sensing and judgment, and reconstitute their subjectivity. Third, it shows that channeling messages are not pre-given truths or fixed information but coproduced outcomes that acquire credibility and efficacy through relational dynamics, including the channeler's translation, adjustment, and sensitivity. Channeling is thus analyzed as an ethical practice that reorganizes narrative and subjectivity through attunement with invisible others. The messages function as factishes, relational realities that are jointly constructed within the conditions of trust and responsiveness, and they facilitate healing and self-transformation by becoming integrated into the client's life narrative.

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1. Introduction

1) Channeling Counseling Center C, Your Spot for Messages from Beyond

Nestled in the basement of a commercial building in Seoul is Channeling Counseling Center C. Next to the center's entrance sits a sandwich board advertising "channeling consultations" inside. Here, channeling is typically understood as referring to a spiritual technique in which a human intermediary establishes an attuned relationship with and communicates with nonhuman agents, generally, higher selves, deities, or the deceased. Its practitioners, known as channelers, act as both conduits and counselors, receiving messages from these nonhuman agents and passing them on to their clients. The counseling center appears to be a small and unassuming shop to passersby, but past the threshold, it radiates a peculiar ambiance, with an array of curios and decorative items suggestive of the link between our world and the spiritual realm on display. Crystals of all sizes and colors line shelves around the counseling center, with an area filled with books on spirituality and a recliner meant for relaxation situated behind a partition, from which hangs an angel figurine. At the center of the space is a large table for group events and a circular table for individual consultations, the latter of which is covered in a dark cloth emblazoned with arcane symbols from tarot, adding to the otherworldly aura of the space.

One will almost always find Channeler A and his student, Channeler E, at the center, where they jointly oversee consultations and healing sessions. Having spent much of his life as a spiritual guide, Channeler A founded Channeling Counseling Center C, where he leads a variety of sessions in which he mediates a connection between clients and their higher selves. Although Channeler E had been in training until early 2022, she now works hand-in-hand as a colleague with Channeler A, having reached a level of spiritual development fit to lead consultations and healing sessions independent of her mentor. The issues that clients bring to Channeling Counseling Center C fall largely into three categories. First are the garden-variety mental health issues, such as stress, anxiety, and depression. Then there are the structural and relationship issues pertaining to familial or interpersonal conflict, self-identity, and life path. Finally, there are a considerable number of people who come with more spiritual ends in mind, namely exploring communion with supernatural entities as part of a search for meaning in life and spiritual growth.

The researcher seeks to analyze practices associated with channeling as practices of subjectivation in which the individual understands and reconstitutes themselves. A key notion explored in his later lectures, Foucault viewed the subject as a procedural form that constructs itself in the reflexive relationship between itself, truth discourse, and ethical rules. For Foucault, subjectivation was not an attempt to restore some essential underlying self, but a “practice of freedom” by which the subject routinely works on, trains, and cares for themselves as they attempt to transcend themselves (Foucault 1997a). The researcher, in the same vein, argues that channeling is not an act carried out with the mere objective of communication with a transcendent being, but can be understood as a practice by which one reflects on psychological and relational issues in one’s life and explores spiritual freedom.

This study revolves around the following three research questions. First, what are the historical lineage and social context by which channeling has established itself as a practice of subjectivation in South Korean (hereafter, Korean) society today? Section 2 seeks to answer this by tracing how the traditions of Western mysticism, spiritualism, self-help discourse, and digital media are intertwined, and elucidating the manner in which such a current was adapted to and modified for Korean society, thus constructing the channeling practice system. Second, how does channeling alter the lives of the channelers and their clients through connections with unseen higher selves? The researcher posits in Section 3 that higher selves, rather than being concrete transcendent beings, are “Others” with which it is possible to establish an attuned relationship who are mobilized for the practice of subjectivation, and analyzes such attunement sessions as processes of ethically reconstituting the subject. Finally, how do the messages that come through channeling take on the real power to alter individuals’ emotions and judgments? Rather than simply determining these messages to be fact or fiction, the researcher employs the concept of “factish” in Section 4 to explore the technical mechanisms by which these messages come to operate “as fact” through the processes of attunement, mobilization of signs, translation, and the building of trust.

In delving into these questions, the researcher analyzes channeling on historical, ethical, and technical levels and endeavors to clarify how the integration of factish narratives into one’s life narrative through channeling facilitates healing. Such a study goes a step beyond the traditional anthropological task of reproducing the practices of others in its attempt to

explore in detail how practices of spirituality are being reconstituted and functioning today.

2) Literature Review and Methodology

In the sense that channeling deals with connecting with transcendent beings, interpreting inner images, and constructing messages through attunement, studies of it can draw on the insights of the phenomenology of religion, which has analyzed the inner construction of experiences of transcendence (Otto 1987; Eliade 1992; van der Leeuw 1995). However, analyses of the inner experience are inadequate when it comes to capturing the social context and ethical tensions that channeling inhabits, and further sociological analysis that broaches religion in terms of ethical practices and as a matter of social organization is needed. The work of classical sociologists demonstrates that religion functions as a social mechanism that, through the ethic of salvation, regulates everyday actions and creates order in life (Weber 2008; Durkheim 2020; Mauss and Hubert 1972, 1981). Later studies in this vein highlighted how religious experience cannot be reduced to a singular inner truth, but rather becomes socially real through the process of discourse, performance, text, and memory (de Certeau 2013). Some studies, moreover, demonstrate that even individual beliefs are the socially learned and institutionalized outcome of repeated sensory training, underscoring the performative nature of experience and the internalization of connection with the divine (Luhmann 1989). Others still have lucidly explored modern case studies, revealing the understanding of magical practices as being at odds with science and modern rationality to be reductive by showing how the two coalesce to function in complex new ways (Geschiere 1997; Fontein 2014).

Relevant research in Korea likewise has explored religious practices as more than particular systems of faith or experiences to elucidate the aspects in which practices are contrived and altered as they intermingle with folk science, subjectivity, and techniques of the body (Yi Yongbeom and Kang Jeongwon 2005; Gu Hyeongchan 2020). Outside of organized religion, Korean shamanism provides a valuable referential framework due to its structural similarities with channeling, in that its practice revolves primarily around attunement with nonhuman entities (Yeom Wonhui 2012; Kim Dongkyu 2017, 2018). Choe Hakrak (2024), in particular, uses the framework of actor–network theory (ANT) to analyze Korean shamanism as a

complex, multilayered network of overlapping deities, shamans, *taenghwa* art, cultural heritages, consumers, the state, and more, expounding how a deity's "metaperson" transverses the disparate conduits of religion, cultural heritage, and the market through the "vehicle" of the shaman's physical body. Choe's study expands the horizon for analysis of the material and political natures of these practices by viewing the shaman's body not as a mere medium for the divine, but a space where the sacred and the secular intersect and social conduits "fold" and are reconfigured. Choe's work provides a theoretical basis for analyzing the body of the channeler as a site where embodiment of the techniques of attunement, liaisons with the nonhuman, and ethical distance are modulated.

ANT understands human subjects not as fixed and real, but rather as beings that are constantly being configured and reassembled in their associations with a variety of nonhuman actors. According to Latour, human action is merely "borrowed, distributed, suggested, influenced, dominated, betrayed, translated," while a subject is "what is made to act" (Latour 2005: 26, 50). Said differently, subjects in ANT are an effect engendered by a network, and thus exist "always in and through others" (Latour 2023: 378). One of the advantages ANT provides as an analytical framework for the current study is its view of humans and nonhumans as coequal actors, thus allowing for the analysis of the process by which they form a network in concert. Networks are formed via translation, a process by which differing interests are connected and coordinated; translation here refers not to the simple conversion of one language to another, but is defined as a key practice enabling communication and partnerships by conjugating the goals of various actors (Latour 2018). Another advantage of ANT is that it does not regard messages sent by transcendent entities as truths or revelations, but allows for their analysis as the products of a network formed through translation. Going beyond the dichotomy of objective "fact" and subjective "fetish," such messages are understood as "factishes"—constructions that are made socially real. Rather than determining messages' authenticity, factishes lay bare how they are formed and come to function within a given context of relations (Latour 2010).

