

The University of Chicago

Moon Circle Rituals – Meditation, Bodily Attunement,
and the Construction of Self-Determination

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December 2023

A paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts degree in the Master of Arts Program in the Social
Sciences

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Abstract

This paper examines the process of self-reflexivity, self-determination, and agency within the context of a moon circle ritual. This is a practice arising in contemporary society that seems to intersect across different “alternative” communities such as Wiccan groups, neopagan groups, alternative medicinal practitioners (doulas, massage therapists, and acupuncturists), feminist groups, women business owners and members of higher academia. This paper explores the ways that self-knowledge and reflexivity form the building blocks of healing within the horizon of the moral good for participants and are constitutive of the participants living a “good life”. The discussion reveals that although there does not exist a radical separation of the mediated and unmediated, the inherent indeterminacy of culture allows the potentiality of undefined experience to exist. Undefined experience is revealed during moon circles and is utilized to produce the normative self-determination present in much of contemporary society’s discourse on the “good life”.

Opening Vignette

The moon circle is housed in a yoga studio. The building is an old brownstone building in Chicago – standing alone as its neighboring buildings have been dismantled to make room for new development. Some of the lots stand empty. To the right of the front door are two frosted windows. Etched into them are the words “holistic” and “boutique”. To the left of the door, a beautiful bay window is frosted with the word “yoga”, below is inscribed a figure of a woman performing the yoga position backward bend. The building is incased in a wrought iron fence painted white. The yoga studio offers multiple “workshops” to its consumers, twenty-five dollars per person, per class. Among the offerings on display s daily Kundalini, Restorative Yoga, Reiki, Tai Chai, Qi Gong, Thai Healing Studies, and a class on the Buddha Dhamma.

Entering the building you are required to remove your shoes – the boutique, a small room, welcomes you at the end of the hallway. The moon circle is held in the basement. The only access is through the boutique, through the backdoor and down the steps to the basement. I carry my shoes as I cross the threshold of the hallway and enter the boutique, my eyes focused on navigating out of the small space, not allowing them to linger on products in case my glance reads as an invitation to sell me the accoutrements of crystals, herbs and books on display. I make my way out of the boutique and down the cement back steps. Back inside the building, I enter the long, cool hallway of the basement, dimly lit. At the far end is a bench, coat hangers and a place to store your shoes. The only door stood slightly ajar to the right. Inside the room are five square cushions arranged in a circle on the wooden floor, a giant unused fire place dominating the opposite wall, its mantel adorned with images of Hindu deities. In the center of the circle is an assortment of different teas, bananas, strawberries, mini-cupcakes, cookies and a

box of tissues. An electric kettle is at the ready, plugged into an outlet next to the wall, mugs set close by. I notice muted ethereal music playing softly.

The workshop instructor – an employee I recognize from the website page, greets us and asks us to take our seats around the circle. She tells us that ritual is important and that today she will be opening the circle (as I later will learn all circles) with a meditation.

Introduction

In this paper, I focus on the experiences of what is known as a moon circle ritual. A practice arising in contemporary society – particularly as practiced within the United States that seems to intersect across different “alternative” communities such as Wiccan groups, neopagan groups, alternative medicinal practitioners (doulas, massage therapists, and acupuncturists) as well as feminist groups, women business owners and members of higher academia. The types and varieties of moon circles are many, but moon circles by practice are rituals carried out in alignment with the moon and often focus on feminine divinity. The moon circles I’ve encountered personally and through my research include goddess worship. The actual experiences of a moon circle vary. They may involve physical rituals of prayer, music, meditation, incense burning and engaging in discussions. The main circle at the heart of the paper focuses heavily on meditation, bodily attunement and facilitated discussions.

I approached this topic as a person who has experienced moon circles prior to beginning the research project. From this preliminary exposure, the questions that resonated with me the most represent a curiosity towards what it is that makes moon circles seemingly so impactful. Why do women speak about the “goodness” and positivity of these experiences? What work is this moon circle ritual doing in the lives of these women?

Using intersecting lenses of anthropology of the “good” and of morality, psychoanalysis, and of affect and bodily attunement, I’ve analyzed my research in terms of self-reflexivity, self-knowledge, self-determination and agency to posit a potential answer. In this paper, I will argue that moon circle rituals are a moral good for participants and are constitutive of the participants living “a good life”. The focus in this paper will be examining the way the moon circle ritual facilitates self-knowledge and self-reflection. The development of self-knowledge and self-reflection produces the capacity for “self-determination”. Self-determination is a normative good, constitutive of a good life and achieving self-determination is healing for these women.

Moon circle rituals, for my participants, play an important role in facilitating pivotal moments, where the meaning and potential of their lives come into sharp focus – moments when they *decide* what sort of life they desire and intentionally develop the strategies and choices to get them there. The negotiation and construction of one’s desire life places my research into what Joel Robbins terms an “anthropology of the good”. Robbins argues for anthropologists to study “the construction of notions of the good, the attempt to put them in practice in social relations and the elaboration of models of time and change that support hopes for success in such endeavors” (Robbins 2013, 458). Studying notions of the “good”, Robbins further argues, restores the critical edge to anthropology that was lost when anthropologists displaced the epistemologically problematic study of the “primitive” or “savage” with that of the “suffering” subject (Robbins, 2013). The savage subject was criticized by many in the 1980’s, most notably by James Clifford in his classic work, “On Ethnographic Authority” (1983). The critique was twofold. The first complaint was epistemological and the second ethical. Epistemologically, it was argued, anthropologists used a slight of hand parlor trick in their ethnographic writing to construct themselves as authoritative and objective. Despite fieldwork being a messy place, filled

with multiple often contradictory perspectives all vying for acknowledgement, the multiple perspectives were subsumed under a singular, monolithic text detailing the “facts” of a cultural other. The ethnographic text obscured the biases and concerns of the researcher behind a constructed rhetorical authority. The actual complex and diverse processes of social systems were overlooked. Ethically, this well-written, bounded and objective text erased diversity and plurality within social and cultural systems, complicit in the stigmatization and marginalization of non-western cultures and peoples (Clifford 1983).

