SEARCHING FOR SUMMERLAND: SPIRITUALIST WOMEN, EDENIC NOSTALGIA, AND ECO-UTOPIAN COMMUNALISM IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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Abstract

This article concentrates on the work of women connected to the Occult revival, examining narratives of interspecies harmony so as to suggest an interpretation of spiritualist communes as possibly proto-ecofeminist spaces. In order to do so, focus is first placed on how the notion of Summerland, or the spiritualist afterlife, inspired the development of anti-hierarchical cosmologies that would sustain reformist activism in spiritualist discourse. The utopian overtones of Spiritualism are traced back to the syncretic roots of the movement, which drew strongly on the desire to recover a lost Edenic bond between humans and nature. In these ways, by means of female leadership, vegetarianism, and agrarian self-sufficiency, occultist communal life developed a unique form of Utopianism, one which combined esoteric beliefs with a desire to reach the anti-industrialist Paradise announced by the spirits.

Keywords: Spiritualism, Utopianism, Communalism, Ecofeminism, Vegetarianism.

EN BUSCA DE SUMMERLAND: MUJERES ESPIRITISTAS, NOSTALGIA EDÉNICA Y COMUNAS ECO-UTÓPICAS EN EL SIGLO XIX

Resumen

Este artículo se centra en obras escritas por mujeres conectadas al ocultismo decimonónico, examinando narrativas de armonía interespecies para así proponer una interpretación de las comunas espiritistas como posibles espacios ecofeministas. Para ello, se centra en cómo el concepto de «Summerland», o el más allá espiritista, inspiró el desarrollo de cosmovisiones anti-jerárquicas sobre las cuáles se fundaría el activismo reformista en el espiritismo. Las connotaciones utópicas del movimiento espiritista se remontan a los orígenes del movimiento, que se basó en el deseo de recuperar un vínculo edénico perdido entre el ser humano y la naturaleza. De este modo, a través del liderazgo femenino, el vegetarianismo y la autosuficiencia agraria, la vida comunal ocultista dio lugar a una forma única de utopía en la cual se mezclaron las creencias esotéricas y la intención de alcanzar el paraíso anti-industrial anunciado por los espíritus.

Palabras clave: espiritismo, utopismo, comunalismo, ecofeminismo, vegetarianismo.

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1. INTRODUCTION

And a second day of Eden would on the earth begin.
Mary Howitt, "The Cry of the Animals" (1834)

Decades prior to her pioneering conversion to Anglo-American Spiritualism in 1853 (Owen 1990, 19), the Quaker writer and reform activist Mary Howitt used her poetry to imagine a world in which other-than-human creatures would be allowed to exist free from the pain and cruelty caused by human abuses. As a vegetarian (Abitz 2022, 57) and an anti-vivisectionist (Oppenheim 1985, 37), Howitt framed her interest in animal welfare within the interspecies kinship often established through spiritualist discourse (Heholt 2021, 98). Her stance was not uncommon among spiritualists in the nineteenth century, especially women, who were most actively involved in animal protection campaigns (Donald 2020, 48). Despite that fact that female occultists did not explicitly self-identify as witches –viewing, rather, their supernatural powers as a religious calling (Braude 1989, 24)–, their practices, tenets, and values display certain similarities with the framing notion operating through this issue: the "ecowitch" (Sotelo 2025, 21-23). Paralleling the present-day recovery of earth-bound wisdom and symbiotic interactions with the natural world, spiritualist culture developed a non-hierarchical cosmology to generate environmentalist narratives against industrial pollution and the massive loss of biodiversity in the nineteenth century (Adkins and Parkins 2018, 4). Just like the abovementioned ecowitches, spiritualist women sustained their environmental rhetoric by means of their unorthodox beliefs and practices, through which the souls of the deceased allegedly provided instructions for humans to advance towards a progressive, inclusive, and harmonious society that was meant to reflect Summerland, or the spiritualist afterlife (Braude 1989, 17).