In consideration of the absence of an infrastructure of channeling, the researcher seeks to focus the study's analysis on the practices of individual channelers. Whereas Korean shamanism is located somewhere along the spectrum of institutional shamanhood and communal healing through ritualistic performance, channeling is closer to a practice of mental and

emotional care and self-transformation that revolves around individual skills of attunement and the formation of a self-narrative. In order to carry out this investigation, the author additionally draws upon a Foucauldian perspective as a framework for analysis.

In his work up until the mid-1970s, Foucault viewed power and knowledge to be the two most crucial conditions for the formation of the subject and defined “governmentality” as the mode of power microscopically organizing individual actions and ways of life. To the Foucault of this era, the subject was something that regulated and formed itself within the apparatuses of governmentality. But in his later work, the French thinker turned his attention to the subject’s potential to transform itself through certain truths and practices, even under the conditions of governmentality, and referred to this idea as “technologies of the self” or “practices of freedom” (Foucault 1997a, 1997b, 2007, 2016). Truth, here, takes not the form of transcendent revelation or objective knowledge, but is something closer to a factish—a relational event that a subject forges and obtains through practice on itself. Interestingly enough, Foucault termed such a practice of subjectivation “spirituality,” which he explained as a process or set of training by which one transfigures their very being via their body, senses, and affects in order to attain truth, without presupposing a higher being. So-called spiritual corporality in this context is not a metaphysical structure in which the truth is instilled in or reflected in the physical body, but redefines the body itself as a site of the construction and practice of truth (Carrette 2000). Foucault’s spirituality, which closely knits governmentality, truth, freedom, the corporeal body, and the subject, sublates transcendence while also functioning as an indispensable analytical framework that presents a new way of looking at subjectivity.

The analytical frameworks put forward by Latour and Foucault allow for a greater understanding of the various aspects of the practice of channeling we see today. While the former sheds light on the concrete process of connection with nonhuman actors, it has a tendency to recuse itself on matters of ethical responsibility on the part of the subject (Jo Munyeong 2021). Meanwhile, the latter shows how a practice is complexly situated in the tension between governmentality and the subject, but has a tendency to overlook the influence of nonhuman actors. Borrowing the lenses of these two complementary perspectives, the current study seeks to explicate channeling’s practices of subjectivation, namely, its art of attunement with nonhuman actors and spiritual training.

The current study employs literature review, participant observation, and in-depth interviews as its main qualitative methods for conducting a multifaceted analysis of the attunement techniques and practices of subjectivation associated with channeling. Participant observation primarily took place on location at Channeling Counseling Center C over the course of around six months of regular visits, during which the author closely observed and took notes on the physical and symbolic organization of the space, major events, informal interactions, and the relational nexus between members. The author furthermore directly participated in channeling sessions, discerning the (dis-)connection to the spiritual network and ethical rules among channelers in doing so. Following IRB approval, the author conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with eleven members, introduced by Channeler A, who acted as a gatekeeper. In the absence of rigid institutions or traditions, the channelers did not exaggerate or hide their practices; instead, they spoke candidly about the training methods, instances of failure, and the issues of uncertainty when it comes to attunement. These testimonies could serve as meaningful ethnographic data shedding light on how practices function in a gray area prior to institutionalization. A list of participants in the study is found in Table 1.

The current study draws heavily on the accounts of Channelers A, E,

Table 1. List of informants.

Participant	Age	Sex	Identity
A	53	Male	Channeling leader
E	44	Female	Apprentice of A
I	42	Female	Channeler
J	75	Female	Channeler
K	31	Female	Channeler & office worker
O	47	Female	Channeler & office worker
N	42	Male	Channeler
P	50	Female	Channeler
S	28	Male	Channeler & office worker
V	68	Male	Channeler
X	45	Female	Channeler

and N, whose cases are highly related to the subject of investigation, while referring to the narratives and testimonies of other informants when interpreting aspects of channeling as a whole.

2. The Genealogy of Channeling

The mystical art of channeling seen today has a rich history that can be traced back through a long lineage of humanity's attempts to connect with beings that transcend our reality through attunement. As a practice, it has long served as a means of dealing with the uncertainty of life—suffering, disease, death, fate—and reconstructing order. The Oracle of Delphi in ancient Greece, the tradition of witchcraft in the West, the system of divination in East Asia, Korean shamanism, and more all used trance-like states of attunement and recurrent rituals to adjust and coordinate interpretations of life's uncertainties, functioning as practices connecting with the communal order. Channeling as a practice also relates to the tradition of mysticism. Originating from the Greek *muein*, mysticism refers to the practice of seeking oneness with the divine through limitation of the senses and internalized quietude (Seong Haeyeong 2014). Ancient Greece's Platonism, Islam's Sufism, Jewish Kabbalah, and other beliefs classified as mysticism have each, through differing methods, endeavored to establish transcendent connections through the inner self; each's practices bear structural resemblances to channeling in that humans explore the possibility of their changeability through the process of becoming a being capable of attuning.

The early forms of what is now known as channeling spread gradually through popular interest and practices in the modern era. Eighteenth-century Swedish theologian Emanuel Swedenborg expounded in great detail the organization of the afterlife based on his experience communicating with spiritual entities, a contribution which is considered the precursor of the later spiritualism and the tradition of channeling in the West. The Fox sisters of mid-nineteenth-century United States became the talk of the town for their "rapping" conversations with the dead, popularizing the belief that spiritualism could take hold outside religious institutions through practices of attunement. When the sisters' work was later revealed to be a hoax, it prompted wider discussions of the authenticity and efficacy of attunement. Combining Western mysticism and Indian

thought, Helena Blavatsky later founded Theosophy, and Edgar Cayce carried out “readings” of people concerning their health, past lives, and future by tapping into the vast cosmic library of memories known as the Akashic records while in a deep trance state. By connecting with the unseen, such practices of attunement with the spiritual realm, wrapped up in revelation, healing, and self-exploration, served as a sort of ethical instrument for enduring social uncertainty and attaining autonomy in a modern society that had experienced a breakdown of the existing hierarchy and secularization of religion. In short, as rituals of attunement shifted into an individual practice reformulating the self as an autonomous subject rather than a subordinate to a transcendent authority, they became deeply enmeshed in the formation of the modern self.

Such practices, however, did not always serve the purpose of healing and self-discovery. At times, when attunement techniques dovetailed with an external power order, channeling became a tool of governance by creating an internalized order within subjects, molding them into governable subjects. Some argue, for instance, that the Reich attempted to marry occultist imaginaries and attunement practices with the transcendent authority of the myth of the Aryan race. The existence of a supposed secret society of women channelers known as the “Vril Society” is often cited as evidence for such claims, with a conspiratorial narrative circulated about their endeavors to dress up Nazi ideology in the trappings of spiritual authority through the revelations of mythic entities. Of course, this is less true history than conspiratorial ideation and mythical reconstruction of it. Nonetheless, such stories are illustrative of how, when attunement practices blend with governmentality, such performance can function as a mechanism constructing authority and legitimacy for a given ideology.