The “suffering” subject became the solution to overcoming these issues. Anthropology transitioned the subject to a trans-cultural subject of suffering, using the global experiences of trauma, violence and trauma as a “bridge, between cultures”. The field of anthropology no longer had to rely on the problematic notion of an “other”. (Robbins 2013, 453-454). This shift in focus allowed anthropologists to hone in on how human systems fail members of society and how each of us are complicit in this domination and suffering. Despite the ethical allure of this position, this came at a cost according to Robbins. Anthropology lost its critical edge, and Robbins would like us to return to the “cultural point” of anthropology; the recognition that there are “profound differences between human lives lived out in different cultural surroundings” (Robbins 2013, 456). Recognizing this will give us back the critical insight that studying difference brings to matters of our own cultures.

An anthropology of the good is a complement to anthropologies that study systems of violence, domination and suffering. It is the counterpart that reveals how human beings strive for goodness and it restores the *agency* of people – something that can often be missed when studying the domination of people. An agency, that I will add, that is not just what one could describe as reactive agency, choices made in response to outside forces. Rather an agency that is

proactive, intentional, and creative. Normative qualities constitutive of self-determination. Moon circle rituals are just one arena where this is occurring and this paper delves into these practices; exploring the ways that self-knowledge and reflexivity form the building blocks of self-determination and healing within the horizon of “good” for these women participants.

Self, Culture and Self-Determination

I would like to now take this next section to discuss the lenses I use to analyze self, culture and self-determination. I use a concept of self that arises when exploring the works of Charles Taylor’s “Dialogical Self” (1991) and Michel Foucault’s “Technologies of Self” (1997) and Marcel Mauss’, “A Category of the Human Mind: the Notion of Person, the Notion of Self” (2004). The self, we’ll come to see, is a product of a particular historical and social context. Next, the cultural lens I will utilize is that of the well-known cultural lens of anthropologist Clifford Geertz in his work, “The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man” (1973) and modified by the critique of the illusion of social wholes encountered in Robert J. Thornton’s, “Rhetoric of Ethnographic Holism” (2014). Geertz’ argument emphasizes the strong shaping and influencing power culture has on individual selves.

An examination of these lenses will set up a contemporary problem of “agency” or the particular subset of agency one might understand as “self-determination.” This problem of self-determination results from a particular understanding of person or self, distilled in the work of Mauss, Foucault and Taylor and the understanding of culture offered by Geertz. This, I argue, has produced an anxiety about self-determination that has preoccupied much research in the social sciences. It seems to be a problem of contemporary Western Cultures: the tension between an overly deterministic outlook of culture and society and the normative cultural good of self-determination. Researchers as diverse as Lauren Berlant, Michel Foucault, Jarrett Zigon and

Brian Massumi have attempted to resurrect or reconfigure an idea of agency working with or explicitly against the ideas of culture and self-determination. While academia is critiquing the idea of culture as holistic (Thornton, 2014), reimagining the notion of what a self is (Taylor 1991) and rethinking the normative dictates of agency (Berlant 2007), there is a growing body of literature suggesting that contemporary individuals outside of academia are also grappling with a similar project of self-determination in the face of cultural pressure. What I hope to demonstrate is that self-determination is not just a theoretical preoccupation reserved for the researchers and social theorists. It is a normative good and a moral good. It is a value held by citizens of the United States and an expected ideal. It is also an important part of most people's individual conception of a good life for themselves. Moon circle rituals are one such place this dynamic is unfolding.

Before moving forward, I would like to address a slight concern that may exist. The problem of self-determination, as I am laying it out, is of importance at the theoretical level and at the level of the participants of my field site. My argument posits that many academic researchers are attempting to solve the issue of how agency is possible; not agency in general but rather the very particular type of agency I define as self-determination that is a normative good. While some academics have identified other forms of agency and argue for us to embrace other conceptions within our research, many individuals of western origin continue to think and theorize agency within the normative framework of sovereignty, choice and self-determination. I find these theories illuminating as they theorize the labor necessary to construct a space for self-determination to exist. And the participants on my field site in varying degrees carry out this labor as they too attempt to carve out a place for themselves to be self-determinative.

To start, I would like to carve out an idea of “self” that is common in academia and as we will see present among the participants of my field site. Argued in the works of Charles Taylor and Marcel Mauss is that the concept of a hidden private self is a special product of contemporary society. In Mauss’ essay, he elucidates a broad history of the concept of self. To begin, he argues that all human beings have always had an idea of “self”. He argues it is a category of the human mind that is innate (Mauss 2004). This sentiment is echoed in Taylor’s article, claiming that it would be “absurd” to claim the “earlier ages had no sense of reflexivity (1991, 304). Yet both researchers identify something unique about the notion of the self in contemporary times. Returning to Mauss, the historical journey begins with an examination of social “roles” and their relationship to the notion of “person”. Individuals were defined by their roles in society; by their rights, duties, and obligations. He utilizes case studies of the Pueblos cultures, various Native American tribes and the indigenous people of Australia to demonstrate this relationship of roles to person. Next, Mauss discusses the development of “persona”. Originally the word meant mask, but came to have a dual meaning. While the word denotes the mask one wears in society, it also denotes the person behind the mask. This discussion centers around examples drawn from examinations of Latin civilizations, India and China. The next iteration of the concept of self, Mauss argues begins when the notion of person gains a moral and religious force, favoring examples from Roman Christianity. Finally, the notion of person and self takes on psychological meaning: the self has become someone with self-knowledge and consciousness (Mauss 2004). Despite a fundamentally flawed argument that attempts to assign cultures to a development and evolution paradigm, he does successfully argue that a private hidden self, that reflects and is self-consciousness is unique to contemporary cultures and it is not universally shared.

idea of reflexivity and self-knowledge being core components of a “self” is expanded by Michael Foucault’s essay, “Technologies of the Self”. In this piece, Foucault conducts his genealogy on the notion of “self”, exploring “the modes of action that an individual exercises upon himself by means of the technologies of self (1997, 226). Foucault, like Mauss, delves into the history of how humans came to define and carve out a domain for what they are. First individuals are given the command to care for themselves which produces an array of techniques of caring for oneself. Through the act of caring for oneself, the act of self-observation and reflection produces self-knowledge. And while the dictate to know oneself was the path towards renunciation of one’s self in Christian spirituality of the fourth and fifth centuries, Foucault argues that within contemporary societies, particularly the human sciences, self-knowledge is not operationalized to renounce the self, but to create a new kind of self (Foucault 1997, 249).

