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# The Methodology of Resistance in Contemporary NeoPaganism

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Rebecca Short  
24 September 2012  
Professor Greta Austin

### The Methodology of Resistance in Contemporary NeoPagan Culture

The number of adherents of NeoPaganism is one of the fastest growing, doubling in numbers about every eighteen months.<sup>1</sup> NeoPaganism is a set of several religious traditions and spiritualities that seek to either (1) painstakingly reconstruct the indigenous religions of the Christianized world, especially those of Europe, or (2) reinterpret these religions in the contemporary era to formulate new religious traditions. Reconstructionist NeoPagan traditions include *Asatru*, a Norse Reconstructionist path, and *Hellenismos*, a Greek Reconstructionist religion. More contemporary, eclectic, new religious movements include Wicca, a tradition of religious witchcraft born out of the ancient Hermetic school of spirituality and magic practice. Wicca is by far the most popular tradition (or, now, set of traditions) in all of NeoPaganism. This religious tradition was started by a man named Gerald Gardner in 1950s England. Wiccans celebrate holidays according to the cycles of the seasons and the moon; it is decidedly an earth-centered religion. And yet despite the growth of NeoPaganism, academic literature on the subject is far from ample, perhaps because the current population of NeoPagans in the United States is about one third of one percent of the total population, or about one million people. Even so, when conducting research on this small group of religions, I found myself caught between 40-year-old accurate scholarship and newer scholarship that was oft riddled with errors, bias and polemic, or sweeping generalizations. One such generalization was made by folklorist Sabina Magliocco when she states in her book *Witching Culture: Folklore and NeoPaganism in America*,

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<sup>1</sup> Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. <http://www.pewforum.org/Religion-News/Modern-Pagans-give-ancient-religion-a-contemporary-twist.aspx>

Witches and Pagans construct their identity in contrast to that of the dominant American culture. Oppositionality is part of the process of identity creation...By choosing to identify as such, Neo-Pagans and revival Witches are knowingly and consciously constructing themselves as the opposite of right society—part of the dark, the irrational, the primitive, and the possibly dangerous. But as we have seen, from their point of view, there is nothing ‘right’ about right society...<sup>2</sup>

She describes the process of NeoPagan identity formation as one of “the romance of subdominance,” or a revolutionary effort to replace dominant culture with a subculture or counter-culture. But is this true? Are NeoPagans inherently reactionary? Feeling that there was more to one million people’s religious traditions than a reaction against dominant religion or culture, I sought to find evidence other than the scant few book sources I could find. In order to formulate the language I needed to describe the information I learned, I also needed to explore and expand upon the work of another writer, ritual theorist Catherine Bell. Due to the lack of available research, I decided to travel across the West Coast of the United States and interview people, attend rituals, and otherwise gather data to arrive at a more accurate understanding of the relationship between NeoPaganism and dominant culture. In my travels, I discovered that the most prevalent and most potent aspect of NeoPagan identity and dialogue with dominant culture was in their use of ritual.

Therefore my research this summer focused on two topics: whether or not NeoPagans self-identify as a counter-cultural movement, and if so, how this identity is revealed through their spiritual and ritual practices and lives. This project is designed to be the qualitative and statistical groundwork to supplement the ongoing writing of my Honors Program thesis, which concerns itself with how emerging Neo-Pagan religious groups align themselves and construct rituals in opposition to dominant social norms in order to bring about, in their eyes, a more peaceable, harmonious world. Many NeoPagan traditions are founded upon principles of cultural resistance

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<sup>2</sup> Magliocco, 185, 202.

and revolution, seeking to overturn systems of human and ecological injustice. They conduct rituals, seminars, and workshops to perpetuate and expand this counter culture in the hope that it will one day override and replace current dominant cultural norms. Rituals involved in this process include vibrant public rituals that are staged at political and social protests, seeking to both gain awareness as well as enact change on a metaphysical, spiritual level. But not all NeoPagans do this.

Upon writing my thesis, which began as a part of an independent study project I conducted in Fall 2011, I discovered that the text-based research was insufficient to support my critique of progressive religious ritual theory, especially the work of Catherine Bell, and cultures of resistance. Catherine Bell's ritual theory argues that religious rituals are not always meant to reinforce social norms onto a person or group. In fact, rituals allow a playing field for acts of resistance to social norms, like wearing a T-shirt with a provocative slogan on it to a church service in order to raise awareness about some issue or another about the ritual practice, rather than wearing the usual, socially-approved garb. However, Bell's work only focuses on acts of resistance by individuals in a ritual against people who enact the ritual. In my thesis, I argue that entire groups can utilize ritual for resistance, not only within the ritual context, but also to use ritual as an inherent tool of resistance to enact change in the dominant culture.

I found that documentation of these NeoPagan religious groups, especially groups that purport a culture of resistance, is scant at best, and the eminent works of anthropology and ethnography of NeoPaganism are very dated, some originally published over 40 years ago.<sup>3</sup> To

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<sup>3</sup> The book I am referencing in particular here in particular is *Drawing Down the Moon* by Margot Alder, which was originally published in 1969 and has enjoyed a few updated editions. Another major work in ethnography and folklore in Neo-Paganism in America is Sabina Magliocco's *Witching Culture*, published in 2004. However, aside from these works, an academic-level critical engagement of Neo-Paganism is rare.

write a thesis that is truly complete and based firmly in a plethora of examples, I needed to explore NeoPagan communities and get to know their adherents. By employing a variety of ethnographic methods, I gathered the necessary information about how NeoPagans construct their religious identity, especially if/how these groups or rituals have a main purpose to oppose dominant culture. By exploring the dynamics of identity formation in NeoPaganism, this project will give me the basic groundwork and understanding of NeoPagan cultures of resistance in order to start about their rituals and how they use those rituals to reinforce their revolutionary mission. However, as I posited earlier, is Magliocco right that all NeoPagans participate in such a mission or identify as being a part of a counter-culture? Furthermore, what does the answer to that question imply about the formation of identity within any subcultural group? Is every non-dominant identity inherently reactionary? The answers could only be achieved by getting into the field and asking the practitioners themselves about how they came to be NeoPagan and why they choose to continue to identify as such.

Unlike what other scholars have argued, NeoPagans do not necessarily include attitudes or acts of resistance or counter-culturalism as an essential part of their core beliefs and practices. Therefore I shall demonstrate how NeoPagans engage in dominant norms without an attitude of counter-culturalism, as well as provide a more thorough analysis of how NeoPagans do engage dominant values and norms in thought, word, and deed.

