Speaking in Celestial Signs
The Language of Western Astrology and the (Tenuous) Bonds of Occult Sociality

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the role of language as a key metaphor and medium of occult sociality among contemporary Western astrologers. I argue that the ‘symbolic language’ attributed to celestial objects and patterns informs everyday speech acts and reinforces shared commitments to the authority of astrological tradition, in the relative absence of conventional structures of belief and belonging. At the same time, the flexibility and versatility of horoscopic symbols authorize diverse and idiosyncratic adaptations, creating patterns of discord and fragmentation often framed as characteristic of the astrology community. I argue that the tension between notions of metaphysical community and professionalization, on the one hand, and the virtues of epistemological individualism and eclecticism, on the other, is a constitutive tension at the heart of Western metaphysical practice. This approach complicates straightforward models of community as consensus, and at the same time challenges common stereotypes about the atomizing effects of alternative spiritualities.

KEYWORDS: astrology, community, language, metaphysics, New Age beliefs, occult sociality, spirituality

Alternative spiritualities informed by New Age beliefs and occult practices such as astrology, divination, and ritual magic have never been more popular or pervasive as they have become in the age of digital and social media. In North America in particular, individuals disillusioned with conventional religious affiliations and authorities are more eager than ever to embrace esoteric and eclectic paths of metaphysical knowledge and personal growth. As in previous waves of occult experimentation, such tendencies reflect a radicalized spirit of epistemological individualism, prompting some observers to conclude that portable, customizable technologies of enchantment proliferating under the banner of ‘spirituality’ invariably undermine collectivist ethics and community formations traditionally associated with organized religion.

Such assumptions beg the question of how we might acknowledge and productively analyze the experiences of individuals who identify with occult ‘communities of practice’ (Lave and Wenger 1991) and the structures of meaning and authority they provide, though they may be tenuous
or heterodox. What attributes of occult sociality reinforce community, in the absence of explicit moral and doctrinal obligations, while safeguarding the privileges of individual autonomy?

Astrology, an oracular technology valued by many as a spiritual practice in its own right, offers an intriguing case in point. Although enormously popular and multifaceted, astrology in the West is mostly a solitary endeavor. Professional astrologers spend years privately learning and honing their skills and advising individual clients. With few institutions, collective rites, or central authorities to speak of, the field is an eclectic mix of interpretive styles, schools, and applications. Centuries of cultural transmission and codification have ensured continuity in basic horoscopic principles, but there is much variation in how astrologers today practice and even define their craft. Debates and idiosyncrasies abound. Like academics, astrologers can be a fragmented and often contentious bunch.

Nonetheless, many practicing astrologers see themselves as part of a larger “metaphysical community” (Campion 2009: 282), a self-image augmented by online platforms and social media. A once obscure subculture is flourishing with new networks of intellectual exchange and public engagement. Yet what practitioners commonly refer to as the ‘astrology community’ remains as ambiguous as it is aspirational. It is a decidedly non-singular entity, instantiated by forms of affiliation—including professional associations, instructional programs, and, as we will see, distinctive uses and invocations of language—but otherwise diffuse and decentralized. This amorphous quality reflects the field’s relative marginality, but it also reveals a constitutive tension at the heart of the Western metaphysical tradition (Albanese 2008). The more practitioners commit to the ideal of an individuated ‘higher self’ (ibid.), the harder it is to create formal, standardized mechanisms of consensus and collaboration.

In what follows I consider how intimations of sharedness are “imagined, negotiated, and discursively constructed” (Hillewaert and Tetreault, this volume) among practitioners of Western astrology in North America and online, for whom the conditions of sharedness have more to do with practice (employing the medium) than adherence to any universal doctrine or teleology. If there is anything that astrologers agree on, anything that transcends their philosophical and technical differences, it is their confidence in the ultimate validity and accuracy of what they call the ‘symbolic language’ of astrology: an order of non-arbitrary signs and delineations based on the study of celestial patterns. It is by learning to chart and interpret the celestial code that astrologers come to predict the future, interpret the past, and investigate all manner of temporal and psychic phenomena.

