



“American Healing”: Primal therapy, rebirthing, and cathartic encounters in 1970s London (and beyond)

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Accepted: 5 March 2021 / Published online: 29 April 2021
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Abstract

In the early 1970s new ideas and practices from across the Atlantic changed British psychotherapy. Many methods were marked by a stress on the body, emotion, and catharsis, with some focused on ‘abreaction’. This tendency was influential enough to prompt R. D. Laing, the most important British psychiatrist of the day, to develop his own system of US-inspired ‘rebirthing’. Although hopes for the widespread adoption of American methods were soon dashed, many London-based practitioners carried the new therapeutic techniques into the wider world, expanding the transatlantic space of 1970s psychotherapy into a transnational one. This history reinforces Howard Malchow’s thesis that US influence was a dominant force in the British counterculture, but the relative failure of translating American practices into the new national environment indicates that the cultural and institutional differences between the two countries should not be underestimated.

Keywords Esalen · London · Catharsis · Psychotherapy · Transatlantic influence

British dramatist James Saunders’s play about Primal Therapy, *Bodies* (1977), was performed in French under the title *Guérison Américaine*, or “American Healing”: Box 22, Folder 5 of the James Saunders Papers, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

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Introduction

In the early years of the 1970s it seemed that a “revolution in psychotherapy” was coming to London from across the Atlantic.¹ Most treatment continued to be provided by the relatively conservative National Health Service (NHS), but the private sector was transformed by ideas, practices, and personnel from the United States. The “New Therapies”,² as one practitioner called them, rejected the psychoanalytic idea of the ‘talking cure’ and turned instead to approaches based on the liberation of the body. Some methods were focused on ‘abreaction’ (reliving early trauma, with an emphasis on directly re-experiencing one’s emotions), the best-known example of which was Primal Therapy, developed by the Californian Arthur Janov; Janov’s book *The Primal Scream* (1970) argued that psychotherapeutic practice should focus on reliving repressed infant trauma. The British did not import techniques alone, but a bundle of attitudes towards psychotherapy and the people who engaged with it: the underlying premise of humanistic psychology in the United States was that therapy could help not only those struggling with psychological distress (people labelled ‘mentally ill’) but also those who wished to develop their full potential for living—in the parlance of the era, ‘self-actualizers.’ A lively ‘growth’ sector established itself in London in the early 1970s and US influences redirected the current of Britain’s radical psychiatry movement, which had been challenging the commonplaces of mental healthcare since the 1950s. The major figures in critical psychiatry all demonstrated a turn towards the body and the best known of them, R. D. Laing, adopted an abreactive rebirthing practice he learnt in New York.

Considered in a wider context, the arrival of American psychotherapies between 1969 and 1973 led to an island of optimism that contrasted with the growing countercultural pessimism about the possibility of social change.³ John Rowan, the second chair of the UK’s Association for Humanistic Psychology (AHP), later recalled that “the world seemed to have swung round to our side”.⁴ The circulation of psychotherapeutic ideas did not stop in London, as therapists took their new practices to locations they deemed more congenial. Ultimately, the American-inspired approaches did little to alter the British mental health system in the long term, though the investment in catharsis contributed to the widespread reevaluation of emotional release apparent across Britain in the twenty-first century.

¹ “Revolution in Psychotherapy” was the original title of Arthur Janov’s *The Primal Scream*. See the letter from G. P. Putnam’s Sons reproduced in Marjan Tosic, “As Tears Go By, Rolling Stones Cover, at The Janov Primal Center,” YouTube, September 17, 2013, video, 1:35, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VuefBdFDXfM>.

² Jerome Liss, *Free to Feel: Finding Your Way Through the New Therapies* (New York: Praeger, 1974), 11.

³ For example, Richard Neville, *Hippie Hippie Shake* (Melbourne: William Heinemann Australia, 1995), 235–36; Jann S. Wenner, John Lennon, and Yoko Ono, *Lennon Remembers: The Full Rolling Stone Interviews from 1970* (New York: Verso, 2001), 11–12.

⁴ John Rowan, *Ordinary Ecstasy: The Dialectics of Humanistic Psychology*, 3rd ed. (Hove: Brunner Routledge, 2001), 193, 196.



US Hegemony?

Any discussion of US-British cultural interchanges from the period must position itself within the substantial and growing body of scholarship that has analysed the political activism and counterculture of the 1960s in a transatlantic context.⁵ These cultural exchanges were not evenly balanced and in *Special Relations? The Americanization of Britain* (2011) Howard Malchow argues that scholars still underestimate the influence of the United States on postwar British life. Assessing the large number of Americans who lived in or visited Britain, the British nationals who received training or inspiration in the United States, and the dominance of American popular culture, Malchow concludes that the US presence represented a “hegemonic reality” in postwar Britain, particularly dominant in the circulation of countercultural practices, texts, and ideas.⁶

This article focuses on one aspect of the transatlantic counterculture, namely cathartic and body-oriented psychotherapies, and we broadly confirm Malchow’s thesis. Nonetheless, referring to political and cultural touchstones such as “self-improvement” and the “pursuit of happiness,” therapy scholars Timothy Aubry and Trysh Travis claim “that therapeutic culture is an especially American phenomenon,”⁷ and we will see how British resistance to emotional expression placed strict limits on the spread of the most extreme cathartic practices. Further, we concur with the editors of *The Transatlantic Sixties: Europe and the United States in the Counterculture Decade* (2013), who state that scholarly attempts to situate the 1960s in a global context (rather than a series of “exceptional” events in San Francisco or Paris) compel us “to understand local and regional inequalities, differences and commonalities, as well as the genealogies of the cultural forms that represent and express places and spaces.”⁸ Timothy Scott Brown similarly observes that even

⁵ Timothy Scott Brown, *West Germany and the Global Sixties: The Antiauthoritarian Revolt, 1962–1978* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Belinda Davis et al., eds, *Changing the World, Changing Oneself: Political Protest and Collective Identities in West Germany and the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010); Brian Dooley, *Black and Green: The Fight for Civil Rights in Northern Ireland and Black America* (London: Pluto Press, 1998); Russell Duncan, “The Summer of Love and Protest: Transatlantic Counterculture in the 1960s,” in *The Transatlantic Sixties: Europe and the United States in the Counterculture Decade*, ed. Grzegorz Kosc et al. (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2013), 144–73; Robin D. G. Kelley and Stephen Tuck, eds, *The Other Special Relationship: Race, Rights, and Riots in Britain and the United States* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Martin Klimke, *The Other Alliance: Student Protest in West Germany and the United States in the Global Sixties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); George McKay, “The Social and (Counter-) Cultural 1960s in the USA, Transatlantically,” in *Summer of Love: Psychedelic Art, Social Crisis and Counterculture in the 1960s*, ed. Christoph Grunenberg and Jonathan Harris (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), 35–62.

⁶ Howard L. Malchow, *Special Relations? The Americanization of Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 2–3, 104–105, 305. See also Duncan, “The Summer of Love and Protest,” 154.

⁷ Timothy Aubry and Trysh Travis, “Introduction: Rethinking Therapeutic Culture,” in *Rethinking Therapeutic Culture*, ed. Timothy Aubry and Trysh Travis (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 2.

