

Community Building through Bodily Affect in Ari Aster's *Midsommar*

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Abstract: Although falling squarely into folk horror tradition, Ari Aster's 2019 movie *Midsommar* establishes its horror by drawing on the family and its intricate connection to affective, that is both emotional and bodily, belonging. I argue that *Midsommar* outlines how the depicted cult's sense of community stems from its practices of physical displays of compassion by juxtaposing the two storylines of Dani's tragic loss of her biological family in the US and her subsequent absorption into a death cult abroad. Hereby, I seek to expand Rosenwein's and Chaniotis's concept of an 'emotional community' to that of an 'affective community.' This analysis of *Midsommar* sheds light on a form of personal apocalypse exploited and reinforced by the destructive powers of a death cult in its access to a new member, using her body and mind alike.

Madness, we're reminded, can look like wisdom through the right eyes, or like liberation in the wrong (blinding day) light.

—A. A. Dowd

Ari Aster's 2019 film *Midsommar*, though highly psychological in its horror, contains matters of bodily affect that go beyond the occasional jump scare and gore. This paper engages with the establishment of a sense of belonging by focusing on the affective dimensions of the Hårga cult as depicted in the film. Cults are commonly associated with strategies of "brainwashing" (Collins), that is, "mind control" or "thought-stopping techniques" (Dittmann). However, the cult depicted in *Midsommar* lures the protagonist with physical affection rather than purely cognitive invasion by providing a space for physical belonging akin to a family setting.

In *Midsommar*, 27-year-old Dani, recently orphaned by her sister Terri's extended suicide, embarks on a research trip to Hälsingland. In rural Sweden, Dani's emotionally distant boyfriend, Christian, and his friends (all anthropology students) are seeking to study the Hårga, a pagan cult whose nine-day Midsummer

festival is taking place during their stay. Dani finds comfort in the Hårga's sense of community and assimilates quickly. The film leaves Dani's future within the Hårga open, as she is the only non-Swede remaining in the group with all other foreigners having been killed by the cult. *Midsommar* closes by presenting Dani to be delighted about her cutting of any ties to the US, as she watches her boyfriend burn to death in the flames of a ritualistic celebration of sacrifice.

My focus for this analysis lies on the Hårga cult's strategies of community building in *Midsommar* and is largely inspired by Barbara Rosenwein's concept of the 'emotional community,' which is mainly concerned with a historical perspective on these communities. I gain a more specific understanding of 'emotional communities' from Angelos Chaniotis's findings on Greek cults. Drawing on theoretical works by Sara Ahmed and Elizabeth V. Spelman, I will expand the notion of the emotionally affective community by adding a bodily component of not only emotional but also physical affect. I argue that it is not by means of brainwashing that the Hårga establish a lasting and successful community (e.g., in its reproduction), but rather by forming a group similar to a biological family that depends on a life-long and bodily sense of belonging. In calling this concept an 'affective community,' I seek to showcase the contribution of bodily affects to the formation and maintenance of the cult portrayed in *Midsommar*.

Finally, I attempt to decipher the appeal the Hårga provide for Dani due to her emotional vulnerability and national background. In doing so, I seek to show how the movie implicitly comments on a white American yearning for a cultural and racial heritage abroad, specifically in Europe. In losing her family and, therefore, lacking a sense of belonging, she is personally vulnerable to the manipulations of the Hårga cult. The Hårga exploit these circumstances both physically and emotionally. Dani's vulnerability also exists on a level of national identity and can be seen in her quest for roots outside of the US. This section will be concerned with the way these two intersect, and how the protagonist, as a white American, is prone to be affected by the promises of an ancient cult rich in traditions and customs.

By close reading the scenes in the film that portray the ritualistic sharing of affects not only on an emotional but also on a physical level, I arrive at the thesis that *Midsommar* outlines how the depicted cult's sense of community stems from its practices of allegedly co-feeling affects. The movie does so by juxtaposing the two storylines of Dani's tragic loss and her absorption into the death cult. Through these ritualistic acts of compassion, the community successfully maintains itself: They affect the guests' bodies so that they engage in reproductive practices.