Invocations of language in astrology are metaphorical but carry literal connotations as well. Astrological symbolism is the basis for an elaborate multi-modal speech genre, affectionately known as ‘astro-speak’, by which practitioners communicate among and about themselves. As opposed to the aphoristic clichés and affirmations of Sun sign horoscopes in magazines and tabloids, astro-speak involves the use of technical terms, celestial signs, and named configurations as versatile figures of speech. It is a shared occult idiom, at once analytical, performative, and mythopoetic. Like other vocational and professional jargons, it facilitates knowledge and communication within a specialized field, and even opens the field up to enactments of expertise among non-specialists (Carr 2010; Eyal 2013). Yet astro-speak is also unlike other focal vernaculars (such as legalese or coding lingo) in that there are virtually no subjects to which astrological terms are not applied. The field claims an almost unlimited purview, which amplifies the moral implications of being conversant with “the poetic breath of nature,” as one astrologer described it. Similar to the Western Apache practice of using indigenous ‘place-names’ to align everyday speech acts with a landscape animated by ‘ancestral knowledge’ (Basso 1996), speaking with celestial signs brings the transpersonal wisdom of the cosmos into daily existence and makes it available to those who seek answers to life’s questions, big and small.
The mystical and pragmatic attributes of language in Western astrology are interconnected and inform the practitioner’s sense of the community as (ideally) an inclusive and expansive domain that is also internally differentiated. Some astrologers work exclusively as private consultants, analyzing charts for select clientele, while others organize conferences, teach courses in astrology, write horoscopes, and record podcasts. Some are major media personalities and social media influencers; others are your classmates and co-workers. Whatever the case, insofar as people perceive themselves and others participating in the circulation of a common code and communicative style, the language/practice of astrology is a moral stance in itself, one that affirms the validity of the medium and the privileged status of the astrologer, in abstraction, as a knowing and knowable moral figure (Keane 2011).

Still, not everyone agrees on what makes someone a ‘real’ astrologer, or which interpretive systems are the most true and accurate. These are but a few of the perennial debates that divide practitioners. While shared knowledge of a symbolic language allows for meaningful sociability, the overall effects of its diffusion are as destabilizing as they are generative. It is no wonder that when my interlocutors talk about the astrology community as a generality, it is often in the context of describing something intangible, unaccountable, atomized, or fractured. This is nothing new. Community, in the context of New Age and metaphysical beliefs, is seldom a straightforward notion.

Such descriptions are suggestive nonetheless, even if they connote something other than stable, homogeneous assemblages. As Anderson (1983: 6) states: “Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.” The ‘astrology community’, like any reification, varies depending on how it is being invoked and by whom. What astrologers do share is an approach to the intelligibility of the cosmos in semiotic and textual terms, and an emphasis on specialized language as the means of interpreting the celestial matrix, connecting with like-minded others, and helping people. Language as such enables possibilities of belonging and individuation. The language of astrology symbolizes the shared metaphysics and traditions that bond practitioners. Yet the freedom with which it circulates and adapts to individual needs, tastes, and intentions is indicative of a similarly shared resistance to institutionalization. The language of astrology is thus both authoritative and authorizing, sometimes in contravening ways. Such is the nature of occult sociality and alternative spirituality in late modernity. It is not simply a matter of collectivism sacrificed at the altar of self-realization, but of people identifying with collective engagements that they hope will facilitate rather than impede their personal journeys toward fulfillment and higher consciousness.

Astrology: “As Above, so Below …”

My first exposure to the world of professional astrology (or any astrology beyond my own Sun sign) was a two-day conference in 2017 sponsored by the New York chapter of the National Council for Geocosmic Research (NCGR), a national member organization dedicated to astrological research, education, and outreach. The roster of speakers included distinguished teachers and consulting astrologers from around the region, whose presentations covered topics such as the astrology of mental illness, information technology, the lives of famous artists, planetary indicators of violent extremism, and a study of the astrological compatibility, or synastry, between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin. Conference presenters and attendees were mostly white middle-aged women and men (more the former), with varying levels of technical knowledge and experience, although all were practicing astrologers of one kind or another. Many sat with open laptops, diligently taking notes and plugging data into astrological software.
For me, the conference was as bewildering as it was captivating. Everyone spoke in English, but it was like listening to a language I had never heard, a seemingly arcane lingo of technical terms and esoteric references. I understood references to astronomy, but these were scant compared to talk of cardinal squares, grand trines, secondary progressions, quincunxes, essential dignities, and the like. Lacking fluency in the astrologer’s lexicon, or any familiarity with astrological charts at the time, I could just as well have been in a room of experts talking about quantum field theory, algebraic topology, or the stock market.

