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The alchemy of life: Magic, anthropology and human nature in a Pagan theology. In Philip Fountain, Sin Wen Lau (eds) *Anthropological Theologies: Engagements and Encounters*, special issue of *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 24:3, 290-309 (2013)

This has been published in final form at:

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/taja.12052/abstract>

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# The Alchemy of Life: Magic, Anthropology and Human Nature in a Pagan Theology

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## Abstract

Reclaiming is a contemporary Pagan tradition rooted in the understanding that sacrality infuses the cosmos. Reclaiming teachers critique the 'mechanistic' basis of modern science and its rejection of magical thought, implicating this worldview in oppression, environmental devastation and colonialism. Their concerns resonate with an emerging critique among historians, who argue that the Enlightenment's rejection of Europe's 'superstitious' past was tied to the colonial project of refuting the religious and magical beliefs of non-Europeans. Engaging with Reclaiming theology exposes the still-uncomfortable relationship of anthropology to 'non-rational' forms of knowledge. In embracing systems of thought profoundly repudiated since the Enlightenment and reimagining what it is to be human, Reclaiming understandings potentially disturb anthropology at its roots, including its very delimitation as a 'science of humanity'.

Keywords: anthropology of magic, colonialism, human in the world, theology, Paganism

## The perennial debate

On a hot June day in Florence, I queue for an hour to enter the Uffizi gallery. At the start, weaving through visions of Virgin and child, I am lulled by the repetition of gold-rimmed Gothic iconography. Immediately as I enter the next room, the expansive images of the Florentine Renaissance explode around me. Dominating one wall, I register with a shock that brings tears to my eyes the awesome frame of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*. I sit and absorb its thick textured layers of green and blue, overwhelming in the flesh, deeply familiar and fearsomely present.

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On a listserv dedicated to academic research into magic, a recent discussion took place when someone asked how it is possible for academics to research magic when, presumably, they are not practitioners. One person responded that, as had been pointed out many times before, many researchers are practitioners, and others replied with observations about the different kinds of research done and the relative importance of 'insider' knowledge in each. Another noted that, among contemporary Pagan communities in industrialised societies, there is a high degree of suspicion towards researchers. This discussion touched on a range of perennial questions that concern ethnographers as participants and observers in communities where practices that might be called 'magic' or 'witchcraft' hold a central place. These are questions that, indeed, have come up before, and will again, even with the wealth of literature that has now emerged dealing with issues of insider/outsider knowledge, the importance of foregrounding 'native' epistemologies, debates on field methodologies, ethics, reflexivity, and the specific challenges faced by researchers of religion.

In Pagan understandings, events that recur signify the presence of an unresolved issue. Following Jung, many Pagan philosophies argue that all our actions, assertions and beliefs about ourselves produce a shadow: the accumulated baggage of those counter-understandings that have been repudiated and rejected, which must be recognised and integrated before it is possible to move on. A coincidence is not a coincidence, so if events keep conspiring to present us with challenges or questions of the same kind over and over, it points to some such usually unpleasant thing lurking in the unconscious. In the vernacular, the universe is trying to tell us something.

As an anthropologist who has conducted research in a contemporary Pagan community whose members very often refer to themselves as 'witches', I have long been interested in the relationship between anthropology and witchcraft. This pairing of terms has come to mark for me an awkward partnering between two fields of knowledge whose unequal status is a metonym for discursive elisions in our discipline as a whole. In introducing her 1977 ethnography of witchcraft in the Bocage in France, folklorist Jeanne Favret-Saada wrote in frustration of such uneven social ground:

Take an ethnographer. She has spent more than thirty months in the Bocage in Mayenne, studying witchcraft. 'How exciting, how thrilling, how extraordinary...!' 'Tell us all about the witches', she is asked again and again when she gets back to the city. Just as one might say: tell us tales about ogres or wolves, about Little Red Riding Hood. Frighten us, but make it clear that it's only a story; or that they are just peasants: credulous, backward and marginal...

No wonder that country people in the West are not in any hurry to step forward and be taken for idiots in the way that public opinion would have them be (Favret-Saada 1977: 4).

Similar concerns surround studies of shamanism, contact with spirits, sorcery and other forms of magic. In 1987, Paul Stoller told of his hesitation in training as a sorcerer among the Songhay in Niger and writing of his experiences. The compelling nature of his encounters left him having to explain them in terms of Songhay understandings, of how a witch smells, how to read signs in nature and the terrifying attacks of spirit beings. Afraid he would be compared with Carlos Castaneda, or be seen to breach field ethics, or to lose his objectivity, his gripping account is introduced by acknowledging his own doubts and questions as he is drawn into the world of Songhay sorcery, doubts as much about his choices in his fieldwork and the potential reception of his controversial account as about what he was seeing, feeling and experiencing as an apprentice sorcerer (Stoller and Olkes 1987: ix-xiii, 25).

Anthropology may have moved on. There is a growing array of in-depth studies of witchcraft and magic in its connections with modernity, the conceptual and theoretical vocabulary at our disposal has expanded, and researchers may now openly proclaim themselves participants. By the 1990s, the reflexive turn in anthropology led Edith Turner to reflect:

In the past in anthropology, if a researcher "went native," it doomed him academically. Vic Turner [her husband] and I had this dictum at the back of our minds when we spent two and a half years among the Ndembu of Zambia in the 1950s. OK, our people believed in spirits, but that was a matter of their different world, not ours. Their ideas were strange and a little disturbing, but somehow we were on the safe side of the white divide and were free merely to study the beliefs. This is how we thought. Little knowing it, we denied the people's equality with ours, their "coevalness," their common humanity as that humanity extended itself into the spirit world. "Try out that spirit world ourselves?" No way (Turner 1993).

