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# From Brook Farm to Burning Man: Alternative Communities in the United States

Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet

Since the Puritans founded their original colonies as the first “alternative communities” in the New World, America has continually reinvented itself through an ongoing series of experiments in how to live together as groups united less by ethnic or traditional ties and more by choice, affiliation, common purpose, and political and/or religious values. I am interested in two specific aspects of intentional communities: religion and environmentalism. Taking as a point of departure the observation that the most successful communities have been united by a common faith or sectarian religious practice, I intend to explore the question of whether alternative communities are always necessarily sites of alternative or heightened religious practice. Secondly, I am interested in how these issues of spiritual being in the world have been historically linked on the part of alternative communities to an ecological engagement and concern with the land and living environment. Finally, I will suggest that the recent skepticism about community, well-intended and necessary as it is, threatens to undermine our ability to accurately understand the legacy and lessons of intentional communities, which may yet turn out to be an important resource for the future.

The question of community has been at the heart of how the United States defines itself from the very start. Since the first European settlers arrived, America has continually reinvented itself through an ongoing series of experiments in how to live together as groups united less by ethnic or traditional identity ties and more by choice, affiliation, common purpose, and political and/or religious values. What I propose to do in this essay is present a short history of alternative communities in

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the United States up to the present, examining in particular the principal kinds of impulses that have led people to decide to withdraw from conventional society. Given the frequency and enduring success of intentional communities organized around a common religious faith (e.g., the Mormons, the Quakers), one of the questions I intend to explore is whether alternative communities are always necessarily sites of alternative and/or heightened spiritual/religious awareness/practices. A second question concerns the fact that most such communities have also been uniquely concerned with their physical and natural environment, the design of their homes and lands, and developing values we would now call sustainability and stewardship. The final question motivating this inquiry is whether there is any vital connection between the spiritual and the ecological dimensions of alternative intentional communities, and if so – *what is it?*

First of all, what do I mean by alternative community? The current word for this is “intentional community,” and there is probably no formula for how to define this except as a community that consists of people that have purposefully joined together to live in a manner they believe is better than the prevailing social structure. So the basic principles are that of *affinity* as opposed to simply accident of birth, and the choice to join with a *group* of like-minded people, as opposed to simply attempting to live your values on your own. In his study of communes of the 1960s, Timothy Miller proposes seven principles: 1. *A sense of common purpose and of separation from the dominant society*, 2. *Some level or form of self-denial, suppression of individual choice in favor of the good of the group*, 3. *Geographic proximity*, 4. *Personal interaction*, 5. *Economic sharing*, 6. *Real existence*, and 7. *Critical mass*, by which he means an intentional community should have at least five individuals (*60s Communes*, xxiii-xxiv). A point that could be added to these principles is that intentional communities or alternative communities have often regarded themselves as potential models for others, showing people that different ways of organizing life are possible. In rejecting “the dominant society,” alternative communities tacitly set themselves up as blueprints for a better alternative.

According to Jonathan Dawson, a leading sustainability writer and educator, the first intentional communities could be dated back to either the Bible, to the prophet Amos, who believed strongly in economic justice, or Pythagoras, who founded a community dedicated to asceticism and fairly strict restrictions in relation to diet and behavior. Dawson also cites Celtic Christian monasteries off the Scottish and Irish coasts in the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries CE (Dawson 15). In an important respect, then, alternative communities have often been linked to relig-

ion, and moreover, they have also often sprung from a rejection of materialism and class. One could say that, from a British perspective, the American colonies were founded as an intentional community by the Puritans, who wanted to live according to what they regarded as a more “pure” interpretation of the Bible, going back to the practices of the early Church.<sup>1</sup> They also saw themselves as a model, in John Winthrop’s words from 1630, as a “shining city upon a hill.” Also like later intentional communities, the Puritans were strongly critical of the poverty generated and tolerated by capitalism, and sought to create a fully egalitarian society with respect to the material standing of each family. A final way in which they anticipated later communitarian projects – many of which experimented with early forms of feminism – is that they advocated literacy for all members including women. In these respects, the Puritans – at least in their intentions – shared with later communards an intense desire for a truly egalitarian community in which every individual feels valued and respected, something that liberal capitalism has never been able to provide.

Just as the Puritans set out to realize their social and spiritual project in the New World, so did many European immigrants in the centuries that followed. No other nation has been home to as many intentional communities as what came to be the United States, since its first settlement. Many came from present-day England, France, Switzerland, Holland, and other countries to create communities that offered an alternative to the injustices and atomism and other shortcomings of life under capitalism. Most of these communities were religious – such as the Quakers, the Shakers, the Mormons, the Mennonites, etc. – and some have been successful and long-lasting. Uniting all of these movements was a strong dissatisfaction with capitalism, class division, excessive individualism, and private property. Here, too, many looked to the teachings of the Early Christian Church and passages in the Book of Acts, which suggest that Christ advocated a system of common property and redistribution of wealth among followers (Jennings 51-52). One of the most interesting and enduring religious communities in the United States have been the Shakers. Founded in America in the 1770s by Ann

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<sup>1</sup> The Book of Acts (especially 2-5) has been particularly important to activists and Christians as it describes followers of Christ being instructed to share all property in common, and the rich to sell their possessions and give the proceeds to the apostles to redistribute among all equally. Not surprisingly, many contemporary American Christian commentators have sought to interpret these passages as ambiguous, claiming that they only suggest acts of charity from time to time, rather than actually proposing a socialist model of common property as they seem to do.