THEORETICAL APPROACH: RITUALS AND THE EMOTIONAL COMMUNITY

In order to embed my analysis in a larger theoretical discourse, this paper is based on Rosenwein's concept of the 'emotional community' as a "[system] of feeling," that is, groups that are connected through a shared set of emotions felt towards a thing or event (842). She further argues that people can move between these communities and be "emotional[ly] transform[ed]" by their affiliated group (843). In *Midsommar*, Dani's emotional transfer happens by means of spatial as well as emotional distance from her hometown.

Chaniotis adopts Rosenwein's theory of the 'emotional community' for his analysis of religious cults, in particular early Greek emotional communities. According to Chaniotis, emotional synchronicity is the driving force behind the social cohesion of a cult. In these groups, members experience belonging on the grounds of shared emotions during rituals. For him, an emotional community is "a community of people who were expected to feel the same emotions (hope, fear, anger, affection, pride, etc.) in the worship of a deity" (265). He further states that the whole festivity risks being suspended if the "prescribed mood" of a ritualistic celebration does not correspond with the momentary expression of the participants' emotions (264).

Slightly altering Rosenwein's approach, Chaniotis understands the emotional community to be prescriptive, rather than merely descriptive, of a community's emotional state. To belong, members are required to display specific emotions, regardless of their actual feelings. Instead of actively feeling an emotion, the same community-making effect is achieved by mimicking the required emotions. In *Midsommar*, we can see forms of theatrical display in several instances (Chaniotis 264), which I will discuss in the chapter on pain. We might also question whether imitation is actually successful in establishing a community-building co-feeling, as the community attempts to comfort and ease its members' pain by imitating their emotional or physical distress.

Later, I use Elaine Scarry's and Spelman's discussions of compassion and collectivity in relation to *Midsommar*'s display of collective suffering starkly opposed to the US-American take on pain as individualized and lonely. Scarry argues that pain is an inherently unshareable notion that can only be experienced by the person suffering (4). On the contrary, Spelman suggests that sharing of affects is indeed possible but may result in the dangerous perception that an emotion can be evaluated by a bystander and decisions about other people's life and death can be made by others (166).

Instead of thinking of Rosenwein's and Chaniotis's concept of the community as purely emotional, I propose to call the Hårga an 'affective community,' based on the assumption that the cult in *Midsommar* is shown to simultaneously use affects

physically and emotionally on its members. Affects are situated “at the intersection of mind and body, cognition and sensation” and refer to both, “parts of the body (nerves, brains, or guts) as well as environments and transpersonal relations” (Cvetkovich 5). This interrelation signals that the concept of the emotional community does not quite suffice to describe how *Midsommar* portrays Dani’s way into the Hårga community. By focusing on the display of physical violence, for instance in the family, we can zero in on this intersection that uses emotional and bodily influence to establish communal belonging.

AFFECT AND THE BODY: ANALYSIS

Initiation

At the beginning of their stay in Sweden, Dani’s group is invited to alter their ‘emotional displays’ and internal emotions to fit into another community outside of the US. The Hårga introduce hallucinogenic mushrooms in order to change the guests’ emotional configuration by physically affecting their bodies with a consciousness-altering substance (0:28:46). Rosenwein states that in ceasing to belong to one community and deciding to join another, “people [...] [adjust] their emotional displays [...] to these different environments” (842)—which is done, in *Midsommar*, on a visceral level for the newcomers and aided by consciousness-altering substances.

The ritualistic consumption of hallucinogenics is not the only rite of initiation through which the guests are welcomed into the community. Chaniotis argues that initiation rites are crucial for building an emotional community because they “insinuat[e] [...] the initiate’s ritual death and rebirth” (267). The film takes up this notion of rebirth on various occasions, most prominently in that it is Dani’s birthday when she arrives in Sweden (0:21:33-37). Pelle, the exchange student who brings Dani and her boyfriend to Sweden, draws a picture of her, and later confides in her that this is “just something [he] do[es] for birthdays” (0:42:54). Here, Dani’s birthday becomes symbolic of her birth in a new community—taking ‘birth’ literally, the beginning of her life in a new family. By sketching Dani to welcome her into the cult and creating an image of her body, Pelle births her anew and simultaneously draws her into the group emotionally and physically. The initiation into the Hårga community is a physically affective ritual: By altering a body’s presentation and its state of mind, a new person is welcomed into the community.