Taylor agrees, “We have developed practices of radical reflexivity in the modern world. And this radical reflexivity has led to something new for contemporary society; “having or being a self” (Taylor 1991, 304). Taylor goes on to argue that this concept of self, that it is only a mind of whose only interaction to the world is through its own representations, is problematic. He wants to argue for a model of self that is dialogical; the self is constituted through conversation and interaction with others. We cannot presuppose the self separate from the world we inhabit or the body we experience life within. Despite this sentiment, every life often orients us to envision ourselves as a mind first and a body second. We have a whole private world; a subjectivity of thoughts, feelings, and desires. We moderate how much the outside world has access to this inner world and social roles, duties and obligations come to be seen as a mask per Mauss or if taking up a performative perspective social roles are only performances.

Let's draw our attention to the way the notion of culture is constituted broadly speaking within our society both academically and publically. Culture is seen as pervasive and all encompassing. The famous proponent of the pervasiveness and importance of culture is Clifford Geertz, consummate cultural interpretist. He argued extensively for the importance of culture in understanding what a human being is. He writes, "Most bluntly it suggests that there is no such thing as a human nature independent of culture" (Geertz 1973, 49). He envisions culture as a control mechanism or a set of instructions, that us human beings use to make sense of and navigate our social and physical worlds. It shapes our beliefs, morals, values, behaviors and choices, often in an unconscious way. Culture is the "lens" through which we can see the world. Geertz maintains we ought not view the person "stratigraphically"; as discrete layers of biology, psychology, society and culture sandwiched together with each within their clearly defined domain. Instead culture mixes in with all other domains, forming a necessary component non-extractable component (Geertz 1973, 37). A human being is thoroughly cultural, every part of the human experience mediated and shaped by culture.

This concept of culture is not without its detractors. Recall James Clifford's critique of ethnographic authority. Culture has many voices and perspectives – it is only through the ethnographer's authority that something like a "culture" bounded and known is produced. Human beings may indeed be thoroughly mediated by engagement in a social and cultural world, but the notion of culture being a singular, homogenous force mediating everyone in the same way is analytically untenable. Robert Thornton discusses the rhetorical necessity of "wholeness". Social and cultural "wholes" exist only in our imagination. An ethnographer creates this wholeness to provide explanatory power to their findings and analysis (Thornton 2014). An actual social whole does not quite exist in the way Geertz suggests. That is not to say there are no

social communities, political affiliations and communal groups, the boundaries of such social communities are often porous and shifting. It is the perceived beliefs, values, rules, duties and obligations that we construct as normative in society that have no existence outside of our capacity to make it real. With the existence of multiple voices and social stratification, not all beliefs, values, rules or duties can be shared equally by all. We construct the illusion of the whole, but the whole is always shifting, instantiations of a social whole or culture are only temporary. The shifting and diverse character does not necessarily contest Geertz' cultural point that humans are thoroughly mediated by cultural forces, but it does reduce the determinative power of a singular culture upon an individual, allowing room for negotiation.

You can find a similar account regarding the self and culture in Katherine Ewing's piece, "The Illusion of Wholeness: Culture, Self, and the Experience of Inconsistency" (1990). She argues that selves, (or rather self-presentations – the way we appear to ourselves) are never unitary, cohesive or necessarily well integrated. We have multiple selves that shift based on context. We rapid fire shift among competing and at times contradictory symbolic frameworks as our sense of self emerges through a dialogic process (Ewing 1990). The key insight here is that despite how multiple varied and complex the actual processes that constitute self and culture – both are socially constructed to exist as illusions of wholeness. Our self is whole and we tend to view culture as a cohesive whole.

The academic arguments that insist on deconstructing the notions of "self" and "culture" as dynamic, dialogic, fragmented and partial is due to the overwhelming power for culture to be viewed as unitary, whole and overpoweringly determinative. And in the case of a self – as private, individual and self-determinative. For social scientists, the anxiety is to resurrect the

agency and freedom of the individual without denying or renouncing the considerable impact of culture on human beings.

I have thus far used the terms agency, freedom and self-determination rather loosely. Agency is more the parlance of an academic; in broad strokes, it is the capacity to act. Freedom is an important term and concept within much of the contemporary world. Freedom is understood as an inalienable right; fundamental for each person. It is the right to act in the way you see fit, it is not just having the capacity to act. Freedom necessitates living in conditions that do not obstruct or unreasonably limit your agency. It is a political ideal enshrined in many constitutions globally and very proudly and fervently embraced by the American ethos of the United States. My paper will capture the ideas of agency and freedom as self-determination; the capacity and right to determine one's self. This includes behaviors, choices, identity, beliefs, and values. Self-determination is a moral virtue in that there is a special moral burden to choose who you will be and determine yourself and life in contemporary society. This self-determination is not just something individuals are told that they must do, it is also something individuals strive to achieve and live up to as a virtue.

The tension is as follows; there is a tendency to see the individual as a private, hidden self with the moral obligation and the individual desire to determine oneself in the face of the overwhelming determinative power of culture to shape us and mold us instead. This has produced an anxiety in academia to redefine how we conceptualize agency or how we conceptualize culture.