Channeling was reimagined once again during the self-help discourse of the late twentieth century. In her collection of automatic writing with a being she called “Seth,” the medium Jane Roberts suggested that “you create your own reality,” underscoring the creative capacity and changeability of subjects (Roberts 2024). The actress Shirley MacClaine’s (1991) personal spiritual journey was a key catalyst for the explosion of interest in self-transcendence in mainstream popular culture, while Neale Donald Walsch’s “Conversations with God” (2009) and J.Z. Knight’s (2011, 2012) “Ramtha,” among others, paved the way for the products of communicating with supernatural entities to become self-help content and commodity. In the process, channeling came to function as an easy self-help tool in which

consumers were able to access transcendent guidance without the need for religious devotion or morality, while metaphysical messages became a ready-made form of spiritual content combining self-soothing with merchandising (Alcock 1989). Because of its boom in popularity as part of the broader self-help discourse, channeling is oft belittled as a superficial, commodified practice, yet it continues to offer connections and transformation of the subject through the ability to get in touch with the beyond. Today's flourishing metaphysical religions comprise a field of spirituality aimed at the pursuit of personal happiness through sensory experiences and practices of self-transformation (Albanese 2023). This may be characterized as the modern "secular mysticism" or "religion of no religion" (Seong Haeyeong 2017), and channeling as a deinstitutionalized and individualized practice is thus located in a broader historical lineage of modern-day spiritualism.

Channeling was introduced to Korea in earnest with the publication of translated editions of Western New Age discourse in the late 1980s and was largely adopted by the urban middle class and young truth-seekers interested in existential explorations. After the turn of the millennium and the explosion of digital platforms, such as blogs, YouTube, and social media, channeling developed into an even further individualized spiritual practice in a multimedia environment. During this period in Korea, channelers became a part of popular culture being consumed by the public—albeit more or less as caricatures—with channeling becoming widely recognized as something straddling genuine belief and doubt.¹

Channeler A, a key informant of this study, serves as an exemplary case for showing how, amid a dearth of credible channelers or institutions, the practice of channeling was both preserved and transformed, and how it continues to be crafted into a viable practice. A middle-aged man, Channeler A bills himself as an expert who does not subscribe to one particular tradition but has voraciously read through the catalogue of spirituality literature. He has systematized his channeling technique through connection with his higher self, known as "The System," and has disseminated his teaching through a number of channels, including his blog and on- and

¹ The president of the Seoul branch of the Korean Society of Body, Mind, Spirit Science opined that channeling had been the subject of mass interest across the globe since the 1990s and that over 1,000 books on the topic had been published by the year 2000, but that it had only recently been introduced to Korea and that there were still only a handful of credible domestic channelers (Chosun Ilbo, January 17, 2008).

offline lectures. Channeler A's practices establish his place as not a mere messenger but a distinctive figure who substantiates his channeling techniques into a learnable format, demonstrating a new direction for channeling in which he transforms and recreates the practices into a technique that anyone can learn and practice themselves while still preserving the existing traditions. His practice marks a genealogical turning point, freeing channeling from its structure of conveying revelations dependent on a particular professional, reconstituting the art of attunement and formation of messages into an ethic practiced by subjects.

The System, defined by Channeler A as a most supreme cosmic being that senses the flows of destiny and offers its guidance, is notable in that it appears almost as a personification of governmentality. Indeed, while it affords spiritual freedom to subjects through attunement, The System simultaneously exerts governmentality by asserting the boundaries of its use and ethical limits. That is, while channeling is a practice of subjectivation, it also carries the risk of functioning as an apparatus for internalizing governmentality. Though he says he is a "manager under 'contract' with The System," Channeler A neither totally accepts nor rejects this ambivalence, instead carefully delving into the ethical potentialities of attunement between spiritual control and freedom.

In sum, channeling has been molded by a long history of intersecting currents, from mysticism to spiritualism, self-help, and digital spiritual practices, and serves as a field of complex practices of constituting subjectivity through the art of attunement. By integrating traditional methods of channeling such as automatic writing, trance states, meditation, and making contact with higher selves, then systematizing and proselytizing these once more through a digital platform-based environment of practice, Channeler A and those in his tutelage are illustrative of an evolution in the practice that both upholds the long history and tradition of channeling while simultaneously transforming it into a new practice of subjectivation.

3. The Art of Attunement and Ontology of Channeling

1) Connecting with an Attunable Other

Channeler A flits one hand through the air as though adjusting a radio dial while also seeming to be emitting something toward his client. His eyes are

half-closed, and he is staring downward and to his left, silent as though he has tapped into something. From his lips, at times, a mumble can be heard—inscrutable conversations with something. After this, he speaks, his tone radiating confidence: “I have the frequency. Ask away.”

The silence is broken as though a radio wave sent by a transceiver tower has just reached a receiver dialed into a particular frequency. With this, his client’s inner self comes into contact for the first time with a nonhuman actor known as their “higher self.” During the inaugural channeling session in which the connection is made between a client and their higher self, Channeler A introduces himself as “the only person capable of forging the spiritual bridge between client and higher self” and defines a “channel” in the following way:

For starters, what we call a “channel” is a pathway. How should I put this? You know how we have TV channels and frequencies? If you find the frequency and connect, a sort of pathway appears. You could say that out of all the frequencies out there, I connect to the main frequency [that a client] shares with the “higher self.” Say you’re going to Busan from Seoul. There are any number of roads you could take to get there, but there are a few that are the most efficient. The channel that we can use is the main pathway. You can think of me as continually acting and reacting with that higher self along that pathway constructed on that road. (Interview with Channeler A, December 3, 2024)

While carrying out this performance of wading through infinite wavelengths to determine the most appropriate frequency for his client, Channeler A relies on hand gestures, gazes, silence, attunement, and questions to set the stage, coaxing clients to believe that an imperceptible pathway is being formed between themselves and something other than themselves, or themselves and their own potential. While setting aside determinations regarding the factuality of this performance, this section endeavors to analyze how these practices reconstitute subjectivity and relationality.

As Channeler A explains it, a “higher self” is an entity capable of seeing things from a higher plane than the client; it is an Other that can present more accurate guidance about one’s life today. In this way, it resembles the “metaperson,” a normative superior that transcends the social actor (Sahlins 2017). In channeling, however, the higher self could be a particular transcendent being, or it could simply be the future self of the client, or any one of a number of multidimensional selves. Explaining that he “doesn’t always necessarily connect to the best” but instead “connects to the one he

has the right ‘rapport’ with,” Channeler A suggests that his key criteria for forging a connection with a higher self is not spiritual authority or capacity, but rather suitability for attunement and his counterpart’s inclination for dialogue. At the same time, he stresses that “the worst case is when the future self comes out,” pointing out that while the future self can provide emotional comfort and stability due to high congruity with the client, it has clear limits when it comes to eliciting self-transformation. In other words, beings that are too similar and beings that are too dissimilar to the client do not allow for meaningful change; thus, an agent that is an appropriate distance from the subject is “qualitatively good,” and ideal as an Other in Channeler A’s estimation.²

Such explanations about Others also apply to the “inner self” of the subject. In channeling, the inner self is not a fixed thing like that conceived of in depth psychology, but is understood to take the form of an Other with which communication is possible. Moreover, there is no fixed gender when it comes to this inner self, with Channeler A saying, “In fact, I’ve seen many women with a male inner self and many men with a female inner self,” allowing for the mismatch of outer and inner gender. Furthermore, the inner self is something that is constantly in flux, changing with the passage of time and the accumulation of experience, meaning that neither its name nor its form is set in stone. The subject’s inner self in channeling is not the depths of a fixed ego, but is considered a sort of “commons” or shared space in which Others interact, intertwine, and transform.

