

Built, Felt, Lived:
Healing within North American Spaces of Retreat

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Introduction
Telling the Story

We think we tell stories, but stories often tell us, tell us to love or to hate, to see or to be blind. Often, too often, stories saddle us, ride us, whip us onward, tell us what to do, and we do it without questioning. The task of learning to be free requires learning to hear them, to question them, to pause and bear silence, to name them, and then become a storyteller.

— *Rebecca Solnit, The Faraway Nearby*

Positionality begins before the ethnographic work: it begins with the seeds that grow into guiding questions. The questions that have informed this project stem from my own lived experience of seeking healing, and they continue to drive many of my pursuits, academic and otherwise. This positionality shaped the engagement and dedication with which I approached this project. I worked to remain reflexive, considering where my identity could trouble the line between informed inquiry and analysis versus an investigation shadowed by bias.

I've spent much of my life telling (and re-telling) my own story. At eight years old, I thought I was going to die. A routine check-up tumbled into a diagnosis and three-day hospital stay. For the first few hours, the doctors around me spoke of my body, named my illness, and gave directions to my parents. But it took my asking before I knew if I would live through the weekend. The term “Juvenile Diabetes” meant nothing to me but sickness, the frightening unknown. After the first twenty-four hours in the hospital, I realized that although I would live, my life would not be what it was. I learned that my condition was chronic—by which I mean interminable. My doctors made ill-timed and upsetting jokes in well-meaning attempts to make me smile, gave me a binder of instructions invented by the American Diabetes Association, and assured me I could live a “normal” life. They left little room for individual response, let alone experimentation with treatment, and gave no warning of the litany of challenges and frustrations I would face by following their rules meticulously.

With my diagnosis came the sudden sensation that my body was not my body. In the hospital and at each endocrinologist appointment thereafter—which were scheduled every three months and entailed thorough blood work and tests that would reveal less-than-perfect control over my glucose levels and body—the doctors emphasized that I was to consult with them before

beginning any “alternative” forms of treatment. The numbers on my charts and tests took center stage at each check-up. I was disembodied.

With time, I began an ongoing dialogue with myself, in which I could sense subtle changes in my own health, identify their source, and search for possible cures. I found a vibrant online community of individuals with Type 1 Diabetes who updated message boards with clues to the answers I sought. My doctors did not facilitate or encourage this dialogue. At first, I craved some hidden cure, but my expectations and hopes shifted with each passing three months, when a doctor would review (and gently reprimand) the results of my lab work. These appointments left me ashamed of my body—which I always failed to control with the proper precision, regardless of my efforts. Still, the litany of tests and questions and forms did not address or give any credence to the bulk of my illness experience. Why was the medicine that kept me alive concurrently making me lethargic, altering my emotional state, and causing interminable weight gain? And if I was following the careful carb counting protocols and food pyramid in the official “how-to” manual, why was my blood glucose impossible to predict? Where was the guidebook for navigating a new social identity as a person with an invisible chronic illness, one that underscored each moment of my days and nights?

My story led me to forms of health care deemed “alternative” by biomedicine. I found profound healing in a community of other patients; practitioners of Chinese medicine, Ayurveda, herbalism, and natural medicine who functioned as allies instead of opponents; and yoga teachers, for many years merely voices on video tapes and in books I found at the local library, who empowered me with a new understanding of my body and this illness. The spine of my story has been bound by personal and academic pages in equal parts. In high school, I conducted autoimmune research on diabetes, determined to exert my analytical mind to make sense of what otherwise seemed inexplicable, to somehow reclaim my narrative by pinpointing its origin. Before leaving for college, I earned my 200-hour yoga teaching certification (and, soon after, my Reiki certification) to facilitate for others the deep healing I was searching for in my own journey.

Each of these teachers and teachings took me both deeper into myself and eventually outwards, towards the community of people I hoped to help. As I gained a greater understanding of my body and a fluency in my narrative of illness and health, I grew more frustrated with how many of my questions had been silenced over the years. My hunger to facilitate healing for others was not purely altruistic; I was motivated by the deep sense of isolation I had felt in my own journey. Despite the passionate allies I found in practitioners, family, and friends, I struggled to locate models

who had experienced and vocalized my same frustrations with the medical system, who might see and validate my experience and unconventional pursuit of personal healing. My healing process was a powerful privilege, but it was—and is—lonely, and long. It is in process, in the present tense. The pivot to facilitate well-being for others was and is still motivated by this process. It is an effort to heal my own frustrations and isolations, as well as to live in and with my body, and an avenue to continue learning and healing from others' lived experiences. My story has often involved more listening than writing, more asking and less answering; it is this continual questioning, and dissatisfaction with the widely accepted answers I was told to believe, that urged me towards medical anthropology. I wanted to see the pluralities, the stories I knew existed that resisted the grain of the biomedically-approved narrative of sickness and health.

I am acutely aware of my positionality and intimate connection to my chosen sites of ethnographic engagement; this awareness was sharpened with each interview, conversation, and moment I spent being—both as an “anthropologist” and a person—at Kripalu and Esalen. This project is inherently personal. It is grounded in an embodied experience of the questions I am asking, and in extensive dialogue with these questions. I spent a few months in the fall of 2019 exploring non-biomedical healing modalities in relation to community and space at an integrative wellness and movement center in White River Junction, Vermont. My ethnographic encounters with this center, along with the process of tracing and writing the themes I found there, allowed me to perceive my identity with greater specificity in a context similar to what I would find at Esalen and Kripalu. I learned that I might leverage the salience of my own experience to better connect with participants and ultimately, to authentically understand, amplify, and articulate their lived experiences of illness and healing in these two very different spaces of retreat.

Throughout this project, I found that my personal path towards hearing my story—of listening, naming, and becoming the storyteller—enabled me to clearly see and attempt to define the type of healing unfolding at Kripalu and Esalen. This definition, while occasionally clearly stated but more often thematically expressed and imbued, was made more tangible by the lens of my journey to reclaim agency over my own body and well-being.

Background and Methods

Until the academic discourse of medicine is expanded beyond the languages of molecules and drugs to include the language of experience and meanings, however, medical science will reinforce the profession's resistance to the problems

of illness rather than contribute to the broadening of its vision. Research that avoids the human side of disorder places the profession and its practitioners in iron chains of restricted knowledge. So fettered, medicine and doctors are unable to address some of the most difficult yet essential questions in the care of the chronically ill; the physician is prevented from having a personal stake in the patient's condition, and medicine from applying moral knowledge to suffering.

—Arthur Kleinman, *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Condition*

For centuries, societies have created designated healing environments. In early history, spaces rooted in religion and often established at sacred sites—like ashrams and monasteries—became places for individuals to retreat, reflect, and engage in contemplative practice. Today, quasi-spiritual and “alternative” medical centers proliferate across the globe, creating specific forms of healing space. In the United States, these spaces—hybrids of spas, schools, and medical facilities—offer a mosaic of treatments, coursework, and consultations for individuals seeking spiritual growth, physical and/or mental healing, or general restoration and wellness. This thesis examines the role that space, place, and community play in healing at North American retreat centers. I hoped to translate the “human side of disorder” into a project that might break some of the “chains” or restricted patterns of academic and medical thought which fail to fully understand and heal chronic and social illness. This thesis draws on semi-structured interviews, written surveys, and participant-observation conducted during November and December 2019 at the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, and the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California. While this topic has been explored in fragmented ways by architecture and design theory, anthropology, and geography, existing scholarship lacks a comprehensive analysis at the intersection of space, sociocultural dynamics, and lived health implications of contemporary healing spaces. Moreover, very little research exists surrounding the emergence of “alternative” retreat centers like Esalen and Kripalu in the United States. With the term “alternative,” I denote the intermingling of Asian medical modalities, new-age therapeutics, and spiritual seeking that form these centers’ healing compendiums. Established scholarship on the design of biomedical spaces also lacks depth in sociocultural and environmental analysis as it relates to the patient narrative and lived experience.

The concept of “therapeutic landscapes” has been used to study the connection between one’s physical and psychological environment and the localized treatment or healing of illness (Gesler 1992; Williams 1998). This term and its associated scholarship form a theoretical backbone for my project and employ a metaphorical geography of both environmental and social components that can help to define what is considered a part of a healing landscape. Williams extends the term to

examine therapeutic landscapes in the context of holistic medicine, using human geography, holistic medical practices, and cultural symbols to contribute to an understanding of “health geography” (Williams 1998). While these texts provide a valuable conceptual map, they are not based on in-depth ethnography, instead drawing upon multiple instances of clinical settings or encounters to develop their theories.

Historical analysis makes up a large part of related scholarship. Many texts examine the sociopolitical influences and implications of medical or health tourism, at its peak in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries throughout England, Germany, and France (Conradson 2005; Steward 2002; Weisz 2011). While spas and healing destinations took different forms across Europe and eventually in North America, each iteration belied deeper workings of class and status, private and public interest, and healing significance imbued in physical place. Of additional interest in this discussion is the state-building element of health tourism, and why some spa or healing concepts are convincing in particular national contexts and not in others (Weisz 2001). Susanna Trnka’s contemporary study of government-funded Czech respiratory spas provides a framework for evaluating efficacy and defining environmental and spatial elements that contribute to deep healing. Trnka examines how these institutions produce healing in ways that are often distinct from Western imaginings of spas, simultaneously exploring the inability of evidence-based medicine to measure the more intangible therapeutic effects of these spaces (Barry 2006; Trnka 2017).

Very little academic work looks at the intersection of non-biomedical treatment or retreat spaces and race, ethnicity, and/or socioeconomic status. In studies of CAM (Complementary and Alternative Medicine) and mindfulness meditation as therapy in the West, people of color and individuals of low socioeconomic status are consistently understudied (Blum 2014). In a study conducted in Los Angeles County, “individuals with incomes exceeding \$100,000 [had] higher odds of reporting CAM use” (Robles et al. 2017, 6). The authors cite similar local studies that have discovered a direct relationship between both higher income and education and increased likelihood of CAM use. These findings are not shocking, but they lend an important frame for questions of access and participant demographics at spaces like Esalen and Kripalu.

In *Positioning Yoga*, Sarah Strauss explores the history of yoga’s transportation to the West and echoes a parallel phenomenon: “Swami Vivekananda presented yoga as a spiritual commodity that had an explicit exchange value...he said that India had an abundance of spiritual wealth...In return, the West...could pay cash for the privilege of learning yoga” (Strauss 2004, 3). While it is clear that yoga, CAM, and Eastern medical modalities like Traditional Chinese Medicine and

Ayurveda are, in the West, made largely inaccessible by income, education, race and ethnicity, and even region, efforts to study these class barriers (and their impacts) in non-biomedical healing spaces in the United States are limited.

Research on biomedical environments like hospitals, sanatoriums, and clinics are mostly concerned with design for disease prevention and general patient relaxation or visual ease (Cohen 2006; Smyth 2005). These studies largely disregard how design can actually facilitate the healing process, overlooking how social dynamics and the daily lived experience of a patient can be transformed by physical and symbolic details of place and spatial imaginaries. Conversely, architectural scholarship devotes attention to the more abstract healing potential of built or natural environments (Day 2007). Efforts to design buildings and communal spaces to facilitate healing endure over time, from the Paimio Sanatorium designed by Alvar Aalto in 1933 to the present-day installation of a healing garden at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles (Vaija 2018; Cedars-Sinai Staff 2017). Studies regarding natural environmental design emphasize the positive health effects of greenery, focusing on how public or urban spaces can improve general community health and wellbeing by becoming “just green enough” (Hartig and Marcus 2006; Wolch et al. 2014). These design and social theories ignore the more nuanced ethnographic realities of how individuals engage with their surroundings in lived illness and healing experiences, and how the configuration of a place is personified by (and impacts) its community and social landscape.

In both of the spaces in which I conducted fieldwork, I planned to engage with two “types” of participants: faculty and employees helping to facilitate the healing experience, and guests (both return guests and first-time attendees). Before speaking with each participant, I provided the individual with a written information sheet and a short verbal explanation of the project. I reached out to some faculty via email instead of relying on an organic meeting, as they were often mentioned to me by participants or otherwise on my radar to interview. Social and informal spaces on the grounds of these centers provided opportunities for my interaction with guests, and my participation in the happenings of each day—like yoga classes, workshops, guided activities, and communal mealtimes—allowed me to establish initial connections with participants. I designed surveys based on environmental, societal, architectural, and cultural factors of each retreat space, and distributed these surveys to a large number of guests from diverse backgrounds and varying positionalities at the center. I hoped to gather valuable qualitative information about how and why guests perceive Kripalu and Esalen to be particularly healing or restorative places.

I had initially expected to use the surveys to determine which participants to interview in longer 30-minute conversations, designing a purposive sampling approach. However, I quickly realized in the field that meeting participants and gauging whether I would want to interview them (and if they would be willing to participate) needed to be a more organic and immediate process. While the surveys facilitated the collection of valuable qualitative and demographic information, they were more an obstruction than a helpful bridge to connect me to participants. I found it most productive to meet participants serendipitously and introduce my project; at the close of our conversation, I would then offer a survey (or a participant might agree to an interview). At Esalen, a smaller community meant that I formed relationships more quickly and with greater ease and intimacy—these relationships were more likely to lead to interviews than survey responses. I conducted eighteen interviews at Kripalu and twenty at Esalen; two or three of these were more informal and lengthy group discussions.

Before each interview and some informal conversations, I asked for permission to record so that I could more actively engage with my interviewees and transcribe our discussions in private at the end of each day. At Kripalu, I collected all survey responses as they were completed, and scanned and destroyed paper copies of surveys at the end of each day. At Esalen, the Office of Residential Operations worked with me to distribute surveys to guests the last week I was there. The paper copies of those survey responses were then sent to me in a secure envelope; after receiving them, I proceeded with the same process of scanning and destroying the surveys. In my data analysis and eventual process of writing, the surveys were not as immediately useful as my two other modes of data collection. Instead, they were helpful points of context from which I could better analyze interviews and field notes.

In addition to surveying and interviewing, I conducted participant-observation. During my time at each center, I attended workshops, classes, meals, and other activities alongside guests each day. At Esalen, where it was possible to volunteer throughout the week, I worked on occasion in the garden, which compounded my immersive experience alongside staff and work-scholars. At both centers, I was able to establish familiarity with faculty and staff after the first few days. My extroverted approach to meeting guests and introducing my project drove my participant recruitment efforts. I kept a notebook with me at all times but did not take notes while engaged in conversation or social situations with others to avoid creating barriers between myself and my interlocutors.

Analysis of my data accounted for both observation of space and design and participant-observation of sociocultural realities. In analyzing the former, I incorporated architecture and design theory literature in addition to anthropological theory and other ethnographic work to frame and understand the details I noted about the physical environments, both built and natural, at Esalen and Kripalu. Prior to my fieldwork, I conducted secondary research to build knowledge about the design, architectural history, and history of each center. I anticipated that this would contribute to my analysis of how the environments function in the context of guests' lived experiences of healing and retreat. After each day, I transcribed interviews and wrote fleshed out fieldwork memos based on my participant-observation. These transcripts informed the questions I explored in subsequent interviews and sharpened my conversational interview approach in an iterative fashion. After the fieldwork was complete, I qualitatively coded each interview, extracting excerpts of participants' stories and voices to comprise a codebook of major themes and sub-themes which informed the chapter breakdown and narrative structure of this project. All participant names mentioned are pseudonyms, with the exception of easily identifiable figures (identifiable for their roles at these retreat centers). At the conclusion of this thesis, I have included a participant reference sheet, which matches participant pseudonyms with short descriptions of their identities in relation to this project. I have also created a "Vocabulary of Healing" in a concluding glossary to catalog the linguistic norms and meanings imbued in these cultures of retreat.

I have written much of this thesis during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. It is an uncertain and surreal time. While it was initially difficult to remain focused on this project in the midst of such a destabilizing global crisis, I am reminded daily of the inseparable entanglement of human well-being and the social fabric. When our daily communities and environmental rhythms are disrupted alongside threats to personal and public health, how do we locate a sense of being well? What forms of dis-ease do we face as we are inundated with fear, panic, and instability? While these questions are not the focus of my project, they have given a new sense of urgency to the writing, to questions of accessibility and states of dis-ease created by the operations and norms of our modern society. We are witnessing (and experiencing) our communities reconfiguring to stay connected, and the palpable challenges of being confined to particular spaces or environments. Now more than ever, community and environment come into focus as components essential to our health.

Navigating Healing

Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.

—Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*

The doctor-patient relationship had its own imbalances. I have never forgotten the sense of powerlessness in the face of instruction: lie down, bend forward, walk for me... You are in someone else's hands. Steady, competent hands, hopefully — but the patient is never in charge. The kingdom of the sick is not a democracy.

—Sinéad Gleeson, “Blue Hills and Chalk Bones”

Early in my fieldwork, I realized that my positionality had led me to assume the abstract process of “healing” was something holistic and individual; it also informed an assumption that healing, at some level, *was* happening at centers like Kripalu and Esalen. I understood holism and individual healing through this positionality: as forms of mending that considered the entire person, the tripartite mind-body-spirit being, as possessing a deeply individual illness and healing story. My path to discovering modalities like yoga and Ayurveda, acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine, Reiki, and other forms of non-biomedical and community-based healing was one instigated by chronic illness. Underscoring my research questions, albeit more subconscious than overt, was my expectation that a large portion of the retreat population was seeking a similar type of healing. Quickly, I learned — as any setting shaped by such a complex amalgam of modalities, histories, and ideologies might have taught me — that the realities at Esalen and Kripalu overwhelmed and complicated my assumptions.

In my first few days at Kripalu, I met people who had been visiting for over fifteen years. As one participant told me, he visited at least once a year to celebrate Thanksgiving and experience a “focused degree of thankfulness and gratitude.” I tried to reconcile my expectations of specific narratives of illness and healing with what my fieldwork was presenting to me. At Esalen too, I met many “seminarians” (the vocabulary used here to describe visitors) who were prompted to visit because they had heard Esalen was beautiful and considered it to be a meaningful respite from life or work. At first, this troubled me. I wondered if I was looking for something that was not there. And yet in equal and eventually greater numbers, I met participants who sought out and experienced

significant healing at Kripalu and Esalen from chronic conditions, trauma, mental illness, deep loss and grief—healing in the way I had imagined it. With these two bodies of experience, my understanding of healing began to shift and reach greater nuance. The definition of “healing” that I will use to ground my research questions holds space for and is directly written by the wide breadth of lived experiences my participants shared with me, while simultaneously informed by the process of embodied healing I witnessed at these centers of retreat.

Imaginariness and definitions of healing—and in relation to these imaginaries, official recognition by regulatory bodies of what is “effective” medical treatment—are crucial frameworks within which this project lives. At best, literature on efficacy in the medical anthropology and health sociology fields situates non-biomedical systems of healing within their cultural origins and lived practices to address how healing happens. At worst, a large portion of this literature uses small and non-representative samples to marginalize and dismiss the very real health transformations of patients in non-biomedical treatment settings. Frameworks of efficacy as developed by Sienna Craig in her work with Tibetan medical practitioners and patients were formative in my understanding of healing at Esalen and Kripalu. Craig writes: “Efficacy is a measurement of micropolitical power, biopsychosocial effects, and cultural affect...The standards, forms, and instruments used to measure outcomes are enmeshed in historical and political relations of power that value some ways of knowing over others and that often are not that well equipped to account for a multiplicity of meanings” (Craig 2012, 7). Looking at participants’ experiences of healing with deep ethnographic attention—grasping it as embodiment, as granting individuals autonomy and agency over their own health and personhood, expecting a “multiplicity of meanings”—is a prerequisite to evaluating the means by which healing occurs.

The definition of healing as expressed by my participants allowed me to perceive how this process unfolded at Kripalu and Esalen. Just as importantly, however, it urged me to look at “illness” in relation to the retreat center and with respect to a larger sociocultural context in which much of human health has been historically claimed by the biomedical domain. Before I could write about how or whether healing was happening in these spaces, I needed to grasp what, at its core, needed to be healed. The notion that emerged was something akin to what Asian medical modalities like Ayurveda or Chinese medicine might refer to as *dis-ease*: a state of disjuncture, fracture, or imbalance that manifests in emotional, physical, or mental unwellness. In “The Mindful Body,” Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock provide a deep understanding of sickness within and beyond the bounds of the individual body. While the binaries they articulate might now be seen as

slightly antiquated or overgeneralized, these points of difference between biomedically-oriented societies and what they labeled, in 1987, “ethnomedical systems,” communicate salient insights as they pertain to the definition of healing emergent within this project.

I did not find this paper until after my fieldwork, and yet it parallels the framework I began to develop around origins of “un-wellness” as I witnessed and heard stories of healing at Kripalu and Esalen. Scheper-Hughes and Lock set a scene of modern Western cultural norms that regard the body as a decidedly individual unit, a machine (both metaphorically and medically). This disjuncture between the individual and community, the body and nature, the partitioning of the individual mind, body, and spirit, they argue, both produces and is a result of profound alienation in modern post-industrial societies. Conditions of disconnectedness, what they describe as a “disembodied self, or a selfless body,” or to use R.D. Laing’s term, “a divided self (1965),” have pathological consequences that manifest in neuroticisms, addictions, and disordered ways of being in our contemporary world (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987, 22). Ironically—or aptly—R.D. Laing taught many workshops at Esalen in its early history.

With this context of our modern state of alienation, Scheper-Hughes and Lock then explore biomedicine’s Cartesian division of disease and illness, which defines disease as an objective abnormality in the function of the body, and illness as the patient’s subjective experience of unwellness. Despite developing a language that discursively recognizes these two categories as separate and unique, biomedicine still claims and medicalizes both. Yet, Scheper-Hughes and Lock posit, this notion of illness—the inherently social and collective component of dis-ease—cannot be properly treated or remedied solely by the medical. Seen through this lens, people attracted to Esalen or Kripalu are attempting to heal—beyond one particular symptom or disease category—a disorder within our social fabric, and a simultaneous failure of biomedicine to treat the body as “a unitary, integrated aspect of self and social relations” (the latter of which fails both in diagnosis and treatment) (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987, 21). While this might manifest as unrelated categories of “un-wellness” in any two individuals at the retreat center—a woman with a high-stress career experiencing chronic fatigue and pain, a man suffering from Lyme disease, a young mother who “just needed to get away”—the core of the sickness and process of healing retain thematic and structural similarity. This similarity matters. It weaves together participants’ narratives with a shared sensibility of the genesis of dis-ease, revealing how and why the same social and environmental factors at Kripalu and Esalen nurture healing processes for maladies otherwise perceived as different from each other.

Embodied Healing

For me, lack of healing has been dissociation. In so many different ways. The thing I'm wrestling with right now, is that the way I've been disembodied, it's like I don't have a back. I can't see my back. So I go to see a physical therapist, he's like, you're not using these things, you're not using your glutes, it's like they don't exist. And you realize that you've become a two-dimensional person that's disembodied, half-embodied.

—David, Esalen seminarian

Scheper-Hughes and Lock argue that profound healing lies in “ethnomedical” systems, wherein the individual body is inextricable from the social and environmental fabric, and is seen “as a microcosm of the universe” (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987, 21). The process of healing as expressed by participants at Kripalu or Esalen (and often leading up to and after those encounters) is one that communicates much of what Scheper-Hughes and Lock outline. **Healing**, as it is defined and enacted in this project, includes this **integration and understanding of the self in relation to the larger social body, the body politic, and universe.**

The concept of “embodiment” is a crucial element of that healing. I draw on Thomas Csordas’s writings on embodiment as a way of understanding the body in the world and collapsing inadequate analytical dualities (Csordas 1988). I use the term embodiment, or **embodied healing**, to encapsulate what almost all participants express in part or whole: **the process of gaining a true understanding of and presence in the body, autonomy in assessing individual wellness versus illness, and personal health agency.**

The process of greater embodiment and a personal transformation of one’s own experience of sickness and health mirrors Christine Barry’s suggestion that many individuals using or practicing CAM are seeking “transcendent, transformational experiences; changing lived-body experience; and the gaining of meaning” (Barry 2006, 2645). These descriptors of a transformed or improved “lived-body experience,” as well as “the gaining of meaning,” are salient signifiers of effective healing within retreat spaces. David, an Esalen seminarian, describes his own understanding of our modern state of alienation, the inadequacies of biomedical treatment approaches, and the healing he seeks as it relates to both embodiment and the integration of the self in relation to community:

What is healing? Is it the baseline state of human society, is it that? I think it’s absolutely not. We’re fundamentally in a state of fever, at all times. So healing is yeah, hopefully my pain

goes down. But then healing is also feeling part of some community, some interpersonal system, some kind of intergenerational sense of being a part of something that's going to continue...Everything is part of healing....Because healing is very slow. I could go on about the concept of healing. I went through the stages of grief with this stuff. Where at first, I was like, I want doctors to fix me. Just fix me, you know what you're doing. And then you move from that to no, actually, you have to do some work. You have to do physical therapy every day, you don't really understand why. It's like, I do this and I get better, but you're not really getting better. So you start getting disillusioned. And then you go to the next phase, where it's: it's not like this exercise is going to magically make me better. It's, how do I appreciate the moment I'm doing it in, in connection with my body to itself.

As I explore the thematic threads of how healing occurs at Kripalu and Esalen, I will use these understandings of illness and healing as essential frameworks to ground my analysis. These definitions are directly informed by participants' own words and expressions of their individual and qualitative experiences at Kripalu and Esalen.

The “Harming Potential”: Notes on Cultural Appropriation, Indigeneity, and Identity

Something I've been more cognizant about in my personal journey in Australia is traditional custodianship and Indigenous relationships to land. And what struck me pretty quickly was an absence around that here. That was quite hard. Quite honestly. I don't think it was altogether surprising that I was, I guess I was hopeful for more of an introduction....Who are the people of this place? And what does this place mean to the Esselen people, and how are they involved? Are they involved?

—Annie, Esalen work-scholar

There are some people here who are having really deeply traumatic experiences of the level of cultural appropriation and whiteness. Especially people whose culture is appropriated by the mere existence of some of the components of Esalen. And they're angry, and rightfully so. And being a part of that community, being connected to other people of color in this experience is important to me as a person of color...And in this space, there are people who are having really negative experiences because of the environment itself.

—Melissa, Esalen seminarian

As I wrote the proposal for this project, I was hyper-aware of matters like cultural appropriation, indigeneity, and accessibility to these spaces of retreat—an awareness cultivated by my own years spent working in yoga studios and alternative healing environments in tandem with my academic and personal studies. While I was unsure of how they might unfold at Esalen and Kripalu (and reminded myself that they would not be the principal focus of my thesis), I felt it a crucial responsibility to pay close attention to these issues and their role in the process of retreat and in these places. Throughout this project, I found myself often consumed by instances of cultural appropriation, by the troubling (and for some participants of color, harmful) homogeneity of the retreat population at both centers. At Kripalu and Esalen these issues are equally present but different, possessing their own specificity in relation to the communities, felt senses, and enacted narratives of each environment. Esalen sits on Indigenous land and takes its name from the Esselen people; Kripalu shares a similar relationship to its land and the area's Indigenous Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohicans. There are layers of occupation, historical commodification and erasure, and cultural decontextualization and interpolation in each place. I explore the details of these histories further in Chapter Two. I hope to capture participants' own relationships to these problematic and important qualities of both Kripalu and Esalen, giving weight to the few people of color in each space who generously lent their time and emotional energies to talk about their experiences. These subjects demand an entire thesis on their own—a thesis that is different than the one I can write. However, they are a part of the ground on which this project sits and they infuse the very elements of environment and community I set out to study. Both here, at the outset, and in other specific places in this thesis, I strive to write with candor about my own observations, criticisms, and attempts to grapple with what I witnessed, while simultaneously remembering the primacy of my questions regarding the healing potential of these spaces.

Chapter One

Becoming Lost: The Pilgrimage of Place

Not till we are completely lost, or turned round, —for a man needs only to be turned round once with his eyes shut in this world to be lost, —do we appreciate the vastness and strangeness of nature. Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations.

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

The road to Kripalu is winding. After three trains that lead me to a deserted bus stop, where I realize I have narrowly missed the last shuttle to Kripalu of the day, I call the local taxi companies (there are three, and each seems to operate only one or two cars). The first two tell me that they do not drive “all the way out” to Kripalu; the third and last option does. By the time the car arrives thirty minutes later, it is completely dark out, and I observe (albeit on a surface-level of impression) the disparity between this town on the outskirts of the sheltered wilderness where Kripalu sits and Kripalu itself. My driver is surprised to hear that I have only visited once before. “Most people, they’ve been at least four times. They know what’s for dinner!” As the minutes go by, the road feels more winding, more remote. The darkness makes each turn into the wooded mountains slightly treacherous, unknown. I am struck by the irony of the ascension—it reminds me of the aphorism of a monk on a mountaintop, retreating from civilization to seek some isolated bliss.

Eventually, the car turns and pulls into the drive of a large brick building. I recognize it as our final destination, piecing together memories of my first visit a few years prior. Still, I am surprised by the sight of the building. From what I can see in the dark, the main Shadowbrook structure is a monolith of brown brick. This description suffices in the light of day too, missing only the central “chapel” that bisects the building, a relic of Kripalu’s distant past as a Jesuit monastery and recent history as an ashram. The entryway — flanked by two registration desks facing one another — is a warm respite from the night’s November chill. I make note of a huge basket of apples, oranges, and pears on the desk, and provide my name and information to a friendly man named Paul who conspiratorially tells me that he is “new to the Kripalu family.” His wording feels intentional: “the Kripalu family.” Paul gives me a laminated name tag, which lists my first and last name, the duration of my stay, and the Kripalu “program” I am registered for. In my case, the tag reads “R&R Retreat”: it is Kripalu’s most general and popular program. Guests can stay for a

morning or a month, picking from a daily schedule of yoga classes, workshops, meditation sessions, Kripalu “Yoga Dance,” Kirtan, and more, supplemented by healing arts treatments or other self-improvement consultations for additional fees. I am directed to a luggage room around the corner, where I drop my bag until my room is available later that night. I follow him up the middle stairwell (there are two other major stairwells, to lend a sense of the Shadowbrook building’s substantial size) to the second floor, where he leaves me at the dining hall.