This article therefore aims to examine the figure of the nineteenth-century spiritualist medium as a precursor of the utopian eco-witch at the birth of the Anthropocene (Adkins and Parkins 2018, 2).[1] In order to discuss the ways in which spiritualist women used the Occult revival as a tool of resistance against the industrialized severance from nature, the present study intends to focus on the presence of Edenic fantasies in spiritualist literature connected to the establishment of utopian communes, especially in the United States. As reflected in Howitt's poem, and as it shall be argued in this text, spiritualist environmentalist discourse relied heavily on invocations of a return to Paradise in which peace would be restored among humans and other species. Such configurations allude to occultist reinterpretations of the Book of Isaiah, specifically regarding the prophecy announcing how, once God's kingdom is fully established on earth, "[t]he wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the

[1] The environmental impact of the Industrial Revolution is often regarded as the beginning of the Anthropocene, a period in which human action became a geological force (Adkins and Parkins 2018, 4).

leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them" (Isaiah 11:6-9). Whereas such images of interspecies harmony have mostly been interpreted as a reference to the Second Coming of the Messiah in Christian doctrine (Sim 2025, 171), this promise of "new heavens and a new earth" (Isaiah 65:17-25) was rewritten by certain spiritualist thinkers as regression into a pantheistic communion prior to the Biblical expulsion of human beings from the Garden of Eden. As I hope to illustrate, this Edenic nostalgia constituted a significant element in spiritualist narratives of reconnection with nature, which were manifested particularly clearly in written accounts of utopian communalism. More specifically, this study wishes to explore the extent to which spiritualist communes may be regarded as potentially ecofeminist spaces that yearned for a return to pre-industrial, pre-anthropocentric, and pre-patriarchal times.[2] By paying close attention to the role of Edenic Utopianism in the destabilization of speciesist and sexist hierarchies in the philosophy behind spiritualist communal life, it is possible to observe how spiritualist women writers like Anna Kingsford, Mary Gove Nichols, and Katherine Tingley anticipated the rise of the eco-witch through their works of non-fiction.

2. BACK TO NATURE: EDENIC ECO-UTOPIANISM IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY SPIRITUALIST CULTURE

Spiritualist communalism in mid-nineteenth-century United States planted the seeds of diverse elements which would come to characterize the New Age communes of the Back to the Land movement in the twentieth century: social justice movements, environmental awareness, non-traditional views of sexuality, and alternative beliefs outside orthodox religions intersected on the margins of mainstream civilization (MacFarlane 2015, 3), united by a sense of impending transformation and progress (Claeys 2022, 424). In a similar manner, the occultist counterculture was also experiencing its own "Summer of Love" by the time Spiritualism originated in 1848. Although, as a phenomenon founded and led by women (Braude 1989, 17), its birth is usually attributed to the "Rochester rappings" initiated by Kate and Margaret Fox (Bennett 2007, 28),[3] the roots of the movement can rather be traced back to the Protestant religious revivals of the Second Great Awakening (Barrow 1986, 10). This moment of religious plurality was marked by the emergence of groups and sects such as Mormonism, Seventh-Day Adventism, Methodism, and other new denominations

[2] As Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan explain, ecofeminist theory explores the diverse ways in which the oppression of women has intersected with the exploitation and subjugation of nature throughout history, identifying and challenging configurations of the feminine and the non-human as secondary to male culture in androcentric systems of domination (Adams & Donovan 1995, 3).

[3] The Fox sisters, two teenagers from Hydesville, New York, are regarded as the founders of Spiritualism because they claimed to have discovered a system of communication with the souls of the dead by rapping rhythmically on the séance table (Bennett 2007, 28).

in the New York area referred to as the "Burned-over District" (Cope 2012, 32).[4] As noted by Logie Barrow, numerous "points of blur and tension" among several theological stances led to the highly syncretic roots of the spiritualist movement (1986, 10), which, among other elements, shared with the Second Great Awakening traits such as communication with the supernatural world (Braude 1989, 13), emphasis on communal gatherings (Hankins 200, 7), as well as millennialist and utopian views (Kerr 1972, 11). For instance, the pamphlet *The Future of the Human Race; Or a Great, Glorious, and Peaceful Revolution, Near at Hand, to Be Effected Through the Agency of Departed Spirits of Good and Superior Men and Women* (1853), published by Robert Owen, founder of the New Harmony commune (Jennings 2016, 139), reveals how spiritualist discourse was particularly saturated with utopian overtones, manifested not only through the intentional ideology behind communal life, but also in the transmission of allegedly ghostly messages announcing that the dawn of a new age was nigh (Braude 1989, 17).