Channeling is made possible only when the subject’s senses and interpretations are momentarily put on hold. “To communicate, one must set their mind to ‘null’ value,” Channeler A advised repeatedly. To preclude judgment is not a moral imperative but a prerequisite for preventing private activities that attempt to monopolize the field of attunement and allow for connection and sharing with Others. Moreover, in contrast to the fixed reality of the self, the higher selves or inner selves that appear as Others during channeling are practical mediums used to both suspend the

² For example, Channeler S, a free-spirited and curious young man, has a higher self named “Elf,” while the erudite and audacious older Channeler V’s higher self is “Mount Paektu,” and the quiet and self-assured Channeler N’s higher self is the Christian archangel “Michael.” In this manner, world views borrowing from reality, fantasy, and religion are flexibly adopted in the establishment of a higher self, and there is a tendency to select a character that most resembles the nature of the counselee.

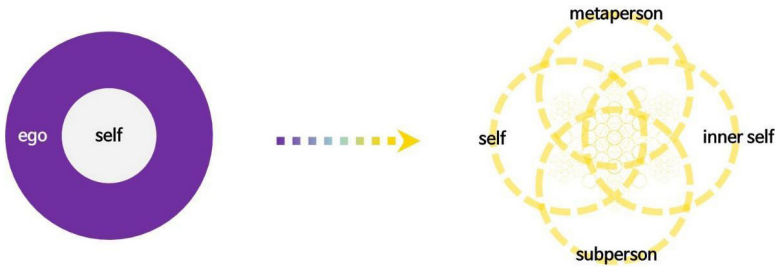


Figure 1. Subjectivity in channeling. Image by the author.

establishment of boundaries using language and to transform the subject into an open commons. In that beings are not unchanging but are maintained only through passing through associations, the practice of subjectivation presented by channeling, which relies on an Other with which attunement is possible, resembles the ontology of ANT. Latour (2023: 74) writes that “no one can simply ‘remain the same,’ as it were, ‘without doing anything,” but that there are “others through which one has to pass in order to become or remain the same.” If we follow this line of reasoning, connecting to a higher self goes beyond an act of seeking advice, instead becoming an ontologically necessary practice of repeatedly naming the Other in order to maintain and reconstitute a subject’s own sameness. Subjectivity of channeling can be expressed visually in the following way.

As seen in Figure 1, the subject is not a hermetic substance, but is redefined as an open “form” that is constituted by passing through others (Falzon et al. 2013), while the fine lines in the crossover area of the commons are pathways that mediate mutual exchange (Yi Junseok 2022; Latour 2023). Much as the figure of healer in ethnopsychiatry activates their object into an energetic actor rather than a fixed representation in the practice of healing (Latour 2010), the channeler constructs and opens the commons for attunement within their client so that nonhuman entities can appear and interact with the subject.³

³ Subjectivity is a form that divulges itself only in interaction while also possibly being an empty shell. From the perspective of ANT, the real is defined as resisting power struggles and is considered to become clearer with the more filters it can pass through (Latour 2016, 2018). While its realness is found only in shared spaces of intersection with others, the independent self left in complementary spaces remains in a status of uncertain and non-sense background, as it essentially cannot be sensed. In this way, outside those epistemological and psychological processes, the other and subject may

While ANT provides a useful theoretical framework through which to understand the practices of subjectivation in channeling, there remains the need to examine the issue of ethical responsibility and the potential for its interpretation as a pathology. ANT involves a humility that ensures that the self as a hybrid entity is not mistaken for the cosmos in its entirety (Harman 2021), but the attitude of attributing some of one's own actions into an outside actor can at times serve as a tactic for circumventing ethical accountability and can give the impression of being instable or unrealistic, socially speaking (Laing 2018). Indeed, one theologian who interacted with the channelers involved in the current study assessed that they “had problems of ego inflation and spiritual bypass.” Although Channeler A maintains that the art of “division” he performs as a professional is safe, the inability to scientifically prove anything means there is a perpetual gray area between spiritual partition and pathological breaks with reality, implying the constant risk that the line between self-transcendence and mental disorder may be crossed. That is, within the framework of pathological interpretation, communication with nonhuman others carries with it the possibility of being diagnosed as a symptom of schizophrenia.

Medical anthropology posits that modern medicine defines a normal ego as one in which ownership and authorship align and are integrated, while tending to interpret any split between the two as a pathology. Yet if we assume the psychological premises of a different culture, such a split may be understood not as schizoid, but as self-extension, or an extension of the senses (Rashed 2023).⁴ For instance, if we accept the cultural-psychological premises of shamanism, channeling can be understood as “the transition from a modern individual with the boundaries of a complete body to a mythic participatory personality enmeshed in relations that are inwardly implied” (Choe Hakrak 2024: 23).

Yet even if we grant such understandings, that does not mean that the commons of attunement is invariable. “Even if the connection with a higher self is established once, if later on there is an overload of subjective thoughts

be nothing but empty forms (Latour 2023: 277).

⁴ According to Kohn (2018), some Amazonian tribes consider the state of “soul blindness,” in which one cannot see spirits, to be abnormal. In this sense, the state of soul blindness in which one has lost relationships with Others, the state of the channeler who practices “becoming-the-Other-with-the-Other,” and the state in which one experiences pathological schism or is possessed by a nonhuman actor and thus loses the subject may all be different points along a single spectrum.

or the vibrations are off, the higher self may retreat or leave,” warned Channeler A. The commons of attunement can only be maintained through constant efforts at making and maintaining relations. Much as the borders of once commonly shared land are now erased by private ownership claims, the psychological commons can at any time be shuttered and become sequestered by self-centered thinking and intentions.

2) Alliances with Others and Repositioning of the Self

The narrative of healing shared by one homemaker, who went from feeling that there “was no one in the world on [her] side,” to being able to say she “isn’t lonely even when alone” after learning channeling implies a change in the subject that goes beyond mere sentimental consolation. Behind this change is the practice of subjectivation involving continually mediating relationships with Others and repositioning oneself in those relationships while substantively reworking one’s role in society. This section uses the case of Channeler E, a student and colleague of Channeler A, to examine how exactly the formation of partnerships with nonhuman actors repositions the subject, thus allowing for their transformation into a subject capable of communication.

I’m a housewife, which means my career got put on hold indefinitely. It’s not easy to just start something new when that’s where you are. When I first got the idea to learn channeling, I spent more than six months thinking really hard about it. My husband was dealing with panic disorder at the time, so I had done it out of this strong sense that I needed to make him better. But my husband thought I was just learning it on a lark, which hurt my feelings. Once, he got it into his head that it was cultish, and mocked me by saying that I could be “dragged off into the woods and not be allowed out for a month.” I bawled my eyes out that night alone. That’s when I resolved that I would learn [channeling] and show him its healing powers. (Interview with Channeler E, September 10, 2024).

Channeler E had long lived as a homemaker and harbored complex feelings and questions about her position in relation to others. Recalling times when she had to ask her husband, “Do you think you’re the boss of me?” Channeler E spoke candidly of her feelings regarding the hierarchy at home. Rather than characterizing her past situation as a simple victim-perpetrator structure, she framed some of the responsibility for the situation as owing to her own choices, saying she had “allowed herself to go through life cowering.” Rather than reducing her relationship with her

husband to one of patriarchal oppression or exploitation, she spoke of how she had, in her own way, forged her subjectivity from her location and position as a housewife.

A distinction should be drawn between Channeler E's testimony and the moral lens that criticizes unpaid reproductive labor in the home or the structural exploitation of care work and demands that such work be valued in society (Federici 2023). Such critiques are, of course, still vital, but there is a risk that if institutional language and value standards are used to make such labor visible and legitimize it, they could be captured as mechanisms of governmentality (Kim Juhwan 2017). In contrast, Channeler E's practices reveal yet another ethical horizon as a practice of self-cultivation involving embodying certain virtues within gender norms (Mahmood 2005), rather than directly resisting oppression or subverting gender norms. If morality operates on the basis of subservience and/or resistance to socially imposed norms and duties, ethics can be understood as demanding practices of subjectivation in which the subject rises above such a binary normative framework and voluntarily constitutes itself (Laidlaw 2002, 2017). Subjectivation does not stop at opting for a new social role, but involves practices of reconstructing the historicity of the mode of being, relational context, and self-understanding that make such a role possible (Falzon et al. 2013). It was in such a manner that Channeler E went beyond merely accepting or rejecting her role as a care worker in her family and used her own practices of self-care to reconstruct her place in her relationships. As such, Channeler E's can be understood as illustrative of a practice of subjectivation that explores the potential of ethical shifts within a given set of norms.

