Utopian Encounters: Healing, Transformation and Paradox amongst Women in Alternative Community

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study examines the stories of 37 women committed to five utopian communities located in the United States and Australia. Drawing on feminist, sociological and poststructuralist theories, it explores participants' pragmatic attempts to create alternative visions of mutual support, care and connection in late modern society. Centrally, it considers the ways participants' subjectivities *intersect* with alternative community and the extent to which such intersections generate utopian possibilities and/or ambivalences.

Method: This project employs a feminist qualitative methodology and gathers data via in-depth qualitative interviews, participant observation and auto-ethnographic writing. It focusses on the subjectivities of women, or those who identify as women, specifically to provide insight into the ways women are currently engaged in generating non-hegemonic discourses in response to dominant neoliberal values and lifestyle practices.

Findings: Centrally, this study illuminates the complex encounter between alternative community and the subjectivities of participants. It argues that discourse, materiality, relationality and emotions intersect and represent meaningful points of contact within alternative life. Thus, alternative community is found to be an entangled and complex site that facilitates relationships across the inside, outside, symbolic and the fleshy. It is also found to have potential to heal, transform and yet simultaneously constrain the subjectivities of its members. Thus, this study makes a case for understanding the mechanics and micro-dynamics underpinning this version of utopia, as it collapses boundaries, invites healing intersections, re-envisions the self and ultimately produces a range of paradoxical encounters.

Contribution: This study contributes to the field of feminist social sciences as it brings together a range of theoretical approaches, including poststructuralism, new materialist feminism and environmental/communal scholarship, to analyse the rich stories of participants. Moreover, it offers fine-grained qualitative data on the more problematic (and subtle) aspects of community discourse and relationships. While the existing literature has often looked at more obvious problems, like break-downs in communication and process, this study looks at invisible expectations that can shape women's subjectivities both productively and problematically. Centrally, it demonstrates that women committed to alternative community are currently engaged in the crucial work of responding to and reconfiguring dominant discourses and approaches to the social and natural world. Such

reconceptualised ways of being in the world serve as a genuine and viable alternative to the consumerist neoliberal culture of post-modernity, yet they also perpetuate certain expectations and limitations which warrant scholarly and practical consideration into the future.

DECLARATION

I, Nadine Levy, certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

I give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University's digital research repository, the Library Search and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time.

Nadine Levy, 30.11.18

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INTRODUCTION

This project stems for my own yearning for community: over the years I had been involved in multiple community ventures and social movements, yet the need to belong to something bigger than myself persisted. I wondered if this desire was linked to my own personal history, which had involved familial loss and estrangement as a child, or whether it was simply a "natural" response to the ever-changing quality of community within a neoliberal society. What I did know, however, was that I was not alone in my search. The yearning for community was shared amongst many of my peers as well as many other women across time and space. Hence, I was eager to understand the factors that motivated women to seek a shared life and involve themselves in communitarian projects. I was interested in applying my feminist imagination to the complexities involved in finding and joining community, extending it both to the fulfilling and challenging dimensions, as I knew a superficial analysis would not fulfil my intellectual hunger. Something more nuanced was needed.

When I first conceived of this project I understood "community" to be some*where* external to the self and as some*thing* that needed to be *found*. Once found I assumed it had the capacity to facilitate deep social ties and quasi-familial bonds and encourage an inclusive social ethic. I imagined one needed to journey *outward* to find community. I did not anticipate that community could be experienced both within and without. Nor did I imagine the more complex interactions that could occur within a community setting across the spheres of narrative, body and environment. At the early stages, I conceived of community in purely social terms and viewed its potential simply in relation to the power to facilitate greater and more meaningful interpersonal connection. However, it was not until my fieldwork was complete that I began to think of it as something more encompassing. Over the course of my journey it came to life as a metaphorical and utopian site, one that had the capacity to facilitate a range of meaningful encounters – one that was more lively, interactive and organic than what I had ever envisioned.

My preliminary understanding of "community" was reflected in the sociological literature, which, in the main, argued that community as we once knew it was under severe threat in the West. Scholars associated the decline of community with the rise of individualism and consumerism, contending that over the last several decades neoliberalism had undermined the robust community spirit we had once enjoyed (Bauman, 2001; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim,

2001; Bellah, 1985; Franklin, 2009; Putnam 2000; Rauch, Deker, & Woodside, 2015; Ritzer,1998; Ryan & Dziurawiec, 2000;).

Eitzen (2004), for example, argued that community was dwindling as a result of an "architecture of loneliness." Such architectural design, he claimed, encouraged individuals to remain indoors and insulated from the public spaces and was perpetuated by individualising technologies such as televisions, refrigerators and computers. This, Eitzen (2004) argued, was compounded by the "mobile" nature of modern life in which individuals were less likely than their predecessors to invest energy into their local communities given there was a high probability they would leave to join a new one within a matter of years. Other scholars, as well as more popular commentators, linked social fragmentation to the rise of online technologies, like the internet, proposing that such technologies reduced communication to a series of empty exchanges that lacked intimacy (Bargh & McKenna, 2004, p577-578; Twenge, 2013). Other scholars characterised the increasing demands on individuals' time and energy as a barrier to maintaining bonds and to enjoying collective pursuits (Eitzen, 2004, Pocock, 2003; Skinner, Hutchinson & Pocock, 2012). This, scholars suggested, was particularly heightened for women who juggled paid work with domestic work and caring responsibilities (Hochschild & Machung, 1990; Skinner, Hutchinson & Pocock, 2012).

Generally, within this body of work, "community" was constructed as the foundation of a thriving society and a force that needed to be revived. A type of urgency was at play here: as community was being dismantled, a range of grave ethical concerns were emerging, such as loneliness and social isolation. Nostalgia also underpinned this perspective; scholars consistently referred to an idealised point in time, a time when individuals frequented the Church on Sundays, attended community events, engaged in a range of hobbies and were politically active with greater frequency and commitment (see Putnam, 2000).

These ideas prompted me to consider a range of questions. Did I believe community was dead? Or was community simply moving location? Over 15 years ago, Pocock (2003) had suggested that community was moving from the streets to the workplace: individuals no longer had the time to engage in "civic" events, she explained, rather they socialised and contributed to communal projects at work, in work time. I could see how this might be the case. Alternatively, I wondered, were we living in a liminal time in which community was still being reconfigured? In other words, could community still be in "process", simply finding a new place to land? Although these macro-questions did not form the central focus of this

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project, they remained with me throughout my research journey and formed the backdrop of my enquiries.

Soon after, I came across another body of literature, one that detailed *utopian* responses to the perceived lack of social connection in modern life (see Chapter One). A range of scholars examined the formation of Intentional Communities (or communes), ecovillages and alternative lifestyle spaces, all of which have featured in Western society for decades. Such literature argued that utopian experiments had the capacity to critique dominant culture, propose social alternatives and foster an ethic of care. Thus, according to this body of work, community was not lost but was being reconfigured outside of dominant culture. These utopian counter-spaces captivated my imagination, partly because I had been involved in such communities in the past, but also because I was interested in understanding the ways in which they fulfilled their aim to provide a more connected and fulfilling life for those involved.

As I delved deeper, however, I could see that this body of work rarely provided critical analyses of the experiences of those involved in utopian experiments. Most scholarship took a functionalist and/or historical approach to community, seldom providing in-depth analyses of the micro-dynamics involved. Moreover, the literature failed to consider the ways in which utopian experiments were implicated in creating their own discursive systems of authority which, I imagined, could result in both productive and paradoxical outcomes.

In response to these gaps, this project was designed to capture the complex experiences, perceptions and views of *women* in alternative community from a *feminist, social constructionist* perspective. I chose to study women - including those who identify as women – as I believe women's subjectivities are significant both epistemologically and politically. As explained in Chapter Two, this methodological choice was premised on the idea that women are impacted by and generate specific gendered discourses that structure subjective life. As such, I sought to use a critical lens to generate fine-grained data detailing women's experiences of searching, finding and ultimately committing to community.

Thus, the parameters of this project were defined as: *women* committed to *alternative communities* located specifically in the US and Australia. "Alternative community" was defined as any progressive, egalitarian, communal and physical space that encouraged unique and progressive ways of relating to the others, the environment and/or the self. Five communities and 37 participants were recruited and involved in this study. These included

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women from a large secular Intentional Community, a Buddhist residential community, a feminist non-residential community and two New Age Intentional Communities. I provide further details on each of these communities in Chapter Two.

The central research question guiding this project, then, was "in what ways are women-participants' subjectivities transformed within alternative community". The term "subjectivity" was used purposefully to capture the proposition that individuals both impact and are formed by discursive systems symbiotically (drawing on Weedon, 1987). Hence, the ways community and societal discourses transformed women's sense of being-in-the world, as well as the ways discourses manifested in the narratives of women, formed a central focus for this project. In addition, throughout this thesis, subjectivity was understood to be shaped by something other than simply language – it was also seen as affected by (and affecting) the *material* aspects of experience. Hence, a further focus for this thesis was the ways in which the environment and the corporeal impacted the experiences of women in alternative community.

This study, thus, aimed to examine both the material and immaterial facets of women's subjectivities. Additionally, it sought to include both the *opportunities* and *limitations* experienced by participants in alternative community. While the literature documented the ways alternative community provided support to those involved and covered some of the barriers to success - like communication breakdowns and/or conflicts arising out of competing interests (see Chapter One) - it rarely detailed the more discursive ambivalences women experienced and navigated in community.

Over the course of my research, my own ideas about where utopia existed exactly and how it worked were challenged. What became clear was that utopian community was enlivened at various intersections and therefore could not be reduced to a singular definition or simple explanation. That is, it could not be described as simply a group of people with a common goal. Nor could it be characterised solely as a concept or a subjective state of mind, or as a feeling of connection, yet it was all of these things and something more.

In order to make sense of the relationship between these sites, throughout this thesis I use terms like "encounter", "contacting" and "junctures" to conceptualise the contacting of spheres which are linguistically bounded, such as self and other, community and individuals, material and immaterial and social and emotional.

The concept of "encounter" originates in geography and postcolonialist thought. As Wilson (2017) argues, "encounter" has historically referred to a meeting between oppositional forces. She builds on this, inviting scholars to think of the concept as both "the coming together of different bodies" and the process of constituting difference (p455). However, I do not use "encounter" here to refer necessarily to oppositional forces, but metaphorically, to discuss the contacting of various spheres that are linguistically demarcated.

Moreover, the notion of "contacting" shares some similarities with the notion of a "contact zone" employed in postcolonial literature (see Pratt, 1991) and geographical works (see Askins & Pain, 2011, Mayblin et al, 2016). The "contact zone" is a notion that conceptualises different, sometimes conflicting, cultural groups coming together and the ways meetings transform subjects in unexpected ways (Pratt, 1991). I use the term "contacting" in a similar yet distinct way to connote something more than simply *bodies* meeting. I use it to capture the connections between various aspects of the utopian project and their potential to lead to meaningful encounters.

Hence, these terms capture the connections between *internal* and *external* aspects of utopia, and I use them to suggest that community's potential lies at the juncture between the material, discursive and relational. This thesis, then, embarks on an analysis of connection, not just between individuals, but between several facets of experience, many of which are commonly considered distinct.

This thesis is divided into seven chapters and is structured in the following way. Chapter One looks exclusively at literature on *alternative communities*. It does not consider the key concepts I apply throughout the thesis. Moreover, in Chapter Two I focus predominantly on the epistemological assumptions informing this study's methodological choices, rather than the conceptual frameworks used to consider each theme. Instead, I introduce relevant conceptual approaches and questions at the start of each thematic chapter (see Chapters Three to Six).

In **Chapter One** I survey the relevant scholarship on alternative communities in the West and consider the main questions driving such work. I find that, in the main, the scholarship has focussed on the structures, sociality and functionality of communities and has been preoccupied with what communities can teach broader society about egalitarianism and living within ecological boundaries. The literature has also considered what such communities might tell us about broader socio-political trends at particular points in history.

Thus, I demonstrate that much of the relevant scholarship has been concerned with *macro-questions* relating to what utopian endeavours *mean* for society *at large*. I argue that my study contributes something new to the field in that it focusses on women's subjectivities and connects them to broader discourses present both within and outside of community. It does this by asking specific questions about how the discursive, material and relational shape the *experiences* of women within community.

In **Chapter Two** I describe the communities involved in this study and outline the main epistemic underpinnings informing the study's research design. I discuss the proposition that human knowledge is continually *constructed* through one's relationship to culture, institutions, social structure, discourse and materiality. Theoretically, I situate my project within the context of social constructionism, post-structuralism and new materialist feminism. I offer an explanation as to why women were chosen as the focus of the project, detailing the feminist poststructuralist premise that women are shaped and involved in creating a range of gendered discourses. Next, I outline the specific methods employed, namely semi-structured qualitative interviews, participant observation and journaling. These methods in combination, I propose, allow me to tease out the underlying meanings and subtleties of participants' experiences in a way that is reflexive of my own preconceptions, biases and experiences.

Chapter Three considers the factors that motivated participants to develop and join alternative community. In particular, it analyses participants' self-reported narratives and the ways these interact with broader cultural discourses arising specifically out of the New Age and human potential movements. I reveal that most self-narratives involved a journey away from mainstream culture toward a sense of connection both psychologically and toward the broader world. Such storylines were shown to be productive in that they invited participants to move toward the richness of their subjective lives, to claim their own specificity and to achieve a sense of homecoming. However, they equally had the potential to stifle stories of failure, unhappiness and frustration that potentially arose from the choice to join community. Additionally, such stories were shown be associated with particular positions of class and race-privilege. Thus, it was at this intersection that something significant yet paradoxical happened: while most participants found belonging and fulfilment within this discursive frame, they equally risked finding themselves constrained within the boundaries of their own stories and unaware of the privilege associated with such vantage-points.

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In **Chapter Four** I turn to the emotion norms that underpinned community life and the ways they shaped participants' subjective experiences. I argue that certain understandings of emotions resulted in the ethical locus of social life shifting from external goals toward a particular way of managing distressing emotions, which encouraged participants across all communities to take "responsibility" for their internal life and aim for greater "authenticity" and "self-awareness." This normative framework, I suggest, was problematic for the minority who did not have the tools or willingness to manage their emotional world in the way that was encouraged. Yet, at the same time, this framework was found to be greatly empowering and therapeutic for participants, highlighting the paradoxical nature of this encounter.

Chapter Five is concerned with the interpersonal and gendered dimensions of community. It examines the social and institutional factors that contribute to participants' fulfilment within community. It explores in particular participants' visions of commitment and interpersonal connection and argues that the notion of "community" was imbued with the discursive formations of "intimacy", "empathy" and "equality", amongst others. Such formations generated significant social and psychological possibilities for participants, particularly for those who perceived community as a safe place (both symbolically and physically) to experiment with alternative modes of being in the world. At the same time, I point to some of the ambivalent aspects of sociality revealing discursive tensions in respect to the way gender "freedom" was conceived and understood by some individuals in community.

The focus of **Chapter Six** is the juncture between the body, the natural world and participants' subjectivities. It considers how these dimensions come together to produce utopian moments of healing and spiritual transformation. It reveals that participants' views and experiences of materiality had a considerable impact on what they derived from (and gave back to) the natural environment as well as how they managed their health. I point specifically to a significant encounter between participants' grief/distress and the natural environment, which reveals that emotions were reflected, impacted and alleviated by "nature" and, in this way, the Cartesian boundaries of mind/body and animal/human were troubled and reconfigured. This, I argue, had significant environmental, psychological and ethical implications in that it encouraged a compassionate way of relating to self and the material.

The **Conclusion** summarises my major findings and contends that my study extends work on utopian endeavours by revealing that transformation within alternative community occurs in

between both internal and external sites. It details the major ways participants'
subjectivities were transformed, liberated and, at times, constrained by virtue of encounters
in alternative community. Such transformations were shown to occur at the points where
subjectivities contacted the *discursive, relational and material*. Centrally, I demonstrate the
ways my work moves away from making sense of alternative community as simply a physical
"space", toward an understanding of community as a complex site that facilitates
relationship between the inside and the outside, the utopian and the material.

CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Alternative communities have a long history in the Western world and it follows that a significant number of scholars have sought to document and understand them from a range of perspectives. Indeed, sociologists, anthropologists, cultural theorists and historians, amongst others,[1] have taken a keen interest in the ways humans group together to create alternative conscious spaces away, both physically and ethically, from the mainstream. Some have examined the meaning of these spaces in a political and sociological sense, while others have documented lessons and insights through biography and historical accounts. For the most part, however, the scholarship has focussed on the *viability*, *success and ethos* of communitarian experiments and, in doing so, has neglected the more *subjective*, *intersubjective* and *felt* aspects of alternative community. In response, my research examines the ways in which alternative community transforms, shapes and/or limits women's experiences.

In this Chapter I outline *the ways* scholars have studied alternative communities in the West. I consider the research questions they have considered, as well as the theoretical orientations they have applied in carrying out their research. I also examine the major themes arising from the scholarship and find that while most studies in this area have been premised on the idea that such communities represent a site of inquiry charged with imaginative and political possibilities, in the main, scholars have failed to offer nuanced analyses of the subjectivities of those committed to alternative community. My study fills this gap.

A preliminary note on the term "alternative community" is in order here. Throughout this thesis, I use this term as a way of describing non-residential as well as residential "Intentional Communities". In relation to Intentional Communities, I adopt the following definition offered by Meijering, Huigen and Van Hoven (2007):

> *1. No bonds by familial relationships only.*
> *2. A minimum of three to five adult members.*

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1 That is not to say there are not a small number of stand-alone studies examining Intentional Communities from other scholarly fields. Brenton (1999), for example, carries out a policy research project on older women creating Intentional Communities, Martin & Fuller (2004) offer a psychological study on the gender dynamics found in Intentional Communities, while Grinde et al (2018) apply social indicators to communards' quality of life and wellbeing and argue "that sustainability, in the form of a communal lifestyle of low ecological footprint, may be promoted without forfeiting wellbeing" (p1).

3. Members join voluntarily.
4. Geographical and psychological separation from mainstream society.
5. A common ideology that is adhered to by all members.
6. Sharing of (a part of) one's property.
7. The interest of the group prevails over individual interests.
(Meijering, Huigen and Van Hoven 2007, p42)

In referring to non-residential spaces, I am alluding to organised communities that inhabit a central location, but do not necessarily offer residential accommodation to their members. These communities do, however, offer a shared ethos, a common set of goals and "psychological separation from mainstream" society (Meijering, Huigen and Van Hoven, 2007, p42). Thus, I use the umbrella term "alternative community" to refer to progressive, egalitarian residential *and* non-residential spaces that have a minimum of three to five adult members.

Communal Studies

Communal studies scholarship has situated alternative visions within the context of broader social trends and has examined what such communities *represent* historically and in relation to the political landscape from which they emerge. In doing so, such work has offered insights into the *social significance* and *meaning* of utopian communities and imaginings.

Communal studies scholars have developed a body of historical work detailing the earliest utopian experiments in the Western world (see Armytage, 1961; Delano, 2004; Muncy, 1973; Stephan and Stephan, 1973). This work documents the structures, lifestyles, religions and ideological orientations influencing such utopian communities. For the most part, such work has focussed on the early communes of the United States, such as Brook Farm (1841–1846), New Harmony (1825–1829), Oneida (1848-1881) and the Shakers (1745-) (see Holloway, 1966), revealing that utopian communities have "been an ongoing theme in American life for more than three centuries..." (Miller 1992, p75). Moreover, such scholarship has shown that the utopian movements of the 18th and 19th centuries were heavily influenced by a series of religious revivals (particularly that of Protestantism) and endeavoured to escape the so-called "trappings" of everyday society by cultivating a simple and non-materialistic existence. This motivation was also reflected in the small number of utopian communities in the United Kingdom (see Armytage, 1961) and Australia (see Metcalf and Huf, 2002).

According to Metcalf and Huf (2002), Australia's first utopian commune was established soon after European settlement, in 1853, by German leader Johann Friedrich Krumnow. This

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commune, which had Christian underpinnings, called itself "Herrnhut" and consisted of a group of German immigrants who pooled their resources to start a farm. According to Metcalf & Huf (2002), in addition to operating the farm, the group provided a safe-haven to Indigenous Australians, homeless people and women fleeing violence. It disbanded in 1876. Another historically significant Australian attempt at a utopian community was led by William Lane in 1893 (see Whitehead, 2018). Lane, an English journalist and influential figure in the socialist/labour movement, led approximately 500 Australians to Paraguay, South America in an attempt to create a socialist utopia for working-class people. Lane's vision was a racist one: he required communards to refrain from "mixing" with people of colour. This commune split soon after it was established but approximately 60 adherents remained committed to a break-away group and continued for a period of approximately 16 years.

The next significant wave of communalism emerged in the 1960s and 70s. During this period, communal studies scholars sought to understand the ways notions of freedom, social resistance and environmentalism were enacted by hippie communards. They also sought to examine the rise of spiritual communities influenced by the New Religious Movement and Eastern traditions (see Palmer, 1992; Abbott, 2015). According to scholars like Miller (1992) hippie communes were socially significant in that they *revived* a long history of communitarianism in the West. However, Miller also asserts that a great amount of variation existed between each wave of communalism (as well as within each of the waves). For example, Miller points to several key differences between the communes of the 1960s and 70s and their earlier predecessors, including the fact that hippie communes routinely offered open membership, access to drugs and free-love whilst most historical communes were closed groups, often influenced by organised religion and strict mechanisms of internal control and structure (Miller 1992, pp79-80).

Significantly, Australian scholar and communard Bill Metcalf offers multiple historical analyses of Intentional Communities established in the 1960s and 70s (Metcalf, 1998; 2004; Metcalf, Christensen & Levinson, 2003) and provides life biographies of those involved in communitarian living (see Metcalf, 1995; 1996), which he situates within the framework of "utopianism" (a theoretical approach discussed below). Metcalf's work illuminates the trajectories of those who have consciously elected to opt out of dominant society to build an alternative. Similar detailed descriptions of the structures and daily life of community living can be found in the work of scholar/communards such as Fisher (2007), Christian (2006) and Kinkade (1994), all of whom provide personal accounts of the way life within community

differs to life in mainstream society. Such accounts argue that viable communes are a positive social phenomenon that is not only effective in challenging the dominant culture but also in modelling progressive and inclusive social norms which broader society can learn from. In this way, these scholars have a clear political purpose: to persuade readers of the utility and accomplishments of utopian communities in the West.

Such historical accounts offer points of comparison for those who study contemporary utopian endeavours. This enables scholars to compare the motivations, objects and structures of current communities with their predecessors and contextualise contemporary community-building. Yet they are also limited in that they do not provide deep insight into the lifeworld of those engaged in the cultivation of alternative spaces and, as such, issues around knowledge, power and discourse are left unconsidered.

The Sociology of Intentional Communities

Another branch of communal studies scholarship that began to emerge in the 1970s can be described as more sociological in its approach. This branch has been termed the "sociology of Intentional Communities". Abrams and McCulloch (1976) offer an early example, which examines communalism within 1960s Britain, as well as an Israeli Kibbutz, and asks to what extent communes have the capacity to institutionalise and promote friendships and social ties. The authors apply (macro) social theory and argue that the worth of the communal experiment lies in its capacity to provide an alternative to the traditional nuclear family. They argue that the "family commune" (which they define as small and generally made up of 5 to 25 members plus children) represents a legitimate alternative that can act to shape society and influence social policy.

Another formative sociological study can be found in the book *Alienation and Charisma* by Zablocki (1980) in which 120 communes of the 1970s are studied in response to the broad research question: "what creates community?" Centrally, Zablocki discovers that communities with strong love-ties (or intimate bonds) are more likely to "fail" compared to those with less one-to-one intimacy. Hence, he posits (rather counter-intuitively) that romantic relationships can lead to a breakdown in the fabric of community. Moreover, he offers some suggestions on how to encourage individuals to remain in community, proposing that relational distancing mechanisms (like discouraging romantic relationships) may, in fact, *assist in* encouraging communards' long-term commitment to community. Again, while Abrams and McCulloch and Zablocki offer insight into the functions and benefits

of communalism, the complex lived dimensions of alternative community are scarcely examined.

Farias' (2017) contemporary exploration echoes Abrams and McCulloch's (1976) inquiry and considers the function of *friendship* in actualising political ideals within organised communities. Based on an ethnography of a community which Farias calls "Longo Mai", this analysis examines the role of social bonds in fostering the political ideals of "complex equality", "empowerment" and "democracy". In doing so, this exploration effectively demonstrates how aspects of Longo Mai's sociality strengthen these political goals. Farias explains:

> *Considering strangers as potential friends and applying this terminology to guests and supporters highlights one of the central values defended by Longo Maï, which is to put the person and its otherness at the centre of the organization. This means here respecting the biological rhythms, personal preferences and concerns rather than looking for instrumental and transcendent goals such as productivity or the organization's survival as an end per se….such practices constitute the core of their political engagement…the group is trying out and constantly recreating the experience of living together in accordance with the values of cooperation, autonomy and complex equality* (pp589-590).

As the above passage suggests, Farias' analysis is an organisational one – she is interested in the *function* of friendship in respect to community activism and social movements. She argues that social bonds, and their affective dimensions, have tangible political outcomes within community - they are shown to encourage diversity, respect and the inclusion of the "Other". However, Farias also endeavours to argue that given Longo Mai does not hold a particular ideology, "the selection of 'friends' through rituals of socialization, therefore, does not operate at the discursive level" (p590). My work can be distinguished in this respect in that it is premised on the idea that interpersonal dynamics are necessarily discursively formed and that as such discourses of sociality are inevitable within communities, even if they are more tacit and unrecognisable in their operation.

Another contemporary example of the sociology of Intentional Communities can be found in the edited collection, *The Communal Idea in the 21st Century*, which examines the political and social relevance of Intentional Communities in modern society (Ben-Rafael, Oved and Topel, 2012). The various authors locate the development of Intentional Communities within the "neoliberal, capitalist backdrop, with its declining social capital" (2012, pvii) and ask to what extent Intentional Communities are effectively challenging discourses of individualism by encouraging egalitarianism. Centrally, they argue that "behaviours, structures or claims

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that were apprehended as problematic and assumed to be avoided in communities… are capable of seeping in and achieve recognition" (p323). Here, the authors argue that issues which were originally rejected by the communities (such as legal structures and consumer culture) are invariably being negotiated and acknowledged by the communities. This results in the transformation of communities' objectives and modes of operating "to endorse new means and ends" (p323).

A similar finding can be found in the sociological work of Manzella (2010) who examines the evolution of communes across the globe, extending his exploration to the Kibbutz movement in Israel and ecovillages in the US. Throughout the book, Manzella characterises communes as creative responses to the hypermodern forces of identity-fragmentation, individualisation, time-acceleration and incessant choice. However, he also suggests that contemporary communities do not reject modernity in its entirety, but rather pragmatically draw on the aspects they find useful and reject other aspects. In other words, according to Manzella, the modern commune exists somewhere in between the poles of modernity and communalism. Thus, Manzella (2010) posits that contemporary communards are "entrepreneurial" in their approach to building alternative societies, as they draw on the workable parts of both modern life and the communal ideal.

Another finding offered by Manzella (2010) is that modern communards are, to a certain extent, driven by a sense of nostalgia in their attempt to recreate ideas of a better past (p176). This again highlights the "liminal" space which such communities often inhabit. In this way, contemporary community represents a site where nostalgia and modernity are negotiated, as well as discourses associated with communalism, individualism and entrepreneurialism. Hence, according to these findings, communes in the modern context are not necessarily "free" of the culture or conditioning which they endeavour to escape or reimagine: rather they are invariably impacted by multiple tensions. However, as Manzella indicates, these tensions are not necessarily irreconcilable. Indeed, his research reveals that most Intentional Communities manage to navigate such tensions skilfully and with awareness. This is an important finding in that it looks at the ways in which social forces penetrate and shape Intentional Communities, rather than simply focussing on what communities tell us about society - thereby flipping the research focus. It also reveals the complications involved in alternative community, stressing that for community members it is not as simple as "opting out of society" altogether, as dominant discourses necessarily "seep in" and affect and shape the nature of community itself.

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Manzella and Ben-Rafael, Oved and Topel's findings reinforce the proposition that discourses necessarily vie for power within communities. Both works reveal that Intentional Communities are necessarily shaped by the discourses of communalism as well as by discursive formations of the culture/s which they critique or oppose. In this way, they propose that the boundaries between Intentional Communities and mainstream culture are not as sharp as they first may seem; in fact, a significant amount of discursive overlap exists. Indeed, while such an insight would not be forthcoming without some awareness of the impact of discourse, what remains unanswered within these works is the extent to which these discourses are personally negotiated, experienced and felt by communards. Hence, while these works take the scholarship in a new direction, again, they do not offer adequate fine-grained data on the lifeworlds of those subject to and shaping the given discourses.

Another contemporary exploration of communal arrangements is offered in the book, *Living in Utopia: New Zealand's Intentional communities* (Sargisson and Sargent 2004). Here, the authors examine a range of progressive contemporary communities located across New Zealand, including cooperative, religious, spiritual and environmental communities. In doing so, they engage in a comparative exercise, examining the lessons learned and challenges faced across the selected communities.[2] Among their findings, the authors highlight that Intentional Communities need not be homogenous or like-minded to succeed; on contrary, they can include diverse groups of individuals with differing views and backgrounds. There are however some factors essential to success, which include a consensus-based approach to decision-making and a commitment to egalitarian practices.[3] In this sense, Sargisson and Sargent's (2004) main object is to examine the long-term sustainability of visionary communities. The authors explain that in order to survive, Intentional Communities need to be able to balance individuals' needs and continually consider the ongoing sustainability of the community's finances and physical environment. In addition to these pragmatic suggestions, the authors examine individuals' motivation for establishing Intentional Communities. Many communities, they claim, arise out of "a deep sense of personal unease

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2 A recent exploration offered by theologian Whitney Sanford (2017) examines several Intentional Communities in Northern America with a similar object: to elicit the lessons of communities adopting the values of "sustainability", "non-violence" and "simplicity". Sanford is interested in documenting the ways communities enact self-sufficiency and successfully reskill community members to minimise their carbon foot-print and encourage a more mindful livelihood. Sanford's works offers a range of instructive examples on ways to live more harmoniously with the social and environmental worlds. This book does not, however, offer an in-depth scholarly analysis; it is largely descriptive and palatable to a popular audience.
3 A detailed analysis of the inherent tensions underpinning the decision-making processes of Intentional Communities can be found in Sullivan's (2016) study of property development of a co-housing project.

and a strong desire to do something about this" and are motivated by visions of the ideal society or a "good life" (Sargisson and Sargent 2004, p182). In this way, the authors do turn toward the subjective, but only momentarily. However, they do not, explore the ways in which discourse constitutes subjects and emotions, nor do they discuss some of the more ambivalent and complex aspects of communal life. These questions appear to be beyond the scope of their research project.

The sustainability of communitarian experiments and practices has also been the focus for a number of other scholars. Donald Pitzer (1997), for example, a leading communal studies scholar, argues that communes should be understood in the context of "developmental communalism", a theoretical framework which proposes that communes arise from certain religious, social and historical processes, and subsequently disband and revert to private property when they no longer serve the groups' original purpose (Cummings 1998, p191). Or, as Cummings puts it, "... most communal experiments – not just religious communes – originate in something other than communalism and end up something beyond communalism" (Cummings 1998, p203). According to Pitzer, a commune can neither be described as succeeding nor failing; rather it exists to fulfil a set of specific goals, for a period, until it is no longer required by its members.

This approach can be distinguished from the approach offered by Kanter (1972) who links the success of Intentional Communities to how long they have remained in existence: she proposes that anything beyond 20 years is a success, while anything less should be deemed a failure. Other explorations of Intentional Communities have looked at related questions, such as the extent to which religion contributes to the survival of communities (see Bader et al, 2006), the impact of members' commitment on the overall functioning of communities (see Hall, 1988) and the extent to which creativity and evolution contributes to the success of communes (see Lewis and Wright-Summerton, 2014). These studies are functionalist in their approach in that they are concerned mainly with the overall stability and sustainability of a given community. One criticism, which has been levelled at functionalism more generally, is that such studies have failed to analyse the more oppressive aspects of social life, as they have largely presumed that the success of community is broadly a desirable thing. Moreover, these studies can be viewed in the same light as the ones I mention above, as concerned with broad questions about communes in general, thereby neglecting the subjective experiences of those involved in community.

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Another crucial question that has concerned social researchers has been the extent to which alternative communities effectively achieve broad social change, be it environmental or social. Schehr (1997) argues that even though Intentional Communities may not be effecting change on a "state" level they should be considered a "subaltern mode of resistance" or a legitimate social movement – one that uses daily practices and utopian visions to resist social norms and the status quo (p160). Susan Love Brown (2002) similarly proposes that at the very least alternative communities represent a persuasive cultural critique about "social and material inequality" (p155). She goes on to state that "…the contrast between the movement and the society at large casts the problem into specific relief and makes it evident, providing the opportunity for re-examination" (p154-155). I would agree that at a minimum alternative communities have transformed our cultural imagination, created significant discursive ripples and invited us to rethink our relationship to the social and environmental world.

Of course, the extent to which an alternative community is successful in changing society substantially is difficult to measure. A recent stand-alone study offered by Hong and Vicdan (2016) attempts to measure the macro-sustainability of ecological communities. The authors investigate what they term "the social configuration of the sustainable lifestyle" (p120). The study challenges the commonly-held assumption that ecovillages are *highly sustainable*, finding that that ecovillages "achieve only average sustainability" (p130), largely due to "ecovillages' detachment from the mainstream and promotion of green lifestyle as an elitist movement" (p134). Their latter point relates to the finding that many of the ecovillages studied adhered to middle/upper class ideals of sustainability and recycling. Although my study does not focus on macro-sustainability per se, the authors' approach is instructive in that it paves the way for more critical approaches to the study of alternative community.

As I have shown, most of the sociological and historic literature examining Intentional Communities has concerned itself with exploring the meaning/s of utopian experiments for society at large. While these have been essential to setting the scene, and providing key findings in relation to the social and historic milieu from which Intentional Communities are born, they neglect the ways subjects are affected, formed and implicated in discourse. Such works have nonetheless undertaken the important work of documenting the structures, sociality and processes of community life and have presented alternative communities as a viable alternative to mainstream modes of structuring social life.

Applying Utopian Frameworks to Intentional Community

As I have mentioned, a concept that has assisted scholars to make sense of alternative communities is that of "utopianism". Levitas' (2003) work is instructive in this respect. She examines multiple definitions of utopia within historical social theory and defines utopia like this:

> *Utopia is about how we would live and what kind of a world we would live in if we could do just that. The construction of imaginary worlds, free from the difficulties that beset us in reality, takes place in one form or another in many cultures. Such images are embedded in origin and destination myths, where the good life is not available to us in this world but is confined to a lost golden age or a world beyond death. They may also be religious or secular, literary or political…Sometimes utopia embodies more than an image of what the good life would be and becomes a claim about what it could and should be: the wish that things might be otherwise becomes a conviction that it does not have to be like this. Utopia is then not just a dream to be enjoyed, but a vision to be pursued* (p1).

Indeed, understanding Intentional Communities as "vision[s] to be pursued" seems appropriate - especially since most studies have shown that communards are motivated by desire to break free of social constraints and develop an alternative way of being in the world. It should be mentioned that historically utopian communities have captured the imaginations of a number of women and feminist fiction writers and their readers (see for example Gilman, 1979 and Piercy, 1976). Indeed, envisaging a better and more equal world is a concern for many who are troubled by inequalities even if they are not able to or interested in pioneering attempts at creating them.

McKenna (2001), amongst other theorists, develops a specifically feminist model of utopia – one that is "process" oriented (rather than goal oriented) and which encourages adherents to apply a critical lens to utopian goals and to play an active part in creating the future, as opposed to allowing the future to naturally unfold (p3). She goes on to explain that:

> *The pragmatist and feminist perspective will, specifically, reject the traditional dualisms of academic philosophy which include male/female, reason/emotion, objective/subjective, and theory/practice. For both pragmatists and feminists, experience is essential to forming theory and knowledge is influenced by one's situatedness. I refer to the process model of utopia as a pragmatist and feminist model in order to highlight these commonalities and to demonstrate the ways in which pragmatism is inherently feminist and the ways feminism, in all of its diversity, can be informed by pragmatism* (p4).

A similar feminist/pragmatic utopianism can be found in another study of Intentional Communities by Sargisson. In her book *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression* (2000a), Sargisson introduces a theory of "transgressive utopianism", which she describes as

"at once utopian and pragmatic" (p1). Transgressive utopianism, she says, moves beyond traditional notions of utopia as a "perfect" society and captures imperfect and practical attempts to enact utopian visions. This form of utopianism is transgressive in two ways: first it challenges common notions of utopia found in the utopian canon, and second, it contests the society from which it has emerged. Sargisson applies transgressive utopianism to both bodies of thought and bodies of people (Sargisson 2000a, p1). The bodies of thought she examines include deep ecology, feminist theory and deconstructive theory, while the bodies of people include members of Intentional Communities. According to Sargisson, these respective bodies hold several features in common. They are subversive and critical of their foundation, yet at the same time they are flexible, aware of their impermanence and intentionally utopian. They are also deliberately positioned outside the mainstream in both a spatial and normative sense (Sargisson 2000a, p2).

This analysis extends utopianism beyond the realm of the literary, creating a place for individuals and groups who are inspired by visions of perfection but enact something much more grounded in the social world. It invites an ethical/philosophical inquiry, one which considers how the human yearning for utopia and the desire for the "good life" is negotiated within both the theoretical and the social world. It also proposes that the ways utopian ideals manifest in the social world involve compromise and negotiation - something very different to perfection. This finding invites theorists and communards to reconsider how they measure success and to be more accepting of some of the more pragmatic dimensions of alternative community.

Another related concept employed in Sargisson's work is that of estrangement. Sargisson contends that utopias are estranged spaces (both in a physical and normative sense), "set apart in space or time in a "no place" whence they offer radical, normative critique and visions of a better world" (Sargisson 2007, p395). Intentional Communities, like utopias, offer this type of estrangement so that community members can freely carry out utopian practices and agendas and engage in internal negotiations away from the public gaze. Estrangement offers utopias with space to be creative and to embark on a journey of radical experimentation. Sargisson's work takes utopian theory and the study of Intentional Communities in a new direction. She contends that our understanding of "utopia" need not be limited to visions of the "perfect society"; rather "utopias" can be seen as workable visions, grounded in the real world, that critique the status quo and creatively imagine an alternative. According to Sargisson, Intentional Communities are opportune sites for such an

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exploration: they trial and experiment with alternative lifestyles, choices and visions and they disrupt neoliberal assumptions that are taken to be universal, such as the divide between public and private, the concept of private property and the delineation of Self/Other (Sargisson, 2000b).

Another theoretical approach applied to alternative community can be found in Susan Love Brown's (2002) edited collection "Intentional Community: An Anthropological Perspective". This collection applies anthropologist, Victor Turner's concepts of "communitas" and "liminality" to communities of past and present in the US. In addition, it considers the ways "heterogeneous societies use community to cope with the exigencies of life" (p6) and the extent to which alternative community represents an effective cultural critique of the societal milieu from which it springs. Echoing Sargisson's description of estrangement, the authors suggest that Intentional Communities are nearly always liminal in that "conceptually, socially and physically, they are set apart from normal society with its structured statuses and roles" (Kamau, 2002, p20). Such liminality and associated communitas, they say, contributes to member satisfaction and the overall "success" of an Intentional Community. Contributing author Kamau links liminality to various factors like the "outsider" identity of communards, their rejection of economic life and the reversal of sex roles within the community itself. It is in dependence on these liminal conditions that communitas is born. According to Siegler (2002) from this same collection, communitas:

> …is spontaneous as opposed to normative, affective as opposed to pragmatic, and egalitarian and undifferentiated rather than hierarchical and segmented into status and roles. It is not a mirror image of structure, but an intermediate phase between structures. It serves as a liberation from the normative constraints of structure and induces individuals to think about cultural experiences... In this way it carries members of a group from one culturally defined state to another, from one structure to another (p42).

The structures Siegler is referring to appear to be that of dominant culture vis-à-vis those of alternative lifestyle. She claims Intentional Communities often exist within these in-between states. Eventually, like all liminal sites, however, new structures are born and such in-between roles and spaces become more defined and less uncertain. This can be seen in the case of long-standing Intentional Communities. However, according to the authors it is within the *transitional* space that the magic of Intentional Community happens. Kamau explains it like this:

> …the experience of communitas can be dazzling. People can communicate spontaneously on the most basic level for no other motive than desire. The most private elements of the

self can be freely and safely shared. Such communion can be a powerful experience. Small wonder that people aspire to its sublimity and, once they have achieved it, do all they can to sustain it (p24).

The language of liminality/communitas seems apt here, particularly in describing burgeoning alternative communities. However, the fact that established social norms and structures often interact with more liminal states within community is not addressed in this collection. What this collection does offer though is a persuasive anthropological explanation for the sustained appeal of Intentional Communities within American society.

Women's-only Communities

I turn now to women's only alternative communities, which a number of studies, across multiple disciplines have explored. Such studies have investigated the feminist desire to escape the "male gaze" and enact "feminine" approaches to social life (see Burmeister, 2014; Cheney, 1985; Gagehabib and Summerhawk, 2000; Kleiner 2003; Luis, 2012; Luis, 2015; Madrone 2000; Rabin and Slater 2005; Ralston and Stoller 2005; Sandilands, 2002; and Shugar 1995). Indeed, each study asks its own set of unique questions and applies a distinctive theoretical orientation.

Some scholars, for example, have focussed predominantly on how feminist practices of income sharing, decision-making and dispute resolution manifests in women's-only communities (see Rabin and Slater 2005). Others have examined the reasons prompting women to establish closed groups away from the mainstream. Brenton (1999), for example, reveals an increasing need among older women to pool their resources and live communally. She explains how such women are "low on material resources... [but] rich in other ways and have natural skills for building a sustainable future and contributing to a sustainable society" (Brenton 1999, p79). Such studies underscore the ways dominant culture does not meet the needs and desires of certain groups of women.

Historically, one of the most significant women's communities was that of Greenham Common Peace Camp (1981 – 2000). As Jarvis (2017) explains, "it is typical for women-only and mixed intergenerational groups to draw inspiration from the way women organised daily life in the enduring peace camps such as Greenham Common…" through a culture of openness, democracy and the candid expression of feelings (p442). Indeed, Greenham Common represented one of the largest women's anti-war communities in contemporary society. This camp formed organically at the RAF Greenham Common in Berkshire, England, in response to the government's decision to introduce nuclear weapons to the site. A

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number of historical protests were staged at the camp – most notably, the "Embrace the Base" event which it was said attracted more than 35,000 women (Welch 2010, p234). Additionally, the camp developed a strong feminist sub-culture and established a number of residential spaces which were kept operating for almost two decades. Welch (2010) argues that spirituality ran deep at the camp, with a number of women adhering to Goddess worship and ecofeminist theology. A number of protests and public stunts were informed by these philosophies; so too was the art that flowed from the Camp (Welch 2010, pp240-241).

Broadly, the aims of the abovementioned studies include the documenting of the major features of a feminist lifestyle to provide inspiration, information and guidance to those who might be interested in developing their own feminist utopian visions. These studies, however, are limited in several significant ways. First, they are underpinned by a range of unexamined assumptions, including the idea that something distinctively "feminist" can *exist* and that it is *possible and achievable* to practice a "feminist process". While I do agree with these suggestions to an extent, to my mind they need to be qualified in the following ways: first, feminism is not one "thing" and second there needs to be some acknowledgment that feminism/s are in fact *discursive formations*, with psychic and material implications. As such, feminism/s can have multiple meanings and/or unintended effects within individuals' subjectivities. In this sense, it is ill-informed to assume that feminist processes will invariably lead to desirable outcomes; discourse is messier than that. Second, these accounts, like those offered by Brenton (1999) and Rabin and Slater (2005), tend to be descriptive and uncritical of the experiences of those engaged in forming feminist spaces. The assumption here is that developing feminist space constitutes an uncomplicated goal that can act as a panacea for the patriarchal ills of society. Again, this does not allow room for an exploration of the ambivalent dimensions of community life, the possibility that the feminist utopian narrative can have some oppressive implications for its subjects, or of tales of failure and difficulty within feminist utopias. For these reasons, I distinguish my study from this approach in that I complicate as well as celebrate alternative community.

In contrast to this, a small number of studies tell a nuanced story of women's-only community. Luis (2012), for example, offers an illuminating exploration of body politics within women's lands, specifically exploring the ways "fat" bodies are understood and experienced within community. Significantly, Luis finds that discourses associated with healthy-eating are present and operate to stigmatise "fat" bodies within the community she

investigates (p110). Specifically, she finds that health within the community she studies is used as:

> *…a metonym for the overarching interconnection between the natural world and the people who live on it and the personal health of the body as maintained through a mindful and thoughtful diet, alternative medicine, and (sometimes) spiritual practice is emblematic of a woman's spiritual and/or moral relationship with these things* (p121).

Hence, such moralism attaches not only to women's politics and activist identities but also to women's bodies (p110). Communards, in her study, were encouraged to take up an "earth-friendly" diet, which Luis explains entailed a hierarchy of purity. Luis finds that this hierarchy operated as more than just a loose set of ideas; it functioned ideologically to devalue and stigmatise "fat" bodies. She explains that women's bodies were perceived as fat in the alternative community "both because of the symbolism adopted from the matrix culture (lazy, lack of self-control, lower class, ugly) *and* because of the symbolism adopted from the feminist environmental movement (parasitical, earth-hating, selfish, poisonous, and undeveloped/spiritually unaware)" (p110). Luis' work offers a sophisticated analysis of bodies and food within Intentional Community, pointing to the more contradictory aspects of women's community, exposing the ways various discourses intersect to create oppressive outcomes for communards.

Another sophisticated study on women's-only spaces is offered by Browne (2011) who explores how "womyn's music festivals" shed light on the creation of rural lesbian utopias. Significantly, she finds that such spaces invite women to experiment with non-hegemonic sexualities and ways of relating to their bodies that would not be possible in dominant culture. This, she explains, is facilitated through female nudity and the exclusion of penises from the festival site/sight, arguing that "retaining the integrity of womyn's space through gendered bodies requires contested gendered/sexed boundaries which are simultaneously empowering and exclusionary" (p21). Although Browne concedes such a space is rich with contradictions and hierarchies, she also proposes that:

> *… these spaces continue to be empowering and valued. There can be no doubt there are flaws to the actualisation of feminist experimental ways of living, but the recognition of such imperfections ensures that the process of working towards impossible utopias remains in place* (p21).

Browne's work offers a theoretical explanation as to why such music festivals are attractive and fulfilling to the women who attend. It also successfully examines the lived experiences

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of women festival-goers rather than focussing solely on the structural and functional aspects of community.

What Browne's and Luis' work have in common is the fact that they investigate the perceptions and specific experiences of women's-only community in a theoretically sophisticated way. This can be distinguished from the macro-sociological studies mentioned above which are more concerned with analysing the community as a whole in response to questions about society and sociality within community. Indeed, my study follows in a similar vein to Browne and Luis, but asks additional questions. Like these authors, it examines the embodied facets of participants' experiences in a general sense, including the ways participants understand and experience food within alternative community (see Chapter Six). Yet it also explores broad questions relating to spirituality, inter-relationality and materiality. In doing so, it draws on Luis' and Browne's approach to discourse within community, which provides an instructive framework and orientation.

Ecovillages

In the following section I consider scholars' interest in ecological Intentional Communities or "ecovillages" as they have come to be known (see Andreas and Wagner, 2012; Bhakta and Pickerill, 2016; Ergas, 2010; Fosket and Mamo, 2013; Hong and Vicdan, 2016 Jackson 2004; Kasper, 2008; Litfin, 2014; Lockyer, 2017; Pickerill, 2012; 2015; 2016). Such work has primarily concerned itself with political and environmental questions and has, in the main, posited that ecovillages represent an *effective* response to globalisation, environmental degradation and individualisation. Indeed, ecovillagers have been shown to be engaged in building self-sustaining communities that have the potential to provide social support and companionship to both the human and the non-human world. It follows that a central concern for scholars in this field has been the ways in which ecovillages reconfigure their own – and society's - relationship to the natural environment and the connected ethical implications.[4] This is something that is reflected in my data and which I explore in greater depth in Chapter Six.

In the main, scholars have suggested that the daily acts of ecovillagers should be understood as acts of anti-globalisation resistance (Jackson, 2004, p1). Ergas (2010), for instance, details

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4 It is widely acknowledged that traditional Western discourses have problematically conceptualised the environment and the social world as separate and independent spheres. In response to this, disciplines such as environmental sociology and the ecological humanities have forged new paradigms premised on the interdependence of the social and ecological worlds. The exploration of ecovillages forms part of the case for a new environmental/social paradigm - one that extends beyond the philosophical.

the ways in which ecovillages challenge macro-structures through their members' day-to-day actions and ethos. She explains:

> *Ecovillagers, as active agents, manage to challenge institutional structure in their every-day actions. By "being a model", they work slowly with bureaucratic institutions to change laws and codes, car and consumer culture, and traditional neighbourhood layouts. They literally change the appearance of a traditional urban neighbourhood block, thereby restructuring conventions imposed on them.* (p50).

Much like the sociological work detailed above, Ergas' analysis examines the political meaning of ecological communities, as well as the pragmatic realities of engaging in such activism. Her focus is on the transformation and negotiation of social structures through the ecovillage project. According to Ergas, ecological communities resist dominant institutions and re-envision them tangibly through reconceptualising and challenging pre-existing models. Drawing on the lived experience and identity-construction of ecovillagers, she considers how ecovillagers' collective sustainability goals are specifically negotiated by individuals and the community, revealing that structures associated with consumer culture can lead to perceived opportunities, constraints and tensions on both a micro and macro level. Indeed, while studies like Ergas' demonstrate the social worth of ecological communities, together with their contribution to the wellbeing of the human and non-human environment, they also point to the practical and often complicated day-to-day experience of enacting utopian visions in a late modern world.

Kasper (2008), in her study on US ecovillages, takes a slightly different approach. She focusses on the *perceptions* of ecovillagers, analysing ecovillagers' visions of community. Her study's primary finding is that ecovillage residents hold an expanded idea of "community", one which encompasses non-human species and the surrounding land (p22). Hence, she shows that residents consider their community to be something much broader than themselves and their human family. According to Kasper, these findings suggest that "the ecovillage is a community model that operates under a framework distinctly different from the human exceptionalism paradigm" (p22). Furthermore, Kasper argues that it is this unique understanding of the social and environmental world that prompts ecovillagers to adopt environmentally sustainable practices and beliefs. These findings, Kasper argues, illustrate that the ways we *think* about community and the environment can greatly enhance environmental awareness and our care for the non-human world.

Kirby's (2003) study of the Ecovillage at Ithaca in New York State likewise explores how ecovillagers reconceptualise environmental and social relations. Similar to the contentions of Schehr (1997) and Brown (2002), Kirby proposes that ecovillages critique the forces of capitalism, consumerism and individualism whilst simultaneously reworking social models. They offer an alternative worldview and set of ethics in relation to both the natural and social worlds. Kirby's study finds that ecovillage residents desire to live near like-minded individuals and build a sense of reciprocity in a community setting (p327). Centrally, residents reported a strong sense of connectedness with the natural world and felt inspired by the wild land surrounding the ecovillage which, they explained, led to a "sense of belonging and communion with all life, in its wildest and most spiritual sense" (p331). They also felt connected to land through the act of organic farming and sustenance, which Kirby claims "creates a sense of partnership with the living landscape of natural and benign human activity, and connects the landscape with the community together" (p331).

Kirby's analysis explains why individuals might seek out ecovillages and remain committed to them. In doing so, she highlights the emotive and spiritual dimensions of ecovillagers' experience, arguing that these elements actively contribute to the decision to become and remain involved in the ecovillage movement. The inclusion of these facets moves the scholarship away from a purely political investigation and considers, albeit briefly, the ways the complex discursive terrain of alternative communities can lead to unique political and social outcomes.

Pickerill's work in the field of eco-homes and eco-communities offers a rich sociological examination of the ecovillage movement. Her work reveals that eco-homes are characterised by much more than their physical structures and design; they are shaped by particular "socio-cultural" meanings and practices. Her work deconstructs such meanings by critically interrogating taken-for-granted notions like "home" (2017a), "privacy" (2017b) and "comfort" (2015a) within ecological settings. In relation to comfort for instance, she argues that represents an "ongoing process, a negotiation between different elements (e.g., climate, materials, and bodies) in a particular place" (2015a). Hence, one cannot simply presume that those living in eco-homes automatically forsake comfort; rather "comfort" is something that is continually being negotiated, enacted and reconceptualized to include more sustainable and communal ideals. Significantly, Pickerill's work also considers gender (2015b), examining how eco-communities address (or at times do not address) barriers to equality. By using the lens of embodiment, her work reveals the ways in which practices of

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the body, such as building and constructing homes, can facilitate or hinder gender equality (2015b). Moreover, Bhakta and Pickerill (2016) carry out a much-needed study on the accessibility of eco-housing for those who are not "physically strong, dexterous and active" (2016, px). Vitally, this study highlights the fact that designers and builders of eco-homes rarely consider the ways such spaces can be made livable for disabled people.