Lee, a cotton mill worker from Manchester, the Shakers created – in the following decades – twenty-five “well-built and prosperous villages” throughout most of the settled regions of the country (Hayden, *Seven* 65) and served as an inspiration to many communities that followed, offering concrete proof that “successful Communism is subjectively possible,” as John Humphrey Noyes, founder of the famous Oneida community in the nineteenth century, put it (quoted in Hayden 65). The fact that Noyes would look to the Shakers, rather than his own communal experiment, as proof of the viability of communitarianism illustrates how influential this group was in the nineteenth century.

The Shakers offer an ideal example of how religious faith and discipline could contribute to a group’s cohesion and longevity. A millennial sect, they believed that the millennium – Christ’s thousand-year reign on earth – had already begun. Like many early religious communities, the Shakers were fascinated by the earth-heaven dichotomy and sought to bridge the gap between the two spheres in their own lives. In practical terms, the earthly sphere was characterized for the Shakers by a thoughtful but strict regimentation of daily life, including every aspect of personal behavior, dress, and domestic economy. The Shakers became well-known for their carefully made furniture and elegantly functional architecture and designs, concrete manifestations of how they adapted their living environment to their spiritual ideas.

Their name, however, comes from the other aspect of their religious practice, that which attempted to imagine and imitate heaven, and which took the material form of joyous and sometimes abandoned celebrations that included singing, dancing and rolling, or twirling and shaking. The dances, which could be witnessed by outsiders and which were drawn by artists, were heavily rhythmic and could be called trance-inducing. Some of the dances thus emphasized the pleasures of what William H. McNeill has called “keeping together in time,” one of the most satisfying physical aspects of ritual (2-5). In preserving the spirit of individual identity and expression, Shakers could also break out into individual forms of ecstatic dance or speak in tongues. They were also encouraged not to harmonize their voices while they sang, but to sing in the key that they personally preferred, according to the principle that God has given each one the gift of voice. In this way, Shakers created a religious practice that strongly emphasized community in its daily performance but still allowed room for intense physical and verbal expression on special occasions.

In offering both strict bodily discipline – including celibacy – and occasions for cathartic sensual release, Shakers attempted to create a spiritual practice that balanced the needs of the body with the need for connection and higher purpose. The community created by Shakers was an egalitarian one, organized into “families” of 30 to 100 people, with members calling each other “Brother” and “Sister.” The families were not based on kinship (and the celibacy requirement meant that there were never many children in the movement) but organized according to members’ relative advancement on the scale of spiritual “travel.” If “family” was one important trope to describe the community, another was that of a “living building,” in which each member was both builder and building block. This second trope is particularly interesting because it fuses the community and its physical space (“building”) into an image that sees the group and its environment as one and the same. This inaugurates the recurrent concern with physical grounds and design that characterizes the history of intentional communities and foreshadows their currently pioneering role in sustainable farming and living.

In a broad sense, Shakers anticipated recycling and what is now called “permaculture” in their relationship to their land and grounds, which was one of careful stewardship, sustainability, and circularity. Millennial in their religious beliefs, they sought to create a heaven on earth, and one that would endure. One of Ann Lee’s most cited quotes is “Do all your work as though you had a thousand years to live, and as you would if you knew you must die tomorrow” (Andrews 24). As a result, they considered carefully what crops to sow on the kind of land they possessed, they practiced crop rotation and contour plowing, they cared for woodland as carefully as their tilled land, they captured rainwater for crops, used human waste for compost, and created a “sacred, closed system” of careful and intense land use that closely resembles what contemporary advocates of permaculture and sustainable farming recommend (Hayden, *Seven* 76).

Although not all intentional communities were as thoughtful and systematic in their use of their natural environment as the Shakers, most intentional communities have had a far more protective and complex relationship to their land than conventional farmers. Because most tacitly opposed American capitalism, especially its competitiveness and social inequality, they have often wanted to be both self-sustaining (not dependent on the dominant capitalist economy) and an alternative model of egalitarianism and cooperation. Since intentional communities often envision or at least hope for long-term futures for themselves, there tends to be an inherent concern with sustainable and regenerative

farming. However, many communities have started off with limited funds and were obliged to buy less-than-ideal land. Some were skillful and knowledgeable enough to regenerate their land, while many others faltered because of poor crops, hard winters, or other practical problems. Many nineteenth-century communities explicitly envisaged their project as creating a kind of earthly Eden (as did the Shakers), and grew disappointed with the initially meager results.