Arousal and Reproduction

Whereas the rites cited above are one-sided, only altering the body of the initiate, the topic of reproduction and sexuality opens a discourse of mutual affectivity, in which both parties alter, change, or influence each other. During the arranged copulation between Christian and Maja, a young member of the cult, twelve naked women of different ages stand in a half-circle around Maja, who is lying on the ground on a bed made of flowers (2:00:02). Here, by initiating new life, the genetic code of the community is affected by an outsider.

Although Maja clearly takes an interest in Christian at the beginning of his visit (0:42:20-30), at the point of their sexual intercourse, both are influenced by drugs that they were given during the festival. We see Maja fall and stumble away from the Maypole Dance, having exhausted her body shortly before the act, but also still affected by the tea the participating women were asked to drink prior to the event (1:43:36-45). Christian, too, first refuses but then swallows the drink that is supposed to undermine his “defenses” (1:44:41). While the movie does not clearly show both as drugged, the mentioned scenes indicate that Maja and Christian are not entirely able to consent to or refuse the act.

Both Maja and Christian are affected by the looming bystanders to the act. When Christian starts to penetrate her, Maja, almost like a child to their mother, reaches out to another woman in the circle, who then sits down with the pair and begins to sing, as if soothing a child (2:01:19-02:09). It becomes clear at this moment that this is not a singular event but rather a typical ceremony within the Hårga family: The other women are part of a choreography, a performance, but they are also part of Maja's bodily sensations. Peter Bradshaw calls this scene a “chorally assisted” act, and it very much is a form of ‘support’ that takes place on several levels. It is necessary to note that it is not her who starts moaning, but rather one of the singing women, imitating what Maja is supposed to sound like while she merely joins in. She is guided into her reproductive role as a Hårga woman by another female member of the community—and both together alter the other women's state of arousal, who start moaning; they are part of the ritual's shared affect (physically and emotionally). The arousal becomes visible when they start touching themselves, which in turn has an effect, an affect, on Christian, who climaxes (2:06:53-55). Tying this back to Chaniotis's lens on rituals, which emphasizes the collectivity of emotion during a festivity, we find that the act can only successfully play out if all people present either actually feel the emotion themselves or at least make others believe they did. This idea especially takes effect when discussing a sexual act, a ritual inherently relying on at least two parties and their physical involvement.

The implementation of the moaning of an older woman who sits down with Maja, instructing her on what to do at this moment, is indicative of how “culturally pre-fabricated” affects are in the Hårga community (Paul 166). It becomes apparent that Maja is not alone in this situation but is flanked and guided by women of her cult. When they start to moan with her, we notice that the group is not only visually engaged in the act, but also physically: Maja and Christian’s act affects their bodies too. At the same time, the group of Hårga physically contributes to the act’s development: An elderly woman steps up to rhythmically push Christian’s buttocks, physically affecting his body (2:06:30-55).

Sexual arousal is directly tied to the maintenance of the Hårga community by placing the act in a collective ritual of reproduction: Maja’s subsequent comment “I can feel the baby” immediately after the act makes sure to connect attraction and desire to the Hårga’s collective need for reproduction (2:06:55). The sexual encounter and the emotional bonding between the Hårga and Christian exclusively serve the continued existence of the cult by avoiding inbreeding within this small community.

Sharing Pain: Purported Compassion

A second physical sensation that is omnipresent in the film is pain. This chapter is mainly concerned with the Hårga’s take on the shareability of pain and its expression. “Pain has [...] been described as a private, even lonely experience, as a feeling that I have that others cannot have,” Sara Ahmed writes in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (20). *Midsommar*, however, suggests that the Hårga frame pain differently: Their community building and notion of belonging are mainly focused on a sense of being able to ease pain (both emotional and physical) through imitating other people’s suffering, exhibiting compassion by co-feeling the sensation.

One of these events in which physical pain is mimicked, and therefore eased, occurs at the very end, when human sacrifices are shown to be burned alive. Instead of leaving them to their own devices and waiting for their lives to end, the community actively engages in the physical display of the sacrificed individuals’ pain: The onlookers are throwing their arms and legs in the air, screaming, yelling, at least pretending that they are suffering alongside the victims (2:19:47-22:17). We understand that the community does not, by any means, attempt to save the human sacrifices but instead indulges itself in a shared experience of the physical expression of pain, relating their own bodies to those suffering.

