Representations of a 1970s back-to-the-land New Age cultic community:

The ascendancy of the Universal Brotherhood and its relevance to the sustainability movement of the 21st century

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If cults are stereotypically typified as dangerous, what can be said of the positive contributions they may actually make to society? The life cycle of the *Universal Brotherhood* (a distinctly Australian cultic experiment) and its marginal ideations are the focus of my research, which also addresses issues of insider/outsider representation. The legacy of this 1970s 'alternative society' is reassessed in the light of the recent ascendancy of issues surrounding cultural and environmental sustainability.

The research focuses on the domain of religious cults, with their marginal thinking, radical social 'othering', emphasis on lifestyle reform and personal transformations, and eclectic re-mixing of many long-established religious, political, and esoteric traditions, often in combination with equally hybridised physical and psychological regimes of 'fitness'. I suggest that the social experimentations of religious cultic communities and the way they were represented in the media have made a substantial contribution to the fabric of society and will continue to do so. I also suggest that the issues tackled by people like the Robinsons: major figures in the 1970s 'Back to the Earth' commune movement, and groups

like the Universal Brotherhood, have prepared the mass consciousness for the uptake of the sustainability movement—notwithstanding the damage they may have inflicted upon individuals, or even a whole group.

In tackling the particular mind-set of cultic communities the Robinson cults and their attitude to the broader society within which they developed are discussed and counter-pointed with an analysis of the ways in which cults tend to be stereotypically depicted in media representations, and so in the consequent responses of the broader society. Careful discourse analysis of news media reports and feature articles about both Fred Robinson and the communities he founded are revealing, showing in detail how the media were then framing shifts around Robinson and the communities, according to the social structures dominant in the day (Fairclough 1989, p. 28), and showing how social conventions are 'clustered in sets or networks which I call *orders of discourse,* a term used by Michel Foucault' (Fairclogh 1989, p. 28).

As the communes extended their influence over wider and wider groups within Australian society in the late sixties and early seventies, media reporting shifted from their earlier framings of communal living and cult leaders within familiar 'health crank' or 'political ratbag' emphases, to espouse first, a relatively sober reporting of 'communities' positioned as religiously and spiritually inclined; to a broader and more good natured, even humorous account of everyday life incidents and episodes within these communities; a resurgence of 'ratbag' reporting of idiosyncrasy and excess; and finally, the waning of the Whole Earth movement after Jonestown (November 1978), and a turn instead to a reporting on the dangers of cult 'brain washing' and ritual abuse.

While adherents of present day cults are still sincerely searching for what they believe will be a more meaningful and authentic life, often led by persuasive, charismatic and intensely

motivated visionaries, they seem to be more likely to be positioned as aligned with terrorism (the *Great Aum* sect; or the Chinese Government response to *Falun Gong);* with 'lifestyle' rather than spiritual regimes (Western Buddhism as rehearsed in magazines and lifestyle television); or situated alongside the re-emergence of 'secret' inner-circle groups inside established religions *(Opus Dei* in the Catholic Church, increasingly identified with right-wing political lobbying).

By exploring what the Universal Brotherhood taught, how it reworked existing resources to match its social context, and how it may still prove able to address issues of today, perhaps my research can make a contribution to the way in which cults, overtly positioned as resistant to mainstream culture, can also be used to illuminate that mainstream. The forms which a specific cult takes within its moment of broadest appeal speak to its links with ongoing social values and the ascendancy of certain central cultural initiatives at certain moments. The allegations made against a cult are equally indicative. By tracing this particular movement within Australia: its central figures, the development of its communities, beliefs, and practices, as they rise and fall across a half a century (1930-1980), the wider PhD project, from which this paper is drawn, aims to tease out the roles such cultural activities play for both internal adherents and the mainstream culture, using the external texts—press clippings, and the internal texts—community-generated newsletters and letters as data.

My plan is to write an inter-linked series of journal articles that chunk a research thesis into a two-part introduction and seven two-part chapters. The articles are between five and seven thousand words in length. The two-part introduction explores the territory of cultic communities and my thesis propositions, related to the contributions made by this New Age back-to-the-land movement. The final chapter theorises the findings, taking up once more the degree to which a given cult can be shown to have contributed to the

development of alternative social and political ideals—especially relating to sustainable living—within the cultural mainstream. The chapters/articles between follow the historical biographies and content of the Robinsons' schemas, and the inception and ascendancy periods of their communities, from two distinct perspectives: Part A of each chapter follows the external *outsider media representation* of the Robinsons and the community, while Part B reveals the *insider participant presentations* via the newsletters of the Robinsons and the community covering the same period. As the narrator, half inside as a former adherent, half outside as the researcher, I reflect, critique, comment on and contextualize these texts, providing a third perspective: that of the informed academic observer. This commentary is then supplemented by a fourth perspective: my own *intertexts*, which recount memories of personal experiences of the time, providing a reflexive auto-ethnographic dimension to each journal article/chapter. These are specifically designed to engage the reader on a personal level. Thus the research methodology aims to interrogate the texts of the *culturally mediated outsiders*; the *subjectively engaged insiders*; the *academically critical theorist*; and the *personally involved experientialist*.