Take Lauren Berlant's piece, "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)". She argues that the concept of individual agency has been too reliant on the concept of sovereignty and overly focused on self-control, consciousness and intention (2007). Sovereignty,

consciousness, intention and self-control are key ingredients to understanding self-determination. Berlant wants something different. Such a conception of agency reduces and erases the agency of too many people. She explores the world of obesity and makes the argument that for those who indulge in excessive eating resulting in obesity, we should not consider them irrational (nor, I suspect, should we consider them immoral or unvirtuous) because they are in fact pragmatically mediating between structural constraint and the limits of power. Normative conceptions of agency presuppose highly visible efforts of people fashioning their lives for themselves, but we should consider other forms of agency – such as the lateral agency of obesity. It is not an example of people cultivating their notion of the “good” life. It is instead people making the best choices within the constraints of the situation (Berlant, 2007). It is a compelling and telling academic paper, it reveals the normative conceptions of agency at play and challenges us to rethink what agency is. The tension of agency and the determinative quality of culture has been resolved through a reconceptualization of agency.

This worry of agency carries on though, extending not just to social scientists, but to the people and communities they study. Brian A Hoey undertook an anthropological study of what he termed “corporate refugees” and their search for a “good life”. Each of his participants recount the unhappiness they felt working and living according to the structure of a corporate job. Within this paradigm, Hoey calls these individuals; “life style migrants who seek to define themselves according to their own ‘moral narratives of self’” (Hoey 2008, 119). They have telos for themselves, an imagined goal for their lives – and corporate structure failed to allow them to achieve the imagined ideal lifestyle and self. The piece explores agency/self-determination; it is a perfect distillation of the tension often experienced between the call to determine one’s self and one’s life, to make choices based on one’s desires and the capacity to choose one’s values and

desires versus the structure and cultural norms of our society such as a corporate lifestyle. Hoey explores this dynamic through “corporate refugees” who have renounced corporate lifestyle: the Monday through Friday type of job, long hours, and constant grind. Those refugees had to plan their “escape” and find refuge in the safe harbor of rural parts of Northern Michigan, where they are able to be the self they imagined for themselves.

Hoey recounts a conversation he had with one of his participants who during the course of fieldwork once reached out to touched his shoulder in emphasis to tell him, “Brian, nowadays you got to put together your own life” (Hoey 2008, 131). The piece explores this navigation and tension of these “corporate refugees” as they struggle to actualize some sense of a “true and authentic self” against the dominant values and beliefs of what constitutes the good life in contemporary US culture, that of a corporate lifestyle.

The ideals of agency and self-determination are widespread principles that are often experienced as being in conflict with the other ideals of our society. There is a tension that is being worked through not only within academic domains but also among some other domains of the public and private life within contemporary societies. Moon circles, similar to “corporate refugees” we will come to see, are an example of this.

Resolving the Tension of Agency

To resolve this tension, academics have put forth a litany of different theories. For the purposes of this paper, I will look closer at affect theory first introduced by social theorist Brian Massumi, and while heavily critiqued, still has produced an interesting way to conceptualize agency, that has led to illuminating experimental concepts such as Kathleen Stewart’s “Atmospheric Attunements” (2011). The next theory I will examine is moral anthropologist Jarrett Zigon’s, “Moral Breakdown and the Ethical Demand” (2007). And finally, the last

framework I will examine, built upon Freud's psychoanalytical lens, is Jonathan Lear's, "Wisdom won from Illness: The Psychoanalytic Grasp of the Human Being" (2014). My argument is as follows; these pieces, each in their own way, resolve the tension of the demands of a normative self-determination and the demands of social and cultural influence. The work being done within these papers mimics the work being done within moon circle rituals. The focus is imagining how can one self-determine in the face of the influence and determinative power of culture.

Massumi's piece, "The Autonomy of Affect" introduces an idea of how human beings work. He argues that our social interactions and engagements with our environment are absorbed into us on two different levels. The first level is that of intensity and the second level is that of quality (Massumi 1995, 84-87). The secondary level is the level of what anthropologist William Mazzarella understands as the level of cultural mediation. It is individual experience that has been "qualified", the place where the "hegemonic symbolic qualification has already been achieved" (Mazzarella 2009, 291-294). Mazzarella argues against such a radical binarization between mediated (qualified) and unmediated (immediate) experience; he argues immediation is a fantasy. For Massumi, anything that registers at the conscious level has only been capable of reaching our conscious level due to being mediated by the symbols of language and culture. It is experience that has been determined, organized and captured into meaning. This has been explored and criticized by Ruth Leys as a particularly narrow type of cognitivism, where cognition is defined only by the "human capacity for producing linguist propositions" (Leys 2011, 470). Experience at the level of quality is fully mediated and shaped by culture through language. Meanwhile the level of intensity is the autonomic level of the body, the first layer through which experience is absorbed before being mediated and the level at which the

“remainder” – the unsorted, unmediated and cognitively undefined experiences exist as traces in our nervous system. Massumi suggests, through disputed analysis of scientific experiments that these levels run parallel to one another; a reinstatement of the mind/body dualism also criticized by Leys (2011, 455). It is this level of intensity or what Massumi understands as affect, where potentiality, freedom and agency exist- untouched by the mediation of culture (Massumi 1995). Our bodies carry the potential of unmediated experience; an opportunity for experience outside of the determinative power of culture – the autonomy of affect. There is a real concern for Massumi, that the level of intensity impacts our biological nervous system in ways that shapes our thoughts and behaviors outside of conscious thought. This is politically concerning, as utilization of the affective resonances has the power to subject individuals to the determinative and oppressive political regimes. His goal is to introduce a way to recognize and study the impact of affect to counteract this worry. Despite the aforementioned flaws; the problematic binary of mind/body and mediation/immediation, this theory contributes to a resolution of the anxiety of self-determination. There is experience outside of the determination of culture, a potentiality located within our bodies. Access to this potentiality is not straight forward, but affect theory proposes that culture does not succeed in mediating all aspects of experience, there is a remainder of potentiality, novelty and freedom if we learn to pay attention to affective resonances.