⁸ Grzegorz Kosc et al., Introduction, in Kosc et al., *The Transatlantic Sixties*, 9. See also Christopher Connery and Hortense J. Spillers, “Introduction: The Still Vacillating Equilibrium of the World,” *boundary 2* 36, no. 1 (2009): 2; Fredric Jameson, “Periodizing the 60s,” in *The 60s without Apology*, ed. Sohnya Sayres et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 178–209.



though scholars increasingly “speak less of ‘1968’ than of a ‘global 1960s[,]’ [...] all 1968s were simultaneously local *and* global.”⁹ In line with these calls for a planetary understanding of the 1960s sensitive to local conditions, we will describe both the “commonalities” and “inequalities” in the adoption of cathartic psychotherapies in the USA and Britain, while demonstrating that the transatlantic exchange of psychotherapeutic techniques was part of humanistic psychology’s larger international circuitry. Through London, these models and methods went on to play the globe.

Europe in Esalen

In the years before 1970 there was significant European input into psychotherapeutic thinking in the United States, most notably the work of R. D. Laing, whose criticisms of his own profession have sometimes been labelled ‘anti-psychiatry.’¹⁰ Throughout the 1960s Laing challenged conventional views of schizophrenia, eventually claiming that in some cases it might be “*a natural way of healing our own appalling state of alienation called normality*”.¹¹ This controversial position was espoused in *The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise* (1967), the text that cemented his countercultural credentials in the United States, where the paperback edition sold hundreds of thousands of copies.¹² Such ideas appealed to a number of US healthcare professionals, who constituted a substantial proportion of the helpers at Kingsley Hall, the most important of Laing’s British therapeutic communities. Some of these Americans returned home to set up organizations along similar lines,¹³ while one of them, Joseph Berke, co-authored a book with a Kingsley Hall resident that became the best-known account of life there. It is likely that Berke’s work with Mary Barnes, using the traditional psychiatric technique of regression, was a factor in stimulating Laing’s interest in the reliving of early experiences.¹⁴

Other European influences came into play at California’s Esalen Institute, the growth centre founded in Big Sur in 1962 by two of Laing’s American admirers, Michael Murphy and Richard Price. Esalen “soon established itself as the bastion of

⁹ Timothy Scott Brown, *Sixties Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 2–3.

¹⁰ We avoid this term because it misleadingly centres the critical psychiatry movement on one stage of the relationship between Laing and David Cooper, while underplaying Laing’s rejection of the label. For a recent example, see Oisín Wall, *The British Anti-Psychiatrists: From Institutional Psychiatry to the Counter-Culture, 1960–1971* (London: Routledge, 2017).

¹¹ R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise* (London: Penguin, 1990), 136, italics in original.

¹² Michael E. Staub, *Madness is Civilization: When the Diagnosis Was Social, 1948–1980* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 64.

¹³ See the essays on the Soteria Project in R. D. Laing: *Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Salman Raschid (London: Free Association Books, 2005).

¹⁴ Mary Barnes and Joseph Berke, *Mary Barnes: Two Accounts of a Journey Through Madness* (New York: Ballantine, 1973); Joseph H. Berke, “The Therapeutic Impact of Regression,” Dr. Joseph H. Berke: Individual & Family Psychology, 2009, <http://www.jhberke.co.uk/articles/regression.pdf>.



New Age therapy,”¹⁵ a place to explore eastern and western practices for optimizing one’s mental and physical wellbeing.¹⁶ Historian Jessica Brogan records that:

Here, the ideas of [Arthur] Maslow and others generated for understanding human psychology were grafted onto lived experience, where they mingled with other approaches and morphed into novel practices. This more personal outgrowth of humanistic psychology would be known as the human potential movement [HPM].¹⁷

One of Esalen’s theoretical touchstones was Wilhelm Reich, a pupil of Freud’s whose flight from Nazism led him to the United States in 1939. He extolled the psychological and political benefits of the orgasm and—prior to a rightward turn in the 1950s that saw Reich become an “enthusiastic Republican”¹⁸—he blamed capitalism and its ideologies for emotional and physical pathologies. This eclectic fusion of Marxism and psychoanalysis led to his expulsion from orthodox psychoanalytical circles but Reichian and post-Reichian ideas, particularly those emphasizing the need for liberation of the body, found a home in the world of humanistic psychology.¹⁹

The HPM welcomed such heresies because it had itself been birthed by the United States’ particular national inflection of Freudianism. According to cultural historian Eli Zaretsky, psychoanalysis in America was strongly influenced by optimistic cultural norms, eventually becoming “almost the opposite of the self-reflective exploration of internal limitations that characterized its European counterpart.”²⁰ The HPM sought to abandon the lingering presence of Freud’s pessimism and replace it with the individual’s quest for self-improvement and happiness.²¹ Initially defined by such figures as Arthur Maslow, Carl Rogers, and Fritz Perls (an analysand of Reich), the HPM rejected the idea of human beings as invariably broken by the conflict between instinct and society. Premising an “innate tendency toward growth”, its advocates promoted “self-actualization” and creative living rather than mending damaged psyches.²² The idea of “psychotherapy for the normal” (in historian Ellen

¹⁵ Lucas Richert, *Break on Through: Radical Psychiatry and the American Counterculture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019), 74.

¹⁶ Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 99, 105.

¹⁷ Jessica Grogan, *Encountering America: Humanistic Psychology, Sixties Culture & the Shaping of the Modern Self* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2013), 159.

¹⁸ Christopher Turner, *Adventures in the Orgasmatron: Wilhelm Reich and the Invention of Sex* (London: Fourth Estate, 2011), 433–35, Kindle.

¹⁹ Nick Totton, *The Problem with the Humanistic Therapies* (London: Karnac Books, 2010), 15–16.

²⁰ Eli Zaretsky, *Secrets of the Soul: A Social and Cultural History of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 76–77.

²¹ Bernie Zilbergeld, *The Shrinking of America: Myths of Psychological Change* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1983), 33–38.

²² Grogan, *Encountering America*, x, 6–12, 27–29.



Herman's phrase) had already gained traction in post-war psychiatry and the HPM's ideology and practices assured even faster penetration of this new market.²³

From the start, some humanistic psychologists called for an increased emphasis on body, emotion, and catharsis. By the end of the 1960s, encounter groups were the commonest form of therapy at Esalen; these groups had originally been rather formal, but eventually the emphasis switched to intense self-expression. Session leaders encouraged participants to vent buried feelings and speak openly about their peers, creating noisy and confrontational scenes. John Heider, a psychologist and Esalen resident, distrusted the desire for "quick fix" catharsis, but nonetheless thousands of Americans arrived in search of "emotional release".²⁴ The Reichian therapist Alexander Lowen was invited to lead workshops at Esalen in 1967, the year he published *The Betrayal of the Body*, a polemical title which resonated with attitudes elsewhere in the counterculture. Lowen and other practitioners of so-called 'bioenergetics' utilized physical exercises that could lead to tears and screams of pain at childhood injuries.²⁵ A pervasive but sometimes unacknowledged presence in the cathartic turn was Lafayette Ron Hubbard's *Dianetics* (1950), which, probably under the influence of the early Freud, announced a programme involving the "discharge" of "engrams" deposited by traumatic experiences.²⁶ The book sold half a million copies in its first year.²⁷

