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Witches, heathens and shamans: Religious experience and gender identity among contemporary Pagans in the United States.

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Witches, heathens and shamans: Religious experience and gender identity
among contemporary Pagans in the United States

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

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ABSTRACT:

This research explores the relationships between religious experience and gender identity among contemporary Pagans in America. Personal experience, specifically spiritual experience, is fundamental in how Pagans described not only their spirituality but also their identities. In a social context where the mind is viewed as sacred and the body as profane, contemporary Pagans are challenging hegemonic beliefs. Through linguistic adaptation and linguistic appropriation, men and women in the Pagan community outline new identities for themselves. In the same way that Pagans understand their spirituality through bodily experience, gender and sexuality are also understood through personal experience. Because of the primacy of experience contemporary Pagans have created new frames for understanding, discussing and validating forms of gender and sexuality that are often framed as “alternative.”

CHAPTER 1: OVERVIEW AND REVIEW OF CURRENT LITERATURE

Vignette 1.a

I sit at the registration booth for the Sacred Harvest Festival even though no one has shown up to register for the past half hour. I can hear music from the other end of the camp where the welcome ceremony and ritual are under way. All of the participants at the week long festival I'm attending are to sign up to help out for four hours during the week. I thought it would be good to get my work done right away and help with registration. It gave me a chance to meet a lot of people, but now I'm disappointed to be missing the first ceremony. Aaron, one of the staff for the Sacred Harvest festival, is shuffling through papers though there is little for either of us to do tonight. He suggests that I go and catch the end of the ritual. There is still about an hour left of my shift, but he says that he doubts anyone else will arrive this late.

I walk Southward towards the singing voices as the last bit of light begins to fade in the sky. I see the group of singers walking from the ritual space northward, towards the fire pit located in the "Heart Chakra" – the primary meeting place. As they walk, continuing to sing, they gather other people who were busy setting up their tents or starting campfires and missed the first part of the ritual.

Some members carry percussion instruments, African Djembes (drums), Indian hoop drums and tambourines. The groups begins to circle around the fire pit singing:

"Fire, sacred fire..."

I'm overwhelmed by the mass of dancers, faces slightly familiar yet primarily unknown.

"burning through the night..."

Their sarongs, kilts and dresses flow as they spin all the while, rotating around the fire.

"Come to me in my dream time..."

The sky is black now, and the stars are bright.

"Bringing visions of light..."

There is an overwhelming effervescence in the air,

"circle round..."

an invoking of something higher.

"Spiral down..."

The group acting and singing as one,

"to these arms open wide..."

and at the same time each individual calling out on their own

"Healing light..."

full of joy

"burning bright"

and yet tinged with pain

"dry these tears that I've cried."

The song continues on, and I find myself swept up in song. New friends grab my arms and pull me into the spiral. Soon, I too am an individual in the dance and yet a part of this larger being. “Circle round, spiral down,” now I’m singing. All the while I feel overwhelmed, yet comforted by the smiling faces, tired and yet invigorated.

1.1 Overview

To understand how Pagans in the United States conceptualize their gender identity one must first examine how they worship, how they celebrate, and how they understand the relationship between bodily experience and spirituality. The Christian denominations of religion, which are predominate in the Midwestern region of the United States, are based heavily in Western philosophy which privileges the mind over the body. In fact, dominant social beliefs are inundated with an assumed separation between rational mind or spiritual soul and profane body.

Inversely, modern Pagans in the Midwest value the experiences of the body as informative to beliefs and ideas. They view the body and mind in balance, informing one another as a single unit. They thus value experience, and particularly spiritual experience. This makes a type of religious plurality possible. This also explains why some religious scholars have, in the past, been unable to come up with meaningful explanations and descriptions of the contemporary Pagan movement (See Bloc 1998; Gallagher 1994). The modern Pagan movement is, after all, a Western movement. However, the discourse within religious scholarship on understanding non-Western religiosity may be more suitable for examining Western Paganism.

These ideas of bodily religion, are also not fully supported by the common, Protestant, religious language, which most citizens in the Twin Cities if not in the Midwest in general are familiar with. Pagans are quite aware of the lack of words, frames

and language for their ideas, beliefs, experiences and practices. For this reason I also find it vital to examine the link between experience and discourse on experience. While considerable research has gone into the ethics of contemporary Pagans borrowing practices and rituals from other religious traditions, little has gone into the borrowing of terms from religious traditions. Along with borrowing Pagans have also invented unique ways to use the very language that has been used to alienate them through creative adaptation of words and meanings. Pagans have created new realms of both religious discourse and social discourse that have allowed them to express often inexpressible ideas but have also inadvertently alienated them from larger discourse in the United States on a range of topics.

One of these topics is gender identity and sexuality. It is only through the frames of understanding religious experience and talking about them that individuals in the Pagan community have begun to frame their experiences of gender and sexuality. This is not to say that this is the only way possible but, not surprisingly, individuals who identify as queer, lesbian or transsexual, among other identifiers, have drawn parallels between their “alternative” religious choices and their “alternative” lifestyle choices. For this reason, the tools that individuals have developed to explain their religion are often used to explain their gender and sexuality. As my Pagan informants explained their own gender identities they focused, once again, on bodily experience. They expressed that their experiences of gender have informed their identity, but do not seem to match, linguistically, with normalized explanations of gendered experience. In this way their identities are not just marginalized, but their experiences themselves are marginalized.

In a religion and social group that not only tolerates differences but values them – those with unique experiences and backgrounds were seen to provide important insights for the group. People who are marginalized in the larger culture are often placed in prominent positions within the Pagan community. Spiritual expertise was often ascribed to members with “alternative” gender identities because of their experiences as marginalized in today’s social climate. The feelings of people in these roles range from self acknowledged importance to slight bewilderment as they consider the contradictory roles they hold inside and outside of the group.

In general, the value placed on different experience, gendered and otherwise, creates a niche in society for people who see themselves as fundamentally different from those in the mainstream American society. Within their loose-knit Pagan community, they find words and frames to describe themselves in valuable and unique ways. This research should not only serve to provide an in depth look at the relationship between religious experience, language use and gender identity among a “non-traditional” religious group in the United States, but also begin to bridge the gap that often prevents cross-religious dialogue and understanding.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge that all frames for society placed on cultural groups by anthropologists and other researchers are just that, frames. They are ultimately used to help onlookers understand society and do not reflect actual physical constructs (Stern 2006). For this reason, I problematize my own theoretical frames in places and examine the contradictions imbedded in things such as: valuing differences over sameness, creating new forms of language to explain oneself and then using them outside of their created context, and the attempt to create all inclusive acceptance of gender,

sexuality and yet maintain cohesion. First though, a more general discussion of where research on Paganism is today.

1.2 Defining Neopaganism:

Paganism, it is important to note, is a genre term that encompasses a number of specific spiritual practices such as Wicca, Celtic Religion, Native American religions, Nature based spirituality, many magically based religions, European variations of Witchcraft (i.e. Striga: Italian Witchcraft), revivals of historic pantheon worship, and eclectic Paganism (Clifton and Harvey 2004). Since many of these forms of spirituality are based in historic religions it is important to note that most are considered revivals of old religions to some extent. Because of this, the term often used is *Neopaganism* or qualified as *contemporary* Paganism. Neopaganism is a term that was used in the past four or five decades and has largely gone out of style. For the sake of this project Paganism, Neopaganism and contemporary Paganism will be used synonymously. Pagan religions that predate the modern movement will be qualified as such.

One of the most well known branches of the contemporary Pagan movement, Wicca, is traced back to Gerald Gardner in Britain. In 1954 Gardner published *Witchcraft Today*, in which he outlined what he claimed was a secret religious sect that had existed before Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire and in turn, Western Europe. Gardner outlined a religious practice that he claimed was based on this ancient religion that had secretly survived, perpetuating itself clandestinely for centuries (Eller 2000; Jencson 1989). Within a few years Wiccan groups, often referring to themselves as covens, began to spring up in both Europe and the United States.

This movement is both affected by and effects many other movements in the United States, the most obvious being the feminist movement. The concept of deity itself moves away from the patriarchic thought of “traditional” religions in the United States creating a trend in Goddess Spirituality. Along with questioning ideas of patriarchal deity, feminist spiritualists also questioned notions of necessary hierarchy in religious groups. Feminist Spirituality has its own roots in the 1970s with women theologians such as Mary Daly, Carol Christ (1979), Judith Plaskow (1979) and Naomi Goldberg (1979) among others.

Feminist spirituality, and Goddess worship eventually came to be considered part of the Neopagan movement. The theological writings created by feminist spiritualist has become part of the unofficial Pagan cannon. Pagan spiritualist groups are not defined doctrinally by the theology of the upper echelons of the church hierarchy, but are instead more dynamic and varied in religious belief among members. Current research suggest that among Pagans identity is not tied to a defined doctrine but instead to a mentality of openness to new types of religious thought and practice as forms of “religious expression that appeal to a wide variety of people” (Gottshcall 2000: 59). (See also: Greenwood 2000; Magliocco 1996; Pike 1996).

Lastly, one aspect of the Pagan movement is the prevalence of solitary practitioners or *eclectic Pagans*, who make up a fair portion of my informants. Eclectic Pagans are part, at most, of loosely connected groups with little if any hierarchy. Some participate only in social settings with other Pagans, doing only personal, self made rituals. Pagans in general, but especially eclectic Pagans, appropriate religious ideas from a variety of belief systems from around the world. They invoke varied and what

would be considered “non-traditional” (in the sense of Western or specifically American tradition) religious ideology and understanding. Many researchers who have written on modern Pagans advocate “new” (or at least less utilized) ways of looking at religion (Bado-Fralick 2005; Berger 2000; Greenwood 2005; Magliocco 1996).

1.3 The Study of Religion in Anthropology:

In my own research I have attempted to utilize anthropological frames for studying religion that consider more than the functional, political and historical facts of any given religion. There are current books on the role religions plays politically and socially, particularly in the case of countries with post-colonial connections with Europe and the United States. An example of this would be Joel Robbin’s book *Becoming Sinners* which examines the synthesis of cargo cults in Papua New Guinea with Christianity (2004). Robbin’s account of how these religions have come together gives great historical context to the development of morality, sociality and politics in Papua New Guinea. However it fails to fully delve into the experience of being a member of the Christian church in Urapmin (the site of his research). Robbin’s book is one of many insightful, anthropological texts that considered the interconnectedness of religion in society. While I also want to examine this interconnectivity, I also wanted to delve further into religiosity and spiritual experience.

Susan Greenwood, in her book *The Nature of Magic: An Anthropology of Consciousness*, uses an approach that seeks to redefine what it means to view religion holistically (2005). Greenwood looks at the individual’s relation to religious symbolism and the experience of the body and consciousness in the midst of mystical acts or spiritually relevant events. Greenwood suggests that magical consciousness is not simply

about solidifying social networks but that it allows individuals to communicate in balance with other aspects and beings of the natural world. David Abrams gives similar accounts in his own ethnographic accounts of “shamanistic” religion (1996). Abrams and Greenwood insist on considering the more than human aspect of religion to actually understand the human aspect of it. As Abrams explains, the nature of spirituality is not simply in negotiating social function, symbolism or sociality, it also is used to maintain ecological balance (1996).

This frame of understanding religion fits with Michael Jackson’s use of what he has termed “existential anthropology” (1998). Existential anthropology is focused on considering the *intrapyschic*, often unconscious, levels of experience that are typically considered fundamental to religion. Jackson is particularly careful to allow his informants to speak and tell their own stories, acknowledging his own inability to fully articulate another experiences.

Nikki Bado-Fralick’s ethnographic work, *Coming to the Edge of the Circle*, comes out of this tradition of anthropology as well. Bado-Fralick’s primary thesis, that unity in Paganism is not related to common belief but instead common practice, closely corresponds with my focus on Paganism, and religion in general, as an experience based system (2005). Bado-Fralick also examines the troublesome dichotomy within religious study as insider and outsider researchers. She correctly conveys that a researcher’s situation in relation to the topic being studied is never reducible to an either/or categorization. In actuality there are infinite outsider perspective and infinite insider perspectives (2005). Anthropologist Kath Weston further suggests that labeling one as the insider or “native anthropologists” or outsider is naturally limiting to the identity of

the anthropologist's identity as well as those of her or his informants (1997). Weston, along with other anthropologists, advocates that any researcher must maintain cultural relativity and consider their own positioning in any research situation (Crocker 2004; Passaro 1997; Taussig 1987).

The case of religious study provides a particular challenge to the anthropologists however, since a researcher can suspend judgment on religion while still doubting its validity. The books which I have chosen to utilize to frame my own research, in maintaining true relativism, force their authors and readers alike to often grapple with ideas of religious truth and experience. Michael Taussig, in his now classical work *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man* initially discusses the historical situation of shamanism in the Amazon but then goes on to include his own experiences of the tangible manifestations of that history in the shamanic ritual. Taussig's accounts of visions, and manifestations of the supernatural tie together the conscious, subconscious, ecological, historical and social aspects of religion in a way that is fundamentally revealing about the anthropologist but also revealing about the nature of religion and spirituality.

1.4 Community and Individuality:

The majority of early academic research on Paganism is focused on debated issues ranging from what "conversion" means in a wider sense to whether Wicca is a modern manifestation of an ancient religion or a new religion itself. Writers on Neopaganism, particularly Wicca often question origins of the religion. A fair amount of writing has been committed to disputing or endorsing Gerald Gardner's claims that

Wicca is a religion that has existed continuously since the beginning of history (Clifton and Harvey 2004; Hutton 2000; Jencson 1989).

Yet the rise of Neopaganism in the United States and Europe is not dependent on whether or not the religion has secretly remained in practice over the last millennium. Many members of the religion are new converts who grew up in Christian families (Gallagher 1994). The survey based research of Jon P. Bloc (1998) and that of Danny L. Jorgensen and Scott E. Russell (1999) both give some insight into the personal identity and religious background of members of Wicca and Pagan faiths. Neither survey was able to pinpoint a class, ethnic or economic component that determined conversion, though there were some trends. There were correlations between religious background and gender. Women are slightly more predominate in Pagan religions than men, and the top faiths that people convert from are Judaism, Catholicism and Protestantism (Jorgenson and Russell 1999).

Another prominent theme in the literature, that both of these sources mention, is variation in religious practice. Some of the interviewees sited use of New Age tools and rituals, some sited Native American Spirituality or rituals from other ancient religions. All those interviewed by Bloc sited themselves as major sources of spiritual knowledge. Within the Neopagan community, which is not easy to concretely identify, much dialogue has gone on about religious appropriation. While many rituals and practices are borrowed from shamanistic, or native American forms of spirituality it is relevant that many Neopagans question and debate the merit and drawback of borrowing from other religious practices. Sara Pike, who has written a vast amount on Neopagan festivals and practices, dedicates a good chunk of her book, *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves* to the

debate about borrowing from Native American practices and using them out of context (2001). This very discussion suggests that while looking at a loosely connected group of people they are talking as a form of Neopagan community in the context of festivals and other types of gatherings.

There has been a small amount of research into the place of the individual and community in alternative religion. The findings of Jon P. Bloc (1998) suggest that while there is no strict doctrine or dogma that Neopagans adhere to, this in itself has created a link and sense of solidarity among them even as individual practitioners of their own spirituality. The often posed question then is whether lack of dogma is in itself the dogma of this religious movement (Bloc 1998; Gallagher 1994).

1.5 Language and Power:

A less examined aspect of the Pagan movement has been the creation of new linguistic frames to talk about religious beliefs and religious praxis. Contemporary Pagans are quite aware of their position in society. This makes much of their speech what J.L. Austin calls performative (1962). In his book *How to Do Things with Words* Austin explains the way that speech acts become active and perform certain tasks, in this case the negotiation of identity and experience. Language, particularly in the context of religious ritual, becomes wholly active and performative. Judith Butler's work on language and performance includes instances where language is used to both aid and hinder the creation of independent and unique identities (1997). Because of their difference in experiences the ideas formulated by Pagans require new ways to discuss religion, social policy and lifestyle in general. This is especially true for members of the

Pagan community who also identify with what would be considered an alternative gender or sexual preference.

Robin Lakoff and Deborah Cameron are two current linguistic anthropologists who have contributed to the study of gender in language. Lakoff's writing focuses, to a great extent, on differences in linguistic usage between men and women including the privileging of male language practices over female linguistic use (2000). Cameron's writings from both 2003 and 2006 are greatly influenced by linguistic theory set forth by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their book *Metaphors We Live By*. Lakoff and Johnson analyze commonly used metaphorical language emphasizing, among other things, that metaphors necessarily forefront certain aspects of the experience being referred to and also necessarily hide certain aspects of it. Cameron adds an extra dimension to this idea by stating that whose experience is hidden and whose is forefronted relates directly to power differentials and value placed on different people's experiences. Every description of an experience portrays one point of view while hiding another. Cameron and Kulick (2003) look at typical linguistic usage, word choice and sentence structure to examine how we shape and express our beliefs of gender through our every day linguistic practices.

Robin Lakeoff, much like Cameron, looks at the way that normalized language is used to create and maintain specific power structures. Lakoff uses the term *exnominated* to refer to those opinions and ideas that are held by those in power. These exnominated ideas and notions are not only held by the exnominated class, they also permeate all levels of society in what comes to be seen as "common sense" or what maintains the "status quo" (2000)

These, primarily linguistic, theories relate to Pierre Bourdieu's writings on social controls. Bourdieu insists that while there are certain notions and ideas that lie outside of the realm of questioning – he calls these assumed ideas *doxa* – other cultural ideas fall within the realm of discourse. Bourdieu states that social upheaval or crisis can and often does facilitate the questioning of *doxa*, which brings previously assumed notions into the realm of discourse. Bourdieu does not specify what does and does not constitute social crisis, though certain occurrences would certainly be assumed (1972).

For all of the above theorists language is a key component of social control but is also a the key means of resistance, especially where there exists awareness. For my own research I look at how Pagans, who readily identify their experiences and ideas as different from the assumed, create their place within society and create outward change.

1.6 Feminist Spirituality:

Another important aspect of my research is the religiosity of women in the Western world in general. In America, women are more likely than men to be religious or spiritual (Fuller 2001). There are a few studies and inquiries into why this is and what this means for women in the age of the feminist movement (Fuller 2001; Walter and Davie 1998; Yates 1983; Sered 1994).

Some of the earliest writings come from Christian feminist theologians such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton who wrote *The Woman's Bible* and Mary Daly who eventually left the Christian faith because of her stance on women's rights. Daly's writing of the psychological need women have for a Goddess make up part of the bedrock of feminist spiritualist writings (1979). Both Stanton and Daly (though Stanton preceded the feminist movement by about 50 years) believed that women could not nourish their

spirituality in strict, patriarchal religions. Daly went a step further claiming that women could never truly feel a connection with God in the Christian church no matter what reforms may come along, because the fundamentals of Christian thought and belief on God (as male) would always leave women subjugated (Eller 2000).

Carol P. Christ made similar arguments based on the psychological implication of having a strictly masculine God, as a female worshiper. Implicitly, she argued, having a male God meant masculinity was valued over femininity and women and creates “psychological dependence on men and male authority...” (1979: 275). Christ, in her book *Rebirth of the Goddess* examines what is meant by Goddess, and matriarchy and in fact feminism. In an interesting linguistic trend I found cited in multiple places, there is an emphasis on all three of these terms denoting balance as opposed to opposition with God, patriarchy and androcentrism respectively (1997).

Judith Plaskow and Naomi R. Goldenberg also claim that the subordination of women inherent in having only a male God is compounded by the biblical ideal set upon women. Early Jewish stories of the creation recount that story of Lilith, who is frequently cited by feminist theologians. Lilith, being a woman created with knowledge of her equality with man refused a position of subservience to her husband, Adam. Neither her husband nor her creator (God, the father) were able to control her and especially her sexuality (Goldenberg 1979; Plaskow 1979).

Another aspect of Christianity that Christ, Plaskow and Goldenberg all point to is how the passivity of women is by far advantaged over assertion of will. The juxtaposition of Mary and Eve is evidence of this. Eve is blamed for the fall of creation by her assertion of will, while Mary is commended for her obedience and passivity to the

immaculate conception (Christ 1979). Even in Christian denominations where Mary is worshiped, there is a very limited range for acceptable female actions. It is Mary's acquiescence and obedience to her God that brings her honor. While scholars argue about the importance of Mary's choice to be the virgin mother, if she had declined she would never have gained the position of power that she is ascribed with in the Catholic faith (Kinsley 1989).