At the same time, the speakers anchored their discussions in well-known historic events and biographies of famous people, allowing archetypal themes to resonate throughout. Speaking on the life of musician Jimi Hendrix, a presenter described how “transiting Pluto was on his natal Neptune” during his iconic 1967 performance at Monterey, denoting a connection between that specific planetary dynamic and moments of intense creative and spiritual transformation. Another presenter evoked audible gasps from the audience when noting that actor Kevin Spacey, recently accused of sexual misconduct, had just begun his second “Saturn return,” a period of personal trial, growth, and reckoning that occurs every 28–30 years depending on its placement in one’s natal chart. In the ensuing discussion, someone pointed out that “the reason we’re being bombarded now with all this stuff about sexual harassment in the news is because Jupiter is in Scorpio.” Others nodded in decisive agreement. During a later exchange, a middle-aged man with a long ponytail uttered to his neighbor, “I got Neptune in Scorpio.” Overhearing this, a young man two rows back swiftly replied, “How’s that working out?” Everybody within earshot laughed. I didn’t get the joke. But with every such comment, comparison, and confession, I was slowly starting to put the pieces together.

My aim is not to decipher these statements here, but to tag them as modest examples of how individual astrologers employ celestial objects/signs as descriptive and indexical figures of speech in relation to a variety of topics and applications. In conferences like the one just described, and across social media, the use of astrological terms and phrases in communicative exchanges, both formal and colloquial, is the most common way of indicating one’s relationship to the astrology community. Seasoned veterans and newcomers alike are always eager to share in each other’s ‘astro-nerdiness,’ in an otherwise relatively obscure dialect. The language of astrology is marked and meta-discursive: every instance is not just an interpretation or prediction of fact but a commentary and moral affirmation of the medium itself. This is especially salient for professional and aspiring astrologers who otherwise lack means of expressing their passion for astrology without fear of being judged or ridiculed by skeptics, or simply misunderstood by people who do not share their fluency.

Members of the general public are often surprised to learn that there is more to astrology than Sun sign horoscopes, curbside fortune-tellers, and viral memes. The umbrella term ‘Western astrology’ refers to a multifaceted field based on oracular techniques derived from ancient Mesopotamian, Hellenistic, Egyptian, Vedic, and medieval traditions, combined with influences such as classical mythology, hermeticism, Theosophy, Jungian depth psychology, and astrophysics. Contemporary applications include personal and professional advising, therapeutic counseling, financial consulting, and specialized techniques such as ‘electional’ forecasting (i.e., choosing auspicious dates for planning weddings, medical procedures, renovations, etc.), to name just a few.

The unifying principle across different strands of astrological practice is the idea that the placements and alignments of celestial objects such as planets and fixed stars at any moment in time can be mapped and studied as the basis for predicting and interpreting human affairs and temporal events. Encapsulated by the hermetic (and proto-Durkheimian) axiom ‘as above, so below’, contemporary Western astrology follows a theory of macrocosmic-microcosmic
equivalence, or “correspondence between worlds” (Albanese 2008: 13) by which everything in the universe is connected and “mystical sympathies and likenesses abound” (ibid.: 14). Patterns embedded in celestial symbols and geocentric cycles are mined for mystical insights that are meant to give people agency in their lives while reinforcing the metaphysical belief that everything happens for reasons that originate both within and beyond human consciousness. An enchanted view of cosmic correlations (what Jung called ‘synchronicities’) has seen renewed popularity in modern times amid heightened social and political anxieties and holds tremendous appeal for generations navigating the onerous emotional, material, and ethical burdens of neoliberal personhood.

According to a 2018 Pew study, 29 percent of US respondents “believe in astrology.” There are no reliable statistics, however, on how many active practitioners there are in the general population. In fact, it is extremely difficult to quantify the astrological subculture once we recognize just how many different levels of participation there are. If we limit ourselves to professional astrologers who affiliate with one of a few national organizations and networks (known as ‘astro orgs’), the numbers range somewhere in the low thousands, and the demographics lean toward educated middle-class whites. But the population of individuals who consult or teach astrology for a living (or semi-professionally) without certification or formal affiliations and produce horoscopes and media content for popular consumption is considerably larger and more diverse—not to mention the countless enthusiasts who interact through workshops, webinars, and digital platforms such as Twitter and Reddit. Moreover, many (if not most) of those who identify with the astrology community engage in other spiritual and occult practices, including tarot, reiki, herbalism, yoga, crystals, and past life regressions, each with their own subcultural dynamics. Metaphysical communities are intersecting and intersectional, making them all the more internally dynamic and complex.

Religious beliefs and backgrounds vary among people drawn to astrology, but they often reflect an affinity for alternative systems. Professional astrologers, by some accounts, are especially likely to identify as ‘spiritual but non-aligned’ (Campion 2012). Practitioners are divided on how they explain or characterize the metaphysics of astrological divination—not to mention questions of causality, karma, and free will—but they tend to agree that it is distinct from anything normally classified as religion. They describe astrology as a ‘tool’, rather than a ‘belief’, reinforcing the notion that it is an autonomous and self-validating medium, free of institutional regulations and impositions. Yet by the same token, astrology is framed as a viable if not ideal avenue of spiritual practice, a way for individuals to become their ‘best selves’ and feel more connected to their inner divinity.

