THE RAINBOW FAMILY: AN ETHNOGRAPHY
OF SPIRITUAL
POSTMODERNISM

Adam Berger

Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD
University of St Andrews
April 2006
DECLARATIONS

I, Adam Berger, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 100,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

[Signature]

Date...

Signature of Candidate...

I was admitted as a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in 1997, the higher study for which this is a record carried out in Britain, Scotland (UK), North America and the University of St Andrews between 1997 and 2006.

[Signature]

Date...

Signature of Candidate...

I hereby certify that the candidate has fulfilled the conditions of the Resolution and Regulations appropriate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of St Andrews and that the candidate is qualified to submit the thesis in application for this degree.

[Signature]

Date

Signature of Supervisor...

In submitting this thesis to the University of St Andrews, I understand that I am giving permission for it to be made available for use in accordance with the regulations of the University Library for the time being in force, subject to any copyright vested in the work not being affected thereby. I also understand that the title and abstract will be published, and that a copy of the work may be made and supplied to any bona fide library or research worker.

[Signature]

Date

Signature of Candidate...
ABSTRACT

The Rainbow Family of Living Light is an intentional society devoted to achieving world peace through spiritual healing. A loose association of spiritual seekers that explicitly rejects all forms of leadership and imposed authority, it represents an interesting example of an anarchist and communal society. Rainbow Family events regularly draw thousands of people. These take place all over the world. While some participants may question the label, it can be described as one of the biggest and most geographically diverse New Age groups on the planet. As such, it is a very important factor in shaping the entire present day New Age movement.

I conducted fieldwork with the Rainbow Family between the autumns of 1998 and 2002, traveling with the nomadic group throughout the United States. The Rainbow Family rejects any sort of official membership, accepting anyone who attends its events as an equal participant. Spending extended periods of time in the field, I became immersed in this alternative society. The distinction between ethnographic researcher and informants was highly problematic under such circumstances. This made me acutely aware of the issues surrounding fieldwork and anthropological authority. My own work began to seem quite similar to the spiritual seeking of other participants. As such, I began to consider the commonalities between anthropology and the spirituality encountered within the Rainbow Family.

The spiritual discourses produced by Rainbow Family participants are uniquely eclectic and ludic in tone. In a setting explicitly championing individual freedom rather than coercion, there is no sense of spiritual orthodoxy. The ways in which spiritual discourses are treated by the Rainbow Family display
interesting attitudes towards truth, authority, and reality. These attitudes are reminiscent of epistemological orientations within postmodernist anthropology. Rainbow Family participants find noteworthy solutions to the apparent ontological dilemmas postmodernism presents. It is my hope that looking at the Rainbow Family of Living Light will suggest a viable way for anthropology to productively deal with its current crisis of identity.
I. INTRODUCTION TO THE RAINBOW FAMILY OF LIVING LIGHT 1

II. RAINBOW GATHERING INFRASTRUCTURE 19

III. RAINBOW PEOPLE AND THEIR NEIGHBORS 50

IV. INTRODUCTION TO PROJECT 85

V. COMMON SPIRITUALITY 106

VI. RAINBOW ANARCHY 145

VII. RAINBOW MYSTICISM 181

VIII. SPIRITUAL HEALING 223

IX. POLITICAL IMPACT 248

X. CONCLUSIONS 269

BIBLIOGRAPHY 282
I. INTRODUCTION TO THE RAINBOW FAMILY OF LIVING LIGHT

The Rainbow Family of Living Light defies absolute description. In a sense, that is part of its mystique. There are many ways in which it could be described, none of which would be entirely satisfying to everyone familiar with the group. Inquiries made to those people actually involved with Rainbow, as the phenomenon is commonly called in casual speech, tend to result in responses highlighting its ephemeral nature. One seasoned participant admonishes inquirers to “be prepared for a different answer from each person who responds. Rainbow is different things to different people”\(^1\). Such an assertion is not necessarily the best way to begin an ethnographic text, however. In this capacity, it is important to provide the reader with a basic understanding of the subject at hand. In order to do this, I present an overview which, though borrowing from emic terminology and commentary, will perhaps strike most Rainbow participants as being overly concerned with fixed definitions. Such a synopsis, however, is likely to be helpful for the reader not familiar with the Rainbow phenomenon.

One favorite ethnographic technique for introducing a group, the historical overview, is especially problematic. The reasons for this complication are worth noting. Participants in the Rainbow Family are explicit about the subjective and ludic nature of their movement’s history, and refrain from making sweeping statements about its past. This attitude is, indeed, expressed in the Rainbow dialect’s term for history, ‘Hipstory’. Hipstory, I have been told, is an

\(^1\) essay written by ‘Carla’, posted at www.welcomehome.org/rainbow.html
acknowledgement of the "personal and changing" character of history"². Such an attitude is also a manifestation of the typical Rainbow abhorrence of things official, a libertarian spirit which tacitly informs many aspects of life within the group. Out of respect for this tradition, I must emphasize that my own account of Rainbow's origins should not be read as representing an authoritative, totalizing history. Instead, like Hipstorical accounts of participants, it should be taken as reflecting a particular and personal reading of Rainbow's roots.

While I will save the details of these Rainbow legends for later pages, no explanation of the Rainbow Family can fail to mention the fact that Hipstory almost always mentions some grand, saving mission that empowers the movement. Rainbow is a spontaneous collection of old souls, coming together to prepare for Armageddon. Other stories suggest Rainbow is the spiritual descendant of the Native American Ghost Dances, an ecstatic reawakening meant to herald an era of peace and environmental harmony. Rainbow may even be construed as an anarchist commune, a collection of cultural insurgents focused on undoing the corrupt industrial capitalist system. Whatever the specific Hipstorical explanation, the Rainbow Family is always portrayed as destined to change history in some benevolent way. This is important to what it means to be Rainbow.

Hipstorical accounts almost always include a description of the movement's first major event, which took place in the summer of 1972, near the small town of Granby, Colorado. Though it was originally scheduled to be held on public land, at Table Mountain in the Rocky Mountain National Park,

---

² Interview with Eagle Eyes, a man in his mid-thirties from southern California, January 1999, Kofa Wildlife Refuge
pressure from local authorities prevented this from happening. A local
landowner allowed the hundreds of early Gatherers to move to a piece of private
property nearby. The first Rainbow Gathering reportedly went on amidst a great
deal of controversy and confusion. Local people were frightened by outlandish
rumors that the event was planned to draw a million people\(^3\) to their sleepy rural
area. Despite drastic efforts by the governor and the state authorities he
controlled, law enforcement attempts to bar people from the area failed. Crowds,
which people today estimate to have been between ten and twenty thousand,
simply hiked to the new site along remote mountain trails the police roadblocks
could not monitor.

Hipstorical overviews always refer to the social climate surrounding this
landmark event. In 1972, the year of the Rainbow Family's birth as a specific
entity, an emergent counterculture was becoming apparent in American society.
This counterculture is often equated with resistance to the U.S. war in Vietnam.
Issues of peace and war certainly played an important role in the emergence of
the counterculture. At some deeper level, however, it embodied a response to
something much bigger. One scholar writes that fringe political movements of
the 1960s "broadened the zone of political activity in all directions- inward into
the personal and outward a critique of daily life"\(^4\). The counterculture, then, was
not merely engaged in political resistance in the traditional sense, but personal
resistance to a corrupt cultural system.

Described as "a variegated procession constantly in flux, acquiring and

---

\(^3\) Cahill, Tim. August 1972. 'Armageddon Postponed'. *Rolling Stone*

\(^4\) Darnovsky, Marcy and Epstein, Barbara and Flacks, Richard. 1995. *Cultural Politics and
losing members all along the route of the march\textsuperscript{5}, the counterculture is even less simple to define than Rainbow. A perusal of the scholarship surrounding the phenomenon known as the counterculture [often spelled counter culture] reveals fairly clear intellectual trends, however. A set of common values may be roughly outlined. An increasing awareness of peace, justice, and human rights issues was central to its development. Utopian ideas of economic equality and the rejection of industrial capitalism were important. A back to the land communalism came into favor within much of the counterculture. An interest in alternative religious practices (what might be called the New Age today), and mystical seeking became central to the lives of many individuals. This overlapped with a keen interest in experimenting with drugs and other mind-altering experiences.

The counterculture’s constituency displayed disdain for the mainstream economic order, the industrial corporate capitalism hitherto virtually synonymous with American society. This trait may at first seem to link the counterculture with the traditional left, with its emphasis on class-consciousness and various critiques of capitalism. However, the counterculture’s rejection of the mainstream economy proceeds from somewhat different assumptions and concerns. Like the traditional left, many within the counterculture were keenly aware of the way wealth is distributed, and opposed the mainstream American economy precisely because of its class inequality. The counterculture, however, also rejected the modes of production developed by industrial capitalism. The counterculturist, like the traditional socialist, was against the boss class. The counterculturalist, though, was also against the factories they controlled.

It is not quite the same thing to say that the counterculture has always been opposed modern technology, though there certainly have been neoprimitivist and Luddite strains apparent within it. Rather, it called into question the supposedly rational, centralized control of this technology. The hierarchical, exploitative, and impersonal relationships associated with mainstream industrial capitalism fell under deep skepticism and strong opposition by people associated with the counterculture. Roszak's assessment of the counterculture as a critical response to the 'technocracy' encompasses this attitude. He describes the technocracy as "that society in which those who govern justify themselves by appeal to technical experts who in turn justify themselves by appeal to scientific forms of knowledge. And beyond the authority of science there is no appeal". While different strains of the counterculture have used different terms to describe the corrupt economic system they oppose, it is this opposition which served to define the counterculture which emerged in the 1960s and early 1970s. As we shall see, this is certainly true of Rainbow as well.

Rejection of the mainstream capitalist economy led to an upsurge in experimentation with non-traditional ways of living. Roszak notes that the counterculture drew upon "a profoundly personalist sense of community rather than upon technical and industrial values". The desire to live by natural, organic laws rather those imposed by mainstream society's ruthless economy is a characteristic shared by American communes throughout history. In the decade prior to Rainbow's emergence, the idea of the commune as an antidote to the

---


mainstream gained significant currency.

One anthropologist who has written an excellent overview of the Rainbow Family, emphasizes this connection. He states that the group "follows a strong utopian tradition in North America that dates back almost to the time of the Western conquest". Historical discourses often describe this feature of the movement's roots, and there is evidently some amount of pride in continuing what is rightly perceived as a venerable American tradition.

While the tendency to equate the counterculture with anti-war activism of the sort which sprang up around the Vietnam war in the late 1960s is overly simplistic, it is not without some merit. The peace movement sparked by the Vietnam conflict certainly was an important inspiration to the emergence of Rainbow. At first a phenomenon largely confined to university campuses, the anti-war movement spread as the scale of the war escalated. As public sentiment turned against U.S. involvement in Vietnam, this peace movement emerged as a powerful force in American life. Large-scale protests became a regular feature of this period, and offered forums for communication of what had hitherto been fairly radical ideas.

As the war dragged on, people began to question why their country would participate in an obviously brutal and unjust conflict. As they did so, many became convinced of an essential link between the war and mainstream American values. Rainbow represented a conscious attempt to develop an alternative to the violence, inequality and commercialism of mainstream society. The social connections and planning skills developed in the context of anti-war activism were applied to the creation of this new society. Dealing with such

---

logistical hurdles as feeding and housing tens of thousands of protesters endowed activists with a knowledge of techniques and strategies which have become essential to putting together present day Gatherings. Those who worked with political organizing brought critical talents to the Rainbow Family. Moreover, the anti-war movement provided a cultural atmosphere in which Rainbow, with its emphasis on praying for world peace, was able to attract large numbers to early Gatherings.

Rainbow has always attracted many people from that side of the counterculture interested in religious experimentation. The group is, on some deep level, sincerely concerned with fostering spiritual healing. Living with Rainbow, one is impressed by the constant reminders of this spirituality, strange as these often seem. The interior of Gatherings is typically referred to as 'the church' or 'the cathedral of nature'. Individuals can be seen deep in meditation in nearly any social context within Gatherings, conversing about beliefs is a favorite activity, blessings and vocal prayers are offered liberally, and so forth. Even the most worldly and mundane aspects of Rainbow life involve a spiritual focus.

There is no explicit orthodoxy of creed, and Gatherers bring with them a wide array of (often contradictory) spiritual leanings. With a strong implicit emphasis on respecting different beliefs, Rainbow Gatherings become places where an open discussion of spiritual matters is possible and encouraged. Indeed, the group is premised on the idea that people of different backgrounds and communities should gather to pray for world peace. This is felt to be necessary, serious work. Some participants may identify as belonging to a single, organized religion, and it is common to encounter people in the Rainbow context who call themselves Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and so forth. Others
prefer to avoid subscribing to any one tradition, and dabble in multiple approaches to worship. Rainbow may thus be perceived as a loose conglomeration of people, from a variety of backgrounds, who gather together to express a common interest in the characteristically countercultural desire to transform the world, here through their spiritual efforts.

The counterculture has often been defined by its attitude towards mind-altering drugs. Rainbow has a reputation as a haven for certain kinds of drug use as well. While commentators from the mainstream society often exaggerate the importance of drug use to the counterculture, it is impossible to not mention the issue in an overview of cultural atmosphere surrounding Rainbow’s emergence. Ironically sparked in large part by U.S. government experiments with LSD and similar substances\(^9\), the counterculture’s interest in psychedelic drugs blossomed in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Marijuana, long a favorite intoxicant of musicians, had become prevalent among the general youth scene as well. These substances were used recreationally, as a party adjunct, but also came to be respected for their powerful reality altering effects. Many came to consider substances including marijuana, LSD, psilocybin mushrooms, and mescaline to be the new sacraments of the counterculture. This tradition certainly lives on within the Rainbow Family.

Use of reality altering substances added fuel to the experimental mood the counterculture embodied. These experiments with lifestyle became wilder, representing more and more radical departures from mainstream values. Coupled with the fact that these substances were illegal, and could land users

---

significant prison terms if caught, the more hardcore aficionados of psychedelics became interested in the idea of creating zones largely beyond law enforcement control. At first these were centered around the 1960s rock music scene, with organizers putting together large music festivals at which participants could indulge freely in lifestyle experimentation and hallucinogenic drug use. These events became definitive of the counterculture in the years leading up to Rainbow's inception.

These large music festivals deeply influenced Rainbow. Some larger festivals tended to become unruly, and efforts were gradually put into place to make them more peaceful events. The sorts of logistical concerns which these potentially chaotic events generated led many to seek a better way to accommodate the needs of large crowds of revelers. During one such festival, called Vortex, which took place outside Portland, Oregon in 1970, planners became interested in the idea that it would be possible to put on a festival focused on cultural and spiritual growth instead of musical bands. Rather than creating another event focused on musical performances, they decided, it might be interesting to use the same organizational skills to bring people together for the purpose of social exploration. Those who became involved in this effort formed a loose coalition which eventually resulted in the 1972 Gathering in Colorado. This period during and after the Vortex Festival is considered by many to be when the movement actually began.

Since 1972, the Rainbow Family has grown into an international movement, with many tens of thousands of participants worldwide. The first international Gathering was held in the Italian Alps in 1983, and since then Gatherings have been held with varying degrees of regularity all around the
planet. There has never been an official membership list. It is often said that "everyone is, and always has been, a member". This is stated somewhat more flippantly in the Rainbow position that everyone with a belly button is welcome to participate in the anarchistic group, and in making lighthearted reference to this by showing navels as 'proof of membership'. Hence, it is impossible to be too specific about Rainbow's worldwide following. Most people who have been involved with it for decades usually say it is around a hundred thousand, but this must be taken as speculation more than anything else.

To put any explicit qualifications on participation in its events would be considered contradictory to the freedom Rainbow is meant to represent. If, as Rainbow's ludic mythology suggests, everyone is at some deep level always a member, then to deny entrance to a Rainbow event is to deny them access to something that is inherently their own. Rainbow events belong to everybody. This attitude is reflected in the exuberant greeting, "Welcome Home", shouted to newcomers as they make their way into the depths of a Rainbow Gathering. This uniquely open character, the fact that there is no official membership and anyone is welcome (encouraged) to attend its events, is quite significant. As we shall see, this insistence on uncompromising openness of membership certainly contributes to a good many of the internal problems the Rainbow Family faces. It is also a source of some of its important strengths. This tension will be explored throughout this ethnography.

Similarly, Rainbow has no official leaders. Asking who is in charge of a Rainbow event is actually a favorite joke within the movement, as individual

---


11 Interview with Sun Bear, July 1999, Allegheny National Forest
freedom and equality are considered inalienable and diametrically opposed to the concept of formal leadership. Decisions regarding the Rainbow Family are made through unanimous consensus, and anyone can suggest or block a call for this consensus. Asking about Rainbow's leadership, in fact, is likely to result in ridicule. A common practice is to point to a nearby young child, and declare that he or she is in charge. As we shall see below, this is actually a humorous response to a very serious matter, as law enforcement is constantly trying to find someone to take legal responsibility for Gatherings. Dealing with the topic in such a playful manner is characteristic of the ludic tone of Rainbow life, and succeeds in infuriating government authorities.

How an intentional community like Rainbow thrives with a totally open membership and lack of explicitly sanctioned leadership is an intensely interesting story. Telling that story may as well start with an analysis of the movement's name. Because of the uniquely open character of the movement, it draws a wide range of adherents. Such internal diversity makes it extremely difficult to say what, exactly, the Rainbow Family is all about, what it is for, what the entire point is. Indeed, the very fact that it cannot be reduced to a simple definition is part of its appeal to many participants. Attempting to label it is likely to be interpreted emically as unsporting and contrary to the mystical, playful tone of Gathering life. While participants in the Rainbow Family are characteristically loathe to attempt such sweeping analysis of their movement's symbolism, it may be possible to reveal something of the group's character by examining the words which make up its name.

The first part of the name, the rainbow, is a multivalent symbol in this
case. New Age writers state that “the rainbow is a universal archetype”\textsuperscript{12} which is has been considered sacred by cultures on every inhabited continent. It is, therefore, considered a symbol which transcends national boundaries in its significance. As one such New Age author puts it, “unlike the cross, the swastika, the hammer and sickle, or even the white dove of peace, the rainbow does not belong to any nation”\textsuperscript{13}. Likewise, it is perceived by many as an emblem of international unity, the coming together of representatives from the world’s religions for the purpose of achieving peaceful relations among all peoples of the earth.

The second part of the group’s name also indicates an important aspect of its character. Strong interpersonal bonds tend to develop rather quickly at Rainbow, largely due to the intense intimacy living together in the woods demands. Sharing food, water, and Gathering facilities for months at a time does much to cultivate a sense of connection among those who populate the Rainbow Family. Because the movement is consciously anti-bureaucratic, it is personal connections between equal individuals that matter in regard to ensuring physical health and social influence. To feel kinship with many people, to be well known and liked, is a key form of wealth within the Rainbow Family.

The nomadic nature of the Rainbow lifestyle, moreover, contributes to the development a familial identity among the people living it. The Rainbow Family is extremely fluid in terms of population, and holds its events all over the country and world throughout the year. This creates an atmosphere where

different individual Rainbow participants are around its encampments at
different times. Meeting up with friends from past Gatherings is very comforting
under such circumstances, so developing bonds of friendship is an important
aspect of helping to ensure a positive Gathering experience. These bonds,
particularly when of a long-term nature, are expressed as familial.

Though it is rarely used in casual conversation, there is another phrase
which is often attached to the movement's name in more formal communication.
Since there is nothing official about the group, it is not quite fair to say that the
full Rainbow Family of Living Light is the movement's proper name, but it is
often used in such a manner. The phrase is an interesting one and perhaps
reflects a deep Rainbow value. It suggests something of the idea that it is
destined to bring renewing, life sustaining energy to a dying world. In this sense
the symbol of living light is quite a good way of describing what the movement
is meant to be. Some participants will go so far as to describe themselves and all
who populate Rainbow as manifestations of a divine energy, sent into this world
by the universe to help grow the world green again, just like sunshine as they
say, and thereby identify more explicitly with the reference to living light in the
name.

The Rainbow Family is now primarily manifested through periodic events
that participants call Gatherings. These are held on every populated continent of
the world, and vary greatly in size from place to place. In the U.S., where the
group first began and I have conducted my fieldwork, Gatherings can be
tentatively fit into three basic categories with regard to population. The largest
events are the Annuals. Annual Gatherings (sometimes called Nationals) in
North America take place in a different U.S. National Forest each summer, and
ideally in a different part of the country. These typically draw between ten and forty thousand participants, depending on where they are held. Gatherings on either of the coasts will tend to be larger, while those requiring participants to travel to less heavily populated regions are generally smaller.

The smallest Rainbow events are fairly informal Local events, called Locals. These are often weekly or monthly one-day Potlucks and Drum Circles attended by less than a hundred people. Local events, in the dozens of communities that hold them, generally happen in secluded areas of large city parks or, sometimes, privately owned rural land. In areas that have harsh winters, they may be held in the homes of participating individuals. Local events function as steering committees of a sort, where more experienced Rainbows come together to discuss matters of concern in the local area. These events are also places where travelers can find out about Rainbow resources in town, which they may utilize to support themselves temporarily. These resources, whether a Rainbow house in the community, communal meals, free clothes, or whatever else, can mean quite a bit to such Rainbow nomads.

Between Locals and Nationals in size are Regionals, a broad category of Gatherings which can range in population from a few dozen to a few thousand, and in duration from long weekends to entire seasons. These Gatherings take place all throughout the year, and each region has its own traditions as to specific times and preferred locations, though they are usually held on federal land. In some cases, though, they take place on state or county land instead. While this is typically seen as a breach of tradition, practical considerations, such as location and better relations with nearby communities and agencies, sometimes prompts Rainbows to choose these forests. This seems to be increasing as harassment from
federal authorities escalates.

Regionals present an interesting insight into dynamic Rainbow's classificatory norms. While Regionals used to be referred to by state names (i.e. Wisconsin Regional, or Vermont Regional), they are increasingly known by what are called 'bioregional' names (i.e. Great Lakes Regional, or North Eastern Regional). Rainbow events are initiated, like all activity within the Rainbow Family, by individuals and groups of individuals. Regional originally start with people at one Local coordinating with Locals in other towns to put on such a Gathering. Sometimes Regional traditions catch on, sometimes they don't. It seems that Regionals are becoming increasingly popular events, drawing more and more people, and catching on as yearly traditions. Various state-wide Regionals are consolidating, and the larger bioregion-based events are becoming the norm in the U.S. This may be due to an overall growth in Rainbow's population, and certainly reflects the maturing of this thirty-something year-old group.

Regional and Annual Gatherings go through four delineated phases. The first of these is the scouting phase, wherein potential Gathering sites are explored and one is ultimately selected. The ideal site should be remote enough from towns and private lands to minimize the potential for conflicts with locals. It should mostly consist of high rather than marshy ground, both for the comfort of those attending the Gathering and the protection of the land itself, as wetland areas are far more likely than drier ground to be adversely impacted by the crowds Rainbow draws. Concern for the local ecosystem also dictates that a potential site be thoroughly scouted for signs of any breeding or endangered species. If any are discovered, scouts will move on to another area.
A site should have at least two points of road access. This helps to alleviate potential traffic jams as vehicles go in and out, more importantly, assures that Gatherers are not trapped if one exit is blocked by storm damage or forest fires. Each point of road access should have a dry meadow nearby, so that vehicles can be parked at the edge of the Gathering. A large meadow at the center of the site is also required, as a place where participants can congregate. There should be at least one good spring to provide drinking water, preferably uphill from potential camping areas. As Rainbow participants never cut live wood for fires, there also needs to be plenty of downed dead wood throughout the site.

The second phase of a Gathering is referred to as Seed Camp. This is a period of hard labor, as a handful of participants create the basic infrastructure needed to accommodate the crowds which will come throughout the course of the Gathering. As will be appreciated, this is no easy feat. Rainbow infrastructure can be quite elaborate. The task is made the more difficult by the fact that food supplies are often minimal during Seed Camp. Those who participate in Seed Camp tend to be full time travelers who have do not have much in the way of financial resources. Since food supplies at Gatherings are based on donations from people coming to the site, this early Gathering phase is generally marked by a sense of scarcity. Seed Camp also tends to attract adult males in far higher proportions than other Gathering phases.

This gender imbalance imparts a somewhat tense atmosphere in which machismo and bellicosity are quite apparent. Problems with locals are also likely to occur sooner rather than later. Occasionally, for instance, Rainbows will accidentally camp too close to private land or near illegal marijuana crops
belonging to locals. Seed Camp is sometimes disrupted by confrontations based on such factors, and these can turn violent. Despite the hardships and discomforts it can involve, however, Seed Camp is a rewarding part of Gathering life. The bonds of camaraderie which evolve during this phase tend to be quite strong, and the satisfaction of having helped to build important Gathering infrastructure is considerable. Further, being a part of Seed Camp is a way of bolstering one's reputation which, as we shall see, is important within Rainbow society.

Seed Camp eventually gives way to the main Gathering, as more and more participants arrive on site. Eventually males and females are represented in roughly even proportions, and all ages are present. Supplies are usually ample during this main phase, and there is something of a sense of thanksgiving as resources are shared generously. This main period is punctuated by the Peak, the point of greatest population. Many Regionals are planned so that their Peak falls on a symbolically important date, such as an equinox, solstice, New Year's Eve, or full moon. North American annuals have their Peaks on the Fourth of July. An atmosphere of revelry and sanctity often surrounds these Peaks, and the choicest supplies tend to be saved for this time. What may be described as key Rainbow values, such as egalitarianism, pacifism, and sharing, are likely to be consciously observed by participants in this phase of a Gathering. This may be described as due to an increased sensitivity towards breaches of informal Rainbow etiquette as the Peak draws near.

As a Gathering wanes and people begin to move on, the last phase begins. Clean Up, as it is called, is similar to Seed Camp in many ways, but is opposite in purpose. Those who remain organize into informal Clean Up crews, and
systematically work to remove, or as they say disappear, all evidence that a Gathering has taken place. All the artificial infrastructure is dismantled and important equipment is moved on to the next site. Garbage and recycleables, which are kept separate as they are produced during the Gathering, are hauled to proper handling facilities. In what is probably best viewed as an effort to maintain good relations with local communities, trash is taken to multiple dumps so that no one municipality is left with the whole of Rainbow's refuse. Very often, the trash Clean Up crews remove from a site includes litter that has been there for years. As well as usually succeeding in rehabilitating and even improving the natural character of the impacted site when allowed to run its full course, this phase is also an important source of material goods for those participating in the Clean Up, as they are able to collect tents, clothes, blankets and other useful items left behind by others.
II. RAINBOW GATHERING INFRASTRUCTURE

Rainbow Gatherings are composed of several emically labeled institutions. The presence of any of these, however, will vary with the size of the Gathering. The larger the Gathering, the more infrastructural elements will be encountered. These are often laid out in an intentional, stereotyped sequence. This reflects a sort of traditional symbolism which conceives of the Gathering as a circle or, more properly, as a series of concentric circles. According to many Rainbow participants, this shape is consciously chosen as an ideal Gathering layout because it has special spiritual properties. There is one strain of thinking at Rainbow which reflects a general New Age belief that circles are able to concentrate and direct spiritual power\(^1\), and that the overall circular layout of a Gathering is conducive to maximizing its positive impact on the universe. Others speak of the circular ideal being a reflection of the egalitarianism which characterizes Rainbow. According to this view, Gatherings are ideally circular because the Rainbow Family itself is a huge circle of equals.

Attached to both ways of thinking is the notion that Gatherings are comprised of a number of layers of sanctity. As one travels from the outside world (Babylon) to the center of a Gathering (Rainbow), one goes from a more secular or corrupted to a more sacred or pure space. The closer one moves to the center of a Gathering, so this orientation describes, the more likely one is to see people living in adherence with Rainbow values of generous cooperation and peaceful collectivism. Structural elements of Gatherings are, in terms of this ideal layout, arranged accordingly. In practice, only larger Regionals or Nationals

come close to actually manifesting this ideal layout. Even at these, it takes a bit of imagination to see the Gathering as a circle. I will describe the components in the sequence they would ideally be encountered, as the model provides the anthropologist with a convenient descriptive framework.

Since all Rainbows spend at least some of their lives traveling through Babylon, the communication network by which information about upcoming Gatherings is disseminated can be considered as the outer circle in Rainbow's infrastructure. At the simplest level, this takes place through word of mouth communication and pamphlets. These pamphlets, typically called Howdy Folks, announce directions to the upcoming Gathering and basic information for potential newcomers. Informal mailing lists are used to send these Howdy Folks to Rainbows who have addresses. These are then copied and dispersed locally, often posted in Rainbow friendly coffee houses and food co-ops. Often, they include a description of the non-commercial, cooperative, and inclusive nature of Rainbow. For example, a Howdy Folks from a Gathering in northern Wisconsin, tells newcomers that: "Rainbow Gatherings are about peace, love, and healing. A Rainbow gathering is a totally free, non-commercial sharing of sacred hearts in the cathedral of nature. There is no admission and there are no leaders or organizers. All are welcome. Rainbow Gatherings happen magically through cooperation and voluntary contributions. Money isn't exchanged at Gatherings".

Publications produced by and for Rainbow are produced in a similar manner. There are quite a few such publications, some distributed nationally, some put out on a bioregional level. Rainbow publications are, as a matter of principle, operated on a noncommercial basis. Advertisements are not accepted,

---

2 1999 Howdy Folks for Wisconsin Regional Gathering
and subscriber lists are never sold. As with Gatherings themselves, they are funded entirely through donations. Since the publications are mainly distributed through the mail, postage stamps make up an important part of these donations. Such donations, however, are not obligatory and failure to contribute money or stamps will not prevent a request for a publication from being honored. Production is similarly tied to Rainbow values, as they are, at least ideally, run by consensus. All are welcome to participate in their creation and, to prevent control from becoming too centralized, some publications intentionally rotate where they are published.

The two most common national publications are All Ways Free and The Rainbow Guide. All Ways Free, sometimes described as Rainbow's main newspaper, has been published in a different part of the country each year since 1985 by an informal and constantly rotating group of volunteers. It is usually about twenty to thirty pages long, comes out quarterly, and is comprised of art, essays, and poems contributed by Rainbow participants from all around the world. Themes of personal spirituality, basic advice on how to put on a Gathering, and current news and debates about the Rainbow Family abound. It is the publication most designed for consumption by the general public, offering a window into Rainbow life and philosophy to those who might not know much about the group.

The Rainbow Guide, a newspaper booklet of similar or somewhat greater length published annually since 1977, is quite different in content. It presents an impossibly brief overview of the Rainbow Family and its Gatherings, and a list of Rainbow contacts throughout the world. This list is compiled on a completely voluntary basis. Address cards are available at Gatherings and are filled out by
Rainbow attendees interested in being listed in the next year’s guide. Those submitting their names to the guide may also note skills and resources they wish to share with others who frequent Gatherings. This publication is a valuable resource for traveling Rainbows, who often call on those listed in the guide when in need of a place to stay for a few days, a shower, help with auto repair, and so forth.

Those newsletters that cater to specific areas, often tied to bioregions, are generally similar in content to All Ways Free, though typically shorter in length. Some of the better known of these newsletters are Ho!, which is published in the Katuah bioregion (southeastern states), Northwest Tribal Newsletter, serving the upper pacific states, and Ozarks Rainbow Bulletin (ORB), from the southern Midwest. They typically include the same sort of submissions as All Ways Free, but usually only from people in the specified geographical zone. These regional newsletters do much to create a sense of connection between participants scattered throughout the given bioregion. Moreover, Rainbow activists can compare notes with their distant brethren by reading publications from other places. Since the sorts of problems Gatherers are likely to encounter are not limited by geography, this ability to experimentally discuss a variety of potential solutions is quite helpful.

Another important component of the Rainbow Family’s present-day communications system is the internet. As municipal and university libraries, even in very small communities, often offer public access to the internet, participants can check email accounts and web pages almost any time they come to town. Though still uncommon due to the cost and somewhat spotty reception, some have even taken to installing computers with cellular phone connections to
the internet in their vehicles, an arrangement which offers a convenient means of communicating while on the road or sometimes even in the woods if reception is adequate. Solar powered laptops are occasionally brought into Gatherings as well, providing a communications link to the entire world. Up to the minute information, photos, and video feeds can be broadcast from within Gatherings themselves.

Though the fact that the often Luddite Rainbow movement has so enthusiastically embraced this most modern of technologies may be perceived as ironic, the internet is particularly well suited to several aspects of the lifestyle and values the group represents. Many Rainbows consider the establishment of open and uncensored communication an integral step towards achieving a healthy society. In contrast to other forums for mass communication, the internet remains free from significant centralized control. Since it is obviously more accessible than other forms of mass communication, the internet is congruent with the value of populist inclusivism which underpins the fact that Gatherings are open to everyone. Finally, the global scale of the internet is harmonious with the global consciousness espoused by many Gatherers, who consider the final purpose of the Rainbow movement to be the achievement of world peace.

Email is one of the most useful tools the internet provides to Rainbow. Since many Gatherers spend much of their time wandering across huge geographical areas and often do not have permanent homes, email is a more practical means of receiving messages than telephones or the post. Email accounts are free and can be accessed from virtually any internet portal. Its instantaneous nature makes this an ideal way for making arrangements with fellow Rainbows. Many people list their email addresses in the Rainbow Guide,
and this can be an unthreatening means of contacting strangers in order to get information about area Gatherings, good places to camp for a few days while traveling through their part of the country, or material assistance. Informal email lists are also kept in some regions, and these are used to communicate information about upcoming events in the area.

The way in which such email lists are kept and utilized reflects something of Rainbow’s egalitarian spirit and its general mistrust of centralized power. This arrangement, typically referred to as an email tree, involves each participant having email addresses for five or ten others. Upon receipt of a message about a Gathering, each person forwards it to the people on his or her list. Since lists are not centrally coordinated, the process is a bit more complicated in practice. There is much overlap between different people’s lists, a built-in redundancy. This feature, rather than being a drawback of the system, actually benefits the process of passing information along. If one person is unable to contact those on his or her list, this redundancy makes it likely that the message will be emailed anyhow. The lack of a centralized list helps to minimize the risk of any individual Rainbow participant being accused by law enforcement officials of being a leader of the movement.

Another way in which Rainbow has come to utilize internet technology is through the establishment of a chat group. This list, called alt.gathering.rainbow or AGR for short, is a place where people can post and read emailed messages. It is a handy forum for exchanging resources involved with the establishment of gatherings. It is often a good place for those in need to find someone willing to share resources in a particular area. These posts also include protracted discussions and debates on many topics having to do with Rainbow life. Since all
these messages are publicly posted, the list also provides a place for curious outsiders to find out about the movement. It is increasingly common for people to bring internet capable laptops into Gatherings, and post messages from the site itself. This allows those unable to attend to keep up on the news, social gossip, and ideas being talked about within the Gatherings, and makes AGR an interesting window into Rainbow life.

The internet resource which has been most dramatically embraced by the Rainbow Family is the world wide web. Many web sites have been created. Some of these are personal home pages with some information about Rainbow, others are intended to be used and updated collectively. The latter sort of site, some worry, may be misinterpreted by outsiders as representing the Rainbow Family in an official capacity. Hence, those who help to maintain such pages are careful to point out that they do not claim to be speaking for the entire group. The person who maintains one of the more popular Rainbow web sites, for instance, states that "This is Not an official document of any kind by the Rainbow Family. This Home Page is my own creation, and as such only represents my own ideas".3

Aside from the potential for such confusion, however, web pages can be useful in a number of ways. On personal home pages, the site's creator may introduce himself or herself, discuss personal interests, politics, or spiritual insights, and post messages to friends. Personal web pages often include links to other sites, which deal with more public aspects of Rainbow. More general pages often post information about events, directions to Gatherings, ride exchanges, legal concerns and other such practical matters. These web pages also serve as a

3 http://www.welcomehome.org/rainbow/main.html#disclaim
means of educating outsiders about the movement, discussing the group’s past, debating what Rainbow is, and presenting extensive collections of photographs of Rainbow people and events.

The Rainbow lifestyle almost always involves traveling over vast distances. Gatherings are held in remote forests all around the country, and so a high degree of mobility is required of those who attend regularly. Though people travel to Gatherings via a wide range of means, from bicycles to personal aircraft, most get to and from Gatherings by driving or hitchhiking. Ride sharing is extremely common and casual, and many Rainbow participants have a fairly large network of friends and acquaintances with whom they tend to travel. This sort of shared traveling is not done merely to get from one Gathering to the next. People use these networks to live nomadically while wandering over huge distances, stopping to stay in Rainbow-friendly communities for a few days or weeks, then moving on either by driving or catching a ride with others living this vagabonding lifestyle. While there is certainly much variation as to how much a particular individual is given to such roaming, it is a practice with which most participants are personally familiar.

This life on the road is referred to by the movement’s participants as the Rainbow Trail. In some ways, those who choose to caravan around the country with people they know from Rainbow serve to spread the word about the group and its upcoming Gatherings. Often, people who make up a Kitchen Crew (see below) travel together with their gear and establish informal and mobile soup kitchens when traveling through cities. Doing so brings them into close contact with travelers not affiliated with Rainbow, who are often thrilled to hear of such a group and plug in themselves. Artists and musicians who meet at Gatherings
also form informal traveling groups, and achieve a similar sort of diplomacy with outsiders through their talents. While most people living on the Rainbow trail would not think of themselves as missionaries, they do appear to serve something of that function to the movement as a whole.

The next layer of Rainbow is the periphery of the Gathering itself. Pulling into a Gathering, one encounters signs and ribbons marking the way to Main Parking. When coming up to this space, usually a large grassy clearing along a Forest Service road, vehicles are approached by people giving directions on where and how to park. Care is taken in Main Parking to space vehicles so that they do not block exit routes. In the rare but not impossible case of a forest fire, this measure could prove critical to the safety of those attending the Gathering. Also, concern for protecting environmentally sensitive areas in or near the Main Parking zone often dictates parking procedures. It is common to see ropes or ribbons blocking off small trees or wetland areas from tires.

Main Parking is more than merely a place to store vehicles while Rainbow participants are at the Gathering. Since getting into the interior of a Gathering where camps are set up often involves a multiple mile hike, those arriving late in the day may remain in Main Parking overnight, preferring to deal with setting up a more permanent encampment in full daylight. Hence, this area often has the feel of a large campground, as people cook, socialize, and prepare their gear for the upcoming weeks in the woods. Main Parking also serves as a place where those needing rides may meet up with vehicles heading out in the desired direction. Potential riders can often be seen in Main Parking, their belongings and maybe children and pets in tow, holding cardboard signs indicating their destinations.
Up the road from Main Parking, and if the Gathering is situated in the ideal circular pattern on the other side of the looping road from it, is Bus Village. This is where live-in vehicles are parked, and where their riders make their camps. Winnabegos, old VW vans, and school buses park side by side, the customized and psychedelically painted vehicles themselves a tribute to the creative do-it-yourself spirit which characterizes Rainbow. Sturdy plastic tarps stretched among these vehicles, make convenient roofs which protect cooking fires beneath from the elements. Bus Village is a bustling place at almost any hour, and it has a reputation for being a place to party. This is earned, in large part, by the rather impressive raves which are occasionally held here.

Massive sound equipment, strobe lights, and generators fill the woods with booming sound and frenetic flashes during these raves, as Bus Village’s resident DJs engage in friendly competitions with one another. These events are major draws for local young people, who often stay on to participate in entire Gathering. Some other Rainbows, though, disapprove of such rave events, bemoaning the “noise pollution and light pollution” they produce. That they bring in so many strangers concerns some Gatherers as well, especially those with smaller children. None the less, such parties are generally accepted by people who do not care to attend but consider them tolerable expressions of the healthy, if perhaps adolescent, exuberance of the predominantly young Bus Villagers.

A somewhat different sort of partying takes place at A-Camp, the section of the Gathering to which alcohol is sequestered. While some people may camp

---

4 conversation with Rain, a 45-year old woman from Tennessee, July 1999, Allegheny National Forest
here merely as a place to party for a few days, many denizens of A-Camp are serious alcoholics. Tension is often high between drunk and sober Rainbow participants, the latter feeling the former to be a drain on resources and a threat to the health and peace the Gathering is meant to establish. While most A-Campers are on fairly good terms with alcohol-free Rainbows, others are feared and avoided because of their occasional violent outbursts. Indeed, violence and squalor are a fairly common part of life in A-Camp. An upside down US flag which usually flies as A-Camp’s identifying symbol silently testifies to one of the main causes for this. It is evidently a sign used in the military to indicate distress, and by veterans to show respect for their fallen comrades. Conversations with A-Campers often reveal wartime trauma to be a part of their personal pasts.

Located right at the front of the Gathering, A-Camp serves as a de facto security system for the Family. That they tend to keep aggressive local visitors away from the main site makes the often rough and occasionally violent A-Campers useful to the entire Gathering. Anyone wishing to cause harm to the Gathering, and as mentioned it sometimes does happen that locals come to Rainbow events with malicious intentions, must first get past A-Camp and its sometimes armed constituents. A-Campers, even those who are sometimes at odds with non-drinking Rainbow participants, feel a certain pride in their protective role. “We’re the goddamn guard dogs, a bunch of Dobermans at the door”, offered one notorious A-Camper (while nursing a bottle of Jack Daniels), “and we look out for all you even though you treat us like dogs!”5.

Beyond A-Camp is Front Gate, a conceptually important layer of the

---

5 Interview with Duck, a man appearing to be in his forties, September 1998, Shawnee National Forest
Gathering. Marked physically with a rainbow-colored flag, a tarped area containing a few tents, and a bulletin board, this area is the beginning of the Gathering proper. Three key infrastructural elements are found here. The first of these is Main Supply, which is either directly in front or to the side of the gate formed by the flag overhead. Bulk food supplies coming in from outside the Gathering are received here and then distributed equally to the various Kitchens on site. Main Supply often has the feel of a large food market, as representatives from each Kitchen come to select those items they need the most. Distribution of food, for the most part, takes place on a first come, first served basis.

These supplies are, in part, purchased with money donated to the Magic Hat, which is intermittently passed around the Gathering, usually amidst entertaining songs and skits admonishing gatherers to contribute as they can. Oversight of Magic Hat funds is undertaken by a group of volunteers usually called Banking Crew, which is nominally open to anyone but tends to be dominated by more experienced and presumably more trustworthy Gathering participants. This is supplemented by large food donations from farms affiliated with the group, of which there are scores around the country. Grocery store refuse facilities are ransacked, during dumpster diving runs undertaken by industrious Rainbows. Such activity is surprisingly lucrative. These excursions are an especially valuable source of more durable items such as coffee or cooking oil, which grocery stores throw away for reasons which Rainbows do not understand.

A second element sometimes found in the Front Gate area is what is dubbed L-Camp, the ‘l’ standing for legal or lawyer. A recently formed institution, and one found almost exclusively at larger events, L-Camp’s function
is to provide an element of legal protection to the Gathering. Often trained lawyers, L-Campers seek to monitor and record law enforcement encroachment on the site. This is done through the use of video and still cameras, two-way radios, and audio recording equipment. L-Camp also provides affidavits to those people who feel they were unjustly harassed by law enforcement officers on their way into the Gathering. Due to their tenacious efforts, L-Campers have won several important legal cases against law enforcement agencies which have resulted in expanded legal rights for Rainbow.

The third activity in the Front Gate area is Welcome Home, where those coming in are greeted and briefed on current conditions on the site, such as possible fire bans, water quality, severe weather hazards, etc. First-time Gatherers are also presented with pertinent Raps, Rainbow’s practical guidelines. These are usually printed on sheets of paper, so that newcomers can read them over if they wish. It is important to note that there is no fixed canon of Raps, and that these can be added to by anyone willing to write a new one up. Raps are not quite rules, more pieces of practical advise for getting by at the gathering and ensuring the safety for the entire assembled family. Rap 107, for instance, describes prudent behavior while at the gathering. It covers topics such as protecting the natural integrity of the site, insuring that water sources do not become contaminated through human carelessness, preventing theft, and discouraging alcohol and violence. Rap 701, playfully named through an inversion of Rap 107, gives advice to those preparing to leave the Gathering. It discusses techniques for removing human signs when packing up camp, thus aiding in the clean-up process.

Leading off from Front Gate is Main Trail, the primary artery for foot
traffic through the Gathering. It is often a product of laborious construction, as holes are filled in, brush is moved aside, streams bridged, and stones are put in place to prevent slipping in areas which are prone to becoming muddy. From the standpoint of the circular ideal mentioned above, main trail bisects the entire Gathering, allowing for relatively quick transportation of people and goods to remote areas. If it is sufficiently free of mud and ruts, Main Trail is also a path that can be used by carts, wheelbarrows, and bicycles, the use of which greatly facilitates the transfer of gear and provisions, as well as important information, within the Gathering. Due to its centrality to the Gathering, Main Trail is also an area for social interaction. It is typical to encounter groups of people sitting along it, taking breaks from their often long hikes between different areas of the site. This informal practice creates a comfortable forum for discussing events and conditions in various parts of the Gathering.