It is my first encounter with the community of Kripalu employees; Paul, along with the two or three women who work at the front desk, become familiar faces during my two weeks at Kripalu. They generously answer my many initial navigational questions with maps of the property and stories of guests’ favorite natural landmarks. They smile politely at me as I cross the main hall at least ten times a day, following the migration patterns of guests to attend workshops and classes, wait for programs to break so that I might approach a participant, and search for any opportunity to speak to new people and introduce my research.

Also on this main hall sits the Kripalu cafe, which becomes my daily station (another reason the front desk employees begin to know my face). The cafe is a natural choice for a temporary office: it is the one space within the building in which the use of electronics is technically permitted—with the exception of phone calls, which can be made only in designated phone booths available on the first, third, and fourth floors. Outlets surreptitiously line the walls, and paper signs on each table list the WiFi network and password, followed by a stern reminder to guests that the use of the cell phones is “strongly prohibited.” The cafe is strategically proximal to the registrations desk, first-floor lounge room, and gift shop, making it an excellent holding space for the gamut of Kripalu guests. Lulls or breaks in the day — often between scheduled programming, in the mornings, and during the late afternoon — pull guests towards the cafe in search of a special treat or something to do (not involving reading, yoga, or other activities related to relaxing and restoring). A shop takes up the corner real estate, selling (upscale and organic) snacks, toiletries, treats from the Kripalu bakery, and coffee for purchase. Adjacent to the cafe is the gift shop, a far more expansive mecca for all things under the wide-reaching umbrella of the Kripalu “brand”: yoga and ayurveda, Eastern religion and philosophy, Western occultism, and products within the gelatinous category of all that might be considered “New Age.”

In this cafe on one of my first mornings, I meet Daniel, who balances a consistent meal of steamed vegetables from the Ayurvedic “buddha bar,” gluten-free oatmeal, and coffee down a flight of stairs from the cafeteria to the cafe each morning in mischievous protest of the silent breakfast

routine standard to the Kripalu dining hall (the cafe is exempt from this rule). For the first two days, I observe Daniel at a distance—the cafe is small, the distance is only conceptual. At each breakfast (and in the hours after, during which we inevitably see each other in the same vinyasa class or workshop), he seems to be reconnecting with close friends—I am mindful not to disturb these intimate breakfasts. On the first day I see Daniel, he and an older couple chat excitedly over their trays; on day two, Dan and a young woman share an animated breakfast discussing the virtues of yin yoga. It is his mention of the silent breakfast that grants me a small opening. He tells the woman that he has been to Kripalu enough times, that he has experienced the silent breakfast and can appreciate it “for what it is,” but now his time is better spent talking.

Within a few minutes, I learn that Dan—on every occasion I had previously witnessed him chatting with what seemed like old friends—had met each person or couple during this five-day stay, often mere hours or minutes before I saw them together. Later he tells me: “Here at Kripalu, none of my friendships blossomed outside. Everything has been made and made rich within this campus. I pay for the connection.” Dan’s magnetic way of being and loquacious connections with other guests—and his immediately enthusiastic support of my project—make him an excellent gatekeeper. While he is the first of his kind I meet at Kripalu, I come to meet a “Daniel” every few days — one or two especially social participants who seem to know every other guest at the center. These “connectors” are invaluable in my fieldwork, enabling me to organically meet participants and hold space for stories and lived experiences I otherwise may not have heard.

Two weeks later, I travel to Esalen. The journey feels steeped in cliché. My first day back in California is gloomy; the sleepy Monterey Bay streets are slicked with rain overnight and through the morning, and I am thankful for the 15-hour respite between my fieldwork at Kripalu and Esalen. From Monterey, I had planned to catch the Esalen shuttle—the only way to arrive on property without renting a car, having a car, or hitching a ride. As I wait with my backpack by the shuttle stop, I notice a familiar *mélange* of emotions: anticipatory, anxious nerves about beginning anew; slight fatigue from the extroversion of my fieldwork.

“Are you going to Esalen?” My thirty minutes of navel-gazing and watching the rain drip off of the roof across the street are punctuated by a man in a small black car with the word “TAXI” affixed haphazardly to its side. I am hesitant to answer. *This couldn’t be the Esalen shuttle? It would need to look more like a shuttle?* When I indicate that I am, the driver is relieved. “I just dropped a woman off to get her bags from her hotel. She’s going to be running. Can you make sure that the shuttle doesn’t leave without her?” Minutes later, I meet the woman we speak of—my soon-to-be first participant

and friend at Esalen. She runs up to the bus stop lugging a big rolling suitcase behind her, shopping bags in hand (she spent the day in Carmel). She is similarly grateful to hear that I'm headed to Esalen, and that the shuttle has yet to arrive. We quickly exchange names and explanations of how we each ended up waiting for a shuttle to a remote retreat center in California. My own anxieties about the unknown that awaits me in Big Sur are eased by this stranger's, who has traveled to be here from Canada, and our shared nerves are interrupted by the arrival of a small white van. Four other travelers—a fraction of our new community for the week—await us in the car, having already boarded at the Monterey Regional airport.

The road to Esalen is mystical. My field notes describe the journey as one “up” the coast, despite Esalen's position about 50 miles south of Monterey. It feels like an ascension. As we pass through Carmel and onwards into the highlands, our shuttle driver launches into an informal history, telling us of Clint Eastwood's brief run as mayor of Carmel-by-the-Sea, where none of the houses have personal mailboxes—by design, so that neighbors are more likely to meet and talk at the post office. Driving us deeper into Big Sur, his history becomes more involved and perfectly timed; if we all look over our shoulders in just a second, we'll catch a glimpse of the picturesque cabin that Orson Welles bought for his wife Rita Hayworth (they measured it for curtains and were divorced before they made a second visit). With each minute, the vistas become more grandiose, the history more complex. Our driver's attention to detail seems to mimic that of whatever created the landscape, of however something like that comes to be. It is untamed and fantastic, yet marked by years of rehearsal, of performance. How is it that the Carmel highlands, reminiscent of their Scottish namesake, are followed by an inconceivable landscape of cliffs, greenery, and an ocean in surreal shades of blue and foam? Every curve reveals something so overt in its representation of beauty that the stomach-churning juxtaposition of the winding, treacherous road aptly completes the vanitas. It is a visceral hour, one that concludes with a turn at a small wooden sign, imperceptible to anyone just driving by: “ESALEN INSTITUTE BY RESERVATION ONLY.”

We pass the small guard house without stopping. A woman named Pam (whom I'll meet that night as the leader of the guest orientation and self-described “old hippie”) has been with Esalen for over 30 years; she knows the shuttle and its driver well. As I climb out of the van and grab my bags, I feel queasy. I look before me at the vast expanse of the front lawn, which foregrounds an even vaster, unending expanse of Pacific Ocean. I turn back, looking up the road and towards the mountains. I'm greeted by a rainbow. The colors are cartoonishly vivid; rain clouds part to make way for a brilliant sun. The intermittent sound of birds and profound ambient silence

of the place enhance the otherworldly picture before me. I turn to a woman checking in seminarians and ask her if they do this every Sunday, for all the new guests.

The visceral drama of the drive along the Pacific Coast Highway leaves me dumbfounded and physically destabilized; I wonder if what I see is real. Reverence and a tinge of delirium hover in the air around our group. As I watch cars and shuttles depart and arrive on Fridays and Sundays over the next two weeks, I see that my experience is not unique (and that this same mythical arrival is felt by newcomers and return guests alike). I wake up at Esalen each day with this same duality of awe and inquiry—there are layers, tensions at play in this alive place.

Upon arrival, guests are directed from the circular drive to the Esalen main office. It is a small room, managing to house a bookstore, couches and chairs for reading (both books and tarot), a small selection of clothing and toiletries, a corner mini-fridge with snacks and drinks (bottles of kombucha, organic chocolates, and nuts sprouted and spiced for optimal consumption and digestion), and a front desk where guests can check in, book a massage, and pick up an Esalen workshop catalog and property map. The books on display change according to the workshop of the week or weekend; when I first arrive, the corner table is covered by literature on creative writing and Esalen bodywork therapy.

As I walk to register, I'm first struck by the office's cozy and unassuming size, immediately comparing it to the multi-room Kripalu gift shop. There are only two women behind the front desk; one invites me forward to check in. It takes a few minutes to explain the reason for my stay. Unlike Kripalu, guests at Esalen are all "seminarians"—they are on property for the express purpose of attending a seminar or program. While some guests register for workshops just for the sake of being at Esalen (and "skip class" in favor of wandering the grounds, hanging out with staff, and soaking in the baths), most seminarians spend the majority of their days fully engaged with the community and self-development of their week-long or weekend programs. After I've described why I'll be at Esalen for the following two weeks, my new friend at registrations hands me my room key and a miniature, Esalen-branded flashlight. This small device will be instrumental in the early mornings and late nights, when guests are not retiring early or sleeping in, but rather beginning the descent down the hill to the baths or to the Lodge (the only space open 24 hours a day, providing a stocked supply of tea, bread, rice cakes, jams and butters, and spotty WiFi). At these hours the grounds are dark, punctured only by a blanket of stars and the loud crashing of the waves — both of which, in the face of a small, weak flashlight, make me feel even more enveloped by the land.

“Have you been to Esalen before?” After first insisting that she saw me around this time last year—a reminder of how many Esalen guests might look like me—she hands me a pamphlet. The blue and white booklet offers basic guest guidelines, mealtimes, information about orientation that night, and a complex property map with symbols designed to make the sprawling property more legible. The map is fortunately labeled with a few payphone booths, which will keep me in loose contact with my family every few days (the nearest cell tower is a 30-minute drive from Esalen, and the WiFi at the Lodge cannot sustain a connection to the Internet for more than a few guests at one time).

My first morning at Esalen, I eat breakfast with Phoebe, a seminarian in a “Mindful Self-Compassion” week-long workshop. We fawn over the homemade granola, the local eggs, the savory quinoa. It’s an overwhelming array of nourishment. Below the words “Currently Harvesting,” a chalkboard in the middle of the lodge reminds us that the produce in each dish is grown just across the Lodge, on the other side of the circular drive, at the Esalen farm and garden. Soon it’s almost ten, and the Lodge clears out as seminarians begin the walk, either across the property to the “Big Yurt” or just above the Lodge to “Huxley,” to their morning sessions. I stay in the Lodge. I don’t quite know what to do with myself; I have yet to gain confirmation as to which workshops I will be able to observe. I spend that mid-morning in and around the Lodge, attempting to take notes. Every view and pocket of the place impresses me, saturates my senses. The windows are gargantuan, providing an unobstructed view of the ocean, horizon, and a portion of the lawn. I’ll come to witness majestic sunrises and sunsets from this vantage point almost daily—so consistent as to become quotidian. I am reminded of the Kripalu cafe, where tall windows similarly frame skies painted shades of red and orange almost every morning and night. The local California-esque cuisine at Esalen takes a different form at Kripalu, where a kitchen designed to feed as many as five-hundred guests serves a greater quantity and diversity of Ayurvedically-inspired meal options. At Kripalu, instead of the Pacific Ocean, my gaze settles on snow and mountains; in my last few days there, the snow swirls into a storm, frigid clouds dusting a white veil across the vast landscape.

“Breathing In” Place: The Felt Sense

Most people, myself included...don't normally look at our surroundings. We breathe them in.

—*Christopher Day*, *Places of the Soul: Architecture and Environmental Design as a Healing Art*

Participants do not need to convince me of the power of these natural surroundings or details of setting. I can feel it. In *Places of the Soul*, architect Christopher Day describes hospital clinics that leave him, despite his “good health,” feeling “only half alive.” He continues: “The brutal vandalism of buildings unfeelingly imposed can have the same effect” (Day 2007, 4). Palpable details at both Kripalu and Esalen conjure a felt sense of restoration and health. These details are not expressed exclusively by healing architecture or attention to spatial design, or even by the sheer beauty of the natural landscape. Rather, they emerge in the subtle qualities at each center, differences that shape participants’ healing experiences — a sentiment confirmed by those who have visited both places. I use the term **felt sense** as developed by philosopher Eugene Gendlin to mean one’s “body-sense of a situation” that often cannot be consciously articulated, that sits on the “edge of awareness” (Gendlin 1984). This embodied sensation is a crucial context in examining these retreat centers as healing environments, and in understanding how and why the two places feel distinctly different (and thus might feel more immediately healing to certain identities or positionalities).

The day before I leave Kripalu, I chat with the woman who typically manages the cafe. She tells me conspiratorially that a “crazy number of people” are arriving that night for the weekend, bringing the total guest population to about six or seven hundred people, not including onsite staff and faculty. While the Esalen property spans over one hundred acres and feels far more sprawling than Kripalu’s mostly indoor facilities, Esalen—as I’m told several times by staff and work-scholars—restricts its overnight guest population to about 120 people. Staff who work full-time are usually granted housing at a separate residential property owned by Esalen a few miles down the road, referred to by the semi-permanent internal community as “North Coast.” Esalen is full of these details that feel like secrets, discursively signaling its more intimate and enduring relational worlds.

The relative sizes of the centers are crucial components of their felt senses; scale also carries weight as it relates to each center’s community of employees, and dynamics between employees and guests. At Esalen, with such an intimate number of seminarians and an almost equal, if not slightly greater, number of employees at any given time, familiarity feels inevitable. Many of my interlocutors remark that Esalen, to them, feels like “adult summer camp” or “like a college dining hall.” Guests and employees do not wear name tags, all seating options are communal and, if the center is at capacity, require guests to squeeze shoulder-to-shoulder while eating. Mealtimes are scheduled within less than two-hour windows. These confined time slots for eating are designed to congregate seminarians, faculty, and employees in one place. The smallness of place is emphasized by the

impossibility of cell phone usage. Most of my interlocutors express that this (essentially mandatory) isolation from the outside world is a major part of why they register even their moment of arrival at Esalen as one that is healing. As one of my participants, Frank, describes it: “I’m not on the phone, I’m not getting emails, I’m not dealing with my kids’ stuff, there’s no work stuff. I’m cut off, and after a couple of days of that, you feel better.” The non-digital forms of communication that take place across the grounds engender new senses of well-being and connectivity.

On a small board at the entrance of the Lodge, the Esalen office posts notes of phone calls left for guests from the outside world; seminarians, faculty, and employees more frequently use the board to “pass notes” to each other. Different forms of intimacy and internal community unfold on this bulletin—people announce if they are looking for or offering rides, meetings for affinity groups of guests and employees are organized, people say goodbyes and thank yous, or leave notes for seminarians arriving in the coming days. It is by the novel connectivity of this board that I find a ride all the way back to my home in Orange County, six or seven hours south of Esalen. Esalen’s literal and enacted intimacy preserves a felt sense of its history, one exempt from the alienation or forced independence of “modernity” and distinctly attached to the “hippie” relics of its counterculture roots. This “summer camp” atmosphere, in which daily demands or worries shrink and the pace of life slows, facilitates the vulnerability, connectedness, and stress-reduction that make the place fundamentally healing.

In contrast, the felt sense at Kripalu inherently demands a degree of regulation, both by the individual and by Kripalu’s oversight. Signs across the building—both on the walls and on every table in the dining hall and cafe—ask that guests do not use their phones or electronics. Still, with a strong internet connection and near-perfect cell service throughout the building, guests’ freedom from technology depends on their own self-discipline and commitment to co-creating a healing space. In many instances, this generates more frustration for my interlocutors than it does restoration. Daniel, whom I’ve introduced earlier as my first “connector,” tells me: “What bothers me most is cell phones...I was bringing my meal down, and there’s people in the dining hall with cell phones...In my yoga class last night, someone’s cell phone goes off. The entire ringtone series of their phone. I mean, what do we do, do we build a whole retreat center in a cage so that nothing comes in?” In this moment, the fabric of the felt sense is ruptured. This tether to the stresses of the “outside world” has a ripple effect, hindering the healing sense of the retreat space.

Marco, a participant who also knows Daniel, tells me a story from that morning, when he and Daniel saw a man bring his cell phone into the sauna. Laughing, Marco recounts: “I swear, I

thought...I don't know. I thought he was going to throw it across the room!" Another guest at Kripalu articulates the same issue: "I did a gentle yoga class this afternoon, and I happened to be in the opposite direction because I had spaced out. So I rolled to my side and the woman next to me rolled to her side, and she was [bursts into laughter] looking at her phone like this [mimics fetal position, looking at her phone]. I wanted to be like, put that away!" This participant goes on to explain that others' use of phones at the center creates an obtrusive barrier, one that prevents her from "starting up a conversation" or connecting with other guests.

Kripalu's substantially larger size lends a different felt sense of connectivity. I interview a couple who have been visiting Kripalu for years. The husband tells me that he stayed at Esalen a few months prior with a social justice group he belongs to. He notes:

Something that's different about this place [Kripalu] is it's quite big...At most, Esalen has two things going on at the same time. Here, there could be a number of things...so, what's the glue that holds it together? It's a little more of a challenge for them [Kripalu] to keep a center because there's all these different things. Whereas these other places, what's happening *is* the group, so there's a cohesion in the group itself. This is not as much that. The conversations are more hit or miss, maybe.

Just as he describes the conversations at Kripalu as being potentially "more hit or miss," it is necessary to emphasize that these differences of subtle environmental qualities or feelings at each place are both subjective and far more nuanced than any high-level comparison can adequately do justice to.

There are, of course, exceptions to each "rule." On my last night Kripalu, I am jolted just before bed by the sound of a loud alarm. I shuffle out to the hallway, and soon find myself outside with all five or six-hundred guests, standing in inches of snow wearing open-toed slip-on shoes and a light sweater. In this extraordinary event, I am reminded of interpersonal kindness and connectivity as they emerge even in a crowd this large—qualities that are perhaps fortified by the sheer quantity of people I see around me, offering a hand or a blanket as we traverse the snow to follow proper fire safety protocol.

The Labor of Retreat: Staff and Employee Communities

The difference in Kripalu and Esalen's sizes also impacts dynamics between employee and guest communities. This structural relationship between the temporary retreat guests and the larger,

permanent community that supports the retreat process has crucial repercussions on the social and felt sense of healing or authentic well-being at each center. At Esalen, employees and work-scholars do not wear any distinct uniform, nametags, or other visual indicators that separate them from the seminarian community. The only external symbols of their “separate-ness” from the guest population are behavioral differences, signifiers of familiarity and greater permanence within the Esalen culture. During my time at the Institute, I am gradually able to discern who works at Esalen and who is a temporary visitor. While employees in the kitchen or on “cabins” crew might seem easy to identify (purely because of their visible roles at the Institute), the thin lines of distinction between permanent or full-time employees and work-scholars is more nuanced. My ability to discern these categories is due in part to my extended stay, but is also largely thanks to the openness with which Esalen employees, work-scholars, and faculty welcome me into their world. While I feel lucky to be embraced in this way, other seminarians and employees demonstrate that this welcome is not unusual or special to my experience. The (essentially unavoidable) opportunities to congregate, eat in the same place, share the baths, and so on—all are inherent aspects of Esalen’s smaller scale that contribute to a greater dissolution of the barrier between guests and employees. Still, it is crucial to recognize the obviously different experiences had by those individuals who do the diligent work of supporting the retreat ecosystem. David tells me: “I had a friend who did the work-study program, and I didn’t know she was doing it, and I ran into her the last time I was here. I was like, Esalen’s amazing! And she was like, Well, it’s a lot of work. There’s a lot of labor that goes into supporting a place like this.”

In contrast to Esalen’s less official delineation of its workforce, all Kripalu employees in service departments (kitchen, dining hall, and housekeeping or cleaning teams) wear brightly colored collared shirts or other recognizable uniforms. All faculty, employees, and visiting teachers at Kripalu wear enamel pins that announce their name and position at the center. Each Kripalu guest is given a laminated ID tag, which informs their retreat peers of their name, length of stay, and “purpose” at Kripalu (be it for R&R or a particular program). At Kripalu, one is less likely to see the same core group of guests and employees throughout the day; while faces become familiar, the sheer size of the center makes it impossible to cultivate the same unavoidable sense of intimacy at Esalen. Kripalu’s employee population—and the separation between guests and employees—also has a troubling racial and socioeconomic component, one that emphasizes the overwhelming homogeneity of Kripalu’s guest population. The people of color present at Kripalu are almost exclusively employees. Many of my interlocutors are disturbed by this division, and are equally upset

by dynamics that I witness, like a lack of human interaction or connection between guests and employees.

At both centers, typical workplace politics are not scrubbed clean from the “conscious” retreat environment. I overhear gossip about who would or would not make a “good” Esalen massage therapist, superficial controversies about who has (or hasn’t) been asked back to Kripalu to lead a workshop or teacher training. Such idiosyncrasies do not “break” the felt sense of healing in any significant manner, but it would be an oversight to pretend as if these petty dramas of human life do not exist in the world of retreat—particularly in these types of retreat where the centers are non-profit *businesses*. While Esalen’s employee community meshes warmly with its visiting seminarians, the underlying realities are not always kind. I hear from many employees and more integrated members of the Esalen community about the lack of support given to what most refer to as the “elders” or “old-timers”—those who have been with the Institute since its beginnings in the 60s and 70s. There is a tension, a frustration between how the Institute presents itself—its felt sense of consciousness and care—and how it treats the figures who have stewarded its community and healing practice. Deborah first came to Esalen when she was eighteen with her year-old daughter. She tells me: “I also was a manager here, twelve and a half years—that just ended, in August. It’s a funny place. Some wonderful things, and some other stuff...Massage people do not get housing, most have another job that is their full-time job. Esalen does give housing to people who work forty hours a week in the kitchen, or on grounds, or someplace else.” Like many of her contemporaries, Deborah raised her daughter alongside the more permanent Esalen community, and lives near the property. Despite the fact that Deborah has a wealth of knowledge and experience, and is a practitioner and teacher admired by seminarians, faculty, and employees, in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis she has been fired, along with many of the Esalen “old-timers.”

How do these underlying tensions—the visible barriers between employees and guests at Kripalu, or the lack of authentic care given to those who pioneered and carry forward the intellectual and experiential tradition of Esalen—impact the felt sense of each place? How are spaces of healing tainted by points of disjuncture or disconnect within the institutional structure or integrity of the ecosystem? I have no definitive answers to these questions and, much like issues of appropriation and accessibility, they are nuanced topics that merit a research project of their own. Still, they expose important possibilities for greater healing, and point to the value of mechanisms that are often present at traditional spaces of religious or spiritual retreat wherein retreat-goers support the space itself through an exchange of labor.

“Like Coming Home”

And the first moment that I drove in and stopped at the gate, I looked around. It felt like I was coming home. It was the strangest feeling, because I am from Brazil. How could this be home? But that's how I felt.

—Esalen seminarian

For many, the felt senses at both Kripalu and Esalen invoke a comfort, safety, and ease that participants describe in equal part as “home,” like in the quote above, and as an “adult summer camp”. The accommodations at both centers—for most participants, basic rooms involving anywhere from one to five other roommates—have the rustic essence of a sleepaway camp or college dorm. Not all participants enjoy this “bare-bones basic” design, as Deborah describes it at Esalen. And yet, many guests do, or at least are willing to sacrifice luxury accommodations for the atmosphere of these centers and, moreover, pay a relatively high price for their entry.

Fundamentally, this format facilitates greater connection between most guests who stay in shared accommodations. Deborah explains: “The man who did a lot of the old building [at Esalen]...He told me personally he built it...purposefully because he didn’t want people to be in the rooms, he wanted them to be outside.” I imagine a similar assumption was made at Kripalu, where the shared rooms are even more bare and basic. During mealtimes in the Kripalu dining hall or the Esalen Lodge, the comparison to an “adult summer camp” is palpable — especially when someone picks up one of the many guitars or drums affixed to the beams of the Lodge.

Participants mention how activities at both centers—like Kripalu Yoga Dance, or the signature Esalen “5Rhythms” dance sessions, which engage in a similar process of meditative movement—make them feel young, uninhibited, or childlike. One of my interlocutors at Esalen, who has visited many times (with her brother, who has been coming to the Institute for over fifty years) observes: “I do feel like a kid. I come here, and I get to run around, and they feed me...It’s so free. It’s like being with a gang of kids. As an adult, that really doesn’t happen.” For many participants, connecting with a sense of childlike freedom (at once shedding the self-conscious worries and anxieties of adulthood) can be deeply healing—a healing embodied in these movement practices and sustained by the felt sense of the retreat environment. This youthful or playful felt sense is present at both centers, counterbalanced by a ubiquitous feeling of calm. After many years of visiting Kripalu, one of my participants, Sabrina, attempts to translate this felt sense into words:

I don't know if Kripalu attracts a certain kind of people, or if it's just immediately contagious once you get here. I think the staff models and faculty model that...I wonder why — I mean, certain places just have that. You can walk into a space and it's just cold, and you don't know why. Here, you walk in, and maybe it's the lighting, maybe it's the color...There are areas where you can sit in a group, comfy chairs, couches, the whole acoustic of the place. It's very, very soothing. You can have a conversation, but it's not like someone else will hear you. There's just this whisper everywhere. It's like a hum. And you can just immerse yourself. So I think the acoustic, the lighting, the colors that are chosen, I think they definitely facilitate that process. And there may be something about you know, the sacred space.

At the end of this description, Sabrina reverts to the mythology of place as I will explore it in Chapter Two, struggling to explain the calm or healing “hum” of the center that cannot be adequately told, but rather must be experienced.

Guests and teachers at Kripalu elucidate how the healing teachings or values of place are upheld (and reflected) by the felt sense of the retreat center. A yoga teacher who has been part of the faculty at Kripalu for over fifteen years explains how the philosophy of Kripalu yoga is embodied within the cultural milieu of the center:

It was really created for householders. That was the vision, that it would speak to people who had jobs and homes and kids and responsibilities. And so the people that teach here, the people that seem to be drawn here, that create all of us, the community, seem to really get the value of: what does it mean to live yoga in your life? ... What I often see out in the world is, a yogi is supposed to look like this. A yogi is supposed to eat this, a yogi is not supposed to do this. There's so much compassion, or no judgment. I think that, more than anything, creates the space of healing. And allows for a wide range of people to feel like they're welcome here.

The values and sensibilities alive at Kripalu literally create a space that can be healing. The conclusion of this statement is important. It highlights a simultaneous tension, one that asks: which “range of people” do the felt senses of spaces like Kripalu and Esalen welcome? For whom is this felt sense healing?

Chapter Two

Narratives of Sacred Space: Mythmaking, Storytelling, and Culture

But the place demands a certain respect; that's maybe not the word I'm searching for, but there's something about this geographic place, the natural surroundings, that maintain the sacredness of the things that go on here.

—*Esalen Cabins employee*

The Esalen landscape commands reverence. Even to those with no knowledge of the history of the Esselen people who settled in and stewarded this Big Sur coastland for thousands of years before it garnered its cultural lore as the Esalen Institute in the 1960s, the place speaks for itself. Nestled between mountains and ocean and threaded with a canyon stream, looming redwoods, and naturally occurring hot sulfur springs, the place is magnificent. In each slice of the land, rich detail comes alive. While the openness of the Pacific and expanse of horizon and sky—particularly striking as the sun rises and sets—evoke an unfurling freedom, the mountains and redwoods are humbling, lending the place a sense of privacy and protection. In any space on the property, be it at the baths perched on the cliffside or at a warm, oak table in the Lodge, one feels held.

This is not by accident. A thick binder sits on the wide wooden coffee table of the Esalen office, listing an extensive DVD collection largely comprised of archival footage from Esalen's history. I was given advance notice of this archive by Esalen's General Manager, Terry Gilbey, who enthusiastically suggested I pack a disc drive for my two weeks in Big Sur. After filling out a small piece of paper with my requests, I find a stack of DVDs in my room, bound by a rubber band. On the top sits a lecture from Stanislov Grof entitled "The Healing Potential of Non-Ordinary States of Consciousness;" beneath it are many more conversations, workshops, and talks with figures like Fritz Perls, George Leonard, and Aldous Huxley. Grof was an originator of transpersonal psychology and one of the first to begin researching psychedelic therapy; Perls coined Gestalt therapy (now widely practiced and nearly "owned" by the center) and eventually built a house and permanent life at Esalen. Leonard was an iconic writer and "grandfather" of the consciousness movement. Beyond his prolific literary career, Huxley's writings on perception, human potentialities, and the mysticism of psychedelics largely shaped Esalen's foundational philosophies. Esalen's rich intellectual history—which I was aware of prior to my arrival and understood in more detail as I inhabited the place—came alive in this footage.

In the middle of this stack is a talk given by Richard Feather Anderson at Esalen in the early 2000s. While I was not familiar with his name, the lecture's title—"Divining the Spirit of Place: The Geomancy of Esalen"—piques my interest. In it, Anderson speaks on the "art of harmonious placements" in relation to Esalen's history and future in sustaining success and symbiosis with the land on which it sits. Early in the lecture, Anderson slides a laminated *bagua*—a basic *feng shui* diagram—over the property map, revealing not only symbolic meanings imbued in the layout of the Institute, but also distilling many of the ways in which Esalen has leveraged architecture, landscaping, and planning to cultivate a sense of both place and community. Feng shui and geomancy are two slightly different terms for the ancient Chinese practice of divination or foresight based on the teachings of the earth. Anderson draws on this tradition to justify his later recommendations for the Institute. Esalen's landscaping strategy, and how it might leverage its layout and relationships to the land to return prosperity and sustained operational success, are of primary concern.