**Spirituality: Personal, but Not Always Private**

One of my intentions in this article is to account for the amorphous tendencies of Western metaphysical communities without simply attributing them to a culture of unbridled individualism. Scholars have singled out New Age spirituality in particular for promoting decontextualized, commoditized forms of spiritual practice that valorize the autonomous self and cater to personal tastes at the expense of doctrinal and ethical cohesion (Bruce 2002; Heelas 1996). Alternative spiritualities, it is argued, support the “individual manipulation of symbolic systems” (Hanegraaff 1999: 147), privileging private over collective/public representations as traditional religious affiliations fade from dominance. In this view, alternative spiritualities inevitably fall short of fostering viable communities or social ethics of any kind (ibid.: 154).
Although we cannot deny the pervasiveness of individualism in modern alternative spiritualities, such assessments pose serious limitations. New Age ideas of the self are more nuanced and complex, addressing objects of spiritual and ethical contemplation beyond the boundaries of the individual (Partridge 2005: 73–75). Furthermore, categorizing religious systems definitively as ‘public’ and alternative spiritualities as ‘private’ reinforces a false dichotomy that does not account for myriad intersections and indeterminacies. Individuals who identify as ‘spiritual but not religious’, for example, may disassociate from formal religious institutions but still actively create communities and collective actions where spirituality is a boon rather than an obstacle to social bonding, ritualization, and civic activism (Zwissler 2007). Scholarly estimations that reproduce flat dichotomies, or overstate the ideological separation between self and society, often fail to note how such movements construct unconventional bonds and affinities “through which inner and outer worlds are connected” (Bender and McRoberts 2012: 10).

Weighing the social dynamics of alternative spiritualities requires that we focus not just on how they measure up against established models of belief and belonging, but also “how spiritual discourses, practices, and identities are produced and the channels through which they circulate in social space” (Bender and McRoberts 2012: 7). Astrology is a ubiquitous and multi-dimensional, if controversial, social field, where dedicated participants “interact more frequently and fatefully with one another than with actors outside the field” (Scott 1994: 207–208). These interactions take place through a range of mediations that include mostly consulting practices, but also vocational conferences, workshops, and webinars; specialty publications such as journals and periodicals; digital platforms (YouTube, podcasting, horoscope apps, etc.); and social media.

More than just sites for the exchange of ideas, these are channels in which the language of astrology is enacted, allowing participants to mutually affirm its accuracy, reliability, and relevance in their lives. The act of speaking in with astrological terms exerts a moral influence that binds speakers to the authoritative medium and each other. In the context of organized and collaborative efforts connected to astrology education, research, and outreach, these bonds reflect and build on substantive personal and professional relationships. In wider, more diffuse contexts, such as social media, they are expressed through interactions far more likely to be contingent and ephemeral. In either case, participants apply a lens of ‘community’: it may at times be no more than a casual, colloquial reference, but it indexes, however tenuously, measures of identification and solidarity.

Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of ‘communities of practice’, with its emphasis on language, can be illuminating here. A community of practice is “a social group shaped by mutual orientation toward a shared activity” (Jones 2011: 25), where individual engagement and the keys to “legitimate peripheral participation” come about through learned ways of talking that are specific to that activity (Lave and Wenger 1991: 109). For practicing astrologers and enthusiasts, much like the community of entertainment magicians studied by Graham Jones (2011: 26), this typically means “mastering jargon and argot, assimilating cultural references, and recognizing the implicit—and sometimes counterintuitive—conventions” of a highly specialized speech genre that “verbally mark[s] their place in the world.” While entertainment magicians are concerned with secrecy in ways that astrologers generally are not, language in both communities carries significance beyond the referential. For astrologers, it is an expression of the union between the human capacity for empiricism and pattern synthesis, on the one hand, and the signifying power of the celestial sphere, on the other.

Fluency in the terminology and poetics of astro-speak is hardly exclusive to professional astrologers. Astrology is one of many occult modalities associated with New Age spirituality (Crockford 2018) and is often used in tandem with other methods of divination and ritual magic among Western shamans, neo-pagans, psychic mediums, and Wiccans. Indeed, it is an essential
part of what Tanya Luhrmann (1989) describes as the ‘common knowledge’ that enables communication and continuity across diverse occult groups and networks. Luhrmann adds that while this knowledge is derived from “shared resources” and subject to “shared constraints” (ibid.: 158–159), it is also notably ambiguous: “not so much a body of precise facts … but something fuzzier: information, associations and symbols taken for granted in a conversation,” thus providing “the ground for ordinary intellectual creativity” (ibid.: 145).

