

“THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL IS
SPIRITUAL”: FEMINISM AND RELIGION
IN MODERN BRITAIN

By

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A thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham for the degree of DOCTOR OF
PHILOSOPHY

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September 2019

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ABSTRACT

This thesis shows how spirituality was a key component of feminist political cultures in Britain from the 1970s, taking an active role in the Women's Liberation movement, at Greenham Common and beyond. However, taken for granted assumptions about the secularism of modern feminist politics, which intersect with broader narratives of inevitable religious decline, have relegated spiritual politics to the sidelines of feminist history, making them invisible when they were, in fact, present and central.

This thesis has a dual purpose. First, as a social historical recovery of the Goddess movement – an attempt by feminists to stake a claim to images of the divine – which determined the shape and form of radical feminist spirituality in Britain for over forty years, but remains misunderstood or ignored in histories of feminism and religious change. Second, to insist upon the decentralising position of spirituality in our histories of modern and contemporary Britain. Paying attention to belief as a major site of historical analysis forces us to recognise and revise the assumptions that underpin the ways we understand our recent past, highlighting the limits of possibility within the secular narratives of conventional academic history and making us rethink our foundational concepts, assumptions and methods. Because the Goddess movement confounds the disciplinary conventions of traditional history writing, this thesis also experiments with new narrative forms that seek to reflect, rather than deny, the metaphysical experiences of Goddess feminists.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was made possible by the Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded Midlands3Cities Doctoral Training Partnership that supported me financially for three years.

Thank you for the opportunity.

Thank you also to my supervisors Matt Houlbrook and David Gange for their creative, challenging and patient engagement with my work. David supervised the Masters dissertation from which this thesis grew, and pushed me into dense conceptual terrain that made history feel exciting. Matt brought politicised history-writing, an infectious passion for storytelling and generous support during difficult stages of writing. Both Matt and David were incredibly relaxed about my failure to 'internalise' deadlines, and for that, I am especially grateful.

The women I interviewed and corresponded with over the course of this thesis helped me see things I would not have done otherwise. They include the eleven women who entrusted me with their life stories, also Jayne Burton, Pat Morley, Sue Yeng and Kath Yi from the Redditch Women for Peace group. Thank you to Denise Arnold, Janet Payne and Marianne for talking to me about the Matriarchy Study Group even though it was only a small, and relatively distant, part of your rich and textured feminist lives.

Truly, the friendships I made over the course of writing this thesis made the process feel all the more meaningful. Special thanks to my uniquely supportive pals Lizzie Cook, Katie Jones and Laura Sefton. Thank you also to Adam Tyers; you are the love of my life and my best friend.

Finally, to my little family: mum Jayne, dad Mark and brother Ed who have never demanded anything from me, pushed me in any direction, or been disappointed when things have gone differently. This thesis is for you.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AA	Architectural Association School of Architecture
CND	Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament
FA	Feminist Archive
FAN	Feminist Archive North
FAS	Feminist Archive South
LSN	London School of Nonviolence
LWLW	London Women's Liberation Workshop
MRRN	Matriarchy Research and Reclaim Network
MSG	Matriarchy Study Group
MSP	Monica Sjö Papers
PAN	Pagans Against Nukes
SCM	Student Christian Movement
WINS	Women's Information and Newsletter Service
WLM	Women's Liberation Movement
WRRC	Women's Research and Resources Centre

INTRODUCTION

BREAKING THE BINARIES

On the morning of Sunday 9 May 1993, a small group of women were holding hands in a circle on a little pocket of grass between the Bristol Council Offices, the Swallow Hotel and Bristol Cathedral. They were stood in reflective silence, centring themselves and asking for protection for what they were about to do. This moment had been four months in the making although some of the older women had been thinking about it for decades, plotting, conspiring, whispering and waiting until the moment was right.¹ Like most “wild magic”, the women’s plans had sparked out of feelings of hopelessness, pain and fear, just as they had over a decade ago when thousands of women travelled to RAF Greenham Common to sing and chant down the murderous energies of nuclear power.² At the beginning of 1993, the women had once again felt that action should be taken. But what to do? “We must end patriarchy” Rachel said, “in cathedrals” said another, “unfrock bishops”, “outfrock bishops”, “visible collective action”, “sabotage ceremonies”, “mass ritual in celebration of women’s spirituality”.³ Four months later, the Cathedral bells were chiming in College Green in Bristol and the women knew that morning service was about to begin. Despite their nerves, twelve of the bravest set off towards the Cathedral. They were going to confront the Bishop and make him apologise publicly for

¹ M. Sjöö, ‘Breaking the Tabu – doing the unthinkable’, *From the Flames*, 10 (Summer, 1993), Pamphlet Collection, The Feminist Library (henceforth FL).

² Vron, *From the Flames*, 9 (Spring, 1993), FL; A. Cook and G. Kirk, *Greenham Women Everywhere: Dreams, Ideas and Actions from the Women’s Peace Movement* (London, 1983).

³ Maggie, ‘The End of Patriarchy...’, *From the Flames*, 9 (Spring, 1993), FL.

*thousands of years of violence towards women. They were going to put a stop to the service and declare the end of God the Father's rule. They were going to reclaim the sacred space for the Mother.*⁴

*No one noticed the women until they were stood in front of the altar. Dazzled by the light coming in through the stained-glass windows and the candles that illuminated the startled faces of the Bishop and the Deacons, it took them a few moments to find their voices. Monica Sjöö, one of the women who had been dreaming about this moment for many years, boldly stepped out in front of the group and unfurled a print of her own painting entitled *God Giving Birth*, which had been labelled obscene and blasphemous by the church since it was first exhibited in 1968.⁵ The Bishop tried to take the print, saying that he was holding the service and the Cathedral was his. Sjöö replied that "the cathedrals are built on ancient sacred sites of the Goddess" and that they were holding their own service.⁶ As she spoke, the other women started singing and drumming to a popular folk song called 'Burning Times' about the persecution of witches by Christians:*

There were those who came to power, through domination

And they were bonded in their worship of a dead man on a cross

They sought control of the common people

By demanding allegiance to the Church of Rome

And the Pope declared an inquisition

It was a war against the women, whose power they feared

In the holocaust against the nature people

⁴ Sjöö, 'Breaking the Tabu', FL.

⁵ R. Parker and G. Pollock (eds.), *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970-85* (London, 1987).

⁶ Sjöö, 'Breaking the Tabu', FL.

Nine million European women died

And the tale is told of those, who by the hundreds

Holding together chose their death in the sea

While chanting the praises of the Mother Goddess

A refusal of betrayal, women were dying to be free.⁷

The Bishop stood still and central, facing the women rather than the congregation. For a few painful moments, the women's voices faltered under his gaze, but regained strength as they made their way through all the verses of the song. When they were done, Rachel, who was leaning against the pulpit, joyfully declared the glad tidings of the "End of Patriarchy" to the congregation.⁸ Outside, back on the grass, the women whooped and cheered at their success, the energy up and alive. "We had reclaimed a sacred space" said Janet, "we had dared to raise our voices in that patriarchal edifice of money and power; transcending our fears, indoctrination, intimidation".⁹ Some of the group said they had not been involved in anything quite so empowering with other women since taking part in direct action at Greenham Common.¹⁰ Reflecting on the events a month later, Sjöö wrote, "It was incredibly powerful & magical & felt somehow significant & magnificent... as if we have opened a chink in the ether, allowed some freedom and power for all women to seep through from some other realm... we had broken some shackles in our own minds."¹¹

My account of the Bristol Cathedral story above contains both familiar and defamiliarising elements. The women's challenge to a patriarchal institution aligns with popular

⁷ 'Burning Times' was a popular song of the British and American post-war folk revival. It was first recorded by American Charlie Murphy in 1981, then again by Irish folk singer Christy Moore in 2005.

⁸ Sjöö, 'Breaking the Tabu', FL.

⁹ Janet Sheerer, "Going to Church.....", *From the Flames*, 10 (Summer, 1993), FL.

¹⁰ Sjöö, 'Breaking the Tabu', FL.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

understandings of contemporary feminist objectives and modes of activism. Drawing on the final decades of twentieth-century feminist discourse, their creative and playful protest highlighted the ways in which institutional religion had violently oppressed women in the past and present. What is shocking, however, is the way in which Monica Sjöö, Rachel, Janet and their friends interwove a vision of politics as magical and magnificent into their demonstration. At every point in their protest, the women broke down the boundaries between the rational and spiritual realms, interpreting the end of patriarchy as a battle fought, not only in the physical infrastructures of male power, but also through cosmic manipulation (“we have opened a chink in the ether”).¹² Importantly, these women did not use spirituality as merely a language through which to discuss political (‘real’) issues, but as the starting point of their radical feminist critique. Challenging the “patriarchal edifice of money and power”, for Janet, arose naturally from reclaiming the Cathedral as a sacred space for women.¹³ Sjöö’s appeal to cosmic energies allowed each of the women to experience a new slice of “freedom and power”.¹⁴

The dominant historical narratives available to us for making sense of this moment do not account for what went on in Bristol Cathedral in 1993. The cornerstone of both histories of modern feminist politics and religious change is women’s absence from the institutions of religious faith after the 1960s. This point of narrative convergence has obscured women’s complicated relationship with the forms and modes of their faith in the second half of the twentieth century. The history of feminism assumes the secularism of feminist politics, especially in relation to the second wave in which the anti-religious and secular emphasis of prolific socialist feminists like Sheila Rowbotham has been made to stand in for the truth of the women’s movement.¹⁵ Histories of religious change in modern Britain are committed to a

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Sheerer, ‘Going to Church’, FL.

¹⁴ Sjöö, ‘Breaking the Tabu’, FL.

¹⁵ S. Rowbotham, *Hidden from History: 300 Years of Women’s Oppression and the Fight against It* (London, 1973); S. Rowbotham, *Dreams and Dilemmas: Collected Writings* (London, 1983).

linear trajectory, depicting religious commitments in terms of loss and decline, part of the inevitable march of modernisation.¹⁶ These two narratives conjoin in gendered accounts of religious change, which argue that the Women's Liberation movement (WLM), and loosening sexual mores, drove down institutional religious adherence from the 1960s.¹⁷ The most vocal proponent of this idea, Callum Brown, appeals to our common sense on this point, "It is difficult to imagine modern feminism without atheism, or atheism without feminism".¹⁸

The common-sense gloss that underpins Brown's gendered account of religious change is precisely what I seek to challenge. Taking my cue from women like Sjöo, Rachel and Janet, in this thesis, I imagine what it meant to attest to a strong feminist faith in contemporary Britain. In doing so, I draw attention to the sticking points in our favoured historical explanations, highlighting the defective equipment we have for understanding the complex, vibrant and sustaining relationship between religious beliefs and feminist politics.

More than an empirical intervention, I also open up the worldviews of spiritual feminists to create a space within which to rethink the very categories of thought that give structure to modern and contemporary historiographies. Following the bracing intervention of feminist theorists like Joan Scott, attending to the life stories of these women implies a powerful role for storytelling.¹⁹ Taking seriously the interests, intentions, attachments and motivations of spiritual feminists opens up narrative problems that are often obscured by purely empirical interventions. The problem of interpretation posed by 'making sense' of the supernatural

¹⁶ S. C. Williams, *Religious Belief and Popular Culture in Southwark, c.1880-1939* (Oxford, 1999); S. J. D. Green, *The Passing of Protestant England: Secularisation and Social Change, c.1920-1960* (Cambridge, 2011); J. Morris, 'Secularization and Religious Experience: Arguments in the Historiography on Modern British Religion', *The Historical Journal*, 55 (2012).

¹⁷ C. Redfern and K. Aune, *Reclaiming the F Word: The New Feminist Movement* (London, 2010); C. G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000* (London, 2001); C. G. Brown, 'Sex, Religion, and the Single Woman c.1950-75: The Importance of a "Short" Sexual Revolution to the English Religious Crisis of the Sixties', *Twentieth Century British History*, 22 (2011); C. G. Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution: Women and Secularisation in Canada, Ireland, UK and USA since the 1960s* (Woodbridge, 2012).

¹⁸ C. G. Brown, *Becoming Atheist: Humanism and the Secular West* (London, 2017), p. 104.

¹⁹ J. W. Scott, 'Storytelling', *History and Theory*, 50 (2011).

phenomena invoked by the Bristol Cathedral protesters, for example, which brings to the fore the ontological place of the spiritual in modern and contemporary historiographies, the troubled and troubling position of feminist ways of knowing in the academy, or the contested nature of historical evidence.

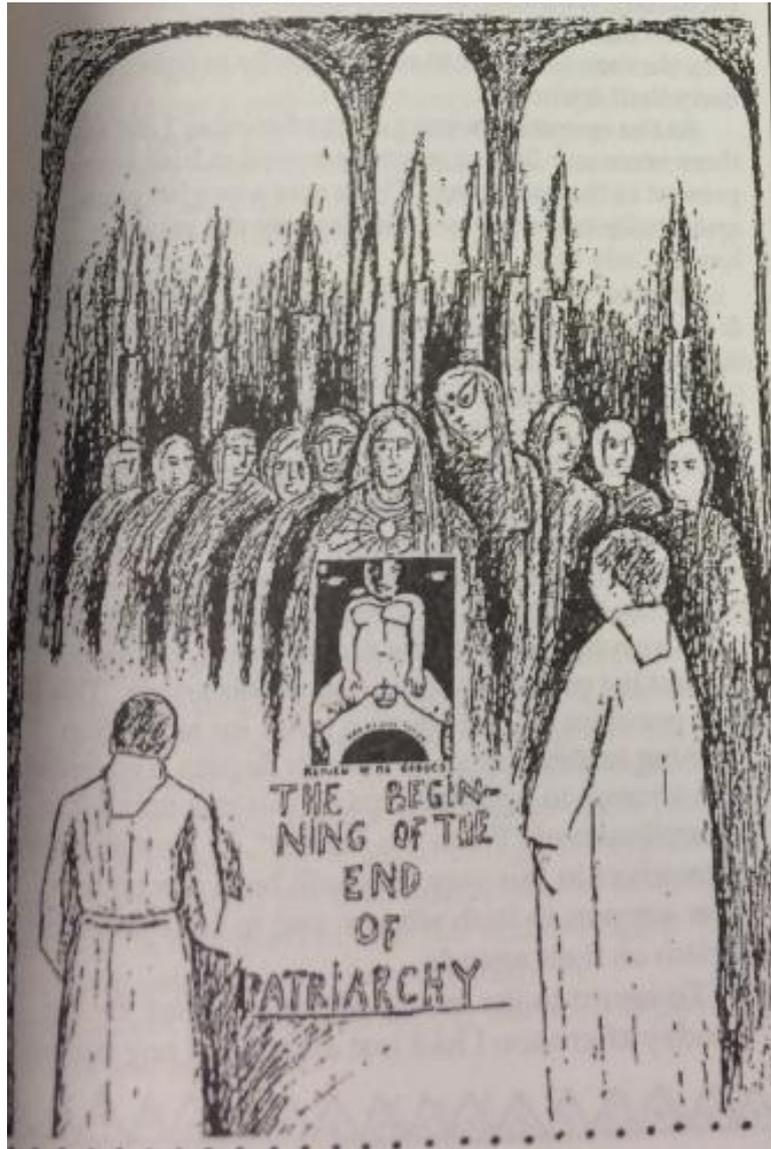


Figure 1. Monica Sjöö, illustration of the Bristol Cathedral action, *From the Flames*, Summer, 1993. Feminist Library, London.

The disruption of Sunday mass by Sjöo and her friends in 1993 was one episode in a long and textured history of radical spiritual protest by feminists. Produced out of the same contexts and networks as the WLM, spiritual feminism emerged at the nexus of several strands of 1970s feminist theory and activism including the critique of institutional religions, a radical rereading of the male academic canon, consciousness-raising and ecological criticism. The first feminist spirituality group was founded in 1975 by a small network of women active in the London women's movement who called themselves the Matriarchy Study Group (MSG), which would later include Monica Sjöo and Jewish feminist theologian Asphodel Long. Group members, most of whom did not adhere to any institutional faith, wanted to address what they perceived as a blind spot in the dominant socialist feminist analysis of women's oppression by asking questions about the psychological impacts of androcentric religious conditioning.²⁰ In line with the avid creativity and invention of the transatlantic second wave, the women undertook a radical rereading of Victorian theories about matriarchy and women's religious primacy in ancient societies, seeking to make a serious contribution to women's religious history as well as intervening in debates around gender equality in the process.²¹

This early feminist exploration of matriarchy outlasted the formal institutions of the women's movement in Britain. Into the 1980s and 1990s, spiritual feminism intersected with several key moments in recent feminist history, drawing upon, shaping and responding to women's peace activism at Greenham Common, the discourse of feminist psychology and the threat of post-feminism in the 1990s. From 1980, the spirituality of the movement increasingly reflected burgeoning interest in the Celtic revival, which had given rise to political groups such as Pagans

²⁰ *Goddess Shrew* (Spring, 1977), DM2123/5/6, Periodical Category 1a, The Feminist Archive South (henceforth FAS).

²¹ 'Asphodel Long', *Goddessing Regenerated*, 4 (Autumn/Winter, 1995/1996), Asphodel Long Papers, DM2767, 5.1, FAS.

Against Nukes (PAN) and the magazine *Wood and Water*.²² Although adherents would emphasise the amorphous nature of their movement, like their sisters in the broader women's movement, spiritual feminists mobilised around local group activity, loose national networks and channels of communication including newsletters, journals and pamphlets as well as conferences and events.²³ In the 1980s, the network had spread country-wide, overseen by the Matriarchy Research and Reclaim Network (MRRN) in which Asphodel Long became a key figure, as well as establishing meaningful links with American feminists in the Woman Spirit movement.²⁴ During the early 1990s, when the Women's Peace Camp at Greenham Common was fading, but the threat of war remained, a renewed grassroots feminist spirituality movement emerged that centred on the East Midlands-based zine *From the Flames*, which produced many of the Bristol Cathedral protesters.²⁵ Since the mid-1990s, the most visible manifestation of Goddess spirituality takes place every year in Glastonbury, where hundreds of women and men come together in August for the annual Goddess conference.²⁶

In their quest to devise a universal Goddess tradition, Goddess feminists deployed myths and symbols from a range of cultures, geographical locations and historical time periods, often with no reference to their specific socio-geographic contexts. The cultural appropriation of Native American, indigenous Australian, ancient and modern Egyptian, and 'African' spiritual practices was particularly rife in Goddess activism at Greenham Common, and continued throughout the movement's history. Equally problematic was the way in which the majority English, metropolitan Goddess feminists of London society persisted in their claims to Celtic

²² S. Feraro, 'Playing the Pipes of Pan: Pagans against Nukes and the Linking of Wiccan-Derived Paganism with Ecofeminism in Britain, 1980–1990', in S. Feraro and E. Doyle White (eds.), *Magic and Witchery in the Modern West: Celebrating the Twentieth Anniversary of 'the Triumph of the Moon'* (Cham, 2019); R. Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford, 1999).

²³ E. Setch, 'The Face of Metropolitan Feminism: The London Women's Liberation Workshop, 1969–79', *Twentieth Century British History*, 13 (2002), p. 177.

²⁴ *Matriarchy Research and Reclaim Network newsletter*, 1 (November, 1981), FL.

²⁵ *From the Flames*, 1 (Spring, 1990), FL.

²⁶ *The Goddess Conference*, accessed 11 September 2019, <https://goddessconference.com/>.

symbolism, motivated by their desire to reclaim a pre-Judaeo-Christian tradition. As Janice Helland argues, metropolitan appropriation and ‘othering’ of Irish and Welsh symbolism has a long history that stretches back to women’s suffrage.²⁷

Goddess feminism was, and still is, a majority white women’s movement.²⁸ In Britain, women of colour did not become active participants in the Goddess movement until the early-1990s, well beyond the period in which Black feminist activists had brought anti-imperial and anti-racist critiques to the broader women’s movement.²⁹ Although there is evidence that the white women of the Goddess movement began acknowledging and incorporating anti-imperialist critique from the mid-1980s, the issue of cultural appropriation was not given a platform until the more ethnically diverse Bristol-based feminist spirituality group Ama Mawu, of which Monica Sjöo was a member, organised a women’s gathering to address racism in the Goddess movement and the New Age in 1993.³⁰ Nevertheless, despite such brief explorations of race and ethnicity in the 1990s, scholar of religion Kavita Maya argues that it remains the case today that the Goddess movement is “entangled with a western postcolonial horizon which universalizes which feminist perspectives”.³¹

What I am broadly calling the Goddess movement, then, includes the activities of spiritual and politically engaged women from 1975 to (roughly) 2005. This forms the case study for my thesis. While I have been working to demonstrate the breadth and complexity of this network, I want to be clear that I view questions of scale as, largely, unproductive. Enquiries into how

²⁷ J. Helland, *British and Irish Home Arts and Industries 1880-1914: Marketing Craft, Making Fashion* (Dublin, 2007), p. 3.

²⁸ K. Maya, ‘Arachne’s Voice: Race, Gender and the Goddess’, *Feminist Theology*, 28 (2019); M. Raphael, *Introducing Theology: Discourse on the Goddess* (Sheffield, 1999), pp. 25-26.

²⁹ Blanche, Caroline, Jo, Martha, Mary, Nozama, Sunflower, Val, Wendy, ‘Goddesses of the British Museum: A Short Illustrated Tour’, c. 1984; Samaia, ‘The White Goddess? Matriarchal Ethnocentrism in Focus’, *Arachne*, 8 (1988), p. 5; N. Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women’s Movement in England, 1968-1993* (Basingstoke, 2016), p. 161.

³⁰ Breaking the Silence: Women’s Gathering Programme, c. 1993, Monica Sjöo Papers, DM2123/1/82, 15, FAS; R. Beauhill, ‘Why Anti-Racism is a Priority’, c. 1993, DM2123/1/82, 15, FAS.

³¹ Maya, ‘Arachne’s Voice’, p. 53.

many Goddess women there were or to what extent the women's movement could be read as spiritual implies that there is a point at which spiritual feminism becomes important enough to warrant serious consideration and a point at which it should be bracketed as marginal. It is worth reminding ourselves here of the ways in which loaded terms like 'marginal', 'idiosyncratic' and 'anachronistic' have historically been used to reject and silence feminist subjects and arguments. Indeed, questions about which individuals or groups have the power to impact our historical narratives, and who is relegated to the invisible fringe, is a historical (and political) question, and one which animates my analysis.

Because I am concerned with uncovering the affective attachments, unconscious motivations and common-sense assumptions that underpin scholarship on feminism's recent past, it is important that I address my own political engagement and affinities with Goddess feminism at this stage.³² Like the women in the Goddess movement, I see myself as a feminist whose desires and hopes for the future are bound up with the political project of gender equality. While I do not attest to faith, I also do not believe there is such a thing as a uniformly secular state of mind, or an entirely secular society. As a feminist open to the workings of the non-rational on political thought, I came to be sympathetic to the Goddess movement, and religious expressions of feminist politics more broadly, although I am not always convinced by their methods and approaches. To some extent, then, this thesis is shot through with my own desire to see religion and spirituality become part of feminist intersectional critique; however, my intentions are less to do with intervening in feminist theory than using the Goddess movement to disrupt the intellectual, political and ontological certainties that underpin histories of modern and contemporary Britain.

³² Historical endeavour as intersubjective, involving fantasy and desire, is a feature of much feminist, queer and postcolonial scholarship. See Clare Hemmings who works through these issues in relation to her subject Emma Goldman in C. Hemmings, 'Considering Emma', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 20 (2013); C. Hemmings, *Considering Emma Goldman: Feminist Political Ambivalence and the Imaginative Archive* (Durham NC, 2017).

Although the links between politics, feminism and spirituality were foundational to the British Goddess movement, and repeatedly reinstated by its adherents, my own preconceptions of the movement were severely limited when I began this project. While I had observed the ways in which well-known American writers like Starhawk or Carol Christ used the Goddess to make feminist arguments, I had seen no evidence to suggest that British Goddess women shared these views.³³ It was my belief that women who used the Goddess as a tool for feminist analysis were a small minority in a larger apolitical movement, or even that their feminism was somehow problematic, or less sophisticated, compared to secular feminists. My intellectual assumptions were shaped by the small amount of historical and sociological literature on the Goddess movement, which reflects many of the theoretical problems underpinning the study of belief in contemporary Britain. The most obvious of these is the conceptual distance between feminist politics and spirituality that is maintained through the treatment of these categories in separate literatures. This is most visible in scholarly work on Monica Sjöö, who appears in the history of art as an important figure in the women's art movement of the early 1970s, but whose feminist spirituality goes unaddressed despite the religious content of her paintings.³⁴ Rather, Sjöö's spirituality is dealt with, almost entirely, by historians and sociologists of the New Age and contemporary Paganism, who read Sjöö's feminism in disappointingly shallow ways, preferring to emphasise her role in foregrounding the Earth Mother in neo-Pagan theology.³⁵

A related problem is the reluctance of historians working on the grassroots British second wave to acknowledge the existence of spiritual feminism. Despite the extent to which the Goddess movement fed into, and was galvanised by, the women's movement, there have been no

³³ Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (London, 1979); C. P. Christ, 'Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological, and Political Reflections', in C. P. Christ and J. Plaskow (eds.), *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (New York, 1979).

³⁴ Parker and Pollock (eds.), *Framing Feminism*; H. Robinson (ed.), *Visibly Female: Feminism and Art Today, an Anthology* (London, 1987); F. Lloyd, 'Painting', in F. Carson and C. Pajaczkowska (eds.), *Feminist Visual Culture* (Edinburgh, 2000); R. Betterton, 'Prima Gravida: Reconfiguring the Maternal Body in Visual Representation', *Feminist Theory*, 3 (2002).

³⁵ M. York, *The Emerging Network: A Sociology of the New Age and Neo-Pagan Movements* (London, 1995).

detailed historical studies of its grassroots activities or organisation to date. Admittedly, as Natalie Thomlinson has argued, scholarship on the women's movement is in early development, "no full-length archivally based history of this 'second wave' women's movement has yet been written".³⁶ However, Thomlinson is part of a generation of feminist historians including Eve Setch, Jeska Rees, Sarah Browne and Sarah Crook who have sought to interrogate the women's movement using intersectional analysis, challenging mainstream accounts through the lenses of race, geographical alternatives and mental health.³⁷ Spirituality and religion, however, have yet to be included in this project. As I show in Chapter 2, this reveals more about feminist historians' attachments and visions for the feminist future than it does the nature of the movement they claim to describe.³⁸

Because of the lack of historical context on the Goddess and the British women's movement, most existing scholarship draws its understanding of the Goddess movement from the American context. This literature foregrounds key texts published by American women at the end of the 1970s, such as Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance* (1979), Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* (1978) and Carol Christ's paper 'Why Women Need the Goddess' (1978). Because of this, scholars wrongly conclude that the international Goddess movement was an American invention that was exported to other parts of the West. Sociologist of religion Giselle Vincett, for example, locates the origins of contemporary Goddess feminism in Britain solely to the work of Starhawk and Christ, entirely overlooking the matriarchy network that facilitated their reception.³⁹ The wholesale application of American frameworks has marginalised the independent foundations of the British matriarchal network and obscured many of its key

³⁶ Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement*.

³⁷ Browne, *Women's Movement in Scotland*; Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement*; S. Crook, 'The Women's Liberation Movement, Activism and Therapy at the Grassroots, 1968–1985', *Women's History Review*, 27 (2018); J. Rees, 'A Look Back at Anger: The Women's Liberation Movement in 1978', *Women's History Review*, 19 (2010); Setch, 'The Face of Metropolitan Feminism'.

³⁸ Hemmings, *Considering Emma Goldman*.

³⁹ G. Vincett, 'Feminism and Religion: A Study of Christian Feminists and Goddess Feminists in the UK' (PhD Thesis, Lancaster University, 2007).

theorists. Historian Ann Marie Gallagher writes “Although the British scene produced Monica Sjöö and others writing about Goddess spirituality, it remains the case that there are no popular *specifically feminist* writers of the influence and magnitude of, for example, Starhawk”.⁴⁰ This over-generalisation ignores the many and varied publications of the matriarchy network, in which contributors theorised all manner of feminist cultural concerns with the Goddess. Gallagher’s statement also writes out notable individual women like Asphodel Long whose scholarship on the Hebrew Goddess and anti-Semitism in traditional theology continues to influence the field today.⁴¹

These same issues impact the detailed work done by feminist theologians on the philosophical contours of the Goddess movement. While Melissa Raphael, for example, situates Goddess feminism within the British women’s movement, her depiction is more homogenous than my research reveals. Raphael incorporates arguments and ideas into her vision of Goddess spirituality that were more common among American Goddess women, foregrounding the work of Mary Daly, for example, when in fact Daly’s work had only a small impact on the matriarchy network. Raphael’s Goddess feminism, therefore, does not always match up with the way British women understood their own movement, a disjuncture that manifested in Goddess feminist reviews of Raphael’s books.⁴² In her review, Asphodel Long worried that academics were attempting to make “comprehensive doctrinal statements” about Goddess feminism without consulting the key individuals or grassroots texts of the movement itself, “I am sorry that [Raphael’s] work on menstruation was not able to carry a reference to *Menstrual*

⁴⁰ A. M. Gallagher, ‘Woven Apart and Weaving Together: Conflict and Mutuality in Feminist and Pagan Communities in Britain’, in W. Griffin (ed.), *Daughters of the Goddess: Studies of Healing, Identity, and Empowerment* (Walnut Creek CA, 2000).

⁴¹ See *Feminist Theology* 11 (2002) dedicated to the life and work of Asphodel Long on occasion of her 80th birthday; A. Long, *In a Chariot Drawn by Lions: The Search for the Female in Deity* (London, 1992).

⁴² Vron review of Melissa Raphael, ‘Theology and Embodiment’, *From the Flames*, 18 (Autumn-Winter, 1996), FL; Asphodel review of Melissa Raphael, ‘Theology and Embodiment’, *Wood and Water*, 55 (Summer Solstice, 1996).

Taboos (Matriarchy Study Group, 1978) which put forward many similar ideas but in a more political setting”.⁴³

Because Goddess feminism came to intersect with some aspects of contemporary Paganism during the 1980s (sharing spiritual source material and religious practices), some scholars of new religious movements have included the Goddess in their analysis. However, these accounts are at best disappointingly superficial, or at worst openly disapproving. Ronald Hutton, one of the most influential scholars of the contemporary Pagan movement, acknowledges the influence of American Goddess feminists, but brackets them as the ‘other’ against which his ‘objective’ assessment of the mainstream movement is pitched; a mainstream that takes male perspectives and androcentric formations for granted.⁴⁴ This is despite the fact that Goddess feminists had an involved, although often painful and frustrating, relationship with the key institutions and individuals of the contemporary Pagan revival in Britain. As I show in Chapter 3, Hutton, along with Paul Heelas, Joanne Pearson, Michael York, Graham Harvey and many others actually had relationships with important spiritual feminists like Monica Sjöö, but were still uncomfortable discussing Goddess feminism in their work. At worst, scholars like Marion Bowman write entirely apolitical accounts of Goddess spirituality that fail to acknowledge its roots in 1970s feminism.⁴⁵

Historian of new religious movements Shai Feraro is the exception here. Through an extensive archival research project, Feraro has uncovered details about the British Goddess movement that are lacking in most other studies. He is one of the few scholars to conclusively bridge the gap between feminism and occultism, tracing their interrelationship from the turn of the century to the 1970s women’s movement. However, the interpretive potential of Feraro’s close research

⁴³ Asphodel review of Melissa Raphael.

⁴⁴ Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*.

⁴⁵ M. Bowman, ‘Ancient Avalon, New Jerusalem, Heart Chakra of Planet Earth: The Local and the Global in Glastonbury’, in D. Kemp and J. R. Lewis (eds.), *Handbook of New Age* (Boston MA, 2007).

is limited by his descriptive rather than analytical assessment, which fails to intervene in broader histories of feminism, religion or contemporary Paganism in Britain.⁴⁶ Feraro emphasises his indebtedness to Ronald Hutton's work even though his own research reveals the deeply problematic exclusions maintained by Hutton's narrative.⁴⁷ This shows just how tenacious androcentric academic formations can be, and points to the ways they are maintained through disciplinary norms and gatekeepers.⁴⁸

The bracketing of feminist spirituality in Feraro and Hutton's work is symptomatic of broader problems in histories of religious change. Underpinning the status of faith in modern and contemporary Britain are historiographical and conceptual presumptions relating to the interpretative dominance of secularisation theory, which broadly holds that institutional religion inevitably declines in modernity. Classic secularisation theory derives from the work of sociologists like David Martin, Bryan Wilson and E. R. Wickham, all of whom were either convinced of the truth of Christian doctrine or sympathetic to its positive impact on British culture.⁴⁹ They were writing during the early 1960s when, Sam Brewitt-Taylor observes, the British national press were stoking overblown anxieties about the declining influence of religion.⁵⁰ Although the simple narrative of religious decline has undergone multiple and varied revision by historians like Sarah Williams, Hugh McLeod, Simon Green and Callum Brown, these only nominally question secularisation's theoretical framework and never in ways that succeed in totally dismantling them.⁵¹ What remains, woven into multiple subfields of modern

⁴⁶ S. Feraro, 'The Priestess, the Witch, and the Women's Movement: Women and Gender in British Magical and Pagan Groups, c.1888 – c.1988' (PhD Thesis, University of Tel-Aviv, 2016).

⁴⁷ Feraro, 'Playing the Pipes of Pan'; Feraro, 'The Priestess, the Witch, and the Women's Movement'.

⁴⁸ E. Kleinberg, J. W. Scott and G. Wilder, 'Theses on Theory and History', May 2018.

⁴⁹ D. Martin, *A Sociology of English Religion* (London, 1967); B. R. Wilson, *Religion in the Secular Society: A Sociological Comment* (London, 1966); E. R. Wickham, *Church and People in an Industrial City* (London, 1957).

⁵⁰ S. Brewitt-Taylor, 'The Invention of a "Secular Society"? Christianity and the Sudden Appearance of Secularization Discourses in the British National Media, 1961–4', *Twentieth Century British History*, 24 (2013).

⁵¹ Williams, *Religious Belief*; H. McLeod, 'New Perspectives on Victorian Class Religion: The Oral Evidence', *Oral History*, 14 (1986); Green, *Protestant England*; Brown, *Christian Britain*; J. Morris, 'The Strange Death of Christian Britain: Another Look at the Secularization Debate', *The Historical Journal*, 46 (2003); Morris, 'Secularization and Religious Experience'.

British history, are unstated assumptions about the incompatibility between modernity and belief, as well as assumptions about what signifies valid forms of religiosity.

The discursive consolidation of secularisation has done much to shape our engagement with both institutional and non-institutional forms of faith. This comes to the fore in historical and sociological work on what are variously called alternative spiritualities, new religious movements or the New Age that scholars argue underwent a surge in the late twentieth century.⁵² Rather than unseating the secularisation paradigm by pointing to the growing popularity of new forms of belief, scholars such as Steve Bruce, Bryan Wilson, Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead solidify disciplinary assumptions about the content of religion, reading spirituality as inherently ‘other’, or indeed even symptomatic of secularisation.⁵³ As Giselle Vincett observes, “spiritualities have identifiable characteristics which locate the sacred and accord authority differently from traditional Christianity”, while Michael York claims that alternative spiritualities emerged solely as “either a product of, or concomitant with secularisation.”⁵⁴ Scholars maintain the oppositional characteristics of religion and spirituality by implying (implicitly or explicitly) that new spiritual forms are of less social value than organised religion. As I explore more fully in Chapter 3, their interpretations of spirituality are inflected with their own anxieties about the ills of secular modernity. So, Wilson claims that “cultic” religions reflect “the ethos of the late 20th century, an ethos of permissive hedonism, emphasizing human happiness and encouragement for people to realize their full potential.”⁵⁵

⁵² P. Heelas and L. Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford, 2005); P. Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford, 1996).

⁵³ S. Bruce, ‘Religion in Britain at the Close of the 20th Century: A Challenge to the Silver Lining Perspective’, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 11 (1996); B. R. Wilson, *The Social Dimensions of Sectarianism: Sects and New Religious Movements in Contemporary Society* (Oxford, 1990); Heelas and Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*.

⁵⁴ G. Vincett, ‘The Fusers: New Forms of Spiritualised Christianity’, in K. Aune, S. Sharma and G. Vincett (eds.), *Women and Religion in the West: Challenging Secularisation* (Aldershot, 2008); M. York, ‘Alternative Spirituality in Europe: Amsterdam, Aups and Bath’, in S. Sutcliffe and M. Bowman (eds.), *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality* (Edinburgh, 2000).

⁵⁵ Wilson, *Sectarianism*, p. 288.

The vogue for gendering both secularisation and re-sacralisation narratives has done little to complicate these normative, linear frameworks. Historians and sociologists of religion invoke traditional readings of woman and femininity to frame the central problematic in their field around why women are more likely to be involved in alternative spiritualities than men.⁵⁶ In doing so, argues Joy Dixon, they apply to the late twentieth century a prescriptive Victorian binary between spiritual-woman and secular-man.⁵⁷ Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas, for example, argue that women predominate in the “holistic milieu” because their traditional role as caregivers leaves little time for personal wellbeing: “many of the women who turn to holistic milieu activities are primarily concerned with caring for their own subjective wellbeing (of body, mind and spirit).”⁵⁸ In a similar argument, Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman claim that, because women’s entrance into the workplace is so at odds with their traditional caregiving roles, they are more “haunted by questions of meaning and identity.”⁵⁹ Women therefore turn to alternative spiritualities that encourage self-searching and are more likely than men to “embark on a spiritual quest and sacralise their selves.”⁶⁰ In tone and content, these scholars echo more overtly pejorative observations by social commentators that centre upon women’s natural inclination to self-care. *Daily Mail* journalist Victoria Moore, for example, concluded of the Glastonbury Goddess conference, “Like so many other cults, [the Goddess] is simply a botched construct... designed as a one-stop, female-friendly solution to our eternal need to love and be loved.”⁶¹

⁵⁶ D. Houtman and S. Aupers, ‘The Spiritual Revolution and the New Age Gender Puzzle: The Sacralization of the Self in Late Modernity (1980-2000)’, in K. Aune, S. Sharma and G. Vincett (eds.), *Women and Religion in the West: Challenging Secularization* (Aldershot, 2008); L. Woodhead, ‘Gendering Secularization Theory’, *Social Compass*, 55 (2008).

⁵⁷ J. Dixon, ‘Modernity, Heterodoxy and the Transformation of Religious Cultures’, in S. Morgan and J. deVries (eds.), *Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800-1940* (London, 2010).

⁵⁸ Heelas and Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*, p. 104.

⁵⁹ Houtman and Aupers, ‘New Age Gender Puzzle’, p. 110.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ V. Moore, ‘The Golden Middle-Class Goddesses’, *Daily Mail*, 11 August 2006.

Academic (and also popular) prejudice against women's spirituality, then, is connected to the historical development of secularisation as the dominant way of explaining religious change, and the development of oppositional categories such as religion and secularism, and religion and spirituality that are derived from narrow institutional definitions of orthodoxy.⁶² By perpetuating and normalising institutional perspectives, scholars of religion do violence to the women of the Goddess movement who sought to challenge those who had all the say on who is inside or outside, mainstream or alternative, organised or casual.

Because I viewed the feminist dynamic of the Goddess movement as marginal, it did not figure in the early stages of my research. I began with an oral history project in which I interviewed women whose spiritual practices focused on, or related to, the Goddess in order to challenge the secularisation paradigm that leaves little space for vibrant religious and spiritual movements that emerged after the 1960s. I believed the testimonies of my interviewees would open up linear narratives about religious change and challenge the implicit institutional perspectives in much of the historiography, which makes value judgements about the content of religion as opposed to spirituality.⁶³ I also wanted to use my interviewees' testimonies to challenge sociologists of religion who wield gender as an empirical rather than epistemological tool, failing to move outside conservative and normative conceptions of femininity in their analysis of women's spirituality.⁶⁴

My approach to interviewing reflected the ways in which feminist historians have used, and intervened in, oral history methodology over the past fifty years.⁶⁵ In line with the political

⁶² F. Cannell, 'Mormonism and Anthropology: On Ways of Knowing', *Mormon Studies Review*, 4 (2017).

⁶³ S. Bruce, *God Is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford, 2002); B. R. Wilson, "'Secularization': Religion in the Modern World", in P. B. Clarke and S. R. Sutherland (eds.), *The World's Religions: The Study of Religion, Traditional and New Religions* (London, 1988); S. Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults* (Oxford, 1996); D. Martin, 'Review of Christopher Partridge "the Re-Enchantment of the West Volume 1"', *The Church Times*, (2 November, 2006).

⁶⁴ Heelas and Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*; Woodhead, 'Gendering Secularization Theory'.

⁶⁵ M. Jolly, *An Oral History of the UK Women's Liberation Movement, 1968 – Present* (Oxford, 2019), pp. 40-41.

commitments of feminist and social historians in the 1970s, my aim, in part, was to recover the voices of spiritual women whose lived experience has been omitted in dominant narratives of religious change.⁶⁶ I also took into account the interventions of feminist scholars such as Penny Summerfield, Lynn Abrams, Sherna Gluck and Daphne Patai who urge historians to shift focus away from objective recovery and towards understanding the subjectivities of their narrators. Drawing upon the insights of post-structuralist theory, they argue that not only do social and cultural discourses and ideologies impact memory and narration, but also the interview relationship itself and the narrator's quest for what Summerfield calls narrative composure.⁶⁷ As David Geiringer has recently argued, these approaches are not mutually exclusive.⁶⁸ In my project, oral history serves as both an insight into the history of the Goddess movement and the ways in which Goddess narrators participated in and refused institutional perspectives and gendered scripts. Ultimately, following the critical historical imperative that emerges from, and animates, oral history methodology, my aim is to challenge the orthodoxies of dominant historical narratives by taking seriously what my interviewees say about the past, including what they choose to omit or emphasise, and what myths and stories frame the telling.

The available literature on the British Goddess movement took me to Glastonbury in search of interview participants. Today, Glastonbury is the most visible site of Goddess spirituality in Britain, home to the only Goddess temple (founded in 2002) and host of an annual conference since 1996.⁶⁹ I reached out to the founder of the Glastonbury movement, Kathy Jones, who

⁶⁶ P. Summerfield, 'Oral History as an Autobiographical Practice', *Miranda*, 12 (2016), p. 2.

⁶⁷ P. Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure: Creating Narratives of the Gendered Self in Oral History Interviews', *Cultural and Social History*, 1 (2004); S. B. Gluck and D. Patai (eds.), *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (London, 1991); L. Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London, 2010); L. Abrams, 'Liberating the Female Self: Epiphanies, Conflict and Coherence in the Life Stories of Post-War British Women', *Social History*, 39 (2014).

⁶⁸ D. Geiringer, *The Pope and the Pill: Sex, Catholicism and Women in Post-War England* (Manchester, 2020), pp. 30-31.

⁶⁹ K. Jones, '21 Years of the Glastonbury Goddess Conference', *Goddess Alive!* c. 2017, accessed 11 September 2019, <https://www.goddess-pages.co.uk/galive/21-years-of-glastonbury-goddess-conference/>; K. Jones, *Priestess of Avalon, Priestess of the Goddess: A Renewed Spiritual Path for the 21st Century* (Glastonbury, 2006).

declined an interview but did pass my call for participants on to several women. In total, I interviewed eleven women aged between forty-two and seventy-three. Because of their relationship with the Glastonbury Goddess, a disproportionate number of participants were living in the South West, however I also conducted interviews in Oxford, Leicestershire, Cornwall, Birmingham and Glasgow.

All of the interviews took place in the first half of 2016, before the political upheavals of the European Referendum and the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States of America, which, as I explain in the conclusion to this thesis, has led to a resurgence in Goddess spirituality as activism. Prior to this, negative social commentary on the nature of women's spirituality had made some of the cohort reluctant to express their faith. At the time she was interviewed, Ruth Parham (b. 1966) was "in the broom closet", fearful of what her colleagues and family members would think if her spiritual practices were 'outed'.⁷⁰ Ruth told me after we had finished recording that the interview process had been cathartic, as she rarely had the opportunity to discuss or define her beliefs with sympathetic listeners. As Summerfield argues, the value of oral history emerges in these situations where the subject has "the opportunity to break such public and self-enforced silences".⁷¹ The embarrassment Ruth felt about her spiritual practices would later make me question how many second-wave feminists participated in Goddess activism from the 1970s, only to deny these attachments later in life, influenced by the denigration of women's spirituality in secularisation narratives.

Feminist oral historians have urged scholars to reflect upon the power dynamic in the interview relationship.⁷² As an academic who is not involved with the Goddess movement, my own status as an 'outsider' shaped the ways in which my participants responded to me. I was particularly

⁷⁰ Interview with Ruth Parham, 7 March 2016.

⁷¹ Summerfield, 'Oral History', p. 11.

⁷² Gluck and Patai, *Women's Words*; J. Rees, "'Are you a Lesbian?' Challenges in Recording and Analysing the Women's Liberation Movement in England', *History Workshop Journal*, 69 (2010), p. 183.

concerned about my position within the academy, as Goddess feminists have been subjected to the academic gaze before and been misrepresented. Despite this, none of my participants were distrustful of my intentions, although some did seek to subvert my assumed power to direct the interview. Early in her interview, Georgina Sirett-Armstrong-Smith (b. 1953), asked what my star and moon signs were in order to take an astrological reading of me.⁷³ In this way, Georgina used knowledge she knew I was not privy to in order to make conclusions about my character, reversing what she assumed to be the traditional interview-interviewee dynamic. Most of the interviewees, however, viewed me as part of the academic or spiritual project to reclaim the Goddess for women in the twenty-first century. Geraldine Charles (b. 1952) took pleasure in talking me through her enormous collection of matriarchal reading material and recommending books to help with my project, while Sue Oxley (b. 1960) believed her invitation to interview was a spiritual sign that younger women were beginning to participate in Goddess religion.⁷⁴ Only one woman, Jane Hall (b. 1964), asked if I was involved in the Goddess movement, to which I replied honestly that I am sympathetic to those who engage with Goddess spirituality, but not an active participant.⁷⁵

The interviews broke down all the structuring binaries – politics versus spirituality; religion versus spirituality – in mainstream scholarship on religious change and modern feminism. Two participants in particular, Geraldine Charles and Cheryl Traffon (b. 1947), were uncompromising about the place of the Goddess within broader feminist political cultures. When I asked these women to describe their spiritual journeys, both (unprompted) wove together a story of spiritual and political development in which they located their Goddess spirituality within the major institutions, ideas and protests of second-wave feminism. Charles, for example, came to Goddess feminism during the 1970s, reading mainstream feminist writers

⁷³ Interview with Georgina Sirett-Armstrong-Smith, 16 February 2016.

⁷⁴ Interview with Geraldine Charles, 15 February 2016; interview with Sue Oxley, 16 February 2016.

⁷⁵ Interview with Jane Hall, 3 March 2016.

like Germaine Greer alongside Merlin Stone, whose work had inspired the MSG.⁷⁶ Straffon's general interest in alternative spiritualities brought her to Paganism in the early 1970s, which animated her research into the Goddess-centred ancient cultures of Cornwall where she lived. Through friends, she eventually made contact with Monica Sjöö, and became involved with the MRRN during the early 1990s.⁷⁷ When I interviewed these women in early 2016, both were editing online Goddess zines in the tradition of early matriarchy groups.⁷⁸

The personal testimonies of Charles and Straffon gave me a starting point with which to place the Goddess movement within the development of the feminist second wave in Britain. As both women had emphasised Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp as a formative moment for Goddess spirituality, I consulted key repositories for traditional and much used source material on Greenham, including the Feminist Archive South (FAS), the Women's Library and the volunteer-run Feminist Library in South Bank. Having already learned about the profoundly spiritual content of Greenham from Charles and Straffon, my encounter with these archives constituted what feminist theorists D-M Withers and Maud Perrier call a moment of "radical unlearning".⁷⁹ The secular-seeming cultural production from Greenham – including newsletters, songbooks, pamphlets, chain letters, drawings and posters – appeared differently, revealing consistent and sustained engagement with Goddess imagery as activism. I saw photographs of makeshift Goddess figurines guarding campfires, read the prophetic writing of protesters who understood and mobilised the workings of ritual and magic in direct action, looked at illustrations of enchanted creatures like snakes, spiders and witches tearing down the fences of the military base.⁸⁰ This moment of realisation, facilitated by taking my interview

⁷⁶ Interview with Geraldine Charles, 15 February 2016; interview with Cheryl Straffon, 15 March 2016.

⁷⁷ Interview with Cheryl Straffon, 15 March 2016.

⁷⁸ *Goddess Alive!* accessed 11 September 2019, <https://www.goddess-pages.co.uk/galive/>; *Goddess Pages*, accessed 11 September 2019, <https://www.goddess-pages.co.uk>.

⁷⁹ M. Perrier and D. Withers, 'An Archival Feminist Pedagogy: Unlearning and Objects as Affective Knowledge Companions', *Continuum*, 30 (2016), p. 358.

⁸⁰ Photograph of the Sheffield Matriarchy Study Group Goddess figure at Yellow Gate, c. 1982 courtesy of Jayne Burton, private collection (Fig. 2); *Women's Peace Camp newsletter* (February, 1983), DM2123/1,

participants seriously, allowed me to open up new histories of Greenham. Much later, I spoke with Jayne Burton from the Redditch Women for Peace group, who gave me valuable insight into how Goddess women established the tone and content of early Greenham action.⁸¹

This thesis also breaks new ground by utilising underused source materials on the feminist second wave. Just like their sisters in the broader women's movement, Goddess feminists were invested in autonomous print culture, forming, exploring and disseminating their intervention into feminist theory through pamphlets, newsletters and magazines.⁸² Their writing is often overlooked by historians, despite the fact that it occupies the same archival spaces as more regularly used source materials, as well as being embedded within mainstream feminist publications such as *Shrew*, *Spare Rib*, *Catcall* and *Red Rag*. For example, *Goddess Shrew* (1977), the first pamphlet produced by the MSG, was one of the final editions of the London women's movement magazine *Shrew*, which historians often use to explain the movement.⁸³ Because Goddess feminists were just as keen to maintain a record of their political activities as their secular sisters, the best-known feminist archives in Britain hold almost full runs of matriarchy network publications. These include all three MSG pamphlets, the MRRN's newsletter, which ran in an unbroken cycle of eight-yearly publications between 1981 and 2000, its irregular journal *Arachne* (1983 – 90), as well as Vron McIntyre and Maggie Parks' zine, *From the Flames* (1991 – 99).

I also use the archives of important individuals in the Goddess movement, such as Monica Sjöo, whose carefully cultivated record of almost forty years of spiritual feminist activity in

Greenham Common Papers 23, FAS; B. Harford and S. Hopkins, *Greenham Common: Women at the Wire* (London, 1984).

⁸¹ Interview with Jayne Burton, 18 June and 28 August 2018.

⁸² L. Forster, 'Spreading the Word: Feminist Print Cultures and the Women's Liberation Movement', *Women's History Review*, 25 (2016); L. Delap, 'Feminist Bookshops, Reading Cultures and the Women's Liberation Movement in Great Britain, c. 1974–2000', *History Workshop Journal*, 81 (2016).

⁸³ D. Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge: The Movement for Women's Liberation in Britain and the USA* (London, 1983).

Britain, Europe and the United States of America illuminates the transnational history of the movement. However, reading the history of the Goddess movement from Sjöö's archive was not a straightforward task, as I examine in more detail in Chapter 4. The splitting of Sjöö's spirituality and politics in separate disciplinary literatures is underpinned by the problematic history and constitution of her archive, in which source material on her politics and spirituality are arranged into separate boxes. Although, on closer inspection, this organisation makes no sense (Sjöö regularly transgressed the boundaries of this categorisation in her writing and annotation), the spatial distinction maintains a more conceptual one. Indeed, the logic of Sjöö's archive stands in for the conceptual problems I seek to examine in this thesis, including the perceived incompatibility of politics with spirituality and optional engagement with the spirituality of our ultra-modern subjects.

Because Goddess feminists took seriously magic, mysticism and extra-natural phenomena, then, my source material also includes the work of myth, ritual, fantasy, imagination and symbol. In their writing since 1975, Goddess feminists foregrounded spirituality as a political tool, interpreting the psychological insights of second-wave feminism as inherently magical and transformative.⁸⁴ In Chapter 4, I use the life of Sjöö as a specific case study to uncover the ways in which the spirit worked to animate the political. In her life-writing, Sjöö identified a series of spiritual experiences, beginning in 1961, which opened up doors to her political development. Indeed, the coming to consciousness moment (which many secular feminists would later describe in distinctly non-rational ways) took place for Sjöö during a vision of the Goddess.⁸⁵ Because I engage with source material traditionally excluded from historical research, I also seek to open up alternative approaches to writing the history of modern Britain,

⁸⁴ See, for example, M. Scott, 'Half Over Heard', *Goddess Shrew* (Spring, 1977), DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

⁸⁵ M. Sjöö, 'My Life Story', October 2003, DM2123/1/81, 4, FAS.

integrating myth-work and storytelling alongside my theoretical agenda, putting into practice forms of narrative that are attentive to the spiritual perspectives of my protagonists.

To return to my historiographical intervention, then, my interviews with Goddess-orientated women, and my archival project that followed, broke open the normative historical models for religious change and feminist politics in post-1960s Britain. When positioned against gendered accounts of secularisation, in particular, the Goddess movement brings forth so much vivid, textured and excess material as to entirely confound our assumptions about women's non-existent relationship with religion in the second half of the twentieth century. Women did not abandon their faith wholesale in the 1960s, as Callum Brown and sociologists of religion like to claim. Rather, the forms and modes of their belief transmuted in response to cultural formations and political challenges.

Historians, Feminism and the Spirit

I am not only concerned with offering an empirical or political corrective to national histories of religious change and feminist politics. I also want to bring this literature into cross-disciplinary conversation with the bracing conceptual work done by feminist, gender, queer and postcolonial historians, critical theorists and anthropologists. My aim, in part, is to draw attention to the insularity of key thinkers like Brown and Woodhead, who question the particulars of secularisation without realising that the entire conceptual framework has been conclusively dismantled elsewhere (the narrative's containment within modernisation theory, for example, or its reliance on normative binary models).⁸⁶ I also want to take up the challenge

⁸⁶ T. Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford CA, 2003); T. Asad, W. Brown, J. Butler and S. Mahmood (eds.), *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (Berkeley CA, 2009); G. Anderson, 'Retrieving the Lost Worlds of the Past: The Case for an Ontological Turn', *The American Historical Review*, 120 (2015); F. Cannell, 'The Christianity of Anthropology', *Journal of the Royal*

posed recently by Joan Scott, Ethan Kleinberg and Gary Wilder to open up critical questions about the limits of history's own possibilities, including the ideology that informs dominant archival processes, assumptions about what counts as history, and how method narrows the range of interpretations that can be offered.⁸⁷ In what follows, I argue that the ultra-modern spirituality of the Goddess movement, which stands so resolutely in the face of our usual ways of knowing, provides a space within which to reflect upon the assumptions and methods that underpin our beliefs about what history can say and do.

Gender historians working on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for whom the spiritual realm has been a productive avenue for inquiry, guide me in this task. Rather than applying secularisation in a dogmatic fashion to the lives of their subjects, historians like Lucy Delap, Jacqueline de Vries, Joy Dixon, Sandra Holton, Alex Owen and Jane Shaw take at face value the religious ideology, both orthodox and heterodox, that animated the lives and politics of their subjects.⁸⁸ For example, Shaw's excavation of the Panacea Society, an interwar religious community that centred on the self-proclaimed female messiah Octavia (formerly Mabel Barltrop), accepts the mystical insights of the community and its founder, despite the fact that the Panacea Society reached its peak at a moment historians often identify as rapidly secularising.⁸⁹ In doing so, Shaw shows how the deeply held religious principles of Octavia

Anthropological Institute, 11 (2005); D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Oxford, 2000).

⁸⁷ Kleinberg, Scott and Wilder, 'Theory and History'.

⁸⁸ J. de Vries, 'Rediscovering Christianity after the Postmodern Turn', *Feminist Studies*, 31 (2005); L. Delap and S. Morgan (eds.), *Men, Masculinities and Religious Change in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London, 2013); J. Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (London, 2001); S. S. Holton, 'Feminism, History and Movements of the Soul: Christian Science in the Life of Alice Clark (1874–1934)', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 13 (1998); S. Morgan and J. deVries (eds.), *Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800-1940* (London, 2010); S. Morgan, 'Sex and Common-Sense: Maude Royden, Religion, and Modern Sexuality', *Journal of British Studies*, 52 (2013); A. Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (London, 1989); A. Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago IL, 2004); J. Shaw, *Octavia Daughter of God: The Story of a Female Messiah and Her Followers* (London, 2011).

⁸⁹ Green, *Protestant England*; C. G. Brown, 'What Was the Religious Crisis of the 1960s?', *Journal of Religious History*, 34 (2010).

and her followers existed, not in spite of, but conterminously with modernity.⁹⁰ Similarly, in *The Place of Enchantment* (2004), Owen reads Victorian occultism and magic as capable of addressing, not only the “central dilemmas of modernity” but as “constitutive or symptomatic of key elements of modern culture”.⁹¹ By resisting linear narratives of secularisation and re-enchantment, Owen draws attention to the transmutations of spiritual commitments to different modes and objects, denying the conflation of secularism and modernity.⁹²

By approaching sacral forms and modes sympathetically, historians like Shaw and Owen deploy an alternative epistemology to frame their historical inquiry; one that accepts, rather than attempts to rationalise, the mysticism of their distinctly modern subjects. This leads them to challenging and productive questions about the possibilities of representing and interpreting such extra-natural phenomena in traditional historical narratives. Owen, for example, explores the disruptive potential of spiritualism in her bracing work on Victorian female mediumship in *The Darkened Room* (1989), arguing that empirical inquiry secures a “single trajectory of consensus reality” that is not conscious of its temporal and cultural boundedness.⁹³ Joy Dixon makes a similar move in *Divine Feminine* (2001), in which she explores the intertwined relationship between women’s suffrage and the Theosophical Society. Dixon explains that predetermined decisions over what is true or meaningful implies an implicit power relationship that often escapes scrutiny.⁹⁴

In this thesis, I apply the theoretical frameworks and approaches of historians working on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the late twentieth century. The problem of interpretation posed by Goddess feminists’ prophetic visions, ritualistic direct actions and invocations to the Cosmic Mother is my starting point in this project. In their provocative

⁹⁰ Shaw, *Octavia Daughter of God*, p. xv.

⁹¹ Owen, *Place of Enchantment*, p. 8.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁹³ Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. x.

⁹⁴ Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, pp. 12-13.

pamphlet ‘Theses on Theory and History’ (2017), Scott, Kleinberg and Wilder charge disciplinary history with perpetuating the epistemological realism of its eighteenth-century origins, foregrounding empirical evidence, the central role of archival fact-finding and the construction of chronological narratives.⁹⁵ Institutional gatekeepers and norms, they argue, perpetuate a vision of historical inquiry as a fact-finding mission, as opposed to the subjective theoretical approach that compromises the discoverable truth of the past.⁹⁶ Because spirituality stands resolutely in opposition to empirical historical method (in that it is neither self-evident nor always discoverable in the archives) it poses a threat to the foundational assumptions of disciplinary history, including the assumed rationality of our subjects, the primacy of observable evidence, essentialising understandings of identity and the presumed transparency of meaning in language.⁹⁷

It is important that we stay with this incommensurability, or instability of interpretation.⁹⁸ Paying attention to what is unknowable, or what lies beyond the scope of historical interpretation, brings into focus the narrow interpretative moves, methods, epistemology and ontology that underpins our favoured historical explanations.⁹⁹ In our normative frameworks, predetermined judgements about what counts as truth or untruth, reason or unreason, real or non-real go unaddressed and unexplored, taken for granted as if we are all in unspoken agreement about their meaning and content.¹⁰⁰ It is important that we address these unstated epistemological assumptions because, as postcolonial scholars like Dipesh Chakrabarty and Gayatri Spivak have shown, they have their own history in Western models of rationality.¹⁰¹

⁹⁵ Kleinberg, Scott and Wilder, ‘Theory and History’, p. 1.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁹⁷ J. W. Scott, ‘The Incommensurability of Psychoanalysis and History’, *History and Theory*, 51 (2012); J. W. Scott, ‘History-Writing as Critique’, in K. Jenkins, S. Morgan and A. Munslow (eds.), *Manifestos for History* (London, 2007).

⁹⁸ Scott, ‘Psychoanalysis and History’.

⁹⁹ Hemmings, ‘Considering Emma’, p. 340.

¹⁰⁰ Kleinberg, Scott and Wilder, ‘Theory and History’, p. 4.

¹⁰¹ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*; G. C. Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Basingstoke, 1988).

These arguments have recently been summarised by critical theorist Greg Anderson, who argues that historicism perpetuates a colonial mentality that seeks to locate “all of humanity’s diverse lifeworlds within the bounds of a single universal ‘real world’ of time, space and experience”.¹⁰² Anderson proposes nothing short of an “ontological turn” in historical inquiry that would take for granted the metaphysical groundings of our subjects, while also forcing us to accept and reflect upon the historicity of our founding assumptions and epistemological categories.

I would add that there is another layer of complexity involved in taking the spirituality of second-wave feminists seriously. While historians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have come to embrace the linkages between religious and feminist ideology, the same cannot be said of historians of second-wave feminism. Owen herself, who acknowledged the ways in which Victorian female mediums achieved social power through essentialising visions of femininity in *The Darkened Room*, used the epilogue of her book to make an extended critique of Goddess feminism. “It claims the transforming power of a feminine that is split off from the social, endowed with the trappings of universality, and placed beyond the world of men and women” she explained, “as such it can offer only a severely limited vision for the future”.¹⁰³ Despite Owen’s earlier refutation of linear conceptions of historical change, she deploys a developmental narrative here to explain feminism’s intellectual history. Through this framework, Owen depicts the realm of the irrational and spiritual as belonging to the nominally subversive, but ultimately entrapping, essentialism of Victorian spiritualism, not the sophisticated political theory of the modern second wave.

Owen’s perspective rests on naturalised assumptions about political secularism being the marker of liberation for women. As Linell E. Cady and Tracy Fessenden have recently argued,

¹⁰² Anderson, ‘Ontological Turn’, p. 787.