Nevertheless, a level of wariness remains around such research, perhaps especially for those of us studying magic among mostly Anglo-European people in industrialised nations. In an ethnography of British Paganism published in 2000, Susan Greenwood carefully justified her choice to become a participant in Pagan ritual and "examine magic from the 'inside'", suggesting a persistent perception of hesitation among anthropologists as to how much 'insider' ritualising is appropriate (Greenwood 2000: 11-13). Roberta James was asked of her Master's thesis whether as a 'believer' she might not be sufficiently 'etic' to conduct her study (James 1997). In part, this reflects ongoing questions as to

what constitutes a relevant field site for anthropologists, and in any case, researchers must carefully delimit our work as to what ideas we accept from our communities of study at face value, and from what claims we must signify a critical distance. (Having failed to do so in reporting the magical beliefs of my interlocutor in a recent article, an anonymous reviewer suggested it sounded like “Harry Potter’s Hogwarts”).

Nevertheless, with a small but growing ethnographic corpus on contemporary Paganism, and a burgeoning literature on the ‘enchantment’ of modernity, it seems we had progressed from the days when Hirst and Woolley, introducing Evans-Pritchard’s research on witchcraft among the Azande, could write: “To the modern consciousness, the very idea of witchcraft is preposterous” (Hirst and Woolley 1982: 213). So I was somewhat surprised to read in Moore and Sanders’ introduction to their volume on the modernity of witchcraft in Africa an echo of these assumptions. Commenting on contemporary Britain, they state that “newspapers advertise weekend ‘Psychic fayres’ where gullible audiences listen to tarot card readings and the voices of the dead” (Moore and Sanders 2001: 1). Perhaps, indeed, the universe is trying to tell us something.

The problem I perceive at the heart of ethnographic studies of magic is a kind of silence that grows out of what Kevin Dwyer once called the “contemplative stance” at the root of anthropology. As a discipline whose roots lie in analysing, describing and interpreting the social worlds of those who are seen to live outside the framing conceptions of hegemonic European knowledge systems, he points to an essential failure of exchange that characterises much of anthropology (although see Haddon this volume for a reading of how knowledge may bleed through these carefully delimited boundaries in ethnography):

The contemplative stance thus pervades anthropology, disguising the confrontation between Self and Other and rendering the discipline powerless to address the vulnerability of the Self... In this way, anthropology has confronted the Other in a manner that works to muffle the Other’s potential challenge (Dwyer and Muhammad 1982: 269).

As Chakrabarty has pointed out, the assumptions, concepts, and genealogical forebears of the European Enlightenment continue to dominate social science departments, even in postcolonial contexts (Chakrabarty 2000: 5-6; c.f. Connell 2007). In anthropology, despite the advances of recent decades, these assumptions very often persist as the sometimes hidden, sometimes overt partner against which social worlds under study are frequently described. In this context, practices of witchcraft, encounters with spirits, and cosmologies of magic become measured against a normative framework that by and large denies their validity. As Greenwood states in her introductory book on the study of magic in anthropology:

Due to the problem of anthropological theories being bound within rationalistic discourses, it has been difficult finding explanatory frameworks that do not reduce the experience of magic to external terms or explanations that obliterate its essence (Greenwood 2009: 8).

Two contrasting approaches to the anthropology of contemporary Paganism, both addressing questions of consciousness in magical practice, draw attention to some of the fraught issues involved. Tanya Luhrmann’s ethnography, first published in 1989, was one of the first to examine Pagan and magical communities in Britain in depth. Asking how it is that people come to accept “outlandish, apparently irrational beliefs” (Luhrmann 1994: 6), Luhrmann explored the complex processes of what she calls “interpretive drift” through which these Pagans came to understand the

magical world. She shows how they explained the workings of magic in the face of overarching rationalist expectations in society and the ritual techniques they used to train their imaginations and induce altered states of consciousness to undertake magical workings.

Susan Greenwood's more recent ethnographies have likewise addressed the cognitive processes involved in magical work, exploring the social and conceptual patterns behind what she calls "magical consciousness" (Greenwood 2000; 2005; 2009). Highly critical and dismissive of Luhrmann's approach (2009: 137-138), she nonetheless draws a parallel set of contrasts between the processes involved in magical consciousness and those of rationalised scientific causation (while being notably more unsympathetic to the limiting conditions of Western rationalism). Focusing in particular on what Lévy-Bruhl called 'participation', Greenwood shows how magical thought involves perceptions of analogical connection and interrelation that draw inherent connections between phenomena which, to Western scientific thought, are quite disparate (2005: 89-118; 2009: 29-43). Following Tambiah, she links the contrasting processes of participation and causal logic to how they reflect contrasting social models, of interconnection and atomised individualism respectively (Tambiah 1990: 105-110).

Despite their differences, both ethnographers explore what they see as fundamental tensions between magical consciousness and the basic premises of modern science. Similarly, in his study of modern occultism, Hanegraaff (2003) builds on Weber's theories of rationalisation to suggest that in the face of growing disenchantment, for modern occult practitioners magical thinking has become reified into a separate 'magical' realm. Like Greenwood, he draws on Lévy-Bruhl's concept of 'participation', suggesting that human beings have a 'natural' propensity for this kind of affective, analogical mode of thought, quite counter to the linear, cause-effect logic which dominates Western science. Yet he also takes seriously Luhrmann's ideas of "interpretive drift", arguing that the cognitive adjustments these magical practitioners have to make in order to shift out of the assumptions of rationalised science are significant. He describes the conditions of disenchantment as characterised by "the social pressure exerted upon human beings to deny the spontaneous tendency of participation" (Hanegraaff 2003: 377). Thus he points to an important dynamic of Western magical practices: that they take place under conditions of disenchantment that have gathered these practices together under a general rubric of 'magical activity', marginalised them into a separate and reified realm, and reshaped them in the process. It is these layered conditions of rationalisation and disenchantment that I would suggest form the starting point for an exploration of the questions that magical, occult and witchcraft beliefs raise for anthropology.