What I would like to stress about conducting this project is that although I am going in with a particular theme in mind—how Neo-Pagans construct ritual to oppose dominant social norms—I am still very much open to experiences that will contradict my current thesis. My objective is not to support my current thesis as such, without further revision, but rather to contribute to a small yet growing body of academic literature devoted to understanding this religious group. I

would also like to note that many sections of this paper have been borrowed from previous research I have done throughout the past year, and in some cases, I have chosen to simply reproduce what I feel was written best the first time around, particularly in the sections A Note on Scholarly Research and Bell and Ritual Theory. Of course, sections on my research findings and conclusions are all original, for these are the fruits of my chunk of research this past summer. This paper in particular is one step in my total research process and a synthesis of all of my past work on the subject. This project is ongoing and will culminate in a final draft in the future, for I will be devoting my fall semester of this year to completing the last ends of this research.

#### A Note about Research and Scholarly Distance

For the sake of transparency and intellectual honesty, I should reveal the means by which I arrived at certain conclusions or gathered certain information, since a few things about the nature of ritual of new religious movements like Wicca I have learned from direct experience, rather than through the works of scholarly writers. I am hesitant to reveal my personal connection with the practice of Wicca, hoping instead to cite sources given from outside the community, but unfortunately little scholarly information exists about Wiccan ritual studies. Of the few sources that exist, many are written by insiders of these or similar traditions—Sabina Magliocco, for example, or Philip Heselton<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Philip Heselton wrote a book called *Gerald Gardner and the Cauldron of Inspiration*, a biography of Gardner and the formation of the religion now known as Wicca. Considering that Wicca is by far the largest and fastest-growing contemporary NeoPagan religion, his work contributed a great deal of new and important information that has helped people understand Wicca and its roots. Philip Heselton is also a NeoPagan himself, initiated into a Gardnerian coven with direct lineage to Gerald Gardner, the “inventor” of Wicca, and the first Wiccan coven. I cited this book extensively in the thesis I wrote for my independent study project.

I first came to be interested in Wicca during my high school years and first started practicing what is often called “solitary eclectic Wicca” shortly before I turned eighteen years of age, in 2008. As I explored the religion further, I came to be a part of a more theologically conservative group of young intellectuals who purported the thesis that only British Traditional Wicca was the “real” Wicca, and all other claims to the title “Wicca” were products of severely unethical appropriation. In crisis about the nature of my spirituality (was I in contact with thoughtforms created to fulfill my own selfish desires, as they said of non-traditional eclectic Wiccans, or was I in contact with real deities?), I decided to become initiated into a “proper” tradition of Wicca.

When I moved to Washington State to pursue a bachelor’s degree in religious studies, I placed an ad in a well-known British Traditional Wiccan mailing list called Amber and Jet, asking if any covens in the Seattle area were open to new students. I was accepted by a small coven, and I studied under them on and off again for over two years. In 2011, the coven decided to disband on amiable terms, leaving me without a teacher. Since then, I have not pursued initiation into a Wiccan coven, nor do I intend to do so anytime soon. Yet, I still consider my studies under this coven to have influenced my spirituality heavily, and very much consider myself a sort of NeoPagan.

As far as the extent of my connections goes, I have talked to numerous members of other British Traditional Wiccan traditions, notably Gardnerians, as well as those of the Kingstone, Mobsian, and Alexandrian traditions. I have attended numerous Pagan and Wiccan gatherings, festivals, and workshops over the short few years I have belonged to the community, both populated by Traditionalist Wiccans (either British or not), solitary Wiccans, non-Wiccan Pagans, and the Pagan-curious. Much of my knowledge about Neo-Pagan community comes

from these in-person conversations and experiences, though I have kept in touch over the Internet with many others, like Alexandrians in Ireland or those whose mobility or location prevent them from meeting me face-to-face.

Here I write as an insider, but not as far inside as Sabina Magliocco and Philip Heselton, on matters of identity and ritual. Though I have been involved with British Traditional Wicca on a personal basis, being in dialogue with Wiccans either in person or by other means of communication, I cannot violate any oaths of secrecy made in order to give very specific details of Wiccan ritual, since I have never been exposed to it, nor would I do so had I been initiated. I believe in honoring the integrity of a religious practice and protecting their rituals regardless of my personal or academic agendas, so I will only and can only reproduce here what I have been freely given by initiates of these traditions, as well as non-British Traditional-type NeoPagans of their own free will during interviews and allowing me to observe them.

My purpose in writing this thesis is to critique and enhance the field of ritual studies. I do not intend in any way to promote Wicca over any other religion, nor to push any other agenda. My only intention is to contribute to the academic study of religion and ritual in areas that I believe to be lacking.

I mention all of this because I have, during the course of my research, been critical of the distance of many spiritually involved, academic authors and writers. Occasionally I have come across passages in the works of folklorists and ethnographers, most notably Sabina Magliocco, that trouble me deeply. She insists that the problem with distinctions of “insider’ and ‘outsider’ is that they presume identity to be fixed and essential, rather than the shifting, negotiated,



contextual construction we now know it to be.”<sup>5</sup> Magliocco also states that she is outside of the insider-outsider category, that she is “neither and both—that how [she looks] at things depends very much upon context, but contains both anthropological and Pagan perspectives at the same time.”<sup>6</sup>

I agree with Magliocco that humans are not the objective observers that we sometimes like to think we are—we are shaped both consciously and unconsciously by our cultures of origin or preference, and those aspects that are unconscious are difficult, if not impossible, to transcend. However, I disagree with Magliocco that the insider-outsider distinction is irrelevant—Magliocco is definitely an insider, but she is an insider that also happens to be trained in ethnography. I will concede to Magliocco that the insider-outsider distinction, as taken as a black-and-white issue, is insufficient to describe the location that a person has toward a subject of interest. That said, there is a measure of skill that is required to report upon religious phenomena so that it can easily be understood by outsiders, without extremes of bias, when one is writing either from the inside or outside.

Magliocco is perhaps far too close to her subject, or she is careless at times with the academic distance of her language. For example, while an interesting perspective, Magliocco’s claim that “the writing of ethnography becomes a magical act, no less than the creation of ritual, the making of a spell, or the manufacture of a sacred object: the ethnographer is by definition a magician,”<sup>7</sup> worries me from an academic standpoint because of the closeness of her blatant statement of spiritual attitude, especially as presented as academic fact. As a NeoPagan myself, I

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<sup>5</sup> Magliocco, *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2004, page15.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Magliocco,18.

understand the point about the shifting of consciousness that Magliocco is trying to make, but I do not think that comparison is appropriate for the academic setting.

I hope to provide an assessment of religious identity that is not so deeply entrenched in my own personal spiritual opinions, giving as much distance between myself and my work as possible. Religion as an academic discipline should be accessible to most everyone without having to wade through others' claims that you are a magician whether you think so or not, terms that perhaps you would never choose for yourself and may find troubling or offensive.