Mazzarella expresses a frustration in his critique of Massumi. He asks, “would it not be more illuminating to explore how [cultural] indeterminacy actually operates in practice as a dynamic condition of our engagement with the categories of collective life?” (2009, 302). Indeed, it would and this engagement is taken up in later affective theories as we move away from the binaries present in Massumi’s work. But affect theory brought to light the

indeterminacy of experience. Some of our subjective experience is captured and fixed – although not indefinitely – into cultural symbolic frameworks. While other subjective experiences remain untethered, unmediated and undefined. Beyond the stark binary between mediation and immediation we come to realize both body can be and is mediated and that cognition includes embodied experience both mediated and unmediated. This feature of indeterminacy is everywhere.

Building on the principles of affect theory is Kathleen Stewart's piece, "Atmospheric Attunements (2011). She analyzes the charged atmospheres of everyday life – things that are in the process of becoming or of being undone that require individuals to labor at producing meaning or significance out of them. She uses the term "forces", as Massumi uses the term affect; forces that arise out of the rhythm of our living and being in the world. She pays attention to the way people "attune" to these forces – how they are assimilated. Assimilation does capture all these forces, there are pockets of indeterminacy left over that always contain the possibility of new attunements. Individuals do tune in and become aware of these forces – they are not inaccessible to conscious awareness, allowing this theory to expand beyond the limits of the original affect theory.

The discussion of affect theory allows us to see that culture has indeterminacy, even as pervasive and determining as culture seems, there are always pockets of potentiality left over. The symbolic frameworks we use to organize life never succeeds at capturing it all. And we can study the way people attune to this indeterminacy. This leads us to examine the next two theories: Zigon and Lear.

Jarrett Zigon is a moral anthropologist. His preoccupation is understanding how the field of "morality" can exist within anthropology in the first place. The predominant approaches to an

anthropology of morality is “the moral reasoning and choice approach and the Neo-Aristotelian and Foucauldian approach” (Zigon 2007, 133). Both theories focus on how one becomes a moral person – one focuses on making moral choices and the other on the development of virtues and dispositions. Zigon expresses the importance of both perspectives, but is concerned with a certain ‘Durkheimian’ assumption that “morality is congruent with society/culture” present in these theories (2007, 134). The field of morality cannot be the same as the field of social values, and expectations of whatever the dominant or prevalent cultural forces are. This would make morality virtually indistinguishable from culture. Anthropologists already study the social roles, duties, expectations and normatives present in cultural and social settings. The key for Zigon is identifying the crucial difference distinguishing the character of morality from that of social and cultural norms. While there does seem to be overlap between the two notions, there is a felt difference between someone flouting social rules and a person that behaves immorally. Social rules and morality may overlap, but they are not the same. Moral space seems marked by the capacity for self-determination and freedom. For individuals to be able to grapple and feel the weight and intensity of moral decisions there must be choice. And not only must there be choice, but there must be competing and indeterminate choices that an individual may or may not align with. Zigon’s theory is an attempt to locate a space outside of the unconscious reproduction of social values and norms among individuals and find the ethical space of individuals grappling with choices, decisions and desires. Zigon locates this space within what he calls “the moral breakdown”.

Borrowing Heidegger’s concepts of being-in-the-world, being-with-the-world, and breakdowns, Zigon carves out the possibility of an ethical domain. Being-in-the-world has an unreflective character; involvement with being in the world is a communal and shared shaping of

our habits and dispositions to the point that it is non-reflective and nonintentional (Zigon 2007, 135-136). Being-with-the-world means we maintain our shared habits and dispositions even in the absence of others; we still comport ourselves as if they were there. Analogous to my thoughts on imagined cultural landscape – the imagined cultural landscape becomes so ingrained in our everyday lives, habits and ways of thinking that it ceases to be intentional or reflective. Instead it is a taken for granted ordinariness.

Being-in-the-world and being-with-the-world, Zigon argues, is not static or closed, it is always “open” due to the existence of breakdowns. Breakdowns are the moments our non-reflective, taken for granted being-in-the world suddenly stops making sense and we must scramble and labor to understand, make sense of, and interpret this novel experience.

Breakdowns are outside of the scope of the symbolic tools we currently have to make sense of them (Zigon 2007, 136-138). This is the domain of ethics, a domain where self-determination is possible and where the indeterminacy and non-mediation of culture is experienced. We are required to labor to attune and assimilate in these moments of breakdown – we must rethink and reinterpret, recontextualize and shift cultural understandings from the symbolic frameworks we have access to.

Here, for Zigon, the body is a collection of the non-reflective culturally mediated habits and dispositions, while for Massumi the body was the source of potentiality and unmediated sensations. Zigon argues that the non-reflective body can suddenly lurch into potentiality and unmediated territory during a breakdown. The argument shifts away from body versus mind or even mediation versus immediation as it seems our embodied existence is capable of being both mediated and unmediated. The discussion becomes about reflection versus non-reflection. Reflexivity is an important component of being and having a self in contemporary society. Self-

determination is more than the capacity to choose within a set of pre-determined choices. The earlier discussion of lateral agency seems to be an agency of this kind. The normative type of agency that is a moral good and virtue in contemporary society requires the capacity for self-reflection. Zigon not only successfully defined an area in which we can identify the study of ethics in culture he exposed the processes through which contemporary individuals achieved the capacity for self-determination: self-reflection. This isn't necessarily unique to Zigon, the notion of self-reflection goes all the way back to Aristotle and the basis of the contemporary understanding of self. Even Foucault explores the role of self-reflection in his piece on "The Technologies of the Self" (1997). Yet, Zigon reveals the process of breakdown through which self-reflection becomes the most salient.