When not displaying Anderson's series of projected images and diagrams, the grainy film frames his face closely—he is animated, excited by what he's found at Esalen. He tells Esalen leadership how fortuitous the "property" is: from the natural sense of place and security created by the slight descent of the main entrance (secondarily guarded by mountain and ocean), to "miraculous" rock formations that, by theories of geomancy and *feng shui*, supercharge one's ability to connect with place, community, and self-cultivation. It is a complex lecture, one that touches on geographies of healing, community, and optimizing organizational success (and one that largely does not engage with Esalen's Indigenous history, or histories of erasure that have taken the fortuitous land to be Esalen's "property"). The way Anderson deftly translates from feng shui to geomancy to Esalen's corporate and strategic interests is equally as complex. In the seemingly simple act of placing the transparent *bagua* over Esalen's cartographic representation, Anderson produces something unintentionally significant. The laminated layers are apt representations for the melding of cultures present in Esalen's formation and negotiation of its own history and mythology.

Jeff Kripal is informally known as Esalen's resident historian. His book, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*, is a tome, spanning the history of the center's inception (including the detailed life histories of co-founders Michael Murphy and Dick Price), geographical setting and landscape, intellectual influences, seminal figures and of course, mythos and pop-cultural lore. On the first page of the book, preceding the Table of Contents and adjacent to the title page, is a reproduction of Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. The visual rhetoric overwhelms,

promising mystical allure and rich detail. The dedication page addresses “Mike” and “Dick”; in between, Kripal places a few lines of Sanskrit and their English translation.

In the first chapter— “On Wild Facts and Altered Categories” — Kripal reviews the theories and teachers of Eastern religion and spirituality that were enmeshed in Esalen’s inception and early years. Kripal’s examination of Eastern thought as it informs Esalen’s past and living ideology is impressively detailed. This makes sense; his areas of scholarly expertise include comparative religion, Hindu Tantra, and Esalen’s own human potential movement—the idea that one could cultivate untapped potential (on an individual and societal level) via holistic health and psychological transformation. Yet, as Kripal carefully weaves the tapestry of Esalen’s rich origins, he spends only one or two pages addressing the Indigenous history of this land that he describes as “ancient, unimaginably older than any human habitation” (Kripal 2007, 28). A glance at the book’s lengthy index reveals that the word *Esselen* is only mentioned on five separate instances in its near-600 pages.

Information on the history (and contemporary presence) of the Esselen people is sparse, within and even outside this volume. Kripal himself describes the Esselen as “one of the least studied tribes of California” (Kripal 2007, 30). He gives an overview of the history of the Esselen and related tribes Indigenous to the area, points out the obvious influence the Esselen had on the naming of the Esalen Institute, and reviews the “particularly cruel” colonial past inflicted upon the Indigenous tribes of the Monterey and Big Sur regions (Kripal 2007, 30). There is a deliberate reverence in Kripal’s language that seeks to honor, in some way, the Indigenous history of Esalen’s land—with an emphasis on the word *history* as complete, regarded as past. His summary of the timeline as it meets modernity maintains: “by most accounts no Esselen could be found in Big Sur by the time the place was homesteaded in the early 1880s” (Kripal 2007, 31).

In my own research and as I noticed narratives of the Indigenous threaded throughout Esalen, I wondered if any Esselen tribe members had been consulted during the founding of the Institute. To my knowledge, none had. There is no acknowledgment that the now-privatized property on which Esalen rests is appropriated land; it is seen as land that rightfully belongs to the Murphy family, that was inherited by Michael Murphy from his grandmother. These discursive signals point to the tensions of the place, the complications and narrative contradictions of language or conjured images that crave the story and symbolic sense of the Indigenous while simultaneously sealing it into a history painted as ancient, separate. Immediately after writing that the “Esselen are not completely extinct,” Kripal states as fact: “neither do they any longer constitute an independent

culture” (Kripal 2007, 31). It is not clear why Kripal has the authority to arbitrate whether the Esselen “constitute an independent culture.” The narrative feels like one of deliberate erasure, a reconstruction of past and present to paint Esalen as the savior of a land abandoned by its original inhabitants.

In my first week at Esalen, a local photographer visits the Mindful Self-Compassion workshop to share his work and describe his relationship to the Big Sur coast and the Esalen landscape in particular. He has lived and photographed in the area for over thirty years. I know of this visit not because I was present for the workshop session, but because multiple friends and participants mention him to me—and describe his thirty-minute talk with such a spectrum of interpretations that I at first do not realize they are all speaking about the same person and presentation. Phoebe, whom I met my first night at Esalen, is the first to mention him to me. We had scheduled an interview about mid-way through the week.

Early in the day of our interview, I spot a note on the board with my name, followed by an amusing qualifier – “Zoë anthropology!” Phoebe writes that she might be a little late, and would I like to find her after lunch? We eventually walk down to a wooden bench at the edge of the lawn that overlooks the ocean (as most vantage points at Esalen do), hidden and held by the overhang of the pool behind it. Phoebe explains:

The reason that our workshop was delayed getting out was because of this man who — I thought of you — I wish you could have been there! Did you hear about it? He is this man who's worked and lived here for 40 years. He is a photographer. I don't know what else he does here at Esalen. And he knows about the Indian tribe, Esselen, that was here. And he just had all this wonderful wealth of information to share with us, about the people that were here originally, and there was some connection with Japan somehow. And then he has these amazing pictures of whales and dolphins.

Esalen lies at an intersection of cultural and intellectual influences, modalities, and myths. This melding is not passive, or by positional happenstance. Whether seminarians, faculty, and leadership recognize it consciously or not, there is an active creation of myth and narrative that goes on within workshops and informal, serendipitous moments like this photographer’s guest appearance in the Mindful Self-Compassion session. It is a part of the promise of the retreat space. From Richard Feather Anderson’s symbolic and literal act of placing the *bagua* over the Esalen map, to Phoebe’s recollection of “some connection with Japan somehow,” cultural interpolation and appropriation are imbued in retreat spaces like Esalen and Kripalu. In the modalities that comprise

the program calendar, fragments and wholes of Eastern, Indigenous, and in total, non-Western teachings proliferate. Kripal describes Esalen's earliest roots as running deeply "in Asian [directions]...The California writers, and alongside them Esalen, would help to change all of this, but they would need Asia, and particularly Tantric Asia, to catalyze such a heretical project" (Kripal 2007, 35). Kripal emphasizes tantra as a major influence in Esalen's founding and present-day philosophy. I wonder how mystical traditions like tantra, which typically requires years of study, practice, and guidance under the supervision of a teacher for fear and reverence of its immense power, translate to a retreat space in California.

In the paragraph that follows, Kripal is quick to point out that the resources for this "project" were equally present in Western religious history, which he describes as being "filled with erotic forms of mysticism" (Kripal 2007, 35). Kripal explains that this vein of Western spiritualism had been eradicated from the United States. He writes: "Obviously, to re-activate something of such a love would require more than a little boldness, more than a little imagination, and more than a few cultural battles" (Kripal 2007, 36). There is a majestic sense of the fantastical in his language. This sweeping statement transitions into Kripal's introduction of Henry Miller and his relation to the Esalen Institute (he was the groundskeeper for the Murphy family before Esalen was "Esalen"). What manifests is the same tension alive in Kripal's overview of the Esselen people: an attempt to grapple with the co-opting and repurposing of Indigenous histories and non-Western cultures, and a simultaneous desire to claim this narrative of the exotic as Esalen's own. An active process of storytelling and mythmaking emerges. It signals the sacred and spiritual through these histories and ideological threads and amplifies Esalen's cultural capital through its own storied past as entrenched in popular and intellectual culture. As negotiated by particular individuals within the Esalen community, an attempt to educate and confront Esalen's relationship to the Indigenous is certainly alive. On a larger institutional level, however, the approach is one not of confrontation, but of "getting past" the past.

In Phoebe's language, there is an understanding of the importance of the Indigenous history of the land. However, adequate education and information are noticeably missing. Sophie, another participant whom I met my first morning at Esalen as we volunteered in the garden and uprooted fennel side-by-side, gleaned a different set of meanings from the session with the photographer. The moment stuck with her. As it nears the end of the mindful self-compassion seminar's week, we run into each other outside beneath the heated lighting that warms the deck of the Lodge. Recounting this same moment that Phoebe described earlier with an entirely different lens, she tells me:

We had somebody come into our workshop and give us a talk, and show some photos of the work he's done around the native history of California. And he just very briefly touched on the sacredness of this land to the Esselen people, and how violently they were removed from this place, and how their burial grounds still remain here. The lives and stories and memories of a whole population live on this land. And I feel like that's very erased in the way that Esalen as a center exists now. So that has been really hard for me to sit with, especially because where I'm living right now, I'm doing a lot of work around learning the Indigenous history of a place, thinking about reparations and returning land to Indigenous people, all of that. So, it feels really weird to be healing here, knowing the violence which my healing is resting on.

The inherent “violence” that Sophie struggles with, in her relationship to Esalen as a designated space for healing, is an important tension at both centers. In “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang outline settler “moves to innocence,” or ways in which non-Indigenous peoples “attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity” by enacting tropes to signal the reparation of colonization (Tuck and Yang 2012, 3). In the language and narratives mobilized by both Kripalu and Esalen around indigeneity, moves to innocence are apparent. As I observe almost all of Tuck and Yang’s six listed categories of “settler fantasies of easier paths to reconciliation” play out at each space, I struggle to see how Kripalu or Esalen might ever truly (literally, and not metaphorically) decolonize their spaces (Tuck and Yang 2012, 4). Can these centers legitimately decolonize without completely upending their institutions? As the authors cite Franz Fanon: “Decolonization never takes place unnoticed” (Tuck and Yang 2012, 7). Are Esalen and Kripalu’s attempts to bring light to their histories actual confrontations and reparations of these dark legacies, or rather, moves to innocence—merely ways to “get past” their pasts?

Sophie is finishing up a year-long program involving food justice and social wellness. As part of this program, she spent a month working and living at another retreat center that is more directly addressing these questions about land, history, and cultural forms of healing (and erasing). She is a white woman, only a few years older than I am. As she alludes to above, she is more engaged than most seminarians in discussions about Indigenous rights and reparations. Although she and Phoebe were present for the same session, the narratives they received were starkly different. Sophie adds:

He was using past-tense language. It was weird because he was using past tense language but also talking about how there are still Esselen tribe members alive, so that was confusing. But

I often get really frustrated when people talk about Indigenous people as only in the past tense. It's a huge act of erasure. So, I'm glad at least one person is talking about this, but was also definitely uncomfortable with the delivery. And there's a big poster on that wall [points across from us, to the other side of the deck] that I've read and yeah, I don't know.

Sophie's identification of the speaker's past tense language as an act of erasure is a nuanced one. It again sheds light on Kripal's narrative voice, which assigns a past tense status to the tribes Indigenous to the Big Sur land. Her perceptive analysis is also noteworthy because it requires deep introspection; discursive subtleties construct felt narratives that most seminarians and members of the community might otherwise not consciously acknowledge or even notice. The display that Sophie refers to combines a few quotes about the Esselen people with general statements that mythologize the presence of the Indigenous on the property. One half of the plaque reads:

The Esselen people recognized the importance of prescribed burns to mimic natural fires in an effort to keep the local ecosystems thriving. Like rain or sunshine, fire is a natural act and to honor this and remain connected to our local forests, we have incorporated posts and beams milled from redwood that naturally fell in fires at the base of Pico Blanco, a peak sacred to the Esselen people. Tom "Little Bear" Nason, an Esselen Tribe leader, generously donated this sacred wood for our use in the Lodge.

Esalen imbues its contemporary identity with fragments of its Indigenous history. In many instances, these efforts feel like disingenuous signals of cultural capital that work to lend the Institute a sense of the Indigenous. The plaque seems to honor an Esselen Tribe leader by name and points to ways in which Esalen has respected the history of the land in its design choices. Is this statement any more than a move to innocence? This instance resembles what Tuck and Yang name *settler nativism*, or an attempt to "nativize" Esalen's history and right to inhabit this place by imbuing its literal structure with some symbolic fragment of the Esselen people. At the top of the same display, a quote refers to the Esselen as "the first California group to become culturally extinct." It is not specified at which point the wood was donated; the Esselen are at once relegated to the past (in tense and official narrative) and recruited in the present. Esalen's website, which has a page titled "The Esselen People," takes part in this same discordant mythmaking. Weaving through a theme of impermanence, the page describes the Indigenous inhabitants of these Santa Lucia mountains as "a people who recognized that they were merely transitory custodians of this heart-stirring land" ("The Esselen People"). The language repurposes Indigenous principles of place and environmental stewardship to erase the violence and disease of the colonial encounter that forced said "transitory"

ownership. This is a convenient narrative that expands into a summary of the Esselen people which selects language like “tribal” and “ritual,” concepts of sacred space and spiritual mythologies, shamans, and community-centered living all as determinants of greater well-being. At times, the page hints at confronting appropriation, or addressing it as a part of Esalen’s history. Still, there is no reparation or rectification of narrative and practice. Again, it rings of another move to innocence: settler adoption fantasies, both in the adoption of Indigenous practices and a creation of “the settler colonial imagination in which the Native (understanding that he is becoming extinct) hands over his land, his claim to the land, his very Indian-ness to the settler for safe-keeping” (Tuck and Yang 2012, 14). It is a hurried summary of the Esselen people in pursuit of claiming a sense of the Indigenous, of “nativizing” the landscape.

Sophie’s concluding thoughts on Esalen’s relationship to its Indigenous past, a resigned but open-ended “I don’t know,” speak to the efficacy of its narrative. Without a clear or official story, Esalen is able to absorb Eastern thought, Western counterculture and occultism, and non-specific self-improvement and spiritualism, creating space for individual co-construction of mythology and possibility. The next week, a first-time Esalen seminarian tells me: “I think you have a conglomeration of a lot of things that make this place unique. Even just the feng shui, you get into the whole Chinese part. You have the water flowing, you have all these different components.” This seminarian perceives the ambiguity as a strength, a source of healing potential. It’s as if the number of cultural influences at play is directly related to the place’s perceived sacredness.

While its history in relation to the Indigenous Esselen people and the mineral springs is often mobilized to categorize it as a “sacred place,” guests and faculty largely identify Esalen as a healing space purely for its natural surroundings (and, for the most part, have little knowledge about this history before hearing of it at their guest orientation or workshop). One participant from Brazil, whom I met in the Lodge (where striking up conversation with fellow seminarians during confined mealtimes is not just welcomed, but inevitable), describes her relationship to the “healing” nature of Esalen’s location independent of its intellectual or cultural history:

Here is not only powerful because it has the minds that created the place. But they created it here because of the nature connection of the five elements. We have the mountain, we have the ocean, and everything in between, the fog and wind and animals. And everything comes together, here is a very attractive area. Up from the mountains, there is the river that flows into the ocean. Then we have the hot springs on the other mountain, the mountain here that

comes and gives us the healing waters in the bath house. And then there is the whole ocean, which is the sacred waters from the earth.

Our conversation is brief, but it is clear that she possesses a distinctly learned understanding of why this natural landscape holds some healing potential. I discover that she is at Esalen for the week to complete the final series of her Esalen Massage therapist certification. She explains that the Esalen Massage technique is inherently linked to this “nature connection of the five elements,” that the long strokes are designed to “make you feel like you are being cradled by the ocean.” Still in this same statement, she tells me that the practitioner’s “complete presence with that, listening to the body” is an essential component of the healing process between the practitioner and person receiving the massage. She connects this complete presence to the natural surroundings: “This presence, this awareness is something that we learn how to embody just by being here, from nature itself. Nature teaches you presence.”

Many seminarians speak to me about their profound healing experiences with Esalen massage. At first, I miss the significance of this element. It takes a few more participants telling me about the transformational effects of an Esalen massage, multiple people disclosing that their first massage resulted in a few minutes of weeping or a feeling that the practitioner was “sucking the pain” out of parts of the body that were chronically afflicted, for me to pay attention. A major part of this healing seems to lie in what the massage therapist describes above: a feeling of being held and present in communion with the surroundings of the natural elements, the vast ocean below the upper deck of the baths where massages take place. I will examine the role of Esalen massage in the healing process in greater detail in subsequent chapters, but this component of nature engendering embodiment and presence (and a consequent sense of being well) is an important theme mentioned by participants at both Esalen and Kripalu.

Many of my informants express that the primary healing power is conferred by the natural landscape itself, independent of Indigenous or other histories of Esalen and Kripalu as healing places. Sophie notes: “The energy of the land here is so palpable, and so different from [comparable retreat center on the East Coast] or Kripalu...The sound of the waves has been really healing to me. And we even did a guided meditation all about our inner ocean, and to use that metaphor internally was really, really powerful.” A young woman from Los Angeles, who has been coming to Esalen at least once every year for the last eight years, describes the natural landscape as the main power of the place, that she “just can’t imagine another place like this,” despite having frequently visited other

retreat centers throughout the state. Over a discussion at breakfast, she explains to me why she “one-hundred percent” believes the baths to be healing:

Let’s just pretend it’s frigging water from the tap. You’re on this cliff overlooking the water, half the time you’re watching whales migrate, otters play, butterflies flutter around your head, like what is not magical about that? That alone. And then if you really want to spiritualize it, I think you can talk about how this water is coming from the ground. You can smell it, you can feel it, like it’s different. But at its core, even if you’re just sitting there on a bench, it’s spiritual. But you add this element of the water coming from the ground that’s allowing you to sit in this. You’re connected to nature and I think, this Mother.

Alex, a masseuse visiting Esalen for a week-long bodywork seminar, paints a vivid picture of his own narrative regarding Esalen’s natural environment. He is originally from Rwanda, lives in Boston, and it is his first time at Esalen. On his last day, he spends several minutes of our interview over breakfast describing to me the healing power of driving past groves of eucalyptus trees on his and his partner’s drive to Esalen from San Francisco. He shares that the smell of eucalyptus not only “transports” him to a sense of home, but also holds special significance as a “healing tree, and is used in a lot of our medicine.” He continues: “Just seeing the tree, the eucalyptus tree, has a lot of medicine. And then understanding the Native American culture behind it, because I’ve worked a lot with Native American medicine men, for me, it’s like going to a medicine place and encountering my medicine. So eucalyptus is my medicine.” Eucalyptus is not native to California; it was brought to the state by Australians during the California Gold Rush. The therapeutic significance Alex senses at Esalen or within the California landscape might not be something specific to this particular piece of earth, but rather an imbued healing invented by years of mythology and narrative. The language he uses, describing the land itself and pieces of nature as “medicine,” is also a significant lens through which the natural landscape can be examined for its healing potential. The majestic landscape is made by these stories as medicinal and transcendent itself, beyond just enhancing the healing environment (and beyond tethers to the true history of place).

As evidenced by even Alex’s description, participants still weave their narratives around the healing impact of the natural environment with mentions of indigeneity. References to the Esselen—though they rarely refer to the tribe by name and often admit ignorance regarding the actual history—are more frequent around discussions of Esalen’s healing baths. Another seminarian who has been coming to Esalen since the late 60s (and who entertains me throughout the week with colorful stories from the center’s counterculture beginnings) tells me: “Oh most definitely [they are

healing]. Because that even goes into the way back when, when the Indians came here for the healing baths. And there's sulfur in the baths, it's hot, that's going to help with skin conditions, and at what point do you expand the healing potential in them to the rest of the place?" Julie, another participant from the Mindful Self-Compassion workshop, cites the Indigenous and the natural in equal part as she explains her conception of the healing waters:

I don't think it's by chance that the baths are such a critical part of the experience here. And there's a historical element to that, Native Americans have used those for years. And they come deeply from the earth. In a lot of ways, you know, the baths are developed, and the humans place these rocks, it's a beautiful setting that's crafted. I do feel that the wildness of that, like the ancientness of that and the wildness of it, has its own force that's being played out.

Narratives around this unique healing potential of the natural landscape are present at Kripalu and Esalen. While they are often tethered to histories of indigeneity, these stories of environmental "magic" are co-created in equal part by participants' individual experiences and felt senses of healing.

As I spoke with seminarians, guests, and faculty at both centers, participants revealed a shared healing mythology I had not considered. I have come to refer to this as the "morphic field" mythology, as coined informally by Robert, the same Esalen seminarian mentioned above who has been coming to Esalen since the sixties alongside Timothy O'Leary and the Mckenna brothers. In between stories about R.D. Laing sitting nude in the middle of the Lodge at mealtimes and Abraham Maslow fortuitously knocking on Esalen's unmarked door in the middle of a rainstorm (the latter of which, despite its unbelievable serendipity, has been confirmed and re-told on Esalen's podcast by Michael Murphy himself), Robert meditated on the idea of Esalen possessing a special healing quality. Eventually, he said:

Well before this [meaning, before Esalen] this was always a spiritual place for you know, the Indians and all this stuff...This is the synchronicity factor...Of course, if you have a mythology, then this is when you get into abstract things, like if you've ever heard of Rupert Sheldrake. Morphic fields. You get a bunch of people, and they repeat the same thing over and over again, and it becomes an autonomous field, and the next thing you know is that the field influences the perceptions of reality. So that's the thing: was it here before? Or did it happen? At this point, it doesn't make any difference.

While this conversation took place towards the end of my research, it gave words to a strong through line between participants' statements and experiences, which reify Robert's more abstract musings on morphic fields.

Many participants believe that the healing histories at Kripalu and Esalen—the extensive past of spiritual-seeking and self-exploration, physical and emotional transformation, and some sense of the mystical—amplify the potential for healing experience at these centers. Julie, expanding on her earlier comment about the healing power of Esalen's baths, recounts:

Last night when I was down there, just impromptu a bunch of folks started singing and we all sang rounds of song. Didn't know any of those folks, you know, but it just sort of spontaneously happened. And it's easy to imagine that for as long as humans have been in this area, those waters have been a place that have gathered people. And that in some way, you know, our singing probably has happened many, many times through different bodies, different voices, different times. And so there's that too, that's sort of ancient that enriches and deepens the here and now experience of what Esalen is now. It's rooted to something that's beyond what it could cultivate on its own, you know, it's rooted in history. I don't know what those practices are, I'm sort of ignorant about a lot of the human history here. But that adds a potency, knowing that this isn't just something that's happened since the 60s. This is something that has existed for a really long time in human history. And so...I don't know. I find myself, in some ways, the ancientness of that, the history that's beyond even the time I can understand is...it's like, my little experience here is joining that river. You know, and others' peoples' experiences here this week. It's joining a river that already was an existing river, that goes back generations. So, in that way, there's more power to it, that's sort of unnamable, what that power is, but it's there, and sort of carries us.

Julie's observation voices the element of the morphic field that recognizes some "ancient" thing, almost imbued in the place, that perhaps is the origin of the healing and community there. And yet it is her telling of this ancientness, the knowing and replication of this long tradition, that might be the real power and driving force behind the healing that happens today. Alex echoes a similar sentiment, albeit attached more directly to the land itself:

For me, history doesn't necessarily have to be written by humans on paper. You can just look at the rocks and the striations that we were noticing as we drove up. For me, nature has a record that has transpired here. And if you think about the first Esselen Native Americans who arrived here, no one had written things for them and said: this is how you use the plant

medicine. This is how you use the ocean. This is where your springs will come out of, your hot springs. So for me, the history is present within the structure itself. And it isn't necessarily what human beings have done here that I'm drawn to, necessarily. It's how they maximize what was here before, and their effort to honor what was before.

Alex's description of Esalen's healing history being "present within the structure itself" is paralleled at Kripalu not in exclusive reference to the land, but rather to the building or the built place as it has transferred ownership through the years. After meeting her in a workshop about healing chronic pain through the eight limbs of yoga, I sit down for an interview with Sara, a young woman who has been to Kripalu a few times before. At a table in the cafe, Sara tells me about a workshop she attended that morning with a long-time Kripalu faculty member (I had been to the same workshop the week before — Kripalu's daily R&R workshops are robust, and popular programs tend to cycle on a weekly basis). Sara tells me:

She said something like, I don't know what culture, but the tea pots where at this point, you only have to pour the water in because there's been so much tea made in the cup, or the pot, that the tea has become a part of the pot, essentially. So you don't even need the tea leaves anymore. And I was sitting next to somebody who said, "That's just like this place," where people come here to have these spiritual awakenings. And so, it's just sort of baked into the walls and the carpet.

While the histories of Kripalu and Esalen differ culturally and temporally, participants in both spaces echo Sara's anecdote, that transformational experiences are somehow "baked into" the center. I have come to refer to this theme as the therapeutic "potential energy" of a place, or the notion that some "long history" (be it actually historically grounded, or only conceived of as such) of healing and self-reflection concentrated in one contained place can amplify the likelihood and power of present and future healing experiences.

The Stockbridge-Munsee Mohicans, an Ashram, and the Tales In Between: History and Myth at Kripalu

Kripalu's Shadowbrook property—the main brick building which houses most Kripalu guests, programming, and facilities—has its own storied past. At the end of the nineteenth century and early part of the twentieth, the original Shadowbrook mansion served as a hotel for a wealthy elite summering in the Berkshires. Frederick Law Olmsted, the landscape architect of New York's

Central Park, designed the grounds. Steel magnate Andrew Carnegie purchased Shadowbrook in 1917; after his death in 1922, it became a Jesuit monastery. A fire destroyed Shadowbrook and killed four Jesuit fathers in 1956, and in 1957, the structure was rebuilt just down the hill from the original location. Guests at Kripalu fill in these details with their own mythologies and hazy memories of what Shadowbrook's history might be, or what they imagine it to be.

One morning, Daniel (my aforementioned “connector”) offers me a riddle. “If you’re such an expert on this place,” he teases me, “I’m going to give you until dinner to answer my question.” He stands up from our table in the Kripalu cafe (where he had been introducing me to more participants over breakfast) and guides me out through the doors opposite the main chapel, doors that open out onto Kripalu’s expansive vista of lawn, lake, and mountains. Dan points to a line of columns just outside the doors, supporting the structure; he says nothing. I am confused. “Look,” he instructs, and points more specifically to areas on only a few of the columns where the stone is worn, eroded. “Does it have something to do with the fire?” I ask. He tells me to think harder, more specifically about “what this place was before.”

At dinner, I do not have an answer that satisfies Dan (likely because I have spent most of my day meeting and interviewing other participants, and forgot about the riddle very soon after he proposed it). Finally, he answers it for me: it is a relic from the Jesuit monastery. The columns were spared during the fire, and the points of erosion are marks from where the brothers’ tasseled crosses would swing and hit as they entered the building. This story seems improbable, and Daniel does not explain how or from what source he gathered the information. Later that night, I relay the story to another guest, Marco, who also knows Dan. Marco has never been to Kripalu before, has a sporadic yoga practice, and came to the center after one of his yoga teachers suggested it as a way for him to get out of New York City. Marco bursts into laughter: “No way. That makes absolutely no sense.” He appreciates Dan’s gregarious spirit but denies the veracity of this tale.

This story of a riddle and its imbued meaning points toward a larger theme: narratives of spiritualism or meaningful history that legitimize the present-day restorative experience are enabled by Kripalu’s official mythologies, but they are ultimately made meaningful or dismissed (regardless of their truth) by individual participants. Most guests’ (and even faculty’s) descriptions of Kripalu history shy away from the Indigenous. While they might offer a blanket statement acknowledging the Stockbridge-Munsee Mohicans (though rarely by name), as at Esalen, participants seem to be only vaguely aware of the Indigenous history of the area. On Kripalu’s official web page

summarizing its history, the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohicans are given one mention as a tribe that “once lived on” the land. The insufficiency of this statement is startling.

On the Kripalu website—after some seeking and researching to understand if Kripalu involves any Indigenous peoples or leaders in their organizational fabric—I am able to find one person who seems to link Kripalu to the Indigenous. Shawn Stevens, a member of the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohicans in Wisconsin, guides some of Kripalu’s outdoor leadership programming. In a video produced by Kripalu entitled “Kripalu Sacred Lands,” he is captured alongside another Kripalu faculty member amidst shots of the surrounding natural environment. His voice echoes over beautiful images of the land: “There is a tremendous energy here within this land, not only here at Kripalu, but throughout the Berkshires...And this is something that my ancestors knew, and that we respected and we recognized for so long” (“Kripalu Sacred Lands” 2019). Like Esalen’s attempts to “nativize” the place by adopting Indigenous mythology, this media registers to me as “a move to innocence,” an effort to signal social consciousness while amplifying Kripalu’s healing capital (Tuck and Yang 2012).

In the stairwells at Kripalu, a different poster of an inspirational quote or image punctuates every floor. From my first visit to Kripalu, I remember distinctly that the sign on the first floor presented an oft-quoted definition of yoga from Patanjali’s *The Yoga Sutras*. The first few days I spent at Kripalu during my field work, I noticed that all of the signs had been removed and were gradually being replaced. This sign—perhaps the most visible or heavily-trafficked sign—was substituted by one that painted an image of “The Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Indians Many Trails symbol.” The poster is only an image of the symbol and its corresponding definition; it does not give any other information about Indigenous land rights or history. The similarity between this act of Indigenous acknowledgment and Esalen’s plaque is striking. In both instances, I am cynical, unsure of the intention behind this visible acknowledgment of the land’s Indigenous history. Both register, again, as moves to innocence - ways that surface-level acts of “decolonization” serve to acknowledge and at the same time minimize or “solve” the legacies of settler colonialism. In “Do Not ‘Decolonize’ ... If You Are Not Decolonizing,” medical anthropologist Nayantara Sheoron Appleton writes: “decolonizing is real work which needs to have real world structural consequences – not hypotheticals. It should not be a buzzword...Do not deploy it in service of the structures it was created to destroy” (Appleton 2019). As at Esalen, the role Indigenous history plays in healing (or perceptions of the retreat space as healing) hinges on individuals’ relationships to the way the center talks about this history.

