Cultivating Freedom:
Reimagining Individualism and Community through the Landmark Forum

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Introduction

The Ties that Bind

My formative memories of community are tethered to a self-help program called the Landmark Forum. Landmark's teachings are centered around the notion that life is empty and meaningless; from this empty space, we each possess inherent freedom and agency. This freedom is meant to empower possibility in Landmark's participants, dismantling the notion that we have no influence over our lives or circumstances. It was through my mother that Landmark became a central part of my childhood; she attended their seminars weekly, participating in their programs while also training to eventually become an Introduction Leader. When I was 7, I was old enough to participate in Landmark programs myself. Landmark's work became a shared language between my mother and I; their teachings and values instilled a deeper meaning into my understanding of existence. I learned to communicate about life and hardship on a higher level, cultivating an awareness of myself by recognizing the power embedded in my own actions and choices.

As I have gained a bit more distance from the program in the past few years, I've found myself wondering if Landmark's teachings and values could be justified within discussions regarding social justice and community-building. I've had enough practice reading and writing about New Age spirituality and cults in my Religion classes - it felt easy enough to lump Landmark into this category. When I tried to explain this part of my life to people, I began to hear my experiences through their tempered reactions. For many people, explanations didn't land quite right, and I often left these conversations feeling disoriented and confused about the program. Throughout college, I compartmentalized this aspect of myself. Privately I thought, "Is Landmark just a self-help hoax?" I considered how the program was embedded in the

socio-cultural dynamics of capitalism, consumer culture, and whiteness - concerns that are salient and valuable among critiques of self-help and spiritual culture. While I thought about Landmark's work in relation to these dynamics, I was hesitant to fully wrestle with such a question, in fear that my entire sense of reality would crumble if the answer was yes.

Throughout this project, I've realized that taking on such a question requires a magnitude of patience and compassion. I could never escape the persistence of my concerns; despite my fears, I felt resolved by my own experience within Landmark's programs. This community inarguably shaped my understanding of selfhood, community, and the meaning of life. My desire to help people heal - to more deeply connect with people - was nurtured through their language around personal transformation. Because I am so spiritually fastened to this work, I realized that to trust this project meant trusting myself above all else. This project is as much an examination of Landmark as it is an intimate, personal exploration of self; it is an attempt to weave together parts of myself that have felt contradictory in the past - my spiritual pursuits and academic interests.

Researching Landmark's genealogy has allowed me to connect with movements and histories of people that extend beyond the program itself. Landmark is not a program that stands on its own - it is a product of a much larger spiritual and historical context. The Landmark Forum originates from a program called est (Erhard Seminar Training), created in the 1970s by an ex-car salesman named Werner Erhard.[1] The program eventually went defunct, and Erhard sold the rights to Landmark Worldwide. At the time, est became extremely popular, drawing attention from celebrities such as Yoko Ono, Diana Ross, and Jerry Rubin.[2] Over the years it has garnered

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[1] Michael Fisher, "'Getting It' and Transforming the Self: Werner Erhard as Unlikely Her to Fritz Perls," *Gestalt Review* Vol. 23, No. 1. (2019): 1.
[2] Lucas Richert, "East meets West at the edge of the ocean," The Psychologist, January 2018, https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-2018/january-2018/east-meets-west-edge-ocean.

many reputations, known for being an outrageous self-help seminar that would not allow participants to eat, drink, or go to the bathroom for hours on end. The program was subject to much criticism for practicing mind-control, being a cult, and generally contributing to a highly individualistic and narcissistic atmosphere within American culture.[3] Est's teachings and programming have since lived on through Landmark, which takes a more chilled-out approach to self-help compared to its predecessor. Its reputation, however, continues to haunt Landmark in its present form.

One of the earliest, and formative, critics of self-help culture was Christopher Lasch, who wrote *The Culture of Narcissism* in 1979. His book prompted a scathing reexamination of society-at-large in light of the political turmoil of the 60s and 70s.[4] In the book, he criticizes self-help culture for contributing to a cultural mindset that places 'survival of the self' above all else. His critique cites est specifically, arguing that such programs promote hyper-individualism and permissive personal freedom. I am choosing to converse with Lasch because his book is a complete embodiment of the very concerns I had when I began this project; he condemns self-help culture for being indulgent and conceited. His incisive analysis, however, forces us to reconsider the ways in which our constructions of selfhood are dictated by capitalism and consumerism.

Lasch's argument has been quite devastating to the cultural perception of the self-help movement. While his ideas continue to resonate within modern concerns of cultural narcissism, his analysis can be extremely narrow. As a participant of the culture that he writes about, I find it hard to reconcile my communal experiences within Landmark and Lasch's assertion that self-help is highly individualized. In a Los Angeles Times article from 1988, Werner Erhard

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[3] Ibid.
[4] Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations,* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2018), xxiv.

responded to criticism about est, explaining how "One of the fundamental misinterpretations is that the work we did in the '70s was part of the Me Decade, when we were actually countercultural in the '70s… rather than becoming self-centered, people who have been through our programs began to look outward, because they got a sense that they could intervene in the circumstances of life."[5] Erhard, to his credit, is not unaware of the many reputations that est has garnered throughout the years; he is not air-headed nor is he ignorant of the way in which this program was, and is, contentious as it has lived on through Landmark. However, his use of 'outward' directly combats Lasch's assertion that such work is narcissistic; rather, it centers community by healing the individual first.

This interconnection between the individual and the communal is a dynamic that lies at the heart of Landmark's work. From an outsider perspective, it can seem like Landmark prioritizes the agency of the individual self over the collective. Rather, Landmark views the experience of the self in holistic relation with the collective. While Landmark is an individualized experience for each participant, it crafts a sense of community because it is done in a group setting. As you move through their curriculum, the transformational focus builds outward from self to community. The teachings try to marry the individual with the group, emphasizing that we can better connect with people by knowing ourselves more intimately.

This commitment to outward healing has remained at the forefront of est and Landmark's work throughout the years. Using a number of scholars and critics, I will disprove Lasch's assertion that programs such as est and Landmark are shallow examples of a self-involved culture. Through analyzing Landmark's notions of selfhood, freedom, and community, I will argue that cultivating a deeper understanding of oneself can be a radical, liberatory tool for social

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[5] Iris Krasnow, "Transformation of est Founder Werner Erhard: The Noted Salesman of Personal Effectiveness Is Still Attracting the Buyers," *Los Angeles Times,* December 2, 1988, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1988-12-02-vw-907-story.html (accessed January 28, 2022).

justice. Rather than encouraging narcissism and the indulgence of personal desire, the teachings and philosophies of these programs are intended to heal the individual in order to inspire collective transformation.

I will begin by outlining Lasch's claim that self-help culture is highly individualistic, encouraging narcissism through the pursuit of unregulated freedom. By locating est and Landmark's conception of individualism in relation to Lasch's analysis, I'll think through the dichotomy between the individual and the communal as they function within these programs. Examining individualism within American culture, I'll bring in scholars like Patrick Deneen and Robert Brandom to consider the role of the individual as it relates to social well-being, raising the possibility that the cultivation of self can be a way to transform and strengthen community.

In the second chapter, I specifically outline some of Landmark's programs, using my and others' experiences to provide a more subjective understanding of their work. I discuss Landmark's techniques and the way they draw from Gestalt awareness therapy. Through this more detailed analysis, I combat the notion that self-help promotes indulgent freedom. I show how Landmark's techniques and practices are rooted in a disciplining of the self that allows access to higher freedom through mastered and sustained awareness.

After presenting a detailed, subjective portrait of Landmark's programs, I will explore how a number of scholars theorize selfhood in relation to individual and communal liberation. I'll use Audre Lorde, Michel Foucault, Jane Bennett and others to analyze Landmark's work through a more activist framework. This social-oriented lens allows me to consider how embodied freedom, experienced through a controlled and sustained attention to eroticism, pleasure, and enchantment, can be a radical tool for subverting systems of oppression.

In my final chapter, I will return to some scholars, such as Slavoj Žižek, who question the legitimacy of spiritual seeking and the cultural encounters implicated in self-help culture. I'll discuss how Landmark's work is involved in the political dynamics of spiritual bricolage, examining the nuance within this convergence of culture. By engaging with some of these critiques, I will continue to problematize notions of individualism and explain how disdain towards self-help reinforces the power that capitalism and consumer culture has over the individual.

Can Self-Help Save Us?

Locating est and Landmark

In *The Culture of Narcissism,* Christopher Lasch critiques self-help culture for encouraging a type of individualism that is defined by an unfettered, indulgent freedom. He is primarily concerned with the way in which such an individualism has led to a breakdown of community, fragmenting American society and generating cultural narcissism. Given the rise of self-help culture in the modern era, exemplified through programs like Landmark, Lasch's critique poses an important question within our current context. He urges us to ask, is self-help a veil for ego-indulgence? What do these programs actually encourage us to explore within ourselves? While Lasch claims that self-help culture is a social disease, programs like Landmark argue that the cultivation of selfhood creates the possibility for communal transformation. In this chapter, I will think through the dissonance between Lasch's claim and Landmark's values, revealing the way in which critics like Lasch overlook the deeper intentions within self-help culture. I will do this by evaluating individualism within American culture, considering the nature of personal freedom in relation to community and combating Lasch's assertion that individual transcendence is antithetical to social well-being.

Cultural narcissism, Lasch argues, emerged as a response to the turbulence of the 20th century, evidenced by tragedies and political uprisings such as the Holocaust, Vietnam, the threat of nuclear annihilation, and the race riots of the 60s. He argues that these events created a sense of "impending doom" that began to permeate the collective psychological sphere towards the end of the 20th century.[6] Lasch accounts for this cultural period as one in which Americans abandoned notions of community in the interest of their own survival and happiness. He explains

[6] Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism,* 12.

that the fear of the unknown destabilized an American "sense of historical continuity, the sense of belonging to a succession of generations originating in the past and stretching into the future."[7] Impending doom, he argues, deadened dreams of the future that tethered Americans together in the past.[8] Rather than deal with the realities of this instability, "People busy themselves instead with survival strategies, measures designed to prolong their own lives, or programs guaranteed to ensure good health and peace of mind."[9] The nation was growing increasingly divided because of the uncertainty that plagued the political landscape. This led to a collective emptiness that left many feeling isolated and faithless within American society. Within Lasch's analysis of this time, self-help culture was a widespread example of a "survival strategy" that allowed Americans to cope with so many collective unknowns. Such a "growing despair of changing society," Lasch bemoans, generated a narcissism that allowed Americans to retreat inward in order to 'find themselves,' so to speak.[10] The individual, Lasch asserts, could only muster the energy to think of themselves in the wake of such great change.

In his article, "'Getting It' and Transforming the Self: Werner Erhard as Unlikely Her to Fritz Perls," Michael Fisher expands on Lasch's conception of this time, explicitly locating est within these movements. He contextualizes est within the "human potential movement," which represented a collective search for self. The human potential movement was primarily grounded in conceptions of the self that came from Buddhism and other Eastern traditions.[11] With the popularity of hallucinogens, meditation, and yoga, Americans became obsessed with the idea of shifting consciousness itself. Fisher quotes Donald Lattin in his account of this time period: "We were a restless bunch, helplessly hoping, endlessly searching for ecstasy and enlightenment…

[7] Ibid., 13.
[8] Ibid., 12.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Michael Fisher, "'Getting It' and Transforming the Self: Werner Erhard as Unlikely Her to Fritz Perls," *Gestalt Review* Vol. 23, No. 1. (2019): 2.

whether through Jesus, peyote, or a charismatic swami from the East"... Lattin's account seems intended to rouse sympathy. But for many social observers since the 1970s, admissions like his lend credence to the claim that the decade was defined by narcissism."[12] This convergence of religious and spiritual thought has led to an array of controversy regarding the appropriation of culture in the West.[13] Concerns of exoticism, capitalism, and consumerism in such movements have bolstered Lasch's critique that such a time was highly individualistic, allowing Americans to pick and choose beliefs and cultural practices for their own benefit.