¹⁰³ Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 242.

the conventional wisdom that “secularization, sexual freedom, and women’s emancipation run always on parallel tracks”, whereas religion inevitably entraps them, has attained the status of interpretative common sense.¹⁰⁴ The conceit appears often in triumphal historical accounts of secularisation. In *A Secular Age* (2007), Charles Taylor argues that in secular modernity the “hierarchical complementarity between men and women” is “comprehensively challenged” adding that this is “a late stage in a ‘long march’ process”.¹⁰⁵ Callum Brown, who has recently taken to arguing for atheism with dogmatic enthusiasm, makes a similar argument, “the positive story of freedom from religion, fostering a new comprehensive moral outlook and a blossoming of the autonomous moral self”.¹⁰⁶

In this way, both histories of religion and feminism adhere to binary models and progress narratives that depict secularism as the end of a linear quest towards liberation. It is so important to dethrone the linkages between secularism, emancipation and modernity because these assumptions perpetuate troubling racialised paradigms. These debates have played out in relation to Muslim women, particularly in discussions of veiling and Islamic feminist groups.¹⁰⁷ Through this lens, argues Clare Hemmings, drawing in turn on Spivak, feminism becomes a Western export, delivered to those who are perceived as less modern and less liberal.¹⁰⁸ In order to confound this formation, the late Saba Mahmood drew attention to the central location of secular agency in liberation movements, arguing that it is “crucial to detach the notion of agency from the goals of progressive politics.”¹⁰⁹ Scott takes a different approach in *Sex and*

¹⁰⁴ L. E. Cady and T. Fessenden (eds.), *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference* (New York, 2013), p. 3.

¹⁰⁵ C. Taylor, *A Secular Age* (London, 2007), p. 167.

¹⁰⁶ Brown, *Becoming Atheist*, p. 5.

¹⁰⁷ S. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Oxford, 2005); L. Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Oxford, 2006); J. W. Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton NJ, 2007); A. Karam, ‘Must It Be Either Secular or Religion? Reflections on the Contemporary Journeys of Women’s Rights Activists in Egypt’, in Cady and Fessenden, *Religion, the Secular*.

¹⁰⁸ C. Hemmings, ‘Resisting Popular Feminisms: Gender, Sexuality and the Lure of the Modern’, *Gender, Place & Culture*, 25 (2018), p. 966.

¹⁰⁹ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, p. 14.

Secularism (2017), performing a genealogy (in the Foucauldian sense) of political secularism to show that gender emancipation was never part of secularism's project. In doing so, Scott highlights the persistence of women's oppression on either side of the secular/religious divide, a reality that often goes overlooked when secularism is seen to be centrally located in democracy and liberalism.¹¹⁰ In what follows, I use Mahmood, Scott and Rosi Braidotti as my guides in uncovering how feminist politics "can actually be conveyed through and supported by religious piety, and may even involve significant amounts of spirituality".¹¹¹

Thesis Outline

The direct action by Monica Sjöö and her friends at Bristol Cathedral and, as I show below, the women's occupation of contested space at Greenham Common, tell us that feminist spirituality was a central component of British feminist cultures by at least the mid-1980s and into the 1990s. What had to happen for the Goddess to be so present, and then to be pushed so firmly to the margins of feminist politics and historiography? This question provides the organising conceit of my thesis. In each chapter, I instigate the Goddess at the centre of contemporary feminism in several different settings, demonstrating what this process does to our historiographical and theoretical frameworks. I then examine the processes of forgetting and silencing in each case study, using this to foreground the theoretical assumptions that regulate what we think we know about feminism's recent past.¹¹²

Chapter 1 recreates my experience of "radical unlearning" in the Greenham archives. Using the profoundly mystical objects I uncovered there, I tell the story of Greenham and 1980s

¹¹⁰ J. W. Scott, *Sex and Secularism* (Princeton NJ, 2018).

¹¹¹ R. Braidotti, 'In Spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 25 (2008), p. 2.

¹¹² Perrier and Withers, 'An Archival Feminist Pedagogy', p. 358.

feminist politics differently, foregrounding magical spiders, snakes and witches as key players in the act of disrupting patriarchal violence and destruction, as well as showing how the Goddess movement's vision of matriarchy took centre stage in protesters' theorising of the feminist future. By making this move, I highlight the dissonance between dominant secular explanations of Greenham and the archival objects that point to repeated and sustained engagement with spiritual modes of feminist activism.¹¹³

Chapter 2 moves backwards and outwards from Greenham, in order to examine the origins of patriarchal feminist politics in political cultures of the 1960s and 1970s. I locate the beginnings of the Goddess movement in the MSG that emerged out of the same networks and contexts as the London Women's Liberation Workshop (LWLW) in 1975. Totally embedded in 1970s feminist political cultures, I show how the MSG mobilised the communication and activist networks of the LWLW, and intersected with the grassroots feminist critique of the patriarchal academy and the revolutionary feminist agenda. Despite their central position in London's feminist circles, I also show how the dominant perspectives of socialist feminists, who were suspicious of matriarchy from the beginning, have been naturalised in dominant historical explanations of the women's movement. Historians take for granted their understanding of Goddess feminism as unavoidably anachronistic and backward, and therefore fail to see the ways in which a spiritual approach to gender politics could be productive.

As explained above, the Goddess movement has not only been marginalised in the history of feminist politics, but also in historical and sociological work on religious change. Chapter 3 traces the history of the Goddess movement into the 1980s and 1990s as it negotiated the rising popularity of spiritual feminism as well as the perceived decline of the women's movement and the growth of androcentric alternative spiritualities. Because of its proximity to movements

¹¹³ A. L. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Oxford, 2009).

that were located at the centre of the so-called New Age in Britain by academics, the Goddess is often implicated in this scholarship, although wrongly depicted as narcissistic or too focused on inner work to be political. By examining the formation of the New Age as an academic tool of analysis, I examine the processes through which the Goddess movement came to be so misunderstood in the academy. I show that narrow methodological and epistemological approaches, as well as implicit androcentric bias, meant that historians and sociologists took the claims of the male-dominated New Age for granted, and used their perspectives to justify claims that feminist forms of alternative spirituality were marginal or insignificant.

Chapter 4 takes the spiritual politics of Monica Sjöö as its case study. In the first instance, I seek to reconstitute Sjöö's spiritual feminist politics that have been wrongly rationalised in academic literature. I locate the roots of these problems in the constitution of Monica Sjöö's Papers (MSP) at FAS, which maintains distinctions between recognisable manifestations of Sjöö's political activism (feminism; artwork; research) and less familiar expressions (spirituality). In doing so, I draw attention to the unstated secular logic that organises, and places value upon, historical sources prior to our encounter with the archive. In the last part of the chapter, I place Sjöö's life-writing into a broader genre of feminist confessional memoir that emerged during the 1980s and 1990s. Doing so allows me to draw comparisons between Sjöö's overt engagement with the workings of the unconscious, and the imagination, fantasy and vision that informed secular feminists' understanding of their politics. In this way, I take up the challenge set by Joan Scott to explore non-material influences upon the development of political cultures.

Because my thesis is concerned with exploring and pushing against the limits of conventional disciplinary history, I also want to suggest ways of taking seriously the spiritual epistemology of Goddess feminists, which accepted knowledge gained through extra-natural encounters as well as the material conditions of women's oppression. At several points in this thesis, I

experiment with storytelling in order to write the history of the Goddess movement in ways that reflect, rather than deny, the women's distinctly metaphysical politics. This thesis, then, is an exploration of what we can do with history when commonly accepted models, categories, methods and techniques are brought into crisis.

CHAPTER ONE

THE GODDESS AT GREENHAM COMMON

We conjured willing women here

And willingly they came

So many sisters brought the power

So many sisters sang the spirit

So many sisters filled an ocean

of Love and Life.

Women wove the circle

Women linked for strength

Women planted Life in Earth

Our bodies triumphed

On this day

We turned the evil

Now our task

To drive it out.¹

¹ Mary, 'Dec 12th at Greenham Common', *Women's Peace Camp newsletter* (February, 1983), DM2123/1, 23, FAS

Who are the Witches?

Where do they come from?

Maybe your great-great-

grandmother was one

Witches are old wise women

they say

there's a lot of witch

*in every woman today!*²

On 12 December 1982, witches travelled to RAF Greenham Common to perform a magical act. News about the spell casting had spread "through rumour and gossip", like an old womanly tradition revived in a nuclear age.³ Bring "anything related to 'real' life", said the whispers, "Believe it will work and it will work".⁴ The witches prepared to cast their spell. As if through "intuition or a mysterious unspoken understanding," they gave their offerings to the twelve-foot-high fence: handwritten incantations, locks of real black hair, goddess-figures made from living bracken and evergreen, sanitary towels red with sacred blood.⁵ Everywhere they wove webs in blue, silver, red and purple wool, casting them into the wire, stretching them over tree branches and laying them upon the churned-up mud.⁶ As they worked, the witches thought of the spider goddess who weaves the web of life, tirelessly mending what has been

² 'Folder of Anti-Nuclear Designs and Aphorisms', c. 1984-1985, *Greenham: A Common Inheritance*, accessed 20 September 2019, http://www.greenham-common.org.uk/ixbin/hixclient.exe?a=query&p=greenham&f=generic_objectrecord_postsearch.htm&_IXFIRST_1163&_IXMAXHITS_1&m=quick_sform&tc1=i&partner=greenham&tc2=e&s=wu4ba_ZNuVi.

³ L. Caldecott, 'Greenham and the Web of Life', *The Sunday Times*, 19 December 1982, Records of Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp (Yellow Gate), 5GCW/E/1, 15, The Women's Library (henceforth TWL).

⁴ 'Embrace the Base – Chain Letter', c. 1982, Papers of Pam Baum Barker, 7PBB, 1, TWL.

⁵ Harford and Hopkins, *Women at the Wire*, pp. 92, 95.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

ripped, destroyed or profaned.⁷ “With wool, with homespun inner knowledge, we will weave again the strands of true existence”, said the witch called Chris, “We will remove whatever lies of force and violence have got caught”.⁸

By mid-afternoon there were enough witches to encircle the nine-mile perimeter fence three times; “a living cord” magically closed by shoulders touching shoulders, hands linked in hands.⁹ At dusk, when the circle was complete, the witches raised the energy by singing and ululating in high-pitched tones:

*You can't kill the spirit,
she is like a mountain,
old and strong, she goes on
and on and on, you can't kill the spirit.*¹⁰

Already the spell was working. The fence, which had appeared final and authoritative that morning, was transforming into something new. Now, the witches looked upon it with affection as they sang and wove. They had stopped believing in its power, no longer able to see the distinction between the clinical rigidity of the military base and the life-affirming presence of the Women's Peace Camp. “My goddess, that fence”, exclaimed Jayne, “What we did to that artificial boundary around the once common land.”¹¹ When darkness fell, the witches lit candles and lanterns.¹² The magic symbols adorning the wire glittered and, in the darkness, the fence seemed to have disappeared altogether.

⁷ Caldecott, ‘Web of Life’, 1982, 5GCW/E/1, 15, TWL; M. Sjöö and B. Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother: Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth* (London, 1987), p. 51.

⁸ Harford and Hopkins, *Women at the Wire*, pp. 92-93.

⁹ Caldecott, ‘Web of Life’, 1982, 5GCW/E/1, 15, TWL.

¹⁰ ‘Songs – Greenham Women are Everywhere’, c. 1988, Papers of Jill Truman, 7JTR/4/3, 1, TWL.

¹¹ Harford and Hopkins, *Women at the Wire*, p. 94.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 92.

This account of the December 1982 action Embrace the Base reinstates the presence of magic and spirituality at the centre of women's activism at Greenham Common. At the nexus of a seemingly diverse range of left-wing politics, including the women's movement, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and anarchism, the Women's Peace Camp became a melting pot of imaginative invention and creative power.¹³ Recognising their continuity with women's groups, peace groups, religious groups and trade union branches, Greenham activists embraced a "fast-flowing stream of ideas" as Cold War tensions heightened, which informed both their political practices and their approach to daily life.¹⁴ Completely in line with their commitment to innovative political practice and strategy, for twenty years beginning in 1981, the women's occupation of contested space was conducted in a profoundly mystical, prophetic and sacralising register. In highly ritualised direct actions, Greenham women harnessed magical thinking to confront and confound patriarchal violence and destruction. During nonviolent acts of resistance, Goddesses, witches and magical dragons were invoked for strength and resilience. Non-hierarchical camp organisation and reverence for the earth was informed by the reclamation of women's sacred prehistory, which was both researched and imagined by Greenham women.¹⁵

This kind of politics, which did not distinguish between the secular and the spiritual, was neither different nor strange in the context of second-wave feminism, but can be traced back to the British feminist spirituality movement, or Goddess movement, that first emerged as part of the London women's movement in 1975. Inspired by the matriarchal theories of Victorian romantic mythographers, archaeologists and anthropologists, as well as a reclaimed tradition

¹³ J. Liddington, *The Long Road to Greenham: Feminism and Anti-Militarism in Britain since 1820* (London, 1989); J. Hinton, *Protests and Visions: Peace Politics in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London, 1989).

¹⁴ A. Snitow, 'Holding the Line at Greenham: Being Joyously Political in Dangerous Times', *Mother Jones*, 10 (February/March, 1985), pp. 30-34, 39-47; Cook and Kirk, *Greenham Women Everywhere*.

¹⁵ M. Raphael, *Theology and Embodiment: The Post-Patriarchal Reconstruction of Female Sacrality* (Sheffield, 1996), p. 25.

of Celtic ritual and celebration, the Matriarchy Study Group (MSG) sought to inflect their political commitments with a deep sense of the value for life and the connectedness of all things.¹⁶ Embedded within the organisations and strategies of the London women's movement, MSG women, including artists Monica Sjöo and Liz Moore, architects Denise Arnold and Janet Payne, and Pauline (later Asphodel) Long, who would go on to become a notable Jewish feminist theologian, gave workshops on prehistoric matriarchal societies at regional and national Women's Liberation conferences, published reviews of key Goddess spirituality texts in prominent feminist publications such as *Spare Rib* and presented slideshows to women's groups across the country.¹⁷ Over six years, the women conducted quasi-academic research into women's lives in prehistoric matriarchal communities, as well as delving into the hidden symbolism of the ancient Goddess religion, publishing their findings, as well as poems, stories and illustrations, in three popular pamphlets, *Goddess Shrew*, *Menstrual Taboos* (1978) and *Politics of Matriarchy* (1979).¹⁸ By 1981, what had begun as a small collective of between eight and twelve women had grown to a nationwide network, overseen by a London-based organisation called the MRRN, which organised Celtic-inspired seasonal celebrations in different parts of the country and produced the network's eight-yearly newsletter and its journal *Arachne*.¹⁹

Despite the centrality of spiritual feminism to the women's movement, and its impact upon the symbolic and practical action at the Women's Peace Camp, by the time historians started writing about Greenham the sense of the spiritual had been effaced from, and marginalised

¹⁶ M. Bishop, 'Feminist Spirituality and Nonviolence', in P. McAllister (ed.), *Reweaving the Web of Life: Feminism and Nonviolence* (Philadelphia PA, 1982).

¹⁷ 'London Matriarchy Study Group General Information', Autumn, 1978, DM2123/2/Religion and World View 1, FAS; 'London Area Women's Liberation Conference', *Women's Information and Newsletter Service (WINS)*, 12 May 1976, FL; P. Long, 'The How and Why of the Matriarchy Study Group', *News from Neasden*, 11 (Spring, 1979), DM2767,1, FAS; Matriarchy Study Group, 'Review of Evelyn Reed "Women's Revolution: From Matriarchal Clan to Patriarchal Family"', *Spare Rib*, 61 (1977).

¹⁸ Long, 'How and Why', DM2767,1, FAS.

¹⁹ *MRRN newsletter*, 1 (November, 1981), FL.

within, feminist and historical accounts. Sociologists and feminist theorists (some of whom were also camp activists) such as Sasha Roseneil, Margaret Laware, and Jill Liddington acknowledge the presence of spirituality but downplay its significance, confining it to the eccentricities of individual women, or to the character of particular camp sites around the perimeter fence named after colours of the rainbow (“Green [Gate] was cosmic”).²⁰ In these accounts, scholars foreground the memories of Greenham women such as Ann Pettitt, Barbara Norden, Carol Ehrlich and Rebecca Johnson who dismissed the spiritual as trivial, disengaged or bizarre.²¹ Norden, for example, asked in *Spare Rib* whether “all the woollen webs and songs with lyrics about women being ‘the spirit’” did anything more than reinforce traditional feminine ideals.²² Even when confronted with campers’ memories of spell-casting, Goddess symbolism, keening and ritual, scholars of Greenham impose a rational interpretation that removes the possibility of mysterious unseen forces at play in the Camp. When long-term camper Penni Bestic told Roseneil that Greenham had “something very magical about it”, Roseneil explained away her testimony as use of “spiritual language”, rather than taking seriously Bestic’s claim that her experience at Greenham had transcended the material.²³

The absence, or misinterpretation, of magic and spirituality in scholars’ accounts narrows the cultural and institutional lineages of which Greenham was a part. Although Greenham is usually connected to the emergence of the WLM in Britain from the late 1960s, historians privilege secular forms of feminist politics, meaning we have lost sight of other intellectual traditions on which Greenham activists drew upon as a source of practice and ideology. Although feminist spirituality was a central part of the women’s movement by 1981, Roseneil

²⁰ S. Roseneil, *Disarming Patriarchy: Feminism and Political Action at Greenham* (Buckingham, 1995), p. 80.

²¹ B. Norden, ‘Many Visions - Many Hands’, *Spare Rib*, 158 (1985); A. Pettitt, *Walking to Greenham: How the Peace-Camp Began and the Cold War Ended* (Dinas Powys, 2006); C. Ehrlich, ‘Socialism, Anarchism and Feminism’, in D. S. Collective (ed.), *Quiet Rumours: An Anarcha-Feminist Reader* (Edinburgh, 2002).

²² Norden, ‘Many Visions’.

²³ Roseneil, *Disarming Patriarchy*, p. 59.

claims there were only two strands of feminist thought available in the early 1980s to inform the women's protest at Greenham: "radical feminism and socialist/Marxist feminism."²⁴ Liddington, in her history of feminism and nonviolence from 1820 to Greenham, similarly overlooks the feminist spirituality movement, despite citing many of its American key texts and theorists, such as Susan Griffin, Carolyn Merchant and Ynestra King.²⁵ This elision is all the more surprising when many of the same historians are willing to credit the impact of anti-nuclear work done by institutional religions at Greenham, such as Quaker Women and the Christian-inspired CND of Bruce Kent and Canon L. John Collins.²⁶

The marginalisation of spirituality is symptomatic of the broader historiography on the women's movement, in which scholars implicitly take up the perspectives of secular-minded feminists who viewed spirituality as an apolitical distraction, or as dangerously essentialist/maternalist. Historians such as Jeska Rees and Sarah Browne ignore the Goddess movement in their accounts altogether, while Eve Setch in her history of the LWLW writes, "Much of the Goddess work could be defined as essentialist, and simple inverted images did not 'operate' as well as or on as many levels as some of the more complex works".²⁷ Here, Setch adheres to a binary that emerged in feminist discourse in the middle of the 1970s between political (read socialist) feminism and other competing forms such as revolutionary, radical, cultural, matriarchal and utopian.²⁸ Setch's words echo those of prominent socialist feminists such as Sheila Rowbotham and Lynne Segal who argued that spirituality's answer to feminist

²⁴ S. Roseneil, 'Postmodern Feminist Politics: The Art of the (Im)Possible?', *The European Journal of Women's Studies*, 6 (1999), p. 167.

²⁵ Liddington, *The Long Road*, p. 215.

²⁶ Liddington, *The Long Road*; L. Robinson, 'It Did Get Tiring to Welcome Everyone to the Fire', *Observing the 80s*, 8 November 2013, accessed 22 September 2019, <https://blogs.sussex.ac.uk/observingthe80s/2013/11/08/it-did-get-tiring-to-welcome-everyone-to-the-fire-politics-and-spirituality-at-greenham-common-peace-camp/>.

²⁷ E. Setch, 'The Women's Liberation Movement in Britain, 1969-79: Organisation, Creativity and Debate' (PhD Thesis, University of London Royal Holloway, 2000), p. 142.

²⁸ M. Maynard, 'Beyond the "Big Three": The Development of Feminist Theory into the 1990s', *Women's History Review*, 4 (1995); Rees, 'A Look Back at Anger'; L. Segal, *Is the Future Female? Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism* (London, 1987).

theory lay solely in the foregrounding of “Goddess-given” natural femininity.²⁹ Because feminist spirituality was identified with the worst excesses of essentialism, feminist scholars have offered continual corrections of its perceived sins, rather than examining its impact on a generation of feminist activists. On this basis, the centrality of spirituality to the women’s movement has been ignored and effaced.

Contrary to this literature, I argue that spirituality, magic and mysticism undergirded the women’s antimilitarist protest at Greenham Common. In part, my project aligns with the work of Christina Welch, Anna Feigenbaum and Shai Feraro who have emphasised the importance of Goddess spirituality and the matriarchal tradition at Greenham.³⁰ However, unlike these scholars, my aim is not only to reassert the position of spirituality in British feminist cultures, nor do I necessarily want to claim that we can uncover political insight from an approach that has been dismissed as essentialist, albeit too readily.³¹ Instead, I want to explore what the ambivalence towards spiritual politics can tell us about the boundaries of acceptability within feminist theory. Clare Hemmings has recently argued that the way in which feminist theory delineates between “good” and “bad” theorists has produced a dominant narrative of the feminist past, that usually locates the origins and development of radical feminist thought in the West.³² While acknowledging that projects which seek to highlight and rectify omissions are important, Hemmings urges us to apply our critical lens to the affective regimes and lures of prior agreement that underpin dominant narrative forms. In this chapter, I take feminist

²⁹ Lesbian Left, ‘Birmingham and the Sixth Demand’, in Feminist Anthology Collective (ed.), *No Turning Back: Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement 1975-80* (London, 1981).

³⁰ C. Welch, ‘The Spirituality of, and at, Greenham Common Peace Camp’, *Feminist Theory*, 18 (2010); A. Feigenbaum, ‘From Cyborg Feminism to Drone Feminism: Remembering Women’s Anti-Nuclear Activisms’, *Feminist Theory*, 16 (2015); S. Feraro, ‘Invoking Hecate at the Women’s Peace Camp: The Presence of Goddess Spirituality and Dianic Witchcraft at Greenham Common in the 1980s’, *Magic, Religion, and Witchcraft*, 11 (2016).

³¹ C. Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham NC, 2011), p. 192.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

spirituality seriously precisely because it poses an epistemological challenge to the perceived secularism of the second wave project.

As I explained in the introduction to this thesis, these problems are compounded by historiography on religious change in modern and contemporary Britain. Although few historians nowadays would subscribe to what Charles Taylor calls the “subtractive” theory of secularisation (where religious change is depicted in terms of inevitable loss and decline), the theory’s foundational concepts still form the presumed context around which narratives of modern Britain are built. Secularisation assumes the incompatibility of modernity and belief, often resulting in the dismissal of spiritual commitments as, paradoxically, existing in spite of modernity rather than constituted by modernity. These issues are related to what some historians are calling the “ontological turn”. Drawing on the earlier work of Dipesh Chakrabarty, Greg Anderson has recently argued that the ontological commitments of conventional historicism reflect Western assumptions about the nature of reality.³³ Conceived of in this way, the “real world” does not include phenomena traditionally associated with magic, religious belief, and ritual; exclusions that come to the fore with regard to aspects of “subaltern” pasts.³⁴ In this way, claims or assumptions about the secular nature of modernity are legitimised, not by historical arguments, but because of culturally specific, and largely unexamined, assumptions about what can constitute a historical fact.³⁵ As Chakrabarty reminds us, the exclusion, or rationalisation, of the supernatural is an epistemological problem because it reflects a particular way of creating knowledge about the past.³⁶

Starting with the distinctly spiritual source material I uncovered at the Greenham archive, this chapter aims to place Goddess politics at the centre of the activism, ideology and symbolism

³³ Anderson, ‘Ontological Turn’.

³⁴ H. White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore MD, 1987), p. 66; Holton, ‘Movements of the Soul’.

³⁵ D. Chakrabarty, ‘Minority Histories, Subaltern Past’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33 (1998).

³⁶ Chakrabarty, ‘Minority Histories’; Holton, ‘Movements of the Soul’.

of the Women's Peace Camp. In the following, I show how protesters' emphasis on ecological politics and nonviolence in a women-only setting were theorised by the MSG long before Greenham began. I also reveal how the practical politics of magical creatures and symbols, for which Greenham is famed, were drawn directly from the Goddess movement's feminist reclamation practices, rather than the American women's peace movement as scholars like to claim. In order to explain how Goddess feminism came to have such a marked presence at the Women's Peace Camp, I take my cue from camper Jayne Burton who was drawn to the inventive spiritual politics of women from a Sheffield-based Matriarchy Study group, including Sarah Green and Katrina Howse, between 1981 and 1984.³⁷ In the broader context of my thesis, this chapter is intended to destabilise and confound traditional histories of Greenham that downplay the serious contribution of Goddess feminists. It also works to set up the problematic that organises the broader piece, between archive material that foregrounds the spirituality of Greenham and our histories that have pushed this spirituality to the margins of 1980s feminist politics.

Matriarchy on Earth: The Sacred Genealogy of Greenham Common

On a warm June day in 1983, some women at Orange Gate were rehearsing a play. "Once women were free and united, and lived together in harmony with nature... This was the matriarchy", smiled the narrator. She had taken the idea for the opening line from a book that was circulating around the camp, "In the beginning... God was a woman. Do you remember?"³⁸ The players leapt out, some bare-breasted and bare-footed, whooping and cartwheeling around in front of a small audience crouching in the grass. "Then the patriarchy

³⁷ Harford and Hopkins, *Women at the Wire*.

³⁸ M. Stone, *The Paradise Papers: The Suppression of Women's Rites* (London, 1976), p. 1.

came to split us up and claim ownership over us and over nature”. Women dressed as men (the patriarchs) marched on carrying trays of tin cans that they tried to sell to the dancing women. The women resisted at first but were subdued one by one. After the salesmen, a priest put veils over the women’s heads and made them kneel, then a thug in dark glasses whipped them into submission with a silk scarf. “But meanwhile some women somewhere were keeping the spirit of woman-power alive”. Three women stepped forward, a Goddess in a rainbow headdress, a witch and a woman playing a guitar. The guitar music released the oppressed women from their trance and the witch wound wool around the patriarchs until they were forced to crouch on the ground, powerlessly entangled in brightly coloured webs. The Goddess freed the women, who stood up, joined hands and began a spiral dance. All the women sang together, “All of our voices and all of our visions / Sisters we can make such sweet harmony...”³⁹

The play, recounted by camper Liz Knight in the *Greenham Women’s Peace Camp newsletter*, is a striking example of how Goddess feminist ideology and practice played out at Greenham during a crucial point in the Camp’s history. Performed as part of a large summer festival on 25 June 1983, 2,000 women came to Greenham that weekend to take part in various symbolic demonstrations and forms of activism. Many of these women would have sat upon the grass with Knight to collectively imagine a time when women and nature were revered under the watchful eye of the Goddess.

The idea for the performance did not arrive fully-formed in the minds of the Orange Gate players. Rather, it drew upon a theory that had underpinned the activities of spiritual feminists in Britain since 1975. Central to the values, organisation and activism of the MSG was a radical rereading of women’s sacred history, which argued that “from the beginning of the human race” until the end of the Neolithic period in approximately 5,000 BC, “everyone took for

³⁹ L. Knight, ‘A Dragon Story’, *Greenham Women’s Peace Camp newsletter* c. 1983, DM2123/2/Politics and Policy 49, FAS.

granted matriarchy values and society was organised on the basis of a woman-led culture”. As an article in the MSG’s first pamphlet *Goddess Shrew* put it in 1977, “The Goddess was worshipped not only in terms of fertility and survival but as a way of life in which the feminine, and female, were considered pre-eminent. Great civilisations were built in these cultures”.⁴⁰ The MSG were active participants in the transatlantic revival of the Victorian matriarchal thesis, originally devised by archaeologists and anthropologists such as Johann Jakob Bachofen, John Ferguson McLennan and Henry Morgan in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴¹ The MSG, along with other British and American feminists such as Marija Gimbutas, Elizabeth Gould Davis and Merlin Stone (whose book *The Paradise Papers* had inspired the Greenham play) sought to reclaim the matriarchal thesis as a way of challenging the normative and objective position of men’s experience in the academy and to re-envision gender relations and society outside patriarchal structures.⁴²

Read through this lens, the Greenham play was a theatrical interpretation of the MSG’s matriarchal thesis. “The patriarchs”, who carried trays of tins to sell to the women, represented the arrival of patriarchal culture and men’s economic domination of women that kept them enslaved.⁴³ The priest, who covered the women and forced them into submissive positions symbolised women’s psychological oppression in societies that worship androcentric forms of divinity, while the thug represented the suppression of women through physical force. Finally, the arrival of the Goddess and the witch, who freed the entrapped women, signified the modern revival of matriarchy on earth, both at Greenham and in broader second-wave cultures. Concluding her summary of the play, Liz Knight reflected on how the play had made her feel:

⁴⁰ ‘Beyond Patriarchy’, *Goddess Shrew* (Spring, 1977), DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

⁴¹ J. J. Bachofen, *Mother Right: A Study of the Religious and Juridical Aspects of Gynecocracy in the Ancient World*, trans. D. Parthenheimer (Lewiston NY, 2003). See also C. Eller, *Gentlemen and Amazons: The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory, 1861-1900* (London, 2011).

⁴² M. Gimbutas, *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe, 7000 to 3500 BC: Myths, Legends and Cult Images* (London, 1974); E. G. Davis, *The First Sex* (London, 1973); Stone, *Paradise Papers*.

⁴³ M. Sjöö, ‘The Ancient Religion of the Great Cosmic Mother of All’, 1975, DM2123/1/85, 5, FAS.

Now I have to go back to the time and place where I usually live. But that's okay. I've been over the rainbow (yes, where blue birds sing and dreams come true!) and I've met the other side of myself. I've reached out for a woman's hand and found them strong. I've touched earth and found it warm... And I wasn't dreaming. I know I can travel there and back again.⁴⁴

In this way, Knight summarised the aims of MSG women such as Arnold, Payne, Long and Sjöo who argued that researching and imagining women's primacy in ancient matriarchal cultures would, "extend [to women] the thought that we all have the psychological power to change our lives".⁴⁵

In order to uncover how matriarchal ideology came to be so present and central at Greenham, I spoke to camper Jayne Burton whose creative input had a significant impact upon the Women's Peace Camp in its formative years. A member of her local CND branch in the West Midlands, Burton had taken part in the Women for Life on Earth peace march that began the women's twenty-year-long occupation of Greenham.⁴⁶ Within the first two months of her stay, Burton became drawn to a small group of women who came to Greenham from Sheffield in December. In a transit van belonging to Sheffield Women for Peace, Ruth Nichol, Katrina Howse and Veronica had come to deliver their friend, social worker Sarah Green (and her tipi), to Yellow Gate, where she intended to stay permanently.⁴⁷ Surprised by the presence of men at the camp and dismayed by the women who were "giving away a lot of energy" trying to set them right, Nichol, Howse and Veronica decided to stay overnight with Green for reassurance.⁴⁸ The following day, Veronica led the women in a protective "white light ritual", in which they sat together in a circle "holding hands, humming and aahing" while imagining a

⁴⁴ Knight, 'A Dragon Story', DM2123/2/PP49, FAS.

⁴⁵ 'Beyond Patriarchy', DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

⁴⁶ Pettitt, *Walking to Greenham*.

⁴⁷ Harford and Hopkins, *Women at the Wire*, p. 26.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

white light emanating out of their bodies and hovering over Green.⁴⁹ At that moment, Burton entered the tipi and intuitively began taking part in the women's ritual. "It felt like the ritual had begun its work" recalled Nichol, "Jayne was there so it was OK. We could 'leave' Sarah safely".⁵⁰

Although Burton did not know it then, the ritualising women in the tipi were from the Sheffield MSG, which had been part of the broader matriarchy network since 1977.⁵¹ The group had formed following a visit by several members of the London MSG, including Pauline Long, who presented the women with a slide show on their research into matriarchy and Goddess symbolism.⁵² Between 1977 and 1979, the Sheffield matriarchal women had experimented with marking "solstitial and other matriarchal festivals", "exploring and experiencing the megalithic sites in Derbyshire" and testing out different rituals for their consciousness-raising potential.⁵³ At Greenham, Burton was impressed by their creative ideas, so different from anything she had heard before. "The concept of Goddess was new for me", she recalled, "The magic of the ordinary woman... but it struck a chord straight away".⁵⁴ Giving her first-hand account to Barbara Harford and Sarah Hopkins just a few months later, Burton framed her understanding of nuclear arms, and patriarchy, through a matriarchal lens:

Patriarchy literally means father rule – and once you spot it, it never goes away: the percentage of men who are involved in the military, the government, positions of power; and of course, there is God the Father, supposed creator of all life – the life force

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ 'Letter from the Sheffield Matriarchy Study Group', *Politics of Matriarchy* (1979), Papers of Berta Freistadt, 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

⁵² Letter to Pauline Long from Helen, 3 December c. 1977, DM2767, 5/1, FAS; 'Matriarchy Study Group Application for Grants', December 1978, DM2123/2, RWV1, FAS.

⁵³ 'Sheffield Matriarchy Study Group', 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

⁵⁴ Interview with Jayne Burton, 18 June 2018.

itself given the masculine gender. I think that is very important – the language we have, the labels we use, they permeate our thinking.⁵⁵

The way in which Burton drew connections between male dominance and the symbolic primacy of the patriarchal God came straight out of the MSG's understanding of women's oppression. The group believed that men and women's roles in contemporary society were stereotyped by dominant religious cultures, as they explained in *Goddess Shrew*, "Today, even where people are not churchgoing or even 'religious' they are conditioned through life in every sector of society to accept its tenets – of a Father God, or even, (if very advanced) of the brotherhood of man".⁵⁶ Group member Monica Sjöö was particularly vocal on this point, arguing as early as 1972 that depicting God as "creator of all life" drew associations between men, creativity and transcendence, while women, who had the biological capacity to create, were dismissed as earthy and profane.⁵⁷

Straight away Burton, Green, Nichol and Howse (who decided to stay at the Camp) began deploying spiritual feminist ideology and symbolism in their approach to life at Greenham. Howse built a Goddess figure to guard over Yellow Gate (Fig. 2) and, a year prior to the Embrace the Base action, Green hung "painted and written messages" along the perimeter fence "in celebration to the trees and the Earth" and for other peace campers to see.⁵⁸ The creative and symbolic actions of the Sheffield MSG women attracted other Women's Camp protesters who, like Burton, were unfamiliar with Goddess politics but attracted to their vibrancy. German woman Babs Schmidt, who became interested in the relationship between ecology and women's spirituality, began participating in action with the Sheffield women, as did Ioma Ax who became well-known at Greenham for carrying a double-headed axe, which

⁵⁵ Harford and Hopkins, *Women at the Wire*, p. 43.

⁵⁶ 'Beyond Patriarchy', DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

⁵⁷ M. Sjöö, 'A Woman's Struggle to Creating Feminist Images = A Statement' in M. Sjöö, L. Moore and A. Berg, *Towards a Revolutionary Feminist Art*, 1 (1972), DM2123/1/87, 1, FAS.

⁵⁸ Harford and Hopkins, *Women at the Wire*, pp. 26-27.

members of the MRRN argued was a symbol of the Goddess.⁵⁹ In March 1982, when the weather had improved, the women decided to build a tree house around a poplar tree to provide a communal structure for the women at Yellow Gate.⁶⁰ Nichol recalled going on a search for organic building materials:

We went gathering reeds from the side of the River Kennet to weave into walls and roof for the tree house – me, Jayne, Sarah, Io and Babs – and as we hummed and sang and called out to each other, I felt a strange connecting timelessness – imagining women doing this together centuries ago and still doing it now all over the world wherever there is relative peace.⁶¹

In this quotation, Nichol deployed several themes that Goddess feminists would have recognised. In the matriarchy network, the River Kennet had sacred significance because of the proximity of its source (Swallowhead Spring) to Silbury Hill in Wiltshire. According to geographer Michael Dames (whose book *The Silbury Treasure* Green had brought with her to Greenham), Silbury Hill, the Avebury Stone Circle and West Kennet long barrow were important sites in the indigenous Goddess religion of Neolithic Britain.⁶² Nichol's comment about feeling a "strange connecting timelessness" with women across space echoes a spiritual experience Sjöo had on the top of Silbury Hill in 1978, which she reflected on multiple times in British and American matriarchal literature.⁶³ Just like Nichol, Sjöo had felt "transported thousands of years back in time... caught in eternity" when she reached the top of Silbury Hill,

⁵⁹ *MRRN newsletter*, 3 (January, 1982), FL; Interview with Jayne Burton, 28 August 2018.

⁶⁰ Harford and Hopkins, *Women at the Wire*, p. 42.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁶² Interview with Jayne Burton, 28 August 2018; M. Dames, *The Silbury Treasure: The Great Goddess Rediscovered* (London, 1976).

⁶³ M. Sjöo, 'An Avebury Experience: Life, Death and Rebirth at Avebury on 6th February 1978', *Politics of Matriarchy*, 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL; M. Sjöo, 'A Trip to Avebury', *WomanSpirit*, 5 (Winter Solstice, 1978); M. Sjöo, 'Spiral Journey', manuscript, 1984, DM2123/1/81, 2, FAS; Sjöo and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, pp. 133-137.

invoking a common belief among matriarchal feminists about the universal experiences of women across time and space.⁶⁴

The Sheffield MSG women, and their growing network of friends, did not only have a significant impact on the aesthetics of Greenham. Shocked by the presence of men at the Camp, Green became centrally involved in the decision to make Greenham women-only in February 1982, reflecting a controversial, although broadly accepted, belief in separatism among matriarchal feminists.⁶⁵ A month later, Green, along with Burton, started planning a weekend-long festival to celebrate the Spring Equinox. Seasonal celebrations that were loosely based upon neo-Pagan and Druid interpretations of Celtic religiosity became common practice in the matriarchal network from the beginning of the 1980s, intended to capture something of the religion of the Neolithic Goddess while also reinforcing the women's ecofeminist principles. In the last few months of 1982, Burton and Green paired up again to plan a larger demonstration, something that would bring thousands of women to Greenham for a collective action. The idea had come to Green a year before when she was walking the length of the perimeter fence:

I remembered something someone had told me about a community in Africa... how it deals with one of its clan who has done something antisocial... against the code of the people. The person is surrounded by all the others in the community. Each of the people remembers good things about the person... They make statements of support and recognition. This goes on until the person in the centre gets enough affirmation and good feelings, until they believe in themselves and Life and no longer need to damage.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Sjöo, 'Spiral Journey', DM2123/1/81, 2, FAS.

⁶⁵ Harford and Hopkins, *Women at the Wire*, pp. 32, 165.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28.



Figure 2. Photograph of the Sheffield Matriarchy Study Group Goddess figure at Yellow Gate c. 1981. Courtesy of Jayne Burton.

Burton remembered Green suggesting to her, quietly, that women might like to come and hold hands around the base.⁶⁷ Together, the two women worked on a chain letter to inform other women about the action. “Sarah did the side about closing the base, the blockades”, recalled Burton, “but my baby was... decorating the fence with things that meant something to you, like bringing real life”.⁶⁸ Burton understood the vibrant inspiration of those early years as mystically inspired, “The Goddess worked through me”.⁶⁹

The matriarchal women from Sheffield were not the only Goddess feminists to camp at Greenham during its formative years. On learning that the Camp was women-only, Glastonbury-based MRRN member Jean Freer arrived for the Spring Equinox ‘Festival of Life’ in March 1982 and stayed at Green Gate until November 1983.⁷⁰ At that time, Freer was only just becoming involved with British matriarchal feminism, having come to the Goddess via Zsuzsanna Budapest’s separatist Dianic Wiccan coven in Los Angeles in 1974.⁷¹ In 1984, Freer wrote a pamphlet entitled *Raging Womyn* (1984) in response to accusations that the Greenham protest promoted essentialising visions of femininity, insightfully commenting upon the marginalisation of Goddess spirituality in the women’s movement, “The WLM oppresses witches and pacifists, two groups Greenham encompasses”.⁷² Kathy Jones, who would later become the matriarch of the Goddess movement in Glastonbury, arrived at Greenham for the Embrace the Base action.⁷³ According to Shai Feraro, Jones wrote two matriarchy-inspired plays during her stay at the Women’s Peace Camp that she performed later at the Glastonbury assembly rooms.⁷⁴ Although Monica Sjöö, who had inspired so much of the Sheffield MSG’s

⁶⁷ Interview with Jayne Burton, 18 June 2018.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Feraro, ‘Invoking Hecate’, p. 236.

⁷¹ ‘Jeane Freer’s Life Story’, accessed 23 September 2019, <http://freer.org/pages/about.htm#Beliefs>.

⁷² J. Freer, ‘Raging Womyn: A Greenham Womyn replied to Breaching the Peace’, manuscript, c. 1984, FL.

⁷³ Feraro, ‘Invoking Hecate’, p. 236.

⁷⁴ Feraro, ‘Invoking Hecate’, p. 236; K. Jones, *On Finding Treasure: Mystery Plays of the Goddess* (Glastonbury, 1996).

activities and perspectives, did not camp for extended periods of time at Greenham, she did attend the Reclaim Salisbury Plain action in 1985 with well-known American Goddess feminist Starhawk.⁷⁵ As I learned from my interviews with Geraldine Charles and Cheryl Straffon, it is likely that many other women who had come to the Goddess independently of the MRRN also camped at Greenham.⁷⁶

While the Sheffield MSG women at Greenham maintained close contact with the MRRN for the first few months of their stay at the Women's Peace Camp, the relationship became increasingly distant over time. In January 1982, just a month after they had arrived, two of the Sheffield women travelled from Greenham to West Kennet long barrow in Wiltshire to celebrate the winter solstice with eight matriarchal women from London.⁷⁷ After that seasonal celebration, Howse wrote regularly to the *MRRN newsletter* to remind other matriarchal women what was going on at Greenham and inviting them to participate.⁷⁸ However, the form Goddess spirituality was taking at Greenham was starting to diverge from the primarily academic interests of the MRRN. As I explain in Chapter 3, the intertwining of direct action with matriarchal magic gave rise a new grassroots community of Goddess feminists in the 1990s when the Women's Peace Camp was going into decline.

The Goddess, Ecological Politics and Nonviolence

Despite the declining rate of communication between the formal networks of the matriarchy network and the Greenham women, matriarchal ideology still had an impact upon the protesters' theorising of their women-only community at the Camp. This was particularly

⁷⁵ *MRRN newsletter*, 28 (Summer Solstice, 1985), FL.

⁷⁶ Interview with Geraldine Charles, 15 February 2016; interview with Cheryl Straffon, 15 March 2016.

⁷⁷ *MRRN newsletter*, 3 (January, 1982), FL.

⁷⁸ *MRRN newsletter*, 9 (Halloween, 1982), FL.

visible in the emphasis placed upon ecological politics and nonviolence at Greenham. While Greenham scholar (and former camper) Roseneil claims that ecofeminist ideas were inspired by the American Women's Pentagon Action in 1980, at least five years earlier, the MSG had developed an ecofeminist ideology grounded in belief in the Goddess.⁷⁹ In a direct denial of patriarchal religions that carve up the world into hierarchical oppositions, the MSG argued that the Goddess represented the sacrality of all things on earth, "wholeness and completion as against male polarisation of the universe."⁸⁰ As group member Margaret Roy explained in the group's third and final pamphlet, *Politics of Matriarchy* (1979):

Supreme Mother can be seen in Mother Nature who is more than pretty flowers. She is the harmony and balance of the natural order, and the ebb and flow, growth and decay, of Life itself... These characteristics are expressed in the communal participation and organisation of work and decision-making, in a caring and cherishing of human potential and in a communal search to explore the meaning of life.⁸¹

The MSG, then, was not only feminist, but ecological in orientation. As I explain in Chapter 2, before founding the MSG, Denise Arnold, Janet Payne, Liz Moore and Marianne* had been influenced by the ecological politics of Gandhian activist Satish Kumar, and wrote for his spiritual-ecological magazine *Resurgence* during the mid-1970s.⁸² In their own MSG publications, the women drew heavily upon French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne, who is often credited with making one of the first statements on ecofeminism, as well as American feminist Nancy Jack Todd who argued that, because women and the earth were both oppressed

⁷⁹ 'Excerpts from the Women's Pentagon Action Unity Statement', in P. McAllister (ed.), *Reweaving the Web of Life: Feminism and Nonviolence* (Philadelphia PA, 1982); Y. King, 'All Is Connectedness: Scenes from the Women's Pentagon Action, USA', in L. Jones (ed.), *Keeping the Peace* (London, 1983); Roseneil, *Disarming Patriarchy*, p. 67.

⁸⁰ 'Hallowe'en - Reclaiming the Night', *Matriarchy News*, 1 (1980), FL.

⁸¹ M. Roy, 'Politics of Women's Power', *Politics of Matriarchy*, 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

* Pseudonym.

⁸² Correspondence with Denise Arnold, 27 September 2018; correspondence with Marianne, 8 October 2018.

by men, women had unique insight into the ecological crisis.⁸³ Because of this, eco-politics were at the centre of the MSG's theorising about patriarchy from the beginning, as shown in an article written by the collective in *Goddess Shrew*:

The Neolithic culture based on cultivation of the soil by hoe, was replaced by an agriculture based on fire and irrigation, which began the devastation of the planet and depletion of resources, by destroying vast areas of land which had been the granaries of the ancient world.⁸⁴

From the late 1970s, matriarchal ecological politics were most actively developed by Sjöö, who anticipated the intervention of American writers like Susan Griffin and Carolyn Merchant by arguing for the existence of the dual oppression of women and the industrial exploitation of the earth in patriarchal societies.⁸⁵ Ecofeminism came to the fore of Sjöö's political imaginary following a spiritual experience on top of Silbury Hill in 1978. Feeling suddenly in divine communication with the Cosmic Mother, Sjöö recalled, "I now understand what Mother Earth means, something so enormous, powerful... also so painful in my own woman's body which is like Hers... violent but gentle... powerful but vulnerable..."⁸⁶ In this way, the urgency of the ecological crisis, for Sjöö, was linked intrinsically to her belief in the Cosmic Mother.

Echoing Sjöö's spiritual vision of radical immanence, Greenham women regularly referred to the Common on which they camped as inherently "sacred."⁸⁷ Camper Beth Junor remembered deploying this idea during one of many attempted evictions of the Peace Camp, "We felt that that was our land, not in a possessive sense but in a spiritual sense."⁸⁸ This was a useful

⁸³ F. d'Eaubonne, 'Feminism and Ecology', *Peace News*, 19 November 1976; N. J. Todd, 'Women and Ecology', *Journal of the New Alchemists*, 3 (1976).

⁸⁴ 'Matriarchy v Patriarchy: As We See It', *Goddess Shrew*, DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

⁸⁵ S. Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring inside Her* (New York, 1978); C. Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (London, 1979).

⁸⁶ Sjöö, 'Avebury Experience', 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

⁸⁷ B. Junor, *Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp: A History of Non-Violent Resistance, 1984-1995* (London, 1995), p. 55.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

ideological tool for the women, who applied the technique of feminist reversal to the patriarchal dualism ‘sacred/profane’. Spiritual feminists like Sjöö argued that this dualism was used by institutional religions to sanction the marginalisation of women, whose bodies and biological processes were usually associated with ‘profanity’.⁸⁹ Greenham women turned this opposition on its head, accusing the military base of making the sacred land profane with nuclear weaponry. As John Schofield and Mike Anderton argue, this rhetorical device challenged the dominant ideology of the base as a functioning and necessary military site.⁹⁰ The reversal played out in actions like tying tampons and menstrual pads to the perimeter fence, which “absolutely stunned and repulsed” the men inside the base.⁹¹ Being untouchable to patriarchy, the blood cloths made impotent the power of the military base and its nuclear weaponry.

Spiritual orientation towards the natural world informed many other direct actions at Greenham, as well as personal acts of subversion. Thanks to the early input of Goddess women like Green, Burton and Howse, many of these took place to coincide with seasonal festivals from Celtic mythology, such as Imbolc (spring), Beltane (summer), Lammas (autumn), and Samhain (winter) as well as the equinoxes and solstices. In this way, Greenham women followed the women of the MRRN, who eschewed patriarchal dating systems for feminist and ecological alternatives.⁹² Green remembered celebrating Samhain in 1981 by walking the “widdershins” of the nine-mile perimeter.⁹³ This was a subversive act. In folk mythology, walking the widdershins, or travelling in the opposite direction to the sun, was an invitation to chaos and confusion. However, as Green explained, her act was not only meant to curse the

⁸⁹ Sjöö, ‘A Woman’s Struggle’, DM2123/1/87, 1, FAS.

⁹⁰ J. Schofield and M. Anderton, ‘The Queer Archaeology of Green Gate: Interpreting Contested Space at Greenham Common Airbase’, *World Archaeology*, 32 (2000), p. 246.

⁹¹ C. Amberston, *Blessings of the Blood: A Book of Menstrual Lore and Rituals for Women* (Victoria BC, 1991), pp. 60-61.

⁹² M. Coghill and S. Redmond, ‘Feminism and Spirituality’, in J. Holland (ed.), *Feminist Action I* (London, 1984), p. 101. Sheffield Matriarchy Study Group ‘Lunar Calendar 1980’, ‘Lunar Solar Calendar 1981’, ‘Solar Lunar 1982 Calendar’, DM2123/7/9 Economics and Law; Religion/World Views; Spirituality/Festivals, FAS.

⁹³ Harford and Hopkins, *Women at the Wire*, p. 27.

military base, it also tied in with spiritual reverence for life on earth, “Our motivation was our love for life and a celebration at the turning of the seasons and the returning of a new year.”⁹⁴

As explained above, seasonal celebration was used in a collective action for the first time at Green and Burton’s Festival of Life in which Greenham women celebrated the balance and renewal of the seasons.

In their theorising of ecofeminist politics, Greenham women consciously deployed Sjöö’s understanding of spiritual connectedness between women, the earth and the Goddess. They regularly experimented with this theme in creative writing pieces, poems and songs that featured in Greenham newsletters and demonstration booklets. The anonymous author of a poem in the May 1984 edition of the *Green and Common newsletter*, for example, conflated the sexual violation of women with the subordination of nature to human profit, “I am still being raped, we all are / quietly they shred the skins of the earth / quietly they rob her rape her rob her / of her life.”⁹⁵ This poem echoes Sjöö’s work, in which she identified the links between masculine consciousness and the devaluation of both women and nature, “Based in matricide, the death of all nature, and the utter exploitation of women, Western culture has now run itself into the ground.”⁹⁶ In the same edition of the newsletter, Babs Schmidt, who moved to the camp full-time after the Spring Equinox celebration, referred to her understanding of ecofeminism in explicitly spiritual terms, “The strength of the spirit is what binds us to the earth / With the binding comes death and the rebirth / The care we demand is by nature herself / the most wonderful present.”⁹⁷ Like Sjöö, Schmidt highlighted the ways in which the dual oppression of women and nature under patriarchy privileges women to speak for the natural world.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ *Green and Common May News*, (1984), FL.

⁹⁶ Sjöö and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, p. xviii.

⁹⁷ B. Schmidt, ‘Green Gate’, *Greenham Women’s Peace Camp newsletter*, c. 1983, DM2123/2/PP49, FAS.

The idea of sacred continuity between all things on earth was also visually represented in Greenham publications. In the 1984 edition of the *Women's Peace Camp newsletter*, a hand-drawn cartoon depicted a Greenham woman planting "Womin Seeds" in the shape of the Venus emblem, the most common symbol of the women's movement (Fig. 3). In the grass, three naked women emerge from the earth, their growth encouraged by a second Greenham woman with a watering can. This drawing represented the spiritual feminist understanding that all life comes from Mother Earth, with whom humanity must reconnect in order to grow. Another drawing in the February 1983 edition of the *Women's Peace Camp newsletter* depicted the top half of a woman's body merging with the base of a tree. Although the woman appeared attached to the earth through her roots, her hands stretched high above her head to a half-moon floating a little way above her. In the image, the woman/tree occupied both the earthly and cosmic realms, symbolising the break-down of cosmological separation between women-human-earth-immanence and men-divinity-spirit-transcendence. This image visually depicted the spiritual feminist conceptualisation of embodied immanence as a refusal of dualistic social organisation. Spiritual ecology also fed into the Greenham women's theorising of nonviolence, to which a public commitment was made at the Festival for Life in March 1982. Although Greenham scholars, such as Roseneil and Liddington, argue that military and nuclear weapons were not issues for concern within the women's movement during the 1970s, the women of the feminist spirituality movement in Britain had already confronted this issue, developing from it a broader philosophy of nonviolence.⁹⁸ Again, these politics had been inspired by the founders of MSG, whose political development took place in the context of debates around Christian, Hindu and Buddhist approaches to peace. As I show in the following chapter, during the early 1970s Arnold, Payne, Moore and Marianne were exposed to these discussions in adult education

⁹⁸ Roseneil, *Disarming Patriarchy*, p. 21.

classes at the London School of Nonviolence (LSN), which sought to theorise a philosophical and revolutionary approach to nonviolence.



Figure 3. “Womin Seeds” cartoon, *Women’s Peace Camp newsletter*, 1984. Feminist Library, London.

Following the MSG’s commitment to theorising nonviolence, Pat Whiting of the Brighton matriarchy group identified nuclear warfare as the “ultimate horror” of patriarchal violence:

Our consumer orientated media glamorise male physical brutality, especially as it applies to women and female sexuality, yet studiously ignore the ultimate horror of the patriarchal violence – the potential for nuclear holocaust.⁹⁹

Whiting grounded her analysis of patriarchal violence in her vision of the Patriarchal Takeover, which spiritual feminists argued brought about the end of matriarchal societies up to 5,000

⁹⁹ P. Whiting, ‘Goddess Politics’, *Politics of Matriarchy*, 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

years ago. Violence, she argued, originated in, and became inherent to, patriarchal societies after matriarchal communities had been destroyed. Expanding upon this idea in the same pamphlet, Anna Perenna made the link from the single issue of nuclear weaponry to all injustices that occur within hierarchical and exclusionary patriarchal structures, writing, “Patriarchal power is expressed through release of energy as violence, at any time. All energy, both personal and State energy must be controlled by patriarchy.”¹⁰⁰ This broader philosophy of feminist nonviolence is usually linked to developments in feminist thought during the 1980s, in particular the work of the Feminism and Nonviolence Study Group that began in 1976.¹⁰¹ While true, this link is emphasised by scholars to the exclusion of feminist spirituality that was also able to offer a sophisticated theory of nonviolence in the years before Greenham began.

The spiritual origins of Greenham’s philosophy of nonviolence are visible in the women’s experimentation with symbolic and magical forms of direct action. As theologian Elizabeth Stewart has argued, during these actions, Greenham women invoked a belief in “unseen forces”, and allowed for the possibility that symbolic gestures and ritual activities could change the world.¹⁰² This was visible in large Wiccan-inspired demonstrations such as Embrace the Base, and during smaller acts of resistance. The January/February 1984 edition of the *Green and Common newsletter*, for example, contained a report of an eviction at Yellow Gate during which some women had joined hands in a circle around an eviction van. “When the van tried to drive away”, explained the author, “the tyres had been let down and the petrol cap had disappeared.”¹⁰³ Here, the writer suggested that the women were able to disable the van with their magical energies alone, rather than through physical manipulation. This story was accompanied by an illustration of the action, where the artist represented the women’s powers

¹⁰⁰ A. Perenna, ‘Towards a Matriarchal Manifesto’, *Politics of Matriarchy*, 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

¹⁰¹ Feminism and Nonviolence Study Group *Piecing It Together: Feminism and Nonviolence* (Devon, 1983).

¹⁰² E. Stuart, ‘Exploding Mystery: Feminist Theology and the Sacramental’, *Feminist Theology*, 12 (2004), p. 230.

¹⁰³ *Green and Common January/February news* (1984), FL.

by drawing jagged lines that emanated from their bodies. Inscribed above the women's heads, like a chant, were the words, "Effect the metal vibrations". Similarly, in her memoir of Greenham, camper Lynne Jones recalled hearing a story about an American serviceman who had been menacingly revving his motorcycle at some women when the bike spontaneously burst into flames between his legs. Lynne's friend, Ioma Ax, interpreted this as a mystical event, brought about by the women focusing their collective wills to disable the threatening soldier. "That's what convinced me to stay [at Greenham]", Ax had said, "Magic."¹⁰⁴

Snakes and Spiders, Webs and Witches: Reclamation Politics at Greenham

Not only did feminist spirituality provide the discursive origins for Greenham's ecofeminist and nonviolent ideology, it also informed the feminist reclamation practices for which the Women's Peace Camp is famed. As Laware, Feigenbaum, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have argued, Greenham women deployed a protest strategy centred on visual symbolism and myth-making practices.¹⁰⁵ By appropriating imagery from ancient history as well as Celtic and non-Western spiritual practices, the protesters sought to disrupt and challenge dominant patriarchal myths that made nuclear proliferation acceptable. To this end, symbolic creatures such as spiders, snakes and witches appeared all over the Camp, in physical form made from lengths of fabric and plastic sheeting, decorated in paint and strewn across the dull green wire of the perimeter fence, or even worn as costumes. As Feigenbaum notes, they also featured heavily in Camp newsletters and magazines, often the subject of poems or stories, or as

¹⁰⁴ L. Jones, 'On Common Ground: The Women's Peace Camp at Greenham Common', in L. Jones (ed.), *Keeping the Peace* (London, 1983), p. 94.

¹⁰⁵ Feigenbaum, 'From Cyborg Feminism to Drone Feminism'; M. Laware, 'Circling the Missiles and Staining Them Red: Feminist Rhetorical Invention and Strategies of Resistance at the Women's Peace Camp at Greenham Common', *NWSA Journal*, 16 (2004); P. Stallybrass and A. White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London, 1986), p. 24.

cartoons sketched in between lines of text and around the margins.¹⁰⁶ Infused with negative connotations in dominant patriarchal discourse, Greenham women inverted or reversed their meaning, drawing on alternative myths and stories as empowering feminist tools. In this way, their aims were both subversive and inventive: to corrupt and contest dominant language and mythology, and create a new language and image-system that spoke to women's experiences. As Burton summarised in the February 1983 *Women's Peace Camp newsletter*, "We are learning, growing, re-discovering the stories of old".¹⁰⁷

This practice of feminist reclamation can be traced back to the British Goddess movement. The early work of MSG members such as Pauline Long and Margaret Roy had centred upon reclaiming ancient Goddesses and their symbolism in order to re-orientate patriarchal religions and cultural myths that worked to oppress women.¹⁰⁸ Long, whose matriarchal research during the 1970s uncovered evidence of Goddess religion in the Old and New Testaments, reclaimed Eve, the serpent, Abraham's wife Sarah and Lots daughters from their negative representation.¹⁰⁹ Roy, similarly, sought to reclaim the Dark Goddess who she believed represented characteristics that were deemed unacceptable in patriarchal visions of femininity.¹¹⁰ In the second edition of *Arachne*, the MRRN collective explained the importance of reclamation politics to the women's movement:

As Elizabeth Oakes Smith said in 1852, 'we aim at nothing less than an entire subversion of the present order of society, a dissolution of the whole existing social compact.' Remembering – re-membering – the Goddess in all her aspects, and in her many names and places, give us the strength to get on with this task.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ Feigenbaum, 'From Cyborg Feminism to Drone Feminism', p. 276.

¹⁰⁷ Jayne, 'Ssssnakes on the Seventh of the Second.....', *Women's Peace Camp newsletter*, (February, 1983), DM2123/1, 23, FAS.

¹⁰⁸ Long, 'How and Why', DM2767,1, FAS.

¹⁰⁹ P. Long, 'Old Testament: Covenant against the Goddess', *Goddess Shrew*, DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

¹¹⁰ Roy, 'Politics of Women's Power', 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

¹¹¹ 'Arachne Reborn', *Arachne*, 2 (1985), FL.

In this way, the MSG argued that reclamation politics were a way of taking back the power of naming, reclaiming and recoding particular signs that had taken on phallogentric meaning, allowing women to discover hidden truths about their collective knowledge and power.¹¹²

Spiders and webs were among the most recognisable spiritual symbols at Greenham Common. Writing in the *Sunday Times*, journalist Leonie Caldecott noted their prevalence during the Embrace the Base action, “Symbols became important, especially the woollen webs that the women had begun to weave in the perimeter fence – an image that reappeared on the poster advertising last Sunday’s event.”¹¹³ In the same article, Caldecott not only linked the web imagery to ecofeminist aims at Greenham, she also commented on their origins in spiritual sources, “An ancient, archetypal symbol of the spider goddess, weaving the web of life.”¹¹⁴ As Caldecott rightly states, webs and spiders were used at Greenham to symbolise the ecological relationship. By weaving woollen webs with which to decorate the military base, Greenham women depicted the web of life that made visible the threads of energy linking all living things together on earth, emphasising their entwined fate. Camper Chris Mulvey, who gave her testimony to Harford and Hopkins in 1984, recalled the meaning she took from weaving webs into the perimeter fence during Embrace the Base:

Like the spider goddess, I will weave with you the threads of our existence, human, animal, and plant together. I will bind them with truth and love and gentleness. Together, strong enough to overcome all lies and violence, we will build again a web of life. Tirelessly, as often as is needed, again and again and again...¹¹⁵

In this quotation Mulvey, like Caldecott, linked the spider imagery used at Greenham to the ancient mythology of the Spider Goddess. Sjöö had explored the symbolism of webs and

¹¹² Feigenbaum, ‘From Cyborg Feminism to Drone Feminism’.

¹¹³ Caldecott, ‘Web of Life’, 1982, 5GCW/E/1, 15, TWL.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Harford and Hopkins, *Women at the Wire*, p. 92.

spiders in relation to the matriarchal Navajo women weavers who, she claimed, “experience themselves as being directly inspired by the Great Spider Woman, the original weaver of the universe.”¹¹⁶ By spinning woollen webs into the perimeter fence, Greenham women became Spider Goddesses themselves, their webs symbolising their attempts to repair the split, torn and fragmented web of life that had been damaged by nuclear proliferation. Not until the end of the 1980s would Sjöö reflect upon the implications of participating in Native American culture without practicing a Native American way of life.¹¹⁷

Snake imagery was equally prominent at Greenham. Twisty serpents filled the front cover of the February 1983 *Women’s Peace Camp newsletter*, which Jayne Burton was in charge of producing (Fig. 4). Feigenbaum notes that the double-spiral formation in which the snakes appear symbolised “the balance of the seasons” and a sense of renewal, which took on urgent meaning for the ecologically-orientated Greenham protesters.¹¹⁸ More than this, in the context of spiritual feminist reclamation practices, the snake or serpent represented female sacral powers of wisdom, magic, healing and immortality.¹¹⁹ Like other characters and creatures that appear in the Bible, Long argued that the serpent was transformed into a symbol of evil during the religio-political manoeuvres to discredit the ancient Goddess religion by patriarchy, a process she described in *Goddess Shrew*:

... the serpent (which, of course, tempted Eve) was a symbol of the Mother Goddess and can be seen today in statues of the Goddess in Crete while St. George is seen slaying the dragon in Christian mythology, in the so-called service of a holy helpless virgin, who stands there ready to serve her hero.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Sjöö and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*.

