

A SHARED INHERITANCE: THE INTERRELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DIVINATION AND CHARMING IN 21ST CENTURY CANADA

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This paper explores the relationship between divination and charming in twenty-first century Canada. Drawing upon my ongoing research with Canadian divination practitioners, primarily in the province of Alberta, I focus on the ways in which these connections are created and utilised within contemporary divinatory acts. Doing so provides insights into how and why these practices are being adapted to new contexts, the individuals who undertake them, and the communities that they serve. By recognising this ongoing process of integration, it is possible to gain insights into the needs that these combined acts meet within modern communities and identify the gaps in current social structures, particularly in relation to health and healing, that lead individuals to seek out and adapt these traditional practices for a modern audience.

Keywords: Canada, contemporary practices, divination, healing, hidden knowledge, survival of charming

INTRODUCTION

Divination¹ and charming have a long and intertwined history, found nestled together in archives and folk collections, as well as in our own memories of plucked petals and chanted incantations to reveal a potential true love. Moving beyond the storehouses of our communal and personal pasts and into the borders of twenty-first century Canada where I am conducting research with divination practitioners, the methods that dominate Canadian, particularly urban, divination (primarily tarot, astrology, numerology, and palm reading) are not always overt examples of charming. Yet, as this paper shows, it is present and, therefore, the question is not, “has it survived?”, but “what has this relationship become?” and “what does it mean to a contemporary audience?”

The practice of charming has frequently been found to be decreasing as time progresses, shifting from broader cultural uses to rural or peasant communities throughout Europe (Pócs 2013: 165; Stark 2009; Davies 1998: 50), but its loss is by no means assured. In Canada, its survival has been recently explored by Martin Lovelace in his work with charming in Newfoundland (2011), a province that has a small population and is typically associated with rural, or outport, life due to its relative isolation and history of fishing. My own research within Canadian cities has found that it has, in fact, become integrated into the repertoire of diviners. While both of these practices, as undertaken within modern urban centers in Canada, have not received much academic attention, turning one's focus to these spaces reveals new ways in which they are transformed in order to meet the needs of the participants and ensure their ongoing survival.

My work on divination has been primarily with practitioners in central Alberta, Canada, focusing on the province's capital city of Edmonton and the surrounding area. Situating my research in an urban centre provides the opportunity to explore the ways in which old traditions are adapted to new environments. This paper, therefore, examines the ways in which the practitioners I interviewed bring together charming and divination to address the needs of their communities, paying particular attention to the interplay between their verbal and physical forms, their relationship to secrecy and hidden knowledge, and their central role within acts of healing and accompanying narratives of victimhood and empowerment. Furthermore, I contend that charming is important to those I work with not only because of their direct relationship, but also because the scholarship around and approaches to charming help reveal new depths to the acts of divination.

BORROWING AND INTEGRATING

Divination, being a conscious act, is a pragmatic one even if it is frequently dismissed as ineffective or frivolous entertainment by many within the societies where it is found. Patrice, one of the participants in my research who uses tarot cards in her own life but does not read them professionally, explained to me that the common thread throughout all of her spiritual practices is that it is "all about divinity, but divinity at a very practical and personal level". An interview with Jean, a mostly-retired tarot reader who has taught Patrice, echoed this approach. We were discussing the information sought and how people use it:

KARI: So there's that practicality to doing a reading.

JEAN: Well, if it isn't usable, if it isn't practical, why are we doing it? You know, why are you paying me ... Why are you taking your time?

There is a commonly acknowledged trinity of topics that lead people to seek out insight through a divinatory reading: love, money, and health. In other words, utilitarian information that can be brought into one's life to make everyday decisions. Charming is, at its core, also a functional genre (Fuller 1980: 164; Pócs 2013: 67; Kapaló & Pócs & Ryan 2013: 2) and has been implemented for these same purposes, integrated into ordinary life with the purpose of improving it. In order to do so, both practices must be malleable, adapting to those who utilise them.