It is fairly common to be stopped by a group of people while walking Main Trail and prevented from passing. This is called a Troll Toll, and is a favorite Rainbow pastime. The person stopped is required to give some gift to the trolls barring his or her way before they allow further passage. Common gifts include jokes, hugs, 'zuzus' (Rainbow slang for sweets), the sharing of a joint or cigarette, or other small treats. The confrontational attitude of these Troll Tolls, which can be somewhat intimidating to those not familiar with the practice, is a playful one. If a person stopped really can't remember any jokes and truly doesn't have anything to share, it is likely that he or she will actually be given a small present by the 'Trolls'. Similarly, if the accosted person is in a hurry and legitimately doesn't have time to play the Troll Toll game, she or he will be allowed to pass without further ado.
Troll Tolls are also a sign that one has reached the interior of the Gathering. In a sense, they are a humorous appropriation of the A-Camp confrontational aggression first encountered when entering a Gathering site. There is a sort of ironic humor implicit to this game, born of the contradiction between the ideal of personal sovereignty and the jokingly coercive nature of the Troll Toll. It is a parody lesson, teaching those involved to value the opportunity to share with fellow Gatherers. It is also a mechanism for encouraging strangers to get to know each other. Through this quite humorous aspect of Gathering infrastructure, people who might not otherwise have a reason to interact are brought into conversation with one another. Joking relationships often spring from these encounters at Troll Tolls. These may last throughout the Gathering and beyond, sometimes resulting in deep friendships.

The task of feeding Gatherers is clearly a serious one, and at larger Gatherings is no easy feat. It is accomplished by the Kitchens, found all throughout the Gathering. These are sometimes right along Main Trail, more often on smaller trails which branch off from it. The number of Kitchens present at a given Gathering is dictated, simply, by how many show up. In general terms, the bigger the Gathering, the more Kitchens do come. Small Regional Gatherings may only have one or two Kitchens, Annuals almost always include more than twenty. They are known by name, and have reputations for specialty foods, religious ideologies, or connections to particular areas of the country or world. Some cook meat, most are strictly vegetarian or vegan. Operated by their Kitchen Crews, there is variation as to how open these Kitchens are to new helpers. All guests are welcome to eat at any Kitchen, however. Some kitchens have food available all day and night, others a single meal a day or just coffee or
tea. Either way, though, they are bustling with activity at any hour.

In the early stages of a Gathering, it is necessary for each Kitchen to build up its infrastructure. Cooking fires are dug into the ground and lined with stones and mud to increase their heat retention and decrease the chances of fire spreading accidentally. Large metal grates are placed over these to create a grilling surface. Ovens, made with large metal drums, may be incorporated into the design if baking is a part of the Kitchen's culinary repertoire. These ovens are fitted with racks, often shelves salvaged from refrigerators, and are covered with clay to retain heat. With such an outfit, a Kitchen can offer visitors fresh bread and cookies, considered delicacies while in the woods. Sometimes a non-cooking fire, called a Bliss Fire, will be established to keep those not involved in cooking activities warm yet out of the way of food preparation.

Shelves are built for storage of the many utensils and spices used in cooking. Counters are made for chopping ingredients and serving food. Dish washing stations are established, using three five-gallon buckets containing soapy water for cleaning, clean water for rinsing, and a weak bleach solution for sanitizing. Pits are dug for compost and dirty (or gray) water. Recycling stations, usually consisting of a plastic bag stretched out on a wooden frame to hold it open at waist level, are found in nearly every Kitchen. Tents are put up to protect valuable food supplies from the elements and hungry animals. Food may be further protected inside supply tents by use of large jars or clean plastic garbage cans. The entire complex is covered by a roof made of plastic tarps.

The overall job of feeding a Gathering is composed of many day-to-day chores, which are carried out on a volunteer basis. Who does the actual cooking varies from one Kitchen to another; some allow anyone who can organize it to
cook a meal, others have a handful of resident cooks. However, there are other tasks which, in sum, can occupy many people. Wood needs to be collected and cut, so that fires can be kept at steady temperatures. Water must be hauled and boiled for drinking or cooking purposes. Ingredients must be carried in from Main Supply and utilized in an efficient manner. Dishes have to be kept clean and ready for use. Waste must be dealt with, and is separated into recyclable, compostable, and garbage materials.

Another aspect of creating a healthy Kitchen is cultivating a pleasant social environment. For the most part, encampments spring up around the various Kitchens, which become de facto social centers at Gatherings. During pauses in work, Kitchens are filled with people drinking coffee, playing music, and getting to know their neighbors. Kitchen Crew may actively solicit talented musicians or storytellers to come perform at their Kitchen. It is not uncommon for Kitchens to have a calendar of such upcoming events posted inside its tarp-covered central area. Keeping people comfortable, well fed, and entertained is the key to building a Kitchen into a large encampment and establishing a good reputation for it.

Rainbow latrines, typically called Shitters, are usually placed within a hundred yards of Kitchens and their surrounding encampments. In contrast to the squeamishness typical to mainstream society about the matter, Rainbows are quite vocal about the need to properly dispose of human waste. If not treated in a sanitary manner, human feces can become a source of disease. Therefore, a conscious and explicit effort is made to minimize the risk of this happening. Reportedly a technique brought to Gatherings by the many military veterans who made up its early constituency, Rainbow latrines consist of a long six inch to
one foot deep trench. Sometimes tarps or wooden structures are used to make these latrines somewhat more private, but they are generally exposed. Toilet paper and ashes are kept nearby in sealed coffee cans, the ashes being useful in keeping flies away from feces. Flies will, according to Rainbow hygiene etiquette, dig through several feet of dirt and then land on food. The use of ashes, which they will not go through, prevents this and minimizes the chance that the insects will spread disease.

Providing adequate water supplies to Gatherers is, of course, also a task of fundamental importance. Water for washing dishes or bathing is sometimes acquired casually from springs, streams, or buckets set out in the rain. Procurement of drinking and cooking water, however, is a more complicated affair. At a few past Gatherings, health was gravely jeopardized by contaminated water supplies. Hence, there is now a concerted effort made to ensure proper supplies of clean water. Most Kitchens boil all water used for cooking and drinking, but many people feel this is not enough of a precaution against the possibility of an outbreak of water-born sickness. Hydraulics, sometimes known as Water Supply, is therefore an important aspect of most present-day Gatherings.

Generally located just down a hill from a large natural spring, Hydraulics uses pvc pipes, gravity, and a filtering system to supply a steady flow of clean water to spigots, which are often housed on wooden shelves underneath a tarp structure. People who volunteer to be Hydraulics attendants oversee the nearly constant activity generated here by Kitchen Crew and thirsty campers filling up their five-gallon buckets, gallon jugs, and canteens. These volunteers make

---

6 Forest Service Report on the 1987 Annual Rainbow Gathering
certain that equipment is working properly, that sanitation standards are respected, and that everyone has a chance to procure all the water they need. Occasionally, nearby Kitchens will work with Hydraulics Crews to install piping to provide gravity driven, filtered running water. Sometimes, too, unfiltered water will be diverted to large shower structures, which utilize passive solar energy to heat it for bathing.

Larger Rainbow Gatherings often include an area called Calm, or less often Mash, which provides free health care and advice. This centrally located space usually consists of a large tarp covered area and military surplus tent, a waiting area warmed by a fire, well stocked medicine shelves, perhaps a diagnostic/massage table, and an assortment of medical reference books. The people who staff Calm are referred to as Healers. Medical knowledge and experience varies widely among these volunteers. All are given training in basic first-aid skills, and most have some more advanced training. It is not uncommon for a trained doctor to be on staff at Calm, and many healers are quite well versed in natural medicine. Indeed, the word Calm is actually an acronym, standing for 'center for alternative living medicine'. This indicates the preference for natural remedies over standard Western medical techniques. In practice, standard and alternative medicinal techniques are combined on a situational basis, dictated in large part by availability of supplies.

Another Rainbow institution found towards the center of a site is Trade Circle. During daylight hours, this area is filled with people engaged in bartering. Interested parties playfully haggle over items displayed on blankets spread out on the ground. A wide variety of goods is generally available here, including batteries, flashlights, tobacco, hand-made jewelry, ornate glass
marijuana pipes, musical instruments, books, craft supplies, healing herbs, handmade clothing, candy bars, and so on. Indeed, the range of items available is quite striking. Rainbow is made up of people who travel over huge geographical distances, and tend to collect a broad spectrum of treasures along the way. Since Gatherings are consciously noncommercial events, the use of money in trading such products is frowned upon. In rare cases, such as where a trader needs cash in order to purchase gasoline for the onward trip, though, money may be used. It will not, however, typically be referred to as money in these cases. Instead, participants in such a transaction will speak of bartering for Green Energy.

A relaxed atmosphere tends to prevail at Trade Circle, as potential trading partners chat, make music, play chess, and practice crafts together. There is an emphasis, occasionally articulated, on mutuality and personal interaction here, in conscious contrast with the crass commercialism of the outside world. I was, for instance, once told that “Trade Circle isn’t about getting rich, or hoarding stuff you don’t need. It’s about sharing your extra stuff with everyone else and vice versa and just having fun with it”7. As will be described below, a good reputation is the most valuable thing a person can have at Rainbow, and generous trading is one means of achieving a good name among one’s fellows. While Trade Circle may be a place where Gatherers can acquire useful goods, the bartering and exchange that goes on here is also a very sociable form of entertainment, making it a pleasant place to spend an afternoon.

The huge diversity of goods available at Trade Circle gives it something the feel of a big flea market. In fact, many Rainbows are avid scroungers of flea

7 conversation with Natalie, a young woman from Asheville NC, March 1998, Ocala National Forest
markets, rummage sales, and the like as they pass through various communities in their travels. Interesting curios and antiques can often be found among the huge quantity of goods at Trade Circle. Some Rainbows pursue an active trade in such goods, making Trade Circle a part of how they make an overall living. They may barter for valuable gemstones, antiques, or coins at Rainbow, and sell these items at antique shops in Babylon. Or they may use goods acquired at Trade Circle to earn money at more mainstream trading events, such as gem shows, flea markets, and annual barter fairs held throughout the country.

The issue of drugs at Trade Circle must be addressed. Trade Circle is the place where the distribution of substances such as LSD, magic mushrooms, and marijuana is most likely to happen. Due to the central location of Trade Circle, it is nearly impossible for uniformed law enforcement officers to enter the area without being detected well in advance. Perhaps more interestingly, the sanctified air associated with this centrality to the Gathering discourages the use of money in such transactions. So while there may be something of an internal drug trade at Rainbow (no more so than in Babylon it is always pointed out by Gatherers), it generally does not involve money.

Another functionally important institution is found near Trade Circle. This is called Info. Keeping up to date on information at a Gathering can, given the large numbers of people involved, be quite difficult. Living in the woods, however, occasionally requires the timely transmission of news, be it about dangerous weather systems approaching, forest fires, expected law enforcement raids, or serious injury. Moreover, it is necessary for a source of such information to be trustworthy, as false rumors can cause panic or, by desensitizing people to such reports, apathy. It is also handy to have a centralized place to announce
upcoming events, concerns, and messages. For these reasons, Info, sometimes called Rumor Control, is an important part of successful Gatherings.

It consists physically of a tent or tarp roof shielding a booth constructed of logs and sticks. Volunteers staff this booth, answering questions and passing on important notices. Large message boards, usually constructed of paper nailed to wooden planks, are available for people to use to pass on information of personal interest. As the Gathering goes on, these become covered in notes giving directions to camp sites, announcing activities, and requesting or offering rides. There is also a large map of the Gathering, where those coming in can figure out where the various Kitchens are located. This is quite useful, not least of all because knowing where a Kitchen is makes hauling food and gear to it much easier.

One part of Rainbow's infrastructure might escape the attention of casual observers and, if noticed, will usually not be considered functional. Taking seriously the common Rainbow idea that the Gathering is a natural cathedral, some Gatherers create Shrines throughout the site. These are places for individual prayer, away from the bustling social world of the Gathering. Some Shrines are strictly personal, while others are collaborative creations, including items placed by dozens of people as they pass it by. These are usually away from the primary trails, often hidden deep in the surrounding woods. Specific locations for shrines are chosen for special characteristics, such as particular beauty or solitude.

Shrines tend to contain eclectic collections of items considered to have spiritual importance, including crystals, semiprecious gemstones, animal and bird bones found in the forest, small craft items such as gods-eyes, and so forth.
These items, which are sometimes called Medicine Objects, serve as tokens of these prayers. At least according to some Gatherers who participate in the creation of Shrines, they actually play a central role in the establishment of a healthy Gathering. The main idea here is that the precise, intentional placement of such Medicine Objects acts upon unseen but real forces to create an atmosphere of health and harmony throughout the site. For Gatherers skeptical of such claims, Shrines are still valuable, in that they are esthetically pleasing and serve as spaces for peaceful contemplation.

Sweat Lodges are also sometimes found close to the center of the Gathering, yet away from heavily used trails. These are dome-shaped structures built with saplings tied together with twine. They are covered with blankets and tarps, and have a single door flap which closes. Inside, they have a large hole, usually three feet deep or more, surrounded by a sitting area which is covered in sage or evergreen boughs. A large fire pit is constructed outside of the structure, about ten feet from the doorway. This is lined with fire-treated rocks to ensure maximum heat retention. By burning hardwood logs for a few hours, this fire pit is filled with very hot coals. Fist-sized rocks are then placed in these coals, and are heated for about an hour. They are then transported by a fire tender to the pit inside the lodge in metal buckets. Water and fragrant herbs (typically sage, cedar needles, or sweet grass) are poured onto these rocks to create a sauna effect in the Sweat Lodge.

These Sweat Lodges are used by whoever wants to organize a 'Sweat'. To some people, a sweat is simply a refreshing steam bath, a pleasant way to stay clean in the woods. To others, their importance is far more spiritual. Sweats can be elaborate ceremonies, often involving several rounds of prayer while the
temperature is gradually increased. The character of these prayer ceremonies is quite fluid, and depends on who is involved in the particular Sweat. Sweats are often considered to be spiritually cleansing, and it is thought that they make people more receptive to the positive energies Gatherings seek to embody. Therefore, Sweat Lodge ceremonies are held before other ritually important events, such as the recounting of Hipstory, a Gathering’s Peak, a Rainbow wedding, and so forth. Because of their ability to purify, Sweats are also considered to have healing effects, and may be prescribed by Calm Healers to treat a variety of illnesses.

Kiddie Village, where small children and their parents usually camp, is among the most important and central parts of Rainbow’s infrastructure. It includes one of the most reliable Kitchens, which provides Kiddie Villagers with frequent meals and snacks and definitely potable water. This Kitchen is similar in layout to others except that it is somewhat larger than most and is adjacent to a large play area. This nearby play space is visible from the Kitchen for safety, and sometimes contains a rope swing or trampoline. Here, children too small to roam the Gathering alone can amuse themselves in the company of their age-mates. Supervision in this area is quite good, with a number of adults watching over the kids at any given time. Since care-taking responsibilities are shared, parents can be secure in leaving their children here for a few hours at a time. By providing them with a place to camp near one another, Kiddie Village also allows parents to develop cooperative childcare plans when venturing to other areas of the Gathering.

In many ways, Kiddie Village embodies key Rainbow ideals more than any other area of the Gathering. Since safety is of the utmost importance in
Kiddie Village, alcohol or violence of any sort is very strongly discouraged here. Because it is located at the interior of the Gathering, it is unlikely that belligerent outsiders or A-Campers will reach Kiddie Village before being stopped by concerned Gatherers. Disruptive behavior which would be considered trivial elsewhere takes on a new gravity here. A person engaging in questionable activities which could potentially put the children at risk, or which frightens them in any way, is likely to be scorned by other Gatherers as particularly insensitive.

Similarly, the high degree of concern for the children's health means that Kiddie Village always has adequate provisions, and that these are distributed freely to all. Indeed, great care is taken here to make certain that good food and water are available at all times, to suit the sometimes varied needs of the children and parents who camp here. Each parent is primarily responsible for the care of her or his own child, but there is a strong common interest in creating a safe and fun atmosphere for all the children. Each adult contributes to this according to his or her talents and ambitions, be it by doing kitchen work, telling stories, leading the children in sing-alongs, washing clothes and diapers, establishing a play area, and so forth. The cooperative work ethic, a central Rainbow value, is perhaps at its strongest in this section of the Gathering.

The other area given this level of respect, the area which traditionally marks the center of the Gathering, is Main Circle. Main Circle consists physically of a very large fire pit in the middle of a suitably large meadow. This fire pit, dug in the shape of a heart, is called the Heartfire. The fire within it is kept going whenever possible, and is stoked into a large bonfire each night. One or four decorated wooden staffs, called Peace Poles, are sometimes placed around this
Heartfire. These are considered by many to become charged with the energy created through the various activities which take place in this sacred space. As shall be described these activities, like the space itself, are deemed central to Rainbow life.

Though on the surface the most mundane, one of the most important activities to take place here is Dinner Circle, where people from all parts of the Gathering come together for a common meal. All of the Kitchens which receive food from Main Supply cook food to serve at Dinner Circle. It is hauled to this central location in large, sealed buckets and coolers, then placed around the Heartfire. Those who come to eat at Dinner Circle, rather than staying in their local Kitchens for the meal, form a ring around the food and Heartfire. Everyone then joins hands, with their thumbs pointing to the left or clockwise with regard to the circle, and chant the syllable ‘Om’ for several minutes. This reputedly has the effect of “blessing the food with our love”.

After the pre-dinner prayer is completed, pregnant women and those with children are invited to step forward and be served. After they have been given plenty of food, representatives from each Kitchen, or Servers, carry their food around the circle and scoop out portions into each remaining Gatherer’s bowl.

Since people camped all throughout the Gathering come to Main Circle at this point of the day, it is the ideal place to make announcements about issues regarding the entire group. As such, it tends to be a setting in which practical matters are discussed. Sometimes, however, a person will say a prayer to bless the food, the Family, and ensure the continued well being of the Gathering. After people have finished eating and chatting, generally about an hour after serving

---

conversation with Harmony, a woman in her forties, September 1998, Nicolet National Forest
the food, people begin trickling towards the edge of the Heartfire to meditate and prepare drums for a night of use, stretching out the skins in the warmth of the flames. Those who choose to involve hallucinogenic drugs as part of the evening drumming ritual usually ingest them now. These substances tend to be served informally, though sometimes a point is made to do so by passing them clockwise with the left hand.

Another activity which happens every day of a Gathering at Main Circle, even in adverse weather, is Drum Circle. After Dinner Circle has been completed, drums and other instruments, including but not limited to guitars, bells, flutes and didjeridus, are brought out and played. This music is free-form in nature, long jams that usually last until dawn. Often, the music is accompanied by the singing of traditional Rainbow chants. There is a large and rather flexible canon of these chants, which are composed by Rainbow individuals and become popular in so far as they are widely learned and repeated. Chant lyrics usually express important Rainbow values. They are, to a great extent, the primary mode of giving verbal expression to what Gatherings are all about.

Council Circles (or Councils) also happen at Main Circle. It is at these that decisions influencing the entire Rainbow Family are made. They are often held to deal with a specific topic, including food supply, safety concerns such as wildfires, or determining the site of an upcoming Gathering. Anyone can call a Council, spreading information about the time (Councils are often timed for Rainbow Noon, that is, at the sun's zenith) and topic by word of mouth and posting a message at Info. Similarly, all are allowed and indeed encouraged to attend. Councils generally begin with everyone in attendance holding hands in
the traditional manner, with thumbs pointing clockwise, and pronouncing the Om. Then comes a stage called Heartsong, wherein each person is allowed a turn to speak about her or his concerns. Usually, a feather, shell, or decorated staff is passed around to mark each person's turn to speak. This ceremonial object is called a feather even when it is not. Even when there is no physical object passed, it is common to hear admonishments to respect the feather in response to interruptions or talking out of turn.

Heartsong is otherwise quite informal, and may be used to speak to any topic the person holding the feather wishes. Throughout this process, any speaker who chooses to may call for a consensus on the topic being discussed. Consensus, the guiding principle of Rainbow internal politics, means that all people at the Council agree to a particular and well-defined decision. Calling for consensus involves stating a proposition, asking everyone to agree by speaking the standard Rainbow syllable for affirmation, 'Ho', and then by silence. The silence provides a space for anyone who objects to say so and state his or her case to the Council. Doing so is called blocking consensus, and is sufficient to prevent a decision from being carried out, though the matter may be put up for consensus again at a future time.

All voices are equal in blocking consensus. I have actually seen two small boys, age five and seven, block consensus against a proposal to organize a work crew to chop up a large dead oak tree for firewood. The boys, two blood brothers who have been involved with Rainbow their entire lives, objected to the tree being cut up because they had incorporated it into their make believe fort. Their consensus blocking appeals were respected by the Council, and wood was
sought elsewhere. In practice, there are ways that a determined group can push through a consensus blocked by just one person or a very small minority. They can simply wait until the people objecting to it leave the Council Circle, or they can keep raising the issue throughout the Gathering until it is consented to. At the very least, however, this mode of governance ensures that contentious ideas will be discussed at great length before any decisions are made.

One Council, more than all others, is critical to planning the future of the Rainbow Family. This is called Vision Council and takes place at high noon on July 7th. It is here that the decision is made about where to hold the next year’s Annual Gathering. During the Vision Council, delegates from the various bioregions bring detailed information about potential sites in their areas to the discussion. People who have scouted these sites throughout the year testify to the qualities of each, often using detailed road and topographical maps. After all potential sites have been described, a long consensus process ensues. The various factions argue back and forth until a workable compromise is reached, such as having a Gathering in one region in the upcoming year and promising to give serious consideration to another area in the near future. This Vision Council is usually characterized by lively arguments and lengthy harangues. It can go on all day, even well into the next.

Two other important Council Circles take place in the planning process for an Annual Gathering. A Thanksgiving Council is held, usually in the region chosen to host the next year’s Annual. By this time, late November, preliminary scouting in the states making up the Bioregion has taken place. Dozens to scores of people from around the country show up to Thanksgiving Council to share a

---

9 February 1999, Ocala National Forest
meal on the holiday itself and discuss potential sites on the days before and after it. Minor decisions are made here, such as the allocation of a small fund to cover the expenses of scouting (which can often involve driving long distances) and a local contact number for those Rainbows gradually making their way to the area. Thanksgiving Council participants decide which state and sometimes even what forest the Gathering will be held in.

As we shall see, there is a good deal of surveillance of the Rainbow movement by law enforcement agencies. Indeed, many Rainbows would be quick to describe this as harassment, an attempt to squelch the group's activities through the intentional application of legal stress on participants. Thanksgiving Council, in recent years, has become a favorite target for these agencies. This may be due to its relatively small size, as larger Councils simply involve too many people for the system to keep track of in an intensive manner. Those Rainbows present at this annual event are likely to be singled out as leaders. Therefore, many have chosen to stay away from Thanksgiving Council as a means of avoiding legal hassles. The internet chat group has become a more important force for this stage of decision making as a result of this. Rainbows mourn the loss of this pleasant Thanksgiving tradition, but recognize the need to adapt to the pressures that be.

A larger Spring Council is held in early June. It is usually in the forest selected for the Annual Gathering itself or one near to it. At this Council, specific sites are discussed and visited repeatedly by the several hundred who attend it. Sometimes Spring Council will be held on the site favored to be used for the upcoming Gathering, but this practice is being intentionally discontinued as it

---

10 Interview with Badger, June 2002, Ottawa National Forest
tends to tip off Forest Service monitors too early in the year, giving them more of a chance to crack down with fines and arrests. In the interest of avoiding government attention and potential permit complications, Spring Council attendants often camp in scattered smaller groups, picking a new place every few days to meet up for united discussions. Usually within a week or two of the beginning of Spring Council, one site will be formally agreed to be used for the Annual. Early Gatherers remain near the chosen site, in scattered and rotating locations, called Holding Camps. These are generally within hiking distance of the selected site, so that their denizens can do their pre-Gathering work. As the formal dates of the Annual approach, Holding Camps come together directly on the site selected by Spring Council, and the Gathering begins.

Main Circle is also the site of Rainbow's most important ceremonies. Chief among these is the Peak of a National Gathering, which comes at noon on the Fourth of July. The Fourth of July celebration actually starts the day before, when Rainbow's folk history (Hipstory) is recounted at length at Main Circle. From dawn to high noon on the Fourth itself, prayerful silence is observed. As the sun approaches its zenith, most Gatherers come to Main Circle and join hands in the prescribed manner. In keeping with a tradition reportedly started by Wavy Gravy, a famous counterculture figure and clown who helped form the venerable Hog Farm commune, this silence is broken by a parade of children marching from Kiddie Village to Main Circle. As the children approach, the Om chant begins, and continues for about twenty minutes. When the children have joined the circle, shouting and jubilation ensue. Prayers and Heartsongs are then vocalized throughout the day, with each speaker taking his or her turn.
III. RAINBOW PEOPLE AND THEIR NEIGHBORS

Certainly, the most important component of Rainbow is the people who make up each Gathering. Those who populate Rainbow events are typically referred to as Rainbows, Family, or Gatherers. Rainbows come from a wide range of social and ethnic backgrounds. All ages are represented, from newborn babies to their parents, grandparents and sometimes great-grandparents. Gender ratios, as described above, vary throughout the phases of a given Gathering. As a noncommercial movement staging free events, there is a high degree of economic diversity among those involved. Some are lawyers, doctors, and university professors, others have been unemployed vagabonds for decades. In the Rainbow context, all are welcome to attend and participate equally.

Rainbows consider this diversity to be an intrinsically healthy state, a sign that interest in the group has penetrated a variety of demographics. The openness of the movement, however, also gives rise to many of its internal problems. Because it is open to anyone who wishes to attend, Rainbow attracts a very small minority of people who could be described as predatory. Thieves, rapists, child molesters, and other dangerous types are not unheard of at Rainbow, though many Gatherers are quick to point out that they are much less common than in the outside world. Many Gatherers also suspect that undercover law enforcement agents frequent Rainbow. Less dramatically, there are people who are simply unreliable workers and who do not pull their own weight in sustaining the gathering. Personal reputation thus emerges as a major factor in Rainbow social life.

Most Rainbows are somewhat loathe to rely too heavily on general labels
in describing their comrades. Since personal reputation is of paramount importance, it is considered more appropriate to speak about fellow Gatherers in specific terms. Given the large numbers of people involved in the Rainbow Family, however, this can be complicated. How, for instance, does one distinguish between different people with the same common first name? Many Gatherers are suspicious of law enforcement surveillance, and few choose to do so through the use of last names. More experienced Rainbows, who may be considered leaders by outsiders, often prefer to not use their real names at all, lest government authorities take notice of their long-term participation in the group.

Therefore, there is a tradition of using Rainbow names. The naming process is far from singular. Nicknames based on physical descriptions of the individual are fairly common. Some people take on new names to mark significant life changes. An individual Gatherer may use multiple Rainbow names in different social contexts, such as when dealing with people he or she knows from different places. Long-term Gatherers, in particular, change their name from time to time. This freedom in naming is more generally in keeping with the key value of personal choice and tolerance of experimentation. Further, it allows Gatherers who may have common given names to use monikers which are memorable, which greatly facilitates the reputation building process.

Beyond personal names, however, there are a number of fairly fluid emic terms which are used to describe different general sorts of people at Rainbow. These are emphatically not titles, merely situational, descriptive labels. Indeed, the concept of titles is antithetical to the Rainbow emphasis on judging each individual by her or his actions. While some Rainbows may find a discussion of
these labels used to describe people simplistic or even contrary to the spirit Gatherings seek to achieve, taking a closer look at how Gatherers describe one another may provide useful insights. More to the point, such a description provides a way of introducing the motley cast of characters which are likely to make up a Gathering.

Depth of involvement in Rainbow ranges greatly. For some, traveling the Rainbow Trail is a way of life. For others, a Gathering might be a weekend camping trip, or even just a safe resting place while traveling elsewhere. Regardless of what part Rainbow plays in the given individual's life, however, the resources of the Gathering are (at least ideally) equally available to everyone. A sort of practical meritocracy peeks through this facade of absolute equality, and Rainbows do not always mind this so much. Conversations with Rainbow participants indicate a tacit understanding that accomplishing necessary tasks sometimes involves following the lead of another.

An experienced Gatherer will sometimes be labeled Elder or High Holy. Though overlapping in their emic definition, the terms are not quite synonymous. Elders, in addition to being older than the majority of Gatherers, are known to have participated in the group for a long time. Their advice is sometimes sought regarding building a Gathering's infrastructure by people with less experience, and they may be especially well trusted by others because of their long-term of commitment to Rainbow. High Holies, while very often also Elders, are specifically people considered worth listening to because of their devotion to spiritual pursuits.

It is important to note that the respect conveyed by these terms has everything to do with the individual person. They are not merely titles given
uniformly to a class of people, such as the older generation or spiritual seekers. Instead, they represent a sort of de facto authority which is a matter of reputation, not of rank. While their advice may be better heeded than that of others, neither they nor anyone else at Rainbow can command others to act. In fact, calling someone an Elder or a High Holy is quite often done as a sort of ridicule, a pointed statement that they ought to curb their attempts to control other people. Such an intention may even prompt the use of these terms more often than the desire to convey real respect.

Another term which indicates that an individual is highly experienced is Road Dog. Like Elder or High Holy, the label Road Dog indicates that a person may be knowledgeable and likely to give worthwhile advice on practical matters. It also indicates that the person is a hardened traveler, and usually that the person lives by traveling and has no permanent address. Calling someone a Road Dog expresses a meaning similar to what the word 'hobo' would in mainstream American English. Indeed, the terms are sometimes used synonymously, though here the pejorative sense of the word is less apparent.

Road Dogs are among the first people to come to a Gathering site, and usually comprise the bulk of early Seed Camp. They are typically male, though the term can certainly be used for women as well. Road Dogs are more likely to be drinkers (or A-Campers) than other experienced Rainbows, and it is this behavior which marks a Road Dog off from an Elder in the minds of many Gatherers. Since many so-called Road Dogs are also part of A-Camp and drink at Gatherings, they often camp at the front of a site, close to the incoming road.

Tour Kids are vagabonds of a somewhat different sort. They are the fans, usually in their twenties, who follow around various musical groups and come
to Rainbow as a sort of safe haven between these shows. In the past, the Grateful Dead tour contributed most to the presence of Tour Kids at Gatherings. Since the death of guitarist Jerry Garcia in 1995 and the end of that band’s existence, Phish tour has brought the largest numbers to Rainbow. Tour Kids are generally well accepted at Gatherings. Indeed, many who follow various musical tours self-identify as Rainbow first and foremost, and go on tour mainly to make money vending crafts at venue parking lots. There is, however, sometimes a feeling that young people stopping off at Rainbow between tours are ill prepared, both materially and experientially, for life in the forest. Their occasional use of alcohol and other drugs worries some Gatherers. Most Tour Kids, however, are well-meaning and respected, if somewhat transient, members of the Rainbow Family.

Gutter Punks, as a number of Gatherers proudly call themselves, are somewhat akin to the Tour Kids described above. They also tend to be young, and draw their identity from affinity to a particular style of music. In this case, the music is punk rock, a genre which has long been seen as antithetical to the hippie music events frequented by Tour Kids. Something of this adversarial attitude is occasionally voiced by those considering themselves to be Gutter Punks, who like to emphasize their difference from Tour Kids. One of the main ways in which they undertake this is through dress. Their leather and spiked garb contrasts with the natural fabrics and earth tones which tend to be worn by Tour Kids, as do their Mohawk cut and pastel-dyed hair with the long hair and dreadlocks of their counterparts.

The Gutter Punk lifestyle is, in some ways, more similar to that of Road

---

1 Interview with Tom Thumb, a man in his early forties from San Diego, January 1999, Kofi Wildlife Refuge
Dogs, as they tend to travel less predictable routes than those following musical groups. Many also travel by hopping trains, a skill which many Road Dogs proudly practice. Further, Gutter Punks are like Road Dogs in that they often spend extended periods of time living on the streets of large urban areas, something which is far less common among Tour Kids. Alcohol use is probably about as common among this group as Road Dogs and, though still fairly rare, hard drug use sometimes occurs in the Gutter Punk scene. Many other Rainbows are somewhat uncomfortable with the pretense of Gutter Punks at Gatherings. Though they overwhelmingly are hard working and articulate people, their often bellicose attitudes and appearances sometimes give them unsavory reputations.

One term which is nearly always used in a self-identifying manner is Faerie. This refers to the radical faerie movement\(^2\), a loose association of gay and bisexual pagans and political activists which holds its own gatherings around the country. It traces its origins to the work of pioneering gay activist Harry Hay who, due to his interest in communist politics, was exiled from the mainstream gay rights movement. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Hay was actively interested in Native American spirituality and, in 1970, moved to New Mexico to find a living Berdache\(^3\) to take him on as an apprentice. In the 1978, he organized the first radical faerie gathering, which was held in Arizona and attended by several hundred people. Since this original faerie gathering, the movement has grown. Many of those involved now also come to Rainbow, and a faerie camp is often present at larger Gatherings.


Faeries are generally well received by other Gatherers, who consider their outlandish parades and parties, which usually happen at night and feature impressive amounts of glow-in-the-dark objects and body paint, to be quite a bit of fun. A small minority of Gatherers, usually those who profess a connection to evangelical Christian groups, do disapprove of the homosexuality implicit in the Faerie identity. Though I am told it is quite a rare event, I have seen at least one explicit confrontation between such a Christian and a self-identifying Faerie. The Faerie involved, Wanderer, later told me that “that sort of intolerant crap is why I like it that we have our own camp”.

There are a handful of people who come to Rainbow to proselytize to other Gatherers. Overwhelmingly, such people are affiliated with either evangelistic Christian sects or the Hare Krishna movement. This latter movement, which came into being in 1966, when A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada founded the International Society for Krishna Consciousness in New York. He had immigrated to the United States the year before, and brought with him an interest in Krishna, a popular deity in much of India. Though related in some ways to the Caitanya Krishnai, which has a long history in India, this new religious sect distinguishes itself by the activities of its members, who devote their time and energy to the study of the Bhagavad Gita, chanting, and dancing. Hare Krishna is an ecstatic movement, wherein devotees seek a "transcendental spiritual solution to their problems", and to “escape from the

---

4 Interview with Wanderer, a man in his late twenties from Phoenix; June 1999, Allegheny National Forest
illusory world of maya” through such activities.

Hare Krishna has often sought converts among the ranks of the American counterculture. Though it “should not be considered a hippie movement”7, it has tended to appeal to those disenchanted with the materialism of mainstream life. Recognizing this, Krishna proselytizers have largely focused their efforts on attracting what would be considered the fringe elements of society. They operate many temples in cities throughout the U.S. and Canada, which offer food and shelter to those in need. Because of this, Krishna, as the group is called, is fairly well respected by many Gatherers, particularly tour kids and gutter punks, who are the most likely to have made use of such Krishna charity in cities.

While at Gatherings, Krishnas continue to provide food to those who want it. The sumptuous meals are generally served within the confines of their camps, usually in a central communal tent. Their use of Indian spices and especially sugar (which is rare at Gatherings) attracts many to Krishna camp for the meals and snacks they serve throughout the day. While there for the food, visitors are often told about the movement, read to from the Bhagavad Gita, and otherwise brought into the Krishna world. Krishnas also put on performances of their chants, which some other Rainbows regard as a choice form of entertainment, collecting in large crowds to watch them.

Despite their reputation for charitable sharing of choice foods, their presence at Gatherings is resented by some other Rainbows. While it is important to point out that many Krishnas are actually quite committed to the Rainbow Family, there is a general feeling that they are outsiders who come to events for

---

the sole purpose of recruiting young Rainbows to their movement. Moreover, there are many negative rumors about the Hare Krishna movement which circulate around Gatherings. These involve a range of seemingly improbable topics, suggesting that they are involved in methamphetamine trafficking, that they lace their food with saltpeter to induce male impotence, that the movement is nothing but a money laundering front, etc. Whether such accusations are to be taken as grounded in actual facts or latent xenophobia, however, is a topic of quite some debate at Rainbow.

The other sort of proselytizing which one is likely to encounter at Gatherings involves evangelical Christian groups. These are generally referred to as Jesus People, Jesus Campers or, less commonly, Jesus Freaks. This former expression is interesting in that it reveals something about the roots of this segment of Rainbow’s population. While there is a variety of Christian groups represented at Gatherings, many are consciously connected to the Jesus People USA movement, which began in Milwaukee in the early 1970s. In 1972, one branch of this movement packed into a school bus and headed to Florida, establishing itself as a sort of mobile mission to the rural south.

Over time, the Jesus People USA movement grew and fragmented, and inspired others to imitate their example. Today, it is common for such outfits to be encountered at Rainbow, often traveling in painted school buses, distributing food, blankets and bibles, and witnessing to other Gatherers. Many of the Jesus People involved with Rainbow belong to groups which are legally recognized charities. They are able to provide government surplus food and other goods on

---

8 Interview with Daniel, a man in his 50s from Chicago, March 1999, Ocala National Forest
a scale which would be prohibitively expensive otherwise. Kitchens made up of evangelical Christians are often among the first to arrive at Seed Camp, and in this capacity are quite useful to the Gathering as a whole.

As with the Krishnas, there is some among of tension between Jesus People and other Gatherers. The nature of this tension is somewhat different, however. Like Krishnas, Jesus People are often seen as intruding upon the Gathering to recruit members to their various groups. Christian groups, though, tend to be more explicit in their social conservatism than Krishnas, which inspires mistrust and resentment in other Gatherers. Many proselytizing Christians, for instance, speak of homosexuality as being evil, are contemptuous of non-Christian religious beliefs (which they consider to be pagan and hence immoral), speak out about the dangers of substances such as marijuana which other Gatherers consider to be healthy sacraments, and so forth. Such positions often prompt others to consider Jesus People to be excessively intolerant, a character trait which is contrary to the Rainbow principles of inclusiveness and acceptance of difference.

Drainbow, a rather contemptuous word, is another label sometimes heard at Gatherings. In contrast to the terms delineated above, it is never used as a means of self-description and usually would not be used within earshot of the person it indicates. This word is most often used as an adjective than a noun, representing less a definable demographic than a description of behavior. While work is entirely optional at Gatherings, it is expected that everyone will contribute his or her share to sustaining the Gathering. It is perfectly acceptable to take a few days here and there to bliss, to relax and not work, but to never work is considered inappropriate. Hence, a Drainbow may simply be one who
does not do his or her fair share of work at a Gathering.

Taking undue advantage of other people's willingness to share is likely to earn a person this unsavory label as well. Since Rainbow is open to anyone, it is perhaps inevitable that some people will come with less than perfect intentions. The general atmosphere of sharing makes Gatherings environments in which fraud can occur. Theft does happen, and it is not unheard of for cars to be stolen from Gatherers. Less dramatically, begging, called spanging, excessively and only for personal gain takes place on a fairly regular basis. Anyone involved in such activities may well be labeled Drainbow, which constitutes a significant blight on one's personal reputation.

Conveying something of the same meaning is Bliss Ninnie. This refers more specifically to someone so concerned with spiritual pursuits that she or he or he cannot act competently on a practical level, and may used in a manner similar to the sarcastic form of High Holy. The word is synonymous with the term 'Woo-Woo', which is used more often by environmental activists. Gatherers have ambiguous feelings about such types. On the one hand, devotion to spirituality is respected and even admired by most Rainbows. On the other, the creation and maintenance of a healthy Gathering takes a good deal of work, especially from more experienced Gatherers. Since Bliss Ninnies are often seasoned Rainbows, their failure to participate in the mundane chores which collectively make Gatherings possible is considered especially deleterious.

There is one category of people who are, in a sense, expected to be Drainbows who do not do much work. Tourists, sometimes called Yuppies, come

---

to Rainbow out of curiosity, and usually only for a few days around the Peak of larger Gatherings. Tourists usually do not travel very far to come to Gatherings, and are typically residents of nearby cities who, having read about Rainbow in their local papers, come out to see for themselves what the fuss is all about. Tourists are regarded ambivalently by more long-term Gatherers. Since Rainbow is meant to be open to anyone, and some who come as Tourists to Gatherings end up becoming more deeply involved, this sort of temporary visitor is welcomed by many.

Because they tend to come outlandishly over prepared for their camping excursion, Tourists also provide Gatherers with useful goods and luxuries such as tobacco and candy. The main mechanism for redistribution of these goods is Trade Circle, where Tourists will often swap for Rainbow crafts. On the other hand, there is some amount of resentment towards people who come only for a few days and contribute little in terms of labor to the maintenance of the Gathering. Some feel that the very apparent disparity in material wealth between Tourists and longer-term Gatherers creates a sort of class tension, which contradicts the ideal of complete equality.

When serious problems occur at Gatherings, Shanti Sena is called upon. Derived from a Sanskrit term, which is interpreted by Rainbows as meaning peace keeper or peace center, Shanti Sena is Rainbow's internal police force. It is impossible to delineate who exactly this term refers to, however, as all Gatherers are assumed to be potential Shanti Sena. If a problem arises in which someone needs protection, he or she is to yell “Shanti Sena” and, ideally, all those within

---

hearing range are to come to provide assistance. In fact, this ideal is not often realized, as most Gatherers lack the training in nonviolent intervention which is supposed to be relied upon in solving such problems. Workshops on Shanti Sena tactics are organized and advertised but, though all are encouraged to attend, they usually attract only a few people. So, in practice, peacekeeping duties are left to a mere handful of Gatherers. The term Shanti Sena is often taken as referring exclusively to these few.

Those that actually participate in Shanti Sena activities are usually quite responsible and respected for their work. On occasion, however, other Gatherers feel that those who are centrally involved with Shanti Sena are excessive in their use of intimidation against potential troublemakers. Problems of this sort are greatly exacerbated by the presence of, or perception of the presence of, undercover law enforcement officers at Rainbow. Some Shanti Sena participants get carried away with ideas about needing to protect the Gathering from such “infiltrators”\(^1\). In so doing, they sometimes create an atmosphere of suspicion and intrigue, which is antithetical to the Rainbow ideal of harmonious inclusiveness, for which they are often criticized. In rare instances, Shanti Sena actions get wildly out of control. While I have never witnessed this myself, I am told that those accused of offenses such as sexual assault or being an undercover agent are sometimes handled brutally indeed.

Details about these cases circulate as rumors. Some people consider them to be fabrications and exaggerations, some consider them to reflect tragic mistakes which took place in the group’s past. Supposedly, those caught

committing especially heinous breaches of Rainbow etiquette used to be punished quite cruelly. Some people are reported to have been tied or duct taped to a tree in a remote area, and abandoned. Involuntarily dosing a person in this situation with large amounts of LSD (called 'acid washing') was supposedly a common part of this punishment. While most Gatherers express a certain amount of horror over such stories, accepting that they reflect gross excess on the part of Shanti Sena, they serve as a sort of backdrop for striving for a more equitable form of internal security.

The majority of Gatherers feel that such callous retribution is a completely inappropriate response to any situation. Frustration with such tactics has led to a conscious reform of Shanti Sena in recent years. Due to the efforts of a handful of experienced Shanti Sena participants to insure that disruptions at Gatherings are dealt with nonviolently, there has been a shift in the way in which peacekeeping is enacted. Instead of attempting to deal with such problems internally, as has usually been the case in the past, the tendency now is to turn the offending individual out of the Gathering, sometimes even into police custody. Though this latter solution is controversial as well, since many Rainbows consider the U.S. criminal justice system to be corrupt, it is deemed preferable by most to the internal retribution that used to be exacted.

As this dilemma illustrates, Rainbow is certainly not insular. Since it involves such a large number of people and is geographically widespread, many non-participants come into contact with the Rainbow phenomenon. Their attitudes toward the group vary. Some outsiders are more or less sympathetic, others are indifferent, a few are openly hostile. The constant interaction between these two social spheres does much to shape the character of Gatherings
themselves. Hence, a discussion of the people who make up Rainbow must include a description of some of these outsiders, and their varied perceptions of the movement. By taking a look at the sorts of relationships which develop between Rainbow and some of the outside interests with which it comes into contact, it is possible to place the movement in its wider social context. To this end, I focus on the reactions to the Rainbow Family of three main categories of outsiders: citizens of communities near Gatherings, law enforcement officers, and the media.

The rural towns bordering National Forests are greatly impacted when Gatherings take place. Particularly in the west of the country, an Annual Gathering may rank among the most populous cities in the state where it is held. To have such a large community suddenly appear, and gradually disappear, in the local area has a number of effects on nearby communities and their citizens. Relationships between Rainbows and locals are often complicated, due to a variation in interests within local populations. Though most Gatherers make an effort to get along with their temporary neighbors, confrontations do occur. On the other hand, it is nearly unheard of for a Gathering to go by without a handful of curious locals attending and even choosing to travel on with the nomadic group to the next Gathering site.

Hostility largely stems from local economic concerns. Residents often perceive the Rainbow Family as posing substantial threats to their fragile rural economies, putting stress on both public and private financial interests. Creating worries about the financial impact on the public sector is the fact that some Rainbows use local medical and welfare resources. Though this use is limited to only a small minority of Gatherers, the enormous population increase due to
Rainbow's presence in the area does constitute an increased drain on these public institutions. State-level officials estimate that "health services, and welfare services within 25 miles of the gathering will be affected"\(^\text{12}\) when Rainbows alight upon an area in high numbers.

It is true that some Rainbows apply for welfare and, particularly, access to food stamps. It is important to point out that this is generally done by individuals participating in Seed Camp. At this earliest stage of the Gathering, before the proper infrastructure is established, food can be scarce and all resources have to be exploited to insure that everyone is fed. Since Seed Camp is heavily attended by Road Dogs who are as a whole willing to access welfare resources, food stamps sometimes help to augment the Main Supply, which has not yet developed to full capacity. However, this use is almost always temporary. Since the most experienced Gatherers, a category which includes the majority of Road Dogs, are most likely to continue on to the next site rather than remain in the area permanently, welfare use tends to drop off quite sharply at the end of the Gathering cycle.