My study seeks to build on Pickerill's work by critically interrogating socio-cultural formations and investigating their potential for social and environmental change as well as the ways they can be revised to promote greater inclusivity and diversity. My work also seeks to build on Kasper and Kirby's findings although the analysis I offer throughout this thesis can be described as more deconstructionist in its approach. I consider how the concepts of "community", "environment" and "nature" are constructed, felt and mobilised by participants. Importantly, however, what distinguishes the approach I adopt in this thesis from works like that of Kasper and Kirby is that I do not assume that the environmental discourses of alternative communities are prima facie desirable, rather I complicate them and acknowledge that both beneficial and non-beneficial implications arise as a result.

Though the literature on ecovillages is still growing, one can see that in the main it has explored the motivations of those living in ecovillages, focussing especially on the connection between community living and environmental activism. Indeed, this type of analysis is valuable in *explaining* the impetus behind ecovillagers' acts of resistance and/or creative re-imaginings. It highlights the practical challenges involved in ecovillage activism and the ways ecovillagers seek to negotiate these. Finally, it effectively outlines the methods ecovillagers employ to successfully change and challenge mainstream institutions and trends. These analyses, I would suggest, provide encouragement and heart to those who wish to walk a similar path, reinforcing the worth and success of such pursuits. That said, much like the sociological work I cover above, they often provide a superficial account of the complex subjectivities of those behind the ecovillage movement. This is an omission that my study seeks to address – specifically, by offering an in-depth analysis of the discursive and phenomenological experiences of the ecovillagers themselves.

Situating this Study within the Literature

In this Chapter I argued that the scholarship on alternative communities has been preoccupied with the structures, visions and practices of utopian experiments in the Western world. Such work has been premised on the idea that alternative communities

represent a viable alternative to capitalist society and have the capacity to provide feasible alternatives to dominant ways of relating to the social world, distributing resources and making a living. In this way, these works have revealed the social lessons arising out of the communitarian movement, egalitarianism and cooperative ventures.

In addition, sociologically oriented works have considered what communities *as a whole* can tell us about broad contemporary social and political trends. In this sense, such works have attempted to understand communitarian experiments within their particular cultural settings. Further, they have considered at which point a community can be said to be successful and/or sustainable – thus illuminating the factors that promote or hinder community building and cohesion.

In this Chapter I also examined a nascent body of work on ecovillages that considers the ways environmental and social relations are being reconceptualised by adherents. I also considered a small body of work that has specifically explored women's-only communities and sought to consider to what extent communities can successfully "enact" feminist processes and visions.

I revealed, however, that on the whole the literature examined omits the complex effects/affects communities can have on individuals' subjectivities. There are, however, a few exceptions in this respect. As I explained, such studies take a more constructionist approach and concentrate more on *experience* than the community structures and reveal both the limiting and empowering aspects of community discourse. I seek to follow in the footsteps of such research projects.

As I show in the next Chapter, this study does not simply answer a macro-question about the meaning of communities in contemporary society; nor does it focus solely on the positive dimensions of community and egalitarianism. There is no shortage of work with this aim. Rather, it provides something more complex. It examines participants' subjectivities in an in-depth way and considers the extent to which alternative community can be a source of both possibility and ambivalence. In this way, it investigates aspects of alternative community that have scarcely been studied within the literature, contributing something new and "alternative" to the field of alternative communities.

Such an approach aims to capture the subtle discursive, relational and material dimensions of community in order to generate important findings not only for researchers in the field

but also for those involved or interested in community. In doing so, it aims to reveal the *mechanics* behind the supportive and healing functions of community, thus examining its appeal and effectiveness in a lived sense. Importantly, this study asks how, why and to whom these functions apply thereby considering the more unexamined ways community can exclude and constrain.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In the last chapter I situated my study within sociological, historical and political scholarship on alternative communities. In this chapter I detail the purpose of my research and explore the theoretical orientation/s informing my study's research design. I outline the ways data was collected and analysed and detail the study's methodology.

Research aims

As I explain in Chapter One, this project provides an empirical analysis of women's attempts to create alternative visions of mutual support, care and connection in late modern society. It examines how women committed to alternative community recount their trajectories, interpersonal bonds and connection to community, as well as how they understand the embodied, material and spiritual dimensions of their experience.

In this way, the purpose of this study is to generate insights into how women involved in contemporary community-building are engaged in reconfiguring dominant late-modern discourses and experimenting with creative ways of being-in-the-world. Thus, this study's central research aim is to investigate how the subjectivities of women committed to alternative community *intersect* with alternative community and the extent to which this intersection generates subjective and intersubjective possibilities, constraints and/or ambivalences.

Subjectivity forms the focus of this project for two main reasons: first, it is considered a site of contestation and creative possibility and second, as Luhrmann (2006) puts it, the study of subjectivity, and particularly one's emotions and internal structures, "gives us more evidence to argue that power is inscribed upon our bodies and that moral judgement is a visceral act" (p359).

Thus, the following research questions guide this study:

- What factors motivate participants to develop and enact alternative ways of relating to the social and material world?
- What commonalities and/or contradictions exist in the self-narratives of participants across communities? What implications do these self-narratives have for participants, in a social, emotional and felt sense?
- What emotion norms, expectations and taboos underpin community life and how do these impact participants' subjectivities?

- How do participants understand the interpersonal aspects of community and how does this impact their subjectivities?

- How do participants relate to and understand their bodies and the natural world?

- What insights might participants' stories provide in relation to the symbiotic relationship between subjectivity, discourse and social life?

- To what extent are participants' subjectivities transformed, shaped and/or limited by alternative community?

Epistemology: How we come to know and who comes to know

Social researchers have consistently emphasised the importance of making explicit the epistemological assumptions underpinning a project's research design (Crotty, 1998). The process of uncovering one's assumptions about human knowledge ensures that the methods selected are congruent with the project's methodology, theoretical framework and epistemology. What follows is a discussion of the various epistemic assumptions that form the foundation for this project.[5]

Centrally, this project is informed by social constructionism. The social constructionist standpoint proposes that knowledge is produced via the interaction between human beings and the cultural world/s they inhabit (see Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Crotty 1998, p42; Mallon, 2004). In this sense, social constructionists posit that we both *shape culture* and *are shaped by it*. Human beings are seen as interpreting and making sense of objects before them by drawing on their cultural understandings and assumptions. I adopt the idea that an individual can never operate outside of the realm of culture, language and narrative. Even in circumstances where an individual appears to be exercising "free" choice, she is often unintentionally limited by cultural understandings and concepts.

Moreover, over the last few decades a number of important theorists, such as new materialists, corporeal feminists and post-humanists, amongst others, have argued that the process of construction is not limited to language or signs. Rather, they suggest that it extends to the material and embodied facets of our experience, both of which also play a significant role in shaping our lifeworlds (see Alaimo and Hekman, 2008; Hird, 2009; McNeil, 2010). These theorists argue that older versions of constructionism failed to recognise the

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5 As with any research endeavour of this scale, a number of interrelated epistemological and theoretical standpoints inform this project's design. In the main these standpoints are complementary; however, some philosophical tensions do exist, which require continual consideration and negotiation, something I engage in throughout this thesis.

role the material world plays in this constitutive process. On this basis, they call on social scientists to relax the boundaries between the linguistic and material and encourage these dimensions to converse and interact. This interaction, they posit, is a potential site of possibility.

This project adopts the extension of constructionism proposed by new materialist feminists in particular. This epistemic position has methodological implications for this study in that it invites the researcher to pay attention to participants' relationship to the material world and their material selves. I discuss this approach further shortly.

I now turn to the epistemological question of whose knowledge is privileged by this research project. Within the traditional qualitative paradigm it is a *subject's* experiences, rather than the experiences or reactions of the researcher, that are considered the most legitimate source of sociological knowledge (Day, 2012, pp63-63). This is particularly so within the paradigm of positivist empiricism, which seeks to interpret the perspectives and experiences of those being studied in an "objective" and "scientific" way. Over the last few decades, feminist and critical theorists have criticised this approach making the case that this view "entails and encourages distance and non-involvement between the researcher and researched and assumes a researcher can objectively see, judge and interpret the life and meaning of his/her subjects" (Wolf, 1996, p4). Moreover, this approach has been critiqued for assuming that a researcher's self should be extricated from the research process and that anything short of this would be likely to produce biased and invalid results. As Haraway puts it, the notion that a detached observer "objectively" sees the world from an un-situated, disembodied position is nothing short of a "god trick" which makes misleading claims to see "everything from nowhere" (1988, p581).

Haraway (1988) as well as other feminist theorists (see DeVault, 1996; Grosz, 1987; Harding, 1991 and Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002, amongst others) have challenged the proposition that emotionality and subjectivity stand in opposition to researcher objectivity on both philosophical and methodological grounds. Such theorists have proposed that social knowledge is necessarily mediated through an individual's constructed reality, which is shaped by one's background, social position, embodiment and ways of knowing. It is also interpreted (and formed) through the lens of a researcher's own vision and emotional world (see Carroll, 2012, p547; Hartsock, 1983; Harding, 1991, Stanley and Wise, 1983, p161).

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From a feminist constructionist point of view, the pursuit of social research should be seen as an exploration of individuals' or groups' constructed realities (which often vie for legitimacy). On this basis, I adopt the view that I do not, as the researcher, have the capacity to "objectively" interpret the experiences of participants. Rather, I can only make sense of participants' experiences through the lens of my own social position, understandings and embodied existence. It is impossible for me to remain entirely "impartial" and extract myself from the research process for I too am deeply embedded in culture/s and ways of knowing. In this way, I view being mindful of my own "positionality" as essential to the production of valid social knowledge.

I take positionality to include awareness of my class, social background, political beliefs, race, gender, personal history and situated knowledge/s (see Hartsock, 1983; Harding, 1991). This notion challenges the positivist perspective that the experiences and perceptions of the researcher are peripheral to the "real" data. It proposes that a researcher should not simply be considered a data gathering tool; on the contrary, she should be considered a feeling human being with a set of constructions and relationships, which will inevitably shape the research design and findings of a study.

The practice of reflexivity is a pragmatic means of situating a study's design and results within the context of one's positionality (see Doucet, 2008). Reflexivity encourages researchers to be explicit about their preconceptions and reactions (See Day, 2012; Holmes, 2010). It invites a form of self-inquiry, encouraging a researcher to reflect on how one's relationship to participants and the topic under investigation may influence a study's results (see Day, 2012; Levy, 2016).

While there is no consensus on what form reflexivity should precisely take, methods such as auto-ethnography and personal narrative provide a useful guide (see Ellis and Bochner, 2000; du Preez 2008; Foster et al, 2005; Hamdan, 2012; Meerwald, 2013; Taber 2010; Wall 2008). Proponents of these techniques argue that a researcher's personal journey should be analysed in conjunction with other data that has been gathered. In this way, the personal story of the researcher is considered relevant and worthy of critical examination (see Meerwald, 2013). Such methods extend beyond analysis of the self, however, as Amani Hamdan (2012) puts it, auto-ethnographic narratives are "not just about me, the narrator, but involve(s) other people who play a role in my lived experience" (2012, p589). Put another way, given researchers are social beings, the auto-ethnographic method has the

potential to provide understandings of the social world being studied. This perspective, I would suggest, renders the distinction between researcher and subject outmoded and encourages a more entangled and inter-subjective process of knowledge production.

Theoretical Framework: How we understand the World

Drawing on feminist post-structuralist epistemology, this project acknowledges that gendered discourses and knowledge-production continue to underpin women's experiences of modern society and that women's lives are complex and far from homogenous. Feminist theory can be understood as a broad and diverse field which has undergone a number of significant iterations over the years. There are, however, a number of core features that inform the methodology and aims of this project.

In particular I draw on the work of Elizabeth Grosz (1988) who explores feminist theory's challenge to the "dominant knowledges" and discourses. These knowledges, according to Grosz, are sexist, patriarchal or phallocentric ways of knowing and are challenged through the development of new knowledges. This project takes up this suggestion by focusing on the subjectivities of women participants. Further, it rejects the major tenets of masculine knowledge-production, which Grosz (1988) describes as:

> *A belief in an unchanging singular "truth" that is singular and accessible;*
> *A belief in the "objectivity" of the research process;*
> *A belief in the idea that language merely reflects an individual's mental processes rather than being constitutive of it;*
> *A belief that subjects and objects of knowledge are separate;*
> *A belief in an intellectual set of ideas whose validity rests on the existence of opposing concepts, i.e. woman/man, emotions/reason, nature/culture* (1988, pp97 -99).

This thesis also draws on the theory of poststructuralist Chris Weedon (1987) who posits that social construction springs from "the relation between language, subjectivity, social organisation and power" (p12). Indeed, the connection between identity and discourse is particularly relevant to this thesis (see Chapter Three). In addition, I adopt the idea that "discourses are continually competing for individuals to take up their "I" positions, to become the subject of those discourses" (Narayan, 2016, p359). However, I also embrace the view that individuals have some degree of agency in creating and shaping discourse and power itself. As Davis (1997) puts it:

> *I have read subjects as both constituted and constitutive…I took the fundamental difference between structuralism and post-structuralism to be the room for movement that the reflexively aware subject had once the constitutive power of discourses was made visible* (p276).

In this sense, the subject is not entirely determined by discourse but rather can be engaged in a two-way relationship. According to Davis (1997), it is reflexivity that can lead to the challenging and recrafting of discourse. This is a topic I discuss in greater detail below.

How we conceive of the subject and its subjectivity is important here. Throughout this thesis, I reject the humanist idea that an individual represents a unified, singular and unique subject and subjectivity. Rather, I embrace the notion of "subjectivity which is precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak" (Weedon, 1987, p33). In Jane Flax's (1993) philosophical exploration of the politics of subjectivity, she refutes the notion of a singular, solid human nature and invites us to consider complex and multiple subjectivities, which she argues include:

> *…temperament and orientations to the world; biological vulnerabilities and needs; capacities for abstract thought, work and language; aggression; creativity; fantasy; meaning creation; and objectivity* (p106).

Later, Flax includes intersubjective relations (or relationality) to this list, which is something I consider extensively in this thesis (see Chapter Five).[6]

I note here Johnston and Barcan's (2006) sophisticated theorising on "intersubjectivity" in which the authors consider how New Age conceptions of the body challenge singular notions of subjectivity. Drawing on Continental philosophical works by authors like Deleuze and Guaratti, Irigaray and Levinas, the authors argue that intersubjectivity as it applies to New Age ideas of personhood and the body (which often include notions of energies, psychic connection and intuition) represents a challenge to "the bounded singular subject of modernity" (p29) and the notion of an individual subjectivity. The authors propose something more entangled, porous and interrelated. As such, throughout this thesis I consider intersubjectivity an important component of subjective life.

At a basic level, I adopt Luhrmann's definition of subjectivity as "the shared inner life of the subject [that is] the way subjects feel, respond, experience" (2006, p345). Like Luhrmann, however, I see subjectivity as something that extends beyond the realm of one's psychology, and one's self, as a political site where varying cultural constructions/discourses vie for power and ultimately shape what we come to understand as the "subject" (see Davis and

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6 I would also add that the visceral and material components of our experience also form part of our subjectivities. Flax's analysis highlights the fact that great variation can exist in respect to the presence of these components from person to person, and, that these components are fluid and malleable (p106).

Sumara, 2002). I see it as necessarily located within a historical-social point in time and formed by a range of mores, expectations and narratives of the day. In this way, this study is underpinned by the oft-cited refrain that the personal is political and the political is personal.

Thus, historical-social processes set the boundaries of what discursive formations are possible at any given point in time. Moreover, as Narayan (2016) explains, one's subjectivity and identity "is reconstituted each time one thinks, speaks, or acts. Thus identity is always historically contingent" (p359). These insights reinforce the importance of maintaining awareness of broader cultural narratives and institutions in making sense of interview data.

Additionally, poststructuralism assists the researcher to identify, and subsequently analyse, potentially contradictory, inconsistent and fragmented narratives present in interview data. Finally, the interplay between power, subjectivity and language is made more visible by poststructuralist theory and thus more susceptible to analysis and deconstruction. In the context of this project, I analyse how women participants make sense of dominant narratives pertaining to lifestyle and community and forging their own significant alternatives.

As mentioned, however, this project goes one step further theoretically and embraces the viewpoint that language is not the only constructing force at play in knowledge-production. As alluded to, new materialist feminists, and many of their ecofeminist counterparts, posit that our corporeality and the ecological world are just as significant as language in shaping our reality and experience (Alaimo and Hekman, 2008, p6; Levy, 2013).

On this basis, this project pays particular attention to the embodied experiences of participants and their relationship to the body and environment. Another reason for this focus is the fact that prior to entering the field I imagined that some of the concerns second-wave feminists had about the environment had influenced the original aims of several of the communities studied. Thus, this project purposefully moves toward participants' sense of embodiment rather than focussing entirely on their language.

This project is involved in the work of problematising the Cartesian binaries of body/mind, nature/culture and animal/human by turning its attention to the material aspects of our lived experience. New materialist feminism, in particular, suggests that life is messier than was once thought: phenomena are interdependent and interconnected and clear

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demarcations between our bodies and minds, or humans and the natural environment, do not exist as we once thought they did (see Hird, 2009; McNeil, 2010).

Pragmatically, this posthumanist/new-materialist position informs this project in the following ways. First, it influenced the questions I asked participants during data collection. During each interview, I purposefully asked participants how they *understood* their bodies and the natural environment, endeavouring to draw out the discourses and experiences attached to both the body and nature. Next, I asked participants how they *experienced* their bodies and the natural environment – pointing to the more phenomenological and experiential dimensions of their experience. Finally, I asked participants about how they saw their mind and body intersecting with their environment/s.

Throughout my time in the field I also made a point of eliciting data on the material dimensions of participants' experience. I did this not only by asking about it directly, but also by spending extended periods of time within communities, observing significant material conditions, phenomena and interactions. I also documented my own bodily and emotional responses to each community. In this way, I was able to move away from language and human-centric approaches to research and see first-hand how the social world was embedded within the material world.

This theoretical orientation also informed how I analysed the research data. As I engaged in coding and the process of interpretation, I sought to understand the relationships and cross-overs between nature, body and the mind. I embraced the idea that nature and the body manifest a certain agency and was interested in uncovering how this might have impacted on participants' subjectivities.

An additional binary that this project attempts to disrupt is that of emotion/reason. As Mary Fonow and Judith Cook (1991) explain a common component of feminist research endeavour is its attention to the affective/emotional dimensions of the research process. As discussed at the start of this Chapter, I consider participants' (as well as my own) emotional responses to the research project as important not only in a reflexive sense but also "for the purposes of scholarship and innovation" (p9). As Fonow and Cook (1991) put it, "rather than ignoring the complexities of negotiating unpleasant interactions in the field, feminist epistemology involves explicit attention to these experiences, analysis of their meaning, and the incorporation of conclusions into further inquiry" (p11). Thus, throughout the research

process I have sought to document and analyse observations relating to participants and my own emotions and affect.

Another defining feature of feminist research that informs this project, is its activist aims. According to Sasha Roseneil (2012), feminist social research should adopt the emancipatory and practical purpose of the critical studies tradition (p20). She explains, "located as we are, in the conditions that we seek to examine, we must nonetheless struggle for, and towards, new ways of knowing and being", thereby effecting social change (2012, p21). However, much feminist research, she says, has engaged in "paranoid practices of knowing" (2012, p21). That is, it has largely focused on the practice of exposing and critiquing at the expense of "our ability to produce nuanced analyses and to identify that which is new" and, further, to appreciate the potentiality and complexity of the present (2012, p24). While I firmly believe that the process of critiquing and exposing gendered discourse is indispensable and invaluable to the feminist cause, I do agree with Roseneil that it is equally important to explore creative feminist ways to relate to the world. In this sense, this project has a clear activist aspiration: it seeks to challenge dominant modes of knowledge-production and, in turn, develop new and more nuanced accounts of the social and environmental world through the perspectives of women participants. The aim of this project is consistent with the women's movement in that it shares the movement's commitment to seek out more equitable, conscious and compassionate ways of interacting with the social and natural world.

I should mention here that feminists have faced a range of ethical and methodological dilemmas in carrying out activist research, in particular "because women subjects identify more readily with women researchers, it may be too easy for subjects to reveal the intimate details of their lives" (Fonow and Cook, 1991, p8). A further dilemma may arise when women researchers form close friendships with participants, as "such rapport could be potentially disingenuous or manipulative and encourage the disclosure of personal information that might not otherwise be revealed" (O'Shaughnessy and Krogman, 2012 p496). While these dilemmas are perhaps more likely to be experienced by those engaged in high-risk research, a number of ethical precautions were taken to ameliorate any potential risk to participants who offered personal information about their lives. For example, pseudonyms were allocated to the names of participating communities and it was formally explained to interviewees that all information provided would be used in the research project.

Methodology

Feminist Qualitative Research

This project seeks to explore the experiences of women participants in an in-depth and nuanced way. As such, it employs a feminist qualitative methodology. Such a methodological choice provides a "means for shedding the exploitative, reductionist, and androcentric tendencies in positivist social science research by allowing women's voices to be expressed and privileged in the analysis" (O'Shaughnessy and Krogman, 2012, p495). Participant observation, semi-structured interviews and auto-ethnography were the primary means of data-gathering employed in this research project. These methods, in combination, allowed me to tease out the underlying meanings and subtleties of participants' experiences in a way that was situated within the context of my own preconceptions and experiences.

The semi-structured interview, which is often held out as the cornerstone of qualitative research, generally involves eliciting a deep understanding of participants' experiences, views and perceptions through the use of open-ended questions and fluid conversation. From a feminist perspective this method allows "women to address the questions that matter most in their lives in a manner that respects their values, knowledge and subjectivity" (O'Shaughnessy and Krogman 2012, p495).

There are, however, a number of ethical and methodological dimensions involved in interviewing women that should be highlighted here. These dimensions have been explored by a number of feminist scholars (Cotterill, 1992; Edwards, 1990; Finch, 1993; Oakley, 1981). Oakley (1981) argues that the idea that the interviewer is a mere data-collecting vessel free of bias is morally and methodologically problematic. In traditional methodology texts, Oakley explains, interviewers are advised not to reveal their own opinions and views and to avoiding responding to questions posed by interviewees for fear of "tainting" the interview data (1981, p36). Instead, they are encouraged to remain "impartial" and use generic probing statements such as "that's interesting", "tell me more" and "I see" to encourage free-association from participants (1981, p37). Here, the interviewer elicits as much information from the interviewee as possible without offering any personal information in return. Oakley argues that this approach is hierarchical and involves the objectification of the interviewee. To counter this she suggests that feminist interviewers depart from traditional sociological understandings of research ethics and develop a more reciprocal and trusting relationship with interviewees. In her own work on women and child-birth, for

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example, Oakley answers interviewees' questions, personal or otherwise, to the best of her ability and maintains friendships with a number of interviewees beyond the research process.

In carrying out interviews I adopted a number of Oakley's above suggestions. At the same time, however, I was careful to avoid participants offering highly sensitive or personal information without reminding them that such information would be used as research data. I made a point of answering any questions put to me by participants – often participants would ask me about my views on the environment and on community and about my personal background. I also encouraged friendships with participants, a few of which I have maintained through email. Yet, on the other hand, I made sure the interview process was formal and involved a clear explanation at the start of each interview about research aims and ethics.

The other primary method I used was participant observation which involved observing and recording the conversations and dynamics of those present at the research site. I did this by making notes on my computer and using a personal journal. This enabled me to observe participants' behaviour and day to day lives and thereby gain a deeper understanding of participants' assumptions and beliefs in a way that could not be elicited through an interview (Aune, 2000).

I used *overt* participant observation and actively participated in the daily activities of the community (drawing on Johnson, Avenarius and Weatherford 2006). I attended community meetings, rituals, social gatherings and other events that I was invited to. At Mountain Valley I attended spiritual rituals and engaged in farming, cooking and gardening. I also attended communal dinners on a daily basis and spent much of my down-time engaging in informal conversation with community members. At Kwan Yin Garden I attended daily meditations, workshops and work meetings and ate with community members twice a day. At River Stream I worked in the industrial kitchen, cooking and cleaning, ate two meals a day with community members, attended social gatherings and participated in a number of community tours.

I should mention that I found this component of the research process the most challenging. In a practical sense I found it difficult to retain conversations and interactions that occurred during the course of a day. This was partly because I chose not to use a notebook in front of participants. This decision was based on the fact that I did not feel comfortable making my

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role as a researcher extremely visible as I was aware it might cause community members to sense an imbalance of power. Moreover, I did not want participants to feel like objects of a study in their own homes. Instead, I would return to my room (which was out of eye-gaze) every evening and type out the conversations and interactions I had observed. Upon exiting the field I then wrote more analytical observations about the community. I also updated my personal journal which discussed my psychological, emotional and spiritual reactions to the community. Another major reason I found this challenging was that participant observation meant I was constantly "switched on" and inhabiting the role of interested and engaged researcher. While this was genuine for the most part, I was also in need of time and space to recharge at the end of the day, which was not always possible.

The method of participant observation has raised a number of ethical dilemmas for researchers in the past. In the case of overt participant observation one problem that has arisen relates to the blurred line between observing someone for the purposes of data collection and engaging in an informal, natural interaction (Platt 2003, p798). In order to avoid this, I made it clear in the in my explanation of the project, that all interactions and observations the researcher is privy to may form part of the data for this project. By giving community/group members multiple opportunities to discuss the project, I was confident that participants were aware the method of observation extended to informal, friendly interactions and "down-time". Community or group members were also advised, verbally, that if they were not comfortable with a particular interaction or event being used by the researcher as data, they could advise me of this and I would take immediate steps to omit it from the record. Additionally, community members were advised that if they no longer wished to be observed, for whatever reason, they could advise me of this and I would endeavour to disregard their interactions and behaviour in the data, though ultimately no community members requested this.

Whilst in the field I endeavoured to engage in the ongoing process of self-reflection. The tool of autoethnography was selected to assist in this respect. Auto ethnography encourages a researcher to explore her own personal experiences, reactions and ideas in relation to those being studied (drawing on Ellis, 2000). This method sits neatly with the view that a researcher's own narrative, emotions and bodily experiences are entangled with interactions with participants (Wall, 2006). Whilst in the field I used both noting and journaling and subsequently analysed these texts using a thematic approach.

Who and Where? Selection Criteria

This project includes the experiences of women residing in Intentional Communities, as well as those committed to non-residential communities. Both have been included in order to capture the subjectivities of women who operate outside of mainstream society altogether, alongside those who are endeavouring to live "in-between" alternative and mainstream cultures. The joys, contradictions and challenges faced by these women provide important complex data in respect to how women committed to alternative visions relate to and understand the social and natural world and create counter-discourses.

This project focuses exclusively on the experiences of women. While I understand that the exclusion of men in this research project may be considered problematic by some, women's subjectivities are significant in both a political and epistemological sense. In designing this project I began from the perspective that women, as a heterogeneous group, are impacted by and engaged in creating a multitude of entwined and competing gendered discourses.[7] I was informed by the idea that:

> …*for many post-structural feminist theories, the workings of language and the structure of one's subjectivity are constructed through psychoanalytic processes in which the structure of sexual difference is a binary opposition between masculinity and femininity. Thus, gender differences are intricately intertwined with the construction of subjectivity, which is one key reason post-structural theories have been of continuing interest to feminist theories…Power operates within these discourses to set the limits of what women can be, and the playing field is not level* (Narayan, 2016, pp359-360).

In the context of this project, I study women in order to examine the creative and non-hegemonic responses they generate in response to dominant neoliberal discourses. I do not seek to merely celebrate women but to critically investigate their utopian and practical aspirations and experiences. An additional reason women were chosen as the focus of this study relates to traditional gendered discourses of care. Within mainstream society women do the majority of caring for others and I imagined that alternative communities had the potential to provide women with a space to be *cared for*. This is a theme I explore in Chapter Five.

It should be mentioned that this project does not subscribe to the idea that women share a singular and "unique" way of knowing the world. Rather, it celebrates that women's subjectivities are embodied, diverse and contextual. Moreover, it does not endeavour to

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7 Of course, men too are impacted by certain gendered discourses, however, their experiences in this respect continue to be explored in the important field of masculinity studies, an area which is outside the breadth of this thesis.

"uncover" one "truth" about women generally; rather it seeks to weave together the stories of women participants, who each have a situated position which is at once socially and materially complex.

Both Australian and the US communities were chosen as a means of eliciting empirical data that contributes to international scholarship regarding establishing and supporting women building communities in the West. Pragmatically, the US was chosen because some of the most innovative communities engaged in reducing the ill-effects of social fragmentation and environmental degradation are located there (see Chapter One). The three US sites selected offer empirical data on women responding innovatively to neoliberal discourses. Further, these three sites have an explicit commitment to gender and community and to fostering and encouraging a feminist, egalitarian and sustainable culture. There are a limited number of comparable groups in Australia and, in the main, those that do exist are in their infancy and do not have a long-term membership base. Further, hardly any Intentional Communities located in Australia embrace an explicitly feminist ethos.

The communities included in this study were selected on the basis of their commitment to one or more of the following ideas or philosophies:

- Commitment to gender equality;
- Providing care and solace for members;
- communal living;
- simplicity or minimising consumption;
- enhancing their relationship to nature;
- enhancing their relationship to the body;
- alternative conceptions of temporality; and/or
- alternative expressions of connection.

Furthermore, only communities that were progressive and consensus-based were included in this study. Communities that adopted autocratic decision-making processes and/or propagating traditional values in respect to gender relations, on the other hand, were excluded. This is because the complexities of autocratic communities and cults were deemed outside the scope of this project. Moreover, the purpose of this study was to explore alternative responses to dominant culture, rather than a return or reinforcement of traditional values.

Building Relationships: Recruitment, Phase One

It has been documented that individuals living in Intentional Communities have reported feeling suspicious and uneasy about academics entering their space (see Forster 1998). This can be linked, in part, to the fact that some researchers in the past have gone into communities with the intention of providing a critique of the community's structure, practices and leadership. Scholars like Forster (1998) emphasise the importance of building a positive relationship with the communities a researcher intends to study. I worked to minimise any potential suspicion by providing the communities with a number of opportunities to communicate any concerns with me prior to the commencement of data collection and by endeavouring to make personal contact wherever possible.

However, as many of the communities I planned on approaching were located outside of South Australia, face-to-face personal contact was for the most part impossible. As such, I decided to create a short, five minute video-clip introducing myself and discussing the aims of the project. I uploaded this video-clip onto YouTube restricting access to only those who were provided with the link. In the video I explained I had a background in social justice and had worked in the area of legal and social rights in the past. I also mentioned my personal involvement in various progressive spiritual and socially-conscious communities. I explained that I had developed the project in order to explore the more creative and positive solutions being generated by women in response to the issues of time stress, over-consumption and environmental degradation in our society.

As a first step I made contact with the Federation of Intentional Communities (FEC) and Intentional Communities Directory (ICD). The ICD is an international directory for established and forming intentional communities, cooperatives, and ecovillages. It serves two main functions: first to provide a place for potential members to search for community and second to provide a central port for information on Intentional Communities to be posted and shared internationally. The ICD invited me to post a notice about my research and a link to my video-clip on their digital notice board, Reachbook. The post was brief and outlined the major aims of my research and invited potential community representatives/members to make contact with me via email or Skype. I received two responses to this post. The first response was from an anonymous individual who lived in an Intentional Community. It read:

> "You write that you are a "feminist researcher". You go on to say that, "The aim of the study is to present a rich account of the stories of women...".

If you are doing a "study", how are your personal politics or beliefs relevant? Shouldn't a researcher entering into a "study" put aside their own issues in order to focus entirely on where the study leads, instead of what the researcher hopes to find or perhaps believes is "truth"?

Secondly, if I may, you state the "aim is to present a rich account". How can you possibly state the aim as having an end result of "richness"? You can't know at the beginning of the "study" if you will find a "rich account" or not. You may find only stories of disappointment, drudgery, failure. You may find stories of great joy and celebration. Until you actually do the study, you won't know what the result will be.

My bias is that I hope you do end with a rich account of success. In this world we live we can certainly use some good or great news. But as researchers, it may be more appropriate to do research instead of looking for predetermined results.

-Best of "luck", and valid results.

(Gender and name withheld in order not to bias reading of above letter.)"

Here, this anonymous individual questions the premise of my research, querying whether my research was genuinely "objective" and "unbiased". This response reinforced the fact that notions of impartiality and objectivity continue to permeate dominant understandings of research, thus highlighting the continuing relevance of the feminist epistemological and methodological approaches explored above. Another response came from a community with an autocratic approach to decision-making premised on sexual freedom and expression. As this community did not meet my selection criteria, I responded explaining that I did not require their participation. At the same time, I sent out letters and emails (see Appendix B) to approximately 20 communities across the US and Australia, which included a link to my video and an Information Sheet (see Appendix B). The preliminary letter included information about my background, personal interests and prior involvement with alternative communities. This letter invited representative/s of the community to contact me to have a discussion about the project. Communities and groups were approached on the basis of their length of operation. The 20 communities I contacted had been in operation for over 10 years. The reason for this is that this project does not focus on problems associated with the establishment of communities and groups – these issues have been well-documented by a number of other studies (see Cock 1979; Kanter 1972; Sargisson and Sargent 2004). Moreover, I held the view the more established the community or group, the more likely it was to have an established culture/s, discourse/s and associated practices and beliefs.

Of the 20 communities, five communities responded and were selected to be part of this study. Three of the five communities selected were located in the United States and two were located in Australia.

I made email contact with each community's representative/s (or "gatekeepers") prior to entering the field. During these discussions I provided the representative/s with a letter to potential participants outlining the goals of my research and inviting them to contact me directly. In all instances, the representative/s provided this information to women of the community.

Representatives were particularly active in assisting me in the process of recruitment. In one community, for example, a representative approached potential participants directly inviting them to speak to me. One morning, as I was eating breakfast, this representative introduced me to four women he thought had interesting stories that could be included in the study. One of the women he approached did not look particularly interested in the study but got her diary out and made a time. He explained that a number of individuals in the community were "introverted" and as such would be unwilling to approach me directly. They needed to be asked. His pre-existing relationships with these potential participants meant he was able to be forward and direct in his request, which it seemed secured a number of interviews I would not have otherwise had. Another example of the active role of the representative involved a representative offering to explain the project's purpose and hand out sign-up sheets during work meetings. These examples highlight the importance of maintaining a trusting and respectful relationship with community gatekeepers throughout the research process. I did this by responding to all forms of communication promptly, only attending meetings/events when invited, expressing gratitude regularly and avoiding being intrusive during my stay with communities.

I also used the method of "snowballing" in recruiting participants, asking participants whether they would be willing to approach others they thought might be interested in my research. The snowballing technique in combination with the role of the active representative was effective in recruiting between 7 and 10 interview participants at each research site.

I should mention here that representatives from Circle Hill expressed concern, from the outset, about the issue of anonymity and confidentiality. I addressed this by agreeing that the penultimate draft of my dissertation be read by a representative of the community. In this way, the community could ensure that anonymity was maintained and that anything harmful to the community could be taken out of the dissertation prior to publication. Once the penultimate draft had been read, a community representative got back to me to advise

that aside from a few minor changes Circle Hill was satisfied with the level of anonymity provided.

Collecting the Data: Phase Two

Women over the age of 18 involved in the community or group for longer than one year were asked to participate in up to two semi-structured interview/s for approximately an hour each in length. During this interview, participants were invited to share their experiences in relation to the natural environment, embodiment and community. Appendix C provides a list of indicative questions used in the interview process. During the interviews, I allowed participants to raise additional themes that were important to them.

It was anticipated that the interviews could raise some sensitive issues for participants; discussions about life-choices and their personal lives could trigger feelings of distress. At the start of each interview, participants were told that they could elect to skip questions at any stage during the interview and that they could ask for the interview to stop. They were also told that they should only provide the information they felt comfortable sharing. At the start of each interview, I explained that any information participants provided would be kept confidential and that all participants, groups and communities would be allocated a pseudonym. I also explained that I would take all steps possible to ensure that participants would not be identifiable by the information they provided. At this point I provided them with a Consent Form (see Appendix E).

Interviews were taped with the consent of the interviewee. The taped interviews and transcripts were only accessed by my supervisors and me. I kept tapes and transcripts in a locked filing cabinet in my office. I took every effort to maintain the confidentiality of the data collected. Participants, communities and groups were allocated pseudonyms and participants' personal details and information were stored in a locked filing cabinet throughout the research process. Any unique features relating to participants' personal circumstances community were dealt with in a way that protected them from being identifiable by general readers. It should be noted, however, that due to the small size of the selected communities participants could be identifiable within their community. This limitation was made explicit on the Information Sheet and was discussed with the participants at the preliminary meeting and before interviews.

Selected Community Sites[8]

Below is a description of each of the communities selected to partake in the study based on my Reflexive Journal.

"Kwan Yin Garden"

The bell chimes at my door. Startled, I jump out of bed. It is 4:45am. The black of the night has not yet lifted and I fight the desire to keep sleeping. I put on my slippers and walk to the communal bathroom. It is sparse and simple in its aesthetic, much like the rest of the building. Two women in black robes are brushing their teeth. They have clear and concentrated looks on their faces. I wonder if they have been awake for a while. I wash my face and change into something black.

As mindfully as possible, I walk down four flights of stairs.

I approach the meditation hall and I notice someone is seated at the door. We do not acknowledge each other. I keep my eyes to the ground. This is not a time for socialising but for solitary practice. As I enter the hall, I bow. I know to do this from my prior Zen training. The hall, large and rectangular, spans to my left and right. A quarter of the room is partitioned off. Later, I realise that this section is allocated to those who hold official spiritual positions at the Centre. I approach the altar. It displays large statues of the Buddha and Kwan Yin (the Goddess of compassion) – I am heartened to see both female and male representations of Buddha-nature.

I walk in a clockwise direction and choose a meditation cushion. I bow to the cushion and sit facing the wall. I hear the footsteps of others assuming their positions next to me. There are about 60 people in the room – some residents of the Centre, others visiting for the morning.

As the gong sounds, I invite my mind to inhabit what Buddhists term "open awareness". I keep my eyes open and simply sit, noticing my body and any phenomena arising in my mind. Those around me make no sound. Their breathing is quiet and their bodies motionless. 25-minutes pass and another bell is rung. We stand quickly, bow to each other and begin walking in a clock-wise direction. I turn my mind to the sensations of walking, letting thoughts go as they arise. Silently, I note "walking, walking, walking".

This sequence of sitting and walking is repeated three times.

An hour and a half in, a service begins in Japanese. Buddhist sutras are read forcefully by the Centre's leaders with tremendous gusto. I tear up. I am moved by the depth of devotion and commitment offered here.

My mind wanders momentarily and I am reminded of a story a resident told me the day before. She had explained that a world-renowned Zen master visited Kwan Yin and commented that "the Centre was great but that residents wake up too early". I chuckle. Despite the intensity of the structure, I can see that the discipline and commitment here is a reflection of residents' deep conviction in the Buddha's teachings.

We leave the hall silently and I notice the sun has risen. It is time for breakfast.

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8 See Appendix A for selected demographics on participants from each community.

This practice of seated meditation, or *Zazen*, is the cornerstone of Kwan Yin Garden. Located in an urban centre on the West Coast of the US, Kwan Yin seeks to provide an accessible site for residents, students and visitors who wish to further their Zen Buddhist training. Two structured periods of meditation are offered each day from Monday to Saturday: once at 5:30am and another at 5:30pm. The meditation periods are open to general public and are compulsory for residents. I learned that several visitors make an hour-long commute to join the Kwan Yin meditations often both before and after work.

Shikantaza or "just sitting" is the core meditation practice offered at the Centre. It is something of a goalless meditation which invites the practitioner to remain open to whatever arises in his/her field of awareness. It is geared towards a kind of paring back, a letting go, an unfolding. In describing the practice, one participant used the metaphor of a container that gently holds whatever arises with love and compassion. The practice, she said, does not discriminate between "good" or "bad" experiences, but rather allows the flow of life to move freely without interference or judgement. This metaphor can be extended to community life at Kwan Yin. During my time there, residents explain that one of the central values at Kwan Yin is a non-judgemental approach to the emotional, physical and spiritual vicissitudes residents face. Indeed, this is something that is explored in greater detail in Chapter Six.

Kwan Yin was founded in the 1960s by a prominent Buddhist teacher from Japan. It is situated in a well-maintained four-story heritage listed building that once housed single disadvantaged women. The rooms are small yet private and each level offers a communal bathroom. The building includes two large meditation halls, a large dining hall and kitchen. Meals are offered communally three times a day. Over time, it has grown to house approximately 60 residents in addition to hundreds of visitors each year. Most residents described themselves as firmly "middle-class". The majority of residents I met hold at least a college education and possess a significant capacity for critical reflection and conscious engagement with the world. Residents do not buy into the property but pay board and are permitted to retain assets outside of Kwan Yin.

The Centre is socially progressive and encourages dialogue on gender and environmental issues. While I am there a series of events were being organised about 'white privilege'. One participant commented that it is "refreshing" to consider the issue of race from the

perspective of privilege in that it enabled her to challenge her commonly held assumptions and unconscious biases. She explained that a central concern for the Centre has been the lack of racial and class diversity and that the Centre has a renewed strategic focus on addressing this.

The Centre is governed by an Abbott/Abbess, management team and an elected Board. The Centre's property is owned by a Buddhist association, rather than by individual residents. The decision-making structure is hierarchical and formal with the Board overseeing all strategic and governance issues. One of the Centre's major aims is sustainability. This includes the sustainability of Zen practice for future generations as well as sustainability of the Centre's infrastructure and the environment in general. In addition to the meditation schedule, it offers retreats and a wide array of training programs on Buddhist philosophy, as well as on other relevant themes, like Earth Day, art and social justice.

"Mountain Valley"

From Kwan Yin, I travelled to Mountain Valley, a rural ecovillages in the south of the US, which is located within one of the most bio-diverse regions of the world. Situated approximately 50km from the closest city, this community spans 330 acres and is physically and culturally separate from metropolitan life. 60 residents live onsite: most are Anglo-American and most identify as cis gender (with a roughly 50/50 gender split). Most residents have not attended a tertiary institution and have had working class jobs and/or precarious employment in the past.

As I entered the site, I was struck by the wildness of the natural surrounds: it was mountainous, wet, and bursting with elemental vigour. My fieldnotes read:

> My host, a woman in her mid-thirties, is dressed in a flowing purple dress that touches the earth. She smells of essential oils and the rainforest. Rain, she says, is a constant this time of year. She warns me to watch out for poison ivy and suggests I carry a torch at night.

> A lake flows through the centre of the property. Everything is wet and bursting with life. I spot bugs, small birds and snakes as we walk. Resident cabins, made of natural building materials, seem to blend into the thick of the rainforest. I can see that much effort has been made to avoid interfering with the environment's original state: the surrounds are minimally cultivated save for a few narrow paths leading to each residential area and certain fields designated for permaculture farming. The physical site seems inconceivably large and I struggle to visualise its outer boundaries.

> (Reflexive Journal, 2013)

Mountain Valley's lay-out is sprawling and emulates a village-setting. It is split up into distinct "neighbourhoods", or residential spaces, which are broadly located across the site. Some are located on the outskirts to ensure greater privacy while others are more public and communal and are situated closer to the site's central hub. It can take up to 15 minutes to walk from one neighbourhood to the next. Each neighbourhood has its own architectural style and approach. For example, one is made up of small mud-huts without electricity or water, while another is populated by large self-contained houses with basic utilities designed for separate families. In addition to the physical differences, the ethos of each neighbourhood is distinct. For instance, some neighbourhoods are more anarchist than others and have minimal expectations in relation to tasks like cleaning communal spaces, cooking, gardening and construction. Other neighbourhoods embrace a more cooperative/coordinated approach, dividing communal tasks amongst residents and visitors, according to set time-frames. There is no broad agreement across the community about the number of hours residents are required to work each week. The division of labour is decided by each neighbourhood according to its own standards and vision. I learned that a number of residents rely on their savings and/or a very small amount of government support, while others run their own individual businesses, inside and outside community, in areas like Reiki, hypnotherapy, biodynamic faming and consensus-training.

My host tells me that I am staying in the neighbourhood with a large cooperative house that offers rooms for rent and/or in exchange for labour. This neighbourhood, she says, has a focus on permaculture and ecological building. My notes read:

> I arrive at the house and am greeted by a woman in her 60s who takes me to an adjacent mud-cabin, containing a futon bed and a small desk. She built the cabin herself, she tells me, and she often uses it as a place of prayer and communion. She is gentle yet she embodies a certain fiery quality, which emerges as she tells me about her long-term passion for the principles of ecology and communitarianism. The house itself is two stories and includes at least 10 bedrooms. A scaffold is assembled out the front and I can see that it is still in the process of being constructed. Three young men in their 20s sit in the dining-area chatting. I introduce myself and they tell me they are renting a room in exchange for some work in the garden.

> I look out the window and can see the sun beginning to set. Specks of green light are populating the sky. This is the dance of lightning bugs, the boys tell me. As night deepens, millions of these luminescent bugs fill the sky and the rainforest becomes louder. Large cicada bugs can be heard pummelling into the buildings as well as the song of millions of species, buzzing and vibrating in all of their vitality.

> (Reflexive Journal, 2013)

Mountain Valley was established in the 1990s by a small group of individuals committed to the alternative lifestyle movement. Since then it has grown to house 50 individuals and aims to continue expanding. Properties are privately owned, though renting and/or WWOOFING (Willing Workers on Organic Farms) is also available within some neighbourhoods. The central meeting point at Mountain Valley is Main Hall which is used for monthly council meetings where decisions are made by consensus and through the process of open-dialogue. Main Hall is also used for other activities, such as yoga and dance. Mountain Valley aims to enact alternative ecology, practice permaculture and spiritual agriculture and provide a space for spiritual practice. It provides women of the community with a women's-only space and access to a resident Priestess who practises feminist spirituality. I note down the following:

> A few days into my stay I can see the extent to which spirituality and eco-activism form a central part of community life here at Mountain Valley. Most residents I meet tell me they practice Neo-Shamanic and Neo-Pagan rituals and spirituality. My host explains many residents are in the process of reconnecting with their ancestors and the original Indigenous culture of the land. They do this through tracing their history, studying with spiritual elders, and engaging in the practice of "spiritual farming" or "spiritual agriculture". One resident explains that these practices help her to worship the elements, ensure that the process of eating is made holistic, and to "become" the natural world itself.

> One night I am invited to a celebratory meal following a day of farming. About 20 residents sit in a circle around a fire. An Anglo-American man in his 30s leads an African chant. The sun is going down and the air is cool. The chant-leader addresses the group. He exclaims "to you the farmers we have been busy preparing a feast for you and we have made moons from the sky for you!" A plate of tortillas is brought forward. Next, goat, deer and rabbit dishes are presented to the group. These animals, the chant-leader explains, have "kindly sacrificed themselves for the feast." Residents nod in agreement. A corn and bean stew is then placed at the centre of the circle – the ingredients of which have been harvested that morning. Residents gaze at the dish with gratitude. One resident spontaneously stands and exclaims: "I honour you bean, his and her majesty, I bow before you. It is just so beautiful to be here with you, the love you offer us." This language is unfamiliar to me, yet I know that something very significant is at play here and that the residents of Mountain Valley are doing some transformative work reconfiguring their relationship to the natural world and the food they consume.

> (Reflexive Journal, 2013)

The last point I make above about the residents' reconfiguration of their relationship to the environment forms a major part of Chapter Six. As I show, my time at Mountain Valley challenged many of my presuppositions about ecological activism and the lived experience of being part of an eco-village.

"River Stream"

A few weeks later I travelled to River Stream, an Intentional Community located in another Southern township of the US. As soon as I arrived I could see that this community differed significantly to Mountain Valley: it was highly structured and underpinned by a range of institutional norms and expectations. My first point of contact with the community demonstrated this. I write:

> I wait to be picked up out the front of the library. About 10 people are seated in the vicinity and I wonder if they too are getting a ride to the community site. A van pulls up. The driver marks our names off a list. He is expecting me, he says. We file into the van. The passengers don't say much yet there is a certain type of familiarity or intimacy about this silence - it's as though pleasantries have long been abandoned.
>
> I introduce myself to a gentle man in his 30s who tells me he has a two-year-old boy and that he was visiting the library to borrow some books for him. He explains that the van goes to the town every day, dropping residents off in the morning and picking them up in the afternoon.
>
> As we pull into the site, I can see my host approaching. He is a serious slender man in his late 30s. We sit on a nearby bench and he gives me an "induction" into the norms of the community. I listen carefully. One of the most important norms, he says, is that you should always *ask to ask* someone a question. This, he explains, means that you should not approach a resident without first asking "can I ask you something?" "That is polite", he emphasises. The rationale is that residents want to ensure a certain level of privacy whilst onsite. It is their home after all. He continues. Phones should be only used in your own room or in the car-park and nudity norms should be set by the residents of each home. I agree to the rules.
>
> My host then directs me to change into a brown shirt and some cargo pants that he has laid for me on a nearby table. He explains that he will be putting the clothes I am wearing through the dryer. This is to ensure I have not brought any bedbugs, or the like, from the prior community I stayed with. These safeguards are important at River Stream, he explains, as the cleanliness standards in Intentional Communities are lower in community than the rest of America and as a result parasites can travel fast.
>
> (Reflexive Journal, 2013)

Founded in the 1960s, River Stream's main aim is to provide a space for self-sustaining communal living. Grounded in communitarianism, a strong work ethic and a robust institutional structure, about 100 individuals resided at River Stream at the time of my visit – residents had a variety of ethnic backgrounds including African-American, Asian-American, British and Anglo-American. In addition, hundreds of visitors stay as guests throughout the year through an organised visitation program that runs every six weeks. At the time of visiting the community was at capacity and offered a waitlist for those who are seeking to join.

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Surrounded by the dense and tall woods, the community property includes a dairy, vegetable garden, a greenhouse, a barn and four main houses. Each house is multi-storied, made of natural timber and contains over 20 private rooms with a window. Some houses are about a 15-minute walk from the central communal area, while others are about a 5-10-minute walk. Residents often use communal bikes – there are about 20 available - to travel within the community space. A hospice is also run onsite which has been set up for members who are aging or require intensive medical support. Nurses from outside of River Stream are engaged to provide the caring.

The community's main hub is a large kitchen/dining space. Meals are offered three times a day at a set time and the community eats together. The kitchen also provides snacks, tea and the facilities to make your own food with what is available. Most of the vegetables, eggs, tofu and dairy used in the kitchen are produced onsite. Large buckets of recently harvested vegetables are kept in a huge cool room, along with grains and other staples.

My first encounter in this communal area evoked a sense of utopianism. I explain:

> I sit outside the dining room for a while and consider the tall, well-established trees that contour the site. On the table alongside me I notice a group of about 15 young people enjoying themselves and laughing raucously. Although they are a diverse bunch that appear to come from all different parts of America, they emanate a kind of progressive West Coast vibe. Perhaps it is their strong aesthetic identity: tattoos cover their body, they don trendy glasses and hip clothes. I can hear the group deep in lively discussion, covering all sorts of topics, spanning from travelling to India to the current state of American politics. After about 10 minutes, I make my way inside. Sly and the Family Stone is being played loudly and I can see about 7 cooks drinking beer and working on dinner. They are chopping root vegetables and working to a recipe that has been pinned onto a pin-board for all to see. Suddenly, I feel elated and excited, part of something bigger than myself. It takes me by surprise. I can see that a type of balance is being struck here by the residents, between meaningful work, fun, connection and joy. I can also see that my concerns about the insular nature of Intentional Communities are being challenged. Not only do residents seem aware and deeply engaged with issues outside of community, they also seem to be enjoying aspects of outside culture like music.
>
> (Reflexive Journal, 2013)

River Stream provides residents with a highly-structured work environment and aims to share both labour and resources in an egalitarian way. The community runs a number of successful business ventures, including a wholesale tofu business, a wood-turning enterprise and a hammock store. One of the most attractive aspects of this community, I am told by several residents, is the fact that community members can choose the type of work roles

and ventures they are involved in. This means that residents can organise their work week in a way that suits their schedule, interests and preferences. This is something I discuss in greater detail in Chapter Five. I inquired about the education of the children living at River Stream and I was told that they are generally sent to public schools nearby or, in certain circumstances, are home-schooled, but that River Stream was in the process of considering sending them to a Montessori school in the future, if their budget permits it.

A key feature of River Stream's history, that is reiterated by residents and within the community literature, is the fact that it was conceived by graduate-student-entrepreneurs ("not by hippies", as one resident reiterates). The founders were inspired by the psychological theories of behaviourism and in particular by the book *Walden Two* (Skinner, 1974). Although behaviourism is no longer as influential, it still features in some subtle ways – for example, some community spaces that require labour may provide incentives like free chocolate and coffee.

The land at River Stream is owned communally and decisions are made democratically (as opposed to by consensus). Each resident, in exchange for 42 hours of labour, has their basics provided for, such as food, second-hand clothing and toiletries, and are provided with a small weekly stipend. Residents are encouraged to develop opinion pieces, in writing, if they have a new idea about community life. These opinion pieces are then posted publically for a period of time and taken up by a relevant committee. River Stream is underpinned by a large and in-depth array of policies on various aspects of community life which are loosely based on the governance structure detailed in *Walden Two.* In this sense, as I argue in Chapter Five, freedom within River Stream is highly regulated and bureaucratised. This has both its benefits and limitations, which I detail in this Chapter.

