

Digital Re-Enchantment:

Tribal Belonging, New Age Science and the Search for Happiness in
a Digital Detoxing Community

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Abstract

Our digital era is no less “human” or “authentic” than any other time in history, yet many people feel that the opposite is true. This study investigates Camp Grounded’s digital detox and summer camp for adults as an example of the “social fact” of anti-tech narratives, and as an opportunity to better understand how we live with technology today.

Why do people attend a digital detox, and what happens when they return to their digital lives? This ethnography of a digital detoxing community views detoxing as a symptom of Weber’s “disenchantment,” an isolating and meaningless modern existence, which can be countered through New Age “re-enchantment.”

At Camp Grounded, digital detoxers hope to recreate the experience of tribal life, using imaginaries of neuroscience to envision the dangerous, unnatural, and “disenchanted” world they live in. At camp, detoxers feel a spiritual connection to nature, to each other, and a deeply rooted sense of belonging to the human race. Returning to their digital lives after their time in the woods, digital detoxers are inspired to prioritise their personal growth and happiness.

This research explores how people can have their own understandings of categories like “use” and “non use” of technology, how science is used and misused by people in everyday life, and the ways in which people imagine technology to be harmful.

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evenings at the desk. Thank you to Kat Baybrooke for tweeting about digital anthropology seven years ago, which sparked a Google search.

Cast of Characters

A list of participants quoted in the thesis in order that they are introduced.

Levi (Nickname *Fidget Wigglesworth*)

The founder of Camp Grounded, a white man in his early thirties.

Brooke (Nickname *Bruce*)

Co-founder of Camp Grounded, wife of Levi, a white woman in her early thirties.

Mobius

Organiser at Camp Grounded, brother of Levi.

Shmu

Organiser at Camp Grounded, brother of Levi.

Popcorn

Organiser at Camp Grounded, a white woman in her mid twenties, close to Levi's family and known for her impressive organisational skills.

Lil Scrambles

First attendee and then volunteer at Camp Grounded in 2014, who did not return in later years, a white woman in her late twenties.

Lemon

Volunteer at Camp Grounded and friend of Popcorn. A white woman in her early twenties, a student passionately engaged with fighting racism and inequality who had a popular Instagram profile.

Downtown

Worked to build the Camp Grounded website in its initial stages, and later volunteered. A white man in his mid thirties who was unhappy with his job at a tech company.

Love Bug

Attendee at Camp Grounded, a black woman in her early forties who worked in an insurance company but was excited to start a new career as a life coach.

Ocelot

Attendee at Camp Grounded, a white, British man in his early forties, who worked as a couples therapist and teacher of Non-Violent Communication in San Francisco.

Redwood

Attendee at Camp Grounded, a white woman in her forties who questioned where she was going in life.

Stoked

Counselor at Camp Grounded, a performer and poet.

Mei Mei

Organiser at Camp Grounded and an artist.

Rawr

Attendee at Camp Grounded, a Mexican woman in her early thirties with a pink Mohican. *Rawr* was a teacher who had struggled with gender norms while growing up in Texas and moved across the country after attending camp.

Tiki

Attendee at Camp Grounded, a white woman in her thirties, a teacher who found Camp Grounded deeply therapeutic.

Luminous

First time attendee at Camp Grounded in 2017, a white woman in her twenties who had studied intentional communities and was passionate about societal issues.

Shadow

Volunteer at Camp Grounded, a white man in his twenties who was interested in the social setting of camp and ran events in San Francisco themed around connecting with strangers.

Brooklyn

Attendee at Camp Grounded, a white man in his thirties who originally attended as a journalist and moved to Oakland after attending camp. *Brooklyn* later met his wife *007* through camp events.

Barnaby

Counselor at Camp Grounded, a musician and friend of Levi's.

Truth

Attendee to Camp Grounded, a white man in his early thirties who was interested in relationships and how to optimise a conversation.

Topless

Counselor at Camp Grounded, famous for "cuddle therapy" and going shirtless for several years. He ran a "topless tea party" in San Francisco.

Bubblewrap

Attendee at Camp Grounded in 2014 and participant of my Masters research, a white woman from Oakland.

Bird

First time attendee at Camp Grounded in 2017, friend of Brooklyn's who drove *Brooklyn*, *Nimbu*, and I to camp in 2017.

Nimbu

First time attendee at Camp Grounded in 2017, an Indian woman in her early twenties who worked at a tech giant and hoped to create a feminist career for herself.

Moose

Organiser at Camp Grounded.

Princess Snapping Turtle

Organiser at Camp Grounded.

Inspector Lightning Bucket

Counselor at Camp Grounded, a white woman in her thirties who led us through the Snowball Ritual.

Dr Boner PhD

Attendee at Camp Grounded.

Lunch

Counselor at Camp Grounded.

Pink Panties

Attendee at Camp Grounded, a white woman in her forties who travelled from Texas, and said that camp was the only time she took for herself all year.

Hey Girl

Counselor at Camp Grounded, a white woman in her early thirties.

Ice Cream Sundae

Attendee at Camp Grounded, a black woman in her forties who appreciated the spiritual aspects of camp.

Captain Astro

First time attendee at Camp Grounded in 2017, an Asian man in his early thirties who worked at a tech giant, and who had found the camp experience perspective altering.

Sticks

Organiser / Counselor at Camp Grounded.

Magma

Attendee at Camp Grounded who later moved across the country to take an organising job with them. A white woman in her late twenties, Magma felt she used Facebook as a crutch and instead hoped to become a “social butterfly.”

Quesadilla

Counselor / Organiser at Camp Grounded, a white woman in her early thirties, who appreciated that some people really needed the guidance Camp Grounded provided to make new friends.

Honey Bear

Counselor / Organiser at Camp Grounded, known for his energetic and welcoming personality. A white man in his early thirties who worked at children’s summer camps.

Condor

Counselor / Organiser at Camp Grounded known for tending the fires and running the sweat lodge.

Smiley

Counselor at Camp Grounded, known for his charisma. A white man in his early thirties who was a thought leader and author.

Artemis

Counselor at Camp Grounded, a white woman in her early thirties who was a mindfulness teacher and therapist.

Twirly

Attendee at Camp Grounded who I sat next to at the silent dinner.

Water

Attendee at Camp Grounded who partnered with *Twirly* for the eye gazing exercise at the silent dinner.

Jelly Bean

First time attendee at Camp Grounded in 2017, an Asian woman in her late twenties who had an emotional experience at the fear burning during Silent Time.

Shooter

Staff at Camp Grounded, a white man in his early forties, a photographer and videographer of camp.

Asterisk

Attendee at Camp Grounded, a white woman in her mid twenties who had perspective altering experiences at camp, and was asking herself difficult questions about white privilege.

Bay Bridge

Counselor at Camp Grounded who used a pseudonym to discuss his concerns about attendees' interpretations of the camp experience.

Fog

A playshop organiser at Camp Grounded, a white man in his fifties who ran the playshop on Time Travel and using the power of the mind.

Raindrop

Attendee at Camp Grounded, a white woman in her twenties who worked at a tech giant, and bought a ticket hoping to become more in touch with what she wanted from life.

Jagger

First time attendee at Camp Grounded in 2017, a Moroccan man in his twenties who worked in the tech industry.

Zeal

Attendee at Camp Grounded, a white woman in her thirties who shared videos on Facebook as part of her work as a motivational speaker.

Sideboob

Attendee at Camp Grounded, an Asian woman in her thirties.

007

Attendee at Camp Grounded, a white woman in her thirties married to *Brooklyn*.

Gypsy

Organiser at Camp Grounded who worked behind the scenes. A white woman in her mid twenties who struggled with the way attendees treated the “royalty” of the community.

Moonlight

Attendee at Camp Grounded, a white man in his twenties who saw organisers using their phones at a gathering.

Chapter 1

Introduction

A Love Letter to the Internet



Figure 1: Early internet portal, from when I first started using computers (Burns, 2015)

I have always loved the internet. I remember the robotic whirring of our dial-up modem, which would connect me to AOL from the house where I grew up, while I watched the graphic in Figure 1 on the screen. My Dad would play chess against the computer each night, humming and tapping his foot in the office while I slept down the hall. At that time, we had a book of every website you could visit, and my Mum ran a computer club at my school with a collection of original Apple Macintoshes. Aged 12, I downloaded MP3s for my green iPod mini. Aged 13, when I got home from school, I would log in to MSN Messenger and chat with friends, sending

early iterations of emojis, and making my “status” a song lyric. When Facebook came along, I had just moved away to University and used it to share photos with the new friends I had made. Today, I wind down at the end of the day with Netflix, while I’ve gained most of my career opportunities directly or indirectly through Twitter.

Going online, for me, has always been a way for me to be more myself; more creative, more funny, and more social. I have found that life online is meaningful, but I never felt compelled to argue that perspective until leaving home. During my art degree in London, people started talking about deleting their Facebook profiles, refusing to buy iPhones, and proudly reverting to Nokia 3310s, the indestructible brick phone that played the game “snake” rather than connecting you online. I paid extra to my student accommodation for internet access, and blue-tacked newspaper clippings of early cat memes above my bed, neither of which my friends were doing. I thought that online dating was a fantastic invention, but on Tinder profile after Tinder profile, I saw the phrase “willing to lie about how we met,” as if it were something to be ashamed of.

While I had always felt comfortable online, other people felt friction with it; it was clumsy, artificial, or even harmful. At art college, friends were the first to remark that I “loved the internet,” and my artwork examined my own relationship with online life by daring to imagine what might be wrong with it. I made sculptures about entering your information to a website profile, all the while asking myself whether it was what Lanier (2011) called a “philosophical mistake” (p. 69) to attempt to quantify your inner world.

But while Lanier saw online platforms as a narrowing of what made a person, to me, it had always felt like an opening. And when I could only imagine so far, through reading books and experimenting with form and colour, I wanted to ask other people directly and systematically, learning from them what was happening, right now, between people and their devices.

This research project is a continuation of the tensions and questions I had back then, an attempt to understand what it was about technology that felt wrong to people. There were a few ways I could have embarked upon answering that question. I considered studying Amish communities; I looked into investigators who delete your entire online footprint; I hoped to work in an internet addiction treatment centre for teenagers and adults. I made inroads towards studying a radio silence zone in West Virginia where a giant telescope detects faraway stars, and where people suffering from Electromagnetic Hypersensitivity¹ take refuge in the forest. In the end I took my questions into a new discipline - digital anthropology - and to the other side of the world, to speak with people who were so concerned about digital technology² that they had attended a “digital detox.”

The Anti-Tech Movement

Since my own digital adolescence, the level of desperate and hyperbolic messages about technology has continued to increase. Headlines urging readers to try a digital detox started in 2007 and have continued regularly ever since, forming a key part of what can be called the anti-tech “movement” (Sutton, 2017, para. 6) or “narrative.” A digital detox is the voluntary removal of devices, “regarded as an opportunity to reduce stress or focus on social interaction in the physical world” (digital detox, n.d., para. 1).

A 2019 Pew survey found that 28% of Americans say they are online “almost constantly” (Pew Research Center, 2019, Figure 1). Many people feel that this change in our behaviour marks a

¹ We currently do not understand this condition or why people suffer from symptoms (Dieudonné, 2020).

² This thesis refers to “digital technology” rather than a more specific term. This follows my participants’ use of “digital detox” which encapsulates all kinds of aspects of digital life. Usually they are referring to online communication, predominantly via social media, as well as instant messaging and email. However some refer to games, phone calls, virtual or YouTube videos. Some were worried about waves radiating from the smartphone itself, blue light from screens, or vibrations from our environments. It would not be correct, then, to describe all digital detoxers’ concerns as focusing on social media or online communication.

loss of an old way of life, and that our digital reliance threatens human relationships themselves. The British spoken word poet Gary Turk implores viewers in *Look Up* (2014), a viral YouTube video and spoken word poem, to stop looking down at our smartphones, experience the world around us, and speak to people in person.³ The film uses the device of two parallel realities; in one reality, his protagonist meets his future wife through asking her for directions, while in another, he uses his phone instead.



Figure 2: Phone Wall by Shiyang he (Young, 2015)

Shiyang he's piece *Phone Wall* looks at the potential loss to relationships in a digital world. In Figure 2, a couple lay in bed together, but a tombstone-sized smartphone slices the headboard in two, bathing one person in light as she gazes at a text conversation, while the other is alone in shadow. In 2016, one survey found that four in ten of respondents felt they had "not truly experienced valuable moments such as a child's first steps or graduation" due to their reliance on technology (Macdonald, 2016, para. 14).

³ I met Turk at camp in 2015, and he performed his poem at the talent show that year.

The feeling that we have an unhealthy reliance on our devices can be found in popular culture. In an episode of the television show *Parks and Recreation* (Daniels et al., 2012), a character explains that his “usual bedtime routine” includes “Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, 'til I slowly drift off.” He eventually admits that “The truth is I spend a lot of time looking at screens, because recently a lot of the stuff in my real life isn't going that great.” Encouraging each other to disconnect, cafes tell its customers, “no wifi, act like it’s 1997;” there are t-shirts and mugs that suggest logging off (Jorge, 2019, p. 11) and nail polish colours called “wire-less is more,” “press pause,” and “gadget-free” (Baym et al., 2020, p. 1).

These examples begin to illustrate a popular narrative where digital technologies are seen as a change to our social world, a barrier between people, a waste of time, or a place where we avoid the realities of life. Another thread of this anti-tech movement centers around the potential clinical harms from technology.

Digital Harm

The headline “How Facebook addiction is damaging your child's brain: A leading neuroscientist's chilling warning” (Greenfield, 2009), exemplifies the frightening warnings we hear from newspapers. Parents in particular worry what technology is doing to their children’s brains and how it might impede cognitive development. Popular authors have also written extensively on the topic, arguing that technology invisibly undermines our ability to focus or communicate meaningfully with one another. *The Shallows* describes technology “re-wiring” our brains (Carr, 2010), leading to shorter attention spans, while Sherry Turkle’s books (2011; 2015) argue that we lose valuable communication skills and opportunities to practice empathy when we choose digital options over face-to-face conversation. Some have written a call to arms, hoping to begin a movement of change. Turkle (2011) calls for people to “find a way to live with seductive technology and make it work to our purposes” (p. 294) and that although our

relationship with technology has been led astray, “[t]here is time to make the corrections” (p. 294).

Articles often compare social media to drugs, particularly heroin and nicotine; explaining that social media notifications provoke small bursts of neurotransmitters such as “dopamine.”⁴ Some use the term “internet addiction” or “problematic internet use,” while a heated conversation continues between researchers about their validity. In internet memes, sometimes an individual is hooked to a social media “drip,” or taking a handful of pills branded with social media logos, suggesting addiction or dependence. In Figure 7, an ironic phone case with the warning label “social media seriously harms your mental health” mimics cigarette packaging, pointing to this idea that technology is addictive or dangerous.

⁴ This claim has been debunked by neuroscientists (Burnett, 2018), and Oxford academics (Orben and Przybylski, 2017). The term “Internet addiction” is not recognised by the DSM-5 (American Psychiatry Association, 2013), see Chapter 2.



Figure 3: iPhone case (Case Warehouse, n.d.)

Disconnecting

Following fears about its damaging impacts, there are a variety of interventions that people are using to limit, control, or cease their technology use. A tidal wave of self-help books promise to help readers understand their addiction, take back control of their lives, and learn to use technology “mindfully” in a more “balanced” way (Eyal, 2014; Levy, 2016; Colier, 2016; Goodin, 2018; Price, 2018; Burke, 2019; Newport, 2019).

In London, UK, private healthcare provider The Nightingale Hospital offers treatment for “technology addiction” through counselling, CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy), and interpersonal therapy. In Washington State, USA, The ReSTART Centre for Technological Sustainability treats behavioural addictions and co-occurring mental health conditions. A South Korean camp “focuses on helping teenagers to feel better about themselves away from their phones” through counselling and activities (South Korean Internet Addiction Camp, 2019, para.

14). In 2008, China classified “internet addiction disorder” as a recognised mental illness, and some Chinese parents send their children to boot-camp-like treatment centres.⁵

The claim that technology is addictive perhaps stems from the techniques employed in its design. With social media giants themselves benefiting from higher engagement, they use techniques like “variable reward scheduling” (Williams, 2018, p. 35) to meet their “engagement goals” (Williams, 2018 p. 8).⁶ Some technology CEOs themselves have banned screens for their children and send them to Waldorf schools which restrict technology use as part of the curriculum. This suggests that the tech workers themselves feel that they have made something dangerous and harmful (Weller, 2018) and has been called a “techlash,” which is “led in part by founders of technology companies [questioning] technology’s impact on wellness” (Baym et al., 2020, p. 1). Technology companies have been offering ways for people to manage their digital use; the iPhone has “Bedtime” and “Screen Time” settings, while Android’s “digital wellbeing” measures time spent on the device and offers more notification options (Beattie, 2018, para. 7). Instagram has experimented with hiding “likes” on user posts, because in their words, “[w]e want your followers to focus on what you share, not how many likes your posts get” (Petalbert, 2019, para. 4).

There are a host of independent digital wellbeing apps, which aim to help users be more “mindful” with their digital use (Jablonsky, 2019). “Siempo” replaces the smartphone home screen with an empty text box, into which you type the name of an app; an intentional opening, rather than an enticement. At the same time, it shows you a pre-decided “intention,” such as “spend more time with family,” (Beattie, 2020, p. 144) which helps you decide whether you need to use that app in that particular moment.⁷

⁵ China is notably more punitive than elsewhere in its treatment of the problem, some centres use electroshock therapy (Ives, 2017).

⁶ I explore this in Chapter 9.

⁷ I discuss Siempo in Chapter 9.

Some people change their settings to make their screen grayscale, following the behavioural design theory that red notifications and vibrant app logos entice you to click on them. Others install apps that limit time spent on specific sites, or use a Facebook “news feed blocker” which replaces other peoples’ posts with an inspirational quote. In 2013, people began to talk about “phone stacking,” a game in which you stack your phones on the table during a mealtime, and whoever checks first must pay the bill (Phone Stack, n.d.).

Many people delete their social media accounts altogether or temporarily. In 2013 Pew found that 61% of Facebook users had voluntarily taken a multi-week break from the site, their reasons predominantly being that they were “too busy,” that they “didn’t like it,” that it was a “waste of time,” and that there was “too much drama” (Pew Research Center, 2013, Figure 1).

There is also a market for technology-free retreats, organised holidays or camping trips designed to keep people from checking their phone. Many combine the removal of technology with yoga, coaching, or New Age spirituality. Intrepid Travel based in California run “digital detox tours” of small guided groups to India and Morocco, with the aspiration for “travel like it used to be. Adventure, unplugged” (Intrepid Travel, n.d., para. 2). Customers sign a no technology “pledge” at the beginning of the trip, and instead aim to “focus on making meaningful connections with your fellow travelers and the local people” (Intrepid Travel, n.d., para. 4). Frances Booth, author of *Distraction Trap* (2013) writes that people who try a digital detox find themselves “feeling less stressed, feeling calmer,” noticing “a sense of perspective, [...] a sense of freedom,” and “time slowing down” (Booth, 2014, para. 6). One of the most prominent digital detox retreats is Camp Grounded, in California, USA.

What is Digital Detoxing?

In this study, I aim to use Camp Grounded to better understand the anti-tech movement. Camp Grounded was a digital detox and “summer camp for adults” based in California, USA. In a rented boy scout camp in the Mendocino forest, several hours drive north of the San Francisco Bay Area,⁸ Camp Grounded banned digital technology, real names, work talk, watches, drugs, and alcohol, filling the long weekend with activities, games, and friendship. Its tagline was “Disconnect to Reconnect.”

In his piece on the camp, Alexis Madrigal (2013) remarks that Camp Grounded was “exceptionally well attended by national media” (para. 3) when it first ran in 2013. The camp and its founders continued to be featured in dozens of televised news specials and articles over the following years and it became commonplace to see the camp mentioned in any discussion of the ills of modern technology. Headlines seized upon the camp, suggesting a digital detox as a possible cure for internet addiction, and showing us the joyful possibilities of putting down our devices and attending this summer camp for adults (Figure 8).

⁸ In 2016 Camp Grounded also ran in New York, North Carolina and Texas, however I chose to focus on the Bay Area (Chapter 3).



Figure 4: Joyful and welcoming campers. (CBS news, 2014)

I first attended Camp Grounded in 2014 as my fieldwork for my Masters in digital anthropology (Sutton, 2014; Sutton, 2017). I attended again in 2015, in addition to helping the organisers run an event that summer. Before my DPhil research I had met hundreds of digital detoxers, many of whom were returning to camp year after year, and who met up regularly back in the San Francisco Bay Area. They themselves often used the word “community” to describe an interconnected group of people in the cities of San Francisco, Oakland, and further afield, who had shared this experience of going off the grid together.⁹ In this more in-depth study, I aim to use Camp Grounded and the digital detoxing community as a prominent example of the anti-tech movement, and as a way to better understand what moves people to disconnect.

⁹ My tentative findings from this initial research helped to inform my approach and research questions (Chapter 2).

Existing Work on Camp Grounded

Before describing my research approach and questions in more detail (Chapter 2) it is helpful to see the ways that Camp Grounded has been interpreted in the literature, and the reasons why people might choose to disconnect. There are three initial themes; that it is similar to dieting with food, a search for authenticity or the natural, or focused on individual health.

In my 2017 paper, based on my 2014 Masters ethnography of Camp Grounded, I argue that digital detoxers used a food metaphor to make value judgments about “authentic” sociality (Sutton, 2017). Several other academics have used the food metaphor to better understand digital detoxing. From the outset, there are clear links with ideas in healthy eating, since the word “detox” is used to refer to dieting. Psychologist Jocelyn Brewer, who attended Camp Grounded in 2014, writes that digital detoxing is “the tech equivalent of a juice cleanse” in which people hope to “detox” their body through a strict diet (Brewer, 2018, para 1.). In Madrigal’s (2013) piece on the camp, he writes that the digital detox name echoes the healthy eating movement, suggesting that “technology is toxic and addictive, unnatural” (para. 19) and that by removing it, we can cleanse or purge something about our lives. In the case of food, people choose to “eat local, organic” (para. 11) and Madrigal (2013) explains that the same logic “has been extended to digital friendships” since “[p]rocessed relationships can’t be as genuine or authentic or honest as real life friendships” (para 12).

Camp Grounded might exemplify some of the same trends in anti-tech rhetoric that I have outlined, like the idea that technology interrupts human relationships, or artificially alters our experiences. The Camp Grounded website¹⁰ (2017) points towards Camp Grounded as a more natural, authentic experience, when they write, “[w]e value smiles, DIY, nature and the great outdoors, long hugs, laughter, tears, good eye-contact and IRL (in real life) community

¹⁰ This version of the Camp Grounded website is no longer available but I have screenshots in my notes.

experiences [...]” (para. 4). A “natural” theme can also be found in Camp Grounded’s imitation of summer camp, with children’s summer camps traditionally held in the forest as “a sanctuary from the artificial, mechanized world of the city” (Smith, 2006, p. 73).

Like the use of CBT and counselling for “internet addiction,” Camp Grounded seems interested in therapeutic benefits of a digital detox. “Our mission is to inspire, educate and empower our collective generation to create more mindful, meaningful, and balanced lives,” they write (Camp Grounded website, 2017, para. 1). The website lists negative health impacts of technology such as inability to focus, lower productivity, and higher stress, similarly suggesting that it is an opportunity for ticket-buyers to manage their health. The website (Camp Grounded website, 2017) cites statistics such as “One out of ten Americans report depression; heavy internet users are 2.5 times more likely to be depressed;” (para. 5) and “33% of people admit to hiding from family and friends to check social media,” (para. 11) but these are lacking sources.

In light of this health-focused aspect of the digital detox, some academics have argued that Camp Grounded is an example of “digital healthism” in which people internalise the pressure to maintain and optimise your own health in new ways (Fish, 2017¹¹) or are regulating themselves and their experiences (Jurgenson, 2013).

¹¹ Fish (2017) is based on my 2014 ethnographic data.



THE FACTS: WHY DIGITAL DETOX.®?

61% admit to being addicted to the internet and their devices
The average American dedicates 30% of leisure time to perusing the web
50% of people prefer to communicate digitally than in person
67% of cellphone owners find themselves checking their device even when it's not ringing or vibrating
One out of ten Americans report depression; heavy internet users are 2.5 times more likely to be depressed
The average employee spends 2 hours a day recovering from distractions
1/3 of people would rather clean their toilets than their inbox
The average employee checks 40 websites a day, switching activities 37 times an hour, changing tasks every two minutes.
However, only 2% of people can actually multi-task without decline in performance.
60% of people say traditional vacation does not relieve their stress
33% of people admit to hiding from family and friends to check social media
High Social media use can trigger an increase in loneliness, jealousy and fear
95% of people use some type of electronics in the hour leading up to bed.
** Artificial light from screens increase alertness and suppress the hormone melatonin by up to 22%

Figure 5: “The facts: Why digital detox?” (Camp Grounded website, 2017)

Camp Grounded hopes to help ticket-buyers with “creating healthy relationships with our devices, developing new positive social norms and etiquette, and by changing the ways in which we build and design our digital technologies,” through which, they say, “we will shift the course of human history” (Camp Grounded website, 2017, para. 18). This is similar to Turkle’s manifesto exclaiming that “although our relationship with technology has currently been led astray, it is not too late to fix things [...] “[t]here is time to make the corrections” (Turkle, 2011, p. 294). Camp Grounded appears optimistic and enthusiastic, hoping to “set the stage for future generations and celebrate our humanity along the way” (Camp Grounded website, 2017, para. 4).

Overall Questions and Aims

While digital use has always felt right for me, I want to know what doesn’t fit for others. While I will provide the more precise Research Questions for this study in Chapter 2, my overarching

aim is to understand what makes Camp Grounded's digital detox meaningful for those who attend, and to use the example of Camp Grounded to better understand anti-tech narratives.

Researchers above suggest that Camp Grounded might be interested in authentic, natural experiences, or an attempt to live more healthily. However, through an ethnographic approach, attending Camp Grounded myself and spending time with digital detoxers, I hope to learn whether those themes resonate with the people who actually attend. In Chapter 2, I discuss non-use research findings that suggest a multitude of reasons why people choose to disconnect, however I find these to be insufficient in providing a holistic picture of what makes digital detoxing meaningful. Through placing non-use in context, I aim to better understand the beliefs and cultural underpinnings of this example of digital disconnection.

An ethnographic approach which places non-use in context has the opportunity to better understand not only how people disconnect, but how they live with digital technology every day. After the detox ended, individuals must return home, to jobs and everyday life, which demand some kind of digital engagement. As people who feel it is important to take their technology away at the detox itself, how do digital detoxers manage their technology use once they return home? How does technology play a part in their usual lives, and in what ways might it harm or disrupt?

My opinions about and experiences of technology are likely to be very different from those who attend a digital detox. For this reason, anthropology is an ideal discipline in which to situate this research, since through an anthropological lens, all cultures and beliefs can be viewed as equally valid. In addition, digital anthropologists have used anti-tech conversations to ask deeper questions about the relationship between technology and human nature (Chapter 2), and whether we have lost something through the progress of modern society. By placing disconnection in the context of culture, place, and of digital detoxers' own lives, I hope to

understand how they understand and live with technology, and what brings them to a digital detox like Camp Grounded.

Overview of Thesis Argument

Through a six-month ethnography, added to two prior months spent with detoxers and three years of contact with them, I used participant observation, interviews, diaries, and structured observations, to learn how digital detoxers experienced Camp Grounded and how they returned home to a digital world. Between 2014 and 2017 I have attended Camp Grounded five times and spent time in the homes and workplaces of those who attended.¹²

This thesis is structured around five findings chapters, each of which focuses on a different theme within digital detoxers' lives. With each chapter, I show cultural underpinnings of their beliefs and behaviours, which ultimately shaped their technology use (and non-use).

Throughout each of these findings chapters, I show detoxers' underlying expectation to improve their mental health, happiness, and their relationships. They did so in terms of New Age beliefs and practices, and interweaved psychology and neuroscience.¹³ Camp Grounded also used a series of particularly Western, American, or Californian cultural cues which made the experience meaningful to those who attended.

At Camp Grounded, detoxers sought to spiritually find their place in the world. They imitated tribal life in an attempt to rediscover what made them "human," emphasising relationships with each other, the natural world, and with their authentic inner selves. They challenged the oppressive and isolating social structures in American life, including digital technology, greed, and progress, instead looking to "more natural" ways to live. They did this through a return to nature, through creating community, and through changing their thought processes, ultimately

¹² See Chapter 3.

¹³ In Chapter 4 I give an overview of New Age spirituality in the context of the Bay Area.

hoping to shift their priorities towards being their best selves. Digital detoxing demonstrates a continuation of primitivism, which has long been entangled with a narrative of progress and new technology; the thesis argues that some of these cultural beliefs are based in problematic roots, originating in colonialism and racism.

Detoxers used new science to dream up visions of their ancestors and their environment, with glowing screens an unnatural addition to human life. Neuroscience became one way to frame the necessity for seeking healthy, natural forms of sociality. Ultimately I find detoxers' use of science a new way to describe loneliness, belonging, and ask questions about how to live a happy and fulfilled life.

This thesis offers the story of a handful of digital detoxers who I got to know during my time in California. While each of them had different beliefs and desires, I have mapped out the common themes across the community. I set out hoping to understand what it was about technology that felt wrong to people, and I discovered that it was a specific understanding of technology, and its place in a disenchanted modern world, which made “disconnecting” from it meaningful. In this way I have been able to provide some answers to the questions I initially set out with, and have begun to point towards how we can understand this instance of digital detoxing within the wider anti-tech narrative.

Chapter Outline

This introductory chapter (Chapter 1) has outlined the widespread anti-tech narrative, fears of digital harms, and ways that people disconnect. Through my own positive relationship with technology, I have described my approach and reasons for wanting to understand non-use in more depth, choosing Camp Grounded's digital detox, and the Camp Grounded community, as a way to answer some overarching questions.

The literature review (Chapter 2) focuses on two important bodies of research around this topic, namely anthropological studies of technology and mediation, and studies of digital non-use.

The former argues that it is important to understand the digital as part of human life; but I push back on this to emphasise the “social fact” of digital dissatisfaction. With the latter, I bring the approach of digital anthropology to studies of non-use and argue that studies of non-use must take context - culture, geography, and individual’s wider lives - into account. This prompts my Research Questions. In order to answer these, I explain that the study required qualitative research methods and in particular an ethnographic study to look into the everyday lives of digital detoxers. I explain the significance of the work, in part, speaking to fears of digital harm, asserting that cultural belief is a more helpful way for us to interpret these fears.

The methods chapter (Chapter 3) focuses on my use of ethnography as well as interviews, diaries, and observations, and the questions and tensions that arose during this particular study. I discuss the importance of placing digital use and non-use in context, in keeping with positioning myself within the discipline of digital anthropology. I focus on themes of authenticity and belief, and how I struggled to navigate being a researcher at Camp Grounded and sharing different ideas to my participants.

Chapter 4: Fieldsite offers an introduction to Camp Grounded. I situate this introduction within some key information about the Bay Area, including its political history, attitudes to technology, and the beginnings of Silicon Valley. I also explain that Camp Grounded should be seen within the context of “intentional communities” of the area, like Burning Man or Back to the Land communes. I describe the importance of New Age belief to the area and to the digital detoxing community, and offer a basic outline of this religion.

Back To Nature (Chapter 5) is the first of five findings chapters. In this chapter I begin to outline the experience of camp. I argue that detoxers understood Camp Grounded as a return to nature, and problematise this by situating the retreat within cultural beliefs about the natural within American culture. In particular I argue that “the natural” is enacted through appropriation of other cultures who are conflated with the past; primitivism in a digital context.

In Growth (Chapter 6) I argue that digital detoxers found the detox therapeutic and transformative. I argue that detoxers combined psychological ideas with New Age ideas of spiritual growth, and situate this along with the practice of mutual help within American culture. Building on Chapter 5, I argue that detoxers felt community or “tribal” support was “more natural,” and they imitate an imagined version of a tribe that supports one another. Using that support and inspiration, they sought to change their lives, seeking “alignment” between their beliefs and everyday lives. I argue that although these activities and expectations formed a kind of “work,” they were experienced as freeing and inspiring.

In Broken America (Chapter 7) I argue that detoxers saw the tech industry, and its impact on the local area, as symptomatic of a greedy and selfish society. Hoping to fight inequality with left-wing “love” rather than right-wing “hate” detoxers anguished over how to best participate politically. With a constant onslaught of “bad news” available via their digital devices, they chose to prioritise self-care, and self-love, by “turning down” the news and retreating to Camp Grounded. Building on Chapter 6, this prioritised their individual mental health. Despite their beliefs about the tech industry, detoxers would work within it if it helped them improve their own life. I weigh up their understandable retreat from political action and engagement with critical questions around privilege and race.

In Community (Chapter 8) I argue that detoxers were seeking to create a sense of community belonging, which I situate within popular descriptions of “disconnected” modern life. I argue

that this community was created using behavioural techniques which are popular in the San Francisco Bay Area. I problematise the utopian visions of the community with a clear hierarchy, where those at the top used neuroscience to judge the lonely and needy members of the community for unhealthy and inappropriate forms of sociality.

In *Intention* (Chapter 9) I argue that detoxers understood their relationship with technology as occurring between brain and device, and they feared that technology designers could manipulate their brains through persuasive design. Using ideas from mindfulness, they learned new techniques at Camp Grounded to help them shift their thought processes and prioritise their choices and happiness. Through three vignettes, I show the way that technology was interwoven with digital detoxers everyday lives, and could both help and hinder them in their aspirations. However, “mindless” use, seen by them as shameful failure, was ever present. I argue that intentional digital use at all times is an unreasonable expectation.

In the discussion chapter (Chapter 10), I introduce Max Weber’s “disenchantment” as a valuable and insightful theory to understand Camp Grounded. I argue that digital detoxing is a New Age strategy of re-enchantment, using tribal belonging towards spiritual self actualisation. Detoxers who were lonely, bored, or missing something in their lives, found meaning and purpose at Camp Grounded. Through the perspective of disenchantment, I argue that digital detoxers used science to enchant their lives, imagining bursts of serotonin as part of their vision of what “being human” means. I am critical of their brain based explanations for the need to attend Camp Grounded and their universalism, and offer the term “neurological primitivism” to think through how this new use of neuroscience repeats colonial narratives. However I emphasise that Camp Grounded was deeply meaningful and transformative for my participants, and that if they see the world as disenchanted, it is understandable for them to seek these spiritual experiences.

I conclude (Chapter 11) by returning to my argument that non-use must be seen in cultural context, and argue it was my ethnographic engagement that allowed me to discover the rich stories behind digital detoxing. I suggest that each example of non-use will have a similarly complex story to be found, but that some of these narratives may be helpful in understanding anti-tech ideas more broadly.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

In this chapter I begin by situating my research within conversations about human nature and technology. This research has critically examined the fear that we lose something about our humanity with each new technological invention. I speak to this research and argue that we can use these fears as an opportunity to better understand how people feel about technology today.

I next turn to research on digital non-use, which has begun to map the reasons why people choose to disconnect. However I find that one-line motivations for disconnection do not satisfactorily capture what makes it meaningful for those who choose to do so. I argue that an ethnographic approach can offer a more holistic picture of disconnection including what digital detoxers believe in and how they live with technology after a digital detox has ended.

Using my perspective on these two areas of research, I outline the approach and research questions for this research study, before turning to the contribution that this research will offer.

Anthropology and Technology: Technologically Human

Nature and Culture

Fears around digital technology can be situated within a long history of moral panics. In 370 BC, Plato's character Socrates worried that the technology of writing would diminish the nuance of human thought, that writing was inhuman, false, and would destroy the need for memory (Ong 1982, p. 78). "Any new media is first experienced as an additional and

problematic mediation to our lives,” Miller and Sinanan (2014, p. 5) write. “New technologies are often accompanied by a kind of moral panic, frequently fostered by journalism” (Miller & Sinanan, 2014, p. 5).¹⁴ Each technological iteration - the introduction of the telephone, television, and video games - is feared to be unnatural, altering something about humanity, or diminishing human capacity. These tendencies are remade in the current anti-tech trend, for example Turkle (2011, p. 2015) or Carr (2010) who fear that digital technology may curtail our capacity for empathy or attention (Chapter 1).

In his writing on *Camp Grounded*, Jurgenson (2013) names authors such as Weber, Benjamin, Ellul, Baudrillard, and Bauman, who each link “altering the ‘natural’ world in the name of convenience, efficiency, comfort, and safety” with “draining reality of its truth or essence” (para. 8). He does this to emphasise “the depth of modern concern over technology replacing the real with something unnatural,” (Jurgenson, 2013, para. 9) which has surfaced particularly in the last hundred years or so - and may lie at the heart of anti-tech narratives.

This thesis argues that digital detoxing is best understood as an example of re-enchantment, countering the disenchantment of the world that Max Weber described in his lecture *Science as a Vocation* in 1918 (Weber, 2013). Like Weber’s suggestion, I argue that digital detoxers saw American society as disenchanted, agree with Jurgenson’s suggestion to link *Camp Grounded* with this view of societal progress as a story of loss. I discuss this in Chapter 10.

While many view technological advancements as a loss of something authentic or natural about what makes us human, it can equally be argued that being human has always been technological. Ong (1982) argues that writing is not only “invaluable” but “essential for the realization of fuller, interior, human potentials [...] Technology, properly interiorized, does not

¹⁴ Future research could focus on the ways that science is communicated by the media, and how that in turn might shape anti-tech sentiments.

degrade human life but on the contrary enhances it” (p. 81). Gasset (2002) similarly feels that it is technology which makes us human; “[t]o react upon his environment, not to resign himself to the world as it is – that is the token of man [...] Man without technology - that is, without reaction upon his medium – is not man” (p. 96). Ong (1982) similarly feels that “[t]echnologies are artificial, but [...] *artificiality is natural to human beings*” (p. 81, emphasis mine).

“Nature versus Culture” is the anthropological tension under which these themes belong, and is “one of a series of classic logocentric oppositions in Western thought [...] a dualistic conception of the universe in which nature becomes negatively defined as that ordered segment of reality which exists independently from human action” (Tilley et al., 2000, p. 219). In some societies this may feel intuitive, while in others there may be no equivalent word or language to describe any division between “the natural world” and “human society” at all (Tilley et al., 2000, p. 219). Anthropologists have recognised that Nature vs Culture is not an objective truth, but an often contradictory way of interpreting the world; Ellen (1996) writes, “the opposition of nature and culture is therefore a pseudo-problem arising out of reflexive symbolic constructs (ordinary language) within culture itself” (p. 31).

The “problem” of Nature/Culture can be illustrated by asking, where does “nature” end and “culture” begin? While Socrates worried that writing may be unnatural or curtail our capacities (Ong, 1982, p. 78), “today, the ability to write has become so ubiquitous that we have almost forgotten that it is a technology” (Miller & Sinanan, 2014, p. 5). Miller and Sinanan (2014) explain that since writing has become so natural to us, if we hear of a society which does not use the written word, we are “more tempted to consider that it is they, rather than us, who lack an essential quality of being fully human” (p. 5).

In Chapter 1 I described the writing of Turkle (2011; 2015), whose work is often referenced by academics as a figurehead for anti-tech narratives, and I pointed out similarities between her

mission and that of Camp Grounded. In their discussion of anti-tech sentiments, Horst and Miller (2012) take particular care to describe Turkle's writing as "infused with a nostalgic lament for certain kinds of sociality or humanity deemed lost" (p. 12). "Mediation" is one key area in which Horst and Miller see a "problem" (p. 12) in Turkle's work. "The problem" can be found in her book *Alone Together*, they explain; "[t]he implication of her book is that prior forms of sociality were somehow more natural or authentic by virtue of being less mediated" (p. 12). Comparing her books to anti-tech rhetoric in journalism, they explain that the perspective "view[s] new technology as a loss of authentic sociality" (p. 12).

To view technology use as "more mediated" is to view it as something that interrupts relationships between people, acting as a barrier or unnatural medium through which communication attempts to flow. Miller and Sinanan (2014) describe a common image of what might look more natural or authentic; "[w]e can't help but contrast [new media] with some imagined conversation between two people standing in a field as representing the original, unmediated and natural form of communication" (p. 5). But Horst and Miller (2012) explain; "In anthropology there is no such thing as pure human immediacy, interacting face-to-face is just as culturally inflected as digitally mediated communication" (p. 12).

The image of "standing in a field" may be an idea which resonates at Camp Grounded, where detoxers travel to a forest to camp together, rather than stay in an urban or interior setting - in addition to the choice to remove technology, real names, work talk, drugs, alcohol, and watches - there may be implicit claims about mediation, or encouraging a more "original," "natural," or "immediate" form of sociality. But Horst and Miller (2012) warn against this, explaining that the anti-tech perspective in Turkle's books and in journalism, "often exploits anthropological writing on small-scale societies, which are taken to be a vision of authentic humanity in its more natural and less-mediated state" (p. 12). Any kind of "more natural" version of sociality at Camp Grounded could potentially use these "small-scale societies" to represent a "more

authentic” form of human life, suggesting that they could communicate more freely and deeply without the trappings of modern society.

Detoxing as a Search for The Authentic

Other authors have identified this theme of “authentic sociality” in anti-tech narratives. In his piece on Camp Grounded, Jurgenson (2013) points towards authentic identity and sociality as the goals of digital detoxing. Madrigal (2013) similarly suggests that “the dream” of Camp Grounded is that “by stripping away the trappings of modern life, we reach a place where humans naturally fall into deep and honest relationships with each other” (para. 22). Jurgenson (2013) situates digital detoxing within a “popular fairytale” in which “real conversation, interaction, identity slowly came to be displaced by the allure of the virtual” (para. 3). “Once upon a pre-digital era,” Jurgenson writes, “there existed a golden age of personal authenticity” (Jurgenson, 2013, para. 2)

In this way, Jurgenson (2013) suggests, removing technology - as well as real names and work talk - could be an attempt to shed inauthentic, social performance, and that detoxers may believe that doing so prioritises their own personal sense of freedom and identity. The view is reductive in his view, “reducing the complexity of authenticity to something as simple as one’s degree of digital connection,” (Jurgenson, 2013, para. 15) which is misled since logging off still presents the individual with a complex, performed social world; “identity theater is older than Zuckerberg,”¹⁵ he writes, “and doesn’t end when you log off” (para. 16).

In attending Camp Grounded, Jurgenson (2012) suggests that digital detoxers may believe they are “going offline,” as a place distinct from their usual, online lives, and writes that many of us “mistakenly view *online* as meaning *not offline*” (para. 13). “Digital information has long been portrayed as an elsewhere, a new and different cyberspace,” he writes (para. 14), but in reality,

¹⁵ This is a reference to Mark Zuckerberg, the creator of Facebook.

digital devices map onto the everyday, running parallel and interweaving with “offline” life. Similarly, Horst and Miller (2012) argue that “[e]very time we use the word *real* analytically, as opposed to colloquially, we undermine the project of digital anthropology, fetishizing predigital culture as a site of retained authenticity” (p. 13). Jurgenson coined the term “digital dualism” in his 2012 piece *The IRL Fetish* to refer to “the habit of viewing the online and offline as largely distinct” (para. 14). Discussing *Camp Grounded*, Jurgenson (2013) remarks; “[u]nplug all you want. You’ll have different experiences and enjoy them, but you won’t be any more healthy or real” (para. 22).

The work of Horst and Miller (2012), Miller and Sinanan (2014), and Jurgenson (2012; 2013), builds on existing literature around the Nature versus Culture binary that has pervaded Western thought, one which has also seen a series of moral panics following new technological advances from writing to video games. In this latest concern over new technological advances, their work debunks anti-tech narratives, each explaining why they are false, misled, or even exploitative. Jurgenson (2012) describes Turkle as “amassing fame for decrying the loss of real, offline connection” (para. 3), a trend which he describes as “ridiculous” and an “error” (para. 12). As I have shown, Horst and Miller (2012) make their case for distinguishing between Turkle’s (2011; 2015) view and an anthropological one, describing her views on mediation as “the problem;” (p. 12) explaining that the idea of authentic sociality is “antithetical” to anthropology (p. 12), and that using the word “real” would “undermine” the discipline (p. 13). Although Turkle works at MIT as a psychology professor, these academics position her as part of anti-tech rhetoric, rather than as another academic. Below, I push back against these arguments; while I agree there are problems with Turkle’s research data, I also feel that her work is helpful in capturing a widespread anti-tech sentiment.

A Social Fact

I have outlined the key ways in which academics have thought about anti-tech rhetoric. Academics make important arguments; explaining how to research our relationship with technology correctly - by avoiding referring to the actual world as the “real” world (Horst & Miller, 2012, p. 13); and by avoiding the trap of “digital dualism” (Jurgenson, 2012, para. 14). They argue that it is a Western tendency to split the world into Nature and Culture, and that whatever we make in human society is just as “natural.” Some refer to anti-tech rhetoric as a “moral panic” and explain why there is nothing “new” about these fears; they even span back as far as the invention of writing (Ong 1982, p. 78). Each of these arguments point out why popular narratives like anti-tech rhetoric are misled.

There are many logically sound reasons why we should see digital technology like we see writing, or manmade fire; as simply another part of being “naturally” human. But regardless of these reasons, many people appear to find digital technology unsatisfying, unnatural, or harmful, as I illustrated in Chapter 1. Based on the anti-tech narratives which inspired this research project, I suspect that these academic views are simply not how most people seem to think about technology.

Although my personal background has had a positive relationship with technology, and although I agree with digital anthropologists who find that we are “not more mediated” by the rise of the digital (Horst & Miller, 2012, p. 15), I take anti-tech views seriously, as a “social fact.” Emile Durkheim’s (2014) definition of a social fact is essentially norms or cultural values across society which shape the life of the individual. Social facts “consist of manners of acting, thinking and feeling external to the individual, which are invested with a coercive power by virtue of which they exercise control over him” (Durkheim, 2014, p. 21). A social fact has “an existence of its own, independent of its individual manifestations” (Durkheim, 2014, p. 27). My

use of Durkheim's social fact is perhaps similar to the Thomas Theorem, a way of thinking about beliefs which have real world consequences; "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Thomas, 1928, p. 572). This is fitting with constructivist research, which looks at norms and beliefs which structure our experience of the world. Using the notion of the "social fact," I take anti-tech rhetoric as an idea within society that manifests itself in tangible consequences like digital detox retreat.

This idea of the social fact is in keeping with the premise of digital anthropology. Horst and Miller (2012) assert that Cultural Relativism is one of the core principles of digital anthropology (p. 4). Discussing this principle, they stress the importance of seeking perspectives outside of the West, and reject the assumption that digital use will be homogenous the world over (p.p. 18-20). Rather than solely relying on "etic" approaches of what technology is, and how it should be used, digital anthropology is well placed to make room for these "emic" perspectives (see Longacre, 1985). Horst and Miller (2012) disagree with Turkle regarding what technology means for human life, but at the same time, Cultural Relativism makes room for these different perspectives on technology. In keeping with their principle, I reconsider the "etic" perspective towards anti-tech views and aim to instead consider the "emic" perspective - or "members' category" (Have, 1999, p. 36) - of digital technology as inauthentic, "unreal" or unsatisfying.

If we only view people who disconnect from technology as misled, it is impossible for us to understand what makes disconnection meaningful to them. Having decided to take anti-tech rhetoric as a social fact, it becomes easier to grapple with the nuance of how and why people might choose to disconnect from their technology. Madrigal (2013) points towards this approach, when he is critical of Camp Grounded yet "take[s] it seriously," (para. 10) in doing so pointing towards a more empathetic and nuanced interpretation of digital detoxing. "Some people feel something is amiss in their relationships, and that technology is to blame," he says (para. 10). He goes on;

[...] [people see] the offline as authentic and the online as hollow, false, unreal. This may be a false distinction, digital dualism, as Nathan Jurgenson calls it, but it's a widespread reaction to the technologies at hand [...] I can sympathize. Who doesn't want depth in their relationships? Or to be judged by the content of one's character, not the company on one's business card? Why won't life slow down and be still? Why can't I figure it all out? (Madrigal, 2013, para. 10)

In Chapter 3, I explain my responsibility as an ethnographer to carry out respectful and empathetic research using “a method of compassion” (Salomonsen, 1999) as part of my methodology - since I believe that this kind of approach may be more revealing in understanding how a digital detox becomes meaningful for those who attend.

Turkle's work may be a useful example of the “social fact” of anti-tech sentiments, equally captured by surveys and journalism; a visceral and intuitive sense that digital technologies leave people cold. “The concept strikes a chord” I write (Sutton, 2017, para. 20), “it sells books and tickets to retreats, and articulates a feeling of concern that individuals genuinely feel.” I continue;

[...] regardless of academic insistence against romanticized discourse surrounding offline interactions, many feel strongly that certain aspects of pre-digital sociality are indeed favourable [...] if this is a misconception, it is a prevailing one, and it may yet teach us about how we culturally interpret our digital artefacts. (Sutton, 2017, para. 20)

Using the argument that digital dissatisfaction is a social fact, I argue that this cultural phenomenon deserves thorough and critical examination. Rather than a “mistake” (Jurgenson, 2013, para. 13) anti-tech views offer us an *opportunity* to better understand our relationship with digital technology. The anthropological perspective of cultural relativism offers an ideal way to consider how technology can be interpreted in these different ways.

Studies of Digital Non-Use

Since the early 2000s, a body of empirical research into technological non-use has begun to emerge which hopes to understand how and why people disconnect. Initially, research viewed these “rejectors” as potential users; research sought to learn how to transition those non-users into users. More recently the research has shifted its tone towards understanding non-use as an important and meaningful act. This literature has begun to grapple with how to define use and non-use; as well as how people describe their reasons for disconnecting, in this way mapping out important themes which may resonate at Camp Grounded.

However, while this research is encouraging in recognising anti-tech rhetoric as a meaningful social phenomenon, I argue that thus far, research has yet to gain a nuanced understanding of the values behind digital disconnection which I argue can only be found by placing it into cultural context.

What is Non-Use?

Early research on technological non-use often presupposed that connection is desirable. Selwyn (2003) argues that “to date, most academics have focused on non-use of ICT as a ‘problem’ which should be ‘solved,’” (p. 107) and that in these accounts, “non-use of technology is considered an abnormality” (p. 106). This assumption in early non-use studies, in which non-use comes from disadvantage or should be pathologized, may be problematized by digital detoxing, since it shows that those with the opportunity to use the internet may not wish to use it.

Wyatt et al.’s (2002) typologies of non-users may be useful, since it includes “resisters” who have never used the internet out of choice; “rejectors” who voluntarily stop using it; “excluded” who have never used the internet through lack of access; and “expelled” who have involuntarily

stopped using it. Within this framework detoxers could potentially be “rejectors” who choose not to use access at Camp Grounded. In her later work Wyatt (2014) suggests, “Rather than seeing use and non-use as an either/or choice, users of digital technologies need to be conceptualised along a continuum with degrees and types of involvement that may change” (p. 2). She adds the terms “forced,” “reluctant,” “partial,” and “selective” digital use; in which case digital detoxers could be any of these four, perhaps “reluctantly” returning to technology after their detox.

As part of my approach, I acknowledged that detoxers would indeed need to return home to a digital world after the detox had ended, and I was particularly interested in how they navigated daily use having attended the detox. Yet some researchers seem to expect their participants to *remain* offline after disconnecting, as if it is some kind of failure if they do return to technology. In their survey and questionnaire based study, Baumer et al. (2013) explain that their participants “relapsed” and returned to Facebook after periods of non-use, while other studies seem to “attribute people’s failure to diminish their technology use to [...] lack of self-regulation” (Lee et al., 2014; Shoenebeck, 2014; as cited in Hesselberth, 2017, p. 1998).

In contrast, Brubaker et al.’s (2016) interview-based study of Grindr users argues that non-use is not a binary issue. They illustrate the ways that people stop using Grindr, sometimes deleting the app itself but “keeping open the possibility of return” (Brubaker et al., 2016, p. 385) depending on whether they want it at that time in their life; some might use it in one context or location, and not in another. Others simply forgot to reinstall on a new device. “Departure, then,” they write, “is neither a singular moment nor a linear path. Rather, it is a process in which people execute, negotiate and undo the meaning of leaving” (p. 385). Similarly, detoxers may not follow a singular story of a heavy digital user who attend a detox and then forever restricts their use; instead they could follow a similarly non-linear path, moving between “use” and “non-use” in their own way.

Disconnecting can take many forms that differ from going off the grid entirely. Ribak and Rosenthal (2015) describe a myriad of varied “micro-resistances” to smartphones that are equally important to recognise, such as keeping phone calls short, “preferring one medium over another” or “turning the phone face down in particular times and places” (para. 2) Each of these actions are arguably a form of “non-use.” In light of such a possibility, they write,

resistance needs to be studied around well-defined *uses* of specific *media* in particular *moments* and *situations* [...] we need to explore the complicated tapestry of ambivalence, as threads of media and uses intersect in complicated patterns of non/use. (Ribak & Rosenthal, 2015, para. 37)

In her overview of findings in non-use research, Hesselberth (2017) explains: “people’s disengagement from technology is rarely total, but often situational, specific to the medium [...], to the time and place of (non)use [...] and to the purpose of one’s abstinence” (p. 1997).

Yet even taking this kind of context into account, “non-use” may remain difficult for researchers to identify or define. Ribak and Rosenthal’s (2015) interviewees who “define[d] themselves as technophobes... all use media — some avidly, some expertly... all use Facebook” (para. 37). Similarly, they explain, “one of Woodstock’s interviewees is ‘an avid blogger,’ and one of Portwood-Stacer’s is a Web developer” (Woodstock, 2014; Portwood-Stacer, 2013; as cited in Ribak & Rosenthal, 2015, para. 7). In their study, Eynon and Geniets (2012) interviewed self-described non-users only to find that they did in fact use technology in unexpected ways.

Rather than hypocritical, these “non-users” may demonstrate forms of resistance that researchers have yet to grasp. In this way non-use may be not only context dependent, but may have vastly different meanings to individuals compared with the way it is typically used in academia. Even a spectrum or “a continuum of degrees and types of involvement with

technology” (Wyatt, 2014, p. 2) may ignore other kinds of relationships with technology and attitudes towards it that fall outside that view.

Why Disconnect?

Rather than assume that non-use stems from disadvantage, researchers have begun to acknowledge that non-use can be deliberately chosen, and that it is “often, active, meaningful, motivated, [...] directed and productive” (Satchell & Dourish, 2009, p. 7). Here I show the kinds of motivations for disconnection that non-use studies have begun to map.

Dissatisfaction

Some individuals in Brubaker et al.’s (2016) study of Grindr users left the platform because its focus on “casual sex or hookups [...] would not result in ‘meaningful connections’” (p. 379) or else they struggled to “meet the ‘right kind of person,’” (p. 379) finding that it did not meet their romantic needs or life situation. Similarly, in Stieger et al.’s (2013) study of leaving Facebook, some participants felt that “Facebook friends are not real” (p. 632).

Across non-use studies, Facebook emerges as “a prevalent focus for resistance” (Gomez et al., 2015, para. 58); its dominance may fuel a desire to escape it. Baumer et al. (2013)’s study found that people who wanted to leave Facebook struggled to do so, in part due to social expectations. Similarly, in Birnholtz’s (2010) study of instant messenger users, interruptions became unbearable as contact lists grew.

Data and Privacy

Some authors argue that non-use is a form of resistance or self-empowerment. In the last decade or so, there has been increasing interest in the workings of technology companies and how they may go against their users’ best interests (Chapter 1). In this way, the concept of technology companies as coercive has become part of a cultural imaginary (Bartlett, 2019), potentially shaping a desire for disconnection.

Some may disconnect due to safety or privacy concerns. In Baumer et al.'s (2013) survey and questionnaire on Facebook non-use, "privacy" and "data use and misuse" were key concerns. Brubaker et al. (2016) write that "'online suicide' or 'infocide' has received increased attention, as have projects like Suicidemachine, a system that automates deletion of social media accounts and content (Karppi, 2011)" (Brubaker et al, 2016, p. 374).

Activism

Portwood-Stacer (2013) argues that abstaining from Facebook may be "a form of consumer activism;" utilising non-use as "a tactic of critique, which manifests the objections and dissatisfactions people feel toward media products, or even media and consumer culture more broadly" (p. 1043). She situates this amongst "practices of 'lifestyle politics,' which characterize citizenship in contemporary neoliberal society (Giddens, 1991)" (Portwood-Stacer, 2013, p. 1043). Similarly in her book *How to Do Nothing*, Odell (2019) suggests seeking activities or hobbies which cannot be turned into profit in any way as a resistance against the attention economy, or capitalism as it manifests itself online.

It is possible that those at Camp Grounded are engaging with similar ideas, and in his piece on Camp Grounded, Madrigal (2013) suggests that the retreat is a resistance to the exploitative potential of social media. He compares descriptions of camp with a movement in the late 60s and early 70s called "the new naturalism" where people in fact "wanted to change their own lives more than they wanted to change society" (Madrigal, 2013, para. 15). "These technologies need real critiques," he laments (para. 29). "Individuals unplugging is not actually an answer to the biggest technological problems of our time just as any individual's local, organic dietary habits don't solve global agriculture's issues" (para. 34). Beattie (2018) feels similarly, arguing that forms of "dropping out" like digital detoxing ultimately "individualize systemic issues of mass corporate surveillance or privacy exploitation that require collective action and structural reform" (para. 12).

If Camp Grounded were a rejection of consumerism (Ribak & Rosenthal, 2015), this could undermine its goal, as Hesselberth (2017) argues, “every form of (consumer) activism tends to open up new market potential” (p. 1999). Camp Grounded itself sells tickets, creating a new kind of consumer option in the existing array of retreats. As I showed in Chapter 1, anti-tech rhetoric has been shown to lend itself to products such as t-shirts, mugs, and nail varnish (Jorge, 2019, p. 11; Baym et al., 2020, p. 1).

Against the Mainstream

Whether an explicit form of activism or not, individuals undertaking non-use may be doing so to set themselves apart from the norm. Baumer et al. (2013) found that their participants showed “a sense of rebelliousness and pride” about their non-use of Facebook (p. 5). Portwood-Stacer (2013) found that many Facebook refusers considered their non-use “a mark of distinction, superior taste, and identification with an elite social stratum” (p. 9). She compares this to Krcmar’s study of families who do not watch television, who similarly “shared a belief that they were iconoclasts” and who “for the most part, [...] relished that role” (Krcmar, 2009, p. 216; as cited in Portwood-Stacer, 2013, p. 9). Rejecting television has historically “functioned as a symbol of resistance to commercialism, passivity, and moral corruption” (Portwood-Stacer, 2013, p. 6), which bears a striking resemblance to the anti-tech narratives I outlined in Chapter 1.

Some argue that digital non-use serves to perform one’s morality. Portwood-Stacer (2013) argues that Facebook non-use is “conspicuous non-consumption” (p. 4) a “performative act, as a lifestyle practice that has the potential to signify about the identity and ideological position of the abstainer” (p. 2). The term builds on Veblen’s (1994) concept of “conspicuous consumption” where one displays whatever luxuries they can afford; while the presence of jewelry might show wealth, the absence of technology might show morality.

Portwood-Stacer's (2013) interviewees positioned themselves "above the 'time-wasting,' 'artificiality,' and 'narcissism' that they see as characterizing Facebook use" (p. 11). Similarly, Ribak and Rosenthal (2015) argue that in popular videos online, a visible "demoting" of smartphones - like placing them face down to hold a conversation - emphasises instead a "more meaningful, fashionably approved, arguably wholesome pursuit" (para. 17).

Portwood-Stacer's (2013) interviewees faced criticism; were considered selfish, attention seeking, trying to prove something, or were accused of thinking they were "better" than other people. Jurgenson (2012) feels that people demonstrate "immense self-satisfaction in disconnection" (para. 10) and argues that those who disconnect can enjoy a moral high ground, and "establish a new set of taboos as a way to garner distinction at the expense of others, setting their authentic resistance against others' unhealthy and inauthentic being" (para. 20).

Not everyone can choose to delete. "These refusals are seen as active, often political choices of individuals who can afford the 'cost of opting out'" Brubaker et al. (2016, p. 375) explain. A digital detox, or being unavailable for several days, may be more costly for some people than others. While a non-user could be attempting to criticise a system, or consumption more broadly, they may inadvertently highlight their own privilege through their ability to log off. Portwood-Stacer (2013) explains, "What one person sees as a demonstration of personal integrity, another person may see as self-righteous elitism" (p. 3). In this way, however those at Camp Grounded view their own disconnection, they may be navigating the perceptions of onlookers.

Self-Regulation

Finally, some have suggested that discourse like digital detoxing is ultimately a form of self-regulation. Madrigal (2013) writes that the digital detox name suggests that by removing technology, it is possible to become healthier, or better people. Plaut (2015) looks at new digital tools which curtail use, which "promise empowerment through limitation," (para. 37) while

Hesselberth (2017) argues that non-use may usher in “new forms of governmentability” (p. 1999). Along these lines, Fish (2017) argues that Camp Grounded is a form of “digital healthism,” which takes the Foucauldian idea of internalised control and applies it to digital technology use; in this case, non-use could be the latest version of societal, internalised expectations. The desire to improve health through disconnection could be this kind of “governmentability” in action. These authors suggest that digital detoxing as some kind of alternative lifestyle or breaking free from the mainstream may belie a new form of self-control, and may lack self-awareness about its own pitfalls.

What Digital Detoxing Might Be

Throughout these studies, it is clear that non-use literature “all signal an emergent unease with the ubiquitous presence of connective media devices within our everyday lives and environments,” an unease which may be “substantially growing” (Hesselberth, 2017, p. 1997) further supporting my argument that anti-tech narratives are an important phenomenon that I consider a “social fact.”

In Chapter 1, I summarised academic views on Camp Grounded: that it was similar to dieting with food, a search for authenticity, or an internalisation of pressure to be healthy. In this chapter I have outlined further possible motivations to disconnect, each of which may resonate at Camp Grounded. Overall studies of non-use take this trend seriously and as a meaningful act, however there is criticism that disconnecting may be hypocritical, privileged, or misled.

Perhaps digital detoxers believe in what Jurgenson (2013) calls the “popular fairytale” of disconnection; that by removing technology, you can be more “authentic” (paras. 2-3) This seems to resonate with non-use literature that found non-users were proud of their non-use, saw themselves as rebellious, and as important critics of mainstream culture (Portwood-Stacer, 2013; Baumer et al., 2013). Digital detoxers might be focused on their experience of Facebook,

or on the ways that technology feels dissatisfying and meaningless in their lives (Stieger et al., 2013; Brubaker et al., 2016).