During our interview, I ask Marco about this. As someone who knows very little about Kripalu—describing his visit as something he booked on a whim, at the suggestion of his yoga teacher—I was interested to learn about his perception of the Indigenous history as it had been presented to him during his brief stay. Marco tells me about a guided hike he participated in that afternoon. Kripalu offers at least one guided hiking session a day, led by two instructors who have been trained in Kripalu’s School of Mindful Outdoor Leadership. Thinking about the hike, Marco rubs the side of his jaw, looking unsettled. He tells me:

Yeah, the guide was kind of talking about—I don't know, it felt a bit weird. She was saying the history of these settlers, these white folks that came here and you know, started “trading” [Marco gestures air quotes] with the natives....Well, I mean, I'm not even sure what happened, with my history knowledge. Well, I learned that her perspective was a completely white, you know, capitalist perspective and it was quite interesting how naive she was about it, it really seemed like that was all there was to know. And it was a bit unsettling at moments.

Marco’s amalgam of confusion and disturbance mirrors Sophie’s reaction to the ways in which Esalen talks about (or around) the Indigenous, albeit lacking Sophie’s same level of cultural and historical knowledge on the topic. His impression of the hike articulates something evoked more generally by participants in both places: an ambiguity or confusion that makes it difficult to pinpoint any one historically accurate narrative. This received ambiguity strengthens Kripalu and Esalen’s ability to mythologize the Indigenous, to craft a hazy history that comes across as “healing” at the intersection of many cultures, peoples, and pasts.

Individual faculty seem to strive for greater nuance or specificity, to somehow reconcile this inadequacy on the part of the larger organization. The first class I participate in and observe at Kripalu is a “Yoga Dance” class, a trademarked style that incorporates freeform dance, yoga, and loud music (with live drums on Saturdays). While the class itself is unlike anything I have ever experienced, it is the teacher’s introduction that strikes me—and that leads me to interview her that afternoon. After instructing us to move around the room and “weave a sacred space” with our bodies, Barbara guides us down to the floor, into a position that feels more like an act of prayer than a child’s pose. She invites us to join her in giving thanks to the land, and she expresses gratitude and honor to the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohicans—articulating the full name—as the rightful owners of the land. I mention this to Barbara during our interview, and she explains:

I would never want anyone to feel like I was taking from them and making it useful for myself, you know what I'm saying? So I've been really honoring the land and the Earth right now. I mean, with everything happening in the world. I feel like every teacher does it differently...But I do feel like it's a sacred space. I feel like Kripalu, because of Kripalu, Swami Kripalu, everyone holds that sacred space thing. How they do it is all different. But they all hold it. I believe they all hold it as a pillar.

For Barbara, sacred space and Indigenous history at Kripalu are intertwined. Still, she returns to Kripalu's history as an ashram, its connection to Swami Kripalu, as the primary thread by which sacredness is felt and upheld. Out of the four or five daily workshops and yoga classes I attend for the two weeks I am at Kripalu—amounting to somewhere over fifty sessions—only a few instructors or faculty mention or acknowledge the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohicans. Far more numerous were allusions to Swami Kripalu or the distinct culture of Kripalu yoga as established during the ashram days.

Similar to how Esalen mobilizes not just Indigenous history but also its own cultural and intellectual past, Kripalu draws on its spiritual history—as a monastery and, more relevantly and recently, as an ashram—to fortify its significance as a healing destination. Kripalu's history as an ashram is rife with controversy and complexity, one that largely overshadows (in most guests' and faculty's imaginaries) any adequate exploration of its Indigenous history. Guests and faculty alike—even guests who admit ignorance as to exactly “what happened” with Amrit Desai, the founder of the center—lower their voices when speaking of “the ashram days.” Personal histories are marked as taking place “during the ashram” or “after the ashram,” referenced in equal part as before or after “the guru.” Amrit Desai, born in India and a close disciple of Swami Kripalu, founded the Yoga Society of Pennsylvania—what would be considered the earliest iteration of Kripalu—in 1966. Ultimately, this became the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health in 1983, when the society relocated to Shadowbrook with a residential staff nearing 350 people, and opened its doors to the public for “immersion experiences...in yoga, health, massage and bodywork, personal growth, and spirituality” (“Our History” 2018). In 1994, it was revealed that Desai was both having extramarital affairs with multiple female resident disciples—despite mandating a strict celibacy policy for all single residents—and profiting far more each year than he disclosed to his essentially unpaid devotees. The scandal sparked Kripalu's transition in the following years from a “religious society” to an “educational institution” (“Our History” 2018).

More interesting than the actual details of Kripalu's controversial past are the ways in which participants both speak of (or around) it. It is difficult to articulate this through participants' actual words, as the meaning emerged in things left unsaid, euphemisms, or voices suddenly hushed in the Kripalu cafe. By silencing or brushing past it, participants are able to separate the darkness of Kripalu's past from the healing ethos of its history and present. Might this indicate a larger mechanism, I wonder, for other ways of forgetting, for recounting the histories of these centers in vague terms to ignore their shadows?

Often, Kripalu guests have only a vague understanding of the institution's history; the details are not what give shape to their perceived sacredness of Kripalu. One participant explains:

I'm not sure if I know if this place was chosen for the ashram, and the convent or monastery for its sacred space. And I'm sure the Native Americans, you know the first residents here, knew about this place. And I don't know if there's a connection between why this place was chosen for an ashram or a convent [sic] in relation to the original people who lived here or roamed through here...I feel it, that it's here. But I don't think that intellectually I know exactly what, what the sacredness of the space is. And I also always forget the order in which, was it first an ashram and then a convent? Or was it the other way around? [laughs] And then I think it doesn't really matter! They knew it was a very soothing place to build this thing here.

She expresses ignorance as to "exactly what, what the sacredness of the space is." Yet, as she points out: it doesn't matter. Her generalized narrative—one that is supported by the overview Kripalu provides on its website and in its programming—constructs the place as healing, as a sacred space.

Even guests with exposure to the actual Indigenous history and more recent past of the land on which Kripalu sits do not cite these factual details as essential to the sacredness of the place. Another participant, who has been coming to Kripalu "for years," admits that she "didn't really know about the sacred space until the last time [she] came." I make note of that phrase: that one could "know about the sacred space" as something that exists and influences healing regardless of whether the individual has a conscious understanding of it. She explains to me:

The last time I came, I forget his name, but he was a Native American who spoke and talked about this being the homeland of the Mohican Indians and he talked about the whole story and the tragedy, obviously, of what happened. But yesterday when I was sitting upstairs and looking out, and you had the mountains, you had the lake, and the sky with the sunset. You could absolutely say that's what it is. I'm coming to value that even more. I didn't really

realize it quite so much, but the more I come, the more I understand, the more I internalize it. And I think sometimes if you come but you don't realize it, it's still there. So I know that this used to be a seminary, but it's interesting to think about the different spiritual traditions that have been here from a seminary, to an ashram, to you know, with the whole sacred area with the Native Americans.

In this quote, the leap that happens from genocide to peace—bridged by this idea that the place exists, both now and in its recent history, as aesthetically beautiful and sacred—is one worth noting. For most participants, it is not knowing how Kripalu has come to be sacred, but rather having reason to believe that it *is* sacred (even if that “reason” is an overgeneralized history or mythologized narrative) that contributes to the gravity of being there. It is this perception or sense of sacredness that gives the place a restorative or healing “power” and enables many participants to suppress or forget histories of violence and stolen land—a forgetting encouraged by the lack of consistent confrontation of these histories at both centers. An Esalen work-scholar, Annie, proposes that remembering these histories, educating participants about the people and culture that inhabited the land long before the institute, is a necessary means by which visitors at Esalen could feel more authentically connected to the sacredness of its place. She says:

All the land we're ever on is sacred, obviously. And I think the marriage of what takes place in this center on this particular land, in this coastland, all of it feels very sacred to me. And perhaps there's a great opportunity missed in not really integrating that cultural knowledge into what it is to be here. This week we did a sweat lodge ceremony and a tobacco ceremony with a Native American woman who has also spent a long time involved at Esalen. And this week was one of the more profound times over the month where I felt really in the land. And I know that's because she was speaking to the genesis of it and the connection to it and supporting us in really feeling connected to the land more than just wandering around this beautiful place can give you. Because I think it gives you an ethereal sense of how sacred it is. But to actually embody that sacredness is another thing.

The “Right” Place: Coastal Positionalities and Predilections

Part of it is simply what looks right to the eye, sounds right to the ear. I am at home in the West. The hills of the coastal ranges look “right” to me, the particular flat expanse of the Central Valley comforts my eye. The place names

have the ring of real places to me. I can pronounce the names of the rivers, and recognize the common trees and snakes. I am easy here in a way I am not easy in other places.

—Joan Didion, *South and West*

Annie’s description of embodying the “sacredness” of place reiterates the importance of the felt sense at the retreat space. The most immediately “felt” element of place at (and between) Kripalu and Esalen is their placement on opposite coasts—one that manifests and is retold through narratives of location and culture as they relate to healing. This statement, beyond its literal meaning, reveals two items at once: my own positionality, and the entanglement of the “felt sense” and subjectivity. My difference in experience at the two centers is inseparable from my own associations with their cultural and geographic essences. Even as I wrote the proposal for this research, I worried about my positionality with respect to place, fearing that it might manifest as bias. How could I temper my instinctive feel for, or response to, the relative healing environment of each place? I was born in Los Angeles, California, and have lived in this state for the duration of my life. I gravitate towards the rhythmic crashing of waves and smell of sweet jasmine intensified by the sun’s heat; a snowy winter landscape does not resonate with me the same way it does many of my friends from the East. I register the geography of the California coast as familiar and soothing, along with the “culture” that stereotypically defines it. While I worried about this positionality in the weeks before my fieldwork, it also stimulated some new curiosities. Would participants share this same understanding of geographic and cultural difference at each center? Would I find that participants typically hailed from the West Coast at Esalen, and the East at Kripalu? Do our places of origin influence the spaces that we find healing?

The “answers” to these questions—questions I did not ask directly, that emerged as participants offered the answers themselves—reveal how the felt sense of place manifests at both Kripalu and Esalen, and how this feeling can translate to one’s sense of wellness. Seminararians and faculty at Esalen who, unprompted, mention West coast culture at Esalen are largely not *from* California. It is as if the perception of the place—a center so ingrained in Californian cultural history—is constructed by its opposition, from a geographically or ideologically removed vantage point. Even my own appreciation for California and sense of belonging near the Pacific are feelings solidified by my time spent on the opposite coast. Peggy, one of the founding Esalen massage practitioners, tells me her story of arrival in the late 60s:

To move from New York City, to the edge of the cliff there, on the Pacific Ocean, and just experience that water and that beach...It was a different world. Part of it is physical, because it's just so expansive here, and the consciousness is so expansive here. Whereas the East Coast I always found very limited, and tight, that's how the East Coast is—it's just tight. It was beyond philosophical, it was really physical. And when you have all that space, your mind can expand as well as your being. It's a tremendous difference.

Having grown up in New York, Peggy's understanding of the felt sense at Esalen is even more "physical" than it is "philosophical." Peggy's description of "the consciousness" being "so expansive here" alludes to the felt sense as influenced by not just history of place, but also a spatial openness.

Esalen's role within the counterculture movement—inviting psychedelic experimentation, innovative transpersonal psychology, and arts and music—contributes to the embodied expectations and assumptions that participants feel (or at least conceptualize) perhaps before even setting foot in the vastness of Big Sur. Peggy's sense of place here relates more to the cultural notion of the "West Coast" than it does to Esalen's history in particular. These felt senses of geographic possibility create space for processes of healing or openness, such as greater vulnerability and connection, that otherwise might not exist within a place that a participant finds stifling, constrained, or cold.

Peggy also blends the importance of proximity to the Pacific Ocean with mythological or energetic healing power of place, echoing some of the narratives explored earlier in this chapter. When I ask her about Esalen massage, mentioning seminarians' accounts of pain being "sucked out" from their physical and emotional bodies, Peggy again returns to the significance of place in preventing pain transference, maintaining the health of practitioners, and encouraging healing: "There are three different waters coming together here, and a lot of negative ions in the air, so the cleansing is just constant. You're down there working, you can always bathe at the end of it, shake it off and go in the water. I think the water is such an essential element in terms of the healing, in terms of keeping ourselves healthy, and strong." For Peggy, in her over forty years at Esalen as a member of the community and leading massage practitioner, the geography and felt sense of place made possible by Esalen's position on the coast and at the intersection of these "three waters" are "essential" components of the healing taking place at the center.

Another participant reflects Peggy's initial comparison, albeit more directly between Esalen and Kripalu than merely the West and East Coasts. Shannon looks to be in her sixties. When we meet in the Lodge, she tells me that she met her husband—who sits beside her—at Esalen ten years prior. In the midst of a long and humorous conversation, Shannon tells me of a visit to Kripalu:

I thought it was gonna be like Esalen. I was visiting my New York sister, and she has a hiking club of these funny girls, just delightful. So we all went to Kripalu for a yoga class. And the place was like [mimes buttoning up her shirt all the way, sits up straighter]. And this was fifteen years ago, maybe it's different. Anyway, we almost got thrown out for laughing...to me it looked like a prison. I was picturing Esalen, we got there and it looked like a bad high school, a prison.

In Shannon's account, the idea resurfaces of rigidity versus openness, or a puritanical, more "buttoned-up" tone at Kripalu that is not present at Esalen. While I witness exceptions to this generalization through interactions with guests and faculty, the felt sense of each place—to me, at least, and to many of my participants—abides by this categorization, be it through the spatial and architectural design or the general scale and style of the two centers.

These distinctions in tone might be attributed to fundamental differences at Esalen: the encouragement of nudity at the baths (and, throughout its history, across the property); the fact that a small bar in the Esalen Lodge serves wine and beer (and the Institute's history of psychedelic experimentation), whereas Kripalu has a relatively strict policy against alcohol, and does not serve or sell it anywhere in its building. There is a sense of mischief and playfulness at Esalen that is not as obvious at Kripalu. My field notes remind me of the adjustment period I feel at Kripalu—in many entries, I mention the pervasive quietness at the center. Many participants seem to speak just above a whisper, and while there is joy and laughter within groups of guests, it is often difficult to break the barrier of the "peaceful," or generally silent, tone of the space. In contrast, Esalen feels boisterous. On several occasions, groups gather around a firepit on the deck of the Lodge and sing songs; the Lodge itself is outfitted with guitars, drums, and a piano that are in use at nearly all hours of the day by employees and seminarians alike. It is easier to meet participants at Esalen because of this difference in atmosphere. Seminarians introduce me to their roommates or friends they met at the baths the night before; for the most part, people are eager to engage. The baths themselves play a large role in this felt sense: while nudity is not required, most participants do use the baths nude, which itself demands a level of vulnerability and often a sense of humor. Esalen, or at least the Esalen community, seems to take itself less seriously.

Many seminarians from the East Coast emphasize the general pace or atmosphere of the West Coast as being not only a crucial element of a healing felt sense at the Institute, but also a quality that largely influenced their decision to choose Esalen as a place of retreat. Earlier in this

chapter, I introduced Alex as a seminarian attending an Esalen massage training course with his partner. They both live and practice massage in Boston, and tell me:

[*Alex's partner:*] We live on the East Coast, and it's always go-go-go all the time, if you don't get out of my way, I'm going to push through you, kind of thing. And that's how people tend to want a massage on the East Coast, is what we've found. There's something so much deeper in Esalen massage...much deeper than the superficial body.

[*Alex:*] And I think part of that is just the laid-back nature, one of this place, one of the West Coast...Whereas the East Coast, if I don't know what I'm supposed to do, I'm going to get either left behind or scraped down. I think just being here in nature, and the space, and being with the ocean. I'm continually reminded that it's all going to work out in the end. One of my favorite proverbs is, nature doesn't hurry and everything is accomplished. And it feels much more like that here, than the East Coast.

I speak to another seminarian who lives in New York. She explains that her therapist recommended Esalen along with two other centers on the East Coast that were offering the same mindful self-compassion course she wanted to attend. For her, the decision was easy: "I think California's overall vibe—I don't even know if it's entirely true, but it does feel more lax and slow-paced than New York, and the northeast in general. I definitely wanted to be at a slower pace." This perception of a "slower pace" in California is interesting, regardless of its veracity. Certainly, the environment of this type of retreat—whether in Massachusetts at Kripalu or California at Esalen—likely feels slow or calm in comparison to most participants' busy work and personal lives. Yet, the pace at Esalen feels even slower, where the daily schedule offers one yoga class and an additional afternoon workshop at most, there is no cell-phone service or internet connection, and participants are given long swaths of free time to enjoy the baths, leisurely walks, conversations with other seminarians, and a weekly enrichment lecture or seminar sponsored by its Center for Theory and Research.

In contrast, Kripalu fills its daily schedule with one or two-hour workshop blocks, at least three designated yoga classes each day (in which two or three different levels of yoga are offered in separate rooms throughout the six-story building), and meditation classes. Workshops are often double or triple-booked, so that guests might choose the program that feels most relevant or interesting to their experience. Additional special events, lectures, and a weekly *kirtan* (devotional singing) open to the community, offer programming as late as 8 or 9 PM. Guests at Kripalu cite this robust schedule as a reason they find the place to be healing, or worthwhile. Comparing Kripalu to

another center on the East Coast, a participant tells me: “[Another center on the East Coast] had a lot of free time. There was hardly any programming. . . . And I’m like, Well, what am I gonna do there? I don’t want to be sitting in my own misery, I wanted to be with people. I want to be occupied. I want to learn. I wanted to be engaged.” This feeling of engagement, or “doing” in accordance with programming, charges Kripalu with its own more regimented sense of retreat. As this participant explains, the sense of structure can lend its own comfort.

It is impossible to rule the East or West Coast—and accordingly, Kripalu or Esalen—as the “more” healing place. These felt senses of well-being are shaped by our preconceived understandings of ease and comfort—understandings that rarely follow any prescribed logic or explanation, but instead are closer to “what looks right to the eye, or sounds right to the ear” (Didion 2017, 126). The felt senses at Kripalu and Esalen are at once embodied and learned, as instinctually felt as they are informed (and complicated) by narrative and mythology about the peoples and meanings that came before these institutions of organized retreat.

Chapter Three

The Container: Generating a Holistic Landscape

In a number of...week-long seminars I've run at growth centers, at Esalen, for example, I have created a psychic space, a certain environment. We've all lived together for five days, cooked together, in silence, using chalk boards...We'd go through change after change after change in terms of the group consciousness. You go through the excitement, enthusiasm, the boredom, the fatigue, and keep going on and on and on behind that. Finally you get into a space where the thing is going on by itself. It is as if it's a wheel and ball bearings, and everybody's just sort of doing that thing to keep it going. It's this place we have all come into where we are now the keepers of the song rather than having all the little separate games we brought to it. And it becomes a very, very high vehicle for group consciousness modification.

—Ram Dass (Richard Alpert), *The Only Dance There Is*

On Holism

During my fieldwork at Kripalu and Esalen, I immerse myself in the “psychic space” of each center before I can even consciously identify it as such. I take physical movement classes, from yoga to experimental dance to *qi gong*; I participate in programs and workshops that require me to lead with my vulnerability instead of my separately constructed purpose as an “anthropologist.” I take meandering walks deep into Esalen’s canyon and down to the Kripalu lakefront, eat meals among guests and faculty, and fall into a cycle of sleeping around 9PM and rising no later than 5:30 each morning.

What strikes me most immediately is the holism apparent in the structure and rhythms of simply being present at these centers. I use the term **holism**, or **holistic**, to describe the interconnection of all components present within the retreat center “container,” both as a physical space and an embodied experience. Not only are all components of the place and practice — the natural setting, healthy and local food, community dining and living, group workshops, the specific programming within these workshops, and so on — thoughtfully bound to one another by the structure of the center, but their healing effects cannot be properly understood unless they are examined as a whole, with this interconnectedness in mind.

Diana, a senior faculty at Kripalu, describes what I identify as “holism” through her lens as an Ayurvedic health counselor and educator:

Part of it is the space itself, the container of the retreat center itself...Our schedule is an Ayurvedic schedule, we have that long lunch break, lights out at 10, you know. So that's built in, three meals, three healthy meals a day built in, connection is built in. You don't get that outside...It's a safe space. So yeah, I think the container that Kripalu creates does half of the transformative work. The other half is like the educational piece that we're talking about, the workshops and things. But I feel like—the land? That's a huge component. The food, the connections. And the routine, those are all *vata*-balancing [Vata is an Ayurvedic descriptor, one of the three *dosha* or fundamental dynamics in this Asian medical system; essentially, this teacher is saying that all of these practices help us to ground, to slow down, to reduce experiences like anxiety or stress]...I do feel like just the retreat itself, the environment here itself is part of the magic, the magic. Also the movement piece, that's also unique to the retreat center. That element of three yoga classes a day if you want them, that body-based piece I think might not be as incorporated outside [in the outside world]. It might be missing from the equation or it might not get as much emphasis.

During my fieldwork, I wondered why this holism felt so distilled in these spaces of retreat. As someone who has the privilege to maintain an independent yoga practice, to access healthy food, nature, and to connect with a like-minded community on a regular basis, why does this experience feel (even to me) especially healing, or medicinal? Beyond my own experience, why do so many others—who mostly share these same resources and lines of access to holistic and relatively consistent well-being, perhaps with the exception of remote natural landscapes—also find Kripalu and Esalen to be concentrated sites for healing, or for the “transformational experiences; changing lived-body experience” (Barry 2006, 2645) invited by alternative medical approaches?

The concept that would address these questions is embedded in my interview with Diana. She refers to “the container of the retreat center itself” as something crucial to the healing that happens there. More than just the holistic totality she describes, the walls of this container—the *shutting in* of the experience to occur only in this designated place of retreat—are what charge spaces like Esalen and Kripalu with a potency for healing otherwise not available in “the outside,” as she and as many other participants describe. Several contextual components are at play here. In almost all religious traditions, long histories of “retreat” have been the primary vehicle for accelerating and deepening spiritual practice. It is a literal retreat from society into isolation, or relative isolation, amidst a community of other seekers. Stripping away the distractions and responsibilities of quotidian “real” life, the retreat inherently intensifies the experience within its walls. Beyond

expressing the isolation and concentration of retreat, I use the framework of **the container** to encompass elements of holism inherent to the retreat center model at Kripalu and Esalen—the interweaving of all things that take place within the container itself. This connectedness illuminates not just the *why*, or the reason participants enter retreat, but also the *how*: the particulars of how effective healing unfolds within the container’s proverbial walls, as well as the impact of shutting certain experiences out.

Gestalt psychotherapy, a transpersonal psychology method instrumental to Esalen’s origins and present-day philosophies, provides a condensed understanding of how the container functions. In this chapter, I will first explore Gestalt and its role in the residential study program I witness at Esalen to exemplify the dynamics of the container on a case-specific scale. I will then point to larger impacts and more nuanced subtleties of the container model as they are revealed by participants’ own voices of sickness and healing narratives at Kripalu and Esalen.

The Container in Practice: Work-Scholars and Gestalt at Esalen

The greatest value in the Gestalt approach perhaps lies in the insight that the whole determines the parts, which contrasts with the previous assumption that the whole is merely the total sum of its elements....Only the interplay of organism and environment...constitutes the psychological situation, not the organism and environment taken separately.

—Frederick Perls, Ralph F. Hefferline, and Paul Goodman, *Gestalt Therapy*

Each month, Esalen accepts a group of about twenty individuals to work, study, and live at the Institute. These “work-scholars,” along with Esalen’s full-time employees, are more fully enmeshed in the permanent Esalen community. The relationships I develop with both of these groups flag my presence and daily rhythms as somehow different from the “typical” seminarian. My two weeks of fieldwork at the Institute align with the last two weeks of the residential program, which (during this particular month) is structured around the study and practice of Gestalt therapy. The Gestalt psychology model is one that was largely developed at Esalen in the 1960s by Fritz Perls and, according to its definition on the Esalen website, “has pioneered our contemporary understanding that ‘mind, heart, body, spirit, and relationship’ are ultimately inseparable dimensions of our human experience, and evolve (or remain arrested) together” (“Gestalt at Esalen”). This mode of transpersonal psychology underscores not just the organizational fabric of Esalen—each team, from the kitchen staff to the corporate offices, conducts group check-ins using “Gestalt-

informed dialogue” multiple times a day—but also is an excellent exemplification of how what I am calling “the container” works. The depth and vulnerability of the program, including the near-constant expectation to process and uncover deep psychological wounds and traumas while working in the garden, eating meals, soaking in the baths, and even retreating to where one sleeps, at once fascinates and terrifies me. Fortunately, the community of work-scholars and Institute employees welcome me into their lives at Esalen, allowing me to pepper them with questions over more intimate dinners, comfortable conversations, interviews, and even a birthday celebration.

I connect with Annie, one of the work-scholars, almost immediately after she learns of my research (word spreads quickly within the intimate Esalen community). Annie is working towards an advanced degree in psychology in Australia. For this degree, she has been conducting several years of fieldwork, interviews, and social work. She tells me:

The work that I do, even in culturally diverse spaces, feels very individualistic. And I think that’s got great limitations to healing. And I’ve been so amazed and curious and intrigued about the group process and what can happen in those contexts. That kind of collective healing, and also acknowledge that it’s such an art, an art that I’ve felt slightly less out of my depth in. But certainly wanting to ask, how does that work? Like **how do you have a container** like that? So that was very much part of my prerogative in coming here.

As she reflects on the “art” of the “group process,” Annie touches on much of what Scheper-Hughes and Lock illuminate as they point to the value of social forms of healing. In “The Mindful Body,” they write: “In collective healing rituals there is a merging, a communion of mind/body, self/other, individual/group that acts in largely non-verbal and even prereflexive ways to ‘feel’ the sick person back to a state of wellness and wholeness and to remake the social body” (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987, 29).

In my conversations with Annie and other work-scholars, I discover that Gestalt at Esalen provides some empirical representation of the container model. A closer look at the practice of Gestalt for these work-scholars is a useful means to better understand the container as it relates to individual and group healing, as well as its relationship to the people and labor that support it. Work-scholars, like most participants, live together in shared accommodations. At the beginning of their program, they are assigned (and have some agency in choosing) a category of work: kitchen, cabins and maintenance, or farm and garden. They each work about thirty hours per week (with two days off), and meet for “class” (daily Gestalt circles and other Gestalt-related studies) multiple times each day. Scholars are provided additional opportunities for education and self-enrichment

throughout their stay, drawing from Esalen's daily schedule of yoga and meditation programming and special workshops on Esalen massage or other therapeutic techniques. The core of this Gestalt program as it pertains to the container is the format of the "circle," or the act of the Gestalt encounter group—what Annie refers to above as "the group process."

During class, the residents work with their teacher, a psychologist and practitioner of embodied relational gestalt (who has authored several books on the subject and its applications for sobriety). From what I gather in conversations with participants, classes typically involve processing groups in which one student sits in the center of a circle and speaks about a trauma, relationship, memory, or behavioral pattern. The group is encouraged to ask questions or make observations about the individual's language, body patterns, or experience, and might even share personal stories about what the individual's testimony is sparking within their own experience. The workshop leader might lightly touch parts of the individual's body to provoke an emotional release, as some Gestalt practitioners (and this session's leader in particular) are interested in embodied Gestalt, or the idea that trauma and emotional "blocks" might be both stored and signaled somatically. There is an important parallel between the physicality of the Gestalt process and embodiment as a measure of effective healing. This description is admittedly vague, and an oversimplification of how messy and personal this process is in actuality. Yet, it is Gestalt's almost opaque and nebulous process that translates so directly to the container model.

The vagueness of experience and description—even from someone within the program, like Annie—makes the healing impact of Gestalt more easily translatable, systematically extended from the individual to the group (and vice versa). In Annie's words:

What I've been really amazed by is how we're continuously doing work for each other. So by **witnessing someone's process**, and noticing what's coming up for me in their process, is **doing the work myself**. And I think that intellectually, I've grasped those concepts before, but I haven't actually experienced them in such an embodied way before. We've got class every night, and there's processing that happens there, but then the processing is all around it. It's in the kitchen when I'm working the next day. It's in my room with my roommates, it's at dinner, it's walking alone, it's being alone in the tubs. It's constant, and it's really nonlinear. So something like a process that happened a week ago might land for me right now in this conversation. And then having the opportunity to bring that back to the group, and to share it, or to have it develop some sort of relativity, has just been really amazing.

Interestingly, Annie (and other work-scholars I speak with) demonstrate how this language of “process” or “processing” functions as both a noun and a verb. The healing is simultaneously an intentional effort (as a noun, in “the group process”) and a subconscious happening under the surface of daily life at Esalen (as a verb).

While one gets a sense of the function of holism here (both within the group and as Annie moves through her Esalen experience), the way she describes “processing” and healing is non-specific. I attribute much of this to the sensitive nature of what is being “processed.” I learn informally from work-scholars about the traumas and deep behavioral patterns that are explored in their Gestalt program (and in one-on-one “dyads” that happen throughout the day). It is difficult to explore these tangible stories of healing in official interviews, as so much of one’s individual healing is attached to peers’ experiences that cannot (and should not, for the safety of the container) be publicly shared. But that inextricable healing, the interconnectedness of experience, matters. Annie’s ability to “[do] the work [herself]” by “witnessing someone’s process”—both the vagueness of this description and its universal application—are paramount to the function of the container. The tension between this generalizability of experience and its specific impact on the individual, as well as a similar paradox between the emphasis on the group collective and equal focus on self-reflection and introspection, are themes not just present but essential to the participant experience at Esalen.