State money covers almost all of the expenses the county governments incur for welfare programs, though this reimbursement system is not perfect and can be slow. For small rural communities even this brief increase in public expenses can be something of a burden. The short-term costs generated by Gatherers use of welfare programs cause friction with residents of local communities. Some say resorting to welfare is contrary to the spirit of independence from Babylon. For these reasons, many Rainbows are vocally

opposed to fellow Gatherers resorting to public assistance. However, there is no way that the anarchistic movement can forbid its constituents from choosing to apply for welfare benefits, and this continues to be a point of contention between Rainbows and their neighbors in nearby towns.

A similar scenario often unfolds with regard to local hospitals. Though Rainbows make considerable efforts to treat illness and injury on site through the efforts of Calm volunteers, some Rainbow individuals do use nearby hospital resources. Again, this probably happens most often in the earlier stages of Gatherings, before proper facilities are in place to take care of health problems internally. Even when Calm is fully functional, however, there are some medical problems which it is not equipped to deal with. In cases where Gatherers do not seek immediate help for venomous snake and spider bites and the injuries are rendered life-threatening through neglect, for instance, Calm volunteers are quick to find the victim transportation to a local hospital.

While they are aware that impacting local health resources may cause hostility from neighboring communities, these volunteers find it inappropriate to let this issue stand in the way of the sick Gatherer’s healing. Many Rainbows consider it outrageous to charge money for providing healing services, which they consider a basic right. Such arguments, though sincere, generally do not sway the opinions of locals, who often become frustrated at the prospect of having to shoulder the financial burden caused by uninsured Rainbows not paying their medical bills. Rainbow efforts to reduce the numbers that utilize hospital facilities go unnoticed by locals. Considering how many people Gatherings draw to an area, however, the situation could be much worse than it is.
Despite perceptions to the contrary, it is the increased law enforcement expenditures which are chiefly responsible for Gathering's negative financial impact on area communities. A striking example of this occurred in rural Arizona, where the township of Pinetop-Lakeside declared a fiscal emergency while the Rainbow Family was holding its Annual nearby. The town council appealed to the state governor for a grant of funds to offset the relatively steep costs, running somewhere around $15,000, incurred by its handling of the Gathering.

Rather than being due to increases in welfare cases or unpaid hospital bills, the cost stemmed from the fact that, according to the local mayor, "we are spending a lot on police overtime, along with food and motels for out of town police who have come in to help us". As will be discussed below, the law enforcement surveillance which has become standard at medium to large Gatherings is quite resource intensive. One local town council member "did wonder if there might be too much police presence in view of the small number of criminal incidents in Pinetop-Lakeside associated with persons going to and from the Rainbow Family gathering", echoing an attitude which is common among Gatherers as well.

Mistrust of Rainbows also comes from the perceived impact of Gatherings on the local private economy. Communities surrounding Rainbow Gathering sites often derive much of their income from seasonal tourism. Since the largest Gatherings take place over the Fourth of July, when the greatest number of these

---

seasonal tourists come to the area, many local retailers feel that these Gatherings might disrupt their usual summer economic pattern. Such concerns have caused hostility since the beginning of the group in 1972, when locals worried that, due to the Gathering, tourists would be frightened away from the area. Since, they reasoned, Rainbows would not spend money like more ordinary seasonal visitors, “the one big tourist weekend of the summer would be a bust”\(^\text{15}\).

This attitude continues today, fueled in large part by specific incidents between business owners and Rainbow customers. Spanging (begging) is probably the most common behavior that upsets shop owners. Though most Rainbows disapprove of this practice, it can be a fairly lucrative enterprise. One young man I spoke with proudly claimed he collected over $80 in a couple of hours, telling potential donors that he needed the money for fuel. He pointed out, however, that most of the money came from other Gatherers and not locals, whom he described as “stingy rednecks”\(^\text{16}\). Shoplifting, though fairly rare, happens too. Shoplifters may feel that stealing from Babylon is different from stealing from other Rainbows and, hence, it is somewhat less stigmatized.

Rainbows also sometimes do things which they consider perfectly harmless but which infuriate shop owners to no end. Just bringing their large backpacks into stores worries shopkeepers, made suspicious by negative rumors and the occasional shoplifter. They may also fear that health codes are being violated when Gatherers, used to walking without shoes, come in to their establishments barefoot. After days and even weeks on the road, incoming Rainbows sometimes attempt to bathe in gas station restrooms, a practice which

\(^{15}\text{Cahill, Tim. August 1972. ‘Armageddon Postponed’. Rolling Stone}\)

\(^{16}\text{Shawn, in his late teens and from San Diego; January 1999, Ocala National Forest}\)
business owners find quite unsanitary. Similarly, they may fill water jugs from local stores' taps and hoses. Though this does not constitute a real economic drain, some shop owners resent that the Rainbows assume they are free to take the water.

The conclusion that the Rainbow Family’s presence will have a clearly adverse effect on local businesses is not entirely plausible. Though it is true that individual Rainbows are not likely to be big spenders when they come to town, their collective effect on certain key businesses is quite positive. Items such as gasoline, Coleman fuel, rolling tobacco, batteries and camping supplies sell at quite a good pace indeed. A newspaper article from the Missouri National in 1996 quotes a gas station owner as saying “I feel like I have won the lottery” because of increased sales due to the Gathering. It is typically estimated by participants that annual Rainbow Gatherings bring $1-$3 million to the hosting area.

For some sorts of retail businesses, then, large Rainbow Gatherings provide opportunities for financial enrichment. This fact has led to an interesting problem that reportedly plagues the group. Since the initial decision about where to have a Gathering is based on reports by scouts, selection of a site is often heavily influenced by the testimonies of just a handful of people. At recent national Gatherings, unconfirmed rumors have circulated that scouts received bribes from local businesses likely to benefit from the event. In exchange, it is alleged, the scouts falsified reports on other potential sites, which may have been more appropriate for a large Gathering but which would not have benefited the

---

Another main reason Gatherings are controversial among local people is that young residents tend to be particularly curious about the Rainbow Family. Eager for the opportunity to socialize with such a diverse crowd, to hear the casual musical performances for which Gatherings are renowned, and looking for a place where they can get away from the social constrictions of small-town life, young adults and teenagers do come to nearby Gatherings in far higher numbers than their older counterparts. Many are also attracted by rumors which tend to spread around local communities that Rainbow is a haven for rampant drug use and sexual experimentation. Those that come to Gatherings with such expectations are almost always disappointed with the rather tame reality they find instead. However, older local residents consider Rainbow a phenomenon which will corrupt their children, and try to pressure legal authorities, including local and state politicians, into preventing Gatherings from taking place for just this reason.

This reputation as a corrupting force on young people is a bit misplaced. More often than not, local teenagers who bring their own intoxicants and fights to Gatherings are something of a disruption to the rather pacific atmosphere that marks Rainbow life. Though they are initially welcomed, it is not uncommon for local youths to cause problems at Rainbow. They are sometimes ignorant of the ban on alcohol, violence, or monetary exchange that is customary in the interior of Gatherings. To have local teenagers drunk, bellicose, or selling drugs is disturbing for more seasoned Rainbows, who may see fit to escort disruptive local teenagers out of the Gathering if the problem is deemed serious enough.

Another factor leading to fear and resentment within local communities is
the rumor that Rainbow is a cult. Though Rainbow is considered by most who attend to be a spiritual movement, there is emphatically no single or compulsory dogma. Indeed, there is more religious diversity at Rainbow than in other populations of similar size, even the most cosmopolitan of cities. The charge is, however, a difficult one to shake off. This is due in part to lexical reasons. Most outsiders are put off by Rainbow’s description of itself as a family, a term which conjures up images of Charles Manson in many American minds.

That the surrounding forest is described as a cathedral of nature is similarly unnerving to some local Christians, who malign Rainbows as “a bunch of tree worshipers” and write off Gatherer’s environmentalist rhetoric as “just the talk of a bunch of fanatics”\(^\text{18}\). The way in which Rainbows refer to the outside world as Babylon seems to some to reflect the cultic “tendency to make members feel distinct from, and usually superior to, humanity at large”\(^\text{19}\). Further, the presence of proselytizing groups at Gatherings seems to outsiders to be proof of Rainbow’s status as a cult.

Rainbow Gatherings occasionally take place in close proximity to Native American tribal lands, which in the west of the country are commonly adjacent to National Forests. As is the case with other locals, Rainbows have varying relationships with these neighbors. Some tribes, Rainbows point out with pride, embrace their movement and consider it to be a meaningful alternative to mainstream society. Other Native Americans find it to be facile, intrusive, and even insulting to their own traditional ways. For those who subscribe to the

\(^{18}\) Interview with Bradley, a local gas station owner, outside the annual in western Montana, June 2000

former standpoint, Rainbow represents a valuable opportunity to introduce healthy values to a population historically associated with colonial exploitation. Rainbow has many Native American participants, who often have familial ties to neighboring native communities. To others, however, Gatherings are nothing more than a noisy spectacle that draws unwanted law enforcement attention and other unsavory elements to their local area.

The frankly mimetic nature of much Rainbow spirituality complicates this relationship. By selectively quoting from and interpreting native traditions, participants discursively declare the group to be part of a timeless mystical tradition based on a harmony with nature. That such assertions are usually based on very incomplete knowledge of specific traditions, however, is a source of conflict with some living groups. Following a long tradition within the American counterculture of toying with "symbolic Indianness"\(^\text{20}\), for instance, Rainbows often assert their independence from mainstream society through the imitation of perceived Native American speech and practices. Actual Native Americans who come into contact with Rainbow are understandably ambivalent towards such mimetic practices.

Some Native American individuals are flattered by the sincere interest expressed by many Gatherers, and may even consider the Rainbow movement to be a potential vehicle for communicating something of their traditional beliefs to a wider audience. As Rainbows tend to be more enthusiastic about learning of traditional ways than many young people within various Native American societies, many tribal members who come to Gatherings often find their visits

rewarding and even flattering. On the other hand, some Native Americans are quite critical of the group, finding the appropriation and distortion of their customs by predominantly Anglo Gatherers distasteful in the extreme. Though Gatherers do mean well in their mimetic play, this behavior is sometimes interpreted as mockery and is met with hostility, occasionally spilling over into physical violence.

Law enforcement officers are the outsiders that interact the most with Rainbows during Gatherings. They are generally referred to as Leos. Though some Leos actually come back to the Gathering while off duty as participants, and are well liked by Rainbows, the presence of uniformed Leos is regarded as intrusive. The reason most often given for this is that most Rainbows object to firearms being brought onto the site. As it is considered to be a sacred space devoted to an ideal of peaceful cooperation, bringing firearms to the site is deemed a sort of sacrilege. It is typical that, upon seeing a gun, a Gatherer will yell “guns in the church” or “six up”\(^{21}\) as a warning to others. Almost always, this is understood by others to mean that a Leo is approaching. This alarm is useful for reasons that go beyond the gun issue. It also serves as a signal to hide signs of illegal activities, such as nude sunbathing, letting dogs run without leashes, smoking marijuana, and so forth, which are accepted at Rainbow but likely to result in confrontations with law enforcement personnel.

At Gatherings held in National Forests, Forest Service is the agency most often encountered. Forest Service Rangers, known as Frogs because of the green shade of their vehicles, are often quite friendly to Rainbow. They pass on helpful

\(^{21}\) I have been told by a number of Gatherers that “six up” is, more properly, slang for a drawn gun, a reference to the six-chambered revolvers or 'six guns' that police used to use.
information about approaching weather systems, environmentally sensitive areas of the chosen site, the presence of archaeological remains, wildlife concerns, and the like. Ranger positions tend to be filled by fairly young employees, such as students who do the work on a seasonal basis. They are often sympathetic to the Rainbow Family, recognizing in it a passion for the natural world that they share. Perhaps because of these facts, the Forest Service bureaucracy seems to have consciously disengaged Rangers from monitoring Rainbow in recent years. This is actually rather unfortunate from the standpoint of maintaining a healthy Gathering, as Frogs tend to be trusted where Leos are not. Removing them from direct oversight of Rainbow has broken down the one viable line of communication between Forest Service and Gatherers.

Forest Service's law enforcement branch is now chiefly responsible for dealing with Gathering activities which go on within the boundaries of National Forests. Relations between this branch of the agency and Rainbow are often tense. Forest Service maintains a team of special law enforcement agents specifically for the purpose of monitoring Rainbow. Forest Service Leos, usually local officers led by a few of these special agents and sometimes accompanied by Department of Natural Resources (DNR) game wardens who can conduct searches without warrants, make frequent forays to the interior of Gatherings. These forays are typically made in vehicles, occasionally on horseback, and only rarely on foot. Their helicopters and surveillance planes fly over National Gatherings multiple times each day. Perhaps even more invasively, the radio frequencies that Rainbows use for internal communication are systematically jammed by the agency.

Hostilities between Rainbow participants and Forest Service Leos do
surface from time to time. Beyond the provocations mentioned above, most of the routine friction between Forest Service Leos and Rainbows involves Gatherers’ disregard for camping limits which stipulate that a person must move on after two weeks and their refusal to sign permits, which are required for groups of more than seventy-five people\(^ {22}\). These refusals, rather than emerging from ignorance of the law, as most Leos seem to believe, are actually matters of high principle. Many Rainbows see the Forest Service regulations as serious contradictions to the first amendment of the U.S. constitution, which grants the right of free assembly.

Public land, Rainbows reason, belongs to the people and not the government agencies that administer it. Therefore, they contend, it is totally inappropriate for the government to regulate people’s access to what is in an inalienable sense their own land. Acquiescing to such Leo demands, it then follows, amounts to surrendering the rights of the people to the whims of a bureaucracy. The act of Gathering itself, therefore, is a form of protest and resistance against a government perceived as insensitive to the rights and needs of the people.

The practical ways in which Rainbows live with such Forest Service regulations is often less noble than the sentiments expressed in their protests. By taking a few simple precautions, they are usually able to avoid fines for exceeding camping limits. Since Forest Service Leos reckon how long people have been on site by tracking license plates, most Gatherers are able to avoid potential citations by parking their vehicles in a different section of the forest

\(^ {22}\) the Forest Service regulation is 36 C.F.R. § 261.10(k)
every few weeks, or using camouflage to hide them. This latter tactic infuriates law enforcement agents, who consider it to greatly enhance the severity of the offense and resulting fine. However, it is not especially hard to hide a four-wheel drive vehicle in the woods with tarps or army surplus parachutes, covered with leaves.

The permit issue, on the other hand, offers no simple solution of this kind. Since signing a permit is to claim legal responsibility for the Rainbow Family as a whole, to take such an action would contradict the important Rainbow principle of individual sovereignty. Not surprisingly, Forest Service has little respect for such philosophizing. When Rainbows refuse to sign a permit for a given Gathering, Forest Service law enforcement typically chooses one individual or a handful of people who they perceive as a leading the group to charge with the failure to comply with this regulation. Such charges are often contested in court, and some Rainbows consider this an important public forum for discussing their right to assembly and free expression of religious beliefs.

A Regional Gathering that took place in the late summer of 1998 in the Nicolet Forest of northern Wisconsin provides a good example of how this process works. Upon hearing that the Rainbow Family was coming to their area, Forest Service monitored the number of people camped around the area of the chosen site. As numbers approached seventy-five, Forest Service personnel gave a permit form and instruction sheet to a Gatherer who one of the officers recognized from previous Rainbow events. When the estimated number of Gatherers reached seventy-five, they selected a different person than the one they had given the permit to charge with failure to sign it. The man they chose to cite was one of the scouts for the Gathering, and had provided information to
other Rainbows via email. Some other Gatherers thought this was the reason he was singled out.

In court\textsuperscript{23}, the defendant, who happens to be a fairly reputable lawyer and marijuana law reform activist in Wisconsin, argued that the permit requirement represented a First Amendment violation. The judge in the case found justification for the Forest Service’s permit regulation in a series of other decisions which had determined that the First Amendment is not absolute and that the freedoms which it provides can be curtailed situationally by specific laws designed to promote public safety\textsuperscript{24}. The particular issue of assembly permit constitutionality had been decided, the judge argued, in a previous case\textsuperscript{25}. Though the defendant pointed out that this prior case had actually differed significantly from his own in that it involved a challenge to sound amplification guidelines rather than merely a permit to assemble, the judgment against him stood and his conviction was upheld.

The judge admonished him that “despite the fact that the Rainbow Family may practice its own form of government that rejects traditional notions of democracy, that does not render it exempt from the laws that govern the rest of us”\textsuperscript{26}. Quite confusingly for Rainbows, a judge in a similar case that involved defendants from the National Gathering in Arizona, held about a month before this Regional in Wisconsin, found that the group-use permit policy was unconstitutional\textsuperscript{27}. Clearly, the issue is controversial within the legal system.

\textsuperscript{23} the case was United States vs Masel (1998)
\textsuperscript{24} United States vs O’Brien (1968), Cox vs Louisiana (1965), Cox vs New Hampshire (1940)
\textsuperscript{25} Ward vs Rock Against Racism (1989)
\textsuperscript{26} United States vs Masel (1998): 32
\textsuperscript{27} United States vs Linick (1998)
itself, and Rainbows are certainly not prepared to obey a law that even Babylon isn't sure is fair. This matter is discussed quite a bit at Gatherings, with ample speculation about the possibility of the case being taken up by the Supreme Court.

The choice between allowing a few individuals, arbitrarily selected by Forest Service, to be arrested and fined on the one hand, and complying with a regulation that forces one person to become the legal representative of the Family on the other, is nothing short of a dilemma for Rainbows. One partial solution that has emerged in recent years is the establishment of a Rainbow defense fund, supplied entirely by donations, which can be drawn upon to pay court fees, put together adequate court briefs, and cover fines. While this solution does not prevent arrests from being made, it softens the financial blow of the fines for the selected individual. It also takes advantage of this less-than-ideal situation by allowing the arrests to be appealed by anyone who happens to be singled out, which provides a means of publicly protesting the permit regulation.

The cooperative legal defense strategy has also allowed Rainbows to work towards reforming other sorts of law enforcement behavior they view as unfair. A good example of this involves the fight over roadblocks, which Leos establish on main roads leading to larger Gatherings. These are often coordinated efforts that involve a number of agencies, most often including state and county police, Forest Service Leos, and U.S. Marshals. K-9 units, employing drug dogs, are sometimes present as well. Less common but far from rare is the use of helicopters providing aerial surveillance support to roadblocks, presumably to report anyone attempting to evade them by using alternative routes to the Gathering.
These roadblocks, including random searches leading to arrests and property seizures, became an especially bad problem for Gatherings taking place in the southern United States. At an Ocala (Florida) Winter Regional in 1997, a few dozen Gatherers staged a peaceful protest just up the road from an especially severe roadblock. This had the effect of warning incoming Gatherers. Some of the Leos involved felt this was a threat to the efficacy of their roadblock, and attempted to disperse the protesters through the use of tear gas and random arrests. Many of those who witnessed this rather shocking event vowed to fight back by legal means, and began recording specific details of the Leo roadblocks with still and video cameras.

Such roadblocks continued throughout the Gathering and the next year as well. However, drawing on the legal defense fund established for the purpose, Rainbows were now able to take the evidence they had meticulously recorded to court. This resulted in a decision that chastised Forest Service Leos and county police for establishing roadblocks that specifically targeted Rainbows.28 Unfortunately, the restraining order that banned future roadblocks was violated the next year by officers, who now referred to the roadblocks as "safety checks".29 On the other hand, these safety checks were significantly less aggressive than previous roadblocks, and so the legal defense fund strategy resulted in an important legal and practical victory for Rainbow.

Beyond this overt surveillance, many Rainbows are convinced that a fairly high level of covert surveillance goes on as well. Most long-term Gatherers have

---

29 Interview with Steve, a county sheriff, one of the original defendants in the case, February 1999, Ocala National Forest. When I asked him if he had heard of the injunction against such activities he told me on tape that he was totally unfamiliar with the case.
stories about catching someone out as an agent. Speculations abound in regard to this issue. Which agencies may be involved is a matter of frequent discussion, and there is quite some disagreement about this. Documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act from the FBI do indicate that this agency ran a surveillance program on Rainbow, sometimes printing resultant documents under the heading “Internal Security- Revolutionary Activities”\(^\text{30}\). The FBI claims they ceased such investigations in 1983, in order to comply with revised domestic security guidelines\(^\text{31}\).

Rainbows I spoke with about these documents were not surprised to hear that the agency had systematically monitored their group, but were generally unconvinced that the FBI investigation had actually been terminated. Forest Service documents complicate the FBI assertion that they are no longer involved with monitoring Rainbow, as they list them as one of the agencies with which they currently “coordinate” law enforcement activities\(^\text{32}\). Whether or not FBI surveillance programs still deal with Rainbow directly, there is certainly a covert law enforcement presence focused on drug interdiction. Arrests sometimes take place based on information reported by undercover State Police and U.S. Marshals, for instance.

That a movement espousing such benevolent values as peace, love, and equality should be so heavily monitored by law enforcement is perplexing to many Rainbows. Aside such petty offenses such as public nudity, smoking marijuana, taking of hallucinogens, and the trouble with Forest Service

---

\(^{30}\) FBI Report on the Rainbow Family 1973

\(^{31}\) FBI Report on the Rainbow Family 1983

\(^{32}\) Forest Service 1999 National Rainbow Family Gathering Final Action Report
regulations mentioned above, Gatherings are relatively free of crime. While it is certainly true that violent crimes including murder have happened at Gatherings in the past, such violence is far less common at Rainbow than it is in cities of comparable population size in the United States. Beyond the risks posed by extended periods of living in the woods, Gatherings are remarkably safe places to be. Yet law enforcement agencies treat Rainbow as though it were a serious threat to public safety. This apparent contradiction endows Gatherings with an atmosphere of suspicion, as Rainbows sense that something is going on that they do not wholly comprehend. Attempts to reach such an understanding shape much of the conversational discourse that takes place as Rainbows go about their day-to-day activities.

The Rainbow movement also routinely receives heavy press coverage. The sheer numbers involved with its larger Gatherings, rendered even more striking since these events are held in rural areas with very low populations, certainly pique the curiosity of the local press. Medium to large Gatherings are nearly always visited by newspaper and television reporters and camera crews, often from national press concerns. Many Rainbows are more or less accepting of this, and individuals are commonly amused when they see their pictures or statements appearing in the outside media. Others, however, bemoan the fact that media reports follow themes which seem to them to be inappropriate and not representative of the real Gathering experience. The mainstream media tends to tell the same stories about Rainbow over and over again, often disparaging it as merely a holdover from the 1960s or as a haven for drug use.

While the assessment that Rainbow is a holdover from the 1960s counterculture is not entirely without foundation, as the movement was born in
part through the efforts of people who worked to stop the Vietnam war in the
late 1960s and early 1970s, it systematically downplays the multigenerational
nature of the present-day Rainbow Family. By representing it as definitively tied
to the 1960s, this attitude implies that only those old enough to have witnessed
this earlier decade are authentic Rainbows. In so doing, it slights the involvement
of younger people, who actually comprise the majority at Gatherings. That the
group is actually made up of multiple generations is a point of pride to many
Rainbows, who see the fact as evidence of its persistent appeal and tenacity.
Hence, the media's tendency to describe Gatherers as aging throwbacks to a
bygone era is considered offensive by many.

Another perceived flaw of the media is its focus on the drug use that takes
place at Gatherings. In reality, the amount of drug use at Gatherings is probably
more or less statistically normal for the United States. Despite their insistence
that the Rainbow Family is involved with drug trafficking, and heavy use of
searches and roadblocks, law enforcement officers are unable to provide any
evidence that drug use is any more widespread at Gatherings than at other
events of similar size and demographic makeup. Despite this truism, the media
often portrays Rainbow Gatherings as scenes of rampant drug use. One reporter,
as an example of the propensity to focus on this aspect of the group, claims that
people come to Gatherings to "do drugs and prance around naked." While the
use of illegal substances does take place at Gatherings, the amount of media
attention the matter receives is surely exaggerated.

The relatively open use of soft drugs such as marijuana may partially

---

explain this, but many Rainbows feel that there is a bit more to it. The crux of the problem, many recognize, is that media outlets are overwhelmingly reporting the Rainbow story from a law enforcement standpoint. Like many such agencies, Forest Service does have professional press liaisons on its payroll. The person primarily responsible for this function within Forest Service bureaucracy is the Chief Incident Information Officer. In 1990, the Chief Incident Information Officer stated that, in order to insure "balanced coverage", it should be Forest Service policy to "set up an information center, provide assistance when requested and offer to accompany all reporters on visits to the site". This escort is not comprised of rank and file Forest Service rangers, but specially trained Public Affairs Officers (PAOs).

Further, this appears to be less an option open to reporters than standard treatment of larger media interests. By controlling the way in which they encounter Rainbow, Forest Service is able to coordinate media representations of the group to a large degree. This is done in ways that many Rainbows find rather sinister, such as briefing press representatives on Rainbow Family affairs at roadblocks. It is, therefore, not entirely surprising that reporters should focus on allegations that the group is involved with serious drug trafficking, since their introduction to it tends to include scenes of heavy law enforcement mobilization. Without any real evidence to bolster such claims, law enforcement press liaisons are thus able to leave reporters with the impression that the group must be involved with criminal behavior.

Efforts are now in place to counter the biases Rainbows perceive in the

coverage of their group. Overall, there is a growing awareness of the role the press can play in helping or harming the establishment of healthy Gatherings. Inevitably, some people come to Rainbow gatherings to satisfy curiosities piqued by media reports. In order to attract people for the right reasons, it is recognized, media coverage ought to be accurate and positive, rather than dominated by misleading and negative stories about the anachronistic and lawbreaking character of the Rainbow Family. Feeling that it is important to avoid a situation in which all coverage is controlled by the Forest Service PAOs, Rainbows themselves are increasingly eager to take charge of the manner in which media representations are created. This has been attempted by writing their own press releases announcing Gatherings before Forest Service is aware of them, leaking information to trusted journalists, and establishing informal press liaisons at Gathering sites.
The Rainbow Family of Living Light, as well as being difficult to define, is a potentially problematic subject for anthropological inquiry. Several of its defining characteristics make Rainbow a difficult subject for the ethnographer to treat. First of all, the rejection of authority constantly voiced within Gathering life raises important issues about representation. In fact, my own fascination with the Rainbow Family is largely informed by these complications. The chance to do research with a group that defies anthropological standards is an opportunity to learn much about the discipline itself. Dealing with the contradictions between standard anthropological assumptions about subject and the realities of researching the Rainbow Family provides an excellent opportunity to achieve a broader understanding of what anthropology is, and what it could be.

One contradiction which quickly became apparent involved the authority. This is hardly surprising when dealing with a consciously anti-authoritarian, and arguably anarchist, group. What right does the ethnographer have to attempt an analysis of the Rainbow Family? Is not such an endeavor contrary to the assumption that the group is made of free, equal individuals? Within Rainbow social life, overtly commanding or speaking for other people is likely to result in ridicule and a negative reputation. The attempt to create a monograph describing the Rainbow Family to outsiders certainly raised eyebrows as well.

This corresponds with anthropology's growing interest in issues of representational authority. Ethnography, at base, is writing about other human beings, representing them not only to an outside audience but to their associates and ultimately to themselves. This is likely to have real consequences for the
human subjects of our discipline. Modernist representational methods, apparently drawing the authority to do so from their claims to be grounded in science, glossed over the potential problems presented by the ethnographic exercise. More recently, however, “ideas about alterity, power relations, and representation” have “dramatically altered our perspective on anthropology as an activity.”

It is no longer a viable option to merely assert that, as a scientist, the ethnographer has the ability and right to speak as though he or she were the final authority on the subject culture. As we shall see, the discipline has become interested in exploring representational strategies which at least address the relationship between authorship and authority. The present ethnography, above all else, is an attempt to find a way of telling some of Rainbow's more interesting stories while remaining sensitive towards the group's anarchist values. Voicing an authoritative metanarrative about Rainbow is not an option to anyone who takes the group seriously.

The fact that I was so interested in different people's spirituality did not mark me as being specially qualified to tell the world about Rainbow spirituality. Many Gatherers intentionally study Rainbow spirituality as thoroughly as I did. Doing so is something of a Rainbow tradition even, a form of New Age scholarship every bit as sincere as our own. Though typically outside of formal academic circles, many Gatherers (male and female, young and old) come to Rainbow to explore spiritual issues. They spend much of their time in rigorous,

---

though often lighthearted, study, sampling the range of spiritual beliefs and practices Gatherings display.

This, of course, made my own work much easier. I was certainly seen as less of an outsider, or intruder, by virtue of the fact that what I was doing in the day to day was not viewed as especially strange. People were in many ways used to talking with others about their spirituality, and that allowed for my experiencing the kinds of conversations that would seem rather odd in the outside world. The complicating factor, though, was that I did so as formal academic research and not merely for personal reasons. This, many suggested in various ways, could be taken as a sign of hubris. Some openly scoffed at my presence, feeling that I must not understand the essentially anarchistic nature of Rainbow spirituality.

No one can speak for others with any particular authority, least of all concerning spiritual matters. As long as I made it plain that I did not consider myself an absolute expert on the matters involved, however, I was generally welcomed into their discussions. The same humility must pervade any writing I generate from this field experience. In my attempt to communicate something about the Rainbow Family, I am not doing anything categorically different than what Rainbows themselves do. Talking about spiritual issues is a completely appropriate and popular pastime within Gathering life. They are quick to point out that spiritual discourse is primarily storytelling.

My own accounts, therefore, must be understood in the same light. I am, like Rainbows, talking about these issues, engaged in a creative expressive act. Attempting to present a picture of this eclectic New Age enclave, I will selectively quote from lived experience and overheard discourse. My
representational choices, the selections I choose to emphasize in this ethnographic text, must be considered my own, based on inescapably, unapologetically subjective impressions.

The essential equality between analyst and subject relates to another complication raised by my study of Rainbow. I was not a clear outsider from the group in the way that most ethnographers are from their subject cultures. There were many people at Gatherings who looked like me in terms of body and dress. Most spoke American English as their primary language. My background and upbringing were far from uncommon in the Rainbow social context. I shared a life status, twenty-something university attendee, with enough other participants that it hardly raised attention. Not least of all, according the Rainbow principle of full inclusion of "anyone with a belly button", I was/am a member of the group. As we have alluded, the way I spent my time at Rainbow events was similar to what other people did. I worked, played, ate, and slept as an average member of the group, my physical survival and theirs equally enmeshed.

By this point in anthropology's history, such a relationship between ethnographer and informants is not unique. There are by now a good many pieces in anthropology's liturgical canon written by authors who were not clearly outside of the groups they describe. There is an important point voiced in some of these. Namely, when the usual cultural distance between observer and observed is defied, the modernist tendency to describe cultures in general terms gives way to a reliance on specifics. Kirin Narayan, in her excellent examination of a holy man in her native India, makes this observation about insider ethnography. In her work, "when people speak, they are identified rather than
being subsumed within categories". Largely due to my insider status within the Rainbow Family, I am also more comfortable with specific than general description. This will be an important factor in shaping the representational approach I employ.

Rainbow also contradicts the typical anthropological penchant for studying cultures as discrete, clearly distinct entities. A facet of the modernist propensity towards creating totalizing ethnographies was the tendency to see subject cultures as superorganic, homogenous wholes. As Holy and Stuchlik contend, this propensity has largely shaped the texts the discipline produces, as the rather Durkheimian notion of culture as objective reality is upheld in most actual anthropological research. It is difficult to discuss Rainbow in terms of a discrete, clearly definable culture. It could be described as an aspect of the counterculture. Or perhaps it is a subculture existing on the periphery of the wider mainstream.

With its rapidly shifting population, constituents that spend at least part of their lives in different cultural contexts, and fairly recent origin, Rainbow is not exactly what anthropologists think of when they imagine their usual subject matter. Moreover, Rainbow is a clearly ludic phenomenon. It is replete with so much conscious playfulness that many within academic anthropology would feel its study to be unworthy of their discipline’s serious consideration. But Rainbow is certainly a cultural phenomenon, and in my estimation quite an interesting one. It certainly has had important impacts on thousands of lives, and has helped shape the character of the contemporary New Age/countercultural scene in

---

America and indeed the world. Any anthropology that cannot accept it as a subject worthy of investigation, I contend, must be questioned.

Shawnee National Forest, October 1998

It is early October in southern Illinois. Summertime slips into autumn, torrential rains mark the seasonal shift. Paths and roads are transformed into almost impassable pools of muck. The mud and rain have become the focal aspects of daily life, dictating when to start a fire, how to dig a Shitter, where to sleep. It is the first of the large Road Dog dominated Gatherings which take folks seeking to avoid the harsh northern winters south from the Midwest to Mississippi and then over to Florida.

A-Camp is large and loud at these southern winter Gatherings. Such is the case at this one, as many drinkers are not respecting the usual practice of keeping all alcohol away from the center of the Gathering. A fight broke out yesterday between an A-Camper drinking from a bottle of whiskey around Kiddie Village and a frightened father. With the help of those around, the two made amends, but many are concerned that A-Camp will overwhelm the Gathering this year. On the edge of the Gathering, Shawnee A-Camp is temporarily home to a motley assortment of characters ranging from partying Phish Tour Kids to aging Vietnam vets to locals out for a good time. It gets larger by the day, as the main Gathering remains more or less unchanged.

A break in the clouds, a glimmer of summerish sun, finds me sitting under the blue tarp roof of Java Kitchen. Glad for the chance to get out from under the shelter and stretch my legs, I set out to take a look around the site. I meet Crow, a
Christian minister and long time Gatherer I’ve known for a few months, along the trail. We stroll lazily up the trail towards A-Camp, the noontime sunshine on our backs drying away the damp. We chat about our lives. He tells me how his faith in Jesus developed back in his days as a kid in Mexico, all that Catholicism, and how he now spends time at Rainbow ministering to interested Gatherers.

The wooded peacefulness of the main Gathering gives way in just a few hundred yards to scenes typical to daily life in A-Camp. Some A-Campers are still sleeping off the effects of yesterday, some are already well into today’s binge. Incoming Gatherers are stopped by drunks pleading for money for the next alcohol run. Scents of exhaust, garbage and vomit overwhelm the nose, particularly sensitive after weeks in the forest.

Our conversation continues, interspersed now with Crow’s greetings to his A-Camp brothers. Coffee being brewed in a big stainless steel pot draws us into a small encampment consisting of three large army tents just off the trail. Five men stare into the fire pit while another stokes it, his face pained by a hangover headache. A mason jar of whiskey passed around the circle, each drinker grunting slightly out of satisfaction for the first swallow of the day. Oatmeal bubbles in a big old black kettle. Moving to stir it, the cook trips over his feet and falls, nearly into the fire. The others guffaw, hand him the mason jar and suggest in broken, gruff phrases that it’s what he needs to combat those dizzy spells.

A few more rounds of the jar and the conversation livens. Crow, who knows two of the men here, introduces me. A profanity-riddled search for clean bowls culminates in the oatmeal being dished out. Settling in for a bit of breakfast, Crow says to the assemblage something like “Yeah, Adam here studies
anthropology. Real interesting stuff”. He means it too, fascinated, like so many outside the academic discipline, by the image of the anthropologist and anthropology he’s gleaned, it seems from our conversations, from National Geographic and Indiana Jones films. One of the drinkers, his name reputedly won in a poker game, gulps from the jar, hurriedly gobbles down an oatmeal chaser, and sarcastically asks, “an-throw-paw-low-gy [drawing out the word as though it were difficult to say, too technical, too highbrow], huh? Ain’t that all that diggin around all them bones and stealin ‘em? Sellin’ all them indian bones to the Smithsonian an’ shit?”

Crow speaks for me, perhaps intuiting that the question sets me slightly on edge. His ministerial experience has endowed him with a heightened sense of empathy, perhaps.

“Man, you don’t even know what you’re talking about. THAT one is nothing but grave robbing.... anthropology is science, real professional, learning about civilizations. Like showing how civilization happened, how ancient civilizations got started, like that...”

His manner of speaking is a disarming, relaxed but well enunciated, combination of southern California and Mexico City. He moved to LA as a young man in the late seventies, he later explains.

Politely- like he just remembered his manners- to me:

“...right, bro? That’s the one?”
Fardon has noted that "not so long ago the neophyte anthropologists could anticipate a well rehearsed answer to questions about the why and wherefore of anthropology." His statement implies a sense of change apparently different from the normal theoretical progressions that have marked the stages of anthropology's previous history. When the epistemological insights and undoings of postmodernism entered into the social sciences, anthropology seemed to be at an important crossroads. Some theorists considered the infusion of postmodernism into anthropology to be a hopeful, potentially fruitful phenomenon. Rosaldo, for instance, enthusiastically declared the apparent "remaking of social analysis" to be afoot. Others were quite negative about the changes they assumed would take place. Consider, as an example, Harris's dismissal of postmodernism as nothing but "obscurantism" and "a research strategy whose aim is to subvert the possibility of achieving a science of human social life."

The crux of postmodernism, it has been asserted, is a rejection of the correspondence theory of truth, the idea that knowledge can ever be a direct representation of reality. The idea of fixed, absolute truth as an ultimate authority is now regarded as quite naive. It is now widely accepted that truth is "relative, local, plural, indefinite, and interpretive." Even theorists associated with the traditional 'hard' sciences have come to admit the role of subjective perception in their work. Polanyi, for instance, famously commented that the

---

8 Harris, Marvin. 1999. Theories of Culture in Postmodern Times. Walnut Creek CA: Altamira Press: 156
positivist "ideal of a knowledge embodied in strictly impersonal statements now appears self-contradictory, meaningless, a fit subject for ridicule" and admonished his fellow scientists to "learn to accept as our ideal a knowledge that is manifestly personal".9

With faith in the correspondence theory of reality waning, the expert status once enjoyed by ethnographers has been brought into question. Much of this has hinged upon the recognition that the epistemological assumptions that once informed fieldwork are untenable. Contrary to what the modernist metapursuit would suggest, there is no such thing as the omnipotent, neutral observer. Hence, fieldwork clearly does not yield the neat social facts that past social scientists envisioned as the building blocks of their studies. Unable to ignore the role of the observer in cultural analysis10, anthropologists have become explicit about the inherently subjective and partial nature of their investigations.

In turn, this has seriously problematized the once-held view that anthropology should be concerned with the establishment of universal laws about culture. In a context devoid of the belief that a total and objective understanding of social behavior is the ultimate aim of anthropology, it becomes difficult for theorists to insist that the discovery of universally applicable laws is a worthwhile pursuit. In a theoretical context that denies the possibility of establishing objective laws about absolute truths, it is not possible to conceive of a standard measure of methodological advancement. Since the belief in a unilinear advancement of anthropological theory was a primary force in creating a stable discipline throughout much of anthropology's history, some

contemporary anthropologists bemoan the current emphasis on subjectivity as leading to theoretical nihilism.

The sort of paradigmatic hegemony that characterized other periods in the history of anthropology is now unable to take place. With its purpose and methodology in a state of constant challenge, no single approach is able to dominate the discipline. As Marcus and Fischer point out, “the current absence of paradigmatic authority is registered by the fact that there are presently many anthropologies”11. This lack of focus, prompted by the abandonment of a progressive template of theory building, is what some anthropologists consider responsible for the discipline’s present malaise. That anthropology is increasingly devoid of an overarching paradigm is often cited as a symptom of disciplinary crisis12.

It is striking that Rainbow attitudes towards knowledge, as expressed in the context of spirituality, share this skepticism towards objectivity and display a similar celebration of subjectivity. Rainbow is proof of a sort that heterodoxy of perspective can be seen as “a fundamentally healthy event”13. For Rainbows diversity is a point of pride. At Gatherings, diversity in the areas of age, gender, race, and economic status is considered to be a sign that the event is successful. A true community, in this view, involves the coming together of difference, not the absence of it. The level of homogenization characteristic of mainstream society and its religious orientations is felt to be infertile, as it is the intermingling of various elements that brings about vitality.

12 Harris, Marvin. 1999. Theories of Culture in Postmodern Times. Walnut Creek CA: Altamira: 154
13 Jarvie, I.C. June 1975 ‘Epistle to the Anthropologists’ American Anthropologist: 257
For anthropology, too, it may be prudent to revel in this state of disciplinary diversity. Rather than hurrying to achieve some sort of imposed stability, or attempting to defend the field from the criticisms of postmodernism, it might be wise to embrace this internal anarchy. Several authors, however, have voiced an intriguing path for the development of an alternative, anarchistic vision for anthropology. Overing, for instance, has illuminated such a path. Taking the concept from the work of radical philosopher of science Feyerabend, she speaks of an "anthropology which is based upon a dadaist methodology". With the emphasis on creativity and situational methodological bricolage, this dadaist type of approach would run counter to the "conceptual totalitarianism", implicit in positivist social science.

While some within the discipline may initially balk at such a project, considering it to make light of their serious discipline. It is my endeavor to demonstrate that a group like the Rainbow Family can actually teach us potential paths for anthropology's development as a multifaceted field. It is striking when doing fieldwork with Rainbow how many similarities actually exist between anthropology and the particular form of postmodernist spirituality and New Age belief found within the group. In some ways, this should not exactly be surprising. Rainbow, like academic anthropology, involves the conscious coming together of creative minds, deeply interested in exploring alternatives to the mainstream Western lifestyle.

Rainbow's events provide a rare forum for contemplating this mainstream culture, and for deep (if not academic- and sometimes outrageous) verbal

analysis of what is unhealthy about that culture. In one sense, Rainbow Gatherings are places where people can engage in conscious social experimentation. Indeed, Rainbow even revels in seeking answers to the deepest questions, often ignored while living in Babylon, such as what it means to be a human being in the natural world. The search for answers to these deep questions is undertaken in a spiritual idiom within Gatherings, but indeed it is not all that different from what anthropology does.

As well as providing an interesting mirror for academic anthropology, Rainbow Gatherings are important meeting places for large numbers of people interested in what can loosely be called New Age beliefs and practices. Therefore, it is important to consider Rainbow spirituality in a wider analytical context. Rainbow thus grants unique opportunities for the ethnographic investigation of New Age spirituality. Prince and Riches have recently noted of the New Age that “anthropologists are being drawn to study it in increasing numbers”\(^{15}\). Looking into the specific discursive trends about spirituality at Rainbow Gatherings can be thought of as extending this wider project. It is my belief that Rainbow actually provides an ideal place to conduct such ethnographic research.

Several points are worth noting here. First of all, the Rainbow Family of Living Light hosts some of the largest New Age events on the planet. Prince and Riches state that Rainbow is noteworthy because they frequently number “in excess of several hundred people”\(^{16}\). As we have seen above, this figure actually underestimates the size of Rainbow events. Indeed, they rarely number fewer

---


than several hundred people, and often number in excess of several thousand people. The largest events, Annual Gatherings, draw tens of thousands of participants. Glastonbury England, another epicenter of New Age activity, has about 8,000 inhabitants. Rainbow events routinely dwarf that community in population. If Glastonbury presents a significant ethnographic sample for researching the New Age, then so too do Rainbow events.

Another feature of Rainbow Gatherings that makes them interesting for the ethnographer is their inherent diversity. Geographically, Gatherings are held in every region of the United States, and in fact worldwide. People come from all over to attend them. As described, those of different economic backgrounds come together to attend Rainbow events. This diversity is also conceptual, as the sorts of spiritual discourse encountered at Gatherings represent many different New Age theories. Even those not particularly interested in spiritual matters, and there are some fitting this description within the Rainbow Family, are likely to be passingly familiar with a variety of different New Age beliefs. An ethnographer of the New Age would be hard pressed to find a better cross-section of the global New Age movement to study.

The one anthropological ethnography of the group, an excellent work by Mark Niman, provides a solid overview of the Rainbow Family. It does not, and does not seek to, go into great detail about the specific spiritual beliefs of Rainbow Gatherers. It does not draw the connections between these beliefs and our discipline. When discussing Rainbow spirituality, he focuses on quasi-spiritual 'fakelore', those stories Rainbows tell each other about the ancient origins of their group. As he critically notes, obviously unauthentic ancient and
tribal motifs "pervade Rainbow iconography". Niman is correct that "Rainbow spiritual practices frequently involve the mimicking, perverting, or outright ripping off of Native American religious rituals". Niman’s criticisms of Rainbow spirituality are valid. Many involved with the group would themselves disparage the Rainbow tendency to misrepresent traditional and tribal practices at Gatherings. Niman rightly points out some of the basic contradictions in Rainbow beliefs. These are certainly apparent and noteworthy.

Ultimately, however, he does not fully explain what it is that has made the Rainbow Family events so successful over the past three decades, and what we as anthropologists can learn from that success. In my estimation this is the more noteworthy story, albeit a difficult one to tell to people not personally involved with Rainbow. One goal of the present ethnography is to convey something of what makes Rainbow so compelling to participants, what leads people to exert the time and energy on creating its events. The answer involves the spiritual side of the group, including playful mimesis and more than occasional absurdity. Looking into aspects of Rainbow spirituality and the way it impacts individual lives can help anthropology make sense of the appeal of the New Age movement, and the wider counterculture in which it thrives.