In light of persuasive digital design and exploitative technology companies, a digital detox might be primarily a political shunning of the current system or assertion of their agency, just as those who delete their online footprint (Baumer et al., 2013; Karppi, 2011; Odell, 2019). Like Odell (2019) suggests, detoxers might wish to critique the very notions of productivity or capitalism themselves. Similar to Portwood-Stacer's (2013) concept of "conspicuous non consumption" (p. 4), there might be a currency to attending a detox, whereby attendees can feel superior to others for having attended. A comparison between technology and food (Brewer, 2018; Madrigal, 2013; Sutton, 2017) might encourage detoxers to think of their time at Camp Grounded like a health spa. Digital detoxers may be people who are interested in self-improvement, holding themselves to a high standard of health. Perhaps ideas of clinical digital harm, such as the ones I outlined in Chapter 1, combine with the idea of a retreat; that it is restful, and restorative, to go to a digital detox. Some non-use studies found that online life was invasive in unwanted ways (Birnholtz, 2010), and this dissatisfaction and stress, combined with new notions of what may be healthy, could create a desire to attend Camp Grounded.

Non-Use in Context

The non-use literature has made steps towards defining non-use and outlined possible reasons for disconnection. However, they could go further in allowing for more nuance in the academic categories of "use" and "non-use," which may be an unhelpful binary imposed upon individuals who instead live within a "tapestry" of technology resistance (Ribak & Rosenthal, 2015, para. 4), and could offer a more holistic understanding of why people choose to disconnect. Following Miller (2013, p. 190) and Miller and Slater (2001, p. 1) I argue that digital disconnection must be studied in context; that is, cultural context that is geographical and temporal, as well as the context of people's lives. The motivations to disconnect that I have

outlined may all resonate at Camp Grounded. However, I argue for an anthropological perspective that focuses instead on who specifically was disconnecting, and where, in order to understand what makes a digital detox meaningful. Broader stories of the individual's life and cultural context may be integral in their choice to attend a detox. An anthropological perspective takes culture into account, and situates non-use amongst cultural beliefs, and ideas of appropriate behaviours. Concepts of what technology is, and what it is for, may differ greatly; whether it symbolises a way to receive crucial information, communicate, work, or relax; shaping concepts of inappropriate and appropriate digital use. Perceptions of devices may also be influenced by perceptions of the technology industry itself, which may differ across cultures and local understandings. In this way, these non-use studies could engage more with why technology would cause friction or dissatisfaction for a specific person in a specific place. I expand upon this approach in Chapter 3.

Some of these studies have suggested that non-users aim to demonstrate their morality. This may be an important theme both within Camp Grounded and across non-use rhetoric. However, this does not explain why it might be important for a particular person to communicate their morality in the first place, nor why they would choose technology use as a site in which to do so, in this specific place and time. "Conspicuous non-consumption" (Portwood-Stacer, 2013, p. 4) may be a helpful way to understand non-use; however, since digital connection itself varies worldwide, it will not hold the same weight in all locations. Equally, while it may be a privileged position to opt out of digital life, this will vary. In some contexts, it will be only the very privileged who are able to opt out, in others, it may be more accessible.

These non-use studies tend to lack detail about what people do instead when a person puts their technology away, and what technology is replaced with. Following Satchell and Dourish's (2009) argument that non-use is "active, meaningful, motivated, ... directed and productive" (p. 7), it is important to consider this aspect of disconnection. Hesselberth (2017) asks, "how does

one study [let alone find] people not doing something?” (p. 1997). But digital detoxing shows that people ostensibly “not doing something” are in fact doing so together at a retreat. Looking at Camp Grounded and how it is designed, it is clear that the summer camp theme is important, which may reflect the importance of themes of the “natural” and of “authenticity.”

By placing non-use in context, this study will seek to understand how non-use is made meaningful, to particular people in a particular place. But in addition to geographical or cultural context, non-use studies rarely situate non-use in time, amongst historical events, political changes, or cultural trends. Put simply - why now? Studies also rarely contextualise non-use within a person’s life story, or at what moment in their life they are choosing to disconnect. Time is also important to consider after the act of non-use itself, yet research rarely discusses what happens after technology is reintroduced. To understand how Camp Grounded is meaningful, it must be located amongst what happens after a detox, and how digital technology interweaves in the lives of those who once disconnected. It may not only be the time spent at Camp Grounded itself which constitutes a form of resistance or critique of technology. It is important then, to ask how those who disconnect understand their own behaviour and reconcile potential contradictions, while capturing the tensions, aspirations, or day-to-day reality of being a non-user, long after non-use has taken place.

A final and important issue is the degree to which non-use is about digital technology at all. Studies have pointed towards self-reported non-users who in fact use some technology heavily, which complicates the categories of “use” and “non-use” (Ribak & Rosenthal, 2015; Woodstock, 2014; Portwood-Stacer, 2013; Eynon & Geniets, 2012). These studies may also suggest that technology is specifically removed as and when it is attached to a broader theme. Do digital detoxers specifically aim to remove technology itself, or are they going to Camp Grounded for more complicated reasons? My approach hopes to de-center technology itself, viewing it as only one part of a digital detoxers’ everyday life.

Research Questions

In this literature review I have spoken to work within digital anthropology, pushing back for the recognition and study of a “social fact” of digital dissatisfaction. I have also argued that although non-use literature has taken digital disconnection seriously, it has yet to situate non-use in context.

Taking a digital detox retreat as an example of anti-tech rhetoric, this study aims to understand why people engage in digital detoxing, and what makes it meaningful to them, by discovering more broadly how a digital detoxer lives in a digital world. With these overarching aims and the existing literature in mind, I approached the study with the following questions; 1. Who are digital detoxers?; 2. How do digital detoxers perceive digital technology?; and 3. How do digital detoxers use digital technology?

1. Who are digital detoxers?

This question has three layers; looking at individual, community, and cultural identity, of those who attend a digital detox.

- A.** What are digital detoxers’ individual personalities, their hopes and fears? Where do they live and work? What do their friendships and family ties look like? Why are they coming to camp? At what stage in their lives are they attending a detox? In what ways does it help them? Are they particularly privileged people (Portwood-Stacer, 2013, p. 3), and if so, how does this shape their attendance to the detox?
- B.** In Chapter 1, I explained that people return year after year to Camp Grounded and that a community has evolved around the retreat. What does this community look like, who are the leaders and followers, and what social dynamics are fostered within it? What do

they feel brings them together? Do detoxers feel a sense of community pride? How does their group identity compare to other groups in the local area?

- C. The third layer speaks to the non-use literature which does not consider cultural particularity of non-use. How does digital detoxers' cultural context shape these previous two identities; what kind of values do they hold, and what kind of behaviours and identities are desirable or undesirable in the local culture? What kind of local ideas may there be around what is "good" or "healthy," and how might these manifest themselves at the digital detox? Does attending make them feel like a healthy, moral, or otherwise "good" person? Some authors have argued that non-use is a search for authenticity (Jurgenson, 2013, para. 2); what aspects of their cultural context might illuminate what this would mean to them specifically?

2. How do digital detoxers perceive digital technology?

Building on **RQ1**, this question considers the specificity of this group's perception of digital technology, rather than assuming how they might find it to be damaging or harmful.

- A. What kind of associations does technology hold for digital detoxers; is it a marker of wealth, a portal for friends and family, a place of work, or a remnant of capitalist culture? Building on the literature in anthropology and Nature/Culture, do they see technology as "unnatural"? How do digital detoxers understand technology - what it is, and what it should and should not be for?
- B. Which aspects of digital technology do detoxers struggle with? Do they tend to view technology as harmful, in terms of depression, or addiction? Or are there other ways that they are experiencing harm? Are there specific health risks to technology in their view? Aside from clinical harm, do digital detoxers find digital technology invasive (Birnholtz, 2010), dissatisfying (Brubaker et al., 2016, p. 379), fake (Stieger et al.,

2013, p. 632)? Do they feel it is the mainstream choice to use digital technology, and wish to step away from that (Portwood-Stacer, 2013, p. 9)? Are they predominantly concerned with privacy (Baumer et al., 2013), safety, or exploitation of their data? Are they concerned digital technology mediating their interactions (Miller & Sinanan, 2014, p. 5)?

- C.** Since digital detoxers live near to Silicon Valley, does this proximity shape their perception of the companies and their products? Madrigal (2013) and Beattie (2018) suggest that people at Camp Grounded are self-focused rather than critiquing the system effectively. Are they interacting with digital design, are they hoping to make changes to digital technology, or do they focus more on their own individual experiences?
- D.** What can the shape of the detox itself show about how detoxers feel about technology? What might constitute a “retreat” from digital life? Horst and Miller (2012, p. 12) and Miller and Sinanan (2014, p. 5) describe widely held beliefs around nature or pre-digital, unmediated communication, such as “standing in a field.” Do these images of nature and the authentic resonate at Camp Grounded? Building on **RQ1c**, what kinds of beliefs might be shaping the detox, for example, ideas about technology, health, summer camp, or nature, within American culture, or within the San Francisco Bay Area more specifically?

3. How do digital detoxers use digital technology?

Keeping in mind **RQ1a** regarding who digital detoxers are and what kind of lives they live, and **RQ2** regarding how they feel about technology, this question asks, what role does digital technology play in their lives broadly? How do they navigate using it, bearing in mind who they are, and how they feel about technology?

- A.** How “digital” are digital detoxers lives? What devices do they own, what platforms do they use? How often do they use them and for what sort of purpose?
- B.** Are there strategies for correct or proper digital use? **RQ2a** asks what detoxers feel technology “should or should not be for,” building from this, do those decisions shape how they use it? Do they adhere to their own expectations? Building from **RQ1b**, if there are strategies for correct digital use, do they judge each other when they fall short, and would that impact them socially within the community? Again, by putting use and non-use in context, this will help to provide more nuance as to how people incorporate technology into their lives, where there is friction and where there is benefit. This kind of context may also help to differentiate between aspirational and actual digital use; the former of which may be disproportionately represented in the self-reporting of many studies.

Approach

In order to answer these questions, this research project will use ethnographic methods. Ethnography is a holistic approach that investigates the “contextual significance of social practices” within a community (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p.p. 134-5). Values, beliefs, and aspirations, can be discovered through the empathetic detail of ethnographic methods, which offer the possibility for richness and depth of data (Eriksen 2001, p. 28). This speaks particularly well to **RQ1**: “who are digital detoxers” in terms of wider, cultural identity, situating the digital detox within wider norms and beliefs.

Ethnography is vastly comprised of the method of “participant observation” which is “the embodied emplacement of the researching self in a field site as a consequential social actor” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 65). This idea of spending time with people while equally asking analytical questions has also been termed “deep hanging out” (Geertz, 1998). This will entail

attending the digital detox myself and spending time with detoxers during their everyday lives in the San Francisco Bay Area. Ethnography is especially powerful in capturing the "social meanings and ordinary activities" of people in "naturally occurring settings" (Brewer, 2000, p. 10). This works well with **RQ1**, particularly illustrating the everyday lives and personalities of detoxers themselves, while also answering **RQ3**, "How do digital detoxers use digital technology?" since I will have access to not only what detoxers say, but what they actually do in practice with their devices.

Participant observation at the digital detox itself will allow me to provide richness not available to me through any other means, enabling me to provide "thick description" (Geertz, 1978) in which we are able to "show rather than tell" (Tracy, 2010, p. 842). I will be able to see how Camp Grounded is designed and made sense of specifically as a respite from technology, demonstrating not only why they are removing technology, but how. Building together with **RQ1c**, this will offer a culturally contextualised view of Camp Grounded and why it looks the way it does, potentially speaking to debates within digital anthropology about conceptions of nature and the authentic.

Alongside participant observation, interviews are usually used as a part of an ethnography. Interviews will help me to answer **RQ2**: "How do digital detoxers view digital technology?" since detoxers will be able to put their thoughts and feelings into words, including those regarding nearby Silicon Valley and its creations (**RQ2c**).

In Chapter 1, I outlined my positive experiences with digital technology. In ethnography, the researcher uses themselves as the research tool, building relationships with participants and immersing themselves in the culture. To immersively experience the digital detox myself and spend time with detoxers will use my own curiosity and beliefs as fuel, contrasting my own relationship to technology with the experience of Camp Grounded towards a fuller

understanding of detoxing and anti-tech beliefs. According to Tracy (2010), good qualitative research is “marked by honesty and transparency about the researcher’s biases, goals, and foibles as well as about how these played a role in the methods, joys, and mistakes of the research” (p. 841). Through my use of ethnography, I will be able to include my own struggles and joys of the research as important data that I will use to build towards an understanding of digital detoxing.

Significance

This research contributes primarily to the discipline of digital anthropology. It speaks directly to Horst and Miller’s (2012, p. 4) response to the work of Turkle (2011; 2015) and emphasizes the legitimacy of disconnectionist sentiments as a social fact. It uses the approach of viewing non-use in cultural context and “de-centering” technology itself (Gray, 2009, p. 16) to focus on the everyday lives of digital detoxers. It also combines both on and offline qualitative methods as well as novel techniques like the use of my own social media profiles. I discuss these methods, and their challenges and benefits, in Chapter 3.

The research also contributes to non-use literature. Research has offered possible motives for disconnection, however, this study will not simply contribute to a growing list of reasons why people disconnect. It will push past straightforward explanations, typologies, or one-line motivations, into a more holistic picture of the values, worldview and behaviour behind digital detoxing, allowing for nuance, tensions and contradictions around technology use. While much non-use literature relies on discourse analysis or interviews, ethnography offers the opportunity to move beyond the interview or the rhetorical justifications within anti-tech sentiments, to gain a far richer picture of the lived experience of participants. This project will contribute to understanding how people experience and use new technologies, allowing for the possibility

that there entirely different ways of thinking about technology use that categories like “use” and “non-use” fail to grasp.

Above, I showed that some researchers showed an expectation for non-users to remain non-users; others found that non-users were described as proud and obnoxious; some researchers were actively dismissive of searching out authenticity, or of seeking “more natural,” “less mediated” forms of sociality. I contribute to each of these by seeking to understand digital detoxing rather than dismissing it or focusing on contradictions. Even as someone who “loves” the internet, I believe that critiques of digital detoxing are missing an opportunity to better understand how people live with technology today.

Speaking to Studies of Digital Harm

I have outlined the two areas of literature amongst which I situate this research; digital anthropology and studies of non-use. I have argued for the recognition of digital dissatisfaction as a social fact, and for the importance of placing digital disconnection in cultural context. However there is a third area of research where my approach and findings may be significant.

In Chapter 1, I explained that there are studies seeking to prove or disprove whether technology actively causes harm. Many researchers and authors claim that we may become depressed, our capacity for empathy may be curtailed, our attention spans shortened, and children’s cognitive development stunted, all from digital technology use. I listed treatment centres, clinics, retreats, and apps, each a form of intervention hoping for a clinical benefit. It is possible that a digital detox, too, could be categorised as one of these hopeful interventions.

However, we do not have robust evidence that shows that technology use is actively harmful or addictive. The dangers of blue light have been vastly overstated (Porter, 2020; Fleming, 2018) while neuroscientists despair at the oversimplification of “dopamine” used to compare social

media to drugs (Burnett, 2018; Orben & Przybylski, 2017). Although Turkle is a recognised psychologist at MIT, her 2015 book relies heavily on a 2014 study (Uhls et al., 2014) that social psychologist Jenny Davis (2014, 2015) has criticised as making conclusions that the data do not support, for example, conflating variables.¹⁶ An ongoing battle between Greenfield and Oxford academics Przybylski, Orben, Bell, and Bishop, continues about rigorous science and the existence of digital harms; they argue that Greenfield in particular does not conduct rigorous research, and cannot trust the findings she publishes about the psychological effects of technology use (Bell et al., 2015). In Mills' (2014) overview of studies into the effect of internet use on adolescent brains, she concludes that there is "currently no evidence to suggest that Internet use has or has not had a profound effect on brain development" (p. 386). At the time of writing, the term "Internet addiction" itself remains unrecognised by the DSM, "The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders".

With a lack of clear empirical proof one way or the other, I find that this begs the question of why anti-tech rhetoric, and the suggestion of digital harm, is so powerful. Rather than being *led* by scientific proof, the studies continue to search for digital harms "almost as if we *want* [them] to be true" (Sutton, 2020, p. 17). Rather than ask whether technology is clinically harmful, I will offer a *constructivist* view of digital harms, which have thus far been viewed with a *positivist* lens. You would not undertake a social science project in a Christian Church by asking whether prayer "worked." "The interesting problem" Lurhmann (1989, p.16) writes, regarding her study of witches, is "not whether those claims are ultimately correct" but "how different people can find different claims persuasive."¹⁷ Ethnographic methods will help me move past this current problem of proving or disproving clinical harm, to better understand culturally constructed ideas of digital technology and its role in modern life, in keeping with Tracy (2010) who writes that

¹⁶ Essentially by taking away technology and adding in a summer camp.

¹⁷ I discuss influences from Anthropology of Religion further in Chapter 3.

“Research that is counterintuitive, questions taken-for-granted assumptions, or challenges well-accepted ideas is often worthwhile” (Tracy, 2010, p. 840).

Chapter 3

Methods

Introduction

In this chapter I begin by outlining my previous experience with Camp Grounded, and why I chose this example as the best way to understand anti-tech narratives. I then turn to my 2017 fieldwork, and discuss my use of ethnography, including participant observation, interviews, diaries, and structured observations.

I discuss the methodological hurdles that I faced and why the friction I experienced during this ethnography led to some of the most important findings. Before I began fieldwork, I knew that this research would necessarily involve studying people with differing views on technology, but I realised later that our differences extended past ideas about technology or authenticity into spiritual beliefs about the modern world (Chapter 10). In order to manage differing beliefs, I argue for Salomonsen's (1999) approach which blends "compassion" and "honesty."

I then discuss a possibly surprising element of this fieldwork, which was how "digital" it was. Following digital anthropology research methods, this chapter details the ways that I used ethnography in both on and offline spaces. Since I used my own personal social media profiles to connect with participants, I build upon my discussion of differing beliefs in fieldwork to suggest that this may create extra difficulty for ethnographers. Finally I discuss analysis, dissemination, and ethical considerations, suggesting that these include not only participant wellbeing but that of the researcher.

My Time with Digital Detoxers: Pre-2017

Officially, the fieldwork which forms the basis of this thesis took place between April 2017 and October 2017, when I was living in the San Francisco Bay Area and spending most of my time with digital detoxers. However, I began studying this community in 2014, and having left the Bay Area I am still, at the time of writing, connected with them online in various forms.

In early 2014, I picked up the phone in my parents' house in West Sussex, and called Levi, the founder of Camp Grounded, at their Oakland office. We had a short conversation about me attending camp for my Masters fieldwork, and he barely batted an eyelid, agreeing that I should attend as long as I didn't distract anyone from their camp experience.¹⁸ I bought myself tickets to two camp sessions,¹⁹ booked an AirBnB near MacArthur BART²⁰ in Oakland, and left for a month, my first solo trip and my first to America, aged 24.

Over those two sessions, I experienced camp for the first time, documenting it carefully while often feeling overwhelmed. When choosing a camp nickname, I decided to call myself *Lucky*, in memory of my late 16 year old cat. I met at least 600 detoxers including Levi, whose nickname was *Fidget*, and Brooke whose nickname was *Bruce*, as well as *Mobius*, *Shmu*, *Popcorn*, *Lil Scrambles*, *Lemon*, *Downtown*, *Love Bug*,²¹ and afterwards added many of my participants on Facebook. I was invited to potlucks, parties, and picnics with them, despite, or perhaps because of, being known as the anthropologist studying the community. I interviewed Levi as well as seven other individuals, and wrote my findings into a thesis focusing on the food metaphor (Sutton, 2014), which I later published as a paper (Sutton, 2017).

¹⁸ I learned later that this was probably the line he gave countless journalists, and he may have thought of me as one of them.

¹⁹ In the summer of 2014 there were 3 sessions, I attended session 2 and 3.

²⁰ Bay Area Rapid Transit, the train network in the Bay Area.

²¹ I refer to digital detoxers by their camp nicknames. Because these names use English words and phrases I have italicised them where they appear mid-text. I explain more about the choice to use nicknames under the heading "Ethical Considerations" of this chapter.

In 2015 I attended camp again, this time staying in *Lil Scrambles*' house and meeting *Ocelot* as well as *Redwood* for the first time as she drove me there. Later that summer I rented a house with *Popcorn* and *Lemon*, and volunteered at a "Digital Detox Zone" which the organisers ran at OutsideLands Festival in the Golden Gate Park, San Francisco. At their warehouse space in Oakland, I helped with odd jobs like painting signs and loading U-Haul trucks with equipment, as well as attending the festival to serve tea in the tea tent and help look after the arts and crafts, with Levi, Brooke, *Shmu*, *Mobius*, *Stoked*, and *Mei Mei*. That summer I also met *Rawr* and *Tiki* when they gave me a ride to a small, afternoon-long, "fake camp" which they ran specifically to be filmed; in a fleeting shot of a news video, my face can be seen, grinning, painted with white dots. I went camping with *Lil Scrambles*, I watched *Desperate Housewives* and went clubbing in the Mission with *Lemon*, and often discussed dating and other ordinary aspects of life in your 20s and 30s with others who I met, particularly women. Throughout all this, I kept notebooks of observations, ideas, and quotes, trying to understand what digital detoxing really meant to detoxers, and started to think about how the community functions outside of the camp experience itself.

The context of the beginning of my 2017 fieldwork was Levi's recent death. In 2016, he was diagnosed with a brain tumour, and in January 2017 he died in hospital. I use my 2014 notes and interview with Levi in this thesis. Although he approved my Masters fieldwork, I never fully cleared my DPhil research with him.²² After he died I turned to his wife and brothers as the gatekeepers of the community, and emailed and Skyped with them to ensure full consent on their part for my research to take place.

²² Once I had heard of his diagnosis I did not contact him directly for fear of being invasive.

Site Selection

As I explained in Chapters 1 and 2, Camp Grounded appeared to be a clear manifestation of the anti-tech sentiment I wanted to explore. I hoped that it would be a group brought together by their feelings about technology, and that by studying them I could learn the personal stories, local values, cultural connotations, tensions, and contradictions behind technology removal and dissatisfaction with digital technology.

Camp Grounded first ran in 2013 and immediately received an enormous amount of news coverage, quickly becoming a fixture in discussions about the ills of modern technology. Digital detoxing, too, became an increasingly colloquial term used to refer more generally to any kind of temporary break from technology. When I started my 2017 fieldwork there were several news articles every week recommending a digital detox, although they did not always mention Camp Grounded - much to the organisers' dismay, as they had trademarked the term. One reason for choosing this group was because they deliberately positioned themselves in the middle of the anti-tech conversation. The history and context of the local area also made this a particularly interesting case, with its proximity to Silicon Valley and long-running interplay between counterculture and technology. In Chapter 4, I situate Camp Grounded amongst this rich history.

Camp Grounded worked well as an "opportunity to learn" rather than seek typicality or representativeness (Stake, 2008, p. 130) - it could not explain non-use or anti-tech rhetoric everywhere. However, having first started my engagement with the fieldsite in 2014 and having watched wider anti-tech rhetoric over several years, I find that Camp Grounded resonates with many conversations around technology use or digital addiction. This follows Tracy's (2010) recommendation that qualitative research can offer "resonance" (p. 845) and be a powerful tool for capturing the stories that help us think through a topic.

Digital Anthropology and Ethnography

Ethnography is the core method of anthropological research and usually consists of participant observation and interviews. In Chapter 2, I explained that the empathetic detail of ethnographic methods fosters richness and depth of data (Eriksen, 2001, p. 28) and that this would be the most suitable method to answer my research questions which focus on the experiences, feelings, identity, and everyday practices of digital detoxers.

While I began my fieldwork at the unusual event of Camp Grounded, I viewed their technology use as an “embedded, embodied, everyday” phenomenon (Hine, 2015). I wanted to understand why detoxers went to Camp Grounded, but also how they could return to a digital world afterwards. Ethnography is especially powerful in capturing the "social meanings and ordinary activities" of people in "naturally occurring settings" (Brewer, 2000, p. 10), allowing me to begin to see how their everyday use of technology might look. It was participating within the community after camp, and spending time in their homes and at their workplaces, that helped me learn about the role technology played in their everyday lives.

In Chapter 2, I argued that non-use studies thus far have not accounted for cultural context, potentially missing out on a deeper understanding of why people choose to disconnect. My approach follows digital anthropologists who emphasise the importance of placing digital use in context. “Why should we do an ethnography of the Internet in Trinidad, or of Trinidad on the Internet?” Miller and Slater write, in *The Internet An Ethnographic Approach* (2001):

The Internet is not a monolithic or placeless “cyberspace;” rather, it is numerous new technologies, used by diverse people, in diverse real-world locations. Hence, there is everything to be gained by an ethnographic approach, by investigating how Internet technologies are being understood and assimilated somewhere in particular. (Miller & Slater, 2001, p. 1)

By looking behind the screen, we can discover not just *how* people use the internet, but “the

cultural logic that underpins *why* [interlocutors] do what they do” (boyd, 2016, p. 81, emphasis mine). Just as they argue for placing “use” in context, I argue that the same applies to “non-use.” A person may remove or curtail their technology use in one place for entirely different reasons from someone elsewhere. I wanted to situate digital detoxing as a behaviour carried out by specific people, in a specific place, and at a specific time, and I wanted to understand what kind of worldview was necessary to find an event like Camp Grounded meaningful. Mary L Gray (2009) calls for social science scholars to “de-center” media as the object of enquiry, through “ethnographic approaches that contextualise media engagements as part of a broader social terrain of experience” (p. 14). Following this, I aimed to situate digital detoxing within detoxer’s wider lives and their everyday use of technology.

My Time with Digital Detoxers: 2017

For this research project, I built upon my experiences with digital detoxers across 2014 and 2015, arriving in April 2017 for six months. I attended a camp “preunion,” volunteered over two days with organisers preparing for camp, and attended the two sessions of Camp Grounded which ran that year (19th-22nd May and 26th-29th May), before spending time with participants afterwards in the Bay Area at their homes and workplaces. I also went with them to brunches, dinners, picnics, parties, gigs, launches, bars, coffee shops, and trivia nights. I went to their churches, spiritual meetings, and communication workshops. In Figure 6 I show the rough order of events during my fieldwork.

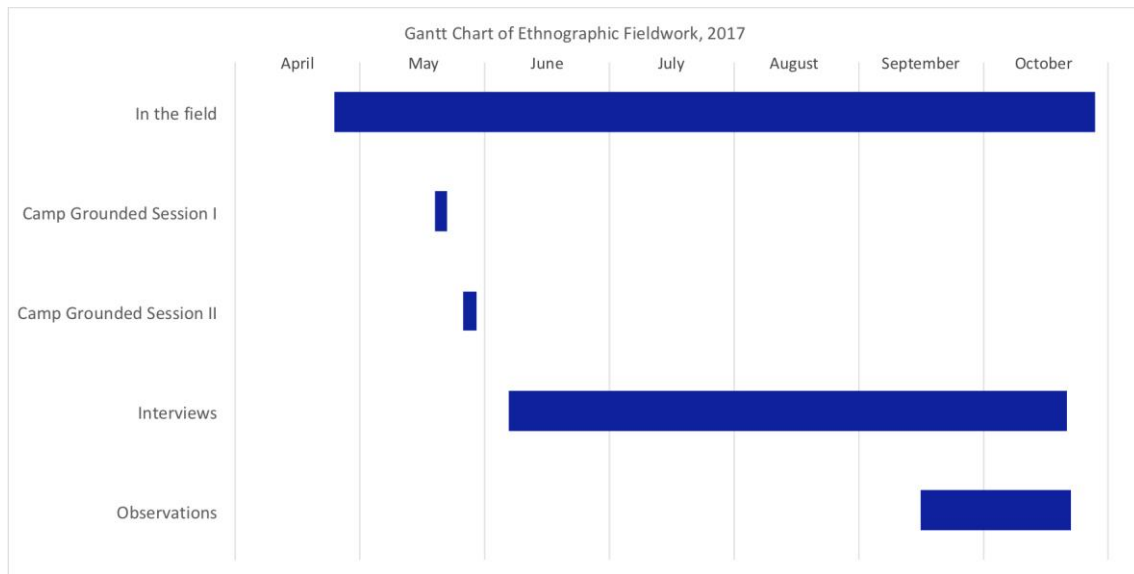


Figure 6: Gantt Chart of Ethnographic Fieldwork

At camp itself I captured photographs and audio alongside my handwritten notes. There were photographers at camp, and I have used their photographs throughout my research over the years, but my disposable cameras allowed me to document parts of camp that the in-house photographers might not focus on. A cassette dictaphone allowed me to keep entire speeches from Camp Grounded that were otherwise lost forever, while still keeping to the rule of “no digital technology.”

After camp I reached out to detoxers using a variety of communication channels. For example, if they had written their email address for me on a slip of paper, or wooden lolly stick, at the end of camp, I emailed them. Some appeared on my Facebook list of “people you may know,” and I added them and sent a message. Others had included their phone number on the camp “roster” and I texted or iMessaged them.

As well as using participant observation in person, I participated in the online presence of the digital detoxing community, particularly on the Camp Grounded Facebook group. This

Facebook group was “secret” and would not appear on search results. Instead, an email was circulated by the organisers explaining that we must add *Popcorn* - listed under her real name, and ask her to invite us in. I joined the Facebook group when I first attended camp in 2014. In 2017, the group had about 1,600 members, and it became a space for people to talk about their camp experiences, to support one another, and share photos and private jokes.

It may be surprising that a community of digital detoxers used a Facebook group. Baym (2006) writes that we must “recognise that the internet is woven into the fabric of the rest of life [...] offline contexts permeate and influence online situations, and online situations and experiences always feed back into offline experience” (p. 86). As I outline in Chapter 2, digital anthropology emphasises the importance of viewing the online realm as a space for valid and authentic sociality. It is important, then, to recognise online sociality as an embedded part of a fieldsite, and I learned much more about my participants by engaging with them online.

Facebook turned out to be my primary tool in finding social events to attend. Many small Camp Grounded reunion events were organised on Facebook with an event page of its own, and I was often on the invitation list. It was handy to be able to see who else had clicked “attending;” I could slowly see who was the most enthusiastically engaged with the events, as well as map who was friends with who. Facebook also makes it possible to see what other events your friends are attending, as long as they are set as “public.” It was therefore possible for me to tag along to things even without an explicit invitation when it felt appropriate. The most common type of event I attended were picnics, which took place in parks around San Francisco, with a handful of detoxers sitting on blankets and sharing snacks, and with a dog or two running around. At these picnics, people shared their camp experiences, talked about their everyday lives, and lamented the political situation. Sometimes they were discussing logistics for getting together again; at one picnic I was invited to try “sexitude,” a dance group which was being attended by men keen to explore their vulnerability and silliness after attending camp.

Camp had gone “on tour” in 2016, and had collected followers in North Carolina, New York state, and Texas. In 2017, following Levi’s death, they knew this might be the last year of camp, and many had flown in to San Francisco. These detoxers from further afield often volunteered to participate in my research. However I bounded my fieldsite by focusing on detoxers who lived in the San Francisco Bay Area, as well as neighbouring San Jose and Marin. In creating my own edges for the study, I acknowledged the partiality of my window onto this topic (Candea, 2007, p. 178; Marcus 1998, p. 5), and aimed for a deeper, rather than a broader understanding of digital detoxing, and of what it meant in this specific place.

I was not only interested in detoxers themselves, but the bigger picture of Californian and American culture. As I journeyed around the Bay Area, I took photographs on my iPhone of graffiti, posters, political placards, building lobbies, advertisements, book displays, food packaging, murals, and supermarket aisles. At gatherings I used up my disposable camera reel, and sometimes took photos with my phone.²³ While spending time on my own social media, I screenshotted news notifications, tweets, and anything else that taught me more about where I was. I put all of these into a password protected fieldwork blog, which I shared with my supervisors. I didn’t have access to a television, but one day in the laundromat I saw a Fox news clip on the dangers of orange juice, followed by a discussion of a Donald Trump tweet; each helping to show me what the popular concerns were within the American consciousness.

I made a point of interviewing and spending time with people outside of the Camp Grounded community. I went to exhibitions, talks, and film screenings, I tentatively explored the Scientology headquarters, and I volunteered at a Burning Man “decompression” event,²⁴ as well as two technology conferences. I spent time with people living in my AirBnb, a tech worker,

²³ Interestingly, phones were often present at these gatherings, as well as alcohol or work talk, each breaking a rule of Camp Grounded.

²⁴ After Burning Man (see Chapter 4), “decompression” events run in cities, supposedly to help “burners” to “acclimatise” to ordinary life. The word “decompress” was also used by detoxers and has therapeutic connotations, the kind of which I explore in Chapter 6.

those I met at events that I attended, local journalist and author of Camp Grounded article Alexis Madrigal, and the manager of Camp Mendocino. In the pocket of a jacket which I bought at a vintage store, I found a business card for a member of the “Orgasmic Meditation” (often called OM) community, which has been described as a “sex cult” by some journalists, and which repeatedly cropped up in conversations, only a few degrees of separation from Camp Grounded. Each of these moments helped to provide valuable context, helping me understand Camp Grounded’s place within the culture of the area, and how it was seen by others. This excerpt from my fieldnotes describes chatting with a woman called Theresa²⁵ at an event called “Ode To Analog” in San Francisco.

I tell Theresa that I know people going to events like “authentic connection” and “deep radical improv” and I ask her whether they are just “Camp Grounded things.” Theresa hangs her head, looks at the floor, and chuckles. “It’s San Francisco,” she says.

In this anecdote, my limited experience with San Francisco Bay Area culture becomes visible, as I presumed the unusual events were limited only to detoxers, before grasping that these were part of the local culture. Through Facebook I saw my participants interested in events with names like “authentic connection,” “deep radical improv,” acro yoga, “crypto consciousness,” sound healing, cacao ceremonies, or a “meet your cervix” workshop. In this way Facebook helped me create an image of where I was alongside in-person experiences.

Ethnography offers an in-depth, but partial view, interpreted through my own eyes. I don’t have a list of where detoxers worked, and I don’t have exact figures on demographics like age, race, income, political views, or background. I didn’t count how many devices they each own, or attempt to measure how long they use devices for. It was only with a small group of detoxers with whom I learned where they work, what they sometimes watch on TV, where they buy a burrito, or what their commute is like. There is much that I do not know about their everyday lives. The fieldwork is also a partial view because it was temporary, gleaning a snapshot of time in 2017. I spent six months doing this fieldwork, and I would have learned different things had I

²⁵ This is a pseudonym that I have allocated.

stayed there for longer. How does the community shift over time? How do they celebrate Thanksgiving and Christmas? Camp stopped running after 2017 - did they continue to feel a community spirit? Did they each find what they were looking for? Instead, I aim to tell their story as I understand it, drawing upon my engagement with them between 2014 and 2017.

Interviews, Diaries, and Structured Observations

I originally planned to interview my participants twice; once soon after camp, and again a few months after. I expected to find some kind of “effect” of Camp Grounded wearing off over time, as well as strategies of use, or “digital diets,” that might be committed and re-committed to. Instead, I learned that time-bound “effects” which wear off soon after the detox itself are trivial in comparison to the role it played in their wider lives. In studying the context of Camp Grounded, I learned that the detox is not only significant during the days that it runs, but is part of a much longer commitment to the values of the local Bay Area; only one piece of a larger story in which detoxers find community and commit to psychological and spiritual self-improvement. In light of this, I chose not to repeat interviews. I do not include dates when quoting from interviews, however, all my interviews took place after the two 2017 sessions of camp, between June and October (see figure 6).

When I focused on individuals for interviews and observations, I very deliberately looked for as much diversity as possible within the group, accounting for gender, age, race, and times they had attended camp. I conducted 31 interviews, using a semi-structured script which is available in Appendix I. Levi’s family - Brooke, *Mobius*, *Shmu* - and other organisers, are not featured heavily in this thesis. My gentle online requests for interviews came during a difficult and busy time and I did not persist. I had more than enough cooperation from other individuals and therefore my data is more reflective of people who attend camp, rather than those who organise it.

Following my participant's communication preferences, I arranged almost all of my interviews online: via Facebook, text, or email. We often met in a cafe, where I tended to buy them a drink of their choice, a token in exchange for their time. The interview took them through a carefully designed "journey" that began with questions that built rapport and context (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 97): "How did you first hear about camp?" "Why did you decide to go?" "What was your first experience like?" We often shared camp stories and laughed together, further building rapport by discussing this shared experience. This was followed by questions which encouraged them to reflect more deeply, "Why do you think people go on a digital detox?" "What do other people say when you tell them about it?" Usually at this point I allowed for tangents, remaining flexible about what might be important during this interview. Then, at about 40 minutes or so, I would turn to the "tech use diary,"²⁶ and ask them to walk me through it section by section. This usually elucidated far more about their day-to-day life, and led to more tangents, which were extremely useful. After this I saved two open ended and often more difficult questions to answer questions for the end: "What do you think about the racial aspects of Camp Grounded?"²⁷ and "How do you feel about the tech industry?"

My research questions (Chapter 2) required interview questions which allowed participants to place emphasis on what they cared about. Because of this, dialogue was a key part of my interviews and while some of my interviews resembled structured questions and answers, some were much more like a long conversation. I used my genuine ignorance and curiosity as a way to press them to be specific, to address paradoxes, and outline cultural histories. Interviews are always a site for the co-construction of knowledge between researcher and participant; rather than the researcher extracting pre-existing information within the mind of the participant, questions provoke new avenues of thought (Kvale, 1996, p. 2; Gubrium & Holstein, 2002, p.

²⁶ I explain the use of a "tech use diary" on page 62 and include an example in Appendix II.

²⁷ I talk about how I added this interview question to my script in Chapter 7.

15). But detoxers are unusual in that they have often carefully thought through both their decision to attend Camp Grounded and their attitude towards digital technology, and discuss it together often. In the case of ticket-buyers, their participation in the interviews was often performative, citing camp mantras or Levi himself. In this way the interview could shift between me setting them off on a topic they were passionate to talk about, and a more rapid back and forth where I could quiz them on specifics.

Some participants perhaps responded to this conversational style by turning the questions back on me, grilling me about whether I liked Camp Grounded, and whether I would attend regardless of whether I was researching it. Halfway during the fieldwork, I developed a pre-interview script where I explained that “if I bring us back from a tangent, it’s just because I really want to be able to ask you all the questions in the time we have.” The pre-interview script was effective in asserting that I would be posing questions to them, rather than the other way around. I also edited my interview script slightly over time, for example I began to include the question about race around halfway through my interviews after I realised what an important theme it was (Chapter 7).

During the interviews, I posed my working theories to my participants. This follows Tracy’s (2010) concept of “member reflections,” which “allow for sharing and dialoguing with participants about the study’s findings, and providing opportunities for questions, critique, feedback, affirmation, and even collaboration” (p. 844). I often heard a clash between my understanding and theirs, or began to feel myself on a steep learning curve, for example this extract from my interview with *Luminous*.

Theodora: The whole thing about sitting with yourself and having a moment of silence, to me, I don't know if it's a British thing, or my personality type, but I do that all the time. So it doesn't make any sense to me that there are so many people who are like, “Oh, I sat still for ten minutes and then I realised I had all this stuff [fears, emotional baggage, etc.]”

Luminous: Yeah we don't - I don't think we culturally teach mindfulness or self awareness in our culture. We don't raise our children very we- these types of things that they're cheerleading for [at camp], is all of the messages that they didn't do a good job teaching us when we were kids, that we all need to hear.

Theodora: - but that's really worrying.

Luminous: It is. It is. That's culturally how it is. Like, we don't teach kids that like, you're worthy and valuable.

Detoxers generally enjoyed the experience of the interview and were vocal about this. But when they referred to an interview as “hanging out” I worried that this showed a lack of informed consent (see section on Authentic Friendship). While I did spend time with participants casually as well, I was surprised that they didn’t see the interview as a more formal event. In Deakin and Wakefield’s (2014) study, they read aloud a short “informed consent” script at the start of Skype interviews, and found that it decreased rapport and changed the atmosphere of the interview. But I may have had the unusual problem of *too much rapport*, and I found my consent form and pre-interview script helpful.

My plan was to use only handwritten interview notes, but as the interviews drew closer, I wondered if this might have been a mistake. I turned up to my first interview with *Shadow* with only a notebook, and he offered to use a digital recorder he happened to own for our interview, sending me the MP3 later. Again, in my next interview, *Luminous* offered to record the interview using an app called Cogi on her iPhone, and sent me the link to it afterwards. After that interview, I used Cogi on my own iPhone for the rest of the fieldwork.²⁸ It turned out that my participants were comfortable with being recorded, and were involved and interested in this part of the interview process. One participant even asked for a copy of the interview recording because our discussion had been useful to them. The tentative finding from re-introducing the iPhone, and laying it on the table between us, was that my participants were less concerned

²⁸ Using an app like this would not have been appropriate had my interviews contained more sensitive information.

about digital technology than I had expected.²⁹ It was important to remain flexible about the use of technology in my methods, not only for logistical ease, but because changing them helped me to learn that remaining “analog” was not of central importance to detoxers, and helped me to “de-center” (Gray, 2009, p. 14) technology within the research.

Fifteen of my interviewees kept a “tech use diary” for me, and most brought it with them to the interview. An example of the diary is available in Appendix II. The diary broke their day down into three hour sections, and asked them questions about their technology use, resembling Broadbent’s (2012) “communication diaries” (p. 132) or Silverstone et al.’s (1991) “time use diaries” (p. 210). The diaries had room for three full days to be recorded. I had searched online for notebooks which would resemble the brown, recycled texture of the Camp Grounded paperwork, and bought a pile of them from Ikea in Emeryville. The camp style was usually handwritten paperwork photocopied en masse, and imitating this, I hand drew the tables. Since the camp handbook included surveys and boxes to be filled with doodles and ideas, this seemed like a good way to encourage participation. I also made a Word document version, in case it suited any of them better. When I gave them the option of a paper or a digital version, it seemed to create anxiety about which they “should” choose. Some of the diary prompts mirrored detoxers’ own language, for example, I asked “What is the technology facilitating?” and “What is it hindering?” which was phrasing I picked up from attending the detox and from my experience with them over the years. Some detoxers filled out only one day, but others filled in three consecutive days. Often they told me that they enjoyed keeping the diaries, and it seemed that they fit into their own desire to be aware of their digital technology use. They were interested in discussing what the diary had made them think about, as well as how the diary had changed their behaviour by making them more self conscious; seemingly anxious that I get the “right” data for my project.

²⁹ This adjusting of technological methods to suit participants is similar to Pink’s experience, which she describes in her 2009 interview.

If their digital use had been altered by the presence of the diary, it did not matter for my research. I used the diaries not as a way to accurately quantify digital use, but as an elicitation tool for reflection and “autoconfrontation” (Mollo & Falzon, 2004); “pursuing not just patterns of use, but also justifications and explanations (and indeed fantasies around) those patterns of use” (Silverstone et al., 1991, p. 210). The diaries proved to be an excellent way to move participants from talking in general terms to talking about their own use specifically.

With five participants I spent between one and two days observing them at their homes, workplaces, churches and spiritual meetings, during dentist appointments, commutes, and winding down after work with Netflix. These were participants who I had interviewed and who had kept diaries for me, and were therefore particularly cooperative - but I also was careful to ask people who could represent different demographics or different aspects of the community; some camp veterans and some newcomers, people in different stages of their careers, and living in different kinds of homes. Observation allowed me to observe how detoxers routinely use digital technology; the “micro-practices of everyday life” revealing “technology use in context,” “daily life routines,” and its “social embeddedness,” (Berker et al., 2006, p. 5).

During those observations, I used an observation schedule, which was structured by my working hypotheses of which themes were arising (Given, 2008, p. 576). My observation schedule is available in Appendix III. The observations provided a more rounded view of the participants who I had thus far seen only at camp, at camp reunions, or in the formal interview setting, and helped me to understand the role Camp Grounded played in their lives. With these five, I took care to write them a thank you card or a small gift to show my gratitude.

Authentic Friendship

Ethnography necessarily requires participation and involvement with participants. This meant not only going to Camp Grounded, but being a part of the social fabric of the community. As I have suggested, I had made genuine and meaningful friendships before 2017, and felt welcomed as an individual. However I was becoming increasingly nervous about the more formal aspects of my research. In 2017, it became very difficult to navigate my relationships with detoxers; they seemed to hope that my primary reason for being there was the joy of spending time with them, when in my eyes, my research had become increasingly serious. This time, I was attending for my PhD at a prestigious university, had gone through a rigorous ethical review to be with them, and was creating my own public platform as a writer. I was struggling to understand how this shift in my own approach might affect my relationship with them; should I be objective, or forming relationships (Oakley, 1981)? Were the relationships I formed before 2017 “unprofessional?” The Camp Grounded rule to remove “work talk” showed their belief that your “work self” was a separate identity to your “true” self, but *I was at camp for my work*. In other words, my fieldsite demanded that I be “unprofessional” while I was working there. Could I offer them my “true self” while simultaneously conducting my PhD research? Anxiously moving between one or the other left me walking an impossible tightrope.

I was genuinely friends with many participants and even found myself drawn into the hierarchy of the community. A go-to camp conversation is to ask how many years you’ve been attending; at camp I heard myself talking about how my engagement with the group spanned years and how I knew the organisers. I detected a sense of pride in how many more mutual Facebook friends I had with the organisers compared with a newcomer. After being invited to brunch at Oakland’s Thai Temple with Levi and his family in 2014, I had actually kept a souvenir of a decorative coin in my wallet ever since, proof that I sometimes gained access to the “inner circle” (Chapter 8). Moments like this told me that I belonged, and even suggested that this

might be *my* community. At other times when I saw participants socialising together on Instagram I realised I had not been invited, and that I could not access the back channels that they used to meet up.

When I tried to tell someone I met at camp how much I was personally struggling on the trip (see Page 77), I might have been viewed in researcher mode, and be offered a monologue for my notes when I really needed a friend. Conversely, when I hoped for a formal tone in my interview, it might have become unexpectedly informal. As Clawson (2009) writes, as anthropologists it is important to never assume our status in the community we are studying. As researchers we can never know quite how our participants see us, whether we are considered “part of the family,” or an “outsider,” by who, or when (Clawson, 2009, p. 63).

As an early career researcher, I had little knowledge that these were common ethnographic problems, and I privately struggled to pull off a balancing act between being “professional” and a “friend” (Taylor, 2011). Anthropologists have long struggled to find the “right” balance between seeing their participants as “friends” and “research subjects,” and it is often uncomfortable (Watts, 2008). In English-Lueck’s (1990) ethnography of New Age health practitioners, she initially attempted to keep fieldwork separate from the rest of her life, but admits a “crisis” moment in, when her “compartmentalization self-destructed” (p. 5) as she brought holistic health increasingly into her job and home; in addition, her participants helped her greatly through grief. “I was an incorrigible rationalist,” she writes (p. 6), “but [the community] accepted and educated me anyway.”

Clawson (2009) writes that “the fieldworker who does not become sufficiently engaged to feel the temptations of belonging is likely to produce work lacking in understanding or empathy” (p. 52), reassuring the reader that although we don’t often write about it, these feelings do happen in necessarily messy ethnographic research. Oakley (1981), too, argues that in fact we *must* be

emotionally invested in our relationships with participants in order to carry out ethical research, and that the expectation to remain objective stems from social science's masculine and positivist roots. Acknowledging these tensions, then, is an important part of a project like this.

Going Native

This fieldwork was marked by tension, not only in terms of a tension between “friends” versus “research participants,” but pressure to embody the beliefs of Camp Grounded. As I explained above, it was a common occurrence for me to be asked whether I would have attended camp if I were not researching it, and I needed to create a pre-interview script to handle my participants' own curiosity about whether I agreed with their views. This kind of interaction began to flag up to me that there was an element of strongly held beliefs within the community. Fitting with the New Age beliefs of the local area (see Chapter 4) Camp Grounded incorporated many practices and beliefs which loosely settle within the definition of New Age religion, which can be difficult to engage with. Hanegraaff (1996) explains that although New Age religion is grounded in the validity of personal experience, it can paradoxically stray into the same dogmatism of traditional religions that it has sought to oppose (p. 329). At Camp Grounded, this paradox lay between the expectation to be “open minded” and to assert your personal boundaries.

Participation was a very self conscious aspect of my fieldwork, both at camp and afterwards. In my interview with *Brooklyn*, we discussed some of the writing about camp, including Madrigal's (2013) piece that I cite in Chapters 1 and 2. *Brooklyn* had found it “anti-Camp Grounded” and “nasty.” “I don't think it was nasty,” I responded. “It was critical, but I thought it was in a good way. I met up with him, [...] he's just fascinated.” “So why hasn't he ever come?” *Brooklyn* asked. *Brooklyn* argued that Madrigal would lose his cynicism once he came to camp for himself and appreciated the “earnestness” of the place. In this conversation, *Brooklyn* urged

me to try more events, mentioning magic mushrooms as something that might be useful for me to get into the spirit of things in the Bay Area. I explained how important it was to assert my boundaries as a researcher, and gratefully pointed to my participant *Redwood* as someone who understood that I was “not looking to join your spiritual community, not looking to have a spiritual experience, just coming as a researcher.” *Brooklyn* explained that while he originally attended Camp Grounded as a journalist, he now saw this as a “ruse” - because, he explained, “I think I wanted something like that, and used being a journalist to get there,” implying that I myself might have some deeper need for the Camp Grounded experience.

There was a lot about Camp Grounded that was difficult. I had reluctantly followed awkward “eye-gazing” exercises³⁰ in which you gaze into another person’s eyes for several minutes, and been told traumatic personal stories. Many workshops sounded horribly invasive, and in addition, I felt that it was unethical for me to attend for my research. As an anthropologist, some participants expected me to be more “open” than most, and seek out these experiences in the name of science. “Let this be more than an anthropological experiment for you,” a Texan woman from my village had said to me, as we said goodbye at the end of camp. “There’s no way to be immersed in something like this without it doing something to you.” She held my face in her hands, and kissed my cheek. Many of them were hopeful that I would be inadvertently moved by camp, and end up acknowledging how powerful it was for me. One detoxer hopefully suggested I had already “gone native” - using anthropological phrasing - with which I disagreed, yet within the same afternoon, another participant became frustrated with my reason for being there, and insisted that I should be “mostly in” rather than writing in my notebook.

Camp Grounded was a self professed community of acceptance, but “being myself” during fieldwork was what sometimes seemed to create friction, for example, at a brunch event, a

³⁰ This is a practice used at Camp Grounded, I also mention its use at a conference in Chapter 4.

woman asked me whether I enjoyed camp, and when I experimented with answering more honestly, she became quite upset with me. These opinions were not limited to my research, but to the imagined gaze of other people outside the community, just as *Brooklyn* had done with Madrigal. To some detoxers, anybody who didn't want to go to camp was "closed minded," lacked self awareness, and were fearful of what deep truths camp would uncover; if you won't do an eye gazing exercise, a detoxer might diagnose this as fear of people "really seeing you."

My experience is similar to Blanes' research on Pentecostal churches (2006); as an atheist, he similarly "fell more or less naively into a methodological dilemma" (p. 225) when his participants asked about his own belief. As an atheist, should he risk "provok[ing] attitudes of rejection" or "maintaining an [...] unsustainable facade" (p. 225)? At one point, once learning of his atheism, a participant had literally turned his back and refused to speak with him.

Some anthropologists feel that greater "openness" of the ethnographer, particularly to intense personal experiences in rituals, can lead to greater understanding and can illuminate the nature of belief in a fieldsite (Magliocco, 2004, p. 12; Lurhmann, 1989, p. 17-18; 319). As I have explained in Chapter 2, my research approach was to take Camp Grounded seriously as an example of a social fact, and I was genuinely respectful and curious, as someone with positive experiences with technology. Despite being an atheist myself, - not unlike English-Lueck's (1990) description of herself as an "incorrigible rationalist" (p. 6) - I was willing to believe a lot of things about Camp Grounded.³¹ I do believe that visiting natural wonders like redwood forests is a perspective altering experience. I think that spending uninterrupted time with friends, being able to be silly and laugh at yourself, and forgetting what time it is, can make all the difference to your happiness. Since camp had been my first time travelling solo aged 24, it had meant a lot to me. I was immersed in camp itself, and participated in it both physically and emotionally. I danced with my participants at their alcohol-free discos, played games with them,

³¹ See Lurhmann (2012, p. xxiv) for another ethnographers' respectful encounter with religious belief.

swam, ate, and slept alongside them in our open-faced cabins. I felt the intensity of the experience; in a 2017 village exercise where we hugged each other anonymously, I held a woman as she wept, and willed strength into her with my arms. Like my participants, I believe that working on your mental health is important - but I'm not sure it should be done without therapists, as it was at camp (Chapter 6). Yet there were limits to my ability to participate and necessary boundaries for me to create while undertaking this research. In 2014, when I unwittingly found myself in a sweat lodge playshop where we would all be taking our clothes off, I quickly snuck back to my bunk bed.

My own "shifting" (Magliocco, 2004, p. 15) between an "insider" and "outsider" of Camp Grounded is reflected in the way that I describe events in this thesis. Sometimes I use "we" to refer to myself and other detoxers, and sometimes I use "they." This is a small differentiation, but it reflects how at times throughout the research I felt like part of the group, and at other times I felt like an outsider. In looking at my instinctive use of the different terms, I find that I use "they" when detoxer beliefs are more in the foreground, and "we" when discussing less highly charged situations.

There may be no solution as to how an ethnographer should manage the beliefs and expectations upon them in their fieldsite, whether they should choose honesty and risk offence, or "shift" between "insider" and "outsider." However there may be ways to handle them as they occur in everyday conversations. Blanes (2006) learned to phrase his lack of belief in terms that his participants could understand: he excused his atheism by shrugging that while they had been touched by God, he had "felt nothing so far," in this way he "used the inexplicable to explain [his] position" (p. 229). Since "pushing your boundaries" was important to detoxers (Chapter 6), I similarly experimented with phrasing my time in an isolated forest, a long way from England where I could not even call home, as pushing my own boundaries, and this helped them view my participation thus far as satisfactory.

Despite professing to be a community of acceptance, there were unacceptable opinions, and while I belonged to the community in some ways, my ultimate lack of conversion and the personal boundaries I created proved to be areas of continuous friction. However, it was specifically through this friction that I became viscerally aware of their beliefs; without it, I don't think I would have come to my conclusion that Camp Grounded is best understood as New Age - something entirely new and unexpected to me - which needed to be treated as religious, rather than simply a detox interested in healthy digital use. Just as I learned through the tension between my beliefs and my participants', Blanes (2006) similarly argues that "anthropological production depends on those tensions" (p. 224) and that these unresolvable problems of belief are "what Clifford Geertz (1978, p. 23) defined as the very core of ethnographic research: the interplay between scientific enterprise and personal experience" (Blanes, 2006, p. 232). I necessarily brought my own values and beliefs, which are rooted in my upbringing in Southern England, rather than Northern California. Hine (2015) explains that "we would not necessarily expect another ethnographer in the same setting to produce the same outcomes" (p. 20) and that ethnography, in fact, "celebrates the involvement of the researcher in the whole process of engaging with the field, gathering data and interpreting results" (p. 19). For this reason my own personal story with detoxers has led to my findings, in keeping with the embodied and subjective emphasis of ethnographic research.

Again while these issues of differing beliefs are context dependent and unresolvable, there are approaches which may help. In her study of feminist Witches in San Francisco, Salomonsen (1999) explains that she had initially begun as a theologian, but found great contradictions; the Witches paradoxically repeated the patriarchal trends they hoped to overcome (p. 5). She presented her findings back to the Witches, who asked how this could be, when their participation in the feminist group had changed their lives and given a new meaning to being a woman? Whatever may seem contradictory or unintuitive from the researcher's perspective has

no bearing on what it may mean to the participant. While camp may not have been transformational for me, it was clear that it was a deeply powerful experience for others. Salomonsen (1999) finds that participant observation, rather than her previous methods, could indeed “do justice” to her fieldsite, and recommends what she terms a “compassionate” methodological approach, not “wholesale positive embracement, nor [...] passionate criticisms and arguing,” but “honesty” (p. 9). This attitude emphasises “taking belief seriously” without “going native” or forgetting one’s place as a scholar (p. 9). A compassionate approach balances researcher honesty with genuine respect for beliefs and behaviours different to one’s own, understanding that there are many equally valid paths to living a meaningful life.

“Friending” Participants

When I connected with detoxers on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter, I used my own beloved and long-established social media profiles. Digital connections like this are a new aspect of ethnographic research which is beginning to be discussed in the literature which alter the “traditional sense of distance between researcher and participant” (Robards, 2013, p. 231).

Participants today are likely to Google researchers, making online self-presentation increasingly important. While I had more formal representations of myself on my University website, use of my own social media profiles may have been fitting with detoxers’ ideas of “work” versus “authentic” persona. My social media contains over 10 years’ worth of my personal information; photos, statuses, and conversations, and I posted on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter throughout fieldwork.³² My participants were able to peruse my profiles if they wanted to, resembling more of an exchange than an “extraction” of information from them. Detoxers tended to add their camp nickname on their Facebook profile (Chapter 8), and I followed suit, despite my uncertainty about it. I was tagged in pictures, statuses, and comments by my

³² Since I often use Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, I have doubtless projected my own ideas of “normal” digital use onto what I found.

participants, who brought me into their social world online - but sometimes they shared photographs of me without my own consent, and in tagging themselves with me, they undid any efforts I had made to obscure their identities.

Rather than a choice made solely to gain access, it made sense for me to add my participants, since I also use these social media sites all the time. It was also very immersive; even when I was “clocking off” from my fieldwork, posts from detoxers were scattered throughout those from my family and friends. Whatever the time of day, I might end up noting down a new observation. I changed my Twitter “trends” to San Francisco, tethering my online news feed to the place I was in rather than news from London. I ended up struggling to separate what I was learning from my own contacts, from Bay Area Twitter users, and from detoxers themselves. In fact I could often see similarities between the way my academic network posted and the way detoxers posted; both tended to be vocally left-wing. This issue of parsing and separating voices in your social sphere may be increasingly difficult for ethnographers including digital worlds in their ethnographies.

In *My Profile: The Ethics of Virtual Ethnography*, Driscoll and Gregg (2010) point out that connecting with participants online can feasibly involve a higher degree of intimacy than “any other kind of ethnography,” taking into account the “ambient technologies regularly used to signal when people get up and go to bed, what they cook, what TV they are watching [...]” (p. 19). Since this intimacy ran both ways, there were benefits and drawbacks; it allowed me to see private or mundane aspects of detoxers’ lives which I would not have been able to see otherwise, but this immersion was not always welcome. After collapsing into bed after a long day and watching *The Great British Bake Off* on Netflix, I might receive several messages from participants suggesting ice cream or coffee, or asking what on earth a “tech use diary” is. These messages were in the exact same format as messages from loved ones in England who were always asleep during my evenings. Digital ethnographers who connect with their participants on

their own phone numbers, social media profiles, and email accounts, may increasingly struggle to “clock off” at all.

“Friending” my participants on my own social media profiles may have also contributed to the methodological tensions that I have outlined in this chapter. Using these personal profiles may have added to the confusion and the sense of invasion I felt while navigating this community’s beliefs and expectations. Robards (2013) explains, “‘friendship’ on a social network site does not equate precisely to more traditional understandings of the term friendship” (p. 224). As such I suggest that researchers who “friend” their participants may need to be mindful of mismatches in expectations for what that relationship means.

After I left the Bay, I struggled with the online connections I had made, and how to manage the relationships at all. I also found myself struggling with seeing new information from detoxers, which kept giving me new ideas. To protect their identities and take them out of my own social media space, I started to unfollow them on Instagram, and move them onto a new Facebook profile. I eventually removed my camp nickname from my profile, which felt surprisingly difficult. This would help to “bound” the fieldwork and more clearly mark an analysis and writing phase. But I felt, and still feel, very conflicted about the friendships. The edges of this “list” that I moved to a new profile were fluid, and some participants who I am good friends with are still scattered throughout my social media.

Analysis

Ethnographic data is very rich, the downside of which is that there is usually a huge amount of information to work with. The key job for the ethnographer is to make data purposive and relevant. “Selection is always necessary,” Richards (2014, p. 41) writes, “and by selecting, you impose your interpretation. Making data is thus highly purposive [...] a skilled interviewer

makes data relevant for the purposes of the project.” From the beginning of this research, I identified what seemed to be coming out of the data, and followed those leads (Miles et al., 2013, p. 25). I wrote Evernote reflections every day on what was emerging from the data, and in my AirBnB I built a cardboard notice board and pinned up my list of initial themes.³³

Upon returning home, I began to transcribe my notes and interviews, and did so chronologically so that I could see how my understandings changed as time went on. During the fieldwork, most of my interviews had felt friendly and relaxed. But when I began to transcribe my interviews, I could see the pressure my participants were putting on me to agree with their beliefs. Although the friction I had felt during the fieldwork had been confusing, it was this later part of my analysis that helped me understand that the group was New Age.

After transcribing, I compiled all my fieldnotes and transcripts into NVivo, and coded sentence by sentence into around 40 different “nodes.” These nodes were a helpful way to navigate the data, detect patterns I had not yet seen, and to read the data closely and systematically.

A systematic comparison of different ways of looking at the data, or triangulation (Richards, 2014, p. 35) was useful during the later steps of interpretation. To test the theory I had chosen, I considered several alternative theories, using them alongside the data and seeing how useful they could be in explaining what I had found. While I had not anticipated using it, Max Weber’s theory of disenchantment (Weber, 1946) repeatedly cropped up in literature on New Age religion, and after careful consideration I decided that the theory would be the most useful in explaining my participants’ decision to attend a digital detox (Chapter 10).

³³ I called one of them “the clash” to refer to my impressions of participants and theirs of me, our differing beliefs, worldviews, and social expectations.

Ethical Considerations

My primary ethical consideration has been to protect my participants, which was something I took great care with, as the research asked participants to expose their personal understandings of digital technology, as well as their feelings, habits, and relationships.³⁴ The Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth's Ethical Guidelines (n.d.) explains; "Anthropologists should endeavour to protect the physical, social and psychological well-being of those with whom they conduct their study and to respect their rights, interests, sensitivities and privacy" (para. 5).

Since detoxers know each other using the nicknames they create at camp, I offered this as an option for relative anonymity, alongside an option for an entirely made up name. In almost all cases, my participants chose to use their nickname. Detoxers tend to take pride in their participation with camp and may have wanted the community to see which quotes were attributed to them, but the use of nicknames means that most readers of the thesis will not know their real names. I have however taken the decision to redact or change names when I feel it is appropriate. I took great care to protect participants who worked for technology companies and who felt precarious when discussing the drawbacks of digital technology, by sharing my transcript with them and redacting quotes when needed.