Many of these early writers of the feminist movement were focused on pointing out the problems with the patriarchal order of Christianity, a newer body of writing, most of which comes from the late 1990s and early 21st century, gives insight into how this dissatisfaction among women lead many of them to Neopaganism and Goddess Spirituality. The emphasis placed on female deity is both politically charged and self affirming for religious women. Marilyn Gottschall explains that feminism is primary to Witchcraft (2000). The tendency to relate Neopaganism back to nature is also indicative of the feminist influence. The image of Goddess and a nurturing Mother Earth stands in contrast to the focus of traditional religion's God over nature mentality. Both this and the image of ancient fertility Goddesses focus on femininity as both strong and firm as the earth and life giving and nurturing as the feminine body; this idea is cited by Christ in her later work as well as other feminist theologians such as Rosemary Ruether and Marilyn Gottschall (Carpenter 1996; Gotschall 2000; Ruether 1979). Helen Berger (2000), Cynthia Eller (2000), Susan Greenwood (2000), Sabina Magliocco (1996), Sarah M. Pike (1996), and Shelley TSivia Rabinovitch (1996) are all more recent scholars in the feminist body of literature on religion. They focus on the roles women play in Neopaganism and current conceptions of the Goddess.

Many of these authors also look at how these beliefs on gender and femininity are practiced in Pagan religion. Penelope Washbourn sets forth a ritualized rite of passage she suggests for girls to celebrate their womanhood by celebrating their first menstruation as a spiritual experience (1979). Zsuzsanna Budapest explains a ritual and blessing based in Goddess Spirituality (1979). Janice C. Crosby and Vajra Ma write about the use of dance as spiritual practice (2000). Layne Redmond, in “Technicians of the Sacred” uses drumming as a practice which in tunes her spiritually with the Goddess (2000).

Another important body of literature to draw on includes the accounts of ritual (such as those above) and belief that are written by Pagans themselves. There is a wide variety of books on personal theology (Fisher 2002) to ethnographic accounts of life in a Wicca Coven (Bado-Fralick 2005). There are a number of books that are considered classics to Neopagans such as: Margot Adler’s *Drawing Down the Moon* and Starhawk’s *The Spiral Dance*. Both of these books outline the major aspects of being Neopagan and the variations within the faith.

1.7 Religion in Context:

One final line of thought that must be teased out from the literature is the relationship between the ancient, modern and post-modern in relation to religion in the United States and especially the Neopagan movement. To return to literature on the Goddess, a number of the aforementioned authors posit that Goddess spirituality is not a new idea. Merlin Stone’s aptly titled *When God was a Woman* seeks to reveal a hidden “herstory” which can instill Neopaganism with a connection to the past (1976). Ultimately Stone’s methods for research and her conclusions are riddled with contradictions, but at the time she wrote her first book she influenced many feminist

spiritualist scholars to examine history more closely and look for alternate historical accounts that consider the lives of women.

Other authors focus on other ancient ideas believed lost. Terrence McKenna's *The Archaic Revival* represents a body of literature examining the idea that there is some spiritual connection that we, as humans in the Western world, have lost. For McKenna, this can primarily be regained through the use of hallucinogenic plants and religious borrowing from traditional shamanic religions (1991).

This brings one more aspect to the forefront: a connection with nature. McKenna, Stone and other feminist and revivalist theorist focus on a connection with nature as a connection with the spiritual. Dennis Carpenter (1996), Chas Clifton (1997), Evelyn Keller (1997) and Michael McNierney (1999) all write on a necessary reconnection with nature as part of modern Paganism. People have become alienated from the earth primarily through the process of modernity. A number of authors state this as a primary theory. Adrian Ivakhiv (1996), Wade Clark Roof (1998), and Rosemary Rutheford (1979) all place Neopaganism directly opposite modernity in many regards. One major aspect of modernity modern Pagans reject is the compartmentalization of life with religion as only one part. Ivakhic, Roof and Rutheford all emphasize the belief in spiritual through the every day, the physical body, communion with nature, and other natural means.

Bruce LaTour's ethnographic account *We Have Never Been Modern* addresses this idea of compartmentalization and specifically states that we do not separate our lives the way modernity suggests (1993). In this frame of thought Neopaganism acknowledges the inability of the human mind to separate the sacred out of the profane. Roof directly

relates this idea to the rise of what he calls “secularized religion.” What he explains is that modernity sought to remove the spiritual from other aspects of life, however, many people do not want spirituality to be confined to a certain place or time and find new ways to insert the spiritual into every day existence (1998).

The movement away from modernity is neither solely an emphasis on the past nor an emphasis on post-modernity. This can be seen in the idea of *Neopaganism* itself: Paganism is used to denote adherence to archaic, pre-Christian, traditions yet the affixing of neo, or new, to the word shows the complexity of how the religion is situated in the context of today. Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin explain that all tradition is contextual. While tradition may be ideologically based in some former action or practice, the tradition itself as well as its ascribed authenticity or lack thereof is always decided in the present. In this way all tradition is based in the present and in a continual re-creation of itself and no tradition is truly spurious (1984).

While there is a fair amount of theorizing about religion and contextually there is little information about how a religion somewhat based in ancient spirituality, set in the modern practically and intentionally contextualizes itself. There is little discussion of actual practice in the current writings. Through examining actual Pagan rituals I hope to address just how contextualization through the creation of tradition is occurring.

CHAPTER 2: METHODS AND DESIGN

2.1 Project Design and Methods:

I collected the data for this research project at three different sites: Iowa State University, Minneapolis and Saint Paul Minnesota, and the Sacred Harvest Pagan Festival in Minnesota. However, the majority of my arguments are based on information I collected from the later two sites. I conducted my preliminary research over the course of eight months at Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa. I attended weekly meetings with the ISU Pagan Community. This preliminary work was used in a few small class projects but primarily served as an introduction into Pagan religion itself. I came to the first ISUPC (Iowa State University Pagan Community) meetings with practically no understanding of contemporary Pagan religion and its many variants. Over the months I attended meetings, social events and one ritual. I was also fortunate enough to have a number of members share they own stories with me. I conducted one formal life history interview with a woman member of the group who identified as both Pagan and Catholic. The focus of the interview was the way she understood her own spirituality and what had lead her to define it the way she did. I also conducted more informal interviews with two other members of the community and I asked questions on their religious backgrounds and eventual conversions to Paganism.¹

While the ISUPC was an interesting group and proved very helpful in teaching me about eclectic Paganism specifically, the group was in constant flux with new members coming and going, joining and then graduating. These factors made it difficult

¹ Note that not all contemporary Pagans are converts, these two individuals happened to have grown up in Christian households.

for me to focus on my intended research goals. As the group went on hiatus for summer vacation I was put in contact with an anthropologist living in the Twin Cities and examining the methods being utilized for community building and cohesion among the Pagans in the area. This anthropologist put me in contact with a number of individuals and groups that placed me in a certain niche within the larger Pagan community. I quickly learned that while there is an umbrella organization, the Minnesota Church of Wicca, that a majority of the Pagans in the Twin Cities claim to be a part of the community itself is far more like a web of personal connections often with one or two individuals connecting religious, political and social groups together.

I spent just over two months living in St. Paul attending meetings and social gatherings with a variety of different groups. At two of the local occult bookstores I attended book discussions, workshops on Pagan music and literature, as well as classes on a range of ritual practices. I also attended social gatherings with local groups, which were primarily held in local coffee shops. During this time I also conducted six life history interviews with members of the community. My interviewees ranged in age from 20 to 60 though all came from a similar education and middle-class background. I interviewed two men and four women, one of whom is a male to female post-operative transvestite. Typically each of these interviews lasted about four hours and would include two visits either at the individual's home or a local diner or coffee shop. The questions I asked were quite broad and the interviews went in a multitude of different directions. The first questions I asked were about the interviewees family history and religious life growing up. All six of my interviewees turned out to have converted to

Paganism at some stage in their life so I tried to understand what had lead them to that conversion.

From here the interview questions focused on how they understood their spirituality today, where they felt they fit within the Pagan community and in the Twin Cities community in general. I was fortunate in that all six of my interview subjects were quite open with me.²

At the end of my stay in the Twin Cities I had only been able to attend one ritual during the midsummer's eve holiday. The ritual I participated in had been part of the annual Pride Festival in Minneapolis and while it was a good experience I felt that I needed to attend more rituals for my research. This was what led me to my final site.

In August of 2007 I attended the Sacred Harvest Festival in Southeastern Minnesota. I spent a week camping at a park that often hosted musical festivals with approximately 150 other campers. I was invited by an informant from St. Paul to camp at her site with the self proclaimed Wyld Women. During the week of camping I attended between two and four workshops a day and all but one of the evening rituals. Many of the participants at the Sacred Harvest festival were people I had met in the Twin Cities but I also met new people and learned about their lives and spirituality. I did not conduct any structured interviews at the festival though I did some informal interviewing with members of my camp. There were six individuals who I sat down with at some point in the week and asked they questions about their lives and spirituality. I was only ever able

² One of these interviews is only used anecdotally in this work since I learned that she is a somewhat peripheral member of the Pagan community and more active in her own Quaker Church.

to jot down quick notes during the day, finally writing out full accounts of my activities before going to bed each night.

In all contexts I was forthright about why I was present and what I was doing. There were members who asked to be excluded from my research and I have respected their wishes. All names in the paper are pseudonyms to protect the identity of my informants. Appendix A includes profiles on all of the informants mentioned in this paper.

2.2 Anthropological Study and Religious Scholarship:

Even as I initially approached this project it became clear that I was going to be drawing on religious as well as anthropological methods and theoretical frames. Not only would I need to utilize both perspectives of scholarship, but I would also need to find a way to harmoniously marry the two into something true to both fields but also usable for myself, as a researcher. An important place to start for both disciplines of this fundamentally interdisciplinary project was with my own position in relation to my research.

In her ethnographic work on Wiccan ritual Nikki Bado-Fralick examines many of the problematic assumptions modern ethnographers must overcome in ethnographic religious studies starting with the erroneous insider/outsider dichotomy in religious scholarship. The field of anthropology has also been plagued by this same dichotomized thinking but Bado-Fralick insists “while this situation has changed considerably in the field of ethnography, it can be argued that religious studies has lagged behind” (2005:5). Much in the way that “native anthropologists,” or those who wished to engage in ethnographic research on a culture or sub-culture they were considered a member of,

were warned in the 1980s that engaging in native anthropology was tantamount to “academic suicide,” (Weston 1997: 164). In the 1990s Bado-Fralick was advised against being forthcoming about her own religious affiliation, as a practitioner of Wiccan religion: “to avoid appearance of insider pleading or Wiccan apologetics” (2005:5).

Both native anthropologists and religious scholar/practitioners have had much to say on the problems inherent in preference for the outside opinion over the inside one. This preference of the outsider relates directly to a preference for the objective over the subjective and an assumption that the distance, etic perspective is naturally more objective. “Ethnographic distance...” writes Bado-Fralick “...was thought to provide a fortress for scholars, surrounding them with a protective moat of objectivity...” (2005: 4).

I will return to the matter of objectivity and subjectivity, but anthropologists have observed even more fundamental problems with the insider/outsider dichotomy. Kath Weston, a lesbian anthropologist who studied queers, questions the entire notion of “native anthropology” preferring the term “hybrid anthropologist” to describe herself. She explains that while her sexuality gained her the label “insider” or “native” for her research, her sexuality does not wholly define her, anymore, then “anthropologist” wholly defined her. People, Weston insists, are constituted by multiple interrelated identities. These different identities may be given preference in certain situations but a researcher does not cease being one at the emphasis of another (Weston 1997).

Similarly, Bado-Fralick identifies the fallacy implicit in the insider/outsider dichotomy that there are only two perspectives: the *one* of the insider and the *one* of the outsider. The voice of the insider is not monolithic; there are countless insider

perspectives just as there are countless diverse outsider perspectives. There are also plenty of perspectives that lie of the edge of the arbitrary insider/outsider dividing line.

This suggests that good scholarship is not necessarily that which is situated on the outside looking in, but one which acknowledges the true messiness of a researcher's own identity and positioning. It is thus implicit that a researcher let go of the notion of objectivity in qualitative research. If a singular emic and subjective perspective does not exist, neither does a singular etic and objective one. Robin Lakoff writes that the normalized or unmarked perspective has often been labeled objective to mask its true nature, as one (though be it the most powerful one) of many possible perspectives (2000). While Lakoff writes specifically about normalized language, her observations fit with the larger shift in social sciences : i.e., true objectivity does not exist and has instead been a word attached to the normalized "scientific" perspective.

Bado-Fralick uses the metaphor of light and dark to address the fallacy of objectivity and the problem with dichotomous thinking in general. If the goal of research is to gain a fuller understanding of whatever it is one is researching then one perspective will not work. In a dichotomous frame that utilizes binary opposition between, say light and dark, there is no interplay between the two. In complete light one is as blind as in complete dark. If sight is the goal, then it is only in the places between complete light and dark that one can see at all. At different levels of light and dark different aspects of the picture will become cloudier or more clear. No one setting is more correct than the others, but simply draws out different aspects of the picture or setting (2005).

Another important reason anthropologists have moved away from insistence upon "objectivity" in ethnographic research is to acknowledge the troublesome implications

when anthropologists claim ultimate authority over the topic of their writings. As James Clifford explains, “It becomes necessary to conceive of ethnography not as the experience and interpretation of a circumscribed ‘other’ reality, but rather as a constructive negotiation involving at least two, and usually more, conscious, politically significant subjects” (1988:41). Ethnographic expression is also dependant upon the translation of experience into text. Even when anthropologists include multiple perspectives (which this paper does) each voice included is situated within political and social constraints. For this reasons anthropologists have fore fronted their own ethnographic authority as a voice to cut through the contradictions of the many subjectivities (Clifford 1988). In this piece, I have tried to pull out a common thread from the many voices included, yet I have also included voices that stand in direct contrast.

Aside from just including multiple perspectives through quotations or co-authorship, anthropologists have typically considered it imperative to spell out their own position so the reader can understand how said perspective influences the anthropologist’s interpretation. The value placed on reflexivity and the closely related value of relativism has been widely accepted in anthropology. For a number of reasons this acceptance has been more difficult in religious scholarship. Ethnographic research on spirituality includes inherently unobservable events and trends making reflexivity more difficult or at least less obvious. For this reason religious relativism has been erroneously translated to mean methodological atheism.

2.3 Cultural Relativism and Methodological Agnosticism:

What does relativism mean in the study of religion? When E.E. Pritchard studied the Azande in Northern Africa he stated on the question of religious belief “when I am home I believe what Europeans believe, but when I am with the Azande I believe what they believe” (E. E. Pritchard quoted in Singer and Dakowski 1990). While this statement could be interpreted different ways; it at least goes beyond the notion of studying religion as false – an ‘opiate of the masses’ – or with the traditional functionalist or structuralist perspective of religious anthropology.

While most American anthropology has moved beyond the reductionism of functional models for understanding culture in religious studies there is still an overwhelming tendency to first approach the study of religion from a functionalist model. The questions most often posed range from: “Why have these people created these beliefs?” to “What purpose does this belief/ritual/practice serve?” A 2007 introductory textbook for cultural anthropology utilizes the Malinowskian concept of the *anxiety theory of magic* stating that “this principle can be observed in many contexts” (Heider 2007: 335). This book provides no alternate frames for understanding religion in the cultural context and eventually goes on to compare religious totems to American athletic mascots in their unity building function (Heider 2007). Gary Ferraro’s textbook on cultural anthropology takes a similar stance defining religion as, “a set of beliefs in supernatural beings and forces directed at helping people make sense of the world and solve important problems” (2006:349). Certainly textbooks are not going to include the depth on any topic that review of the current literature would. Yet, there are few textbooks that give the same time and depth to the study of religion and relativity as is

given to other topics such as exchange, politics and kinship. The ethnographic literature on religion utilized many different frames for understanding spirituality than textbooks suggest.

There are works that utilize a Durkheimian sort of functionalism portraying religion as unifier, such as Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern's account on the use of sorcery and gossip as social controls throughout the world (2004). There are works that go away from the socio-cultural emphasis often placed on spirituality, such as Susan Greenwoods exploration of the relationship between magical practice and the human mind (2005). Many other works consider religion more holistically in relation with historical situations, constructs of family, language and power such as Lila Abu-Lughod's book on Bedouin ideas of modesty and propriety (1999) or Peter Wogan's examination of literacy and power in Ecuadorian religion (2004).

Religious scholarship itself has often favored a form of study referred to as *methodological atheism* in the study of religion. While this is not the same as functional views of spirituality the two tend to work hand in hand. Religion is thus reduced to a institution created solely by people to fulfill societal functions of some sort. This is basically a rewording of Marxist notions developed in the 19th century that religion is simply "the flower on the chain" or, the more popular, "opiate of the masses" (Morris 2003:32). In my own research I draw from anthropologists who consider religion in a more relative and holistic way. Religion can be functional but it is also intertwined with ideas of symbolic meaning, identity creation and negotiation of power.

It would also be problematic and dishonest for me to claim to my research subjects that I am a Pagan since I never self-identified as one before my research. Is it

possible then, on a personal level, to refrain from claiming a certain faith or spiritual path and yet truly understanding that faith in a way that is both insightful and respectful to the thoughts, feelings and integrity those who do identify as Pagan? While I have already addressed the issues with the insider/outsider dichotomy often ascribed to religious study; the inevitable question I face is “well, what DO you believe?” Cultural relativism would suggest that religious anthropologist approach other religions with a type of ‘methodological agnosticism’ not, as has long been the approach: ‘methodological atheism.’

Methodological agnosticism seems far more akin to cultural relativism than assumed atheism. How does one become an agnostic researcher though? In my case the answer was found within the most traditional of ethnographic methods: participant observation, with a focus on the participation aspect. While interviews and sitting in on group discussions gave me an important foundation for my research; actually participating in everyday Pagan life and Pagan rituals was absolutely necessary to understanding Pagan beliefs and identity. This sort of research requires a constant effort to suspend, as much as possible, preconceived notions and beliefs. I must admit though, that this is impossible to do fully. Relativism of any sort cannot be mistaken for objectivity. Anthropologists, among other academics, consider this to be unattainable (Malkki 1997). My own accounts and knowledge are always situated and my view is never all inclusive. Liisa Malkki suggests that while fieldwork often includes a seemingly unending search for more data, to provide a more complete account on their topic, anthropologists may be better off considering their accounts in the frame of witnessing over reporting (1997).

Malkki goes on to address the ethical considerations anthropologists must make in what information they seek and also what information they share. Anthropologists sometimes get caught up in digging up, not necessarily more, but private or secret information with the false notion that this secret information must be more revealing than readily accessible information (1997). In my own research there were certain rituals and events that I did not attend due to a definite lack of expertise. There are also accounts that my informants or I deem too personal to share. Religious practice requires just that: practice. I would certainly have been ill prepared to enter into some of the more intensive rituals or take a leadership role in any ritual I participated in. Thus there is certainly information that was not and is not available to me. Sure I may have been able to mimic the physical actions but certainly religious participation is not simply physical participation. This means that despite all efforts at relativity, my own position informed my access to information, my experiences and my interpretation.

2.4 Theory and Interpretation:

While the above mentioned framework has aided in my methods for study it still does not fully prepare me to write about what I studied, what I experienced, nor does it inform you in how you should read this. Malkki, in her suggestion that anthropologists view themselves as witnesses over reporters also quotes Mark Pedaltiy who insists that anthropologists must “play with all their cards on the table” both in the field and in their writings (1997: 93). This research was done in partial completion of my master’s degree in Anthropology at Iowa State University. I shared a class, educational and race basis with most of my informants as most of them were white, middle-class with at least a college education. While I do not identify as lesbian or bisexual I am familiar with gay

culture having many gay friends. Along with many of the women I met during my research I do often identify with having a unique gender. Much like my informants, I have always felt that I do not fit certain gender expectation which permeate American culture, especially in the Mid-western region of the country.

My religious background is particularly important to mention for this research. I grew up in a Lutheran home in the Midwest and that will surely show in my writing and interpretation on Paganism. While I still identify myself as a protestant Christian I have studied, read on and experienced many other denominations and religions; I hope that will show as well. I also must admit that my informants quickly became my friends, and while I don't want to paint a picture that is rosier than real life, criticizing any apparent contradictions, which all religions have, was particularly difficult for me. I also am fully aware that many of them will eventually read this work. I feel this knowledge has made me rely more on the words of my informants. This knowledge is coupled with a belief in the necessity of religious coexistence and cross-religious understanding in our global world. Once again, this makes criticism difficult, even while I realize it is quite necessary in some places.

I will not try to convince you that what the Pagans in the Midwest believe is the truth or that it is real. In fact, they themselves would not try to convince you of that since Paganism is not a proselytizing religion. What I instead must insist is that you try to accept is that the experiences of the people portrayed here are real; the meaning is real.

When students in introductory Anthropology courses ask how cultures could believe in Witchcraft or magic as a means of healing I often draw upon a quite old anthropological documentary from Napoleon Chagnon's fieldwork among the

Yanomano. In the 30 or so minute clip, called *Magical Death*, a shaman healer performs a rite of symbolic violence against another tribe on behalf of a new ally. The ritual serves much as a form of exchange in that it solidifies the relationship between the two tribes. The video goes on to depict an involved and painful rite in which the shamans snort epene, a hallucinogenic plant, induce trance and physically exhaust themselves as they spiritually attack children in another village (Asch 1973). What I point out as important in this portrayal is that no one runs over to the other village to check if children are actually dying. No one adds up the yearly death rate and holds that against rumors of spiritual attack from other tribes. Yet, this ritual, this painful and taxing ritual, is an important enough act that it is the requested 'item' of exchange from a new friend, and the religious practitioners involved put their body through an observably taxing ordeal to perform their spirituality. While my students and certainly any outsider would have a hard time accepting that this ritual is working, that it is 'real' or 'true' it is impossible to deny the meaning that it has among these people.