What follows is an analysis of Rainbow spiritual discourse based on fieldwork conducted at Gatherings throughout the United States between the Autumns of 1998 and 2002. Living on the Rainbow Trail during this period, I had the opportunity to attend three Annuals, twelve Regionals, and countless Local events. Like many Gatherers, I stopped in Rainbow-friendly communities to

---

work between these events. I did not hide the fact that I was an anthropologist conducting fieldwork, but did not advertise the fact too widely. People who knew me certainly knew of my project, however, and expressed a good deal of curiosity about it. I conducted my field research assuming that to do Rainbow justice, "the multitude of voices which clamoured to be heard during research ought to reappear in the text"\textsuperscript{19}.

Informal conversations about spirituality happen all the time within Gathering life. These often involve large groups of people discussing a multitude of topics within the same conversation. In tandem with the admonishment that I only record people who had given me permission to do so, the wide ranging, rambling tone of larger group conversations made them difficult to capture on tape. Therefore, I tended to seek out smaller groups of people. After a few weeks in the field, as I began to understand some of the themes I might like to discuss in my ethnography, I wanted to ask more directed questions. This sometimes involved a level of patience and concentration on a single issue that potential informants felt was inappropriate or unnatural. I therefore tended to turn to people I had gotten to know fairly well, who understood and accepted my project, and who felt comfortable with me as a friend.

My original idea was to simply record spontaneous conversations about Rainbow spirituality, which are quite common, with an unobtrusive hand-held tape recorder. I soon learned that this kind of approach was not entirely feasible, as the use of a recording device presented its own problems. Bringing a recording device to Rainbow is never unproblematic. When Tourists and press representatives bring cameras and video cameras to Gatherings, they are always

told to only take images of people who have specifically agreed to be recorded on film. While some Gatherers were earnestly interested in helping me facilitate my project, the same sensitivities came into play, shaping the character of the fieldwork in ways I had not fully anticipated.

An ethical issue therefore came to light early in my fieldwork. Since informants sometimes discussed matters that could be legally sensitive, they were sometimes hesitant to discuss certain themes. They certainly would not say some things to outsiders. Even though I had gained their trust, many objected, my recordings and resulting texts might get into the hands of hostile outsiders, such as law enforcement. It was only possible to convince such people to speak to sensitive issues by agreeing to guarantee privacy. Out of respect for the privacy concerns of those Gatherers who may be involved in them, I will fictionalize these conversations to a degree. Many people who agreed to be interviewed did so with the understanding that their names and whereabouts would be concealed in the text. I will honor these wishes by sometimes altering sensitive facts where doing so does not compromise the discourses themselves. Names will be altered as well, though attempts will be made to replace them with ones that are evocatively similar.

I also came to realize that many people were reluctant to speak on tape because it was difficult for them to talk in too totalizing a fashion about their spiritual beliefs. To a degree I suspect this reflects the usual difficulty of informants to speak about things outside of a performative context, in wholly abstract terms. It also involves the highly emergent nature of spiritual belief in the Rainbow (and New Age) setting. Spiritual theories are not codified and
concretized quite as much as one would generally consider the case with orthodox religious beliefs.

Indeed, the lexical distinction many Rainbows make between 'religious' and 'spiritual' beliefs reflects this. The former is taken to be established, inherited cultural baggage. A person might say, for instance, that they "grew up with lots of religion. We are all Catholic down there, you know that, and the Virgin was always there". Spirituality, on the other hand, means something much more subjective, inspired, and emergent. Hence, it was more difficult for people to talk about directly. To do so on tape seemed to make people feel a bit preachy and insincere in their beliefs. Many refused after hearing their words played back to them, and I expect that this was a common reason.

Probably the most serious impediment to conducting the sort of recording based fieldwork I would have liked was that very few people wanted to be seen speaking for Rainbow as a whole. As I have mentioned, there is a strong stigma attached to any one person speaking for others. This is exponentially true with regard to spiritual beliefs. Indeed, those that do attempt to represent Rainbow as a whole tend to be considered peripheral individuals. To engage in such behavior marks a person off as a proselytizer, cult fanatic, or lunatic. Informants were always hesitant to have a record of their voice describing Rainbow beliefs because very few indeed were comfortable being seen speaking for the entire group. They assumed that a social scientist would be attempting to write a definitive account of the Rainbow Family, a project most people wanted nothing to do with.

20 Interview with Crow, Shawnee National Forest, October 1998
Only after stumbling attempts to explain what an anthropologist does, and debunking myths about the aloof social scientist, was it possible to truly establish meaningful dialogue with reluctant informants. Ultimately, having an opportunity to speak about such matters allowed glimpses into some of the deep motivations for living in this atypical way. It became apparent during my field experience that Gatherers were eager to speak to a handful of main points in response to questioning them about their beliefs. Borrowing from these discourses as a means of illustrating the recurring themes encountered in the field, it is hoped, will allow the anthropologist to paint a picture of Rainbow which readers not directly familiar with this highly eclectic group can comprehend.

It is surely a truism to state that each participant in a discussion brings a certain intellectual background, certain ideas and orientations that inform what they have to say about a topic. Rainbow conversations about spirituality are no exception. People speak about spiritual matters in terms of what they know, what traditions they have encountered in their personal studies. My own ways of making sense of Rainbow follow this truism. As an academically trained anthropologist, I was continually reminded of the practices I had read about in ethnographic texts. In fact, the many points of commonality with traditional cultures I observed within the Rainbow Family did much to make the group seem less contrived, more authentically distinct from mainstream Western society. This illusion of being something traditional, even aboriginal, is certainly played up by Rainbows. As we shall see, much of the impact of Rainbow spirituality relates to this cultivated image.
Rainbows themselves were very interested in hearing about such comparisons, and so these largely became my contribution to discussions about Rainbow spirituality, just as others would draw upon their own areas of expertise in these conversations. As I was compelled to make explicit during such conversations, I assert no pretense of scientific method when making these comparisons between Rainbow and other ethnographic descriptions. The sort of comparison I employ is one mindful of Overing’s assertion that "the use of comparison in contemporary anthropology is more akin to the unselfconscious, commonsensical comparison of everyday judgment than to the formal, cross-cultural comparison of analytically defined variables". My approach is explicit about the insight described by Hobart, that ethnographic "analysis may require multiple perspectives, a sort of poetic, rather than scientific, realism".

I do not use the comparative method to prove similarities between Rainbow and other cultures in any objective sense. Rather, my goal in drawing these comparisons is to provide a (subjective) context to the practices and beliefs found within Gatherings, which can seem rather hollow and contrived until one realizes that they are not all that uncommon in the greater ethnographic record. For the sake of painting a more vivid (if impressionistic) portrait of the Rainbow Family, I will explore the points of comparison with other cultures that came to mind when making sense of Gathering life.

While specific opinions about spiritual issues vary considerably within this diverse group, it may be possible to subjectively discern themes that form the core of a general Rainbow spiritual orientation. By elaborating on each of

---
these general topics through reference to recorded conversations, it may be possible to illustrate a certain unity of interests behind the variations of Rainbow spirituality. This sort of exercise will serve to bolster an understanding of the spirituality behind the wider American counterculture. As an intergenerational assemblage of people coming from all over the country and indeed world in search of an alternative to mainstream society, the Rainbow Family presents a rare opportunity for the anthropologist to make sense of the beliefs and interests which inform what is often, and perhaps unsatisfyingly, dubbed the New Age movement.
V. COMMON SPIRITUALITY

There are social or common aspects of Rainbow spirituality. These daily repeated activities are considered to be the central work of the Gathering. Rainbows individuals almost always spend more time engaged in these common spiritual pursuits than any other form of work. In fact, is not uncommon to hear commentary about how this is the real work of the Gathering, and that the success of the rest (food preparation, infrastructure building and maintenance, and so on) is contingent upon success in this field. The main idea is usually that achieving spiritual harmony within the Gathering, by respecting and sharing Rainbow spiritual values as much as possible, will result in the physical health of the event.

Since the physical center of the Gathering site is considered to be the most sacred space, many of these public spiritual activities take place around the Heartfire, which is ideally kept burning at all times. A considerable portion of a Gathering’s collective labor is invested in maintaining the infrastructure necessary for these activities. Digging a proper Heartfire pit is no quick task, and the constant wood gathering, necessitated by the tradition of preventing the fire from extinguishing, is fairly labor intensive. The primary work of maintaining the Heartfire, though, involves labor of a more spiritual sort. Though ritualized in the sense that certain sorts of activities take place at given times of day, these events are entirely voluntary and free form. As is the pattern in Rainbow generally, these acts of public worship are thought to gain their strength from the coming together of different energies, and therefore individuals are encouraged to do what they like within certain implicit parameters.
The daily tasks involved with keeping a strong Heartfire, as Gatherers are apt to say, form a cycle that is remarkably constant considering the totally voluntary character of this important work. At dawn, Main Circle is loosely populated by people engaged in quiet meditation. Usually those participating in dawn ceremonies do so standing and moving in a slow, stretching dance, such as in Tai Chi. Though a particularly energetic Gatherer may occasionally greet the others assembled around the Heartfire at dawn, this is generally considered to be a time for silence. For some, this ceremony marks the beginning of their day, as they have freshly risen from a night of sleep. For others, it is the end of the day, and they have spent the night drumming here. This feels like a sort of changing of the guard, though the point is denied by Rainbows I have spoken with. They tend to consider the population around the Heartfire to be in a more constant state of flux. While it is considered inappropriate to ever leave the Heartfire totally unattended, there is not a strong sense of individual obligation to accomplish this. It happens, Rainbows insist, through the magic of the Gathering.

As the morning progresses, Main Circle hosts events of a more verbal nature. Councils, as mentioned, may be called by anyone, at any time, and for any purpose. Usually this has to do with solving a specific task or problem. Sometimes, though, they are simply opportunities to express personal thoughts with a group, or Heartsong sessions, as Councils of this sort are called. This kind of activity generally happens during the daytime, with more practical Councils filling the morning and Heartsong sessions going until dinnertime just before sundown. Music may be played during any part of the day, but generally begins in earnest in the late afternoon, with stringed instruments such as guitars being strummed together softly, as people occasionally speak up on whatever subject
they choose. Usually, open musical jams and Heartsong sessions last until Kitchens start arriving with food for the evening meal, at which point shouts of “dinner” and “we love you” are voiced and those present are joined by their hungry comrades.

The drums used in this next phase of the daily Heartfire ritual are considered individual property, but are usually stored at Main Circle and can be used by anyone who wishes. Other instruments join that in what is referred to as the Drum Circle, such as didjeridoos, guitars, and bells, are considered more personal, and one must ask to borrow these. As the instruments are made ready, people begin strumming out simple rhythms and cords. With others joining in as the evening goes on, this free-form jam becomes musically complex and increases dramatically in volume. At its peak, somewhere between one or two in the morning, a Drum Circle can be heard for many miles. It abates around sunrise, with people passing in and out of it throughout the night.

Especially in the earlier part of the night, there are many spectators enjoying the drumming jam and socializing. They sit in a ring around the musicians in the middle, though some join in by dancing close to the fire. Spatially, dancing usually takes place amongst the musicians and, not uncommonly, right up against the fire, displaying a certain amount of bravado. A person will occasionally leap through a corner of the Heart Fire, defying the flames as a means of showing the joy of the moment. On rare occasion, someone will misjudge distance and partially fall into the fire. Though such a person will immediately be pulled out by those around, serious burns have occurred. Children, therefore, are not usually allowed to participate in this way, though a responsible guardian may carefully shepherd a child to the edge of the fire to
better see what is going on there. This dancing also makes for interesting shadow play in the firelight, which children and others can enjoy watching from a safe distance.

Often, people will use this time of day for prayer, and may sit throughout the night in meditation, perhaps joining in the music occasionally if they please. Sitting in a ring directly around the musicians, people involved with this sort of prayer activity are considered an integral part of the drum circle. They are usually described as adding to the energy of the jam, or as helping the musicians be sensitive to the energy of the Gathering, which they then manifest in the music. Participation in this aspect of the Gathering, like all others, is officially open to anyone. Though others may join in for short periods, it mostly tends to be Elders and High Holies who take on this role at drum jams. Indeed, a person who engages in long-term participation in this facet of Gathering life is quite likely to achieve a reputation as someone quite committed to spiritual matters.

The Drum Circle tradition is very important to the Rainbow Family. It bridges the gap between entertainment and prayer, and is often credited with leading individual Gatherers to spiritual introspection. Highly social events, nightly Drum Circles are the closest thing to the decadent partying outsiders expect to find within Gatherings. Nearly every newcomer will attend Drum Circle rituals. A new Gatherer's first experience of the spiritual buzz will often happen within the Drum Circle context. This may possibly be accompanied by use of a mind altering substance, which Rainbows say can make people more sensitive to the power of the drums. It has been remarked that "reggae music has been the most powerful force behind the international spread and popularity
of Rasta culture"¹. On a vastly smaller scale, it is Rainbow musical performances at Drum Circle which draws people to spiritual seeking at Gatherings. The draw of the music is not to be underestimated.

And indeed, the power of music to draw individuals into a more introspective, spiritual state generally is not to be underestimated either. Crossculturally, music tends to play an important role in developing spiritual sensitivity. In an excellent discussion of the emotionally persuasive power of music, Lindholm notes that the Akawaio of Guyana harness the mind altering potential of music in performance of their séance rituals. He describes that these rituals begin with slow chants, dancing, and chanting, and accelerate “to an increased pitch of emotional power”² as the alternative reality of the séance takes hold. Rainbow drumming often incorporates this slow to fast rhythmic pattern as well. The effects appear to be similar to what Lindholm describes. The complex and increasingly frantic rhythms of Drum Circle performances are intoxicating and reality altering in their own right, even without the use of drugs. The powerful music of the Drum Circle ritual contributes greatly to the otherworldly feel of Gatherings.

Many Gatherers consider music to be a form of blessing or sanctifying a given Rainbow event. In fact, some people declare music to be something more than that. According to one woman, drumming is a “protection against the sickness of Babylon”³. Sullivan notes that many cultures “reckon music to be the

---


³Interview with Whisper, June 1999, Allegheny National Forest
primordial reality that modulates other cosmic and cultural manifestations."⁴. Rainbows voice a similar belief, considering music to be a way of giving expression to the spiritual energy in each individual. By bringing these spiritual energies together in the Drum Circle ritual, Rainbow is able to tap into a source of power that transcends the limitations of the physical world. This power, wrought by cooperative spiritual expression through music, is believed to be able to transform the physical world. As we shall see, Rainbows are very interested in gaining access to primordial power to transform a corrupt outer world.

June 1999, Allegheny National Forest

"Whisper", I laugh, "that's what you call yourself"? She looks at me and laughs back, obviously full of joy to finally be at this year's Annual. We both arrived this afternoon, and are sharing the fairly long hike into the Gathering's interior. She had just been telling me about the difficulties her vehicle had en route from New York, and how she had just returned from Senegal a few weeks ago. We are finally introducing ourselves, and to hear that this boisterous little woman carrying three large drums in a big mesh bag and one tied to her pack is called Whisper entertains me quite a bit.

We are walking with a gentleman who surely seems to deserve the name more than she does. Alaikum introduces himself. The pair explains that he is from Chicago, and that they were married in Senegal a year ago. He has family there

and he was living there after college. They stopped on their way back from
Africa so he could meet his new wife's family, and to come to this large Annual
Gathering, which happens to be fairly close to New York this year. He was
nervous to meet his new in-laws he says. He smiles and nods, "it's good to be
home though, after all that! We'll kick it with Rainbow for a week, then break
north and see what that's going to be".

We sit down to get out some water out of his big blue pack. It is very hot in the
late afternoon sun, it is a relief to sit in the shade and have a drink. The pair tells
me about their ambition to establish a business selling imported drums, possibly
in Ithaca, a beautiful college town about four hours north of New York City.

As a small child my family had a cabin in the woods near there, and I tell them
about some of my early memories from there. I describe the river where we
would fish, the amazing fossils in the rocks, the color of the leaves in the
Autumn. Whisper and Alaikum smile broadly. They have been dreaming of
making a life together in this part of the world, and have come through a lot to
get here.

I ask them how they plan to set up a shop in Ithaca, if they think that there's
enough of a market to really make it work. Whisper went to college at Cornell,
but hasn't been back in three years, she explains. She is not entirely sure they can
make it work, but says it is worth a try.

Whisper: These drums we get, it's a friend of Alaikum's uncle. He's like family...
Alaikum: Yes! I love him like family [laughs]. He is the man. He wants to help us now that we're married.

Whisper: These drum are really something. And we get them for a price no one can match. He buys them at the markets and knows what to look for. You have to know how to spot quality there, but if you can do that, you can get some real beauties.

She shows me her mesh bag. Unlike many drums I've seen at Rainbow, these do not have decorative carvings on them. I remark that people might want something more decorative, and Jean smiles his toothy smile.

Alaikum: These are carved from hand by real artists though. Real Ghana djembes. This time we have drums from Ghana, sometimes he gets them. See how they're thicker on top? These shake the earth!

Whisper: These are from a guy who brings them from Ghana to our friend. His family has made them just like this forever. And they sure do make some noise! Wait until you hear these all at Drum Circle. People who play drums will totally hear the quality. Good wood, carved out so carefully, real goat skins, these are some drums, man!

"We're gonna make some noise tonight, Whew!", she adds.
After a generous break from hiking, and downing about a half gallon of water among the three of us, we load up and keep walking. Alaikum and Whisper speak in French for a minute, then ask me if I would like to drum with them tonight.

Adam: I'll probably go down to the Heartfire, but I don't really play anything myself.

Alaikum: But we will show you! It is simple. You just need to see how to play, then you can do fine!

Whisper: Yeah, you need to try these!

I respond that I want to find the Kitchen I tend to camp with, and set up my tent. But I promise to meet them down at the Drum Circle at some point tonight.

Whisper: I'm telling you. You need to feel these beauties. These are some real solid weapons, man!

Alaikum pretends to drum and smiles broadly.

Whisper: You can just feel it when you play a good drum. It just booms. Nothing can harm us when we have these! Like I said, these some solid weapons. Drum down the walls of Babylon all night long [laughs]!
I ask her to elaborate; she tosses back her dreadlocked head and chuckles.

Whisper: Man, people have always known about this. They sure do in Africa, huh [looking towards Alaikum]? You get a dozen drums raging, and you just hit the sky, it makes everyone so high, just pure thunder. Rolling thunder, right? And it makes you so strong, like to just become one with the earth and eachother, and pound out the earth's heartbeats. Nothing is stronger than that. Babylon can't even touch you.

The three of us continue to walk and talk. Whisper explains that they want to not only sell drums, but teach traditional rhythms. “We will spread the thunder all over”, she says, and dreams of “a thousand drums chipping away at Babylon. Straight Nybinge beats”.

As the conversation continues, I ask Whisper to tell me what it is about drums that she thinks makes them powerful. She turns to Alaikum and speaks a few lines of French, then the couple laughs.

She turns to me: Well, it's like the drums bring the energies out into the open, earth vibes, you know? And that's dangerous for Babylon, yeah. But I THINK that's what it is? It's in the head for sure. You get these kind brothers and sisters just so, so, well, you know? Just like they are a vehicle. When you really get jamming, you are just a vehicle for Mother. You feel the waves of her being. And just being there, with people, it's a rush [laughs]. Music, man! It doesn't tame the beast, it makes the tame, uptight people into beasts, wild nature, just living the
moment.

Chanting sporadically accompanies Drum Circles, and is a favorite part of the ritual for some people. Anyone who wishes to lead a chant can do so by moving to the center of the circle, where the drumming is taking place, and addressing it to the fire. Drummers themselves will sometimes begin a chant, though usually they will put down the drum and stand up for the event. The person then begins reciting a chant, perhaps one known to many in the circle. In general, they are comprised of one to five short verses, and simple enough to be easily memorized. Choruses of wordless phonetic syllables frame these verses. Choruses are usually chanted by everyone present, even spectators, while verses may be recited by individuals. As they generally do not take very long to recite, they may be repeated again and again in a single performance, sometimes with an increase in tempo each way through. Volume may be increased or decreased each time as well, so that the chant culminates in shouting or a whisper. Total duration for a performance of a single chant can be up to about half an hour, going on until the person who began the chant stops.

All chants, I have been told repeatedly, originate as individual creations. They are intentionally composed, as a form of spoken poetry, and often reference earlier chants in their verses. Chants achieve repetition only through popular appeal. Their composers are well aware of this, and in a sense compete with one another to ‘write’ (the word used even if pen and paper has never been involved in their delivery) chants that will be remembered well into the future. Most in a given Drum Circle only know a few of the verses, and new ones are often written and added freely, transforming the chant over time. When it happens that a
chant does become popularly known and repeated, the specifics about the Gatherer that originally wrote it fade, and it is eventually referred to as belonging to Rainbow tradition.

The Rainbow chant tradition has always impressed me as an example of how individual creativity shapes culture generally and religious practices in particular. The fact that these verbal expressions of Rainbow values originate as the conscious creative work of specific Gatherers, and potentially melt into a general canon of chants, provides an illustration of how religious beliefs and practices originate and change. While the level of explicit recognition that spiritual discourse is a product of individual creativity is perhaps exaggerated in the Rainbow movement, a strong case can be made for the position that conscious creativity informs religious activity in all cultural contexts. By considering concrete, discursive acts which are typically glossed over in most anthropological theories of religion, individual variation can be seen as an inescapable feature of all spirituality.

This is due to the frankly performative character of any concrete manifestation of spirituality. Fabian, who has outlined an anthropology aware of the performative character of culture, cautions that performance should not be projected onto others "in order to contrast them with our own... serious business"5. Nor does such an approach involve metaphorically linking religious activity and the tightly scripted acting found in our plays and films. What is meant by using this word is that the activities described should be understood as coming into being in real time, in a flexible and (at least partially) self-conscious fashion. Looking at ethnographic examples which highlight the role of the

individual in creating it, we see that it is possible to construe religious knowledge as necessarily emergent, never truly static.

Overing convincingly demonstrates that such a fluidity is present in lowland South America, among the Piaroa. She describes how she was unable to make sense of the cosmological models expressed in the chants of local spiritual leaders or ruwangs so long as she expected to find "an image of a single unified world". Only when she recognized that "what we can know are versions of the world which are always tied to frames of reference" was she able to understand the significance of the chanted cosmologies. Since the Piaroa believe that ills in the human present result from "acts of self-aggrandizement and treachery" which occurred in an earlier age, healing largely consists of the ruwang describing why exactly the victim is ailing. This diagnostic process involves telling cosmological stories through a special chanted, often punning language. As the situational details vary from case to case, each individual ruwang weaves complex and dynamic cosmological images for the audiences assembled to participate in the healing rituals. Echoing the philosopher Nelson Goodman, Overing states that "truth must be thought of as other than corresponding to a ready-made world" in Piaroa cosmology.

A similar account comes from another corner of the world, Papua New Guinea. Schieffelin's report on the details of Kaluli seance is, like Overing's piece, an illustration of cosmological change occurring through manipulation of

---

7Overing, Joanna. 1990. 'The Shaman as a Maker of Worlds: Nelson Goodman in the Amazon'. *Man* 25: 606
religious beliefs. In this case, it is again evident that the performative format of religious practice itself encourages incremental innovation. When a Kaluli person falls ill, relatives call for a known spirit medium to contact the spirit realm in an effort to discover the cause of the sickness. The adept medium heightens the “compelling quality of the seance long before the performance itself begins” through progressively delaying the ritual and hence inflaming the community’s anxiety. Surrounded by a restless audience, the medium lies down in the darkness and waits for the trance and possession to take hold. As the spirits come up into the medium, they each sing an original song which is enthusiastically chorused by the closely gathered audience. After thus announcing its presence, each spirit engages the audience in enigmatic and heavily nuanced conversations.

Trying to figure out the identity of the guest spirit, or reacting nostalgically to one which is successfully identified, the audience is deeply engaged in the performance. The dexterous medium is thus able to dramatically manipulate the mood and spiritual understanding of her or his gathered community through improvisational song composition, strategic choice of spirit guests, and conversational flow. Kaluli mediums occasionally have their spirit guests levy taboos on their human host group and, presumably, thereby sustain interest in and respect for the invisible forces even when there is no overt crisis. Though “Kaluli laymen are generally not aware of the variation and inconsistency in their knowledge of the invisible”11, it is apparent that the various

mediums impart their respective, though perhaps overlapping, audiences with subtly different cosmological views. Due to the very way in which knowledge of the spirit world and its demands is revealed, then, such knowledge is implicitly heterogeneous and proccessual.

Rainbow chanting traditions follow basically the same pattern, though here there is no ideological orthodoxy per se. Rainbows are quite explicit about the fact that chants are created and repeated as performances, with audience expectations in mind. The effect of this detail is that there is a good deal more transparency about, perhaps even a celebration of, the fact that this kind of mythological drift takes place, as chants are repeated and redacted. Rainbows acknowledge that a certain amount of calculated reputation building informs chanting. The ability to write and perform an interesting and compelling chant, is a primary route to respect and a modicum of practical authority. A chant is obviously more likely to be repeated if it is memorable. Memorability is often accomplished by troping upon themes and rhythmic structures of existing Rainbow chants.

Chants also achieve memorability by repeating romantic claims about the Rainbow Family. They are also one of the first forms of verbal expression about what Rainbow is all about a new Gatherer is likely to encounter. Chants are therefore very important vehicles for shaping the mythology of the Rainbow Family. Even if some of the assertions voiced in chants may not be considered literally representative of what the Rainbow Family is, they are certainly poetically representative of Rainbow ideas about their group. While it is impossible here to catalog the entire range of chant lyrics and themes, a survey of these will illustrate how chant lyrics paint a highly romanticized portrait of
Rainbow.

Chants often address the connection between Rainbow and nature. Usually, the group is portrayed as closer to nature than the outside world. Such rhetoric often describes a familial relationship between Gatherers and nature, and hence a responsibility of the former to save the latter from destruction. Consider, for instance, the lyrics to the popular chant known as Earth Mother:

"The Earth is our Mother/We must take care of her/ The earth is our mother/We must take care of her/ Please come alive on this sacred land/ Please come alive on this sacred land/ The sky is our father/ Please take care of him"  

Themes of togetherness also inform the chant lyric tradition. They tend to describe fellow Gatherers in familial terms, just as they do the natural world. The togetherness is sometimes described as actual unity of identity. This can be unity of the group, and unity of the group with nature or universe. A chant known as I'm In You is probably the most popular expression of this theme: "You are my mother/ You are my father/ You are my lover/ You are my friend/ You are the beginning/ You are the center/ You are the end/ For I'm in you and you're in me/ For I'm in you and you're in me".

Despite the fact that the Rainbow Family has existed for only three decades, part of the mystique of the group is that it is, in some metaphysical sense at least, an ancient tribe. This assertion informs the Rainbow sense of righteousness, as though their values are traditional, while the outer world's values are faddish aberrations from more timeless form of morality. It also bolsters the sense of unity within the group, suggesting that the individuals who

---

12 Recorded July 2000, Bitterroot National Forest
13 Recorded July 2000, Bitterroot National Forest
come to Rainbow do so as a sort of regrouping after lifetimes of separation. The chant called Honor You captures this fascination with faux ancientness: “We are an old family/We are a new family/We are the same family/Stronger than before/We honor you/We honor you/We lift you up”\(^{14}\).

The circle is an important conceptual aspect of Rainbow life. Though actual Gatherings may seem to consist of randomly scattered camps, they are generally described as circular. The circle is a symbol of unity and cohesion, and power. Chant lyrics will often enforce a sense of Gathering circularity. One common chant called I am the Circle goes like this: “I am the circle/Love is healing me/We are the circle/Love is healing us/We are one/We are one/Unite people/Be as one/Unite people/Be as one/Circle/Circle/Circle of living light/Circle/Circle/Family of living light”\(^{15}\).

Opening to transcendent powers is considered to be a first step towards facilitating healing. Healing the self and healing the world is a very important theme of Gatherings. Not surprisingly, the chants heard at Drum Circles express this interest in healing. Love is often associated with the goal of healing, as though to focus loving thoughts is to tap into a potent healing energy. The chant Love Heals All describes this theme: “Love has the power to heal this world/Now is the time to heal this world/Love has the power to heal this world/We have the power to heal this world/Our love's the power to heal this world”\(^{16}\).

One general aim at Gatherings is to open hearts and minds to a transcendent energy. The Drum Circle ritual is a place where many Gatherers

---

\(^{14}\)Recorded June 2000, Daniel Boone National Forest

\(^{15}\)Recorded June 2000, Daniel Boone National Forest

\(^{16}\)Recorded May 2000, Daniel Boone National Forest
pray or meditate on increasing their sensitivity to the innate powers of the earth or universe. Doing so is considered to be the first step in achieving a healthy Gathering. One common chant embodies this aim. Open Up, or Opening as it is sometimes called, tends to be chanted when using psychedelic drugs. Interestingly, it is often said to be of Muslim or Sufi origin. It goes: “I am opening up/I am opening up/Sweet surrender/To the light/light my soul/We are opening/We are opening/Opening up/Opening up.”

Chants are not the only verbal expressions of shared Rainbow spirituality. There is another verbal tradition which merits mention here. A number of quasi-religious discourses are known and repeated by many Gatherers. These are usually not considered literal spiritual beliefs by Rainbow individuals. From an emic perspective, these tales are best described as a part of Rainbow Hipstory. Such Hipstorical myths typically proclaim that the group is destined to play a special role in benevolent world transformation. Quite often this special role is said to be related to an end-times scenario.

The first Gathering in 1972, for instance, is remembered as centering around predictions of imminent Armageddon, reportedly revealed to certain early Rainbows in visions. Early Rainbow facilitators are reported to have foreseen that the Gathering would attract 144,000 “of god’s elect mentioned in the book of revelations” to come together on July 4th to signal the commencement of Armageddon. Since then, many other apocalyptic theories have spread within the group. These have waxed and waned in popularity, and some have evidently faded out of memory as their predictions failed to come

\(^{17}\) Recorded July 2000, Bitterroot National Forest
\(^{18}\) Cahill, Tim. August 1972. ‘Armageddon Postponed’. Rolling Stone
true.

By far the most popular of these Hipstorical myths is the one known as the Hopi prophecy. Most, if not all, Rainbows know the story in one of its many forms. It is often retold to new Gatherers the first day they arrive at Rainbow. There are many written versions of it. These sporadically appear in Rainbow publications, and are posted at Gathering sites or on Rainbow web pages. A paragraph which graces the front page of one of the largest Rainbow web sites summarizes the Hopi prophecy, and is particularly well known. It states that “when the earth is ravaged and the animals are dying, a new tribe of people shall come unto the earth from many colors, classes, creeds, and who by their actions and deeds shall make the earth green again. They will be known as the warriors of the Rainbow”\(^\text{19}\).

Other renditions of this prophecy meticulously describe the signs that it says will proceed the end of this age and the coming of the next. Various tellings of this part of the prophecy mention different signs, but they all tend to involve environmental or social degradation, and blame the encroachment of Western civilization with triggering the immanent apocalypse. Usually, though, the language of specific predictions is chosen to bolster the idea that they are of an ancient source. Pre-modern images are used to describe recent technology, in order to avoid anachronism and preserve the veneer of venerability upon which the prophecies rest. The process of describing future events in archaic and metaphor-laden language is usually central to the telling of this part of the Hopi prophecy. Such obfuscation is fairly obvious, so that the meanings of these

\(\text{19} \text{ www.welcomehome.org}\)
images will be apparent to all but the least imaginative audience members.

- 

July 1999, Allegheny National Forest

According to one version of the prophecy, there are seven signs that will indicate the end of the present age. This rather formal telling is part of the day-long Hipstorical Heartsong session which is traditionally held on July Third. People have been filtering in and out of the Main Circle area since dawn, taking and leaving places in the ring of seated Gatherers. As an old brass Tibetan prayer bell is circulated clockwise, each person who has something to add speaks. Some lead the congregation in prayers or shouts praise, others speak of specific problems at this Gathering that need to be resolved before the peak tomorrow, others recount Hipstorical myths.

A woman appearing to be in her fifties or sixties takes the bell (referred to as the feather) from a young man who had nothing to say with his turn. She gives him a grateful nod, her hands folded on the feather in the fashion of a prayer, and stands. She is dressed in a green robe and wears an elaborate turquoise and silver necklace depicting an eagle. She greets the group with the phrase ‘Mitakuye Oyasin’, which is supposedly Lakota for ‘hello all my relations’, and introduces herself.

Dancing Eagle: Hello my family. It is so good to be here, with you all of you, all of us on the land, so welcome home, home to all of you. My name is Dancing
Eagle. Praise the spirit that brought us together!

Several voices from the audience shout 'ho', asserting their agreement with the statement of blessing.

Dancing Eagle: The spirit brings us here, to our home, in these times when the mother is suffering. And we come for many purposes, to see family, to groove, to play music and dance. And so much more, we are here for so much more, by the grace of the spirit. And so I would like to tell everyone here an old prophecy, most of you have heard, but there are some new faces here, and they need to know it too. It was given Rainbow by our Hopi brothers and sisters. It comes from their creation story, it has come down from generation after generation, and the wisdom speaks to our age. To us, to our children (gesturing to a woman with an infant on her lap), to the future. And the Hopi say that there are seven signs that our age will end, this world will end, and the next will emerge. Seven signs that time as we know it will end.

She paces around the circle, looking each person in the eyes as she recounts these signs. Most people here have, as she says, probably heard renditions of the prophecy, but listen with an attentiveness appropriate to the ritual importance of the day and activity. The woman is fairly well known throughout Rainbow and has a reputation for spiritual devotion. There is an air of reverence among those assembled.

Dancing Eagle: Seven signs will precede the end. Seven signs will pass before this world, the fourth world, gives way to the next world, which will come. The
first sign, they said that a race of white skinned men will come, and kill with thunder. And this has come to pass. The second sign speaks of beasts, like buffalo, that will overrun the earth, like buffalo but without horns, not part of the wild earth. And this has passed. The third sign tells us the mother will be wrapped in a giant spider web, and the fourth speaks of stone snakes choking her, constricting her. And these too have passed. Then the sea will turn black, and this is happening, the seas are dying. And then the plants of the earth will wither and die, and this is happening all around us. But the seventh sign, the last sign, speaks of a race of rainbow warriors, and these will come from all of the nations of the earth, and they will be known by their hair, long like the red man, and by their pure hearts. And it will be these rainbow warriors, their task will be to grow the earth green again in the fifth age, and the sun will rise over the next world and all will be whole again. And so it shall be.

As Niman states in his book, this prophecy "is the Rainbow Family's ultimate romantic vision. It is not, however, Hopi"\(^{20}\). He bases this conclusion in part on an interview he conducted with a Hopi man by the name of Thomas Banyaca, who was chosen as a youth to interpret Hopi spiritual teachings for the outside world and has taken the message of his people to international forums such as the United Nations. Banyaca "was unfamiliar with the Rainbow Family"\(^{21}\), and dismissive of the idea that it had anything to do with the prophecies of his people.

In fact, the myth actually comes from a booklet called 'Warriors of the


Rainbow', "a ninety-five-page evangelical Christian tract"\textsuperscript{22} written in the early 1960s. The story caught the attention of New Age literary circles, and has been repeated in print a number of times. One rendition, which has apparently been read by Rainbows researching the roots of their group comes from Alberto Ruiz Buenfil. Buenfil says that "the ancient legends are acquiring the characteristics of a new mythology"\textsuperscript{23}, and thus has perpetuated the perception of the Hopi prophecy as a legitimately ancient story.

Despite the less than ancient history of this theory, most Rainbows I have spoken with seem to consider the Hopi prophecy to be authentically Hopi as well, and have reacted with surprise to the assertion that it is a fabrication. The degree to which it is believed to be a literally accurate foretelling of what is to happen to humanity, however, varies. Most people consider the apparent intersection between the Hopi myth and the Rainbow Family to be a sort of coincidence, perhaps significant as an inspiring metaphor for what their group should strive to be.

Such people generally do not actually think that Rainbows are the chosen people, predicted by ancient Hopis to redeem the world. Others, however few, do take a much more literal approach to the prophecy, and consider Rainbow to have an obligation to the Hopi nation to herald the coming of the next world. According to such thinking, the movement should reach out to as many people as possible, from all corners of the world, and encourage them to strive for spiritual purification. When a 'critical mass' (as they often say) of the earth's population is Rainbow, the next age will begin.

Such an interpretation is bolstered by another cycle of Hipstorical myths which circulate at Gatherings. Though not as popular as they evidently once were, most long time Rainbows have heard the stories about a red tablet given to Rainbow by Hopis. Supposedly, a group of four Hopi men in an old Ford pickup visited a commune in Oregon in the March of 1972, four months before the first Gathering. They are reported to have been traveling with an ancient, glyphed red tablet, which they gave to commune members to bring power to the upcoming event, along with instructions to return it to the Hopi reservation in Arizona just before the millennium. It was evidently brought to many Gatherings as prescribed, but has not been seen publicly since the 1979 Gathering in Arizona.

Some thought it had secretly been returned to the Hopi tribe, others that it was lost when the two people guarding it were left behind when a vehicle in which they had hitchhiked a ride from sped off from a gas station stop with all their gear. Whether returned to its original owners or stolen by ignorant outsiders, the tablet is thought to have been the proof for the Hopi people that this group calling itself the Rainbow Family is the same as the rainbow warriors described in their prophecy. Without the item, it is commonly implied, Rainbow will not be accepted as a legitimate tribal movement by the Hopi, and by extension native peoples generally. The tablet itself is usually described as a red sandstone, red ivory (oddly enough), or red granite disk. It reportedly dates back to the Hopi’s ancestors, now known as the Anasazi, and has several ancient glyphs on one face.

I had an opportunity to speak with one of Rainbow’s most respected original members the summer before he died. Sun Bear, in his late seventies, had long been involved with the American counterculture and New Age movements.
In fact, he took his name (the only one I knew him by), from the famous Native American New Age shaman, a close friend, when that Sun Bear passed on. He told me that he had been one of the people to whom the tablet was originally given. Four older Hopi men had presented the tablet to a commune in Oregon in 1970, not 1972, and were never heard from again. The tablet did, as often described, travel to Rainbow Gatherings for about a decade, and was then taken to the Hopis, who were skeptical of the tablet’s authenticity. It was eventually turned over to him to take care of. He claimed to have taken it back to the farm in western Oregon, near the town of Veneta, where it was originally given to the Rainbow Family, and to have told twelve people of its location in case it would ever be needed in the future.

According to Sun Bear, the disk is about a foot in diameter, and apparently carved out of red granite. The glyphs on its face show a swastika “pointed in the sunwise direction”, or clockwise, a cross, a crude figure of a man, and a stylized sun. These are arranged circularly, like a zodiac, and are separated by two ninety degree lines, so that each design occupies a delineated quadrant. Sun Bear stated that he did not know what the glyphs “would mean to the Hopis”, but had his own ideas about their significance. The swastika, he said, stood for change, and the clockwise direction indicated that this change is positive. The cross, he thought, meant the coming together of heaven and earth, or an interaction between the physical and spiritual worlds. He saw the man as a Christ figure, or maybe a symbol representing all humanity. The sun he described as a sign of the transcendent divine energy that supports the world.

---

24 Interview with Sun Bear, July 1999, Allegheny National Forest
Interestingly, he had ambiguous feelings towards the theory that this stone is actually of Hopi origin. It did, according to this source, actually travel to the Hopis in 1972 after the Gathering, and was investigated by their elders. Evidently, the group of Rainbows that brought the stone to the Hopi elders underwent intense purification rituals in the months of the Gathering, before venturing to the Hopi reservation. The rather off-handed way in which these Hopi elders dismissed their claims came as a disappointment, and somewhat shook his faith in the prophecy's veracity. Despite this, the stone evidently traveled with Rainbow, and the stories regarding its origins continued much as before. According to Sun Bear, it was retired after complaints from Hopi tribal members at the 1979 gathering, who felt it was inappropriate for Rainbow to be making claims which involved their people.

Other Gatherers, however, do not accept the idea that the tablet was rejected by the Hopi elders and taken back to Oregon. For those who believe it to have been lost, or inadvertently stolen, the attempt to locate the Hopi tablet is nothing short of a mission. Since it is understood to play a role in the commencement of the new millennium, the search for it seems to have intensified in the late 1990s. Its absence is sometimes blamed for the less than ideal conditions that occasionally mark the Rainbow experience. According to those inclined to believe in the power of the tablet, Rainbow will not be truly whole until it is returned to its proper place at Gatherings and, ultimately, to the Hopi nation. In this incomplete state, it is felt, Rainbow is sapped of the spiritual strength that enabled it to endure the hardships which marked its germination. The entire group, then, is jeopardized by this inability to locate the Hopi tablet.
January 1999, Kofa National Wildlife Refuge

The gem show in Quartzsite, an isolated town in southern Arizona, has drawn many Rainbows to this area. The southern California Regional, a nationally important Rainbow event, will be starting soon, and dozens of early Gatherers are scattered throughout the high desert surrounding Quartzsite. We meet up with them on occasion, usually in town, and discuss the logistics of moving to a main site, which has yet to be determined. Most of the hosting Family, many of whom are from San Diego, are expected to show up this weekend, and more final decisions will be made when they arrive. In the meantime, Holding Camp denizens are busying themselves with the gem show in town.

Many of the Gatherers here at this point are from other regions and specifically came for the Quartzsite show. It is considered by people involved in gemstone collection ('Rockhounds', as they call themselves) to be one of the best venues in the country to buy and sell gemstones in bulk. Unlike some of the shows in more metropolitan regions, such as the one in Phoenix that is scheduled to happen in a month, the Quartzsite show is frequented almost entirely by people involved with the business. Hence, it is a place where wholesale deals take place in preparation for the retail oriented shows where dealers make their money selling to collectors.

Like several of the Rainbows who came early to this Gathering, one of the people in our camp of eleven is a serious Rockhound. His name is Trapper, and he is
rather famous in the Portland Oregon area as an eccentric character who makes his living mining opals in the hills east of that city, and selling them in the downtown business district. A man in his fifties, he's been making a living selling the gemstones since the early 1970s, and has been a part of the Portland and Eugene Rainbow scene for nearly twenty-five years. A woman who traveled with us from San Diego recognized him at the gem show four days ago, and he's been camping with us since then. He had been hitchhiking to town from his lonely camp in the desert with fifty pounds of gemstones until then, and was quite happy to finally encounter Rainbow people with vehicles. On the bumpy ride over the old desert roads back to our camp this afternoon, Trapper and I talked at length about my interest in recording Hipstorical stories. In the course of our conversation, he mentions that he always keeps an eye out for the Hopi tablet when he comes to the Quartzsite show. It just might, he argues, end up for sale at a show like this.

Adam: Yeah, I've heard of that thing. You know about it?

Trapper: You young people don't remember it because it got lost. Uh, well, it's a circle, with marked quarters, red granite. And they say it's the missing Hopi calendar stone that tells the end of the world. I've seen it, it has writing on it, ancient Hopi writing. Well, we used to bury it under the northern Peace Pole in Main Circle, and dig it up to take to the next Gathering. But then, I guess it was nine or ten years after Granby [the first Gathering in 1972] that the truck it was in broke down and the stone got lost in the back of a car that stopped to help. That was almost twenty years ago. But it wasn't the first time it got lost, it's been lost a
century before, and we’ll find it again.

Adam: Where did it come from in the first place? If it’s a Hopi stone, where did Rainbows get it?

Trapper: Well, I’ve only heard a few hundred [ironic tone] stories there. But what I think is that it was stolen by white people a hundred years ago, but then some Hopi elders bought it back from some museum and then gave it to some Rainbow High Holies for one generation, to absorb the vibes of it into Rainbow. But we’re supposed to give it back for the millennium, when the new world is revealed, and so we need to find it. Our energy won’t be right until we do, and Gatherings won’t be as strong, because the Hopi energy is missing.

The Harmonic Convergence movement, which came into popularity in the mid 1980s, lends another influential theory to this loose canon of Rainbow Hipstorical myths. The main idea behind the Harmonic Convergence is that the destruction of world will take place unless (again) 144,000 participants come together to bring the world into a new consciousness as the planets are aligned in their orbits. If this is done, the New Age will be an enlightened paradise. If it is not done, it will be one of tribulation and suffering. The prediction is attributed variously to the ancient Mayans or sometimes ancient Hopis, though again the claim was denied by present-day Hopi elders. On August 17 1987, three planets lined up with the moon, which was taken as an celestial sign by people involved

---

with this movement to act on that day. Simultaneous prayer circles were held around the globe to mark the beginning of the close of an era, which would culminate in cataclysm sometime around the millennium. This constituted the “the largest participatory New Age worldwide event” to date. Since the 1980s, the Harmonic Convergence idea has become widely repeated at Rainbow.

The date when the fateful planetary alignment, marking the end of this era, will take place is rather fluid. The idea that technology would fail because of the Y2K computer problem became popular at Gatherings in the years leading up to the millennium within Rainbow, just as it did in mainstream American culture. After the year began without any significant problems, some people began talking about May 5th of 2000 as being a possible date for world cataclysm. This seems to have been largely based on the rather untenable claims of a single New Age writer who postulated that planets would line up on 5-5-2000, causing the earth to wobble and bringing about a new ice age. When that day came and went, a theory put forth by one of the main literary proponents of the harmonic convergence concept, which involved the idea that an important Mayan chronological unit would end in the year 2012, gained renewed popularity. One prominent writer states, and Gatherers repeat, the idea that this event will trigger an Armageddon that will result in ancient Mayan wisdom being revealed to humanity.

