Growing Up Off the Grid | Jennifer Hamilton on Miro Bilbrough



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In the Time of the Manaroans by Miro Bilbrough Victoria University 304pp Published September 2020 ISBN: 9781776563128

I've been in therapy for nearly half a decade and I'm only now re-connecting with aspects of myself that I tried to leave behind. Still, now, in my late thirties, I find myself too embarrassed to look back. From where I stand, it is heroic to relive the emotional and physical experience of being teenage again and braver still to write and publish a memoir about it. And so, despite being a teenager clearly in thrall to shame and confusion, Miro Bilbrough's memoir goes back and fearlessly recounts some of the intense, awkward, difficult and beautiful details that mark her transition to adulthood.

In the Time of the Manaroans is a coming-of-age memoir written at several decades reach about growing up in an off-grid intentional community in the Pelorus Sound, the north-eastern corner of the South Island of Aotearoa. It is also about becoming a woman and an artist in this context. The author lives with her father and younger sister in the Floodhouse, a house named quite literally for its propensity to flood. Despite its proximity to water and arable land, times are often lean because the community is transient and not well-organised around the subsistence labour required for an off-grid life. Although Bilbrough is not exactly

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left to fend for herself, her teenage years are marked by having to put all the pieces of a life together and getting very little solid support along the way.

The memoir is comprised of episodes of different scales, ordered with some chronological fidelity. It is visually rich to such an extent that the prose closely resembles Bilbrough's primary medium, film: ekphrastic passages invoking an almost photographic memory of certain people, places, emotions, smells, experiences. Chapters are called things like 'Uncle Martin', 'the smell of thing', '5A', 'Hairdressing', 'The Last Time I saw Richard', 'Loyalties', 'Chanel No. 5', 'I had a dream'. These richly photographic flashes of memory, interspersed with actual

pictures, are nevertheless towed by a strong developmental undercurrent that delivers the narrator to adulthood. The formal tension – between the fragmented nature of the text and the controlled craft of the writer, between the blur of being a teenager and the putatively linear logic of growing up – makes and breaks this tale.

The specific recollection of a young woman's coming-of-age in an eco-commune is also keyed into a much bigger set of contemporary social concerns about gender, sexuality, social organisation and environment. First, despite their geographical remoteness, the Manaroan hippies (a term Bilbrough uses with both pejorative and affectionate valences) should be seen as an aspect of the global white middle class environmental activist and Back to Land movements of the 60s and 70s. Growing up amidst an older generation's rejection of the system, and on the periphery of second-wave feminism and civil rights, the memoir provides an historically nuanced and quite troubling perspective on the question we're urgently asking today: how can live well in new figurations of community as the climate changes?

It is because of the pressing relation with the present that I have to begin by thinking through my disappointment at its too-tidy ending. Despite the difficulties Bilbrough has meeting basic needs of food, shelter and love, she asserts an appreciation for 'the green consciousness at work in our lack of cars'. Moreover, although Bilbrough wasn't a radical feminist asserting herself and sexual rights at every turn as a teenager, the troubled and troubling experiences registered in the book were, we're told, a 'precursor to later richer experiences'. These concluding caveats reduce the text's meaningfully messy middle to an anxiety that the story will be misconstrued as a rationale not to try alternatives. The caveats tacitly encourage us to not be put off by the possibilities of alternative lifestyles, despite hers seeming particularly unappealing. That life at the Floodhouse is difficult and bears little resemblance to the geodesic dome yurt idylls of the 1970s and the #cottagecore Instagram off-grid dreams of the present strikes me as its most interesting feature. While the first three hundred pages of the memoir is a brave act of self-exposure, the author comes up against an anxiety that it will all be taken the wrong way in the final two pages. I think to get the most out of this book, though, we need to ignore the final two pages and read it the wrong way.

'It might be politically worrying', say Caroline Levine and Mario Oritz-Robles, 'to draw attention to the middle since it so clearly lacks drama and conviction ... but could there be such thing as a radical middle?' A coming-of-age tale is always in

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the middle, beginning and ending in the throes of a life. The body and soul of a teenager is the awkward meat in the life sandwich. The coming-of-age middle is, from memoir to bildungsroman, always *potentially* radical too, because it represents people or characters figuring out how to inherit the world: what bits to take on and what to at least try to refuse, reject or make new. The messy middle is akin to Jack Halberstam's definition of queer time and space: 'used in ways that challenge conventional logics of development, maturity, adulthood, and responsibility'. This period in life is represented in so many famous texts, and to understand what is unique about Bilbrough's particular iteration, we need to put it into relief against at least some of the others.