In the nineteenth century, new ideas about reform, human perfectibility, socialism, and revolution created a more secular foundation on which people dissatisfied with the dominant order could found alternatives, yet all maintained some religious or spiritual dimension. Henri de Saint-Simon, Étienne Cabet, and Robert Owen all had an impact to varying degrees on the United States, though none of them more so than Charles Fourier. Over thirty Fourierian communities called “phalanxes” were founded in the United States, and although most only lasted a few years, the North American Phalanx operated from 1843 to 1855 (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/utopia#ref1041400>).

Like most planners of intentional communities, Fourier found conventional nineteenth century society – and especially capitalism – deeply dissatisfying. As a boy, he learned in his father’s textile shop that selling was often indistinguishable from lying and swore an “eternal oath” against commerce (Jennings 181). Specifically, he considered capitalist competition as wasteful, incoherent, and unproductive, and subsequently imagined communities organized on industrial and domestic *cooperation* instead. He also felt that conventional society stifled all of human beings’ God-given emotional and relational needs, creating mental illness and other pathologies, and imagined a community in which people spent most of their time pursuing their interests and creative expression, as well as cultivating a wide range of rich human relationships and friendships according to the natural laws and principles of what he called “passional attraction” (his theory of the operation of human emotion and desire). In practical terms, Fourier saw people living in a phalanx working only a few hours a day, at tasks attributed according to their natural talents and interests, and the rest of the time devoted to activities that correspond to the five senses, including music, painting, drawing, sculpture, and eating, as well as hunting, fishing, libraries, picnics, mass, etc. Women would have the same scholarly and physical activities as men, as well as complete sexual freedom, one of Fourier’s many proto-feminist ideas that were far ahead of his time.

Although there is a strong scientific bent to Fourier's vision, which is extremely systematic and even obsessively numerological, there is nevertheless a religious or spiritual substrate to his philosophy. At the foundation of his theory of human nature is the argument that the existence of God is sufficient proof of the perfectibility of man and the inevitable goodness of his needs and desires. Fourier's philosophy is based on what he calls the three "unities," which consist of the unity of man with himself and his nature, the unity of man with God, who gave man his nature and passions, and the unity of man with the Universe (Poster 8-9). By devoting one's self to cultivating one's "passional" needs and happiness, one is actually acting in highest accordance with what God intended for humans. Fourierism also resonated with the principles of Romanticism and especially Transcendentalism, which saw the divine as present inside every individual. The dichotomy between daily life and communal celebration would diminish, making every action in a typical day an iteration of communal belonging.

Nowhere was this fusion of the practical and the communal more apparent than in the way Fourier imagined the layout and design of the phalanx grounds. Believing that the arrangement of human society was correlated to the "health" of the earth and the cosmos, Fourier regarded the universe as a "coherent mechanism created by a beneficent and omnipotent God" (Jennings 167). Accordingly, Fourier saw the natural and built landscapes as interdependent and inseparable, and specified that the ideal phalanx would be located in a picturesque, varied location, "provided with a fine stream of water, intersected by hills, adapted to varied cultivation, contiguous with a forest" (Hayden, *Seven* 154). What was especially important was spatial distribution of various productive activities to encourage communal and personal contacts. To this end, he proposed a pattern of interlaced cultivation. Work groups would identify the specificities of the soil and microclimate, and then lines and patches of cultivation would extend out from the central area. The point was both to make use of varied terrain and to create opportunities for social interaction, that is, to "bring different groups together on the same grounds" so that workers could meet and interact (154). Fourier's landscape thus imagines the natural and the built features of the land to be arranged to maximize both their agricultural potential (hence the concern with microclimate and soil) and the social and relational potential of people.

The largest, longest-lasting, and most promising of Fourier's living communities was the North American Phalanx in Colt's Neck, New Jersey. Founded by Albert Brisbane in 1837 with the financial backing

of non-resident sponsors and sixty resident founders, the community endured for thirteen years before financial problems brought it to a close. Ironically, these problems stemmed less from a failure to prosper than from pressure by the sponsors to build a giant edifice that would supposedly create a sense of community. Residents resisted this impractical plan, resulting in a drastic reduction in the sponsors' financial contribution (Hayden, *Seven* 172). Instead, the residents of the phalanx constructed a pleasant three-story wooden structure built on local models that served as the main building and was still standing a hundred years later. Around this building, they developed their estate according to Fourier's principles, leaving woodland intact, and creating an interlaced area of cultivation that produced fruits and vegetables that sold well across New York (Hayden, *Seven* 161).

Even more famous than the North American Phalanx is the community founded by George Ripley, Brook Farm, which was initially a Transcendentalist community and then adopted Fourierian associationism for the second half of its six-year existence. This community is amongst the most famous nineteenth-century experiments thanks to its connections to American literati, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, who lived there for six months and seems to have especially resented having to perform manual labor. Brook Farm is thus remembered best for its satirical description in Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) and for its various problems, including poor crops. Apparently the soil was not very good and the system of voluntary work (often by writers and intellectuals with few farming skills) made self-sufficiency more elusive than at the North American Phalanx. Nevertheless, in the course of six years, thanks largely to its prosperous school, it had added four attractive buildings and was solvent. It was only after a fire destroyed a large new but uninsured building that Brook Farm folded. Admittedly, however, Brook Farm is something of an exception to the tendency of nineteenth-century communities to espouse proto-ecological ideas. Perhaps because its goals were more closely tied to social equality, education, and the cultivation of the arts, and its revenue depended largely on its school and manufacturing activities, Brook Farm residents were less explicitly concerned with their natural environment than other communities and Fourierian phalanxes.