While the convergence of culture between the East and West invites meaningful critique within the American context, it is too simplistic to say that these movements were entirely appropriative or problematic. A closer look at these movements complicates Lasch and Fisher's analysis; while Lasch argues that programs such as est were individualistic survival mechanisms produced in response to collective instability, many of these movements offered a sense of community and belonging to many individuals. Spiritual seeking created a greater and more diverse exchange of religious thought, pushing against American secularism and Christianity.[14] This allowed many Americans to commune in alternative ways, exploring new realms of personhood and meaning. Michael Fisher writes that "What emerged [after the sixties] was a turbulent cultural dialogue that highlighted the very tensions, longings, and anxieties that made est appealing to some and appalling to others. In an era when the country seemed in decline, est was a beacon and a target for many Americans' desire for wholeness, salvation, and fuller selfhood."[15] It's no surprise that est's promise of wholeness and fulfillment was a breath of fresh air for such a directionless generation.

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[12] Ibid., 3.
[13] Véronique Altglas, *From Yoga to Kabbalah: Religious Exoticism and the Logics of Bricolage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 60.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Fisher, "Getting It," 4.

During this period that Lasch describes as highly narcissistic, programs like est seemed to provide much community for isolated Americans. Lasch's critique explicates the dichotomy between the individual and communal in our conception of social well-being. What is the individual's role within community? Landmark, as a continuation of est, reveals that concerns of the self are still deeply relevant within American culture. I want to know if the cultivation of "fuller selfhood," as Fisher writes, can be reconciled with a deeper commitment to social change.

Lasch's Narcissist

Concerns of selfhood are not specific to self-help culture or programs like Landmark. Ultimately, we are all constantly engaging with the self in distinct and various ways based on how we conceptualize ourselves in relation to others. Analyzing the role of the individual within programs like Landmark requires a greater exploration of individualism within American culture. While Lasch uses self-help as an example of his notion of narcissism, he is ultimately rendering narcissism a disease that implicates American society more broadly. By considering different notions of individualism and the self's place within society, I can better articulate the possibility for community that arises through Landmark's cultivation of selfhood. Through this analysis, I will show how Lasch's conception of narcissism obstructs a deeper understanding of this attention to the self and recreates a detached objectivity that is detrimental to the possibility of community.

Lasch characterizes the modern narcissist as embodying a certain kind of American individualism that puts one's needs above anything else; this type of individualism encourages a sense of personal freedom that is purely focused on self-actualization and satisfaction. In his book, *Why Liberalism Failed,* Patrick Deneen defines this individualism through the social

contract theories of John Locke, who conceived of "natural humans not as parts of wholes but as wholes apart. We are by nature "free and independent," naturally non-governed and even nonrelational."[16] This understanding of the individual maintains that we, as humans, are separate in the most profound sense, and thus we should do whatever we want because we have the freedom to do it. Deneen goes on to describe this type of liberty as "a condition of complete absence of government and law, in which "all is right"- that is, everything that can be willed by an individual can be done."[17] Lasch's narcissist thrives off of this individualism, seeking validation from everyone around them while pursuing an "apparent freedom" that is actually bolstered and sustained by others' admiration.[18] Furthermore, this individualism promotes a kind of agency that relinquishes one from the responsibilities of participating in community.

Deneen and Lasch conceptualize the pursuit of freedom, in the context of individualism, as untethered to any concern for communal freedom or justice. Rather, these narcissistic individuals, exemplified through self-help culture, prioritize their happiness and liberation at the careless expense of others. This characterization of individualism creates an extreme binary between the individual and the communal and leaves little room for a more interconnected relationship between the two. It seems as though the alternative to this individualism is a society in which community functioning is prioritized over the individual; instead, people become cogs in a machine that suppresses individual agency and freedom of self. I'm concerned with how Deneen and Lasch's notions of individualism distance us from the idea of a society that values individual well-being at all, in fear that this pursuit is a narcissistic endeavor. Robert Brandom helps us conceive of a relationship between individuality, community, and freedom that offers a

[16] Deneen, Patrick J, "Uniting Individualism and Statism," in *Why Liberalism Failed*, ed. James Davison Hunter, and John M. Owen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 48.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism,* 19.

balanced possibility for social well-being - one that values the individual in conjunction with the collective. The interconnection of these three forces within Brandom's argument provides a helpful framework through which we can analyze Landmark's conception of the individual vs. communal.

In his essay, "Freedom and Constraint by Norms," Brandom uses Kant and Hegel to theorize the way in which social constraints by norms such as practices, cultural structures, traditions, etc… engender different kinds of freedom which can be measured against such constraints. Kant, Brandom references, argues that freedom itself is defined simply by constraint through norms, meaning that one experiences freedom in opposition to constraint. Brandom, however, uses Hegel to theorize a higher notion of freedom that is *made possible* by such constraints, but is not a direct result of the constraints. This is an expressive freedom that is more ineffable - almost spiritual in nature. He uses language as an example of a social norm that allows us to explore new realms of existence: "One acquires the freedom to believe, desire, and intend the existence of novel states of affairs only insofar as one speaks some language or other, is constrained by some complex of social norms. Expressive freedom is made possible only by constraint by norms…"[19] As Brandom articulates throughout the essay, such expressive freedom is not just experienced as a relief from the constraints imposed; the structure of the constraints allow individuals to access an untapped freedom that is unlocked through careful and intentional practice.

Brandom's example of language provides a useful metaphor for how the cultivation of particular practices can allow us to experience higher expressions of freedom. Landmark's cultivation of selfhood directly relates to the attainment of such freedom; individuals are taught

[19] Robert Brandom, "Freedom and Constraint by Norms, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (1979): 194. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20009758.

to engage in self-discipline through attention to language, attitude, and thoughts, for instance, that are disempowering to one's self-worth. Through this discipline, one gains a greater capacity for personal liberation, which I argue fits into Brandom's category of expressive freedom. Brandom argues that expressive freedom, while liberating and inspiring for the individual, is also just as necessary for strengthening culture and community. He writes that this is a

> Positive freedom, freedom *to* do something rather than freedom *from* constraint… Thus we cannot attribute to a dog or a prelinguistic child the desire to prove a certain conjectured theorem, the belief that our international monetary system needs reform, or the intention to surpass Blake as a poet of the imagination. One comes to be able to do such things only by becoming able to engage in a wide variety of social practices…[20]

Brandom clarifies the use of such a freedom in the context of the community. Constraints and norms, at their best, allow individuals to attain greater capacities for learning, creating, thinking, and building.

The idea that expressive freedom is productive to the community can be usefully linked to Landmark. Expressive freedom is defined as a sense of possibility; the front page of their website reads, "Redefine what's possible: in your relationships, your work, your families, your communities, what matters most to you."[21] This slogan centers the individual while also focusing this possibility to a communal sphere. These words imply that it is in the interest of our greater community that we prioritize a cultivation of such expressive freedom within the individual. This prioritization of the individual as benefiting the community offers an alternative notion to Lasch and Deneen's arguments that individualism isolates the individual from contributing to society.

Given such widely held assumptions around individualism, which I began to outline with Lasch and Deneen, the cultivation of such an expressive freedom is not necessarily deemed a

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[20] Ibid.
[21] Home page, *Landmark Worldwide*, April 22, 2022, https://www.landmarkworldwide.com/.

worthy task for community-building. There now seems to be a fierce dichotomy between the individual and communal, in which Americans are wary of appearing narcissistic or self-involved due to the profound influence that critics like Lasch have had on American culture. Programs like Landmark appear naive, illusory and even delusional under the category of Lasch's narcissism. While his critiques remind us to question the merits and intentions within the cultivation of selfhood, his reactionary response to such a pursuit illuminates deeper tensions within the structure of American society and the formation of community.

Lasch critiques self-help culture for its seemingly narcissistic abuse of personal freedom. Brandom's expressive freedom helps us look at individualism within self-help culture through a different lens. Rather than treating the pursuit of selfhood as an indulgent, permissive phenomenon, I want to consider how Lasch's fear of individualism prevents him from analyzing self-help from a more generous viewpoint. His perspective on the so-called awakening of the 60s and 70s encapsulates his characterization of the narcissist. He writes that,

> …people have convinced themselves that what matters is their psychic self-improvement: getting in touch with their feelings, eating health food, taking lessons in ballet or belly dancing, immersing themselves in the wisdom of the East, jogging, learning how to "relate," overcoming the "fear of pleasure,"...elevated to a program and wrapped in the rhetoric of authenticity and awareness.[22]

Lasch's critique is fraught for a number of reasons. On the one hand, he questions the 'authenticity' of these practices, a concern that is particularly valid in regards to the commodification of Eastern religions. However, I don't think that Lasch is so concerned with the ethics of spiritual seeking so much as he is simply wary of feelings and human enjoyment; his disdain of the self, of "pleasure" and embodied experience, reveals a fundamental disconnect

[22] Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism,* 13.

within our relationship to ourselves. Lasch basically argues that engaging with oneself and exploring personal interests is narcissistic.

The salience of terms such as pleasure, feelings, and self-improvement speak to the way in which these aspects of selfhood are frowned upon, at least for critics like Lasch. This attitude encourages a control over the self that represses desire; this control just suppresses selfhood rather than doing anything productive. In fact, it harms the individual. Brandom asserts that "Political constraint is illegitimate insofar as it is not in the service of the cultivation of the expressive freedom of those who are constrained by it."[23] The constraint of enjoyment, of personal expression, seems to encroach on the boundaries of productive and generative norms as Brandom would define them. Lasch, however, implies that the experience of feeling itself is a crossing of social norms; the need to control pleasure, for instance, is emblematic of Christian attitudes regarding sin and virtue. The controlling of feeling and the suppression of desire in modern culture can be traced to more insidious dynamics ingrained within American culture.

Freedom and Control in American Culture

In a more historical context, Lasch argues that the modern narcissist was born out of the colonial and imperial self. He draws comparisons between the Western frontier and the "White Anglo-Saxon superego, which feared the wildness of the West because it objectified the wildness of the individual."[24] The "wildness of the West" exemplified the possibility of exalted freedom for White colonizers; its wildness, however, also inspired great fear because of their own repression of the senses. This unencumbered liberation was too antithetical to the traditions from which the colonizers came; religion, feudalism, and monarchy - these systems maintained a

[23] Brandom, "Freedom and Constraint," 196.
[24] Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism,* 19.

severe control over the White ego.[25] This mental restraint contributed to a psychic repression; the inability to feel alive within themselves led colonizers to exert extreme control over such wildness by whatever means necessary, resulting in mass genocide and violent subjugation of Native peoples.

Lasch comments on this violence and the ways in which the White repression of the id led to an obsessive desire for capital and accumulation, perhaps resulting in modern consumerism: "While celebrating the romance of the frontier in their popular literature, in practice Americans imposed on the wilderness a new order designed to keep impulse in check while giving free reign to acquisitiveness."[26] This notion of impulse control can be defined most explicitly within the suppression of sexual and physical primal desire. By repressing one's primal nature, we effectively deaden our entire sense of aliveness. This creates an alienation of the self; because aliveness is not felt in the physical body, it can only be experienced through drastic external measures. This numbness creates a larger emptiness, or void, within the body, meaning that violence and control outside of the self becomes the dominant mode through which we feel something.

Lasch's analysis of colonialism speaks to the way in which this psychic schism is rooted within the very fabric of American culture. Consequently, we cannot examine the rise of self-help culture without looking at the very origins of society; the broader category of repression presents a poignant way to inspect the emergence of personal desires in a modern sense. If American identity is founded on the repression of impulse, then much of our culture must stem from an inner rage that offers no release for these untapped desires. Our inability to feel deeply has generated a culture of consumption that is borne out of violence, mostly unbeknownst to us:

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[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.

"Modern propaganda of commodities and the good life has sanctioned impulse gratification and made it unnecessary for the id to apologize for its wishes or disguise their grandiose proportions."[27] Capitalism, therefore, represents a structural response to this repression; Americans are programmed to look outside of themselves for security and stability rather than experiencing an inner aliveness that connects us with each other. Connection, and personal identity, is now measured through an external self rather than our essential nature as individual human beings.