Throughout my paper, I mean to be explicit about my sources, including whether or not I received the information through my own conversations with Wiccans or otherwise.

As always, I encourage critical analysis of my writings, whether I have been remiss in my intention to distance myself or not.

### *Methodology of Research*

In order to gather enough information to write this short foray into the complex process that is the formation of religious identity within Neopaganism, at first I decided to employ only a couple of ethnographic methods (as defined and described by H. Russell Bernard in his *Research Methods in Anthropology*): semi-formal interviews and participant observation. As my research progressed, I also found informal interviews and direct observation immensely helpful. By conducting interviews and having informal conversations with Neopagans, I hoped to gain insight into the more private, hard-to-see factors, like childhood upbringing and spiritual experiences, that determine spiritual identity. When choosing people to interview, I started with my own acquaintances and friends in the Neopagan community and worked my way outward,

employing the snowball method to meet new NeoPagans in the area. I also joined listservs of prominent NeoPagan groups in California especially, since that is entirely new territory for me, in order to gain potential interviewees.

At the conclusion of my research, I interviewed at least 35 people from Washington, Oregon, and California. For the short span of time that I would be working on this project, I thought that 35 was a good number for my exploration in ethnographic fieldwork, despite the fact that there are a great deal many more NeoPagans in the areas I was surveying. The people I interviewed overwhelmingly identified as female; for NeoPaganism, for a myriad of reasons, generally tends to attract more women than men, especially in the traditions more closely related to Wicca and other forms of religious witchcraft. I chose to focus on this exact demographic—people who practice religious witchcraft and a more generic, Wicca-flavored eclectic NeoPaganism—for this is the same demographic that Magliocco, whose claims I am investigating, draws from for her own research. The people I interviewed were between the ages of 18 and 70 years old. I also drew my interview pool from a number of different traditions, from the most eclectic, solitary practitioners to members of very conservative, highly traditional covens of religious witchcraft. Lastly, I talked to NeoPagans who were raised in a NeoPagan household as well as those who chose this identity later in life. Of those who “converted,” they were mostly brought up in Christian homes, except for one, who grew up Baha’I, and a few others who grew up in self-described Wiccan or nonreligious households. All names have been changed or omitted to protect the identity of the people interviewed in this project.

To compliment this introspective analysis, I also chose to include observation methods in order to see how this identity and conceptualization of one’s own religious path looks like in day-to-day life. NeoPagans are intensely practical people, and dealing with the tactile, physical

world is a major, if not essential aspect of their religious lives. Especially within the particular strains of NeoPaganism that I worked with for this project, these people love to work with stones, crystals, herbs, and art. Conducting regular ritual is also important to these people, involving a number of formal ritual tools, candles, and incense. Understanding the enactment of belief in ritual is important because ritual can help reinforce, nourish, and deepen one's own spiritual worldview or sense of community. Therefore I made sure to attend a few NeoPagan rituals; for the final count of my research, I attended at least five.

I attended several meetings of local NeoPagan organizations and attended two major annual festivals. One particular festival draws several hundred NeoPagans from many states and Canada, and the other drew NeoPagans as far away as Australia. Because of the informal nature of most of the interviews I conducted there, I was unable to ascertain the exact origin of these people, and as such my pool of information might be drawn unintentionally from NeoPagans outside of the United States' West Coast. I found that participant-observation was helpful in making new connections, though my experiences in the rituals themselves did not really affect the information I gathered during the interviews.

### *Historiography of Two Religious Witchcraft Groups: British Traditional Wicca and the Reclaiming Tradition*

Before I jump into a full evaluation of Bell's ritual theory, I must first explain what I mean by the terms British Traditional Wicca, its offshoots, and the Reclaiming tradition, what these religions are, and why they are important to the study of ritual theory.

By the term British Traditional Wicca, as I have mentioned in earlier sections, I mean the group of new religious traditions that have evolved directly from the Gardnerian tradition, a

tradition of religious witchcraft that originated in the New Forest area of England around the 1930s and 40s. A retired British civil servant named Gerald Gardner is widely regarded as the father of this movement. Gardner claims to have been approached by members of a Rosicrucian theater organization who professed that they knew him in their previous lives.<sup>8</sup> They then directed him to a coven of witches in the New Forest area, who initiated him into their religion, which Gardner believed to be a survival of ancient Paganism according to the (now debunked) theories of anthropologist Margaret Murray.<sup>9</sup>

While the veracity of Gardner's initiation and the existence of this coven is mostly speculative at best, and perhaps Gardner created this story to lend credence to a religious tradition that he in part invented, it is definitively true that Gardner, along with several other people (most notably his high priestess Doreen Valiente), constructed (or elaborated upon) a religious tradition that has gathered a considerable following.

Gardner first published two fiction books called *A Goddess Arrives* (1939) and *High Magic's Aid* (1949) to put out his religious ideas to the public before the Witchcraft Act of 1735 was repealed in 1951. The Act criminalized the pretence of witchcraft and divination. After the Act was repealed, Gardner published *Witchcraft Today* (1954) and *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (1959), detailing in part the practices of his coven and the nature of his spirituality. Gerald hoped to spread the ideas of religious witchcraft in this manner, hoping to win "converts" so that he might be reincarnated into a witch family after his death, according to his beliefs about the afterlife.

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<sup>8</sup> Heselton, 18.

<sup>9</sup> Margaret Murray posited a thesis that a strain of pagan belief and practice survived the Christianization of England through to modernity, and this witch cult worshipped a prehistoric "Horned God." These arguments can be found in her books *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921) and *The God of the Witches* (1931). Her arguments have received heavy criticism since their publication, including historian Ronald Hutton.

Hallmarks of this form of religious witchcraft include, as mentioned above, worship of a solar, horned god and a lunar goddess. These witches observed eight solar holidays, called Sabbats, which occurred at the equinoxes, solstices, and the halfway points in between, and whose names are derived from ancient Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, and Norse festivals. They also observed lunar holidays, called Esbats, celebrated usually on the eve of a full moon. Valiente, Gardner's famous high priestess, is credited with writing most of the rituals and poems that belong to the liturgy and lore of their tradition, whose nature is primarily orthopraxic, or, in other words, concerned mostly with the correct performance of ritual, rather than correct belief. The exact wording and nature of these rituals are kept secret by initiates of the tradition, though Gardner and others have published pieces and parts of liturgical texts and ritual themes in various works<sup>10</sup> to help give others a better idea of what to expect when encountering this tradition (henceforth called Gardnerian Wicca).