Yet, like most intentional communities, Brook Farm attempted to invent a more "whole" and balanced life for residents. According to George Ripley, the stated goals of the community were to reject competition and to attenuate class differences by asking all residents to perform manual labor as well as leaving them time for study and leisure. In



a letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ripley explains his wish to combine the “worker” and the “thinker” in one individual (Ripley, “1840 Letter” 23). In another letter, Ripley tells Emerson that he believes in “the divinity of labor,” articulating a vital link between the spiritual, practical, and economic dimensions of the project, a link that seems to characterize many American intentional communities (Ripley, “I believe” n. pag.). All were to be paid the same for any kind of work, including women. In addition, residents enjoyed picnics, theatricals, card games, weekly dances, and a variety of artistic activities. Although Brook Farm was not explicitly a religious community, they performed a nightly ritual of holding hands and vowing “truth to the cause of God and Humanity.” This was called the “symbol of Universal Unity,” a phrase that recalls Fourier’s three-fold “unities” and resonates with the frequent expression among founders of intentional communities of a desire for a more whole and connected life, less fragmented and divided by class and social hierarchy.

One of the criticisms of the idea of community that has been made in recent years is that it is a highly romantic notion that often hides a more sinister political agenda. Thus, while celebrating wholeness and natural or spontaneous connectedness, the notion of community in fact implies an exclusion of those who are different and a reification of identity. In a similar vein, Miranda Joseph argues in *The Romance of Community* that “the rhetorical invocation of community and the social relationships that are discursively articulated as community” are actually “imbri-cated with capitalism,” by which she means they are complicit with it even as community is often invoked as a form of resistance to capitalism (viii-ix). While a blind idealization of community is certainly a dangerous thing, and notions of community have often been invoked by American nationalists and nativists who posit America as a “Christian” or a white nation, often also in response to forces of industrialization or now globalization, it seems impractical to scrap all notions of community altogether. If we do so, we will be hard pressed to find a vocabulary to understand the deepest longings and intentions as well as the subjective experiences and objective achievements of communitarian pioneers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> As for Joseph’s point regarding exclusionary aspects of the notion of community, it must be acknowledged that the members of the intentional communities discussed in this essay were predominantly white, and that some socialist communities in California explicitly refused African American members (e.g., Llano del Rio). Productive counter-examples to this bias are hard to find – the highly mediatized Jonestown cult, for instance, being too bleak to serve as a positive example, and also much too complex to be

While Joseph's articulation of community and capitalism may reflect the complexities of how this term is often deployed ideologically, the history of intentional communities in the United States suggests that capitalism has rarely been so thoroughly repudiated as by the groups discussed above. Almost every intentional community, whether religious or secular, has expressly rejected the principle of individual and class competition, citing the atomism, inefficiency and injustice of the principle of competition itself. All have embraced a deep structural reliance on cooperation and mutual aid, and many used the aforementioned Book of Acts (2-5) as a model for altruism. For example, Mormons initially upheld a principle of shared property stored in communal storehouses administered by bishops, who would distribute according to need. All new members were to deed ("consecrate") their property to the church, which could then bestow lands or farms on members in "stewardship" in order to earn their living but donating all extra proceeds to the church again. These practices were later dropped but the movement had begun with a radical attempt to challenge the inequalities created by capitalism (May 141-51).

The Mormons' Law of Consecration is one of many ways nineteenth-century intentional communities sought to bridge a variety of systemic dichotomies and create a more integrated and "whole" life experience. Intentional communities almost invariably strove to be self-sustaining and therefore required members to be both residents and workers as opposed to having work outside. Many were feminist in the sense that they advocated certain forms of equality between men and women, most strove to find labor-saving or labor-pooling solutions to reduce women's work, and most rejected the nuclear family model or what John Humphrey Noyes called "the little man and wife circle" as too isolating and inefficient (Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution* 37). In some communities, integration of the functional and the aesthetic happened spontaneously, while in others it was to showcase the community for visitors, and in other cases because residents were inspired by the idea of creating an Edenic space on earth, a practical garden where people and nature co-exist symbiotically. A song at the Oneida

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done justice to here (cf. Chidester) – though the reasons are less hard to find. African Americans historically did not have access to the mainstream capitalist life that white communitarians were fleeing, and often already had a strong sense of community, frequently centered around their church. Since the 1960s, many intentional communities have consciously sought to be racially integrated, and some African American communes existed, but true diversity continues to elude the intentional community movement (Miller, *60s Communes* 171).



community founded by John Humphries Noyes describes a place where work, worship and daily life are fused into a single whole: “We have built us a dome/On our beautiful plantation/And we all have one home/And one family relation” (Holloway 179). With the parallelism of the dome, plantation, and home, the song expresses the desire for fusion among the spheres of religion, work, and domesticity, combining the main aspects of an integrated life into one physical space.