Hubbard's *Dianetics* originated in Southern California, and there are good reasons to see the Golden State as the geographical hub for the new psychotherapies, from Primal Therapy to Erhard Seminar Training ('est'), Gestalt Therapy to Synanon (a drug rehabilitation organization notorious for its aggressive, confrontational methods).²⁸ California has long been associated with bohemianism—Jack Kerouac's *Big Sur* (1962) describes his experiences in the region—and groups such as the Beats played a key role in contributing to, while also complicating, the valorization of strong feelings in post-war American subcultures. While the Beats encouraged the expression of powerful emotions (think Ginsberg's mid-1950s "Howl"), it was also the case that they practiced an aloofness that could be interpreted as a version of bourgeois emotional repression. Hipsters, however, understood their stance as a rejection of the norms of sociability that demanded ersatz bonhomie. According to their self-image, the Beats and other hipsters weren't emotionally inhibited, because that would demand intense exertion to keep feelings under wraps; instead, they

²³ Ellen Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 240–41, 263. See also Martin Halliwell, *Therapeutic Revolutions: Medicine, Psychiatry and American Culture, 1945–1970* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 4–6.

²⁴ Grogan, *Encountering America*, 191–92, 203.

²⁵ Alexander Lowen, *The Betrayal of the Body* (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1969), 228–29.

²⁶ L. Ron Hubbard, *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health* (Los Angeles: The Church of Scientology of California Publications Organisation, 1977), 122–27, 273.

²⁷ Hugh B. Urban, *The Church of Scientology: A History of a New Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 70–71.

²⁸ Paul Williams and Brian Edgar, "Up Against the Wall: Primal Therapy and 'the Sixties,'" *European Journal of American Studies* 3, no. 2 (2008): locations 7–8, <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.3022>.



were effortlessly “cool”.²⁹ As hipsters morphed into or were replaced by hippies, an ideology took hold based on the rejection of reason and the celebration of instinct and spontaneity.³⁰ The hippies’ abandonment of socially conditioned emotional repression influenced a substantial fraction of the US middle class into embracing a “looser life” that promised a more bodily and affective existence, as well as promoting the release of “submerged, primordial energies”.³¹

Esalen in Europe

It was not that British psychotherapists lacked an interest in abreactive approaches. Some psychiatrists were already prescribing drugs to promote cathartic reliving and the use of LSD for this purpose began in a British hospital in 1951.³² When the drug was criminalized in 1966, at least one practitioner switched to other methods of triggering abreaction.³³ But these were isolated examples and, in the late 1960s, cathartic techniques were far better known in the United States than in the UK: two well-known instances outside Esalen were the groups run by Daniel Casriel³⁴ and Paul Bindrim’s widely publicized Nude Therapy, which included reliving birth experiences in a body-temperature pool.³⁵ For many Londoners, the first glimpse of something like Esalen itself would have come at the April 1970 screening of Paul Mazursky’s film *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice* (1969), where an unnamed character practices a version of primal screaming *avant la lettre* in the grounds of a mountainous retreat overlooking the Californian coast.³⁶ Alice was played by actor Dyan Cannon, and while this highly reserved character spends most of the film keeping a cautious watch on her less inhibited friends, Cannon herself began Primal Therapy with Janov in the early 1970s.

A good example of both American influence and the importance of catharsis in the transatlantic space of psychotherapy is the programmatically entitled *Free to Feel: Finding Your Way Through the New Therapies* (1974) by Jerome Liss. During

²⁹ Peter N. Stearns, *American Cool: Constructing a Twentieth-Century Emotional Style* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 182.

³⁰ W. J. Rorabaugh, *American Hippies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 5, 10–11; Duncan, “The Summer of Love and Protest,” 157–58.

³¹ Sam Binkley, *Getting Loose: Lifestyle Consumption in the 1970s* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 2–5.

³² Andy Roberts, *Albion Dreaming: A Popular History of LSD in Britain* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2008), location 932 and passim, Kindle; Jay Stevens, *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream* (New York: Perennial Library, 1988), 84.

³³ Frank Lake, *In the Spirit of Truth: A Reader in the Work of Frank Lake*, ed. Carol Christian (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1991).

³⁴ Daniel Casriel, *A Scream Away from Happiness* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1972), 16.

³⁵ Paul Bindrim, “Nude Marathon Therapy,” in *Inside Psychotherapy: Nine Clinicians Tell How They Work and What They Are Trying To Accomplish*, ed. Adelaide Bry (New York: Basic Books, 1972), 141–62; Ian Nicholson, “Baring The Soul: Paul Bindrim, Abraham Maslow and ‘Nude Psychotherapy,’” *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 43 (Fall 2007): 338, 346.

³⁶ Michael Billington, “Sexual Square Dance,” *The Illustrated London News*, April 4, 1970, 26.



the 1960s Liss had been one of a number of London-based Americans associated with Laing's Philadelphia Institute. Towards the end of the decade, while remaining sympathetic to Laing's ideas, he began to champion methods oriented towards bodily and emotional release. Liss claimed that forward-thinking therapists were dissatisfied with "talk therapy": "Traditional psychotherapists" continued to follow Sigmund Freud's later ideas, but their more up-to-date colleagues were returning to the cathartic methods of his earlier work.³⁷ Liss's historical sketch needs considerable nuancing, since Freud's version of abreaction was restrained by later standards³⁸ and catharsis and abreaction were still used as psychiatric techniques in the mid-twentieth-century.³⁹ But in broad terms, Liss's evaluation was true: psychoanalysis set therapy on a path in which word was more important than body.⁴⁰ The therapeutic models that emerged in 1960s America sought to reverse this situation by replacing analysis and restrained abreaction with full-blooded emotional release—"maximal catharsis", as one critic put it.⁴¹ In the early 1970s these approaches carved a space for themselves in Britain's private health sector, which had previously offered fundamentally the same treatments as the NHS, albeit with a different balance between psychotherapy and other methods. The arrival of the new therapies presented a challenge to medical practice within the NHS itself, although the necessarily cautious nature of publicly funded medicine meant that successful encroachment into the state sector was rare.

The NHS primarily operated according to the medical model of psychological health, typically offering medication or self-management strategies to the 'mentally ill'. Behaviour modification techniques were considered suitably safe and scientific, but psychoanalysis and other forms of talk therapy, though available to a limited number of patients, were regarded as too expensive and unproven for publicly funded medicine.⁴² Nevertheless, there is evidence of patient demand for the new psychotherapies,⁴³ and some practitioners in the state system were open-minded about incorporating them. In a review of *Free to Feel* Sidney Crown, consultant psychiatrist at the London Hospital, wrote that ideal readers of Liss's book would be "straight therapists who, ignorant of [new psychotherapeutic techniques] become

³⁷ Liss, *Free to Feel*, 3, 32–33.

³⁸ Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*, trans. and ed. James Strachey and Alia Strachey (1893–95; London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1956), 6–7, 17.

³⁹ G. Watkins, "The Psychodynamic Treatment of Combat Neuroses with Hypnosis during World War II," *The International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis* 48, no. 3 (July 2000): 324–35.

⁴⁰ Henri F. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (New York: Basic Books, 1970), 57–74; Gustl Marlock, "Body Psychotherapy as a Major Tradition of Modern Depth Psychology," trans. Michael Soth, in *The Handbook of Body Psychotherapy and Somatic Psychology*, ed. Gustl Marlock et al. (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2015), 83–101.