Lasch critiques self-help and spiritual culture for giving in to the whims of uncontrolled desire - for encouraging personal indulgence by chasing the "good life" through consumption. While consumptive desire has deadened humanity in a myriad of ways and certainly overtaken a lot of self-help culture, Landmark is not a program that promotes such indulgence. On the contrary, the cultivation of selfhood requires an immense amount of control and discipline; it is a disciplining of the self that redirects control from an external to an internal locus. It seeks to relocate control so that individuals gain more awareness over the impulses that lead us to consume, for instance. This inner control over such impulse allows us to experience a sense of fullness and presence that works against the emptiness and numbness that plagues American culture, as I described. Control is redefined through self-regulation as opposed to external, dominating forces.

Lasch, however, views systems of control as the force which preserved community in the past; his examples promote patriarchal authority as one of these binders. He asserts that the growth of bureaucracy has contributed to a societal confusion previously abetted by authority figures "formerly represented by fathers, teachers, and preachers."[28] He views such figures as

[27] Ibid., 32.
[28] Ibid., 20.

authoritative structures that society needs in order to preserve a kind of American community. I, however, view his notion of American community as a complete illusion - a facade that has sustained White privacy, comfort, and 'tradition' at the catastrophic expense of violence and colonialism. In the context of repression, I find Lasch to be afraid of the modern world, yet yearning for a time that substituted external control and domination in the place of extreme social dysfunction. This control is simply another byproduct of fear - a repression in and of itself.

The internal control harnessed within Landmark's work is different from the repression of desire that I discussed earlier; it's a controlled mastery of awareness over the self that inspires a liberatory sense of peace. This focused awareness increases our connection with ourselves while inevitably connecting us more deeply with others. Pursuing a greater sense of peace and connection through this kind of self-knowledge is seemingly off-putting to critics like Lasch. He cites Jerry Rubin, an activist and est participant, as an example of what he views as the consequences of this culture. He writes that,

> Rubin sees his "journey into myself" as part of the "consciousness movement" of the seventies. Yet his "massive self-examination" has produced few indications of self-understanding, personal or collective… Rubin discusses the "female in me," the need for a more tolerant view of homosexuality, and the need to "make peace" with his parents, as if these commonplaces represented hard-won insights into the human condition.[29]

Lasch's blatant sexism is just one example of the ways in which he is obviously blind to the issues that face American society. He diminishes the legitimacy of issues like sexism and homophobia, coarsely remarking that they are far too silly to be "hard-won insights into the human condition." Especially in a more modern context, his analysis of what it means to be insightful seriously undermines the suffering that does plague our culture. If overcoming

[29] Ibid., 24.

prejudice, which produces suffering and demolishes community, is not the suitable way to rebuild a fragmented society, I am not sure what Lasch regards as important. His disdain for the revelations that Rubin discusses only exhibits his own discomfort with feeling deeply; he characterizes empathy as a trivial cliche and reinforces a certain kind of masculinity that discourages real engagement with the issues that plague American society.

Lasch raises valuable concerns regarding the sense of individualism that has shaped modern notions of American culture. Notions of selfhood arising from programs like Landmark, however, exist outside of our traditional understanding of American individualism. Yes, Landmark encourages us to embrace a kind of autonomy in our lives, like chasing our personal dreams. This encouragement, however, really emphasizes the way in which our identity exists in relation to the people around us. Because of the way that we are all interconnected, we have to own ourselves and our imperfections so that we can be more present and connected. It is the persistence of repression, and the avoidance of self, that actually creates the narcissism that Lasch observes; we become so unaware of ourselves that we neglect our own needs while simultaneously harming the people around us.

I'm interested in how this repression plays out in American culture at this moment. The distractions that have come out of modernity have certainly contributed to a growing inattentiveness and consequently a massive rise in anxiety. The catastrophes that Lasch wrote about during his time still prevail through war, racism, sexism, and other violences - yet now we have the addition of social media and technology. This gives us both the tremendous potential for understanding and empathy while numbing us further in the wake of anxiety and fear-mongering. Can we resist the temptation to numb out? I believe that our very existence depends on this

question. If we ignore the ways in which these distractions are distancing us from each other, we risk further disconnection and the possible collapse of community.

Ultimately, Lasch fails to wonder whether engagement with the self is, in fact, a detrimental response to a crumbling society, or if it is actually indicative of a deeper shift within our collective psyche. I'm inclined to argue the latter, in part because I have the luxury of perspective from the 21st century. I will continue to show how other scholars conceive of the cultivation of selfhood as a practice that allows us to view systemic problems, such as hatred and violence, as essentially materializing within each of us. Landmark's programs are designed to help participants recognize the way in which they are active agents of change occurring on all levels of the individual and social. This recognition instills a greater sense of responsibility within the individual as they realize their impact on the collective. While Lasch views the political turbulence of his time as a loss of American temperament, he is unable to recognize the ways in which the tragedies of the 20th century are emblematic of deeper societal fragmentation: repressed hatred and violence coming to light on a collective scale. To ignore our own positionality in this fragmentation minimizes our culpability as agents of such violence.

Subjective Experiences within Landmark's Programs

Locating Myself

As I explained in the previous chapter, Lasch is fundamentally concerned with an expression of selfhood that is unfettered, unregulated, and at the mercy of unpredictable desires and tendencies. His scorn for self-help culture is characterized by this fear of a lack of restraint within an individual's behavior. In fact, Landmark embodies quite the opposite; Landmark values discipline just as Lasch does, though he articulates it as a means to maintain the order of society whereas Landmark emphasizes the importance of refining control over the self.

By examining the interrelation between freedom, constraint, and community in the context of self-help culture, I will show how Landmark promotes a cultivation of such freedom through a disciplining of the self. This freedom is harnessed in the interest of collective transformation; rather than urging individuals to surrender to their every desire, they are taught to pay attention to themselves, fostering a selfhood that allows them to be more present and engaged in their lives and in their communities. This is a liberation that emerges through a fine-tuning of presence and attention to social constraints and forces of domination that work against community in the interest of maintaining total control over the individual.

Outlining Landmark's programming through personal experience and interviews with other participants, I will highlight the techniques and exercises that Landmark employs in order to engage their participants on a more visceral level. In the larger context of self-help culture, I am considering the way in which a program like Landmark can be a potential method for community-building and social engagement by means of cultivating a deeper relationship with the individual self. I will emphasize the way in which Landmark promotes a notion of selfhood that is viewed holistically in relation to the community. These anecdotes and technical analysis

will help frame my larger discussion of a productive individualism that prioritizes affect and feeling in healing societal fragmentation.

In crafting this analysis, I am leaning heavily on my own subjectivity as a narrator of Landmark's work. While I bring in some alternative perspectives, my description of Landmark is pretty much entirely a result of my own experiences and perceptions of this program. I chose to do this for a few reasons, one being that it is difficult to find many anecdotes about Landmark's programs. In the conversations I had with some participants, the specifics of the program were harder to recall; the impact that it had on their lives was more memorable. Consequently, many details about the program come from my own vivid memories. Secondly, this project is not meant to box Landmark's programs into one generalized experience. On the contrary, I hope to push against the desire to generalize and categorize individual experiences arising through self-help and spiritual seeking. By recalling the program through my own experiences, I am also emphasizing that these teachings cannot be judged objectively; any set of values or practices is ultimately filtered through our own subjectivity as people. I believe that such subjectivity gives us a greater capacity for understanding and so I am centering myself in order to present a deeper and more holistic exploration into one experience.

A Contentious Reputation

When I ask most people if they have heard about Landmark, I usually get two distinct responses. They'll either respond as overjoyed participants of the program, or give me a suspicious smile, wryly asking "Isn't it a cult or something?" If you Google "Landmark Forum," you will get a slew of Reddit threads pondering this very question. The cultural unsteadiness around programs like Landmark makes it a more fascinating program to write about; it exists

within a more liminal space, one that is not explicitly religious, yet maintains a kind of privacy that people love to liken to Scientology. However, many Reddit users, for instance, are outsiders who haven't actually participated in the program. I'd like to expel any darker suggestions about what Landmark entails.

From a marketing standpoint, it's difficult to fully grasp the extent of Landmark's mission and effectiveness through the confines of a website. Even the online explanations of their particular courses cannot capture what actually occurs in their rooms. Landmark's website expresses a distinctly vague and corporate idea of possibility; it could be that of any business consulting firm, for instance, or some other leadership development program. The aesthetic is conveniently palatable for the average American; like your own personal infinitude, Landmark is not confined to a vibe, per se. The colors are beige, white, and green, with Getty images of people smiling, or the Golden Gate Bridge.[30] If you weren't looking closely, the website itself could be a stock template of a Wordpress website, waiting to be personalized. Given the array of bland and ambiguous imagery that populates Landmark's website, anyone might raise an eyebrow at what Landmark is really all about. Pyramid scheme? Cult? These are the questions which often arise in the conversations regarding Landmark and its predecessor, est.

Many people maintain their suspicions around Landmark until they are actually in the program, or in an introduction to the program. The leaders are always very professionally dressed, yet participants come from a variety of backgrounds. There are people who are passionate about being there and others who are incredibly ambivalent, if not disdainful, about being there. Those people have usually been nagged so hard by friends or family that they are tired of hearing the very words, "the Forum." They sit quietly in the back row on the first day, not daring to speak and politely declining any requests to engage with the speakers. Most of

[30] Home page, *Landmark Worldwide,* https://www.landmarkworldwide.com/.

these people probably expect to leave after the first day; they will tell their friends or family that they tried it and did not like it, and the conversation will finally be closed. And some of these people do leave. However, many of them, surprisingly, come back and finish the seminar. I've watched people walk in on Day 1 slouching and frowning in their chair, and by the end of the weekend they are sitting in the front row, engaged and smiling at the leader. As I will try to communicate in my description of Landmark's work, it's somehow impossible to perceive reality like you did before you walked into that drab conference room.

My mother discusses her own hesitations when her friend tried to convince her to do it in the 1990s: "I was originally introduced to the Landmark Forum in about 1996 in Los Angeles by my friend Danielle. She had just done the Forum and she came to the dinner we were having with the group… We were kind of intrigued but we were in our 30s… then she started calling us and inviting us and everyone was like "don't answer the phone Danielle is gonna call!"[31] Ten years later, my mother was dealing with difficulties in her marriage and a friend recommended that she do the Forum. This time, it was different for her. Her pilates instructor "told me to come to an introduction at her house, I said "I know, but I'm not gonna bring my checkbook, I know they're gonna ask for money," so I didn't bring my checkbook and then I went to the introduction and I was totally blown away and I went and got my checkbook."[32]

When my mom was reintroduced to Landmark, she was wrestling with the recent discovery that my father had been cheating on her for a number of years. In an instant, her entire reality was completely destroyed - it was difficult for her to process and obviously affected her sense of self. She found herself lost in life, having devoted her identity to being a mother and a wife and neglecting her own desires along the way. In many ways, the devastation of this

[31] Jonna Juul-Hansen in discussion with the author, December 2021.
[32] Ibid.

situation forced her to re-examine what she wanted out of life. In the introduction my mom did, participants completed the "Vicious Circle" exercise, where you unpack a particular situation by writing 'what actually happened' in one circle, and then writing 'what you made it mean,' in the other circle.[33]

For my mother's situation, what actually happened was that my father cheated on her; what she made it mean was that her life was a lie, she wasn't good enough, she couldn't trust men, the list of meanings and stories goes on and on. This simple exercise draws attention to the ways in which we conflate things that happened to us with the stories that we create about those events: "I realized that could be freedom for me if I could really get that."[34] This distinction gives us the opportunity to relinquish those stories and recognize that these circumstances don't actually reflect our worthiness. Such an understanding requires an attention to the self that is not easy; one has to reckon with difficult aspects of who they are. This demands great control and self-acceptance. My mom went on to complete many different programs within Landmark. She gained so much from her own experience that she pretty much required that I participate in multiple Landmark programs as well. While I was also resistant to doing this work, watching my mom reinvent her life at such a fragile time assured me of Landmark's legitimacy as a place for healing.