### **Spirits and deities**

In late summer, a friend takes me walking in the hills of Marin County. It is a day following my return from a Reclaiming witchcamp in the Oregon mountains, and I am wrapped in the dreamy blanket of ritual retreat. At the end of the trail, the path opens up to a wild little cove, turbulent waves beating the dark cliffs, the Northern California tides swirling dangerously. In a protected pocket in one corner, I crouch in water a few feet deep and allow myself to roll in the shallows, calling on Aphrodite. The beach is small stones the size of my fingertips, in hues of dark red-brown, sea green, ochre, slate grey. The washing waves make bubbles and froth in the gaps and crevices. I take a handful of stones home.

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Reclaiming is a tradition of contemporary Paganism founded in Northern California in the late

1970s. Emerging in conversation with direct action anti-nuclear campaigns and the activist networks of the anarchist coffee houses in San Francisco, many of the community's founding members were influenced by the feminist and anarchist ideas of this milieu. As a result, they developed a radical vision for their spiritual community: directing their practices of ritual towards changing patterns of social relationships and restoring caring, respectful relationships with the natural world. Like other Pagan traditions, Reclaiming members see themselves as practising a form of nature religion, by which the cosmos is alive and infused with sacred energy. Seeing no separation between the spiritual and the material worlds, they hail the Earth as sacred and observe ritual festivals in line with what they call the 'Earth's holidays', at the solstices, equinoxes and four 'cross-quarter' days in between. Reclaiming rituals are both celebrations and effective actions, designed to influence the workings of the cosmos through ritual magic. But, given its radical roots, and the continued involvement of many members in social activism, several of its teachers have written in-depth critiques of capitalism and of the systems of domination and exploitation they see as characterising industrial societies since Europe's early modern era. In this context, the focus of Reclaiming ritual magic tends toward more utopian, transformative and social activist-oriented ends than is typical for most Pagan traditions. For these Reclaiming members, a goal of social change is part and parcel of their recognition of the deep sacredness of the cosmos.

Reclaiming in the San Francisco Bay Area involves hundreds of people who take part in the public and private rituals, classes, camps and workshops that form the backbone of community life. Between 60 and 120 people typically attend the rituals held at festival times, although the largest event of the year can attract over 1000 participants. For my research, I have attended Reclaiming events as a participant-observer over several years, most intensely in the Bay Area during 2006-7. At this time, I lived among Reclaiming members, joined classes, workshops and retreats, helped organise and (at times) lead rituals, and spent social time with others from the community. I read publications and discussed ideas, conducted interviews and passed out surveys. But more central to the insights I gained, for these many months I was deeply immersed in community life.

These Reclaiming events, formal and informal, offer various trajectories through which the core ritual and theological ideas of the tradition are shaped. And, while Reclaiming teachers emphasise practice over belief, and routinely eschew doctrinal approaches to religion, a substantial core of written material has been developed, both as books published by Reclaiming authors, and in blog posts and articles. Along with liturgical elements such as ritual chants, these reflect a body of ideas on divinity, sacrality and religious ethics that, while not entirely systematised, are certainly coherent. It is this complex of ideas, transmitted in writing, orally and pragmatically, that I label Reclaiming 'theology'.<sup>1</sup>

In Reclaiming theology, this conception of the sacred cosmos is both pantheistic and polytheistic. Individual deities, evoked in myriad forms drawn from mythological landscapes across an array of cultural and historical contexts, are representative of particular aspects or dimensions of the cosmos. Developing relationships with each deity thus allows people to develop relationships with those aspects of the natural world or of human existence which that deity has come to represent. Given their eclectic scavenging of myths and their awareness of participating in a self-created religion, most Reclaiming members consciously foreground the role humans have played in apprehending, shaping and even creating the spiritual world. For priestess and teacher Rook, the

ontological status of deities is unambiguously real and independent of human interpretation; nevertheless she sees humans and deities as being in historical relationship:

[My] belief about deity is that there are rays or streams of deity energy, and that they come up with different faces according to the culture, according to how the people relate to them, just as we have different facets of self... So, just like we are formed by our friends and our culture, these deities are formed by the people that worship them. However, I don't believe they are created whole cloth by the people that worship them. I believe that Demeter—what we call Demeter—was some natural force that helped things grow better, and that was hooked into those Mediterranean cycles of things grow in the winter, and were dead in the summer, and what does that look like? And people picked up on that and said, 'Oh, it would be really helpful to get to know this force. How do we do that? Let's give it a name. Let's create mythos around it, so we can relate to it better.' So, I do believe that deities are *strengthened* by people, and formed by people. But I don't think that they're actually necessarily *created* by people.

Rook's emphasis on developing relationship points to the most central theme at issue in Reclaiming: practicing magic is about connecting with the enspirited world. Jone Salomonsen writes in her ethnography of Reclaiming: "building of spiritual connections with the extended family (including people, plants, trees, sun, moon) is regarded as an integral part of the job of growing up and as measurement of emotional maturity" (Salomonsen 2002: 285).

This awareness of the world as enspirited is connected to an understanding of the cosmos as interconnected, and of human consciousness as overlapping with the surrounding world. As Rountree suggests of a group of feminist witches she worked with in New Zealand:

Central to their holistic worldview and their theories about magic's efficacy is the shamanistic belief that all things—plants, animals, people, rocks, the elements, and so on—are connected in dynamic relationship (Rountree 2002: 44).

Reclaiming teachers often write about this sense of connection as patently straightforward. In her first widely read book, *The Spiral Dance*, Reclaiming teacher and priestess Starhawk writes:

People often ask me if I *believe* in the Goddess. I reply, "Do you believe in rocks?" ... we do not *believe* in rocks—we may see them, touch them, dig them out of our gardens, or stop small children from throwing them at each other. We know them; we connect with them. In the Craft, we do not *believe* in the Goddess—we connect with Her (Starhawk 1999: 103).

Yet, while Starhawk writes of connecting in the language of commonsense experience, behind this is an evocation of the reality of rocks other than what would likely be acknowledged by a geologist or a mineralogist. For Reclaiming members, picking up a rock is a spiritual experience. As another Reclaiming teacher, George, described this experience to me, Reclaiming's understanding of the material world evolved out of the awareness that:

That rock, there's something more than a rock going on there. There's something we don't see.