Firstly, her teenage years were roughly contemporaneous with John Hughes' reign in Hollywood. Thus, it is helpful to note that what Bilbrough navigates at the Floodhouse is the opposite of the playful and privileged rejection of suburban middle-class structures in *Sixteen Candles* and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. She's never seeking to reject anything or resist authority. On the contrary, her parents rejected the norms of middle-class life and she lives in its wake. As such, she is preoccupied with figuring out for herself better ways of getting by: 'It is my experience' she says in a section called 'Too far out', 'that if you swim out too far in this world – a late-seventies anything goes world – no one comments, certainly not the adults.'

The lack of parental authority and the story's structural heterosexuality also means Bilbrough's experience lacks structural repression and revelation of the lesbian coming-of-age tale. This tale can go in a number of directions. In Winterson's Oranges are not the only Fruit Jeanette seeks to move away from evangelism generating a story that moves toward desire, liberation and selfrealisation, on one hand. On the other, the structural oppression manifests as wild jealousy and teenage murderousness in Peter Jackson and Fran Walsh's Heavenly Creatures. Made in 1994 but based on a true story from the 1950s, the teenage friends at the centre of the tale. Pauline and Juliet, turn their angst outward and slaughter Pauline's mother with bricks. Neither transformed into something different nor turned outwardly on others, all Bilbrough's anxiety, frustration and fear or 'angst' is turned inward on herself: 'After sex in my daytime bed, I feel an animal panic. I have no idea how to overcome the overexposure or the anxious desire to please'. She doesn't complain of being let down or get angry at others or jealous of friends, rather she internalises disappointment as her own problem and tries better next time.

Fair comparisons can be made between *In the Time of the Manaroans* and Janet Frame's mythic framing of a younger self in *To the Is-land,* which Frame establishes as a 'record of fact and truths and memories of truth' in ways echoed by Bilbrough. Both tales are also about becoming artists. But Frame's family life is far more conventional. Their house doesn't flood, her father is in a union, she wears a school uniform and they borrow books from a library. From a section called 'Work and Play' in Bilbrough's text, by contrast, we learn that 'Work isn't rostered at Manaroa but takes place as a result of informal murmurs or by independent initiative'. The memoir thus lacks all the trappings of white middle class coming-of-age tales defined by seeking to either resist parental, legal, religious or school-house restraint or finding ways of coming out. Bilbrough has to discover her boundaries and glean what she can along the way, which makes for a life oscillating between states of creation, curiosity and stress.

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Despite the lack of structure and conventional hierarchy, Bilbrough has strong influences. From the age of seven to fourteen she lives with her communist and feminist maternal grandmother; a woman wary of patriarchal authority ('she warns me never to undress in the same room as [my father]'). Her father, with whom she lives from the age of fourteen to seventeen, created the Floodhouse. Although she reports scepticism of her grandmother's concerns ('her view of my parents is a lurid mash-up of warnings that I disregard as best I can. Against my better judgement, her cautioning insinuates itself into my modest baggage.') This baggage nonetheless affords her some critical perspective on her father, and she reveres him at the same time as seeing that he's 'not as tired as he thinks he is'.

This observation is never explained, but it seems like dad's existential fatigue at the state of the world does not correspond with the energy required to build it anew.

So, while the Floodhouse that Bilbrough's father built is so named because it actually floods, metaphorically it is also a messy domestic scene, with the labour required for an abundant off-grid life missing. Inevitable drudgery combines with the low-tech in Manaroa to make for a very unappealing lifestyle:

In general, mundane chores are made epic by the absence of labour-saving devices that became commonplace decades ago. Washing clothes, for instance, is a half-day enterprise that involves splitting firewood to heat the copper in the shed. After simmering the laundry for a few hours, you transfer it to one of two concrete sinks and drag your clothes or sheets repetitively over the metal ridges of another early-twentieth century prop, a washboard. No one can bear to undertake such toil more than once a month, and so we go smelly.

This labour-intensive vision of life off-grid is precisely the kind of apocalyptic techno-phobic fantasy that is invoked by climate-sceptical critics of renewable energy transition, for example. They imagine greenies want to send us all back to pre-industrial days of perpetual toil. An image of middle class living standards (which are, in the first instance, creations of fossil fuels) plays a constitutive, if tacit, role in the wider ecological imagination. The anxiety around loss of living standards, I'd wager, is not because the idea of changing the way we do things is bad, but rather because of the kind of labour it takes to do it well. It is not done well in Manaroa because the community is ad hoc. It is a tidal community - the Manaroans drift in and out – with Bilbrough's not-as-tired-as-he-thinks-he-is father as the most constant presence. Thus, for the Manaroans there is coherent collective will to resist the norm, but no shared vision for how to be alternatively organised. As such, 'work isn't rostered ... This way, no one's autonomy is infracted'. In this context the '[c]ollectivism is a hazy ideal that none knows quite how to enact'. The rejection of the normative household structure is as far as things get in this iteration of the eco-commune.