⁴¹ Frederick H. Lowy, "The Abuse of Abreaction: An Unhappy Legacy of Freud's Cathartic Method," *Canadian Psychiatric Association Journal* 15, no. 6 (December 1970): 559.

⁴² Stuart Sutherland, *Breakdown* (Frogmore, St Albans: Granada Publishing, 1977), 26 ff; M. Shepherd, "Psychoanalysis, Psychotherapy, and Health Services," *British Medical Journal* 2, no. 6204 (December 15, 1979): 1558–59, JSTOR.

⁴³ D. D. R. Williams, "Some Memorable Advice," *British Medical Journal* 323, no. 7326 (December 15, 2001): 1407.



irritated” when their patients ask them “to combine, say, ‘primaling’ or ‘Rolfing’ with their useful but pedestrian once-weekly, NHS, psychotherapy”.⁴⁴ Still, the powerful arguments of cost and the need for proved efficacy meant any ingress to the NHS depended on the efforts of sympathetic individual practitioners and these were few and far between.⁴⁵

Given these constraints, it was in the private sector where the new therapies made most headway.⁴⁶ The process of transplantation began when three Americans helped a British psychotherapist revive Reichianism in the UK. The first, Malcolm Brown, established a Reich study group in 1967, and the next year David Boadella (the only practicing British Reichian) invited Alexander Lowen to give a bioenergetics workshop. Liss attended, and was inspired to start what were possibly the first British encounter groups.⁴⁷ Practices developed at Esalen would soon appear in London via the Association for Humanistic Psychology, founded in 1969 to bring the HPM’s ideals to Britain.⁴⁸ Although the AHP only had 41 members, it joined with other groups to invite Michael Murphy to visit in 1970 with a team of Esalen colleagues that included William Schutz, pioneer of cathartic encounter groups.⁴⁹ The Americans met Laing and participated in four events. “People are so... out of touch with their real feelings,” proclaimed Murphy, who feared the notorious “stiff-upper-lip” [sic] would make the British unsympathetic to Esalen’s methods. He was reassured when 400 people shrieked and jumped up and down in response to a request to “release” themselves; some of these participants relived childhood experiences. Glyn Seaborn-Jones, the first British-born primal therapist, was one of those present.⁵⁰

One legacy of the visit was the launch of Quaesitor,⁵¹ the first European growth centre. Founders Paul and Patricia Lowe (both AHP members) had prepared themselves by attending as much Esalen training as possible.⁵² In spring 1973 the Americans Denny and Leida Yuson, who had been invited to London four years earlier to work with drug addicts,⁵³ were operating at Quaesitor, running 48-h encounter marathons and group sessions based on approaches developed by Synanon.⁵⁴ A second

⁴⁴ Sidney Crown, review of *Free to Feel* by Jerome Liss, *British Journal of Psychiatry* 132, no. 5 (May 1978): 521.

⁴⁵ For examples see Ray Lightbown, “N.H.S. Gay Professionals Group & the CHE Medical Campaign: Report Back,” *CHE Bulletin* 3, no. 9 (1975): 15; “R. L. Jillett TD, MB, BS, MRCPsych, DPM,” *British Medical Journal (Clinical Research Edition)* 287, no. 6385 (July 9, 1983): 137–138, JSTOR.

⁴⁶ Shepherd, “Psychoanalysis, Psychotherapy, and Health Services,” 1557–59.

⁴⁷ David Boadella, “Reich’s Impact in England,” *Energy and Character* 5, no. 1 (1974): 70–76.

⁴⁸ Rowan, *Ordinary Ecstasy*, 193.

⁴⁹ William C. Schutz, *Here Comes Everybody: Bodymind and Encounter Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), xiii–xviii, 5–10.

⁵⁰ Bernard Weinraub, “Esalen Encounter Group Finds British in Touch,” *New York Times*, June 15, 1970, 4. See also Rowan, *Ordinary Ecstasy*, 193; Kripal, *Esalen*, 193.

⁵¹ Some sources claim that Quaesitor was operating in 1969, so this might have been a re-launch.

⁵² Gilda E. Myers, *My Life as an Artist* (Morrisville, NC: Lulu.com, 2010), 263.

⁵³ Alex Mold and Virginia Berridge, *Voluntary Action and Illegal Drugs: Health and Society in Britain since the 1960s* (Houndsmill, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 28–31.

⁵⁴ “Growth Centres: Calendar of Events,” *Self and Society* 1, no. 1 (March 1973): 16, 31.



London growth centre, Kaleidoscope, was founded by Bill Grossman, an American encounter group leader.⁵⁵ Zulma Reyo, an American of Puerto Rican heritage who had undergone training at Janov's Primal Institute, maintained a busy practice in the basement of Kaleidoscope.⁵⁶ In September 1973 Grossman's stand-in, Michael Barnett, re-launched the centre as Community, the change of name an indication of Barnett's attempt to integrate psychotherapy more firmly into people's lives. One of Community's group leaders had trained with Carl Rogers in California.⁵⁷ Soon a third venue was established, the London Growth Centre in Kentish Town.⁵⁸

Expressing emotion seems to have been important in all these encounter groups, even those inspired by Carl Rogers, who is generally associated with quieter methods,⁵⁹ and the London centres were soon influenced by the era's most radically expressive psychotherapy. Arthur Janov's Primal Therapy contained few new elements except a near-total reliance on abreaction and a challenging format used to batter down defences.⁶⁰ Janov argued that the repression of childhood feelings created neurotic symptoms that could only be cured by re-experiencing early traumas; plunging back into long-deferred emotions was accompanied by screaming, crying, thrashing pillows, and beating walls. Janov was influenced by HPM therapists—learning in person from Perls and Rogers⁶¹—but the relationship between Primal Therapy and humanistic psychology is complex. Janov returned to the pessimistic Freudian view of human beings as damaged and was deeply invested in the concept of neurosis as a form of mental illness, two sets of ideas that the HPM rejected. Nevertheless, the focus on the body and emotions meant that Janov's methods were noted with interest by humanistic practitioners on both sides of the Atlantic. In April 1973 Grossman described the psychotherapeutic rationale at Kaleidoscope as undoing mental illness by expressing feelings,⁶² and in 1977 the AHP journal *Self & Society* claimed that, "Since Janov's *Primal Scream*, the concepts and practice of Primal Therapy have become a growth industry."⁶³

This was not a growth industry with which Janov was directly involved. He visited London in May 1972 to promote his ideas⁶⁴ and in October of that year Dyan

⁵⁵ Michael Barnett, *People, Not Psychiatry* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973), 159–61.

⁵⁶ Zulma Reyo, *Tightrope: My Story with Osho Before He Was Osho* (N.p.: n.p., 2017), locations 420, 451, 612–14, Kindle; Ma Prem Tao, "When Depressed, Simply Be Depressed," Osho World, April 2008, https://web.archive.org/web/20200225075716/http://www.oshoworld.com/Articles_and_Stories/Ma_Prem_Tao.asp.

⁵⁷ Alan Lowen, "The Art of Being," interview by Iain McNay, YouTube, July 3, 2012, video, 17:20, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QFZX7eTJ-zM>.