At the start of the research, I suggested to the organisers (who I considered gatekeepers) that I write a post on the Camp Grounded Facebook group declaring my presence, but they decided against it. For this reason, my time spent in that group may have been closer to lurking than participation, and my presence may not have always been obvious. I mostly stuck to "liking" posts and looking for housing and rides to events, but I did not usually contribute to discussions, which were laden with group values. At this time, it is unclear how digital ethnographers should

³⁴ I received ethical approval for my CUREC 1A before beginning the fieldwork.

navigate issues of “lurking,” “screenshotting,” and consent (Hine, 2017; Richman, 2007; Eynon et al., 2017). Taking everything into consideration, I chose to screenshot for my own personal notes, and carefully check whether anything was searchable before using a few key examples in the final work.³⁵

Physically I blended into my fieldsite, as the majority of detoxers were white, able bodied, in their 20s and 30s, and more than half were female. This undoubtedly shaped my access. I was sure that some male participants had agreed because the interview seemed to resemble a date. One participant added me on Facebook after the interview, then enquired about my boyfriend, who I had strategically made visible on my profile.³⁶ On the other hand, again, the way I present in person likely granted me the ability to appear non threatening, non critical, and be perceived as an ideal listener, granting me access to information.

At one point during the first session of camp in 2017, a woman had what sounded like a psychotic episode, and it proved to be one example of how my fieldwork inherently included talking about mental health, which went on to become a major theme in my analysis. The theme of mental health, and frequent use of casual forms of therapy like the grief deep dive³⁷ also meant that within the interview detoxers could potentially perceive me as a casual therapist, which was helpful for data collection, but concerning ethically.

In addition to protecting participants, researchers are increasingly considering the impact of research on themselves, and scholarship has reflected a turn towards discussing mental health during ethnographic fieldwork (Backe, 2015; Pollard, 2009). Even though I knew that “emotional transference” would likely happen as I learned about my participants, I did not

³⁵ Since I already had written consent for my interviews, the data in this thesis privileges interview quotes over data from social media – but ideally they would have been on equal footing.

³⁶ This is similar to women ethnographers wearing a wedding ring during fieldwork to avoid misunderstandings.

³⁷ I discuss the grief “deep dive” in Chapter 6.

anticipate the effect that fieldwork could have on me. The trip intimately acquainted me with the deep sadness that comes with extended and lone travelling. I commonly experienced feelings of invasion and exhaustion from being constantly available, and disappointment from being misunderstood. Digital technology was a blessing, and I was able to spend hours on the phone to England, stream TV shows, and sink into my social media bubble almost as if I was at home (Sutton, 2019).

Researching participants in English-speaking countries who may well read the final published work is territory which anthropologists are negotiating with increasing frequency. Forsythe (2001) charts these new areas of ethical quandary, focusing on the new power dynamics that occur in these settings (p. 130). Criticism of *Camp Grounded* in this work is extremely carefully considered, and I sincerely hope that any participants reading this work take my research in the spirit it is intended; using a curious, compassionate - but critical - approach, I seek to understand, rather than to disrupt or offend.

The more difficult aspects of fieldwork did not deter me from believing that ethnography is the best way to learn about a community, and through the methods outlined here I have started to build a picture of what this particular group cares about and how they see the world. Digital detoxers have been charming, frustrating, and baffling, and learning about them has been an endlessly fascinating adventure.

Chapter 4

Fieldsite

Introduction

In keeping with my approach of placing digital detoxing in cultural context, this short chapter offers an introduction to Camp Grounded as well as the local culture in which Camp Grounded took place, with an overview of the San Francisco Bay Area, its history, and local ideas, and important political and cultural events in 2017.

The Story of Camp Grounded

The company “The Digital Detox” was founded by Levi Felix and his partner Brooke Dean in 2012. Levi’s story was touted by media outlets between 2013 and 2017, which is where I can verify word of mouth around the story, however the facts shift a surprising amount. The story goes that in 2009, Levi was living in Los Angeles and working for a start-up called Causecast. He was always the first to have the latest gadget, but eventually found himself in hospital due to “burnout.” He was hospitalised with an “oesophageal tear,” although some sources mention a “stomach ulcer,” and “internal bleeding.” In quotes from Levi, he attributes what happened to “exhaustion,” and “burnout,” and sometimes calls it a “near death experience.” Importantly, he attributed his burnout to his overworking and over-use of digital technology.

As part of his recovery, he went backpacking for two and a half years with Brooke. In Cambodia, he lived “off the grid” with friends and set up a guest house. Some stories report this as an island where stayed for somewhere between a few weeks and 2 years, walking barefoot, fishing, and eating coconuts and mangos, spending time with his loved ones with no internet connection. When he returned to the Bay, he wanted to bring his experience and his revelation

about what is really important in life, back into the lives of others. Levi told this story at the end of each camp session, standing on the main field, with the campers listening and sitting on the grass. The story became a kind of legend, and I once heard it put into song form, performed by *Barnaby* with a guitar around a campfire. News outlets also tended to hang the story of camp around Levi's legendary Cambodia trip.

Levi and Brooke set up The Digital Detox LLC, running small digital detox retreats. In 2013, they ran the first "Camp Grounded" at the rented campsite, Camp Navarro. The company also brought shorter detox events to San Francisco throughout the year such as Unplug SF. Aside from this, unofficial events and parties were often organised by those who had met at camp. In later years, they rented Camp Mendocino for their California camp sessions, and also took camp "on tour," visiting North Carolina, New York, and Texas.

Including staff, there were around 350 people at camp. In 2014 tickets cost roughly \$300, but this rose each year, and in 2017 tickets were closer to \$700. In 2017 there seemed to be about 10 individuals on full time pay, with roughly 20 others paid for production during camp itself. After that, there were some 50 volunteers. Over the years, attendees returned time and time again, purchasing tickets or volunteering as counselors and helpers.

The Bay Area

The idea for Camp Grounded resonates with the rich history of the San Francisco Bay Area, in particular the clashes between utopian and dystopian views of technology, as well as movements questioning mainstream culture which have thrived there since the 1960s. The culture today is one of experimentation, self-improvement, and New Age practices.

History

The San Francisco Bay Area sits on the west coast of the United States in Northern California. San Francisco itself resides within the peninsula, with San Jose (Silicon Valley) to the South. Over the Bay, across the Bay Bridge, lies the East Bay, including Oakland and Berkeley. Camp Grounded was founded in Oakland, but the retreat itself ran in a boy-scout camp about four hours' drive north into the Mendocino forest.



Figure 7: Map of the San Francisco Bay Area. (Wikitravel, n.d.)

The land was originally home to the Ohlones of the Native American Indians (Madley, 2016, p. 28), and was colonised by Spanish settlers in 1769. Madley (2016) documents the genocide of natives in California between 1846–1873, of which a few were able to resist and survive. The small island of Alcatraz, which sits in the middle of the Bay and was once a famous high-security prison, was occupied by Native American activists between 1969 and 1971. Northern California was famously a locus for a gold rush between 1845 and 1858 when around 300,000

people descended on the area, further displacing and decimating the native population (Rawls et al., 1999). The possibility for overnight success marked a new kind of “American Dream” dubbed “The California Dream” (Starr, 1986).

The Gold Rush is one of a series of “unique cultural movements” in the area (Marwick, 2013, p. 39), which has created its specific character, preceding its “centrality [...] to food, health, sexual, and social Countercultural movements” in later years (English-Lueck, 2010, p. 10). UC Berkeley is where the Free Speech movement began in the 1960’s. At the same time, California was the home of the beat poets and the popularizing of hallucinogenic drugs. Counterculture, a word meaning a subculture with views that differ to mainstream society, is often used to refer to the Counterculture of the 1960s; a widespread Western movement that was partly shaped by the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam war, characterised by bohemianism, an interest in sexuality, women’s rights, psychoactive drugs, and questioning of authority. Counterculture of the 1960s is often described as centering in the San Francisco Bay Area. Timothy Leary’s phrase “Turn on, tune in, drop out” was popularised during a gathering in San Francisco’s Golden Gate park, a call for listeners to embrace spiritual discovery as a part of rejecting the status quo. One element of this is appropriation of Indian spirituality and practices, for example, Counterculture figures including Gary Snyder and Stewart Brand “viewed Indians as a curative to the anomie and alienation of American corporate culture” (Nakamura, 2014, p. 931), while The Beatles - who famously tripped on LSD in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury - helped popularise Indian spirituality when they “visited Rishikesh in 1968 to study under Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, in turn giving birth to the New Age movement” (Zutshi, 2019, para. 22).

In 1986, Burning Man was first created with a bonfire ritual on Baker Beach in San Francisco. 30 years later, it is a fully fledged festival-slash-temporary-city, built and deconstructed every August in the Black Rock Desert of Northwest Nevada and often attended by Bay Area locals. Some of Burning Man’s “ten principles,” written in 2004 by founder Larry Harvey, include

“radical inclusion;” “decommodification;” “radical self expression;” and “leaving no trace” (burningwiki.com, n.d., Figure 1). Burning Man is a community project that departs from mainstream culture, and an experimental festival in which many attendees create enormous temporary sculptures and structures; the most famous being the large temple and “the man” itself, both of which are burned at the end of the nine day period.

Some of these ideas seem to resonate with Levi’s own story of his epiphany while travelling in Cambodia; the idea that there might be a simpler way of life outside of American society, where people commonly seem to work themselves into exhaustion as Levi did. This history of the west coast as a frontier of ideas and new ways to find success may also have influenced his creation of Camp Grounded.

New Age

English-Lueck (1990) explains that “California has been a Mecca for a variety of social and technical revolutions, including the ‘Aquarian Conspiracy’” - or “New Age” (p. 1). The name “New Age” originates in astrology, with the idea of a “dawn of Aquarius,” or “the new age of aquarius” ushering in a new movement in the 1960s and 70s. English-Lueck (1990) explains that the term referred to “a conscious attempt to reform Western society” promoting “values of self-responsibility, plural life-styles, psychological growth, creativity, affection, and a sense of ecological connection” (p.1).

In this thesis I will argue that Camp Grounded was New Age, and that it was best understood as an attempt to survive and flourish within a broken, modern American society. But digital detoxers themselves rarely used the New Age label. New Age is often an “etic” category imposed upon a group by academics and it is helpful for this thesis; rather than reinventing the wheel and documenting each aspect of their belief system, I can point towards similar manifestations and theorisations elsewhere.

In Chapter 3, I explained that attending events outside of camp was crucial for me in understanding what was and was not unique to camp. Facebook showed me New-Age-like event listings where my participants had clicked “attending,” including “acro yoga,” “crypto consciousness,” “sound healing,” and “cacao ceremonies” which often liberally appropriated from India, Tibet, and Central or South America. In San Francisco, I saw events centered around Buddhism, Astrology, dance, sexuality, monogamy, sugar restriction, masculinity, and introversion, advertised on notice boards and by word of mouth, or online on websites like Facebook, Meetup, or Eventbrite.

English-Lueck (2010) found that the countercultural history of the Bay Area, combined with the decades of immigration from Asia, has resulted in a mixing pot of beliefs and cultures, where residents draw freely from cultures. *Ocelot* felt similarly. I interviewed *Ocelot* in Dolores Park cafe, the sun dazzling us through the window. He explained;

The fact that [camp has] so many playshops on like, meditation and self care, and personal growth, and cuddle therapy [...] It's a lot of stuff which is very familiar to those living in the Bay Area... [through] the Bay Area, a lot of ideas have come into, not only America, but into western Europe and elsewhere, from India, China, and other places.

The area has long been “a conduit for cultural influx, both of immigrants and global ideas,” fuelling an “increased experimentation with... plural medical beliefs” (English-Lueck, 2010, p. 13). English-Lueck (2010) calls this “deep medical diversity” (p. 191), “combining alternative Countercultural care with a wealth of immigrant-based medical beliefs and practices” (p. 190). From the outset there were clearly themes of health and medical harm within digital detoxing, beginning with Levi’s own physical symptoms which he attributed to digital over-use. However, this thesis will show that Camp Grounded was not only interested in clinical harms from technology (Chapter 2), but seeking a blend of psychological and spiritual health (Chapter 6). A few detoxers criticised “Western medicine,” told me that they had tried acro yoga, or read about “energy medicine,” but they were interested predominantly with non-clinical approaches

to mental health with a spiritual dimension (Chapter 6).

A blend of the psychological and the spiritual is characteristic of New Age. In other, traditional religions, God and the self are separate or “dualistic,” while New Age holds a “holistic” concept of the divine; God is within the individual, the natural world, and the cosmos (Aupers & Houtman, 2010, p. 6). Developments in psychology in the 20th century, predominantly from Freud and his student Jung, were extremely influential on New Age (p. 9). Hanegraaff (1996) writes that Jung “enabled people to talk about god while really meaning their own psyche, and about their own psyche while really meaning the divine” (p. 513). Hanegraaff goes on;

New Age religion [tends] to blur the distinction between religion and psychology to an extent hardly found in other traditions [because] ‘personal growth’ can be understood as the shape ‘religious salvation’ takes in the New Age Movement. (Hanegraaff, 1996, p.p. 183, 46)

While it is typically understood as alternative, in fact, “a significant portion of the American population engages in the use of alternative healing, enough to suggest it is no longer so alternative after all” (English-Lueck, 2010, p. 98). In dream catchers, Western yoga, or when Urban Outfitters sells crystals, these are emblematic of the permeation of New Age ideas into the mainstream, and the commodification of spirituality that New Age is often criticised for. New Age is a “bricolage” - followers are able to piece together whatever works for them, an attitude which allows for customisation and individual paths to spirituality, borrowing from Buddhism, Greek gods, Witchcraft, and early European Paganism (Aupers & Houtman, 2010, p. 7), this is sometimes criticised as “supermarket spirituality” (Partridge, 2004, p. 32). At camp there were tipis, burning sage, sweat lodges, and yoga, while spiritual gurus and crystals were fixtures of digital detoxers’ everyday lives – but New Age ideas were used as-and-when desirable. This is fitting with the cultural mixing pot of the Bay Area in which “[t]hrough conscious consumerism, people juggle a variety of medical body-related practices” (English-Lueck, 2010, p. 13).

At camp in 2017 I enjoyed *Blue Moon*'s mindfulness playshop, where we followed breathing exercises, a "body scan," and learned about "delta" and "alpha" brain waves. English-Lueck (2010) describes Silicon Valley as a culture of "rampant experimentation," which is "both scientific and countercultural" (p. 6). This blend was extremely important at Camp Grounded, as I will show in Chapters 8, 9, and 10. This was also true at a New Age technology conference that I attended in San Jose, where a man on stage with a microphone explained that he wanted to give us a "big dose of oxytocin," and to start the conference with splitting into pairs to begin an eye-gazing exercise. Pacing the stage, he commanded; "allow yourself to feel it. Feel the pain, the anguish, the happiness, and just have that full empathetic state with the person across from you."³⁸ At camp this exercise tended to last a couple of minutes, but here it started and stopped for an hour or so. After working in groups to create game-changing ideas, a man volunteered on the microphone, "we think the entire notion of capitalism needs to be redesigned," which was met with sincere, hearty applause. Very similar New-Age-like ideas and practices were central to Camp Grounded, as I will show across the findings chapters.

Intentional Community

Miller (2012) explains that "communal living has been an ongoing, if little noticed, theme in California for over a century and a half" (p. 3). Since 1852, people have retreated from mainstream culture to create new, self reliant, "intentional communities" and "eco-villages" built within rural Californian settings (p.p. 3-6).

Beattie (2020) argues that Camp Grounded follows directly from the earlier counterculture of the Bay Area, specifically "the practice of intentionality, or goal-orientated living" where people lived in communes to "seek social cohesion and optimal methods of living" (p. 139). These people were what Fred Turner (2006) called "the New Communalists;" many of whom were "technologists, building high-tech geodesic domes," (Beattie, 2020, p. 140) and who used the

³⁸ This exercise caught me completely off guard, and it is an hour of my life I will never get back.

famous *Whole Earth Catalogue* which “presented tools and technologies to help New Communalists live self-reliant and spiritual lifestyles” (p. 140). Meanwhile, Levi and Brooke similarly hoped to create “a new chapter, an opportunity for us to redefine what our relationship with digital technology looks like, and in turn, how we experience life on this beautiful planet. [...] So that someday, our grandchildren will look back on the choices we’ve made and say ‘thank you’” (Camp Grounded website, 2017, para. 6).

Camp Grounded was often described by detoxers themselves as an “experiment in community” (Interview with *Truth*) or as an “intentional community.”³⁹ Intentional communities “aim to achieve cohesive social integration, with some communities using behavioral design to organize and create governance and social structures” (Beattie, 2020, p. 141). For example, Beattie (2020) explains, “inspired by B. F. Skinner’s *Walden Two* (1948), Twin Oaks [community] used behaviorist techniques to design its social systems” (p. 141). In this way Camp Grounded, while only a brief retreat rather than an established commune, was likely influenced by intentional communities in Northern Californian history which served to critique modern society and create new utopian communities. Like the Twin Oaks use of behaviourist techniques, Camp Grounded banned technology, real names, work talk, time, drugs and alcohol, age, and running, while encouraging norms around friendliness and respect, and these were followed with a level of sincerity that might not have been found when it ran in other states. “New York camp was a debacle,” *Brooklyn* told me in our interview. “Lots of drugs.”⁴⁰ Because they don’t have Californian intentional living, they do what the fuck they want.”

³⁹ Shenker (2010) describes intentional community as “a relatively small group of people who have created a whole way of life for the attainment of a certain set of goals” (p. 6). Boal (2012) remarks that it is just a less “embarrassing” term for “commune” (p. xvi).

⁴⁰ The banning of drugs might be surprising considering the historic relationship between counterculture and psychedelic drugs, but at Camp Grounded the philosophy seemed to be centered around becoming more in touch with reality, rather than less (see therapeutic ideas of “grounding” in Chapter 6 and 9).

In the Bay Area, I found that these sincere social experiments were still common. I met detoxers who were experimenting with alterations to social settings back in the Bay Area; meeting to discuss taboo subjects like death or sex, or to eat a meal blindfolded. *Topless*, a camp counselor and “cuddle therapist” who didn’t wear a shirt for several years, ran a “topless tea party” event in San Francisco, where participants followed the rule to ask for consent before looking at someone’s body (SFpeople, 2015); each of these had an implied political message or social critique and formed a kind of mini-society with new, curated social norms.

Camp Grounded should also be contextualised within other utopian and countercultural organisations of the Bay Area. It was often compared to Burning Man as a similar festival-type gathering often touted for its transformational effects.⁴¹ Levi and his friends and family were seasoned “burners” who built their own camp at the festival each year. At camp they used their “playa names”⁴² and likely based their design of Camp Grounded on their experiences. In 2014 my participant *Bubblewrap* told me that Camp Grounded was “Burning Man Lite.” The Esalen Institute could be another key influence. Situated in an area of natural beauty just south of the Bay Area, Esalen is both an intentional community and educational centre, running seminars on “human potentiality” in the 1960s. During my time with detoxers I learned about Esalen as well as men’s communities, self development programmes like Landmark Forum, and women’s sexuality groups. Some of these personal development and educational retreats seem well suited to technology critique; since this fieldwork, Camp Grounded organisers have run retreats at Esalen focusing on digital detoxing, while at Spirit Rock, “a meditation center in Marin County,” a seminar was run in 2019 to discuss “technology as an existential threat to mindfulness” (Marantz, 2019, para. 9). Within this context, Camp Grounded appeared to be contributing to a collection of retreats, festivals, and educational centres, situated within local ideas of counterculture, New Age spiritual or medical practices, and intentional community.

⁴¹ I discuss detoxers’ perceptions of Burning Man in Chapter 7.

⁴² Playa names were invented by Burning Man staff for communicating via radio, and became popular way to assume a new identity while at the festival (Playa Name, n.d.).

Counterculture and Technology

It may seem surprising that the technology industry, now a well-oiled, capitalist machine with enormous profit and impact on global democracy, originated in Bay Area counterculture. An “entanglement of bohemian idealism and high-tech industry” has been called The Californian Ideology; “a new faith” (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996, p. 1) and “a set of widely held beliefs” (Marwick 2013, p. 23), which “emerged from a bizarre fusion of the cultural bohemianism of San Francisco with the hi-tech industries of Silicon Valley” (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996, p. 1).

The ideology blends two ostensibly opposite concepts, the “free-wheeling spirit of the hippies” and “entrepreneurial zeal” (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996, p. 1). This combination is only possible “through a profound faith in the emancipatory potential of the new information technologies” (p. 1). The utopian view of technologies believes that computer technology brings “positive social consequences, that the technology industry is where the best and brightest thrive, and that an unfettered free market is the best way to ensure prosperity for all” (Marwick, 2013, p. 23). In the tech scene, “capitalism was considered an agent of political change rather than something to be questioned” (p. 23). Yet in The Free Speech Movement and the protests at UC Berkeley in the 1960s, students marched because they “feared that America’s political leaders were treating them as if they were bits of abstract data” (Turner, 2006, p. 1). In this way the local area has historically been host to utopian and dystopian views of technology.

Turner (2009) argues that Burning Man had a crucial influence on Silicon Valley; since its beginnings the same individuals who create technology have attended the festival, and today Google has its own Burning Man camp. In his 2009 paper *Burning Man at Google*, he argues that the ethos of Burning Man is the same as that of technology companies; an attempt at a truly equal society, prioritising sharing and creativity over financial gain. Today, however, Burning Man is increasingly commercial (Turner, 2009). Despite its utopian aspirations, Silicon Valley

shows “a discrepancy between its discourse of egalitarianism and the realities of social hierarchy” (English-Lueck, 2002; as cited in Marwick, 2013, p. 77). Barbrook and Cameron (1996) explain that while followers of The Californian Ideology hope for a digital world in which everyone can express themselves, they are simultaneously blind to the inequality in American society that they create. These topics were very important to detoxers, and I focus on them in Chapter 7.

While Silicon Valley was originally more contained in the South Bay, over the past decade, it has consumed the city of San Francisco to the north, as well as Oakland and Berkeley to the North East (English-Lueck, 2017, p. 1). None of my participants lived in the South Bay but many were based in San Francisco or Oakland. The people of San Francisco and Oakland must increasingly reckon with this powerful industry, as *Lil Scrambles* explained during our interview;

Uber coming to Oakland is just really scary for people... It's the old Sears building, so it's like an Oakland staple, and our skyline, which is very small... It was up for sale for a long time, and it was like, “Who's gonna take that building?” And then, when Uber did, it's just... There's some feelings of, why is Oakland letting this happen? You know? Letting Big Tech come in, when they have plenty of space in San Francisco or Mountain View? It's like, you just can't really stop it, I guess.

Lil Scrambles' feelings were reflected in stickers and graffiti scattered around Oakland streets and cafes, demanding to “end the techie takeover” (Figure 8) or stating that “queers hate techies” (Figure 9), the latter reflecting the way that the Bay has historically been a haven for LGBTQ people.



Figure 8: "End the techie takeover" graffiti in Arbor cafe bathroom, Oakland



Figure 9: “Queers hate techies” sticker on pavement in San Francisco

These aspects of Bay Area culture seemed to clash with that of the tech industry. English-Lueck (2017) describes the Silicon Valley “work defines worth” mentality (p. 28) in which your job title denotes your value, and hard work, or being available online at all times, is central. Levi himself appeared to have lived this story, resulting in catastrophic consequences to his health, through which he had discovered the importance of digital detoxing. In addition to removing technology, the rule of “no work talk” at Camp Grounded seemed to push back against Silicon Valley culture.

Demographics

The ban on “work talk” made it difficult to know how many detoxers worked within Silicon Valley itself, but my impression was around half or less. One year, Google hired the camp for their employees alone as a team building exercise. But regardless, technology was incorporated

in everyone's work in some form. All detoxers owned digital devices, all had some form of social media profile, and almost all of them regularly used a Facebook account.

The Bay Area is mostly composed of two key populations: locals who have been born and raised in the area, and newcomers who have emigrated from elsewhere in the US or further afield, (English-Lueck, 2017, p. 28). It is a highly diverse area, with some emigrating specifically to work in the technology industry, often from south and east Asia, these immigrants "layered on top of decades-old immigrant patterns to the area" (p. 10). It is primarily the established Latino and African American communities who "remain on the margins" of the tech industry's success (p. 10).

42.41% of Bay Area residents were white in 2010 (Menendian & Gambhir, 2019, Figure 13); 23.5% were Latino (Menendian & Gambhir, 2019, Figure 9). Asians were "the second largest ethno-racial group" with "the highest rate of growth of any racial group in recent decades" (Menendian & Gambhir, 2019, para. 29), at 23.6% in 2010 (Menendian & Gambhir, 2019, Figure 5). 6.4% were African American (Menendian & Gambhir, 2019, Figure 1), forming a "significant, but declining portion of the population" (Menendian & Gambhir, 2019, para. 12), while 0.3% were Native American (Menendian & Gambhir, 2019, Figure 17). Racial diversity at Camp Grounded seemed to be fairly representative of the wider area. Attendees to Camp Grounded were mostly white, with Asian attendees as the second largest demographic, followed by hispanic, and several Indian. While there were a handful of black women at camp, there were several camp sessions where there were no black men at all. Despite some Native American imagery and practices being used (Chapter 5), I did not find Native American people present at camp.

Camp was attended by more women than men.⁴³ Most detoxers, especially those from the Bay Area, were in their 20s and 30s, and were single and renting. Although English-Lueck (2017) found that family was integral to Silicon Valley life, digital detoxers were a specific demographic who almost never had children or dependents. It was detoxers who had travelled from outside of the Bay, often Texas, who were more likely to be older and to have families.

There was often a long list of attendees with dietary restrictions, including vegetarian, vegan, gluten free, and dairy free, but I was told that this was not the case in camps run outside of California. This appeared to fit with local criticism of agribusiness and an emphasis on organic and locally grown food (English-Lueck, 2010, p. 13).

Political Leanings

In January 2017, the year of fieldwork, Republican candidate Donald Trump was inaugurated as President. Throughout the year there was increasing political tension in the USA between the left and right, which included the far-right rally in Charlottesville in August, in which one woman died.

California had voted Democrat, and the cities of San Francisco and Los Angeles followed the country-wide trend for urban areas to be the most left-wing.⁴⁴ House windows in my Oakland neighbourhood, Rockridge, continued to display Democrat election campaign signs, even including a nine-year-old “Obama 2008” poster. On front lawns, many placards announced the same paragraph; “In this house, we believe: Black Lives Matter, women rights are human rights, no human is illegal, science is real, love is love, kindness is everything.”

⁴³ This is interesting in light of Linda Woodhead’s (2007) work on the higher proportion of women in New Age groups in England.

⁴⁴ Rural Californian areas voted Republican. As I travelled through the Sierra Nevada I saw a memes ridiculing Obama printed on paper and tacked above a supermarket register.

In a gift shop in Oakland I saw a novelty “Hillary” nutcracker, inspired by the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, whose legs could crunch the shell of walnuts. The shop window also featured a sign about using Witchcraft on Trump. At the register, I laughed with the cashier at some red “Make America Great Again” hats that instead read “Fuck Trump.” She warned that buying them made you inadvertently look like a Trump supporter from a distance, the encounter suggesting to me that shared political views were common, and that it was possible to laugh with strangers about Trump’s latest escapade as if you were talking about the weather. Carved into the pavements around Oakland were messages to pedestrians; “Kill Trump” one read. Other people seemed at the end of their tether with the entire situation. “ABSOLUTELY NO! POLITICS! IN THE STORE!” was written in biro on a sign in the glass door of my local liquor store.

During my time in America, there was a lot of generalised fear and uncertainty about the impacts of technology, particularly in terms of how it might damage democracy. The possibility that the 2016 election had been hacked or manipulated was being unravelled but was not entirely understood, and Facebook had committed to combating fake news on its site through the use of fact checkers. However, this was before the Cambridge-Analytica data breach had been discovered, and so before Mark Zuckerberg testified to congress in 2019.

South of the Bay Area, in Los Angeles, 2017 was the year of the #MeToo movement, which began a cultural turn to redefine consent and women’s rights. The Bay Area itself had a unique commitment to an edgy, sexually liberated feminism that could be seen in the events and organisations that called the city their home, for example, the local “Orgasmic Meditation” group that I heard much talk of which radically centred women’s pleasure. After hearing detoxers’ enthusiasm for it, I bought myself a ticket to a “dick pic” exhibition which showcased unsolicited graphic images sent from men to women on dating apps. The exhibition literally framed the (often grotesque) images and accompanying vulgar and abusive messages, and

pinned them to fake bedroom walls. Freedom, safety, and health, were irrefutable human rights that women were vocally demanding with humour and tenacity.

Women's right to abortion was another contested debate across America. At a digital detox reunion in Dolores Park in July, detoxers discussed a new Planned Parenthood⁴⁵ centre which was set to be built, sparking pro-life protesters to gather and write on the pavement in chalk outside the planning commissioner's house. The detoxers assumed that those who were anti-abortion had deliberately travelled into the city that day, but some anti-abortion protesters had shouted "This is my neighbourhood!" while protesting, which they found worrisome; they debated whether they could fathom a San Francisco resident who was anti-abortion. The conversation emphasised their view of San Francisco as a place of diversity and "openmindedness" to people from all walks of life, sexualities, religions, and race.

The context I have provided in this chapter is important for understanding the environment that detoxers were hoping to foster at Camp Grounded, and their beliefs and goals in life. The first findings chapter, Chapter 5, focuses on the experience of camp, and its creation of norms, which builds upon the historical context of California that I have laid out here. After that, Chapter 6 focuses on the New Age blend of psychology and spirituality. Detoxers were almost all vocally left-wing, and I discuss the importance of this in the context of 2017 American politics in Chapter 7. Chapter 8 returns to this idea of creating community in modern life using a blend of the "scientific and countercultural" English-Lueck (2010, p. 6), while Chapter 9 argues that digital detoxers hoped to live their lives with greater "intention."

⁴⁵ Planned Parenthood, a centre providing sexual health advice and support, also offered abortions, and was a locus for pro and anti-abortion clashes, left and right-wing views.

Chapter 5

Back To Nature

Introduction

In this chapter I begin to illustrate the experience of Camp Grounded, while arguing that detoxers primarily saw each of its design elements as creating a “return to nature.” I argue that detoxers believed that the modern world was not how humans evolved, and that Camp Grounded used ritual to transport them to their spiritual human roots.

I argue that the trope of “the natural” is part of American cultural DNA; rather than *less* cultured, the forest is equally laden with belief. I show that in order to create this, detoxers appropriate a mash-up of cultural practices which feel “exotic” or “other.” Detoxers were weaving together from different cultures, instrumentally using pieces of what looked “exotic” or “ancient,” to ritually transport themselves to another time in human history. While this is extremely meaningful to them and seen as participating in “one big human family,” by imitating these cultures, detoxers are repeating colonial narratives that separate indigenous cultures from technological progress. Primitivist ideas become revived in a digital world; in cultural scripts of who is digital and who is not.

To the Forest

Arrival

Camp Grounded’s digital detox was hosted in a boy scout camp near California’s Mendocino forest, several hours’ drive north of San Francisco. The route to camp passes several one-road towns of just a few buildings and rolling hills of brown grass and bushes, until eventually the

road becomes stony, and twists for what feels like hours through deep, overhanging forest. At this point, the phone signal becomes intermittent until it disappears completely. As we drove to session 1 of 2017, *Brooklyn, Bird*, and *Nimbu* and I listened as our car radio began to sputter and cut out.

Arrival at camp always includes the same series of events. Hand painted signs start to appear, proclaiming that “You are now entering a device-free zone.” Beaming camp staff wearing fluorescent fancy dress usher us into parking spaces, hugging strangers as they step out into the dust with as much enthusiasm as old friends. We unload our luggage, placing it in piles headed to different villages. The attendees are organised into men’s villages such as Bear or Fox, women’s villages such as Bobcat or Deer, and a “genderful” village, “so that EVERYONE can feel included and safe at Camp Grounded” (Camp Grounded website, 2017, n.p.).

“I was still nervous all the way up, and I was having to like, really talk myself into continuing to drive all the way to Mendocino,” *Ocelot* told me in our interview about his very first trip to camp.

I wasn't going to back out, because I'd paid the money, but I was like “Oh god, this is gonna be a terrible mistake, it's gonna be a lot of caffeinated 20-somethings who I have nothing in common with,” and I was gonna feel completely left out.

And then I got there, and there was *Moose*, I dunno if you know *Moose*, and she just told me everything, where to put my things, where to park the car, and she said, “And can I give you a hug?” and it was so much like, full on welcoming, that I even found myself being like, “Oh I’ve been really nervous to come here,” and blah blah blah.

She said things like, “I'm so glad that you came, even though you're nervous,” stuff like that, which is not like, scripted stuff. This is like people who care about people, and paying attention, and who are like, genuinely empathetic.

Next to the car park, under the trees, there is a large table of milk and cookies, including non dairy milk, and gluten free cookies. Camp includes options like this for Bay Area residents who often have dietary requirements - described with a positive slant by camp as “special

commitments.” On another table are name stickers, and a few volunteers or counsellors nearby to help detoxers invent a “nickname.” While I chose *Lucky* in 2014, others had chosen names like *Princess Snapping Turtle*, *Inspector Lightning Bucket*, *Dr Boner PhD*, *Lunch*, *Pink Panties*, and *Hey Girl*, and some detoxers changed their nickname each year that they attended.

Further down the pathway, away from the cars, volunteers sit at tables under marquees to help us sign forms. “Registration” ensures that the admin is all completed in order for us to have a smooth experience at camp, for example being able to order food and drinks at the canteen, a little hut serving food and drink outside mealtimes, with a password rather than a credit card. Confirming our details on the forms is the last time we see or hear our real names for 72 hours.

Walking through more forest and over a rope bridge above an almost emerald green creek, we arrive at another little ritual, the handing over of technology at “tech check.” We enter into a small white marquee with plastic chairs arranged like a congregation in front of a television screen. In batches of around 10 people, we sit and watch a short film on an old bulky television that looks like it’s been wheeled in from a school classroom. The film itself has a 70s film effect and features a scientist in a lab discussing the dangers of digital technology. We are given “specimen bags” with “BIOHAZARD” written under a garish orange logo, which I fill with my phone, headphones, wallet, and keys, and we hand the bags over to disembodied hands poking through the marquee walls, with one last fleeting feeling of trepidation; the last act of committing to the next four days and whatever it holds.

Leaving the parting folds of the marquee, we find ourselves in the heart of camp. The first thing we see is the main field, where music is playing on speakers placed either side of a raised stage, and people are dancing. Clothing varies from casual, comfortable clothes suitable for camping, to something very similar to Burning Man’s “playa style,” a kind of theatrical dress of bright colours, onesies, tutus, and wigs. Around the edges of the field, counsellors are offering haircuts

with electric razors. Some women shave the side of their head and have patterns etched into the newly short hair. “There's something that happens, energy wise,” *Ice Cream Sundae* told me during our interview, about the moment you arrive in the middle of camp.

So many people were already like, (snaps fingers) in camp, like, (snaps fingers) we're here (snaps fingers) face paint, oh my god, immediately, crazy clothes on, immediately, you know what I mean? It's done. It's here. *I'm in. I'm in camp.* You know what I mean?

After arriving on the main field, the next port of call is “village orientation” where I meet my camp counsellor and bunk mates, and go through a series of ice breaker exercises with them, including creating a village “cheer” that will be performed to the rest of camp on the main field. The open faced cabin (a cabin with only three full wooden walls) in which I sleep houses some fifteen other women, many of whom have flown in from across the country to attend camp. The creaky metal bunk beds become home for all of us for three nights, and the women decorate their spaces with Camp Grounded branded bandanas, homemade bunting, and fairy lights. The site itself is used by children throughout most of the year, and these beds are on the small side; the women laugh and commiserate together about how ridiculous they feel climbing into them.

Within the campsite there is a large dining hall, an amphitheatre of seating arranged around a fire pit, the “villages” of cabins, a climbing wall, zip line, and little pathways that lead off into the forest where beautiful vistas or secret coves can be found. The American summer camp experience was interwoven into Camp Grounded; there were village cheers, counsellors, funny song lyrics, all-camp private jokes, dares, and toasting marshmallows around campfires. For one informant it was even the exact same campground she had attended as a child.

The programming at camp has a clear structure which repeated each weekend “session” of Camp Grounded. Each morning is yoga, sweat lodge, tai chi and meditation, and each evening there is an event; Friday evening is the all camp campfire, Saturday evening is Silent Time and

the talent show, and Sunday evening is the disco. Since we don't have watches, there are giant painted spinners to help us know roughly what's planned for the day. The more structured parts of camp bring everyone together at once on the main field or amphitheatre to help shape a carefully curated journey through the camp experience, whether it is an instruction for a high-energy ice breaker session on the main field, or a poignant speech made by the light of the campfire at the amphitheatre. There are optional "playshops"⁴⁶ which include songwriting; meditation and breathing; interpersonal space holding; acro yoga; salsa, vulnerable journaling; self-care and ritual; solar carving; philosophical speed dating; and mindfulness: relationship to the present moment.⁴⁷ Built into the structure of camp is "free time," allowing for napping, swimming, or walking. The Camp Grounded motto, read aloud at "tech check" is "Wherever you are is exactly where you're supposed to be." This is sometimes followed by the phrase "If you want to just go sit in a hammock and read a book, that's awesome!" These mottos reinforce the freedom detoxers have to choose their own activities during the detox.

Shake That City Off

It's the first session of Camp Grounded in 2017, and detoxers are gathered on the main field of Camp Mendocino, in front of the stage. We have performed our village cheers, and I know from previous years that we are about to play some games. The winner raises the camp flag, and we will then be sent to the dining hall for dinner, which tonight is red rice with lemon and olive oil, and chicken cooked with apricots and olives.

Shmu, Levi's brother, is standing on the raised stage with a microphone, telling us that we will soon be playing "Rock Paper Scissors." "Before we play a game," he says, "I notice that you all look so beautiful, and speaking of beauty I want to invite my friend *Sticks* up here to help me out with this..." The crowd whoops as *Sticks* joins *Shmu* on stage. The voices and speakers echo around the forest clearing, but won't be overheard as we are many miles from the next town.

"You all look so beautiful," he continues, "and, I'm noticing something on them. You notice that?" *Sticks* nods and speaks into her own microphone. "It's like a little bit of city, mixed with, been on a winding road for a while, mixed with like, sort of, hanger⁴⁸..." "Yeah, a lot of city on y'all," *Shmu* agrees. "So uh, *Sticks* is gonna help shake that city off."

⁴⁶ "Playshop" rather than "workshop" is in keeping with the "no work talk" rule and emphasis on "playfulness."

⁴⁷ I return to the use of mindfulness in Chapter 9.

⁴⁸ The words "hanger" or "hangry" combine "hunger" and "anger."

Sticks takes centre stage. “So in the words of Taylor Swift, we’re gonna “Shake It Off.” So spread out a bit, you’re gonna use all your limbs for this. So here’s what we’re gonna do,” The crowd shuffle around and give a few metres around each other. “You’re gonna shake your right hand five times, your left hand five, your right foot five times, your left foot five, yeah? And we’re gonna count down from five. Nod enthusiastically if you’re with me!” Everyone nods. “And the trick is, you also have to shout it!”

Limb by limb, the detoxers raucously copy *Sticks*’ rendition of the exercise, shouting numbers as they do five shakes for each limb, four shakes, three, two, one. For these kinds of moments, I’ve learned that the best approach is to either join in wholeheartedly, or not at all, and I follow the crowd.

“I don’t see any more city on ‘em,” *Shmu* says. “No you ready, you ready!” *Sticks* agrees.

Detoxers drew an opposition between the city and the forest, between human culture, and nature. “Technology,” “billboards,” “high buildings,” and “cars” were considered parts of the human-made environment that people usually “have to deal with,” framing human environments as noisy, industrial, and stressful. In our interview, *Ice Cream Sundae* used a metaphor of “stripping” to describe how Camp Grounded took away the trappings of everyday life.

You don’t have all the wires, and all that. All you have is your animal human-ness, and the greenness of the land, and the trees [...] It’s so easy to forget that we as human beings are really a family. You know? And when you give yourself those opportunities just to be with the earth, just to be with the water, just to be with the food, [...] [it takes] all those things having to be stripped, for you to go, “Oh right! We’re a human family!”

To use the phrasing of ritual theorist Arnold van Gennep (1960), Camp Grounded is a “liminal,” “transitional,” or “threshold” experience, which includes “a suspension of the usual rules of living” (p. 115). In rituals, van Gennep describes the order of rites in three phases; “rites of separation from a previous world, or “preliminal;” rites of a transitional stage (threshold or “liminal” rites); and ceremonies of incorporation into a new world, or “postliminal” rites,” (p. 21; as cited in Pike, 2001, p. 20). The long car ride through the winding forest road, enjoying a

childlike snack of milk and cookies, replacing real names with nicknames, and “shaking the city off” are some of the rites of separation that Camp Grounded used.

The feeling of this transition was described in an interview to me by *Captain Astro*. *Captain Astro* was an Asian man in his early 30s, who lived in San Francisco and worked at a tech giant. 2017 was his first time at camp, and he was spellbound by his experience.

If I had to describe it in one word, it was a very magical experience. When I think about all the different rules and the environment they create by taking away technology, your name, your work, all of this, and then also the fact that you're in a nature space, versus like a very city space, I feel like the environment was set up so you can organically just be who you are, do what you want, feel how you feel, and it was really safe and okay.

Captain Astro begins to capture the way that Camp Grounded aspired towards more natural forms of self and sociality. The rules of “no work talk” and “no real names” were examples of what detoxers considered a “stripping away” of the trappings of everyday life. This was part of their creation of a temporary “intentional community” (see Chapter 4) in which they created a kind of mini-society with new, experimental norms.

In the Bay Area’s culture of driven technology workers (English-Lueck, 2017, p. 28; Chapter 4), “What do you do?” is asked all too quickly during first introductions. *Captain Astro* worked at a high profile tech company and felt that it was hard to avoid being used by other people as a contact, or judged quickly as a specific type of person, and found the rule of “no work talk” particularly reassuring. He had moved to the city a year or so ago, but had yet to make the kind of friendships he really wanted. Rather than chalk this up to bad luck, he had begun to worry that he actually lacked the ability to forge “deeper” relationships. With networking banned, he may have felt he could finally seek out the friendships he really wanted, or perhaps that people could get to know him in a way that they did before he took his new job. In this setting, *Captain Astro* felt, “[...] you can organically just be who you are.” Taking away these habits, in his view, allowed detoxers to “just be” together, getting to know each other for “who they really

were,” and enjoying each others company rather than being competitive. In Chapter 2, Madrigal (2013, n.p.) suggested that those at Camp Grounded hoped that “by stripping away the trappings of modern life, we reach a place where humans naturally fall into deep and honest relationships with each other.” “Stripping away” and “shaking off” these aspects of human society were a societal comment which critiqued the kinds of bonds made back in everyday life.

“Why did I give that part of myself up?”

In addition to removing “work talk,” the introduction of playful nicknames and ban of real names seemed to help detoxers discover a different side of themselves. *Captain Astro* told me that he chose his camp nickname because “I’ve always wanted to be a captain and I’ve always wanted to be an astronaut.” Nicknames could be a way to your “more authentic” self, as well as a way to play with new identities. While there were other adult retreats where the lack of technology was incidental, detoxers proudly told me that Camp Grounded was unique in its lighthearted and playful tone. Exemplified by the “shake it off” moment, and the imitation of childrens’ summer camps, Camp Grounded encouraged detoxers to “reconnect” with their childhood self through playful activities.

For *Rawr*, this playfulness was a kind of rebellion against the expectations of adulthood, as she explained during our interview;

I’ve always been very playful, and that gets beaten out of you as an adult, a lot, partly by other people telling you to act your age, and partly because life is hard, and sometimes you lose that, and you don’t want to lose that, that’s a part of yourself you really shouldn’t lose.

Rawr was a Mexican woman in her early 30’s with a pink mohican and boyish clothes who had grown up in Texas, where she had struggled with gender norms.⁴⁹ She was a school teacher and often held righteous anger at society with articulate explanations. She loved playing soccer and I would often see her kicking a ball around the main field at camp. Part of her playfulness came

⁴⁹ I tell *Rawr*’s story in Chapter 6.

from disappointment in adulthood and in modern society more generally; she struggled financially more than other detoxers. She went on;

A lot of those things that are traditionally supposed to happen are inaccessible to us. We are of a generation that can't afford to buy homes. We can't really afford to have kids... I think it's kind of a "fuck you." [...] I think a lot of us pushed ourselves out of being playful to play the game, and then we realised the game's bullshit, and so why did I give that part of myself up?

In Chapter 2, I explained that non-use literature has pointed towards the possibility that non-users aspire to go against the mainstream. Camp Grounded's rejection of networking and "grown up" behaviour similarly seem to resist societal norms, possibly with "a sense of rebelliousness and pride" (Baumer et al., 2013, p. 5).

While *Rawr* was less interested in the spiritual aspects of Camp Grounded, many interpreted this idea of "playfulness" as spiritually healing. In describing his first trip to Camp Grounded, *Ocelot* explained that he initially decided to buy a ticket while following advice from a "healer." "He said, 'Young man, you just need to let your inner child out [...] There's nothing wrong with you, but you've gotta play. You're not playing enough.'" In this way playfulness was another of the "plural medical beliefs" (English-Lueck, 2010, p. 13) of the Bay Area, understood by *Ocelot* and others as a deliberate activity done for your emotional health.

Alongside the core beliefs of New Age which I outlined in Chapter 4, in New Age belief, "to experience the self is to experience [...] 'the inner child'" (Heelas, 1996, p. 19). Detoxers construed the more playful activities at camp - playing games or toasting marshmallows - as "letting your inner child out" and "feeding your inner child," repeating this metaphor of a kind of "deeper" self hidden within the layers of societal expectations.

“Nature is Innately Spiritual”

Magma is a white woman in her late 20s with long brown hair, who had been on the camp organising team when it was on tour in 2016.⁵⁰ In our interview, *Magma* told me that she grew up in Texas where air conditioning was the only refuge from the heat, and she spent her childhood indoors watching television. She “didn’t earn an appreciation for being outside,” but having attended Camp Grounded and having recently read a book about “nature deficit disorder” she was learning more about “what restorative qualities [nature] actually has.” Similar to playfulness, detoxers often referred to “nature” as something they were committing to for their emotional health. Some told me about the importance of “forest bathing,” or the “vibrational waves” of the forest, while others described it as an almost religious experience. In my interview with the organiser *Quesadilla*, she explained;

I think that nature is innately spiritual, and so anytime you're put in the woods you're gonna have some sort of grounded spiritual experience, if you wanna call it that, or not, it's also just nice to be in the woods, you know? It feels good, and it feels good to be away from our lives, and to play.

I think maybe people that weren't into religion or anything before, do feel that Camp Grounded is the spiritual experience that they've had, and that's cool.

Quesadilla here explains that nature is “innately” spiritual, and says that Camp Grounded is “the spiritual experience” that many non religious people have had. Almost in the same breath, *Quesadilla* says that “it’s also just nice to be in the woods,” shifting into a gentler rationalisation for enjoying the forest, which might appeal to the less New Age attendees of camp, such as *Rawr*. Like the “bricolage” of Bay Area culture and New Age tendencies, it mattered very little to detoxers which specific philosophy they cited, whether it be “vibrational waves” or “nature deficit disorder” - to them it was obvious that nature was an enduring, positive presence in human life.

⁵⁰ I quote *Magma* further in Chapters 6 and 9.

As I began to outline in Chapter 4, New Agers believe that humans have been “estranged” from nature (Magliocco, 2004, p. 202), and feel that a spiritual connection to the forest has been disrupted by the progress of human society. Similarly, detoxers appeared to experience each of the rules and design elements of Camp Grounded as “more natural” and felt a multiplicity of benefits from them. *Captain Astro* felt reassured about people seeing his true identity, *Rawr* was able to rebel against adulthood, *Ocelot* felt he was letting his inner child out, and *Quesadilla* described a religious experience of the forest - each of these seen as returning to something “more natural” they had lost. Below I will unpack why these “more natural” or “returning” ideas are powerful in America.

Nature in America

I have argued that a “stripping away” of modern life at Camp Grounded allowed detoxers to experiment with authenticity, health, or spiritual experiences, and that it also resonated with New Age critiques of modern society. However this “stripping” relied on concepts of the natural in American culture. While “Nature” and “Wilderness” were considered “deserted,” “savage,” “desolate,” and “barren” as little as 250 years ago, it since undertook a dramatic transformation into “a sacred American icon” (Cronon, 1996, p. 13). Cronon (1996) traces this transformation through two key concepts; “The Sublime” and “The Frontier” (p. 9).

Both Wordsworth and Thoreau wrote variations of “the face of God” as glimpsed in the most impressive landscapes on Earth. Cronon (1996) explains that in these descriptions of nature, “God was on the mountaintop, in the chasm, in the waterfall, in the thundercloud, in the rainbow, in the sunset” (p. 10). John Muir similarly wrote within the trope of “Nature as cathedral,” describing Yosemite as a “display of God’s power,” (Cronon, 1996, p. 12). Each of these writers demonstrate “The Sublime” as seen in nature.

“The Frontier” concept was specific to the United States, and relied on primitivist ideas.

Primitivism is “the nostalgia of civilized man for a return to a primitive or pre-civilized condition” (Bell, 1972, p. 1), a story which is “immensely powerful and seductive” (Torgovnik, 1990, p. 3). Primitivism can be found in the concept of The Frontier, where an over civilised and corrupted society could be restored through returning to more primitive ways of living. In the writing of Frederick Jackson Turner (1920), The Frontier was an opportunity for colonists to shed their European past, to “reinvent” democratic systems, to “reinfuse” themselves with a sense of independence and “rediscover” their primitive roots (Cronon, 1996, p. 13). “Wild country became a place not just of religious redemption” Cronon (1996, p. 13) writes, “but of national renewal, the quintessential location for experiencing what it meant to be an American.”

In using this land for their own reinvention, Americans simultaneously created the myth of the “vanishing frontier,” in which “wildness” dwindled in abundance, and required protection from civilisation in the shape of National Parks. “To protect wilderness was in a very real sense to protect the nation's most sacred myth of origin,” Cronon (1996, p. 13) writes. When visiting the National Parks, an American can not only experience the awe inspiring scale of its mountains and forests, but enact these stories within the cultural DNA around the excitement of self sufficiency and personal reinvention.⁵¹ The Mendocino forest similarly offered an experience of wilderness, and at Camp Grounded, these American perceptions of nature shaped their sense of a religious experience in nature, and ideas of a more authentic version of themselves.

Native American Indians

These narratives of “the natural” and “The Frontier” are inherently violent towards Native American Indians. Americans have simultaneously decimated the Native population while exaggerating, misrepresenting, and imitating aspects of their culture. For Americans, Native American Indians have long represented a closeness to nature, and a primitive and more authentic society (Van Slyck, 2006, p. 173). In *Playing Indian*, Deloria (1998) explains that

⁵¹ The Mendocino Forest is not a national park like Yosemite, but does have several wilderness areas for wildlife preservation.

Native American culture, just as with the myths of “Wilderness” and “The Frontier,” has been used by Americans to create a new national identity and to satisfy a need for authenticity in modern times” (p. 7), their cultures becoming “objectified signifiers of spiritual authenticity and spirituality to white people” (Pike, 2001, p. 134; as cited in Magliocco, 2004, p. 216).

The concept of Summer Camp itself was built upon both American conceptions of nature and of Native Americans. Ernest Thompson Seton deliberately imitated Native American Indians when he set up the first American boy scout camp in 1902 (Van Slyck, 2006, p. 170). Seton’s summer camp used Native American names, agreements, (p. 178) and a hierarchy (p. 184) which imitated “the best things from the best indians” (p. 180). This was done in the hope of instilling values into the boys and encouraging them to be “set on the path to respectability” (Van Slyck, 2006, p. 178). The use of the campfire in summer camps in Seton’s era was partly influenced by Native American Indian “council rings,” which were organised around a campfire (Van Slyck, 2006, p. 175). Like the use of “The Frontier” to “reinvent” democratic systems, to “reinfuse” themselves with a sense of independence and “rediscover” their primitive roots (Cronon, 1996, p. 13), Native American culture could be used instrumentally towards personal reinvention.

Another Native American fixture of Camp Grounded were the tipis, built as part of the rented campground. Tipis have long been “generic symbols of Indianness” in North America (Van Slyck, 2006, p. 171), yet were only used by specific Native American groups. These structures were used during Silent Time (described below on page 111), as quiet meditation spaces, or else for therapeutic and spiritual “playshops” and “deep dives” like tarot cards,⁵² potentially serving as “signifiers of spiritual authenticity and spirituality to white people” (Pike, 2001, p. 134; as cited in Magliocco, 2004, p. 216).

⁵² I describe *Asterisk*’s experience with a tarot card playshop in Chapter 6.

Never Itself but Always Ours

The design of Camp Grounded was seen by detoxers as a *removal* of aspects of unnatural modern society, yet it could equally be seen as an addition or creation. The rented campground at Mendocino was far from a true “wild” space but one curated with pathways, amphitheatres, lighting, and running water, as somewhere that fulfilled the image of “nature” by mimicking that which feels “natural” to Americans. By stepping into the forest, detoxers were treading a predetermined cultural path. Entering into “nature as cathedral,” (Cronon, 1996, p. 12) for Americans, holds a series of historical connotations and quasi-religious, patriotic, or primitive triggers, as well as the possibility for personal reinvention. Detoxers were openly referencing these long-established symbols; Thoreau himself was quoted in the Camp Grounded handbooks since at least 2014, referencing long held, Western views of nature.

Perhaps because I am British, these perceptions of nature were not self-evident at all. While children in America are more likely to be familiar with Native American Indian imagery - at Thanksgiving and in Summer Camp symbolism - their culture did not hold much reductive symbolism for me. All I knew about Summer Camp was what I had seen in *The Parent Trap*, and I did not look to the redwood trees as symbols in which to rediscover my primitive roots,⁵³ like I heard my participants doing. This difference became even more apparent to me when I told my informants that I was taking a break mid-fieldwork to visit Las Vegas. For many of them the city seemed to connote artifice, monetary gain, and alcohol, aspects of modern life that they hoped to “strip away” at camp. Yet visiting Camp Grounded is arguably no less artificial than visiting Vegas, since both are equally cultured spaces. In Chapter 2 I explained that anthropologically all spaces are “equally cultured,” whether it be an online environment or a forest. Raymond Williams (1983) felt that “nature” was “perhaps the most complex word in the

⁵³ In fact when I looked at them, my thoughts went back to reading Carl Sagan, who finds the immensity of the universe a lesson in perspective. To him, “The universe seems neither benign nor hostile, merely indifferent” (1981, p. 250).

[English] language” (p. 219; as cited in Coates, 2004, p. 1). “We have not made the natural world but we have, in a sense, created nature,” Coates (2004, p. 9) explains. Evernden (1992) similarly writes “a forest may be a mythical realm or a stock of unused lumber, but either way, it is able to serve a social function. It is, in that sense, never itself but always ours” (p. 110; as cited in Coates, 2004, p. 10).

This first section has argued that detoxers experienced Camp Grounded as more natural, and situated their experience within New Age beliefs and American cultural narratives. Below, I will build upon this to argue that Camp Grounded created a sense of a return, not only to nature, but to the past.

To the Past

Silent Time

Honey Bear is the first to sit in front of the laid fire. Soon, *Condor*, dressed in a white bunny suit, lights the huge wooden logs, and a fire crackles merrily, while 16 people sit around it in silence, stony faced.

There is a distant sound of the river gushing past and occasional tweeting birds. The sky is grey with a hint of blue - dusk is approaching. The air is cold and clear, with the scent of forest and smoke. Smoke gushes out from between the heavy looking logs, curls around them, then flies away in a pale cloud upwards and outwards, and tiny pieces of bright gold spit upwards between me and the redwoods and tipis. There are five tipis in total here, raised, with steps leading up and wooden deck floors. They tower meters above us, three wooden poles leaned together and wrapped with white material. The ground is dusty, with pine needles, pine cones, dry twigs that have been crushed underfoot, and scatterings of new greenery. In front of me, *Honey Bear* and *Smiley* hug emotionally.

Silent Time is not explicitly written in the camp schedule, and is somewhat sprung upon first timers to camp. In our villages, our counsellors told us to put on white clothes, handed out little brown envelopes to us, and instructed us to spread out across the camp. Alone, in silence, we read the enclosed piece of paper, which asks us to consider: “What would I like to bring into my world?” “What do I want to move towards in life?” In order to do so, we must write down our “fear” in order to let it go from our lives.

In the intensity of the weekend, I have always enjoyed the peace and quiet of Silent Time, and enjoyed listening to the sounds of birds and trickling water. But my body aches from lack of a good bed or a good night's sleep and my back hurts from always sitting hunched on the floor. I'm wearing so many layers to keep warm that I can't fully bend my arms; I'm wearing my denim jacket with sheepskin lining, which is the palest and warmest thing I own, but I feel guilty, because I haven't brought a white outfit for this evening. Some counsellors wear white bridal dresses or cream shawls, white flowers in their hair, and have painted white dots on their faces. They must be frozen.

Brooke stands on a wooden deck holding a sign saying "burn your fears" and ushers people in the right direction. Near the campfire, counsellors hold stacks of small white cards and hand them to detoxers. The cards show the camp motto, "Wherever you are is exactly where you're supposed to be" printed on them. More people arrive in a steady stream, perhaps for the warmth. They stand behind the circle of those seated, creating a larger, outer circle, and heat waves ripple in front of their faces. The "all gender" toilet stalls are only 10 metres or so away. The metallic creak of the toilet roll dispenser sounds out.

One person has stepped forward into the inner circle and burned their piece of paper, with their "fear" written on it. The ashen fragmented pieces dance skyward and then flutter away above us into the surrounding trees. One swims back through the air in front of me and lands, limp, on the dust. Some people have put their arms around each other, or are hugging while staring into the flames.

Every few seconds now, someone puts their fear in the flames, in a seemingly random order. Some have been sitting there all this time and only then seem to feel ready to stand up or lean forwards and burn it.

A low note sounds. A counselor is playing an accordion from the doorway of one of the tipis. She extends the note, making it louder and quieter, adding others in, changing pitch, but keeping the noise constant. This wave of sound feels like the atmospheric music added to a scene in a film. Another woman lights a stick of fragrant wood and blows it out as she paces. She waves it all over and around another woman who holds her hands in the prayer position.

People file in slowly through a gap in the circle and take their turn to throw their paper into the fire, often taking a moment to watch it burn, or look up into the sky, although some dive quickly in and out. Many have white face paint in lines and dots. One man, crying, stares deeply into the flames, brings the paper up to his forehead, then casts it in, and files out of the circle, still grimacing with tears. Many are sniffing, trembling with tears, and hugging in groups. There is a distinct heaviness to silent time this year, since Levi died only months ago.

Eventually a sign is held up by a counsellor saying "make your way to the dining hall." We walk in a silent procession. Usually a deafening space during mealtimes, this enormous, wooden, echoey space is filled only with the sound of footsteps and of

people settling into their seats. The hall is full of foldaway tables and plastic chairs, and tonight the lights are down to show the fairy lights and decorations around the room. On the wall are white string circles that look like dream catchers. Still silent, we are instructed by a piece of paper laid between our cutlery to eat our food “mindfully,” noticing every single bite, thinking about the journey the food has made from farm to plate.

While we are still finishing our meal, *Stoked* recites a poem with *Honey Bear*, and *Artemis* speaks about people who have “passed;” her voice cracking. I feel my eyes well with tears at her sadness and at the grief in the room.

Stoked asks us to look into the eyes of the person sitting across from us. Next to me, a woman called *Twirly* stares intently into the eyes of the woman called *Water* sitting opposite her. The woman opposite me stares back at me, but I focus on her nose. I simply cannot look into her eyes. *Twirly* and *Water* continue staring long past the end of the exercise, with tears in their eyes, and when we are instructed that the silence has ended, they whisper to each other, “you are enough” and “you are whole.” Brooke smiles sadly at me and pats my shoulder as she walks past, and I smile back at her with a mouth full of arugula.

Eventually I turn to *Twirly* and strike up a conversation. I tell her how much I like Silent Time, and mention that I am an introvert as an offer of an explanation. I say perhaps I should even try one of these week-long silent meditations that detoxers have told me about. *Twirly* says that she has done one of those recently, and ended up doing a whole month of silent meditation. She says that she felt she was always attending to other people’s needs, and that being silent let her only think about herself for once.

This was my fifth silent time, and my fifth trip to Camp Grounded’s digital detox. Silent Time always fell on the Saturday night of Camp Grounded programming, and although we had only been there for 24 hours of workshops, games and icebreaker exercises, it felt like we had been there for days.

I was told that Levi enjoyed “bringing people up and then down again,” a phrase accompanied by showing levels of “up” and “down” with one hand. While games and dancing were “up,” Silent time was “down.” Silent Time was an intense moment at camp, and an emotional and transformative experience for many of my informants. Many described it as the moment in

camp in which they “finally broke down,” crying and feeling overwhelmed. 2017 was *Jelly Bean*’s first time at Camp Grounded. She is an Asian woman in her late twenties, working at a tech company in San Francisco. She lives in a rented room outside of the city with a family who she manages to mostly avoid. Since it was her first time to camp, she did not know what to expect at Silent Time.

“Everyone was being very emotional during the camp fire,” she told me during our interview.

For me, I was kind of restricting from being that emotional. I was trying to search for it, but at the same time I was just being very distant. I had a weird moment of panic, where I’m like, “This is too weird.” Like, “Where did I get myself into?” “Is this really what I wanted to sign up for?” “I’m not on the same level as everyone else here.” “Why am I here?” “What is this?” But I passed by *Honey Bear*, and he gave me that card - and I have it in my wallet actually - and it says, “Wherever you are is where you’re supposed to be,” and I just had a meltdown.

There’s a lot of times in my life where I’m like, “What am I doing?” Like, “Why is this happening?” ‘Cause I am one of those people where I deal with a lot of unfortunate things. And I always keep telling myself, “It’s okay, maybe this was supposed to happen. I’ll learn something from this.” And so to hear those words, was so reassuring. And I was like, “I’m not the only one that thinks this.” “Everyone else thinks the same as I do.” “It’s okay to feel lost.” It was okay to feel the way that I was feeling. And that I was supposed to be there.

Unhappy in her job, and having recently suffered a loss in the family, *Jelly Bean* felt like “one of those people” who often had to “deal with a lot of unfortunate things.” *Jelly Bean* drew a link between feeling lost in her life with the panic she felt about not belonging or participating more correctly in the Silent Time ceremony. It was little wonder that *Jelly Bean* asked herself “What did I get myself into?” during Silent Time. In an isolated forest, this group had performed a kind of cult-like ritual, which isolated campers from one another and asked them to reflect on their darkest fears, sometimes to the point of deep emotional distress. Silent Time was portrayed as a moment of deep reflection, where you simply weren’t allowed to “distract” yourself from your

inner thoughts, and were forced to “sit with them.”⁵⁴ The moment *Honey Bear* gave her the card with reassuring words written on it, she felt that her feelings of confusion and worry themselves were validated; it was normal to be feeling lost at camp, or even in life more generally, turning her discomfort into feelings into acceptance of the camp experience. *Jelly Bean*’s story of discomfort followed by relief had become very familiar to me. Similar to *Ocelot*’s anxiety before he felt truly welcomed at camp, detoxers commonly described similar narrative arcs of trepidation; surrender; reassurance; and finally conviction that they, too, were “supposed to be there.”⁵⁵

In crying, *Jelly Bean* seemed relieved that she was able to participate more fully in the ceremony. The camp motto, “Wherever you are is exactly where you’re supposed to be” refers not only to choosing your own activities for the weekend, but the permission to move through emotions.