Hence Bilbrough's concern that we might read this book the wrong way. 'Now even more than then, I appreciate ... our stringent consumption, our constant gardening. Our collective footprint was tiny, wittingly so' she assures us. Moving on from environmental concerns to gender and sexuality yields another clear retrospective reflection: 'The inverse relation of sexual joy to experimentation has troubled me as I write. I have wished it could be otherwise – for my past self and the reader... I would like to add that this lack was a precursor to later richer experience ... The discovery of agency took a lot of fumbling and misfires, as these

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pages record. The book is so much more than this, but I am totally fixated on this retrospective editorialising which amounts to an apology – in both senses of the term – for the entire life and book in terms of present day concerns about sexuality and environment. The bravery of the self-exposure involved in documenting one's teenage life as memoir is undercut by a last-minute attempt to control how we draw meaning from it.

The 'anticipation of retrospection' is a concept to describe the experience of being lost in the middle of the text but buoyed by the promise it will all make sense. 'Perhaps we would do best to speak of the anticipation of retrospection as our chief tool in making sense of narrative, the master trope of its strange logic' says Peter Brook in his classic study of narrative plot. But the point of queer tales that deviate from the norm is that meaning can't be controlled or fit into an existing master plot: even the strongest bleach cannot purify the teenager's life at the Floodhouse. The apology in *In the Time of the Manaroans* suggests that the author is concerned the text does not make retrospective sense. Despite the fidelity that Bilbrough pays to the experience, the precision and detail through which she tries to stitch up the narrative of her life throughout, the process still does not yield clarity or closure, rather discomfort and fear it will be misconstrued.

I think she's right. We don't have workable vocabularies for interpreting partial starvation as a result of eco-conscious communal life or the feeling of almost being sexually assaulted in a remote mail ship but being just empowered enough to flee. Even the delicately drawn and painstakingly detailed episodes of material deprivation and sexual intimidation, and their contrast with more strange, wonderful, joyful pleasurable times of dressing up and partying until sunrise, can't confidently yield retrospective clarity.

How then can we read the memoir holding onto its rich picture of a life and in light of its apologetic caveats? In the highly circulated <u>article</u> *On Heteropessimism*, Indiana Seresin makes a similar fuss about another seemingly minor caveat. In a sexuality studies workshop, Seresin quizzes the prized queer memoirist Maggie Nelson about the line 'Heterosexuality always embarrasses me' in the best-selling book *The Argonauts* ('so rabidly popular among women and queers that my first copy was swiped from my bag at a dyke bar in 2016'). Here's Seresin:

At the time this caveat struck me as both unnecessarily defensive and disingenuous. Of all people, Nelson knows her queer theory, and thus knows that her own heterosexual experience only comes into focus via the cultural delineation of heterosexuality from other (less embarrassing?) forms of intimacy and attachment. It doesn't make sense to extricate your own straight experience from straightness as an institution – if you are embarrassed by one, you are necessarily embarrassed by the other. Heterosexuality is nobody's personal problem.

Heterosexuality is nobody's personal problem. Just as Nelson need not be individually embarrassed by her own moments of attraction to cis-gendered men, Bilbrough does not have to defend the fact that her teenage years were sexually messy and poorly accommodated. It is not her fault that she modelled her desire on what she thought other people wanted rather than what she wanted herself, just as it is not a problem of the book if a reader concludes that the Floodhouse might have benefited from a washing machine. That the Floodhouse wasn't going to yield an easy upbringing is what her communist feminist grandmother was

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worried about. Although as readers it might be easy to don our Family First pants and point to the absent mother and dysfunctional household of the commune, my wager is that the dysfunction has less to do with the low-carbon emission collectivity at the Floodhouse and more to do with the spectre of heteropatriarchy and fossil capital tacitly guiding people's activities in both life and love – despite the strong desire to reject the system and go off grid.

