

GIMME THAT REAL OLD TIME RELIGION:
RE-EMBEDDING WHITE IDENTITIES THROUGH ETHNIC NEO-PAGAN
RECONFIGURATIONS OF EUROPEAN HERITAGE IN TEXAS

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

According to social theorists, Westerners are increasingly inter-connected with other societies through the complex processes of modernity and globalization, thereby creating an increasingly multiethnic and religiously pluralistic world still dominated by the rationalism of modernity. Consequently, their world is disenchanted and their identities disembedded from traditional contexts, thus placing many individuals in a state of identity crisis. For working and middle-class white Americans, this problem is exacerbated by the unmarkedness of white racial identities, and the subsumption of ancestral ethnic European identities within this unmarked racial category. This dilemma has led some to question and challenge the authenticity and legitimacy of their religious identities and traditions, and to develop strategies to re-embed, revalorize, and refashion their racial and class identities. My research offers an investigation of one such strategy, specifically that employed by Neo-Pagans with an ethnic focus. I explore how recent traditions compose a new strategy that is attractive to white Americans seeking to re-root and give new meanings to their racial and religious identities. Furthermore, I suggest that a key reason some are drawn to and mark identification with ethnic Neo-Pagan traditions is a desire to refashion ethnoreligious identities to re-embed themselves in a re-enchanted physical and social world where ethnic ancestry and whiteness matter in new ways.

This research is guided by the following questions: How might ethnic Neo-Pagan options mitigate the foregoing dilemma experienced by primarily white and working or middle-class adherents? What potential benefits come with identification with these traditions? Are ethnic Neo-Pagans concerned with legitimacy and authenticity as they

reconstruct European folk traditions and histories, and how might those practices and narratives conflate European ethnicities into newly revalorized forms of whiteness? These questions are addressed through a combination of qualitative data-collection methods. Interview and participant observation data for this project were collected at diverse Neo-Pagan field sites in Texas. I identified and analyzed themes of ethnic heritage and ancestry that emerged from these data to determine how they bear on prominent race and class performance theories, particularly regarding questions about changing constructions of race, ethnicity, and religious identities in response to globalization.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my loving and supportive husband, my amazing daughter, and the people of the Neo-Pagan community of Texas.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION, LITERATURE REVIEW, AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Introduction and Statement of the Problem

Anthony Giddens (1990, 1991) argues that Western identities have become “post-traditional” and “disembedded” as a result of modernity and globalization. Social theorists argue that these processes have led to a situation in which a growing number of Western identities are in a state of crisis (Appadurai 1990, 1991, 1996; Bauman 1992, 2000; Beck 1992, 2000; Castells 1997, 2000a, 2000b; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Kaplan 1987; Karner and Aldridge 2004; Martin and Mohanty 1986). Furthermore, these processes have disenchanting Western life, while forcing Westerners to navigate a social world where traditional religious understandings of that world and of oneself are challenged by increasingly unavoidable religious pluralism (Partridge 2004a:15; 2004b:8-16). This problem of identity is exacerbated for working and middle-class white Americans first by the fact that white racial identities are unmarked, and second because their ancestral ethnic European identities have become subsumed within this unmarked racial category (Roediger 1999 [1991], 2005; cf. Bonnett 1998; Kaufmann 2006). While the unmarkedness of whiteness obscures the privileged social status whites enjoy (Franks 2001:7; Lipsitz 1995, 1998:1; Nelson 2008; Wilkins 2008), it also renders it “boring and unhip” (Wilkins 2008:248). If this is the case, upon what can these Americans hang their identities?

Several researchers have proposed that white, working and middle-class Americans are finding strategies to cope with this crisis through different ways of actively re-embedding and refashioning their racial, ethnic, and class identities in new contexts. Aaron Fox (2004) and other contemporary scholars argue that these Americans have developed at

least partially successful strategies to revalorize and refashion their classed white identities (Bosse 2008; Deloria 1998; Dox 2006; Waters 1990; Wilkins 2008). The forgoing dilemma has also led some to question and challenge the authenticity and legitimacy of their religious identities and traditions (Adler 1986:4; Cooper 2009, 2011; Gardell 2003; Magliocco 2004; Pizza 2009). Considering that Americans have a wide range of religious strategies available (Gardell 2003:12-18; Partridge 2004a, 2004b, 2005), why do some choose Neo-Pagan paths as their strategy? This is especially curious when one considers that Christian fundamentalism, ecumenism, and even many New Religious Movements may incur less social risk and stigma than Neo-Paganism in American society (Gardell 2003; McGee 2005; Wilson 2005). To address this question, I offer an ethnographic investigation of the strategy employed by Neo-Pagans with an ethnic religious focus in order to explore to what degree recent traditions compose a new identity strategy that is attractive to working and middle-class white Americans seeking to re-root and give new meanings to their racial and religious identities. I suggest that a key reason Americans are drawn to and socially mark identification with ethnic Neo-Pagan traditions is a desire to refashion ethnoreligious identities that re-embed them in a re-enchanting physical and social world where ethnic ancestry and whiteness matter in new ways.

More specifically, this research seeks to answer the following questions: How might ethnic Neo-Pagan options mitigate the dilemma of identity experienced by primarily white, working and middle-class adherents? What benefits do these traditions offer? How do members construct and mark their new ethno-religious identities? Of what import are ethnoreligious legitimacy and authenticity in the reconstruction of European folk traditions and histories, and how might those practices and narratives revalorize whiteness? These

questions are addressed through the examination of personal narrative interview, participant observation, and archival data collected at several types of Neo-Pagan field sites in Texas from April 2011 through May 2013. In my analysis, I identify themes of ethnic heritage and ancestry that emerge from these data to determine how they bear on prominent race and class performance theories, particularly in terms of questions about changing constructions of race, ethnicity, and religious identities in response to the processes of modernity and accelerating globalization.

Several scholars have explained the emergence of various Neo-Pagan traditions, communities, and identities as responses to the destabilization and alienation of Western identities (Adler 1986:4; Cooper 2009, 2011; Gardell 2003; Magliocco 2004; Pizza 2009). While these studies shed light on possible social causes and processes of the reconstruction and development of eclectic forms of Wicca or Witchcraft, Norse-themed Neo-Paganism (Heathenry or *Ásatrú*), and Celtic-themed Neo-Paganism (Druidry), they tend to ignore or de-emphasize the importance of race and ethnicity (e.g., Cooper 2009, 2011; Magliocco 2004; Pizza 2009), or they emphasize the most overtly racist elements (e.g., Gardell 2003). In contrast to these studies, I investigate whether and how Neo-Pagans are responding to the crisis of identity proposed by Giddens (1990, 1991)—including the perceived problem of devalued, unmarked European-based white identities—by identifying with ethnic forms of Neo-Paganism. Because American Heathenry has been well addressed in the literature (Blain 2002, 2004, 2006; Gardell 2003; Harvey 2001; Kaplan 1996, 1997; Pizza 2009; Strmiska 2007; Strmiska and Sigurvinsson 2005), I especially attend to perspectives from adherents of Celtic, Slavic, and other non-Heathen Eurocentric traditions, while including several Heathen voices.

This research contributes to the growing discourse of emergent religious phenomena and will enrich our understanding of how individuals negotiate alternative religious identities, while reassessing assertions that white Americans seeking to modify their racial identities must appropriate exotic Others. More broadly speaking, it also contributes to public discussions of working and middle-class white American notions of the past and ancestral heritage, and reveals how such individuals experience and navigate an increasingly pluralistic society where the authenticity, legitimacy, and meaning of one's ethnic and religious identity are in question.

Research Focus and Guiding Questions

The overarching goal of this research is to reveal why some American Neo-Pagans choose religious identities with ethnic components when most American Neo-Pagans choose an Eclectic religious identity that is not centered (at least overtly) on notions of blood rights or ethnicity (Jorgensen and Russell 1999:327; Magliocco 2004), especially considering that the vast majority of adherents are white, working to middle-class, highly educated but often underpaid, politically progressive, and urban (Berger, Leach, and Shaffer 2003:29-34; Magliocco 2001:4), a pattern that my pilot study (Lowry 2011) also revealed in Texas. (However, it is noteworthy that my exploratory pilot study survey data and later fieldwork suggest that the Texas Neo-Pagan community may be somewhat less educated and affluent than Neo-Pagan communities in other regions of the US that have been studied, which is a topic to explore in future research.) To guide this research, I address the following questions:

- 1) How and why do ethnic American Neo-Pagans construct ethnoreligious legitimacy and authenticity, including through the appropriation of pre-Christian European folklore and the reconstruction of new folk histories?
- 2) How and why do ethnic American Neo-Pagans appropriate reconstructions of European ancestral groups rather than exotic Others (contra Waters 1990:152), and how might such ethnic Neo-Pagan options help mitigate the foregoing identity dilemma?
- 3) Do reconstructions of Druidic and other non-Norse/Heathen ethnic American Neo-Pagan identities have the potential benefit of offering a less contested and risky path between charges of cultural appropriation and accusations of racism?

Literature Review

Background: Reconstructionist and Eclectic Neo-Paganisms

The umbrella terms “Pagan” and “Neo-Pagan” describe an exceptionally broad religious and spiritual category that includes many emergent, nature-based, duotheistic or polytheistic, pantheistic, and animistic traditions that often draw inspiration from mythology, archaeology, and folklore (Adler 1986; Berger, Leach, and Shaffer 2003:3-7; Clifton 2004; Jorgensen and Russell 1999:327; Magliocco 2001:1-6). These labels are polysemic, and are applied differently or not at all by believers (Strmiska 2005a:4; Simpson 2000:20-27). Some shun the label “Neo-Pagan” because it undermines claims of authenticity (Shnirelman 2002:199-200), while others, such as some American Druids (e.g., Bonewits 2007a, 2007b), use the term to define their own and related traditions. These terms have generally been re-appropriated from Christian culture by adherents to

differentiate their European-based traditions from Native American or other indigenous religious traditions, and to explicitly mark their identities as non-Christian (Strmiska 2005a:7, 11-13). The Germanic term “Heathen” has been similarly re-appropriated to describe various Norse and Germanic Neo-Pagan traditions. Following the conventions used by scholars such as the folklorist Sabina Magliocco (2001, 2004), “Neo-Pagan” is used here when broadly referring to this religious phenomenon. Except in the rare cases of a written response from an informant, in which case the original text is quoted, the lower-case term “pagan” is used to reference the religious practices and beliefs of ancient cultures, such as the Iron Age Celts and Vikings, from which modern Neo-Pagans often draw inspiration simply for clarity. A similar distinction is made between “witch” and “Witch,” the latter referring to modern practitioners.

Several scholars have recently begun to explore how Americans choose to self-identify with Eurocentric forms of Neo-Paganism, at least in part as a response to the perceived uprooting of identity in the face of globalization (Adler 1986:4; Cooper 2009, 2011; Gardell 2003; Ivakhiv 1996; Magliocco 2004; Pizza 2009). Historian and scholar of comparative religion Michael Strmiska distinguishes between “Reconstructionist” and “Eclectic” (usually Wiccan) Neo-Pagans, stating that “people for whom ethnic identity is very important tend to prefer the Reconstructionist form... and people with little interest or even a positive disdain for issues of ethnic identity tend to prefer the Eclectic type” (2005a:20). While Eclectics loosely draw inspiration from ancient pagan traditions and beliefs, Reconstructionists (often called “Recons” in the Neo-Pagan community) tend to follow or contribute to scholarly discourses about their ancestral past, which they consider foundational to their religious traditions and identities. For example, anthropologist

Murphy Pizza (2009:83-85) found Norse Neo-Pagans (Heathens) in Minnesota creatively honor ethnoreligious traditions by reconstructing the present, rather than attempting to accurately reconstruct ancient practices. (I draw heavily from Pizza's dissertation work in Minnesota, which was published in the Ashgate New Religions series [Pizza 2014].

However, since her work was not published until I was in the final stages of writing this dissertation, I cite her original dissertation at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.)

Recons thus draw from the past, not to fabricate Hobsbawmian (1983) traditions out of whole cloth, nor to completely revive them, but to consciously fashion new religious practices and identities that serve their modern needs and are believed to align with those of their ethnic ancestors. Neo-Pagan "reconstruction" henceforth refers to this process.

Nationalist Recon traditions make up the dominant form of Neo-Paganism in Eastern and Central Europe, "where ethnic culture and identity remain important organizing principles of social life and cultural activities, while Eclectic Neopaganism is more prevalent in the British Isles and North America, where ethnic identity has tended to be de-emphasized" (Strmiska 2005a:20). This is not surprising considering that ethnicity is often interwoven with nationalism in Europe, whereas American nationalism typically de-emphasizes overt discourses of ethnicity (Strmiska 2005a:14-18). With this dichotomy in mind, I explain why some predominantly working and middle-class white American Neo-Pagans are choosing to reconstruct ethnic religious traditions and identities, particularly when overtly ethnocentric or racist nationalistic discourses are often de-emphasized in white American society, and when so many other religious alternatives are available.

Globalization and Racial and Religious Strategies to Mitigate Disembedded Western Identities

Several scholars have addressed the dilemma proposed by Anthony Giddens (1990, 1991) by investigating how working and middle-class white Americans attempt to revalorize and re-mark their white identities in response to globalization—a process often involving the appropriation of elements of Others’ identities and traditions. While white Americans who find their own, unmarked racial or European ethnic identities devalued or uninteresting may revalorize their racial (and classed) identities through reconfigurations of European-derived folk performative art (Fox 2004) or identification with alternative, primarily white subcultures, such as the goth subculture and evangelical Christianity (Wilkins 2008), they have historically run relatively low risks in choosing to construct alternative identities, and are therefore free to adopt a strategy of “playing Indian” by selectively appropriating elements of Others’ ethnic identities (Deloria 1998; see also Bosse 2008; Dox 2006; Wilkins 2008).

Additionally, the prominent sociologist Mary Waters asserts such Americans—if given the choice—would choose non-white or otherwise exotic ethnicities, rather than “diluted” or antiquated, uninteresting European ones when seeking to modify their ethnic identities (1990:152). For example, Waters gives an example of one respondent who says she would choose a “living” and “rich” ethnicity with a “thick” culture, such as those she believed were experienced by American Indians, Gypsies, Eskimos, or even Italian Americans (in the romanticized sense of members of a tight-knit ethnic ghetto) rather than her own “diluted” Scotch Irish ethnicity (1990:152). Drawing from sociologist Herbert Gans’ (1979) concept of “symbolic ethnicity,” Joanna Bosse (2008) found a similar motive among the white salsa dancers in her study, who selectively appropriated real or perceived

elements of Latin Others in order to make their own identities more interesting or exciting. In contrast to Waters' and Bosse's claims, however, my research suggests that some white Neo-Pagans, especially those with an ethnic focus, find that their own European ethnic ancestors and heritage can be used as quite sufficiently rich sources for reconfiguring identity.

Drawing from her fieldwork among Neo-Pagans in the San Francisco Bay area, folklorist Sabina Magliocco (2001, 2004) contends that many Neo-Pagans—modeling American civil rights and postcolonial indigenous movements—seek to construct oppositional, marginalized identities as a strategy of resistance against what they perceive as not only European colonial but also Christian dominance (see also Chase 2006:151). By building supportive religious communities and aligning their refashioned identities with those of other historically marginalized groups, these predominantly politically progressive, white, working and middle-class individuals are able to construct and perform identities that emically place themselves outside of this global hegemonic structure, while providing new meanings and contexts for their ecstatic experiences and imaginative creativity. Pizza, however, found that Neo-Pagans in Minnesota's "Paganistan" were shifting away from a focus on identities in opposition to dominant constructs, changing how they saw themselves "from marginals to 'just folks' who hold different views from other Twin Cities residents" (2009:123); this difference may be due to temporal or regional differences between their two study populations. In any case, Magliocco (2001, 2004) proposes that the strategy of reframing Neo-Pagan identities as analogous to those of other marginalized groups also provides adherents a reaffirming social context in which white or European-

specific ethnicities are revalorized and re-marked as personally and socially meaningful badges of identity.

The Swedish scholar of comparative religion and religious racist extremism Mattias Gardell (2003) explains the rise of the white-racist American counterculture, including white-racist traditions within Heathenry, by arguing that globalization and multiculturalism have caused many Americans to feel their identities are threatened, devalorized, and destabilized. From this perspective, romanticized, Eurocentric Neo-Paganisms provide one strategy to cope with this crisis of identity. The globalization of culture has left white racists feeling that all cultures and religions are now relativized, and thus that the primacy of European and Anglo-American culture is threatened. On the other hand, nationalist identities are considered untenable because they see the US as being too debased by multiculturalism for them to hang their identities upon it (Gardell 2003:10, 342). Fueled by increasing global flows of racist information, white-racists paradoxically base their racial projects on the belief that the decline of white Western dominance and the phenomenon of globalization are the result of a global anti-white conspiracy (Gardell 2003:10-12).

In Gardell's (2003) model, Western ethnic, racial, and religious identities are fragmented and put in a state of crises as a consequence of the centripetal force of globalization. In our global era of urbanization, modernization, and domination by free market fundamentalism and multinational corporations, several factors come into play: 1) religious leaders no longer hold unquestioned final authority; 2) knowledge and social authority are based on divisions by social function; 3) traditional communities undergo destabilization; and 4) fears of cultural homogenization take root and grow. These forces ultimately leave many whites feeling adrift in a world where Western civilization no longer

controls the direction or pace of social change (Gardell 2003:6-7, 13; see also Karner and Aldridge 2004:25). These individuals must now contend with a world where social stratification has been usurped by functional differentiation, and where people, goods, capital, signs, and information flow around the globe at an unprecedented rate and intensity (Friedman 1995:70), creating for many a postmodern identity crisis or what renowned anthropologist of modernity and globalization Arjun Appadurai calls a “disjunctive order” (1990:296, 1996). Our postmodern world is also one in which identities have become deterritorialized (Appadurai 1991; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Low 1996:393) and other once taken-for-granted moorings of identity and meaning are let loose, contested, and reconfigured (Kaplan 1987; Karner and Aldridge 2004:25; Martin and Mohanty 1986). Moreover, capital has increasingly replaced ethnicity, race, and religion as the central organizing criterion for individual identity (Gardell 2003:7-9; Liechty 2003). Social scientists Christian Karner and Alan Aldridge (2004) argue that new religious responses provide much-needed explanations and reassurances for people attempting to navigate their quickly changing and increasingly globalized yet atomized social world (see also Bauman 1992, 2000; Beck 1992, 2000; Castells 1997, 2000a, 2000b).

New Religious Movements (NRMs) such as Neo-Paganism comprise one religious strategy aimed at resolving this “disembedding” of identity (Giddens 1990, 1991) by actively “re-embedding” identities into new contexts (Gardell 2003:14-15). Environment and culture scholar Adrian Ivakhiv (1996), for example, argues that the emergence of contemporary Neo-Pagan religion is a psychological response to the crisis of identity that has come about due to the depersonalizing and disenchanting impacts of modernity (see also Adler 1986:4; Magliocco 2001, 2004). To mitigate these problems, Neo-Pagan

movements, he argues, are “an attempt to enrich the ‘psychic ecology’ of contemporary culture by re-mythicizing and re-’story-ing’ our world and the living beings that make it up” (1996:256). The emergence of American Neo-Paganism is thus framed as a response to the Weberian disenchantment and desacralization of Western social life and nature in the globalized, multicultural, postmodern era, in which little room or value remains for ecstatic experience or imaginative creativity in ritual due to the influences of the Enlightenment, industrialization, and the Reformation on Western thought and life (Magliocco 2001:5, 2004). Furthermore, Westerners are increasingly unable to avoid exposure to the ever-growing smorgasbord of competing religious ideas that challenge traditional religious moorings (Partridge 2004a:15-16, 2004b:15). These factors help explain why some Americans seek new religious alternatives, and why they have not chosen to participate in similarly experiential forms of Christianity.

Members of Western NRMs have at their fingertips a wide array of cultural elements resulting from the global flows of information and material goods from which creative *bricoleurs* can and do appropriate, borrow, or “reclaim” in the refashioning of new religious traditions (Ivakhiv 1996; see also Bowman 2000:71; Magliocco 2004; Partridge 2004a; 2004b; Pizza 2009). Paradoxically, this religious *bricolage* is in response to the very crisis of identity caused by globalization. Neo-Paganisms, as a subset of such movements, respond to the dilemma of modernity by offering new identities symbolically rooted in romantically reconstructed agricultural pasts in order to resacralize their physical and social world and to revalidate ecstatic experiences (Gardell 2003:15-18, 278-279; Magliocco 2004:37-43). A central focus of my research is to discover and explain in depth the ways in which informants draw from the smorgasbord of religious and cultural elements available to

them (from contemporary Others or ancestral ethnic groups), how these individuals go about choosing which elements to include in their religious lives, and how such elements are put into use to mitigate the aforementioned dilemma of modernity.

Reconstructionist Neo-Paganisms as Reconstructions of Ethnicity and Race

The reconstruction of ethnic or racialized forms of Neo-Paganism often includes the “biologization” of spirituality and religion (Gardell 2003:17), although how this process occurs remains obscure. Such a theology presumes that spirituality is something of blood and DNA, wherein an ethnic “folk soul,” spirituality, and pantheon are inherited as an ethnic birthright (Gardell 2003:17, 269-270). This is a common tenet among nationalist Eastern and Central European Neo-Paganisms, where Heathen, Slavic, and Baltic Neo-Pagans often consider their “revived” religions to be genetically and spiritually inherited by “the folk” and tied to ancestral homelands (Aitamurto 2006; Asprem 2008; Ivakhiv 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Laruelle 2008; Shnirelman 1998, 1999/2000, 2002, 2007; Simpson 2000; Strmiska 2000, 2005a, 2005b, 2007). Ethnic Neo-Pagans seeking to restore purportedly authentic ancient traditions and beliefs often focus their attention on their own ethnic ancestry, which invariably means some degree of ethnic essentialism (Magliocco 2004:54-55). The implication is that in researching ancestry, they often “poach” from romantic nineteenth and early twentieth-century scholarship infused with racist and ethno-nationalist assumptions that may be internalized and embedded in their ethnoreligious worldviews.

As the core of my research concerns American ethnic Neo-Pagan traditions that are not typically nationalist or explicitly racist in nature, Gardell’s (2003) distinction of “ethnic Ásatrú” is of import here. This form of Ásatrú (a subgroup of Heathenry) is seen by its

adherents as a middle path between militantly white-racist Ásatrú groups, who make a strictly Aryan blood-right claim, and anti-racist Ásatrú groups, who claim they do not consider race or ethnicity important (Gardell 2003:162-164, 271; see also Blain 2006; Kaplan 1996); however, ethnic Ásatrúars have been accused of racism from anti-racist Heathens and of being race traitors by white supremacist Ásatrúars (Gardell 2003:258). Ethnic Ásatrúars almost invariably base their spiritual understanding and ethos on more moderate yet nonetheless racialized notions of ethnic blood rights based on an “organic relationship between biology and religion” among people of northern European ancestry, which prominent Ásatrúar Stephen McNallen termed “metagenetics” (Gardell 2003:269-270; contra Kaplan 1997:80). In this scenario, ethnicity continues to be conflated into race, reviving pre-World War II notions that European regional or national ethnic groups constitute culturally and genetically distinct racial groups (Gardell 2003:271). My ethnographic data reveal that Celtic, Slavic, Hellenic, Irish Traveler, and other ethnic Neo-Pagans—including ethnic-focused Witches—may have similar notions of European ethnic heritage and religious identity, suggesting that several ethnic Neo-Pagan traditions in addition to ethnic Ásatrú represent less contentious—although still problematic—strategies for reconfiguring white identity in novel ways. Also, while I had originally intended to only include a few Heathen voices in my project, it turns out Texas has a rather large Heathen population, and so I ended up drawing much more than anticipated from this subgroup. This change in plan was fortuitous, as it allowed me to offer much more ethnographic texture and nuance to the current discourse on moderate Heathenry in the US.

Cultural Appropriation, "Reclaiming,"

and the Construction of Ethnoreligious Authenticity and Legitimacy

Pizza (2009) distinguishes between the processes of "social legitimation" of new religions as described by religion scholar James R. Lewis (2003:13-16) and "religious authentication." In her model, religious legitimation entails external verification or social acceptability to outsiders (including potential converts), while authentication occurs through subjective, internal processes that do not concern social legitimation (Pizza 2009:85-86). She suggests Neo-Pagans generally favor personal spiritual experience over other sources of religious authentication (see also Eller 1993; Magliocco 2004; Pike 2001; Rountree 2004; Salomonsen 2002). Based upon Pizza's dichotomy, "legitimacy is convincing, persuasive; authenticity is *seductive*. It is typically the process of being seduced by the aesthetics and the intense emotionality of religious experience that leads people to embrace and practice a religion" (2009:85-86; original emphasis). Magliocco (2004:223, 236-237) similarly argues that aesthetics, rather than notions of ancestry, primarily draw some to ethnic Neo-Pagan traditions and identities. Pizza rightfully puts the construction of Neo-Pagan religious identity in the context of personal experience and challenges the conflation of legitimation with authentication (2009:85). In contrast, the evangelical Christian scholar of religion Michael Cooper (2009, 2011) describes how modern Druids reconstruct a past upon which to legitimize and re-embed their ethnoreligious identities through a process of "ancientization." While Cooper's concept remains undertheorized, it corresponds with sociologist La Dorna McGee's finding that the Neo-Pagan claim to ancientness "is used to legitimize individual and organizational identities" (2005:15), and to my previous findings

(Lowry 2010, 2011) that American and British Druids reconstruct divergent folk histories as part of a process of religious authentication and, to some degree, legitimation.

In her review of the recent discourses regarding the relationship between modernity and folklore, prominent folklorist Giovanna Del Negro (2004:45-7) argues that, while there have been improvements with this thorny issue within folkloristics, the weaknesses of even these newer approaches may be seen when examined in light of the work of anthropologist Milton Singer. As described by Del Negro, Singer's (1972) ethnography demonstrates the usefulness of approaching tradition and modernity as social phenomena in people's everyday lives that can be revealed through ethnography. According to Del Negro, Singer's work—upon which she builds her own work on the modern-yet-traditional *passeggiata* in Sasso, Italy—reveals that modern Hindu Indians experience and face modernity through a dialectic of “traditionalizing” and “modernizing” processes, by which the new is made old (not unlike Cooper's [2009, 2011] notion of “ancientization”), and the old is reinterpreted to be new (not unlike the process taking place among the newly middle-class Nepalis described by anthropologist Mark Liechty [2003]). Perhaps most relevant to both Del Negro's (2004) work and my own research is Singer's hypothesis “that in a primary civilization like India's, cultural continuity with the past is so great that even the acceptance of ‘modernizing’ and ‘progress’ ideologies does not result in linear forms of social and cultural change but may result in the ‘traditionalizing’ of apparently ‘modern’ innovations” (1972:68). In Singer's model, traditionalization and modernization (which in this case are intertwined with Westernization) occur simultaneously through a localized cultural lens. This view, while still well within the culture-historical framework, was a challenge to the prevailing but weakening assumption at the time that “modern” and “traditional” cultures

were mutually exclusive categories (Singer 1972:383). Del Negro's research demonstrates how the Sassani perceive and experience the *passeggiata* as tradition, despite its modernity. As she argues, "In short, for today's Sassani, modernity *is* the tradition" (2004:46; emphasis added). Upon this theoretical foundation, I investigate the nuanced ways in which ethnic Neo-Pagans simultaneously modernize and traditionalize their beliefs and practices as they wrestle with the dominant paradigm of American modernity and reconstruct traditions drawn from ancient Europe to serve their present needs in Texas.

I believe that the process of drawing upon the past-as-perceived or "folk histories" (Hudson 1966) by religious individuals merits further investigation. Just as secular folk histories are used to authenticate identities and offer legitimation of practices and ideologies to current and potential members (Friedman 1992a, 1992b; Green 1976, 1997), religious traditions across the globe continue to rely upon selectively appropriated elements from the past to authenticate religious identities and present traditions as legitimate to adherents and possible converts. If legitimacy plays a potentially important role in attracting and retaining members, as Pizza (2009:129-130) observed was sometimes the case in the Twin Cities Neo-Pagan community, then it is reasonable that Neo-Pagan traditions in competition with each other might attract new members who seek both religious authenticity and at least some degree of legitimacy as promoted by members of those traditions. For example, my previous exploratory research into the primarily American tradition of *Ár nDraíocht Féin* (ADF) Druidry (Lowry 2010) indicates that some American Druids choose to join ADF because of its claims of historical authenticity, and to some extent, of perceived legitimacy. Nor are Neo-Pagans "the only Americans looking for an answer by exploring the past" (Gardell 2003:342), as there are diverse groups of Westerners seek to re-root their identities

in reconstructed pasts. The aforementioned observations suggest that how the past is appropriated and reconstructed into folk histories, and how such histories are put into use for religious authentication and legitimization do indeed matter to some Neo-Pagans (see also Lowry and Pizza 2004), as well as to some members of—or potential converts to—other religions in the US, and thus that this issue warrants the in-depth investigation offered in this dissertation.

Druidry and Other Non-Heathen Neo-Paganisms as Middle Paths?

Several scholars have offered summary descriptions—and in rare cases fuller ethnographic representations—that contribute to our understanding of American and British Druidry. Most of these researchers only mention Druidry in their catalogues of Western Neo-Pagan traditions or as brief ethnographic anecdotes (Chase 2006; Clifton 2004; Davy 2007; Gardell 2003; Greenwood 2000; Harvey 1997, 2004a, 2006; Pike 2001; 2004; Pizza 2009; Rabinovitch 1996). Others explore in more depth the romantic nationalist roots of British Druidry and its role in the origins of Wicca (Hutton 1999, 2007, 2009; Magliocco 2004), ways in which British Druids appropriate and ascribe new meanings to prehistoric monuments and symbols in the quest to reconstruct and authenticate Celtic beliefs and practices (Blain 2001; Blain and Wallis 2004a, 2004b; Wallis 2004; Wallis and Blain 2003), and in one case, a novel British Druidic ancestor construction (Harvey 2004b). Only a few investigate ways that contemporary Druids and other quasi-neo-Celtic individuals (again, primarily in Britain) reinvent and mark new ethnoreligious pasts and identities (Bowman 1993, 1994, 1996, 2000; Cooper 2011:142; Harvey 2007). However,

voices of American Druids are rarely encountered in these works, nor are Druidic constructions of ethnicity and race central themes.

In light of the racist/race-traitor dilemma faced by the Heathens Gardell (2003) describes, the danger of charges of cultural appropriation faced by Wiccan and other Eclectic Neo-Pagans, and the fluidity of modern constructions of “Celtic” identity, I propose that contemporary Druidry and other non-Heathen ethnic Neo-Paganisms may offer less risky middle paths for Neo-Pagans seeking to construct, mark, and revalorize their white identities. Such a strategy would allow adherents to emphasize their European ethnic heritage without exposure to the risk of being perceived as racists. Even though ethnic Celtic identity is a complex issue with nationalist and sometimes explicitly racist overtones in Europe, I do not think that it carries the same historical baggage in the US as Heathen identities do. I propose that by opting for traditions and identities tied to their own ancestors, they may also avoid charges of cultural appropriation. I do not mean to say, however, that a “Cardiac Celtic” identity—or an “elective affinity” independent of any demonstrated Celtic heritage (Bowman 1996, 2000:70)—does not incur its own social risks in Europe. However, while a Cardiac Celtic identity may be contested in the Celtic Fringe, it appears to carry a low risk in the US.

As I have discussed elsewhere (Lowry 2003), the Iron Age Celts are especially open to appropriation and reinvention because they appear to conform to the Enlightenment concept of the “noble savage” (Bowman 2000:74). At the same time, many works on the Celts are supplemented by romantic caricatures of the national character of contemporary Celtic peoples, such as the Irish and Welsh, leaving the Celtic label “up for grabs” (Bowman 1994:146; see also Bowman 1993, 1996, 2000:74; Gardell 2003:138; Hale and Thornton

2000; James 1999:137-138; Morgan 1983; Piccini 1996; Trevor-Roper 1983). Magliocco (2004:218-219), for example, proposes that Celtic history, myth, and folklore have been attractive to Neo-Pagans since the emergence of their religious movement because the ancient Celts carried less risky symbolic baggage than did the ancient Romans and Germanic peoples, who were respectively associated with Italian Fascism and German National Socialism in the early twentieth century.

Folklorist and religion scholar Marion Bowman (1994:146-147, 1996:243, 248, 2000:75-76) and Gardell (2003:146) argue that some Druids and other Cardiac Celts draw from and contribute to an emerging political discourse that actively constructs and appropriates the Iron Age Celts in order to legitimize both Celtic nationalist and European Unionist claims. This is a particularly concerning issue, as there is presently a broad political movement to portray the European Union as a legitimate political structure founded on the notion that ancient Celts (or other closely related “Indo-Europeans”) inhabited all of the current nation-states that make up the Union (Bowman 1994:146, 1996:248, 2000:75-76). Not only does this process conflate Celtic ethnicity with an “Indo-European” race, but it also excludes the indigenous non-Indo-European-speaking peoples of Europe (e.g., the Basque and Sámi) and all non-white residents. For some Cardiac Celts who make ethnic blood-right claims, “the Celtic spirit... not only keeps company with the national folk-soul but, through it, with the folk souls of other [white] nations, so maintaining a unity which is at the very soul of our race” (interviewee quoted in Bowman 1996:243), yet others de-emphasize ethnicity by ascribing their Celtic identities to spiritual rather than biological ancestry (Bowman 1996:245). My preliminary research (Lowry 2010) first suggested there is an emphasis on Celtic or “Indo-European” ancestors—and thus possibly a novel and

perhaps less threatening and contentious refashioning of whiteness—in the primarily American Ár nDraíocht Féin (ADF) Druidic tradition. In the case of ADF, Celticness seems to be inflated with notions of “Indo-European” (white) racial identity, a proposition that is intensively investigated in this dissertation.

Research Design, Field Sites, and Methodology

Research Design

The research models for this project include site-specific event and festival ethnography (Browne 2009; Coco and Woodward 2007; Getz 1991, 2008, 2010; Magliocco 2001, 2004; Pike 2001; Pizza 2009), experiential ethnography and narrative analysis (Blain 2002, 2004, 2006; Magliocco 2004; Pizza 2009; Salomonsen 2002), and the analysis of archival materials (Berger, Leach, and Shaffer 2003; Gardell 2003; Pizza 2009). Festivals of the kinds described below were chosen in part for convenience, as they offer relatively rare moments of community gathering for this dispersed population, but also because festivals provide contexts in which folklore and differential identities emerge between groups and are performed, folklore and social solidarity are maintained, internal conflict and dissent are negotiated, and the meanings of modernity are explored, contested, and reconfigured (Bauman 1972, 1986; Del Negro 2004; Magliocco 1993; Manning 1989; Stoeltje and Bauman 1989). From April 2011 through May 2013, I gathered data through participant observation and semi-structured interviews of self-selected members of the Texas Neo-Pagan community, with a focus on those who self-identify with ethnic Neo-Pagan traditions. Additional data were obtained from popular published and online Neo-Pagan

texts that likely inform participants' views and understandings of ancestry, ethnic heritage, and other emergent elements that pertain to their traditions and identities.

Particular attention was given to recruiting participants who self-identify with Celtic or Druidic or other non-Heathen ethnic Neo-Pagan traditions (e.g., Slavic) because, as described above, such traditions are not as well represented in the ethnographic literature on American Neo-Paganism; however, a sample of Heathen voices from Texas is included. As previously mentioned, this Heathen sample was originally only intended to be relatively small and only for comparative purposes; however, I ended up gathering much more Heathen data than anticipated because of their relatively—and unexpectedly—prominent presence in the Texas Neo-Pagan community, and because such data allowed me to contribute important ethnographic nuances to discussions about moderate Heathen identities.

The rationale for using multiple sites is the decentralized nature of the Neo-Pagan community in America, including Texas, which is composed of several inter-related “hidden communities” (Berger, Leach, and Shaffer 2003:xvii; Cowan 2005; McGee 2005:29-30). Due to the decentralized nature of this community, informants were recruited using purposive sampling, which is appropriate because I had predetermined criteria (i.e., self-identification with an ethnic or culture-specific Neo-Pagan tradition) relevant to the research objective (Patton 2002). Ethnographies of Neo-Pagans inevitably rely on snowball sampling and self-selection for interviews, thus incurring a selection bias that underrepresents “solitaries” who may not attend gatherings (Berger, Leach, and Shaffer 2008:207-208). Many scholars, however, present reasonable justifications for such a sampling method when researching this decentralized and often polyaffiliative community (Berger, Leach, and

Shaffer 2003:3-7; Bloch 1998a; Clifton 2006; Coco and Woodward 2007; Greenwood 2000; Jorgensen and Russell 1999; Magliocco 2004:11, 230-237; Pike 2001; Pizza 2009:158; Rabinovitch 1996).

Site Descriptions and Sampling

Fieldwork occurred at multiple sites in Texas, including Neo-Pagan festivals and retreats, annual Pagan Pride Day (PPD) events in the Houston, San Antonio, and Austin areas, monthly Pagan Night Out (PNO) events in Houston, and other small ritual gatherings in the Houston area following the example of other Neo-Pagan ethnographies (Berger, Leach, and Shaffer 2003; Coco and Woodward 2007; Foltz 2005; Jorgensen and Russell 1999; Magliocco 2004; McGee 2005; Pike 2001; Pizza 2009). I recruited and interviewed a total of 44 participants from the Texas festivals and other gathering field sites described below, and carried out participant observation among several hundred members of the Texas Neo-Pagan community at such field sites over the period of fieldwork. This sample size was agreed upon by my dissertation committee because it ensured response saturation, or the point at which no additional data are being found (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Except for some of the ADF Druids (who tend to be somewhat more insular within the Neo-Pagan community), many of the members of the Texas Neo-Pagan community attend multiple festivals and gatherings, and are polyaffiliative (68 percent of the 54 survey respondents in my pilot study [Lowry 2011] identified with more than one tradition). I had permission from the authorities associated with these sites, and obtained permission from authorities at the field sites as necessary. Subsequent interviews were arranged through previously established networks.