¹¹⁷ N. Sturgeon, ‘Ecofeminist Appropriations and Transnational Environmentalisms’, *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 6 (1999).

¹¹⁸ Feigenbaum, ‘From Cyborg Feminism to Drone Feminism’, p. 276.

¹¹⁹ M. Wakeling, ‘The Serpent and the Goddess’, *Arachne*, 4 (1986), FL.

¹²⁰ Long, ‘Old Testament’, DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

In the 1986 edition of *Arachne*, Mary Wakeling, who began contributing to the MRRN's publications in 1984, sought to rediscover the snake's 'true' meaning by drawing upon imagery from Neolithic Crete, Sumer and Egypt. Presupposing similarities across all of these diverse ancient cultures, Wakeling concluding that the snake was universally celebrated for its complexity of meaning, "Snakes produce many from a clutch of eggs making them an obvious symbol of fertility, yet the poisonous fangs of some, and their need for live food makes them also symbols of death", she wrote.¹²¹ In this way, Wakeling made snakes the perfect symbol for matriarchal feminist aims in that their incorporation of both life and death, earthly and cosmic, fear and hope confounded patriarchal dualisms. By reclaiming the history of snake symbolism, both Wakeling and the women at Greenham revealed the reductive nature of patriarchal coding and demonstrated the possibilities for renewal once such constraints were removed.

Witches were an especially vibrant, and emotionally charged, aspect of feminist reclamation politics both at Greenham and within the matriarchy network. Shai Feraro and Christina Welch note that the term witch was "common currency" at the Women's Peace Camp, appearing in newsletters, illustrations and inspiring songs such as "We Are the Witches of Diana, Singing For Our Lives".¹²² In the matriarchy network, witches were woven into the matriarchal metanarrative consistently from 1975 and well into the 1980s, referred to as if their status and meaning were a matter of common sense.¹²³ In her article about Egyptian fertility practices in *Goddess Shrew*, for example, Pat Whiting made an off-hand comment about the troubled position of the witch in women's sacred history:

¹²¹ Wakeling, 'Serpent and the Goddess', FL.

¹²² Feraro, 'Invoking Hecate', p. 240; Welch, 'The Spirituality of, and at, Greenham Common', p. 239.

¹²³ Some examples include Long, 'Old Testament', P. Whiting, 'Women in Ancient Egypt and Fertility Control'; Angela, 'Trees and their Significance in the Goddess Religion', *Goddess Shrew*, DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS;

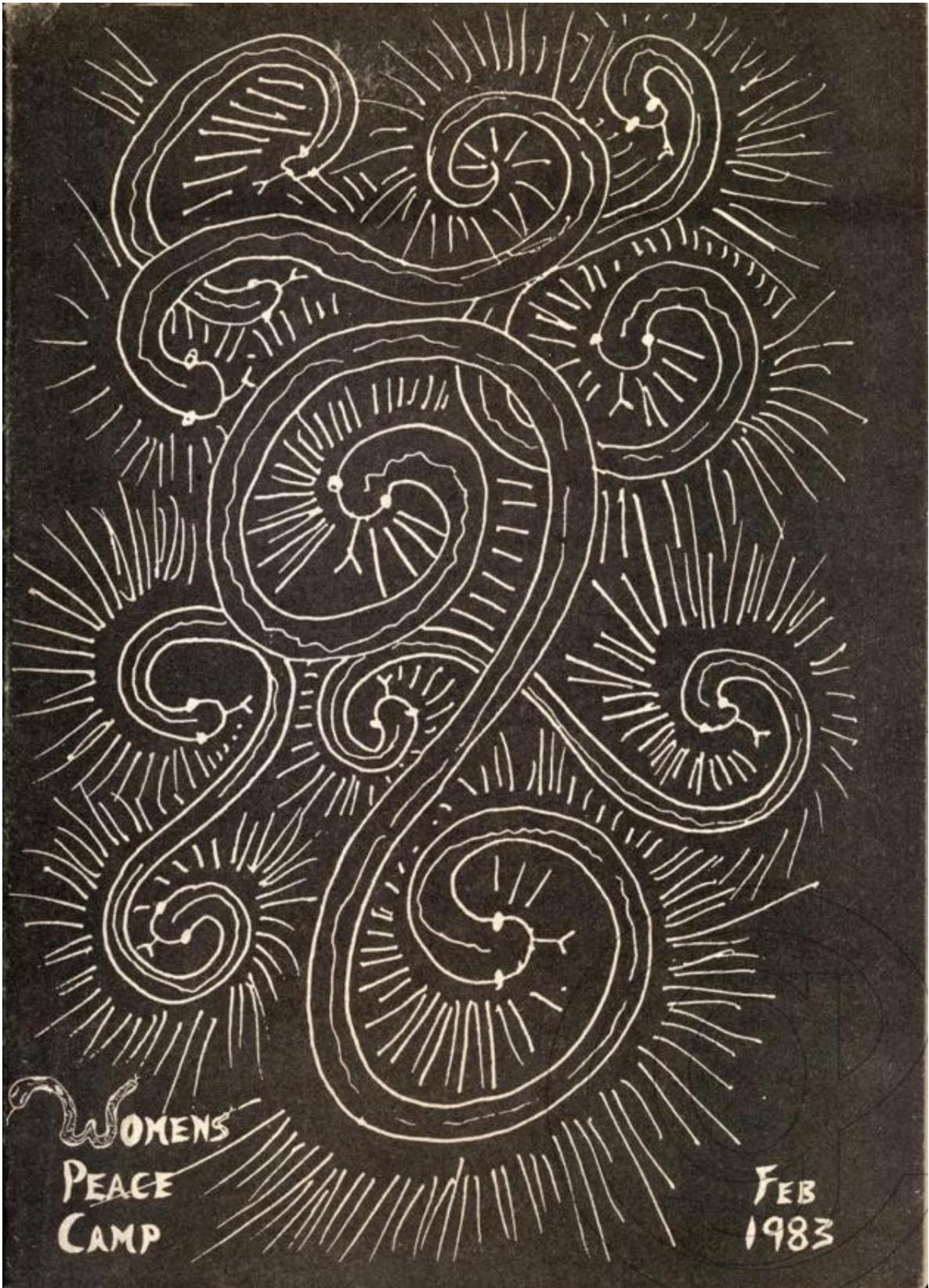


Figure 4. Jayne Burton's edition of the *Women's Peace Camp* newsletter, February 1983.

Feminist Library, London.

Egyptian women still held on to a fantastic degree... control of their fertility which was denied to women in contemporary societies and was completely abolished under the Christian patriarchs who punished women who dared to seek such control (i.e. the witches) with persecution and death.¹²⁴

Monica Sjöö, in particular, had a lot to say about the place of the witch and witchcraft in matriarchy, as well as their relevance to the contemporary women's movement. In her 1975 pamphlet entitled, 'The Ancient Religion of the Great Cosmic Mother of All', which she wrote prior to joining the MSG, Sjöö explained, "The witches or Wiccans (wise women) practiced a prechristian women's religion, the 'Dianic cult' and during the witch-hunts they chose to face a horrible death because they believed that the fertility of the countryside depended on their sacred rites".¹²⁵ In this formation, the fate of the witches stood in for women across time and space who were violently suppressed by patriarchy.

For Sjöö, witches came to symbolise, not only women's oppression, but also the wrongful possession and enclosure of the common land by androcentric institutions. This understanding would later play out at Bristol Cathedral in 1993, when Sjöö and her friends stopped service in order to "[reclaim] a sacred space" and "break the silence of christianity regarding the cruel murder to women in the name of their god".¹²⁶ Sjöö had been formulating her ideas about the interconnectedness of witches and the sacred land since at least 1975; however, these came to the fore more regularly in her writing during the 1980s.¹²⁷ In 1984, Sjöö visited the small village of Loccum near Hanover in Germany where she had been invited to take part in a women's group who were using an ancient folk dance of the Balkans to connect with the Goddess. On conducting research into the village, Sjöö discovered that "as always the church here had taken

¹²⁴ Whiting, 'Women in Ancient Egypt', DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

¹²⁵ Sjöö, 'Ancient Religion', DM2123/1/85, 5, FAS.

¹²⁶ Sheerer, 'Going to Church', FL.

¹²⁷ Sjöö, 'Ancient Religion', DM2123/1/85, 5, FAS.

over an ancient sacred site.” Writing to the *MRRN newsletter*, she explained, “By the cloister, in a field, there is a small circular pond – anciently sacred to the Goddess (?), in which 200 women were drowned as Witches (Hexen) as late as the 1660s”.¹²⁸ After a period of mourning in which Sjöo reflected upon “just how thorough the ‘Witch-Hunts’ (Burning Times) were in Germany”, she returned to the pond with some women and encircled it as the Greenham protesters had done during the Embrace the Base action in December 1982. Sjöo’s understanding of Loccum’s history reflected her eco-feminist politics: that whenever the land is enclosed or wrongly contained, women suffer.

The witch as a symbol for land reclamation fit perfectly with the spatial politics of Greenham Common. As early as January 1982, protesters were making links between the enclosure of the common land, patriarchal law and violence towards women. When Newbury District Council wrote to the Women’s Peace Camp to demand the end of their occupation, some women wrote in response:

They used to burn witches and the law of the time endorsed it. At one time it was illegal for a married woman to retain her property. The Law is not a creature which exists independently... The protection of life on this planet goes beyond the Law and politics.¹²⁹

Similarly, in 1983 the *Green and Common newsletter* reported on a successful Halloween action in which women started tearing down large sections of the perimeter fence for the first time: “the time witch we chose [for the action] was immaculate – magical women’s intuition. We felt happy – dismantling something evil to reveal the beauty of the stolen land – ♀ RECLAIMING, REFOCUSING, REUNITING”.¹³⁰ Using a deliberate misspelling of the word

¹²⁸ *MRRN newsletter*, 23 (Autumn Equinox, 1984), FL.

¹²⁹ Harford and Hopkins, *Women at the Wire*, p. 30.

¹³⁰ *Green and Common Women’s Peace Camp October/November news*, 1983, FL.

‘which’, the author of the action report implied that the destroyers of the fence were themselves witches, intent on reclaiming the land that had been taken from them. Beth Junor reported in her history of the Women’s Peace Camp from 1984, that Sheffield MSG woman Katrina Howse had entered the base and called out to the Goddess “Hecate!”, who MRRN member Cathy explained was associated with darkness and witchcraft.¹³¹ Similar to Sjöo encircling the pond at Loccum, Howse’s act was a way of paying witness to the lives, and terrible deaths, of historical women witches. Indeed, there is evidence of cross-communication between Sjöo and the Greenham protesters when it came to witch symbolism. At Loccum, Sjöo initiated the Irish practice of “keening”, a spiritual act of women’s collective mourning that had been a part of Greenham activism since the winter of 1981, and sang songs from Greenham, including “You can’t kill the Spirit” and “We all come from the Goddess”.¹³²

As well as reclamation of sacred space, Greenham women drew connections between their own experiences of persecution at the hands of the soldiers guarding the base and the witches’ tormentors in the Church. Roseneil recalled that many of the women “who first learned about the witch-hunts... while at Greenham felt a deep connection across time with them”.¹³³ This notion of a universal sisterhood with women across time and space (sometimes referred to as “woman culture”) had been developed by the MSG since the 1970s.¹³⁴ Writing in the MRRN’s journal *Arachne*, Susan B. Paxton applied this idea of women’s sacred continuity to historical women accused of witchcraft. Paxton argued that the word “witch” had been wielded by patriarchs across centuries to marginalise women who refuse to conform to traditional feminine standards or lifestyles:

¹³¹ *MRRN newsletter*, 10 (Winter Solstice, 1982), FL; Junor, *Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp*, p. 29.

¹³² *MRRN newsletter*, 23 (Autumn Equinox, 1984), FL.

¹³³ S. Roseneil, *Common Women, Uncommon Practices: The Queer Feminisms of Greenham* (London, 2000).

¹³⁴ Sjöo, ‘Avebury Experience’, 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

The threat of untamed women – whether Pagans, political revolutionaries, powerful healers, post-menopausal women, or lesbians – is so terrifying to patriarchy that ‘witch’ comes to represent a horrifying figure: hideous featured drapes in black cloth, hexing, poisoning and making impotent their innocent (often male) victims.¹³⁵

In her article, Paxton reclaimed the title witch for herself, manipulating language as a tool with which to name and claim her own experience, “I had realized some common element in my own estrangement from society as a woman who had separated from her husband and chosen to live alone, and the ‘eccentrics’ who had been slaughtered in the Middle Ages”.¹³⁶ In doing so, Paxton implied that women could participate in the distant experiences of historic women using just their imaginations and intuitions, using this to come to knowledge about the depth of patriarchal rage and violence. “Patriarchy has been with us, systematically oppressing, eliminating and hating us for a few thousand years”, concluded Paxton, “However, if we relearn what has gone before, realize that our eccentricities or our aggressive behaviour are only unacceptable in *this* system.... Then maybe we can overcome our differences”.¹³⁷

The similarities between the persecuted witches Paxton described, and the experiences of the Greenham women were too obvious to ignore. While for some protesters the resonance was entirely spiritual, standing in for women’s natural inclination towards magical arts and subversive power, other Greenham women researched the history of the witch trials and executions like their matriarchal sisters, comparing these to the experiences of protesters at the hands of male authorities. Physical, sometimes violent, arrests, court cases and imprisonment had become disturbing facts of life at Greenham by the middle of the 1980s. In 1985, Howse used the *Green and Common newsletter* to call upon women everywhere to support their

¹³⁵ S. B. Paxton, ‘Witches, All of Us’, *Arachne*, 1 (May Eve, 1983), FL.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

Greenham sisters in their seemingly endless persecution by men. She wrote two stories, one entitled 'The Witch Trials 15th/16th/17th Centuries and all Centuries all over the World', and the other, 'The Greenham Witch Trials 1985'.¹³⁸ Both stories told identical stories about women's persecution, but substituted witches for Greenham women:

We cannot be like her, she lives alone without men" / "We cannot be like you, we have our families, our husbands"; "They say the devil comes to her in the dead of night" / "They are lesbians, aren't they, and do unspeakable things at night"; "She does rituals in her garden" / "She does rituals on the Common."¹³⁹

Like Paxton, Howse drew similarities between the historic witches and Greenham witches and collapsed linear time in order to invoke a universal experience of women's oppression, "Not to support actively in changing the patriarchy", she warned women, "means watching other women burn – NOW."¹⁴⁰

The Practical Politics of the Snake, the Dragon and the Witch

The ideological function served by myths and symbols in the feminist spirituality movement translated into practical action at Greenham Common. The first snake action at Greenham took place on 7 February 1983 to coincide with Defence Secretary Michael Heseltine's visit. The previous day, some women had built three giant serpents out of fabric, papier-mâché and paint.¹⁴¹ The creations were long enough and wide enough to accommodate thirteen women in single-file, carrying the snakes above their heads. Burton, who reported the action in her February 1983 newsletter wrote that the morning of the seventh was snowy, but fires had been

¹³⁸ K. Howse, *Green and Common Women's Peace Camp*, Summer 1985, FL.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Interview with Jayne Burton, 28 August 2018.

built and women were singing and banging drums to raise the energy in advance of the action.¹⁴² All the women about to inhabit the three snakes piled into vans and cars and travelled to a weak-spot in the perimeter fence, “Through the gap we went.... No damage done... just three bolts removed”, wrote Burton.¹⁴³ Once inside, the snake-women wound and danced their way down the runway; singing, slithering and sliding. Although two snakes were awkwardly apprehended by police – who presumably were not sure how to deconstruct the giant creatures – one snake, named Sybil by her handlers, stayed within the base for an hour before being dragged off into a police van.¹⁴⁴

The snake action is a perfect example of how the practical and the spiritual fused to create a highly effective feminist protest. Practical in that the women engaged with the physical realities of the Camp to build the snakes. Spiritual in that, under the canopy, the women were able to take on the role of the ancient serpent, who, as Feigenbaum notes, was able to slide over, under and through “the holes or cracks in [the] security system.”¹⁴⁵ Burton acknowledged this fusion in her report on the action:

We made three long snakes the day before... Practical things – getting material, plastic, sewing, painting..... Magic feelings – the snake – the serpent – women’s energy – the spirit of nature – spring returning to the earth – healing – life – fun – laughter – caring.....¹⁴⁶

The snakes, whose spiritual meaning challenged societal dualisms such as military/civilian, sacred/profane, hope/fear broke into the base, making a mockery of the unnatural boundary marked out by the perimeter fence.¹⁴⁷ According to Eleanor McManus who attended the

¹⁴² Jayne, ‘Ssssnakes’, DM2123/1, 23, FAS.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Harford and Hopkins, *Women at the Wire*, p. 103.

¹⁴⁵ Feigenbaum, ‘From Cyborg Feminism to Drone Feminism’, p. 278.

¹⁴⁶ Jayne, ‘Ssssnakes’, DM2123/1, 23, FAS.

¹⁴⁷ Harford and Hopkins, *Women at the Wire*, p. 28.

planning meeting for the direct action, the idea to use snakes to break into the base had purely practical origins, “We’d used ladders to climb over the fence – why couldn’t we slide under it too... like snakes? This inspired us to explore snake mythology”.¹⁴⁸ This quotation from McManus shows that, for Greenham protesters, coming up with practical direct actions led naturally to discussions about symbolic meaning and mythology. Indeed, McManus’ exploration of snake mythology echoed the excavations of matriarchal women like Sjöö and Wakeling, “The snake represents psychological renewal, the change from winter to spring and reincarnation. In some places the serpent is shown swallowing its own tail, indicating the circle of Eternity; the beginningness and endlessness of life”.¹⁴⁹

The ways in which spiritual symbolism shaped political practice at Greenham was further demonstrated on 25 June 1983. To coincide with the full moon, the women organised the Rainbow Dragon Festival, which was inspired by a conflation of Aboriginal Australian and North American Indian spirituality and mythology.¹⁵⁰ The MSG had been experimenting with dragon symbolism since 1977, specifically in relation to the mythical story of St George and the Dragon. Just like direct actions at Greenham, the spiritual feminist reclamation of the dragon had practical meaning for the women in the MSG, who were looking for a striking image to put on a poster advertising their jumble sale. The resulting poster, recalled Long, “showed a woman riding away on a great white horse, and a knight on the ground in the coils of a huge serpent. The legend ran: ‘Damsel, escaping from St George, is aided by a friendly dragon’”.¹⁵¹ While playful, and intended to be humorous, Long explained that the women’s use of the dragon summarised the MSG’s thinking at that point:

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 102.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Welch, ‘The Spirituality of, and at, Greenham Common’, pp. 234-235.

¹⁵¹ Long, ‘How and Why’, DM2767,1, FAS.

The dragon is a symbol of the mother goddess, living on earth, in the sea, and in the air, flying and with fire in her nostrils. She was Tiamat of the ancient Babylonians, symbolised the whole, and was cut in half by her son. Her name was translated into “chaos” in the Hebrew, and she was cut in half by God in Genesis when he created the world. The Christian view of the damsel waiting to be rescued (from a powerful female figure) by her hero, is the symbol of our put-down.¹⁵²

At Beltain 1983, just two months before the Greenham women held their own Rainbow Dragon Festival, some women from the London MSG decided to turn the reclamation of St George’s Day into a matriarchal festival, renaming it Dragon Day and proposing it became part of the women’s cycle of seasonal celebrations. “In the old pagan religions”, explained Fiona in the *MRRN newsletter* advertising the event, “the dragon was a beneficent symbol resembling wisdom, fertility and the energy that flows from the earth especially at sites such as stone circles and placed dedicated to the Great Mother Goddess”.¹⁵³

Due to the shared networks of friendship between Greenham and matriarchal women, it is no coincidence that dragon symbolism was picked up by Women’s Camp protesters. However, Greenham women did not link the dragon’s symbolism to the myth of St George. According to Monica Sjöo, an Australian Aboriginal woman called Zohl had been living at Greenham since 1983, sharing her experiences of the destruction of land belonging to indigenous peoples at the hands of British, French and American nuclear and military interests. Writing in the *MRRN newsletter*, Sjöo recounted what Zohl had told her about the Aboriginal myth of the Rainbow Dragon and its link to the protest at Greenham:

It is a chilling thought that uranium when it is mined is rainbow coloured and that both amongst the Abouriginies of Australia as well as amongst the Hopis of USA there is

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ *MRRN newsletter*, 13 (Beltain, 1983), FL.

the warning prophesy that if Uranium is mined (the veins of our Mother torn out/the rainbow serpent is disturbed in her dreaming) from under their sacred lands, the resting places of their dead ones, it will lead to utter destruction. These peoples, as well as the wise women of our own past, are still the guardians of our mother, the earth and their warnings must be listened to before it is too late.¹⁵⁴

In a booklet to accompany the Rainbow Dragon Festival, this myth was explained by radical anthropologist Chris Knight. In a move that echoed his friend Pauline Long's biblical exegesis (Knight got to know the London MSG women because of their shared interest in the historical put-down of menstruation), Knight argued that the "Rainbow Serpent" appeared in the story of Noah's Ark, but the link between rainbow and dragon (serpent) was obscured because of "relatively recent patriarchal cosmology which treats the snake as the embodiment of all evil".¹⁵⁵ Drawing on the matriarchal approach to myth and symbolism, Knight argued that the Dragon represented women's menstruation and its destruction symbolised patriarchal religions that were "based universally on the atomisation of womankind 'at the point of reproduction'".¹⁵⁶ The Dragon at Greenham, then, did not only take on ecological meaning, she also represented the menstruating Goddess, a symbol of women's magical, life-affirming power.

At the Festival, part of the direct action involved the women sewing their own Rainbow Dragon, long enough to encircle the nine-mile perimeter fence. As Liz Knight (Chris Knight's sister) recalled, on the day of the action, women laid the three-foot wide strips of material in their laps and began sewing. There was a green and gold silk sari, fluttering patches of orange and scarlet satin that looked like dragon's scales, a red stretch of cotton with a pink heart in the

¹⁵⁴ *MRRN newsletter*, 28 (Summer Solstice, 1985), FL.

¹⁵⁵ C. Knight, 'Rainbow Serpent's Return', *Rainbow Dragon Booklet*, c. 1983, DM2123/1, Greenham Common Papers 22, FAS; C. Knight, *Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture* (London, 1991).

¹⁵⁶ C. Knight, 'Rainbow Serpent's Return', DM2123/1, 22, FAS.

middle. Like the snake action, the practical act of stitching a mythical creature together was both material and spiritual. While building the dragon, Greenham women sat in small groups, echoing the social formation of Navajo women and reclaiming women's mystical gathering.¹⁵⁷ Matriarchal women who were interested in artistic expression also experimented with the magical act of knitting and weaving.¹⁵⁸ In 1983, MRRN member Susan Marionchild led a series of classes entitled "Spinning and Weaving: Psychics for Women", which implied that women's mystical intuitive abilities could be nurtured and expressed through practical acts of creativity. The magico-religious functions of sewing the dragon were acknowledged by Ioma Ax who made the demonstration booklet for the Rainbow Dragon Festival:

Fairy-stories, nursely rhymes, myths; a lot of them need recreating into life loving, life affirming, life-respecting mythology. How else do we expect our children or our selves to get our unconscious examples of ethics that do not hold militarism and macho values as the only predominant ethics in our society.¹⁵⁹

In this quotation, Ax stated that the physical creation of the Rainbow Dragon symbolised women's need to create affirming myths and symbols. She echoed spiritual feminists like Sjöö and Long who excavated matriarchal cultures for their mythology, using their findings as hermeneutical tools to imagine how society could be organised differently. The dragon symbol was particularly well suited for this purpose in that it clearly echoed the aims of Greenham women themselves. Awakened by the patriarchal ruin of the natural world, the dragon threatened to destroy human society, bringing chaos and confusion, but also promising a new world order in her wake.

¹⁵⁷ Knight, 'A Dragon Story', DM2123/2, PP49, FAS.

¹⁵⁸ *MRRN newsletter*, 5 (March, 1982), FL.

¹⁵⁹ *Rainbow Dragon Booklet*, DM2123/1, 22, FAS.

On Saturday 29 October 1983, the Greenham witches decided the time was finally right to remove the physical fence from the common land. Just like the build-up to other direct actions, the day had a magical feeling about it, recalled Theresa, “so calm, warm, encompassing more and more arriving women”.¹⁶⁰ At the same time, emotions were running high. The witches were thinking about their sisters who lived hundreds of years ago, whose failure to conform to the rigid patriarchal order led to their torture and fiery executions. Despite this, the Greenham witches set their minds to the direct action, intuitively arranging themselves around the fence, which had been carved up into thirteen sections, each representing a symbol in the matriarchal Zodiac. Arachne, the thirteenth sign – the sign of the Spider Goddess – was particularly charged, “after two thousand years of lying dormant” thought Theresa, Arachne had come back.¹⁶¹ The witches appeared out of the woodland and bracken, draped in black cloth with their faces painted pale, clutching their magical bolt cutters.¹⁶² Babs sat on Theresa’s shoulders and started snipping away at the fence, while women dressed up as spiders travelled around the perimeter giving updates on their progress. Inevitably, however, the persecution of the witches began, especially violently this time. Soldiers “dragging [women] through barbed wire, poking metal and wooden stakes through the fence at hands, breasts, faces; twisting arms and wrists enough to break them”.¹⁶³ Nevertheless, the Greenham witches felt hopeful, “The candle and the flame inside burning, still willing, still hoping, can only continue to enflame and rekindle another’s passion and together we are powerful, more powerful than the machinery”.¹⁶⁴

Like the snake and dragon actions, the attempted destruction of the perimeter fence on Halloween in 1983 was rich with matriarchal symbolism. Only five months after the MRRN published the first edition of its new journal named after the Spider Goddess, Greenham women

¹⁶⁰ Harford and Hopkins, *Women at the Wire*, p. 159.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

¹⁶² *Green and Common Women’s Peace Camp newsletter* (October/November, 1983), FL.

¹⁶³ Harford and Hopkins, *Women at the Wire*, pp. 161-162.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

began appealing to Arachne in earnest. What's more, the place of the Spider Goddess in the matriarchal Zodiac had been theorised by MRRN member Blue Moonfire who had started exploring feminist interpretations of astrology a year before. "There is still a lot of information about ancient astrology, in its relation to women, which has been either rejected as unimportant or not looking into at all", explained Moonfire, "and which needs to be rediscovered and reclaimed".¹⁶⁵ Finally, the witches, whose sustained appearance throughout almost forty years of spiritual feminist activity in Britain were taken up by Greenham protesters to stunning effect. A symbol of women's subversive spiritual powers, their presence at the Women's Peace Camp leaves no doubt that the practical magic of spiritual feminism was at play at Greenham. Like the witches, both Greenham and matriarchal women had the monstrous ability to threaten the patriarchal structures.¹⁶⁶ In line with other female monsters – the Rainbow Dragon, the serpent, the Spider Goddess – they walked the boundary between order and chaos, subverting patriarchal logic wherever they found it. Greenham women's spiritual association with these creatures offered endless possibilities for magical, imaginative and symbolic protest acts.

Conclusion: A Vanishing Act

Once upon a time there was a beautiful Earth Dragon belonging to Old Mother Earth herself... The Dragon had roamed all over the land, Protecting the Earth since time began. Gradually Man started to destroy the Earth bit by bit, and sure enough – bit by bit the beautiful Earth Dragon became invisible to the human-eye – for it's Pure Rainbow colours were lost to our Perception, only to our imagination was she visible.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ *MRRN newsletter*, 9 (Halloween, 1982), FL.

¹⁶⁶ Raphael, *Thealogy and Embodiment*, p. 250.

¹⁶⁷ 'Rainbow Dragon Poster', c. 1983, FL.

Like the Greenham women's Rainbow Dragon, the centrality of spirituality to the Women's Peace Camp has been made invisible by historical conceptualisations of feminist politics and religious change in modern and contemporary Britain. Contrary to this literature, I have shown how spirituality shaped feminist politics at Greenham in multiple ways, informing the ideological underpinnings of Camp life and protest technique, as well as feeding into the women's conceptualisation of their feminist politics. I have linked this to a broader movement of spiritual feminism operating at sophisticated levels during the 1970s and 1980s that both drew on, and undergirded, the British women's movement. This sustaining and vibrant form of spiritual politics forces us to rethink the place of spirituality in both feminism's intellectual history and histories of secularisation that negate the possibility of mystical and supernatural ways of being and understanding.

It also forces us to rethink the presence of spirituality in contemporary Britain more broadly. Although secularisation is not an explanation used by many historians anymore, like patriarchy itself, it is an interpretive framework that has proved exceedingly difficult to resist. Historians encase their analysis of belief within narrow conceptualisations of rationality and reality that reflect the ontological commitments of post-Enlightenment Europe to the exclusion of other ways of being and understanding. Historians' vision of causality over the worldviews of those they study is, therefore, strangely narrow; far narrower than most people today, never mind those in the past. It is in this way, not in a set of arguments about the past but rather in assumptions about what counts as history, that the secularisation myth continues to dominate our discipline.

This should no longer be the case when critical, postcolonial, and feminist theorists such as Saba Mahmood and Talal Asad have revealed the presumed rationalism of modernity to be a

pillar of the Eurocentric edifice.¹⁶⁸ As these scholars show, the dethroning of secularism is therefore a theoretical, conceptual and political problem: coming down to nothing less than ending scholarly complicity with imperial and unreflexive Western presumptions that monopolise the meaning and content of secularism and rationalism.¹⁶⁹ In this chapter, I have argued that historians of modern and contemporary Britain should take the non-rational seriously precisely because it destabilises categories of knowledge and established historiographical positions, and highlights the limits of possibility in our explanatory systems. The presumed secularism of modernity is in desperate need of unseating because it has taken on a common-sense gloss that obscures the unacknowledged role of tired narratives of progress that lie behind our favoured historical explanations.

In this chapter, I placed the vivid, symbolic and profoundly spiritual politics of the Goddess movement at Greenham Common during a formative moment in the Camp's history. The rest of this thesis moves to explain how the Goddess could become so central and influential to British political cultures by the mid-1980s but so strangely overlooked now. In the next chapter, I move back from Greenham to the middle of the 1970s and the founding of the MSG in London that made possible so many of the creative symbolic actions at the Women's Peace Camp. In the process, I ask questions about broader historiography on the WLM that has participated in the elision of spiritual feminist politics from broader narratives of feminist political history.

¹⁶⁸ Asad, Brown, Butler and Mahmood (eds.), *Is Critique Secular?*, p. 7.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

CHAPTER TWO

THE GODDESS AND THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

In this chapter, I uncover the radical origins of the feminist spirituality movement in Britain to reorient the place of the spirit within histories of the second wave. The MSG was a small network of women operating within the London women's movement between 1975 and 1981. Animated by late Victorian debates about matriarchal prehistory, the group set out to prove that women had not always been “‘inferior’, subject and oppressed,” as an essay in *Goddess Shrew* put it in 1977.¹ Rooted in the same conditions in which the second wave emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s, their excavation of the matriarchal past, and experimentation with Goddess symbolism and ritual, were intended to address women's psychological imprisonment in the present and explore new social and political feminist futures. Using the structures and cultures of 1970s feminist activism, over six years the group developed a quasi-academic programme of research, talks, workshops and writing that aimed to restore women's knowledge of their divine past.

Although Goddess politics were a product of the same networks and contexts as the broader WLM, the MSG's spiritual interpretation of the feminist project placed it at odds with dominant accounts of 1970s feminism. Socialist feminists viewed the Goddess as marginal from the beginning, deliberately deploying the distinction between spiritual-feminism-apolitical and socialist-feminism-political as a tool of erasure. By naturalising and justifying this distinction

¹ 'Beyond Patriarchy', DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

in line with revisionist secularisation narratives, historians have colluded in the elision of spiritual feminist politics. Following the powerful interventions of the most recent generation of WLM scholars, I use the presence and centrality of the MSG within the broader feminist project to put to lie later ideas that spiritual feminism was somehow marginal or different. Going further, I use this as a starting point to open up a critical perspective on the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of established feminist historiography that place matters of the spirit outside the boundaries of feminist theory.

Historians and sociologists have interpreted the feminist second wave as uniformly secular, a product of the materialist politics of the mid-century socialist movement.² They draw upon influential self-identified socialist feminists such as Juliet Mitchell and Sheila Rowbotham who wrote many of the second wave's foundational statements as well as the first versions of the movement's histories.³ Embedded within Marxist materialism, these women viewed religion as a remnant of feminist campaigns past; a relic that failed to offer a systemic analysis of women's oppression or an ideology for social change. Contrary to the deeply held religious principles of the feminist first wave, Mitchell's influential article published in *The New Left Review*, entitled 'Women: The Longest Revolution' (1966), moved focus away from the past endorsement of "myths of the eternal feminine" or "types of women through the ages", towards exploring women's potential in the present.⁴ Working the revisionist secularisation narrative into her own autobiographical formation, Rowbotham wrote that her Methodist-inspired "inclination to mystical idealism" gave way to Marxist materialism in the 1960s.⁵ In her article 'Women's Liberation and the New Politics' (1969), Rowbotham described a hierarchy of

² S. Bruley, *Women in Britain since 1900* (Basingstoke, 1999); Roseneil, *Disarming Patriarchy*; Rees, 'A Look Back at Anger'.

³ J. Mitchell, 'Women: The Longest Revolution', *New Left Review*, 40 (November-December, 1966); S. Rowbotham, 'Women's Liberation and the New Politics', in M. Wandor (ed.), *The Body Politic: Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain 1969-1972* (London, 1972).

⁴ Mitchell, 'Longest Revolution', p. 16.

⁵ Rowbotham, *Hidden from History*; S. Rowbotham, *Promise of a Dream: Remembering the Sixties* (London, 2000), pp. 37, 63.

consciousness where the Marxist critique of oppression and control was a far more sophisticated form of resistance than “simple moral protest”.⁶

The perspectives of socialist feminists such as Mitchell and Rowbotham are overrepresented in histories of the WLM. Scholars rely heavily on first-hand accounts by 1970s activists who wrote their own histories in order to self-define and self-narrate outside patriarchal structures. Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell’s *Sweet Freedom* (1982) is often cited, as are first-hand accounts by Rowbotham and Lynne Segal, as well as collections of memoirs, such as those compiled by Michelene Wandor and Amanda Sebestyen.⁷ While writing the history of their own movement was an important vehicle for a range of feminist ideologies, the majority of these personal testimonies, in historian Jeska Rees’ words, “represent only one strand of British feminism, that of ‘socialist feminism’”.⁸ As seen above, religious activism was viewed as irrelevant or backward by socialist feminists, and so many did not reflect upon the spiritual dimension of resistance in their accounts. Others were explicitly critical of the Goddess. Using the language of mystery and abstraction, which resonates with contemporary critiques of the New Age, Rowbotham accused the American feminist spirituality magazine *WomanSpirit*, upon which the MSG based their own publications, of “yearning towards a past potential”, in which “women’s lack of possibilities in the here and now are inverted, and opposed to an abstract state of power which was mysteriously lost”.⁹

Through privileging socialist feminist accounts, scholars have disciplined both the historiographical frameworks and the conceptual apparatus we have for thinking about the WLM. Even when personal testimonies fail to mention spiritual feminism, they implicitly (or

⁶ Rowbotham, ‘Women’s Liberation and the New Politics’, p. 13.

⁷ A. Coote and B. Campbell, *Sweet Freedom: The Struggle for Women’s Liberation* (Oxford, 1987); S. Rowbotham, *The Past Is before Us: Feminism in Action since the 1960s* (London, 1989); L. Segal, *Making Trouble: Life and Politics* (London, 2007); M. Wandor (ed.), *Once a Feminist: Stories of a Generation* (London, 1990); A. Sebestyen (ed.), ‘68, ‘78, ‘88: *From Women’s Liberation to Feminism* (Bridport, 1988).

⁸ Rees, ‘A Look Back at Anger’, p. 338.

⁹ Rowbotham, *Dreams and Dilemmas*, p. 202.

explicitly) support a binary distinction between socialist and non-socialist feminist politics.¹⁰ Largely written during the 1980s and 1990s, individual and collected memoirs unite around the understanding that the feminist project is over. They tell a story of loss in which the theoretically sophisticated socialist feminism of the early movement gave way to the essentialism of non-socialist feminist politics from 1975 (the same year the MSG was established).¹¹ As Mary Maynard has argued, although non-socialist politics were defined in multiple ways, they were usually characterised as “apolitical”.¹² So, for Lynne Segal, “cultural feminism... suggests women do not need to change their lives”.¹³ Similarly, Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell identified “radical feminism” as socialist feminism’s other, “The radical feminists held out for exclusion and won a tactical victory. Thereafter, the Workshop became an increasingly separatist enclave”.¹⁴ Campbell went on to argue that the “resurrection of patriarchy”, in particular, was to blame for the unsophisticated sexual politics of the WLM.¹⁵ Amanda Sebestyen came up with a schema that included thirteen different strands of feminism, but only identified socialist feminists as “Politicos”.¹⁶

The political/apolitical binary lined up socialist feminism against non-socialist feminism, class-based against individualistic, particular against universalising theories of social change. In this analysis, spiritual, radical, revolutionary, separatist, cultural and utopian feminism were identified as anachronistic offshoots, a position justified by their perceived theoretical backwardness. Thus, when feminist artist Marie Yates reflected upon MSG member Monica Sjö’s paintings of the Goddess, she concluded “Radical (or Essentialist) Feminism was not

¹⁰ Setch, ‘The Face of Metropolitan Feminism’, p. 172; Rees, ‘A Look Back at Anger’, p. 338.

¹¹ Setch, ‘Women’s Liberation Movement in Britain’, p. 8.

¹² Maynard, ‘Beyond the ‘Big Three’.

¹³ Segal, *Is the Future Female?*, p. 69.

¹⁴ Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*, p. 242.

¹⁵ B. Campbell, ‘A Feminist Sexual Politics: Now You See It, Now You Don’t’, *Feminist Review*, (1980), p. 13.

¹⁶ A. Sebestyen, ‘Tendencies in the Movement: Then and Now’, in R. Pachaci (ed.), *Feminist Practice: Notes from the Tenth Year! (Theoretically Speaking)* (London, 1979).

my thing”.¹⁷ Through this framework the Goddess movement was made to function in certain ways, becoming the perpetrator of the “devastating split” that brought about the end of the second wave project in the mid-1970s, while simultaneously securing the position of socialist feminism as the heroine of the story.¹⁸ This position is still fought for by some 1970s socialist feminists today, like historian Sue Bruley who makes statements like “I know from personal experience” to contest or support more recent revisionist histories, such as Natalie Thomlinson’s work on race, which Bruley believed was “overstated”.¹⁹



Figure 5. For Beatrix Campbell, matriarchal feminism, depicted in her article ‘A Feminist Sexual Politics’ as the Minoan snake goddess (centre), was one kind of feminism that “depoliticized women’s sexuality”.

Despite these problems, historians of the WLM have done important work bringing to knowledge pieces of feminist history that have been obscured by mainstream accounts. Setch

¹⁷ ‘Marie Yates on St Ives, John Latham, conceptual art and feminism’, *artcornwall.org*, accessed 4 September 2019, http://www.artcornwall.org/interviews/Marie_Yates.htm.

¹⁸ Rees, ‘A Look Back at Anger’, p. 351.

¹⁹ S. Bruley, ‘review of N. Thomlinson, “Race, Ethnicity and the Women’s Movement in England, 1968 – 1993”’, *Contemporary British History*, 31 (2017), p. 144.

and Rees have both sought to historicise the overdetermined distinction between socialist and non-socialist feminism described above, interrogating it with alternative source material, such as the *London Women's Liberation Workshop newsletter* and testimonies from radical and revolutionary feminists.²⁰ Looking to geographical alternatives, Sarah Browne has written the history of the women's movement in Scotland to challenge primarily English and urban accounts.²¹ Most recently, Natalie Thomlinson, who urges historians to confront "the more troubling aspects of feminism's past", has led by example in her book *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Liberation Movement in England* (2016), which charts the racial tensions and lingering imperialist ideology in post-1968 feminism.²² To do so, she sought out the previously marginalised perspectives of Black, Asian, Jewish and Irish feminists, creating a new archive to intervene in oral history projects that privilege white voices.²³

Although revisionism has enlivened historiography on the British WLM in recent years, Goddess politics have received no attention. Unlike the accounts above, which are animated by the search for, and creation of, new archival sources to tell different stories, no work to date has focused on recovering Goddess politics from the archive. Although sources are fewer in number, Goddess feminists were just as likely to record the history of their movement as their socialist feminist sisters, their testimonies appearing in all the places historians traditionally look for evidence of the women's movement. MSG member Pauline Long contributed to her friend Amanda Sebestyen's collection of memoirs, as well as *Generations of Memories* (1989), which was compiled by the Jewish Women in London Group.²⁴ In both of these, she reflected upon her transformative encounter with spiritual feminism. Monica Sjö and Pat Whiting, of

²⁰ Setch, 'The Face of Metropolitan Feminism'; Rees, 'A Look Back at Anger'.

²¹ Browne, *Women's Movement in Scotland*.

²² Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement*, p. 4.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

²⁴ Asphodel, '1968: Prague Winter, Feminist Spring', in A. Sebestyen (ed.), '68, '78, '88: *From Women's Liberation to Feminism* (Bridport, 1988); A. Long, 'A Pinhole in the Darkness', in J. Copperman, H. Kanter, J. Keiner and R. Swirsky (eds.), *Generations of Memories: Voices of Jewish Women* (London, 1989).

the London and Brighton MSG respectively, wrote about abortion, contraception and sexuality through the lens of Goddess politics in Michelene Wandor's *The Body Politic* (1972), the first anthology of writings about the women's movement.²⁵ London MSG members Mary Coghill and Sheila Redmond surveyed developments in feminism and spirituality across institutional and non-institutional lines in Joy Holland's *Feminist Action I* (1984).²⁶

Taking notice of these sources reveals that Goddess feminism was an intimate and integral part of second-wave feminist politics. Its existence draws attention to the sticking points in our favoured accounts of the feminist second wave, asking us to confront the historicity of the ways we understand the WLM. However, there are limitations to projects of inclusion. As critical theorists like Antoinette Burton, Clare Hemmings, Joan Scott and Gayatri Spivak have argued, the parts of the feminist past that scholars choose to bring forward, or leave behind, tell us about their own political attachments in the present.²⁷ Thomlinson's work on race, for example, is motivated by her own hopes that "contemporary actors in women's politics may be able to learn something from the successes and failures of older generations of feminist women".²⁸ In other cases, affective attachments work to suppress alternative histories, revealing that the choices we make are never neutral or unmotivated. Setch, who claims to challenge the dominant perspective of socialist feminists, for example, nevertheless echoes their opinion on the Goddess' lack of political potential.²⁹ This reveals more about Setch's own affective and theoretical presumptions than the historical feminist movement she claims to study.

²⁵ M. Sjöo, 'A Woman's Rights over Her Body', in M. Wandor (ed.), *The Body Politic: Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain 1969-1972* (London, 1972); P. Whiting, 'Female Sexuality: Its Political Implications', in M. Wandor (ed.), *The Body Politic: Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain 1969-1972* (London, 1972).

²⁶ Sjöo, 'A Woman's Rights'; Coghill and Redmond, 'Feminism and Spirituality'.

²⁷ A. M. Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (London, 1994); Hemmings, *Considering Emma Goldman*; J. W. Scott, *The Fantasy of Feminist History* (Durham NC, 2011); G. C. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge MA, 1999).

²⁸ Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement*, p. 201.

²⁹ Setch, 'Women's Liberation Movement in Britain', p. 142.

This chapter, then, is primarily concerned with examining how Goddess politics came to be dangerous territory for historians of the WLM. Rather than passing judgement upon, or offering correctives to, Goddess feminists, I take at face value their struggle to theorise gender and sexual difference during the late 1970s, observing the contradictions, painful negotiations and ultimately unresolved dilemmas in their articulation of the feminist utopia. My aim in doing so is to move critical focus away from the Goddess movement itself, and towards the narrative of feminist history that has excluded spiritual politics. This involves historicising the assumptions that create the boundaries of acceptability within feminist theory, such as the perceived incompatibility between feminism and the sacred. In the process, I also want to reveal how spiritual politics were animating and inspiring for many feminist activists during the second wave.

In the first section of this chapter, I trace the history of the MSG to show the ways in which spiritual feminism was entirely embedded within both the physical and ideological spaces of the London women's movement. I show that matriarchal feminists viewed their project as an important contribution to debates around gender politics, drawing on existing modes of feminist publishing, activism and campaign cultures to spread their message. In the following section, I draw upon testimonies from three of the MSG's founding members to show how Goddess politics emerged out of familiar and unfamiliar contexts and ideas. Following their shared experience of local politics in London, both Goddess and secular feminists expanded their definition of politics to include personal transformation. However, thanks to their prior involvement with, and interest in, the spiritual counterculture of the late 1960s the founders of the MSG came to interpret this as a spiritual project. In the last part of this chapter, I turn to the MSG's working out of gender and sexual difference in order to contextualise overblown accusations of essentialism, revealing the ways in which spiritual politics could animate theories of gender and sexuality in ways that were non-essentialist.

The Matriarchy Study Group, 1975 – 1981

In October 1975, eight women met together for the first time in a flat in central London to discuss the very ancient past and its relevance to the contemporary WLM.³⁰ Four of the women present, Denise Arnold, Janet Payne, Liz Moore and Marianne, had organised the meeting, having spent the previous few months scoping out feminist friends who shared their belief that the women's movement was "only questioning the 'tip of the iceberg'".³¹ While discussions about women's social, economic and sexual oppression were important, they argued, feminists needed to question why women continued to believe in myths that secured their own oppression.³² Why, even "under socialism, in the countries which give themselves this description", did women continue to accept their role as the subordinate sex?³³ It was not only this feeling of frustration with the feminist project that united the eight women. Each one had observed evidence that, a very long time ago, women's place in society had been different.³⁴ Some had intuitively seen this in the way ancient sacred sites, such as Silbury Hill or the Glastonbury Tor, emulated the shape of the female body, or the way in which Goddess figures tenaciously retained their place in patriarchal religions.³⁵ Others had read about it in books. Multiple volumes of late nineteenth-century anthropological literature, discredited by the academy, claimed that it was the Goddess, rather than God, and her symbolism that "unquestionably has been the most persistent feature in the archaeological record of the ancient world".³⁶

³⁰ Long, 'How and Why', DM2767,1, FAS.

³¹ 'General Information', DM2123/2/RWV1, FAS.

³² 'Asphodel Long', DM2767, 5.1, FAS.

³³ 'Beyond Patriarchy', DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Correspondence with Marianne, 18 December 2018; correspondence with Janet Payne, 1 February 2019;

Long, 'Pinhole', p. 192.

³⁶ E. O. James, *The Cult of the Mother-Goddess: An Archaeological and Documentary Study* (London, 1959).

By the end of the meeting, the atmosphere amongst the women was feverish. They were both excited and a little cautious about what the Goddess could mean for the WLM and their personal lives.³⁷ At stake was not only evidence that women had been powerful before, but that biological justifications for women's inferiority were entirely illusory. Bringing this knowledge to the broader women's movement, they believed, would necessitate a "re-appraisal of patriarchy in politics" that went far beyond the material analysis favoured in the existing women's movement.³⁸ Until "male based conditioning... is removed", argued the eight women, "there can be no real political advance".³⁹

The trajectory that brought the eight women to the Goddess in October 1975 had taken them through many of the same staging posts as other key figures in the women's movement. Like the majority of their second wave sisters, all but one had experience of higher education, some for lengthy periods at respected institutions. Arnold, Payne and Charlotte Ellis, for example, had trained as architects, Arnold at the University of Manchester and Payne at the Architectural Association School of Architecture (AA).⁴⁰ A generation older than the other women, Pauline Long was the only woman who had not been to University. Nevertheless, she had forged a successful career in trade journalism and it was in her flat, where she lived alone, that the group met for the first time in October 1975.⁴¹ Other women were exploring their feminism through creative projects, including Moore, Fiona Cantell and Patricia van Rood who were all painters.⁴² While all the women had encountered radical politics prior to joining the MSG,

³⁷ Long, 'How and Why', DM2767,1, FAS.

³⁸ 'Beyond Patriarchy', DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement*, p. 25; correspondence with Janet Payne, 26 September 2018 and Denise Arnold, 27 September 2018.

⁴¹ Correspondence with Denise Arnold, 27 September 2018.

⁴² Ibid.

Long had the most extensive relationship with the Left, having joined the Communist Party in the late 1930s and then becoming a Labour councillor in Kent during the 1960s.⁴³

Of the eight women who attended the first meeting in October 1975, Long recalled, “all were feminists and most had been through some sort of conscious raising”.⁴⁴ By that time, the London women’s movement had been active for six years. In line with the national trend, women’s groups had started emerging throughout the capital in 1969, overseen by a citywide organisation called the London Women’s Liberation Workshop (LWLW) that was founded at the same time.⁴⁵ The women were embedded within these social, activist and campaigning networks. Aged fifty, Long was invited to the Shepherd’s Bush women’s group by her daughter-in-law in 1971, and eventually went on to volunteer at the Workshop, which operated out of a dilapidated town house near Seven Dials.⁴⁶ Payne joined the newly formed Finsbury Park consciousness-raising group in 1975 and two years later co-authored the paper, ‘Towards a Radical Theory of Revolution’ with revolutionary feminists Sheila Jeffreys, Siva German and Catherine Lunn.⁴⁷ Other women who were not already in women’s groups expressed their commitment to gender equality through specific feminist issues, including Marianne who campaigned for women’s rights to an abortion.⁴⁸ Moore, along with Ann Berg and feminist artist Monica Sjöö (who later joined the MSG) made one of the foundational statements of the British women’s art movement in the 1972 zine *Towards a Revolutionary Feminist Art*.⁴⁹

⁴³ Long, ‘Pinhole’, p. 188.

⁴⁴ Long, ‘How and Why’, DM2767,1, FAS.

⁴⁵ L. Graessle in Wandor (ed.), *Once a Feminist*, p. 131; Setch, ‘The Face of Metropolitan Feminism’, pp. 171-172.

⁴⁶ Long, ‘How and Why’, DM2767,1, FAS.

⁴⁷ Correspondence with Janet Payne, 26 September 2018; S. German, S. Jeffreys, C. Lunn and J. Payne ‘Towards a Radical Theory of Revolution’, paper presented at Towards a Radical Feminist Theory of Revolution Conference, Edinburgh, 1977.

⁴⁸ Correspondence with Marianne, 18 December 2018.

⁴⁹ Sjöö, Moore and Berg, *Towards a Revolutionary Feminist Art*, DM2123/1/87,1, FAS; Parker and Pollock (eds.), *Framing Feminism*, pp. 4-5.

Viewing their intervention as quasi-academic in nature, the women decided to start a study group to bring knowledge of the Goddess and ancient matriarchies to the broader women's movement. Study groups had been part of the landscape of the LWLW since at least 1971, differing from consciousness-raising groups in their focus upon theorising women's oppression through specific issues or political ideologies (mostly Marxist), rather than personal experience alone.⁵⁰ Hoping to perform a feminist reclamation of the word 'matriarchy' from its pejorative usage in Victorian anthropology and archaeology, the eight women named their collective the Matriarchy Study Group. At the beginning of February 1976, Arnold posted the following advertisement in the *Women's Information and Newsletter Service (WINS)* (then the newsletter of the London women's movement) to announce their first meeting:

Study group beginning soon on patriarchal/matriarchal culture and religion. Projected areas of study: Judaeo-Christian heritage, Anthropology and Archaeology, Myths and Symbols, Witchcraft or Women wisdom.⁵¹

The MSG was founded at a time of vibrant multiplicity in the London women's movement. Consciousness-raising groups, study groups, activist groups and special issue groups had burgeoned in the middle of the decade, giving rise to competing feminist theories that would come to challenge the analytic dominance of socialist feminism.⁵² Because of this, first-hand accounts by socialist feminists often retrospectively label this moment as one of disintegration and decline.⁵³ At stake in the broader WLM when the MSG was founded, then, were conflicts over socialist feminist politics, anxieties about theoretical fragmentation and the growing

⁵⁰ Setch, 'Women's Liberation Movement in Britain', p. 36; North London Political Study Group 'The Study Process: A Women's Political (Marxist) Group' in Papers from the Second Women's Liberation and Socialism Conference, London, 22/23 September 1973, DM2123/2, Politics/Policy 9: Socialist Feminism 1969-1974, FAS.

⁵¹ *WINS*, 4 February 1976, FL.

⁵² Rees, 'A Look Back at Anger'; Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement*, p. 54.

⁵³ Segal, *Is the Future Female*; R. Coward, 'Socialism, Feminism & Socialist Feminism', in F. A. Collective (ed.), *No Turning Back: Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement 1975-80* (London, 1981).

discourse of anti-essentialism. That the MSG were keen to name their intervention as a direct challenge to socialist feminism may have contributed to conflicts around its reception.

Despite some group members' ambivalence towards the academy, the MSG's organisation closely resembled a University curriculum, including two-weekly group meetings, reading groups, discussion papers, lectures and guest speakers, most of which took place in Long's flat.⁵⁴ This organisational structure was influenced, not only by the women's experiences of higher education, but also by other grassroots feminist projects that were exploring ways of intervening the patriarchal paradigms of academia. Their structure and aims closely mirrored those of the London Feminist History Group that had started meeting in 1973 for talks on group members' research, "work in progress" sessions and to provide feminist research support.⁵⁵ In 1975, some members of the History Group, including Leonore Davidoff and Dale Spender, founded the Women's Research and Resources Centre (WRRC) at University College, London specifically to create a historical record of the women's movement (now known as the Feminist Library).⁵⁶ Through mutual membership, and shared feminist physical and spatial infrastructures, the MSG intersected with these two groups, eventually depositing its library at the WRRC in October 1983.⁵⁷

For the women of the MSG, matriarchy was as valid an avenue for feminist research as the history of socialism was for Sheila Rowbotham, or the Victorian middle-classes were for Davidoff and Catherine Hall. Not only did the scholarly pursuit of matriarchal studies give women knowledge of their divine past, which had been (deliberately) hidden in male-dominated scholarship, it also had the potential to entirely destabilise the androcentric assumptions behind archaeology, anthropology, the history of religion, biblical exegesis and

⁵⁴ 'Matriarchy Study Group – 1977 Meetings', courtesy of Rupert White, private collection.

⁵⁵ A. Davin, 'The London Feminist History Group', *History Workshop Journal*, 9 (1980).

⁵⁶ D. Spender, 'Notes on the Organization of Women's Studies', *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, 1 (1978).

⁵⁷ *MRRN newsletter*, 16 (Autumn Equinox, 1983), FL.

so on. However, at the same time as offering a radical rereading of these texts, the early work of the MSG relied heavily upon the patriarchal dynamics of traditional disciplines. Their intervention was inspired by a popular theory in nineteenth-century anthropology and archaeology, which claimed that early (primitive) forms of social organisation were woman-led before these were destroyed (civilised) by patriarchal tribes. Swiss anthropologist Johann Jakob Bachofen had been the first to make this argument in 1861, although his idea soon gained acceptance in Britain, Germany and America.⁵⁸

Although encased within conservative Victorian gender values and triumphalist accounts of modernisation, the matriarchal thesis had played an important role in feminist, socialist and anarchist politics during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁵⁹ Both Frederick Engels and Karl Marx were influenced by American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan's materialist telling of the "evolution" from golden matriarchal past to patriarchal present. In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884), Engels used Morgan's research to argue that the move from matrilineal to patrilineal forms of inheritance meant men were able to take control of production, and thus the first form of class oppression was between the sexes. Indeed, through these key texts, many socialist feminists such as Rowbotham and Mitchell became aware of the matriarchal thesis; however, unlike the women of the MSG, they dismissed them as hopelessly essentialist.⁶⁰ Matriarchy was also used as a political tool by some first-wave feminists. At the turn of the century, the classicist Jane Ellen Harrison interpreted the pre-Greek period as "matrilinear" and argued that parts of this matriarchal culture informed the shape of Greek religiosity.⁶¹ A committed feminist and pacifist, Harrison

⁵⁸ Bachofen, *Mother Right*; McLennan, *Primitive Marriage*; L. H. Morgan, *Ancient Society: Or, Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilization* (Chicago, 1907).

⁵⁹ Eller, *Gentlemen and Amazons*.

⁶⁰ Mitchell, 'Longest Revolution'; S. Rowbotham, 'The Trouble with "Patriarchy"', in F. A. Collective (ed.), *No Turning Back: Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement 1975-80* (London, 1981).

⁶¹ J. E. Harrison, *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (Cambridge, 1912).

used her research to challenge male primacy in the academy in much the same way the MSG would do sixty years later. Like them, Harrison was also regularly criticised by her peers for privileging a feminist agenda above objective scholarship.⁶²

The MSG was not the only feminist group to revive the matriarchal thesis in the late twentieth century. Renewed concerns about women's rights in the 1960s and 1970s led many in the transatlantic women's movement (both academic and non-academic) to take up matriarchy, using it as a thought experiment for contemporary sex and gender roles. Elizabeth Gould Davis, a librarian living in Florida, re-read Western history through a matriarchal lens in *The First Sex* (1971), which became a bestseller in the early 1970s. Lending academic elaboration to Gould Davis' theories, Lithuanian-American archaeologist Marija Gimbutas concluded in 1974 that "matrifocal and probably matrilinear, agricultural and sedentary, egalitarian and peaceful" Neolithic Europe was shattered by waves of patriarchal Aryan tribes invading from the Caucasus Mountains in the third millennium BC.⁶³ Gimbutas' evocative reading attracted a feminist following, who saw her work as a political statement on the androcentrism of traditional archaeology. In 1976, American feminist artist Merlin Stone published *The Paradise Papers* (alternatively titled *When God Was a Woman* in the United States of America), in which she explicitly linked her version of the matriarchal hypothesis, which took place between Goddess-worshipping Canaanites and patriarchal Hebrews, to feminist and ecological arguments.⁶⁴ Importantly, British women were not the passive recipients of this mostly American material, as some scholarly literature on the Goddess movement would have

⁶² S. Arlen, "'For Love of an Idea': Jane Ellen Harrison, Heretic and Humanist", *Women's History Review*, 5 (1996), p. 171.

⁶³ Gimbutas, *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe*, p. 9.

⁶⁴ Stone, *Paradise Papers*. See Letter to the Matriarchy Study Group from Merlin Stone, January 8 9978 (1978), DM2767, 5/1, FAS. Note that Stone used a dating system agreed upon at the Great Goddess Re-Emerging Conference in Santa Cruz in 1978, which reflected the addition of 8,000 years of matriarchal history and civilisation.

us believe.⁶⁵ Stone's *The Paradise Papers* included a quotation from future MSG member Pat Whiting, who had used ancient Egyptian contraceptive practices to make a point about the sexual politics of the women's movement in 1972.⁶⁶ This reveals that British Goddess women were central and active, rather than marginal and passive, participants in the transatlantic matriarchal revival.

Indeed, the ways in which British feminists elaborated upon the matriarchal thesis reflected the specificities of their own political cultures. Long, for example, was the orphaned child of Jewish immigrants from Warsaw who arrived in Britain at the turn of the century.⁶⁷ After a troubled childhood in a Jewish community in Portsmouth, and an ambivalent relationship with her faith, Long delved into the repression of the Hebrew goddesses in Jewish theology.⁶⁸ Despite being the only group member to regularly protest the academic orientation of the MSG, Long was nevertheless incredibly rigorous in her approach, echoing the early feminist *Midrash* (classical Jewish biblical interpretation) of American women like Rachel Adler and Judith Plaskow.⁶⁹ Another MSG member, architect Angela, explored ecological politics through researching the significance of trees in ancient Egyptian, Babylonian and Western European, Goddess religions. In the MSG's first publication *Goddess Shrew*, she argued:

By destroying both the concept of the Goddess and her place of worship, these sacred groves, patriarchy was able to devastate and literally to rape Mother Earth, devour her

⁶⁵ R. Mantin, 'Theologies in Process: The Role of Goddess-Talk in Contemporary Feminist Spirituality' (PhD Thesis, University of Southampton, 2001); Vincett, 'Feminism and Religion'; W. Griffin (ed.), *Daughters of the Goddess: Studies of Healing, Identity and Empowerment* (Oxford, 2000).

⁶⁶ Whiting, 'Female Sexuality' quoted in Stone, *Paradise Papers*.

⁶⁷ Long, 'Pinhole', p. 190.

⁶⁸ Long, 'Old Testament', DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

⁶⁹ R. Adler, 'The Jew Who Wasn't There: Halacha and the Jewish Woman', *Davka*, (Summer 1971); J. Plaskow and D. Berman, *The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism, and Sexual Ethics, 1972-2003* (Boston MA, 2005).

offerings and to see nature as something outside human life. The urban and technological society followed naturally...⁷⁰

In her essay, Angela used matriarchy to lend historical specificity to early work on feminist ecology done by women like Nancy Jack Todd and Françoise d'Eaubonne, who urged feminists to take seriously the links between ecological crises and women's oppression.⁷¹ For Angela, the rape of Mother Earth worked as a metaphor to highlight the dual oppression of women and nature, while also providing a road-map for what she believed were the real historical processes that lay behind the conflation.

Research did not constitute all of the MSG's activity. The group's central argument was that patriarchal religion, with its suggestive symbolism and imagery, should be taken seriously precisely because of its psychological power over women. "We took it as given", recalled Long in an interview with the American *Goddessing* magazine in the mid-1990s, "that Patriarchy was absolutely – what's the word? *ineluctably* – there's no other word – was *totally* bound up with Patriarchal religion".⁷² Three years before American feminist theologian Carol Christ argued that patriarchal religious symbols must be replaced with female affirming imagery, the MSG were claiming that uncovering and researching matriarchy gave women the "psychological power to change our lives".⁷³ As Long explained in 1979, the "spiritual element" of the group's work was so important because it "goes back to our consciousness and conditioning from the moment of birth. Setting the record right, and deriving strength from it is the birthright of all women".⁷⁴ The MSG's focus upon spirituality, then, was completely in line with the psychological insights of second-wave feminism. As such, the group women

⁷⁰ Angela, 'Trees and their significance', DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

⁷¹ d'Eaubonne, 'Feminism and Ecology'; Todd, 'Women and Ecology'.

⁷² 'Asphodel Long', DM2767, 5.1, FAS.

⁷³ 'Beyond Patriarchy', DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS; Christ, 'Why Women Need the Goddess'.

⁷⁴ Long, 'How and Why', DM2767,1, FAS.

experimented with ritual and seasonal celebration as a way of engaging with consciousness-raising, the value of which they felt was overlooked in socialist feminist analysis.