Although this ambiguity is evident across New Age and occult milieus, in more specialized domains of astrological discourse and practice like those I have mentioned, participants take pride in precision and consistency. They relish opportunities to ‘talk shop’ with other astrologers, often in great technical detail. Since astrological talk is an idiom mainly derived from the formal methods used for charting the actual positions and movements of celestial objects (see below), its implications are cosmological and spiritual as well as epistemological. And since it is the primary—in fact, only—means by which astrologers instantiate their expertise and mutual understanding, the implications are also profoundly moral.

And yet, taking the moral dimensions of speech seriously “does not commit us to the idea that a moral community must entail a harmonious consensus” (Keane 2011: 167). The popularization of esoteric knowledge allows it to circulate freely across many different media and levels of discourse. The very versatility that makes the language of astrology so appealing to enthusiasts makes the field all the more susceptible to splintering and atomization. Astrologers are keenly aware of this dynamic, which has only intensified as astrological resources have become freely and widely accessible on the Internet.

We must therefore be attentive to alternative expressions of cohesion and continuity. Unconventional approaches to belief and belonging yield unconventional patterns of belief and belonging. American metaphysical and New Age traditions have persisted not in spite of their eclecticism, resistance to institutions and hierarchies, or emphasis on individualized and improvisational spirituality; rather, the struggle to maintain balance between individuation and indoctrination is the very model of sociality upon which such movements thrive (Albanese 2008; Brown 1997). As we will see later, the challenges can be cause for concern and frustration among insiders, as they have certainly been for astrologers invested in their own community dynamics. Astrologers recognize that the challenges of community are intrinsic to their chosen medium. They understand that the language of astrology is individually authorizing even as it is universally authoritative.

Horoscopy: Nativity as a Point of View

Regardless of their differences, Western astrologers are unanimous to the point of insistence that astrological symbols function like language in their ability to convey layers of meaning and purpose inscribed in the stars, and that horoscopic methods are the most efficient means of interpreting what the universe has to say (Forrest [1984] 2012). For some, it is a matter of seeing planets as indicators of universal archetypes that manifest in history and the human mind (Tarnas 2007). Others like Megan, a student astrologer, described astrology to me as “a language for the divine to be able to speak to us in a way we can understand, and astrologers are the interpreters.”

While many practitioners believe there is a strong intuitive element to astrological divination, the work of interpretation is achieved first and foremost by visualizing astronomical data and calculations in concise diagrammatic form. Astrological charts, traditionally cast by hand before the advent of commercial software, make the ‘grammar’ of the heavens legible to human eyes. Astrologers regard them as objectively accurate yet polysemic texts, from which a wide
range of analytical, metaphysical, and predictive insights can be gleaned. Like most diagrams, astrological charts are “abstract maps” that point “as much toward the different potentials in outcome as they do toward a similarity in relations or constitution” (Bialecki 2017: 69). They define conditions of possibility within circumscribed spatiotemporal frames, indicating patterns of repetition as well as novel contingencies. Moreover, they are linguistic templates, providing the basis for syntactical constructions and figures of speech that effectively mimic the representational order of a universe that speaks in signs and metaphors.

The standard chart-form in contemporary Western astrology is a two-dimensional wagon-wheel diagram showing the placement of the ‘planets’—that is, the known solar planets, plus the Sun, Moon, and Pluto—and other celestial objects along the ecliptic (the apparent path of the Sun) at any given moment in time from an earth-bound perspective (see fig. 1). In natal astrology, the chart is a virtual snapshot of the celestial sphere as it ‘appears’ to a newborn at the time and place of birth. It is literally the native’s point of view.

The outer rim of the wheel is divided into 12 equal segments representing the ‘signs’ of the zodiac. The inner wedges represent the twelve ‘houses’, mathematically derived subdivisions that may or may not be aligned with the signs (depending on the chart system in use). Whereas planets and signs represent archetypal impulses and qualities of action, the houses represent different topics, contexts, and relationships in a human life cycle. In analyzing charts, astrologers pay close attention to what are known as ‘aspects’, the angular distances between planets, and ‘transits’, their relative motions over time. Planetary aspects and transits are prime indicators of

Figure 1: A sample birth chart for 12:00 PM, 4 October 2021, New York City. Source: astro-charts.com.
how planetary energies happen to be interacting—whether they are harmonious or in conflict, for example. Astrologers attend also to the elemental conditions associated with particular signs (earth signs, water signs, etc.), among a host of other factors.