Indeed, practitioners often describe acts such as picking up a rock, or touching a tree, as involving a direct experience of the enspirited world, connecting them with the element of earth, the goddess Gaia, the spirits in that region of land or the interconnected energy of the cosmos.

Reclaiming ontologies of deity reflect an outlook of ambiguity that is deliberately cultivated, an example of what Luhrmann calls 'interpretive drift', creating a point of entry for those accustomed to more rationalist thought into the patterns of Reclaiming magical thinking. Rook rejects a merely

psychological or symbolic interpretation of deity, but for many others, deities are understood mainly as symbols with psychological effects, their myths and stories allowing humans to think through experiences in symbolic terms. This ambiguity is reflected in a conversation I was party to, which I noted down shortly afterwards. One Reclaiming member said of deities:

They are an archetype. When I invoke Artemis, she has the meanings of protection for childbearing, for mothers, and we can all understand that that's what she stands for – it is a shared understanding.

Her friend spoke in rejoinder:

I thought that was beautifully put. Intellectually I agree. But at a deeper level, when I aspect a Goddess, she is there.

This conversation reflects a spectrum of understandings about the nature of spirits and deities. But this spectrum is not generally viewed as a matter requiring resolution. Rather, in line with Reclaiming's anti-doctrinal stance by which everyone is acknowledged as their own spiritual authority, each person is encouraged to come to their own understanding, based on experience.

Such an anti-doctrinal approach, characteristic of many Pagan traditions, points to important differences in theology from religions such as Christianity. While there are many often conflicting theologies within Christian traditions, in Pagan traditions such as Reclaiming, a conscious principle of plurality means that theological ideas are widely expressed in an evocative rather than an analytical mode, with an emphasis on how these ideas might open up ways of imagining and being rather than be honed into religious truths. Although many Reclaiming writings do convey a sense of authorial assurance, strong suspicion is directed toward any religious leader claiming to speak with a voice of authority, and the mode of teaching and ritual is experiential rather than didactic. This makes the systematisation of theological ideas arguably less of a priority for many Reclaiming teachers and ritual leaders than it might be in other religious traditions, leading to frustration among some at a perceived need to become more theologically sophisticated. Yet even those theories prioritising experience of deity over belief are core Reclaiming understandings that can themselves be understood as theological claims.

The deliberate cultivation of a field of ambiguity in Reclaiming writings, furthermore, is not simply about embracing pluralism or anti-doctrinalism. It is designed to engender a certain kind of thinking. Starhawk writes:

I have spoken of the Goddess as psychological symbol and also as manifest reality. She is both. She exists, *and* we create Her (Starhawk 1999: 107).

Here, Starhawk points not only to her understanding of the complex ontology of deity, but also to the open state of mind she hopes to encourage among her readers, an embrace of 'both/and' thinking designed to cut against the 'either/or' thinking of causal logic and scientific rationalism. The centrepiece of theological thinking for most Reclaiming members is not to define the ontology of deities and spirits in any particular way, but to encourage openness to alternative ways of seeing the world and to foster habits of analogical thought that embrace contradiction.

For most of my time studying Paganism as an anthropologist, I too cultivated this outlook of both/and thinking. I read tarot, invoked deities and participated in rituals in a frame of studied ambiguity with respect to the nature of my experiences. But, following a conversation with an atheist friend part way through my fieldwork, I decided that it was time for me to 'get off the fence'



as I thought of it, and figure out what I actually believed was true and not true of the enspirited world. I realised that, while I could respect the range of considered interpretations among Reclaiming members, and remained very open to the experiences of Reclaiming rituals, I did not believe in the actuality of spirits or deities.

Holding to the understanding that Reclaiming embraced every person's spiritual truth as equal, I was not expecting the sense this created for me that this decision placed me outside of Reclaiming, nor the growing fears that this outsider status would potentially compromise my ability to write about Reclaiming as an ethnographer in ways I was comfortable with. I had struggled with ethical questions raised by critiques of anthropology, in particular of those tendencies seen as typifying traditional ethnographic approaches of 'othering' our communities of study. Notwithstanding the discipline's historical aversion to risks of 'going native', I had decided that my own preferences would be better served by studying a group as at least a potential insider. Still, given the relativistic approach to spiritual ontology routinely avowed by Reclaiming members, it has taken me some time to puzzle over why my own atheistic decision should raise for me such thorny ethical concerns.

### **Magic, science and colonialism**

As summer turns to fall, ocean waves wash over my mind, invade my dreams and overwhelm my waking consciousness. The Rites of Passage class I am taking combines dream work, myth and ritual around the theme of transformation. We learn about alchemy, its application as spiritual process, of *solve et coagulum*, stages of transmutation of the raw substance of our souls: dissolution, purification, awakening, and the final stage refining gold to rose. The dream fragment I bring for reflection has me going through a portal framed with stone tiles in grey, sea green, aqua, ochre. I write in my journal: "I woke up at the start of the week with the feeling of being washed up on the shore of my life."

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In a series of essays over several decades, Reclaiming practitioner and historian of science David Kubrin has developed a critical analysis of the social and epistemological upheavals through which what he calls a mechanistic view of the world became hegemonic in European knowledge. As an author and member of Reclaiming from its early years, Kubrin's analysis of the historical conditions of European science has shaped the political theology of Reclaiming as a whole, including being picked up through the influential writings of Starhawk (see Salomonsen 2002: 127n5; e.g. Starhawk 1988: 216). Focusing on the central figure of Isaac Newton, Kubrin highlights how the father of modern mechanistic science was deeply inspired by Hermeticism, holding to ideas of the cosmos as animate and creative, and undertaking studies in alchemy and mathematical mystery traditions (Kubrin 1981: 110-114). Such ideas, Kubrin suggests, were central to Newton's scientific theories, including his theory of the mysterious forces of gravity that operate between all bodies in the cosmos (Kubrin 1981: 112). Yet in the context of Restoration Britain, Kubrin argues, Newton suppressed these ideas in his publications, since they were widely viewed as connected with the radical religious upheavals and social uprisings of the lower classes in the period of the Civil War. Exploring the systematisation of mechanical philosophy and attempts to order and limit ambiguous language through the newly-formed Royal Society, Kubrin suggests that such processes were viewed by reformers such as Thomas Sprat as helping to reinforce a respect for law and order in society (Kubrin 1981: 108).