I am content leaving the 'truth' of religion to the theologians. Not to say there is no theology presented here, but it is not the focus. The focus instead is on a religion that is based in individual experience and personal authenticity. The meaning of that in itself and the meaning of the rituals, rites and mundane events that facilitate these experiences are instead what the reader should find themselves questioning and pondering. Truth tends to come down to a matter of perspective. So instead I look at meaning and the implications therein.

CHAPTER 3: RELIGION AS BODILY EXPERIENCE

3.1: Introduction

One of the most fundamental differences I encountered in how I had been raised to understand religiosity and how my Pagan informants understood their own spirituality was the role of the body in religion. Not all religions place mental transcendence and belief at the forefront, but mine certainly did. Pagans in the midwestern region of the United States do find themselves situated within a context that has historically come to view the mind and body as not only separate, but attributes different, and typically unequal, values to the roles of each. I do not want to suggest that Pagan religion is based any more in physicality than other religion. Instead, Pagans recognize the necessity of physicality in informing religion. Western philosophy has largely influenced Western religion and society in general. Utilizing the theories of Merleau-Ponty, as adapted by Elizabeth Grosz and David Abrams, I would like to suggest a new way to study religion. This method is far more useful than older methods for religious study in the situation of Paganism, which is a largely experiential religion.

The assumed separate nature between mind and body has also been highly value laden and is part of a larger bifurcation between the mind, rationality, thought and permanence as opposed to the body, emotionality, feeling and temporality. Pagan theology, as well as some modern methods for religious theory, hold bodily experience as fundamental to understanding religion and personal ideas of spiritual identity. Among my Pagan informants, experience was vital in the creation of self-identity in terms of religion and everyday life. Many of my informants identified their methods and means of

experiencing the world as somehow unique from the experiences of most others. They did not suggest their lives were that different but rather that the way they experienced the events of their lives somehow was. These differences, which they considered marginalized, were so vital to how they understood themselves that they found it necessary to create new frames to understand their own unique experiences.

The relationship between the individual, the universal, and the contextual here becomes key. In this chapter I examine this relationship in the terms of the individual body in the natural world. Nature, as I was told by my informants, is of vital importance in Pagan spirituality. It is impossible to understand the value of the body in religion or the body in nature without first examining what it means to view the religious self as a physical body.

Vignette 3.a:

It was the middle of my week at the Sacred Harvest: Divine Possession festival. Late enough in the week that the exhaustion of camping was starting to hit me, but early enough that I was still pushing on and trying to go to everything that I possibly could. I was accompanied by a few members of the group that I was camping with, the self proclaimed “Wyld Women.” I was actually sporting a sarong that evening, which Kendra had graciously loaned me out of her collection of colorful sarongs. I also had on what Kendra lovingly referred to as a “butt jiggle” also loaned to me by a member of the Wyld Women. The effect was that every step and movement of my hips made the sound of a tambourine or jingling bells. My sarong was too long, actually my legs are too short. This is not an unnatural occurrence for me though it is slightly more troublesome to walk on the edges of one’s skirt than the back of one’s jeans.

The ritual that night was focused at the opposite end of the site from the previous ones, in the “Heart Chakra.” The fire pit was blazing, and the sand around it had been cleaned out and raked flat. After this had been completed elaborate designs were drawn in the sand with different colored spices. The whole stage had been fenced off with only one entrance and one exit, at three-o’clock and 6-o’clock, left unfenced. Kendra, who was also my primary informant and had been my key into the group I was with, had explained to me that the idea of the Rangoli ritual was that the dancing over top of the patterns drawn in the sand were meant to serve as

a prayer that the dancing feet pounded into mother earth. By the end of the night my bare feet were black and red and smelled of cayenne pepper.

The dancing itself took on many of the characteristics of social dancing at the festival; the dancers all moved in a circular motion around the outside of the fire to the sound of beating drums. There were additional aspects to the dancing at the Rangoli ritual as well. Instead of just dancing in a circle everyone danced in a slightly spiraling motion moving inwards around and towards the fire which was blazing quite nicely by the time my friends and I joined. While there was no taboo against talking and joking while in the circle, indeed it was often part of social dancing, very few people did and no one said more than a few words to one another if they spoke at all. For the most part it would have been difficult to talk over the sound of the drumming but more than that the dancers seemed to be drawn inward at times dancing with eyes closed, though I imagine opening them from time to time to not run into other dancing within inches of them as well as so as not to fall into the well tended fire and wind up cooked with all the spices they danced on.

Some dancers approached the innermost spiral of the group and stayed there for the majority of the night while others would spiral in and back outward. As the night wore on the circle came closer and closer to the edge of the fire. I found myself in the smallest part of the circle a number of times in the evening but only fairly early. The inner circle was not as close to the fire pit as they later were but still I found myself close to the fire itself. The wind blew the heat of the fire towards one quadrant of the circle creating a range of space which one danced through while spiraling inward or outward. When I found myself nearest to the fire the change in temperature was quite intense. It was the first time that I truly grasped the idea of experiential ritual and religion: religious ecstasy. I found myself eagerly awaiting the moment I would enter the hottest part of the circle as well as relieved when I moved quickly back out of it and took deep breaths from the relatively cool air. I was unable to stay at the center of the circle for very long since the heat eventually became too much for me as I grew tired from dancing. There were those who stayed near the fire all night even moving closer and closer to the edge of the fire pit so that people seemed almost on top of the fire and partially in the extending flames by the end of the night.

3.2 Embodied Research, Embodied Religion

In every conversation and interview that approached the topic of ritual, my Pagan informants and friends brought up the value of religious experience and ecstatic experience, which I took to mean thoughtful, spiritual experience. I had greatly

misunderstood. My informants were not talking about intellectual religious understanding or insight. They were talking about the bodily sensation of religious ritual. They were talking about the feeling of the air moving around one's body as they dance, the sensation of heat and coolness as one moves around the outside of an open fire, and a myriad of other bodily feelings that are part of ritual.

I hate to admit that I did not grasp this for an embarrassingly long time. Despite my knowledge that in many ways Paganism was going to require me to broaden my view on religion, I was still looking for the thoughtful, insightful religious experience of my youth and young adulthood in the Lutheran Church. That is not to say that all Christian churches forefront religious knowledge and understanding over religious experience but mine certainly had. I knew that religion was not simply a realm of thought. I am familiar with religion as practice, but it has taken extra effort for me to recognize what that means as well as how that may feel.

Western philosophical tradition has drawn a fairly rigid line between bodily experience and religious thought that is not fundamental to religion, but is common in the "religions of the book" that are predominate in the Midwest religion of the United States. This philosophical trend, among other things, divides much of what is part of humanness into sets of related binaries. The mind and body split is the most commonly acknowledged binary; the split is also value laden. The corresponding binaries are also placed within this value system: genuine and spurious, deep and superficial, transcendent and immanent (Grosz, 1996: 3) Religion, being relegated to the valued side of the chart, is thus thought to be under the domain of the mind. Religion in Western tradition is thought to then be defined by dogma. For this reason it is not surprising, though it is

troubling, that Jon P. Bloc (1998) and Eugene Gallagher (1999) among others, cite the defining trait of Neopaganism to be a lack of doctrine which is held to so fervently that it is in and of itself a type of dogma. This often mentioned theory shows just how unlikely it is for any person, scholar or not, to understand the current Pagan movement from a purely belief centered model.

As part of bifurcation between the mind and body, the body becomes a tool to be controlled by the mind. The body is conceptualized to be “a mode of rendering public and communicable what is essentially private.... It is a vehicle for the expression of an otherwise sealed and self-contained psyche” (Grosz 1996: 9). As Elizabeth Grosz suggests, the primacy of thoughts, feelings, and the consciousness are held above the external body, which serves simply as a blank slate for communicating the internal, *true*, self. The body must be pliable for shaping based on notions, ideas, and beliefs. Similarly, it must be transparent to adequately express the internal self (Grosz 1996).

The internal self and belief for a Pagan in the United States is neither transparent nor is it readily definable. Nikki Bado-Fralick suggest that in her own research it is not internal belief systems that Pagans use to define their spirituality or even Paganism, but instead religious practice (2005). Pagan communities, churches, and covens are brought together by shared rituals and religious praxis. Shared experience was similarly emphasized by my own informants, particularly social experiences of misunderstanding or marginality. These shared negative experiences, often precipitated by an unwillingness or inability to communicate proper roles and ideals, were counteracted by shared experiences of spirituality and acceptance.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty takes particular issue with claims of biological science that individuals can somehow exist in the objective. The objective here is a position for study that exists outside of what it studies, culture or the world in general. Despite the claim of rational man to utilize his mind and knowledge over his body and feelings, Merleau-Ponty highlights any human's inability to have any viewpoint outside of their body. It is as our bodies that we perceive the world and make theories about it (Abrams 1996; Grosz 1996). Religious knowledge in Western tradition is similarly situated outside of bodily experience. Divine truth and transcendence are situated somewhere outside or even above the body. The sources of religious study, for Christianity and Judaism religious texts, are often spoken about as gaining their authority through being written based on internal, divine revelation to the author. These works inspired not by bodily experience, but by some transcendent communication from God, are reliable because of their existence outside of the corporeal world, even while they are accounts of human experiences in a very real world.

Much of this contradiction is a product of the primacy given to language, particularly written language, as solid and unchangeable, and thus not subject to the mutability of context and time (Abrams 1996). This view of the solid nature of authoritative text fails to take into account that texts themselves are mutable even when they are not changed. The context of interpretation makes overall religious uniformity over time impossible and realistically fruitless. This is not meant to suggest that all Christian and Jewish (or for that matter Islamic) denominations emphasize consistency of beliefs, but with the prevalence of the "religious right" (and other fundamentalist groups)

a myth of an unchanging religious tradition throughout history has been used to deny other religious groups' beliefs and practices as authentic forms of religion.³

While Contemporary Pagans reach into the past for ideas, the personal world views held by most Pagans are based on life experiences, mystical or otherwise. As Kris, another informant and friend of mine, told me as we sat outside of a local coffee shop: “experience is a pretty good convincer.” This means that for Pagans, life experiences are not only meaningful, but authoritative in how they establish one’s own relationship with the divine. They view the self as an authority because it is through their own experiences that they come to understand the divine.

At one “Book Worm’s” workshop, a monthly discussion on a book of Pagan interest held in a local occult bookstore, a slightly heated discussion on what is primary to Paganism culminated in Phillip’s assertion that Pagans must not “divorce themselves from ecstasy,” to which Xander, another group member and friend of Phillip, forcefully responded: “Pagans must not divorce themselves from critical inquiry.” While the conversation was heated, it was not as argumentative as I first interpreted it. From my early perspective, ecstasy and critical inquiry are relegated to two separate realms, but this is not necessary unless one fully accepts dualism of mind and body. I, at this point in time, was not “thinking Pagan,” a phrase which Phillip often used.

In reality, critical inquiry is never truly separate from the body. Merleau-Ponty explains that as humans we must always consider our perspectives as subjects “being-to-the-world.” It is only through our perceptions of the world that we come to think about,

³ I use the word “authentic” here, not because it is a particularly clarifying word in this context but because it was a word that was often used, defined and adapted within the Pagan community. I will return to this later.

theorize on and understand the world. One can never stand outside of the body for a truly objective view. It is because of the body that there are objects for me to examine. The mind is not simply a “captain of a ship.” Merleau-Ponty insists that the idea that the mind is separate from and controls the body is what ultimately leads to solipsism (Grosz 1995).

Similarly, the act of communicating with the world is also not a matter of the mind overcoming the shortcomings of the body. Language itself is often considered a product primarily of the mind. One of Saussure’s earliest points about language is that it is arbitrary. There is no intrinsic link between the sounds of a word and the thing that word comes to signify. The signifier (or word in this case) is only linked to the signified (the thing it represents) through prior knowledge. This does not change the fact that communication itself is bodily. When children learn to talk they do so first by making sounds, learning what these sounds feel like in their mouths. This physical association is no less important than the auditory one as words refined and personal meanings become attached to the taste or feeling of each word. “We thus learn our native language not mentally but bodily” (Abrams 1996:75).

To understand the body as significant in research as well as religion we must consider the body in different ways than Western philosophy has previously allowed. Experience is not to be explained away as being opposed to or less important than rational thought, as the binary discussed above suggests. Nothing happens only to the mind or only to the body. As Grosz states. “...experience is always necessarily embodied, corporeally constituted, located in and as the subject’s incarnation. Experience can only be understood between the mind and body – or across them – in

their lived conjunction” (Grosz 1996:95). In this paper I utilize Grosz’s concept of the corporeal self and any experience as fundamentally physical *and* mental.

3.3 Experiencing the World Differently:

Another important aspect of this value laden dualism is a desire to universalize the natural body so that it might be the mind instead that defines difference. The body is viewed as a blank canvas upon which the mind might assert itself. Experiences are thus ultimately universal, and it is only our interpretations of them that vary. This universal body is a very specific body, and the universal experiences are specific to this body. Any other body or experience is ultimately defined by its deviance from the universal: white, male, young, middle-class, heterosexual bodies (Grosz 1996). It is this view that is called the “objective,” suggesting that some view is located outside of the body and thus holds some “truth” that is unknowable to other bodies. This ‘objective’ experience and viewpoint is given unquestioned authority, and voices of other marked bodies are said to be unable to truly understand their experience because of their subjectivities.

The existence of objecting voices shows that there are other equally true frames for human experiences. Grosz discusses this as “text on the body” in the way that normalized notions are taught and asserted onto the mind and body. Yet the flesh of the body is resilient and there are “limits imposed by the inability of particular texts or particular language to say or articulate everything” (1996: 118). These limits are identified by many of my informants such as Rick, a man in his late 20s who identifies today as a solitary Pagan practitioner. Rick had a fairly strict Christian upbringing, but beginning at an early age, he had many experiences of a supernatural nature that he came to find were considered abnormal. While his family first attributed his insistence that his

experiences were real to childhood imagination, over time concern grew within his family and his church until as a teenager he was forcibly made to take part in an exorcism. I use this as an example of physical text being written on the body to somehow change or redirect a mind that cannot understand its own experiences.

Rick's experience with the Christian church is far more extreme than the experiences relayed to me by most of my informants. His story portrays, in a readily discernable way, how individual experiences that don't meet the expected or normalized frame are interpreted for the body in question, instead of by it. Rick never did and still does not believe he was possessed but instead identifies a basic lack within his family's church to allow for different experiences, mundane or supernatural. His interpretations were viewed as incorrect even though he was the one with the actual knowledge of the experiences. The message given to Rick in this instance is that if the way one perceives the world does not fit with normalized notions, then the body must be explained away as a faulty means for understanding.

In this situation many individuals, depending on their investment in the social network they are apart of, may very well allow their bodies to be explained away. They may come to allow texts they did not perhaps choose, to be written. For Rick, his body may have been forcibly marked, lest anyone think exorcism is not an act of bodily (though not just) alteration, but the marking did not take. He, like many of my informants, sought out a place where his own experiences could be viewed as revealing of truth instead of obscuring of it.

Susan, an elder in the Pagan community, always saw – or perhaps sensed – the world differently than those around her. As a healer within her community she now can

identify that her experience was different, but for a long time she thought that sensing other people's illnesses and pain was quite normal. She describes a sensitivity to "shifts in energy" in a very tactile way and for this reason her ways of both communicating with and understanding others are somewhat different. Susan also experienced much of the mundane world differently, often speaking of sights and sounds in a very tactile way.

David Abrams identifies the blending of the senses, or synaesthesia, as a fairly common human attribute. While it is often distinguished as pathology, the average speaker of the English language understands references to "warm" and "cool" colors, "dark" sounds and "loud" clothing (1996). Susan's insistence that she felt what other people might say they heard or saw or perhaps sensed, was certainly not an ailment for her, but instead provided her with insight in certain situations. The blending of sensory perception within common language and also for those who more easily do so, blatantly contradicts the notions of an objective point of view, or even a more correct point of view.

"Music is not in visible space, but it besieges, undermines and displaces that space. The two spaces are distinguishable only against the background of a common world and can compete with each other only because they both lay claim to total being. The sight of sounds and the hearing of colors comes about in the same way as the unity of the gaze through two eyes: in so far as my body is not a collection of adjacent organs, but a synergic system, all the functions of which are exercised and linked together in the general action of being in the world, in so far as it is the congealed face of existence..." (Merleau-Ponty in Grosz 1996:99).

For Kris, another elder in the local Pagan community, it is her life experiences which led her to gender-reassignment surgery, that have defined her unique role most readily. She often used the word marginalized to explain much of her life story. Her gender transitioning also occurred while her wife battled chronic illness. Separated from the community by different interests, different views on gender, continued depression and

dedication to an ailing spouse, Kris now sees the value of her time as an outsider. She explains that it has allowed her to articulate questions and often step in to translate between people who are misunderstanding one another. As she explained it:

If there is a specialized place for people like me, and by ‘like me’ I mean pretty specifically: me, I think it’s to think about stuff and communicate to the other people... think about what people are saying; the implications of what people are doing in their rituals.

She specifies on her role in communication and translation:

People who have been marginalized are surprisingly good at articulating some of those questions.

Kris identified her differences as valuable. Helen Berger and Douglas Ezzy, in their book on the phenomena of teenage conversion to Paganism, see a similar viewpoint. Among the young converts they interviewed, most see themselves as different and have no wish to change that. They embrace their differences at an age when most kids are trying to blend in:

Not all young people who think of themselves as different become Witches, but those who do become Witches often see themselves as different. Furthermore, and possibly more importantly, on the whole they like the idea of being different... The religion, among other things, provides a venue in which being different is acceptable and even seen as positive (2007: 81).

This value in difference is not just prevalent in members’ life stories, but is also discernable within rituals themselves. At the Sacred Harvest festival, one of the nightly rituals, called the “Pathway to Oneness” ritual, was focused around the idea of multiple unique people becoming one community.

Vignette 3.b:

The ritual began early in the evening, the sun still in the sky. I watched as each person was ushered through a gateway draped with silver fabric like curtains. As I took my turn through the gateway I was greeted by a woman who passed a smoldering bundle of incense in front of me, I inhaled the smoke which was

reminiscent of patchouli, but I have never been good identifying smells. As I did this she said “we each have within us, the spark of life.” As I moved on towards the pathway which curved into and around the wooded area surrounding the camp, I came to the next station. Aaron was standing there in his full ritual regalia and he stamped a crescent moon onto my forehead as he said “you are worthy” before ushering me into the woods. I was grateful that no one was watching since the moment had overwhelmed me into tears.

There were other people stationed at certain spots along the path giving certain affirmations and mantras, though I was drawn mostly inward as I imagined the others in front and behind me were. The walk through on the winding path was slow and while the path was fairly short time seemed to move slower yet. The mood changed as I emerged from the woods was lead by chalk lines on the ground in a circle that slowly spiraled in towards the center of the clearing.

The small choir situated outside of the spiral chanted “one... one... one...” again and again hanging on to the “n” of each “one” to mimic the sound of ringing bells. As this continued, voices from within the still slowly spiraling line of people would ring out lines from a poem which I latter learned is an old Celtic poem, The Song of Amergin:

“I am a stag of seven tines.
 I am the flood on the plain.
 I am the roar of the ocean.
 I am a hawk on a cliff.
 I am a tear the sun lets fall.
 I am a spear that roars for blood.
 I am the salmon of wisdom.
 I am a ruthless boar.
 I am a hill where the poet walks.
 I am the grave of every vain hope.
 I am a wave of the sea.
 Who but I knows the ages of the moon?
 Who but I knows the place where the sun crouches?”

The ringing of the choir grew louder as everyone filed through the spiral. As the first participants in line reached the center of the circle one of the guides finished the chant saying:

“The Goddess is in all of us”
 At that we were led back out as the chorus began a new song:
 “We are walking in the light now
 Where harmony resides
 Weaving patterns with our love now
 Where peace and balance abide”

We were out of the spiral to a fountain shaped like a Goddess from which we were each to drink; one act to be completed by all to solidify the unification of one group of many different people. We were each to use the cup-shaped beads on the necklaces we had received the night before to catch and drink the water. Unfortunately I realized after filling my bead with water that my necklace was tied too tightly around my neck to reach my mouth, so I was only able to spill water down my chin. I had to laugh to myself even if I was in the midst of this solemn occasion.