"Circle Hill"

I arrived back in Australia and the next phase of my fieldwork involves the community of Circle Hill, a feminist spirituality centre located within the suburbs of an Australian capital city. Circle Hill can be distinguished from previous communities in that it is non-residential. It does, however, have some clear similarities with Kwan Yin in that its primary function is to provide a place of contemplation and reflection for women who are spiritual seekers and/or seeking solace and connection. Certain features of the community are also reminiscent of Mountain Valley, particularly its explicit commitment to female spirituality and religion. I recount my first encounter with the space:

Nestled away in the backstreets of a leafy suburb, Circle Hill is a small yet vibrant space that is purposefully constructed in the shape of a spiral. Inside, large windows offer a rich view of the luscious garden, which includes an ancient fig-tree and is home to a large variety of birds. Striking clay sculptures of strong wild women can be found both outside and inside. As I enter the centre, I can see that about four small rooms line the corridor, which I am told by my host, are used by spiritual counsellors and psychotherapists for a small fee. She also explains that they provide women with the space they might need for a private moment to read or engage in some reflection. In the main communal area, a welcoming open-plan kitchen is stocked with tea, coffee and biscuits. The building itself is covered in colourful mosaic pieces which one can imagine were created in community by a team of volunteers. I am told by my hosts that the volunteer program has been very successful over the years and that only one part-time administration assistant is paid for her time. All workshop leaders, support staff and managers offer their time and energy freely. This is clearly a much needed and successful venture.

(Reflexive Journal, 2013)

Circle Hill was founded in the 1990s by a group of Christian nuns and associates. It receives funding from a progressive Christian organisation as well as individual donors and income from hiring out its hall. It is underpinned by a feminist world-view and provides a multitude of programs on feminist spirituality, art and movement. At the time of visiting, groups were exploring the following: grief, meditation, dance, theatre, poetry, gardening and theological, spiritual and non-spiritual texts. Although it has a strong continuing connection to its Christian founders, it can broadly be described as ecumenical and welcoming of all spiritualities, particularly those that embrace the female aspect. It represents an urban sanctuary, which aims to promote empowerment of women and provide support and companionship to women on their spiritual and healing journeys. Hundreds of women frequent the centre per year. It offers a library with a rich and varied selection of feminist, spiritual and self-help books. Individual support and friendship are also offered through a "spiritual companionship" program and community building events, such as dinners and volunteering opportunities. I attended the theological group and can see these meetings hold a special place in the lives of attendees. My notes explain:

I am greeted at the door by a sweet woman in her 70s who tells me she is a Christian sister. She has a very warm and accepting demeanour and takes me to the main meeting area, which I can see forms the centre of the spiral. I notice a table, as I enter the room, which appears to be a type of altar. It includes a clay sculpture of 6 women with a candle in the middle and water alongside of it. I ponder its significance. It reminds me of the images at Mountain Valley though I can sense that witchcraft/paganism is not necessarily its inspiration. Seven women attend the gathering, most of whom are nuns in the senior years. We sit in a circle and discuss a text written by a Muslim woman from Ghana. The conversation is centred on whether the Koran can be said to have been misrepresented and whether, in certain

parts, it can be said to be empowering of women. I can see that this discussion is deeply satisfying for participants. It is honest, forgiving and intellectually sophisticated.

(Reflexive Journal, 2013)

It was clear from this encounter that one of the central functions of this community is providing members with a sense of belonging and acceptance. This is something that I elaborate on in greater depth in Chapter Five.

"Oasis"

The last community I attend is Oasis, a residential New Age ecovillage located in rural Australia. Founded in the 1980s by a small group of spiritual seekers in their 20s-30s who were influenced by Eastern philosophy, Oasis has retained an unwavering commitment to Indian spirituality and personal development. Residents share a dedication to the principles of self-discovery, transformation and transcendence. The community space offers a beautiful large hall used for meditative and body practices, which is open to those both within and outside of the community. Vipassana meditation and catharsis meditation are offered daily and spiritual chanting and communion are offered on a weekly basis. I attended one of the chanting sessions and was moved by the ecstatic and transcendent nature of the gathering:

> I am sitting in the hall waiting for the chanting to begin. Natural light seeps in through the windows and an elaborate shrine stands tall, displaying images of an Indian guru. His gaze is intense, penetrating and disarming. I introduce myself to a man next to me. He is a visitor and he wants to talk to me about his relationship to his body. He tells me that this practice, the chanting and the catharsis, has meant he saw his physical form in a whole new way. He explains that he had recently been cycling around Australia and for the first time he began to feel it was his body doing the riding rather than his "self" doing the work. He says that he had a similar experience at an Indigenous festival and that he felt his body, involuntarily was doing the dancing. Our conversation is cut short. A man with a long beard begins to play the harmonium and a woman chants in Sanskrit. We repeat after her: "Hare, Hare! Govinda Rama!" About an hour in, a tremendous sense of peace comes over me and I can feel my sense of self becoming less bounded. A rush of ecstasy comes over me and I look around and see similar ecstatic expressions on the faces of those around me. This is the heart of the community, I think. A joyous expression of the divine through community.

> (Reflexive Journal, 2014)

The community site faces the sparkling Eastern coastline and is situated near a beach-town situated in a region that enjoys a particularly tropical and warm climate. The community is made up of 40 hectares of land and includes 11 residential properties. At the time of visiting

Oasis was owned by 14 "shareholders" and rented rooms to 10 tenants. Each house is privately owned by a single individual and/or family. Most houses include a large garden area, which some use for vegetable gardening and tending to chickens. The houses vary in size, with some being sufficiently sized for one and others being a medium sized family home. By and large, all houses are based on ecological/sustainable design and building principles.

One of the residential houses is a communal space which is rented by tenants and by guests on an ad hoc basis. It is a medium sized house with approximately four bedrooms, a large dining area and three attached "granny-flats". Whilst visiting, about 8 people lived in the house and 2 tenants in the granny flats. The communal house is used for community dinners, which are held once a month, and are attended by residents, visitors and outside guests from the nearby community. There are a number of communal facilities, including an outdoor shower and a composting eco-toilet.

The surrounding land, which is made up of a mixture of native and exotic trees, is tended to by the residents through an ongoing Landcare regime, which involves the planting of native trees and plants and regular weeding. The property attracts a range of wildlife, including large carpet pythons, green tree snakes, koalas, wallabies, echidnas, flying foxes and bandicoots. Decisions are made by majority and only shareholders are entitled to vote; long-term tenants are excluded from the decision-making process. Outside of the communal house, food and finances are not shared. In this way, this community is less communal than some of the prior Intentional Communities I attend. It values private space and can be described as more of a co-housing venture than a commune.

Data Analysis: Phase Three

The data was analysed by using a constructionist thematic approach (see Clarke and Braun, 2014). This was carried out by identifying recurrent themes and contradictions in participants' comments, behaviours and interactions (Dey, 2003). In addition, taken-for-granted assumptions were teased out and a critical lens was applied to the ways participants *spoke* about their lives and their internal worlds. I was also interested in the material and environmental phenomena I observed in each community. I endeavoured to capture my perceptions of these in my personal journal.

Before entering the field, there were several themes I sought to explore with participants. These included their relationships, spirituality, reasons for joining community and

relationship to the body and environment. While these themes formed the starting point for my data analysis, I remained open to any other themes that emerged and/or that were important to participants' discourses during the process of coding. As a feminist, I was interested in honouring the parts of participants' stories that were most important to them. I also wanted to remain open to any creative responses, ideas, experiences that formed part of their subjectivities which I had not originally envisioned. In this way, my approach was partly informed by grounded theory (see Creswell and Poth, 2018). In keeping with this approach, I endeavoured to preserve the integrity of the data by presenting participants' comments and behaviour within their original context. I also situated the data within the history and operation of the community or group being studied.

As a first step, full transcription of the interview data was carried out. This was partly completed by me and partly by a transcription service. These interviews, along with my field-notes, were then fed into NVivo. Initially I read through the transcripts and field-notes a number of times and created codes (or NVivo "nodes") based on broad themes as they arose. Next I identified the narrative features of each interview and wrote a 250 to 500 word memo on the discursive style and key elements of each interview. Drawing partly on a narrative approach to qualitative research (see Creswell and Poth, 2018), I "restoryed" each interview, putting together a chronological narrative and highlighting major plot features. I then engaged in refined coding in relation to the most predominant themes relevant to the research questions. I did this largely by hand, highlighting and writing notes in the margins. I also used NVivo to identify the major themes covered in my personal journal and notes. Carrying out the analysis in these three waves resulted in a highly nuanced and sophisticated analysis of the data and its possible meanings.

Conclusion

This research project aims to investigate the subjectivities of women committed to alternative communities. Subjectivity was chosen as the primary site of examination as I believe it to be a crucial location where non-hegemonic discourses and creative alternatives to modernity are being cultivated and negotiated.

Women, in particular, were selected as participants for a number of reasons. First, this study rests on the belief that gendered discourses shape women's subjectivities in particular and complex ways. Second, gender was a key feature of participants' experience as each community studied was committed to challenging traditional gender relations and gendered

ways-of-being in the world. Finally, as identified in Chapter One, there is a dearth of scholarship offering a nuanced and critical understanding of the encounter between women's subjectivities and the work of developing new social and therapeutic possibilities within alternative communities.

Throughout this Chapter, I detailed the numerous theoretical and epistemological threads that inform the project's methodology and situated my project firmly within the context of feminist qualitative research and social constructionism. I explained the process of recruitment, selection and data-gathering and highlighted the main methodological tensions I faced in the field and explained the ways I navigated them. My approach is self-reflexive and considers the ways my own subjectivity could be impacting the research process. In this way, this project rests on a strong methodological foundation, which I believe is essential to the success and validity of any given research project. The next Chapter turns to the specific discursive formations underpinning participants' self-narratives.

CHAPTER THREE: Tales of Yearning, Belonging and Authenticity

Introduction

This chapter explores the narratives participants employ in describing their journey to alternative community. It considers the "plot" features and discursive devices that underpin participants' stories (Creswell and Poth, 2018, pp65-110) and considers the ways in which storylines shape the contours of participants' lifeworlds and inform claims to knowledge, truth and normativity. It examines the empowering aspects of such narratives, demonstrating that, for the most part, they encouraged a sense of belonging and provided participants with the strength to adopt unconventional life pathways. In this way, the encounter between particular cultural discourses and participants' self-narratives is linked to connecting and therapeutic outcomes.

This Chapter, however, also reveals the more limiting aspects of these narratives, extending the Foucauldian proposition that discourse can be at once productive and oppressive (Foucault 1978, 1980). In this vein, it considers the trade-offs and sacrifices participants made in order to maintain these alternative identities. Moreover, it suggests that certain features of participants' storylines were associated with feelings of loss in relation to former relationships and/or pursuits, revealing the more paradoxical features of the utopian project. In addition, the main discourses (arising from the New Age and psychotherapeutic milieu) affecting participant self-narratives had the potential to exclude those who do not have the requisite economic and/or cultural capital to engage with certain ideas and techniques. Further, such discourses often relied on a certain elitism which could be both essentialising and reductive.

Ultimately, I argue that participants drew on a romantic narrative as well as aspects of both the "hero"s' and "heroine's" journey in constructing their search for alternative community. However, unlike the traditional hero's journey, most participants' ultimate goal was not individualistic but relational. Participants yearned for greater connection with their subjective lives as well as support, friendship and a connection to the transpersonal and spiritual. Ultimately, this narrative structure was shown to have both empowering and constraining effects for participants: participants felt elated to be in a community of people who adopted similar story-lines and reported developing greater self-awareness and connection to self and others, yet at the same time participants could rarely see beyond the

discursive systems in which they were entangled, which at times limited their capacity for reflexivity and reflection on their own cultural context.

Throughout this thesis I subscribe to the idea that discourses are made up of certain "truth statements" that arise from structures of power (Foucault, 1980). Such structures are complex and often provide pay-offs to those within a given hierarchy. Hence, throughout this Chapter, I explore the ways such truth statements manifest in participants' self-narratives, particularly in relation to their decision to join alternative community. A crucial question which I seek to address toward the end of the Chapter relates to the link between subjectivity and discourse. I ask to what extent participants can choose a "subject position" within the discourses available to them (Weedon, 1987, p112). I also consider participants' reflexivity and whether they are capable of transgressing the discursive milieu.

It should also be reiterated here that as I explain in the previous Chapter, I take the position that language is but one way in which life worlds are formed; material, sensory, emotional and transpersonal factors also play a significant role in constituting social worlds. However, for the purposes of this Chapter I focus mainly on language and narrative while in subsequent chapters I place more of an emphasis on the intersection between language and non-linguistic phenomena.

New Age Discourses

The most influential discursive systems, according to my findings, arose out of the New Age and psychotherapeutic movements, movements that intertwine in several vital ways. I consider these two systems generally before I outline my specific findings.

New Age spirituality has been described as an eclectic and diverse space that draws "upon multiple traditions, styles, and ideas simultaneously, combining them into idiosyncratic packages" (Aupers and Houtman, 2006, p201). One aspect that unites the New Age, however, is the move away from a certain external authority, such as God, toward an inner authority which adherents refer to as "inner wisdom" or the "inner self". Kohn (1991) describes the New Age as a "self-religion" with a commitment to the "the individual's inherent godliness, which has enormous "'transformative' power" (p136). In this way, the individual's ego and/or the intuition are considered the highest forms of authority by adherents (Barcan, 2011, p35). Thus, the spiritual quest is often conceived by the New Age as one that spirals inward and downward, toward the self or the soul, rather than upward toward the heavens or a God. Thus, New Age adherents seek to "uncover" and subsequently

"express" their "true" nature, both as a member of "humanity" and as a uniquely constituted individual (Heelas, 2009).

While there is no doubt that this discourse has had many beneficial implications for adherents, many of which are described in-depth by Heelas (2006; 2009), it is not without its limitations – for example, the notion of the "inner self" is often constructed by adherents as essential and pre-cultural. This begs the question: can what is deemed "inner-wisdom" ever genuinely be separated from socialisation and governing social norms and truth/knowledge claims (in other words a system of discursive authority)? The potential problem here is that an undeserved amount of moral weight can be attributed to the notion of "inner wisdom", which leaves it open to misuse or, at a minimum, a misunderstanding of how one's wisdom comes to be.

Moreover, such discourses rarely address the issue of class, race or able-bodied privilege. This raises a further question: is the notion of inner-wisdom a Western, middle-class ideal that relies on humanistic notions of the individual self? And if so, in what ways does it exclude those who do not have the luxury, willingness and/or resources to consult the requisite texts, teachings and techniques, not to mention those who rely on a different moral framework? Are such individuals constructed as less "enlightened" or morally inferior? Further, how are people who do not fit the White middle-class norm represented and treated by this discourse?

In part, these questions are taken up by Crowley (2011) in her book, *Feminism's New Age: Gender, Appropriation, and the Afterlife of Essentialism* in which she finds that the New Age Movement, as well as healing/therapeutic cultures, have overwhelmingly attracted white middle-class women (Crowley, 2011, p29). Indeed, this was reflected within the demographic of my participants, as well as within many other studies. Amongst my participants, one self-reported as African American, another as Native American and the remaining as Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-American. Strangely, and perhaps tellingly, the fact that contemporary wellbeing culture has generally been the province of white middle-class women has not been the focus of much scholarly attention. What is more, as Crowley (2011) explains, little scholarship has analysed the ways in which race intersects with gender within New Age circles.

In her book, Crowley (2011) specifically explores the appropriation of "exotic" cultures, such as Native American and Eastern philosophies within the feminist New Age. She makes some

vital observations about the contradictions between New Age praxis and academic feminism, ultimately attributing these to the fact that certain aspects of the New Age can be described as "outmoded, frustrating, and racist" (p165). However, Crowley goes one step further to analyse the "complex dynamics of power, embodiment, and altered gender identities" of the New Age (p165). That is, she does not dismiss and invalidate the New Age merely because parts of it are misconceived, but rather seeks to delve into the more complex negotiations New Age adherents are engaged in, particularly in respect to race, identity and the body.

Crowley first turns to how gender is constructed within the New Age. She finds that New Age adherents generally adopt essentialised views of gender difference and subscribe to the idea that men and women need to integrate their "masculine" and "feminine" sides in order to become spiritually "integrated" or "whole". She explains:

> …women believe they have a special calling because they are more attuned to spirituality. Women believe that they live closer to the earth and cycles of nature, and thus they can protect the environment…Women believe that because they are more willing to integrate their male and female sides, they can teach men to do the same. Women believe that they understand the interrelatedness of all life better because they have superior qualities such as nurturance, understanding, and patience (p164).

Yet at the same time, she finds that adherents endeavour to move beyond the so-called "worldly" distinctions of gender towards something more non-dual. She explains that:

> [although this] seems like a contradiction between a desire for gender balance here on earth and a longing to leave gender behind it is better described as a tension— a tension common to New Age culture, where practitioners try to bridge the gap between the material plane of everyday life and the more ethereal plane of the spiritual one (p5).

In addition to essentialised notions of gender, Crowley also finds that adherents exoticise, fetishise and appropriate the practices of people of colour. Rightly, she argues that this has racist and unacceptable political consequences; however, she also seeks to understand the cultural and historical reasons behind this and associated effects. One of her most interesting claims is that "white women participate in New Age culture in part to negotiate the long, complex, and some would say failed political alliances with women of color" (p9). She explains:

> Just when women of color challenged feminism and women's and gender studies for its racist foundations in the 1980s and 1990s, many white women turned toward New Age spiritual practices that "allowed" them to live out fantasy unions with women of color that were disrupted in the public, feminist political sphere (p9).

A major reason for this, she says, is the notion that ancient or tribal wisdom is "the only hope for survival, since Western culture, medicine, and technology have brought the world to apocalypse" (p94). An example of this offered by Crowley is that of Goddess worship which, she explains, invites worshipers to access a "prehistorical", "racialized" and "primitive" body, one that acts as a portal to "sex, darkness and earthliness", qualities they may have felt alienated from within late capitalism (p119-120). This facilitates a new relationship to one's "gender identity" and body that is "positive, supportive, multiracial, sexual, and completely beyond the reach of the state" (p131). Hence, in this way, such practices can lead to the embodied transformations that women desire. However, she also emphasises that this body is a highly-racialized body: it is conceived "not just as essentially wise but also as essentially dark" (p165) and is instigated by a longing "to "return" to the black body and a perfect matriarchy" (p165). That is, Crowley claims that "white women fantasize a utopian harmony wherein they already have the "primitive" within" (p165). Such a conception is reductive, demeaning and prone to creating racist power-dynamics. However, Crowley also acknowledges that this does not necessarily come from an unwholesome or even fully conscious place, rather she concludes that:

> *New Age women want community, and they want empowerment as women. What is troubling to me is that without an overt political platform, many of these women will be unable to make demands as a community. Even more troubling is the unacknowledged imperialism and racism of most New Age practices that undermine claims for gender justice* (p167).

I agree with this summation and, like Crowley, I do not dismiss the feminist New Age outright, but seek to understand both its productive and potential negative outcomes. I do this throughout the remainder of the Chapter (though specifically looking at narrative) and return to themes of embodiment and race within Chapter Six. Crowley's work makes an important contribution to the scholarship on New Age spirituality as it provides a nuanced analysis of the assumptions within the paradigm and the emanating power dynamics.

Psychotherapeutic Discourses

New Age ideas share much in common with "therapy culture"[9]: namely, both adopt the rhetoric of "release" and "liberation", which urges individuals to emancipate themselves from the "shackles" of conventional society. Both suggest that adherents can achieve freedom through self-awareness, self-expression and other techniques that unearth the

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9 Furedi (2004), author of *Therapy Culture*, argues that the language of individual emotions and the cultural script of "syndromes", "emotional healing" and "self-esteem" lead to fragmentation within the modern era.

"real" self.[10] Additionally, both are suspicious of "dominator culture" and its influence on individuals' internal worlds.

Generally speaking, the psychotherapeutic movement endeavours to empower adherents to find their "inner voice" through the process of feeling their emotions "fully", grieving past losses and uncovering limiting habitual patterns associated with one's family dynamic in his/her formative years. Its primary focus is on the individual and his/her capacity for psychological freedom via greater awareness and emotional healing. Again, much like the New Age, this discourse risks class and race blindness. That is, in order to participate in intensive psychotherapy one requires a certain amount of financial and temporal capital. Likewise, even the techniques that are less expensive, such as group-therapy, reading and "self-therapy" requires a certain level of education and willingness to subscribe to Western humanistic notions of psychic suffering and their remedies.

Among those committed to alternative community, one popular incarnation of this movement is "liberation psychotherapy", which Holden and Schrock (2007) define as a discourse that invites individuals to free themselves of societal expectations, "institutional life and social relationships as well as [embarking on] "processing"" (p176). Processing, according to the authors, involves exploring one's childhood experiences in an attempt to unearth one's "real" or "authentic" self, which, in turn, encourages the unrestrained expression of emotions - particularly emotions that have been discouraged in mainstream culture, such as grief, anger or despair (2007, p178).[11] In this way, adherents are not expected to behave in ways that are "nice" or socially acceptable rather they are invited to express how they are "genuinely" feeling moment by moment. The authors explain that proponents of liberation therapy consider the uncovering of the "real self" an act of political resistance directed at capitalist, patriarchal, dominator culture.

Rice (1992), also critic of therapy culture, proposes a similar view, but adds that another feature of this discourse is the idea that individuals are innately non-violent and loving (p347). As Carl Rogers (1982), one of the founders of humanist psychology, famously said:

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10 For an exploration of the increased therapeutic nature of Western culture see Rakow, Katja. "Therapeutic Culture and Religion in America." *Religion Compass* 7.11 (2013): 485-97; Furedi, Frank. *Therapy culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age*. Abingdon; Oxon: Routledge, 2004; Illouz, Eva. *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help.* Berkeley; Los Angeles: Univ of California Press, 2008.

11 This is ties in with Foucault's (1976) notion of "confession" as a dominant cultural practice spanning across a number of institutions in modern times. According to Foucault, "…Western societies have established the confession as one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth" (p59). In fact, Foucault specifically highlights the parallels between psychoanalytical therapies and Christian confession (1976, p65).

…my experience leads me to believe that it is cultural influences which are the major factor in our evil behaviours…I see members of the human species, like members of other species, as essentially constructive in their fundamental nature, but damaged by their experience (p8).

Put simply, in this discourse it is *culture* that corrupts and contaminates individuals. In response, individuals are seen as creating defences in relation to these constricting and abusive structures, usually from early in life.

Holden and Schrock (2007) suggest that psychotherapeutic discourse can have the effect of denying power relations and masking potential inequality or exploitation. According to these critics, the use of supposedly asocial notions - such as authenticity - has the potential to create hierarchies based on those who behave in the prescribed way and those who do not (Holden and Schrock, 2007). One can imagine that those who comply with the discourse may yield more social (and perhaps economic) capital (Bourdieu, 1984) compared to those who do not. Another concerning implication is "the idea that interpersonal problems originate in individuals' personalities… [this] limit[s] discussion and help[s] reproduce organisational inequality" (Holden and Schrock p177).[12]

Rice (1992) argues that therapeutic pursuits are "not so much a liberation as a deliverance from one into another system of authority" (1992, p353). The findings I offer in this Chapter reflect Rice's contention in that the self-narratives participants construct are limited and shaped by discourse and are subject to certain ways of constructing the "truth". However, I also show that they serve various productive purposes, both individually and socially.

These discourses manifested clearly in the narratives of participants (as I show) and tacitly within each communities' objects and visions. That is, communities' websites, vision statements and founding documents were rarely explicit in their commitment to "psychotherapy" or the "New Age" yet at the same time certain institutional processes could be linked to aspects of these discourses. For example, Kwan Yin Garden's policy documents explicitly prescribed "non-violent communication" (NVC) as a means of resolving community grievances. NVC was also taken up by River Stream, Oasis and Mountain Valley albeit more informally. Though NVC is not strictly "therapeutic" in its objectives, it is born out of the

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12 While this assertion may seem at odds with Rogers' aforementioned claim that it is culture (particularly familial culture) that contaminates the individual, this is not necessarily the case. While adherents view individuals' personality structures and potential neuroses as formed early in life through the internalisation of parental, institutional and cultural messages, they also claim that it is the individual who "carries" this blueprint within his/her psyche and projects it onto the world. Hence, in this way, it is the individual's responsibility to heal past wrongs and take charge of their own dysfunctional projections.

psychotherapeutic milieu. NVC encourages free-flow communication, the honest expression of feelings/needs/perceptions and the use of a "safe container" as a way of handling interpersonal disputes and community problems (see Rosenberg, 2003). In the case of Mountain Valley, "co-counselling" was also offered as a formal means of addressing ongoing interpersonal issues and grievances. Overall, however, Circle Hill's vision was perhaps the most overtly psychotherapeutic in its vision. "Healing" and "self-development" were unambiguously put forward as the objects of Circle Hill's program. In addition, Circle Hill actively promoted the cultivation of spiritual friendships and support groups for those facing emotional difficulty.[13] As these documents were not extensive – in fact, most were minimal - the focus of this Chapter is on the discourses of participants' speech and actions. Hence, what follows is an exploration of the key features of participants' tales of yearning, searching, fate, belonging and authenticity. This examination sheds light on participants' particular ways of knowing and being and the construction of their subjectivities within community.

Yearning and Searching

The *search* for meaning and connection is very familiar within bohemian and spiritual subcultures in the West – particularly for those who fittingly refer to themselves as "seekers" (see Drury, 2004; John, 1997; Sutcliffe and Bowman, 2000). Indeed, this is a feature of both the New Age and psychotherapeutic movements. As I will show, the impulse to search for what is meaningful serves as a significant feature in participants' self-narratives, one that prompts alternative ways of being in the world. It instigates a journeying (see Jager, 1974), in which participants seek in order to fill an existential "gap" – whether emotional, spiritual and/or relational. Seekers embark on an expedition of sorts, often both in a physical and discursive sense. As my data indicates, to be engaged in seeking is to move toward truth, connection, insight and meaning and move away from the "status quo", the "superficial" and the "mundane".

This motion (away from certain ways of being, towards others) is reflected in a broader cultural refrain of "spiritual journeying" (Keegan, 1991). A small body of literature deconstructs the narrative creation involved in spiritual life and proposes that the

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13 It is important to mention here that all communities, excluding Kwan Yin, were ecumenical in their approach to spirituality. Mountain Valley, Oasis, River Stream and Circle Hill's websites explicitly referred to embracing "diverse" spiritual traditions and practices. This deliberate reference to "spiritualties", as opposed to a certain religion, can be viewed as a way of pointing to New Age spiritualties and modalities, as opposed to traditional theistic approaches.

quintessential spiritual journey has come to involve the story of an *individual* embarking on a trying quest in an attempt to seek *success* and *personal transformation*, which, in turn, leads to an understanding of one's place in the order of things (see Ray and McFadden, 2001). Thus, the traditional stages of "spiritual development" are commonly represented as "the call, the search, the struggle, the breakthrough, and the return" (Ray and McFadden, 2001, p202). Such a story can be linked to narratives of spiritual development both within Western mythology (take the Odyssey for example) and Eastern philosophy (the Buddha's search for enlightenment). This story is encapsulated within the "hero's journey" or the "monomyth", which Joseph Campbell (1949) famously explains as:

> *A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man* (p23).

Several researchers, however, have critiqued this narrative, arguing that it is overly individualistic and does not consider the fact that spiritual paths are sometimes relational, overlapping and interdependent (Murdock, 1990; Ray and McFadden, 2001). Moreover, the classical version of this myth, as expounded by Campbell and his counterparts, has been criticised for not capturing women's spiritual journeys as they exist empirically and within our cultural imagination. Feminist scholars have posited that women employ more inter-relational and circular metaphors in relation to the spiritual path – such as the quilt and the web (Ray and McFadden, 2001, p202). In her book *The Heroine's Journey: Woman's Quest for Wholeness* (1990), Murdock offers an alternative "feminine" myth, one which involves healing the mother/daughter split and returning to feminine qualities amid patriarchal culture. This, she claims, goes some way in addressing the fact that Campbell's myth implicitly involves a masculine protagonist and denies that some heroes/heroines may be called to reclaim qualities commonly associated with the "sacred feminine", such as embodiment, tenderness, care and connection.

Aspects of both the hero's journey and Murdock's feminine myth were reflected in this study's findings. Consistent with the hero's myth, most participants used the frame of the "journey" or the "search" as a way of constructing their narratives. However, in the main, participants' ultimate goals did not relate to individual transformation. Rather, participants predominantly reported longing for relational and interpersonal connection. This extends Heelas' (2009) contention that New Age is not necessarily self-absorbed but can encourage

greater connection. Indeed, alternative journeys were reported as culminating in relationality, care and belonging - both within the natural and social world. This was linked to the finding that most participants were critical of narratives of individualisation/individuation and were in some way informed by feminist thought and/or feminine spirituality.[14]

There was, however, one interesting exception to this. A small number of participants from Kwan Yin Garden referred to their primary goal as individual liberation, believing that discipline, commitment and spiritual practice could lead them to their desired destination. Community was viewed as a vehicle to support individuals not as an end in itself. That is, while there was an emphasis on service and benefiting others during the process of individual training, these activities were seen as serving the journey toward Enlightenment rather than being the central goal of the journey.

One participant, Melinda from Kwan Yin Garden, claimed that this conceptualisation resulted in the depreciation of the more "feminine" aspects of the spiritual path, such as embodiment and gentleness. She then went on to critique the masculine construction of the hero's journey as adopted by Zen practitioners she practised with. Indeed, Melinda's comment represents an interesting example of reflexivity and the fact that participants were often familiar with the feminist concepts I consider throughout this thesis. In Melinda's case, this awareness prompted her to seek an alternative approach to spiritual practice, one that was gentler and more holistic. However, I should also note that while participants like Melinda generally seemed proficient at critiquing patriarchal masculine conceptions of the spiritual, rarely did they turn this same lens to essentialised conceptions of femininity.

Searching also extended to the search for alternative social spaces and arrangements. In fact, this was also the case for those who did not identify as "spiritual" or a "seeker". Most participants described a pull toward something utopian, something more desirable than the "status quo" or the "mainstream". This reflects Sargisson's (2000a) findings regarding communards' utopian desire for a better society[15]. Participants wanted to be close to like-

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[14] I note here that while participants seemed critical of masculinised notions of spirituality rarely did this critique extend to class and/or race. These dimensions were rarely raised as participants spoke of their spiritual journey, which suggests that most participants did not see their spiritual quest as necessarily a privileged pursuit in spite of the fact that from an outside point of view it relied on both cultural and social capital.

[15] It is important to highlight that participants generally offered a mixture of both realistic and idealised conceptions of community, echoing Sargisson's (2000s) "transgressive utopianism" where "pragmatism combines with idealism" (p50). The communities featured in this study offered critiques of the status quo and generated aspirations and creative alternatives relating to cooperation and the preservation of the natural

minded individuals with similar visions and values. This perhaps comes as no surprise. What is interesting, though, is that this searching formed a discursive starting point, one which had implications for the ways participants experienced their journeys.

So, what was it that participants were yearning for in an emotional sense? Of course, each participant's response to this question was slightly different, however, in the main participants described wanting safety, belonging and understanding – usually in the form of a place/space. And, it was not just a physical place participants were yearning for – it was also a metaphoric one, which for many represented safety and nurturance (a theme I take up in the next chapter). Participants longed to be able to share their pain and difficulties in the company of others. Victoria from Circle Hill, for example, lost her long-term partner of 20 years to cancer and was seeking the companionship and wisdom of other women as she managed her grief – she had felt lost and out of place in her community and as though she had no one to turn to. Circle Hill represented itself as such a refuge: as a feminist spirituality centre, it is driven by notions of acceptance and support for women particularly during trying times in women's lives.

Abagail, also from Circle Hill, was craving emotional connection with others to support her through a trying period as she parented her daughter. She explains:

> I put her [my daughter] into school and I thought she'd be ready to go to a state high school …and she was absolutely terrified and she hated it and she was very naughty and sort of spat the dummy and threw tantrums and I left her there one day yelling at me what a bad mother I was and so on. I had nowhere to go, I had no one that I could share that pain with…It brought it home to me that there's no one here that I can speak to at that level, know what I mean? Sharing your feelings. It's all very well to say it's a lovely day and isn't that tree beautiful but yeah.
>
> Facilitator: So that level of deeper connection?
>
> Abagail: Yeah and sharing my pain, my anxiety and all of that yeah. So that was…
>
> Facilitator: What prompted [you to seek community]?
>
> Abagail: Yeah, and there were other times too when I was just driving around… there was no one I could ring up and say could I pop in for a coffee or want to meet me for a coffee or anything.

At that point in her life, Abagail had moved to a new town and was yearning for a type of intimacy she did not have access to. While she had acquaintances, she lacked the types of

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environment. However, most participants were careful not to fall into the trap of purely idealised thinking. Most explained that being committed to community for any length of time it was clear that perfection was unattainable and a certain realism and flexibility was needed to make community sustainable.

relationships that allowed her to share her struggles in a way that felt authentic and safe. Abagail had "no-place" to return to when she was in pain. Abagail's description of driving around looking for someone to share her experiences with can be read in both a literal and metaphoric way. Metaphorically, it captures the emotional yearning she was facing at the time – seeking out a place to visit when needed, a place which made her feel welcomed and supported. Abagail explained that she felt people in the mainstream were not in the same "zone" as her; to her mind, they were superficial and judgemental. For years, she had felt pressured to conform to certain expectations of who she should be as a mother and a partner. In fact, these expectations had such an impact on Abagail that she felt compelled to fabricate her age for years, claiming she was 10 years younger than she was. She explains that she could not tell the truth about this part of herself until she found a space which represented safety and embodied a "shared understanding" of the world.[16]

Charlotte from Oasis described herself as an "orphan" prior to finding alternative community. Within her interview, she spoke at length about her quest to belong. She had always felt as though she did not quite "fit in". Coming from a very small migrant family she struggled with bullying at school and did not feel understood or heard by her parents. In her adult years, she became estranged from her only brother due to differences in lifestyle and values. At the same time, she craved a "big" family, which she hoped could provide her with a social and emotional foundation. She observes that others in community share similar motivating forces:

> I mean we all try to find where we belong and coming up here, it's like a whole bunch of dyslexic people live up here in a way because we all come up here because we didn't fit somewhere else and so even though we all come from very different paths and different lifestyles or somehow we didn't fit into whatever was out there and coming up here to the alternative lifestyle, it sort of gave us a common ground and it just sort of happened organically and it wasn't a conscious thing and it just – I just was looking for somewhere where I could belong and I guess we were all like orphans looking for that.

Oasis encouraged diversity and unique self-expression. In fact, it was one of the major aims of the spiritual practices taken up there. Many community members spoke at length about

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16 Abagail's experience is also reflective of the fact that isolation as a mother is not an uncommon experience (Mauthner, 1995; Munch, McPherson & Smith-Lovin, 1997). Arguably, limited social and emotional support is in place for women experiencing difficulties in motherhood – indeed women are expected to fulfil the role of the "good mother" and "cope" with difficult moments in the parenting relationship with ease and emotional poise (see the classic work of Rich, 1976). Abagail's vulnerable response to her daughter's anger could be read as a deviation from this expectation. Abagail felt as though the mothers within her community would not welcome her experience without being critical of her. It is therefore unsurprising that she felt a pull toward a community that had an alternative way of viewing femininity and women's place in the world.

discovering what was distinctive about their inner-self in spite of what their family and/or society expected from them.

Taken together, these accounts can be understood as more in line with the myth of the heroine's journey than the classic hero's journey. Murdock's (1990) myth begins in a similar way to the hero's journey in that the heroine journeys toward the unknown, abandoning the social expectations imposed upon her (i.e. notions associated with femininity like dependency and subservience) and embarks on a liberating adventure in a traditionally "masculine" sphere. Like the hero, she meets metaphoric dragons and ogres who need to be slain in order to find the boon of success. Ultimately, she gains some recognition and acceptance within masculine culture. However, unlike the hero's myth, this is not where the journey ends: the heroine then experiences feelings of spiritual scarcity and yearns for something greater, something more "integrated" and "whole". She seeks to reconnect with the "feminine" side she initially split from. In this process, she heals the mother/daughter split and ultimately reclaims the abandoned masculine parts of her psyche and achieves a certain balance and integration.

In the case of this study, several participants reported similar trajectories: many had participated in what might be described as "masculine" culture by embarking on a career and attempting to "succeed". However, at some point they experienced a deep spiritual/relational calling and a desire to return to what can be described as qualities associated with the "sacred feminine" like healing relational wounds, connecting with their body, forging new familial bonds and seeking out a space that values care and compassion. Participants often came into community with very specific needs and expectations regarding connection and support, which were for the most part fulfilled (how this looked specifically will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five). Indeed, these findings lend support to Murdock's (1990) contention that relational and web-like metaphors involving community can at times be more appropriate in conceiving of women's spiritual paths.

I now return to the experience of seeking for participants. Yearning prompted a type of metaphoric movement, away from certain objects or modalities, towards others. The language used by participants captures this sense of movement. Prior identities and ways of being in the world were framed in terms of the distant past, while participants used words like "returning", "arriving" or "finding" community in culminating their narratives. In a discursive sense, participants often neatly journeyed from point A to B - though I would

argue that life-transitions are rarely that smooth in practice. Put another way, journeys were, for the most part, narrated in a linear fashion. Rarely did participants describe a change of heart in relation to the object/s being yearned for or ambivalence in relation to the pursuit for meaning or connection. Whatever was being sought at the commencement of the narrative remained the constant goal – it represented truth and the real possibility of connection and/or liberation.

This metaphoric movement is explicitly described by Sue from Mountain Valley who employs the framework of "Family Constellations Theory" to make sense of her own "pattern of movement". She links her desire for a safe place to Jewish ancestral displacement. Yet within the same breath, Sue also relates her longing to her political stance against female dependency. In this way, she looks to both political and spiritual explanations for her desire to seek out community and safety. She explains:

> My family was an immigrant family. My parents came from Europe and in family constellations it was shown to me how searching for the new country, the new community, the safe place is in my family history as part of the meaning that carries…People very rarely live or raise their own families where they grew up. Family constellations explains this as a further carrying out of will. Nobody who came here was living where they grew up either and it just becomes the way. Before you even think rationally about it it's in you to follow a pattern of movement or no movement if that's what your previous pattern was. It's very fascinating. So what moved me to come here is like well I just always got that community was a healthy way to live, particularly for women because women have been and still are in so many ways totally dependent on the relationships they have with men in order to survive and thrive. I hated that idea. I hated the idea that if you break up you're out. You don't have a place. I could see how whether you're in love or you're not in love you have a community around you with your friends close to you.

Rosie, who is also from Mountain Valley, similarly describes a longing to feel rooted and safe. She too attributes this to a hereditary line of dislocation. She explains:

> I oftentimes do the co-counselling on "I'm proud to be an American" and it always brings up for me how rootless Americans are. I mean my lineage, my original ancestors were pushed off of their land, to never be able to go back home again and then to come across a huge body of water and come to a new land which you have no semblances of... So, I'm wondering about it in our genetics, the rootlessness, so in my world a caring culture would be one where we actually understand the story of place.

Rosie is not only referring to finding a place, but also to honouring the "story of place". I asked Rosie what she meant by this and she referred to revering and recognising what has gone before us. Mountain Valley, as a community, was deeply influenced by radical

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ecological understandings of the world, as well as notions of "tribalism", which were reminiscent of the essentialised and racialized New Age notions Crowley (2011) examines. Mountain Valley espoused an inclusive ethos that encouraged a more "primal" way of life. In this way, it invited members to become "rooted" and embark on a journey of returning to something more fundamentally "basic", "essential" and "primitive" within themselves and in relation to the land they tended to.

The narrative feature of searching/yearning can be read as indicative of a broader social expectation within communities that a sense of dissatisfaction and searching feature in participants' storylines. This led to social and individual implications. One such implication is the fact that it was almost unexpected for community members to express any sense of contentment about the "outside world" (or "dominator culture"), even more so to sing its praises. Possessing a critical opinion about the mainstream, together with a pull towards an alternative mode of being, was considered a highly legitimate reason within community for seeking out alternative spaces.

This expectation operated for participants in both productive and repressive ways. Productively, searching/yearning led to feelings of greater social acceptance. In this sense, it was disconnection that connected - an absence of belonging that helped participants belong. Searching/yearning also provided participants entry into a new social group and community – one which sought to address the issues that prompted participants' yearning in the first place. Participants united around their search for a "healthy" or "desirable" way to live. Such desires were welcomed and were rarely challenged by other community members. Moreover, the rhetoric of the "search" was used by participants to justify radical life decisions, such as leaving paid work and joining community. By framing their story in the context of a quest for meaning, their decisions were more immune to criticism as they took on a certain sacredness and untouchability.

Emotionally, participants were validated: their experience of lack of connection and meaning was considered by other community members as "only natural" in response to the supposedly meaningless and shallow mainstream. This was illustrated through the above example of Charlotte who, having always felt a misfit, found her family amongst fellow misfits who shared her vision. The limiting side of this narrative was the fact that it could discourage participants from embracing aspects of the mainstream or their past experiences

and lead to black-and-white judgments (or "truth statements") about the "outside". This is something that is explored further below.

Together these findings indicate yearning and searching formed a discursive starting point in most participants' narratives. The metaphor of the quest/journey was used by participants in explaining their pull towards alternative community. This reflected aspects of both the hero's journey and the heroine's journey and, as such, could be linked to broader cultural narratives. This arguably enabled participants to justify their life decisions, not only to themselves but also to others in their life. It provided the starting point for participants' alternative identities and ways of being in the world. Such starting points, when shared with others, led to greater social acceptance and belonging within community. Thus, it was the discursive formation of the search, which largely arose from the New Age movement that intersected with participants' identities and ultimately led to greater connection with others and validation from the world around them.

Fateful Paths

An alternative (albeit less common) starting point that prompted the seeking of alternative community related to notions of divine intervention or providence. Such starting points involved a description of something otherworldly, something that provided a sudden message or call to action that was seemingly "out of the blue". Participants claimed that such a calling was not linked to any prior reasoning or planning, but rather represented the divine/god/the universe "speaking through them". In this way, some participants claimed to have the capacity to channel the divine. All that was needed from their side was to trust, listen and respond. As I will show, this discursive starting point reflected a "romantic narrative" – particularly for those engaged in more counter-cultural New Age philosophies of divine transcendence. For these participants, the force that propelled them toward alternative community was sacred and involved a message from "fate" or an external "voice". As Rosie from Mountain Valley describes:

> I received a message. I was in the car, through a cassette tape player of songs…all of a sudden I had this voice in my head that said "go to the place where this music has been made." At first, I thought it was like some part of my personality kind of like you know how you have mind chatter, but it was very persistent. Where is this coming from? So, I got curious about what [the community's founder] was doing….

Here, Rosie discounts the possibility that her desire for community came from her own personality or self. Instead, she attributes it to an external messenger, one, which in her view, had more authority than mere "mind chatter". This was a voice that needed to be

taken seriously and listened to. It was persistent and attributable to something holy. It could, in her view, be linked to her ultimate calling or purpose in life. Interestingly, in this account, Rosie both reifies and blurs the boundaries between "self" and the divine. Divinity expresses itself through her, yet it still possesses a distinctive voice, one that can be distinguished from the mundane level of the personality. This points to the fact that, unlike most participants – particularly those who were committed to narratives around healing and self-awareness - Rosie did not construct or justify her search for alternative community through a narrative of deficiency. That is, she did not frame her desire for community as a gap needing to be filled, rather there is a sense of opportunity in her language – she was to go to the place where the music was made and who knows what mysterious fruit this will bear. In this way, Rosie's language is reminiscent of broader spiritual narratives associated with mystery, mysticism and a trust in the "great unknown".

Jessica, also from Mountain Valley, explains her experience in similar terms to Rosie - though Jessica is not just describing her journey to alternative community; she is also referring to living alone in the woods for a period of two years. She explains:

> Jessica: Really, it is such a story and about two years. But yeah, it's about as rural as you can get, I didn't plan it is all I can say. I didn't plan it. But whoever she was emerged and that's who I am now. I just shed most of the conventionality at that time
>
> Facilitator: Like so you were by yourself during that time in the woods, and then you had this obviously desire to live communally at some stage.
>
> Jessica: After I had a child, yeah. Fate stepped in again after a couple of years. It's like hmm, I really needed money and a friend of mine had his kids there for the summer and said, come spend the summer with me, I've got a spare bedroom, you know I'll give you a little money and your rent and food and all those things.

It comes as no surprise that such discourses were present at Mountain Valley - of all the communities I studied it was the most alternative and radical in its ethos and approach. As I explain in Chapter Two, Mountain Valley was steeped in the American New Age and attracted members who were willing and happy to separate themselves physically and psychically from mainstream society.

Heather, from Oasis, a community which was influenced significantly by Oriental spirituality, similarly speaks of the "magic" of things coming together:

> So I sought out the… spiritual matriarch of this area... It was a wonderful welcoming because we hadn't seen each other in over 15 years. So that was wonderful and I went to the [meditation] and I sat there meditating and feeling my connection to [the

Divine] and said okay, "Well, today before I leave here, I'd like to have my community service, I'd like to have some form of income and I'd like to know where I'm going to live. Thank you, thank you very kindly." So at the end of the morning [the spiritual matriarch] had asked me if I would like to cook once a fortnight for the [meditations] and that meant that I was earning some money, I had my service. And she said why didn't I go to [the community] to see if they had any vacancies here and that's how I arrived here….. I kept seeing this view here, I don't know what you would call this vegetation, and the ocean. So this is actually what I kept seeing but I had no idea, I hadn't put it together with [this community] even though I had been to [this community] before.

Heather was at a crossroads in life when she posed the above questions to the "Divine source". She had been "on the road", travelling without any fixed plans for months, though throughout this time, she had felt trust that the "universe" would care for her and deliver opportunities when she was in need. This trust was derived from her spiritual beliefs, specifically the New Age idea that life continually delivers opportunities to "grow" and "transform" to those who seek. This had the impact of reassuring Heather during liminal periods in her life, as she described remaining relatively unaffected emotionally by dominant expectations relating to work and finances.

Concepts like "fate" and "destiny" are central to more counter-cultural discourses of spirituality, particularly arising from Hinduism and transcendentalism so it follows that they were adopted by participants like Jessica and Heather to make sense of life opportunities. These discourses suggest that if one is "open" or "receptive" to the "abundance" of the universe one will be more likely reap its benefits.[17] Put poetically, if one listens to the call of the universe one's true purpose will reveal itself. Arguably, such rhetoric tends to dismiss one's own agency and can border on magical thinking. However, in the context of participants' lives this discursive device had, in the main, productive outcomes: it provided participants with a strong sense of purpose and it enabled them to dismiss societal expectations and embark on an unconventional journey – whether they chose to move to the woods for an extended period of time or join a commune in a faraway place. This discourse provided participants with the strength to break away from the mainstream and did not require them to provide conventional reasoning for their decision.

Unlike more psychotherapeutic and indeed religious methods, channelling spontaneous and imaginings and messages did not necessarily require a certain level of education and/or

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17 This discourse is explicit in best-selling self-help book, *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne (2006), which has been subject to scathing criticisms for being seriously misleading and turning a blind-eye to the action that is required to address social and psychological problems (see Ehrenreich, 2007 and 2009).

theoretical knowledge, rather it was an accessible way of gaining "wisdom" and communing with something "outside" the self.

In feminist terms, participants were arguably experiencing what could be described as "alternative ways of knowing", which include intuitive, spiritual and bodily knowledges that challenge the traditional Cartesian split of mind/body, knowledge/emotion (see Barbour, 2004). In the case of participants, alternative knowledges arose from images, messages and feelings in the body. Participants were accessing what New Age adherents describe as their "inner wisdom".

Scholars like Heelas (2009) highlight the fact that this notion also invites individuals to turn toward their own inner lives and connect with their internal preferences and needs. This was certainly the case for participants who had felt heightened social pressure around how to use their time and energy within dominant society. Inner wisdom came to mean a "felt sense" that a certain pathway, decision or vision was "right" or "clear". This, it seemed, was connected to participants' commitment to honouring their bodies and the natural world, a theme I explore in Chapter Six. In this sense, they saw themselves as having the capacity to access a "deeper" and more "real" truth – one that they came to believe was unconditioned by prior socialisation. For many participants, the emotional and intuitive "self" was seen as the primary authority. However, as mentioned, something interesting was at play in relation to how the "self" and the "divine" were conceived by these participants. I would argue that participants did not always see the self as a unified, separate entity (as is often the case in mainstream Western humanist discourse and indeed more individualistic versions of the New Age which is discussed by Flax, 1993) rather they saw it as a relational (and transpersonal) vessel that could capture greater spiritual truths. Again, this gives weight to Heelas' (2009) argument, rebutting the assertion that the New Age has created further individualisation and self-absorption.

Overall, participants seemed elated in their capacity to connect with these divine messengers. They also appeared to experience a spiritual trust that things would eventually work out in their favour – after all, they were channelling something much bigger than themselves, something that was all-knowing and omnipotent. Like the makings of a good romantic story, participants imagined that goodness would necessarily prevail, enabling them to transcend the "bad" (which was often conceived of as the "mainstream") and achieve transcendence or, at the very least, live a life that was more congruent with a
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"divine plan". This discursive feature eased participants' anxieties connected to the modern day pressures of advancing a career, being financially responsible and having a linear thought-out "life plan". Rather, participants needed only to relax and allow the Divine to direct them to their next destination and pursuit. It follows that the Divine was considered a gateway to the "truth" which was delivered through participants' intuition via their bodies and spontaneous imaginings. Again, it was at the intersection of this New Age idea of an outside messenger and certain participants' narrative construction that a sense of trust and wellbeing was produced and maintained.

Constructing and Responding to the "Mainstream"

The concept of the "mainstream" was central to most participants' self-narratives. It was frequently described as the catalyst that instigated participants' journeys and as a point of contrast with participants' newly constructed identities. It was constructed as "hyper-masculine" and "competitive" and in this sense prompted participants to abandon conventional life and seek something more "feminine" and embodied, which, as I mention above, is a central feature of the heroine's journey. It also served as a way of justifying unconventional, sometimes radical, viewpoints and discourses. This, arguably, had the effect of lessening internal tensions participants experienced in relation to their decision to join alternative community. The "mainstream" was frequently referred to as "dysfunctional", "sad", "unhealthy", "miserable", "superficial", "unwelcoming" and "limiting" and was often characterised as a global and unified system. In this way, it became the "other" which operated to separate participants from the evil, injustice and ignorance in the world (Staszak, 2008). As Sue from Mountain Valley says:

> …my instinct says there is just about everything about Western culture seems to me unhealthy if that's what you want to address it to.

The contemporary economic system was often represented as the root cause of the "dysfunctional" mainstream. For example, Vera from River Stream describes the "economic system" as a superstructure that can be linked to the social issues of drugs, poor mental health and a generally uncaring culture:

> Vera: I guess I recognised that a lot of people in my life, like older people– parents and teachers and friends – were just all having a really hard time with mainstream life. There had been a number of suicides in my community and I just thought I needed to do something to make sure I don't end up miserable and try to find something better. I guess that's a pretty dark reason but…

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Facilitator: So anything in particular or…?

Vera: Finances and divorces, drugs, just everything, the whole spectrum.

Facilitator: And why do you think it's so intense in mainstream at the moment?

Vera: I think it's largely due to our economic system. [in relation to her current community]….seeing people care for each other so much more in daily life.

Facilitator: Had you not felt that in daily life out there?

Vera: No way, no.

Facilitator: I wondered if you could tell me a bit more about what aspects of mainstream society you were dissatisfied with prior to joining?

Vera: Sure. It's been a while. Yeah, I think not only are people not as welcoming when you come across them on the street, but like they're often rude or violent or threatening, those really weren't for me to be around and I saw a big drug problem in my home State and had a lot of – you know, my friend's family was destroyed by that – and I think it's really hard for people to take it anywhere financially. That was hard, you know, like I was basically – you know, got a car so I could go to work so I could pay for the car?

For Vera, the mainstream, in this way, was conceived as system of power and exploitation: various institutions worked together to oppress and enslave those at the bottom of the hierarchy. This viewpoint was reflected in other participants' accounts that associated the "mainstream" with conspiracies and calculated exploitation from those in positions of power.[18]

Oli from Oasis offered a similar view:

Oli: Mainstream society, yes. Very, very dysfunctional and sad, and it seems to me things for my mind are taking too long. But then I think to myself, right, okay, remember that the media feeds us only what somebody wants us to know. There is much going on on the planet that is positive and we're kept in this loop, vested interests definitely, conspiracy theories if you like. I read a book years ago, *13th Stone*, a fascinating book! And one chapter called "Matters of Interest and Consequence." Talking about the Federal Reserve Bank of America setup in 1913 to keep the government out of banking, setup by private individuals and they still control, and they do nothing. They press buttons. You've heard of pyramid selling? This is the pyramid. We are at the bottom and they are at the top, they do nothing.

Facilitator: Yeah that's so true. That's how you could describe most board members!

Oli: Totally, and yet you know, "Pyramid selling is not allowed..!" But we live in the whole pyramid, so we are the plebs at the bottom supporting the few on the top. But

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[18] As mentioned in Chapter Two, River Stream had been founded during the 1970s at the height of such critical awareness and was driven by the political ideals of communalism and non-hierarchal ways of structuring social life, thus such sophisticated political commentary on mainstream remained a central part of the community's rhetoric.

> I'm hopeful from what I've heard and understood and feel, that there will be movement and there will be change, and it has to happen.