A significant element of this flexibility, of equal importance to both charming and divination, is situated in their ability to take on both verbal and material forms. T. M. Smallwood defines charms "as objects (good luck charm), ritual actions, superstitious actions associated with attendant words, letters and words themselves being used magically" (2004: 11), which emphasises this mutability and a capacity to exist outside of the verbal. The charm extends beyond the text itself (Klyaus 2009: 17; Klaniczay 2013: 284), allowing it to "circulate with rapidity and astounding adaptability", which Edina Bozóky writes about in relation to medieval charms (2013: 108) but is equally applicable within other, more contemporary contexts. Divination also encompasses tangible and intangible forms created, combined, and altered to accommodate individual requirements. It is, therefore, not surprising that these two systems continue to be brought together and their verbal and material components interwoven to produce the desired results.

THE VERBAL

Gus, who began to read tarot a few years ago and does not yet do so professionally, highlighted one of the central verbal components of divination – the question:

I think one of the key things that I find really important when I'm doing readings for people is to make sure that it's really clear what we're doing and that there is a purpose. Like I mentioned before, the birthday reading that I do, that's because you want to know what your next year is going to be like. So there's a very clear purpose inside of that reading.

But then also, one of the ones that I've done a couple times is when people are about to embark on their – well I was working with students, right, and that was the last thing they did as their undergrad. So like, what's it going to be like? I'm going to try to get a job now, what's that going to be like? So they had that question and I'd, I didn't let them go, 'what's my future going to be like?' No, it's kind of like, let's nail that down,

let's be more specific. Are you worried about a relationship in your life? Are you worried about your career? Are you worried about something in your love life? What really is the thing that's, you know, if you're losing sleep, what is it that's causing you to lose sleep?

So really, it's really kind of making sure that I nail all those things down and then at the same time really let the symbols and the cards and those things speak and then keeping in mind that I'm really giving them a narrative to give them cause to reflect on what the future could be. Because I think that's what actually is being divined out of this; it's not a future that's written in stone. It's a contemplation of what could be. And then being that there is that relationship of it's, what could be, really presenting the complexity of those things.

For him, the proper construction of the question, the verbal component of the divinatory act, is essential for the success of the ritual and in shaping its outcomes. Our lives are complex, and any act that seeks to reveal a part of it or to support a change within it means that the language must be precise and focused, moving beyond the superficial to the real heart of the matter.

If we adapt Jonathan Roper's concept of charming as "the verbal element of vernacular magical practice" (2004: 1) – setting aside the relationship between magic and divination² – a parallel can be made between charming and divination with the former as the key verbal element of the divinatory act. In much the same way, Éva Pócs writes about impossibility formulas within charming as "a verbal means of magic which express (as is common in incantations) the wish to attain a particular concrete aim" (2009: 27). While the questions within divination are not incantations, their formation must be crafted carefully in order to articulate the purpose of the reading and desired outcome.

Individual readers develop their own systems for creating questions and the rituals surrounding them. Options include writing down the question and burning it after the reading, as I was taught at one workshop, or speaking them out loud or, conversely, quietly focusing on them during the reading. The question may be shared between the reader and client before the reading, or not, and topics range from a specific concern to the broader, such as Gus' birthday reading which looks at what the year holds in store for the individual. From these questions emerge the method to be used and, in the case of tarot cards, the layout for the cards (the positions they are placed in during the reading). Without attention to the question or the charming component of divination, the message, especially from complex methods such as the tarot, will not be successful and the problem will not be resolved.

THE MATERIAL

In a follow-up email, Patrice provided the following explanation of her use of Self-Mastery cards, a deck of cards that contain a spiritual quality on each one:

Every New Year's Eve, John [Patrice's husband] and I and another couple engage in a ritual with the Self Mastery Deck. We pick a card from the full deck for each month of the next year. My card for this month is balance. It's wonderful to have a quality to focus on each month because it helps bring it to life. It's a really great way of raising consciousness. I shared this process with other friends, so there are four more of us doing it together. We check in with each other on the first of each month, sharing the qualities each of us will be exploring that month. Then we support each other in living with those qualities. This is predictive, I guess. It's interesting to see what qualities are in focus for the year ahead because it helps map out themes of growth. For example, compassion came up for me three times at the end of this year, so I'm going to be focusing on compassion for three whole months this year. It's striking to have that repetition, because there are lots of cards in the deck. To draw the compassion virtue three times, all at the end of the year, it's intriguing. What am I coming to?

This practice can be done with a variety of decks including tarot, angel, and oracle that lay out key themes or issues to be confronted or worked with during the month. The words or images on these cards become a charm, a verbal, pictorial, and/or material object that is the result of the divinatory process. This charm is then carried by the individual through the month, encouraging their self-growth and development much like the inscribed papers tucked away in amulets.