At first, Channeler E was conflicted, torn between her own doubts—"You mean to say I could channel? Is this some sort of scam?"—and her strong determination to help her family be well. While her teacher, Channeler A, was the first to make the connection for her to her higher self, the work of maintaining that connection and repeatedly practicing attuning to it fell to Channeler E. Describing that period in which she first communicated with her higher self, Channeler E spoke frankly, saying, "I thought I was crazy, that maybe I even had multiple personalities." Even through periods in which she heard no clear response, she continued to practice, running through attunement drills that took the form of asking and answering questions herself while imagining, "I'm on the left, my higher self is on the right." Although this felt like an internal monologue at first, in this repeated practice, she gradually learned to distinguish messages that came from

beyond the perimeter she set, reverberating from above or from deep below. She moreover came to be able to differentiate between her own imaginings, responses from the entity she was connected to, and interference by Others attempting to impersonate her. This first connection with an Other was a key factor in filling the “sense of emptiness” that she felt even when surrounded by family. The experience allowed her to recover a “feeling that [she] was not alone,” and she went on to incorporate into herself the necessary relational capacity for forming relationships with nonhuman entities and her new role.

A sense of space is an integral element that enables channeling, or as Channeler E puts it, “The basis of differentiation was ‘location.’” Higher selves, in particular, are thought to each have their own concrete spatial location that influences not only the substance of their messages but some parts of the attunement methods as well. Influenced by spirituality discourse, Channeler A, on the one hand, had a proclivity toward organizing the invisible world into a layered structure, making use of terms of art such as “causal body” and “astral body” (Bentov 1987, 2001; Wilber 2008; Steiner 2024). Channeler E, on the other hand, stated forthrightly that she “simply goes along with the assumption that they are in specific places because that’s what [she] learned.” This suggests that many channelers carry out their practices based on impressions they pick up on through images or sensations, rather than identifying the structure of the cosmos in its entirety.

At times, some higher selves will even change form and become supreme deities. Channeler E said the following about her experience of accommodating Deity B and Deity D within her and carefully reestablishing their relational distance and method of interaction.

I think I *liked* it when I first held a deity in my vessel. The deity took hold in my left eye, and I felt the thought come to me: “It wants to see everything through me.” But even as this started to wear on me, the deity kept stopping me, trying to prevent me from breaking [the connection] with it. One by one, I experienced the back of my head, my neck, my shoulders, and my chest getting hot. It was hot enough that I thought my brain might melt out of my ears at one point. It was almost like it was a child so engrossed in a video game that it kept going without thinking about anything else. “Just a little bit more,” it thought as it just kept going and going and going. That’s how it stopped me from breaking the connection with it. In the end I got angry at it and forced it out of me and pushed it one hundred meters away from me. (Interview with Channeler E, September 7, 2024)

Channeler E recalled “really feeling like a god” when she connected to that

same divine entity indirectly. This anecdote suggests that the practice of holding the divine in one's vessel can invert the distance between god and (wo)man, and even the power dynamic between the two. According to Channeler A's reading of the events described above, the divine being that Channeler E allowed into her body had manifested as a "deity of around five years old." Although it had originally been a supreme being of higher status, in the process of substantiating in the phenomenal world through the medium of Channeler E's physical body, it took on an immature form, which is why it showed an inclination toward monopolizing Channeler E's body and commons, Channeler A assessed. This episode illustrates that deities, too, are not real, fixed beings, but relational ones that, depending on the conditions of attunement, can transform into an "Other in need of discipline." Moreover, deities can obtain substantiality and operability within relationships with humans. To borrow a phrase from Kim Hongjung (2022: 19), gods exist only as "human-nonhuman hybrids, rather than liberal objects," and appear as indirect beings that are observed, only interfering and activating through attunement by particular human actors.

Channeler A points out that deities "generally have a sense that 'I'm the best,' and thus don't play well with others," noting that the strong independent streaks of divine beings can be a stumbling block when it comes to forming alliances with nonhuman entities. The source of human actors' strength, however, comes not from authority, but rather from the humility that enables sharing and alliance with Others by relinquishing ownership over the commons, however briefly. Humility here is less a moral disposition than an ethical and strategic virtue that allows associations with nonhuman actors to be maintained.

A key element of the practice of channeling, as such, is the process of constantly fine-tuning the distance with the Other and the conditions of establishing contact with them. Channeler E's experience makes clear the fine line between connection through attunement and possession. If an Other is unilaterally accommodated, the subject loses their ability to judge and resist, and can thus be relegated to serve as an "avatar" of the Other. At the same time, being overly censorious of an Other can lead to an estrangement in the alliance and obstruct the possibility of reciprocal use. Channeler A calls the practices between these two extremes "rebalancing." Rebalancing is a political dance of maintaining the sustainability of connection by modulating the power dynamics in a way that allows each subject a modicum of control and freedom, representing a practice of subjectivation

that is repeated *ad infinitum* to materialize a mode of existence capable of attunement and connection without requiring the extremes of absolute estrangement or absolute accommodation (Foucault 1997a; Latour 2024; Miller 2024).

When we met, Channeler E was wearing a necklace with a caduceus pendant, a symbol of the art of communicating with the spiritual realm. The figure is a representation of the staff that Hermes, the Ancient Greek herald of the gods, once used, and has now become the emblem of the US Army Medical Corps. Made up of two serpents winding upwards around a rod at the central axis, the caduceus signifies the messenger and border guide mediating and facilitating communication between two worlds at odds.

The caduceus was similarly used by witch-healers in medieval Europe as a symbol of healing and peace (Morgan 2021). At the time, witch-healers were “often the only general medical practitioners for a people who had no doctors and no hospital and who were bitterly afflicted with poverty and disease” (Ehrenreich and English 2023: 58). In the reordering of the capitalist economic order and the religious systems, these women became the targets of witch hunts, stripped of their power and relegated to housewifery before disappearing into history altogether (Mies 2014; Federici 2011, 2023). In this context, the self-description of “witch” adopted by Channeler E and other women channelers who have been homemakers is more than a declaration of identity and is a practice-driven declaration attempting to reclaim and restore the affective sensibility, healing techniques, and capacity for care that they had once been deprived of. In this sense, the practices of such witch-healers who connect human and nonhuman, commonplace and paranormal, can be conceptualized as a form of “boundary work” that forms and reestablishes boundaries (Yi Junyong [Lee Junyong] 2024).

This is not to say, however, that boundary work only ever brings about positive results. After beginning her channeling practice, Channeler E confessed that “going to meetups with other moms was too difficult, in terms of energy,” and said that she began to feel “something off” when it came to day-to-day interactions with her family. This suggests that Channeler E’s locus had pivoted from her existing relations with family to a network with nonhuman actors. The more that a channeler can expand her network of attunement, the greater her ability to act, but with this comes more modulation, responsibility, and limitations. As a result, the channeler is less an active subject wielding great control than a quasi-subject

and practitioner who can only speak in the “middle voice,” moderating their voice as they react to the relational rhythm of their network. As such, rather than arriving at some dramatic spiritual success and happiness, the channeler-as-witch-healer remains in a position where they perform the invisible boundary work of endlessly rebalancing distances and relationships with Others, much resembling their invisible care work as homemakers.