To flesh out this idea of co-feeling, we can turn to an even more overt example, which is Dani’s physical reaction to Maja and Christian’s copulation. The film shows her vomiting, emphasizing that her body can quite literally not contain this

overwhelming emotion, therefore expelling it (2:04:13). Dani becomes physically absorbed by a swarm of other women, who guide her to bed where she then collapses. The women encompass Dani so that she does not need to contain her emotions (or bodily fluids) herself. The seven women form a cage around her body, holding the newcomer down with their hands and producing sounds that resemble the soothing of a baby. The group is mirroring Dani's cries, vocalizing her distress (2:05:07–06:41). In breathing and wailing with her, they are mimicking her pain and disgust. While this seems almost as if they are mocking the girl, it soothes her distress and Dani calms down, comforted like an infant by its parents.

The film depicts how pain as an affect “actively destroys language” (Scarry 172) through Christian's inability to communicate with Dani about the loss of her family. Yet, the Hårga women, by merging themselves with her, manage to establish a form of conversation by “deconstructing [language] into the pre-language of cries and groans” (172). The Hårga women's attempt of relating to Dani is not through language, as her American boyfriend tries and fails to do, but more visceral and appealing to her primal instincts: They cocoon Dani with their bodies, almost like absorbing her back into her mother's womb, evoking notions of mothering and a biological family unit.

There is a rhythm in their collective wailing that I read as symbolizing the ongoing manipulation, a pattern that swallows her self, and a way to continuously bind Dani to the Hårga community. The camera then cuts back to the rhythmic moaning of Christian and the orgy in the barn (2:06:23). Conversely, Rick Alan Ross argues regarding this scene that the rhythm the group expresses “can become hypnotic, it can become mood altering, and it can be a trance-inducing process, and so this becomes a [sic] avenue of manipulation” (03:46–57). Dani is no longer an individual with her own grief but rather is encapsulated by seven other women who claim her body as one of their own.

In this rhythm, however, Dani loses her ability to contain her emotions. Approaching the Armageddon of her individual identity, she now needs the guidance of others to know how to respond to distress. As a result, her peers' imitation becomes ritualistic and potentially necessary for any future situation of distress. Hence, the protagonist becomes dependent on other members to contain her emotions for her. In the repetition of ritualistic acts, physical boundaries cease to exist. In *Midsommar*, the Hårga are portrayed as laying claim to the bodies of others by assuming that they can have a co-feeling—compassion—with them. The rites we witness in the movie are the foundation for a successfully established ‘affective community,’ which then becomes both the appeal and the danger of the group.

Similarly, but vastly different in the use of violence, the film frames the Ättestupa—a ritualistic murder of elderly people with roots in pagan Scandinavian

mythology (Spadoni 719)—as an act of compassion, which is supposed to relieve elderly cult members from their alleged suffering. During Dani’s stay, the violence of the Midsummer festival first surfaces when the Hårga cult kills two elderly people by having them jump off a cliff in such a ritual. The setting of this scene is formal in the arrangement of huge dining tables in the shape of a rune and an intricate performance of individual rites that culminate in the brutal murder of two members (0:52:15). At the same time, though, the bright daylight and collective action of the scene suggest normalcy, ritual, and machinery. Ulrika, a cult leader, attempts to explain why this “custom” (1:05:00) among the Hårga is understood as “a great joy for” the two people who jump (1:05:06–07). She emphasizes that she, too, will perceive this “end of the Hårga lifecycle” with a strong sense of joy once her time comes (1:05:05). Ulrika fleshes out what the end of life would look like without this ritual: In speaking of “pain and fear and shame,” the Hårga believe that life would ultimately “spoil” if it were not given away voluntarily (1:05:30).

Ulrika assumes that the Hårga can understand each other’s suffering and can, therefore, calculate their members’ degree of pain. Spelman argues that “[t]o put on the mantle of others’ suffering is to proclaim oneself as well informed [...] about what that suffering means” (166)—which is mirrored in the Hårga’s prescribed end of an individual’s life cycle that is arranged like seasons and stops at age seventy-two (0:47:09–33). Ulrika and the other Hårga serve as a stand-in for Terri, Dani’s sister, who projected her own suffering onto her parents to legitimize her extended suicide. Terri not only killed herself but she also preemptively took away the grief her parents could have felt. She wrote “everything’s black - mom and dad are coming too” (0:10:50), perhaps falsely anticipating a death wish from her parents. In both scenes, the younger party decides for their elders.