All “groups” at Esalen—employees, company leadership, seminarians—are engaged in some form of Gestalt, be it Gestalt-informed dialogue, organizational practices, or actual Gestalt group therapy. This gives shape to the container at Esalen. Still, in comparing the work-study’s container experience to the seminarian’s, there is an important degree of removal from the upkeep of the container itself. While at many religious retreats that involve a greater degree of humility and renunciation, a participant would be expected to take part in the collective work that sustains the retreat “container,” that element of sacrifice or labor is missing for most participants at Esalen and Kripalu. At the Esalen orientation and in the booklet provided in each guest room, seminarians are encouraged to volunteer in the farm and garden and/or the kitchen during their stay to “experience our unique living laboratory” and “harvest produce for our communal meals.” There are details all around Esalen that encourage guests to sustain the container—signs in the Lodge that ask guests to compost food scraps and take only what they need (and eat what they take); reminders to conserve water and reuse linens; and the simple ask that seminarians make their beds and tidy their rooms each day. Still, these suggestions are distant from the real work it takes to support the center. On my second week at Esalen, I sit at a table with two guests looking over their orientation materials. I

overhear them laughing at the idea of volunteering in the kitchen or gardens. “For the amount I’m paying to be here? I don’t think I’ll be volunteering my time.”

Building on insights from the Gestalt group therapy model, I argue that the container of Esalen or Kripalu—a “safe space” wherein the merging of mind/body, self/other, individual/group can each or all occur at a mealtime, in a workshop, out in nature—is also the collective healing ritual itself. The container largely targets our society’s fractured state, rectifying a collective illness brought about by modernity’s disconnect of mind from body, or individual from group. This process facilitates healing as defined in Chapter One, integrating the self with the larger social body and conceiving of the self “as a microcosm of the universe” (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987, 12). The second major component of the definition, which I have referred to as **embodied healing**, is supported by each element of the container (and, accordingly, by the totality of these interconnected parts in the participant’s lived experience while in retreat).

It is important to note here that the language of holism, along with the mechanisms that cast the retreat center as a container for healing, are not vocalized exclusively by guests at Kripalu and Esalen. In the prior chapter, I explored the narratives actively constructed and upheld at both centers (and their palpable effects on senses of sacredness and mythologized healing powers). This same narrative effort is apparent in faculty’s ways of speaking about the holistic model of the retreat center. One teacher at Kripalu opens a fifty-person workshop by stating: “Kripalu has a tendency of doing this. That we uncover, **we break you open**...Look outside: you can’t help but feel connected. We feed you good food, you feel connected.” Another Kripalu faculty, guiding a workshop on the chakra system for healing chronic pain, tells us: “Through yoga, through dance, through the embodied practices we do here, we begin to get out of the head and live in the body. You’re able to understand your body more from your own perspective.” This is an important illumination of what I mean by embodied healing, or embodiment—and is a sentiment echoed by many of my participants. She explains that balancing the chakras and sustaining well-being feels easier at Kripalu because “Your lunch is made for you, you’re taken care of, you can see the nature, the trees out the windows. There’s also a real magic, of great teachers showing that it’s within you.” Interestingly, much of this language aligns with ideas of effective healing as embodiment and health autonomy.

And yet within this description, tensions abound and persist in participants’ accounts of their healing experiences at Kripalu and Esalen. The interconnectedness and holism of the container are juxtaposed by an emphasis on the individual. The renunciation or asceticism often involved in many types of traditional retreat are noticeably absent. Instead, part of the healing milieu at Kripalu or

Esalen involves distancing participants from the work it takes to sustain the container, like preparing healthy meals (to use the teacher's example above). The distance is perceived as another healing element: participants are able to operate on a baseline of assumed nourishment and care.

Considering Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Kripalu and Esalen satisfy participants' needs along three major bases: physiological needs, safety needs, and senses of love and belonging.

Consequently, they are free to devote more energy and attention to their self-development, learning, and "self-actualization," to use Maslow's terminology. It is not surprising that Maslow was such a formative influence in Esalen's philosophical origins.

The specifics of these healing processes—how the container model enables embodied healing and integration of the self into the larger social body and universe—are illuminated in participants' experiences and the design of "the container" or retreat center. A major facet of this design is self-containment: the removal and cultivation of the retreat center as something apart from "ordinary life" is essential to the collective healing that occurs within its walls.

"A Garden of Eden": The Cultivation of Retreat as Permission to Heal

Nestled in remote locations, Kripalu and Esalen are physically self-contained. The walls of the retreat container are as literal as they are metaphorical. The symbolic language of the space is more palpable from the inside. In Chapter Two, guests imply that the overwhelming scale of the environment (and its historical "sacredness") correspond to the magnitude of emotional processing and internal work taking place in each center. Nearing my last few days at Esalen, I meet Katrina, who is visiting for a weekend grief workshop to process her mother's recent death. As we sit on the deck of the Lodge, the crashing of the waves against the cliffside and loud December winds demanding that we both speak a little louder, she tells me:

Esalen is even above and beyond the pictures I've seen, or what people have told me about. Because everything is manicured and beautiful and wild and you turn around, and it's this gigantic, dramatic. It almost goes along with the drama that I feel inside. The landscape, it really adds...dramatic is what I'm going through. It's a projection. And the minute you look at the ocean, it's more like soothing, like the waves, the waves of life, and that's how it helps me meditate and understand that the waves are breathing. Like life, as well, does not exist without death.

This connection Katrina makes between grief — her ability to process and contextualize what she has learned within the workshop — and the natural landscape is a glimpse of how the holistic container functions.

The environment is a “projection” of her own internal reflection and, as she mentions several times in our interview, impacts a stronger significance through the relationships and interpersonal processing born in the workshop and sustained through Esalen’s community dynamics. In every moment a participant spends at Esalen or Kripalu, she might recall the interconnectedness of all the components that contribute to her health. This is, admittedly, a sweeping statement. Perhaps a seminarian is merely reminded of the connection between what she eats, or who she speaks to, and her sense of well-being. Still, for my interlocutors, this holism is apparent in the environment the container generates, from the natural landscape to the living mechanisms of the retreat center itself. Katrina’s realization about the ebb and flow of life and death is a resonant truth. Why is it that, a year after her mother’s passing, it was this weekend at Esalen that allowed her to embody that understanding? The distance of the retreat—its separation from our modern western culture—grants permission for participants to reflect and integrate learnings that might otherwise feel out of reach or only thinly understood.

Julie, who has visited Esalen multiple times before, mirrors Katrina’s emphasis on the juxtaposition of “manicured” and “wild” elements of place. She describes how this deliberate cultivation enhances her ability to engage with the retreat experience:

I do think this is a Garden of Eden...I see the earth as the primary healer. Whether it’s the baths or the view of the ocean, being at the edge of a continent, the crashing of the waves, the stillness of the water moving, the aliveness of the farm itself, the fact that we eat that food here. The movement that it takes to walk through the forest or walk across the grounds. All of those things and particularly, for me personally, beauty, it just, it touches the soul in a deep way [Julie begins to cry, and pauses before continuing.] I think it opens us to the things that are always here, the potential to be in relationship, share, meaning, purpose, all that stuff. Obviously it has manicured lawns in places, but it also has trees that are hundreds of years old that are in their wildness and in their strength. The canyon, the river, it’s very liberated, vibrant. So there’s the untamed aspects and more tamed aspects of this land. I think somehow even that combination has a unique power that’s different than just wilderness. **In some ways it’s friendlier to human experience.**

Julie’s concluding descriptor—that Esalen’s grounds are “friendlier to human experience”—speaks to the physical design and emotional or psycho-spiritual appeal of the retreat center container. The cultivation or “manicuring” (a word that both Julie and Katrina use) grants a permission to unfurl that Julie finds more powerful “than **just** wilderness.” Julie and Katrina perceive the “wildness” of Esalen’s landscape as more meaningful **because of its cultivation**.

Extending this metaphor, they each are able to unfurl, or fully express their healing and connection, because of the self-containment and separation of retreat. All of these words are cultural and subjective, constructions of imagined “wildness” or “taming” of the natural world that create a sense of safety and containment, and that, overtly or not, relates to human intervention into non-human lifeworlds or “environments.” Both Kripalu and Esalen are understood as holistic terrariums built and sustained through this cultivation; the sense of safety that this cultivation, this manicuring, produces seems to be a prerequisite to the healing that happens within. The container makes accessible—once one gains access to the container, that is—sustained well-being or healing, largely by holding space or giving permission for this healing to occur.

Holding the Form: Containing (And Cordoning Off) Healing

Form and function are a unity, two sides of one coin. In order to enhance function, appropriate form must exist or be created.

—*Ida Rolf, creator of Structural Integration and early Esalen faculty, Rolfing*

In my first week at Esalen, I take a walk off-property, climbing up the steep entry driveway to escape onto the Pacific Coast Highway so that I might see both Esalen and its sweeping Big Sur vistas from “the outside,” as passing cars, camper vans, and groups of ambitious cyclists do. When I attempt to re-enter the space, walking back down the drive only twenty minutes later, I am met at the guardhouse by Susan, the friendly Esalen “old-timer” who led my orientation session the night before. Not recognizing me, she wants to know if I am a seminarian, and asks for the name of the workshop I am a part of. She is suspicious, more restrained than I remember. After a few minutes of explanation and proof — I show her the keys to my room just down the road — she allows me in, transforming back into the good-natured “free spirit” I had initially registered her to be.

Just as the healing components within the container are instrumental, so, too, the walls that separate and contain this container are thick. The idea of containment itself does as much of the

healing “work” as what is within. By drawing boundaries that designate Kripalu and Esalen as environments of healing, vulnerability, intentionality, self-improvement, and so on, the retreat centers signal to their participants a special permission to deeply engage in the healing landscape and process. The container walls are as real as they are imagined, articulated by remoteness of place and barriers to entry, which include substantial “admission fees” and, in the case of Esalen and some workshops at Kripalu, extensive waiting lists that require registration months or years in advance. While these walls select for the people and ideas that are welcomed in, the containment of spaces like Esalen and Kripalu are problematized by what they keep out, resulting in homogenous guest populations (with respect to mostly income and race/ethnicity) and fostering a general uniformity of thought. These barriers are felt through arrival and existence in these spaces and produce serious limitations to healing—complications I will explore in Chapter Five.

The factors that construct a sense of containment at the retreat—like these barriers to entry—can also amplify the healing process. Almost all of my participants express some variation on the idea of the retreat population being “self-selecting.” One seminarian, who has been coming to Esalen regularly for fourteen years, tells me: “There’s a lot of people here who have been **working on themselves** for decades, and they’ve been coming here, and taking workshops and they’re just **more enlightened people** to begin with.” This participant articulates a few tensions at once: a cult of individuality wrapped within the holistic or community-based experience, as well as the barrier to entry (imagined or real) attached to the idea that participants are “more enlightened people” before even entering the retreat space. Barbara, whom I mention previously and who is a long-standing Kripalu Yoga Dance teacher, echoes this from the faculty perspective: “I feel like it’s got this supportive environment and this clientele built in, that people are going to be open and they’re looking to be open. If they’re not open, they’re looking to be opened up.” Both of these are mere glimpses into sentiments held by almost all participants, even those visiting Esalen or Kripalu for the first time. Again, threads of mythmaking, the stories told and projected about spaces like Kripalu and Esalen, mesh with the construction of the container.

What is crucial about these perceptions is their effect on the healing processes that take place within the retreat “walls.” The idea of self-selection, or a retreat population cultivated by consciousness, mindfulness, and other similar buzz words, confers a sense of safety. A participant at Kripalu, recalling her first visit a few years prior in the midst of an unhealthy breakup and depression, tells me: “I came up here because I wanted to go somewhere that was safe and secure. And that was health and wellness. Conscious, integrated, and yoga, and a place that a single woman

can go on her own and not have to worry.” She wraps both the safety of Kripalu and its holistic container “contents” in the same category.

There is more to examine here, about why or how this sense of containment and safety facilitates effective healing. As Phoebe expresses it: “I think healing is better manifested when we feel safe. When you feel comfortable and safe, and I feel this [her Esalen experience] offers that comfort and safety. And I think that has played a part in my healing.” In other retreat settings, safety might not be a priority (or even a guarantee). As mentioned earlier, extreme forms of self-discipline or renunciation often figure into the historical concept of religious or spiritual retreat. The “safe space” is a crucial distinguishing quality of retreat centers like Esalen and Kripalu, and an important marker of the container model. While forms of retreat that do not prioritize psychological or perceived safety might be conducive towards larger goals of inner cultivation or spiritual growth, this element of safety facilitates the process of healing (an entirely different aim than spiritual study or advancement). Much of this relates to deep vulnerability and connection, and how a felt sense of safety makes possible this vital component of healing in retreat spaces. While the next chapter is devoted to exploring deep vulnerability as it pertains to effective healing, the structural elements that create this security—the walls of the container—are worth noting explicitly.

Constructing Separate Worlds: The Retreat Versus “Real Life”

The construction of the container as bordered and guarded—distinguishing it as something *out of or other than* “normal life”—also lends many participants a sense of altered experience or identity while in retreat. As effective healing is defined by both embodiment and a transformed lived body experience, this changed well-being (or way of being) is an important product of the retreat container. Participants describe embodying completely different characteristics, behaviors, and states of mind they consider ideal or aspirational while at Kripalu and Esalen. They wake up earlier, make better food choices, are friendlier and more willing to strike up conversation with a stranger than in “the real world.” As Frank tells me: “There’s, like, Frank in the real world, and Esalen Frank.”

This duality holds a powerful social truth. The walls of the container are necessary: they hold space for a type of personal transformation that seemingly cannot happen in “ordinary life.” The psychic space for “group consciousness modification” as it is mentioned at the opening of this chapter is made not only by the holistic experience of being in an environment of retreat and concentrated community, but it is equally predicated on the notion of that space being *out of*

“normal” society. At the same time, it reveals that the ways in which we live our “normal lives” are fundamentally not healing—and might be actively harming. It is telling that the “safety” of the container is understood (and described) by participants as one that allows vulnerability and openness—ways of being that are otherwise not overtly permitted by our sociocultural norms.

Given this need for a retreat space separate from our social fabric, one that attempts to mend the fractures of the fabric itself, I found myself wrestling with the obvious limitations to this treatment approach. Can the impacts of the healing, the sense of embodied well-being and transformed lived experience, extend beyond the perimeters of the container? And if they can, for how long? What is required to maintain the often-ineffable sense of being well that marks one’s stay at Esalen or Kripalu, if part of that being well requires the container itself? Frank’s story is worth exploring in greater detail as it relates to these questions.

I meet Frank during my second week at Esalen. I first observe him in the Lodge at dinner on Sunday night, sitting at the head of a crowded, laughing table with two bottles of wine opened before him. Later, several interlocutors tell me I “have to meet” the man who was in a terrible motorcycle accident, who had a miraculous recovery “because of Esalen.” The man they speak of is Frank. His roommate facilitates our introduction. The two are ubiquitous and extroverted characters for the rest of the week, both being the type to book their programs for the express purpose of being at Esalen, or doing what Frank’s roommate calls “the Esalen personal retreat” (skipping one’s workshop and enjoying the grounds, people, food, baths, and other amenities of the retreat environment).

Frank tells me that he has been to Esalen “50, 60 times maybe.” He explains to me, briefly, the role that Esalen played in his recovery from a motorcycle accident fourteen weeks prior. “I was in the hospital for three weeks. Had many surgeries. My foot, my arm, broke my arm in two places, fractured my wrist, tore all the ligaments in my hand. And my foot, the same thing.” He looks to be in perfect health. Other seminarians tell me that Esalen was responsible for his miraculous healing. This is not accurate. Frank provides me with a more comprehensive story of his recovery and enduring relationship to Esalen:

My PT guy, who’s been doing this for 13 years, said, “I’ve never seen anything like [your recovery] before.” I ran a mile on the treadmill last week. And part of it was coming here again. I booked this, knowing when I was going to come here, which gave me a goal of like 16 weeks to get back on my feet, to start walking again, unassisted. So I printed out a picture of Esalen, hung it in my hospital room, over my bed and kept it in the house, put it on the

fridge. And I was determined to get to a point where I could come here and walk around. Unassisted. Get up and down out of the pools, go walk into Canyon, which I'm going to do a little later, go for a walk along the river. And so that was a big part of my healing was knowing I was coming here. And then coming down here, of course going in the tubs.

... I'm a pretty skeptical guy. I'm not that spiritual. So for me, I absolutely believe that there is something about this place — I don't know what it is, the magnetic poles, the energy fields, the ancient Indians. I have no idea what it is, you know, where it sits in the universe, the beauty of the land, the weather, there's definitely something about this place. When you walk along the river, down there across the bridge. When you go down there and sit in the water. Every time I come here, every time I leave, I feel a little better, a little healthier....I work on myself here, even when I do the personal retreats. Like I said, I always have some kind of insight. Let's say I haven't talked to my sister in two months, we're fighting, and I'm only seeing my point of view. She did this, she did that. It's not that I can't forgive her. It's just that I've pushed her away because I just don't want that negativity in my life, as much as I love her. I just can't be around someone who's toxic. So I've just avoided her. And then I come here and then I'll think and think and think, and you have a lot of time to think, and you're more open, your defenses are down a little bit more, and I'll find a way to go home and then approach her, or do something to resolve that. I've had people in my life who've told me, especially the last five, six years, who have said, I've seen a remarkable change, a difference in the way you...I used to have a really bad temper, used to be incredibly impatient, much more judgmental, much more critical of people and things, you know. And I've had people who have known me my whole life, my twin sister just told me this a couple weeks ago. And that's some workshop stuff, but a lot of it is just working on myself.

...

But I come here, and I get to challenge myself to step out and do things that are outside my comfort zone, too. One of the things that I always do when I come here, too, is I always say okay, I'm going to be much more personable, more open, more sociable, I'm going to be more of an extrovert. I was walking around with a woman last year, like four months ago, and I told her, I'm really shy, and she laughed out loud. She said, "You're shy? You're the least shy person I've ever met in my life." And I said, "That's here. You know, if I walk into a party, I'd be hiding in the corner." But here, I always make a concerted effort to be more

outgoing and friendly and sociable. I've been here sometimes at the end of the week where I've known everyone on the property. And that would never happen at home. I go to the same gym every day. I've been going there for years. I don't know anybody. It's such a safe space here, that it's a really good environment to challenge yourself, to stretch yourself. Like I said, go outside your comfort zones, do things that scare you. If you're going to do it, this is the best place to do that kind of thing. Because people here are pretty cool. They're all pretty like-minded people. It's not the kind of place where people are gonna make fun of you, or criticize you, or judge you.

...

And I feel it, I try to hold on to it when I leave here for as long as I can keep that. But it doesn't take long. You get into San Jose, you hit frickin traffic. Someone's beeping you, flicking you off, beeps the horn and your phone starts going with the texts. You're very insulated here. Isolated, insulated. Micro-bubble. You get home and it's like you get hammered by emails, my daughter calls me up and starts complaining about something or other, and then you're back in the zone.

Frank's experiences at Esalen speak to holistic levels of healing and self-improvement; they address the components of the container that facilitate this healing (like the baths, the ongoing opportunity to "process" in every moment or interaction). Still, our interview left me questioning the ephemerality of the container model.

The healing effectuated by "contained" retreat spaces like Kripalu and Esalen can be transformational, or powerful, and at the same time temporary or fleeting, less palpable outside the bounds of that container. Another notable component of both Frank's testimony and statements from faculty and participants earlier in this chapter (and to come) is this narrative switch between the first and second person. Frank flips from "I feel it, I try to hold onto it" to "You get into San Jose...you're back in the zone." It almost reifies the perception of self as mutable or somehow different in retreat in contrast to "normal life." The use of the first or second person does not follow an exact pattern; participants do not use the "I" to speak only of the self in retreat, or the "you" to refer to their experiences outside of the container. Still, there is something about this narrative mode that constructs the self as an object of retreat or healing, one that is at times personal and at others observational, or understood at a distance.

While almost every participant tells me of several new tools or epiphanies that they will be able to incorporate into "real life"—and most return guests emphasize this to be a consistent virtue

of their time at the retreat center—about half of the participants I speak with are unsure if they sustain the same deep sense of being well, the same degree of transformed experience, that marks their time at Kripalu or Esalen. Does the “micro-bubble” of healing created by the container allow for a continued transformation or healing outside of the space, in everyday life? Do these narrative shifts reflect some degree of separation, or a missing piece to full integration? The larger question is difficult to answer definitively, but it is important, and it is one I will revisit after examining the healing narratives of two more participants within these containers.

Immersion: Healing Within the Glow of the Container

I guessed this was the afterglow I'd read about, and for a few days it cast a pleasantly theatrical light over everything, italicizing the ordinary in such a way as to make me feel uncommonly...appreciative.

—Michael Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind*

While I could spend an entire chapter elucidating exactly how Kripalu and Esalen have manicured each detail of their containers to support whole person (or whole community) well-being, I hope instead to continue directing focus toward participants' voices. On a near daily basis, my participants explain profound experiences of healing as they relate to “the container.” The model of the Gestalt work-study program itself is one that encapsulates the container model in relation to embodied healing and transformed lived experience.

Kripalu does not have this groundwork of Gestalt group therapy, but the center emulates the same qualities and structures. Sabrina, a guest who has been coming to Kripalu for many years, describes the function of holism in her healing experience at Kripalu, before we even touch on her journey with a chronic illness:

I think just looking out onto the beautiful, natural environment is something that by itself, even if there was no program or nothing else, that by itself is absolutely amazing. But I would say the same thing about the programs and the R&R. Even if the environment outside was different, it would still be so worth coming here, but the combination of these two—and I think they go nicely hand in hand [threads her fingers together] or they complement each other so nicely, because what you experience in the classroom here or in a lecture when you go outside, you experience the same thing. And I think this connection of nature really helps facilitate the connection with myself. This true self, this inner self, which I

think both on the mat and in a seminar, and outside, those two work together. And I think that makes Kripalu so special. If it was only one or the other, that would be great, but the two together I think, elevates each one component.

As with Katrina's relationship to the natural environment at Esalen, Sabrina is better able to heal at Kripalu because the various parts of the container enhance her opportunity to learn and embody that well-being.

Sabrina originally came to Kripalu to heal (or at least better cope with) a long struggle with chronic Lyme disease. Near the conclusion of our interview, I ask if her experiences at Kripalu persist beyond her stay—if she feels a tangible improvement in her health, even when she returns to her “real” life (wherein she has a fulfilling but demanding career, and splits her time equally between New York City and Washington, D.C.). After a few enthusiastic nods, Sabrina answers:

Definitely. So, I was dealing with Lyme disease, but the chronic form of it, which you never know when it's hitting you, and how long it's going to last and this fear of, what if I am just so incapacitated, what if I'm just too tired, too exhausted to move my body. And I think coming here, It's like, there's so much more than just the body. Even though you're doing yoga, and you're moving, but you just do your best on that given day. And learning that my true inner self is not defined by how well the body does that day. And, that is something I like to appreciate. I can still communicate with people, even if I'm not in the mood to talk. I can communicate through the eyes, and gesturing, and I think losing a little bit of identification with *just* the body. That there's more...And interestingly through that process, my body aches way less. I have had really long stretches where I haven't had any of those recurring Lyme symptoms. And I feel like as I'm thinking less about the body, the body actually heals.

Sabrina's words evoke qualities of effective healing as outlined by Scheper-Hughes and Lock, by Barry and Csordas. She not only locates embodied healing in her physical and emotional experience—no longer controlled by chronic Lyme disease or living in fear of it—but she also speaks to a changed lived body experience, one that now enables her to identify with herself as a whole person in a new way. This, in turn, has ameliorated her “recurring Lyme symptoms.” Moreover, she cites the multi-faceted contents of the Kripalu container as agents in this healing. She continues:

It's both the physical and the mental and then this connection with the greater powers...Before I came here, I did these things in isolation. I did my exercise, and my yoga in

isolation, and counseling and therapy was in another silo. And then I'd go hiking, so nature is in another compartment. And I think here, those components have come together and work hand in hand to bring just a higher level of well-being.

Sabrina's description of the compartmentalization of her treatment approach is fascinating. The isolation of each healing component limits her healing or sense of being well, whereas the holistic container (a silo itself) brings her wellness to "a higher level." Sabrina's experience of these healing parts being more powerful as a whole, as they are concentrated in the container to "work hand in hand," is a sentiment echoed by many other participants—particularly those who have spent years attempting to better navigate life with chronic illnesses.

The holistic model does not, however, only service maladies that can be diagnosed, like chronic Lyme disease or other biomedically-ordained categories of illness. Many of these healing elements target a fundamental fracture in the social fabric of modern life (which can produce symptoms, or a need to heal, that do not trace back to a disease category or diagnosis). At Esalen and Kripalu, participants inhabit a cultivated social ecosystem where it is perfectly acceptable—and expected—to strike up a conversation with a stranger over lunch, or disconnect completely from email, social media, and other distractions of our digital age.

David, an Esalen seminarian, speaks to this social fracture as it relates to his experience of illness and healing uncovered at Esalen. I am introduced to David about midway through my first week at Esalen by Phoebe. The two are in the same self-compassion workshop, and Phoebe pulls us both together in the Lodge. "He's been here a million times! David, you're going to love her project," Phoebe tells us. After I explain my research, David offers to speak with me right then, over dinner. Our interview lasts almost two hours. His first visit was one year prior, on a self-imposed work sabbatical. David had been suffering from what he would eventually see as years of extreme burnout that suddenly manifested in debilitating chronic back pain, serious issues with his gut and digestion, anxiety, and insomnia—a host of afflictions that could not be adequately explained, diagnosed, or treated by his biomedical doctors. He has since visited more than five times (in one year), and tells me that he will be back for another workshop during the New Year (our interview takes place in mid-December).

The following excerpt is lengthy, but in it, David weaves a tapestry of healing elements present at Esalen that have facilitated his healing process. Over the span of our conversation, he tells me:

My experience at this place has been: think of it like the hard sacred and the soft sacred. The hard sacred would be like an epiphany. Literally see God in front of you, or a psychedelic experience, like a sublime moment. Unmistakable. Fast sacred and slow sacred. And then I think that there's this other experience...I really think of this not as sacred, but as fundamentally fitting life, human life. It's this blend of giving people what they need — and I mean people in the sense of, people as a community — at a really deep level, we are meant to be like this [gestures around to the Lodge, all groups of people sitting, eating, and talking at communal tables].

So, in San Francisco, when I go outside and I walk down the street, and I don't see anyone I know, there's something wrong, fundamentally wrong with that. If I walk down the street, and I go to my favorite restaurant fifteen minutes from my house. I have a nice stretch of walking, say hi to someone I know, maybe I run into someone eating at the same time. That feels closer. And if that happens a lot, then I start feeling like there's a community I'm part of. If it doesn't happen at all, I feel lonely. I feel alienation. And then I come here, and it's just the density of that. I come to eat, and every mealtime I could sit anywhere, and I'm going to have a lovely conversation....And the fact that I am able to do that, **allowed** to do that.

I think a lot about the little bits of design that make these spaces....Clearly they've refined these practices in a very human way for decades. And it's all around here. Everything around here, the bread, the fact that there's tea and snacks in the afternoon, and that the food is cooked and served a certain way, and the signage. And then the baths, obviously. [I ask David if he thinks the waters themselves are healing, or if he finds the community more important.] Both, and I think what I'm getting at, is I actually think it's the connective tissue between those two that makes it sacred. So, all of the ways that the interactions between us are designed, and bring us together, designed with a space that makes it really easy to be in community. And even with the baths, the fact that you have the solar heater for the towels, and a very well-designed anti-chamber. Everything about it. It could've totally been just a hole, there are springs like that. Those exist....I think there's actually this third thing that makes it healing, which is—the baths make it healing, because it's just healing to be in hot water.

And then the community makes it healing, I think because a lot of people are on healing journeys. Every time I've come here, I've met someone who quit Google and was very happy about it, I've met people who have gone through similar chronic illnesses, I've met people who — one of the guys in our group is a professor who studies the intersection of Silicon Valley and counterculture, he studied burnout, so I was talking to him earlier....

Healing is very complicated. So there's the part of healing that's physically getting better, physically. And then there's the mental part of getting better. And a big part of that is changing, and there's a big part of that that's accepting. The first time I was here, for the film festival, it wasn't a "healing" workshop. But being reminded of what creativity felt like was one of the most intensely powerful healing experiences I could've had in that moment. And then the people I talked to...I think a big part of it is the intergenerational connections happening here. Every time I come here, I'll run into one or two people who are roughly the same age going through the same thing. But the striking thing is, I feel like the first time I was here, I ran into another designer who couldn't open photoshop without having panic attacks. And weirdly I was ahead of him in my healing journey. So we had a short conversation that I think helped him a lot, where I was like, it's going to get better. And there were people there who had 30 or 40 more years of career in their lives and could give me perspective.

It's moments like these, and there are lots of small moments spread out like that throughout the week. And then you have that, and you go to the baths after, and you're like, watching a meteor shower...So what's been healing about it for me, and why I come back...I think it gives me a taste of what life could be like, how I could eat, how I could interact with people, how I could be present. The kind of beauty that could be in the world. After coming here, I felt a desire to make my space more beautiful at home. I felt a stillness. It felt like it resourced me for the actual healing. It's like a pitstop, like filling your car with gas or something. And learning skills right now that will help me.

The holistic totality of healing factors that David identifies reflect the experiences of most participants with whom I speak: nourishing food, community connection, an absence of technological distraction, intergenerational relationships, cross-pollination of healing knowledge and

experience, comfort and safety, a beautiful and soothing environment. Much like Sabrina's story, David's language aligns with definitions of effective healing as embodiment and transformed lived experience. David's experience also provides some empirical "evidence" of how the healing taking place at Esalen or Kripalu is non-linear, and often cannot be sufficiently encompassed by terminology or measures of efficacy imposed by biomedical disease categories. David still does not possess the biomedical language to describe his afflictions, but he is able to identify how Esalen has transformed his lived experience and relationship to his chronic pain and burnout. There is a thread in both David and Sabrina's "testimonies" between the many detailed components of the container and their collective ability to effect healing. While the well-being that participants experience can be described as holistic, it is the "medicine" itself that involves the crucial holism.

Integration: Sustaining the Healing Outside the Container

To find our place in the world after we emerge from the magnified mythological vision, the world of the truly wide screen; to avoid getting the metaphysical equivalent of culture shock or a deep-sea diver's "bends" from coming up (or down) too fast, or from awakening too fast from that other world that we also enter sometimes when we dream but usually forget; and to find our car in a different place from the place where we parked it—that's the trick...

—Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*

The majority of participants treat their visits to Kripalu and Esalen like David describes it above: "pit stops" of remembering, wellsprings from which they resource their healing journeys. A couple I interview at Kripalu, who have together visited the center regularly for the last six years, speak to the holistic value of the container (and why that same value can only be fully experienced *within* that container). The woman tells me that she visits Kripalu primarily for the renewal of creativity and personal inspiration it provides her, as both a yoga teacher and educator. Her husband adds:

I think the benefit of unplugging from cell phones, and work, and tasks, and home and all the 10,000 things is super useful, because I'm more likely to have more meaningful conversations with my wife, more likely to remember my dreams, more likely to get in touch with my body. I find myself quite open to all sorts of experiences and kind of touching the wellspring of my spirituality. So I find it very valuable. It is difficult to carry forward, which

is why it's good to come back on a somewhat regular basis or something like this, to kind of recharge.

Modern ways of being, marked by individualism, a high-stress and fast-paced culture of productivity, technological overwhelm, and alienation, are not suited to human wellness, and do not facilitate the meaning and well-being mentioned above. If we are lucky, we can find a momentary respite from this social illness by visiting Kripalu or Esalen, and remind ourselves of “what life could be like,” as David puts it. If we are even more fortunate, this respite might be available to us once a year, or multiple times a year. Still, the effects of the healing endure for many—even if they appear over time, like Sabrina’s debilitating Lyme symptoms gradually fading, or in sudden transformations of understanding, like both David and Sabrina’s re-conceptualizing of their illness narratives.

It is important to acknowledge the transformative healing that can (and does) take place in spaces of retreat, within the container. At the same time, what this healing ecosystem reveals about our ordinary lives—“the outside” of normal society—is telling. We live, as David put it, “in a state of fever, at all times.” We do not ordinarily exist in community contexts nourished by interpersonal connection; we do not perceive the natural world around us as some fantastic combination of “wilderness” and “manicured” design or an opportunity to reflect on the teachings of mindfulness, self-compassion, and care that program leaders and faculty teach. We are inundated by technology, routine, “the 10,000 things” of work and family and responsibility that do not touch these containers designated for healing.

What would it take for a tech company like David’s, or a city like San Francisco, to hold a space that is conducive to sustainable well-being? More realistically, how might participants prolong the “afterglow” of such immersive healing? Annie, the work-scholar I mention at the start of this chapter, vocalizes this need for an exit strategy of some sort:

It’s one thing to have this beautiful container to go [uses hands to gesture very rapid progress] and then be like shit, now I’m completely open and I’ve got to return to, sometimes, the antithesis of the container. And do places like this have a kind of responsibility in preparing people for that, providing ongoing support? I don’t know. I feel really quite empowered to leave. I feel like sometimes in these situations I’m hanging on...I do feel ready for this next week and I’m really here, and also I feel like I’m ready to begin to integrate it. Because I think whilst I’ve been so enamored and grateful and felt an exceptional amount of really deep honor for being here, there are — and maybe this is just true of retreat centers in general or whatever you call this place. It feels like there are natural

limitations and I do feel quite perturbed by the lack of diversity here. It feels really uncomfortable for me. And I look forward to learning how to — whether it's me personally — how we can make these places more accessible to people.

Annie's statement urges us back towards the beginning of this chapter, towards considering the boundaries that gird the healing landscape of the retreat center. The walls of the container generate a safety that is conducive to healing, one that leaves participants "completely open." Inherent to these walls are barriers, major obstacles to who can or cannot enter the healing container—lines of inaccessibility that produce "natural limitations," as Annie mentions, to the extent of healing (both personal and communal) that can happen within.

Much like the figurative and literal dimensions of the container walls, the conditions that keep certain positionalities or people out of the container are as grounded in personal life contexts and ideologies as they are in financial or geographic barriers. Annie expresses simultaneous concern and optimism for participants' departure from the retreat environment. The "normal world" that a participant returns to might be what Annie describes: "the antithesis" of this cultivated place of healing. At the same time, it offers a wider context in which seminarians or guests—equipped with new tools of awareness, practices picked up in workshops and experiences—might evolve their healing as it meets the realities of daily life, beyond the limitations (and idyllic insulations) inherent to the container.

Chapter Four

Healing by Connection: Deep Vulnerability

Illness mitigates solitude in another way in that it attacks any notion that you are separate, autonomous, and independent. You require bone marrow or blood from another, the care of experts and of the people who love you... You cannot ignore that you are biological, mortal, and interdependent.

—Rebecca Solnit, *The Faraway Nearby*

The Permeability of Illness and Healing

During the first few years of my diabetes diagnosis, illness eased solitude thinly and by necessity. My life depended on medications given to me by doctors with whom I felt little connection; my health was a topic of conversation owned as much by myself as by my parents, the school nurse, an endocrinologist I had to see every three months. For a long time, illness amplified my solitude as I sought desperately to avoid identifying with other diabetics, fearful of being categorized as unhealthy, less strong or capable than my peers. These feelings persist, despite my own growth. When I began to open up and outwards, an unfurling I accessed at first by reading others' stories and eventually by writing my own, my illness narrative turned a corner from isolation and disembodiment to connection and active healing. The healing, however, began before I was able to share my story. It was prompted by earlier forays into online message boards and communities of Type 1 Diabetics who had tried non-conventional avenues of treatment I, at that point, had never heard of. It is the impact of this connection and the lines of information and understanding it unlocked, along with the more profound embodied and whole-person healing I located as I shared more freely about my illness with others, that initially prompted my curiosity about how community and connection might engender powerful healing.

The structure of nearly every workshop or class I observe or learn about through participant interviews at Kripalu and Esalen involves, and usually depends upon, vulnerability. Teachers—be they permanent faculty or guest instructors—create safe spaces so that guests can be comfortable to share deep feelings, experiences, and stories. While many teachers explain or create this safe space before participants are invited to be vulnerable, more often than not, it is participants' assumed vulnerability that co-creates a sense of safety or trust. In “The Mindful Body,” Scheper-Hughes and Lock point to collective healing rituals and other community-based processes of healing that

respond to integrated notions of illness, senses of un-wellness that touch the social dimensions of sickness. Their description and ethnographic examples of these rituals closely mirror common (but powerful) exercises regularly taking place at Kripalu and Esalen. In these moments of vulnerability and exchange of embodied experience, both in formal and casual contexts, one witnesses what Scheper-Hughes and Lock describe as an almost ineffable “merging” or “communion” that brings the sick person back into “a state of wellness and wholeness” (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987, 29).

In “Shiatsu in Britain and Japan: personhood, holism and embodied aesthetics,” Glyn Adams develops an idea of **embodied permeability**, which suggests that healing is experienced and enacted on individual, embodied, and importantly interrelated levels by both practitioner and patient (Adams 2002). This concept maps well onto the collective—or permeable—healing that occurs at Esalen and Kripalu as individuals engage in deeply vulnerable and introspective healing journeys alongside each other. While Adams explores the idea of embodied permeability by examining the physical and interpersonal relationship between a shiatsu practitioner and patient, similarly intimate connections are built within the retreat center container. The practice of vulnerability—as participants share intensely personal stories of death, grief, addiction, chronic illness, and so on—accelerates or assumes a level of intimacy that enables this transpersonal healing.

As explored in the previous chapter, Gestalt group therapy is a striking testament to the healing effects of vulnerability in a confined community setting (one that disregards norms that might ordinarily urge us to stay silent, to keep our traumas, frustrations, and pains to ourselves). The Gestalt group circle—a structure used in many Esalen workshops—is based on an exercise developed by Fritz Perls called the “hot seat,” in which one volunteer would sit in the center of a room, surrounded by a circle of fellow seminarians. In *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*, Kripal summarizes the format: “A kind of one-person psychodrama would ensue—the more crying and volume, the better. Fritz would encourage the individual to project the various personalities of his or her psyche into the room and deal with them verbally and emotionally in an attempt to reintegrate the fractured self and so create a new gestalt or whole” (Kripal 2007, 164). In this structure, the essence of collective healing rituals that Scheper-Hughes and Lock describe is apparent. The individual’s “fractured self” is extracted and witnessed by his peers, who are then able to affirm and integrate the whole or healed self back into the social fabric. Kripal writes: “‘Miracle cure’ stories abound in the Esalen lore...Perls had a wall in his room decorated with eyeglasses from clients who had recovered normal eyesight following a gestalt session” (Kripal 2007, 164). While Gestalt is rooted in Esalen’s history, the core practice of bearing one’s “illness” to the retreat

community as an act of healing is omnipresent at both Kripalu and Esalen—and imparts tangible “results” in both places (even if these results are less astounding than the “lore” about Perls’s therapeutic success).

The legacy of the “hot spot” continues today at Esalen in workshops and settings not specifically focused on Gestalt therapy. David describes a workshop he attended earlier in the year:

The most healing moments I experienced there were the moments of **seeing my struggle in perspective** or **shared with others**. We did this exercise called ‘hot spot’...very honestly creating a really safe space where people could feel comfortable revealing themselves. So someone in the center. And this is, I think, a fundamentally healing experience. This workshop’s big, so it’s like 60 people, you’re in a circle, you can see everyone. You get there and you’re strangers, you don’t know anyone...The gist of the story was that as a commander in Iraq, she [the woman at the center of the hot spot] had watched her brother die when their vehicle had been blown up, and then years later had broken her body in 37 different places in a motorbike accident. And between the psychological trauma and the physical trauma, and she described it in such a way that I remember sitting there and thinking, I’m having a psychedelic experience right now because I could, as she was describing it, I could see it. And there was something about the intensity of, when would you ever be in this situation with 60 people in the circle pointed at a person? It’s like with a lens, when you point it at something, you can start a fire? Human attention, I think, works the same way. Most of life we’re all scattered a bunch of different directions. So with hot spot, all that human attention focused on the middle created I think a literal — I’m not religious and I don’t believe in supernatural events...But **the felt experience was such deep human connection and perspective**.

David’s account gets at some of the nuance of *why* deep vulnerability is a “fundamentally healing experience” at the core of this group ritual. His description draws out salient features of this experience: the safe environment as being both created by and allowing for vulnerability, a focused experience of empathy or bearing witness, the sharing and gaining of perspective.

These features are present at both Kripalu and Esalen and distinguish this deep vulnerability as a healing process. David’s experience also importantly resembles the role that altered states of consciousness have played in traditions of shamanism and, as it relates more immediately to Esalen’s intellectual history, in transpersonal psychology. Mark Kasproff and Bruce Scotton explain: “The use of ASCs [altered states of consciousness] is perhaps the oldest healing technique...[defining] an

ASC as a change in thinking, feeling, and perception, in relation to one's ordinary baseline consciousness, that has a beginning, duration, and ending. In the shamanic traditions, ASCs facilitate a 'journey' in which one leaves one's usual world...has experiences, perceptions, and insights, and returns ideally changed in some constructive manner" (Kasprow and Scotton 1999, 17).

There is another salient connection to Arnold van Gennep's rite of passage framework, modeling "rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation" in the context of the retreat participants' journey to and through the retreat experience, and as these phases imply healing processes that must occur in the context of the social body (van Gennep 1960, 11). ASCs are not only precipitated by psychoactive substances—they can be initiated with breathwork, ritual, and other meditative techniques. The use of deep vulnerability in healing processes at both centers parallels this "altered state of consciousness" healing paradigm that takes participants through a structured ritual and collective journey, one that involves a separation from and reintegration to "real life."

Organized Vulnerability: Creating Space for Healing

Kripalu means compassion — no judgment. And in that space, you can be vulnerable. As a teacher, I'm allowed to be vulnerable when I teach. And that's where the authenticity and full self-expression to me comes from, and the power of transformation that allows. Because if I'm saying, "I have this all figured out, I'm perfect," that creates a distance between us. But if I say, "I'm struggling with this, here are some things that have helped me." If I'm willing to, as a teacher, model vulnerability, then anyone who's in class with me, feels — hopefully, that's my hope — safe, to be like, Oh, this is a space where I can do that, not feel judged, not feel like there's anything wrong, not feel like I'm going to get "fixed." And that to me creates this incredibly big space.

—Kripalu yoga faculty

Features of the retreat container, and in particular the concept of a "safe space," are both prerequisites for and results of deep vulnerability. As this faculty describes it—who has been teaching at Kripalu and co-leading Kripalu yoga teacher trainings for over fifteen years—the safe retreat space held by teachers and students alike is instrumental to both the act of being vulnerable and the "power of transformation" that authenticity enables. This deep vulnerability, a ubiquitous part of the retreat experience, takes place interpersonally and informally. Yet, it is important to first acknowledge how the classes, programs, and language in place at Kripalu and Esalen create the

“incredibly big space” for normalizing and encouraging profound openness and sharing of illness narratives.

As evidenced in Chapter Two, Kripalu and Esalen’s rich histories influence their present-day healing environments on mythological, imagined, and literal levels. The histories of these centers play a similar role in holding space and expectation for deep vulnerability, a legacy maintained by faculty and assumed (or quickly inculcated) by guests. Barbara, a Kripalu Yoga Dance teacher, tells me about her healing journey—one that was launched by her first visit to Kripalu as a guest in the 90s, and that is rooted in an experience of witnessing and taking part in deep vulnerability. I do not prompt her to share this particular story with me, and it is important to note that with all participants I interview, rarely do I need to prod or pointedly ask for details about personal stories of illness or healing. Participants are open and vulnerable by default. This poses a significance in and of itself, one that illustrates the norms that are alive at both of these retreat centers. It is useful to examine this assumed vulnerability within van Gennepe’s rites of passage framework. In a sense, the “separation” or preliminal period of a rite of passage or transition occurs before a participant arrives in the “hot spot” seat, and arguably before a seminarian even arrives at the retreat center (van Gennepe 1960).

Barbara provides me with context on the state of her life and health around the time of her first visit. She was living in New York City and, in her own words, was “kind of a messed-up individual” struggling with “eating disorders, self-hatred,” and exercise addiction. She was also practicing yoga, and visited Kripalu with a boyfriend at the time. Barbara explains to me a Kripalu practice “back then” (at the time of her first visit) called “woundology,” wherein teachers would “tell their wound story”—a trauma, illness, addiction, or other point of fracture that launched their journey to Kripalu and healing. She recounts her first Kripalu Yoga Dance class, in which she listened to the teacher’s wound story about his childhood trauma and lifelong healing journey:

And so then we danced. And at one point, I was just crying in the corner, I just fell apart. And it was so great, it was the best falling apart ever. I was laying there on the floor, in tears...hysterical crying and then I realized that I just couldn’t abuse myself anymore. It was a real change-on-a-dime kind of thing. I never went back to the gym again...I was not going to look in the mirror and assess my body and do all that crap, crazy things.

Barbara’s anecdote exemplifies not just the powerful, almost ecstatic type of transformative healing that can emerge from a space of deep vulnerability and personal expression in the group ritual, but also how teachers and participants preserve and encourage such openness.

Kripalu faculty, particularly those who have been with the institution since its early days, set a tone of vulnerability, in part through this practice of “woundology.” This type of ritual ecstatic healing is not novel. It is one that has a deep history in cross-cultural practices of healing. Among the Plateau tribes in the Pacific Northwest, as just one example in North America, “The patient who suffers from spirit illness will die unless he or she undergoes a ritualized death in the spirit dance initiation. The initiate is both vulnerable and powerful” (Csordas and Lewton 1998, 439).

Vulnerability is a crucial element in the history and present of similar ritualistic healing approaches. Near the end of our conversation, Barbara explains to me why, in over twenty years of teaching, she finds this bearing witness as a community to others’ pain and healing to be so effective:

If we can hold space in the community, people feel seen and healed as opposed to just isolated and hiding, which is what people do when they’re in grief. Holding space is the heart. It’s like therapists holding space and living that vicarious trauma, and watching all the sadness, and it is hard. So that’s why the dance is healing because you can let go, in the community. I can’t do that by myself, if I played that music. It’d be fun, but I’d lose steam. I’d lose energy after three or four songs. In a community and the bigger the group, the more you can dance, you can just go on and on...It is the energy body. We are all merging into one field...It’s trusting that energy, that the community will hold them.

Barbara’s emphasis on the healing produced by this intersection of community and vulnerability echoes several themes in Scheper-Hughes and Lock’s discussion of the social and collective dimensions of dis-ease. By exposing one’s pain or illness narrative rather than turning towards isolation or alienation, the participant in the healing ritual is “felt back” into and merged with the social body. The community is not just the force that sustains the ritual, as Barbara explains, but is also the instrument of the healing process itself. The group is able to “hold space” for the vulnerability and sharing of “vicarious trauma” to be transformed into agents for collective feeling and healing.

As I learn of this process alive at both Kripalu and Esalen, I worry about instances in which this potentially could inflict harm. Are precautions taken to be mindful of how others’ traumas, or the assumption of vulnerability, might be re-traumatizing for participants? Marco, a first-time attendee with a “beginner’s mind” approach to the norms and assumptions at Kripalu, reflects this same concern:

I was in a meditation workshop and the guy was like, really zen, he didn’t waste a lot of words. But at a certain point, he was like, So now, we’re going to direct these phrases to your

five year old self. He said that a bit lightly. And I thought of that for a second. I'm, you know, I'm good. When I was five, I was happy. I do have a happy five year old inside of me. But I have a friend of mine specifically in mind, who, if you told her something like that, the trauma that she received around that age, she'd probably run out of the meditation class.

Because it was just out of the blue.

Workshops often involve more safeguards than this example; I note that teachers at both centers typically begin class with a rote reminder that participants may leave the room or choose not to participate if they at any point feel uncomfortable, unsafe, or triggered. This reminder is done differently by each teacher and at each center. At Esalen, where each workshop mandates a week-long or weekend commitment to a defined group of seminarians, programs usually begin with a lengthier session to set collective boundaries, precautions, and expectations. I do not hear any stories of “failure” with regard to the forms of deep group vulnerability at Kripalu or Esalen; this might be attributed to the “self-selecting” factor of participants. Individuals with less successful stories, or those who could register this deep vulnerability as harming rather than healing, likely do not attend or return to these places of retreat.

Esalen Massage: Cross-Cultural Connections to “Shamanic” Healing

During my two weeks at Esalen, I am astounded by the sheer quantity of participants who share with me stories of transformative physical and emotional healing from Esalen massage. More specifically, I am struck by how many people—men and women, young and old—tell me repeatedly of their experiences spontaneously or uncontrollably crying during their massage treatment. Esalen massage is defined by its focus on mindfulness and embodiment (for both the practitioner and client), along with what the Esalen website describes as “nurturing contact, integrating strokes and detailed attention to the whole body” (“Welcome to Esalen Healing Arts”). David gives me the clearest summary of Esalen massage from his “client” perspective:

Esalen massage is extremely different than any other massage I've had anywhere else. It's all very long, flowing strokes. There's this sense of being held. The therapist starting here [points to his underarm] and going all the way down your body, and holding your leg and moving it around. It really feels like this whole-body care. And everyone does it in a different way. I've had like 6 massages here, but they all seem to end with various swaddling in different ways. You get put into a fetal position, or a very relaxed position, and wrapped in a

blanket. There's something about it that feels very different...it feels less practical than lyrical.

In addition to this “lyrical” care, one of Esalen’s “elders” (a massage therapist who has been with the Institute since the 60s) tells me that, in those first few decades, “You were nude when you got a massage, you were nude when you gave a massage. It was very different back then. It wasn’t sexual, it really wasn’t.” Like the structures or exercises within workshops at both centers, the interpersonal vulnerability of an Esalen massage is both an assumed and integral quality of the practice.

Over breakfast in the Lodge, a seminarian—at Esalen that weekend for a grief workshop—hears about my project and reaches out to grab my hand:

If you’re looking at healing, you’ve got to look at Esalen massage. It’s unlike any other massage I’ve had. The whole time I had my first massage here, I was thinking, how is this guy not taking on all my pain? It felt like **he was sucking the pain — physical and emotional — right out of me**. And with the sound of the crashing waves, along with the way the massage makes you feel held — I started crying! Both times, the practitioner just touched me in some way, and I started sobbing.

This idea of a pain transference, as if the massage practitioner were “sucking the pain...right out of” the client/patient, is one echoed by multiple participants. Interestingly, the language and physical sensation of “sucking” or extracting an object of dis-ease from the patient are prevalent in traditions of shamanic healing. In their overview of transcultural psychiatry and ritual healing, Thomas Csordas and Elizabeth Lewton note that one of two major illness types diagnosed by North American shamanic healers is “‘intrusion’ by something physical or spiritual, which can be treated by ‘sucking out the pathogenic object’” (Csordas and Lewton 1998, 438). Shamanism in Central and South America also involves these same practices of exorcism—of “sucking” an object of illness out from the patient—that resembles the “sucking” or drawing out of pain that participants describe as being a part of Esalen massage. Csordas and Lewton’s paper emphasizes the many instances in which guests’ and practitioners’ descriptions of vulnerability and collective healing at Esalen and Kripalu correspond to pre-existing traditions of ritual or shamanic healing. Overwhelmed by similar testimonies regarding the healing power of Esalen massages — I hear more than a few each day — I schedule interviews with more of the Esalen massage therapists.

I seek out Deborah Medow and Peggy Horan, two women who were instrumental in the development of Esalen massage at the Institute in the 1960s. Deborah and Peggy are generous with their time and wisdom in each interview, sharing with me not just the philosophical and embodied

concepts of Esalen massage, but also telling me stories of their personal histories with the Institute and its natural landscape. I ask Peggy specifically about this idea of transference, of the masseuse “sucking the pain” from her client. She tells me:

It’s been very transformative for many people, people who have never been touched with kindness...The way we train people is in awareness, so the practitioner learns what it is to be self-aware, what it is to be emotionally intelligent. Know yourself, so that the transference isn’t happening, so that the client gets clarity from the practitioner, and presence...You learn as a practitioner to have very clean, clear boundaries in every way, not taking on another person’s burdens. If you’re going to be present with them, you’re not going to merge with them.

In this massage practice and deep interpersonal connection at Esalen and Kripalu, being present and aware are essential components that allow for vulnerability and pain to be “held,” or processed.

Peggy emphasizes the importance of “clear boundaries” between practitioner and patient, an idea that reflects the same structure of the container model. These clear lines of individuality and protection serve to construct a space that can accommodate such deep vulnerability. Peggy’s focus on “clear boundaries” rejects the transference of pain, or the transmission of “another person’s burdens” from patient to practitioner. At the same time, her commentary elucidates how intentional awareness, understanding, and emotional presence can enable the permeability of healing touch and care. The practice of Esalen massage, along with collective ritual healing exercises like “hot spot” and Kripalu Yoga Dance, share core similarities with shamanic healing practices as they pertain to this idea of permeability or transference. Csordas and Lewton write of “anomalous or wondrous experiences which...are characteristic of shamanic healers cross-culturally. McClenon’s [1993] experience-centered approach highlights the importance of emotional connections experienced by shamanic healing participants...The healer and patient become connected, their bodies communicating back and forth until the problem is fixed” (Csordas and Lewton 1998, 439).

Validating the Dis-eased Experience: Seeing as Healing

People who have recently lost someone have a certain look, recognizable maybe only to those who have seen that look on their own faces. I have noticed it on my face and I notice it now on others. The look is one of extreme vulnerability, nakedness, openness. It is the look of someone who walks with dilated eyes, or of someone who wears glasses and is suddenly made to take them off. These people who have lost someone look naked because they think themselves

invisible. I myself felt invisible for a period of time, incorporeal. I seemed to have crossed one of those legendary rivers that divide the living from the dead, entered a place in which I could be seen only by those who were themselves recently bereaved.

—Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*

During my time at Esalen, David Kessler, a renowned death and grieving expert, leads a weekend workshop with a yoga instructor who specializes in grief yoga. The program is entitled “Finding Meaning,” and merges yoga with Kessler’s grief teachings and exercises to guide participants towards releasing pain and reaching the “sixth stage” of grief—after denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—where they might find meaning and healing. Grief and the act of healing from profound loss fit squarely within the categorical definition of dis-ease, despite our society’s unwillingness to properly address or openly discuss it as such. As Scheper-Hughes and Lock write: “Pain destroys, disassembles, deconstructs the world of the victim. We would offer that illness, injury, disability, and death likewise deconstruct the world of the patient by virtue of their seeming randomness, arbitrariness, and hence their absurdity” (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987, 29).

The Friday on which weekend workshops begin, I meet Angela and Kay. I approach the two as they sit at a table on the Lodge deck with two other men, and it is one of my less graceful introductions—I sit down and inadvertently interrupt their conversation. Almost immediately, however, the two women (whom I later find out are sisters) are warm, and readily explain their workshop to me. It is their first visit to Esalen. As we talk later into the night, they share their story with me. This story is deeply personal to Angela, and it feels important that it is told in her own words:

My husband and my son died, one day apart. My husband had been sick for a long time. And my son died from suicide the next day. And it was very traumatic because he did it in front of me. And I've had EMDR therapy [eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, a form of psychotherapy designed to alleviate distress from traumatic memories or images], which really has helped, there's no trauma left. There's grief, which is going to last forever. Well, my sister here, her friend comes here, like four times a year...I hadn't even met her yet. And she paid for me to come here for this seminar. Because she knew it would help so much, and it has, it really has. I would recommend anybody come here, for any reason at all.

After her friend booked the seminar for Angela, Kay reserved her own place to support her sister. While I speak to many participants in the grief workshop—and these seminarians are some of the

most friendly, forthcoming, and humorous people I meet that weekend—I spend the most time with Angela and Kay. The sisters’ experiences at Esalen provide strong empirical evidence not just for the healing that comes from vulnerability, but also for exactly how that vulnerability is structured within the seminar.

From what the sisters and many other participants in the grief program share with me, I gather that many of the sessions involve equal parts “learning,” or listening to Kessler explain concepts from his work with grief, and sharing or experiential processing. The format seems similar to the processing that occurs within Gestalt: there is a collective examination of a thought pattern, deep hurt, or persistence of pain that, in working through or evaluating one person’s experience, can facilitate healing for the group. Kay describes this further:

And with the guilt that people have, he [Kessler] would just call them out. People have these ideas, and after a while you start to believe them, they become true to you. Like, maybe someone thought they were the reason their mom died. They didn’t call her, or they did something. He would say, you know, you did the best that you could do. He would say, I left the room and my mom died. And was that my fault? No. And he would go through this chain of questions, and dismiss the whole wrong way of thinking. In front of the group. And everyone does it [feels guilty from these irrational thoughts].

Kay’s reference to “these ideas” or recurring narratives “[becoming] true” to the patient or participant points again to the healing potential of an altered state of consciousness in the context of transpersonal psychology as outlined by Kaspro and Scotton. By engaging in this deeply vulnerable state, the individual can dislodge from her irrational but unshakeable thought patterns or dis-eased ways of being. As seminarians share deeply personal guilt or sadness around their loved ones’ deaths, the group also engages in a form of practical healing. Kessler is able to instruct the group by extrapolating from the individual experience—an experience that is often universal. Again, this process looks similar to Gestalt; experiences of vulnerability, processing, and healing are more generalizable than one might think. Participants express intense pains and, in this case, forms of shame, that might otherwise be hidden for fear of social alienation or rejection. This act of expression resulting in bearing witness is a powerful healing, one that operates reciprocally.

Throughout the weekend, I am astonished at Angela and Kay’s degree of empathy. It seems extraordinary—particularly Angela’s ability to heal directly from the empathy she experiences for others’ stories of loss and grief. This is a process felt by most everyone I speak to in the seminar and many participants at both retreat centers, but Angela’s testimony astounds me. Her story of loss and

grief seems to me to be so deep. In our conversations, Angela teaches me a valuable lesson about how healing operates through vulnerability in these spaces: pain and illness are not measured or felt in degree. It is this equalizing empathy or gaining of perspective that enables participants to experience tangible transformations in lived experience, to feel a part of a group and to “process” by witnessing others’ healing journeys. Angela explains:

Thinking I’m not the only one—knowing I’m not the only one. I couldn’t believe how many stories were very similar or even worse, I couldn’t imagine anything being worse than what I saw, than what I went through. There are a lot that are, or the same. There’s loss of children that are a lot younger than mine was...loss of a dog, loss of a home, grieving over losing a lot of money, a lot of things, not just my grief. There’s a sense of unity, being here with them. And being able to talk before class, after class, during meals...And just knowing that gives me a freedom to talk to them. Just knowing that they’ve been there, too. There are other people here I wouldn’t approach and talk to, I don’t think, because they’re here for something else. I know the people in our class, why they’re here. And it’s the same reason I’m here. It just gives me permission to talk to them.

Some of the sentiments Angela expresses relate to aspects of the container—the “freedom” or “permission” to talk to others who will understand and be able to help process her grief and healing, and the opportunity to facilitate these connections “before class, after class, during meals.” The healing space is held by a collective vulnerability, one that enables these ongoing moments of recognition and “feeling” the self back into an integrated social fabric, as Scheper-Hughes and Lock describe it.

Immediately after Angela shares this with me—as if scripted—a couple approaches our table in the Lodge. The woman says to Angela: “Mark needs to get your number!” Mark and Angela discuss potentially attending another grief workshop together that Fall in Sedona. Kay offers to add the woman to a Facebook group for parents who have lost their children. Angela shares an intimate story with the couple to explain how she told her grandson of his father’s death in the hopes of helping them navigate grief and loss with children. Mark and his partner are grateful; the bond between the four involves a clear exchange of information, resources, and (perhaps most importantly) empathy and understanding for each other’s healing journeys.