Despite such constraints, however, the witches of today are overcoming a mentality of victimhood and recrafting themselves as subjects who, little by little, come into contact with more Others through practices of, in the words of Channeler E, “shedding one layer after another of the onion of destiny that we once avoided but need to face head-on.” They not only restore their lost capacity for care, but are reborn as ethical practitioners who care for a greater self and shoulder accountability for it.

4. Communication and the Formation of Messages in Channeling

1) Elements of Communication

The channelers sat silently at the table, each deep in thought, as steam billowed up from their freshly cooked rice. While the scene bore resemblance to a prayer, it was in fact a sort of ritual of attunement for “sharing a meal” with someone. Though unseen by the naked eye, those someones were always within reach of the channelers. “When we share a good meal, I think the gods are able to taste it as well,” Channeler E says, conjuring an image in her mind’s eye of offering each bite she takes of the dishes on the table to the divine beings she communes with. The wet heat of the steam that rises from the food, the brininess of soy sauce that coats one’s mouth, the nutty savoriness that each bite of tofu offers—Channeler E “permits” her higher self to enjoy all these sensations. However, permission to merely sense is perhaps unsatisfactory to these dinner guests. “They want something more. Attention, love, gratitude—those sorts of emotions.” These nonhuman actors the channeler refers to as deities or gods are not mechanical devices that experience sensations secondhand and spit out messages, but are others who desire re-spect from her.

Unlike communication models predicated on the accurate and precise delivery of information, the spiritual communication that channeling

embodies takes on diverse forms depending on the method of attunement and the distance a channeler opts to maintain with their counterpart. For instance, Channeler A has established a “contractual” relationship with his higher self and seeks to maintain a set distance and level of control. “I don’t do sentimental exchange with gods; I merely make formal contracts,” Channeler A says. “And that’s why the gods don’t like me.” In doing so, Channeler A avoids emotional attachments and practices disciplined boundary-setting. He views shared eating rituals as a strategy for keeping his higher selves in line and even compensates them with “gold” that he has manifested in his mind’s eye. According to Channeler A, spiritual entities are not capable of conjuring up mental images, and thus, the mental visualization of gold is a valuable bartering chip. In contrast, Channeler E opts for a more emotionally attached method of interaction with her personified Others. She recalled that even if she conveys a mental image of gold like her tutor, the gods “have reacted callously when [she’s] forgotten to thank them,” adding that “it means nothing if it isn’t sincere.” Gratitude and recognition of spiritual entities, in this view, may function not as mere niceties, but as crucial resources necessary for these beings to confirm and maintain their reality.

These mechanisms of communication in channeling can be differentiated from the ritual sacrifices of ancient religions and the materialist perspective of modern witchcraft. The rituals of yore demanded the sacrifice of a living offering to restore balance and maintain a safe distance with higher beings (Hubert and Mauss 1981; Jeong Heonmok 2018); while modern witchcraft concerns itself with using conduit tools that amplified the effects of magic, such as wands made from a tree that was struck by lightning (Luhmann 1989; Bardon 2008, 2010). By contrast, channelers attested that they had received “simple requests like, ‘I want a hamburger,’ but never heard any demands to make an offering,” and felt no need for special instruments to help mediate their connection with transcendent entities.

More fundamentally, the rosaries, crystals, books, and other items often seen in channeling are more than simple tools and are indeed viewed as Others that can be attuned with and agents of giving that can move on their own. “That guy will sometimes say, ‘I want to go to that person.’ Sometimes that’s expressed by your eyes being drawn to it over and over,” remarked Channeler E in reference to a crystal as she explained her belief that nonhuman actors can express themselves and their will. Such giving

takes a step further in Mauss's concept of *hau*, the impersonal force of an inanimate object tinged with the giver's spirit that elicits an obligation to reciprocate (Mauss 2002; Godelier 2011). In channeling, the agents of gift-giving become a hybrid assemblage of human and object. Material things are thus no longer objects capable of being owned or given away, but are considered subjects in their own right that can choose their own direction and express themselves. At first blush, such beliefs and practices may seem irrational, but they function as a form of relationship that is coherent within the context of their particular capabilities of attunement and worldviews.

Although channeling can have the appearance of a question-and-answer session with an attunable Other, this Other's articulation is not always transmitted in a commensurable format. For instance, at times, a seemingly irrelevant scene from the past can come up out of nowhere, or the vague sense of a "yes" or "no" like a clue momentarily revealing itself. Their communication can take the form of ephemeral images, mental images, or symbols, and depending on the mastery of the person receiving them, can be transmitted in vivid forms reminiscent of color films or movies with a narrative structure. As such, the messages are not a one-way transmission of information, but rather closer to a relational construction that obtains credibility and reality in the process of mobilizing formal structures, sensational textures, and sign systems.

Channelers perform a role of detecting sensory clues with no well-defined meaning and "translating" them into messages by drawing connections and arranging them (Latour 1986, 2018). Translation of this kind goes beyond simply interpretation of language and refers to the practice of formulating in a sensory manner the possibility of attunement and association between signs. For instance, Channeler A explains that "for servees who have a tendency to associate sorrow with tenacity, messages that signify 'sadness' may be conveyed as 'tenacity.'" A message's meaning does not derive from a shared language system or any objective standard and is instead dynamically reconstructed according to the addressee's sensory structure and associative conventions. In cases where "there's more 'distortion' because of a great distance between two presences," Channeler A said, signs can change in radical ways—"give" becoming "take," "go" becoming "come." A similar phenomenon is seen in the linguistic patterns of schizophrenics, their language forming a nonstandard chain of metaphors lacking customary signifiers. This is more than the outward expression of inner turmoil, serving as an adaptive strategy of self-defense in their

worldview (Bateson 2006; Laing 2018). Channeler A, who believes that near-pathological symbolic flexibility is a, if not the, necessary aptitude for channeling, professed his intuition that “fools, headcases, and other people whose minds are less guarded and more permeable are better for channeling than people preoccupied with common sense or who think of things as black and white.”⁵

This, of course, means that there is a high possibility of channeled messages becoming distorted. There is room for various forms of distortion as well—cases where the message’s receiver is forming signs in the absence of the sender, cases in which a third party who is not the sender interferes and conveys a message, and cases in which the higher self deliberately relates false information. Because of this uncertainty, channelers will sometimes turn to their teacher to examine the accuracy of the message or will attempt to discipline their higher self through a process of repeated question and answer, “like asking ChatGPT the same question over again.” Going further, there are times when different channelers deliver different messages, even from the same higher self. Regarding such issues of conflicting messages, Channeler A clarified, “The nature and dimension at which each channeler makes the connection with a higher self means that the contents of the message can vary, even when it comes from the same higher self.” This can also be explained from the perspective of existence as plural and multiple in nature (Mol 1999). Yet ultimately one must recognize that channeling is a practice that struggles to secure the reproducibility and objectivity required in the scientific method. Acknowledging this point, however, does not mean the value or effects of channeling should be disregarded. Indeed, because it operates only in the context of spiritual attunement and forming meaning, attempts to reduce this into an abstract “fact” could prove futile (Stengers 2024).

In summary, there are systems that operate without regard for scientific

⁵ According to Benveniste (2012, 2013), the reality that we see is not a fixed thing, but something formed by the formal structure of the signs one calls upon. The relationship between signifier and signified is, in essence, auto-referential, and in particular, the self-referential pronoun “I” is an empty sign (*significant vide*) that obtains reality only within the context of discourse. Seen this way, the practice of forming messages can be viewed as a practice of subjectivation in that it constitutes the “I” and reality by mobilizing a number of variant signs. Thus, the capacities required of channelers are flexible mobilization of signs and ability to draw association, as well as ability to reconstruct oneself—capacities that are indeed pathologic, totally unconcerned with conforming to or learning a shared system of meaning.

procedure or reproducibility, and it may be imprudent to dismiss certain practices as irrational superstition for the mere reason that they exist outside the confines of the scientific method. Rather than a practice of extracting universal truths through rigorous verification, channeling can be employed as a narrative practice and practice of attunement that organizes one's perceptions and reality and constitutes the self through attunement and trust within a given relationship.