There is another cycle of Hipstorical myths that underpins both the Hopi prophecy and the harmonic convergence idea. Rainbow Family participants, it is

claimed in these stories, are selected for the task of bringing in a new era because they are, actually, the reborn souls of an ancient and wise people. Who this people is taken to be, exactly, varies. The Hopi and Mayan are mentioned of course. More vaguely but along similar lines, Gatherers are sometimes stated to be the fallen warriors who resisted the genocide wrought by the encroachment of European settlers. Jesus Campers and Krishnas, on the other hand, tend to avoid explanations based on reference to North American natives, and instead often describe themselves as reincarnations of the original Christians and ancient Indian mendicants respectively.

July 1999, Allegheny National Forest

Various Krishna camps travel the Rainbow circuit. These are in essence similar to other kitchens, as they are a social unit which camps together and primarily spend their time cooking for other Gatherers. They stand apart from other kitchens on several points, however. Krishna encampments tend to be larger than other kitchens, often involving scores or hundreds of people. Krishnas do not use individual tents but instead sleep in very large custom-built structures that feel quite a bit like circus tents. During the day these tents serve as spaces to cook delicious curries and sweet desserts in huge quantities.

The large tents are also used to educate visitors from throughout the Gathering about the Krishna faith. People of varying spiritual orientations will often drop by a nearby Krishna camp to see a traditional Krishna chant, receive lessons on the Bhagavadgita, or participate in Krishna’s lively dances.
Turkey Vulture, who handles much of the banking for the entire National Gathering, is considered the main facilitator of the biggest of three Krishna encampments here. I was introduced to him several weeks ago at L-Camp. When he heard about my project he made me promise to come see what Krishna was all about and talk. Otherwise, he declared, I'd be misled by the unflattering rumors that surround the Krishna movement at Gatherings.

Now, three weeks after the Gathering's Fourth of July Peak, the Gathering is decreasing in size. A series of small Regional Gatherings in Vermont and Quebec are planned for the rest of the summer, and many Kitchens are already leaving for those. The three Krishna camps have all remained here, and are taking on an increasingly important role in feeding the Gathering.

Since Krishna camps primarily give out food at their own Kitchens, rather than at Dinner Circle, more and more people are spending time at their encampments. The proselytizing spiritual performances that Krishna camps employ to attract new participants are becoming favorite forms of entertainment. Several hundred Rainbows are eating dinner at Krishna camps each night. Many are sticking around for hours afterwards, curious about these demonstrations of the Krishna faith.

I have learned since meeting him that Turkey Vulture is well known in Krishna circles both within and outside of Gatherings. I have wanted to ask him some questions about the Krishna faith and how it corresponds to Rainbow spiritual
sensibilities. After a wonderful dinner of vegetarian curry and the sweet goo
balls that Krishnas typically serve as a sugary treat, he is leading a workshop on
basic Krishna beliefs, which he playfully dubs Krishna 101. There are three other
large tents at this camp. Dinner was cooked in one, there is a demonstration of
chants in another, and devotee’s children are sleeping in the third.

The chants are popular. Other Gatherers like to meditate while listening to them,
which Turkey Vulture encourages. He considers the chants themselves to be an
important part of the Krishna effort to reach out to new adherents. He describes
this to the group of about twenty-five people attending his Krishna 101
workshop in his characteristically lighthearted manner.

Turkey Vulture: Hare Krishna! Hare Rama! That’s why we’re here tonight, to
learn about Krishna, who he is, what he stands for. You’re here tonight for the
same reason I am. To eat! Good, good. I believe in the best food. And I believe in
Hare Krishna. You don’t, maybe, but you’re here to hear, to listen, and that’s
good. I thank you. Lots of you have been here for the chanting. That’s the first
step. Just lose yourself in the chants and let Krishna’s voice, the eternal supreme,
make you forget your physical self. That’s the first step. You felt the power, now
you’re here to find out more about us people with the funny haircuts are up to.

He goes on for about five minutes describing that Krishnas seek to move beyond
their physical selves to achieve union with the supreme power of the universe,
that they believe joy is the only appropriate prayer, and that this joy will bring
together the people of the world in peace. He then addresses some of the typical
concerns Rainbows have about Krishnas.

Turkey Vulture: Some of you, I know, I can tell by your worried faces, you think we’re out to get you. No. We don’t have machine guns, we aren’t dealing drugs, we don’t put salt peter in the goo balls [a practice, it is rumored, Krishnas do to prevent erections]. Don’t worry men, you’ll be fine. I want to tell you what I believe, but we’re not here to force anyone to believe that.

He pauses, sitting in the lotus position for a moment, meditating. Then he looks at the assembled audience and asks us what Krishnas believe. No one says anything, so Turkey Vulture raises his hand and mockingly calls on himself to answer. He speaks up in a jokingly slow voice.

Turkey Vulture: Whoa bro. You, like, pray to that blue dude and chant. Right? Isn’t that right?

The audience laughs at his performance. He goes on.

Turkey Vulture: But no. We see god everywhere, when we greet each other, the hands folded in prayer, it’s greeting the god in the other person. Our stories, we tell stories about a blue boy, Sri Krishna, one of god’s masks. It’s just a mask. We all have lived through many lifetimes. People here at Rainbow know that. We’ve all heard it, how we’re Indian warriors, Jesus’s apostles, Irish druids, sadhus wandering the earth, it’s not my place to say that isn’t true. It is true. Krishna actually just means anything that attracts us to god. All those lifetimes before this
one, they’re just as real as this one. Just as unreal. They are just the masks. We believe in what’s behind all the masks. The one behind the masks. That’s you. That’s what we believe in.

Rainbow Gatherers’ transparent willingness to alter seemingly important aspects of its mythology speaks to the group’s ludic tone. With certain dramatic exceptions, such as the man Trapper cited above, very few Rainbow participants believe that these central myths are actually true. Krishnas and Jesus Campers may well consider literal faith in these Rainbow myths to be blasphemous, but repeat them anyhow. Other Gatherers, what might be considered the mainstream of the group, are openly and unabashedly dismissive of the idea that these myths are to be taken as factually accurate. As we shall see, these stories are quite important to the movement, but this importance comes from factors other than unquestioning belief in them.

Perhaps the most obvious effect of such Hipstorical mythology is that it serves to bind this rather disparate bunch of people together. Though different factions within Gatherings subscribe to quite a variety of spiritual beliefs, the fact that these stories are widely known and repeated by all segments of the Rainbow Family provides something of a common ideology to Rainbow. In a loose sense, to be Rainbow is to be aware of, and perhaps to participate in retelling, these Hipstorical myths. This canon of stories adds to the strong spirit of spontaneous community that characterizes healthy Gatherings. Even the improbability of these Hipstorical myths works towards fostering a perception of separation from the outside world and, by implication, an alternative identity.

Repeating stories that seem strange and even delusional to outsiders
creates an atmosphere of joyful camaraderie, much as sharing an inside joke might be expected to do. This is apparent in the comic glee evoked by the shock newly arrived outsiders express upon first encountering such legends. Learning these Hipstorical stories, and to play along with the claims made within them in a good natured manner, is thus something of an initiation for newcomers. Those outsiders who continue to react negatively to such tales, who respond to them with undue fear or overly hostile skepticism, are unlikely to feel socially comfortable at Rainbow. Such myths are therefore display something of a practical function, helping to define the Rainbow group.

- 

September 1998, Nicolet National Forest

About twenty Rainbows, maybe a quarter of the Gathering at this point, are basking in the radiant early afternoon sun along the banks of a small but deep lake. Some are swimming in the cool water. Others sit in a circle singing songs. Two young boys are in the process of testing a raft they made from branches and hemp rope that, remarkably to my mind, supports one of them and almost both. The idyllic late summer scene is shattered when an old truck, spewing dust everywhere, comes rumbling all the way down to the rocky shore, literally two feet from the water.

No Rainbow would drive right through a Gathering like that unless there is a serious emergency, and so everyone turns to look. It is hard not to, such is the violence with which the truck bounds down the dirt walking path to the lake. There is a moment of tension as the truck stops and the two doors
simultaneously open. We expect it to be a serious problem, maybe law enforcement, or hostile outsiders. Two men get out of the truck and just stare for a minute, perhaps amazed to see find themselves surrounded by so many people, some naked, others dressed in strange attire.

None, surely, could be more striking than Babayaga. An eccentric man by any account, he commands quite a visual presence. A man standing six-foot-six, and in his fifties, his beard is as long and gray as that of any storybook wizard. His long gray hair is tied in a slightly off-center bun on the back of his head, held together with two rainbow colored chopsticks. He wears a single garment, what appears to be a pair of long johns, died fluorescent rainbow colors. And it has dozens of small trinkets, crystals, feathers, and so on, tied loosely to, and constantly falling off of it.

After a moment of silence, and one of the men muttering something about hearing about how the hippies were out here and pointing to the fishing gear in the bed of the truck, Babayaga leaps towards them and embraces them both in a bear hug. “Welcome Home, brothers”, he shouts. The men look horrified, and stiffen at this very imposing man’s embrace. The wary group erupts in laughter, the tension of the moment having dissipated.

Babayaga stands back dramatically, laughs, and following a favorite Rainbow joke says, “ah, you must be the plumbers, you look like plumbers to me”. One man, the passenger, explains their story, telling everyone that they just wanted to check out the Gathering if it would be okay, and that they live in a trailer park
outside of Alvin [a nearby small town]. Babayaga explodes with laughter, and invites “our friend Alvin the plumber” to sit and enjoy some pita bread and freshly made humus he and a few others had been munching. The men sit down immediately, seeming to feel very awkward with the situation. The rainbow-bedecked man asks the crowd if there might be any “broken pipes” around, and several people come forward with ornately colored glass marijuana pipes. Babayaga collects them and, squatting over the two newcomers, asks them if they were plumbers or not.

The men laugh nervously, and one reaches into his jeans and pulls out a bag of marijuana, which Babayaga takes from him with a mock air of ceremony, and fills up all of the pipes. Seeing that his bag is depleted, the man’s face falls, but he says nothing. He had probably expected, as so many outsiders do, to find copious quantities of drugs available within the Gathering, and is sorely disappointed to find himself the sole supplier of marijuana to a large crowd, which has by now formed a loose ring around him. The pipes circulate around the crowd, each person taking a puff and passing the pipe to his or her left, and the man’s entire stash is smoked by the jubilant Gatherers.

After the pipes are extinguished, the newcomers sit and engage those around them in polite, almost timid, conversation. They talk about the heat wave, ask what Gatherers do for drinking water, and make other such innocuous inquiries, all the while staring at the naked people in the group as though stunned by this casual public nudity. After about five minutes of this, the conversation turns to why the Rainbows do this, why they hold Gatherings. An older and respected
woman in the crowd, Gaya, speaks up, stating that they do it to heal the land with their love. The men do not seem to understand what she means, and squirm nervously, perhaps thinking that her comments are proof that these Rainbows are nothing but a bunch of environmentalist zealots, as is commonly reported in nearby towns.

Sensing that the men are uncomfortable, and maybe the source of their discomfort, Babayaga breaks in. Evidently thinking it will calm their nerves to understand Rainbow in its fuller context, he begins a very dramatic rendition of the Hopi prophecy, emphasizing that the ancient Hopis are watching over Rainbow approvingly and addressing them as though there actually are spirits hovering over the spot. The men hastily glance from face to face as he tells this wild story, and seem frightened by the lack of disapproval from the crowd, which sits respectfully and listens to Babayaga entertain them with his gift for storytelling.

That the local men seem confused by the narration spurs Babayaga to describe in extra detail the way that this world will end, by nuclear war and famine he says, which of course bothers the men all the more. They sit and listen for about ten minutes, and then hastily excuse themselves by saying they want to get some fishing in this afternoon, exchanging glances with each other as they walk the short distance to their truck. And then they speed off, which evokes laughter and calls of “come back for Dinner Circle” from the crowd, which means it in earnest, underneath the clowning.
VI. RAINBOW ANARCHY

One of the most obvious manifestations of the Rainbow resistance to mainstream values involves ideas about leadership and freedom. Personal sovereignty is considered a nearly absolute good within the Rainbow subculture. Except in the most extreme situations, it is inappropriate for one person to determine the behavior of another through any sort of direct coercion. This is emphatically true with regard to spiritual belief. Resistance to the establishment of hierarchy and imposed authority probably does more to shape the character of Rainbow spiritual discourse than any other single factor.

At the same time as personal sovereignty is celebrated in the deepest areas of Rainbow life, the extensive infrastructure and upkeep involved in the production of Rainbow events is premised on cooperative labor and material collectivism. Sharing resources and labor on an ongoing basis is what makes Gatherings possible. Without substantial efforts from the majority of Gatherers, the large groups Rainbow attracts would not be able to survive for extended periods in the wilderness.

Since there is no coercive control or formal authority, all tasks are accomplished on a voluntary basis. Individuals donate their labor for the greater good of the Gathering. While there is a certain sense that to not contribute one’s fair share of work to the Gathering is inappropriate, there are no material sanctions to be suffered by the chronic loafer. Similarly, a person who works hard does not receive more of the Gathering’s resources than anyone else. Securing the labor necessary to sustain a Gathering is accomplished through a
form of collective volunteerism that is rare in the outside world.

Gathering life is marked by many playful reminders of the group's collectivist character. Such reminders take a number of forms. On one level, there are the explicit declarations that Rainbow is a family, and that fellow Gatherers are typically referred to as brother or sister. There is also the practice of shouting “we love you” in rounds from camp to camp, a sort of phatic communication between widely dispersed Kitchens. This generally takes place at dawn, as a way of waking up neighboring encampments, or at night as a form of celebration. It is yelled from main circle as a means of calling Gatherers from around the site to dinner as well. There are frequent physical reminders of Rainbow’s solidarity. Even people who don’t know each other hug as a customary greeting. Similarly, the practice of chanting the Om together before meals involves holding hands, often with strangers.

Given that social scientists often see “collectivism as the antithesis of individualism”\(^1\), it is interesting that this combination of values should overlap as they do in the Rainbow context. It is particularly worth noting because the contrast, between collectivism and personal autonomy, is not a given but instead a product of certain cultural prejudices. Overing suggests that “the very contrast of ‘priority upon collectivity’ versus ‘priority upon the individual’ belongs to the domain of Western discourse”\(^2\). She details how such a contrast is meaningless in other cultural contexts, namely in lowland South America.

Specifically, Overing describes how for the Piaroa, like many peoples

---

\(^1\) Banks, J.A. The Strange Death of Capitalist Individualism. Brookfield VT: Dartmouth Publishing: 2
throughout lowland South America, "sociality is premised on an assumption of personal autonomy, and thus 'unity' and 'freedom' are not opposed as valuations in their own political philosophies". Noone has the ability to directly command others to work in the Piaroa case. To try to coerce others in such a manner would be considered anti-social. It would me more than anti-social, it would be contrary to the very premise of social interaction: individual sovereignty.

What thrives in the Piaroa setting, Overing describes, is "a collectivity of the intimate and the informal". The labor and resource sharing necessary to sustaining life proceeds as an expression of intimate bonds between individual people, not any direct authority of leaders or laws. This sharing of resources and labor happens outside of formal rules about cooperation. Personal relationships and individual judgements inform this sharing process. As difficult as it may be for outsiders to understand, this is the best way to describe what happens at Rainbow events as well. There are no leaders to command, there are no explicit rules about how to share. There is only the informal collective, ultimately informed by the free will of the individuals who make up the group.

The Rainbow Family may therefore be presented as an example of a thriving anarchist community. Gatherers will only rarely make reference to the political theories of anarchist theorists. However, social interaction within the Rainbow Family reflects clearly anarchist values in a number of fundamental ways. Indeed, the movement presents a rare glimpse into a form of social interaction that is so foreign to modern Western societies. This is a testament to the resilience of pre-colonial social structures and the importance of preserving them for future generations.

---

1 Overing, Joanna "The Anarchy and Collectivism of the 'Primitive Other': Marx and Sahlins in the Amazon" Hann, C. Socialism. 1990. London: Routledge. 43
2 Overing, Joanna "The Anarchy and Collectivism of the 'Primitive Other': Marx and Sahlins in the Amazon" Hann, C. Socialism. 1990. London: Routledge. 45
organization which denies any authority but that which resides equally among its population. This is a key feature of an anarchist society as described by anarchist theorists. Bakunin, for instance, declares that “outside the parasitic, artificial institution of the state, a nation consists only of its people”.

Rainbow events create what Gatherers and their observers sometimes call temporary autonomous zones, a concept articulated by the anarchist theorist Hakim Bey. Government law enforcement is clearly not in control of Gatherings. Despite the resources government agencies spend on monitoring the group, an enormous amount by Rainbow standards, there is not all that much that they can do to police the interior of Gatherings. When law enforcement officers do come into Gatherings, which happens with some regularity, Rainbows raise a vocal alarm. This makes it difficult for policing agencies to catch unwary Gatherers in the act of committing what would be considered crimes in the world outside Rainbow. Even when they do, it is often impossible for arrests to be made. Unless law enforcement personnel have the support of nearby Rainbows, it is likely that they will prevent a fellow Gatherer from being removed from the forest. Because of this, law enforcement activities are largely limited to controlling the perimeter of Gathering sites.

Rainbows are well aware of this, and consider the fact that they are able to establish areas largely free from external laws to be an important success. This attitude largely stems from a perception that coercive authority is prone to corruption and abuse. Many Rainbow people experience unfair treatment and

---

8 see Forest Service Report on the 1990 Annual Gathering: 8
even serious harassment from police while traveling between Gatherings. This may be explained in large part by the unorthodox lifestyles and appearances embraced by some Gatherers. Local law enforcement officers may also be made suspicious by the vagabonding associated with Rainbow. In a society where not having a permanent home is taken as a sign of irresponsibility and even criminality, it is perhaps not surprising that police should be uneasy about people living on the road for extended periods of time. Whatever the reasons behind it, however, such treatment endows Rainbows with a basic mistrust of such authorities.

Rejecting external authority is considered part of creating a peaceful Gathering space. Emma Goldman contended that "all forms of government rest on violence". Gatherers often voice similar ideas. The presence of armed law enforcement officers attempting to patrol sprawling Gatherings certainly feeds this perception. While some Gatherers do own weapons, they are almost always kept put away while at Rainbow events. Only Leos would walk into a Gathering with guns on their hips. Many Rainbows consider this an offensive violation of the sacred Gathering space. People encroaching on an egalitarian community with weapons and badges, attempting to control the behavior of others, contradict the tolerance and peacefulness Rainbow is meant to embody. The image equates elitism with violence, versus the peaceful egalitarianism of Rainbow.

As mentioned, Rainbow's internal policing mechanism, Shanti Sena, ideally involves everyone present when a problem arises. This reflects a general sense that the creation of elite groups with special rights and responsibilities

---

impedes the development of a healthy social order. That there are occasional failures to achieve this ideal in practice is a source of concern for many Rainbow Gatherers, even those few who regularly participate in Shanti Sena activities. Because of the propensity for only a handful of Gatherers to be actively involved in Shanti Sena, concerted efforts have been made to reach out to more people. Such efforts largely center around facilitating training exercises, which have become more common at recent annual Gatherings. Training sessions include the teaching of nonviolent techniques that can be used to subdue an unruly or violent Gatherers, as well as extensive discussions of the role Shanti Sena should play in Rainbow life.

- 

September 2000, Nicolet National Forest

Yosemite is clearly the only one here who really has any idea about Shanti Sena. The eleven of us are attentive to what he says, but maybe don't really understand the significance of it. Up here in Wisconsin, Gatherings are remarkably peaceful. Even A-Camp is tame compared to other parts of the country. Everyone pretty much knows each other at these modestly sized Regionals, and that does a lot to prevent the sort of problems that occur elsewhere.

Most of us have been to Rainbow events in other places and of different sizes, and are aware that violent outbreaks do happen. Even so, none of us have ever been directly involved with them. A long time Rainbow from northern Georgia originally, and a recovered alcoholic as well, Yosemite spent years in some of the toughest A-Camps in the country. A man in his early forties, he first became
involved with Rainbow in the early 1980s, and has been living at Gatherings ever since.

People at this year’s Annual Gathering have been talking quite a bit about having it here in Wisconsin in the near future. Yosemite stopped by our Regional to take a look at the area, which he hadn’t been to since the Annual in Minnesota a decade ago. He seems impressed by the area, and says that he definitely thinks there are potential sites in this particular forest. The local family, he mentions, needed to get ready for the possibility that it’ll host the Annual soon.

Last night at a Council about preparations for the Annual, he announced that he wanted to facilitate a Shanti Sena teach-in at Rainbow noon. Now it’s about 1:30 PM, and we’ve been sitting in a circle at the small Calm encampment for about an hour, taking turns talking about the sorts of problems that might come up at an Annual. Someone mentions an incident that is rumored to have taken place a month ago, during the Annual’s Clean Up phase.

Sitting comfortably under a lush maple canopy, we talk about this unsettling event, which reportedly involved Shanti Sena catching a woman with a large amount (five pounds, it is suggested) of methamphetamine powder. They had turned her over to one of the state troopers standing guard just outside the parameter of the Gathering. Some people thought it was the right thing to have done, others were critical of involving the police.

Yosemite speaks up, stating that the case is not quite what it first seems.
According to his rendition of the story, which seems to be based on first hand experience with the people involved, the woman was framed by two A-Campers who fancied themselves Shanti Sena. According to Yosemite, a local man had come to the Gathering during Seed Camp trying to sell a large quantity of the drug, which is used by many people in rural Montana. The A-Campers he encountered robbed him, and had turned him out of the Gathering. Weeks later, they planted the methamphetamine in the tent of a woman they were angry at for speaking out about their obscene and unwanted sexual advances. They were, evidently, getting revenge for her having embarrassed them.

Such corruption, Yosemite declares, is the danger of letting just a few people take over the Shanti Sena role. "It shouldn't be a full time job. Anyone that wants it as a full time job doing that, you should be a little nervous. When no one does anything because they don't know what to do, you get some crazy Hitlers taking over the whole show. I've seen it a thousand times."

The rest of us take his point, and begin to understand why it's important that everyone be trained in nonviolent peacekeeping tactics. For the next few hours we practice restraining a mock aggressor through bear hugs, how to link our arms together to form a human shield, how to talk a person out of a violent rage, and so forth.

This episode illustrates one of the primary criticisms of the power structures found in mainstream society. Anarchist Kropotkin wrote "we absolutely reject the introduction into revolutionary organization of a hierarchy
of ranks"\textsuperscript{10}. This sentiment is clearly important to Rainbow life. By placing authority in the hands of only a few individuals, it is felt, a society invites its abuse. Sharing power and responsibility in an egalitarian manner is thus considered to be a practical defense against the corruption it can engender when concentrated. Within the Rainbow Family, there is a strong belief that the more people participate in the decision making and peacekeeping processes, the stronger the Gathering will be. When it happens that participation in Shanti Sena or Councils is overly limited, Gatherers will actively seek to involve more people in order to bolster their legitimacy.

This emphasis on preventing elite elements from taking power away from the masses of people it impacts may be due in part to Gatherers' personal experiences with such conditions. The subcultural milieu in which many Gatherers live, especially those who are full time travelers, is full of proselytizing cult groups seeking new members. It is felt by most Rainbow Gatherers that such recruitment tends to be exploitative, and that charismatic or leader-based cults are dangerous. Therefore, there is a perennial fear that Rainbow itself, which they consider a space that is fairly safe from such exploitation, could be made vulnerable to cultic influences. This fear is heightened by groups, which many Gatherers perceive as charismatic and authoritarian, actually coming to Gatherings. As stated above, evangelical Krishna and Christian groups are often present at Gatherings. They are tolerated rather well on the whole, but do draw some criticism for their apparently less than egalitarian internal structures.

More dramatically, notorious cult leaders and their followers have visited

Gatherings in the past. In the early 1990s, for instance, a cult leader from rural Washington called Love\textsuperscript{11} attended Rainbow events with his entourage, who evidently considered him to be divine. Some Gatherers were attracted to his group, and moved into his compound in Washington. He eventually was caught embezzling from the organic farms his group worked. The entire operation, which Love lorded over, was a scam taking advantage of the people who supplied its labor. Instead of spending the proceeds of this business on internal improvements as he claimed, Love is reported to have wasted most of it on lavish living and a serious cocaine habit. This experience frightened many Rainbows, who see it as a cautionary example of what can happen when the value of individual sovereignty is abandoned to charismatic leadership. No doubt due to events such as this in Rainbow's history, there is a very real and explicit fear of exploitation by those considered leaders.

-  

July 2000, Bitterroot National Forest

We just had a huge breakfast of chocolate chip pancakes and organic eggs at Kickapoo Kitchen, which had brought its ingredients from the collective of organic farms some of its crew works in southwestern Wisconsin. Today is sort of a special day, July 3rd, and Hipstory is being told at Main Circle. Everyone is in a holiday mood, this being nearly the Peak of a fairly large Annual Gathering. I intend to go down to Main Circle right after breakfast and spend the day listening to Hipstorical accounts. This Gathering has drawn many High Holies, and it promises to be interesting to hear Hipstories from people directly involved

in the group's initial germination.

I mention my plans to Firebird, a dreadlocked, older Road Dog from Sacramento. I generally don't get along with him. We exchanged some harsh words about a week ago. He had heard me talking to another Gatherer about my research while sitting around the Kitchen’s Bliss Fire one night, and from then on considered me to be some sort of undercover police agent for reasons I never understood. Despite reassurances from people who knew me, he remained suspicious. I had considered him a bit paranoid and standoffish, but we are beginning to get along better in recent days. He now allows me to record him if I ask first, though sometimes refuses if he thinks the topic is too sensitive.

I ask him if he might want to walk down to Main Circle together to hear the Hipstories. He says he'll go down, but not now, since Ram Dass, one of the more famous early Gatherers and New Age celebrity, is talking this morning. When I invite him to elaborate on why that bothers him, he begins to talk about Love’s cult and the danger of “making people into gods”. I ask him if he could say it on tape, he eventually agrees, and we sit down next to the dishwashing station for a few minutes to continue to conversation.

Adam: So you were just telling me about Love cult and how...

Firebird: I was telling you about Ram Dass. I just don’t trust it when it gets like that where everyone is hanging...
Adam: You mean when a famous person comes here?

Firebird: Well, we got Woody Harrelson, you know, Ani what’s her name, Ani Difranco, right? Oh, not just that, not just famous ones, but, ah, people other people see as more than them. Like I was saying, like that they should hang on to their every word and do whatever they say even when it’s, it’s bullshit.

Adam: You were telling me about remembering the Love cult being here, tell me about that if you can.

Firebird: Yeah, that’s probably why you’re here [half-jokingly referring to me as a law enforcement officer]. No. I remember they, he has this huge white tent for him. People bringing him food, working themselves like slaves. And he had a nice, huge tent and brought all sorts of people in for these big parties there. It was cool. But then you saw how people, they were like his little slaves. That’s not Rainbow!

Adam: You said you knew people who had joined up with him?

Firebird: Yeah, well, he was just some coldhearted dude stealing, it turned out. But you had some people that went up there to his farm and he ripped them off. I think he got arrested or something. But it was him, the other people were just stupid and thought he was Jesus or something. I don’t know too much, but I know he screwed them over. Some big acid thing, he was making millions and they all got busted.
Adam: So you think Ram Dass is like that? I don’t really know that much about him.

Firebird: No, it’s not him at all. I mean he’s supposed to be a good guy. Well maybe sort of weird. But who knows? He could be a good guy. I just don’t want to treat some dude like he’s god, that’s all. He could, it can make a person misuse, take advantage of their control over people. No one should control other people. That’s why we’re here.

Resistance to the establishment of a Rainbow leadership is also a reaction to some of the difficulties the group faces from the outside world. People consider the emphasis on personal autonomy to be, at least in part, a practical response to the harassment they often receive from government representatives and locals. Law enforcement agents often want to find the one person who is responsible for Rainbow’s events. As has been described, this is partially due to the Forest Service regulation that a permit needs to be signed for group use. Also, suspicious outsiders sometimes consider Rainbow to be a cult, and have the idea that there must be a charismatic leader behind it’s organization. Being explicit about the priority of individual choice is, according to many informants, a way of dealing with outsiders insisting on talking to Rainbow’s leadership and hence of diffusing legal responsibility for its events.
June 2000, Bitterroot National Forest

We decided to cut through the woods instead of sticking to Main Trail. Loaded down with the day’s food supplies and not yet used to the thin air at these altitudes, the three of us are tired out by the hike back to Kickapoo Kitchen and are trying a new shortcut. Tea Time, renowned within the Rainbow Family for providing herbal teas at just about any hour, is already busy when the narrow trail along the heavily timbered ridge leads us to it. We are still learning the trails, and it comes as a pleasant surprise to find that Tea Time is on our route to Front Gate.

We are thirsty and order up spearmint teas from the pink haired young woman working the counter this morning. She looks tired and I mention it to her. She laughs, says it has been wild around here all night, and that other people will take over as they wake up. We thank her for the tea. She tells us is made from dried mint grown on a nearby organic farm. It smells wonderful.

It is late June, but we are up so high here in western Montana’s Bitterroot range that it is still pretty cold in the morning. We left the Kitchen earlier on, during the spectacular dawn, and hiked the three miles or so along main trail to the incoming road. The Main Supply people had been calling the Kitchen staff over the radio for an hour before someone in our encampment woke up just before dawn and heard them. Main Supply runs on strange hours, evidence perhaps that much of Rainbow’s food comes from nocturnal dumpster diving runs. Now, about nine in the morning, we are tired and cold. Tea Time’s Bliss Fire feels good
as we sit down for a rest.

On the way back in from picking up the supplies we had seen paper plates nailed to trees which had messages such as "warning: leaderless individuals ahead" written on them. They were all over the place, along Main Trail and also along the deer trail through the woods we had taken. I was curious about them, and asked my companions what they were for. They had agreed to let me interview them about it when we got back to our camp, but it would give us a good excuse to linger around the fire here to do it now.

Sally, a woman in her twenties who came in from her home in Minneapolis the day before, leans back on the big bag of potatoes she's been carrying. Gopher, an older road dog originally from Utah, squats down next to her. Over our mint tea we discuss the paper plates we'd seen.

Adam: Well, I just wanted to have you tell me about those plates. What do they mean, why are they there, that kind of thing.

Gopher: Me? Uh, I'd say they're mostly at Welcome Home usually. It ain't always out on little trails like that. But it's just to let people know there's no one in charge of this mess.

Sally: Leos are always coming through asking for that.

Gopher: Yeah, it's for them. And just curious people too. They come here and
think it's like some new age cult group with a guru...

Sally: Which it isn’t...

Gopher: Which it ain’t, but people think so I guess. But I guess it’s mostly for Leos when they try to ticket someone I’d say.

Given the absence of what mainstream society would recognize as social organization, outsiders assume that Gatherings must be scenes of chaos and disorder. This is actually not the case, and many thrill seeking visitors are dissapointed by how tame Rainbow life actually is. As mentioned, crime does occur at Rainbow events. However, crime is actually far less common within Gatherings than in comparably sized cities, and typically more victimless in nature. Shanti Sena can be a fairly effective way to deal with specific situations. It is not, and is not meant to be, the primary means of keeping Gatherings from decending into chaos. As unusual as it may seem to outsiders, reputation is actually the mechanism which maintains the peace at Rainbow events.

It is difficult to imagine that residents of a comparably sized city in mainstream American society could operate on such a basis, but reputation is the key to social interaction within Gatherings. Because Rainbow’s social bonds are so strong and overlapping, personal reputations spread widely throughout Gathering sites. A negative reputation, in particular, is likely to be passed along. Gatherers will usually make a point to warn each other of a dangerous or untrustworthy individual if they see the person in question moving to a new Kitchen. It is therefore fairly difficult to escape a sullied reputation. This serves as
a sort of casual security mechanism, and to a degree Gatherers can be confident that their fellows will tip them off to someone who is not to be trusted.

A person with a negative reputation is, therefore, likely to have difficulty getting along socially in the Gathering setting. People will be wary of such an individual and will avoid his or her company when possible. In extreme cases, Kitchens may discourage such a person from taking refuge in their encampment by refusing to feed him or her. Being cut off from a Gathering’s social network is, in some cases, tantamount to being cut off from its material base. Since surviving unassisted in a wilderness is a serious challenge to the individual’s physical safety, a disgraced person is not likely to stay around the Gathering site for very long. A powerful recourse for Gatherers confronted with a seriously problematic person, then, is commit him or her to social exile.

October 1998, Shawnee National Forest

Wolf, a long time A-Camper, came all the way back to our Kitchen tonight. We are sort of surprised to see him, since it is such a far walk and, as usual, he is quite drunk. This time he has left the bottle behind at least, which is good since he caused such a stir the other night by walking all the way into Kid Village with it. Even though he is a hard drinker, he is a decent guy and we’re happy to have him visit as long as he does not drink here.

He looks uncharacteristically serious coming up to the Kitchen, where we are
washing dishes from the night's meal. It turns out that someone has stolen money, about $150, from A-Camp, and they heard the suspect was seen here. Wolf wants to ask if we know where he is now.

Those of us in the Kitchen put down our work and sit at the Bliss Fire with Wolf, recognizing that he's come here to discuss a serious problem. Dawn, a woman in her late twenties from Columbia Missouri, is eager to hear the story of how it happened. She says she never trusted him. Her boyfriend, Twain, seems surprised to hear the news. Caya, the Kitchen’s matriarch who is in her fifties, shakes her head and says she feels bad that she misjudged the accused man, named Lefty, whom she’d liked. We ask Wolf to tell us more.

In fact, the person in question had turned up out of the blue two days ago, set up his tent, and never left the Kitchen area for about 48 hours. His tent was gone today, and nobody had seen him since this afternoon when someone noticed him walking north up the Main Trail away from Front Gate.

Wolf: Well, he got all drunk. And we’re passing the beer hat [A-Camp’s equivalent to the Magic Hat], and the little thief took it out of Ace’s tent and split. Everyone was partying, so it took us a while. But then Ruby [Ace’s wife] saw the hat gone.

Dawn: See? I always thought there was something about that guy. He was, did
you notice he was right handed? Lefty, huh, now we know why they call him that!

Gaya: Well, he did help us out here. He never left, man! But this morning his stuff was gone. This chick Anja said she saw him going that way [indicating north], like I said. But he seemed real good, like a good guy, didn’t he?

Twain: He just showed up like that though. I thought about that. But yeah, you’re right.

Dawn: [to wolf] If we see him we’ll take him to you in A-Camp, okay?

Wolf [laughing]: Naw, I sure wouldn’t do that. It took the whole Gathering to get that money, forget it. I just wanted to see if he has the money or what. But he’ll never go back to our camp.

Twain: No way will he come back, huh? He’s probably in Carbondale [the closest city] by now or something!

Wolf: I sure hope. We don’t want him around, and he sure as hell don’t want us around him, I’ll tell you that! But tell everyone that if they ever see him, tell everyone to cool it with him. He’s no good. Keep him away from your money,
tell people to remember that.

Gaya: Yeah, we don't need that around here anyhow. We don't need him around here if he's like that.

The reason that such a system can flourish within Gathering life, participants will say, has to do with Rainbow's emphasis on personal freedom of self-expression. Rainbows often explicitly deny that mainstream society actually approves of individual freedom and uniqueness, qualities which are sometimes associated with Western individualism. According to this Rainbow thinking, the sense of individual choice that seemingly informs life in it is illusory. This is sometimes stated to be a false ideology that masks the conformism fostered by an intensely commercialized culture. Rainbow is, in contrast, a place where genuine individuality can flourish. It is felt that the self-knowledge involved with a real focus on individual freedom is what makes a healthy communal social order possible.

February 1999, Ocala National Forest

A productive Kitchen depends on a steady supply of dry firewood. In addition to the nearly constant cooking that goes on at an active Kitchen, a well-stoked fire is necessary for rendering water drinkable through lengthy boiling. The section of the Ocala National Forest in which this year's Gathering is being held is
composed almost entirely of replanted monocrop pines. The native old growth was logged long ago, and the delicate intermingling of species found elsewhere in this area was destroyed. This makes wood foraging more difficult than might be expected, as smoke from these southern pines irritates the respiratory system, causing what Rainbows call pine flu. Pine flu manifests itself in sometimes severe sore throat and cough.

The odd hardwood, oaks mostly, provides relief for those who spend long hours in the Kitchens. Since it is tacitly understood at Gatherings that it is inappropriate to cut a live tree, it is often quite difficult to find enough dead hardwood to keep the Kitchen fire going. Once a dead oak is found, Kitchen Crews will spend a good deal of time getting to it and bringing back as many logs as possible.

Coral had just been out for a walk around the site, and found two dead oaks, maybe a mile from the Kitchen. She and I set out with a wheelbarrow and bow saw. We are happy to take a few hours to secure a supply of this superior fire wood, since we’ve spent too much time around the Kitchen and were both feeling the effects of the pine smoke. She said it had made her voice deeper than it normally was, and she’d noticed it the night before when she was singing after Main Circle last night.

She mentions that she only ever sings in public at Rainbow, that she feels
awkward doing so in what she calls her real life. A woman in her mid-thirties, she's been settled down in Gainesville for a few years, and now has a decent job selling real estate. She confides that she wishes she could live at Rainbow full time and would if her husband was willing. He doesn't like to be out in the woods for more than a few days at a time. So instead she comes every year for a month to the Florida Gathering as a compromise, while he stays home and tends to the household.

I ask her why she doesn't like to sing at home, and comment that she has a nice voice. She hesitantly explains that “it just embarrasses her” there, that it makes her stand out in a way that's uncomfortable for her.

Coral: It's like here, I'm just me. It's my real home. But there, there everyone expects me to be a certain way. Just to sort of fit in. I know it's silly, but it just makes me feel safer to not be the different one. I swear, I feel like I'd go nuts if I couldn't get away from all that sometimes.

Adam: So you think you can express yourself at Gatherings better?

Coral: Well, yeah. I mean, I do there too, around the house you know. But, well, at work! I'd never even think about singing Janis [Joplin] around my office! Not in public! You know what I mean? They'd think I'm crazy or not doing my job. People here just expect it, and that's sort of encouraging. That's why I like it here,
and wish I could stay.

We stop, she needs to figure out which fork in the deer trail the oak trees are down. The replanted pines are in almost perfectly even rows, and being lost in it almost feels like walking through a giant cornfield. Coral decides that the wood is down the thinner trail, where the dense palmettos underfoot show subtle signs of her previous passage. After a few minutes, she continues talking.

Coral: Out there you just have to channel it. You buy a new pair of shoes that you want, something funky or whatever. You go to Gator [the mascot of the University of Florida] games and yell and scream and do the wave. Yeah. I like all that stuff, it’s sort of corny, but it makes me happy. But it’s not like here. I’m just more free to actually do what feels natural.

Adam: I hear people say that, but what is it here that makes the difference?

Coral: It’s relaxing. Well, for one I feel so much more open. So I get to know so many cool people so well. People I’d never even talk to in the real world. It’s really like family. I trust the people with the next tent over better than I do our next door neighbors we’ve had for three years at home. You know? I never even talk to them. That’s Rainbow.
Emma Goldman stated that “the individual instinct is the thing of value in
the world”\textsuperscript{12}. This is clearly true within Rainbow. The anarchist condition
encountered at Rainbow events strongly emphasizes this aspect of social life. It
has been stated that the New Age in general is based on the principle of full
individual exegesis\textsuperscript{13}. Nearly everyone involved with Rainbow will agree that the
individual is the guiding authority in all matters of lifestyle, especially spiritual
belief. Unlike many of its more mainstream manifestations, Rainbow religiosity
is typically quite hostile to the idea of experts mediating between the divine and
the individual, largely because this tends to create a class division between a
clerical and lay community. At Gatherings, everyone is encouraged to act on
their personal sense of spiritual seeking and even though some may gain
reputations for their insightful theories or tenacious devotion, the emic view is
that all people are equally able to make equally meaningful connections to the
divine.

This is true even among those who adhere to otherwise rather socially
conservative religious traditions. Jesus Campers, though they may perceive
hierarchical relationships between religions, with their own literalist Christianity
being judged morally superior to other belief systems, see relationships within
their own faith quite differently. Like many American fundamentalists, they
completely reject the idea of a formal clergy, and consider one’s personal
relationship to Christ to be paramount. Unlike some of their more mainstream
brethren, however, Jesus Campers self-consciously avoid the sort of celebrity
leader status achieved by some preachers, such as televangelists. They are maybe

\textsuperscript{12} Goldman, Emma. 1969 [1910]. \textit{Anarchism and Other Essays}. New York: Dover Publishing: 58
\textsuperscript{13} Goldman, Emma. 1969 [1910]. \textit{Anarchism and Other Essays}. New York: Dover Publishing: 16
even quicker to rebuff a person expressing too much charisma or egotism than others at Rainbow events. This fact compels other Gatherers to accept them more than they might non-Rainbow conservative Baptists, who are generally mistrusted as too cultic.

February 1999, Ocala National Forest

Aaron certainly gravitated toward Jesus Camp, hardly a surprise. The nearby town of Ocala, from which he came, is known to all Rainbows who attend Gatherings in the socially conservative Florida panhandle as a center of Christian fundamentalism. Many try to avoid it, despite the generous charity the local churches offer to destitute travelers. Two churches serve hot meals, one on Wednesday and one on Friday, and another gives out free used clothing to anyone in need. The churches in town are notoriously ruthless in their proselytizing though. They also tend to be hostile to openly homosexual Faeries that might encounter them. Normally quite grateful for material handouts, Rainbows in this area are sufficiently frightened of the local churches that they stay away for the most part.

A friendly local man, one of only a handful to attend this rather large Regional, came in with the bed of his truck full of grapefruit for the Gathering the other day. He spotted Aaron walking down main trail, and commented to a nearby A-Camper that the man is considered a religious extremist even by other Ocala residents, and is widely thought to be mentally ill. That A-Camper told him that
he should warn Crow, a friend of his with strong ties to both of the big Jesus encampments inside the Gathering, which he eventually did. Crow, who I know from recent Gatherings, has been watching Aaron since the man was found preaching about the evils of abortion at Kiddie Village yesterday, which seriously offended many parents and scared some of the younger children.

I know Crow well enough to sort of understand why he doesn't warn people about this rather aggressive man. It certainly isn't that he agrees with Aaron's intolerant sense of faith, or even a conviction about his right to speak freely. It's much simpler than that, yet doesn't seem fully compelling to me. He just thinks it would be impolite to tell too many people of the man's faults. Though he doesn't choose to warn others, which some have suggested he should, he is quite concerned and is making a point to "keep an eye on Aaron as long as he is a guest of our Rainbow Family".

Others are not so welcoming, including many well-known Jesus Campers. Brother Michael, an incorrigible proselytizer himself, is very sick of him already. Apparently Aaron has been claiming to be descended from Jesus, and is insisting that following him is the only way to salvation. Claims of this former sort, actually, are not particularly rare, as mentally ill Gatherers or locals often seem to identify with that role. What's bothering brother Michael, Crow tells me, is that Aaron keeps claiming that he will be able to walk again if he accepts him as his spiritual leader. This, again according to Crow, strikes Michael as a repugnant blasphemy, and hurts him personally. As I learn, Michael is in a wheelchair because of a bus accident that killed two of his friends in 1993 en route to the
Florida regional. He is understandably sensitive about his condition. So are many of his Rainbow friends, who helped him through the tragedy.

It is now dusk after an unseasonably hot day. The surprising cool of the night air reminds us that it is still winter, and the rather sudden shift in temperature has sent many Gatherers in search of warmer clothing. Dinner Circle has just ended, and drumming is beginning. About a hundred people make their way down Main Trail to their camps to fetch more appropriate apparel. I have just been chatting with Crow and a friend of his named Linda, a young Jesus camper from Lincoln Nebraska, over dinner. They have agreed that something should be said to Aaron. With his reputation for fairness and gift of sensitivity, Crow is probably the best person to do so.

Curious about how he plans to handle the situation, I ask him what he’ll say.

Crow: Man, I don’t really know exactly. It’ll come out how it comes out, you know? It’s just between the three of us, right?

I mistakenly think that he is asking me to keep this conversation private, and say that I will. Linda recognizes my misunderstanding and clarifies.

Linda: Not us three, that’s a saying. Like, when something is real personal, just between the two people like you might say, it’s really three, since God’s there too. But I think what he’s telling you is not to ask him what he’ll say. He knows, and God knows, and that’s enough.
Crow: But don't worry about it, you aren't wrong to ask though. It's just an old thing I always say all the time, but I forgot you might not of heard it before. But yeah, Linda’s got it, like she said it.

Adam: Well, can I ask you a different way though?

Crow [flashing a friendly smile] You can always ask me differently, of course you can, bro.

Adam: Well, what I guess I’m trying to get at, is what makes this guy something special, that you feel like you have to say something to him, and watch him like you do. What makes him so suspicious to you?

Linda: Well he’s crazy, for one! I mean, don’t you think he’s just crazy? It’s scary.

Crow: Yeah, he sure is crazy, but he can be crazy if he wants. Like half the Gathering.

Linda [laughing]: Yeah, but some crazy people are okay I guess. He’s scaring people with all that stuff he says.