Championing spirituality also allowed the MSG to rigorously critique what they viewed as the patriarchal rationality and objectivity of academic disciplines. Long explained this imperative in an early summary of the MSG's activity, which she wrote towards the end of the 1970s, "We saw the polarity of the split where the 'good' in patriarchal terms lived 'high in the sky' in the academic, 'scientific' realism of 'thought' and that feeling, sexuality, intuition and related matters were 'below' and inferior".⁷⁵ MSG member Monica Sjöö, who championed this argument in her writing, explained in her first pamphlet, 'The Ancient Religion of the Great Cosmic Mother of All' (1975) that Marx and Engels' reading of matriarchy fell short because it failed to take seriously the centrality of "magico/religious/sexual development" in woman-led societies.⁷⁶ This, Sjöö argued, was symptomatic of patriarchal-secular interpretation and knowledge-formation, which persisted in socialist scholarship. She explained:

And when some Marxist theoretician comes along and claims that on these occasions everything which is not directly productive labour is but mystification, illusion or 'cunning of reason', it must be forcibly pointed out that he is himself a far more complete personification of patriarchy and capitalism than any mere boss could be.⁷⁷

Long and Sjöö were addressing the traditional knowledge-making practices at play in the academy that had worked to denigrate ancient Goddess religion by emphasising objectivity and empiricism. By locating "mystification" and "illusion" as serious topics for research, the MSG sought to destabilise, not only patterns of privilege and power in the academy, but also the

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Sjöö, 'Ancient Religion', DM2123/1/85, 5, FAS.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

dominant ideology of knowledge construction within male-dominated universities.⁷⁸ In this way, the MSG shared the priorities of other grassroots feminist movements that helped introduce women's studies to British universities during the 1970s.

Spiritual experimentation, then, was an important part of the MSG's "revolutionary effort" from the beginning.⁷⁹ "That's the way we worked", recalled Long, "We had meetings, each presented our results, and had discussions. Then we went to the sacred sites and various things happened".⁸⁰ Some of the inspiration for this new form of women's spirituality came from distinctly non-spiritual sources. As historian Cathy Gere notes, although archaeologist Gimbutas did not intend to provide a roadmap of Neolithic European spirituality in her book, her thematically organised chapters ('Mistress of the Waters: The Bird and Snake Goddess', 'The Great Goddess of Life, Death and Regeneration') were read by many women as a "comprehensive neopagan theology".⁸¹ Similarly, geographer Michael Dames' two books on the role of Silbury Hill and the Avebury Stone Circle in Neolithic Goddess religion, published in the late 1970s, provided enough information for a basic reconstruction of rituals of the landscape.⁸² Discovering new spiritual forms, then, was an extension of the MSG's research project, involving a considerable degree of knowledge about symbolism and mythology, combined with more intuitive practices. Describing the matriarchy network's ritual activity in 1984, Mary Coghill and Sheila Redmond explained that "Inspiration somehow always comes along".⁸³

The mid-century renewal of interest in ancient Celtic religion and culture, including what Ronald Hutton calls "the New Druidry", also fed into the MSG's experimentation with ritual

⁷⁸ C. Kramarae and D. Spender (eds.), *The Knowledge Explosion: Generations of Feminist Scholarship* (New York, 1992).

⁷⁹ Long, 'How and Why', DM2767,1, FAS.

⁸⁰ 'Asphodel Long', DM2767, 5.1, FAS.

⁸¹ C. Gere, *Knossos and the Prophets of Modernism* (London, 2009), p. 216.

⁸² Dames, *The Silbury Treasure*; M. Dames, *The Avebury Cycle* (London, 1977).

⁸³ Coghill and Redmond, 'Feminism and Spirituality', p. 103.

and seasonal celebration.⁸⁴ According to Hutton, although interest in indigenous British religions first surfaced in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the “growing quest for alternative spiritualities” during the 1960s led to its second modern revival.⁸⁵ Of the groups that emerged at this time, the MSG was most heavily influenced by the Druidic Golden Section Order, which was founded by architect Colin Murray in London in 1976. Murray developed a relationship with the MSG based on his shared reverence of the Celtic Goddesses (the Matronae as he called them) and the earth.⁸⁶ Like the MSG women, Murray had derived his understanding of Druidic practice almost entirely from Robert Graves’s interpretation of Welsh mythology in *The White Goddess* (1948), using his work to build an alternative calendar that operated around significant seasonal events, including the equinoxes and solstices and Celtic “fire festivals”.⁸⁷ Until Murray’s premature death in 1986, the Golden Section Order played an active part in the MSG’s intellectual and spiritual experimentation, giving talks at group study meetings and inviting members to take prominent roles in seasonal celebration.⁸⁸ The MSG was also influenced by writers John and Caitlín Matthews who combined Druidic practice with the kind of Western esotericism developed by the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in the nineteenth century.⁸⁹ Unlike the Golden Section Order, the Matthews’ advocated the use of meditation and suggestive imagery to make contact with the spirit-world, ideas that would have a big impact on the spiritual modes employed by the matriarchy network into the 1980s.⁹⁰

This heady combination of matriarchal thesis and spiritual exploration was too much for many of the MSG’s secular sisters to bear. As they grew in prominence, the MSG faced criticism

⁸⁴ R. Hutton, *Witches, Druids and King Arthur* (London, 2003), p. 239.

⁸⁵ Hutton, *Witches, Druids*, p. 243; G. Harvey, *Listening People, Speaking Earth: Contemporary Paganism* (London, 1997), pp. 17-33.

⁸⁶ A. Long, ‘Colin Murray - in memoriam’, *Wood and Water*, 20 (Winter Solstice, 1986).

⁸⁷ C. Elias, ‘Memory at Sites of Non-Place: A Eulogy’, in P. Davies and C. Matthews (eds.), *This Ancient Heart: The Threefold Relationship between Landscape, Ancestor, and Self* (Hampshire, 2015).

⁸⁸ ‘Matriarchy Study Group – 1977 Meetings’; Long, ‘Colin Murray’.

⁸⁹ C. Matthews and J. Matthews, *The Western Way: A Practical Guide to the Western Mystery Tradition* (London, 1985).

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-21.

from their fellow feminists, as well as academics and radical Christian activists who heard about their work.⁹¹ Long joked to American spiritual feminist Charlene Spretnak that, while planning *Goddess Shrew*, the group had been infiltrated by a Marxist feminist who, in Spretnak's words, "subtly but persistently tried to get them to see 'the error of their ways'".⁹² Exercised by the negative response, the group decided to produce a publication to dispel misconceptions about their project. Under pressure from lack of financial resources, Long suggested that the MSG should agree to produce the next edition of the London women's movement magazine *Shrew*, believing there might be some money left over from sales of the previous edition.⁹³ Since 1969, each copy of *Shrew* had been produced by a different local or study group who chose an overarching theme and took charge of the magazine's content, layout, illustration and design.⁹⁴ That the MSG had access to this mainstream form of feminist communication shows that they were not as marginal as some feminist scholarship implies.

The MSG named their magazine *Goddess Shrew* and it was published in the spring of 1977 after the group had been meeting for just over a year. Its content was primarily drawn from group members' research papers, including Long's work on the Goddess and the Old Testament, Payne's research on the Goddess in the landscape, Moore's exploration of persisting matriarchal culture in Crete and Whiting's work on Egyptian fertility control.⁹⁵ The MSG's *Shrew* began with a series of editorials, explaining and defending their feminist intervention. In 'Beyond Patriarchy', the group explained "Our aim of understanding the present is to influence the past", an answer to interlocutors who accused Goddess feminism of

⁹¹ Long, 'How and Why', DM2767,1, FAS.

⁹² Letter to Charlene Spretnak from Pauline Long, 20 October c. 1977, DM2767, 5/1, FAS; C. Spretnak (ed.), *The Politics of Women's Spirituality: Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power within the Feminist Movement* (Garden City NY, 1982), p. xxii.

⁹³ Long, 'How and Why', DM2767,1, FAS.

⁹⁴ Forster, 'Spreading the Word', p. 820.

⁹⁵ Long, 'Old Testament', J. Payne, 'Stone Circles and Energy Lines', E. Moore, 'Why Matriarchy', P. Whiting, 'Women in Ancient Egypt', *Goddess Shrew*, DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

being theoretically backward and reactionary.⁹⁶ The MSG were not afraid to make their critique of socialist feminists known, and some members used the pamphlet to double-down on the failings of material analysis. The back page of *Goddess Shrew* included a short poem by Payne entitled ‘Song of the Matriarchal Materialist’ that playfully critiqued Marxist feminists:

Matriarchies don’t exist

So anthropologists say

Women were never equal

Not in Canaan, not today

[...]

A lot of pretty pictures

Nothing can be proved

Unacademic nonsense

We will not be moved.

[...]

We don’t need a herstory

We don’t need a past

Discard all the evidence

Marx will save women at last!⁹⁷

⁹⁶ ‘Beyond Patriarchy’, DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

⁹⁷ J. Payne, ‘Song of the Matriarchal Materialist’, *Goddess Shrew*, DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

In the poem, Payne rehearsed the commonly-held belief in the MSG that socialist feminists were too reliant on male political formations to make a significant contribution to women's emancipation ("Marx will save women at last!"). In the second stanza quoted above, Payne accused her secular sisters of aping the knowledge-making practices that marginalised women's experiences in the academy, including dismissing matriarchal spirituality as "pretty pictures" and "unacademic nonsense".

Although Long recalled two years later that *Goddess Shrew* seemed "to reflect only dimly what we were saying and doing", within a short time correspondence came pouring into Long's flat from appreciative women, and some men, from all over the world, "Women started writing to us from all over the place, sending us their life histories, stories, poems, beautiful letters, postcards, drawings".⁹⁸ Indeed, the letters the MSG received were often emotive. Many women wrote of their longing for information about Goddess religions and lamented the dearth of available information, "I was incredibly excited when I read your issues of SHREW", wrote London-based Ina Miller, who had distributed the magazine among her friends.⁹⁹ Similarly, Alexis America, who wrote to the group from Connecticut, expressed her desire to "jump across the sea and join your group" adding, "I've been on a solitary quest for the Great Mother, always wishing for somebody to share my excitement with."¹⁰⁰ Showing that the MSG had an academic reputation similar to the London Feminist History Group, Ruth Tomkins wrote to the group explaining that she had wanted to undertake a research project on "the matriarchies" at the University of Kent, but no supervisor could be found, "I find that I really need to talk with others who feel that this is a vital area in recovering our identity and culture, and who see the need to carry the concept of revolution into hitherto neglected aspects of our lives".¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Long, 'How and Why', DM2767,1, FAS.

⁹⁹ Letter to the Matriarchy Study Group from Ina Miller, 26 September 1977, DM2767, 5/1, FAS.

¹⁰⁰ Letter to the Matriarchy Study Group from Alexis America, 2 November 1978, DM2767, 5/1, FAS.

¹⁰¹ Letter to the Matriarchy Study Group from Ruth Tomkins, undated, DM2767,5/1, FAS.

Although Long expressed surprise at the reach of *Goddess Shrew* she had, in fact, worked hard to ensure a large readership. Utilising her publishing expertise, she had written to British and American left-wing and feminist publications asking them to announce the publication of *Goddess Shrew* to their readership, including the British pacifist newspaper *Peace News* and the American feminist magazine of the *Women's International Network*.¹⁰² However, by far the best publicity came when Irish journalist Mary Kenny wrote a short piece about *Goddess Shrew* in *The Guardian's* women's page in March 1977. Written in the context of growing debates around women's ordination in the Anglican and Catholic Church, Kenny explained:

Their Shrew is very scholarly, drawing on an impressive volume of research into ancient religions... But [MSG] want to go farther than straight scholarship; they want to apply what they have learned to the dilemmas of women today who, the group feels, have been cut off from the sacred roots of women-culture.¹⁰³

Kenny's review prompted a response, not only from feminist women, but also from sympathetic members of the church who produced some of the earliest literature in support of women's ordination, securing the MSG's position in relation to the latent Christian women's movement.¹⁰⁴ Father Hugh Bridge, a Catholic priest, wrote to ask the women for a copy of *Goddess Shrew* so that he could include it in his bibliography entitled *Feminist Theology and Women Priests*, which was published in 1977.¹⁰⁵ Long's determined campaign of publicity also brought the MSG to the attention of key figures in the American women's movement. In October 1977, Charlene Spretnak wrote to the MSG to ask if she could review *Goddess Shrew* in the American feminist magazine *Chrysalis*, which was achieving a regular readership of

¹⁰² Long, 'How and Why', DM2767,1, FAS.

¹⁰³ H. Hebert and M. Kenny, 'Sidelines: Self-Service Pain-Killers... Goddess Worship', *The Guardian*, 7 March 1977.

¹⁰⁴ J. Dagers, *The British Christian Women's Movement: A Rehabilitation of Eve* (Aldershot, 2002), pp. 65-66.

¹⁰⁵ Dagers, *Christian Women's Movement*; Letter to the Matriarchy Study Group from Hugh Bridge, DM2767, 5/1, FAS.

13,000 in the late 1970s.¹⁰⁶ Individual articles from *Goddess Shrew* were also picked up and reprinted in American magazines, including Angela's essay on trees and the Goddess religion, and Monica Sjö's 'An Avebury Story', both of which appeared in the pioneering American feminist spirituality magazine *WomanSpirit*.¹⁰⁷

In total, *Goddess Shrew* sold 5,000 copies, leading to a sharp rise in the MSG's profile. Between 1977 and 1979, the group undertook ten speaking engagements at academic departments and feminist groups within universities, including the Women's Group at Kings College London, the Women's Studies department at London City University, as well as giving a Women and Anthropology workshop at the City Literary Institute in Holborn.¹⁰⁸ These activities brought the women into contact with academics who were sympathetic to their aims. Starting work on their next pamphlet *Menstrual Taboos*, which explored the denigration of menstruation in patriarchy, allowed the women to connect with radical anthropologists like Chris Knight, who went on to write *Blood Relations* in 1991 as well as Penelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrove who wrote *Wise Wound* in 1978.¹⁰⁹ Through group member María Piacquadio Losada, an Argentinian woman who had previously been part of a guerrilla group in Venezuela, the MSG made contact with Robert Kruszynski at the Natural History Museum who assisted with their research into the Palaeolithic period.¹¹⁰ Like their first-wave predecessors such as Jane Ellen Harrison, the MSG started conducting alternative tours of the British Museum, emphasising evidence of the matriarchal past through representations of the Goddess.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ Letter to the Matriarchy Study Group from Charlene Spretnak, 15 October 1977, DM2767, 5/1, FAS. K. L. Endres and T. L. Lueck (eds.), *Women's Periodicals in the United States: Social and Political Issues* (London, 1996), pp. 9-15.

¹⁰⁷ Angela, 'Trees and their Significance in the Goddess Religion', *WomanSpirit*, 4 (Summer Solstice, 1978); Monica Sjö, 'A Trip to Avebury', *WomanSpirit*, 5 (Winter Solstice, 1978).

¹⁰⁸ 'Application for Grants', DM2123/2, RWV1, FAS; Letter to the Matriarchy Study Group from Catherine Ebenezer, 23 October 1977, DM2767, 5/1, FAS.

¹⁰⁹ Correspondence with Denise Arnold, 27 September 2018; 'Application for Grants', DM2123/2, RWV1, FAS; Letter to the Matriarchy Study Group from Penelope Shuttle, 23 November 1977, DM2767, 5/1, FAS.

¹¹⁰ Correspondence with Denise Arnold, 27 September 2018.

¹¹¹ Blanche, Caroline, Jo, Martha, Mary, Nozama, Sunflower, Val, Wendy, 'Goddesses of the British Museum', c. 1984.

The women were also becoming more visible in the London women's movement. Although their membership was constantly fluctuating, it had grown from eight to twelve regular members following the publication of *Goddess Shrew*. Two new Matriarchy Study groups had also formed in Brighton and Sheffield in 1977 following visits and slideshow presentations by London group members. Matriarchy and the Goddess were also becoming part of the feminist mainstream, particularly, as Eve Setch notes, in the visual arts, poetry and music of the women's movement.¹¹² The feminist band Ova, who were active between 1976 and 1989, and performed regularly at feminist events in London and Germany, often used matriarchal symbolism in their songs, explaining to Redmond and Coghill, "We try to use music as earthing, spirit can't be separated from everything else."¹¹³ Three members of the MSG, Long, Coghill and Diana (formerly Miriam) Scott contributed to the feminist poetry anthology, *One Foot on the Mountain* (1979), exploring themes like Goddess Creation and the Dark Goddess.¹¹⁴

The height of the MSG's activity in 1977 coincided with the rise of revolutionary feminism, which, Jeska Rees argues, mounted a significant challenge to socialist feminism in the final few years of the 1970s.¹¹⁵ Several women from the MSG became involved with the revolutionary feminist project, sharing the desire to challenge the ascendancy of socialist feminism as well as the call for an explicit examination of the ways men oppressed women beyond economic constraints alone. In 1977, MSG member Payne presented a paper, co-written with other revolutionary feminists, at the Towards a Radical Feminist Theory of Revolution conference in Edinburgh. In the paper, Payne argued that revolution meant "a total

¹¹² Setch, 'Women's Liberation Movement in Britain', pp. 103-151.

¹¹³ Coghill and Redmond, 'Feminism and Spirituality', p. 104. 'Ova – the Radical Feminist band – Rosemary Schonfeld', *Lesbian History Group*, 15 September 2017, accessed 4 September 2019, <https://lesbianhistorygroup.wordpress.com/2017/09/15/ova-the-radical-feminist-band-rosemary-schonfeld/>.

¹¹⁴ M. Coghill, 'Goddess Creation' and D. Scott, 'Poem for the Dark Goddess, on the Full Moon' in L. Mohin (ed.), *One Foot on the Mountain: An Anthology of British Feminist Poetry, 1969-1979* (London, 1979), pp. 75-76, 172-173.

¹¹⁵ Rees, 'A Look Back at Anger', p. 341.

transformation of society... A feminist revolution requires the smashing of the whole system".¹¹⁶ This statement closely echoed the MSG's writing in *Goddess Shrew*, "We move from the importance of feminist social demands to total re-appraisal of patriarchy in politics generally".¹¹⁷ By the time the MSG published their third pamphlet, *Politics of Matriarchy* they were explicitly addressing revolutionary feminist issues, including the ways in which male sexuality oppressed women, the problem of violence and ways of reviving women's power. Anna Perenna, for example, argued that feminists must take seriously sexual oppression along with economic oppression, the latter of which, she argued, had received far more attention from the broader women's movement.¹¹⁸

Politics of Matriarchy was the MSG's final pamphlet before the group underwent major changes. By the end of the 1970s, all four of the founding members were moving on, and the remaining group members were dealing with internal politics. At the height of tension surrounding the inclusion, or exclusion, of transsexuals in the women's movement, a highly involved and productive member of the MSG was accidentally outed during a group meeting. Leveraging the arguments of American women like Janice Raymond, Long argued that transsexualism undermined rather than opened up debates about gender, while simultaneously deploying an essentialist argument to state that transsexual women could never be "real" women.¹¹⁹ As Setch notes, these discussions were not limited to the MSG but were common within the London women's movement in the late-1970s.¹²⁰ While not all of the MSG women shared Long's perspective, Arnold and Payne admitted that, because their lives were pulling them away from the group, they did little to counter Long and support their friend.¹²¹ Their

¹¹⁶ German, Jeffreys, Lunn and Payne 'Towards a Radical Theory of Revolution'.

¹¹⁷ 'Beyond Patriarchy', DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

¹¹⁸ A. Perenna, 'Politics of Patriarchy', *Politics of Matriarchy*, 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

¹¹⁹ Asphodel, *London Women's Liberation newsletter*, 17 October 1979, FL; J. G. Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (Boston MA, 1979).

¹²⁰ Setch, 'Women's Liberation Movement in Britain', p. 66.

¹²¹ Correspondence with Denise Arnold, 27 September 2018; correspondence with Janet Payne, 26 September 2018.

ambivalence towards the issue, and the ensuing emotional fall-out, led to group activity diminishing significantly in 1979, although Long and several other group members did continue. While transsexual women continued to have an impact on the shape and content of matriarchal theory, their presence was a cause of contention into the 1990s.¹²²

To conclude, I have shown in this section that the MSG held a central, rather than marginal, place within the London women's movement during the 1970s. Despite facing criticism from the start, the MSG was able to weave itself into the existing social, organisational and activist structures of the movement, as well as making a significant contribution to feminist theory and symbolism. In the following section, I seek to identify the intellectual trajectory of the four founding members of the MSG who, unlike the majority of their feminist sisters, interpreted the second wave as a distinctly spiritual project. Their political formation included campaigning around local issues as well as serious engagement with 1960s utopian left-wing politics and countercultural esoteric spiritualities. These strands were not interpreted as separate, or separable, by the founders of the MSG, but interlocked in interesting ways. By excavating the MSG's political origins, I challenge both literature on the Goddess movement, that depicts the Goddess as an American export, and the broader women's movement that traces its intellectual genealogy to exclusively secular left-wing projects.

¹²² Sociologist Val Remy was a close friend to Monica Sjöö and impacted her feminist spirituality, although Sjöö herself was noticeably quiet on trans-issues. In the 1990s, the feminist spirituality zine *From the Flames* published an inflammatory article on transpolitics based heavily upon the work of Raymond. See Mary, 'Some Thoughts on Transsexualism & Transgenderism', *From the Flames*, 18 (Autumn-Winter, 1996), FL. Vron McIntyre, who published the article, later expressed her regret at fuelling anti-trans rhetoric, and now identifies as sympathetic to transpolitics. See Vron McIntyre interview with Martha Robinson-Rhodes, 8 November 2018.

The Goddess and the Alternative Society

The MSG's founding members, and many of the women who joined later, were becoming politically active at a time when the parameters around political action were changing. Just like the broader women's movement, Goddess politics had their origins in institutions and networks that were seeking alternatives to the post-war vision of modernity. Through participating in community activism around inner-city housing, as well as student radicalism and movements for peace, both Goddess and secular feminists politicised the everyday, initiating a shift away from traditional forms of Left activism, towards the transformation of inner perception, personal relations and behaviours.¹²³ For Goddess feminists, this shift aligned with the founding members' personal interest in spiritual alternatives, especially Eastern mysticism, in which they found not only the language of inner transformation but also practical lifestyle changes that suited their political cause. For these women, then, the turn to the spiritual was the logical fulfilment of the central insight of the WLM, that "the personal is political".

Taking my cue from three of the four founding members of the MSG, this section traces the ideological roots of Goddess feminism within two countercultural strands of the early 1970s. Entirely unprompted, Denise Arnold, Janet Payne and Marianne told me that the biggest influences on the MSG were campaigning with George Clark, a community and peace activist, and attending evening classes at the London School of Nonviolence (LSN), an adult education initiative for young activists. Through these outlets, the women took part in conversations that would anticipate the revolutionary focus, emphasis and mode of argument of the MSG from 1975. This included theorising an "Alternative Society" that looked to the distant past for indigenous, environmentally sensitive models, rewriting history as the starting point for radical

¹²³ C. Hughes, *Young Lives on the Left: Sixties Activism and the Liberation of the Self* (Manchester, 2015), p. 144.

political critique and utilising spirituality as a subversive alternative.¹²⁴ However, while rooted in these key thinkers and institutions in a productive sense, in the face of burgeoning feminist critique during the first half of the 1970s, the MSG was also a recognition of the limits of these forms of political organisation. Disillusioned with the “macho” politics of the LSN, the three women founded the MSG in 1975 to offer a feminist reworking of Alternative Society principles.¹²⁵

Just like the broader women’s movement, the MSG’s politics were cast out of the intersections between 1960s peace activism, the New Left, student radicalism and the counterculture.¹²⁶ For Arnold and Payne these shoots intertwined, in the first instance, in community action groups that emerged at the beginning of the 1960s in response to inadequate housing standards, racial tensions and exploitative landlords.¹²⁷ Towards the end of the decade, such groups were increasingly concerned with representing tenants who lost out in urban modernisation projects that emanated out of central government during the 1960s and 1970s.¹²⁸ As students of architecture during the late 1960s, Arnold and Payne became particularly attuned to the negative effects that top-down development projects had upon local communities. Starting University in 1966 and 1967 respectively, their architectural and political education was initially shaped by the radical discourse of student activism and liberal tutors, who encouraged a critique of mainstream architectural modernism and the societal values it represented.¹²⁹ This was particularly true of Payne, whose participation in community politics was secured by tutors

¹²⁴ S. Kumar, *Non-Violence or Non-Existence: The Gandhian Ideology of a Non-Violent Society* (London, 1969).

¹²⁵ Correspondence with Denise Arnold, 13 January 2019.

¹²⁶ Bouchier, *Feminist Challenge*; Roseneil, *Disarming Patriarchy*; Rowbotham, *The Past Is before Us*.

¹²⁷ G. Towers, *Building Democracy: Community Architecture in the Inner Cities* (London, 1995), p. 54; J. Davis, ‘Rents and Race in 1960s London: New Light on Rachmanism’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 12 (2001); P. Hain (ed.), *Community Politics* (London, 1976).

¹²⁸ Towers, *Building Democracy*; O. Saumarez Smith, ‘Central Government and Town-Centre Redevelopment in Britain, 1959-1966’, *The Historical Journal*, 58 (2015); P. Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2002); Hain (ed.), *Community Politics*; J. O’Malley, *The Politics of Community Action: A Decade of Struggle in Notting Hill* (Nottingham, 1977).

¹²⁹ For radical approaches to architecture during this period, see S. Sadler, *Archigram: Architecture without Architecture* (London, 2005).

and radical guest lecturers like philosopher Ivan Illich, whose critique of institutionalisation impressed her.¹³⁰ During the time Payne was there, students and tutors from the AA were at the centre of community politics, such as student Jim Monahan who set up the Covent Garden Community Association in 1971.¹³¹

Accordingly, while studying at the AA, Payne volunteered in community campaigns, interviewing tenants about their experience of housing and offering legal and social advice. This was a popular form of metropolitan student activism during the late 1960s and early 1970s, and one in which other second-wave feminists, such as Sheila Rowbotham and Lynne Segal, also took part.¹³² In 1967 hundreds of students signed up to work on well-known housing activist George Clark's Summer Project in North Kensington, during which they interviewed 8,000 residents in more than 60 roads.¹³³ In the face of the remote management of urban regeneration projects and minimal public consultation, inviting tenants to have a say in shaping their environment was a radical act. Indeed this experience fed directly into a political campaign that both Arnold and Payne became involved with in 1970. That year, both women took internships at Lambeth Borough Council, joining a group of thirty architects, urban planners and designers (including future MSG member Charlotte Ellis) who were employed to work on a regeneration project in Brixton. If the plans had come to fruition, recalled Payne, the group would have overseen the construction of several, octagonal high-rise buildings and an elevated motorway that would have run through the heart of Brixton. Aware that most tenants

¹³⁰ Correspondence with Janet Payne, 1 February 2019.

¹³¹ Towers, *Building Democracy*, p. 59.

¹³² J. Davis, 'Community and the Labour Left in 1970s London', in C. Williams, A. Edwards and D. Tanner (eds.), *The Art of the Possible: Politics and Governance in Modern British History, 1885-1997: Essays in Memory of Duncan Tanner* (Manchester 2015); Rowbotham, *Promise of a Dream*, p. 122; L. Segal, 'A Local Experience', in S. Rowbotham, L. Segal and H. Wainwright (eds.), *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism* (London, 1979).

¹³³ 'Notting Hill Summer Project Community Notebook', c. 1967, 1179/4/2/8, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (henceforth MCR); C. McGlashan, 'Civil Rights in W.10', *The Observer*, 25 June 1967; G. Clark, 'The Lesson of Acklam Road', *New Statesman*, 7 August 1970; G. Clark, 'Community Action: Notting Hill', *Anarchy*, 77 (1969); O'Malley, *Community Action*.

found the idea of high-rise buildings undesirable, the group of thirty, led by a socially aware Australian job architect, misbehaved as much as to entirely unravel the project.¹³⁴

Community politics did not just form the political and organisational training ground for Goddess feminists. Looking back on their experiences, secular feminists like Rowbotham and Segal argued that local activism in Hackney and Islington during the 1960s and 1970s was central to the latent structures and ideology of the broader women's movement.¹³⁵ As Stephen Brooke has argued, women's experience of campaigning around the "emotional and material experiences" of tenants, squatters or claimants prefigured the subjective politics of the second wave.¹³⁶ Segal credited the Islington Tenants Campaign with placing "the actual experiences of people as they consciously, and less consciously, participate in the struggle for a better life" at the centre of her Left politics.¹³⁷ For Rowbotham, founding a tenants association in Hackney fed into her conceptualisation of what she called "the new politics" that broadened the orthodox definition of political engagement to include subjectivity and affect.¹³⁸ In the same way, political intervention inspired by the everyday informed the MSG's insistence that feminists should take seriously the ways in which patriarchy penetrates the mind as well as social structures.

The politics of both secular and spiritual feminists, then, were firmly rooted in the insight that came from participating in local action groups. Through this shared experience, Segal, Rowbotham, Arnold and Payne reached the conclusion that social change would be predicated upon transforming "internal perception" and "personal relations" as much as external structural change.¹³⁹ However, unlike those in the broader women's movement, Arnold and Payne

¹³⁴ Correspondence with Janet Payne, 1 February 2019.

¹³⁵ Rowbotham, *Promise of a Dream*, p. 122; Segal, 'A Local Experience'.

¹³⁶ S. Brooke, 'Space, Emotions and the Everyday: The Affective Ecology of 1980s London', *Twentieth Century British History*, 28 (2016), p. 119; Hughes, *Young Lives*, pp. 184-185; Crook, 'Activism and Therapy'.

¹³⁷ Segal, 'A Local Experience', p. 241.

¹³⁸ Rowbotham, 'Women's Liberation and the New Politics'.

¹³⁹ Hughes, *Young Lives*, p. 144.

interpreted this as a distinctly spiritual project. Against the backdrop of the countercultural revival of alternative spiritualities, which had its geographical centre in London, the women had been experimenting with Hindu and Buddhist practices of meditation, yoga and food ritual. In part, they drew upon the literature and institutions created by enthusiasts in the London Theosophical Society during the 1920s, such as the Buddhist Lodge and its journal *Middle Way*, which became well-known resources for spiritual seekers in the 1960s.¹⁴⁰ Through spiritual centres like the shop and meeting place Gandalf's Garden in Chelsea, the women also had access to visiting Indian gurus and books on occultism and mysticism.¹⁴¹ When the MSG was founded in 1975 it attracted other feminists who had participated in alternative spiritualities in different ways, including Margaret Roy, a Kabbalist who lived at the London Buddhist Society in Bethnal Green during the 1970s.¹⁴²

While historians of religion often describe the 1960s revival of alternative spiritualities in apolitical terms, for the women of the MSG spiritual exploration was entwined with their political development.¹⁴³ For Arnold and Payne, practicing meditation and yoga was about the power of the mind, a way of training oneself to resist the internalised dictates of capitalism. Similarly, adopting the Buddhist-inspired macrobiotic diet was a perfect way to bridge the personal and the political. Macrobiotics had come to Britain following the publication of George Ohsawa's book *Zen Macrobiotics* (1965), which had inspired American expatriate Greg Sams and his brother Craig to found London's first macrobiotic restaurant in Paddington in 1968.¹⁴⁴ Organised around a complicated system of yin and yang food groups, the diet promoted rigorous self-control as well as placing emphasis on eating locally grown and

¹⁴⁰ F. Strachan, *The Aquarian Guide to Occult, Mystical, Religious, Magical London and Around* (London, 1970).

¹⁴¹ H. McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford, 2007), p. 134; J. Green, *Days in the Life: Voices from the English Underground, 1961-1971* (London, 1988).

¹⁴² Correspondence with Denise Arnold, 27 September 2018.

¹⁴³ See, for example, Heelas, *New Age Movement*.

¹⁴⁴ W. J. Belasco, *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry* (London, 2007), p. 56.

seasonally available produce. For Arnold and Payne, these principles emphasised moderation in the face of the perceived excesses of consumer culture, as well as promoting ecological thinking.¹⁴⁵ Coinciding with the DDT scare in the United States of America between 1969 and 1972, the women would also have been acutely aware of the dangers of mass-produced food, which undoubtedly fed into the MSG's conceptualisation of the earth as the body of a poisoned woman.¹⁴⁶

The combination of spiritual exploration, and insight gained from community activism, came together for the MSG founders in a “group learning community action” organised by the well-known housing activist George Clark in 1972.¹⁴⁷ This consisted of discussion meetings that took place every Saturday afternoon for two months in Clark's living room, attended by ten to twelve activists who had a stake in community politics.¹⁴⁸ While firmly rooted in the material experiences of slum housing in London, the utopia that Clark and the MSG founders discussed for two months in 1972 prompted an engagement with global intellectual, political and spiritual currents, the kind of which eventually fed into the MSG. Although Clark's repertoire included conventional housing activism, such as founding the Notting Hill tenants association and rehousing campaigns, by the time the women knew him he was speaking in revolutionary terms.¹⁴⁹ In 1972, he told a journalist from *The Guardian* that his project was about creating “new structures” and “new values” out of the places where “there's been a total breakdown... where a greater number of the population are almost totally excluded from the benefits of society”.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 55.

¹⁴⁶ Angela, ‘Trees and their significance’, DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS; P. Long, ‘Politics of Sexuality’, *Politics of Matriarchy*, 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

¹⁴⁷ Correspondence with Marianne, 9 October 2018.

¹⁴⁸ Including the anti-road activist Steven Ward.

¹⁴⁹ G. Clark, ‘The Lesson of Acklam Road’, *New Statesman*, 7 August 1970.

¹⁵⁰ ‘A Most Dangerous Man: Eric Silver on George Clark's Nationwide Plans’, *The Guardian*, 15 April 1972.

When the two months with Clark were up, the small group of activists continued to meet and discuss alternative forms of community organisation. However, missing the power and vibrancy of practical action, Arnold and Payne were keen to find a new outlet. In line with their spiritual experimentation, the women had been taking yoga and meditation classes with peace activist Satish Kumar in the crypt of St Martin-in-the-Fields.¹⁵¹ Since 1969, Kumar had been co-running an adult education programme called the LSN, which also held its evening meetings in the crypt. While the School did not, in fact, offer any of the practical action the women wanted – “basically a talking shop” in Marianne’s words – it did pick up where the meetings in Clark’s living room had left off.¹⁵² Indeed, Clark and the LSN were part of the same composition of political and theological projects, sharing links with Christian CND, the Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence, the New Left and student radicalism. On the invitation of Kumar, Arnold, Payne, Moore and Marianne started attending the School’s evening meetings in 1972.

The LSN was founded by former CND chairman Canon Lewis John Collins. In the political climate of 1968, Collins was becoming increasingly concerned about the violent acts committed by and against “the young, social democrats, progressive liberals, intellectual visionaries and idealists of every kind”.¹⁵³ While many had been critical of his conservative approach to social change, Collins was nevertheless a well-recognised figure in the British peace movement.¹⁵⁴ Known for his commitment to moderate politics in the face of the growing radicalism of the British Left, Collins spent most of the early 1960s resisting the civil disobedience of Bertrand Russell’s CND spin-off The Committee of 100, of which George

¹⁵¹ Correspondence with Janet Payne, 1 February 2019.

¹⁵² Correspondence with Marianne, 18 December 2018.

¹⁵³ L. J. Collins, ‘Introduction’ in Kumar, *Non-Violence or Non-Existence*, p. 8.

¹⁵⁴ J. Burkett, ‘NGOs in Contemporary Britain: Non-State Actors in Society and Politics since 1945’, in N. J. Crowson, M. Hilton and J. McKay (eds.), *NGOs in Contemporary Britain: Non-State Actors in Society and Politics since 1945* (Basingstoke, 2009).

Clark was a founding member.¹⁵⁵ Despite this, Collins' speech to the 200-strong crowd of mostly young activists at the opening meeting of the LSN on 30 January 1969 promised a distinctly revolutionary approach. Using the language of the new "personal politics", he announced to the crowd "We want a new society. Only a totality of outlook will create a revolution of conscience... we need to examine [nonviolence] as a total concept to be applied to the whole of our lives".¹⁵⁶

The two younger men Collins chose to run the School shared his newfound revolutionary outlook and were embedded in the new politics. One was the reverend Colin Hodgetts, then a trustee of Collins' other socially conscious religious organisation Christian Action.¹⁵⁷ More than a generation younger than Collins, Hodgetts viewed the counterculture as completely in line with the social utopia that had existed in Christian thought for centuries. His understanding of political change through personal transformation inspired him to experiment with Christian community organisation in similar ways to the Othona Community, which had been founded by Canon Norman Motley in 1946.¹⁵⁸ When the LSN opened in 1969, Hodgetts and his wife were living in a small experimental community in Bow, which he later described as "the Kingdom now... an island of new standards and a new lifestyle that challenges the old".¹⁵⁹ To help with the School, Collins also enlisted Satish Kumar, who was best known in Britain for his Bertrand Russel-inspired 8,000-mile peace walk against the bomb that started at Mohandas Gandhi's grave in Delhi in 1962 and ended in Washington DC in 1965.¹⁶⁰ Like Hodgetts, Kumar's commitment to nonviolence was religiously inspired. From the age of nine, he lived

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ 'The speech delivered by Canon L. John Collins at the Opening Meeting of the London School of Non-violence', George Willoughby & Lillian Willoughby Papers, DG 236, 22, Swarthmore College Peace Collection (Henceforth SCPC).

¹⁵⁷ C. Hodgetts, *Action! A Cleric Off the Leash* (2016), p. 174.

¹⁵⁸ D. Conradson, 'Somewhere between Religion and Spirituality? Places of Retreat in Contemporary Britain', in P. Hopkins, L. Kong and E. Olson (eds.), *Religion and Place: Landscape, Politics and Piety* (London, 2013); Hodgetts, *Action!*, p. 230.

¹⁵⁹ Hodgetts, *Action!*, p. 189.

¹⁶⁰ S. Kumar, *No Destination: Autobiography of a Pilgrim* (Bideford, 1992).

in a Jain monastery practicing an extreme form of nonviolence, “I wore a cloth folded eight times across my mouth to prevent any violent exhalation of breath which might hurt the air or any organisations in it”.¹⁶¹ Aged eighteen, he read Gandhi for the first time and was converted to spiritual activism, becoming a disciple of Vinoba Bhave, then the leading guru of Gandhian philosophy in India and founder of the Indian land reform movement.¹⁶²

The LSN was immediately popular with young activists both inside and outside the peace movement. Out of the 200 who attended the School’s opening, 86 enrolled for classes, including Pat Arrowsmith, the youth secretary of the Peace Pledge Union and Peggy Smith, a life-long peace campaigner.¹⁶³ Student activists, like Albert Beale, later of *Peace News* magazine, signed up after hearing John Peel “plug” the School on Radio 1.¹⁶⁴ In 1973, Kumar took over the editorship of the environmentalist *Resurgence* magazine, and began using it as an extension of the School’s theorising. In doing so, he exported his ideas to a larger audience, drawing in support from individuals in the Student Christian Movement (SCM) and the environmentalist movement as well as some feminists. Although there were other institutions in Britain offering training in nonviolence at that time, the LSN was the only one aligned with the emotive tenets and psychological hallmarks that had grown out of community politics.¹⁶⁵ Eschewing practical training, Kumar and Hodgetts saw nonviolence as a tool for radical societal critique. “What I am suggesting”, wrote Kumar in his book *Non-Violence or Non-Existence* (1969), “is a complete and absolute change in personal attitude, personal approach, social values, and political and economic conditions”.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 29.

¹⁶² S. A. Wolpert, *Gandhi’s Passion: The Life and Legacy of Mahatma Gandhi* (Oxford, 2001), p. 92.

¹⁶³ Letter from Satish Kumar to George Willoughby, 5 February 1969, DG 236, 22, SCPC; Memo from George Lakey to George Willoughby, Lynne Shivers and Devi Prasad, 7 November 1969, DG 236, 22, SCPC.

¹⁶⁴ ‘More home truths’, *The Guardian*, 29 October 2004, accessed 4 September 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2004/oct/29/radio.broadcasting>.

¹⁶⁵ T. Olson and L. W. Shivers, *Training for Non-Violent Action* (London, 1970); Hughes, *Young Lives*, p. 145.

¹⁶⁶ Kumar, *Non-Violence or Non-Existence*, p. 10.

The emphasis on inner transformation at the LSN was made explicit from the beginning. The School's lecturers and guest speakers were often psychologists, such as Holocaust survivor Fred H. Blum, who led a series of classes on sociological questions relating to nonviolence and human nature "within the framework of the development of consciousness".¹⁶⁷ This would have resonated with the founders of the MSG, for whom questions about consciousness-changing were taking on new meaning and importance during the early 1970s. When Arnold, Payne and Marianne started attending discussion groups at the School in 1972, speakers included John Heron who pioneered forms of co-counselling in the early 1970s, advocating for community-based problem solving rather than a hierarchical relationship between therapist and patient.¹⁶⁸ Not only did this align with the feminist critique of traditional therapeutic methods, co-counselling also appealed to many feminists during the 1970s due to its ideological similarities with consciousness-raising.¹⁶⁹

Like the women of the MSG, key individuals at the LSN interpreted psychological work as a spiritual project. Aside from Kumar and Hodgetts, who were influenced by Hinduism and Christianity, other lecturers drew heavily upon the work of economist Ernst Friedrich Schumacher, whose book *Small is Beautiful* (1973) became one of the crystallising statements on environmentalism. Describing his approach as "Buddhist economics", Schumacher blamed Western modernity's "single-minded pursuit of wealth" and growing inequality, in part, to a decline in "spiritual and moral" principles.¹⁷⁰ Like Hodgetts, Schumacher's theology was cast out of the Christian Golden Rule and Gandhi's interpretation of Jesus' teachings, a popular convergence within the British pacifist movement stretching back to the 1930s.¹⁷¹ Schumacher

¹⁶⁷ 'Non-Violent Sociology: A course of five lectures to be given by Fred H. Blum', c. 1969, DG 236, 22, SCPC.

¹⁶⁸ 'Training in Nonviolence Bulletin', *War Resisters International*, 7 (January, 1972).

¹⁶⁹ B. McLellan, *Beyond Psychoppression: A Feminist Alternative Therapy* (North Melbourne, 1995), p. 16.

¹⁷⁰ E. F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as If People Mattered* (London, 1973), p. 30.

¹⁷¹ E. F. Schumacher, 'This I believe...', *Resurgence*, 55 (March – April, 1976); See S. Koven, *The Match Girl and the Heiress* (New Jersey NY, 2014); S. Scalmer, *Gandhi in the West: The Mahatma and the Rise of Radical Protest* (Cambridge, 2011).

had, in fact, come to Christianity through taking up meditation as an adult, claiming in *Resurgence* that fifteen minutes per day spent concentrating and relaxing had allowed him to develop the “inward parts” necessary to develop a Christian conscience.¹⁷² Schumacher believed that reinstating the place of spiritual morality in economics would shift the emphasis from materialism to human wellbeing.

Another influential regular speaker at the LSN was Arthurian scholar Geoffrey Ashe who, unlike most male writers, would go on to attain acceptance within the international Goddess movement for his book *The Virgin* (1976), in which he read the Christian Mary as a continuation of the Goddess of pre-Christian cultures.¹⁷³ Like the founders of the MSG, Ashe valued the new mysticisms of 1960s counterculture, believing they represented a continuance of the anti-establishmentarianism of nineteenth-century English radicals.¹⁷⁴ In both invocations, he claimed, mysticism played an important role in bringing about “*human* change, a transformation in attitudes, in thinking, in life-styles, leading to a fundamentally different society”.¹⁷⁵ In an argument repeated by the MSG women from 1975, Ashe argued that modern spirituality should be rooted “in the mythology, the traditions, the spiritual geography and holy places of Britain itself”.¹⁷⁶ While this imperative led the MSG women to pre-Christian Celts and Druids, Ashe was specifically interested in the Arthurian legend, identifying modern Glastonbury as the site of Arthur’s Isle of Avalon in his popular book *King Arthur’s Avalon* (1957). His work on this subject secured Glastonbury as not only as the most important geographical site of countercultural spiritualities but also, as I show in Chapter 3, of the Goddess movement from the mid-1990s.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷² Schumacher, ‘This I believe...’.

¹⁷³ G. Ashe, *The Virgin* (London, 1976).

¹⁷⁴ G. Ashe, ‘Creeping Revolution’, *Resurgence*, 41 (November-December, 1973).

¹⁷⁵ G. Ashe, *The Offbeat Radicals: The British Tradition of Alternative Dissent* (London, 2007), p. 256.

¹⁷⁶ G. Ashe, ‘Gurus Galore’, *Resurgence*, 56 (May – June, 1976).

¹⁷⁷ Hutton, *Witches, Druids*, p. 50.

Ashe's spirituality, then, was derived from ancient models, a project the MSG women adopted when they founded their group in 1975. Indeed, for contributors to *Resurgence* magazine, turning to the sometimes vaguely defined past was a central component of theorising the Alternative Society. "Traditionally", wrote Kumar in the summer 1976 edition of *Resurgence*, "the most important unit of human activity has been the village. In pre-industrial agrarian societies the village was the universe in miniature".¹⁷⁸ Ivor Browne, also in 1976, argued against the social significance of the nuclear family, drawing upon the various ways in which the family had been conceived in Ancient Greece and renaissance Italy, "Not until modern society do we find the isolated nuclear family as it exists today".¹⁷⁹ As part of the same project, the MSG women deployed the work of anthropologist Marshall Sahlins to put aside Western ideologies of development in order to reclaim the structures of the past.¹⁸⁰ Just like Kumar and Browne, the MSG drew the justification for new social formations from what they believed about the matriarchal Neolithic. Using these ideas as their starting point, the women advocated for small community organisation in their feminist utopia. In *Politics of Matriarchy*, for example, Anna Perenna argued that the organising principles in a modern matriarchal society would centre upon "smaller units" in contrast to patriarchy that "works from a position of authority downwards".¹⁸¹ Margaret Roy similarly stated, "Communal living is a top priority today, sharing our lives and our work organising in co-operatives and smaller-scale working units".¹⁸²

By the time Arnold, Moore, Payne and Marianne were working towards founding the MSG at the end of 1975, their ideas about matriarchy and the Goddess were having a clear impact on

¹⁷⁸ S. Kumar, 'Holistic View', *Resurgence*, 55 (May – April, 1976).

¹⁷⁹ I. Browne, '20th Century Myths', *Resurgence*, 56 (May – June, 1976).

¹⁸⁰ Perenna, 'Towards a Matriarchal Manifesto', 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Roy, 'Politics of Women's Power', 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

Resurgence magazine. In 1976, Simon O'Donohoe of the Irish SCM recounted what he had learned about Celtic Ireland from the women's movement:

...many aspects of Celtic society accorded a higher status to women than subsequently became the practice... Remains of this survive in Irish mythology, where the woman, not the man, is the spiritual vehicle which carries the soul to rebirth in a later generation.¹⁸³

Early in 1976, at the height of the women's movement, Ashe used his regular column in *Resurgence* to ask, "It is meaningful... to talk about and hope for a revolution if it does not include the revolution of the radical feminists?"¹⁸⁴ However, some readers of *Resurgence* viewed Ashe's comments as perfunctory given that women occupied a marginal position in the magazine itself. Writing in response to Ashe, Kathy Jones (later of the Glastonbury Goddess movement), Margaret Cheney and Virginia Naeve complained that women were rarely given feature pieces in the magazine, and were more often cloistered to the book reviews section.¹⁸⁵ Likening women's treatment to shallow readings of Goddess spirituality, Jones wrote, "on the whole the main role of women within the alternative culture is that of Earth Mother, another variation of the passive role".¹⁸⁶

Although Kumar responded defensively ("Readers and writers have been attacking us on the ground that most of our articles are by men. Our only defence is that most of the articles submitted to us are by men. Women writers where are you?"), his call did inspire the members of the newly formed MSG to begin foregrounding their feminist intervention in *Resurgence*.¹⁸⁷

Arnold and Fiona Cantell joined the editorial collective from the spring 1976 edition and stayed

¹⁸³ S. O'Donohoe, 'Celtic Roots', *Resurgence*, 56 (May – June, 1976).

¹⁸⁴ G. Ashe, 'Exit Women's Year', *Resurgence*, 54 (January-February, 1976).

¹⁸⁵ K. Jones, 'Radical Feminism', M. Cheney, 'Why No Women?'; V. Naeve, 'Drought of Women Writers', *Resurgence*, 55 (March – April, 1976).

¹⁸⁶ K. Jones, 'Radical Feminism'.

¹⁸⁷ 'Resurgence Notes', *Resurgence*, 55 (May – April, 1976).

on until the summer of that year, using their reviews of books by Goddess feminists and interviews with key ecological theorists to discuss their own research into matriarchy. Although ostensibly writing a review of Merlin Stone's book *The Paradise Papers*, for example, Arnold used her word count to discuss the MSG's intervention into feminist theory:

The mythical Golden Age of matriarchy may have had limitations, but it did produce 600 years of peace and plenty in Minoan Crete. Society was able to encompass both good and evil into one divinity and both male and female aspects into individuals. There was communal marriage and communal child-rearing (sometimes by men). Society was matrilinear. Only under patriarchy is the knowledge of paternity essential for the passing on of capital, property and goods. Pre-marital virginity and exclusive sexual faithfulness by wives are then necessary concomitants. Many of the customs regarding abortion, marriage, illegitimate children and sexual freedom were more open then than now.¹⁸⁸

By making this move, Arnold was able to insert the MSG's vision of the Alternative Society into debates that were dominated by male activists like Kumar. Never before had feminist cultural concerns like abortion, sexuality and child-rearing been given sustained attention in the pages of *Resurgence* magazine. Indeed, besides Ashe's conciliatory suggestion that women should be at the forefront of the revolution, feminism was given short shrift altogether by regular contributors, despite the fact that the women's movement was speaking to all the societal issues identified by Kumar, including ecology, peace, economic injustice and the concentration of power.

Despite their best efforts, by the end of 1976, Arnold, Payne, Cantell and Marianne were moving away from the LSN and *Resurgence* magazine. The final straw came when George

¹⁸⁸ D. Arnold, 'Women's Rites', *Resurgence*, 58 (September-October, 1976).

Matthews wrote to *Resurgence* in order to respond to Arnold's review of *The Paradise Papers*, criticising her for making "statements about the past which are not based on evidence", and for relying too heavily upon the "remote past" for new models, despite the fact that this technique was regularly deployed by *Resurgence* men.¹⁸⁹ Long responded:

Even in the Alternative Society, I have seen no fundamental change in the relationship between men and women, role playing is more or less the same, although the men may be seen to run a creche and bake the bread and are certainly less caught up in the material rat race. And is there any reason why things should be different? Not, I think until all the implications of Patriarchy are unravelled; the emotional, sexual, psychological, social and political, in a dialogue between men and women.¹⁹⁰

Against the high point of the WLM, and matriarchy's promise of new emancipatory possibilities, the Alternative Society seemed hopelessly androcentric to Arnold. While the ideas of men like Kumar, Schumacher and Ashe had been revelatory to the women at one point, by the mid-1970s they seemed like another patriarchal canon to overcome. The male-dominated nature of the mainstream Left had also been brought home by other women in the MSG who had not been part of the LSN, but had nevertheless experienced deep, emotionally painful levels of oppression within other supposedly radical left-wing groups.

To conclude, then, I have shown in this section that the politics of the MSG developed out of many of the same contexts and ideas as the broader women's movement. By revealing the extent to which the women engaged with spiritual development as politics I have also identified some of the often-overlooked intellectual strands that fed into the feminist second wave. Indeed, many of the well-known countercultural political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, such as housing and peace activism, were influenced by spiritual and religious politics. When

¹⁸⁹ G. Matthews, *Resurgence*, 60 (January-February, 1977).

¹⁹⁰ D. Arnold, 'The Sisterhood of Man', *Resurgence*, 62 (May-June, 1977).

viewed from this perspective, the perceived secularism of mid-century British political cultures looks entirely mythical. In the final section of this chapter, contrary to the affective assumptions of 1970s socialist feminists, I reveal the ways in which spirituality allowed the women of the MSG to theorise gender in productive and non-essentialising ways.

The Sexual Politics of the Goddess

As shown above, the binary distinction between socialist and non-socialist feminist politics in first-hand accounts of the women's movement has disciplined the ways in which we engage with the politics of the second wave. By proudly resisting the secular and materialist politics of socialist feminism, the MSG became associated with a range of perceived apolitical excesses, including essentialism, a commitment to female supremacy, escapism and individualism. These readings obscure the creative ways in which the MSG used spirituality to think about the problem of sexual difference. Feminists who were attuned to a secular analytical framework interpreted the MSG's mystical intervention as a case of false-consciousness; a way of numbing the lived realities of oppression, or avoiding class consciousness, in favour of foregrounding "Goddess-given" natural femininity.¹⁹¹ For these critics, the Goddess and matriarchy simply reversed the dominated/dominator paradigm, securing women's superiority through what Beatrix Campbell called a "cult of women-are-wonderful" that drew its justification from troubling linkages between the sacred, women's bodies and nature.¹⁹² At its worst, women like Karen Lindsay and Lynne Segal argued that the rhetoric of "gynocracy", which underpinned the MSG's conceptualisation of the feminist future, echoed that of the most

¹⁹¹ Lesbian Left, 'Birmingham and the Sixth Demand'.

¹⁹² A. Weinbaum, 'Review of Elizabeth Gould David "The First Sex"', *Spare Rib* 19 (1974); H. Harris, 'Review of Merlin Stone "The Paradise Papers"', *Spare Rib* 50 (1976); Segal, *Is the Future Female*; Campbell, 'A Feminist Sexual Politics'.

extreme separatist feminists, who located all society's ills with men and advocated for a woman-led society that bordered on fascism.¹⁹³

In this section, I trouble reductive readings of Goddess politics by taking at face value the MSG's theorising of gender and sexual politics during the second half of the 1970s. Ironically, given the regularity with which the group was accused of biological essentialism, the MSG saw their intervention primarily as a challenge to the myopic gender politics of socialist feminists.¹⁹⁴ "What has not yet been achieved", argued the group in their first pamphlet *Goddess Shrew*, "is the understanding that women (and men) are still constantly under the oppression of male-based conditioning".¹⁹⁵ This conditioning, they claimed, would remain intact until the feminist project started asking questions about the historical and psychological origins of contemporary sexual divisions that cast man as superior and woman as inferior.¹⁹⁶ Matriarchy and the Goddess, then, were intended as consciousness-raising tools; a way of moving beyond material analysis towards recognising the constructed nature of gender. More than this, by stressing the emancipatory importance of the spirit, the group made an avowedly postmodern feminist argument. Pointing to a wider understanding of "reason" than accepted by the academy, the group accepted knowledge gained from beyond the evidence of the senses, including imagination, wisdom and intuition.¹⁹⁷

To be clear, I do not want to suggest that the MSG was at the cutting edge of feminist theory, or that feminists of the present would do well to return to their brand of spiritual activism. Although Goddess politics were far more sophisticated than first-hand accounts allow, the MSG did sometimes invoke fixed antagonisms between the sexes. While acknowledging the

¹⁹³ K. Lindsay, 'Feminist Spirituality', *Spare Rib*, 62 (1977); Segal, *Is the Future Female?*

¹⁹⁴ *Goddess Shrew*, DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS; P. Long and M. Coghill, 'Is It Worthwhile Working in a Mixed Group?', August 1977, DM2123/1/82, 15, FAS.

¹⁹⁵ 'Beyond Patriarchy', DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

¹⁹⁶ Long and Coghill, 'Working in a Mixed Group?', DM2123/1/82, 15, FAS.

¹⁹⁷ See, for example, Angela, 'Trees and their Significance', M. Sjöö, 'Women's Spirituality', Scott, 'Half Over Heard', *Goddess Shrew*, DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

mutability of the category woman, for example, group members often mobilised a fixed definition of the term in their research, using it to inform their descriptions of prehistoric matriarchies. However, these moments of dissonance, which largely pivoted around the theoretical tension between gender and sexual difference, mirrored those in the broader women's movement during the late 1970s, and that still exist in contemporary feminist thought today.¹⁹⁸ Since its inception, the women's movement had battled with foregrounding the culturally constructed nature of gender and deploying a fixed definition of woman to analyse subordination. Spiritual feminists, then, were not the only ones dealing with the unresolvable problem of sexual difference; however they were most vehemently penalised for their perceived failings.

In the following, I assess the MSG's approach to sexual politics through their written work. In line with their commitment to a quasi-academic style of research, group members collected reams of notes from the books they read, which they formulated into discussion papers, talks, articles as well as creative writing pieces and poems.¹⁹⁹ "We have a huge backlog of written material", wrote the group in 1978, "from our own study meetings and from correspondence from all over the world".²⁰⁰ In three consecutive years, starting in 1977, the MSG used this wealth of material to produce three pamphlets: *Goddess Shrew*, *Menstrual Taboos* and *Politics of Matriarchy*. Alongside these, individual members of the MSG including Coghill, Sjöo, Elizabeth Lawton, Long and Scott published their own pamphlets that dealt with, or were inspired by, matriarchal principles.²⁰¹ These publications were the spaces in which spiritual feminist politics were brought into being. Produced using the structures and institutions of the

¹⁹⁸ Hemmings, 'Resisting Popular Feminisms', pp. 971-972.

¹⁹⁹ Correspondence with Denise Arnold, 27 September 2018.

²⁰⁰ 'Application for Grants', DM2123/2, RWV1, FAS.

²⁰¹ Long and Coghill, 'Working in a Mixed Group?', DM2123/1/82, 15, FAS; M. Coghill and D. Scott, 'If Women Want to Speak, What Language Do They Use?', October 1977, DM2123/83, 2, FAS; E. Lawton, 'The Inevitability of Matriarchy', undated, c. 1977, Matriarchy Collection, FL; Sjöo, 'Ancient Religion', DM2123/1/85, 5, FAS.

second wave's vibrant print culture, the MSG's writing was intended, specifically, to engage in debates about gender and sexual politics with other feminists.

Accordingly, in their first pamphlet, entitled *Goddess Shrew*, the group sought to locate their intervention within the politics of the second wave. In the opening editorials, of which there were three, unsigned and therefore presumably written by the entire collective, the MSG explained how their excavations of patriarchy and Goddess religion spoke to the feminist agenda. “[Woman] has been the victim of more than double oppression”, they wrote in ‘Beyond Patriarchy’, “she has provided slave labour both for the benefit of the principal exploiter... and in all classes for the personal benefit of the male himself”.²⁰² Although not overt, socialist feminists would have recognised the MSG's critique of the Marxist approach to women's subordination. Class-consciousness, the group argued, was not enough to secure women's emancipation: sexual oppression would not automatically dissolve when women entered the workplace, or even as a result of the socialist revolution.²⁰³ Instead, women needed to look beyond the outer folds of power structures towards the “immensely strong conditioning” that convinced them of their own inferiority.²⁰⁴

The first step, as the MSG women saw it, was to highlight and challenge embedded justifications for women's inferiority. “At that time”, recalled Long, “there was an academic view – a general view – that it was an inevitable process, that women had always been less strong and less able than men, and that this must go on forever”.²⁰⁵ However, if – as the group's research revealed – women held religious and cultural power “from the beginning of the human race until from 5,000 – 2,000 B.C.”, then there was nothing permanent or inevitable about their subjugation in the present; no reason, at least, derived from their bodily capabilities.²⁰⁶ “This

²⁰² ‘Beyond Patriarchy’, DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

²⁰³ Whiting, ‘Goddess Politics’, 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

²⁰⁴ ‘Beyond Patriarchy’, DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

²⁰⁵ ‘Asphodel Long’, DM2767, 5.1, FAS.

²⁰⁶ ‘Beyond Patriarchy’, DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

knowledge”, wrote Sjöo in *Goddess Shrew*, “made it clear to me that the oppression of women during the past thousands of years has nothing to do with our biology as women but has all to do with patriarchal culture and economic structures.”²⁰⁷ What’s more, through their analysis of the Patriarchal Takeover, the period during which matriarchal communities were supposedly suppressed by male-dominated tribes, the group was able to explain both the origins of women’s subordination and the ways in which it had been maintained through thousands of years of psychological conditioning. When patriarchal “Aryan or Indo-European” tribes invaded in the fifth millennium BC, the group argued, their own myths and values succeeded those of Goddess cultures, including “appropriation and ownership”, belief in infinite growth, “the worship of power and domination” and the “monopoly of force”.²⁰⁸

For the MSG, then, matriarchy operated as a way of introducing a theory of gender to the WLM. The workings of the Patriarchal Takeover showed that ‘woman’ was not a natural category, but the product of human ideas; specifically those belonging to Aryan and Indo-European “hunter-fisher tribes from the Caucasus”.²⁰⁹ What’s more, if ‘man’ and ‘woman’ had been constructed through the machinations of patriarchal tribes, then these ascriptions were open to change. Matriarchy worked, for the MSG, not only as a useful consciousness-raising tool, but also as a blueprint for how gender could operate outside hierarchical binaries of masculine and feminine.

However, by the time the MSG was founded in 1975, socialist feminists already associated anthropological theories about ancient woman-led communities with essentialism. Mitchell and Rowbotham, for example, had come to ideas about the matriarchal origins of human society through its intellectual life in communist and socialist circles. Writers like Marx, Engels

²⁰⁷ Sjöo, ‘Women’s Spirituality’, DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

²⁰⁸ ‘Matriarchy v Patriarchy’, DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

²⁰⁹ ‘Beyond Patriarchy’, DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS; ‘Matriarchy v Patriarchy’, DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

and August Bebel had relied heavily upon anthropologists like Lewis Henry Morgan and Bachofen to substantiate their descriptions of pre-class-based societies.²¹⁰ In ‘Woman: The Longest Revolution’, Mitchell dispensed with their appropriations of the matriarchal past, dismissing them as the result of “inaccurate anthropological investigations”.²¹¹ Furthermore, she argued, these writers used matriarchy to argue that women’s inherent biological inferiority, combined with motherhood, excluded them from production, “Her biological status underpins both her weakness as a producer, in work relations, and her importance as a possession, in reproductive relations.”²¹² In Mitchell’s analysis, then, the matriarchal theory that informed socialist writers was not only un-true, it also contained dangerous essentialising tendencies that reflected nothing more than the regressive Victorian sexual attitudes of the exclusively male writers.

Therefore, while the women of MSG believed matriarchy could usher in giddy new heights for feminist critique, socialist feminists were already convinced of its theoretical backwardness. Women like Rowbotham and Mitchell were unable, or unwilling, to read the MSG’s contribution outside their pre-formed ideas about the theories of Victorian men like Morgan and Bachofen. Long noted the ways in which this assumption prevented the MSG from performing a feminist reclamation of the word matriarchy, “at that time, in the ‘70s, we were talking about Matriarchy and we were hoping to reclaim the word... We didn’t get away with it, somehow the general climate was that Matriarchy was just the reverse of Patriarchy”.²¹³ Even feminists who were broadly sympathetic to matriarchy could not see how it could mean anything other than substituting male for female dominance. Writing a year before the MSG was founded, Alexandra Weimbaum warned against American writer Gould Davis’

²¹⁰ Eller, *Gentlemen and Amazons*.

²¹¹ Mitchell, ‘Longest Revolution’, p. 14.