Setting up the Programs

The fundamental truth that one gets out of Landmark is the idea that life is empty and meaningless. This is the core paradigm shift that many participants, including myself, walk away with after participating in such a program. This notion, however, is not just a fact or idea that you

[33] "The Landmark Forum Course Syllabus," *Landmark Worldwide, ,* https://www.landmarkworldwide.com/.
[34] Jonna Juul-Hansen.

walk away pondering; the program is designed for you to literally feel the freedom of that statement in the deepest part of yourself. It is a self-shattering experience that instantly connects you with a higher understanding of human existence; it also involves a tremendous amount of mental attention and engagement. One does not passively experience such an awakening - you have to exert control and discipline in order to follow along. Once you finally 'get it,' it feels as though a sense of reality is crumbling before you - the veil is lifted, even for a brief moment, and you see the true smallness of everything that seems to matter so greatly. Such a discovery becomes incredibly liberating, rather than hopeless and depressing, opening up a new realm of possibilities that seemed untenable before.

I will do my best to explain the ways in which Landmark provides such a jaw-dropping experience for its participants. It is a program that truly stands on its own, not fully resting within the clean categories of simply spiritual, therapeutic, or religious. However, I want to highlight the way in which Landmark, and est's, teachings draw on Gestalt awareness techniques. Gestalt's holistic notion of selfhood significantly influenced Landmark's approach to self-help; the techniques are based on a growing awareness of the instincts of the self and the way one interacts with their environment. Understanding the ethos of Gestalt provides a more helpful context regarding the mental faculties Landmark tries to cultivate within their participants.

The Gestalt School of Psychotherapy was founded by German psychotherapist Frederick (Fritz) Perls, along with his wife, Laura Perls.[35] Gestalt psychology is rooted in the tension between wholeness and fragmentation. The very word, gestalt, is defined as "a whole not equal to the sum of its parts."[36] In the context of psychology, it is understood that the human mind is an

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[35] Gary Yontef and Lynn Jacobs, "Gestalt Therapy," in *Current Psychotherapies,* ed. Danny Wedding and Raymond J. Corsini (Boston: Cengage, 2019), 342.
[36] Lester Embree, "Merleau-Ponty's Examination of Gestalt Psychology," *Research in Phenomenology* 10, (1980): 92. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24654310.

elaborate and mysterious unit that cannot be interpreted through fragmentation of the body and the mind. Rather, it must be examined as a whole. Perls used the foundation of Gestalt psychology to develop Gestalt therapy, which takes a more holistic approach by gaining an awareness of human consciousness and the interactions between the body and mind.[37] The therapy itself uses a wide variety of techniques and ideas to help the client gain awareness of their mind; Gestalt therapy recognizes the many different factors that can influence our being, such as affective, sensory, cognitive, interpersonal, and behavioral components.[38] This emphasis on experiential healing very much underscores Landmark's methods.

The Landmark Forum is the initial program that kick-starts Landmark's "Curriculum for Living." This is a 3 day, 9-5 seminar that happens on a Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, and then an evening session on Tuesday where attendees can bring guests. The aesthetic of the experience is almost comical; most of Landmark's programs take place in a conference room in a hotel or another corporate building. Participants are given name tags and are arranged in the room as if you are attending some kind of business meeting or seminar to build company morale. Leaders wear formal business suits; all of them are very polished yet ambiguous in a certain way. They do not stand out or show too much personality in how they present themselves. They are like vague apparitions, a mirror for what we could all become if we "did the work" that Landmark preaches.

The program's leader is perhaps the most pivotal aspect of the experience; they set the tone for how participants show up in the room. There are certainly parallels between the client/therapist relationship in Gestalt therapy and the coaching dynamics in Landmark. In Gestalt, this is considered to be a mutual relationship in which the therapist and client work

[37] Yontef and Jacobs, "Gestalt Therapy," 342.
[38] Ibid., 342.

together to uncover blindspots, even in the way the client relates to the therapist. Thus, it is not a relationship of just talking and listening; the therapist is highly aware of the client's demeanor, while also being attuned to how their demeanor affects the client:

> The therapist is in a powerful position in relation to the patient. If the therapist regards the patient with honesty, affection, compassion, kindness, and respect, an atmosphere can be created in which it is relatively safe for the patient to become more deeply aware of what has been kept from awareness. This enables the patient to experience and express thoughts and emotions that she or he has not habitually felt safe to share.[39]

In the relationship between the client and the therapist, there is an emphasis on understanding the client's subjective experience - it is the responsibility of the therapist to get into the client's experiential world. This is the phenomenological element of the work, which takes into account everything that is occurring between the client and therapist in a particular moment. Moreover, it is necessary for the therapist to be vulnerable in the relationship as well. In order for the client to feel comfortable and open, the therapist assumes an awareness of their own habits and creates an environment for relating that feels like an equal playing field.[40]

The structure differs within Landmark because there is usually one leader for about 90 participants in a seminar. However, the leader's job is to connect with each person in the room, whether directly or not. They are distinctly 'relatable,' making sure that every participant is on the same page. The days contain both teachings/lectures along with coachings. The coachings take place in front of all the participants; someone is either chosen (consensually) or volunteers to get coached by a leader, usually in front of a microphone so that everyone can hear. Even when participants aren't personally coached, the transformations that occur in front of the entire room are powerful to watch. They can have a drastic impact on everyone in the room because of

[39] Yontef and Jacobs, "Gestalt Therapy," 361.
[40] Ibid., 362.

the radical vulnerability that is being shared, and because the leader crafts an environment in which participants feel empowered, even if they are having a breakdown. The leader uses these coachings as examples of their specific teaching; they ask a particular question through which to coach one person, yet it often feels very personal to everyone else in the room as well. You feel yourself through the person that is getting coached - this establishes a safer and more intimate environment in the room, while also showing participants that vulnerability does not have to be limited to intimate relationships. It is a powerful tool that can be utilized anytime, with anyone we choose.

Like Gestalt, Landmark actively engages participants in exercises and techniques that are meant to jolt the individual out of their perceived reality. Leaders are trained to wake you out of your slumber by questioning how you are literally showing up in the room. It's not uncommon for one to be called out on their posture, body language, tone of voice, etc… as indicative of the way they are carrying themselves in the world: "...we explore a new view of language that alters the very nature of what is possible. Language comes to be seen as a creative act. Listening and speaking - actions we would normally see as commonplace - take on new dimensions and unexpected power. They become instruments of creation."[41] This deep, detailed way of coaching forces one to examine how both verbal and body language, for example, can impact the ways in which we diminish and empower ourselves on a daily basis through our choice of words.

From my own experience, leaders do not reveal much personal information about themselves in the seminars. They reveal just enough to seem human and show that they too have struggled or hit rock bottom like the attendees have. The point of the leader, however, is not to be explicitly relatable. Landmark pushes you, usually lovingly, to a place that you might not be willing to go without being prodded. Their language is consistent and repetitive, urging that you

[41] "The Landmark Forum Course Syllabus," *Landmark Worldwide, ,* https://www.landmarkworldwide.com/.

don't phone in your life. Est embodied an even harsher style than Landmark now does, but its rigorous technique provides helpful context for the program's evolution:

> ...the obtrusive profanity was intended to shock participants and draw any immediate reactions up to the surface. "Your life doesn't work!" was a euphemism for lost aliveness, and the insult was designed to provoke defensiveness… The purpose of the trainer's offensive persona was to jolt complacency and encourage self-awareness.[42]

At first, these techniques can seem very performative and almost outlandish. While Landmark is a toned down version of est's abrasive approach, the style is still uncomfortable and raises many emotions in all of the participants. Leaders yell and call out specific individuals without warning.

As much as you want to disappear into the walls and observe the seminar from the outside, Landmark pushes against this urge. It often feels like the program is tailored specifically to your story; the adrenaline and energy within the room is quite addictive. While est took a more extreme approach, literally preventing people from eating, drinking, or going to the bathroom, Landmark gives participants breaks, encouraging them to stay in the room until then if possible.[43] The structure, and the blandness of the room itself, is designed for everyone to focus on the work and the concepts - minimizing any distractions and creating a highly immersive experience.

The Forum

Landmark Worldwide offers endless seminars for their participants. However, the three pivotal programs that allow access to such seminars, the Forum, the Advanced Course, and the Self-Expression and Leadership Program, are defined as the Curriculum for Living. The Forum, Landmark's first seminar, is focused on transformation that begins with the individual self - this

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[42] Fisher, "'Getting It' and Transforming the Self: Werner Erhard as Unlikely Her to Fritz Perls," 7.
[43] Jerry Rubin, "Est," in *American Spiritualities,* ed. Catherine L. Albanese (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 254.

transformation is primarily characterized by exploding one's typical understanding of reality. Most people who attend the Forum are adults who are going through midlife crises, divorces, dealing with trauma, or other hardships. Because the Forum is every participant's introduction to the work, the weekend is spent tearing apart certain ideas that we have all been programmed to accept as 'truth.' Participants examine their filters of perception: "..we visit the notion that while we think of ourselves as open-minded and objective, in fact our approach to ourselves, our circumstances, and others is often filtered and even obscured by pre-existing notions and ideas – by our upbringing, our values, our past experiences."[44] This introduces the concept of life being one big game made up by fictionalized rules, yet we take these rules as fact and allow them to dictate our own choices in life. We are all playing games and conflating these games with reality. This lack of true awareness becomes a problem once we find ourselves stuck in the paradigms we've created.

Unpacking this blockage does not prioritize self-actualization in a selfish sense; while Landmark encourages participants to pursue dreams and goals within their lives, their philosophies (in my experience) do not promote an attitude toward life that prioritizes one's personal happiness at the expense of others. In fact, one of the foremost distinctions is recognizing our own responsibility within certain circumstances we have faced. One of the exercises, from my recollection, had us call people in our lives with whom we have a 'racket' - this is a common term used within the program that refers to either a complaint we have about something in our lives, or a fixed way of being within the world/in relationship with other people.[45]

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[44] "The Landmark Forum Course Syllabus," *Landmark Worldwide, ,* https://www.landmarkworldwide.com/.
[45] Ibid.

Many people who enter the Forum are dealing with significant blockages within their lives; this is often exemplified through relational hardship. Leaders will spend a long time coaching individuals through such blockages, questioning them for an hour, sometimes, about their relationship with their parents and how that has shaped their relationship with their partners or children. This requires tremendous patience on behalf of the leader and the participant; they will keep probing and questioning until the participant 'gets it' - that they used their past to dictate their future. Exercises like this one force you to have a conversation that you might have assumed would never happen, or would never be possible, because of a certain 'story' that you have about the situation or yourself. There are many participants who walk into the Forum with estranged parents who they haven't spoken to in years, and by Tuesday night, those parents are showing up with their children. This is just one small example of transformation that happens in the span of a weekend.

Another distinct aspect of Gestalt therapy, which inadvertently plays into Landmark, is the notion that human consciousness is created in the here and now. We are programmed, however, to project our past into the future, thus clouding our perception of the present moment.[46] Betty Cannon compares Perls' Gestalt therapy with Jean-Paul Sartre's existential theories in her article, "Nothingness as the Ground for Change: Gestalt Therapy and Existential Psychoanalysis." Both Perls' and Sartre's work focuses on the "idea that "nothingness" lies at the heart of the human world-making process."[47] Gestalt prioritizes experience over intellectualization, holding a fundamentally phenomenological approach to understandings of consciousness.

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[46] Betty Cannon, "Nothingness as the Ground for Change: Gestalt Therapy and Existential Psychoanalysis," *Existential Analysis* 20, no. 2 (July 2009): 194.
[47] Ibid.

The structure of the Forum primes participants to have the capacity to receive greater distinctions about life as the weekend goes on. Throughout the course, the leader will reference a mysterious distinction that is going to occur on the last day. They will say things like, "On Sunday at 4pm, your whole life is going to change." The major breakthrough that is defined on Sunday is the most crucial take-away that defines Landmark's work. It is the idea that "life is empty and meaningless, and it's empty and meaningless that it's empty and meaningless." Sartre's definition of nothingness helpfully communicates this concept more technically. He defines this nothingness as the space from which we unconsciously create meaning and value: "Being-in-itself (what's simply there) defined by being-for-itself (human value creation)."[48] This distinction basically describes the way in which we attach meaning to the material world, yet do not recognize how we conflate our consciousness with physical reality. Cannon writes that, "Though the material world exists first and is not dependent on consciousness to *be,* it does depend on consciousness to be *this* or *that.*"[49] Thus, we are constantly filling the empty void within us with things and ideas and truths; like a spring of water that keeps flowing, there is no static reality, yet we aren't trained to recognize this subconscious dynamic.