This research re-assembles and highlights those positive social contributions and cultural innovations proposed, and to some extent achieved, by Fred and Mary Robinson and the Universal Brotherhood, between 1962 and 1978 (the focus period). While recording and detailing the weaknesses and idiosyncrasies of the group—and indeed of its leaders, there will be an equal focus on the many positive contributions made to individual adherents, but also to the broader social thinking of the day. The life style experimentations of the group will be explored, with some themes now emerging as a generation ahead of their time, while others seem curious anachronisms. Above all, this study reveals how far any attempt to read the Australian 'alternative culture' communal movements of the sixties and seventies from within the dominant 'cult' literature of today, produces a total misrepresentation of both its aims and its achievements. While it may never have been as

successful, nor as influential, as it sought to be, the movement did achieve some positive and enduring social change and culturally meaningful interventions—and is in no way deserving of the almost unrelieved negativity contained within both the media representations and academic literatures of 21st century accounts.

The major contributor to this negativity has been the location of the major strands of cult research within organisations dedicated to cult overthrow. The bulk of the literature exploring and representing the history and practices of cults has been produced by the following groups of researchers:

- disenchanted ex-adherents with an urgent need to denounce their former beliefs and the leaders they once trusted
- representatives of rival mainstream religious groups who are convinced of the correctness of their own stance in contra-distinction to the cult under their scrutiny
- agents of de-programming services, such as private investigators employed to snatch family members said to have been 'kidnapped' by cults
- psychologists employed to counsel such 'returned' individuals; they are known in North America as exit counselors
- various national law agencies charged with investigating possible (always thought probable …) breaches of the law
- journalists seeking sensational narratives, usually around salacious sexual issues and mind control
- anthropologists and ethnographers who:

    - see themselves as detached impartial observers, making culturally mediated 'outsider' evaluations, but with the disadvantage of being unable to fully investigate or comprehend the inner workings of the cult

- seek, as researchers, the authentic voices of both founders and adherents via a more participatory style of field research.

Such representations make for fascinating but intensely negative reading; nor have they been without mainstream influence. Each of these ‘anti-cult’ forces has led to the creation of further (binary) oppositional groups, many of which support connected issues, such as religious freedom. While at present there seems to be little moral or social panic about cults, an ongoing and often fever-pitched debate continues across some elements of society. Discussion about cults (both specific and general) is very much alive and active on the internet, ready to be unleashed again into the mainstream culture as soon as a major incident occurs. Perhaps anti-cultism can become as dangerous as cultism, for it, too, can inflame the cultic mindset, entrenching remaining cult members and sending them into ‘persecution mode’—as in the example of David Koresh. There is surely irony in the idea that the anti-cultists exemplify cultic behaviour better than the cultists themselves, but any analysis of their behaviours and discursive regimes suggests that they do.

So what does it take to qualify as a cult? Rutgers University professor Benjamin Zablocki (1997) outlines differences between cults and churches, and sects and denominations. He sees cults as innovative, fervent groups usually started by charismatic personalities. If they become accepted into the mainstream, then they lose their fervour. As they become more organised and integrated into the community, they then become churches. But when people within churches become dissatisfied and break off into fervent splinter groups, the new groups are called not cults, but sects. As sects become more stolid and integrated into the community, they become denominations. Such definitions of religious organisations become helpful when I seek to define where groups such as the Universal Brotherhood fit into the typologies of cults that scholars have created. Interestingly, Zablocki’s definition places cults as the most innovative kinds of religious organisation, for a cult has not come directly out of a church, sect or denomination. It is from the outset a new compound,

perhaps eclectic in its selection of beliefs, values and practices, but original in its assemblage of a set of core principles.