Donna, a professional medium and tarot reader in Edmonton, explained to me that the objects she uses, such as tarot cards, serve as an entry point into the divinatory act but are not (always) required in order for her to access the requested information; a perspective she shares with many others. For some, the cards are read intuitively, embedded in the context of the reading, for others, they are there for the client, to act as a point of contact for everyone involved. Solomon Nigosian, in his study on divination in the Old Testament, observes how these objects serve to both separate the role of the diviner from others and facilitate the reading: "diviners differ from both prophets and seers or visionaries in having to rely on objects such as charms and amulets, which they use as mediums for obtaining the necessary information from the supernatural order (2008: 18). While not all of my interviewees required material objects, for many they were important, particularly because so much of divination deals with the

intangible – our interior world and potential futures – that the intermediary provides a foundation upon which such topics can be recognised and addressed.

Treva, who is not a professional reader but uses divinatory methods including runes and pendulums in her own life, spoke to me of the multipurpose nature of these tools. She always carries a talisman or charm with her that helps keep her “grounded”; frequently it is a pendulum tucked in her pocket. During our conversation, we both reflected on how this tool becomes a medium for obtaining the information she seeks within herself:

TREVA: So I don't know if these would be talismans or divination. I think these would be more divination.

KARI: I think a lot of times it's how you use it.

TREVA: Yeah.

KARI: They're all just tools.

TREVA: They're all tools, exactly. That's right. And this [the person] is the greatest tool; this is where the wisdom lies. This [the pendulum] just helps to open up, to get through all the critical levels, thinking levels to get down into the source.

We later returned to our discussion of pendulums, and again she reflected upon their identities commenting that “I don't know if those would be talismans too, but a pendulum, I might just get a yes or no or use it for more of a quick answer” before concluding that “I like it though; it just feels good. It feels good”. The tool of divination does not have a fixed identity but is capable of flux and change and has the capacity to become a charm within and outside of the divinatory ritual. What matters most in the context I am examining is that it is useful and meaningful to the person who employs it. When Treva carries her pendulum, she sometimes needs it for divination and other times as a charm. It, therefore, provides a system of protection and guidance so that when this single object is in her pocket, she is never without either.

“Talismans in general”, writes W. F. Ryan in *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, his seminal work on divination and magic in Russia, “can cross the boundaries between what have variously been called learned and popular, high and low, or great and little cultures”, as well as other religious and linguistic boundaries (1999: 217). In part, this flexibility comes from their ability to be formed from everyday objects (see *ibid.*: 218–221), a feature shared with divination. While the tools used by many of the practitioners I have worked with are more complex, such as tarot cards, any object can be used – food, leaves, parts of the body, dreams, books and words, water, stones – one is only limited by one's imagination. Consequently, something that is a charm can also be adapted

to a divinatory act and vice versa allowing practitioners to take advantage of this creative potential to form the best method for a particular circumstance.

Recognising that the role of creating talismanic charms “may involve a written as well as an oral dimension (the most obvious example of this being the existence of spellbooks)” (Roper 2003: 50), parallels to contemporary divination practices are again found. Several of those I interviewed keep journals (not the same as spellbooks but serving similar preservation functions) where they write down their own meanings and interpretations of readings. Beyond serving the practical functions of recording specific acts for posterity and to be reflected on to determine whether or not they were effective, divination journals also become part of the process of self-development. Mélanie, a member of the United Church of Canada who works a great deal with dream interpretation, explained to me that:

I remember one dream that was very vivid. Really, really vivid, and I wrote it all out and I never figured it out. And it felt like an important dream but I never got the “ah ha!” from it. Never really, you know, so I still have it, you know, and every once and a while I’ll pull it out just see if it means anything, because that’s the other thing. Because time is of no – you could have a dream twenty years ago and if it comes to your mind today, that’s when it, because it’s not time bound – so I think if there’s a message, let’s call it the universe. If the universe is trying, is wanting to tell you something, that’s not time bound. But you might have an experience that reminds you of a dream from twenty years ago, you know, and it comes together because I don’t believe in coincidence ... So there are no coincidences, so you just look for connections.