The nothingness that we experience, while in many ways freeing, is also terrifying. When we actually experience the collapse of our projections and feel the freedom of this quiet nothingness, we also confront an eradication of the self for a brief moment: "My freedom leaves me feeling unfounded, ungrounded, unable to count on myself to be this or that kind of person. If I turn and take a vantage point on myself, my self eludes me. There arises a gap or nothingness between the self perceiving and the self perceived."[50] Our desire to have a concrete sense of self (that we are able to "perceive") is simply an anecdote to the ineffable sense that we are

[48] Ibid., 195.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid., 196.

constantly transforming and changing. What causes us such great internal confusion is the fact that we are consistently resistant to that change; our resistance is really our Ego trying to find some kind of control over our being. Rather, it takes a greater amount of personal control to combat the Ego. Perls defines this discrepancy as having an "allegiance to "character"… a commitment to predictability based on an attempt to objectify the self."[51] This desire to 'figure out' who we are is replicated and externalized through many aspects of society; our obsession with defining ourselves through specific identities further limits us from truly expanding and transforming. If we aren't careful, we remain stuck within certain stories about who we are. Landmark's ultimate goal is to shatter these stories so that we can see the essence of ourselves more clearly.

While the idea of emptiness and meaninglessness is no secret in the context of the human condition, and in other religious philosophies, it is worth noting that many people who participate in Landmark are not necessarily approaching this program from a religious or spiritual perspective. This is a major breakthrough for most people in the room, and I think the significance of this breakthrough is heightened by the emotional priming that occurs throughout the weekend. In some ways, Landmark's seemingly corporate aesthetic actually intensifies the experiences that participants have throughout the weekend. I walked out of those rooms like I was on drugs, high from the blunt honesty that pervaded the entire experience. I would liken this feeling to a transcendent feeling; it disrupts the highly mediated, detached way in which many of our lives are constructed.

I was only 14 when I did the Forum, an age that some might argue was young for this kind of self-examination. However, I remember being 14 and seriously struggling with my own sense of self and my place within the world. Fourteen is, in some ways, the most unforgiving

[51] Ibid., 197.

age: I was filled with self-hatred, I despised my body, I felt gross and guilty about my existence, I wanted to be loved, I felt older than I was, I was completely disoriented by the physical and emotional changes that I was experiencing. To be in that vulnerable space and have someone yell "It doesn't matter! None of your fears matter!" was honestly the only truth that could have penetrated my ego at that time; I needed a dramatic experience to combat the violence of the voice inside my head. Truly getting, in an embodied sense, that life has *no inherent meaning* was extremely freeing. Moreover, I felt so much less alone in the recognition that everyone else was worried about themselves just as much as I was. I realized that everything was subjective; I could choose to attach to fears or to let them go. The simple awareness of this subjectivity gave me a sense of liberation from my mind. I felt more in control over my thoughts and feelings, understanding that they did not define me. I was in 8th grade at that time, and I believe that the Forum radically shifted my sense of self as I entered high school.

The Advanced Course

As I will continuously distinguish throughout my analysis of Landmark, the curriculum's design is meant to build outward from the self towards community. However, this relationship between the individual and the group is not a binary; each program, beginning with the Forum, contextualizes the self within the community. This is evident in exercises like the one I highlighted earlier; connection with ourselves is dependent on our relationships, and vice versa. It is a kind of symbiosis that we must pay closer attention to.

After the Forum, the next course in the Curriculum is the Advanced Course, which is focused on transformation on a group level. One of the participants I interviewed, Mike, has been involved with Landmark for a number of years, completing many seminars and even becoming

an Introduction Leader: “The Advanced Course is really about community, and the idea that we can accomplish so much more in community than we can alone.”[52] In this course, you are teamed up with a ‘working group,’ for the entire weekend. Your working group becomes your family throughout this program; while everyone still participates in the program as individuals, you usually eat lunch with your group, discussing certain exercises and ultimately hold each other accountable during the weekend for completing certain tasks. One of the great moments of the Advanced Course happens on the last day. All of the participants in the room form two lines across from each other. Each person stands face to face, about 1 foot away from each other. You are asked to stare into the other person’s eyes for a number of minutes. The closeness is awkward, even uncomfortable to begin with, but the point of the exercise is to see yourself inside of this other person, to love them as if they were you. People often begin to cry, understanding the profound sense of connection within this shared aliveness.

The idea of the Advanced Course is to develop the notion of yourself as interconnected with the group; if one person is late to return from a break, for example, other members of the group take responsibility in front of the program for that person. This kind of accountability powerfully illuminates the way in which each individual is integral to the functioning of the entire community. Leaders will actually wait until everyone in the room has returned from break, even if just one person is missing. They will then have a discussion with this person in front of the program, asking why they were late and holding the group accountable. These moments are not meant to be a public shaming; rather, they are teachable moments in which leaders are actually advocating for each individual to realize how much everyone else in the room is relying on them. While it often can feel like trivial minutiae that a participant is late, these moments are

[52] Mike Rhinehart in discussion with the author, February 2022.

meant to show how the details of selfhood that we often neglect or take for granted are sometimes the most important ones.

The Advanced Course, besides the group element, also enhances the conversation around the self that begins within the Landmark Forum. Participants are pushed to examine how they view themselves and the ways in which their identity was formed around pivotal, often traumatic, experiences that occurred in early childhood. This is further specified in the Advanced Course through the language of our 'act': "We all make up a lie about who we are as itty-bitty kids, and it's always in the background running and it's been running so long that we're not even aware of it. But it is what stops us everywhere in life."[53] We all create 'acts' in reaction to these experiences; if we become entrenched in these 'acts,' they become our personality and we end up carrying childhood wounds in our everyday experiences.

Leaders will have participants come up to microphones in front of the room while they guide individuals through discovering their 'act.' They will ask questions like, "Recall the first time in your life when you truly felt alone." The idea is that your reaction to this experience, as a young child, shaped a large part of your identity. 'Acts' are described in numerous ways, like "No one cares about me," or "Everyone else is wrong" or "I can't trust anyone." These are just a few examples. Jerry Rubin, in his account of est, recalls his reckoning with his 'act' in a seminar led by Werner Erhard: "Now Werner was creating a psychological theater provoking people into self-confrontation. Whenever people discover themselves, they grow and learn - and that has to be revolutionary. (My act is liking something *only* if I can call it "revolutionary.")[54]

This exercise is always extremely moving; when I did the Advanced Course my senior year of high school, I was one of the participants that went up in front of the room. Our leader

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[53] Ibid.
[54] Rubin, "Est," 255.

was coaching me through the day that my Dad left and my parents officially separated. While I wouldn't say it was the hardest day of my life, that moment drastically changed the trajectory of my childhood. I remember being surprised by the wave of pain that lurched within me as I stood up in front of 90 people. My knees almost buckled and I profusely sobbed, barely able to speak. It was one of the first times that I really felt the weight of hardship and the complicated nature of love. I was also the youngest participant in the room - afterwards, many people came up to me and hugged me, thanking me for my vulnerability. I was profoundly moved by the realization that I, at 18, could touch people who were many years my senior. This new awareness completely shifted my perception of age as a measure of knowing; I understood that we are all suffering, that our shared humanity has the power to connect us across the difference of time.

In our discussion, I asked Mike how he would define "authenticity" in the context of Landmark. I meant this specifically in relation to Landmark's core philosophy, which often emphasizes the power of cultivating an "authentic" experience of life, and an "authentic" relationship with yourself and others. He replied, "The ultimate inauthenticity is that there is *anything* significant about me or my life. And I don't think that gets drilled in as to what that really means."[55] Well, what does that mean? I was struck by the way in which Mike's conception of authenticity was framed in opposition to the term itself. I pushed further, posing an alternative definition. I said, "Perhaps authenticity is an acknowledgement of the game." This distinction is fickle; however, I think that inauthenticity, as Mike defines it, refers to the way in which we approach everything as meaning much more than it really does. Authenticity, therefore, is found through the recognition that *all of this* is made up anyways. This concept is beautifully articulated by Nietzche:

[55] Mike Rhinehart in discussion with the author, February 2022.

> We believe that we know something about the things themselves when we speak of trees, colors, snow, and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things - metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities… Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions - they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force.[56]

The idea of illusion is perhaps a more poignant derivative of inauthenticity. Nietzche's use of metaphor helps express the way in which we assign meaning to everything. We become so entrenched in the meaning, however, that we forget that it was us who made it mean something to begin with.

Landmark's work is meant to engender both individual and communal freedom by reconsidering the notion of meaning. While this is a liberating discovery, the subjective experience of their programs show how such liberation does not arrive out of nowhere. It is fostered through a masterful awareness of the self, requiring an exertion of control and discipline that must be continuously reinforced. Furthermore, such an awareness is not gained once; it has to be maintained through meticulous attention to the ways in which we are deeply programmed to remain unaware. This unawareness not only harms our own sense of self, but also disconnects us from our relationships and our communities. By knowing ourselves more intimately, we are able to pay deeper, loving attention towards others.

[56]Frederich Nietzche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense (1873)," 1873, https://www.austincc.edu/adechene/Nietzsche%20on%20truth%20and%20lies.pdf, 3-4.

Considering Erotic Freedom

Know Yourself

From my description of Landmark's programs, we can begin to see how the binary between the individual self and society as a whole is actually false. Communities are not separate entities from the individual, operating on their own accord. Rather, every individual participates in the creation of communities, cultures, and systems of belief. This is a critical distinction, disassembling the supposition that individuals have no agency, both within their construction of selfhood and their place in community. Societies, however, do not necessarily reflect a holistic portrayal of every individual's desires and needs. Power, control and domination all work to subdue these individuations for the net benefit of a few; critics like Christopher Lasch reaffirm the notion that community must be maintained through such external control.

I would now like to complicate the ideology that prioritizing community is central to the function of society. Landmark's teachings exist on the periphery of an entire body of critical scholarship which engages with this very restructuring. I will investigate the ways in which activists and scholars such as Audre Lorde, Michel Foucault, Adrienne Maree Brown, and Jane Bennett theorize the cultivation of selfhood as a necessary spiritual practice that bolsters communal well-being. These scholars help contradict Lasch's assertion that the pursuit of pleasure and joy is somehow selfish, separating the individual from participating in community. I will redefine pleasure through the lens of abundance and connection, as opposed to indulgence and narcissism, radically reshaping the work that programs like Landmark are doing to heal community. By analyzing the nature of control, I will illuminate the way in which the cultivation of selfhood requires harnessing a personal control that is productive as opposed to oppressive.

The relevance of the self within a functioning society has always been a profound concern within questions of community-building. This tension is paramount in the construction of culture; it is the nucleus out of which spiritual and religious beliefs, ethics, and practices across all cultures and societies are formed. The link between political formations and the existential nature of the human condition is thus inarguable. In American culture, however, this interrelation has been construed as separate in the political context; Audre Lorde discusses the way in which modernity has exacerbated this distance in her essay, "Uses of the Erotic." Lorde explains how,

> The dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is also false, resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge. For the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic - the sensual - those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings.[57]

Firstly, I will define Lorde's use of 'spiritual,' as it is significant in this discussion and contrasts an understanding of spirituality that is often White-washed via the New Age movement. The commodification and appropriation of indigenous beliefs and practices have unfortunately led many to invalidate the legitimacy of the spiritual realm.[58] Lorde's use of the word speaks to an essence of being that forms the crux of our existence; it also implies an interconnectedness that is central to the notion of community I have defined within my analysis of Landmark.