To the uninitiated, an astrological chart is an indecipherable jumble of lines and obscure glyphs. For astrologers, it is a precise and informative oracular technology. It is justified by a semiotic ideology (Keane 2007) that ascribes extraordinary signifying power to objects in the celestial sphere, and by a textual ideology (Bielo 2009) predicated on the ultimate reliability of horoscopic representations. While astrologers acknowledge a subjective dimension in chart analysis, they view the chart as a time-honored, rule-governed medium modeled on the order of the cosmos, the function of which is to enhance human agency through anticipatory knowledge, and to deepen emotional, spiritual, and historical awareness.

Specific interpretations vary depending on an astrologer’s theoretical orientation. Most astrologers see the natal chart as a ‘blueprint’ or ‘roadmap’ for the life of the native, an accurate but non-deterministic visualization of preordained circumstances and proclivities. For those who practice ‘psychological astrology’, it is a map of the human psyche, including conscious and unconscious motivations. Adherents of ‘evolutionary astrology’ read birth charts for spiritual and karmic insight, tracing the journey of the soul through cycles of reincarnation, while specialists in ‘mundane astrology’ attend to matters of collective and world-historical significance, using chart techniques to predict political, economic, and environmental trends, including natural disasters. Medical astrologers read birth charts for indications of personal health issues. The list goes on.

Despite these varied applications, most basic delineations and archetypical principles that characterize contemporary chart analysis remain fairly consistent across interpretive schools. This consistency is reinforced in publications, training programs, webinars, and conferences, especially through the common practice of displaying ‘example charts’—that is, the birth charts of famous people and anonymous clients, or charts based on historic events—in order to highlight and compare notable configurations. On social media such as Facebook groups and Reddit threads, participants regularly post charts associated with current events, such as a political election or the death of a celebrity, offering their own interpretations and soliciting opinions about how these events manifest symbolically. Whether it involves seasoned practitioners demonstrating their interpretive skills, or students learning to sight-read horoscopic patterns, the practice of discussing example charts contributes to a process in which esoteric concepts and interpretive principles are normalized in the form of a common vocabulary. While disagreements occur, especially in debates over technique or in cases of missing data (such as accurate birth times), such exercises reinforce epistemic norms and facilitate the incorporation of astrological symbolism into everyday speech acts.

**Language: Speaking with Planets**

As a tool for predictive work, character analysis, spiritual growth, and social rapport, the language of astrology—including descriptive and meta-discursive practices in which horoscopic signifiers feature as linguistic resources in themselves—offers the structure and the fluidity to apply to any conceivable topic of human concern, from the mystical to the mundane. It thrives, moreover, on the semantic flexibility of its constitutive elements and their ability to be used in variable combinations and multiple semiotic registers (symbolism, indexicality, metonymy, etc.) while remaining intelligible, or at least appearing so, as coherent figures of speech.

The most familiar expressions are those that index personality traits associated with zodiacal signs, such as referring to someone as a “typical Gemini” to describe a gregarious or chatty
nature indicated by the individual’s natal Sun sign, or characterizing a dramatic or self-obsessed person as “very Leo.” A veteran teacher and organizer in the astrology community, whom I will call Donna, cited her “Capricorn rising” (Capricorn was on the horizon at the time of her birth) to explain her self-motivation and her capacity for spearheading new projects. She elaborated on the theme in an interview by describing herself, almost confessionally, as “a first house Pluto in Capricorn,” which makes her naturally inclined to want to feel in control of her life and be in charge of things.

Among practitioners and enthusiasts, sharing personal astrological data is seen as “an amazingly deep shorthand that allows us to get to know each other very quickly” (Taylor 2015: 252). Appropriately, instances of astro-speak usually involve precise technical vocabulary. Statements such as “my progressed Moon is in Libra,” “I just entered a Venus-ruled profection year,” and “I have a 2H [second house] Mars opposing my North Node” appear regularly on social media and in conversations on everything from career opportunities and the perils of modern dating to concerns about finances, family relationships, and physical and emotional well-being. Each unit of chart analysis is loaded with semantic possibilities, which are dictated by tradition, synthesized intuitively and creatively, and converted into figures of speech whose meanings are determined by the context and manner in which they are used. In the course of a casual conversation, for example, someone may refer to being audited by the IRS and then contextualize the event by disclosing that “Saturn is transiting my eighth house.” The statement draws on Saturn's symbolic associations with boundaries, restrictions, and governmental authority, as well as topical links between the eighth house and issues having to do with money. In another context—say, a group of astrologers debating house delineations—the same person might observe that “Saturn in the eighth is frightened of intimacy,” evoking different (but thematically linked) connotations whereby Saturn, now personified, represents a dimension of the human psyche rather than an external force or circumstance.