According to the "spirits" that spoke through mediums, believers would be conducted towards a perfected society, where "Spiritualism [would] work miracles in the cause of reform" (Braude 1989, 17), "oppression [would] die" (Tiffany 1857, 169), and peace would reign for "only one humanity, and one flag for all and every one" (Cox 2003, 181). This "open and sympathetic" quest towards "the understanding of Truth irrespective of race, nation or color" constituted a groundbreaking approach in pre-Civil War America, one which, besides challenging racial discrimination (Cox 2003, 201), encouraged believers to transcend other types of earthly barriers and relate to other beings as undifferentiated spirits (Nelson 2013, 34). In addition to promoting collaborations across classes, genders, ethnicities (Nelson 2013, 34), the movement's egalitarian claims included efforts towards interspecies harmony and environmental accountability. At a historical moment characterized by a turning point in the relationship between human and non-human life (Denenholz & Danahay 2007, 8), fueled by Darwinist anxieties and industrial expansion (Murphy 2019, 23),[5] spiritualists hoped for "a Golden Age to come, not only for man but for the lower kingdoms, a time when humanity [would] realize its duty to its younger brothers – not to destroy them, but to help them" (Leadbeater 1913, 34-35). Despite manifesting anthropocentric vestiges in his view of animals as inferior creatures, the occultist vegetarian activist Charles Webster Leadbeater framed occultist predictions for a

[4] This term was borrowed by the historian Whitney Cross in 1950 from *Memoirs of Reverend Charles G. Finney, the American Evangelist* (1876) and is now employed to refer to the Western and central regions of New York where the reforms and religious revivals of the Second Great Awakening took place during the first half of the nineteenth century. As Rachel Cope clarifies, this epithet reflects "a time and place that was repeatedly burned by the fires of revivalism" (2012, 32).

[5] Charles Darwin's well-known *Origin of Species* (1859) destabilized boundaries between humans and other animals, leading to ground-breaking considerations regarding non-human subjectivities in nineteenth-century culture (Denenholz & Danahay 2007, 2). At the same time, the Industrial Revolution problematized the gap between humans and nature by triggering pollution, mass extinction, and intensified farming methods (Adkins & Parkins 2018, 5).

utopian society within an anti-speciesist cosmology, arguing that the creation of this earthly Paradise would be only be possible once humans stopped consuming meat and other animal products (Leadbeater 1913, 35). His stance was far from unique within the Occult revival, which by the late nineteenth century was brimming with similar visions of destabilization of the human-animal barrier in the Great Chain of Being.

The eco-utopian line of thought which sustained spiritualist communes drew from diverse sources of inspiration which intersected through the origins of the movement (Barrow 1986, 11). In Britain and the United States, the nineteenth century had already witnessed several attempts to establish alternative societies characterized by their responsible interactions with nature (Jennings 2016, 12). English Romantics like Samuel Coleridge planned to build Pantisocracy, a utopian community in America (Trahair 2013, 307), while Percy Shelley imagined a perfect society based on natural harmony in *Queen Mab* (1813) and William Blake famously evoked Isaiah's prophecy as a return to natural unity in his *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794). American transcendentalists also adopted a pantheistic approach to non-human life (Burkholder 2010, 645), famously immortalized through Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay *Nature* (1836), which would leave its mark on spiritualist culture (Carroll 1997, 111). Vegetarian, anti-industrialist communes such as Brook Farm and Fruitlands,[6] among others (Burkholder 2010, 645), stemmed from eco-utopian Transcendentalism and became sources of inspiration for spiritualist communal life (Blake 1962, 232). Most notably, by the time the Fox sisters began contacting ghosts, the Second Great Awakening had been sizzling for decades with millennialist predictions of a righteous period on earth before the Last Judgement (Green 2022, 33),[7] many of which contained clearly Edenic overtones that were inherited by Spiritualism and transferred into the ideology sustaining the communes. For instance, Quakers, Shakers, and Universalists, all of which influenced the origins of the Occult revival (Cox 2003, 16), perceived the entry into the nineteenth century as a moment of transcendental change towards a perfected way of life marked by a sense of veneration towards God's Creation (Jennings 2016, 15). Since the seventeenth century, the yearning for a return to "Innocence," or "Arcady," an ideal, rustic past, has been a significant part of Quaker principles (Skilbeck 2021, 245). Planting trees, preventing deforestation, protecting animals, and, in numerous cases, rejecting the carnivore diet were deemed as necessary gestures to achieve this earthly Paradise,[8] which required a sense of responsibility towards the natural world (Skilbeck 2021, 246).