Furthermore, the initiates of Gardnerian Wicca are all a part of a priesthood—there is no laity. They are initiated by cross-gender initiation wherein men initiate women and women initiate men, yet there exists the exception that people can initiate close relatives of the same gender, the idea being that you are initiating another part of yourself. The goal of ritual is to pay homage to the god and goddess as two aspects of a singular supreme deity, who is ultimately unknowable, but has made itself accessible by splitting into gendered poles (male and female, active and passive, solar and lunar, etc.) and governing the natural cycles of Earth and the

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<sup>10</sup> As in *Witchcraft Today* (1954) and *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (1959) by Gerald Gardner, and, from an Alexandrian Wiccan perspective, *The Witches' Bible: The Complete Witches' Handbook* by Janet and Stewart Farrar.

universe. During the course of the ritual, there is time for a “magical working,” or an act of witchcraft.<sup>11</sup>

The roots of Gardner’s tradition are easy enough to pick out, tracked extensively in works like *Triumph of the Moon* by historian Ronald Hutton and Gerald Gardner and the *Cauldron of Inspiration* by Wiccan initiate Philip Heselton. Gardner was most influenced by renowned secretive and occult esoteric orders like Rosicrucianism, Freemasonry, Ordo Templi Orientis (through his personal connection to Aleister Crowley himself<sup>12</sup>), the famous grimoire called *The Key of Solomon*, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and Hermeticism, as well as Margaret Murray, as mentioned earlier.<sup>13</sup>

For example, Masonic influences include the use of the phrases “so mote it be” and “merry meet, merry part, merry meet again” and “the Craft;” nudity, being bound and blindfolded, and use of a sword during initiation, presentation of working tools upon initiation, and ritual circumambulation. From the *Key of Solomon*, Gardner was inspired to include similar rituals of the benediction of salt, the ritual bath, and the conjuration of the sword, among others. Material appropriated from Crowley and the Ordo Templi Orientis (of which Gardner was a member), was derived mostly from the Gnostic Mass and “*The Book of the Law*.”<sup>14</sup> The origins of Gardnerian ritual have been covered extensively by historian Ronald Hutton and Gardnerian initiate Aidan Kelly.<sup>15</sup>

Murray’s major contribution to Gardner’s worldview was supplying the (false) idea that there existed a single, widespread tradition of religious witchcraft that existed in Europe until the

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<sup>11</sup> I learned the facts presented in this paragraph from my personal associations, though this information can be verified elsewhere through the works of Gardner, the Farrars, and others.

<sup>12</sup> Heselton, p.179-214.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 290-302.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Hutton, 227.

seventeenth century; this fertility cult worshipped a horned god and each group of witches, called a coven, was made up of thirteen members who gathered at major solar holidays, called sabbats, and business meetings, called esbats. Their practices included dancing, ritual sex, and the veneration of their god—a horned god—as incarnate in whichever witch acted as the physical host for the god that evening.<sup>16</sup> Gardnerian Craft incorporates the incarnation of a deity, called “Drawing Down the Moon,” in which the Gardnerian Goddess is “drawn down” into the body of a female priestess, the names of sabbats and esbats (though esbats are gatherings at lunar holidays), and the nature and purpose of many of the rites.

Gardner also influenced his tradition by incorporating his love of naturism,<sup>17</sup> as seen in the mandatory “skyclad,” or nude, participation of the tradition’s adherents, and from his work and study of indigenous traditions in Malaysia.<sup>18</sup> He was also fond of poetry and copied many works into his Book of Shadows, or a sort of magical cookbook he created that contained rituals, spells, psychic exercises, and any other thing he deemed worthy of inclusion.

It is no secret that Gardner’s witchcraft tradition is heavily heteronormative. Alex Sanders, an initiate of Gardner’s tradition (first dubbed “Gardnerian” by a witch from another—perhaps competing?—tradition of witchcraft as a pejorative, but the name stuck and lost its derogatory nature quickly), took issue with Gardner’s refusal to initiate homosexuals. Alex broke off from the Gardnerian tradition, the first of many schisms, and established the Alexandrian tradition, naming his wife as his high priestess. While many believe that Alex named the tradition for himself, he claimed that he named it after the great library at Alexandria.

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<sup>16</sup> Hutton, 195.

<sup>17</sup> Heselton, p. 101-134.

<sup>18</sup> Seen most readily in the incorporation of a ritual blade, the *athame*, into Gardnerian Wicca. This incorporation stems from Gardner’s fascination with ritual blades, like the Malay *kris*. Heselton, 347.



Sanders was a more vocal advocate of religious witchcraft in England than Gardner and garnered much media attention.

As the tradition gathered more adherents and spread to the United States, more schisms occurred, establishing several more traditions. These traditions include Mobsian Wicca and a group of traditions called Central Valley Wicca. A group of either Gardnerians or Alexandrians emigrated from England directly to the Central Valley region of California and established several traditions there, including Silver Crescent, Majestic, Assembly of Wicca, Kingstone, and Daoine Coire. These traditions together comprise what is now called British Traditional Wicca.

Following the publication of numerous texts about these new traditions of witchcraft and the explosion of the number of adherents, some Wiccans chose to diverge from the orthopraxic nature of these traditions and start their own, though only loosely related, yet many taking the name “Wicca” with them. What unites British Traditional Wiccans as opposed to other kinds of Wiccans is a claim to an unbroken lineage of initiation from Gerald Gardner himself or a member of his coven, as well as a “core” of allegedly unaltered ritual praxis, which is passed from priest to priestess to priest by oral lore and a written text in the Book of Shadows, copied by hand following initiation. According to the information I have gathered from numerous practitioners of a variety of British Traditional Wiccan traditions, each coven is allowed to add to their ritual and Book of Shadows as long as it does not replace the core of unaltered ritual nor changes the core in any way. Heselton’s research agrees with mine: “Indeed, it seems likely that the Book of Shadows currently in use by most present-day Gardnerians is a much more elaborate document than anything which may have existed when Gardner was initiated.”<sup>19</sup> Which parts are allowed to be changed and which parts are not is a matter that is shrouded in secrecy, due to the

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<sup>19</sup> Heselton, 290.

nature of the oaths sworn by the initiates upon initiation, which states to not divulge any part of the ritual practices of their coven, core or not. In other words, part of Wiccan ritual is, at least allegedly, unchanged and links all British Traditional Wiccan traditions together, but even two covens of the same tradition may seem very different depending on what non-core practices they have incorporated due to the dynamic and flexible nature of general Wiccan praxis.