Oli's viewpoint is reminiscent of Marxist perspectives on ideology and false consciousness (Eyerman, 1981). It echoes the idea that there is a "truth" to be revealed about "the system" and that social relations need to be challenged in order to emancipate the masses. This rhetoric is hardly surprising given Oli (who was 70 years of age at the point of the interview) and her generation had arguably been significantly influenced by social movements of the 1960s and 1970s that were characterised by critical and structural thought. Another noteworthy observation was that while many participants had the capacity to offer broad structural analyses regarding the "outside" world, very few participants commented on their own educational, able-bodied and/or race privilege. This may have been in part due to the fact that I did not ask them directly about their own "privilege" per se, or perhaps it was harder for participants to turn a critical eye toward their own positionality as it had become familiar and/or taken for granted.

Marg from Oasis constructs the problem with mainstream society as one of "life-force", which is associated with Eastern approaches to understanding the self that involve talk of life energies and their capacity to be reinforced or depleted by certain actions and thoughts. The way to replenish this "force", Marg says, is through time, space and a connection to something meaningful, privileges that are not available to most in the mainstream:

> it's like there's a huge squeeze on, that just squeezes the life force out of people, and that's mainstream society, and so, the Taoist master Mantak Chia he says you know, we all have a certain amount of life force, and then we use that life force in order to make money, and then we use that money to buy worthless things. So really we're using our energy for worthless things. But really the way the world is now, you know we need more and more money all the time, things are getting more expensive…Every being in order to be well in wellness needs time and space, whether - how you want to fill that time and space. If you fill that time and space in a positive way that's even better.

Marg represented the issue with dominant culture as individuals' insufficient awareness and understanding of their psychological and spiritual selves. From one perspective, this critique is at odds with more all-encompassing, structural analyses offered by participants like Oli, though, interestingly, these two discourses seemed to coexist in the minds of participants without much felt contradiction. Jude from Mountain Valley, for example, speaks of how she understands the political and spiritual aspects of her identity:

Facilitator: So do you think your desire to get involved in this under consumption lifestyle came mainly from political roots or also from a spiritual place as well?

Jude: I don't really separate those… Yes I don't have a separation for any of that. I mean spiritual is not a separate thing for me. My political, my spiritual, everything is one thing for me… when you're talking about political activism and you're talking about the spiritualities of people - and this is really where I've spent a lot of time is looking at in ancient cultures through radical thought I'm looking at the belief systems that people had around the supernatural or spiritual, whatever and the political system they had and how those related. So that women who were abused and discarded in the spiritual world were abused and discarded in the political and social world of those cultures.

Other participants reconciled these two aspects by explaining that without self-awareness there could be no awareness of injustices committed by society at large. How the problem was constructed is significant, because as Bacchi writes (1999), how a problem is represented can determine possible solutions generated. Significantly, those who believed that the problem was mainly a lack of internal awareness felt as though their activist work could include spiritual practice, while those who saw the problem as more structural were more inclined to pursue activist work within mainstream society whilst retaining their commitment to alternative community.

Approximately a third of participants were involved in social justice activities outside of community in response to the inequalities and injustices arising from mainstream. Jude, who is mentioned above, was one such participant. She made a point of critiquing those who were purely focussed on spiritual life or the "cosmic" as she refers to it, to the exclusion of activism within dominant culture. She explains:

You try to talk to people of patriarchy and they're just like well that's just - when we deal with the cosmic - and I'm just like wait, women are being beaten and raped every day, this is not just about the cosmic. The cosmic does enter into this, don't get me wrong, but as a political activist I have a very different viewpoint for class and race and sex and all of that. I have too much of a political mindset really for a lot of the stuff…That's another reason I can't get along in a community like this is because they're always using terms like "higher power" and shit. People say enlightenment and I say endarkenment. I'm into the dark because I feel that's also racist, this whole enlightenment stuff is highly racist. But if you don't have that political analysis people don't know how to go there. I mean because we just aren't taught to analyse anything, not economics, not social systems, not religious systems. I mean we're really ignorant.

Jude's comments demonstrate a critical awareness of race and the historical context of the term "enlightenment". As such, I would suggest that Jude is not engaging in what Crowley (2011) would term "appropriation" but attempting to resist prejudicial ideas. Such political

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activism informed Jude's lifestyle and decision to be actively engaged in social justice causes. Though mainly based at Mountain Valley she spent three months a year in other cities engaged in peace activism and charitable activities. During this time, Jude refused to adopt the practices and values of those in the mainstream, which she perceived to be detrimental to the environment and contrary to her commitment to no-waste and rejection of dominant norms. She offers an example:

> ...for three months I do promotion for charities and I basically live - although I'm not supposed to - in the office. I sleep on the floor and I live in the office. So that's all air conditioned because we've got computers and duplication machines, all the stuff of an office and so it has to stay a certain humidity and it's got flush toilets and electricity for everything. I live there for three months and I pee in a cup so I don't use the toilet and I put it down the sink and then I use a sponge and I wet myself with a sponge then I wash those off and put them under the sink. So I minimise the toilet use...But I hate throwing my pee out. I hate it. I mean it's nitrogen. It's fertilizer [laughs]. But there's no place for me to put it there. It's just the people who work with me are just like so many people are about... Well they're just like - they're straight. I can talk to them a little bit about what I do. They're glad that I come in because I offer unique perspectives with the things. But they can't talk to me too much because I feel they're just wasting tonnes of money all the time like most people are from my point of view.

Kerry, also from Mountain Valley, was similarly active outside alternative community by frequenting the closest city once a week to be involved in Palestinian Human Rights activism. This involved attending meetings, letter writing and sharing information on global developments. Arabella from Kwan Yin Garden explained she had long-term commitment to environmentalism and advancing ecological awareness through her academic studies. However, for the large part, participants saw their life within community and their commitment to minimising their ecological impact and cultivating "awareness", personal responsibility and spiritual values, as a sufficient form of activism and a significant critique of dominant culture. Ari from Mountain Valley puts it like this:

> ... the vision would be that consciousness basically, that higher states of consciousness can become our central focus...So that when we see someone who's out of consciousness we can say hey we're really here, about consciousness and when your site looks like a dump that's really not what we're here for. We're to bring consciousness and beauty and organisation to our spaces and to the planet. So then once we've got that all in place which we're definitely moving in that direction, so much so...So once we have that then we become an - we're able to attract other people who are ready to create that and that is the model that they see. Yes we grow our food. Yes we demonstrate permaculture. But what we're really doing here is we are cultivating higher states of consciousness and making it obvious in all of our connections.

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In Ari's interview she juxtaposes her "evolved" way of seeing with the mainstream, which was often similarly described by other participants as "asleep" and "unenlightened". Moreover, in discussing the mainstream, participants referred to a dominant script or trajectory that prescribed the ways in which someone *should* carry out their life. Participants, across multiple communities, termed this "programming" or "conditioning" and explained how they had managed to "disentangle" themselves from it. From a sociological point of view, it could be argued that participants were demonstrating reflexivity in relation to their socialisation (Giddens, 1991). Many were critical of dominant structures and institutions and were aware of their impact on them. Moreover, most perceived a level of choice and a capacity to resist such structures. Rosie from Mountain Valley explains:

> Well I grew up very middle class. Middle class oppression is like "don't rock the boat, do the right thing, stay safe, stay secure, make sure you plug into a job, make sure you have a good return on your investment, get a house, find a partner, have a family". I remember one day saying "do I want to do that" and will I wake up some day and say wow what did I do with my life? That was the day, it was about five years after I graduated from college. I said "I don't want to play this game."

There seems to be a tension within Rosie's account in that she criticises the mainstream's move toward security and safety, yet, she also values a sense of belonging and being supported by others. One can assume that the safety and security Rosie yearns for was not material, but rather emotional or spiritual. Moreover, the tension in Rosie's narrative tends to indicate that the heteronormative model of the family did not represent what she wanted for her life. Rosie explains that she wanted something broader and more interconnected; she wanted a large "bio-regional" family.

Heather from Oasis describes those in the mainstream as having no understanding of their "internal terrain", linking this to consumerism, the media and television:

> I do find it at times challenging, living in conventional reality, say for example when I go to visit my daughter and her family in the suburbs. I find living in the suburbs very challenging, and interfacing with people who have no concept of their internal terrain, people who are living a totally external life and receiving all of their input from media and television and choosing to feed themselves at McDonald's. I get quite ill when I go into that reality for any length of time…I'm very porous and my auric field is very extended because I choose not to shut it down because I feel unwell doing that as well…The looking outward, the external, because that's the way mainstream is programmed, external, consume, external, everything you need is on the outside, on the television, this will make your life better, on the radio, in the newspaper, doomsday, everything's wrong, blame everybody else. Everything is on the outside, nothing is on the inside. That's where the problem lies. My

understanding of life in this third dimensional reality on planet Earth is that your entire reality is created by your inner terrain, your thoughts, your feelings, your beliefs, your willingness to be flexible and change from one minute to the next, what you believe or what you conceive of. That is what you create on the outside, totally.

Indeed, Heather places strong moral weight on the capacity to look inward and makes a range of additional moral claims, though she does soften her stance by explaining it is not people she is judging but "places". It is fitting that Heather chooses the example of McDonald's, as it arguably represents the epitome of American mass-culture. Here, Heather is drawing on a broader discourse of social decay and depravity. According to this discourse, the US is to blame for the infiltration of mass culture as it is seen as "the source or epitome of all that is most debased and dangerous in popular culture" (Parker, 1998, p5). This is reminiscent of the "McDonaldization thesis" offered by George Ritzer (1998) who claimed that characteristics of fast-food establishments, namely, instant gratification, calculability, standardization and homogenisation, are now integral to the structures of modern societies. Heather, and other participants, construct mass culture as an opiate for the masses, which stifled political activism and civic-participation and disconnected individuals from their spiritual homes. This mirrors the broader discourse that suggests:

> *The social and industrial processes that have created the modern mass media seem intrinsically bound up with secularization. But mass culture also can be viewed as a substitute for mythology or even as an ersatz religion (Brantlinger, 2016, p82).*

Hence, according to this discourse, mass culture has become a very poor substitute for a life of spiritual meaning, connection and exploration. According to Parker (1998), this theory can be found on both the right and left sides of politics – with the right claiming that:

> *…industrial societies tend to homogenise the cultural distinctions, or more accurately hierarchies, that allow elite (or supposedly "authentic" folk) artefacts and practices to exist. The mass suffocates individual genius (p2).*

The left, on the other hand, claim that "mass culture somehow drugs the common people into oblivion and pollutes the ground from which genuine innovative cultural practice can spring" (Parker, 1998, p2). This, Parker argues, can lead to a "prescriptive elitism" that "requires that "we" are defined as culturally different, more discriminating, less likely to be duped and so on" (p4). Unlike other forms of classism, this elitism, however, is not born out of possessing greater economic capital, rather it is grounded in theory of taste/lifestyle that effectively "others" those who engage in, or even enjoy, mass culture and its manifestations. Moreover, it assumes a lack of agency amongst those consuming dominant forms of culture.

Heather, and many other participants seemed to be distancing themselves from a portion of the population - those with less "legitimate" cultural capital - expressing their disdain for those who consume and are influenced by popular culture. This, arguably, had the effect of devaluing the taste and lifestyle choices of those who inhabit dominant culture and perpetuating a self-reinforcing loop that did not allow for divergent viewpoints.

This discourse led to a certain moralistic and dichotomous perspective. Indeed, Heather's conception assumes that materialism and spirituality are not capable of coexisting. In her view, the mainstream is toxic – to such an extent that she needs to guard it from seeping into her sensitive and attuned self. One can see the dichotomy of pure/impure operating here and having the effect of distancing Heather from what is "other", "dirty" and "toxic". This frame provides Heather with full justification for opting out of conventional society. Mainstream makes her sick and in this way, she has no other option but to ensure her own health is preserved.

This approach was also found to have some productive implications for Heather and other participants: for one, many participants gained meaning and a sense of identity in minimising their consumption, avoiding fast-food (and other such establishments), refraining from watching TV and embarking on environmentally friendly lifestyles. Moreover, participants' critique of cultural depravity provided a much-needed invitation for them to return to the richness of their subjective-lives, something they claimed was missing from their life in the mainstream.

As the above examples demonstrate, participants' language, in this topic, had a distinctively moral flavour. Those in the mainstream were considered unhealthy and unhappy in a normative sense, and those who had the willingness to step out of it were treated as successfully rising beyond mediocrity and mundanity. This rhetoric was reminiscent of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of class and distinction in which he argues that within certain "fields", individuals vie for "capital" in order to gain power and social superiority (see Bourdieu, 1984). In "othering" the mainstream, participants seemed to be asserting their "spiritual capital" (see Guest, 2007; Verter, 2003). Those with the most distinction within this field were the ones who managed to move beyond the need for consumerism and live simplistically with a commitment to practices of inner wellbeing. Participants were rarely aware of the class implications of their claims. There was rarely any acknowledgment by participants that those who could lead such a lifestyle were often in a financially stable

position, with enough education to engage in critiquing the mainstream and developing alternatives. Moreover, participants lacked recognition that cultural capital was also essential in transcending the mainstream and achieving acceptance in the "field" of alternative community. It was only those who knew how to "play the game" who had the capacity to move beyond dominant culture and find belonging elsewhere.

In this section, I have shown that the notion of the mainstream was used to "other" sections of society yet also assisted in participants' identity-creation. The mainstream was conceived of as a total system that had sinister and exploitative motives. It was viewed as oriented toward the external and the material. It was also seen as a system which oppressed and fooled individuals. In this way, it was seen as hyper-masculine and invited participants to return to more feminine qualities of nurturance and connection. On this basis, participants positioned themselves as morally distinct from the mainstream. Though this had classist undertones, an analysis of social class and/or elitism was rarely offered by participants. Overall, the concept of the mainstream seemed to have a paradoxical effect: it simultaneously facilitated reflexivity about dominant culture amongst participants, which united community, while perpetuating a certain class-blindness and barrier to connection to those committed to dominant culture.

Belonging; Returning Home

As mentioned, one of the productive aspects of participants' self-narratives was a sense of belonging. Participants united around their dissatisfaction with dominant culture, their commitment to something greater than materialism and their unwavering dedication to community. According to Yuval-Davis (2006), the concept of belonging can involve both political and emotional dimensions. Belonging, she says, can relate to one's perceived membership of a group, such as an ethnic, racial, cultural or religious group. As an exclusionary concept, it can also involve the policing of boundaries between "us" and "them" making it necessarily political. In an emotional sense, belonging relates to feelings of attachment, of being at home and of safety. In this way, "constructions of belonging… cannot and should not be seen as merely cognitive stories. They reflect emotional investments and desire for attachments" (2006, p202). Moreover, Yuval-Davis (2006) posits that belonging is often born out of a yearning for connection or a yearning for a future vision of one's trajectory. My findings are consistent with Yuval-Davis' contentions. As I showed in the above discussion, participants' sense of belonging involved excluding those who were

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perceived to be concerned with superficial pursuits, engaged in consumerism and/or unconscious of how their "mainstream" choices impact on themselves and the world around them. In this section I focus on emotional belonging.

Most participants concluded their self-narratives romantically by explaining how they experienced a satisfying sense of homecoming within alternative community. In this way, the majority of participants determined that their search for safety, belonging and love had been "successful". They had come home and found their tribe and from this point onward their quest took on a different form. They were now able to return to what they knew to be important to them: relationality, embodiment, the natural world and self-discovery. Echoing the heroine's path, participants had effectively separated themselves from masculine culture and were now in the depths of exploring their disowned "feminine" qualities.

Positive endings, as a narrative feature, echo some aspects of the New Age and its relationship with positive psychology. While participants' experiences within community were often mixed, in reflecting on their journey, most expressed gladness that they had decided to venture forth and "seek", for in a narrative sense they had found what they had been looking for. Bec from Mountain Valley explains:

> I feel extremely supported here. Of course, there's challenges sometimes that come up living so close with other people. That is really pretty rare for me and usually even when there are challenges it's usually a really good experience for me in the long run. Afterward I look back and it was a growing, learning experience for me. So I feel really supported in the community, I feel like there are ways that we as a community can get better at supporting each other and when I look at my life here compared to my life before I moved here, it's amazing the resources and support I have by just living communally and feeling like everyone here in this community is a part of my family. Knowing that they're there for me, I can call on them if I need to and I'm here for them in so many different ways, it's really amazing.

Bec's optimistic tone is evident in this passage. Indeed, the rhetoric of transforming difficulties into "life lessons" can be found in most New Age spiritualities. Moreover, the notion that interpersonal difficulty can illuminate aspects of one's psychological self, enabling personal growth, is also explicit in psychotherapeutic discourses. Both discourses embrace the idea that each individual has their own "curriculum" and must face a range of challenges in order to transform themselves and reap the benefits of their journey. Another point to be made here is that Bec seems to have found what psychotherapeutic discourse might term a "secure base" (see Bruhn, 2011). Her explanation seems to suggest that she

has found a sense of security and a place of ongoing comfort. From this foundation, she is able to manage conflicts and work with difficult scenarios, within community, without compromising her feeling of safety and belonging.

Like Bec, other participants referred to their community as family. Vera from River Stream says:

> The community is giving me something of a – just a common ground that I can come and go from and feel safe to come and go and be myself and they've become my family.

However, participants were not referring to family in the conventional meaning of the term. In fact, they often contrasted their family of upbringing with their "chosen family". What distinguished the two was the fact that this newly created family shared a "like-mindedness" and common understanding. So, in this sense, participants were referring more to the family they yearned for rather than the family they were actually raised by. Jessica from Mountain Valley says:

> So this seemed to be a place where I fitted. People were willing to accept me and perhaps I could find a way to use some of the skills I learned here and contribute to what I thought was a wonderful idea.

As Jessica hints, this is the family that allowed participants to be themselves without judgement or condemnation. Thus, such a chosen family was constructed as offering unwavering acceptance and the sharing of a similar worldview or set of values. Tina from River Stream explains:

> Facilitator: And why did it feel like a good fit?
>
> Tina: In many ways it's hard to describe, I just felt like I was coming home to people, I didn't feel like I was different. Some of the things that I noticed – for instance I didn't shave my legs and I noticed all of these women didn't shave their legs, and I wasn't the weird one anymore. Then there was a few other things like that maybe, mostly just I felt like these people were similar to me.

Tina's experience can be linked to what Goffman (1959) once described as "impression management". Tina was staring through the "looking glass" imagining how she was being perceived by others. In the mainstream, she experienced internal tension and imagined she would be judged and stigmatised, while at River Stream she did not feel the need to manage her bodily appearance as others were similar to her – she had found her tribe. She was also in the process of deepening her beliefs and philosophies in relation to the world around her.

The narrative feature of belonging and returning home to a family provided participants with

a sense of ease both socially and within their own sense of self. Participants did not have to worry or manage parts of themselves like their outward appearance. This meant they could express themselves more fully and find their "inner voice", a point I will now turn to. This had positive implications for participants who experienced less tension within themselves and between their identities and the outside world as a result. Belonging was something felt internally and experienced externally for the shifting toward one's inner landscape occurred by virtue of community both real and imagined.

Disconnection with the Outside world: Trade-offs

According to Campbell (1949), the hero's journey is not without its challenges; it often requires sacrificial commitment and the courage to face difficulties in the name of growth and transformation. These challenges provide the hero with the ammunition needed to develop an alternative way of being in the world. Metaphorically speaking, the hero's journey quintessentially ends with "the phoenix rising from the ashes" and with the birthing of a new self. In this Chapter I have shown that participants' self-narratives involved a quest for belonging, safety and acceptance, which often concluded with a romantic ending. Yet, just like the mythical hero, this journey came with some costs.

Significantly, not all participants were willing to discuss the types of sacrifices they made in adopting their alternative way of life. I noted in my field-notes that those who adopted heightened optimism oftentimes avoided being critical of their life-decisions. Moreover, those who shared the costs of the journey routinely spoke of them in a positive manner. Challenges were experienced for a "reason" that, participants claimed, would ultimately bear beneficial fruit. It follows that most participants were unwilling to frame difficulties in a negative light. This is unsurprising given the hero's journey always has a good ending – if it were otherwise, it would be a tragedy. As I probed for further details about the negative implications of their journeying, I was often met with a reluctance to discuss any difficulties that could not be rationalised within the frame of the romantic narrative. This could be interpreted in a number of ways. First, it might imply that experiences that sat outside of the discourse could not be rationalised or integrated easily. It might also suggest that the discourse of the hero's journey was so pervasive that participants did not have the discursive capacity to conceive of their experiences in any other way. Alternatively, it could indicate something about the level of trust participants had toward the research process or it might indicate reluctance to revisit any pain they had as a result of such sacrifices. In any event, the

discursive frame participants used resulted in a paradox.

Of the costs participants did discuss, most related to outside relationships. Tina from River Stream explains that she is unable to keep up with her outside friendships, partly because of the difference in lifestyles and values:

> Facilitator: I wondered if you could say whether your relationships to those outside of River Stream are important to you? Whether it's been something you've actively maintained or something that you haven't felt you've needed to maintain?
>
> Tina: Well I haven't maintained them very much so there's some guilt there, like there are some people that I want to stay connected to and others where I think it would be nice to but my lifestyle is so different from theirs, we don't have as much point of intersection as we did then, whenever it was that we knew each other. So yeah I'm not really keeping up with those friendships. I hear that that's pretty typical of this community.

Similarly, Rosie from Mountain Valley frames her declining relationship with her family as a sacrifice that she is willing to make in order to focus on building community. She explains:

> Facilitator: Relationships with others in the outside?
>
> Rosie: I've had to sacrifice relationships outside. I do have some connections with a lot of people outside actually but in terms of it certainly would not be – I guess if I wasn't here I would be maintaining connections, stronger connections with my family of origin but they understand. They tell me you keep doing what you're doing because if it gets bad we know we're coming to you…
>
> Facilitator: That sounds like they admire you?
>
> Rosie: They must, I don't know. Sometimes they get upset with me too because I'm not present for them. There's those familial obligations as a daughter, as a sister and I have – I can't – I can't do it all.

Cheryl from Kwan Yin represents her struggles in terms of choice. She explains that she does not have the capacity to be emotionally available to those outside of community as she made a decision to prioritise community life over outside connections:

> …one of the things that has been really difficult about living here is keeping in touch with my friends who don't live here that are from other parts of the world or other places because I end up in order to be available to the community here, emotionally kind of, it feels like I end up putting those other relationships on the back shelf or not at the forefront which is a choice but if I am in community that's how I want to be in community, you know…

Amongst those who did mention their dissatisfaction with outside relationships, this was characterised as a trade-off they were willing to make – one which seemed insignificant in comparison to the gains they received from the community they were a part of. The fact that participants rarely spoke of the trade-offs or costs of joining alternative community can be

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explained in multiple ways. However, one convincing reading, in light of this Chapter's other findings, is that participants struggled to put words to anything that sat outside a positive/romantic narrative structure.

Conclusion

In this Chapter I charted the main features of participants' self-narratives and demonstrated how they reflect broader discourses arising out of the psychotherapeutic and New Age movements. I pointed to the fact that the structure of participants' narratives tended to rest within the frame of a romantic narrative, which fittingly culminated in a positive ending. I highlighted that such narratives were, for the most part, neat and linear. There were minimal plot twists/narrative features that were "out of place". Moreover, participants endeavoured to rationalise challenges or difficulties they faced within this romantic framework. They saw difficulties as a way to grow and to learn and part of their path to belonging and authenticity.

I also contended that participants' self-narratives do not take on alternate narrative forms – that is, participants rarely constructed tragedies, comedies or other variations in recounting their journey to community. It follows that omitted from my data were stories of failure. This, I suspect, can be linked to the fact that both psychotherapeutic and New Age discourses do not make sufficient space for different "genres" or narrative-structures. This indicated that participants only had certain discursive systems available to them at the point in time I interviewed them. In this way, they could be said to be constrained by discourse. For any deviation from these systems could have resulted in ostracism or a sense of not belonging to the group of which they so deeply desired to be a part.

I also showed that while many features of participants' narratives reflected the classical hero's myth, they also differed in an important way: the aim of participants' search, by and large, was connection and relationships rather than individual triumph. While the plot features of searching, the call, the quest (which included challenges and trade-offs) and the "happily ever after" outcome were present, what participants yearned for was social belonging and the capacity to express themselves (particularly their emotional and intuitive selves) in a safe and accepting container, which represent key features of the heroine's journey. They also yearned for the safety of community to enable them to journey inward toward the depths of their inner worlds. As I show, participants claimed to have found what they were looking for.

Throughout this Chapter I revealed productive aspects of the *encounter* between New Age and psychotherapeutic discourse and participants' stories. Participants appeared to experience a coherent identity and self-narrative, one that reinforced their unconventional decision to join community. Participants' self-narratives provided validation and reinforced their decision to seek what their heart yearned for. They were able to seek emotional support and express anger, grief and sadness more freely than within dominant society. In the following Chapter I consider how the narrative feature of "authenticity" specifically *intersected* with participants' emotional worlds.

The findings I offer in this Chapter reinforced the post-structuralist contention that individuals find themselves in particular discursive systems, which influence their boundaries of possibility. Participants found themselves in a system that valued positivity, "authenticity" and the romantic narrative. Participants rarely resisted or subverted the dominant discourses I mention, which tends to indicate that participants, in the main, (paradoxically) took on a compliant subject-position. In this way, participants rarely deviated from the romantic narrative and its key features. Ironically, an aspect of this narrative was a critique of mainstream society. Participants, however, rarely applied this critical lens to the discourses that governed their own experiences in alternative community. So, in this sense, participants were reflexive of discourses outside of themselves, but did not demonstrate a strong awareness of the rules and expectations of their own cultural milieu. This, I would argue, resulted in an absence of discussion about class, race and able-bodied privilege.

All that being said, this milieu provided participants with a fulfilling, self-aware and connected life. While some scholars have been particularly critical of the New Age and psychotherapeutic discourses and the fact that emphasis on notions like the "inner self" and "inner wisdom" have the potential to promote further individualisation and narcissism within our already neoliberal society, my findings suggest that New Age discourses within alternative community were effective in encouraging participants to move toward the richness of their subjective lives, as well as enhancing their relationships to others and indeed the transpersonal and spiritual. Put another way, getting in touch with one's "authenticity" (which will be discussed in the following Chapter) often led to greater self-awareness (particularly around emotions) but also greater ethical responsibility in relation to community, the environment and the world at large. At various points within this Chapter, I demonstrate that New Age narratives were effective in broadening participants' understanding of the subjective-self as they moved away from prescribed notions of how

they *should* be using their lives toward more creative and loving possibilities. Participants were shown to value both the texture of their inner worlds and greater kinship with their community and their environment. Moreover, it was community that provided them with a secure enough base to journey inward and to search for a life of meaning and satisfaction. In this way, communities' impact manifested across and in between internal, relational and communal terrain.

CHAPTER FOUR: Authentic Emotions and Technologies of the Authentic Self

Introduction

In the previous chapter I examined the storylines and discourses that both shaped and limited participants' experiences. I outlined the discursive implications associated with the hero/heroine's journey which was found to provide many participants with a sense of homecoming and liberation. I posited that these storylines allowed participants to explore aspects of themselves that they felt had not been encouraged within mainstream society. In this Chapter, I examine the ways participants' emotional worlds - which I take to include the psychic, bodily and affective features - meet socio-cultural formations. I consider the ways participants talk about emotions and how such talk impacts their subjectivities. In this way, I extend my analysis to include a focus on emotions, building upon my exploration of narrative and discourse. In particular, I compare the ways emotions are conceived of by participants, revealing that such understandings are shaped by the discursive milieu they inhabit.

I start the chapter by outlining each community's specific approach to working with emotions as well as the sociological scholarship informing my approach. Next, I demonstrate that for the most part emotions were understood through a *psychotherapeutic* frame: participants linked their emotional suffering to "unmetabolised" past "traumas" and "wounding" and claimed mainstream did not offer adequate support to "process" and "feel" their suffering in its fullness. Ultimately, I argue that this way of making sense of emotions was experienced by participants as congruent with their ideas on emotion management and, as such, provided a useful way to conceive of, work with and allow psychic suffering.

In the second part of this chapter, I link the discursive notion of "authenticity" to certain technologies of the self, namely, "self-awareness", "personal responsibility", and "openness". I examine the discursive and ethical contours of these technologies and argue that they arise from the hegemony of the psychotherapeutic frame. I demonstrate that such technologies reproduced a specific moral framework that prioritised spontaneous, open and self-aware modes of emotion management. Moreover, I reveal the ways the juncture between discourse, technologies of the self and affect produce a particular version of emotional and ethical selfhood.

Throughout this Chapter I use the concept of "technologies of the self" to consider the ways in which knowledge/power operates through "very specific "truth games" related to specific

techniques that human beings use to understand themselves" (Foucault, 1988, p18). I subscribe to the Foucauldian idea that humans often engage in certain techniques that rely on certain methods of understanding and acting on self, "in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Foucault, 1988, p18).

Nikolas Rose (1998), who has advanced Foucault's work on governmentality in particular, explains that technologies of the self can include ways of thinking, acting on the body and engaging in specific intellectual approaches (p31). In relation to the late-modern notion of "authenticity", Rose's claims:

> *If the new techniques for the care of the self are subjectifying, it is not because experts have colluded in the globalization of political power, seeking to dominate and subjugate the autonomy of the self through the bureaucratic management of life itself. Rather, it is that modern selves have become attached to a project of freedom, have come to live in terms of identity, and to search for the means to enhance that autonomy through the application of expertise. In this matrix of power and knowledge the modern self has been born; to grasp its workings is to go some way towards understanding the sort of human beings we are* (p262).

Indeed, within the paradigm of authenticity, the "project of freedom" that Rose refers to is central – for the promise associated with specific technologies of authenticity is a more liberated and true selfhood.

Community Structures and Emotions

At the outset, I offer some context on the unique ways in which each community understood and related to emotions. While there were an overwhelming number of commonalities across the communities, each had a slightly different approach – indeed, such distinctive features may have attracted participants to a given community in the first place. Specifically, each community had a particular perspective on how individuals' *ought* to manage their emotions, both in relation to their own psyche and the world around them.

At Mountain Valley, for example, emotions were often feminised, revered and considered a fundamental expression of one's "intuition" and "highest" spiritual self. Moreover, they were spoken about freely and regularly: it was not uncommon for community members to congregate informally to discuss their "feelings" and what had recently "come up for them".

Circle Hill had a similar rhetoric, though the emphasis seemed to be more on the "healing" of emotions through relationship and the "sharing" of feelings with empathetic and attuned companions. The community espoused the idea that with the support of other women one could feel "safe" enough to work with some of the more difficult aspects of one's psychic

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world. In other words, it was compassion and the "companioning" of others that made healing possible.

River Stream's approach was also relational but had more of an emphasis on interpersonal conflict resolution than the healing of individuals' past wounds (though many community members were engaged in this work). Thus, the expression of emotions in relation to other members were encouraged through both formal and informal mechanisms, such as regular community meetings and other means of consistent communication.

At Kwan Yin, where Buddhist discourse had a strong hold on community members, emotions were constructed by community as "transient" and "empty" phenomena, as were thoughts and perceptions that came and went moment by moment. The invitation here was to "let emotions be" and not necessarily get involved with the stories attached to them. Instead, members were invited to watch emotions and not necessarily act on or engage with them. That being said, the community demonstrated compassion and mercy toward those who were caught in an entanglement of difficult emotions.

Lastly, at Oasis, the teachings of the community's Indian Guru were particularly influential in circulating the idea that "unwholesome" or "limiting" emotions should be purged through unhindered emotional expression. The suggestion here was that emotions were capable of being released through corporeal techniques.

Scholarly Conceptions of Emotions

This Chapter brings into focus the ways emotions are represented by participants – in particular, it investigates the metaphors, systems of logic, and explanations for emotional distress that participants apply. The discursive representation of emotions is a crucial site of inquiry for according to Illouz:

> *…language defines categories of emotions, establishes what an "emotional problem" is, provides causal frameworks and metaphors to make sense of these problems, and constrains the ways emotions are expressed, made sense of, and managed* (2009, p10).

Within this Chapter I also endeavour to consider what emotions "do" and embrace the idea that emotions are socially specific, political, discursive and capable of being influenced by and influencing social worlds (see Ahmed, 2004; Lupton, 1998; Parkinson, 1996). Equally, I acknowledge the role of affect, which I take to include embodiment, bodily intersubjectivity, autonomic responses and socio-cultural formations (Wetherell, 2013). Like feminist theorists, I reject the idea that there is a hierarchy between emotion and reason or indeed

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"a hierarchy between emotions: some emotions are "elevated" as signs of cultivation, whilst others remain ""lower" as signs of weakness" (Ahmed, 2004, p3). Thus, in this sense, I do not strive to uncover "healthy" emotions but critically analyse the full array of participants' emotional states – whether they be "positive" or "negative" according to discourse.

A note about the definition of emotion is in order here. Throughout this Chapter I adopt a rather flexible definition, side-stepping the largely pondered question regarding whether a limited number of "basic human emotions" exist within the human psyche (see Solomon, 2002). Rather, I adopt a broader conception of emotions and consider emotions to be any subjective feeling or affect, which is associated with a cultural label, directed toward an object/s, which elicits action (such as a somatic response). I embrace Illouz' (2008) idea that:

> *Emotion can thus be defined as the "energy-laden" side of action, where that energy is understood to simultaneously implicate cognition, affect, evaluation, motivation, and the body. Far from being presocial or precultural, emotions are cultural meanings and social relationships that are closely and inextricably compressed together, and it is this tight compression that gives them their capacity to energize action.....Emotion is certainly a psychological entity, but it is no less and is perhaps more a cultural and social entity: through emotion we enact cultural definitions of personhood as they are expressed in concrete and immediate but always culturally and socially defined relationships* (p11).

I draw out the relational dimensions of emotions within the next Chapter but for now I offer an exploration of the entangled nature of discourse and emotions within participants' subjectivities.

The Psychotherapeutic Model of Emotions

I begin this examination by considering the ways in which participants perceived the causes of and remedies for their mental suffering. Distressing emotions were often constructed by participants as the direct result of earlier traumas and neglect, which could only be addressed through the process of *ventilating* and *feeling* emotions in a "safe" space. This particular understanding of emotions, I propose, can be linked to a psychotherapeutic model, which I alluded to in the previous Chapter. As already mentioned, the psychotherapeutic approach seeks to excavate and plumb the depths of emotional states, as well as link them to formative experiences. The goal, then, is to enhance awareness of the familial reasons behind one's emotional turmoil, for:

> *… the family is the point of origin of the self, the site within which and from which the story and history of the self can begin. Where the family had hitherto been a way of "objectively" situating oneself in a long chronological chain and in the social order, it now became a biographical event symbolically carried throughout one's life and*

uniquely expressing one's individuality. Further, it became the cause and foundation of one's emotional life (Illouz, 2008, p39).

Prior to joining community, Hannah from Oasis came to believe that she had not been truly "nourished" by her birth family or society at large. She says:

> Probably about when I was 22, 21, 22, I just had a breakdown basically. I just couldn't – I felt like I couldn't function in the world anymore and I was looking for answers. I went through, I think – I had – I was going through anorexia and eating disorder issues and I came through it but I was left with all of these questions.

Hannah was not just struggling to make sense of the specific pain associated with her family of origin; she was also attempting to come to terms with the existential pain of not knowing "how to function in the world anymore". Hannah yearned to understand her painful childhood experiences spiritually and place them within the context of broader human experience. However, as she explains, dominant culture did not allow for the introspection and restorative work she craved. Consistent with the psychotherapeutic approach, she seemed to be suggesting that her subjective self needed to be examined, felt, and unearthed in order to bear fruit. The mainstream posed barriers to such internal work.

Another example of this can be found in Ali's story. Ali, 20 years old, from Mountain Valley described suffering from severe emotional and physical difficulty as a result of the life-long expectations of her birth family. Soon after leaving high school, she explains, she felt pressure to take her parents' advice to attend university. While at university she began to associate with radical students and soon became an activist. However, during this time, she also endured serious and debilitating stomach pain which could not be explained by Western medicine. She sought the assistance of a psychotherapist and began to suspect this pain was linked to what she refers to as "unprocessed emotion" and "trauma". Quite suddenly, she made the decision to abandon her life as it currently stood and seek out Mountain Valley which was located in a rural environment. Ali quit her university course and ended a romantic relationship within a matter of weeks. She describes this decision as something she had to do to "survive", rather than a considered choice - she was burnt out, depressed and determined to work with her "unprocessed" emotions, which she was convinced were undermining her life. Ali imagined community would offer a healing space where she could "listen to her body" and "work on herself".

Indeed, what Ali envisioned is reflective of certain psychotherapeutic approaches to childhood trauma. She was rejecting the idea that she should suppress her emotions or

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eliminate them instantaneously by replacing them with positive feeling states.[19] Rather, she elected for what she described as a more meaningful and fluid approach to her emotions. She speaks of "processing" her difficulty over a long period of time with the help of a safe environment free of rigid expectations and demands.

Belinda, also from Mountain Valley, explained that she felt like an "emotional wreck" upon joining community. In her words, she had always felt like an "emotional basket case" and had engaged in years of psychotherapy to gain some clarity about why she faced such inner turbulence. She had a challenging relationship with her immediate family members who, for the most part, were political and religious conservatives. Over the years, Belinda became more progressive and lost contact with her family. With the assistance of a therapist, she began to attribute much of her psychological turmoil to the ways she was raised. Upon joining community, Belinda did not feel she was on stable emotional ground. She had just experienced several impacting events, including the end of a long-term relationship and losing her home in a natural disaster. She explained that one of the main factors that enabled Belinda to embrace more negative feeling states was the support of a close group of friends which she made a few months into joining community. They served as confidants and a supportive base. A few years into her time in community, Belinda asked these friends to form a "clearness committee" to identify her main "faults". She explains:

> I got tired of dealing with myself and my stupidity and so I called a clearness committee, which is when you get a group of friends together and they're your committee and help give you advice about a problem. So, I got three of my closest friends…and I got them together to be my "clearness committee", and I said okay I want you to lay it on me, what do you think my biggest faults are that I need to work on because I'm tired of being so aggravated about everything all the time. They were like "you're too hard on yourself, you should honour yourself" and they gave me this whole list of things that I should do and they said if you ever feel like you are putting yourself down, you should go and knock on our door and tell us to our face, and we will tell you the opposite. They came up with this whole plan of action for me about increasing my self-esteem, they said that's the biggest problem we have with you, you are always putting yourself down and then you get upset at yourself. So, I took their advice to heart and started to feel like more self-esteemed.

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[19] Participants' desire to unearth and experience some of painful past could be seen as somewhat incongruent with the happiness movement's focus on positivity, a model which is often taken up in late capitalism. According to Miller (2008):

The model of mental health depicted by positive psychology turns out to be little more than a caricature of an extravert—a bland, shallow, goal-driven careerist whose positive attitudes, certainties and "high self-esteem" mask the fact that he lacks the very qualities that would enable him to attain a degree of true self-knowledge or wisdom, and to really grow as a human being (p600).

This passage reflects many facets of therapy culture. First, Belinda seems to be engaged in a type of confession, something at the heart of a therapeutic knowledge-production. Her friends act as witnesses as she narrates her story. As Illouz (2008) explains:

> …the process of telling the story of one's self would be the process of exercising a new art of personal memory, transforming the past into a ghost that perpetually haunts, structures, and explains the present. (p47).

Indeed, the airing of her deepest emotions and cognitions, and the resultant "realisations" Belinda receives seem to have led to a kind of "redemption" or "salvation" within her emotional world.

Second, this conversation seems to shift Belinda's self-blame by reallocating some of the responsibility for her emotional distress to old ways of being. That is, before meeting with the "committee" she links becoming "aggravated" and lacking "self-esteem" to her own "stupidity" - thus taking responsibility for her reactions. Ultimately, her friends recommend that she spends time "honouring" herself and avoiding putting herself down. This, again, reflects Illouz' (2008) idea of how therapy culture (as well as the happiness movement) views causation. In relation to the therapy frame, Illouz explains that:

> The narrative makes one responsible for one's psychic wellbeing, yet does so by removing any notion of moral culpability. It enables one to mobilize the cultural schemes and values of moral individualism and of self-improvement. Yet by transposing these to childhood and to deficient families, it exonerates the person from the moral weight of being at fault for living an unsatisfactory life (2009, p184).

The above understanding seemed to be freeing and empowering to Belinda. She was no longer the "bad" one but rather her suffering arose due to misconceptions around her self-worth, namely that she wrong in some way, which could be traced back to her formative experiences. Finally, the clearness committee and its narrative appeared performative in its function. Indeed, the fact that it was even described as a "committee" highlights this performativity. As Illouz (2008) puts it:

> The narrative is performative, and in that sense it is more than a story because it reorganizes experience as it tells it. In the same way that performative verbs do the very action they proffer, a wide variety of social sites such as support groups or talk shows provide a platform on which healing is performed. This is an important feature, as it is in the experience of self-change and in the construction of that experience that modern subjects experience themselves as morally and socially most competent. Self-change is perhaps the chief source of contemporary moral worth (p184).

The Committee enabled Belinda to undergo such "self-change"; one which she felt encouraged more self-love and understanding toward her past and present subjectivities.
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Indeed, it should be noted Belinda's living arrangements meant that Belinda's friends lived close-by and could observe her ways of relating and provide her with insights and feedback which she found to be useful and "true". This "clearness committee", and I would argue the therapy narrative more broadly, had a significant impact on her. She began to make progress on her emotional issues, which she attributes largely to her friends' willingness to affirm her worth and work through her issues collaboratively.[20]

Belinda's experience was not isolated – in fact, although it took different guises, it was shared by the majority of participants across all communities. However, one of the major appeals of Mountain Valley for participants like Ali and Belinda was the fact that most community members appeared to view emotions as superior to the intellect. As mentioned in Chapter Two, this idea was perpetuated through the community's broad involvement in Shamanic spiritual practices, which promised to enhance connecting with "intuition" and the "earth" – feminine qualities that appeared to invite a more embodied, emotional and interrelational approach to the self and community. This approach was reflected in some of Mountain Valley's formal mechanisms, for example, members were encouraged to communicate their feelings extensively within "Council Meetings" and were often diverted to mediation and NVC.

Although I have only considered a small number of examples in an in-depth way, my data revealed that most participants were influenced by psychotherapeutic discourse which encouraged them to "feel what they were feeling" and express it within a loving environment. Alternative community was seen as such a space - one that could allow participants to be "honest" about what they were going through and "process" their emotions. In this sense, joining community served two important functions in relation to participants' emotional selves. First, it removed the pressure within their subjectivities to be continually "happy" and replace their negative emotions with positive ones. Hence, perhaps the distress participants described was not as personal as it seemed – rather, participants' suffering may not have necessarily been linked to a denial of participants' "true" self but instead the result of competing emotional styles and discourses (specifically, the pressure to remain positive versus the need to feel a broad spectrum of emotion) that vied for power within participants' subjectivities. Ultimately, however, the psychotherapeutic approach

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20 It should be stated here that it could challenging for some women to have a similar open conversation with friends about emotions within dominant culture: such a conversation would arguably be more likely to occur within the confines of a mental health professional's office, rather that amongst a group of friends.

proposed a model of working with difficult emotions that participants saw as liberatory, safe and more in line with their preferred approach to the emotional world.

Emotional Safety

Across all communities, participants claimed that alternative community provided a space to explore, feel and understand their emotions in all their complexity. For the most part, the community environment acted as a safe therapeutic container where certain emotions could be felt, embraced and expressed. Farrin from River Stream[21] explains:

> Facilitator: So, have your emotions changed in other ways since coming? Some say they have become more agitated because you are living in such a small place, others become more peaceful.

> Farrin: Yeah. It's interesting. I think I have become more peaceful. I am more tolerant of other people actually and more, um, when I am in a bad mood I am very aware of it, so more aware but I would say my emotions have changed for the better and I feel as though I am coming out of myself more, it has taken me a while to open the door. I was like peeking out and coming out a little bit. There is *a safety* here that allows that too. I think a lot of people talk about that. It's a big part of it....

Another example of the way this therapeutic container operated to support participants within community can be found in Cat from Kwan Yin's story. Prior to moving to community, Cat's brother died unexpectedly. Upon moving into the Centre she describes letting go of her former identity as a professional and fully inhabiting a "messy", "sad" and "grief-stricken" identity. In fact, she describes once conveying concern to a fellow community member who responded saying, "yes, you should be sad, go ahead and do what it is you need to do." Soon after, she was given a month off community duties by management to tie up loose ends and deal with legal matters arising from her brother's estate. She explains that she was encouraged by fellow community members to take care of herself and resume her duties once she felt "up to it". This allowed her, she said, to experience her emotions "fully" without having to engage in the emotional labour of masking her feelings at work.

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[21] I note that the emphasis at River Stream was on the *expression* of emotions. Informed by the idea that emotions were "better out than in", whilst in the field I observed that talking about one's feelings was a regular feature of community life at River Stream. Moreover, the airing of emotions, in all their diversity, was seen as integral to communitarian harmony. This was mirrored in the many transparent and open processes the community adopted, which I allude to in Chapters Two and Six. Within these spaces, it was seen as legitimate, and even encouraged, to talk about how an event, decision, process or relationship made *one feel*. So long as individuals were taking responsibility for their "own" emotions and not using their talk to "intentionally" harm another, I observed that members' feelings were validated and taken seriously as though they were important messages that necessarily bore meaning and significance.

This approach was reflective of a broad rhetoric associated with emotions at Kwan Yin: through Buddhist teachings, books, talks and study-groups, the community encouraged members to approach emotions as "waves" within the mind that did not require alteration or interference. One was invited to simply allow them to run their course. During frequent "Dharma talks" the leaders of the community were invited to avoid taking the contents of their mind too seriously and instead "let them be". That is, members were not encouraged to "purge" their emotions, but watch them appear and dissipate in a non-judgemental and compassionate way. Unlike most other communities, this ethos did not insist community members express their emotions automatically but rather do so "skilfully" and "selectively". Hence, in comparison to other communities, emotions were not given as much authority at Kwan Yin. They were seen as simply "empty phenomena rolling on".[22] Thus, there was a certain lightness and non-involvement in this approach that is worth highlighting here.

Alternative community was constructed by participants across all communities as a loving space that allowed members to behave in a way that was consistent with their "internal" experience, whether positive or negative. Hannah from Oasis explains:

> There's not such a stop on, say if someone cries or you're in turmoil. "Stop crying". It's none of this kind of bullshit. It's an ability just to be with what's coming up and that's generally why I came here and not to kind of say, "yes, they can look after me", but just to know that I can breathe a little bit easier because when – I find it a bit more challenging when you're just surrounded by people that are – they're not there yet. They're still acting on the program, how they've been programmed.

These alternative emotion norms were a significant impetus for Hannah to join community in the first place. Indeed, participants across all communities expressed relief at not feeling obliged to "suppress" or "alter" certain emotions or feeling states to the same extent as they had in the past. Similar to Hannah, Les, from River Stream felt comfortable enough to both feel and express emotions:

> I am certainly not afraid to feel emotions anymore and I am not afraid to express it. I wouldn't say that before I moved here I was afraid but I definitely would have been conscious about sharing it but I also am 10 years older than when I moved here and 10 years more comfortable with who I am and how I feel about things.

Cheryl from Kwan Yin Garden similarly places value on the process of "allowing" emotions:

> Cheryl: My emotions have changed.

22 This term has been popularised by Buddhist teacher and scholar, Joseph Goldstein. See: Tworkov, Helen, "Empty Phenomena Rolling on: An Interview with Joe Goldstein" *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* (1993): https://tricycle.org/magazine/empty-phenomena-rolling/ Accessed 6 February 2018.

Facilitator: They have?

Cheryl: My experience of it is that I have more frequent and more intense emotions.

Facilitator: Really? Good and bad? Is it because you are more aware of it? Or because you are in community?

Cheryl: It might be; I don't know. It's like it does have to do with allowing, some kind of allowing.

Taking these accounts together, I would suggest that the triumph, and indeed hegemony, of the therapeutic discursive milieu within alternative community was experienced by participants as coherent and safe. One reason for this was that it provided a coherent system, and way of understanding, messy emotional and subjective experiences. According to Wright (2011):

> *Stories of emotional angst suggested that a therapeutic worldview offered a means of framing and articulating experience, and as such provided people with a resource for managing uncertainty, and difficult situations (p4).*

The safety participants describe could also be linked to what Wright describes as "a shifting orientation to suffering" (p48) in that it provides a way of "working with" and "responding to" mental suffering and multiple other existential questions that the mainstream fails to offer. In addition, the *idea* that alternative community required less pressure to feel happy continually had positive implications for participants – many of whom relied on it to explain their newfound sense of support and freedom. This sense of allowing what one was feeling to express itself, whether internally or externally was associated with the notion of authenticity, which I turn to next. At a minimum, how emotions, and indeed suffering, was framed within alternative community seemed to sit more comfortably with participants in that they seemed to be more congruent with how they saw themselves and how they believed their emotions should be managed. Hence as psychotherapeutic approaches to emotion norms *encountered* participants' internal worlds healing outcomes were achieved.

Emotional Remedies: "Authentic" Emotions

In the remainder of this Chapter, I consider the "technologies of the self", arising from the notion of "authenticity" (see Leeuwen, 2001; Taylor, 1991). I consider "authenticity" a normative, performative and affective proposition that sets certain standards in social contexts. It is performative in that it evokes, "patterned behaviours, narrative structures, and the semantics of feeling" (Jung, 2011, p279) which are entangled with notions of "self-realization under the truism of "being oneself" (p279). Moreover, it elicits certain feeling

states, interpersonal dynamics and techniques of emotion-management. In a broader sense, it reproduces a "master schema for imagining a good life" (p279), particularly in the Western world and countries like the US. According to Jung (2011), following the counter-cultural revolutions:

> *Emotions or feelings became the touchstone by which the world was viewed, experienced, and evaluated. Although the revolutionary fervor of the 1960s and the early 1970s died out in the later decades of the century, the baby-boomer generation has made the turn toward subjectivity a routine feature of their lives* (p281).

Vannini and Williams (2009) put it like this:

> *Authenticity is not so much a state of being as it is the objectification of a process of representation, that is, it refers to a set of qualities that people in a particular time and place have come to agree represent an ideal or exemplar… [the] sociology of authenticity must attend to the socially constructed, evaluative, and mutable character of the concept, as well as its impact on a number of social dimensions* (p3).

Hence, to study authenticity is to consider what it represents within a social setting as well as its implications for individuals and groups (see Lindholm, 2008; Taylor, 1991 and Vannini and Williams, 2009). Moreover, it requires that we consider the extent to which it is connected to a moral framework.[23]

As I mention in the previous Chapter, as well as finding belonging within community, participants described experiencing a sense of refuge and acceptance within their own skin and identities or "authenticity". Productively, the notion of authenticity served both an emotional and a political purpose for participants. In an emotional sense, uncovering what was always "true" and "inherent" generally involved a felt sense of understanding, relief and openness. In this way, "authenticity" invited participants to move toward the richness of their subjective lives, to reclaim the specificity and texture of their feelings, perceptions and views and focus on the contents of their personal experience. Participants felt lighter, liberated and more in tune with their own emotional needs and preferences, as well as the more difficult emotions that may not have been acknowledged or indulged in the mainstream. As Charlotte from Oasis puts it:

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23 The scholarly debate associated with authenticity echoes several highly-debated questions pertaining to the nature of social reality within the social sciences. Realists, for example, may subscribe to the idea that there is something "truly true" about one's internal reality, while social constructionists, on the other hand, view one's "authenticity" as an entirely constructed phenomenon formed through social and cultural discourses. The debate pertaining to authenticity also relates to how the self is conceived. Can the self be separated from culture and society or is it is something that is shaped by social forces? Moreover, does the self exist outside of its interaction with the outside world? I take a constructionist approach viewing authenticity as a discursive formation worthy of deconstruction.

> That moment when I actually first found that authentic voice coming out and giving myself permission to be that authentic in that really Kali [Hindu Goddess of Death] sort of presence and it was – I just remember it being incredibly liberating. In fact that's when I actually [committed to a spiritual path] after that, after that moment. It was like, wow, this is so valuable for me and it really liberated me.

Moreover, discovering one's "authentic self" liberated participants from the constrictions of the mainstream institutions and expectations. They felt free enough to choose another path, or in some instances choose no path at all. In the name of authenticity, the institution of family (in its traditional sense) could be abandoned without guilt or shame, as could the expectation of mainstream work. Authenticity provided justification for these acts of social resistance and thus served a political purpose. Further, given this authentic self was considered inherent and pre-dating social conditioning, for participants it represented the truth. This, in itself, carried great power.

The "authentic self" was described by a number of participants as someone who had extracted themselves from the mainstream "program" and acted in a way that was counter to societal expectations. Hannah from Oasis explains:

> … this is what [my spiritual teacher] has given to me, a chance for me to really discover who I am and work from who I am, not from what I've been told how to be and what I've adopted and thought how I had to survive.

Significantly, most participants linked authenticity primarily to the emotional dimensions of their being. For participants, emotional authenticity involved employing certain technologies to uncover what they "really" felt. Sue from Mountain Valley, who practised "non-dualism" spirituality, makes this point clearly:

> [in referring to her teacher's words] "Look inside. Your own authority is the authority. I can't find it. I can give you techniques. I can give you suggestions. I can give you things to read. But all the answers, all the authority's going to come through you because it's everywhere in everybody. It's not consigned even to the intellectually superior".