1) The Council of Magickal Arts

The Council of Magickal Arts (CMA) is a legally incorporated, non-profit organization near Flatonia, Texas that hosts public rituals that last for four days twice a year: for Beltane (mid-April) and Samhain (mid-October). These festivals take place a few weeks before the official holy days (Beltane is May 1 and Samhain is November 1) so that participants may also celebrate their High Days privately or with their own groups. These are the largest annual Neo-Pagan festivals in Texas, with hundreds of participants who come from across Texas, as well as from across the nation and occasionally from abroad. CMA is also the site of McGee's (2005) sociological fieldwork in 1996 into why Neo-Pagans choose to join such a marginalized religion. These festivals are open to the public, although most come at the invitation of someone from one of the established camps, which have formally established claims to specific plots of land. The land itself, which covers several acres, is owned and managed by the CMA organization. In order to attend a festival, one must pay festival-specific fees in addition to annual membership dues; these costs fund the non-profit's maintenance of the land and facilities, while also discouraging freeloaders or individuals who may be hostile to Neo-Paganism. While there is no official religious affiliation requirement and few formal rules, individuals may be forcibly removed for inappropriate behavior at the discretion of CMA officials.

CMA was the site of my exploratory pilot study fieldwork during the 2011 Beltane festival, the results of which I presented at a Scientific Study of Religion annual meeting (Lowry 2011), as well as being the site of subsequent ethnographic fieldwork at the 2012 Beltane, 2012 Samhain, and 2013 Beltane festivals, where I obtained fruitful participant

observation and interview data. CMA festivals generally fall within the campout festival category of Neo-Pagan events described by sociologists Angela Coco and Ian Woodward (2007) in Australia because the focus is on building and maintaining community, ritual, and religious and magickal training. (Throughout this work, I use the common Neo-Pagan spellings of “magick” and “magickal,” which emically differentiate between slight of hand magic and magic in a spiritual sense, but also mark the speaker/writer as Neo-Pagan. For example, the main Neo-Pagan shop in Houston is The Magick Cauldron.) Unlike the campout festivals those ethnographers describe, however, a common part of the experience for many is visiting the vendors selling Neo-Pagan goods and services (e.g., jewelry and reiki healing) along “Vendor’s Row,” a centrally-located lane-like area with vendors’ booths. Similar festivals were the field sites for other ethnographic studies of Neo-Pagan communities (e.g., Berger, Leach, and Shaffer 2003; Foltz 2005; Jorgensen and Russell 1999; McGee 2005; Pizza 2009).

Mirroring cultural geographer Kath Browne’s (2009) research into the intersecting and overlapping factors that motivated separatist feminists to attend the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, the participant observation data I collected at CMA strongly suggest that the festivals serve as crucial contexts for members of this hidden religious community to participate in Neo-Pagan practices with coreligionists (such as rituals, chants, workshops, and dressing in non-traditional garb), to renew and maintain a safe, dynamic, equal, accepting, and Neo-Pagan-affirming space and culture, to “reconnect” with the land (which many festival-goers consider sacred), to reunite with “family” in a widely inclusive sense, and to recharge and restore a sense of wellbeing. Like most American Neo-Pagan festivals (Berger, Leach, and Shaffer 2003:203-7), participants at CMA festivals are expected to

provide their own supplies, contribute to communal camp meals (or bring their own food), volunteer time (such as working the front gate for a few hours), and follow group behavioral norms. There are typically large rituals around the central bonfire led by volunteer covens or other religious groups, as well as a series of volunteer-led religious and magickal workshops and smaller rituals, such as handfastings (Neo-Pagan wedding ceremonies).

2) Pagan Pride Day and Houston Pagan Night Out Events

Like the Australian Pagan Pride Day (PPD) field sites described by Coco and Woodward (2007), Texas PPD events are annual gatherings in major urban centers in the state. These gatherings are largely Neo-Pagan markets or fairs held in public spaces that are attended primarily by Neo-Pagans, but these events are also intended to welcome and inform non-Neo-Pagans in the local community. They are hosted at facilities or venues (such as civic or community centers, city parks, and restaurants) that are rented or reserved for each event. These gatherings are important contexts in which Neo-Pagans can express pride in their religion, gather as a community, and establish and renew social relationships with coreligionists who may not attend other local events or who live in other Texas cities or in rural areas. Each event also offers an opportunity for members to celebrate and bless the local community through a public volunteer-led ritual, which is typically the event's high point.

In 2011 and 2012, I carried out fieldwork for this research, including vital participant recruitment and interviews, at the PPD events in Houston, San Antonio, and Austin. Texas PPD events take place in September and October, and each draws hundreds

of diverse Neo-Pagans from the local metropolitan areas and from across the state and beyond. They last throughout the day and long into the evening, which provided me many opportunities to recruit new participants and to either interview them there or to meet them and arrange interviews for a later date. I also arranged for introductions and interviews when possible before each event through pre-established social networks. Writing this in November of 2014, it is worth noting that I, as an insider, was asked to serve as the Education Coordinator for the 2013 and 2014 Houston PPD events because of my reputation as a scholar of Neo-Paganism and because of my close relationships with several of the organizers. As a member of the Protogrove of the Live Oaks ADF group (described below), I also co-led the main ritual with one of my one of my interviewees; this ritual was the first Druidic ritual ever performed at a Houston PPD event. While these two events took place after my fieldwork was officially concluded, they greatly contributed to my understanding of this religious community and its practices, while reaffirming my connection with the broader Neo-Pagan community.

The Houston Pagan Night Out (PNO) events, like the Australian Pagans in the Pub field sites where Coco and Woodward (2007) carried out fieldwork, are public monthly gatherings at a restaurant in central Houston. These PNO gatherings are casual, primarily social events attended by dozens of individuals who primarily live in the Houston metropolitan area. There are no rituals at these events, but there are announcements made about up-coming festivals, important updates about members in the community, and other information pertaining to the local Neo-Pagan community. This venue, which served as my entry point into the local Neo-Pagan community in 2006 (before I began my doctoral

studies), provided me with rich social networking and recruitment opportunities and valuable participant observation data over the course of my fieldwork.

3) Ár nDraíocht Féin (“Our Own Druidry”)

One of the central parts of my fieldwork was working with the Ár nDraíocht Féin Druidry (ADF) community in Texas. ADF is a legally recognized church in the US and one of the largest Druid organizations in the United States. As of August 19, 2012, there were 1160 fully-paid “official” members in the world, 1022 in the United States, and 49 in Texas based on data from the ADF member’s website; however, there are many more individuals who participate but whose memberships have lapsed or who have not paid membership dues. Having briefly been an ADF member many years before my doctoral work, I rejoined ADF and began participating in August 2011 in small public ritual-centered festivals hosted approximately every six weeks by the Protogrove of the Live Oaks, which at the time of my fieldwork was one of only three groves (congregations) or protogroves (provisionary congregations) in Texas. These High Day rituals, which are advertised through local interpersonal and online Neo-Pagan networks, are held at private homes or public parks, are open to the public, and typically have a dozen to a few dozen participants. The solar and agricultural High Days celebrated in ADF Druidry are the same as those celebrated in most other Neo-Pagan traditions: Samhain (November 1), Yule (winter solstice), Imbolc (February 2), Ostara (vernal equinox), Beltane (May 1), Midsummer (summer solstice), Lughnassadh (August 1), and Mabon (autumnal equinox). I was able to attend and participate in rituals to celebrate each of these festivals, save for Ostara. Although each ritual, which lasts approximately an hour, is prepared, scripted, and led by core Live Oaks

members, there are often several Neo-Pagan participants who may only be exploring the option of ADF Druidry, or who simply like to participate in ritual with diverse Neo-Pagan groups. Much of these events, which tend to last from approximately 6 pm until near midnight, involves socializing and partaking in the potluck feast.

From August 2011 through the end of fieldwork in May 2013, I worked closely with Live Oaks, including participating in the ADF Dedicant Program, which is the training program required to become a full ADF member, along with several other Live Oaks members. This training, which was led by the grove's Senior Druid, took place once a month for several hours at a member's home. Unfortunately, the training eventually broke down over the course of my fieldwork due to scheduling challenges experienced by several members. In her research among Neo-Pagans in the Twin Cities, Minnesota, Pizza employed this kind of reflexive ethnography, a method she terms "participant-apprenticeship" (2009:29). Working closely with this protogrove—including attending organizational meetings, helping in ritual design, participating in the Dedicant Program and rituals, and helping with the Live Oaks booth at the 2012 Houston PPD event—offered valuable insights into the "nuts and bolts of organizational meetings and matters" (Pizza 2009:29), while providing first-hand experiences with how members purposively incorporate notions of the past, ancestors, and ethnicity or race into their organizational practices.

The annual Texas ADF retreat, organized by ADF Druids in the state, takes place in early February to celebrate the High Day of Imbolc (February 2). Approximately 50 to 100 individuals from the ADF groves in the Houston, Dallas, and Austin areas, as well as ADF Druids who live other parts of Texas attend these retreats. I attended the 2012 retreat,

which provided particularly rich ethnographic data for my project. This retreat was especially important because it offered a rare opportunity to gather crucial ethnographic data from a key ethnic Neo-Pagan (Druid) population that is relatively small in number within the dispersed Texas Neo-Pagan community. It was also important because it drew solitary ADF members from other parts of Texas, from as far away as El Paso, and because ADF Druids appear to be somewhat less integrated into the larger Texas Neo-Pagan community than other groups. The inclusion of participants from this retreat significantly increased the representativeness of my population sample.

4) Celtic Ways Coven

The Celtic Ways Coven (a pseudonym for requested privacy) is a legally recognized Wiccan church that holds private and public rituals in the Houston area. Celtic Ways Coven (CWC) is comprised of a high priest and priestess and their initiates, who have committed to study the CWC tradition. They host eight major annual festivals celebrating seasonal changes with ritual (the same as celebrated in ADF) that are open to the public. There were approximately 30 participants at the CWC ritual I attended as part of my fieldwork (and a similar number at rituals I attended before I began fieldwork). These events are largely social gatherings for the coven and others from the Houston area Neo-Pagan community, although the high point of each celebration is a ritual in which all may participate, followed by socializing, often around a fire. However, as with all of these kinds of festivals, the CWC member serving as priest or priestess would announce that the rituals will be in their tradition (here, Celtic Wicca), and that they understand participants may follow other traditions, exemplifying the often ecumenical and polyaffiliative nature of Neo-

Paganism in the US. Their rituals, as at CMA, are not usually strictly serious in tone; rather, they are moments of religious *communitas* that are usually both respectful of the sacred and playful in spirit, whereas the ADF rituals I attended were often more serious. It is also noteworthy that it is common to see the same people at different festivals and rituals. For example, core members of CWC originally invited me to their 2009 Samhain ritual because of my interest in Celtic Neo-Paganism and because they knew me from my participation in other local Neo-Pagan contexts, including CMA. While I had attended several of their rituals before beginning fieldwork and had intended to attend several more of their rituals during the course of fieldwork for this project, I was only able to attend the Samhain 2011 festival, where I did participant observation and interviewed one CWC member (who has since left this group) and a Sumerian non-CWC member.

Methodology

I employed a combination of qualitative methodologies in this research: 1) narrative analyses of interview data, 2) analyses of participant observation data from the festivals, rituals, and ADF Dedicant trainings, 3) and text analyses of relevant online, published, and archival Neo-Pagan materials. These analyses were supplemented with qualitative data obtained from surveys collected during my April 2011 pilot study.

I coded the data collected through the methods described below using MAXQDAplus, a qualitative data analysis computer program, and analyzed these data in order to identify themes of ethnic heritage and ancestry, as well as concerns about modern social and spiritual life that relate to modernity and globalization. These themes were then interpreted in relation to theoretical questions about changing constructions of race,

ethnicity, and religious identities in the contemporary US. More specifically, these data were examined to see what they may reveal about how ethnic Neo-Pagan reconstructions of ancestral pasts, the processes involved in such reconstructions, and appropriations of ethnic ancestors—rather than exotic Others—help mitigate social problems experienced by adherents. The analysis of these data also shed light on ways in which such reconstructions and appropriations are used to revalorize whiteness and European ethnicities in new meaningful ways and how they may be employed to legitimize and authenticate new religious traditions and identities. In addition, this analysis allowed me to explore the possible personal and social benefits associated with identifying with a range of ethnic Neo-Pagan traditions, and whether such traditions offer strategic middle paths between charges of cultural appropriation and racism.

1) Interviews

Much of the data collection for this project occurred through in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. Most interviews were conducted in festival and ritual contexts, and the recorded interview conversations usually lasted from thirty minutes to three hours. Some of the interviews took place at participants' homes or at public venues, such as cafés. As described above, these contexts overlapped in the case of PPD and PNO events, which were held in public spaces. All interviews were carried out at locations chosen by the informants, and—following protocols previously approved by the Texas A&M University Institutional Review Board—I obtained signed consent forms from participants before recording interviews or taking photographs or video recordings. Recording the interviews did not appear to cause participants discomfort or compromise

the quality of the data gathered. I believe they were relatively comfortable because they were educated Westerners who were at least somewhat familiar with the idea of scholarly research and interviews.

Based on current ethnographic practice among several folklorists and anthropologists who have studied Neo-Pagan communities in the United States, I request permission to offer participants the choice of using their legal names, the names they go by in the Neo-Pagan community, or anonymity. This practice is described and justified, for example, in Sabine Magliocco's (2004) and Murphy Pizza's (2009) ethnographies of American Neo-Pagans. In light of the potentially socially charged nature of some of the data these individuals offered, especially concerning race, and because several individuals mentioned sensitive information (such as participating in Alcoholics Anonymous), I ended up either using the "festival," "Pagan," or "magickal" names they go by in the community or pseudonyms that reflect their ethnoreligious traditions (such as for the Heathen Baldur) or that are of the same sort of traditional American names as their legal names when they did not have a "festival" name (such as Guy and Mark).

As was the case for other research into Neo-Paganism (Gardell 2003; Magliocco 2004; McGee 2005; Pike 2001; Pizza 2009), it was essential for me to conduct interviews in order to obtain personal experience narratives of how participants think about their ethnic heritage, ancestry, and folk history in relation to their religious identities and traditions. For example, I asked questions about what "the ancestors," ritual garb and other accoutrements, tattoos and other religious symbols, and deities meant to interviewees, as well as questions about what role—if any—ethnic heritage or ancestry played in their identification with certain traditions. As described in the literature review, ethnographic works on American

Neo-Paganism have largely tended to de-emphasize ethnic ancestry and race or focus on the most racist Heathen subgroups of the movement. I believe that having interviews from a broader sample of ethnic Neo-Pagan voices increased the representation of this diverse community and better allowed me to address my research questions.

The analysis of these personal experience narratives allowed me to identify values (Braid 1996; Dolby 1996) that connect and underlay informants' notions of ancestry, folk history, ethnic heritage, and religious identity, as well as the discursive meanings they ascribe to and perform through ethno-religious adornments and other identity markers, such as tattoos, jewelry, and garb, and other folkloric elements, such as altar decorations (Magliocco 2001; Hewitt 1997; Young 1993; Wojcik 1995). As religion scholar Nancy Tosh (2000) demonstrated in her dissertation on folkloric and performative constructions of Neo-Pagan (principally Wiccan) identities, personal experience narratives are often used by individuals in interrelational processes of identity construction (see also Bennet 1986; Bloch 1998b; Calhoun 1994; Denzin 1989; McCall 1990; Mishler 1986; Riessman 1993, 2003; Roof 1993; Santino 1983; Somers and Gibson 1994). The analysis of such narratives also allowed me to understand how the adherents negotiate their marginalized ethno-religious identities within predominantly conservative Christian religious landscape of Texas.

2) Participant Observation

Participant observation (including photography and video recording) is a useful and appropriate method in cultural anthropological investigation (Bernard 2006; Del Negro 2004:5). It has been a primary tool used in recent research into the religious beliefs, practices, and marking and construction of identities among contemporary Neo-Pagans

(Coco and Woodward 2007; Magliocco 1996, 2001, 2004; Pike 2001; Pizza 2009). I participated in and observed rituals in the festival and other contexts described above to identify and document how ethno-religious practices and identities are performed, and to spur questions to ask of participants afterwards. For example, I documented ways in which ancestors were invoked in ritual, how ancient and reconstructed European symbols and other European-derived cultural elements were employed in ritual, and how the past, European ancestral groups, and issues of religious authenticity and legitimacy were discussed by members at these religious events. My fieldwork for the pilot study phase of this project (Lowry 2011) showed that such behaviors and topics of discussion are prominent at such Neo-Pagan events, and my later fieldwork reaffirmed this observation.

Folklore is intimately connected to and expressive of identity and culture (Georges and Jones 1995; Sims and Stephens 2005). Several scholars of American Neo-Paganism have carried out fruitful ethnographies by analyzing religious folk material and performances to shed light on our understanding of Neo-Pagan identities (Coco and Woodward 2007; Magliocco 1996, 2001, 2004; Pike 2001; Pizza 2009; Wales 1994). The collection and analysis of participant observation data, coupled with interview data, allowed me to answer questions about how individuals and groups reinterpret, reinvent, and put into use folkloric elements in their current religious practices to signal and reaffirm ethno-religious identity. While I focus my attention on the performances of the rituals themselves, I carried out participant observation during casual interactions, conversations, and spontaneous religious acts that also produced data that were useful in revealing ideas of ancestry, ethnic heritage, folk history, and ethnoreligious identity held by participants. I also carried out participant observation when conducting interviews at individuals' homes,

thereby allowing me to gather crucial data about meanings and motivations in the constructions of home altars as folkloric phenomena, as well as other ethno-religious home decorations, which did in fact often turn out to be important expressions and markers (to self and others) of ethno-religious identity (Magliocco 2001; Wales 2004).

3) Published and Digital Texts

Following Pizza's (2009) and Gardell's (2003) methods of archival and literary analysis, I also collected and analyzed data from published and online sources written by and about the Neo-Pagan traditions represented in this study. I particularly attend to materials relating to *Ár nDraíocht Féin* (ADF), including analyses of general information about ADF theology and practice on the organization's website (adf.org), texts published by ADF members, and online and printed training materials used in the Dedicant Program. In particular, I examined materials that describe emic notions of ethnic Neo-Pagan identity and tradition, theology, folk histories about ancient and historical European ethnic groups, and issues of religious authenticity and legitimacy. This method proved to be productive in my previous research comparing constructions of folk history among ADF Druids and members of the British organization, the Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids (Lowry 2010).

As Facebook has become a prominent mode of communication for many in the US and globally, including for many Neo-Pagans, I also found that this new tool of digital ethnography was especially productive in gathering data for this project. Participants often shared religious memes, online media articles, and personal posts, as well as the accompanying conversations on Facebook, that offered insights into their religious and ethnic ideas and identities, often tied to everyday experiences, thoughts, and concerns.

Interacting through this form of social media effectively offered me yet another method of collecting valuable participant observational data from participants as they communicated in what has become just another form of social interaction in their daily lives. In this sense, I was able to “meet” my participants “where they are” (Carpenter 2014).

Collecting and analyzing digital data, including carrying out narrative analyses on relevant blogs and Facebook posts and comments by participants, has several practical and methodological strengths and weaknesses (Coco and Woodward 2007; Cowan 2005; Horst and Murthy 2008; Postill and Pink 2012). The recognition of the many ways that the Internet, including social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, may be employed as a useful tool in carrying out digital ethnography was one of the dominant themes at the 2014 American Folklore Society annual meeting in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where several panels and individual presentations explored the topic. For example, Jennifer Spitulnik (2014) presented on how the Broadway community signifies insider and outsider identities on Twitter, and Ida Tolgensbakk (2014) presented on how Facebook memes reveal how the kebab has become a symbol of national Swedishness. In her 2014 AFS conference presentation, Tracy Carpenter (2014) described several advantages of using social media, including Facebook, as an especially useful tool for recruiting and collecting data from informants of hidden or dispersed populations. While the use of digital ethnographic methods has the inevitable potential for selection bias, it allows practical but non-intrusive research into “hidden” Neo-Pagan communities, and as such, follows Douglas Heckathorn’s (1997) argument that alternative methods of social research are often necessary when studying members of hidden populations. This method is also justified because the Internet has also become a primary venue for disseminating materials about

Neo-Pagan beliefs and practices and exchanging intra- and inter-Neo-Pagan communication about their traditions and identities, as well as reaching potential converts (Arthur 2008; Coco and Woodward 2007; Cowan 2005).

Researcher Positionality

In addition to being a white native Texan from a middle-class background, I am also a Neo-Pagan—a Gallic-focused Druid with some eclectic Wiccan influences to be precise—and I have been one since I was a teenager. In fact, my own religious practice and thought is what motivated me to first study Celtic studies at Université Rennes 2-Haute Bretagne in Rennes, France through an exchange program at Reed College, then to explore animal sacrifice in Iron Age Gaul for my Masters work at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and eventually to my current research on ethnic Neo-Pagan identities and traditions at Texas A&M University. This potentially—though not necessarily—problematic positionality as an insider/outsider thus requires explanation.

In *The Passeggiata and Popular Culture in an Italian Town: Folklore and the Performance of Modernity* (2004), Giovanna Del Negro gives a personal example of autoethnography in the field, and offers a background to the ideas of autoethnography and reflexive or experiential ethnography, arguing that both are useful and important in her study of how gender norms and identities are performed and negotiated in the traditional evening stroll or *passeggiata* and other contexts in a small village in Central Italy (“Sasso”). Del Negro situates herself as what anthropologist Kirin Narayan (1992) calls a “halfie,” or an ethnographer who is a partial insider (2004:69; see also Abu-Lughod 1991), because she is the daughter of Italian immigrants to Canada who came from the region of her study, and who maintained

relationships with relatives in Sasso. She ties the value of her liminal status to her ethnography, saying, “In Sasso and Montreal, the various representations of national and ethnic identity that I experienced were bound up with discourses of modernity” (2004:69). More specifically, she describes her observations that the Québécois see rural Italy as either idyllic or backwards, while the Sassani describe Canada as either an example of the values of modernity “or a place where nouveau riches outmigrants lost their traditional Old World civility” (2004:69). Her “halfie” status gave her valuable access, although it also sometimes made things difficult in the field (2004:69).

Del Negro describes autoethnography—in contrast to positivistic approaches—as a method aimed at “reveal[ing] the complex and subtle ways in which the researcher encounters and responds to others in ethnographic fieldwork” (2004:70). She describes autoethnography as ethnography in which the researcher does not pretend to have an “objective outsider” perspective, and instead, positions themselves in their ethnography by, as she argues is asserted by anthropologist Deborah Reed-Danahay (1997), writing “a text that blends ethnography and autobiography” (Del Negro 2004:70). Del Negro also discusses the contribution of reflexive or experiential ethnography in anthropology, which came about in response to the “crises of representation” epitomized by James Clifford and George Marcus’ seminal critique of ethnographic writing, *Writing Culture* (1986), a critical discourse highlighting that ethnographic texts are produced within political contexts, and that claims to objectivity and political neutrality are naïve. As she argues, “Their work has been instrumental in helping to recognize the contingent and partial nature of knowledge and in inspiring a generation of scholars to experiment with different voices and rhetorical styles” (Del Negro 2004:71).

Del Negro discusses these issues in terms of folkloristic methods, and points out that folklorists have traditionally been “halfies” (of the same nationality and often race but different class as their informants), and yet, in that domain, being a partial insider has not usually been deemed problematic (2004:71). While admitting that some early folkloristic work has been rightly criticized for being romantic and elitist, she also discusses how more recent folkloristic-oriented ethnographers with “critical programs or an empathetic desire to understand their research participants on existential or human terms have used reflexive techniques” (2004:71). She also argues that, in their classic work *People Studying People* (1980), folklorists Robert Georges and Michael Owen Jones “emphasize that the primary reality of ethnographic research is in the social interaction between fieldworker and research participant” (2004:71). Del Negro mentions, for example, how several feminist folklorists have reflexively acknowledged how their feminism has affected their choices of what to study, their method choices, and how they interpret data (2004:72).

Del Negro explains how she uses autoethnography by drawing on personal experiences to shed light on her observations from the field and narratives from her own family “to illustrate a larger historical process,” and, drawing from insights from the writing against culture crisis, to highlight the importance of being sensitive to the politics of representation, particularly in regards to the representation of regional identities (2004:72). While she is clear that her intention is not to navel-gaze, Del Negro argues that humanistic ethnography can be useful in addressing larger theoretical questions, and that the study of any given subordinated group can simultaneously offer valuable data about the local while illuminating larger social issues (2004:72).

In their study of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, folklorists Helen Regis and Shana Walton similarly recognize their layered, sometimes harmonious and sometimes conflicted positionalities, as they are simultaneously researchers and long-time members of the community they are investigating:

Our position is perhaps not the same as that of some ethnographers who offer critiques of public displays. We have multiple relations to the festival we are interpreting, sometimes simultaneously. We are fans who seek free tickets. We are producers who seek to bond with musicians themselves. We are ethnographers who set down our pens and dance. We are performers who take notes on our own performances. We are white women in a majority black city. We are divided subjects. We experience discomfort in the awareness of our multiple roles. We find transcendence in the gospel tent. We don't have time to talk because we have work to do. We replicate social structure as we seek to subvert it. Perhaps it is for this reason that we have sought to write about the Jazz Fest in collaboration with each other, in order to tease out the multiplicities in our experience. This task challenges us to theorize a reflexivity that is multilayered and hybrid, drawing on postmodern and feminist approaches. The insider/outsider dichotomy often disintegrates for us. We are producers/consumers/performers/ethnographers. (Regis and Walton 2008:404)

Regis and Walton highlight how ethnographers who share social attributes with their informants move back in forth between their insider and outsider identities and roles in their work. They go beyond the lauded, traditional notion of participant observation, for when they do participate, they do so as community insiders who are co-producers with their informants, while simultaneously being ethnographers documenting the behaviors of others and themselves. It is admittedly a challenging positionality to have, but not an overly daunting one.

As discussed in depth by Pizza (2009:31-41) in her research on Minnesotan Neo-Pagans, many researchers of Neo-Paganism themselves either began research as cultural insiders, as Pizza did, or became insiders while working with a Neo-Pagan community (e.g.,

Greenwood 2000, Magliocco 1994, Orion 1995, Pike 2001, Salomonsen 2004, Rountree 2004). As Pizza (2009:38-39) discusses, several insider researchers of Neo-Paganism in *Researching Paganisms* (Blain, Ezzy, and Harvey 2004) talk about the advantages of sharing participants' social traits—in terms of class, sociopolitical leanings, and often religious identity—with a blurred, reflexive positionality, such as the ease of community access and trust and “shar[ing] a language with [one’s] informants” (Pizza 2009:28), as well as the challenges an insider ethnographer may face, especially regarding distrustful charges from the academe of overly subjective bias.

I have known Pizza since we were graduate students at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee together (2002-2005), when I was working on Iron Age Celtic archaeology, and we presented a joint conference talk combining our different anthropological perspectives to analyze current interpretations of Neolithic Venus figurines (Lowry and Pizza 2004). We spent many an hour in conversation over this issue of bias and objectivity, of insider and outsider positionality, grappling with the possible risks and challenges as we considered our roles as anthropologists. Going through this process of reflection for so many years, and thinking critically about these issues in light of the literature I discussed above, I am convinced that being a Neo-Pagan (as well as white, Texan, and middle-class) ethnographer is not detrimentally problematic for the integrity of my research into this religious community in Texas. As discussed above, folklorists like Regis and Walton (2008) have long shared social identities, backgrounds, and experiences with their informants, and that has not diminished the value or trustworthiness of their work. And as Del Negro (2004), Pizza (2009), and others have argued, having a reflexive insider or “halfie” positionality—when done with a critical, honest awareness of one’s own subjectivity—can itself offer

valuable ethnographic insights. Having said that, I, like Del Negro, do not wish to wantonly indulge in navel-gazing, and so I only discuss my reflexive observations when warranted, either to give necessary context to data I present and analyze, or when my own participation as a Neo-Pagan—for example, in ritual—contributed data to this research in a noteworthy way.

Broader Implications and Future Goals

My research engages with current scholarship in the following ways: 1) It contributes to the growing discourse of these emergent religious phenomena by including a wider range of ethnic Neo-Pagan traditions than has often been examined in the literature. In particular, it adds American Druid and other non-Heathen voices, as well as more diverse Heathen voices, and representations for consideration in academic discussions of this growing new religious movement. By doing so, this research also lays the groundwork for future research I plan comparing nationalist Druids in France, Belgium, and Québec with Druids in the US; 2) It critically challenges claims that Eurocentric Neo-Pagans in the US are drawn to ethnic traditions for aesthetic reasons alone, and that religious authenticity and legitimacy are not important factors in choosing to self-identify with or reject certain traditions; 3) It challenges assertions that white Americans seeking to modify their ethnic or racial identities are left with little option but to appropriate exotic Others; and 4) It enriches our understanding of how members of such new religious movements find ways to negotiate alternative religious identities within the socially conservative “Bible Belt,” and in relation to their own regionally-informed identities.

This research also has broader impacts in three main areas: 1) By sharing my research in Neo-Pagan venues (which I have been invited to do), it engages the local community in public outreach; 2) It contributes to public discussions of white American notions of the past and ancestral heritage by shedding light on novel reconfigurations of ancestry and ancestors within the broader American religious landscape; and 3) It broadens both scholarly and public discourses of how white, working and middle-class Americans are creatively navigating an increasingly multiethnic and religiously pluralistic society where the very authenticity, legitimacy, and meaning of one's culture, religion, and identity are brought into question.

CHAPTER II
ETHNIC NEO-PAGAN ADAPTATIONS TO MODERNITY
AND FOLK HISTORIES

Ethnic Neo-Pagan Perspectives on the Blessings and Curses of Modernity

Many of the critiques of modernity—both explicit and implicit—that emerged from my ethnographic data mirrored those discussed by other scholars of Neo-Paganism (Harvey 2007; Ivakhiv 1996; Magliocco 2001, 2004). These include concerns about the impacts of the Enlightenment, the degradation and desacralization of the environment, gender, and sexuality, problems with modern technology, urbanity, and capitalism, and other impacts of the Enlightenment and modernity.

Almost everyone I interviewed or talked with in the field brought up notions of resacralized nature, the need to connect more with nature, and to protect the environment. These issues typically went hand-in-hand with challenges of urban living for Neo-Pagans. Oftentimes these beliefs involved beings reconstructed from European folklore, such as Heathen land wights or spirits, ADF Druid Nature Spirits (one of the three Kindreds or categories of spiritual beings in ADF), and the *domovye* [singular *domovoy*] or house fairies the Slavic Witch Opal honors. While describing land wights, Scaði, who claims to be a “Family Tradition” or “Fam-Trad” (Adler 1986 [1979]) Heathen, explained why she puts out milk, cookies, and “shiny things” for these nature spirits reconstructed from Scandinavian folklore on her property:

Oh, yes, you still do it today, otherwise they do things like make your pipes break.... If you are in harmony with the land, then your crops will grow. If you are not polite, again, it’s that that hospitality mindset extends to the spirit realm, as well. If you’re not polite to everything around you, then they have the right to be rude to

you. And if you do not give appeasement to the land spirits, then they will break your pipes and steal your crops.

Here Scaði offers a folkloric understanding of the reciprocal, respectful relationship Heathens have with land wights in Texas. She also gives an example of how the language is agricultural, even though most American Heathens are urban and not growing crops, including Scaði, who at the time of the interview lived in the Houston area. Her example of pipes breaking, however, articulates her modern way of living with her reconstructed premodern beliefs by describing how dishonoring this relationship with land spirits is believed to possibly adversely affect life in urban settings.

These concerns about nature were often tied directly to the participants' everyday, modern, predominantly urban lives, and participants tended to be reflexively aware of challenges "connecting with nature." Brian and his wife, Emily, who lead a unique Irish tradition Brian said he inherited from his grandmother (thus a Fam-Trad tradition), were among the most explicitly critical of modern American urbanity. For example, Emily said:

[The Gods ask,] "Are ya getting it yet?" Until it collapses, 'cause nobody's getting it. Yeah, it's every time you drive down a highway, there's more and more billboards. There's more signs. People—it's not necessarily the traffic, but I see this. I see manmade buildings. I see advertisements everywhere. I see cars, people hustling, bustling around. They're not taking time to listen to the Earth. Hopefully, when they go home they are, but probably most of them aren't. And the message keeps getting louder from the Gods: "Do you get it?"

Here Emily describes what she perceives to be an increase in natural disasters and environmental problems, as well as problems of alienation and social disconnection in urban life, as direct messages from the divine, not just to fellow Neo-Pagans, but to all

Americans. She also implies that if people would only listen to these divine messages, their modern lives would be better.

Grim, a Witch with a mix of Heathen, Italian, and Celtic ethnic foci and an undergraduate degree in anthropology and graduate experience in comparative religion, expressed similar sentiments when she explained why she thinks many become Neo-Pagan:

One, it's a feeling that there's been a break with the relationship between humans and the Earth. And we're reaping the problems right now. Health problems, social problems, economic problems by overusing resources and global warming, and all of that. So people feel that they have to reinstate some relationship or sanctity to the Earth. Also, resacralizing the body. I think a lot of people are tired of being told that sex is bad and dirty, or that their body is unattractive or something like that. Or that the females somehow are subservient. There's a resacralization of both the feminine body, the Earth's body, and sexuality in general. And then I think ancestor[s] is the third. And they're all equally important in the movement.

Two of these observations—that the environment and sexuality and gender should be resacralized—correspond with those proposed by other researchers of European and American Neo-Paganism (Adler 1986 [1979]; Blain, Ezzy, and Harvey 2004; Block 1998b; Harvey 2007; Ivakhiv 1996, 2005b; Magliocco 2004, Pizza 2009, Simpson 2000, Strmiska 2005a; Tosh 2000). Her last observation, as well as her personal draw to her ethnic foci, regarding the importance of reincorporating ancestors into American religious life is a common theme in studies of nationalist European traditions (Aitamurto 2006; Asprem 2008; Ivakhiv 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Simpson 2000; Strmiska 2000, 2005a, 2005b, 2007; Strmiska and Sigurvinsson 2005), but it is rarer in research of American Neo-Paganism (Blain 2002; Gardell 2003; Kaplan 1996; Pizza 2009:81-11; Strmiska and Sigurvinsson 2005). I return to this focus on ancestors and ancestor veneration as a virtue and identity anchor in the following chapters.

Individuals find different ways to reconcile urban life with a nature-centered religion. Some move to or near rural areas, such as SaINt, who had recently found Neopaganism and was exploring Heathenry, and his Hellenic fiancée (at the time of our interview), Azure, who moved to a small town only 30 minutes from downtown Houston to take advantage of urban benefits with easier access to the countryside. SaINt lauded the diverse natural landscapes of Texas and saw that environmental diversity as a draw for Neopagans, while recognizing the constraints they may feel in major urban centers: “No matter what you feel closest with, you can find it generally within our [state’s] borders. I can understand how it would be hard like in Houston, or, say, Dallas or Austin, somewhere that’s a major metroplex to connect because most of the natural landscape has been locked off.” In the same conversation, Azure contrasted her experiences in their current location with when she had lived in cities:

If I have got this little grove of trees right back over here... it’s a lot easier to connect than, say, if I was in my [previous] apartment complex, where there was no kind of trees at all, and no kind of nature. Everything was pretty much just, here’s some grass. It was nothing else. But it’s a lot quieter out here. You can see the stars, and nature is more prevalent out here than, say, some of the other areas I’ve lived in, where it was just concrete.

Here Azure describes ways my interlocutors may adapt and reconcile their nature-centered religious lives with urbanity, but also why she prefers living closer to the countryside. Jill, an ADF Druid, similarly said in her ADF Dedicant Program write-up:

I love being in nature. It is so peaceful to get away from the city and out to the country. I know in my life it is hard to find places that I can be in Nature. Yet, I can still find ways in the city to help her. I can still find areas that I can escape to that the city has not taken over.... Through my time of saying prayers of thanksgiving to the spirits of the land, through my time of working with animals, and through my living in an area prone to harsh weather, I have learned that Nature is something that does need help at times to clean up the print that we leave on her.

I feel we each have a roll [*sic*] to play to help the environment.... If I could, I would move out into the country, live from the land, and never see people. Yet, I am not rich, so I adapt areas of life to try and have as little impact as possible.

Here and elsewhere in that document, Jill talks about how, despite the constraints of urbanity she experiences, she connects and reconciles her everyday practices in urban Texas to her religious practice by being conscientious about litter, recycling, and donating to the Arbor Day Foundation. She also honors nature by expressing gratitude, watching for warnings or omens about threatening weather changes, and gardening when possible.

Few explicitly raised issues of rationalism and materialism from the Enlightenment, although many made implicit criticisms. SaINt and Guy, a committed Hellenist, both criticized our American educational and cultural tendency to consider narratives of non-Abrahamic deities as mere “fantasy stories” or “myths” (in the vernacular sense of “untrue stories”) not to be taken seriously; this is a bone of contention and arguably seen as a problem with modernity, the intellectual and cultural inheritance of the Enlightenment, and Christian influence.