As a result of these scientific upheavals, heavily imbricated with questions of social control and political order in the mid-seventeenth century, Kubrin suggests, the view of the world as made up of dead matter has become hegemonic: “The world in essence, is colorless, tasteless, soundless, devoid of thought or life. It is essentially dead, a machine” (Kubrin 1981: 108). More generally, he links the emergence of this mechanistic worldview across the scientific communities of Europe to a rapid expansion of extractive industries, the emergence of a nascent capitalism, and the processes of European colonisation of the Americas, Asia and Africa (Kubrin 2002-3). By serving both to dehumanise the mechanised world and marginalise the specific local knowledge, healing practices and “animist” spiritual beliefs of indigenous peoples, he argues, the scientific revolution which deanimated the material world is deeply implicated in the fraught history of colonialism and in the widespread environmental and social exploitation we see today. And, while focusing his critique on colonialism and capitalism, he is also critical of radical theorists such as Karl Marx, who he sees as perpetuating this mechanical worldview.<sup>2</sup>

While wanting to problematise the equation often made by Reclaiming members between their own practices, those of pre-industrial Europe and those of indigenous “animist” religions around the world, it worth noting that a parallel set of connections between European Enlightenment epistemology and the expansion of European colonialism has recently been made by a number of historians. Drawing on the work of postcolonial theorists such as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), Kathleen Davis, a scholar of medieval history, calls into question the designation of a period of Europe’s past as “medieval”, a periodisation which she says did not emerge until the colonial era of the Enlightenment:

The construction of a “medieval” period characterized by irrational superstition was fully involved with the identification of colonial subjects as irrational and superstitious, and this process bore concrete effects upon colonized peoples through the systems of rule that it generated and legitimized. The idea of a superstitious Middle Ages, in other words, did not preexist the “superstitious” colonial subject upon which it became mapped; rather, they emerged together, each simultaneously making possible and verifying the other (Davis 2008: 20).

What is at issue here is not the specific modes of knowledge associated with that period of Europe’s past, nor how closely or distantly such ideas mirrored those of the Enlightenment’s ‘others’, but the making of that ‘superstitious’ past as a rejected ‘other’ of Enlightenment knowledge, and how this was implicated in the making of colonised ‘others’.<sup>3</sup> While Davis focuses on secularisation as a whole, the rejection of those forms of knowledge labelled ‘magic’, ‘occult’ and ‘witchcraft’ has been more totalising than the rejection of religious belief, which after all still has widespread social acceptance.<sup>4</sup> Pagans within Reclaiming identify with that rejected knowledge, sometimes claiming historical genealogy, but more centrally seeking to unearth what has been buried in the shadows of the European Enlightenment’s creation of its pre-modern past, in order to undermine the exclusions that now comprise a powerful basis of post-Enlightenment knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

Problems of social scientific knowledge about spirits, magic and witchcraft – Hirst and Woolley’s presumed ‘we’ of “modern consciousness” who find claims of witchcraft “preposterous”; Moore and Sanders’ description of British people who have their tarot cards read as “gullible”; Turner’s recognition that she had been operating under an unstated understanding that there was a “white” side of the divide, thereby denying coevalness to her interlocutors – each of these reflects in

different ways these long, contested historical processes of the constitution of officially sanctioned European knowledge as divested of 'superstition'. This same framing resonates with the marginalisation of specifically Christian beliefs among Anglo-American anthropologists discussed by Fountain (this volume). Notwithstanding anthropology's enduring and often admirable tradition of seeking to engage with the beliefs of colonised 'others', the excision of 'superstition' from sanctioned European knowledge is reflected in the careful bracketing of magical knowledge in many ethnographic accounts, in the long debates about the rationality of magical beliefs and in the tendency to reduce ideas around magic and spirits to social terms. And it is reflected, too, in the processes that have led some scholars to continue to adopt a double standard: dismissing the magical beliefs of Anglo-Europeans while respecting those in other social contexts.

To understand further the implications these changing conceptions of legitimate knowledge hold for anthropology it is worth turning to Foucault's (1966) analysis identifying two major epistemological breaks underpinning the development of current European scientific knowledge, in what he calls the establishment of the "Western *ratio*" and the founding of the social sciences rooted in the "figure of man". With respect to the sixteenth century, Foucault argues that the "project of elucidating 'Natural Magics'" was revived in this period "and for contemporary reasons: because the fundamental configuration of knowledge consisted of the reciprocal cross-referencing of signs and similitudes" (Foucault 1966: 37). He quotes Paracelsus (a key figure among contemporary Pagans) to illustrate this cross-referencing of the properties of things and their signs:

But we men discover all that is hidden in the mountains by signs and outward correspondences; and it is thus that we find out all the properties of herbs and all that is in stones. There is nothing in the depths of the seas, nothing in the heights of the firmament that man is not capable of discovering. There is no mountain so vast that it can hide from the gaze of man what is within it; it is revealed to him by corresponding signs (quoted in Foucault 1966: 36).

Foucault describes the orders of knowledge characterising natural history in this period, up to and including the world of sixteenth century natural historian Aldrovandi:

Until the time of Aldrovandi, History was the inextricable and completely unitary fabric of all that was visible of things and of the signs that had been discovered or lodged in them: to write the history of a plant or an animal was as much a matter of describing its elements or organs as of describing the resemblances that could be found in it, the virtues that it was thought to possess, the legends and stories with which it had been involved, its place in heraldry, the medicaments that were concocted from its substance, the food it provided, what the ancients recorded of it, and what travellers might have said of it... [Aldrovandi], in the case of each animal he examined, offered the reader, and on the same level, a description of its anatomy and of the methods of capturing it; its allegorical uses and mode of generation; its habitat and legendary mansions; its food and the best way of cooking its flesh (Foucault 1966: 140-141).