As the word 'cult' will need defining in relation to my project, so will the word 'commune', the other word most often used (derogatorily) to describe the Universal Brotherhood. While the literature on alternative 'back-to-the-land' communes is quite different from the literature on cults, it will become complementary when used in my project. It is noteworthy, for instance, that the 'alternative press' supported Fred Robinson and the development of his communities, allowing young people with *cosmicountercultural* ideals to connect with his thinking. Articles from the radical press (which I will cite in my thesis) worked to confront cultural bias, but only amongst those who were already confronting the prevailing hegemony. Reporting within the mainstream was more complex—although there are clear examples of discursive work which was far more accepting of alternative social ideas than may be anticipated—at least from the post-Jonestown, anti-cult perspectives of today.

Confronting and challenging the sustained bias of research relating to small religious cults such as the Universal Brotherhood becomes a significant focus of my project. Can the stereotypically negative connotations of a research literature on 'the dangers of cults to society' be balanced, or at least tempered, by a new focus on 'the contribution of cults to society'?—not ignoring their failures and negative aspects, but examining instead the complexities of the position they take up in relation to their particular mainstream context-of-the-day.

By investigating a cult as inherently *inside* its socio-cultural moment, I am attempting to show that by its very nature, the cult tendency to seek an *outside* location for expression of its values has placed it under such severe pressure that both its long-term sustainability and its contemporary and subsequent reputation have suffered.

My involvement

It is at this point that my own personal experience of the cult, which is the focus of this study, becomes central to the proposed goals. As the person who first discovered and publicised Fred Robinson, founder of the Universal Brotherhood*,* bringing him to my generation, and then as a founding member and one of the core leadership for seventeen years, I kept detailed accounts of the development of group values and practices. By recounting, re-thinking, and in part re-writing the history of the Universal Brotherhood cult, the legacy of such groups may come to be seen as being valuable, and possibly even enduring. I have deliberately set out to consider what within it could still today be accounted a useful and successful social experiment, which completed a natural life-cycle (rather than failed).

As a researcher I am, therefore, involved in investigating my own role in the forming, dismantling and interpretation of this cult some thirty years on. My reflective intertexts (in the genre of creative non-fiction) become *vignette artefacts* about another lived and in various ways still living artefact: the Universal Brotherhood community. The reflexive writing style required for the project, along with a generalist stance on the uses of mixed qualitative methodologies, leads me back to a notion once central to the movement itself: *interdisciplinarity*, in the very specific sense which it always held within the common understandings of Robinsons' thinking. Fred Robinson's attempt at enunciating something analogous to a s*uperdisciplined or transdisciplined* practice[1] intersects in interesting ways with the multiple strands of investigative work required in this project—and together, they may yet prove to have something distinctive to say about how late-modern eclectic social movements organise their thinking.

In 1971, I met Fred and Mary Robinson and, together with a few others, founded a spiritual or 'New Age' *intentional community*, designed to be a model for the 'alternative society'

(Robinson 1971) that we believed would play a part in world transformation as we moved into a New (Aquarian) Age. The group flourished in the mid-seventies to become known as the Universal Brotherhood.

In an era obsessed with alternative lifestyle possibilities, hundreds of press articles were written about Fred and his unusual cosmicountercultural ideas and the community he inspired. For almost two decades 'the community' (as we referred to it) was often cited as the most successful commune in Australia. In its waning years a PhD was written about the Universal Brotherhood, with me depicted as 'the Preacher' (Black 1984) and represented as the interpreter and populariser of the Robinsons' ideas.

It is very much the duality of vision which this produces in me as researcher that drives this re-examination of the social and cultural experiences of a past generation. At one level, it is important to place on record the central experiences of a community movement which influenced the formative years of a powerful generation: the post-war Baby Boomers, as they confronted—and partly at least rejected and sought to reform—adult living. For those who actively discarded the then entrenched life trajectory of career and suburban family establishment, communal experiences remain an alluring core of cultural value. But even for the majority, who remained more or less within a social mainstream, alternative values still characterised their generational identity—and may still be doing so.

For both groups, detail of how the Robinsons' schema was conceived, developed, embraced, enacted and discarded, is important. My research, initially then, seeks merely to fill this gap. There is, for instance, very little drawing on the Robinson's own sources in Black's thesis—which, instead, focuses on issues of power relations, both communal and cultic. I intend rather to explore ways to allow the original voices of the movement through, to establish from their own words, actions and teachings, the values and aspirations behind

the community, often using quotes that appeared in the press or in the internal newsletters, tracts and handbooks. Together these texts, along with the short biographies of both Fred, the charismatic 'Prophet,' and Mary, the politically savvy 'Discerner' (as Black distributed their roles) will build an understanding of how young New Age seekers of the seventies, like me, were recruited into the Robinsons' cultural experiment: 'inspired to outwork the vision', as it was described within the community.