The chorus continued as other voices began to join in:

“We are one... one heart beating

We are one... we sing

We are one... Together repeating

Oh, it's now we are one

Oh, it's now we are one”

The song of Amergin is set to recognize the 13 common-law months of the Celtic calendar year, though I did not know this at the time (Graves 1957). Each line of the poem was recited by a member of the still slowly moving spiral all set over the ringing of the choir: “one... one... one...” With each line representing such variation in nature and recited by various people from different places within the spiral, it seemed to be a continuation of the earlier affirmations in the wooded maze the: “you are worthy” or “we each contain the spark of life.” I specifically recall the booming voice shouting “I am the spear that roars for blood” followed by the softer yet firm assertion “I am the salmon of wisdom.” The two seemed so distant from one another yet both equally important.

The Oneness ritual exemplifies many of the aspects of respect for individuality and tolerance for difference within pagan thought. Yet it is vital to note that there are certainly also instances of exclusion. I previously mentioned the use of the word “authenticity” by Pagans within their own discussions. While the word takes on a slightly different meaning in the context of Pagan conversation, there is ultimately a strong implication that the discussion of an experience as authentic assumes inauthentic

experiences exist as well. While Pagans identify their experiences as devalued, the persistence of the term “authentic” to describe some experience devalues others’ experiences. those experiences, names or unmaned, which are set opposed to authentic experiences are thus deemed spurious.

3.4 The Body in Nature:

The tricky relationship with human experience is how universal it is and yet how specific it is to each individual. When I asked Phillip whether or not Paganism was a modern religion he immediately responded “definitely, *post*-modern even (his emphasis).” Then he paused and added that there is also something universal and timeless in the relationship Paganism has with nature. He described Paganism as the spirituality that people come up with when they are simply placed on the earth and discover a relationship with it. David Abrams suggests that an understanding of religion as experiential necessitates that it must be situated within nature. He explains, within his own ethnographic research, that it is within nature that human beings tend to become most aware of their bodily perceptions and sensations. We may constantly be experiencing the world sensuously, yet when we are deeply imbedded within the routines of life and familiar with the items we interact with, it is easy to forget the continued presence of our very senses in relating with the world. He explains that we only tend to notice our ever present bodily experiences when they fall outside of our expectations (1996).

Most, if not all of my informants identified having a relationship with nature as a vital aspect of their spirituality. Part of Abram’s insistence upon connecting with nature feeds directly back into learning to accept the experiences of others. Knowledge or

realization of one's place within nature, as a part of and perceiver of the world, forces one back into their body. For Abrams then, being within nature is inherently about accepting one's place as a part of nature. Social and ecological hierarchies are wrecked by a position that is situated within, and not above, the natural world (1996).

One of my most profound experiences at the Sacred Harvest Festival occurred on the second to last night. After the ritual for the evening had ended, the normal dancing that followed was postponed by a great thunderhead looming in the distance. In small pockets people gathered on the Western side of the camp watching the wall of clouds light up the night sky. Kendra, standing just behind my right shoulder, began singing a haunting melody as we watched the sky with everyone else. The breeze was not cold, but refreshingly cool after the warm day. I was wearing a sarong in which I felt the air, particularly that breeze, in a wholly different way than normal. Perhaps it was just different in that I actually noticed it.

A fellow camper reported that there was an equally large thunderhead on the East side of the camp and to the North, just as dark. We were surrounded by this storm lighting up the sky. Kendra reached the chorus of her song: "Sōwulō" she repeated in long draw out notes. She had sung this song before around the camp fire at night. The word comes from the runic alphabet, the letter or word meaning light or fire, particularly a light or self truth that remain partially hidden by the dark. Before too long we were ushered back to our tents to wait out the storm.

Abrams suggest that an often overlooked role of religion and particularly religious leaders in non-Western societies is how they negotiate not only relationships between individuals through shamanic healing or ritual, but between the social world and the

natural world. Resolving social problems or physical ailments may only displace the larger problem if it is a manifestation of a lack of balance between the social and ecological worlds. Like the boundaries between mind and body break down, so does the boundary between society and ecology (1996).

I have always loved storms; this storm was different but no exception. After returning to the campsite I curled up in my tiny tent which was only large enough for me to lie across in the very center. I heard the wind in a way that one simply does not inside a building. In the dark I could see the shadows of the trees overhead so faintly that it was not so much like sight but as if I could feel the leaves brush up against me. Suddenly there was pounding on all sides of the tent. It took me a moment to realize that a sudden burst of wind had shaken free all the loose acorns on the tree above me. Mixed in, the soft tapping of rain began. In the dark I was blind, noticing the sound and smell of a rain storm in a way I imagine I haven't since being caught outside in one.

Abrams identifies our believed separateness from nature as a part of, if not the defining factor of modernity. Phillip made a similar assertion when he qualified his statement that Paganism was modern, with the necessity within his own spirituality of communing with nature. He particularly mused about society's basic disconnect with nature as their source of food. All food must ultimately come from nature, yet we rarely see just where our food does come from.

Susan suggested a similar necessity for Pagans to reconnect with the natural world. When I shared with her my own tendencies towards anxiety, (imagine that a stressed academic!) she shared with me a visualization meditation based around visualizing one's self as "the earth tree." The earth tree is a popular artistic depiction also

called the Celtic tree of life which portrays a tree with roots reaching upwards, branches reaching downward connecting along the sides to form a full circle. Susan told me to imagine my branches reaching sky wards and my roots stretching down into the earth. Meditation, particularly that set in nature or about nature, dissolves the boundaries created between humans and the rest of nature as minds instead bodies in the world.

Merleau-Ponty's theories on embodiment include a particularly poignant idea on the reversibility of sensations. One cannot touch another object without also being touched by that object. In the case of self touch, one cannot touch their own hand and truly distinguish the feeling of one hand being touched from that of the other touching (McLane 1996; Grosz 1996; Abrams 1996). Abrams similarly asserts that we can never separate the embodied sensation of touching an object from that of being touched by an object. In the case of the everyday, manmade world, the touch is barely noticed or registered, yet the feelings of touching and being touched by nature are never entirely familiar. This means that connection with nature is also a connection with one's own embodiment (1996).

The Oneness ritual, outlined above, was meant to provide both acceptance and group unity at the Sacred Harvest festival. The first portion of the ritual was set in a labyrinth of trees and bushes for a vital reason. The last action performed upon each individual before entering the wooded maze was a christening with a crescent moon as one of the leaders declared the individual worthy. For any individual who has often felt an outcast in society the proclamation of worth, immediately followed by admittance into the natural environment and symbolically one's own self and then the ritual space and community is a powerful one. Even as an outsider in this very inclusive community, and

as a non-Pagan there were times when I felt my outsider status, I was overcome with tears (although anyone who knows me will report that crying is not all that uncommon for me).

The overlaying of diverse parts of nature in the oneness chant is also revealing of the diversity of nature and the acceptance within nature of many diverse elements and beings. The natural world is a place which cultivates diversity. Different shapes, colors, types and orientations of bodies are not only okay, but necessary for the balance of the environment. It is also fitting for Pagans to identify with the natural world for the simple fact that the communities that they feel have alienated them have done the same to the very ecological systems that they live in.

Abrams examines a number of reasons that religion, particularly book based religions, have tended to disassociate with nature. One of his suggestions is that the God of the Old Testament is a God that is often pitted against nature or as able to overcome the natural world. Human beings are placed above other animals in Genesis and told to “be fruitful and multiply,” stretching out across the expanse of the earth. There are, of course, many biblical passages that describe a God within nature such as God’s response to Job out of the whirlwind or the importance of “air” or “breath” in the creation story (Abrams 1996)

The Gods and Goddesses of Pagan tradition are located within nature itself and often contextualized based on the characteristics of a particular area. As Kris explained to me, the Goddess of rains is not going to be viewed the same in a pleasant river valley as compared to a harsh mountain climate. “We have to deal with the Goddess locally” she adds “but we can deal with the Goddess locally.” Scholar Judy Harrow tells a story

which Kris drew upon. Harrow was meeting with a local coven in Michigan; they met on the shoreline to perform a ritual. They began as many rituals do: after casting a circle the participants faced each of the cardinal directions calling each of the four elements: earth, air, fire and water. As they faced East, looking out across Lake Michigan, they called air. “Okay, in Minnesota they can go with whatever direction they want – but when you’re that close to water...” She trailed off restating that adjusting a ritual to fit the local is not only acceptable but vital. “That’s the experiential” she added:

That’s another piece that needs to happen... okay, look at the book and get an idea. Then close the book and *go out and meet nature*... that’s where you’re gonna find out where your Gods are... they’ll let you know. You can only have local interactions because you can only *be* local. We are not transcendent beings! [her emphasis]

The value placed on the natural world also corresponds to a value for preserving nature. Kris’ insistence that “we are imbedded in nature” means that humans are dependant upon nature and thus must consider their impact on nature. This was a widely shared value among most, if not all, of the Pagans I met. At the week long Sacred Harvest Festival all the campers consistently reminded one another to pick up after themselves. One of the festival coordinators, Aaron, took pride in having been told by the owner of the park that the Sacred Harvest group is the only group all year that leaves the park cleaner than it was when they came.

Phillip explains that “experiences with the natural world are profoundly important and are being rediscovered and looked into.” As another example of contextualizing ritual, Phillip explains “I think to stand in a cornfield in Wisconsin and call the Goddess Isis is...” he pauses “I praise the love and I praise the effort that goes into it, but I think they’re trying to hard.” As Phillip puts it, in the Pagan quest for “authenticity”

“reconstructing ancient rituals is interesting but is a dead end.” And Isis, the Egyptian Goddess associated primarily with the Egyptian cosmos and the Nile, may be ill fit for Wisconsin cornfields.

Other forms of experience and context are vital in belief and ritual. Kris and Xander have been putting much time and effort into their own take on Pagan systems of belief. They were inspired into action over 20 years ago in what both of them call “the year the God died thrice.”

Pagan holidays are typically focused not only around the changing of the seasons, but the changing of the Goddess and God. The three-fold Goddess is an important aspect of Pagan beliefs that expands notions of feminist spirituality (more on this later). The Goddess is viewed throughout the year as maiden, mother and crone. Similarly the God is affiliated with trickster, lord and father and typically dies and is reborn in the course of a year. This pattern also fits with the phases of the sun: rising, mid-day, and setting; and the moon: waxing, full, and waning.

Xander and Kris were members of a group made up of three other covens who worshipped together on the major holidays. It just so happened that each coven had a slightly different timeline for the yearly death and rebirth of the God. Each celebration was organized by one of the three covens and in this particular year they came up in the less than ideal sequence such that the God died at Lamas (in early summer), Mid-Summer’s Eve, and Samheime (in the fall). The experience did not sit well with either of them and as Kris said “the paradigm of the dying God and undying Goddess did not work anymore (for her).”

As they looked to nature and personal experience to find something that resonated more; they realized that there are 8 pagan holidays and 4 phases in the lunar cycle: which includes not only waxing, waning and full, but also the absent moon. Similarly, there is a period in the sun cycle where the sun is absent. A little over a year after the “God died thrice” they had developed a system based around a four-fold Goddess and four-fold God and the balance between them throughout the seasons. Xander explains that “none of them ever really go away. They just have more influence at their time of the year.”

Kris explains that this was what “rang true” for them and additionally jokes “being good polytheists we didn’t care what other people thought.” Despite it being a joke it is reflective of certain implicit values within Paganism. If the self and the experiences of the self hold spiritual authority, than other’s experiences are also authoritative in their faith. Once again, tolerance is a necessary value even while Pagans, like most people of other faiths, tend to surround themselves with like minded people. While Susan recalled to me that she was aware of a few people who had cloistered themselves fairly tightly within the Pagan community, the majority of the people I met were taking these values of tolerance, acceptance and respect and applying them into their everyday lives. The tolerance of beliefs resonates in their tolerance of different viewpoints and lifestyles and an understanding of some universal human connection even between people with great differences.

Phillip tries to explain the necessity that people have to be with like-minded individuals and at the same time the importance of universal connections between all peoples. While he realizes that people thrive spiritually in cohesive groups, he worries about developing a Pagan tendency of, “before [doing] anything sacred, drawing circles

around us, which shut-out the rest of the world, and standing there with our backs to the rest of the world. [pause] That's also a mistake.”

3.5 Descriptions and Infinite Digression:

Mark, another community elder in the Twin Cities, was in the process of writing his own article for electronic publication on Pagan identity. In the course of one of our discussions he explained to me that he was not attempting to “define” what it means to be Pagan. Considering the experiential basis of Paganism, it would be difficult if not impossible to define. As he explained, definitions are by nature limiting. I was struck by that sentiment as I recalled reading Paganism defined as: a nature religion, a folk religion, or ethnic religion; or as any religions existing outside of the Abrahamic tradition (Christianity, Islam and Judaism). More narrow definitions exclude any of the “world religions:” Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Shintoism and other “civil religions”. Those definitions certainly can tell you what Pagans are not, but little else.

Mark instead suggested that descriptions were far more accurate and far more useful. I cannot define a Pagan because their beliefs are as limitless are their possible experiences. I can describe the people I met, the rituals I was a part of and the discussions they were constantly having. “[It] is normative rather than definitive,” Mark explained to me. It is also part of an internal conversation among Pagans themselves, and also between Pagan groups and the communities they live in.

As I looked at how to describe the relationship between individual and universal experience; I found myself in what the Mentoring Elders’ group had called “infinite digression.” Phillip explains that every time he or the group we were in at the time finds a way to look at the heart of the issue or finds some answer to what Paganism is, they

must step back, move to the side and come at the same thing from a different angle, a different perspective. As Kris explained it:

So you back away from a subject then you take another run at it. Then you go over this way then you come back over there, and then you come down through the chimney, through the windows. Eventually you trample the subject to death, but in the process you've shown that there are so many connections.

This analogy came to represent my understanding of the relationship between the universal, shared experience and the personal, unique one. If some intangible Pagan identity exists, if some ecstatic experience exists that is decidedly Pagan, then maybe everyone is looking at the same thing, maybe everyone is going through the same experience; but we are all seeing it from our own unique angle. Thus the more angles we view it from, the closer we are to a complete picture. As such, I will examine all of the aforementioned topics again in the following chapters, only from different angles and with different emphases.

CHAPTER 4: LANGUAGE USE AND THE MEDIATION OF EXPERIENCE

4.1 Introduction:

The realm of theology, for many Pagans, exists in the translation of religious experience into language. It is only through discussion that critical inquiry becomes possible. This discussion is in all actuality a part of ritual itself though it is typically not noted as such. Bado-Fralick (2005), explains the importance of asking questions about how everyone experienced the Wiccan initiation ritual which she participated in. This often leads to stories about rituals past: examination of what has worked and what has not. Bado-Fralick explains that this immediate feedback forces all involved in the rite to begin the important process of reflection immediately. This process of reflection is vital and is what makes experiential religion possible.

In my own research, specifically the rituals I participated in at the Sacred Harvest Festival, I also encountered practices of critical examination. This process, for me, arose around the camp fire with other participants. In many ways this discussion was very practical; people would share with one another what they liked and what they did not like, what moved them spiritually and what did not. Members of Harmony Tribe (the group that organized the festival) would often wander into the discussion the evening after the ritual occurred or perhaps ask the next morning and ask what people thought. This discussion thus serves practical purposes of gaining feedback, criticism and suggestions for future rituals.

This was not the sole purpose of these types of conversations though. As participants took themselves back to the more meaningful moments of the night's ritual,

the spiritual importance of that moment was not just remembered but relived. Participants would pause as they sought the right words to adequately explain their experience. At times, those words simply did not come and explanations of the ritual experiences would be filled with sighs or gasps in lieu of words. As my informant Kris reported to me in a fairly common sentiment: “Sometimes the words won’t come; sometimes the words aren’t there.”

Like Kris, the majority of people I interviewed or spoke with, identified developing a language for her spiritual discussion to be a key component of cultivating a personal Pagan spirituality. It does, on the surface, appear contradictory that internal inquiry could be so fundamental in a somewhat mystical form of spirituality with an experiential base. The two are actually fundamental to one another, and the negotiation between experience and inquiry can only occur through language.

This chapter focuses on the inadequacies identified by my informants in normalized religious language and how they are utilizing adaptation and appropriation of language to overcome the limiting linguistic frames they are using to explain their experiences. I will first examine the link between religious experience and discussion and how linguists have discussed the negotiation of experience through language. Much of this mediation of experience is based in normalized linguistic frame, specifically normative religious language. Contemporary Pagans are in the midst of creating new frames of language to explain different theological ideas. The primary tools used are adaptation of language and appropriation from other cultures and religious traditions. I will examine how these tools are used to negotiate both theological beliefs and identity among Pagans.

4.2 Linguistic Theory and the Negotiation of Experience:

I mentioned in Chapter One a heated conversation in which Phillip stated that Pagans must not “divorce themselves from [spiritual] ecstasy” and Xander responded that Pagans must not “divorce themselves from critical inquiry.” I initially mistook the statements as contradictory, and Richard and Xander, being good friends who often have friendly arguments, stated these two ideas in a somewhat heated manor. As the conversation wove around these and other related topics we eventually returned to the relationship between ecstasy and thoughtful inquiry. It became readily clear that the two were not contradictory.

My assumptions that physical ecstasy and mental inquiry were necessarily opposed to one another come out of the philosophical dualism prevalent in Western thought. Richard, during this and other gatherings, expressed a need to move away from the dualistic thinking that initially tripped up my thinking. The Cartesian dualism between mind and body would make Richard and Xander’s statements incompatible. Pagan theology (if there is a unified Pagan theology that is) rejects this type of dualism and instead suggests that the two are different sides of the same coin. Much in the way that discussion of ritual is actually an important part of the ritual, inquiry into spiritual experience is an important part of that experience. Furthermore, meaningful personal experiences become the basis for inquiry.

The value of discussion after rituals on the topic ritual meaning and experience makes speech acts in this context at Pagan festivals decidedly performative, as A.L.

Austin suggests most, if not all speech is (1962). J. Searle adds to this the importance of intentionality within a context in which the speaker expects their intentions to be perceived based on shared understanding (1965). Thus within the context of the Pagan festival speech becomes intentionally performative in the creation of cohesive understanding of religious experience and the negotiation of identity. As previously mentioned, this interplay between individual experience and shared understanding occurs through language.

Linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson develop a similar relationship between language and experience in their book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). They suggest that “our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” and thus is intrinsically linked to literal action (1980: 3). Lakoff and Johnson tend to fall on the more linguistically deterministic side of the line, while I tend to agree with Xander’s statement that “the game isn’t always limited by the rules” (the irony of using a metaphor to disagree with Lakoff and Johnson is not lost on me).

I would thus like to outline my own adapted theory from Lakoff and Johnson. An important aspect about metaphorical language is its twofold nature of representation. To use a metaphor, or to use one object to describe or explain another object is to forefront certain aspects of the reference object. To talk about “falling in love” is to explain the process of going from a state of “not in love” to one of being “in love” similar to the experience of losing out to gravity. It is sudden and is for the most part, out of one’s control. To forefront one aspect of the reference object is to hide or minimize all other aspects. “Falling in love” is an action that involves another person, not the ground and it

certainly does not involve gravity. Lakoff and Johnson argue that the metaphors we use to talk about experiences directly impact what we actually experience. If one expects to go from a state of not being “in love” to being “in love” as “falling” then they will experience it as sudden and out of their own control as the metaphor suggests.

It is at this final point that I would include my own modification. When one experiences something and finds that the current metaphor or language simply does not fit, then he or she must create a new linguistic frame (be it another metaphor or something else) or adjust their understanding of the old frame to fit the experience. The phrase “falling in love” is such a common metaphor that even those who experience this process as something other than falling - i.e. as a slow process or a personal decision – still use the metaphor but have internally adjusted what the work “falling” in this context means to them. Thus “the game isn’t limited by the rules.” Language does not wholly dictate experience but does influence how one relates and represents their own experiences to the world.

Deborah Cameron, another linguist, draws upon the theories of Lakoff and Johnson, specifically in regards to gender and sexuality (2006). Cameron adds the dimension of power to the situation by questioning who makes the normalized metaphors that become part and parcel in American English. Within the Pagan understanding, if all people have unique and individualized experiences then why are some peoples’ linguistic frames for these experiences normalized while others are marginalized? Cameron insists that normalized metaphorical language is normalized because it is the language of those in power, or one could say represents the experience of those in power. Robin Lakoff calls these normalized modes of talking along with normalized modes of being as

exnominated (2000). The actions and language of the exnominated class, the class which is the majority in name though not in numbers, are considered to be status quo, the assumed, the linguistically unmarked (see Jakobsen and Pomorska 1983).

In my own and other anthropologists' research on the Pagan movement in America and other English speaking countries, there is a general consensus among self-declared Pagans that they are not part of the exnominated. Although demographically speaking, Pagans are typically white and middle to upper class, which is exnominated. As previously addressed, a key aspect of conversion for most Pagans is an early self-identification as fundamentally different, in some way, from most people in their larger culture.