⁵⁸ "Growth Centres: Calendar of Events," 31.

⁵⁹ Steve Murgatroyd, Letter, *Self and Society* 3, no. 3 (1975): 29.

⁶⁰ Arthur Janov, *The Primal Scream* (London: Abacus, 1973).

⁶¹ Arthur Janov, "The Hot Seat," The Primal Center, June 2005, <http://primaltherapy.com/GrandDelusions/GD12.htm>.

⁶² William E. Grossman, "The Encounter Experience," *Self and Society* 1, no. 2 (April 1973): 27.

⁶³ "Spotlight," *Self and Society* 5, no. 5 (May 1977): 141.

⁶⁴ Review of *Energy and Character*, *Self and Society* 1, no. 4 (June 1973): 17.



Cannon told the *Daily Mail* that Primal Therapy was coming to Britain “soon”.⁶⁵ Later in the decade there was a research collaboration with the Maudsley Hospital but Janov abandoned his plan to open a Primal Institute in Britain.⁶⁶ He was also eager for his therapy to be available on the NHS, but this too never materialized, and in 1978 the disillusioned Californian lamented that British people were psychotherapeutically backward because of a repressive national culture.⁶⁷ Janov finally set up his European centre in Paris, a location (according to him) partially determined by his divorce agreement, which prevented him from practicing in another Anglophone country.⁶⁸ In any case, Primal Therapy’s wave of popularity had broken, and this new Primal Institute in Europe closed in 1985.

In the absence of a London-based Primal Institute, the demand for the new therapy was met by Reyó and Seaborn-Jones. Seaborn-Jones had written in 1968 of the power of LSD mixed with Ritalin to induce abreactions,⁶⁹ and, after encountering Primal Therapy, he began offering a variant of Janov’s key techniques (a three-week period of intensive “reliving of core experiences” during which the patient was isolated from the outside world). Seaborn-Jones eventually merged primal approaches into an eclectic system called Reciport (“reciprocal support”).⁷⁰ Janov strongly resisted all such methodological hybridity, but it was necessary in Britain because his strident rhetoric appealed mainly to those who sought relief from all-pervading emotional pain. Although state spending on mental healthcare was never adequate, the NHS did seek to meet the increasing demand of the 1960s by offering more outpatient treatment.⁷¹ This limited the market for anyone offering private mental health services: the demands of financial solvency being what they were, practitioners had to attract consumers in search of personal growth, and thus the most successful imports had humanistic elements from the start. One of those was “primal integration”, which the Canadian William Swartley claimed to have been developing since the early 1960s, a blend of encounter group and regression techniques.⁷² Its transplantation into Britain was enabled by the networks created by the AHP and the London growth centres and in 1975 Swartley toured Europe, reporting “Primal has not quite happened in London, but there is such great interest in it that it will happen soon”.⁷³

⁶⁵ The Lewin File, “What Three Weeks in an Empty Motel Room did for Dyan Cannon,” *Daily Mail*, October 20, 1972, 7.

⁶⁶ “Notes,” *Journal of Primal Therapy* 4, no. 1 (Winter 1977): 110–11; “Notes,” *Journal of Primal Therapy* 5, no. 2 (Fall 1978): 147.

⁶⁷ Ross Benson, “If You Want to Grow Up, Be a Cry Baby,” *Daily Express*, May 3, 1978, 11.

⁶⁸ Arthur Janov, “My Life: Practicing Primal Therapy,” Janov’s Reflections on the Human Condition, February 18, 2017, <http://cigognenews.blogspot.com/2017/02/my-life-practicing-primal-therapy.html>.

⁶⁹ Glyn Seaborn-Jones, *Treatment or Torture: The Philosophy, Techniques, and Future of Psychodynamics* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1968), 271–79.

⁷⁰ Glyn Seaborn-Jones, Interview with June Posey, *Self and Society* 5, no. 6 (June 1977): 207.

⁷¹ Sutherland, *Breakdown*, 218.

⁷² Juliana Brown and Richard Mowbray, “Definitions and Historical Development,” *Primal Integration*, 1994, <http://www.primalintegration.com/definitionandhistory/definhist.html>.

⁷³ William Swartley, “Report on the State of Primal in Europe—Fall 1975,” attached to the *International Primal Association Newsletter* (February 1976).



At times the US-inspired move to bodily and cathartic psychotherapy coalesced with the critical psychiatry movement.⁷⁴ Thomas Scheff, a sociologist whose ideas were broadly in line with Laing's, brought Re-evaluation Counselling (RC) to Britain, a Dianetics-inspired method created in Seattle by Harvey Jackins in the early 1950s.⁷⁵ RC combined the discharge of imprinted trauma with the principle of mutual aid.⁷⁶ These aspects were complementary: the emphasis on catharsis meant that interpretation by a therapist was no longer important, so psychiatric expertise was unnecessary. RC enabled people to help each other after a short training period, each person talking and listening in turn. Scheff spent 3 years in RC as part of a mission to supplement professional psychotherapists with trained lay personnel,⁷⁷ and in 1970 he taught the first RC workshop in Britain.⁷⁸ Historian Beryl Satter, who records several instances of how RC was packaged to appeal to leftists, notes that outside the United States the international RC movement was strongest in the UK.⁷⁹ Laing, Cooper, and their associates had already created a deep countercultural cynicism about psychiatric expertise, so a practice in which ordinary people helped each other spread rapidly.⁸⁰

An eclectic union of critical psychiatry and cathartic methods was also present in the activist mental health organization People Not Psychiatry (PNP), conceived by Michael Barnett while reading Laing's *Self and Others* (1961).⁸¹ In July 1969 Barnett published an article in the countercultural *International Times* (*IT*) which claimed that "psychiatry is politics" and ended with a request for "[a]nyone wanting to join in changing the scene, a revolution no less" to contact him.⁸² The idea of a network offering mutual nurturing as an alternative to psychiatry and hospitalization spread quickly through word of mouth and advertisements in *IT*. Barnett was in tune with the "new methods": he regarded Freudian interpretations as "mostly crap" and claimed that before encounter groups people had "nowhere to shout or scream or cry."⁸³

PNP's most flamboyant member, Jenny James, introduced herself to Barnett by offering to "do anything, from typing to blowing up psychiatrists".⁸⁴ An admirer

⁷⁴ There were also aspects which went in different directions, such as the Mental Patients' Unions that emerged independently and at roughly the same time in the United States and Scotland.

⁷⁵ John Heron, "History & Development of Co-Counselling," *Self and Society* 8, no. 4 (1980): 99; Harvey Jackins, *The Human Side of Human Beings: The Theory of Re-evaluation Counselling* (Seattle: Rational Island Publishers, 1986), 1.

⁷⁶ Jackins, *Human Side*, 76–80, xi.

⁷⁷ Thomas J. Scheff, *Catharsis in Healing, Ritual, and Drama* (1979; Lincoln, NE: Authors Guild Backprint.com, 2001), ix–x.

⁷⁸ Rose Evison and Richard Horobin, "Co-Counselling," in *Innovative Therapy in Britain*, ed. John Rowan and Windy Dryden (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1988), 87.

⁷⁹ Beryl Satter, "The Left," in Aubry and Travis, *Rethinking Therapeutic Culture*, 124.