²¹² *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²¹³ ‘Asphodel Long’, DM2767, 5.1, FAS.

conceptualisation of matriarchy in *Spare Rib*, “The foregoing criticisms... caution against the creation of a spurious myth of the golden age of matriarchy which is as false as the patriarchal myth of women’s timeless subjection to men”.²¹⁴ Similarly, in a review of Stone’s *The Paradise Papers*, feminist anthropologist Hermione Harris cautioned that women must be careful “not to set up other myths” to take the place of patriarchy.²¹⁵

The women of MSG were acutely aware of these criticisms when they were working on *Goddess Shrew*. They all had friends in the broader movement who did not share their Goddess convictions, and they had read the major socialist feminist texts that dismissed what they viewed as the liberating potential of evidence from the past.²¹⁶ Their third editorial, ‘Matriarchy v Patriarchy: As we see it’ was specifically intended to answer these accusations. “We... do not envisage matriarchy as a mirror image of patriarchy, so that as patriarchy = male dominance, so therefore matriarchy = female dominance” the group proclaimed, “Dare we suggest that this could even be a Patriarchal notion”.²¹⁷ The inspiration for this statement came from the women’s reading of early feminist work on ecological issues. The reading list at the end of their editorial cited two essays: one by French feminist Françoise d’Eaubonne, that had been translated and republished in *Peace News* magazine, and another by American Nancy Jack Todd.²¹⁸ It is likely that the founders of MSG were introduced to this reading material through the *Resurgence* network. Todd, in particular, had strong connections with the peace movement and Schumacher whose book *Small is Beautiful* was a rallying cry for *Resurgence* editor Satish Kumar. In her article ‘Women and Ecology’, Todd argued that women’s rule would replicate none of the hierarchical structures that gave order to patriarchy. Rather,

²¹⁴ Weinbaum, ‘Review of Elizabeth Gould David’.

²¹⁵ Harris, ‘Review of Merlin Stone’.

²¹⁶ Pauline Long was friends with Amanda Sebestyen for many years, although Sebestyen was always suspicious of Goddess feminism. In 1991, Sebestyen dedicated a prose poem entitled ‘We Agree to Differ’ to Long on occasion of her 70th birthday. A. Sebestyen, ‘We Agree to Differ’, in W. Sidhe and D. Cohen (eds.), *A Garland at Seventy* (London, 1991).

²¹⁷ ‘Matriarchy v Patriarchy’, DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

²¹⁸ d’Eaubonne, ‘Feminism and Ecology’.

matriarchy would reflect the holistic, “immanent essence” of a woman’s perspective.²¹⁹ This immanence was not naturally derived, she was keen to point out, but involuntarily put upon women due to their second-class status and closeness to the equally subjugated earth.

However, despite their attempts to theorise gender outside conventional norms, biologically determined visions of womanhood did sometimes feed into the MSG’s research into matriarchal prehistory. In *Goddess Shrew*, for example, the group described the matriarchal Neolithic, which they claimed covered the period between 10,000 and 2,000 BC, as providing “structural expression” to functions belonging specifically to women, including “security, receptivity, enclosure and nurture”.²²⁰ In this way, the group drew their evidence for the value-system, and even physical and spatial infrastructure of the Neolithic (“rounded womblike houses and temple forms”), from women’s bodies.²²¹ The very nature of the Patriarchal Takeover, similarly, relied upon constructions of woman as peaceful, and men as violent and destructive, the contention working to moralise the ancient past in ways that echoed Victorian excavations of matriarchy.

The group was motivated here by the desire to reclaim women’s reproductive processes that were traditionally denigrated in patriarchy and even, they believed, by some feminists. This posed a problem, however, giving rise to a point of contradiction in the MSG’s denial of fixed notions of femininity, while at the same time seeking to reclaim and celebrate biological functions like menstruation and childbirth. For Long, a mother of two, the latter was particularly important. “It is a major part of my spiritual politics”, she reflected in the mid-1980s, “to upgrade the mother... and, thus, reclaim the Mother... and... Her daughters”.²²² Sjöo was similarly committed to the sacrality of motherhood. Childbirth was the context in

²¹⁹ Todd, ‘Women and Ecology’.

²²⁰ ‘Matriarchy v Patriarchy’, DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² *MRRN newsletter*, 19 (Candlemas, 1984), FL.

which she had her first vision of the Goddess, an experience that inspired her well-known painting *God Giving Birth*.²²³ For Sjöo, motherhood was central to the Goddess' status, "Had not the Goddess given birth to the entire Universe out of Her womb?", she asked in *Goddess Shrew*, "Her shaman/priestesses were also midwives and healers and the women's birth-precincts were the first temples or sacred places... where no man could come".²²⁴ In this way, Sjöo sought to elevate childbirth to the sacred generative powers of the "Cosmic Mother" who creates all things.²²⁵

The MSG's second pamphlet came particularly close to essentialising politics. Unlike *Goddess Shrew*, which contained a broad survey of the group's research interests and creative writing, *Menstrual Taboos* united the women around ancient and modern attitudes towards menstruation. In matriarchies, menstruation had been viewed as "spiritual, consecrated, wonderful, incomprehensible", explained Long, until the patriarchs recast it as shameful, something to be hidden.²²⁶ By making the claim that women's power was located in the mysterious workings of their bodies, Long was invoking a well-worn traditional representation of femininity. These issues were particularly evident in the group's claim that "women almost universally lived apart from men" during their periods, segregating themselves to special "women's huts".²²⁷ In her article, Whiting relied heavily upon American socialist Evelyn Reed to argue that women made the conscious choice to segregate themselves "for their own... protection from the male, when performing their vital and life-giving functions."²²⁸ Whiting set up a binary here between women who are morally superior and pure, against men who are

²²³ Sjöo, 'A Woman's Struggle', DM2123/1/87/1, FAS.

²²⁴ Sjöo, 'Women's Spirituality', DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

²²⁵ Sjöo, 'Ancient Religion', DM2123/1/85, 5, FAS.

²²⁶ P. Long, 'Red is for Life: An Enquiry into the Taboos Surrounding Woman's Cycle', *Menstrual Taboos* (1978), Alice Meakin-Grigor Papers, AMG, 1, Feminist Archive North (henceforth FAN).

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ P. Whiting, 'Menstrual Taboos and their relation to Female Sexual Oppression', *Menstrual Taboos*, AMG, 1, FAN.

violent and aggressive.²²⁹ In the same pamphlet, Long paraphrased American psychoanalyst Mary Esther Harding, who argued that if women returned to the enforced solitude of primitive times, they would “gain closer contact with the primitive forces within them”.²³⁰ The implication here is that menstruation, a biological function, could put women back in touch with their natural, unalterable feminine essence.

Through a secular feminist reading, then, the MSG’s work on childbirth, motherhood and menstruation emphasised the unchanging and morally superior qualities of women against the aggression and will to power of men. This was a problem for the MSG who were more readily associated with elevating reproductive functions by their secular sisters than any other aspect of their politics. Karen Lindsey, writing in *Spare Rib* in 1977, argued that spiritual feminists in Britain placed emphasis upon women’s “childbearing capacity” and “the rediscovery of women’s traditional skills like herbal cures”.²³¹ In 1980, Liz Heron warned of the Goddess movement’s tendency to advocate for essentialism; “to celebrate child-bearing and child-rearing as ‘womanpower’, as one strand of contemporary feminism has done, risks bringing us full circle to another kind of biological essentialism”.²³² She warned her fellow feminists that they must “mistrust the myth of motherhood and any prospect of its revival in our midst”.²³³

However, to dismiss the MSG’s attempt to sacralise women’s reproductive capabilities entirely is to overlook the ways in which the group sought to radically reconfigure women’s relationship with fertility. Returning again to the example of Neolithic matriarchy, the women argued that the primacy of the Goddess did not simply tie women to their natural roles as mothers. Rather, motherhood endorsed women’s fully-fledged participation in society without

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Long, ‘Red is for Life’, AMG, 1, FAN; M. E. Harding, *Woman’s Mysteries: Ancient and Modern* (London, 1935).

²³¹ Lindsay, ‘Feminist Spirituality’.

²³² L. Heron, ‘The Mystique of Motherhood’, in Feminist Anthology Collective (ed.), *No Turning Back: Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement 1975-80* (London, 1981), p. 139.

²³³ Ibid.

denying their generative capabilities. “In the ancient past”, wrote Sjöo, cultures were initiated and shaped by collectives of strong and creative women “who were the mothers as well as THE producers and also the seers, shamans and communicators with the living spirit and energies of Cosmos and Earth”.²³⁴ For Sjöo, denying the sacrality of motherhood (as Heron suggested) also had real implications for contemporary women’s health and wellbeing. Drawing on her own traumatic experience of childbirth in hospital, during which she was put to sleep against her will, Sjöo argued that patriarchal society “forces women to bear children through ignorance and fear”.²³⁵ Reclaiming (ancient) knowledge about birth would spare women the physical and psychological pain of medical institutionalisation, she argued, “We have to decide under what circumstances, in what environment we want to give birth – we must control medicine to do with women’s bodies.”²³⁶

Not all the women in the MSG viewed motherhood as central to the group’s broader political project. While it was important for women like Long and Sjöo to make this critical move, other members (particularly the founders) did not express an interest in reclaiming reproduction. The advertisement Arnold placed in *WINS* to promote the MSG in February 1976 did not mention reclaiming women’s sexual characteristics at all, placing more emphasis upon rewriting the male academic canon.²³⁷ When I reached out to founding member Marianne, she made sure I understood that, for her, motherhood was never part of her “women’s spirituality”:

Because of my own background and experience - never having or wanting children, for example, - I never related to the idea of extolling motherhood etc. My own feminist

²³⁴ Sjöo, ‘Women’s Spirituality’, DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

²³⁵ Sjöo, ‘A Woman’s Struggle’, DM2123/1/87/1, FAS.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ *WINS*, 4 February 1976, FL.

perspective was that that was in itself limiting of women's experience and possibilities.²³⁸

Women who corresponded with MSG during the 1970s echoed this sentiment. Jane Dew, who wrote to the group in 1979 after the publication of *Politics of Matriarchy*, had a complicated view of her woman's body, acknowledging that she loved "being female, I feel my whole being is in accord with the real world (not society for that is not reality) i.e. the seasons, lunar rhythms, ancient patterns", while at the same time distancing herself from the solely reproductive earth mother vision of feminist spirituality, "I am no Earth Mother, I'm being sterilised in the Autumn!"²³⁹

In their last pamphlet *Politics of Matriarchy*, the MSG made their most self-conscious attempt to deal with sexual difference. Unlike their other publications, the group used this pamphlet to suggest what societal values and organisation might look like in a post-patriarchal future.²⁴⁰ Following their claim in *Goddess Shrew* that matriarchy was holistic, not dualistic, the women tried to conceive of a matriarchal future that denied gendered binaries. In her article 'Towards a Matriarchal Manifesto', for example, Perenna addressed the spatial configuration of matriarchal politics in order to challenge the separation of men and women into what she called "men's huts" (public sphere) and "women's huts" (private sphere). This division, Perenna argued, maintained a hierarchical binary between women's reproduction and men's production.²⁴¹ To flatten this distinction, Perenna argued that in the matriarchal utopia all of human activity would centre upon, and take place in, the household. This was not a neo-conservative manoeuvre to return political women to the domestic sphere, but rather an attempt to destabilise the very distinction between the domestic realm and the realm of industrial

²³⁸ Correspondence with Marianne, 18 December 2018.

²³⁹ Letter to the Matriarchy Study Group from Jane Dew, 21 August 1979, DM2767, 5/1, FAS.

²⁴⁰ Long, 'How and Why', DM2767, 1, FAS.

²⁴¹ Perenna, 'Politics of Matriarchy', 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

production. If “giving birth to children, teaching and learning” and “political and social discourse, decision-making about local political issues” were located in one place, then men and women could participate equally, she argued.²⁴² Drawing on Dorothy Dinnerstein’s, *The Rocking of the Cradle and the Ruling of the World* (1976), Perenna concluded, “As women become reintegrated into the productive realm, so men must share the responsibilities of the domestic realm; the emotions and realities of childcare”.²⁴³

While Perenna sought to challenge gender binaries through spatial politics, Long dealt specifically with the problem of men and women’s gendered roles in the matriarchal future. This was charged terrain for Long. Alongside reclaiming the Hebrew Goddesses, she also wrote at length about women’s sexuality in the MSG’s publications. Long had come to feminism through the late-nineteenth-century New Woman ideal, which an older friend had introduced to her when they were living together in poverty in London during the 1940s.²⁴⁴ Accordingly, as a young woman, Long sought independence from men, reading Hannah Stone’s, *A Marriage Manual* (1937) in order to make informed decisions about her own sexuality. Refusing to marry after the birth of her first child in 1942, Long was pressured into allowing the Communist Party (she had been a member since the 1930s) to find adoptive parents for her young son so as not to affront the British working-class community.²⁴⁵ Long’s essays in MSG publications, therefore, regularly dealt with the repression of female sexuality and patriarchal punishment of female sexual transgression. Unlike other members of the MSG, who sometimes emphasised female peace-keeping against male violence and destruction, Long insisted upon the role of anger in matriarchy:

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ L. Bland, ‘The Married Woman, the ‘New Woman’ and the Feminist: Sexual Politics of the 1890s’, in J. Rendall (ed.), *Equal or Different: Women’s Politics 1800-1914* (Oxford, 1987).

²⁴⁵ Long, ‘Pinhole’, pp. 204-205.

Until our anger boils over, we will not be free people. So often we bury it, we ‘forgive’, we turn it into pain, acceptably weep, wash up and smile again. No longer. There can be no future for us until we uncover the spring which is now a volcano, and let it go where it has to. We have to seek justice.²⁴⁶

Long’s own experiences convinced her that women’s oppression centred on the containment, control and discipline of their bodies. “Women have always connected sex with death”, she wrote in her contribution to Amanda Sebestyen’s collection of WLM memoirs, “for generations until only this century it has been for many women a nine months’ journey to death”.²⁴⁷ Reading menstruation, female sexuality, childbirth, mothering and women’s old age as sacred was important for Long because it reversed the negative presumptions about female incapacity that had fed into her own experiences of sex and motherhood.

In her matriarchal historical recovery and her spirituality, then, Long had a tendency to invoke ‘woman’ as singular and timeless, whose positive characteristics emerged from specific biological functions. However, she simultaneously insisted that matriarchies of the past and future would not adhere to simple gendered dualisms or hierarchies.²⁴⁸ These tensions played out in Long’s theorisation of gender in a post-patriarchal future. Drawing upon American radical feminist Andrea Dworkin’s ideas about “androgyny”, and the work of feminist science-fiction writers such as Marge Piercy, Long argued that the feminist erotic model of the future would be “gynandrous”.²⁴⁹ For Long, gynandry signified, “male and female characteristics in one organism and take on the further meaning of such two-sex characteristics being of equal importance”.²⁵⁰ Long explained, here, that human beings could incorporate both female and

²⁴⁶ Long, ‘Politics of Sexuality’, 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

²⁴⁷ Asphodel, ‘Prague Winter, Feminist Spring’, p. 14.

²⁴⁸ ‘Matriarchy v Patriarchy’, DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

²⁴⁹ A. Dworkin, ‘Marx and Gandhi were Liberals – Feminism and the ‘radical’ Left’, *Peace News*, 1 December 1978; M. Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (New York, 1976).

²⁵⁰ Long and Coghill, ‘Working in a Mixed Group?’, DM2123/1/82, 15, FAS.

male characteristics, and that both would be of equal value; however, at the same time, she did not deny that men and women are, inherently, different. Elsewhere, she drew links between gendered characteristics and sexed bodies, “We can be happy in whatever turns out to be the specific characteristics (if any) of our gender”.²⁵¹

Long’s struggle to theorise sexual difference in the matriarchy network echoes the tension that existed since the beginning of the women’s movement between mobilising woman as the basis of a stable political movement and wanting to deny prescriptive or compulsory notions of femininity.²⁵² As with many other second-wave feminists, these tensions came to a head, for Long, in debates around trans participation in the WLM.²⁵³ After discovering that a member of MSG was a trans woman, Long threw aside her gynandrous view of post-patriarchal society and took to the *London Women’s Liberation newsletter* to argue that trans women were not real women at all, but men who presumed to enter feminist spaces.²⁵⁴ Her argument was intended to challenge what she perceived as the essentialising politics of trans; however, her own argument was also rooted in biological essentialism. For Long, trans women could never be real women because they were not born with the same types of sexual characteristics.

The unresolvable problem of sexual difference, then, troubled Goddess feminists in the same way it troubled the broader women’s movement. However, the predetermined opinions of secular feminists on the supposedly essentialising terms matriarchy and Goddess have resulted in many women overlooking the ways in which Goddess feminism could provide sustaining resources for conceptualising gender. Historians of the WLM have perpetuated these affective assumptions, unable to read matriarchy and the Goddess as anything other than a sign of essentialising, or theoretically backward, politics. By conducting the first in-depth reading of

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² J. Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (London, 1974).

²⁵³ Setch, ‘Women’s Liberation Movement in Britain’, p. 66.

²⁵⁴ Asphodel, *London Women’s Liberation newsletter*, 17 October 1979, FL.

the MSG's written work, I have shown that historians should not dismiss all discussion of the Goddess as back-door conservatism. At very least, we must take seriously the real social and psychological needs of the women who turned to the Goddess to express their feminist politics during the 1970s.²⁵⁵

Conclusion

In January 1980, Janet McCrickard sat down to read the first copy of *Spare Rib* she had bought in three years. Doubtful that Goddess feminism would ever get a fair representation in the national women's movement magazine she was, at first, delighted to see an advert for the Woman Magic exhibition in Sheffield, which included paintings by her friend Monica Sjöö. Her delight turned to anger, however, when she discovered, once again, that *Spare Rib* had used the short advert to patronise and belittle Goddess feminists. "Paintings by Monica Sjöö, Beverly Skinner, Ann Berg, and batiks by Marika Tell", read the advert, "all celebrating the goddess within them".²⁵⁶ To McCrickard, this felt like a dismissive and insulting summary of a movement that gave shape to her feminist politics. Yes, the Goddess was within, but that was only one small part of the story. Exasperated, McCrickard decided to write a note to the editors expressing her anger. "Dear *Spare Rib*", she began:

You habitually present religious feminists as a weak minority, somehow not 'proper' feminists, reactionary, divisive, self-indulgent, unrealistic, otherworldly, diverting energy from the political struggle... You find it impossible to get past the block of received socialist wisdom about the 'opium of the people'... You have inherited the

²⁵⁵ K. Rigby, 'The Goddess Returns: Ecofeminist Reconfigurations of Gender, Nature and the Sacred' in F. Devlin-Glass and L. McCredden (eds.), *Feminist Poetics of the Sacred: Creative Suspicions* (Oxford, 2001).

²⁵⁶ 'Woman Magic', *Spare Rib*, 90 (January, 1980), p. 29.

great masculinist tradition of suppressing women's religious voice. St Paul would be proud of you!²⁵⁷

McCrickard's comments in 1980 could equally apply to the way in which the Goddess movement is represented in women's movement histories today. The primacy of Marxist feminist voices, and the politics of representation that see them as more legitimate than other forms of feminism, have written out the varieties of 1970s feminist experience. This is especially disappointing when Goddess feminists were so deeply aware of how the academy had denied women their own religious history, and how hard they tried to leave a representative report of their movement.

To be clear, the point of this chapter has not been to criticise socialist feminists of the 1970s for dismissing Goddess spirituality (although I do take issue with those who are now women's movement historians and who fail to historicise the evidence of their own experience).²⁵⁸ Rather, by looking closely at what parts of the feminist past historians choose to question, and which they bring forward uncritically, I have moved focus away from different forms of feminist activism themselves and towards the historical narrative that arranges them into "good" or "bad"; essentialist or non-essentialist; political or non-political theories.²⁵⁹ This is particularly important when, as feminist theorists like Joan Scott and Clare Hemmings have reminded us, historians of the WLM are "desiring subjects", invested in the past and future of the feminist movement.²⁶⁰ While affective attachments have led to radical and exciting reclamations of feminist voices lost, they have also perpetuated the exclusion of others.

²⁵⁷ J. McCrickard, *Spare Rib*, 92 (March, 1980), p. 4.

²⁵⁸ J. W. Scott, 'The Evidence of Experience', *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (1991).

²⁵⁹ Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, pp. 21-22.

²⁶⁰ Scott, *Fantasy*; Hemmings, *Considering Emma Goldman*.

CHAPTER THREE

THE GODDESS VERSUS THE NEW AGE

This chapter traces the story of the matriarchy network into the 1980s and 1990s in order to reveal how the Goddess has been the subject of erasure, not only in histories of the women's movement, but also in histories of religious change. I show how the methodologies and epistemologies that scholars (in particular sociologists of religion) have used to construct the "New Age" as a category for analysis have either marginalised the feminist Goddess or depoliticised her entirely. In well-known work by Paul Heelas, Linda Woodhead and Marion Bowman, the Goddess is often portrayed as a "feminine oriented" therapeutic tool for women, entirely detached from the radical community politics that produced her.¹ Even scholars of contemporary Paganism and witchcraft such as Joanne Pearson, Ronald Hutton and Graham Harvey, who often claim to be more attuned to their case studies and sometimes write as "insiders", make the same elisions.² They either trace the Goddess' genealogy back to amateur anthropologist Gerald Gardner's version of Wicca in the 1950s (entirely overlooking her origins in the WLM), or view feminist spirituality as a highly controversial but numerically insignificant offshoot ("mutant") of the broader Pagan movement.³

¹ M. Bowman, 'Nature, the Natural and Pagan Identity', *DISKUS*, 6 (2000); Heelas and Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*.

² J. Pearson, "'Going Native in Reverse': The Insider as Researcher in British Wicca", *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, 5 (2001).

³ C. Hardman and G. Harvey (eds.), *Paganism Today* (London, 1996); J. Pearson, R. H. Roberts and G. Samuel (eds.), *Nature Religion Today: Paganism in the Modern World* (Edinburgh, 1998); J. Blain, D. Ezzy and G. Harvey (eds.), *Researching Paganisms* (Walnut Creek CA, 2004); J. Pearson, 'Demarcating the Field: Paganism, Wicca & Witchcraft', *DISKUS*, (2000).

The depiction of Goddess spirituality in New Age scholarship stands in stark contrast to the ways in which women like Asphodel Long (known as Pauline before August 1979) and Monica Sjöö described their own movement. Historicising Goddess feminism, and attending to the intentions of women like Long and Sjöö, can therefore go some way to contesting the presumption that the Goddess is nothing more than a narcissistic, post-feminist idol. More than this, I want to use this chapter to bring into focus the moment in which the academic understanding of the New Age came into being, a version that has proved remarkably resilient. Many high-profile Goddess feminists, including Sjöö, Long, Daphne Francis, Siren Harradine and Shan Morgain, were actively involved in this process, taking part in conferences and events that produced some of the earliest literature on the New Age, which they reviewed in Goddess-oriented publications.⁴ They repeatedly contested the story that sociologists of religion were telling about the New Age, drawing attention to the “reactionary, hierarchical, racist and misogynist agenda” behind male-dominated alternative spiritualities.⁵ Despite this, the perspectives of Goddess feminists were systematically omitted from anthologies and conference reports that formed the bulk of early literature on the New Age.⁶ Reviewing this process reveals the politics at play in the formation of academic knowledge. Scholars and practitioners of the New Age marginalised feminist ways of knowing, while taking at face-value men’s experiences and assuming they represented the mainstream of the movement.⁷

Recent historiography has challenged the idea that the women’s movement went into decline in the late 1970s. Natalie Thomlinson’s retelling of the women’s movement from a multiracial

⁴ S. Harradine, ‘Goddess Spirituality – Making our Voices Heard’, *From the Flames*, 17 (Summer 1996), FL; Asphodel, ‘review of Ronald Hutton, “The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles”’, *Wood and Water*, 39 (Summer Solstice, 1992); M. Sjöö, ‘The Glastonbury Goddess Conference, Radical Feminism and Earth-Based Spirituality’, *From the Flames*, 19 (Spring, 1997), FL; M. Sjöö, ‘New Age and Patriarchy’, *Religion Today*, 9 (1993-1994).

⁵ Sjöö, ‘New Age and Patriarchy’, p. 22.

⁶ See, for example, Hardman and Harvey (eds.), *Paganism Today*; Pearson, Roberts and Samuel (eds.), *Nature Religion Today*.

⁷ Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*; J. E. Pearson, ‘Religion and the Return of Magic: Wicca as Esoteric Spirituality’ (PhD Thesis, Lancaster University, 2000).

perspective, for example, shows that the 1980s were “as equally a vibrant period of feminism as the early 1970s”.⁸ Similarly, Sarah Crook has used the case study of the Islington Women and Mental Health Project to challenge “the ineffective intellectual framework provided by the concept of ‘waves’ of feminism”, revealing how dynamic feminist resistance to mental healthcare operated during the 1980s.⁹ Goddess feminism intervenes in traditional movement chronology in similar ways. In the early 1980s, the spiritual feminist politics of the MSG grew rapidly in popularity. What began as a localised study group of between eight and twelve women grew into a nationwide network, boasting international links with Goddess feminists in Europe, the United States of America, Australia and New Zealand. The surge in popularity was galvanised by the women’s occupation of RAF Greenham Common from September 1981, which, as I showed in Chapter 1, became an outlet for Goddess-inspired direct action and matriarchal social organisation, as well as providing fertile ground for the reception of books by American Goddess feminists, such as Starhawk, Margot Adler and Zsuzsanna Budapest.¹⁰ At the same time, debates about women’s ordination, which were similarly inspired by second-wave feminism, pushed the question of women and religion into public consciousness.¹¹ During the 1990s, the work of both Christian and Goddess feminists (Long and Sjöo in particular) came to figure in the formation of feminist theology as an academic discipline in Britain.¹² While the Goddess was entering the academy, a renewed grassroots feminist spirituality movement was being organised by a younger generation of women who came to the Goddess at Greenham Common. Like their foremothers in the MSG, these women insisted upon spiritual politics as a vital feminist imperative, but added to this a strong instinct for how

⁸ Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women’s Movement*, p. 10.

⁹ Crook, ‘Activism and Therapy’, p. 1154.

¹⁰ See Chapter 1 and Welch, ‘The Spirituality of, and at, Greenham Common’. for American Goddess feminist texts at Greenham Common., such as Starhawk, *Spiral Dance*; M. Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today* (New York, 1979); Z. E. Budapest, *The Holy Book of Women’s Mysteries* (Venice CA, 1979).

¹¹ Dagers, *Christian Women’s Movement*.

¹² Long, *In a Chariot Drawn by Lions*.

ritual work tied in with direct action. In the mid-1990s, Kathy Jones (who had been involved with the Goddess movement since the late 1970s) sought to tie the generational and international threads of the Goddess movement together in Glastonbury, which by the 1990s was known as the geographical centre for alternative spiritualities in Britain. In 1996, she organised the first annual Glastonbury Goddess Conference attended by hundreds of women from America, Europe, New Zealand and Australia.¹³ Although Jones retired in 2016, the annual Goddess conference continues today.

Despite its increasing presence in popular consciousness and in the academy, dominant scholarly understandings of Goddess spirituality have been disciplined by sociological work on the New Age. In part, the problems with this scholarship are methodological. Pearson and Hutton, for example, draw their understanding of the Goddess almost exclusively from male-dominated Pagan institutions that were traditionally hostile to Goddess feminism, such as the Pagan Federation (known as the Pagan Front before 1989), the British Druid Order, the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids and the Fellowship of Isis.¹⁴ While Pearson and Hutton accept the existence of an overtly feminist Goddess movement (although they link its origins to the United States of America, rather than the British WLM), they downplay its significance, or discredit it with pejorative language. Hutton, for example, discusses the “wanton invention” and “lurid fantasy” in the work of Mary Daly, and dismisses Zsuzsanna Budapest for “shunning men”.¹⁵ Pearson also relies heavily upon the American feminist spirituality movement, concluding, “the myth of the golden age of matriarchy has had relatively little impact in Britain”.¹⁶ It is surprising that scholars like Hutton and Pearson, who were ostensibly aware of a feminist

¹³ W. Griffin, ‘Crafting the Boundaries: Goddess Narrative as Incantation’, in W. Griffin (ed.), *Daughters of the Goddess: Studies of Identity, Healing, and Empowerment* (Oxford, 2000), p. 80.

¹⁴ Pearson, ‘Religion and the Return of Magic’; Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*.

¹⁵ Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*, p. 344.

¹⁶ Pearson, ‘Religion and the Return of Magic’, p. 131.

Goddess movement in America, overlooked the range of feminist theorisations of the Goddess and matriarchy in Britain.

If a narrow methodological approach is one reason why Goddess feminism has been overlooked by scholars of the New Age, a narrow definition of religion is another. As I showed in the introduction to my thesis, New Age scholarship is grounded in conceptual problems relating to the study of religion, which is narrowly defined by fixed doctrine, timeless ideals and strong institutional presence. In this formation, scriptural and theological substance and social significance are what make religions, not poorly articulated thoughts or inconsistent opinions, which are disregarded as eccentricities.¹⁷ Accordingly, sociological definitions of the New Age string together a set of often unrelated practices in time and space that fall outside their assessment of what it means to be religious. These are often expressed as simple binaries: where religion is serious and substantial, the New Age is irrelevant and disengaged or, perplexingly, where religion deals with faith and transcendence, the New Age deals with secularism and matters of the material world.¹⁸ These emerge from the hinging binary (value-judgement) behind secularisation theory, between tradition-religiosity-(good) and modernity-secularism-(bad). In this way, for scholars like Bryan Wilson, Paul Heelas and Michael York, the New Age becomes shorthand for the ills of modernity, drawing uncritically upon sociological, historical and philosophical work on authenticity and narcissism in the modern world.¹⁹

Scholars' commitment to these predetermined characteristics and affective presumptions has meant that the (historically) specific contours of extra-institutional religiosity have vanished

¹⁷ D. Lyon, 'A Bit of a Circus: Notes on Postmodernity and New Age', *Religion*, 23 (1993); Wilson, *Sectarianism*.

¹⁸ W. J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden, 1996).

¹⁹ See, for example, C. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York, 1979); M. Berman, *The Politics of Authenticity: Radical Individualism and the Emergence of Modern Society* (New York, 1970).

into generalisations and homogeneity. Rather than drawing conclusions from source material, historians and sociologists of religion discipline what they find into pre-determined categories. This means that the Goddess movement's roots in the radical politics of the 1960s and 1970s are often overlooked in favour of spiritual practices, behaviours or even paraphernalia that fit into scholars' superficial understanding of the New Age, such as Tarot, I Ching, incense, ley lines, astrology, eastern and esoteric spirituality, yoga or meditation.²⁰ In her edited collection with Steven Sutcliffe, Bowman fits Goddess spirituality into some of the most well-recognised tropes of New Age scholarship, such as the narcissistic selfhood implied in her section title, 'The Personal Quest', or the rampant capitalism of "'Mix-and-Match" Spirituality', elsewhere 'Spiritual Shopping and Consumer Choice'.²¹ In her assessments, Bowman does not mention feminism or even politics at all, and is far more likely to take seriously the perspective of the established church than feminists. In a chapter for Heelas' edited collection, *Beyond New Age* (2000), Bowman accepts the words of a Christian minister in Glastonbury, drawing uncritically on his differentiation between the Christian "What is *the* truth" and the New Age (including Goddess) "What is *your* truth", a thinly veiled critique of the individualism of the secular world as opposed to the collective conscience of Christianity.²²

The proximity of Goddess feminists to New Age scholars during the mid-1990s meant that many Goddess-oriented women knew they were being wrongly depicted by the academy. In response, some Goddess feminists started demarcating the boundaries of acceptability within their own movement. The Glastonbury movement, in particular, was viewed by many as a sign that the male-dominated New Age had successfully infiltrated the feminist spirituality

²⁰ G. D. Chryssides, 'Defining the New Age', in D. Kemp and J. R. Lewis (eds.), *Handbook of New Age* (Boston, 2007).

²¹ M. Bowman, 'More of the Same? Christianity, Vernacular Religion and Alternative Spirituality in Glastonbury', in M. Bowman and S. Sutcliffe (eds.), *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality* (Edinburgh, 2000), pp. 86-87; Bowman, 'Ancient Avalon'.

²² Bowman, 'More of the Same?', p. 100.

movement, producing a vision of the Goddess that was heteronormative, monotheistic and not attuned to feminist analyses of capitalism, class or race. This story of depoliticisation in the Goddess movement echoes the narrative of loss that is so common in first-hand accounts of the women's movement. While I accept that not every woman involved with the Glastonbury Goddess movement from 1996 was as committed to fighting the patriarchy as the MSG were in 1975, I am nevertheless suspicious of a singular narrative that tells of the loss of politicisation and rising superficiality in the next phase of the Goddess movement, especially when it shares so many narrative similarities with the arguments secular feminists made about the Goddess in the 1970s.

To engage critically with this interdisciplinary literature, this chapter takes at face value the complex negotiations between the Goddess movement and broader extra-institutional spiritual practices, such as Paganism and witchcraft, in the 1980s and 1990s. I will attempt to read these distinctions, in each instance, to see what boundaries are being constructed between appropriate and inappropriate forms of feminist spirituality. In this way, my focus aligns with that of the previous chapter in which I sought to write the intellectual history of the division between Goddess feminism and political feminism in the second half of the 1970s. I also want to show the intimate ways in which the formation of the New Age as a category for analysis informed the response of Goddess feminists, who felt they were being marginalised by academic scholarship. In this chapter, then, I argue that we need to complicate politically loaded categories like New Age, which rarely reflect the phenomena they intend to describe.

The first section of this chapter assesses the moment in which tensions around the political integrity of Goddess feminism first surfaced during the mid-1980s. I reveal how, despite some criticisms, it is difficult to map a singular narrative of depoliticisation onto this period. Critics were only among a minority and the political imperatives of matriarchal feminism were continually reinstated by group members during the period. In section two, I argue that

retrospective accounts that tell of the linear loss of politicisation in the Goddess movement were influenced heavily by Monica Sjöö's writing about the New Age in the 1980s, and by the spiritual feminist community that formed around these arguments at the beginning of the 1990s. Finally, I use the case study of the confrontation at the first Glastonbury Goddess Conference in order to show how the pressures of academic knowledge-formation acted upon Goddess feminists, leading them to distinguish between good and bad Goddess feminists and theories.

The Matriarchy Research and Reclaim Network, 1981 – 2000

As they predicted during their first meeting in October 1975, the Goddess had transformative effects on the personal lives of the MSG women. As a tool for liberating the self from patriarchal structures, revolutionary matriarchy raised profound questions about female sexuality, social relations, community organisation, language and rationality.²³ Like other feminists in the broader women's movement, by the end of the 1970s the founding members of the MSG were making changes to their personal lives that reflected their political critique. Although Denise Arnold had already spent five years studying to be an architect, she went back to University in 1979 to retrain as an anthropologist specialising in matrilineal practices in indigenous communities in Bolivia.²⁴ In 1978, Marianne and Liz Moore both left Britain in pursuit of the Goddess; Marianne travelling overland to her guru's ashram in India and painter Moore moving to Crete to make a film about matriarchy with fellow artist Jenni Wittman and filmmaker Jenny Morgan.²⁵ Between 1976 and 1977, Janet Payne was going through a divorce

²³ *Politics of Matriarchy*, 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL; Coghill and Scott, 'If Women Want to Speak', DM2123/83, 2, FAS.

²⁴ Correspondence with Denise Arnold, 27 September 2018.

²⁵ Correspondence with Denise Arnold, 27 September 2018; correspondence with Marianne, 18 December 2018; Correspondence with Jenny Morgan, 30 September 2018. Although not part of the matriarchy network, Jenny Morgan went on to produce several episodes of the British Broadcasting Corporation documentary series *Everyman* that reflected matriarchal themes, including 'Sweet Mother' (1979) about Christian representations of the Virgin Mary, as well as 'The Devil's Gateway' (1981) about the menstrual taboo in established religions.

and trying to “reinvent herself” as a woman, while Brighton MSG member Pat Whiting started identifying as a lesbian.²⁶ Although matriarchy was the inspiration behind many of these life-choices, it also took some of these women away from the MSG itself. Their departure was secured by the conflict over the place of transsexual women within the MSG, as well as Pauline Long’s increasing dominance within the group.²⁷

But the MSG did not end with the departure of its founding members. Several women remained in the London group, whose politics and sense of self had become increasingly tied up with matriarchy and the Goddess. For Long in particular, the stakes were high. Feminist spirituality had transformed her troubled relationship with her Jewish identity, bringing together a newly found positive sense of herself as a Jew – interested in the “female side of the Jewish deity” – and a feminist.²⁸ In 1979, the Goddess became central to Long’s selfhood when she changed her name from Pauline to Asphodel (after the flower associated with the Greek Goddess Persephone, a symbol of rebirth) in an act of self-definition in the face of ageism from younger feminists.²⁹ Mary Coghill also continued to be active in the MSG. She had joined the group towards the end of the 1970s, authoring two poems for *Menstrual Taboos* in 1978. Like Long, Coghill was academically minded and creative, interested in the scholarly integrity of matriarchal studies and exploring the Goddess through poetry.³⁰ Coghill was important because she had access to mainstream feminist institutions and communication networks through Sisterwrite bookshop, which sold the MSG’s publications as well as books and magazines by American spiritual feminists, including Starhawk’s *The Spiral Dance* and the Boston-based journal *Woman of Power* (1984-1995). Kabbalist Margaret Roy, who was the most engaged of

²⁶ Correspondence with Janet Payne, 26 September 2018; correspondence with Denise Arnold, 17 September 2018.

²⁷ Correspondence with Janet Payne, 26 September 2018.

²⁸ Long, ‘Pinhole’, pp. 212-215.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 189-190.

³⁰ Coghill, ‘Goddess Creation’, pp. 172-173.

the three in mysticism and the occult, also stayed on having found an outlet for using the Goddess as feminist therapeutic practice.³¹

The changing group dynamic altered the spirituality of the matriarchy network, lending it a form derived from the fledgling mid-century Pagan movement and a new emphasis upon self-work. Although neo-Paganism had always been present in the MSG, Long's newfound position of authority brought it to the fore. Since 1976, she and other members of the MSG had been involved with the Golden Section Order, a Druidic ritual group founded in London by architect Colin Murray, "for the preservation of Caeltic Lore, Monuments and Antiquities".³² Long was impressed by Murray, drawing parallels between his intellectual approach to the study of Celtic art, mythology, history and religion and her own research into matriarchy.³³ Under her influence, MSG organisation and content started to mirror Murray's understanding of the Goddess in indigenous Celtic religion. From 1980, individuals and regional MSG groups started producing lunar calendars, which closely followed Murray's thirteen-month Druidic Tree calendar.³⁴ These informed the dates of the MSG's seasonal rituals and publications, including their short-lived newsletter *Matriarchy News* (1980-1981) that was intended to appear quarterly on the Celtic "Fire Festivals"; Samhain (1 November), Candlemas (1 February), Beltane (1 May) and Lammas (1 August), just like Murray's own newsletter, *The New Celtic Review*.

Margaret Roy's interests also had an impact on the changing spirituality of the MSG. Reflecting changes in the broader women's movement, at the end of the 1970s Roy became increasingly vocal about the Goddess as a tool for feminist therapy.³⁵ In many ways, this therapeutic element was not a new addition to the MSG. In *Goddess Shrew* the authors of the editorial announced

³¹ M. Roy, 'Power of the Dark Goddess', *Politics of Matriarchy*, 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

³² *The New Celtic Review*, 1 (February, 1977).

³³ Long, 'Colin Murray'.

³⁴ *MRRN newsletter*, 3 (January, 1982), FL.

³⁵ Crook, 'Activism and Therapy'.

“we want to share our regained confidence in ourselves with other women. We extend to them the thought that we all have the psychological power to change our lives”.³⁶ In the third MSG pamphlet *Politics of Matriarchy*, however, Roy was more specific, arguing alongside well-known feminist psychotherapists and sociologists, such as Dorothy Dinnerstein, Hannah Gavron, Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein, that patriarchy created the conditions for mental illness in women.³⁷ The “Dark Goddess”, for Roy, was simultaneously a practical and magical way for women to heal their torn apart psyches, working as a metaphor for all the biological processes and characteristics that patriarchy labelled bad in women, like menstruation. Choosing to embrace the “Dark Goddess”, for Roy, was a way of rejecting the sanitised image of “Woman” in patriarchal society. Roy’s growing interest in feminist therapeutic practice fit well with the psychological insights of Long’s Pagan rituals. Increasingly, MSG members used the language of “inner life”, “True Self”, and “emotional and psychic growth” when writing about their feminist spirituality; all terms that sociologists of the New Age would later associate with individualism and narcissism but, as my reading shows, had their roots in feminist politics.³⁸

The MSG’s self-conscious turn inward through feminist therapy and Pagan ritual came to the fore at their first conference Wise Woman, held at Caxton House in North Islington on 16 May 1981.³⁹ The conference theme was “women’s healing and creative wisdom”, reflecting Roy’s interest in the Goddess as a therapeutic metaphor and Long and Coghill’s recovery of “wise woman” archetypes in Celtic religion. In the conference pack, the women sought to explain their changing focus from matriarchal research alone to feminist healing, admitting, “we have withdrawn a little into ourselves... but [this] is not without far-reaching political

³⁶ ‘Beyond Patriarchy’, DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS.

³⁷ Roy, ‘Dark Goddess’, 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL; Crook, ‘Activism and Therapy’.

³⁸ P. Long, ‘Politics of Sexuality’, *Politics of Matriarchy*, (1979), 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL; Roy, ‘Dark Goddess’, 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL; Long, ‘Colin Murray’.

³⁹ ‘Matriarchy Study Group Conference Wise Women – Booking Form’, c. 1981, FL.

repercussions”.⁴⁰ Putting into practice Roy’s ideas about the Dark Goddess, Coghill led a workshop called “Matriarchal Mysticism” in which women were encouraged to use Goddess archetypes for “protection”, “strength” and finally “action” against patriarchy.⁴¹ For the first time the Goddess became a method of self-fashioning; a new image that women could think into being to overcome the psychological indoctrination of patriarchy.

The conference was a turning point for the MSG in terms of organisation as well as content. Rising membership brought with it the need for a larger organisation that would reflect the needs of women outside London. Accordingly, Long, Coghill and Roy founded the MRRN at the end of 1981, echoing that which had gone before but on a larger scale. The loose network of regional Matriarchy Study groups (including London, Sheffield, Brighton, Glastonbury, Birmingham and Hebden Bridge) and practicing individuals organised themselves informally, meeting to discuss research or plan rituals.⁴² In the hands of former London women’s movement worker Long, the role of the MRRN echoed that of the LWLW: an umbrella organisation that shared information, produced a newsletter and organised national conferences and outings. In London, what became known as the “mother group”, met to celebrate the Celtic Fire Festivals, equinoxes and solstices, and on the first Tuesday of every month for “business and discussion and exchange of information”.⁴³ The mother group made use of the women’s movement institutions of the 1970s, taking up meeting rooms at A Woman’s Place, which started life as LWLW premises on Earham Street, before becoming a London women’s centre in 1975, as well as starting a matriarchy library at the WRRC from October 1983.⁴⁴ Once again,

⁴⁰ ‘Precise of Workshops/Papers’, 1981, courtesy of Rupert White, private collection.

⁴¹ ‘Mystical Personae: the Wise Woman in each of us’, Wise Woman Presentation Pack, Beltain 1981, FL.

⁴² *Arachne*, 1 (May Eve, 1983), FL.

⁴³ *MRRN newsletter*, 1 (November, 1981), FL.

⁴⁴ *MRRN newsletter*, 16 (Autumn Equinox, 1983), FL; the MRRN’s library still exists at the Feminist Library (formerly the WRRC) now known as the Matriarchy Collection.

this demonstrates how central and involved the Goddess movement was within the broader organisational structures of the WLM.

Despite the vibrancy of the early 1980s for matriarchal feminists, retrospective accounts by women like Long and Sjöo often identify this moment, and specifically the founding of the MRRN, as the beginning of the New Age infiltration of Goddess feminism. Writing in the Goddess-oriented Pagan magazine *Wood and Water* in 1995, Long reflected:

As the '70s turned into the '80s, many women were attracted to the Goddess movement through routes other than the political. There was a monsoon of New Agey, where every person was directed to look to herself or himself and effect personal growth, without much reference to the community or to the world.⁴⁵

This comment is surprising because Long, with Coghill and Roy, directed the strong emphasis upon Pagan ritual and feminist therapy in the matriarchy network during the 1980s. It is especially jarring to see Long, in the last line of the quotation above, associate the language of “personal growth” with the apoliticism of the New Age, when she had found the language of inner transformation such a valuable feminist tool herself. In fact, fearful of dogmatism, the MRRN did allow its increasingly diverse membership to interpret the matriarchy network in ways that were “personal and meaningful” to them, allowing their collective to echo the diversity and creativity of the LWLW towards the end of the 1970s.⁴⁶ The London mother group, for example, contained several subgroups that included Long’s study group, but also Roy’s psychic group, Ruby’s ritual group, and then later Nozama’s Tarot group and Jean Freer’s Wiccan grove group.⁴⁷ However, like socialist feminists assessing the state of their own movement in the mid-1970s, Long looked back on the rise of ritual-orientated groups as a sign

⁴⁵ Asphodel, ‘Politics and Feminist Spirituality’, *Wood and Water*, 51 (Summer Solstice, 1995).

⁴⁶ *Arachne* 1 (May Eve, 1983), FL.

⁴⁷ *MRRN newsletter*, 1 (November, 1981), FL; *MRRN newsletter*, 2 (December, 1981), FL; *MRRN newsletter*, 8 (1982), FL; *Arachne*, 1 (May Eve, 1983), FL.

of depoliticisation, setting up a binary between study-political and ritual-apolitical which was rarely used by members of the MRRN themselves during the 1980s. This has masked the continued emphasis upon political spirituality that existed within the Goddess movement throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

Long's retrospective accounts had an impact on both popular memories and the small amount of scholarly work done on the British Goddess movement. By the 1990s, Long had become a prominent voice in the newly formed discipline of feminist theology, having completed her undergraduate degree at the King's College Department of Theology and Religious Studies in 1983 and then going on to do graduate work on the Hebrew Goddess of wisdom.⁴⁸ In 1994, she used the academic journal *Feminist Theology* to make a judgement on the state of the Goddess movement, "Today the women's spirituality movement is growing steadily, and newcomers often have little sense of its history, believing it to be more or less New Age or neo-pagan in its entirety".⁴⁹ Long was an important gatekeeper of the MRRN, speaking to academics including sociologist Wendy Griffin and graduate student Kayoko Komatsu, who wrote her Master's thesis on matriarchal feminism in 1986.⁵⁰ Griffin relied almost exclusively upon Long's testimony to write the history of the MRRN, organising her narrative around Long's claim that the Goddess movement struggled with the "growing divergence between those who wished to do what they saw as scholarly work and those who wanted spiritual practice".⁵¹ This linear narrative from political research to apolitical ritual also informed the work of feminist

⁴⁸ Long, 'Pinhole', p. 214. Also see *Feminist Theology* 11 (2002).

⁴⁹ A. Long, 'The Goddess Movement in Britain Today', in C. Clifton and G. Harvey (eds.), *The Paganism Reader* (Abingdon, 2004), p. 231.

⁵⁰ W. Griffin, 'Goddess Spirituality and Wicca', in A. Sharma and K. K. Young (eds.), *Her Voice, Her Faith: Women Speak on World Religions* (Cambridge MA, 2002); K. Komatsu, 'An Empirical Study of Matriarchy Groups in Contemporary Britain and Their Relationship to New Religious Movements' (MA Thesis, University of Leeds, 1986).

⁵¹ Griffin, 'Goddess Spirituality and Wicca', p. 269.

theologian Ursula King who wrote, “Matriarchy study groups were founded first and then the development of ritual came later”.⁵²

The singular narrative of depoliticisation Long described does not map onto other first-hand accounts of the feminist spirituality movement. When I asked Denise Arnold about Long’s narrative describing the MSG’s journey from matriarchal studies in the 1970s (political) to the MRRN’s ritual activity (apolitical) in the 1980s, she told me that spirituality had always been present in the MSG, central to its political activities from its moment of inception.⁵³ As I showed in the previous chapter, Arnold, Payne, Moore and Marianne were all exploring spiritual alternatives alongside their politics before the group began. This is not to deny that some of its members raised objections about the form and content of the MRRN’s spirituality; however, these were rarely expressed in terms of simple binaries such as research versus ritual, or feminist politics versus New Age spirituality (the term New Age was not used at all by members of the MRRN during the 1980s). Rather, members’ concerns reflected anxieties about issues that were specific and internal to the Goddess movement, including questions around involvement of men and boy children, censorship and philosophical questions about the nature of the Goddess herself. Combined with the increasing availability of spiritual resources (both feminist and otherwise), members of the MRRN spent the 1980s defining and redefining their women’s spirituality against other available formations.

In the summer of 1985, for example, the back page of the *MRRN newsletter* featured a cartoon of a woman standing in a darkened room staring intently into a candle, her heavy curtains closed (Fig. 6). “I wonder what season it is outside...” read the caption below, in a pointed critique of women who practice rituals without engaging with situated real world politics. Read in the context of Long’s retrospective accounts, the cartoon appears to support the supposedly

⁵² U. King, *Women and Spirituality: Voices of Protest and Promise* (Basingstoke, 1993), p. 135.

⁵³ Correspondence with Denise Arnold, 27 September 2018.

depoliticising dynamics of the MRRN during the 1980s. The woman in the cartoon could be an apolitical New Ager, whose closed curtains represented a closed mind, turned off to social injustice or ecological destruction. In fact, before 1985, apolitical spirituality had not been identified as a threat by the MRRN. Indeed, the intended target of the cartoon is unclear; was the illustrator making a comment on the depoliticisation of the Goddess movement, or of women who had come to spirituality with no awareness of its subversive political potential? This may have been in response to the general rise in groups, publications and events touting spiritual alternatives, most of which had an ambivalent relationship with politics. Anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann describes 1980s London as in the grip of a revival in mysticism, citing popular shops such as Mysteries in Covent Garden, which stocked books on esotericism and occult goods like the “candlemagic starter kits”, which may have figured in the MRRN’s cartoon.⁵⁴

The first indication that there was anxiety in the matriarchy collective about the form its spirituality was taking came from Cleis early in 1983. Cleis had been a productive member of the matriarchy network in London during the 1970s, but her involvement waned when she moved to Yorkshire in 1981. Wanting to reconnect with the power of seasonal feminist ritual, Cleis took part in a matriarchal gathering organised by the MRRN while on a brief visit to London. However, something about the women’s gathering did not feel right. “I could feel little of the fundamental connection between Feminism/Spirituality in the gathering I attended”, she wrote in a letter published in the MRRN’s newsletter, “It seems to me we are in danger of simply removing God from Christianity and replacing him with a Goddess”.⁵⁵ Cleis’ comments were made in response to a particular moment during the ritual when one woman had exclaimed, “Open your heart and let her in”. To Cleis, this sounded more like a call-back

⁵⁴ T. M. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft: Ritual Magic and Witchcraft in Present-Day England* (Oxford, 1989), p. 5.

⁵⁵ *MRRN newsletter*, 11 (Candlemas, 1983), FL.

to the crusades of American evangelist Billy Graham in the mid-1950s than her own radical feminist spirituality. Didn't "let her in" imply that the Goddess was out there somewhere, like the abstracted God of Christianity?

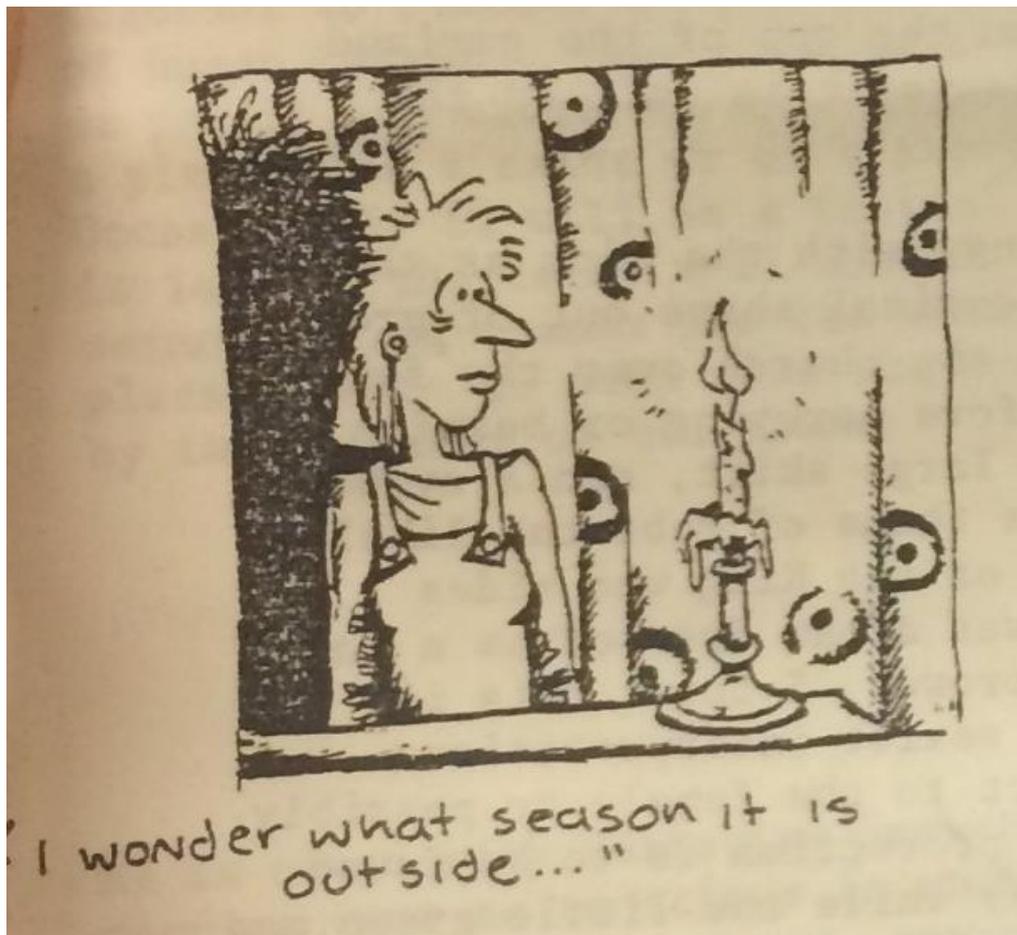


Figure 6. "I wonder what season it is outside..." cartoon, *Matriarchy Research and Reclaim Network newsletter*, Summer Solstice, 1985. Feminist Library, London.

While a shallow reading of Cleis' comments might appear to support Long's retrospective account of depoliticisation, a closer look reveals that Cleis was asking the MRRN to address more complicated issues concerning the philosophical nature of the Goddess and how this impacted her political potential. While Long located the decline of politicisation to the women's

increasing call for ritual and the decline of research, Cleis never made that distinction. For her, ritual was the radical political promise of Goddess feminism. As she went on to explain:

As I see it/feel it, the Goddess is me/she's within me. Only the alienation I experience as a ♀ within Patriarchy has disconnected me from that knowing of myself. The healing process of Feminism: coming together with ♀, re-discovering my own power (power to, not power over) is what reconnects me to the Goddess in myself".⁵⁶

Cleis demonstrated clear support for the psychic Goddess work advocated by MRRN members like Margaret Roy at the beginning of the 1980s, and which had existed to a lesser extent against the backdrop of spiritual feminism since 1975. Indeed, keen to address the concerns of women like Cleis, the inherently political message of the female divine within was reinforced in the MRRN's journal *Arachne* just a few months later, "We do not believe in a Goddess who is separate from ourselves, or is a controller who is separate from other living things, from the earth or from the Universe".⁵⁷ It is interesting to note here that Cleis' statements also run contrary to the judgements of scholars of the New Age who associate inner work with narcissism and individualism, especially when they relate to women's spiritual practices.⁵⁸

The only other protest about MRRN's spirituality to appear in the early 1980s (the period Long retrospectively characterised as the beginning of the split between feminism and spirituality) came from group member Lorna. She saw the radical potential of Goddess feminism threatened by the practice of censorship. Responsibility for compiling the *MRRN newsletter* was shared between different individuals and groups within the nationwide matriarchy network, some of whom had contradicting ideas about what the newsletter should include and exclude. Lorna was angry on behalf of Jan whose letter complaining about the behaviour of one particular man

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ *Arachne*, 1 (May Eve, 1983), FL.

⁵⁸ Heelas and Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*; Houtman and Aupers, 'New Age Gender Puzzle'.

had been cut, without explanation, by the newsletter compilers. In an argument that echoed the antagonism between revolutionary and socialist feminists over men's role in the oppression of women, Lorna wrote:

I don't want to see Feminist religion being turned into some wimpish a-political 'everyone is beautiful' humanism, and I especially don't want to see us rejecting ANGER – anger against our oppressors is a healing and spiritual emotion – a powerful tool women have for so long been denied.⁵⁹

Again, rather than dealing with the proliferation of ritual development over political work, Lorna was addressing more specific concerns about the relationship between structure and theory within the MRRN. Her concerns over newsletter policy, for example, touched upon broader debates that had raged in the London women's movement since the mid-1970s, with censorship standing in for the problem of organising non-hierarchically and avoiding placing power in the hands of a few women.⁶⁰

Lorna was also addressing the place of men within the Goddess movement, another issue that feminists in the broader movement had been dealing with since the late 1960s.⁶¹ Ever since the Hebden Bridge matriarchy group had failed to organise a crèche at their Beltane celebration in 1982, women had been using the *MRRN newsletter* to debate the inclusion or exclusion of women with boy children.⁶² By the time Lorna entered the discussions in 1983, the issue had expanded to include "matriarchy-orientated" men, the possibility of including men in consciousness-raising sessions and separatism.⁶³ As I showed in my previous chapter, these highly charged issues over sexual difference and women's oppression were never resolved, and

⁵⁹ *MRRN newsletter*, 12 (Spring Equinox, 1983), FL.

⁶⁰ Setch, 'The Face of Metropolitan Feminism', p. 185.

⁶¹ N. Owen, 'Men and the 1970s British Women's Liberation Movement', *The Historical Journal*, 56 (2013).

⁶² *MRRN newsletter*, 7 (Summer Solstice, 1982), FL.

⁶³ *MRRN newsletter*, 7, FL; *MRRN newsletter*, 9 (Halloween, 1982), FL.

debate about the inclusion or exclusion of men continued for at least ten years in the *MRRN newsletter*.⁶⁴ To interpret Lorna's comments purely as a sign of depoliticisation, then, is to detract from the intensely political debates taking place within the MRRN during the 1980s.

While Long accused ritual-makers in the MRRN for touting an apolitical agenda, many of the spiritual practices taken up by the matriarchy network during the 1980s were informed by American women with feminist inclinations. *The Spiral Dance*, written by Californian woman Starhawk, had a significant impact on the MRRN. Starhawk had set out to devise a feminist poetics of magic and ritual that dealt with women's oppression and the possibility of consciousness changing, explaining, "There are infinite ways to look at the world; the 'other vision' frees us from the limits of our culture".⁶⁵ Rather than having to negotiate the ritual and spiritual forms offered by the British Pagan and Wiccan networks, many of which did not identify as feminist or were even openly hostile to the women's movement, Starhawk's spiritual exercises were orientated specifically towards feminist aims. Other inspiration for ritual activity came from Zsuzsanna Budapest, who started the first lesbian separatist coven in California in 1971. Budapest's politics were transmitted to the British matriarchy network via group member Jean Freer, who was initiated into separatist Wicca by Budapest herself in 1974. Between 1981 and 1982, Freer led a series of talks on Wicca's relationship with feminism, eventually founding her own coven or "Grove group" within the MRRN.⁶⁶

However, the form of feminist spirituality advocated by these American writers was not accepted uncritically by the MRRN. Despite a largely positive reception of Starhawk when she visited London and Leeds in 1985, Sheffield MSG member Jenny Goodman commented:

⁶⁴ *MRRN newsletter*, 87 (Lammas, 1992), FL.

⁶⁵ Starhawk, *Spiral Dance*, p. 32.

⁶⁶ *MRRN newsletter*, 5 (March, 1982), FL; J. Freer, 'Creating a Sacred Grove', *Arachne*, 1 (May Eve, 1983), FL.

Some of Starhawk's phrases during the rituals reminded me intensely of school assemblies, and brought up all the resistance I have felt in the context of patriarchal religion. I don't want Woman-magic to sound like a thinly feminized version of that. And 'Blessed Be' just plain embarrasses me (what does it mean?). Perhaps this resistance is keeping some feminists away from the Goddess...?"⁶⁷

Goodman's concerns echoed those made by Cleis, who warned of the depoliticising effects of conceptualising the Goddess as an outside entity, rather than existing inside women and nature. Goodman's suspicions about Starhawk challenge the assumptions of historians and sociologists who believe that American women were solely responsible for the emergence of the Goddess movement in Britain.⁶⁸ Long before Starhawk came to Britain, the matriarchy network had a sophisticated Goddess movement with which to interrogate her spirituality and politics.

Ironically, even though the American Pagan movement drew heavily upon British source material, including Gerald Gardner's mid-century interpretation of Wicca, the British neo-Pagan movement itself was far less developed.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, the MSG worked with the small number of politically orientated Pagan groups that combined ecological politics with indigenous British spirituality. Two of these had an especially big impact upon the MRRN. In 1979, Hilary Llewellyn-Williams and Tony Padfield founded the magazine *Wood and Water*, which began as a single-issue activist project to preserve "sacred springs and wells".⁷⁰ Because of Llewellyn-Williams' personal interest in Wicca, combined with her reading of Sjöö and the MSG's *Politics of Matriarchy*, she shaped the magazine into an outlet for Goddess spirituality and ecology, using it to resist the "aggressive and competitive" values of patriarchy.⁷¹ When Llewellyn-Williams and Padfield gave up editorship of *Wood and Water* in 1981, Long's

⁶⁷ *MRRN newsletter*, 28 (Summer Solstice, 1985), FL.

⁶⁸ Vincett, 'Feminism and Religion'; Gallagher, 'Woven Apart and Weaving Together'.

⁶⁹ Gallagher, 'Woven Apart and Weaving Together'.

⁷⁰ *Wood and Water*, 1 (1979).