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[6] The famous American novelist Louisa May Alcott would later reflect on her negative experiences at the flawed Fruitlands commune in her satire *Transcendental Wild Oats: A Chapter from an Unwritten Romance* (1873).

[7] Religious groups such as the Millerite Adventist Movement or the Seventh-Day Adventists based their utopian views on the belief that the Second Coming of Christ was nigh, which required a complete reform of society (Pitzer 1997, 475).

[8] Just like Howitt, numerous early spiritualist converts owed their vegetarian ethics to their Quaker roots, in which the meatless diet was conceived as an act of peace-making with other species under the same Creator (Gregory 2018, 30).

Quite similarly, spiritualist communes were founded on Edenic aspirations, aiming towards a "property-free existence in the orchards of Paradise" (Jennings 2016, 12). Their anti-industrial, vegetarian, and environmentalist values echoed Isaiah's prophecy in diverse ways, since they intended to reach a time in which "Earth [would] become the footstool of heaven" and "health and happiness [would] flow into the place of disease and sorrow," as assured by the medium Chandos Leigh Hunt Wallace (1885, 5), who, like other clairvoyants, adopted a plant-based diet (Owen 1990, 126). Much like their Quaker predecessors, spiritualists viewed "Deathless Food" as an essential step towards the betterment of civilization (Gregory 2018, 142). Paired with a participation in the late-nineteenth-century "back-to-the-land" movement, environmental concerns had become commonplace in spiritualist utopian projects by the *fin-de-siècle* (Gregory 2018, 6). A clear example of Edenic yearning for a lost connection with nature can be found in the writings of the British medium and animal welfare campaigner Anna Kingsford, whose doctoral thesis *The Perfect Way in Diet: A Treatise Advocating a Return to the Natural and Ancient Food of our Race* (1892) promoted a recovery of interspecies harmony.[9] As the title indicates, in this work, the spiritualist author defends vegetarianism as the natural diet of the first humans, whose initial unity with their Creator was mirrored through their oneness with the rest of Creation (Kingsford 1892, 10). By means of an anti-speciesist reinterpretation of the Biblical Genesis, Kingsford argues that this state of bliss was interrupted by the beginning of the carnivore diet, which would have brought violence, sickness, and moral degeneration into the world (Maitland 2011, 29). The Fall of Man would therefore not have been caused by Eve's tasting of the forbidden fruit, but by the consumption of animal flesh. To recover this lost Paradise of pantheistic symbiosis, we should, Kingsford claims, abolish animal slaughter (1892, 9), a gesture that would bring "the real salvation of the human race" (Kingsford, qtd. in Maitland 2011, 29). Such views were likely to be inspired by the mystical experiences of the Swedish philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg, a vegetarian thinker whose theology played a crucial role in the foundations of Spiritualism (Barrow 1986, 10), including his interpretation of meat-eating as the original sin (Kerrigan 2012, 112). In spiritualist terms, dietary reforms towards vegetarianism would thus contribute to humanity's "return to its ancient obedience to Nature" (Kingsford, qtd. in Maitland 2011, 29), not only by re-establishing a peaceful coexistence with all living creatures, but also by regaining a spiritual communion with the souls of plants and animals (Maitland 2011, 31).

In order to recover this Edenic state, spiritualists aimed their imaginations towards a perfected world, "working with God and Nature" to "reconvert it into Paradise" (Kingsford 1892, 9). As James Gregory explains in "Religion and the Victorian Vegetarians" (2018), numerous branches of the Occult revival understood the plant-based diet as a form of physical and psychic purification that could affect

[9] Besides being a pioneering advocate for women's rights and animal protection, Kingsford was also one of the first female physicians in Britain to earn a medical degree (Moulds 2021, 164).