Some were more explicitly critical of the impacts of the Enlightenment and modernization. Grim and Mathcar, a Druid with a role in ADF’s hierarchy and a graduate degree in linguistics, offer two such examples. In one breath, Grim described what she saw as the dilemma modern Americans face:

There’s something missing. There’s something that’s been taken or lost. And when the model that we’re stuck with either rampant consumerism and going to the mall all the time and buying things, and that’s who you are as [an] American, or if it’s your Christian identity, and for some people, the Christian religion, the Christian faith, is just not satisfactory. It was not for me.

In this assessment, spiritually bankrupt and unmoored consumerism and Christianity are the primary options available to Americans seeking to cope with the challenges of modernity. The choices, then, are seen as being largely limited to religiosity via the dominant religion (Christianity) or essentially giving in to the perceived worst of modern American culture (amoral consumerism).

Mathcar also drew a dichotomy in what he believed were the predominant options for dealing with the problems of modernity, except his were both religious:

But the thing that concerns me is the responses I'm seeing. Either fall into fundagelicalism, which is not just fundamentalism, but the fact that they have to convert you to it. Let me rephrase that, the ditheistic Fundamentalism of the Middle Eastern religions. Or you get the Neo-Pagan response. I'm much more comfortable in the realm of taking myths seriously but not literally, because, oh, God, here's where being from Texas really matters and seeing the difference between West Hispanic Catholic, don't bother us, go tell the priest Texas and East Baptist Church of Christ, get in your business for you Texas, I'm sorry—literalism kills. And that is a dead end, and I mean that literally.

Gardell (2003:12-14) describes three primary types of religious responses to the disembedding and fragmentation of individual and group identities resulting from globalization: nationalist fundamentalism, interfaith ecumenism, and new religious movements. Here Mathcar focuses in on the first and last possible responses, clearly favoring the latter. While referring to fundamentalist Christianity, Mathcar, like Grim, does not see Christianity or any other Abrahamic religion as a viable option. It is worth keeping in mind that Mathcar was a devout "High Church Episcopalian" for many years as a younger adult. It is also worth pointing out that it is exceptionally common for Neo-Pagans of various stripes to consider Christianity to be but one form of Abrahamic religion, and to emically collapse all such traditions into one Abrahamic category. Furthermore, more

Reconstructionist-leaning ethnic Neo-Pagans often frame Christianity as an invasive Middle Eastern religion, a notion I return to in my discussion of folk histories later in this chapter.

Mathcar further explained his ADF-informed (though not necessarily bound) vision of how modern Americans should best re-moor themselves in myth (following Ivakhiv's argument that Neo-Pagans seek to remythicize and re-'story' their world [1996:256]) to counteract what he sees as the lethal, dehumanizing impacts of modernity:

That's why I'm thinking, how do we interact and deal with the world and with myth as man or humanity as the story-telling animal, and work with these stories in a positive constructive but not straight-jacketing fashion to create in so far as possible creative, constructive subversion? And I mean that. Because the dominant paradigm we live under and the master narratives we live under don't work. And they are toxic. It's that simple. And when I say those, I'm primarily referring to unfettered Keynesian capitalism, or the scientific realism that leads to the kind of industrial or now digital world that so many of the, I'll say it flat out, Asperger's Syndrome suffer. Well, they don't necessarily know they're suffering. That Silicon Valley, I lived in that world, and it is absolutely, utterly devoid of mystery, wonder, life, and it is absolutely sterile and barren.

There is much in this statement to unpack. Firstly, Mathcar explicitly describes the “dominant paradigm” and “master narratives” that support and continue what he sees as “unfettered Keynesian capitalism” and the impacts of Enlightenment-inherited rationalism, industrialization, and the recent digitalization of Western culture to have led to a “toxic,” “sterile,” and “barren” world with no sense of mystery. He finds the answer to this lethal, un-mooring problem in novel forms of remythicizing our world as a kind of “creative, constructive subversion;” examples of how this remythicizing is done in ADF Druidry are described in the chapters on ADF altars and rituals (Chapters 3 and 4). The dominant metanarratives of modernity, as described here, are deemed insufficient to maintain healthy ways for humans to live.

I asked Mathcar how he finds Neo-Paganism to be a way to re-mystify and revive Western culture. His response was that Neo-Pagan traditions drawing on premodern European cultures, such as ADF Druidry, offer such a better way:

Breathe life into an otherwise dead, gray, lifeless, lunar landscape of make a buck any way you can off of anybody, and it doesn't matter who you hurt, what you use up, what you destroy, because it's all just raw materials. I'm going, no fucking way, that is not how humanity's always dealt with it. And, yeah, the past is not always right, but they may have had some really, really good ideas. I'm sorry, we have lost extremely valuable, yes, technology and skills. For example, the arts and crafts movement, you find me somebody who can do that kind of work nowadays.

One of the things I kept hearing out of my Chinese friends living in the Bay Area who would talk to me about the modernization of not only Taiwan but China, is we don't even have our traditional craftsmen anymore. Their kids don't want to do it. They want to go become computer programmers. We all literally can't get some of the things that were normal during our parents' and grandparents' lifetimes that were traditional Chinese crafts. How does this answer? This is where I'm partly saying the work I am doing in my own context is the work I presume other people are doing in their own context to reconnect not only with their own culture, their own ancestry, but also their own Gods.

This response shows a critique of modernity that is not limited to the West; indeed, his second-hand mini-narrative about the perceived cultural costs of modernization in China indicates an indictment of modernity and modernization *as they have occurred and continue to occur* inside and outside of the West. This is a pained story of deep loss that permeates my interview data.

Mathcar suggests that the best way to remedy this process of loss is to “reconnect” with the past: with one's European ancestors and their culture(s) and Gods. While I take each of these up in the remaining chapters, it is important to note several things here. Based on the rest of my conversations with Mathcar and other ethnic Neo-Pagan informants, I do not believe these individuals are *necessarily* engaged in a nativistic project,

wherein there is a “conscious, organized attempt on the part of a society’s members to revive or perpetuate selected aspects of its culture” (Linton 1943:230; see also Eriksen 1993:86) (although there are some such elements), but in a loosely connected revitalization movement. Anthropologist Anthony Wallace (1956) described such movements as organized attempts to restore equilibrium under extreme socio-cultural disorganization. This process involves a sudden identification with a new movement, usually during political domination or economic crisis, when people reject or revise their worldview because the old way is no longer adequate. I propose that all new religious movements have aspects of revitalization movements, as the members of such movements all seek to find new ways to adapt to what they consider a broken, unsustainable or otherwise unsatisfactory social world (Lewis and Hammer 2007; Partridge 2004a; 2004b, 2005).

However, Mathcar is clear that he does not envision the ancient Celtic or European world as a utopia to restore when he says that “the past is not always right, but they may have had some really, really good ideas.” Barring perhaps Brian and Emily, who seemed to have somewhat millenarian perspectives, none of my ethnic informants suggested that their ancestral pasts were utopias, nor that they sought to establish a utopia; rather they see their ancestors and their premodern European cultures (implied by Mathcar’s use of “context” or ADF code for ancestral European culture) as bearers of skills and ideas that could offer a *better* way to live in the modern world, a theme I revisit in the following chapters.

Furthermore, Mathcar’s reference to presuming that others are doing such work (noting that he sees his efforts at reconstructing ADF Druidry as an intentional project) “in their own context” suggests that he has an ecumenical perspective, and that he sees himself as working together with members of other Eurocentric Neo-Pagan paths, such as

Heathenry, on a bigger collaborative project, but also it seems with other non-European revivalist religious traditions. Such ecumenism points back to Gardell's (2003) inclusion of interfaith ecumenism as one response to the challenges of modernity and globalization, highlighting that agents are not necessarily bound only to one kind of response. In this case, involvement with a new religious tradition goes hand-in-hand with a sense of interfaith cooperation.

My conversations with Mathcar and other ethnic Neo-Pagans also reveal that a focus on ancestral pasts does not necessarily mean a wish to abandon modernity altogether, nor that they are uncritical of romanticizing the past. For example, Mathcar said:

I will be blunt with you. I see—and I'm going to go out for the much larger picture here, the Neo-Pagan community—and that's using the term very loosely.... I fully recognize our dependence upon the nineteenth century Romanticists. In one sense. But what I see is the all-too-common response, not answer, response to the desacralization of the world and scientific materialism—and that's not a dirty word, and there's nothing wrong with it, because God Almighty, I have no desire to live in a world without antibiotics, trust me. And there are times where I honestly think I have more in common with the atheists as far as [being] a skeptic, as a rationalist skeptic, when it comes to making policy and making health decisions, and making decisions on how best to manage resources.

Here he criticizes Neo-Pagan tendencies to overly rely on the writings and notions of European Romantics, who were responding to the rationalism and urbanization of the Enlightenment. While he appreciates that Neo-Pagans are inspired by the Romantic view that the world is full of mystery and wonder, he is critical of his co-religionists' penchant to, as Magliocco (2004:54-56) argues, "poach the stacks" of academia—especially Romantic folkloristic and anthropological scholarship—for material when reconstructing or reclaiming what they believe to be authentic pre-Christian folk spiritual knowledge and

practices. He clearly he has no desire to live in a premodern world, romanticized or otherwise, and he at least partially values rational skepticism.

In a similar vein, Guy, who has a bachelor's degree in history with a focus on the rise of new religious cults in the ancient Mediterranean world, explained that he sees the West's inheritance from the Enlightenment as not only beneficial, but specifically helpful in mitigating some of the dangers of Christianity (which my informants often described as *part* of modernity):

I think a lot of modern culture is actually still based on classical understanding.... I mean, a lot of the excesses that were brought on by Christianity have been moderated and have been tempered because of the Enlightenment movement, which was based on guys reading classical writings. So there is already a little bit of that [that] has been brought back. Just the idea of rational, logical thinking. The Socratic method of questioning and reasoning. A lot of that already kind of just sort of wormed its way in. But, yeah, that whole insistence on orthodoxy would be great [*said as sarcasm*] if it wasn't there.

Guy's statement suggests both a criticism of Christianity and a view of the Enlightenment as both a positive connection to the ancient Greek pagan past *and* a partial remedy for what he sees as the dangers of Christian hegemony, especially insurances on orthodoxy. To a degree, he offers a nuanced challenge to Magliocco's (2004) and others' arguments that Neo-Paganism is necessarily a counter-response to the Enlightenment. However, I believe Guy offers an atypical perspective that may specifically tie to his educational experiences and his Hellenic focus. I suspect this view is more common among Hellenists, especially those in modern-day Greece. It is also of import that he emphasizes rationalism, which is contrary to the view of many in my and other studies of Neo-Pagans. Guy, like Mathcar and many of my ethnic Neo-Pagan informants, sees modernity as flawed and the past as a primary source to which one may look to find solutions to the problems of modernity.

Some aspects of modern life, however, including intellectual and cultural elements inherited from the Enlightenment, are imbued with value and seen as worthy of keeping.

Ethnic Versus Eclectic Folk Histories, Concerns, and Values

Folk History

What my data revealed that most contributes to discourses about Neo-Pagan critiques of modernity is that many discussed the negative impacts they considered to be consequences of Christianity (or Abrahamic religions in general), and what they perceived to be the loss of ancestral values or virtues in modern American society. These themes were especially prominent in the ethnic Neo-Pagan narratives, and one useful way to examine such divergent group values is through an analysis of their versions of the past.

Revitalization movements typically include the forging of “folk histories” as proposed by Charles Hudson, whereby one’s topic of investigation is “to find what people in another society believe ‘really happened,’ as judged by *their* sense of credibility and relevance” and “to find out how the members of a society explain why things happened the way they did” (Hudson 1966:54). On the other side of Hudson’s dichotomy is “ethnohistory” (1966) or a Western scientific notion of an objectively credible past, which may or may not match with a group’s folk history. In other words, whether or not a group’s folk history is (ethno)historically accurate, what matters to the ethnographer is what the folk group believes, how those beliefs reflect other crucial aspects of culture, their criteria of validation, and what use those beliefs are to the people in question. As folklorist Thomas Green phrases it, it is “clear that while a history of a people may portray what they

do, a history by a people explains what they *are*—or, rather, *what they profess to be*” (1976:315; emphasis added).

Green (1976) offers an ethnographic example of how a folk history and other invented traditions (Hobsbawm 1983) may be used strategically by marginalized groups. He demonstrates how the Tigua of Ysleta del Sur (now in El Paso, Texas) have constructed a folk history they use to show themselves to themselves as 1) brave people who have a history that shows them how to resist domination by Europeans (and, by implication, white American culture), and 2) having a much older claim to their territory than the ethnohistory describes. Green argues the Tigua were motivated to nativism by the perception that their cultural integrity was threatened, and they had only folk history to use as a basis of their movement. For most Tigua, “oral tradition at this time centers upon their claims on and rights to the land they inhabit. Oral tradition, at least in the present situation, is not isolated then, but arises, is renewed, and addresses itself to current tensions” (Green 1976:313). This case study highlights how a group’s folk history is used to explain their current situation, and to offer a “traditional” model for how to address their present concerns.

Green proposes, “The hypothesis that ‘folk history is refracted into opposed versions in ways that are governed by critical features of social structure’ [Hudson 1966:54] seems to be borne out in the folk history of the Tigua Pueblo of Ysleta del Sur, for the areas that are productive of the most intense social conflict at the present time are those that form the core of their historical narratives” (1976:315). Even though I doubt the mainstream, Christian society knows there is such a conflict with Neo-Paganism, it appears that my informants also perceive a threat, which especially manifests at the nexus of their

narratives about the Burning Times and the Christianization of Europe, where Neo-Pagan and dominant Western versions of the past diverge most.

Folk history, group boundaries, and nativism are interrelated features of group maintenance. Green argues, “Folk history is exegetical. It attempts to explain present circumstances in terms of past occurrences and, thus, affects present behavior” (1976:315). Nativism requires clear group boundaries, and “folk history provides an explanation for the existence of social boundaries as well as providing an instrumentality for the creation of these structures” (Green 1976:316). As anthropologist Frederik Barth (1969) argues, ethnic groups require stereotyped characteristics in order to maintain cultural distinction in the midst of cultural plurality. Furthermore, Richard Bauman (1971) argues that folklore is particularly useful for constructing and maintaining differential group identities, even when opposing groups have direct interaction. Folk history is thus useful in articulating such relationships, because “exoterically, it explains the motivations of contemporary social systems, and esoterically, it provides the self-image necessary for the pursuit of nativistic goals” (Green 1976:316). Oral tradition—especially folk history—is good at forging and maintaining cultural unity among an otherwise dispersed and disorganized group in oppressive, plural contexts (Green 1976:316-17; see also Fernandez 1966), such as the religiously and ethnically plural context in which American Neo-Pagans find themselves. The Tigua folk history is used to unite the Tigua by offering a sense of distinct ethnic identity pride (Green 1976); in a similar way, Neo-Pagan folk histories—both Eclectic and ethnic Recon—may help these groups forge a sense of re-rooted religious or ethnoreligious identity and pride in the midst of America’s pluralistic society.

Lastly, Green (1976) argues that there are two main folkloric ways to establish and maintain group boundaries: gossip and oral narrative. Gossip works in this way when the minority group gossips while in contact with the dominant assimilative group. Oral narrative, however, does not require such an intimate relationship, because “folk history deals more with esoteric self concepts. In the case of the Tigua, ‘others’ are merely a background against which the successful ‘self’ struggles and is illuminated or ennobled” (Green 1976:317). I investigate how this same idea may relate to how American Neo-Pagans create and maintain boundaries between themselves as a larger community and the dominant Christian American culture, as well as how they create and maintain boundaries among their diverse Neo-Pagan traditions.

In his analysis of the transmission and reconstruction of Texas folklore, Richard Bauman makes the salient argument that “folklife festivals *are* the constructions of the present, though made up of performances of the past” (1986:39; original emphasis). “It is not folklore that is featured in folklife festivals, but staged, framed reconstructions and reenactments of it,” he argues, “The festivals are nonetheless vehicles of mythic expression for all that—*our modern way of presenting ourselves to ourselves* in light of the formative forces and experiences that made us what we are. We have been transformed by history and our myths must follow suit, *for myth is of the present though it draws its sanction from the past*” (1986:40; added emphasis; see also Marcus 1989). Festivals emphasize tradition, and thus a perception of continuity rooting the present in the past, yet they take place in the present and express immediate concerns about the present and future, including concerns about social change and diversity (Bauman 1986; see also Stoeltje and Bauman 1983, 1989). These performances retell origin folk histories, while articulating the group in their modern, lived

contexts. As with folk history, symbolism is more important than historicity (Bauman 1986:34).

In the following sections, I reveal how such folk historical narratives express and articulate with the present concerns, anxieties, and values of contemporary Neo-Pagans in Texas, while demonstrating that the process of drawing upon the past-as-perceived by religious individuals merits further investigation. Just as secular folk histories are used to authenticate identities and offer legitimation of practices and ideologies (often nationalist or nativistic) to current and potential members (Friedman 1992a, 1992b; Green 1976, 1997), religious groups also rely upon selectively appropriated elements from the past, which they use in the revival and invention of traditions to authenticate and legitimize their religious identities and traditions. I believe this process exists among groups smaller than nations that do not rely on enculturation but conversion or joining, as demonstrated by Green's (1997) research into historical narrative in the martial arts, which shows how the analytical concept of folk history may be applied to smaller folk groups, in this case, practitioners of the Won Hop Loong Chuan martial arts tradition in the US, who buy into the group's folk history as they become members.

Divergent Views of the Burning Times Folk History

In the usual Eclectic folk history, the British Celts carried on beliefs that syncretized Neolithic, Bronze Age, and Iron Age European beliefs and practices until they began to be persecuted by the increasingly dominant Christian Church. This brings us to one of the central themes of the Eclectic folk history: Christian persecutions of followers of "the Old Religion" and the "Burning Times," the Neo-Pagan term for the European witch craze of

the 14th through the eighteenth century (Starhawk 1999 [1979]:29-31). Neo-Pagan author Raven Grimassi argues that the persecution of followers of the “Witch Cult and other Mystery Traditions” actually began in the 4th century, when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire (2006:14-17); from that point on, followers of the Old Religion were increasingly persecuted in the Eclectic version of the past. While this early history follows the version commonly promulgated by Western historians, the idea that ancient Celticized Neolithic beliefs persisted unbroken until the twentieth century does not (Hutton 1999). I believe the Burning Times folk history may be perceived as a “collective trauma” that is a crucial component in the formation of current Neo-Pagan identities (see also Shuck 2000 and Tosh 2000). The Burning Times theme often takes a central place in Neo-Pagan writings, as in anthropologist Loretta Orin’s *Never Again the Burning Times: Paganism Revived* (1995), and in many conversations I participated in or heard in the field among Eclectics when recounting the history of their religion.

In this version of the past, at least some of the victims of the European witch trials were clandestine followers of the Old Religion, often midwives and herbalists, who were persecuted because of their beliefs and practices as part of a concerted effort by the Christian authorities to wipe out the last vestiges of worship of the Horned God and the Mother Goddess. These witches were persecuted because they represented a threat to the authority of the patriarchal Christian Church. According to the prolific author, amateur anthropologist, and founder of British Traditional Wicca, Gerald Gardner (1999 [1954]), up to nine million witches were persecuted. This part of the Eclectic folk history continues today (Shuck 2000; Tosh 2000), despite recent research indicating that the vast majority of those accused—which historian John Demos (2009) estimates only reached up to two

hundred thousand—were primarily marginalized women and not followers of a pre-Christian religion or even practitioners of magic. Starhawk, the renowned Neo-Pagan author, points out that “Witches themselves say that few of those tried during the Burning Times actually belonged to covens or were members of the Craft” (1999 [1979]:30); however, it remains a potent, meaningful part of the past as constructed by many Neo-Pagans, particularly Eclectic ones.

Continuing this folk historical narrative, some British peasants preserved remnants of this belief system in their folklore and in secret despite of a long history of cruel Christian persecution, until the religion was revived in the mid-twentieth century by British Neo-Pagans, beginning with Gardner, and then it spread to the US. The “Wiccan Mystery Tradition” is thus believed to originate from this Celticized version of the Neolithic cult of the Great Goddess (Grimassi 2006:4). Gardner sought to legitimize his concept of Wicca as a survival of an ancient witch-cult by drawing from the work of the now-discredited *The Witch-cult in Western Europe* (1921) by the British anthropologist, folklorist, and Egyptologist, Margaret Murray. Murray’s “witch-cult hypothesis” stated that Medieval and Renaissance witchcraft was a survival of a religion based on worship of the Horned God dating back to the European Neolithic period. Murray even wrote the introduction to Gardner’s seminal work, *Witchcraft Today* (1999 [1954]). Gardner used Murray’s idea to buttress the belief that British Wicca was a legitimately ancient religion that had documented continuity with Neolithic European religion. This folk history has continued, despite the fact that this version of history has been discredited among historians, particularly due to the work of historian Ronald Hutton (1999), who found no ethnohistorical evidence to indicate such continuity with earlier pagan religions or mediaeval witchcraft; rather, it is seen by

contemporary scholars as a wholly modern religion constructed in mid-twentieth-century Britain (Berger and Ezzy 2009:502-503).

I asked participants how important the Burning Times were to them. Almost everyone I interviewed spoke about the Burning Times as a warning narrative about the possibility of marginalization and persecution at the hands of a dominant group. Data from the small sample of Eclectics I interviewed and from observations at festivals, however, generally aligned with this folk historical notion that many if not all of the victims of the Burning Times were witches or pagan practitioners persecuted for their ancient beliefs.

Snowflake, a young eclectic Witch, offers one such version of this Burning Times narrative:

They're interesting as far as research, mostly because everybody got hanged, so I'm really confused as to why we call it the Burning Times. But it's interesting to me to see how Christianity played a big part in that, and how it was really backhanded and incredibly sinister. It basically shows the lack of politics in paganism. The politics is what allowed them to organize and persecute and create this genocide. And the free-natured, "I walk my own path" pagans did not have the organizational skills to get done what needed to be done to stop that from happening. So I feel like it's something that we should learn from. That it's, yes, we're free willed and we're spiritual, but if it came to a point where we were getting persecuted, I would hope that, instead of hiding, we would stand up and say, "You know, just see my point of view." Because there were very few people that stood up and said, "I am a witch and I'm proud of that. And whether you kill me or not, your God is a forgiving God, so no matter what you do, you kinda lose." It kinda seems like there could've been more to have been done about that, but I wasn't there. It's just my opinion. Burning Times, it's really important because a few pieces of literature survived that time period... like the Alexander tradition because of books that were written and actually saved.

While questioning the focus on burnings, Snowflake frames the Burning Times as an indictment of Christianity as harmful and "sinister" and a warning for modern Neo-Pagans that they can be persecuted if they are not vigilant, but also if they are not politically

organized, which she sees as a reason witches and other pagans were unable to resist persecution and “genocide” during the Burning Times. Later in our interview, she talked about the Salem Witch Trials and connected the Burning Times to current Christian persecutions of witches and shamans as a colonial effort to modernize indigenous tribes: “They head hunt witches in South America right now, because shamans keep the tribes alive, and if they take that spiritual leader out, then you can get them out of the tribes that they live in and into society.” We also see this perceived holocaust as a lesson about being “out of the broom closet” or publically Neo-Pagan. On the other hand, she reveals her value of being “free-willed” in one’s spiritual path. Also, while many Wiccans have become more reflexive about their Burning Times folk history in response to works such as that by Hutton (1999), her reference to Alexandrian Wiccan having texts that “survived” the Burning Times—an assertion with no ethnohistorical foundation—shows that this particular folk history continues to be transmitted and internalized within segments of the Neo-Pagan community.

Snowflake also offered an intriguing family narrative connected with the Burning Times that was unique in my dataset. She explained that a family member took their family genealogy back several centuries in Europe, and that “we did have one pagan in our family that was involved but not killed in the Salem Witch Trials. She was there, and she was a part of it, and she was not accused or anything. She just happened to be present at the time. She was actually a witch, and so it was really interesting to me that we had that.” Snowflake did not offer evidence for this belief, and she was clear that she was not Fam-Trad. This small family narrative ties her to the Burning Times in a direct way, and it highlights the

degree to which she accepts the Burning Times folk narrative as not only a useful warning, but an accurate version of the past.

The ethnic informants I interviewed varied in their responses to questions about the importance of the Burning Times. A few Heathens quickly dismissed it altogether as unimportant. Others said some victims were indeed pagan, but that most were marginalized Christians, especially women, which matches with the ethnohistorical research about the European witch craze and the Salem Witch Trials (Demos 2009). For example, the Druid Brian, who at the time of our interview was working on a master's degree in anthropology, said, "During the Burning Times there were a lot of midwives that were very Christian that were burned just because they were a midwife." He later told me, "I personally think the Burning Times, mainly the Spanish Inquisition, was not a witch hunt against witches. It was more of a suppression of women, whether those women were good Christians or not," and that he thinks "more of the men were probably pagan, where more of the women were probably Christian that just wanted to have a place, and wanted to have some power or had power, and these Christian men come in and say, 'Okay, you can't have power anymore. The Bible says your place is in the kitchen. I'm the head of the household.'" He later said, "There were a lot of pagans killed, but for the most part, it was Christians killing Christians." He was adamant, however, that, while the Burning Times was important, the spread of Christianity was much more so. Emily, his more eclectic wife said, "I'm sure there was [sic] pagans there who practiced, and knew they were, and keeping it low key, because of the persecution." She expresses the folk historical notion that pagans were persecuted, and often brought up the image of the healing woman and midwife—which has some ethnohistorical support—but she also talks about those who "practiced" and "knew"

they practiced pagan traditions. Brian, who conflates the Spanish Inquisition (which was primarily about the persecution of “Converso” Jews) with the Burning Times, sees it as more about political persecution of dissidents and the marginalized (while saying that some victims were pagan), while Emily sees it more as persecution for following the Old Religion.

Scaði, the self-described Fam-Trad Heathen, said the Burning Times were not important to her because “I don’t consider myself a Witch at all.” But she also said, “It was very damaging to the long-term mindset against Earth magick and the natural religions. The puritanical panic that created the Burning Times was very misplaced and very much a reactionary occurrence,” she explained, “The tragedy was a reaction to fear, and that tainted the acceptance of something that is very natural and healthy in being the natural religions. There was no sense in that. There were a lot of very good herbalists that were burned alive for no good reason.” Like most Heathens and other Recons, she draws clear a distinction of identity in relation to Witches, and thus in relation to their connection to the Burning Times. Scaði’s statement shows, however, that she also sees the Burning Times as a broad attack against magick and “natural religions,” suggesting she does maintain part of the classic folk history.

HearthWitch, a kitchen Witch with Heathen leanings who had recently begun studying ADF Druidry, similarly told me, “We lost a lot of knowledge. Women lost a lot of their power. They lost a lot of equality.” She said she thinks those women were “more like healers, midwives, shamans, priestesses, elders, or just women who went against society” for not getting married or having children and wanting to be self-reliant. Personalizing the Burning Times, she said, “No, they didn’t like women like me,” and that they thought independent women like her worshipped Satan and danced naked. She then explained that

the Burning Times offer a lesson about tolerance and understanding of people who are different. Opal, a Slavic Witch, described the Burning Times as “sort of a holocaust for women and anyone who’s different,” and framed it as a case of Christians choosing to “stomp on anything related to the Earth.” Fionnghal, a leader of the Houston-area ADF Druid protogrove, also drew a lesson, comparing it to current witchcraft accusations in Africa: “They used the accusations of witchcraft to get rid of people they didn’t like. It’s the same thing. It was the same exact thing.”

What these women describe is ethnohistorically accurate in some ways. As historian Malcolm Gaskill argues, “Witchcraft was female power, and belonged to the female sphere of running a household: the image of a witch tended to be that of a supremely disobedient and destructive mother or wife” (2005:48). As John Demos (2009) contends, most of the accused were indeed women, reflecting the patriarchal, misogynistic nature of European society at the time, and many were elderly or middle-aged, especially widows, and most were poor undesirables (although some wealthy widows were likely accused out of resentment). This misogyny also connects to the fact that witches were believed to especially target the fertility of women and crops through black magic. As such, “The wisest course in early modern community life—especially for women—was to blend in and not to seem too openly self-assertive. To be, or to behave, otherwise was to open oneself to suspicion of witchcraft” (Demos 2009:43). This focus on social deviancy in witchcraft accusations, especially against women, is common cross-culturally (Demos 2009:41). HearthWitch, Opal, and Fionnghal, who all have some degree of ethnic focus, draw from ethnohistorical perspectives about witchcraft accusations being used to target the marginalized social Other, but they also appear to keep part of the folk historical narrative of the Burning Times—that

midwives and herbalists were the primary victims, even if they do not accept that nine million witches were killed.

Blaidd, a self-described syncretic Celtic Heathen, told me, “It’s so overdone. I do realize it was a horrible time in history. I think it happened, yes.” But she explained that there were as many tortured and burned who were Christian, Jewish, and Roma as there were women or men who may have had any kind of pagan beliefs. She continued:

It was a field day for the Catholic Church. It had to do with control and government. It wasn’t just because they were witches, because just as many Jews died. So, to me, it’s just like, really? We’re doing this again? I understand that people were burned at the stake, but it was just as much a chance as it was Molly down the street, who wore her skirt too high and showed her cleavage, as it would be someone who might have actually done witchcraft. So, to me, it’s like, yeah, it was a bad time in history. And, yeah, some pagans died. But it wasn’t just the pagans, so don’t blow it up out of proportion.

Like Brian and Emily, Blaidd ascribes some historicity to the notion that some victims were pagan, but she is critical of the Neo-Pagan community’s continued inflation of it. And she draws from ethnohistorical understandings of the witch craze as primarily being about enforcing social norms, especially regarding women’s sexuality. Blaidd further explained how she sees the Burning Times as a useful, broader cautionary tale for the modern world, saying, “I just don’t think that government should have that kind of control. And no religious group should ever have that kind of control again, ever. It goes beyond religion. It’s just like, no religious group should have that much control in the government, ever. It doesn’t matter what religion it is.” Here we see her understanding of the Burning Times as a warning against allowing any religious group that kind of power, which is reminiscent of Mathcar’s anxieties about Abrahamic “fundamentalism” in the contemporary US.

Other ethnic informants expressed similar concerns about perceived risks of persecution in the modern US through their discussions of the Burning Times folk history, despite any issues they had over its weak ethnohistorical support. For example, Rowan, a Celtic-focused Witch, told me in her emailed response to my questions:

It is important to me to understand, though, how the fear and hatred of Other affects my relationships with non-Pagans, and affects Pagan community. What many Pagans seem to believe happened—a wholesale program of discrimination, disenfranchisement, and murder, can happen in current American culture. Religion has become a culture war in this country, and the middle ground is not growing fast enough. I'm less afraid that the Burning Times will come again than I am that [the writer] Margaret Atwood was right and I'll wake up someday in Gilead wearing a red dress.

Brigid's Ember, a long-time ADF Druid, expressed similar fears when I brought up the “Never Again the Burning Times” bumper sticker seen on many a Neo-Pagan vehicle:

If anything, given what's happening with the extreme influence of Evangelical Christianity on national politics and in some places—many places—state politics in the United States, it almost seems more apt a slogan now than it would have been during the times of the Inquisition when they weren't actually after us. There are some politicians who have gone on the record about it. It's unfortunate that we're in more danger of a political—hopefully not literal—Burning Times now than we were in the Middle Ages. That says a lot about our national politics these days.

The politician she was referencing was former Georgia House Representative Bob Barr, who led a brief, unsuccessful campaign to have the Pentagon ban Wiccan practices in the US military in the late 1990s, which earned him a “Burning Times” award from ReligiousTolerance.org in 1999 (http://www.religioustolerance.org/burn_aw2.htm). The ADF Druid Fionnghal said the Burning Times narrative remains popular in the Neo-Pagan community because, “The people are afraid. They see all these religious fruits out there, a lot of right-wingers out there, who want everybody to go back to God and all this stuff.

And they see that as the Burning Times. It's in their heads." Despite their critiques of the Burning Times folk history for its weak ethnohistorical support, these women use this narrative to raise concerns about conservative Christianity's strong influence in US politics, especially as it relates to civil freedoms for Neo-Pagans.

The majority of my ethnic Neo-Pagans informants were highly critical of the Burning Times folk history's lack of ethnohistorical support, while emphasizing its use as a cautionary tale with several lessons and warnings for the modern world. Not surprisingly, those with more of a Recon bent said they value ethnohistorical scholarship, and they tended to talk about the Burning Times in its ethnohistorical context, rather than as a religious or identity anchor. For example, Rowan described it this way:

The first thing that comes to mind is lies and hyperbole, on both sides. Pagans throw around numbers like "nine million women" and "millions of women and children," but if I understand correctly far fewer than a million people, all told, were actually ever prosecuted, charged, imprisoned, or killed for anything to do with witchcraft. And rather than a religious issue, it seems to have been a cultural, social, and economic issue. A surprising number of those charged and stripped of lands and titles during the Middle Ages had desirable property that went to their fine upstanding neighbors. All around, it seems like it was lies and misdirection then and half-truth and misunderstanding now.

Fionnghal similarly described it as a collective trauma narrative in the broader Neo-Pagan community that has been used as a unifying mechanism, but one that she no longer supports, because "It's lost a lot of its historical context, 'cause it's not as real as people think it is." She sees the Burning Times, rather, as "really a kind of function of when people are financially stressed," suggesting that the Burning Times to her were just one of many examples of how economically strained groups can react, a notion supported by ethnohistorical research (Oster 2004). Here we see the value of scholarship—if only from

an armchair perspective—among ethnic Neo-Pagans when they evaluate folk historical elements. Guy, the Hellenist with an academic background in ancient religions, similarly framed the Burning Times as a situation of an overly stressed society creating a “boogeyman,” and using the marginalized as scapegoats to function as “a release valve that had been created by the folks in power,” a notion supported by ethnohistorical research on witchcraft accusations in Europe (Demos 2009), as well as among other groups, such as the early twentieth century Navaho described by anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn (1944).

Macha, a Witch with a strong Irish focus rooted in her Irish Traveler ancestry, was particularly critical of her coreligionists’ continuation of the classical Burning Times folk history:

They are important. But it’s another one of those things heavily distorted and that I’m always questioning, reminding myself that it’s become a very popular aspect of Neo-Paganism. With not all of its facts straight. And please, if one of our reasons is to seek truth, then let’s remain true instead of adding to falsehoods. We love this particular time even though most of those people were not witches. The Burning Times mostly really focus on people that were Christian, that were outcasts and persecuted for being outcasts of some kind or another, and not what we would think is a witch at all, not a pagan at all, for the most part. I remember and honor that as any human persecuted, but not specifically, I mean. It adds to our popular legend now, which has a validity, but it’s not the same as history. Tradition is not always the same as history.

Macha’s perspective, which is reflexively critical of such Neo-Pagan reconstructions—perhaps influenced by her undergraduate coursework in cultural anthropology, highlights one of the central differences within that religious community: ethnic or Recon concerns with ethnohistorical authentication through (selective) ethnohistorical support. And while she greatly values tradition, which came up many times in our conversations, she explained, “Tradition is not always the same as history.” She “honors” those victims, but does not

consider them religious forbearers persecuted for their faith as in the usual folk historical understanding of the Burning Times. Furthermore, like many other ethnic Neo-Pagans I interviewed, she sees her religious path as one centered on seeking truth on a philosophical level, which is at least partly why she expressed such concerns with the usual folk historical version.

The ADF Druid Brigid's Ember was perhaps even more scathing in her assessment of the classic Burning Times folk history:

So, look, real history. The true facts. The Inquisition was way more focused on finding Christian heretics and Jews than pagans. It is a myth that has shaped a lot of how certainly at least some elements of the Pagan community and the Wiccan community especially see themselves. And I think it's kind of a handy myth for representing some of the conflicts that people feel in modern Neo-Paganism in opposition to dominant religious paradigms in this country. But the way it is painted in the mythology that I've heard among especially Wiccans isn't something that actually happened. It didn't happen like that. And I think it's a little dangerous to pin so much of self-conception on a false myth of organized persecution. I feel like it almost picks a fight. "Well, you Christians are so evil. You did this to us." "Well, we didn't actually." And the Catholic Church historically has—I mean, the Crusades—plenty to answer for. But an organized extermination of a universal, European Goddess cult that didn't actually exist? On a scale that wasn't actually done? As a primary focus of the Inquisition, which it wasn't? It just seems like picking a fight based on history that didn't happen. And that doesn't strike me as a good idea.

Not only do we see in these statements a rejection of the historicity of the classic Burning Times folk history—a process itself based on her criteria of authentication via (selective) uses of ethnohistory, a core tenant of ADF Druidry, but Brigid's Ember challenges its commonly understood value for modern Neo-Pagans. While recognizing that this narrative is “a handy myth” for resisting the “dominant religious paradigms in this country” (code for socially powerful forms of Christianity), she sees the community's reliance on it as actually putting Neo-Pagans at risk within the broader society in which they live. It seems that, in

her view, it is not only intellectually dishonest to conflate the Burning Times into more than it was (while recognizing that there were real atrocities committed by Christians seeking to maintain hegemony), but it potentially further strains the fraught relationship between the Neo-Pagan community and the rest of predominantly Christian US society.

Christianization of Europe Folk Histories

Asking participants how important the spread of Christianity in Europe was to them turned out to be a particularly fruitful question for the ethnic Neo-Pagans I interviewed. The many Eclectics I talked with in the field and the small sample I interviewed tended to describe it as an unfortunate historical process that was mostly lamentable because of the perceived loss of status for women (itself based in part on the same folk historical notions of high female status in the Burning Times narrative) and for the loss of magickal, nature-centered practices and knowledge. Like most of the ethnic Neo-Pagans I interviewed, some Eclectics, however, framed the Christianization of Europe in colonial hegemonic terms.