⁷¹ H. Llewellyn-Williams, 'The Goddess and the Well', *Wood and Water*, 2 (Lammas, 1979).

partner Daniel Cohen took it over, reinforcing the magazine's positive relationship with Goddess feminism.⁷² The MRRN also had a strong relationship with Pagans Against Nukes (PAN) which was founded by Philip Cozens in 1980. Cozens had come to Goddess-orientated spiritual ecology via the Communist Party, the women's movement, Caitlín Matthews' version of Wicca and finally Greenham Common.⁷³ Like the MRRN, PAN worked as a foil to the broader Pagan network that often shied away from engaging with political issues. Writing in the editorial of their magazine *Pipes of PAN*, Cozens wrote, "When we founded P.A.N. (Pagans Against Nukes) a couple of months ago one of our concerns was that despite the proclamation of their love for Mother Earth and the Lord of the Wild Hunt, so many pagans were apathetic in the face of rising international tension, increasing armaments..."⁷⁴

Both *Wood and Water* and PAN were included in the MRRN's ritual activity. The MRRN's 1982 Lammas celebration at Worthy Farm near Glastonbury, for example, was part of a larger event called Green Gathering, which included workshops by key matriarchal women such as Sjöö alongside a Lughnasadh ritual organised by PAN.⁷⁵ When they did not include other political groups, the MRRN's rituals were orientated towards feminist goals. Although the women did not keep written records of their ritual activity, members often wrote in to the *MRRN newsletter* to describe the political vitality of the rituals they had attended. After a Candlemas celebration in Derbyshire, for example, Fleur wrote, "I... feel personally healed by just being able to spend some time in a quiet space, so close to the goddess and away from the cities, and the constant distortion of our lives by the patriarchy".⁷⁶ In 1983, Luhrmann spent Halloween with fifteen matriarchal women celebrating at a barrow in Kent while researching

⁷² *Wood and Water*, 1 (Samhain 1981).

⁷³ Feraro, 'Playing the Pipes of Pan'.

⁷⁴ *Pipes of PAN*, 2 (Imbolc 1981).

⁷⁵ *MRRN newsletter*, 8 (1982), FL; S. Feraro, 'Connecting British Wicca with Radical Feminism and Goddess Spirituality During the 1970s and 1980s: The Case Study of Monica Sjöö', *Journal of Contemporary Religions*, 30 (2015), p. 314.

⁷⁶ *MRRN newsletter*, 4 (Candlemas, 1982), FL.

her book *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft* (1989). Although she described the ritual in more detail than the discussion that preceded it, she remarked, "The meeting was like many other feminist organization meetings: long on equality, emotional honesty and earthiness".⁷⁷

Although, admittedly, there were more ritual and celebration than research groups within the MRRN, research nevertheless remained an important way of expressing feminist politics into the 1980s. In 1984, Penny and Angela founded the Earth Mysteries group that set out to "study and visit ancient sites in Britain" just as the MSG women had done during the 1970s.⁷⁸ That same year, the Goddess Guide collective produced a pamphlet entitled 'Goddesses of the British Museum', designed to make searching for evidence of the Goddess religion "more accessible", as well as highlighting contested forms of knowledge making: "the colonial imperialism of the 19th century... is still to a large part enshrined in what images are considered important in the Museum".⁷⁹ The network's journal *Arachne*, first published in 1983, was also used to foreground the research interests of its members, including papers on the symbolism of Avebury, the Patriarchal Takeover as it played out in Scotland and medieval witches, all with bibliographies and footnotes.⁸⁰ Indeed, even at the end of the 1980s, and despite the increase in ritual work, the MRRN's publications had a reputation for their "scholarly" approach to Goddess feminism, associated primarily with the British Museum and archaeology.⁸¹

Importantly, hardly any of the women involved in studying the matriarchal past, or indeed in the broader MRRN, distinguished between research (political) and ritual (spiritual) during the 1980s. The Earth Mysteries group, for example, combined their visits to ancient sites with meditation and dowsing, while the meetings of Long's own Study group usually concluded

⁷⁷ Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft*, p. 55.

⁷⁸ *MRRN newsletter*, 19 (Candlemas, 1984), FL.

⁷⁹ Blanche, Caroline, Jo, Martha, Mary, Nozama, Sunflower, Val, Wendy, 'Goddesses of the British Museum', c. 1984.

⁸⁰ Angela, 'The Goddess Religion At Ancient Avebury', Cathy, 'Scottish Goddess', Paxton, 'Witches, All of Us', *Arachne*, 1 (May Eve, 1983), FL.

⁸¹ Martha Robinson-Rhodes interview with Vron McIntyre, 8 November 2018.

with “ritual and singing”.⁸² Women who wrote for *Arachne* understood the importance of taking seriously what they learned through spiritual and imaginal experiences, as well as through traditional disciplines, writing in the editorial of the first edition, “We aim to totally reintegrate our logic and reasoning with our emotions and spirituality (an ideal very different from patriarchy’s insistence on divisions)”.⁸³

What caused Long, in the middle of the 1990s, then, to look back upon the history of her own movement as one long decline in political attachments? In part, Long shared the same generational anxieties as other 1970s feminists. The rapid uptake of new recruits made her worry that women who had not honed their political arguments in the WLM were diluting the Goddess movement, even though many of these younger women came to the MRRN via Greenham Common. However, there were also specific issues playing out in the realm of spiritual politics when Long was writing. At the end of the 1980s, women in the Goddess movement began expressing their anxieties about the ways in which the so-called New Age was co-opting feminist arguments. Sjöö had the most to say on this topic, writing prolifically in many Goddess feminist publications about the dangers of patriarchal spirituality throughout the 1980s. Her arguments inspired a new magazine and a community that sought specifically to guard against the infiltration of the patriarchal New Age, while also redefining the boundaries of acceptability within the Goddess movement in the process. In the following section, I examine the ways in which Sjöö’s writing changed the terrain of Goddess feminism as it moved into the 1990s and lend context to Long’s retrospective accounts of decline and depoliticisation.

⁸² *MRRN newsletter*, 20 (Spring, 1984), FL; *MRRN newsletter*, 11 (Candlemas, 1983), FL.

⁸³ *Arachne*, 1 (May Eve, 1983), FL.

New Age Armageddon

Feminist artist Monica Sjöo was at the centre of the anti-New Age rhetoric that developed within the Goddess movement during the 1980s and 1990s. Her critique of male-dominated Pagan and Wiccan organisations for their frank commercialism, institutionalism and promotion of traditional gender roles not only informed retrospective first-hand accounts of the feminist spirituality movement, but also provided the ideological scaffolding for a new community of Goddess-orientated feminists during the early 1990s. This new collective, that did not operate from a geographical location, but rather centred on the zine *From the Flames* and annual women's camps, attracted a younger generation of women whose introduction to Goddess politics had taken place at Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp during the 1980s rather than directly through the matriarchy network.⁸⁴ Sjöo provided the continuity between these two generational strands. Sjöo had come to Goddess spirituality through a radical reading project, which included Simone de Beauvoir, Swedish feminist Elin Wägner and Robert Graves, as well as spiritual experiences during the early 1960s.⁸⁵ Following her self-published pamphlet 'The Ancient Religion of the Great Cosmic Mother of All' in 1975, she became a regular contributor to the MSG's pamphlets and events, and was noticed by the pioneering women of the American Goddess movement, including Ruth and Jean Mountaingrove of *Womanspirit* magazine. Living outside London during her involvement with the MSG, Sjöo had the critical distance, and the international perspective, to offer regular comments on the health of the Goddess movement as a whole.

⁸⁴ Maggie, 'Despair and Empowerment', *From the Flames*, 1 (Spring, 1991), FL; Martha Robinson-Rhodes interview with Vron McIntyre, 8 November 2018.

⁸⁵ S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York, 1953); R. Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London, 1948); L. Katarina, *Elin Wägner's Alarm Clock: Ecofeminist Theory in the Interwar Era* (Lanham MD, 2008); H. Forsas-Scott, *Swedish Women's Writing, 1850-1995* (London, 1997).

And the Goddess community wanted to listen to her. By the late 1980s, Sjöo had become one of the most influential women in the international Goddess movement. Her book *The Ancient Religion of the Great Cosmic Mother of All* (based upon the pamphlet of the same name), which had a small but significant impact on women living in Europe, was expanded in 1987 by poet Barbara Mor and re-published as *The Great Cosmic Mother* by Harper San Francisco, which capitalised on the vibrant alternative spiritualities movement on the West Coast.⁸⁶ The success of the book solidified Sjöo's place in the American Goddess movement alongside women like Starhawk and Budapest. In 1990, novelist Alice Walker sponsored Sjöo to come with her paintings to the United States of America.⁸⁷ During this trip, Sjöo met and befriended other important Goddess-orientated women, including archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, who was then living in the canyons outside Los Angeles, West Coast woman Shekinah Mountainwater, as well as journalist and witch Margot Adler.⁸⁸ Sjöo bolstered her international reputation by touring her lengthy slideshows on her "research into Goddess religion and ancient women-cultures" to groups of women in the United States and Europe.⁸⁹ "She inspired so many women", recalled Cornwall-based Goddess feminist Cheryl Straffon, "Particularly with her talks and things, she would be very active in going around giving talks in America and here and everything".⁹⁰

Unlike her friends in the matriarchy network, Sjöo was suspicious of the mid-century Pagan movement from the beginning. Like other male-dominated organisations, she suspected that the most visible Pagan networks, such as the aggressively named Pagan Front, had ignored the feminist intervention, foregrounding heteronormative visions of gender through their spiritual

⁸⁶ The expanded version sold 15,000 copies in three years. See R. White, *Monica Sjöo: Life and Letters 1958-2005* (Cornwall, 2018), p. 174.

⁸⁷ Sjöo, 'My Life Story', DM2123/1/81/4, FAS.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ M. Sjöo, 'Autobiography', 1985, DM2123/1/81/4, FAS.

⁹⁰ Interview with Cheryl Straffon, 15 March 2016.

practice, advocating for traditional conceptualisations of female passivity and male creativity.⁹¹ From the mid-1970s, Sjöö subjected the Pagan revival to the same feminist analysis as the male-dominated Left. Of the Earth Mysteries movement, which had emerged out of early twentieth-century amateur archaeology, she wrote, “I saw in my mind’s eye men with guns stalking the ley lines!”⁹²

Although Sjöö wanted to keep her distance from contemporary Paganism, she became embroiled in its project following the publication of her pamphlet ‘The Ancient Religion of the Great Cosmic Mother of All’. With its references to Robert Graves, “the triple-Goddess”, witchcraft and priestesses – all themes that were regularly explored in Pagan literature – adherents mined Sjöö’s writing for facts about Celtic and Wiccan religion and philosophy.⁹³ However, the responses from men were often ambivalent or negative, confirming Sjöö’s suspicions about backward gender politics within the movement. John Score, the notoriously homophobic editor of *The Wiccan* (the magazine of the Pagan Front), wrote of Sjöö’s pamphlet, “An assembly of interesting facts with Women’s Lib interpretations one might think; with possible lesbian undertones?”⁹⁴ Michael Howard, reviewing the pamphlet in *The Cauldron* wrote that he was nervous about Sjöö’s “Goddess bias to the exclusion of the Horned God”.⁹⁵ In 1979, the year several popular American Goddess feminist books were published, Howard remarked, “the entry of feminist groups onto the [Pagan] scene is something which will create challenging new problems in the years to come”.⁹⁶ Terry Parker, also of *The Cauldron* was so incensed by the spiritual feminist intervention that he wrote an article entitled ‘Some Thoughts on Goddess Fundamentalism’ in response to Jean Freer’s book *Toward a Reclaimed Tarot*

⁹¹ M. Sjöö, ‘Some Thoughts about the New Age Movement’, *Wood and Water*, 28 (Summer 1989).

⁹² Sjöö, ‘My Life Story’, DM2123/1/81/4, FAS.

⁹³ Sjöö, ‘Ancient Religion’, DM2123/1/85/5, FAS; Sjöö’s pamphlet was included in a list of Pagan magazines and publications in *The Cauldron*, 6 (May Eve, 1977).

⁹⁴ M, ‘Around the Literary Corner’, *The Wiccan*, 50 (10 September 1976); Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*, p. 370.

⁹⁵ M. Howard, ‘Feminist Witches’, *The Cauldron*, 5 (Candlemas, 1977).

⁹⁶ M. Howard, ‘Balance & Polarity’, *The Cauldron*, 14 (May Eve, 1979).

(1982) and, later in the decade, wrote inflammatory letters about Sjöö to her co-writer Barbara Mor.⁹⁷

Provoked by the lack of understanding from key men in the Pagan movement, Sjöö was moved to set out her argument in writing. She made her first sustained response in 1981 (the same year Long was driving a turn to Paganism in the MRRN) in a characteristically long-form article published over two editions of the eco-feminist magazine *Wood and Water*.⁹⁸ In the article, entitled, ‘No Real Changes: Continuing Sexist Assumptions in the New Age’, Sjöö charged the leading men of the supposedly revolutionary New Age movement for touting a conservative agenda. She wrote:

Unless ‘New Age’ people question Patriarchal capitalism based on Women’s oppression, private property, class hierarchies, racism and imperialism, alienated labour, dualistic thinking of Spirit above Matter, Mind over Body, and a male Godhead... then they are part of the problem and not at all the solution.⁹⁹

Sjöö was particularly concerned about the gender politics of contemporary Paganism. In response to the monotheism of institutional religions, Pagan and Wiccan groups often identified as duotheistic or pantheistic, meaning they revered both Gods and Goddesses. In their conceptualisation, the female and male deities (sometimes referred to as the Goddess and the Horned God) were complementary opposites, embodying characteristics traditionally associated with femininity and masculinity.¹⁰⁰ Sjöö argued that this “Renewed advocacy of heterosexuality” went “hand-in-hand with male supremacy”. “Women are yet again taught

⁹⁷ White, *Monica Sjöö*, pp. 204-205.

⁹⁸ M. Sjöö, ‘No Real Changes... Continuing Sexist Assumptions in the ‘New Age’’, *Wood and Water* 2:1 (Samhain, 1981); M. Sjöö, ‘No Real Changes, Part Two’, *Wood and Water* 2:2 (Imbolc, 1982).

⁹⁹ Sjöö, ‘No Real Changes’.

¹⁰⁰ Hutton argues that Score and Howard thought that involving the Goddess in this way restored freedom and authority to women. See Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*, p. 370.

acceptance, passivity and ‘unconditional love’” she wrote, “by selfstyled male Gurus who claim to be above Gender”.¹⁰¹

In the coming decade, tragic personal events brought Sjöo closer to the New Age. In 1985, her youngest son Leif was killed by a car in the South of France aged fifteen and, shortly after, her eldest son Sean was diagnosed with terminal cancer. “After my young son’s death”, Sjöo reflected in *Wood and Water*, “there were many things I desperately needed to find out and to understand about the Afterlife, about Near death experiences and Lucid dreams so as to keep at all sane... and my ill son was in great need of healing on all levels”.¹⁰² Accordingly, Sjöo experimented with spiritualism, meditation, healing and parapsychology. At the same time, Sean became involved with the rebirthing movement through the Bristol Cancer Help centre, which claimed that correcting breathing practices could cure extreme physical illnesses.¹⁰³

After a period of grieving, Sjöo emerged at the end of the 1980s feeling that she had been a victim of the depoliticising effects of the New Age. The pain of losing two of her sons, she recalled, had temporarily taken the sting out of her political critique, “I was willing to read innumerable books written by spiritualists, and by young men and women in the New Age” she wrote in *Wood and Water*, overlooking their “patriarchal terminology of man-he, mankind-he etc.”.¹⁰⁴ The New Age had also had terrible effects on her terminally ill son. The rebirthers’ treatments were inappropriate for someone with cancer so advanced, argued Sjöo, but they had nevertheless persisted and charged Sean fees he could not afford. Incensed, in 1988 Sjöo began working on a new book that sought to read the New Age as part of the global right-wing agenda. Fresh from her tour of the United States of America, which included a lengthy stay in San Francisco the home of the American New Age, Sjöo observed the ways in which

¹⁰¹ Sjöo, ‘No Real Changes’.

¹⁰² Sjöo, ‘Some Thoughts’.

¹⁰³ See DM2123/1/81/1.

¹⁰⁴ Sjöo, ‘Some Thoughts’.

commercialised alternative spiritualities fit with the ideology of the “white and privileged” warmongering, imperialist power.¹⁰⁵ This view was formed in communication with Sjöo’s Goddess-oriented American friends, such as Mor who prophetically wrote to Sjöo in 1989, “Here Donald Trump is a New Age Guru & will run for president one day. It is very hard to separate spiritual elitism from wealth, God from the dollar this side of apocalypse”.¹⁰⁶

Sjöo’s archive at FAS reveals her research project for the book. Between 1988 and 1992, Sjöo undertook a radical rereading of the New Age’s source material, which many practitioners (and academics) refer to unproblematically. While nineteenth-century Theosophists, Helena Blavatsky and Alice Bailey in particular, are often credited with laying the groundwork for the modern New Age movement, Sjöo revealed the imperialist and anti-Semitic ideology that lay behind their ideas.¹⁰⁷ “It was belief in the inherent superiority of the white race that made these mediums emphasise the goodness of light whiteness and of fire”, Sjöo would eventually argue in her book *New Age and Armageddon* (1992), their credo upholding “the spiritual realms as profoundly patriarchal and undemocratic and a mirror image of this society as it now is”.¹⁰⁸ Sjöo extended this analysis to the Findhorn Foundation in Scotland, a well-known New Age spiritual community founded in 1962 by the mediumistic Eileen Caddy and her husband Peter. The community, argued Sjöo, drew directly from the work of Theosophists and adhered to backward gender politics, “throughout her life [Eileen] seems to have obeyed what men told her whether they were her husband or the voice in her head”.¹⁰⁹ Sjöo’s reading of the New Age in the context of the Patriarchal Takeover revealed its most insidious project. “It became kind of obvious to me”, she wrote in an extract of her book published in *Wood and Water* in 1989,

¹⁰⁵ M. Sjöo, *New Age and Armageddon: The Goddess or the Gurus? Towards a Feminist Vision of the Future* (London, 1992), p.

¹⁰⁶ White, *Monica Sjöo*, p. 131.

¹⁰⁷ See annotated copy of Institute for Planetary Synthesis, ‘The total challenge of humanity on earth: the Jewish problem. A study for World Sewers’, 1946, DM2123/1/86, 5, FAS.

¹⁰⁸ Sjöo, *New Age and Armageddon*, p. 92.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

“that the so-called New Age movement had emerged just at a time when women are rising worldwide... yet another attempt by (heterosexual and white) men to co-opt women’s energies, to divert us from the struggle to free ourselves”.¹¹⁰

During this period, Sjöo turned her critical analysis on the Goddess movement itself. Throughout the 1980s, Sjöo had never questioned the changing shape of the MRRN’s spirituality, despite the fact that it came to include more and more upon ideas from the neo-Pagan movement. During the mid-1980s, she had defended MRRN member Shan Morgain when she received criticism from the matriarchy network for teaming up with a man to start a shop in London to sell Goddess publications, posters, cards and incense.¹¹¹ However, by the end of the 1980s, Sjöo explained how “disappointed” she was in the Goddess movement, “When I see no awareness of race and class or of what the USA and the West are doing to the ‘Third World’ peoples, how the comfort and wealth in the West is based on the exploitation of dark peoples and their natural resources and labour all around the world”.¹¹² Leveraging the critique of consumerism, Sjöo added, “It is simply not enough to take Goddess names, gather for rituals, go on expensive Goddess tours... while the Goddess Earth is dying around us and Her daughters are suffering everywhere”.¹¹³ Although Sjöo had previously used the spiritual traditions of indigenous cultures in her political work (particularly at Greenham Common), by the end of the 1980s, she began drawing upon the work of Native American academics and activists such as Paula Gunn Allen to challenge the neo-imperialism of this approach.¹¹⁴

Sjöo was not alone in her concerns about the New Age infiltration of the Goddess movement. While she was working on her manuscript, anxieties about the New Age were increasingly

¹¹⁰ Sjöo, ‘Some Thoughts’.

¹¹¹ *MRRN newsletter*, 32 (Spring Equinox, 1986), FL; S. Morgain, ‘GUEST POST: Separation of Goddess & Pagan Communities, A UK Perspective’, 29 October 2008, accessed 5 September 2019, <http://medusacoils.blogspot.com/2008/10/guest-post-separation-of-goddess-pagan.html>.

¹¹² Sjöo, *New Age and Armageddon*, p. 25.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ P. Gunn Allen, ‘Who Is Your Mother? Red Roots of White Feminism’, *Sinister Wisdom*, 25 (Winter, 1984).

discussed in Goddess-sympathetic publications like *Wood and Water*. This was often in response to the anti-feminist statements, and occasionally personal attacks, made by the institutions of mainstream Paganism. Jenny Goodman of the Sheffield MSG, for example, recounted an anti-Semitic attack on a woman at an Oak Dragon camp (an alternative spiritual gathering that had links with Greenham Common and the broader peace movement), and complained that the organisers had failed to address the issue politically. “Spiritual consciousness without real political awareness or experience is at the core of the problem” wrote Goodman.¹¹⁵ In response, Glastonbury-based Janet McCrickard agreed:

Many thanks for latest W&W – very pleased to see the exposé of New Age philosophy – or should I call it by its proper name, Nazi philosophy? The New Age really is a fascist wolf in a left-wing fleece, and the sooner people wake up to this fact the better... “Spiritual consciousness” my a***; this kind of thing has nothing to do with spirituality!!”¹¹⁶

Like Sjöo, McCrickard had a long history of fighting male bias in the New Age. In 1980, she had explored ways of uniting Paganism and Goddess feminism in a pamphlet entitled, ‘The Way of the Goddess: A Pagan Declaration for Goddess Folk, Christians and Others’ but received criticism from Pagan men who could not accept the Goddess as the primary source of creation to the exclusion of the Horned God.¹¹⁷ This only served to convince McCrickard of the primacy of the Goddess, writing to Sjöo shortly after her pamphlet was published, “*absolute* matriarchy is the only answer. When men rule death results. When women rule, life results. (And that is that!!!)”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ J. Goodman, ‘Are Such Things Done on Albion’s Shore?’, *Wood and Water*, 24 (Spring Equinox, 1988).

¹¹⁶ J. McCrickard, *Wood and Water*, 25 (Summer 1988).

¹¹⁷ Feraro, ‘The Priestess, the Witch, and the Women’s Movement’, pp. 272-273.

¹¹⁸ Letter from Janet McCrickard to Monica Sjöo, 30 August 1980, DM2123/1/85, 2, FAS.

In Malvern, former Greenham Common activist Maggie Parks was paying close attention to these debates. She had observed the ways in which Malvern, “like many sacred places”, was being “taken over by New Age capitalists” who were setting up shops and offering alternative healing practices and forms of therapy without any political awareness.¹¹⁹ This was particularly insulting to Parks, whose feminist perspective was enlivened by “the goddess and wimmin’s spirituality” at Greenham. “I wish all wimmin could have a Greenham experience”, she reflected years later, “To know that political action can be creative, effective, spiritual and fun and to learn that spiritual work and development can be political and subversive”.¹²⁰ Parks had known Sjöö since 1984, collaborating with her on Women for Life on Earth events, and planning direct actions at Greenham.¹²¹ In March 1989, she invited Sjöö to give a workshop on the dangers of New Age patriarchy at the National Angry Women’s Conference. The workshop brought together several of Sjöö and Parks’ friends who were all increasingly concerned about the New Age, including feminist artist and performer Jill Smith and Greenham activists Vron McIntyre and Daphne Francis, the latter of whom had written about anti-feminism at the Findhorn Foundation in *Spare Rib*.¹²²

Sjöö’s workshop was such a success that the women decided to organise a dedicated conference to the same issues called Challenging New Age Patriarchy, which took place in September 1990 in Malvern.¹²³ 150 women attended workshops on key themes in Sjöö’s forthcoming book, including “Racism/Cultural Theft within the New Age”, victim-blaming, New Age heterosexism and the abuse of ancient sites.¹²⁴ Once again, many women welcomed the discussion. Writing in the *MRRN newsletter*, Elizabeth reported that, “The conference brought

¹¹⁹ White, *Monica Sjöö*, p. 204.

¹²⁰ Maggie, ‘Despair and Empowerment’, FL.

¹²¹ White, *Monica Sjöö*, p. 174.

¹²² D. Francis, ‘Survivor of the “New Age”’, *Spare Rib*, 157 (August 1985).

¹²³ Sjöö, *New Age and Armageddon*, p. 9.

¹²⁴ ‘Challenging New Age Patriarchy’ flyer, c. 1990, FL.

back to me the feeling of 20 years ago, of the need to know the connection between private and political”.¹²⁵ Feeling the appetite was there for a renewed grassroots Goddess movement, Parks and McIntyre started a new zine called *From the Flames*, which unlike other available Goddess publications focused specifically upon reviving spiritually informed direct action. In the opening editorial of the first edition, published in the spring of 1990, Parks mentioned neither the women’s movement, nor the matriarchy network. Instead, she located the origins of her radical feminist spirituality to Greenham Common:

It was there [at Greenham] that my politics, sexuality and spirituality came together and fused. It was there that I first knew the goddess, felt the strength and healing energy of women and understood the power of direct action. It was here [sic] that I first understood that my anger need not just fester into despair but that it could be used as a fuel to ignite me into action – could be used in creative ways as a motivator for change.¹²⁶

Despite its emphasis upon Greenham Common, *From the Flames* was read, and contributed to, by prominent and long-serving members of the MRRN such as Asphodel Long, Nozama, Ellyn Stagg and Jean Freer. Women who had expressed their disappointment at the bracketing of feminist issues in political Pagan groups also contributed, including Nicola Beechsqirrel formerly of PAN and Wren Sidhe of *Wood and Water*. When Sjöö’s report of the Challenging New Age Patriarchy conference was published in *Woman of Power* magazine, American women also started getting in touch with *From the Flames*, one of whom compared the American New Age movement to the conservative ministry of Jerry Falwell.¹²⁷ While Parks was renewing the Goddess movement through *From the Flames*, McIntyre was seeking another

¹²⁵ Elizabeth, ‘The Malvern Conference “Challenging New Age Patriarchy”’, *MRRN newsletter*, c. 1990.

¹²⁶ Maggie, ‘Despair and Empowerment’, FL.

¹²⁷ Rosemary, *From the Flames* 2 (Summer 1991), FL.

outlet for the radical reclamation of common land that took place at Greenham Common. Early in 1990, she, and some other women who had been at Greenham, organised the first Spiral Womyn's Camp in Wales, a women-only camping experience that held workshops on women's spirituality and practiced direct action.¹²⁸ The ethos and structure of the Spiral Camps echoed the women's activism at Greenham Common, as Yohanna Gardner recalled:

For me this camp was exciting in showing what amazing things we can do when we focus our womyn energy together. An experience of this was stopping the flight of military planes overhead. Some of us gathered in a tepee and devised a protective ritual and walked the boundary of the land we were on.¹²⁹

Parks and McIntyre naturalised Long and Sjöö's narrative of depoliticisation in *From the Flames* by using it as the hinging point of their feminist critique, reprinting a lengthy extract from Sjöö's forthcoming book *New Age and Armageddon* in the first edition of the zine. Unlike the MRRN's publications, their focus was not upon researching matriarchy, or exploring the feminist utopia through matriarchy, but rather critiquing New Age practices that they believed robbed the movement of its political edge. In the editorial of the first *From the Flames*, McIntyre wrote:

It seems to me, and I don't know how it happened but I suspect that the New Age Movement has something to do with it, that there has been a slow change and an appropriation of this energy into other things. Slowly over the years, as I have seen a rise in goddess consciousness and a growth in the wimmin's spirituality movement, I have also seen a decline in radicalism.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Martha Robinson-Rhodes interview with Vron McIntyre, 8 November 2018; *Spinning Spiral* (July, 1995), DM2123/1/86/1, FAS.

¹²⁹ Y. Gardener, 'Womyn Gathering', *From the Flames* 2 (Summer 1991), FL.

¹³⁰ Maggie, 'Despair and Empowerment', FL.

While Parks and McIntyre wanted to draw attention to some long-acknowledged problems in women's spirituality, including white European and American women taking up Native American spiritual practices, consumerism or the backward gender politics of the New Age, they also drew new boundaries of acceptability around what counted as feminist spirituality. Some of their ideas conflicted with the MRRN's definition of feminist spirituality in the 1980s.¹³¹

While *From the Flames* did not dispense with the matriarchal metanarrative of history, or the Patriarchal Takeover, for example, contributors did question the validity, or necessity, of conducting research into the matriarchal past. Following a conference called Women as Guardians of our Sacred Sites, organised, in part, by Long's women's spirituality group in Brighton, many women wrote to *From the Flames* to complain of their negative experience. Parks found that the "sterile forum" imposed by the conference organisers shut down the possibility for "talking, discussing – visioning – musing – debating – dreaming – even, dare I say it, arguing", as well as any creative or spontaneous activity, the kind of which she had experienced at Greenham Common. "Instead", wrote Parks, "we were greeted with reams of papers and agendas" that stifled "flowing discussion".¹³² The quasi-academic nature of the conference, which had been central to the MSG when it was founded in 1975, no longer spoke to Goddess feminists of the 1990s, who had drawn their understanding of Goddess politics from the vibrant direct action practiced at the Women's Peace Camp. For Jill Smith, the entire idea of studying sacred sites was detached from her understanding of women's oppression:

My spirituality and my goddess are grounded in the real world. My goddess is of the pubs and getting pissed as much as of the deep tranquillity of hours in a stone circle.

¹³¹ A. Smith, 'For All Those Who Were Indian in a Former Life', *From the Flames*, 2 (Summer, 1991).

¹³² Maggie, *From the Flames*, 2 (Summer, 1991), FL.

She is the goddess of grape and grain (and doing the washing-up and the laundry and the shopping) and of the guts of the earth as much as pure aestheticism.¹³³

Similarly, for McIntyre whose political development had including reclaiming common ground at Greenham, revering sacred sites shared uncomfortable similarities with established religions and their acts of enclosure, “What is a sacred site when all the earth is sacred? What do we mean by sacred? How much do our ideas of the sacred still come from patriarchy, from Christianity?”¹³⁴

From the Flames also marked a conclusive break in the relationship between contemporary Paganism and the Goddess movement. Greenham had shown women like Parks and McIntyre that women’s spirituality could emerge spontaneously from their own creative energies, especially in the face of global crises. Taking inspiration from the highly elaborate and sometimes hierarchical rituals of the androcentric Pagan movement, as the MRRN had occasionally been wont to do, seemed increasingly futile and disingenuous to these women. The first edition of *From the Flames* included a creative writing piece called ‘Drawing Down the Moon’ by Wren Sidhe, who playfully critiqued the “cosmic” gender balance insisted upon in Pagan ritual, as well as the unusual terminology and artificially crafted nature of the proceedings.¹³⁵ “It is sometimes said that the ritual of Drawing Down the Moon can only be performed onto a High Priestess by a High Priest”, wrote Sidhe, “whose training has included wandering in the wilderness for seven long years with nothing but an old grey cloak, a staff and a lamp for company”.¹³⁶ Sidhe used her creative writing piece to show that it was possible for women to conduct magic without men or expensive ritual paraphernalia, drawing on both

¹³³ J. Smith, *From the Flames 2* (Summer 1991), FL.

¹³⁴ Vron, *From the Flames 2* (Summer 1991), FL.

¹³⁵ W. Sidhe, ‘Drawing Down the Moon and Candlemas Ritual Cake’, in C. Clifton and G. Harvey (eds.), *The Paganism Reader* (Abingdon, 2004), p. 330.

¹³⁶ W. Sidhe, ‘Drawing Down the Moon’, *From the Flames 1* (Spring, 1991), FL.

the separatism of the protest at Greenham Common and the do-it-yourself nature of the women's direct actions:

I drew down not just the moon, but the whole sky, bit by bit in my own back garden last week without ever having done these things. It only took 2 days and didn't include anyone using their male polarity to bring out the divine essence in my female polarity although some previous Craft members have said this is a strict necessity.¹³⁷

The punchline of Sidhe's piece was that she had drawn down the moon by digging a pond in her back garden that reflected the sky, adding, "For those without gardens: a saucer of water placed on a windowsill will also Draw Down the Moon".¹³⁸ In the next edition of *From the Flames*, Gardening Witch suggested plants for the pond, adding "And if you're likely to be visited by heterosexist pagans who like going for a walk – keep a plank handy..."¹³⁹

While the critique of the New Age and androcentric Paganism was relatively light-hearted in Sidhe and Gardening Witch's writing, other articles in *From the Flames* were far less gentle. The therapeutic focus of the matriarchy network became a serious target of extended critique in *From the Flames* over multiple editions. While women like Margaret Roy had emphasised the political vitality of "turning inward" during the 1980s, for Parks and McIntyre this was a deeply unsatisfactory answer to the realities of patriarchal oppression and war. Recalling the magically inspired movement-based politics of Greenham Common, Parks and McIntyre believed that only women using their "collective energy" affected real change, unlike the "easy option" of personal politics.¹⁴⁰ Both women were becoming increasingly concerned about the proliferation of therapeutic modes within the Goddess movement since women had started leaving the Peace Camp at Greenham. "Wimmin who for a number of years agitated along with

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Gardening Witch, 'Further Thoughts on Drawing Down the Moon', *From the Flames* 2 (Summer 1991), FL.

¹⁴⁰ Maggie, 'Despair and Empowerment', FL.

me are now all becoming therapists or healers, ‘working on themselves’ and helping other wimmin to ‘heal and grow’”, wrote Parks in the first edition of *From the Flames*.¹⁴¹ Reading personal politics as nothing more than an especially insidious infiltration of the Goddess movement by the New Age, Parks overlooked the intended political vibrancy of personal politics, which had been inspired by the 1970s women’s movement.

Monica Sjöö’s critique of the New Age, then, gave rise to a vibrant new grassroots community of spiritual feminists, who mobilised around the idea that the Goddess movement was constantly at risk of infiltration by the New Age. Against the changing political climate, and the proliferation of non-political spiritual alternatives, the *From the Flames* collective drew on their experience of collective action at Greenham Common to inform a new women’s spirituality that was animated by direct action, and defined against androcentric spiritual formations. In the section that follows, I assess the ways in which the new boundaries the *From the Flames* collective drew around their women’s spirituality hardened during the 1990s, due to the dual pressures of post-feminism and increasing academic interest in the New Age. Determined not to be relegated to the margins of scholarly work on alternative spiritualities, several prominent Goddess feminists inserted their voices into these debates, although often to little effect.

“Is the Goddess Marginalised?”

Oh dear what can the matter be?

All the goddesses went down to Glastonbury,

They’ve been there from Thursday to Saturday,

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

Nobody knew they were there.

You could go if you could afford to pay,

It'll only cost you loads of dosh-a-day.

But you can take the Goddess of your choice away,

If you can scrounge the fee.¹⁴²

The poem above was written by Penny, Carol, Caz and Linden: four of sixty women who entered the Glastonbury Assembly Rooms on the evening of Saturday 3 August 1996 to protest the first Glastonbury Goddess Conference.¹⁴³ They had come from a nearby farmer's field, just outside Shepton Mallet, where the seventh annual Spiral Womyn's Camp was taking place.¹⁴⁴ That morning, fifteen spiral womyn who knew about the Glastonbury Conference were sharing information and plotting around the campfire.¹⁴⁵ I heard entry cost £100, said one woman, and concessions required a "begging letter". "If you booked early it was cheaper than if you booked later" said another, "if you were rich it was cheap, if you had to save up it was expensive". Most outrageous of all, announced a third woman, there was a "goddess banquet" happening that very evening, "which was closed to women who couldn't afford the rest of the event and cost extra to Women contributors such as Janet McCloud who is poor and speaks on behalf of 'women of all red nations'".¹⁴⁶ Incensed by the exclusivity of the Glastonbury Goddess Conference, which seemed so at odds with everything the Spiral Camp stood for, the spiral womyn painted their faces blue like Icenian warriors, dressed up in "tutus housecoats and frilly

¹⁴² Lilo Lil and the Lillettes – Penny, Carol, Caz & Linden ('The Goddesses of Spiral Camp'), *Spinning Spiral* (1996), DM2123/1/86/1, FAS.

¹⁴³ Maggie, 'The Goddess without Politics is like the Ocean without Water', *From the Flames* 18 (Autumn-Winter, 1996), FL.

¹⁴⁴ 'Spiral Women's Camp 1996', *From the Flames* 17 (Summer, 1996), FL.

¹⁴⁵ Maggie, 'The Goddess without Politics', FL.

¹⁴⁶ Rachel, 'A Message from the Bad-Faeries', *From the Flames* 18 (Autumn-Winter, 1996), FL.

knickers, ball gowns and T-shirts”, and prepared to go to the banquet.¹⁴⁷ Were they not Goddesses after all?

That evening, the vibrant convoy of “Greenham women, Tree women, clowns, teenagers, intellectuals, anarchists, Lesbian avengers... Goddesses all” travelled into Glastonbury.¹⁴⁸ Ignited with Greenham spirit, the group danced up to the Assembly Rooms, carrying colourful banners that read “Cosmic Capitalism” and “The Goddess is not for sale”, all the while singing “You can’t buy the Goddess” to the tune of the popular Greenham chant “You can’t kill the spirit”.¹⁴⁹ Although at first, their Glastonbury sisters welcomed them warmly (“These women are our guests and should be invited into the hall with us”), by the time the spiral womyn entered the main hall the atmosphere had changed.¹⁵⁰ The spiral womyn were surprised to see the room arranged like a “civic reception”; tables lined up in uniform rows with crisp pink tablecloths and elaborately arranged napkins, polished wine glasses and neatly printed menus. What did any of this have to do with Goddess spirituality, spiral woman Maggie Parks asked herself, what did any of this have to do with challenging the patriarchy?¹⁵¹ The debate that ensued between the ticketed women and the spiral womyn was acrimonious, and some spiral womyn were injured when the conference organisers tried to eject them from the hall.¹⁵² When men started offering their opinions (the Glastonbury Goddess Conference was a mixed event) the spiral womyn walked out together, returning to their farmer’s field to share the story of what had happened.¹⁵³ “I never did get answers to my questions”, thought Parks.¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Maggie, ‘The Goddess without Politics’, FL; S. Hutchinson Nunns, ‘The Glastonbury Goddess Conference’, *Wood and Water*, 56 (Autumn Equinox, 1996); Rachel, ‘Bad-Faeries’, FL; Asphodel Long ‘Indefensible Attack’, *From the Flames* 18 (Autumn-Winter, 1996), FL.

¹⁵⁰ Maggie, ‘The Goddess without Politics’, FL.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Rachel, ‘Bad-Faeries’, FL.

¹⁵³ S. Gill, ‘A Joyous Way to Demonstrate’, *From the Flames* 18 (Autumn-Winter, 1996), FL.

¹⁵⁴ Maggie, ‘The Goddess without Politics’, FL.



Figure 7. “Wot taking so long...?” cartoon, *From the Flames*, Autumn-Winter, 1996. Feminist Library, London.

For Parks and McIntyre, who covered the events over five pages in *From the Flames*, the violent confrontation in the Glastonbury Assembly Rooms was the natural conclusion of a divide that had plagued the feminist spirituality movement since the 1980s. On one side were radical Goddess feminists (spiral womyn), whose ethos and principles were firmly rooted in the 1970s women’s movement and the creative, magical, non-violent direct action at Greenham Common.¹⁵⁵ On the other were the Glastonbury Goddess women who were not feminists at all, but represented the co-optation of the Goddess by the right-wing, consumerist, patriarchal New Age movement. Taking place three years after many of the same womyn disrupted morning

¹⁵⁵ Rachel, ‘Bad-Faeries’, FL.

service at Bristol, the confrontation in the Glastonbury Assembly Rooms was a striking echo of both the political practices and the stakes that had been at play in the women's reclamation of the Cathedral. Just like the Bristol Cathedral action, the spiral womyn's non-violent and sacralising occupation of the Assembly Rooms was a way of changing the energies of a place that had been profaned by the patriarchal order, reclaiming it for the Goddess. In Bristol, the profanity had been androcentric religion, while in Glastonbury it was the consumerist New Age Goddess movement.

Echoing the narratives of decline and loss offered by socialist feminists like Anna Coote and Bea Campbell during the 1980s, many of the women who wrote in to *From the Flames* following the Assembly Rooms encounter wove the Glastonbury conflict into a story of depoliticisation, empty parody and take-over.¹⁵⁶ In poetic prose, Rachel, one of the women who came up with the idea for the protest, wrote:

Once-upon-a-time, not so long ago Women... decided to change the world and this time they named this changing FEMINISM... Now along came a grey and snotty demon by the name of mammon (consumerist-capitalist-creep to his friends) and seeing that many in the world were desperately seeking something he decided to put on a flowy frock, a meek all-loving voice and go into the 'goddess' business.¹⁵⁷

In a reflexive and emotionally charged piece in the same edition, Parks explained what was at stake for her personally during the Glastonbury demonstration, "Goddess spirituality has been an intrinsic part of my life for fifteen years. I have challenged and will continue to challenge any attempts to exploit or misappropriate it by elites, hierarchies and those who seek to assimilate it into old patriarchal structures".¹⁵⁸ Deploying the affective politics of despair in

¹⁵⁶ Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*.

¹⁵⁷ Rachel, 'Bad-Faeries', FL.

¹⁵⁸ Maggie, 'The Goddess without Politics', FL.

this way allowed Parks to construct herself as the feminist heroine of the Glastonbury protest, over and against the non-feminism of the Glastonbury women.¹⁵⁹

The rhetoric of therapy and healing became the ideological battleground upon which these broader debates played out. In her account of the protest at the Assembly Rooms, Parks foregrounded the therapeutic language deployed by the Glastonbury women as a sign of their anti-feminism. During the confrontation, Parks recalled, one fee-paying woman had cried out that the spiral womyn's behaviour was bringing back memories of childhood abuse. "As someone who works closely with issues of sexual violence and women who have survived it" countered Parks in *From the Flames*, "this sort of new age psychobabble really pissed me off".¹⁶⁰ Although it is unlikely the woman had an agenda, Parks interpreted her comments as a deliberate attempt to diffuse the radical politics of the spiral womyn using a parody of a feminist argument. "It still never ceases to amaze me", wrote Parks, "that when women are anything more than nice, polite and passive, that we are perceived as aggressive".¹⁶¹

At the time of the Glastonbury protest in 1996, Parks and McIntyre had been using *From the Flames* to critique therapy for three years. In an article called 'Defying Analysis', the women made their most overt statement on the topic, dismissing the feminist credentials of therapeutic practice and linking its genealogy to the patriarchal New Age:

Although there are feminists who believe therapy provides us with tools for radical change, we think therapy has more in common with new age ideas than with feminism, in particular these ideas have been strongly influencing women's spirituality, undermining its feminist content.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, p. 193.

¹⁶⁰ Maggie, 'The Goddess without Politics', FL.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Maggie and Vron, 'Defying Analysis: Does Therapy Depoliticise Us?', *From the Flames*, 13 (Spring, 1994), FL.

In the article, Parks and McIntyre drew upon a long history of anti-therapy discourse within the British and American second wave. Sarah Crook has argued that the development of a feminist-orientated mental health programme in Britain was encouraged by a stream of literature in the early 1970s that critiqued male-dominated mental health institutions for perpetuating traditional gender norms.¹⁶³ However, by the end of the 1970s, when fears about cultural feminism were reaching their peak, some women questioned whether therapy could ever fit into the feminist paradigm. Sheila Jeffreys wrote to *Spare Rib* in 1978 to argue that there could be no such thing as feminist therapy because the entire idea of one-on-one counselling had been invented by the male ruling class, and was embedded within patriarchal value judgements.¹⁶⁴ For Jeffreys, rather than helping women, therapy re-cast the community problem-solving of consciousness-raising into individualistic terms.

At the same time, the shift away from inner work was also taking place in feminist circles in the United States of America. As literary critic Trysh Travis has observed, American feminists first took up the politics of personal transformation because of changing political and economic circumstances under Ronald Reagan's administration. "The defeat of the proposed Equal Rights Amendment, a major backlash against affirmative action, and the systematic dismantling of the funding structures and government institutions of the Great Society", Travis argues, meant that some feminists retreated from active engagement with movement politics feeling the time was no longer right for mass action, preferring to experiment with change through personal and cultural transformation.¹⁶⁵ However, this change in tactic had its critics. Some American feminists were angered by the ways in which the turn to personal politics fed into the late 1980s "rage for recovery", a marketing ploy used by the publishing industry that

¹⁶³ Crook, 'Activism and Therapy'.

¹⁶⁴ S. Jeffreys 'Against Therapy' in S. O'Sullivan (ed.), *Women's Health: A Spare Rib Reader* (London, 1987).

¹⁶⁵ T. Travis, *The Language of the Heart: A Cultural History of the Recovery Movement from Alcoholics Anonymous to Oprah Winfrey* (Chapel Hill, 2009), p. 221.

saw self-help books proliferate, sold through therapists' networks and at women's weekend retreats.¹⁶⁶ In their article for *From the Flames*, Parks and McIntyre were influenced by some of these American critics, including Celia Kitzinger and Rachel Perkins who wrote *Changing Our Minds* (1993) and Caryatis Cardea's article, 'The Lesbian Revolution and the 50 Minute Hour: A Working-Class Look at Therapy and the Movement' (1985).

An honest account of the turn inward to feminist therapy and healing, however, must acknowledge that these ideas were first popularised by the patriarchy network itself during the 1970s and 1980s, rather than rooted in New Age practices. Indeed, the ways in which the MSG used personal transformation had its roots in the same political training ground as many second-wave feminists during the late 1960s. In the 1990s some women who recognised this linkage wrote in to *From the Flames* to insist upon the political vitality of feminist therapy despite Parks and McIntyre's article. Rehearsing the arguments the MSG were making fifteen years previously, Albatross argued that personal politics were not the "indulgence of internalism" but asked, "how can I effectively change the world if I live in pain, in fear, in paralysed powerlessness? ... We are abused by those we have been taught to love and then the abuse is hidden in darkness and we are told that we are to blame for the way we are".¹⁶⁷ Similarly, Jill, writing from Hebden Bridge, accused Parks and McIntyre of establishing a reductive binary between feminism as good and therapy as bad, "I am after collective feminist political change AND I believe that by changing ourselves we can change the world".¹⁶⁸

There were other pressures acting upon Parks and McIntyre that caused them, increasingly, to differentiate between good and bad theories and practices within the Goddess movement. Fuelling fears about the rise of post-feminism during the 1990s was the concern that a younger

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 266.

¹⁶⁷ Albatross, *From the Flames*, 2 (Summer, 1991), FL.

¹⁶⁸ Jill, *From the Flames*, 14 (Winter, 1994), FL.

generation of women, both inside and outside the academy, were unfamiliar with the politics of the WLM, or the legal, political, social and economic change the movement had won.¹⁶⁹ The publication of feminist confessional memoirs and first-hand accounts during the 1980s and 1990s was partly conceived of in response to this issue.¹⁷⁰ Like their secular sisters, Goddess feminists were worried that young women attracted to the Goddess movement were unaware of its radical feminist past. This anxiety crept into Asphodel Long's assessment of the health of the Goddess movement in 1994.¹⁷¹ Similarly, in the first edition of *From the Flames*, Parks reflected upon taking part in a ritual action against the Gulf War, and how the involvement of apolitical women had made the experience feel empty and futile:

I realise now that many of these wimmin did not come to goddess through a radical feminist perspective and so do not see raising energy as a tool for action and political change. It was enough that we sent healing energy to the Gulf and the rest of the ritual was to make ourselves feel better about it all.¹⁷²

These anxieties were compounded by developments in the academic study of new religions. During the early 1990s, the New Age became a viable research topic, emerging as a subfield in the sociology of religion. This was problematic for Goddess feminists because scholars took male-dominated alternative spiritualities as the mainstream of the movement, ignoring the beliefs, writing and networks of spiritual feminists. In 1993, Tony Walter, then an independent scholar, estimated that his Sociology of the New Age conference was the first time British academics had met to discuss the contours of New Age religiosity. In fact, that year there were two others, the Contemporary and New Age Religions in the British Isles in Bath and the International Conference on Paganism in Contemporary Britain at the University of Newcastle-

¹⁶⁹ G. Griffin (ed.), *Feminist Activism in the 1990s* (London, 1995).

¹⁷⁰ Sebestyen (ed.), '68, '78, '88.

¹⁷¹ Long, 'Goddess Movement in Britain Today', p. 321.

¹⁷² Maggie, 'Despair and Empowerment', FL.

upon-Tyne.¹⁷³ Attendees at all three conferences included academics who would go on to establish the thematic pillars of New Age and Pagan studies, including Paul Heelas, Graham Harvey, Joanne Pearson and Marion Bowman. Many of their papers were published in special conference reports in academic journals and some were compiled into edited collections, becoming some of the first textbooks on the New Age.¹⁷⁴

The reports of these conferences, and the books that followed, reveal that many of the pejorative characteristics assigned to the New Age by sociologists were there from the beginning. At the Sociology of the New Age conference, for example, Heelas linked the New Age to “the triumphalist capitalism which developed during the 1980s”.¹⁷⁵ Heelas was fresh from compiling an edited collection entitled, *The Values of Enterprise Culture: The Moral Debate* (1992), which sought to critique the new set of values created by Margaret Thatcher’s government that provided the cultural context for free market economy. Heelas came to the New Age, then, feeling that his own historical moment was heavily inflected with individualism, aggressive capitalism and selfhood, aspects he failed to contextualise in his approach to the study of the New Age. In his conference paper, he read the New Age through what he saw as the worst aspects of neo-liberalism. Anxieties about post-Thatcherite Britain emerged in the work of other sociologists, including David Lyon who identified “self and consumption” as the key organising principles of the New Age, and Tony Walter for whom “privatisation and individualisation” were key driving forces.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷³ P. Heelas, ‘The New Age in Cultural Context: The Premodern, the Modern and the Postmodern’, *Religion*, 23 (1993); C. S. Clifton, ‘The Pomegranate Returns from the Underworld: A Letter from the Editor’, *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies*, 6 (2004); E. Arweck, *Researching New Religious Movements: Responses and Redefinitions* (London, 2006).

¹⁷⁴ See *Religion* 23 (1991); Hardman and Harvey (eds.), *Paganism Today*; Pearson, Roberts and Samuel (eds.), *Nature Religion Today*; Heelas, ‘The New Age in Cultural Context’.

¹⁷⁵ Heelas, ‘The New Age in Cultural Context’, p. 106.

¹⁷⁶ Lyon, ‘A Bit of a Circus’; T. Walter, ‘Death in the New Age’, *Religion*, 23 (1993).

Unsurprisingly, given their awareness of how academic knowledge-formation had marginalised women's sacred history, Goddess feminists paid close attention to these debates. Keen to bear witness to their own experiences, many even attended early academic conferences and some women presented papers. Ironically, while the academics who came into contact with Goddess women often drew upon their ideas to support their dismissal of the New Age as disengaged and frivolous, they simultaneously denied the existence of the radical feminist spirituality these women represented. Heelas, for example, used a quote from an article by Daphne Francis to support his point that New Agers combined their beliefs with all kinds of different lifestyles and politics, "from Jungian-based paganism to ecologically-sound yuppie entrepreneurship".¹⁷⁷ In fact, Francis was writing to argue that, no matter what kind of lifestyle they practice, New Agers are usually privileged, male, white and middle-class, interested in "upholding present power-relations, particularly between the sexes".¹⁷⁸ Heelas completely misinterpreted Francis' article and the set of political arguments that informed her work. Indeed, if he had read on to the end of Francis' piece, he would have seen that her article was adapted from a longer version in *From the Flames*, "a new British journal of women's spirituality", pointing to the existence of an active feminist spirituality movement in Britain.¹⁷⁹

As the patriarchal New Age had been at the centre of Sjöo's radical research and writing project for many years, she was particularly keen to share her views with the academic community. In May 1993, she gave a paper entitled 'New Age and Patriarchy' at the Contemporary and New Age Religions in the British Isles conference alongside Bowman, Harvey, Hutton and Michael York. In her paper, Sjöo emphasised that her knowledge was formed through her feminism and her working-class status. "I am not an academic", she said, "My standpoint is that of a feminist

¹⁷⁷ Heelas, 'The New Age in Cultural Context', p. 104.

¹⁷⁸ D. Francis, 'Crystal Balls', *Trouble and Strife* 22 (Winter, 1991).

¹⁷⁹ Francis, 'Crystal Balls'; D. Francis, 'How to Survive an Attack of New-Age Ideology – Deciphering New Age Doublespeak', *From the Flames*, 1 (Spring, 1991), FL.

artist of working class origin”.¹⁸⁰ In what followed, Sjöo challenged York for his “charitable” description of the New Age during the opening presentations of the conference, and said of Richard Roberts’ work on New Age work-based training programmes that what he saw as “amorphous religious synthesis” was in fact “highly patriarchal religious thinking”.¹⁸¹ However, Sjöo’s perspective did not make a dent in the arguments of either sociologists of religion or practitioners of alternative spiritualities who were also at the conference. Even Hutton, who became friends with Sjöo during the 1990s, persisted in marginalising the feminist Goddess movement in his writing, leading Sjöo to call him out in 1997, “[Hutton] often rubbishes the research by feminists, such as the archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, into ancient Goddess cultures... Whether Ronald intends it or not the fact is that misogynistic Pagans and Earth Mysteries people use his material in negative and destructive ways”.¹⁸²

At stake when the first Glastonbury Goddess Conference was held in 1996, then, was the rising threat of the patriarchal New Age, and anxieties about the representation of Goddess feminism within the academy. The *From the Flames* collective was right to be concerned. When sociologists of religion eventually did start paying attention to the Goddess movement, they looked straight past the political interventions of women like Francis and Sjöo and towards the Glastonbury Goddess movement, which appeared to support many of their predetermined judgements about the form and content of the New Age. In their writing, scholars like Bowman emphasised the consumerism of the movement, drawing attention to the expensive Goddess Conference and its organisers’ vested interests in selling Goddess merchandise in their own shops or tickets for their workshops.¹⁸³ In her article ‘Procession and Possession in Glastonbury’ Bowman negatively contrasted the Glastonbury Goddess with Christian activity

¹⁸⁰ Sjöo, ‘New Age and Patriarchy’, p. 22.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Sjöo, ‘The Glastonbury Goddess Conference’, FL.

¹⁸³ M. Bowman, ‘Procession and Possession in Glastonbury: Continuity, Change and the Manipulation of Tradition’, *Folklore*, 115 (2004), p. 281.

in Glastonbury, writing “The Goddess Procession has its serious moments, but on the whole it is far more ludic than either of the Christian events”.¹⁸⁴

The Glastonbury Goddess movement also appeared to fit within increasingly popular gendered interpretations of the New Age. While sociologist of religion Linda Woodhead took a sympathetic approach to the spiritual feminism of American writers in her 1993 article ‘Post-Christian Spiritualities’, by 2005 she was wielding a reductive explanation for women’s apparently enthusiastic take up of alternative spiritualities.¹⁸⁵ Overlooking the political motivations she had identified in the work of feminist theologians such as Mary Daly and Daphne Hampson, when she teamed up with Heelas to observe the “spiritual revolution” in a small Cumbrian town, Woodhead drew her explanations from reductive (and patronising) readings of traditional femininity. “More women than men tend to emphasise relational subjective-life”, wrote Woodhead:

...and since much of subjective wellbeing culture and the holistic milieu *in toto* emphasise ‘inner’ relationality, their provisions of activities are considerably less likely to appeal to those men (in particular) who seek to develop their subjective-lives by going into the world to achieve and compete whilst retaining their own boundaries and sense of being in control. Hence the high percentage of women in the milieu.¹⁸⁶

For Woodhead, the Glastonbury Goddess movement supported her argument that women were drawn to the New Age because it sacralised “distinctly feminine activities”.¹⁸⁷ The Goddess, for her, was nothing more than a representation of universal and timeless femininity, which

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 182.

¹⁸⁵ L. Woodhead, ‘Post-Christian Spiritualities’, *Religion*, 23 (1993).

¹⁸⁶ Heelas and Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*, p. 98.

¹⁸⁷ Woodhead, ‘Gendering Secularization Theory’, p. 192.

modern women, who were increasingly drawn away from relational activities by work, wanted to reconnect with.

However, the binary divide between political spiral womyn and apolitical Glastonbury women was not as clear-cut as *From the Flames* suggests. The Glastonbury Goddess Conference was co-organised by Kathy Jones, a former Greenham activist who was embedded within the political, intellectual and spiritual networks that had produced the MSG in 1975. Jones' political activism began with the self-sufficiency and ecological farming movement during the 1970s, ideas she explored in her book *Learning to Live in the Country* (1976), which was reviewed in *Resurgence* magazine.¹⁸⁸ Like the founders of the MSG, Jones had agitated for better representation of women in *Resurgence* following Geoffrey Ashe's piecemeal intervention, accusing the male-dominated editorship of marginalising the women's movement, "The revolution is already occurring – quickly and without violence. Half of the population of the world is taking a massive stride forward in consciousness".¹⁸⁹ In 1988, while living in Glastonbury, Jones even commented on the threat of the patriarchal New Age in a local *Earth Mysteries* newspaper, writing:

Most of the paganism I have seen is mainly male dominated, using the same old stuff dressed up in another version. Feminism to me is about empowering women and redressing the balance. If that needs positive discrimination in favour of women, then I'm for it.¹⁹⁰

Keenly aware that the Goddess had her origins in the women's movement, when Jones organised the first Goddess Conference, she was keen to invite pioneering feminists like Asphodel Long and Monica Sjöö. Long later wrote a letter in support of the Glastonbury

¹⁸⁸ B. Vale, 'Armchair Farming', *Resurgence*, 57 (July/August, 1976).

¹⁸⁹ Jones, 'Radical Feminism'.

¹⁹⁰ 'Kathy Jones Inner Views', *Glastonbury Communicator*, 16 (1988).

women in *From the Flames*, offended by the spiral womyn's "military style attack" on the gathering and their silencing of other women.¹⁹¹ Although Sjöo was hurt by the ways in which the Glastonbury women had treated her guest, the Native American activist Janet McCloud, in the years that followed, Sjöo made peace with Jones and continued attending the conference.¹⁹²

That the Glastonbury movement emerged out of the same intellectual trajectory and contained some of the same rhetoric as the feminist spirituality movement from the 1970s makes it even more perplexing that sociologists of religion have marginalised its subversive potential. Feminist politics are clearly visible in all the places a scholar would usually look for evidence of the Glastonbury Goddess movement, suggesting that academic accounts are driven more by scholars' preconceptions than the actual lives and politics of their subjects. In her book *Priestess of Avalon* (2006), for example, Jones wrote, "One of my aims is to bring feminist ideas and thinking into Goddess spirituality, beginning by reclaiming language from the thrall of patriarchy", thereby drawing upon feminist theories about patriarchal ways of knowing.¹⁹³ Elsewhere, Jones' arguments revealed serious engagement with the work of Sjöo, who championed the rejection of binary thinking in Goddess spirituality, "I do not equate white, right, might, high, higher, upper chakras etc., with the good; or black, dark, deep, low, lower, lower chakras etc., with the bad".¹⁹⁴ When Jones started offering courses for women and men to train as Priestesses and Priests of Avalon, she gave her students reading lists that included key texts of the late twentieth-century matriarchal revival (Marija Gimbutas, Michael Dames, Robert Graves, Geoffrey Ashe), feminist theology (Mary Daly, Mary Condren) and the writings of well-known British Goddess feminists (Monica Sjöo, Asphodel Long).¹⁹⁵ Jones

¹⁹¹ Long, 'Indefensible Attack', FL.

¹⁹² Sjöo, 'The Glastonbury Goddess Conference', FL; Interview with Cheryl Traffon, 15 March 2016.

¹⁹³ Jones, *Priestess of Avalon, Priestess of the Goddess*, p. 7.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ 'Priestess of Avalon Reading List', c. 2007, courtesy of Helen Anthony, private collection.

even set writing projects for Priests and Priestesses-in-training that echoed the feminist historical recovery of the MSG and MRRN during the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁹⁶

What is more, at the beginning of this project, I learned about the overtly feminist roots of Goddess spirituality through two committed members of the Glastonbury Goddess movement. Geraldine Charles had trained as a Priestess of Avalon with Jones in 1999 and, three years later, helped her found the Goddess Temple in the centre of Glastonbury. She also assisted with the organisation of the Goddess Conference for several years, and is still the webmistress of the Temple's website.¹⁹⁷ Cheryl Traffon, who had been active within the MRRN during the 1980s and 1990s, was similarly engaged with the Glastonbury movement, joining the planning group for Goddess Conference ceremonies on Jones' request.¹⁹⁸ When *From the Flames* became too exhausting for Parks and McIntyre to continue producing in 1999, and the *MRRN newsletter* finally came to a halt in 2000 after nineteen years of uninterrupted publication, both Charles and Traffon came to see the Glastonbury Goddess movement as the natural inheritor of the spiritual feminist movement in Britain. There is evidence that other Goddess women viewed Glastonbury in this way too. Although Sjöö died in 2003, and Long just two years later in 2005, other notable women from the international Goddess movement continue to come to the Glastonbury Goddess Conference, including Zsuzsanna Budapest who presented on the history of the separatist Dianic Wicca tradition in 2011 and Starhawk who led two workshops in 2016 and one on the legacy of Marija Gimbutas in 2018.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁶ 'Goddesses Associated with the Isle of Avalon', 2007, courtesy of Helen Anthony, private collection.

¹⁹⁷ Interview with Geraldine Charles, 15 February 2016; Geraldine Charles in Jones, *Priestess of Avalon, Priestess of the Goddess*, pp. 501-504.

¹⁹⁸ Interview with Cheryl Traffon, 15 March 2016.

¹⁹⁹ 'Goddess Conference 2011, Viagenssagradas, 15 February 2011, accessed 23 September 2019, <http://viagenssagradas.blogspot.com/2011/02/goddess-conference-2011.html>; 23rd Annual Glastonbury Goddess Conference, accessed 23 September 2019, <https://goddessconference.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Goddess-Conference-Programme-2018-low-res.pdf>.

Interestingly, like Long, Parks, and McIntyre, women within the Glastonbury movement had their own generational anxieties about the threat of post-feminism and the New Age into the 2000s. Echoing the spiral womyn writing in 1996, Charles told me:

What I was disappointed in was how much New Age spirituality – I am not a New Age fan at all for all kinds of reasons... I just don't see the relevance but if you talk to some of this lot... you'll find that people articulate Goddess spirituality and New Age spirituality and I don't think they are necessarily connected in any way... I was disappointed when people would come up to me and say things like well of course, you know, numerologically your name... and I thought fuck off. Sorry! This has got nothing to do with Goddess, I'm not interested!²⁰⁰

Also, like Long, Charles' anti-New Age stance had been informed by the work of Sjöo, especially her pamphlet, 'New Age Channellings: Who or What is being Channelled?' (1998).²⁰¹ Charles was not alone in her concerns. In an article for Charles' online zine, *Goddess Pages*, Jacqueline Woodward-Smith, who began Priestess training with Jones in 2002, also commented upon the threat of the New Age on the Glastonbury Goddess movement.²⁰² Her article, 'The Goddess vs. the New Age: Singing the Sacred Land' (2006) drew heavily upon Sjöo's writing, including her 1987 book with Barbara Mor and *New Age and Armageddon*:

What we do know, or may intuitively feel, is that the first cultures were matristic (centred in the feminine) and that, for reasons that are still becoming clear, a patriarchal system usurped that more holistic way of living. We also know that the monotheistic

²⁰⁰ Interview with Geraldine Charles, 15 February 2016.