In this passage, Lorde writes about a fundamental disconnect that is embedded in our understanding of the self. The erotic, while often relegated to the category of sex, actually envelops much of our individual essence. Furthermore, one cannot actually suppress it; this

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[57] Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," in *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good.* ed. Adrienne Maree Brown (Oakland: AK Press, 2019), 31.
[58] Laura Perez, "Spirit Glyphs: Reimagining Art and Artist in the Work of Chicana Tlamatinime," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 44, no. 1 (1998): 1. doi:10.1353/mfs.1998.0009.

relates to Lasch's category of repression and the controlling of desire. The choice, or instinct, to control the erotic is another gesture of its elemental power and force over the psyche - this control is just a violent expression of self-denial. Acknowledging this inability to turn off our own selfhood, as measured by the erotic, collapses the illusion that community is an entity which operates outside of us.

Lorde's conception of the erotic reveals the way in which we are not static beings; our energies are constantly flowing and changing in reaction to others. Framing the question of self as bound up in the spiritual and the erotic reveals how the complexities of personhood, such as desire, joy, pain, and violence, are governing cultural forces. Moreover, this perspective compromises the secular's false objectivity by asserting that everything is subjective. Examining the formation of community through this lens dismantles the notion that society can be regulated by systems of domination and coercion; this larger exertion of control is a facade sustained in opposition to the erotic. While Landmark does not explicitly reference the erotic, their philosophy about the interrelation between self and community speaks to this very notion. One is taught to observe the way in which their very being (as measured through body language, voice, actions) has an impact on both their sense of self and their relation to others. Through self-observance, individuals realize that there is no real authority controlling their actions; agency can be discovered and harnessed within.

While Lorde helps us conceive of the schism between the spiritual and political, Foucault examines a much earlier relationship between the two. In *Technologies of the Self*, Foucault uses the political principles of the Greeks as a way to complicate the prioritization of selfhood within modernity. For the Greeks, cultivating selfhood was a guiding principle for both the political

context and the "art of life."[59] This was defined through their own religious philosophies: "The Delphic principle [know yourself] was not an abstract one concerning life; it was technical advice, a rule to be observed for the consultation of the oracle. "Know yourself" meant "Do not suppose yourself to be a god.""[60] The technical nature of such a "knowing" is pertinent to Landmark's attention to detail, reinforcing the importance of intention in this practice. The practice of knowing oneself requires a great deal of control and awareness over one's mental and physical faculties. Of est, Jerry Rubin said, "Now Werner is teaching me that I control my body; my body does not control me."[61] Through this controlled surrender, one is liberated from the confusion of self that arises from not being attuned to one's erotic instincts.

The latter idiom in Foucault's quote further reflects an understanding within Greek culture that individuals do not possess inherent answers that aren't tethered to their own imperfect experience. All wisdom and knowledge is consequently subjective and ultimately gained through the lens of self. Conversely, we must be careful to not allow others' supposed authority to cloud our own instincts towards truth and justice. The overarching point, however, suggests that self-knowledge is the way towards righteous action; this philosophy as a political principle centralizes the role of self in a well-functioning society.

Selfhood, Mysticism, and Landmark

I'm interested in how Landmark's notions of the self arise from a religious convergence of the spiritual and political that both Lorde and Foucault articulate. While Landmark appears quite secular to many people, closer examination reveals distinct parallels between Landmark's

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[59] Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the self," in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault,* ed. Luther et al (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 19.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Rubin, *Est,* 254.

notions of selfhood/community and spiritual values that derive from the mysticism movement. By considering this parallel, I will show how religions and spiritual values about the self are constantly implicated in the formation of culture and community. This will help dismantle the binary between the spiritual and the political that Lorde points out, further emphasizing how the self and the erotic are linked with the communal sphere.

In his book, *Restless Souls,* Leigh Eric Schmidt explores the birth of the American "seeker" that characterized mysticism. A true spiritual connection with God, in this context, was discovered through the cultivation of one's individuality and mental faculties. The mind became one's church, "seen as an "unbroken horse" over which the rider must learn to assert control through developing the habits of fixed attention."[62] This focus on control ties in with Landmark's emphasis on gaining an awareness of the stories that run our ego and identity, preventing us from experiencing freedom within ourselves. The emphasis on the personal was freeing for practitioners. Rather than following the dogma of one religion, all religions and practices became vessels for attaining deeper spiritual experiences: "Many of these newfangled pilgrims traveled several different religious paths in succession…they charted a path - at least, so they imagined - away from the old "religions of authority" into the new "religion of the spirit.""[63] This shift from the external to the internal reflects an emphasis on harnessing personal control in order to transcend suffering. Similarly, Werner Erhard's methods in creating est involved a combination of both therapeutic and spiritual notions regarding the liberation of consciousness.

Schmidt's use of "religion of the spirit" speaks to Lorde's notion of the erotic. Both conceptions emphasize a cultivation of inner experience that is also relevant within Landmark's work. Though the meaning of this interiority might be different in these various contexts, the

[62] Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 161.
[63] Ibid., 7.

experience of one's inner being is acknowledged and seen as valuable. These understandings of individualism allow us to see a higher interconnectedness between the individual and communal. For instance, while mystical seekers sought an individual connection with God in the place of religious authority, it was not a movement that meant to separate the individual from the community. Robert Brandom's notion of community helps us examine mysticism as another religious category that still operates within such a structure. Brandom writes that "The cultivation of community consists in the development of new sets of social practices, at once the result of individual self-cultivation (producing novel performances which, institutionalized as responses to other performances make possible new social practices) and the condition of it."[64] This definition marries the individual with the community, highlighting the way in which individual actions are part of community-building - even if they seem individualized.

Within the formation of mysticism, the relinquishing of "religious authority" was simply another creation of norms; Schmidt addresses the various "rudiments" of religious liberalism that defined the attainment of this spiritual relationship. A few of these include,

> …individual aspiration after mystical experience of religious feeling…the immanence of the transcendent - in each person and in nature, the cosmopolitan appreciation of religious variety as well as unity in diversity, ethical earnestness in pursuit of justice-producing reforms of "social salvation," and an emphasis on creative self-expression and adventuresome seeking…[65]

From this handful of characteristics, it's clear that there was a particular structure which determined one's ability to access a divine connection with a God-like source. Moreover, these tenets are rather uplifting in their hope for both individual and collective transcendence. This framework for spiritual enlightenment was not based solely on individual actualization, but

[64] Brandom, "Freedom and Constraint," 195.
[65] Schmidt, *Restless Souls,* 12.

rather promoted an interconnectedness that defines the "transcendent" as existing within everyone. The emphasis on both the individual and collective within the above tenets are central to Landmark's work, which emerged from this earlier movement. While Landmark does not subscribe to any religion or dogma, Landmark and est's origins reveal the way in which these programs' teachings came from notions of spirituality that evolved throughout the 20th century. This interrelation complicates the idea that our current culture and shaping of community is divorced from these early notions of selfhood.

While Schmidt examines the emergence of individualism within the mysticism movement, Courtney Bender wrestles with the way in which we analyze individual religious/spiritual expression in the modern context. In her book, *The New Metaphysicals,* Bender argues that such a gray area of spiritual expression is formed by the liminalities within religious culture, which often go unnoticed:

> It is precisely the individual, abnormal type of religious experience, which has developed within a long set of interactions among sociology, philosophy, hermeneutics, and theology, that provides a space for sociologically meaningful "religious individualism" to emerge and take (changing but definite) shape as a category of religious expression; and it is precisely these conversations that we must investigate before analyzing Americans' spiritual expression.[66]

Bender helpfully articulates such a religious individualism as not necessarily resulting from a collapse of community or religious organizing, but rather another category entirely. Her analysis helps define Landmark's work as participating in religious engagement through the creation of community. While this kind of religious expression does not necessarily adhere to communal norms such as the homogenous creation of rituals, clothing, practices, etc…, this apparent divergence does not render such an expression religiously illegitimate.

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[66] Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 11.

While I am framing Landmark's work as religious/spiritual, most of Landmark's participants, I suspect, would argue against any kind of religiosity occurring in those spaces; many of them are drawn to it *because* it is framed as quite secular and unattached to religion or dogma. Landmark's creation of community outside of traditionally 'religious' circles, however, is precisely what makes the work a form of religiosity. I asked one participant if he thought that Landmark was a spiritual community, and he replied, "I don't think it's a *spiritual* community but I think Landmark is a powerful tool to deepen and access our spirituality."[67] This response perhaps reflects the difficulty with which we view individualized experiences as part of a greater communal experience. Landmark as a structure that allows one to deepen their own spirituality, even as an individualized experience, inarguably places such a program within Brandom's category of community and expressive freedom. Individuals within Landmark are still participating in a cultivation of community because they are operating under norms that are defined by the program. Under Brandom's terms, community is constructed through the engagement in a set of practices; this legitimizes a notion of community that is based on interior experiences - spiritual experiences - that connect us regardless of literal formations within physical spaces.

All of these voices help push against the assumption that spiritual seeking is entirely individualistic. Mysticism, for example, reveals how a personal connection with the divine actually enhances an attention to the divine in others. I think that Landmark's cultivation of inner being also enhances this attention to others. Linda Woodhead articulates this notion in spiritual terms. She distinguishes between a self-serving and more holistic spiritual point of view; a truly holistic spirituality asserts that "by going 'deeper' into the self, a person is said to connect with this 'chi,' and discovers a 'core self,' 'soul' or 'spiritual dimension.' By the same token, the

[67] Mike Rhinehart in discussion with the author, February 2022.

individual also comes into closer connection with other people and the universe as a whole, realizing a spiritual connection with them all."[68] This perspective offers hope for collective transcendence; through spiritual practice, individuals can better themselves with the intention of being more present within their community.

Relocating Control

Recontextualizing the self as an active agent within community subverts the normalization of external systems of authority. Under oppressive structures, the regulation of bodies now takes precedence over the regulation of the body; we are all subject to normalized systems that silence individual welfare. It is in the interest of the powerful to reinforce the erasure of self; this is the only way to convince individuals to participate in such systems. In *Discipline and Punish,* Foucault writes about the implication of the body in the political sphere:

> …the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. This political investment of the body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its economic use; it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination…[69]

The body, as Foucault emphasizes, is continuously at odds with power and authority. The body is a utility for production that benefits a particular subset of individuals - those who hoard such power through accumulation of wealth and capital. These systems, however, are rather invisible in our daily existence until we begin to notice that they are actually everywhere, indicated through symbols expressed through media, consumer culture, and technology. We are

[68] Linda Woodhead, "Real Religion and Fuzzy Spirituality? Taking Sides in the Sociology of Religion," in *Religions of Modernity Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital*, (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 39.
[69] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975): 26.

consistently implored to look outside of ourselves for satisfaction and contentment. The systems that supply us with pleasure conversely infuse us with prejudice, hatred, and fear. This weaponization of the erotic blocks us from actually being present/connecting with our visceral experience of other people.

As Foucault goes on to say, the maintenance of such systems requires a great attention to detail; this is precisely why such a great power is not necessarily salient in our daily existence: "A meticulous observation of detail, and at the same time a political awareness of these small things, for the control and use of men, emerge through the classic age bearing with them a whole set of techniques, a whole corpus of methods and knowledge, descriptions, plans and data."[70] This detail is exemplified through structures like the bureaucracy, for instance, and the difficulty with which one has access to resources like healthcare, food, and housing. The individuals who are not directly suffering from lack of access to such resources, however, don't have to face the same consequences of such a system. The primary concern then becomes the preservation of such agency by whatever means necessary.

Since detail is the mechanism through which power is contained, it is in this attention to detail that we can actually combat such large-scale systems. This requires a masterful awareness of the ways in which the ideologies of power are constantly shaping our actions and reactions, not just politically but spiritually. Movements like mysticism and programs like Landmark showcase spiritual methodologies for combatting such detailed power: "For the disciplined man, as for the true believer, no detail is unimportant, but not so much for the meaning that it conceals within it as for the hold it provides for the power that wishes to seize it."[71] The cultivation of awareness is an inversion of control that allows us to regain true agency instead of an illusory

[70] Ibid., 141.
[71] Ibid., 140.

agency shaped by the confines of oppression. Through Landmark's work, one begins to question everything they considered as truth; this reconsideration holds tremendous possibility for overcoming internalized prejudice or hatred. Landmark forces people to engage with the root of beliefs and truths - implementing this practice into everyday existence gives individuals more agency over their erotic instincts. Moreover, such a practice actively prioritizes freedom and connection over numbness and detachment.