The Eclectic Witch Snowflake—as well as many others—described it as a case of Catholicism “taking over” Europe, while strategically syncretizing pagan elements to facilitate conversions, a notion grounded in the process of *interpretatio christiana*, which derived from the historically (in)famous letter preserved in Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* from Pope Gregory I to Mellitus, the first Bishop of London, in 601 instructing him to selectively appropriate pagan temples and practices to serve the Catholic Church’s missionary ends (see Inglebert 2001). As Snowflake described it, “It’s quite genius. I mean, it was get them comfortable, dress like sheep... and then overtake them later.” The implication is that she perceives early Christianity in Europe as invasive and Machiavellian.

She said Christianity has a good message of kindness, but that Christians were and are often deceitful in their missionary efforts. She also told me that after Constantine converted, which she described as strategic (a notion with some ethnohistorical support), “it takes over Europe. And then the Europeans—Spanish, English, French—are all bringing it to the United States. And then the United States cultivates it, and then brings it to other cultures.” Here she connects the Christianization of Europe, which is framed as colonial, to later Western Christian hegemony via colonization of indigenous peoples, but also it seems to current American missionary efforts. She ended her discussion of the topic by challenging the authenticity of Christianity’s origins, and judging the religion to be one that “cultivates you to follow the herd” and is “not something that cultivates individuality,” revealing her value of individualism, an extremely dominant value in Neo-Paganism, but one I would also argue is particularly prominent among Eclectics.

Despite her problems with ancient (and modern) Christianity, Snowflake found one important benefit from its essential eradication of paganism in Europe:

And in Paganism you can’t find the whole truth, because a lot of it was destroyed, and thus why you’re able to make your own path, which you have to look at, was that a positive thing that everybody went through this, so I could make my own path, so that I’m not stuck in the same orthodox religion as everybody else with pre-established traditions that have to be done this way and that way. It’s a give and take I guess that you have to find the silver lining.

She offers an interesting interpretation by claiming that the Christianization of Europe might have inadvertently liberated modern Pagans like herself to be free of constraining traditions *because* so much was lost and destroyed. This narrative reveals a central value in Eclectic Neo-Paganism: freedom to creatively innovate without constraints from the past or tradition. As I will show in the following chapters, ethnic Neo-Pagans also value creative

bricolage (though they have different authentication constraints), but they tend to have a different perspective on the spread of Christian hegemony in Europe.

The Christianization of Europe was a drastically more crucial event for my ethnic informants, as they generally described it as a devastating—and often deeply personal—loss of their own ancestral indigenous cultures, especially regarding ancient European cultural values. As discussed by Gardell regarding Heathenry, the usual description of ethnic Recon Neo-Paganisms goes something like this: re-envisioned folk histories provide a renewed ethnonationalist orientation towards a future centered around an attempt to restore the “natural” communities of a romanticized, imagined golden age when pagan European peoples lived harmoniously in kin-based tribes on ancestral lands. In this folk history, ancient pagan European communities and folk identities were later fragmented by centuries of Christian suppression and modernization, which led to the disintegration of kin-based tribalism and alienation (2003:17, 278-279). Religion scholar Scott Simpson argues, “In Central and Eastern Europe Neo-Paganism is a movement made up of groups that see themselves as the legitimate continuation of the pre-Christian religious beliefs of their ancestors and/or geographical territory. Their concerns are typically immanent, earth-centred, and local” (2000:26-7). Religion scholar and historian Michael Strmiska (2005b) found a similar notion of local ethnic continuity and revival among Baltic Neo-Pagan groups. These are territorialized, ethnic, nativistic movements focused on restoring the imagined golden ages of their localized ancestral pasts. Ironically, the very roots upon which modern Neo-Pagan traditions are reconstructed are themselves the product of nineteenth-century European idealizations of a rural past and romanticized folk traditions

that arose in response to incipient processes of globalization (Gardell 2003:18; Magliocco 2004:37-43).

While this basic folk narrative is common among nativistic ethnic Neo-Pagan movements in Eastern and Central Europe (Aitamurto 2006; Aspren 2008; Ivakhiv 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Laruelle 2008; Shnirelman 1998, 1999/2000, 2002, 2007; Simpson 2000; Strmiska 2000, 2005a, 2005b, 2007), such versions of the past also appear in other parts of Europe. For example, there are Greece's militantly nativistic, racist, and xenophobic Golden Dawn political party and the nationalist Supreme Council of Ethnikoi Hellenes (a founder of the World Congress of Ethnic Religions, later the European Congress of Ethnic Religions), which, according to the latter organization's English website (<http://www.ysee.gr/index-eng.php>), describes itself as "aiming to the morale and physical protection and restoration of the Polytheistic, Ethnic Hellenic religion, tradition and way of life in the 'modern' Greek Society from [*sic*] which is oppressed due to its institutionalised intolerance and theocracy" (for a discussion of Hellenic movements in Greece, see Voulgarakis [2011]).

While Eclectic Neo-Pagans—especially Wiccans and other Witches—tend to focus more on the Burning Times narrative, ethnic ones tend to focus more on folk narratives concerning the Christianization of Europe, often with a specific focus on how that process is understood to have played out in their ancestral motherland(s). This same pattern emerged from the data from my pilot study survey of 54 individuals (Lowry 2011), which showed that the more Recon one was in orientation, the less important the Burning Times were and the more important the spread of Christianity in Europe was. For example, the Irish Druid Brian drew such a contrast during our interview:

What's more important to me than the Burning Times is the true martyrs of Paganism going back to, say, St. Patrick. Yeah, that's more important to me than the Burning Times. Ireland, right? Never stepped foot on by the Romans. It's our own fault that Christianity came to Ireland, because we invited them over, 'cause we were squabbling so much amongst ourselves, we needed the English help. So we invite them over, and we are all of a sudden being converted. Okay. Forcing to convert, not so okay. Blatantly have our traditions outlawed and sentenced to death for our traditions, that's where I have my problems. The spread of Christianity has a bigger impact on me than the Burning Times, because the Burning Times to me was... a lot of times.... there were a lot of pagans killed, but for the most part, it was Christians killing Christians. It was Catholics killing Protestants. Yeah, but the domination of pagans through the spread of Christianity, those are the true martyrs.

In this version of the past, the Burning Times were less important to Brian, because they primarily involved intra-Christian persecution; however, as already discussed, he did say that some victims were actually pagan. The spread of Christian hegemony in Europe, however, is much more important and personal, indicated by his use of the “we” and “our traditions” when speaking about how pagan Ireland, his ancestral homeland, allowed in missionaries like St. Patrick. Furthermore, Brian appropriated the New Testament term martyr to describe the pagan victims of the forced Christian conversion and persecution that ethnohistorically took hold under Roman Emperor Theodosius I, whose late 4th-century decrees of the formally delegitimized and outlawed paganism in the empire (Freeman 2008). While Brian conceded that “we have a lot of what we have today because of that domination,” in his folk telling of this past, the “true martyrs” were those ancient Irish pagans, *not* early Christians as the dominant Christian narrative tells it. This notion of martyrdom is personal, not only for the perceived sense of religious continuity, but also because of the belief that those ancient Irish pagans who suffered were his own ancestral kin.

One of the most poignant results of my research was not so much the folk historical versions of the spread of Christianity in Europe themselves, which tended to draw more intensely from ethnohistorical research than those offered by Eclectics, but how my ethnic informants talked about that past in such strong emotional terms. While we were discussing issue of racism in Heathenry, Baldur, a shamanistic Heathen, described it this way:

Christianity invaded. Took over the pagans. Burned them in many cases. Burned their churches. Killed their priests. Forbid their teachings. And what they couldn't exterminate, they adopted and made Christian. That's why a lot of times the Christians would show up, they'd burn down the temple or cut down the tree, and put a church right on top of it. They'd say, "Fuck you, that's ours now." That's a why a lot of Christian holidays and traditions are very pagan...

And so in some weird way, I feel a lot like the Native American who had his culture taken away. I feel a lot like the African who's had their culture taken away, too, because I also had my culture taken away. It just happened a thousand years ago. And I'm sorry that part of my ancestry was to take your culture away. But just to kinda keep spreading that hatred and that oppression. Yeah. Pretty much wiped out. One of the things that I thought was interesting [was that] someone was talking about Chinese herbalism. And so I kinda asked a question of why do we always have Chinese herbalism? Why don't we have European herbalism?

At this point in the conversation, I pointed out that we do have the The Nine Herbs Charm recorded in the 10th-century *Lacnunga* manuscript, which is a folk charm with Anglo-Saxon pagan and early Christian notions about herbal healing, as well as mentions of the Anglo-Saxon deity, Woden. He responded, saying:

There's some out there. But one person explained it pretty well. He says, "Well, we kinda burned all the people who knew anything about European herbalism. They're not around anymore. And most of 'em didn't write it down." But, yeah, in general, anyone who knew about the wise craft was killed. Or was so afraid of death that they just kept their mouth shut. Didn't teach anybody. It didn't get passed on like it should. We still get some of it, but not too much. We lost huge chunks of our culture. And they're still out there.

Baldur offers an interesting case where a discussion about the issue of racism led him to a critique and folk historical narrative about the Christianization of Europe and the notion of Christians being hostile foreign Others, which he, like Snowflake, then makes analogous to the European colonization of the Americas. In this way, his narrative indigenizes him in his view and emically places him in a similar situation as Native Americans. The content of this narrative speaks to Magliocco's (2004) argument that Neo-Pagans want to situate themselves as outside of and resistant to Christian Western hegemony (see also Chase 2006:151).

Baldur's performance of this folk historical narrative reveals a deep sense of cultural and personal loss, as well as regret that his Christian ancestors perpetrated the same violence against Native Americans, which is all the more salient considering how important ancestry is to him. His example of the Chinese having been able to keep their ancient herbal traditions, while the pagan Germanic and Scandinavian traditions were largely lost, speaks to a profound frustration that other ethnic and racial groups have *their* ancient traditions, but *he* does not, because of how Christianity spread in Europe (but also because of modernity, which is not in this part of his narrative). In this sense, his rendition of Heathen folk history frames the Christianization of Europe as not just the replacement of paganism by a new religion, but as a form of devastating ethnocide, the ethnocide of *his* people, which he relates to the ethnocide of Native American cultures by Western Christians, including his own ancestors. This narrative is personal. And it is painful. Like many ethnic informants, he describes feeling robbed of his cultural birthright that "didn't get passed on like it should" by a violent, invading religion. And while my mention of The Nine Herbs Charm piqued his curiosity, that bit of ethnohistorical information did not

seem to sooth his feeling of loss of what he believes was a once robust corpus of Germanic herbal lore that he had a right to inherit.

Baldur expressed some joy in the fact that many American holidays have pagan roots, such as Christmas and Easter, and that many of the days of the week in English are based on Anglo-Saxon deity names, such as Tuesday being named for Tyr. “It does get to this notion of we are really a pagan culture,” he said, “We just have a Christian veneer smeared over it.” Here we see a re-conceptualizing of American culture as actually pagan to some degree; this kind of notion of reclaiming the pagan roots of US culture was expressed by several ethnic informants. These small folkloric remnants of pagan Europe, however, are seen by Baldur and other ethnic participants as meager and insufficient to assuage their sense of loss. Furthermore, because they believe more ancient cultural information is “still out there,” they continue to mine what research on the past they can access (which for many is limited to what is available online or in mainstream popular texts), and they rely on and trust the work of popular Neo-Pagan authors, such as the Heathen writer, teacher, and foundational actor in American Heathenry Edred Thorsson, who has academic credentials.

Grim, the Witch with Heathen, Italian, and Celtic ethnic foci, offered a similar lament regarding the Christianization of Europe:

I personally felt when I found out there’s such a thing as Celts, such a thing as a Norse religion. Christianity was European, and before Christianity, they were dirty barbarians. We weren’t. They were. And there was this massive separation between people and their ancestors, just their ancestral heritage. And then picking and choosing what to keep, what not to keep. Finding out that the Christmas tree and the Easter egg and all this stuff [have pagan origins]. I really felt like I had been ripped off. I felt like my ancestors, my heritage had been ripped off. And in its place was something that was very unsatisfactory that I strongly disagreed with. Although, ya know, whatever spirituality you follow I respect.

There are several important themes in Grim’s statement about her feelings about that past. Her response offers a critique of how European and European-descended Christians frame history in a religious dichotomy of “us” Christians and “those” pagans/ heathens, even though they have ancestors in both groups. She, like many ethnic participants, expressed frustration with how pre-Christian and early Christian European history is usually taught in the US. Drawing both from my fieldwork and my own experiences as an American who went through an elite Catholic primary and high school education, I offer this basic nationalist American folk historical narrative: ancient Greece began Western civilization, ancient Rome and then later Western Christian Europe improved upon it, and then the US became the final, best incarnation of that civilization. In this dominant version of the past, non-Greco-Roman pagans, such as the Celts, Anglo-Saxons, and Norse, were savages who offered nothing of value to Western culture until they were Christianized. As a youth who came to be interested in my own ancestral Celtic culture, I was often frustrated that these pagan European cultures were only mentioned—*if* they were mentioned at all—in passing in history courses as part of the background of Greco-Roman and early Christian European history. The non-Hellenic ethnic-focused informants I interviewed, be they ethnic Witches, Druids, or Heathens, often expressed similar frustrations about not finding out about their pagan ancestral cultures until they were adults, and having been denied as children that information, which they now see as their birthright.

Grim’s response also gets at a core issue in my research: the disconnect she observed among modern American Christians and their pagan ancestors. She was clearly angered by what she saw as the Christianization of Europe, including *interpretatio christiana* syncretisms, as having not only “ripped off” elements of her European ancestral heritage,

but of having deprived her of that heritage and of her own European pagan ancestors, who had all but been erased in the dominant American version of the past. In place of that link to her ancestors and their pagan culture, she was raised in Christianity, a religion she finds “very unsatisfactory” and at odds with her values.

Erik, a young Heathen man, echoed many of the previous sentiments in our interview. “We practice these things because it’s who we are. Because we’re seeking something. We’re seeking a fulfillment of this big hole that lives and resides right in our gut,” he explained, “And it’s a spiritual thing. That we’ve either always had or was beaten into us when we were very young. And we weren’t fulfilled spiritually by the teachings of the Church and things like that. So we sought other ways.” We see in these powerful statements a partial explanation and articulation of religious identity, practice, and individual journeying to and within Neo-Paganism. It is also significant that he went from a question about the Christianization of Europe to the religious journeys of modern Neo-Pagans, and poignantly frames it as a quest driven by a deep lack of something in their religion of origin. And, like Grim, he adds a caveat: “But, then again, I think Christianity has its place at the table, just like every other religion should.”

Grim’s and Erik’s statements reveal a thorny, yet common, element of American Neo-Paganism: an immanently postmodern ecumenical spirit—at least nominally—regarding religious diversity. Later in our conversation, Grim said, “I’m not anti-Christian per se. I mean, people that are Christian today, that’s fine. If that’s their path, that’s fine. But the historical movement of Christianity, I find to be extremely destructive.” No matter how strong their feelings were regarding Christianization in the past or modern Christianity (and they often were strong), all of my informants indicated that they respect that some

choose a Christian path. I believe this postmodern conundrum of criticizing other traditions or groups, while not wanting to be perceived as judgmental—an issue I revisit in my discussions of ethnic middle paths (Chapters V and VI)—is one experienced by several philosophically relativist (predominantly white) social movements, including recent LGBT and feminist ones.

As it specifically concerns Neo-Pagan adaptations to modernity, I think such ecumenical language points to efforts to create a novel social model of community that celebrates religious pluralism. On the other hand, since religious diversity is seen as a value in the broad community, there are inherent boundary conflicts regarding the exclusive claims of Christianity or any other “intolerant” tradition. For example, Grim later said of Christianity and Christian proselytization:

The intolerance is built into that religion. And will always haunt that religion. Will always haunt that religious perspective. It's the intolerance. Whether it manifests as missionary work trying to change people, in the kindest possible way with the best intentions or in true violence. They're both to me violence. Whether it's emotional, spiritual, or physical, it's violence. For me to go to my neighbor and say, “What you're doing is wrong, you need to do what I do.” And I do not tolerate it in Paganism either. People are like, “Well, you can't come to the circle like that. Or you can't do this or that.” I have no toleration of dogma at all. None. I won't even associate with people like that.

Not only does Grim consider all Christian missionary work and Christian claims to exclusive truth to be forms of violence, but she said she does not tolerate anyone making authoritative, exclusive claims regarding Neo-Pagan practice or beliefs (“dogma”). This issue of intolerance of intolerance lies at the heart of much of the current debate in the West and elsewhere over moral relativism and social diversity. Furthermore, there are religions (including many Christian groups) that reject that kind of non-Abrahamic

ecumenism, nor would most if not all of these Neo-Pagans tolerate fundamentalist Christians or other fundamentalists who overtly criticize or demean alternative religions, LGBT people, women, or other minorities.

Like Baldur, Grim's rendition of the Christianization of Europe—which draws both from ethnohistory and folk history—is highly critical of the process for its perceived ethnocidal destruction of indigenous European culture and values:

I think it was very destructive, because, well, one, any time you push a form of spirituality on somebody, I think you're doing them violence. That is such a personal path. And then also you have whole languages, whole symbol systems, whole sets of divination and magickal practices and priestly class and roles of women redefined, and animals—how the animals are treated and sacred spaces and nature. Suddenly Earth is here, given to you for your use versus we were born of this tree or this mountain, and we live in tandem with the animals, who are our brothers. I think it's extremely destructive environmentally. It was very destructive to women. You know, many tribal groups broadly across Europe had different attitudes about gender. But I think some were maybe kinder to homosexuality. Some were kinder to women. Now, maybe the charity to the poor was better within the Christian setting. And taking care of the ill. But I don't know, I just find it was probably a horrible, horrible thing that happened to Europe.

In her narrative, Grim offers a list of destructive or problematic consequences of the spread of Christianity in Europe. While conceding that Christianity may have been kinder towards the poor and the sick—at least compared to certain pagan European cultures, she clearly expresses a belief that pagan Europeans had some better values and customs that were replaced with worse Christian ones. In particular, the desacralization of nature and the lowering—in least in some societies—of the status of women and homosexuals. In her retelling of this folk historical narrative, Grim alludes to the ethnohistorical fact that some pagan European cultures offered women considerable status (for example, the Iron Age Celts [e.g., Arnold 1991, 1996]), but also that some did not share her value of homosexual

social equality (for example, the Vikings had strong prohibitions against some forms of homosexuality [Gade 1986]). This process, in her final assessment, was “horrible,” and the diverse pagan religions of ancient Europe that Christianity replaced offered *better* values to live by in the modern world.

Erik made similarly strong critiques of the spread of Christianity:

They used fear to bring about what they wanted. And to get these people on board. And to bring ‘em under the warm wing of Christianity. And they stole, and they trampled, and they raped everything that was sacred and pure about what these people believed in. And then they took it as their own. They built their churches over the mounds, over the sacred places of the Celts and the Vikings and all those people, and they made it their own. I’m not happy about it. How dare you? How dare you? Who are you to come in and do that? [*He slams his fist down*] Fuck! It’s like book burning. And the Reichstag fire in the 1930s when Hitler took power in Germany. You create a spectacle and you instill fear into people. And you get them to follow you through fear.

Again, we see a folk historical perspective of early Christians as hostile, manipulative invaders that destroyed, literally and figuratively raped, and “stole” from native pagan European cultures through cultural appropriation justified by *interpretatio christiana* in their efforts at conquest. We also see how emotional his understanding of that past is with his exclamations and his comparison of the process of Christianization with that of the rise of the Nazis in the 1930s. On one level, this narrative again reveals the emic notion of ancestral European ethnocide, but it also brings to light several other things of import: anger over the past, deep offense to his values of rights to cultural preservation and to freedom from oppression, a moral affront to intolerance of religious pluralism, and resentment toward groups that use fear as a strategy of social control. It is worth noting that these values of freedom deeply resonate with modern American values, a notion that Erik later reaffirmed in our conversation, highlighting how ethnic Neo-Pagan values often

overlap with modern American values, but through a specific kind of ethnoreligious lens.

Returning to the question of how ethnic Neo-Pagan folk histories about the Christianization of Europe relate to modernity, when I then asked Grim for confirmation that she thinks that at least some social ills are tied to that past, she explained:

I think prejudices, I think this one truth.... Okay, before, you have tribal groups. Their deities are local. Their spirituality's local. They understand that the group over here has a different deity and a different practice, it's because it's tied to their land and their ancestry. And so they're more accepting of differences. That the issue of having differences is to be expected. Because land has *anima*. Land has spirit. And land has diversity. Where if you have the one truth, you drain the Earth of all sacrality. You drain people of all sacrality. And [if] God's up there with one truth, well, yeah, everything has to be the same.

In this statement, Grim not only criticizes Christian monotheism for desacralizing nature and humanity (mirroring Magliocco's [2001, 2004] and Ivakhiv's [1996] interpretations), but she also offers a folk historical explanation for why ancient European paganism—and by implication, modern Neo-Paganism—offers a more natural, *better* value system regarding ecumenism and religious pluralism, which is clearly one of her core values (along with resacralizing nature and humanity). This value of religious pluralism is put in contrast to Christianity with its exclusive theological claims and universality in terms of (desacralized) geography. In this narrative, ancient European pagan religions were ethnic and tribal, and they were tied to localized, sacred geography. Cross-cultural ethnographic and archaeological research generally supports this part of her narrative, something she was likely aware of considering her academic background in anthropology and religion. It is not so clear, however, that ancient pagans consciously *valued* religious diversity among the different ethnic groups they encountered, as much as recognized it. This relatively recent modern value of religious diversity—shared by Eclectic and ethnic Neo-Pagans alike—is

grounded in and expressed through a folk history that gives its origins in ancient European paganism, thus offering an example of the “traditionalizing” process that Milton Singer (1972) describes as part of modernity (see also Del Negro 2004).

Bearing in mind that my Neo-Pagan informants often described Christianity and other Abrahamic religions as a crucial *part* of modernity (in contrast to how many scholars talk about modernity), Grim’s folk historical narratives point to a fundamentally different worldview, and thus ethos, compared to the modern Western world: sacred versus profane nature, religious pluralism versus exclusive monotheism, gender equality versus patriarchy, *et cetera*. Furthermore, her version of the past, with its emphasis on sacred land, ancestry, values, and pluralism, suggests the belief that the European pagan past offers solutions to the problems Westerners have experienced for centuries over environmental degradation and cultural and religious differences. These problems are immanently pressing today, as Americans continue to struggle to cope with challenges with the environment (now “climate change”), sexism, and centuries of intra-Abrahamic conflicts on a global scale that seem to have only gotten worse the past few decades, especially regarding conflicts between Christians and Muslims, but also increasing anti-Semitism in Europe.

Lastly, Grim, like Baldur and Snowflake, directly brings her critique of Christianization back to Euro-American efforts to destroy Native American religious beliefs and practices, as well as back to problems with modern Christianity in the world as she perceives it:

And then we [whites] did the same thing. We came over here and we did it to the Natives. Anything we’ve done to the Natives, we’ve done to ourselves. Or it has been done. Like forced conversions. I hear stories. And Viking stories. The chieftain wouldn’t convert, so they got a boiling pan of water and stuck it on his belly until his belly burst open and his guts came out. They shoved a snake down

his throat and ate out of the side of his belly. Yeah, forced conversions are... it's a violence. To me, it's akin to rape. I really am against missionaries going to these poor communities when these people are desperate for food. Like, [*in affected happy voice*] "Oh, yeah, we'll give you some food. Come and learn about Jesus." To me, it's oppressive. You're preying upon people.

In this part of her narrative, Grim draws connections among oral traditions of Charlemagne's well-documented forced conversions of pagan Saxons in the late 8th century, Euro-American religious ethnocide of Native American groups, and contemporary Christian missionary efforts. All three of these aspects of Christianity—ancient and modern—she condemns in the strongest of terms by equating them with violent rape. This is an unequivocal condemnation of not only early Christianity—contra the usual American folk historical version, where the coming of Christianity to European peoples is seen as wholly good, but equally of real and perceived modern Christian hegemony in the US and elsewhere. While it is true that Christian power has generally waned in Western Europe, this is arguably *not* the case in the contemporary US, especially regarding Evangelical Christian sociopolitical power (Steensland and Wright 2014), and certainly not in Texas and the rest of the American South, where conservative Christians continue to wield significant direct and indirect power and influence in both politics and everyday life (Wallace, Wright, and Hyde 2014; Wuthnow 2014).

Brigid's Ember, an ADF Druid, offers a similar, but in some cases divergent, perspective on the Christianization of Europe. I asked her if she thought Western civilization would be better had Christianity not replaced native European religions. She said she has not reached a verdict yet. "I think some things would probably be better, and other things would probably be worse. We've lost a lot of culture and information.

Especially religious culture and practice,” she explained, “And I can’t ever really quite forgive the mediaeval and renaissance Catholic Church for some of the ways it went about outlawing native practices. It did a lot, though, to calm some of the internecine quarrels in much the way the Roman Empire did.” In her assessment, Christianity was destructive of pagan “native practices,” but it was also a unifying force in Europe, along with the Roman Empire. She went on to say:

I sort of wish that if there going to be a great unifying force spreading across Europe in the way that the Christian Church did, that it had been a little more like the pre-Christian Roman Empire in letting people keep their native practices as long as it didn’t interfere with.... But then we would’ve lost other governmental pieces of culture. Which we ended up losing anyway, eventually. Often to the Roman Empire before Christianity got there. So, I don’t know. I mean, we lost a lot. But we probably would’ve lost some of it in other ways. And so much of what the world would look like now would depend on who won those quarrels. Because I think there’s a human drive to explore and to expand and to find new resources. It might’ve been the Vikings. It might’ve been a government. Who knows how much further Charlemagne would’ve gotten? Even not as a Christian Emperor, but as a Frank. Once you get past small, local communities, there seems to be a drive to expand. A drive toward empire, and that has some positive effects and lots of negative ones.

Brigid’s Ember’s view of this part of the past mirrors that offered by the popular Jewish American lawyer, writer, and columnist Jonathan Kirsch (2004), who argues that the Roman Empire offers us a better model of religious pluralism than later monotheistic Abrahamic states offer. Like Kirsch, Brigid’s Ember sees the pagan Roman Empire as a better model, because it was generally tolerant of local religious traditions as long as they were not openly hostile to imperial authority, whereas Abrahamic religions, with their exclusive monotheistic claims, have a long history of persecuting other religions, a fact that continues to cause conflict in the modern world. She does not, however, have such a romantic view of the pagan European past as to presume that the modern world would necessarily be *better* had

Christianity not supplanted European paganism, as she speculates that the Roman Empire and later empires, such as that of Charlemagne, would have inevitably changed Western civilization even without Christianity, and would have incurred their own cultural costs. Following this notion, she later explained that she does not think the Celts would have “taken over Europe” because they had chronic inter-tribal warfare (a view with ethnohistorical support). “Christianity took over from it, sure. But the degree to which Greek and Roman philosophy, including pre-Christian philosophers, have influenced Western culture, our political practices, our discourse, our ideas,” she said, “It’s at least as bound up with the Roman Empire as it is with the Catholic Church. And then they got bound up with each other and the result is most of what you see.” Her statement suggests that many of the benefits—but also the costs—of modernity, in her view, may have come about anyway through empire, regardless of Christianity’s influence.

Not all of my ethnic-focused informants were as intense in their recounting of Christianization folk history. For example, the Heathen Loki, while being clear that Heathenry is an “ever-changing religion,” said, “I’m not trying to talk bad, but some Wiccan traditions are all about, “Oh, I was initiated by this tradition. We can trace our coven all the way back to so-and-so.” But the Norse religion and the Germanic religions—Anglo-Saxon, Norse, Icelandic—where the lore that *Ásatrú* draws from—was actually, if not the last, one of the last to fall to Christianity. I know it doesn’t personally affect me, but it does give me a sense of pride and honor in it.” Loki frames the Christianization of Germanic lands as one of indigenous European religions “falling” to Christianity, reflecting a milder version of the tale of ethnocide, but he does not do so in such strong terms as rape. On the other hand, he, like *Scaði*, also uses this narrative to situate his identity in relation to Wicca, while

suggesting that Heathenry is more authentic because the Norse and Germanic peoples were among the last Europeans Christianized.

Our Ancestral Past as a Model for Our Present

These folk historical narratives reveal several core ethnic Neo-Pagan values of European ancestors, ancestral lore, a sense of European cultural birthright, as well as resacralized nature, sexuality, and human existence. While these retellings of the past similarly draw from romantic versions of Europe's past, they are not necessarily nativistic in orientation, as my informants are Americans who identify as such, and so for them it is not a matter of seeking to revive an ancient, localized ethnic national heritage and religion. They also do not necessarily see their ancestral pagan European cultures as representing a golden age (though they are often romanticized), as much as offering a *better* way to live in their modern world.

CHAPTER III
THE CONSTRUCTION, USES, AND MEANINGS
OF ETHNIC NEO-PAGAN ALTARS

In this chapter, I present interview and photographic data from ethnographic encounters with several ethnic Neo-Pagan individuals at their homes, which I do in the present tense to reflect the ethnographic moments as I experienced them (in other words, I describe the locations and meanings of items as the informants described them at the time, recognizing that religious décor is likely to change over time, as might the meanings informants ascribe to those items). I focus on three case studies: one of an ADF Druid, Jill; one of a Heathen, Da Troll; and one of a Hellenic Witch, Azure. These data are supplemented with details from altars described by other informants. While each altar is unique, these examples are representative of the kinds of materials and processes involved in constructing other altars I observed or was told about by informants. The individuals I interviewed, however, vary in the degree to which they syncretize elements from other traditions, and not all ethnic Neo-Pagan altars are as ethnic-focused as the ones I discuss here. Also, not all Neo-Pagans construct altars, and if they do, they may range from very simple—such as that of the ADF Druid Fionnghal, who only has a statue of the Irish Goddess Brigid and a plastic candle (because she lives on a boat and space is limited)—to extremely complex, such as Jill’s and Azure’s altars. I analyze these data to identify ways that folkloric elements express, constitute, mark, and give meaning to ethnoreligious identities, traditions, and spaces in twenty-first-century, urban Neo-Pagan life in Texas. I also analyze these data through a theoretical lens grounded in issues of globalization,

modernity and postmodernity, and Michel De Certeau's (1984) notion of "tactics" or ways of "making do" as forms of agency and resistance.

Modern and Postmodern Urbanity

In addition to the unmooring of traditional identities due to the processes of globalization described in Chapter I, a related issue is modern urbanity, which I first discussed in part in Chapter II. The German philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel was critical in his 1903 essay, *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (2002 [1903]), of what he considered the psychological and social costs of modern urbanity. In doing so, he attempted to push against Marxist romanticism of rural life by highlighting how the metropolis gives individuals freedom—although his view of pre-modern Europe was still rather romantic, as people in his traditional rural community were "sociable, caring and connected," while modern urbanites are "reserved, untrusting and blasé" (Osbaldiston 2010:139). The price for the freedom offered by modern urbanity was the depersonalization of the individual and a "blasé outlook" (2002 [1903]:14) that resulted from the intellectualism (in the sense of a loss of quality for quantity) that emerged as the middle class grew due to the rise of the money economy. Simmel was concerned with how modern individuals coped with money economy-based urban consumption, where money stripped away "the distinctions between things" and rendered them meaningless (2002 [1903]:14). While he acknowledged that producers and consumers were alienated from each other in the modern city, he also critiqued the intense Marxist focus on alienation, and challenged the literature of his time that glorified the freedoms of modernity.

As an early twentieth-century social Darwinian, Simmel (2002 [1903]) considered a “blasé” outlook or attitude a necessary psychological response of indifference that protects the modern urban dweller from the potentially overwhelming and increasingly intense stimulation caused by a constant bombardment of signs, symbols, goods, money, and people that flow through the city in everyday life. Sociologist Kevin Aho summarizes Simmel’s notion of the urban blasé attitude, saying, “We are so busy, so over-stimulated and stretched thin, that we have become bored, blasé to the frenzy of everyday experiences” (2007:448). Furthermore, “this leveling results in a feeling of emptiness and restlessness, what Simmel calls the ‘blasé attitude’” (Aho 2007:450). Sociologist Nicholas Osbaldiston similarly describes Simmel’s metropolitan world as one characterized by the “tragedy where perception is flattened, sociability is limited and objective culture deadens the senses (the blasé attitude)” (2010:211). Aho (2007) argues, “In our indifference we search for something, anything that evokes a strong *aisthesis*, momentarily breaking the spell of boredom” (448), and “In today’s hyper-accelerated world, what is novel and exciting today no longer excites the nervous system tomorrow; yesterday’s pleasures become boring and uninteresting” (457). In other words, an important consequence of having such an urban blasé outlook is a need to seek out ever-novel sources of stimulation and meaning in one’s personal life. This blasé attitude also led to social aversion and conflict in city life, framed as a price for the freedom to be true to one’s inner nature.

Another price of urban modernity Simmel (2002 [1903]) identified was that the city with its money economy was reconfiguring the relationship between social status and identity, as goods once reserved for elites could increasingly be consumed by the growing middle class, and urbanites increasingly had opportunities for social mobility. He proposed

that middle and upper-class individuals adapted to this dilemma through the differentiation of identity, not only in terms of divisions of labor, but also in terms of “being different” (2002 [1903:18]). Eccentricity and idiosyncrasy in his view became necessary adaptations of the emergent urban bourgeoisie and the aristocracy to cope with the consequences of industrial divisions of labor and urbanization, which included more physical comforts, but also a decline in spirituality, meaning, and elite notions of culture, because the individual had become “a single cog” struggling against “the vast overwhelming organization of things and forces which gradually take out of his hands everything connected with progress, spirituality and value” (2002 [1903]:18). Simmel argued that for the individual to maintain a sense of self in the face of such de-personalization by the city, “extremities and peculiarities and individualizations must be produced and they must be over-exaggerated merely to be brought into the awareness even of the individual himself” (2002 [1903]:19). To survive the cost of intense urban life, one must thus push one’s identity to the forefront through material culture and behavior.

Simmel’s concerns were similar to those of German-Jewish philosopher and social critic Walter Benjamin. In his essay about the Modernist arcades, boulevards, and *flâneurs* of Paris in 1939, *Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century* (1969 [1939]), following the Marxist currents of his time, Benjamin argued that modern cities made their citizens question their identities and roles in their emerging industrialized, urban world. He also argued that the technological advances of his time, such as photography, while wondrous, also rendered those things meaningless, because they had once been only in the realm of the elites, but were now mass-produced and available to the growing urban middle class, which he suggested led to social anxieties in the city. In response to this anxiety, he argued, modern

urban dwellers emphasize the “traces” of their lives—and thus the traces of their identities—through the material possessions they choose to display in their homes, where they take refuge from the modern city.

According to the 2010 US census, 80.7% of Americans live in urban areas (United States Census 2015). The vast majority of Neo-Pagans in the US are also urban (Berger, Leach, and Shaffer 2003:29-34; Magliocco 2001:4), a pattern that my pilot study (Lowry 2011) and later fieldwork revealed is the case for most Neo-Pagans in Texas. All of the participants I interviewed lived in or near major metropolitan areas. As discussed in the preceding and following chapters, my predominantly urban informants find ways to adapt their “nature-based” religious traditions to modern urban life in the US.

Anthropologists Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson argue that the contemporary postindustrial West is a world in which notions of cultural difference and community have been reconfigured, and imagined communities and identities tied to those communities have become largely deterritorialized in the traditional sense of direct interpersonal interaction (1992:9). They argue that postmodern urbanity “has enabled the creation of forms of solidarity and identity that do not rest on an appropriation of space where contiguity and face-to-face contact are paramount” (1992:9). Furthermore, in the pulverized space of postmodernity, space has not become irrelevant: it has been *re*territorialized in a way that does not conform to the experience of space that characterized the era of high modernity. It is this that forces us to reconceptualize fundamentally the politics of community, solidarity, identity, and cultural difference” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:9; original emphasis). Contemporary Neo-Pagan communities compose one such “imagined community” (Anderson 1991) based on such a premise of difference.

In her review of the anthropological literature about the city, anthropologist Setha Low (1996) argues that in studying the urban, we should “attend to the social relations, symbols, and political economies manifest in the city, and view the ‘urban’ as a process rather than as a type or category” (1996:384). She argues that this is the case because the macroprocesses involved in late capitalist, postmodern, postindustrial life and their consequences for individuals are intensified and most readily identifiable in the cities, and are thus best explored in those contexts (1996:384). From this perspective, “the ‘city’ is not a reification but the focus of cultural and sociopolitical manifestations of urban lives and everyday practices” (Low 1996:384). In short, there is something important and meaningful about urban spaces and the everyday lives of those who inhabit them, as those lives and spaces are intertwined with and exemplars of much larger global processes.

Furthermore, several scholars argue the intensity of modern and then postmodern urban life has allowed certain kinds of essentialized identities of resistance to emerge. For example, LGBT historian John D’Emilio (1993) argues that, while homosexual *behavior* had always occurred, the emergence of the Western gay identity and the notion of a gay community were only made possible and given space to exist because of social changes due to urbanization and capitalism. In his refutation of the myth of the “eternal homosexual,” D’Emilio proposes that the shift to capitalist wage labor transformed the family from the primary unit of production to the primary source of emotional satisfaction, and this change allowed for the idea that one could—and *should*—pursue and enjoy a “personal life” outside of the context of labor (1993:103). D’Emilio and George Chauncey (1995), another celebrated LGBT historian, discuss how the emergence of the notions of gay identity and community in the US during the late nineteenth through the twentieth century was not only

a mainly urban phenomenon, but also an overwhelmingly middle-class white one. It is hard not to see an important parallel with the fact that Western Neo-Paganism is also primarily a working and middle-class white phenomenon.