²⁰¹ Interview with Geraldine Charles, 15 February 2016; M. Sjöo, 'New Age Channellings: Who or What is Being Channelled?', 1998, accessed 24 September 2019, <http://www.monicasjoo.net/books/naessay/newageessay1.htm#contents>.

²⁰² Jacqueline Woodward-Smith in Jones, *Priestess of Avalon, Priestess of the Goddess*, p. 496.

religions grew from, and were central to, that process and continue to reinforce it today; the New Age is, in many cases, doing the same.²⁰³

In this quotation, Woodward-Smith built not only upon Sjöö's articulation of the threat of the New Age, but also upon the rereading of religious history undertaken by the MSG from the 1970s. Woodward-Smith invoked the matriarchal metanarrative of women's sacred past, drawing similarities between the Patriarchal Takeover and the machinations of the patriarchal New Age. In other parts of her essay, Woodward-Smith drew upon ideas that Margaret Roy had foregrounded in the MRRN at the beginning of the 1980s, about reclaiming the Dark Goddess as a political move, "The Goddess is both light and dark with no separation between the two, just as we are, and if we ignore one side of Her then we do nothing but damage to ourselves".²⁰⁴ In this way, then, Woodward-Smith's writing shows that the deeply political arguments and modes of activism that had existed in the Goddess movement since the 1970s persisted in contemporary articulations in the 2000s and beyond.

To conclude, in this section I have shown that during the 1990s, feminist visions for alternative spirituality came to exist simultaneously with other explicitly anti-feminist forms. Because sociologists of religion identified these anti-feminist movements as the centre of the New Age, Goddess feminists like Long, Sjöö, Parks, and McIntyre came to understand that their feminist Goddess was a precarious formation, a realisation that inflected their movement as these women started to draw distinctions between political and apolitical forms of spirituality. As I have shown in this section, however, the Glastonbury Goddess movement, which was designated apolitical by spiritual feminists and academics alike, retained much of the political vibrancy of the MSG in 1975. This misreading is due to scholars' own failure to see the feminist

²⁰³ J. Woodward-Smith, 'The Goddess vs. the New Age: Singing the Sacred Land', accessed 12 August 2019, <https://www.goddess-pages.co.uk/the-goddess-vs-the-new-age-singing-the-sacred-land-2/>.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

politics of the Glastonbury movement, a failure that is grounded in their presumptions about the apoliticism of new spiritual movements and also framed within overdetermined understandings of femininity that see women's spirituality as inherently concerned with therapy and self-work.

Conclusion: "We are not being counted"

In the summer of 1996, Siren Harradine wrote to *From the Flames* to report on the Nature Religion Today conference at Lancaster University. "It must be stated", she wrote, "that given what was said & not said it was as if feminism never happened".²⁰⁵ Harradine was commenting specifically on a paper presented by Lancaster PhD student and conference organiser Joanne Pearson, who reported on the results of a questionnaire she had circulated among the "pagan community" about the form and content of "Contemporary Goddess Religion".²⁰⁶ "The results she presented I found surprisingly unrepresentative of my relationship with the Goddess and the views and beliefs expressed by witches and Goddess centred women whom I know and have met on the women's scene and on the Spiral network", explained Harradine:

For example, 86% of respondents said they worshipped the Goddess and Gods equally – and only 5% said they worshipped the Goddess solely, further to this 90% of respondents did not become involved in Goddess worship through an interest in feminism, only 1% felt they practiced a form of "new age feminism".²⁰⁷

On confronting Pearson, Harradine discovered that her questionnaire had only been circulated in Pagan and Wiccan organisations that were traditionally hostile to Goddess feminism,

²⁰⁵ Harradine, 'Making Our Voices Heard', FL.

²⁰⁶ Pearson, 'Religion and the Return of Magic', p. 109.

²⁰⁷ Harradine, 'Making Our Voices Heard', FL.

including the Pagan Federation (known as the Pagan Front until 1981), several Druid networks and the Fellowship of Isis, which did promote matriarchy and the Goddess, but never as part of a feminist agenda. When Harradine asked Pearson if she would circulate her questionnaire through the MRRN and *From the Flames*, Pearson replied that it was “too late in the day”.²⁰⁸

The methodology deployed by Pearson brings into focus the androcentric bias that persists in the sociology and history of religion. Despite the fact that Pearson’s institutional connections included Michael York, Graham Harvey and Ronald Hutton, all of whom knew Goddess feminists personally, Pearson nevertheless chose not to include the perspectives of radical spiritual feminists in her research project. This is especially surprising given that Pearson was interested in excavating specifically Goddess-orientated forms of contemporary spirituality. In the same way that Hutton felt able to disregard Monica Sjöö’s intervention in his writing on the contemporary Pagan movement, or indeed the way Heelas overlooked Daphne Francis’ radical feminist critique of the New Age while simultaneously allowing it to inform his own work, Pearson felt comfortable telling Harradine that she had run out of time to send questionnaires to the radical feminist Goddess network, as if this were not a significant exclusion.

For all of these scholars, then, dealing seriously with spiritual feminism was interpreted as a choice. Although the feminist Goddess was a visible and agitating presence during the moment in which ideas about the New Age began to solidify, sociologists and historians of religion felt comfortable omitting the feminist critique from their accounts. This sense of optional engagement was, in turn, informed by assumptions about who or what constituted the mainstream of the New Age movement. Because scholars like Pearson identified large, male-dominated institutions such as the Pagan Federation as the cultural centre, they naturalised

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

assumptions about feminist spirituality being a marginal, numerically insignificant, or even an ideologically extreme (or “fundamentalist”) anachronism.²⁰⁹ What is more, when sociologists of religion did start paying attention to the Goddess movement, they were only able to analyse it through an overdetermined and often pejorative reading of ‘womanhood’, in which the Goddess became a symbol of unproblematic forms of femininity rather than a radical tool for gender critique. That scholars would adhere to such distinctly normative frameworks to approach the study of the New Age is surprising when alternative spiritualities themselves are viewed by many as on the peripheries.

In the following chapter, I turn to the spiritual politics of Monica Sjöö, one of the most influential feminists in the international Goddess movement, in order to reconstitute her spiritual feminist politics that have been wrongly split in academic literature. In this way, I follow women’s historians working on the nineteenth century, such as Alex Owen and Jane Shaw, who have found innovative ways of taking seriously the intersections between spiritual and feminist ideology in the lives of their subjects. However, I also show that recovering Sjöö’s spirituality is not an easy task given the predetermined categorisation of her archive, which maintains recognisable secular histories of the women’s movement, while relegating spiritual materials and accounts to the margins. In this way, Sjöö’s archive is a physical manifestation of scholars’ ability to choose whether to engage with the spiritual motivations and attachments of their ultra-modern subjects or not. In the final section of the chapter, I take seriously Joan Scott’s call to include the irrational and imaginal in our histories of political development by drawing comparisons between Sjöö’s overtly spiritual life-writing and the autobiographical formation of secular feminists such as Rowbotham and Segal, who attest to revelation and vision in their accounts of coming to consciousness.

²⁰⁹ White, *Monica Sjöö*, pp. 204-205.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SPIRITUAL POLITICS OF MONICA SJÖÖ

Monica Sjöö (1938 – 2005) is best known in feminist history for a painting. *God Giving Birth* (1968) is a towering six-foot tall oil on board depiction of a non-white woman in childbirth, her expression serene as she floats in the cosmos (Fig. 8). From her sacral body emerges, not only her child's head, but also the entire creamy lightness and darkness of the universe: birth “on a cosmic scale”.¹ Censored for blasphemy by the arts council in St Ives in 1970, *God Giving Birth* found its spiritual home at the first Women's Liberation Art Group exhibition at Woodstock Gallery in London in 1971. From there, it was shown in many feminist events during the early-1970s, including the 1972 National Women's Liberation conference in London and the Woman Power exhibition at the Swiss Cottage Library in 1973. Its visibility and notoriety in the early years of the WLM (*God Giving Birth* courted vitriolic objections well into the 1980s) propelled the painting into feminist consciousness. Reproduced widely in feminist art history books by Rozsika Parker, Griselda Pollock and Hilary Robinson, Sjöö's vision of women's sacred generative powers has come to symbolise the birth of the British women's art movement.²

However, Sjöö's political activity extended far beyond one painting. A prolific, globally-networked and theoretically innovative feminist activist from the 1960s until her death in 2005,

¹ Raphael, *Thealogy and Embodiment*, p. 267.

² Parker and Pollock (eds.), *Framing Feminism*; Robinson (ed.), *Visibly Female*; Lloyd, 'Painting'.

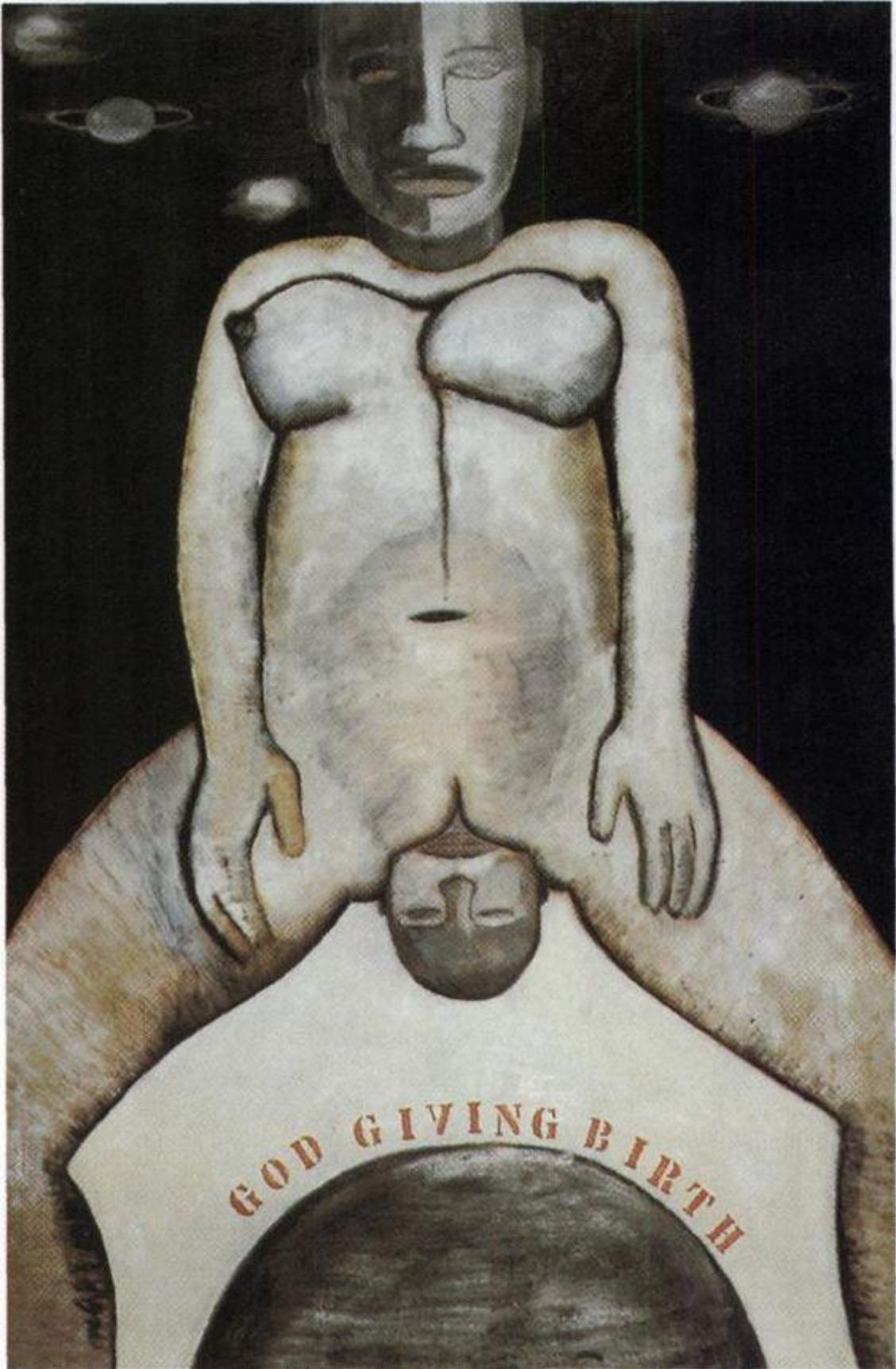


Figure 8. Monica Sjöö, *God Giving Birth* (1968).

Swedish-born Sjöo produced over 250 paintings, took part in at least twenty international exhibitions, spoke regularly at political and research conferences, wrote four books and numerous chapters, articles, pamphlets and poems. Her activism, which included writing and visual art, sought to challenge women's assumed biological inferiority through an analysis of the oppressive effects of patriarchal religion and culture. A decade before American feminist theologian Carol Christ gave her paper at the Great Goddess Re-Emerging conference at the University of California about the dangers of androcentric religious symbolism, Sjöo was already exploring the transformative potential of female-affirming images, myths and stories in her painting and writing.³ Inspired by the matriarchal theories of romantic mythographers, such as Robert Graves as well as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and the ecological politics of Swedish feminist Elin Wägner, Sjöo developed a women's spirituality that could challenge the hierarchical dualisms and linearity of patriarchal culture and philosophy. This vision for a women's spirituality was foundational to the development of the British Goddess movement from 1975.

Sjöo's political project was, therefore, one of spiritual transformation, in which mystical forms and modes had the power to alter women's psyches and deliver them out of patriarchal conditioning. Whenever she wrote about contemporary feminist issues, such as abortion and contraception, she re-called ancient matriarchal societies where "women were always in charge of the knowledge of contraception, abortion, midwifery".⁴ When she theorised about eco-feminist politics, she invoked the physical and psychical pain of the Earth Mother.⁵ As Sjöo's political imaginary developed, she applied her spiritual revolution to the global patriarchal-capitalist system that oppresses minorities and the Earth itself. She argued that the "re-fusion" of "unconscious spirit" and "conscious body" could bring into focus a new reverence for the

³ Christ, 'Why Women Need the Goddess'.

⁴ Sjöo, 'A Woman's Rights', p. 181.

⁵ Sjöo, 'An Avebury Experience', 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

earth and everything inhabiting it.⁶ From these sacral origins, Sjöö became the pre-eminent eco-feminist theorist in Britain during the 1980s, her work influencing, and building upon, American writers such as Susan Griffin, Gloria Orenstein and Charlene Spretnak who recognised the parallel oppression of women and nature.⁷ This magico-political body of literature would become central to the style and ideology of the protest at Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp during the 1980s, informing the women's reclamation of sacred space and the associated opening up of feminist consciousness. The same impetus persisted in spiritual feminist protest, playing out in Sjöö's protest at Bristol Cathedral in 1993.

Not only was spirituality and the Goddess present at the very centre of the women's movement at a formative moment, Sjöö's politics (that show no boundary between the spiritual and the secular) persisted throughout its history. Despite this, Sjöö is only ever referenced in feminist historiography in relation to a particular moment in the history of the second wave (the early 1970s) and a particular theoretical shift: the depiction of women's experience in the visual arts. When cited, Sjöö and her spiritual politics are often made to symbolise an early, theoretically unsophisticated moment in feminism's intellectual history that feminist theorists have since moved far beyond. Parker and Pollock, while crediting Sjöö with the origins of the feminist art movement in Britain, interpret her figurative style as imbibing the kind of biological essentialism she resisted, "overtly insisting on the singularity of women's consciousness and experience and the need for specially fashioned iconography to celebrate it."⁸ Similarly, when art historian Moira Vincentelli interviewed Sjöö during the late 1980s, she felt able to push her

⁶ Sjöö and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, pp. 416-417.

⁷ Griffin, *Woman and Nature*; I. Diamond and G. F. Orenstein, *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism* (San Francisco CA, 1990); C. Spretnak, *The Spiritual Dimension of Green Politics* (Rochester VT, 1986).

⁸ Parker and Pollock (eds.), *Framing Feminism*, p. 185.

on how far foregrounding matriarchy revealed her desire to “turn the tables” on men, hinting that feminist theory had gone far beyond such reductive binaries.⁹

The way in which Sjöö has been marginalised and misunderstood within feminist historiography shows us how the spiritual has been received in feminist theory and contemporary British political cultures more broadly. Sjöö’s mystical politics have come to place her at odds with the dominant narrative of Western feminist history, where the movement and the feminist subject is defined as uniformly rational and secular.¹⁰ Feminist historians have failed to challenge this assumption by implicitly accepting and foregrounding the secular voices of Sjöö’s contemporaries, who associated mystical politics with essentialism, or subjected them to ridicule. They echo Sjöö’s contemporaries such as feminist artist Pen Dalton who told interviewers from the *Personal Histories of the Second Wave of Feminism Project*, “I thought Monica’s writing was a bit raving... I wasn’t quite convinced by the spiritual and Goddess pre-occupations”.¹¹ By failing to historicise the opinions of contemporary feminists who viewed Sjöö’s work as embarrassing, or something to be laughed at, historians of the feminist past are caught in webs of complicity. They buy into the affective regimes surrounding Sjöö that make her difficult to identify with.¹²

Taking Sjöö seriously as an exemplary, rather than eccentric, second-wave feminist forces us to think differently about the dominant history of feminist politics in Britain. In part, this is a project of inclusion and recovery: writing Sjöö’s vibrant brand of political spirituality into feminism’s intellectual history makes the women’s movement look richer, fuller and more textured than secular histories allow. However, I do not claim only to reassert Sjöö’s position

⁹ M. Vincentelli, ‘Monica Sjöö’, in H. Robinson (ed.), *Visibly Female: Feminism and Art Today, an Anthology* (London, 1987), p. 84.

¹⁰ Braidotti, ‘In Spite of the Times’.

¹¹ V. Honeybourne and I. Singer, *Personal Histories of the Second Wave of Feminism: Summarised from Interviews*, Vol. 1 & 2 (2003), p. 77.

¹² C. Hemmings, ‘Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn’, *Cultural Studies*, 19 (2005).

as a lost or misunderstood feminist theorist, nor do I necessarily want to emphasise the importance of her spiritual politics to the feminist project (even though her ideas were formative in many areas, and she is often – wrongly – not cited). Rather, I want to explore how the ambivalence towards, or the ridiculing of, Sjöö’s spiritual politics can reveal the boundaries of acceptability in feminist theory. I follow feminist theorist Clare Hemmings who has recently argued that feminist scholars should move beyond projects of inclusion, and towards assessing “the politics that produce and sustain one version of history as more true than another”.¹³ Analysing the dominant narrative of feminist history that excludes Sjöö reveals what Hemmings calls the “technology of the presumed”; statements, claims and implicit assumptions about the feminist project that appear so obvious they do not require evidencing.¹⁴ Through this analysis, I bring into focus naturalised assumptions about the necessity of secular agency to the second-wave feminist project.

Recovering Sjöö’s spiritual politics provides the focus of this chapter. Beginning with her political writing that centred on a spiritual experience at Avebury in Wiltshire, I show that matters of the spirit were inextricably linked to the formation of Sjöö’s political imaginary. By contextualising Sjöö’s retelling of the Avebury experience within the British matriarchy network, I reveal the ways in which her foundational writing fed into the rhetorical and linguistic devices used by the women of the transnational Goddess movement during the 1970s and 1980s. More than simply recounting Sjöö’s style of spiritual feminist politics, this chapter also examines the ways in which they have been elided in feminist scholarship. By turning to Sjöö’s archive, currently held at FAS at the University of Bristol, I show how the implicit secular logic of dominant archival practices has rendered Sjöö’s spiritual politics invisible, and suggest ways in which researchers might move beyond such narrow epistemological

¹³ Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, pp. 15-16.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

frameworks. This chapter concludes with an analysis of Sjöö's autobiographical writing. By placing Sjöö's life-writing in the broader genre of feminist confessional memoir, I reveal how coming to consciousness memoirs echo spiritual transformation narratives. This forces us to question the supposed uniform secularism of the broader second-wave project.

Life, Death and Rebirth at Avebury, 6 February 1978

The ancient standing stones surrounding Avebury village in Wiltshire appeared as Monica had imagined: rough, squat and colossal, bowing out of the earth like giant human bodies with overgrown heads.¹⁵ Some were mutilated, many were missing. During the witch-hunts, the stones were deliberately burned, split apart and buried by the Christian authorities because "the church feared their powers."¹⁶ Monica could see evidence of the destruction: incongruous smooth edges where the stones had been cracked with fire and cold water then smashed apart with sledgehammers. Where stones were missing, ugly triangle-shaped markers stood in their place, like gravestones.¹⁷ "Painful to see".¹⁸ The Avebury henge enclosure was just one of the ancient monuments that Monica had come to see on a late winter's day in 1978. Inspired by Michael Dames' reading of the Wiltshire village as the sacred centre of megalithic culture in Britain, Monica had begun painting a triptych of the ancient sites.¹⁹ At her home in Bristol sat a characteristically large canvas, lightly marked with the outlines of the Avebury henge, West Kennet long barrow and, in the centre, Silbury Hill, the pregnant belly of the Mother Goddess. Together, in divine sequence, on Monica's canvas and in the rolling chalk landscape, the collection of monuments marked out Her living characteristics.

¹⁵ Sjöö, 'Spiral Journey', DM2123/1/81, 2, FAS; Sjöö, 'An Avebury Experience', 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

¹⁶ Sjöö, 'Spiral Journey', DM2123/1/81, 2, FAS.

¹⁷ Sjöö, 'Spiral Journey', DM2123/1/81, 2, FAS; Sjöö, 'An Avebury Experience', 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

¹⁸ Sjöö, 'Spiral Journey', DM2123/1/81, 2, FAS.

¹⁹ Sjöö, 'My Life Story', DM2123/1/81, 4, FAS.

Monica walked the entire outer circle of the henge and then followed the remains of the West Kennet Stone Avenue, deviating from its path to trek through ploughed and muddy fields towards Silbury Hill. Monica had already seen its form in the distance from the window of her decommissioned Post Office van as she travelled from Bristol.²⁰ From the road, the Hill had appeared smaller than her hand, a diminished ridge in the Wiltshire down-scape. From where she now stood, just outside Avebury village, Silbury Hill was hugely distended, its bulk filling the field in which it sat. In this way, as Dames had written, Monica could simultaneously perceive the Hill as all possible sizes, “a speck of dust, an egg, a human belly, a mountain, the world, and the universe”.²¹ Both the macrocosm and the microcosm, the speck of dust and the universe, endless death and re-birth, containing all things, just like the Cosmic Mother Herself. By now, Monica could feel the effects of the mushrooms she had eaten for lunch. She grew desperate to reach the sanctuary of the Silbury Mother. As she scrambled through marshlands and wilderness, trying to avoid rows of barbed wire, she felt herself transported back thousands of years in time. She had felt like this before, seventeen years ago at the birth of her second son at home in 1961 when she was twenty-three. In between huge contractions, the Goddess had revealed Herself, open and vulnerable, giving Monica insight into the immense powers of women’s bodies and sexuality.²² Now the feeling was sharper. Monica saw the Goddess’ grieving, Her pain at the destruction of Her body as she was polluted, abused, raped. Monica felt it in her own body.

As she climbed onto the matted grass covering the Her belly, a man bellowed from the road, “Get down from there!” Monica felt overtaken with sudden and enormous grief.²³ The Mother. The Mound cried through her, “I am at one with Her, grieving at our lost women-cultures...

²⁰ Sjöo, ‘An Avebury Experience’, 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

²¹ Dames, *The Silbury Treasure*, p. 12.

²² M. Sjöo, ‘God Giving Birth’, [artcornwall.org](http://www.artcornwall.org), accessed 14 July 2018, 8 September 2019, http://www.artcornwall.org/features/Monica_Sjoo_God_Giving_Birth.htm.

²³ Sjöo, ‘Spiral Journey’, DM2123/1/81, 2, FAS.

the pollution & death of Her land & nature all around us."²⁴ *The man shouted from the road again. Fear pierced through Monica's grief. Like a hunted animal, she clambered down from the Mother's Womb, fleeing the road. The road. The road appeared to stand for everything alien and evil: patriarchal machinery, authority, oppression. In the distance, at Salisbury Plain, were military bases. Shots rang out across the landscape. Overhead airplanes flew in a continuous drone. Evil, evil. Danger.*²⁵

*Almost running, Monica retreated into the fields. Standing in the Mother's nature, she turned back towards the Mound. It looked exposed and vulnerable like a naked breast, the indentations in the grass like veins.*²⁶ *Once again, sadness overwhelmed her. Monica understood what Mother Earth means: something enormous and powerful but also painful in Monica's own body, which is so like Hers. Violent and gentle, powerful and vulnerable, light and dark.*²⁷

The story above is a reconstructed telling of Sjöö's visit to the sacred sites in Avebury, Wiltshire in February 1978. In part, it draws upon her own depiction of the events in writing and painting. Having recognised the Avebury experience as transformative, Sjöö returned to it several times throughout the rest of her life, re-working it into prose poems, text to accompany paintings, or chapters in books. The story also deploys the imaginal tools Sjöö and other feminist researchers (such as archaeologist Marija Gimbutas) used to reconstruct pre-historic matriarchal societies.²⁸ Although Sjöö's experience at Avebury was partly inspired by geographer Michael Dames, who wrote of the sacred sites' significance in Neolithic Goddess religion in *The Silbury Treasures* (1976) and *The Avebury Cycle* (1977), it was also psychologically derived from bodily and cosmic experience.²⁹ On top of Silbury Hill, Sjöö

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Sjöö, 'An Avebury Experience', 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Stone, *Paradise Papers*; Gimbutas, *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe*.

²⁹ Raphael, *Theology and Embodiment*, pp. 28-29.

remembered women's divine past and mourned it, "I am at one with Her, grieving at our lost women-cultures".³⁰ In this way, Sjöö entered communality with the spirit world, bringing herself into contact with the omnipresent sisterhood and the Cosmic Mother. My version of the story, therefore, includes myth and metaphor, as well as sympathetic engagement with Sjöö's embodied and numinous experiences. In short, rather than subjecting Sjöö's Avebury visit to the rational exposition of the historical discipline, it accepts at face value her epistemology, in which myth could say as much as, if not more than, sensory and empirical evidence.

For historians of modern Britain, spiritual experiences such as Sjöö's often appear to epitomise the bizarre, eccentric and irrational. Critical theorist Greg Anderson has recently observed how supernatural occurrences that take place in modernity are "rendered into modern terms" through a project of rationalisation.³¹ A rationalist reading of Sjöö's Avebury experience not only applies binaries that Sjöö herself would not have recognised (real/non-real; truth/untruth) it also, to quote Alex Owen, "trivialises the issue and fundamentally misses the point".³² The binary opposition real/non-real implies consensus agreement about the nature of reality, as well as the "unproblematic nature of evidence".³³ For early modern historians, taking the supernatural seriously has proven a relatively easy injunction to accept. Lyndal Roper in her book *Oedipus and the Devil* (1994) is able to analyse witchcraft confessions and accusations as "vivid, organized products of the mind", taking their "imaginative themes" seriously in order to uncover "the fear of those who accused, and the self-understanding of people who... came to see themselves as witches".³⁴ Although some historians of modern Britain, such as Jane Shaw, have also positioned themselves against the positivist impulse, unlike early modern

³⁰ Sjöö, 'Spiral Journey', DM2123/81, 2, FAS.

³¹ Anderson, 'Ontological Turn'.

³² Owen, *The Darkened Room*.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. x.

³⁴ L. Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality, and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1994), pp. 202-203.

historians, their interventions, and their subject matter, are often viewed as eccentric.³⁵ Owen's dazzling work on Victorian spiritualism in *The Darkened Room* (1989) and *The Place of Enchantment* (2004) is cited for empirical information about the spiritualist movement in fin-de-siècle Britain, but rarely used to think about the epistemological challenge of writing the supernatural into our histories. Despite Joan Scott's insistence on observing the function of the "irrational" and "fantasy" in the development of political cultures and identity, then, political history remains confined within a materialistic analysis.³⁶

To read Sjöö's mystical writing and artwork in a positivist or rationalist way is to misunderstand her politics. Spirituality was not separate from Sjöö's political formation but central to it, often taking priority over material evidence. By engaging bodily and psychically with the spiritual feminist conception of women's sacred past, Sjöö was able to conceive of a feminist utopic future that was anti-patriarchy, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and ecologically centred. Combining the fragments from her study of pre-historic cultures and visits to the sacred landscape with reverie and numinous experiences, she generated a radical political programme that had contemporary application. Even the form of Sjöö's writing about Avebury served a political purpose: blending poetry and argumentation, deploying a creative hermeneutics of imagination that challenged the fact/fiction dualism in traditional academic writing.

In what follows, I use Sjöö's various retellings of the Avebury visit in both art and writing to show how her spiritual experiences were also sites of political development. Days after her visit to Avebury, Sjöö sat down to write an account of the trip that she eventually reproduced,

³⁵ Shaw, *Octavia Daughter of God*. See Shaw's reviewers, who accept her sympathetic approach to a modern spiritual movement, but nevertheless persist in their views that the Panacea Society, Shaw's case study, is laughable or too marginal to intervene in historiographical debates. S. Mumm, 'Review of Jane Shaw "Octavia, Daughter of God"', *Canadian Journal of History*, 47 (2012).

³⁶ Scott, *Fantasy*; J. W. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', *The American Historical Review*, 91 (1986); J. W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1999).

largely unedited, in her unpublished manuscript *Spiral Journey* (1984).³⁷ In the same year as the visit, Sjöo reworked her original notes into a prose poem called ‘An Avebury Experience: Life, Death and Rebirth at Avebury on 6th February 1978’, which the MSG published in their third pamphlet, *Politics of Matriarchy* (1979).³⁸ An abridged version of the poem was also published in the 1978 Winter Solstice edition of the American feminist spirituality magazine *WomanSpirit* under the shorter title ‘A Trip to Avebury’.³⁹ Almost ten years later, a description of Avebury’s significance to Neolithic Goddess religion – heavily inflected with Sjöo’s spiritual experience – appeared in her first book co-authored with American poet Barbara Mor entitled, *The Great Cosmic Mother* (1987).⁴⁰ In each revision, Sjöo used the story to address political issues of importance to her, including the dangers of patriarchal religion and culture, land rights, and ecological reverence.

Before her visit to the sacred sites at Avebury, Sjöo was already a committed feminist activist. While living in poverty with her single mother in 1950s Stockholm, she read Friedrich Engels and watched films by Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein, both of which she credited for her Marxist analysis of women’s oppression.⁴¹ Like other socialist feminists, Sjöo believed that “changes in the economic structure, the end of private property”, and finding alternatives to the “father-centred family” were key to ending women’s subordination.⁴² However, for the revolution to be truly successful, Sjöo argued that women needed to recognise and dislodge the myth of their own supposed biological inferiority.⁴³ She explored these ideas for the first time in the zine *Towards a Revolutionary Feminist Art* (1972), which was intended to provide the context for her painting *God Giving Birth* prior to its exhibition at Swiss Cottage Library. Sjöo

³⁷ Sjöo, ‘Spiral Journey’, DM2123/1/81, 2, FAS.

³⁸ Sjöo, ‘An Avebury Experience’, 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

³⁹ Sjöo, ‘A Trip to Avebury’.

⁴⁰ Sjöo and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, pp. 133-137.

⁴¹ Sjöo, ‘My Life Story’, DM2123/1/81, 4, FAS.

⁴² Sjöo, ‘A Woman’s Struggle’, DM2123/1/87, 1, FAS.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

explained that myths about women's biological inferiority were rooted in Christian philosophy, in which the Godhead was depicted as exclusively male, giving rise to a hierarchical binary between man (divinity-transcendent-production) and woman (earthly-immanent-reproduction).⁴⁴ For Sjöö, women's economic and sexual freedom was predicated upon, not only taking control of reproduction, but finding affirming imagery that restored the creative power of processes traditionally dismissed in patriarchy, including menstruation, motherhood and female sexuality.⁴⁵ Beginning with the matriarchal theories of Reed and Graves, Sjöö began researching pre-historic Goddess religions, mining them for their liberating potential almost fifteen years before the MSG started meeting in 1975.

As I showed in Chapter 2, however, Sjöö's emphasis upon reclaiming female biological processes was interpreted by many of her contemporaries, and some feminist art historians, as essentialist.⁴⁶ Socialist feminists criticised Sjöö for locating the source of female power within women's reproductive capabilities, and for perpetuating the "myth of motherhood" by portraying birth in art.⁴⁷ In fact, Sjöö was an early critic of essentialism, arguing that the binary organisation of gender difference was a patriarchal construct that did not exist in pre-historic matriarchies. In her first extended writing piece 'The Ancient Religion of the Great Cosmic Mother of All' (1975) Sjöö explained, "The notion in this society of what is 'femininity' and what 'masculinity' is closely linked with rigid heterosexuality and didn't exist in ancient society."⁴⁸ For Sjöö, normative distinctions between men and women, masculinity and femininity emerged with patriarchal religious cosmology that separated spirit from body, heaven from earth and immanence from transcendence. This splitting, argued Sjöö, created

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Parker and Pollock (eds.), *Framing Feminism*; Vincentelli, 'Monica Sjöö'. See also A. Jones, 'The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party', in N. Broude and M. D. Garrard (eds.), *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History after Postmodernism* (London, 2005).

⁴⁷ Sjöö, 'A Woman's Struggle', DM2123/1/87, 1, FAS; See, for example, Heron, 'The Mystique of Motherhood'.

⁴⁸ Sjöö, 'Ancient Religion', DM2123/1/85, 5, FAS.

“false dualities and a division of life into higher and lower categories of spirit and nature which usually goes hand in hand with a symbolism in which spirit is male and nature female.”⁴⁹ For Sjöo, sacralising birth could allow women to reclaim the power of divine creation and confound the Christian formation that abstracts creation to God the father in the sky.

Because the physical and psychical dangers of androcentric religions were the starting point of Sjöo’s feminist intervention, they took centre stage in her various depictions of the Avebury drama. In both her private and public writing about Avebury, she set the scene using her initial impression of the stone circle. “Amazing colossal stones”, began her account published in *Politics of Matriarchy*, “the centre of the Mother Goddess”.⁵⁰ A closer look at the stones, however, revealed signs of violence, “Many of the stones are mutilated... like half a head chopped off”; “gravestone” markers showed where the stones “fell and were buried”.⁵¹ Only in her personal record and in her 1987 book *The Great Cosmic Mother*, co-written with Mor, did Sjöo explicitly name the stones’ tormentor. “The Church”, threatened at the height of the European witch-hunts, wrote Sjöo, was ready to destroy any remnants of the Pagan tradition.⁵² In her book, Sjöo allowed herself space to describe the Christian church’s “long fight against the Avebury stones” in gruesome detail, recounting how they were smashed and exorcised by Christian authorities “with the sign of the cross”, before being “burnt, chipped, mutilated” and finally buried. ⁵³

The matriarchal women in Britain and America who were reading Sjöo’s accounts of Avebury in *Politics of Matriarchy* and *WomanSpirit* magazine would not have needed clarification about the stones’ persecutor. It would have been clear to them that Sjöo was writing Avebury into the story of the Patriarchal Takeover, a narrative device used primarily in the British matriarchy

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Sjöo, ‘An Avebury Experience’, 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Sjöo, ‘Spiral Journey’, DM2123/1/81, 2, FAS; Sjöo and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, pp. 133-137.

⁵³ Sjöo and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, p. 134.

network to explain how patriarchy achieved global dominance. Identifying her own project as part of the matriarchy network's political agenda, Sjöo read Avebury through the lens of the Patriarchal Takeover, painting a vivid picture of matriarchal Britain's "great power, beauty and mystery" through the Avebury stones, prior to their violent destruction by Christians.⁵⁴ This bears striking similarities with the writing projects of other women in the MSG during the 1970s. In *Goddess Shrew* (1977), the London collective provided an overview of the Patriarchal Takeover, explaining that the Palaeolithic and Neolithic eras (25,000 – 5,000 BC) were characterised by the worldwide worship of the Goddess religion. This continued until c. 6,000 – 5,000 BC, they argued, when nomadic warrior tribes from the north, who worshipped a male-God, violently destroyed the matrilinear communities and matriarchal religions of the east Mediterranean and then the Middle East.⁵⁵ Although matriarchal prehistory did not occupy as prominent a place in the American feminist spirituality movement, *WomanSpirit* magazine included poems about ancient women's lives as well as research on matriarchal symbolism and organisation.⁵⁶

Sjöo deployed other rhetorical devices commonly used in the transnational matriarchy network. In 'An Avebury Experience' and 'Trip to Avebury', she wrote about the damage and destruction done to the standing stones as if they were living bodies: operated upon, killed and then buried. By placing the destruction of the anthropomorphic stones in the context of the European witch trials, Sjöo invited her feminist readers to imagine the pain and suffering endured by accused women at the hands of their Christian torturers. In *The Great Cosmic Mother*, Sjöo made this comparison clear, "This was at the height of the witch-hunts, and these

⁵⁴ Sjöo, 'Spiral Journey', DM2123/1/81, 2, FAS.

⁵⁵ 'Matriarchy v Patriarchy', DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS; E. Moore, 'Patriarchal Takeover – Europe & the Middle East', *Politics of Matriarchy*, 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

⁵⁶ max xarai, 'Believe in Woman's Ways', *WomanSpirit*, 1 (Autumn Equinox, 1974); M. Dyak, 'Matriarchies and Mother Goddesses of the Indians of North and South America', *WomanSpirit*, 8 (Summer Solstice, 1976); Tovah Rainsong, 'Symbols of Matriarchy', *WomanSpirit*, 4 (Summer Solstice, 1975).

ritual stones of the Goddess – just like her priestesses, the witches – were actually ‘tortured’ and ‘exorcised’ by Christian priests”.⁵⁷ The witch trials were a source of deep emotional pain for Sjöo, and she regularly drew comparisons between the persecution of witches and second-wave feminists in her writing. “I am like a present day witch”, Sjöo told art historian Vincentelli in 1987 “To them what I am doing is blasphemy. To me the whole Christian thing is blasphemous”.⁵⁸ The echoes of this personal pain would later provide justification for Sjöo and her friends’ demonstration in Bristol Cathedral in 1993, during which the women sang and drummed to the popular folk song ‘Burning Times’ while asking the church to apologise for the mass murder of innocent women.⁵⁹

Just like the MSG’s research into ancient matriarchies, Sjöo’s spiritual experience at Avebury worked as a method of feminist knowledge making. This had important political implications, as matriarchal feminists believed that following the Takeover, the patriarchs had deliberately tried to erase women’s sacred history.⁶⁰ When Sjöo arrived at Avebury in February 1978, she had already read the radical geography of Michael Dames, who had been the first to challenge dominant anthropological, historical and archaeological interpretations of Silbury Hill as a royal tomb. The tropes of “kingship, personal property and individual glory”, he argued in *The Silbury Treasure*, simply did not apply to Neolithic Britain.⁶¹ Rather, Dames claimed that Silbury Hill was the geographical centre of Goddess religion in Neolithic Britain, reading the mound as a depiction of the pregnant belly of the Mother carved directly into the landscape. In her Avebury stories, Sjöo brought Dames’ reading of the sacred site into vivid, contemporary reality through her spiritual experience, while also reclaiming Dames’ Avebury for spiritual feminist myth-making purposes. After Sjöo published ‘An Avebury Experience’ in *Politics of*

⁵⁷ Sjöo and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, p. 134.

⁵⁸ Vincentelli, ‘Monica Sjöo’, p. 84.

⁵⁹ Sjöo, ‘Breaking the Tabu’, FL.

⁶⁰ Long, ‘Old Testament’, DM2123/5/6, 1a, FAS; Moore, ‘Patriarchal Takeover’, 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

⁶¹ Dames, *The Silbury Treasure*, p. 11.

Matriarchy, other women in the matriarchy network started reading Dames and using his ideas a starting point for similar accounts. In the first edition of the MRRN's journal, *Arachne*, Angela Solstice wove Dames' interpretation of Avebury into a radical rereading of women's fertility, a contemporary political project that was important to her. As Solstice concluded in her piece:

If the Goddess was thought of as the creator of the Universe, as giver of all life, as the inventor of agriculture, of the alphabet and of writing, as the source of all intelligence as the dispenser of justice and wisdom and as a whole host of other images as there is ample evidence she was, then fertility meant a great deal more than this limited male view of today!⁶²

The way Sjöö and the women of the matriarchy network dealt with Avebury was an example of the kind of feminist reversal that permeated their writing and activism. Deploying her characteristically dark sense of humour, Sjöö noted the presence of a bright red lorry at the foot of Silbury Hill that had the name Peter Lord in big letters on the side. “*Lord... oh no...*” she wrote in ‘An Avebury Experience’, “is there nowhere, not even in Her presence when one is allowed to forget the Patriarchy and its deadly godhead”.⁶³ Although playful and, I think, intended to be humorous, Sjöö drew attention to the word “Lord” to make profane a traditionally innocuous object. In doing so, she reminded the reader of the ubiquity of patriarchal propaganda.

God, for Sjöö, was the androcentric symbol from which patriarchal abuses drew their justification and meaning, the projection into the sky of the “earthly patriarch father, owner of cattle, women and children”, destroyer of all life, “animal, vegetable and human”.⁶⁴ In *Towards*

⁶² Angela, ‘Ancient Avebury’, FL.

⁶³ Sjöö, ‘An Avebury Experience’, 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

⁶⁴ Sjöö, ‘A Woman’s Struggle’, DM2123/1/87, 1, FAS.

a Feminist Revolutionary Art, Sjöo explained that Christianity did not just psychologically subjugate women by convincing them of their biological inferiority, it also underpinned exploitative economic arrangements of “land-ownership, power, and economic privilege”.⁶⁵ These, Sjöo argued, were what actually lay behind the exploitation of women and minorities. In *The Great Cosmic Mother*, Sjöo described the links she observed between Christianity and economic oppression, “In Europe, at first, Christianity was a religion of the elite”, an “affectation of feudal lords and later kings”.⁶⁶ She applied this thesis to the fate of the Avebury stones, connecting Christianity with private ownership and the enclosure of common land:

The institution of private property finally brought about the end of the sacred stones, with the enclosure of common land by private, wealthy farmers. The emergence of the landless proletariat and the modern notion of individual progress at the expense of the community fittingly coincided with the fall of the Great Mother at Avebury.⁶⁷

These passages reveal Sjöo’s engagement with debates about land rights that were taking place in the anarchist movement in Britain during the 1970s and 1980s. Although she refused to join left-wing movements that marginalised feminist issues, Sjöo was sympathetic to anarcha-feminist groups who often took a distinctly spiritual approach to their politics.⁶⁸ In the same way that Sjöo reclaimed ancient sites for the Goddess, the Cambridge Anarchists used indigenous Indian traditions and Aboriginal beliefs to make arguments about land rights, quoting a Blackfoot Indian chief in their newsletter, “[The land] was put here for us by the Great Spirit and we cannot sell it because it does not belong to us”.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Sjöo and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, p. 298.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 134.

⁶⁸ See, for example, *Anarchist Women’s Newsletter*, c. 1995, DM2123/1/83, 5, FAS.

⁶⁹ ‘Land Rights’, *Fighting Times: The Newsletter of Cambridge Anarchists*, 4 (1995), DM2123/1/83, 5, FAS; *Spunk Library*, accessed 1 September 2019, <http://www.spunk.org/texts/pubs/ft/sp001286.txt>.

Pre-empting the symbolism deployed during the women's protest at Greenham Common, Sjöö repeatedly referred to the barbed wire fencing surrounding Silbury Hill as a way of drawing attention to the wrongful enclosure of common land.⁷⁰ In the prose poem, 'An Avebury Experience' Sjöö used the barbed wire as a narrative device to build tension as the story reaches its climax. As the reality of Silbury Hill's enclosure sank in, Sjöö referred to herself as a "hunted female animal", equally as trapped by patriarchal possession and abuse of the land:

...we plod across ploughed, muddy fields... having to cross eternally barbed-wire fence... Gripped by panic, unable to either remain or to cross over the ugly, and now seeming *so* offensive, fences... Her womb surrounded by water is everywhere shut off by treble-layers of barbed-wire fences."⁷¹

The fences also symbolised what Sjöö perceived as the deliberate separation of women from their sacred history, which she was only able to overcome by reconnecting with the physical environment, "I clutch a stone in my hand for safety".⁷² It is possible, then, to read Sjöö's Avebury story as a reworking of myths of the commons that emerged from debates about enclosure during the nineteenth century.⁷³ Taking a distinctly spiritual approach to these myths, both Sjöö and the Cambridge anarchy-feminists invoked ancient religions to argue that common land had timeless and universal primacy.

In each account of Avebury, Sjöö described her experience of the earth in visceral and bodily terms. In both 'A Trip to Avebury' and 'An Avebury Experience' she recalled scrambling through "marshlands and wilderness", her feet sinking down into the muddy fields as her longing to reach Silbury Hill intensified.⁷⁴ In *Spiral Journey*, she wrote of how the grass felt

⁷⁰ Sjöö, 'An Avebury Experience', 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Sjöö, 'Spiral Journey', DM2123/1/81, 2, FAS; Sjöö, 'An Avebury Experience', 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

⁷³ K. Navickas, 'Common Land and Common Misconceptions', *A History of Public Space*, 10 February 2018, accessed 1 September 2019, <http://historyofpublicspace.uk/2018/02/10/common-land-and-common-misconceptions/>.

⁷⁴ Sjöö, 'A Trip to Avebury'; Sjöö, 'An Avebury Experience', 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

between her fingers, comparing it to “matted and unkempt” hair.⁷⁵ Reconnecting with the land in this way allowed Sjöö to reclaim it without imposing traditional forms of possession or enclosure. What’s more, Sjöö’s metaphor of Silbury Hill as a woman’s body provided the backdrop for the climax of the story. Standing on the Hill, surrounded by the sights and sounds of patriarchal technology and violence, Sjöö reached the conclusion that would form the basis of her eco-feminist theorising: “I now understand what Mother Earth means”, she wrote, “something so enormous, powerful... also so painful in my own woman’s body which is like Hers... violent but gentle... powerful but vulnerable...”.⁷⁶ For the first time in her writing, Sjöö made the direct connection between the Earth (the Cosmic Mother) and her own woman’s body.

In this way, Sjöö pre-empted the formative work by American eco-feminist theorists, such as Susan Griffin, whose book *Woman and Nature* was published in Britain in 1984. Like Sjöö, Griffin argued that women and the earth were identically oppressed by patriarchy, both subjugated to the realm of immanence and embodiment.⁷⁷ Because of this, Sjöö felt able to speak for Mother Earth on top of Silbury Hill, “I am overtaken with a sudden & enormous grief... the Mother... the entire Mound cries through me”.⁷⁸ In ‘An Avebury Experience’, Sjöö channelled the psychic torture undergone by the Cosmic Mother at the sensory onslaught of patriarchal dominance in Avebury: the cars on the road below, the angry man shouting, the sound of warplanes, and the military base nearby. Once again, Sjöö deployed a feminist reversal, drawing attention to the profanity of patriarchal machinery against the sacrality of the Mother’s nature. This feminist rhetorical device would have significant application for the

⁷⁵ Sjöö, ‘Spiral Journey’, DM2123/1/81, 2, FAS.

⁷⁶ Sjöö, ‘An Avebury Experience’, 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

⁷⁷ Griffin, *Woman and Nature*.

⁷⁸ Sjöö, ‘Spiral Journey’, DM2123/1/81, 2, FAS.

women of Greenham Common who used precisely the same techniques to highlight the patriarchal profanity of nuclear warfare and military structures.⁷⁹

As I explained above, childbirth and mothering were central to Sjöö's feminism and took on new urgency following her initiation into ecological politics on Silbury Hill. Viewed in tandem with her first spiritual experience during the home birth of her second son Toivo in 1961, the Silbury Hill revelation reads as the climax of Sjöö's theorising on women's sacrality and reproductive capabilities. Sjöö described both as birth experiences; however while the birth of her son was ecstatic and powerful, her experiences on Silbury Hill made her feel "vulnerable" and exposed, bringing into focus her belief that patriarchy makes childbirth dangerous for women.⁸⁰ In the final two paragraphs of 'An Avebury Experience', however, Sjöö turned the vulnerable birth symbolism on its head, describing her panicked retreat into West Kennet long barrow, a tomb-like Neolithic structure dug into a chalk ridge nearby. Continuing the landscape-as-female-body metaphor, Sjöö described the long barrow as the Cosmic Mother's "underground womb", the location of the Goddess' generative powers:

Feeling infinitely "higher" within the tomb/temple than when re-entering the world outside. Strange and powerful vibrations... here no feeling of sorrow and vulnerability... this is the place of the Winter/ Death Goddess and we are here in Her season, and within her realism. We are welcome...⁸¹

In a metaphor for her broader political project, Sjöö's experiences in the West Kennet womb symbolised her belief that feminists should return to the ancient Goddess religion as a way of finding sanctuary in contemporary patriarchal society.

⁷⁹ Laware, 'Circling the Missiles'; Feigenbaum, 'From Cyborg Feminism to Drone Feminism'; Stallybrass and White, *Politics and Poetics*.

⁸⁰ Sjöö, 'A Woman's Struggle', DM2123/1/87, 1, FAS.

⁸¹ Sjöö, 'An Avebury Experience', 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

However, for Sjöo, returning to the Mother's womb was not about retreating from the feminist project. Rather, it meant finding a geographical and psychic space within which to think into being new feminist worldviews and identities. Like the broader matriarchy network, Sjöo believed that alternative societal models could be derived from a radical rereading of the past and women's religious history. Just as she had brought Dames' matriarchal Avebury into contemporary resonance through her spiritual experience, Sjöo also legitimised the matriarchal project by making extra-natural contact with ancient women. Writing in 'An Avebury Experience', she described feeling "transported back in time" once she reached the foot of Silbury Hill, suddenly entering into communication not only with the Cosmic Mother but also with women across time and space.⁸² By queering linear time in this way, Sjöo was able to enter into sympathetic participation with women's distant experiences and gain knowledge about what she called the universal "woman culture".⁸³ In another example of cosmic feminist knowledge making, then, Sjöo denied patriarchal epistemology that failed to take into account information gleaned from the numinous or reverie.

Remembering, reconstructing and revising lost knowledge about woman culture was central to Sjöo's political project. For her, gaining knowledge about nature, the spirit, healing, magic, sexuality and creativity (categories that were not viewed as distinct) was a transgressive act, symbolising power out of patriarchy's control. In the following section, I assess the ways in which spiritual feminists, including Sjöo, experimented with a radical methodology of the archive from the late 1970s, which sought to reclaim and organise women's sacral knowledge in spite of western scientific attempts to make it invalid. The section below uses Monica Sjöo's Papers (MSP), which are currently held at FAS, as a case study to show how spiritual feminists sought to conceive of knowledge preservation differently. I also show how their radical

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ N. Vest, 'Is Reverie to Be Trusted? The Imaginal and the Work of Marija Gimbutas', *Feminist Theology*, 13 (2005). *ibid.*

configuration was compromised, and eventually abandoned, in the context of growing institutionalisation, the involvement of charities, local councils and universities. Because of this, the spiritual feminist archive was rendered into traditional terms, a process that made invisible the spirituality of Sjöö, the women's movement and mid-century political cultures more broadly.

Monica Sjöö's Archive

Monica Sjöö began archiving her papers at a time when spiritual feminists were imagining new ways of preserving the information they were uncovering about women's sacred history. In 1977, matriarchal feminist Jean Freer founded the Feminist Archive (FA) in her living room with help from her local women's group. Viewing archiving as part of the feminist consciousness-raising project, Freer wanted to devise a radical methodology that would "help womyn restructure knowledge to strengthen our wynn's culture and to further undermine the patriarchy".⁸⁴ During the 1980s, she and some women from the matriarchy network devised a classification system designed to foreground, rather than marginalise, women's sacral and embodied experiences. However, endemic lack of funding and space, and the restrictive conditions imposed by the archive's charity status and the universities that housed it meant that this radical spiritual feminist vision was never realised.⁸⁵ Because of this, there is tension between Sjöö's own radical archiving project in the years before her death and the construction of her posthumous archive that frames her for a contemporary (feminist) audience. In the following, I locate one of the best known feminist archives in Britain within the history of the

⁸⁴ J. Freer, 'Feminist Archive: Explanatory Notes by the Founder', July 1986, Feminist Archive Records, DM2123/1/70, FAS.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

Goddess movement. I also review the processes through which the spiritual feminist ideology, which was central to the archive's establishment, came to be marginalised.

The idea of creating a feminist archive emerged from a small, rural women's liberation group in Shepton Mallet, just outside Glastonbury, during the winter of 1977.⁸⁶ Group members, including Jean Freer and the novelist Fay Weldon, wanted to establish a "prototype" regional repository that would comprehensively document the activities of feminists in the south west, as well as collect materials from the broader national and international second wave.⁸⁷ The need, as they perceived it, was so great because only the WRRC and the Fawcett Library in London had anything resembling a feminist archive, although the focus of the WRRC was less on preservation and more on supporting contemporary feminist concerns, and the Fawcett Library's collection mainly consisted of papers on women's suffrage.⁸⁸ The FA was officially founded in 1978, growing out of Weldon's personal collection of feminist materials that she had been storing in her attic, eventually including newsletters, conference papers, posters and information leaflets donated by local women's groups.⁸⁹ In time, the FA came to intersect with the establishment of women's studies in British universities, requesting tape recordings of women's studies lectures and course materials from students, as well as advertising in the journals of the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE) and the Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL).⁹⁰

Californian Freer (who sometimes used the pseudonym Carol Lee) took the lead in bringing the FA into being. Moving to Britain in time for the first Women's Liberation march in London

⁸⁶ 'History by the boxful with a feminist touch', *Bath and West Evening Chronicle*, 8 February 1980, DM2123/1/70, FAS.

⁸⁷ Letter from Carol Lee to the Southwest Sisters, undated, DM2123/1/70, FAS.

⁸⁸ *Friends of the Feminist Archive Newsletter*, 2 (June, 1979), DM2123/1/70, FAS.

⁸⁹ Letter to the Southwest Sisters, DM2123/1/70, FAS; *Feminist Archive Bulletin*, 3 (October, 1984), DM2123/1/70, FAS; 'Women Come Out of the Attic', *The Evening Post*, 14 December 1988, DM2123/1/70, FAS; 'The Women's Room', *Observer Colour Supplement*, 16 May 1982, DM2123/1/70, FAS; Honeybourne and Singer, *Personal Histories of the Second Wave*, p. 92.

⁹⁰ Letter to the Southwest Sisters, DM2123/1/70, FAS; *Friends of the Feminist Archive Newsletter*, 2 (June, 1979), DM2123/1/70, FAS.

in 1971, Freer had joined the first radical feminist group in the capital soon after, which included other American expatriates like Lilian Mohin and Sheila Shulman.⁹¹ By the late 1970s, Freer had become a committed Goddess feminist and was in regular communication with the matriarchy network; however, her interest in spiritual feminism pre-dated the MSG. In 1974, Zsuzsanna Budapest herself had initiated Freer into separatist Dianic Wicca at her coven in Los Angeles.⁹² On her return to Britain, Freer became an important conduit between the American and British Goddess movements, communicating Budapest's separatist witchcraft to the women of the MRRN via her Grove Group in the early 1980s.⁹³ An uncompromising separatist feminist, Freer eventually withdrew her support of the FA over a series of challenges to her women-only archiving policy, and her growing concerns that the archive was becoming only "loosely feminist".⁹⁴ Freer eventually resigned as a trustee of the FA in 1994 after minimal involvement for several years.⁹⁵

Thanks to Freer's efforts, and the lack of feminist archive provisions elsewhere, the FA grew rapidly under her care. By 1986, the archive took-up 230 feet of shelving and comprised of books, periodicals, and ephemera, including pamphlets, jewellery, postcards and clothing.⁹⁶ However, like other grassroots archives, the FA struggled to find a suitable home, remaining in Freer's living room for two years, before spending eight months of 1980 homeless in a damp coach house in Bath.⁹⁷ Although to Freer's mind it was "politically unacceptable" to house the archive in a university ("most Feminist Archive users and workers feel uncomfortable there"), the substantial collection drifted in and out of higher education institutions throughout the

⁹¹ Feraro, 'The Priestess, the Witch, and the Women's Movement', p. 258.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ *MRRN newsletter*, 2 (December, 1981), FL; *MRRN newsletter*, 34 (Summer Solstice, 1986), FL; *MRRN newsletter*, 47 (1988), FL.

⁹⁴ Letter from Jean Freer to the Feminist Archive Working Group, c. 1984, DM2123/1/70, FAS.

⁹⁵ Feminist Archive Day Book 1993-96, DM2123/1/72, FAS.

⁹⁶ Freer, 'Explanatory Notes by the Founder', DM2123/1/70, FAS.

⁹⁷ 'Feminist Archive Potted Hystory', 30 January 1990, DM2123/1/70, FAS.

1980s and 1990s.⁹⁸ From 1981 to 1988, the FA was stored at the University of Bath, although in cramped conditions that made it hard for readers to visit.⁹⁹ In 1988, specific parts of the collection and duplicates were sent to the University of Bradford where there was a thriving Women's Studies Department and an active grassroots women's movement, while the remaining collection moved to a back room at Trinity Street Library in Bristol.¹⁰⁰ Since 2001, the Bradford material has been housed at the University of Leeds and is now known as the Feminist Archive North (FAN), while the Bristol collection moved to the University of Bristol in 2008, and became the Feminist Archive South (FAS). In the following, I will refer to the archive as the FA before 2008, and FAS after 2008.

Reflecting her involvement with the transnational Goddess movement, Freer wanted the FA to record women's knowledge of their sacred history. "It is my deepest wish", she wrote in 1986 as she was relinquishing custodianship of the archive, "that wherever [the FA] is housed and whomever looks after her, the focus of separatist spirituality expressed primarily as feminist witchcraft will infuse her spirit and provide motivating energy."¹⁰¹ Having originally trained as an education professional, Freer had links with associations and unions of teachers in Britain and was therefore able to pay close attention to developments in women's studies during the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁰² Her own views on feminist epistemology drew heavily from the work of feminist theologian Mary Daly, who had a large impact on the American Goddess movement but whose work was less well known in the British matriarchy network.¹⁰³ Before becoming involved in the MSG, Freer reviewed *Goddess Shrew* and *Menstrual Taboos* in the socialist

⁹⁸ Freer, 'Explanatory Notes by the Founder', DM2123/1/70, FAS.

⁹⁹ G. L. Hudson, 'The Feminist Archive', 24 April 1986, DM2123/1/70, FAS.

¹⁰⁰ 'Bradford Branch of the Feminist Archive Explanatory Notes', 1993, DM2123/1/70, FAS.

¹⁰¹ Freer, 'Explanatory Notes by the Founder', DM2123/1/70, FAS.

¹⁰² 'Jeane Freer's Life Story', accessed 2 September 2019, <http://freer.org/pages/about.htm#Beliefs>.

¹⁰³ Feraro, 'The Priestess, the Witch, and the Women's Movement', p. 262.

feminist journal *Feminist Review*, using Daly to explain why the social sciences had failed to take seriously the plentiful evidence uncovered by the matriarchy network:

... (the) tyranny of methodology hinders new discoveries. It prevents us from raising questions never asked before and from being illumined by ideas that do not fit with pre-established boxes and forms. The worshippers of method have an effective way of handling data that does not fit into the Respectable Categories of Questions and Answers. They simply classify it as non-data, thereby rendering it invisible.¹⁰⁴

For Freer, then, the erasure of women's spirituality was, in part, a problem of naming and categorisation. In her own writing, Freer regularly used Daly-inspired neologisms to deal with the limitations of androcentric language, such as "humun", "hystory", "womon" and "wmyn".¹⁰⁵ Many of these became common currency in Greenham Common newsletters and magazines during the early 1980s while Freer was camping there full-time.¹⁰⁶

In line with Daly's comments on the tyranny of methodology, Freer was keen to devise a system of archival classification that foregrounded women's sacred history. Like the Fawcett Library and the WRRRC, the FA had originally used a system devised by feminist librarian Wendy Davis in 1978 that used women's issues to inform its organisation.¹⁰⁷ Pushing this further, Freer wanted the FA to echo the spiritual feminist imperatives of revising and reversing patriarchal history, providing a new treatise on religion and developing an alternative language for women to describe their experiences. The categorisation system, for Freer, also had to reflect her matriarchal (and radical) feminist desire to reintegrate spirituality into women's everyday lives and activism. Emphasising the consciousness-changing potential of this move,

¹⁰⁴ M. Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (London, 1973), p. 11. Quoted in C. Lee, 'Matriarchy Study Group Papers', *Feminist Review*, 2 (1979), p. 74.

¹⁰⁵ Feraro, 'The Priestess, the Witch, and the Women's Movement', p. 263. J. Freer, 'Raging Women: A Greenham Womon Replies to Breaching the Peace', manuscript, c. 1984, FL.

¹⁰⁶ Freer, 'Raging Women', FL.

¹⁰⁷ 'Classification System', *The Feminist Library*, accessed 2 September 2019, <http://feministlibrary.co.uk/classification-system/>.

Freer wrote that the new classification system would be “based on an attempt to step beyond the bounds of patriarchal language and conceptualisation”, warning FA volunteers to “re-organise your thinking if you haven’t already done so”.¹⁰⁸



Figure 9: Jean Freer in her living room surrounded by Feminist Archive boxes, c. 1979.
Feminist Archive South, University of Bristol.

Developing the new classification system, however, was laborious, complicated and time consuming.¹⁰⁹ Freer and volunteers at the FA painstakingly produced several different drafts of the new system, often hand-written over reams of pages, between 1984 and 1985. In their

¹⁰⁸ Freer, ‘Explanatory Notes by the Founder’, DM2123/1/70, FAS.

¹⁰⁹ ‘Methodological Index: Creation of Classification Scheme – Feminist Archive’, undated, DM2123/1/69, FAS.

third accession bulletin, published in 1984, the seven main “sections” proposed were “cosmology”, “communication”, “healing and divination”, “human society”, “history and politics”, “ecology” and “technology”.¹¹⁰ This system took for granted the reality of matriarchal prehistory, with the “cosmology” section containing materials on matriarchal “practices, ceremonies, rituals & traditions” as well as detailing their destruction by patriarchal religions.¹¹¹ Indeed, the logic of the archive broadly followed the Patriarchal Takeover narrative. Volunteer Lyn Stagg wrote on another draft version of “cosmology” dated April 1985 that the section would begin with “mythology & storytelling” and then lead on to “the later patriarchal ‘religion’”.¹¹² While this in itself did not challenge more traditional narratives of modernisation or development, the women made sure to address hierarchical dualisms in their categorisation. So, while the aspects of “Universal Mother” religion were dealt with in many subsections, “monotheistic patriarchy” was covered in just one. Similarly, in the “communication” section, the volunteers privileged non-institutional ways of knowing over “institutionalised education (schools, colleges etc)”.¹¹³ However, privileging women’s experiences and knowledge in this way sometimes led to problems. Stagg wondered how their system could account for patriarchal medicine in “healing and divination”, scribbling a note on the 1985 draft, “Drugs and institutions doesn’t fit in with this concept but it is a reality we can’t ignore”.¹¹⁴

There is no evidence that Freer’s spiritual feminist classification system was ever put into practice. The high turnover of volunteers at the FA, combined with regular moves and Freer’s declining involvement, made an already large and unwieldy task particularly challenging. Despite this, the spiritual feminist ideology of the FA impressed many women in the patriarchy

¹¹⁰ *Feminist Archive Bulletin*, 3 (October, 1984), DM2123/1/70, FAS.