In Ulrika’s statements about the necessity of the Ättestupa, the camera lingers on Dani’s blurry silhouette and finally cuts to her face, visualizing a bridge to her own story and to her parents’ death at the hands of their other daughter who might have felt the same as Ulrika (1:05:22–42). Both the killing in the Ättestupa and the murder-suicide of Dani’s sister and parents are visceral, violent, and graphic. Yet, Dani’s reaction to her family’s death is agony and pain while the cult members frame the death of their family as a compassionate way of easing their suffering. Terri’s face is shown tormented and agonized: She has vomit flowing out of her gas mask that is stuck to her face with tape, and her eyes are popping out, huge and in panic (0:10:35–45). In the US-American context, the murder is set in the dark and at night (0:01:43–11:56), leaving the individual to die on her own and in a room separate from her parents (0:10:14). The film implicitly comments on the above-stated difference between the individualist and uncompassionate US society, which deserts Dani, without any family left, in her grief, and shows her sister to have killed herself painfully and alone.

Terri's and her parents' death displays only a surface-level contrast to the Hårga's supposed warmth, collectivity, and brightness in this death ritual, however, we see the violence in graphic detail. Ulrika's rosy depiction stands in contrast with the graphic and violent reality of the rite: After surviving the jump, the man is hit by a cult member with a mallet, and the camera focuses on the image of his body bouncing back from the impact (1:03:52). Later, we see the bloody and disfigured dead bodies that are brought to be burned (1:13:16)—unceremoniously and on metal handbarrows (1:13:12), revealing the absurdity of calling this a cult of compassion and harmony.

Even before the two elderly people jump, we quickly come to understand that they do not perceive their killing as an act of clemency; their faces do not speak of hope and salvation but rather radiate fear and alarm (0:56:30-43). Acknowledging that this is in fact not a positive or desired situation for these two individuals renders the killing “a sort of brutal euthanasia” (Cea). Before the actual sacrifice takes place, the two elders perform a ritual akin to breathing exercises in a language resembling Old Norse (0:55:27-56:09). They are not only experiencing the emotions inside their bodies but are also performing their fear with their bodies.

There are rules in the Hårga cult that a person's life cycle must obey. These rules reveal that people are seen as the cult's property and unable to make decisions about their lives on their own. The cult's rituals rely on the assumption that individual bodies are subject to a collective force of decision-making and that everybody subscribes to the feelings necessary for the respective ritual. The *Ättestupa* is perhaps the most “jarring” of the customs depicted in *Midsommar* (Cea), but Chaniotis's observation that in such a ritual everybody ought to feel the same emotions holds here too: The cult kills its members with the justification that this is in the individual's and the community's interest.

FAMILY HORROR AND VULNERABILITY

In depicting the ritualistic killing of the elders, the film emphasizes how vulnerable both the emotions and the bodies of family members are to each other's violence. This vulnerability is presented, firstly, through the lack of physical distance within the Hårga community (similar to a family unit that lives under one roof); and, secondly, through the emotional state of Dani's character, recently orphaned and far away from home (comparable to the emotional attachment a child might have to their parents). In American cinema, a tradition of family horror has produced “countless scary movies that show just how tough and complex communicating with relatives can be” (Tsintziras). This subgenre is taken up in *Midsommar*'s destructive forms of community-making that rest on the ways in which physical

access and emotional vulnerability in the Hårga cult are similar to those that produce the horror of Dani's family's death.

The horror in *Midsommar* is based on the potential for traumatic violence in a space as intimate as the family. Chris Dumas argues that “[w]ithout th[e] element of violence, most horror films would simply be family melodramas” (34), from which follows that the family (melo)drama lends itself to horror. In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed defines family as a “happy object,” usually attached to feelings like safety and belonging (21). However, the reverse is true in movies of family horror: The causes for “family structures gone horribly awry” oftentimes are “deep-rooted dissatisfactions and unbearable repression” (Gill 17). Thus, the very parameters that are supposed to define (in Ahmed's terms) a ‘happy’ unit are giving way to horrifying violence among its members.