Information provided through a divinatory act, whether it comes from a requested dream or a tarot reading, is not always immediately applicable. The act of writing down the information, of inscribing it, creates a charm that holds this meaning until it is needed, whether it is twenty minutes or twenty years later. These journals become talismans of knowledge and discovery that are part of a continual process of transformation and a representation of information unfolding throughout time as one returns to read it again and apply it to new contexts.

THE HIDDEN

Returning to the functional nature of both divination and charming, they often signify that the hidden and secret moments of our lives we seek to uncover are not those that grant us insight into the grand mysteries of our universe but

are instead rooted in the questions of our everyday life: an illness; a disaster; or the loss of a job, relationship, or loved one. The services of charmers and diviners have long been sought out by those hoping to understand, control, or heal the parts of their lives that feel subject to random chance. After all, they both share a foundation of secrecy, of engaging hidden knowledge, and using or revealing connections and meanings many cannot see or choose to ignore.

Charmers have a long tradition of keeping their knowledge to themselves, contending that if it is shared the power will be lost (Davies 1998; Lovelace 2011). Conversely, divination is a process of uncovering information that is unknown, but its sources have frequently been shrouded in mystery. With the growth of the publishing industry and the ease by which books about divination are obtained, however, the secrets of interpretation are accessible to almost everyone. Yet, many readers also develop their own systems of meaning that belong to them alone in part because it is built on their subjective experiences and intuitive understanding of the specific reading and client.

Irene, who has been a professional reader for several decades and resides in Edmonton, strongly recommends that practitioners create their own decks and not share the full meanings with anyone. The two main reasons for doing so are because “it’s so original and unique; you get really proud to know you can do some of this stuff, right. And it’s really kind of cool, but the power within you gets stronger because they’re your cards, literally your cards”. This approach parallels the secrecy of knowledge many charmers have upheld. Power comes from the exclusive relationship one develops with their tools and systems. Furthermore, it recognises the mutable nature of these methods that causes them to slip into a state of unknowability as new uses remove them from past contexts and meanings.

In his article “From the Power of Words to the Power of Rhetoric: Nonsense, Pseudo-Nonsense Words, and Artificially Constructed Compounds in Greek Oral Charms”, Haralampos Passalis focuses on the incomprehensible words in charming. They are, he writes, “subjected to multiple modification procedures and new words that have been adapted to the morphological linguistic system of the performers” (2012: 11–12). Unlike concepts of mystery within esoteric or occult practices wherein the secret knowledge exists independent of those who seek it out, meaning here becomes unknowable to the outsider because they do not share the performative moment within which the interpretation has emerged. In other words, this hidden knowledge is contextually dependent since it is “not accidental, but constitutes wider rhetorical strategy, which is not exclusively related to an inherent secret power of words” (ibid.: 16).³

Turning our attention back to the formation of the question in divination, the issue of secrecy must also be addressed because it shows how the hidden

becomes layered into a reading, first, as addressed earlier, because it is being used to access unknown information; second, because the question is not always revealed to the practitioner. In these circumstances, it is the client who has secret information unknown to the reader. In his work on Ifa divination, Richard Bascom found that clients also sometimes sought this unknowability:

If [---] the client wishes to conceal his question from the diviner, he asks for two objects from the diviner's bag and whispers these statements to them so that the diviner cannot hear, cupping his hands over his mouth so that the diviner cannot read his lips (Bascom [1969] 1991: 54).

While, in circumstances such as these, trust (or the lack of it) in the reader's abilities plays a part, among those I work with, they are often the ones determining whether the question is or is not revealed. Some do not want to know it before the reading, if ever, because to do so will cause bias in their interpretations. This approach suggests that, unlike with charming, for some the divinatory act loses its power when certain secrets are revealed to the practitioner.

COMING TOGETHER

The relationship between charming and divination has not always resulted in them being wielded by the same individual. Owen Davies, focusing on charmers in England and Wales, writes that they “were remarkable for their ordinariness: they did not usually dabble in any other magical abilities. Unbewitching, fortunetelling, thief detection and love magic were all the province of cunning-folk” (1998: 42). In my research, however, I have found that many contemporary practitioners have taken on the role that charmers once played within their communities, incorporating it into their own repertoire of knowledge and practice. In part, this expansion of roles reveals an increase in access to different modalities through books and the internet. In addition, as larger social institutions move away from acknowledging and requiring these different roles, it has led to a breakdown of the divisions between them and resulted in individuals claiming what they need from each without external forces to moderate.