Sue's teacher's comment is interesting for multiple reasons. First, it highlights the central role of techniques, and indeed the requisite expertise, needed to "uncover" one's "inner authority". Second, it points to the idea that authenticity is often constructed as beyond, or outside, the realm of rationality and cognition. In this way, notions of authenticity can have the subtle effect of undervaluing cognitive approaches to the management of emotions (like cognitive behavioural therapy) in favour of approaches that elicit "spontaneous" and "honest" emotional responses. According to Salmela (2005):

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An authentic or a genuine emotion, according to this view, is a sincere and spontaneous response to the eliciting situation. The emotion is founded on the subject's spontaneous apprehension of the object that reliably manifests his or her concern for it (p210).

It follows that being "authentic" necessarily meant avoiding "inauthenticity", a notion participants associated with denying, rationalising or modifying what was "really" being felt. For participants, the process of moving toward authenticity, then, involved admitting to what one was feeling and not modifying it on the basis of "outside expectations".

Oli from Oasis, who had become a spiritual seeker in the 1970s, offers a specific understanding of authenticity. Oli describes having a revelation in respect to her husband who she had been married to for a period of seven years. Soon into her spiritual journey, Oli started to see that her husband did not value her interests, often belittling and silencing her. During a session with a spiritual psychologist Oli came to realise that she wanted to be alone. She explains:

> I visited [the psychologist] who I did some work with me as to my relationship. I had to sit opposite him cross-legged with our knees touching, and he said, "Finish the sentence for me." – I can't share with him then – so three times, and the third time – I said, "I'd rather be alone."

Oli is suggesting that authenticity is capable of being uncovered by the right person, asking the right questions, the right number of times. She claims that within this session she came to an emotionally honest and spontaneous insight. Soon after, Oli makes the final decision to end the marriage. Despite the financial stress and difficulties associated with single parenting, this enabled her, she says, to embark on a path of self-discovery. A few years later Oli met a man 20 years her junior. She describes "rejecting her conditioning" and entering into a romantic relationship with this man, which ultimately led to what she felt was an enduring and meaningful partnership.

The selfhood that flows from the discourse of authenticity appeared to prioritise moments of affect (over more well-considered emotional responses). These moments were interpreted as unfiltered and therefore more legitimate. And, indeed, the discourse seemed to elicit certain affective responses. Participants reported that they felt lighter, freer and more at peace with themselves when "authentic". While authenticity did sit comfortably for most participants, it also had some more constrictive implications. For example, while rarely acknowledged by participants it had the potential to lead to the *policing* of authenticity within community. Moreover, authenticity seemed to be structured as a social norm through community's informal discourse. It was not uncommon for alternative community members

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to use the terms "inauthentic" or "not real" as an insult. Moreover, there seemed a tacit social obligation that one would be authentic in nearly all social interactions – I intuited this during the course of many participant interviews. These reflections beg the questions: who determines what a real/authentic emotion is? And what micro-power dynamics are implicated in negotiating such dynamics? These questions I consider in the following Chapter, particularly in relation to intimacy and relational emotions.

Technologies of the "Authentic Self": Self-Awareness

In order to become "authentic", participants explained that they needed to become *aware* of what they were feeling and *why*. This represented yet another technology of the "authentic self". Participants, across all communities, described self-awareness as the process of becoming aware of how past experiences impacted on their present subjectivity. Most embraced the proposition that present-moment feelings could be traced back to their formative experiences in childhood. This viewpoint was reflective of the psychotherapeutic approach that proposes one's "unconscious" or "shadow side" influences our "adult" ways of relating to our experience or causes dysfunctional "acting out". Self-awareness was often described as a quality to aspire to: without it, participants contended, individuals would simply be repeating the "dysfunctional past". Moreover, the absence of self-awareness was said to lead to "unhealthy" interpersonal interactions and breakdowns in the social fabric of community.

The problem-construction here is worth teasing out. Building on the idea that outside forces were to blame for emotional turmoil, participants' narratives revealed a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between self and society. The idea was that once an individual had removed themselves from the mainstream, she still had to purge the forces that had been internalised within her psyche. This was constructed as the deeper, more involved process of excavation, one that required letting go of the forces of denial or repression and plunging into one's past within the context of a safe, supportive and reflexive environment. The primary way self-awareness was managed and policed by community members was through the language and questions posed to each other and to themselves. Participants, across all communities, endeavoured to link any perceived deviation from the norm of self-awareness to individuals' lack of willingness to "face up" to their formative wounding.

Kerry from Mountain Valley, for example, expresses her frustration at community members who do not participate in community events as a result of "unresolved" issues:

> Kerry: I really find that disappointing, that people come here to sit around and have people around them, but not actually participate, it's a drag.
>
> Facilitator: Yeah
>
> Kerry: It's not like I don't understand it, why – I feel like it's kind of parasitic almost.
>
> Facilitator: I understand.
>
> Kerry: Other people would be mad at me for saying that, but I often feel that way. I was shocked, just really shocked at that amount of introversion, which I think it's *mistaken* all so often for *unresolved internal problems*, and then "I'm an introvert". No, you need to figure out why you can't relate socially. Because introverts in general I think, who are true introvert, can relate socially if they don't have some other factor going on. So, I think it's a highly misused term. Damaged might be, you know, we're all damaged. I'm damaged just from being alive.

Kerry's use of language here tends to suggest that she sees these individuals' lack of awareness as a "problem" that needs to be repaired. Her use of the term "damaged" points to the idea that as humans we are likely to carry unresolved wounds within us, as a result of past relationships and experiences.[24] Kerry frames self-awareness as a responsibility owed to the community at large. In other words, community members owe it to the community, as well as themselves, to become aware of their internal problems to solve them. At Mountain Valley, this was seen by community members as a fundamental ingredient in community life: "consciousness" was seen as the panacea to community trouble and elevated as the highest value.

Marg from Oasis discusses self-awareness differently. She sees self-awareness less in psychotherapeutic terms and more in spiritual terms. She equates self-awareness with "wholesomeness". Wholesomeness, she says, involves being aware of how the mind "runs" so that one can "purify" obstacles to self-realisation and provide guidance to others. She explains:

> Facilitator: What does it mean to be wholesome?
>
> Marg: Well a counsellor has to be wholesome, one, you have to have figured out your own mind and how it runs, you have to have been aware of the pitfalls. You know we humans we're all on this bit of a roller coaster, emotionally, mentally, we get caught in ditches, mental, emotional ditches, and that's when people seek

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24 Kerry's comments also suggest that she believes that we are all born with inherent goodness or purity that becomes corrupted by society, particularly the family (this is reminiscent of the work of Carl Rogers (1982) cited in the last Chapter).

counselling, that's when people seek a change of lifestyle, because they realise they get caught in these same ditches. How to get out of them? Now how can somebody pull you out who's got some great theory but who hasn't done it themselves. So, I would say wholesome is somebody who understands their own mind and how to free oneself from the suffering that we constantly get - no, not the suffering, the mental ditches that we constantly fall into. How to get out. I still fall into ditches, but I give good advice because I have also learned how to pull myself out.

For Marg, the notion of self-awareness seemed to be associated with a purity binary– that is, those who remained "unaware" were considered unwholesome and less "refined" and lower on the spiritual ladder. Again, one could imagine that this may have normative implications in that those who were less aware were considered less likely to achieve higher levels of spiritual attainment. Moreover, being a "whole" human being was juxtaposed against being incomplete or someone who had not actualised their potential. Indeed, this moralistic notion had the potential to exclude those who did not value or understand this specific framework and its technologies.

A number of participants made the point that living in community assisted in the development of self-awareness. As Farrin from River Stream explains:

> …because there are so many people everywhere that you really can't get away from them, which is also very interesting because you have to deal with your own shit. You know, face your own self in lots of ways and for me I really felt strongly I had to make this my home… I have never been that much in touch with my emotions, but I do notice though that I am going deeper I think, and I am going to places that I often just skirted over before I came here. So, I think it is deepening my emotions. I guess I am more conscious of what I am doing and deliberate because I am more aware of my emotions. It's difficult. I hadn't really thought about that. So, if I am feeling I don't want to do something I won't be conscious of that, and then I am aware of a resistance, and then I realise "oh that is what I am resisting type thing, so that kind of awareness is coming through more. But I think I was half asleep in lots of ways before I came here. I do feel like I am waking up in a way."

It is clear in the above passage that Farrin has internalised the social norm of self-awareness. She contrasts this to the way she had operated in the past which she labels as being "half asleep". In this way, she seems to be judging her previous self. Equally, self-awareness also seemed to have had a positive impact on Farrin's life: she speaks of her actions becoming more deliberate and becoming aware of her boundaries in respect to how she would like to relate to others.

Vera, from River Stream, makes a similar point to Farrin. She speaks about how community acts as a mirror reflecting her emotions:

> Vera: Yeah, my emotions have changed a lot while living here.
>
> Facilitator: In what way?
>
> Vera: I think I at least try to recognise my emotions more than before I lived here. Yeah, I think everyone here gets a lot of feedback over time, like about expression and emotions and the place they're in.
>
> Facilitator: How do they get that feedback? Do people say things?
>
> Vera: Yeah, you know, eventually you get to know someone and they'll say like "How come you're always like this?", or "How come today you're like this?", or like "Gee, I really didn't like how you told me to do that job back there. It sounded like you're angry", you know, stuff like that, and people come from different backgrounds here and some people are more tolerant than others about emotional expression.

Receiving feedback from others provided Vera with insight into what she was feeling and how her emotional expression impacted on others. This was radical for participants like Vera - given how rarely such conversations were considered to happen in dominant culture. It does, however, raise the question of the how community members managed, surveilled or policed individuals' emotional worlds. What types of emotions were seen as understandable or valid? And further, what kinds of emotional expression were encouraged or rewarded? Vera, in this passage, mentions the fact that certain individuals were more open to emotional expression than others. Anger, she says, was called out as hurtful. A more detailed exploration of the types of emotions that were legitimated/illegitimated will be offered in Chapter Five.

Some participants approached self-awareness in a structured way. Ali, from Mountain Valley, for example, used the tools of non-violent communication and journaling to bring some awareness to her emotions and her needs:

> It would be that I would bottle it up and not talk about it and not think about it. I found that journaling has been amazing for processing my emotions and finding inner empathy skills and learning non-violent communication skills which - non-violent communication is a lot about how you relate to others. But it also can be used to relate to yourself too of just what are my needs in this situation, what am I feeling and what are my stories about this situation that are intensifying these feelings that maybe the story isn't actually what's true. Being able to really notice my patterns and when I get triggered and things, noticing that I'm triggered not so much because of what's happening in the moment but what it reminds me of in my past.

Ali uses the term "triggered" which suggests she has a particular understanding of the way emotions manifest. Emotions were perceived as lying dormant, ready to be sparked or activated by an external stressor. Participants often linked such dormant emotions to the past rather than the present. In this way, a number of participants thought it important to be

aware of past issues and their continued emotional presence in one's life. Indeed, for most participants, the process of self-discovery generally involved an excavation of the past. The focus was often on making sense of one's childhood in order to understand the present more accurately. The past was often described as frozen in a point in time - memories were fixed and often formed part of the "shadow" or "unconscious" side of one's psyche. Moreover, the "past" was often blamed for present dysfunction and problems in the community setting. Ali went on:

> Those old hurts and old traumas that when something is triggering me it's really not this person and this moment, it's what I didn't get in childhood or what I never allowed myself to do or some shadow side of myself. Really looking deeper into the shadow has been amazing for allowing my emotions to flow freely. That, I think, has been amazing for my belly pain because some of my practitioners, particularly my energy healers, have told me that women really lock their emotions in their bellies and that when you're in a situation where you can't effectively process those emotions it gets all tied up in the belly. So, a lot of my even physical healing has been around letting these locked up emotions out and learning to not lock them up.

The first step in healing for Ali - and indeed for most participants – was for these emotions to be known and seen and then contextualised within one's personal history. Almost universally, participants agreed that it was the process of learning about themselves - who they are and what they wanted in life - that gave them purpose. Terms like "growth", "learning" and "discovery" were routinely used by participants in discussing their values and goals. Oli puts it humorously:

> Yes, well "perfect" is an idea of our mind only, isn't it? I don't think it's possible in a third dimensional world, maybe in others, who knows? But like I remember [my spiritual teacher] saying something like, "Well when you're perfect you're dead." Because it means there's no other growth, you're finished. You're cooked!

Cook (1999) takes issue with the notion of self-awareness, arguing that it is culturally specific and has the effect of potentially excluding those from other cultures and backgrounds. He explains that self-awareness is underpinned by a very specific notion of selfhood and cites Geertz' important observation:

> *The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic centre of awareness, emotion, judgement and action, organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively against other such wholes and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures.* (Cook (1999) p1295 citing Geertz (1979) p229).

I would add to Cook's observations that the moral requirement of self-awareness had the implicit consequence of devaluing those who did not have the skills or willingness to engage in it. Moreover, self-awareness is arguably associated with power and class in that those who have the knowledge and language to express their emotions in a self-aware way may possess a high level of cultural capital and education.

A noteworthy example of a participant unwilling to comply with the norms of self-awareness can be found in Jude's narrative. Jude had lived at Mountain Valley for several years and during this period experienced intense stress due to interpersonal conflict. At the time, a few older women within the community were in the habit of expressing their emotions overtly. This way of relating, Jude explains, made her feel uncomfortable and did not accord with her understanding of "emotionally mature" relationships. She saw it as childish and akin to a "sibling" relationship. Over the years, Jude began to experience ongoing and intense conflict with one particular community member, Mary. During this time, she felt pressured by the community to engage in formal mediation or counselling with Mary to come to some resolution. Jude refused on the basis that she did not want to be put in a "vulnerable" position in relation to Mary. That is, she did not want to comply with community prescribed notions of self-awareness. Mary, who had been trained as a counsellor, was well-versed at "talking things out" and Jude was not interested in engaging in this type of relating – she felt that it would give Mary "power" which would ultimately lead to her own powerlessness. She describes feeling the need to be "true" to herself rather than capitulate to community pressure. Ultimately, Jude decides to formally "shun" Mary, refusing to acknowledge or interact with her. This comes at a significant price for Jude: she is pushed to live on the physical outskirts of the community, ultimately losing the respect of other community members. She explains:

> …there's parts of me that are just real. I'm out there and anybody can - my finances, anything you want to know I'm just like "what do you want to know?" So that's hard because not everybody's like that. …. Vivienne said to me "Jude you're not my elder anymore" and I said "you know Vivienne I've never designed my life around being an elder to you - I want you to know this. So, if you need to go somewhere else and get some other elders - go right ahead - that's not my function in life." So, she went and counselled with Mary 11 times and she finally says to me "you know Jude, you were right." I said, "well you know this is what I have to do, if people don't like it because I'm shunning this person too bad, I'm sorry, get your own life."

Jude's refusal to engage in counselling can be viewed as transgressive in the context of her community. It is not to say that Jude was not self-aware but rather she was unwilling to

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engage in the community's prescribed techniques for self-awareness. As she explains, her fellow community members sought to impose certain norms on her: they wanted her to "work through" issues with Mary and reach a harmonious and peaceful resolution. Jude did not want to express her emotions in mediation though she was willing to express them in other contexts, such as our interview. Nor did she want to come to a resolution. Jude rejected the goals of mutual understanding and acceptance. Rather, she sought to be "true" to herself and honour her lack of respect and feelings of dislike toward Mary. As a result, Jude felt forced to live on the outskirts of community and rarely participated in community events and spent most of her time alone, which she says she enjoyed; at the very least, she seemed to enjoy it much more than living a life that conformed to expectations she did not agree with. Jude's experience highlights how different understandings of self-awareness and emotional expression can clash and lead to real life consequences for participants.

In this section I have contended that the technique of self-awareness was underpinned by the notion that humans were burdened by unacknowledged emotional baggage from the past that needed to be unearthed and recognised – otherwise, participants suggested, one's dysfunctional history had the potential to repeat itself. For many participants, emotions were conceived as lying dormant, ready to be triggered by an external event. Becoming aware of the "causes" of these emotions was seen as a way to avoid to the unconscious acting out of past abuse and dysfunction. Self-awareness led participants to experience their subjectivities in greater depth and with greater nuance. However, I also suggested that self-awareness had the paradoxical potential to slide into self-monitoring or self-surveillance, however most participants did not seem too concerned by this possibility. It was unclear whether this was because more rigid types of self-surveillance had become normalised within participants' subjectivities or because their approach was non-coercive or a result of something in-between. Another implication of self-awareness was the individualisation of emotions, which I turn to now.

Technologies of the "Authentic Self": Personal Responsibility

The technique of self-awareness seemed to place a significant amount of responsibility on the individual for both the harmony of the community, as well as their own wellbeing. Participants across all communities explained that once they became aware of emotions they then felt they needed to take "personal responsibility" for them. Hannah from Oasis says:

> Hannah: [it's] about taking responsibility for your stories and your trauma and about healing that, healing your stuff.

This norm, it appears, was encouraged by fellow community members. A number of participants spoke of being held to account by others who thought they were in the process of re-enacting dysfunctional patterns or relationships from the past. For some participants, taking personal responsibility was a political act. To them, the mainstream was marked by a lack of responsibility and awareness: our finite resources continued to be pillaged by those who were living in the world in an unconscious way - in a "life-taking" rather than "life-giving" way as multiple participants put it. Personal responsibility represented an alternative approach. Taking responsibility was often contrasted with victimhood. As Hannah further explains:

> No. I'm not a victim. It's always my choice what I put myself in and what I don't and there's always something for me to see so it's basically – yeah, they're the two main things, and with all the work that I've done it's still my responsibility to live from that place….Compared to what I was, I take more responsibility…I guess before I came [here] the emotions would live me and I just accepted that that's the way I was but actually it's a programming and something I was actually reacting to that had happened in my childhood and then I carried around for the rest of my life and got in the same situations over and over and here comes the emotion and this is who you are and often people would say "you're a real emotional person". I think it's bullshit but that's their perspective on it but it's like I never used to be separated from them. Yeah. I don't throw them out on people. I really – yeah. They don't rule things.

The suggestion here is that by becoming aware of past "programming" Hannah was able to have more freedom or space to *choose* how to respond to life events. This capacity she attributes to the work she had done in uncovering and working with her "conditioning". Authenticity was thus interpreted as being aware of one's automatic responses, placing them within the context of one's history, and expressing the feeling that arises rather than "acting them out" unskilfully. While this may seem to run contrary to notions of "free" emotional expression, for the most part it sat comfortably alongside it. Across all communities participants were encouraged to avoid blaming and instead use phrasing like "I feel…" or "your actions led to me feeling."

Further, the theme of personal responsibility highlights the agency some participants believed they had in relation to their social and emotional worlds. It was almost as if by taking personal responsibility participants felt they had more control over their lives and the capacity to minimise the risk of external stressors. Again, Hannah speaks clearly on this point, saying:

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> … generally I can say I have a lot more love for myself and a lot more understanding about how I interact with life and how it's my responsibility how things go. So with whatever happens in life I don't blame because it's always my responsibility no matter what depending on the situation and whether – how active I am in it.

Tina from River Stream similarly states:

> I think I take more personal responsibility for my emotions than I used to. Instead of blaming other people for my being upset I'm able to notice that I'm upset and then change the situation or remove myself, or just choose to continue to be upset than sort of telling someone else that what they did was wrong and that they shouldn't have done this to me. I just mostly identify as having a higher base level of happiness than I did before. I still get sad and I still get stressed, and it sucks when that happens, but I can – I would say that overall I'm a happier person here than I have been at all in my adult life.

Interestingly, in these passages both participants link this sense of personal responsibility to a positive feeling state – that of happiness and increased self-love. However, from a discursive perspective, it is unclear whether it is the act of living in congruence with this discourse that is the causal factor at play, or whether the notion of personal responsibility served as an effective cognitive and social technique that increased positive feeling states.

Another important point to make is that the norm of personal responsibility was policed by community members primarily through the conversations that were had around dispute resolution. Members, across all communities, were encouraged by other members and those in positions of authority to take some ownership for their "baggage" in the context of interpersonal conflict. Moreover, all communities had some form of mediation mechanisms that encouraged members to express how they felt and take ownership of their reactions and feelings.

My findings indicate that while taking personal responsibility seemed to empower participants it also tended to obscure the more structural and social factors linked to negative feeling-states. Moreover, one could imagine that the notion of personal responsibility could lead to self-blame. There potentially seemed to be a very fine line between taking responsibility for one's healing vis-à-vis taking responsibility for past injustices and trauma experienced at the hands of others. This leads to the question of whether the notion of personal responsibility had the effect of depoliticising past injustices and discouraging collective action on social issues like abuse, alienation and violence. Arguably, personal responsibility is compatible with the neo-liberal discourse which propagates self-determination and self-made opportunity. Hence, the paradox at play here

was that participants, by and large, were seeking to reject discursive formations arising from neo-liberalism. This was an inconsistency that was rarely, if ever, addressed or acknowledged by participants.

Technologies of the "Authentic Self": Open and Closed Emotional Relating

In this section I briefly consider a frequent metaphor that participants used, that of "open" vs "closed" emotional relating. Broadly, this related to being open amongst others. In other words, it involved the act of expressing oneself and seeking support. It was also associated with being "open" with one's self. This involved looking at one's past and "patterning" and allowing emotion to be felt. As Ali from Mountain Valley explains:

> Facilitator: Okay. I'm wondering if you can say something about your emotional life. Have your emotions changed since joining?
>
> Ali: Oh my gosh. Yes it's been huge. It's been amazing. My defence mechanism, my strategy, was always not to feel things, to just kind of bundle it up and put it in a box and put it away in my mind and not to feel much emotion at all. Part of this big healing journey has been opening up those boxes and letting the emotion out and it's quite a journey. It's quite a rollercoaster. There is - just the other day I cried 20 times throughout the day just on and off all day. It was like every little thing would tip me off and I'd cry. Then the next day I was fine and it was great because I'd let it out and it used to be that I would bottle it up and not talk about it and not think about it.

The assumption here is if one acknowledges and feels emotions fully, one is likely to feel relieved of emotional burdens one has been carrying. Within this discourse, the bottling up of emotions had the potential to lead to a volcanic explosion of sorts. This presumes an emotional repository that stores emotions that are unexpressed or unprocessed. According to this viewpoint, if we do not express these emotions they can lead to physical and psychological issues. This is a common narrative pertaining to emotions within certain psychological circles (see Levine, 2010). Ali's position is reminiscent of the psychotherapeutic refrain "the only way out is through" (Pascual-Leone and Greenberg, 2007). While this approach did seem to lead to productive outcomes for Ali's wellbeing, it also had the effect of creating certain expectations around how to experience emotions "properly". Janet from Kwan Yin Garden hints at this as she shares her emotional experience after losing her husband:

> I think I am somewhat guarded in my emotional life. It's been hard for me, my husband died now three years ago. No two and a half. Two and a half years ago and it's been very hard for me to just allow my grief to express itself. I miss him

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enormously but I just don't. *Pause.* Ahhhhhhhhhhh. Having a good cry about having him gone has been difficult. *Pause* So I think I am somewhat guarded in not wanting to feel the full brunt of it. I talk to him all the time. There he is (pointing to a photo).

Janet's comments raise some interesting questions. Did she feel the need to cry and experience a grief-like reaction as a result of certain emotion norms? To what extent is she engaged in the act of suppressing and denying grief that she knows to be latent? In any event, Janet seemed troubled about the fact that she was not meeting a certain emotional standard. Perhaps this represents the more constrictive result of the norm of emotional openness. Or perhaps it relates to the expectation at Kwan Yin to "watch" emotions which may have set a tacit norm that discouraged excessive talk about the content of one's psychology (which can be contrasted with the approach at River Stream and Mountain Valley). Put another way, it appeared at Kwan Yin that while emotional openness seemed to be encouraged in relation to one's self, it was not always encouraged in social spaces.

The next level of meaning related to "openings" and had more of a spiritual quality. These openings were linked to insights or clarity of vision. Hannah explains:

> So, it was hard when I first got [on this spiritual path] because it's very confronting because people are so *open* and faced with how I was in the moment, very *closed*, confused and all these things and I came to a place where everyone's *open* and I was just mesmerised and at the same time it's challenging because personally for me things were coming out and I didn't know what was happening…. it's like you have this massive *opening* and surrounded by people that actually understand and will have the potential to understand and they really look at you in the face and they really listen to what you're saying and then you come back here and the world is crazy and it's like trying to find yourself in it and with the judgements that are coming.

According to Hannah's description, fellow seekers reflected each other's emotions like a mirror - and this mirror was constructed as an accurate one, at the very least it was more accurate than dominant culture in Hannah's view. Again, Hannah's descriptions seem to be associated with the spiritual proposition that we can uncover our essential open and clear nature with the help of certain techniques and a community.

While for the most part this specific account of emotions led to feelings of authenticity and belonging, it did not allow for the valid role defence mechanisms might play in the managing of emotions. Relatedly, I would contend that being open to one's emotional world may have the paradoxical potential to lead to feelings of being overwhelmed and helpless for some. Further, the norm of being open also had the potential to lead to further norms around confession and surveillance within alternative community.

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Conclusion

Within this Chapter I examined ways participants understood and experienced emotions within alternative community. I demonstrated that emotional authenticity formed a major discursive formation and was one of the ideas that compelled participants to join alternative community in the first place. Ultimately, I proposed that the psychotherapeutic discourse triumphed within community and that this resulted in particular understandings of emotions and emotional expression. Moreover, it was linked to participants' understandings of the cause/s of their suffering and its possible remedy. Central to this discourse was the notion of "authenticity", which was associated with the qualities of spontaneity, honesty and freeing the self from past conditioning (particularly conditioning associated with one's family). This freedom was considered by some participants a form of emotional mastery, which could disentangle one's "true" "emotions" from what one was "told" to feel and behave and "choose" how to respond to a past or present event. It was also linked to the *expression* of emotion, which was valued as therapeutic and essential for healing and spiritual growth. Hence, as this framework *intersected* with notions of self and ethics, it was found to have multiple intertwining implications: first, it encouraged greater emotional literacy, awareness and expression, which for the most part was beneficial and therapeutic for participants. Second, it shifted the ethical focus of social relations to the sphere of emotionality: participants were encouraged to take personal responsibility for their feelings and engage "openly" when interpersonal conflict emerged.

These findings had paradoxical implications for participants and their emotional worlds. For example, the drive to attain "authenticity" and engage in the work of self-development was arguably necessary for participants to fit in and/or achieve satisfaction from their association with alternative community. Moreover, certain forms of emotion-management emerged which had the potential to be policed and surveilled within a community-setting, predominantly through discourse, but also through informal and formal community mechanisms. One concerning issue raised was the fact that community members' varying capacities to adhere to communities' models of emotion management could result in the exclusion or stigmatisation of those without the skills, literacy or wiliness to engage in such practices. Equally, in some instances, the focus on individuals' emotions and personal responsibility had the potential to depoliticise past injustices and discourage collective responses to certain forms of violence, such as familial abuse. Lastly, it can be suggested, that despite an ethos of inclusion and diversity, communities like Mountain Valley, Oasis and

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River Stream did not allow sufficient room for alternative models of emotions, outside of this psychotherapeutic frame.

CHAPTER FIVE: NOTIONS OF COMMUNITY AND DISCOURSES OF RELATIONALITY

Introduction

Community continues to be of both a practical and an ideological significance to most people, and is thus an important area of study for the social sciences…The concept – if for a moment we may be allowed to describe it as such – provides both a means of encompassing a wide variety of social processes and an idea which has much more than simply technical meaning, for it refers to symbols, values and ideologies which have popular currency. People manifestly believe in the notion of community, either as ideal or reality, and sometimes as both simultaneously… (Hamilton, 1985, p8).

In the previous chapters I explored the discursive and emotional features of participants' personal experience and revealed that it was the desire for connection that motivated participants to seek out alternative community. Such participants imagined receiving the relational nourishment they craved through collective engagement and emotional connection. In this chapter, I delve deeper into the interpersonal and gendered dimensions of community life, and following Hamilton's suggestion, look specifically at the stories, values and metaphors that shape participants' understandings of community and their relationships with others, both within and outside of community.

Significantly, I demonstrate that while relationality featured universally in participants' accounts it had various meanings depending on the particular cultural formations at play. As such, I consider the most dominant relational discourses: namely, gender freedom, communitarian commitment, and connection/intimacy and examine the ways these formations were experienced, challenged and reproduced by participants, as well as by the communities themselves. I then consider the extent to which they impacted subjectivities and interpersonal relationships. I argue that as alternative community's social norms *contacted* participants' subjectivities what generally emerged was a greater sense of support, meaning and relationality. In this way I contend that alternative communities engaged in the radical work of transforming the way we understand relationships, community and the self/other divide.

However, at the same time, I also reveal that at times these formations led to exclusionary outcomes, particularly for those who refused to conform to community practices. Moreover, while most participants were very pleased with the ways gender was reconceptualised within alternative communities, notions of "gender freedom" sometimes resulted in problematic dynamics that had not been fully anticipated. Thus, the interpersonal aspects of

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community had the paradoxical capacity to simultaneously alienate and support community members.

I wish to make the point here that unlike the previous Chapters which drew largely on interview data, the following analysis relies heavily on the informal interactions I had with the participants as well as the relationships I observed between community members and their community's institutional structures. This decision was made, in part, because I observed that discourses pertaining to relationality were more likely to be enlivened in the context of informal social interactions than in a one-on-one interview setting. That being said, I incorporate interview data where relevant.

Aims of Community

I begin this Chapter by reiterating the ways communities represented themselves to contextualise this exploration and to preface how representations led to visions of mutual support and solidarity, as well certain expectations of members. Upon entering the field I made note of each community's goals and aspirations, many of which were contained in communities' policy documents, statements, membership agreements and websites. My preliminary notes explain:

- Mountain Valley represents itself as a "village" that aspires to uphold the long-term sustainability of land, culture and spirituality. Community, according to Mountain Valley's objectives, involves a self-sufficient, local economy, ecologically-sound infrastructure, and technologies that enable members to grow food and access clean water in a way that is environmentally responsible and respectful to the bioregion. Members agree to "care" for people and the earth (which symbolises something much broader than the bounded community itself), to enact a simple and sustainable lifestyle, to cultivate a balanced spiritual ecology and to promote harmony, cohabitation, and collective, transformative solutions to interpersonal issues. Moreover, members are expected to deal "honestly" and "openly" with others, commit to personal "growth" and engage in envisioning sustainable futures and facilitating "personal" and "global healing".

- The major focus for River Stream is the fair division of labour and responsibility within community. Members sign an official agreement in which they committed to do their "fair share" of work, which is taken to include caring, educating and disciplining the community's children. Similar to Mountain Valley, the broad object of

River Stream is to provide society with a sustainable and ecologically-sound example of successful cooperative living that is active in eliminating, sexism, ageism, racism and competiveness. Moreover, the River Stream membership agreement includes a commitment from members to be "kind", "gentle" and "honest" and engage with the community's policies, and dispute resolution processes.

- At Kwan Yin, the main goal of the Centre is to further the Buddha's teachings, in a way that is sustainable and facilitates "access", "connection" and "opportunity". Members are expected to engage in a life based on Buddhist ethics, which includes the "Three Refuges": that is, recognition of the Buddha within the self and all beings, a commitment to compassion and wisdom as outlined by the teachings of the Buddha and respect for diversity and difference so as to encourage an inclusive and safe space for a variety of individuals to practice Zen. Members also committed to avoiding doing harm and to actively do good for the benefit of "all beings". Members are also expected to refrain from stealing, lying, engaging in sexual misconduct, killing and drinking and taking drugs in the community. Thus, in this way Kwan Yin offers a specific list of prohibitions to guide members' conduct.

- Oasis also has spiritual objectives, however members are not expected to commit to a prescriptive ethical standard but instead are invited to agree with the following broad principles: vegetarianism, collectivism and a commitment to equal rights, privileges and responsibilities. Members are also expected to make a weekly contribution to the common land. The broad aim is to "integrate" both community and spiritual life and provide a space for meditative practice. Sexual ethics are not discussed in the community's official documentation.

- Circle Hill seeks to respond to the oppression and suffering of women and work towards a compassionate world which promotes social justice, peace, and living in harmony with the earth. Given Circle Hill is not residential, expectations of members are not detailed in the community's documentation.

These visions were crucial to each community's sense of identity and purpose. They promoted coherence and direction and proved important to the long-term sustainability of each community. For instance, participants often referred back to these ideas and explained that they drew on them for motivation and persistence during the more trying times. Thus, each community's ethos provided a robust foundation of commitment and shared hope. As outlined above, while there are many overlaps in relation to the communities' visions of

sustainability, equality and honesty, each community had a unique orientation, which likely attracted participants to it in the first place and also had implications for participants' subjectivities.

I now turn to participants' subjective notions of community, which I would contend were shaped by both the community's philosophy and their own positionality. My analysis is informed by Cohen (1985) who argues that community should not simply be understood as a set of institutionalised structures but as a symbolic, nuanced and distinctive concept that has specific meanings to individuals based on their own personal understandings and experiences. He explains:

> *"Community" can no longer be adequately described in terms of institutions and components, for now we recognize it as symbol to which its various adherents impute their own meanings. They can all use the word, all express their co-membership of the "same" community, yet all assimilate it to the idiosyncrasies of their own experiences and personalities* (Cohen, 1985, p74).

Evelyn from River Stream points to this. She says:

> Sometimes it is hard in any community I think. It is really tempting to think about "River Stream" and the concept of River Stream, but it sort of does exist and it doesn't. It does in that I have my River Stream but everyone's River Stream is different so that it can be hard when you disagree with someone to say "well we don't do that at River Stream, it's not what River Stream is about". So it's subjective.

Evelyn's point about such subjective discrepancies is noteworthy, particularly in relation to conflicts within community which I allude to shortly. It highlights the fact that multiple and complex forces shape the way each individual perceives community. In other words, while the way each community understood itself had substantial bearing on participants' ideas of what community ought to be, other factors were also at play. Moreover, such idiosyncratic differences had a significant impact on the interpersonal dynamics and structures of alternative community.

Three major ways of viewing community emerged from my interviews with participants. First, community was defined as a shared vision or ideal which involved working towards a common set of values and goals and making a serious commitment to the space: Ari from Mountain Valley described "the concept of sharing things in common, the idea of being part of something with a greater vision." This way of understanding community promoted a sense of solidarity and commitment amongst members. Second, and perhaps more simplistically, participants referred to community as a physical place that was taken care of

by a group of people: Vera from River Stream talked about community being "a group of people that care about a place." This way of understanding invited members to dedicate their labours to the physical site of community. Third, it was understood as an intersubjective place/space which made community members feel safe, cared for and comforted: Rosie from Mountain Valley explained it as "when people had hard times they depended upon each other". The latter definition correlates with the emotional aspects of community that I explored in depth in Chapter Four.

Community and Commitment

A major theme that arose when speaking to participants about community was that of commitment. The reason for this was plain: transience threatened the viability of community and had the potential to problematically impact the older, less independent residents. Indeed, participants across all communities expressed the importance of sustained commitment to their chosen community. Some explained that they felt resentful towards those who entered community for a temporary period of time and/or for their "own" purposes. Fay from River Stream, who was in her 60s and was a long-term resident puts it this way:

> Some people sometimes talk about River Stream being like a college or a university or somewhere that you can stay here for a while and have an interesting time and then move on. I don't identify with that. Be here, learn some skills and move on. That's not what I'm looking for at all. I'm looking for somewhere to stay.

> Facilitator: So that commitment aspect of it?

> Fay: Yeah. I believe that there is quite a turnover sometimes and that the system kind of adapts to that but that it can be destabilising for some long term…It means constantly training new people which I don't enjoy particularly. I would rather be working with a more committed, long term group of peers so that we could gain the skill level together and learn from each other.

Les, also from River Stream, puts forward a similar perspective. She had been committed to cooperative ventures for some time and had made the move to River Stream because she wanted to live with those who shared a similar level of commitment. She had attempted a cooperative venture while she was at university. However, while she enjoyed strong friendships with the women in her past community, she had the continual sense they were going to move on with their lives. This prompted her to find individuals who saw community "as their life". She says:

> I was going to Graduate School and I convinced them [her friends] to move with me and we formed a cooperative and it was like specifically women, vegetarian cooperative. That was great. That lasted for like three years I think, maybe four, it

lasted for four. I left after three years, ironically because I started to realise that none of my friends were as committed to the idea of cooperative living as I was and I kept expecting them to say "I am going to back pack around Europe. I am going to get married. I am going to have a baby. I am going to move on with my life" basically. I am going to leave the cooperative and this was really important to me I was realising, this way of living and so I started thinking that I needed to look for people where this was actually important too and it was very hard decision for me to make because these women who I was close to, we bonded you know and I was thinking about leaving them..

In Fay's and Les' passages there exists a distinction between those who were committed to community in a long-term sense and those who saw community as simply a temporary arrangement. Fay and Les, amongst others, wanted to see community as their "home", not as something that could be used for individuals as a transitional space for their own limited purposes.[25] One way this issue was resolved at River Stream was by putting energy and resources into long-term infrastructure and resources for aging members. As mentioned earlier, River Stream offered a community house for the aging and a hospice staffed by nursing staff. Yet, at the same time, River Stream did not discourage temporary members from joining, as their presence effectively staffed the community's businesses. In a conceptual sense, the presence of temporary members changed the face of community and for some reflected a trend that did not accord with some participants' initial vision.

Jessica from Mountain Valley had an emotional response each time she discovered a community member was not going to stay long term. She says:

> ...my dreams are big, my dreams are big... I want 15, I want 20, I want 30 [living in her community house]. So it's like wonderful people coming into our lives and then leaving. So it's just like I want them to stick and I want them to decide that this is what they want. They do slowly, slowly, slowly. So there's very different personalities, so you know I get my hopes up, I kind of fall in love, and I hope somebody wants to join us, and then they don't, and I have to go through that disappointment, that's the hard part.

Sue from Mountain Valley specifies an actual period of time that she considers ideal in terms of commitment from other community members:

> … to create an ideal community the first thing I would say is that the people who start it need to commit to being involved with it in a very serious way for a good 10

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25 I note that there is a wide body of literature looking at the meaning of "home". According to Mallett (2004), a diverse range of understandings of "home" exists. It has been linked to an actual physical space (i.e. a house or community); it has been viewed as a site of relationship or family and/or as a subjective space associated with intimacy, refuge and comfort. It has also been linked to identity and one's sense of self, as well as a political site of potential oppression and marginalization. I would suggest that while participants used the concept of home to point to a number of the aforementioned dimensions, the idea of home as a metaphorical place of refuge, comfort and stability seemed to predominate.

years or more. That's what I tell people now. You want to start a community? You better promise not to leave it for 10 years... It's so easy, especially Americans I think or maybe it's true of Australians, to have an idea and throw it down.

Like Sue, a number of older participants had been involved in various political and social counter-culture movements of the 1960s and 1970s and saw contemporary society as marked by transitoriness and fragmentation. As such, they believed that individuals were now less loyal and committed to social causes than other generations. This was reiterated by Victoria from Circle Hill:

> Facilitator: What aspects of Circle Hill do you strongly identify with?
>
> Victoria: Basically that it is trying to found communities or encourage community. I very much feel, as clearly you do, that our civilisation destroys communities by and large, does not foster the kind of stability and the kind of connections that allow community to develop. We move around so much with work, we're often separated from family, really drastic things and we've lost our connection with the land which was a community. My people come from a farm so I spent holidays there as a child so I had that sort of connection. And because people who work the land need each other, there's still that same basic recognition of "we actually need our neighbours. We mightn't like them, but we need them." So you form a community.

Sue and Victoria's comments are reminiscent of the work of Robert Putnam (2000) who contends that individuals in the West do not commit to social ventures and institutions in the same way they once did. He attributes this to increased mobility- for instance, in-between jobs, locations and across global boundaries - and the decline and dispersion of traditional institutions (like family, full-time employment and religion). The result, Putman claims, is certain unwillingness and/or an inability by individuals to commit to relationships and social projects in a sustained way. There is nostalgia present in this perspective – the days of committing one's life to a utopian vision through community building seemed to be slipping away. This perspective, I would suggest, functioned as a kind of reference point for participants that operated to categorise anything short of long-term commitment as something of a failure (see reference to Kanter, 1972 in Chapter Two). Yet it also was the force that propelled community forward – without this sentimental and philosophic commitment to community life there would be no good reason to fight for its continuity and preservation. This was an inspired and active perspective, one that prompted participants to commit their entirety to building community.

However, at times this perspective also bordered on a type of uncritical communitarianism, which had some potentially problematic implications. Freidman (1989), for example, claims that uncritical communitarianism rarely critiques established forms of community like

neighbourhood. Rather, these institutions are seen as inherently worthy of extension simply by virtue of the fact that they counter individualism. In Friedman's words, "any political theory which appears to support the hegemony of such communities and which appears to restore them to a position of unquestioned moral authority must be viewed with grave suspicion" (1989, p281). Hence, according to Friedman, communities should not be valorised merely for being communities. They should be chosen based on one's decision to privilege certain ways of being over others.

An example of the uncritical valorising of community can be found in Jessica's narrative. She says:

> Well the vision, the vision. The vision is people, the vision probably is tribe, it's extended family, it's communal, communism, it's actual sharing of resources. In my vision of my tribe money doesn't exchange hands and people don't keep score….Multi-generational living within the ecological boundaries, and really getting what that means, and I don't know what that means, I don't know. I have an intellectual idea, I have a little tiny bit of a spiritual knowing, and I have a whole lot of glimpses. But I sure don't know. But whatever that looks like, it's as simple as that. I want to be a tribe and I want to be multi-generational.

Jessica describes ideal community with reference to traditional social arrangements like "family", "neighbourhoods", "tribe", as well as living within "ecological boundaries" and seems to be alluding to extending the communities that one finds him/herself in. As Friedman predicts, Jessica does not demonstrate much awareness of the fact that she is seeking to extend established institutions rather than reconfigure them. That being said, later in the interview, Jessica did identify as a feminist though this seemed secondary to her commitment to the creation of a "tribe", as she puts it.

Some participants were more explicit about the way feminist philosophy informed notions of community. For instance, Victoria from Circle Hill, who identified as a strong feminist, describes community in terms of voluntariness explaining:

> I think our society has by and large lost many of the ways in which community can be formed and this was one way in which we could draw in people and connect them with each other in a non-coercive kind of way, a voluntary, free, enjoyable way and I do think it has worked like that. I think people meet people who become friends here. So there's that basic thing.

Victoria saw certain obligatory communities – like family and religious institutions – as potentially oppressive to women. Her vision of community represented an opposite motion

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– one of freedom of association and the desire to reconceptualise community as friendship and commonality rather than extend traditional forms.

Hence, a distinction existed between community members who saw long-term commitment as essential to successful community life and those who did not. Those who had long term aspirations felt disappointment, frustration and sadness at a perceived lack of commitment on the part of others. Yet, I also suggest that participants' visions for community, particularly those that were reflexive, provide community with the fuel to continue in spite of hardship, promoting sustainability and communal identity.

The Paradox of Commitment: Confinement

I move on now to consider a potentially darker side of commitment: that of confinement. This is a theme that emerged in my auto-ethnographic writing during fieldwork specifically with the rural Intentional Communities, Mountain Valley and River Stream. Notably, my own feelings of confinement impelled me to explore the paradox of "entrapment" and "freedom" with participants.

At Mountain Valley, my inquiries revealed that social entrapment was experienced by a small number of participants who explained that they felt as though they could not leave community as they had used most of their savings to become members and purchase their block of land onsite. Such blocks were very difficult to sell, as potential buyers would need to be committed to the location, lifestyle and values of the given community. Moreover, employment opportunities were limited due to the community's remote location. These factors meant that leaving the community was not a financial option for such women, particularly for those who were older and retired from paid work. As Ari put it:

> …it's very difficult to get out and resell your property because our membership is so small and complex. So that means that people who come, whether they want to or not, they tend to stay a while. So you get to know them better and you get to see folks go through their stages and because you're in community together and you co-own this property…So there's a lot of opportunity to understand the human condition and archetypes and the way that I show up and it's reflected. It's an opportunity for me to understand my own behaviours more deeply too. It's more difficult to escape or run away from your own behaviours or someone that you may have a personality conflict with. In mainstream society you can usually find a way to escape. Not always because maybe they're in your worksite or it's your boss but there are fewer escape routes here. But there still are plenty and people still use them.

Ari's comments demonstrate a paradox: while escape can be difficult, staying in the one place can lead to a greater understanding of what she calls "the human condition" which is often linked to the idea of human freedom.

In addition, a number of women reported feeling unable to leave Mountain Valley temporarily. This was largely due to difficulties with transport and the fact that community members were committed to minimising their environmental footprint. Whilst at Mountain Valley I made the decision to leave for the weekend and I too experienced a similar sense of conflict. I worried about how the community would perceive me. Would they think I was wealthy and lacking commitment to the environmental preservation? Would this impact negatively on how I was viewed in the community and, in turn, on my ability to recruit participants? The decision took on great meaning and gravitas. The tightly-linked nature of the community, as well as the fact that members rarely interacted with those living in the mainstream, meant that relationships tended to be more intimate and intense. Moreover, unlike within the mainstream where the decision to use transport is usually a personal one, decisions around movement and transportation quickly became known to the whole community.

By contrast, the transport at River Stream was highly coordinated with daily buses leaving to and from the community to nearby small towns. However, it was not so much the physical remoteness that invoked the confinement here, but rather, the institutionalisation and routinized nature of community life. Daily life was highly structured at River Stream. Each member had a comprehensive weekly work schedule, which outlined where they should be and when. A minimum of 42 hours of work was required of each community member – this included caring responsibilities, house cleaning, health appointments and other self-care practices. Meal times were set with the community eating together twice a day. Meals were eaten in a large dining hall, with food being cooked en masse and served from large bain-maries. Participants frequently made comments about life at River Stream being akin to school camp. Further, the issue of access to private space, within this communal setting, was raised by Farrin. She said:

> I think we could have a lot more privacy. For me we could have a lot more privacy for sure and I would like some bio-fuel vehicles that we could take out a little bit. I would like to have more escape routes from people. Because even going out in the woods from time to time I don't feel that alone really. But I am still fairly new. At first I felt like I was being watched a little bit. I am not really, but just because there are so many people everywhere that you really can't get away from them…

This sense of not feeling "alone" troubled Farrin for another reason as well. She felt constrained in respect to her romantic relationships. She had had a number of "flings" but did not feel comfortable enough having a serious relationship with someone from River Stream. She explains why:

> I feel like it's such a small community, I could if I wanted to but for me that is not a freedom feeling, it's more a lack of freedom feeling in that I don't want to be in the bathroom or at work with somebody. I just think that is too claustrophobic and I also worry that I might get obsessed with somebody and then I think am I going to see them around the corner or am I going to see them at lunch.

As I have already mentioned, of all the communities studied, River Stream offered the most communal of living arrangements. All houses at River Stream were communally shared, however each member (including child members) was entitled to his/her own room. In addition, clothes were shared as were toiletries and other basic necessities. Income too was held in common and in order to promote equality members were required to freeze their assets and refrain from using them while living at River Stream. Farrin, in the above passage, is referring to the fact that each house had norms around communal spaces and some houses had agreed that it was acceptable for multiple members of the house to use the bathroom simultaneously.[26] Again, paradoxically, to many members this represented a freedom of sorts – freedom from body norms and boundaries, however to others committed to notions of privacy this had the potentially reverse effect.

In addition to issues around privacy, I was also interested in the extent to which River Stream participants' sense of spontaneity and freedom was affected by the structured nature of community. How regularly did community members enjoy unstructured free time? Was this something that was important to them? With a minimum of 42 hours of work, in addition to meal times, (which often led to hours of socialising) a limited amount of time was left for pursuits that sat outside of the daily routine. Cate expressed slight frustration at not having time to engage in creative pursuits, play sport and do more travel. She says:

> I don't have a problem working 42 hours a week, but there's part of me that if we could make it a priority to be able to work less, I think that would be nice, because

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26 I offer a note on the extent to which other communities were structured communally. As I have mentioned elsewhere, similar to River Stream, each member at Kwan Yin was entitled to his/her own room but outside of that the site was communally shared. However, comparatively Kwan Yin had more of an air of privacy, which was likely connected to the fact that internal introspection and time in solitude were encouraged by the Buddhist ethos. By contrast to these two communities, at both Mountain Valley and Oasis members had the option of privately owning a house on the community property. As mentioned above, this, however, was dependent on a members' level of finance. Those who could not afford to buy in only had the option of living in communal houses, which some members argued caused something of a class divide.

there is a lot of other things that I want to be able to do. It's hard to travel, it's hard to have a need to travel, it's hard to have time to travel. There are the main things.

Facilitator: What kind of things would you do with your spare time, if you worked on a part time basis?

Cate: I would play music more. I would do more physical activity. Probably travel.

Cate was an exception. Interestingly, when I enquired with the participants from River Stream, by and large, they explained they did not have a problem with this facet of community life. In fact, many participants explained that they had a very strong work ethic and felt that working hard was part of their identity. Thus, this was part of the reason they were attracted to River Stream in the first place. Some participants explained that within this structure one could choose their own pace. That is, one could elect to work long hours, at a high intensity and take on managerial responsibilities. Alternatively, one could do no more than the minimum hours and work at a pace that suited the individual. Les explained that often having a good time at work was prioritised over efficiency:

> In a lot of our work we choose to be less efficient in order to be happier. Some of it is, especially with food preparation, people want to make good food. They want to have a good time to do it well and over the 10 years I have lived here the amount of time that has been allocated for food preparation has increased…

The issue of confinement was not as pronounced at Oasis and Kwan Yin and this was partly due to the fact that both communities were within 10km from the city/nearest town, which meant that community members did not face physical barriers to maintaining ongoing relationships with other communities and individuals. At Oasis, community members were not required to work onsite, which meant that many spent their days offsite working in the nearest town. Although most community members did work onsite at Kwan Yin during the day, many left the community at some point in the day to meet friends, attend meetings or do exercise. This was easily facilitated as Kwan Yin was located in the middle of a city.

However, both communities did require community commitment to regular spiritual practice, which may have been confining to some. At Kwan Yin the schedule was uncompromising. As already mentioned, residents were required to rise just before 5am for the first session of sitting at 5:30am. This session culminated in a service that ends at 7:30am. The next period of compulsory sitting was at 5:40pm. Between these periods, residents seemed to work very hard in the office, kitchen or on the property. Despite this the structure of spiritual practice at Kwan Yin was described by most participants as supportive to their freedom, rather than impacting on it. At Oasis a similar albeit less rigid spiritual

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schedule was maintained. Community members generally gathered in the meditation hall at 7:30am for movement meditation and again at 5:30pm. Unlike Kwan Yin, however, attending the meditations was not an institutional expectation. At times, there were only 2 or 3 community members in the meditation hall at a given time. This provided community members with the flexibility to attend when they felt they needed to or alternatively engage in spiritual practice in their personal space. By and large, participants reported enjoying this flexibility.

For some participants, certain aspects of community, such as privacy norms, expectations around environmental awareness and each member's level of financial commitment, were confining. However, by the same token, a number of seemingly rigid structures like work routines and a defined spiritual schedule had the opposite effect, contributing to participants' sense of freedom and fulfilment within community, thus interrupting simplistic dualism of freedom and entrapment. Hence, one possible reading here is that the *potential* flip-side of commitment within alternative community is the experience of confinement and entrapment. A better reading, however, is that a social paradox is at play: "confining" features of community life can equally represent emancipation and freedom for others depending on one's positionality and subjective understandings.

Discourses of Gender Freedom

I now turn to the interpersonal discourse of gender freedom and reveal the many ways this notion shaped social relations within community. I include a section on gender in this Chapter because it was a concept that had been considered extensively by all communities and as such represented a structuring social and community discourse. I focus, in particular, on the ways it ordered space, elicited and/or stifled certain actions, and framed community decisions.

I use the term "freedom" carefully here and apply the Foucauldian approach that this notion can be used to control and set normative frameworks yet it can also empower and lead to productive outcomes. Thus, in this section I reveal the ways each community was committed to their own version of gender freedom, whether it was in the form of equality of opportunity, sexual liberation and/or the institutionalising of corporeal norms. In addition, I zero in on two of the most revealing and complicated examples of gender freedom and demonstrate that this discourse resulted in a range of noteworthy contradictions particularly where "gender freedom" was conceived as a form of liberated sexual expression.

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I begin this examination by considering "gender freedom" as it expressed itself at River Stream. Of all the communities, norms associated with gender were institutionalised to the greatest extent at River Stream. Many of these norms had been operating since their introduction in the 1970s at the height of the radical feminist movement; they were, however, subject to the process of continual community formal and informal discussion. When I first arrived at River Stream I entered the Visitor House for the first time where I was greeted by a young woman visitor who sat on the couch topless. She seemed visibly uncomfortable as I entered the room and was quick to explain that one of the agreed norms within the house was that both men *and* women were "permitted" to reveal their chests. She went on to say that the facilitator of the River Stream Visitor Program had advised that this was something that needed to be agreed upon by all visitors at the start of each visitation period. Her seeming discomfort appeared to be due the fact that I had not been at the meeting and therefore not in a position to agree to this body norm one way or another.