Spatial Access

The first layer of vulnerability portrayed in the family-like setting in *Midsommar* is spatial. The Hårga set up their living space in a manner that resembles a traditional household open to anyone at any time. When the Americans first enter the dormitory, the music swells and is tinged with warmth and hope. The camera follows the guests' gazes upwards, and we see the ceiling, an assembly of wooden beams covered in symbols and drawings (0:46:16). For this analysis, their style seems more relevant than their symbolism: The drawings look like those of a child—happy, unskilled, chaotic—through which, despite its size, the hall becomes intimate and cozy. This living-room aesthetic adds to the notion that after horrendous events, a long flight, a drive, and a bad trip, they are finally welcomed home, as indicated by the *mise-en-scène*.

In this apparent bliss of arrival, Christian points out that there is “not a lot of privacy,” as this ‘living room’ area doubles as a bedroom for all members aged between eighteen and thirty-six (0:47:11). In fact, there is no privacy at all, since the beds are lined up on the wall leaving an entirely open space. This inexistence of refuge from other members and their rituals points to the very type of community the Hårga portrays. Spelman points out that “[w]hether a community has shared or individual experiences of grief and joy depends on the extent to which that community allows individual ownership of property” (25). The spatial situation in the Hårga members' lives gives way to the affective success of their rituals, as they share everything, down to their sexual encounters, pains, names, and rooms, establishing ties similar to those in a biological family.

Vulnerable Members

A second layer of vulnerability is tied to Dani's acute grief of losing her family. Pelle lures Dani in by emphasizing how she could be part of a community that would not let her feel alone because there would be others to replace a family, or encompass her in a communal bodily collective that would resemble a familiar bond on a physical level. However, as the community ritualistically imitates each other's pain, Pelle's loss of his parents is artificially generated: He ambiguously states that his parents have "burned up in a fire" (1:11:34), yet the later events of the movie seem to hint at the possibility that they might have been human sacrifices too. No less a tragedy for Pelle, his parents' death was potentially engineered by the community to create a suffering they can then soothe. Glenn Collins notes that this is a common strategy of cults to render their (new) members more vulnerable to their teachings.

Dani's heightened vulnerability after her family's death gives way to her wish and eagerness to participate in the cult's rituals, which help her emotionally and physically partake in the community. This eagerness is visible in the Maypole dance that represents the climax of the festival, a scene with several components of how Dani becomes part of the community. She is requested to drink a "tea" (1:37:35-38:16), a substance that enters her body so that her mind reaches an altered state of consciousness. Dani begins to dance, and although she does not know the choreography yet, she is being driven by the other bodies around her (1:44:00-45:57).

This scene, however, takes the affectivity of a shared movement ad absurdum in her sudden ability to speak and understand Swedish (1:46:48-47:07). By moving her body in unison with the other women, she can become part of the community, to feel what they feel and know what they know—as one of the women claims: "It's dancing!" (1:47:07) The sharing of knowledge through simultaneous movement is depicted as a form of co-feeling: A shared state of consciousness can be reached through physical imitation of one another so that Dani seems to earn a place in the cult by emotionally and physically adapting to the community.

A Source of Origin

Lastly, the film comments on a white US-American yearning for a place of origin by depicting Dani's fascination with the Hårga's community and rendering them a group akin to a biological family. In a recent article for *The New Yorker*, Maya Jasanoff underscores the ongoing craze for genealogical research in the US, jokingly suggesting "that [it] is the second most popular hobby in the United States, after gardening." I read Dani's trip to Sweden as a quest not only for immediate belonging but also one for heritage in the broader sense: In a conversation before departing, her questions for Pelle are geared towards the ancientness and pageantry

of the cult, which suggest her interest in his ancestry as a search for personal heritage. Rob Kroes understands “America [to be] a stray member of a larger family, a descendant from Europe,” and Dani metaphorically reflects this loss of heritage (1135). When Pelle shows her pictures on his phone, she is more interested in the runes on the clothes than the people that are wearing them (0:22:22-28). The runes might represent an ancient place of origin that the US cannot provide her.