Within the contemporary diviner there is a coming together of different roles and methods, continuing the tradition of adaptability that has allowed both charming and divination to survive. Their increasing interconnectedness permits the practitioner to meet the needs of those who seek them out. Marlene, a reader who utilises a variety of tools, offers lessons on ritual practices: “I teach ceremony too, like how to use ceremony to bring healing because really it's all about putting out intentions, using the moon at the right time and everything”. Part of this “everything” is the integration of charms in these

ceremonies. Divinatory methods help to determine what needs to be healed and when to undertake the act, the charms serve as a tool for focusing intent and providing the healing.

Much like the charmers who came before them, divination practitioners have had to contend with the issue of monetary exchange, and in their current state we can see how these different roles are understood by the individual who inhabits them. Lovelace found that the “refusal of any reward for an act of charming is a point made by almost all Newfoundland charmers, often vociferously” (2011: 41). Accepting money for their services is often a challenge for the professional reader, particularly when they are starting out. In part, it has to do with recognising that what they have to offer is of value and that charging money brings a new level of seriousness and responsibility to their work. Still, when it comes to the practice of direct healing, which typically lies outside of the divinatory act but is undertaken by many who are diviners, several of those I interviewed will not charge for it. Richard, the minister of St. Brigid’s Spiritualist Church in Edmonton, explained that for him healings are very sacred and set apart from his other practices like card readings: “If a person comes and you give them a healing and they feel really good about it, they can leave a donation to the church, but not to me [---] it’s voluntary work ... healing is very spiritual”. For individuals such as these, a differentiation between their position as charmer (or healer) and that of diviner emerges in how they treat the concept of exchanging money for their services, demonstrating that they do not necessarily embody all these roles simultaneously.

The “ordinariness” that Davies identifies in charmers has become, within my research, part of the divinatory identity as well, tied in with their shared practicality. A constant refrain from those I have interviewed is that divination belongs to us all; it is something ordinary people can engage in. Richard considers it “our natural ability”, but we often do not regard it as such because it is no longer part of contemporary Canadian discourse. Gus has found this to be the case and says: “one of the things that I responded to really early on when I started talking about this [tarot] is the idea that in our society we are not taught how to read symbols. It’s not something that we are really taught a lot about”. Heather, a tarot reader in Edmonton, also reflected on the status of tarot and spiritual practices in general in our society:

I think we all have it, I think over a couple of millennia, I think it’s been, you know, especially over the last six hundred years or so, I think a lot of that stuff has been squashed, been undermined. I think we all had the power; I think we still have it. I think it’s just underutilised.

Yet, she sees a shift with more people in Canada having spiritual experiences and “looking for an opportunity to start thinking about these kinds of things”. And that becomes one of the key roles of the individual who takes on the role of healer-charmer-diviner among my participants; those they work with often need to be shown these different possibilities because they are not taught how to pay attention to their own intuition or to regard these methods as viable sources of information.

Both charming and divination, therefore, serve to help individuals connect to all aspects of themselves and their places in the world. Charms are a means of supporting interpersonal relations (Kropej 2003: 65), becoming a communicative act (Ilomäki 2004: 53) in the same way as divination. The practitioner often serves as a translator for these messages until the individual seeking the reading can claim them for themselves. They also provide support for the person when they do not want to interpret their own information for fear of their biases limiting what they are able to access, particularly if the topics are frightening or difficult. The spaces these practices create allow people to engage in their own narratives and find new ways of understanding and communicating their lives.

HEALING

One of the most significant examples of the integration of both divination and charming among my practitioners revolves around healing. Illness, the sociologist Meredith B. McGuire observes, “is a profoundly human experience” (1990: 286), as is the search for methods of coping with it. As Roper posits, “verbal charms are a near-universal (perhaps even universal) way of coping with ill health” among other struggles in life (2009: xiv). Over time, charms and divinatory acts have been drawn upon to facilitate healing⁴, adapted to fit the needs of a community, and while they may appear to have been discarded in Western medicine, they are not so easily dismissed. Lovelace observes that “Newfoundland has had a very strong and widespread tradition of healing by means of charms” (2011: 37). It is, therefore, not surprising that he has found there is an ongoing interest in keeping charms within the process of healing.