Creating a Ritual

When I first attended camp I assumed that Silent Time was a long-established ritual, but in my 2017 interviews I started a serious attempt to map where it might come from. The presence of the tipis, dreamcatcher-like circles, and campfire, may each have repeated the same stories that I have outlined around Native American Imagery as “signifiers of spiritual authenticity and spirituality to white people.” In addition, the location of the forest may have referenced “cathedral,” for “religious redemption” and “renewal” (Cronon, 1996, p. 13). Detoxers sometimes talked about “Vipassana” meditation and silent retreats which take influences from Buddhism, suggesting that the use of silence was a reference to these.

⁵⁴ In Chapter 6 I discuss the value that detoxers placed on “discomfort” as a path towards greater emotional awareness and health.

⁵⁵ I have not fully explored the process of religious conversion in this thesis. Luhrmann (2012) offers an ethnographic account of conversion in Christianity, while Tourish and Irving (1995) describe techniques used in religious cults, both of which have strong parallels with Camp Grounded.

But where did burning of “fears” come from, the use of incense, wearing white, or the accordion? To what are these referring, and to whom did the traditions belong? I noticed similarities between the fear burning and Burning Man, where an entire structure is built and filled with memories of loved ones who have died, then ritually burned at the end of the festival. Since Levi and other organisers regularly attended the festival, this seemed to be influential. Some felt the ceremony had Jewish influences, such as *Shooter*, who was asked by the organisers to film camp over several years, as he explained in our interview;

I was standing there filming this whole thing just kinda like, wide eyed, like “wow,” and Levi leans in, and was like (whispers) “this is the part that makes us look like a cult.”

I asked his mother about it, and she was the one that told me about how when they went to Jewish summer camp as a kid, the white dinner was a part of that whole Jewish summer camp. Put on their whites, they say.

Nimbu, an Indian woman in her early 20s, told me that “In Hinduism when someone dies you wear white, and light the funeral pyre.” She also explained that during the recent Black Lives Matter protests, she knew people had been burning sage in front of the police, because it was “warding away spirits.” For a long time I was frustrated in my inability to trace the origins of the ritual, but eventually I realised that to my participants, it was more important that it interweaved multiple significant symbols that could provide meaning for them individually.

Love Bug is a black woman in her 40s who grew up in Oakland, and who worked for a large company while doing an undergraduate course part time. She had been to camp several times, but while I spent time with her at her work, she explained to me what Silent Time had felt like the first year she attended.

It was really kind of like, “What’s this?” And burning your fears, it was like, “Oh this is powerful,” and then you see this table, and it’s all laid out and it’s all beautiful, and everything’s white, and it’s just um, it’s almost corny to say it was like a pure - there was like a purity to the air, something, you know, sacred about it. But it just really hit me, it was like, “Wow, I don’t think I’ve ever had anybody take such careful thought about doing something special for me.” And, “Wow the people behind this, it’s not that they just, put on camp...” [voice is emotional] It was much

more than just going to a summer camp. [voice almost a whisper] It was going to a place where it was okay to be yourself.

Love Bug understood the Silent Time as a moment of “purity,” feeling that the white was a symbol that the experience was sacred, even though she herself felt this might be a “corny” interpretation. But she also made a link between the aesthetics - that everything had been made to look “beautiful” - with the feeling of love and support from the organisation of camp. Silent Time was meaningful to *Love Bug* because it felt like deliberate time set aside to make her feel special. In Chapter 8, I focus more on *Love Bug*’s story and her interpretation of the loving Camp Grounded community.

Jelly Bean described the connotations Silent Time had held for her during our interview.

I wouldn’t know where the fire normally comes from. But when it comes to fire, people feel some sort of resurrection from it. For New Year’s, for example, my friends and I would write down all your fears of the year and you throw it away into the fire. So I feel like that’s maybe a common thing.
As for the dinner, wearing white and all that stuff, I get... ish. But that’s the part of me that’s like, this is super... hippie-ish. Where I feel like, this might have been done years ago. But as for the concept of it all, I wouldn’t know.
I felt like this was something I would have seen in the 70s. I feel like maybe someone kept that tradition somewhere else, and brought it in.

Jelly Bean made links between the ritual and her own life; the “fear” burning ritual made intuitive sense to her, as a moment of release and saying “goodbye” to things that she wanted to leave behind on New Year’s eve. But in addition, the aesthetic of the ritual lent it a gravitas, a feeling of “tradition” where “this might have been done years ago.” Although she didn’t know exactly where it was from, she felt the ritual had come from “somewhere else” and had been “brought in,” and seemed to interpret it as legitimate and established.

Ice Cream Sundae, like *Jelly Bean*, was at camp for the first time in 2017. *Ice Cream Sundae* is a black woman in her late 30s who grew up in San Francisco, and we sat together in a restaurant in San Francisco for our interview, laughing at the mural of a forest on the wall next to us as if

we were back at camp together. During Silent Time, she found significance in the use of smoke, and in the natural setting;

You know in a lot of indigenous traditions, the smoke is healing, and it calls forth ancestors. That's another thing that I love about being here in the Bay Area, is that kind of thing is not ran away from here. Right? The stuff that they were doing at camp, a lot of that is indigenous Native American stuff. That stuff comes from African tradition, it comes all these different kinds of traditions that are about spiritualism. I was like, "Oh wow, this is how they're calling in spirits here, and the spirits are very much here in the forest."

For *Ice Cream Sundae*, Silent Time demonstrated the Bay Area and camp's interest in Native American and African cultural practices. The use of smoke, and the spiritual and cultural connotations it had for her, was something at home in the Bay Area, a place where "that kind of thing is not run away from," implying that the Bay Area is open minded to these practices, while elsewhere people may be fearful of them. This resonates with my description of the area's eclecticism in Chapter 4. From her perspective, we were "all a human family," and this appropriation helped her to viscerally feel connected with cultures all around the world, and contrast them with the life they were living in the Bay Area.

Love Bug, *Ice Cream Sundae*, and *Jelly Bean*'s explanations show how this intense experience was laden with meanings brought to the ritual by the attendees, and that for them the incorporation of disparate ritual elements appropriated liberally from religions and cultures was an inspiring factor, rather than seen as inappropriate or confusing. In Chapter 4, I explained that New Agers are typically eclectic in their choice of spiritual path, which is sometimes criticised as "supermarket spirituality" (Partridge, 2004, 32). *Jelly Bean*'s use of the suffix "ish" allows for cherry picking, blending, and grey areas, using only pieces of these practices. The aesthetic of Silent Time, regarded as classically "hippie-ish," "traditional," or even "corny," also aligned with the wider cultural imagination of what cults in the 70s looked like; just as Levi had whispered to *Shooter*, "this is the part that makes us look like a cult," perhaps playing with the words' sinister connotations.

During Silent Time we had gathered around the campfire, where many stirring or important speeches often took place. The campfire was an important piece of the transportative power of Camp Grounded, taking us both back to nature and back in time. Seton (2016), one of the original creators of American summer camps, writes;

When first the brutal anthropoid stood up and walked erect - was man, the great event was symbolised and marked by the lighting of the first campfire. For millions of years our race has seen in this blessed fire, the means and emblem of light, warmth, protection, friendly gathering, council.

Only the ancient sacred fire of wood has power to touch and thrill the chords of primitive remembrance. When men sit together at the campfire they seem to shed all modern form and poise, and hark back to the primitive - to meet man as to man - to show the naked soul. (Seton, 2016, p. 5)

While detoxers smelled the smoke, felt the warmth, and gathered together under blankets in its orange glow, or when they ritually burned their fears in the flames, they may have also experienced the campfire as “thrilling the chords of primitive remembrance” or as a “portal to premodern authenticity” (van Slyck, 2006: 183). A juxtaposition was also made between the campfire and digital technology; the fire as a symbol of authentic human experience, with digital technology as a pale imitation. I saw this juxtaposition made visible at camp; a t-shirt drying on the side of a cabin that read, “You can’t download the smell of a campfire.”

Adler (2006) explains that New Agers “tend to view humanity’s ‘advancement’ and separation from nature as the prime source of alienation,” and use “ritual as a tool to end that alienation” (p. 20). Silent Time, if seen as a ritual, brought detoxers into feeling more deeply connected with the forest around them, through sitting alone amongst the trees, watching the powerful fire consume the enormous logs, and invoking indigenous or Native American traditions, who to Americans, have connoted a closeness and spiritual connection to the natural world (Magliocco, 2004, p. 217).

The spooky and sinister image of detoxers wearing white around the fire is similar to what Luhrmann (1991) has termed “sacred play” (p. 333) to describe how Witches in London draw on images in fiction (such as pretending to be Gandalf) to create their magical rituals. Detoxers, too, are drawing upon images and concepts in the wider American imagination. Detoxers at Camp Grounded enjoyed not only being “playful,” but “playing at” a series of cultural cues including nature as “cathedral” (Cronon, 1996, p. 12) as well as the Western-centric image of the “tribe.” Following Luhrmann (1991), the fear-burning ritual is a kind of “sacred play” (p. 333) whereby a ritual draws together “ancient imagery” in a “theatrical enactment,” resulting in a transformational and overwhelming experience, even one that is intensely religious (p. 337).

“We’re Village Creatures”

Shadow was a white man in his 20s who had volunteered for several years at camp. *Shadow* had aspergers and had found camp to be helpful in learning more about social settings. He was interested in camp as an intellectual experiment in community, and he had organised his own social experiments in the Bay Area themed around connecting with strangers. I interviewed *Shadow* in his living room in Fruitvale, surrounded by plastic milk crates and handmade signs from his latest pop-up event. He told me;

I think that if you focus so much on the technology aspect, and the fact that something is digital or not digital, you miss the larger point of like, it's not that technology is bad, it's that we're using technology in the way that we're told, as opposed to the way that mimics the things that we've been doing for thousands of years. It's an imperfect projection.

You can make the same argument of McDonalds, for example. Like, yeah, it's food, but it's not actually representative of the things that our bodies were made, were designed to consume, and so that has consequences.

From *Shadow*'s perspective, technology use or non-use itself was less important than a focus on how human life had originally evolved, and how digital life differed from the ancestral environment. *Shadow* went on to compare digital experiences with how Camp Grounded felt.

When we talk about digital detoxing as a relief, it comes from understanding like, “oh yeah, when I’m having a conversation, *this* is the thing that I’m trying to get to, this is what a “like” on Facebook feels like face to face.” You know?

It was interesting that *Shadow* had compared Facebook to McDonalds, since this repeated a food metaphor that I had heard in previous years at camp, i.e. that one could “binge” on social media (Sutton, 2017). In this case, *Shadow* framed certain kinds of foods as natural, while others, like McDonalds, were unnatural, implying that sociality at camp is more natural, while digital sociality is unnatural.

Shadow’s food metaphor exemplified the desire at Camp Grounded to rediscover and experience “the things that we’ve been doing for thousands of years,” a cause which has striking similarities to the paleo diet. In Knight’s (2011) paper on the paleo diet, she writes that copying what a hunter-gatherer might have eaten - nuts, berries, and meat - rests on ideas of “evolutionary nutrition,” or, “the premise that the human body has adapted to function best on the diet eaten in the Paleolithic era” (p. 707). While the paleo diet involves eating whatever “nature intended us to eat,” *Shadow* was describing how nature intended us to socialise, arguing that being together in person is what human minds were originally “designed” for.

Shadow was interested in Camp Grounded because he, too, was experimenting with what makes us all tick socially. From *Shadow*’s perspective, detoxers chose face-to-face communication at Camp Grounded because humans evolved that way, and importantly for him, this might be the best choice for a satisfying conversation. Other detoxers described similar ideas, but from a slightly different perspective. *Luminous*⁵⁶ had studied intentional communities at college, and had a far more political angle, attributing a need for camp to societal problems within the system of modern American society. “We’re village creatures,” she told me in our interview.

⁵⁶ I introduce *Luminous* more in Chapter 7.

We're animals that thrive in community, [but] capitalism insists that we're these individual economic units. Look at the way that our streets are set up in these world war two barracks, there isn't even a physical space that promotes people to interact, knowing your neighbours and relying on each other. And ultimately that's what makes life worth living, is your relationships.

For *Luminous*, modern life had isolated people in pursuit of financial gain and power for the few.⁵⁷ The very buildings of the Bay Area were a metaphor for the individualism and isolation that was so characteristic of modern, American society; a violent force separating one another, not unlike *Rawr*'s description of childishness being "beaten out of you." This was a common idea amongst detoxers. "I think that the Western world doesn't work for humanity" *Ice Cream Sundae* similarly summarised during our interview.

In our natural state, *Luminous* argues, there would be a far better sense of community, and the possibility of "relying on each other." At Camp Grounded, detoxers lived in "villages," sleeping together, eating together, in a new architectural and social arrangement. After attending camp, detoxers often referred to the digital detoxing community as their "tribe" (Chapter 6 and 8). The use of this term was in keeping with their view of camp as fostering more natural forms of sociality.

Both *Shadow* and *Luminous* seemed to contrast modern, digital life with how humans had evolved, just as *Ice Cream Sundae* had said, "[y]ou don't have all the wires [...] all you have is your animal human-ness." The phrasing reunites human beings with the animal world, undoing those thousands of years of building civilisations and creating social norms like "work talk." This "return" to a more natural way of life was seen to hold therapeutic benefits, which I will explore in Chapter 6.

⁵⁷ In Chapter 7 I expand further on *Luminous*' views and the political aspects of Camp Grounded.

Discussion

Detoxers saw Camp Grounded as a “return to nature” where they could “strip away” elements of modern life, including networking, real names, or adult expectations. The Camp Grounded tagline “Disconnect to Reconnect” follows this narrative of “returning,” and suggests that disconnecting from technology allows you to reconnect with yourself, with others, and with the natural world.

Some detoxers felt that such a stripping would reveal a more authentic form of self, or be emotionally healthy. Others felt that Camp Grounded offered an important, political critique of modern life, by imitating earlier periods in human history. *Shadow* explained that humans were not “designed” for modern life, *Luminous* also illustrating that humans required community based living, which they temporarily recreated at Camp Grounded.⁵⁸ These ideas are fitting with primitivism.

Knight (2015) calls the paleo diet “nutritional primitivism,” a “pursuit of supposedly simpler, more natural and authentic ways of eating” (p. 441). Knight’s (2015) participant Lisa tells her, “if you would look at say perhaps a tribe living out there [...] they have to go out and pick their food and they have to grow it” (p. 447). This is more healthy, Lisa suggests, because “they’re eating the foods that nature intended for them to eat” (Knight, 2015, p. 447). In this way she “constructs an imaginary example of the primitive Other ‘out there’ in the wilderness” (Knight, 2015, p. 447). Lisa’s “romanticism” shows “primitivist discontent with contemporary Western culture” (Knight, 2015, p. 447) that is similar to that of digital detoxers. As Horst and Miller (2012) pointed towards in Chapter 2, Camp Grounded could also be “a nostalgic lament for certain kinds of sociality or humanity deemed lost” and seemed to purport the idea that “prior

⁵⁸ In Chapter 6 and 8 I focus more on the way that Camp Grounded imitated hunter-gatherer sociality.

forms of sociality were somehow more natural or authentic by virtue of being less mediated” (p. 12).

Digital detoxers hoped to return to nature, and like Adler (2006, p. 20) suggests, they used rituals like Silent Time to live more in line with how they were “designed” and embrace being “village creatures.” Silent Time mixed together cultural symbols like nature as cathedral, along with cultural practices like Vipassana, or burning sage, with the campfire, ultimately creating a transporting, therapeutic experience. In Chapter 4 I outlined the way that New Age is often a “bricolage,” liberally appropriating from different cultures to varying degrees. Silent Time is a striking example of this tendency, and detoxers’ individual interpretations of the ritual show just how little they were concerned about the accuracy or integrity of appropriation.⁵⁹ Since *Ice Cream Sundae* felt that “the Western world doesn’t work for humanity,” it was encouraging to her that Camp Grounded was incorporating non-Western cultural practices since it demonstrated being “open” to them.

Who is Online, Who is Offline

Although the design of Silent Time could seem random, Hess (1993) suggests that New Age appropriation aims to fulfill an image of a “native exotic other” (p. 48). Similarly, Magliocco (2004) writes that “Many Neopagans⁶⁰ [New Agers] believe marginalized peoples have spiritual wisdom and a relationship with the earth that the dominant culture has lost” (p. 233). Silent Time mashed together an image of “the other,” one which provided not only a return to the natural, but to earlier times in human history. Detoxers could glimpse the life of their imagined ancestors, and feel a sense of the tribal that they were missing in their everyday lives.

⁵⁹ I discuss New Age cultural appropriation in Chapter 10.

⁶⁰ Paganism falls under the umbrella of New Age religion. Magliocco (2004) refers to “Neopagans,” while the other authors I cite (e.g. Adler, Pike) use “Pagan.”

As Horst and Miller (2012) suggest, Camp Grounded may have created an image of “more natural” life, by “exploiting” images of tribes originally popularised in anthropological accounts (p. 12) (Chapter 2). Images of indigenous people have long been exploited to create narratives around race and technology. Martha Sandweiss, a photo historian, has shown that Edward S. Curtis’ archive of photographs *The North American Indian* deliberately cropped out nearby railroad tracks, preferring to focus on “mounted war parties or ceremonial dances - that were no longer openly practiced on reservation lands” (Van Slyck, 2006, p. 171). As such, Curtis created “an invented visual record,” which denied the co-existence of Native Americans and technological progress (Van Slyck, 2006, p. 171). Native American culture was firmly placed in the authentic past, rather than the technological present, and this served to legitimise the erasure of the Native American people as well as instrumental uses of their culture.

More recently, Hobson (2008) argues that popular culture has “constructed a racial ideology about technology” (p. 111). Films and visual culture “associate whiteness with ‘progress,’ ‘technology,’ and ‘civilization,’ while situating blackness within a discourse of ‘nature,’ ‘primitivism,’ and ‘pre-modernity’ (Hobson, 2008, p. 114). Using the film *The Matrix: Reloaded* as an example, Hobson (2008) explains;

The predominantly black residents of the multicultural Zion [...] dwell in caves and boogey down to pre-modern percussions, highlighting the primitivist impulse of those who are outside the machine’s mainframe generating the Matrix —the cyberspace realm of the “dream world” for those (primarily white) who remain plugged into the system. (Hobson, 2008, p. 119)

From the cropped railroad tracks all the way to *The Matrix*, these primitivist ideas draw from opposing categories of “civilised” and “primitive.” The same ideas are alive at Camp Grounded in the appropriation of the “exotic” and “other” to feel that they are “returning” to something more natural than their everyday digital lives, temporarily leaving their comfortable homes and urban life.

In this chapter I have argued that Camp Grounded was a return to nature; to a more natural form of self, sociality, and environment. Detoxers also believed that we did not evolve to live in the modern world, and sought to rediscover the “relief” of how things are “supposed” to feel. I have situated these beliefs about the natural within American culture, showing not only how these narratives are powerful, but how race and ethnicity plays a part in *who* is seen to hold spiritual authenticity. These ideas and practices ultimately separate “exotic” peoples from technology, recreating long held exploitative narratives; something which Horst and Miller (2012, p. 12; Chapter 2) pointed to as a potential pitfall of anti-tech narratives. In Chapter 10, I draw upon these perceptions of “returning” to nature, and bring this together with the work of Max Weber to argue that digital detoxers saw American life as “disenchanted” and having lost a degree of humanity through progress. Returning to this vision of ancient human life was one way in which they hoped to “re-enchant” their experience of the world. The following chapters will build on this to show the way that these beliefs about the natural informed detoxers’ search for good mental health and happiness in modern society.

Chapter 6

Growth

Introduction

In this chapter I argue that detoxers interpreted Camp Grounded as a transformative, therapeutic experience, which used clinical ideas in spiritual terms. Through camp, detoxers were inspired to change their lives, often changing their careers or moving across the country.

Building on the previous chapter, I argue that parts of what detoxers considered good mental health were the “natural” state of things, like support from a village or tribe. Detoxers emphasised the power of community support for emotional health and self improvement over clinical interventions, and I contextualise this within “mutual help” practices in America. In the discussion, I argue that while these were forms of “work” on the self, they were experienced as freeing.

Trying to Find My Happiness: Redwood

Redwood is a white woman in her forties, with sparkly blue eyes and chin length wavy blond hair. She is single with two dogs that she adores like children. *Redwood* loves Camp Grounded and has attended for several years. But since Levi’s death, the sessions in May might have been the last she’ll ever attend, and *Redwood* turns her attention to her life moving forwards.

Redwood and I are having lunch in a diner near Marin, just north of San Francisco. We perch on high stools, tucking into toast, eggs, and bacon. Gesturing in the air, she tells me, “I’m constantly going, ‘Is this what life is about?’” Before settling in Marin, *Redwood* attended college, was an actor, and sailed around the world as part of a crew. Nowadays, as well as a part time job in an Apple store, she is an occasional masseuse, but neither seem to make her happy.

Telling me about her job at the Apple store, she explains, “I don’t love it. I’m over it.” The job is, for her, “a means to an end.” One of her co-workers is a stickler for company procedure; they had a fight over whether or not to help a customer by bending the rules. “I don’t like to play by the rules,” she explains.

Comparing herself to me, *Redwood* explains, “I don't know if I could do a PhD, because I'd get to a point where I'd be like, ‘This is hard, I don't wanna do this anymore,’ and I'd just fuckin’ stop. And I'm not proud of that.” “I’m such a commitment-phobe,” she tells me, “I’m not disciplined, I don’t use my talents.”

Last night, we went together to see *Redwood*’s spiritual guru. In an unassuming room in a warehouse, a group sat in a circle with a motherly looking woman with greying hair and woollen socks, our shoes in a pile by the door next to shelves of crystals. *Redwood* had snored quietly in the corner for much of the meeting, woken only by a quiet buzz of her smartphone. But when *Redwood* said something that doubted herself, the guru had said severely, “You are more powerful than you realise,” while *Redwood* scoffed.

“People say ‘You've accomplished a lot of things in your life,’” *Redwood* tells me across the diner table, seemingly with this conversation in mind. “I'm like, I - I - I haven't,” she stutters, and laughs, “you know?” “The people I'm jealous of are people like Fidget [Levi]. The people I'm jealous of are people who go, ‘I have this aching desire to do this thing and I'm just gonna do it no matter what.’”

Redwood tells me about a playshop she attended at camp this year taught by the camp counselor *Artemis*, which focused on career choices. “What really hit me more than anything, was at one point she said, ‘So why am I teaching this class?’” *Artemis* had explained, “I'm qualified to teach this class because I love my life, and I worked to make myself love my life [...] I just decided to stop doing the things that weren't important to me, and only do the things that were important to me.” *Artemis*, a soft spoken woman in her early 30s, white, with long brown hair, is a mindfulness teacher and coach in the Bay Area.

“Now,” *Redwood* continues, “what I don't understand is, why don't I do that?” “I've done a lot of work on like, spiritual groups and being in different things trying to find, like, my happiness.” She’s tried Landmark Forum, and attends her spiritual meetings, but she feels that camp fits her best. “With Camp Grounded, I didn't know what it was I was looking for, but when I got there, I was like, ‘This is what I want. I want a place where we all feel safe to just be who we are.’”

Redwood was searching for happiness. Many detoxers appeared to be people who were, over the span of years and even decades, deeply committed to chasing happiness, fulfilment, and a better version of themselves. *Redwood* had tried a few personal development programs, but none of them fit her cheeky and rebellious personality quite like Camp Grounded.

At Camp Grounded, many detoxers had a profoundly therapeutic experience, which enabled them to identify why they felt lost and dissatisfied and how they could embark on a path to happiness. A lot of this, as *Redwood* suggested, seemed to mean “only do[ing] the things that

were important to [them]” whether in their career or elsewhere. But *Redwood* had been to camp each summer for several years, and was still searching. *Redwood* said that camp was “a place where we all feel safe to just be who we are,” but paradoxically, it was also a place that inspired detoxers to improve themselves. Rather than a singular moment of transformation, detoxers could rediscover paths to happiness and rekindle them each year alongside other forms of self-improvement.

Part 1: Sharing our Pain

Camp Grounded was not only a “summer camp for adults” filled with playfulness and nostalgia, but a transformative experience and a site of self reflection and analysis. *Asterisk*’s stories help to illustrate detoxers’ use of therapeutic concepts and the impact that they could have on a person attending camp.

Holding Space: Asterisk

Asterisk was a white woman in her mid twenties, with a pixie cut of short ginger hair, square thick-rimmed glasses, and a love for graphic design. *Asterisk* was a quiet and sincere person who I met after camp in 2017 at a brunch event. When I added her on Facebook I saw that she sometimes posted statuses about Camp Grounded to her profile. “Often in my life, I tend not to do things when the odds feel too great. I don’t feel like a winner,” *Asterisk* wrote as a Facebook status after camp.

I wonder if I’ll ever find love because the odds of meeting the right person feel so high. But this weekend I was able to shift my inner monologue from “it probably won’t happen for me, why bother” to “keep going, anything is possible.”

At camp, *Asterisk* won the all-camp game of “Rock Paper Scissors Rockstar,” meaning that she was the one to raise the camp flag; in the status she explained this to her friends.

hundreds of people chanted AS-TER-ISK AS-TER-ISK AS-TER-ISK (my camp name). It was such a shock, a thrill, and I loved the glory of it.

Feeling the support and enthusiasm from the crowd at camp, *Asterisk* applied this to her own broader lack of confidence and feelings of hopelessness, and it inspired her to turn these around in her mind.

During our interview, *Asterisk* told me that she had attended a tarot card playshop at camp, held in one of the tipis. Despite having never used tarot cards before, she told me, “As soon as I looked at the cards that were in front of me, I just burst into tears. It like, clicked, and brought up all this stuff for me that I thought I had processed, but I hadn't.” The images evoked a romantic heartbreak that still held great sadness for *Asterisk*. “I was crying in front of these strangers and it was like, really intense,” she said. While she cried, she noticed the other playshop members hesitate in comforting her. They had said, “We just need to be here, and hold space, and witness this.” For *Asterisk*, this was even more poignant, as she explained;

They're not trying to comfort me, they're not trying to make it better, they're just making the space for me to feel these things, and that felt really cool [...] I think maybe that was the first time that I had understood what it meant to hold space for people.

Detoxers tended to feel that a caring listener should not attempt to stem the tears, but encourage a healthy outpouring of emotion instead. After the tarot card playshop, *Asterisk* continued to revel in her realisation throughout her time at Camp Grounded; “I think it took me a couple more days to like, fully interpret all of that,” she said, illustrating the mood that many detoxers were in throughout the weekend.

What she told me during our interview helped me to understand the use of terms like “holding space,” simply listening to other people’s problems, and “hearing” them - which meant listening carefully and understanding them in a way that would help the speaker. Other terms included “being seen,” which *Lemon* explained is “seeing someone at that deep level, and [...] not turning away from it.” Similar was the use of “heart holding,” and being “held,” as well as the words “trauma,” “triggered,” and “empowered.”

Another commonly used therapeutic concept was “boundaries.”⁶¹ “Boundary setting” in interpersonal relationships has become a popular recommendation in therapy in the last few decades, and I heard detoxers use the concept to emphasise their own needs over others’, or draw a line about what they did not want to do.

Many informants talked about their “story” or “narrative” just as *Asterisk* described “shift[ing] my inner monologue.” These seemed to be identical to “narratives” in analytic therapy, where “the therapist seeks to reassemble the fragments of utterances into a coherent story” which paints the client “as both author and actor of their own life” (Rose, 1999, p. 251). In therapy, these narrativizations can help to identify your beliefs about the world, about your place in it, and what your struggles are.

It was important for detoxers to identify what they had not yet “processed,” since without this, issues would lurk beneath the surface, causing continued pain. Rather than sweeping negative emotions under the rug, detoxers were keen to “sit with” their distress or discomfort. This was something which detoxers felt Facebook and other social media were unhelpful for, since they were felt to placate, hypnotise, and pacify users. In my interview with *Lemon*, she explained;

If I get upset, I start crying, I can just pick up my phone and start looking and distract my mind, and not allow myself to release that, or cry it out. Which in personal experience causes this pent up energy.

Camp was commonly described as a “pressure release valve” for negative emotions that had been building up in everyday life. The fact that *Asterisk* was left to show her emotions during the playshop demonstrated this idea that emotions can be “pent up” and must be “released.”

This idea of pressure and release is a Freudian idea, which are commonly used in New Age (Chapter 4).

⁶¹ The history of boundaries is unclear, but the idea possibly follows Freud’s (1955) sense that “protection against stimuli is almost more important than the reception of stimuli” (p. 27; as cited in Jordan, 2004, p. 67).

Although each of these techniques may be uncomfortable, that discomfort itself was highly valued. The value that Camp Grounded placed on “pushing through discomfort” is extremely similar to “distress tolerance,” a proposed cure for some psychological disorders including post traumatic stress disorder. A key tenet of treating a traumatised person is the concept of “turning towards” and confronting the traumatic experience. Similarly, “grounding” focuses on external, sensory stimuli to overcome panic attacks or sensory nervous system overload, interestingly similar to the name “Camp Grounded.”⁶³

Asterisk’s stories demonstrate the way that pieces of psychology and therapy were used by detoxers to make sense of their emotions and experiences. Her stories also point towards the kinds of transformative and perspective altering moments that detoxers often had at camp.

Sharing Human Pain

It’s the Saturday of session 2, 2017. The women of Bobcat and Deer are standing in a circle, and we are asked to write on a piece of paper, “the ways that you hope, that you wish, that you *want* with all your heart for other people to see you, in your best version of yourself,” and on the other side, “how we *don’t* want to be perceived, and how we fear we might be seen by others in our worst state.”

I’m conscious that the purple biro I used, now sticking out of my jacket pocket, identifies my own words, and that I’ve probably self censored in part because of it. We’re asked to crumple our paper into a ball and enjoy a “snowball fight,” and after politely attacking one another for a few minutes, we pick up one of these snowballs and return to the circle with it.

From the snowball we have retrieved, we take turns to shout a word aloud from the negative side of the paper; “unapproachable;” “boring;” “intimidating;” “quiet;” “selfish;” “closed minded;” “know it all;” “overwhelmed;” “needy;” “bitch;” “angry”. One young woman has begun to weep at the word “needy” and is consoled by those closest to her. We switch sides, the voices now a different tone, higher pitched and cheerful. “In control;” “inspired;” “loveable;” “comfortable with my body;” “accepting;” “great ass!” (laughter follows this); “caring;” “intelligent.”

Our counsellor *Inspector Lightning Bucket* looks round, eyebrows raised. “Anything surprising?” She asks. She laughs, and a few others join in. “What the fuck, right? [...] Turns out everyone’s on the same damn page.” “How many people look around the

⁶³ In Chapter 9 I discuss digital detoxers’ interest in “presence” which is also similar.

circle and see useless, invaluable, unlovable, beings?” she continues. There is laughter at this absurd suggestion. “What if we were able to see ourselves the way other people see us?” The woman who was touched by the word “needy” is consoled by the Bobcat women, and we each affirm to one another that we are allowed to ask for what we need in life, rather than caring solely for others. Wringing a used tissue, her nails bright pink, *Sparkly Things* expresses emotionally that camp is the only time she takes all year away from her kids and home, just for herself.

This exercise, which I call The Snowball Ritual, is one example of ritualised sharing which exemplifies Camp Grounded’s creation of a “safe” space for “processing” emotions. In Chapter 5 I explained that the camp motto was “Wherever you are is exactly where you’re supposed to be,” which referred not only to physical activities, but the intense emotional spaces that detoxers might find themselves in.

Despite being relative strangers, the structure that The Snowball Ritual provided allowed the women to feel safe in sharing information about themselves that they believed was unacceptable and shameful in everyday life. *Tiki* told me about her experience of the same Snowball Ritual in our interview.

So many of them just had all these parallels, where it's like, “Wow, this other person had the exact same things that they wanted people to see in them, and the exact same things that they didn't want people to see in them.” You realise that all of that like, depth of human emotion, from the negative to the positive and everything in-between, is kinda universal. And I think that is kind of the essence of what you experience at camp and what you come to realise. And that, in itself, is like, very therapeutic I think.

For *Tiki*, this was “overarching, this is how humans are, kind of stuff.” The idea that, in *Inspector Lightning Bucket*’s words “[it] turns out everyone’s on the same damn page,” encouraged the women to feel less alone in their fears and anxieties. *Tiki* found this realisation to be “very therapeutic,” helping her consider her own problems in a new light.⁶⁴

In another group exercise with the women of Bobcat village the following day, *Inspector Lightning Bucket* asked us to split into two groups. While one group closed their eyes, the other

⁶⁴ This thesis does not focus on gender, but the anxieties aired during the Snowball Ritual were highly gendered.

could “anonymously” approach and hug them. If you wanted a hug, you held your arms open, while if you didn’t want one, you crossed them across your chest. When I anonymously hugged *Sparkly Things*, she cried and cried, and I hugged her as tightly as I could. In return, I received wonderfully warm and emotional hugs while my eyes were closed, but after a few minutes I crossed my arms across my chest, and sensed women hovering nearby, seemingly hoping I might change my mind. Through their embraces, I understood that the anonymity provided an extra layer of kindness, since there was no reciprocal benefit, only the gift of support with no ties.

Both of these village exercises used anonymity to help the women to imagine their own individual pain as universal. In The Snowball Ritual, the semi-anonymity helped us to write down our true feelings - although as I showed with my purple biro, this didn’t work perfectly. The device of anonymity worked to make a stranger in front of you represent *any* human being, who in that moment was reflecting your own struggles back to you, finding common ground, and receiving you with care and attention. This formed not only a sense of closeness with those physically attending Camp Grounded, but with the wider world of imagined human suffering, echoing the New Age belief (Chapter 4) that humans are all connected both to one another and to the universe. At the same time, as *Tiki* had explained, this was “very therapeutic.”

Luminous explained that “people can finally have a release” at Camp Grounded “because they know they’re being held by loving arms.” Taken literally, this might apply to *Sparkly Things*, who cried all the more during the anonymous hugging exercise at village time, but equally, detoxers felt metaphorically “held” by each other. Again, *Luminous* repeats the “pressure” versus “release” metaphor from Freudian psychology.

In Chapter 5, I argued that ritual connected detoxers to imagined ancestors on a visceral level, campfires and smoke which “thrill the chords of primitive remembrance” (Seton, 2016, p. 5).

The therapeutic experience of camp was just as visceral, through embraces, tears, and poignant realisations, providing a deep and perspective-altering experience of acceptance and support. During our interview, *Love Bug* read me her poem entitled *My Tribe* about the Camp Grounded community, where she described screaming with her fellow campers. “I walked into the woods and I screamed,” it begins,⁶⁵

And immediately my tribe appeared and surrounded my broken spirit,
And they screamed with me.
They helped me unlock the chains that inhibited my freedom, and as each chain lifted,
my mind and body lightened.
My tribe saw me, heard me, wanted me, and I saw them, heard them, wanted them. And
every one of us was needed, every one of us important. [...]
I walked out of the woods tired but full, with my inner critic silenced, ready to face
life's challenges as they unfold,
With the spirit of my tribe wrapped around my soul.

Love Bug had been accepted, screams and all, given permission to “let out” her authentic struggles. To be “seen” and “heard” on this level, and still be accepted, was deeply healing.

“We Hold You Like a Hammock”

While therapeutic experiences were commonly experienced during Camp Grounded itself, they continued after camp into detoxers’ everyday lives, and even into the online lives of digital detoxers. Many detoxers joined the secret Facebook group “Camp Grounded Alumni” once the detox was over.⁶⁶ “Part of the reason people go to Camp Grounded is the digital detox, but I think the bigger part is the community,” *Bay Bridge* told me, pointing towards the importance of this community to those who attended.

After returning from camp, detoxers began to post on the Facebook group wall. Many of them referenced private jokes from that summer, and in the comments underneath, campers who had only met in the forest found each other once again. Many posted in the group praising and thanking the camp community. “I was inspired by camp to break through my fears and start

⁶⁵ This refers to an ice-breaker exercise sometimes used on the road before camp, where *Honey Bear* asked arrivals to scream into the mountains.

⁶⁶ There were many other Facebook groups connected to camp, e.g. for campers living in specific states or belonging to different villages, as well as private group messages.

learning the piano,” one person wrote, asking for recommendations for teachers in the city.

Another woman posted a “before” and “after” camp selfie; in the “before” she looked tired and sad, in the “after” her eyes sparkled as she smiled. Now, she explained, she was:

[...] eating healthy, meditating, and on a path to truly become my best self. Thank you to Camp Grounded and all of you for planting the seed for this.

A post from another woman read,

Yesterday was a particularly tough day for me but camp memories kept me up on my feet! [...] You all save my life without knowing and I am so damn privileged [sic] and grateful to have ever experienced the magical experience of camp with every single one of you <3 THANK YOU!!

A comment below this post replied, “We hold you like a hammock. Sink into us and look at the sky.”

“The Vulnerageous Thread” was a well known event on the main Facebook group, in which the original poster encouraged detoxers to comment below with their current struggles in life. The word “vulnerageous” mixed the words “vulnerable” and “outrageous” to define this bold, brave, forward-thinking slant on sharing their problems together.

I present to you THE VULNERAGEOUS THREAD. Reply with your difficult statement starting with the number of your post in sequence. It can be anything as long as it's brave. Let's see how far we get!

41 posts were added underneath detailing people’s worries; one lamenting that the dishes were still not done; one worried about their in-laws; another talking about childhood abuse. *Love Bug* contributed to explain that she was struggling with her undergraduate course. *Love Bug* told me that she contributed to the group, “‘cause I wanted to get it off my chest. I wanted to put it out loud, I think sometimes that we don't get a chance to do it out loud.”

We've got this experience together, where I feel like everybody was transformed in some way, because of their camp experience. Whether it's just that they finally felt safe and they have this community that they feel they can reach out to and ask for help, [it was] always available before, but it probably never felt safe to ask for.

Detoxers did not only undertake this kind of “vulnerageous” sharing within the private group itself, but began to follow the same norms on their own Facebook profiles. Here the audience

was not only detoxers, but friends, family, and acquaintances from other times in their life. *Love Bug* had been sharing images from camp, which she knew looked like a lot of fun.⁶⁷ She acknowledged this, and wrote as a status;

I posted some pretty cool pics that captured my summer and they represented some good times.
This summer I also dealt with depression, heartbreak, loss, and pain. Life will give you both. We don't usually take pics of that stuff but we sure do feel it.

Love Bug was being thoughtful to her Facebook friends when she posted this status. Sharing their worries and problems in the same way that The Snowball Ritual enabled could be therapeutic for her, but also feasibly help an imagined audience in recognising that everyone has private struggles.

Community Love

Community support, the sense of being loved, and feeling "safe to just be who we are," was important at Camp Grounded. In Chapter 5 I explained that detoxers interpreted Camp Grounded as "more natural;" whether it be a more natural environment or more natural forms of self, without the oppression of modern societal norms. As I began to explain in Chapter 5, detoxers felt that humans evolved in villages where people could "rely on each other," (*Luminous*) and as such, "playing" at being a tribe during the short detox was a step towards how we were "designed" to live. A sense of belonging itself was seen as "more natural" than the modern, urban, individualised world that detoxers usually inhabited. "There's like, this basic model of like, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and one of those tiers is belonging," *Lemon* explained to me during our interview. "I feel like, especially in our Western society, because it's so individualised, we tend to not find that belonging and that community." In this view, returning to a "more natural" form of village life at Camp Grounded would have therapeutic benefits. This is similar to evolutionary psychology, which places the science of human psychology into evolutionary perspective.

⁶⁷ I explain the release of official Camp Grounded photographs in Chapter 8, Community.

Tiki had found The Snowball Ritual “straight up therapeutic,” specifically because “You get to be surrounded by people not judging you in any way, [...] you get to just be this like, whole other level of yourself, without worrying about what you should be doing.” This sense of acceptance was extremely powerful. *Tiki* told me that she was “in a daze” for a long time after camp. “I was telling my parents all about it,” she explained, “and my Dad said, ‘It sounds like you just went through three years of therapy in four days.’”

Tiki’s comment pointed towards the way that detoxers often described community love at Camp Grounded as just as good, or if not better, than Western clinical medicine. *Redwood* felt similarly, feeling that “connection” - even with a beloved pet dog - was the best treatment. “I struggle with depression,” she said.

There's a certain level of depression where you need to go into deep therapy with lots of drugs. But there are people where I feel like there's the depression of the world, people who are becoming depressed and just taking pills, because they've forgotten how to connect.

Redwood along with many detoxers felt that the experience of community was a more effective, more “natural” form of therapy than “just taking pills” when in fact they have “forgotten how to connect.” Besides, she argued, American psychiatrists are “scared of getting sued” and don’t always have the answers; “just because I'm a doctor doesn't mean I know everything!”⁶⁸

At the end of camp in 2014, I transcribed a speech that Levi gave that he would repeat many times over the years. “The redwoods are the tallest trees in the world,” he said, but they have shallow roots. They interlock, and create this super social network.” Through this new sense of community, or a root network, Camp Grounded “planted the seed” for a new period of growth and fulfilment in detoxers’ lives.

⁶⁸ Such skepticism of science or medicine as an establishment is common in New Age belief, and I discuss this in the Chapter 10.

No Shepherds, All Sheep

The therapeutic aspects of Camp Grounded can be contextualised within a rise in everyday use of therapeutic concepts (Furedi, 2013). Rose (1999) argues that psychological expertise has become enormously significant as ways for Western individuals to think about themselves and their lives. Travis (2010) focuses on the history of the “recovery movement,” where American television shows like *Oprah* have popularised and legitimised group therapy, 12 step programs, interventions, and public confessions, each of which could have shaped the group sharing exercises at Camp Grounded.

I illustrated through *Asterisk*’s stories how ideas of narrative, pressure, and release, were appropriated from the clinical realm of Western psychotherapy into detoxers’ experiences. According to Rose (1999), people’s everyday use of psychological knowledge is complex, “one of bricolage, translation and hybridization” (p. 265). Expert clinical terms can become appropriated, applied liberally, and internalised, while experts themselves can be deemed unnecessary, since people become “experts of their own existence” (Rose, 1999, p. 265). I have explained (Chapter 4) that in the Bay Area, “plural medical beliefs” (English-Lueck, 2010, p. 13) are common, while New Agers are similarly eclectic. Following English-Lueck (2010) and Rose (1999), detoxers were mish-mashing psychological ideas in their own terms.

The exercises I have described bear a striking resemblance to “mutual help,” a practice popularised by Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), which was originally founded in America in the 1930s, and has since experienced great significance in American culture. Valverde and White-Mair (1999) explain that AA consists of mutual-help groups and bottom-up, non-expert-led networks, in which a group each aid each other, rather than relying on professionals. Valverde (1998) describes mutual help as “the gathering of a flock that refuses to be shepherded except

by other sheep” (p. 19). This is “not the guidance of expert 'shepherds,'" instead, “‘sheep' themselves gather together to care for one another's 'souls'” (Rose, 1999, p. 265).

The Vulnerageous Thread exemplified Camp Grounded values around vulnerability and “mutual help;” rather than speak to therapists, the love of the community could therapeutically help people to feel supported and not alone. Rather than a clinical problem like alcoholism, detoxers felt that everyone had “forgotten how to connect” in the modern world, and were perfectly able to diagnose this problem in others, helping each other at the same time as helping themselves.⁶⁹

This lack of clinical therapists at camp was something that made me uncomfortable. My own Dad was a medical doctor in England and my familiarity with and faith in Western medicine created another sense of difference between myself and my participants (see Chapter 3). While at camp, *Rawr* had told me that she planned to attend the newly introduced “grief deep dive.” As we queued for dinner together outside the canteen, I expressed my concern that it would not be run by professional therapists. At a time when so many people were grieving for Levi, I understood why it had been introduced, but seriously questioned how far they could take this idea of community love as a sufficient form of support. Thinking about what I had said, *Rawr* chose not to attend.

During the fieldwork a widely shared piece of gossip was that a woman had had what sounded like a psychotic episode during one of *Fog*'s playshops.⁷⁰ The story raised the spectre of serious mental health issues, especially how they might be made worse by the intense, isolated

⁶⁹ I explore this idea of “community” in the modern world in Chapter 8.

⁷⁰ This happened in Session 1, 2017, while I attended *Fog*'s playshop the following weekend.

environment of camp.⁷¹ After session 1, the organisers advertised on Facebook last-minute for an on site therapist for the last session of camp.

Some of the counsellors that I interviewed were very unhappy about the lack of clinical intervention, and even found that ticket-buyers were confusing the staff with therapists. “I’m not a professional and this isn’t therapy,” *Bay Bridge* told me, about his frustration with the therapeutic experiences that campers sought. He told me that one camper had contacted a counsellor after camp, explaining that they were depressed and hated their life. “That person needs real attention and help from a medical professional,” he said, “not from someone who was their counsellor two years ago.”

But in *Redwood*’s view, “the depression of the world” was distinct from clinical depression, and was a problem that could be solved through “connection” to another being. *Redwood*’s comment summarised the perspective with which detoxers found the therapeutic elements of Camp Grounded meaningful, more effective, and more “natural” than visiting a paid therapist or “taking pills.”

Part 2: Alignment

Fog’s Playshop

Outside the tea yurt there are big piles of shoes and boots. Inside, about 30 people are sitting cross-legged or leaning backwards on the persian carpets, facing *Fog*, a white American man in his 50’s with gray shaggy hair, a wizened face, sparkling blue eyes, and a knowing smile.

Everyone is very quiet and listening to *Fog* speak. *Fog* tells us about how everything that ever was or will be is simultaneous, and that we are all one consciousness. He uses the metaphor of tuning into a radio station to explain the different realities that we can choose to exist in.

While he talks, two women in particular are looking at him earnestly with wide eyes. *Fog* tells us he will be guiding us through a meditation and asks us to close our eyes.

⁷¹ This can perhaps be illustrated by *Jelly Bean*’s experience of Silent Time in Chapter 5.

We first picture that everything around us has melted away, leaving us bathed in white light. Then he asks us to imagine a time or place that we want to visit. We are silent for about ten minutes and some of the people laying down have begun to snore. I steal a glance at the room and see that *Fog* is swaying backwards and forwards.

I let my mind go blank and wait for images to appear, imagining that whatever I see could be my future. I see an upstairs hallway and a wood framed window alcove, which looks like a home where I could live with my boyfriend when I return to England, a great improvement on the open faced cabin back in my village and the AirBnB awaiting me back in Oakland.

Fog asks us to open our eyes and some people share where they have travelled. Some have revisited childhood. One met their father on a beach, another revisited a time when his parents forgot to pick him up from school. His voice cracking, he explains how the kids who bullied him had put gum in his hair. His grandmother picked him up, and during the meditation he had smelled the peanut butter she used to get it out again.

Others travelled forwards in time. Next to me, *Luminous* describes meeting herself in the future, and says that it was like a motherly presence. This future version of herself had a job, children, and a house, things her present self was struggling to organise. During the vision, this future self reassured her that she's doing just fine and not to worry - she would get there in the end. Her eyes fill up as she speaks, while around the room other people cry while listening to these stories.

The following afternoon, in the "deep dive" building on the playshop, *Fog* teaches us how to be a "wizard" through a series of partnered exercises; through this training, we learn a method for changing both the weather and our own future. The trick to both of these, *Fog* explains, is that you must visualise what you want to happen, consider how this would improve the world, or lives of others, then forget about it - and later, you would see the results.

Fog's teaching, I later realised, was essentially a mash-up of *The Secret* (Byrne, 2011), and *The Law of Attraction* (Abraham et al., 2006), which teach that positive thinking can change reality. Whatever their history or problematic aspects, in this particular setting, these ideas were used as an inspirational and transformative tool. *Fog's* meditations were opportunities for detoxers to look intensely inward, and to safely share what they saw with like-minded listeners.

While *Fog* was ostensibly teaching us about parallel universes and how to be a "wizard," it was less about how the universe is, and more about how it could be for you. Opening up the possibilities of parallel universes, of supernatural powers, and things occurring beyond the observable universe and beyond, seemed to be a way of inspiring his audience to open up these

possibilities. Detoxers could stretch outside of their usual routines, outside of their usual selves, and creatively explore who they wanted to be, and what they wanted to achieve.

“What Do I Want?”

Captain Astro had been present at *Fog*’s playshop during the incident with the woman’s psychotic episode, and insisted to me that the woman in question had “become one with the universe,” and was simply taking on the teachings of the playshop. This year had been his first time at Camp Grounded, and he had been inspired by his experience to start writing a book. “I think people reading this book would be like wow, I can’t believe this guy’s exposing himself so much,” he told me excitedly.

Captain Astro told me that across the “deeper” conversations he had at camp, the content often covered topics like trauma, alcohol, sexuality, and unhappiness. But the “correlation” across all of them, he explained, was that they were all about an underlying “misalignment that they felt, that what they’re doing or how they’re living their life is not aligned with what they actually want.”

Raindrop was a white woman in her 20s who worked at a tech giant. *Raindrop* echoed *Captain Astro*’s idea of “alignment” by explaining that she went to camp to get back in touch with her true feelings and desires. “Really why I signed up [to camp],” *Raindrop* explained, was because “technology [...] And the general world makes me feel very out of touch.”

[...] I’ve lost sight at times of, what do I enjoy? What do I want to do? Trying to figure out my next step in my life, do I wanna stay here? Do I wanna change roles in the company? Do I wanna go back to school? Like, trying to figure out my path, and trying to get into a place where I could make that space, where I could get back in touch with myself.

Without the tensions of normal life, “stripped away” by the rules of camp, detoxers could bring to the fore their true desires. In this way, detoxers implied that it might be more natural to focus

on yourself, but societal expectations change your priorities. *Raindrop* wondered, “If life is so precious, why am I working at a tech company?”

As we sat in the diner in Marin, *Redwood* and I had discussed “finding her happiness.” She demanded, “Why don’t *I* do that?” - why couldn’t she be like *Artemis*, a counsellor who attributed her happiness and success to “only do[ing] the things that were important to me.” Detoxers wanted their lives, and their actions, to match their values.⁷²

Having gained an important perspective on their lives while at camp, detoxers wanted to seize their new realisations to create change. This is fitting with Pike’s (2001) study of a New Age group, where she found that they “carry the liminal experience of the festival back home with them when they return to ‘mundania’” (Pike, 2001; as cited in Urban, 2015, p. 303). When they return, they do so with a “new sense of self” uncovered at the festival that continues as they return to normal life” which are experienced as “emotional and spiritual changes” (Pike, 2001; as cited in Urban, 2015, p. 303).

After winning a game at camp, *Asterisk* realised that she could shift her inner monologue about not being “a winner.” She also found that she had things she was still processing, which might be holding her back. Having experienced The Snowball Ritual, *Tiki* felt that her problems were “universal,” while others might feel that they had connected with a wider imagined vision of humanity. Acting upon this, they felt they should be more comfortable with who they are, less afraid of appearing negatively, or braver in “taking up space” and “speaking their need.”

Journeys

In our interview, *Raindrop* told me that she was “trying to figure out my path” using the metaphor of a “path,” which made tangible this idea of “moving” from dissatisfaction to the life

⁷² *Redwood* exemplifies an element of yearning to emulate the organisers. This was a common theme which I explore in Chapter 8.

she wanted. Many detoxers used the metaphor of “growth” or of a “journey,” which is useful to understand the way that they saw themselves as changing, transforming, or moving towards their happiness.

Rawr had moved to the Bay Area after first attending camp in 2014. In Chapter 5, I introduced her as a Mexican woman in her early 30’s with a pink mohican and boyish clothes. Having struggled with gender norms in her home state of Texas, she could finally be herself at camp, as she told me in our interview.

I was a tomboy, you know? But in Texas... I wanted to wear my brother’s clothes, I can go out at recess and play soccer in shorts and a t-shirt, I can’t in a dress and mary janes. You know? That turned into this whole, “Is she a lesbian?” I was like, “No, I’m not gay, I just like to run!”⁷³

And as you get older, there’s a very narrow path for what a woman should be in the South, especially in a place like Dallas which is very conservative. Nothing about me fit that. I’m a person of colour, I like to skateboard and to play soccer, I like punk music. Becoming a teacher, there was a very narrow dress code. You’ve gotta wear a dress or khaki pants. I would go into Anne Taylor loft and basically be in tears, because I was like, “None of this is me.”

She had persisted as a teacher and worked in North Carolina when she first flew to California for camp.

I feel like all my priorities shifted while I was at camp. Within two weeks I found another job out here. I realised that I’d never felt, at any point in my life, that I could be who I really was. I got to camp and I was like, “Why am I struggling? Why am I fighting that? ‘Cause these people aren’t.” And so meeting those kinds of people helped me.

Several detoxers told me that they had moved to the Bay because of camp. I think [the reason for moving here] was camp specifically,” *Rawr* said.

I come out here, and I’m just like, “Oh, I can be who I am?” That’s why I wouldn’t leave the Bay. I can’t afford to buy a house out here unless the market crashes, and I don’t think I want kids, but I can’t afford them anyway. But I can be who I am here, and that’s huge, you know? So camp very much opened that door for me.

Downtown had also physically moved across the country, coming to California from Florida a few years before he briefly worked for camp and later volunteered. People in Florida were “very

⁷³ The Bay Area was seen as a space that welcomed LGBTQ people.

conservative, and very Republican-ish,” and “not really open” to the kinds of things they did at camp. “I knew that there was something more for me out here,” he said. “I didn’t know what it was, but [since moving] I’ve grown in directions that I wanna grow.” Having moved to the Bay Area, *Downtown* had been seeing *Artemis* as a counsellor.

These kinds of changes were part of detoxers’ way of life, as *Magma* helped me to understand. In Chapter 5, I introduced *Magma* as a woman who had been on the camp organising team in 2016, and who had grown up in Texas. When *Magma* worked for camp, it had been behind the scenes in the role that *Popcorn* usually occupied.⁷⁴

From a volunteer and a past employee perspective, I would say people come to camp that need camp. People that are in need of support, or a structured environment in which you can play, you can disconnect, you can take on a different identity, you can practice growth.

Anyone that is drawn to camp needs something from it. The people that are drawn to camp are those that need community, need a sense of identity, or want to grow.

While she acknowledged that some people might dismiss the therapeutic aspects of camp, and say “ehh, it’s just for fun,”

I’m still seeing changes in that person’s life. So whether they’re doing their own work regardless of the experience, or, if it’s because of this community, which is what I’m gonna say it’s a part of, um, it doesn’t necessarily have to happen at camp. I think it’s what happens after camp that’s more important.

Camp Grounded was rarely the first time that detoxers attended some kind of retreat or program.

While *Redwood* visited her spiritual guru and had tried Landmark Forum, others had tried the Hoffman Process. *Love Bug* belonged to a Christian church, where she ran bible study and a women’s book club. These were just some of the variety of local programs, collectives, and communities (see Chapter 4). Digital detoxers tended to have tried, and often still belong to, a

⁷⁴ In 2017, *Popcorn* had returned to run camp after Levi’s death, and *Magma* attended as a volunteer instead. I tell more of *Magma*’s story in Chapter 8.

variety of training programmes, spiritual groups, or similar, all to try and improve themselves and find their way in life.⁷⁵

Magma was exemplifying the assumption of therapeutic “work” done on the self towards happiness and fulfilment - to “grow,” often through the kinds of training programs, groups, or life changes. In the Bay Area, a rich menu of communities and workshops allowed for people to find whatever felt right individually. Camp Grounded was another of these groups that worked as a way to help them on their “journey” through life towards “growth.”

Lemon’s Instagram

Just as detoxers had done with the community Facebook group, technology use itself could be a part of this “growth,” “process,” or “journey.” *Lemon* is a white woman in her early twenties, a student, barista, and part time photographer who was working on a photography project with a non profit. *Lemon* described herself as on a “journey” where Camp Grounded had offered her a sense of community that took years for her to feel was her own. In our interview *Lemon* told me about a time when Instagram had been central to her journey a couple of years ago, after she had begun to volunteer at camp. “I spent a lot of alone time back then, even more than I do now,” she told me.

I would post like, 3 photos a day, and I would do these journal entries in them and talk about my life and my processes and what I'm going through, and I used it as a very therapeutic way to kind of, get it all out.

Lemon used her Instagram account as a therapeutic aid, using photo captions to write diary-like entries which explored her anxieties, triumphs, and realisations, these serving as a form of self-directed therapy to a semi-public audience. Posting in this way, rather than making her audience uncomfortable or unimpressed, seemed to “resonate” with onlookers. “I ended up getting a lot of followers [...] comments and messages” she said, “through putting that out there and having that vulnerability.”

⁷⁵ Some of them stuck with the summer camp theme, attending a host of similar “adult summer camp” experiences.

As well as this, interested in body positivity and shaming around her weight, *Lemon* posted increasingly revealing photographs of herself. “I’ve straight up put half-nude photos on Instagram, and been like, ‘This is my body, deal with it.’” She laughed. *Lemon* also considered uploading fully nude images. “That boundary kind of interests me, and targeting ‘What am I scared to put out there?’ Maybe I should push it a little bit.” This, too, was a way that she was using the platform for her own personal growth.

Lemon combined more of the ideas about sharing and support, vulnerability, and pushing through discomfort, feeling that Instagram could be a helpful tool for learning more about herself and processing her feelings. In this way, the detox itself was only one moment in a series of commitments to how to live well, and “growth” could be done both with and without technology itself.

Do What You Love

After attending Camp Grounded as a journalist, *Brooklyn* had left his job and had moved across the country. In Chapter 3, *Brooklyn* felt that he had used his job to attend camp as a ruse, since he had an unrealised personal need for the experience. He had been expected to be online constantly, and “It felt like the internet was coursing through my body,” he said. “It made me physically ill.” This mirrored Levi’s own digital “burnout” that I described in Chapter 4. “Camp allowed me to see there’s another way to live,” he explained. Since living in the Bay Area, he had met his wife through camp related events.

A handful of detoxers who I interviewed used camp as a moment of self directed disruption; an inspirational moment of gained perspective where they could commit more seriously to their career goals. *Luminous* told me that she “set the intention” ahead of camp that it was the last moment of “playing” before seriously pursuing creative projects and moving on from her job as

a nanny. Doing so would fulfill the vision she had in *Fog*'s playshop.⁷⁶ *Redwood*'s job at the Apple store did not resemble the image she wanted of fulfilling her passions or doing something "creative," and similarly, worrying about which "path" she ought to be taking, *Raindrop* had asked in our interview, "If life is so precious, why am I working at a tech company?"

While many detoxers might have a regular job and a hobby or "passion project," the goal would be to make that project the main source of income. In this way, they hoped to find a job that would be "fulfilling." A self-directed career would be ideal, where you could share what you have with others; be it expertise in life coaching and therapy, or your art, music, or performance. These jobs would likely be just as screen-based as their original job.

A surprising amount of detoxers became, or aspired towards becoming, a therapist of some kind.⁷⁷ After camp I spent time with *Love Bug* at her job in an insurance company, where she taught new employees in "The Redwood Room," a space full of wheely chairs and grey HP computers, shelved binders of paperwork, and a fake pot plant. As she set up for the day, she danced around the room to Justin Timberlake from an early iPod, and introduced herself to her students with both her real and camp nickname. During a coffee break, I noticed an image on her laptop's desktop background; a joyful, leaping figure, with the phrase "facilitating your joyful movement" in a swirly font. I asked her what it meant, and she told me that it was her personal slogan that she developed during her coaching training. "I'm gearing myself up for the next stage of my life," she told me that day. "Coaching at work is great but I'm not connecting with people like I'd like to."

⁷⁶ In Chapter 9, I return to *Luminous*' career goals and show how she struggled with digital distraction while trying to commit to her career.

⁷⁷ It surprised me that detoxers, who so often described an ongoing search for fulfilment in their lives hoped to counsel other people. Woodhead (2007) argues that women commonly seek careers as coaches after joining New Age groups as a way of reconciling work and domestic identities.

Love Bug told me that she needed to speak with *Ocelot* for guidance as she transitioned from her insurance job into a full time counsellor. *Ocelot* did couples therapy and taught Non-Violent Communication (NVC) workshops in San Francisco.^{78 79} *Ocelot*'s lifestyle seemed to fit the aspirations of many detoxers who I had met; "I don't have to fake very much to do my work," *Ocelot* told me, suggesting, like *Captain Astro* had, that an underlying value of digital detoxers was to "align" "how they're living their life [...] with what they actually want."

Just as *Love Bug* looked to *Ocelot*, *Redwood* had yearned for *Artemis*' lifestyle. Organisers and counselors were more likely to do creative and self-directed jobs; some were "thought leaders," public speakers, and authors, while others developed "team building exercises" in the form of treasure hunts and games. Each of these were coveted roles which attracted surprising levels of adoration. To align your beliefs with your job would be more fulfilling and more authentic, just as *Artemis* had explained that she "loved her life" after she "decided to stop doing the things that weren't important to me, and only do the things that were important to me."⁸⁰

Discussion

Detoxers like *Redwood* were searching for their happiness, and had tried all kinds of communities and programs to practice "growth." Like *Redwood*, the detoxers I interviewed had found that Camp Grounded worked well for them, offering them a perspective altering experience and inspiration to change their lives.

Building on Chapter 5, detoxers felt that it was "more natural" to have a "tribe" to feel supported and understood by. Detoxers like *Love Bug* felt that from love and support comes

⁷⁸ Although he was a regular ticket buyer at camp, while teaching, *Ocelot* appeared to take on the status of a celebrity-slash-guru.

⁷⁹ Non-violent communication is a practice founded on the principle of compassion, with the assumption that every action reveals an unmet need, and that revealing those needs and having compassion for them would lead to harmonious relationships.

⁸⁰ Chapter 8 and 9 look more at hierarchy and aspiration.

growth. In this way, while they were committed to creating a community, the individual themselves would benefit from belonging to that community - like Levi's metaphor of the redwood tree which only grows tall because of its interlocking underground roots.⁸¹

In Chapters 1 and 2 I showed the ways that technology has been seen as a threat to mental health. In these accounts of the therapeutic aspects of the digital detox, however, technology was not an adversary but entangled in their lives. The Facebook group was used for therapeutic conversations and to create a continued sense of support after camp itself had ended; *Lemon* used Instagram photos and captions to explore her own inner world and experiment with her self image; and when *Brooklyn* left his journalism job, he did so not just because of its digital aspects, but because he sought a better life. Across these stories, technology and mental health came together in unexpected ways for digital detoxers.⁸²

Working for Happiness

In Chapter 2, I suggested that Camp Grounded might be a place of rest and relaxation, a restorative time spent away from the pressure of everyday life. Yet there was a large degree of “work” being done both at Camp Grounded and around it. *Magma* referred to the “work” she saw detoxers doing, whether through camp or in their own lives, while *Artemis* had explained, “I love my life, and I *worked* to make myself love my life.” This exemplified the kind of expectation that detoxers held to transform their lives.