The establishment of the phrase British Traditional Wicca occurred following much confusion over what exactly constituted the term Wicca. Following the publishing boom of information claiming to be Wicca, especially in the 1990s to the present, the term has been used to describe solitary practitioners who appropriate any spiritual practices they like and eliminating anything they do not like at will, or covens that work exclusively with Celtic (or another historically Pagan pantheon's) deities as more specific manifestations of Gardner's god and goddess, and more. Many British Traditional Wiccans, who keep to the core of their lineage traditions, bemoaned the unapproved appropriation of the name of their religion to stand for, in their eyes, a non-orthodoxic, non-orthopraxic hodgepodge of practices and individuals who had appropriated everything but the kitchen sink. With a lack of unity of common praxis, deities, and beliefs, why do non-properly-lineaged, eclectic Neo-Pagans choose to adopt the term of a specific, fertility-based, exclusive religion? Perhaps more importantly, who has the authority to define what is Wicca and what is not? Therefore, they decided to separate themselves from the popular notion of Wicca as being highly eclectic by specifying that they practice a certain kind of Wicca. To this day, many British Traditional Wiccans despise the appropriation of the name Wicca and are unafraid to decry what they perceive as the horrific desanctification of their tradition by "spiritual imperialists," though a great many are perfectly at ease about the evolution of the term Wicca to encompass a great many things.

British Traditional Wicca continues to thrive today, yet more people these days tend to practice with non-British Traditional covens or, especially, as solitaires. This demographic shift is due to the ease of accessibility of books, rather than working partners, who may be hard to come by when one lives in a more remote or less spiritually diverse (or tolerant) area.<sup>20</sup> While the “correct” use of Wicca continues to be debated to this day, the majority of those who study Wicca, either personally or academically, use the term to describe a number of traditions and solitary practices greater than just British Traditional Wicca. However, for the ease of this paper, since a more general, non-traditional Wicca is my focus, I will henceforth make clear which demographic I am talking about in particular.

The Reclaiming tradition is a tradition of religious witchcraft that was founded in the San Francisco Bay area in 1982 first as the Reclaiming Collective by a well-known Neo-Pagan named Starhawk, but it later became an official incorporated religion in the mid-1990s. Its influences include Dianic feminist Witchcraft and the Anderson Feri tradition of religious witchcraft, both of which have similarities with Wicca but usually are distinguished from it, even in the broadest use of the term.

From its inception, Reclaiming has always run on a non-hierarchical, collective, and communal basis, stressing consensus decision-making, community values, collective action, ecology, feminism, and political action.<sup>21,22</sup> Magliocco notes that “Reclaiming initiates must

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<sup>20</sup> The information from this paragraph and the preceding two comes from my own conversations and experiences. A Mohsian tradition high priestess who lives near my university, on Anderson Island, WA, holds to the more conservative definition of Wicca, as does an Alexandrian high priestess that I am routinely in contact with, who lives in Ireland. Daoine Bandia, the coven I studied under, is fully accepting of the use of the term *Wicca* by non-British Traditional Wiccans.

<sup>21</sup> Adler, Margot. *Drawing Down the Moon*, 123-4.

<sup>22</sup> Magliocco, 81.

make a pledge to work for political change,” and such a pledge had made them prominent activists in the San Francisco area.<sup>23</sup>

Reclaiming’s only secret component is their initiation, which is optional; all other events are public, sometimes drawing numbers in the few thousands, or operated by smaller covens (traditionally no larger than fifteen members). Initiation is tailored to each individual and their needs, rather than a standard set initiation as seen in Gardnerian Craft.<sup>24</sup> This tradition is entrenched in a worldview that identifies power in “all systems of oppression as interrelated and rooted in a structure of domination and control.”<sup>25</sup> Reclaiming groups run “covens, affinity groups, and Witch camps, worldwide summer intensives that transmit the tradition.”<sup>26</sup>

### *Bell and Ritual Theory*

Before I begin explaining NeoPaganism and its relationship to counter-culturalism, especially through ritual, I think it would be best to explain the work of Bell first. Catherine Bell seeks to approach ritual theory from a place different from her predecessors. She argues that ritual theory tends to universalize the characteristics of cultural activities that are usually described as ritual, and, in this process, a significant portion of the unique meanings and intents behind those activities is lost.<sup>27</sup> In other words, the attempt to create an overarching definition of ritual only allows us to understand any ritual from the rigid norms set by the definition instead of by the specific cultural and spiritual contexts of that activity. Some rituals in some cultures will look much different in form and purpose than rituals of another culture, so the attempt to create a

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Adler, 124.

<sup>26</sup> Magliocco, 82.

<sup>27</sup> *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 205.

bridge between the two by creating a universal definition provides only a vague, imprecise, or overly inflexible understanding of other forms of ritual.

Bell navigates these problems by first overturning and refuting traditional characteristics of ritual, and then secondly creating an understanding of ritual that allows for specific cultural meaning and context through the concepts of ritualization and performance. Bell first lays out criteria that her predecessors have usually used to characterize and explain ritual: “the acting out of social relationships [...] in order to express and alter them,” “to control by defining, modeling, and communication social relations,”<sup>28</sup> and “the features of formality, fixity, and repetition.”<sup>29</sup> Instead, she posits that ritual “is always contingent, provisional, and defined by difference,” the latter of which is defined as an action that “contrast[s] the routine activity.”<sup>30</sup> She argues that the formality and fixity of ritual that previous ritual theorists have stated are hallmarks of ritual are not so, but rather that they are “a frequent, but not universal strategy.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, the old definition of ritual as a fixed, repeated action excludes other certain activities that can and should be counted as ritual.

Bell then engages three major concepts of old ritual theory—belief, ideology, and legitimation—before she tackles her major critique of ritual theory, which is that the point of ritual is not to reinforce hierarchical social norms in order for some people to control others, as other ritual studies have assumed, but rather that ritual “constitutes a particular dynamic of social empowerment.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 89.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 90.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 91.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 92.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 181.

For example, Bell critiques the idea that ritual is meant to legitimize the power that some hold over others by invoking a Foucauldian critique of power. Bell aligns herself with Foucault, stating that power is not something that can be obtained to force others to act according to one's own will, but rather that power is the ability to influence the direction things already in motion. In this way, ritual does not "refer, express, or symbolize anything outside itself,"<sup>33</sup> but rather involves a complex interaction between actors of ritual, namely their abilities to consent to and abilities to resist what happens in the ritual. Most importantly, "every power relationship implies the potential for struggle or confrontation."<sup>34</sup> This theory is a direct blow to traditional conceptions of ritual, since Bell is now defining ritual as something that requires agency of all those involved rather than an attempt of those who hold social authority to legitimize and thereby continue to possess that authority by pressing conceptions of the necessity of hierarchy into the minds of ritual participants. Ritual participants, with their agency according to Bell, have the ability to resist and reject authority that others may try to place upon them within the context of ritual.

In other works by Bell, such as her article, "Performance," she continues to move away from fixed, formal, and repetitive conceptions of ritual by migrating to the language of performance theory. She states, "performance theory is more likely to eschew concerns with how ritual molds people to maintain the status quo, looking instead at how individuals fashion rituals that shape their world."<sup>35</sup> Here, Bell continues to hold fast to the view of human agency<sup>36</sup> in ritual and looks toward a conception of ritual that is not meant to impress and legitimize social

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 195.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 201.