One example is a woman Lovelace met named Shirley, whom he describes as part of “the post-modernization generation, university-educated and working at the highest level of orthodox medicine in a research laboratory. Nevertheless she is very interested in complementary forms of health care, which is where she suggested charming might take on further life” (ibid.: 44). I found similar individuals during my own fieldwork including Donna, a scientist working for the University of Alberta, whose approach of not discarding one system for

the other but integrating them into a more holistic approach to health care reflects Shirley's.

Among those I interviewed, divination and charming maintain their place in the repertoire of healing because they recognise that it is an intricate process demanding equally complex tools, both ancient and modern, for its success. In doing so they situate themselves as part of the therapeutic process but do not claim an ability to replace a doctor. Jessica, a tarot reader originally from Alberta, now residing in Newfoundland, emphasised that she is not a medical professional:

It's about centering them and balancing them and then directing them to get the appropriate help that they need within the medical system. Because the one thing I will never say is that I am a certified counsellor or psychiatrist or psychologist or doctor. So I may pick up on something, there may be something that you need to get investigated, but it doesn't mean that, you know, I'm going to be the one that diagnoses you either. And I think that there can be a balance between our rational, medical system and what people like myself do. There can be a balance. I don't believe that they have to be mutually exclusive.

Instead, they see themselves as part of a larger system, as explained to me by Peter,⁵ a Tarot reader currently working in Edmonton:

So if you do have some health issues, you know what, go out and exercise, go out and do things, go to the doctor. And I really perceive as doing, you know, going to the doctor instead of the holistic – I believe both, but I believe first and foremost is going to the doctor and then if you want to do some holistic energy, well then by all means you can try here and there, but I always believe that you need to do the medical energy first.

And by Donna:

So I'm very careful to now, people will come to you about health, too. They'll want to know, how do you see my health, and that kind of thing. And you can tell them stuff, but you don't want them to rely on you for a diagnosis because I'm not a doctor, I'm just, you know. I could say sometimes I can see where, hmm, you know, you might need to get some medical care, or I can see that yeah, they're going to have a hospital visit. I can also see sometimes that there's going to be an injury.

This approach fits with Davies' findings that "[c]harmers did not diagnose, and charmed only for commonplace complaints which were recognised by orthodox and folk medicine alike" (1998: 41) and Bente Gullveig Alver's observation that "[s]eldom will a patient bypass the doctor and go directly to a folk healer"

and, even when they do so, are “likely to continue seeing the doctor” (1995: 25). People, when suffering an illness, still seek out a multitude of different ways to find healing and frequently strive to find a balance among all these different systems.

Divination and charming both emerge from a need in the community. As societies develop new systems of treatment, it is to be expected that the roles of past modalities will change. However, adjustment does not mean dismissal, and the willingness of practitioners to recognise their supportive function, whether it is socially accepted and acknowledged or not, allows for them to adapt to the shifting of needs and values. Instead of placing themselves in opposition to medicine, they step in to fill gaps within the system on an individual level, bringing all approaches together into a whole entity focused on the healing of a specific person.

A significant part of healing within holistic approaches comes from finding meaning and the creative power of speaking of one’s experience. Sabina Magliocco draws attention to this expanded understanding in *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America*:

Western biomedicine does not generally address the issue of meaning, because it treats the body and illness as objects, separate from the person who experiences them. By contrast, in many alternative healing approaches, the body and illnesses are assumed to be laden with meaning. Indeed, part of the healing process consists of discovering the meaning of a person’s illness episode and then addressing that meaning through embodied practices (Magliocco 2004: 142).

Divination provides access to some of this meaning, drawing into consideration a variety of potential causes that can extend back into past lives or ancestral patterns. Once identified, charms are brought in to facilitate healing. Shannon, a practitioner who provides a variety of healing modalities to her clients, discussed how she incorporates a word of intention into her Reiki practices:

So what would happen is, so you’ll lay out on the table and then I’ll ask you for a word, and that will be your word of intention. That’s the word that you focus on during the whole session. I say, so tell me, imagine what your life would be like if that word was true. So let’s say the word was peace. You need peace in your life. I say, what does peace smell like to you? What does peace taste like to you? What does it look like to you? What does it, you know – Use all of your senses as you’re going to get this, is what my peaceful life will look like.

This word serves as a charm although, in this context, it is created by the patient and not the healer.