By contrast, he points to Jonston's *Natural history of quadrupeds* in the mid-seventeenth century, which he suggests is representative of a "landmark" event, "the sudden separation... of two orders of knowledge henceforward to be considered different", the divorce of an object's qualities and properties from its representations and allegorical meanings, its legends and symbolism (Foucault 1966: 140). As Foucault points out, this is not a matter of what more has been learnt of a plant or animal, but of what is now left out of such accounts. Upon this separation developed the emergence of the methods of tabulating and classifying characteristic of Linneaus in natural history, the

‘mathesis’ of the natural sciences, and the corresponding systematisation of other disciplines such as language and economics.

Scholars such as Davis are critical of Foucault’s tendency to echo the dominant periodising laid down in the Enlightenment history he seeks to critique (Davis 2008: 19), and many of these transformations might be seen as more partial, gradual and transitory. Nevertheless there are compelling differences between how Paracelsus or Aldrovandi appear to construct knowledge of the world, and what would be legitimate for publication today. And a further shift was initiated (Foucault places this around the beginning of the nineteenth century), as these disciplines begin to turn upon themselves, to become drawn out by their long histories, a process that gives us the foundations of knowledge on which we currently draw.<sup>6</sup> For Foucault, this self-consciousness of the conditions of knowledge turning upon itself helps precipitate the appearance of what he calls the ‘figure of man’, the doubling of humans as subjects and as implicated in the order of the world to be known. From this the human sciences arose, appearing “when man constituted himself in Western culture as both that which must be conceived of and that which is to be known” (Foucault 1966: 376). While framed in by the ‘Western ratio’ of physical and biological sciences and formal philosophy, referring back to these for concepts or models or for a basis of mathematical formalisation, according to Foucault, the human sciences are also what emerges from the gaps between the gridlines of this ordering frame (Foucault 1966: 379).

The philosophy of Reclaiming members, aimed at recovering allegorical meanings behind things perceived in the natural world and at foregrounding analogical ties between our being and the cosmos, can be seen as a move to undermine this double-displacement of humans within the order of dominant European knowledge. Reclaiming knowledge recognises an interplay of scientific, sensual, mythological, metaphorical and symbolic understandings of things as informing our complex embeddedness in the cosmos. Thus water is understood as a clear liquid made up of molecules of hydrogen and oxygen, seventy per cent of our bodies, cool and flowing, burbling or turbulent, a quencher of thirst, the source of life on earth, a cleanser, healer and purifier, the nourisher of dreams, the domain of emotions, and the element corresponding to the direction of West, associated with the chalice, evening, autumn and the power ‘to dare’. These associations are malleable and creative – in some places, ritualists may associate this element with a different direction, or consider healing more a property of earth, or feel that they have a special relationship with water that impacts their physical, emotional and spiritual disposition, moulding who they are. But the interpretations and symbolisms humans have lent objects in the natural world are also seen as part of their make up, shaping the accumulated properties of the physical material.

When I spoke with Reclaiming priestess Inanna about my materialist inclinations and my belief that the social changes Reclaiming members aim at could be achieved by non-religious means, she responded:

There is a layer of reality beyond this layer. Once you open up to it, you see that there are patterns. I don’t want to use the word ‘energy’...but, anyway, there is no other word. And it’s material. There are all the things, the physical world, that are understood by science. And above that there is another reality [at this point she held her hands in parallel one above the other] that we need religion to access... A materialist worldview cannot ignore this layer, even though science cannot understand it.

Reclaiming methods, rituals, classes and teachings aim at providing access to and relationship with those aspects of the material world that science cannot understand. The choice to orient towards the 'layer beyond this layer' is, for Reclaiming members, a decision to affirm a subaltern truth resisting the boundaries and limits of current science. This explains the discomfort I felt in consciously rejecting the ontology of spirits and deities of Reclaiming. Such a choice ran the risk of precipitating a closing off to other ways of seeing the world, and thereby to the roots of how Reclaiming members seek to challenge scientific hegemonies in industrial modernity. In the fraught field of practice created by the tendencies within Enlightenment knowledge towards distancing from 'superstitious others', it seemed to place me back on what Turner called the "white" side of the divide.

## Being human

The year is ending. It is winter, and my ritual group is working with Egyptian deities for Solstice. Isis is the focus, but I volunteer to call Osiris, who was dismembered, cast into a river, and reborn. As I invoke, I fall flat on my back and ask Osiris to come take us apart. Within a week, my oceanic world is unmade, life turned over and harshly rerouted, relationships torn asunder; the old life dissolved and the process begun again.

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In Kubrin's writings, he distinguishes between three orders of understanding: information, knowledge and wisdom, critiquing what he sees as the tendency of what he calls the information age to reduce the world to abstract atoms of data. As anthropologists, we may well declare that we avoid reproducing our visions of the world as atoms of data, but in our holistic, qualitative approaches endeavour to increase the wealth of knowledge rather than merely the stores of information. Yet few of us would claim overtly that the purpose of our discipline is the gaining of wisdom. Like religion, my suspicion is that wisdom in our current disciplinary ordering has largely been relegated to the domain of the 'purely personal', rather than being a collective concern. We are comfortable in describing the world, but less at home in discussing how to live well. In his provocative discussion of the layered relationships between anthropology and theology, Joel Robbins echoes something of this sentiment, in reminding us that perhaps in recent decades especially, anthropologists have largely lost sight of the critical agenda implied in our discipline: the idea that through our research we might "convince people to learn from how others live to live otherwise themselves"; or in David Schneider's words, that "somewhere there must be a life really worth living" (Robbins 2006: 288, 292). Perhaps placing the getting of wisdom explicitly at the centre of our agenda could lead us back to questions of the kinds of lives that might be really worth living.