¹¹¹ ‘Feminist Archive Classification Scheme: A Brief Overview’, 30th April 1985, DM2123/1/69, FAS.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

network, including Monica Sjöo, who shared Freer's commitment to documenting the Goddess movement. Between 1984 and 1985, Sjöo made several substantial donations to the FA, including the exhibition catalogue for her Woman Magic exhibition, leaflets relating to the Women's Abortion and Contraceptive Campaign, which she had founded in Bristol in 1971, and a collection of local, national and international women's movement publications.¹¹⁵ During the 1990s, after the archive had moved to Trinity Street Library in Bristol near to where Sjöo lived, she donated several copies of *From the Flames* as well as leaflets and information about her own Bristol-based feminist spirituality group Ama Mawu. Sjöo was not the only spiritual feminist making donations. Asphodel Long sent several copies of the *MRRN newsletter* and its journal *Arachne*, Vron McIntyre donated the back copies of *From the Flames* in the late 1990s, while, as early as 1979, Kathy Jones donated plans for a feminist healing centre in Glastonbury.¹¹⁶ Women from the broader movement also made donations during the early 1980s, including Amanda Sebestyen, who sent copies of *Spare Rib*, and Sue Bruley who sent socialist feminist campaigning materials.¹¹⁷

Between 1999 and 2000, Sjöo worked with FA volunteer Jane Hargreaves to archive a larger collection of her personal papers that related to feminist activism in Bristol and London. Having developed a close relationship with Hargreaves, Sjöo agreed to bequest the rest of her papers – a substantial collection – to the FA upon her death. When Sjöo's son Toivo dropped off the last of his mother's papers following her death in August 2005 volunteer Liz Bird thought they look jumbled.¹¹⁸ Offering to give shape and meaning to what she perceived to be an incoherent collection of papers, Bird – then a lecturer in women's studies at the University of Bristol –

¹¹⁵ 4... LEAFLETS/PAMPHLETS/ARTICLES, c. 2 July 1983 – 15 December 1993, DM2123/1/72, FAS; Book of accessions, c. 12 May 1984 – 23 May 1985, DM2123/1/72, FAS.

¹¹⁶ Letter to the Feminist Archive from Vron McIntyre, 25 March 1999, DM2123/1/71, FAS; 'Leaflets, Pamphlets and Periodicals', c. 9 September 1979 – 8 December 1981, DM2123/1/72, FAS; Unnamed book of accessions, c. 12 March 1984 – 23 May 1985, DM2123/1/72, FAS.

¹¹⁷ 'Leaflets, Pamphlets and Periodicals', c. 9 September 1978 – 9 December 1981, DM2123/1/72, FAS; 'Leaflets, Pamphlets, Articles', c. 2 July 1983 – 1992, DM2123/1/72, FAS.

¹¹⁸ Correspondence with Liz Bird, 21 March 2018.

took them home, spread them out on her attic floor and began organising. An active member of the Bristol women's movement herself, Bird was familiar with the intellectual networks that informed Sjöo's thinking.¹¹⁹ Her categorisation of MSP, which remained largely unchanged when the collection was catalogued in 2009, reflected her own understanding of feminist and left-wing politics. MSP, as you find it today, is an extremely large collection consisting of eight Bankers Boxes split into five top-level categories, excluding miscellaneous items. They are, "Feminist Politics" (Boxes 82 and 83), "General Politics" (83 and 84), "Spirituality" (85 and 86), "Art" (87), and "Anthropology/Archaeology" (88).

The organisation of MSP runs contrary to how Sjöo viewed her life and politics. As her writing about Avebury shows, Sjöo perceived no distinction between her feminist politics, spirituality, research into matriarchal pre-history or her visual art. Their rigid separation in the archive creates distinctions that Sjöo herself would not have recognised. For example, contained within the two boxes labelled "Spirituality" is various literature from the Goddess movement that Sjöo viewed as central to her political imaginary. This included matriarchy network publications such as the MSG's pamphlets, *Arachne* and the *MRRN newsletter*, as well as journals and leaflets from the international Goddess movement, including the Irish *Matronnist* leaflet and the Florida based *Goddessing* magazine.¹²⁰ Also archived within the "Spirituality" box are newsletters and journals that Bird interpreted as Pagan and therefore apolitical, but which had *a priori* political aims, such as *Pipes of PAN*, the newsletter of PAN and *Wood and Water*, a feminist-oriented, eco-pagan magazine first published in 1979.¹²¹

While the "Spirituality" boxes contain a somewhat disorientating collection of Goddess and Pagan literature, Sjöo's research and writing on the New Age movement, explorations of

¹¹⁹ Honeybourne and Singer, *Personal Histories of the Second Wave*, pp. 4-6.

¹²⁰ DM2123/1/85, 6, FAS; *Official Matronnists Leaflet*, 1980, DM2123/1/86, 7, FAS.

¹²¹ DM2123/1/85, 1, FAS; DM2123/1/86, 1, FAS.



Figure 10: Sjöö (right) and Jane Hargreaves (left) at the Feminist Archive with Sjöö's archive box on the table c. 1999. Feminist Archive South, University of Bristol.

witchcraft and Glastonbury Goddess conference programmes, the boxes on “Feminist Politics” support a more recognisable, uniformly secular history of the feminist second wave. They include oft-cited source materials from the WLM, including documents relating to the first conference at Ruskin College in 1970, as well as specific campaigns on issues including equal rights at work, pornography, motherhood, lesbian and gay rights, and the most prominent regional groups.¹²² The archive also delineates between different strands of feminist politics such as “Anarchist-Feminism” and “Feminism & Socialism”, even though, for Sjöö, this was not a distinction that mattered.¹²³ In this way, to paraphrase Clare Hemmings and art historian Griselda Pollock, the “Feminist Politics” boxes in MSP work to support the “common sense” of feminism’s dominant history.¹²⁴ Bird’s organisation of Sjöö’s archive in line with her own experience of the women’s movement, then, gave value to source material that she viewed as vital parts of the story of feminist politics in late twentieth century Britain.

As scholars of the archival turn have shown, archives are free from neither argument nor ideology.¹²⁵ While we know Sjöö, and many others, did not perceive distinctions between spirituality and politics, or art and feminism, MSP reinstates and normalises them, speaking to the implicit nature with which secular assumptions discipline historical epistemology. In the same way as Ann Laura Stoler observed “colonial common sense” in the logic and habits of Dutch East Indies colonial archives, then, I identify secular common sense in the reasoning and assumptions that lie behind the constitution of MSP.¹²⁶ Because secular logic is often passed off as “common sense” (or a way of lending coherence to a “jumbled” collection of papers),

¹²² DM2123/1/82, files 1, 4, 5, 6, 8 & 12, FAS.

¹²³ DM2123/1/83, file 1 ‘Anarchist-Feminism’ & 2 ‘Feminism & Socialism, Feminism & Religion Feminism & Language’, FAS.

¹²⁴ C. Hemmings and G. Pollock, papers given at Stories that Matter: Feminist Methodology in the Archives conference at the Institute of Contemporary Art, 22 November 2015, accessed 7 September 2019, <https://archive.ica.art/whats-on/stories-matter-feminist-methodologies-archive>.

¹²⁵ B. K. Axel (ed.), *From the Margins: Historical Anthropology and Its Futures* (London, 2002).

¹²⁶ Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, p. 3.

historians often deny its theoretical approach.¹²⁷ In fact, the secular epistemology of FAS has implications for the way historians engage with MSP. The archive makes possible certain claims, or kinds of histories that align with the common sense of feminist history, and support the secular logic of history writing. Precisely because the volunteer archivists who attended to Sjöö's papers have already identified, and stratified, categories for us, researchers can make a choice about which aspects of Sjöö's politics to engage with and which to ignore. A historian of the WLM could order the "Feminist Politics" boxes, for example, and see the rational, secular project they expect. Similarly, art historians can uncover Sjöö's involvement with the early days of the feminist art movement without engaging with her conceptualisation of painting as a form of shamanism.

Maud Perrier and D-M Withers have recently argued that archives are sites of feminist pedagogy precisely because they offer up more excess, untidy material than is commonly used in feminism's dominant history.¹²⁸ While I think they are right, I also believe we should be careful not to invoke the archive as a neutral space: a non-ideological, non-theoretical repository from which the researcher can uncover new realities using unproblematic empirical evidence. Before I read MSP at FAS, I already had a strong sense of what 1970s and 1980s feminist spirituality looked like thanks to my conversations with Cheryl Traffon and Geraldine Charles. By necessity I overdetermined my subject, reading MSP in its entirety, searching for, identifying and pulling out strands of political spirituality. I rethought the categorisation of MSP in Sjöö's terms as I went, imagining ways in which the archival material might be organised differently. In this way, then, I do not believe that the "authority and coherence of dominant feminist stories" will be challenged because MSP exists; neither do I believe its

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 9.

¹²⁸ Perrier and Withers, 'An Archival Feminist Pedagogy'.

existence dethrones secular logic.¹²⁹ Rather, historians should make themselves familiar with the history of the archives they use, and the ideology that informs their practices.

With this in mind, although the artificial arrangement of MSP makes it harder to access Sjöö's spiritual politics, a closer look reveals how the material baulks against its stratification. Papers on Sjöö's Bristol-based feminist spirituality group Ama Mawu are awkwardly split between the "Spirituality" and "Feminist Politics" boxes. *From the Flames* is archived in "Feminist Politics", whereas *Arachne*, the journal of the MRRN, is archived in "Spirituality", even though both were part of the political Goddess movement. In addition to this, Sjöö's authorial voice is present in the archive, woven through annotations on pamphlets, journals and manifestos, as well as present in her own writing, public and private. In this way, Sjöö sought to bring a range of political positions into conversation, including spirituality and feminism, ecological politics, personal experience, alternative women's voices, herstory and critiques of imperialism and anti-Semitism. In the following, I examine Sjöö's marginalia and written work in the archive to look 'outside the boxes' in order to start examining the connections between different categories into which her archive was separated.

In a folder labelled "Research Notes" in Box 85 ("Spirituality") of MSP, there is a copy of psychoanalyst Erich Neumann's essay, 'On the Moon and Matriarchal Consciousness' (1954), sent to Sjöö by her friend Marianna in 1975. In the essay, Neumann lays out his interpretation of the matriarchal thesis advanced by anthropologists and archaeologists like Bachofen in the nineteenth century, adhering to the same traditional gender divisions. Matriarchal consciousness (associated with women, the moon, irrationality, creativity), he explained, was the predecessor of modern Western patriarchal consciousness (associated with men, the sun, reason, logic, science, empiricism). The full seventeen pages of the document are thickly

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 355.

annotated by Sjöö. On the first page, she ridiculed Neumann's grandiose claims, underlining his term "patriarchal accent" and writing beneath "prick consciousness".¹³⁰ Three pages further in, under a paragraph that seeks to explain the assumed association between women and the moon, Sjöö subjected Neumann to feminist critique, "Male wish & phantasy about women's dreaming & receptivity – in complete contradiction to women's actual lives & activities".¹³¹ At the bottom of the same page, exasperated by Neumann's reductive conflation of women and nature, Sjöö wrote, "We are part of nature, we are influenced by the moon & cosmic vibrations & must recognise this & live with not against as men have tried to do which is death".¹³² Two pages later, following Neumann's discussion of the cosmic-mythological realm, Sjöö wrote, "why assume there is a contradiction in listening to one Inner wisdom & thinking consciously?"¹³³

This densely annotated copy of Neumann's essay is representative of the kind of marginalia Sjöö left on many of the documents in her archive. On photocopied articles and book chapters, journals and magazines, newspaper cuttings and website print-outs, Sjöö's distinctive loopy handwriting fills the margins and weaves between lines of text. In addition, vertical lines, stars and crosses score page edges, select words and sometimes full sentences are gone over and over in pen to make them stand out from the page. Her comments include criticisms, affirmations and cross-references to other texts ("See [Robert] Graves on this"; "See 'Women in Agriculture' pages 128 – 129"), suggesting that Sjöö was engaged in a radical programme of reading in preparation for her various writing projects.¹³⁴ Some documents, like the Neumann essay, are annotated in a mixture of blue biro, black fountain pen and pencil showing

¹³⁰ Annotated copy of E. Neumann, 'On the Moon and Matriarchal Consciousness', trans. H. Nagel, *The Analytical Psychology Club of New York*, Spring, 1954, DM2123/1/85, 5, FAS.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Neumann, 'On the Moon and Matriarchal Consciousness', DM2123/1/85, 5, FAS; Notes on pamphlet advertising Mary Daly's book *Outercourse* and book signing event, 20 November 1992, DM2123/1/83, 7, FAS.

that Sjöo returned to some documents repeatedly, making new connections and formulating new thoughts.

In this way, Sjöo's spidery handwriting wove webs between different modes of political engagement usually treated as discrete. One of the most familiar ways in which this plays out in MSP are documents revealing Sjöo's interrogation of the androcentric Left. Because women were at the centre of Sjöo's revolutionary imagination, she made a point of refusing to join left-wing movements that failed to consider feminist issues. Despite this, Sjöo's archive reveals she did engage with the Left; however, almost always to confront their misogyny. She had endless patience for correcting the publications of radical left-wing movements, particularly anarchist ones, which framed their arguments using language that applied exclusively to men. Where "man" was used to stand in for humanity, Sjöo scribbled it out and replaced it with "woman". When "lord" was used to talk about divinity, Sjöo replaced it with "lady". In this way, Sjöo applied the spiritual feminist critique of androcentric language to the radical Left. Similarly, Sjöo used her spiritual feminist understanding of oppression to critique what she viewed as the narrow aims of the anarchist movement in Britain. On a line of the Anarchist Communist Federation's leaflet entitled 'Aims & Principles' that read "Full emancipation cannot be achieved without the abolition of capitalism", Sjöo added, "and Patriarchy."¹³⁵ At the end of the list of nine principles, Sjöo wrote "women's unpaid work, peasants, indigenous peoples, Mother Earth?"¹³⁶

In other annotations, Sjöo was far more explicit about bringing accusations of misogyny against left-wing groups. In early 1995, she was involved in an increasingly aggressive debate about pornography that was raging between the anarchist newspaper *Freedom*, and the Cambridge Anarchist Group. Two months after they failed to publish Sjöo's letter in support of the

¹³⁵ 'Anarchist Communist Federation: Aims and Principles', undated, DM2123/1/83, 5, FAS.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

Cambridge Anarchists, the *Freedom* bookshop collective used their feature in the newspaper to mock the anti-pornography position. Next to a list of books by pro-pornography writers, the editors included “The Prude Index”, measuring each book out of ten, “of the amount of teeth and tearing of hair likely to be provoked among such unfortunates as the Cambridge ‘Anarchist’ Group, but which well-adjusted individuals can safely ignore”.¹³⁷ In a note, that appears directed at the researcher, Sjöo wrote below this section, “This in Freedom bookshop which has never stocked feminist material!”¹³⁸

Sjöo’s annotations in MSP also reveal the way she brought the realm of the sacred into conversation with contemporary political issues. As I explained above, Sjöo’s socialist politics were grounded in the idea that the patriarchal God justified and gave structure to economic formations that oppressed women. In the margins of a photocopied article from *Connexions* on the impact of globalisation on third world countries and women, Sjöo summarised her belief, writing “God = director of corporation”.¹³⁹ In her reading, Sjöo looked for contemporary alternative economic arrangements. In the pacifist magazine *Peace News*, she annotated an article by Saswati Roy entitled, ‘Economic Empowerment and Tribal Women in India’ (2000). Roy’s description of the lives of tribal women living in Orissa (now Odisha) on the Bay of Bengal matched described Sjöo’s own understanding of woman-culture and nature religion, “integrally linked to the forest, which has been their source of food, fodder and wood for fuel. They worship nature and in sickness collect medicinal herbs from the forest.”¹⁴⁰ Once again invoking the matriarchal metanarrative, Sjöo marked out the passages where Roy described the matriarchal tribe’s destruction by patriarchy, “The western model of ‘modernization’, a development ideology pursued in India since independence in 1947, has ruthlessly damaged

¹³⁷ *Freedom*, 25 March 1995, DM2123/1/83, 5, FAS.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Annotated copy of ‘Fallacies of a New World Order’, *Connexions*, 44 (1994), DM2123/1/82, 15, FAS.

¹⁴⁰ Annotated copy of S. Roy, ‘Economic Empowerment and Tribal Women in India’, *Peace News* (June – August, 2000), DM2123/1/83, 7, FAS.

and destroyed vast tracts of forest in the interests of larger development projects.”¹⁴¹ In this way, Sjöö brought the anarchist politics of land rights, anti-technology, anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism into conversation with matriarchal politics.

One of the most striking ways in which MSP mismanages Sjöö’s politics is in its treatment of the weighty research project she undertook in preparation for her book *New Age and Armageddon* (1992). Over the course of five years, Sjöö collected and annotated literature on what she perceived to be the worst kinds of patriarchal spirituality, such as the Findhorn Foundation, Theosophy, the conspiracies of David Icke, the UFO movement, Erhard Seminars Training (est) as well as death and near-death studies, which she felt had so abused her during her son Sean’s terminal illness. In MSP’s two “Spirituality” boxes, this material is arranged, misleadingly, alongside the Goddess and Pagan literature that Sjöö felt did represent her political spirituality. Because literature on the patriarchal New Age takes up the majority of space in the two boxes, Sjöö’s spiritual politics are made to look like one marginal aspect of the ‘mainstream’ androcentric New Age. What’s more, assigned to the “Spirituality” boxes, the deeply political objectives of Sjöö’s writing about the New Age are downplayed. As I explained in the previous chapter, Sjöö’s book *New Age and Armageddon*, as well as her writing around this subject during the 1980s, was intended to challenge the patriarchal, capitalist, right-wing alternative spirituality movement that sought to subsume left-wing political projects. Her annotations of New Age literature in MSP reveal that Sjöö was trying to draw out the anti-Semitic and imperialist ideology behind key source material, such as Alice Bailey’s writings, on which Sjöö wrote, “Her ‘solution’ to ‘The Jewish problem’ is for Jewish people to assimilate into the dominant culture wherever they live. In other words, when there is no longer a Jewish culture there is no ‘Jewish problem’!”¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Institute for Planetary Synthesis, ‘The total challenge of humanity on earth’, DM2123/1/86, 5, FAS.

Examples of Sjöö's written work are also archived in MSP. By producing her own political position statements that ranged from essays, chapters, pamphlets and books, Sjöö reworked her reading for different (largely feminist) audiences. One of her earliest writing projects was an essay called, 'A Woman's Struggle to Creating Feminist Images' that was published in the first edition of her zine *Towards a Revolutionary Feminist Art* to which artists Liz Moore (of the MSG) and Ann Berg also contributed. The zine preceded the Woman Power exhibition at the Swiss Cottage library in 1973, and included an 'Arts Manifesto' by Sjöö and Berg that foregrounded women as the first oppressed and argued in favour of figurative political painting.¹⁴³ In the essay, Sjöö critiqued American feminist writers such as Shulamith Firestone, who argued in *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) that women should eliminate their role as creators of children, using science to devise a way of reproduction outside the uterus.¹⁴⁴ Drawing on her own research into matriarchal societies that work with, not against nature, Sjöö wrote, "The concept of test tube babies was created by male scientists and it sure is a one-sex world that is envisaged... don't forget that science and technology are almost entirely in men's hands as well as serving capitalistic interests solely".¹⁴⁵ Sjöö therefore used spiritual feminism to critique the perspectives of secular feminists who, she believed, reinforced patriarchal technology of oppression.

One of Sjöö's formative pieces of writing was her pamphlet 'The Ancient Religion of the Great Cosmic Mother of All' in which she used spiritual feminist politics to interrogate key socialist texts. The pamphlet started life as a talk given by Sjöö at the Workers Educational Association (WEA) in Birmingham in 1975. In its extended form, Sjöö sought to explain why researching "ancient women cultures in the matriarchal societies of the past" were central to her politics.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ M. Sjöö and A. Berg 'Arts Manifesto', in Sjöö, Moore and Berg, *Towards a Revolutionary Feminist Art*, DM2123/1/87, 1, FAS.

¹⁴⁴ S. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (London, 1971), p. 238.

¹⁴⁵ Sjöö, 'A Woman's Struggle', DM2123/1/87, 1, FAS.

¹⁴⁶ Sjöö, 'The Ancient Religion', DM2123/1/85, 5, FAS.

Sjöo began with an analysis of Marx and Engels, who were important to her early political development. She argued that, even though both Marx and Engels discussed matriarchy as an ancient form of communism, they performed the same abstraction as patriarchal-capitalists, by separating “economic/productive development from “magico/religious/sexual development”.¹⁴⁷ Central to socialist thinking, argued Sjöo, was the assumption that the history of human endeavour was centred on production, and that mysticism and religiosity have always been extraneous. In this way, stated Sjöo, Marxist politics rehearse patriarchal dualisms that, “split production from religion, science from magic, medicine from herbal knowledge, sexuality from the sacred, art from craft, astronomy from astrology, language from poetry and to place specialised knowledge in the hands of a privileged, male elite”.¹⁴⁸

Since the movement began, Sjöo had sought to bring her spiritual politics to bear on the WLM. In 1972, she wrote an essay for Michelene Wandor’s edited collection, *The Body Politic*, intended to provide a record of the impact of the Ruskin Conference in 1970, which Sjöo had also attended.¹⁴⁹ Three years before MSG had formed, Sjöo’s article for Wandor tied the contemporary second-wave feminist issue of reproductive rights with ideas from matriarchal pre-history. In her essay, entitled ‘A Woman’s Rights over Her Own Body’, Sjöo recovered ancient Herstory in order to challenge contemporary ideas about contraception:

It is important to realise that men’s control over women’s fertility has not always existed and that it is in fact a relatively recent development, since in ancient and primitive societies women were always in charge of the knowledge of contraception, abortion, midwifery. Women have in all ages sought to limit their pregnancies. The first

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ See DM2123/1/82, 1, FAS.

known medical text, an Egyptian papyrus dating back to nearly 2000 BC, contains prescriptions for contraceptive substances to be inserted into the vagina.¹⁵⁰

In this way, Sjöö anticipated the central problematic of the MSG, foregrounding the impact of the patriarchal Christian tradition on attitudes to women in contemporary society:

The Christian religion is centred around an almighty Father-god, his son and the son's non-sexual virgin-mother. The Christian god was serviced by celibate male priests to whom the woman was the creation of the 'devil'. She alone represented sexuality, her sexual organs were fearsome and unclean, and birth was disgusting and unholy.¹⁵¹

In both her annotations and writing, Sjöö broke down the normative categories that frame her life and work in MSP. In the section that follows, I push this analysis further, questioning the extent to which the mainstream of the WLM was indeed as committed to rational politics as it appears. I compare feminists' accounts of coming to consciousness with Sjöö's distinctly spiritual life-writing to show that, for both, matters of the psyche were central to building new feminist identities and communities. While secular feminists did not describe their experience in the language of the spirit, their consciousness-raising work nevertheless involved the imaginal and emotions as way of interpreting politics outside the androcentric Left.

Spiritual Quest in Feminist Confessional Memoirs

Like other second-wave feminists, Monica Sjöö insisted upon the centrality of personal experience to her political project, viewing her own embodied reality as a source for women's sacral herstory. In much of her writing, Sjöö incorporated autobiographical encounters,

¹⁵⁰ Sjöö, 'A Woman's Rights', p. 181.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 182-183.

eventually going on to write lengthy accounts of her life in the early 2000s.¹⁵² Sjöo's life-writing was a product of the same political imperatives that inspired WLM activists to reflect upon their personal experiences of feminist activism in the 1980s and 1990s, producing a new genre of confessional memoir in the process that became a mainstay of publishing houses like Virago and The Women's Press.¹⁵³ These accounts appeared in various forms, including autobiographical non-fiction and semi-autobiographical fiction by prominent feminists such as Sheila Rowbotham, Rosie Boycott, Jill Tweedie, Lorna Sage, Lynne Segal and Ann Oakley, as well as edited collections like Liz Heron's, *Truth, Dare or Promise* (1985), Sara Maitland's *Very Heaven* (1988), Amanda Sebestyen's, '68, '78, '88 (1988) and Michelene Wandor's *Once a Feminist* (1990).¹⁵⁴ In this section, I read these texts outside the realist autobiographical genre in which they are often framed. Although women like Rowbotham and Segal did not explicitly use the language of spiritual transformation in their writing about the women's movement, they nevertheless engaged seriously with the workings of imagination, dream, fantasy and myth in their reflections on the coming to consciousness moment. Paying attention to these non-material expressions of politics answers Joan Scott's call to take seriously the workings of passion and fantasy in the development of modern feminist political cultures, as well as blurring the distinction between secular and spiritual feminist politics.¹⁵⁵

My starting point for reading feminist confessional memoirs differently comes from a statement made by socialist feminist Lynne Segal as she was reflecting on the process of writing her own memoir, *Making Trouble* (2007). Looking back upon the genealogy of women's autobiographical writing, Segal argued that late twentieth-century feminist memoirs

¹⁵² Sjöo, 'My Life Story', DM2123/1/81, 4, FAS.

¹⁵³ R. Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (London, 1989), p. 15.

¹⁵⁴ Rowbotham, *Promise of a Dream*; R. Boycott, *A Nice Girl Like Me: A Story of the Seventies* (London, 1984); Segal, *Making Trouble*; J. Tweedie, *In the Name of Love* (London, 1979); A. Oakley, *Taking It Like a Woman* (London, 1984); L. Heron (ed.), *Truth, Dare or Promise: Girls Growing up in the 50s* (London, 1985); S. Maitland (ed.), *Very Heaven: Looking Back at the 1960's* (London, 1988); Sebestyen (ed.), '68, '78, '88; Wandor (ed.), *Once a Feminist*; Rowbotham, *Dreams and Dilemmas*.

¹⁵⁵ Scott, *Fantasy*; Scott, 'Gender'.

had something in common with women's spiritual life-writing. "When those early Seventies feminists later recalled the impact of feminism on their lives," Segal explained, "there were certain similarities with the spiritual quests of... seventeenth-century scribes".¹⁵⁶ To support her point, Segal quoted Janet Ree in Wandor's edited collection, *Once a Feminist*, who compared coming to feminist consciousness as being in communication with something greater than herself, "You had this feeling of being high, and somehow corporate, part of something, large, public and significant... It was such a turbulent change".¹⁵⁷ Similarly, Sarah Benton, who Segal herself interviewed, said that feminism made previously esoteric knowledge available to her: "Women's liberation suddenly lifted the curtain concealing the big world from us, and oh it was exciting".¹⁵⁸

To be clear, I do not want to suggest that feminists like Ree or Benton were suppressing deeply held institutional religious or spiritual beliefs. Socialist feminists who wrote memoirs during the 1980s and 1990s tended to dismiss the impact of institutional religion on their self-formation, keen to downplay its influence on their lives. Stef Pixner, for example, recalled having dispensed with Christianity as a very young woman growing up in London during the 1950s:

I am decidedly anti-religious... I stand with my eyes open in morning assembly; why is everyone talking to someone who clearly isn't there? In the playground one day I am taunted and called a heathen. It hurts but I'm proud of my difference, my unbelief.¹⁵⁹

Other women inflected their autobiographical formation with gendered narratives of secularisation offered by historians like Callum Brown, who argued that the sexual politics of

¹⁵⁶ L. Segal, 'Who Do You Think You Are? Feminist Memoir Writing', *New Formations*, 67 (2009), pp. 131-132.

¹⁵⁷ J. Ree in Wandor (ed.), *Once a Feminist*, p. 99.

¹⁵⁸ S. Benton in Segal, 'Who Do You Think You Are?', p. 132.

¹⁵⁹ S. Pixner, 'The Oyster and the Shadow', in Heron (ed.), *Truth, Dare or Promise*, p. 88.

the long 1960s and the women's movement contained secularising momentum.¹⁶⁰ Rowbotham, for example, had a profoundly “mystical Methodist” upbringing, and framed her early analysis of economic inequality and social justice in religious terms.¹⁶¹ In echoes of Monica Sjöö, Rowbotham even viewed the high offered by magic mushrooms as a “profound spiritual encounter”.¹⁶² However, exposed to dialectic materialism through the European counterculture of the 1960s, Rowbotham dispensed with mysticism, going on to insist in her book *Hidden From History* (1973) that religion was irrelevant in modern society, despite the impact it had on her own formative years.¹⁶³

Despite Segal, feminist life-writing itself is usually interpreted as a secular form of self-expression. Historian Lyn Abrams has recently interpreted the “expressive revolution” that she claims prompted feminists to reflect upon their self-formation as a secularising moment, emphasising its intersection with the “rise of individualism, secularisation, and a range of counter-cultural values and lifestyles which began to be incorporated into the mainstream”.¹⁶⁴ As I have shown elsewhere, however, what Abrams calls the “expressive revolution” was interpreted by many women as a spiritual act.¹⁶⁵ What's more, an overdetermined secular and rationalist interpretation of feminist autobiographical formation elides the points at which women viewed their politics in extra-material terms. Rather, I want to ask what it means to read feminist confessional memoirs outside imposed historical categories of secularism, reason and rationality. How would it change our histories of the WLM if we took Segal's comments

¹⁶⁰ Brown, *Christian Britain*; Brown, ‘Sex, Religion, and the Single Woman’; Brown, *Becoming Atheist*.

¹⁶¹ Rowbotham, *Promise of a Dream*, p. 28.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁶³ Rowbotham, *Hidden from History*. See also Rowbotham, *Dreams and Dilemmas*.

¹⁶⁴ L. Abrams, ‘Heroes of Their Own Life Stories: Narrating the Female Self in the Feminist Age’, *Cultural and Social History*, 16 (2019), p. 206.

¹⁶⁵ See also historians who have foregrounded the role of imagination and fantasy in twentieth-century formations of the self, M. Houlbrook, “‘A Pin to See the Peepshow’: Culture, Fiction and Selfhood in Edith Thompson's Letters, 1921–1922’, *Past & Present*, 207 (2010); M. T. Saler, *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Pre-History of Virtual Reality* (Oxford, 2012). Also, Trysh Travis' reading of Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple* Travis, *Language of the Heart*, pp. 209-217.

seriously and read feminist confessional memoirs through the lens of the “spiritual quest”? This is particularly important because first-hand accounts are widely used as source material for the WLM.¹⁶⁶

Feminist confessional memoirs were both a product, and an extension, of the personal politics that had informed the early women’s movement. Made manifest in consciousness-raising, the slogan “the personal is political” led women to confront the lived realities of oppression, work together to restore their damaged psyches and envisage a feminist utopic future.¹⁶⁷ When women began writing about their experiences of the women’s movement, their narratives often echoed the consciousness-raising process writ-large. They usually centred upon the moment of coming to consciousness in which the authors realised – usually with the help of their already enlightened sisters – that their problems with self-identity in relation to gender and sexuality were a symptom of male-dominated society, not because of natural codes of feminine behaviour or personal failings. “I learned that none of us live outside ideology”, wrote Sally Alexander in her contribution to *Once a Feminist*, “I was enthralled at that idea. It seemed a revelation! To explain both the limits of one’s own thoughts – how difficult to circumvent cliché – but also the materiality of speech and thought.”¹⁶⁸ To reinforce and foreground this transformative moment, memoirs usually followed a formula of “what life was like before” and “what life is like now”. Jill Tweedie, columnist for *The Guardian’s* Woman’s Page, for example, contrasted her liberated self with what she called her “doll self” in her memoir, *In the Name of Love* (1979).¹⁶⁹

As I showed in Chapter 2, the matriarchy network also had its roots in the personal politics of the 1960s and 1970s. Just like their sisters in the broader women’s movement, 1970s spiritual

¹⁶⁶ Also, see Rees, ‘A Look Back at Anger’.

¹⁶⁷ S. Bruley, ‘Consciousness-Raising in Clapham; Women’s Liberation as “Lived Experience” in South London in the 1970s’, *Women’s History Review*, 22 (2013).

¹⁶⁸ C. Hall in Wandor (ed.), *Once a Feminist*, p. 92.

¹⁶⁹ Tweedie, *In the Name of Love*, pp. 5-7.

feminists held their own consciousness-raising sessions every two weeks on Sunday afternoons in order to think through the emancipatory possibilities of their more cerebral research into ancient woman cultures.¹⁷⁰ Although the consciousness-raising sessions subsided into the 1980s, matriarchal women continued to emphasise self-reflection and inner transformation. Under the leadership of Margaret Roy, Mary Coghill and Pauline Long this was expressed in increasingly spiritual and ritualistic terms. For example, when the MRRN was founded in 1981, Roy began a Psychic Group in London that worked through exercises in American psychoanalyst Diane Mariechild's book *Mother Wit* (1981).¹⁷¹ For the members of the psychic group, personal transformation through blessing and healing rituals aimed to rectify women's self-ignorance in patriarchy. Being in touch with the body-mind-spirit in this way challenged the patriarchal division of these elements, and allowed women to use their own experiences as a resource for personal and social change.

Despite the ways in which both secular and spiritual feminists acknowledged the political potential of inner work, many women in the WLM questioned the validity of personal transformation in the hands of spiritual feminists, arguing that their methods had depoliticising effects. As Karen Lindsey, quoting Pam Macy, argued in *Spare Rib* in 1977, "Spiritualism separates you from the mainstream of struggle... people turn their energies into themselves and each other, instead of fighting out in the world where the oppression is".¹⁷² Sociologists of religion such as Linda Woodhead, Paul Heelas and Brian Wilson have naturalised this critique, reading the emphasis upon personal transformation in new spiritual movements as evidence of narcissism and navel-gazing, especially in women.¹⁷³ Ingrained ideas about the incompatibility between politics and spirituality inform both of these readings. Because spiritual feminists

¹⁷⁰ 'Matriarchy Study Group – 1977 Meetings'.

¹⁷¹ *MRRN newsletter*, 2 (December, 1981), FL; D. Mariechild, *Mother Wit: A Feminist Guide to Psychic Development* (Trumansburg NY, 1981).

¹⁷² Lindsey, 'Feminist Spirituality'.

¹⁷³ Wilson, *Sectarianism*; Heelas and Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*.

framed personal transformation in explicitly mystical terms, and drew upon spiritual methods to achieve their aims, their self-work has been perceived as apolitical, despite the fact that it had the same ideological roots as consciousness-raising. Acknowledged as part of the women's movement, but seen as pushing a non-political programme of "self development", the Goddess movement became a scapegoat onto which feminist anxieties about the political potential of consciousness-raising were projected.¹⁷⁴ This anxiety took the form of a binary that emerged during the 1970s, as Gill Philpott explained in *Spare Rib*, "between 'campaigns' and consciousness raising – between those who felt they should be doing things 'out there' and those who thought it was essential to talk together as women".¹⁷⁵ Ree made the same distinction in her contribution to *Once a Feminist*, between "goddess worship" and consciousness-raising that "was constantly seeking connections with political and social realities, and possibilities".¹⁷⁶

This view overplays the rationality and secularism of mainstream feminist autobiographies. Although rational-seeming, with their emphasis on analysing women's personal issues in the context of gender power relations, women's life-writing also contained revelation, references to the transformative power of the mind, imagination, interconnectedness and visions of the future. In the following I read feminist confessional memoirs against the overtly spiritual life-writing of Monica Sjöö and other matriarchal women, paying attention to their narrative and rhetorical similarities. Like socialist feminists, Sjöö started writing accounts of her life in the 1980s, producing her first explicitly autobiographical reflection in a manuscript entitled *Spiral Journey* that she completed in 1984 but never published. Acknowledging the influence of "the personal is political" Sjöö explained in the introduction to *Spiral Journey* that her life-writing

¹⁷⁴ Lindsey, 'Feminist Spirituality'.

¹⁷⁵ D. Gregory, R. Baldwin, R. Wallsgrove and G. Philpott, 'Consciousness-Raising: Back to Basics', *Spare Rib*, 92 (March, 1980).

¹⁷⁶ J. Ree in Wandor (ed.), *Once a Feminist*, p. 103.

– especially her description of spiritual experiences – was intended to provide context to her political artwork:

I have recently felt an increasing need to compliment this by writing a personal account, a tale weaving together the threads of my own experiences and pilgrimages, following the Earth Spirit on Her paths over a number of years and thereby also telling the background story of where my paintings come from and what inspired them.¹⁷⁷

By the time she began writing lengthy autobiographies in the early 2000s, shortly before her death, Sjöo framed her life story as a (political)-spiritual quest, beginning with the suppressed “nature mysticism” of her mother at the hands of controlling male family members and Stockholm’s urban environment, to meeting the Goddess for the first time in 1961, to protesting the witch trials at Bristol Cathedral in 1993.¹⁷⁸ Each of these spiritual milestones in Sjöo’s life brought with them new political revelations, “I decided there and then that I would dedicate my life to creating paintings that speak of women’s lives, our history and sacredness”.¹⁷⁹

Because Sjöo’s political subjectivity unfolded, primarily, in the cosmic realm, spiritual experiences, such as encountering the Goddess in childbirth or gaining communality with the universal woman culture at Avebury provide the narrative arcs of her life-writing. Each event, for Sjöo, prompted a change in inner perception. Writing of seeing the Goddess for the first time during the birth of her second son Toivo in 1961, Sjöo wrote:

For the first time I experienced the enormous power of my woman’s body, both painful and cosmic and I ‘saw’ in my mind’s eye great luminous masses of blackness and masses of radiant light coming and going. The Goddess of the Universe in her pure energy body. This birth changed my life and set me questioning the patriarchal culture

¹⁷⁷ Sjöo, ‘Spiral Journey’, DM2123/1/81, 2, FAS.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

we live in and its religions that deny the life-creating powers of the mothers and of the Greater Mother.¹⁸⁰

This quotation, taken from the text that accompanied her painting *God Giving Birth*, makes no distinction between the vision of the Goddess and feminist insight. The birth experience, for Sjöo, brought with it an analysis of patriarchal culture in which women's sacred reproductive capabilities are denied or belittled. Sjöo's second spiritual experience at Avebury, which I have described at length above, similarly brought a broader awareness of the destruction of the earth.

While Sjöo's life-writing pivoted around spiritual experiences and visions of the Goddess, secular feminist memoirs centred on the coming to consciousness moment, with both Sjöo and secular feminist using similar techniques to emphasise the moment of transformation. Like Sjöo, secular feminists who were writing retrospective, and therefore synthetic, accounts of their lives emphasised the consciousness-changing moment by drawing particularly sharp distinctions between "who the author was before" and "who the author is now". Although told in a diverse array of ways, according to Segal, "who the author was before" usually involved the trials and constraints of girlhood, falling into a disappointing marriage and, often, lone motherhood after relationships had broken down.¹⁸¹ "I just remember that time as absolutely horrendous. Exhausted, confused, feeling absolutely terrible" wrote Val Charlton, recalling the time just after the birth of her first son.¹⁸² After an unplanned pregnancy aged sixteen, Lorna Sage contemplated jumping out of the window of the hospital.¹⁸³

In feminist confessional memoirs, the oppressions, restrictions, humiliations and crises of life that took place before the coming to consciousness moment were rarely described in purely material terms. More often, they dealt with matters of the psyche: the problem of internal

¹⁸⁰ M. Sjöo, 'God Giving Birth'.

¹⁸¹ Segal, 'Who Do You Think You Are?', pp. 125-126.

¹⁸² V. Charlton in Wandor (ed.), *Once a Feminist*, p. 162.

¹⁸³ L. Sage, *Bad Blood: A Memoir* (London, 2000), pp. 261-263.

perception, for example, crisis of self or sudden recognition of the unconsciousness fantasies and workings of the mind that shaped women's inner and outer worlds.¹⁸⁴ Prior to becoming involved with the women's movement, lawyer Raya Levin believed that she had the same access to the public sphere as her male colleagues; however, after meeting with a women's group, she was shocked to realise that she had been "quite unconsciously" using her femininity to secure her position.¹⁸⁵ Similarly, Dinah Brooke, in a memoir that incorporated creative writing techniques, reflected upon the ways in which women's sense of self was psychologically conditioned:

As you grew up you didn't just grow up in a vacuum. You grew up into a series of expectations. Others people's expectations about you. These are very important... On the whole little girls are given pink baby clothes and little dresses to wear, and little boys blue baby clothes and shorts or trousers.¹⁸⁶

In their memoirs, both Levin and Brooke foregrounded the psychological constraints that entrapped women over economic forms of oppression. For Levin, this involved recognising that she had to emphasise her femininity to succeed in her career while her male colleagues made no such moves. In line with the mantra "the personal is political", Brooke concluded that feminist analysis had to interrogate women and girls' psychological conditioning in order for women to break out of stereotypical modes of womanhood.

In confessional memoirs, then, the feminist transformation was not just seen in terms of physical action or agitation for improved material conditions, but in an alteration of attitude that Goddess feminists interpreted as spiritual. Coote and Campbell acknowledged and explained the centrality of inner transformation in their first-hand account of the women's

¹⁸⁴ S. Alexander 'Review of J. Scott "The Fantasy of Feminist History"', *Psychoanalysis and History*, 17 (2015).

¹⁸⁵ R. Levin in Wandor (ed.), *Once a Feminist*, p. 49.

¹⁸⁶ D. Brook, *ibid.*, pp. 236-237.

movement, “because it was about women’s own existence, rather than about society ‘out there’, there also began a process of self-transformation”.¹⁸⁷ Therefore, when Wandor reflected upon her own experience of consciousness-changing, she explained that “exhilarating, all-embracing feminist politics” reached all “parts of the psyche”.¹⁸⁸ When the consciousness-raising moment came for other memoirists, many described it in ecstatic and revelatory terms. After attending the first WLM conference at Ruskin College in 1970, for example, Ree recalled, “I remember walking home in a daze, as if someone had really hit me with some new perception”.¹⁸⁹ At around the time of the Ford sewing machinists’ strike in 1968, Audrey Wise felt that there was “a kind of consciousness in the air” as if like a spell.¹⁹⁰

Some feminist memoirists expressed this change in internal perception as a struggle to reconnect with their authentic selves, an approach also deployed by Goddess feminists in their spiritual self-work. “What was mum before she was identified as a mum? What was a wife before she was identified as a wife? Those words surely can’t describe their real identity, their true selves, their whole selves”, wrote Brooke, describing the ways in which patriarchy disciplines women into narrow roles.¹⁹¹ Similarly, lamenting the limits of possibility for young women growing up in the 1960s, Sally Alexander told Wandor, “I think now that there was no way to be a woman and to be intelligent and articulate in the sixties”.¹⁹² After attending the Ruskin conference, however, Alexander felt suddenly reconnected with a true sense of self that had been denied by patriarchy, “It helped me find myself... I learned who I was through the women’s liberation movement.”¹⁹³ Following this moment of awakening, many memoirists felt

¹⁸⁷ Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*, p. 7.

¹⁸⁸ Wandor (ed.), *Once a Feminist*, pp. 4-5.

¹⁸⁹ J. Ree in *ibid.*, p. 95.

¹⁹⁰ A. Wise in *ibid.*, p. 201.

¹⁹¹ D. Brooke in *ibid.*, p. 239.

¹⁹² S. Alexander in *ibid.*, p. 85.

¹⁹³ S. Alexander in *ibid.*, p. 91.

themselves and their worlds profoundly altered, their new sense of self totally at odds with accepted social realities. Selma James explained the quest for new realities in *Once a Feminist*:

You record the daily strivings of people for something new; that was a basic part of your job as a Marxist, to document the ways in which reality is not as the State says it is. And you can point to what you record of this subversive reality and say, yes, there is an alternative, and it is striving to emerge; here it is, this is the evidence.¹⁹⁴

In this way, just like their Goddess feminist sisters, memoirists began to see accepted feminine codes as mythical, no longer stable formations but fictive images to be challenged. Public values, institutions and systems of belief suddenly appeared to represent just one way of being among many. Some spiritual feminists referred to this process as recognising and revising “patriarchal magic”, as Jean Freer explained in *Arachne* in relation to patriarchal rewriting of religious history and symbolism, “Patriarchal storytelling, as its history, distorts experience to fit the needs of those seeking unnatural power”. She went on to explain how the dominance of patriarchal magic normalises violence towards women, “Patriarchal mythology glorifies the rape of Persephone by her uncle and tries to teach us that a frightening experience of violent incest is a necessary part of every girl’s transition into adulthood”.¹⁹⁵

The self-work required to recognise the workings of patriarchal indoctrination in feminist confessional memoirs echoed more explicitly spiritual practices of matriarchal women such as Margaret Roy in the early 1980s. Drawing upon broader theorists of feminist therapeutic practice, Roy’s Goddess politics centred on the idea that patriarchy divided women’s psyches into two parts; one sterile brand of traditional femininity that was acceptable in male-dominated

¹⁹⁴ S. James in *ibid.*, pp. 188-189.

¹⁹⁵ J. Freer, ‘Patriarchal Magic’, *Arachne*, 2 (1985), FL.

society, and another wild half that women had to suppress. Embracing the Dark Goddess, for Roy, was a way of reuniting women with their authentic selves:

How well you fear me, you out there. No wonder you pretend I am not here. Because you fear me, I am your Death that haunts you to the end. But I am also your unborn self and it is that you really fear. My fire in you you smother, the unknown depths that deny the lesser self and draw you forward into that great ocean of life which is your only strength.¹⁹⁶

Read in tandem with the spiritual work of Goddess feminists, then, the coming to consciousness process of secular feminists echoed the psychic insight offered by magic and ritual in the Goddess movement.

From the 1970s, the Goddess movement's political project involved visualising alternative feminist futures organised around matriarchal principles. Women like Long and Coghill intended this act as a way of reclaiming "a new and vital expression of our women's power".¹⁹⁷ Secular feminists were just as engaged with the act of visualising, or prophesying, alternative social arrangements with attendant new possibilities for women. Echoing the writing of the MSG from 1970, Wandor referred to the "sheer force of will and passion" that would "build a new society in an image we were outlining as we went along".¹⁹⁸ By working towards a radically altered perspective that called into questions social and political traditions, feminist confessional memoirs can be read as visionary texts. Wandor explained the feminist project in distinctly visionary terms, "you have to imagine some kind of future before you can plan for it".¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁶ Roy, 'Dark Goddess', 7BFR/P/2, 2, TWL.

¹⁹⁷ 'Precise of Workshops/Papers'.

¹⁹⁸ Wandor (ed.), *Once a Feminist*, p. 3.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

In Sjöö's overtly mystical accounts of coming to feminist and ecological consciousness, she described being put into communication with something larger than herself and boundless. In all of her spiritual experiences, Sjöö was placed in divine communality with woman cultures past and present, as well as with non-human entities including the earth itself. Although feminist memoirs ostensibly reflect upon the transformation of subjective consciousness, they also sought to make connection with broader social and political issues. Tweedie, for example, explained:

For the first time I saw myself face to face, recognised myself, realised that I was not my own creation, uniquely formed in special circumstances, but much of a muchness with other women, a fairly standard female product made by a conveyor-belt society. Inner battles, to be fought for myself alone, became outer battles, to be fought alongside the whole female sex. Release, euphoria.²⁰⁰

Tweedie's self-recognition contained two moments. One in which, like Levin and Brooke, she realised that she was the product of psychological indoctrination, a symptom of "conveyor-belt society" that produced "a fairly standard female product". The second part involved Tweedie understanding that "inner battles" could be political, and that they could take place in the realm of community action. Wandor echoed this *Once a Feminist*, writing "the exhilaration of feeling part of a larger group, and the excitement of feeling that one's life as an individual can carry greater purpose and meaning".²⁰¹ Similarly, Anna Davin:

Involvement in the feminism of the early 1970s was exhilarating and empowering. We learnt that our discontents and thirsts were not individual. We made friends. We shared

²⁰⁰ Tweedie, *In the Name of Love*, p. 7.

²⁰¹ Wandor (ed.), *Once a Feminist*, pp. 2-3.

a vision of how things could change, in our immediate circumstances and relationships, and the whole society beyond.²⁰²

Secular feminists, then, did not interpret writing about their personal experiences as narcissistic or apolitical, but as containing a distinctly political dimension. Turning inward, for these women, inspired a deep critique of normative gender roles, a recognition of the ways gendered ideologies were impressed upon women's psyches and a conscious uncoupling from these. In this way, both secular and Goddess feminists experimented with the unconscious workings of the mind as part of the broader feminist politics.

To conclude, I have shown that rational readings of feminist politics do not do justice to the passion, fantasy and imagination of second-wave feminist politics. Because consciousness-changing was depicted as a psychological transformation, women's descriptions often incorporated dreams, fantasies and imagination.²⁰³ Reading feminist confessional memoirs and Sjöö's spiritual life-writing as part of the same intellectual genealogy – rather than viewing Goddess feminism as an anachronistic other to more mainstream forms of feminist politics – reveals shared engagement with the non-rational. Historians of modern Britain should rethink their engagement with contemporary politics along these lines, paying attention to what is missed in purely rationalist interpretations.

²⁰² A. Davin in *ibid.*, p. 69.

²⁰³ Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, p. 82.

Conclusion: Imaginative Feminist Politics

It took a few years for the visionaries themselves to explicitly acknowledge the importance of the imagination, both in its own right as the raw material for artefacts, but also, perhaps, in politics.²⁰⁴

Wandor's tentative observation that imagination played an important role in the constitution of second-wave feminist politics is one that historians need to start taking seriously. Although very few scholars of the women's movement would claim that modern feminist politics were solely the product of rational self-interest, our histories of late twentieth-century social movements nevertheless remain more attendant to social and economic analysis than the unconscious processes – passion, creativity, imagination and vision – that animated the WLM and modern British political cultures more broadly. As Wandor suggests, we cannot understand the politics of the second wave until we take seriously the role of the imagination in the theorising of feminist futures, or the motivational role of political desire, or the internal revelations that accompanied the coming to consciousness moment.

As I have shown in this chapter, however, taking the non-observable workings of the mind seriously is difficult when traditional historical methodology is grounded in realist epistemology and empiricism.²⁰⁵ As I demonstrated in relation to MSP, archival encounters are disciplined by often unstated assumptions about what counts as historical evidence, or “what belongs inside the box”. The providence of these structuring ideologies are usually invisible to historians doing the research. In the case of MSP, the categorisation replicates dominant secular

²⁰⁴ Wandor (ed.), *Once a Feminist*, p. 5.

²⁰⁵ Kleinberg, Scott and Wilder, ‘Theory and History’.

histories of the women's movement by foregrounding rational-seeming source material, not the fantasy and mysticism of Sjöö's spiritual revelations in Avebury, for example.

It is essential that we accept the workings of the non-rational in political cultures, then, not only because it adds texture to our histories of feminist thought, but also, as this thesis has argued, because it calls into question the epistemological and ontological categories upon which our favoured historical explanations rest. This kind of critical reflection is urgently needed when, as I have shown, empiricist methodology is shaped by implicit secularising logic that offers nothing but precariously rational interpretative categories. Opening up categories like politics to include unconscious, unknowable workings of the mind, and even spiritual experiences, is important because it challenges us to rethink the categories we view as fixed and knowable, drawing attention the points at which our analysis falls back on common sense assumptions about the nature of the past.

CONCLUSION

“BIG WITCHY ENERGY” AND FEMINIST POLITICS OF THE PRESENT

In August 2018, American activist and politician Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez told journalist Sarah Smarsh about a “profoundly spiritual experience” she had during a protest near the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, which straddles the border between North and South Dakota. The demonstration had been going on for two years prior to Ocasio-Cortez’s visit, an attempt by Native American protesters (they called themselves Water Protectors) to stop a crude oil access pipeline being installed straight down the middle of a natural formation of sacred significance. On the site of the planned pipeline, a protest camp had grown called Camp Sacred Stone, whose motto was “Defend the Sacred”.¹ For two years, Water Protectors had been singing and praying on the site in big circles linked by hands in hands, a way of protecting the sacred landscape from the profanity of industrialised oil recovery. Identifying the sacred underpinnings of the protest, Ocasio-Cortez told Smarsh, “Native American spirituality was the lynchpin for the water protectors there. This is where people get the strength”.² In an echo

¹ P. B. Campbell, ““Those are our Eiffel Towers, our pyramids”: Why Standing Rock is about much more than oil”, *The Guardian*, 15 May 2017, accessed 16 September 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2017/may/15/those-are-our-eiffel-towers-our-pyramids-why-standing-rock-is-about-much-more-than-oil>.

² Sarah Smarsh, ‘How the American left is rediscovering morality’, *The Guardian*, 4 August 2018, accessed 10 September 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/aug/04/american-left-morality-alexandria-ocasio-cortez-bernie-sanders>.

of Monica Sjöö's spiritual-political revelations, Ocasio-Cortez named this moment as pivotal in her decision to run for office.³

“What is remarkable about this story”, observed Smarsh “is not that [Ocasio-Cortez] felt transformed by an event that was both political and spiritual. It is that she dares to speak of it publicly”.⁴ In her article, Smarsh placed Ocasio-Cortez within a broader resurgence of spirituality in the American Left, noting that politicians like Bernie Sanders are increasingly appealing to sacred principles in order to frame discussions about morality. These sacralising politics are especially visible in Marianne Williamson, Oprah's former spiritual advisor and current Democratic Party presidential candidate, whose political vision (that includes ecological sustainability and reparations for African Americans) is grounded in the spiritual value of love.⁵ Similarly, at the grassroots, writer Sady Doyle has observed the resurgence of feminist witchcraft in response to Donald Trump's election as President of the United States of America and attendant exposures of institutional misogyny. “Whether it's hexing the president, chatting in WhatsApp covens or featuring in TV reboots”, explained Doyle, “radicalised women have been finding strength in the ancient pagan arts”.⁶

Although not as overt, the same reclamation of sacral politics – particularly feminist witchcraft – is taking place in Britain during this turbulent political moment. On 24 September 2019, to announce the Supreme Court's ruling that Prime Minister Boris Johnson had illegally suspended Parliament, Lady Brenda Hale (the first female President of the Supreme Court) wore a shockingly realistic, and eye-catchingly large, spider brooch on her right shoulder. Intuitively recognising the brooch as a provocative symbol, the press and cultural

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See Travis, *Language of the Heart*, pp. 238-244;

⁶ S. Doyle, ‘Monsters, men and magic: why feminists turned to witchcraft to oppose Trump’, *The Guardian*, 7 August 2019, accessed 16 September 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/aug/07/monsters-men-magic-trump-awoke-angry-feminist-witches>.

commentators on Twitter speculated about its meaning, many invoking (both implicitly and explicitly) an older brand of spiritual feminist politics in their interpretations. “The brooch that ate Brexit”, ran *The New York Times* headline, in an echo of the Spider Goddess of Greenham Common whose powers included the entrapment and consumption of profane patriarchal magic.⁷ “Revenge of the girly swot”, read another, implying a feminist reversal of Johnson’s derogatory and sexist comments about former Prime Minister David Cameron just a few weeks earlier.⁸ In a more overt reference to the politics of feminist spirituality, journalist Lou Stoppard argued that Lady Hale – who was dressed all in black bar the spider brooch during her historic announcement – brought “Big Witchy Energy” to disrupt the patriarchal political establishment, invoking the witch as a symbol of specifically (although not exclusively) female subversive powers.⁹

Despite undergoing a resurgence in our current political moment, the varieties of women’s religious experience continue to occupy contested territory in contemporary cultural commentary. Although Smarsh claimed that the American Left is embracing spiritual politics, Williamson has been pilloried as a “joke” candidate by the left-wing media and admonished for her “moony politics”.¹⁰ Her book *Healing the Soul of America* (1997), which forms the basis of her coherent policy ideas, has been reductively bracketed as a “self-help” guide, associated with all the trappings of “psychobabble”.¹¹ Similarly, although journalists like Stoppard have revived a spiritual feminist reading of the witch as a powerful symbol of

⁷ L. Stoppard, ‘Big Spider Love: The Brooch That Ate Brexit’, *The New York Times*, 24 September 2018, accessed 28 September 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/24/style/brenda-hale-brexit-brooch.html>; Sjöö and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, p. 50.

⁸ E. Whelan, ‘The Cult of Lady Hale’, *Spiked*, 25 September 2019, accessed 28 September 2019, <https://www.spiked-online.com/2019/09/25/the-cult-of-lady-hale/>.

⁹ Stoppard, ‘Big Spider Love’.

¹⁰ D. Wickenden, ‘Marianne Williamson Would Like to Clarify’, Podcast Audio, *The New Yorker: Politics and More*, 3 September 2019, accessed 16 September 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/podcast/political-scene/marianne-williamson-would-like-to-clarify>; S. Saraiya, “‘No One Decides to Run for President Impulsively’: Marianne Williamson explains her magical thinking”, *Vanity Fair*, 30 July 2019, accessed 16 September 2019, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2019/07/marianne-williamson-interview>.

¹¹ Saraiya, “‘No One Decides to Run for President Impulsively’”.

women's ability to disrupt patriarchal authority and norms, this has been undercut by the right-wing press who use the label to silence subversive women.¹² More quiet expressions of women's spirituality in Britain, such as the Red Tent movement, which attempts to revive the sacrality of women-only spaces, or the increasing popularity of priestess-run Goddess Temples, are not so openly pilloried, but equally assumed to be of no political value. When women's spirituality is invoked, then, it is still often in relation to apoliticism, the lunatic fringe or associated with overdetermined feminine characteristics and activities such as self-help or, in more derogatory terms, narcissism and excessive consumerism.

By writing the first history of the Goddess movement in Britain, I have shown that women's spirituality cannot be called apolitical, save by those who analyse it through an androcentric framework. Feminist spirituality emerged out of the vibrant, creative, sophisticated, agitating politics of the WLM in the 1970s and distinctive critiques of the modern world that grew out of the spiritual counterculture. For over forty years, the Goddess movement theorised women's sacral powers as disruptive, troubling and antagonising to patriarchal workings of power and authority, subversive tendencies which are perhaps one reason why it has been marginalised and ignored in both popular and academic accounts. When this history is brought to the fore, Ocasio-Cortez's spiritual experience at Standing Rock, Williamson's loving politics and Lady Hale's spider brooch are all the natural inheritors of radical transatlantic Goddess feminism.

In this thesis, I have also sought to explore the processes that pushed Goddess feminism so firmly to the margins of our histories of modern Britain. I have shown that this story of relegation and bracketing is linked to the dominance of androcentric practices, assumptions, modes of interpretation, and understandings of social order and relationality that persist in

¹² A. Pierce, 'Ex-barmaid with a spider brooch who spun legal web that snared PM', *The Daily Mail*, 24 September 2019, accessed 28 September 2019, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7500627/Ex-barmaid-spider-brooch-spun-legal-web-snared-PM-ANDREW-PIERCE-Lady-Hale.html>.

academic ways of knowing. This is evident in the way historian Callum Brown, for example, is located at the centre of historiography on religious change in modern Britain, despite the fact that his formative book *The Death of Christian Britain* is now almost twenty years old, and that gender historians such as Delap, Morgan, Owen and Shaw have offered up eminently more sophisticated and inclusive interpretations. I would argue that it is precisely because Brown's account replicates, rather than seeks to disrupt, establishment forms of faith that he has been credited with delivering the dominant account of religious change. This is unsettling when Brown's vision of legitimate belief perpetuates the perspectives of religious institutions themselves that already have all the say on who is inside or outside, heterodox or orthodox, religious or spiritual. It is through these implicit value-judgements that women's spirituality – and other diverse expressions of religiosity – are marginalised, or misinterpreted as signs of resurgence rather than evidence of the ever-changing, myriad forms and modes of religiosity.

Although I have only dealt with the bracketing of extra-institutional forms of women's spirituality in this thesis, the normalisation of male-dominated forms of faith has also made invisible activist women who located themselves within established religious traditions. Almost a year to the day after Monica Sjöö's demonstration at Bristol Cathedral, the first fifteen women were ordained as priests after a gruelling and painfully slow campaign for ordination. While Jenny Dagers has written a compelling account of the women's campaign using the archives of the Christian Women's Information and Resources project (CWIRES), the experiences of feminist Christian women have similarly been relegated to the margins of feminist history and broader political cultures in modern Britain.¹³ Often, women who remained committed to institutional religions while agitating for change are perceived as behind the times, or even antagonistic to the broader feminist project, perceived as denying

¹³ Dagers, *Christian Women's Movement*.

their own agency.¹⁴ Although Goddess and Christian feminists were often keen to emphasise their difference as a method of self-definition – a way of marking out their critical perspective in relation to the institution – their stories are, nevertheless, intertwined historically and conceptually.¹⁵ Both groups were fighting for a stake in representations of the divine, but their efforts have been omitted from histories of modern and contemporary Britain because of scholars' affective and theoretical assumptions.

Just because the relationship between feminism, politics and belief has been ignored or misunderstood by historians and sociologists, then, does not mean that radical feminist forms of faith are not widespread or enthusiastically participated in by women. As I have argued in this thesis, the existence of such forms should force us to question what other political manifestations are not reaching our attention because they are bracketed as marginal, subjective, feminine, frivolous, spiritual rather than cerebral. This critical historical project moves focus away from judgements about what counts and does not count as historical knowledge, towards recognising that such distinctions are inherently political and often silencing to women's religious and political endeavour. By using the Goddess movement as my case study in this thesis, I have sought to make visible the implicit value-judgements, culture-bound epistemologies and ontological certainties that exclude more than they reveal about the recent past.

Ultimately, my aim in understanding the spiritual dimension of feminist politics in the past is to explore the potential of opening up new possibilities for political engagement and practice in the present. As I have shown above, radical spiritual feminism is undergoing a resurgence, but academic and popular interpretations remain dismissive or openly derogatory. By

¹⁴ Cady and Fessenden, *Religion, the Secular*, p. 5.

¹⁵ See, for example, Coghill and Redmond, *Feminism and Spirituality*; J. Garcia and S. Maitland, *Walking on the Water: Women and Spirituality* (London, 1983); Devlin-Glass and McCredden, *Feminist Poetics of the Sacred*; S. Maitland, *A Map of the New Country: Women and Christianity* (London, 1983).

recovering the history of the Goddess movement, I have shown how the last forty years of feminist activism in Britain has been inflected with sacrality, thereby revealing that contemporary articulations of feminist spirituality are not anachronistic but part of a longer, embedded, feminist tradition. Placing contemporary expressions of spiritual politics within this trajectory opens up a space for spiritual women to speak for themselves, challenging institutional ways of knowing and making available far more of human life than historical explanation allows.

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