Ulrika Wolf-Knuts argues that “it is also possible to maintain that the charm gives the person in need of help a language in which to express his needs” (2009: 166). Mimicking the secrecy of charm texts, Western medical language often denies the patient the ability to speak openly and completely about their experiences. However, divinatory acts and the ways in which they integrate charms provide new ways of articulating personal experiences, giving the patient their own specialised language that does not dismiss medical discourse but complements it while being uniquely tailored to the experiences of the patient. The movement toward a more holistic approach does not demand that all knowledge be disclosed but that people need to be part of the process and that they have their own information to contribute.

Healing that emerges from speaking one’s story requires that people have spaces where they are heard. In *Living Narrative: Creating Lives in Everyday Storytelling*, Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps discuss this desire to be listened to in relation to illnesses, noting that for those who suffer from chronic conditions, it is difficult to find “active listenership” because those within the medical system, as well as family and friends, “resist narratives that deviate from the canonical plot that illness is only transitory”. In particular, stories that come “uncomfortably close to disclosing the chaos and terror accompanying illness” or that “have no clear logic or resolution” are often quickly halted (2001: 277). However, charming and divination often embrace narratives that exist outside of linear time, drawing upon past lives and hidden connections that go beyond Western medical discourse. They provide places within which to share one’s narratives and explore not only the health issue itself but its impact on the rest of the person’s life and those with whom they share it. Within the work of these contemporary practitioners, all of these components come together to give the client a language and a space to seek out and come to terms with their own issues.

The mediumship of charms identified earlier by Nigosian also appears in acts of healing. Having an object present in a ritual can be important for the curative process by giving tangible form to something that cannot otherwise be seen. Richard Smoley and Jay Kinney note this interplay in Philippine extraction healings:

They use some combination of genuine paranormal power and sleight-of-hand to perform “bloody extractions”, whereby they magically seem to reach into a patient’s body with their fingers, without surgery or implements, and extract harmful objects ranging from worms to safety pins. Though these healers have been shown to use some measure of

trickery, many patients go away from the procedure much improved or even completely healed. If this is a matter of healing by suggestion, it seems to work often enough. Far more than Western doctors, shamans regard the mental and emotional condition of the patient as paramount in the healing process (Smoley & Kinney [1999] 2006: 165).

The tangibility of divination tools and charms serve the same function, not to trick the client but to give all involved a point of focus, a palpable representation of an illness that is often beyond the capacity of the human eye to see and a potential remedy that is often equally mysterious.

Healing extends beyond the physical body and its injuries to psychological challenges including past experiences of abuse. Laura Stark's discussion of magic and charming in "The Charmer's Body and Behavior as a Window onto Early Modern Selfhood" is worth a closer look because of the connections she makes between internal and external systems of power and the expectations for their protection of our well-being:

It is no surprise, then, that descriptions of magic recorded in rural Finland paint a vivid picture of persons who perceived themselves to be vulnerable and unprotected. In modern society, the individual is protected by laws, practices and institutions which safeguard personal boundaries. These include laws against fraud, defamation, slander, assault, battery, intimidation, violation of privacy, and more recently in some Western societies, laws against sexual harassment, stalking, and the physical punishment of children. Early modern individuals, by contrast, had to protect *themselves* from threats, and magic provided one means of doing this (Stark 2009: 5).

She later notes that "if nothing outside the self guarantees individual rights, then the individual must contain *within himself* the means to secure these rights, and the result is a very different sort of self" (ibid.: 13). Expanding upon this idea, at first glance the external structures established in twenty-first century Canada to protect its citizens indicate that divination and charming are no longer needed. Yet, in my interviews it no longer surprises me when I am told about their experiences of abuse, rape, and assault and the ways they have shaped their lives and practices. Listening to practitioners discuss their experiences, it becomes apparent that these systems fail.

What these conversations reveal is that these external institutions are not perfect, and when they falter, people seek to establish an internal means to protect themselves and allow them to cope with and heal from trauma. Fur-

thermore, these difficult experiences may help develop the intuitive abilities they draw upon to conduct readings. Marlene speculated that:

I think all kids are intuitive, you know, and when you grow up in a house where it's not necessarily stable some of your senses develop a little bit more strongly than others. You have to check in emotionally with the adults in the room to kind of know what to prepare yourself for because, you know, all of that uncertainty.