According to English-Lueck (2017), in the Bay Area, “life is a series of projects” (p. 37) with people getting together to learn a new skill via Meetup.com, attending conventions, and joining associations (p. 38). She writes that “the self becomes a project, subject to endless tinkering” (English-Lueck, 2010, p. 6). I similarly found that the array of meetings, workshops, and

⁸¹ I explore this more in Chapters 8 and 10.

⁸² This continues to be true in Chapter 7, where I argue that detoxers struggled with digitally mediated news, not because it was digital, but because of its content.

programs seemed to provide a way for Bay Area residents to work on the self.⁸³ The camp experience was far more emotionally heavy than the summer camp theme might suggest, but the value placed on self work and the popularity of self development programs in the local area helps to explain the desire for a transformative or therapeutic experience at camp. The fact that *Lemon* gained Instagram followers while exploring her mental health online also suggests that this was a valued behaviour and welcome form of online content within her social circles.

More broadly, work on the self like this has been identified as a trend in Western culture. Academics have studied the way that mental or emotional wellbeing have become objectives “to be sought out and consumed as objects of moral value” (Lupton, 1995; 1998; as cited in Scott 2006, p. 145). “Health has become a commodity that is constantly pursued but never fully achieved by the ‘worried well,’” where people “cultivate both the inner and outer selves” (Crawford, 1984; 2000; as cited in Scott, 2006, p. 145).

The expectations within the camp community might have been felt as intense and overbearing. In Chapter 5, *Jelly Bean* struggled during Silent Time, asking herself “Where did I get myself into?” *Jelly Bean* felt compelled to find meaning in her discomfort and find her place at camp to be a metaphor for her sadness and struggle back home. Perhaps, on the one hand, detoxers did discover levels of sadness they didn’t know were there, or maybe they just wanted to join in, as I suggested that *Jelly Bean* might have. A paradox where we should be open-minded, chase what frightens us and push through discomfort - like *Lemon* with her nude instagram photos - while still being true to ourselves, was often confusing and guilt provoking for me as a researcher (Chapter 3). Another paradoxical expectation was that of self acceptance versus self improvement.

⁸³ While in Chapter 8 I focus more on the idea of conversation and relationships as a project, here it was the self that was a project.

Academically, it is possible to interpret the therapeutic expectations of Camp Grounded as “governmentality,” or the internalisation of responsibility to be healthy. Scott (2006) explains that the pursuit of health in Western life is “one dimension of the trend towards surveillance medicine [...] directing the Foucauldian gaze onto the spaces between bodies and encouraging us to monitor our own health (Hughes 2000)” (Scott, 2006, p. 145). Healthism, in Rose’s (1999) terms, is largely an exercise in internalised power and regulation (p.p. 86-87); he argues that the search for freedom via “the psy” sciences consists of managing inner emotions (Rose, 1999, p. 222), along with “slow, painstaking, and detailed work on our own subjective and personal realities” (Rose, 1999, p. 258).

However this does not capture the self described experience of digital detoxers’ therapeutic work at camp and in their everyday lives; they see their behaviour as a way of seeking freedom and happiness. For detoxers, theirs was a world they believed to be broken and stacked against happiness and good mental health (See Chapter 7), and working on the self is a rebellious form of vital self care. These are exciting and inspiring ideas, rather than crushing ones. Indeed, Rose (1999) explains, forms of self work like those I have described are actually often experienced as “therapies of freedom” (p. 259).

Magic and Therapy

Earlier I explained that detoxers described the importance of letting out “pent up” emotions, to reveal deeper, more authentic worries and fears, in terms of Freudian pressure and release. I explained that this was done in a way that Rose (1999) points towards (p. 265). But the use of clinical language at camp was not the same as a psychiatrist’s. Each time it was blended with spiritual ideas in a bricolage-like way, fitting with English-Lueck’s (2010) description of Bay Area “deep medical diversity” (p. 191) which draws from a variety of Western and Eastern concepts of health.

Clinical ideas were not being used in a clinical way, but for spiritual problems, just as *Redwood* explained that camp did not treat “serious” depression, but “the depression of the world.” For *Redwood*, it was “connection” which would overcome this. This pointed towards the way that Camp Grounded offered something that medicine, “pills,” or paid therapists, could not. Spiritual transformation in New Age groups, Magliocco (2010) argues, uses “a variety of technologies” which may in fact use scientific language “as a legitimizing discourse” (p. 638). “Regardless,” she explains, “the nature of personal transformation and enlightenment is spiritual” (Magliocco, 2010, p. 638). As I explained in Chapter 4, “New Age religion (tends) to blur the distinction between religion and psychology to an extent hardly found in other traditions,” Hanegraaff (1996, p. 183) writes, “basically because [...] ‘personal growth’ can be understood as the shape ‘religious salvation’ takes in the New Age Movement” (p. 46; see Chapter 4). Although detoxers worked with language of mental health, of repression, release, anxiety, depression, they sought not only better health, but spiritual growth. Dramatic life shifts could be found by blending together these clinical ideas with the use of tarot cards, group sharing, and parallel universes.

In Part 1 of this chapter I compared the use of “mutual help” at Camp Grounded to the techniques used at AA. Both AA and Camp Grounded rejected the presence of clinical professionals, relying more on community support. While AA ostensibly treats alcoholism, its goal is actually “helping people achieve inner peace” (Valverde, 1998, p. 124). Valverde and White-Mair (1999) explain that AA sits “between medicine and religion” since it “incorporates elements of the disease model of alcoholism while remaining fundamentally a spiritual programme” (p. 393). Similarly, Camp Grounded was not treating depression, but helping people find spiritual transformation.

Rather than working on the self as a “project,” it seemed that many detoxers were lost and unhappy, with Camp Grounded providing something they were otherwise missing in their lives.

Some of my participants had moved to the Bay Area and had not yet made friends, some were single and didn't want to be, some hadn't yet found their vocation in life. Each individual could use camp for whatever it was they needed, and rituals themselves reflected this. The fear burning during Silent Time (Chapter 5) was a moment to re-establish a commitment to ending anything that made detoxers unhappy, just as *Fog's* meditation was a moment to identify what mattered to them, even if, again, that was not explicitly outlined in the instructions.

Each time we gathered with a counsellor, my village mates appeared to have new stories to tell about what they had discovered about themselves that afternoon. The breakthrough moments at camp happened with a frequency and earnestness that I began to find unconvincing. But it was important to those at camp to be continuously growing, and finding new dramatic realisations about the self. Detoxers described camp as transformative, but after years of attending, people were still experiencing breakthrough moments. Rather than the digital detox being one moment of change, detoxers were in an ongoing process of growth. Taking a psychological reading of themselves, analyzing themselves, and working on themselves, was a continued spiritual exercise for digital detoxers.

In this chapter, I have argued that digital detoxers experienced Camp Grounded as therapeutic. This seemed to be fitting with local workshops and communities designed around the local value of self-improvement. More broadly, there are American, culturally specific beliefs about how to best deal with depression or mental health, like "mutual help," which shaped the ice breakers and sharing exercises at camp. Detoxers appropriated various clinical phrases and concepts, blending them with spiritual ideas. The incorporation of medical ideas into everyday life is a common Western theme, while New Agers often use the language of psychology or other sciences to describe their spiritual practices.

Some expectations that detoxers had for themselves are concerning or are paradoxical; they may create distress or necessitate painstaking self analysis. However, the felt experience of the therapeutic aspects of camp was inspiring and freeing. The Snowball Ritual, for example, could be perspective altering and affirming, sometimes giving them a sense of connection to the human race itself. Belonging to the “tribe” of Camp Grounded was experienced as spiritually nurturing, and helped to support them in their journey towards “growth.”

This chapter has explored the therapeutic experience of camp, and built upon the notions of “the natural” which I explored in Chapter 5 to argue that detoxers felt it was important to recreate the experience of belonging to a tribe. In Chapter 10, I return to this point, and using the work of Max Weber I argue that this was one way that digital detoxers were hoping to “re-enchant” the otherwise “disenchanted” world in which they found themselves.

Chapter 7

Broken America

Introduction

I have argued that detoxers saw Camp Grounded as a return to nature (Chapter 5), where they sought to undo the artifice and expectations of normal modern life in the San Francisco Bay Area. I have also argued that they sought good mental health, personal growth, and happiness (Chapter 6). In this chapter I argue that detoxers believed Camp Grounded was an important intervention within their “broken” surroundings.⁸⁴

In this chapter, I argue that detoxers were cautious of their technology because of a combination of their political views and their prioritising of mental health. The right-wing government of 2017 and inequality of American life caused them distress that they felt eroded their wellbeing. Since they often heard “bad news” via digital technology, muting, “turning down” and switching off their devices were ways they could prioritise their happiness.

While detoxers hoped to challenge inequality, and were passionate about their political views, following Chapter 6, I argue that their ultimate priority was their individual wellbeing, and that their privilege raises important questions for how those with privilege continue to navigate a difficult political time both on and offline.

Part 1: The Tech Industry

In this first part, I argue that for digital detoxers, the tech industry was a close-to-home symptom of America, which had its priorities in the wrong order; aiming to “disrupt” and make

⁸⁴ In Chapter 8 I argue that detoxers were creating “community” to counter the “disconnection” of their country.

money without addressing more deep-rooted problems like economic inequality. This was seen as prioritising profit over people, firstly by evicting the countercultural soul of the Bay Area, and secondly by increasing local economic inequality and homelessness.

The City is Not The Same Place

I'm sitting in Philz Cafe, San Francisco. The baristas are yelling out names and "ALMOND CROISSANT WARMED UP" with increasing frustration. A man in the coffee queue wears a Slytherin t-shirt, another wears a blue hoodie with cartoons on. People sit at Apple laptops, wearing white earphones, while others chat over coffee. Outside, a haunted and shrunken looking man with pale blue eyes, baggy trousers and a raincoat shakes a paper cup at passers by.

I made these fieldnotes while waiting for my interview with *Ice Cream Sundae*. When she arrived, we ate noodles together as she told me about her life growing up in San Francisco.

I left for 11 years [...] I moved back, and the city is not the same place. There are remnants of it that remain, but it's very different. [...] San Francisco used to be the Haight Street Fair with face painting, it'd be Folsom Street with people walking nude, really alternative ways of living. [...] When I was a kid I lived on Hayes [street]. We'd just open our windows and watch Bay to Breakers⁸⁵, and it was really fun. It was more about running for a cause and having fun and getting dressed up.

Now, she explained, the event was more about partying; "the cause behind it seems to have gotten lost," she said. Detoxers like *Ice Cream Sundae* seemed to feel that the soul of San Francisco had disappeared in the last 10-15 years.

Luminous was an attendee who exemplified a passionate and well informed outlook on the problems with American society. A white woman in her 20s, tall with brown hair, *Luminous* was fierce and intelligent. At university she had studied "intentional communities," and had an interest in societal inequality and dissatisfaction. We sat together in Arbor cafe, Oakland, for

⁸⁵ Bay to Breakers is an annual footrace which begins at The Embarcadero, next to the Bay, and ends at the Great Highway, where waves "break" against Ocean Beach. It was started after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake as a way to raise morale and continues today as a celebration of local culture (History: Bay to Breakers, n.d.).

our interview.⁸⁶ Historically, San Francisco was a haven for creatives and misfits, as *Luminous* explained to me.

I've been here for 13 or 14 years and I've really watched the cultural landscape of the Bay Area change. Whereas before, a lot of people would migrate towards San Francisco because they were outcasts and they were looking for camaraderie and to be with the other people who didn't fit in, liberal, a lot of queers, radicals, artists, activists, [...] now the changing demographic is that people's motivation for moving to San Francisco is to work in the tech industry.⁸⁷ My communities, that are the countercultural artists and activists and freaks and weirdos, who are still surviving in the Bay Area, are the ones who are providing the tech industry people something.

Many detoxers told me a similar story, that the creatives of the Bay Area were now “gone, gone, gone” (*Ocelot*) but that camp brought together a handful of those who had survived. In Chapter 4, *Lil Scrambles* was saddened that Uber had bought part of Oakland's iconic skyline, and described the unstoppable force of tech companies creeping north and east (English-Lueck, 2017, p. 1). “I think that part of what camp is, is a way to create what that San Francisco Bay Area vibe was, in a contained safe area,” *Ice Cream Sundae* said. In this way, perhaps camp was celebrating the culture of the Bay Area as it was before the tech industry arrived.

Tech Bros and Decadence

I walk past a lot of homeless people outside Civic Center BART. There's moaning and swearing. They sit crumpled on the concrete blocks by the big fountain. I wonder if they drink that water. As I walk further up the enormous plaza, my feet pass over brass words laid into the paving stones reading “faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person...” To my right, a line of people wait to be given meals from a feed the homeless stall. The civic center building stands majestically, looking like a European palace.

While walking to an interview in San Francisco, I wrote these fieldnotes on the stark difference that I could see between those with, and those without. In our interview, *Luminous* explained;

People who service the city can't even afford to live there. [San Francisco's] whole firemen staff lives outside of the city, which is crazy, because if there's some major disaster, all your firemen are like, a commute away. And I've seen just huge camps arise underneath overpasses [...] like the great depression or something.

⁸⁶ *Luminous* recorded the interview for me on her phone, which I explain in Chapter 3.

⁸⁷ Camp Grounded banned “work talk” partly as a reaction to Silicon Valley culture, emphasising people's value outside of their job (Chapter 4 and 5).

“And you attribute it to the tech industry?” I confirmed. “Oh, there's no doubt.” *Luminous* said. This change in the reason for coming to San Francisco, and a new, high demand for housing had sent rent prices soaring, displacing communities and increasing the homeless population (Wong, 2019; Redmond, 2019). The 2017 “homeless census” counted 7,499 homeless people living on the streets of San Francisco. The Civic Centre building that I walked towards in my excerpt sat between the tenderloin, which is the city’s most densely populated homeless district, and the headquarters of Twitter and Uber, where homeless people shuffled in front of the glass skyscrapers.

Digital detoxers were commonly vocal about issues of inequality like homelessness on Facebook. On her Facebook profile, *Ice Cream Sundae* shared an image of three homeless tents beside a road. Above the tents was a billboard with a deeply juxtaposing slogan; “helping put home ownership within reach in Oakland.” She had found the image elsewhere online, and had re-uploaded herself. Her text posted alongside the image was a simple “Smdh,” meaning “shake my damn head.”

A detoxer commented underneath, “the world we live in - sad and shameful...” *Lemon* had also commented, “The amount of displaced people is a humanitarian crisis... the way we write them off, ignore them, and push them into hiding says some shameful shit about our institutions and our society...” *Ice Cream Sundae* agreed, commenting again below *Lemon*. “Yea, I’m interested in getting people together to discuss some solutions to this. I’ve found myself crying seeing SO MANY people living this way.”⁸⁸

In my interview with *Jagger*, who worked in the tech industry, he explained; “I do think a lot of startups have the aim of changing the world, without necessarily thinking about whether they're

⁸⁸ In Part 3 of this chapter I discuss a tension between posting online about issues versus doing “the work.”

changing the world in a good way or a negative way.” This was a common view of the tech industry held by detoxers, in which it had vast potential for good, but usually made things worse.

Burning Man helps to explain the mismatch between the tech industry’s aspirations and reality. When detoxers talked about the tech industry, they often talked about Burning Man. In Chapter 4, I described the links between countercultural events like Burning Man and the beginnings of the technology industry. Turner (2009) argues that the ethos of Burning Man is the same as that of technology companies; an attempt at a truly equal society, prioritising sharing and creativity over financial gain. Today Google has its own Burning Man encampment. In September, when Burning Man ran, the common joke was that San Francisco became a ghost town.

While many detoxers attended both Burning Man and Camp Grounded, some were deeply unimpressed with it.⁸⁹ For these detoxers, Burning Man was emblematic of the “disconnect” between tech workers and the world that they were making worse; complaining, for example, that their relatives voted for Trump, before going back to work at Facebook.⁹⁰ *Brooklyn* described Burning Man as “decadent” and *Shooter* guessed that it cost around three thousand dollars to purchase all the necessary gear. Turner himself explains in an interview that during his last visit, “the original, anti-capitalist edge that I remembered had been ground down to the point of disappearing” (De Witte, 2018, para. 7).

After Burning Man ended in 2017, a satirical headline (Jiang, 2017) joked; “As Burning Man Concludes, Tech Community Returns to its Asshole Roots” which juxtaposed different values of the festival in turn with different problematic elements of San Francisco life; a woman

⁸⁹ Some detoxers saw Burning Man as “less natural” and having more “cultural baggage” (Interview with *Brooklyn*) than Camp Grounded, since it included drugs, alcohol, and technology. However the organisers attended Burning Man every year and likely drew from their experience when designing camp.

⁹⁰ Detoxers felt that Facebook had directly exacerbated their current political situation. In 2018, a Trump campaign strategist explained that “without Facebook we wouldn’t have won” (Osno, 2018, para. 75).

proclaimed radical acceptance of all backgrounds while zooming through San Francisco's most densely populated homeless district in an Uber; and a man proclaimed the value of giving rather than taking as he chose not to add a tip for his takeaway coffee.

This perspective saw the tech industry's alignment with countercultural values as at best delusional, and at worst, deceptive. I felt this tension when I sat in the Facebook lobby in San Jose, underneath a wall of screen printed posters in red capital letters. "Move fast;" "Black Lives Matter;" "Be bold;" (something in Chinese); "Stay focused and keep shipping;" "Be open." Their analog style, inspirational messages, and reminder for being "open" reminded me of Camp Grounded. I nervously glanced up at the security cameras while writing my notes. The Facebook lobby seemed to be attempting to blend into its surroundings, cloaking itself in the aesthetic of resistance and counterculture, while simultaneously a frighteningly powerful company.

Burning Man, for detoxers, often connoted delusion and selfishness that *Rawr* summarised as the personality of a "tech bro." *Rawr*, who often attended gigs around the Bay Area, explained; "We'll go to shows, and we're just like, 'ugh, look at all these tech bros, look at all these tech assholes.'" "How would you describe a tech bro?" I asked. "Somebody who feels entitled to the space more than other people." She said.

If I make this app that's a laundry delivery service, what does that mean for the laundromats in the area? [...] if they made products that really made people's lives better, okay. And there are some products that do that, and I applaud those things, but there are plenty that don't. And it's made for a quick buck at the expense of other people, and the complete disregard for who you're hurting when you do these things. And that's a bro. That's not everybody in tech, that's specific - *that's a bro*.

She described "tech bros" who filmed mosh pits at the gigs she attended in the Bay Area; misunderstanding that a mosh pit is to be experienced, and not filmed. She went on;

To me it feels like a violation of a sacred space. And that you're doing it more for yourself, without regard to the other people that are there. And I think that's emblematic of the whole thing, the way they've invaded San Francisco, without regard for the

people that have been there for forever. You know? The people who have lived in the Mission for generations, who now can't afford to.

My husband was born and raised here, [...] he'll point stuff out, you know, and be like, that used to be this really cool dive bar and now look at it.

There were people here before you. You bought a place that had four families living in it, so you could renovate it and make it just for yourself. I think that there's an entitlement and selfishness to it. I think that's it, the entitlement. Just like, "Well, I can afford it, so I'm doing it."

The phrase "tech bro" was often used by detoxers to connote white, male, technology workers, who found success in the technology industry specifically through selfishness and thoughtlessness.⁹¹ The technology itself was not necessarily the problem but this specific personality behind it. In 2017, the "rampant sexism and misogyny" (*Hey Girl*) of the tech industry was beginning to be taken seriously, contributing to the wider cultural trope of the tech bro.⁹²

While "disruption" was a core value of companies like Facebook, whose mantra was "move fast, break things," detoxers had seen the damage it could cause. "We don't need to disrupt the dry cleaning industry," *Downtown* sighed. "I think [the tech industry] is over inflated and ruining a really good part of America." At *Sparkkle*'s "indoor camp evening," *Ocelot* wore a t-shirt that said "move fast don't break things."

While detoxers often interpreted tech bros as selfish and thoughtless, *Lemon*, one of the most politically minded detoxers, acknowledged what people hoped for when they attended Burning Man. "I think people in Burning Man are very much idealist. Like, this is ideally how this world could be." She went on;

⁹¹ *Nimbu*, who worked at a tech giant, expressed great frustration at the lack of gender and racial diversity in technology companies and the impact that had on the tools they created; a far narrower assumption about what mattered to those on the user end. This issue of lack of diversity within the design process, and the frustration of women and POC within the company, is something that merits further study.

⁹² "Feb. 19, 2017, was Uber's day of reckoning" Bhuiyan (2017) writes, when Fowler published a blogpost on sexism at the company, beginning a kind of "me too" moment for the tech industry.

We could have this like, radical inclusion, and radical love, and service. And then there's another part of me that feels like, "Ok, but where do we build that bridge?" Because that's - that's not here. That's not where we are. [...] Is that really a reality, for everyone to start on that level?

It was a privileged position to attend Burning Man, to be able to take the time off work, and purchase the necessary gear, and Burners were also able to "start on that level" of excitedly imagining an artistic and spiritual utopia, because they were several levels of privilege above pure survival. This yawning gap between those who had nothing, living metres away from those with decadent levels of success, gave *Luminous* a strong emotional reaction. "I just, I lost it, man," she said, describing an experience of looking up at the Salesforce building in San Francisco during a party.

I started almost having a panic attack. [...] I think that my feelings of anxiety around it has to do with the accumulation of wealth in such a concentrated area that I don't necessarily see benefitting the people who are living here already, [...] this beautiful, safe haven culture is kind of being choked out."

Priorities

Shadow felt that the San Francisco Bay Area was a kind of "Guinea Pig" for the rest of the world, where apps would be tested out, to see how they worked elsewhere. But he explained,

I think it's moving too fast. [...] there's so much momentum. We are doing these things at the speed that we *can* do them rather than the speed that we *should* do them.

But *Shadow* did not blame the tech industry exactly.

If you're blaming the tech companies you have to blame the stock market, and if you're blaming the stock market, [...] it's just so many pieces of America on top of each other. [It's] an inevitability of being in a competitive society. But it's also the struggle that our generation is continuing to deal with, trying to find sustainability rather than progress.

Shadow pointed out that the tech industry was a symptom, rather than a cause, of American problems, and hoped that his generation might be able to question the ideal of "progress."

"There's a lot of awesome stuff that technology is doing," *Tiki* said. *Tiki* had recently heard a woman talk about her tech company that helped provide access to water. "There's also useless

stuff that comes out of it, that just wastes our time. I mean, mobile games are fun, but like, *really?*” *Tiki*, who taught at a secondary school, was dating a man who worked on Farmville. *Tiki* explained that tech workers like her boyfriend were “getting paid 5 million times more than I do, and I’m a teacher... You’re just making a thing that people can waste time doing. They’re fun, I enjoy them, but why is that a priority?” To *Tiki*, this was emblematic of the way that society was valuing the creation of technology that may or may not help the world, over children; placing monetary gain over nurture of individuals through their lives.

In each of these examples, detoxers were explaining the damage of the tech industry through a wider societal problem: capitalism. This was a countercultural idea, which I also heard at the New Age technology conference in San Jose, where one popular suggestion for a society-changing idea was that “the entire notion of capitalism needs to be redesigned” (Chapter 4). In this way, detoxers felt the very organisation of their society was geared towards profit for the few, with the tech industry as a symptom of this larger problem. By living in the Bay Area, this perspective grew from their firsthand experience of the way the landscape had changed; all the way from the curtailing of the “misfits” and “hippie” culture, to evicted families, and people made homeless.

In Chapter 5 I showed that the rule of “no work talk” at Camp Grounded pointed towards their desire for a return to a more natural, authentic way of being together. But it also specifically spoke to a desire to escape the tech industry’s hold on the Bay Area. Through this rule, detoxers emphasised that what mattered was not career success, but who you were as a person, just as *Luminous* had explained (Chapter 6), camp told people “over and over again,” that “you’re worthy.” This appeared to be such “good medicine” (*Luminous*) specifically in the Bay Area, because it had become such a competitive and career-driven place (English-Lueck, 2017, p. 28).

This cultural change was what affected detoxers the most personally; *Rawr* had lost dive bars and her gigs were invaded with “selfish” people; *Luminous*’ friends were struggling; *Ice Cream Sundae* felt the “cause” and “alternative ways of living” in the city had gone. While many detoxers and their friends had needed to move out of San Francisco,⁹³ homelessness itself did not affect them directly. *Tiki* acknowledged that the outrage she and other detoxers felt tended to be on behalf of others. “I’m certainly very very privileged,” *Tiki* explained. She was born and raised in San Francisco and had a rent controlled apartment which allowed her to stay on a teacher’s salary. “While all this is real, and I see this stuff happening around me,” she said, “I’m still generally doing okay, except for wanting to buy a house and not being able to do that.” Whether or not it affected them, the inequality that the tech industry created mattered to them, and for them it was an important part of their left-wing views to care about others, as I will continue to explain below.

In Part 1 I have argued that digital detoxers held negative connotations of the technology industry due to their firsthand experience of the disruption it created, and the delusions they saw it holding about it being a positive impact in the world. They used what they saw around them to form their political views about their country, as I go on to explain below in Part 2.

Part 2: Bad News

For detoxers, the tech industry was an increasingly concerning symptom of American, capitalist priorities in 2017. But a more recent and shocking development for them was the election of Republican candidate Donald Trump in November 2016.

Trump’s win had stoked intolerance in America. In the summer of 2017, Trump hoped to instate a “travel ban” on visitors from seven largely Muslim countries, supposedly for safety reasons.

⁹³ Often to Oakland, where the housing market was still oversaturated and overpriced.

Trump's election promises included "building the wall" to prevent immigration from Mexico; ostensibly a policy to prevent economic damage and threats to American's safety.⁹⁴ The discussion alone - rather than the implementation - of both the "Muslim ban," and "the wall" exacerbated racism across the country. Hate crimes and police racism were in the news with increasing frequency, in particular the murders of Philando Castille and Sandra Bland, and stories of ICE officers storming Greyhound buses demanding proof of citizenship, deporting or holding people in detention camps. After the 2017 far-right rally in Charlottesville Trump chose to condemn "all sides" of the argument, showing his reluctance to condemn racism.⁹⁵

During this ongoing increase in racist attacks, the black American football player Colin Kaepernick had begun to kneel in protest during the national anthem at the start of games. "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color," he explained in a post match interview. *Redwood* shared a viral Facebook post about Kaepernick on her Facebook profile that read,

Taking a knee is a sign of respect for something injured. When a player on the field is injured, the players all take a knee in a show of respect for the hurt player. By taking a knee during the anthem, they are showing respect but for a hurt, injured, broken country.

"We are so hurt and broken," *Redwood* added, despairing at the intolerance from Trump and his followers which had left the country unrecognisable to her.

Love and Hate

In Chapter 4 I explained that the Bay Area had voted Democrat in the 2016 election, and that during the fieldwork, I experienced moments with strangers where it was assumed that we shared left wing views. Walking the streets of Oakland and San Francisco, I began to notice a recurring theme of "love" countering "hate." A poster in a shop window with a fist pumping the

⁹⁴ However, left-wing critics called this racist, and a threat to shared humanity. "No human being is illegal" one poster read during the DACA (Deferred action for childhood arrivals) rally in San Francisco.

⁹⁵ In Chapter 3, I describe this blurring that I experienced between my participants' social media and my own academic social media bubble.

air read “Resist Fear, Assist Love” (Figure 10). When a right-wing rally was scheduled in San Francisco, Facebook events like “Bay Area Rally Against Hate” appeared in my suggestions. One of the planned counter-protests included standing in a heart formation, visible from the sky. A poster on a lamppost referring to these protests read “No hate in the bay, march against white supremacy” (Figure 11). In Chapter 4 I described placards outside houses around my neighbourhood in Oakland which proclaimed, “In this house, we believe: Black Lives Matter, women rights are human rights, no human is illegal, science is real, love is love, kindness is everything.” In this sense, “kindness” itself was often emphasised within the context of political views.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ This is fitting with Hasson et al. (2018) who found that “liberals *wanted* to feel more empathy and experienced more empathy than conservatives did” (Hasson et al., 2018, p. 1449, emphasis my own).



Figure 10: Poster in Oakland shop window



Figure 11: Poster on Oakland lamppost



Figure 12: Screenshot of Wildfire Fundraiser Facebook Event

This “love” and “kindness” was seemingly drawn upon not only against political adversaries, but in the face of natural disasters. When the California wildfires filled the sky with orange clouds in 2017, the idea of “love” became powerful once again in posters reading “The love in the air is thicker than the smoke” (Figure 12).

Digital detoxers themselves often drew upon these same political ideas. When *Ice Cream Sundae* and *Lemon* discussed homelessness in Oakland on Facebook, they were disappointed in the way that their society “writes people off.” Detoxers were concerned for those who had suffered from the tech industry’s success whether or not they struggled themselves, because it was part of their politics to empathise with those who were less fortunate. Detoxers cared deeply about those affected by the tech industry, and in addition, they cared about those who were impacted by the Trump administration; people of colour, LGBTQ people, and victims of assault.

Camp Grounded itself reflected the visible political messages that I saw around Oakland and cast itself as a space of tolerance and support. Speeches focused on consent,⁹⁷ and there was a “genderful” village for those who were non-binary, so that, as the camp handbook explained, “EVERYONE can feel safe at camp.” In this way, like the messages I saw around the Bay Area, Camp Grounded was emphasising the idea of “love” as a resistance against intolerance.

In Chapter 6, I argued that the sense of support detoxers felt at camp was central for them. In Chapter 3, *Luminous* had argued; “The environment in mainstream capitalist reality is constantly trying to knock people down. People feel inadequate, they feel shame if they don't have money, it's never good enough, you're never good enough.” Camp, instead, set about teaching people that they were “worthy and valuable,” regardless of their job, income, or status in the real world; again, positioning themselves as nurturing and caring for everyone, rather than the competitive and cruel outside world. Detoxers appeared to interpret capitalism, and the resulting tech industry, as a spiritual failing of their country to prioritise profit over all else.

It is common for New Agers to blend their political and spiritual ideas. Pagan authors like San Francisco based Starhawk (1988) sees “the destruction of the world” in “environmental degradation, human exploitation, violence,” and “alienation” (p. 5; as cited in Magliocco, 2004, p. 202). Starhawk (1988) refers to “the “estrangement” of human consciousness, which she defines as a failure to perceive the interconnectedness of the world and our part in it” (p. 5; as cited in Magliocco, 2004, p. 202). Similarly detoxers may have seen a kind of spiritual disconnection or estrangement in the tech industry, between the tech industry itself and the way it harmed the very environment from which it had grown, or between American society and the

⁹⁷ In 2016 Camp Grounded introduced The Consent Fairy, who gave lessons about consent. I also noticed that they stopped encouraging detoxers to choose a “date” for the camp dance, suggesting they were less keen to encourage romance at camp and focus on managing relationships safely.

human “exploitation” it fostered. Detoxers like *Luminous* emphasised the ways that the inequality and intolerance of American society were indicative of how it treated human beings.

In Part 2 I have provided the political context of 2017, and outlined the kinds of political views that were emphasised at Camp Grounded. I build on this below to show the ways that detoxers reacted to the right-wing government and forms of inequality, and how the theme of “kindness” or “love” versus “hate” were put into practice.

Part 3: Outward

Detoxers lived with a pressing question of what they individually ought to be doing to fix their “broken” country. I saw this question as having two opposing answers: one was to fight “outwards,” through engagement and action, and the other was to look “inwards,” disengaging with what was happening around them. Throughout my interviews, detoxers anguished between these two. To begin with, I describe “outward,” before focusing more on “inward.”

Roll Up Our Sleeves

Lemon regularly attended protests and felt passionately that it was important to “roll up our sleeves” and “get to work.” Most recently, she had attended a DACA⁹⁸ protest in Berkeley. This was just one of the many protests that summer, and detoxers often shared protest event pages, as well as news articles and viral posts about political developments, on their Facebook pages.

But others confessed that they were struggling to maintain a sense of outrage and action.

Redwood explained that she had found herself getting lazy after months of political fighting. “At first I was like, ‘We’re gonna fight this,’ and ‘I’m gonna get out on the streets,’ and, you know, I

⁹⁸ DACA is “Deferred action for childhood arrivals,” an American immigration policy where those who entered the US illegally as children can apply for two years’ “deferred action” on deportation, providing time to gain a work visa or similar. Protests began when Trump announced that he would be stopping the policy in September 2017.

do my marches,” she explained. “I get my daily text of things to do. [But] do I do it all? No.”

The texts, she explained, asked her to engage with local representatives; “Call your senator, call your this... Yeah, I get them every day, and I get them in an email, too. ‘Five things you can do today!’ And I don’t do them every day.”⁹⁹

In Chapter 6 I introduced *Asterisk* as a woman who experienced personal revelations at camp. “I’ve always been uncertain if I would label myself an activist?” *Asterisk* said during our interview, pushing her glasses up her nose, her voice going up at the end of the sentence like it often did, turning a statement into a worried question. “‘Cause I have a lot of close friends who are activists, [...] I’m not that level, but I mean, [...] social justice has always been really important to me, ever since I was young.” *Asterisk* had recently created a Facebook event for a board game night at her Oakland apartment. She had received the first copy of the board game she had designed, which blended her political passion with her love of graphic design (hence her choice of nickname). “[It’s] about community organising,” she explained excitedly, “[it] introduces people to different activism tactics in a really fun way.” *Asterisk* also fought inequality in other ways. “Sometimes I go to protests,” she told me; she also donated money when she could.

There are a bunch of groups that I make monthly donations to, like really small monthly donations, [...] and so sometimes like, that helps me feel a little bit better, like you know when I’m reading about some kind of devastation or destruction somewhere, like, just donating a little bit, being like, that’s what I can do for now.

Asterisk often posted about politics on her Facebook profile. “I do what I can to stay informed, and like, talk about things publicly,” she told me. *Asterisk* went on;

I mean, I think one of the most important political things that we could be doing now, especially as a white person, is like, having, you know, really open conversations with people about what that means, and what white supremacy is. I’ve always worked on making my feminism as intersectional as possible, and so I try to be really informed about those things. I think the personal is political, and I have a lot of friends who post a lot about social justice, and I’ve learned a lot from [them].

⁹⁹ In Chapter 6, *Redwood* struggled greatly with confidence and self control, and her confession here seemingly fit this image of herself.

In particular *Asterisk* was keen to describe a social media post from a friend, who had been questioned by a stranger about a “Black Lives Matter” t-shirt they had been wearing. In the post, they acknowledged that they had not been ready to discuss it properly. *Asterisk* approved of her friends’ acknowledgement of her own failings in being a good ally - it was this, she felt, that showed a more honest and engaged commitment to fighting racism. *Asterisk*’s approach focused on understanding privilege and raising awareness as a way of fighting inequality.

But *Lemon* was angry and disappointed about the lack of support that white people in San Francisco were giving people of colour. When she was at the DACA protest, she explained, “The majority of people there were people of colour. There were white people there for sure, but not a lot. And why is that?” She demanded, as I spent time with her at her barista job. Although people often claimed to care, people didn’t seem to turn up to the protests, just as *Redwood* lacked energy for engaging politically. *Lemon* went on;

What percentage of this city is white? What percentage of this city is liberal? What percentage of this city has progressive values? [...] I do believe in democracy, and I do believe there is power in people, so where are the people?

Similarly, it was hard to see where posting about causes on Facebook translated into tangible help. I pushed *Asterisk* to explain why she posted politically on her Facebook profile. “I mean it is a good question.” She said.

It's hard to know or feel like it's doing anything, ‘cause I know we're all like, in our own bubbles and tend to like, surround ourselves by people who think similarly [...] I actually don't know if I have anybody in my network, or my Facebook friends, who think differently from me. I probably do, but I don't really know. I don't have any vocal Trump supporters in the things that I see, [but] maybe there are some people who are quiet, conservative people.

Asterisk implied that if there were quiet Trump supporters, she might be influencing them with her posts, thereby helping to change people’s minds. But she acknowledged that her posts might simply be reaching people who already agreed, and were already doing what they could,

therefore her efforts might not be “doing anything” to help. If so, she feared, she might seem to be posting for herself, rather than a cause. *Asterisk* went on:

I see a lot of performative wokeness, of, um, especially on social media, and so, I try not to do it for that reason, like I try not to post things that are just like, you know, “Oh look at how informed or woke I am”, but to really engage more thoughtfully and be more transparent about stuff.

Lemon was similarly concerned with white, Bay Area residents who create a “pretty package” on their social media of, “this is what we care about.” A vocal dedication to helping those in need, was all very well, *Lemon* said, “but where's the actual fucking work behind it?”

“Performative wokeness” is defined by Bowes (2017) as “a superficial show of solidarity with minority and oppressed bodies of people that enables (usually white and privileged) people to reap the social benefits of wokeness without actually undertaking any of the necessary legwork to combat injustice and inequality” (para. 2). Crittle’s (2017) *Performative “Wokeness”* also explores white allyship:

Instead of being seen as a pro-social act, racial bias confrontations from a white ally can be perceived by blacks as a compensatory act, resulting from an individuals’ guilt regarding past wrongdoings and the subsequent desire to be seen as good and moral. (Crittle, 2017, p. 5)

As an example of how to avoid performative wokeness, *Asterisk* offered her friend’s post about their Black Lives Matter t-shirt; for her this was an example of engaging thoughtfully and being transparent about being white, which was crucial in the current political moment. “I also have a Black Lives Matter t-shirt,” she said. “If somebody wanted to engage with conversation about it, I’m not sure I would know what to say, [...] I know that I might screw it up.” “So you might hesitate when you put it on,” I said, “because you're like, ‘Am I ready for that conversation today?’” “Right,” she said, “which I don't feel great about, because that's something that, for me, is a choice.”

Detoxers were thoughtful and considered about tackling racism and inequality in their society, but it was hard to see where their ponderings translated into tangible change - and always, as

they *Lemon* and *Asterisk* acknowledged, when it came to detoxers who were white, it came from a similar perspective of *choosing* to care; *Asterisk* could choose to wear her Black Lives Matter t-shirt, while a black person could never choose their skin colour nor the racism they would suffer. A 2019 essay penned by American Basketball player Ken Korver explained his similar realisation;

I can say every right thing in the world: I can voice my solidarity [...] I can condemn every racist heckler I've ever known. But I can also fade into the crowd, and my face can blend in with the faces of those hecklers, any time I want.
(Korver, 2019, para. 38)

Each of these points have illustrated the way that detoxers were trying to help make the “broken” world around them a better place: through protests, donations, and open conversations that raised awareness. Yet all of these ways to “outwardly” try to help created tension between helping, and performing helping. Detoxers like *Asterisk* seemed confused about whether their efforts would make a difference, while *Lemon* was frustrated that other people wouldn’t do what she did: get on the streets and donate money, and do so sincerely, rather than for praise. The next part argues that rather than “outward,” many detoxers described a focus on “inward” efforts, in which they protected themselves from distressing information about their country and prioritised “self-care.”

Part 4: Inward

While the previous section discussed the ways that detoxers *engaged* with politics, and took *action* against injustice, in this section, I explore their emphasis on *disengaging*. I argue that detoxers primarily felt that the “bad news” of America in 2017 was a threat to mental health. I argue that since they prioritised their mental health, it followed that anything they could do to protect themselves, or improve their emotional reaction, was paramount; both by removing technology when they attended Camp Grounded itself, and in strategies within their day-to-day lives.

Self-Care

Lil Scrambles and I got together at the end of my fieldwork to attend a gig. "Man, you have been here through a lot of shit," she said. *Lil Scrambles* was referring to all the things that had happened politically and in the news in the six months I had been there, including far-right protests, threats from North Korea, the deadliest shooting in American history in Las Vegas, California wildfires, and #MeToo.

On a post to her Facebook profile, *Redwood* wrote,

There is entirely too much fire-loss-hurricane-disaster-shooting-killing-sexual assault - racist-bullshit going on for me to deal with. It's just too much for one sensitive soul to handle

I need a minute to catch my breath.

Please god, please let the fires, the sadness, the loss, the killing, the disrespect and the just plain MEANNESS STOP. We can't only show our love and caring for each other when disaster strikes.. We need it all day, every day.

Be kind and gentle with each other.. We are all frayed and frazzled. Take care of yourselves (praying emoji, heart emoji, praying emoji)

"The world is falling apart and my heart is raw and it's all overwhelming." Wrote *Tiki* as a Facebook status. "I won't tell you to rally -" another detoxer commented underneath. "Just take gentle care of yourself. It will get different. HUG!!!" Both *Redwood* and *Tiki* were exemplifying the emotional toll that detoxers experienced while living through the tumultuous year.

Zeal is a motivational speaker, whose Facebook was filled with videos of her offering advice to her followers. In one video from the summer of 2017, *Zeal* is sitting in a car seat, filming herself, smiling. In a sweet voice, she starts to speak.

Hey love! Just sending you so much love and support today. I am en route to a client right now, and I wanted to share and just have a transparent moment where I let you know (she laughs) that... (her eyes become glassy and her voice breaks) I've been feeling really beaten down and sad about the state of the world.

Zeal goes on to say that where recently she had been supporting others and "trying to make an impact in the world," she had forgotten to do "things that I know replenish my soul, and help

me be more emotionally stable [...] otherwise my light burns out.” She emphasises to her listeners, “Focus in and take care of yourself. Replenish yourself, replenish your soul, and prioritise that.”

Zeal’s message implied that since she cared deeply about the state of the world, and tried her hardest every day, she would be rightfully exhausted. *Zeal*’s video, like *Tiki* and *Redwood*’s statuses, demonstrated the idea that detoxers felt that watching “the world fall apart” was harming them as onlookers and required counteracting.¹⁰⁰ This could be seen as part of digital detoxer’s commitment to “self-care.” Self-care has been defined as “any activity that we do deliberately in order to take care of our mental, emotional, and physical health” (Michael, 2016, para. 3). It has become highly popular in recent years, with “over 15 million Instagram posts tagged with #selfcare” depicting yoga, nail art, and lotions (Stamp, 2019, para. 1).¹⁰¹ *Zeal*’s video showed that it was admirable and important to take time away from the news for your own mental health, building on my argument in Chapter 6, in which I argued that “work” on the self was a central priority for digital detoxers.

Breaking Up With the News

“Since the election I have definitely, unfortunately, been more pulled into Twitter,” *Brooklyn* told me. *Brooklyn* felt that reading more news helped him with anxiety and stress to feel that he was in control; “If I know every single thing happening in the breaking news phase, then it’s not as scary, it’s not as overwhelming,” he said.

I’m happy about the state of my personal life, but I’m so unhappy about the state of the country, and the world right now, that I think I’m a little bit too hooked on news. And it’s not healthy to be thinking about Trump [...] and all that stuff, all the time.

¹⁰⁰ While detoxers did not explicitly call the news “traumatising,” their descriptions suggest that informational content online which conflicts with political beliefs might be associated with colloquial understandings of trauma.

¹⁰¹ While it was recommended for PTSD in the 1960s, it is now a colloquial term often used on Instagram hashtags (Stamp, 2019).

In a dry spell of graphic design work, *Asterisk* said that she had been mostly “idly messing around the internet [...]” at which point she had consumed more news. “I think feeling like I’m not productive makes me feel bad, and then reading about all the terrible things happening in the world makes me feel worse,” she told me. *Asterisk* turned off her news notifications a couple of months after the 2016 election. “The volume of stuff that’s happening is so intense,” she said. “Now I’m in a phase where I hardly actively check the news, I just kind of see stuff other people post on Facebook, and will skim the New York Times headlines maybe once a day.”

“You won’t actually read the articles at the moment?” I asked, surprised, since she had just told me how important it was to stay informed. “[...] I think it’s a balance between feeling like an informed citizen, and...” She trailed off.

But at a certain point, I think you can also take it too far. I think the news, especially now, can just be like, really bad for mental health. And I think it’s good to stay informed, but also, good to, you know, stay healthy. And there are certain things that you just can’t really do anything about, and so reading like, ten articles about the same thing, it’s just gonna make you feel terrible.

In our interview, *Asterisk* told me that camp had been positive for her, firstly to “not have the burden of being reachable by other people, [...] for me also, especially this year, being off the news for a couple of days is such a relief.”

Camp Grounded itself was seen by many detoxers as a relief, since it was an escape from information about how “broken” their country was; with the “moral outrage” of politics exhausting them every day, it was good for their mental health to get away. *Brooklyn* explained;

Another reason why camp is good, is that the whole time we were there - there were little bits of conversation about these things, and I definitely would think, “What’s gonna happen in the world when we get out?” But my time at camp was not spent thinking about the president, or about anything. It’s selfish in the best possible way. It’s self-focused for a bit.

“The nice thing about Camp Grounded was that nobody talked about Trump for all that time.”

Jagger summarised. He went on;

I didn't think of Donald Trump a single time for three days. And I don't know about you, but I've been following politics a bit more since his election, and it was so nice, to not be able to think about that sort of thing.

Many detoxers described the emotional experience of reading “bad news,” where they felt overwhelmed, unable to help, and that their finite amount of empathy and energy was drained by what they were reading online each day. This has been described as “outrage fatigue” (Nanay, 2020, para. 5) in which the constant moral outrage at right-wing news becomes overwhelming. In 2017 it became common to discuss such thing as “too much empathy” which can lead to “burnout” (Reynolds, 2017, para. 9). A few detoxers suggested that there were “limits” to what people can take from the news.

In Chapter 6 I argued that detoxers appropriated ideas from analytic therapy, blending them with spiritual self improvement, as part of their “work” on the self, their tending to mental health, and search for happiness. Here, detoxers appropriated the idea of “boundaries” - usually used in interpersonal relationships - to their relationship with the Trump administration, amongst other problems in American life.¹⁰² The negative emotions that the news provoked in them seemingly necessitated the creation of boundaries. *Ice Cream Sundae* wrote that homelessness left her “crying,” *Luminous* described a “panic attack” at the “accumulation of wealth.” In reaction, *Asterisk* told me that donating to causes helped her “feel a little bit better.” Since they were largely powerless to “trying to make an impact in the world,” it made more sense to “focus in and take care of yourself,” recovering from their distress, than continue to try and help while their own “light burns out” (*Zeal*).

Since news could reach detoxers through their own social media “friend” lists, one form of boundary creation was to delete right-wing Facebook friends. At camp, session 2 in 2017, I sat

¹⁰² The very notion of a boundary, Jordan (2004) writes, requires an idea of “self,” which in Western culture is deemed “bounded, separate, contained” (Jordan, 2004, p. 123). This may locate this desire for boundaries as a particularly Western one.

with *Redwood* and *Rawr* at a picnic table. *Redwood* described a friend from the past whose Facebook posts seemed to have become very different to her politically as the years went on. “I have a theory about friendship which is that friendships are meant to come and go,” *Rawr* replied, “and Facebook prolongs those friendships.” *Rawr* also had a friend from the past who had become right-wing. “This year he became a Trump supporter,” she said,

and I was like, “This relationship should have ended when I was 18.” I unfriended him and it felt very weird, but I was artificially prolonging the relationship anyway. And I don't want to live in an echo chamber,¹⁰³ but he was posting offensive things about same sex relationships.

But while *Redwood* and *Rawr* wanted to delete Trump voters, they knew that this too might be damaging. *Redwood* was angry at Facebook - and herself - for allowing her own “echo chamber” to shape her view of the world, “After this election, I was like, 'Did I get played a bit?'" She was referring to manipulative election tactics that had been used to polarise political views in the country. Only seeing your left-wing Facebook friends gave the illusion of harmony when elsewhere Trump's win appeared inevitable. "I realised I'm in an echo chamber, I'm in California," *Redwood* said. "Fuck Facebook! Fuck them!"

While *Rawr* and *Redwood* considered deleting Facebook friends, others used different strategies to create “boundaries” between themselves and the news. *Brooklyn* explained that he had changed the radio station from news to classical music on his alarm clock. “After the election, we decided not to have NPR any more,” he said. “Otherwise it was Trump?” I laughed. “It was too stressful to wake up and hear the President's voice,” *Brooklyn* agreed, “but also to hear bad news.” Similarly, *Jagger* had turned off news notifications after camp, avoided Twitter, and switched political podcasts for music instead. “I've been trying to listen to more music just so I can think about other things,” he said.

¹⁰³ “Echo chamber” had become a colloquial phrase in the media since the 2016 election, often used to explain why Trump's win had been such a shock. The Oxford dictionary defines it as “an environment in which a person encounters only beliefs or opinions that coincide with their own, so that their existing views are reinforced and alternative ideas are not considered” (Echo chamber, n.d., para. 1).

“I try to do podcasts more than news,” *Shadow* told me. Using his Amazon tap, a bluetooth speaker, he would play podcasts from NPR or The New York Times as part of his morning routine, attempting to do this instead of reading the Apple News app, or Twitter. “It’s a ritual really,” he said. “It’s an easy thing to put on while I take a long shower in the morning. It’s...” *Shadow* sighed. “It’s finite. So the end of a podcast is the end of all the news that you need to hear.” Startled, I agreed with *Shadow*. “That would be a lovely feeling,” I said. “Right?” he exclaimed. “There’s nothing like that with Twitter -” He offered an example; ““Here are the 20 tweets you need to see.””

“The news notifications were getting so annoying,” *Captain Astro* complained, “I actually can’t do it anymore. I had to turn them off. Originally when I came back from camp, I had them on still, because I thought [...] I should probably know what’s happening in the world.” But since camp, his experience had continued to be negative. With Apple’s notifications, he said, “Literally, I was getting a notification about something that happened with Donald Trump like every three hours. Not that I really care one way or the other, it was just getting ridiculous.” It had gotten to the point where, he explained, “It sounds really terrible, but I don’t think I really care.”

In this way, detoxers lived with a deep tension. On the one hand, they felt it was of paramount importance to care for those less fortunate than themselves and be aware of the injustice in America (Part 2), in order to help make the world a better place for those less fortunate than themselves (Part 3); but on the other hand, they felt that it was bad for their individual mental health to hear what was happening in their country. With so much difficulty, confusion, and fatigue, it was unsurprising that detoxers were sometimes seeking respite from “bad news.”

White Utopia

“I noticed a lot of people on the alumni group were just like, ‘How can we leave politics out of camp?’” *Rawr* said in our interview. Since Camp Grounded already banned real names, work talk, drugs, alcohol, and watches - why not ban “politics talk” - and have a break from the exhaustion they felt in everyday life? In addition, this might prevent clashes or arguments that would undermine the supportive atmosphere.

When I attended Camp Grounded in 2014 and 2015, it didn’t occur to me that there might be Republicans in the woods. After the 2016 election, new questions arose for me. It couldn’t possibly be 100% Democrat, I thought, but it certainly seemed that way. Bumping into *Downtown* at camp, he told me that he had attended the “Woke Politics” deep dive. I had seen the workshop listed in the handbook as “a healthy conversation about the “p” word” where they would “Put aside political labels, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ and explore what makes each of us come alive.” When I asked *Downtown* what the deep dive was like, he told me, “It was mostly how to deal with Republicans.” Camp was not “politics free” any more than it was “culture free” (Chapter 5). Instead, it exemplified the values that they cared about most deeply; it was left-wing, and a space where people could feel surrounded by like-minded people, and it was agreeing with each other which made that political environment appear invisible.

Rawr explained why it had been upsetting for her to hear the call for a “no politics” rule. When we met after camp for an interview, she was in the process of making extra precautions for a road trip she was planning, in case she was pulled over and detained, specifically because she was Mexican and was under threat of racism from law enforcement.

I’ve memorised [my husband’s] number, I’ve memorised my brother’s number, got my passport, I’m doing everything I can to make sure that if I get stopped, they don’t detain me for immigration purposes, even though I’m a citizen, I was born in Chicago, you know? And that’s not a fear that I had a year ago.

At camp, where a sharing of honest fears and giving and receiving comfort formed its therapeutic ethos, why couldn't her current, daily experiences of racism be out in the open? *Rawr* said that while at camp, "It would be really nice to sit with somebody else who looks like me and say, 'Dude, aren't you afraid of that too?'" *Rawr* told me that she had been exasperated at a white woman at camp.

She was talking about [how] what she appreciates about camp is that we all get along, and, "I just don't understand why we can't take this to the outside world," and "Why can't we just get along like this?"

Rawr had wanted to respond, "Hey! Centuries of systemic racism!" "But I can't say that," she explained;

I *can* be myself [at camp] but in a way that's not threatening to white people [...] You have the privilege to say, let's have a "no politics" rule at camp. Well *you can* do that, *you* get to do that, and that's not true for many of us.

This issue was brought to the fore by *Ice Cream Sundae*, who posted a Facebook status on her profile after camp, explaining that "It took me a while to feel safe at camp - the first night I was there I was scared that I could be in danger. I felt that I could be turned on at any moment being with a mob of white people." While many detoxers viewed Camp Grounded as a joyful haven, this was not the experience for everyone. After *Ice Cream Sundae*'s status, I began to introduce the question "What do you think about the racial aspects of Camp Grounded?" to my interviews.¹⁰⁴ By and large, detoxers responded by lamenting the lack of racial diversity at camp, crucially, speculating as to how to encourage more people of colour to attend.¹⁰⁵

"There are definitely things [at camp] where I'm like, 'Oh my god this is so white,'" *Rawr* said. She explained that a lot of camp was "marketed" towards "reliving your childhood," but, she said "this wasn't *my* childhood." For camp to be more diverse, *Rawr* explained, it would need to be "proactive" with its inclusion; "You've gotta put on your website that there's a prayer room,"

¹⁰⁴ This was a clumsily phrased question, but I kept it that way because it would not "lead" any particular answer.

¹⁰⁵ They often switched to praising camp's welcoming of diversity in gender and sexuality, rather than race.

she said, and offer a solution for someone who needs to know what time it is in order to pray.

“There are people who are very conscious of these things who are trying to change it, but they don't know how.”

I had been thinking deeply about the white-ness of Camp Grounded and talked with *Rawr* about it in our interview. “I remember seeing a Black Lives Matter sign pinned up at camp on the main field,” I said,

I remember thinking, what you say and what you do are two different things. It's all very well to say [Black Lives Matter], but everyone here is white, everyone I'm looking at right now is white, [so] this doesn't make any sense [...] [And] people are talking about issues [to me in my interviews] but I don't know what they're actually doing. Is talking about an issue enough? Is that helpful? And I don't know. Maybe I'm expecting too much from people.

“No I'm with you,” *Rawr* said, “and I don't think that talking about it is enough.” She went on:

There are so many tech people [at camp], and that [talking, not doing] is my problem with tech. You don't see beyond your own privilege, and I do see that at camp. And I also see that everywhere. One of the things that frustrates me about the Bay Area is that people think that they're not part of a problem [...] we're all part of the problem, myself included, all of us. The fact that I pay \$500 for four days [at camp] makes me part of the problem, when I could have spent that time volunteering and donated that money. We are all part of the problem.

Thinking back to the way detoxers talked about Burning Man, and its disconnection between the decadence of the tech industry success and the suffering of the Bay Area, it seemed possible that they, too, felt that they were “idealist,” in *Lemon*'s words; that “this is ideally how this world could be.” Many detoxers talked openly about recognising their privilege and what it meant to attend Camp Grounded in the landscape of suffering that they saw around themselves. But while camp was a space of tolerance and kindness, it could not shrug off the legacy of racism in America, and was not “fixing” anything in the world which they must return to.

Part of the Problem

12 out of the 30 detoxers I interviewed worked or had recently worked in the technology industry. In these people, I saw little contradiction in returning to their job after attending camp.

When I pressed *Sideboob*, who worked in tech, on this, she explained, “I don’t think I can bring a lot of Camp Grounded values to my work, 'cause that's gonna go against the company’s goals.”

Nimbu was frustrated with her tech worker colleagues, and felt that they didn’t connect the dots between making damaging products and seeing society suffer as a result. “But you work at [tech giant].” I said, “are you not one of these people?” “I am one of these people,” *Nimbu* laughed. Explaining her position, she told me, “I cannot control what my product looks like.” Neither could she stop the cultural changes that were altering the face of San Francisco. When I spent time with *Nimbu* in her apartment, she explained that her area of San Francisco used to have a lot of Latinos before “people like her came along.”¹⁰⁶

Detoxers who worked in the tech industry did so for a good job, and a good salary. As I showed in Chapter 6, *Redwood*, who worked in an Apple store, saw the job as “a means to an end.” She was, however, considering learning to code. “I’ve thought about going into coding,” she said in our interview,

because they say [...] you will always have a job [...] It's a necessary evil, it's not going away, so you might as well figure out how you can benefit from it [...] The rich people always seem to win, that's what it comes down to.

Using a technology company temporarily to earn money, before getting out again, appeared to fit within the philosophy of attending Camp Grounded: to work towards individual happiness and wellbeing, against the odds in a dog-eat-dog world, where society “didn’t work for humanity” (*Ice Cream Sundae*, Chapter 5).

¹⁰⁶ I spend more time illustrating *Nimbu*’s life and perspective in Chapter 9.

When going through my data, I noticed that no detoxer remarked on how digital technology could be improved, nor how the structures behind the technology should be changed.¹⁰⁷

Detoxers' response was inward or self-focused work rather than outward or structural change. For them, attending to self-care and practicing self-love in a country designed for competition and isolation was, in itself, a spiritual resistance.

Discussion

Digital detoxers felt that they needed to remove digital devices at camp and strategically disengage from technology because of a combination of their left-wing political views and their prioritising of mental health. While they believed in “kindness”, “empathy” and “love” as political ideas, and wanted to put these into action, it was difficult to navigate whether they were helping, or performing helping; acting for others or themselves.

A politics of “love” took the form of supporting each other at Camp Grounded, or empathising with those less fortunate than themselves, but importantly, it was also turned inward on themselves. At camp, the political “silence” allowed them a sense of relief and a chance to look after themselves in a tumultuous political landscape. Placing their non-use in context, as I argued for in Chapter 2, illuminates crucial reasons why they find technology difficult to use in their daily lives; in part, that it was a conduit for information about a world that they found difficult to hear.

The Mute Button

In *Hush* (2019) Mack Hagood uses the metaphor of noise cancelling headphones to discuss the politics of listening. Hagood (2019) describes a 2013 advertisement in which Colin Kaepernick, the same black football player who later went on to kneel in protest (page 167), uses

¹⁰⁷ Had Levi published more of his manifestos before his death, these may have offered the changes that he hoped to see in the world.

headphones to stride unaffected through crowds of jeering hecklers (p. 1). In the sonic bubble Kaepernick carves for himself he is able to mentally prepare himself for the game. Hagood (2019) argues that this advert, and the invention of noise cancelling headphones, were a “lightning rod” for a cultural moment (p. 1). The advert exemplified the idea that people can now technologically take control of their auditory experiences; using noise-cancelling technology, as well as white noise and soundscapes, people began to carve sonic “safe spaces.” Pogue (2007) writes that thanks to the headphones, “The roar of the engines is magically subtracted from the sound that would otherwise have ground away at your wellbeing for six hours” (para 3, as cited in Hagood, 2019, p. 188). This individual world-making fixes *individual perceptions*, rather than seek to change the structures that created the noise; Hagood (2019) argues that this is celebrated because “strategic quietude is prudent technology of self-care” (p. 200). He argues that “Orphic media” “foreground a deep desire for control as freedom” (Hagood, 2019, p. 4) in which controlling what we hear is tantamount to feeling free.

At Camp Grounded, a space is fashioned with like-minded individuals which is literally impenetrable from outside information, and they are only able to “hear” what they want. They make the choice to disconnect, to stop engaging, and to cut themselves off from the modern world, and as *Asterisk* had said, it was a “relief” to do so. Upon returning to a digital world, detoxers often adjusted their notifications, “blocking out” or “turning down” news notifications.

While everyday news may have “ground away at [their] wellbeing,” (Pogue, 2007, para 3) creating boundaries and escapes from that news would be an opportunity to ensure their “light doesn’t burn out” (*Zeal*). Hagood (2019) uses the perspective of “affect” (p.p. 4-5), seeing media as a primarily emotional space, rather than informational. Detoxers similarly interpreted “bad news” as an emotional issue,¹⁰⁸ feeling distress, panic, and sadness, at what they saw. In

¹⁰⁸ Emotions have recently been studied as an important facet of political behaviour (Miller, 2011). I’m interested in how detoxers were framing politics as an emotional issue.

this way digital detoxers strategically disengaged from technology, not just to manage information, but to manage their own emotions.

While headphones “promise to help users [...] remain unaffected in changeable, stressful, and distracting environments, sonically fabricating microspaces of freedom for the pursuit of happiness” (Hagood, 2019, p. 3), Camp Grounded similarly provided a space for detoxers to escape the distress of ordinary life and use the opportunity to seek growth and happiness. Like Kaepernick preparing to step onto the pitch, the political “quiet” of Camp Grounded might allow them to centre themselves and flourish; the silence could be used towards their ongoing self improvement.

Oppositionality

Hagood’s (2019) example of the headphones advert exemplified racial tensions in America, and in the face of racial hatred, Hagood explains, silencing can be an important tool for survival. Sometimes, he explains, the “din” makes “guarded listening a necessity for sensory and emotional self care” (Hagood, 2019, p. 4). Yet when digital detoxers felt the relief from being at Camp Grounded or “turning down” the news, it was usually not their own discrimination that they escaped. In fact, people of colour at camp continued to be deeply aware of racism while there. Instead, camp was an escape from *empathising* with other people’s oppression. While they were saddened and shocked to see the way the tech industry exacerbated inequality in the Bay Area, this didn’t always directly affect them. It was the loss of creativity, community, and cultural identity which hurt them the most.

In Magliocco’s (2004) study of North American Neopagans, she found that the majority white, middle class group, were using a technique of “oppositionality” in their identity construction. While on the whole they were not a marginalized group, she writes, “Neopagans have crafted a history for themselves that specifically links themselves to the marginalized and oppressed”

(Magliocco, 2004, p. 187). For example, Magliocco (2004) explains that Neopagans perceive the dominant culture as “anti-imagination” and cast themselves as a marginalized and delegitimized group who are “outside the norm” (p. 201). In some ways this is similar to detoxers’ “playfulness” and rejection of adulthood responsibility and “work talk” that I described in Chapter 5. In that chapter, *Rawr* explained that she was from “a generation that can't afford to buy homes. We can't really afford to have kids... I think [playfulness] is kind of a "fuck you." Magliocco (2004) explains that New Agers tend to position themselves as the antithesis to dominant structures in society as “a kind of intentional marginalisation” (p. 202).