Altars as Folkloric Tactics

Folklorist Sabina Magliocco (2001) argues that creations of folkloric Eclectic Neo-Pagan art are “tactics” or ways of making do in the sense proposed by renowned French Jesuit scholar, Michel De Certeau (1984). Tactics are acts of resistance in the moment by the weak or marginalized (De Certeau 1984:xix). These tactics, Magliocco asserts, are employed as a kind of resistance “to create a satisfying alternative culture in which individual creativity is valued” (2001:7). While De Certeau’s tactics are usually framed in terms of the use of public urban spaces, such as in political geographer Anna Secor’s (2004) research among Kurdish women who use the tactic of anonymity to navigate life in modern Istanbul, Magliocco (2001) demonstrates how members of the Reclaiming and Fellowship of Isis traditions construct altars, adornments, decorations, clothing, and other items as tactics, in this case to resacralize their modern American world, to mark alternative religious identities, and to resist the kinds of perceived negative impacts of modernity discussed in Chapter II.

De Certeau proposes that modern urbanites are engaged in cultural production through the ways they “make do” with the goods they choose to consume (1984:vii, 30-33). This argument challenged the Marxist paradigms of his time in that it included the reuse of cultural products in ways unintended by the producers and not simply factory production, thus questioning the assumption of top-down, passive reception of culture and the idea that

the whole of identity came from the division of labor. Resistance in this sense is syncretic *bricolage* with agency. In other words, De Certeau asked if there is any control over the means of cultural production, and if so, how such behaviors were tactics. Here I explore how ethnic Neo-Pagans employ such tactics as spatial practices of resistance and as cultural production in everyday life.

In his history of Mexican home altars, historian and scholar of popular culture William Beezley (1997) describes how eighteenth-century indigenous peoples in Mexico maintained their pre-Columbian altar traditions by syncretizing indigenous and European Catholic symbolism, which may be interpreted as tactical resistance to Spanish Catholic hegemony. He describes how Mexican home altars took on even more significance during the nineteenth century in cities, when civil bodies enacted laws meant to further secularize urban public life by requiring that icons be moved indoors and out of public spaces. My data suggest that Neo-Pagans in Texas similarly tend to keep overtly religious symbols out of public view. This tendency may be because of worries about the risk of conflict with Christian neighbors, which is tied to the kinds of perceived conflict with Christians described in Chapter II. For example, the Heathen Thunor explained that his group is cautious about what they do when performing rituals that his neighbors might see:

Ya kind of worry what the neighbors think, and what they're gonna do. Or are they gonna do something crazy like call the cops? So obviously, there's some things that we don't do.... I often wonder what the neighbors would think, but yet I still hold these rituals on my lawn. We do most of it on my patio, which is actually fenced. But they can hear us when we say, "Hail Thor!" So what do they think? I don't know. They haven't said anything about it. They haven't started acting differently about it. I feel very lucky for that. But I do worry about that, because this land can be full of people who have a very strong opinion that other peoples' ways of being wrong.

Thunor expresses anxieties about performing Heathen rituals in view of his non-Neo-Pagan (and most likely Christian) neighbors. Moreover, his reference to Texans with strong views about others' morality seems to be code for concerns about socially conservative Christians having negative reactions to and possibly confronting him over his ethnoreligious practices at his home in Austin. This tendency to keep practices out of public view may also have roots in America's history of secularization and moving religious symbols out of the public sphere and into the home. In either case, keeping altars in the domestic sphere may be seen as tactics of making do and resistance in secularized urban contexts.

Beezley (1997) also highlights how Mexican home altars reflect technological and other social changes that took place over the twentieth century, such as the inclusion of photographs, which became much more affordable at that time, and how Mexicans choose items for their personal altars to symbolize the struggles and desires of their everyday lives. In her study of altars from the Reclaiming Neo-Pagan community in California, Magliocco (2001:20) gives examples of how items were chosen to symbolize pressing local political concerns of that community at that time. I believe she makes a useful argument that such community "altars as performances acutely reflect the specific political context surrounding their construction" (2001:20). As I discuss in Chapter IV, I gathered many examples of such contextuality, such as prayers at ADF Druid rituals dealing with current local, national, and global anxieties and challenges.

The diverse objects on Mexican home altars are symbolic reminders of special moments and relationships with loved ones and spiritual beings in the worshippers' lives (Beezley 1997:100-101). One may interpret the acts of assembling such items for Mexican

home altars as De Certeauan tactics, because they are ways of “making do” that allow individuals to cope with the adversities of modern life, including the pressures of secularization. Here I explore how ethnic Neo-Pagans in Texas construct their altars, give meaning to the items they chose to include, and use their altars to mitigate the challenges they face in contemporary everyday life. What stories do their home altars tell? What interpersonal relationships and relationships with deities or other beings do the altar items represent and signal? What kinds of layered meanings are inscribed upon altar elements? Do the objects on their altars help those who craft them navigate adversities in their daily lives, and if so, how do they do this?

All of the objects on these altars are polysemic depending on the immediate context and the particular observers involved at that moment (Beezley 1997:100-101; Turner 1982:16, 20). Practitioners selectively choose what is appropriate based on their tradition’s criteria and on what is relevant to their current lives (Beezley 1997:105). Beezley also points to the impact of capitalist modernity through reference to the commercialization expressed by the common presence of popular, mass-produced items that came into use in the late nineteenth century (1997:104). This practice also shows just how selective altar hybridity can work. In her ethnography of Eclectic Neo-Pagan altars, Magliocco (2001:23), describes how many of her informants often buy hand-crafted or mass-produced items from a variety of vendors, and that some deity statues are mass-produced, in some cases abroad (Magliocco 2001:34).

Throughout my fieldwork in Texas, and through my involvement in this community for many years previously, I have observed the kinds of contemporary, urban *bricolage* and folkloric reuse in many home and festival contexts. My experiences in the community has

produced countless examples of Neo-Pagan statuary and ritual items that are mass-produced—often in Asia where production is cheaper—and then bought by Neo-Pagans from myriad sources who put them to religious uses. Although Beezley (1997) and Magliocco (2001) do not explicitly discuss these processes in terms of globalization, I think they provide insightful examples of how Neo-Pagans not only participate in globalized, transnational markets through the purchasing of such items, but also contribute to the production of them. How do Texas Neo-Pagans obtain objects for their altars? Were they gifts? Hand-crafted items bought at festivals or commissioned from artists in the community? Contemporary or antique mass-produced objects? Is there concerns about the use of mass-produced items when they are used in “nature-based” religious practice? If so, how is that conflict mitigated?

Beezley (1997) describes how historical, political events in nineteenth-century Mexico led to a situation in which many rural Mexicans were left without priests or churches, and so “family-based religious practice centered around the home altar became the norm” (1997:97). Except for a few rare cases, such as Circle Sanctuary in Wisconsin, American Neo-Pagans have had marginal success at establishing permanent temples or ritual spaces. While there are major festivals, such as those hosted by CMA, my informants in Texas, like in other parts of the country (Berger, Leach, and Shaffer 2003; Magliocco 1996, 2001, 2004; Pike 2001; Pizza 2009), usually must use members’ homes or public spaces for group rituals. For example, the 2012 Austin Pagan Pride Day festival was hosted at a city park, the San Antonio one at a civic building, and the Houston one at a restaurant, and each city has at least one monthly social gathering (without rituals)—a PNO—at a restaurant or bar, much like the Australian Pagans in the Pub events described by Coco and

Woodward (2007). As discussed in Chapter IV, the Houston-area ADF group usually performs its High Day rituals at members' homes or at public parks. I have, however, heard several individuals in major Texan cities talk about trying to gather resources to establish more permanent spaces for the Neo-Pagan communities in their cities. I mention these observations to highlight the crucial value of home altars in the everyday religious lives of Neo-Pagans in Texas. Most American Neo-Pagans do not have the luxury of permanent community ritual spaces afforded to members of larger, more organized, and more affluent religious groups, and so they must "make do" with altars in their homes or yards for regular, everyday religious practice.

Jill Clíodhna: an ADF Druid Case Study

In March of 2012, after interviewing Jill at her home in Galveston, Texas, I asked her to explain her altars and other spiritually meaningful decorations in her room. The first piece Jill described was a round, hand-painted and carved piece of wood (Figure 1) hanging on the wall across from her bed. This wall plaque was originally meant to be used for throwing crystals and stones as a new creative form of divinatory practice, but she never used it in that way. This seemingly simple piece of room décor was imbued with an immense amount of both ethnoreligious symbolism and deep personal story. On its surface, the ADF-specific cosmological symbolism is fairly simple: (from the top clockwise) the sun, fire, a void, a well, the moon, a tree, and the Earth in the center. The three primary symbols used in all ADF Druidic rituals are the Fire, the Well, and the sacred World Tree. As she explained, smoke from the Fire sends messages to the Shining Ones (the ADF term for deities). The Well allows her "to get the messages to and from the ancestors. That

water passageway, it's going down into the earth where, of course, most of our ancestors are buried into the earth, but it's that lower realm of things." The Tree connects the realms above, below, and our world, and represents nature.

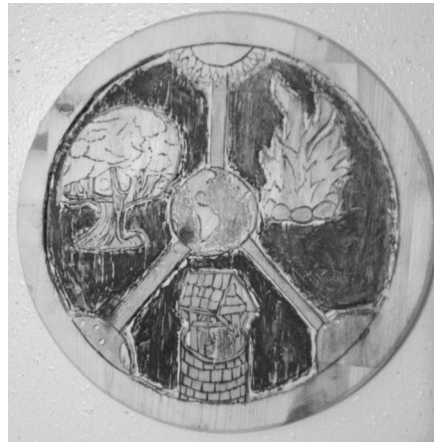


Figure 1: ADF cosmological wall plaque

The meanings Jill gave for each of these images follow the standard ADF symbolic system, but her own explanations of what they mean to her reveal how important this simple decorative object—and the thought and effort put into making it—is to her. The sun image represents “a new birth area, shiny, bright, nice, wonderful type deal,” whereas the moon (the mound to the left of the Well) symbolizes the night and difficult, dark periods in her life “because nighttime is tough.” The mound to the right of the Well represents a “voidance” or the unknown parts of life (even unknown to the “Kindreds” or the Shining Ones or deities, ancestors, and Nature Spirits). Lastly, the Earth “is the connection to everybody else,” and its divinatory meaning would be “I need to look to fellow humankind to find the answer.” This decorative plaque serves as a tactic to re-root

Jill in a cosmologically structured and resacralized world in which she is connected to and guided by deities, ancestors, and the rest of humanity (in the broadest sense of an imagined community). Not only is it an example of “making do” in terms of physical construction, but it is also a tactical means of mitigating feelings of alienation, de-personalization, and uprootedness that accompany modern urbanity, as well as resisting the disenchantment and secularization of American social life due to the influences of the Enlightenment and capitalist post-industrialization described in the previous chapters.

Jill made a brief yet telling comment about this piece that made reference to how it was inscribed with multiple meanings. She said, “It’s one of the few things that I keep around that my ex-husband helped with.” In our earlier conversation, she explained, “I had a very, very controlling ex-husband who did not like anything that took away attention from him. And, so, rituals and prayers even took time away from him. So I had to get them when he wasn’t around, which was very slim times.... I’m free now.” This piece is thus a daily reminder of not only the connections she has worked to establish with her Kindreds, but also of who she once was and who she is now—a woman who sees herself as free to live her life with agency. Her comment also suggests that it serves as a reminder of a relationship that was nonetheless important to her and that helped form the woman she has become.

Jill has three distinct altars in her bedroom for her Kindreds. Two are store-bought self-standing wooden shelves, while the third is the top of a bureau or cabinet that she uses to hold miscellaneous ritual paraphernalia, such as herbs, oils, candles, and altar cloths. Demonstrating the dynamic and hybridizing nature of folkloric ethnic Neo-Pagan décor and altar construction (which aligns with other aspects of folklore [Bauman 1983; Magliocco

1996, 2001, 2004; Pike 2001; Toelken 1996]), Jill explained that all of her altar items were found, gifted to her, or bought from a variety of vendors. Like the Eclectic Neo-Pagan altar tools described by Magliocco (2001:23), her use of diverse material elements obtained in varied ways to construct religious decorations in her home reflects the folkloric and polysemic nature of such intentional, creative *bricolage* in contemporary ethnic Neo-Pagan practice.

Her Shining Ones altar (Figure 2) is an assemblage of deity figurines and other symbols Jill associates with her Gods. Some represent sacred femininity based on folk historical meanings assigned to Neolithic “Venus” figurines. Speaking of the small pink and the larger brown Goddess figures on the altar, Jill explained: “I love [them] because they have big bellies and they’re big. They’re like all the deities would have been back then. Big women were [respected] and what was expected and found beautiful and not what we see as people nowadays.” Jill—a large woman by most American standards—offers both an affirmation of her own theologically grounded notion of sacred feminine beauty—itsself based on the kinds of Neo-Pagan folk histories discussed in Chapter II, and a critique of dominant American ideal norms of beauty. This example mirrors Magliocco’s observations that Neo-Pagan representations of sacred femininity often “have features such as abundant flesh, drooping breasts, and pregnant bellies, which are not usually a part of everyday representations of women in Western society.... By making images of the feminine divine that focus on and exaggerate these qualities, Pagan artists normalize and sacralized them; no longer grotesque, they become sacred” (2001: 27-28). As such, Jill’s Goddess representations suggest tactical ways of “making do” meant to resist the contemporary

constructions of femininity she faces in her everyday life, while resacralizing her identity as a woman *and* as a large woman by American standards.

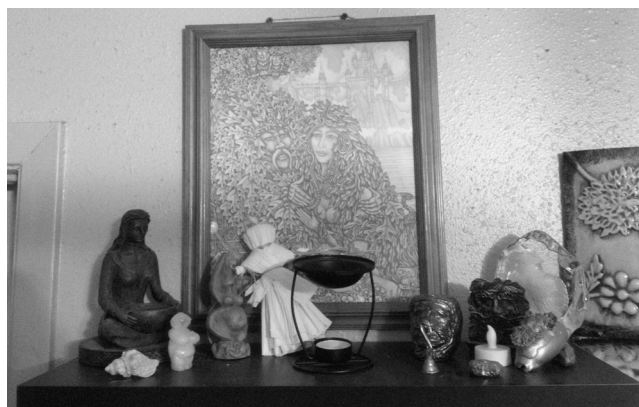


Figure 2: Shining Ones altar

Other items are explicitly Celtic in reference to her focus on Welsh ancestry within her personal practice, such as the seated statue she associates with Cerridwen “with her well and her wisdom,” who is a Welsh Goddess of inspiration and transformation in ADF Druidic theology. The cornhusk doll, which is a traditional representation of the Irish Goddess and saint, Bríd [pronunciation: breezh /’briʒ/] or Brigid, was a gift her married, polyamorous partner Sarah made during a ritual at a Texas ADF retreat the month before (as discussed in Chapter IV they later separated). Previously, Sarah had explained that she was supportive of but did not identify with Neo-Paganism. The representations of Cerridwen and Bríd serve multiple functions and are inscribed with layered meanings. These deities, coupled with Jill’s emphasis on Celtic ancestry, reflect an attempt to revalorize her European ethnic heritage, and by doing so, re-affirming her refashioned sense of Celtic

identity in contemporary, urban Texas. These images also re-embed her in an ancient-yet-reconstructed world where nature and rural farming were viewed as sacred and central to people's values and lives. The Cerridwen figure represents the notion of personal transformation, which has been a central goal and value in Jill's life over the past several years. The Bríd doll represents an important Celtic deity on Jill's Shining Ones altar, as well as the identity-reaffirming relationship she had with Sarah, which contrasts sharply with her fraught relationship with her ex-husband and the conflicting sense of self she had when she constructed her wall plaque. These two items exemplify how seemingly incongruous forms of art—the mass-produced Cerridwen statue and the hand-made Bríd doll—may be combined to serve the religious needs of ethnic Neo-Pagans seeking to reconstruct ancient European symbols and traditions in new ways deemed appropriate and useful in twenty-first-century American life.



Figure 3: Shining Ones altar, right side

Masculine deities were also represented on the altar, such as the framed Green Man figure (behind the plastic candle, Figure 2)—a folkloric survival of pre-Christian British religion—and the Green Man/Green Woman print made by a now-deceased friend that hangs on the wall (Figure 2). The novel Green Woman represents a wonderful example of how Neo-Pagan artists creatively reuse and refashion folkloric elements, and how such innovations may serve important functions for consumer-adherents who find such aesthetics meaningful. Other male deity symbols are not as easily identifiable to observers, such as the pyrite “sun disk” in front of the artificial candle (Figure 3), which she described as “a gift from the Sun God.” Jill explained the small bell in front of the Green Man face (Figure 3), saying, “It’s a bird’s head and that’s for [the Iron Age Celtic God] Grannus, who is pictured as a crane, and is a God of change and transformation.” Since our interview, Jill joined the ADF Order of the Crane, a mystery-centered online divinatory group, who use a special set of crane-themed divinatory tools to explore personal spirituality and for divination in ADF rituals. These tools, which are a novel construction inspired from Celtic lore, are produced by and sold only to fully initiated ADF members. She often talked with me and others in the grove about her work in this mystery tradition, and about how important it is in her daily life.

Jill’s bell, the glass eagle plaque representing a sky God, the plastic tea lights, and the black tea light oil diffuser used for oil offerings (Figures 2, 3, and 6) are examples of how objects from everyday life are put to new religiously meaningful uses in folkloric ways by ethnic Neo-Pagans. The Green Man/Green Woman image functions as a tactic to resist the desacralization of Western life and nature, while representing refashioned notions of the divine inspired by British folklore. The representations of Grannus and Cerridwen root

Jill's religious practice and values in a reconstructed past, references her Celtic ancestry and ethnic identity, and serves as a reminder of her goal of self-transformation in her everyday life.

One of the least remarkable objects on the Shining Ones altar to the unaware observer is also one of the most meaningful: the simple seashell in front of the Cerridwen figure (left, Figure 2). Jill shared how she came to have a life-changing relationship with an ancient Irish Goddess of sea and sky, Clíodhna, and how she came to identify herself with that name in honor of her matron deity (Clíodhna is the name of another Irish sea Goddess used here for anonymity):

One day I was down here in Galveston. And I was walking along the beach and the name “Clíodhna” had come to me. And I didn't know who she was at that time, and I knew I was Pagan and I hadn't really selected a deity to be my matron or my patron. I was just generally calling out to them and saying, “If any of ya'll want to, let yourselves be known to me.” The name [Clíodhna] came to me and I said, “Okay. Are you my matron?” And I said, “I will have you show me the way. A yes or no answer.” And this is how we've talked ever since. I go to the beach to get my answers from her. There is a specific type of shell that's part of the conk family. It's very rare to find whole on the beach. If it's a “yes” answer I find it whole. If it's a “maybe” answer I usually find it where 80% of it's still there. If it's a “no” answer I find it but 80% of it's gone. So when I asked her that, that's what she showed me. I wasn't even really looking down for seashells. I was just talkin' and I stepped on it. And I cut my foot. And I looked down and I picked up the shell and I'm like, “It's a yes!” I had asked that a whole shell that's normally not found on the beach whole be given to me if it's a “yes.” And so that's how it became our way of communicating. She became my first Goddess that I knew by name. I went home and researched her and found sea and sky. And I've always been drawn to the sea. So it made sense that a sea and sky Goddess would be my first one. Of all the deities she's the only one that's really, truly stayed with me. During my tough times that's who I run to first because of that motherly aspect, whereas the other deities had been flowing in and out of my life.

I call this kind of story about being claimed by a deity a “hit-on-the-head” narrative (a phrase modeled after the language used by the Celtic Heathen Blaidh to describe such an

experience), a topic I revisit in the following chapters. These narratives seem more common among ethnic Neo-Pagans, who tend to believe in what is often termed “hard polytheism” (Corrigan 2015a, 2015b; Dangler 2015; Kraemer 2012:33-38; Serith 2003) in ADF and other Recon traditions. Hard polytheism is the belief that deities are individual beings with their own unique attributes, personalities, and desires; as such, they are believed to sometimes claim individuals. This notion contrasts with Wiccan or Eclectic “soft polytheism” (Kraemer 2012:26-27), where all Goddesses are faces of the one Goddess and all Gods are faces of the one God. To use an analogy, it is somewhat like the difference between forging relationships with new people, rather than connecting with different aspects of the same person.

As part of this relationship with her matron Goddess, Jill explained that she informally took the last name of Clíodhna, which she plans to eventually make her legal last name, rather than the maiden name she uses now or the last name of her ex-husband, as well as making Jill (her legal middle name) her legal first name to replace the name of Mary, with which she does not identify because of its Christian symbolism:

When it came to me who I am now—not the Church of Christ Christian, straight girl doing whatever everyone else wanted—but following the religion I chose, living the lifestyle I chose, being poly, being a lesbian, all of that and it came true to me in dressing how I wanted and not how everybody else wanted, I was like, “You know what? I need a name that says, “I’m me and this is who I am.” And Clíodhna—taking her as my last name was also a very respectful manner to me. And it was something that would have been done in ancient days.

As Jill’s narrative eloquently reveals, that simple seashell on her Shining Ones altar is much more than a decorative object chosen for aesthetic appeal alone. It is a reminder of a profoundly personal religious experience and of a crucial relationship with a Celtic Goddess.

It is also a reminder of the struggles she has overcome—including conflicts with Christian society’s expectations of who she should be and how she should live—to develop her identity as a self-defined woman who is openly Neo-Pagan, lesbian, and polyamorous in contemporary Texas. Renaming herself after Clíodhna and rejecting the Christian name ascribed to her are powerful examples of ethnic Neo-Pagan tactics of agency and resistance to the kinds of real or perceived threats of Christian hegemony in Texas and the US in general discussed in Chapter II. And in referencing a folk history in which women traditionally named themselves after matron Goddesses, Jill’s self-renaming re-embeds her in a sacred, meaningful past.

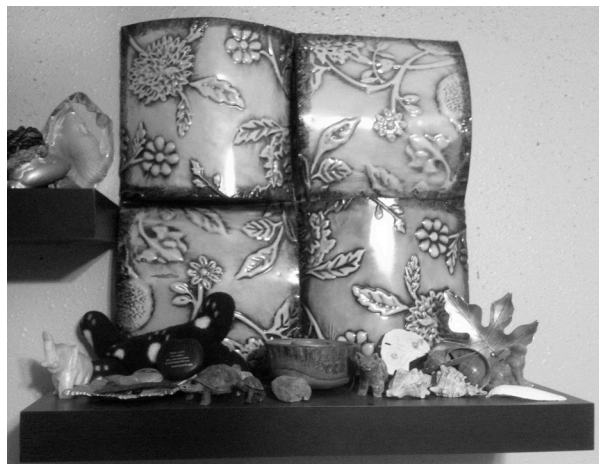


Figure 4: Nature Spirits altar

The second altar (Figures 4 and 5) is dedicated to the Nature Spirits, which comprise one of the Kindreds within the ADF belief system. Here again, each object has its story that interweaves with Jill’s own story and its religious relevance. As Jill explained,

“each one [of the animal representations] is specifically chosen,” demonstrating the agency and intentionality involved in her altar construction. For example, the black and white dog toy represents her dog Blue, who no longer lives with her. She explained that the elephant and wolf figurines represent strength, while the tortoises are reminders “to take my time through things and look at all the facts.” The brown carved bear figurine (Figures 4 and 5) was a gift from Neo-Pagan friends in Arkansas, and she has kept it on her altar since they gave it to her. The green wolf figurine (Figures 4 and 5) in particular has significance to her:

The only critter on my altar that’s always been in my life is the wolf. And I love wolves. And that will change out periodically, which wolf is sitting up there. I definitely see that as a spirit that protects over me. When I was a kid we were staying at a state park somewhere that wolves were prominent to be at, and I wandered off down the nature trail, and my dad found me. And I was playing with cubs that were wolf cubs with the mama right there and she didn’t care until my dad came to try to get me. And she had already incorporated me into the pack and then she cared. I always give my respect to the wolf.

The wolf on the altar thus represents both Jill’s religious views of nature and part of her own personal story. She had an equally powerful story associated with the large, round moon snail shell on her Nature Spirits altar. This shell was gifted to her by her Alcoholics Anonymous sponsor to congratulate her for reaching three months of sobriety. As Jill explained, “This is from a very Christian woman who respects my religion and my ways. So it’s got placed right there. Three months was a big deal, and for her to do that was awesome.” The wolf figurine and the moon snail shell, like the other religious objects in her room, along with the experience Jill associated with wolf imagery, highlight the variety of ways Neo-Pagans use personal décor in their homes to mark ethnoreligious identity and serve as reminders of where they came from, what they has overcome, important interpersonal relationships, and who they are at the moment.

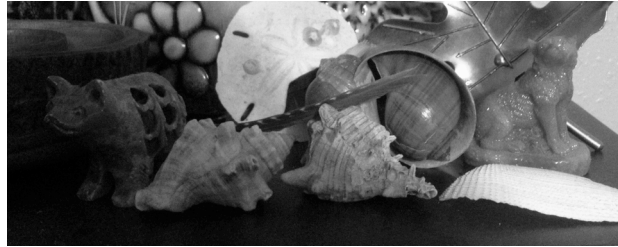


Figure 5: Nature Spirits altar, right side

Other objects on her Nature Spirits altar (Figures 4 and 5) include purchased crystals and metal leaves and the sand dollars and other seashells that she has found and displayed on her altar over the years. The large metal decorative piece showing leaves in seasonally-colored panels and the wooden bowl in the center of the altar (Figure 4) also demonstrate the dynamic and hybridizing folkloric nature of ethnic Neo-Pagans décor and altar construction, as Jill bought those items at either Pier One Imports or Tuesday Morning (she could not remember which), both popular chains of home décor stores that typically cater to middle-class shoppers. Jill explained that all of her religious items were homemade, gifts, bought at mundane stores, vendor booths at Neo-Pagan festivals, or garage sales, or found while “dumpster diving” or in natural contexts. A similar reuse of found objects is exemplified by the altar construction of HearthWitch, the kitchen Witch and ADF member with Heathen leanings. HearthWitch explained that she found a broken figure of Glenda the Good Witch by a tree in her apartment complex that she fixed and uses to represent the “overall Goddess.” She bought a little item showing two owls at a thrift store to represent “the God;” she said the owls reminded her of the God Odin (though he is usually

associated with ravens), the Norse, and masculinity. She also bought an item at a thrift store that depicts a “cat lady” holding a cat that she uses to represent the Norse Goddess Freyja (HearthWitch actually said Frigga or Frigg [the Æsir wife of Odin], but her description of the deity suggests she either meant Freyja [the Vanir fertility Goddess] or was conflating the two Goddesses, the latter of which I found is not uncommon). She chose this representation because the Goddess’ chariot is pulled by two cats in Norse mythology. Jill’s and HearthWitch’s repurposing of such diverse material elements obtained in so many varied ways—including novel uses of mass-produced material culture—to construct their altars and other ethnoreligious, identity-reaffirming decorations in their homes exemplifies the folkloric and polysemic nature of such intentional, creative *bricolage* (Bauman 1983; Toelken 1996) and “making do” in contemporary American Neo-Pagan life.



Figure 6: Ancestors altar

Jill’s third altar (Figures 6 and 7) is dedicated to the ancestors and to living members of her biological and chosen family, including her ADF family. The most obvious markers

of the ancestors on this altar are the photograph of her “granddaddy” and the mass-produced resin skull, which she said was “one of the most perfect ways to say ancestors” (Figure 7). She chose this particular skull because it was produced with Celtic designs, and so reflects the Celtic focus of her Druidic path. The photograph of her grandfather was displayed for its obvious religious connotations (veneration of “the ancestors”), but also because it was a daily reminder of a deceased, beloved family member. This focus on personal ancestors, which has been observed in many Neo-Pagan ethnographies (e.g., Magliocco 2001, 2004; Gardell 2003), may be interpreted as a tactic of resistance in postmodern American life. Jill’s construction of an ancestor altar and regular performances of ancestor worship re-root her in a meaningful, resacralized world, and they help mitigate the alienation of modern urban life by anchoring her in a community of ancestors. Such ancestor veneration by Jill may also be a form of resistance to the general abandonment of ancestor worship in the white, Christian American religious landscape.



Figure 7: Ancestors altar, right side close up

Less obvious is the meaning of the silver female piece on her ancestors and community altar (Figures 6 and 7). Jill said that she originally bought it simply for home décor at her previous apartment; however, she put it on this altar because “it’s represented even myself and women in my life that I know who have passed on.” Other objects on this altar also made reference to Jill’s living family and community, as well as serving as reminders of her everyday goals and changing sense of self. The large silver platter was a gift from her niece, and was placed on the altar because of the aesthetic value it has when it reflects burning tea lights during rituals, in addition to the value of it having been a gift from a close family member. The altar also displays her Alcoholics Anonymous sobriety chips, which reference her identity as a recovering alcoholic and her everyday efforts at recovery, as well as a cobblestone from a work retreat that reminds her of her commitment to the clinic where she worked at the time and to the community it serves. These objects symbolize relationships with individuals and her community, everyday goals in life, and the identity she continues to shape; as such, they tactically re-anchor her in a meaningful past, while symbolically re-embedding her in a resacralized living community.



Figure 8: Ancestors altar, oghams, petrified wood, and prayer beads

Other elements on her ancestors and community altar (Figures 6 and 7) have more explicitly ethnoreligious meanings. A beige ceramic vessel serves as the Well, the means of communicating with ancestors in ADF Druidic tradition. She puts American coins in the Well as “silver offerings” and keeps a marble in it “because it was given to me one day to remind myself that I didn’t lose all my marbles [and] to remind the ancestors they didn’t lose all their marbles either.” Other items include two vases used for oil sacrifices that she bought from a friend at an ADF retreat, an artificial tree to represent the World Tree in ADF, a wolf-skin pouch made for her by Neo-Pagan friends containing a set of deer antler ogham (reconstructed Irish divinatory tools) (Figure 8), a miniature scythe (“because every Druid has one”), an onyx knife bought in Cozumel, Mexico with Sarah used to snuff candles, homemade ADF-inspired prayer beads, and a vial of holy water from sacred wells associated with the Goddess and saint Brigid that a Druid friend brought from Ireland—a place usually considered a sacred homeland by Druids (Lowry 2010, 2011). These items serve ritual functions, but also signal her refashioned and revalorized Welsh Celtic identity and important relationships. As tourism researchers Irena Ateljevic and Stephen Doorne (2003) demonstrate, objects purchased on trips for loved ones may be put into use as markers of identity and social relationships that inform the construction and maintenance of identity.

Da Troll: a Heathen Case Study



Figure 9: Da Troll with drinking horn

Da Troll (Figure 9) is a gentle bear of a man and a Heathen. In September of 2011, I drove down to interview him at his apartment in a small town about 45 minutes south of downtown Houston, Texas. When he greeted me, he was wearing a t-shirt with an image of the Norse God Thor and “Viking Berserker” in red letters. After our interview, I asked him to tell me about the religious items in his home. He displays most of these items in his living room, where there were placed throughout the main living space of his apartment. Upon entering his home, one of the first things a visitor sees is a bookcase crammed full with fantasy books and Norse-themed objects (Figure 10). On one shelf he has a large Thor’s Hammer (a primary symbol of Heathenry), a Thor doll, a bust of the God Loki, and a green nature spirit (all of which were mass-produced). On the next shelf, he keeps a drinking horn (Figure 9) upon which he burned Norse runes that are particularly important

to him; such horns are commonly available at the Texas Renaissance Festival (which many Texan Neo-Pagans enjoy) and at many Neo-Pagan venues. On another shelf is a Thor's Hammer in plastic canvas needle-point, and on the other shelves are several antler-handled knives and Medieval-themed daggers that he bought or constructed through the years. He also has a large green cloth showing an image of a World Tree with Norse designs. On the living room side wall are drawings of Norse runes (Figure 11) that he had drawn and displayed to help him memorize the runes for use in Heathen magic and divination.



Figure 10: Shelf with Norse and other religious images

Da Troll first took the Norse God Loki—the infamous trickster of Norse myth—as his patron deity (a common tradition across Neo-Paganism, but especially common in ethnic traditions, as with Jill's references to her matron deity). Over the course of his religious journey, however, he distanced himself from Loki, and decided to take the Norse warrior God Thor as his patron. Revealing the kind of personal relationships with both deities and kin, his son had given him a bronze bust of Loki with horns (Figure 10, center) as a Christmas present, without knowing his father no longer considered Loki his patron. Da Troll chose to keep the Loki bust displayed among the other ethnoreligious materials in

his living room because of the family relationship he associates with it, and to honor that past closeness with the deity. The wide variety of purchased and handmade religious objects, such as the handmade needle-point Thor's Hammer and the rune drawings, the Thor doll, various daggers and knives, and the rune-inscribed drinking horn, further exemplify how ethnic Neo-Pagans creatively use and reuse available resources in the folkloric construction of urban religious spaces that reflect ethnoreligious identities, experiences, relationships, and personal narratives.

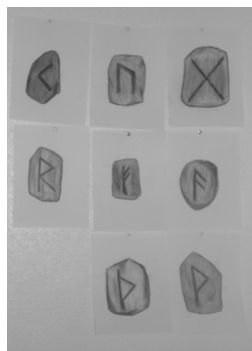


Figure 11: Rune drawings

The choices to purchase or craft these items and to display them in his living room may be interpreted as tactical ways of “making do” that appear to serve to keep Da Troll’s relationship with his son prominent in his everyday life, while resacralizing this kin relationship through the association with the Loki image and its inclusion among other Heathen objects. As I found was common among ethnic Recons, the notion of resacralized kinship is an extremely important value to Da Troll, who often over the course of my fieldwork posted daily Facebook posts referencing the Heathen meaning of the day and

highlighting family and “the tribe.” The reference to his relationship with his son via the Loki bust in his living space is an extension of Da Troll’s emphasis on the sacred nature of kinship in his everyday life, and thus may be seen as a tactic of resistance to the sense of alienation and the common perception that family has become devalued in modern, urban American life.



Figure 12: Altar

On the other side of the living room is a bookcase (Figure 12) used to hold DVDs, spiritually important objects, and his altar (on the top of the bookcase). Da Troll briefly explained:

It’s a mix of an ancestor altar, but I also have the four directional animals on there, which my Native American teacher, that’s what he taught me. The buffalo is the white buffalo for North, and that’s for wisdom. The bear is the yellow bear of the East, and he’s for strength. The mouse on the South is green, and that’s for

introspection. And the eagle, the black eagle of the West, and he's for looking outward.

The most obvious ancestral elements on the altar are the photographs of deceased kin. The idea of “kin” is a particularly central and salient notion within Heathenry. Notions of “blood kin” and “kin of heart” have emerged as prominent themes in most of my interviews with Heathens, Druids, and other ethnic Neo-Pagans; however, it appears to be most prominent among Heathens and ADF Druids.

Da Troll also spoke of his Native American teacher in kinship terms, which helps explain the connection between the ancestor altar and his teacher, whom he described as a spiritual ancestor. While he said his ancestry is primarily Scottish, German, and English, he also said he has some Native American “blood.” He uses knowledge of his Native American ancestry and experiences learning from a Native American teacher to explain his syncretism of Heathen and Native American beliefs and practices, but bringing up these factors in his narrative also helps avert possible risks of charges of cultural appropriation, an issue I revisit in Chapter V. Such syncretism was also signified by the cigar offering in a clam shell on the altar. The objects on this altar are polysemic symbols that serve multiple functions in Da Troll's everyday life. They reflect the personal relationship he has with a Native American man who taught him spiritual knowledge that he has incorporated into his hybridized religious tradition. They express the sacredness of nature, and thus may be seen as a tactic of resistance to the desacralization of nature in contemporary American life. These objects are also reminders of the kinds of ethnoreligiously framed values—wisdom, strength, introspection, and the need to look outward—that Da Troll seeks to embody and enact in his everyday life.

Other objects I observed on the two middle shelves of the altar bookcase (Figure 12) in his living room included a turtle skull and shell, animal bones and antler pieces, a wide range of stones and crystals, a mortar and pestle, several stone turtles, mollusk shells, feathers, an Egyptian-themed stone pyramid, and the two large pine cones. On the floor under the bookcase were several decorated wooden boxes and a cigar box that contain other religiously important objects, such as cigars for offerings. The contrast of this smorgasbord of religious items and the mundane DVDs on the bookcase speaks to the folkloric nature of this altar space in Da Troll's home. This urban space is neither exclusively sacred nor profane; rather, it is both. This lack of distinction between such spatial categories is typical of how Neo-Pagan and other religious folkloric spaces are constructed in contrast to bounded, institutional or "high" religious spaces, such as churches (Magliocco 1996, 2001, 2004; Pike 2001; Pizza 2009).