The power of eroticism can be the activist's greatest tool for obstructing systems of oppression. As I pointed out earlier, the erotic can never be fully suppressed; it boils within each of us even when we are unaware of its magnitude. Individuals are shamed, through systems like religion, to distrust the erotic as a measure of knowledge. Christianity, the foundation of American culture, tells us that desire is the thief of virtue, and so we are diligently trained to shame ourselves. We learn to continuously fight against ourself in an attempt to subdue the erotic's cues and signals. Lorde characterizes the gravity of the erotic's power:

> The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves.[72]

Lorde's position as a Black woman is greatly implicated in her contextualization of the erotic; I believe her analysis of the erotic speaks to the way in which systems of oppression are designed to block our experience of real joy, pleasure, and fulfillment, while simultaneously arousing hatred and violence. This dynamic, of course, most directly impacts those who are targets of the colonial project. It is in the interest of those most affected by such a system that we are all called to attend to this very issue.

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[72] Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 29.

Adrienne Maree Brown discusses the subversive nature of pleasure and joy within the political context in her book, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good.* Brown centralizes Lorde's essay on the erotic, while grounding it in the framework of activism. Brown also centers her own Blackness in her analysis of pleasure; she beckons us to examine the ways in which centering our own well-being, articulated through moments of joy, aliveness, and pleasure, reorients our relationship to power structures that inhibit such feelings. She writes that "Pleasure activists seek to understand and learn from the politics and power dynamics inside of everything that makes us feel good… they believe that by tapping into the potential goodness in each of us we can generate justice and liberation, growing a healing abundance where we have been socialized to believe only scarcity exists."[73] Pleasure, meaning that feeling of true goodness and abundance that we have been taught to persecute, becomes a marker of truth. Rather than being an indulgent activity, the prioritization of pleasure is an instrument of healing because we access a higher potential for connection in this vulnerable space.

Brown further emphasizes the way in which such pleasure is not a singular feeling; it is bound up in the erotic - an expression of our deepest self. By locating pleasure and joy as singularities on a spectrum of feeling, we end up defining our base existence as neutral and numb. This numbness causes us to chase pleasure in other regards, further distancing us from true access to ourself, which is always available when we pay deeper attention: "Part of the reason so few of us have a healthy relationship with pleasure is because a small minority of our species hoards the excess of resources, creating a false scarcity and then trying to sell us joy, sell us back to ourselves."[74] Brown explicates the way in which systems like capitalism force us to participate in consumption - we are programmed to believe that such consumption is the only

[73] Adrienne Maree Brown, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good,* (Oakland: AK Press, 2019), 13.
[74] Ibid., 15.

way we can access our inner being. When we relocate pleasure to a central point in our understanding of self, we prioritize this abundance and no longer rely on such systems to fulfill an inner void. Our own connection with ourselves takes power away from external systems of control.

Cultivating Aliveness

Pleasure and aliveness do not come naturally. The idea that pleasure is easily accessible strengthens the belief that it is an indulgent experience, as Christopher Lasch frames it to be. On the contrary, such a feeling must be intentionally cultivated because society conditions us to accept numbness. In her book, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, Ethics*, Jane Bennett uses the language of enchantment to encourage affective relationship with the world.[75] Her use of enchantment helpfully supplements both Brown and Lorde's notions of pleasure and the erotic; she describes enchantment as "a mood of fullness, plenitude, or liveliness, a sense of having had one's nerves or circulation or concentration powers tuned up or recharged - a shot in the arm, a fleeting return to childlike excitement about life."[76] Bennett looks to childhood as a rich representation of this experience - an important perspective that seems to fade with time. Children view the world in technicolor, full of possibility that is viscerally palpable. They believe in magic; as they grow older, this sense of wonder passes and is often replaced with more cynical understandings of life.

The shift from enchantment to disenchantment announces a significant transition that clearly requires more attention than it is given. The passage into adulthood is naturally a difficult one; yet it has become increasingly passive, and children are expected to enter a growingly

[75] Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, Ethics,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 3.
[76] Ibid., 5.

overwhelming world without much guidance. This emphasis on childhood plays a large role in how Landmark conceptualizes the emergence of our current selves. They challenge participants to go back into memories of their childhood in order to discover how early pains and wounds shaped their perception of the world. Such a practice, while very erotically intense, reveals the root of seemingly benign ideas about the world that end up reinforcing disenchantment. Bennett argues that "The question is not whether disenchantment is a regrettable or a progressive historical development. It is, rather, whether the very characterization of the world as disenchanted ignores and then discourages affective attachment to that world."[77] Bennett portrays disenchantment as an ailment that is ultimately demoralizing. It seems that such disenchantment with the world lends credence to Brown's claim that pleasure is seen as scarce.

Without a real attachment or enjoyment of the "marvelous specificity of things," we are left with nothing but a desire to consume; this gets externalized in both harmless and harmful ways as we require a greater sense of control in the face of dissatisfaction. Bennett's advocacy of enchantment reveals the way in which disenchantment actually absolves us from all investment in the world around us. Enchantment is the opposite of complacent, and must be "fostered through deliberate strategies."[78] Such strategies must be drastically outrageous in order to thwart nihilism's ferocity, like practices that I describe in Landmark's work. Landmark's teachings are arduous; they are meant to break down the constructs of reality so that participants can 'get' that the fullness of life exists in this very moment. Jerry Rubin, in his account of est, recalls the sense of freedom that washed over him:

> This is it? What I have been hoping for, looking for? Nowhere to go but here? People in the room began screaming at the discovery that there is nowhere to go. I could literally feel the tension disappear. I saw faces lighten. My shoulders relaxed and I felt a full

[77] Ibid., 3.
[78] Ibid., 4.

> feeling in my stomach. Time slowed down. I felt like the richest man on earth. Because I had everything. I had The Moment, my life in my hands.[79]

In the simplest of terms, Landmark and est teach a radical sense of presence. And when we finally become present to the actual moment we are in, everything disappears. What's terrifying is how much effort it takes to tune into the present moment. The normalization of disenchantment has made individuals uncomfortable with joy, pleasure, and expansion. It is more widely accepted to maintain a measured and dubious relationship with the world. Thus, the resistance of this complacency requires much more work than falling asleep to suffering and hardship.

Lorde, Brown, and Bennett's articulations of the erotic and pleasure helpfully contrast Lasch's portrayals of pleasure and joy that he describes during the 1970s. This spiritual, conceptual understanding of activism is centered around a notion of community that is greater than literal communities that we individually occupy; it is a hope for community that regards everyone as connected through the nature of existence. This means that each person we encounter is a part of our community - we cannot be distanced from each other by social or cultural differences.

Jerry Rubin discusses the importance of this realization in his activist context: "Later, my political activities were motivated by basic feelings of equality: a Vietnamese peasant is equal to a Wall Street executive. Everything that makes us different from one another is artificial: all human beings basically want and need the same things - love, security, energy."[80] Rubin's reflection invites different reactions, especially when analyzed in the modern context. On the one hand, his notion of equality is seemingly obvious. His claim about difference could also be read

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[79] Rubin, *Est,* 259.
[80] Ibid., 256.

as a diminishment of the realities of socio-cultural differences. While this might be a simplification on his end, I think he speaks to a collapse of difference that exists in a higher realm - a spiritual notion of connection that binds us all together. The explicitness of his words is a worthy reminder of the ways in which we consistently create differences between ourselves and others. Instead of becoming a generative and productive aspect of our shared humanity, we now view difference as a true separator between us and other people. The subtlety of difference that we regard as overwhelming truth is another example of Foucault's detailed, intentional construction of power. It is up to the individual to stretch out across this difference and affirm our interconnectedness.

Presence is not an Exit-Strategy

Politicizing Self-Help and Spiritual Seeking

Reimagining individualism as a generative ideology also requires an evaluation of the ways in which it has infringed upon liberation, creating complicated tensions within self-help culture and spiritual seeking. In his creation of est's programs, Werner Erhard drew from a vast well of religious and therapeutic resources, ranging from Eastern religious thought to Gestalt awareness techniques.[81] The dynamics of such religious amalgamation are thick with concerns of appropriation, particularly in the context of New Age consumer spirituality. I'll examine how the diversification of religion and cultural borrowing complicates notions of individualism in self-help culture, locating Landmark's proximity to these dynamics. By putting critics like Andrea Jain and Slavoj Žižek in conversation, I will consider the reverberations of capitalism and consumer culture on individual religious engagement and push against the notion that self-help is an escapist survival strategy.

It's necessary to consider the cultural contexts and dynamics that uplift programs like Landmark in American culture. For example, its secular appearance certainly appeals to audiences that might be more averse to explicit religious or spiritual practices. Historicizing this program's religious undertones, however, reveals a more complicated convergence of culture. Jerry Rubin writes that "est [was] an attempt to Americanize Eastern consciousness - to make it available to the majority of people."[82] Rubin's language makes one bristle, invoking troublesome language that centers American principles. While Landmark does not explicitly use Eastern traditions or language in its current iteration, both est and Landmark's philosophies can be traced to Eastern religious thought. This blending of religion and culture was, and still is, contentious as

[81]Lucas Richert, "East meets West at the edge of the ocean," The Psychologist, January 2018, https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-2018/january-2018/east-meets-west-edge-ocean.
[82] Rubin, *Est,* 251.

practices such as yoga and meditation have become widely accepted and encouraged. It's worth acknowledging this background in order to contextualize Landmark outside of the American secular.

The intermingling of culture is both inevitable and necessary in order to bridge the disconnect of difference. The politics of cultural appropriation should not make us hesitant towards this intermingling, but rather urge us to gain a greater awareness of positionality and power within encounters with foreign cultures. This dichotomy between the political implications of religious engagement and actual spiritual experience continues to perplex an understanding of spiritualism that is more nuanced.

The expanding awareness of religion and culture outside of Western secularism is a critical way to decentralize America's ideological power; the implications of colonialism, however, risk harming such cultures when Americans attempt to take a hold on these cultural traditions. Laura Perez, a Chicana scholar, points out the hesitancy in invoking the s/Spirit in her own work:

> Beliefs and practices consciously making reference to the s/Spirit as the common life force within and between all beings are largely marginalized from serious intellectual discourse as superstition, folk belief, or New Age delusion, when they are not relegated to the socially controlled spaces of the orientalist study of "primitive animism" or of "respectable" religion within dominant culture.[83]

Perez speaks to the complex cultural factors that inhibit and complicate the way scholars like herself push against Western secularism. The development of New Age spirituality, often characterized by White women who appropriate indigenous and Eastern traditions, further obstructs a legitimate engagement with the spiritual sphere as a necessary cultural and political

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[83] Laura Perez, "Spirit Glyphs: Reimagining Art and Artist in the Work of Chicana Tlamatinime," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 44, no. 1 (1998): 1. doi:10.1353/mfs.1998.0009.

category; the language of 'the spiritual' is unfortunately often lumped into one larger White-washed category which is then critiqued for being naive or illusory. Perez helps us combat this understanding of the spiritual in order to demystify such Western connotations.