Chart symbols and synodic cycles also feature in speech to identify specific time periods or phases in people’s lives. The Saturn return, mentioned earlier, represents something of a ‘cosmic rite of passage,’ the mere mention of which calls to mind momentous and daunting transitions between stages of adulthood. References to recurring celestial events, such as planetary conjunctions, eclipse seasons, lunar cycles, and even days of the week (e.g., referring to Saturday as ‘Saturn’s day’), are regular staples of astrological discourse, usually to highlight prevailing moods and potentialities. A person sensitized to shifts in zodiacal seasons might say (or tweet) in February that they feel “overwhelmed by all this Aquarius energy,” with both positive and negative connotations, or express enthusiasm about a coming New Moon, an auspicious time for new beginnings and initiatives.

One of the most popular indicators of this kind is the notorious ‘Mercury retrograde,’ a reference to the three or four times a year when Mercury appears to move backwards. Even outside the astrology community, the phrase has become virtually synonymous with computer glitches and technological breakdowns. Among those who take astrology seriously, the expression is so normalized as a means of explaining certain conditions of reality that it is “often deployed without any further explanation or contextualisation” (Crockford 2018: 49). Another common practice is to classify generational cohorts based on coinciding long-term transits on the part of slow-moving ‘outer’ planets. For example, astrologers will describe baby boomers as the “Pluto in Leo” generation (i.e., born with Pluto in Leo), and millennials as “Pluto in Scorpio,” with all the relevant generational stereotypes left at least partially implied.

Major planetary transits figure prominently in discussions of world-historical events and trends. Right now, for example, as Uranus, the planet of invention, rebellion, and disruption, makes its seven-year transit through the steadfast earth sign of Taurus, the phrase “Uranus in Taurus” is ubiquitous in conversations about political and economic upheavals, from right-wing
population to cryptocurrency, or historic changes involving information technology and environmentalism. In early 2021, this discourse intensified with references to an impending “Saturn-Uranus square,” a 90° aspect denoting conflict and tension. American astrologers are similarly attuned to the profound societal transformations that are projected to take place as the United States undergoes its first “Pluto return,” which will culminate in 2022 as Pluto reaches “27 Cap” (27° of Capricorn), its location at the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Smaller, short-term transits come into daily conversation as well. When things got a bit heated during an online panel discussion on the theme of astrology and race in 2020, for example, more than one attendee made note of the fact that there was a “Mars-Moon conjunction in Aries” taking place at the very same moment: strong reactions and fiery emotions were only to be expected.

All these astrological phrases and references situate individuals within the cyclical, archetypal frameworks of astrological time, implicating them in a moral universe where astrology is the primary language for making sense of reality. Like the Apache speech genre of 'speaking with names' (Basso 1996: chap. 3), instances of astro-speak are performative verbal routines that allow community members to signal their participation in a shared linguistic code and lay claim to its perceived benefits as a means of heightening self-awareness and knowledge. Professional astrologers avoid using obscure jargon when advising clients or writing for general audiences. But in the presence of other astrologers, they embrace it with gusto. Whether invoking their own charts in conversation, or those of loved ones and celebrities, practitioners take great satisfaction in demonstrating fluency in the company of others. As the language is bound to the rhythms and energies of the cosmos, the ability to translate it in human terms is regarded as spiritually edifying. At the same time, the practice of rendering and applying that universal code is a deeply individualized endeavor, making ‘metaphysical community’ something of a complicated ideal and a perennial challenge.

Community: Bumping Along

When I asked Donna, quoted earlier, how she characterizes the astrology community, she echoed a common refrain: “Well, it’s very Uranian of course. It’s a bunch of weirdos doing a bunch of weird things, marching to their own drumbeat.” She acknowledged that the language of astrology is the “connective tissue,” but added that “finding people that speak your language and connecting up with them is a bigger process.” Clubs and associations can be scarce or alienating. Competitive and argumentative impulses prevail. “We all are just weird in so many different ways,” she continued, “locked in our own fears and doubts and trying to grab a piece of the pie that sometimes appears to be limited. There are defense mechanisms and the need to be right. I mean, we’re just human. We bump along, doing our thing.”