Later, it became clear that this approach, based on consensus and established norms, was a central feature of River Stream: a fellow visitor explained that there were demarcated zones where *both* men and women were required to cover their chests and others where both were free to be topless. The community representative soon after explained that these zones had been agreed to via a formal process involving meetings, policy proposals and consensus-voting. The result of this bureaucratic process, I was told, was that men would be governed by the *same* bodily expectations and norms as women and that these norms would not be reproduced in an ad hoc way, but routinised. The result of this, for women in particular, was a sense of freedom. Participants reported enjoying being topless in a way that was "not sexual". They also reported enjoying seeing men subject to the same norms around nudity. The fact that these matters were settled in advance, I was told by a number of community members, meant that men would not be permitted to simply revert to familiar and taken-for-granted ways of being in the world. Something interesting was at play here: while this could be seen as a form of social control, for River Stream members, it was generally interpreted as a form of social freedom, one which was based on reflexivity and a direct challenge to gendered structures.

In addition to the bureaucratisation of body norms, River Stream was explicitly committed to encouraging experimentation in the realm of gender-identity through gender-fluid approaches to clothing, nudity and language. Individuals, for example, were encouraged to refer to each other as "co" (as a pronoun) rather than by reference to their sex. Moreover,

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toilets and bathrooms were unisex and all community members had access to a unisex communal wardrobe. Many men wore dresses and skirts and women appeared very comfortable in "masculine" working attire. These measures seemed to encourage the notion that individuals should be "free" to "choose" certain aspects of their gender identity. For the most part, this was productive and provided participants with joy, delight and a form of creativity and expression they had not enjoyed in dominant society. Community members appeared to revel in the freedom to express their individuality in a way that was not constrained by gendered expectations.

However, although most female community members took pleasure in not having to conform to such gender stereotypes, some expressed dismay that these norms did not necessarily translate into broader "feminist" attitudes at River Stream. That is, several participants expressed the view that while the bureaucratic and institutional approach to gender-norms was indeed a huge step in the desired direction that was not to be underestimated, it was not sufficient to address the fact that dominant approaches to gender on occasion "infiltrated" community-life.

This issue was raised specifically in relation to the women's-only living quarters at River Stream which housed approximately 10 women. The space was established in the 1970s by feminist community members. I was invited to have a look at the space. It was a well-maintained lounge room with book-shelves dedicated to feminist philosophy and fiction. Participants explained that men were permitted to visit this space until 6pm at which time they were asked to leave. Women would often use this space to meet both informally and formally to share their experiences of gender relations. Multiple participants expressed concern that enthusiasm for this space was declining over recent years. Tina, a young woman in her 20s, felt concerned other young people did not see the political value of the women's-only space. She says:

> Lately since I've moved here there hasn't been much interest among women to live here [the women's only quarters]. They often will be here for a while and then move out when they can find a different room.

> Facilitator: Why do you think that is?

> Tina: Well I think that they don't politically value women's space, like that's not "a thing" anymore. I think that there's an age gap because most of the people moving here are young and it's usually not young people living in this hall. They might want a louder space, they might want a space that allows kids, they might want a space where their boyfriend can hang out in the evening. There's a lot of reasons and

people say that's not for me, they sometimes joke about this place as the place that no-one wants to live, they kind of put it down rather than recognising the value and sometimes they talk about how it's egalitarian, that we shouldn't be allowed to restrict, so there's that. I would basically like to see people having – valuing women's space more.

Tina describes a tension between the discourse of radical feminism, on the one hand, and that of egalitarianism on the other. Tina seems to be suggesting that the valuing of women's-only space was considered by many community members as a relic of the past and no longer necessary; in other words, some community members believed equality had been achieved within River Stream and therefore the need for women's only sites had dissipated. However, Tina felt strongly that this space should persist. She explains that despite the institutional approach to gender relations, there continued to be undesirable gendered power dynamics, albeit of the more subtle variety:

> …. sometimes some men here have really fucked-up attitudes but they don't say it, they're not vocal about it, so any outright misogyny people wouldn't get away with in mixed company but there's not like a straw consciousness of "I'm a guy who has privilege, let me work on that", or am I inserting myself into this women's space or women's conversation, maybe I shouldn't. Some guys – the way they talk about women sexually it's pretty mainstream, and I'd rather that that wasn't here at all.

Later in Tina's interview, she explains that she felt that the gendered dynamics at River Stream were a "light version of what goes on outside." In other words, her view was that despite the community's feminist inspired actions and intentions, aspects of dominant culture "crept in" and needed to be "called out" and discussed in the company of other women.

Tina's perspective is interesting for a few reasons. First, it points to the fact that participants often imagined community as a bounded entity that could become vulnerable to the mainstream "leaking in" (see Manzella, 2010). Thus, in this sense, River Stream was thought of as a microcosmic utopian space that needed to be guarded from dominant cultural attitudes. Second, Tina's description draws on the long term, yet just as persistent, debate of victimhood versus agency within feminist circles. According to Tina's perspective, "patriarchy" was still an overriding structure – this, she explained, meant that women's space should be defended as it provided the means to reflect on oppressive structures, commune with other women and develop a connection to the self away from "patriarchal ideology" and the "male gaze". On the other end of the spectrum, Tina describes a countering view of gender relations that assumes that since women within community have

similar opportunities to men, and are subjected to similar body norms institutionally, the problem of inequality has been resolved. Indeed, this debate is reflective of broader debates within feminist circles though what is interesting is the fact that these tensions continue to play out within community spaces, informing behaviours, resulting in conflict and intersecting with subjectivities.

Whilst in the field at River Stream, I could sense these tensions at play. For instance, I noted several embodied displays of hegemonic masculinity at a social gathering I attended. I observed two or three men using space in a domineering way, asserting themselves vocally and physically, and embodying a certain extroverted and forthright form of sexuality. They did this by occupying space with abandon, dancing and talking with others in ways that were brazen and unselfconscious. These displays accorded with the work of scholar Connell (2000) who argues that masculinities, and their associated "patriarchal dividends", manifest in the ways men and boys use their bodies within space. Ironically, these men chose to wear traditionally feminine clothes, like floral dresses. While this initially seemed inconsistent, it may not have been: such community members appeared sufficiently confident within their own masculine identities and hence comfortable to engage in overt forms of gender and sexuality experimentation. On the one hand, such displays challenged some of the constricting social norms pertaining to sexuality: these male members appeared to be troubling gendered categories as well as the mainstream discouragement of more "primal" forms of sexuality. However, on the other hand, they could have been experienced as intimidating by those who did not share such a forthright approach or who perceived these behaviours as implicit expressions of male power.

From my standpoint, it appeared that the discourse of hegemonic masculinity, as manifested through the body and space, was vying for social legitimacy vis-à-vis institutional approaches to gender equality. Perhaps a potentially unintended outcome of the institutionalisation of gender norms was a backlash of sorts – expressions of hegemonic masculinity could possibly manifest in more informal and "private" spaces, in a way that was very separate to institutional norms, via sexuality, social gatherings and informal uses of space. This lends support to my contention that gender freedom was complicated at River Stream.

However, it is important to reiterate that such expressions did seem to represent the exception and most participants felt very pleased to be part of community in which feminist discourse formed a legitimate topic of discussion at an institutional level. A number of

participants conceded that while there were still some issues pertaining to gender relations at River Stream, on the whole, the community environment was considerably more progressive, receptive and conscious than mainstream society. This was very significant for participants and gave them reason to stay in community and engage in reflexive discussions about how they experienced gender.

Another complex example of the intersection of gender and social relations presented itself at Oasis. Whilst in the field I observed a handful of strong, forthright and dominant male personalities. This seemed to impact on the social space in three major ways: first, conversation was often sexualised, second, women were at times belittled and subjected to hostility by such men, and lastly, women's viewpoints were, at times, drowned out or, in extreme cases, completely silenced. However, unlike River Stream, gender norms were not considered at an institutional level at Oasis. Although feminist discourse did affect the subjectivities of the participants I spoke to, it seemed to be more something that was raised by individual female members rather than by those who held power within community. However, a commitment to the notion of "sexual" and bodily freedom seemed to be shared by both genders. This is something I will turn to shortly.

During my time at Oasis I encountered two male community members who actively opposed feminist approaches to research. The first occurred upon arriving at Oasis, where I met Gavin for the first time, who commented that I "must be the one sent to Oasis to eavesdrop". I laughed it off and did not think much of it until the following day when I met similar antagonism from Darren, another male community member. As I was interviewing Darren's female partner, he entered the space and spent some time hovering within earshot. After about 15 minutes he intercepted and offered his opinion on feminism and my research project. My field-notes explain the exchange:

> During the interview, I noticed that my participant's partner was milling around. Near the end of the interview he interrupts saying "so you are not going to talk to the blokes to see what the real story is?" I explain that women have often been left out of research and that's why I have decided to focus on their experience. I try to appear calm. He retorts that he has been raised with feminism, but that men too have been affected by the system. He says that he feels that women rarely ask how men are, whereas men ask women all the time how they are. I reassure him that there is a whole branch of research looking specifically at male experience and that, in my view, men too have been impacted negatively by social systems. He is angry. He responds saying that he has seen the other side of feminism - the unsupportive side. I nod and know not to engage in a further debate around the issue. I resume the interview. My participant laughs it off.

This interaction indicates that the feminist discourse, as well as the grouping of women together around women's stories/issues, was threatening and even offensive to some male community members. Darren's interruption suggests he had a strong desire to have his opinion heard and was willing to transcend social etiquette to achieve this. It seemed Darren had constructed a story of reverse oppression - which may have had some validity based on his lived experience - in which feminism was to blame for perpetuating the alleged oppression of men. Indeed, this is not an uncommon view – the idea that men have suffered at the hands of feminism is a central tenet of the men's rights movement, which emerged in the 1970s and continues to bear some influence on how certain groups of men see gender relations (see Coston and Kimmel, 2013).

Another pervasive dynamic I noted at Oasis related to the ways women and men interacted in the house I was staying in. Significantly, I noted that women expressing themselves certain ways provoked anger amongst some men. Phil, who was about 65 years old and was a long-term member, made numerous sarcastic and humiliating remarks in response to an older participant's comments about her spiritual life. Phil's remarks were provoked by the stories my participant would tell about her power and wisdom and connection with Australian Indigenous culture. In response Phil would say words to the effect of "would you stop banging on about that, please", "I am sick of hearing about that" and sarcastically "oh really?" This verbal belittling occurred in communal spaces often while I was close by. One possible reading here is that Phil was speaking back to what he perceived as racial appropriation (see Crowley, 2011). In other words, he may have been irritated by the New Age discourse which invites white individuals to claim some kind of special affinity with tribal communities who are perceived as being especially in touch with the earth and their spirituality. My participant seemed to be committed to this notion (see Chapter Three). However, she had a different view on why she was being put down by Phil. She felt he hated her asserting herself because she was an older woman. She explained that she thought he was only interested in being respectful and kind to "younger sexually attractive women".

This participant's comments seemed to correlate with my own experience of Phil. Over the course of my time at Oasis, Phil seemed to be attempting to share a kind of intimacy with me. At times, I felt he was attempting to disrupt the bond I shared with my participant. For instance, during a formal interview with the participant he purposefully played loud music and interrupted us about unrelated issues. He was aware I had spent long periods of time with her and that she had made extensive effort to make me feel welcome and accepted

within the community. On numerous occasions, Phil asked if I wanted to go out with him to the local markets and the beach. Each time I gently refused. At that time, it was unclear to me whether the intimacy he sought was intellectual, sexual or both, though things soon became more clear. One day Phil told me the following sexual anecdote for my own "protection". He explained that he thought I should be aware that "pooftas" were often at the beach nearby "fucking" in clear view. He once went down to the beach with his "woman friend", he explained, and they saw two men having sex with a woman who was screaming "Come on me, like a real man!" A group of children then appeared within view, at which point, he said, the threesome ran off into the bushes. This anecdote caught me off guard. Phil's use of homophobic language was offensive. Moreover, his story and choice of language included unnecessary sexual details and expletives. His manner assumed an intimacy with me that we did not share.[27] Within moments of recounting this story, seemingly unaware of the irony of the situation, Phil again asked if I wanted to go the beach with him. He went on to say that we would "swim nude together" and he hoped that "would be ok". I said I had writing to do but thank you for the very kind invitation. Phil seemed to be asserting a type of power over me in the form of sexual speech. He repeatedly mentioned that he had multiple sexual partners, some of whom were significantly younger than him.

Sexual speech extended to other men at Oasis. Several men openly discussed their sexual endeavours – some of which were with much younger women. Sex tended to be talked about more by men than women in communal spaces. One man referred to himself as a "sailor", while another gloated as he told me the story of how he was in a relationship with a young woman of Japanese ethnicity who "felt obliged" to prepare three meals a day for him. These men seemed to be enjoying the "bachelor lifestyle", which they reported would often involve meeting new young women who visited Oasis in the short or long-term. Such men were not "full members" of Oasis, rather they were tenants who seemed to enjoy the unfixed and uncommitted nature of their living arrangement. There were, however, long-term spiritual practitioners and disciples of the Indian Guru who had established the community. Amongst the men who were in longer-term relationships and who were long-term members, significantly less expressions of domineering sexuality were on display. Sex did not seem to feature to the same extent in their public conversations and such men did

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27 This could perhaps be linked to the cultural ideal of intimacy within alternative community which I discuss later in this Chapter.

not live in the communal house, but had private abodes on the community land with their partners.

I would argue that such attitudes towards women and sex had been shaped by Oasis' history, which had been influenced by the discourse of "free love". The community had been linked to a spiritual tradition which encouraged free sexual expression. Established in the 1960s during a historically liminal time, the community rejected the authority of Judeo-Christian puritan approaches to sex but arguably had not yet fully developed its own framework of interpersonal ethics. As such, what followed was wild experimentation, which many would claim was reflective of the counterculture more generally. Early in the spiritual tradition's history there were reports of violence as well as extremely disinhibited sex groups, however as time went on things started to change: the spiritual guru prohibited all acts of violence and encouraged more moderate approaches of relating to others. The leader of the tradition was both anti-authoritarian and anti-theistic in his approach which accounted for much of his appeal. He proposed that religious codes relating to sexuality were repressive and should be abandoned for a more radical ethic of freedom and disinhibition. According to Oasis community members, this invited a radical approach to the body and sexual relations; participants explained that they were able to disentangle "shame" from sexual acts which enabled a sense of emancipation they had not before experienced.

However, at the same time, my time in the field revealed that a range of meanings were smuggled in via the notion of "sexual freedom" – namely, the normative expectation of abandoning sexual restraint, an assumption that all men and women should want and enjoy sex and derision of those who chose not be sexually active. Hannah made this point when she described going to a variety of spiritual events which enabled her to become more sexually "open", "risk-taking" and "unconstrained". She saw this as a central step on the path to spiritual freedom. Indeed, the point in history in which this community was established is significant. It arose out of the sexual counterculture which was later revealed to be not as "free" as it might seem. Several authors argued that the sexual revolution of the 1970s continued to be influenced by patriarchal approaches to sexual and gender relations (Aguilar, 2013; Miller, 1991).

Following the study, I learnt that one of my participants had left Oasis due to the sexual politics of the community. She was not in a position to offer a follow-up interview, however,

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it was clear that the sexism and sexual politics displayed by certain men had worn her down and had made her feel unsupported and disrespected.

Gender relations and sexual politics appeared to be less overt in the remaining three communities. At Kwan Yin, for example, gender was considered institutionally, but less as a means of standardising micro-behaviours/body norms and more as a way of encouraging and supporting women to apply for and assume positions of power. Over the past two decades, many of the community's senior leaders were women and the community seemed committed to formally minimising all forms of sex discrimination and gendered discrepancies in opportunities. Whilst in the field, I observed community members conversing in nuanced ways about the fact that Buddhism had been a historically patriarchal religion and that most positions of spiritual and political authority across all traditions had been taken up by men. This was a view shared by most members, whether male or female. It was clear that Kwan Yin was committed to reversing this pattern of inequality by encouraging women to apply for managerial roles and openly discussing any instances of perceived or actual discrimination. This level of commitment had very positive results for participants with a number commenting that they felt the barriers to women's leadership had been addressed through continual reflexivity of male "privilege".

In the case of more informal interactions between the sexes, Buddhist discourse, particularly around prohibitions of sexual misconduct, seemed to stifle obvious displays of sexuality at Kwan Yin – sexual speech was avoided in public spaces, most members wore unisex black clothes and women often shaved their heads and avoided makeup. In this way, expressions of sexuality and courting were almost entirely absent whilst I was in the field. This may have been linked to the fact that unconsciously acting on "greed" or "desire" was generally seen as an impediment to spiritual liberation by those at Kwan Yin. That being said, a more complex type of sexual politics could have been more manifest within the intimate spaces I was not privy to. I was aware that a small number of residents were in romantic relationships though I was unable to gauge much else about the dynamics of these relationships other than the fact that they kept their romantic lives private and rarely spoke of them publicly. In this way, compared to Oasis, a converse approach to sexuality was present at Kwan Yin, though interestingly this was not once raised by participants. As such, this approach seemed to accord with participants' values which may have been present before joining Kwan Yin or as a result of their ongoing involvement.

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At Mountain Valley, the notion of gender freedom seemed to strongly underpin community life. Whilst in the field I noted that both women and men spoke extensively about attempting to emulate a matriarchal society – for instance, many spoke of African tribal communities in which women were viewed as "life-givers" and the "primal keepers of wisdom" (see Crowley 2011). Indeed, while this represented a type of racialised and gendered essentialism, these discourses had productive implications for the women of the community. For instance, most "elders" at Mountain Valley were in fact women. This was interesting for a number of reasons: first, it indicates that the discourse of difference feminism (which I take to mean the notion that women have certain inherent strengths by virtue of their sex) had been successful in transforming mainstream gendered power structures within the context of Mountain Valley. Second, this discourse did not seem to be as frequently challenged by men compared to other communities like River Stream and Oasis. Finally, as I set out in the first Chapter, Mountain Valley was a mixed community that attracted both men and women in equal measure.

Lastly, Circle Hill, which was the non-residential women's community, negotiated gender relations pragmatically. While most events involved women exclusively, men were not shunned or turned away when they frequented the Centre. In fact, in the main they were welcomed. Additionally, some events catered to both genders. Members rarely spoke about their relationships with men and, in this sense, Circle Hill represented a place of symbolic comfort that for participants seemed to exist outside the realm of gender relations. Thus, gender freedom within this community involved the creation of a site where a new, alternative way of relating to gender could blossom. Indeed, this space for most Circle Hill participants symbolised a nurturing, feminist space that was not entangled with patriarchal structures or behaviours – instead it offered a space for creative possibilities to blossom in relation to sex and gender.

A note is in order here in regards to sexual and gender identities within community. Of the women who participated in this study, all identified as cisgender. Further, most participants seemed to adhere to traditional gender binaries, referring only to "men" and "women" in discussing gender. That said, whilst at Circle Hill and Mountain Valley I deduced that expressions of queer, non-normative and/or fluid gender identity would have, in all likelihood, been celebrated, although I did not directly observe such expressions while in the field. By contrast, it was unclear whether the men at Oasis would have welcomed expressions of gender fluidity given their less than favourable ideas about feminism and

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homosexual practices; as noted above shareholder-men who I did not come into contact with may well have held a very different set of values. Kwan Yin, on the other hand, was in the practice of holding talks and events that acknowledged non-normative queer identities, which were well-attended and deeply-integrated into the ethos of the centre. As discussed above, experimentation with gender identity was widespread at River Stream, particularly in respect to clothes and physical expressions of identity. For the most part, the children of River Stream were raised in a gender fluid way and not restrained along gender-lines in their choice of clothing, choice of name and/or pronoun. In respect to sexuality, about a third of participants identified as gay/lesbian or bisexual with the remaining identifying as heterosexual. Aside from the instance at Oasis that I recount above, I did not observe or hear about any explicit instances of homophobia within community.

I also note that I have not spent a great deal of time detailing the practices of parenting and mothering within alternative communities. In part this is because roughly half of participants interviewed were over the age of 50 (see Appendix A) and/or no longer had responsibility for the primary care of dependent children. Moreover, only one participant, Les at River Stream, under 50 years old had a small child. Her experience and some general observations in other communities are worth noting here. Les explained that prior to conceiving her two year old son she sought the permission of the community to have a baby. This was policy, she explained, as the community took on the responsibility of caring for the child. One of the things she valued most about raising her son at River Stream was the system of "primaries". Primaries were community members who were committed to spending their labour time caring for a non-biological child. For Les the implications of this were significant: as a parent she chose to care for her child as much as she wanted, yet she also had the freedom to work the hours she chose whilst knowing her child was developing a strong ongoing attachment with other adults. From what I understood, Les and her male partner spent roughly the same amount of time caring for their son.

Gender egalitarianism appeared to inform River Stream's policy and Les' approach. Les and other River Stream members not romanticise mothering, they constructed it as any other community job: in terms of labour hours and credits and autonomy to choose your hours of work. In this way, caring for children was not seen in gendered terms. The community website lends support to this stating that in the past children had occupied a "children's house" which involved workers doing shifts to care for the children, but that this had been changed as parents wanted to spend more time raising their children. At the time of visiting,

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River Stream were raising about 6-10 children. Children were either homeschooled or attended a school nearby. Children lived in the same houses as their parents, who lived with other parents and non-parents. From what I could gather, notions of the "utopian" childhood circulated within community with community members speaking about the "freedom" children enjoy whilst in community: freedom to be in nature, to spend time alone and to exercise their imaginations.

At Kwan Yin I noticed the absence of children. There were no residents under 18 and it was clear the Centre did not have a family focus. I was told, however, that Kwan Yin had a sister Centre in the country that welcomed families and small children. In fact, in the 1960s and 1970s many of Kwan Yin's older residents had raised their children at this sister Centre which was located on a large farm with enough space for children to explore and play. Similarly, there were no children at Oasis at the time I visited, aside from children visiting from off-site for community meals. Again, this is largely due to the aging demographic of the community.

At Mountain Valley, I observed there were a few families with children who owned their own eco-homes onsite. These families seemed to take full responsibility for the care and financial responsibility of raising children. Although I did not interview these members, a single mother (who was not a shareholder and who had only been there for a short period of time) had mentioned in passing that she had felt discouraged by Mountain Valley to apply to stay long-term as the members feared she may be wanting to "offload" her caring responsibility onto others. This theme was not taken up but it is worth noting that this rhetoric may have been present within some communities and therefore may have had an exclusionary impact on mothers joining.

This section has argued that the ways communities, and their members, understood the discourse of gender freedom shaped the power relations and sexual politics of community life. Moreover, the discursive/constructionist frame applied was useful in revealing that the specific way each community understood and enacted gender freedom mattered. That is, on face value, while each of the communities featured in this study were "feminist", significant differences existed in the ways communities *did* gender. Thus, the realities of community life were shown to be messy and complex. This section focussed on two of the most intriguing examples of gender relations, namely at Oasis, where discourses of sexual liberation were shown to undermine certain feminist approaches and at River Stream where bodily norms were institutionalised and resulted in both desired and potentially problematic outcomes.

Hence, gender freedom as a discourse proved paradoxical and complicated within the context of alternative community. On the whole, however, participants were generally very satisfied with the fact that communities were engaged in the task of reconceptualising gender despite the fact that they believed communities needed to engage in further reflexivity and change.

Connection and Interpersonal Emotions

In this section I consider discourses relating to connection and intimacy, which I link to the psychotherapeutic milieu discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three. Indeed, "connection" was a key premise of this study. As a theme it was made explicit in the study's Information Sheet (Appendix D) and Letter of Introduction (Appendix B) and was introduced at the start of each interview. It follows that women who volunteered to participate in this study had given this topic significant thought and consideration. In fact, nearly all participants asserted that connection was central to their lives. But what was the nature and meaning of "connection" exactly? Connection seemed to be distinguished by participants from the term community. That is, while "community" seemed to exist as a bounded image contained within a space or vision, connection connoted multiple possibilities and interrelational pathways that had the potential to lead to a deeper sense of humanness and potential for growth. Thus, connection was described as the cornerstone of community.[28]

Across all communities, the term "connection" seemed to be used by participants as a way of referring to a series of social and psychic processes. Connection referred to a *feeling* shared inter-subjectively between likeminded individuals as well as a *force* that gave substance and meaning to human relationships. In a more everyday sense, connection was the term used to describe meaningful long-term friendships with others that were "honest", "genuine" and "stable". It follows that the notion was used by participants as a way to assess the normative value of a given relationship or interchange – participants would often ask was connection there or not? In this way, connection was juxtaposed against its opposing force: "disconnection" or a lack of intimacy.

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[28] In this section, I seek to highlight the *social rules* and *unspoken assumptions* present within different approaches to relationality. I use my own experiences in the field (where I carried out participant observation and auto-ethnographic writing) to explore the noteworthy aspects of communities' social and relational spaces. Many of the social rules and practices I encountered in the field were different to those arising out of my personal social and cultural milieu. In this way, the discomfort I experienced points to inconsistencies between differing habitus. Such inconsistencies provided me with some interesting insights into what was expected in a relational sense within community which I explore in this section

Alternative communities' emphasis on connection can be linked to broader cultural trends. According to Weingarten's (1991) work, which was written almost three decades ago and can still be applied, intimacy is "an overriding cultural value" (p1), one that is highly prized in most modern institutions, including the family, workplace, friendship and romance. Much like the frame employed in this study, Weingarten employs a constructionist viewpoint to analyse the parameters and implications of this cultural value. She explains:

> Intimacy is one such "reality" that individuals construct. At the same time, these unique constructions of intimacy contribute to, sustain, reflect, and are affected by prevailing discourses (p1).

Weingarten identifies two key discourses shaping intimacy: the first she calls the "individual capacity discourse" which she says is underpinned by the notion that "that intimacy is a capacity that rests within an individual.... [and] that self-disclosure, often of personal feelings, is the way this capacity is expressed" (p2). The second she names, the "quality of relatedness" discourse which, she explains, "construes intimacy as a product of a kind of relatedness in which individuals are able deeply and extensively to know each other" (p2). Both discourses, she argues, are underpinned by a range of assumptions about our capacities as humans. The first assumes a "unitary, skin-bounded self" that "operate[s] from a clear and informed knowledge of the self (p3)[29], while the second assumes that experiences of intimacy with, for example, casual acquaintances or strangers, are unlikely to be "true" intimacy" (p6). Rather, "true" intimacy arises from a certain quality of deep and sustained connection.

Aspects of both of these discourses can be found extensively in the psychological literature. For example, in the 2004 *Handbook of Closeness and Intimacy* psychologists, Laurenceau, Rivera, Schaffer and Pietromonaco state:

> *Intimacy is initiated when one person communicates personally relevant and revealing information, thoughts, and feelings to another person...for the interaction to be experienced as intimate by the discloser, he or she must subjectively feel understood, validated, and cared for* (p63).

Within the same handbook, psychologists Firestone and Firestone (2004) argue that in the context of romantic relationships:

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29 Interestingly, she contrasts this with a postmodern approach to intimacy which, due to its more dispersed view of personhood would suggest:
> *...a goal of relationship, and of intimate interactions...as the ability to re-story one's life by co-creating meanings with others without constraint or limit, rather than the ability to bring to a relationship a clear story about one's self* (1991, p3).

The authors believe that intimacy also involves "seeing" and being "seen," that is, having an empathic perception and a depth of understanding of the other. Intimate relating is made up of positive behavioral components that are not merely ideational but have an outward manifestation, a style of communication where both partners experience a sense of shared meaning (pp376 – 377).

Indeed, a number of features of these discourses were found within the ways the notion of "connection" was constructed by participants. For instance, in the case of the more psychotherapeutically oriented communities, such as Mountain Valley, Oasis and Circle Hill, the notion was linked to vulnerability and developing an understanding of the more psychological dimensions of the human experience. It follows that a reason commonly cited by participants for the importance of interpersonal connection was the idea that relationships facilitated self-development and reflection. Marg from Oasis makes this point clearly:

> Well living in a community - see when we're living with ourselves, we can just hide our shadows, we can constantly stay in our comfort zone. Living here…you get to really see where your mind's at and where your emotion is at when something happens that isn't exactly how you want…. I think community's a great teacher and it really gets - it really shows us where we're at… community is about being with the right company and right company in a higher sense means that we support each other to rise, to not fall in those ditches, or to support each other when someone does, keep a clear perspective. When it's not that, you have to look at, is it pulling me down? Is it pulling me into conflict, is it pulling me into the worst that I can be, or is it bringing the best out of me?

A similar point was made by a number of participants from Kwan Yin. According to such participants, by observing one's reactions to others, one could gain insight into one's own psychological makeup and "unwholesome" states of mind like greed, hatred and delusion. This, in turn, would enable Kwan Yin participants to observe these forces and abandon them, thus promoting what Buddhists would describe as an "awakened" state of being.

I now wish to examine what the discourses of connection *did* within the context of community. Across all communities, the discourse of connection led to a relational intensity of sorts.[30] Whilst in the field I noted this took many forms; it manifested in certain topics of conversation, body language and approaches to emotional expression. My field notes provide telling illustrations of this. Perhaps one of the most pronounced experiences of relational intensity I encountered occurred upon arriving at Mountain Valley for the first

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30 Although the term "intensity" may seem inexact it seems the best term to capture how seriously connection, relationships and interpersonal emotions were often taken by participants. Note that I use its common meaning, rather the meaning that arises out of Deluzian/affect studies scholarship.

time. A participant had kindly offered to collect me from the airport and drive me to the community. As we drove, I could sense that we did not share similar social cues and that Mountain Valley was located further away from the metropolitan life than I had originally anticipated. This was further reinforced when I arrived at Mountain Valley. My field-notes explain:

> Mary introduced me to her friend Peter. Peter shook my hand for an uncomfortably long time – "it's so good to meet you." I gazed back at Peter; he was looking intently into my eyes. We stayed looking at each other for what felt like about five minutes. I wasn't sure if this greeting was going to turn into a hug. I awkwardly looked away and laughed at our exchange.

Following this interaction with Peter, I began to suspect that certain expressions of human connection at Mountain Valley were divergent from mainstream in some significant ways. Peter's approach echoed Farias' (2017) suggestion, which I mention in Chapter One, that the Intentional Communities practise "hospitality toward strangers", "open their doors to visitors" and put "the person and its otherness at the centre of the organization" (p589). However, unlike Farias' contention I was not sure whether this approach resulted in greater equality or whether it perpetuated further systems of authority. Peter seemed to be communicating a deep intimacy from the moment we locked eyes. He seemed to be enacting the idea that we were capable of "deeply and extensively" knowing each other (Weingarten, 1991, p2). Unlike Peter, however, I felt compelled to withhold intimacy until a longer-term, safer relationship was established. In that exchange, I experienced a kind of cognitive dissonance: my own socialisation was informing my decision to hold back, yet I also felt a sense of guilt as I wondered whether I *should* be feeling and expressing a sense of reciprocity. Would anything short of this be deemed socially deviant? Moreover, if I did not reciprocate in an acceptable way would I be perceived as unloving or spiritually unaccomplished? And further what did this tell me about the contest of power in the community? How would this impact the progress of my research? Another possible reading of this exchange could be that Peter was exerting traditional male power over me, as I entered his territory for the first time. He may have intuited my discomfort and insisted on such intensity regardless.

Although this interaction endured for but a moment and did not result in any obvious ramifications, it did open the door to a new line of investigation. It led me to consider how one receives and/or recognises intimacy and love within community. Which discourses and bodily forms of relating are familiar? While Peter seemed to be offering me "love" or

"connection" in the way he understood it, I struggled to receive it. His expression seemed unfamiliar and provoked a sense of discomfort and tension within my own subjectivity. Conversely, it seemed to elicit a kind of meaning and fulfilment within Peter. Perhaps he felt an immediate sense of recognition merely by virtue of our shared humanity.

Prior to this exchange I had encountered other distinctive forms of relationality. Those at the Kwan Yin Garden, for example, seemed to adopt a very particular understanding of connection though a paradox was also at play. At times the Buddhist discourse suggested that connection *with others*, in the form of friendships and unstructured socialising, was not viewed with as much normative importance as connection with the "self".[31] Participants often talked about spending less time socialising and developing friendships in order to cultivate a deeper relationship with themselves. However, while aspects of the Buddhist discourse of solitude and self-actualisation appeared to sometimes contradict the notion of intimacy, it became clear that the construction of the self was similar across these two formations.

That is, the "Buddhist self" appeared contained, yet relational and likewise, the "intimate self" appeared to have the capacity for empathy and connection yet was constructed as separate, unified with unique individual thoughts and emotions. The "Buddhist self" appeared relational in multiple ways: for instance, on an existential level, participants sought to abandon the distinction between self/other (seeing it as all mere phenomena rising and falling) and as such viewed deconstructing the very concept of "others" as a significant part of their spiritual practice. Moreover, relationality was captured in the "Bodhisattvas vows" which invited a personal commitment from participants to liberate "all sentient beings" from suffering. The division between self and other was hence troubled here with "others" being represented as equally as important and worthy of liberation as the individual self. This seemed to be consistent with the Western psychological notion of reciprocal intimacy which invites the qualities of deep-relatedness and shared-meaning, as well an empathetic and compassionate response to another's *separate* subjective thoughts and emotions.

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31 I note that participants at Kwan Yin Garden conceived of the self as constituting two different aspects in continual relationship: the first was the self that experienced thoughts, feelings, emotions and sensory input and the second was the self who was aware of and held what was being thought and experienced. By cultivating the presence of the "knowing self", participants explained, individuals would become more integrated and connected to others. This, in turn, enhanced the ways participants related to one another. In particular, it was said to increase participants' capacity to "hold space" for others.

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I experienced a felt-sense of both of these discourses whilst carrying out an interview with Melinda from Kwan Yin. My field-notes read:

> The exchange I had with Melinda was intense. As we sat in the Kwan Yin Garden, she maintained eye contact with me throughout the whole interview. She had been living at another Buddhist Centre for a number of years and I could sense she identified strongly as spiritual practitioner. Vibrant and youthful, she was aware of her body and deeply settled in her own skin. I experienced her gaze as loving and present. She spoke with what appeared to be honesty and courage and she didn't skirt around the important issues. She made me feel as though we had known each other for years. She explained that she had been a dancer and that being "in her body" was important to her. I could sense that. She was slender, tanned and athletic and seemed as though she took a lot of care of her physical self. The other thing that struck me about Melinda was that she was very open and I felt immediately intimate with her.

I could intuit that Melinda was present in her body and senses as we conversed. She sat upright and only moved her body minimally during the two hours we were together. When she did move, it was conscious and purposeful. She seemed at ease within her embodied self yet simultaneously aware and controlled. I noticed she did not fiddle or distract herself. As we talked, she looked deep into my eyes so as to indicate she took each of my questions sincerely. She often paused and considered her responses before answering. Melinda's body language and her willingness to reflect deeply on the various themes raised in the interview, gave me the impression that she was taking this interaction seriously. In Buddhist terms, she was remaining "present" in the moment we found ourselves in. Throughout the interview we exchanged knowing looks of mutual connection and made each other laugh – sometimes raucously. I left the interview with a strong sense that Melinda was putting much energy into "understanding" me and my study. I also got the sense she had a strong awareness of the contents of her "own" subjectivity, life story and preferences and was eager to understand "mine". We were engaged in an "intimate" exchange, one that seemed particular to the time and place we were in.

Indeed, I had a similar albeit less intense experience with most participants at Kwan Yin Garden. This was an indication that there were some social rules of note at play. Perhaps the most prominent of these was the expectation that community members engage in deep listening and reflection, which as I mention above, is connected to the western psychological approach to intimacy. However, in this case, it was also informed by the Buddhist practice of mindfulness, which seemed to permeate most interpersonal interaction. In fact, while I was residing at Kwan Yin, I could feel myself adopt this social rule more fully. I too took to the

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habit of listening very attentively, considering others' viewpoints seriously and allowing myself to digest information slowly and in a reflective way. I avoided talking on topics that did not seem "meaningful" and refrained from speaking negatively or critically about specific individuals. I was very familiar with the Buddhist approach to "Right Speech", which includes avoiding "useless" talk or "harsh" words. Most participants reported finding a sense of freedom within these rules in that they did not have to worry about divisive speech and could also avoid too much "superficial" social interaction that took them away from their spiritual practice. The flipside of these rules, however, was that it constrained Kwan Yin community members from engaging in interpersonal spontaneity. Outward expressions of joy were minimal as were emotional expressions of anger or hate. When a social emotion was expressed publically it was more likely to be done so in a measured way. Moreover, when difficult emotions were expressed, they were often communicated in a considered way and responded to very gently. Love and intimacy were generally enacted through silence and active listening. It appeared that love was synonymous with a type of holding presence, rather than an overt engagement or an attempt to "fix" a problem. Most participants, I could sense, thought this a positive outcome of the Buddhist teachings as it helped minimise emotional harm and support those in turmoil.

Thus, in this way, connection and intimacy were clearly founded in specific Buddhist teachings at Kwan Yin, which led to a common understanding throughout community. Arguably, other communities, on the other hand, had a wider range of interpretations of intimacy and how to practice connection, as there was less unification across beliefs/practices. That said, as I mention in Chapter Four, all communities placed normative value on being "open" with others about one's inner feelings, fears and experiences. Participants explained that this enabled them to be honest about, and express, a wider range of emotions than within the mainstream. An associated expectation was that those receiving this information respond in a caring and loving way. Indeed, such an exchange could take many different forms. Across all communities this norm promoted a sense of acceptance and support which participants reported feeling comforted by. *Active* empathy was the norm at River Stream and Mountain Valley – that is, unlike the practice at Kwan Yin of responding in a silent and reflective way, empathy was often offered through hugging and overt words of comfort.

Whilst at River Stream I attended a tour of the site. The first thing the tour guide said was that he was feeling rather depressed because it was the one year anniversary of his dog's death. Community members responded with sighs of sympathy, hugs and statements like "thank you so much for sharing that", "this must be so difficult" and "we are here for you, man". Participants reported feeling greater freedom to express their emotions in this way and it seemed that, at River Stream in particular, men were not discouraged from expressing such vulnerability and receiving such warmth in return. This seems to support the claim that some interpersonal norms were being successfully transformed within such alternative communities.

Unlike Kwan Yin, *full* and *unconstrained* emotional expression was often on display at River Stream and Mountain Valley. In particular, I observed substantial expressions of joy, happiness and empathy.[32] For participants committed to deep and intense ways of connecting with others, "mainstream" relationships were repeatedly conceived of as superficial and meaningless, while relationships with other community members were referred to as familial, passionate and heartfelt. Ali, from Mountain Valley, for example, explains:

> It's really hard to relate to people who kind of go live in the mainstream world on many different levels but particularly because I feel like mainstream people relate in a much more shallow way and they need a long time to feel comfortable to go into anything even slightly deeper. I've had so many incredibly beautiful deep interactions with people that I almost barely know really and it just feels really hard to maintain a really shallow relationship with them when I have such meaningful, deep connections with my close friends here and can even be really vulnerable and really open and tender-hearted with people…

As mentioned in Chapter Four, relating deeply was associated with expressions of "authenticity". It was also linked to the emotion norms of vulnerability and self-expression.

That being said, it is important to note that some members sat outside the parameters of the intimacy discourse. Fay from River Stream did not feel a connection to those around her, in fact she reported feeling lonely as result of the high turnover of community members which I mention earlier. Many of her close friends had left the community over the years, and she had grown distant from others still on site. At the time of the interview she reported spending most of her free time alone. She explained that other community members rarely asked how she was going or checked in:

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32 I note that a potential result of this was that emotions that were lukewarm or lacking in "depth" could have potentially be seen as less worthy, aberrant or even undesirable.

When I joined I formed a group of close friends. We were in each other's lives every day and would check in "How is it going?" a lot. As time has passed, I don't really have that here. Very few people actually ask me how I am doing. I mean that is partly because the people I work with – you know, I'm the manager and they're… there is quite an age gap and there is an experience gap. I don't know if I'm not seen as fully human or something, but people don't tend to ask me "How are you today?" …. You know if somebody asks me, I wouldn't lie and say everything is fine. I'd say "Well actually I didn't really feel like working this morning, but it's okay now I'm here." I would say the truth but not many people ask. There are a few people that I eat meals with that might ask how I'm doing or they might not. We might just chat about something more neutral or community issues or something. So I feel that I'm kind of much more independent by necessity.

I asked Fay how she dealt with this and she explained that once a week she would spend time with her friend who lived in a nearby community and, whilst onsite, would submerge herself in her work. I was struck by Fay's commitment to River Stream despite the fact she did not receive the emotional nourishment she wanted. It seemed as though her commitment to the values of the community and the fact that she was able to do the work she loved – gardening and working with fresh produce – outweighed her need for interpersonal connection. Fay's perspective, in this way, represented an exception to the dominant perspective that perceived connection with others was one of the most desirable aspects of community.

Moreover, not all social emotions[33] were allowed free reign at Mountain Valley and River Stream. Unrestrained displays of love, grief, sorrow and frustration were commonplace, whilst displays of hate, envy and malice were less common. Participants at Oasis and River Stream spoke of being involved in "non-violent communication" which, they explained, enabled them to express their feelings of hurt or pain without directing anger or hate towards a specific individual; it was through this technique that less desirable social emotions were managed.[34] Diane from River Stream explains:

Facilitator: you're able to express them [social emotions] more freely or feel them or…

Diane: Well I've been part of transparency culture here…so I have had a lot of changing the way that I interact with my emotions but that's been more very intentional on my part. Like, I read the book *Nonviolent Communication* [Rosenberg,

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[33] "Social emotions" are defined by Hareli & Parkinson (2008) as:

> …social in a different way to other emotions. Shame, embarrassment, and jealousy are social emotions because they necessarily depend on other people's thoughts, feelings or actions, as experienced, recalled, anticipated or imagined at first hand, or instantiated in more generalized consideration of social norms or conventions. Each of these emotions derives its defining quality from an intrinsic relation to social concern (2008, p131).

34 For an in-depth description of the process and practice involved with "non-violent communication" see Rosenberg (2003).

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2003] after I moved here and I was part of a transparency group which is sort of like people getting together to sort of try to communicate authentically with each other. Like, we'd start our meetings off with going around and sharing. Everyone would say, "if you really knew me then you would know that" – and complete the sentence of something that could be like as scary and vulnerable as you wanted it to be or just very mundane if you weren't feeling like sharing anything vulnerable. So I guess I've just done a lot of work intentionally trying to deal with emotions and talk about them and work on having better interpersonal skills.

While Diane's use of the term "transparency" does connote openness, which was valued at River Stream, her reference to developing "better interpersonal skills" suggests that, according to this philosophy, certain social emotions should be expressed while others should communicated with more "care" and intentionally. At Mountain Valley, a similar discourse was adopted around how to express social emotions. Kerry from Mountain Valley explains her involvement in "Forum", which she had observed in other communities. She had started to introduce the process to Mountain Valley though it was still in its nascent stage. She explains:

> Forum is a process of speaking what is alive and true for you in the centre of a circle of people that you trust, and who hold you in love. And you speak your truth and there's a facilitator who might actually stir it up a little bit and bring out more. But all the focus is on that one person, and then that person sits down and there are reflections back, what I saw was this, what I didn't see but maybe this, you know, nothing to try and fix a person or anything like that or judge them. So this process is used in some very intense things because they are polyamorous community, and they had to have a way to deal with jealousies and lots of things.

Again, Forum represented a technology that could manage less desirable emotions by airing them in a controlled yet loving setting. Such techniques may represent what Sargisson (2000) refers to as the "publicisation of emotions". She explains this concept:

> *Emotions, and the ways that individuals negotiate relations in transition are part of a community's history. They are also part of its character. The "publicisation" of this is interesting. First, as stated, in community these negotiations are enacted in a fairly public space and frequently involve more actors than in a "private" household. Indeed, several people cited the support of the community to be one of the most important things about being there. Second, the inscription of this into a "code" of behaviour is often intentional and public. What constitutes "appropriate" behaviour might be discussed, for instance, at a community meeting. This play of emotion on an (albeit contained) public stage is an integral part of what it is to live in community (p66).*

Community approved schemes like "non-violent communication" and discussions around "right speech" at Kwan Yin, for example, were publically discussed, adopted and policed.

Participants from both River Stream and Mountain Valley reported that such techniques were generally effective in maintaining community harmony and cohesion as well as promoting trust and support amongst members. However, not all members complied with these norms. Amongst participants, two women from Mountain Valley reported deviating from such techniques. Both Jude and Jessica rejected, in particular, the expectation of non-violent communication and were especially critical of its discourse. Both participants elected to communicate in a way that felt more "true" to them – this involved communicating their views forcefully and angrily without worrying much about the potential interpersonal implications. Both had entered community with strong visions of communalism, but were soon to be embroiled in serious conflicts with other members pertaining to private property, the environment and feminism. At the time of the interviews, both participants were still coming to terms with what these conflicts meant in relation to their lives, identities and understandings of community.

As I explained in Chapter Four, Jude had shunned and had been shunned at Mountain Valley. This resulted in her living in a caravan on the periphery of community and only associating with a select few. She seemed to negotiate her feelings of exclusion through constructing an identity that was not reliant on human attachment/s, but rather had the capacity to feel "at home" and connected in spite of disconnection:

> I can honestly say that I feel at home no matter where I am. I feel enfolded by the natural world and by my ability to manipulate people within that so that I can create community anywhere I go. I can go anywhere. I mean that's why at Mountain Valley - I didn't have anybody there. I had friends there but I didn't have anybody there I cared if I left and if I never saw anybody again I don't care. That's hard for some people to deal with.

It was unclear to what extent Jude was committed to this belief or was utilising it as a strategy to rationalise a very difficult situation. In any event, this logic seemed to assist Jude in managing, and even enjoying, her everyday life on the periphery of community.

In this section I reveal that significant weight was placed on interpersonal connection and intimacy within community. It led to particular social expectations associated with active empathy, intersubjective openness and displays of care and connection. This provided most participants with a safe base which they reported enabled them to feel and express their psychic pain in the company of others. However, it also had the potential to lead to unwanted repercussions for those unwilling to comply with such norms. A small yet

significant number of participants were not fulfilled by the interpersonal dimensions of community life, which led to a sense of disconnection and loneliness.

Conclusion

This Chapter examined the major discourses structuring the interpersonal aspects of alternative community. The notion of commitment was found to be central to participants' idea of community – this was the case particularly for older female members whose freedom to leave community was arguably restricted. While "commitment" was at times informed by an uncritical and nostalgic communitarianism, it was shown to have the effect of encouraging community cohesion and perseverance particularly over long periods of time and promoting freedom and safety for some. However, it also had a potentially repressive side: various structures, routines and ideas linked to commitment had the potential to lead to feelings of entrapment and alienation for some participants.

I argued that a similar paradox existed in relation to gender relations within alternative community. It was plain that gender was being reconfigured in significant ways within alternative community: I identified successful instances of members adopting gender fluidity, egalitarianism, equality and challenging gendered emotion and body norms. However, I also showed that sometimes more complicated outcomes resulted from notions of "gender freedom", which were more congruent with traditional power-infused dynamics and led to participants feeling undervalued and belittled.

Lastly, I revealed the extent to which the discourse of connection and intimacy formed a normative framework that operated across all communities. I argued that as the discourse of connection *met* with participants' subjectivities the potential for deep moments of intra-psychic relationality and human growth emerged. Moreover, I demonstrated that alternative community provided members with the capacity to express their emotions more fully and receive support and acceptance in a way they could not in the mainstream. In this way, most communities successfully transformed interpersonal norms, and the duality of self/other. However, much like any normative framework some members fell outside this discourse and as such experienced some troubling consequences.

CHAPTER SIX: MATERIAL BOUNDARIES: NATURE, BODIES AND THE TRANSPERSONAL

Introduction

The preceding chapters focussed on the narrative, emotional and relational dimensions of community life. Building on these facets, this Chapter looks specifically at the *material*, proposing that participants' subjectivities were transformed through alternative approaches to landscape and body. Specifically, it investigates encounters between nature, emotions and embodiment and considers how material (and immaterial) boundaries are negotiated by participants.

Throughout this Chapter I examine the ways participants understand and reconfigure the dualisms of nature/culture, human/animal and mind/body. I consider participants' philosophical and metaphysical conceptions of the natural world. Participants' descriptions are then analysed in the context of deep ecology, new materialist feminism and ecofeminism. Further, I consider corporeality and reveal the ways in which it formed a significant site of spiritual development and exploration. Finally, I detail the practice of engaging in bodily catharsis as a means of "discharging" emotions that no longer "serve" the individual.

Ultimately, I argue that these encounters - between mind, body and nature - have the potential to generate significant discoveries, to enable healing and psychic "growth" and to lead to an expanded selfhood. Hence, I contend that the manner in which participants viewed and related to "nature" and their bodies had a substantial impact on what they derived from the material world – it also dictated how they treated the natural environment, managed their physical and emotional health and understood themselves both existentially and personally.

What is "Nature" exactly? And why does it "matter"?

I begin with a question that may at first glance seem basic: what is it we are referring to when we speak of "nature"? Though simple, it is at once a philosophical, political and pragmatic question, one that can lead to illuminating political and normative insights. The first point I wish to make is that nature is inherently an exclusionary concept – that is, whatever we do not consider "nature" is by its very definition "unnatural" or "artificial". Moreover, within certain sub-cultures (such as radical ecology) what is deemed unnatural is

also considered undesirable or unworthy. As I will show, for example, to many participants nature was seen as good, wholesome and pure, while the "unnatural" was constructed as corrupted/corrupting and/or unhealthy.

As with any other discursive category, nature must have a beginning and an end. However, where these boundaries lie is not that clear. Nature is a term that is used to point to many things as well as not much at all. It is used as a placeholder or metaphor, as a way of referring to material objects and as a means of describing an essence or force. It can refer to phenomena that are seemingly "untouched" by culture or civilization, or it can simply refer to plant, fauna, animals, water, earth, fire and non-built landscapes. It can also be used as a way to describe rules that are seemingly beyond human control and rationality – i.e. "the laws of nature". For these reasons, nature, in a general sense, is a concept that is contestable and unsettled.

Timothy Morton (2007) in his stimulating book *Ecology without Nature* makes a convincing argument "against" the concept of nature. His work critiques romantic accounts of the natural world and posits (rather provocatively) that the conceptual category of nature has the effect of undermining the ecological cause. For one, he says, it creates a subject/object distinction, which distances the observer from the environment it seeks to engage with. In other words, nature is often characterized as "That Thing Over There that surrounds and sustains us" (2007, p1), rather than the thing that *is* us or that *constitutes* us. In exploring various aesthetic depictions of the natural world, Morton asserts that "putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration." (p5). This is particularly the case, he says, in respect to romantic works that "concretise" nature as if it is a thing that exists separate to our own humanity. As Morton (2007) further explains:

> …*one of the basic problems with nature is that it could be considered either as a substance, as a squishy thing in itself, or as an essence, as an abstract principle that transcends the material realm and even the realm of representation* (p16).

Yet, as he explains:

> *The more we study it, the more we see that, beyond the fact that many different people have many different opinions about it, nature itself flickers between things – it is both/and or neither/nor. This flickering affects how we write about it…It is both the set and the contents of the set. It is the world and the entities in the world. It appears like a ghost at the never-arriving end of an infinite series: crabs, waves, lightning, rabbits, silicon…Nature. Of all things, nature should be natural. But we cannot point to it* (p18).

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In this sense, nature is both everything and nothing at all. Morton's analysis is important as it invites us to consider what ecological thinking would look like free of such an elusive category. Would such an approach benefit what we call the "environment" and sentient beings at large? And what would the absence of the concept of nature do for the environmental movement more broadly? Morton (2007) gives us an insight into what this might look like theoretically:

> *"Ecology without nature" could mean "ecology without a concept of the natural." Thinking, when it becomes ideological, tends to fixate on concepts rather than doing what is "natural" to thought, namely, dissolving whatever has taken form. Ecological thinking that was not fixated, that did not stop at a particular concretization of its object, would thus be "without nature"* (p24).

Morton's proposal is rousing. For if the dualism between man/nature (whether used romantically or not) was to be abandoned, other ways of experiencing or understanding the environment could surface and fill such a space. The reason I offer Morton's analysis upfront is because it represents an important, yet unusual, thought experiment which I believe serves to shed some light on the approach I take in this Chapter.

In designing the aspect of the study that contemplated participants' relationship to the natural world, I sought to challenge my own assumptions about the concept of nature/environment. I questioned the idea that nature was a particular "thing" or "substance" (as Morton puts it) that was external to what I understand as "self". I also questioned the notion that nature possessed a fundamental, definable essence that provided inherently healing or therapeutic properties – though, as I will show, this was a view shared by the majority of participants. Philosophically, although I had a sense of what nature was not, I did not have a clear sense of what nature was, save to say I envisioned that nature could act as both a metaphorical tool and as a lived experience – amongst other things. I was also critical of the fact that the category of "nature" was largely positioned against the notion of "culture". Such boundaries, to my mind, were unsettled, contentious and empirically refutable.

Given the absence of a clear definition, I was deliberate about how to word questions about nature and ecology as I collected data. I explicitly asked participants how they conceived of "nature", as well as what they got from this concept/experience in an emotional, sensory and symbolic sense. I structured my interviews in a way that enabled participants to explore their own meanings and experiences of nature freely and at their own pace. As I

demonstrate throughout this Chapter, my data reveals that participants possessed particularly diverse understandings of nature – some of which gave rise to important tensions and contradictions.