There is a difference between oppression and empathising with oppression, and the difference is that many detoxers could escape it whenever they needed to. For white digital detoxers, the world was depressing only when they experienced it through their digital device. Similarly, *Asterisk* acknowledged that she had the privilege of choice when she could decide whether to wear or not wear her Black Lives Matter t-shirt.

It was not that their allyship was insincere. Their distress, and their descriptions of it, may have been a way to show that their allyship was not intellectual, but visceral. Detoxers were painfully aware of their own privilege, and discussed it with me at length in interviews, particularly discussing increasing racial diversity at Camp Grounded as their hope for levelling that playing field. Some were enthusiastically engaged with social justice projects. But their experiences were fundamentally disconnected from the struggles of those they sought to help. The kind of “Broken America” that detoxers saw encompassed inequality; homelessness, racism, sexism, but they used these as proof of an umbrella concept of a different problem. This was the difference between a society that does not foster *happiness*, and a society that does not keep people safe, well, fed, or housed. Camp Grounded was focused on the former, not the latter.

Detoxers saw their own self-care as a kind of resistance, an idea which can be traced to black experiences and resistances. “Microaggressions” and the idea of “death by a thousand paper cuts” have each been used to describe black experiences of daily racism (Sue et al., 2007; Lee & Hicken, 2016; or discrimination against LGBTQ people: Nadal et al., 2011). Audre Lorde, who described herself as a “black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet,” writes, “[c]aring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (Lorde, 2017, p. 130). The actual term “self-care” came first from trauma therapy and then from The Black Panthers “as a means of staying resilient while experiencing the repeated injuries of systemic, interpersonal and medical racism” (Stamp, 2019, para. 4). There is a difference, then, between the history of these ideas and using them to talk about spiritual journeys at Camp Grounded.

In Chapter 1, I showed that Camp Grounded hoped to “shift the course of human history” while in Chapter 4, Camp Grounded appeared to have aspirations to change the world,

[...] to write a new chapter, an opportunity for us to redefine what our relationship with digital technology looks like, and in turn, how we experience life on this beautiful planet. [...] So that someday, our grandchildren will look back on the choices we’ve made and say “thank you.”
(Camp Grounded website, 2017, para. 6)

Yet rather than changing the world, detoxers were more likely to be changing it for themselves. Digital detoxers never intended to actively change the tech industry; it was instead a kind of inward work that they felt was most important; looking after themselves as a kind of resistance.

In Chapter 2 I showed that some academics are critical of Camp Grounded in the way that it “individualize[s] systemic issues [...] that require collective action and structural reform” (Beattie, 2018, para. 12; also Madrigal, 2013, para. 34). Stamp (2019) similarly writes, “it can be tempting to seek retreat, using luxurious #selfcare strategies as a means of disengaging from the infuriating aspects of civic life [...] [but] Systemic oppression can’t be outrun” (paras. 12-13). “Turning down” the news was an understandable reaction to distress, but it was tension with

detoxers' own desires to be politically informed, to engage, or to "do the work" towards changing their society.

Detoxers' political action and inaction provoke important questions about how those with privilege should navigate listening and allyship, both on and offline. It would be easy to describe detoxer's political views as hypocritical in light of their attendance to Camp Grounded and choice to strategically disengage from information about the Trump administration. Instead, however, I suggest that their behaviour may reflect a widespread trend in left-wing circles - perhaps an understandable one - towards disengaging. The Saturday Night Live¹⁰⁹ episode after the Charlottesville rally demonstrated an example of burnout and disengagement in mainstream media. The comedian Tina Fey forcefully shovelled sheet cake¹¹⁰ into her mouth, seemingly having emotionally snapped. "I know a lot of us are feeling anxious and asking ourselves, 'What can I do?'" she said, stickily. "Instead of participating in screaming matches and potential violence, [...] Order a cake with the American flag on it and... just eat it."

In this chapter I have argued that detoxers' need to reduce their digital use was the product of their direct experience of the tech industry, their local context, their political views, and their emphasis on mental health. In Chapters 5 and 6, detoxers used the "more natural" image of the "tribe" as an aid to mental health and spiritual self actualisation. Building on this, I have argued that detoxers saw the need to preserve their mental health as urgent, specifically due to their "broken" surroundings. Detoxers were posing themselves as people "oppositional" to mainstream culture through a kind of politics of "love" or "kindness;" but I have shown the way that this identity they held was entangled with race and privilege. This chapter offers context for Chapter 8, in which I argue that detoxers were seeking to create community in an isolating modern world.

¹⁰⁹ I saw detoxers share Saturday Night Live videos on Facebook several times.

¹¹⁰ A rectangular, frosted cake.

In this chapter I have focused on the ways in which detoxers saw American life as “broken.” In Chapter 10, I use the work of Max Weber to argue that “disenchantment” is the best way to understand this vision of a “broken” world, where digital detoxers hoped to discover their own happiness and meaning in order to “re-enchant” their experience of the world.

Chapter 8

Community

Introduction

In this Chapter I argue that detoxers saw themselves as countering “disconnection” by creating “community,” a “tribal,” more “natural” kind of sociality, felt to be a radical act. In Chapter 7 I argued that digital detoxers felt that their society was “broken” and that a rise in right-wing politics was symptomatic of an uncaring, intolerant, fearful, and selfish society. In this chapter I argue that a key aspect of this “broken” diagnosis was the idea of compromised relationships; while earlier forms of sociality in human history had been more “natural” (Chapter 5), living together, cooperating, and “relying on each other,” the progress of the modern world had isolated people from one another.

Camp Grounded was experienced by many as a joyful welcoming into a community. I contextualise this idea of creating a sense of “belonging” within other social experiments in the Bay Area. But the utopian visions of community and a camp “family” were complicated by a hierarchy, in which camp organisers judged ticket-buyers for inappropriate forms of sociality on Facebook. This was made visible through their use of neuroscience, which they used to weigh different kinds of communication as more “natural” or “unnatural.” Detoxers were both creating, and evaluating, the aspirational idea of “community” in the modern world, using new scientific concepts. While in Chapter 6 I argued that detoxers appropriated therapeutic ideas and blended them with the spiritual, in this chapter I build on this to argue that concepts from neuroscience and behavioural science became appropriated to leverage ideas of the natural and moral. I argue that as such, detoxers were using relatively new science, to describe perennial human problems of in and out-grouping, loneliness, or relief in acceptance.

Part 1: Finding Belonging

In this first section I focus on the aspirations behind the term “community” and how two detoxers, *Love Bug* and *Truth*, interpreted the word’s meaning. I argue that experiments in sociality were believed to be the tonic that “disconnected” American society needed, fostering the sense of “community belonging” that detoxers searched for. I then situate this search within wider narratives that espouse similar ideas.

My Tribe

In Chapter 5, *Love Bug* had felt the Silent Dinner demonstrated the deep sense of care, attention, and love that the organisers provided for her. In Chapter 6, she called the community her “tribe” and had opened up to other campers about her problems, since it “finally felt safe to do so.” For *Love Bug* it was finally “okay to be yourself” at camp. In Chapter 6 I quoted *Love Bug*’s poem titled *My Tribe* that explained what the community meant to her. “I feel like I’m a part of a community that I didn’t have before,” *Love Bug* told me in our interview. In this excerpt, I am in *Love Bug*’s apartment.

The walls of *Love Bug*’s one-bedroom Oakland apartment are painted bright yellow, but the brightness is masked by tightly packed bookcases and dozens of photographs and decorations. The words “love, pray, read” and “stop, smile, breathe” are affixed to one wall. There’s a painting of a tree, a heart made of red tinsel, and framed photographs of friends and family.

She affectionately shows me her “baby laptop” and her older, clunkier laptop - whose password is “Love Bug” written with numbers. On the printer she has stuck a handwritten phrase to herself, which reads “You are Loved.”

“My colleague is texting me whether we’re going to dinner tomorrow,” she excuses herself from showing me around. “I just wanna reply to her real quick.”

I continue to gaze around the room at this Aladdin’s cave of sentimental objects, and find a corner devoted to Camp Grounded: a display of all-camp photographs, and polaroids of her and her best camp friend *Fabulous*, from years of attending camp. There’s a camp-branded dollar,¹¹¹ a wooden sign she made at the “solar carving” playshop, and a googly-eyed “love bug” that she glued together in the art barn.

¹¹¹ Camp-themed dollars were called “Honey Bucks,” toy money that featured a picture of the counsellor *Honey Bear* with a wild expression on his face.

Love Bug was a reflective and spiritual woman who always seemed to make an effort to help other people and was training to become a life coach (Chapter 6). But while she was yet to do so professionally, *Love Bug* still aimed to help others; I watched as she nurtured her students at her job with reassurance, gold heart stickers, and little notes of encouragement and prayer. During my fieldwork, she gave me several prayer cards with handwritten messages encouraging me in my research. For *Love Bug*, this was her bringing her experience of camp - in which she had never felt so cared for - back home and into her job, spreading that feeling outwards into the world. Not only did she share this love to others; this was the same thing that she did to herself in her own apartment, with sunny coloured walls and mementos to remind herself that she was loved and supported. The shrine of Camp Grounded mementos reminded *Love Bug* of the time she spent at camp, while on her wrist, she wore a bracelet that read “#forevergrounded” a photo of which she posted to her Facebook profile, explaining, “Camp Grounded added so much to my life. I never want to forget! (heart emojis)”

It was not surprising to me that *Love Bug* would want to remember the experience of camp. Over the years I too had collected mementos from Camp Grounded which reminded me of moments of kindness or shared laughter, including a honey buck, a Tiny Times,¹¹² letters from campers, and my nickname carved onto a piece of wood by *Skipper*. At the end of colour war games in 2014, all four coloured teams combined to make “Brown Team,” the crowd screaming, jumping, cheering, and high-fiving each other in celebration that everyone had won equally. I still have my green string bracelet, reminding me of that afternoon.

¹¹² Miniature, camp-themed newspaper made by *Mobius*.

In earlier chapters I described ice-breakers, playshops, and games, some of which were therapeutic (Chapter 6) which were described as “down.” Others were playful, or “up.” In my fieldnotes from camp, I wrote;

The crowd on the main field are asked to mingle and pair up - with “new friends,” - and to discuss “What condiment would you like to come out of your belly button, followed by your best impression of a goat.” The crowd talks, there is chaos, and soon, random sounds of goat-like screaming.

A combination of shared laughter and shared emotions - a blend of the “up” and the “down” - was important to many of my participants. *Love Bug* felt cared for by the community as people she could share her true self with - but equally, they were people with whom she could laugh. Finding happiness together, being brave enough to be “audacious” together, created the definition of “community” that *Love Bug* seemed to hold; and for her this was certainly worth remembering.

Lil Scrambles told me in our interview,

The tone they set was just playful and kind of like, anything goes, you know? And almost like, invincible to the outside world. And that’s kind of how you feel when you’re 11 and you’re at a sleepaway camp.

Redwood, who had bravely stepped up to perform in the talent show one year, explained what it had felt like; “There is just so much ‘yes’ coming at you. [...] You’re like, oh my god, it wouldn’t matter if I came up here and picked my nose, these people would be like, ‘Yes! You’re awesome!’” This overwhelming feeling of acceptance, for *Redwood*, had helped her feel like she had found a place “where you could truly be yourself.” Like *Love Bug*, *Redwood* had mementos from camp; her blue cap was covered in sewn-on patches commemorating all the years she had attended, and at camp she wore this along with her village necktie (Owl) around her neck.

After camp detoxers often found each other on the Facebook group “Camp Grounded Alumni.” In Chapter 6 I explained that digital detoxers used the Facebook group to support one another; they

also referenced private jokes, emotionally described their camp experience, and thanked the community. On their own profiles, detoxers almost universally used Facebook's affordance of "other name" to add their new camp nickname underneath their real name; through this we were able to find one another through mutual friends. *Love Bug*, too, included her nickname under her real name. On both the group and their profiles, detoxers tended to upload photographs from camp, which were released a few weeks after the sessions ended. I myself was compelled to sift through the images to find myself in the crowd, or discover where I may have been candidly snapped. This appeared to be what many detoxers also did, saving images of themselves in the throes of supposed unselfconscious joy, often in playful outfits, dancing, hugging, grinning, cheering, being lifted into the air - all with the redwoods in the unfocused background.¹¹³ *Love Bug* posted an image of her posing with two friends in fancy dress at the camp dance on her Facebook profile.

The Facebook group was the place that I saw Camp Grounded tattoos. "Grounded," one woman had written on the side of her foot, in a typewriter style font. "So, I got this today (heart emoji)" she posted on the group, with the photo attached. Another woman posted, "Redwood-esque tattoo to remind me of camp and all you beautiful humans," with a photograph of a shaded-in tree on her bicep. *Love Bug* herself was planning a tattoo of a heart of roots, which flourished into flowers above the ground, once again telling herself that "love" would lead to "growth" (Chapter 6).

A tattoo lasted far longer than the experience of camp itself, but it marked the long-lasting effect it had on their lives and their relationships which they wanted to extend into the Bay Area.

Brooklyn and *007*, who got married during the fieldwork, had met through camp friends. Many campers created new friendship groups and met up at reunions, which I attended throughout the summer that I was in the Bay Area, usually taking the form of picnics, game nights, or meals

¹¹³ Since I rarely did any of these, photographs of me were harder to find.

together. These events were often advertised to all members of the Facebook group, and this way I was able to tag along (Chapter 3). Others moved into shared homes together, where they often had what they called “community dinners” or shared meals. In an advert for one shared home, the residents explained their manifesto:

Instead of isolating ourselves in cookie-cutter apartment units or lonely suburbs, why not surround ourselves with like-minded, inspiring, motivated people?

Camp also extended into life in the Bay Area when detoxers could meet in a supermarket, recognising each other as “Grounders” when one wore some camp merchandise. These initial conversations, whether on or offline, tended to begin with a comparison of “how many camps” you had attended. In this way, for many detoxers, attending camp gave them a sense of community belonging, which extended into life in the Bay Area, both on and offline.

Disconnection

Throughout the previous chapters I have shown the importance to detoxers of “community” and “belonging.” Not only were these concepts considered more “natural,” and a fixture of pre-modern life, but because they were “natural,” they were a vital part of tending to one’s mental health. *Luminous* argued that “we’re village creatures, animals that thrive in community” (Chapter 5), and she also felt that at camp people might be “making eye contact with people for the first time, maybe in years.” *Lemon* similarly argued that “belonging” was part of “Maslow’s hierarchy of needs,” but that “in Western culture we don’t tend to find that belonging” (Chapter 6). *Redwood* had said that people were “taking pills because they’ve forgotten how to connect” (Chapter 6). Through *Luminous*, *Lemon*, and *Redwood*’s words, I learned that detoxers held a general, political concern for a society-wide lack of “community” and “belonging” in America. Camp Grounded, in contrast, gave them something to belong to.

“Disconnection” has been described as the defining problem of the modern age. A long running literary trope has identified the perception that the modern world is disconnected, from the natural world, and from a visceral sense of one’s place and purpose in the universe. In “alienation (Marx), anomie (Durkheim), the mass man (Ortega y Gasset), and the lonely crowd (Riesman)” Tom Wolfe (1976) finds a similar story every time; “a creature uprooted by industrialism, packed together in cities with people he doesn’t know, helpless against massive economic and political shifts” (para. 126). Bauman (2001) argues that “the modern fascination for community reflects the search for security in an unsafe world of increasing isolation” (as cited in Bowles, 2015, p. 46). A search for community, perhaps;

[...] says more about personal narratives of insecurity and a desire for a return to a fictive era of trust and mutual co-operation than it does about any particular acts of *communitas*. Community is, for Bauman, primarily now best understood as an unfulfilled desire emanating from the modern world.
(Bauman, 2001, as cited in Bowles, 2015, p. 46)

In Bowles’ (2015) ethnography of canal boaters, “community” is “felt to be something lost and lacking in consumer society, a mechanism that works against [...] alienation and disconnection” (p. 194). Communes and communitarian ideology, particularly in Northern California, have sought to create a sense of community that “counters the alienation of so much of American life” (Miller, 2012, p. 10). Etzioni (1995), a prominent supporter of communitarian ideology, argues that “What is needed [...] is a strengthening of the bonds that tie people to one another, enabling them to overcome isolation and alienation” (p. iii; as cited in Brown, 2002, p. 4). “Communitarianism in this sense,” writes Brown (2002, p. 4), “...is a broad-based ideological program for recapturing something that Americans feel they have lost.” In these accounts, Americans in particular seem to feel that the bonds of society have been eroded by the modern world, with America and Northern California forming especially fertile ground for the establishment of “intentional communities” (Chapter 4).

Some authors have argued that digital technology exacerbates this sense of disconnection. Turkle's (2011; 2015) writing exemplifies a wider literary trend that views the digital age as progressively more "estranged" than ever before; that we are *Alone Together* (2011) and must set to *Reclaiming Conversation* (2015). Detoxers sometimes commented that paradoxically while the world becomes more digitally connected, we are more isolated from one another, or that there's nothing "social" about social media.

Overcoming social disconnection has been the source of multiple pop science and psychology books across the Western world in the last ten years. Kate Leaver's (2018) *The Friendship Cure* advocates for stronger social ties, specifically because, she argues, loneliness is the biggest health threat of the modern age. Other authors hope to rekindle social ties now lost, by invoking the evolutionary and ancient. A book on sale in a local Oakland bookshop titled *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging* (Junger, 2016), described the instinctual, evolutionary pulls we feel towards small-scale village life.

Rituals in New Age spirituality, especially Paganism, hope to "end, for a time, our sense of human alienation from nature and from each other" (Adler, 2006, p. 137). In her book *Earthly Bodies Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community* Pike (2001) argues that Neopagans seek to express their true identities, but fundamentally seek to find a sense of community belonging. She writes that similar events to Neopagan festivals, like Burning Man, are "opportunities to feel a sense of belonging to a community" (Pike, 2001, p. xxiii). Adler (2006) explains that Pagans experience the feeling of "being at home among one's true family for the first time" (p. 309), echoing the sentiments of detoxers who could "finally be themselves" and had found community at camp.

Some authors (Luhmann, 1991, p. 231) point towards Pagan festivals as an example of what Durkheim called "collective effervescence" (Durkheim, 1995, p. 218), later developed by

Turner (2011) who coined the term “communitas,” a sense of community fostered through a shared ritual experience. Miller (2015) explains that “Turner, like Durkheim, sees communitas as counterbalancing the alienating effect of social structures” (p. 3). Similarly, digital detoxers set to recreating community at Camp Grounded, in opposition to “alienating” modern life, by recreating an imagined image of tribal living (Chapter 5), and did so in part for their mental health (Chapter 6). The Camp Grounded slogan, “Disconnect to Reconnect,” linked this idea of stepping away from everyday life, in order to rediscover a sense of “connection.”

Love Bug illustrates the fondness with which she remembers time with her “community” and the importance she placed upon that sense of belonging. Yet surprisingly for detoxers, there were plentiful ways to continue experiencing community while using digital technology; by sharing on the Facebook group or on their profiles, uploading photographs, alongside in-person forms of gathering or souvenir-keeping, to remember together the experience they had at camp. The desire to maintain the community made at camp, and their views on societal disconnection, illustrated why it made sense for detoxers to use Facebook to maintain their sense of community despite their ostensible concerns about technology as a “barrier” between them. In this way the sense of “connection,” “belonging,” and having the “community” there for them online was seemingly more important than digital use or non-use.

Taking Community Seriously

“It kind of seemed like they were taking ‘community’ seriously,” *Truth* said, praising camp.

Truth and I were sitting in an iced tea bar in San Francisco for our interview. A white man in his early 30s, working in the tech industry and living in San Francisco, *Truth* often wore his Camp Grounded branded t-shirt, pale yellow with the brown logo on the front, and a flat cap over his curly brown hair.

Truth was fascinated by the science of relationships, and how to optimise them by making small changes to the social setting. “I don’t know anyone who seems to geek out as much as I do on the specifics of what we can actually do right now and in every interaction, to intentionally try to make it better,” he told me.

I think that I learned how to socialise late in life,¹¹⁴ and so maybe for me it’s more intentional. And it’s so exciting for me to realise that it’s within the grasp of any person - a lot of what people are missing are very much learnable skills. I’m excited about the possibilities of how an environment can shape people’s behaviour in all these like, simple and subtle ways.

Truth offered an example.

If I was interested in your jacket or something, there’s two different questions that I might ask, one might be, “Why did you pick that jacket?” and the other might be, “How did you choose that jacket?” Which question would you rather be asked?

“How did you choose..?” I tentatively replied. “Yeah,” He said.

Everyone would rather be asked that question. It’s a better question. Questions that begin with “why” like that just feel a little bit accusatory, and it puts distance between us. Any person today could just stop asking questions like that and be better connected with those around them.

“Now I feel self conscious about my questions,” I murmured, looking at my interview script.

Truth laughed. “It’s all the stuff I’ve stolen from books, but for me it’s amazing how such a simple thing could be one less barrier between me and people.” He had also recently read *The Science of Happily Ever After* (Tashiro, 2014), which looks at the 25% of marriages that succeed and what distinguishes them.

For *Truth*, Camp Grounded was what he called an “experiment in community,” an “environment that shaped behaviour” that tried out a lot of the science he had read about in books. At Camp Grounded, techniques like ice breakers were used to create and shape the very sense of community that *Love Bug* cherished. While *Truth*’s interest in creating “community” was very different to *Love Bug*’s, he had very similar ideas about the importance of creating this

¹¹⁴ Camp may have hosted a higher proportion of people on the autistic/aspergers spectrum than the general population; however, the way that an interest in social skills combined with spirituality and local values showed that this could not be the only explanation.

sense of “belonging.” He explained, “What we all need and want - I think our biggest needs, aside from food and shelter, are really about people and the experiences we have with others,” he told me.

The digital device problem is just that it's getting between us, and each other, but a lot of things are getting between us and each other. We find a lot of artificial ways to separate each other, like based on identity or our work or our beliefs, it turns out we all just want the same basic things, we all want to be happy, and safe. [...] That distance that we created, because we thought it would make us feel safer, was just making us feel lonely and sad.¹¹⁵

[...] the environment of not having digital devices, [...] being supportive and there for each other and not having time, helps make it easier for people to, even if not intentionally, find their way into this presence and connection, that for me is what I'm probably missing most in the world.

Truth took “connection” as something that could be created deliberately through choices in the environment or use of words. For *Truth*, the rules of camp; no real names, no work talk, etc. fostered “presence and connection” that was “what I’m probably missing most in the world.” Perhaps camp could even help him with “learnable skills” to overcome the fact that he “learned to socialise late in life.”

Detoxers dutifully followed the rules at camp, as well as ice-breakers and exercises which the organisers ran throughout the weekend. The instruction to pair up and ask, “What condiment would you like to come out of your belly button, followed by your best impression of a goat” was one example of camp encouraging detoxers to be “playful” or “goofy” and “lower boundaries” to make new friendships. On the tables at mealtimes were jam jars filled with conversation starters asking quirky and oddly specific questions, to help start each of us on the path to a new friendship. *Captain Astro* similarly wanted to avoid “superficial” information about people and instead learn about “things that make them who they are,” what they “love” and what their “dreams” are - in his words, a focus on these topics “tells more about their experience as a human being.” Like *Truth*’s interest in “how an environment can shape people's

¹¹⁵ *Truth*’s feelings are fitting with the desire to “lower barriers” between each other (Chapter 6) and detoxers’ fight for “love,” tolerance and open mindedness over conservatism (Chapter 7).

behaviour,” encouragement from the organisers set us on a path to find a “deeper” sense of connection between each other.

Connection in the Bay Area

English-Lueck (2017) argues that in the San Francisco Bay Area, everyday life becomes a “series of projects [...] Relationships are [...] transformed into products, and people “work” on their relationships, making them projects with goals” (p. 37). In her view this practice “mirrors the practice of an engineer in the workplace,” seeping out from the technology industry into everyday life (English-Lueck, 2017. p.37). *Truth*, similarly, “geeked out” on the possibilities for tweaking conversations “in every interaction, to intentionally try to make it better,” appreciating the tricks that camp had used to foster friendships at camp.

For me, *Truth* was the clearest example of commitment to optimising “connection” through continuous self-skilling - which was not only a Camp Grounded idea, but a Bay Area one. In Chapter 6 I described *Ocelot*’s job as a teacher of Non-Violent Communication in couples and workshops. When I participated in his workshop in San Francisco, the room was full of enthusiastic attendees, seemingly unrelated to camp, who had come along almost like communicating effectively was their favourite hobby. In keeping with English-Lueck’s (2017) findings, detoxers worked not only on the self (Chapter 6), but on their sociality, their relationships and conversations. Rather than just a kind of “project,” however, “community” may have been desired more so in the Bay Area partly because of its high proportion of immigrants from other states and from abroad. “When you move to a new city and you don’t know anyone, what do you do?” *Truth* said. For him, Camp Grounded along with Swing Dancing had been his way to get to know people. With each of these, he explained, “if you pay money and you show up, they’ll promise you happiness and friends.”

Through local events, I was able to see the value placed upon creating relationships within the local area. I saw a Facebook event for an Oakland-based “World’s biggest eye contact experiment 2017” with a camp counselor in the banner, and the description; “Let’s share a minute of eye contact with strangers in public to rebuild our sense of shared humanity in Oakland!” While I had assumed eye gazing to be an invention of Camp Grounded, used to encourage detoxers to lower defences and allow someone to “really see you,”¹¹⁶ there were still further examples of this. The New Age technology conference in San Jose had begun with an eye-gazing exercise in pairs, where we would begin to get to know one another (Chapter 4). The speaker told us this would kick off the conference on the right foot with a “boost of oxytocin.”

Further events were named “Designing your relationship - use design thinking to craft mutual joy;” and “Creating the relationships you want.” An event focusing on “authentic relating” described itself; “Participants experience more self-awareness and deeper levels of connection.”¹¹⁷ On another Facebook event, “Men’s collective” and “Sacred Circle” were overlaid onto an image of an open fire. “Tired of small talk?” the post read. “Looking to engage in more meaningful conversation?” They promised; “We may enter the circle as strangers but we leave as brothers.” Through new, evidence-based recommendations, these workshops seemed to aspire towards “deeper levels of connection,” and “better communication.”

In this way the idea of sincere “experiment[s] in community” were valued in the Bay Area more generally. The term “community” may have been used in the Bay Area as something each person was working to deliberately build around themselves, and they seemingly felt that learning the skills of relationships would help them to cultivate it in their lives. The effect would

¹¹⁶ The metaphors of “seeing” and “being seen” were used in relationship-building exercises (Chapter 6) and exemplified a commitment to fostering a spiritual sense of connection.

¹¹⁷ This event had multiple detoxers who I was Facebook friends with marked as “interested” or “attending.”

allow the individual to experience “community,” “find their tribe,” feel loved and supported (Chapter 6), in a way that detoxers believed to be more “natural” (Chapter 5).

At the same time technology companies and products were using the idea of community as part of their branding. Ella,¹¹⁸ the tech worker who I interviewed who did not come to camp, worked for a rideshare app whose manifesto sought to foster new friendships between strangers - fixing not only the issue of pollution and traffic, but the “lonely” commute to and from Silicon Valley. During the 2017 fieldwork, Facebook changed its “mission,” now aiming to “bring the world closer together” by “empowering people to build communities.”

Conjuring Community

While *Truth*’s swapping of “why” for “how” was a small change, he was inspired by the potential for this approach, just as detoxers felt that camp’s rules or ice breakers would encourage “deeper” connections. It was specifically through techniques like alterations to conversation that people in the Bay Area seemingly felt “community” could be brought forth.

After an ice breaker exercise at camp, the riotous chanting of “one new friend!” showed a sincere and almost charming approach to creating, and optimising, relationships. While I found them cheesy, or uncomfortable, the techniques that I experienced were, for my participants, seemingly powerful in making them feel close to one another, and often generating the sense of “community” that *Love Bug* reminisced about so fondly.

While *Truth* explains that “a lot of what people are missing are very much learnable skills,” Turkle’s *Reclaiming Conversation* (2015) draws a similar line between techniques in conversation and the wider sense of disconnection in modern life, arguing that “conversation is the most human - and humanizing - thing we do” (p. 3). Turkle (2015) cites “eye contact” as

¹¹⁸ This is a pseudonym that I have allocated.

“the most powerful path to human connection” (p. 36),¹¹⁹ and as a requirement “for emotional stability and social fluency” (p. 36), while a lack of it is “associated with depression” and “isolation” (Turkle, 2015, p. 324-5). Speaking about the neurological impact of face to face conversation, she writes that “[i]n humans, the shape of a smile or a frown releases chemicals that affect our mental state” (Turkle, 2015, p. 342). Similar to *Truth*, Turkle (2015) also similarly talks about the importance of practicing “skills for conversation” (p. 27, 220), and “practic[ing] empathic skills” (p. 32).

It seemed that harnessing these tools and understanding their underpinning science was the work the individual could do towards the more ambitious goal of “community.” When *Truth* seeks “learnable skills” to attend to the fact that he “learned how to socialise later in life,” both he and Turkle (2015) frame good sociality as something that takes individualised work. This was mirrored by workshops in the Bay Area that sought “authentic connection,” expecting attendees to want to participate in overcoming the wider sense of disconnection that they felt in the world.

The idea of community itself shifted and morphed from person to person. For *Truth*, “community” was a group of people who had found ways to “connect” without “barriers.” Since he had “learned to socialise late in life,” camp seemed to be a place where *Truth* could hone his skills for making friends, which would help him feel less lonely in San Francisco. In Chapter 6, I suggested that many detoxers were struggling with loneliness, which was especially likely if they were transplants to the Bay Area. In these ways, there were many reasons why detoxers might personally be pulled towards the embrace of a welcoming and accepting community, and be as thrilled as *Love Bug* to find it.

¹¹⁹ Echoing detoxers’ own use of structured eye contact.

In Part 1 of this chapter I have shown the emphasis that detoxers placed on community, and the way that they believed it could be created with small, evidence-led techniques. The way that detoxers were creating community via evidence-led techniques can be further understood by looking at *who* used these ideas within the community. In Part 2 I argue that this was largely a top-down message, made powerful by the popularity of the organising team, with new expectations to socialise correctly.

Part 2: The Cool Kids

Some Campers Cling

I met with *Bay Bridge* at the Ferry Plaza in San Francisco for our interview. As we talked, we sat on a bench on the pier and looked out over the bay and the bridge into Oakland, sheltering from the sun. *Bay Bridge* had been a counselor for camp many times over the years, and used the view from our interview setting to invent a new camp nickname for himself to be quoted in my research, so as to speak more freely about a difficult topic. “At camp I feel sometimes people think that they're getting closer to people than they actually are,” he told me. “Camp creates this amazing vulnerable connection place,” he said, but “some campers cling.”

He felt that some campers expected too much from him when bumping into him after camp,

Like I'm gonna fucking entertain you [...] That was a contracted position, I was working, it's part of my work. As counsellors we are all talented people that have other things going on.

While many ticket buyers like *Love Bug* considered Camp Grounded their “tribe,” the organisers tended to be uncomfortable about the ways that they interpreted the detox. In Chapter 6, I suggested that some organisers, like *Bay Bridge*, found the therapeutic aspects of camp concerning. *Bay Bridge* had found that some campers think of camp as “the family I've never had” and viewed counselors as people who could help them in distress long after camp had ended. This to *Bay Bridge* was deeply inappropriate; “They have a whole life, and job, and

situation, it's not fair for you to reach out to them and be like, 'Hey I'm thinking of committing suicide, can you help me?'" He went on;

I don't mind the friend requests, I think that's natural. I go to a tonne of programs and people become Facebook friends. What I care about is missed expectations, which I think happens at camp. People have a connection [and think] we're gonna be best friends.

He had tried to find ways to gently create boundaries for himself after camp ended, to protect himself from "clingy" campers who misinterpreted his role at camp as their "best friend."

In Chapter 3 I describe my own similar experience as a researcher of camp. I too had struggled with the relationships I was making with detoxers and often felt anxiety about whether my interest in them was being misinterpreted. As I spoke to *Bay Bridge*, we commiserated about the uncomfortable positions we had been in over the years. Yet on the other hand comments like his made me angry on behalf of the campers I was studying. We had been asked to embrace each other, lower boundaries between us, and share our "deepest fears." Several times at camp, the organisers had given speeches telling us we were all part of a "family" now.

Lil Scrambles had been a ticket-buyer in 2014 who returned to volunteer the following weekend; "Levi said to me one night when I was disco dancing at the canteen, making peanut butter and jellies¹²⁰," she said, "He's like, 'You're like, really in our family now.' And it was exciting." *Lil Scrambles* described "the core folks" as "celebrities," and explained, "they're really opening up the world for you, and really involving you and including you."

The sense of welcoming from the organisers was an important reason the ticket-buyers found the experience so moving. In her poem *My Tribe* (Chapter 6), *Love Bug* wrote, "every one of us was needed, every one of us important." In particular, many detoxers only felt comfortable with the camp experience after an interaction with an organiser. In Chapter 5, *Ocelot*'s initial

¹²⁰ Peanut Butter and Jam sandwiches.

trepidation had vanished when he felt welcomed by the organiser *Moose*, while *Jelly Bean* only felt that she belonged during the overwhelming experience of Silent Time when *Honey Bear* had noticed and reassured her.

In this way some of the choices the organisers made, like the techniques used to foster friendship, may have left ticket-buyers confused, initially thinking they were part of one “community” or “family,” and then realising that it had only been temporary. After camp, it seemed that the “community” split into smaller friendship groups, the organisers as one exclusive group. It seemed that the concept of the Camp Grounded community was somewhat aspirational, didn’t quite exist in the way that some people hoped it might, and was desired by some people more than others.

Just as *Lil Scrambles* called the organisers “celebrities,” *Gypsy*, a white woman in her mid-twenties, and an organiser who mostly worked behind the scenes for camp, explained to me:

One party I went to, these two people [...] were being very standoffish to me. They're like "So who do you know from Camp Grounded?" "Who brought you here?" And I was like, "I actually work for Camp Grounded. I help run it." And they're like, "Oh! Okay!" and just [did a] complete 180.

I was told I was “Camp Grounded royalty adjacent” this summer [by] a camper. *Big Fish* and I both were. And we were really perplexed as to what that even meant. It feels so childish. I was pretty irked by the comment.

Gypsy told a story about her visit to a counselor’s house who lived with a camper.

She [the camper] was just so happy that I was at her house, and I was like, "I don't really know you..?" She's like, "Yeah but I have a Camp Grounded core staff member at my house right now!"

Gypsy wondered aloud what this camper had been thinking.

Is it because you had such a transformative experience, that you wanna be as close to the core that you can? I dunno. But it is so strange. People are weird. It's a strange clique. [...] It was dunno if it's for validation, or what it stems from, but people [say] "Well I've been to *every* camp;" "Oh, I'm friends with *Popcorn*, I know her in the real world."

I don't think I would ever be a camper. What I've seen created [...] I'm not attracted to be a part of that. [...] 'Cause I've seen these campers who come and create this strange,

cool kids club, almost. To be honest, I don't hang out with campers. To me, there's another subdivision, of my true community, of the staff, because it *does* feel like an equal playing field. It doesn't feel like a bizarre, status-seeking thing.

Just as *Gypsy* described her “true community” of the staff, *Bay Bridge* explained that with his fellow organisers, “we loved each other so much.” The staff would be at the campsite for up to three weeks in one go, far longer than the campers were present. This was “one of our main obstacles,” he said, since they tried to avoid letting new campers feel they were “not in the clique” and “left out.”

Asterisk told me that she found the community “cliquey” and some of the counselors “intimidating.” But she said that what was so good about camp itself was that “it's the kind of place where you can connect with anybody.” She said optimistically, “if you are suddenly sitting next to one of the organisers, it's like, not a big deal.” It saddened me when she added, “but then out in the real world, it goes back to normal. And it's like they're busy and important.” *Truth*, too, had been ultimately disappointed by the counselors. “The sort of people who [are] running camp, I don't super vibe with them [...] I love my counselor, in the sense that he seems a nice guy, but whenever we talk it seems like the conversation is very short,” he observed. “I don't think I've had a genuine conversation with anyone who's a counselor. I guess all those folks are probably busy, or in demand, or have a lot of friends there already.”

It was my own struggle to gain access to organisers' gatherings that showed not only the existence of this friendship group, but how it felt to be excluded from it. While I had an affinity with the organisers in some ways, I misinterpreted our commiserating conversations for them seeing me as “one of them.” My heart sank when I saw organisers post photos together of day-trips that I had never heard about, arranged through private threads, rather than events

advertised to the entire Facebook group.¹²¹ I was surprised when I was invited to join a shared house with other organisers - if I just filled in the online application form - but after I honestly described my tea, pyjama, and solitude-filled schedule, I didn't make it into the next round. Horrified at the idea of appearing "clingy" myself, and accepting that I may be lumped in with lowly ticket-buyers in their minds, I hesitated to pin down organisers for interviews in case my interest be misinterpreted as admiration.

A Social Butterfly

Magma told me that when she first attended Camp Grounded in Texas in 2015, she "bought into the cult a little bit, [and] became one of those obsessive campers that maybe added a few too many people on Facebook." "Camp for me was more about connection and community than it was about digital detox," she said during our interview. "Now I'm in a place where I have people that I know that I can check in with."

The following summer, *Magma* was thrilled to move from her Texas home to the Bay Area, when she was given *Popcorn*'s role on the camp organising team.¹²² Thinking aloud during our interview, she worried whether she had ever been as good as her predecessor. "I just wish I could be just as slightest as awesome as Poppy," she said, perhaps a little sad that the role had been given back to *Popcorn* this year.

Through *Magma*, I heard glimpses of how individuals within the community might privately navigate its "cliques" and "celebrities." *Magma* identified as an "introvert" and a "socially awkward person." She told me, "I wanna be a more skilled social butterfly, so I don't need Facebook. And the more I use Facebook, the less social butterfly I might feel capable of being. It feels like a crutch." In *Magma*'s view her use of Facebook was a self-perpetuating issue, where her introversion led to her using the platform for comfort, while she really wanted to be a

¹²¹ I explore my own sense of belonging in the camp community in Chapter 3.

¹²² *Magma*'s dramatic life change is fitting with the stories in Chapter 6 where camp inspired people to move across the country.

“social butterfly.” I replied; “Are there people who you know who are social butterflies, that you are seeing and wanting to embody?” She explained;

When interacting with several people at camp, they have a charismatic, open, loving, warm presence, so it's like, "Oh, I want to embody more of that."

In *Magma*'s view, her own awkwardness and introversion were the opposite of the desirable personality traits which the organisers and counselors seemed to embody. She went on;

They don't use Facebook as much as - or they don't post very often, they might be using other forms of social media, I don't really care.

Seeing the charisma of the organisers, made *Magma* feel she must commit to being more like them. Presuming their lack of reliance on Facebook, perhaps, she felt, if she changed her digital use, she might be able to achieve this. Yet as an introvert, Facebook seemed to work well for *Magma*. Enjoying acquaintances' Facebook posts about their children and dogs, she could “keep tabs” on her friends easily, in fact, it would be “exhausting” for her to learn as much about people any other way. Despite being helpful for her, *Magma* was still unhappy about using Facebook.

I know I would much rather that Facebook was not as big a part of my life as it is. I value Facebook for what it gives me, but at the same time, I detest the reasons why I might need it [...] It provides a level of comfort to a socially awkward person, I guess, for me. But I don't wanna be that.

Magma's desire to become better at being social echoed *Truth* and his interest in “the science of connection” and the building of social “skills.” *Truth* had said “I learned to socialise late in life,” and was keen to learn from books about how to have better conversations. Like the workshops and programmes around communication in the Bay Area, the expectations *Magma* had for herself to socialise in a different way sounded like hard work.

Magma aspired towards less reliance on Facebook that might make her, too, be “charismatic, open, loving,” and “warm.” Rejecting this temporary “comfort” that Facebook gave her, and instead seeking to stop using it as a “crutch,” might help *Magma* to grow and transform to be

more like the organisers.¹²³ Organisers seemed to have it all, including creative and caring careers which “aligned” with their values (Chapter 6), as well as in-person friendship groups. They seemed to be happy, just as *Artemis* had told *Redwood* in the previous chapter; like *Magma*, *Redwood* aspired towards the life she saw a counselor living.

Sugar and Splenda¹²⁴

Detoxers like *Love Bug* used the Facebook group after camp, and for many, it seemed to be a place in which the feeling of community could continue after camp and into their everyday lives. As I argued earlier, this showed that “community” - or rather, shared experience and support - rather than digital use or non-use, was what mattered to these particular digital detoxers.

Yet what *Magma* was telling me showed a different angle. Many of *Magma*’s ideas were based in the top-down teachings from Camp Grounded which told them that there were indeed more natural ways to communicate. Some detoxers’ anxieties centered around the fear that they weren’t “being social” in *the right way*. These were anxieties fuelled by the top-down messages of Camp Grounded, shown by the way that *Gypsy* felt about the Facebook group.

What's hard for me in the Facebook group is, I'm just like, “Ahh, I would love to, like - I wish someone could be there for you in person to have that camp connection.” I feel like, with the Facebook group, a lot of people use it to try and like, satiate that need that camp got, but it's like trying to get sugar by eating splenda. You're never gonna get that same feeling, but you're hoping that sense of sustained community - maybe you'll get what you're looking for, get that feeling, but...

“So they really need someone in person to help them?” I asked. “Yeah,” *Gypsy* said. In *Gypsy*’s metaphor, Facebook was “splenda,” a synthesised, chemical, imitation of “connection” which beguiled people into feeling they were satisfied. Talking about the quality of different forms of “connection” could work as an implicit judgment of those who did regularly and visibly use Facebook to communicate. The judgment was that people behaving this way lacked self-

¹²³ *Magma*’s self analysis using her Facebook use is reminiscent of Turkle’s (1996, p. 169) concepts of “acting out” and “working through.”

¹²⁴ Splenda is an American sugar substitute.

awareness about their emotional needs, and were ultimately connecting thoughtlessly without “intention,”¹²⁵ and without consideration of emotional health.

In my 2014 interview with Levi, we discussed the way that digital anthropologists argue online life is just as “real” or “valid” as offline life (Chapter 2). “Online community is legitimate,” he said,

It’s like some people like Vegas, other people like the woods. Second Life is a legitimate community, but so is eating microchips and drinking coca cola. I’m not saying it’s right or wrong, but you can be more satisfied with life off of a screen.

Here, Levi acknowledged different tastes, but ultimately judged those who do find community online as fundamentally misled (Sutton, 2017). Just as detoxers saw Vegas as artificial, while the forest was authentic (as I argued in Chapter 5), Levi’s comment, just like *Gypsy*’s invocation of sugar and splenda, showed that they felt people were fulfilling their “needs” (*Lemon*) in an inauthentic, and unhealthy way. When every person needs community, or is at heart a “village creature,” “community” was, to detoxers, a basic need like food. Detoxers like *Love Bug* enjoyed the community online, but it was somewhat embarrassing to the organisers when people made use of it, just as some may find it shameful to admit you regularly eat fast food.

But all of this went against what I had heard from ticket-buyers about the supportive community, how healthy a sense of belonging to it was, and the fact that community was more important than use or non-use. I presented this to *Bay Bridge*: “I feel like one of the main things that people love about camp is the community,” I said,

and they really do feel that it does extend past camp. They really feel now that they’ve found their “tribe,” they feel like they belong. But for you, it’s like, you get back and now there’s a boundary drawn. ‘Cause maybe you didn’t need that, but they did?

“Right. Right. Exactly. Yeah. That’s right.” He replied. He went on;

¹²⁵ Chapter 9.

There's people that have come to camp, and they're in a really bad place, they don't have a lot of people, then they need that ongoing support, like you said. And then for some of us, it's like, "Wait, we live this all the time."

I think what [the community] really provides is, people know that there's amazing people out there, and that they don't have to settle for lame people. And if I don't have those people in my current life, something's wrong.

I don't need the likes and confirmation, because I got it from camp, or I get it from a lot of people that have told me recently, in person, that they think I'm great.

Like *Gypsy*, *Bay Bridge* indicated that those who ran camp had an in-person network of people to rely upon - their "true community" - and that the Facebook group (or things like the Vulneragous Thread, Chapter 6) were poor attempts to grasp the kind of support and "confirmation" that camp had initially given ticket-buyers, perhaps for the first time in their lives.

While many ticket-buyers were lonely or unfulfilled before camp, and then left feeling fulfilled or inspired, excited to use Facebook to connect with their new friends, *Gypsy* moralised their digital use with her "splenda" comment. *Bay Bridge*'s comment invoked neurotransmitters rather than food:

I think we're making people feel how good it is - we're showing people - more than digital detox, it's more of like, what in person connection - what *real* dopamine feels like, versus red-dot-Facebook-notification dopamine.

Bay Bridge's use of "dopamine" is fitting with fears around digital harms that I outline in Chapter 2. Like the comparison of sugar and splenda, there was "real" connection, and "imitation" connection; each could yield dopamine, but one was better than the other. A similar message was given in the camp booklet, which we each received a copy of in the mail. A title

called “Hug It Out” asked detoxers to “Give someone a hug.” Hugging was important at Camp Grounded,¹²⁶ and as this instruction shows, encouraged.¹²⁷

[...] Get a mega dose of oxytocin-and lower stress levels with a nice big 20 second long hug. Supplement the dopamine and oxytocin that we’re getting from social networks and our cellphone alerts with real human interaction. Let’s train our brains to associate these feelings with other people instead of gadgets.

Like *Bay Bridge*, the recommendation invokes neurotransmitters, to leverage “real” versus “fake” “human interaction.” Another heading in the camp booklet called “‘Like’ Someone In Person”¹²⁸ asked detoxers to:

Say “Thank you.” According to studies, practicing gratitude increases health and happiness, improves sleep, heightens alertness and determination, and even stimulates anti-aging hormones in your brain. [...] Those who practice gratitude regularly report fewer illness symptoms and have more energy in life, resulting from higher levels of activity in the hypothalamus and release of feel-good hormones like norepinephrine and neurotransmitters like dopamine.

Like *Truth*’s evidence-led search for “connection,” there were explicit gestures or interactions which the organisers wanted ticket-buyers to practice, with science to justify the activities or choices being made in the design of the weekend. Sociality itself was explained in chemical terms; where the individual experience of “community” would yield a healing effect. The “oxytocin that we’re getting from social networks and our cellphone alerts,” in the view of the Camp Grounded booklet, needed to be switched out for oxytocin from in-person interactions. It could be received from both sources, but one was preferred over the other.¹²⁹

Yet the organisers didn’t necessarily use their social media in a “better” way than others, indeed, *Magma* didn’t even care what counselors did with their Facebook - while simultaneously admonishing herself for using it incorrectly. At *Brooklyn* and *007*’s engagement party, *Moonlight* told me conspiratorially that he recently hosted camp organisers and

¹²⁶ In one interview I requested that we skip the hug, but found myself in my participant’s arms before I could finish the sentence.

¹²⁷ In Chapter 6 I showed the importance of literally and figuratively being “held” at Camp Grounded.

¹²⁸ This is a reference to Facebook “Likes.”

¹²⁹ I focus more on this use of neuroscience in Chapter 9.

counselors around the campfire at his home. “They were on their phones just scrolling,” he revealed, “and I was like, guys, look at me, give me attention, and they were just busy. So camp is not a magic fix.” In a similarly conspiratorial way, *Brooklyn* told me during our interview;

Levi would admit, in his private times, that he is just as addicted as any of us. He's not a guru on a mountain. He Googled his own name, every day. He did! He told me that. He checked Twitter all the time to see mentions of Camp Grounded.

The reason these stories were such powerful gossip was that *Moonlight* and *Brooklyn* knew how much the community idolised the organisers, and how much people assumed that they used their technology in a “better” way.

Like *Gypsy* and *Bay Bridge*, other organisers were tired of “clingy” campers. In my interview with the organiser *Quesadilla*, she rolled her eyes at the conversation starters in jam jars, explaining that she doesn't “need” them, but appreciated that “I get that a lot of people do.” After meeting some people from camp, her boyfriend had told her, “You know, they're kinda weird.” Ticket buyers were commonly lonely, or shy, or awkward, and these may have been the factors that drew them to Camp Grounded in the first place. If it helped them to feel supported and less alone, why shouldn't they use Facebook? In our interview, *Quesadilla* told me that she replied to her boyfriend, “You get that they all found each other?” A lot of these people didn't have a community, [...] and now they do.”

Discussion

I have argued that detoxers felt a sense of community belonging was a more natural way for people to live (Chapter 5) and that imitating it would be good for mental health (Chapter 6). I have also argued that detoxers found American society to be “broken,” partly due to the way that it isolates people and does not cater to people's needs (Chapter 7). In this chapter, I have explored this idea of modern societal “disconnection” and the desire to imitate a vision of “community” imagined from earlier times of human history. Camp Grounded sought to imitate

an “imagined” vision of camaraderie that resembled what they felt America had “lost,” a supportive environment that, in their view, was the more “natural” way of life that had been corrupted by modern society.

Detoxers passionately felt that it was important to create “community,” but its definition differed from person to person. *Love Bug*, for example, spread her feelings of care and attention to others after she received them at camp. This, as well as the interchangeable use of the words “connection” and “community” in detoxers, may point towards “community” being better defined as “closeness,” “support,” “friendship,” “understanding,” or finding “like-minded people.” The passion with which many of them sought to find this suggests that many did not have it in their everyday lives.¹³⁰ Perhaps what was being framed as a political, or societal problem (Chapter 7), had its origins in feelings of ordinary, individual loneliness.

The Shape of a Smile

Rose and Abi-Rached (2013) trace how our view of “correct” sociality in the wider cultural imagination changes in light of new scientific progress. “A picture is beginning to form,” Rose and Abi-Rached (2013, p. 22) write. “In this image, the human brain is evolved for sociality, for the capacity and necessity of living in groups” (Rose & Abi-Rached, 2013, p. 22). It is based on this, they explain (Rose & Abi-Rached, 2013, p. 22), that parents feel the need to train their children cognitively, to help them practice empathy. Working on our sociality and our brains is a new internalised responsibility, a way that we can play our part for the good of society.

Detoxers similarly seemed interested in the idea that humans were “designed” to live in groups, and were using behavioural science and neuroscience to argue for the necessity of the interactions they were creating at Camp Grounded. While behavioural techniques, or hugging for 20 seconds, may have felt unnatural to me, to detoxers, this was practicing “more natural”

¹³⁰ As *Bay Bridge* suggested in Chapter 6, when we discussed the problems that detoxers had with depression and loneliness.

sociality. It was through new scientific ideas about the way humans evolved to socialise that they were conjuring their vision of “community.” When the Camp Grounded booklet asked us to “say thank you” and “practice gratitude regularly,” this was fitting with the trend that Rose and Abi-Rached (2013) identify. Like detoxers, Turkle (2015), too, uses neuroscience to explain healthy types of sociality, emphasising eye contact and empathy; each done towards “reclaiming conversation” in an isolating, digital age. As I argued in Part 1 of this chapter, both Turkle (2015) and *Truth* seemed to frame social “skills” like better conversations, or clearer communication, as each individual’s responsibility to hone and improve. If we followed the instructions at camp, we might not only enjoy the benefit of “less barriers” between us - we were promised a “release of feel-good hormones like norepinephrine and neurotransmitters like dopamine.”

Following an established history of “intentional community” in California (Chapter 4), Camp Grounded was a miniature version of cults and communes which defied mainstream norms, and attempted to “recaptur[e] something that Americans feel they have lost” (Brown, 2002, p. 4). The desire for this “fictive” vision of community is true not only at Camp Grounded, but in the Bay Area, in anti-tech writing like Turkle’s (2011; 2015), and in a long-running trope of Western literature.

Like the use of behavioural design common in intentional communities (Chapter 4), detoxers aspired to create a tribe-like community using rules (or “invitations”) ice-breakers, and neuroscientifically informed changes, and they felt that certain techniques and skill-building, even in the smallest of social encounters, could be used to create that community. But can “community” be created through small interactions, like “the shape of a smile” (Turtle, 2015, p. 342), or is it made of something bigger? With both detoxers and Turkle, there may be a conflict between the kind of “community” or “connection” that they seek, and the methods with which they hope to create it.

Still, detoxers were optimistic. *Truth* had said that what he found at camp was what he was otherwise missing in his life. *Love Bug* was thrilled to tell me that she did indeed find what she was looking for, and her trinkets, mementos, and jewelry, told a story of her deep sense of community belonging. To detoxers like *Love Bug*, they did find their “tribe,” one which felt like their imagined idea of pre-modern, natural, “village” life (Chapter 5).

Leveraging Science and Fitting In

In medicalisation literature, it has long been recognised that we label what were previously ordinary behaviours as illness as a way of enforcing social norms (Conrad, 1992; 2007).¹³¹ At Camp Grounded, detoxers’ discussions around healthy sociality appear to be less about clinical knowledge, and more concerned with moralised ideas of the natural and the authentic. The way that detoxers were using behavioural science, neuroscience, or metaphors like splenda or microchips, points towards a *social* use of *clinical* ideas; to leverage what “correct sociality” might look and feel like.

These scientific ideas were powerful not only because detoxers sought improved emotional health (as I argued in Chapter 6), but because of the hierarchy of the community. Within the “family” of the Camp Grounded community, there were smaller friendship groups or “cliques” where there was judgment, jealousy, and disappointment. To feel such a sense of welcoming only for it to be taken away may have created a powerful drive for detoxers to follow the values that the organisers espoused.¹³²

¹³¹ *Truth* and *Magma*’s concerns about social awkwardness are fitting with Scott’s (2006) *The Medicalisation of Shyness* - a specifically Western concern.

¹³² I suggested this in Chapter 5 when *Jelly Bean* felt uncomfortable during Silent Time and relieved when she began to cry.

In the top-down design of camp - the camp handbook, and in my interviews with organisers, I often found strong views about how to correctly socialise, as well as disdain for those who did not follow those guidelines. Through the use of food metaphors and neurotransmitters, counselors were leveraging scientific ideas to moralise “good” and “bad” sociality. There is no scientific basis to “real dopamine;” instead, this was a way to describe “more natural” forms of sociality.

The counselors were the vision of a happy and healthy person, surrounded by in-person friends. The group was referred to as “my true community” (*Gypsy*) who “loved each other so much” providing each other with in-person support that others might get from Facebook “likes” (*Bay Bridge*). Their popularity, their charisma, and living lives which they “loved” (*Redwood* quoting *Artemis*, Chapter 6) made these ideas believable, and by explaining their lives in terms of the good choices they made, they extended the possibility for ticket-buyers to experience the same happiness.

In Chapter 6, *Redwood* and *Magma* hoped to emulate the lives of Camp Grounded counselors. In this chapter, I have shown the way that the counselors talked with frustration about ticket-buyers, finding them “clingy.” *Quesadilla* said that although ticket-buyers may be “weird” it was a good thing that they “found each other.”

In this chapter I have explored the importance detoxers placed on a sense of “community” or “belonging,” as well as the ways in which their vision of community was aspirational rather than successful. Detoxers both created and evaluated community through scientific ideas like behavioral design or neuroscience, using these not in a clinical sense, but to frame sociality at Camp Grounded as more natural. While the impulses behind creating “community” were sometimes framed as societal or political, I suspect that they often stemmed from loneliness and a search for something to belong to.

In this chapter I have explored the ways that detoxers were conceiving of the aspirational idea of “community” and argued that they used scientific ideas to conjure a sense of community belonging. In Chapter 10, I use Max Weber’s theory of disenchantment to better understand their use of science, and argue that they used neuroscience and behavioural science to “re-enchant” their experience of the world.

Chapter 9

Intention

Introduction

In this chapter, I argue that detoxers hoped to become “intentional” in their lives, using mindfulness to shift their thoughts to where they wanted them to be. They also wanted to be intentional in the way that they used digital technology.

I begin by explaining the way that detoxers conceived the relationship between brain and device. I argue that detoxers felt that persuasive design could capture their attention through tricking the brain. New life aspirations, which were conceived of partially at camp (Chapter 6) were pursued through a perspective shift, in which they looked at their devices with new eyes, aiming to use it for their own goals from now on.

Using three stories, I show the way that technology was entangled in detoxers’ day-to-day lives, in which they sought to focus on their own goals, seeking better health, happiness, or success, - depending on the individual. I argue that aspirational digital use is entwined with aspirational identity, and they hoped to alter their digital use because they wanted to transform themselves.

But failure, shame, and disappointment was ever-present. In the discussion, I argue that the expectation for digital use to *always* fit within one's overarching goals is too high an expectation. Finally, I argue that detoxer’s use confounds expectations in non-use literature.

Part 1: The Brain

“That Little Serotonin Boost”

When *Magma* woke up on the weekend, she told me that she would “probably roll over and cruise Facebook or Instagram on her phone, or check and see if I got any messages from the night before.” She did this, she said, “as a way to stimulate my brain into being awake.” In her sleepy state, she found that scrolling through posts from friends was an easy way to slowly encourage herself to start the day. “Which is embarrassing to admit,” she added. “Why is it embarrassing?” I asked. “Because I -” she stuttered, “I think some of it is the community pressure, of being like, ‘You should move your phone out of your bedroom.’” A page in the Camp Grounded handbook read “Buy an alarm clock. [...] Wake up with an alarm clock instead of your cellphone. You’ll sleep better and won’t have the urge to check your messages.” As *Magma* explained, this became a norm encouraged within the community, one which she was breaking every morning.

Magma described her encounter with her smartphone as something that would help to “stimulate” her brain after a long sleep. Her description exemplified the way that detoxers talked about their encounter with digital devices as one which would have an effect on their brain. [Facebook] is really for like, when I’m bored, or when I just don’t wanna use my brain,” *Redwood* similarly said. She described her job at the Apple store.

All day long I’m helping, helping, helping, helping. I don’t wanna help people. I wanna go turn my brain off. And so I’ll go in the break room and just look at Facebook. Instead of talking to my coworkers, instead of going outside.

Redwood was using her Facebook newsfeed as a way to “turn off” her brain after the effort of serving customers, while *Magma* had coaxed her brain from sleep using social media; each describing their newsfeed as a restful, soothing space, a fixture of their routine, which helped them transition between moments in their day.

Both *Magma* and *Redwood* described turning to the newsfeed for the helpful effect it would have on their brain. This was a brain which needed “switching off” after working hard, or could be “stimulated into being awake” through scrolling on Facebook, like an “machine” or “engine” that the self had to work with.

This brain-language, which was often used in relation to technology use, was made even more explicit amongst detoxers’ use of neurotransmitters dopamine and serotonin. *Tiki* told me,

I feel like I get very sucked into the, like, addictive piece of it, where it's just like, checking my phone for no reason, other than I just wanna check my phone. And I just wanna get whatever that little serotonin boost is.

In Chapter 2 I introduced neurotransmitters as part of the way wider anti-tech narratives discuss digital harms. In Chapter 8, I argued that organisers and counselors were leveraging neuroscience to moralise “good” and “bad;” “natural” and “unnatural” sociality. I argued that this idea was made powerful to ticket-buyers through the organisers’ popularity. In Chapter 8 *Bay Bridge* explained that at Camp Grounded, “we're showing people [...] what *real* dopamine feels like, versus red-dot-Facebook-notification dopamine.”

What *Tiki* said, as well as *Magma* and *Redwood*, demonstrated the way that detoxers were conceptualising their technology use in terms of the brain, with *Tiki* in particular seemingly imagining neuroscientific chemicals when she used her device. Later in this chapter, I will continue to build upon this to show the importance of neuroscience in digital detoxing, and argue that neuroscience and brain-talk was part of detoxer’s language around living “with intention.”

Mindless-ness and The Vulnerable Brain

While *Magma* and *Redwood* justified their use as helpful during a particular moment in their day, *Tiki* felt that she was unsure why she was checking her device, seemingly “for no reason.” Many other detoxers described digital use that was unintentional. In our interview *Raindrop* explained,

Last night I found myself checking Instagram while I was in bed, and probably spent like, an hour, just scrolling through, looking at stories, and I just feel like it's such a waste of time. Why was I doing that? I was trying to ask myself, “Why am I doing it?” And it just felt like it was a mindless thing at that point, I felt like I wasn't even being like, “Oh I need to check this,” I was just like, checking it without even realising I was checking it.

Raindrop described this unintentional use as “mindless,” and as a “waste of time” that she quizzed herself about. *Shadow* felt similarly. “I go into my phone for a reason, I'm sure of it,” *Shadow* laughed,

and then as soon as I'm in there, I try to remember what the thing was, and I try to do that thing, [but] it might be a different thing from what I originally went into my phone for. There's definitely a number of hours that I counted that felt like I was just sort of, scrolling through whatever pops up on Facebook, without saying ‘no.’”

Both *Raindrop* and *Shadow* were describing habitual digital use that they found themselves doing without being sure how they got there; whatever their original intention had been for picking up the device had become lost. *Tiki* justified this in terms of the “addictive” aspect of her device, a need for “serotonin boosts” which she received from checking her phone. *Tiki*'s comment demonstrated the way that detoxers often felt that they would “check my phone for no reason,” perhaps because of something else going on beyond their conscious thought. *Shadow* offered an explanation along these lines;

That's just partially 'cause Facebook's really really good at making that happen. They have a lot of data to understand how to get you to that place. Not even in an evil way, it's more just in a mathematical way, it's just all about optimisation. And optimisation without editing is dangerous.

In Chapter 7, I illustrated detoxers' perception of the tech industry. *Shadow* argued that the tech industry itself was not evil, but there were "so many pieces of America on top of one other" which led to the technology industry seeking profit at other kinds of human cost. In speeches at Camp Grounded, Levi and others described technology as only a "tool," which could be used for good or bad; but detoxers tended to be disappointed that the tech industry did not use its potential for good (Chapter 7). Although *Shadow* explained that it was "not in an evil way," it's "just all about optimization," *Captain Astro* painted a more concerning picture. Speaking highly of tech ethicist Tristan Harris, he explained that Harris' work taught that "we as a society have this obligation to make sure that we are not vindictively designing software. Which, hands down, is occurring right now." *Captain Astro* explained why technology design had become so "vindictive";

[in] the monetisation models in digital media [...] the more that users spend on those apps, the more they get paid. So the apps, the only thing they care about is getting more time spent by users, even if it's at the cost of giving the user things that they need, and addicting users.

Captain Astro, who worked at a tech giant, was familiar with conversations around persuasive design. In his thesis *Freedom and Persuasion in the Attention Economy*, ex-Google-employee-turned-technology-ethicist James Williams (2017) similarly writes that in an abundance of information, attention becomes a scarce resource, and that "persuasion, then, is the dominant business model of the digital attention economy," (p. 1). Just as *Captain Astro* explained, with eyes on a screen, companies can advertise amongst posts from friends, family, and co-workers, generating revenue from intimate sites of real estate in a person's life. *Captain Astro* speculated as to whether it would be possible to disrupt that market. "I think it's gonna be a hard battle," he said.