When writing about magic and religion, I am led to ask why is it useful to talk about my own experience? Why does Greenwood open her book *The Anthropology of Magic* with a description of her first, intense trance journey as an ethnographer (2009: 6-7), or Luhrmann her discussion of religiously-inspired hallucinations with her memory of thinking she saw druids at her window during her fieldwork as a graduate student (2012: 191-192)? Certainly, placing spiritual experience in the authorial voice helps allay any sense of scholarly 'superiority' over an 'ignorant', 'credulous' or 'insane' subject of study. It helps trouble the insider/outsider divide by resisting a strict relativism between subject community and scholarly community, implicating the anthropologist to some extent in the experiences and beliefs of those under study. Particularly where an article aims

at explaining (or explaining away) religious experience in social or psychological terms, personal accounts of spiritual encounters can undermine the coherence of that account in a recognition that all humans, including scholars, hold ideas that are inconsistent, partial, fragmentary and contradictory.

Yet this mode of lending veracity through authorial testimony also recalls Pritchard's (2010) critique of those arguments that urge scholars to 'take religion seriously' by remaining endlessly open to religious encounter, forestalling indefinitely all boundaries and closure. Such appeals to an endless state of liminality and suspension of disbelief, she argues, necessitate "a rather spectacular gesture on the part of the scholar... that threatens to upstage the person or object of study" (Pritchard 2010: 1098). They betray "Enlightenment assumptions in which the scholar is the only true agent in these [religious] encounters" (Pritchard 2010: 1102). Personal testimony from the scholar runs the risk of similarly privileging the scholar. In general it risks leaving spiritual experience in the realm of the purely personal; at worst it assigns the mediation of religious insight to the person of the scholar. For the questions raised by religious encounter to have an impact on anthropology, the encounter must therefore move beyond the scholar's experience to the domain of social theory, of how we frame our discipline and of those unstated norms against which religious experience is frequently assessed.

This seems to be part of what Robbins is getting at when he enjoins anthropologists to "imagine that theologians might either produce theories that get some things right about the world they currently get wrong or model a kind of action in the world that is in some or other way more effective or ethically adequate than their own" (Robbins 2006: 287). Yet his partial resolution – that we must "ground other ontologies we bring to the discussion in the way we always have – by finding people who live in their terms and describing how they do so" (Robbins 2006: 292), is in danger of reiterating the contemplative stance that pervades the anthropological project. And while he provides a compelling case, in conversation with the Christian theology of John Milbank, for recognising differences of what Milbank calls "social ontology" (Robbins 2006: 289), my concern here is at the level of ontology in the broader sense – what we might call cosmological ontology – and with challenging those special categories of 'the social' and 'humanity' that delimit the boundaries of our discipline. If Foucault is right, so long as the 'objectivity' of the natural sciences stays intact, anthropology for all its questioning is likely to remain bounded in by the 'Western ratio' and the 'figure of man' (c.f. Dwyer and Muhammad 1982: 256-257). Judging from the issues raised within recent ethnographies of Paganism, despite the compelling attempts to destabilise the 'objective' ground from which ethnography has often been written, the rational human remains an unstated null hypothesis for much anthropological writing.<sup>7</sup>

Reclaiming theology reminds us that we are not isolated atoms of humanity, that intersubjectivity means we are invested not only in each other, but in our surroundings, in the woodlands or coastal foreshores or cities we inhabit, as well as those we visit in our imaginations and in our rituals. A social moment is a triangulation between specific phenomena – some stones, the tides, an image of a Goddess, the presence of a friend. And as our surroundings are absorbed in our breath and our bones, they echo, transmute and return: as cells and exhalations, as dreams, memories and visions, as emotions, inspiration, ideas and theories. I am a being of the ocean, of the rocks and the foam, implicated in the plasticity of blue-green paint and the symbols it traces, in the limn of a shoreline

and the exchange of a fleeting moment. This is what Reclaiming teachers describe as alchemy. Consider the following passage:

Just as plants, animals, stones, air, light, etc, constitute theoretically a part of human consciousness ... so also in the realm of practice they constitute a part of human life and human activity. Humanity *lives* on nature – mean[ing] that nature is the body, with which one must remain in continuous interchange if one is not to die. That the physical and spiritual life of humans is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for humanity is a part of nature.

Decades of human ecology, broadly defined, increasingly demonstrate the wisdom of recognising how we are caught up in our surrounds and they in us – climate change science being perhaps the most stark example. And indeed, those who work between anthropology and environmental science or biology have begun this process of foregrounding an understanding that the wider environment is tied up in our makeup as humans. Yet to place this understanding at the centre of our work would seem to require us to knock down the wall dividing anthropology from all of the natural sciences, including physics – that discipline specialising in the study of stones, air and light – in order that we move beyond the bounds of both. Taken to its full logic, such an approach begins to unravel our discipline as a special science of humanity.

Bruno Latour (1993) has shown how ‘the social’ and ‘the natural’ have always been invested in one another in knowledge systems that tend to be called ‘modern’, and how the occlusion of their shared terrain has ironically led to the proliferation of networks and hybrids across these supposedly separate domains. He endorses a situation where “anthropology comes home from the tropics” (Latour 1993: 100) to show how Enlightenment knowledge systems are deeply invested with such interactions. The anthropologising of ‘modern’ epistemologies offers then part of an answer to these concerns, though it rests heavily on the pivot of ethnographic exegesis. Another angle on these issues is offered by Karen Barad (2003), whose feminist epistemology speaks to those such as Donna Haraway and Sandra Harding who have critiqued concepts of pure objectivity in scientific knowledge (e.g. Haraway 1988; Harding 1991) and who embrace a participatory conception of humans in intersubjective relation with other species, with technology and with the material world generally.<sup>8</sup> Drawing on the epistemological and philosophical insights of the physicist Niels Bohr, and his recognition that, in quantum physics, an apparatus mutually implicates experimenter and experimented, Barad generalises a broader analytical approach, showing both the implicatedness of humans in our surrounds and the inadequacy of reified models of the object-world. Viewing phenomena as totalities, as “the ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting ‘components’” (2003: 815) she points the way to how we might begin to theorise our world as mutually implicated.