Crow: And he can scare people too, if that's what he wants to do. Maybe he's just that kind of guy, I don’t know. But he’s just kind of overstepped a line, you know? It’s too much, and my friends, especially my friend Brother Michael, have
asked me to help them out now.

Linda: Yeah, did you hear that, what he was doing to Brother Michael! I couldn’t believe my ears, I swear!

Crow: He doesn’t know what that poor man’s been through, right? We’ve known him all the way through it, but he just doesn’t know.

Adam: Neither do I, so tell me about it!

Crow: You weren’t here, huh? I thought you were maybe. Well, that old bus of theirs, the old bluebird, it was like real little, right? You’ve seen them before. But they were coming over from Boone, up there in the mountains north of Asheville [North Carolina], and well, Brother Michael just got back from Africa, he was over there for a long time, I met him before he went and that’d be, well, 1990, or maybe 89, he was in Guatemala. So he was over there for years, right? And he comes home and they get run off the road by a truck. Just out of control in those hills, you know?

Linda: And some people died! Like two good brothers of his, called up, just like that. And he ends up in a chair, but even that took some work with him, he was a total quadriplegic, just a complete cripple.

Crow: Yeah, sis, and now look at him! Right on! He’s doing real good, huh?
Linda: Yeah, it's a miracle. It really is.

Crow [turning to me]: But Brother Michael, he couldn't be more independent minded. He'd pick up and travel a thousand miles, just go. He went all over, Mexico, Guatemala, I knew him from some Gatherings down there years ago. And then Africa, all over the west coast. Carrying this big cross the whole time! Talk about crazy! They must've thought he was completely out there, bro. But he did it, and some people respected him, he changed lives because they saw he had some kind of protection.

Linda: He must've, even now he must. He's a real fighter!

Crow: He's real square with the Lord. He's straight up, you know? He doesn't ask for much, and can bear a whole lot...

Linda: Wow, that's for sure...

Crow: ... and it's not right for some deluded person, or any man, to ever try to come between him and his Lord. That's all. He doesn't need to be told what to do or how, he's a man of real faith, and doesn't need anyone getting in the way of that. Especially not now, when he's in that chair, he's paid his dues, and doesn't need it.

The other main proselytizing group, the Krishnas, may at first seem to be an exception to this emphasis on individual liberty as well. Though they tend to
play down this aspect of their movement while at Gatherings, the wider Hare Krishna movement is rather autocratic in its internal structure. Neophytes are expected to completely submit to the orders of more experienced Krishnas. This submission is less pronounced while at Gatherings, I have been told, but can still involve minute details of new Krishnas’ lives, such as when to sleep and awaken, when and what to eat, and what work to do during the day. Other Gatherers are somewhat uneasy with this apparent lack of egalitarianism within Krishna encampments, and consciously stay away from them despite the exquisite vegetarian food and beautiful music provided for visitors.

The social hierarchy of Krishna camps, however, does not translate into matters of the inner life. As Krishnas consider the material world to be illusory, and the task of the devotee to overcome the senses in order to experience the divine in its true state, they emphasize the role of personal experience in their spirituality. True devotion, according Krishnas, is contingent upon direct perception of the universal, not merely obedience to the deity or social order. The rigid behavioral codes that are so distasteful to non-Krishna Gatherers are, actually, intended to liberate the individual from the material world. Rather than being limitations, as they are perceived by most Gatherers, they are emically understood to be a means building mental discipline. Only through learning to transcend the senses and the ego, Krishnas believe, is it possible to experience the absolute. When, on occasion, this point is communicated to non-Krishna Rainbows, their mistrust abates somewhat.

June 2000, Bitterroot National Forest
Turkey Vulture, or Turkey as his many friends call him, is a strange sort of man. He is a main facilitator for Krishna camp, and looks the part. He wears the dusty orange robes and tuft of hair typical to committed Krishnas, and is often found leading other members of his encampment in Krishna chants around main circle at daybreak. Some other Gatherers resent this due to the noisiness of the process, which involves the clanging of bells and cymbals. When the matter is brought up at councils, as it is on occasion, Turkey flatly refuses to discontinue the practice, and will block consensus until other give up their effort to preserve the dawn silence they cherish.

Despite this rather comic stubbornness, he gets along quite well with most experienced Gatherers. This is partly due to the fact that he’s been involved with the Rainbow Family just as long as many elders have, albeit with a part of it avoided by most Gatherers. Mostly, though, it is due to the fact that he is particularly trustworthy and articulate. Given the Krishna refusal of material wealth it is perhaps ironic, but Turkey has been a key member of Rainbow’s informal Banking Crew for years. In fact, he is often put in charge of holding the Gathering’s money, which can be as much as several thousand dollars at Annuals.

I was first introduced to Turkey Vulture a year ago, by some friends of mine working at L-Camp. He was filling out an affidavit about the search of one of the main Krishna buses, which he found absolutely hilarious. Evidently the Pennsylvania State Police had pulled over this supply vehicle when it turned on
to the Forest Service road leading to the Gathering. They looked through every jar of spice, and all the bags of basmati rice the vehicle was hauling, making a considerable mess. Turkey and the driver, a man called Devi, spent nearly an hour by the side of the road salvaging their ingredients after the police left. Devi was quite angry about the ordeal, and insisted that Turkey, who found it infinitely amusing, fill out an affidavit supporting his description of the event.

I was struck by the man's carefree demeanor, and was intrigued to learn that this Krishna facilitator often played a central role in the Rainbow Family's financial affairs. People I asked about Turkey would giggle to themselves, playfully curse at him for what they perceived as his stubbornness, and eventually describe him as one of their favorite people to run into at Gatherings.

By Rainbow standards Turkey is a remarkably busy man. He oversees the maintenance of the large Krishna Camp's infrastructure, helps cook the flavorful meals they serve several times daily, and gives lectures to anyone who wants to sit around afterwards and learn about his movement. I was never able to interview him at any length because of his rather hectic daily schedule.

Now, a full year after I first met him, I am presented with an opportunity to talk to him for half an hour or so. A Banking Council was originally scheduled for Rainbow Noon today, but it is raining quite hard and the Banking Crew decided to cancel it. Turkey hiked the mile or so here to Main Circle in the thick of the storm, and his Krishna robes are completely soaked. As the Banking Crew participants are leaving Main Circle to seek shelter from the precipitation and wind, Aurora, a friend of mine from last year's Gathering in Wisconsin, calls out
He laughs and says that he is fine, that the cold does not really bother him, but she insists and we walk together through the grove of small spruce trees between Main Circle and Java Kitchen, where she is camping. Turkey begins talking about how he is reminded of a recent trip to Glacier National Park, on the way here from Vancouver, which involved walking through a spruce grove like this and surprising a grizzly. He smiles broadly and says that he fully expected to die at that moment, and that the bear was beautiful.

We reach the camp, where the small Kitchen Crew and a few guests are sitting around the tarp-enclosed Bliss Fire, drinking coffee. Aurora asks if there’s any left, and a man in his thirties gets up, runs to the nearby supply tent, and hands her a bag of gourmet coffee and an old fashioned grinder. She smiles, understanding without his saying anything that they’ve already drained the large pot sitting next to the Bliss Fire.

The three of us go to the Kitchen, which is also enclosed by tarps, to grind the coffee and make a smaller batch on that fire. Turkey offers to do the grinding, and refuses to allow Aurora to do it even though norms of hospitality would suggest that it is her task to do. We sit down, and he sets up the grinder on a flat rock and cranks the handle for about a minute. He carefully puts the freshly ground coffee into an empty glass jar sitting on the clean dishes rack, and begins to fill a medium sized pot with water.
Aurora: Dude, relax! It's my Kitchen, you are so nice when we come through yours, so it's my turn.

Turkey: Sorry, but I really don't mind! Look at this stuff! This is good coffee. And I never get a chance to drink any coffee. I'm always in Krishna camp, you know. I'm just excited to have some.

Aurora: I though you like never drink coffee, isn't it banned for you guys?

Turkey laughs, and asks if she sees any other Krishnas around.

Turkey: No one's keeping score up here. I can't really have Krishna brothers or sisters seeing me, because we tell them not to, but I really like good coffee. I totally miss it!

As the three of us crouch around the Kitchen Fire, waiting for the coffee water to boil, I ask Turkey about his past. He tells me about growing up in a suburb of Seattle, running away at fourteen to travel, and attending the Gathering in Oregon that first year on the road. He then moved up to Vancouver and became involved with a Krishna Consciousness house, where he spent the next three years learning about that movement. When he traveled to California to attend the Annual Rainbow Gathering in 1984, he decided to help build a Krishna presence within the Rainbow Family. Since then, he's attended every Annual but one, and even helps to organize Rainbow events in Seattle and Vancouver.
Adam: I understand how Rainbow would appeal to a young kid, but how did you get into Krishna? I mean, what was the appeal?

Turkey: Well, yeah, I was a kid. Things were pretty cool in Vancouver, but I was too young to rent a pad or get steady work, so I just hung out around the handouts, you know? The Krishnas were a lot cooler than the churches, I guess that was part of it, and, well, it just seemed more wild or something. So I guess I had a curiosity. But the more I learned about it, it just grew into part of my life, and I learned the Gita [Bagavagita] and really felt the freedom in it. I really got into it, and into Rainbow too, so it is sort of natural that I’m doing this.

Aurora: But how could you stand it? All the rules about everything, they make you follow? They control everything in your life, I could never do that, and for a teenager! Whoa.

Turkey: Well, yeah, I always sort of resisted that. I wasn’t really into it for a few years, but then I pretty much always wore the robes, by the time I was 18, shaving my head and everything. Until then I was just another street kid, but I hung around there mostly. They gave me a sense of belonging too, like Rainbow I guess. But all those rules, they taught me to be more patient with myself and the world. It’s discipline. Because of that, you need to have that to really get into the enlightenment Krishna’s all about, it keeps you humble and mentally sharp.
VII. RAINBOW MYSTICISM

Most who come to Rainbow do so with the understanding that it includes the sharing of profound experiences and insights. However, this is often just one of a number of traits that appeal to participating Gatherers. Whether they come to socialize with old friends and fellow counterculturalists, to partake of communal material resources, or simply out of curiosity, most Gatherers do eventually participate in the mystical side of Rainbow life to some extent. This may be considered an important strength of the group. Because individuals are encouraged to be involved with such activities, people who normally might not consider themselves religious specialists at all are able to explore, both privately and publicly, their own sense of mystical connection to the perceived divine. As we will see, this often results in a sense of spiritual awakening and empowerment that changes lives.

Even among those sub-groups least concerned with the value of individual sovereignty in general, the freedom to personally experience the divine is considered to be of the utmost importance. While some Gatherers, like the Krishnas, may submit to externally imposed behavioral routines, it is felt that this is ultimately just a step towards personal enlightenment, and not of particular importance in and of itself. Despite the wide range of personal beliefs expressed in Rainbow discourse, it would be difficult to find anyone advocating a faith based on indirect revelation. It is likely that such a person would be scorned as mentally unfit or trying to establish a cult. This point marks a fundamental distinction between Rainbow and traditional mainstream religiosity.
Rainbow spiritual rhetoric, perhaps more than any other aspect of discourse, emphasizes the role of the individual. A primary reason that individual revelation is considered necessary to real spirituality, according to many Gatherers I've asked about the matter, is that this direct approach to religiosity involves viscerally powerful experiences. The sensuous qualities of spiritual activity are celebrated by Rainbows of all sorts. Chant lyrics often refer to the energy of the Heartfire making them feel high, for instance. Spiritual discourses within Gatherers commonly describe their ceremonies and other spiritual activities in terms of producing 'energies' or 'vibes'. This reflects Rainbow's very subjective and sensuous approach to religiosity, which clearly "asserts the primacy of mystical experience"\(^1\).

I.M. Lewis, pioneer anthropologist of religion, asserted that most religions do not encourage individual ecstatic encounters, even though these same religions often refer to direct revelation in the history of their traditions\(^2\). Rainbow is a glaring exception to this. Though anthropology typically has difficulty fathoming the role of the ecstatic experience in shaping spiritual expression\(^3\), appreciating the appeal of Rainbow to many of its constituents necessarily involves acknowledging this facet of Gathering life. Gatherers of all backgrounds visibly participate in what they themselves would tend to describe as mystical pursuits, and indeed everyone is encouraged to do so. The quite populist approach to mysticism within Rainbow somewhat problematizes the assertion that "almost by definition it [mysticism] partakes of the quality of the

---

esoteric⁴.

The sort of ecstatic worship and sense of direct revelation normally associated with religious specialists elsewhere are here considered everyday parts of Gathering life. Distinctions between sacred and profane are consciously and playfully manipulated in the day to day of Gathering life. Participants are encouraged to find deeply meaningful ways to engage with their natural and social surroundings. Individuals willfully and explicitly engage in spiritual, physical, and social purification exercises in order to increase their sensitivity to the energies or vibes mentioned above. Introspective meditation about and collaborative discussion of religious themes is an ordinary part of the Gathering experience for many people involved with the Rainbow Family. To many, this is a good part of the fun of Gathering life.

January 1999, Kofa National Wildlife Refuge, Arizona

Full moons are treated as special occasions during Rainbow events, and often mark the Peak of Gatherings. At this one, it signals the official beginning of the Gathering, and the dozens of people who have been camping around the area have come together today. There is an atmosphere of celebration, as the eighty or so people who have made it here for this first night socialize with old friends and new acquaintances. Dinner Circle tonight was particularly active, as the different encampments converging here have used their combined resources to produce a veritable feast. There were burritos, an eggplant stew, and pasta with pesto.

After living on the road and in Seed Camps, the special meal was a treat indeed.

The moon is quite bright out here, illuminating the desert floor below us. It rose about an hour ago. It is fairly late in the night, and the Drum Circle is pounding out a steady flow of intricate rhythms. The ten or so drummers are surrounded by about fifty other adult Gatherers, the children having been put to bed hours ago. A large kettle of tea is set to boil on the Heartfire, which is rather unusual. I ask a man sitting next to me about it, he shrugs and says he thinks it is mushroom tea. An older man overhears the question and tells me it is indeed made from some particularly potent mushrooms, picked in northern California a few weeks ago by a friend of his.

We get to talking. The man, called Eagle Eyes in an ironic reference to his very thick glasses, tells me that he has arrived today from San Francisco, which we passed through on the way here weeks earlier. He came down as part of a five vehicle caravan, he tells me, and that they do this every year. The less centralized northern California Gatherers consider it appropriate to meet up with their well organized southern California [referred to as SCROLL- Southern California Rainbow of Living Light] counterparts from time to time, to discuss statewide concerns. This visit, he tells me, he wants to talk to them about the possibility that the Annual will be held in their bioregion next summer, and the increase in A-Camp activity Gatherers in his area have noticed recently.

Eagle Eyes tells me that coming down here is really one of his favorite times of year, that the desert surroundings add something to the atmosphere of the Gathering which he finds powerful. He tells me that he is a computer
programmer in the San Francisco Bay area, and that coming to Rainbow events is his way of connecting with his deeper side. He goes on to describe that traveling down here every year feels like pilgrimage of sorts.

Eagle Eyes: I live up there, there’s a great community, and it’s beautiful, and I have a good job. But to get away from all that, and come down here for a few weeks, it’s really something I look forward to. It’s a special energy, these SCROLL Gatherings. Maybe it’s the desert, or it’s also like a crossroads, because people come here from the northwest, the southwest, the south, Mexico, everywhere. But it just has a feeling to it I come back to.

I ask him to elaborate on that point, and he shrugs, telling me its just a feeling and hard to explain. I insist he try to put it into words and he reluctantly obliges.

Eagle Eyes: There’s, you can just feel a vibe. It’s like the pure Rainbow vibe. We have Gatherings up there once in a while, but it’s all people from around there. Here it’s like Nationals, but so pure. You know? It’s like, there’s some energies coming together and you can feel that. When I was a kid, I grew up in the Catholic church. And I’d go to church and there’d be everyone in their fancy clothes, just socializing, then this naked dude nailed to a cross in a crucifix. And there was that passion in his eyes, but everyone else just couldn’t see it, it was just like something they did. But at Rainbow, there’s that feeling, that buzz, and everyone feels it. And feeling that way with people from different corners, I come here for that, and so the Gathering’s real strong down here, and I really get charged up by that feeling.
Adam: What do you think makes it so that’s strong here, I mean at Rainbow, but more than out in the cities and regular life?

Eagle Eyes: Well, really Babylon isn’t anything different than Rainbow. We’re all people. But out there, people have forgotten what it means to be a complete person, which is to have a real relationship with the creator or God or the Om [laughs] or whatever you want to call it. When you don’t have that, it’s like being incomplete. But at Rainbow, I guess people just accept that part more, and see that they can open to it. It’s their business, not just for some monks living somewhere or a priest, it’s them, and that brings out the real magic of it.

Mystical experiences, and the revelations that they may occasionally impart, are often described through the vocabulary of ancient and exotic traditions. Various Native American, Rastafarian, and Sanskrit loan words are commonly heard within the Rainbow Family. Specific individuals may borrow other languages as well, in my experience including Hebrew, Celtic, and Arabic. A primary reason for seemingly unusual practice is, simply, that these words are felt to express mystical states better than any in English. Due to the perceived equivalency of various traditions, there is a sense that all spiritual language refers to a universal mystical tradition. They can, therefore, be used interchangeably in the Rainbow view. This assumption, which Heelas dubs “the perennialized viewpoint”5, and marks as generally characteristic of New Age beliefs, seems to be based upon the idea that different religions are simply

different ways of trying to describe the divine, which is ultimately ineffable.

Perhaps the most compelling reason why Gatherers choose to express their spirituality in what they perceive as ancient terms is the common idea that such traditions represent forms of belief untainted by the impurity of modern industrial capitalism, or Babylon. Due to the rather cynical attitude towards ecstatic religiosity held by much of mainstream society, there is a desire among many Rainbows to mark their own beliefs as real and sincere. Through forging deliberate connections with what are taken to be unassailably authentic forms of spirituality, Gatherers seek, usually implicitly, to assert the veracity of their own practices. There are many examples of similar behavior in ethnographic literature about religiosity. One of the most striking descriptions of this phenomenon comes from Taussig, who describes that “mimesis and the power to transform run together”\textsuperscript{6} in magical traditions.

While the focus on mystical experience may be at odds with mainstream Western religiousity, it is certainly not unprecedented from a crosscultural standpoint. Anthropologists have often described the ecstasy of mystical revelation as the main focus of spirituality within subject cultures. For example, Benedict notes of the Kwakiutl in the Pacific Northwest, “in religious ceremonies the final thing they strove for was ecstasy”\textsuperscript{7}. Mainstream society may scoff at the sort of ecstatic mysticism Rainbow celebrates, but this pessimism towards direct revelation is actually fairly uncommon from a crosscultural perspective. Associating their own activities with those of geographically and temporally


\textsuperscript{7}Benedict, Ruth. 1959. \textit{Patterns of Culture}. Boston: Houghton Mifflin: 175
dispersed mystical traditions is a way of rhetorically bolstering their authenticity and importance.

The process of striving for purification as a Gathering’s Peak nears is conducted to heighten participants’ sensitivity towards such mystical experiences, and not primarily for abstract moral reasons. Individuals are felt to have an unspoken responsibility to focus their consciousness on the ecstatic side of spirituality, which helps to make the event more powerful for everyone present. Whether this is done through modification of diet, dress, or other personally meaningful rituals is up to each person. It is commonly understood, though, that to pursue this sort of direct revelation is an important part of the work necessary to putting on a successful Gathering. By encouraging its constituents to open themselves to the aesthetic power of spirituality, the group seeks to generate a sustaining level of spiritual momentum.

By far the most popular and visible form of participation in such mystical activities, the nightly drumming and chanting ritual incorporates aspects recognized by anthropologists as commonly present in ecstatic movements. The utilization of repeated and complex rhythms in these Drum Circles, for instance, is said to often be among the “techniques to achieve mystical experiences” in other cultural contexts. Further, the frenetic dancing and chanting which tends to accompany these musical performances have been cited as contributing to the achievement of altered states of consciousness. Crowding together around the Heartfire during this ritual may also be seen as enhancing the affective impact of

---

this ritual\textsuperscript{10}. That the only lighting is from a flickering fire and the moon and stars also contributes to a sense of suspended reality during this nocturnal ceremony. Since these known ecstatic techniques converge in a single ritual, it is not surprising that Drum Circles often lead participating individuals to a sense of rapture that many consider sacred.

The use of certain kinds of psychoactive substances is indeed a notable part of Rainbow spiritual seeking. Anthropologists have at times been dismissive of the role that intoxicating substances may play in ecstatic experiences, at least when these take place in mainstream society. One noted investigator of ecstatic religion specifically ridicules the taking of hallucinogens as nothing more than "instant religion" which need not concern anthropologists in their exploration of cultural approaches to mysticism\textsuperscript{11}. Other social theorists take a contrary view, affirming that "drugs provide the most ready aspect to what William James declared was the root of religion, namely the mystical experience, the most captivating and transforming experience known to man"\textsuperscript{12}.

While the former view may prevail in mainstream society and among many anthropologists, most Gatherers consider select intoxicants to have sacramental value due to their enhancement of ritualized ecstatic techniques. Though it is important to acknowledge that there is a good deal of controversy regarding drug use within Gatherings, with some substances being more widely accepted than others, a range of psychoactive drugs are considered appropriate for inspiring mystical revelation. Many specific substances find their way into

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\end{thebibliography}
the interior of Gatherings, with the approval of many, if not all, participants.

Rainbows are quick to point out that intoxicants have often played an important role in spirituality, and that mainstream society's rejection of this connection is somewhat aberrant. They are not wrong. Crossculturally, spirituality and intoxicants are often linked. Speaking specifically about hallucinogenic substances, Dobkins de Rios notes that "these substances have played more than a minor role in structuring the lives, beliefs, hopes, and values of a large number of people". She argues that "cultural identity is learned and reaffirmed by psychic productions under drug experiences". Rather than being the anti-social, destructive behavior it is assumed to be by mainstream society, Rainbows do consider specific substances to be useful in achieving a healthy Gathering.

Drug use is often employed in preparing people for spiritual work. In lowland South America, for instance, powerful hallucinogens are used to initiate and train novice adepts. Goldman describes how the Cubeo utilize drugs to make the novice understand the importance of the spiritual (or shamanic) side of life. Lizot speaks of a Yanomami "shamanic initiation ceremony that involves prolonged hallucinatory rites". Drug use in these cases, as among Gatherers, facilitates the spiritual maturity of the individual by opening them to experiences outside their day to day consciousness.

Intoxicating substances are also used among many peoples to promote

---

creativity. As Overing describes, the Piaroa envision tianawa gods who "sit on celestial clouds taking hallucinogenic drugs and chanting for eternity their songs of productivity"\textsuperscript{17}, thereby creating existence. Creativity and drug use are symbolically linked for the Piaroa, with hallucinogenic substances being a culturally acceptable form of creative inspiration. Among the Achuar of lowland Ecuador, individuals compose songs which are reputed to have magical powers. These special songs are often revealed to the individual "in drug-induced trance"\textsuperscript{18}. Drugs are used by these two cultures as a means of inspiring creativity, and hence productivity. While the outside world may consider drugs to hamper productivity, Rainbows take an opposite view, and clearly they are not alone.

The most common controlled substance at Gatherings is marijuana, which is often used casually, but may also be taken as a sacrament. When used as part of a public ceremony such as Drum Circle, it is usually smoked in large and ornate pipes, which are passed around the assembled circle. These pipes are considered to be the collective property of the entire Rainbow Family, though they are looked after by specific individuals, and often have interesting histories which are recounted during their use. One, for instance, is reported to have been given to Rainbows by members of the Coptic Church in Ethiopia\textsuperscript{19}. Another was supposedly gifted to a group of Rainbow peace activists by members of the Viet Cong, and is said to be crafted from metal salvaged from a destroyed U.S. tank\textsuperscript{20}. Borrowing a Rastafarian expression, these collectively owned pipes are called


\textsuperscript{19}Interview with Fisher, August 1998, Nicolet National Forest

\textsuperscript{20}Announced at Main Circle by an Elder woman named Gaya, July 1999, Allegheny National Forest
Chalices when used in public ceremonies, which verbally asserts their sacramental status.

July 1999, Allegheny National Forest

As the possessor of an important Rainbow Chalice, Gaya is constantly invited to smoke marijuana. People consider the use of such an artifact to give energy to their ceremonies, and its use is constantly being requested. Gaya is encumbered with attendance of these events to make sure the pipe is not lost. It is a valuable piece of Rainbow history, many believe, and preserving its presence at Gatherings is an important responsibility.

This important treasure is a long steel pipe, with an oversized conical bowl. It looks like an opium pipe in shape and size. Reportedly, the Chalice was given to the Rainbow Family by members of the Viet Cong. Some people say it was actually given to the Rainbow Family by Abbie Hoffman, the Yippie activist of 1960s fame, who got it as a gift from Ho Chi Minh himself. Hoffman did, evidently, attend Rainbow events in the 1980s.

Gaya does not especially mind the responsibilities which come along with caring for this relic. A rather charismatic Elder who has been attending Rainbow events since the mid-1970s, she has a reputation for public speech and spiritual sensitivity. Her storytelling skills are famous.

Some people consider her a bit snobby or unapproachable, but she was quite
gracious in humoring my request for an interview. I don't know her at all, and approached her out of the blue to tell her about my project. She seemed fairly used to being asked about the Chalice, and didn't ask me many questions about my ethnography.

Now that the Gathering is winding down, she has time to talk. We sit in the shade of a big white pine on the edge of Main Trail. There is a cobweb of thick ropes strung up between two trees next to us. Kid Village put that up a few weeks ago, and it is a favorite place for older kids to climb and play.

Now it is late at night though, and the ropes are empty. We are playing a favorite game of Rainbow adults, the Troll Toll. Gaya is stopping people as they come up Main Trail, asking them for “jokes, smokes, or tokes”, as the saying goes. Those who know Gaya offer marijuana, pleased to have a chance to smoke out of “Gaya's Chalice”.

As we get ready to do the interview, there is a third person with us. Gaya's friend Pelican, an older gentleman she tells me she knows from Key West, sits with us. He has a small drum with him to bring to Main Circle, and stopped to “bless it with Gaya's pipe” when he saw her along the trail.

Adam: Is that what people call it, your pipe?

Pelican: We call it that! She’s had it for twenty years and doesn't lose it!
Gaya: No. Not twenty. Diamond left us in '89. He gave it to me to care for.

Pelican: Diamond, I haven't heard his name in so long! Aho Brother Diamond!

Gaya: People still call it Diamond's pipe, or the Vietnamese Chalice, or mine. Whichever. I still think of it as his though. But it isn't. It's Rainbow's!

Adam: And did it, do you really think it came from Vietnam.

Pelican: Looks like it, huh?

Adam: I could see that...

Gaya: Well, yes, I certainly, it did. Certainly. I do think so. A tank? I can't tell. It's metal! Viet Cong? Diamond said so, but he was an old prankster, you can't trust a word he says. Said. But maybe so!

Pelican: I think ol' Abbie might have been playing a trick on Diamond anyhow.

He turns to me.

Pelican: You know Abbie Hoffman used to come to Rainbow?

Adam: I've heard that a few times, yeah.
Gaya: He certainly did. Good guy deep down, [laughs] but really deep down!

Pelican: He came here when he was on the run! It was a gas, here while the whole world's looking for him.

Gaya: Like he said, we make our own history! He used to have fun, we all did, it might not actually be true. But people get something out of it, the vibe is there. It might be really what they say.

- More powerful hallucinogens are also used ritually within Rainbow. While they may be taken recreationally by some Gatherers when abundantly available, it is typically felt that they should be reserved for spiritual purposes. The most common of these is LSD, which is often supplied by Tour Kids coming from large musical events, where the substance is present in large quantities. While I have never seen such activity, it is reported that Rainbows occasionally manufacture the chemical, which is evidently not particularly difficult. This is said to produce a weak form of the substance called Family Fluff. LSD is usually encountered in liquid form at Gatherings, and less commonly dripped on blotter paper, sugar cubes, or cookies. It is relatively inexpensive and easy to hide due to the very small size of an active dose. However, some consider LSD an inappropriate sacrament, as it is an artificial imitation of preferred natural hallucinogens.

Psilocybin-bearing mushrooms are the most readily available of these natural psychedelics. Indeed, such mushrooms can often be found growing naturally in and around Gatherings sites. They are harvested in large quantities
at times. Since confusion with other mushroom species can and has resulted in accidental poisonings, a rigorous identification process, involving multiple experienced mycologists and sport prints, is considered appropriate before ingestion. Mushrooms are typically boiled to make a tea, usually within Kitchens but sometimes directly at Main Circle itself. The tea is shared by anyone who wishes to partake. Other ingredients, such as mint and cloves, are sometimes added for flavor. Passion flower, easily obtainable at health food stores, is often included as a supposed means of enhancing the hallucinogenic quality of the tea.

More exotic plant hallucinogens are sometimes encountered. Particularly at Gatherings in the southwest and near the Mexican border, mescaline rich cacti such as peyote and san pedro are ingested. Sometimes these are brewed into a tea that is ingested in a manner similarly to the mushroom tea, though never, at least in my experience, at Main Circle. More typically, though, a group of known and trusted comrades are invited to participate in what are called Peyote Ceremonies, even when cacti other than lophophora williamsii are consumed. These should be read as a sort of loose imitation of rites associated with the Native American Church, a group with which some Gatherers are affiliated. While I am told that Peyote Ceremonies vary, they typically include a day of fasting, followed by a visit to a Sweat Lodge, and then the consumption of the raw buttons or slices of cacti.

The portions are placed on a crescent shaped altar made of sand or dirt before being eaten, and are prayed over by everyone participating in the ritual. When such a ceremony is held, the culminating act, the actual ingestion of the cacti, occurs while other Gatherers are at Dinner Circle. When the initial nausea has subsided and the psychedelic effects have begun, those who have eaten the
cacti join the people already assembled at Main Circle in an inconspicuous a
manner as possible to avoid arousing jealousy in those who did not have the
opportunity to participate in this ritual. Inquiries I have made to Gatherers about
the apparent discrepancy between the Rainbow ideal of open sharing and the
rather secretive nature of the Peyote Ceremony have tended to result in
references to past problems with people fighting over scarce peyote supplies and
a few individuals needing to be taken to Calm due to temporary insanity from
taking too much mescaline. That Peyote Ceremonies are conducted in a
somewhat clandestine manner, then, is explained as a practical response to past
problems.

While the use of such substances may be accepted as playing a role in the
development of individual spirituality, Rainbows almost uniformly reject the
claims of outsiders that drug use is a core activity of the group. Indeed, many
other, perhaps less dramatic, activities are taken as far more essential to the
establishment of a spiritually healthy Gathering. Many Gatherers like to meditate
in solitude. This activity is seen as having a somewhat different effect than the
Main Circle meditation. Whereas the latter is considered to be a way to bring
together the disparate energies of the Gathering, meditating in solitude is taken
to be a means to achieving union with nature, the universe, and thereby to
strengthen the individual. In order to understand this point, it is important to
consider that the common Rainbow reference to their Gathering sites as
cathedrals of nature suggests that it is possible to achieve an awareness of the
transcendent divine through experiencing the manifest creation.

Venturing into the wilderness, usually alone, some Gatherers conduct
what could be described as short pilgrimages away from the Rainbow crowds.
They do so explicitly intending to contemplate the universal through the observation of nature. Whether such trips away from the social chaos of the Rainbow life last hours or days, they are considered an important part of helping individuals, and thus the Gathering as a whole, maintain a connection with the energies of nature. It is often during such excursions that Gatherers create Shrines, and these are loosely taken as tangibly representing the prayers and insights that make up these short pilgrimages.

As mentioned, Shrines often include objects found in the woods, such as animal bones, feathers, and interesting stones. Rather than being mere curiosities, these are often said to be placed quite intentionally to mark revelations rendered through spending time alone in the wilderness. Both the spiritual insights gained on these excursions and the items used in building shrines are referred to as gifts given to Gatherers by the forest. Found objects are nearly always left in the forest, that is, not brought into the populated area of the Gathering. This is said to be done as a sign of respect for the wilderness and appreciation of what it adds spiritually to the Gathering.

Such excursions are taken as a response to a personal dilemma or problem, or simply for the aesthetic pleasure of exploring a beautiful forest in peace and solitude. Since a nearby Gathering provides a reliable material and social support base, it is actually an ideal place from which to launch a personal expedition into remote corners of the forest. This sort of extreme camping, far more dangerous without such resources nearby, is rendered fairly safe and accessible by the presence of a Rainbow event. Individuals interested in totally immersing themselves in the wilderness are thus able to do so without taking the considerable risks that would otherwise be involved. Should a problem occur,
the isolated camper need only find his or her way back to the Gathering, which can often be done by listening for drums or watching for bonfire smoke, to receive adequate assistance.

What individuals do while out on such excursions varies. Some people, going out for a day or less, consider themselves to be primarily engaged in a fast to purify the body. Others may take food and water supplies with them, especially those who stay alone in remote areas of the forest for multiple days. The time may be spent mostly in seated meditation, or quite actively, hiking, rock climbing, or just exploring interesting natural features. Sacramental drugs are sometimes included in these short pilgrimages, as they are in other aspects of Rainbow spiritual seeking. However, less experienced campers are usually cautioned about the dangers of taking hallucinogens when alone in rough terrain or building fires in remote areas. Evidently there have been serious accidents.

Whatever motivations might contribute to a person's choosing to go off alone for a time, doing so is typically considered to have profound transformative effects on participating individuals. This is marked by the practice sometimes being referred to as a Vision Quest, which suggests something of the revelatory power of spending time alone in the wilderness. Though it is relatively uncommon for those seeking solitude in the wilderness to claim they literally experience visions, this speaks to a general sense that the practice is a means of opening the mind to transcendent energies present in the forest. Individuals may even take on new names as a result of these experiences.

Vision Quests, which should be read as a conscious imitation of initiation rites associated with certain Native American peoples. Those who undertake such excursions almost uniformly describe them as among the most powerful
experiences to be had during Rainbow events. One investigation of Native American vision quest traditions suggests that they provide a socially approved means of integrating individuals into a greater social order. Gill explains that due to the vision quest tradition, “the uniqueness and creativity of the individual within society is not sacrificed”21. Vision Quests within Rainbow serve a similar role. Isolation has long been recognized by anthropologists as a common way to initiate neophyte spiritual experts22. The isolation of Rainbow Vision Quests is self-imposed. In so far as this isolation serves as a means of spiritual initiation, it is strongly self-initiation, seeking direct communion between the individual and the divine.

Individual connection to the divine is also attempted by trying to understand visions presented in dreams. They are allowed to influence waking behavior in ways that would be impossible to imagine in the outside world. How one’s time is spent is often heavily influenced by dreams. Everyday decisions, such as whether to help in a Kitchen or participate in a scouting expedition, are often made with reference to one’s dream consciousness. In a broader sense, dreams are sometimes interpreted as providing advice about how to live one’s life. Major choices regarding lifestyle, names, and where to travel to next are premised on powerful nocturnal visions.

Putting so much importance on dreams may seem odd to outsiders, but is seen in many cultures. Dreams are considered to come from the spirits of the dead in some cultures, such as the Dowoyos, as described by Nigel Barley23. In other cultures they are thought to be a naturally sensitive state, in which the self

can transcend ordinary reality. Crocker describes that to the Bororo “dreams are experience of the soul”\textsuperscript{24}, and an important means by which shamans “turn away from this world and to behold the true universe”\textsuperscript{25}. Social theorists have repeatedly claimed that “dreams act as private myths for the foundation of a new religion”\textsuperscript{26}. This idea is taken seriously by many Rainbow participants, and dreams may be taken as signs to initiate personal or group purification ceremonies.

The content of dreams often informs the spiritual discourse within Gatherings. This takes place in informal settings, such as during the workday, where it is a favorite topic of discussion. People amusingly describe their dreams to each other, offer up interpretations to one another, and compare the imagery which they present. Perhaps because of the relative similarity of experience within a Gathering, born of living together in the same place with a number of others for extended periods of time, Gatherers often have quite similar dreams. This imparts something of a sense that an entire social unit, be it a Kitchen or an entire Gathering, share a single dream life. Hence, collective decisions are sometimes justified by reference to dreams as well.

Because of these beliefs, dream interpretation is considered to be part of maintaining a healthy Gathering. Heartsongs at Councils are often dominated by the discussion of dreams, with even the most practical-minded of Gatherers participating in what might be considered a rather peculiar form of collective introspection. Keeping in mind that Rainbow events are considered to grow out of a spiritual center, and that introspection is taken to be a primary route to the


perception divine forces, this cooperative dream exploration can be understood as serious business. Individuals gain reputations for outstanding abilities regarding this pursuit, and those considered talented in this area are often sought out by others to help them make sense of their own dream imagery. Such informal experts will often advise individuals or groups on rituals which may be appropriate in response to particularly powerful or shared dreams.

July 1999, Allegheny National Forest

Three days into July, early evening on top of the plateau of a craggy hill in the Allegheny range, watching dusk shin through the misty clouds around us. More clouds beneath us, down in the valley, obscure our view of several Kitchens operating below.

Sarah comes toddling toward us slowly, her left hand closed around a clump of vegetation. Her mother, Irene, and I watch. We laugh at the odd expression on the little face, a smirk of pride almost, glistening with teething drool. A quick glance over to Irene shows a reflection of that pride in her own features, the doting look of motherly love shining in her gentle eyes. Sarah climbs into my lap and puts her fist to my mouth, offering me the plant matter she’s carried our way. After asking her a few times to show me what she’s found, she opens her fist to reveal, amongst a good amount of peripheral grass and dirt, one of the wintergreen plants that carpets this side of the mountain.
“You must have seen us chewing that, didn’t you!”, her mother laughingly asks her yellow-haired baby (who is by now amusing herself by tugging on my beard with her free hand, and rather indifferent to Irene’s voice). Then, looking up to me, “She’s so smart! I can’t believe how smart she is sometimes, just blows my mind...”

I give an affirmative chuckle, making silly faces to an amused Sarah.

We’ve been lazing around for an hour or two, doing some light kitchen work. Crumbling crackers to make the breading for fried zucchini, to be specific. Nothing too taxing, a task well suited to the aura of calm that has settled over this section of the Gathering. Most of the littlest ones are already asleep, their fussing and crying is abated for the evening.

Irene is about to put Sarah to bed as well, and states that she’s decided Sarah ought to participate in the parade tomorrow. She says she has to wake up early to collect material needed for decorating the toddler with the often cartoonish and runic face paintings many of the parading children enjoy wearing. Anhks, yin-yangs, peace symbols, rainbows painted on with different colors of clay and charcoal, that sort of thing.

An elfish, petite woman of twenty, Irene is a first time mother, and fascinated with the emergent personality of her baby. Like many parents accompanying small children to the Gathering, she is camped around the area known as Kiddie Village. The kitchen I have become accustomed to camping with has set up just a
few yards up the trail from this area. It makes for a lively yet secure neighborhood within the sprawling Annual Gathering.

As I chuckle my affirmation of the baby's cleverness, Irene's voice takes on a focused tone.

Irene: You know, I had a dream, I dreamed, like a few months after Sarah was born. I told it to Sun Bear27 one time just afterwards, he said it was a vision, it's important. I think so. I've never had something like that before. But it was so... you know?!

"Yup", I replied softly, Sarah now trying to remove my glasses from my face with both hands, having dropped the wintergreen.

Irene: Mmm hmm, it's funny maybe, but means so much to me. I dreamed about Rainbow, about a gathering, it was a Gathering but a SUNflower! Like there was the edge of it, the top of it I mean, which was the petals. The really pretty part. And that was us, the way I was before I had her...

Adam: ...before you had Sarah?

Irene: ...yeah, before I was a mother and was just out there living like a kid myself. Dancing and drumming all night, just loving life. That was us, the showy

27 A 70 year old elder, one of the most respected older Rainbows, revered as a High Holy because of his placid wisdom. He died shortly after this Gathering.
petals. But the point of all the flower was what was inside it, the seeds! That’s what really... that’s what the flower’s really for. To spread the seeds. And here they are, all these children, the little kids, the babies, up around here. They’re the real point of this too, the Gathering, I mean.

As standing up, facing me and lifting her shirt so I could see the large tattoo of sunflower, based on a Van Gogh painting, on her lower stomach: “did you see this?”

Sitting back down again, she continues.

Irene: It’s my meditation. It makes me think about that, that it’s so important to put the seeds - my Sarah - first. We need to make sure the seeds can grow healthy, that they’re safe to grow up and spread the beautiful flower parts of life too. That’s the cycle.

I nod.

Irene: After I told Sun Bear, it was a few weeks after, I got this done. When I told him he taught me how to make a sand painting, just like the Navajo ones, praying on each little handful of sand or rocks, or what you can find, when you sprinkle it on the rock. I did one a few days later, in the woods. I found a good flat rock and made one. I sat in the middle of it when it was pretty much, you could tell it was a sunflower at least [laughs]. Ah, and Sarah fell asleep because it took a while and she was tired, so she was asleep when it was done. And so I sat
in the middle of it with her in my arms asleep. And Just held her for what seemed like hours. It probably was.

Sarah successfully steals my glasses, we laugh as I make a goofy monster face at her and take them back from her tiny hands. Irene gently scolds the little one for taking things that aren't hers.

Irene: I've never been so high in my life, so aware, as that. Just from sitting there in that sand painting. It was like everything I was worried about, all my worrying questions about how to raise her right were answered. I heard it all so clearly for once. I know it was just me thinking it to myself really clearly, in words sort of but not talking, but it almost felt like it was coming from somewhere else. And it taught me so much. So I got this done later, so I'd remember it all, that dream.

Intentional modification of diet is another way in which Gatherers seek to bring themselves closer to a state of spiritual sensitivity. Food supplies of all sorts come into Gatherings, including items which some people choose to exclude from their personal diets. People often strive for dietary purity in anticipation of Gathering Peaks. Many adopt alternative eating habits on a full time basis. There are many different forms of diet modification. Some Christian, Jewish, and Muslim Gatherers refuse to eat pork or stay strictly kosher. Others do not eat red meat, or factory farmed meat, for health reasons. A fairly high percentage of Gatherers are strictly vegetarian. Others go even further, adopting the Vegan lifestyle. This latter diet entails avoiding all animal
produced foods, including dairy products and even honey. Interestingly, the Vegan diet is considered by most Gatherers to represent the highest level of purity, and they will often stay Vegan temporarily to cleanse themselves ritually.

Though Kitchens almost always serve vegetarian food to Dinner Circle, they may occasionally prepare foods other Gatherers refuse to eat for their own Kitchen staff. As a Gathering’s Peak draws near, however, this practice becomes fairly rare, as there is a general attempt to consume ritually pure meals. Individuals are loosely expected to participate in this process, but each is able to decide the specific ways in which to do so. People may fast completely, consuming only water for two or three days to prepare themselves for a ritually significant Rainbow date, such as July 4th. More commonly, they will make efforts to give up certain sorts of food, such as meat, dairy products, refined sugars, or processed foods for a week or so before the Gathering’s Peak.

The food deemed appropriate for Gatherings is sometimes referred to as Ital, a word consciously borrowed from Rastafarians to refer to organically produced and (usually) vegetarian food. In some instances, though, people who are normally quite resolute in their vegetarianism or Veganism may actually be willing eat meat and consider it to be an Ital dish suitable for a time of purification. Such aberrations involve meat that was raised by organic farms aligned with the Rainbow Family, or killed in a manner deemed natural by those who consume it in violation of their personal dietary codes. This points to a deeper meaning of the word Ital. It does not simply mean a set of foods, or even agricultural techniques, but a method of production deemed harmonious with natural processes.

Some amount of hunting takes place on the periphery of Gatherings.
Rainbow hunters tend to be Road Dogs who kill one or two deer to augment food supplies. Though the practice is illegal out of season, and may draw unwanted attention from the authorities, it is often condoned when carried out in a responsible manner. Hunted meat, like all Rainbow food, is shared among all Gatherers who wish to eat it. There may be a degree of solemnity in its consumption, and rituals of thanksgiving may be performed by individuals who choose to share in the meal. Since it is generated outside of the factory farming system that feeds mainstream American society, and many choose meatless diets out of concern for the social impacts of this agricultural system, this more natural meat is acceptable. Breaking the laws of the outside society by responsibly and respectfully hunting an animal perhaps symbolizes Gatherers' sense that they are more connected to the natural world than mainstream America. The food is even considered to have sacramental value, as though the act of reverently eating flesh taken from the Gathering site does something to bind individuals to the group, and the group to the land it occupies.

Diet modification is a feature of spirituality in many cultures. It is often used to prepare individuals for spiritual work. The Songhay, for instance, give apprentice sorcerers a special 'sorko' food. Its preparation and consumption is thought to give the apprentice power. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of diet modification among Rainbows, vegetarians agreeing to eat hunted meat as Ital and proper for Gathering consumption, is reminiscent of a case of diet modification among the Piaroa. Overing describes the ruwang or "wizard transforming animal flesh into edible vegetable form". Through this rite,

Piaroas can eat meat but still identify as vegetarians. The point in the Piaroa case, and the Rainbow as well, is that it is a social process, and not merely a physical product, that makes foods culturally acceptable.