Azure: a Hellenic Witch Case Study

Azure, whom I interviewed at her home in a small town about half an hour from Houston, Texas in October of 2012, identifies as a Hellenic Witch with a strong Greek focus in her practice, especially regarding deities. Like many ethnic informants, she first found Wicca, but came to find it was not a good fit for her; however, she still also claims a Witch identity. She is a *bricoleuse par excellence*, incorporating not only many creative "Witchy" elements in her religious life, but also aspects of Voodoo and Hoodoo, especially since moving from Washington State to Texas about a decade before our interview. While she has a great supply of information on ancient Greek deities and religion, she incorporates or appropriates Voodoo and Hoodoo elements and puts them to Hellenic uses because, as

Azure explained, “I actually want something tangible to work with to put my intent towards. I want a candle to go for that, and I want to burn this or burn that. It’s funny how we get so ritualistic with things, but having that tangible is something that I like to be able to do to kind of focus my energy on.” She said she thus draws from certain other traditions, especially Voodoo and Hoodoo, that have more “tangible” magickal elements that she finds lacking in Hellenism. As in ADF Druidry, which seeks to “fill the gaps” with materials taken from other “Indo-European” cultures, Azure feels a dearth of tangible elements in Hellenism, so she draws from local (most likely filtered) Hoodoo and Voodoo traditions to fill in those holes (such justifications for cultural appropriation are revisited in Chapter V). Here we see the importance of those tangible elements drawn from other traditions as a matter of *bricolage* serving a practical purpose driven by a sense of need, but also influenced by local traditions, which relates to the kinds of notions of resacralized cultural and geographic locality discussed in Chapter II.

Unlike most informants—or other Neo-Pagans I have known over the past two decades, Azure has an entire room dedicated to her Neo-Pagan books and her altar (Figure 13). Only one other informant, the ADF Druid and ex-Santaría practitioner, Mark, reported to having once set up a room exclusively for his altar. Azure’s altar room also serves as her craft room, which makes sense, since much of her craftwork relates to her religious life or to aspects of her life related to her religious life (such as belly dancing). She explained that she put all of these materials in one room so it does not “take over” her home, which she said can happen all too easily.



Figure 13: Upper sections of altar

Like Jill, Da Troll, and many other ethnic informants, Azure creatively puts mundane furniture—in this case, an entertainment center (Figure 13)—to novel ethnoreligious uses. Each section is dedicated to a specific Greek deity with which she has a strong relationship: Persephone (the right-side cabinet), Dionysus (the left-side cabinet), Hecate (the two center shelves), and Hades (on the floor in the center). The drawers in the unit hold her “regular magickal stuff.” This unusually complex altar is truly a living *pièce d’art* that she continually modifies in response to her ethnoreligious and aesthetic needs and desires. I am grateful that she shared it with me, as she usually keeps it private. Pointing to concerns about the ever-increasing flow of information due to social media and the eradication of personal privacy—issues with which I suspect many people of diverse faiths grapple, she said, “I don’t know why people will sit there and throw shit up on Facebook, when this is your personal, magickal space.” Some other Neo-Pagans do, such as the ADF Druid Sean, who often posts his seasonal altars on Facebook, while others, such as the Irish

Traveler Witch Macha, keep their altars very private. I bring up this issue to highlight how Neo-Pagans, like many in the West and elsewhere, are navigating potentially risky new waters when it comes to deciding whether or not to share personal religious elements of their lives online.

Hecate is her primary matron Goddess. Like Jill and many other ethnic informants, Azure has a hit-on-the-head claiming narrative. She explained that early on in her exploration of Neo-Paganism, Hecate kept showing up when she used a Goddess oracle deck: “Hecate kept coming up as associated with me. And I just sat there and I was like, you have got to be shitting me, right?” She felt that Hecate was intentionally engaging with her, so “I went ahead and I did some reading in what the little [oracle] booklet said, ‘cause I really hadn’t ever come across with her, and then it just kinda came up and came up and came up, and I was like, oh shit, maybe I need to go ahead and do some stuff. Maybe research a little bit before I go ahead.” Earlier in our interview, Azure had explained that she had been able to talk with the dead since she was a toddler (which had frightened her mother). She connected this oracular experience with her experiences with spirits of the dead: “So I was like, well, maybe this [has something to do] with her being the gate-keeper and the guardian with going back and forth and the gateway to the dead. I’m like, well, this is very interesting.” Hecate, she explained, “just kind of said, ya know what, you’re mine. And it was through dreams and it was through personal growth and meditation and different things like that.” This had been a challenging, conflicting process for Azure. She said she had felt like Hecate was claiming her, and so she researched the Goddess, but “I was like, I don’t feel like I’m anything like that.” Over the next few years, she went through many struggles in her mundane life, including losing her job and boyfriend, and her house

burned down. As she kept exploring her relationship with Hecate and having the Goddess interact with her in dreams, things turned around for the better. After talking with some fellow Neo-Pagans about her experiences, she has come to ascribe this change in her life to her growing relationship with Hecate: “So it was like, she pushed and she pushed and she made me strong.”



Figure 14: Hecate altar, top center shelf

Her connection to Hecate is why she dedicated the two large center shelves to the Greek Goddess of Magick and Crossroads (Figure 14). Her altar is adorned with symbols drawn from Greek mythology, modern Neo-Pagan folklore about this deity, and her own aesthetics. Along with the plaque showing the Goddess in triple form, there are many (generally mass-produced) items chosen to serve as symbols traditionally associated with Hecate: torches (represented by the scion and hurricane lamp, keys, crossroads, willow trees, animals (frogs, dogs, snakes, owls, and horses), and generally “Witchy” elements. She also has a framed black and white drawing draped with black cloth with a white skull

pattern that she uses to represent Hecate (Figure 14). The drawing is a “fairy” piece drawn by and bought from a woman artist, exemplifying how ethnic Neo-Pagans may reuse items to suit their ethnoreligious needs and aesthetics through *bricolage*.



Figure 15: Hecate plaque and sconce, above top center shelf

Azure’s main Gods are all chthonic (Hecate and Hades) or have chthonic aspects (Dionysus and Persephone). Hecate is her “main go-to” deity, and she explained how the hard polytheistic relationships with the other deities flowed from her initial relationship with Hecate: “[Hecate] came in, and then the others just kind of followed in after and said, ‘Eh, well there you go.’ But I hold her in a very high regard. I’m very drawn with the other three, but she’s just there.” She explained how some of what she knows about these deities and their attributes came through oral tradition: “When I’ve sat there and I’ve talked to people with learning through growing with my path, and talking to people about that, it was very much a chthonic thing. Like everything was Underworld. Even with Dionysus. It’s that whole connection with the dead. With Dionysus it’s grapes. And then with Persephone, it’s always the pomegranate.” Neo-Pagans learn about ethnic deities from a

multitude of source, including the Internet, books on Neo-Paganism and mythology, and oral tradition.



Figure 16: “Witchy” bottles on Hecate altar, lower center shelf

The lower center shelf (Figures 13 and 16) is filled with “Witchy” bottles and other items in honor of Hecate as Goddess of Magick, but also because of her Witch (but not Wiccan) identity. She has collected these bottles over the years, along with other whimsical things that she finds fun. “My house can get overrun with Witchy shit really quick,” she said laughing. These empty bottles have labels, such as “Eye of Newt,” “Mushy Maggot Wart Cream,” and “Witch’s Hair.” These bottles can be found at popular home décor stores, especially near Halloween (Samhain).



Figure 17: Kleidouchos

One piece in particular epitomizes how ethnic Neo-Pagan religious items can be constructed through creative *bricolage* that includes the ascription of new ethnoreligious meanings to mundane materials. Her handcrafted “Kleidouchos” piece (Figure 17) has a large key ring and other keys and decorations on it. Kleidouchos is painted in Greek because “it basically means key-holder, so that was for Hecate.” The two large keys on the central ring are “actually old jailhouse keys from Texas.” The set of keys on top are old train switches, and there are other keys attached amidst the artificial leaves and other decorations throughout the piece. The mother of SaINt, her fiancé at the time, gave her all of these keys, and she decided to make an “art piece” with them, “for her [Hecate], so I could put it on my altar, and that’s just kind of what came out of it.”



Figure 18: Persephone altar, right-hand cabinet

Persephone is represented in another section of the unit (Figure 18). There's a round drawing, a framed rectangular piece, a carnival-type masque, a red heart-shaped box, a box with a Celtic knotwork design she got as a birthday gift, and a prefabricated round grey pentagram. "I don't know why I've got some of the things that I do in here," she explained, "It just kind of feels like it." She, like other informants, chose some elements for several, sometimes overlapping reasons, including for aesthetics, ethnic or specific pantheon symbolism, and the representation of inter-personal relationships. Her mother bought the carnival mask for her in New Orleans when Azure was a child. Explaining how this mask symbolized Persephone, she said, "For some odd reason, I felt it connected with her" The framed drawing is a card her mother sent her; she appreciates that her mother thought it was so Goddess-like that she chose to get it for her. The round image was from her first trip to a Neo-Pagan retreat in Texas, where there was a swap, and she chose it and uses it to represent the Goddess. She has a fairy house on the Persephone altar that she got for Yule one year. I asked if the fairy house was in there because of some specific connection to Persephone, and she simply said, "It's just in there," suggesting she chose it mostly for

aesthetic reasons.

Azure explained that her relationship with Persephone, the Goddess of Spring who spends half of the year overseeing the dead in the Underworld with Hades, has changed as she has gotten older:

When I was younger I felt more of a connection with her, because she is kind of seen as a younger deity, I guess. She's got kind of that maiden form. So I think that when everything was kind of starting out, I felt a little closer to her. As I find myself getting older... I mean, I'm not necessarily as close to her as I was. But at the same time I'd like to go ahead and continue to honor her, because she was a part of my life, and I did feel very connected with her.

Just as Da Troll changed his relationship with Loki and Jill said some deities “had been flowing in and out of” her life, Azure’s relationship with Persephone highlights an interesting—though probably not unique—feature of Neo-Paganism, namely that Neo-Pagans of many stripes often talk about their relationships with deities changing over the course of their lives, much like how inter-personal relationships change. Azure’s connection to Persephone was tied to her own maidenhood; but as she has gotten older, that self-identity has changed, and so her relationship with Persephone has become less central in her life, while her relationships with her other main deities have become more important, especially it seems with Hecate. When these kinds of changes take place, Neo-Pagans usually do not just discard their previous deities; rather, they keep a connection, though a weaker one. And sometimes they renew their relationships with those deities and strengthen them, depending on what is happening in their lives. While I have heard Eclectics talk about their relationships with their Gods in these terms, these kinds of relationships seem to take on more importance among ethnic Neo-Pagans who hold more to a hard polytheistic theology, because they see deities as distinct individuals with whom

they have relationships, rather than as only different aspects of the same God or Goddess they continue to interact with in various guises. This is a subtle distinction in theology and experience that I revisit in Chapters V and VI.



Figure 19: Hades altar, center floor

The floor in the center of the entertainment center is dedicated to Hades (Figure 19). Azure chose a statue of Hades with Cerberus and “skulls and different things like that, just more associated with the Underworld” to represent the Greek God of the Underworld. She got the mass-produced Hades statue from a Neo-Pagan store. There is a stuffed pillow with a skull, resin skulls, and two black coffee cups with white skulls. She feels very close to Hades: “I have a lot of offerings as far as wine goes with him, but as far as connection with him as a father God, as my go-to, I’m still Hecate’s girl.”



Figure 20: Dionysus altar, left-hand cabinet

The two cabinet shelves dedicated to the God of Wine Dionysus (Figure 20) has artificial grapes with leaves and a mass-produced Dionysus statue. The bottom shelf holds a pewter drinking horn, two empty wine bottles, and other symbols of viticulture, as well as incense. The statue and horn were wedding gifts. All of these elements are used to connect her modern life to ancient ideas of Dionysus. She said her connection to Dionysus was mainly through her affinity for wine—which she partially explained through her having grown up near orchards and wineries in Washington State, and partially because she likes wine a lot and has a tendency to get somewhat drunk at festivals. “Dionysus, he’s my good time,” she said.



Figure 21: Hurricane lamp, top center shelf

While most ethnic informants—especially ADF Druids and Heathens—said they were drawn to their traditions because of a strong sense of ethnic ancestry, both Hellenists I interviewed—Guy and Azure—did not express this kind of connection. Guy claimed no Greek heritage other than through Western culture. Azure said she is half German, a quarter Greek, a quarter Italian, and “a smidge” Navajo. This difference is manifest in Azure’s altar. She said, “The closest thing to any kind of ancestors or whatever is my great-grandmother’s, that hurricane lamp.” The lamp (Figure 21) is an anchoring symbol of her great-grandmother and her ancestors, but she described it as “another source of light,” explaining that it is primarily a torch symbol referencing Hecate. While she often brought up her interest in Greek culture, and that she was learning modern Greek through a CD course and hoped to visit the ancient pagan sites in Greece one day, her Greek ancestry was not an important draw to Hellenism; rather, her path to a focus on Hellenism appears to have emerged primarily through her interactions with Hecate and then her other Greek deities. This example is put into sharp contrast, for example, to Jill’s dedication of an entirely separate altar for the ancestors and Da Troll’s focus on ancestors on his altar. It is also different in meaning from the Slavic Witch Opal’s reuse of a green glass ashtray for vodka offerings to the Slavic fairies or *domovye* that she inherited from her now-deceased, beloved Ukrainian grandmother through whom she connects to her Slavic deities and traditions. For Opal, the use of the ashtray—an excellent example of *bricolage* and ascription of ethnoreligious meaning to an otherwise mundane object—is at least equally about her ancestry as it is about use in ethnoreligious practice.

One last observation that emerged while Azure showed me her altar concerns intra-Neo-Pagan syncretism and how informants often relate their current tradition to previous

ones they explored. Most of my informants, like most Neo-Pagans, began their journey in Neo-Paganism through Wicca, most likely because it is the most popular and easily accessible denomination (for lack of a better term) in the US. Azure, like all of the ethnic informants I interviewed who had begun with Wicca, eventually came to find Wicca dissatisfying due to its perceived lack of cultural focus and ancient authentic roots (an issue discussed in Chapter II). [It is important to reiterate here that she does identify as a Witch, but not in the Wiccan sense of the term.]



Figure 22: Cauldron and prayer beads, top center shelf

Three elements of her altar assemblage especially exemplify how many ethnic informants re-incorporate or add Wiccan elements into their ethnoreligious practice. These are her black wrought-iron cauldron with a typical Wiccan pentagram and her prayer beads (Figure 22), as well as her athame or ritual knife (Figure 23). She uses the cauldron, which may be obtained at most Neo-Pagan shops and festivals, to burn incense or raw herbs as deity offerings. She also has a set of prayer beads with little stars between the beads and a key at the end to represent Hecate. She said she does not know why she chose pearly white, black, and blue, but guessed it is because she likes blue; the white and black are opposites

that “balance.” She found the prayer beads online, highlighting the value of the Internet in Neo-Pagan practice. Azure explained, “they’re almost kind of like Wiccan in nature, and I’m not Wiccan by any means, but I just felt like they’re pretty neat. There’s three sets of 13. It’s basically for Maiden, Mother, Crone, but I kind of worked them into my dealings with Hecate.” While making it clear that she her identity is distinctly *not* Wiccan, she chose these Wiccan-like prayer beads for their aesthetic and practical value, and she puts them to a new use in Hellenic practices centered on Hecate. She explained that the three sets of 13 beads represent Hecate’s attributes of wisdom, walking the crossroads, and personal growth.



Figure 23: Athame, top center shelf

Lastly, I asked Azure if the thing I saw wrapped in a black cloth with a white nylon chord tied around it was an athame [pronounced ‘ath-ə-may] or a traditional ceremonial knife used in Wicca (and from there, in other traditions). She explained that she has another athame, but that this was her first from when she was Wiccan. She uses it in protection rituals or spells, though in ways adapted to her Hellenic practice: “There’s different things, like where you don’t necessarily open up a circle, but it’s more like

antiquity. And I don't want to sit there and throw pigs blood all over the place, so I have to kind of do it in my own way, which I guess would be kind of like callin' quarters, but in a different way." Not only is the athame traditionally Wiccan and from her life as a Wiccan, but she uses it in somewhat Wiccan-influenced ways (as opening a "circle" and "calling quarters" reference Wiccan practice). This syncretism is in part because of her modern sensibilities and practical limitations due to both modernity and urbanity, and possibly in part because of a lack of available ethnohistorical information about ancient Greek ritual practices; both factors limit how ethnohistorically faithful she can make her quasi-reconstructed practice. The fact that she not only kept the athame despite her Hellenic tradition, but that she has re-incorporated it into her new ethnoreligious practice offers an excellent example of how Neo-Pagans may hold on to items associated with earlier parts of their religious journeys as reminders and markers of their past identities and experiences, but also how they may layer new ethnoreligious meanings on to them in the case of ethnic Neo-Pagans. This issue of holding on to tokens of past identities begs further exploration. Westerners often do this—for example, keeping soccer trophies, photographs of ourselves from the past—but it is unclear how often people who change religious paths typically do this, nor is it in the scope of this work to address that intriguing question. In any case, Neo-Pagans, including my informants, often have large, ever-changing collections of Neo-Pagan items, which is a common topic of humor in the community.

Ethnic Neo-Pagan Altars:

Bricolage, Tactics, and Ethnic Markers

My analysis of these data reveals ways in which home altars and other religious décor are manifest “traces” in Benjamin’s (1969 [1939]) terms of modern, urban life in Texas. These individuals’ lives are inscribed—at least partially—by the religious items they create, buy, modify, and display in their homes. Religion is an important part of their daily lives, and those lives leave their marks or “traces” in their urban living spaces. Yet these objects are not only decorative markers that indicate isolation and that one’s home is merely a refuge from urban modernity, as proposed by Benjamin (1996 [1939]); they are important symbols that re-anchor these individuals in larger religious and (resacralized) secular communities.

Just as contemporary Mexicans use everyday home altars to physically symbolize the joys and challenges of their personal life journeys, as well as their relationships and negotiations with their deities (Beezley 1997:100-101), the focus on and rituals for ancestors—both general ethnic ancestors and deceased beloved kin—re-embeds these ethnic Neo-Pagans in a resacralized world with a meaningful, spiritually grounded past. Their relationships with ancestors and deities through rituals in their homes, including offerings and divinations, also help them face the challenges of everyday life in the contemporary world, be it coping with marginalized identities, stress from jobs, financial worries, or complicated family situations, among many other struggles faced by urban Americans in the early twenty-first century. The religious artwork and objects inscribed with stories of friends, family, and partners, deity representations, and other items placed on my informants’ altars and around their living spaces are daily reminders of where they come

from, who they have become, and who they hope to become. They are also reminders of crucial social relationships—past and present, human and divine—that mean a great deal to them and that have informed their sense of self.

Additionally, the contrast of the *bricolages* of ethnoreligious and mundane items that Da Troll, Jill, and Azure choose to display on their altars and around their living spaces also demonstrates the folkloric nature of such altar spaces in these ethnic Neo-Pagan homes. These spaces are neither exclusively sacred nor exclusively profane; rather, they are both. In part this simultaneity emerges from the shared and common Neo-Pagan religious view that the material world is imbued with the divine and thus inherently sacred. Such a blurring of spatial categories—both sacred and mundane—is typical of how folk religious spaces are constructed. The folkloric nature of their altars and other decorations also is evident in the use of such diverse material cultural elements in new contexts, such as the use of plastic tea lights, the needle-point Thor's Hammer, the natural objects like stones, shells, and feathers, and other items procured from natural, mundane, and Neo-Pagan contexts, as well as the contextual overlapping with mundane elements, such as DVDs) in the case of Da Troll's religious assemblage (however, it seemed that all of the items on Jill's and Azure's altars had some kind of religious symbolism). Even the shelves and bookcases, which were not originally intended to form the contexts of Druidic, Heathen, or Hellenic Witch altars, are examples of mass-produced home décor being put to new ethnoreligiously meaningful uses.

Pizza (2009:85-86) and Magliocco (2001:6, 13, 2004:223, 236-237) both argue that aesthetics, rather than notions of ancestry, are primary draws to Neo-Paganism, including ethnic Neo-Pagan traditions. Jill's, Da Troll's, and Azure's altars and other religious home décor, however, mark specific ethnic Neo-Pagan traditions (ADF Druidry, Heathenry, and

Hellenism) and identities. We see, for example, the references in Jill's bedroom to ADF theology and cosmological symbolism (e.g., the Well, Celtic deities, ogham, and Irish holy water), the references to Hellenic belief and practice on Azure's altar (e.g., Greek deity statues), and the many Norse references spread around Da Troll's living room (e.g., images of Thor and Loki and rune drawings). These conscious and intentional uses and reuses of particular elements of material culture differentiate these spaces and traditions from each other and from Wiccan ones, which tend to have different, more formulaic elements, such as typically including an athame (a Wiccan dagger), a pentagram, images of a God and a Goddess, and representations of earth, air, fire, and water (Wales 2004). Da Troll's Heathen altar space and Jill's ADF Druidic altar spaces differed from typical Wiccan altar constructions, which tend to have such formulaic elements. While Da Troll's altar included symbols he associated with the cardinal directions, he made no reference to the Wiccan elements. Similarly, Jill employed ADF Druidic symbols (the Well, Tree, and Fire) and myriad nature symbols, but had no specific system expressing the Wiccan notion of the four elements. Azure, who did re-incorporate Wiccan tools and symbols in her altar, ascribed new Hellenic meanings to them and used them in Greek-focused practices. My interviews with ethnic Neo-Pagans and participant observation among them reveal that these groups usually make explicit distinctions between their traditions—and religious spaces—and Wiccan ones. For example, at the 2012 Houston Pagan Pride Day event, where I helped with the Houston area ADF Druid grove's informational booth, pamphlets about ADF Druidry were given out that clarified what ADF Druidry is *and* how it differs from Wicca.

By displaying certain elements on her altar, Jill marks her private living space as an ADF Druidic space, as Da Troll marks his living room as a primarily Heathen space (albeit

one with Native American influences), and Azure's altar is distinctly Hellenic "Witchy." In these cases, private urban spaces are intentionally and tactically marked as European in important ways that highlight European ethnic ancestry (although Azure's was less about ancestry than cultural focus). Jill's and Da Troll's focus on ethnic heritage and ancient European ancestors has the advantage—as pointed out by Magliocco (2001:69)—of sidestepping issues of cultural appropriation because the ancient Europeans are not here to protest and modern Europeans have little interest in protesting such appropriations by European-descended white Americans. But even Azure had little risk of charges of appropriation, as she has some Greek heritage, and modern Orthodox Greeks are unlikely to challenge her were they to discuss her path. While only anecdotal, the Welsh, Breton, and Irish friends I spoke with about these issues when I studied Celtic studies in Brittany in the 1990s said they consider modern Druidic practices laughable or annoying at most, but not threatening. This mirrors the attitude folklorist Marion Bowman observed in her study of "Cardiac Celts" or individuals with an "elective affinity" independent of any demonstrated Celtic heritage (1996, 2000:70).

In contrast to sociologist Mary Waters' claim that white Americans would prefer to have the ethnic identities of exotic Others, which they find more interesting and imbued with value, my research suggests that some Neo-Pagans, especially those with an ethnic focus, find that their own ethnic ancestors and heritage can be used as profoundly meaningful sources in this process of revalorizing and reconfiguring Eurocentric ethnoreligious identities. This process includes the marking of private spaces through the construction of altars and home décor. I contend that Jill's focus on ADF Druidic religious imagery and Da Troll's focus on Heathen symbolism serve as tactics meant to revalorize

and refashion European ancestry and ethnic identity in white American social life, where it is usually de-emphasized and subsumed with the unmarked white racial category. Azure, whose Hellenic practice and identity was not seemingly rooted in her partial Greek heritage (among other European lines of ancestry), constructed an altar that marks a primarily European identity and practice. Even Azure's reuse of Voodoo and Hoodoo elements are given Hellenic symbolism and function.

The sample of data I present here suggests that a key reason Americans are drawn to and socially mark identification with ethnic Neo-Pagan traditions is a desire to refashion ethnoreligious identities that re-embed them in a re-enchanted physical and social world where European ethnic ancestry and whiteness matter in new ways. The pieces that Jill, Da Troll, and Azure—like other ethnic informants—chose to incorporate in their ethnoreligious practices in spaces of their private homes mark those spaces as lived-in spaces. But they also mark their living spaces as Eurocentric and ethnically marked sacred spaces within the modern urban American landscape where they are symbolically connected to communities of ethnic and remembered ancestors, Gods and Goddesses, nature spirits, and living loved ones.

CHAPTER IV
THE RECONSTRUCTION AND PERFORMANCE OF ETHNIC NEO-
PAGAN RITUAL

In this chapter I discuss how rituals constitute a crucial part of the process of (re)constructing, marking, performing, and re-embedding ethnic Neo-Pagan identities. The data for this case study come from fieldwork at small ADF ritual gatherings hosted by the Protogrove of the Live Oaks (henceforth called “Live Oaks” or simply “the grove”), the Houston-area group of ADF, between August 2011 and May 2013. These seasonal rituals were held at homes or public spaces, open to the public, and typically attended by a handful to a dozen or so participants. Each ritual was prepared, scripted, and led by official ADF members. These data are supplemented by textual materials that inform many ADF Druids’ conceptions of key ritual elements, including basic theology, chants, and fundamental elements required for all ADF rituals. Each group, however, adapts the rituals to their own aesthetic tastes, European ethnic focus, current needs, and local environment. Data also come from participation in the rituals at the three-day-long 2012 retreat in Kerrville, Texas (see Figure 24), an event organized by ADF Druids in Texas every year to celebrate Imbolc [pronounced im-bolk /’ɪm:boʊlk], and to reaffirm local and global ADF identity. The retreat was attended by several dozen ADF members from across the state, and the Austin, Dallas, and Houston groves each led a major ritual.



Figure 24: Texas ADF Imbolc Retreat 2012 flyer (Godwin 2012b); digital design used with permission from Amanda Godwin

In terms of structure, I take the reader with me as I experienced one particular ritual event—Imbolc 2013—to offer some of the textures and contours of ADF Druidic ritual in actual practice. I chose to focus on data from this ritual for two reasons. Firstly, as I always participated in the ADF rituals I attended, and because they were most often at night (thus not lending themselves to being video recorded), my field notes varied in quantity and depth. The 2013 Imbolc ritual was one of the rituals for which I had exceptionally detailed observational data. Secondly, this ritual event (including preparation and post-ritual interactions) in many ways epitomized the Live Oaks ADF rituals I attended. [The rituals at the 2012 Imbolc retreat had many more attendants than the typical Live Oaks rituals, and the three main rituals at the retreat were somewhat atypical in focus (one for opening the festival, another for unity in the ADF community, and the third for closing the festival); however, these retreat rituals followed the general ADF format and entailed much of the same kinds of behaviors. As an analogy, it is somewhat like the difference between a

Catholic mass on a typical Sunday and a Catholic Easter mass.] After walking the reader through the ritual with me, as I experienced it and with additional details from other rituals and commentary, I analyze these data in terms of Imbolc as a festival and in terms of ADF notions of European ethnic spiritual beings, ethnic marking, uses of the past for authentication, material and performative *bricolage* and adaptation, and ways such rituals help mitigate the challenges of modernity.

Imbolc Ritual 2013

On February 1, 2013, Live Oaks held its annual Imbolc ritual. Imbolc is a festival of spring and the Celtic Goddess Bríd [pronunciation: breezh /'briz/] or Brigid that is celebrated in much of the Neo-Pagan world, itself a reclaiming from the festival of the Catholic saint in Irish folklore. This ritual was hosted by one of the core Live Oaks members, Jill Clíodhna (whose altar is discussed in Chapter III). We met that evening at her house in Galveston, which she shared with her a woman named Sarah and Sarah's husband and children. Jill and Sarah had been in a polyamorous relationship and had broken up the day before, and so this created a strained situation for all that evening. Sarah and her husband owned a lot across the street, and we held the ritual in the backyard there. Aside from myself and Jill, there were only four other participants: Fionnghal (another core member of the grove), Kate and her girlfriend Laurie, who both practice the Faery Tradition and had never done Druidic rituals, and Mike, who just moved from New York with his boyfriend, and had only practiced Wicca and Traditional Witchcraft. "Newbies" were welcome because ADF requires all High Day rituals be open to the public, and so Live Oaks advertises their rituals online, such as on Facebook, and by word of mouth.



Figure 25: Food and drink for the feast, Lughnasadh 2012

It is common to have a potluck feast after an ADF ritual, such as the one for the Lughnasadh 2012 ritual held at Ravenheart's home (Figure 25). This community-affirming element of ritual is common in most traditions; however, one distinct aspect of most Neo-Pagan notions of post-ritual feasting is that, in addition to socializing, it is understood as a way to "ground" magickal energy built up during the ritual. Because Live Oaks prefers to hold each High Day ritual on the traditional day, however, this means the rituals often took place late in the evening once everyone arrived, a relatively recent Live Oaks custom that made it challenging for participants to read their scripts; this is also why many of the photos used here come from the daytime rituals at the 2012 Texas ADF retreat. Fionnghal had pushed for Live Oaks to do it this way, because she felt it was more historically authentic, and would thus please the Gods more. This was the case for this Imbolc ritual, which was on a Friday. Rather than have the feast afterwards, we decided to start before the ritual, so folks could eat as we waited for others to arrive. Our feast was made by Sarah and Jill, and

included roast pork and vegetables from their garden. I brought goat cheese in honor of the ewe milk symbolism of Imbolc (which derives from the Old Irish *i mbolg*, meaning “in the belly,” a reference to pregnant and birthing ewes), as well as Italian bread and gouda. We all grazed and chatted while other participants arrived. Sarah socialized with us in the house, but did not join us for the ritual later due to her and Jill’s strained circumstances.



Figure 26: Ravenheart’s backyard used as a nemeton, Midsummer 2012

As is often the case with Live Oaks public rituals, where newcomers are common, some time is given before the ritual starts for core members to explain ritual elements with which participants may not be familiar, including how to pronounce Irish terms and names of deities and other beings mentioned in the ritual. [Live Oaks chose Irish as their “hearth culture.” ADF requires groves to choose an “Indo-European” “hearth culture” as the focus in all major public rituals.] Ritual leaders explain where things already are or are to go in the nemeton (an archaeological term for Iron Age Celtic ritual spaces [e.g., Figure 26]) and what each “player” or ritual character does when and how; they also do a run-through of the

chants used in that particular ritual. For this ritual, Fionnghal plays the role of Senior Druid, Jill the Seer, Kate the Warrior, and I the Bard. These are the usual key roles in all ADF rituals following the Core Order of Ritual (the basic liturgical order all ADF High Day rituals must follow). Participants are given printed ritual scripts so they can follow along; oftentimes, however, we simply read from the downloaded scripts on our smartphones. In many ways, the Live Oaks rituals I participated in were much like play rehearsals, as few members knew their lines well enough to perform their parts without scripts. Highlighting this issue, Jill says, “I actually know the outline part of it by heart, to where if I didn’t have this I could still do the ritual in the correct order.” Fionnghal responds, saying that they used to have a lot of new people all the time, so they have not yet been able to “get off script.”

When Mike asks about the ADF ritual format, Jill quickly explains key elements of it. She says that she sees ADF rituals as hosting a party and basically inviting spiritual beings. She also brings up the ADF-specific folk notion of *ghosti*, which she explains is about giving gifts, such as oil and praise offerings, to the beings they invoke (deities, ancestors, Nature Spirits or Sidhe [pronounced shee /’ʃi:], and Outdwellers), and getting gifts in exchange. Jill says this practice is essentially giving gifts to the honored guests invited to the ritual.



Figure 27: Altar preparation, Imbolc 2013

We head over to the small backyard of the house where we will have the ritual, and Jill carries the altar supplies in a laundry basket. Chatting, a few of us start arranging the altar (Figure 27) on a small wooden table. It is truly a *bricolage* of materials Jill has chosen, as is usual for these rituals: some items are her regular ritual paraphernalia, while others are improvised. A light blue sarong is used for the altar cloth. There are two small ceramic miniature vases for holding olive oil for offerings. There is a small cast-iron cauldron with a charcoal burner with incense for the ritual Fire in which oil offerings will be poured, a sage smudge bundle for cleansing participants, a large pewter bowl with tap water for the Well, a handcrafted square post with a Celtic tree design that Jill bought from the ADF website for the ritual Tree, and two mass-produced skulls (Figure 28) to represent the Ancestors. Jill brought a cornhusk doll, a traditional representation of Bríd in Irish folklore, that Sarah made for her during a ritual at the previous year's Imbolc retreat. Most of the cookies and a wooden mug full of milk are for the bread and drink to be shared during the ritual. The Nature Spirit or Sidhe offering is a small silver platter of homemade Chexmix. We also needed a green sprig for the person who would sprinkle water on the participants at one

point in the ritual. We had forgotten about that element, but someone suggests I go break off a flower stalk from one of the broccoli plants in the garden in front of the main house, which I promptly do.



Figure 28: One of the resin skulls—here on her altar—Jill used for Imbolc 2013

There are also a small ceramic teapot for the drink offering for the Outdwellers (potentially meddlesome fairy folk in ADF theology) and a dinner plate with cookies. The drink offering is traditionally milk, but we use Tecate beer. The issue of the beer comes up as we prepare for ritual. Kate, as the Warrior who will make that offering, asks if she should open the can for the fairies, saying, “they’re not really good at pop tabs.” Fionnghal says she needs to open it for them. We joke about how having to open it themselves would distract the fairies, but Fionnghal rather seriously says the point is to give them beer. Someone says that brand of beer is nasty, and Fionnghal says, “Oh, don’t say that. The fairies might here you.” To the fairies, she says, “It’s good beer! Really!”



Figure 29: Ritual clothes, Unity Ritual, Imbolc Retreat 2012 (Godwin 2012d); photo used with permission from Amanda Godwin

At one point before we begin, one of the newbies asks about ritual garb, noting that we are all dressed in mundane attire (much like the anonymous woman making an offering in Figure 29). Fionnghal responds, saying that many Neo-Pagans do dress in special clothes for ritual, but then says, “And then there’s the thought that people back in the day wore what they had. And so, why don’t we wear... that’s Wicca [where special garb is commonplace]. So street clothes would be perfectly cool, because it was perfectly cool back then, because it’s what you had.” Jill often wears some special items, including a special hat (Figure 30) to remind her of her now deceased friend and founder of ADF, Isaac Bonewits, a special scarf, and a ritual leather belt, all of which she wears for this occasion.



Figure 30: Jill’s hat, Unity Ritual, Imbolc Retreat 2012

As we are about to begin, and some participants are finishing their last cigarettes, Jill says she is sorry if any emotions come out during the ritual, which we all know references the immediate breakup she is going through. Fionnghal says she is impressed with how she has held herself together, and I point out that we are in a safe space. We all then go to the edge of the backyard for the procession into the nemeton.

At this point, it is dark. And the ritual begins. As Bard, I ring a silver bell in three sets of three, as nine is a sacred number in Celtic and most Neo-Pagan lore. Fionnghal as Senior Druid announces, “We, the children of the Earth, are here today to celebrate the Feast of Imbolc, when the return of the warmth is confirmed. Let the rites begin!” We slowly enter the nemeton, chanting “Come we now as a people to gather at the sacred Well. Come we now as a people, together in the warmth and the light of the flame.” We chant this as we circle three times around the altar, going deosil (clockwise), which is considered propitious—a notion and term that appear to have come from Scottish Gaelic lore (deoseal) by way of Wicca. Some of us are unfamiliar with the chant, though, and have trouble reading the lyrics on our paper scripts or on our glowing smartphones, and so stumble with the words. A dog barks in the background.

Jill as Seer and I as Bard then purify the participants. Jill uses the broccoli sprig to asperge each person, saying, “With the holy waters of the Earth, I cleanse and wash your body.” I light the sage smudge bundle and cense others at the same time, saying, “With the holy fires of the sky, I cleanse your spirit.” When everyone else has been purified, Jill and I exchange tools and cleanse each other. At this point, the Outdwellers need to be distracted with offerings. Kate as Warrior pours some Tecate beer into a cup, puts a cookie on a plate, walks to a predetermined spot to the south of the envisioned nemeton boundary, and

holds the offerings out. “Outdwellers! Mischievous creatures who work against Man and God alike! Take these offerings and trouble us not! Leave us to our workings in peace this day!” she says loudly. She leaves the beer and cookie out for the Outdwellers at the edge of the yard and returns to the nemeton, where Jill and I cleanse her with water and incense again. This re-cleansing is considered imperative, since the person left the sacralized nemeton space and had an encounter with potentially harmful fairy folk.

Next is the honoring of the Earth Mother. Participants are guided to kneel and touch the ground. Jill as Seer thrice invokes the Earth Mother as the source and mother of all. [Unlike most other deities in ADF, which are almost always perceived, described, and invoked as individual beings drawn from specific “Indo-European” ethnic traditions following the notion of hard polytheism I described in Chapter II, the Earth Mother is described in the Core Order of Ritual and in all of the ADF rituals I attended as a generic deity, without any specific ethnic name or attributes other than general Earth Mother qualities.] Each invocation of the Earth Mother is followed by a traditional ADF call and response of “*bíodh sé amblaidh.*” This Irish phrase, which seems to be a distinctly ADF folkloric phrase, came up during the ritual preparation, when Jill explained that it is pronounced bee-uh shay alee [ˈbiə ʃeɪ əˈli] and that it means “so be it.” One of the newbies pointed out that the spelling looked complicated. Fionnghal explained that Irish is standard in pronunciation, but hard if one is not familiar with the rules. The Seer ends this part of the ritual, saying, “We honor and thank you, Earth Mother, with flesh and bone to give you strength! Earth Mother, accept our sacrifice!” (This sacrifice being the invocation on bent knees itself). Our scripted response is, “Accept our sacrifice! *Bíodh sé amblaidh.*”

Then comes the “grove attunement.” As Bard I lead the group—many stumbling along with the lyrics—in a triple round of a chant that goes, “We are a circle moving, one with another. We are moving together. We are one.” I then lead them on a guided meditation that is much like other Neo-Pagan guided meditations I have participated in, though some of the symbolism has specific ADF meanings. In this particular meditation—as they vary—we imagine we become like the World Tree (a cosmic symbol in ADF discussed in Chapter III), with our feet becoming roots that reach deep into the loving earth to the nourishing ancestral waters below, and with our hands reached upwards, becoming branches in the sky. We imagine our branches being interconnected, thus connecting us as a grove and with the cosmos. “We are together as one folk among the trees of the forest,” I say. I end this part with a call and response of “*bíodh sé amhlaidh.*” According to the script, we are then to be guided by the Senior Druid Fionnghal in a call and response series focusing on our worship, actions, and love being honest and true, but we accidentally skip this part.