⁸⁰ Rowan, *Ordinary Ecstasy*, 69.

⁸¹ Michael Barnett, "The Truth Comes Sideways," interview by Iain McNay, YouTube, June 9, 2010, video, 13:10, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_70ple2Rk6c.

⁸² Michael Barnett, "The Sick Scene," *IT*, July 4–17, 1969, 3.

⁸³ Barnett, *People*, 103–16.

⁸⁴ Barnett, *People*, 106.



of Laing, James had been in therapy with David Boadella, at whose Reichian-influenced sessions she was able to “sob and rant and rage and cry and kick”.⁸⁵ This was her initiation into deep feeling therapy, and when she became the first tenant of a community house set up by PNP she held two free encounter group sessions each week with the American Jerry Rothenberg.⁸⁶ James is best known for the primal communes she established in Europe and South America,⁸⁷ yet her relationship with Primal Therapy began with resistance. By June 1971 she had read and liked *The Primal Scream*, but in July 1972 she returned from holiday to find that primal therapists had visited the PNP house and some of their methods had been adopted: “god how I hated it, half a dozen people moaning and yelling and screaming all at once...”.⁸⁸ Nonetheless, James went on to found several communes in London and Ireland that practiced primal-style therapy either free or at low cost.⁸⁹ For all Janov’s leftist politics and rejection of elitism,⁹⁰ he charged high fees and decreed no-one could practice Primal Therapy without his authorization.⁹¹ Against this, James maintained ordinary people could do therapy for themselves⁹² and mocked his imperiousness with the formulation “Lord Janov”.⁹³ James was in turn criticized for political naivety by other radicals on Villa Road, the South London street where she established primal communes in the mid-1970s; some of her neighbours claimed that James’s emphasis on individual therapy, rather than collective action, made her complicit with capitalist society.⁹⁴

On 7 October 1972 R. D. Laing met Janov and came away with mixed feelings. He thought the Californian was a “jig man”, someone who knew a lot about a little.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, he later praised him for making screaming acceptable,⁹⁶ and Laing’s son and biographer suggests that his father was impressed by the business possibilities of Primal Therapy—all you needed was a suitable space in which people could “let it all hang out”—and might have gone down that path himself but for Janov’s primacy.⁹⁷ Laing’s openness to extreme catharsis was rooted in a complex relationship with countercultural developments. The authentic meeting with the client—the basic mode of his psychotherapy, once he abandoned a fondness for Freudian

⁸⁵ Jenny James, *Room to Breathe* (London: Caliban Books, 1983), xi, 1, 13, 50, 222.

⁸⁶ James, *Room to Breathe*, 28; Barnett, *People*, 107.

⁸⁷ *The Silence and the Scream*, BBC Radio 4, July 25, 2018, audio, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0bbp9qf>.

⁸⁸ James, *Room to Breathe*, 62, 140.

⁸⁹ Jenny James, *They Call Us the Screamers: The History of Atlantis Primal Therapy Commune, Burtonport, Co. Donegal* (London: Caliban Books, 1983), 32, 39.

⁹⁰ Arthur Janov, *The Primal Revolution* (London: Sphere Books, 1975), 214.

⁹¹ “Primal Pique,” *Village Voice*, December 13, 1976, 26.

⁹² James, *Room to Breathe*, 37.

⁹³ Jenny James, “Atlantis—New Revolutionary Force in Ireland?” *Self and Society* 6, no. 2 (1978): 59.

⁹⁴ John Davis and Juliane Fürst, “Drop-outs,” in *Europe’s 1968: Voices of Revolt*, ed. Robert Gildea, James Mark, and Anette Warring (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 208.

⁹⁵ Adrian Laing, *R. D. Laing: A Life* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), 165.

⁹⁶ Richard I. Evans, *R. D. Laing: The Man and His Ideas* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976), 26.

⁹⁷ Laing, *R. D. Laing: A Life*, 165–66; R. D. Laing, Interview, in *Psychologists on Psychology*, ed. David Cohen (New York: Taplinger Publishing, 1977), 211.



interpretations—had always included bodily awareness.⁹⁸ Nevertheless, his early clinical approach, with its Existentialist roots, did not reflect the central *theoretical* importance he gave to embodiment.⁹⁹ This changed as he became increasingly influenced by the ‘loosening’ of life discussed above; in 1968 he praised Reich’s efforts to remove “character armour” by muscle release.¹⁰⁰ In the same year he expressed an admiration for at least some aspects of the hippie project, although his wide reading and personal involvements make it impossible to claim specific influences.¹⁰¹ By 1972 changing social norms were producing more intimate forms of male greeting—embracing or even kissing rather than shaking hands—and Laing cited this development as proof that therapeutic methods involving the whole body were now necessary.¹⁰² Previously his use of abreaction seems to have been heuristic, but he was ready to adopt a more direct, forceful, and systematic method of bringing about the return of the repressed.

The most important influence on Laing’s turn to rebirthing was not Janov, but a different US psychotherapist. In Laing’s retelling, Elizabeth Fehr discovered her approach when a 24-year-old man appeared at her office. He had run away from a mental hospital after a third suicide attempt and began making “writhing, twisting movements”. It seemed clear to her that he was trying to be born, and so Fehr, “playing the part of the midwife”, symbolically delivered the patient. The process proved so effective that she started taking others “through ritual reenactments of their births, down a thirty-foot-long mattress”. In 1972 Laing visited Fehr’s birth-orientated commune in Manhattan, where he witnessed a number of rebirthings and was impressed by the results.¹⁰³ In August 1973 Fehr came to London and rebirthed Laing and others in his network.¹⁰⁴ After this second visit he was ready to try the technique himself.

Laing continued rebirthing for at least 12 years.¹⁰⁵ In its most typical form the rebirth would have to struggle free of something like a six-person rugby scrum,¹⁰⁶ and although Laing was not consistent in his comments, he usually suggested that

⁹⁸ Laing, *R. D. Laing: A Life*, 171–72; Bob Mullan, *R. D. Laing A Personal View* (London: Duckworth, 1999), 122.

⁹⁹ Allan Beveridge, *Portrait of the Psychiatrist as a Young Man: The Early Writing and Work of R. D. Laing, 1927–1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 241–46; R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self* (London: Penguin, 1990), 69.

¹⁰⁰ R. D. Laing, “Liberation by Orgasm,” *New Society*, March 28, 1968, 464–65.

¹⁰¹ Martin Howarth-Williams, *R. D. Laing: His Work and Its Relevance for Sociology* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), 71.

¹⁰² “R.D. Laing in the USA”, © 1972–2014, Surveillance Films, Inc., director/producer Peter Robinson, MS Laing Add 1/B/55 (Special Collections, University of Glasgow Library), its audio soundtrack of conversation at La Salle Hotel, November 14, 1972, 9:30–10:30.

¹⁰³ Peter Mezan, “R. D. Laing: Portrait of a Twentieth-Century Skeptic”, in Evans, *R. D. Laing*, xxxviii; R. D. Laing, *The Facts of Life* (New York: Pantheon, 1976), 61–63.

¹⁰⁴ Elizabeth Fehr, letter to R. D. Laing, June 9, 1973, GF21(F), in MS Laing GF 19–28 (Special Collections, University of Glasgow Library).