Katrina, another participant in the grief workshop, echoes the same as she tells me about an exercise that Kay and Angela also describe to me. Kessler asks the group to write letters to their loved one(s) who passed; the next day, he asks each seminarian to find a partner and read their

letters to each other. Katrina is immediately worried—she is originally from France, and had written her letter in French (“I didn't think that I needed to translate it in English because, you know, I just never talked to my mom in English”). She was paired up with another woman in the class who had not yet found a partner:

And she said: I speak fluent French. I lived in France for twelve years...With that woman who could understand French, I really connected with her. She made me talk about her, about my mom, and I talked about her dad. And of course, that's what we're looking for through grief. To have someone that you can talk to who is invested, who is genuinely listening, who has been through what happened. And usually, typically I imagine, once you've said it to all your friends and your close people, then they've heard it, they don't need to hear it again. But you need to talk it over and over and over and over until there are no more tears. I haven't really, I haven't reached that point. Talk about it a million times until the tears are done, especially when it's recent.

There is something simple in the cathartic crying and genuine connection Katrina speaks of. Katrina's healing is rooted in this interpersonal vulnerability, in being present and “genuinely listening” to a stranger who is capable of deeply seeing and understanding her. Katrina, Kay, and Angela talk about healing in relation to grieving the passing of their loved ones; the experiences of grieving illness and death are not so different.

Ephemeral but Deep: Naming the Silent Things

What is the source of our first suffering? It lies in the fact that we hesitated to speak...It was born in the moments when we accumulated silent things within us.

—Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*

Participants refer to a special permission or allowance created by the container of the retreat center (and structures within workshops) that make deep vulnerability possible. With this potential for openness as an assumed part of the Kripalu or Esalen experience, guests and seminarians are largely free to speak of their pains and struggles without hesitation, to liberate their “silent things” and heal through that process of vulnerability and connection. The vulnerability expressed in participants' organic interactions is often just as (if not more) powerful than the connections embedded in workshop or program exercises.

From this deep vulnerability, however, guests do not expect (and often do not want) relationships that persist beyond the retreat experience, or even beyond a conversation. Within the physical retreat container is a similarly cordoned emotional container. What matters is not the relationship created, but rather the healing that stems from the moment of vulnerability and connection. The idea of self-selection, or that guests at these retreats are specifically there to “work on themselves,” is an essential assumption that creates a space in which authentic connection can happen on a regular and almost immediate basis.

I speak to a husband and wife who have been visiting Kripalu for the last six years, and who accordingly share some insights on this culture of openness. The man says matter-of-factly: “People are totally self-selected, they’re coming to get in touch with themselves...people are coming not as their work selves, their parental selves, they’re coming to explore the sort of key part of themselves, which may be hidden. Underdeveloped. It’s more likely that the conversations are going to be about that, and not, Hey, what do you do for work?” His wife picks up on this comment, adding:

That’s so interesting that there’s very little conversation about that [one’s profession]. It’s more, What did you think of that? What came up for you? What did you write about? I think it’s kind of like this adage of, sometimes you bare your soul to the stranger on the bus, you know, you’re going to have a long bus ride together, and then you say goodbye. And you’re never gonna see them again, but you might have shared with them things that you might not have shared with somebody close to you.

A few other participants at both centers call upon this adage of the “stranger on the bus,” referring to ephemeral connections that serve as temporary but impactful moments along one’s healing journey. As Frank puts it: “Here, it doesn’t take much, the next thing you know you’re telling people everything, your life story. I’ve had people tell me deeply personal stuff, people I don’t even know. You don’t see that. Where else in the world do you see that?”

Not only do I hear about these deeply vulnerable moments from participants, but I also experience them myself. In classes and workshops, I hear incredibly personal stories of illness and healing (and share my own), witnessing other guests and seminarians cry, shout, and even sing. These expressions of experience and emotion—ungirded responses to senses of dis-ease or the natural fluctuations of human life—are important moments of catharsis otherwise often suppressed or unnaturally hidden in favor of social norms that govern “real life.” For many of my interlocutors, there is something liberating about the ephemerality of the relationships made at these centers. Perceiving fellow retreat-goers as this trope of the “stranger on the bus” enables participants to be

immediately vulnerable, an openness encouraged by the seeming anonymity or consequence-free implications of the exchange.

For some guests, part of the appeal of this opportunity for vulnerability is an equal and opposite permission: one that allows participants to be left alone, that does not demand small talk or other social expectations. In a class at Kripalu that uses yoga philosophy to discuss managing and healing chronic pain, I meet Sara—first mentioned in Chapter Two—who shares this perspective, and who also appreciates moments of authentic vulnerability and connection. She explains that she first came to Kripalu after she graduated a rigorous business school and, in addition to dealing with epilepsy, chronic pain, and a slew of “health crises, not related to the pain,” also tells me that she was, at the time, “feeling like I didn't know who I was anymore, what career path I wanted to take.” Her sense of dis-ease was both physical and existential. Recalling that first visit, Sara tells me:

It sounds so trite, but after I left, just everything was illuminated for me. Things that I had questions about, trying to get back into the real world after school, like everything — the path was just made clear. The chance to take a week out of life, and then just think and be quiet, and not engage with people, really...This is going to sound terrible, but one of the things I actually enjoy about being here is that you don't have to engage with people...It was really healing not to have to answer any questions, or to sit by myself and eat and not have to communicate with anyone, not have to tell anyone anything.

The permission to be, to sit with her thoughts without worrying about making “small talk” with her fellow retreat guests, was an important facet of Sara’s healing experience in that first visit. In the present day, she is more interested in connecting with others.

Still, the option to choose between opening up to other participants and enjoying solitude is one made possible by the vulnerability afforded in the retreat environment. Sabrina shares this same appreciation for the freedom afforded by the ephemerality and lack of expectations involved in relationships at the retreat center. For her, this permission to isolate or socialize as one wants cultivates an even greater sense of connectedness: “Everybody respects boundaries. That’s what I like. Everybody seems to respect: we’re connecting but it’s also not necessarily permanent. There’s a certain freedom in that. We’re creating this really warm and welcoming space. So I feel a connection with everybody here, even if I don’t talk to them.” Members of the retreat community are free to socialize or not, to share their complete “story” or withdraw into their own contemplation—rarely is that decision questioned, and if it is, I do not witness it.

Sara describes her experience from this visit, in December, as she participates in a Kundalini workshop for cultivating self-love and acceptance:

We're talking about you know, very personal things. One of the participants turned out to be a shaman, and she gave me a message. Oh my god, I was in tears. In the end, it is great for the people you meet and the stories you hear. But it's not required. It's not forced. It's a little more organic. You're in a community of other seekers, for the most part, people are all here for their own journeys, on their own particular paths. And so I feel like everyone, for the most part, understands that pact of, you don't need to engage in a really long conversation about, whatever. There's no small talk here.

Sara credits a community understanding and permission to *be*—however she wants, in community or in solitude—as healing qualities of the retreat space. Not only does it give her time to reflect in a way that she feels cannot happen in ordinary life (and in a way that afforded her clarity and illumination via her first visit in particular), but Sara also perceives it as an opportunity to bypass forms of unfulfilling connection in favor of meaningful interaction.

Social Healing: I'm Not Okay, You're Not Okay

David's statement about his time at Esalen, encapsulating the accounts I have shared in this chapter, is worth repeating: "The most healing moments I experienced there were the moments of seeing my struggle in perspective or shared with others." Phoebe, the first participant I meet at Esalen (and in the midst of her first visit to the Institute), explains her own transformation of lived experience just as clearly, citing the same source of healing:

You just look around the room and you speak to people and you think everything's fine. But now, I get to see that no, everything is not fine [she laughs]. I'm not okay. You're not okay. And we're okay with that, it's okay. So I think that the community aspect is so important to the healing process, because it makes you feel like you're not alone, and you're not this defective person. There's not something wrong with you.

Each of the aforementioned instances of healing by vulnerability that takes place at Kripalu and Esalen echoes shamanic traditions and other forms of collective ritual healing that have been historically practiced cross-culturally.

Returning to the Csordas and Lewton paper, it becomes clear that these ritual healing acts at Esalen and Kripalu are fundamentally social, or involve the remaking and healing of the individual in

relation to the collective social body. There is an emphasis on restoring harmony not exclusively within the self, but rather “between self, society, and the world” (Csordas and Lewton 1998, 440). David’s description of a “psychedelic experience” during the “hot spot” exercise is not so surprising. Rarely do we have the opportunity to experience the profound empathy stimulated by a detailed, visceral account of a person’s pain or suffering. Similarly, rarely do we have the opportunity to share our own stories of dis-ease, to be seen, recognized, and embraced still, felt back into the social community as a whole and well person.

Chapter Five

Healing for Whom?

At first glance, Esalen might appear to be a perfect example of the commodification and deracination of the sacred and the business of selling it to a general public...Donovan, for example, recalls some graffiti painted on Esalen's entry sign in 1990: 'Jive shit for rich white folk.' In a similar spirit, the hippies referred to Esalen in the Summer of Love as 'the country club,' which, of course, they then happily visited in droves.

—Jeffrey Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*

Country Clubs of Wellness

Issues of appropriation and commodification saturate both Kripalu and Esalen. These issues are amplified by the high price point of a stay at each center. Aside from the substantial costs required to travel hours into Kripalu and Esalen's remote healing havens, a weekend at each center typically runs upwards of \$600 for the most price-conscious and “bare-bones,” as Deborah puts it, dormitory rooms. At Esalen, guests can choose “sleeping bag” accommodations for \$400 total per weekend workshop, which provides a common space for participants to essentially camp indoors—perhaps the most economical offering between both centers. Esalen's most deluxe option—a house (Fritz Perls's former residence, to be exact) overlooking the ocean—costs \$3100 for a weekend; at Kripalu, a weekend R&R retreat in a private room reaches a much lower maximum of \$1400. These already high prices often spike much higher depending on the workshop and time of year.

My field notes are riddled with unanswered questions about these facts of (in)accessibility, along with the overwhelming lack of diversity I witness, based on my observation of guest demographics. Who profits from the creation and commodification of these “alternative” spaces and practices of healing? How to reckon the fact that real and meaningful healing occurs in these spaces, but that this healing also comes from cultural traditions and contemporary identities that do not belong to the centers which interpolate them, nor most of the participants who use them? If profound healing is occurring within these places of retreat, and the guests largely represent one race and socioeconomic class, who, then, gets to heal? For whom are these places healing? As I have explored in Chapter Two in relation to concepts of indigeneity, land ownership, and cultural appropriation, these centers are largely disconnected from the cultures and histories they capitalize and rest upon. Lines of accessibility and the resulting homogeneity of the guest populations at

Kripalu and Esalen impact the felt sense of healing at each place—an impact more immediately visible to participants than issues of cultural appropriation or Indigenous erasure.

The racial/ethnic and socioeconomic makeup of the clientele at Kripalu and Esalen influences the communities that emerge within the retreat campuses, and it speaks to the accessibility of this type of healing experience: the wellbeing it can engender, and for whom. The demographic reality at each center, while spanning broader economic diversity than I expected, caters to a primarily white clientele. Apart from the high cost of participation that contributes to the lack of economic diversity in the retreat demographic, the depth of social and economic determinants outside the “container,” in turn, contribute to an almost entirely white guest population at both centers. While I intentionally sought out diverse voices and experiences in my fieldwork, the majority of my participants — a greater proportion at Kripalu than Esalen — were white. In this chapter, I hope to amplify the minority voices — black, Indigenous, people of color — who I met within the retreat environment, interjecting my own observations and experiences only as they might elucidate the dynamics of diversity and cultural erasure at each center.

Geographic proximity or the resources necessary to travel to these centers certainly influence the demographic makeup of guests. Still, other sociocultural barriers to entry guard the retreat spaces miles before one even gets to the point of booking a program or stay. The practices that guide most guests to discovery of Kripalu or Esalen—yoga and meditation, alternative or non-biomedical healing modalities—all practices that *usually* require socioeconomic security, or some excess of time and capital to access, at least in the United States. For individuals not born into the cultures from which such practices arise, these “alternative” modalities typically require privilege. As I have mentioned in the Introduction, people of color and individuals of low socioeconomic status are consistently understudied in research on CAM and meditation as therapeutic interventions (Blum 2014). In a Los Angeles County study, “individuals with incomes exceeding \$100,000 [had] higher odds of reporting CAM use”; similar local studies demonstrate a direct relationship between the likelihood of CAM use and an individual’s income and education (Robles et al. 2017).

Both centers’ marketing, language, and hiring practices signal that, as a long-standing yoga teacher at Kripalu says: “We would all like more diversity.” The gap between this stated desire for diversity and visible uniformity of guest identity can only be bridged by deep examination and decisive action on the part of Kripalu and Esalen. Both centers make efforts to represent diverse identities and perspectives via permanent and visiting faculty and programming; still, these business decisions do not translate to the demographic makeup of the guest populations. This issue is one

partly informed by larger barriers to entry within the yoga and alternative healing “industries” in the U.S. writ large.

Robin Rollan, who runs a popular blog called *Black Yogis*, tells *The Atlantic*: “The upscale white woman is the image of yoga...I think a lot of us see yoga as something that’s not for us, because of the lack of imagery [of people of color in yoga]” (Murphy 2014). Yoga teaching certifications pose another barrier in this sphere; there is a major gap between the number of white instructors and people of color who are certified yoga teachers, in addition to very few bilingual certification offerings. As a result, individuals primarily see white, English-speaking yoga teachers, which cyclically welcomes and makes space for white and English-speaking yoga students. Deeply entrenched cultural perceptions of yoga have also historically made it and alternative modalities less prominent in non-white communities. A 2009 study in the *Journal of Religion and Health* reported that a significantly greater proportion of African Americans and Hispanic Americans used prayer for health reasons. Meanwhile, “African American women and Hispanic women and men were significantly less likely than European Americans to use other spiritual practices such as meditation and Tai Chi” (Gillum and Griffith 2009). In other words, barriers to participation are informed by structural as well as cultural contexts.

Beyond what I have outlined above, my research cannot adequately resolve questions regarding *why* these guest populations are so homogenous. Rather, I hope to uncover how spaces of retreat that so visibly lack diversity—with respect to the guest community in particular—effect a particular type of healing for one type of person, but not for others. For many participants of color, it is not a choice to confront these questions of guest diversity in relation to healing or safety, but rather an inherent part of their existence in these retreat spaces. The homogeneous racial/ethnic makeup of spaces designed to heal can have the exact opposite effect: these environments are healing for particular identities, at a particular price.

What Constitutes a “Safe” Space? Who Can Feel Safe?

Before I examine how the visible lack of diversity at Kripalu and Esalen informs the healing that can occur in these spaces, it feels important to reiterate my own privilege and positionality. I am a white, able-bodied woman conversant in worlds of “alternative” healing modalities. I have the privilege not only of the more official “permission” to be at Esalen and Kripalu because of my express research purpose, but also am readily welcomed and affirmed in these spaces given who I

am in the world and how others perceive me. This is not to say that I haven't struggled or made concerted effort to cultivate my own sense of wellness as I live with a chronic health condition and to support and generate healing in others. It is simply to name this context. My felt sense of Kripalu and Esalen upon arrival—an embodied, instinctual feeling—is one of ease and safety. This, itself, is a privilege, one that many guests (also white-presenting and able-bodied) share. With my ethnographic lens, I can investigate this felt sense with more nuance and perspective. Still, this immediate sense of safety and acceptance is crucial, because it speaks to how the healing container is one largely informed by participants' identities and positionalities. Many participants describe the container as safe, healing, and welcoming because that is how it feels, **to them**.

The writing of Jacoby Ballard helps to establish a groundwork for what privilege (and conversely, inaccessibility or oppression) look like within spaces of yoga and alternative healing. Ballard is a working-class, queer, transgender yoga and Buddhism teacher and activist who strives for greater “intimacy, alliance, and solidarity with those not often encountered in the yoga classroom: dis/abled people, those with abundant bodies, people of color, undocumented immigrants, queer, trans, and gender non-conforming people, and low-income people” (Jacoby Ballard). I do not know, and do not meet, Ballard through my research, but I find his writings and own personal website to be important sources of information regarding these questions of accessibility and healing communities.

Ballard has been involved in social justice work for fifteen years, a yoga teacher for twelve, and earned his 500-hour certification at Kripalu. As a student of yoga and a teacher actively working to dismantle and repair many of the failings I have identified in this chapter, he offers a perspective and lived experience that is worth highlighting. In a piece for the website *Decolonizing Yoga*, Ballard writes:

I find conversations about privilege and oppression sorely lacking within yoga...Because of who is largely in the room, who can afford access, and who feels welcome, these dynamics of power go largely unnoticed...there are always people in the room, visible or not, who have struggled against oppression their entire lives, and this is a trauma that lives in the body, and so we must know how to hold space for them, and hold them well when we are asking them to open their hearts. (Ballard 2013)

Ballard's words are an apt preface to the ways that Esalen and Kripalu fail to hold thoughtful space for those who are not born into identities that feel welcome or represented, who have struggled against this oppression Ballard speaks of.

During my first week at Esalen, I attend a lecture organized by Esalen's Center for Theory and Research (CTR) entitled "The Religion of No Religion." As the Associate Director of this Center and the author of the book alluded to in the lecture title, Jeff Kripal introduces the discussion. Noticeably, all of those involved in the panel — the person hosting, the three panelists, even the directors of the CTR — are men. While male and female seminarians are equally represented at Esalen, the institute's history and present-day leadership are dominated by male figures. In regards to this panel, the three male visiting scholars include Dr. Biko Gray, Kripal's previous student and a professor of Religion at Syracuse University. The lecture is relatively unstructured; each of the three speakers spends about fifteen minutes reviewing his area of study and professional history, along with his relationship to Esalen. Biko's two co-panelists—older white men who have long histories with Esalen and its intellectual roots—summarize their work within Western occultism and Indian religion and history, respectively. Biko, a younger black man whose work is situated at the intersection of religious philosophy and African American religion, spends his time speaking about the #Blacklivesmatter movement as a sacred act of spiritual mourning and resistance. As I listen to the three speakers, I feel the urgency of Biko's voice. In the midst of a mostly white audience and two other panelists who express complete reverence towards Esalen's (also male, also white) intellectual roots, Biko's presence is larger than his individual person—it is a representation of the voices and perspectives that have the capacity to bring Esalen (and Kripalu) forward, towards critical self-examination and authentic inclusivity.

This becomes uncomfortably apparent as the panel opens for audience questions. A young Indian woman, whom I recognize from the Mindful Self-Compassion workshop, raises her hand: "I look around, and it's all white people practicing my culture, practicing yoga. I don't know why they can't go to their own history, why do they have to take my culture? Can you speak to that?" She makes an important and confrontational observation, one that should not come at a surprise to any in the room. At a bare minimum, she asks for acknowledgment of the delicate line between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation inherent to much of what is practiced at Esalen (and Kripalu). The two older white male panelists have, to me, shocking responses. One begins with: "I'm not 'woke.' So to me, all this cultural appropriation stuff, it's a non-issue." The other panelist, who is a scholar of Asian religions and philosophies (and who also presents at Kripalu), tells the seminarian, "Yoga was a Western export. These gurus, swamis came on an evangelizing mission to the West. They exported yoga to the West." It is painful to witness the tone-deaf response, one that

demonstrates how these communities can be unsupportive, unsafe, and harming to non-white identities and individuals who witness their cultures being appropriated at these centers.

Biko follows these statements of erasure with a powerful acknowledgment: “I’m going to disagree with my colleagues. There’s a difference between cross-pollination and theft.” While Biko gives the woman some sense of validation and acceptance, his co-panelists continue to disagree and try to shut down the suggestion of appropriation. The community does not treat this seminarian’s vulnerability and testimony of discomfort as it does in the many instances explored in Chapter Four. Rather, it rejects her feelings of anger or confusion, and confirms her alienation in this white space. As I wait to speak with Biko after the panel has ended, a seminarian tells Biko that she is from Mexico, and that she has visited Esalen many times. She tells him that, typically, there are “people from all over the world,” but that during this visit, “It is all white people. And it makes me angry! I want to scream at someone, but I don’t know who to tell it to!” Biko laughs gently, agreeing with her and simultaneously explaining that he has little agency at the institute. Part of the harm inflicted by the retreat community, as exemplified during this panel, is the resistance towards confronting or even addressing these obvious issues of appropriation and homogeneity.

Towards the end of the week, I meet two seminarians in the mindful self-compassion workshop; they are roommates, and join my table at lunch with a joyful intimacy and energy. Had I not interviewed them, I would have assumed they were old friends. I bring up the Wednesday night panel as we talk about the inaccessibility and whiteness of the Esalen experience. Although neither attended the panel, one of the roommates, Melissa, laughs and rolls her eyes, telling me: “Oh, I *heard* about that.” We talk about how, if psychological safety seem to be the bedrock of the community and healing at Esalen, this moment during the panel—in which the seminarian was made to feel not just at odds with the group for her question, but almost crazy or invalidated for expressing her identity—is one that induces harm.

In our interview, Melissa generously offers an account of her own experience at Esalen, as a black woman visiting for the first time. She explains earlier in our interview that she is biracial, and mentions being “raised in white culture” in childhood, discovering in adulthood “this other major part” of her identity. She now spends most of her time with people of color as her “close friends, or chosen family.” Melissa tells me:

It’s been my experience in this particular place, that it caters entirely to the white experience. And that is something that, as a person of color, makes me uncomfortable. And because I’m also steeped in whiteness as part of my identity, I feel like I can handle it without it being

traumatic. That's not necessarily the experience of every person of color. There are some people here who are having really deeply traumatic experiences [from] the level of cultural appropriation and whiteness. Especially people whose culture is appropriated by the mere existence of some of the components of Esalen. And they're angry, and rightfully so...And in this space, there are people who are having really negative experiences *because of the environment itself*.

Up to this point in our interview, Melissa and I have discussed how Esalen's physical setting and geographic location instills awe and calm; she also values the relationships cultivated at the institute. Like many participants whose experiences I described in Chapters Three and Four, Melissa notes the vulnerability initiated within her workshop. When paired with opportunities to connect, share, and exchange experience throughout the retreat landscape, this effects significant healing for the anxieties and insecurities that she sought to address when she signed up for the workshop. She tells me earlier in our conversation: "I feel very validated as a human being in this program." The program itself is teaching a practice that is healing, and is supported by a greater degree of infrastructure or ground rules to include different identities and experiences.

Melissa's description emphasizes that, while the social environment or community has the ability to heal, this ability depends on who feels *a part of* this community, who feels understood and embraced by the social environment. Scheper-Hughes and Lock's concept of the "three bodies" — the individual body, social body, and body politic — is a critical model here (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987, 7). The tension between Melissa's individual sense of healing and larger understanding of harm inflicted by the retreat community and environment corresponds to Scheper-Hughes and Lock's use of these three bodies as units of analysis for cultural sources and meanings of sickness and health. Melissa continues:

And because of some of the ways in which the course itself [the mindful self-compassion workshop] is designed, in the erasure of the historical, spiritual components that again, are completely appropriated from people whose cultures are represented here. And so understandably, there are people having really visceral reactions and I, as a person who came here for my own personal healing and growth, I'm finding myself torn between wanting to shut that out and just retreat into the whiteness of myself, versus wanting to show up in my person of color-ness in solidarity and support because I understand that feeling deeply. I'm not having it myself because it's not my culture that's being appropriated in this moment. And I feel residual frustration myself both for the experience, but then have this third or

separate level of frustration of like, Ah, I wish you [the other people of color in the given instance] weren't having this frustration so that I could just focus on me and not have to worry about you. It's very complex, the things that are in my head.

Melissa expresses a painful tension; she is experiencing healing at the level of the individual body, but she cannot ignore the harm done to the social body and body politic in which her identity also intersects. She articulates needing to “retreat into the whiteness of [herself]” as an individual body that can receive healing; simultaneously, her “person of color-ness” pulls her to identify and stand with a social body and a body politic that are not included in the healing of the retreat space. She recognizes and can feel the harm inflicted by the retreat environment on other persons of color at the center, and the broader implications of this cultural appropriation and exclusion on the body politic. Melissa's healing process at Esalen is fractured, incomplete. This tension produces not just a barrier to healing, but a sense of dis-ease or disjuncture in and of itself. Effective healing, as defined by embodied and whole-body healing, is made impossible by this splintering of the three bodies.

My many participants who explain that they feel “safe” to be vulnerable and share their whole selves with the retreat community—an instrumental vehicle for the social healing that occurs within the retreat container—are existing within a community that is structured around their safety. They do not have to grapple with the active harm inflicted by actions of appropriation or erasure of their identities and cultures. Of course, there is nuance beyond these statements. I am present at each center for only two weeks, witness an extremely narrow snapshot of guest demographics and dynamics, and do not speak to every person of color at the retreat center. Still, Melissa's statements speak for the experiences of other people of color at Esalen that she has come to know that does not produce healing. In my observation, Melissa's words could also be applied to Kripalu. The retreat container and community, by components of design that exclude and erase—in Melissa's words, elements that cater “to whiteness and cultural appropriation”—can actively harm certain identities and participants at both centers.

A large part of this issue, of the felt sense that the retreat center is designed to accommodate and hold space for white and socioeconomically privileged bodies, is created and perpetuated by the centers' unwillingness to overtly acknowledge, let alone actually remedy, these instances of contradiction and appropriation. Anti-racism educator Robin DiAngelo, in “What's My Complicity?” outlines the resistance I see at Esalen and Kripalu—be it on a community or corporate level—that keeps these spaces trapped in cycles of harm for BIPOC. DiAngelo writes: “We white people make it so difficult for people of color to talk to us about our...racist patterns and

assumptions that, most of the time, they don't. People of color working and living in primarily white environments take home way more daily indignities and slights and microaggressions than they bother talking to us about because their experience consistently is that it's not going to go well" (Van Der Valk and DiAngelo 2019). She emphasizes that, as white progressives attach themselves to the "idea of being free of racism," their resistance to critical examination and ongoing work builds, and they become comfortable within a culture of tacit white supremacy and, in this case, appropriation and exclusion (Van Der Valk and DiAngelo 2019). These dynamics persist in the retreat space by means of a positive feedback loop: while the centers align their brands with values like "diversity" and "accessibility," they become complacent, neglecting the actual (more difficult) work of welcoming and creating space for the experiences of marginalized peoples.

I want to emphasize that it is the retreat space and how people act in these spaces —*and not the modalities themselves*—that hold the harming potential, and that speak about and treat these modalities in ways that feel exclusive and inaccessible. In many studies, researchers have delivered mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and yoga programs to low-income minority adults, inner city bilingual (English/Spanish) communities, and severely economically disadvantaged communities; in all cases, study groups demonstrated high completion rates, positive psychological and physical health results, and increased self-compassion and life satisfaction (Szanton et al. 2011, Kabat-Zinn et al. 2016, Hick and Furlotte 2010). It is clear that, despite significant barriers which typically make these practices accessible only to those with socioeconomic privilege, mindfulness-based stress reduction techniques, yoga, and alternative healing approaches appeal to and benefit underserved communities. It is not these modalities that are innately harmful to BIPOC or socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, but rather the homogenous and often appropriative "container" sociality and environment that create, for many people of color and marginalized identities, the "harming" effect.

"Whose Body is To Be Enlightened?"

At Esalen, this question of identity politics and the balance between healing and harming environments are further complicated by dynamics of nudity at the baths. These dynamics point back to how history and construction of community are intertwined in who is "allowed" to heal in these spaces, and also how this is gendered. Esalen's intellectual and cultural history is rooted in masculine figures like Murphy and Price as its founders, Alan Watts, Aldous Huxley, Stanislov Grof,

and so on. Very few women are listed as the “heavy hitters” of Esalen’s early origins, and this gender imbalance persists in Esalen’s organizational leadership today.

The first time I venture down to the baths it is early morning, before dawn. Although I grew up in California, I was not raised with the open-mindedness and counter-culture liberties that Esalen represents; I am apprehensive. At first, the baths are empty, and I am relieved. Soon, the only other people among the small and silent cliffside oasis are three older men. It begins to feel more like a trap than an oasis. My anxiety lights up. While nothing has been done or said, as the only woman outnumbered by men in a dark and physically vulnerable environment, I feel immediately unsafe. This feeling gradually subsides as my time at Esalen continues and I get to know the people that comprise the community, to experience kindness and connection. Still, there are days or weekends when I avoid the baths entirely after meeting or becoming aware of male seminarians that make me uncomfortable in moments at the Lodge or during interviews. I speak with Annie about this during our interview.

Annie expands on how her gender complicates her experience at the baths, one of the central healing instruments at Esalen. She tells me:

There's something that I have noticed about, I suppose, the vulnerability of being naked in that space that I am curious about. And I've felt things come up in me around sexualization and consent, that I feel are things that perhaps are not named here...And **even just experiencing a gaze...how do you manage how people feel in that space in general?** And obviously, it [the bathing] has a strong healing component. And how does that look different for everyone?...I had an experience one night when I was down there, late on my own, it was completely black. And there was a man sort of standing behind me, just standing. And I watched myself become very anxious. And I was like, this is really interesting. Not that I felt he was going to do something, but what that brought up for me was trauma around being alone in those spaces in the dark with a man.

Annie’s experience at the baths mirrors my own: she is a white woman who, while occupying an axis of privilege, also registers Esalen’s healing community in a different way than a male participant might. Much of what she describes (and of what I experience, too) evokes social theory on the ongoing harm inflicted by the gaze. As Foucault describes it: “There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. **Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze...**each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer” (Foucault 1980, 155).

The sensation Annie describes — of suddenly becoming self-conscious or uneasy in her own body, reminded of moments in which she felt unsafe as a product of another gaze — is one produced by this interiorization of “experiencing a gaze,” as she puts it. This notion is inextricable from embodied healing. Embodiment, or the way we experience our lived bodies, is attached to the social practice of the community. An individual’s awareness or imagination of a threatening gaze in this space is an obstacle to effective embodied healing; it takes one farther away from the bodily autonomy and health empowerment that this healing process involves. Annie is critically thinking about this community as one that is healing only for certain identities, that holds possibilities of harm—potentials that “perhaps are not named here” and that are informed by different axes of identity. There are substantial harming implications here for survivors of sexual assault or trauma, regardless of gender. As Annie expresses, there is no clear way to “manage” how people feel in the baths, but Esalen might begin by addressing these possibilities of un-safety during guests’ orientation to the institute, or creating designated and protected areas of the baths for private use. Importantly, Annie has been at Esalen for a month as a work-scholar. In comparison to my transitory visit as an outsider, she is more deeply embedded in the day-to-day realities of this community and its felt sense of being not only predominantly a healing place for “white people,” but also one that is distinctly male.