Self-reflection is taken up in social scientist Jonathan Lear's analysis of psychoanalysis and its relation to one's achievement of a morally, virtuous and good life. Lear argues that psychoanalysis created the conditions for thoroughly developing one's capacity for self-consciousness. The conditions for self-consciousness, Lear argues, make Aristotle's vision of "practical wisdom"; the ability to cultivate the right habits and dispositions through self-awareness and self-reflection possible. The process of psychoanalysis, developed by Freud and most concisely distilled in his book, "The Interpretation of dreams", facilitates the free flow of consciousness in the individual. The therapist guides the person through making the unconscious workings of the mind apparent to the person (Lear 2014, 95). Lear argues that the nature of what self-consciousness is can be interpreted quite vastly, but that the process of psychoanalysis constructs what self-conscious thought it. The struggle to allow free-flow association and suspend judgment is constitutive to the development of what self-consciousness is (Lear 2014, 95). Recognizing unconscious parts of our "selves" –our behaviors, thoughts and feelings allows

the possibility of intervention in a similar way to how a breakdown works. The ordinary and taken for granted becomes visible. This why Lear argues that psychoanalysis is a type of practical wisdom – it is a technique to discover a way to live well through understanding what it is that is unconsciously limiting or distracting you.

In terms of self-determination psychoanalysis provides a blueprint of intentionally creating the conditions of self-reflection. You uncover the unconscious and taken for granted everyday structures operating in your life, this discovery allows you to reflect and confront the indeterminacy of cultural and social structures. A space is created for new interpretations and understandings. Psychoanalysis is a controlled form of intentional “breakdown”. Taking the insights of affect theory, breakdowns and self-reflection; we are provided a litany of tools and techniques to facilitate the process of self-determination. The discussion of affect theory reveals that although there does not exist a radical separation of the mediated and unmediated, the inherent indeterminacy of culture allows the potentiality of undefined experience to exist and one merely needs a little cultural breakdown or to facilitate one through the use of psychoanalysis.

Returning to the topic of moon circle rituals, I will demonstrate that the principles of bodily attunement, meditation and talking with one another encapsulate the process of constructing self-consciousness and self-reflection. Through this process, the capacity for the normative notion of self-determination is created. The women express feeling happy, healthy and better due to this ritual of self-reflection which enables them to take control of their lives.

Note on Methods and Design

My research was conducted in Chicago during the academic year of 2019. I was able to connect with a commercial yoga space that hosted monthly moon circles. I was able to attend three moon circle rituals as well as conduct one formal interview with a participant. The

participants of the moon circle shifted month to month with only a few participants remaining the same across the research period. I took field notes based on participant observation as well as notes on the educational materials and images passed around during the moon circles. The participation and observation of these moon circle rituals provides merely an introduction to the social phenomena taking place. Recalling the discussion earlier in this paper; ethnographic research constructs imagined social wholes as a heuristic device to explore and make sense of social life. The data I paid attention to, the topic of agency and self-determination, and the degree to which I was able to integrate and participate all impact the data I collected and the conclusions I drew. Social phenomena are a dialogical process – I am observer, but also participator; in many ways my presence acts as the research instrument filtering the data. My actions and interpretations alter and produce the very social process under investigation. There is no claim to objectivity, but instead a critical exploration of my position and background and their impact on my research.

For my data analysis, I completed several rounds of coding beginning with open coding. My mind has always sought out the connections and tensions between individual and society and I'm drawn to social settings and data that explore these phenomena. I highly doubt that my findings are the only socially interesting or important processes unfolding nor are they the most compelling for certain researchers, but it was the data I observed and analyzed and it provided great insight on the workings of self-determination and the striving towards a good life.

I came to this research project with previous experience of moon circle rituals run by a family member. The circle consists of closer friends – more stable and consistent in attendance and participation, non-commercial and private. The moon circle I participated in for research in contrast was hosted in a yoga studio with a cost of \$25 per attendance, unless a member's package was purchased. While I encountered some reoccurring themes, some themes were

completely novel to me. Many of my participants outside of the instructor were majority white women with backgrounds in higher academia, some with advanced graduate degrees within the social sciences – most frequently in psychology. It's entirely possible that the academic bias of seeking and achieving self-determination had a higher degree of occurrence in this moon circle than in others. It was also entirely possible that my background as a white woman, pursuing a graduate social science degree helped construct an environment where these themes were more salient. It did, at the least, facilitate my integration. The themes of healing, self-reflexivity and healing remained salient themes across the personal and academic experience. I mentioned my moon circle participants were majority white. I did have the opportunity to speak briefly to a friend of a friend who knew I was studying moon circles. She also attended moon circle rituals, but moon circles dedicated for and by black women, and briefly described themes of liberation and social oppression that were differently situated than the moon circle rituals of white women. The moon circle I attended is but the tip of the iceberg in the midst of a culturally varied social movement.

One more salient theme present at my field site is that of goddess worship, which is intertwined deeply with the ethos of the space. I came to know the religious history of many of the participants to find that a Christian background was common. Many of the participants experienced rejecting the perceived patriarchal aspects of Christianity and chose to pursue divine feminine worship. One participant stood out from the other participants in that she was introduced to moon circle rituals through a female catholic priest. A limit of my research was that my analysis did not venture too deep into the religious aspects of the space. Investigating why people to turn to religion and spiritual practices was a research project beyond my scope and interest. I did however find the turn from Christianity to the feminine divine as well as the

appropriation of broadly categorized Eastern spiritual and religious practices analytically significant. This turn to the feminine and to the use of Eastern spiritual practices rather than Christian is an analysis I briefly cover. This is an account of my position, limits and biases that inform the research I did and the analysis I produced.

Meditation, Bodily Attunement and Talk

There were many meditations conducted over the course of the mon circle; several per circle. Meditation was the method through we learned how to become aware of our bodies. Much like psychoanalysis draws our attention and awareness to the loose association of ideas and thoughts in our minds, meditation calls us first to draw attention to the breath and sensations of our body. One of the very first meditations our instructor guided us through was one called a pelvic floor meditation. Our instructor, an American woman of East Asian descent, cross trained across different modalities of healing – Chinese medicine, Tai Chi, and Qi Gong, began the meditation by asking us to close our eyes and breathe deeply. She tells us to connect wherever in our bodies we feel disconnected mentally or emotionally. The guided meditations involved tasks – creative and playful. For this meditation, we were required to envision our pelvic bowl, “find the shape, then mold it like a bird molds its nest.” This envisioning and exploring was our “body’s language to us” to enable us to find truth. We needed to focus in on our pelvic bowl – our womb –molding it and shaping it while we sifted through the emotions, sensations and images it brought to our mind. Meditation was a mix of attuning to the body and allowing free association of sensations with little distinction between whether they arose from mind or body, a tacit understanding that they came simultaneously from both, as they flowed across our awareness. At the end of the meditations participants were encouraged to share their experiences. Most participants were eager to discuss and disclose.