the evolution of the human soul (2018, 136). Spiritualist writings by women such as Annie Besant explicitly link vegetarianism, spiritual improvement, and social reform in the shape of empathy towards non-human subjectivities (Besant 1913, 15), thus emphasizing its role in the creation of eco-utopian narratives. Likewise, Kingsford conceived meatless food as a vital step towards a fully transformed society in which dietary reform would intersect with other progressive efforts like first-wave feminism and anti-vivisection campaigns, assuring that "the Vegetarian movement is the bottom and basis of all other movements towards Purity, Freedom, Justice, and Happiness" (Kingsford, qtd. in Maitland 2011, 27). It is therefore hard to ignore the presence of utopian overtones in spiritualist depictions of the recovery of pantheistic unity (Maitland 2011, 27-28), in which the destabilization of anthropocentric hierarchies went hand in hand with the dismantling of androcentric binaries, as well as with the abolition of further forms of oppression (Nelson 2013, 34). Mirroring Kingsford's claim that "universal peace is absolutely impossible to a carnivorous race", numerous intentional communes attempted to ensure "the future creed of a nobler and gentler race" (qtd. in Maitland 2011, 28). However, as shall be discussed in the following section, certain spiritualist communes would not necessarily fit the contemporary definition of ecofeminism (Adams & Donovan 1995, 3), in spite of their revolutionary anticipation of the concept of utopian eco-witches.

3. AN ALTERNATIVE PARADISE? SPIRITUALIST COMMUNES AS POTENTIALLY ECOFEMINIST SPACES

The recurrent aspiration towards an Edenic, pre-industrial past in spiritualist discourse was materialized through the creation of communes on the margins of urban civilization (Melton 1997, 394). Despite being far from unique in their quest for connection with the natural world in mid-nineteenth century America (Pitzer 1997, 182), such social experiments were directly inspired by the values of Spiritualism, which were, in their turn, drawn on information provided by mediums. For example, the anti-hierarchical cosmology fostered by occultist colonies echoed "the brotherhood of man" (Jennings 2016, 141), one of the seven principles of the movement, allegedly dictated by the ghost of Robert Owen through the British clairvoyant Emma Hardinge Britten (Byrne 2010, 82). Similarly, the American medium Cora Scott, raised at the Hopedale commune (Owen 1990, 210), described Summerland as a utopian state where "differences of birth, nationality, outward rank or even of education are not real differences" (Scott 1915, 32) due to the dissolution of "all (...) lines, barriers, and human standards" (Scott 1915, 31). In order to attain Heaven on Earth, numerous communes attempted to put into practice the advice that Kingsford, Leigh Hunt, and other mediums provided for the improvement of society: "purity of diet," that is, vegetarianism, "passion for the animals," and the "exaltation of womanhood" (Maitland 2011, 21), the latter being particularly reflected in the notable presence of female leadership in such liminal spaces (Jennings 2016, 122). It soon became clear that spiritualist re-imaginings of interspecies encounters implied a re-evaluation of other forms of dogmatic submission, since occultist rewritings of

the Genesis not only erased God's command for man to rule over all the creatures of the earth, the sea, and the air (Gen 1:26), but also left out patriarchal dominion and the curse of Eve,[10] thus allowing for the development of potentially ecofeminist epistemologies in communal life (French 1985, 341).

Such elements had their roots in reformist Edenic narratives within the movement, since, for example, Kingsford's description of a peaceful, vegetarian era before the carnivorous Fall echoes similar discourses among certain feminist groups of the period, which found inspiration in a hypothetically lost, pre-patriarchal age supposedly marked by a plant-based diet, harmonious interactions between species, and gynocentric networks of collaboration (Adams 2010, 143). Rosemary Radford Ruether identifies comparable visions of an idealized matriarchal past in contemporary ecofeminist currents, which also imagine a distant, preagricultural time when "all was benign between the genders and in the human-nature relationship" (Ruether 1992, 143). This lost Paradise, allegedly sacrificed to the rise of the violent androcentric order (Ruether 1992, 143), was also evoked by female occultists such as Moina Mathers and Florence Farr, who searched for empowering tools in *fin-de-siècle* neo-paganism (Denisoff 2022, 140). In this sense, it may be possible to identify analogous ideas in spiritualist communes founded or led by women, which were meant to foreground feminist and environmental concerns by fostering alternative lifestyles and relational modes (Pitzer 1997, 34). For instance, most spiritualist colonies manifested this tendency through networks of progressive movements, hosting vegetarians, animal rights activists, women's rights advocates, free lovers, or dress reformers who contributed to building this arcadian future (Jennings, 2016, 122). In this way, vegetarian communes like Harmonia (1850-1917) (Kitch 2000, 299), the Brotherhood of Light (1880s-1910s) (Pitzer 1997, 455), or the Krotona Theosophist Institute (1912-) (Melton 1997, 409) shared their eco-utopian yearning for a sense of universal harmony which placed women at the center.[11]