One should recall that the idea of setting “nature” aside as an untouched preserve was not fully articulated yet at the time of the antebellum communes and would come at the end of the century, after the closing of the frontier and the dedication of national parks. Although the conservation movement has done Americans a valuable service in protecting areas of wilderness, the way in which the American landscape is thereby divided into “protected” parks, agricultural land which can be ruthlessly exploited, and urban areas where humans are packed far away from both turned out to be problematic. This fragmentation of the landscape and of life into sharply differentiated categories reflected the compartmentalization of modern life more generally, where spirituality, connection, and play were as carefully cordoned off from daily life as the national parks were far from urban and farming areas. These neatly policed divisions between work, home, and play – which promoted soulless conformity to professional identity and highly conventional social roles – were among the many sources of dissatisfaction for young Americans in the 1960s, when the next great wave of communitarian experiments appeared.

The surge of 1960s “communes,” as they were often called, emerged from a thorough and devastating critique of the failures of American capitalism in the wake of WWII. This critique of American technocratic and consumerist society began in the 1950s with the Beats. Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” (1955) depicted America as a concrete prison where poets and other non-conformists went mad. The image he uses of America as “Moloch,” the Canaanite god associated with child sacrifice, evokes the structural violence of a society that required everyone to live in a hetero-normative nuclear family and have a corporate job, while regularly sending its young off to die in foreign wars (e.g., Korea in the early 1950s). Similarly, Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957), the more romantic flip side of Ginsberg’s “Howl,” described a longing to leave mainstream society and its rigid structures and explore the rest of the country and its many less travelled roads.

The Beats' disinterest in a nuclear family and a consumerist work model paved the way for the wholesale disaffection from that lifestyle in the 1960s, a disaffection that took on greater urgency when the war in Vietnam escalated after 1964 and revealed the dark underside to American prosperity. While the military-industrial complex, as Dwight Eisenhower had called it in his 1961 farewell address, drained government coffers to build bombs and toxic chemicals to drop on peasants in Southeast Asia, and as the number of American and Vietnamese deaths climbed daily, the Civil Rights movement at home revealed the emptiness of American claims of national community and coherence, and young people began to abandon conventional American society (Braunstein and Doyle 8-9). The counterculture of San Francisco, the epicenter of the hippie movement, emerged from a rejection of the rigidity, emptiness, and hypocrisy of middle class life and undertook a broad-ranging exploration of group living and alternative values, both in the city and the neighboring countryside. By the late 1960s, many thousands of people were living in intentional communities either as a way of taking political activism to a new level, by living the values they believed in, or as a way of simply withdrawing their energy from what they saw as a murderous, unjust and soul-killing system.

The 1960s commune movement was thus every bit as existential and spiritual as it was political. Some communes were explicitly Christian, devoted to the more progressive teachings of Jesus Christ as counterculture model. Miller writes that in fact the "Jesus communes" may have been "the largest identifiable communal type of the 1960s" (*60s Communes* xxiv). Others looked to Native American or eastern religious traditions to find models for imbuing the everyday with a sense of the sacred (see Krech; Smith). All were appalled by the empty materialism of American life and outraged by the hypocrisy and violence behind the white suburban family model for American national community while African Americans, Native Americans, and others were being exploited and excluded (Miller, *The Hippies* 8).

The intentional communities that resulted differed from the nineteenth-century experiments in several important respects. First of all, 1960s communards were not interested in the model of an earthly Eden or garden of paradise, as many of the antebellum experimenters had been. Founders of the 1960s communes embraced a philosophy of "back to the land" instead, which looked to historical and not Biblical roots. Most of all, they looked to Native Americans for practical knowledge in sustainable and self-sufficient farming skills as well as a model on how to live in a more spiritually balanced way. While many hippies

and communards romanticized Native American life, to be sure, they generally did so out of a respect for a cultural heritage that had been mostly erased up until that time, and out of an awareness of the ongoing struggle of Native Americans to reclaim their land sovereignty and civil rights (the American Indian Movement was founded in 1968). Many other communes hoped to invent a more sustainable, satisfying, and equitable life on their own, solving problems as they came up with new ideas and design structures (such as the geodesic domes that characterized Drop City in southern Colorado).

According to Timothy Miller, foremost historian of the hippie movement and counterculture, there were several thousand communes during the 1960s era, with incredibly diverse goals, structures, compositions, and achievements (*The Hippies* 88). Nevertheless, one generalization that can be made is that, like their predecessors, 1960s communes grew out of a strong conviction that American capitalism was a failure as a social system. Competition and consumerism had fragmented people's lives into empty routines of work, leisure, and consumption, wholly devoid of real meaning, real playfulness, and real connection to other people, while producing foreign wars and domestic exploitation. Like the founders of intentional communities of the nineteenth century, the hippies and commune creators of the 1960s sought to create communities that offered true equality to all members, often offering membership to anyone who wanted it, redefining the meaning of "family," and attempting to invent a more whole and integrated way of life (*The Hippies* 93).