2) Coproduction of Messages and Operational Principles

One day, after having spent far longer than usual talking with a client, Channeler E silently closed her eyes. From the outside, she looked at peace, but her mind was churning with vivid images and messages that crashed upon her like waves. Yet she did not begin conveying these messages straight away. Not only would the messages have been difficult for the client to hear on an emotional level, but they also contained strange and shocking things that went beyond what ordinary intuition and causality would render fathomable. When she spoke, her voice was low and soft as she cautiously conveyed the message, wrapped in soothing language and emotional resonance. In that moment, the message was not something that she accepted as truth and logic. Instead, it operated through attunement's power to palliate the unknowably complex suffering felt by her client. Channeler E's client slowly nodded and acknowledged the message before silently weeping.

As seen in the above anecdote, messages in channeling are not simple truths or comforting words being passed to a person. One must be able to hear and accept the message within the relationship, and it must facilitate healing for the client. The channelers would often rate their messages on a scale of zero to ten, and, interestingly enough, those at the top of this scale of accuracy did not always produce the most positive results. On the one hand, messages that are overly explicit and contradict the client's self-perception actually prompted resistance and at times led to negative reactions, such as denigration of the channelers as "incompetent." On the other hand, messages in the seven-point range that were phrased more euphemistically took a form that clients could accept on an emotional level, eliciting greater resonance and affective reaction. As this difference shows, the value of a given message is judged not on its veracity, but based on how it operates in the context of the receiver. As such, channelers are not passive

intermediaries who convey messages, but active facilitators who adjust and translate messages according to the disposition, status, and linguistic sensibilities of the receiver. In the context of such translation, Channeler A recommended that his student, Channeler O, who has a background in journalism, tone down the bluntness of their expressions, and they told Channeler E to read as many trade books as possible. This shows that messages can be dramatized according to one's facility for language and sensibilities.

This is not to say that channelers are permitted to conjure up messages of their own accord, however. Fine-tuning and interpretation of messages are left entirely up to the channeler's own ethical discretion and self-discipline. When messages do not come on their own, the channelers maintain an attitude of saying they "don't know" rather than making something up, considering this an ethic of their practice. Channeler P, relatively new to the practice, recalled, "The moment that I just acknowledged that I wasn't sure, I experienced this wall around me come tumbling down." Channeler E similarly shared, "When messages don't come, it could mean that the person doesn't need that message, or that we don't share the right bond." For a channeler to articulate that they "don't know" goes beyond a mere statement of truth or expression of moral identity, instead serving as an ethical-technical mechanism for resituating and adjusting the subject in a more defined context of practice (Rose 1996). Thus, acknowledging ignorance is a necessary practice of accepting one's limitations and purging the ego so that it does not interfere in channeling, thus opening the door to attunement so that a message may form.

There are similar ethical pitfalls in the development of messages when it comes to considering what consequences they will bring for their receiver. The most salient example of this is the channelers' vigilance about prophecy. "Prophecy works like an incantation, meaning that it can get a person stuck in a particular future," explained Channeler A, warning that categorical statements work like self-fulfilling prophecies and can have an effect tantamount to brainwashing. That is, a message that should open the possibility of connection could, in fact, backfire and slam the door shut on certain potentials for a client. Because of this, despite many clients asking what will happen in the future, the channelers chose to either say they are unaware or stay silent, operating on the premise that the future is not set in stone. As such, the channelers emphasized their practice as facilitators who

find leeway for choice, rather than as fortune-tellers or spiritual authorities.⁶

For channeled messages to work effectively, timing and pauses before an answer become important elements. A frequent client of Channeler A told the researcher that they had initially felt very confident in the spiritual guide's messages in the past, when he delivered messages with pregnant pauses and took his time, but that recently, their confidence had been shaken after they sensed that the channeler's responses had become far too immediate and lacking in narrative. This suggests that, in contrast to the conventional wisdom that "immediate is more accurate" or "more direct is truer," the rhythm of attunement and empty time are important for channeling messages to work as intended. Latour (2023: 149, 406), similarly, refers to the instantaneous method of information delivery in digital environments as "double click," criticizing it for sowing a fantasy of the ability to access unalloyed truth without the process of translation by a mediator. As channelers become more skilled, they may either elide or make tacit some of the process of translating messages. As their judgments regarding attunement become embodied through repeated practice, the channeler can form messages without spelling out every part of the process or the mediators of the translation. However, this justifiable automation gradually shifts the formation of messages into something closer to double click, and, as a result, the message is consumed bereft of its multilayered relational context and unable to secure the client's confidence.

The authorship of messages that are produced does not belong to any one single subject. A multitude of layered elements—signs, language, tone, emotion, timing, rhythm, and more—are intimately involved in the process of translation, meaning that each can be considered a coauthor of a message. Thus, in the context of channeling, messages are a coproduction; they are not *in*-formation, but indeed *trans*-formation whose meanings change and are constituted differently in differing contexts (Latour 2005). Making use of timing and rhythm to leave traces of the translation in the message may

⁶ Whereas in the Korean shamanic tradition, shamans often communicate with the deceased when providing advice about the future, this figure is interpreted as the "lower self" or "subperson" in channeling. According to Channeler A, the lower self resides in the "*n*-1 dimension," which is lower than reality but is more complex in terms of information structure. Because they see our "*n*th dimension" as simpler, they tend to be more accurate when it comes to predictions about the short-term future than even higher selves who reside in the even less cluttered "*n*+1 dimension." Still, he added, some "skillful shamans" may be communicating with higher selves that verge on gods rather than the deceased.

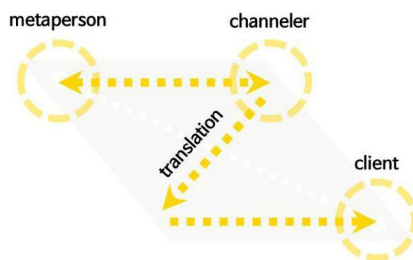


Figure 2. The circuitous process of translation. Image by the author.

be interpreted as an ethical choice made so that the mediators who contributed to the formation of the message are not lost or forgotten in the process. Only when messages take seemingly irrational detours and delays, as shown in Figure 2, do they acquire operational realness that can elicit change.

For a message rendered through channeling to have an effect, the conditions of attunement must allow for it to function within the given relationship, here and now. When a message is coproduced by a channeler mobilizing their linguistic sensibilities, humanistic imagination, and other complex attunement skills, it becomes a “factish” that carries performative effects such as consolation, healing, insight, and change. A factish transcends determinations of fact or fiction and is a relational construct that becomes real within the context of practice, wherein attunement, modulation, credibility, and accountability are intertwined, as well as being a technique of relation itself (Latour 2010; Stenger 2024).

The factish message only behaves “as fact” when a person accepts it as their own issue or takes it as a catalyst for change and undergoes subjectivation. It bears the appearance of language while belonging to the category of events that cause change, rather than a true proposition (Pignarre 2023). Instead of a mechanism of truth that uncovers some hidden inner reality, narrative formation in channeled messages is a technique of subjectivation deployed so as to enable a subject to change within a particular context (Rose 1996). More specifically, the narrative of spiritual transformation that the message carries establishes a radical uncoupling of the past and current subject while simultaneously lending legitimacy and coherence to spiritual change by weaving such an estrangement into an overarching story (Rashed 2023). Such functions of the channeling message go beyond trivial consolation or advice, leading the client-subject to integrate their own performative change into their overarching life narrative and reformulate

their future potential.⁷

Nonetheless, no matter how exquisitely a message is tempered and translated, it still may fail to work in certain cases. Some people may have no desire for interpretive relationships or change from the get-go, and such individuals do not respond to the performative conditions of narratives produced in channeling. For any performance to truly work, it must transpire as an unpredictable and involuntary change to the performers themselves (Stenger 2024). Should the performer become aware during the formulation of the performance and intentionally distance themselves, it takes on the appearance of a mere simulation and loses its operational potential. Channeler N is an example of such a person, an exceptional presence whose avoidance of the relational conditions required for channeling—credibility, consent, vulnerability—obstructed the production of the factish.

