Shamanic phenomena, it seems, have always been part of the human consciousness and modern Western shamans (neo-shamans) are seeking to (re)-claim what some would see as their (lost) heritage. The literature on neo-shamans focuses primarily on core shamanism or re-constructed shamanisms as practised in parts of Britain, the United States, and Northern or Western Europe. There is a need for other perspectives, and analysis of neo-shamanism from other areas of the globe, to avoid the methodological traps of assuming all neo-shamanisms are the same (Wallis, 2003: 230). This chapter, an annotated bibliography drawn from my doctoral thesis about contemporary shamanic healing and neo-shamans in New Zealand covers many landscapes and crosses numerous boundaries, drawing on literature from various academic disciplines, popular publications and the internet.

Categorising Neo-Shamans

Robert Wallis (2003), an academic and self-identified neo-shaman, provides a sympathetic, but not uncritical account of the diversity of neo-shamanism, drawing on the shamanic practices of contemporary pagans in the United Kingdom and North America, and core shamanism as taught internationally by Michael Harner and the Foundation for Shamanic Studies. He discards descriptors applied by other scholars to neo-shamans—“crisis cults”, “revitalisation movements”, “marginal religious movements”, “subculture” or “counterculture” movements, or “New Age” amongst others—on the grounds that neo-shamans are too numerous, too diffuse, and diverse in their practices and that, at least in some areas, they are becoming mainstream and even operating within the corporate world. Neo-shamans, he says, ‘embody a number of socio-political locations, including counter-cultural, being socially integrated, modern and post-modern. In this diversity, neo-Shamanisms reject attempts at simplistic classification…we might rather speak less pejoratively, pluralistically and simply, of ‘neo-Shamanisms’. (ibid.: 30)
The 1960s counter-culture movements, with their dismissal of mainstream values and politics, adoption of New Age spirituality and values, healing and personal growth, environmental concerns, drug experimentation and pop music, certainly provided fertile ground for modern shamanic movements to emerge during the 1970s (Heelas, 1996; Vitebsky, 1995). Harner (1990: xi) puts forward several reasons for the ‘shamanic renaissance’ in the Western world: the end of an Age of Faith and a corresponding search for an experiential spirituality, along with an increased interest in holistic health and spiritual ecology. Romantic and idealised notions about “exotic others” perceived as being in touch with a pristine nature possibly also fuel the trend (Vitbesky, 2003; von Stuckrad, 2002).

In spite of Wallis’ (2003: 29) and other neo-shamans’ rejection, there is a tendency for some to link neo-shamanism with New Age thinking. There are overlaps between contemporary Western shamanism, paganism and New Age thinking (Greenwood, 2005; von Stuckrad, 2002), all of which have been subsumed under the heading ‘nature religion’ (Albanese, 1991). Susan Greenwood (2005:ix) writes that ‘[n]ature religion comprises a number of spiritual ontologies, all of which have different conceptions of nature, but most share the view that there is an interconnected and sacred universe’. Other writers compare and contrast the New Age and neo-pagan movements (York, 1995; Greenwood, 2000: 8–11; Pearson, 2002), noting the tendency for New Age thinking to be more transcendent and utopian than that of neo-pagans. The ‘essential lingua franca’ of New Age thinking is ‘self-spirituality’ (Heelas, 1996: 18) and similarly, many neo-pagans and neo-shamans aspire to create their own spiritual pathway. In some areas at least, New Age mores have made such a widespread impact that some aspects of its thinking are now mainstream (for example, holistic health and the move towards integrated medicine, or within the corporate world which has embraced team-building and prosperity consciousness, “creating your own reality”-type beliefs). This is true for many neo-shamans too,

1 Heelas’ and Woodward’s (2005) Subjectivization Thesis offers the possibility of the co-existence of secularisation and sacralisation in modern Western society, correlating this with social changes within education, health, and other sectors with their trends towards being more people-focused rather than rule bound and hierarchical in structure. See also Cowan (2005: 193–194) who notes that people are becoming not ‘less religious’ but ‘differently religious’.