They were also interested in creating a relationship with the land that was respectful, healthy, and sustainable. Rachel Carson had published her terrifying study of pesticides used in industrial farming, *Silent Spring*, in 1962, and had created an awareness of the urgent need to rethink farming and its dependence of toxic chemicals. At the same time, the capitalist model of land as private property for extraction of resources and industrial farming was openly questioned for the first time. One response that exemplified the spirit of the times was Lou Gottlieb's. A musician and scholar, Gottlieb founded in 1966 Morning Star Ranch, a free-wheeling commune outside of San Francisco, and in 1969 deeded the land to God. Although a local judge objected that God was "not a person, natural or artificial, in existence at time of conveyance and capable of taking title," the concept of open land (related in spirit to the so-called crash-pad in urban areas) was popular among the 1960s generation, who questioned the logic and legitimacy of private property in general (Miller, *60s Communes* 51). Another response was the bioregionalism movement, which looked back to Native American culture and

sought to redefine community in terms of naturally coherent biomes and regions (see Arnsperger in this volume).

Although most communes lasted no more than a few years, some have endured and thrived up to the present. The Farm was conceived in Haight-Ashbury and finally established in Tennessee, and has existed since 1971. According to Timothy Miller, it epitomizes “most perfectly . . . the spirit of the communal 1960s era” (*60s Communes* 118). Founded by Stephen Gaskin, a university instructor and spiritual leader, the Farm was rooted in “prototypical hippie spirituality and religiosity, espousing a unique faith that drew from the deepest insights of all the world’s major religious traditions” (118). Members took vows of poverty and dedicated themselves to helping the poor in the third world, and the commune has had an international program in place since 1974. Environmentalists from the start, they sought self-sufficiency in food and practiced veganism, avoiding all animal products including leather and honey. They also established a public-interest law firm which filed lawsuits on behalf of victims of exposure to nuclear radiation, fought the Army Corps of Engineers plans to control wild rivers, and published climate change research.

The Farm still exists today and its mission statement of core beliefs still heavily emphasizes spirituality as well as an expanded vision of community. The first value listed is:

We believe that there are non-material planes of being or levels of consciousness that everyone can experience, the highest of these being the spiritual plane . . . We believe that we are all one, that the material and spiritual are one, and the spirit is identical and one in all of creation” (<http://www.thefarm.org/about-our-community/basic-beliefs-agreements/>).

If The Farm represents the prototypical 1960s commune, then this statement conveys several exemplary aspects of hippie spiritual belief and practice. First of all, it rejects secular materialism and affirms the existence of a spiritual dimension or “plane.” It claims that “everyone can experience” this plane, alluding to the notion of personal subjective experience of a “higher level of consciousness,” situating the spiritual in “states of consciousness” which can be accessed (through meditation, mind-altering drugs, or other consciousness-altering techniques). The claim that “everyone” can experience these planes emphasizes the democratic and participatory aspect of 1960s religiosity, located in each individual and not in an institution or spiritual leader.

Nevertheless, not to overstate the correlation between intentional community and religion, there have been many communities that are fully secular and not concerned with spirituality in any overt form. One of these is the Los Angeles Eco-Village (LAEV), founded in 1993 in Los Angeles just west of downtown. The community is comprised of around 40 people who live on the premises in two apartment buildings that Eco-Village owns as a cooperative. Members are assigned an apartment according to their needs, which may evolve as their family grows or changes. Since 1993, the LAEV has been “eco-fitting” the buildings for sustainability, encouraging residents to bike instead of drive, make soil through composting, and reaching out to the neighborhood in a variety of ways. The Eco-Village has several on-site workshops and crafts spaces, including for soldering and sowing. It uses solar cookers and captures rainwater. The courtyard garden features a variety of local or edible plants and serves as the main gathering place for outdoor events. The LAEV is also heavily invested in teaching, offering weekly tours and frequent conferences on topics related to sustainability. The main focus of the LAEV is reducing residents’ carbon footprints and developing the processes of community-building and development.

Like other intentional communities which have sought to create more integrated or “whole” life experiences, the LAEV explicitly uses a method called “Whole Systems Approach,” which it defines on its web-page as a “whole-systems or permaculture approach to community development, integrating the social, economic and ecological or physical aspects of neighborhood life with the goal of raising the quality of life while radically reducing environmental impacts” (<http://laecovillage.org/crsp/>). The emphasis here is on integrating social and environmental concerns, which has always been a key feature of intentional communities, as we have seen, only here the environment is urban rather than rural.