The level of hybridisation and interdisciplinarity involved in a multi-perspective interrogation of an alternative society is itself analogous to the work of a cult, which selectively and often idiosyncratically marries ideas and creates new versions of belief. Cults often reside in a 'space-between' (Dawson 2000) that comes to be seen as 'other'. While my research report will be written in clear English, the formatting of the writing, with reflexive digressions and multiple conceptualizations, roams the margins of established academic genres. The idea of writing sixteen journal articles to make up one thesis is itself an outlandish experiment, but one that seems to fit the project and this late-onset academic writer.

The 'space-between' in society—the social domain of cults—calls for a similar space for the capture of the Robinsons' movement.

Knowledge about cults in an Australian context is fragmented, and is mostly anecdotal in nature.[2] Relatively little academic research has been done on cults by former insiders (especially by their founders/leaders). The research that has been done (and it is legion on the internet) has most often been undertaken by disaffected former members, who are now part of another cult—often converted 'born again' fundamentalist or evangelical Christians. While some of this research has academic merit, it often has a sub-textual agenda which is inimical to impartial investigation as it presupposes an ultimately correct theological stance.

The largely modernist ethnographic critiquing of the Universal Brotherhood as undertaken by Black in the mid-eighties can now be seen as sagging under the weight of post-modern resistance to the narratives on which it was built, thus being part of what Berry calls 'the Old Story' (Denzin & Lincoln 2000, p. 1061). The hybrid spiritual-scientific New Age grand narrative of the Robinsons, and the artefact that evolved from it, The Universal Brotherhood, is ripe for a new cultural critique that draws on methodologies that are leading to what Gergen and Gergen suggest is 'the "post" post period—post-poststructualism, post-post modernism—an age of reconstruction'(Denzin & Lincloln 2000, p. 1061). As no one is quite sure what this means for interpretive ethnographic practices it is clear that:

> We are in a new age where multivoiced texts, cultural criticism, and post experimental works will become more common, as will more reflexive forms of field work and intertextual representation. There is so much to say about the *hybridirectionality* of qualitative research as we contemplate the sixth moment and wonder 'What next?' (Denzin & Lincloln 2000, p. 1061).

Before I began to understand what this meant I was already a 'true-believer', ' … poised to cross the bridge into the seventh moment' (Denzin & Linclon 2000, p. 1062).[3]
I am excited by the possibilities of this 'new age' for academic research, for it seems I am joining an entire research community in making a crossing:

> We face a choice, in the seventh moment, of declaring ourselves committed to detachment or in solidarity with the human community. We come to know, and we come to exist meaningfully, only in community. We have the opportunity to rejoin that community as its resident intellectuals and change agents (Denzin & Lincoln 2000, p. 1062).

It seems to me that cults need to be reassured by the intellectuals of society that they too are part of the community, playing a valuable social role. Such recognition may encourage

cult members to read more freely about themselves (made possible by technologies unavailable a generation ago) and thus engage with the fair critiquing of aspects of their cult/community that may need correction (as I did twenty years ago).

It is my hope that my research on the Universal Brotherhood will produce a culturally relevant, albeit posthumous, review of the Robinsons' achievements. Almost in phoenix style, I can already identify enduring meaning within the ashes of this well-meant, often misguided, before its time (yet also of its time) utopian project which I am depicting as a creative contribution to mainstream culture, rather than as a marginal countercultural failure.

> The whole concept of centre and margins is being transfigured by methods, methodologies, research practices, and epistemologies scarcely dreamed of a generation ago—or even when the first edition of this *Handbook* was published …. (Denzin & Lincoln 2000, p. 1063)

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Notes

1. Fred used the term the 'cosmic viewpoint' to depict an all-encompassing perspective that sees something 'how it really is'.
2. The difficulty of gaining permission to undertake serious research on a functioning cult from the 'inside' is obvious. Journalists tend to provide culturally mediated and biased information to the public, giving little time or energy to understanding the full epistemological issues of the cult they are investigating. Their focus is usually on the 'dangers' of any cult being investigated, and the purpose/result of these articles is often to engender 'moral panic'. My research about the *Universal Brotherhood* in particular and cults in general endeavors rather to highlight the values, contributions and strengths made to Australian culture, even while identifying and admitting the false ideals/mistakes and weaknesses. Perhaps more than any other issue this is, as I currently see it, the key potential value of my research.
3. I am somewhat aware of my own cultic tendency as an early career researcher.