May 1999, Daniel Boone National Forest

I couldn't tell if Pablo was angry or proud when he saw the deer his son Maple shot. The boy had been missing all morning, and had neglected to wash the breakfast dishes as he promised. The father had just been joking with the dozen or so people assembled around the deep fire pit drinking coffee. He mockingly threatened to make the boy do all the cooking for the evening meal, which the others responded to with amused horror. Having a ten year old running the Gathering's main Kitchen laughable notion, particularly so close to it's Peak.

The boy jumped out of a beat up old purple Buick that pulled in as far as the muddy road got to the Kitchen. Two men who we did not recognize followed him. Opening up the back passenger door of the car, they pulled out a small dead buck. It was evidently bleeding from its neck and onto the rear seat, which caused one of the men to swear. They carried the carcass the hundred or so yards across the clearing, and set it down next to the Kitchen's woodpile.

Pablo questioned his son about where he had been all morning, and the boy excitedly explained that he had been about a mile down the road at a small pond
since dawn. He told us how he saw deer there yesterday afternoon, and went back as soon as he woke up, taking his small compound bow with him. He got a great shot off and killed this yearling buck, but couldn’t drag it back to camp. It only weighed about sixty pounds, but the small boy could barely budge it. He told how he started to run back to camp for help, but encountered this vehicle of incoming Gatherers about half way back.

The man who had been sitting in the driver’s seat laughed and told the boy to explain what happened when they tried to get the deer into the car. They both laughed, and the child said that it wasn’t yet dead and “came back to life” and started kicking in the back seat. He shot it again at point blank range, putting an arrow clear through the neck and into the seat cushion. The car’s owner checked Pablo’s angry glance with a statement about how the vehicle was “a piece of shit anyhow” and that he found the whole situation funny, but was surprised at how much blood came out of the deer.

Sitting at the Kitchen this afternoon, we chop vegetables for the stew being prepared. Pablo and another man, Gopher, are showing the young hunter how to tan the animal’s hide, stretched out in a frame made from a poplar sapling. They’ve already helped him butcher it. The fresh venison has been chopped into cubes, and is being browned in a large wok by Gopher’s girlfriend Hattie. The pair are experienced Road Dogs, in their fifties, and have obviously prepared deer under such conditions before. They say that the best thing to do is sear all the meat at once, then make a stew out of it, as letting it simmer over the fire will keep it good for days. There is about a half pound of venison for each and every
Gatherer on site, so preserving it for a few days is important.

Dogs are sniffing around the woodpile, where the deer was rapidly butchered by Pablo and Hattie. They had suspended it from the branch of a maple tree, carefully taken out the organs, and then skinned the animal. The guts had been buried deep in the woods, but there is much blood in the grass next to the woodpile, its scent subtly apparent in the afternoon heat. The dogs, gathered into a free-roaming, playful pack as is often the case at Gatherings, are very interested in it. Occasionally one runs into the Kitchen space, probably smelling the cooking meat, and is chased out amongst cries of "dog out" and "dog in the Kitchen". The worst offender is Hattie and Gopher's shepherd mix Deliliah, and Hattie gets up to tie her to a tree. As she scolds the dog, she asks the nearest person, Babayaga, to keep stirring the meat around in the wok. It doesn't all fit at once, and the hot fire is searing the batches of chunks quickly.

Babayaga is an eccentric character from southwestern Wisconsin, considered a bit mentally ill by some. Those who know him well, and this includes Pablo, say that he is sort of schizophrenic and delusional or something, though usually trustworthy. A few days ago he made sexual advances at a sixteen-year-old Gatherer, a girl from nearby Lexington who came out with some friends to check out Rainbow. She laughed it off, but other Gatherers, including her friends from home, are rather more outraged. So is Pablo, who intuitively dislikes him and has scornfully referred to him as 'Talks Too Much' for years.

Despite the negative rumors surrounding Babayaga, and his sometimes erratic
behavior, he is well liked by most Gatherers. A proficient entertainer and self-proclaimed High Holy, he is rather charismatic and is knowledge of world mythology is extensive and authentic. Combined with his personal propensity to spin outlandish tall tales, this makes him an interesting storyteller. And indeed, there is a kind of wisdom in his occasionally delusional silliness.

I look over at Babayaga, who identifies as a long-time Vegan, stirring the large pile of venison chunks in the wok. He looks over at me and laughs comically, recognizing the irony of the situation. Pablo, working on the stretched deer hide with his son and Gopher, catches my eye and then looks at Babayaga.

He gets up, stretches his arms, and then walks over to his tent just a few feet into the woods. As he comes out a moment later, he is holding a bowl of burning sage and an eagle wing. He gently steps around us as we work on preparing ingredients for the stew. People look at him, some giggle, as he silently brushes sage smoke onto each person with a few deliberate whisks of the wing. When he gets to Babayaga, who is still stirring the meat, he inundates the man and the meat with sage smoke, stoking the burning bundle into flame as he briskly fans it.

He sets the bowl and wing down, the sage still burning, and addresses the people gathered around the Kitchen.

Pablo: Aho! It is good to see you, my relatives. It is starting to feel like home here, isn't it? The weekend is coming in two days, and we should start to see the
numbers go up a lot.

He picks up the sage bowl and wing, covers himself in smoke, and dumps the smoldering sage into the cooking fire.

Pablo: Today is a very special day for me. My boy here, as most of you know, killed this little buck this morning. Now I'm not quite thrilled with the timing! [people laugh] But today is a special day for him, and for me. He got first deer. And he did it right. More or less, give or take a car seat or two. [hearty laughter]. No, I want to thank the brothers who gave him a ride, I know it means a lot to him. And I want you to know that I'll give you some Green Energy [cash] for the seat, brother.

The car's owner, a first time Gatherer from Paducah, assures Pablo that money isn't necessary. He seems quite taken with the Gathering so far, and says that he was glad to be able to help. Pablo walks over to him as he sits on the other side of the fire, helps him up with an extended hand, and hugs him.

Pablo: The Gathering is really starting out now. The Rainbow spirit is here. The great spirit sent my son a deer, and he sent us one another. Now I know there are plenty here who don't eat meat, that's okay. But I want to ask you, humbly invite you, to share this stew with us. We're going to have way too much otherwise. [laughter] This little buck gave its life so my son could shoot his first deer. It lived its whole life out here, on this land, free. This ain't McDonalds big macs, friends. It is the land, right here.
Babayaga: Ho! Brother Pablo, aho! Thank you for the kind words.

Pablo walks over to the other man, still crouching over the wok. He puts his hand on his shoulder and begins to speak again.

Pablo: And one more thing. We are family here. We share. Not just food, we share this space. It is our home. We need to treat our family with respect, the brothers and the sisters. [several others shout “Ho!” in agreement] Now tonight at Main Circle we’ll have this stew. Hell, it might be in your pancakes for the next two weeks if we don’t get more people! [laughter] I respect if you are Vegan, vegetarian, or just don’t like the looks of the stew. But me and my son want to offer it to you and will be serving it at Main Circle tonight. To his family. To welcome us home.

These typical spiritual activities point to an underlying spiritual commonality. These activities are thought to purify individuals in preparation for important events. These activities also encourage a level of introspection uncommon in the outside world. Those who participate in them are often quite vocal about this point, and consider this fact to explain why they often have powerful effects on people’s lives. The Rainbow view is that there is an essential connection between the individual and universal consciousness is expressed by a wide range of Gatherers. Exploring the former, therefore, is considered to be a means of touching the divine. The purification process can thus be read as encouraging participants to get in touch with their natural individuality, stifled
by life in a corrupt Babylon, and thereby facilitating mystical experiences of the divine.

This goal is related to the idea that Rainbow spiritual activities specific effects on unseen yet real energies. Details the flow of these unseen energies comprise a fairly common part of Rainbow spiritual discourse. Many Rainbows speak of each person as emitting a particular sort of energy or vibration, often called a vibe, in the same way that the New Age movement might talk about auras. These vibes are not static, but fluidly parallel moods, changes in mental states, and longer term personality shifts. Interactions between people are also described as having distinctive vibes. The purification process apparent at Gatherings is felt to have a benevolent influence on personal vibes and, by extension, to bring those borne of relationships into harmony with one another.

Those who speak of such energies or vibes are aware that they are fantastic representations, something talked about in a playful and often ceremonial tone. They are not, however, considered unreal. That is, such energies are felt to have a sort of reality that is differently, not less real than everyday objects. Within the suspended reality of Rainbow life, the imagination is felt to be a powerful human sense with a definite influence on the material world. Ritually describing people, interactions, and Gatherings in such terms may be thought of serving a psychological function similar to the pathworking exercises encountered in New Age practices.

Conceiving of the universe as a flow of energies is not uncommon crossculturally. The Tukano, as one example, speak of the energy of universe as
one big, interconnected circuit\textsuperscript{30}. For them, understanding the way the elements that make up this circuit relate to one another is an important aspect of the spiritual life of healers. The !Kung, as another example, conduct their ceremonies with the express mission of getting in touch with "n'um spiritual energy"\textsuperscript{31}, and thereby gain a means to influence the human sphere. Similar concepts of unseen energy, and its utilization to transform the world, are a distinct facet of Rainbow spirituality.

September 1998, Shawnee National Forest

Dinner Circle was significantly larger tonight than it has been throughout the Gathering so far. We are about a week away from the official start of the Gathering, two weeks from the peak. As is typical for a southern road Gathering, Seed Camp has been mostly populated by A-Campers and Road Dogs. The balance is starting to shift, and the interior of the Gathering is starting to fill in with tents and tarps. Two new Kitchens showed up on site today, one early enough in the morning to have already contributed to the evening meal. This traditionally large Regional is beginning to feel more like a Rainbow Gathering than it has for the past few weeks.

Until now, it has been overwhelmed by A-Camp, and norms about alcohol and fighting in the interior of the Gathering have not been closely heeded. This has


been a source of worry for some other Gatherers, as serious violence has erupted in past years. The large number of incoming Rainbows is therefore a source of relief, as it beginning to seem possible that this will be a healthy Gathering after all. Its population is still about seventy percent male and adult, but the gender gap has narrowed quite a bit. A small Kiddie Village has been established, maybe the most important sign that a Rainbow Gathering is finally underway.

Drum Circle, now taking place around a Heartfire that was enlarged this afternoon, has a jovial feel to it tonight. There are at least two dozen drums going, and the sound echoes throughout the forest in a way it hasn’t before. Chants are being performed as well, which almost never takes place during Seed Camp.

I noticed earlier this evening that there are now four poles, stripped three-inch diameter logs, erected in a hundred foot or so square around the Heartfire. They are painted with stripes of color, and are decorated with different sorts of feathers. I asked an older Rainbow who came down from a Gathering I just attended in Wisconsin what they were when I first saw them, and he told me to stay at Drum Circle late tonight and he’d show me. Fisher, as he is called, is in his fifties, and told me he is originally from Boston when I met him a few weeks ago. He has been coming to Rainbow since the late 1970s, and is considered something of an important Elder by his compatriots. He has been charged with the task of holding several minor Rainbow relics, including a Chalice given to the movement by a Coptic priest who visited a Gathering in the late 1980s and a Tibetan prayer bell reportedly blessed by the Dalai Lama, the latter of which he has with him tonight.
We sit facing the Heartfire, at the back of the crowd, by now six people deep, which is ringing it. My nearest neighbors back at camp, a man named Twain and a woman called Dawn, both in their late twenties, sit to my other side. They have come here from Columbia Missouri, not too far away from here, out of curiosity. They had heard of Rainbow before, and finally decided to check out a nearby event. I have the impression that they've been disappointed at what they have seen over course of the past week, hardly surprising considering the rather rough character of the Gathering so far. Still, they are good natured people, and are obviously excited by the drumming tonight.

After sitting and enjoying a round of chanting, I remind Fisher of my question regarding the four poles in the ground by way of mentioning to the couple that the elder said he'd tell me about them. He smiles, rubs his white beard, and says that they're for a meditation some Rainbows like to do. He tells me it is a meditation on the energy of the Gathering.

Adam: And the sticks, they're part of it?

Fisher: We call those the Peace Poles. They form the directions around the Heartfire. Some people like to send energy a certain way, like towards the dawn or sunset, or to another part of the world. So they show the directions. And that's useful for getting around the Gathering too.

Adam: But how do you tell which one is which?
Fisher: By the colors. It's not just Rainbow, they're from American Indian prayers. I don't know how we started doing it though. We paint red on the northern side, that's the red road. That's like the Rainbow trail. Then the yellow on the east, there's the rising sun. South is white, for the purity of the earth. And then west is the blue, dark blue or sometimes black, for the setting sun. The sun is setting on the west, the whole western world, and then the red road shows us, the next step.

Twain and Dawn say nothing but look with curiosity at Fisher. This seems to be what they wanted to find at the Gathering, something traditional and esoteric, and they listen intently, though it is a bit hard to hear him over the echoing drums. The older man continues.

Fisher: They are like antennas, they absorb the energies on the land here, everyone's energy, they pick up all the vibes. That all goes into the Heartfire, and then it goes out. Out into the world, to the four directions. And you can focus it to one place or another.

Adam: What vibes? What do you mean by that?

Fisher: Well, like I said, this is a meditation. It maybe ain't science, but who knows? There are all sorts of vibes science can't explain, so who knows? But the whole world, and the whole universe, is just one being, so the flow of the vibes is like blood through the body. There are complex vibes flowing all the time [he
taps the brass bell, making it ring slightly]. Some vibes are unhealthy, cancer, and that's Babylon, Babylon creates that. So we send out the healing vibes, I think of it like rainbow colored, I see that in my visions. But it can go out there and heal the whole thing, but we have to make sure we're sending out the right energies. You can see the colors of the four directions, picking up the energies from the Gathering, and making a rainbow. And it comes out of the Heartfire, out into the universe.

By positing the existence of an unseen energy flow that connects different elements, through such visualization exercises, the idea of harnessing powers unknown in the corrupt, outer world becomes more convincing to participants. Further, assuming such a role endows participants with a sense of control over the outer world, as though they have special insights into the universe's true nature, inherited from a venerable tradition of esoteric wisdom. Building an alternative society devoted to a perceived spiritual struggle for the survival of the earth lends a strong sense of purpose and empowerment to individual Gatherers. This perception also renders one of the more interesting features of the Rainbow calendar more meaningful than it might seem at first glance.

The idea that they can contribute to world peace and healing through cultivating the proper energies or vibes is often voiced in explaining why the Fourth of July is such an important part of the Rainbow year. Admittedly, there may be more mundane reasons for why it is chosen as the Peak of the largest event, the weather is generally good and many people (including students) are on vacation at this time of year, but Rainbows proudly declare that the day is particularly sacred for another reason. It is Independence Day in the United
States. In a tradition that dates back to their early resistance to the Vietnam war, Rainbows seek to counter the bellicosity represented by what is a highly militarized holiday in mainstream society. By focusing their spiritual consciousness, presumably honed by the purifying and meditative activities conducted throughout the rest of the year, on changing the world, Rainbows consider themselves engaged in a form of spiritual insurrection.

July 2000, Bitterroot National Forest

The children broke the silence at Rainbow Noon. It had been quite an interesting experience all morning, with tens of thousands of people going about their preparations in silence. The distant pop of fireworks, shot off by locals celebrating the Fourth of July, occasionally interrupted the stillness. Otherwise the only sounds than could be heard were the playful vocalizations of children and dogs, both excited by the air of ceremony surrounding the morning.

The Gathering's children, with painted faces, bells, and some musical instruments, marched parade fashion in a line from Kid Village to Main Circle. Adults in Main Circle stood pronouncing the Om, hands interlocked in the traditional manner, as the children approached. When the Kid Village parade reached Main Circle, loud cheers and shouts of "We love you!" erupted from the crowd. Celebratory drumming commenced, echoing throughout the mountain valley.
People eventually sit down where they are. There are thousands of people here, the circle of seated Gatherers is massive. Prayers and Heartsongs are to begin. The circle of people is so physically large that the first literally have to shout as loud as she can to be heard. Gaya, who I have known for about a year, is an accomplished public speaker, and has told me that she often facilitates the beginning of the Fourth of July Heartsong ceremony. Since I know how loud she usually speaks, it is striking how quiet she sounds here even though she is yelling, due to the size of the circle.

Gaya:
Aho! Aho! We love you!

[loud shouts of "we love you" go up from the crowd]

We love you, Rainbow People everywhere, we love you! Join us here! Today! Today is the Fourth day of July, a big holiday out there. Independence Day!

[cheering]

And we can help them celebrate with our love! We can send out our prayers we've prayed, our visions we've had, all the way out there into Babylon. So let's make it be peace and love, not their bombs and greed! Let our energy flow like a rainbow out of this circle. Let's let them know we love them!

We love you! [repeated loudly by crowd]
VIII. SPIRITUAL HEALING

The recurring emphasis on spiritual purity corresponds to a strong Rainbow interest in bringing benevolent change to a troubled world. This is said to be characteristic of the New Age generally, which is often marked by its "concern with healing and holistic emphasis". Linking healing and spirituality, which perhaps seems strange to mainstream society, is often done in other cultures. The !Kung, for instance, engage in healing trances as the high point of their central spiritual ritual. Myerhoff presents another interesting example of this link, noting the "rapid oscillation between mythical and physiological themes used in healing" among the Huichol. Rainbows do something of the same thing, and consider healing to be a spiritual matter as much as a physical one.

As we shall see, much of the healing power of Rainbow is manifest on a personal level. Since there is gentle social pressure to participate in this cleansing process, people are quietly encouraged to give up harmful habits, at least temporarily. Significant results often come of this. Most notably, it often leads drunks and drug addicts to become sober. Quite a few Gatherers, for instance, first came to Rainbow for the partying atmosphere of A-Camp, and turned their lives around as they became increasingly involved with other aspects of the group. Gatherings provide a sort of retreat where people can rectify problems in their lives and become familiar with new, healthier lifestyles.

Rainbow events create a liminal space where people can experiment with

---

new habits and beliefs. The gregarious nature of Gatherings fosters an atmosphere of social support for self-improvement efforts which is difficult to achieve in the outside world. Further, the collective nature of Rainbow's material base makes it possible for individuals to devote time and energy to non-economic pursuits. Since the needs of food and shelter are met through casual collective labor, each person is able to work as much or as little as he or she likes. This allows for a level of economic flexibility those used to struggling at work or on the streets might not have in their lives outside of Rainbow.

July 1999 Allegheny National Forest

I first met Shanghai Sam in A-Camp at a Florida Gathering this past winter. Despite his tiny frame, he had a reputation for seriously hurting fellow A-Campers in fights. It was a constant problem for him, having to fight. As an immigrant from Cambodia, visiting locals and some of the regular Rainbow drunks harassed him racially. They probably meant no real harm, but his violent temper had flared up on several occasions.

Seeing him sitting deep inside the Gathering this afternoon surprises me. I am walking down the muddy trail parallel to the swollen creek that bisects the Gathering site, and he sits on the other side. He's playing a wooden flute, and waves to me as I approach. I wave back, my curiosity piqued by his uncharacteristic friendliness.

He calls me over from across the narrow creek, and I wade to the other side. It is hot this afternoon, and the knee-deep water is cold and refreshing. I sit down,
leaning on a rock next to him, and he asked me what I’m up to. I tell him about
the teach-in at Calm this afternoon. The Gathering’s numbers are growing by the
day, and Calm is a bit overwhelmed with Tourists suffering from bee stings,
stubbed toes, and other minor injuries. It was decided at a Council earlier in the
week that people involved with the various Kitchens should learn to take care of
the more mundane problems.

Sam tells me that he had been planning on going, and that he actually knows a
little about field first aid from his childhood experiences in Cambodia. I’ve never
really talked to Sam before, as he is considered to be a rather dangerous drunk,
and am struck by his commitment to helping out the Gathering. I ask how he
heard about the teach-in, and he says that he was talking to one of its facilitators
about it the other day, a man named Crow.

Sam: Crow really helped me out. I know him.

Adam: Yeah?

Sam: You know him?

Adam: Yeah, I see him all the time at different Gatherings.

Sam: He’s a good guy. I stopped drinking because of him. He really helped me.

I congratulate Sam, and he looks at me with tears in his eyes.

Sam: I never thought I’d see the day. I never thought I could. But here I am, no
drink for almost a week.

We talk for a while more, he tells me about how he first came to Rainbow, two years ago, in a drunken haze. He never really knew why he stayed, he just didn’t really have any other place to go he guesses. Although he says he resents the teasing from A-Campers, he is impressed by how kind people are in other parts of the Gathering. He tells me that he’s been staying at Crow’s camp for the past week, and has stopped drinking.

Sam: Yup, Crow always comes up there to A-Camp. He reads his bible to us, and just talks. He is very nice to me even though I am not a Christian, not like some people. I went to Sweat [to a Sweat Lodge] with him, and am not up in A-Camp since then at all.

Adam: So the Sweat Lodge helped you? That’s what helped you stop drinking?

Sam: Not only the Sweat. Just everyone in here is so nice to me. I can’t remember how nice everyone was. Like respect. Why would anyone go back up there? Not me. I have a new life.

The sort of personal healing which takes place within the Rainbow context is sometimes simply medical in nature. People often come to Gatherings when ill. In one sense, they function as places to get over short-term illnesses. This is due to the fact that Gatherings provide nomadic participants with a safe space in which they can rest, eat well, and enjoy pleasant company. Otherwise homeless people sometimes come to Gatherings with fairly severe contagious diseases, such as pneumonia and even tuberculosis. Because of the risk of communicating
such illnesses to others in attendance, Calm volunteers teach Gatherers about
how to reduce their chances of spreading. Such education generally consists of
lessons on how to recognize symptoms of infectious sicknesses, and sanitation
measures that can be taken to prevent epidemic. When sharing food, beverages,
or smokes, Gatherers are very careful to avoid contact with other people's saliva.
It is customary for each person to bring his or her own bowl, cup and spoon to
Gatherings so that dishes are only used individually.

People who show symptoms of contagious illness are directed to Calm by
other Gatherers, and are encouraged to camp nearby to it so that they can receive
treatment and avoid excessive contact with other Gatherers. The free treatment
provided by Calm is the only source of health care available to many who come
to Rainbow's events. As mentioned, trained health professionals can usually be
found among the ranks of any particular Calm encampment's volunteers. Sick
people benefit from the opportunity to be diagnosed and told how to treat their
illnesses. Calm facilities nearly always have stocks of antibiotics on hand, which
can be very useful in treating the sorts of diseases found throughout homeless
populations. By spending their recovery camping near experienced healers, sick
people at Rainbow receive a level of follow up care that is unparalleled in
mainstream outpatient settings.

Patients of another sort come to Gatherings as well. People with terminal
illnesses attend Rainbow events with a desire to partake of its reputed healing
properties. Some come seeking a new perspective on their situation. The
emphasis on mindfulness and meditation at Rainbow events allows such patients
to reflect on their disease and the life they have left. It can be a deeply
transformative experience for such people, who sometimes see Rainbow as
helping them find the inner peace they need to face the prospect of death. The healing such Gatherers seek is more psychological and spiritual than physical. Others, however, come literally expecting to find cures for their illnesses. Quite interestingly, such terminal patients sometimes actually do find that participation in Rainbow events makes them feel healthier and even extends their lives beyond doctors’ predictions.

June 1999, Allegheny National Forest

I first met Prudence a few months ago, at a Regional Gathering in Kentucky. I had been struck by her sound judgment while working with her at L-Camp, monitoring the rather elaborate efforts of high level Forest Service Leos to disrupt the Gathering. No one quite knew why the Leos were conducting such intense surveillance of that rather small Regional Gathering, but she suggested that it should simply be taken as training for this year’s Annual.

It’s good to see that she’s made it this Gathering. She told me back in Kentucky that she’d been given six months to live last summer, and that there really wasn’t anything doctors could do to prevent her liver cancer from ultimately killing her. She still seems strong, almost a full year after that pessimistic diagnosis.

A woman in her late fifties, Prudence has lived a rough life. She was a career army officer, and had served in Vietnam for several years in its supply corps. When she returned home to New Mexico, she got married and had two kids. Tragically, her children died in a fire that was suspected of being due to arson. Her husband didn’t cope well and became addicted to painkillers. She eventually
left him, and moved to Denver where she started a marginally successful used bookstore. Then, when she was diagnosed with cancer, she attended a Colorado Regional Gathering with some friends.

Prudence has been traveling with Rainbow ever since, and is well respected by fellow Gatherers for her forthrightness and bravery. Though she's only been involved with Rainbow for a year or so, her reputation for facilitating L-Camp is widely known.

She shows me around L-Camp and introduces me to the two other volunteers. They've been busy all afternoon taking affidavits about the road blocks on the main road from town, some Gatherers' vehicles had been searched with drug dogs despite refusing to give consent.

I tell her that she looks healthy, and that it's something of a relief to see that she's well and hard at work putting together a good L-Camp. She thanks me and laughs, stating that it surprises her how good she feels.

Prudence: Adam, I'll tell you. I feel better than the day I went into that doctor's office. I have energy, and just feel like my old self. I still might go anytime, but I feel great, damn it!

I jokingly tell her that it must be all the alternative healing techniques her Calm volunteer friends insist they try out on her. I know from the last Gathering that she is extremely skeptical about the efficacy of the rather unorthodox treatments they prescribe for her, reike massage, crystal healing and so forth.
Prudence: Ah, well. I don't know about all that. But hell, it makes me feel good that they love me enough to try. And who knows, maybe it does something. I do feel good.

Adam: So you really think all that helps?

Prudence: Well, at least it helps that they try and that they're thinking about me. Just being out here in the fresh air, keeping active, that goes a long way. But feeling that love from so many people, that does a lot too. I'm still alive, right? And I feel really fine. And I have good company. There's something you just can't argue with!

Many Gatherers feel that the healing their movement seeks to achieve is of a wider biological scope. Rather than merely being a means for individuals to improve their own health, it is felt by many that the movement exists to bring about a large-scale environmental renewal. This attitude is bolstered by Hipstorical legends claiming that Rainbow is the fulfillment of ancient prophecies about the healing of the world after a time of environmental degradation. Even if the claim that Rainbow is a fulfillment of ancient prophecy is not to be taken literally, it is a powerful statement about the belief of many Gatherers that the movement can help reverse damage done to the natural world by modern society. Learning to understand something of the complex way that species interact, simply by living in the woods, does much to foster a sense of connection to the natural world. It is sometimes pointed out by Gatherers that this can lead to a reassessment of attitudes towards the natural world characteristic in mainstream culture.
This contrast of values is illustrated by Rainbow criticisms of the agency that oversees the National Forest lands they usually use for Gatherings. Forest Service is legally required to consider the environmental impact of commercial activities in areas under its jurisdiction. Rainbows often allege that the biologists Forest Service hires to determine whether or not a proposed commercial venture will have deleterious effects are under pressure from the agencies to not probe too deeply into possible environmental consequences of potentially lucrative ventures. The logging and, less commonly, mining activities which take place on Forest Service land provide a tax base for local communities, which would otherwise be left without adequate funds for community services. Restrictions on commercial activities in nearby forests are considered by many locals to impede economic development and thereby jeopardize job security.

To many in mainstream American society, environmental concerns seem to contradict practical considerations, as they are likely to slow down the process of resource development. This, it is feared, may be deleterious to local rural economies and the way of life to which most Americans are accustomed. Those espousing more environmentally sensitive views are therefore portrayed as misguided dreamers with little understanding of the wider impact of their radical beliefs on actual people. They may even be depicted as caring more for a handful of obscure species than they do for the welfare of human beings. Since they often do have significantly different material interests in Federal lands than their non-Rainbow neighbors, and are transient (if often cyclical) occupants of the natural areas in which they camp, Gatherers are considered by many locals as interlopers with a propensity to meddle in the lives of those residing more permanently in areas bordering the forests.

Forest Service is under considerable pressure from economically interested parties to allow the natural resources under their control to be
extracted for short-term financial gains. Indeed, it has been asserted by prominent environmental theorists that there is an increasing tendency for government agencies to consider conservation to mean "in practice the development of resources as quickly as technically possible with the available capital". Rainbows, on the other hand, consider such an attitude highly inappropriate, even blasphemous. For them, wilderness has an immediate value in its natural state. Living forests offer a means of satisfying many of their basic needs.

Naturally downed wood is utilized for cooking and heating fuel, live trees are used as structures from which the ubiquitous plastic tarps which shelter Gatherers are suspended, springs provide water supplies, particular plants are selectively harvested for healing purposes, and so on. Moreover, it is the secluded character of National Forests which lends an adequate land base on which temporary autonomous zones can be created. Were it not for the presence of significant tracks of wilderness, this nomadic subculture would be unable to find places of refuge from a society they consider corrupt and threatening. It creates the possibility of establishing liminal spaces wherein the group can minimize its dependence on mainstream America. Efforts by Gatherers to preserve the integrity of natural spaces can in this sense be considered tantamount to an attempt to preserve a kind of freedom the Rainbow Family celebrates.

The interest in environmental healing expressed within the group reflects more than the simple desire to preserve resources that it utilizes for its continuation, however. Forest Service is nominally concerned with maximizing the benefit of natural resources to the nation's human population. Rainbows, on

---

the other hand, consider people to be but one of a multitude of species which share the land. They often emphasize that humans, despite pretenses to the contrary, are not significantly different from or superior to other forms of life. The anthropocentric focus common within the Forest Service bureaucracy and its operational methodology is often contrasted with what Gatherers consider their own more holistic consciousness. Decisions influencing resource extraction from Federal lands, they argue, are therefore unjustly biased towards serving human economic needs and ignore the longer term implications of such activities for other species.

A theme often present within Rainbow spiritual discourse is that Gatherers are more in touch with the natural world than mainstream society. Some chants describe the connection with nature in familial terms. Other species are referred to as brothers and sisters, and the basic elements of nature as mother and father. An interesting gender dichotomy appears here; earth is often portrayed as a mother and sky as a father, as is also the case in other cultures. Sensitivity towards the relationship between humanity and nature is considered to be a definitive aspect of Rainbow, and to endow the movement with extraordinary powers of perception. In some sense, it is this awareness of the innately natural character of humanity that distinguishes Rainbow, marking it off as more pure or more enlightened than mainstream society. These chants then, collapse the distinction between humanity and nature.

Heya heya heya heya ho/Heya heya heya heya ho/Mother I feel you under my feet/Mother I feel your heart-beat/Earth my body/Gaya my heart/Father I see you when the fire shines/Light of the fire gonna make us high/Earth my

---

body/Fire my spirit/Earth my body/Fire my spirit/Mother I hear you in the river song/Eternal waters flowing on and on/Earth my body/Water my blood/Earth my body/Water my blood/Father I see you when the eagle flies/Flight of the eagle gonna take us high/Earth my body/Sky my breath

According to one common Rainbow view, it is only through coming to a spiritual awareness of the innate interconnectivity of all natural species that the biological crisis posed by industrial society can be overcome. Encouraging a contemplation of the essential unity of all life, and accepting the mutual dependence of seemingly unrelated species, is held to be a necessary step towards correcting the unhealthy biological atomism encountered in mainstream society. When people think solely in terms of the human good in making resource allocation choices, for instance, the decision necessarily excludes a wider understanding of its implications for the natural world. By developing a culture of sensitivity towards the (often subtle) natural relationships which found within and between ecosystems, based on the assumption of an ultimate unity of life, much Rainbow spirituality seeks to counter the Western bias of seeing different species, and especially homo sapiens, as fundamentally distinct from one another.

More practically, Gatherers are often adept naturalists, they occasionally record the presence of species which would otherwise be overlooked by Forest Service and the logging companies which seek to extract timber from public lands. This information has been instrumental in overturning approval for several timber sales. Rainbows often have contacts among local environmental

---

5 recorded July 2000, Bitterroot National Forest
advocacy groups, and may provide them with records proving the presence of rare or endangered species, such as photographs or formal affidavits drawn up with the help of L-Camp lawyers. Since Forest Service is (at least for the time being) required to allow a period in which the public can appeal its internal environmental impact assessments, such evidence can provide environmental activists with sufficient grounds to legally delay and potentially stop timber sales.

One important effect of Gatherings is that they bring huge numbers of people into specific areas of the National Forest system. Forest Service decisions about whether or not to approve sales legally must consider how many people use the area for recreation. As they bring tens of thousands of people to fairly small sections of forest, Gatherings threaten timber sales by greatly changing recreational use statistics. Less commonly, it is alleged that some Rainbows may directly interfere with timber company operations. It is not unheard of for logging equipment such as bulldozers near Gatherings to be sabotaged. While it is impossible to say for certain who is responsible for such mischief, it may well involve people associated with the Rainbow Family.

Timber company representatives are thus often outspoken critics of the Forest Service's 'allowing' Rainbow events to happen. They sometimes publicly protest Gatherings by organizing other locals and addressing the media. Ironically, such timber interests often claim that they do so for environmental reasons. Such an incident took place at the 1995 National in Arizona. Gatherers were camped in a section of the Carson National Forest that a timber company sought to clear cut. A spokesman for a local logging rights association contacted newspapers to denounce Forest Service for not forcing Rainbows to submit their
plans for analysis and approval before going ahead with the Gathering. He claimed that the environmental impact of having so many people in the area would be deleterious, and that Rainbows were getting preferential treatment from Forest Service and environmental groups. This man stated that the "so-called environmentalists, the prima donnas who are conspicuous by their silence, their absence, in this whole thing"\(^6\) were hypocrites for not holding Rainbows to the same standards as logging companies. This biased treatment, he contended, was due to the fact that Rainbows were the environmental groups' "constituency out there, their letter writers, the backbone of their support"\(^7\).

Rainbows I spoke with found it rather ridiculous to criticize their Gatherings on environmental grounds, which Forest Service itself states have few long-term adverse effects on the local environment\(^8\), while condoning the impact the logging industry has on National Forest lands. The charge, however, that Rainbow is comprised of environmental activists is not altogether unfounded. Though it is certainly true that one would be hard-pressed to find a Gatherer unsympathetic to the ideals expressed in such activity, most Gatherers are not affiliated with environmental activism. Some of the Rainbow Family's constituents are, on the other hand, deeply involved in environmental justice organizations. People claim connections to a range of specific groups, some which operate through legislative and legal means, others which are more directly confrontational. Among the latter category are such names as Greenpeace, Earth First, and even the notorious Earth Liberation Front.

---

\(^6\) Stauffer, Mike. June 22 1995. 'Locals React to Rainbows'. Taos News

\(^7\) Stauffer, Mike. June 22 1995. 'Locals React to Rainbows'. Taos News

\(^8\) 1999 National Rainbow Event Resource Summary USDA, Forest Service, Region 9, Allegheny National Forest
While it would certainly be an overstatement to say that Rainbow is an environmental group, it does provide a rare opportunity for people affiliated with various branches of the environmental justice movement to meet and interact. Most larger Regionals and Annuals have several workshops dealing directly with environmental activism. These are usually fairly open forums where people compare experiences, discuss tactics, and the like. Occasionally they will be narrower in scope, and seek to inform about issues specific to the local bioregion. Connections made at such workshops certainly do translate into action in the world outside Rainbow. Although some Gatherers are relatively indifferent to such undertakings, other people may travel to specific environmental actions in caravans organized at Rainbow events.

In fact, it is often this connection to environmentalism, and particularly its more radical branches, which is credited with inspiring so much interest in Rainbow from law enforcement. According to many Gatherers, the surveillance conducted on Rainbow is done as part of investigations into groups such as the three mentioned above. Though this is probably not convincing as a complete explanation, it may be a factor, and investigations are quite extensive and resource intensive. Because of this some Gatherers, even those deeply involved with environmental activism themselves, resist being associated with groups which practice tactics they find objectionable. There may be a sort of generational factor at work here, with older Gatherers being most vocal about the need to prevent violence and property destruction from sullying the reputation of activists everywhere.

---

June 2000, Allegheny National Forest

Despite the cold winds and rain, about fifty people came out for the workshop about environmental activism on Federal land which has been advertised at Info for the past week. We are assembled at Popcorn Palace, a Kitchen which, as its name suggests, is well known throughout Rainbow for serving very large quantities of popcorn to snacking Gatherers. The popcorn is typically flavored with spices not often associated with popcorn. Tonight we are treated to huge bowls of popcorn with sugar and cinnamon, curry powder, and brewers yeast as we sit under the patched, olive drab tarps that cover the Kitchen complex. The Bliss Fire is going strong, and our Popcorn Palace hosts bring continuous cups of chamomile tea and offer blankets to anyone who seems cold.

This Gathering has drawn large numbers from the northeastern United States, and many attending the discussion tonight are from Vermont. Those of us from other areas are impressed as they recount a series of environmental victories achieved in that state over the past decade. Most notably, they tell us of how a handful of Earth First activists successfully petitioned state courts for injunctions leading to the complete cessation of commercial logging in Vermont’s beautiful Green Mountain National Forest. One older man, called Moose, was centrally involved in this effort. He describes to the specific legal battles that led to the ultimate outcome, presenting us with large laminated maps of the forest and a time line indicating the particular timber sales that the group contested along the way. The congregation is impressed.

Activists from other bioregions speak up, expressing wishes that purely litigious
strategies would yield real results in their respective states. It is felt that few states in the US have populations and courts as sympathetic as those of Vermont, known throughout the country for its rather progressive political climate. Legal tactics alone are felt to not be quite as effective elsewhere. Particularly in western states, where the timber lobby is often deeply entrenched in local politics, it is difficult to prevent cutting on National Forest land by appealing to the court system.

A young woman I know from Oregon, by the name of Gypsy, speaks up. She begins talking about the tensions between loggers and activists in the Pacific northwest, and challenges the strategy the Vermont family describes. Gypsy states that environmentalists in her area learned long ago that state politicians are so beholden to the large timber companies that, in her opinion, only direct action promises any real success.

Gypsy [addressing Moose directly]: I guess what I'm saying, Moose, is that we've gone the legal route. I guess it can match them once in a while, but what are you going to do? The entire system is against us, when the entire system is corrupt. I say we need to tie ourselves down, block the roads, spike as many stands as possible, and just goddamn whatever to make it cost something to log our forests. There's not really anything else we can do but slow them down by whatever ways.

Moose replies to Gypsy that he respects her opinion, but honestly thinks that such tactics only anger local populations and lead to a situation where it is impossible to develop bonds with the people who live around the forests. He asks her to think about the long-term impact of directly confrontational
approaches.

Moose: You might be able to slow them up for a while, but then what, you can't spike every tree, can you? They just keep doing what they do, and you're the bad guys as far as local people know. Wouldn't it be better to try to get the people on our side through educating, ain't nobody I can imagine who thinks its right that taxpayers shell out a billion dollars a year so the timber companies can chop down everything they see. That's not even good for the loggers, and the smarter among them know it. They're being used by the companies, and they know where the jobs'll go when the forests are gone.

Moose's partner, a woman in her fifties by the name of Fern, adds her voice to the conversation. She presses Gypsy on the arson of a Forest Service district headquarters in the Cascade National Forest as an extreme example of how direct action can earn environmental activists bad names in the opinion of the wider public.

Gypsy: Well, I wasn't involved with that little fiasco. But I know people who were, and I can tell you their hearts were in the right place. I don't mean like that, that was just sort of crazy, and you're right, Fernie. Even that just slowed down the Klamath sale while they investigated, even that didn't stop it. But it sure got people's attention, and that's what we need to get. To get the message on the news, on the TV, on the radio, in the papers, just out there. People have no way of knowing what's up in their forests, we need to wake them up to it before the forests are parking lots.

Fern: Yup. That got their attention all right! It got the feddies [federal
agents] attention at least! Now they have an excuse to mess with all of us, they just have to say we’re ELF [Earth Liberation Front, the group that claimed responsibility for the arson] and anything goes. Just like a good old fashioned witch hunt, and the public couldn’t care less because as far as they know we’re just a few wild eyed fanatics, not just people like them. What good is that? Does that make our job easier or harder?

Outsider suspicion is exacerbated by rumors that the Rainbow movement is connected with the sort of direct action campaigns that use property damage as a tactic. Though the occasional sabotage of logging equipment or spiking of trees does happen near a Gathering site, such actions are relatively uncommon and are not generally carried out by long-term Gatherers. Proponents of direct action tactics in the name of environmental justice are not violent in a literal sense. However, highly publicized cases of property damage at the hands of activists create a public perception that radical environmentalist groups, and by extension Rainbows, are literally dangerous. There is a sense among logging communities, probably one which is prevalent throughout many sectors of mainstream rural American culture, that radical environmentalists actually harbor deeply destructive agendas, including the disintegration of Western civilization, disruption of economic stability, and even human extinction.

There is a belief among many Gatherers that failure to reign in ecologically destructive economic impulses, ultimately, will lead to a large-scale human catastrophe. They make the point that our own long-term success as a species is necessarily tied to that of the others in our environment. They actually perceive themselves as engaged in a struggle for human survival, and against an industrial culture that is unsustainable and even pathological. That said, there is
a good deal of pessimism about the outcome of this struggle and consider it
doomed to failure because of the overwhelming imbalance of power in favor of a
destructive, industrial culture. The point is made that environmental degradation
will result in the extinction of many species, including humans, but that others
are likely to survive even the most severe cataclysm. While I have not
experienced Rainbows actively advocating human extinction, some do feel it to
be inevitable because of current practices in mainstream culture.

Ideas that could be described as apocalyptic are often apparent in
Rainbow discourse about healing. This may at first strike outsiders as alarmingly
strange, even proof that the Rainbow Family is a cult. In fact, apocalyptic
speculation is not all that uncommon among spiritual seekers in other social
contexts. It plays a key role in New Age spirituality. Indeed, for many in the
outside society apocalyptic discourse is directly tied to “awareness of the New
Age movement”10 in general.

Apocalyptic theories abound in the wider society as well. As one scholar
describes, “end-time expectations go right to the heart of American religion”11.
This theme is quite common in evangelical Christian sermons, for instance. Such
ideas are not confined to religious circles. As Kyle notes, “sometimes
apocalypticism can infect the wider culture”12. This was certainly the case during
the tenure of my fieldwork. In the years leading up to 2000 AD people all over
the world were concerned about cataclysmic change due to the Y2K computer
programming error. Worries over the Y2K bug were especially acute in America.
This was perhaps partly due to the venerable American tradition of apocalyptic
speculation. The major factor, however, was the country’s very heavy reliance on

computer technology. At the time many in the mainstream postulated that American society would face a monumental crisis when this computer technology failed. Mainstream America prepared for disaster in the months leading up to the millennium. People everywhere stockpiled food and dry goods, and interest in survivalism surged as this panic intensified. This clearly impacted the Rainbow movement. Some considered credited Y2K speculation with swelling Rainbow’s numbers around the millennium, and it certainly became a frequent subject of Rainbow spiritual discourse within Gatherings.

The Y2K crisis illustrated an interesting feature of Rainbow spirituality. Most people in mainstream society saw the Y2K bug as something to fear, and were quite unhappy that society should be plunged into change because of this programming oversight. Rainbows, on the other hand, spoke rather positively about the prospect of computer failure. They saw the anticipated event as a major opportunity for encouraging healthy change. The self-destruction of modern technology and the bureaucracy it supports frankly thrilled many Gatherers. This speaks to the anti-institutional nature of much Rainbow spirituality, a feature that scholars have associated with apocalyptic movements\(^{13}\). In spite of the disarmingly playful and peaceful tone of Gathering spirituality, it often speaks to a real interest in radical world transformation.

Unlike much of American society, then, Rainbow tends to consider apocalyptic prophecies as sources of hope and inspiration. The anticipated crisis, however it is described, is not felt to actually be an end per se, but a new beginning. This is often stated in evolutionary terms, as though the apocalyptic event is destined to spur “the human race to its next step in evolutionary development”\(^{14}\). For Gatherers, crisis is a natural evolutionary step which

---


humanity should embrace, not fear. In typically ludic fashion, Gatherers project their sincere interests in world healing into rather outlandish stories. They express an urgent sense of crisis, as though the world were on the brink of major transformation. Gatherers often think of themselves, and their spiritual activities, as fulfilling a manifest destiny. The apocalyptic speculations that abound within Rainbow spiritual discourse serve as a kind of emboldening mythology. Gatherers are able to think of themselves as participating in a wider spiritual revolution, and not merely as lone actors. This adds an aura of power to what outsiders might see as rather mundane actions.

October 1998, Shawnee National Forest

Dragon's Tooth Kitchen has become synonymous at this Gathering with the delicious hot cocoa they serve every afternoon. People from all over the site linger around its rather small encampment for the opportunity to enjoy a cup or two of the stuff, made from dark chocolate, powdered milk, brown sugar and a variety of spices all brewed up in a large pot over the cooking fire. The delicacy has been quite popular at this Gathering, marked by extended bouts of cold and damp weather, and provides a welcome excuse for people to break from the day's chores and socialize with friends camped throughout this rather diffuse Gathering site.

Located on a hill towards the center of the Gathering, it has recently come to host informal Banking and Main Supply Councils. With the paths throughout this section of the forest slippery from mud, this arrangement has been taken on as a means of avoiding the need for Kitchen representatives to travel all the way to
Main Circle or Front Gate each day, as would typically be done.

The main phase of this Gathering has passed, and the numbers have dropped dramatically this week. There are probably only one hundred and fifty people still here, beginning to dismantle a dozen or so Kitchens. The quick drop in population has left the remaining Gatherers with ample supplies of staple foods, but the presence of delicacy foods has dwindled as the inflow of people has stopped. Dragon's Tooth workers are concerned because animals tore into the last of their chocolate supplies last night. From the tracks it appears to be the work of raccoons.