Much like the séance room, where mediums conversed with the dead, reinvented the boundaries of female identity (Tromp 2006, 5), and supported each other on the margins of patriarchal society (Braude 1989, 166),[12] the spiritualist

[10] Mary Gove Nichols, Chandos Leigh Hunt Wallace, Alice Stockham and other spiritualist women openly defied the biblical configuration of painful childbirth as Eve's punishment for the original sin. Instead, they presented parturition as a natural event which ought to be devoid of suffering (Owen 1990, 130).

[11] For the purpose of the research scope, this article only focuses on spiritualist communes in which the struggle for women's liberation intersected with diverse forms of environmental awareness. Other colonies, such as the Lily Dale Assembly (1879-), Camp Chesterfield (1886-), or the Cassadaga Spiritualist Camp (1894-) were also in line with the gynocentric character of Spiritualism (Braude 1989, 8), but did not present, to my current knowledge, any explicit evidence of eco-utopian values beyond the fact that they were isolated spaces in nature.

[12] Numerous scholars have pointed out the transformative potential of the séance circle in relation to women's self-expression (Tromp 2006, 5). As argued by the spiritualist medium Amanda Britt Spence, participants were often advised to gather in an exclusively female and non-hierarchical space, since ghosts, she assured, abhorred the rigidity of conventional power structures (Braude

commune became an alternative space outside the rigid norms of conventional nineteenth-century civilization, a promising site where utopian impulses were intended to be combined with the non-violent cooperation often attributed to matriarchal societies (Camara 2013, 273), as well as to other communes also based on what Batya Weinbaum terms "female values:" collaboration, nurturance, and sharing, as opposed to the competitive dynamics and hierarchical domination of androcentric cultures (Weinbaum 1984, 164).[13] Dwellers shared lodgings on common land in rural areas (Silver-Isenstadt, 2002, 83), in contact with natural cycles and away from the spiritual and environmental pollution of the industrial city (Leadbeater 1913, 32). Community dining rooms, schools, and libraries were set up among orchards, fields, and gardens (Silver-Isenstadt 2002, 83). Paralleling other experimental living arrangements in the nineteenth century (Klee-Hartzell 1993, 19), spiritualist communes were meant to be rooted in egalitarian goals and equally distributed labour (Jennings 2016, 290). Most notably, since women were regarded as better communicators with the Great Beyond (Owen, 1990, 7), such colonies allowed female occultists to assume leadership roles in relation to diverse forms of resistance against ecological destruction.

This view was consolidated by the fact that mediums often functioned as porous borders between species due to their ability to visibilize animal subjectivities (Heholt 2021, 98). For numerous occultists, the very same sensitivity which allowed the clairvoyant to host stories from beyond the grave would permit them to feel the vibrations of animal emotions, which would make possible the inclusion of non-human perspectives in the séance (Leadbeater 1913, 34). As Hilary Grimes points out, their invisibilized condition as nineteenth-century women led to narratives of identification with other 'ghostly' and oppressed subjects whose voices were similarly suppressed in mainstream culture (Grimes 2016, 95). Therefore, by verbalizing the perspectives of subaltern subjects (Bennett 2007, 102), spiritualist women identified and denounced the power dynamics which excluded female and non-human voices from the historical discourse. This form of mediumistic empathy can be observed, for instance, in the works of spiritualist authors such as Florence Marryat, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, or Sophia de Morgan, who wrote against vivisection and other forms of cruelty towards animals which became prominent topics nineteenth-century women's literature (Donald 2020, 48).[14] According to Coral Lansbury, Victorian women's concern with animal suffering reveals analogies between androcentric oppression

1989, 165). Mediums were, in addition, free to perform subversive identities and utter the most scandalous "spirit-messages," as long as they remained under the alleged influence of spirit possession, which allowed them to explore diverse roles and voices outside the limitations imposed by Victorian femininity (Owen 1990, 7).

[13] Weinbaum is here referring to types of behavior observed at exclusively female communes such as Twin Oaks, which function as places where women can "cleanse themselves of male, negative, and city energies" and coexist outside capitalist patriarchy (1984, 158).