In addition to Morton's work, ecofeminist thought also challenged my assumptions about the culturally reinforced binaries of nature/culture and human/animal (see Plumwood, 1991; 1993; Reuther, 1975; Sandilands, 2000 in particular). This, in turn, influenced the study's design and data collection. Specifically, this project's design was informed by the idea that individuals' subjective experiences could be viewed as continually embedded within both the human and non-human contexts. As well, it was based on the idea that it is difficult (even unethical) to separate human experience from the environment from which it springs. For this reason, I was particularly cognisant of the ways participants interacted with the material world, particularly as I engaged in participant observation. I anticipated that ecofeminist thinking would also influence the views of participants - particularly those committed to feminist ecological spaces. The data shows that this was indeed the case: the majority of participants communicated their resistance toward anthropocentricism. Moreover, many linked the anthropocentric worldview to patriarchal culture, amongst other structures of domination. Interestingly, a number of the tensions present in ecofeminism/s' major debates were mirrored in participants' understandings of the natural world, which I will explore shortly.

As alluded to in Chapter Two, new materialist feminism extends ecofeminism and further informs this project. New materialist feminism advocates for an environmental ethic by advancing the concept of interconnectedness between the human and non-human. However, unlike more ideological/essentialist expressions of ecology or ecofeminism, new materialism is not reductive in its approach. Rather, it invites complexity and the possibility of surprising and unexpected interactions.

Stacey Alaimo (2008), who has written extensively on new materialist feminism, argues that one of the most undesirable legacies of third wave feminism is its move away from nature and the material aspects of the body (Alaimo, 2008, p237). While much was written about the body by corporeal feminists including Judith Butler, most has focused on the role that language and signs have played in inscribing meaning on the body, thus casting "the body as passive, plastic matter" (Alaimo, 2008, p237). Further, third wave feminists' commitment to social constructionism, she argues, rendered the body separate to biology, and severed it

from "evolutionary, historical, and ongoing interconnections with the material world" (2008, p238). This, Alaimo suggests, has had undesirable ethical and political implications (2008, pp251–53). In an attempt to transcend nature/biology, she says that the binary of nature/culture is further reinforced and undisrupted. She goes on to explain that biological determinism, a very particular version of biology, is implicitly accepted and other models are not explored (2008, p241). As Vicki Kirby (2008) cautions:

> *…poststructuralist arguments claim that human cultural activity involves symbolic processes that mediate and reinvent a "Nature" whose essentialist truth can never be accessed... [as such] we remain culture bound according to this logic, alienated from a Nature whose properties and capacities we can never know* (p6).

In other words, we continue to be limited by a Cartesian logic that positions nature as an inferior background, one that we can never access or engage with (Kirby 2008, p6).

What is needed to address this, then, is the "transformation of gendered dualisms" or a "counter biology" of sorts—a socio-scientific theory that embraces the possibility that we are not distinct entities operating in isolation from the material world and that we are not separate from nature; rather, we are bound up and entangled in this complexity (Alaimo 2008, pp240–241). Our own health and the health of the natural environment are deeply interrelated and inseparable, such theorists claim. The symbiotic relationship between humans and the natural world, then, extends beyond the symbolic and provides sufficient reason to cultivate a respectful and caring relationship. It allows individuals to open ourselves to mystery and possibility and acknowledges that the material world can lead to powerful human experiences of devastation, as well as joy. As humans, we share what can be described as a common vulnerability in relation to the volatility of the natural world and our bodies. Informed by these insights, I was particularly interested in the ways participants challenged material and non-material "boundaries" and understood the relationship between their psychology, materiality and the environment they inhabited. I was also interested in hearing about the ways the body and mind were *affected* by the environment.

My decision to focus on the intersection between body, environment and subjectivity arose, in part, as a result of Alaimo's (2008) theory of "transcorporeality" which marries corporeal and environmental philosophy, positing that our material selves are enmeshed, and in a continual relationship with other bodies and the environment. Nature, Alaimo argues, is much more than a lifeless backdrop—it can be seen as an active *agential force* that interacts and interchanges with our own "fleshiness" and has the power to transform human

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experience (2008 pp241–242). The "fleshiness" or "materiality" to which Alaimo refers is based on more than a cultural understanding of the body; it is informed by new developments in biology, neuroscience and psychosomatic theories. According to these theories, the body is in a constant state of flux, changeable, and in interaction with the environment around it. Our bodies, she says, are more than blank slates awaiting the inscription of culture—they possess a certain type of material agency, one that can be observed when we fall ill or experience sexual desire (Alaimo 2008, p249). The idea of agency is valuable in understanding how our own corporeality responds to certain internal and external circumstances. Alaimo's notion of agency also extends to the non-human world. She cautions, however, that given that "agency" has often been associated with the humanist idea of an autonomous subject, it must apply differently to the natural world (2008, p246). Since it is almost impossible to identify a central actor or force in the natural world, a conception of ecological agency that is "not predicated upon a humanist model of the free individual" is needed. Alaimo finds such a conception in the work of Karen Barad, who proposes that agency should not be seen as a characteristic, but rather as performative or as "intraactive" (Alaimo, 2008, p248). Barad's notion of intraactivity proposes that environmental phenomena are in a constant state of relating and responding, and exist by virtue of these relationships (Alaimo, 2008, p248 citing Barad 2003). The idea of "wildness" is closely associated with Barad's intractivity (Alaimo, 2008, p249). Wildness describes an enlivened nature—one that that is responsive, interactive and budding. The body too has a similar quality—chronic illnesses, for example, can be seen as intraactive, often interacting with a range of environmental factors, such as food, sleep and stress (Alaimo, 2008, p250). These ideas have informed not only what I asked participants but also how I analysed the data, which focused in particular on the encounters between the material and the self.

Navigating the boundaries of Nature/Culture and Human/Animal

Across all communities participants understood the concept of nature as phenomena separate, yet vulnerable to, civilisation. Participants referred to plants, trees, wildlife, ecosystems and the elements as "nature". Nature, participants claimed, could be accessed in the outdoors, by standing on the earth, sitting under a tree, listening to the birds, or going for a walk in the wild. In other words, nature was seen as something that was not accessible within the confines of four walls or within urban space. In this way, nature was implicitly juxtaposed against the notion of the artificial or the "unnatural". Hence, in an attempt to radically rethink nature, participants inadvertently maintained the idea that the natural

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world stood in opposition to culture: the difference being that instead of privileging culture over nature, as is often done in the mainstream, nature was privileged over culture. As Morton (2007) hints, romanticising nature can have the unintended effect of maintaining the culturally accepted dualism of nature/culture, rather than challenging its very premise. This can lead to a reification of the binary which does not envision more complex interactions. In the context of this study, nature was rarely acknowledged as having the potential to cause discomfort, though within a number of communities the natural environment proved challenging to navigate.

While the binary of nature/culture generally went undisturbed, participants' understandings did however disrupt another closely associated dualism, that of human/animal. Participants consistently challenged the idea that humans were somehow distinct to animals or to nature itself. In fact, many extended the notion of nature to include their very own human life.[35] The idea that humans were constituted *by* nature had normative implications. This was the case particularly at Mountain Valley where Shamanism and radical ecology represented a central philosophy, which invited an honouring and revering of the natural world and its inseparability to our humanity as well as an extension of one's subjectivity. A number of participants from Mountain Valley proposed that in harming the natural world, we were harming ourselves. In the below passage, Rosie from Mountain Valley does not seem to distinguish her own body from the body of the world. In discussing earth-based spirituality she explains how environmental exploitation prompted deep grief within her:

> So if you were to come into a clear cut and somebody had bestowed this beautiful land to you that happened to be where this clear cut was, and you were a very spiritual being, very connected to the earth the first thing you might do is to begin to restore it. The way to do that is to just start to build soil. The way to build soil is to metabolise grief. So to really understand what grief is, grief is when you know that there's something that so feeds you that when you don't have it, it evokes that grief. So to hold that connection to something that was life giving, so go back to the trees again that once stood before the clear cut, when those trees were clear cut to grieve the loss of those trees.

Rosie felt the pain of the trees. She understood, in a spiritual way, that it was the trees that fed her. Further, she felt she was somehow at "one" with the natural world and that human

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35 It would be easy to suggest that this position is reflective of the Spinozian idea that "human" is nature. However, what distinguishes participants' approach from the philosophy of Spinoza is the belief that we should treat the environment with the same moral concern we apply to humans by virtue of us being it. As Lloyd (1980) argues, Spinoza saw morality as properly linked to "human wellbeing" and "survival" (p309). He did not see the non-human world as the proper basis for morality, as some environmentalists have suggested. In other words, according to Spinoza moral decisions could be soundly made considering human interests alone.

life could not, or should not, be privileged over the natural world. Indeed, most participants agreed that humans were part of the whole and they therefore could not see why morality/ethics would attach to human welfare alone. In this way, participants' views could be read as in line with deep ecology. Plumwood (1991) describes deep ecological approaches like this:

> *Deep ecology locates the key problem area in human-nature relations in the separation of humans and nature, and it provides a solution for this in terms of the "identification" of self with nature. "Identification" is usually left deliberately vague, and corresponding accounts of self are various and shifting and not always compatible. There seem to be at least three different accounts of self involved - indistinguishability, expansion of self, and transcendence of self - and practitioners appear to feel free to move among them at will. The indistinguishability account rejects boundaries between self and nature. Humans are said to be just one strand in the biotic web, not the source and ground of all value …. Where "identification" means not "identity" but something more like "empathy," identification with other beings can lead to an expanded self…. [in respect to the [transcendence of self] Fox urges us to strive for impartial identification with all particulars, the cosmos, discarding our identifications with our own particular concerns, personal emotions, and attachments (Fox 1990,12). Fox presents here the deep ecology version of universalization, with the familiar emphasis on the personal and the particular as corrupting and self-interested- "the cause of possessiveness, war and ecological destruction* (1990, pp12-13).[36]

Like Rosie, Bec also from Mountain Valley used language akin to the indistinguishability approach in referring to her relationship between the self and natural world. She explains:

> I do recognise a difference between like the natural world and the human constructive world. A lot of my life is about bringing them together and not seeing such a difference there because humans are a part of the natural world. So often we will think of ourselves as not. The natural world's out there and our human world is here and they're very different. In some ways that's true because we humans have made it that way. In reality it's not, and I mean we're a part of nature and so a lot of my life is about bridging those worlds and really inside myself recognising that and bringing my life more in tune with the cycles of the natural world.

This challenge to animal/human binary substantially advanced the environmental cause. It placed environmental concerns in the centre of participants' lives and this was reflected in the ecological practices of the community as well as the fact that participants' subjectivities seemed to expand to include a continual awareness of how their actions impacted the world around them, as well as being open to the way in which they were emotionally moved by nature's offerings.

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36 Citing Fox, Warwick. *Towards a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New foundations for Environmentalism*. Boston: Shambala, 1990.

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Another way that nature transformed subjectivities was via the idea that nature was *benevolent* and *healing* force which could act as an emotional and physical panacea during times of need. Participants reported gaining a sense of acceptance, refuge and holding from what they described as "nature". Some described experiencing a sense of homecoming. As Rosie from Mountain Valley put it "nature is kind of like home, where I feel at home in myself." Like many other participants, Rosie felt not only at home within the world at large when surrounded by the natural environment, but also more at ease in relation to her own inner experience.

Many participants described receiving comfort from the natural world, alluding to the experience of ease, safety and relaxation. For some, particularly the more introverted participants, nature was seen as a refuge away from the complexity of social interactions and community expectations. In addition, participants spoke emotionally about the beauty of the natural world. Most participants were captivated and "in awe" of nature's splendour. This was at once an aesthetic, symbolic and embodied beauty participants were speaking of; an essential and "untouched" beauty that brought them closer to their sense of spirit and to the world at large.

Participants who identified as spiritual often saw nature as expressing a Divine or transpersonal force. Oli from Oasis, for example, talked about being "rapt" in nature and coming to understand it as an expression of God:

> It sustains me, lifts my spirits… I don't know how to describe it but it's almost like one is rapt in it... It's someone's breath. It is our breath, because they [trees] give us all this oxygen….They sustain us, our breath. The hand of God! To feel the hand of God move through the being…

Oli's metaphor points to her perception of the inseparability of humans, nature and the Divine. In this way she challenges the dominant idea that nature is somewhere "out there". Instead, nature flows through her, with every breath. Another evocative image that was used by a number of participants was that of "falling in love" with nature. Rosie describes it powerfully:

> Well just like when you fall in love for the first time and you meet your lover for the first time and look in the eyes of that person, there's no wrong they could ever do. It's like "oh my gosh", my world is shook up, oh my, I love this person and that's – so it had all of the markings which you are experiencing, beautiful natural surroundings and the forest, the water.

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Here, Rosie seems to be explicitly referring to the fact that her relationship with the natural world is idealised, suggesting she possesses awareness of the romance and symbolism involved in her relationship with the environment; though she does not necessarily see this as a bad thing – it is almost something she and embraces. Her relationship with the natural world is represented as something of a love affair - intense, all-consuming and underpinned by deep emotional attachment. It follows that for Rosie and other participants parting ways with nature is almost unthinkable.[37] Tina from River Stream similarly expressed the love she felt for the land. She says:

> I was also really in love with the land. I identify as a Pagan and I'm so into the trees here, and where I was before there was nowhere to go to be on the land. Like if I wanted to just like be with the earth there was a bush outside my apartment. Here there are all these trails, and streams, and rivers, and ponds, and I can wander and I can be alone, and feel a sense of place – and watch the seasons, and get away from development, yeah…I think what's really great here is that you walk everywhere, the weather matters, you notice when it's dark because you're walking around in the dark, the sun is down, or when it's raining you're getting wet because you have to walk from place to place, you're not in a car, and you have to pay attention to the sky and the soil when you're working in the garden. That's something that you could just completely overlook if you weren't doing that.

Tina's comments demonstrate that a central part of her love for nature was noticing its unfolding, as well as the fact that it supported solitude and reflection. This was the case for a number of participants. As Tina explains, she felt connected to the natural world when she was able to notice, for example, the changing seasons and the transition from day to night.

Nature was described by some participants as a gateway to something broader than the self. For Hannah, from Oasis, who identified as a spiritual practitioner, nature provided her with a sense of communion or oneness, echoing Plumwood's indistinguishability approach. She explains:

> Facilitator: What does it ["nature"] provide you with?
>
> Hannah: More a connection and oneness I guess. Yeah. Like, I have much more of an understanding now about – even with animals or trees or whatever, that it's all a part of life and this is what I like and that's also more of what I've sunk into from being in community.

Hannah was able to see that "it was all part of life", thus suggesting that one should not turn away from nature for it was part of a broad whole that linked us together. It follows that for

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37 I note here that one possible consequence of this way of thinking is a sense of entrapment. Although Rosie and Jessica did not mention this explicitly, they did suggest that their attachment to the natural world was so strong that they felt committed to staying close to it – even in the face of trying social circumstances.

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participants like Hannah, turning one's back on nature was congruent with turning one's back on the self – this echoed the deep ecological principle enunciated by Plumwood of the indistinguishability of self vis-à-vis nature.

A related yet perhaps more psychological way nature was understood by participants was as a *force* or *substance* that possessed a therapeutic quality. For Peta from Oasis, for example, nature was an essential force that provided her with both beauty and healing, or perhaps a particular beauty that *led* to healing. She said:

> For me, being in nature is essential….I need nature. I need space and I need the freshness…So it is essential for me to have it in my life and live in beautiful places. We often go for walks or we paddle through rivers and it's very quiet just admiring the beauty. For me it's very healing and it's essential.

Similar to Oli's comments about nature breathing through her, Peta alludes to nature's "freshness", which she sees as fulfilling a basic need that was fundamental to her emotional stability. For both Peta and Oli, culture/civilisation was underscored by an inertness or staleness – a force that was the antithesis of regeneration and replenishment. Another point to make is that, by and large, nature was seen as possessing a unique force that could not be replaced and that its essential essence could not be found within anything else. It could not be emulated or recreated and was distinctive to the wild. By seeing, breathing and walking through nature an essential energy or life force flowed through participants, enlivening them and feeding their spirit. Sue from Mountain Valley makes this point clearly, explaining the decision she had made a number of years ago:

> I was in [psychoanalytic] analysis to try and understand why I wasn't happy. One of the things that was revealed to me through my understanding was I needed to get close to something "green". I needed - even though I was like that's nice, it wasn't a clear connection for me. The message was you're totally cut off from the earth; you need to at least plant something. You need to have a little piece of green that you relate to because it's going to be good for you…. Well going back to the day when I got the idea that I needed to be closer to green in order to be balanced, to get closer to some kind of balance and not totally tipped in one direction I lived more and more in places that were close to the earth even though it was for that reason, that atmosphere, not for I'm going to do something with the earth.

Sue's relationship to nature appeared more passive than that of other participants. She explains that she did not necessarily need to actively engage in gardening or farming to reap its benefits, rather she benefited from simply being "close" to "green". Sue did not seem to be concerned about the mechanics of how this worked specifically and as such, she did not offer any details about why her subjective experience was altered by this "green". Much like

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other participants, nature was characterised by Sue as a mysterious force that could not be fully understood. She did know instinctively, however, that it made her happier. Sue's statements are reflective of the broader discourse in the modern world that "green space" such as parks, gardens and rural areas have a positive and restorative impact on the health of individuals (see Finlay et al, 2015).

Similarly, Charlotte from Oasis pointed to a specific activity within the natural world that provided her with solace. Charlotte, who spent much of her day attending to a community garden, enthusiastically explained that having her hands in the garden weeding provided her with an emotional "release". The garden, in this way, enabled her to expel unwanted energy and emotions. She comments "thank God for weeds, because some days it is so healing, just pulling out weeds. I don't know what it is but it's something. It releases something." Here, Charlotte cannot articulate exactly what this "something" is that is being released but she knows it to be valuable. Again, nature seems to be operating in remedial ways. Another important point is that Charlotte seems to be reifying boundaries between the body and the natural world; that is, something from "within" her is "released" and given back to the earth, yet at the same time she seems to perceive a metaphorical equivalence between the release of the weeds from the earth and emotions from herself.

Indeed, Charlotte's account reveals the interesting ways the boundaries between "inside" and "outside" were conceived and experienced by some participants. It points to the fact that some participants considered their emotions to be something that arose predominantly from *within* the individual and that needed to be expelled or purged. At times, the relationship between the outside (the environment) and inside (one's internal landscape) was directly and causally healing. As I have shown, a number of participants explained that "nature" (as they understood it) healed and soothed them. A converse causal relationship was also present for some participants in relation to urban spaces. Vera from River Stream for example, spoke about her belief that urban environments made people "angry", explaining she does "not feel well in cities." At other times, the connection between the environment and emotions was more complicated and symbiotic. `

From a scholarly perspective, there are many possible explanations for participants' increased sense of wellbeing in nature. A rather simplistic account can be found in the psychological literature which contends that nature has a calming and therapeutic effect on one's nervous system as it encourages individuals to exercise, relax and let go of the major

concerns of their lives (see Hinds and Sparks, 2008; Kaplan, 1995; Ulrich, 1983). A more convincing analysis can be found in the sociological literature. For instance, LeFebvre's (1974) work on the social production of space posits that social relations do not (and cannot) exist outside of space – that is, sociality is necessarily spatially located. Thus, for LeFebvre, space should be analysed in conjunction with power, discourse, ideology and symbolism. LeFebvre, however, is not merely talking about physical space; rather his analysis extends to the conceptual dimensions of space. By considering the symbolic aspects at play, natural spaces can also represent a type of "counter space", which according to Tonkiss (2005) is:

> *… the work both of political imagination and of practice. They are implied in the criticism of normal spatial arrangements, and realised when existing spaces are remade in contrary ways. They run from the everyday to the experimental* (p64).

Taking these two ideas together, participants' comments can be understood as referring to both the lived and symbolic aspects of what they experienced as restorative and healing. The landscape was charged with political and idealistic symbolism and potential. In the minds of participants, rurality stood in opposition to capitalism. Unlike the accelerated and often highly structured nature of life within capitalism, nature ran counter to the institutional pressures and normative regulations of modern life. It represented something more organic, free-flowing and spontaneous, something that "allowed" rather than confined. Moreover, nature was free from *human* authority and hierarchy, which participants felt provided them the space they needed to connect with their own subjective needs, wants and dreams. It also symbolised a gateway to the transpersonal which facilitated a sense of "letting go" and allowing life to flow through the self. In this way participants seemed to be surrendering to something bigger than the individual self, much like the surrendering one might do in a religious setting (it is no wonder one participant referred to nature as her "Church"). Nature allowed participants to eschew the pressures of capitalism and instead place their emotional worlds front and centre. Thus, in this context, nature gave participants freedom to move toward the contents of their inner world, release what they felt was holding them back and ultimately get in touch with their values and what they held important.

Hence, nature here constituted what qualitative geographers might call a "therapeutic landscape", that is, a place that has the capacity to promote wellbeing and health (see Conradson, 2005; Gesler, 2003; Perriam, 2015; Williams, 2007). However, such a concept has its limitations: for the most part, this field has neglected the more psycho-social dimensions of healing, thus failing to provide a satisfactory understanding of the interaction between

psyche and space and the precise mechanics involved in healing (Rose, 2012). There are however some useful exceptions. For example, Doughty (2013) argues that landscapes are necessarily relational. Doughty applies "intersubjectivity" in analysing the experience of those walking in the country landscape for health. She explains:

> *The therapeutic landscape hence could be understood as a shared orientation towards something that promised wellbeing and happiness. In practices like "walking-with" we share not only a physical direction but also an affective and emotional intention* (p144).

Thus, Doughty makes explicit the *social* meanings attached to space and how these meanings might facilitate healing. This is an important point in relation to the above findings in that despite the fact that most participants were relating to the natural world individually, the healing power of nature was not experienced individually but collectively and was linked to discourses expounded by community members and the community itself. In the case of Mountain Valley, Oasis and River Stream, for example, the value and power of nature arguably formed a structuring belief, featuring in community manifestos and rituals within community. Indeed, nature as a healing force was spoken about extensively across all communities. Thus, this common understanding led to a common intention: to commune with nature in order to heal.

Another convincing explanation for the healing potential of landscape can be found in Rose's work (2012) which offers a psychoanalytic analysis of the ways nature can facilitate "mentalisation". Rose's argument is that "certain kinds of landscape, encountered simultaneously as both natural, objective realities but also "representations", can "mirror" emotional states back to the viewer, precipitating a beneficial mentalising process" (p1383). The process of mentalisation here involves reflecting on what one is feeling and why, as well as what others might be feeling and why. Generally, the psychoanalytic literature has focussed on the ways a parent/infant relationship involves the mirroring and containment of difficult emotions which can lead to mentalisation and, as such, has not fully considered the role of space or landscape. Hence, Rose's work is particularly innovative in combining both psychoanalytic and geographic insights. Like the parent/infant dyad, Rose explains, landscape can in part facilitate the process of thinking *about* feelings or thinking *about* thinking. Individuals might interpret nature metaphorically as a healing entity and therefore feel secure enough to experience and reflect on intense states of affect. She explains the role of metaphor in this way:

Well-known, generic examples include: sunlit uplands seen as if hopeful; sunrise as if promising; dark skies as if foreboding; grey days as if enervating; thunder and lightning as if bad deeds might attract punishment, clear skies as if a new start were possible, deserts as if spiritually challenging, woods as if confusing, a chasm or an abyss as if hope is lost, the sun's rays as if we are blessed, etc. When seen as if, the landscape and natural phenomena engage the imagination in metaphorical thinking to create interpretations of felt-states, applicable also to the emotions of others (p1385).

Rose theorises that individuals hold an imagined representation of the landscape in their minds to which they form a positive affinity or attachment. Then, if individuals contact the actual landscape and if it is congruent with their imagined ideal, it can provide them with the security and safety they need to feel, contain and ultimately calm intense states of affect. However, Rose acknowledges that this is not always the case: landscapes have the potential to result in both healing and negative feelings like fear, exclusion or danger. She explains:

It is important to stress that an encounter with natural phenomena is inherently unpredictable; because of weather, atmospheric effects, seasonal variations and so forth the landscape may fail to look like its pictorialised image, it may look like another representation, or appear entirely strange, and these transformations present fresh symbolic and metaphoric possibilities, a modified palimpsestic screen affording new projected imaginings, a wider range of feelings to be witnessed, represented and interpreted. Thus, in the case of landscape at least, the agency of the object is twofold, residing in both its sedimented cultural potential, its capacity to stimulate new interpretations, but also in its variability as a setting or screen for projection and recovery (p1385).

Rose's work embraces the relational dynamics that shape one's encounter with landscape as well as the "physical features" of the landscape and the "…practices of viewing and pictorialising which result in the intentional mental phenomenon of the "landscape"" (p1382). In this way she conceives of a therapeutic encounter that is at once social, material and imagined. Such a multi-layered approach sheds light not only on the complexity of the encounter but also on some of the experiences of emotional holding which I now turn to.

As outlined above, Rose (2012) claims that nature can provide something of a holding or mirroring environment for difficult affective states. She contends that:

The process suggests ways in which the capacity of the self to extend its capacity for both self-understanding and imaginatively grasping the minds of others, leading ultimately to broader and better possibilities for living. The face of nature, made visible in the representation of landscape, can be treated as that of a quasi-person with whom the viewer interacts to establish a relationship with the potential to enhance emotional self-awareness and empathic capacity. However, it is clearly the case that this interpretation of landscape as the face of nature depends upon the legacy of Romantic and postRomantic ideas that still have a profound cultural influence; for example, the notion that nature is a vehicle for the development and exploration of self-consciousness and identity, that images from nature can provide ways of thinking about and

understanding human feelings and what is ultimately real and of value for the self. The point here is that the practices of visualising related to the phenomenon of therapeutic landscapes have a particular and still potent cultural legacy (p1384).

This was indeed reflected in my findings with a number of participants explaining that they were better able to tolerate challenging emotions and experiences by reason of their connection to the natural world. For example, as detailed in Chapter Five, Jessica had faced significant interpersonal conflict at Mountain Valley. When asked about how she found solace and comfort whilst dealing with these difficult interactions, she alluded to the natural environment. It was a holding place for her where what she was going through could be processed, felt and ultimately let go of. She explained that "over and over again I wake up in the morning and think "oh, I don't care [about the conflict], thank you, I'm so glad I live here." No matter what else, I'm so glad I live here."" However, Jessica was not saying that her emotions would disappear or dissipate by being in the outdoors; rather she was saying that she was given the space and strength to feel what was happening within her. She explained that she often spent time praying, crying or screaming in the company of trees. This gave her a sense of "release" and also enabled her to feel as though she was acknowledging and feeling her "real" emotions in their fullness. A similar observation was made by Peta from Oasis who explained:

> …when… I feel there is a need to process certain emotions then I would look out for a place in nature and work there or be there and just have the healing surrounding to sort out what the emotions are.

For Peta it was the soothing properties of nature that assisted her in gaining some awareness of the specific emotions she was experiencing in order to "process" them. This too demonstrates that the natural world did not act to eradicate the emotions, but rather provided a reflective space for Peta to work through her emotions in a supportive way, reinforcing Rose's (2012) contention that natural landscape can facilitate a process of "thinking about thinking" or mentalising. Rose explains:

> *The viewer, able to work with the imagination to formulate and consolidate representations within a secure base experience is able to externalise negative affect states, knowing that it will not be overwhelming or negative, but can lead to positive emotions, such as sharing, empathy, and self-regulation* (p1385).

Nature also acted as a space of unconditional love, or in psychoanalytic terms, an "attachment object". Victoria from Circle Hill had been in a long-term relationship with a female partner during the 1970s and had been subject to extensive discrimination and bigotry in her workplace, amongst other social spaces, due to her sexual orientation. When

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she first went camping with her partner, she was struck by the extent to which nature was fully embracing of her identity as a lesbian woman. She experienced a profound sense of freedom by virtue of the fact that she felt she did not feel she had to justify her life decision to others. She explains:

> I guess my love of the country came from that because if we went camping or something, it was wonderful. We didn't have to explain anything to anyone. Even before I recognised that I had this "strange tendency" [referring to her sexuality]… But the way out of that sort of tangled knot of harsh emotions is to be part of something that is bigger than you and I think after [my partner's] death, she'd actually taken me camping, she introduced me to camping…It wasn't until [my partner] took me camping later on that I really, really discovered it.

A similar finding is offered in a recent study carried out by Meyer and Borrie (2013), which explored the ways LGBTI individuals experience wilderness. Significantly, the authors find that the wilderness provided LGBTI individuals with the opportunity to transcend heteronormative discourses pertaining to identity and corporeality. They explain:

> *This sense of belonging is possible in part because wilderness provides opportunities to escape (to escape structure, judgment, and technology) and to experience bodily awakenings and connections (kinaesthetic awareness, sensory engagement with natural processes)* (p303).

Moreover, it invited participants "to shed their social skins and escape people who discriminate against or don't accept them because they do not conform to a two-gendered system of male or female" (Meyer and Borrie, 2013, p306). This, they claim, encouraged participants to inhabit their bodies in a way that was not possible within capitalist society (p314). For example, the study's participants reported experiencing their bodies more somatically, meditatively and free from the restrictions of gender. These findings are indeed reflective of the LeFebvrean suggestion that cultural meaning is imbued onto landscape and that sociality is invariably entangled within spatial relations. It is also reflective of the new materialist proposition that our bodies and environment interact in interesting and sometimes unanticipated ways.

It follows that for Victoria the wild represented freedom and acceptance and she enjoyed the way in which her body responded to the surrounds. In addition to providing a refuge away from heteronormativity and a renewed sense of self and embodiment, it also provided her with a safe place to grieve. Victoria had lost her partner early in their relationship. Shortly after her death, Victoria purchased property in a rural area. She describes the ways in which the land assisted her in coming to terms with losing her partner prematurely:

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…the land which helped me come to terms with [my partner's] death…The things that grow there are survivors and yet it's an enormously rich environment if you live in it. There are an enormous number of birds and insects and flowers and different shrubs, trees, and how tough! They really get through a winter of 40 degrees, they have to and they develop strategies. I think I started admiring that land for being a survivor because I was trying to be a survivor. My partner and I, we'd had a wonderful partnership. It really was something fairly extraordinary and to lose that…So I was grieving deeply for many years and the [land] helped me get through it and I think it was there, I found when I'd drive up, I had a tiny little caravan to start with and then I had a gale-proof garage put up which turned into a hut - the first few days, the first week, I would just sort of look at the outside of it. I was an outsider. Then all of a sudden, it was as though it accepted me and I was part of it and I could actually walk through it and see it and belong. That was an extraordinary experience for me and it tied in with what I was doing [at Circle Hill] at the time, that one needs to feel part of something bigger than themselves and because I've got a, what do you call it, an agreement on the land so nothing can be done to it, it's preserved forever, I couldn't do anything to it. I didn't have a responsibility to it - to make it better or do anything to it so I could just be in it and that was a great relief, a release for me and that was part of, I suppose, the spiritual journey that I was embarking on….

Victoria's description of her connection to country is moving. Victoria's story shares features of an initiation story.[38] Losing her partner initiated her into a broader community of survivors. Loss and difficulty were natural, as was finding ways to cope with trauma. It was not until Victoria went through the perilous journey of grief and pining that she felt the land had "accepted" her. This connection to land has stayed with her long after the death of her partner. A few things should be said about Victoria's story. The first is that the way she initially describes nature mirrors her journey through grief. This disturbs the idea that the environment is somehow separate to one's psychological world. According to Victoria's initial description, the outside ran parallel to the inside and, in this way, nature acted as a reflection of her psyche. The question of whether Victoria experienced nature in dualistic or monistic terms is an interesting one – and one that cannot be easily resolved. Initially, Victoria speaks of nature being "out there", as something she yearned for and observed from her hut, but with time, she explains, she comes to belong or become part of nature itself. One reading is that with time she let go of dualistic understandings and came to feel as though she was a continuation of nature, and conversely that nature became a deep part of her humanity (or "humanimality" as Freeman (2010) and others refer to it). Another reading

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38 Marcus (1960) defines initiation stories in two ways. He explains:

> The various critical definitions of the initiation story fall into two groups. The first group describes initiation as a passage of the young from ignorance about the external world to some vital knowledge. The second describes initiation as an important self-discovery and a resulting adjustment to life or society (p222).

Victoria's initiation story seemed congruent with Marcus' latter definition.

is that Victoria retained a sense of being accepted by nature but felt her "self" was still distinct and in interaction with nature.

Cat from Kwan Yin told a similar story of the environment assisting her in grieving for her brother. It was the death of Cat's brother that prompted her to ask some broader philosophical questions about what happened after death. Whilst contemplating this question she was reminded of the teaching of Vietnamese Zen Teacher and peace activist, Thích Nhất Hạnh. She describes how his teaching on losing a loved one encouraged her to become more open to the natural environment, and the world at large:

> …after my brother died, in fact it was what I was thinking about, in terms of we don't end we begin in another way, a sense of who we are in all things at all times. So that became less of an intellectual thing for me…Because Thích Nhất Hạnh has this thing, if a person dies imagine your loved one saying to you I am not here in the way you recognise. I am in the rocks, the trees, the rivers and if you look for me and say hello I will be very happy. That's like a distilled version of what he says. So immediately I was amazed by the fact that I would literally think to myself, I am looking for my brother to say hello so my eyes are open to new people and place and things around me in a way that they weren't before he died. Because I wasn't looking for someone I loved in the things around me so I am different in that way. You know tiny bit more patience, tiny bit more openness, tiny bit more receptive to ideas about how I impact the world.

Here, the symbolic meaning of the landscape is transformed. It is personified and reflects attachment figures that have died. Spending time in nature then becomes akin to spending time with loved ones. Cat's description is perhaps more explicit and less metaphorical than that of Rose's (2012). In any event, it serves a similar function: to contain and placate the intensity of her grief.

In this section I have argued that the encounter between participants' psychological world, the environment and the symbolic led to some significant healing possibilities for participants. This encounter challenged the traditional psychological idea that the individual psyche is contained and bounded, as well as the idea that humans are somehow separate to nature. I have revealed the ways in which the social, material and psychological worlds contacted and led to a sense of emotional containment and placation for participants. Emotions seemed to be reflected, impacted and alleviated by the material world and in this way these aspects were "intraacting", thus reinforcing the new materialist position that our health, bodies, minds and the natural environment are enmeshed and responsive to each another.

Moreover, I have extended both Doughty and Rose's findings, positing that the healing quality of nature in alternative community can be explained by reference to the social meanings attached to nature, as well as the imagined, representational and lived dimensions of the landscape. It is this *encounter,* I argue, that facilitated moments of healing for participants. Participants "unlocked" nature's healing powers by holding an idealised image in their minds (which was informed by social and community meanings) whilst simultaneously communing with the material landscape. Nature, in this respect, represented a space away from capitalist expectations and provided a holding environment which enabled participants to "release" difficulties and past wounding and endure difficult emotions which I will turn to now.

"Feeding what feeds you" – Cyclical Relationships

In this section, I focus specifically on the ethos at Mountain Valley, arguing that it represented an important intersection between body, spirituality and environment, which considerably expanded community members' subjectivities in relation to the natural world. Indeed, Mountain Valley was unique in that most community members I met were deeply involved in radical ecology, anarchism and Shamanism. In line with these approaches, one of the main ways participants from Mountain Valley described their relationship to their surrounds was by reference to "feeding" and "being fed". Hence, in this way participants were pointing to a deep and circular encounter: between body, mind, spirit and the environment. This was particularly the case for those intensely involved in Earth-based spiritualities.[39] A number of participants from Mountain Valley spoke enthusiastically of the reciprocal "feeding" relationship they had with the natural world. Rosie, for example, said:

> It's a place that *feeds* me…I have so much access to this wonderful energy that graces us every day. I am highly dependent upon it, in fact human beings in general I believe are dependent upon this energy that flows through this earth and through the plants and into our bodies. You can be really disconnected from it and ultimately I think that that creates a lot of dis-ease, disease. So I think in these 12 years I find myself

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39 I should note that a number of scholars have examined the adoption of neo-Shamanism amongst Euroamericans. In the main, they have been divided on whether New Age adaptations of Shamanism should be considered "genuinely" Shamanic and on whether Shamanism should be considered "universal" and "accessible" across all times and cultures or rather specific to particular Indigenous cultures (see Francfort and Hamayon, 2001; Wallis, 2003; and Znamenski, 2003). On the one hand, I take the poststructuralist view that "authenticity", or indeed "purity" of religion, is but a cultural construction. Hence, most spiritualities and religions are an assemblage of various historical practices. Yet on the other hand I share the concern of some scholars that those adopting Neo-Shamanism may not have sufficient understanding of the symbolic, cultural and social meanings of such practices for Indigenous peoples, which may lead to blind appropriation and destructive results. This question sits outside of the scope of this thesis but would benefit from further research and discussion.

actively *sourcing* – I source by going out into nature. When I was living in an urban area I did not source, resource, to have my well filled again, I fill my well and it's how I'm trying to complete the circle and then to give to nature.

As reflected in Rosie's comments, the idea that nature possessed an essential curative capacity was shared by a number of participants. Rosie goes one step further, however, and employs a medical metaphor to describe what humans receive from the natural world. She explains that, in her view, being disconnected from nature can lead to both a lack of ease within one's self as well as "disease" in a medical sense. Moreover, Rosie uses the image of a well that needs filling up to suggest that without nature one is starved of the fundamental resources one needs to survive. Rosie speaks with delight about the joy she experienced returning nature's generosity by "feeding it" – thus completing the circle of life, as she describes it. She continues:

> I'm giving and I love to do compost so I'm a big humanure fan, so making these "closed loops". So all the energy is actually ultimately we're growing beautiful soil. That's how we're giving back, that's how I'm feeding Gaia is starting to take our junk mail and our poop and our food scraps and heading on down towards Gaia and then these beloved seeds get put into the ground and then the food comes back to us and we poop it out and then it goes back to – or the rabbits, the rabbits are pooping, I take the poop out to the garden and then the garden produces clover in fact all of that, there's ground ivy, clover and brambles and all of that goes to feed the rabbits and then the rabbits poop and I take the poop, so it's like these cycles. It's heavy in my heart how complex [it is], it is so complex this beloved world.

Mountain Valley community's strong commitment to the humanure system pointed to this reciprocal understanding of humans and the environment. In a community of nearly 100, humanure was used as the primary way of dealing with human waste. This involved using buckets to capture waste and, when full, storing them for a period of three years until safe to distribute over the garden. River Stream also used a smaller version of the humanure system, however, in the main, it employed a conventional sewerage system. At Mountain Valley an extensive composting system was also used for food scraps. Returning manure and food waste back to the earth enabled Rosie and others to "feed Gaia" and ensure that nothing from the material world is wasted or disregarded. A sense of responsibility and ethic of care toward the environment informed such practices, thus reflecting ecofeminism's call for care and compassion toward the environment (Sandilands, 2000). It also reflected the new materialist idea that humans and nature are bound up in a materially fleshy engagement, one that cannot be separated or captured in a simplistic binary.

Rosie's comment "it's heavy in my heart how complex … It's so complex this beloved world" is powerful and illustrative of her understanding of how the various aspects of the natural world depend on each other in intricate ways. Rosie's descriptions mirror Alaimo's idea that materiality has an agency of its own that impacts and shapes our human lives. Rosie seems to be pointing to the fact that we both relate to the Earth and *are related to* by the Earth and, in this way, acknowledges that the non-human and human world are interwoven and that phenomena arise out of the complex interactions of various causes and conditions.

Rosie allows the complex nature of the world to touch her emotionally. She expresses gratitude toward the earth and what it has given her and simultaneously challenges the anthropocentric idea that nature exists in order simply to serve humans. Rosie, as well as many others, did not simply assume that it is the role of the natural world to satisfy our every need as a human. For nature was not seen as a resource to be exploited or used for one's own purposes; it was seen as a living entity with its own needs that should be honoured in its own right.

The notion of "feeding what feeds us" was one used by a number of participants at Mountain Valley - many of whom had studied the work of a particular Western spiritual teacher. I was told that this teacher had spent extensive time in certain traditional African communities training in Shamanic spirituality. Bec from Mountain Valley eloquently explained her teacher's philosophy:

> Eventually we will have a life sustaining culture again. The crux of a life sustaining culture to me is a culture that feeds that which feeds us all. That feeds the whole and the wild and feeds the earth and sees that as a priority. If a culture does that I think then a lot of the other aspects of life sustaining culture kind of follow from that…..to give to, to and there's different ways that you can do that. One of the biggest parts of it is first realising and just knowing that everything we are and everything we have comes from earth, from – you can use so many different words for it… There's so much here it's hard to find words around it, but recognising that and knowing that we as humans can never give back what we have taken to live. That's alright, it's not that we should feel guilty for that or something but just knowing that. At the same time knowing that we'll never be able to pay it back and trying to. Doing our best to do what we can and in the traditions that I study there's different specific ways that we do this. Like I have an offering bowl on my table and we give a little bit of food every time we eat, we blow our breath on a little piece of everything we're eating and putting it in the bowl and then take that out to the wild to feed the holy; beautiful words and prayers, making offerings, and just – all of these things with the idea that in everything we do recognising that fact, that I'm only doing this, I'm only nourished, I'm only alive because 'She' has given this to me. Like I said before I guess, recognising that fact, if you really recognise that fact deeply then the feeding will follow. If you really know that in yourself.

Bec's comments suggest that although it is impossible to give back what one has received from the natural world, appreciation can be offered in return. Indeed, during my time at Mountain Valley, I participated in a number of rituals that sought to honour the earth and return its generosity. One such ritual is worth recounting here. I was invited to participate in a day-long practice of "planting corn". This community ritual, I was told, was inspired by the ancient Shamanic practice of spiritual farming. That morning I arrived at the fire pit at 8am to help rake leaves and clear space. While I did this, a community member set up an Altar which consisted of a clay pot draped with string and fabric. She intimated that the Pot represented the Mother/the Earth and related to it with the utmost tenderness and care.

As I raked, I was struck by a sense of irony: I was moving leaves in the middle of the rainforest and, as the direction of the wind changed, the leaves returned to their original place. I came to realise, however, that I was not being asked to clean or physically clear per se, but to honour and clear the space "energetically". This can be contrasted with the ways we order space in the mainstream – often attempting to "separate" civilisation from nature by removing "dirt" from "our" space, or, as Douglas once put it viewing dirt as "matter out of place" (Douglas, 1966, p36). This was clearly not the motivation here. At Mountain Valley dirt was revered. I was shifting leaves so that the community could sit comfortably and directly on the dirt. For dirt was seen as inseparable to ourselves, to our flesh. And in this way, I was beautifying and caring for this sacred dirtiness.

Community members gathered at the fire pit at exactly 12:21pm. We were told to eat lunch beforehand and arrive on time. As I arrived, a fire was being lit and we were welcomed by a female elder who addressed the fire, which was tall and large. Her tone was animated and excited. "Oh hello grandfather fire! So wonderful to see you!" she exclaimed. She went on: "YOU, who warms us, helps us to cook our food, creates this spark in our spirit, we honour you, today we are here to feed you!" An Anglo-American male community member tended the fire with an expression of spiritual intensity. The fire seemed to be being personified. The community member blew on wood and related to the fire pit as though it was the holiest of mounds. We were instructed to watch the fire and sing a traditional Namibian chant, which was translated as "you who feeds me I feed and you feed me".

This ritual can be contrasted with the more simplistic accounts of benevolence I detail earlier, as it is a noteworthy example of the worshipping of nature for both its enlivening and terrifying qualities. The practice of honouring the fire element was a reminder that nature,

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even in its holiness, is not simply lightness and benevolence. It is wild and something that can cause grave harm. Yet, it is also essential to our survival. Participants seemed to hold both of these understandings simultaneously. Here we were "feeding" an energy that could not be contained. We were allowing it to be fully itself. I felt somewhat fearful of this practice - my own socialisation meant that I wanted to tame the fire. In fact, I noticed a strong urge to tame many other things that were beyond my control at Mountain Valley. However, as my participants well knew, believing I had the capacity to control the material world runs contrary to the very laws of nature. Participants instead saw both the destructive and life-giving properties of nature as worthy of respect, deference and acceptance. By contrast, my impulse to tame arguably arose from a desire to domesticate what seemed wild and uncultivated. Indeed, theorists have argued that within Western culture the dualism of wild/tame can be linked to the "othering" and "colonisation" of the natural world (see Birch, 1990 and Katz and Kirby, 1991) – which has again reinforced the binary of nature/culture.

Once we left the fire pit we congregated before rakes, spades and shovels. My field-notes explain this exchange:

> This time, an even more enthusiastic and emotional woman was talking to the metal. She was thanking it, explaining that we were again here to feed it, to honour it, to give back to it, as it had given so much to us. She then spat whiskey on the tools as a way of feeding them. She went on: "you, beautiful, magnificent metal, which has come from the sky, spectacular and elegant appearance. I am so humbled by your presence and grateful you are here today. We are here to feed you today, to honour you as the kings and queens you are. You beautiful metal tools. Please do not bite us. You are an extension of our hands. You do what we could not do ourselves you nourish us and help us to obtain food. We are here to honour you today."

> (Reflexive Journal, 2013)

After the rakes and shovels were honoured, we spat into the pot and began the day's work. As I dug the earth, large black snakes slithered past my feet. Community members did not seem disturbed by their presence. I repressed a scream. Following our time farming, we congregated around a female elder who praised "chaos and decay" in a 20 minute speech. We then enjoyed meat that had been slaughtered two days before by someone external to the community. The meat was blown on and thanked for its sacrifice. The day carried on late into the night with a male community member telling Shamanic myths until dawn.

These practices disturbed the animal/human dualism. They honoured the environment as though it was equal, if not more revered, vis-à-vis the "civilised" world. This invited a broader and more inclusive environmental consciousness and challenged dominant

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discourses around consumption excess and pillaging what we need from the Earth without regard for our finite resources. A further binary that Mountain Valley challenged was that of light/dark, which often underpins Judaeo-Christian discourse (see Fontaine, 1986). For Mountain Valley members, darkness within the natural world was seen as vital and a sacred expression of the universe echoing more of a new materialist feminist perspective that embraced unpredictability. Participants saw their relationship to the material world as reciprocal and felt morally obliged to give back to nature as evidenced by humanure system. They also experienced expanded sense of their sense of self: indeed, nature provided them with a portal to the spiritual dimensions of their existence and their place within the council of all beings.

However, it would be naive to assume that these practices and approaches did not have clear racial implications. As Crowley (2011) contends, notions of the body in the context of the New Age are often essentialised and linked to racialized ideas of the primitive, the earthy and the dark. In other words, such practices are influenced by the idea that white women have the capacity to return to a primal essence within and merge with the darkness from which they were split off from. Participants at Mountain Valley rarely challenged this reductive narrative though that is not to say some did not have the capacity or willingness to do so. This led to a paradoxical result: while broadening their environmentalist stance, participants did not fully appreciate or engage with the colonial undertones and potential appropriation that could flow from such representations of nature and the self.

Food and other Practices of the Body

I now turn to the ways participants understood and related to the food they consumed. Participants, across all communities, emphasised the importance of having a meaningful relationship with the food they put into their bodies. This led to a way of connecting with their embodied selves that had not been possible in mainstream society. It also expanded their subjective sense of their own corporeality and encouraged them to think about the ways their bodies interacted at both symbolic and material levels.

Most participants constructed their bodies as *made* of what they chose to eat, both physically and energetically. It is no surprise, then, that nearly all participants wanted to know exactly what they were putting into their bodies and where it came from. For those who ate meat, for example, this involved knowing how a given animal was treated prior to

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its slaughtering.[40] It follows that a number of participants gained a deep sense of fulfilment from being directly involved in the process of producing/growing their own food. Charlotte from Oasis explains:

> It's always been very important to me to eat well and eat healthy, to grow my own vegetables and be connected to the whole process. Yeah. I've really enjoyed that aspect of it. Really understanding the laws of physics and laws of nature and how that influences everything.

Ali from Mountain Valley communicated something similar. She described the satisfaction she gained from working in a dairy and subsequently eating what she was involved in producing. She says:

> I've really enjoyed it, the embodied part of particularly working with animals or just having contact with them and really there's so much meaning and purpose and fulfilment that comes out of producing something that I then get to eat and having a relationship with that being.

At Mountain Valley, approximately 20 per cent of food was grown onsite, while the remaining 80 per cent was sourced from neighbours or stores in the nearby town. At River Stream the opposite was true with at least 80 per cent of food being grown or produced onsite and the remaining being bought from local sources. At Kwan Yin food was bought entirely from local organic farmers off-site, while at Oasis each individual was free to source their own food via their own means (which, for some, included growing/producing it themselves) however some meals were taken communally, particularly in the communal house.

Food was a central part of community life, particularly for participants who ate together regularly. At Kwan Yin, for example, community members ate together 2 to 3 times a day. Their meals followed a macrobiotic diet, which consisted of large amounts of whole grain foods, legumes, fresh vegetables and pickles and a low amount of fat and sugar. The macrobiotic diet seemed to be understood by community members as having "purifying" properties capable of warding off diseases such as cancer:[41] Eating as a community took up at least 2 to 3 hours of each day – even for those who were not involved in food preparation. It was a chance for members to meet with one another and enjoy their food in a slow and

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40 At Kwan Yin most, if not all, members were vegetarian but no other community was exclusively vegetarian, with most members making an individual choice around whether or not to eat meat.

41 I note that a few participants from Kwan Yin complained that they felt there was not enough protein in the macrobiotic diet and as such they felt they needed to supplement it by sourcing food from outside of the community.

mindful way. Before each meal at Kwan Yin a blessing ritual was followed involving the recitation of the following prayers:

Food Offering Verse (at breakfast)

This morning meal of ten benefits

Nourishes us in our practice.

Its rewards are boundless,

Filling us with ease and joy.

Food Offering Verse (at lunch)

The three virtues and six tastes of this meal

Are offered to Buddha and Sangha.

May all sentient beings in the universe

Be equally nourished.

Participants at Kwan Yin generally subscribed to the idea that the primary purpose of eating was to *nourish* the body and spirit. In this way, eating was not carried out merely to elicit temporary pleasure, but to fuel and sustain individuals so they can achieve a higher state of contentment through the pursuit of the Noble Eightfold Path.[42] This approach highlights an interesting doctrinal distinction present within Buddhist thought relating to the difference between temporary pleasure and ultimate liberation. A number of participants explained that, according to Buddhist philosophy, a "wholesome" motivation has the capacity to transform seemingly ordinary activities into spiritual practice – that is, the qualities of mindfulness and care could "convert" the most mundane of activities into acts conducive to Buddhist liberation. Hence, within this paradigm, individuals were encouraged to approach food "virtuously" so that it could become a cause/condition for their ultimate awakening - rather than merely a moment of fleeting sensory pleasure.[43]

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42 The Noble Eight Fold Path is the fourth of the Four Noble Truths as taught by the historical Buddha. Broadly, the eight facets can be grouped into ethics, discipline and wisdom.

43 This approach illuminates a tacit dualism underpinning participants' adaptation of Buddhist philosophy. It has been suggested that although Buddhism is not a Cartesian tradition, modern interpretations of it are nonetheless influenced by Western Enlightenment thinking (see Aronson, 2004). Indeed, the question of whether the mind and body should be seen as separate or "one" is largely unsettled in Buddhist philosophy (see Lin, 2013) and whilst many Buddhist practitioners would consider themselves non-dualistic in their thinking, the way bodily practices were approached at Kwan Yin tends to suggest otherwise. Specifically, the notion that one must move beyond the pleasure of the senses in order to achieve a "higher" form of contentment may suggest that the pleasure of the body is not valued vis-à-vis the contentment of the mind. That is, though the body is the vehicle, it is not the final destination. In other words, Buddhist participants were looking for mental emancipation rather than sensory enjoyment. While many spiritual ecofeminists, like Starhawk (1979; 1981; 1990; 2010), have indeed critiqued Western religions for the repression of sensual

Across all communities participants reported avoiding "unhealthy" or "toxic" foods, preferring "local", "hand-picked", "wholesome" food. This, I would suggest, demonstrates that participants were not only influenced by environmentalist perspectives on consumption/production, but also by the rhetoric of healthy/clean living (as well as healthism and the responsibilisation of risk) (see Luis, 2012; Engs, 2001). Cheryl from Kwan Yin explains that one of the benefits of living collectively was the fact that she always knew that the communal food would be healthy. She says:

> I basically don't have to think about what I am eating and whether I am eating in a healthy way. It's just everything is available and healthy and I don't put so much effort into thinking about food, what I am going to cook and what I am going to buy so that seems to benefit my body in a way that is, yeah, I feel good.

A related idea that emerged across all communities was that for food to be beneficial it needed to be "pure". A similar finding can be found in the work of Luis (2012) which was alluded to in Chapter One. Her work explored food politics in a lesbian community and she found that a hierarchy of purity existed in relation to the food women chose to consume. She explains that:

> *…these hierarchies roughly occupy the nutritional pyramid but the concerns behind them are not solely nutritional. One concern is the level of processing and additives: vegetables, especially organic ones, are seen as "especially pure" because they have not undergone processing by human agency. [This is even more so if the vegetables are local grown or self-grown and/or raw]* (p125).

Similarly, I found that for most participants, purity was defined in relation to the extent to which it was "unprocessed" or "natural". In other words, food was pure if it had not been subject to significant human intervention. Another characteristic of "pure" food related to its freshness. Rosie from Mountain Valley said:

> … these berries here [pointing to some berries] maybe this is true I don't know, but if I'm eating food minutes after it's been picked could it be that that food has more nourishment than food that's been sitting in the grocery store for three days, a week, maybe even two weeks? So I raise my own rabbits, I slaughter my own rabbits.