<sup>35</sup> "Performance," 209.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 209: "...performance is a fresh awareness of human agents as active creators of both cultural continuity and change rather than passive inheritors of a system who are conditioned from birth to replicate it."

norms but rather a utilization of ritual to continually sculpt and redefine social norms. Perhaps the most important concept to understanding performance theory is, again, the idea that a ritual should be understood in terms of “a specific ethnographic instance instead of a generalized description in the abstract.”<sup>37</sup> Again, Bell argues that we must allow cultural context to dictate which actions of that culture are ritual ones and which ones are not by virtue of understanding which actions are seen as normal and which actions are seen to be specially done. By doing this, one reduces the amount of assumptions that the ritual theorist brings into the study of some action and thereby avoiding assumptions of an “underlying system or structure” that might not be there at all.<sup>38</sup> Bell’s conception of ritual theory, then, is highly anti-comparativist and demands a thorough understanding of a culture’s unique worldview before one can begin to define the actions that separate that culture’s ritual from other actions and their purposes.

Bell is highly conscious of potential problems of performance theory, citing its “tendency to flirt with universalism” which takes root in an inclination to “assume that performance is a single, coherent thing, sufficiently the same everywhere.”<sup>39</sup> In other words, even within the context of a culture’s specific worldview and norms, performance theory might not allow for an understanding of rituals within that culture that diverge from the culture’s own norm. In this way, there could be a problem of universalizing within the context of the culture, even if we avoid attempts to universalize conceptions of ritual and performance in old cross-cultural notions of ritual.

One critic of Bell, Ronald Grimes, argues in his article “Performance Theory and the Study of Ritual,” that Bell does not successfully move away from her own universalizing

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 215.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 215.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 218.

tendencies. He argues that Bell continues to provide universal definitions of performance and ritualization, saying that, “whether one calls them ‘basic’ rather than ‘universal’ hardly matters.”<sup>40</sup> I think that Grimes misses the point Bell is trying to make—that some ritual seem to have common characteristics and that these are the characteristics that old ritual theorists have gravitated toward in defining ritual, but that these characteristics exclude many other forms of action that could be accurately classified as ritual. The point I believe that Bell is trying to make is that while some strategies exist to identifying ritual in some instances no matter the cultural context, not all ritual can be identified this way, and thus there exists a need for a definition of ritual that is inclusive of any cultural norm.

In her “Performance” article, Bell complicates her own theory by citing the example of the Chinese tradition of offering incense to the ancestors. She is aware that even her culturally inclusive definition of performance may not account for the divergence of some Chinese ritual practice whereby an individual demonstrates her own agency by performing the offering in a different manner than is usually practiced throughout China. She acknowledges, “Attempts to formulate a system run into counterexamples and regional differences very quickly.”<sup>41</sup>

My only offering to save Bell is that the ritual theorist must be vigilant to these divergences and must be ready to explain why these divergences occur within a culture. However, Bell’s awareness of her own problems with universalization does not throw out her critique of old ritual theory altogether. Performance theory still holds on strong to the idea of human agency and innovation in ritual, which I consider to be the key concept in critiquing traditional ritual theory.

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<sup>40</sup> *New Approaches to the Study of Religion*. “Performance Theory and the Study of Ritual,” page 125.

<sup>41</sup> “Performance,” page 218.



My own concerns about Bell's work is not so much focused on problems of universalization but rather her lack of exploration into the use of ritual to sculpt culture outside of the ritual context, whereby a ritual community invokes their own agency within the larger culture to skew certain events in their favor. Bell is aware that ideas of performance theory have "significantly affected how many people today think about and engage in their own religious activities," meaning that becoming aware of ritual and performance theory allows one to better construct actions that make the most out of human agency. However, her awareness of "revising canons and fostering new styles of ritualization—notably styles that emphasize the communal, the performative, and the symbolic" is never actually extended and discussed at length in support of such a notion.

For example, Bell relies heavily on the theory of the ritualization of the body, which she derives from Foucault. She quotes Foucault extensively to provide the idea that the body—or, in other words, the individual—is the "most basic and fundamental level of power relations."<sup>42</sup> She elaborates upon this concept, saying "the individual so constituted is not so much a vehicle of power as that the very microcluster of relations that constitutes power itself."<sup>43</sup> In a ritual context, the body and its participation in ritual are meant to symbolize the societal group and the social body, especially the "strategic play of power, of domination and resistance, within the arena of the social body."<sup>44</sup> In her "Performance" article, Bell cites as an example a hypothetical individual's deviance from the widespread Chinese ancestor veneration practice as an act of resistance.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Foucault, as quoted in *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 202.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 203

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 204

<sup>45</sup> "Performance," 217.

What Bell fails to mention is this aforementioned “communal” aspect said to be so important to the study of ritualization. A crucial point that Bell misses is that sometimes individuals gather together to resist dominant power relations or institutions in broader society. Bell also, like many other ritual theorists, such as Durkheim, focuses too much on dominant ritual practices (like the use of incense in Chinese ancestor veneration), rather than citing any minority ritual groups that are established because of a need to shift dominant paradigms. Instead, not on the individual is the site of resistance—entire groups of individuals can also function as a site of resistance, and, in the context of that group’s religious worldview, the group dynamic is the most important, most fundamental aspect of resistance that can ensure the success of that ritual in any significant way. I believe that an exploration of ritual groups that actively do this in their rituals is essential to support Bell’s claims that such a relationship exists in the realm of ritual—citing Foucault alone is not enough to support her argument.

All that is left now is to provide an analysis of ritual theory, especially the work of Bell, in light of non-dominant religious movements. Arguably one of the fastest religious movements in America today is that of Neo-Paganism, which in truth is a catch-all term for a great number of smaller religious movements that are either an attempt to reconstruct pre-Christian religions of Europe or to create new religions that are deeply inspired by those ancient traditions. Since there are so many of these movements, I want to look at two of the most significant and popular “sects” of Neo-Paganism that are vibrant today: British Traditional Wicca, its immediate offshoots, and the Reclaiming tradition of religious witchcraft. These are two religious traditions that often or primarily engage power relations in general society while operating from an explicitly non-dominant position. Their conception of the role of ritual within their own religion and in society at large will help elucidate and support Bell’s conception of performance as action

that is primarily concerned with human agency and the ability to sway events that are already in motion, supplementing her inadequate support for her argument. First, a necessary explanation of the British Traditional Wiccan and Reclaiming religions and worldviews is at hand, and then an analysis of their ritual constructions and purposes will follow.