Although the LAEV is ostensibly secular, I would argue that there is nevertheless a tacitly spiritual dimension to their project, articulated most clearly in the first of their seven core values (first formulated in 2011 and regularly revisited). These values include “Learn from nature and live ecologically” and “Create balanced opportunities for individual participation & collective stewardship,” but the one that speaks in a quasi-religious register is “celebrate and include joy in all our endeavors” (<http://laecovillage.org/home/about-2/>).<sup>3</sup> This value resonates with

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<sup>3</sup> The complete list of values: “1. Celebrate & include joy in all our endeavors / 2. Take responsibility for each other & the planet through local environmental & social action /



spiritual import. The word “joy” is not a term that evokes mainly an ethical or political stance, but emanates from a register that is affective and potentially religious. The word “celebrate” makes the tone and lexicon of the phrase even more explicitly linked to worship. I would argue that even in this most pragmatic and secular of intentional communities, values that cannot be called anything except spiritual nevertheless lie at the heart of their project and communal spirit.

A final contemporary example of an intentional community is the annual festival at Black Rock Desert, Nevada, called Burning Man. Initiated in 1986 as a small party on a beach near San Francisco, Burning Man is now an event that attracts over 60,000 people annually. This is not an intentional community in the same sense as the others, since it exists geographically for only one week a year, but it arguably springs from similar impulses and addresses similar yearnings (see Junger). A subtitle of Burning Man sometimes is “a festival of radical self-expression,” which points to the fact that the creation of temporary artwork and performance has been at the core of how Burning Man has developed. The festival takes its name from the wooden sculpture in the form of a giant man that is built every year and ceremoniously burned on the last day, in an event that recalls fire-based pagan seasonal events. Although the festival now commissions certain artists to come and create their art-pieces before the five-day official event begins, all participants are encouraged to bring things they have made or to express themselves creatively. There is no money at the festival (except to buy ice and coffee in the central tent) and everyone is invited to volunteer for one of the many tasks that contribute to the functioning of the event, including greeting people, providing information, running the lost and found service, working at the central café, and providing security. The festival organizers do not pitch the festival like a concert (though there is a lot of music) or an art show (though there is also a lot of art), but as a temporary city that is meant to serve both as foil to contemporary society and as a model for a responsible alternative community.

The festival lists 10 core values, namely, radical inclusion, gifting, de-commodification, radical self-reliance, radical self-expression, communal effort, civic responsibility, leaving no trace, participation, immediacy. Like most other intentional communities, Burning Man springs from a

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3. Learn from nature and live ecologically / 4. Build a dynamic community through diversity & cooperation, giving & forgiving / 5. Inspire compassionate, nurturing, & respectful relationships / 6. Create balanced opportunities for individual participation & collective stewardship / 7. Engage our neighbors and broader community in mutual dialog to learn, act and teach” (source: <http://laecovillage.org/home/about-2/>).

conscious rejection of capitalism and the kind of culture and subjectivity that develops around it.<sup>4</sup> The values of “gifting” and “decommodification” refer to the prohibition on money transactions, the encouragement of barter, and an attempt to temporarily suspend the economic logic that structures much of our lives. Recalling the Diggers’ experiments with free medical services and free goods in the donation-based “Free Store” in San Francisco, Burning Man encourages participants to interact with each other on a basis other than consumerism and exchange. “Radical self-reliance” and “leaving no trace” both allude to the protective relationship with nature that participants are required to have: everyone must bring everything they need to survive a week in the desert, and they are asked to take everything with them when they leave. The goal of the festival is to “leave no trace” on the desert after the festival in order to preserve the local eco-system and natural environment.

If “no trace” is to be left on the desert after the departure of tens of thousands of “burners,” as festival participants are referred to, the community that they build there is meant to endure throughout the rest of the year in a different form. Participants can stay in touch with each other, meet locally and even create local versions of the festival called “burns.” The values that are promoted during the one colorful and joyous week of celebration in the desert are intended to be cultivated throughout the year in one’s daily life. The yearly event is imagined like a coming together of the tribes, recalling the Human Be-in of 1967 in San Francisco, except that the somewhat nostalgic notion of a “tribe” – enthusiastically embraced by the hippies in honor of earlier Native American cultures – does not resonate with the Burning Man ethos as well as does the image of a temporary city, as can be seen in the value of “civic responsibility.”

However, there is one important element of tribalism at the festival: the ritual of burning the wooden effigy on the last night, a pyromaniac’s dream of a pagan ceremony, with fire-breathers and fire-dancers and fire cannons and the bonfire of the giant wooden man. This brings me to the question of religion and spirituality. To be sure, Burning Man is not a religious event, nor even explicitly spiritual in the manner of The Farm. Nevertheless, there is an element of the religious in the quest for collective celebration through art and ritual, the desire to alter one’s

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<sup>4</sup> There is of course a certain irony that the main participants are well-educated and fairly well-off. According to the Burning Man census figures, most participants have at least a B.A. degree and 31 percent of 2016 participants have a graduate degree. Most also earn between 50,000 and 100,000 dollars per year (source: [https://drive.google.com/file/d/0BxJfvV\\_7\\_\\_jqRTlpVHRWbGZIMkE/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/0BxJfvV_7__jqRTlpVHRWbGZIMkE/view), 16-18).



consciousness through art, dance, meditation, drugs (including alcohol), or other means, and a general interest in participating in a heightened experience of shared community. Durkheim in his *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* saw one of the first forms of religion and culture emanating from group life as the division of time into the profane and sacred, with the former consisting of daily life and the latter organized into periodic moments of coming together for ritual and group worship, arousing in participants a heightened emotional state that Durkheim called “effervescence” (Durkheim 427-28).