One of the participants shared that the exercise was hard for her, she could not envision anything. Difficulty in performing the meditation was a constant refrain during the sessions. Our instructor agrees that meditation can be difficult. To combat this difficulty, she advises us that mediation should be repeated daily. Free association of the mind often meets resistance and according to Lear is one part of what constitutes the experience of self-consciousness – the desire to get back to the ordinariness of life and leave the indeterminacy behind.

The beginning process of meditation included the moments of closing our eyes, quieting ourselves, taking deep breaths and attuning ourselves to the sensation and presence of our bodies. It is a moment of taking the unreflective, every day, embodied “being-the-the-world” and subjecting it to our conscious awareness. Meditation’s call to attuned to the body also meant attuning to the flow of images, sensations, feelings and ideas that arose from the free association of thoughts and embodied sensations during guided mediation. These meditations challenged us to uncover the structure of our minds and bodies in society. We experienced the free association of sensations. The final step of the mediation was to take the experience and find ways to interpret and make sense of it through the dialogical act of sharing in the communal space. Talking with others, allowed the experience to become assimilated, captured, and given cultural meaning. To do this was to attain “true” and “authentic” knowledge of oneself and through this knowledge: healing. Meditation gives us access to truth and with knowledge comes healing.

One of the guided meditations was about the concept of love. After the meditation, a participant asked the instructor, “how to define love? ...How do you bring you bring love to someone who did something shitty to you?” The instructor emphasized the importance of setting boundaries with other people and that we can also turn to meditation for clarity and answers. Another participant chimed in to share experiences she had had with an abusive ex-boyfriend.

She described her anger as a tightness in her chest and a disconnect – the inability to feel – her “lower body”. The only way she could overcome these feelings was through a technique of mindfulness and deep breathing. She shared that she worked with an instructor during the breathing session and as she processed her anger she slowly began to feel her lower body again. She described becoming strong and “assertive”, so much so that she became strong enough to tell her ex-boyfriend to “fuck off”. The instructor affirms the story and adds that our bodies heal us because it informs us. “Meditation” she continues, “is a healing journey. We have to give ourselves permission to be open to healing. Meditation is always about our intentions and thoughts. Intention and thoughts are the blue prints of creation”. She briefly tells us about the Akashic records, an amorphous energetic/spiritual database that contains all the knowledge about our past lives, present and the future possibilities. Meditation grants us access to this knowledge and truth.

The connections between body, healing and knowledge is frequently cited through periods of discussion during the moon circle rituals. During the aforementioned pelvic bowl meditation, a participant shared she felt a painful “pinching” sensation in her right ovary. She shared that the pain was the way her body of making her avoid “tuning in” and understanding “what’s going on down there.” Our instructor told us that as women, we “hold energy in our body, especially our pelvic floor. “Tuning in with meditation is a process and we must ‘allow our body time to reveal what it needs to reveal.” In other words, the instructor guided the participant into understanding that there is no pressure to understand right away or to rush things – the pain was a cue to slow down.

There are several examples of participants attuning to the pain and discomfort in their body as a source of knowledge and truth. One participant shares that she believes her body

punishes her with severe menstrual cramps and pain each month during her menses for not being pregnant. The instructor once again urges her to utilize meditation to gain knowledge and truth about what her body is communicating with her. While it would have been easy for the instructor to dictate to the participant any number of interpretations: the pain is a sign she wants to be a mother, it's a sign she fears becoming a mother, it's a sign of the pressure to be pregnant prevalent in society etc., the instructor instead asks her to look to her body for the truth and answers she seeks. The instructor also tells all of us that connecting and focusing on our bodies during monthly bleeds will offer clarity. The instructor urges her to meditation on the question and wait a few menstrual cycles for clarity to come.

The pain and fear one participant feels during a meditation on our root chakra is the topic of the next discussion. After sharing her fear and pain, the instructor asks her to consider whether the sensations she is feeling is due to connecting to her root chakra? The meditation just completed was centered on the root chakra, associated with safety and the mother goddess. The participant reflects and shares that she feels afraid because she sees the root chakra and the mother archetype as weakness and does not wish to be weak.

In these examples, women are connecting and unearthing the “untapped potentiality” – the unmediated remainder of the indeterminacy of culture during meditation and reflection. The most important key here is the talk unfolds among the group, before in between and especially after the meditation sessions. It is during these talks that the imagined cultural landscape snaps back into focus from its usual background of ordinary everyday life, as it becomes dialogically negotiated, reinterpreted and altered according to the contributions and understandings of the participants. Important information is circulated regarding the values and cultural paradigms utilized by participants during discussion. Ideas are offered, negotiations take place and

individual understandings expand while the shared imagined cultural landscape is altered. Recall the woman whose harbored anger at her abusive ex-partner manifested as tightness in her chest and numbness in her body. Through what she describes as mindfulness and breathing techniques, she was capable of taking control and removing her abusive partner from her life. The discussions alter the meanings and possibilities of choices in these women's lives.

Physical sensations and feelings that are unnoticed in the everyday being-in-the-world are brought under our conscious awareness and are imbued with new understandings that motivate new actions. This is the process through which self-determination emerges.

