
Book Review

Katri Ratia, *Alternative Spirituality, Counterculture, and European Rainbow Gatherings: Pachamama, I'm Coming Home* (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2023), 294pp., £35.09 (ebk), ISBN: 978-1-003-33343-2.

As this book points out, there is a distinct lack of scholarly literature investigating the phenomenon of Rainbow Gatherings and similar alternative communities, in sharp contrast to their wider relevance. The author herself puts it in her description of the book: Rainbow Gatherings 'form radically alternative temporary societies in the peripheries of modern states and manage themselves without centralized power, market economy or institutionalized forms of religion'. In Europe and the US at least, Rainbow Gatherings are a long-standing fixture within a varied tradition of countercultural events, and as such have an outsized influence not just on other such gatherings, but festival culture, nature-based spiritual movements, and everything connected to them. In my own experience, with my own research into similar-yet-different countercultural events, academic colleagues often misunderstand quite how radically different such events can be, when compared to more familiar cultural phenomena. As a result, I applaud the scope of this monograph, and am familiar with the struggle to deliver a full and authentic historiography and ethnography of a phenomenon, yet also present a critical analysis that fully engages with the wider scholarly field. This text does it extremely well.

Chapters Two and Three give a thorough account of the history of Rainbow Gatherings, first in the US and then within the European setting. We are given a clear picture of the founders' hope of birthing a revolutionary utopia and treated to a detailed description of how 'the total number of Rainbow-related events on the planet, from small get-togethers to big mass events rises to hundreds annually' (p. 42). Nonetheless, the cultural context that provided a fertile soil for Rainbow's spread in Europe would benefit from more critical examination. The author does not discuss in much depth important themes such as conflicts with authorities, or the influence of military veterans on camp culture. Elsewhere, there are distinct hints of ethnonationalist ideologies at play. The author describes in some detail the ways in which Rainbow's foundational ideology is expressed through its protocols and processes, but often steps back from the wider implications of how that ideology meets the wider world. If another world is possible, how much are the people of Rainbow prepared to sacrifice of this one to build it?

Chapters Four and Five, similarly, provide a wealth of ethnographic data about the culture of the gatherings, from the Magic Hat to Talking Circles. Intersectional

politics, flows of authority and mechanisms of accountability are delineated here in their ideal forms, and even their pragmatic realities, but less often critically analysed. The fact that Rainbow participants sometimes refer to their legal or given names as 'slave names' (p. 142) for example, deserves more than a passing mention. I am also of the opinion that no sentence in an in-depth ethnography should begin with 'I assume that...' (p. 93). These are, as already stated, understudied phenomena. Nonetheless, I would have preferred more connections made to the wider counterculture. Some of what the author presents as 'minor controversies' within Rainbow have led to significant breakaway factions spawning entire ecosystems of new events. On the other hand, a lot of the cultural conventions here presented as specific to Rainbow are in fact common to many other similar events, including the 'Rainbow songs' (p. 152) that are part of the established repertoire at a variety of countercultural events.

Nonetheless, the latter sections of this monograph include insightful attempts to theorize from the data. These include the idea of the circle as a memetic form central to both the practicalities and the theologies of these events, how space is deliberately reconstructed into place, and how ritual is used to support pragmatic as well as religious aims. Chapter Seven begins with a strong summary of the literature on the counterculture and gift economies, and applies both to Rainbow as a useful case study. The reader is left with a clear understanding of an idealised microeconomic and countercultural system in delicate and evolving equilibrium, although I was less convinced than the author about how well this works in practice. In my experience, 'the impacts of sociability and charisma' (p. 175) are not as easily bracketed out of the data as they are here, and just because there are few known serious crimes, this not always reflective of rates of interpersonal abuse or violence. This is important for more than reasons of accuracy: if the point of Rainbow Gatherings is to build a better world, then how effective it does so—even in microcosm—is important, especially now that the movement is 50 years old.

Theoretically speaking, there are a few other significant omissions or missteps. Many of the chapters in *Ways of Walking* (Ingold and Vergunst 2008) would further contextualise Rainbow's spatial processes. Matthew Wood's (2007) work on the New Age would usefully connect the non-formative authority structures here with participants' economical marginalisation. There is scant literature at present on contemporary forms of self-hagiography, but nonetheless, the concept at least would be a useful one to apply to Rainbow 'hipstories' (Kripal 2001). And despite an entire chapter on vernacular tradition and folklore, the author makes a common misstep in applying Primiano's work (1995) only to non-institutionalised forms of religion, when the whole point of his argument is that all religion is vernacular (p. 211).

The monograph's best theoretical accomplishment is in applying Mauss, Tarot and the triaxial model of religiosity to Rainbow as case study. Chapter Nine contains a coherent analysis of Rainbow theology, and its emic conceptions of Nature, the self, interconnectedness, playfulness, and gifting. Chapter Ten ends with some interesting speculations. It references the work of Jordan E. Miller in proposing radical democratic action as *a priori* religious practice and discusses the idea of gatherings as temporary cities. Overall, this is a solid addition to the field,

with moments of real insight, and obvious omissions that future research will hopefully address. As with most doctoral monographs, however, its true value lies in its meticulously curated data rather than its slightly weaker analysis.

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References

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