Spiritual Engagement within American Capitalism

In *Peace love yoga: The politics of global spirituality*, Andrea Jain explicates the way in which critiques of spiritual seeking are often prone to simplification that harms other cultures. She begins by highlighting many scholars' uncertainty towards modern spiritualities, like the mindfulness movement and Buddhism in the West. She cites Slavoj Žižek, who argues that:

> The "Western Buddhist" meditative stance is arguably the most efficient way for us to fully participate in capitalist dynamics while retaining the appearance of mental sanity… It enables you to fully participate in the frantic pace of the capitalist game while sustaining the perception that you are not really in it; that you are well aware of how worthless this spectacle is; and that what really matters to you is the peace of the inner Self to which you know you can always with-draw.[84]

Žižek doesn't flinch in his argument against practices like mindfulness and the like. He emphasizes the contradiction in the term "Western Buddhist," highlighting the ways in which American religious identities have often been formed through the use of the other cultures and practices. These traditions, like Buddhism, get repurposed in order to serve the American in the most productive way possible. Véronique Altglas illuminates the complicated trajectory of this phenomenon in her book, *From Yoga to Kabbalah: Religious Exoticism and the Logics of Bricolage*. She explains that Western colonialism created "a text-based, pragmatic, rational, universal, individualistic, and socially active Buddhism emerged and seduced Westerners in the twentieth century. By contrast, traditional cosmology and ritualism were downplayed, devalued,

[84] Andrea Jain, *Peace love yoga: The politics of global spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 59.

and considered incompatible with modern times."[85] Altglas and Žižek raise important issues regarding the dissemination of religion within the American sphere. Est exemplifies such confusion; Erhard certainly participated in this process, drawing on Eastern thought and other practices while creating a program that ultimately benefited many Americans. However, to simplify this dynamic as complete appropriation undermines Erhard's intentions to help people within the conditions of his cultural context.

It is worth examining Žižek's claim that spiritual seeking can become a precarious dance in the context of capitalism. In many ways, I resonate with this assertion; he implies that in seeking a higher power, we indulge the instinct to escape from our cultural position. However, I'm troubled by the implication that our only option in the capitalist game is to surrender to it, without questioning or sustaining an awareness outside of it. This is precisely the issue with such critiques; they assume that people only use spirituality to better themselves as agents of capitalism. While programs like est and Landmark exist within the American context, the cultivation of self that emerges through their work can ultimately work against oppressive systems, as I've demonstrated thus far. We are all participants in the capitalist game; Žižek's critique only reaffirms the power of such a system and offers no sympathy for ideologies that might combat capitalism's insidious nature. Moreover, his argument pits Western rationalism against Eastern religious thought. His tone reeks of a kind of secular superiority that diminishes so many cultures outside of the West.

Jain also struggles with Žižek, and others, who "pit capitalist spirituality against authentic religion."[86] She writes that many studies "lack nuance in certain ways, for example, suggesting that those who commodify spirituality are not sincere seekers as much as they are capitalists and

[85] Altglas, *From Yoga to Kabbalah,* 60.
[86] Jain, *Peace love yoga,* 54.

imperialists."[87] Questions of authenticity only further confuse the nature of reality; there is no way to truly regulate or validate anyone's use of religion or spiritual practices. The issue with many critiques of spiritualities is the discrepancy between the political implications of these movements and seekers' subjective experience.

Jeremy Carrette and Richard King's landmark book, *Selling Spirituality,* encapsulates this discrepancy; they argue that New Age spiritual culture is simply religion, specifically Eastern religion, that gets repackaged in order to satisfy the Western consumer: "The wisdom of 'spiritual classics' like the Tao Te Ching become reduced to a philosophy of worldly accommodationism, tailored to reduce the stress and strain of modern urban life for relatively affluent westerners."[88] Carrette and King's assertion, however, magnifies the distance between critics of modern spiritualities and the cultures from which those teachings originate. While there is merit to their argument, particularly in the popularity of New Age symbols like crystals and tarot cards, such a claim mostly stands on the generalization that spiritual culture is entirely the product of capitalism.

Carrette and King's analysis is too binary in the wake of such cultural change; furthermore, their critique does not give worthy credence to the religions and philosophies of which they write. Michael Fisher offers a similar opinion regarding the contentious nature of the spiritual awakening of the 60s and 70s and its effect on est and Landmark: "Viewed less sympathetically, these recombining efforts look more like crass bricolage, reflecting the desperate opportunism of desperate people."[89] Fisher's take exemplifies a more extreme understanding of this time, again reflecting a DIY-attitude towards self-improvement and

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[87] Ibid., 56.
[88] Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion,* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 90.
[89] Fisher, "Getting It," 3

actualization. Altglas explicates the notion of agency and bricolage in modern spiritual identity. She explains that under the effects of postmodernism, there has been a collapse of "boundaries between reality and representations, implosion of social classes and genders, fragmentation of information and knowledge."[90] The traditional norms of community and culture, previously outlined by religion, class, geography, and identity, are now unclear in the post-modern world. This collapse of tradition has, of course, led us towards individualism, making it more difficult to discern the ethics of cultural borrowing and the ramifications of such encounters. Rather than observing such cultural encounters as detached outsiders, investigating spirituality within America requires more consideration for the growing entanglement of culture resulting from globalization and modernity. Perspectives like Carrette, King, and Fisher's reduce the cultivation of selfhood to a shallow desire to feel good, washing such a pursuit of all complexity.

Fetishizing Reality

In his book, *On Belief,* Žižek discusses the way in which we all orient ourselves towards reality; he defines this orientation as a 'fetish' that locates us within the world. Fetish is described as "the embodiment of the Lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth."[91] Under Žižek's claim, we are all continuously fetishizing reality, making up stories that allow us to sustain ourselves within this unknowable world. Every fetish that we choose to embody functions as a way to maintain our particular relationship with reality; we create fetish in order to 'understand' reality, whatever that means for each of us. Within this analysis, spiritual seeking within American culture is troubling; Žižek believes that principles regarding presence and transcendence are the "fetish which enables you to (pretend to) accept reality "the way it is.""[92]

[90] Altglas, *From Yoga to Kabbalah,* 4.
[91] Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief,* (London: Routledge, 2001), 13.
[92] Ibid., 15.

Such an attitude naturally places Landmark's teachings under this category of fetish; Landmark's assertion that life is empty and meaningless is just a perspective that disengages us from "the unbearable truth." Jerry Rubin's recalls Werner Erhard shouting, "There is nothing to find! There is no tomorrow! Tomorrow is today! There is nothing nothing nothing! This is it! And it doesn't matter!"[93] According to Žižek, Landmark's drastic claim about reality is just a lie - a facade that overlooks human suffering, providing an 'easy way out' under the notion that nothing matters at all.

It seems as though Žižek is chiefly concerned with the way that fetishes, such as Landmark's, distance individuals from becoming fully engaged social actors. He writes specifically of Buddhism, brashly asserting that,

> Buddhism serves as a palliative to Western consumers, promising the individual an escape - a therapeutic distance or coping mechanism - into the experience of the present moment. Such an escape allows them to imagine themselves as separate from the normal demands of everyday life and disconnected from the social and economic relations of global capitalist exchange.[94]

This reading is reminiscent of Christopher Lasch's critique of self-help, further suggesting that spiritual seeking is antithetical to community and only works in the interest of personal benefit and gratification. The individuals who use the idea of 'presence' to live beyond the madding crowd are using it as a mere coping mechanism. As I have shown so far, such a generalized critique only skims the labyrinthine surface of many spiritual philosophies. The idea that being present would somehow distance the individual from reality is an odd and misconstrued inference; being truly present allows one to attend to the subjective experience of the relations

[93] Rubin, *Est,* 258.
[94] Žižek, *On Belief,* 59.

that Žižek writes about. One is forced to more consciously engage with the demands of everyday life, becoming active agents rather than passive actors.

Žižek seems to view radical presence as a form of escapism; in shedding our identities when we are present, we effectively let ourselves off the hook in our lives by canceling "the full impact of reality."[95] His concern extends to the political realm - if people spend all their time being present to themselves, they will lose the motivation to participate in dismantling systems like capitalism. While he critiques Western Buddhism explicitly, the teachings of Buddhism, Zen, Landmark, and est all grapple with the question of reality and living in the present. Jerry Rubin, who was an activist, feared that the presence he found in est would lead to complacency in his political endeavors. He wondered, "'Will living in the moment destroy my desire to create and change?' My behavior will not necessarily change but my *awareness* will change…I become one with my seeking, and merge with the moment."[96] Rubin's reflection illuminates the way in which Landmark's transformational values, ethics, and beliefs function relative to the person who engages with such practices. Spiritual practices, more broadly, are like forms of technology that we use as a way to move through the world. A practice cannot be objectively judged based on the person who uses it; such practices are tools for the self, not outside forces fundamentally altering a person's core essence. Ultimately, these perspectives are shaped by the individual who approaches the practice with their own values; the claim that spiritualities minimize a person's motivation to enact change in the real world is moreso a reflection on the values of the individual.

Žižek's notion of fetish, while an interesting lens in which we can critique spiritual practices, cannot just be applied to spiritual escapism. If Western Buddhists, for instance, are

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[95] Ibid., 14.
[96] Rubin, *Est,* 259.

using the present moment to retain "an inner distance and indifference towards the mad dance of this accelerated process," don't we all have our own fetishes which allow us to cope with reality?[97] The rejection of reality's abundance, or the belief that there is nothing to find in the present moment also seems like a fetish in and of itself - a nihilistic perspective that takes a harsher stance toward reality. Žižek seems unaware of his own subjectivity, preferring to view life's frustrations as the measure of the human condition; this further orients us towards suffering, deadening any hope of transcendence. Let us recall Jane Bennett's lens of enchantment vs. disenchantment - both provide us different avenues for attending to the world. Landmark and est reinvigorate an enchantment towards living that engenders freedom and possibility. Ultimately, there is no righteous stance towards reality; the preferable one, I would argue, is the perspective that inspires curiosity, engagement, and love within this finite existence.

Critics like Žižek helpfully point to certain contradictions in the formation of spiritualities within Western culture. However, these scholars are often guilty of simplification, criticizing spiritual practitioners under the assumption that they lack any awareness in their choices to engage with certain beliefs or perspectives. Jain shares my own frustration with such binary understandings of modern spiritualities. She concurs that,

> It is too simple to suggest that neoliberal spirituality is merely made up of commodities, easily bought and sold, and that the people buying those commodities are isolated consumers interacting with the world through consumption alone and disconnected from actual communities, or that the spiritual people are not so much seekers as consumers...interested in little (and sometimes nothing) more than escaping the realities of capitalism.[98]

Jain pushes against the urge to analyze every encounter with foreign culture as completely enmeshed in consumerism and neoliberalism. While these are necessarily lenses through which

[97] Žižek, *On Belief,* 13.
[98] Jain, *Peace love yoga,* 63.

we must examine the evolution of culture, relying on such critiques categorizes human beings as cogs within a system - stripping individuals of their own agency and personhood. While it might feel easy to categorize all spiritual seeking within these structures, such an analysis does not dare to look beyond the binary of the secular. To probe the depths of the spiritual movement reveals a more intricate story; one in which many people are seeking meaning, connection, and community beyond the structures of capitalism and consumerism.

Conclusion

When I began this project, I had a lot of fear about what I would discover if I looked at Landmark too closely. One of my advisors warned me early on that I might feel disillusioned by this program at the end of the year. I thought about the possible outcomes, considering how certain conclusions might impact my relationship with my mom, for instance. Would this implode my sense of reality? The decision to venture into this world also came with a willingness to let parts of myself go. I believe that this openness allowed me to create space for contradiction and uncertainty.

Ultimately, I still have great reverence for Landmark's programs. Recalling my own experiences has certainly reminded me of how much their work transforms people's lives. However, more than bringing me closer to Landmark, this project has expanded my understanding of selfhood and the way we locate ourselves within the world each day. Landmark's claims are not at all singular - they speak to a much greater sense of interconnectedness that can be accessed in a variety of ways. The beauty of this discovery is that we are all equal and critical sources of this connection. However, to feel connected requires persistence and maintenance. Prioritizing love, joy, and pleasure is an act of disobedience towards the systems that try to oppress us. AnaLouise Keating writes that a "politics of spirit demonstrates that holistic, spirit-inflected perspectives - when applied to racism, sexism, homophobia, and other contemporary issues - can sustain and assist us as we work to transform social injustice."[99] Breathing life into the spiritual allows for expanded possibilities of transformation beyond the material. The ability to confront our preconceived notions of self and other reveals the potential for an enduring liberation that emerges deep from within.

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[99]AnaLouise Keating, "'I'm a Citizen of the Universe': Gloria Anzaldúa's Spiritual Activism as Catalyst for Social Change," *Feminist Studies* 34, no. 1/2 (2008): 56. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20459180.

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