Equally important, individuals feel that their unique experiences, while they may be socially marked, are in fact something to be validated and celebrated. It is not enough to say that their alternate or marked experiences led them to Paganism, but they also refuse to make their experiences fit into normalized frames, linguistic or otherwise. When Kris said to me "sometimes the words aren't there" she was not admitting defeat at the inadequacies of language to explain her own experiences; but was instead expressing why she and others in the Pagan community are attempting to appropriate, adopt and invent their own form of Pagan-Speak.

It would be difficult to understand how it is that Pagans, at least in the Twin Cities, are forming a new and unique identity for themselves without understanding how it is that they are forming their own unique form of language. In many ways the creation of new uses for old words and entire new lexicons works to legitimize those aspects of their lives that have been seen as deviant or alternative.

4.3 Language and Theology:

Theological language among contemporary Pagans is full of adapted, invented and appropriated language because normalized theological language in the United States is lacking for their purposes. It became quickly apparent that one primary reason Paganism is fairly misunderstood by the average person in the United States is a lack of suitable language to express key theological points.

“English,” explains Phillip, “is the sacred language of the Witches.” While this chapter examines the issues that contemporary Pagans face in creating an identity not readily available in the normalized language of religion and theology, they are still utilizing English to negotiate identity. Linguist V. Voloshinov explains that while language is internalized this does not mean that linguistic systems are beyond creative use or change (1927). This means that a single language, instead of determining a shared culture or conceptual system, can cultivate multiple social groups with diverse beliefs and practices. Through the adaptation of language as well as the appropriation of other forms of language the Pagan community is creating their own conceptual system with a language that has not historically been particularly useful for them.

Considerable research has gone into the ethics of religious appropriation – especially in the case of native North American religion (see Hart 1995; Pike 2001). However, the most prominent form of cross-cultural appropriation that I witnessed was that of theological language. The meetings and workshops I attended were full of words from Eastern religious traditions, Native Indian religion, old Celtic and Druid faiths,

Indigenous African religion as well as fantasy and science fiction subcultures in the United States.

A sentiment that was often expressed by many of my Pagan informants within discussions on theology was the difficulty of explaining their religion, spirituality and beliefs in what they consider to be a primarily monotheistic linguistic frame. Paganism is not monotheistic, yet it is not simply polytheistic. In the most simple way, polytheism is set to mean not “many Gods” but the opposite of “one God.” The problem here is that “one God,” i.e. monotheism, does not have a single, all encompassing opposite.

Any responsible anthropologist would find this frame for religious understanding inherently ethnocentric. In this case ethnocentrism is also imbedded in the very language being used by Pagans to more fully express themselves. For this reason, along with expressing the difficulty of using monotheistic language to talk about their beliefs, many of my informants expressed a difficulty in simply “thinking Pagan.” As community elder, Phillip, said to me “[we are] still learning how to do this; still learning how to think Pagan. I keep discovering things that once somebody has articulated them seem entirely obvious.” Phillip went on to explain that unlearning these long ingrained conceptions imbedded in normalized language takes conscious effort and constant self-examination. He has been practicing his faith for over 40 years and quickly admits to me that he still has trouble “thinking Pagan.” Kris uses the same phrase about learning to “think Pagan,” agreeing with Phillip’s insistence that it takes a long time to learn to do.

This process of “thinking Pagan” is first and foremost dependant upon a language which adequately expresses the theological ideas and ideology of Paganism (if there is a unified ideology). There are a number of terms specific to Paganism through adoption,

invention or appropriation. One might ask why this is even important but as Xander expressed, many theologians within Paganism find themselves in cross-religious dialogue and are at a loss to explain themselves. This is not because the ideas are not there but because there are trapped within a monotheistic, often Protestant Christian, theological system.

In the middle of a “Book Worms” meeting Xander exclaimed to everyone in the room “I’m a pan-atheist: I don’t believe in all Gods.” This statement was intended as a joke, but at the time the joke was lost on me. I later came to understand that the term *pantheistic* had a very unique definition within the community. Pantheism is historically associated with the Romans and takes on a range of definitions: from any religion including multiple pantheons, to a political tolerance of multiple religions. The definition utilized among the Pagans in the Twin Cities is that pantheism is a system of religious belief in which one’s beliefs leave room for a wide variety of world-views and belief systems. In other words, one’s personal beliefs do not exclude another’s seemingly contradictory beliefs.

Within this understanding of the word *pantheism*, the word *pan-atheism* takes on a very different meaning. When Xander stated “I’m panatheist...” he drew upon the pantheistic belief in multiple world views. When he added to the statement “...I don’t believe in *all* Gods” he emphasized the inadequacy of the idea of atheism in light of pantheism, which leaves room for multiple systems of belief. The statement “I don’t believe in all Gods” could either mean ‘I don’t believe in any and all Gods’ or ‘I don’t believe in certain Gods.’ In the same way, within modern theological language ‘pantheism,’ in Pagan terms, is ambiguous. Does it mean that one believes in God? In

certain Gods? In all, though they are divergent, Gods? ‘All of the above’ many of my informants would insist.

Mark, another local elder, mentioned that in the theological scale between monotheism and polytheism, -theism refers to a number of deities, namely one or many. Variations of the word do not, in fact, refer to acceptance of other beliefs and world views. Within the United States, *monotheism* is, in and of itself, an unmarked category. Monotheistic, after all, includes only a small range of theological beliefs: in one singular deity; while the marked categories of *polytheism* and *pantheism* are thought to mean anything that is not monotheism.

The number of deities is not in question for contemporary Pagans but the term pantheism forces them into the “polytheistic corner,” not because of a belief in multiple deities but because of an acceptance of multiple viewpoints, a parameter not often considered in modern theology. As Mark goes on to explain, not only is acceptance and tolerance widely ignored in monotheistic theology, similarly important questions of the divine’s relationship, spatially and logistically, with humanity are assumed and thus ignored.

Also assumed are certain ideas about the accessibility of a monotheistic God, though this was not always the case. For centuries, intermediaries were expected to act as liaisons to the divine until theologians in the reformation suggested that a direct connection to God was not only possible but necessary for those seeking a true understanding of the divine. Mark suggested that even within today’s theological language of religious accessibility, there is still an understanding that established paths to the divine are the only paths to the divine. A readily proximate and accessible deity

simply does not fit within modern theological language the same way that pantheistic: neither monotheistic nor polytheistic language, fails to fit.

Importantly, within this theological frame and linguistic frame the connection between religious experience and belief come together. A belief in a religion which leaves room for various views and understandings of the divine, but sees the divine as not only accessible but active in most life experiences, makes a wholly experiential yet also inquisitive religion possible.

4.4 Linguistic Appropriation:

Unable to find frames within the normative religious language that fully expresses their religious experiences, Pagans have often taken on the role of informal anthropologists: studying and learning from religious traditions all around the world.

The purpose of this research was not to delve into the ethics of appropriation, which for some academics, and indeed for some Pagans, has become a slightly offensive term. The post-colonial context, the ethics of appropriation and the commodification of knowledge, often indigenous knowledge, certainly warrant discussion. Of particular consideration has been the borrowing of rituals such as sweats and spirit walks from Native American Religions. My own research focuses on the appropriation of language, which has not received as heated discussion. It is impossible, however, to insist that it is ever only words and never concepts that are also borrowed. It is also impossible to insist that those concepts were not also original to the borrowers, who simply lacked words to describe them.

It is also worth noting that in this section I discuss appropriation not only from other places but also other times. While it is somewhat odd to discuss someone

borrowing from their own history, the trend of researching past Nordic or Celtic language and religion, in my research, fit the patterns of research on other world religions.

Furthermore, for many of my informants, the history of their ancestors could only be speculated upon since they had grown up in Christian or Jewish homes. It thus becomes a bit bizarre to insist that they have a right to borrow from traditions that may have belonged to some ancestor but not from those which they are not likely to be genetically connected to. Their previous knowledge on each is the same.

Yet the current Pagan movement in the United States is predominantly white. In my own research all of the regular attendees of meetings and rituals were of European or Mediterranean descent. The question of whose ideas are allowed to be borrowed and adapted cannot be removed from the historical context of the colonial past. This conversation is not simply happening about Pagans however, it is a discussion that came up in my presence a number of times with varying levels of sympathy. The conversations occurring among Pagans, between appropriators and appropriates, and among historically oppressed groups, particularly Native Americans, certainly warrants more study. (For a more in depth analysis see Hart 1995; Pike 2001).

While the Sacred Harvest Festival did include a sweat lodge that people were welcome to use, in my experience, the most common type of appropriation that I observed was linguistic.

As mentioned above, Western religions find themselves based in or at least greatly influenced by early Western philosophies. Beginning with Plato's insistence that true knowledge, rationality or spirituality lies in a realm outside of the body, that of the mind or soul; much religious language has maintained a divide between the two

(Spelmen 1982). It would be simplistic to suggest that Eastern religions value the bodily more than Western ones do; ancient Indian and Hindu philosophy suggests a direct relationship between the spiritual and physical experience (Van Voorst 2003). Many of my informants became interested in Eastern philosophy and religion when they came up with notions that were unsupported by the language from their, typically Christian, upbringing. In the philosophies that predate Hinduism and Buddhism, the body-mind is seen as a single unit, and the external is processes not only physically but also spiritually through places within the body that also correspond to areas of spiritual sensitivity (Van Voorst 2003). Instead of belief in a soul which is separable from the body, Vedic scripture identifies seven chakras which are housed within the body.

At Sacred Harvest we met every morning at the Heart Chakra. We would discuss the more practical aspects of the week and go over any changes in the schedule. The group would also acknowledge people who had been particularly helpful or needed special consideration from the rest of us. It seemed fitting that the Heart Chakra is connected to equilibrium and balance, as well as complex emotions such as compassion and thankfulness (Van Voorst 2003).

A number of workshops at Sacred Harvest included guided meditation. At one particular meditation we were being led to find our sacred animal. The leader of the meditation, Nan, who also set up many of the nightly rituals, encouraged us all to sit on the ground as upright as we could aligning our base chakra, associated with our most instinctual feelings with our chakra at the third eye, associated with perception.

These realms of discussion also included many new age sounding mentions of “energies” related to the chakras or bodily energy in general. In fact it is the Eastern

influence in both the Neopagan and New Age movements that most often results in their conflation with one another. The use of the word “energy” actually came up in a number of discussions among community elders in the Twin Cities. While it was a commonly used word, at times it was hesitantly used as its meaning had become so wide and diverse. Xander explained that energy is one frame for what Christians call angels or Heathens call land whites. At the same time Susan used the word energy to talk about the connection between two people in her work as a reiki healer. As she explained to me: “your body will decide how much energy it can take.” She had explained before that reiki is an interaction between two peoples’ energies. At the same time, she said that after performing reiki it would make her hyper and give her lots of energy, in the everyday sense of the word.

There are other subcultures and groups which many Pagans have adopted language from, primarily because they are also affiliated with the other groups. Many of the Pagans in the Twin Cities were also part of Heathen and Slavic reconstruction groups. They were interested in Celtic and Druid mythology and thus had thrown themselves into readings on both religion and cultural life for these early European groups. One of the more interesting appropriations was that of the word “Guedon” from early Norse writings. As Phillip once explained to me, the word Goddess is simply the diminutive of the word God. Kris went on to explain that what you end up with is “the feminine, masculine deity.” Guedon is a word for a feminine deity that simply follows a different grammatical frame.

In all of these situations of linguistic and or theological appropriation there is one more important form of borrowing occurring: that of other deities. Often these are deities

that do not fit within today's frames of acceptable gendered behavior, if not acceptable behavior in general. It is overly simplistic to suggest that Christianity provides no feminine images of the divine as Mary Daly does, but Christianity does not present these feminine images of the divine (1971). The virgin Mary is an important part of Catholic doctrine, but if we are to agree with Daly's insistence that deities often portray aspects of humanity that people take as examples for actions or values; Mary's role will not fit many women (Christ 1979). I will return to this in more detail in the final chapter.

Pagan mythology, which borrows from Norse, Egyptian, Greek, Roman and Hindu mythology (among others), provides a range of views on female and male divinity. These deities are often mentioned in context with just how they go against normalized notions of acceptable behavior and identity. Standard Pagan rituals will begin with a calling down of the God and Goddess – which God and Goddess are called upon range based on the season, the purpose of the rite and likely the persuasion of the ritual organizer. While the rituals themselves utilized these deities in a serious tone, at more social times the portrayal of these deities were placed in the context of modern norms and values to a humorous end.

Every night at the Sacred Harvest festival, the group I camped with would gather around the camp fire and many nights we would sing campfire songs. Some were traditional and others certainly were not. The songs often included accounts of appropriated deities in familiar tunes. For instance, instead of the children's song "Little Bunny Foo Foo," kids learned the song "Little God Anubis." "Jesus Loves the Little Children" had an interesting makeover in "Kali Loves the Little Children" which went on "...all the children of the world: boiled or broasted, baked or fried, with some French

fries on the side. Kali loves the little children of the world.” Borrowing well known tunes has a long history in the creation and adaptation of many religions, but there was also a certain irony inherent in the use of popular tunes to sing about their own less than popular religious notions. The juxtaposition of Pagan notions in popular, especially Christian, songs captured the nuanced relationship many Pagans have with what they call the “over-culture.”

4.5 From Linguistic Adaptation to Misrepresentation:

“You’re going to think that Pagans have a *wicked* sense of humor (my emphasis),” Kris said to me during one of our interview sessions. I responded to her that I would be right to think so. Humor was one of the most obvious ways that my informants redefined themselves while acknowledging the definitions that had been placed upon them. At the end of the week-long Sacred Harvest festival, a group of parents gathered all the youth together for what they called the “save the Pagan babies!” photo that they posted on their web-site every year with that very caption. The humor in this name comes from the historical relationship between Christianity and Paganism. For most of medieval history babies of Pagan families were saved *from* their parents and brought into Christian communities. There is still a prevalent faction in the US that would take part in the same practice given the chance today. In this paradigm, the Pagan babies must literally be *saved from their Paganism*. However, the phrase is renegotiated to denote the much more recent history of social persecution most of their parents underwent for being Pagan or Witches. The phrase then can be seen as saving the Pagan babies from the persecution that most recent Pagan converts have faced in the last fifty years. On an even deeper level many members of the Pagan community see the greatest

threat from the American culture at large, typically referred to by them as the “over-culture,” as detrimental to their well being, dignity and self-esteem. Thus Pagan babies are not being saved from Paganism, but *by Paganism*.

The medieval roots of contention between Christianity and Paganism showed up in the many of specifically Pagan jokes I heard. In one of the monthly elder’s meetings in the Twin Cities that I attended, in response to conversations about the duties of the umbrella organization they were all members of, Xander snarled out “Nobody expects the Pagan inquisition!” harkening the Monty Python phrase “Nobody expects the Spanish inquisition!” This refers back to the very European body that was most popularly known for sentencing and executing suspected Pagans in medieval Europe. The serious conversation was momentarily interrupted by laughter from the whole group, showing that the irony was not lost on anyone there.

A shared language and shared barrage of phrases and colloquialisms seemed not only important to the creation of community among Pagans in the Twin Cities – “Paganistan,” as they call it – but were readily identified as such. Phillip, who actually coined the term “Paganistan,” said as much in one of our in depth interviews on himself and the Pagan community in the area.

When I asked him how community cohesion is formed in a religion with so much theological variation he identified shared practices as important and followed that with “shared vocabulary.” Another interviewee and elder in Paganistan, Susan, said that she knows community members who have so imbedded themselves in the Pagan community that they forget how different terms and phrases are used in the outside world. She expressed the same sentiment during elder’s meetings and social gatherings throughout

my stay. The workshop, called “Mentoring Elders” though often referred to as “Meddling Elders” served as a keystone for me to not only pick-up on the primary tenants of Pagan belief, but also on the use of language in expressing the beliefs and lifestyles of contemporary Pagans.

The less historical definitions placed on Pagans found their way into many jokes as well. The most obvious example comes once again from a campfire tune at the Pagan festival I attended. This song was shared with me long before I had joined in the singing around the fire though. At the first meeting I attended with Kendra in the Twin Cities, when I told her I was studying “Pagan identity,” among other things, she broke out into the first verse of this song:

(To the tune of Yankee Doodle)

I’m a Wiccan Shaman Druuuu-id. I am new age through and through.
Dressed in crystals from my head to toe, Feathers and pyramids too.
My spirit guide is from Atlaaaaan-tis: He’s an Aztec Zen guru.
Come spend the weekend with us for two thousand dollars, and you’ll be a
Wiccan Shaman too.

The inclusion of multiple belief systems and religions addresses the eclectic nature of contemporary Paganism and even acknowledges the ridiculous lengths some self-proclaimed Pagans go to in order to make certain claims about their spirituality. As I learned at the Sacred Harvest Festival, there are two more verses to this song, one which also makes light of certain assumptions and stereotypes about Pagans in today’s culture:

I’m a neo-gothic Vaaaam-pire. I’m a creature of the night.
I write dark poetry to cleanse my soul. I never go out in the light.
I dress like I fell through a tiiiime warp, from the nineteenth century.
If you wear black velvet, lots of lace and pancake makeup, you might look almost
as goth as me.

While most of the Pagans I met simply did not fit this frame, others did.

Members of the community were both accepting of the choice to dress “goth” and aware

of the humor in taking it too far. A number of Pagans at the festival, especially among the teenage population, did express exasperation at the assumption that to be Pagan they needed to wear black clothing and heavy eyeliner. These phrases acknowledging, and in some ways reclaiming stereotypical images are another important part of how Pagans are negotiating their own experiences of simply being Pagan.

Pagans today are certainly aware of how outsiders view them and how they are portrayed in popular culture. While the advent of Pagan-based movies and television shows, such as Charmed or The Craft, have made their religious choice less exotic, it has not made it much more understood (Berger and Ezzy 2007). These portrayals become a product of a lot of joking, but often the joking cloaks real concerns with being taken seriously. The jokes made around me acknowledged the bit of truth that might exist in the stereotype. The jokes that were made in interviews or in one on one conversations were more focused on acknowledging and then dispelling the common portrayals of witches, especially in mass media.

In their book on teenage Witchcraft Helen Berger and Douglass Ezzy state that in their research they expected to find at least a few “McWitches” as they call them: young girls drawn to Paganism with ideas of casting spells, especially love spells. They did not encounter a single one however and conclude that what they found were highly spiritually reflective men and women. More than once in their book, and more than once in my own discussions, Pagan informants mentioned that it was nice to have their religion a bit more accepted by someone because they had seen Sabrina the Teenage Witch or Practical Magic, but the portrayals still hardly match real life Pagans. Paganism, for one thing, is most often portrayed in not only fiction but fantasy stories and supernatural tales.

One of the most common qualifications made to me about pop culture references to Paganism is the lack of spirituality represented and the emphasis on gaining magical power. Berger and Ezzy mention one teenage Witch who found the movie The Craft “appalling because it portrays power over people and doesn’t contain any images of the Goddess” (2007: 49).

It is for this and other reasons that contemporary Pagans are searching for conceptual frames to both help them understand themselves and also help others understand them. The theological language being used among Pagans is especially relevant because of the intentionality of its inventors. Many of the elders in the Twin Cities are searching out and reclaiming words and phrases from history to express what has long been inexpressible. At the same time there are intentional efforts to reshape words out of the every day vernacular. Both types of linguistic adaptation have their difficulties for a cultural group so imbedded in and yet resistant to the larger culture they exist in. On the surface many of my informants saw little necessity to be understood by those outside of the Pagan community. Historically, becoming part of the Pagan community has required excessive effort since most Pagans were fairly quiet about their affiliation. Kris recounted how excited he had been to come across an article in the Omaha World Herald about Witches that listed actual names. Up until that point he (now she) had found little information on it. Even books on the subject were hard to find.

At the same time, my informants did become frustrated about having to, so often, explain to others just what being Pagan meant. I was surprised at how often I had to explain to people what Paganism meant. While the pop-culture television shows and movies have made Pagan language and ideas more accessible, they have not made them

any more understandable. On top of that, words adapted from the “over-culture” by Pagans and reframed are no help once placed back in their original context. Attempts to talk about ideas such as “energy” sound ambiguous at best and wishy-washy at worst. The jokes that Pagans make within their closed groups about their identity as “Wiccan-Shaman Druids” are not often repeated in “mixed-company.” Even when stated in front of me early on, they often came with qualifications.

4.6 Speaking Across Religious Divides:

This chapter has been intended to show the ways contemporary Pagans are overcoming what they see as an inadequacy of current normative language, especially religious language, to talk about the experiences of many people, but particularly themselves. The lack of necessary language, identified by my informants, first creates a sense of marginalization, not of identity but of experience, suggesting that since one’s experience does not match the frames used to often explain it, there is something different about that experience. Unlike linguistic determinists would suggest however, the men and women I met did not change their experiences to fit the already existent frames. They instead intentionally created frames – primarily through appropriating and adapting language – that more adequately fit their experience.