¹⁰⁵ R. D. Laing, “The Politics of Birth,” draft, April 1985, MS Laing A165 (Special Collections, University of Glasgow Library), 35.

¹⁰⁶ Summary of description by Adrian Laing, email to author, December 20, 2017.



bodily-emotional catharsis was the most important benefit of the experience.¹⁰⁷ This does seem to have been the result in many cases: “People would start to go into [...] all sorts of mini-freak-outs and birth-like experiences, yelling, groaning, screaming, writhing [...]”.¹⁰⁸ But catharsis was not the whole story; rebirthing echoed worldwide initiation ceremonies by invoking the mythological symbolism of death and rebirth.¹⁰⁹ Fehr’s practice had been completed by a symbolic ritual¹¹⁰ and Laing agreed that what happened *after* was an important part of the process. As someone who experienced rebirthing as participant as well as practitioner, Adrian Laing states, “Everyone came round and treated me as a newborn baby, which was very moving and heartfelt”.¹¹¹

This interest in re-enchanting and expanding the shrivelled psyche of modern humanity was key: the rationalism of the urban industrial West was seen as anti-thetical to the therapeutic project of recovering the authentic self, so, although Laing himself remained based in London, for other practitioners emigration was a logical step. After the initial transplantation from the United States, London became a hub for the onward movement of therapists and techniques to diverse destinations around the world. These locations shared a significant symbolic role in the geopolitical imagination of the HPM. Catharsis and encounter groups might begin the quest to undo alienation from one’s true self, but for some, physical escape from modernity was necessary in order to find true authenticity.

Where the exodus to India was concerned, the appeal of non-European life was intensified by the country’s long, sophisticated tradition of psychological investigation. Many of the London-based therapists mentioned above travelled to the Pune commune of Osho Rajneesh, where, it was claimed, the benefits of catharsis were augmented by a meditation-based spirituality. Osho’s lectures to Indian audiences in the 1960s resonated with the western counterculture by recommending the disruption of conventional norms and praising “‘divine madness’”; in 1970 Osho told his followers to embrace intense cathartic experiences during “Dynamic Meditation” sessions.¹¹² In the early 1970s he sent emissaries to Britain, and, starting in 1972, a steady stream of therapists from London began to arrive in Pune.¹¹³ A memoir by ‘Sam’ about his experiences at Osho’s ashram recounts that Paul Lowe inaugurated an encounter group that adapted Primal Therapy and “was soon to become notorious for its extremism.”¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁷ R. D. Laing, *The Voice of Experience: Experience, Science And Psychiatry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), 120.

¹⁰⁸ Laing, *R. D. Laing: A Life*, 180.

¹⁰⁹ John Heaton, “The Self, the Divided Self and the Other,” *Journal of the Society for Existential Analysis* 6, no. 1 (January 1995): 54. Cf. Laing, *Politics of Experience*, 106.

¹¹⁰ Elizabeth Fehr, “Latest Findings [Natal Therapy],” audio letter to R. D. Laing, August 24, 1973, MS Laing WB75 (Special Collections, University of Glasgow Library), 00:50–2:30.

¹¹¹ Adrian Laing, email to author, December 4, 2017.

¹¹² Hugh B. Urban, *Zorba the Buddha: Sex, Spirituality and Capitalism in the Global Osho Movement* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 33–36, 60.

¹¹³ Pierre Evald, “Part Three: Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh,” OSHO Source BOOK, 2014 and 2019, <https://oshosourcebook.com/part-three/>.

¹¹⁴ Sam, *Life Of Osho* (London: Sannyas, 1997), 45.



Zulma Reyo followed with her own style of primal groups.¹¹⁵ Catharsis became a common experience for westerners at Pune, and by the late 1970s the ashram attracted between 25,000 and 35,000 visitors a year,¹¹⁶ making it one of the world's largest centres for body-based psychotherapy.

Jenny James mocked Osho¹¹⁷ and sought a different path to transcendence. She fled the PNP house in London, first for the Lake District and then for rural Ireland, seeking to escape “the whole of modern civilization”.¹¹⁸ As explained in the 1982 book *Atlantis Magic*, in County Donegal her commune sought expansion of the self by eschewing the pseudo-enhancements of modernity and drawing on the locale's fairy tales and legends. James named the commune ‘Atlantis’, an outpost of Celtic mysticism where magic and folklore erupted into everyday life. One communal house was painted with the signs of the zodiac, while another was called Tir na n’Og, the mystical land of the young in Irish mythology. Anti-industrial ideology combined with Cold War anxieties to motivate a further move, and in 1983 James started a new community in the Tolima state of Colombia, deep in the jungle and a FARC stronghold (she became a critical supporter of the guerrillas). James and her followers were still trying to escape “western civilisation”¹¹⁹ but apocalyptic thinking impelled this remove: they feared an impending nuclear or ecological disaster and thought geographical isolation would provide some protection.¹²⁰

Conclusion: ‘The English are not Californians’

The migration of cathartic therapies into London was another example of how the allure of American ideas was strong enough to overcome British countercultural revulsion at US imperialism.¹²¹ The transatlantic influence took several forms, most notably the reception of theory, the role played by Americans and by US-trained therapists, and the work of people like John Rowan, who consciously sought to import American practices. Nevertheless, as Malchow acknowledges, US influences always melded with local elements; London's psychotherapeutic scene was a product of the interaction between new techniques and the people and ideas associated with critical psychiatry. Moreover, the global 1960s involved far more than just bilateral Anglo-American relations, as we saw in the exchanges with the Pune

¹¹⁵ Zulma Reyo, email to author, March 20, 2019. Reyo continues to practice psychotherapy around the world, as documented on her website; see “Curriculum Vitae,” Zulma Reyo, 2021, <https://zulmareyo.com/en/about>.

¹¹⁶ Urban, *Zorba the Buddha*, 69–70.

¹¹⁷ Jenny James, *Atlantis Magic* (Horsham: Caliban Books, 1982), 124–26.

¹¹⁸ Jenny James, *Male Sexuality: The Atlantis Position* (Horsham: Caliban Books, 1985), ix.

¹¹⁹ Martin Hodgson, “For 17 Years a Guerrilla Group and a Commune Lived in Harmony. Then Came a Brutal Killing,” *Guardian*, October 10, 2000, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2000/oct/10/martinhodgson>.

¹²⁰ James, *They Call Us the Screamers*, 5.

¹²¹ McKay, “The Social and (Counter-) Cultural 1960s,” 55–56.



ashram.¹²² When Gerda Boyesen, trained during Reich's pre-American sojourn in Norway, relocated to the UK in 1968 to start a private therapeutic practice, a more thoroughly European ingredient entered the London mix.¹²³

Abreactive psychotherapy was not like rock music, where the British assimilation of American influences was so successful that it produced a reversal of the dominant transatlantic flow. It also cannot claim the appeal of British Pop Art, where practitioners integrated American elements to create a distinct national form.¹²⁴ Laing's workshops were controversial and divisive within his own circle¹²⁵ and rebirthing in the UK died with him in 1989; the term now refers to a distantly related system first imported from America in 1980. The cathartic and encounter movements never had anything like the success they enjoyed in the United States. In both countries the hopes that the HPM would sweep all before it were dashed,¹²⁶ but British activities always operated on a markedly smaller scale. By the end of the 1970s the three London growth centres mentioned above had shut down, though they were replaced in 1977 by the Open Centre, which still functions today.¹²⁷ A small number of primal-style therapists now practice in London, while the Reichian tradition is represented by thinly patronized methods that go under the general rubric of 'body psychotherapy'.