### *Research Findings: Resistance*

I found throughout my interviews and in communication with NeoPagans over the years that there is a prevalent, widespread attitude of hostility toward Christianity. Many people expressed concern about the roots of their religious tradition and believed that Christianity and its authorities and institutions sought to conquer and assimilate as many people and their traditions as they could, especially during the Middle Ages. Often times this idea of a happily pre-Christian Europe is propagated through the myth of a pan-European ancient Goddess cult, which was the foundation of supposed matriarchal (or at the very least, matrilineal) societies that praised the cycles of the seasons and the equality of all genders. Though this myth has largely been debunked by scholars<sup>46</sup>, many NeoPagans still hold to it as the veritable truth. One man I interviewed told me that “women are the basis of all culture” because of their life-giving capability. Some hold this myth so dear that they construct entire versions of NeoPaganism explicitly for women only, often called Dianic Witchcraft or Dianic Wicca.

Another myth that is held in reverence among a large number of NeoPagans is that of the Burning Times, or the persecution of so-called Witches during the Middle Ages and the Inquisition. Many NeoPagans see these persecuted people (usually women) as their spiritual

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<sup>46</sup> For example, see *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why An Invented Past Will Not Give Women a Future* by Cynthia Eller.

ancestors and identify their own modern position as a subcultural religious group with that of the persecuted in Europe some hundreds of years ago.

These biases have a lot of influence on the ways some NeoPagans choose to practice. For example, I interviewed quite a few people who were not fans of the traditional Tarot decks because they portrayed Christian symbols like “The Devil” card, or they chose not to use the phrase “I call upon the Watchtowers” during the invocation of the four sacred directions (also called the elements or quarters) during ritual because the term “Watchtower” comes from Enochian magic (Christian angel magic).

Aside from these historical concerns, many NeoPagans choose to identify contrary to dominant culture because of immediate social concerns, especially women’s rights (as in the case with Dianic traditions) and environmental justice. The Reclaiming tradition in particular is very active in confronting ecological issues. Reclaiming co-founder Starhawk conducts many Earth Activist Training camps each year, which focus on teaching valuable non-dominant approaches to living in harmony with the environment, including a permaculture certification course and resolving conflict through the process of consensus. The Reclaiming tradition is especially known for their public ritual, which I will get into a little bit later.

There are a myriad of ways that NeoPagans engage these issues outside of the context of ritual. Art is one way that I have seen them engage the dominance of Christianity in the last few thousand years. I met one man who converts old statues and statuettes of the Virgin Mary into a horror-macabre Sante Muerte statues, painting them into an image reminiscent of a bride of Death. Next to these statues, I observed a plaque on display that declared that the gods and goddesses of antiquity were replaced by the Catholic Church’s Virgin Mary and saints. These

refurbished Virgin statues symbolize a desire for the death of Christianity as well as a new veneration of the cycles of life and death, which NeoPagans believe that Christianity ignores.

But non-ritual resistance is not the only way that NeoPagans engage dominant culture. Or, I should say, perhaps NeoPagans do not engage dominant culture at all! I interviewed quite a number of people—mostly solitaires who did not practice regularly in any group—who thought that engaging dominant culture was out of the question. One woman told me, “I do not identify with a counter-culture purposefully. Really, if you think about it, Christianity is technically the counter-culture.” She also said, “I do not think that engaging politics in ritual is appropriate, much less effective. There is way too much charged energy going on there for a ritual to make a difference. My spirituality is a personal path, and I only use ritual to address my personal problems.” In other words, her spirituality was an entirely personal issue that had no business dealing with the outside world, in part because of the very personal nature of the spirituality itself and in part because of the lack of efficacy she felt it would have if she had carried any sort of ritual out.

Another woman in particular who stood out among the rest of the people I interviewed was someone who had converted her entire home into what she calls a Pagan monastery. I took a tour. From room to room, there were giant altars everywhere. What caught me off guard, especially in relation to the majority of people I had been speaking with, was that her largest altar had a two or three-foot tall statue of the Virgin Mary. But this was no defacement of the original statue—this was the real deal, and in the statue’s hands were a great many number of rosaries. In front of the statue were a number of pillar candles and what I understood to be offerings of all shapes and sizes. In other spots around the room, I could see statues of Isis, Sekhmet, Brigid,

and other Egyptian and Celtic deities. Clearly this woman's practice is eclectic in the fullest extent of its power.

Her practice excluded a "reactionary" sense of cultural attitudes in a way that she described as, "holding a high vibrational frequency without desiring a certain outcome." She said that she did not do "worry prayers" for friends, because she does not think that stooping down to the level of others's sorrow and issues of ego was beneficial. Instead, she focused on creating and maintaining a space where others could find respite from the chaos of day-to-day life and rise above its petty problems. But this extends not only to how she participates in relationship to dominant culture (that of non-participation, of non-compliance), but also in a radical re-interpretation of what it means to have human rights:

The next level of this powerful story we are player in is to detach from so called human rights. Yes! two very important tools for those who intend to "make it through this next round" is to offer up 1. The Right to Judge and 2. The Right to be Offended. No doubt I shall bring upon myself judgment and will offend many in this statement! One may say "you fool! Just look at what is going on all around us! We must be judge this and use the energy of being offended to get off the couch and make a difference!" This, I understand to be the old way, and I do not judge it's efficacy, however I feel "a new thing, a fresh dispensation" and in this way one does not have to have an impetus of this nature to act.

In other words, to "react against" something is something of the past that should be left behind, and instead we should take up an attitude of non-judgment and non-offense, to "return to a state of innocence," she told me time and time again.

Therefore the identity of NeoPagans is complicated, unlike the sweeping generalization that Sabina Magliocco made in her work. Instead of a rag-tag bunch of discontents as she would have us believe, NeoPagans attitudes toward dominant culture are as individualistic and varied as NeoPagans themselves.

Yet there is quite a big demographic within NeoPaganism that *does* adhere to a culture of resistance, most often rooted in the Reclaiming tradition as described earlier. I had the privilege of attending five Reclaiming rituals and living for a week with nearly 100 (or more!) others who self-identified as Reclaiming. Unfortunately, I did not get to interview them all, but they helped provide me with a new lens for looking at the way NeoPaganism can and does address dominant paradigms that they find unfavorable.

To begin this discussion on ritual resistance, I want to revert back to my discussion on Catherine Bell. As I mentioned earlier, she only discusses the rituals used in dominant religious groups, and she only refers to acts of resistance at the individual level and as occurring within the location of a ritual that is not specifically constructed for the purpose of resistance. What is more, she uses the vocabulary of *ritualization* to describe what separates certain sacred actions from other, mundane, normal actions. And here is where I wanted to fuse these many ideas of hers to describe what I think makes Reclaiming unique among the various NeoPagan traditions—it *ritualizes the act of resistance itself*.