There are limits to how much adaptation of common language can be used to create a wholly different identity. As Phillip’s statement from chapter 3 – about invoking the Goddess Isis in a Wisconsin cornfield – shows, even words that are adapted maintain certain aspects of their old meanings. Phillip discussed a “Pagan quest for authenticity” even while disputing the very term authenticity particularly in how it has been used to devalue Pagan practices.

The very term “authentic” was disputed in situations where it was used to assume that religions without a long, continuous history were somehow illegitimate. The term was also adapted to speak specifically to personal experiences, foregrounding the authenticity of experience in defining religion. Yet the connotation that some practices, beliefs, or experiences were less than genuine could never truly be purged from the adapted methods for using the word “authentic.” In fact, the very acknowledgement of misrepresentation of Pagan identity in America betrays the inclusive nature prescribed to Paganism. If certain portrayals of Paganism are misrepresentative then they are inauthentic in their portrayal. There may well be other Pagans who self-identify with these misrepresentations, such as those portrayed in popular media. It would seem that while Pagans may attempt to render the term “authentic” inert, they have reestablished a different means for judging religious traditions, beliefs and experiences as authentic or inauthentic.

There is one more glaring contradiction associated with the adaptation of religious language within the Pagan community. I was told by many of my informants that Pagans do not only want to be able to discuss their experiences with one another. Contemporary Pagans want to be able to enter the realm of public discourse on topics ranging from religion to public policy. Words that have been given new meaning within the Pagan community do not maintain that meaning outside of it. As Kant explained, once a speaker has finished the act of speaking it is completely up to the listener to interpret (Butler 1997). The linguistic frames created for understanding the individual experiences for Pagans thus alienate them from many segments of the larger culture, even while they bridge the alienation they have often found within themselves.

The adaptations in language are, at once, not enough and too much. As with all forms of resistance or self-assertion there are limits. The apparent contradictions should in no way, diminish the very real impact linguistic adaptation has had in outlining Pagan religion and identity. Similarly, the negotiation of language in understanding individual experience in relation to religion and spirituality is vital to understanding how gendered experiences are interpreted, explained and negotiated in culture. These methods used in theological understanding are carried over into how members of the Pagan community understand and talk about their gendered experience and identity.

CHAPTER 5: GENDER IDENTITY AND RELIGIOUS EXPERTISE

5.1 Introduction:

Pierre Bourdieu describes the realm of discourse as the site in which cultural change is negotiated. *Doxa* on the other hand, is the realm of thoughts, ideas and values that lie outside of discourse. *Doxa* is made up of the unquestioned cultural assumptions that cultural structure, for Bourdieu *habitus*, is built upon. In times of crisis, however, doxical ideas may become necessary to examine. When this happens the idea itself ceases to be *doxa* and falls into the realm of discourse (1972). As an example, linguist Robin Lakoff cites that the word “racism” did not find its way into the dictionary until 1907.

Are we to suppose that the attitudes and behaviors that we call ‘rac(ial)ism’ did not exist among speakers of English before 1907? ... Rather, it was not until recently that our culture evolved enough to enable us to step outside the frame in which such behavior was normal and so invisible. Racism could only be named when speakers could imagine a world in which it did not exist (2001:51).

This is similar, in many ways, to Jacobson and Pomorska’s idea of the unmarked (1980). Certain ideas are also socially unmarked or *exnominated* as in Lakoff’s frame. Lakoff also refers to these *exnominated* ideas and values as “common sense.” In the early 1900s it was “common sense” that white men were physically and mentally superior to white women and black men and women. Scientists measured brain capacity to rank the races in order of evolutionary development (Gould 1981; Lewontin 1991). What is called “common sense” is actually cultural sense, *doxa*. There have long been similar assumptions about sex and gender, but no one doubts anymore that sexism existed before the word took on its current meaning in the 1970s (Lakoff 2001).

To understand how contemporary Pagans are questioning notions of gender and sexuality in the same way they question normative notions of religious authenticity, we must first examine what the normalized notions are that they face. It is only then that we can begin to look at how Pagans are questioning doxical notions of gender and sexuality based on bodily experience, in order to create new ideas of gender identity and sexual preference. The questioning of gender norms takes on two broad, interrelated aspects: the questioning of the assumed innateness of correlations between biology, gender and sexual preference and the cultural preference for presumed masculine traits and the devaluing of the feminine. Pagans are renegotiating ideas of gender, through valuing often marginalized gendered experiences much in the same way they value unique spiritual experiences (as outlined in Chapter 3). Contemporary Pagans value those individuals with identities, specifically those gendered identities, that fall outside of the exnominated, because they represent unique experiences of gender and insightful understanding of identity.

5.2 Normative Notions of Gender and Sexuality:

When my Introduction to Cultural Anthropology students first begin the discussion of sex and gender, I begin the section on gender with a simple exercise. I write the word “male” and the word “female” up on the board and ask each student to write a corresponding word in each column. Not surprisingly, the words written up on the board tend to correspond to “masculinity” and “femininity” or gender, instead of biological sex. There is, of course, always the aware student who writes “strong” or “independent” in the female category trying to counterbalance the highly gendered adjectives that fill the board. Many of my students walk knowingly into the trap, with

fully aware what my point will be. I must acknowledge that the correlation assumed between biological sex and cultural gender is not as strong as it once was, though it is still there. What is less acknowledged is the correspondence assumed between biological sex and sexual preference.

Few theorists on the subject would deny that gender and sexuality are intrinsically linked, either fundamentally, socially or both. Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick suggest that our expectations of gender are derived from our roles in the act of sex itself. Some feminist writers suggest that the way we define women's sexual bodies by their lack or absences related directly to the creation of passive notions of sexuality (Grosz 1996). I find either of these arguments overly deterministic but do agree that many of our notions of gender may be derived from the ways in which we talk about and understand sex (2003). Cameron and Kulick argue that in United States English, sex is typically described as something that is done by a man to a woman. Men are active while women are passive (2003). Women's primary sexual organs are often defined by an absence instead of a presence (Grosz 1996). Neither of these can show a cause and effect relationship even if they show a corollary. After all, it is not true that sex is something done by a man to a woman, nor is it true that the defining characteristic of the female sex organ is an absence. It could instead be argued that our assumptions of female silence and passivity lead us to describe or even view sex in a very limited way and describe the female vagina as a thing that is not there instead of that is there.

There is a definite link between gender and sexuality however. We tend to attribute feminine qualities as not simply signifying femininity but also attraction and desire to attract men. Masculine attributes are not simply to show masculine inclination

but also to attract women. While both of these theories are problematic to some extent the aforementioned theorists are on to something. There is a real cultural link perceived between gendered behavior and sexual preference in the United States. It is strong enough that men who act feminine are perceived to be gay and even accused of being in denial if they claim otherwise. I would like to present another possible theory:

In the exercise mentioned above many of my students are fully aware of, and more questioning of the assumed correlation between sex and gender. What is less acknowledged is the correspondence assumed between biological sex and sexual preference, though there are few who would argue that the United States is not a heteronormative society. When the correlation between sex and sexuality is absent, the even less questioned or less acknowledged assumption is that sexual preference must at least correspond with gendered characteristics. As the role of biological sex in determining both gender and sexual preference decreases the assumed correspondence between gender and sexual preference seems to increase. If one can no longer assume that all men are sexually attracted to women, then perhaps one can assume that all men who act masculine and any women who act particularly masculine are attracted to women.

The existence of “lipstick lesbians” and “queens who can pass” is a particularly troublesome wrench to throw into the mix, but may also explain the prevalence of homosocial, yet intentionally heterosexual behavior particularly among men. While many people, men and women alike, have become more comfortable with the prospect of having a gay friend or acquaintance, men particularly still report that they fear the possibility of being hit on by a gay man. It seems that a gay man who can blend or can

“pass” as straight may be worse or more feared than a man who’s obviously feminine behavior marks him as gay. Lesbians seem to be allowed slightly more leniency when it comes to feminine behavior, but it is assumed that women who are overly masculine, particularly in dress, certainly could not be interested in men, of any gender.

In the interplay between sex, gender and sexuality the normal sexual body is as limited as the objective body which I discussed in the 3rd Chapter. As Elizabeth Grosz explains, all forms of sexuality aside from male, heterosexual sexuality are highly scrutinized as ranges of perversion instead of viewed as part of a spectrum of sexualities. The normal sexual relationship, the male-female, monogamous relationship is the least examined relationship much as the young, white, male body is the assumed objective body which examines all other subjective bodies. It is worth noting that the battle for the preservation of the family, waged by the religious right, is a fight for a very particular type of family, and the problems possible within a monogamous, properly gendered, heterosexually based family are either ignored or placed into a different category (Grosz 1996).

For these reasons, this section on gender and particularly marginalized genders includes individuals with “alternative” gender traits and individuals with “alternative” sexual preferences. In many ways the gender of individuals with “alternative” sexualities is marked regardless, since it either betrays their biological sex or their sexual preference.

Acknowledging the more nuanced relationship between sex, gender and sexuality is a vital part of feminist research. The other important trend for feminist research to address is the relative de-valuing attributed to feminine attributes. Femininity, while it may be necessary to woo men, is seen as a lesser set of values than masculine values.

Cameron explains that while gendered attributes are to correlate with biological sex, masculine traits are still the overall normalized traits in culture in the United States, especially in the public sphere. The values associated with good business practices: rationality, activeness, leadership, are defined as masculine values, while feminine emotionalism and passivity are ultimately devalued (2003; 2006)

As Cameron and Kulick explain it, women find themselves in a double-bind: the feminine is marked, but acting outside of one's own gender is also marked (2003). This means that women are marked either way: either as of less value because they do not conform to standards in public culture or they do not conform to their expected gender standards. Men run the risk of being doubly marked if they are not careful since to betray their acceptable gendered traits is also to betray those traits which are held most valuable in society. This means that to truly combat the narrow definitions of acceptable gendered behavior one must question both the belief in innate gender/sex correlations and the value placed on masculine traits over feminine ones.

This argument is not always explained in terms of lesser or greater values attributed to men or women, but as necessarily different yet equal roles. In arguing that women are naturally equipped for roles of nurturance or caretaking assumes the fore mentioned link between the male and the mind, and the female and the body (Chapter 3). As Elizabeth Grosz explains this separateness, even if it attempts to counteract the devaluing of the feminine, has troubling implications:

Women can no longer take on the function of being *the* body for men while men are left free to soar to the heights of theoretical reflection and cultural production. Blacks, slaves, immigrants, indigenous peoples can no longer function as the working body for white "citizens" leaving them free to create values, morality, knowledges. (1996:22)

Feminist theorist Linda Alcoff suggests that the way feminists begin to negotiate the two sides of this feminist dilemma is through allowing experience to inform theory, and not vice-versa (1988). Alcoff was specifically dealing with the negotiation between human essentialism: which rejected belief in a biological correlation between femaleness and femininity, and cultural feminism: which rejected the devaluing of feminine traits in society. At their extremes, these two schools of thought made up the poles of early feminist theory. Alcoff's model not only takes into account the more nuanced nature of gender, sex, biology and acculturation but also leaves room for cross-cultural understandings of feminism and the needs of women. Alcoff draws upon the theories of Tereasa de Lauretis who defines experience as "a complex interaction of the 'outer world' and 'inner world,' the continuous engagement of a self of subject in social reality." (quoted in Alcoff 1988: 433). This means that experience is not only the internal feelings and sensations but also the way a given person interprets, reflects and positions his or her experiences within their outer world. In this frame, gender is embodied and yet also contextualized much in the way that religious experience is among Pagans – as explained in chapter one.

5.3 The Complexity of the Gendered Experience:

On one of my first trips to the Evanstar Bookstore where the monthly elder's meetings occurred, I overheard a discussion on fairy-tales between the store owner, Kayleigh T., and her children. The group was trying to brainstorm possible stories to use for the summer children's theatre workshop. As the conversation jumped from one childhood myth to another I noticed a fundamental breakage in the trends of gender internalization often prevalent in children's stories. In most stories the villains break

gender norms, while those who live happily ever after have maintained them. As one girl brought up the story of the frog prince, Kayleigh's oldest daughter told her younger sister, that in the original story the princess who kissed the frog to turn him into a handsome prince really was not the kind and self-sacrificing girl she is made out to be now; she was actually quite spoiled.

As the conversation continued through Greek and Roman myths I heard one of the young girls proudly proclaim "I want to be Medusa!" in reference to the story of Perseus. The conversation continued and I marveled at the little girl ignoring stories of fairies and princesses and requesting to play a figure in mythology so ugly that she turned onlookers to stone.

Much as with understanding religious experience, those members of the Pagan community whom I interviewed stated that early on they felt that they experienced gender and/or sexuality in a way that was altogether different from what they felt they were expected. On his front porch, surrounded by plants and flowers, Phillip began his life story identifying himself as "a pre-queer kid" growing up with a Jewish mother and an Anglican father in a largely Catholic area of the city. He articulated his place as an outsider even early in his life, actually within the first two minutes of our interview. It was Kris, however, who best articulated just how her experiences of gender fit or fail to fit within the normalized notions of gender. She explained to me that while she surrounds herself with friends who accept and value her experience as a transsexual she does not agree with the often expressed notion that she had "done the male thing and was now doing the female thing." She insisted that this is not the case, "I've never

understood what it was like to be male. I doubt I'll ever understand what it's like to be female."

What is most relevant here is that Kris has been male, and she is in fact female. What she has never been is what culture has taught her a male or female *should* be. Neither her experience of maleness nor femaleness have fit the normalized explanations. Not only is her experience thus fundamentally different, but it is, in and of itself, marginalized.

While Pagan gatherings and festivals in general often constituted a place free from many of the normalized expectations of gender, marginalization based on expectations of gender did still occur. Aaron was an organizer at the Sacred Harvest festival. I met him the first night I was there and he instantly wanted to make me feel comfortable as a first time attendee to the festival, even after he found out I am an anthropologist. While facilitating a discussion between the teens brought by their parents to the festival and the older "first generation" Pagans, Aaron gave an account of a ritual at one of his earliest festivals.

That particular evening, the men and women were having two separate rituals that were to then converge around a fire and culminate in music and dancing, as many rituals do. He laughed a little when he explained that "of course" the men finished too early and as they waited for the women to arrive, one member of the group began singing a song which I had never heard of, but Aaron explained was a decidedly heterosexual men's song. Slowly all but a handful of men were singing and dancing around the fire. Aaron looked over and noticed that the only men still standing away from the group were the few gay men. As he explained, the energy that had built up over the course of the

evening was suddenly ripped away from him and the effect was so jarring that he spent the rest of the evening recovering.

The stories mentioned above fit within Cameron and Kulick's framework of *homosocial* gatherings in which heterosexuality is often fore fronted to avoid being labeled as homosexual instead of homosocial (2003). In their own ethnographic accounts, Cameron and Kulick examine socialization among fraternity brothers and businessmen in male social clubs. They explain that while homosociality is immensely important in Western culture, it is often mixed with homophobic language or overtly heterosexual discussions about women's bodies and sexual exploits to distinguish it as a social and not a sexual event (2003). The effect of the intentional distinguishing of homosocial behavior does more than distinguish, it necessarily diminishes those ways of life that it is distinguishing itself from.

While Aaron's story of exclusion takes place at a Pagan gathering, most of the accounts of exclusion and marginalization of gendered experiences were set in contrast to the atmosphere of Pagan festivals and gatherings. Phillip recounted his first festival experience as one of an acceptance he had heard about but had not fully believed. He laughed at the memory of one of his earliest relationships with a boy he met at a festival explaining they were "attached to each other in that obnoxious way, always together and touching each other." While he saw instances of homophobia at the time, he recalls a number of straight men being pressured into *accepting* it. "People were coming up to us and asking to take our picture, that was when I realized these claims that Paganism was tolerant and it had a place for queer people: I saw those claims were absolutely bang on true."

At the same time, however, Philip does identify a tendency within even Pagan tradition to want to create superficial gender balance, “divide(ing) everything in the universe into gender balanced pairs... it’s more rich and vibrant and elegant and complicated than that.” I did see people fall into dichotomous thinking, but at the same time there was a general acceptance of variations of gender and sexuality among the Pagan groups in the Twin Cities and at the Sacred Harvest festival. Even Kris, upon her admission that she knew neither what it was like to be male or to be female, went on to add, “...but it does allow me to look at it from the outsider’s eye... And I really think that they don’t grasp the idea ‘well how can you not know what it’s like to be male?’ well it’s not that simple.” She then set her hands about a foot apart from each other just above the table we were sitting at, “so people ask me where on the scale I fit, the thing is on a linear scale ...” she lifted one hand above her head, looked up and laughed, “I’m about right here.”

Both Kris and Philip identified the Pagan social networks they were a part of as not simply tolerant of their differences of gender and sexuality. Similarly, both of them also drew a direct connection between tolerance of multiple religious viewpoints and acceptance of multiple lifestyles. I asked Kris if it was simply an instance of “fringe attracting fringe.” She stated that she would not try to deny that that may be a facet of it but then also described acceptance as a built-in facet of Pagan theology. “I like to think that the acceptance of alternatives carries over from other belief systems to other social interactions” Kris adds, mentioning specific cultural practices like polygamy.

Phillip, looking at the opposite side of the same situation, identified monotheism as having a history of being bad towards queer people. “There’s one God, then there’s

one way to be and there's one way to do things which is my way" he paused and made an exasperated sound before finishing, "It's people who think they know what the Gods want." He goes on to relate this acceptance of multiple paths spiritually to multiple ways of living in terms of sexuality and gender. It is not limited to life choices in this vane though; it stretches into all realms of lifestyle. "When this really basic thing about you is different" he explains, "[you] ask questions about your place in the world... [you] develop introspective skills."

While it is not as simple as 'All Pagans reject dichotomous, simplistic definitions of gender and sexuality,' – that is clear from the stories and incidents already mentioned – in the same way that Pagans find themselves in the midst of an ongoing dialogue about religious understanding, they are discussing and critically examining cultural ideas about gender and sexuality as well. As Kris stated quite poignantly, "We all live imbedded in the over-culture, the over-culture has some very strict ideas." She then paused and looked up at me smiling, "All those who love and worship are mine," she says quoting a saying of the Goddess in Pagan tradition.

5.4 Re-Valuing the Feminine:

"We all have a Goddess shaped hole in us somewhere" Phillip quoted his friend Stephanie Fox to have said. This is not because the feminine is more divine or spiritual, but because in the Jewish tradition he was raised in, the feminine simply was not there. "I fell in love with the Goddess very very early," he told me. "I felt the presence of the divine feminine and it was missing in my family traditions." The idea of the missing female divine is not only currently prevalent among Pagans but comes out of the developments of feminist spiritualists in the mid twentieth century.

“At the very dawn of religion, God was a woman. Do you remember?” In 1976 Merlin Stone first published *When God Was a Woman*, which quickly became talked about, quoted and cited in Pagan and feminist dialogue and writings (Stone 1979: 120). While Stone was the not first to acknowledge that there were certain aspects of the past that *history* had overlooked, her article was greatly venerated and often echoed in other writings on feminist spirituality. While historians, among others, may find the claim a bit simplistic – and for good reason – many Pagans, as Goddess worshipers, feel that history books neglect to emphasize the preeminence of the Goddess at the beginning of the written record. At the beginning of the Iron Age, one sees the rise of patriarchy and the suppression of the history of the Goddess (Long 1994: 308). An important point that Goddess worshipers argue fiercely is the precedence of the Goddess historically over Christianity and Judaism. As Carol Christ, a preeminent writer on feminist spirituality, expressed upon reading Stones aforementioned article, “When I first read those words, my flesh tingled.” The ancient existence of something Christ felt to be true all along inspired her, along with many others to uncover a “hidden” history and make it known (Christ 1997: 52).

As a student of history, I have to work to hold my tongue at the simplicity of this theory, yet the existence of Goddesses in the past among many cultures is quite supported (not to mention Goddesses still worshiped around the world today). Whether universal or not, it has lead many Pagans and feminists to reach into the past to question the state of current affairs which they feel to be lacking. Is this, in fact, what we have lost? Is the Goddess what is missing? There are certainly examples of religions with very strong

Goddess traditions and many varied Goddesses that still largely devalue women and femininity.

A lack of female images of the divine does seem to speak to a devaluing of the feminine. The “discovery” of the Goddess does not just make Christ’s flesh tingle because it is a neat discovery; it speaks directly to her sense of value as a woman. One of the most quoted phrases comes from a play by Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*. The play culminates with a cry of “I found god in myself/ and i loved her/ i loved her fiercely!” (Christ 1997: 25; 1979: 277).

For Pagans in the Twin Cities one aspect of reclaiming the Goddess has been renaming the Goddess. As with other aspects of theology, the need for a strong feminine divinity has led to linguistic adaptation. Among the elder’s group, there was a strong inclination to replace the word Goddess, which Kris at one point in time called “the feminine masculine God” with the old English word, *Guedon*. As Xander explained to me, the term “Goddess” is actually a diminutive form of the word “God.” The use of the term *Geudon* over Goddess was inconsistent however, and while there was a necessary intentionality, it was not yet widespread enough within the larger Pagan community.