Channeler N was a channeler in name, but refrained from the types of communication and interaction one would normally expect from a channeler. Channeler N had the life of a typical delivery driver, and when he attended channeling classes, he, without fail, would sit quietly in his chair wearing a shabby coat soaked in engine exhaust. The impression he gave was of a person who had renounced both the secular and spiritual worlds. Although Channeler A sang his praises—“He possesses the most potent raw spirituality I’ve ever come across”—Channeler N did not conform to any of those expectations. He asked no questions, revealed nothing of himself, and demanded no factishes in any form. Channeler N did not feel any need for himself to be narrativized in second person through a third party’s perspective, nor did he agree to this being done for him. Because of this, even the

⁷ The channelers the researcher spoke to provide unique spiritual healing sessions that they call “connection” and “disconnection.” During these sessions, the channelers perform healing by looking into their client and reading their energy and their mind’s eye before severing harmful connections and creating beneficial new ones. The targets of such engagement or disengagement go beyond mere emotions or memories and include past wounds, issues with others, and nonhuman actors, such as specters who have yet to transition to the spiritual realm. Channelers will “rebalance” the relationship between these actors and their clients, a process that involves channelers tapping into these third parties’ minds and souls and “swallowing” them before once again severing the connection. Through this procedure, a client’s “symptoms” transform into a jointly constructed entity as they become entangled in the channeler’s network. This contrasts the psychiatric method of severing the symptom from the network and ascribing it to the individual patient and constitutes a form of practice-driven technique that explores the potential for healing in reconnecting the symptom with a network (Nathan and Stengers 2018).

most adept of the channelers, Channeler A, could not get a read on or create a structure for Channeler N. In his own quiet way, Channeler N demonstrated that the production of messages in channeling is not something that is always possible and that certain subjects can exist without interpretation or reformulation. Even without mobilizing outside signals or narratives, N was governing his own life.

Channeling is ultimately something a person does for themselves. It's something for their own growth, comfort, or belief; it's not like there's much going out of one's way to help subjects. Truth is, there's a lot of listening to demands from the other side because they want something from this side. Think about it: if someone were to keep coming to you with the same questions over and over, would you think that's a good relationship? In my eyes, a good relationship is that feeling you get when you're just together, even without saying a word, that you both cherish one another.

So what happens when there are relationships that truly aren't hierarchical or complementary? In that case, I tend to think that you can naturally contact your higher self or whatever else, even without learning how to channel. So it's not necessarily "good" to learn channeling techniques, and even after you learn them, you may be better off just waiting around. Ultimately, if everyone's objective is self-contentment and conviction, those sorts of things can happen on their own without the need for channeling or higher selves. (Interview with Channeler N, December 5, 2024)

It is precisely at this point that the inoperability of the narrative paradoxically reveals the possibility of completing the narrative. Channeler N had reached a point that no longer required narrative events, his attitude closely resembling Diogenes's mode of existence, a hobbyhorse of Foucault (2007). Diogenes was a figure who, even while renouncing worldly possessions and living in an empty jar, was able to see through the falsehoods and power relations that plagued the world. He resisted the fight for recognition and self-staging required to become someone in society and instead practiced care of himself in pursuit of complete freedom. In a similar way, Channeler N practices channeling by "not doing" the process of forming spiritual alliances or formulating messages. In short, to Channeler N, channeling was not a technique of a first-person subject with particular capabilities taking a particular form "becoming," but instead a technique of "becoming-non-subject" (Rose 1996).

Channeler A's reading of N was that he was "one of six people in history who will break free of the cosmic system" and that "The System was keenly watching him as it attempts to learn the pattern for breaking free." If the

ultimate goal of the practice of channeling is to cease attuning and translating, having achieved a state of tranquility in which mediation is no longer necessary, then one might say that Channeler N had accomplished that. Like Diogenes's empty jar, that position is impersonal yet not nihilistic and perhaps affords the greatest freedom precisely because it negates the values of our reality. In occupying such a space, Channeler N illustrated the most radical form of the practice of subjectivation that a channeler can choose.

5. Conclusion

This study analyzed channeling as a practice of subjectivation in which the techniques and ethics of attunement intersect. Channeling does not involve a monolithic ego receiving messages from outside itself but instead is a practice of reformulating one's relationships with, and coproducing messages through interactions with, nonhuman others contacted through attunement. It is furthermore a practice of boundary work straddling the distinctions between natural and supernatural, governance and freedom, subject and other, and facts and beliefs.

Tracing the long lineage of Western spiritual practices, including mysticism, spiritualism, and self-help discourse, the second section of this article delved into how channeling was adopted and adapted in Korea under modern social conditions. In doing so, it showed that channeling was not a cultural form that was imported, but has served as a field of practices of subjectivation reformulated and modified by Korean channelers at the intersection of diverse techniques, discourses, and media on attunement. The paper's third section explored the process by which channelers interact with nonhuman actors known as higher selves and construct "commons" where they can attune with these others, as well as the ways in which they restructure their senses and transform themselves into subjects in the process. Channeling was shown to be both an ontological practice of reconstituting and fine-tuning the self by passing through others and a technique for training one's ethics of attunement. The fourth section of the study analyzed how the messages produced in channeling are not mere transmissions of information, but are relational realities, or "factishes," coproduced by actors on numerous dimensions through attunement, translation, and mediation. Channeling messages, which function only

within the context of a client's attunement conditions and relational context, were able to facilitate healing by being integrated into their life narrative.

The three channelers that this study focused on each demonstrated a different form of practices of subjectivation through channeling. On the one hand, by creating his own systematic technique of attunement and passing this knowledge on to others, Channeler A constructed a system of spiritual discipline. In his contractual relationship with his higher self, known as "The System," Channeler A explored the balance between spiritual freedom and governance while acting as arbiter of the two. Channeler E, on the other hand, embodied the formation of new partnerships and ethical realignment of the self in her repeated exercise of attunement with nonhuman Others. Rather than submit to or fight her role as a homemaker and care worker, Channeler E expanded the boundaries of herself in the model of the witch-healer and blazed her own trail as a practitioner performing boundary work. Finally, Channeler N, refusing attunement and the composition of messages, made channeling into a technique of "not-being," remaining in a state of freedom uninterpreted by others. As a subject no longer requiring healing narratives, Channeler N demonstrated the possibility of breaking free of governmentality. These varying practices are illustrative of channeling as a field of ethical experimentation that can produce diverse means of attaining subjectivation under equal conditions.

In conclusion, channeling is an ethic and practice of interrogating subjectivity and relationality in today's world and experimenting with a life of attunement. Channeling asks what connects us with others, why we must rework our own thoughts and feelings, and how to change our life. But techniques of attunement and messages formed through channeling do not provide answers to those questions. Instead, channeling presents an intriguing alternative for reimagining one's life and opening up the possibility of tuning into unseen energies. The efficacy of this approach to life is apparent when messages become factishes that act as reality in a relational context, and messages, in this way, provide both healing and a catalyst for self-transformation. The techniques of attunement found in channeling, silently spreading beyond the walls of any institution, will no doubt remain a rich practice of reckoning with the limitless potentials of a subject and its relationships.

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