[14] See Marryat's *The Blood of the Vampire* (1897), Stuart Phelps' *Trixy* (1904), or De Morgan's *Threescore Years and Ten Reminiscences* (1895).

and the treatment of non-human creatures, which would imply an anticipation of ecofeminist concerns among suffragist groups and animal welfare activists (Lansbury 1985, 84). Taking into consideration this shared victimhood of women and nature under interlocking systems of domination (Adams & Donovan 1995, 3), occultist communes may have incorporated analogous notions in their advancement of women's rights and environmental conservation.

As an example of the ecofeminist potential of spiritualist communalism, visions of agrarian self-sufficiency, vegetarian living, and natural healing were upheld by the celebrated medium Mary Gove Nichols,[15] who travelled across several communes in the United States as one of the first advocates for the meatless diet (Blake 1962, 231). Her works on women's rights, gynecology, hydropathy, dress reform, and other social issues circulated among progressive circles of the day and were praised by fellow writers as well-known as Walt Whitman, who stated that "the more and wider these truths are known, the better" (qtd. in Reynolds 209). Gove Nichols and her husband, Thomas Low Nichols, founded several "harmonic homes" (Silver-Isenstadt 2002, 200), where they expected to welcome a "New Era for Humanity" through the help of "Proper Mediums and a Harmonious Circle" (Gove Nichols, qtd. in Silver-Isenstadt 2002, 203). Following the spirits' advice (Silver-Isenstadt 2002, 188), the couple settled at diverse intentional colonies like Mnemonia, Modern Times, and Desarrollo (Blake 1962, 232),[16] where the meatless diet was embraced as "the inlet to a new and holier life" (Gove Nichols, qtd. in Blake, 1962: 227). Paralleling Kingsford's arguments regarding an Edenic vegetarian society, Gove Nichols believed in the transformative power of "beautiful food" (Gove Nichols 1855, 182), which would foster "a capacity for all other reforms" (Gove Nichols, qtd. in Blake, 1962: 227), as she explains in her autobiographical novel *Mary Lyndon* (1855).

In this work, she recorded her experiences at Modern Times, a commune founded by anarchist thinkers Josiah Warren and Stephen Pearl Andrews, where, in addition to rejecting materialism and industrialization in favor of a more sustainable way of life (Jennings 2016, 19), members strove for more egalitarian relations between the sexes (Passet 2003, 27). At this "place of preparation, a training ground" for utopian society (Owen 1990, 200), women were encouraged to delegate domestic labour to the cooperative kitchen, communal nursery, or centralized laundry so as to focus their time on intellectual activities and reformist activism (Passet 2003, 26). Men and women would receive equal payment for their work (Silver-Isenstadt 2002, 65), and female members of the community would be liberated from the patriarchal institution of marriage through the controversial practice of "free love,"

[15] Numerous spiritualist women became involved in natural healing methods as a strategy of resistance against the often harmful practices of male-dominated medicine in the nineteenth century (Owen 1990, 122).

[16] Gove Nichols also engaged in experimental living at natural healing establishments such as the Yellow Springs Water-Cure, although it seems unclear whether this can be technically classified as a commune (Silver-Isenstadt 2002, 202).

or polyamory (Passet 2003, 28). Furthermore, utopian communalism stood in opposition to the values of industrial capitalism (Jennings 2016, 19), which had spurred the large-scale consumption of meat (Adams 2010, 206) and transformed human-animal interactions through increasingly intensive agricultural practices (Adkins & Parkins 2018, 5). As a form of resistance, the community promoted a lifestyle centered on self-reliance, urging members to grow their own vegetables (Gregory 2018, 142). Such was the case of other colonies characterized by female leadership, like the abovementioned Krotona, founded by Besant, or Lomaland (1898-1942), a theosophist community led by Katherine Tingley, a spiritualist disciple of the notorious medium Helena Blavatsky (Melton 1997, 401).