What is fairly common, however, is the multiplicity of the Goddess. Pagan rituals typically involved the invoking of at least one Goddess, which changed depending on the group, the times of year and the purpose of the ritual. Much as with appropriation of language, Pagans have appropriated deities from multiple traditions. These deities came from Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Norse and Hindu pantheons, among others. Though not used in actual rituals, I return to social gatherings and campfire tunes for examples. One of the first songs that we sang every night at the Sacred Harvest Festival was “Old Time

Religion.” While we would all join in the chorus, any individual could then contribute a verse they had either learned or made up. Many of these verses were about specific deities:

It was good enough for Isis
 She always came through in a crisis
 And she never raised her prices
 She’s good enough for me

Verses on female deities were typically more colorful than this one shows, however, and highlighted characteristics of the deity that would be devalued in the over-culture.

We will save a place for Eris
 With an Apple for the fairest
 Though her mood swings kind of scare us
 She’s good enough for me

There are some that call it folly
 When we worship mother Kali
 She isn’t very jolly
 But she’s good enough for me

Other verses were specifically targeted at and criticized ideas of female sexual propriety.

We will worship Aphrodite
 Though she’s kind of wild and flighty
 But she looks good in her nighty
 And that’s good enough for me

Well we went to worship Venus
 By the Gods you should have seen us
 Now the clinic has to screen us
 But she good enough for me.

There were more than just deities examined in the song and other typically scandalous notions were also flaunted:

It was good enough for Sappho
 With her lady on her lap-o
 She put Lesbos on the map-o
 With her Pagan Poetry

We will worship like the Druids
 And drink strange fermented fluids
 And run naked through the woo-oods
 And that's good enough for me

There is room enough in Hades
 For the criminals and shadies
 And disreputable ladies
 And they're good enough for me

There were also more serious verses

Pagans gather in their clearing
 For the end of winter's nearing
 And the maiden is appearing
 Bringing promises of spring

The prevalence of a three-fold or four-fold Goddess (of which the maiden is one) also speaks to the valuing of the feminine in multiple forms and variations. The three-fold/four-fold God or Goddess reflects variation of the earth through the seasons of the year and variation of living things throughout the span of their lives. Xander's conception of the four-fold Goddess is one example of this. He describes the Goddess as the maiden, the mother the crone and the hag or the dark Goddess. While maiden and mother in many ways represent aspects of femininity that are common or normative, the dark-Goddess deals with death and decay. He tells me about her, smiles and adds "I like her." The God is also conceived of in multiple ways, giving credence to multiple views on masculinity.

The value Xander gives to the dark Goddess relates directly to the way that the phases of a woman's life are celebrated. A few of the Wyld Women at the Sacred Harvest festival had been "croned," which is a ritual celebration of passing onto the later stage of one's life. As Carol Christ insisted, women have a psychological need for the Goddess, for a version of the divine that is more akin to themselves and their own

experiences. The multiplicity of Goddesses and multiple incarnations that are allowed, give value to women's lives at all stages.

Christ argues that systems "focused around exclusively male images of divinity create the impression that female power can never be fully legitimate or wholly beneficent" and that a woman can only "see herself as like God (created in the image of God) by denying her own sexual identity" (1979: 275). She also notes that in the Western (and for Christ, particularly Christian) tradition, women may gain some power in youth but are denigrated as they age and unlike men who may become wise or authoritative with age, old women are pitied. While the situation may be far more nuanced than Christ shows it to be, the portrayals of male and female worth are kinder to men as they age than to women. In Christianity the primary female figure of divinity or influence is that of the Virgin mother, Mary, who like many of the female saints, remains in perpetual youth and purity (Christ 1979).

Croning rituals stand in direct contrast to denial of the older woman's worth. By celebrating the entrance into a stage of life that is typically devalued in today's culture, Pagans are reaffirming their worth even if certain sectors of society wish to deny it. This celebration of the life stages of women is also reflected in the celebration of a woman's first menses. Penelope Washbourn calls the first menses the first major crisis that women face. She explains "Menstruation creates anxiety, not only or particularly because of the physical discomfort or lack of information about it, but because it implies the need for a new self-understanding based on a new body experience" (1979: 249). While Washbourn may have been writing in the late 1970s, for women, speaking about one's period, especially in mixed company, is often considered rude or disgusting. Even

when the level of acceptability is breached, it is spoken of in metaphor and circumscribed. Can you imagine how people would respond to a tampon commercial that used red liquid instead of light blue?

Washbourn suggests that the way we speak about, or fail to speak about women's period, is reflective of the cultural view that menstruation is primarily an inconvenience to be avoided and ignored:

...even in these days of tampons and pain remedies(,) we do not like to be inconvenienced. The image of humanness that predominates our industrialized society is based on the mind controlling the body. To be limited by our bodies, whether in sickness or death, or particularly by the female body processes, is considered weakness and threatens our "normal" forms of mastery and self-control (1979:254).

Grosz similarly argues that the seepage of fluids, in this case blood, from the body directly rejects the assumed boundedness of the body which is necessary in the creation of the binary categories at the basis of the mind-body split (1996). The idea of menstruation as "dirty" speaks to the way that it "upsets or befuddles order" (Grosz 1996:192). As Grosz explains, nothing is innately dirty, but certain things, when out of their proper place are distinguished as such (1996)

The language used to talk about these vital aspects of a woman's life were not disdained forms of speech, at the Sacred Harvest Festival; they were typically celebratory. On the second day of the festival I started my period, almost a full week early. When I quietly inquired to Kendra about getting a lift into the nearby town to get tampons, she looked at me and laughed asking why I did not just ask around at a place with so many other women. She then walked over to the group of men and women at the campsite and asked for me. Within a few hours every one I was camping with knew that I had my period or was "on my moon" as they said. Throughout the week this was

reported to account for particular aspects of my experience especially during rituals and meditation.

Much as there are rituals associated with croning, typically signaled when a woman enters menopause; there are also rituals associated with a girl's first menses. No one denies that periods can certainly be an inconvenience, especially while camping, but menstruation is also a vital symbol of womanhood, fertility and spiritual power. In a workshop entitled "Realizing your potential in a woman's world" Micah, the workshop leader, explained that when women menstruate the energy that is housed in the womb up until that point is released to move up through the body activating the upper chakras until reaching the crown of the head. While this was simply one man's take on the nature of gender and sex, he associated menstruation especially with creativity and insight.

The phrase "on your moon" illuminates the inherent connection women are believed to have with nature and the natural cycles in that a woman's cycle typically mirrors the phases of the lunar calendar more closely than the Gregorian calendar. The phrase itself could also be seen as a means for circumventing that hush-hush word "menstruation" through nice sounding metaphorical language.

The prevalence of rituals surrounding women's first menses and menopause speak to the experiences of physically being a female body. While Carol Christ's insistence that the veneration of female deities instead of just male ones will provide women with greater influence may be simplistic, the presence of Goddesses does serve to break down the binary categories which I keep returning to. If the female, profane, perhaps even "dirty" bodily experiences are shown to be part of the sacred, the categories become more permeable (Grosz 1996). The inclusion of experiences particular to women in informing

spirituality reveals that religion is always shaped by experience. As Grosz argues though, the experiences of a very limited type of body, in this case the male body, have formed religious insight in the past.

5.5 Expertise as a Product of Difference and Marginalization:

Every person I interviewed, and most that I just shared conversations with, at one point or another explained having a feeling of being “different” from early on. As was mentioned in the first chapter, within Paganism difference is typically not diminished and ignored, but instead not just tolerated but highly valued. I was especially intrigued with the way this was manifest for individuals with more extreme forms of alternative sexuality or gender. While areas of expertise were certainly not limited to those with unique gendered experiences, for those with marginalized gender or sexuality, this role was inherently linked, either by them or by others, to the specialized roles that they found themselves in.

As Philip and I sat on his front porch in Minneapolis, surrounded by flowers and plants, he explained that he identified as “a little pre-queer kid” early on and began to negotiate his place as an outsider. He mentioned this within the first two minutes of our first interview, and correlated his own experience with that of third gender individuals in Native American traditions. He went on to joke that while men were out hunting and women were taking care of the children, gay men came up with the religious rituals. At one point he elaborated on this saying there has been an inclination for “queer people saying, ‘this is why we’re here, to provide humanity with spiritual direction.’” He laughs and admits his own exaggeration saying, “Okay, That’s quite a claim!”

Philip was involved in the Sacred Harvest Festival as a guest speaker and ritual leader. I had learned through many of my friend, in the Twin Cities that Philip had a reputation as a good large ritual leader, as well as an expert on mythology and folklore. Philip explained to me that individuals who discover that their gender or sexuality is fundamentally different are forced into an inherent spiritual quest early in life. This, he says, makes them prime candidates to assist others in similar spiritual journeys later in life. Philip also states that there is something inherently similar between descriptions of spiritual ecstasy and the language of eroticism stating that the two “don’t just overlap but are in many ways articulations of the same thing.” He goes on to admit “maybe as gay people who define ourselves specifically along the lines of sexuality, maybe that is particularly poignant, at least for us.”

Along with his interest in recovering mythologies, Philip has been vocal about creating new mythologies, especially for queer men to identify with. He states that for a while he was focused on creating new mythologies about women until he realized the simple fact that “women are perfectly capable of speaking for themselves, they don’t need me to do it.” In this way, Philip recognizes a vital position for himself but also the necessity for people of all situations to listen to one another. His expertise is not all encompassing and with Philip, as well as other leaders in the Pagan community, the value of listening to one another and truly empathizing as much as possible was identified as key in creating meaningful religious practices and cohesive community.

Aaron also found himself in an important role within the Pagan community, though of a different nature. He often jokingly referred to himself as a “camp counselor” which was fitting in many ways, especially in the way he was able to relate with children

and teens. The first night that I met Aaron, I was sitting at the registration booth helping people figure out where to camp and where electrical hookups were available and such. As the evening went on most of the participants had already arrived and for about the last hour of my shift there was little to do. Aaron, as a member of Harmony Tribe, the organizing group, sat with me for the last part of the evening as people got settled in and things quieted down in the camp. He spoke to me quite candidly about his experiences within and outside the Pagan community, even knowing I am an anthropologist.

Aaron was especially good at working with understanding the youth involved in the festive. He helped organize rituals and workshops just for them and set up a cross-generation discussion. He explained that outside of the Pagan community his interest in working with youth is often met with suspicion as adults ask why an openly gay man would want to spend so much time with kids and teenagers. He says he has never been greeted with that suspicion within the Pagan community.

Aaron also drew specific parallels between having grown up an openly gay man during the era of AIDS, and creating rituals and gatherings that are sensitive to the needs of people who long for understanding that they are not getting in the “over-culture” because of differences of lifestyle, religion, or sexuality, among other things. His role as a marginalized individual because of his sexuality, has made him very perceptive in how marginalization works both socially and on the individual.

In the story Aaron told (mentioned early in this chapter) about being unintentionally excluded from a men’s ritual as a homosexual man, he went on to explain that these are the sorts of considerations that need to go into organizing rituals. He is especially thoughtful and empathetic about creating rituals, workshops and activities that

are inclusive instead of exclusive. It is this same ability that makes him especially good at working with teens. At the festival, teens readily related to him. He understood the feelings of alienation that most adolescents have and was able to consider their needs in organizing events for them.

Unlike Philip and Aaron, however, not all Pagans who were assigned roles of expertise were so accepting of the position they were placed in by others. In the aforementioned festival workshop on the nature of gender (Realizing your potential in a woman's world) the leader, Micah, stated his adamant belief that those who had undergone gender transformation or sexual transformation were more in touch with both the feminine and masculine aspects of their selves. Cynthia, a male-to-female post-op transsexual, voiced uncertainty at that statement. Kris, who often lead rituals and taught younger Pagans in the Twin Cities, expressed a similar sentiment when she stated that she neither knew what it was like to be a woman, nor had she ever known what it was like to be a man. Kris was considered a gifted ritual leader and teacher, who was often asked to preside over handfasting ceremonies (a Pagan wedding ceremony). She explained her position in a far more nuanced way:

My gender experience has been [*long pause*] it's allowed me to express desire for balance that people will actually listen to, usually for the wrong reasons, but I'll take it. [...] There was a tendency by some to say 'oh, you've done the male thing and now you're doing the female thing.' Every time that comes up I say 'no, that's not quite right.' I've done the *other* thing. I never understood what it was like to be male, I doubt I'll ever understand what it's like to be female...

She acknowledges that she does have insight to share because her experience of gender was wholly different from that of most people who live their whole life as one sex. She acknowledges an assumed expertise, but states that in many ways it is a misunderstood expertise. She goes on:

But it does allow me to look at it from the outsider's eye. You give me credence for something I don't really have, expertise I don't have but at least it allows me to express the opinion and be heard, and be listened to. And I really think that they don't grasp the idea 'well how can you not know what it's like to be male?' Well it's not that simple.

Her experience is valued, even when it is not fully understood by those in her community. She says that more than understanding both "doing the male thing and female thing," she understands the complexity that exists in how people experience gender. She laughed saying it is nice to be accepted and valued by others "even if they imbue [her with] abilities of experiences far beyond those of mortal men."

Not all of the leaders given spiritual expertise were viewed as such or viewed themselves as such. Some of the instances of expertise from marginalization were a bit more mundane, though by no means less important. Casey was a member of the Wyld Women's group that I camped with, who along with a few other festival goers participated in drag king shows in the Twin Cities. When another Wyld woman decided she wanted to try out a little gender bending of her own while at the festival, she went to Casey for assistance. LaShay was overly girly in many ways, she identified with fairies, and often wore her hair curly. Casey gave her an impressive makeover, and also helped her to get in touch with her inner-Seth. That was the name she took on for the day.

It may sound far more like a frivolous exercise in gender bending, and indeed LaShay was thrilled when she could be introduced to someone who knew her and not be immediately recognized, but afterwards LaShay reflected on the experience in a more meaningful way. She felt that it had been personally insightful for her to try to live for a day as someone wholly other than herself and yet still herself. We all noticed that by the end of that day she walked different and held her head a bit different, but we could still

recognize her as LaShay. She had tapped into a different aspect of herself, with Casey's help. At the end of the experience LaShay explained that she felt this festival was the safest place she knew to try out being masculine, and Casey was a good person to help her, and last but not least, she had experienced few things more uncomfortable than having her chest bound for a full day.

All sorts of specialists are needed for a festival with nearly 200 participants to go well. Kimberly, a member of the Wyld Women, is a firefighter and also moonlights as an emergency medical technician. She was one of two EMTs, both of whom were women, at the festival. For this reason, Kimberly was a vital part of the practical day-to-day activities at the festival. When I first met Kimberly I would not have known she was a woman, had it not been for her name. She is tall, with broad shoulders favoring t-shirts and men's shorts and sometimes a canvas bucket hat over her fully shaved head. Kimberly was particularly fond of lewd jokes, which I suspected she liked to tell me to see if I would scare easily, and Kimberly is the only person I have ever met who chews tobacco and does not spit. She prides herself on her ability to "gut it."

When I had a less than pleasant reaction from a food allergy though, it was Kimberly who took care of me. And even the next day when the Benadryl had everything under control she was insisting that she check my heart rate regularly and asked me if I was feeling okay and had been drinking enough water. Kimberly's medical knowledge and patience with campers made her a vital part of the festival.

What is as important as their roles in the Pagan community, is the complexity of gender embodied in each of the individuals described here: Kimberly, one of the toughest women I know who also wholeheartedly takes on the role of a caregiver; Casey who may

be a woman but was LaShay's expert on getting in touch with her masculine self; Kris whose expertise was valued even while it was misunderstood; Aaron whose experiences as an openly gay man made him very perceptive on creating inclusive gatherings, and Philip whose spiritual quests early in life provided him with the tools to guide others in their own spiritual discoveries. For all of them, at least part of their assumed expertise comes from the way they crystallize the complexity of gender and use it to form their identity. As mentioned, there were plenty of members who were granted expertise based on other unique experiences and valued forms of knowledge. In most cases, much as in the examples presented here, it was characteristics that were devalued in the over-culture that were valued and praised within the Pagan community. For individuals who identified themselves based on fundamentally different types of experiences, having a place where these experiences were venerated instead of marginalized, gave many of them a feeling of belonging they had missed in most aspects of their lives.

Many individuals would express the feeling that it was within the Pagan community, especially at festivals, that they felt they were truly at home and could be themselves. There were challenges all around to always be themselves even in less than hospitable circumstances, but everyone understood how much more difficult it was to be complex in a culture that looked for simplistic ways to frame religion, gender, sexuality and even experience itself.

5.6 Complexity made Simple:

Here I would like to acknowledge the very real instances where acceptance of various ways of being were placed into surprisingly normative frames. As anthropologist Steve Stern insists of his own work, theoretical frameworks used by anthropologists do

not exist in the real world but are constructions used to make sense of it (2004). It should be no surprise then that I came across examples within my research that simply did not fit in the frame I developed for examining gender identity in the Pagan community. Here I examine a frame for understanding gender that does in some places and does not in other places fit into the framework I have developed. A few times I have made mention of the workshop I attended at the Sacred Harvest Festival called “Realizing your potential in a woman’s world.” This workshop was lead by an older man named Micah, who among teaching about his views on gender, taught about forms of martial arts, Eastern philosophy, had a penchant for swords and a seeming distaste for clothing. I will first lay out and then analyze his schema for understanding the nature of humans and the universe itself.

Fundamentally, power is feminine while vision is masculine. In creation, the feminine, the Goddess, created the space and the masculine, the God, inseminates the space. He used the analogy that the female sets out the choices and the male makes the decisions. Both are necessary, he insists, because without the masculine the ideas remain there and are never acted upon but without the female there is vision with no means to carry it out.

Once upon a time, the world was matriarchal and “God was a woman” as Merlin Stone wrote. The community, instead of the individual, made decisions collectively. Over time the Goddess was taken away, the body became devalued under the mind and humans were taught about a distant, male deity which they were separated from.

Individuals are all comprised of an inner-self and an outer-self, one of each gender. We are taught by society to acknowledge only our outer-self and deny the other.

Thus to feel complete we must find another person who fulfills the part of our personality that we have denied, creating relationships out of dependency. We find individuals whose male self matches our male self and female self matches our female self. For this reason he rejects the idea of homosexuality and heterosexuality all together since we are all just looking for someone who best matches our two selves, no matter what biological sex they may be.

Micah did distinguish between “authentic male and authentic female,” versus “society male and society female.” We should not be striving for societal characteristics of masculinity or femininity since the feminine has been so devalued. Because the feminine has been devalued for so long, many women have been able to get in touch with their inner-male more than men have gotten in touch with their inner-female. For this reason women are beginning to define masculinity, which is apparently a problem, though I am unsure why.

When asked about how transsexual individuals fit into the frame, Micah insisted that those are individuals who are so in touch with both aspects of themselves that they understand both being male and being female. When Cynthia expressed doubt at that sentiment, Micah explained that she was confused as to what was “authentic masculinity” as opposed to “social masculinity.”

Micah focuses back on the female as the power and means to get things accomplished and the male as the vision of what should be done. He says this is why in sex men are always ready and it is up to women to set the place and time.

While this view could account for complexity in an individual, it does not account for complexity in masculinity or femininity. Similarly, while it denies the values placed

on feminine and masculine attributes, it solidifies the socially constructed correlation between the female and the body and the male and the mind, which is one of the fundamental tenants of andocentric belief. It maintains the social “division of labor” where women are to function as the human connection to the body while men serve as the human connection with the mind. His insistence on universal attributes of masculinity and femininity also make acceptable certain social ideas about men and women, such as: men are always ready for sex. Now this is not true because of a biological need but instead because of the way the universe has imprinted human beings. It assumes a universality to this type of experience and seeks to explain it in universal terms.

It is this very type of thinking, in universals, that have left many members of the Pagan community alienated from or marginalized from larger society. If their experiences do not seem to fit this model it is because they misunderstand their own experiences not because the model is not all inclusive. As with Cynthia’s instance that she is not very in touch with a masculine side of herself and in fact does not wish to be. While Kris insists that it is overly simplistic to say “oh, you’ve done the male thing and now you’re doing the female thing” Micah makes almost that claim about all transsexuals; assuming that all transsexuals are such for the same or similar reasons.

While I have spent this paper ultimately trying to explain the complexity of gender and how it is embodied among contemporary Pagans, this frame explained to me by a Pagan seems to cut away all the complexity I found in other places. What I am left with is that in a community that values the marginal, the alternative and the unusual, those who fit within the norms of gender and sexuality still have a very real experience that they wish to make sense of as well. While I am critical of Micah’s theory because it

universalizes so many things which I came to view as particular to the individual, I imagine there are members of the community which his framework resonates with.