A number of interesting contradictions arose in relation to which foods were considered more "pure" than others. By and large, fruit and vegetables, particularly the organic variety, were considered wholesome, so was tofu, which paradoxically requires extensive

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pleasure, there is yet to be a similar critique of Buddhism, perhaps because Buddhism has only been popular in the West since the 1970s and has largely been seen as an alternative to Judeo-Christian traditions.

processing. Sue from Mountain Valley spoke of how she thought that certain types of bacteria and dirt were good for the body if they came directly from the earth:

> The air is good. The thing that I think of most - the water is good - and we're exposed to natural organisms. If the food's coming out of the garden and it's not muddy I don't wash it. There are things that are good for us to get inside of us. Our water is not pure. That's good for us. We're not vulnerable when a little bit of bacteria gets in, to falling apart. People can filter their water if they want to and so on.

These "good" forms of bacteria were differentiated from what participants often described as "toxins". I asked Marg from Oasis what harm such toxins could inflict on humans and she said the following:

> Stop filling your body with all these toxins, because toxins affect your mind, affect your perception, then that whole thing goes with being part of the rush that doesn't give you space to connect with your "soul self".

Marg's comments demonstrate the extent to which food intersected with other aspects of participants' perceptions of their subjectivities. For Marg, toxins did not just infiltrate the physical self - they also crept into one's soul or spirit. Marg had been significantly influenced by the Hindu/Ayurveda tradition, which proposes that food needs to be treated with sufficient mindfulness and care in order for it to be "healthful" (Morningstar, 1995). Indeed, it was unclear whether Marg was speaking of toxins that had a reality in the material world or whether she was speaking in more metaphorical terms. One possibility is that she was referring to the energetic properties of the food she consumed.

Another way the mind, body and spirit intersected was via the phenomenon of "healing foods". Ali, who had suffered from chronic stomach pains prior to joining community, in part attributed her recovery to her relationship to food. She says:

> ...food has been so important in my healing, really high quality foods and particularly animal products have been really healing for me because grains and beans are really taxing on my digestive system. So I eat a lot of animal products and to have a personal connection with the animals whose lives have been given so that mine can be sustained and improved is I think a really important part of the emotional and spiritual psychosomatic connection that it's all an integrated whole.

This, again, reflects an interesting encounter: between the body, spirit and materiality. Participants like Ali seemed to be alluding to recent developments in gut health and embracing the intersection between psyche and soma. Ali is referring to the importance of thinking of the self as embodied and responsive to matter – or in new materialist feminist terms susceptible to certain complex "intraactions". Indeed, this idea is taken up by new

materialist feminist, Elizabeth Wilson in her book *Gut Feminism* (2015) where she invites the reader to consider the proposition that the gut is "a site of intense biological, pharmaceutical, and psychological agency, on which the center is always vitally dependent" (p14).

In some communities, community members went to great lengths to understand the process of consumption/production. Farrin from River Stream, for example, had been present at the slaughtering of a cow at River Stream. During the interview, as Farrin explained the process to me in great detail, I could feel my stomach turn and a sense of light-headedness. She noticed my affect and asked if I was comfortable for her to continue. I told her it was no problem I wanted to hear about it in full. Farrin begins the description:

> It was about 6 or 7 people and first we went to where the cows are which is across the field and we went in and whoever offers themselves, I mean it is a very Native American way of doing it actually, so whoever is the one that is there. One did come forward a little bit. I don't think he really offered himself, of course not, and you kind of got them separated and you went into this field and you close the gate on the others and then (this is kind of bad) but there was a carcass of a previous, think it was an old cow who died, which is sadder to me in a way because you take from them all their lives and then shoot them in the head and eat them…He [the cow] went down to where the remains were and he put his head down and he sniffed and sniffed for a long time. He had his head down and he kind of bellowed like a kind of a bellow of outrage. This is anthropomorphising.

> Facilitator: Oh my.

> Farrin: And I felt like warning and just like horror.

> Facilitator: Oh that is horrible.

> Farrin: Yeah it was. It was really intense and it was really sad and everyone was really shocked by it.

> Facilitator: Wow. It's so hard isn't it? I am not a vegetarian but when I hear stories like that there is something deep inside me that shifts.

> Farrin: Yeah because you kind of recognise that and really it is a recognition I think.

Farrin's reference to a sense of *recognition* and *empathy* with the cow is resonant of Plumwood's notion of the expanded self. In line with Plumwood's definition, is not that Farrin identified herself in the animal, but rather she offers some understanding towards its experience. She continues:

> Then he walked away and [another community member] gave him some grains and he was eating the grains and being very careful of being shot in that little triangle between the ear and the eye where and got shot really well in the head. He fell over and I don't know... they don't die instantly, there is a lot of kicking and mechanical

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stuff….They cut his head off. Skinned him. Then it was getting kind of interesting how it was all done. The butchery…then on the dinner table that night then there was the actual seared cow. Because that is what *it* is about. I wasn't going to but I felt I needed to eat it all. And it was kind of difficult to eat it but I had a very different relationship to my food at that time. Having been there and see the animal die changed it incredibly and then I didn't go to the next, I went to help butcher. They hang out. There is a butchering bar where the beefies are. Or not right near them and I just was interested….

Farrin's relationship to food shifts following the witnessing of the slaughtering – she has a sense of owing it to the cow/the process to avoid wasting any of the meat. Her food takes on a different meaning, one that is more linked in ethics and the emotional reality of killing to eat. She explains another way the slaughtering affected her:

Here I am becoming aware in a slightly different way, more of a sort of, more of a predator, which is that I felt like such a predator. I would identify the prey and I wondered whether that was a female thing, which I thought was an interesting question, but yeah we were like a pack of wolves going after that deer. You know when we were slaughtering it and the animal is on the ground, it's just like a cave painting; it is incredible how it felt. And that continuity, going back through history was a good feeling as well….Sometimes when I am out in the garden you know, with a bunch of people and we are harvesting peas or something we look like a troupe of baboons or something, I really like that. So yeah, we are pretty primal here I think.

The language and concepts Farrin uses in the above passages are similar to those used by participants at Mountain Valley. Farrin felt enlivened as she connected with her "animal" or "primal side". She began to sense that she was part of the food chain. Although she was an animal lover, she also constructed herself as predator. This indeed reflects the blurring between the human and non-human world offered by new materialism and ecofeminism. It also reflects a call from feminist anthropologists and philosophers who see the human/animal duality as unrealistic and the cause of many animal rights abuses (See Bulbeck, 2012; Gaard, 1997; Noske, 1989).

As I have shown, across all communities, notions of purity, nourishment and wholesomeness were associated with the consumption of food. At Kwan Yin, food was seen as a way of sustaining one's efforts to achieve mental liberation – thus challenging dominant consumerist rhetoric of physical pleasure for the sake of pleasure. These discourses had both positive and negative results: from a health and environmental perspective, they encouraged participants to stick with foods that were local and did not involve excessive processing, they also encouraged ethical choices, however at the same time they had the potential effect of othering segments of society not interested in food in the same way and

extending the discourses of healthism. Yet something profound was also at play: participants seemed to be alluding to an embodied fleshy meeting between the way they perceived food, related to it and the material act of eating, digesting and fuelling their subjectivities. This, again, represents a contact point, one which has the potential to heal and transform depending on the meaning attributed to the foods eaten.

The Body as a Site of Spiritual Exploration – Grounding and Moving

As the above section shows, the intersection between nature and spirituality was particularly pronounced at Mountain Valley. At Oasis and Kwan Yin while there was still a focus on materiality, it was the physical/energetic *body* that was seen as the primary "doorway" to "spiritual awakening". Participants from both communities spoke at length about the spiritual insights they gained from working with their own corporeality which I turn to now.

Barcan's work on complementary and alternative therapies is significant here. In *Complementary and Alternative Medicine: Bodies, Therapies, Senses* (2011), she offers a rich exploration of the ways such therapies, or techniques, can "open up rich worlds of corporeal and intercorporeal experience" (p3). Specifically, she considers "the largely unexamined cultural, phenomenological and philosophical dimensions of alternative medicine" (2011, p3), charting its sensual aspects. She addresses how such techniques construct and act on the following senses: sight, sound, touch and intuition. Here, the body is analysed as a cultural phenomenon, a site where New Age and consumerist discourses are enacted and new ethical, phenomenological and intersubjective possibilities are generated. Barcan offers a multitude of examples that reveal the ways in which such therapies invite us to radically rethink the body and its relationship to others. Indeed, this section endeavours to follow in Barcan's footsteps by considering the philosophical, discursive possibilities and richness of such body techniques.

At Kwan Yin, the practice of seated meditation involved sitting in an upright posture for a period of 25 minutes, followed by a 5 minute period of walking meditation. As mentioned in Chapter Two, sitting meditation was required of residents twice a day, six times a week. Whilst in seated meditation, the instruction was either to watch the rise and fall of the abdomen as the breath entered and left the body or, alternatively, to practice an open awareness, which involved mindfully observing all phenomena as they arose, including thoughts, sensations and emotional or embodied feelings ("just-sitting" meditation).

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Participants at Kwan Yin often described the body as the basic foundation for spiritual practice. It acted as an anchor or place to gather the mind, which enabled practitioners to "let go of" thoughts or "tame" their "discursive minds". In other words, as the mind wandered and identified with certain stories, the instruction was to return to embodied awareness. In this way, the body was used as a way to settle the mind and assist in both the development of non-judgemental awareness and ultimate insight into the nature of "reality".

By contrast, the meditative practices at Oasis had multiple stages and involved a significant amount of spontaneous and free-style movement. Although these practices were optional, most community members had extensive experience in these techniques and had attended retreats employing such approaches in the past. Each morning before showering, community members would engage in a cathartic meditation practice in the communal hall. This involved a period of circular breathing (10 minutes), followed by vigorous jumping and exclaiming the syllable "ho" (10 minutes) and a period of emotional catharsis (10 minutes). Meditators were advised to use their body and "express" their emotions in the way they wanted to. This expression was to be uncontained, uncensored and spontaneous. This, participants explained, enabled one to tap into "authentic" energy. This often expressed itself as screaming, crying, laughing and singing. The next phase involved a period of ecstatic dancing to electronic music (10 minutes) and finally a period for silence and rest (10 minutes).

Participants from both Kwan Yin and Oasis explained how relating to their body using spiritual methods allowed them to "transform" their hearts and minds. It was through tuning into the body and "receiving" its "messages" that participants were able to gain some understanding into who they were and their needs and wants. These methods were often described as enabling participants to access a place that was beneath their "conditioning" or "programming" as they described it.

Peta from Oasis explains the transformative potential of returning to the body:

> I can say that I was not in my body as a child at all. I was just hiding somewhere way away. I found it too difficult to be in this body and on this planet... Then in my 30s I decided to become a massage therapist and that has helped me to settle in my body and be grateful to my body...On a spiritual level I wasn't present. Through body work - I did a big training in India for two months every day I was doing body work. I have gone through a whole tumble drying process. Being in the body, learning from the body, loving the body and understanding it. Since then I have put it into practice as I

live on. So yes, I am very much in the body. Until you are in your body, you don't know that you are not in your body until you come home. This is your grounding, your temple, your vehicle to be in. At 61 I am still very active, healthy, good and happy in the body.

Peta employs the image of going through a spiritual "tumble dry process" via her body work. This, she says, enables her to connect to love and understanding in relation to her physical and spiritual self. In this way, she began to place her body front and centre of her experience - arguably enacting a type of new materialist feminist praxis seeing both mind and body as entangled and mutually supportive. She also subscribes to the idea that "the body processes and holds emotions…" and that "emotional experiences are held whole and complete like tiny time capsules deep in the body's inner space" (Barcan, 2011, p79). This was not a matter of "balancing" mind and body but seeing their inextricable connection. Similarly, Cat explained how bodily practices reminded her of her shared humanity or physicality. By being in the body she was not splitting off the part of herself that connected her to others:

> I like that there is stuff built into what we do [here] that is intended to bring us back to our bodies, that intends to remind us that I am a person and the person next to me is a person and it's just intended to be these reminders of what we want to offer each other and that we do it together as a community.

A number of participants reported experiencing otherworldly experiences through embodied spiritual techniques. Oli from Oasis, who was about 70 years old at the time of the interview, explained that she was able to gain access to different archetypal characters through sound and dance, though it was unclear whether she was referring to past lives or something more psychological. She did, however, seem to be "channelling "universal" energies" (Barcan, 2011, 123). She says:

> I know I've done sound – what's that trance-dancing. And sound work too where I have felt that I have been a Native American chief, you know, with my hands up saying, 'Great spirit, why have you forsaken us?' And another time, another feeling of being a young female child having been displaced, and there was some other music, you know, "Sacred Spirit" I think it's called. Some of that kind of brought back stuff too. It's quite fascinating, just little… And it feels totally valid for yourself. Other people think, 'oh you're just nuts', okay. It's valid for me.

Oli's last comment about her experience being invalidated by others demonstrates an awareness of the fact that her experience was not necessarily accepted or understood by society at large. It sat outside of common experience, even within the Oasis community. Despite this, however, Oli seemed to receive a great amount of satisfaction and enjoyment from being able to channel transpersonal expressions of "humanity" through her movement

practices. In this way, Oli, like Cat, challenges yet another binary – that of self and other. It is almost as if when connecting with the divine Oli can be anyone and everyone. I was lucky enough to engage in some dance with Oli. My field-notes explain:

> During the interview, Oli asked me if I wanted to do some dancing together the next day - just the two of us. I said I would love to. We met in the community meditation hall at 9am. She had a soundtrack she had put together with a range of songs – from disco tracks to contemporary hip-hop. She pressed play and off we went. We danced in our own space, not together, but as I looked over at Oli I could see she was engaging in a form of wild self-expression. She shouted and made expressive hand movements and allowed the music to penetrate her. I could see that she was experiencing a type of ecstatic bliss. It was contagious. I allowed myself to relax and enjoy. I was struck by how different this was to doing conventional forms of physical exercise. It included our emotions as well as our bodies. There was no expectation I repress spontaneous expressions of feeling or to dance in any particular way. At one point I rested in child's pose during a song. At 10am she clinically switched the music off and wished me a good day.

> (Reflexive Journal, 2013)

Another pertinent theme that emerged at both Oasis and Kwan Yin was the idea of being psychically "grounded". Being "grounded" was seen as a desirable state, one that one should aspire to in one's spiritual practice. I enquired with participants about what being "grounded" meant exactly and why it was seen as a preferable state to ground*lessness*. Peta from Oasis describes it as "coming home". She says:

> What it means to me is that you can settle in the body and be present. It almost feels like there is so much energy often up here [pointing to her head]…It's still that connection to the heavens as well but very rooted on the planet. So that is what it means to me. That settled feeling in the body.

Peta's description points to an interesting dichotomy between heaven and earth. She seems to be suggesting that being lost in one's mind (in the "heavens") should be balanced or "brought down to earth" through grounding practices - much like stirred up tea leaves dropping to the bottom of a cup. In this way, Peta is tapping into the idea of "balance" (between mind/body) adopted by many concerned with wellbeing both within and outside of mainstream.

Participants associated being grounded with the notion of a firm, solid and unwavering foundation that could "hold" or "handle" whatever life presented. This was reminiscent of the notion of a holding that Rose (2012) expounds which is associated with what a parent might offer a child. In this model the body represents the stability and reliability of a good enough parent who is able to placate and endure intense manifestations of emotions.

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Arabella from Kwan Yin explains the impact "grounding" has on her emotional and interpersonal life. She says:

> I am learning to really listen to what my body feels like. Anxiety feels really uncomfortable but kind of calm and grounded and confidence feels very secure…. My heart rate slows down to something that feels right in my body there is no like tension in any of the places that stress normally causes tension. That grounding feeling is what I like and I notice that slowing down helps me to find this kind of grounded space and spaciousness and relaxing around things and practice helps me to remember that those are grounding elements for me so to know that practice is always there and being at Kwan Yin for me is an easy way to access that, that grounding, that calm, that silence, no matter what is going on and…the same conflicts or things that throw you off your grounding still happen, but to be able to access or touch that grounding of practice and all of the things about practice that for me that help me to relax. I don't know if relax is the right word but calm down, that's that joy, oh practice is always there, it is always with me. It's a comforting thing.

Arabella refers to the psychic and somatic interchangeably when describing her sense of relaxation, which mirrors the new materialist position that we are in continual interaction with our entangled materiality. Cat from Kwan Yin speaks also of the psychological benefits of feeling grounded in her body. She says:

> … I just found a way of being on my cushion that was really solid. It was just so much more solid and being able to be with that suffering. There was a guy sitting next to me and he said he spent his whole life trying not to be in his body. You know drugs and acting out, just trying to avoid being himself and who he was, so this was a fundamentally hard practice in that way so I had a great appreciation for the fact that the practice requires you to just be with who you are, whatever your body is like at any given time.

Cat and other participants seemed to be suggesting that the body had the capacity to reveal one's "true" feelings and "true" self. According to this view, the body had a kind of transparent quality and encoded a type of "truth" or reality that could be accessed by getting in contact with somatic sensations and messages. Hannah from Oasis explains grounding in a slightly different way: she describes it as a sense of being connected to one's "power" in the face of internal and external challenges. She also associates the opposite with a disconnection from reality. She says:

> if I'm not grounded then I'm not really connected to reality.
>
> Facilitator: Yeah, and what does it mean to be grounded?
>
> Hannah: Well, I mean there's that body sense, the ability to really have the weight in the feet, in the legs and really in the sex centre and not in the mind and – how else would I say? Yeah. To be in your power basically as a force but in your own energy and your power…It's like, if you're grounded and someone walks past and wants to

push you over they can't because you're grounded. You've got your roots, but if you're not, if your energy's up in your head and you're la, la, la, random emotions and they're kind of taking over, people can come and they can knock you over with what they want to throw at you. So that's how I kind of see it…So sometimes I get completely thrown and then it takes me a little while to come back and get my grounding and go okay, actually, I wouldn't have acted that way. I should have acted that way and then I clear it up. So it can be frustrating because I just want to be – but you can't. It's just a – it's a practice.

What is interesting here is that for Hannah and a number of other participants the mind is conceived as somehow separate to body. However, unlike the Cartesian dualism which sees rationality as superior to corporeality, she sees the body as a superior (or at least equal) source of wisdom and relatedness. According to Hannah's account it follows that being "trapped" in one's mind is considered a lowly spiritual state. Instead, being connected to our embodied selves is seen as a portal to our "full" spiritual capacity. This perhaps could be read as a response to the devaluing of embodiment in mainstream Western culture. However, it prompts an interesting question about whether the split between mind/body is being maintained or reconfigured by participants like Hannah. It prompts us to consider whether this is simply a reversal of the dualism feminists have been attempting to transcend altogether. There is no doubt that Hannah sees a clear connection between mind and body yet she still seems to tacitly prioritise an embodied awareness over intellectual capacity. In this sense, it could be said that she reverses the idea that it should be rationality that dictates morality and behaviour, instead pointing to bodily intuition as the proper way to guide integrity and wisdom. Or perhaps, as Barcan (2011) posits, something more complex is on foot here, as broadly speaking in New Age discourse:

> …intuition fits on neither side of a neat binary, being neither reason (rationality, logic, analytical, capacity) nor emotion. Rather, it represents the pinnacle of perceptive capacities, but one that needs to work in conjunction with other modes of knowing (p203).

As already mentioned, catharsis meditation was a central practice for those at the Oasis community. Catharsis was described by participants as the process of "de-conditioning" the "self" and as a way of extricating patterns which no longer served them. As explained in Chapter Three, in the main, participants understood their "conditioned-self" as a constellation of dysfunctional thoughts and/or behaviours arising out of the process of socialisation. According to participants, however, this conditioning did have the capacity to be transformed and replaced. Thus, a certain hopefulness underscored the process of catharsis – catharsis could lead to something more "authentic", connected and free.

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Moreover, the mainstream could be effectively purged in order to make the way for more life-affirming and respectful approaches to the social and natural world. In describing the meditation, Charlotte from Oasis used the imagery of transformation of one's socialisation. She said "it's just a place [catharsis meditation] where I can just be free to throw that out and acknowledge that it's there but to release it and let it go and transmute it, I guess, in some form and it was incredibly liberating." Hannah, also from Oasis, who had engaged in long periods of this practice, put it like this:

> What this work has done is just phenomenal and it's specifically breaking through our conditioning which is exactly what I wanted. I didn't know at the time what conditioning was or anything like that but going [into an intensive period of meditation practice], it opens you up. All the meditations, you're there to look at your conditioning and throw it out or do whatever you need to do to find yourself basically. [The meditation is designed] specifically throw out the conditioning. So I did a lot of that, just also because when you shift from, say, living in your conditioning to in what is just in your being it's not an easy journey because it's like – I mean, my brain is literally rewired. And I am flying now, if you know what I mean.

Hannah's words have an intensity about them. She is interested in "breaking through" and "throwing out" her past patterning in order to achieve something more "authentic". Her account seems to be underpinned by the idea that beneath the "conditioning" one could find one's "true self" – which she conceives as linked to the Divine. At some point in the interview, I asked what she had discovered *specifically* through the process of catharsis. She had referred to uncovering her authenticity in a general way but had not given many details about what her transformation felt or looked like exactly. She responded that she had discovered a connection to her "sexual centre", which acted as an entry-point to her "source energy". She said:

> … specifically it's trying to hammer the sex centre basically and get us into our source energy basically and out of the head, but we're so used to being in the head that we don't even know what it's like to be in that energy and even for years I did [catharsis meditation] and it took me a while to even understand coming into the first chakra basically because it's very confronting…We get so heavily conditioned around sex and repressed of sex and it can be quite difficult. So I had to do a lot of therapy as well as that, in conjunction with it. I mean, the idea to get down into the first chakra is probably – it's huge because it really takes you away. It shows you the potential that you can have away from what the mind is programmed and how you're living and it's like you completely switch - - -

This source/sexual energy, it seems, linked Hannah to a fundamental "essence" which she believed she shared with all of life (see Barcan, 2011, p24). It also provided her with the capacity to see her potential beyond the normative restrictions of her past. She was tapping

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into a sense of possibility that she had not known existed. She no longer had to comply with her past programming or constricting identities; she could now create a new way of being in the world. For Hannah, this opened the door to the qualities of spontaneity, truth, freedom and transgression – and this was the place from which she sought to live. It is interesting to highlight at this point that these are features that are often associated with the sphere of the bodily: culturally, the body is seen as spontaneous and beyond our control (see Price and Shildrick 1999) and Hannah seemed to be referring to both the material body and using it as a metaphor for a new way of life.

Natalie explains that through the process of catharsis meditation she became aware of the difficult emotions present in her mind-stream. She also developed the capacity to let them go:

> You can shout and scream and let go of whatever you – and the beauty with that is also that you learn in the [meditation] – and I think that is a very crucial point for me at least – learning to watch your emotions. Don't get too bogged down or identified with them. So in catharsis [meditation], you can do it for 10 minutes then you let it go and move on. A beautiful little point because you know just let go and move on. So emotions are signs that you have to pay attention to for me and that process that what is the message in there and what does it want to "show" me or teach me or what is important? Process it and then let it go. For me the surroundings support such a process. Instead of letting your life be dominated all the time by your emotions like anger or frustration or demands or expectations or whatever it is. To remain watchful and aware. Knowing that it is a changing event. So that is in a nut shell what ties things up...They are messages and there are events in our bodies manifesting but some are old habits of our conditioning. They don't really have the right place and now – so to remain watchful and aware of it frees you up from that sort of thing.

Within these accounts the boundaries between inside and outside seem to be preserved by participants at Oasis. The idea that something residing "within" needed to be ejected out of the self into the world indicates that participants saw themselves – specifically their heart and mind – as a bounded entity who needed to use a special technique to expel the unwholesome in order to make "space" for the holy.

Throughout this section I have demonstrated that participants adopted certain "grounding" and/or expressive techniques which promoted moments of transpersonal transcendence and expanded participants' subjectivities. These methods allowed participants to accept experiences of psychological distress more readily, access messages through the body and get in touch with what participants understood as the "authentic self". Most participants seemed to value embodied wisdom as much as detached rationality. This, arguably, could be

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seen as an example of new materialist feminist theory in practice. By challenging the superiority of mind over body, participants reported experiencing the body as a source of comfort, wisdom and wholeness.

Conclusion

This Chapter explored the ways in which participants' sense of materiality *intersects* with participants' psychological and spiritual worlds. It examined the ways certain culturally accepted binaries were reconceptualised by participants, revealing that participants, across all communities, challenged the Cartesian dualisms of animal/human and material/immaterial. It argued that alternative approaches to "nature" expanded participants' sense of self to include an ecological awareness, resulting in greater environmental responsibility and an expansion of their inner worlds. Participants generally saw their own human life as equal to the natural world and in this way *interrupted* the hierarchy of human vis-à-vis animal. It follows that ethics were seen by most participants as properly applying equally to both the social and material worlds. Participants also demonstrated deep empathy with the natural world – some even extended this to a full rejection of the notion of an individually bounded, separate self in relation to nature.

I contended that "nature" represented a symbolic, lived and relational phenomena that led to healing psycho-social outcomes. Indeed, the *encounter* between matter, the metaphoric and the self enabled participants to feel their emotions and think about thinking. It also provided a portal to the Divine and transpersonal. Connecting with matter was seen as freeing, authentic and as a gateway to spiritual presence. Moreover, it symbolised a source of physical and emotional refuge: participants explained that in the wild they were better able to endure, release and allow their emotions and abandon normative restrictions and expectations.

Thus, the encounter between landscape and subjectivity broadened participants' perceptions of their place in the world whilst simultaneously moving them closer to the specificity of their inner lives. Moreover, the boundaries of participants' personhood stretched to encompass materiality. Specifically the material and metaphoric body was used as a gateway to authenticity, the containment of troubling affect and as a portal to moments of transcendence. These findings, taken together, reveal that complex accounts of materiality allow for intraactions with mind and spirit and tangible possibilities of transformation and healing.

CONCLUSION: UTOPIAN ENCOUNTERS AND PARADOXES

Contribution to the Field

As outlined in Chapter One, scholarship on alternative communities has proposed that Intentional Communities, as well as communes and other alternative lifestyle movements, represent a creative and successful critique of modern life (see Manzella, 2010, Jackson, 2004, Kirby, 2003 Sargisson and Sargent, 2004). This project extends these findings and shepherds the study of alternative communities into original territory. Centrally, it argues that alternative communities are complex sites of entangled and intersecting discourses, which taken together, have the potential to broaden the horizons of human possibility, promote richer "connection" and provide hope, healing and solace in the context of late modern life. Yet, at the same time, this study finds that such communities have the potential to do the opposite: that is, to create bounded discursive systems that can exclude and/or disappoint those who exist on the margins. These findings are significant in that they provide insight into the appeal, promise and yet unavoidable complexity of modern alternative communities in the West.

As identified in Chapter One, a significant gap in the scholarship exists in relation to the discursive complexities shaping the *subjectivities* of those committed to alternative community. I linked this to the fact that such works were not always informed by critical traditions of thought. Rather, much of the literature employed a socio-historic method, documenting the biographies, structures and social aspects of utopian experiments and placing them within the context of broader cultural trends such as the counter-culture and Western religious revivals (see Metcalf, 1998; 2004). At the same time, I pointed to a number of sociological studies that addressed macro-questions relating to social ties, friendship and social cohesion in community (Abrams and McCulloch, 1976; Sargisson and Sargent, 2004), the factors that lead to a community's ultimate success or failure (see Zablocki 1980; Farias, 2017) and the extent to which modern neoliberal discourses shape community structures (Ben-Rafael, Oved and Topel, 2012 and Manzella, 2010). Ultimately, however, I demonstrated that most studies focussed on community or society itself, neglecting the symbiotic and inherently political relationship between community and subjectivity.

In Chapter Two I contended that the concept of subjectivity represents a site where innovative possibilities and non-hegemonic discourses are enacted, tested and tangibly

experienced. Not only does it capture the internal workings of the individual, it signifies something beyond the psychological, where cultural constructions contend for legitimacy, control and hegemony. Thus, by studying subjectivities and their inextricable relationship to normativity this study provided fine-grained data on the micro-dynamics and the specific yet often subtle social constructions that shape the experiences of women in community. Without such data it would not be possible to assess whether alternative communities are genuinely meeting the needs of its members, in a lived sense. Further, the focus on subjectivities in this study provided insight into the ways women's sense of self is constituted and reconstituted within (and by) community and the extent to which they exercise their agency and resist subject positions. Thus, this thesis took heed of Foucault's suggestion that "discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it" (Foucault, 1978: 101).

Centrally, this thesis argued that the encounter between discourse, materiality and relationality had the transformational effect of making and remaking participants' subjectivities in an ongoing and material exchange. At the same time it acknowledged the inherent unpredictability of such encounters and their potential to evoke "the simultaneous experience of fear and wonder, risk and fulfilment" (Wilson, 2017, pp455 - 458). Indeed, this thesis highlighted such paradoxes and ambiguities, pointing to both the transformative and more unexpected, and at times dangerous, implications of subjective encounters, which I detail throughout.

Throughout this thesis I applied theories of discourse and knowledge, emotionality, utopianism, ecofeminism and new material feminism to elucidate the fleshy, emotive and discursive effects of subjective encounters. Specifically, I have examined the following: human potential discourses and personhood; emotions and the "therapeutic" milieu; relationality and intimacy; and materiality and the transpersonal.

Central Findings

This thesis argued that the utopian project is not simply a place one travels to or a vision to be pursued - though it is both of these things - but a space that exists within, outside and in-between. Hence, utopia exists beyond the commonly imagined *boundaries* that demarcate community, the self and the natural world. Unlike traditional conceptions of utopia as an imagined *place*, *destination* or *state of being,* it was found to be organic and spanning across

and in-between a multitude of sites, spiralling inwards toward the depths of the soul, and upwards to the sky and trees. The utopian community, then, involved connections across all of these spheres. I argued that community acted as container for social critique and connection and deep personal introspection, actively inviting members to move toward the richness of their inner lives and to claim their own psychological, corporeal and spiritual specificity, whilst simultaneously deepening their relationships with other community members. This study confirmed Sargisson's (2000a) findings that those committed to alternative community shared a utopian vision for a better, more fulfilled and connected existence and that these visions were indeed pragmatic and flexible. However, it added something new, demonstrating that utopia, in practice, existed at various meeting-points and was enlivened at these junctures.

Throughout this thesis I argued that alternative community was not a self-centred project. Though many participants' journeys were instigated by an individual crisis, love, acceptance and connection were seen by participants as the pinnacle of self-discovery. Thus, my findings add weight to Heelas' (2009) contention that groups informed by New Age spirituality should not be viewed as self-absorbed or concerned solely with individual goals, but rather motivated by care for the world around them. Indeed, this study argued that New Age discourse within alternative community encouraged greater care and compassion for the self and the broader world, thereby challenging the boundaries between self and other.

For example, I examined the ways the natural world released, healed and assisted in the processing of participants' personal distress and invited them to claim their "animal" nature and foster a greater understanding of their place within the "fabric of life". Hence, the self here contacted the material world in a way that was therapeutic, illuminating and reconfiguring. Moreover, rather than push away suffering, difficult emotions were tenderly embraced, expressed and managed through the body and self-expression. Darkness and light were invited in. Gender relations were reflected on openly and grievances were publically negotiated. Thus, for most, to be a member of alternative community was to inhabit a subjectivity that was relational and introspective. This was a self that invited connection, rather than separation, and collapsed the margin between "me", "you" and "other". In this way, the material, discursive and relational comingled, broadening participants' horizons and experiences of being-in-the-world.

Healing and Spiritual Encounters

In this thesis I argued that *healing* and spiritual *growth* represented some of the most significant transformations occurring within the communities studied. I revealed that participants across all communities were engaged in healing past wounds, healing their relationship to the Earth, healing interpersonal ruptures and transforming their relationship to self, others and their sense of embodiment. Indeed, healing and growth occurred in various forms and across intertwining sites. It occurred in the spaces in-between, as materiality contacted discourse and as relationality met with emotional realms.

In Chapter Three, I argued that a fundamental therapeutic encounter took place at the juncture between human potential discourses and participants' narratives of self. Specifically, I showed how emotional "authenticity" and spiritual "seeking", led to particular understandings of the self which in turn had therapeutic benefits. Participants' self-narratives were generally constructed as a *journey* that involved leaving the mainstream in an attempt to find something more meaningful, spiritual and connected. Such narratives then culminated in receiving love, solace and "authenticity". I argued that such storylines had productive implications. First, they were shown to reduce tensions participants faced in relation to their own identity and the outside world, particularly in relation to the "choice" to pursue an "alternative" way of being and living in the world. Second, such storylines promoted a sense of connectedness within community, for in sharing similar narratives participants felt they had found their "tribe" and achieved the sense of homecoming that they yearned for. In this way, shared discursive formations promoted belonging, connection and acceptance within participants' minds as well as within community itself. Thus, my work points to what such discursive formations *did* exactly when coming into contact with the subjectivities of participants. That is, while most work on alternative communities find that connection is one of its major benefits, the scholarship has rarely explained the mechanics behind connection and belonging.

In Chapter Four I proposed that as human potential narratives contacted participants' identities and conceptions of community something further took place: participants experienced more emotional and social safety, self-awareness, healing and the possibility of greater connection. Moreover, this juncture was associated with participants increasing their capacity and willingness to reflect on distressing emotions and "manage" them through various techniques of the self, body and mind. Such junctures generated a distinct form of personhood, one that prioritised emotional life and, thus, encouraged community members

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to "feel" and "express" moments of "spontaneous" affect that may otherwise have been supressed. These findings extended Heelas' (2006) contention that New Age discourses invite individuals to move toward the richness of their subjective lives and broaden their "horizons" by understanding and relating to their suffering in unique ways.

In Chapter Four I elaborated on the ways in which a psychotherapeutic model of working with emotional suffering intersected with social ethics within alternative community. I revealed that participants across all communities critiqued the dominant emotional styles in mainstream culture, particularly the pressure to be "continually happy" and "suppress" negative emotions especially in social settings. This was contrasted with the emotional style offered within alternative community where emotional honesty and expression were encouraged, as were certain affective states that may have been otherwise viewed as taboo or illegitimate in mainstream society.

These findings extended the work of Illouz (2008) who examines "therapy culture" in the West, characterising it as a discourse that involves attributing emotional distress to the dysfunction of one's birth family, engaging in a type of 'confession' (or emotional expression), which results in a type of "redemption" (or healing). My work revealed that as such a discourse contacted participants' subjectivities an alternative ethical framework emerged, one that situated the locus of community life within an individual's capacity to understand, feel and express emotions in a safe and loving way and relate to others and the natural world in the same way. This framework invited participants toward their own difficulties and the specificity of their own internal lives, something they may not have done within mainstream culture. It also encouraged a very particular understanding of social life and what it meant to live in community. Such a normative framework encouraged community members to foster self-awareness, take personal responsibility for troubling emotions (whilst frequently placing moral culpability on one's birth family) and engage openly and "authentically" particularly when conflict arose. This framework, then, ensured that "therapeutic" ways of relating to self and other remained at the centre of community life.

In Chapter Five I examined the notion of "community" and argued that it represented a physical, social and metaphoric site that facilitated utopian encounters. I revealed that "community" was imbued with notions of "connection" and "intimacy", which, as Weingarten (1991) suggested decades ago, remain widespread values in Western society. In

this Chapter I problematised the idea that "connection" is simply "natural" and contended that connection had diverse meanings depending on the formations it contacted. In this way, I distinguished my study from the majority in the field - particularly works in the field of social psychology (see Laurenceau, Rivera, Schaffer and Pietromonaco (2004) and Firestone and Firestone (2004)) - which have assumed that there is a "normal" way to foster intimacy. Instead, I revealed that connection here was associated with the relational norms of active empathy, openness, expression and reflexivity as well as overt displays of love and empathy. These norms guided social practices and encouraged certain ways of relating to others at social gatherings, meal-times and during informal occasions. Moreover, participants overwhelmingly perceived community as a "safe base" to venture into unexamined parts of their psyche and explore alternative ways of interacting with others. In this way, community norms interacted with participants' personal psychology, facilitating greater possibilities for intersubjective connection and personal growth.

The final group of intersections I expounded were associated with the ways the environment, body and spirituality met in participants' subjective worlds. I argued that nature acted as a symbol, material phenomena and healing and supportive force in times of need. My work here built on the literature on "therapeutic landscapes", particularly the work of Rose (2012) who suggests that the encounter between landscape and metaphor can lead to healing points of contact. My work extended Rose's suggestions revealing that nature encouraged participants to reflect on and "mentalise" their troubling emotions, escape social stigma and manage grief in a safe and loving space. It also led to moments of transcendence and spiritual growth in which participants connected with their "primal" humanity and experienced themselves as part of something transpersonal. I argued that in paying attention to their own materiality and its "intraaction" with the world around them, participants' personhood extended to include the material and to embrace its capacity to placate suffering and marshal spiritual growth. Moreover, I revealed how new materialist feminism and ecofeminism helped make sense of such moments of material contact. Pragmatically, such encounters were shown to encourage greater environmental awareness and challenge mainstream consumerist rhetoric and practice. They also encouraged deeper and more meaningful relationships with food and the body. Participants used corporeal practices to expand their subjectivities and make contact with spiritual wisdom and what they viewed as their "authentic" self. Thus, in this way the reconfiguring of immaterial and material boundaries proved both healing and transformative.

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Taken together, these findings revealed that alternative community and its associated discourses were largely successful in offering women a satisfying, therapeutic and connected alternative to mainstream culture. Thus, for the most part, alternative community was fulfilling its promise, effectively providing a tender container for women who sought such nurturance. However, unlike other studies, this thesis exposed the mechanics that operate behind such utopian encounters, focussing particularly on the complexity involved as the discursive, material and relational aspects of community life contacted and produced alternative ways of being in the world.

Paradoxical Points of Contact

However, this thesis did not tell an entirely utopian story. It did not simply canvas the positive aspects of alternative community; it also highlighted some of the more limiting and, at times, constrictive components of utopian encounters. Thus, certain discourses, practices and cultures aimed at promoting community members' healing and connection were shown to have the opposite effect for a small yet significant minority. Put another way, discursive, relational and emotion norms that seemed empowering and healing on the surface had some unintended and, at times, unexpected implications.

Thus, my findings indicated that certain encounters and their challenge to traditional boundaries proved exclusionary at times. The utopian self, then, created a paradox: it created its own boundaries that disappointed a minority of participants. Those who did not fit the discursive construction/s, or who did not subscribe to particular modes of managing their emotions and/or relationships faced a markedly different experience compared to their counterparts. Although this was not the norm, and none of the participants interviewed reported regretting being part of such an endeavour, these paradoxes highlighted the multiple, and sometimes darker, implications of the utopian project. Such complexity meant that the confining features of community life I refer to equally represented emancipation and freedom for others and vice versa.

I offered a number of pertinent illustrations in this respect. For instance, I argued that the major discursive formations underpinning participants' narratives did not appear to allow room for stories of failure, frustration and disappointment. This begged the question: were aspects of participants' experiences being omitted from their self-reported narratives and, moreover, were particular features of communities' discourse immune to criticism? An example offered in Chapter Four revealed that the emotion norms of authenticity,

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spontaneity and honesty had the potential to exclude those who did not have the capacity or willingness to engage in such emotion work and that, at times they elicited disgust toward those who did not have the willingness to relate to their emotions in a "vulnerable" and "open" way. Additionally, I found that different interpretations of authenticity could lead to conflict, disagreement and in extreme cases shunning within community. These findings extended the sociological literature on psychotherapeutic discourse that has critically examined constraining "systems of authority" (Rice, 1992) in these contexts, proving that it is essential to shine a light on the exclusionary aspects of discursive systems.

In Chapter Six I proposed that certain norms relating to the natural world were found to be constrictive at times. I found that participants reified the boundary between nature and culture and as a result tended to devalue aspects of mainstream society that they considered to be too "civilised". As a result, I argued that participants might struggle to appreciate some of the uncomfortable aspects of the natural world and to receive the comfort and solace they desired from what they understood to be "culture". Lastly, and yet of equal importance, I revealed that the social norms of certain communities led to a certain blindness in relation to sexual politics, in particular notions of "freedom" were often used against women to justify sexualised speech and behaviour. This was shown to act as a serious barrier to fulfilment and connection for a small number of participants, thus extending the very small number of studies that examines sexual politics in alternative communities (see Martin and Fuller, 2004; Miller, 1992).

These findings contributed something new to scholarship on alternative community in that they offer fine-grained qualitative data on the more problematic (and subtle) aspects of community discourse and culture. Whereas the literature has often looked at more obvious problems, like break-downs in communication and process (see Chapter One), this study looked at the more discursive expectations that can adversely affect women's subjectivities in a way that is often tacit and overlooked.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study demonstrated that although community life can produce some difficult social norms, it continues to provide support and connection in women's lives. However, as with any research project, it was limited in a number of ways. First, participants were interviewed at a particular point in time. This meant that this study's data did not capture long-term changes in participants' attitudes and experiences. A longitudinal study could have examined

how participants' perceptions and experiences changed across time and space and the reasons for this. Moreover, participant observation was limited to a period of two weeks at each site. A longer period of the time in the field would have continued to expose some of the more buried issues and tensions within alternative community. This could have been particularly useful in analysing some of the difficult gendered dynamics I pointed to in Chapter Five. Since most of these dynamics were captured during participant observation, it is feasible to suggest that further data could have been gathered if I had stayed in the field for a longer duration. Another obvious limitation was that this study focussed on communities from only two countries. If this study was more extensive in its scope it could have been enriched by including other communities from countries with strong communitarian histories like New Zealand and Canada. Lastly, and most obviously, this study did not include the direct voices of men, though they were included in participant observation. This was a methodological decision, as the purpose of the study was to make the voices of women central and to delve into the more complex aspects of their subjective experiences. Had the scope of this study been more far-reaching, a comparison of the perceptions of men and women could have elicited further insights into the sexual politics and gender dynamics. This is indeed an area that would benefit from further research.

Little, if any, research has been undertaken analysing the intersection of discourse, materiality and relationality and its potential to transform women's subjectivities in alternative community. Thus, these findings represent a necessary contribution to the field in that they point to the fact that focussing simply on the structures or practices of community in isolation is hardly sufficient: discourse and the material lens are also needed to provide a more complete picture of the factors that enhance and/or inhibit the satisfaction of those committed to alternative community.

Thus, this study has multiple implications for further research in the area of alternative community. The first is methodological. In studying alternative community, my findings indicate that considering the symbolic, material and social aspects, and their unique comingling, is especially fruitful in developing a multifaceted picture of the ways in which community can affect individuals' subjectivity. In this way, the location researchers choose for analysis is of great importance. This study also indicates that mixing interviews, auto-ethnography and participant observation can provide a fuller picture of some of the more subtle aspects of discourse and community relations. Finally, this study argues for a model of utopia that moves the site of inquiry from simply the community structure toward various

and intersecting spaces that create meaning and ultimately transform subjectivities. I have offered a nuanced conception of healing and how and where it happens exactly which may be of use to women within alternative community or who are seeking out alternative community or lifestyle. By conceiving of utopia as existing at meeting points, women may develop a fuller picture of the specific mechanisms behind connection and healing. In addition, by understanding some of the more troubling aspects of alternative community, idealised conceptions of utopia may be challenged and reality-tested in a more explicit and meaningful way.

Appendices

Appendix A

Pseudonym	Community Pseudonym	Age Range
Miranda	Kwan Yin Garden	60-70
Cat	Kwan Yin Garden	30-40
Janet	Kwan Yin Garden	70-80
Arabella	Kwan Yin Garden	30-40
Carole	Kwan Yin Garden	60-70
Cheryl	Kwan Yin Garden	30-40
Melinda	Kwan Yin Garden	40-50
Ali	Mountain Valley	20-30
Sue	Mountain Valley	60-70
Rosie	Mountain Valley	60-70
Ari	Mountain Valley	50-60
Jessica	Mountain Valley	60-70
Kerry	Mountain Valley	60-70
Bec	Mountain Valley	30-40
Belinda	Mountain Valley	40-50
Jude	Mountain Valley	50-60
Les	River Stream	40-50
Evelyn	River Stream	20-30
Fay	River Stream	50-60
Tina	River Stream	20-30
Vera	River Stream	20-30
Diane	River Stream	20-30
Cate	River Stream	20-30
Farrin	River Stream	40-50
Gail	River Stream	80-90
Heather	Oasis	50-60
Marg	Oasis	40-50
Cally	Oasis	50-60
Oli	Oasis	60-70
Charlotte	Oasis	40-50
Peta	Oasis	50-60
Hannah	Oasis	20-30
Rachel	Oasis	40-50
Natalia	Circle Hill	60-70
Victoria	Circle Hill	60-70
Sara	Circle Hill	50-60
Abagail	Circle Hill	60-70

Appendix B

To

I write to you regarding research I am currently undertaking as a PhD student in the Discipline of Gender Studies and Social Analysis at the University of Adelaide.

I write to introduce myself, to provide you with some information regarding my study and, most importantly, to invite your community to take part in my research.

I would also like to direct you to a video link (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zTf8AXE_AyQ) which provides further information about my research interests and background.

The study I have designed explores the experiences of women committed to alternative ways of living, being and knowing. It focuses on the ways women understand and relate to their own bodies, the natural environment and to others.

The purpose of the study is to explore these themes in depth and present a rich account of the stories of women actively pursuing alternative beliefs and visions. Your community's participation would assist me greatly with my exploration. Specifically, it would enable me to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and views of women committed to sustainable communal living and community building.

I have chosen to study this topic because I am a firm believer in the power of community and our capacity to offer more care and compassion to the world around us. We live in an age where many individuals report feeling alienated and disconnected from the people and pursuits that are important to them. This is made worse by the growing demands on our time and energy, which makes it difficult for many to adequately respond to our bodies and minds' needs.

I have been involved in a number of communities and groups which have played an important part in shaping my understanding of modern society. These have included women's groups, social justice movements and environmental groups. I have learnt a great deal from these groups' members about how we can improve our wellbeing and quality of life by bringing a different quality to the way we relate, be and know.

I attach the project's Information Sheet which outlines what participation would entail.

I would love to have a telephone conversation or Skype meeting with you to discuss the project further and to provide you with some more information regarding participation.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

PhD Candidate

Appendix C

- Do you need anything on the info sheet explained to you?
- Signing consent form
- Should not go for longer than 90 minutes
- All answers provided will be confidential
- The (insert community) and the (you) will be allocated a pseudonym
- You will get an update of the research findings via a restricted blog
- You can elect to skip any questions you don't feel comfortable answering

Background and Joining a Group/Community

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your background?
2. How did you come to be here?
3. Can you describe your first encounter with this community and why you thought it was a good fit?
4. Can you tell me a bit about your community/group? (probe: goal, intentions, visions, structure and decision-making)
5. What motivated you to become part of this community or group?
6. How long have you been part of this group/community?
7. What aspects of this group/community do you identify strongly with?
8. Is there anything about this group/community you do not identify with?
9. Are you or have you ever been part of similar groups/communities? If so, can you tell me about them?
10. Were there aspects of mainstream society that prompted you to seek out an alternative? (Probe: the pace, alienation, disconnection, demands etc)
11. Were there aspects of the mainstream society that you were (or are) dissatisfied with and why?
12. Did you have any expectations or thoughts on how joining this group/community might help address these issues?
13. How have these expectations measured up?
14. What do you enjoy most about being a part of this group/community?
15. Have you learnt new skills or taken up new pursuits since joining this group/community?
16. What do you enjoy least about being part of this group/community?
17. Are there any activities that you used to enjoy that you have given up since joining this community? If so, why?

Visions and Futures

18. If you could paint a picture of an ideal society or community, what would it look like? (prompt: lifestyle, relationships with others, role of nature, connection to the body)
19. Do you feel as though you currently embody some of these ideals in your life? Has this always been the case?
20. Do you feel you may be able to embody these ideals more fully into the future? If so, why?

21. What aspects of mainstream society do you hope will change into the future?
22. Does feminism in any way play a role in your vision?

Relationship to and Understanding of the Body and the Natural World

23. How would you describe your relationship to your body? Has this changed over time? If so, why?
24. Do you believe your relationship to your body affects your sense of wellbeing/happiness? If so, how?
25. How do you understand the relationship between mind and body? Has this changed over time? If so, how and why?
26. Do you find the distinction between mind and body a useful one?
27. How do you understand the concept of "nature" or the "natural environment"?
28. Is your relationship to nature something that is important to you? If so, in what way?
29. Can you tell me a bit about the role of the nature in your life? Has this changed over time? If so, how and why?
30. Are there certain things you learn from the natural world? If so, can you please elaborate?
31. Has your relationship to mind, body and the environment been informed or shaped by your group/community? If so, how?

Relationship to and Understanding of Time

32. Has your experience of time changed in any way since joining this community/group? If so, how?
33. How would you describe the pace of your life? Has this changed over time? If so, how?
34. Are the qualities of mindfulness and attentiveness important to you? If so, how?

Relationship Emotions and the Senses

35. Has your relationship to your emotions changed in any way since joining this community/group? If so, how?
36. Do you perceive any link/s between your emotions, your body or other outside factors?
37. How do you understand your experience of the sensory world? Has this changed over time? If so how?

Relationship to the Community and Others

38. What does the term "community" mean to you?
39. Do you believe we live in an individualised society?
40. How important is the role of community in your life? Has this changed over time? If so, how?
41. Can you tell me a bit about your relationships with others in your community/group?
42. Can you tell me a bit about your relationships with your friends and family outside your community/group? Have these changed over time?
43. How do you relate to the idea of interconnectedness?
44. Can you tell me a bit about the values you think we should bring to community life?

Appendix D

Information for PhD Research Project:

Relating, Being and Knowing: Visions of Mutual Support and Connection in Women's Lives

Purpose of the Study

Issues of isolation, loneliness and disconnection are widespread in modern society. Many individuals struggle to cope with increasing demands on their time and energy and, in turn, have less time for enduring friendships, meaningful hobbies and contemplation. Moreover, a significant number of individuals struggle to find the time and space to engage in self-care practices and respond to their bodies' needs and signals. This is especially heightened for women who bear the primary responsibility for care-giving and household work. In response to these issues, a number of women have proposed alternative ways to relate to and understand the social world. Some have suggested, for example, that we become less individualistic and more community-minded; others have proposed we slow down and bring the qualities of attentiveness and openness to our daily activities.

This study will focus on the experiences of women who are committed to alternative ways of living, being and knowing. It will examine the factors that motivate women to enact alternative visions and will explore the ways in which women participants understand and relate to their bodies, the natural environment and relationship to others. It will explore a range of communities and groups established to foster alternative visions of living, including eco-communities, feminist groups and simplicity collectives, and will contribute to knowledge in the area of sociology and feminist practice. The aim of this project is present a rich account of the stories of women who enact alternative visions in the face of the ever-growing forces of individualism, consumerism and technological advancement.

Participant Involvement

- All participants will be given the opportunity to attend a **preliminary meeting** of no more than 30 minutes with the researcher to discuss the project in greater detail and ask questions they might have.
- You can withdraw your participation at any time during the research process.
- Women who have been involved in their group or community for longer than one year and who agree to further involvement may be invited to participate in an interview of no longer than 90 minutes.

The Study's Results

The results of this study will be presented in a dissertation to be submitted for the purposes of a PhD. They may also be published in a number of journal articles and books.

Upon agreeing to participate, the researcher will provide you with a link to her research blog so that you can follow the progress of her research. All blog posts will describe the research

findings in a general sense and will not refer to individuals' experiences. At the conclusion of the research, the researcher will write to you outlining the project's key findings.

Privacy and Anonymity

All the information you provide during the course of this study will be kept confidential. The taped interviews, transcripts, photos and research notes will only be accessed by the researcher and her supervisors. At the conclusion of the research process the photos, taped interviews and transcripts will be placed in secure storage.

In order to maintain anonymity all participants, communities and groups will be allocated pseudonyms. Moreover participants' personal details and information will be stored in a locked filing cabinet throughout the research process.

Any unique features relating to the personal circumstances or your community will be dealt with in a way that protects you from being identifiable by general readers. However, given the small size of your community someone may be able to identify you as a participant. If you are concerned about this, you are welcome to discuss how best to deal with this issue with the researcher.

Should you have any concerns or complaints about the conduct of this project please refer to the "Contacts for Information on Project and Independent Complaints Procedure" sheet for more information.

Appendix E

Consent Form for Interviewees

1. I have read the attached Information Sheet and agree to take part in the following research project:

Title:	***Relating, Being and Knowing: Women's Visions and Practice***
Ethics Approval Number:	HP-2012-035

2. I have had the project, so far as it affects me, fully explained to my satisfaction by the researcher. My consent is given freely.

3. I have been given the opportunity to have a member of my family or a friend present while the project was explained to me.

4. Although I understand the purpose of the research project it has also been explained that involvement may not be of any benefit to me.

5. I have been informed that, while information gained during the study may be published, I will not be identified and my personal results will not be divulged.

6. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time during the research process.

7. I agree to the interview being audio recorded.   Yes ☐   No ☐

8. I agree to allow the researcher to take photos of my group/community's site. I understand that these photos will not include individuals and will not be used in any publication.

                                        Yes ☐   No ☐

9. I am aware that I should keep a copy of this Consent Form, when completed, and the attached Information Sheet.

Participant to complete:

Name: _____Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher/Witness to complete:

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I have described the nature of the research to_____

(print name of participant)

and in my opinion she/he understood the explanation.

Signature: _____Position:_____ Date: _____

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