Kroes’s notion of the US as ‘a lost child that seeks to return home’ embeds the film in a discourse of transatlantic relations that cast “America [...] as lacking the European sense of the past as a living presence” (1136). In falling for the Hårga’s promise of past and heritage, Dani exchanges her individuality and ownership of her body and mind for a place of origin. The Hårga offer Dani a language beyond English in her sudden ability to speak Swedish as well as a community she yearns for after losing her family. The film’s setting reflects this yearning in the two initial shots of each setting: While the US is displayed as dark, uninviting, and cold (0:01:00-02:09), the bright and endless Swedish summer reflects the apparent harmony that appeals to Dani (0:25:05). After landing in Sweden, though, the everlasting brightness is depicted to be disorienting rather than comforting: The long, upside-down shot of their drive to Hälsingland reflects Dani’s state of mind and the disorientation that is inflicted upon her as she is introduced to the cult so shortly after her trauma and far away from home (0:26:14-51). This disorientation foreshadows the cult to be fanatic and cruel despite its apparent harmony, and, contrary to its first appeal, to treat its members as property belonging to the overall group rather than to themselves.

The cult abuses Dani’s vulnerable state in that they provide an affectionate and supportive place that pulls her in, ultimately cutting her off from her environment by having her kill Christian in the flames of yet another ritual of sacrifice (2:14:00-end). Dani’s desire to belong leaves her as the only American in the group of Swedish cult members, so she, too, becomes part of the cult that cares more for communal survival than individual lives. After emphasizing that he is “very, very glad [she is] coming” to Sweden, Pelle mentions the death of Dani’s family, which triggers her mental and physical breakdown (0:23:10-15). He argues that he, too, lost his family and still has a family-like construct that he belongs to, both bodily and emotionally. Dani, subsequently, is specifically interested in Pelle’s “commune,” in which “everybody sort of does everything together,” suggesting her yearning for belonging to a collective (0:21:49-22:03). Pelle recognizes Dani’s pain in this conversation, and his mention of her family at this exact moment seems calculated and deliberate to strike a chord with the visibly emotionally unstable protagonist.

Spelman expands the notion of belonging by thinking about property, which directly embeds the juxtaposition between US and European cultures in the film to be based on communal and individualist designs. While in the US, individualism is

often inherently tied to commodities, the Hårga constitute an example of a group that shares everything, down to their bodies. In any community, “[p]eople will grieve over misfortunes they count as theirs, and rejoice in good things they do or that happen to them. But what they count as ‘theirs’ or ‘not theirs’ depends on the kind of polity in which they live” (Spelman 26). In *Midsommar*, the Hårga community, in which everything is owned collectively, is represented as a quintessential opposition to American individualist culture, which cannot meet Dani’s emotional needs.

CONCLUSION

By providing a family-like setting to those most vulnerable, *Midsommar*’s Hårga establish a lasting community and succeed in drawing Dani in, showcased by acts of compassion or co-feeling. Chaniotis’s and Rosenwein’s theoretical concept of the cult as an ‘emotional community’ worked as a necessary starting point for this analysis. However, in expanding the term of ‘emotionality’ to ‘affectivity,’ we can emphasize not only emotional but also physical aspects of the Hårga’s strategy of community making. As I have deciphered in this paper, the imitation and apparent possibility of sharing affects form the Hårga community, for instance, through rituals of initiation and ritualistic engagement in life-making or life-ending practices.

Both Dani’s emotional instability and the family-inspired space in which the Hårga have access to any of the members at any given time support the notion of the affective community as actively seeking out potential members based on their vulnerability. This extraordinarily homogenous cult assures its perseverance by attracting new members, or, in Christian’s case, reproductive ‘contributors’ into the cult. Next to her emotional and physical vulnerability, the Hårga exploit Dani’s wish for a place of origin that exceeds her belonging to an immediate family and is even concerned with her heritage.

Further research would benefit from focusing on *Midsommar*’s depiction of the Hårga as a highly exclusive place deeply afflicted with racist and nationalist undertones. Dani may be able to allow herself to be comforted by the Hårga “as a hearth fire might warm a cozy family room,” but this only works at the expense of the lives of the guests who cannot physically adapt to the demands of a white (and, in fact, whiteness-obsessed) cult (Spadoni 721). In *Midsommar*, we can clearly see that the community’s sense of belonging, and, in turn, the ability of characters to adapt to the community, only extends to those of their own race and considered worthy of co-feeling by the Hårga.

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