In the last few years, popular science books have detailed the use of persuasive technology design. In Chapter 1, I pointed towards techniques like "infinite scroll" which offers a continuous stream of new posts on a news feed. In the case of infinite scroll, the "constant

revisiting of familiar stimuli becomes almost automatic” (Bartlett, 2019, p. 192). This scrolling “activates our dopamine systems” (Eyal, 2012; as cited in Bartlett, 2019, p. 177), in what has been called “dopaminizing,” where “repetitive behaviours that stimulate small dopamine hits, (such as scrolling, liking and posting) produce changes in the neural pathways in the brain” (Moore, 2017, p. 68; as cited in Bartlett, 2019, p. 178).

Like *Tiki* who described “that little serotonin boost,” these authors describe the issue of unintentional digital use as one relating to “dopamine” and “dopamine systems,” each referring to neurochemicals playing a part in the attention economy. In this way, what *Raindrop* might call “checking for no reason” might be happening because her newsfeed was designed to pull her back every time.

Like *Magma* and *Redwood*’s description of the effect of technology on their brains, this idea of “vindictive design” was described as a brain-related problem in a clip about Camp Grounded on a prominent American news channel. The clip focused on *Downtown*, and used an interview with him, clips of him around his home, and footage from Camp Grounded.¹³³

Presenter: [*Downtown*] couldn’t stop himself, every few minutes, checking his phone.

Downtown: They do a really good job at sucking you in, and keeping you in.

Downtown here refers to “they,” meaning technology designers, as “do[ing] a really good job at sucking you in,” just as *Shadow* had explained that “they have a lot of data to understand how to get you to that place.” *Downtown*’s digital use is not only unintentional - he “couldn’t stop himself.”

Presenter: - then one day it happened, as he stared into his phone -

Downtown: I cognitively said the word “that feels warm.” It was too close to what I’d heard of heroin addiction, it scared me to death.

Presenter: [*Downtown*] knew he needed to stop.

Honey Bear: Every time your phone buzzes or beeps or pings, your brain is literally releasing oxytocin which is known as the cuddle hormone.

¹³³ This was likely a “fake camp” created specifically to be filmed, like the one I attended in 2015.

(We see clips of people enjoying themselves at camp.)
 Presenter: [*Honey Bear*] is a director with the digital detox of oakland which runs retreats and camps for adults, where all electronics are confiscated at the door.
Honey Bear: It can be scary, sometimes people feel anxiety, they feel restless -
 Presenter: - symptoms of withdrawal.
 [...]
 Downtown: Camp hits you like a tonne of bricks, when you realise that everyone's just... human?

In this clip, *Downtown* implied that his digital use had become like “heroin addiction” because he believed that his brain had been comforted by his device. *Honey Bear* then juxtaposed the feeling of intimacy with a *person*, versus mediated through a device; tricking the brain into a sense of false intimacy was possible through these neuroscientific processes. While *Magma* and *Redwood*'s brain was described like an engine that needed “stimulating” to start up in the morning or “switched off” for a rest - the brain could also be duped, misled, or meddled with.

In Chapter 8, Gypsy had worried that detoxers were choosing the equivalent of “splenda” over “sugar” when they fostered community via the Camp Grounded Facebook group, while *Bay Bridge* wanted to “show people what real dopamine feels like, not red-dot-notification-dopamine.” Here, again, the organisers were worried that people are easily misled - on a neuroscientific level - into receiving false, unnatural comfort and support from their technology. The neuroscientific tricking, for detoxers, explained why *Raindrop* and *Shadow* found themselves using their device and wondering how they got there, being persuaded, “without saying no.”

Cultural Imaginaries of Serotonin

In *The Algorithmic Imaginary*, Taina Bucher (2017) argues that “nobody outside Facebook really knows how the algorithm works” (p.40), and as such, users speculate as to how it works, how to manage it, and live with it in their day-to-day lives. While Bucher (2017) defines the algorithmic imaginary as “the way in which people imagine, perceive and experience algorithms

and what these imaginations make possible” (p. 31), ideas of serotonin or dopamine were similarly the way that detoxers imagined, perceived, and experienced digital technology use. *Tiki* believed that she checked her phone “for that little serotonin boost.” The camp handbook similarly asked us to “[s]upplement the dopamine and oxytocin that we’re getting from social networks and our cellphone alerts with real human interaction,” while *Bay Bridge* hoped to show ticket buyers what “real dopamine” feels like (Chapter 8).

Similar to their concerns about neurotransmitters, a fear circulated amongst detoxers around “blue light” which is feared to “block[s] a hormone called melatonin” (Blue Light and Sleep, n.d., para. 4). Like popular ideas of “dopamine hits,” this is not based in evidence (Fleming, 2018). *Captain Astro* feared that using a screen in bed would “create all these weird associations;” while *Sideboob* told me that charging a phone near your pillow was “not good for you.” Each assertion pointed vaguely toward headlines and scientific studies about harmful, invisible effects of technology, showing a generalised fear around the brain and digital technology. *Sunrise* told me that with digital technology, “My biggest fear is how it’s rewiring my brain in ways I’m completely unaware of and unable to manage.”

Detoxers’ “brain talk” can be contextualised within popular narratives around “brain cells,” “oxytocin,” “dopamine,” and “serotonin.” Serotonin has come to be known as a “happy chemical” and now enjoys a warm and fuzzy reputation, even being used on jewelry designs (Figure 13), while brain cells and depression can be used in memes about depression, anxiety, and productivity (Figure 14; Figure 15). In this way neuroscience has become part of a cultural imaginary within everyday life.



Figure 13: Serotonin Bracelet. (Amazon.com, n.d.)

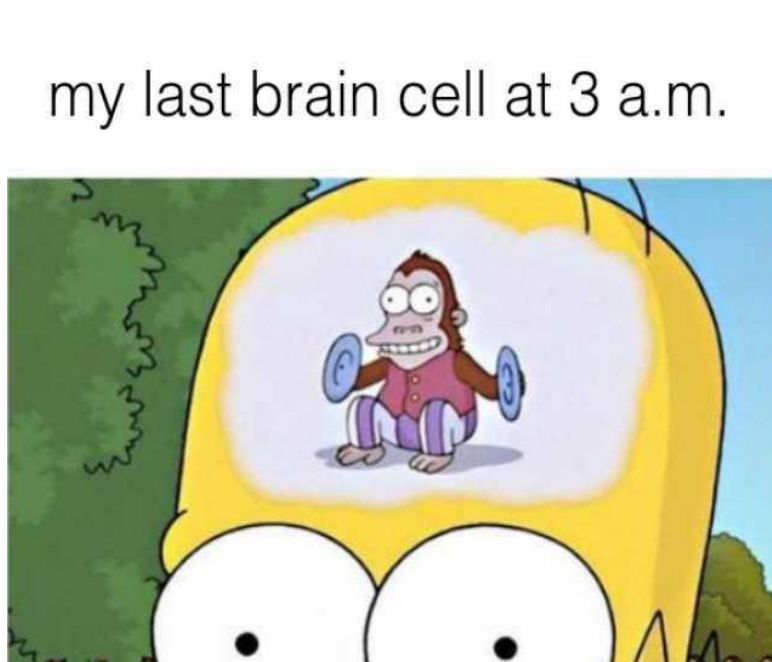


Figure 14: Meme of "My Last Brain Cell at 3am." (dopl3r.com, n.d.)



Figure 15: Meme of “When my brain finally manages to pump out some dopamine.” (Knowyourmeme.com, n.d.)

In the past half a century, Rose and Abi-Rached (2013) argue, it is scientific developments in understanding the brain that are changing how people see the self (p. 225).¹³⁴ “[...]‘[N]euro-drinks’ promise to improve our brain power,” they write (Rose & Abi-Rached, 2013 p. 226), while “‘neuro- trainers’ claim that their courses will enable us to take full control of our lives” (p. 226). In these kinds of examples, we can “recognize the growing power of the belief, however banal, that by acting on our brains, we can improve our mental life and enhance our everyday capacities [...]” (Rose & Abi-Rached, 2013 p. 226). Like Rose and Abi-Rached’s (2013) examples, detoxers used ideas of “real dopamine” and focused on how their brain was reacting to technology, to talk about the need to prioritise time without screens.

¹³⁴ In Chapter 6, I argued that detoxers were using language and concepts from psychology, while here I argue that they were using neuroscience.

In Chapter 2 I argued that the idea of “dopamine hits” from social media use is reductive and does not point towards addiction (Burnett, 2018). Rather than clinically correct, detoxers used scientific ideas, and generalised fears around technology and the brain, to make moral claims. In Chapter 8 I argued that detoxers used neuroscience to moralise good and bad sociality. In this section, detoxers believed that technology could be detrimental to their focus, productivity, or general wellbeing. In both, the use of neuroscience heavily implies a need for conscious, intentional behaviour, to overcome this tricking on a neuroscientific level.

In this first part, I have argued that detoxers understood their interaction with their device in terms of the effect it had on the brain. In Part 2 I turn more to thought processes, and how detoxers hoped to shift thoughts away from technology use and into engaging with other aspects of their lives.

Part 2: Shifting Consciousness

Mindfulness

At the campfire on the first evening of Camp Grounded in 2017, *Artemis* gave a speech. “Even if you’re thinking of something else,” she said, acknowledging that our attention may be wandering in the excitement of the day;

I want you to just hear this: that what we choose to give our attention to determines our lives. It determines how we behave, and it determines who we are, and what we say. It determines our relationships and it determines our culture. And so [...] I wanna just invite you to just really be aware of that while you’re here. To notice what it is that you’re giving your attention to.

Without saying so explicitly, *Artemis*’ speech was referring to the way that in everyday life, we might be giving “too much” attention to our digital devices. At camp, however, we could choose to disrupt that habit, learning how to focus instead on what mattered to us. *Artemis*’ speech was fitting with the values of Camp Grounded, communicated via the digital detox 2019

handbook, where a page entitled “Digital Detox(R) Homework” asked questions about everyday micro interactions with devices such as “do you fall asleep with your phone or laptop in bed [...]?” or “do you text and walk?” The prompt explained that using these questions;

We ask you to become aware of your relationship, noticing each time you use one of your devices or give attention to a glowing screen, and to even challenge yourself to question the motivation behind each click, share, like, save, or edit-undo [...] Don’t judge your technology use, merely observe your daily actions and the ways in which the screens and gadgets weave into the fabric of life, moment to moment.

The top-down message seemed to have incorporated concepts from mindfulness. In Chapter 5, we were asked to eat “mindfully” during the silent dinner, and to notice each bite while thinking about the journey the food had made, from farm to plate. Mindfulness was also built into Camp Grounded at playshops like “Mindfulness: relationship to the present moment,” where we carefully ate an orange, and walked feeling every facet of the sole of our feet, paying deep attention to details.

The premise of Mindfulness, according to the NHS summary (Mindfulness, 2019), is to develop “awareness of our thoughts and feelings as they happen moment to moment” (para. 8) in order to “interrupt the 'autopilot' mode we often engage day-to-day” (para. 19). “Imagine standing at a bus station and seeing 'thought buses' coming and going without having to get on them and be taken away,” the summary continues (Mindfulness, 2019, para. 23).

These same concepts could be applied to technology use. Like watching buses from a bus station, “each click, share, like,” was a digital action that detoxers watch and contemplate, questioning how helpful it was for them. The reason to do this, as *Artemis* explained, was that small decisions added up to something much larger; since “what we choose to give our attention to [...] determines our lives” and “who we are.” Applying this to technology use, the camp organiser *Gypsy* explained in our interview, “We're not saying that technology is bad, it's just

being conscious of how you use it and being intentional about it, [...] you have the choice, every time you use it, how you're going to use it.”

Using mindfulness, detoxers could be “intentional” about their choices. Although intentional community is an established idea (Chapter 4), “setting an intention” or “being intentional” have more recently become popular terms in self care and spirituality. “Although intentionality is well discussed in academic fields,” Beattie (2020, p. 140) explains, “ [...] as a folk concept it is underscrutinized.” Detoxers commonly used the term when referring to following one’s authentic desires. In Chapter 6, *Redwood* was inspired by counsellors like *Artemis* who “loved her life” because she had chosen to “only do the things that matter to me,” while *Captain Astro* felt that people at camp sought “alignment” between their beliefs and actions. Similarly, detoxers wanted their digital use to align with their goals, however small the action may be; fighting the way that persuasive design could obscure their authentic “intention.” Williams (2017) argues that “[i]n the short term, [persuasion from the digital attention economy] can distract us from doing the things we want to do. In the longer term, it can distract us from living the lives we want to live” (p. 6). In this way detoxers were reflecting a wider conversation both in and outside of academia in which persuasive design may have deeply destructive long-term effects on people’s happiness; something which they were learning to counteract at Camp Grounded.

Presence

For detoxers the way to become “intentional” about not only our digital use, but our lives in general, was to practice mindfulness through being “present.” “Using a phone is like time travel,” Levi told me in our interview in 2014, “[...] because you’re either looking at the past or the future.” For Levi, smartphones reflected information from elsewhere, pointing your thoughts towards past or future problems or anxieties. He took out a picture of the Camp Grounded logo and proudly began to explain it to me. The logo (Figure 16) featured two intersecting triangles,

resembling an hourglass. I was familiar with it, and had seen it on stickers, bags, and tshirts, but assumed that it depicted a mountain. Levi explained;

We have this hourglass approach to life, where there's all this focus on what you have left and how much you've done. But what if you merge the top and bottom of the hourglass? Then there's a focus on this part.



Figure 16: Digital Detox logo. (Camp Grounded website, 2017)

He pointed to the middle of the logo, where the triangles overlapped. If this were an hourglass, the present moment was magnified larger than just a few grains of sand.

At camp, detoxers had revelled in “living in the moment,” soaked up the feeling of being in the trees, listening to the birds, and feeling the grass under their feet. Without clocks at camp, hours felt like days, time expanding in unfamiliar ways. Detoxers often felt more attuned with the natural rhythms. “I was actually sleeping outdoors for all three nights, *Jagger* told me, “and it was great. It got really cold, but I was going to sleep with the stars and the redwood trees, and then waking up with the sun.”

At Camp Mendocino, you were inescapably immersed in the intense detail of nature. Every leaf was its own universe, each square inch a microcosm of the wider ecology of living things, of little beetles, ants, or greenflies. The closer you looked, the more you could see, frayed bark on a redwood tree, leaves browning on the dry ground, and in the soil, I could imagine even

smaller living things beyond my range of vision, spores, organisms, busy “world-making” with each other in an interconnected rhythm (Tsing, 2015). In Chapter 5 I argued that the design of Silent Time facilitated a sense of feeling closer to nature by drawing on American, historical and cultural visions of nature. To focus on the details, in this philosophy, shifted attention away from anxious thoughts and things beyond your control, and closer towards gratitude for the natural world, and perspective on your own small life in the grand scheme of planet earth.

“Grounding” itself is a technique I introduced in Chapter 6, used for treating PTSD and related anxiety disorders; it brings you back in touch with the present moment, to your breath and physical sensations. To use “grounded” in the name of Camp Grounded was a spiritual version of this same therapeutic idea. To “pay attention” to nature was to shift consciousness to what mattered, rather than being caught up in digital distraction or anxiety. To be closer to nature (Chapter 5), and to be present, was seen to be good for mental health.¹³⁵

Yet *Redwood* had described using Facebook as a way to “switch [her] brain off,” a kind portal out of the present moment. Digital devices were considered excellent at doing this. While it could be seen as helpful, as *Redwood* and *Magma* suggested, it was more commonly seen as a “crutch” or “placater”, just as *Lemon* had said, “If I get upset, I start crying, I can just pick up my phone and start looking and distract my mind” (Chapter 6). Rather than giving oneself a break this way, detoxers felt it was important to remain present. During our interview, *Magma* explained;

The problem with not being mindful is that you are not present, and not being present is equal to not being happy. Because if you aren't fully in the moment, how can you be happy?

¹³⁵ In Chapter 4, I noted that it was surprising that Camp Grounded banned drugs, since hallucinogens are embedded in the history of counterculture. However, this helps to demonstrate how detoxers wanted to be *more* in touch with reality, rather than less.

“Nature” like that at Camp Grounded was the key place where detoxers felt they could practice presence and gratitude. When *Redwood* described needing to “turn [her] brain off” during a break at work, she had added disappointedly that she would “look at Facebook [...] Instead of talking to my coworkers, instead of going outside.”

Passing Time on BART

It was one thing to practice presence amongst the majestic redwoods and supportive atmosphere of camp; in everyday life, it was more complicated. “I take BART everyday,” *Quesadilla* said, describing her commute to San Francisco. “I sit and I either read or listen to a podcast, and everybody's on their phone.” Since camp, she felt, “I just observe it more [...] I notice that people are on their phone more [...] public transportation's so weird, it's like everybody's just like this,” she mimed holding a smartphone close to her face, with her neck angled downwards.

Some detoxers suggested that they ought to be striking up conversations with strangers on BART rather than using their phone. This mirrored the way that they were keen to befriend strangers at Camp Grounded. The morning of our interview, *Gypsy* had chatted a woman on her BART commute after she fortuitously forgot her earphones. This pointed towards the way that people in the Bay Area were seeking to find “community,” challenging norms around avoiding talking to strangers, and counteracting the “disconnection” of modern life, as I argued in Chapter 8.

The BART is one of the noisiest trains I've ever travelled on. One day when I saw a female pilot riding towards the airport, sitting proudly with her priority luggage, who was quizzed enthusiastically about her job by two women sitting near her. It was so loud, the women had to shout to hear each other. On another day, the wheels drowned out the sound of a homeless man as he took the seat beside me and shouted until the driver asked him to leave.¹³⁶ The BART train left the bright and humid air of Oakland, and wailed and screamed as it rattled itself into the

¹³⁶ I discuss homelessness in the Bay Area in Chapter 7.

dark tunnel underneath the sea, resurfacing in the cooler underground station of Embarcadero, underneath San Francisco, where it was greeted by a computer-generated voice.

City life in the Bay Area contrasted sharply with the natural beauty and leisure opportunities like Camp Mendocino available closeby, and I felt that it was unfair to expect people to practice this value of “being present” throughout the drudgery of a morning commute. Sometimes, I knew from my own experience, we wear headphones to block the world out. We listen to podcasts or music, or we get involved in a back-and-forth with a good friend online, and find ourselves pleasantly “elsewhere.” In Chapter 7 I discussed the ways that people today use technology to sonically carve out spaces of solitude in the modern world; sometimes this is necessary for our own wellbeing. *Lemon*’s experience of the BART train was far closer to my own feelings. “When I’m on the train, I’m just wanting to pass time,” she said. “I’m not like, ‘I’m in the moment! I’m on BART!’” she spoke in a mocking tone.

BART is *so loud*, and it's so crowded, and it's under a dark tunnel, [...] It's just really depressing. The lighting is all fluorescent, the seats are grey, and it's just like, not a place I want to be spending my time, and “be present.”

It was also easier to be present when you were privileged, with time off work, or holidays to beautiful locations, and I pointed this out in several of my interviews; detoxers in the Bay Area with access to rolling hills and forests, with a safe home and bed, and with wifi and electricity, had a lot to be grateful for. At Camp Grounded, too, detoxers enjoyed unusually delightful surroundings that were carefully curated for them. But two detoxers who I posed this to pushed back, feeling that wealthy people were less likely than anyone to be “present.” This was fitting with their primitivist outlook (Chapter 5), in which increased comfort was “mindless,” while to live day-to-day dealing with problems of earthly survival were deemed more appropriately in touch with reality.

Mind-Talk and The Cultured Brain

Other researchers have found similar “brain-talk” in studies of non-use. In a study of participants who had been paid to temporarily stop using Facebook, Baym et al. (2020) found an unprompted “discourse of mind” using “mind words” like “conscious,” “realize,” “aware,” and “mind” (p. 4). These participants described increased awareness of their use, which was usually a negative realisation (Baym et al., 2020, p.p. 4-5). Baym et al. (2020) argue that this demonstrates the arrival of mindfulness in popular culture that “has made its way from books, apps, workshops, and training modules into [...] Americans’ popular consciousness” (p. 2).

Mindfulness originated in Buddhism, but in a Western context, it has shed its religious trappings and gained neuroscientific validity. “Part of the modernization of Buddhism,” Kirmayer (2015, p. 458) explains, “was to describe it as a science of the mind so that the religious trappings were incidental and even disposable.” While Buddhism emphasises a concept of “no-self,” in the west, mindfulness is used specifically to work on the self; its original values “in unavoidable tension with Western values of individualism that seek to cultivate, amplify, enable, and aggrandize the personal self” (Kirmayer 2015, p. 452). In this way the practice of mindfulness is conceived of and used in highly specific ways depending on its context.¹³⁷

Some researchers have applied mindfulness to technology use in order to help people manage their devices (Rauch, 2018). Similar to these, detoxers were seemingly hoping to regain power over parts of their lives that did not work for them, with their mental health in mind. Using mindfulness-based ideas, detoxers could shift their thoughts away from “mindless” “autopilot” use of devices, just as they had been “persuaded” to by the technology design, and into a sensation of “presence,” whereby they could experience gratitude, feel “grounded”, and “be happy” (*Magma*). Brain-related explanations were central in these discussions, in which

¹³⁷ I discuss universalism and the human brain in Chapter 10.

detoxers might “become aware” of previously “mindless” behaviour. Shifting their thoughts into conscious decision making, for the smallest of digital gestures, was a spiritual practice for detoxers at Camp Grounded.

The brain had seemingly become a central focus for detoxers in working on their own happiness, and outside of camp, I learned more about the local context for these brain-based explanations. At the New Age technology conference that I attended in San Jose (Chapter 4), there was a room full of whimsical devices for sale; a device shooting coloured light over the faces of people lying down like Star Trek’s sick bay; and a table of devices which clipped to your nostril, with a screen showing a coloured image of a brain. Four chairs in a row welcomed us to try “MUSE,” a device designed to help you meditate. I put on a headband, which could apparently read your brain signals by touching the side of your head, and was given an iPad, which after a two minute meditation showed me a graph of my brain activity, as it danced up and down the axis between focused and not focused. When the salesperson explained it to me, I attempted to defend my poor score.

The headset offered a way of measuring my brain’s ability to be “mindful” and “present.” Regardless of whether detoxers would ever buy such a thing, the headset demonstrated an idea in the Bay Area, in which mindfulness meditation, the brain, neurotransmitters, and thought processes, were centralised in concepts of wellbeing, to the point that people would want to measure and optimise them. It demonstrated an idea within Western culture, where we might aspire to train our own brains (Rose & Abi-Rached, 2013, p. 226), and to practice empathy and social skills (Turkle, 2015, p. 32, see Chapter 8). Fitting with Kirmayer’s (2015, p. 458) point, it encapsulated the way that a religious practice originating in Buddhism could be Westernized, translated into a graph measuring your performance.

English-Lueck (2017) found that “pragmatism” in Silicon Valley includes the idea that “[t]he mind is an instrument to be used for the fulfillment of practical goals” (p. 185). Similarly, both the headset and digital detoxers invocation of neuroscience pointed towards conceiving of one’s personal growth in terms of the mind. After the fieldwork, in 2019, this theme continued in the Bay Area, as “dopamine fasting” (Grant, 2020) - in which you limit external stimuli like eating, talking, or using digital devices in order to sharpen focus - became a trend in Silicon Valley. For detoxers, mindfulness was a way to mould their thought processes towards their self-flourishing, and could be a tool with which to spiritually resist the exploitation of their own minds and relationships, to “turn your attention” instead to flourishing and happiness.

Part 3: Living with Technology

In this final empirical section, I focus on the ways that digital detoxers were aiming to use their technology “with intention” - or always in keeping with their beliefs. Through three examples, *Downtown*, *Ocelot*, and *Nimbu*, collected through interviews and time spent in their homes and workplaces, I show how technology use was entwined in detoxers’ daily routines, and utilised towards growth and happiness. While these show the ways that detoxers were hoping to make technology use meaningful, I finally turn to the ways that this was an on-going struggle for detoxers.

Downtown’s Morning

Downtown hated his Job. As I rode with him in his car from Oakland to his tech company job in San Jose, he explained that with such limited housing, workers like him must drive 50 miles a day, something that he particularly struggled with as he dreaded arriving at his destination. “I fuckin’ loathe the tech industry for the most part,” he said. “I think the company that I work for is actually not a bad company [...] but they do prop up some of the world’s worst companies.” Every morning on his commute, *Downtown* told me, “I’ll take a meeting in my car on my phone. It’s scheduled for 10.15 every morning and I just dial into it. [...] Which is a nightmare.” “Why

is it a nightmare?” I asked. “Because I hate my job,” he said simply. “I just basically sit there and listen to a bunch of nerds talk about a bunch of bullshit I don’t care about.”

In Chapter 6, I introduced *Downtown* as having emigrated from his parents’ house in Florida to California, in part because Florida had felt repressively right-wing. Since camp he had started seeing a therapist. “I was a better person for having gone to camp,” *Downtown* said, “I treated people better, [...] I treated myself better, [...] camp really opened me up to how I could be a better person.” When I suggested that people often moved to the Bay Area because of its progressive politics, he specified; “it doesn’t have anything to do with politics, it has to do with a mindset. Like, if you wanna grow, and get better in certain areas of your life.” These were the things that *Downtown* cared about far more than the work he did at his tech company job, just as *Raindrop* had asked in Chapter 6, “if life is so precious, why am I working at a tech company?”

In our interview, *Downtown* told me more about his everyday use of technology. “I remember reading the very first digital detox like, manifesto kind of thing,” *Downtown* told me, describing an early iteration of the Camp Grounded website.¹³⁸ “Immediately I went out and bought an analog alarm clock.” The 2014 digital detox “field guide” offered several instructions for returning to a digital world. The “Buy An Alarm Clock” heading read:

give yourself 30-45 minutes to wakeup, make some coffee or tea, and start the day on YOUR terms before getting wrapped up in email, Facebook, memes, the news or other forms of media or digital communication.

“I tried to keep my phone outside my room after that,” *Downtown* said. “That was back when I *had* a room. Hah. Ever since I’ve been living in studios.”¹³⁹ Living without walls to segregate different domestic spaces problematised the camp rule of “keeping phones out of the bedroom” - but *Downtown* got around this by leaving his phone as far away as possible, in the kitchen.

¹³⁸ I quote camp’s self-described “mission” in Chapters 1 and 2.

¹³⁹ Shared homes or small studios were not uncommon in the Bay Area, which was suffering a housing crisis (see Chapter 7).

I use my phone for a clock, but I leave it in the kitchen. So I walk over to the kitchen, and I usually turn on a podcast to get started, and that's through Sonos, so it's also through my phone. And then I make coffee which is also an app, which I use in my phone. It's a really nerdy coffee app. It records all my stats on my coffee, so I'm making sure I'm getting exactly what I need from my coffee. [...] it measures the water, so the ratios are spot on, [...] it's basically a way of measuring those numbers.

Sometimes I'll respond to email, check my text messages if they're there. But other than that, I try to keep my whole morning device free. I'm eating my breakfast and coffee without this thing right near me. I don't do very good at it all the time, but I try my best.

Even though *Downtown* tried to keep his morning “device free,” he was relying on his phone to play a podcast, to brew his morning coffee, as well as use it to check the time, respond to text messages and check email. *Downtown* was trying to enjoy his morning with the phone working towards what he wanted, and implemented strategies like physically distancing himself from it, as part of that changed approach. Just as the camp handbook had commanded detoxers to “start the day on YOUR terms,” *Downtown* used his phone towards his own enjoyment and optimisation, before he must get into his car, and start a day that would not go the way he wanted it.

In Part 1, *Downtown* was “scared to death” of the reaction he had to his phone when it “felt warm” to him. Afterwards, *Downtown* had slowly adjusted his relationship with the device. While *Downtown*’s practical use may not have changed much at all, his attitude to his devices was radically different after reading Levi’s manifesto and attending Camp Grounded. Others, like *Ocelot* and *007*, showed a similar attitudinal change in their digital use through attending Camp Grounded.

Ocelot’s Picture

“I’ve got a modern dilemma going on,” *Ocelot* tells me, as he stands in his sitting room clutching his laundry. “I need to recharge my fitbit, but then I won’t get the steps.” With the laundry room downstairs in his block of flats, he’s keen to make sure they count. “‘Cause I’ve got my whole spreadsheet for my steps, you see,” he says, smiling at his own absurdity. “I don’t

want to go throwing my steps away.”

I have known *Ocelot* for several years, and he had always been someone I enjoyed seeing; partly because he’s another Brit, and partly because he’s a calm presence who speaks in a low, measured voice, with a dry sense of humour. In Chapter 6, *Ocelot* taught communication to a room of attentive listeners in San Francisco. Based on my knowledge of him, I’m shocked when I learn that *Ocelot* uses a spreadsheet on his laptop to quantify how long he spends doing various activities - including steps - categorised into “work, life, spiritual practice, music making,” and his favourite game, “Connect 4.” “It really increased the amount of exercise I do,” he explains,

which has led to quite tangible results. Somehow tracking really helps, the system appeals. It is leading to change that feels good. There’s room for goofing off, but it needs to be proportionate to other stuff.

When he disappears for a “26 minute nap,” after which he sleeps through several gong-like chimes, he explains that it was alright to oversleep because he had worked extra hours last week. This was “goofing off” in perfectly calculated proportion.

I notice that underneath *Ocelot*’s angled laptop is a black and white image printed on plain paper, stuck with sellotape onto the laptop stand. It’s an image of the Camp Grounded founder, Levi, and I recognise it from his obituary. I ask *Ocelot* about it. “I don’t know if he helps with it now, but what I intended was his presence helps me get up and step away from the computer,” he replies. “Actually, I think it has been a background influence.” *Ocelot* was concerned about “moving less” when he was “sitting looking at a screen.”

That position is so hunched, you’re pulling your shoulders forwards, and I would end up with my forearms sore, and my upper back would start feeling weird and tense [...] It’s so important to move [...] I feel better, I’m certain that I feel better when I’m using the computer and the phone less.

Having drawn his attention to the picture, *Ocelot* reconsiders it. “I’m actually switching out my Fidget [Levi] picture, which I’ve been meaning to do for a long time. I’m going to replace it with the one of him with a microphone, pointing at the camera.” Sticking the new image in place, he is pleased with his handiwork. “It’s more aggressive,” he says.

Like *Downtown*, *Ocelot* had not necessarily reduced his digital use, but changed his attitude towards it. He incorporated it into his life in a way that worked for him, and used it to measure his fitness, a “system” which was part of his own aspirations for himself. Technology could both help and hinder the ways that *Ocelot* wanted to be spending his time. The picture of Levi under his laptop showed the way that *Ocelot*’s alteration in digital use was not practical but attitudinal, just as *Downtown* kept his phone a few more steps away to remind himself to use it on his own terms. Using this attitudinal, rather than practical shift, detoxers could *choose* their use, rather than be swept up into it mindlessly, to do so with intention, rather than unintentionally.



Figure 17: 007's iPhone lock screen, taken on the drive to camp

Similar to *Ocelot*'s sellotaped picture of Levi, 007 used a pre-made lock screen¹⁴⁰ on her iPhone, which reminded her to consider, each time she went to use her phone, whether it was absolutely necessary. On the drive up to camp, I took a photo of her phone (Figure 18) which shows she had already selected "airplane mode" for the drive, although our signal would slowly become non-existent once we turned off the highway. As 007 raised her finger towards the "swipe to unlock" message, she might change her mind, and put the phone away again. Instead

¹⁴⁰ This image came from psychologist Jocelyn Brewer's collection on her website - 007 had seemingly heard of her while I met her through academic circles.

of checking it because she was bored, for example, this would mean she could always have a purpose; fighting the kind of experience *Shadow* had described when he laughed that “I go into my phone for a reason, I’m sure of it, and then as soon as I’m in there, I try to remember what the thing was [...]” Both *Ocelot* and *007* were using visual cues to shift their attitude to digital use, and to catch themselves before they got lost in their device.

Throughout these examples, small changes in detoxers’ domestic environments were helping them to alter their attitude, as part of their aspirations for themselves. This was partially encouraged by top-down recommendations at camp, encouraging them to “be[ing] conscious of how you use it and being intentional about it, [...] you have the choice, every time you use it, how you’re going to use it” (*Gypsy*). Using mindfulness, in which you become aware of your thoughts, detoxers applied this practice to the minutiae of digital use in everyday life, shifting those thought patterns in the belief that doing so was a powerful way to practice growth.

Nimbu’s Future

Ocelot was seemingly unusual within the digital detoxing community for being so fastidious with his self-tracking. But *Ocelot*’s spreadsheet and his photograph of Levi were examples of the way that detoxers were all working on themselves and their happiness. While *Ocelot* was interested in his posture, fitness, and use of his time, *Nimbu* held a vision of her future in which she lived out her feminist beliefs.

Nimbu was an Indian woman in her mid twenties, who had moved from India to San Francisco to work at a tech giant. Each day, she got the bus to San Jose, doing what she could to keep up with the workload during a journey that might take over an hour. Her studio apartment was small, but it was a huge improvement on the place she had recently left, in which her stove was next to her bed. Acknowledging the effect of her industry on San Francisco, she told me that apartments like hers used to be occupied by Latino families, before “people like her” came

along.

While I spent time with her, *Nimbu* was recovering from a breakup, and she had deleted her Facebook account to prevent herself from looking at her ex-boyfriend's profile. *Nimbu* was interested in her own self development, had tried Landmark Forum, and it was her therapist who suggested she needed to "feed her inner child" with something like Camp Grounded (Chapter 5).

When I visited her at work, *Nimbu* told me about the gender and racial imbalances in her industry. As an Indian woman, she was in the minority, and knew that the values of her company were determined by white, straight, men. Her colleagues could never understand her experiences online, where she had been attacked by trolls in the past. As an Indian woman on a visa, her safety could be threatened living in America, where trolls could get you fired, or even call a SWAT team to your house. Meanwhile, her work colleagues often enjoyed the decadence of Burning Man, extolling the virtues of equality, before continuing the same problematic work. Over her work lunch she muttered her quiet frustration with her company, and later on, when I joined her in her apartment, I learned more about the role that these feelings played in her life goals.

In our interview, *Nimbu* told me that women's shoes had always hurt her feet, and that she had learned how bad they can be for your spine; "Shit," she had realised, "I'm fucking up my whole body for this stupid, societal idea of 'sexy.'" She had the idea to create a company offering comfortable but stylish shoes for businesswomen. "I think the one thing that I have decided for myself, is that I'd do something that would empower women," she explained.

When *Nimbu* finally finishes work at 8.20 she switches from her work laptop to her personal laptop. Visiting Amazon Prime, she cues up *Poirot* with subtitles, and we settle down to watch

it together on her sofa. As we watch, *Nimbu* tells me enthusiastically about *Murder She Wrote*, a similar show featuring an older, single, lead woman. The character of Jessica Fletcher is a plucky and assertive crime-solving novelist, played by Angela Lansbury. “I would like to be like Jessica Fletcher,” *Nimbu* daydreams. “She writes books and travels, and she’s very dedicated to what she’s doing. I would like to be so dedicated. It’s the only show about a woman having fun, and she’s contented.” Both women in our twenties, *Nimbu* and I carry on discussing feminist lead characters, dipping in and out of the *Poirot* plot.

Having been so quiet and uptight, she is now her relaxed, chatty, and giggly self that I first met in the car to camp (Chapter 5). With such a dramatic change, I wonder whether she is happy with her job. I ask her why she works so hard. “I [...] work hard because ultimately, my goal is to have my own company,” she says. Camp Grounded had helped her think through this aspiration of hers, committing more seriously to focusing on her goal. Without the “distraction” of Twitter, she explains, she could do things that were “uncomfortable,” but “would lead me to this amazing transformation [...] that would lead me to pursue my future that I’ve painted to you more seriously.”

Camp Grounded had encouraged her to get rid of distractions, and welcome the sense of discomfort that detoxers commonly believed to lead towards growth (Chapter 6). When *Nimbu* worked late into the evening, she hoped that it was an important part of creating this future.

The kind of things I do right now would be something that I would have to do in my own company anyway. I’m pretty sure the workload would be ten times higher than what I have right now. So if I can deal with this, then I feel I may be able to deal with the company.

“So it’s sort of training?” I ask. “Yeah.” she replies. “That’s what I’m trying to convince myself. Who knows.”

Nimbu's technology use reflected her desire to be like her feminist role model, Jessica Fletcher, who is "dedicated" to her job and "contented." Her hard work was done towards "pursuing her future" in a kind of training for when she would run her own company that "empowers women." When both working and resting, *Nimbu* tried to make her technology use align with what she cared about. Deleting her Facebook profile would help prevent herself from mourning a relationship with her ex-boyfriend, instead focusing on becoming an independent, focused woman. In addition, she struggled with the political ramifications of her own company, quietly struggling amongst her white, male colleagues, whom she knew did not understand the experiences of vast swathes of their global users. While personally disagreeing with the structural issues at play, she could use this company for her own future success - just as I argued in Chapter 7 - that rather than seeking to change the technology industry, detoxers were using them towards their own happiness. To be a successful woman in Silicon Valley, working her way up through a tech giant, was a rebellion that she hoped would eventually help other women, while simultaneously creating her own pride and satisfaction.

Shifts

Detoxers each considered themselves on a journey to a better life, in which they would someday reach their potential and live in alignment with their values (see Chapter 6). Looking across the stories of *Downtown*, *Ocelot*, *007*, *Nimbu*, and more, I argue that detoxers' alteration in digital use was not quantitative but qualitative, not practical but attitudinal. Detoxers' digital use was not only about strategies, but about their lives having changed because of Camp Grounded; they hoped to become a new person with a new outlook. *Downtown*, *Ocelot*, and *Nimbu* showed that technology was often present and contributing to them reaching those goals. The changes, and their motivations, would be entirely different from detoxer to detoxer, since they held different visions of their aspirational future.

While *Downtown*'s daily life would be spent working for an industry he hated, his private moments of the day could be reclaimed by adjusting his attitude towards them. *Ocelot* wanted to have better posture and be more productive; seeing Levi's face every time he sat at his computer helped him to remember that everything must be "proportional." Finally, *Nimbu* wanted to be a strong independent woman, and she used her technology to both help her work on her future, and rest with inspirational stories.

"I hear Fidget's voice"

Downtown, *Ocelot*, and *Nimbu*, demonstrate the way that technology use could come together with aspiration, and that Camp Grounded inspired them to pursue their goals. But these aspirations were often overshadowed by the reality of detoxers' digital use; it simply wasn't possible to use technology "with intention" at all times.

At the start of this chapter, *Magma* had used Facebook and Instagram to "stimulate [her] brain into being awake" when she woke up in the morning. "Which is embarrassing to admit," she had added. Despite being a helpful way to wake herself up in the morning, and despite this occurring entirely privately, *Magma* was still embarrassed and holding the Camp Grounded community in mind when using her phone in a way that she "shouldn't."

Redwood felt a similar kind of shame and resignation about her technology use. "I check Facebook while driving," she said, "I do all the bad things." "All the bad things" also included using her phone in bed. "I am gonna stop," she said, but then rolled her eyes and pulled a face that said: "Yeah, right." Holding her phone between us during our interview, she showed me the apps she had on it. "For a while I tried to hide Facebook down, away," she waved her hand, explaining that she could move the Facebook app icon out of sight, and have to search through several pages of apps to use it. But this hadn't worked; "I was like 'fuck it, I always find it.'"

In Chapter 6, *Redwood* was frustrated with herself for not finding her passion or sticking to one path, calling herself a “commitment-phobe.” This same vision of herself, as lacking self control, was one she held when considering her technology use. “I don’t have self discipline,” she said. “Like, I’m not great at dieting, I’m not great at budgeting, I’m not great at turning off my Facebook,” she laughed. “I feel bad,” *Redwood* said, “because I wish I had a strength of, just turn that off.”

Like *Redwood*, many detoxers struggled with shame about their digital use. In my interviews, I tended to offer my own positive experience with technology to try and encourage them to share use that did not fit within the values of the community. Almost every detoxer I met who had bought an alarm clock in their initial post-camp haze had given up and brought the phone back into the bedroom. *Rawr* similarly confessed to me that she often brought her phone into the bathroom, which was recommended against in the handbook and in Levi’s speeches. “I hear Fidget’s [Levi’s] voice every time,” she said.

While she felt ashamed about her digital use, *Redwood* had recently learned more about persuasive design and had begun to see her own lack of self control in a new light. “You start to feel bad about yourself [...] but then luckily people like Tristan [Harris] [are] doing research on this stuff, and um, you start to realise that, it’s just like drugs.” Echoing *Shadow* and *Captain Astro*, *Redwood* explained to me that technology design has become manipulative, and cited Harris as her source; “I see it now,” she said, pointing to Harris’ work,

it’s an addiction, and it’s a dopamine thing. [...] Somehow our brain is set to certain desires, it’s set to certain things, and they’ve done research to know how to keep us looking at it. [...] They know how your brain works and they want to addict you.” [...] So yes we can have dominion over it, but it takes work.

On the one hand, *Redwood* was ashamed at her lack of self control. But it might not be her fault that she is using her phone “badly,” if technology designers “know how your brain works” and “want to addict you.” As a result, *Redwood*’s perceived inadequacies and failures might not be

failures at all, but evidence of neurological manipulation, holding her back from her own possibilities for growth.

Discussion

Digital detoxers understood digital technology use in terms of the effect it had on the brain, describing a “serotonin boost” from checking a phone. I have situated this belief within cultural imaginaries of serotonin in which tech designers could trick the brain with persuasive design, giving you the chemical burst without the lasting sense of human relationships that detoxers felt all people need (Chapters 6 and 8).

This “brain talk” was the way detoxers conceived of wellbeing, centralising their thought processes in their efforts to become happy and fulfilled. In Chapter 7 I argued that detoxers saw American life as “broken,” geared towards profit rather than humanity. To live unintentionally, or passively, could allow you to be swept in unhealthy behaviours, and lose track of your own authentic desires. To be lost in a digital haze, like when people sat on the BART, would be to let your life pass you by. The only remedy, they felt, was to be “intentional” about each aspect of their lives, including their digital use.

Aspirational Use

Detoxers’ aspiration for “intentional” digital use is fitting with the Bay Area’s history of “intentional communities” (Chapter 4). Beattie (2020) situates the app *Siempo*, created by an Oakland based duo, within the same culture of Bay Area “intentionality.” In *Siempo*, Beattie (2020) explains,

Users are prompted to set their intention via an open field text box [...] The box asks: “What’s your intention?” Some examples are provided and include: “spend more time with family,” “eat healthy foods,” and “keep my phone locked”. Once users have set their intention, this text stands out on the screen. [...] Users are reminded of their intention every time they unlock their phone, as well as when they swipe to additional screens.
(Beattie, 2020, p.p. 144-6).

Siempo reminds users of their intention every time they use their phone. This way, Siempo serves as a way to interrupt habitual or unintentional digital use, helping the user to choose each use, in light of this reminder of their goals. Like the creators of Siempo, digital detoxers appeared to expect their digital use to fit within the bounds of their goals and values, with the Camp Grounded field guide asking “challenge yourself to question the motivation behind each click, share, like, save, or edit-undo,” because as *Artemis* explained, “what we choose to give our attention to determines our lives.”

But Beattie (2020) argues that Siempo is misled. “There appears to be a presumption by *Siempo* that the user should always have an intention,” Beattie (2020, p. 146) writes; “there is less room for idle smartphone play or digital wayfaring” (p. 146) or the kind of “daydreaming or reverie” (Beattie, 2018, para. 14) that often characterise digital use. In fact, Beattie (2020) argues, “all human behaviour cannot be intentional” (p. 146), something we have learned from behavioural science (Ohtomo, 2013; as cited in Beattie, 2020, p. 146) and there is no empirical evidence that a prompt like this would lead to better wellbeing.

I have personally found joy in digital oblivion. Can “digital wayfaring” not be positively indulgent or restful in a way that is indeed purposeful? Couldn’t the “self care” detoxers were doing (Chapter 6, 7) look like giving yourself the flexibility to let your mind wander online, without self punishment? In my view, digital use like this is not only acceptable, but just as human and natural as any other way of spending time (Chapter 2). Yet for detoxers, the use of digital spaces in which they might daydream, rest, be comforted, or even feel at home, were considered “embarrassing” or prompting feelings of embarrassment, shame, and fear.

In Chapters 6 and 8, I argued that many of those who came to Camp Grounded sought to fill an aching need for love and acceptance; I suggested that their use of the Facebook group provided

a sense of friendship and support that they sorely needed. As a single woman, connecting to her camp friends via her device could be a positive part of *Redwood*'s day. Detoxers told me that digital use was often acceptable and that it was "balance" that they sought - yet they were still crushingly self punishing about potentially arbitrary rules for how and when to use their device.

Detoxers may have had unreasonable expectations of themselves, creating anxiety in their private moments that could be restful. Beattie (2018) argues that the actual effect of apps like Siempo is constant self-management, where any digital use not deemed useful becomes "abnormal" (para. 14). *Magma* found technology useful, especially for her introversion (Chapter 6), yet she still felt inadequate, and that her use revealed undesirable aspects of herself.

In Chapter 6 I argued that the expectation for "work" on the self was vastly influenced by the charisma and popularity of the organisers of Camp Grounded. If they imitated the vision they held of the counselors, based on who they met in the woods, detoxers would use technology "intentionally." This is *aspirational digital use*; use that is entangled with aspirational identity, a yet-to-be-realised image of themselves. For someone lonely, awkward, tired, depressed, it seemed that they could be disappointed by aspects of their digital lives which more accurately matched who they realistically were, rather than who they hoped they might become.

Redwood was less interested in persuasive design itself, and more interested in her own ability or inability to pursue her self improvement. This demonstrates the way that while referring to structural issues, detoxers were more concerned with their individual experiences (see Chapter 7); intimate encounters with devices, the sensation of being drawn to this object in their homes, and what their relationship with that device said about them as a person. *Redwood* seemed to be comforted by Tristan Harris' work, since perhaps it wasn't her own lack of self control that meant she used Facebook too much. In light of this it may be that "internet addiction" (Chapter 1) is better understood as unintentional digital use, or digital use which does not match who you

want to be. I suggest that detoxers aspired for *all* of their digital use to serve a new vision of themselves, an idea explicated using cultural imaginaries of neuroscience, and made powerful by a desire to belong to the Camp Grounded community.

Not Non-Use

In Chapter 2, I outlined research into digital “non-use.” If approached as “non-users,” digital detoxers paradoxically used technology frequently. But “use” is something that people define for themselves in different ways regardless of academic categories. When *Downtown* described his morning as “device free,” yet used his smartphone, it showed not that he was hypocritical, but that he understood the device as something that could, without him wanting it to, “suck” him in and waste his time. Prioritising his own activities and using the phone towards them, was, to him, barely digital at all. Using brain-based, or thought-process-based explanations, detoxers were conceptualising digital use in their own way. Their “non-use” was in fact an attitudinal, rather than practical, shift in the way they used their technology, and for them this was powerful.

This demonstrates the way that use and non-use can play out in the everyday lives of those who have strong feelings about digital technology. This appears to be something the literature is struggling to grasp. Baym et al.’s (2020) participants described increased “awareness” about the negatives of Facebook after they were temporarily paid to stop using the site, but did not necessarily change or reduce their use, to the authors’ dismay: Baym et al. (2020) are seemingly frustrated that individualised responses to problems with social media do not address the systemic issues at play. Like the research I outlined in Chapter 2, this demonstrates an undue expectation from researchers for non-users to remain offline, or only behave in line with their values; any misstep judged as hypocritical or a failure.

I do not judge detoxers on whether they fought the tech industry or met their expectations for themselves. Instead I argue that detoxers were seeking something close to what Selwyn (2004) points to, on the difference between *access* to technology, and actual technology use. “‘Use of ICT’ does not necessarily entail ‘meaningful’ use of ICT,” he writes (Selwyn, 2004, p. 349). In meaningful use, “the individual exerts a degree of control and choice over the technology and its content thus leading to a meaning, significance and utility for the individual concerned” (Selwyn, 2004, p. 349). Detoxers lived with technology in a way that differed from my assumptions about restriction or replacement, instead using an attitudinal strategy. Detoxers wanted to make technology work for them, rather than against them, wasting their time, or “sucking” them into unintentional use. Camp Grounded was not usually one moment of drastic change either to their lives or to their digital use. Rather it was an inspirational perspective shift that allowed them to confidently rearrange their priorities back home, pushing themselves and their goals to the foreground.

Detoxers were using brain-based explanations to conceptualise their digital use, fitting with wider narratives around neuroscience which I have referred to as cultural imaginaries of serotonin. They sought to protect themselves and prioritise their own goals over the goals of technology companies by shifting their thought processes. Using recommendations from Camp Grounded, they aimed to assert themselves against devices. For them this was a meaningful reclaiming of their attention and part of their spiritual work towards self flourishing, building on my argument in Chapter 6. Building on the hierarchy and expectations that I outlined in Chapter 8, despite their attempts, they were often disappointed that their aspiration to become more like the counselors fell short, and that their digital use did not match the new identities they were hoping to become.

In this chapter, I have shown the ways that digital detoxers lived with technology, and how after camp, they shifted their attitude towards it in order to better use it towards their own goals. In

Chapter 10, I draw upon each of the findings chapters, and using the work of Max Weber, I argue that they saw themselves in a “disenchanted” world. I use this theory to argue that their efforts to be “intentional” with technology, to make their own life meaningful, and to prioritise their happiness, can best be understood as a form of “re-enchantment.”

Chapter 10

Discussion

Introduction

This discussion looks across the findings chapters, and offers a theoretical framework with which to understand the way that digital detoxers saw the world, and what made attending Camp Grounded meaningful for them. In Part 1, I use Weber's theory of disenchantment to argue that digital detoxers saw the modern world as having departed from humanity's "natural" roots. After introducing disenchantment, I show that the theory is commonly applied to New Age groups, who "re-enchant" against disenchantment. I argue that digital detoxing is a New Age strategy of re-enchantment, enacted via an imitation of tribal sociality.

In Part 2, I use disenchantment to understand the use of science in digital detoxing. This draws upon the argument I have made across Chapters 6 and 8, and which I brought together in Chapter 9, where I argued that detoxers used cultural imaginaries of serotonin to envision their relationship with technology. With detoxers drawing on psychology and neuroscience, I argue that much of their re-enchantment was done inwardly towards mental health and happiness.

In Part 3, I take a critical stance on digital detoxers' misuse of anthropology and neuroscience. They imagined one universal encounter between brain and technology, yet their goal of self flourishing was in fact highly specific to Western and American values. By glorifying tribal life in these new, neuroscientific terms, they are repeating long-held colonial, primitivist narratives. At the same time, however, I argue that Camp Grounded was a powerful, heartwarming, or moving idea for them, which gave them a sense of hope that they could find their happiness.

Part 1: Disenchantment

Disenchantment

Across the findings chapters, I have argued that detoxers saw American society as having experienced a process of societal change and technological advancement, which came at a high price - losing touch with what made them “human.” This is particularly clear in Chapter 5 where I argued that they hoped to imitate a “more natural” era of human history, and built upon in 6 where it was a loss of “tribal” or “village” life that they linked with good mental health. In Chapter 7, I showed how detoxers emphasised a politics of caring for those less fortunate than themselves, positioned against the greed and competition that they saw in modern society. In Chapter 8, I explored the way that Camp Grounded created a “community” to fight the sense of disconnection in modern life, doing so through specific forms of “more natural” sociality. In Chapters 6, 8 and 9, I argued that detoxers used ideas from psychology and neuroscience to work on themselves and their sociality, to flourish against the odds. In both Chapters 7 and 9, I showed how detoxers could survive modern life through the creation of personal “boundaries” and through changing thought processes.

Surviving a modern world through a return to “the natural” confirms what several writers have speculated to be the root of anti-tech narratives (Madrigal, 2013; Miller & Sinanan, 2014, p. 5; Horst & Miller, 2012, p. 12), as I showed in Chapter 2. These writers have suggested several similar theories to explain anti-tech narratives (Jurgenson, 2013, para. 8) but from these, I found that Max Weber’s “disenchantment” is the best theory to help us understand digital detoxing.

Max Weber described disenchantment in his lecture *Science as a Vocation* in 1918 (Weber, 2013).¹⁴¹ The disenchantment of the world, according to Weber (2013), meant that increasingly we would learn to dominate the natural world, predict it, and bend it towards our own will. For the world to be “disenchanted” means that it is no longer mysterious to us, but can be scientifically explained. Saler (2004) explains that disenchantment is “the removal of magic and meaning from life through the processes of rationalization,¹⁴² transforming modern¹⁴³ existence into, as Weber put it, ‘an iron cage of reason’” (Weber, 1958, p. 155; as cited in Saler, 2004, p. 138).

Weber’s concept of disenchantment rested upon a comparison with “savage” societies. While the “savage” needed to use “magical means in order to master or implore the spirits,” in modern times, “technical means and calculations perform the service” (Weber, 2013, p. 139). However, “one who rides on the streetcar has no idea how the car happened to get into motion,” Weber (2013, p. 139) said, “and he does not need to know”. Modern people could safely assume that someone else knows, or that Science could explain it. Compared with modern citizens, “the savage knows incomparably more about his tools” (Weber, 2013, p. 139); would know exactly how to obtain their food and what processes were required to do so.

In this way for Weber, “progress” was not necessarily valuable. In *Science As A Vocation* (Weber, 2013) he said that “civilised man” who lives amongst “continuous enrichment of culture” (p. 140) would only grasp at fleeting pleasures, rather than understanding a more deeper meaning to existence - thanks to its need for “progressiveness,” he said, “civilized life as such is meaningless” (p. 140). In traditional societies, instead, “the world remains a great

¹⁴¹ Disenchantment is a translation of the German word *Entzauberung*. Weber gave his speech in German, and so the commonly agreed upon translation of his phrase “entzauberung der welt” is “disenchantment of the world” but a more literal translation could be “de-magicking”, since “zauber” means magic. Weber borrowed the term from Friedrich Schiller.

¹⁴² Rationalisation is the process through which Weber said disenchantment would occur.

¹⁴³ The terms “modernity” and “disenchantment” are often linked e.g. Saler (2004: 138) refers to “the widespread association of modernity with disenchantment.”

enchanted garden” (Weber, 1971, p. 270). While we may be able to control more of the world around us, and bend it to our own ends, we might lose sight of the *meaning* of those actions. “He understood rationalization as a Faustian bargain,” Aupers and Houtman (2010, p. 15) argue; “although effectiveness and efficiency are greatly enhanced, these come at the price of widespread problems of meaning.”

Another important way that Weber theorised disenchantment was through the decline of religion. In a disenchanted world, there is a lack of clear guidance for how to live your life, contributing to the sense of “meaninglessness.” Aupers and Houtman (2010) explain that for Weber, “[Science] cannot provide answers to what are ultimately the most significant questions faced by mankind – the meaning of life, the purpose of the world, and the life plans to pursue or refrain from” (p. 1). To these questions, “Only a prophet or a savior can give the answers” (Weber, 1948, p. 153; as cited in Aupers & Houtman, 2010, p. 1).

Weber was writing at the turn of the 19th century, when steam engines and factories were technologies that perhaps influenced his view, as these machines “increasingly became an autonomous force beyond human control” (Aupers & Houtman, 2010, p. 15). Jacques Ellul (1967) helps illustrate this perspective in Weber’s work:

The machine, so characteristic of the nineteenth century, made an abrupt entrance into society [...] man has to put up with it the best he can. Men now live in conditions that are less than human. [...] Think of our dehumanized factories, our unsatisfied senses [...] our estrangement from nature. Life in such an environment has no meaning. (Ellul, 1967, p.p. 4-5; as cited in Aupers & Houtman, 2010, p. 16)

There have been numerous interpretations of Weber’s disenchantment, many of which disagree with one another. This is partly down to variation in translations, but also because his writing is complex. But the most common interpretation is that Weber identified a narrative over time, in which progressive technological and scientific developments would result in a different

relationship to the world; that certain things might be lost in that transition, which “savage” societies would retain. Broadly, Saler (2006) writes, disenchantment means that,

wonders and marvels have been demystified by science, spirituality has been supplanted by secularism, spontaneity has been replaced by bureaucratisation, and the imagination has been subordinated to instrumental reason.
(Saler, 2006, p. 692)

As a result, he goes on, modernity itself can feel “dehumanising” (Saler, 2006, p. 693).

Digital Detoxing and Disenchantment

This sense of what has been lost through the process of increased technological control over the world resonates with digital detoxers’ accounts of life in 2017. If technology designers did not care about user wellbeing, and was part of a system that valued profit over people; this could be progress “at the price of widespread problems of meaning” (Aupers & Houtman, 2010, p. 15).

Disenchantment could be thought of as a narrative within the Nature/Culture problem which I outlined in Chapter 2, since both are concerned with human progression from a more “natural” existence to a “civilised” one. Echoing Nature/Culture, in this case, human culture progressively “disenchanted” the world away from humanity’s more natural, “animal” roots, and digital detoxers often contrasted modern, digital life with how humans had evolved.

In Chapter 5, I argued that detoxers hoped to “return” to a “more natural” environment, which would make more sense to our bodies and minds, and their animal roots, since we ourselves came from the trees many years ago. *Quesadilla* said that Camp Grounded was the spiritual experience people had had, which she attributed to being in nature. Like Weber’s (1971) description of an “enchanted garden” (p. 270) the Mendocino forest was a spiritual space filled with wonder where they could marvel at the beauty of nature and feel a sense of perspective against the towering redwood trees.

What is crucial in the way that disenchantment - and Nature/Culture – can be applied to detoxers is the focus on the human experience, and an emphasis on “more human” values. Camp Grounded emphasised the idea that it would be “more human” to value each other in terms of their hopes, dreams, and darkest fears; rather than how much money they made or which company they worked for. It might feel “more natural” and “more human” for detoxers to ban “work talk” and real names, ultimately preventing any kind of networking. This was one societal norm which *Truth* said created “barriers” between one another – and was felt to be a widespread problem in the San Francisco Bay Area. As *Luminous* said, “we’re village creatures, we’re animals that thrive in community, [but] capitalism insists that we’re these individual economic units.” Ascribing nicknames and encouraging play could allow detoxers to be their “more natural” self, or “inner child,” discovering their own worth without connection to companies or success. Viewed in terms of disenchantment, each of these could fight against aspects of disenchanted modern life which alienated people from one another.

In Chapter 6, detoxers told me that a sense of community support was more natural, more human, and vital for mental health - far better, *Redwood* argued, than “taking pills.” Blending psychological ideas with the spiritual, they appropriated from the clinical realm to leverage what they felt was important. Camp Grounded was experienced as deeply therapeutic, and often instilled its attendees with a sense of acceptance, belonging, and confidence. These could then be channelled into becoming a happier person outside of the event itself - indeed, there was an expectation amongst digital detoxers to be “doing that work” on themselves and practicing “growth,” often holding a vision of the camp counselors as their ideal.

In Chapter 7, I situated detoxers efforts towards good mental health and happiness within a society that detoxers described as geared towards competition and profit. Detoxers were interested in the spiritual dimension of political choices which fail to meet the “human” needs of Americans; it would be “more human” to support people than allow inequality, and a politics of

“love” over “hate” would therefore be “more human.” The tech industry itself was another symptom of a society that did not care for its citizens; the flood of tech workers crushing the culture of San Francisco and exacerbating inequality, while remaining disconnected from the world they inhabited. Anguishing over how to fight inequality, detoxers chose to prioritise their mental health, retreating away from difficult information and working for tech companies when it helped them protect and build their own future.

In Chapter 8 detoxers emphasised the sense of acceptance and belonging at Camp Grounded, situating this within a society that was socially alienating and “disconnected.” Like Turkle’s (2015) recommendation that “[c]onversation is the most human [...] thing we do” (p. 3), detoxers were aspiring towards this more natural, “human” sense of community. This was described by *Bay Bridge* in neuroscientific terms; the need for choosing “real” dopamine, over “Facebook dopamine” through approved in-person gestures and behaviours, and in this way, community was conjured on an interaction-by-interaction basis. While in Chapter 6 detoxers used psychology, here they used neuroscience and behavioural science to leverage ideas of ideal sociality. Importantly, this was a top-down expectation, coming from the community “celebrities.”

In Chapter 9, detoxers were seeking to be more conscious about their digital use, rather than allowing themselves to be exploited or drawn into the desires of technology designers. They hoped to shift their thinking from “mindless” into “intentional” living, being “present” in their surroundings, which meant being “grateful” for the beauty of the world around them. I saw this to be a spiritual shift into a new appreciative, spiritual, “connected” mindset - finding magic in the everyday, and making each detail meaningful for themselves. What they had taken from camp itself helped them to work towards a more exciting vision of their own future, often in imitation of the counselors themselves.

Across these chapters, the community created their vision of a more natural way of life, resisting the alienating and disenchanting forces in the world around them. These values were made powerful by a desire to belong and the social world of the community, and many detoxers aspired towards the lives of the counselors who were a vision of confidence and happiness.

New Age Re-Enchantment

In each chapter I have shown the ways that detoxers were focused on restoring the world around them with what they felt that it lacked. This tendency to try to “fix” a disenchanted world has been called “re-enchantment.” Re-enchantment has been linked with New Age religion (Aupers and Houtman, 2010; Magliocco, 2004; Ruickbie, 2005; 2006; Lyon, 2000: 34). Magliocco (2004) writes that “Like Max Weber, Pagans see the world as having been progressively “disenchanted” by the developments of modernity” (p. 120). Similarly, Aupers and Houtman (2010) describe the “increased popularity of New Age, Paganism, Wicca, and the like, as indicating a present-day re-enchantment of the world” (p. 4).¹⁴⁴

Heelas (1996) explains that New Agers believe “we malfunction because we have been indoctrinated [...] ‘brainwashed’ – by mainstream society and culture [...] materialism, competitiveness, [...]” (p.p. 18-19). They feel that “the importance [society] attaches to playing roles – are held to disrupt what it is to be authentically human” (Heelas, 1996, p.p. 18-19). To continue to subscribe to the norms of mainstream society, in New Agers’ view, “is to remain the victim of unnatural, deterministic and misguided routines; to be enslaved by unfulfillable desires and deep-seated insecurities” (Heelas, 1996, p.p. 18-19). Through a rejection of this, they hope to “encounter[ing] a new realm of being [...] what we are by nature” (Heelas, 1996, p.p. 18-19).

¹⁴⁴ Aupers and Houtman (2010) draw a causal relationship between disenchantment and New Age. They feel that “From a Weberian perspective, it is not surprising at all that the problems of meaning created by rationalization and disenchantment have *produced* New Age as a modern religious attempt to overcome them” (Aupers & Houtman, 2010, p. 12; emphasis mine).