At the same time, there are major components of embodied healing and health empowerment that take place at the baths—for men and women alike. I do not wish to gender this healing experience, as both men and women at Esalen cite the vulnerability and body acceptance that takes place at the baths as a significant healing of their time at the institute. The baths work to dismantle the idea that there might be one “perfect” or even preferable body type, or that health is signified by the way a body appears. On the expectation of a certain aesthetic female body, Susan Bordo writes: ‘With created images setting the standard, we are becoming habituated to the glossy and gleaming, the smooth and shining, the ageless and sagless and wrinkleless. We are learning to expect ‘perfection’ and to find any ‘defect’ repellant, unacceptable’ (Bordo 1997, 3).

This expectation, of course, produces a host of dis-eases across all genders: eating disorders, anxiety disorders, senses of alienation or rejection. Even without an official diagnosis, feelings of body shame and insecurity involve some level of disembodiment or dissociation. In baring all types of bodies — large, small, old, young, and not perfectly shaped, toned, or tanned — the baths resist the canonic aesthetic ideal of what a healthy body “should” look like, producing tangible acceptance and embodied healing for individuals’ relationships with their bodies. This profound opportunity for

healing again points back to the importance of representation and, in the case of the baths, context. If Annie and I each experience the baths as one woman outnumbered by men, the social container feels unrepresentative and unsafe. Representation in these spaces gives participants permission to feel vulnerable, to know that their vulnerability will be received within a safe and healing community, as opposed to being scrutinized under the gaze of a threatening “other.”

In response to my questions about what makes a “diverse” community, one that feels authentically safe not just for white and/or male identities, Annie tells me:

This is a conversation I had with a person of color this morning. Like, is this what white people want? Do white people think that healing is being around other white people? **And I think it's one thing to just offer this space to diverse communities. And it's quite another to actually embed leadership and directors in positions of diversity.** And not only the culturally diverse thing, but I feel it's really quite a male space as well. I've struggled with that as well. Because even when you think about the lineage and the history, it's all white men. And to me, how do I identify with that? **And what are the limitations for me as a woman, gathering the benefits of healing if it's coming from a place that has a completely different experience to my own?**

Annie raises important questions about the infrastructure of Esalen. Are the community and these teachings informed by female voices, by people of color? What is the harming potential of a space that is, at least as Annie and other women, including women of color, perceive it, designed by and for white men?

In *Esalen*, Kripal does not ignore the exclusion that is embedded in the center's history and present along lines of gender, sexuality, and race. At once addressing and dismissing these components of homogeneity, Kripal writes: “although it must be admitted that Esalen's general history is predominately a masculine one and that its clientele is overwhelmingly middle class, heterosexual, and white, it is also safe to conclude that Esalen's ideal answer to the question, **whose body is to be enlightened?**...That answer is every body” (Kripal 2007, 462). Kripal describes an Esalen philosophy that combines critical feminist theory, Fredu, and Foucault, one which strives towards egalitarianism — and one that, he is quick to qualify, is far from actualized. “Colored bodies are not well represented on the grounds, and most bodies simply cannot afford an Esalen massage or a trip to Big Sur” (Kripal 2007, 462).

Kripal goes on to say that Esalen's closing of its short-lived San Francisco Center in the 60s was the single most damaging event to its future as a space that could be inclusive of a wider

socioeconomic community, writing that it “more or less guaranteed that Esalen’s clientele would remain upper middle class and overwhelmingly white. And so it has” (Kripal 2007, 463). According to Kripal, the San Francisco Center did not make “good” economic sense—but it held tremendous potential to create a safe healing community for a greater number of identities. This emerges as a common theme between both Kripalu and Esalen: it is one thing to signal a desire for “accessibility” as a buzzword, and quite another to take the necessary steps to create spaces that feel safe and healing for a non-white, non-upper-middle-class clientele.

I have spent a considerable portion of this chapter examining how the inaccessibility and homogeneity of Esalen’s community limits its ability to heal marginalized identities and can, in many instances, inflict harm. Despite this focus, as I mentioned with Melissa’s testimony, I propose that the same issues exist at each center, and that my conversations at Esalen apply to Kripalu (and vice versa). While I experience Esalen’s community as one that possesses a much greater degree of racial and cultural diversity than Kripalu’s, at least at the level of clientele, these differences are ultimately insignificant. It is perhaps because of Esalen’s intimate size and marginally greater diversity that I was able to have more meaningful and open conversations about these questions. Both centers are inaccessible and homogenous, and engage in similar forms of appropriation; it is of little import whether one is slightly more diverse than the other.

As at Esalen, many of my participants at Kripalu are aware of the whiteness of the center (and as I have mentioned, this homogeneity appears even more pronounced at Kripalu). Most, however, are themselves white, and have little to say about how the center might resolve this issue, or how the felt sense of community is shaped by its homogeneity. Kripalu’s gift shop, which sells books, tapes, beauty products, and trinkets that fall under the umbrella of non-Western and New Age healing modalities, has a table devoted to books written by and for women of color; it sits in a corner of the shop opposite the entrance. In the store’s front display window is a stack of books by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Hillary Clinton; titles like *White Fragility*, *Radical Dharma*, and *The Body is Not an Apology* signal an effort to embrace different identities along axes of race, body type, and gender.

I am predisposed to scrutinize the sincerity of this selection — or to wonder about its intended audience. I hope that these are altruistic attempts to educate and expand the awareness of the Kripalu guest and faculty demographic, and to make guests of different identities feel more comfortable at the center. At the same time, I cannot ignore the dissonance between this performance of social awareness and the lack of lived diversity in the guest population. There is an

obvious friction between this picture and the image of a white male faculty leading a workshop titled “Introduction to Shamanism,” using storytelling, mythologized tropes, and imagery of the Indigenous to give a room of white-presenting guests tools that they likely do not have the cultural rights or knowledge to use.

While Kripalu has many of the same issues as Esalen, several of my participants at Kripalu compare the two centers—even before I mention that I am doing a comparative study—along these lines of accessibility, seeking to emphasize that Kripalu fares “better.” As we discuss how Kripalu has changed over the last two decades, one faculty member tells me: “Now we have so many more people, so many more interesting types of people and more diverse things happening here because it’s more corporate and it’s more accessible now. That is an issue, though. Like Esalen is so expensive that it is not accessible.” By accessible, I think this teacher intends to signify that Kripalu’s marketing — its intentional deployment of “diversity” as a part of its brand values and hiring protocol — makes the center more welcoming to diverse identities. The reality is not so. This “corporate” change has, at the same time, done away with programs that did actually make Kripalu more accessible (at least economically), like work-studies and full scholarships. As I learn from many faculty who began their path with Kripalu by way of such opportunities, these programs offered immersive training in Kripalu yoga practice and teaching, education in Ayurveda, and room and board in exchange for work or demonstration of socioeconomic need.

Another guest, who has been visiting Kripalu for about a decade and is an older white woman, tells me: “I’ve seen more people of color in this visit than I’ve ever seen before...So who knows how it’s changing in that way, in terms of being more accessible to a broader audience. And it’s got to be enough of a community of people coming so that if they are coming from a different background or culture, they’re not flying solo, they need to feel connected themselves.” This word “accessible,” one that resurfaces in many of my conversations with white participants, seems to be mobilized in a similar way as the term “diverse” or “diversity.” Each alludes to a discomfort with or, at a minimum, awareness of the whiteness of these spaces. Still, its actual meaning — making the center literally accessible to more identities by minimizing barriers to entry — brushes over the deeper work that needs to be done to make these spaces not just accessible economically, but actually appealing, welcoming, and ultimately healing to non-white identities. While perhaps not as aware of existing discourse or possessing the positionality herself, she expresses the same sentiment that Melissa and Annie explain: the communities of each retreat center, in order to be able to heal

(and not harm) diverse identities, must also authentically understand and integrate those identities into the community.

Waking Up: The Work of Authentic Inclusivity and Accessibility

If mindfulness is indeed a “movement,” I want to be a part of a movement that supports people to wake up to the connections between us, that helps us see that personal stress reduction is not separate from fair wages and safe working conditions, that does not hide from questions about power and privilege.

—Maia Duerr, “Toward a Socially Responsible Mindfulness”

The Esalen panel I describe at the beginning of this chapter reverberates through the retreat community. More precisely, it pervades circles of younger seminarians and people of color. A few days before that panel, staff, community, and guests organize (via the message board) a “BIPOC Chat”; after the discussion, the group informally reconvenes by felt necessity. Aside from those actively engaged in questions of appropriation, erasure, and diversity at the institute, most white seminarians do not seem to register the panel as noteworthy or troubling. After the discussion, I walk down to the Lodge with some seminarians I recognize, and a few I don’t; we talk for almost an hour about the event. David comments that it struck him as a distinct manifestation of a “passing of the guard.” The two older white panelists, unaware of the cultural complexities and problems present at Esalen and fixated on romantic retellings of their own Esalen histories, represent all that is Esalen’s past; Biko and his intersectional identity, scholarship, youth, and voice—one that departs from the antiquated perspectives of his colleagues—represents the future. The next day, I overhear Michael Murphy (the founder of the institute) and Esalen’s General Manager talking over breakfast. The two are discussing, from what I can surmise, bringing in Biko as a resident scholar. One of the two excitedly says: “That is the next intellectual level. That is the level of discussion we want here.” From the vantage point of my academic context at Dartmouth, in which Biko’s level of engagement with these issues would be assumed or taken for granted, it is noteworthy that Esalen considers his discussion a radical departure from its current philosophy.

There is a similar desire to foster genuine community and thought diversity at Kripalu, at least as articulated by the faculty I speak to. One long-standing yoga teacher at the center tells me: “It [the diversity] comes and goes, depending on the programs in-house. I hope—I think—it’s moving in a more diverse direction. It is still primarily white people, primarily older, but it changes

and is changing. We're trying to, very thoughtfully, do everything we can to make that happen. It's tricky to get people of color to come on staff. Would you want to live in the Berkshires? It's a very white part of the world." This argument—one that sounds like an excuse to justify a lack of progress—seems self-perpetuating. Kripalu's "official" response does a better strategic job at identifying what, exactly, the center is doing to institute greater diversity within its staff and space.

In a page on the center's website entitled "Kripalu's Dharma: Working Toward a Compassionate, Connected, and Awakened World," Kripalu's CEO Barbara Vacarr writes about confronting privilege and "creating a Kripalu where all feel they belong" (Vacarr 2020). In this release, Vacarr lists tangible steps for Kripalu's "Strategic Priority" towards diversity, like incorporating bias trainings, recruiting a diverse board, building out diverse programming, and delivering English as a Second Language programming to staff "to reduce the 'silencing effect' created by bias against nonnative English speakers" (Vacarr 2020). At the bottom of the page is a list of books, webpages, articles, and podcasts for the Kripalu community to educate themselves on white privilege, reparations, mass incarceration, racial bias, and building welcoming and safe communities for diverse identities.

Developing a diverse staff and releasing well-written and thoughtful initiatives, while both important steps, will not "fix" the larger felt sense of exclusivity and homogeneity at both centers. The path forward is not simple or easily identifiable, intertwined as it is with barriers that are erected both by the retreat center and larger socioeconomic realities—the same forces that make complementary and alternative medical approaches widely inaccessible in the United States. As participants' experiences and issues of cultural appropriation demonstrate, the problems of accessibility and diversity as they create healing or harming communities at Kripalu and Esalen are deep-rooted and will require substantial change to mend.

Sophie, whom I introduced in Chapter Two, offers an example for where Kripalu and Esalen might start. She spent a summer in a work-study program at another similar retreat center, and recounts:

I think the primary difference I've observed on that topic is that at [the other retreat center], over the summer they had a whole series of workshops specifically for people of color, focusing on decolonization and healing and sovereignty, and all sorts of really powerful topics. I know some folks who were in those retreats and had really powerful and really complicated experiences being in that place, having those conversations.

Programming that responds to the express difficulties that black, Indigenous, and people of color participants have in these spaces is one step forward, and also can facilitate safety and healing for individuals that might otherwise experience these retreat centers as harming.

While I have yet to specifically address how the LGBTQIA+ community intersects with identity in these spaces, designated programs in both spaces hold retreats for queer communities, often related to queer empowerment and embodiment. Esalen and Kripalu both, however, have complicated histories with queerness. At Esalen, Kripalu identifies “that the Esalen of the 1960s was not particularly friendly to homosexuality. It certainly allowed such people on the grounds, even into the community, but it also kept them ‘in a sort of cocoon of isolation’” (Kripalu 2007, 462). At the same time, Kripalu mentions that Esalen was a wellspring for discussions of sexuality, “gay consciousness...lesbianism, [and] bisexuality” during the 70s (Kripalu 2007, 462).

It is important to recognize that these two dynamics are enacted at once: programming does not always translate to the felt sense of representation or integration among the lived experience of community. Kripalu has also been historically limited in its relationship to the LGBTQIA+ community, particularly because of its religious history as an ashram. While some of Kripalu’s male devotees during its days as an ashram under Amrit Desai likely identified as gay or bisexual (a reality that Danna Faulds, a devotee during these days, touches on in her memoir *Into the Heart of Yoga*), this identity was largely kept secret or hidden. At both centers, LGBTQIA+ identities are better represented than members of the BIPOC community across faculty, staff, visiting presenters, and community members. Participants who identify with the queer community do not mention this component of their identity as one that is felt as “other” at Kripalu or Esalen, or that hinders their experience of healing and retreat.

As exemplified by the homogenous, mostly white and upper-middle class makeup of my study participants, Kripalu and Esalen’s efforts to expand their communities and welcome diversity have not yielded any tangible change. These centers must do more than announce that diverse identities are welcome (a passive and superficial step that does little to actually create an authentically safe or appealing space to marginalized peoples). To a further extent, as explored in Chapter Two, it seems apparent to me that spaces like Kripalu and Esalen will not be able to foster truly diverse healing communities until they properly confront cultural erasure and decolonization (beyond the metaphorical). It is difficult to imagine how (if at all) Esalen and Kripalu might do this decolonizing work to create a space that is healing for all without completely transforming their “brands,” or the

ways in which they understand and market their histories, cultural mythologies, and the modalities they use.

Despite the need for significant change, I am optimistic. The tools to move these communities forward, to create containers that feel safe and actually healing for many instead of few, are embedded in Kripalu and Esalen's own histories and presents. While the disturbing moment I witness at Esalen exposes an ugly reality, it also points to a tremendous opportunity for the institute to continue to step forward towards greater progress and confrontation of its own shortcomings. Kripalu writes of Esalen's early efforts to make itself accessible to a wider audience:

By 1966...Pike and Leonard both encouraged Murphy to open an urban branch of the institute...an urban environment promised to balance or even correct some of Esalen's shortcomings, including the prices it had to charge for room and board and its failure to reach outside the white middle-class for its central clientele. Ron Brown, for example, who led racial encounter sessions in San Francisco under the Esalen banner, liked to refer to Big Sur as "the South."...The San Francisco Center sponsored four consecutive racial encounter workshops [Racial Confrontation as 'Transcendental Experience'] that, all and all, ran from 1967 to 1970 (Kripalu 2007, 182).

These "racial encounter sessions" were held just a few years after the Watts Riots in Los Angeles; the registration form describes the program as "bloodless riots where the most dreaded thoughts and emotions may be expressed, where self-delusions that limit can be stripped away. Only when such confrontation has occurred can man expand his blackness and whiteness into creative humanness" (Kripalu 2007, 183).

In this description, confrontation of racism and oppression and the notion of "working on oneself" are inseparable. An ethos of inclusivity and confrontational work in the name of greater progress and expansion of the "human potential" are central philosophies of the Esalen culture, rooted in programming from over 50 years ago. The issues they face now demand a true embodiment of these values. Terence Gilbey, Esalen's General Manager, lists as a major priority for the year 2020: "Foster greater diversity, equity and inclusion in the Esalen community...Community has always been an important concept at Esalen...given our focus to increase our mission impact it is even more imperative that this concept be as inclusive as possible" ("A Framework for the Future" 2020). The announcement is concluded with Terry's email address and a call for direct feedback; it resembles Kripalu's announcement regarding its own efforts to cultivate diversity through hiring processes and corporate training.

At Kripalu, presenters and programs signal a potential for change. During the two weeks I spend at Kripalu, several visiting teachers are people of color and LGBTQIA+ activists within the alternative healing and yoga worlds. On the program schedule, there is a weekend retreat held in August and October entitled “Yoga Retreat for Women of Color”; it seems that there have been similar workshops held in past months which intend to create safe spaces for diverse identities and backgrounds. Kripalu has its own “Teaching for Diversity” fund, which provides financial support “to projects that will benefit as many people in as many places as possible” (“Jonathan P. Schwartz Teaching for Diversity Fund” 2020). Additionally, its RISE Program, a mindfulness-based stress reduction practice intended for situational resilience, facilitates programming for underserved communities (and uses this programming to research the evidence-based impact of RISE). In 2008, Kripalu conducted and published a study to demonstrate the value of Kripalu yoga for “diverse and underserved/underprivileged populations (e.g., minority groups, the elderly, gay populations)” (Wilson et al. 2008). Still, these initiatives do not get at the political and economic roots of many barriers to inclusion in yoga and alternative healing, some of which I have outlined at the beginning of this chapter.

Moreover, in each of these efforts to address the identity politics of exclusion apparent at Kripalu and Esalen, the centers, in many ways, avoid acknowledging or fixing the faults of their own communities and spaces. The active harm that many black, Indigenous, and people of color participants experience at Kripalu and Esalen—and women of all backgrounds, albeit perhaps to a lesser extent or in distinct ways—emphasizes the power of community and environment in the process of effective healing. Without first creating sociocultural environments that recognize marginalized participants’ lifelong experiences with oppression, trauma, and exclusion—and that actively seek to address and rectify their own roles in these dynamics—these spaces of retreat will be confined to facilitating meaningful healing for those in white and socioeconomically privileged bodies. As Melissa explains:

To me, there are some very glaring components of this place, and of the program itself that I do think make it hard to be in a space, of having psychological safety in this space, in this work. Like the psychological safety component is necessary as part of the workshop we're in. I personally don't feel it fully, and I know others don't, because of the components catering to whiteness and cultural appropriation.

How can the retreat participant experience powerful healing if the process of this healing is predicated on emotional discomfort, a “psychological [un]safety,” and a reproduction of privilege? If

they wish to create spaces that are healing “for all,” Kripalu and Esalen might begin the real work of confronting dynamics of privilege, power, land rights, and cultural appropriation—and recognize that these issues are not separate from realizing the “human potential,” but rather an inextricable part of it.

Conclusion

Continuing to Listen

Pain destroys, disassembles, deconstructs the world of the victim. We would offer that illness, injury, disability, and death likewise deconstruct the world of the patient by virtue of their seeming randomness, arbitrariness, and hence their absurdity. Medical anthropologists are privileged, however, in that their domain includes not only the unmaking of the world in sickness and death, but also the remaking of the world in healing.

—Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock, *“The Mindful Body”*

In his preface to *The Wounded Storyteller*, Arthur Frank writes that, rather than the theory of his book awaiting “further research,” it instead “awaits further living and the stories of those lives” (Frank 1995, xxi). I have always perceived my love for writing as one motivated by an inherent fondness for words and language—a love perhaps inherited or impressed upon me as a child. I see now that I write from a need to hear and tell stories, to “remake” or re-assemble the world around me in and through healing, as Scheper-Hughes and Lock write. This ethnographic endeavor—the research and the writing—was immensely rewarding. It has carried me, provided me with a lyrical felt sense of learning and growth. The four weeks I was granted to listening to and re-assembling the meanings embedded in others’ stories about illness enabled me to look beyond measures of biomedical efficacy and towards deeper understandings of the conditions and effects of what I’ve called in this thesis “holistic healing.” I feel privileged to have heard and to be, now, re-telling these stories of dis-ease, healing, and the embodied sense of well-being that centers like Kripalu and Esalen can facilitate. Still, much like writing, the work of listening is never done—this “story” is not complete.

The findings of this work evidence the tangible impacts of community and space—built, natural, mythologized, and felt—on locating and sustaining states of well-being. Participants’ experiences of healing at Kripalu and Esalen urge us to pay attention to these elements of the healing process as essential to modern modes of health care—even if the specifics of what is offered at Kripalu and Esalen remain aspirational or inaccessible for many people. Where we heal, as well as our mythological and cultural conceptions of spaces of health care, matter to the healing process. Our environment—personal attachments to the natural landscape, meanings imbued by our personal pasts and histories of place, our accessibility to natural spaces “untamed” (metaphorically or not) by human domain—all powerfully influence states of health and illness. Vulnerability and the

sharing of illness narratives in community engender profound and lasting healing. These learnings also point to an equal need for attention to how our relationship to other people, to a sense of social connectivity, to the land we inhabit and the stories we tell all might help to better understand disease categories and origins, as well as what effective embodied healing looks like. Moreover, many aspects of the felt sense of healing at Kripalu and Esalen reveal a major social sickness: the “state of fever,” as David describes it, that underscores our modern lives. Disconnected from built senses of community or meaning and largely disembodied from what it could mean to feel well in our physical and psychosocial experiences, those with socioeconomic access and a sense of cultural “belonging” in such spaces gravitate to these retreat centers as reminders of, as David again articulates, “what life could be like, how I could eat, how I could interact with people, how I could be present. The kind of beauty that could be in the world.”

Like any site of ethnographic work, Kripalu and Esalen do not tell one type of story or one singular truth. The narratives of healing this project explores, and the mechanisms by which community and environment can be structured to engender greater embodiment and health autonomy, emphasize the “multiplicity of meanings” that must be expected and considered as we examine healing forms and practices (Craig 2012, 7). In a larger academic sense, the healing happening within these places of retreat implies how we might transform our understandings of efficacy—and why it is crucial that shifts in “measurement” be made. I am certain that few, if any, of the participants in this project could adequately fit their journeys from dis-ease towards well-being within the measures of a controlled clinical trial. The satisfying mess within which anthropology and ethnography dwell is one suited to study healing as it actually unfolds.

Matters of cultural appropriation, indigeneity, and accessibility to these spaces of retreat thread throughout this project. While I came to this work with my own awareness about these issues and how they problematize the retreat space, instances of cultural appropriation, the homogeneity of the retreat population, and mythmaking regarding the cultural histories of spaces like Kripalu and Esalen both tangibly characterize and limit the healing that can happen within these containers. It is my hope that this project not only sparks further research at the nexus of accessibility/cultural appropriation and the communities that form within alternative healing spaces, but that it also prompts more socially conscious, confrontational, and ultimately productive conversations about these issues at centers like Esalen and Kripalu.

This thesis grew (both in its design and writing) from the seeds planted by my personal story of dis-ease and healing. The subsequent stories told—about chronic illness, grief, human

connection, sacred space, meaning-making, and transformed lived experience at Kripalu and Esalen—give voice, clarity, and affirmation not just to my participants’ journeys towards embodiment and well-being, but also to my own. Often, in academia and biomedical modes of care, we are taught that the missing pieces to our health are exclusively encoded in accepted medical texts and diagnostic procedures, in books and principles and stories already told. I propose a new framework. Deeper truths about not only the process of healing, but also what it means to be well, are revealed through the embodied lens of an interlocutor, through the literal reframing of spaces as holistic containers or healing ecosystems. Nuanced frames that pay mind to these built, felt, and lived spaces enable us to see health and dis-ease as not separate from the land we inhabit or the social norms and communities within which we live and co-create, but rather interconnected in ways we cannot (and should not) ignore.

The Glossary

A Vocabulary of Healing

The following draws on parallel efforts within contemporary anthropology to expand on stories and meaning via the cataloguing form of a glossary. Specifically, I draw on Tuck and Ree's "A Glossary of Haunting" essay within *Handbook of Autoethnography* and Seigworth and Greg's "An Inventory of Shimmers" from *The Affect Theory Reader* (Tuck and Ree 2013, Greg and Seigworth 2010).

hold space, holding space

Related to the idea of a "safe space," the act of "holding space" involves making intentional metaphorical, and sometimes literal, "room" for healing in the context of the retreat environment. Holding space typically happens in a group setting, and includes devoting time, attention, or care to a general group emotion (like grief, frustration, anger), or a person's individual expression of their experience, positionality, or feelings. This phrase possesses a similarity to the idea of "bearing witness." In both, the verbs "bearing" and "holding" point to the weight of this exchange. The space held is often one that receives something at once heavy and intense, delicate or sensitive. Through the act of holding space, a group bears witness, engaging in community healing via vulnerability and connection.

human potential; Human Potential movement

Michael Murphy and Richard Price, Esalen's co-founders, envisioned the Institute to be the epicenter for the study and development of human potential. The human potential movement came to be defined as a psychosocial philosophy influenced by Abraham Maslow's theory of self-actualization and George Leonard's studies about the potential of the human mind. The movement refers to this endeavor to cultivate the untapped potentialities of individual and social well-being and advancement. This idea of the human potential is also referenced at Kripalu, albeit in a more informal sense of reaching one's "full" potential through yoga, mindfulness, and healthy living.

process

Refers to both the act of doing Gestalt psychotherapy — in the form of the Gestalt encounter group or Gestalt-informed dialogue — and the immersive and ongoing nature of this therapeutic approach. Work-scholars and Esalen community members use "process" and "processing" as both a noun and verb, denoting it as an intentional effort (as a noun - "the group process") and a continual unfolding that occurs at Esalen due to the support of the container (as a verb).

safe space

Used by guests and faculty alike to describe the felt sense of trust and safety at Kripalu and Esalen—a sense that is a prerequisite to the vulnerability and healing that happens in these spaces. A "safe space" is often constructed in an official sense by ground rules or expectations set by teachers and program leaders, which include but are not limited to: disclaimers regarding confidentiality, general goals for the program or workshop duration, trigger warnings, complete permission for participants

to leave the room or choose not to share/participate in any given moment, and interpersonal exercises to build trust. At the same time, it is largely created by factors not overtly stated, like assumptions about the “types” of people that participate in the retreat community (see “self-selected”), the healing that has happened throughout the centers’ histories, and elements of mythmaking and storytelling about sacred space.

self-selected

The term or idea used to describe the retreat community: as individuals who tend to be more open-minded to alternative healing modalities and Eastern practices, dedicated to “working on” themselves, and seeking something similar from the retreat experience. This descriptor can function as justification for participants’ willingness to be vulnerable and connect with their fellow participants. As a guest at Kripalu says: “People are totally self-selected, they’re coming to get in touch with themselves...they’re coming to explore the...key part of themselves, which may be hidden.” Self-selection not only engenders vulnerability, but also increases the likelihood of meaningful conversations and connections between guests at the center. This self-selection, although perhaps not intentionally structured or spoken about in relation to the demographic makeup of these spaces, does capture the homogeneity of race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status within the retreat community. The “self-selection” of the retreat population is not entirely positive; it also indicates who is left out of these contained healing places.

“stranger on the bus”

An adage mentioned by a few of my interlocutors, this phrase refers to the social norms that foster deep but ephemeral vulnerability at both Kripalu and Esalen. As one Kripalu guest puts it, “you bare your soul to the stranger on the bus...and then you say goodbye.” There is no expectation of any enduring relationship. Rather, it is the moment of deep vulnerability and connection that matters.

“working on” oneself

Often a qualifier for the “types” of people that attend retreat centers like Kripalu or Esalen (and related to both “self-selected” and the “human potential”), this phrase alludes to the active seeking of self-improvement, introspection, and general betterment of whole-person well-being.

woundology/wound story

These are terms both used exclusively by Barbara, a teacher who has been with Kripalu since the 90s. She explains these terms as being in practice about twenty years ago. Teachers would tell their story of illness (or the initial pain point that brought them to Kripalu) and consequent healing journey. While this term is no longer an official practice at Kripalu (and, to my knowledge, never was at Esalen), this custom—of introducing oneself alongside one’s illness or wellness narrative—is a social norm alive at both places of retreat.

Major Participants

Esalen Institute

Alex: Lives in Boston, visiting Esalen with his partner (both masseuses) for a week-long massage training program.

Angela and Kay: Sisters, visiting Esalen for the first time for a weekend grief workshop.

Annie: Esalen work-scholar from Australia; grapples with questions of accessibility and Esalen's Indigenous history.

David: Has visited Esalen many times over the last year. Credits the Institute as being a major part of his healing journey from burnout, chronic pain, and related states and symptoms of dis-ease.

Frank: Has been to Esalen "50, 60 times." At the time of our interview, had recently made a miraculous recovery from a bad motorcycle accident.

Melissa: First-time seminarian at Esalen. Speaks to problems of accessibility, appropriation, and the "harming potential" from her perspective as a person of color.

Phoebe: First-time seminarian at Esalen, visiting for the Mindful Self-Compassion workshop.

Sophie: First-time seminarian at Esalen; grapples with questions of erasure, appropriation, and Esalen's Indigenous history.

Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health

Barbara: Kripalu Yoga Dance faculty who has been involved with the Center for over twenty years.

Daniel: A "connector" interlocutor. Has visited Kripalu multiple times a year for over five years.

Marco: First-time visitor to Kripalu. Casual yoga practitioner looking to get away from the city.

Sabrina: Has been coming to Kripalu consistently for several years. Credits the Center as being a major part of her healing from chronic Lyme disease.

Sara: Has visited Kripalu a few times; cites her visits as helping her locate meaning and heal chronic pain and stress.

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