Next Fionnghal as Senior Druid states the purpose of this ritual, saying, “As the ancients did before us, and our descendants will after, we come to the grove to honor the beloved ancestors, honor the noble Sidhe and to honor the blessed Shining Ones. This is the Feast of Imbolc. We come to honor the Lady Bríd and the beginning of spring.” This is immediately followed by the “recreation of the cosmos,” which in ADF lore consists of the Triple Hallows: the Well of the Sacred Dead and of the Underworld, the Fire that connects us to the Shining Ones or deities, and the Tree, which is the symbol of the World Tree or Axis Mundi. The chant begins with the refrain, “By fire and by water, between the earth and sky. We stand like the World Tree, rooted deep, crowned high.” This is followed

by verses—interspersed with the refrain—about the Well, the Fire, and the World Tree. After each cosmic symbol is invoked, an offering is made: for the Well, the Seer offers US coins as silver; for the Fire, I pour olive oil into the cauldron with the charcoal burner; for the World Tree, the Senior Druid pours some Tecate beer (though wine is usually offered) at the roots of a palm tree at the edge of our nemeton space. The palm tree had previously designated for that purpose. The fact that the only tree-like plant available in the backyard was a palm and how that was somewhat odd was discussed during preparation. Fionnghal determined it was close enough to a tree for our purposes.

The opening of the gates follows. Kate as Warrior takes a container of oil in both hands, and holds it up in front of altar while facing main fire, which in our case was the cauldron with a burner. She loudly intones, “Manannán, you the gate keeper, the one who stands between the worlds. Open the gates between the realms for us! Show us the way as we walk, following your holy traditions! Guide us as we follow the Sacred Road! Share your magick with us! Watch over us as we meet with the Kindred! Manannán, accept our sacrifice!” We respond, “Accept our sacrifice!” Kate pours oil into the cauldron. Normally, the Warrior does the next part, but since Kate is unfamiliar with it, Fionnghal goes in a deosil circle around the nemeton space (this is normally done holding a staff, but we had forgotten to bring one). As she circles the nemeton, we all chant, beginning in a hushed tone, “Open the Gates! Open the Gates! Open the Gates!” Our voices grow louder and faster as the energy builds. Normally, we would continue to chant as the Warrior says the next part, but Kate is unsure of what to say, and takes a moment to find her lines. Once she does, Fionnghal tells her, “Go for it!” Kate faces the altar, raises her arms, and fervently says, “Manannán Mac Lir! Join your magick with ours! Let the Fire

Gates open! Let the Well Gates open! Let the Tree serve as the Crossroads between all the worlds! Manannán of Openings, admit us into the presence of the Shining Ones! Let the Gates be open!” She then firmly strikes the ground with her foot, and we all shout, “Let the Gates be open!”

After we all take a moment to figure out what comes next, Jill as Seer, Fionnghal as Senior Druid, and I as Bard guide the group in inviting the three Kindreds, who are the Nature Spirits (or Sidhe), the Ancestors (capitalized when referred to as “the Ancestors” following ADF custom), and the divine Shining Ones. Throughout this part, we hear a dog barking in the background. Jill goes to the outer edge of the nemeton space and invokes the Mighty Dead, our ancestors. “We, the Folk of the Earth, call out to you, the Mighty Dead. Hear us our ancestors, our kindred. You who were here before,” she intones. We all say, “We welcome you.” “Ancestors of those present here today,” she continues. We all say, “We welcome you.” She says, “You who have taught us and still guide us now.” “We welcome you,” we respond. Jill concludes the invocation, saying, “Come to the Fire, our Ancestors. Meet us here at the borders of the worlds. Teach us and guide us as we walk the paths of old. Ancestors! Ancients! Accept our sacrifice!” She sets some cookies and milk down. We respond with, “Accept our sacrifice!”

There is a bit of confusion about what happens next, so Jill directs me to do my part. As Bard I say, “We the Folk of the Earth, call out to the Spirits of the Land! Hear us, companions and teachers! Kindred of Earth!” The group responds, “We welcome you!” I make the invocation, “Kindred of Water!” “We welcome you!” all respond. I say, “Kindred of Sky!” All say, “We welcome you!” I continue, “Come to the Fire, oh blessed Sidhe. Meet us at the borders of the worlds. Teach us and guide us as we walk the paths of

nature. Nature Spirits! Noble Sidhe! Accept our sacrifice!” According to the script, I was to put oatmeal into the Fire, but, instead, I scatter Chexmix around the circle, a change we worked out beforehand. “Accept our sacrifice!” say all.

Fionnghal takes a moment to find her Senior Druid lines. She says, “We the Folk of the Earth, call out to the great Shining Ones! Hear us, great eldest and brightest! All of the Gods and Goddesses!” We respond: “We welcome you!” She continues, “All of the Gods and Goddesses of this place and time!” “We welcome you!” we say. “All of the deities of the Folk gathered here today!” Fionnghal says. We reply, “We welcome you!” She continues the invocation: “Come to the fire, oh great shining Ones. Meet us at the borders of the worlds. Teach us and guide us as we walk the paths of the holy. Shining Ones, accept our sacrifice!” She pours oil into the fire cauldron, and we all say, “Accept our sacrifice!” These offerings are followed by a chant led by the Senior Druid. To help us all find it in the script, she says the name of the chant. And so we chant (but in this instance not sing), “Let our voices arise on the Fire. Let our voices resound in the Deep. May the spirits accept what we offer, as we honor the old ways we keep.” Fionnghal concludes the invocation of the Kindreds, saying, “We graciously welcome you, beloved Ancients, noble Sidhe and mighty Shining Ones! To all who have come to us at the fire, we invite you to join us in our honoring of the Lady Brigid, within our Sacred Grove!”

As Bard I say, “This is the Feast of Imbolc. The first day of spring. The day when the animals are finally able to go outside after staying sheltered all winter long. We honor the Lady Bríd with milk and sweet. Lady Bríd, the Goddess of the home fires. Lady of healing, Lady Goddess of productive (I accidentally say productivity) and literary skills, Lady of the beginnings of spring and of nourishing milk, we ask you to join us as a tale is told.”

Following the script, I describe the many qualities and aspects of the Goddess Bríd, along with some of her biography known from mediaeval Irish texts and the Irish folklore of Saint Brigid. I talk about how she is the Goddess of creative arts and craftwork, healers, and poets. I describe her role as a character in the Irish texts. I talk about her symbolic relationships with the fires of hearth and smithy, life and healing, divine inspiration, and her role as patroness of the *filidbact*, the bards of ancient ethnohistorical Irish religion. I tell stories of how the lore ties her to wells and springs, especially hot springs, which ADF lore describes as manifestations and symbols of her combined fiery and watery attributes. I then tell the listeners about the festival of Imbolc in Celtic tradition, and how it is about the time of milking ewes and caring for livestock as spring arrives. I end the storytelling by reminding the participants of Lady Bríd's role in our modern lives, saying, "She is the patron Goddess of many who honor her in ceremony, song and art. Bríd is a great eternal being who, like the flame of life itself, keeps alight and rekindles hope and inspiration. The sacred power of Bríd can act as a catalyst for us in many ways, awakening creativity, compassion, and skill." The Senior Druid asks for Bríd's blessings, for the Goddess to join us, and for Bríd to accept our sacrifice (the invocation itself being the sacrifice). We respond, "Accept our sacrifice!"

The next part of the ritual is for praise offerings. This is arguably the heart of the ritual for most participants. It certainly is on this occasion. It begins with Fionnghal as Senior Druid inviting members "to give praise and offerings to any of our Kindred, including those who have gone before, those who dwell in the wood, water and air, and the great ones, especially the Lady Bríd." These offerings can come in many forms by any member. Sometimes they are spoken, other times sung or danced. Some involve pouring

oil or other things into the fire (such as herbs), and some are silent. This particular Imbolc happened as many of us were experiencing strong emotions over things happening in our everyday lives. Each of the following prayers was followed with an olive oil offering into the fire cauldron and by a call and response of “*bíodh sé amblaidh.*”

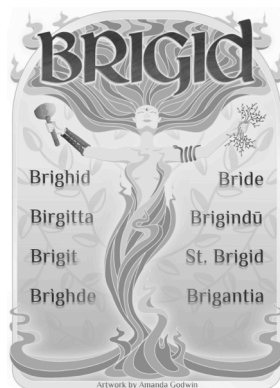


Figure 31: The Goddess Brigid and her other Celtic names (Godwin 2012a); digital design used with permission from Amanda Godwin

First Jill approaches the altar. She praises Bríd and asks for the Goddess to give her healing energy as she goes through the hard time she is experiencing. She then says, “To all my Kindreds, I thank you for the strength I do have because of you.” Next I speak. My husband and I were expectantly awaiting the birth of our daughter (who was born two days later). I pray to Bríd using her Irish, but also her Briton and Gallic names (Brigantia and Brigindona respectively) (see Figure 31), as a Goddess of childbirth, home, and hearth according to folklore, for our daughter to have a safe birth and to be healthy. I then call upon my ancestors and those of my husband, asking for guidance and protection, and to

help us welcome our daughter into our family. Kate talks about the doubts she has had the past year that Lady Brigid had left her behind. She says, “I would like to rededicate myself to you, to all of my ancestors, and your kindred spirits. And thank you for the coming year, and all of the new beginnings we will soon feel under our feet and over our heads. I praise you and honor you, and thank you for joining us this evening.” Fionnghal talks about how the Challenger space shuttle “came down in pieces all over us” almost 30 years previously. She asks for Bríd to help those suffering still from that event, and thanks the Goddess.

Fionnghal as Senior Druid says, “Now we have given sacrifices so that the Powers and the Kindred will know our intentions. Let our voices be raised with the Fire. Let our voices echo in the Well. Let our voices cross through the borders of our worlds. Let us send our energies through to the other worlds! Oh, Lady Bríd, we give you love and respect as we pray to you! Accept our offerings!” We all say, “Accept our offerings!” As Bard I put the broccoli sprig and some oil into the cauldron. I unintentionally spill some extra, and we joke about how it is an accidental sacrifice. Jill as Seer puts more coins into the Well as another offering, and concludes the praise part of the ritual, saying, “Blessed Lady Bríd, Gods and Goddesses, Ancestors, Nature Spirits and spirits of this place and time, if we have done any offense, if we have been incomplete, if we have performed improperly, accept this final offering in compensation.” She pours more oil into the cauldron.



Figure 32: Crane divination, Midsummer 2012

Next is the omen-reading. Jill as Seer asks the group to be open to the powers of the Kindreds, and announces that she will do a reading to see what they have to say. She does a reading with her crane divination set, which she also used for the Midsummer 2012 ritual (Figure 32) and which I described as part of her home altar assemblage in Chapter III. This is a prime example of novel reconstruction specifically within ADF tradition, as it originates with the ADF Order of the Crane, a specialized tradition that draws inspiration from possible symbolic meanings of cranes in the Celtic world, as these and other water birds were considered liminal creatures in the Iron Age Celtic symbolic repertoire (Lowry 2005:146-150). Omens can be done with whatever tool the Seer prefers. Fionnghal, for example, uses tarot, such as at the 2012 Lughnasadh ritual (the feast of the God Lugh and of harvest in August), and Sean used tarot for the omen during the Imbolc 2012 Opening Ritual (Figure 33). Another ADF member, HearthWitch, who has Heathen leanings, prefers her rose quartz runes, which she used for her omen as Seer during the 2013 Beltane ritual celebrating fertility in May. Jill does a reading for each Kindred. She sees grounding, safety, vulnerability, endings, home, and stillness from the Sidhe; fear, worry, and uncertainty from the Ancestors; and speeding up, preparing, ascending, and losing balance from the Shining Ones. She interprets those omens to be advice to the grove to not lose

our grounding or balance, even when things come to an end, and that even with our grove's uncertainty, things would speed up.



**Figure 33: Tarot omen, Opening Ritual, Imbolc 2012 (Godwin 2012e);
photo used with permission from Amanda Godwin**

The “blessing” and sharing of the ritual bread and drink follows. The Senior Druid says, “Ancients, Sidhe, and Shining Ones, we have honored you and given sacrifices to you. We ask in return for our praise and gifts, your blessings upon us individually and as a Sacred Grove. We now share in our gifts to you.” As Bard I offer the ritual drink of milk to each participant, saying, “Drink so that you may never thirst.” Jill as Seer offers cookies, saying, “Eat so that you may never hunger.” This part, which reaffirms the bonds among the participants themselves and among each participant and their Kindreds, is both solemn and friendly, and takes several minutes as each person is offered a sip and a piece of bread.

The Core Order of Ritual next has a part on magickal “workings” overseen by the Seer, although my fieldwork data show that Live Oaks rarely does anything for this part. I never saw magickal workings done. If participants do something, it is usually prayer and

requests for help from deities and ancestors, unlike Wiccan rituals, which tend to be especially focused on magickal work. My data from interviews and participant observation—along with my own experiences in the Neo-Pagan community and reading of countless books on Wiccan and other Neo-Pagan traditions over the past two decades—suggest that Wicca and other Eclectic Neo-Pagan rituals tend to be much more about magickal workings than about devotion to deities, ancestors, or other spiritual beings. Many of my ethnic informants often criticized Wicca for its strong emphasis on magickal workings and its de-emphasis on what they consider sincere veneration. They often described this contrast in terms of self-centered practice focused on serving one’s desires versus tribe-centered practice focused on kin, community, and reverence to deities, ancestors, and spirits (though such comments were almost always preceded or followed by caveats that they did not mean to demean Wicca or its adherents). Also, much like the ADF Druids, who rarely do magickal workings (although they do have ways to do so, and may in their private religious lives), all of the Heathens I spoke with said they rarely if ever do magick in group rituals, and only a few said they regularly do rune magick.

During this evening’s Imbolc ritual there are some very emotional and insightful workings. First, Jill says, “Grannus, God of Transformation, Lady Bríd and your healing, I pray to you that as I take on the next chapter of my life and the transformation that comes there, the healing and peace—not necessarily be quickly, but be as it needs to be and in your time and not mine. But I pray also that you go with my family as they move [out of state] and their transformations, and bless them also.” She continues, “Grannus, Lady Bríd, my Ancestors, my Nature Spirits, and all my Shining Ones, I ask this of you: let love and peace and blessings be upon all that are in my heart, even though our paths now separate.” We

do a call and response of “*bíodh sé amhlaidh.*” She is crying, and so several of us give her supportive hugs.

Next, Kate asks if Fionnghal would ask her own ancestors to help her with some upcoming challenges. Fionnghal laughs and says, “I’ve got some pretty surly ancestors, just so you know.” I laugh, because I know she is referring to her Scottish ancestors, who do have a surly history. Kate says that’s why she asked her. Fionnghal points out that her Scottish ancestors “are not the nicest people sometimes, but they’re strong.” Kate says, “They understand.” So Fionnghal prays to her ancestors aloud to give Kate guidance and “that mean streak that ya’ll all got. That awesome instinct and strength. Bless her. Guide her. Keep her protected. Show her how to use that strength she has insider her.” We do a call and response of “*bíodh sé amhlaidh.*” Fionnghal then prays for all of her loved ones who are struggling, as well as for financial help and guidance in her own life, followed by a call and response of “*bíodh sé amhlaidh.*”

Jill says she has something else to say. “Three years ago, I left my ex-husband,” she says and laughs. “But this ring I put on because my marriage to my Kindreds and my spirituality is more than any person. And this ring stays on my ring finger and not any person’s. And I cleanse it tonight. And I ask that those vows that I made three years ago still remain true.” We do a call and response of “*bíodh sé amhlaidh.*”

The ring Jill rededicated to her Kindreds is a profoundly important ethnoreligious symbol for her. During our interview, she explained how she came to use this ethnically marked piece of jewelry to represent both her relationships with her Kindreds and her release from her previous marriage to her ex-husband, who had not been supportive of her religious practice:

When I divorced my ex-husband, I said I would never legally marry again, and I haven't. And that no other ring would be on the ring finger, because it's that the one that's got the direct line to the heart. And so I got a ring with oghams on it.... And I don't remember now exactly what it says, 'cause it's been two in a half years, no three years since I got it.... And when I divorced him, I did a ritual on the beach, and said that [the] reality is, is above any other person in my life is my relationship to the Kindreds and my marriage to them. So reality for me is I'm married to my spiritual basis before anything. That nobody else gets in the way of it again. Nobody else tells me what I can or cannot worship. Nobody else tries to control that. That is mine. That is what I will do. And I made some offerings of oil and alcohol and whatnot else to them and it was a very powerful time for me. I cast it out to the waters as my final gift, my old wedding band, and I switched fingers and said from now on, this will be my only ring, and it will remind me always that first and foremost, my relationship to my deities and my ancestors and my nature spirits comes first, and then all other love.

The rededication of this ring takes on an exceptionally intense meaning in light of its origins narrative and the ending of her relationship with Sarah that was taking place at the time of our Imbolc ritual. This one symbol potently marks her refashioned identity after her divorce (which is also discussed in Chapter III), her reaffirmed ADF identity, and her relationships with her Kindreds. And despite having forgotten the ethnohistorical or folk historical meanings she originally assigned to the individual Irish ogham symbols, this ring also marks her Celtic ethnic identity.

For brevity, I will now only summarize the rest of the ritual, which is essentially a reversal of the first half. The Senior Druid performs the "thanking the beings" part, thanking Bríd and each Kindred for joining us, followed by a response of thanks. Then Jill as Seer talks about how we all have gone through struggles and losses, but that we also will continue to grow and succeed in the future. "With the help of each other as well as the Kindred," she says, "we will strive to continue on a positive and holy path." We do a call and response of "*bíodh sé amhlaidh.*" Next, I as Bard direct the participants to do a shorter

meditation to release any extra energies they had tapped into during the first meditation, but to keep what energy they need.

Next is the closing of the gates. Kate as Warrior starts walking widdershins (counterclockwise), which is considered the opposite of deosil—a notion and term that seem to have come from Lowland Scots lore by way of Wicca—around the nemeton space. Starting in a loud, fast voice, we all chant, “Close the gates! Close the gates!” We keep chanting, going slower and slower and quieter and quieter, until it’s a loud whisper. We all suddenly stop when Fionnghal stomps the ground firmly (normally this is done by the Warrior with a staff). Kate then thanks Manannán for lending us his magick, and we all give thanks. With the gates closed, Fionnghal as Senior Druid now closes the rite, saying, “Now let the Fire be flame. Let the Well be water. Let the Tree be only wood. Let all be as it was before. *Bíodh sé amblaidh.*” We all respond, “*Bíodh sé amblaidh.*” Fionnghal concludes the ritual, saying, “Go now, Children of the Earth. Peace and blessings be upon you. The rite is ended.” She then reminds us of the name of the recessional chant, “Walk with Wisdom,” the lines of which are: “Walk with wisdom, from this hallowed place. Walk not in sorrow, our roots shall e’er embrace. May strength be your brother, and honor be your friend. And luck be your lover, until we meet again.” We chant as we thrice circle the nemeton space going widdershins, and then leave the space, going to the edge of the backyard. Fionnghal thanks everyone for coming and we all hug.

After the ritual, we stand around talking for a bit. We joke about a cat that some saw watching the ritual. Then the conversation turns to the fairy folk. Kate says the fairies were messing with her and Jill because something kept hitting them during the ritual. We then talk about how the fairies can be troublesome (as they are often blamed in the Neo-

Pagan world when small items go missing), and Kate says she has a secret for dealing with pesky fae: string together a bunch of pop tops and hang it outside, because the fairies “love to play with shiny shit,” and will thus be distracted from causing mischief.

Fionnghal then asks Mike what he thought about his first Druidic ritual. He merely says that he found it different from the last group he worked with. The conversation then turns to how we will probably not do rituals at his location again, since Jill will be moving, but Kate and Laurie offer their place in northwest Houston for future rituals. This discussion leads Jill to talk with Kate and Laurie, who are Jill’s friends, about helping her pack and the issues resulting from the breakup.

We eventually pack up and start heading back to the house to hang out for a bit before we all head home. As we walk, I ask Kate how she got into Faery Tradition. The Faery tradition, also called Feri, is a distinct, primarily oral tradition of American Traditional Witchcraft (see Davy 2007:152-153; Hopman and Bond 2002 [1996]:62-88, as well as faerytradition.org and feritradition.org). We talk about that for a bit, and then she says she has had a hard time “melding life and spirituality,” and that she liked our ADF ritual. She and Laurie talk about how it felt “like home.” Highlighting how some Neo-Pagans are not comfortable doing rituals in public spaces, Laurie says she does not do rituals in public because she is afraid of ridicule. They then ask me about my soon-to-be daughter, and we talk a bit about the adoption process. They congratulate me and recognize the stressful situation I am in. We all talk for a while more at the main house, and then disperse.

Imbolc as Ritual, Imbolc as Festival

Folklorists and anthropologists have long argued that rituals and festivals *do* or *achieve* something for the participants (Bakhtin 1968, 1998; Bauman 1986; Falassi 1987, 1997; Santino 2009; Smith 1974; Stoeltje 1992; Stoeltje and Bauman 1989; Turner 1996). The small 2013 Imbolc festival and other Neo-Pagan ritual festivals I attended achieved several individual and group benefits for the attendees. My data suggest these festivals heighten group expression and identity, intensify social solidarity, honor and reaffirm relationships with sacred beings (the Kindreds or ancestors, nature spirits, and deities in ADF rituals), and provide contexts for multiple interpretations and the renegotiation of social identities and social change.

Imbolc and all other ADF High Days celebrate Celtic (or other “Indo-European”) seasonal agricultural and solar calendrical festivals reconstructed from myths, traditional customs, and other folklore. Beverly Stoeltje (1992:267-8) argues traditional festivals typically are calendrical, following the seasonal, solar or lunar rhythms of nature, thereby situating them as events regulated by nature, not human agents. This is the case with the 2013 Imbolc festival, which in ADF tradition celebrates the Goddess Bríd, who is associated in Irish folklore with the birth of baby sheep, the milking of ewes, and the caring for livestock as spring arrives. Stoeltje proposes that such a festival “yokes the social group to this cyclical force, establishing contact with the cosmos and the eternal processes of time” (1992:268). Festivals emphasize tradition, and thus continuity rooting the present in the past, yet they take place in the present and expresses immediate concerns about the present and the future (Bauman 1986:40; Stoeltje and Bauman 1989; see also Picard and Robinson 2006:6-9, 14-15). As folklorist Richard Bauman describes it, “the community-

based festival represents a mechanism by which the members of a community deal expressively with the forces of modernity” (1983:157). In my analysis below, I demonstrate how ADF festivals like the 2013 Imbolc event simultaneously offer participants important anchors in their ethnic pasts, while helping them mitigate the challenges of their modern lives.

Folklorists Edith Turner (1996:484) and Alessandro Falassi (1987:3, 1997:296-8) describe the two most common functional perspectives on festivals as those of carnival and intensification. According to Falassi, most research centers on the carnival aspects of festivals; that is, the common features of symbolic transgression and inversion of mundane social behavior. Turner describes the carnival nature of festivals as “statements of antistructure” that subvert the daily social order and de-emphasize mundane social structures and social negotiations. Others focus on festivals as contexts for rites of intensification, in which a group confirms its worldview. Along these lines, folklorist Robert Smith (1975:5) describes participation in festivals is a “right” of members of the community (however defined by the group) and that participation in festivals may function as markers of membership in the community. Falassi describes this intensification as one achieved through the performance of behaviors that parallel mundane behaviors, but in more stylized forms that imbue them with heightened symbolic meaning. Turner similarly describes this approach as one focused on how festivals intensify social values and solidarity (see also Picard and Robinson 2006:10-11). My data suggest that participants attend these festivals, including the 2013 ADF Imbolc festival, at least in part because of this intensification of Neo-Pagan or tradition-specific values and social solidarity.

Falassi (1987:3, 1997:296-8) contends both of these approaches are useful, but only partially. Instead, he claims we are better served by combining these perspectives, as festivals renew culture through symbolic inversions, transgressions, and reversals of daily behavior *and* intensification of mundane behavior. In addition, festivals include the symbolic abstinence of some daily behaviors. It is the combination of all of these elements that makes festivals potent, symbolic events. On the other hand, Smith proposes that some subcultures in the US hold festivals where “one finds a certain number of people who find the festival premises of reality more valid than those of everyday life and try to make them their ordinary reality (1975:10). He hypothesizes that such festivals would be characterized as consisting largely of close friends, calm in atmosphere, and contexts for dressing “down” rather than “up.” The small ADF festivals I attended fall well within this category.

It is questionable whether the category of carnival as discussed by folklorists Robert Smith (1974), Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1968, 1998), and others applies to the 2013 ADF Imbolc ritual event and other Neo-Pagan festivals in which I participated. My data suggest that carnival is not usually an important part of Neo-Pagan practice, despite first appearances. Many of the behaviors seen at festivals, such as nudity (at CMA rituals, but not at ADF ones), *are* inversions of dominant social norms; however, they are seen by participants as ideally *normal* behaviors that are simply forbidden or discouraged by the dominant Christian society within which they live their mundane lives. This relates to Smith’s argument that some minority groups use festivals as contexts in which to behave in ways that are seen as more real than those in their everyday lives. My festival data indicate that many if not all Neo-Pagans see festivals as sacred contexts in which they can be their most ‘real’ selves and can behave in ways that they wish were more possible in their mundane lives. In this sense,

the festivals I attended—including those of the ADF tradition—were primarily rituals of intensification of shared, marked group identity (be it broadly Neo-Pagan or tradition-specific) and not carnival.

According to Smith, “the festival is (and can be used as) a prime device for promoting social cohesion, for integrating individuals into a society or group and maintaining them as members through shared, recurrent, positively reinforcing performance,” thus maintaining tradition and predictability in their structure (1975:9). On the other hand, he argues festivals also promote change because each *individual* enactment is a novel and creative event that is largely characterized by unpredictability (1975:9). As Smith argues, “No one wants a *repetition* of last year’s festival” (1975:9; original emphasis). In short, Smith argues “the festival is a conservative institution which functions to provide occasion for change, especially among individuals” and it “is an organization of diversity in which different individuals and groups interact” (1975:139).

Stoeltje similarly argues, while “the messages of festival concern the shared experience of the group,” festival also communicates “multiple interpretations of that experience” (1992:263) and “attracts separate social interests, recognizing difference within the confines of the social group” (1992:266). Smith claims it is because of this tension between certainty and uncertainty (and one could argue, between groups and individuals) that participants are not able to judge whether or not a festival was successful until it has been completed. He thus argues “the central function of the festival is to give occasion for people to rejoice together—to interact in an ambience of acceptance and conviviality” (1975:9) and that this is because the festival is “an occasion for the evocation of complexes of emotion sets among members of a group [that] promote[s] social cohesion, but... also

promotes change” (1975:10). Jack Santino (2009:12-13) also argues festival events—even carnivalesque ones—can be socially normative in function, but that they can also reflect social change and be contexts for personal and social transformation. The 2013 ADF Imbolc ritual and other Neo-Pagan festival rituals, such as those put on by CMA and CWC, offer participants important opportunities to celebrate together in safe, accepting contexts, while also offering space to renegotiate social identities and change.

During rites of conspicuous display within ritual (Falassi 1997; Turner 1996), participants are given an opportunity to have direct contact with sacred objects that may be restricted at other times of the year, are usually festively decorated, and embody the most important symbolic aspects of the community. While access to Neo-Pagan sacred objects are rarely if every restricted, ADF and other Neo-Pagan rituals often provide rare contexts in which participants can proudly display private ritual items of the sort that they usually keep private in their homes and on altars (see Chapter III). For example, Jill’s use of the Bríd doll in the 2013 Imbolc ritual that usually resides on her altar.

Ritual dramas and rites of competition are also typically part of festival (Falassi 1987, 1997; Stoeltje’s 1992). While ADF rituals rarely have contests (though I have participated in such mock contests in rituals of other Neo-Pagan traditions), drama is central in all ADF rituals. These rites are mythical in theme, and often dramatize traditional creation myths, legends of the foundation or migration of the community, or important historical or mythical events that are central in the community’s collective memory. These rites remind the participants of their shared history and identity, and thus I believe they are rites of intensification that reaffirm group identity and solidarity. We see the drama element in ADF rituals in the recounting of stories from mythology and other folklore associated

with the deity or deities being celebrated, who in the case of the 2013 Imbolc ritual was the Goddess Bríd.

Feasting (Stoeltje 1992) or rites of conspicuous consumption (Falassi 1987, 1997) are also usually a key part of festival. The specific kinds of foods and drinks are important in festival contexts, as they embody and express group identity and communicate messages about the group's tradition; for example, the goat cheese I brought to the 2013 Imbolc ritual in honor of the ewe milk symbolism of that particular festival. The social nature of commensality is emphasized and affirms group identity. According to Falassi (1987, 1997), rites of conspicuous consumption are usually feasts characterized by traditional or blessed foods and drinks (see also Socolov 1997; Turner 1996:487). As symbols of the fertility, abundance, and prosperity of the community, they typically involve abundant or excessive displays. Smith argues that feasting symbolizes abundance and provides an intense social context, and that festive drinking acts to both legitimize and lubricate social relations (1975:111-14). Furthermore, participants often consider feasting to be a form of communication with their deities and ancestors. In ADF ritual, we can identify two types of feasting: the eating of bread and drink during ritual, and the sharing of food and drink before or after ritual. In both cases, these feasts reaffirm and resacralize social ties and a sense of *communitas*, which Falassi defines as “a community of equals under certain shared laws of reciprocity” (1997:300; see also Turner 1996:487). They also offer a sense of eating and drinking with the Kindreds, who are perceived as ritual attendees.

Festivals usually end with concluding events (Stoeltje 1992) or rites of devalorization (Falassi's 1987, 1997), which symbolically mark the end of the festival and the transition back to the space and time of mundane life. Stoeltje argues festivals tend to follow a lineal

progression from formality begun during the opening ceremony to increasing informality, spontaneity, and intensity. The concluding event, then, is characterized by less structure, more expressions of personal creativity, and increasing noise and participation involving drumming, singing, drinking, loud displays, and informal socializing. CMA, CWC, and PPD festivals tended to end this way, allowing participants to let loose and socialize, as well as to experience intense spirituality, such as by entering trance through drumming and dance around the bonfire at CMA. ADF High Day festivals, however, tend to end more quietly with informal socializing and food and drink.

Falassi (1987, 1997) also describes rites of exchange, which comprise the aspect of the fair (see also Picard and Robinson 2006:13; Turner 1982), and they are symbolic expressions of *communitas*). Economic exchanges at festive fairs are accompanied by symbolic forms of redistribution, including the exchange of information, ritual gifts, visits, acts of pacification, remissions of debt, and thanksgiving to the community or the gods. Such exchanges as so broadly defined took place in all of the festival and ritual contexts I experienced during my fieldwork, sometimes in formal ways (such as the purchasing of an item from a vendor) and informal ways (such as the exchanging of gifts and information, along with visiting). Furthermore, as the ADF 2013 Imbolc demonstrates, the many offerings of oil and other gifts, such as songs, to the Kindreds as *ghosti* exchanges are of great import to participants, who see these reciprocal exchanges as reaffirmations of their Kindred relationships.

Ancestors

As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, ethnic Neo-Pagans typically make intentional, explicit distinctions between their practices and identities and those of Wiccans. We see further distinctions in this regard when we look at notions of ancestors. While most Neo-Pagan traditions incorporate ancestors into ritual practice, my research reveals that ethnic Neo-Pagans, including ADF Druids, have a much more intense focus on not only ancestors but blood ancestors (versus fictive kin) in both ritual and their general religious lives. This relational difference is evident in the clear importance of ancestors in this Imbolc ritual, even though the festival is centered on themes of spring and the Goddess Bríd. They are invoked repeatedly during the ritual, and offerings are often made into the Well, which is believed to connect the living with their ancestors. There is always a divinatory reading done in ADF High Day rituals, which can take any form, but in this particular ritual, Jill chose to ask for advice from *all* of the Kindreds, including the Ancestors. While ancestor worship is common in Wicca and many related forms of Neo-Paganism, it is usually only the case during the season of Samhain, the commonly celebrated ancient Celtic and modern Neo-Pagan New Year, when the veil between the living and dead is seen as thinnest, as well as the ethnohistorical origin of Halloween, All Souls' Day, and *Día de los Muertos*. One of my Eclectic informants, Snowflake, explained that she usually only invokes her ancestors when she needs "guidance when we're really, really lost." Snowflake further explained that she sees her ancestors as her own past lives, and so "if it's something that can give you a positive experience to use for today, then we're gonna try to interpret it and use it to our advantage basically." While Snowflake's view of the role of ancestors as a practical resource certainly does not necessarily reflect all Eclectic or Wiccan views, this notion of the

ancestors as something to “use” is in sharp contrast to ethnic notions of ancestors. In ADF and Heathen traditions in particular, ancestors are always *explicitly* and *often* invoked and reverently honored in all rituals, such as in the 2013 ADF Imbolc ritual.

We also see other un-scripted references to ancestors in this evening’s event. Jill brought her two resin skulls to represent the ancestors, adding to the ritual *bricolage*. They are also alluded to in reference to doing ritual as “the ancients did before us and our descendants will after” and when they were asked to “teach us and guide us as we walk the paths of old.” They are honored by calling them “beloved ancestors” and “the Mighty Dead.” They are specifically called “our” ancestors at several points in the ritual, which is unlike the typically brief and generic reference to “the ancestors” in most non-Samhain Eclectic or Wiccan rituals. Three poignant examples of this idea of ancestors emerged from Jill, myself as a practitioner, and Kate during the praise part of this Imbolc ritual. Jill included her ancestors in her prayer for help during her current crisis. I invoked my and my husband’s blood ancestors for help with the approaching birth of our daughter. And Kate rededicated herself to her ancestors and had Fionnghal pray to her own Scottish ancestors to help her. While it is not common to invoke another’s ancestors to bless a non-descendant, this example highlights the interconnected notions that each person can claim, has direct access to, and can make requests of their own blood ancestors. In this sense, relationships with ancestors are understood to be much like those with living kin, except that one’s ancestors are dead, always reachable, and able to lend supranormal help that the living cannot. This idea of ethnic ancestors as present, active, and agentful participants in actors’ lives is a novel adaptation in contemporary white American society, where ancestors are typically not understood in such a way.

As demonstrated by these and similar data from all of the other ADF rituals I attended, the ancestors are most often understood specifically to be blood ancestors, although several individuals also explained in our interviews that they may include fictive kin (such as close friends or grove mates) or cultural ancestors (such as historic state or national figures) when thinking of or invoking “the Ancestors” in their daily lives. In many cases, these ancestors are seen as embodying and passing on ethnic identities and qualities, as exemplified in the reference to Fionnghal’s “surly” and “strong” Scottish ancestors. In my earlier interview with Fionnghal, she often talked about how she sees herself as the proud inheritor of those Scottish qualities of character, and she often made offerings specifically to her Scottish ancestors in other rituals I attended. Other members also often brought up their ethnic ancestors, either during ritual or in casual conversations afterwards. The scripted reference to doing ritual as “the ancients” did in the past and “our descendants” will do in the future adds to the role of ancestors as a means of re-embedding adherents, as it constructs a sense of continuity, and frames members as future ancestors themselves. This idea, which seems to be much more common in ethnic traditions, highlights how European ethnicities, and thus whiteness, are revalorized and resacralized in adherents’ lives. It also gives believers a sense of duty to live with honor and virtue, since they will one day be ancestors called upon by descendants. I observed this notion of future ancestorhood several times doing fieldwork among ADF Druids, but it is especially central in Heathenry, where it permeates their Nine Noble Virtues.

Ethnic Marking and the Use of the Past for Authentication

There are many ways that ethnicity is marked in this Imbolc ritual, as well as in all of the other ADF rituals I attended. One of the most obvious ways Celtic ethnicity was marked was by the use of the novel reconstruction of the call and response phrase, “*bíodh sé amblaidh.*” To my knowledge, this phrase is not a traditional Irish one, but a Gaelicized version of the Wiccan “so mote it be,” itself a modern, adapted appropriation of the Biblical “amen,” which is often translated as “so be it.” ADF leaders even offer translations of common ADF terms and expressions into the six living Celtic languages for groves and individuals who want to further mark their rituals as Celtic (Kondratiev 2015). Similarly, in my experience with ADF Druids, the Outdwellers are always described as generically European and are based on an amalgam of European fairy lore, thus marking European practice and identities, even if these generic fairies do not mark ethnicity-specific ones. When I began this project, I predicted that ethnic Neo-Pagans would generally draw from traditional fairy lore associated with their ethnic focus. This was rarely the case, however. The ADF Druids, Hellenics, and most ethnic Witches shared this generic European notion of the fairy folk, which was surprising, especially considering the great amount of lore we have about Celtic and ancient Greek fairies. This observation is in contrast to the reconstructed fairy lore of many Heathens I interviewed, who tend to have a much more ethnic-specific (Norse or Germanic) focus in fairy lore, as they usually invoke and leave offerings specifically to wights (see discussion in Chapter II). Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter III, the Slavic Witch Opal offered a rare example of an ethnic Witch who specifically draws from her ancestral ethnic heritage in her understanding of fairies with her sacrifices to the Slavic *domovye*.