The Kitchen's regular guests are dismayed to hear that the favorite afternoon beverage isn't available, and are sent to other Kitchens and Main Supply to trade tobacco for chocolate as they gradually arrive this afternoon. Someone must have chocolate, even snickers bars would work, the Kitchen staff declares. Dragon's Tooth has been gifted two large ropes of tobacco grown on an organic farm in Tennessee as a token of gratitude for its hospitality. It has a trade good that is more highly sought than chocolate. Everyone is confident the afternoon's cocoa will be brewed yet, and many set out to ensure that it is.

I know one of the main Kitchen facilitators here from the Gathering in Wisconsin the month before. She is called Cinder and lives most of the year in Milwaukee. We have a common friend from her neighborhood back there, and she is catching a ride home in a van with some space left in it in two days. Since I don't have a vehicle at this Gathering, I am considering going back to Milwaukee for a few weeks until heading west for some of the Regionals coming up there. We sit and discuss the logistics of getting the ride together, finding money for gas, getting
equipment and luggage up to Main Parking, when to meet for departure.

Cinder jokingly refers to the raccoon raid as a sign it’s time for her to move on, and adds that she’s getting a bad cough and suspects it may be pneumonia. Some of the other Gatherers have come down with it, and the best thing to do about it is to get into sturdier shelter. She mentions that this is actually the third time the raccoons have stolen food from the camp, and begins talking about how impressed she is with their ability to adapt to having a human presence in their area.

Cinder: Those things are kind of cool, if you think about it. I guess I think that we’re sort of a plague, or more like a cancer on the planet. We change the whole world, just about. There’s not too many places left, right? But raccoons can always cope.

She gets up and grabs one of the ropes of tobacco stored in the supply tent that was broken into last night. Rolling a cigar-sized cigarette with oversized papers generally used for large spliffs, she continues talking.

Cinder: Well, I sort of see us, just our one animal kind, as malignant, like cancer. Something went wrong with us and we keep spreading out of control. And eventually the mother’ll die from us. But not everything, they’ll be around, some species will still be around. I bet those raccoons are one. But there’s all kinds of animals, and like whatever weeds, they can survive. After we’re gone, and the earth will grow again and die again, and it’s all the cycle of life and natural anyhow.

I begin to remark that she has a depressing way of looking at things. Seeing to
be genuinely annoyed she interrupts me.

Cinder: What? No dude. That’s what I’m saying! Well I see how you’d say it’s depressing for us, but it sure looks realistic to me. But it’s not the end of the world, just us. And the mother can regrow again from the seeds species that are really the strongest survivors. And dude those raccoons aren’t going anywhere!

She lights up her cigarette, takes a few puffs, and coughs violently, curses, and goes on.

Cinder: It’s a fine system, in the long term, it’s balanced. Just maybe we don’t always know it, but it’s balanced.

-
IX. POLITICAL IMPACT

There is a common perception that New Agers are politically apathetic. Such an opinion is often voiced at Rainbow events, and this is a key reason Rainbows don’t like that label. As described, people who seem too removed from reality are often described as a Bliss Ninnies or less commonly Woo-Woos. These unflattering descriptions are also used to criticize people who are totally oblivious to the political impact of Rainbow spirituality. Many Rainbows consider world healing to be a directly political matter. This often contributes to tensions between Rainbows and local populations. Small rural communities tend to be bastions of conservatism, and indeed make up a core constituency of the political right in the United States. Rainbow events, by contrast, attract many people interested in radical politics. As is the case with other realms of belief, there is much variation in political opinion within Rainbow. Many within the Rainbow Family celebrate the fact that it provides a forum for discussion of political matters that may be neglected in American society. Raising political consciousness is considered to be a primary concern of the group.

Considering its roots in the 1960s counterculture, this is probably not surprising. Radical activists have been a part of the Rainbow Family since its inception. Many early Gatherers lived in intentional communities that were involved with draft resistance throughout the Vietnam war. One, the Marble Mount outlaws, was a group in northern Washington engaged in smuggling draft-dodgers across the Canadian border in the late 1960s and early 1970s. According to some Hipstorians, it was at this commune that the original vision of putting on a Rainbow Gathering occurred. Draft resistance was a real part of
early Gathering life, and this point is celebrated by older Gatherers.

Crossing borders illegally is still a small facet of Rainbow's reality. This may be one reason law enforcement agencies spend so much money monitoring Gatherings. It is emphatically not a common part of Rainbow life to cross borders in an illegal manner, and Gatherers would probably question a person as to why he or she needed to evade legal means of travel from one country to another. However, Gatherings provide unique logistical benefits to people wishing to cross into Canada and, less commonly, Mexico. They are often held close to border areas, in vast stretches of wilderness. They are often big enough in population to make it possible for an individual to get lost in the crowd from a law enforcement standpoint, if not the standpoint of other Gatherers. They are places that people can easily hitchhike to and from. Most importantly, they are places where a fugitive can find sympathetic people to help him or her cross borders. Strong friendships are made quickly within Rainbow life, and people's sympathies are often with other Gatherers rather than drug laws.

The Rainbow Family has always been associated with radical political movements, certainly another reason for the law enforcement interest in the group. A handful of old American Indian Movement (AIM) participants still come to Rainbow events. There are anti-nuclear activists, including a few who are part of the Nobel Prize winning group Physicians for Social Responsibility. In the 1980s, many people tied to the solidarity movement protesting Reagan's wars in Central America came to Gatherings. At a time when the Guatemalan military was cracking down its citizenry, many Rainbows involved with the Farm commune in Tennessee traveled to that nation as a form of practical protest against U.S. support for its violently repressive government, and helped local
indigenous groups form collective farms.

All in all, Rainbows are extremely nomadic people. Even those with permanent homes travel quite a bit. This is an intrinsic characteristic of the lifestyle, spending extended periods of time on what Gatherers describe as the Rainbow Trail. Interestingly, many incorporate attendance of activist events into their own personal Rainbow Trail. There is actually a fairly well traveled activist circuit in the United States, with regular gatherings of their own. Rainbow Gatherings provide a safe, anonymous haven to people on this circuit. One might stay the Winter at the large Ocala regional in Florida, then go to neighboring Georgia for the School of the Americas protest in March, attend the annual IMF/World Bank protest in DC in April, and then travel to the National Gathering. Drives between stops are no more than a day in length, and Gatherings present opportunities for free food and lodging. Hence, Rainbow does become an important force in shaping the North American activist scene.

The concept of the Rainbow Trail should not be taken as purely literal. As well as being a way of referring to the specific nomadic routes Gatherers travel, the term also connotes a sort of personal pilgrimage. For many Gatherers pursuing their own nomadic spiritual paths along the Rainbow Trail, the interface between activist events and Gatherings is very important. Gatherings give the individuals a place for familial comfort, prayer, introspection, and physical rejuvenation. Activist events give Rainbows a place to act on the moral insights revealed in their prayers at Gatherings. Spending time in the cathedral of nature, or church, Rainbows describe, is a way to stay spiritually strong while wrestling with Babylon's injustices. Rainbow's empowering character thereby fuels people's personal struggles to transform the world through political
Moreover, Rainbow continues to be a place where people can hone basic skills that they can contribute to activist activities. In the early days of the Rainbow Family, Gatherings benefited from the experiences people had from feeding and housing protesters. Now the situation is somewhat reversed. Kitchens are often encountered at anti-globalization protests throughout North America, utilizing their skills to feed a new generation of activists. For the past thirty odd years, Rainbows have experimented with ways of coordinating necessary social activities. Now they are able to take the strategies they have learned within Gathering life into the outside world. Facilitating mobile Kitchens capable of feeding thousands of people, producing hundreds of gallons of drinkable water from natural springs, providing improvised medical care to a plethora of ailments, and babysitting dozens of children at a time is not easy to do. Learning the best ways of accomplishing these formidable tasks at Gatherings, Rainbows become extremely valuable political activists.

Outsiders may question how a group can be interested in both mystical spirituality and political activism. The mysticism apparent at Gatherings may seem to be so otherworldly that it contradicts anything like traditional political discourse. And to some degree it does; Rainbow's interest in politics is somewhat different than its mainstream counterpart. As we shall see, Gatherers tend to reject neat distinctions between spirituality, politics, and day to day life. It does embody a different approach to political matters than mainstream society tends to take. As Lewis and others have noted, ecstatic and mystical movements often
draw vitality from political stress\(^1\). Rainbow, as a conglomeration of spiritual seekers, must be understood in the context of increasing frustration with politics as understood by the outer world. In it, radicalism and mysticism come together to create a plethora of interesting lifestyles.

January 1999, Black’s Beach, San Diego

It’s about three hours after nightfall and the Drum Circle here on Black’s Beach is going quite strong. There are about a hundred and fifty people, mostly young, jamming away around a small bonfire. This local event is quite popular, and always draws Rainbows from all of southern California together for an evening each month. Seed Camp for the SCROLL (Southern California Rainbow of Living Light) Regional is expected to be underway soon, so this particular Drum Circle has the feel of a staging ground for that event. There are people here from other areas, ready for the Regional to begin.

The upcoming Gathering is a favorite event in the Southwestern bioregion. Every year it attracts up to two thousand at its Peak, including many from other parts of the country. There is an atmosphere of anticipation at this Drum Circle. Local Rainbows feel that they need a bit more time to organize the event properly, however. Water is always a concern at desert Gatherings, and it will take at least a week more to haul enough water barrels to the Kofi Wildlife Refuge, just over the Arizona border.

Faced with the prospect of spending at least an extra week waiting for the Regional to begin, many of those who have traveled to get here are thinking of places to go in the meanwhile. Some of us are probably going to camp in the Kofi Wildlife Refuge and check out the nearby gem show in Quartzsite. A few of the people present are part of a caravan headed to the larger Regional in Florida that is already underway. I am thinking of going that way eventually, but would like to participate in the SCROLL Regional as long as I am out here. That they are stopping at the Western Shoshone reservation on the way interests me though, and I am tempted to go along with the convoy.

I talk with Pablo, a respected Rainbow Elder I've known for about a year. He is from Texas, and needs to get back to his wife and children before those two Gatherings. The convoy, which he pretty much facilitates, has evidently been out in this part of the country organizing support for a rally on the Western Shoshone reservation. The rally is to protest the U.S. government's continued use of a nuclear proving ground on their land. The main protest is scheduled for Mother's Day, the first Sunday in May. As Pablo describes, a core of activists will camp camping at a secret location in the adjacent Toiyabe National Forest. The plan is to build up the numbers in the upcoming months, before converging on the proving ground on May 9th.

He expects that there will be arrests, and he expresses concern about being separated from his children if he and his wife should be taken into custody. This is a worry for others as well, he tells me, and the fear of having children taken by the state has inhibited many from participating in the annual protest over the
years. This year the activists have a plan. They will leave the children behind at the hidden camp with a few trusted chaperones, who will then bail out those taken to jail.

Pablo: We had this vision last year. I don’t know why it’s taken so long, but maybe because it’s been a few years now. We’re more aware of the issue, more people are more willing to give some of their time to it I guess.

Adam: Yeah, how long have you been doing this?

Pablo: I’ve been going since ‘92. You ever heard of Wavy Gravy?

Adam: The clown?

Pablo: Yeah, he does that clown thing. And he’s been into this. I know him from Gatherings way back, and ran into him in ‘92 and he got me into it. I know some of the Shoshone elders now, they’re good people. It’s sad to know them and see them all drop off year after year. Cancer kills just about everyone up there on the res. All my kids know these elders. They’re like grandparents. And we take it real personal.

Adam: But so the kids always come to the protests too?

Pablo: Yeah, then my wife’d take them, or I would for the big stand-off. I’ve been arrested three times now, she’s been in once. It’s just a fine, but that cuts down
by half how many of us are there, right? The same thing happened to my wife's people [her mother was Navajo, I know from meeting her at past Gatherings], so she takes it personal and wants to be right there up front too.

Adam: So this year you'll have like a few full time babysitters so the rest can get arrested?

Pablo: Well, it's more along the lines of a Kid Village. I've done plenty of that and have most of the supplies in my bus. We're going to set up a good working Kitchen for people as they come in. I have to go to Austin, but the other vehicles'll come for this Gathering. And then I'll bring my family and anyone else.

The Rainbow Family tends to be a radicalizing influence on the people who attend its events. As mentioned, there is a perception among Rainbows that their Gatherings are under heavy surveillance by law enforcement agencies, and speculation about the causes of this condition are a popular topic of conversation. That such discourse is an everyday part of Rainbow life is, ironically, leads many otherwise politically apathetic Gatherers to question the interests and tactics of law enforcement agencies and the morality of government in general. Encounters with government representatives at Rainbow events, which tend to be negative, may be the first brush with the law for many new Gatherers. Having one's car or tent searched, being ticketed for public nudity within the National Forest while bathing, or seeing regular surveillance flights overhead can be startling. When such experiences take place in an atmosphere so
charged with uncertainty about why the government is so interested in Rainbow, the effects can be rather profound.

One point of view sometimes heard from people with military backgrounds is that authorities are alarmed by the fact that so many veterans attend Gatherings. While it is far from clear that the authorities actually monitor Rainbow for this reason, the perception is certainly there. It is true that a good number of military veterans do frequent Rainbow events. They are particularly prevalent within A-Camp. Many of the veterans involved with Rainbow, especially those who served in Vietnam, were drafted into service as unwilling participants in war. Some experienced brutal combat, and many became addicted to drugs and alcohol while in the service. When they returned home, they received little or no assistance in putting their lives back together, and wrestled with trauma, addiction, and poverty before finding a home within Rainbow. While nearly all the veterans I’ve spoken with are quick to denounce their violent pasts, many speak to a deep resentment of the government that forced them into military service.

While these veterans are actually a small minority of the overall Rainbow population, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that they do constitute a security concern for the U.S. government. Though there is certainly nothing illegal about former military personnel expressing dissatisfaction with their government, it is not difficult to understand why law enforcement officials would want to keep close tabs on such individuals. This concern is perhaps heightened by rumors among law enforcement agencies that ex-military Rainbows are heavily armed at Gatherings. Unsuccessful attempts to locate arms
caches have not exhausted the suspicion among law enforcement agencies that these veterans are stockpiling weapons. Most Rainbows find this suspicion perplexing and frightening. Some Gatherers do carry knives and machetes for utilitarian purposes, and a few travel with firearms for self-defense and hunting. It is true that firearm possession is a bit more common among veterans, but to suggest that this legal activity might constitute a conspiracy by former military personnel to "ambush" representatives of the U.S. government is considered outrageous by everyone I've asked about the matter.

Whatever their reasons for conducting such intense surveillance, it is undeniable that law enforcement agencies do add a certain mystique to Rainbow Gatherings. Their presence is impossible to ignore. From roadblocks on the way in, multiple overflights in helicopters and surveillance planes each day, to surprise incursions referred to as 'raids' by Gatherers, law enforcement shocks new Rainbows. Roadblocks seem an unnecessary invasion of privacy to people not used to them. Aircraft overhead are loud, and break the relative silence of living in the woods in a way that is impossible to ignore. Law enforcement control over activities is minimal. Their attempts to control Rainbow seem very heavy handed, especially in light of their inefficiency. Arrests often seem to be very arbitrary, feeding a sense that anyone might be taken into custody at any time, without specific cause. This constant fear of arrest adds an intense emotional intensity to Gatherings. Constant rumors of immanent raids, occasionally fulfilled, play into this intensity.

The Gathering atmosphere is charged with issues of government authority

---

2 Forest Service report on the 1997 Annual in Oregon
3 Forest Service report on the 1997 Annual in Oregon
that just can't be ignored. The seemingly wild claims of Gatherers are bolstered rather than refuted by government statements and activities. The high level of law enforcement activity, and strangely large number of officers it involves, compounds this sense of being part of an outlaw group. Rainbow people do come to feel persecuted by the law enforcement officers, who usually contribute little to the actual safety of Gathering life and often issue citations and arrests without what Rainbows consider sufficient cause. Government becomes a natural topic of conversation under such circumstances. Rainbow does, then, contribute to the spread of anti-government feelings. Such an influence is largely due to misguided government efforts to police Gatherings. This is a known irony to Gatherers, who point out many cases of apolitical young people become politically charged after experiencing law enforcement excess at Rainbow events.

May 2000, Daniel Boone National Forest

It is a bright June afternoon in the rolling Kentucky hills, the sunlight shining through the tall canopy shimmers with that blue-green tinge so characteristic of Appalachia in the summertime. The Gathering is going strong. It's been about a month and a half since the first Seed Campers arrived, and there are now about 400 people here.

The Leos are more active than they have been throughout the Gathering so far. They ticketed two men who have been here since the beginning of Seed Camp the other day, and have threatened to arrest them if they are spotted anywhere
within ten miles. Though such an arrest is technically illegal, as moving a mile every two weeks is adequate according to Federal law, these men have hidden their truck far off the road. It is camouflaged with a green tarp and brush, and is virtually invisible, even from just a few feet away.

The peace of the day was interrupted earlier this morning by two Leo trucks driving up the rather steep dirt path that is being used as Main Trail. It is barely wide enough for the vehicles to pass, and the Trade Circle at the top of the hill had to be hastily evacuated as the trucks came along. When the trail got too steep even for their four wheel drive trucks, the Leos turned around and drove back to Front Gate. There they warned everyone present that it was time to go home, and asked specifically about the red Toyota truck driven by the two men already ticketed.

Prudence told them that she hadn't seen it in days, which is true, and suggested that perhaps they've left the Gathering, which she knows to be false. The Leos called her on the lie, saying that they would have seen it leaving. Threatening to come back and "clear us out" later, the Leo trucks drove off.

Many of us are intimidated by the encounter, and find it unnerving that the Leos seem to be claiming that they're monitoring both the roads so thoroughly that they would've noticed a lone vehicle driving off. It is not, however, all that surprising. Surveillance at this relatively small Gathering has been quite intense. Helicopters have flown overhead twice a day, in the morning and at dusk. CB radio frequencies used to communicate within the Gathering have been jammed with a strange loop of three conversations. Those who have more experience
with L-Camp find it amusing that they always use the same tape to jam radio signals. Roadblocks are in place on the main road leading in, manned by county sheriffs randomly searching cars. And perhaps most strikingly, a woman recognized as a high-level Forest Service law enforcement officer has been to the Gathering twice in the past two days.

Also, a local tow truck driver drove up to Front Gate about half an hour ago, claiming to have heard plans for a raid on the Gathering over his radio. He seems sincere, and we have no reason to doubt him. This adds an immediacy to the tension we’ve all felt for the past few days.

Cob, a man in his early twenties from LA who randomly wound up at the Gathering with some friends, is visibly panicked by the prospect. Rather irrationally, he begs Prudence “Not to let anything happen to him”, which amuses her.

Prudence: Worried about the raid? Hmm? Oh [laughs softly to herself], that’s not anything to worry about. Shit, either it’ll happen or it won’t, not much we can do about it but wait.

Cob doesn’t seem too comforted by this. He confides that his friends and he are concerned about police going through their car. They got here before the roadblock, and have never been searched in all of their travels on Phish tour. Prudence [raising her glance squarely to his]: Hide any contraband, if you got any, though. That’s true. They might bring dogs if they really mean business, so
keep that in mind. Sometimes they bring in, and they can bring in, game wardens, they can do searches without warrants. Bury it someplace if you have to, under a rock or something. Other than that, just relax, you’ll be just fine.

Cob is relieved by the advice, as though he hasn’t thought of it himself, and sighs. Zach has the keys, he says, and is up in Ozark Kitchen. He thanks Prudence and turns to go find his friend. As he does, he looks back at the older woman with a perplexed expression on his face.

Cob: Why are they doing this at all? I mean, what’s up with all of this? I’ve never felt more on the spot with the cops! Not at home, not on tour, and here we are in the middle of nowhere in Kentucky, and it’s like Waco or something!

Prudence laughs and says he ought to come to the big Gathering this summer, then he’ll really see something.

Rainbow’s politicizing potential is uniquely tied to lifestyle. Attending Gatherings might not always encourage participation in mainstream politics, but it certainly exposes people to forms of political awareness they might otherwise not encounter. More importantly, Rainbow teaches people to develop conscious, personally meaningful ways of living. Doing this in a social context rich in political discourse and connections to radical activism, Gathering life leaves many individuals far more politically engaged than they would be without attending Rainbow events. That this radicalizing process takes place in a context so rich in spiritual discourse fosters a rare level of personal commitment to
improving the world. Politics is not a discrete part of life for many Gatherers, but rather spills over into spiritual belief and vice versa. Experimenting with new, healthier total world views, Gatherers consider themselves to be participants in bringing humanity to a new overall consciousness.

Attending Rainbow Gatherings involves leaving one's normal world to spend prolonged periods of time immersed in another reality. Moreover, the reality in which Gatherers live is a consciously ludic one. Mainstream society's norms are intentionally sublimated, as Gatherers experiment with what they consider to be more natural ways of relating to one another and the world around them. The incoming individual is confronted with a somewhat disorienting social world, replete with practices and discourses novel enough to endow the experience with a profoundly surreal character. Moving from one cultural context to another necessarily involves a learning process, an acculturative experience, not often encountered by adults remaining in a static social context. Forms of tacit knowledge from one world do not necessarily apply in the other, and assumptions must be rethought.

Though internal perceptions may remain unchanged for a period, behavior is more immediately brought into line with Rainbow expectations. Inhibitions must be relearned when moving into a new cultural environment, lest one's new comrades take offense at what they consider inappropriate modes of action. This is even true when entering into the Rainbow social milieu, with all of its libertarian rhetoric. Indeed, the lack of a formal external authority may even require a degree of personal responsibility unparalleled in mainstream society. What may be perfectly acceptable in mainstream American society will mark a person off as stingy and possibly hostile within Rainbow. Traveling back
into the mainstream after extended stays at Gatherings is similarly confusing, as laws and points of modesty which are basically irrelevant to Rainbow life suddenly take on new importance as soon as one leaves the woods. Thriving in such a state of cultural confusion requires a high level of self-awareness. Moving from one set of norms to another requires more concentration than day to day life does in general, the act involves a sort of introspection often absent in the outside world.

Anthropologists have long spoken of "auto-normal" individuals as being most likely to participate in ecstatic religiosity. What is meant by this is that people who have undergone disruptive experiences, through trauma or psychosis, and have relearned how to relate to the world, tend to play shamanic roles in their societies. There is a straightforward reason why this may be the case. The level of introspection necessitated in readjusting to social life after such a crisis involves recognizing that reality is not static or singular. Social norms thereby are revealed as constructed. A fluid sense of reality, by extension, implies malleability, driving home the point that the psyche can be intentionally taught to perceive the world in particular ways. In an only slightly different way, experiencing the liminality associated with moving from the one cultural context to the other impresses the new Gatherer with the decidedly elastic nature of perception.

By encouraging individuals to come to their own ecstatic encounters and revelations, rather than dictating a rigid code of beliefs, Rainbow promotes forms of introspection not commonly found in either the outer world. Even the most

---

basic assumptions upon which modern society rests are open to question in the atmosphere of suspended reality often create, and new orientations can be explored. Individuals are able and indeed expected to follow their own idiosyncratic insights to new understandings of reality. This interior freedom, and the very real changes in personality and lifestyle it can produce, is part of a process that some Gatherers see as quite subversive. Allowing people to experiment with alternatives to mainstream cultural norms, in an environment that is spiritual but also social and economic, can be read as an important form of deep protest against that mainstream.

June 1999, Allegheny National Forest

The rain came today. Black clouds have been overhead for the better part of a week, and the wind has been strong, but the storm finally hit us this afternoon. The downpour flooded the brook that runs along Main Trail, washing over the path in places, and transportation is difficult at the moment due to the extremely soft ground. Mud-caked volunteers are collecting stones and thick sticks, building foot bridges over the most treacherous parts of Main Trail. Most other people are still huddled under tarps and around fires. Though the rain has slowed to a mere drizzle, the strong winds are remarkably cold for the season.

The people sitting around me are doing what Rainbows tend to do when inclement weather compels people to abandon their usual work routine and seek shelter under the tarps of nearby Kitchens. Quarters can be rather close, as they are today, with eight people including two toddlers crowded under Moon Dog
Kitchen's fifteen foot silver tarp. We are high on the top of a hill, certainly not the place to be in a storm like this, watching rivulets or rainwater stream down the steep slope, and shivering from the damp and wind. The untended and dampened fire blew out hours ago, and it is rather chilly despite the body heat from huddling together under the heavy plastic tarp.

Despite the less than ideal conditions, everyone is relaxed and happy. Even the two toddlers, who had been crying earlier, seem to be relieved by the rain slowing down. The sky is still quite dark, though it is probably only three in the afternoon. We see people patching up Main Trail, but no one working on the path leading up from the valley below us. The ridge we are on is quite steep and tall. It usually takes a good half hour to hike all the way down. It isn't really all that far away in horizontal terms, and can even be seen for most of the walk, but could be difficult just now.

Two of the Kitchen Crew went out about an hour ago, as soon as the rain began to diminish. As is customary after a heavy storm, they will report back on the condition of the trails and any hazards wrought by the flooding conditions. Though we are certainly not obligated to stay in camp, it is considered imprudent to walk around the site directly after a rain without a specific reason. Beyond the increased threat of personal injury, foot traffic during a storm is potentially destructive to Main Trail and the plant life which grows along it. When the scouts return, many of us will go out and work on those sections of the trail they report to need repairs. Until then, we just wait around the camp, make sure our personal gear stays dry, and continue the lengthy conversations that
have entertained us throughout the stormy day.

One of the things we are talking about is Rainbow’s ability to shift winds. Encounters with forest fires are not unheard of, especially in the west of the country where abnormally arid conditions have led to occasional fires near Gathering sites in the past decade. Due to the group’s large labor base, Rainbow bucket brigades have occasionally played an important role in putting these out. Another tactic is often deployed to prevent fire from spreading into a Gathering site. Gatherers join hands, forming a wall in front of the spreading fire, and chant the Om, and this technique seems to be surprisingly successful at shifting winds, and hence the fire, away from Gatherings.

Clearwater, a man in his late thirties from Lexington Kentucky, tells us about how he saw a large fire averted in this manner at the 1994 Annual in Wyoming. A wind that local fire authorities declared was very unusual came up just as the fire was about to encroach on the event, and Gatherers evidently felt this was due to their chanting and concentration of energies. The fire, Clearwater describes, was put out quickly once it changed its course. Others huddling in the Kitchen take this as a form of proof that Rainbow can, indeed, control the material world through its spiritual prowess.

A woman also present, slightly younger than the former speaker, chuckles somewhat at how eager the others were to accept this as a sign of Rainbow’s power. I know from previous conversations with the woman, who goes by the name Strawberry because of her red hair, that she grew up in a family involved with black nationalism in Grand Rapids Michigan. Perhaps due to this influence,
she is more politically aware than most other Gatherers, and has made a name for herself in the movement for putting on interesting workshops about race issues. I am curious to see what she has to say about the matter and ask her to elaborate.

Adam: Strawberry, what do you mean by the laughing? Don’t you think it really works [referring to changing wind direction through collective concentration]?

Strawberry: Well, since you ask, I think there might be more to it than that. But I was laughing because I love that, I really do, that’s the magic. People just have a way of seeing things a little bit different when they’re here. People just get used to seeing miracles, and you got to love that!

Adam: What do you mean, what miracles and what does it mean?

Strawberry: Oh, well, you know what I’m talking about, like things you need just manifest. Like rides, or a tent, or anything you need. You trust in miracles here, and you’d never do that out there. That’s just plain a good lesson for all these people that come through, for the people who see us come through town.

Adam: And what does that do?

Strawberry: Huh! I always imagine what it must be like for some little girl or little boy, sitting on the porch, seeing some crazy psychedelic triple-decker bus with a dozen freaks on it! They live on that thing? That’s like the circus out there in real life, it’s got to be such a trip!

Adam: [laughing] Yeah, that must be a new one for...
Strawberry: For everyone, not just the kids, but I can see how that’d be a big treat for them. But even the people that are older, coming here, they might live on the streets of some shitty city, or in suburbia, and they come here. Seeing all the love, people sharing all the scraps instead of fighting over scraps, and living good on it. That really makes people think, like wow, this can happen. And the drumming and prayers, all the pure magic vibes, that shakes people up when they get into that. Feeling all that, there’s new possibilities.

Another woman sitting under the kitchen’s tarp, named Irene, is holding her small child on her lap. She smiles and adds a “yeah, sister!” to Strawberry’s vision. Strawberry playfully rubs the infant’s nose and goes on.

Strawberry: For a new world. Never mind just wind, we can shake up the whole damn world! For these little guys. And that’s why I was laughing. I love to see people getting down with that magic vibe, it’s like some kind of breakthrough every time someone crosses the Rainbow trail, and we’re moving on from Babylon into a whole new world.
X. CONCLUSIONS

Rainbows believe that their group is destined to bring about a new era of spiritual enlightenment. Sometimes this is described with reference to quite fanciful tales, sometimes in more mundane terms. Creating temporary anarchist communities in the peripheral areas of the state, they seek to present alternatives to mainstream sensibility. This task is undertaken in a cacophony of specific ways, with Gatherers letting their personal ecstatic experiences guide them in building new life patterns. Playful though it is, the discursive work involved is considered to be important, spreading benevolent and healing energies out into a world dying because of the lifestyles of those who populate it. Rainbow considers its postmodern spirituality to be a tool for radical cultural renewal.

Just as Gatherers engage in the rather esoteric and unusual activities which collectively can be called Rainbow spirituality with an overall focus on global transformation, so too can anthropologists direct their studies towards building a better world. Since they saw themselves as neutral scientists, there was tendency among modernist anthropologists to deny the ethical implications of their work. Basing the field on artistic rather than scientific grounds allows an opportunity to challenge this tendency. As Rosaldo points out, "dismantling objectivism creates a space for ethical concerns in a territory once regarded as value-free". It is possible to envision a politically sensitive postmodern

---

anthropology in which the ethnographer as bricoleur\textsuperscript{2} is able to creatively address a plethora of representational concerns and ends. Such an anthropology could involve an increased consciousness about the ethical implications of the writings it produces.

It must be recognized that there have been theorists concerned with the applications of anthropology since the beginning of the discipline. Often, such thinkers have been pushed to its periphery by those wanting to establish a pure science of man. On occasions, however, the practical impact of anthropological studies has been brought to the forefront of the field, sometimes by the most influential anthropologists of the day. Indeed, some of the first instances in organized anthropological scholarship were deeply involved with social justice. As Goldschmidt describes, the early Ethnographic Societies in France and England were primarily interested in discussing such political topics as slavery and colonialism, often in quite moral terms, before they were edged out of the game by the more objectivist Royal Anthropological Society\textsuperscript{3}.

In the early years of the discipline, anthropology was linked to colonialism. This connection was extremely close, and the declaration that "ethnography was colonialism's twin"\textsuperscript{4} rightly captures this relationship. Western imperialism provided access to peoples which would otherwise be quite difficult to reach. Perhaps more importantly, the problems of governing geographically vast and culturally diverse colonial holdings convinced


governmental and economic entities that the skills of this new science were indeed worthwhile. Anthropologists were sent into the field not just to record disembodied cultural data, but to obtain an understanding of languages, power structures, spiritual beliefs, and other bits of information which could be put to work in controlling colonial subjects.

Such efforts often led to questionable conclusions about specific cultures, and the information gleaned through anthropological investigation tended to be put to uses which would seem quite unethical today. None the less, it should be recognized that these efforts did give the colonizing forces a real power over indigenous peoples. An understanding of a particular group of people, even one which would be considered incomplete and flawed from the emic perspective, gave colonists the ability to manipulate the said people in subtle ways, such as playing on existing rifts within subject communities, undermining attachment to a specific land base through replacing traditional religions with Christianity, and so on. This allowed for a level of control that military might alone could never achieve. As Foucault and others would later describe in quite some detail, there are intimate relationships between knowledge and power. Anthropologists were put to work by colonial administrators to exploit this connection.

Despite pretenses to the contrary, couched in the familiar claims of building an objective science and so forth, anthropologists in this era served an important function as cultural spies. Indeed, the information they reported back to the European world bore less of a resemblance to the neutral facts of the hard sciences than they did the situational and opportunistic findings of intelligence agents. That anthropologists in this period were so eager to project themselves as
aloof researchers recording fixed data is actually rather ironic, as it was the very human level of their investigations that made them worthwhile from a practical standpoint. Simply being on the ground, immersed in the culture under study, allowed anthropologists to collect information that would be more or less invisible otherwise.

In the course of my own fieldwork with Rainbow, the connections between anthropologist and agent often were raised by suspicious Gatherers. While I made no secret of the fact that I was attending Gatherings as an anthropologist, I did not advertise it either. Gatherers who did not know of my project, noticing that I was writing down notes and taking recorded statements from informants, would sometimes arrive at the conclusion that I was an undercover law enforcement officer. These suspicions were usually easily dispelled by the assurances of other people who knew me a bit better, but sometimes lingered for long periods of time. As uncomfortable as that situation was for me, it drove home the insight that the anthropologist in the field has access to quite intimate forms of discourse, regularly overhearing information which would rarely be available to outsiders.

Perhaps a more artistic anthropology, unburdened by the pretenses of a totalizing scientific objectivity or theoretical hegemony, can embrace this fact in a productive way. Putting the habits of informal interrogation learned through anthropology to the task of intelligence gathering of this type could generate valuable and practical insights. Such efforts, for instance, might be undertaken in order to better understand the power structures of our own society. As Nader
among others have suggested\(^5\) anthropology can study the institutions which dominate our culture. Applying the long-term immersive research method to corporations or government, for instance, an anthropologist involved in this sort of investigation can access discourses normally hidden from public view. Turning these into representations intended for popular consumption would be a way of utilizing the discipline to demystify power structures and contribute to the establishment of a more democratic society.

A role for anthropologists, then, could be to use their status to provide an expressive outlet to cultural perspectives which are seldom considered in the mainstream society. Cultures and subcultures living on the periphery of the global mainstream have generally not been heard from in discussing problems which face the entire world. Real democracy, if it is ever to be attained, will necessarily involve the public being given access to a wide range of information about important topics. Commonly, however, the people involved in such decisions are not presented with significantly diverse points of view. Especially in the present day, when policies are implemented on a global scale, this is insufficient. Presenting "alternative cultural visions of the world"\(^6\) becomes an important function in this context, and anthropologists are in a unique position to do so.

Learning about other ways and beliefs, and taking these seriously, could therefore be a way to approach present social problems. As with Rainbows, who see themselves as ultimately engaged in positive world transformation, the sort


of cultural experimentation anthropological research involves may be an important way to respond to the political and social challenges we presently face. Rainbows consider the mind expanding qualities of their spiritual searching to be quite revolutionary, producing idiosyncratic, eclectic insights into ways of life healthier than those typical to Babylon. Anthropology could have a similar focus, seeking to impact the greater world through the insights its investigations generate. Moving away from the totalizing goals of anthropological modernism creates a space for taking such alternative perspectives seriously. Marcus and Fischer have suggested that “anthropology is not the mindless collection of the exotic but the use of cultural richness for self-reflection and self-growth”.

Simply considering our own social structures and the problems associated with them from vantage points gleaned from other peoples could be an enriching form of cultural brainstorming. Being a conduit for cross cultural communication, providing a forum for the real exchange of ideas, could be a way that anthropology can help to build a healthier world. Much of the work implied by such a task would be described as translation. Representing cultures to one another is not, as we now understand, a simple matter. As Overing and others have noted, it actually involves quite creative processes. The illusion of the possibility that we can achieve anything like an exact translation is quickly dispelled by recognizing the subjective nature of knowledge. Insisting on the ideal of exact translation in this sort of communication, in fact, is fairly dangerous. It reduces what is an essentially lively and conversational process to mere sterile analysis.

---

Leaving such representations in the creative realm, on the other hand, conserves a space for the audience to engage with ethnography on a more personal level. In addition to producing texts which are "usually boring" and often "virtually unreadable"\(^9\), modernist anthropology has typically denied the role of the reader in understanding the cultural other through its emphasis on exact translation. The highly ludic atmosphere of Rainbow Gatherings, though it may draw scorn from outsiders, is an important part of the group's appeal. It is what allows constituents to connect with the divine in ways which, though they may seem inappropriate to the mainstream and even sacrilegious by the imitated cultures, are personally meaningful. Allowing lived culture's characteristically ludic voice to come through in ethnography can enhance its social impact as well.

Rainbow is subversive because it challenges assumptions about reality. And that this power is potentially shared by anthropologists. Moving into alternate cultural realities, either as an anthropologist or as a Rainbow, often leaves the individual psyche in an almost hallucinatory state. Rainbows seek this altered state of reality, through prayer and music, psychedelic substances, and personal rituals. They do so to bring their consciousness into accord with the energies of nature, which they contrast with a corrupt and destructive culture. Anthropologists can facilitate a similar disruption of common sense, and inspire cultural reflection. Ultimately storytellers rather than neutral observers, artists rather than scientists, anthropologists can approach representational projects with the explicit intention of impacting audiences in specific ways.

It could well be that the power of Rainbow Gatherings to transform individuals is very real. And perhaps this is the key to conscious cultural change. Doing fieldwork in such a setting made it impossible to ignore the ongoing debate within anthropology about the role the individual should play in ethnographic analysis. Within Rainbow, one is constantly reminded of the fact that spirituality is fundamentally an individual matter, and that the beliefs and practices of equal individuals is what creates Rainbow's collective vigor. Rainbow could be described as an intentional society. It is certainly that. But in some way it is more appropriate to call Rainbow a collective of intentional individuals. As people pursue ideosyncratic paths to spiritual healing, they contribute to the health of the group itself. With the goal of changing the world at large, Rainbows help each other pursue their own utopian visions. Rainbow therefore engages culture at what may be described as its most basic unit: the individual.

Anthropological theorists, on the other hand, have traditionally rejected the viability of an individual-based methodology on the grounds that it is ethnocentric. The concept of the individual, it is pointed out by those opposed to an individual based approach, is culturally specific and hence should not be trusted by ethnographers. The theoretical stance which rejects individual-based methodology, on the grounds that it is ethnocentric, is found in an early manifestation in the work of Marcel Mauss. Mauss argued that the 'category of self' is not a universal, that it is unique to Western thought. Louis Dumont, who held his teacher Mauss in great esteem\textsuperscript{10}, elaborated upon this idea, infusing

social science with a mistrust of an individual-based approach.

In a number of key works, Dumont devoted himself to tracing the historical roots of this, supposedly uniquely Western, mode of thinking. He declares that "there emerge two kinds of societies": where "the individual is a paramount value I speak of individualism. In the opposite case, where the paramount value lies in society as a whole, I speak of holism". Social scientists have thus contended that the cultural nature of the Western concept of the individual make it an unfit tool for understanding the social elements of human life. Mauss and Dumont, for instance, attempt to demonstrate that the Western conception of selfhood is not immutable or natural, and hence is inappropriate for use in the social sciences. They seek to convince the scholarly community of the "sociological relativity of the individual as a category of thought" in order to initiate a process of purifying comparative sociology of what they deem to be a distinct handicap for understanding other societies. Thus, it is clear to these thinkers that "every time we confront a foreign society the holistic approach is called for".

Other authors, such as Anthony Cohen and Nigel Rapport, hold that the primary unit of data is the active individual rather than the society as a whole. Whereas Western social science, influenced as it is by the holistic methodology, tends to go top down from society to individual, these theorists recommend that anthropology view society as built up by the activity and discourse of creative

---


and self-conscious individuals\textsuperscript{14}. This is not to say that society is denied existence or importance in this mode of analysis; on the contrary, the idea is that it is through the activity of interactive individuals that society comes into being. The individual is emphatically not regarded by Cohen or Rapport as being a discrete, bounded entity which exists in a social vacuum: "One may be an individual actor but inevitably one acts within an environment made, inter alia, of other social actors"\textsuperscript{15}. As Rapport describes, this view simply takes it as granted that "it is in individuality that the roots of the social and the cultural lie"\textsuperscript{16}.

An individual based methodological approach clearly fits with the values and logistics apparent within the Rainbow Family. It is also, I contend, a powerful way to respond to the challenges postmodernism has presented to anthropology. As the ontological principles which have traditionally driven anthropology have come into question, so too have modernism’s methodological and representational strategies. The anthropological fieldworker is not merely an aloof observer, but an active participant in a dynamic social setting. Life in the field, like day to day life in any circumstance, is often bewildering. Instead of downplaying this very obvious point, as modernist ethnography tended to do, postmodernism is quite vocal about the insight that there is no such thing as the observable discrete culture, that the knowledge gleaned through fieldwork is itself fragmentary\textsuperscript{17}.

The anthropological fieldworker can be thought of as just another

\textsuperscript{17} Clifford, James and Marcus, George. 1986. \textit{Writing Culture}. Berkeley: University of California Press: 134
individual participant in the events he or she records. In modernist ethnography, representational authority was a fairly simple matter. Indeed, the issue is often avoided by the virtue of the fact that “the third-person replaces the more fallible first-person”\(^{18}\). Utilizing a writing strategy which emphasizes the specific and sensuous perceptions of the personal narrator, ethnography can engulf the reader in the explored cultural world. Encouraging such an intimate connection between text and reader, instead of discouraging it through distancing writing, can provide a powerful discursive space. Communicating something of the suspension of reality involved with crossing cultural borders to an audience which might not otherwise have such an encounter could, like the Rainbow movement, disrupt the complacency of mainstream society.

The small trauma of experiencing another reality “disrupts common sense and makes us reexamine our taken-for-granted assumptions”\(^{19}\). Written representation of it can as well, if crafted to do so. Ethnographers are actually closer to the poet “who recognizes the implications of his analogies and medium, than we are to neutral scientific observers peddling panaceas”\(^{20}\). Readers can relate to the ethnographies produced in this creative spirit as they would other forms of art. Instead of merely transferring information about subject cultures, they are to be subjectively consumed and internalized. Just as the field worker does not merely record but selects and redacts in constructing anthropological texts, so too does the reader of such texts actively participate in creating their

\(^{18}\) Marcus, George and Cushman, Dick. 1982. ‘Ethnographies as Texts’ Annual Review of Anthropology: 32


meaning.

Ethnography, then, can be considered a “cooperatively evolved text consisting of fragments of discourse intended to evoke in the minds of both reader and writer an emergent fantasy of a possible world of commonsense reality”\(^{21}\). Theorists have recently called for the establishment of anthropology as a sensuous, phenomenological form of scholarship. According to this approach, the presence of ethnographer demands allowing the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and feelings of the field experience to penetrate the ethnographic text\(^{22}\). Some advocates of this kind of anthropological writing insist that human perception in general is fundamentally sensuous\(^{23}\).

Achieving this necessarily involves a radical rethinking of writing techniques. Rather than seeking the distanced textual position which marked modernist ethnography, anthropological writing geared towards this project need to carefully consider writing techniques which encourage cultural shock and the deep sense of reflection it can engender. Much has been written about postmodernist representational strategies. These discussions have centered around important questions about epistemological assumptions and authorship. Until now, however, there has been a general sense of confusion over what to actually do with these strategies. Even some of the strongest proponents of an anthropological postmodernism have difficulty envisioning a truly postmodern ethnography.

---


Postmodernism's challenges have left the correspondence theory of reality an extremely suspect basis for a discipline. The fieldworker is inescapably bound to the sensual limits of subjectivity. He or she can never see every aspect of a subject culture, even if such a whole could be unproblematically imagined. Instead of always continuing to describe cultures in holistic ways, as might be fitting to a scientific anthropology, it behooves the artistic anthropologist to speak of experiences in very specific terms. As Rainbows constantly remind each other, speaking in general terms asserts a form of authority not congruent with their egalitarian anarchism. Instead of the monolithic canons espoused by traditional religiosity, Rainbow spirituality is premised on the idea that spiritual knowledge is infinitely plural, yet specific. This attitude can inform an artistic anthropology in its pursuit of more epistemologically honest representational strategies.

An anarchistic, artistic anthropology can have the same power to alter consciousness. Modernism's ethnographic realist writing style intentionally denied the chaotic, sensual side of the field experience. By allowing forms of writing which acknowledge the very personal, emergent, and specific character of ethnographic knowledge, postmodernism within anthropology can infuse texts with a new vital appeal. Storytellers more than scientists, anthropologists are thereby able to bring readers into intimate understandings of inherently reality testing aspects of the field experience. Embracing anthropology's natural potential to disrupt mainstream common sense, ethnography can be considered a tool for promoting cultural introspection. Just as in the Rainbow example, this introspection may be a step towards much needed cultural growth.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Banks, J.A. *The Strange Death of Capitalist Individualism*. Brookfield VT: Dartmouth Publishing


Cahill, Tim. August 1972. 'Armageddon Postponed'. *Rolling Stone*


Cox vs. New Hampshire (1940)

Cox vs. Louisiana (1965)


Harris, Marvin. 1999. *Theories of Culture in Postmodern Times.* Walnut Creek CA: Altamira Press


Jarvie, I.C. 1975. 'Epistle to the Anthropologists' *American Anthropologist* (June 1975) 253-266


Marcus, George and Cushman, Dick. 1982. ‘Ethnographies as Texts’ *Annual Review of Anthropology.* 25-69


United States vs. Linick (1998)

United States vs. Masel (1998)

United States vs. O'Brien (1968)


Ward vs. Rock Against Racism (1989)