Heteropessimism is a concept that names the lack of tools we have for fully exploring and understanding the internal contradictions of heterosexuality as they manifest inside the heterosexual experience. That is, we have pessimism rather than a workable critical program. As Seresin puts it, 'Queer theorists look smugly at heterosexuality over their shoulders as the thing that they have - thank God – left behind.' While this is a caricature of a rich and exciting critical field of which Seresin is part, even the seemingly capacious queer theory has its blindspots. A few years ago, Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson edited a special issue of *differences* journal, critiquing the position of heteronormativity as the opposite of queer. The perverse effect of which is it creates a foundational conceptual binary opposition in a theoretical system avowedly seeking to work beyond binaries. 'What does queer inquiry do when its critical vigor is constituted by something other than an axiomatic opposition to norms?' This question is relevant to my reading of *In the Time of the Manaroans* because although the fraught coming-of-age story cannot be theorised in terms of queer *identity* – Bilbrough's teenage years are very straight and she exclusively reports desiring men - her tale is located in a queer time and place in terms of the communal family structure and the parental rejection of normative narratives of development. There are normative and antinormative components to the tale; a mix that is as interesting as it is critically confusing.

In the dearth of tools we have for thinking well about heterosexuality, there is no ready-to-hand vocabulary for a critical feminist understanding of a flatly average experience of heterosexual hierarchy. We have visions of true love against the odds, sexual assault, deviance and liberation but not mediocrity. Satisfying heterosexual love between women and men that triumphs despite the patriarchy is the obverse of the litigation of the experience of sexual violence, the collective struggle of #metoo or the resilience feminism model which Robin James observes recycles 'damage into more resources'. While queer theory tends to avoid the topic, straight feminism doesn't fully deal with the spectrum of relationality within heterosexual desire.

For example, although we are told Bilbrough moves into a pleasurable form of heterosexuality later in life, how does one read the following formative moment:

Did Doug rake Miro last night? Sai demands of Sylvie. I have no idea what to do with the furrow the verb ploughs through my brain, with Sai's projection of the casual violence of adult relations, or Doug's embarrassing proximity ... I do have a crush on Doug, but these accusations are of a different order ... Years down the track I wonder about the nature of this small boy's experience. At the time my own shame is too great to think of anyone else.

Desire for Doug motivates Bilbrough's involvement in this tableau. She's interested in Doug and how it makes her feel, and yet as the desire develops into lived experience it becomes contradictory and confusing. She does not disavow her desire for Doug, so we can assume it is both pleasurable and permissible:

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straightness is socially sanctioned and thus can now. But her desire runs confusingly afoul of Sai's misogynistically styled inquiry into what may or may not have happened between them. For Seresin, disavowal of critical interest in heterosexuality ignores what she calls 'the proper object of inquiry' in relation to difficult experiences of heterosexual desire: misogyny. The misogyny here is subtle. Sai characterises a particular direction to desire's flow and a kind of structuring sexual violence that is alien to Bilbrough's own experience. Her desire is proximate to his words though, he names what she is feeling but in ways that are unfamiliar to her. This causes shame. The shame she feels is for feeling something good but being told by someone who she has been taught to respect (a

man) that she isn't feeling it in the right way. Desire, tacitly according to Sai, should be coming from the man to her and be violently imposed upon her. Sai's version of heterosexual desire is shaped by misogyny.

Thinking more specifically about Manaroa in historical terms, in the context of the hippies and the global Back to Land Movement, we can note that the lesbian separatist commune experiments also peaked at a similar moment in history. These communes can function as an interesting counterpoint to Bilbrough's life at the Floodhouse in this regard. Not that lesbian separatism 'worked' while Manaroa didn't - but it did have a theory of gendered power at the heart of the redesign of social ecologies. Lesbian separatism was a materialist form of sexual identity politics, where being off-grid was also about being outside of heterosexuality. Freedom of sexual identity or gay liberation was only part of the point. An impossibly bold social and material vision of women's liberation is also contained in certain forms of lesbian separatism. That, according to Monique Wittig's 1980 essay 'The Straight Mind', 'lesbians are not women' because the women only exist as a subordinate class of beings within heterosexuality. Lesbians have 'run away' from that hierarchical structure, and as such escape having to belong to this subordinated class of being. It is not just non-normative desire, but an alternative political economy that becomes possible outside the heterosexual household. To be clear, I am not demanding there should have been historical queerness where it is not, nor do I want to suggest that Bilbrough would have been better off as a political lesbian. Nor that it would be a better book if the narrator was explicitly critical of the heteropatriarchy. Nor, even, that a couple of lesbians could have transformed Manaroa. (If only lesbians were so powerful). What I am saying, though, is that despite being isolated, heteropatriarchy is omnipresent at her eco-commune and it is no one's fault but we need to be able to see it and talk about it. Despite nods to second wave feminism, heteropatriarchy is there. It hangs in the air and, like the dead rat in the Floodhouse honevpot (true story!), is hard to ignore.