This leads me to ask what happens when the abnormal becomes normalized to the extent that it is valued as much as or more than the normalized. When we make what has been marked, not only that but special and valued, might some feel compelled to mark what has long been unmarked? Much like metaphor, all frames for understanding experience, be they gendered experience, religious experience or any other type, forefront one understanding. To reframe that experience, fore fronting what was previously hidden, you also hide what was previously fore fronted. Does the valuing of the “alternative” gendered experience devalue the “normal” one? Does placing so much value on an individual’s differences in experiences lead them to act differently when they might in fact not be, or wrap normalcy in complexity even while at its base it has not changed?

In many ways, however, stumbling across a gender paradigm that is actually reflective of normative views on gender simply reveals that normalized experiences are such because they are also reflective of some people’s experiences. If I had met no one within the Pagan community whose experience of gender fit with ideas of normalcy then a certain aspect of the complexity of gender that is allowed within the Pagan community would in fact, be missing.

This theory of gender speaks to a certain individual’s experience of gender. It is still based in the fundamental primacy of bodily experience to inform authentic discussion and insight. As explained in chapter one, most Pagans believe in some sort of

universal spiritual presence or being that is contextualized from place to place. What is perhaps missing here is the allowance for contextualizing for the individual.

What is really at question in this instance is the relationship between the individual and the universal. As Philip said to me as we finished up our final interview, a glass of buttermilk sitting in front of me, which I had tried and found myself to truly disdain, “I find myself in a battle of centripetal and centrifugal forces... and our job is to keep the balance.” He pauses for a long while collecting the right words.

People often want to get together with other people like them and that’s good for us to create these cohesive groups. The mistake or the danger of this is when we fall in monotheizing thinking: “only our group can do this, only gay people can do blah, only people of northern European extraction can blah blah.”... they are contradictory needs we need to balance. As soon as we think we have it all figured out there is something new to work on.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUDING REMARKS

Recently, while flipping through channels on television, I came across a program on The Discovery Channel about a mother who was overtaken by evil spirits when she began studying Wicca. The show, which is normally dedicated to stories about haunted houses or ghostly encounters, told the story of the dangers associated with “magic” and “witchcraft” through the eyes of the aforementioned women’s Christian son. While religious plurality has become more prevalent, and somewhat more accepted today, it reminded me how skewed the picture of Wicca and other Pagan religions still are. At one point during a testimonial from the son, he explained that he was concerned that his mother was “getting in over her head,” by concerning herself with “magic” and the occult. I was particularly struck by the son’s assumption that Wicca was magical, while Christianity was not.

At one point during the episode, the son was offended when his mother hung his cross necklace in the middle of a Pentagram on the wall. This visual of the two symbols as one struck me as a sign of religious unity and plurality, but it infuriated the son. Christianity seems, in this and other instances, to be held separate from other religions even while its history is intertwined with many of them. I admit that in this paper I tend to distinguish between Christianity and Paganism as well. In the future, I believe that frames for understanding religion that forefront the primacy of experience in the formation and continuation of all religions, such as those provided by anthropologists and scholars such as David Abrams and Susan Greenwood, will provide greater understandings of not only the differences between religions but their commonalities as well.

As theories based on the corporality of self convey, all of life is negotiated through the body and bodily sensation. Thinking about religion only provides a surface level of understanding. When researchers experience religion before forming conclusions or intellectualizing, they are able to formulate a more complete picture of spirituality, community and the self. I feel that the research presented here provides an example of what experiential research can tell us. I would like to believe that this research will eventually be part of a larger body of research that considers not only religion, but also other aspects of culture in terms of the corporeal being – the self which is both mind and body, not separate but combined back into the single unit they always have been. Pagans are aware of the importance of experience in spirituality, though this should not suggest that other religions are not as informed by experience. What are those experiences and how do they compare to the ones presented here?

How are experiences negotiated in certain times and places? Religion, as Handler and Linnekin suggest of all tradition, is constantly being renegotiated and recreated. I was particularly interested, during the course of my research, in the advent of “second generation Pagans” within the Pagan community. In a religion that has derived a great deal of its identity in divergence from the norm, or individuals who emphasize religious choice, how will children raised into Paganism shape their religion and personal identities?

I only met with a few second generation Pagans during my research (many of them being adolescents or teens and thus not the focus of my work). In a religion where many individuals base much of their spirituality on choice, the existence of Pagan individuals who did not intentionally choose Paganism is slightly paradoxical. There is

considerable respect for this young community as individuals recognize that they are the group that will likely be leading and teaching new Pagans in the future, there is also a disconnect between first and second generations Pagans. When Aaron organized a cross generational dialogue between the two groups, only a handful of first generation members (four, including myself, to be exact) showed up. The conflicting attitudes about this young group of Pagans are worth watching in the future. Their actions will be a vital part of Pagan identity and community as it continues to be reinvented again and again.

These members of the community will likely be joined by others as the number of Pagans grows every year. Research into this group, as with any community, must look at the social context that the group comes out of. In this paper I examined the link between social beliefs on gender and sexuality, and the gender and sexuality of members of Pagan religions. While my informants disagreed with many of the normalized notions of gender and sexuality and are thus excluded from certain dialogues on the issues of sex and gender, they can also be seen as part of the larger discourse on what it means to be woman, man, gay, straight, or bisexual in the United States. While they distinguish themselves from these norms of sex and gender they are still influenced by and influence them.

In my research, I focused on the place of gender in how it defines difference among many contemporary Pagans. There are other factors in the negotiation of identity, some of which I have mentioned and others which are not discussed in this paper. In most instances my informants identified themselves based on their differences with the “over-culture,” yet it is important to note that while they focused on their marginal status, some factors of their identity are also privileged. One glaring example of this is the lack

of much racial diversity. The majority of contemporary Pagans in the two areas I conducted my research were white, and of Northern European descent. There were a fair number of individuals with Mediterranean heritage; however during the duration of my fieldwork I only encountered one black individual. This woman attended a bookworms discussion at one of the occult bookstores, though she did not identify herself as Pagan.

My knowledge is too lacking on the subject of race in the Twin Cities area to draw any conclusions on why there is a relative lack of black Pagans in the area, though there is a large black population. In my time with the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual) community (including but not limited to Pagans), there was only a small representative group of black individuals. This lack of diversity was noted by a number of young second generation Pagans as contradictory to the ideas of diversity and acceptance within Paganism. I never heard any malicious or insensitive discussions about race, yet for a group that emphasizes marginality and difference it is worth asking why there is a lack of diversity in race. Racial marginality is one of the most undeniable forms of marginality in the United States. Why are there so few black Pagans, and why is there so little concern within the Pagan community when diversity in other areas is prized? What does the racial commonality for a group so diverse in other regards say about Paganism, religion in the Mid-west and race relations in the United States?

These are questions that my research does not prepare me to adequately answer. Research is, after all, never truly finished on a subject, but eventually abandoned. The more one learns the more questions there are to ask. I return to Mark's idea of "infinite digression" (Chapter 3). What this paper was meant to do was examine one thread which weaves through Pagan religion, identity and community. Once that thread has been

teased out and examined, one must step away from the topic, take a new perspective, and follow that one as well. Each perspective may seem to contradict the ones examined before it, yet each is a vital part of the subject. While my own research may say quite a bit on contemporary Paganism there is infinitely more that it does not and cannot say.

APPENDIX A: BIOGRAPHIES

Aaron: Aaron is a member of Harmony Tribe, the group which organizes the Sacred Harvest Festival every year. He is in his mid 30s and identifies as gay. He was a very good organizer and is especially good with youth and teens. He often organized gatherings for the younger guests at the Sacred Harvest Festival. He lives in Minnesota.

Casey: Casey is a member of the Wyld women group that camps together at the Sacred Harvest Festival. She identifies as a lesbian and also regularly performs in drag king shows in the Twin City area. She is in her late 20s.

Cynthia: Cynthia is a member of the Wyld women group. She is in her 40s and is a male to female post-operative transsexual. She dates both men and women. She lives in the Twin Cities area and sometimes performs stand-up comedy.

Kendra: Kendra was my first contact in the Twin Cities. She is a St. Paul resident in her mid 30s. Kendra is also an anthropologist working on her PhD, doing research on Pagan community building in the area. Kendra is involved in the Pagan community for spiritual and academic reasons. Kendra invited me to the Sacred Harvest Festival and asked me to camp with her and the other “Wyld women.”

Kimberly: Kimberly is a firefighter and emergency medical technician in the Twin Cities area. She is in her 30s and identifies as a lesbian. She is an intentionally masculine looking woman, with broad shoulders and fully shaven head. She is a member of the Wyld women who I camped with at the Sacred Harvest Festival.

Kris: Kris lives in St. Paul and is in her mid 50s. She is known as a local teacher for Pagans often leading classes on ritual practices. She is also a member of the local Heathen reconstructionist group. She is considered a community elder and often attends

the local mentoring elders meetings at a local occult bookstore. Kris is a male to female, post-operative transsexual. She states that her gender reassignment surgery is the second best thing that ever happened to her; the best being her wife, who died a few years ago. Xander and Kris have been developing their own school of theological thought, called “Twyvern Wicca.”

LaShay: LaShay is mentioned in this paper for her day spent as “Seth” her male alter-ego. LaShay is in her early 30s and very petite. She was also a member of the Wyld women and also helped out with rituals at the Sacred Harvest festival as a member of the choir.

Mark: Mark is a frequent participant in the mentoring elders meetings in the Twin Cities. He lives in St. Paul. Mark is married to a woman but identifies himself as alternatively gendered reporting that he often takes on feminine roles in his marriage. Aside from being a local Pagan elder Mark also has been working on describing Pagan identity in a paper he plans to publish online.

Micah: Micah lead workshops at the Sacred Harvest festival on forms of marital arts and sword play. He also sold swords. He is in his late 50s with long grey hair. He also lead the workshop “Realizing your potential in a woman’s world.”

Phillip: Phillip is a Minneapolis resident in his mid 50s. He is a member of a local coven and also leads rituals with other covens in the area. He leads book discussions out of one of the local occult book stores and is considered to be a community elder. Phillip identifies as queer and often correlated his sexuality with his position as a spiritual leader in the community. Phillip attended the Sacred Harvest festival as a guest speaker. He

writes modern folklore and even has a CD. He is responsible for the coining of “Paganistan” in reference to the Twin Cities.

Rick: Rick lives in central Iowa and is a member of the Iowa State University Pagan Community. He is in his late 20s and identifies as a solitary Pagan practitioner. He is very knowledgeable on the natural world, particularly flora and fauna of the area in which he lives. He grew up in a very strict Christian family and has had some bad experiences within his families church.

Susan: Susan lives in Minneapolis and is very active within the Minnesota Church of Wicca (MCOW). She is also a community elder and often attends the local mentoring elders group. She is in her 50s and is a local reiki healer. She provides reiki sessions as an occult bookstore in Minneapolis. She is married to Xander, another one of my informants.

Xander: Xander is a Minneapolis man in his 50s. He is involved in the local Heathen reconstructionist group and Asatru (a Celtic based religious group). He frequently attended the local mentoring elders meetings and is married to Susan, another informant. Xander and Kris have been developing their own school of theological thought, called “Twyvern Wicca.”

APPENDIX B: PAGAN SONGS

From Chapter 1:*Fire, Sacred Fire* (Pp.1)

Fire, sacred fire, burning through the night.
 Come to me in my dream time, bringing visions of light.
 Circle round, spiral down, to these arms open wide.
 Healing light, burning bright, dry these tears that I've cried.

From Chapter 3:*Song of Amergin* (Pp. 35)

I am a stag of seven tines.
 I am the food on the plain.
 I am the roar of the ocean.
 I am a hawk on a cliff.
 I am a tear the sun lets fall.
 I am a spear that roars for blood.
 I am the salmon of wisdom.
 I am a ruthless boar.
 I am a hill where the poet walks.
 I am the grave of every vain hope.
 I am a wave of the sea.
 Who but I knows the ages of the moon?
 Who but I knows the place where the sun crouches?"

We Are One (Pp. 35)

We are walking in the light now
 Where harmony resides
 Weaving patterns with our love now
 Where peace and balance abide

Sacred mysteries of the flame now
 Burning bright from within
 Choirs of celestial voices
 Whispering on the wind

We are dancing in the light now
 Circling round and round
 Sweetly singing of this love now
 A voice of truth resounds

We are one... one heart beating
 We are one... we sing
 We are one... Our voices repeating
 Oh, it's now we are one
 Oh, it's now we are one

From Chapter 4:

Little God Anubis (Pp.56)

(To the tune of *Little Bunny Foo Foo*)
 Little God Anubis hopping through the pyramids
 Finding all the pharaohs and boppin' 'em on the head
 (spoken) and down came the Goddess Isis, and she said
 I don't wanna see you, little God Anubis
 Taken all the pharaohs and boppin' 'em on the head.

Kali Loves the Little Children (Pp.56-57)

(To the tune of *Jesus Loves the Little Children*)
 Kali loves the little Children, all the children of the world
 Boiled or broasted, baked or fried
 With some ketchup on the side
 Kali loves the little children of the world

Yankee Doodle Subculture (Pp.59-60)

(To the tune of *Yankee Doodle Dandy*)
 I'm a Wiccan Shaman Druuuu-id. I am new age through and through.
 Dressed in crystals from my head to toe, feathers and pyramids too.
 My spirit guide is from Atlaaaan-tis: He's an Aztec Zen guru.
 Come spend the weekend with us for two thousand dollars, and you'll be a
 Wiccan Shaman too.

I'm a Pollyanna Paaa-gan. I am all sweetness and light.
 I call on only warm and fluffy Gods; all of my magic is white.
 My teddy bear sits on my aaaaal-tar, he presides at every rite.
 I cleans all my furniture of negative vibrations in case Loki slept here over night.

I'm a neo-gothic Vaaaam-pire. I'm a creature of the night.
 I write dark poetry to cleanse my soul. I never go out in the light.
 I dress like I fell through a tiiiime warp, from the nineteenth century.
 If you wear black velvet, lots of lace and pancake makeup, you might look almost
 as goth as me.

From Chapter 5:*Old Time Religion (Pp.76-77)*

(Only verses sung at rituals or gatherings I attended included here)

Gimme that old time religion
 Gimme that old time religion
 Gimme that old time religion
 That's good enough for me

We will worship Aphrodite
 Though she's kind of wild and flighty
 But she looks good in her nighty
 And that's good enough for me

We will have mighty party
 In the honor of Astarte
 Grab you toga – don't be tardy
 'Cause she's good enough for me

Let us raise a toast to Bacchus
 We will raise a royal ruckus
 Then he'll lay us down and fuck us
 And that's good enough for me

Well we went to worship Venus
 By the gods you should have seen us
 Now the clinic has to screen us
 But she's good enough for me

We will bow down to Hephaestus
 As the blacksmith he will test us
 'Cause his balls are pure asbestos
 That's good enough for me

We will save a place for Eris
 With an apple for the fairest
 Though her mood swings kind of scare us
 She's still good enough for me

It was good enough for Sappho
 With her lady on her lap-o
 She put Lesbos on the map-o
 With her Pagan poetry

There is room enough in Hades
 For the criminals and shadies
 And disreputable ladies
 And they're good enough for me

We will worship like the druids
 And drink strange fermented fluids
 And run naked though the woods
 It's good enough for me

Let us pray like the Egyptians
 Pyramids to put out crypts in
 Fill our subways with inscriptions
 It's good enough for me

Let us sing a song of Mithras
 Let us sing a song of Mithras
 ...Nothing rhymes with Mithras
 But he's good enough for me

There will be a lot of lovin'
 When we're meeting in our coven
 Quit your pushin' and your shovin'
 And leave some room for me

We will go down to the temple
 Sit of mats of woven hemp-le
 Try to set a good exemple
 It's good enough for me

There are some that call it folly
 When we worship mother Kali
 For she isn't very jolly
 But she's good enough for me

When you come to worship Odin
 You don't need to put your coat on
 Get your ax and get your woad on
 It's good enough for me

We will song a song of Loki
 For is the lord of chaos
 Which is why this verse doesn't thyme or scan or anything like that...
 But he's good enough for me

As the waning year is ending
Young and old souls now are blending
Voices round the circle sending
Samhain blessings 'cross the world

Pagans gather in their clearing
For the end of winter's nearing
And the maiden is appearing
Bringing promises of spring

Light and darkness stand together
Leafing birch and flow'ring heather
Kindred clad in fur and feather
Tell us spring has come again

Hand in hand we leap the fire
To the meadows we retire
To fulfill Beltane's desire
And give seed to all the land

Meeting at the witching hour
By the brand and bud and flower
Folks are raising up the power
And that's where I want to be.

APPENDIX C: GLOSSARY, PAGAN SPEAK 101

Asatru: A branch of Paganism associated with Old Norse Mythology. There is an active Asatru organization in the Twin Cities (As explained to me by Xander).

Beltaine: One of the eight Pagan holidays. Celebrated on May Day or May 1st. This holiday celebrates the union of the God and Goddess and is often celebrated by dancing around the May pole. Handfastings often occur on this day (Cliffton 1998).

Candlemas: See Imbolc.

Druid: A religious sect often considered Pagan. Based in Celtic mythology and rituals. Is part of but also separate from the local Pagan covens. Many Druids cross paths with Pagans socially but are a decidedly different religion (As expressed to me by Kris).

Gardenarian Wicca: Named for Gerald Gardner founder of his own covens in the 1950s. Gardner claimed his covens were based on secret medieval religious sects that had maintained clandestine covens. This is typically disregarded by scholars who insists Gardenarian wicca is of Gardner's own making (Eller 2000; Jencson 1989).

Guedon: An old English word for the female divine. Being reclaimed in place of Goddess by some Twin City Pagans (As explained to me by Kris, Phillip and Xander)

Heathenry: A Slavic reconstructionist group that is not particularly religious but includes many members of the Pagan community (as explained by Kris).

Imbolc: One of the eight Pagan holidays. Celebrated in early February. This is when Pagans begin looking towards the spring and the return of the maiden Goddess. Converted to the Feast of the Purification by the Catholic church and known as candlemas (Cliffton 1998).

Lammas: One of the eight Pagan holidays. The first harvest holiday as the days begin to get shorter. Celebrated on August 1st (Cliffton 1998).

Mabon: One of the eight Pagan holidays. Celebrated on September 21st. This is the second harvest holiday as one begins to look towards winter (Cliffton 1998).

MCOW: Acronym for the Minnesota Church of Wicca. An umbrella organization formed in the 1990s which many covens are housed under. Formed primarily for legalistic purposes to ordain ministers to perform legal marriages and such (As explained by Susan).

Midsummer: One of the eight Pagan holidays. The summer solstice, celebrated on June 21st in celebration of the sun God (Cliffton 1998).

Paganistan: A term to refer to the Twin Cities. As Pagan festivals converged around the Twin Cities and a handful of occult bookstores in the late 1980s and early 1990s the cities gained a reputation for housing a large Pagan community. This drew many Pagans to the area thus serving as a sort of self-fulfilling prophesy (As told to me by Phillip and Kris).

Pantheism: In the Twin Cities, a form of religious belief that sees all religious views as equally true and valid representation of the divine (As explained by Mark).

Poly-affiliation: A term coined by Murphy Pizza, a local anthropologists, to explain the inner-connections of the Pagan community in the Twin Cities even while they are not part of any larger organizing structure. Instead the Pagan community is made up of many tenuously connected groups within different traditions that are still akin to one another.

Ostara: One of the eight Pagan holidays. Celebrated on March 20th or 21st or the Vernal (Spring) Equinox marking when day and night are the same length. Ostara is associated with the Goddess Ishtar or Asarte, or Eostra from which the Christian holiday Easter gets its name (Cliffton 1998).

Out of the Broom Closet: A play on queer-speak and the phrase “out of the closet.” Pagans use this phrase to denote whether or not they are open with others about their Pagan beliefs. Due to a recent history of mistreatment based on their beliefs some Pagans opt to stay in the broom closet with their co-workers and even parents and extended families.

Over-Culture: A term used to refer to the notions of the larger, primarily protestant Christian culture Pagans find themselves within. It is in some ways a derogatory term for the groups that Pagans often feel oppressed by.

Reiki: A type of meditation and healing based in Eastern Philosophy. The name is derived from the idea of unifying “rei,” the supernatural or divine world, with one’s ki or qi or personal spirit or life force (As explained by Susan).

Samheim: One of the eight Pagan holidays. Celebrated on October 31st or November 1st. Samheim is associated with death and the cycle of rebirth. Marked by the final harvest this is considered by some to mark the end of the year (Cliffton 1998).

Second Generation Pagans: A term used to refer to Pagans who were not converts but had been raised in a Pagan household. These were usually teens and children but Aaron, who is in his 30s, is also a second generation Pagan.

Tyvern Wicca: A specific belief system based around a belief in a four-fold Goddess and God as opposed to the three-fold Goddess and dying God. Based around the Eight Pagan holidays (as explained by Kris).

Yule: One of the eight Pagan holidays. Celebrated on December 21st, the summer solstice, the shortest day of the year. After Yule the days get longer marking the rebirth of the sun. Considered by some to be the end of the year (Cliffton 1998).

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