Allow me one last example. One of the guided meditations we did was one where the central theme was "defying conventions". The goal was to "find" yourself outside cultural and social labels. The guided meditation followed the story of the goddess archetype Inanna, who once journeyed three days through hell, stripping off her accoutrements and pieces of herself until she was left bare and vulnerable. She was murdered and resurrected after three days. It is a story of journeying into the shadow, and losing oneself to be reborn anew. Here participants, were guided along this story, metaphorically stripping off pieces of themselves as they worked through the meditation. The discussion that followed was illuminating. A participant expressed how "interesting" and "cool" it was to meditate on the idea of self with no labels. The instructor asks what that means for her. She promptly responds; "unfathomable". The instructor turns to the group seated in our meditation circle, "Ego can melt away and transcend during meditation". We ought to "accept all things as artificial – make peace with that and leave it behind". A secondary participant contributes, "the goal is to understand how to be in our roles and release them." The instructor continues discussing the nature of who we are. "We are not our names, then what?"

What is really us? What has been given to us? And is this what we want to be?" She once again tells meditation is meant to into our authenticity.

There is discussion and tacit acceptance that the self by default is "artificial", the self outside of labels is "unfathomable". The task then is to reflect on the options available, the structures present and decide how we would like to respond to them. The self is mediated, but there are always creative and novel ways to respond especially after reflection and discussion.

The cultural frameworks embedded in the imagined cultural landscape, the reflection, and our responses to our social worlds is at the heart of self-determination. The non-reflective and unconscious structures, represented by the imagined landscape are made conscious through meditation. The symbolic frameworks are what get negotiated, amended and expanded during these discussions. Symbolic frameworks are also disseminated at my field site through educational printouts passed around during the moon circles, put together by the instructor. Two sets of printouts are of importance.

The first image is that of the moon cycle (waxing waning, full and new) and the menstrual cycle (bleeding, ovulation, luteal phase and follicular phase) and the association of both of these cycles with specific incarnations/archetypes of the divine feminine goddess. A full moon corresponds to the Mother goddess, associated with expansion, fullness, summer, and fertility. It is at the peak of the menstrual cycle; ovulation. It has the word "light positive" written next to it. The waning moon is associated with the Wild Woman goddess archetype. The waning moon is our luteal phase; we are descending into darkness – the "dark negative" portion of the cycle. It is a time of transition where we begin to encounter the "shadow self" and gain access to psychic knowledge. While we gain access to self-knowledge, self-critique is encourage during this period of time. The next stage is the new moon, associated with winter and the goddess

archetype Crone, signifying death and associated with menstrual bleeding. It is a time to “surrender” and “be still” Here we experience clarity and visions so that we may emerge a new reborn person. It is the darkest part of our cycle. The instructor tells us as she explains that during the bleeding phase of the cycle we get comfortable and creative with our blood. She suggests painting with the blood and watering our plants with the blood. The goal is experimentation and novelty. The waxing moon brings us back into the light, associated with the reborn Maiden goddess archetype and the season of spring. It is a time for learning and energy. It is the follicular time of our cycle, in between bleeding and ovulating, where new beginnings and potential lie.

The chart shows the interrelationships between, body, goddess, moon and seasons. It is also a chart that shows a journey of death and rebirth. In this cycle, we journey into darkness and stillness. During the dark period, we are observant and reflective. We ask questions and we wait for clarity, listening to our bodies. There is part of us that dies and is shed and then we emerge born anew; something different than before. The ritual of meditation captures this, we close our eyes and descend into darkness for clarity and we emerge with new self-knowledge and understanding and the potential for self-determination.

The second round of documents distributed at the moon circles was a packet of notes and images of the goddess archetypes from a diverse and wide array of cultures – from Ancient Greek and Mesopotamia to Hindu goddesses. Even the figure of Mary Magdalen makes an appearance; transformed into a force of feminine divinity. Shared among the description and attributes of these goddesses are themes of “shadow work” – the process described above about the journey into darkness for knowledge and truth – sovereignty, strength, power and truth. Particularly the truth about one’s self.

The feminine divine itself operates as a sort of “shadow work” to counteract the norms of patriarchy prevalent in contemporary society. The Goddess is truth and authenticity, where one can go for reflection, truth and guidance in the face of patriarchal power. While the utilization of East Asian practices not only expands the explanatory repertoire of their imagined cultural landscapes, it is also a subversion of the dominant western paradigm. While one can see the anti-patriarchal and anti-western sentiment within moon circles, it is important to note that the participants are not completely abandoning western culture. Despite operating in a space saturated with images and practices originating from non-western sources; the way the moon circle is structured is almost like a contemporary academic classroom. There is an instructor who passes out notes, facilitates discussions, and assigns tasks. Better yet, it could be read like a therapeutic encounter prevalent in western conceptions of therapy: the instructor/therapist guiding the group through a healing session. The structure and formula of the moon circle strikes one as thoroughly western and contemporary. The western paradigm of the self as independent, sovereign, and self-determining remains desirable among the participants.

The worship of Feminine divinity is still a challenge to the patriarchal order. Femininity is associated with the body and the natural world. Masculinity is cerebral, cognitive, and rational. Masculine energy acts upon the natural world. Elevating the importance of the body and the natural world as necessary components to realizing self-determination redeems the feminine. What the moon circle and divine feminine worship do, is normalize the feminine as inherent and necessary aspects of self-determination. The feminine is the shadow part of the world; where the promise of novelty and freedom exists. If you remain in the domain of the masculine, you deny yourself the self-reflection and self-knowledge necessary to be truly self-determinative and free.

Conclusion

To summarize my argument: the capacity for self-determination is a normative, moral good in western cultures, particularly in the United States. Moon circles utilize meditation, bodily attunement and the act of talking to generate self-knowledge through self-reflection. Self-reflection is achieved through attuning to the indeterminacy of culture through meditation and dialogically constructing new meanings utilizing shared imagined cultural landscapes. Through this process, the understanding of self is altered and the ability to define and act upon themselves and their lives is achieved – the capacity of self-determination. This process also alters the shared understandings of the imagined cultural landscape. Feminine divinity and moon circles are a rebalancing of Western culture; dominantly masculine, cognitive and rational. The feminine is discursively constructed as necessary and inherent in achieving the normative good of self-determination that western culture demands.

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