The fact that the problems of sexual hierarchy and gendered power relations don't go away when one leaves the suburbs to embark on a series of green life-hacks is what makes Bilbrough's book especially compelling to read now. The tacit misogyny of certain alternative green lifestyle cultures is evident both then and now.

Take New Years a decade ago. I went with friends and a former partner to Confest on the Edward River nine hour's drive south west of Sydney. Wamba Wamba Country. It was an intense trip. The land was drought stricken, but a flood had also passed through the Riverina recently. So it was bizarrely boiling hot, tinder dry and yet the river was high. Mosquitoes were breeding in stagnant ponds amongst

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almost dead trees. Days were pushing forty degrees with gusty dry winds, at one point an abandoned candle or incense stick caused a whole tent and car to catch fire. A major disaster was somehow averted with a makeshift fire truck and lowpressure hoses. As soon as the sun set the mozzies swarmed in volumes I'd never experienced before. It's a lo-fi event, no amplified music or light and lots of workshops on all sorts of things from meditation and seed collecting to DIY sauna-making and kissing. As with gardening at the Floodhouse, clothing is optional at Confest, and the majority of participants walk around naked for the duration. My crew was a mix of queers and straights, but overall, despite rainbow coloured body paints and bunting, the festival was deeply heterosexual. The free

tantra and massage workshops were convened by a man wearing purple Thai fishing pants, mustard leather vest, with a brushed pony tail and goatee surrounded by naked women; the man running the kissing workshop avowed male homophobia but encouraged female homoeroticism. Beside these workshops was advice on how to save seeds, built yurts and live off grid. It is an event to think outside the box, but only so far. Similar tales circulate about more recent Burning Man and Rainbow Gatherings. Heteropatriarchy and homophobia remain tacitly constitutive of these 'alternative lifestyle' zones and alternative environmentally conscious communities. Why this matters now, though, is that for 'alternative lifestyle' to be anything other than a superficial solution to ecological crisis, both the material and existential components of that living have to be rethought.

The lack of skill that the Manaroans have for growing enough food is related here. When we think about moving off grid, or to a new social scenario what makes it so difficult is we have to rework all the pieces from the ground up. This is difficult work, as Bilbrough notes:

The cupboard is bare, and we have been on rations for days. Unsure of when the lean times will end, or what relief the mailboat will deliver, we subsist on chapatis and tea ... Relief comes from an unexpected quarter. When Bruce breaks his stoned monolith stance on the sofa the results can be spectacular ... There is wheat and cooking oil but not much more. We are approaching one of those frequent all time lows. Only two stunted tamarillo trees are stooped in abundance.

The life is sometimes so lean that they have to rely on a stoned chef to awaken from his slumber to rescue them with tamarillos and vegetable oil. But is the detail with which Bilbrough describes this material and existential scarcity that this memoir is at its best. It functions as an extraordinary emotional representation of the cruel optimism that exists in not only under capitalism, but in ostensibly radical communities. The book provides a template for a reality check about the work that is needed to find ways of living better post-feminism in the grips of a major ecological crisis. Here I mean living in climate change not after feminism did all its necessary work, but in the wake of decades (or centuries, if you go back to Wollstonecraft) after the inauguration of an expansive feminist project that challenged the gender hierarchy and questioned what Adrienne Rich called 'compulsory heterosexuality'. Some think the work is over, but it's only just begun. There evidently has been some fairly widespread successes (depending on where you live: different rights to voting, abortion, divorce, work), and particular kinds of queer and feminist success stories like gay marriage and female Prime Ministers, but so much remains tacitly or explicitly the same. When confronted by

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these twin crises, rising sea levels and rising misogyny, unless we think them together, we're not going to get very far very fast. In the Floodhouse, despite having a composting toilet, sexual experiences were not liberating and the dishes were often left unwashed. The real challenge to power comes not only by questioning the architecture of house, but in seriously rethinking how people translate desire into touch in its bedrooms and how we redistribute the doing of the dishes in the kitchen.

So tear out the last two pages of this book and read it. There is no quick fix for the problem of carbon emissions and the work involved in change is difficult. This

memoir is an example of what life is like when off-grid is done with good intentions but without a substantial vision for and commitment to new social practices. As with carbon emissions so to with misogyny in heterosexuality: it's sweaty and emotional work to find new ways of relating to one another, and people, especially young people, need to be well supported in their communities to be able to do it and not internalise all the confusion. Bilbrough's memoir shows us just how hard, circuitous, successful, failed, partial, detailed, lush, weird, scary remaking the world can be. In this case it didn't work out as planned, but the world does have a poetic coming of age memoir.

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