I had the opportunity to meet with many long-time Reclaiming folks, including Starhawk herself, and many of them talked about the various public venues that they held ritual. The most famous ritual of Reclaiming is called the Spiral Dance, a ritualized dance that symbolizes the sacred cycles of life, death, and rebirth. This ritual is often done in private with close community members or at large gatherings like the one I attended, but it also used at public protests, like at nuclear plants or clear cutting sites, for the purpose of demonstrating what the cycles of life and death *should* look like and that the event they are protesting against is *not* what ought to happen. Because of this public venue and active engagement of a social issue in a public ritual setting, these Reclaiming folks are *ritualizing*—or making distinct—an act of protest that is much

different than other acts of protests, i.e. picket signs, marching, and chanting. For Reclaiming, environmental injustices is not just a political or social issue—it is also a spiritual issue, especially because the Reclaiming tradition explicitly venerates the Earth.

Reclaiming rituals are so saturated with counter-culture that the first ritual I attended with them, which had nothing explicitly to do in content with social justice or environmental concerns, opened with the song, “*Our hand will work for peace and justice/ Our hands will work to heal the land/ Our feet will trace Her moving patterns/ Let us dance and bless the land.*” This song holds a lot of interesting notions, including the idea that humans do not just have the “divine spark,” but that they are divine in-themselves and are capable of blessing the land on their own, especially through acts of social justice and fostering communities of peace. I even sat down for an interview with someone who I thought was an active member of Reclaiming but turned out to be a devout atheist and found religion to be rather absurd. A self-identified materialist, atheist, and socialist, he said that the reason he ever got involved with Reclaiming was because his daughter wanted to seek a spiritual community and he respected that. However, he wanted her to grow up in a community that valued his leftist politics, so he chose the Reclaiming tradition as the most appropriate religious venue for his daughter’s adolescence. It was the *politics*, not the *spirituality*, of Reclaiming that drew him to this tradition.

I did have the opportunity to sit on the very explicitly counter-cultural ritual planning committee one evening. The planning started about two hours before the ritual itself—in stark contrast to the many-labored hours of thought and intention that go into the rituals of other NeoPagan traditions—and this ritual, like all Reclaiming rituals that I have attended or read about, used little or no ritual tools besides the people present. The intention of this ritual was, “to travel through time, to envision the future, and to gather the courage to act now.” This ritual



was mostly centered around environmental justice, but due to the recent revision of the Principles of Unity the same day to include non-gendered language of Reclaiming's official statement about the nature of Divinity, many people may have focused on other issues personally. The magical working of the ritual was a trance led by Starhawk, who gave a speech about the nature of the power of Witches—that they can transcend the barriers of time to heal wounds even when it seems too late. This view is particularly poignant when many members of this religious tradition think that global warming has already taken its toll on the environment and that it can only escalate from here—we cannot right our past wrongs, or so it may seem to the non-Witch. Reclaiming see the natural world's degradation as an event that impacts not only human life, but the entire web of life as a whole. Because of this, coupled with the fact that Reclaiming is an earth-centered tradition, they see environmental issues as the forefront of all social justice issues. As one Reclaiming Witch put it to me, “how can you claim to love and worship the cycles of the Earth and yet do nothing about our dire circumstances?”

And here we arrive at a crucial point in my argument: the need for community. Although many Reclaiming Witches live on their own, the coming-together and community building are essential needs and cores of the Reclaiming tradition. It is the community structure that is so important to them, *not the ability of the individual to resist on her own*, which makes their rituals successful. An individual alone could not do the kind of work they seek—the romance of subdominance of Magliocco is the perfect language to describe their efforts, for their spirituality is not only personal, but very much socio-political and seeks to overturn dominant culture (i.e. the way dominant culture views its relationship to nature) and replace it with its own.

This need for environmental justice has also been enacted by solitary Wiccans. I spoke with a woman who found cause for the assembly of solitary Wiccans globally to respond to the

rupture of the Deepwater Horizon rig in the Gulf of Mexico. This lady, who has a YouTube following of several thousand, helped organize a coinciding ritual event to heal the waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Her fanbase, who are overwhelmingly solitary practitioners, agreed to enact a healing ritual at the same time, though because of the highly independent nature of solitaires, each of their rituals looked radically different. This event may give evidence for Bell's claims about resistance occurring at the level of the body, though it becomes complicated when a great number of bodies are acting in a way that cannot accomplish anything *without the community structure*. Furthermore, this is yet another case of the ritualizing of resistance—the ritualization of opposition to consumer culture and human reliance on oil technology for support. Without our oceans, this woman said, we would be without life.

However I did find one cut-and-dry example of how NeoPagans may choose to voice their disapproval of dominant social expectations. At the Reclaiming gathering I went to, there was a special, ritually consecrated space called a *Bower* that was essentially a tent filled with safe-sex supplies and manuals and mattresses, placed by the scenic river away from the rest of the camp. There, people could (alone or otherwise) reserve the space for use, presumably for sexual activity. The last time I went to a Christian church gathering, I did not notice a special place to have coitus! Certainly this is one way in which NeoPagan culture is definitely the counter-culture at the level of the individual body: the blatant affirmation of sexuality via *the explicit practice of said sexuality* in a religious setting is rarely heard of in dominant culture in the United States. And because of Reclaiming's radically non-binary view of gender and sexual orientation, this is a pinpoint of all sorts of paradigm-resisting, be it the dominant norm of heterosexuality to monogamy to even "proper" ways and places to have sex. While this may seem to be a subcultural effect, the *Bower* space becomes a radically ritualized act of sexual

liberation in contrast to dominant culture *because* the entire attitude of Reclaiming is counter-cultural.

### *Conclusions*

As such, with a little tweaking and expansion, I have found Catherine Bell's language of *ritualization* to be a powerful ally to interpreting and understanding the actions of religious people, particularly in this context of NeoPaganism and ritual. Throughout this paper I have examined the myriad of ways that NeoPagans do and do not express their hostility toward dominant culture. While some regard dominant culture as the counter-culture, some choose to recognize the pitfalls of dominant culture as little as possible, opting instead to separate themselves like the Pagan monastery woman and offer a peaceful alternative to dominant life. From counter-culture to more or less functioning the way most dominant-cultured people do, aside from a private religious practice, the faces and attitudes of NeoPagans are much too diverse to slate as inherently reactionary or otherwise. And through the ritual theory of Catherine Bell, we have seen how communities come together, how individuals operate separately-but-together, and examined the resistance of the body. Hopefully by this endeavor I have begun to show how truly diverse this community is and the intense individualism that characterizes how they choose to assemble, identify, and, if they feel so called, act for change.

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