I have described Western astrologers as a community of practice, but you could just as well say they are practitioners in search of community. As it is, the concept of community is often loaded with irony: as soon as it materializes as a function of our ideals and aspirations, it starts to fall short of our expectations. Communities are seldom more ‘real’ than in those moments when we find ourselves sensing the gaps, dwelling on shortcomings, and straining to clarify the borders of inclusion. The times I have heard astrologers talk explicitly about themselves as a community have often been in moments of reflexive criticism, pointing out quirky and idiosyncratic tendencies and disagreements over the boundaries of authenticated practice. As scholar-practitioner Nicholas Campion (2009: 282) explains: “All astrologers share the experience that it ‘works’ but the ‘community’, such as it is, contains some who deny that other astrologers are real astrologers at all. The gulf between those who think that it can be proved statistically and
those who imagine they are medieval diviners is deep. The rhetorical positions combine with rival allegiances, exactly as in any other field.”

It is true that astrology’s internal debates and rivalries suggest more in common with mainstream professions than one might think. But they are also indicative of the duality that animates occult sociality, the interplay of “centripetal” and “centrifugal” forces (Bialecki 2017: 61) propelled by a focal apparatus. The language of astrology inspires solidarity as well as fragmentation. Important trends in Western astrology over the past century, such as the development of certification programs, came about through efforts on the part of a critical mass to establish uniform standards and support systems modeled after modern therapeutic, academic, and consultative disciplines. While crucial to the emergence of an esprit de corps in the astrology community, such efforts are not always in sync with the independent proclivities of practitioners, many if not most of whom are self-taught and take pride in cultivating their personal styles, preferred techniques, and eclectic hermeneutics.

In recent years, access to online learning resources and astrological software has allowed the field to grow and diversify, and even project an image of unity like rarely before. But the potential for disunity and discord has increased as well. As more individuals take up the language of astrology and put themselves forward as exemplary practitioners, accusations of misuse and misrepresentation and disputes over intellectual property have escalated (like so much virtual discourse), as have condemnations of so-called fake astrology, which astrologers recognize as their single greatest liability and the hardest to control. A popular revival of traditional Hellenistic techniques has produced its own debates and schisms, as practitioners rally around and argue over interpretations of ancient sources and techniques that in any other field would likely fall under the more restrictive purview of academic scholars (Brennan 2017).

The current renaissance has resonated especially strongly with younger practitioners and enthusiasts, including people of color and queer/trans astrologers, many of whom are vocal in calling out the community’s internal legacies of racism and exclusion (or ‘gatekeeping’) on the part of an established white elite. Demands for inclusion, transparency, and accountability—a trend that has been linked to Saturn transiting the sign of Aquarius—represent significant shifts in the public culture of astrology, while stirring their fair share of controversies and recriminations. The move toward virtual conferencing during the pandemic has been momentous in this regard by opening spaces of astrological discourse to a wider, more diverse audience than usual, disrupting much of the status quo in the process. A newly emboldened community of practitioners is rising to the challenge of decolonizing astrology, which entails serious efforts to revisit, reform, and recover the language of astrology for marginalized groups, who seek, in short, to make it more spiritually validating by making it their own (Kat 2021).

To be sure, the various cultural dynamics just described emerge from historical and social factors that are beyond the scope of this article. My intention has been to demonstrate how they are indicative of the complex character of collectivism in decentralized alternative and occult fields like astrology, where idealized structures of belonging are tenuous by nature, and where no tenets reign supreme other than a core belief in the supreme reliability of the occult medium itself. Whereas conventional intellectual, religious, and professional fields function within more or less institutionalized parameters, astrology and other alternative modes of spiritual and occult practice, while hardly detached from institutional entanglements (Bender 2010), exist in comparatively liminal domains. Even as professional astrologers seek legitimation, they embrace the indeterminacy and marginality of the field as marks of distinction.

There are, of course, recognized teaching lineages and hierarchies of knowledge among astrologers, as well as renowned institutions. The field is anything but chaotic and unruly. But authority mainly lies with the symbol system, the structure of non-arbitrary significations attributed
to celestial objects. The system in turn grants authority to those who can decipher it and make it their own, through private practice and as contributors to the public arena. That there will always be subjective and cultural influences that shape how individuals absorb and externalize the system is something few astrologers deny. In fact, it is vital to the field’s resilience and its ability to take on diverse areas of material and metaphysical concern through multiple applications, including modes of therapeutic counseling and care that have become synonymous with alternative healing professions. At the same time, the extent to which the language of astrology lends itself to versatility and individual mastery, free of institutional control, allows for all manner of dissonances, eccentricities, novel assertions, and unorthodox (or should I say, Uranian) claims. The fault lines of occult sociality may not seem ideal, but they are intrinsic to the articulated sense of community that they invariably complicate.

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