Why did the abreactive techniques falter so quickly in the UK? Commentators from the period often underlined the difference between British and US social norms, particularly the greater repressiveness and pessimism of British culture. Ironically, where the "stiff upper lip" was concerned, it appeared to be loosening at the start of the 1970s. Thomas Dixon's *Weeping Britannia: Portrait of a Nation in Tears* (2015) demonstrates that emotional repression, while not a transhistorical feature of UK life, was a hegemonic masculine ideal in the era of British imperialism. For Dixon this began to change in the early 1970s, which he attributes to "second-wave feminism, pop music, American psychiatry, and the British tabloid press".¹²⁸ Nevertheless, the decline of the "stiff upper lip" did not proceed quickly or deeply enough for the new therapies to take root. As the Esalen missionaries feared and Janov was soon to observe, the British remained more resistant to emoting than Americans, and even the counterculture was not so different. "The English are not

¹²² McKay, "The Social and (Counter-) Cultural 1960s," 56.

¹²³ Clover Southwell and Staff of the Gerda Boyesen International Institute, "The Gerda Boyesen Method: Biodynamic Therapy," in Rowan and Dryden, *Innovative Therapy in Britain*, 180.

¹²⁴ McKay, "The Social and (Counter-) Cultural 1960s," 54; Simon Rycroft, *Swinging City: A Cultural Geography of London 1950–1974* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 49–53.

¹²⁵ Daniel Burston, *The Wing of Madness: The Life and Work of R. D. Laing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 128–29.

¹²⁶ Robert Reinhold, "Encounter Movement, A Fad Last Decade Finds New Shape," *New York Times*, January 13, 1974, 50.

¹²⁷ Silke Ziehl et al., "Who We Are and What We Do," The Open Centre, accessed May 5, 2020, <https://www.opencentre.com/Who%20We%20Are%20and%20What%20We%20Do/>.

¹²⁸ Thomas Dixon, *Weeping Britannia: Portrait of a Nation in Tears* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 263–67.



Californians”, wrote one commentator in *IT*, as he implied that London audiences were too repressed to properly let go during “raves”.¹²⁹

The British press presented the HPM—based on the principle that humans are capable of growth towards better and happier selves—as the product of a falsely optimistic and impatient country on the other side of the Atlantic. The *Daily Mail* linked the HPM to a US “society that traditionally yearns for instant answers, instant joys, instant success. The Nescafe culture.”¹³⁰ The *Daily Telegraph* referred to “the so-called ‘Human Potential’ movement” while a *Times* article bore the mocking title “Task force to ensure Californians feel good”.¹³¹ These publications represent a broad swathe of British middle-class newspaper readers, and two prominent psychiatrists and intellectuals felt the same way. Towards the end of his life, R. D. Laing—perhaps forgetting his own rebirthing seminars—made disparaging comments about the HPM’s supposed quick fixes, declaring himself unimpressed by “all that stuff on growth and development and human potential weekends where you go through a hero’s journey in 72 h”.¹³² In a book co-authored with BBC radio producer Sally Thompson, the prominent psychiatrist Anthony Clare opined that it was America’s “belief in progress, the better life and the pursuit of happiness” that made it “the obvious culture in which therapies dedicated to notions of self-perfectibility and growth might flourish”.¹³³ It is, of course, wrong to conclude there was an absolute dichotomy between American optimism and British pessimism; we referred above to the US psychotherapist John Heider’s opposition to ‘quick fix’ catharsis. Nevertheless, contemporary observers identified this as a factor in the differing fates of the HPM and its associated practices.

More important than overarching cultural factors for the take-up of the new therapies is the different historical development of the institution of psychiatry in the two countries. In 1979 Michael Shepherd, a professor of epidemiological psychiatry, argued that American psychiatry absorbed the tenets of psychoanalysis into its mainstream, while psychoanalysis and psychotherapy exerted much less influence on psychiatry in the UK, partly because of British psychiatry’s “long-standing links [...] with the main body of general medicine”. The legacy of this was a deep-seated tradition of seeing psychological disturbance as a pathology requiring the intervention of medically trained professionals in clinical settings, not a series of sessions with a psychoanalyst or psychotherapist. This medicalization of psychological distress had two main consequences for the new therapies: first, the fact that most psychiatrists saw themselves as doctors rather than psychotherapists meant that, as discussed above, policymakers in the NHS were generally reluctant to fund techniques whose

¹²⁹ Raymond Durgnat, “Rave or Stiff Upper Lip,” *IT*, February 13–26, 1967, 11.

¹³⁰ Herbert Kretzmer, “Conjuring Up the Fears and Furies,” *Daily Mail*, November 24, 1979, 21.

¹³¹ Ian Brodie, “Just the Odd Blister in Fire-Walking Fad,” *Daily Telegraph*, November 26, 1984, 3; Charles Bremner, “Task Force to Ensure Californians Feel Good,” *The Times*, March 3, 1987, 7.

¹³² Bob Mullan, *Mad To Be Normal: Conversations With R. D. Laing* (London: Free Association Books, 1995), 212.

¹³³ Anthony W. Clare with Sally Thompson, *Let’s Talk About Me: A Critical Examination of the New Psychotherapies* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1981), 13–14.



safety, efficacy, and value for money were yet to be proven.¹³⁴ Second, as Freudianism was the progenitor of the HPM and the new psychotherapies, the absence of a large psychoanalytic sector in the UK meant an almost complete lack of a British ‘seedbed’ when the American techniques were transplanted.

Despite these cultural and institutional barriers, the aftershocks of the HPM and Primal Therapy in Britain are still resounding where social attitudes are concerned. The dangers of holding back emotion are the subject of frequent public comment and journalists freely dispense advice on constructive ways to express anger. Responding to the national mourning at the death of Princess Diana, some critics identified an “Americanization” of affective life.¹³⁵ Although it is naive to entertain a model where one country imposes its behavioural norms on another, perhaps the cathartic psychotherapists of the 1970s could take succour in the myriad signs that British society has finally heeded their warnings as to the dangers of repression.

Acknowledgements The authors wish to thank: Kenneth Robinson, “R.D. Laing in the USA” (©) 1972–2014 Surveillance Films Inc., Dir./Prod. Peter Robinson. Adrian Laing for permission to quote from the Papers of R. D. Laing © R. D. Laing Estate and for answering our questions by email. Both of these archives are held by Special Collections, University of Glasgow Library, and we thank the archivists for access and help with permissions. The Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas (Austin), who provided an International Travel Stipend to enable us to access the James Saunders Papers held there. This financial support was sponsored by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Research Fellowship Endowment. Thanks also to the archivists at HRC who facilitated that access and gave permission to quote from the archive. Zulma Reyó for answering our questions about her work by email.

Declarations

Conflict of interests The authors are aware of no conflicts of interest.

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¹³⁴ Shepherd, “Psychoanalysis, Psychotherapy, and Health Services,” 1557–59.

¹³⁵ John F. Lyons, *America in the British Imagination: 1945 to the Present* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 139.



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