Similarly, detoxers fought the disconnection of modern life, and of life in the San Francisco Bay Area, which they described as selfish, profit oriented, and competitive. Rather than fall victim to “work talk”, and “playing roles” of jobs, they could value each other for their personalities and shared memories. Pagans tend to feel that “Civilised humanity, by losing touch with the primitive [...] lost and subordinated what was essentially human within itself” (Adler, 2006, p. 274). Adler (2006) argues that “it is clear that primitive societies [...] allowed for more participation in community life” and that aspects of primitive life were indeed “more in tune with human existence” (p. 274).

Luminous described American society as failing to meet human needs; nurture individuals, teach them how to manage emotions or practice self care, or even value themselves aside from their financial standing. At Camp Grounded, detoxers went against the mainstream to work on mental health, to come together as a loving resistance, and to find happiness despite your surroundings. Together, they could find childlike joy in adulthood. Prioritising each of these things, for them, would be “more human.” New Age, as I explained in Chapter 4, is “a conscious attempt to reform Western society” promoting “values of self-responsibility, plural life-styles, psychological growth, creativity, affection, and a sense of ecological connection” (English-Lueck, 1990, p. 1). These values are felt to be necessary in the context of a disenchanted modern world that has broken with the way of life that humans previously lived.

New Age re-enchantment intersects with political identity, and the literature helps shed light on the importance of political identity to digital detoxers. Pagan San Francisco-based author Starhawk (1988)¹⁴⁵ calls the domination of the natural world (typically from men) “power over” (p.p. 2-3; as cited in Magliocco, 2004, p. 201). Magliocco (2004) explains that for Starhawk the people behind modern progress are disconnected from the “exploitation” (Magliocco, 2004, p.

¹⁴⁵ Magliocco (2004) describes Starhawk as “the most prominent founder of the San Francisco group known as “Reclaiming” and one of the most influential writers in the [Neopagan] movement” (p. 201).

202) they carry out and its “impact on the environment, society, and the individual” (Magliocco, 2004, p. 201), arguing that this is the root of “estrangement” of “human consciousness” in modern life (Magliocco, 2004, p. 201). Starhawk feels that “humans are estranged from nature, from other human beings, and from parts of themselves” (Starhawk, 1988; as cited in Magliocco, 2004, p. 202).¹⁴⁶ In Chapter 7 I similarly argued that detoxers were distressed at the “disconnection” between “tech bros” and the inequality and damage they were inflicting on the San Francisco Bay Area, for example extolling the values of equal society at Burning Man while exacerbating homelessness and evicting the local counterculture. Magliocco explains that Starhawk (1988) hopes to replace “power over” with “power from within” (Starhawk, 1988; as cited in Magliocco, 2004, p. 202), a term that Magliocco (2004) explains, means “I am able” (p. 202). This resonates with detoxers’ own emphasis on spiritual survival amongst “broken” surroundings; a flourishing that would see them be their best selves, healthy, happy, in defiance of the broken, unhealthy, competitive world around them.

Just as Starhawk (1988; as cited in Magliocco, 2004, p. 202) sees people as “estranged” through their disconnection from the self, each other, and the natural world, Camp Grounded fostered a sense of “returning” or “reconnecting” to each of these three things. The digital detox tagline itself was “disconnect to reconnect.” Camp Grounded itself, like a Pagan festival, is a kind of ritual that “allow us to re-create that unity in an explosive, nonabstract, gut-level way. Rituals have the power to reset the terms of our universe until we find ourselves suddenly and truly ‘at home’” Adler (2006, p. 137). Just as the campfire “thrilled the primitive chords of remembrance” (Seton, 2016, p. 5; see Chapter 5), Camp Grounded stirred detoxers’ imagination in a way that offered a powerful reminder of the spiritual dimensions of belonging to the human race.

¹⁴⁶ Magliocco (2004, p. 204) links Starhawk’s views to Morris Berman (1984), who “suggests a reenchantment of the world, a politics of consciousness which would reconnect the individual to the community and to the larger world.”

Many detoxers described this as a reconnection with their authentic self, which they phrased in terms of working on their mental health (Chapter 6), or on their mental processes (Chapter 9). In their experience, after camp they began prioritising what they “really wanted” from life, being engaged and conscious - “intentional” rather than allowing for the “meaninglessness” of disenchanted life take over. Re-enchantment was enacted not only through ritual at camp grounded, but in everyday life. Feeling that their environment was unnatural and persuading into unhealthy behaviours, they felt the need to consciously choose their own path. This was done on a long-term scale as I argued in Chapter 6, but it was also done on a moment by moment basis where they attempted to nudge their thought processes towards a larger goal of living “intentionally” (Chapter 9). While their lives might have looked the same on the outside, or they might have been using technology just as much, it was an internal change that had occurred.

Digital detoxing was not primarily concerned with an addiction to screens, nor curing unhealthy digital use. Instead, it was about transcending the unnatural, inhuman aspects of disenchanted America, by imitating a vision of what being human means. Digital detoxing imitated tribal sociality, as a strategy of re-enchantment. With ritual providing this visceral sense of returning to a human family, at Camp Grounded, they could begin to re-enchant each of their lives.

An Ongoing Disenchanting

Before his lecture *Science as a Vocation*, Weber attended the Monte Verità (Mountain of Truth) community in Ascona, Switzerland. This was “a community that had turned its back on the iron cage of modernity to take refuge in enchantment and mysticism” (Josephson-Storm, 2017, p. 277), and an “early prototype for a hippie commune, full of nature people (Naturmenschen), and complete with nudity, free love, and vegetarianism” (Josephson-Storm, 2017, p. 275). Its leaders were interested in Eastern religions as well as “palm reading and tea-leaf reading to spells and séances and Ouija boards” (Josephson-Storm, 2017, p. 275). While not necessarily

joining in with these activities, Weber would at least have been aware of them. At the time that he theorized “disenchantment,” which captured a sense of the “dehumanised” factories and grinding gears of human progress, there were wider discussions of “bibliomancy [...] witches [...] spiritualism and angels” (Josephson-Storm, 2017, p. 298). In this way, at the time that he theorised the disenchantment of the world, Weber would be accustomed to a variety of “enchantment.”

Josephson-Storm (2017) argues that scholars tend to “assume that a disenchanted world has absolutely no magic in it” (p. 271)¹⁴⁷ - but that this is a misinterpretation. Weber’s writing never sought to describe a disenchanted world, but rather an “active, ongoing *disenchancing*” (Josephson-Storm, 2017, p. 300). This *disenchancing* is an ongoing back and forth between disenchantment and enchantment, in constant tension. Rather than there being empirical evidence for disenchantment, or a world that lacks enchantment entirely, disenchantment is a trope; a movement; a feeling. Josephson-Storm (2017) explains that like disenchantment, “modernity” is similarly less of a literal time period, but a word used to actively create a sense of “rupture” between today and the vague imagined past (p. 7). Saler (2004) similarly writes that “[t]his widespread association of modernity with disenchantment is [...] a performative discourse: it helps create the perspective it describes” (p. 138). We ourselves create these tropes anew every day, each time we categorise modern life as fundamentally different, more rational, less human, than the world that our ancestors lived in.

Just as my initial approach was to recognise the social fact of digital dissatisfaction (Chapter 2) I have found rich evidence of the experience of disenchantment, and I argue that disenchantment, too, should be seen as a social fact. Weber’s disenchantment helps us to understand what digital detoxers believed in, and how Camp Grounded became meaningful for

¹⁴⁷ Some find that digital technology itself paradoxically is mysterious and enchanting, which “turn[s] the modern Weberian perspective up-side down” (Aupers, 2010, p. 235) but this may misunderstand the way that disenchantment and enchantment work together (Josephson-Storm, 2017, p. 271).

them. I argue that detoxers were applying this existing cultural trope to life in 2017, and to their digital experiences. Paired with more recent research in New Age re-enchantment, this theory sheds light on the way that detoxers felt they were working to fix a broken modern world.

Part 2: Science and Re-enchantment

Across the findings chapters I have argued that detoxers interweaved psychology and neuroscience into their beliefs about technology and the modern world. In this part, I build on these arguments and use disenchantment to better understand how and why detoxers used scientific ideas.

In Chapter 5 I began to argue that detoxers hoped to recreate a sense of “returning” to a “tribe” or an imagined pre-modern state, while in Chapter 6 I argued that they felt this community support would have a psychological benefit. In Chapter 8 I argued that detoxers like *Truth* and *Bay Bridge* were both creating, and evaluating, the aspirational idea of “community” in the modern world, using behavioural science and neuroscience. I built on this in Chapter 8 and 9, to argue that detoxers understood the need to imitate tribal sociality, and use their technology more “intentionally,” in terms of the brain.

Bay Bridge’s hope that Camp Grounded would show people what “real dopamine” felt like as opposed to “red-dot-Facebook-notification-dopamine” is similar to discussions of “the natural” in anti-tech rhetoric (Chapter 2). Turkle’s (2011) writing suggests that “prior forms of sociality were somehow more natural or authentic by virtue of being less mediated” (Turkle, 2011; as cited in Horst and Miller, 2012, p. 12). Indeed, *Bay Bridge*’s use of “real” versus “fake” dopamine does imply that offline sociality is more natural, healthier, and *Gypsy* argued that it would be more satisfying. However, I build on this existing theme of “the natural” in anti-tech rhetoric, by showing *how* detoxers conceived of offline sociality as more natural, using scientific ideas, to imagine the ancient.

Detoxers justified their actions using pieced-together parts of new scientific findings, which for them, neuroscientifically proved modern life to be unnatural. In this view, humans evolved for a different environment which is long gone. More specifically for detoxers, our brains are “designed” for another world. Part of their effort to create “community” in an otherwise alienating modern world followed scientific advice that suggested it was good for them. In Chapter 5, I compared Camp Grounded to the paleo diet; just as those who follow the paleo diet do so because they wanted to eat what their stomach evolved to (Knight, 2015), detoxers attended Camp Grounded because they believed that it was closer to what their brain evolved to experience. Inching closer to this experience of the ancient was a spiritual experience, and as such, I argue that science itself was used by detoxers to conjure a sense of enchantment.

Inward Re-enchantment

For detoxers, tech designers could stimulate the same parts of the brain with a Facebook notification that you might receive from meeting a friend. The human brain - this caveman brain - was vulnerable to these unnatural modern forces, since the tech industry exploited their “human need” for sociality. This would be a disenchantment of the inner self, an “exploitation” of “human resources” (Starhawk, 1988; as cited in Magliocco, 2004, p. 202) towards profit. Being tricked in this way would draw you unwittingly into Weber’s (2012) description of “the iron cage,” a metaphor for the sense of being trapped in a disenchanted world, with no clear reason or purpose for your behaviour. Detoxers were attempting to learn how their everyday devices worked, using new popular understandings of neuroscience, like Weber’s example of driving a car without necessarily knowing how to build a car yourself. In this way neuroscience could help them understand the threat of disenchantment in their home, and in their intimate interactions with digital technology.

Williams (2017) argues that “In the short term, [persuasion from the digital attention economy] can distract us from doing the things we want to do. In the longer term, it can distract us from living the lives we want to live” (p. 6). Similarly, *Artemis*’ speech and other comments from detoxers suggested that long term this would prevent a person feeling truly supported, in control of their own actions and thoughts, and ultimately prevent flourishing and happiness. But technology was just one example amongst the values of their society which they found exploitative and “less human.”

While in one sense Camp Grounded “reconnected” detoxers with a vision of “the natural” that was external - like the forest itself or an ancient image of the tribe - much of that reconnection was internal. Camp Grounded inspired detoxers to change themselves and their lives. In Chapter 6 *Rawr* had felt that she had never been able to “be who I really was,” and when she attended camp, she became inspired by the people she met. She asked herself “why am I struggling? [...] ‘cause these people aren’t.” She left her job and moved across the country, to a place where she could “be myself.” In Chapter 8, *Love Bug* covered her apartment with bright coloured paint, photos of people she loved, and trinkets she had collected from her camp experiences over the years. Each of these mementos spoke to her, told her that she was loved by others and by herself, and reminded her to feel joyful and that she belonged to something special. While working at her office job, she was planning to switch careers; she knew she was on a path to a “new life,” something she reminded herself with through the counseling slogan on her laptop background.

Mindfulness could be part of a spiritual resistance against these neuroscientific forces of disenchantment coming from the tech industry. Following popular understandings of psychology and neuroscience, detoxers were working on their thought processes, thinking their way into an enchanted world, and an enchanted vision of themselves. Armed with lay knowledge of psychology and neuroscience, they were seemingly able to viscerally feel an

improvement in their life through the use of self-analysis, mindfulness, or other ways of nudging their minds and the resulting chemical processes out of one state and into another. In this way, detoxers used psychology and neuroscience both as a way to conceptualise the forces of disenchantment in modern life, and as a way to fight it.

New Age Science

New Age is "a worldview that includes both science and spirituality" (Drury, 2004, p. 10), with New Agers having "a penchant for bringing together the technical and the spiritual, the scientific and the religious" (Hess, 1993, p. 4). In Chapter 4 I explained that New Age has typically incorporated the work of Freud and Jung, and that for New Agers, working on the self becomes a religious exercise (Hanegraaff, 1996, p. 183). In Chapter 6 I argued that detoxers were blending psychological ideas with the spiritual. Following Rose and Abi-Rached (2013) I find that neuroscience is a more recent branch of the sciences to be incorporated into the everyday lives of digital detoxers.

Some readers may feel that the psychology and neuroscience that detoxers' use is correct, for example, that you do indeed receive a burst of dopamine from checking a notification, or that blue light from screens prevents restful sleep. Regardless of their factual basis, science was used productively by detoxers to make claims about the world they inhabited; that there was something better or healthier in the past, that was now being lost with the use of digital technologies - and that this science could be leveraged towards self improvement and happiness.

Digital detoxers were using science only as and when it fit with their beliefs about a disenchanted world. This is common in New Age groups. In his analysis of New Age texts, Hanegraaff (1996) finds that New Age science does not follow validity or rigor, but fits within a "philosophy of nature" (p. 64)¹⁴⁸ which unifies the world into one picture that makes *intuitive sense*; science is used when fitting with a predetermined belief or narrative. This, of course, is

¹⁴⁸ He calls this "naturphilosophie."

not science at all. In this way, Hanegraaff (1996) explains, arguing with New Agers about specific scientific claims is entirely counterproductive (p. 66).

In Chapter 8, *Truth* hoped to swap one word in a question to lower barriers and find a better conversation; in Chapter 5, *Ice Cream Sundae* felt that having everyday life “stripped” away would reveal that “we’re all a human family.” The Snowball Ritual (Chapter 6) left detoxers like *Tiki* feeling that their problems were “universal” while the Anonymous hugging ritual provided a sense of comfort and safety in the arms of strangers. Detoxers believed that once misunderstandings were vanquished, everyone would feel closer to one another, based on an underlying belief in which humanity tends towards loving acceptance, and that the “natural” state of things is an invisible bond between all of us. Following Hanegraaff (1996, p. 64), I argue that science was a placeholder for a New Age belief about humanity in which we are all connected by our joint humanity, used by detoxers to argue that we *should* work to overcome modern “disconnection” from each other, the natural world, and our authentic inner selves.

Enchanting Science

In the narrative of disenchantment, scientific progress and mastering our surroundings is what ultimately disenchant the world. Yet science was a key theme in the way that digital detoxers conceptualised what it means to be human.

I found that detoxers were using evolutionary psychology and neuroscience to uncover the secrets of our ancestors who inhabited a “more natural” environment. They imagined the way it would feel to live out this ancient form of life, envisioning the dopamine and oxytocin it would bring forth in their bodies and minds. They did this in ritual at camp, where it was a powerful feeling of returning to essential aspects of humanity; and they did this at home, contrasting the ancient with their modern lives, and using it to question what was the most essential aspect of

their own personal journey. In fact, the science that detoxers used served to make the world more meaningful and *more enchanted*.

Josephson-Storm (2017) argues that science itself, while a part of human progress and processes of disenchantment, can itself offer new possibilities for enchantment (p. 313). Space exploration, for example, is based in physics and engineering, but might inspire spiritual feelings of our connection to the cosmos.¹⁴⁹ When we learned that our bodies are made of elements from collapsing stars (Sagan, 1990), this offers the potential for greater feelings of a spiritual connection with the universe. Similarly, developments in psychology or neuroscience allowed digital detoxers to use new research on how humans evolved, to think about what it means to be human.¹⁵⁰

This may be a trend that extends further than digital detoxing. While writing up my thesis I submitted my DNA to a website that showed me where my own DNA came from.¹⁵¹ As I clicked through the website I found myself imagining each small migration, each pairing of people, spanning back in time. The recent popularity of DNA tests like that available on Ancestry.com might exemplify a trend for modern people to dream about the prehistoric past. This imagining is made possible through the development of genetic science, offered to everyday people who wish to learn about their “roots.” The cultural significance of DNA tests like this could be that we now have a powerful new tool for imagining the past, and what it means to be human, just as the cultural significance of psychology, neuroscience, and behavioural science, was to reimagine the spiritual meaning of human connection in the San Francisco Bay Area.

¹⁴⁹ Religion can be highly compatible with space work, see Wiebel, 2020.

¹⁵⁰ Taylor (2007) described “magic” as belief in “moral forces” which invisibly shape our existence (p. 29); by this definition dopamine or serotonin may as well be magic, this science further creating a sense of enchantment for detoxers.

¹⁵¹ Submitting DNA samples to these websites is not recommended (Zhang, 2018).

Hanegraaff (1996) explains that New Agers specifically use “new” science - rather than old (p. 62). “Traditional science [...] is thoroughly condemned as materialistic and conducive to human alienation,” he writes (Hanegraaff, 1996, p. 62), but “the New Age has discovered the new science as a potential ally against it” (Hanegraaff, 1996, p. 62). This seemed to be true for digital detoxers, since *Redwood* in Chapter 6 felt that Western psychology and “taking pills” was a flawed ideology - that community love and “connection” was a more effective, more “natural” therapeutic aid. Hanegraaff (1996) explains, “by re-labeling their perspective as ‘leading edge science,’ they see themselves as the avant-garde of scientific progress: pioneers of a radical new worldview” (p. 63). In this way, when detoxers used work by Turkle, or invoked neuroscience, they could feel that they were talking about something cutting edge. Like Krcmar’s (2009) participants who did not watch television (p. 216; as cited in Portwood-Stacer, 2013, p. 9; Chapter 2), detoxers saw themselves as “iconoclasts,” pioneers who were informed and brave enough to deconstruct the status quo. While Weber argued that Science cannot provide the answer to modern “problems of meaning”, detoxers did indeed use science in their search for happiness and meaning.

The Ancient and the Modern

In Chapter 4, English-Lueck (2010) described Silicon Valley as a culture of “rampant experimentation,” which is “both scientific and countercultural” (p. 6), where people follow the philosophy of “use any tool that works” (English-Lueck, 2010, p. 191), freely drawing from the array of cultural practices in the San Francisco Bay Area. In Chapters 6, 8, and 9, I showed how detoxers followed English-Lueck’s (2010) description of Silicon Valley experimentation and optimisation; in 6, they worked on the self, in 8, they worked on their relationships; in 9 they worked on their thought processes, each time using a blend of scientific and spiritual ideas.

English-Lueck (2010) found that her participants might hope to “enhance concentration” using a combination of “double lattes” and “Ginkgo biloba tablets” (p. 192). Similarly, digital detoxers

were incorporating anything from mindfulness, burning sage, fitbits, coffee measuring apps, or hugs that provided oxytocin - each on the basis that they might be useful in achieving their desired goals.

Adler (2013) explains that the Pagan “quest” is to “take the best of some of the ancient stuff [...] [and] combine it with a way of living in the modern world.” For Adler (2013), Pagans are people who hope to “get to the ecstatic”, but “can get up in the morning and still make our living as doctors or computer programmers.” Similarly, detoxers were hoping to reconcile the modern and the ancient in order to optimise themselves and their experiences, harnessing tribal sociality towards their individual happiness, using ideas about the way humans evolved towards their mental health, enjoying the “primitive thrill” of the campfire (Seton, 2016, p. 5) while simultaneously retaining their modern lives.

Deloria (1998) describes the act of “playing indian” where New Agers can enjoy “both civilised order and savage freedom at the same time,” - to “have their cake and eat it too” (p. 157). Similarly, detoxers didn't really want tribal life, they wanted the best parts of it. They wanted to be both ancient and new; magical, while using technological tools that have predictable outcomes; spiritual, at the same time as being rational, medical, and scientific, “playing” at tribal life (Lurhmann, 1991, p. 333) while maintaining Western rationality. At Camp Grounded they could have their cake and eat it, too.

Part 3: A Human Family

I have argued that Weber’s disenchantment is a helpful theory to understand what made Camp Grounded meaningful for detoxers, and how they used science as part of their re-enchantment. In this section I am critical of digital detoxers’ New Age beliefs about one “human family” and their primitivism - namely that more “primitive” societies retain an authenticity which

“civilized” ones have lost. I conclude, however, by reiterating the ways that it was a deeply meaningful event for those who attended.

New Age Universalism

When Weber attended the Monte Verità community in Ascona, he would have been surrounded by a variety of practices - “palm reading [...] tea-leaf reading [...] spells [...] séances and Ouija boards,” (Josephson-Storm, 2017, p. 275). Yet Weber described himself as “absolutely unmusical religiously” with “no need or ability” for religion (Weber, 1975, p. 324). We can’t know exactly what Weber thought about the practices at Ascona: some feel he “adopted a rationalist stance” and that he “firmly dismissed” them as “weakness” and “plain humbug or self-deception” (Weber, 1948, p. 149, 154-155; as cited in Aupers & Houtman, 2010, p. 3), while others think he referred to them as “no humbug, but rather something very sincere and genuine” (Weber, 1948, p. 155; as cited in Josephson-Storm, 2017, p. 277), and that he saw them as a “positive, if somewhat naïve, model of utopian enchantment” (Weber, 1948, p. 155; as cited in Josephson-Storm, 2017, p. 277)). The story of Weber’s visits to this community strike me as similar to my own attendance to Camp Grounded where my atheism was an important aspect of my experience (Chapter 3); like Weber, I was a social scientist trying to make sense of practices and beliefs being borrowed and re-imagined at an enchanting community retreat.

At Camp Grounded I would not, or maybe could not, be moved by the experience - not quite “going native” (Chapter 3). As an atheist and a Brit, I was unfamiliar with summer camp and Native American Indian imagery, confused by eye gazing, and by the desire to experiment with community. Ultimately, Camp Grounded did not “work” for me. But during my time with detoxers, I was repeatedly told that Camp Grounded could be transformative for me, and that the experience would meet not only my unspoken human needs, but anyone else’s I could

imagine. Anyone who hadn't had their heart opened by the camp experience yet must be a cynical person, closing themselves off from discomfort and ultimately growth.¹⁵²

My life is not one of blanket "incorrigible rationalis[m]" (English-Lueck, 1990, p. 6).¹⁵³ At *Fog's* playshop, I didn't really believe that I could learn how to change the weather with the power of my own mind - but I could still enjoy and find meaning in the exercises. When I was a child I followed spells in a book for witches like they were recipes and attempted astral projection, I now have tarot cards and sage, I watch programs about the paranormal, and during my art degree I sought to recreate the experience of floating in amongst the stars.¹⁵⁴ I could instinctively understand enchantment myself but when my research did not leave me "transformed", a palpable disappointment in my participants led me to understand their New Age, universal beliefs (Chapter 3). This is fitting with the findings of other New Age researchers. Magliocco (2004) explains that,

At its best, [Neopagan universalism] draws attention to our shared humanity; at its worst, it flattens and homogenizes difference to the standards of white middle-class culture, assuming that all peoples understand the universe as we do [...]
(Magliocco, 2004, p. 233)

As I explained in Chapter 3, universalism is common in New Age groups (Hanegraaff, 1996, p. 329). Magliocco (2004, p. 217) explains that Pagans often use universalist notions of human similarities. By creating the "family" of Camp Grounded, detoxers created an imagined microcosm of humanity, and through "connecting" with people there, they could restore their faith in humanity at large. New Agers often notice similarities across cultural practices, and find this to be "evidence of a greater spiritual truth underlying all religious traditions," and they "often perceive the act of borrowing from another culture as a compliment" (Eller, 1995, p. 75, as cited in Magliocco, 2004, p. 224). Rather than a personal link to traditions, Pagans often feel

¹⁵² In Chapter 3 I explain that differences and friction between us helped me notice detoxers' universalism.

¹⁵³ Cuthbertson (2018) asks scholars to "reveal their own religious, scientific, or metaphysical positions" when researching disenchantment (p. 7).

¹⁵⁴ This was inspired by Carl Sagan's work and reminiscent of Bennett's (2001) definition of enchantment, which is similar to awe or wonder.

an “affinity” with practices that “become[s] one of many ways of imagining identity” (Eller, 1995, p. 75, as cited in Magliocco, 2004, p. 236-237). Although Camp Grounded didn’t explicitly appropriate from one single culture in large amounts, detoxers imitated tribal life because “the Western world doesn’t work for humanity,” imitating a vision of the tribal because they claimed a spiritual, ancestral “affinity” with the breadth of human culture throughout time and space.

Savage Fantasies

In Chapter 6, detoxers used ideas from evolutionary psychology to argue that Camp Grounded’s community, village life, imitated the environment in which the human brain evolved. In Chapter 8, camp organisers preferred the dopamine and oxytocin that came from in-person, versus online sociality. For detoxers, since all human brains had the same requirements, and Camp Grounded recreated the ancestral environment, Camp Grounded should feel natural to anyone, and anyone disagreeing simply did not understand how healthy, effective, and natural it was. In this way, by talking about the human brain, detoxers were claiming their *specific* beliefs as *universal*.

In this primitivist view, modern people have lost something important that the caveman may have retained. Like *Bay Bridge* argued (Chapter 8) our brains would enjoy the kind of dopamine that it was designed to experience, in an alignment between human needs and their environments. Knight (2015) argues that the paleo diet is “nutritional primitivism,” which “refigures third-world scarcity as desirable” (p. 448). Conjuring a two-dimensional vision of a “tribe” (Knight, 2015, p. 447), her participants argued that this tribe would eat “the foods that nature intended for them to eat” like meat and berries, while the modern person can “grab a donut or grab a cake” (Knight, 2015, p. 448). Knight’s (2015) participants were interested in food, while detoxers were interested in sociality. While digital sociality was readily available, it was healthier to seek out in-person contact. In detoxers’ explanations, I heard them describe the

same imaginary tribe, invoked to describe better social relationships, and therefore better mental health.¹⁵⁵¹⁵⁶ Their brain-based explanations of the need to “return” to the ancestral environment is what I call *neurological primitivism*; a term which helps emphasise how science can leverage belief, how universalism obscures specific viewpoints, and how ‘new’ science can perpetuate racism and exotification.

Detoxers were committed to fighting racism and inequality in their country (Chapter 7), yet they created a “return to nature” that I have argued is rooted in primitivist beliefs (Chapter 5).

"Ironically, while Neopaganism likes to construct itself as critical of colonialism, racism, and ethnocentrism," Magliocco (2004) writes, “its ideology is based on nineteenth-century notions of primitivism and cultural evolution” (p. 233). These nineteenth-century narratives can be traced to early anthropology, which espoused the narrative of unilinear cultural evolution and that the “more primitive” or “savage” has yet to become “civilised” (unilinear cultural evolution, n.d.). Anthropologists become the go-between, providing knowledge of people who clearly live in the present day, yet for us “exist [...] simply to embody our prehistory” (Di Leonardo, 2000, p. 30).

It was the same “savage” from early anthropological accounts who detoxers may have been drawing upon in their visions of more natural life. Digital detoxers felt their Camp Grounded “tribe” aspired to recreate the way that their ancestors evolved. In Chapters 2 and 5, Horst and Miller (2012) argue that anti-tech writers like Sherry Turkle “exploit[s] anthropological writing on small scale societies which are taken to be a vision of authentic humanity in its more natural and less-mediated state” (p. 12). Camp Grounded - which I have taken to be an example of the anti-tech narrative (Chapter 1 and 2) - lived out this same vision, misusing anthropological research.

¹⁵⁵ This is fitting with my argument (Sutton, 2017) that comparisons with food are useful for understanding value judgments about how we “consume” technology.

¹⁵⁶ This also implies that the caveman had the best mental health of any later iteration of human society.

In *The Use and Abuse of Anthropology* Rosaldo (1980) argues that literature has used anthropological writing to project modern concerns onto the past, “using anthropology as a precedent for modern arguments and claims” (p. 392). Detoxer’s own phrases like “our animal humanness” and “how we were designed” pointed towards an archetypal human brain, tribes and cavemen used to conjure their arguments about “human needs.” This neurological primitivism, or brain-based explanations for a need for a tribal life, turns anthropological writing into a “hall of mirrors” where we continue to find ourselves at every turn (Rosaldo, 1980, p. 392). More often than not, McKinnon (2006, p. 4) argues, we use evolutionary psychology not to objectively understand the past, but to describe whatever our culture values today, conflating “natural” human behaviour with modern, Western norms. Rosaldo (1980) explains, though instrumentally using these stories of how humans evolved, they are “finding in their origin stories a universalised version of contemporary concerns” (p. 392; as cited in Seaver, 2015). Similarly, detoxers “return” to a “more human” experience posits a specific vision of humanity, looking upon the caveman through modern-tinted glasses.

To view any culture as less developed, or more social, is now “antithetical to what anthropological theory actually stands for... all people are equally cultural” (Horst & Miller, 2012, p. 12). But the trope of the “noble savage” is alive and well (Di Leonardo, 2000, p. 33). American television show “survivor” features a group stranded on an island; a narrative which Delisle (2003) argues is “nineteenth century colonial adventure fiction” (p. 45), and an experience through which participants describe “growing as a person” (Delisle, 2003, p. 50). Detoxers not only imagined the lives of their ancestors in the *past*, but compared their experience with other countries in the *present*, noticing how American society had been designed with particular values in mind, and choosing the best values to imitate (Chapter 7), ultimately using these nineteenth-century narratives of cultural evolution to place Western society as more developed, more civilised, and further into a misled, technological future.

Conflating the “other” with the past, as I argued in Chapter 5, has served to legitimise the erasure of the Native American people – and so while the disenchantment story is ostensibly one of Western mistakes and spiritual suffering, the glorification of the noble savage will always come back to these violent narratives.

Roots to the Past

While it is important to be critical of the beliefs that underpinned Camp Grounded, the core of my approach is to understand how a digital detox could be such an important moment in their lives from digital detoxers’ perspective. Detoxers felt that they were searching, experimenting, and creating something important together. Through her research on Pagan communities in America, Adler (2013) explains that she has learned, “Everybody on some level is searching for their ancestors.” Similar to my own experience of a DNA test, Camp Grounded points towards a desire to use science to imagine roots to the past, and a way for people to find their place in the world.

The “affinity” that New Agers feel with appropriated cultural practices, Magliocco (2004, p.p. 236-7) explains, is “[...] in essence an aesthetic and spiritual sentiment”; their choices “based on a desire to return to origins” (Magliocco, 2004, p.p. 217-8). New Age rituals give people a connection to either “real or imagined” ancestral customs, creating “powerful affective states that gave individuals a sense of connection to something greater than themselves - a tradition that had endured through time and space” (Magliocco, 2004, p. 224). Similarly, Silent Time (Chapter 5) used a variety of cultural practices mashed together, to create a therapeutic and spiritual experience which made them feel closer to nature and “a sense of connection to something greater than themselves.”¹⁵⁷ Magliocco (2004) goes on to explain that rather than focus on whether individuals have a right to use specific cultural practices [my emphasis]:

¹⁵⁷ Magliocco (2004, p. 224) found her Bay Area based Pagan participants refused to appropriate Native American Indian culture which she attributed to local caution. My participants were indeed highly sensitive to appropriation of customs or practices, but fell into pitfalls ideologically.

[...] in the end, what moves us may not be a matter of blood [...] but of spiritual and emotional *longing*. The art of magic allows our imagination to transcend the boundaries of blood and geography, to experience, at least in part, other cultures and time periods and feel empathy with other living beings.
(Magliocco, 2004, p. 237)

Other researchers of New Age spirituality have captured a similar sentiment of “longing” “searching,” and “transcend[ing] blood and geography.” Zutshi’s (2019) *India Syndrome* describes white Westerner’s attendance to The Bhakti Fest¹⁵⁸ in India as an example of “spiritual tourism” (para. 20). According to Zutshi (2019), these events are “undergirded by common features of the New Age worldview: a disenchantment with mainstream society and the belief that modernity is in crisis” (para. 13). Like detoxers, attendees to the Bhakti fest would be searching for a sense of affinity with “a human family” specifically to counter the sense of disenchantment in their own lives. At the end of the festival, resting under the stars, Zutshi (2019) felt a “palpable sense of shared joy and bonding,” remarking on how “refreshingly sincere and earnest” the people were (para. 26). “One could be forgiven,” he writes (Zutshi, 2019, para. 27), “[...] for feeling that we are all part of a bigger plan, and that things will work out just fine, even if the shrieking news channels indicate the opposite.”

Zutshi (2019) captures the same sentiment behind detoxers’ re-enchantment at Camp Grounded. Camp served as a reminder of “what makes us human,” because their modern experiences, those in San Francisco or using digital technology, had left them feeling that something had been lost since humans departed from tribal life. Using that vision of “humanity” to shift their life stories, they could extend the experience into their everyday life, where they cared for themselves amongst desolate surroundings and flourished despite the odds. Both at camp itself and in their day-to-day lives, they could use that new sense of “affinity” (Magliocco, 2004, p.p. 236-7) to shift their lives to a place where could “find [them]selves suddenly and truly ‘at home’” (Adler, 2006, p. 137).

¹⁵⁸ This is part of the “transformational festival circuit” which includes Burning Man.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that Weber's disenchantment helps us understand why detoxers gathered together at Camp Grounded, and that in keeping with studies of other New Age groups, Camp Grounded was a form of re-enchantment, working to undo the disenchantment of modern life. Detoxers created a temporary return to tribal life, which inspired them to shift thought processes and spiritually resist an unhealthy and exploitative environment in their everyday lives.

I have also argued that disenchantment helps to make sense of detoxers' use of science. New Agers often use science which is "leading edge" (Hanegraaff, 1996, p. 63), and detoxers similarly invoked neuroscience to tend to themselves and their wellbeing. Although ostensibly contradictory, science can indeed be enchanting, and was helping detoxers to imagine stepping back in time, or reconnecting with more authentic visions of humanity; to phrase and leverage their ideas for how humans were "designed" to live, and how to live well today. After Camp Grounded they could use science to enchant everyday life, using pieced together ideas to design a life for themselves; taking some of the ancient and some of the new, to make their modern experiences more bearable.

I have been critical of detoxer's universal ideas of "how we are designed" and deconstructed these beliefs, calling them neurological primitivism. Like Knight's (2015) term "nutritional primitivism" this helps to show the way that modern ideas about health that use the ancestral environment actually recreate racist and colonial narratives. Taken altogether, I show both how powerful the story of disenchantment was for detoxers, and how it can uphold these narratives in a digital context.

Through these arguments, I have shown that conceptualising digital detoxing is a far more nuanced and complicated endeavour than the existing literature (Chapter 2) suggests. Crucially if we look at disenchantment as a social fact, just as with digital dissatisfaction, this creates an *opportunity* to understand what productive work it is doing amongst users of technology today. In the final chapter (Chapter 11) I return to this point to argue that this ethnography offers a much richer view into anti-tech rhetoric than the literature thus far.

Chapter 11

Conclusion

Introduction

In this final chapter I summarise the findings of the research project, and return to the research questions that I laid out in Chapter 2. I summarise how my findings speak back to existing literature on digital disconnection or “non-use.” I then point to the wider significance of my findings in areas of digital harm and anti-tech narratives more generally.

Summary

Digital detoxers imitated tribal belonging in order to re-enchant a digital, disenchanted, modern America. Max Weber’s narrative of disenchantment, combined with existing research on New Age groups, helps to make sense of how digital detoxers found Camp Grounded meaningful and how they returned to living in a digital world. In Chapter 10, I argued that this desire to imitate a tribe or community projected specific beliefs onto a universal idea of “being human.”

Academic literature has often sought to debunk anti-tech narratives, finding the writing of prominent anti-tech author Sherry Turkle to be a “problem” (Horst and Miller, 2012, p. 12), “ridiculous” or an “error” (Jurgenson, 2012, para. 12). Taking digital dissatisfaction as a social fact, and as an opportunity to learn, has revealed a narrative of disenchantment that was meaningful for digital detoxers, and a myriad of cultural beliefs that can help us understand how people are living with digital technology today.

This research project was an extension of my investigations at art college and later in digital anthropology, which sought to understand “what felt wrong about technology” to those who

participated in “anti-tech” narratives. As I explained in Chapter 1, my own positive experiences of technology created curiosity about those who felt differently to myself.

With an ethnographic approach I have sought to understand those with differing opinions to my own. My own Britishness and atheism did not connect with what my participants described as “human nature.” This friction in differing beliefs and experiences led me to important findings; the dogmatism of some of my participants helped me to situate Camp Grounded within New Age spirituality and re-enchantment. Detoxers found the world to be disenchanted, with modern life as alienating and fundamentally “inhumane.”

In Chapter 2, I argued that studies thus far have begun to capture the motivations for digital disconnection, but tend to focus on too-neatly summarised problems that people have with their devices. In contrast, I tell the story of digital detoxing by contextualising it in the world that detoxers inhabited. By placing digital detoxing in geographical, cultural, and historical context, I have situated detoxers beliefs, for example, their desire to “return to nature” amongst American concepts of the natural (Chapter 5). My examination of “the natural” in digital detoxing suggests there may be a sinister thread in wider anti-tech rhetoric which relies on primitivist, racist stories which juxtapose “civilised” and “savage” people (Horst & Miller, 2012, p. 12).

Using psychology and neuroscience, detoxers argued that our digital environment is misaligned with the one that the human brain evolved to experience. But this neurological primitivism, and their universalism, masked values which were particular to their culture. They aspired to imitate “tribal” life not for community cooperation, but for individual mental health (Chapter 8); to use mindfulness not to practice Buddhist concepts of “no self” but to work directly on the self (Kirmayer, 2015, p. 452; Chapter 9). Detoxers invocations of the brain were always cultured, always layered with belief, and never “natural.”

Camp Grounded was experienced as stepping outside of mainstream societal expectations and choosing to live with “intention;” ideas which they then applied to their aspirations in life. In this way digital detoxing was more about life in the modern world, than technology use alone. Overall, I found that detoxers were not primarily concerned with an addiction to screens, nor curing unhealthy digital use. Instead, digital detoxing was an opportunity to transcend the unnatural, inhuman aspects of disenchanted America, by imitating a vision of what “being human” means.

Research Questions

I aimed to understand why people were attending a digital detox and what happened when they returned back home. I broke this into three research questions: “Who are digital detoxers?”, “How do they feel about technology?”, and “How do they use technology?” Here I summarise my answers to each of these questions.

1. *Who Digital Detoxers Are*

The first research question - “Who are digital detoxers?” - considered three layers of identity: individual, community, and culture.

Each individual had a slightly different perspective about the benefits of attending Camp Grounded. Some hoped to become more playful, others hoped to find a place to belong, while some were focused on improving themselves. They generally seemed to buy a ticket when they were seeking a therapeutic benefit, looking for more meaning to their life, or gaining life perspective and making important decisions. Sometimes this led to them moving across the country or changing their career, to better align their lives with their values.

In terms of demographics, detoxers tended to be in their late twenties or early thirties, single, and without children. Many detoxers appeared to be renting, either alone or with friends, while their family members lived in other states or even further afield, since it was common to emigrate to the Bay Area. These were people who were able to prioritise their happiness, rather than looking after dependents or struggling to make ends meet. There was no question about their access to digital technology, at least at this period in their lives. Financially, they tended to be comfortable enough to afford at least one \$700 ticket, or a payment plan for a ticket, which indicated a level of disposable income. Being able to attend the retreat from Friday to Monday, as well as meet with me for an interview, suggested a degree of control over their time.

In Chapter 2 some authors suggested that digital detoxing might be a privileged activity, even ridiculing it as “self-righteous elitism” Portwood-Stacer (2013, p. 3). Digital detoxers are clearly highly privileged in a global context, but in the context of the Bay Area itself, they may have not felt that they were comparatively successful or wealthy. The group often seemed to struggle in terms of happiness and mental health, anxiety, depression, confidence issues, and most importantly, existential questions about their life and how to live it. As Portwood-Stacer (2013, p. 3) suggested, while from the outside these may seem like privileged problems, they were felt deeply by digital detoxers.

The Community and Hierarchy

Much of “who digital detoxers are” came down to what they believed in as a group, for example, they sought to improve their lives, to care for themselves and each other, and use new scientific ideas to do so. They were not just attending Camp Grounded to have a break from their technology. Following New Age ideas, they were interested in creating spiritual connections with nature, each other, and with their authentic desires (Starhawk, 1988; as cited in Magliocco, 2004, p. 202).

It was widely felt that Camp Grounded provided a sense of acceptance and welcoming which was deeply validating to attendees. But despite utopian ideas about the camp community, hierarchy was very important. There was a noticeable difference between the higher and lower ranks of the social group. Levi himself was widely adored and a micro-celebrity in the San Francisco Bay Area. Those who helped to run camp were a fairly closed friendship group who tended to be charismatic and working in creative or self-directed roles, while those lower down tended to have less self confidence, and be employees of companies.

While at camp, the organisers would be welcoming and emotionally available to ticket buyers, but this would cease after the detox ended (Chapter 8). The temporary nature of this retreat may have made some people all the more desperate in their desire to belong to it. This may have created more efforts for in-grouping including shaming themselves or others when they fell short of the community expectations, even when using technology in their private moments. Many detoxers enjoyed a feeling of community via the community Facebook group. Those higher up the hierarchy were less interested in the group, because, they explained, they already had a friendship group to rely on. They were less likely to publicly or visibly be using technology frequently. The impression this gave greatly affected the way that some individuals felt about themselves and their technology use. Aspirational technology use was mixed up with aspirational identity; while some wanted to rely less on Facebook, this was only true because they hoped to alter their confidence and approach to life more generally.

As a community, digital detoxers were often proud of, and loyal to, Camp Grounded and its organisers. For detoxers, anyone “anti-Camp Grounded” and “nasty,” were cynical (Chapter 3), and “probably needed it the most.” But while I initially assumed Camp Grounded was very unusual, I discovered that there were strikingly similar personal development programmes, community building workshops, retreats, or rituals, in the San Francisco Bay Area. These groups appeared to hold similar values around self-improvement or community building, and

use similar techniques to the ones at Camp Grounded. However detoxers saw Camp Grounded as “more natural,” more safe, and more “playful” than these other options.

Cultural Values

I have situated detoxers “return to nature” within long-held ideas in American culture; it can be understood as stemming from Western visions of Wilderness and the colonial Frontier (Cronon, 1996). In America, it is common to “play indian” (Deloria, 1998), or imitate the primitive through the use of Native American culture. These were the foundations of the original American summer camps created in 1902 (Van Slyck, 2006, p. 170).

I was surprised by the intense, therapeutic experience that detoxers were seeking at Camp Grounded. But the incorporation of psychology and neuroscience into everyday Western life has been traced by Rose and Abi-Rached (2013), and there are pseudo psychological practices which have become part of the fabric of American culture, especially mutual help, a blending of psychology and spirituality, and a rejection of experts.

In addition, Camp Grounded is fitting with New Age beliefs around working on the self as a spiritual exercise (Hanegraaff, 1996, p. 183, 46). In Chapter 4 I outlined the prominence of New Age spirituality to the local Bay Area, a place where people commonly show an “increased experimentation with [...] plural medical beliefs” (English-Lueck, 2010, p. 13). It was fitting with Bay Area culture that detoxers would be “open” to trying practices that might heal them physically, mentally, or spiritually. Combining these ideas of spiritual flourishing with ideas of the natural, they sought to recreate community support of tribal life, which they felt would be good for mental health and happiness.

Finally Camp Grounded’s desire to set up a new community with its own norms, and go “back to nature,” resonates with the local history of intentional community (Chapter 4). I noticed that Camp Grounded was fitting with the prominence or “default” of left-wing views in the local

area (Chapter 4), which were fighting an intolerant and uncaring society. Detoxers understood the Bay Area as bringing together people who wanted to “grow” and “get better” (Chapter 9), caring for both those less fortunate as well as their own emotional health (Chapter 7).

2. *How Detoxers Felt About Technology*

Digital detoxers were concerned with the way that technology was designed to persuade users. Having seen the selfishness of “tech bros” who made a profit at a great human cost to the culture of the Bay Area, they saw a similar theme in the devices themselves. But technology was only one example of modern life which indicated “progress” that did not consider what was actually “good” for people; considering how humans had evolved, and what human needs were.

Digital detoxers’ primitivist views saw Silicon Valley as symptomatic of a profit and progress oriented society, exploiting users in a process of forgetting and neglecting a sense of humanity. Conversely, detoxers felt that technology should be a “tool” for what they wanted to achieve, that it didn’t matter *whether* they used it, as long as it was “serving them.” Technology should be used “intentionally,” towards happiness, optimisation, and spiritual connection.

Their concern about technology relied on cultural imaginaries of neuroscience (Chapter 9), and blended the scientific with the moral. Technology was unnatural because it preyed upon human evolution, and their own brains could be tricked by the “dopamine” they received from a Facebook notification, masquerading as the same dopamine from a hug. In Chapter 10, I called these brain-based explanations for a need to attend Camp Grounded “neurological primitivism.” I argue that this science was only used to leverage moral ideas about the natural-ness of online and offline sociality.

3. *How Detoxers Used Technology*

Camp Grounded was only a brief moment in the lives of digital detoxers, and living with technology was their day-to-day reality. They tended to have high levels of technology at home,

owning smartphones and laptops, sometimes more than one of each, as well as other gadgets like fitbits or bluetooth speakers. Most of them had a Facebook profile, and many of them participated in the Facebook group. Others used Twitter, Instagram, iMessage, Whatsapp, and Snapchat. There was nobody for whom technology was not some part of their job. Even those who ran Camp Grounded, or counselors with exciting creative jobs, used screens frequently for their work, and often promoted themselves on social media.

Detoxers used technology for a morning alarm, checking the news, brewing coffee, for work, maintaining friendships, tracking their time, watching TV, and resting. For some, YouTube lulled them to sleep, and for others Facebook coaxed them awake. Some used them to share political journalism, or for introspective writing about their self-work. Digital technology was interwoven into digital detoxers lives, and could be at the same time helpful and unhelpful, restful and stressful, exciting and boring, heartwarming and embarrassing.

Facebook itself was central in discussions for proper and improper digital use and they often held different opinions from one another. Some felt that talking about emotions and problems on Facebook was indulgent, or misled, while others found it to be a positive, affirming experience. The recommendations for technology use that suggested keeping phones out of the bedroom, bathroom, or making sure that you're using it "with intention," were generally coming from the top down. Ticket-buyers were excited to put them into practice and to buy an alarm clock once they got home. At the very same time, those recommendations were rarely followed; detoxers were extremely invested in the ideas, while simultaneously rarely putting them into practice. Digital use could be seen as a marker of their lack of self-control which could be extrapolated to their life more generally. Some detoxers judged others harshly for visible, heavy use of Facebook, or felt pity for them. In fact, the top-down recommendations for technology use, and this shame and judgment, were at odds with how it actually worked well for them in the day.

Instead of changing or reducing their use, detoxers made attitudinal changes. Such a shift helped them in asking “Do you really need to check?” and attempt to “start[ing] the day on YOUR terms,” before being swept up in it instead; this way, they could work on themselves and their goals, aspiring towards the person they wanted to be.

Significance

Digital Anthropology and Nature/Culture

This research speaks primarily to the discipline of digital anthropology, and contributes to the conversation around technology itself as part of being human. Using Weber’s theory of disenchantment I argue that digital detoxers saw the world as having experienced a loss, with the modern world feeling unnatural and not catering to human needs.

Some academics posit that being human has always been technological (Ong, 1982, p. 81; Gasset, 2002, p. 96) while digital technology is as “natural” as the rest of human experience (Horst & Miller, 2012, p. 12; Chapter 2). Despite this, digital detoxers were concerned there was something “wrong” with modern life, and were concerned with how to use new technology while still being “human”, a view which I approached as a social fact.

These questions may not be limited to academic work, since they grapple with whether there is or is not something fundamentally different, or diminished, about our life with digital technology compared to earlier periods in human history. In historical context, our lives are much better. But is human life diminished with the introduction of new technologies, and do we lose something as we feel ourselves moving further from “nature”?

In this study I hoped to use Camp Grounded to better understand anti-tech sentiments. My

findings have demonstrated perceptions of technology, of Silicon Valley, health, and nature, which may be helpful in understanding anti-tech ideas more broadly. Cultural imaginaries of serotonin (Chapter 9), neurological primitivism, and aspirational identity entwined with aspirational digital use, may each help to explain in more detail how people conceive of using technology too much (Chapter 1).

As well as a theoretical contribution, this project speaks to methodological conversations in digital anthropology, since I used ethnography both with digital detoxers in person and through their social media profiles. This is in keeping with the view that online sociality must work alongside in-person ethnography, recognising the way that online life is embedded in people's lives (Hine, 2005, p. 13; Miller & Slater, 2001, p. 1). In order to conduct this aspect of my research, I chose to "friend" my participants, which led to unique methodological hurdles (Chapter 3). My friction with my participants' belief about forging deep relationships may have been made more intense for me by the digital element. The current turn towards researcher mental health and experiences (Backe, 2015; Pollard, 2009) coincides with a time when researchers may need to connect online with participants in the field (Robards, 2013, p. 230). Future research could continue to ask how researchers should navigate this. At the same time, my own experience has shown that fieldwork which would have traditionally been isolating can be made easier by digital technology, which can shrink distances and make you feel not so far from home (Sutton, 2019).

The methodological choices of this research along with the findings of Chapter 7 contribute to political conversations around privilege, echo chambers, and polarisation. It was important for me and central to this research project to listen to beliefs that differ to my own. But it was seemingly difficult for my participants to do the same, not only to my views on technology and Camp Grounded, but to right-wing views. In a country – and a time - where Hagood (2019) says, the president himself shows a "blatant, Twitter-led rejection of listening" (p. 223) I worry

that digital detoxers exemplified the same kind of closed-mindedness that they opposed (Hagood, 2019, p. 228). If what you choose to hear shapes the very reality that you live in, what consequence will our digital choices to “unfriend,” “mute,” or “turn down” have long-term? What if hearing that reality and engaging with it is the only way to make the world a more equal and “more human” place? Listening across difference is never easy, but I wonder if the principles of anthropological research have something to offer in America’s politically turbulent times.

Studying Disconnection

This research contributes to studies of non-use by showing that understanding digital detoxing is a far more nuanced and complicated endeavour than the existing literature suggests. Existing research has begun to point towards motivations behind the desire to limit, control, or resist digital use (Chapter 2), which suggested that detoxers might be seeing themselves as rebellious; fighting tech companies; critiquing notions of productivity; trying to become better people; working on their relationships; working on their health; feeling superior for attending, or using it as a restful break from stress.

I found that *all* of these motivations resonated with digital detoxers, but these are one-line explanations that miss a rich, holistic picture of digital detoxers’ relationship with digital technology. While technically correct, they don’t capture the “longing” (Magliocco, 2004, p. 237) and search for happiness and fulfilment which I argue to be central in digital detoxing. Through an ethnographic approach that placed technology non-use in context, I have discovered these broader stories. Looking at how detoxers actually understood and imagined technology, both in terms of their everyday relationship with their device, and the spectre of what technology represents, were vitally important in understanding digital detoxing.

I also argue that our participants can have more nuanced relationships with technology than researcher expectations might grasp. Early research into non-use saw disconnection as a “‘problem’ which should be ‘solved’” (Selwyn, 2003, p. 107). Non-use has since been recognised as purposeful and part of the “control and choice” through which people make technology use “meaningful” Selwyn (2004, p. 349). My findings are fitting with this growing recognition.

Similarly, Gomez et al. (2015) write that “resistance” to technology is “not a Luddite call to reject all technology,” but rather a “technologically-savvy drive to better manage the use of ICTs to meet a fuller spectrum of [...] needs” (para. 1). Rather than rejecting technology, detoxers told me that they sought “balance” in which they could live in a modern life without succumbing to thoughtlessness, through careful reflection on the purpose and consequences of their choices.

The literature around non-use still has a way to go. Researchers no longer see non-use as a “‘problem’ which should be ‘solved’” (Selwyn, 2003, p. 107) - but Baym et al.’s (2020) study indicates that participants’ return to technology can be seen as some kind of “relapse” or failure. The study exemplifies a trend of undue expectation on those who disconnect to *remain* offline, and a judgment that any form of return is due to low self-control. Other researchers similarly describe returning to Facebook as “relapsing” (Baumer et al., 2013) or “attribute people’s failure to diminish their technology use to [...] lack of self-regulation” (Hesselberth, 2017, p. 1998).

Similarly, in Chapter 9 I argued that detoxers held themselves to an unfair standard to limit their digital use and to always be behaving “intentionally” while I disagreed that “unintentional” use is some kind of failure. But detoxers *aimed* for something close to Selwyn’s (2004, p. 349)

description of “meaningful” digital use, which was intertwined with their hopes for how they could change their lives.

Baym et al.’s (2020) study also exemplifies disappointment that their participants could only react to structural problems in the technology industry on an individual scale. This is something that Madrigal (2013) and Beattie (2018) also describe as disappointing and frustrating; hoping perhaps that those who dislike Facebook will come together to enact change, rather than escape to the woods. In Chapter 7 I suggested that disconnecting from distressing information online may not be politically effective, but is an understandable reaction.

We cannot expect our participants to be “intentionally” choosing all of their digital technology use, no more than we can expect anyone to be rational about their beliefs and practices. Only by placing disconnection in context does it become more clear the way that aspiration and failure in tension tells us what people care about and how they view technology.

Conclusion

In this study, I have used an ethnographic approach to situate digital detoxers’ use and non-use amongst their beliefs about modern life. Using Weber’s disenchantment, I argue that digital detoxing was a strategy of re-enchantment in a “broken” modern world, using neuroscience to recreate tribal belonging. The desire to belong, to find roots into the past, and to feel connected to a vision of “being human,” are some of the things that digital detoxers “longed” for and which brought them together at Camp Grounded. Situating their beliefs within American culture, I show that their “return to nature” was built on primitivist narratives.

Camp Grounded was often experienced as transformational, because this sense of tribal belonging or being “held” by others encouraged them to ask themselves what kind of life they

wanted to live and who they wanted to be. They took this back into everyday life, prioritizing their desires and goals whenever possible. Digital technology was interwoven into their lives and was often a part of their efforts for “growth.”

After my fieldwork with digital detoxers, I still love the internet, and believe that technology is deeply human, social, and meaningful. But I have also begun to understand why digital detoxers felt differently. Through my own experience of their New Age spiritual beliefs, rituals, and life in the San Francisco Bay Area, I have suggested why this community came together in the woods, and how Camp Grounded helped each of them on their path to happiness.

Appendix I: Interview Script

Scope of questions for semi-structured interviews

Questions for attendees with diaries

- How did you feel about using the diary?
- How did you find using a physical diary, would a digital one have been easier?
- Were there any moments of tension, when you used technology and would rather have not been? (if yes, what happened?)
- Were there any moments where you couldn't use technology and wanted to?
- In the time recorded, what did the technology you used facilitate?
- and what did it hinder?
- Did you feel any discomfort in seeing your digital use written down? Do you feel any discomfort in talking about it?
- In the days recorded, had you tried out any new behaviours, e.g. altered your use directly because of camp?

Questions for general attendees

- Why did you decide to go to Camp Grounded?
- How did you find out about it?
- How was your experience of Camp?
- Had you done any kind of digital detox before?
- What do people say when you tell them about it?
- Why do you think Camp Grounded is happening?
- Why do you think it's happening specifically here?
- What are the reasons you think people go on a detox?
- Why do you think digital detoxing is helpful for you?
- What does camp give you that you don't find in your day to day lifestyle?
- What changes do you think you'll make as a result of camp?
- Do you use social media? Which platforms do you usually use?
- How do you use them? Do you post statuses? Images?
- How do you not use them? What would you never do and why?
- Do you use digital technology as part of your work?
- Do you feel like a part of a community thanks to Camp Grounded?
- Does the tech industry feel like a significant presence in your life, living in the Bay Area? (How do you describe that relationship?)
- How do you feel about the tech industry?
- What do you think will come next after Camp Grounded? (Do you think there will still be a desire for something similar if there are no more sessions?)

Word definitions: What does ____ mean to you?

- using technology 'with intention'
- 'Manifesting'
- 'Be present'
- 'Authentic'
- 'Connection'
- 'Be seen'
- holding space

Informants who I feel able to discuss arising themes with:

- Do you think what's happening with tech is similar to what's happened with food?
- Do you think concerns about tech stem from an idea that it's something we didn't evolve to use?
- Some people at camp are interested in the spiritual side, human connection, and some are really concerned about addiction and what it's doing to our brains. Do you think camp is more spiritual or scientific?

Extra, if neighbouring topics arise:

- Instagram – do you use filters, how would you feel if you got no likes
- What did you think about the digital photography at camp?

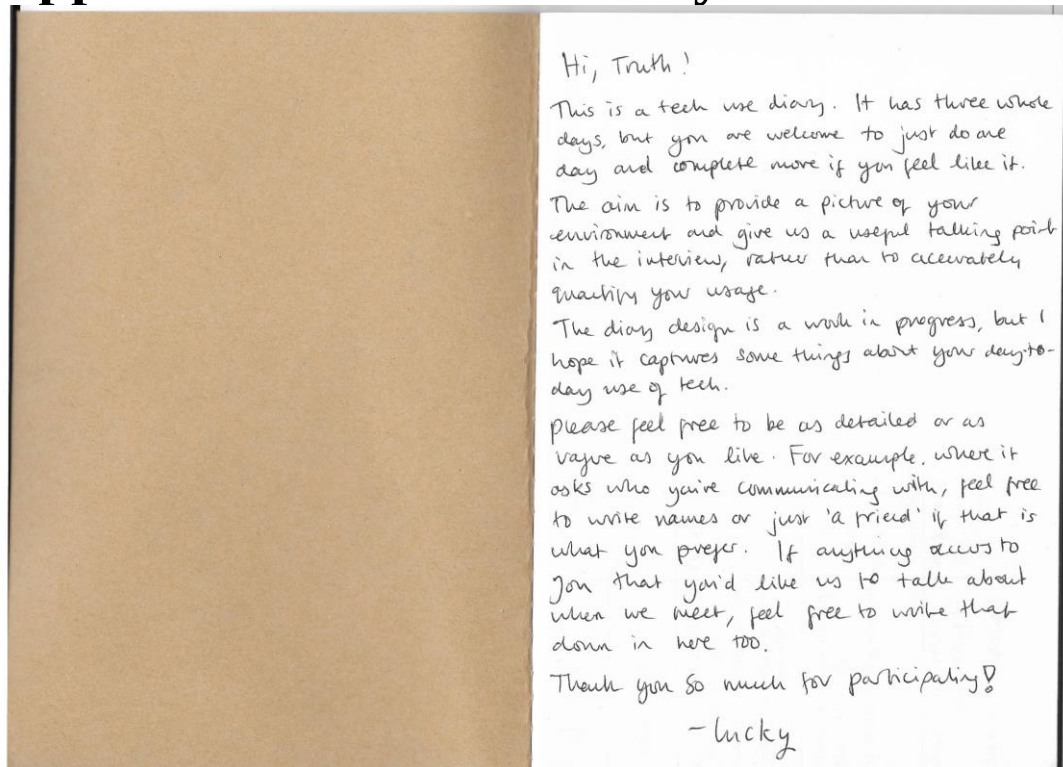
Questions for core people / organisers

- How did you get involved with camp?
- What was your experience of preparing for camp? What kind of logistical things were you a part of?
- How was your experience of Camp this year?
- Can you describe how the experience was shaped for the attendees?
- Did you hear of anyone who really struggled with the camp experience?
- Did you hear of anyone struggling without their technology?
- Why do you think Camp Grounded is happening?
- Why do you think it's happening specifically here?
- What are the reasons that you think people go on a detox? Are they different for different people?
- What kind of people do you think come to camp?
- Is digital detoxing helpful for you personally?
- Has being involved with camp made you reflect on your own digital usage?
- Does the tech industry feel like a significant presence in your life, living in the Bay Area? (How do you describe that relationship?)
- How do you feel about the tech industry?
- What do you think will come next after Camp Grounded? (Do you think there will still be a desire for something similar if there are no more sessions?)

Questions just for people like Bruce with access to database

- What was the gender balance at camp?
- How many people bought regular tickets, how many had payment plans?
- Do you know how diverse it was?
- What were the dietary requirements of attendees?
- What kind of things did people write on the input form – 'what are you hoping to get out of the experience' – and 'what are your fears/anxieties about coming to camp'?

Appendix II: Tech Use Diary



Appendix III: Observation Schedule

Evening _____	Informant _____	Date _____
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SMARTPHONE

Where is it being kept?
 When it's just the two of us?
 When we are with others?

Are notifications on?
 Do notifications interrupt anything?

Used while
 Eating? Drinking? Driving?

SMARTPHONE / LAPTOP etc.

Are they communicating digitally?
 With whom and why?
 What format is their communication taking?
 e.g. Text, Facebook, Slack, Call, Email

When they communicate, is it offhand and quick?
 Is it carefully considered?

Are they consuming information?
 How are they consuming information?
 e.g. Facebook, Instagram, News feeds, Twitter

INTERACTION

Are they communicating with others in person?
 With whom and why?

What is their reaction to observation?

What is their attitude to their tech?
 Do they voice any issues with tech?

Are strategies used? Or clear boundaries set?
 Are they explicitly explained?

Do they justify their tech use to me?

Do they comment on:
 Other people's tech use?
 My tech use?

Do they explain other lifestyle choices?
 Do they comment on other people's lifestyle choices?
 My lifestyle choices?

Evening _____ Informant _____ Date _____

CAMP COMMUNITY

Do they mention other campers?
Who do they align themselves with?
Who do they distance themselves from?

Do they talk about camp related events?
E.g. photos coming out?

What is their camp community role?

TECH INDUSTRY

Do they mention this? How?
Do they distance themselves from tech industry values?

Do they make any suggestions for how tech could be improved?

Do they practically do anything to help?
Tech issues they care about?
Other societal issues?

WORK

Are they working?

How does tech feature in the work?
Is social media integral?

Does personal digital communication run in parallel when working?

Is it a 'tech' job?
Is there tension about that?
Are they vocal about their issues with tech while at the job?
After working?

Are their work colleagues considered 'their people' or not?

Does their work performance bear resemblance to what I have already seen?

Optimisation

Self help
Privilege
PerfProgressive

Health

Societal malaise

Religion

Digital use and moralization
New age belief + Science
Universality
Rejection of other ideas
Repeated mantras

Individualization

Choice

Communication

Societal roles
oppressive

Context collapse

Sincerity

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