Tingley's work *The Life at Point Loma* (1909) reveals how the eco-ethical values promoted by spiritualist visions of Summerland continued to inspire communal philosophies into the twentieth century. Education at the communal school was based on the belief that humans are "immortal souls, not divorced from beneficent Nature, but indeed and in truth a part of it" (Tingley 1909, 18), a notion that was consolidated by means of outdoor teaching on land development, the dangers of pollution and the depletion of natural resources (Skeans 2018). For Tingley, children's direct contact with nature was an essential step towards the ideal society, since "[t]rue education," she argued, "is the power to live in harmony with our environment" (1909, 8). In line with the abovementioned eco-utopian discourse in spiritualist culture, the commune aimed to heal the shattered Edenic bond in search of spiritual oneness with nature: "[t]he curse of our nations is separateness," as humans "forget that they are a part of Universal Life" (Tingley 1926, 4). Members gathered their meatless food from a fruit and vegetable garden (Melton 1997, 405), building an alternative to the polluting forces of industrial capitalism. In Tingley's view, this policy would be the only plausible solution to the state of the planet, since "[t]he commerce and the industries of the world have fallen into the hands of those who are governed entirely by selfish interests" (1909, 5). However, although Tingley's leadership inspired further theosophical communities like the Temple of the People (1898-), founded by Frances LaDue (Melton 1997, 430), the occultist eco-utopian dream was not to last. Lomaland never attained the financial self-sufficiency for which it strove and, like many other similar experiments, eventually fell into decline (Melton 1997, 406). At the same time, the popularity of Spiritualism began to decrease shortly after the Fox sisters' confession of fraud (Davenport 1897, 84), and spiritualist communes were soon shattered by internal contradictions.

4. CONCLUSIONS: LOSING SUMMERLAND

> These were people who had evaded the Smoke, and looked forward to a Utopian world in which smoke would be no more.
> A.S. Byatt, *The Children's Book* (2009)

By the early twentieth century, spiritualist eco-utopianism seemed to have drifted away from its initial ideals. Despite their original stance against industrial

capitalism, many became entrepreneurial communes where dwellers produced and sold diverse goods, gradually emulating the economic and property laws of the urban civilization that they had previously chosen to flee (Melton 1997, 430). This breakdown of communal values, along with the leadership vacuum left by the death of the original founders (Melton 1997, 404), led to a recession in membership, as well as to a dwindling of confidence in the toils of the agricultural lifestyle (Francis 2018, 27). In addition, Spiritualism was gradually replaced by Theosophy, which implied that the original anti-authoritarianism of the Occult revival became increasingly supplanted by hermetic elitism (Tryphonopoulos 1996, 43). The disappearance of utopian values was also reflected in women's roles in the colonies. Despite the fact that these spaces originally facilitated the subversion of conventional gender roles (Silver-Isenstadt 2002, 65), some of these organizations ultimately replicated the same androcentric dynamics they were seeking to avoid: many of them returned to traditional divisions of labour, often assigning more domestic tasks to women (Pitzer 1997, 169). Certain non-monogamous colonies, which were meant to subvert the legal status of women as private property of their husbands (Braude 1989, 126), did not achieve female erotic liberation, but, instead, resulted in the sexual exploitation of female members of the community (Jennings 2016, 18). Accounts from the theosophist Aquarian Foundation (1878-1938) reveal how the women of the commune were designated to mate with their leader, Edward Arthur Wilson, or "Brother XII," in the name of his alleged sexual teachings (Pitzer 1997, 412). Other groups exhibited similar practices, the most infamous one being the Oneida community (1848-1880), where its polygamous founder, John Humphrey Noyes, inspired spiritualist experiments with 'free love' (Pitzer 1997, 273).

These instances demonstrate that eco-spiritualist practices, rather than being entirely free from patriarchal ideologies, were not always as radical or transformative as they might appear. Nevertheless, despite the partial failure of the spiritualist quest for Summerland, the work of the activists and thinkers mentioned in this study demonstrates how the nineteenth-century Occult revival offered its female followers diverse tools to pave the way for contemporary approaches to occultism, spirituality and performative witchcraft. As manifested through the eco-utopian perspectives of Kingsford, Gove Nichols, and Tingley, spiritualist culture anticipated several of the attributes which characterize present-day reactions against the environmental crisis, such as the prominent presence of women in animal welfare advocacy (Adams & Donovan 1995, 5), or the recent interest in off-the-grid, communal living among the youngest generations (Haddaway 2025). Despite the practical limitations of eco-utopian communes, the syncretic roots and pantheistic overtones of Spiritualism offered women of the period a unique language for interspecies reconciliation, configuring their esoteric beliefs as tools of resistance and sources of hope.

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