Nevertheless, our tenacious disciplinary premises remain highly resistant to any such unravelling.<sup>9</sup> We can no more publish George’s meditations on a rock as natural science than return to the macro- and microcosmic analogical connections of alchemy as the basis for our chemistry. And nor could I hope to publish in a social science journal a paper outlining the underpinnings of the 2008 financial crash in the tense alignments of Pluto, Uranus and Saturn.<sup>10</sup> Nor, perhaps, should I wish to. These are extreme examples, but they highlight the dimensions of our knowledge-worlds affected through those long historical processes of exclusion Kubrin designates as the ‘mechanisation’ of the world.

There are grounds for seeing possibilities of intersecting knowledge that do not necessitate the wholesale adoption of these claims. For those who did not chance to recognise it, the unattributed

quote on human nature above comes not from Reclaiming, but from that supposed paragon of Enlightenment rationalism, Karl Marx.<sup>11</sup> Although what Marx meant by being human and what Reclaiming Pagans might mean by similar claims are not the same thing, the resonance of Marx's statements with Reclaiming ontologies of humanness suggest perhaps more room for a productive conversation than might at first appear. And on two things at least they would likely agree: expanding how we understand the world to uncover the insights of subaltern knowledge begins with practice; and if successful would almost certainly end with a total remaking of our current disciplinary orders of knowledge.

## Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the Australian National University and made possible by support from the Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley. I am grateful to anonymous reviewers and to many colleagues – particularly Margaret Jolly, Alan Rumsey and Gilbert Herdt – for comments on drafts of this paper. I also thank those Reclaiming members who taught me so much, and who challenged me to think alchemically.

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- <sup>1</sup> The literal meaning of the term 'theology', with its monotheistic roots, is somewhat awkward in this Reclaiming context, since Reclaiming ideas of divinity are plural, multi-gendered and fluid, embracing pantheistic, anthropomorphic and myriad other conceptions. Many feminists in Pagan and Goddess traditions prefer to use a feminine form of the term, 'thealogy', to emphasise their focus upon a Goddess or goddesses. However, this too appears overly narrow for those Reclaiming members seeking to celebrate gender-fluid, androgynous, pan-gendered and ungendered forms of deity. However, Reclaiming members do at times speak of Pagan theologies, or discuss the need to deepen their theological roots, suggesting that the concept has important traction despite being somewhat ill fitting. Thus, despite its limitations, I use the term here, emphasising the status of these ideas as a cohered body of knowledge.
  - <sup>2</sup> Kubrin, unpublished notes on 'Marxism and Witchcraft'.
  - <sup>3</sup> This is of course caught up in similar problems of temporalising to those identified by Fabian when he discusses anthropology's tendency to deny 'coevalness' to interlocutors (Fabian 1983), linking these concerns to Turner's self-critique of her earlier ethnographic practices touched on above.
  - <sup>4</sup> This transition it seems was fairly sharp, at least in England, where the same law in 1736 which repealed witchcraft as a crime now criminalised any claim to its performance as fraud (Bailey 2008: 24).
  - <sup>5</sup> The canon of the European Enlightenment was of course not formed in isolation, but rather emerged in less and more fraught encounters around the world, both fleeting and enduring. The emergent ideas of the Enlightenment must then be seen as a product of these myriad encounters, invested with power differentials and violence, but also with more underground patterns of exchange, and always subject to contestation, both from outside of and within European social contexts (Jolly 1992; 2009). Many of the more obviously egregious ideas of Enlightenment and subsequent nineteenth century thought – such as essentialising conceptions of race as inferiority – have become marginalised today not least as a consequence of anti-colonial and anti-racist resistance. Nevertheless, the marginalisation of 'superstition' remains a strong and enduring legacy of these earlier conceptions.
  - <sup>6</sup> Foucault is rightly often critiqued for occluding colonial realities and the impact of global encounters on the development of European knowledge over these centuries, which among other things precipitated the rapid growth of biological and human sciences from the late eighteenth century (e.g. Jolly 1992: 358). Yet, while the impetus for these developments must be seen as far from confined to the internal dynamics of European knowledge, it seems plausible that established exclusions framing knowledge in earlier eras have continued to leave their mark upon these emergent disciplines, within which we broadly work today.
  - <sup>7</sup> A great deal of ethnographic literature on themes such as 'personhood' and 'rationality' has been written to productive end, calling into question fundamental assumptions for example about the universality of social ideas of the person as a rational human atom. Yet, often this literature betrays an underpinning assumption of a normative rational individual of 'the West' against which our models of 'others' can be compared (see e.g. the critique in LiPuma 1998). And as Helliwell and Hindess (1999) have shown, our most basic terms such as 'culture' and 'society' rest on the same underpinning logic of what Foucault calls the 'figure of man'.
  - <sup>8</sup> Haraway's work in these areas is of course extensive, but some of this is neatly telescoped in a fairly recent interview with Nicholas Gane (Haraway 2006).



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- <sup>9</sup> The challenges for a discipline of anthropology in taking up such questions is touched on in Christopher Pinney's exploration of the goal of undoing the subject/object divide: "[undoing] the purification of the world into objects and subjects... is made doubly difficult by the obvious fact that the human sciences are themselves – historically and epistemologically – a reflection of the self-same process of purification" (Pinney 2005: 257).
- <sup>10</sup> This example is taken from an astrology newsletter to which I am subscribed.
- <sup>11</sup> The quote is taken from Marx's writings on estranged labour published as *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, section XXIV (Marx 1959). I have retranslated the generic German 'Mensch' as 'human', as a more accurate reflection of its meaning in current English usage.

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