Burning Man is nothing if not a weeklong condition of effervescence and heightened emotional, sensory, and social experience. The core value listed as “immediacy” alludes to the importance of mindfulness, being in the present, being “awake” (a key principle of Buddhism, which comes from “bodhi” or “to wake up” in Sanskrit), or simply being attentive and fully engaged with one’s immediate environment as opposed to being submerged in the automated and routinized experience of everyday working life. Burning Man’s particular form of spirituality, like that of the Shakers and many other communards, is based on the belief (and putting into practice) that every individual has a unique voice (as the Shakers put it) and gifts; is simply unique; and should share this uniqueness and these gifts with the world, which will receive and somehow answer. This is the foundation of the value of “radical self-expression,” as Larry Harvey describes it in a 2014 interview ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x54s\\_G0NYG8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x54s_G0NYG8)).

Making the connection to religious experience nearly explicit, Harvey argues that the “ultimate experience” that draws people to Burning Man is for “transcendence, being connected to something much larger than you are.” He explains that many people come for the artwork or for the prospect of a weeklong desert rave but they end up staying “for the community.” The set of values espoused by the Burning Man festival, according to Harvey, adds up to “a whole life and an ethos,” an “authentic life,” and that “people come from all over the globe to see what that feels like.” Asked if Burning Man has ever changed anyone’s life, he replies: “Incessantly . . . it’s like a conversion experience,” evoking the way that intense experiences of community seem to generate religious rhetoric and affect ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x54s\\_G0NYG8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x54s_G0NYG8)).

Although Burning Man is not a community where people live physically all year long, it offers participants a temporary experience of intentional community of sorts and the possibility to remain in contact throughout the year with people who have shared that experience. It is

possible to argue that the yearning for more meaningful encounters with like-minded friends and strangers and for an alternative to the deadening mechanisms of work and consumption-driven capitalism is the same for Burning Man participants as for people who actually move into a “real” collective living experiment.

Although there is a strong ethos of leaving “no trace” on the playa, the use of heavy generators for lights and sound systems, trucks spewing water for people to revel in, and the gratuitous destruction of the Burning Man effigy itself, reveal that other impulses besides environmentalism are driving the event. These include, I would argue, a yearning for ritual, for creativity, playfulness, connection, and for the sacred. The fact that many participants come to Burning Man to celebrate their weddings (including numerous group weddings for the San Francisco crowd) suggests that the festival has succeeded in creating an occasion that functions as a meaningful ritual, a true “holiday” and moment of collective effervescence. With their whimsical costumes and mutant vehicles, Burning Man participants may seem on the surface as different from the Shakers as anyone could be, yet in the underlying impulse to create a community of radical horizontal participation and a space for “radical self-expression,” burners are acting out of a similar need as the Shakers when they whirled and danced and spoke in tongues.

In describing the intentions and longings of American communarians, and paying less attention to the problems and dissatisfactions they encountered, I do not mean to imply that alternative communities were always or even often successful. Most struggled with economic problems and internal conflicts, experiments with egalitarian labor distribution often fell short of true gender equality, and efforts to replace monogamous marriage arrangements with “free love” were often mixed at best. Nevertheless, to dismiss intentional communities as founded by naïve or manipulative eccentrics, as Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance* left generations of American readers feeling about Brook Farm, is to do a profound disservice to American history and to future generations which may need to look to these communities for ideas on how to live less destructively than we currently do. Recent critiques of community have attempted to complicate a concept that is indeed often invoked rather uncritically. Miranda Joseph points out that it is almost inconceivable to use the term “community” in any but a romanticized and positive sense despite the fact that it often carries a strongly exclusionary dimension. Joseph argues that in fact modern invocations of community are strongly implicated with capitalism (viii-ix), and Roberto Esposito

makes a similar case when he proposes that community and its connotations of *belonging* are strongly linked to property and *proprium* (2-3).

Despite these legitimate concerns and critiques, American intentional communities deserve to be taken seriously. In repudiating the competitive and exploitative relationships created necessarily and by definition under capitalism as it developed in Europe and North America, intentional communities have attempted to realize social life without private property, class inequality, or sexual hierarchy. Though not always successful, their example offers valuable lessons. Many adopted an attitude of careful and sustainable cultivation of their land as a mirror to the attitude of care and protectiveness of their individual members as well as the group as a whole. In doing so, many also found a sense of higher purpose, human connection and sacredness that sociologists and other observers have reported as largely lacking in modernity (Taylor 367-68). The recent surge in intentional communities suggests that these lacks have only grown more intolerable as people realize that our current forms of inhabiting the planet are not only unsatisfying but destructive and, worse for us, suicidal. This is why throwing the community baby out with the romanticized-community bathwater does us no service in terms of looking for the solutions we need now to regenerate a sense of connection to each other and the planet we share as a species before it's too late.

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