While stereotypes of divination suggest its role as that of superficial entertainment, it is consistently used by those I have interviewed to engage with challenging experiences. They question the protective power assigned to the Western legal and medical systems, among others. People who have experienced the fractures in these structures turn to alternative methods not in an effort to dismiss the external ones but because they recognise the need for something more, that what is officially sanctioned is not enough.

Being able to claim a language or system of meaning that is rooted in internal, lived experience, supported by the holistic practices of which divination and charming are a crucial part, resituates power away from larger social structures and back within the individual who is dealing with the trauma. It is not possible for such empowerment to come from external institutions alone. Irene explained that she believes that before we come into this life we choose everything that happens to us, meaning that "all the crap that happened in our lives are all our lessons. You can either grow stronger or it weakens you". Until you claim your own experiences, in your own way, you can never heal, and a key way of doing so for her and others is found in the information and languages provided by divination and charming brought together for this essential purpose.

CONCLUSION

People are complex, and to regard any system or practice they create as any less so is to do these acts and those who use them a disservice. It is, therefore, essential to not assume that past practices of divination and charming have simply disappeared in the contemporary Canadian context, but instead to take a closer look at the ways in which they have been transformed. It is necessary to examine the ongoing relationship between charming and divination, particularly the ways in which they continue to be integrated into each other, and how the modern practitioner has come to embody these different roles for the purposes of engaging with and exploring the unknown and promoting healing

and reconciliation. In doing so, we find that the relationship remains an important one for many divination practitioners and for the communities they serve.

My work with diviners in central Alberta and the ways in which charming is present in many of their practices gives us a glimpse into, but by no means a comprehensive conclusion of, contemporary divination and charming within Canadian borders. It reveals the different ways in which the old is incorporated into the new and how past traditions are transformed within changing times. It demonstrates that we have ongoing concerns that we share with all who have come before about health and healing, and that the systems established by our ancestors still have much to offer. By understanding the ways in which these traditions have been brought forward, we better comprehend the needs of the twenty-first century citizen and the fractures within the external institutions and social systems set up to protect and aid them. Ultimately, it becomes apparent that divination and charming will continue to be adapted and remain necessary as long as we face uncertainty in our own lives.

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NOTES

- ¹ My definition of divination is that it is the conscious utilisation of a variety of tools to uncover information deemed by the participant(s) to be otherwise unknowable. This information can be about, but is not limited to, the future and is often about present or past situations (including past lives). While divination can be a spiritual act, there is no religious requirement since the source(s) of this knowledge range from external deities to one's own subconscious.
- ² While divination factors into magical practices (see, for example, Farley 2009 for an exploration into how tarot has been integrated into esoteric, occult, Neopagan, and New Age practices), I am in agreement with Patrick Curry that "divination cannot seamlessly be accommodated to the category of magic" (2010: 4).
- ³ The secret power of words plays out in various concepts of silence through divination. The practice of a dumb supper is typically found in records from rural communities; I have not encountered it being undertaken in urban centers, but it is worth recognising because of its manipulation of sound and silence. In this act, a young woman prepares a dinner in complete silence and backwards with the result being that her future spouse will appear for the meal. It is usually held at midnight, often on Halloween.

If silence is broken at any point the ritual will not work or the vision will disappear. In this case, the charm as a verbal component of the divinatory act is defined by the absence of language. In doing so, there remains the recognition of the importance of words and the power they have within ritual settings. (For more on the dumb supper and collected examples, see Bill Ellis' *Lucifer Ascending*, particularly pages 153–163; Paul B. Frazier's "The Dumb Supper"; and Wayland D. Hand's "Anglo-American Folk Belief: The Oral World's Legacy to the New".)

⁴ See Judit Kis-Halas' article "This Child Here Won't Shed Tears of Dreadful Fright, 'Cause He's not Caught by Devil's Might'. Change and Stability of Charms Against Fright Illness: A Hungarian Perspective" for past examples of the integration of charms and divination for healing purposes.

⁵ Peter is a pseudonym, chosen by and used at the request of the participant.

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Primary source materials come from interviews with Canadian divination practitioners conducted from 2015 to 2016. All interviews were conducted and fully transcribed by the author. Minor grammatical changes have been made and stutters, false starts, and pause words have been removed for the ease of reading comprehension. All interviews and transcripts reside with the author.

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