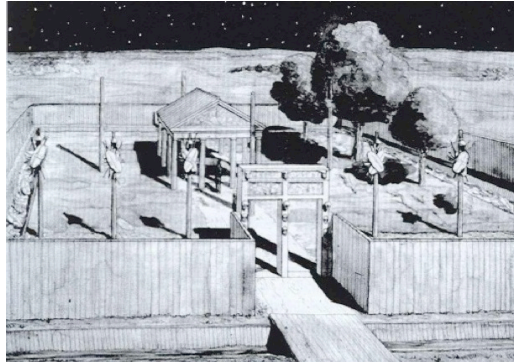
Several of the ritual items and statements by participants similarly draw either specifically from Celtic cultures or European culture in general. Jill invokes Grannus, a Celtic deity syncretized with Apollo primarily in the continental Celtic world, as a God of transformation. I invoke Bríd by her Briton and Gallic names. In a similar way, during the Live Oaks 2012 Lughnasadh ritual, some referenced the patron deity by his Irish name, Lugh, while I called him Lugos (a Gallic equivalent) and Jill called him Llew (his Welsh equivalent), each reflecting our individual ethnic focus in our own practices. The cornhusk doll used to represent Lady Bríd, which Jill keeps on her altar, comes directly from Irish lore, as do the name Brigid, the use of the Irish pronunciation of Bríd; and the festival of Imbolc itself. Furthermore, the organization's Irish name *Ár nDraíocht Féin* is a Celtic marker. Isaac Bonewits (1983) intentionally chose this name when he founded ADF in 1983. Much of the story of Bríd I recounted during the ritual in my role as Bard comes straight from Irish mediaeval texts and oral lore. The notion that Manannán mac Lir (Manannán son of Ler) (Figure 34), for whom the Isle of Man (Manainn in Manx) is named, is a divine trickster magician comes from Irish, Manx, Scottish, and Welsh lore. The ADF tradition of having roles for Senior Druid, Bard, and Seer (or Ovate) comes from classical sources, especially the Greek geographer Strabo's *Geographica*; however, to my knowledge, there is no ethnohistorical record of a Warrior role in Iron Age Celtic ritual (although there were many warrior-centered rituals [Brunaux 2000; Lowry 2005]).



Figure 34: Manannán (Colbert 1997); artwork used with permission from Joanna Powell Colbert, www.gaiansoul.com

There are some elements pertaining to Bríd and Manannán, however, that are specific reconstructions based on ADF lore and thought. ADF lore, for example, has reconstructed an association between Bríd's fiery and watery qualities for hot springs. This process seems to derive from the conflation of Brigid (known as Brigantia in Britain) with Brixia or Bricta, a Goddess represented at the thermal springs at Luxeuil, France (and whose name is etymologically related to Brigid and Brigantia), and perhaps with other Goddesses associated with hot springs that the Romans syncretized with Minerva (as they did Brigantia), such as Sulis, who was syncretized with Minerva at Aquae Sulis (Bath), England. The notion of "gates" between the worlds and Manannán's role as gatekeeper are novel ADF reconstructions based on their interpretations of and extrapolations from Irish mythology, in which he (as a sea deity and psychopomp) is described as the gatekeeper of the Blessed Isles beyond the sea, which are the gateway to the Otherworld. And while the term *nemeton* is an archaeological term for open-air Iron Age Celtic cultic spaces (Brunaux 2000; Murray 1996a; 1996b:125), such as the sanctuary at Gournay-sur-Aronde, France (Figure 35), the idea that a backyard of a house in Galveston, Texas in 2013 could be

temporarily imbued with the sacrality of a Celtic nemeton for a ritual performed by a handful of Americans is a modern reconstruction that nevertheless marks the participants and their rituals with a stamp of ancient Celticness.



**Figure 35: Reconstruction of the sanctuary at Gournay-sur-Aronde
(after Brunaux 2000:100)**

The format and core content of ADF ritual have been explicitly reconstructed by the founder Isaac Bonewits and other ADF leaders to be based on what ADF calls “Proto-Indo-European” and “Indo-European” scholarship. According to Bonewits’ (1983) original idea of ADF, the research upon which this Druidic tradition was to be based included the works of such scholars as comparative philologist Georges Dumézil, archaeologists Marija Gimbutas and Stuart Piggott, and historians Mircea Eliade, Anne Ross, and Nora Chadwick. Much of their scholarship into “Indo-European” history has been challenged, however, or outright dismissed by contemporary archaeologists and prehistorians; for example, Gimbutas’ Kurgan hypothesis and related argument for a primary Goddess of Neolithic Europe has largely been discredited in the academe (Renfrew 1999:268 and Krell 1998; see

also Lowry and Pizza 2004). Ethnohistorically, many of these elements in ADF are novel folk traditions. The ADF Dedicant Manual used for training initiates, for example, explains the importance of Fire in ADF rituals thusly: “The Fire is the ancient focus of ritual. It is the transmuter and transformer, which can take something, like oil or butter, and change it into something else, something possibly more accessible to the Gods. The Fire corresponds with the Shining Ones and Order, and serves as a connection to the world of the Heavens. The Fire is common to all IE cultures.” There is no question that fire was often part of ancient European rituals and symbolism, such as its uses in Gallic animal sacrifices (Brunaux 2000; Lowry 2005). The ideas, however, that all Bronze or Iron Age deities were associated with fire and that fire always represented some sort of cosmic order—as suggested here—are ADF folk historical reconstructions.

The fact that many sources of scholarship have been challenged in the academe is not necessarily problematic for adherents, however, much like how the use of archaeologist Marija Gimbutas’ now largely discredited scholarship is not perceived as a problem by contemporary members of the Goddess Movement (Lowry and Pizza 2004). And as I discussed in Chapter II, folk groups determine their own criteria of historical validation when (re)constructing folk histories (Hudson 1966), and when, as Magliocco (2004:54-55) describes it, they “poach” from scholarship when (re)constructing traditions (see also Lowry 2010).

One of the most central elements of all ADF practice is the notion of *ghosti* (pronounced go-stee /’goʊsti/). Jill’s explanation of this unfamiliar term to Mike before the ritual nicely summarizes this folk notion. She said that ADF rituals are basically parties to which the Kindreds are invited and given gifts of offerings as a sign of their status as

honored guests, but also so that they will bless the worshippers with gifts in exchange. The ADF Dedicant Manual describes *ghosti* as a reconstructed proto-Indo-European notion that “underlies our entire religion. We give offerings to the Kindreds to form relationships with them, just as we would give of ourselves to our friends and family, to maintain close ties.” This theological concept is emically authenticated through the use of the past in the Manual, which says, “In ancient days, folks would build friendship by the ritual exchange of gifts, and these ties could bind families for generations. And so we give to the Kindreds in expectation that They will give to us in return.” The Manual also explains how reciprocity in ADF ritual works: “I give so that You may give. This is one of the most common forms of sacrifice in ADF. We make offerings to the Kindreds in order to receive blessings or wisdom in return.” Highlighting the nature of hard polytheistic theology in ADF (where deities are perceived as distinct individual beings), while localizing it within the Southern culture of Texas, Jill explained the idea of *ghosti* in ADF tradition during the Live Oaks 2012 Lughnasadh celebration, saying, “the best way to talk about it is Southern hospitality.”

Drawing from examples in Greek and Irish mythology and history, as well as contemporary scholarly sources, Reverend Kirk Thomas, one of the leaders in ADF, describes *ghosti* as “a recreated Proto-Indo-European root which means, ‘Someone with whom one has reciprocal duties of hospitality’” (2014). He further explains, “Relationships based on mutual exchange were similar to ‘kin’ relationships but crossed the boundaries between families and were usually accompanied by ritual gift giving. This would create an obligation of mutual hospitality and friendship that could continue in perpetuity” (Thomas 2014). The Reverend argues that Indo-European cultures, such as those of ancient Greece and Ireland, were socially bounded through patron-client relationships, whether those

relationships were between people or people and deities. This claim is largely supported by ethnohistorical research; for example, Celtic warriors sacrificed animals and made offerings at temples as part of a religious vow wherein they would promise some of the spoils of war if the deity granted victory (Brunaux 1988:103, 2000:197-199). The kinds of ADF *ghosti* exchanges with deities described here, however, are evidently and admittedly modern and relate to the modern, most often urban lives of the practitioners. As discussed below and as seen in the 2012 Imbolc ritual, US coins are sacrificed, not cattle or spoils of war, though the symbolism is seen as the same.

All of these elements, from Fionnghal's references to her Scottish ancestors to the *ghosti* Kindred offerings to Jill's rededication of her Kindred ring to the Imbolc and Celtic deity lore in the ritual—as in all of the other ADF rituals I attended—mark both the ritual and many—though not necessarily all—of the participants as Celtic, and certainly European, and thus white. But these ethnic and racial identities and practices are not merely marked. They are resacralized, revalorized, and deeply re-embedded in a sacred past that gives the practitioners a sense of meaning and continuity drawn from the perceived ancientness of ADF practices, symbols, and values, as well as from their own ancient ethnic ancestors, who they believe are active agents in their lives. Through the performance of these rituals, the participants no longer perceive their white identities as unmarked and boring and their ethnic heritage as devalued; rather, these aspects of their identities are transformed into important sources of pride and sacredness in their modern, everyday lives.

Adaptive Bricolage in Ritual

In Chapter III, I described how ethnic informants mark, revalorize, and resacralize ethnoreligious identities and urban spaces through *bricolage* with agency by crafting, buying, modifying, and displaying material culture and inscribing it with religious and ethnic meanings. Folklore is intimately used in the construction and marking of identity (Georges and Jones 1995; Magliocco 1996, 2001, 2004; Pike 2001; Pizza 2009; Sims and Stephens 2005; Tosh 2000). Folklore is also dynamic by its very nature (Toelken 1996), including in response to social changes caused by the processes of modernity (Bauman 1983; Magliocco 1996, 2001, 2004). This dynamism includes the use of cultural elements in new contexts and creative cultural *bricolage*, or the taking of whatever verbal, ideological, or material resources are available and using them to construct novel cultural creations that are meaningful to a folk group (Bauman 1983; Georges and Jones 1995; Magliocco 1996, 2001, 2004; Pike 2001; Pizza 2009; Sims and Stephens 2005; Toelken 1996). As I discussed in Chapter III, the ethnic Neo-Pagans in my study often devise new ethnoreligious uses of mass-produced material culture in the construction of altars and home decorations that reflect the folkloric and polysemic nature of such intentional, creative *bricolage* in contemporary American Neo-Pagan life.



Figure 36: Altar *bricolage*, Midsummer 2012

We can see this same process in the 2013 Imbolc ritual performance and in other ADF rituals I attended, such as at the 2012 Midsummer ritual (Figure 36). Bearing in mind that ADF Druidry is a Neo-Pagan Recon tradition (although they tend to eschew this label because of its fundamentalist associations), wherein members draw inspiration from ethnic ancestral pasts that often include romantic views of nature in modern contexts, it is important that signifiers of modernity permeate these rituals. The location of the 2013 Imbolc ritual itself is inscribed with modern meanings, as it was performed in the backyard of a twentieth-century bungalow house in Galveston, Texas. The ADF rituals I participated in were usually in members' backyards or city or state parks. The 2011 Mabon (vernal equinox) Live Oaks ritual, for example, was at a park in Houston, Texas (Figure 37). The use of such a park—which in the 2011 Mabon instance was complicated by an interruption by a park security guard, who thought we had real fires burning despite a burn ban that was in effect—exemplifies how ADF traditions can be adapted—though complicated—by using public urban spaces for ritual. Not only did this ritual not take place in a misty forest in Ireland, it did not take place in a forest at all, despite the folk historical notions of ancient

mystical Celtic Druids—often imagined as noble savages who were “ecologically aware custodians of ancient wisdom” (Bowman 1994)—worshipping in ancient sacred groves (the source of the organizational term “grove” in ADF), a notion with deep roots in Romanticism (Bowman 1993, 1994, 1996, 2000), but one that continues to hold the popular Western imagination (Piccini 1996). Nor did the Live Oaks rituals take place in monumental sanctuaries like the Gallic site of Gournay-sur-Aronde (Brunaux 2000:100) (Figure 35), or even in modern sanctuaries modeled after such sites. These folks often lack the funds to take off to the Old Country for High Day rituals, and Neo-Pagans in general struggle to afford to build and maintain monumental temples—an issue the Neo-Pagan bloggers Cara Schulz (2015) and Molly Khan (2015) recently discussed, and so they “make do” in Michel De Certeau’s (1984) terms by intentionally envisioning and spiritually recreating a nemeton in quite modern urban American spaces.



Figure 37: Ravenheart, Sylvan Rodriguez Park, Houston, Texas, Mabon 2011

We also see this kind of creative *bricolage* as a way of making do in the use and reuse of modern material culture in ADF rituals, a practice that caused no conflict despite the goal of performing authentic—though admittedly modern—Druidic rituals. These items included mass-produced objects put to ADF uses, as well as Neo-Pagan handcrafted items and natural materials. The cast-iron cauldron with its charcoal burner and Jill's skulls are all mass-produced items that can be purchased at Neo-Pagan shops, such as Houston's Magick Cauldron, at festivals, or online. The serving bowls and platters, such as the pewter bowl used as the Well, were all mundane items used for sacred purposes. The square post with a Celtic tree design used as the Tree was bought by Jill from the ADF website. Sometimes the use of artificial, mundane material culture is out of purely practical concerns, despite the possible disjuncture considering how Druidry is typically considered a nature-centered tradition. [This perception that permeates popular and Neo-Pagan imaginings of the Celtic world are particularly due to the strong influence of folk historical notions of the Druids from classical and romantic sources, which is somewhat ironic considering how much of Iron Age Celtic ritual took place in monumental sanctuaries in urban contexts [e.g., Brunaux 2000]; Lowry 2005). For example, as discussed in Chapter III, Jill sometimes uses plastic tea lights on her altar, because she can leave them unattended. Fionnghal similarly only uses artificial tea lights for home rituals, because she lives on a boat where fire is a safety hazard. We used such artificial lights during the 2011 Mabon ritual, the altar for which was a park table, rather than real candles, because a fire ban was in effect at Texas parks at the time (Figure 38).



Figure 38: Altar with plastic lights, Mabon 2011

Epitomizing how practitioners make do by using modern, readily available materials in novel ethnoreligious ways are the use of homemade Chexmix as offerings for the Nature Spirits and a can of imported Mexican Tecate beer for the fairy folk offerings. Practitioners are well aware that they are not literally recreating ancient European practices and materials, and they often have a sense of humor about this. This humor is exemplified by Kate and Fionnghal joking about whether or not the fairies could open the beer can themselves, and Fionnghal announcing to the Outdwellers that the beer really is good when someone said they dislike that brand of beer. Added to this *bricolage* are things like Jill's cornhusk doll and the broccoli sprig from her garden. The doll is simultaneously a marker of her relationship with Sarah and the Goddess Bríd, revealing how polysemic such items may be.

The spontaneous use of a broccoli sprig in the 2013 Imbolc ritual as a tool to asperge the participants highlights how such rituals are ecologically localized in practice. We see similar adaptive ecological localizations of ritual practice in the use of the palm tree for Outdweller offerings in the 2013 Imbolc ritual, the use of a pecan tree for Outdweller

offerings when using Ravenheart’s backyard as a nemeton space, such as during the 2012 Lughnasadh ritual (Figure 39, right). and the use of honeysuckle from Ravenheart’s yard (Figure 39, on fence behind altar) both for an asperging sprig and for flowers for the Nature Spirits offering for the 2013 Beltane ritual. In light of concerns about both authenticity and localized practice, it is worth noting that palm trees do not grow in ethnohistorical or contemporary parts of the Celtic World (though they do grow in other “Indo-European” regions), and pecan trees are emblematic of and indigenous to the American South, not Europe. Demonstrating the practical and flexible nature of localized ADF practice, Fionnghal explained that it was acceptable to use the pecan tree for Outdweller offerings in the 2012 Lughnasadh ritual because it lies to the south of Ravenheart’s backyard, and that direction is associated with fairies and bad energy in ADF lore.



Figure 39: Honeysuckle and altar in Ravenheart’s backyard, Midsummer 2012

One of the most striking examples of how ADF—like other ethnic Neo-Pagan movements—seeks to not only draw from the past in its reconstructions, but to do so in

ways the folk group considers authentic in inspiration concerns the issue of garb at the 2013 Imbolc ritual. Fionnghal contrasted how many Neo-Pagans, such as Wiccans, often dress in special ritual garb with how ADF practitioners usually wear “street clothes” for ritual. Most participants at the ADF rituals I attended wore everyday clothes, such as Sean during the Opening Ritual (Figure 33) and a woman in the Unity Ritual (Figure 29, right) at the 2012 Imbolc retreat. Many did, however, wear Neo-Pagan jewelry of some sort, such as Jill’s ogham Kindred ring and my Celtic triskel ring and necklace. Fionnghal used folk historical information to authenticate this common practice in ADF ritual when she explained to Mike that the ancient Celts would have worn their daily clothes for ritual.

Rare exceptions were offered by Ravenheart and Mathcar. Ravenheart prefers to wear special garb that she makes modeled after mediaeval tabards (Figure 37), and the Live Oaks grove wore similar tabards crafted by Ravenheart when performing the Closing Ritual at the 2012 Imbolc retreat for other Texan groves. This latter example is rare, however, as most Live Oaks participants usually wore mundane clothes during the rituals I attended, and these special tabards were only used due to the importance of our grove leading a ritual at the retreat. It is also important to note that at that time Ravenheart, who had previously practiced with a Wiccan coven, was a central member of the grove (and often ritual hostess), but that she still in many ways considered herself a novice in the tradition.



Figure 40: Mathcar making oil offering, Unity Ritual, Imbolc Retreat 2012 (Godwin 2012c); photo used with permission from Amanda Godwin

Mathcar said he usually also wears special ritual garb modeled after reconstructions—albeit it romantic ones—from the past. He wore, for example, his ceremonial garb during the Unity Ritual at the 2012 Imbolc retreat (Figure 40). In our interview, Mathcar explained that he always wears his special white linen and flax tailored robe “specifically and only for ADF Druid rites. If I’m going to somebody else’s Druid rites, I have something else that I will wear or I will wear street clothes.” He explained that he wears this robe “when I’m working inside my own denomination or whether I’m working with a friendly allied one, it’s more an issue of membership or not.” It is thus a symbolic marker of ADF membership and representation. In this sense, Mathcar is somewhat unusual in his strong focus on denominational identity; this is not surprising, however, considering his high status and role in the ADF hierarchy. I asked him what this white robe marks for him, and he explained that it “is just distinctly and deliberately a

demarcation of this as sacred space of time and work as opposed [to] the mundane time and work.” His ritual garb is thus an intentional tool to demarcate sacred work and time, as well as an ADF identity and role marker. “It is a part of the set of ritual tools that I use consciously and deliberately,” he elaborated. When I asked him if the color white was significant, or if it was merely about aesthetics, he responded:

Oh, the Indo-European caste system particularly—and I use the word caste probably unwisely, but there was social and professional stratification. And traditionally—and this one is across Indo-European language-speaking peoples—they used white for their priest class. And whether I at times am happy with it or not, without going into great detail about it, I am a member of that class and therefore this is the work I do. And therefore this is the appropriate color for me to wear. Black, look, I’m from El Paso; you don’t wear black to start with. Two, I’m also not Wiccan. Three, yeah, it’s a bitch to keep white white but, okay, you deal and you learn how to get rid of stains [*laughs*].

Here Mathcar offers excellent examples of how ADF folk historical notions of Indo-European culture—based on the kinds of scholarship I described—are used to authenticate reconstructed ritual garb for modern practice. More specifically, he uses information from that folk history and scholarship to authenticate not just the aesthetics of his ceremonial attire (that it be a white robe), but also the symbolism of it as being an important marker of identity as a “member of that class” of reconstructed “Indo-European” priesthood, rather than a specifically Celtic Druidic priesthood.

As I discussed previously in this chapter and in Chapter III, this focus on “Indo-European” culture—something I believe is a novel refashioning of whiteness without explicit racial reference as it is framed in geographically and linguistically bounded cultural terms—is a central notion in ADF thought and practice. Mathcar also points to how ADF ritual is adapted to local ecology as a matter of practicality, as he finds white to be better

adapted to the heat of El Paso, Texas. Furthermore, he prefers white so as to not mark a Wiccan identity, as Wiccan clergy traditionally wear black robes for ritual (though this is not always the case). There is little information about what common Celts wore when performing or attending local rituals, but that is besides the point: all three of these ADF members use their folk understandings of the past to authenticate their modern practices—whether it is wearing street clothes, a tabard, or a white robe—as inspired—*but not bound by*—the past.



**Figure 41: Well of the Ancestors with US coin offerings,
Closing Ritual, Imbolc Retreat 2012**

In a similar way, at the 2011 Live Oaks Lughnasadh ritual, Fionnghal explained how—in her and ADF’s view—ADF is not “Reconstructionist.” She described Reconstructionism as trying to revive ancient cultures, but said that is unrealistic, because we live in a different world. [It is worth noting that the only self-identified Reconstructionist I encountered was Fiona, who explicitly said she identifies as an Irish Reconstructionist, yet she was clear that she had no intention of trying to fully revive ancient Irish culture.] In terms of ADF practice, Fionnghal talked about how the Celts had cattle raids for honor and

wealth, but cattle no longer play the same role in our society. She also said ADF is against animal sacrifice, because society has changed (and thus no more cattle or spoils of war offerings as there were during the Iron Age). She also talked about how the Celts had sacrificed animals and silver and gold into water, and so ADF folks often sacrifice silver—symbolized by modern US coins (as in the 2013 Imbolc ritual and the 2012 Imbolc closing ritual [Figure 41]), or they “sacrifice” by putting money towards a cause, such as how she donates money to the grove and Jill donates to the Arbor Day Foundation. Just as Pizza (2009:83-85) noted in her ethnography of Minnesotan Heathens, these ADF Druids creatively honor their ethnic ancestral traditions by reconstructing the present, rather than trying to exactly reconstruct ancient practices. Recons thus make do by drawing on the past, not to fabricate Hobsbawmian (1983) invented traditions out of thin air, nor to completely revive them, but to intentionally fashion new religious practices and identities that serve their current needs and are believed to reflect those of their ethnic ancestors. Several Heathens I interviewed said their goal is not to faithfully reconstruct ancient rituals in every detail, but to perform ones their ethnic ancestors would *recognize*, a detail made all the more salient when one considers that ethnic Neo-Pagans often believe that their blood ancestors are honored guests at their rituals.

Mitigating Modernity in Ritual

As discussed in Chapter II and demonstrated by these 2013 Imbolc data, modern, everyday worries and concerns are also an important part of ADF and other ethnic Neo-Pagan rituals, as they are in other traditions. Prayers for help through the challenges of daily life, prosperity, jobs, healing, guidance, and strength are common. We see this in Jill’s

request to Bríd, Grannus, and her other Kindreds for healing, transformation, peace, and strength as she and Sarah (and Sarah's family) were about to go separate ways, as well as in her cleansing of her Kindred ring and the renewal of her vows that her spirituality remain central in her everyday life. We also see this focus on daily life in my prayers about my daughter's birth, but also Jill's prayer during the 2012 Lughnasadh ritual for her to develop better relationships with her coworkers. Not all of the prayers I observed were requests, however. For example, another longtime member, Brigid's Ember, sang a song of praise to the Shining Ones during that same Lughnasadh ritual as thanks for blessing her recent marriage. Sometimes this focus on everyday concerns is in terms of the grove itself. This focus on community is seen, for example, in this Imbolc's omen reading, when Jill interpreted her crane omens as advice for the grove to remain grounded and optimistic, despite upcoming changes.

Returning to the issue of hard polytheism, Wiccans and other Eclectics often treat deities as tools for magick rather than as beings to venerate and revere. Snowflake, who is Eclectic, explicitly expressed this kind of view of deities. When I asked her about invoking Gods, she explained:

Not often, but if I find that I'm having a really hard time, and like if we're in between festivals and I feel like spiritually I'm just off of it, then I'll invoke the Goddess Bast, which is obviously an Egyptian Goddess. But she's basically for health and safety. But more than anything so that I can think clearly and try to work the things out that I need to work out. We don't invoke often, but when there's a need for it, then we use it... And as far as what Gods and Goddesses that we actually recognize and pray to depends on what we're actually trying to accomplish. We have a Book of Shadows on an array of Gods and Goddesses. So for the moment, we pick the one that's most effective for what ritual we're performing or what we're trying to accomplish.

In stark contrast to the kinds of relationships most if not all of my ethnic informants described, Eclectics like Snowflake often pick and choose deities for rituals and magickal workings based on what they are “for” and on how “effective” they will be for what the practitioner is “trying to accomplish” (much like how Snowflake said she primarily “uses” ancestors as a source of information), rather than based on a desire to worship the deities and maintain relationships with them. Not only did the vast majority of my ethnic informants talk in depth about their relationships with specific deities (in the sense of hard polytheism), such as Jill’s and Azure’s claiming narratives (among several such narratives), but they often also criticized Wiccans and other Eclectics (though with the usual caveats) for their perceived lack of piety.

I do not mean to suggest that this intra-Neo-Pagan issue of the importance and presence or lack of magick and piety in ritual is a detrimental source of internal social conflict; rather, Neo-Pagans are an exceptionally ecumenical, heterodox religious community. These differences, however, continue to be debated within the Neo-Pagan community, as exemplified by Sam Webster’s (2015) recent discussion at *The Wild Hunt* blog about both academic and Neo-Pagan debates about the relationship—if any—between magick and religious practice. I highlight this common difference of theology and praxis between ethnic Recons and Eclectics to show that these two broad groups (as I categorize them) seem to be coping with modernity in somewhat different—though related—ways, and that ethnic Neo-Pagans more often re-anchor themselves in the face of modernity through relationships with and rituals for deities (in a hard polytheistic sense) and blood ancestors (as well as nature spirits), and less so with magickal practices.

In some cases, my data reveal a focus on broader social or environmental concerns beyond the grove and its members' lives. We see this in Fionnghal's prayers to Bríd during the 2013 Imbolc ritual for those suffering because of the Challenger space shuttle's explosion almost three decades before. Prayers for the Earth to be healed from environmental damage were also common. At the 2012 Lughnasadh ritual, one participant prayed for peace as American society struggles through the contentious gay marriage issue. And during the 2012 Midsummer ritual, Fionnghal prayed for the victims of Hurricane Sandy, which had hit in October of that year; and she prayed that Manannán—who is ethnohistorically described as a sea deity—be “appeased” so that we would not have any more hurricanes soon. HearthWitch had made a similar prayer then to her Norse patron Goddess, Frigga. In all of these examples, ADF Druids situate their practice, inspired from folk notions of an ancestral past, in relation to broad current concerns. By doing so, they simultaneously resacralize the present, while offering social ways to cope with such anxieties in their everyday lives.

The Present Re-rooted in Performances of Our Ancestral Past

The data presented here reveal ways in which folkloric ritual elements express, constitute, and mark European ethnic Neo-Pagan identities. This analysis provides ethnographic accounts of how modern ADF Druids in particular purposively and creatively use ethnohistorical and folkloric notions of the past, ancestors, deities, and other spiritual beings, personal experience narratives, and a diverse *bricolage* of materials in their (re)construction and performance of authenticated yet modernized “ancient” Druidic rituals. The performance of these ethnically marked folkloric rituals re-embed adherents in

a resacralized past and present, give expression to novel formations of white identity, and provide cultural ways to safely express modern anxieties, needs, and hopes.

CHAPTER V

NAVIGATING THE CONTESTED WATERS OF CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

Much has been made of the issue of Eclectic Neo-Pagan appropriations of non-white cultures. Some, such as scholar of women's studies and religion Cynthia Eller (1995:77), criticize white Neo-Pagan appropriations from non-white or non-European cultures as yet one more example of whites exerting hegemonic dominance by poaching from historically exploited ethnic groups. This critique mirrors Akhil Gupta's and James Ferguson's (1992:19) warning against celebrating the flow of cultural elements to urban centers too uncritically, because doing so obscures problems inherent in capitalism, particularly unequal power relations.

Others frame cultural appropriations by white Neo-Pagans as less problematic. Sabina Magliocco, for example, acknowledges the dangerous potential cultural appropriation from marginalized ethnic groups perceived as "noble savages" has to homogenize cultural differences through a white middle-class lens (2001:68, 2004), but also argues that such appropriations by Eclectic Neo-Pagans are less worrisome because the practitioners have the intention of symbolically making something whole through creative recombinations that celebrate cultural diversity (2001:69-70). This perspective suggests that the noble ends justify the means. Cultural appropriation, she contends, is essentially an inevitable result of middle-class white exposure to the globalized, transnational flow of goods, ideas, and images. She also proposes that such appropriations are the result of what folklorist Robert Cantwell (1993:5, 1999) calls "ethnomimesis," or the unconscious mimicking of artistic traditions and motifs from neighboring ethnic groups, especially when those elements make similar references (Magliocco 2001:22), or as the result of

anthropologist Michele Stephen's (1989, 1995) notion of the "autonomous imagination," whereby individuals unconsciously and inevitably absorb imagery and other cross-cultural elements through everyday exposure to such elements due to globalization and transnationalism (Magliocco 2004:177-178, 228-229). While working and middle-class white Americans are unquestionably coming into contact with new religious ideas, symbols, and practices, it is not as though whites were living in a cultural vacuum before they could read about Vodou or Buddhism on Wikipedia. I contend that we must continue to be wary of operating from a notion of globalization that presumes some sort of postcolonial *tabula rasa*, as though colonialism itself had not been a form of knowledge production and cultural appropriation.

Ethnic Neo-Pagan Views of and Justifications for Cultural Appropriation

Many of my ethnic informants explained that somewhere along their religious journeys—sometimes before and sometimes after they initially found Neo-Paganism—they were attracted to Native American or other non-European traditions because of the values and beliefs of those traditions, often regarding notions of resacralized ancestors, tribe and kinship, and nature. Some did explore these non-European traditions for a time before finding a tradition rooted in their ancestral culture, while others refrained from doing so and decided to look for those same qualities in their own ancestral pasts without delving into what they considered problematic cultural appropriation, and yet others found creative ways to justify appropriations that fit within their ethnic tradition's folk criteria of authenticity and ethics.

The views about cultural appropriation among my ethnic informants tend to fall into three broad categories: 1) My people’s way—avoid it by focusing exclusively on one’s own—as Mathcar called it—”cultural context” (see Chapter II). This notion often implicitly relies on some sense of ethnic heritage, but does not always, as in the case of both of my Hellenic informants, (who often described their draw to Hellenism as a matter of cultural heritage and enculturation). If there is an appealing element (such as a deity or practice) from another’s culture, look for an analogue to reconstruct or wholly construct from one’s own ethnic tradition (this is the more squarely Recon perspective); 2) Respectful appropriation—appropriate, but make sure to thoroughly research the original “cultural context” or find a teacher considered a legitimate member of that tradition and of that culture, and be respectful of the culture of origin; or 3) Supranormal justification—have a supranormal experience narrative to justify the appropriation of that element, such as a divine hit-on-the-head story.

My People’s Way

The Heathen Thunor offered a particularly salient and thoughtful perspective on this issue of appropriation. When I asked why and how he ended up choosing Heathenry, he explained not only why he felt he could make a legitimate claim to the tradition, but also why he chose *not* to follow a non-ancestral or Eclectic tradition:

I looked into things. Native Americans, for example, of course, had this concept with the tribe or the family or whatever, is very fundamental to their mindset. But it didn’t resonate with me in the same way that I thought that something should. And I looked at Shinto, because the Shinto shrines are typically to the local spirits and to the ancestors, as well. And that was kind of appealing, because you’re forming a bond to the land the same way in some ways that Native Americans do, First Peoples anywhere do. The indigenous peoples almost always had some great

reverence and respect that they hoped was mutual with the land, but they also had this concept of my ancestors, my tribe are important to me. And Shinto had that with spades. But I really couldn't satisfy my hunger there because I felt like I needed to dive too deeply into customs that were foreign to me in order to get anywhere. So I started looking inward, so to speak, and I remembered the rune. And I remembered my experiences. I had several business trips to Scandinavia, actually, and I remembered some experiences happening over there.... And just these little things along the way in that journey with knowing that I wanted ancestors to be a key part of any spirituality that I was going to really embrace and call my own.

The rune story to which he refers is about how he had repeatedly drawn a certain rune (using a close friend's rune set) while he was still exploring Neo-Pagan options, and that it felt like a message about his path needing work, though he was not sure what that message was at the time. Thunor thus offers a narrative about how he was attracted to Native American and Shinto traditions that had elements he sought (reverence for and relationships with the land and ancestors), but then how he could not connect because it was not of his ethnic cultural heritage, and because he did not feel he had the cultural competence to authentically or legitimately follow a Native American or Shinto path. So he "started looking inward" at his own ethnic heritage to find a path that valued ancestors and nature that "resonated" with him.

Much like the white individuals discussed by several scholars (Bosse 2008; Deloria 1998; Dox 2006; Waters 1990; Wilkins 2008), Philip Deloria (1998), Thunor and my other ethnic informants often explained how early in their journeys they had felt their ethnic heritage was either uninteresting or inaccessible (or both), and that they were usually attracted at some point to certain elements of essentialized non-white Others' cultures and their (real or perceived) sense of ethnic heritage and pride. Thunor's statements about his perception of Native Americans and Shinto Japanese, for example, reveal a somewhat

sweeping, romanticized view of both groups being homogenous and “connected” to the land and to ancestors. Unlike the people described by Waters (1990), Bosse (2008), Dox (2006), and Deloria (1998), as well as the lower-class white “wannabe” women who sought to appropriate Puerto Rican identities discussed by Wilkins (2008), however, my informants did not cope with this problem of having “boring and unhip” ethnicities (Wilkins 2008:248) by freely appropriating exotic Others; rather, they looked to their own European ethnic heritages as much as possible to find and reconstruct what they could to suit their needs. In Thunor’s case, this meant looking to his Germanic and Norse heritage to find a path that honors ancestors and nature, a path that he identifies with Heathenry.

Thunor explicitly rejected the idea of a blood-rights claim to Heathenry. Later in our interview, he explained, “I want be clear on this—I don’t think that you have to have any ancestry you can document to follow a particular path. It just has to resonate with you. But I think these are reasons why they have resonated with me.” He very explicitly, intentionally, and thoughtfully explained that he rejects the idea of blood-right claims, which, as Mattias Gardell (2003) discusses, is a particularly thorny issue in Heathenry considering there are some white-racist Heathen groups that do make such claims. On the other hand, Thunor did suggest that his connection to Heathenry is based on his blood lineage in addition to his cultural heritage, the latter of which I think is largely based on the ethnohistorical fact that American culture draws significantly from a Germanic heritage. He told me, for example, that German came “almost naturally to me as a language.” It is important to note that only one Heathen informant, Scaði, claimed that one must have Germanic or Scandinavian blood ancestry to be Heathen.

Thunor also brought up an issue that many other ethnic informants—especially ADF Druids—brought up, namely that he felt he wanted a tradition (and by implication, religious identity) that he felt he could legitimately claim and confidently defend. He rejected choosing a non-European tradition because he felt he lacked the ethnic heritage and cultural competence to make what he considers a legitimately claim. Thunor—like others discussed in Chapter II—lamented the loss of Germanic pagan lore (which he explicitly sees as his birthright) due to Christianization. “I really sort of detest the tearing down part of things that people do with other people’s cultures and traditions,” he said, “And so, it feels like a shame to me that I should have an ancestral way that was inherited, and yet, I really don’t. I mean, obviously, I do, I just have to go dig for it. But somewhere along the way, only little pieces and scraps and shreds of these traditions have actually made it to me.” He then talked about how he sees himself as being engaged in an intentional project of reconstruction and revival—much like how Mathcar described his ADF work in Chapter II. This respect for “other people’s cultures and traditions” is part of why he felt that Native American and Shinto traditions were not his to claim.

Bearing in mind that once one claims a Neo-Pagan identity in the US, there is a grand smorgasbord of paths and traditions one is usually free to explore, Thunor also explained that he eventually chose Heathenry over Wicca and other Eclectic approaches (which are usually most easily accessible) for similar reasons:

Well, I could be sort of pan-Pagan, if I wanted. And that doesn’t pose a philosophical problem for me. I think for some people that really works. And I think for me, there’d be a lot too much “Ooh, shiny” going on and I wouldn’t ever grow as a person in that direction the way that I think I probably need to or want to. So, I wanted to find something specific. Something that had credible, established traditions. Partly so I wouldn’t have to reinvent them all, myself. Partly, so if

somebody says, what the hell are you doing, I can say, “I’m doing what my ancestors did as best I can.”

He thus rejected Eclecticism earlier in his journey—not because he necessarily saw it as less authentic or wrong, but because he personally felt he would grow best by focusing on an ancestral ethnic path. And while he does not mention it here, he had already talked about needing a focus on ancestor worship, which, as I explained in the previous chapters, is not nearly as central in Eclectic Neo-Paganism. We also see here that he wanted a tradition he considered legitimate and already established because it would require less work, and not necessarily because he thought it would be more authentic. This argument is somewhat contradictory, however, in light of the kind of work he described as necessary for reconstructing Heathenry, and in light of how well-established Wicca is. While authenticity was not a primary factor in his choice, it seems that feeling like he could make a legitimate, defensible claim to his alternative tradition in the US was a factor. He was more explicit elsewhere in our conversation that his main concern was about feeling the need to be able to defend his religion to Christians, which makes sense as they are numerically and socio-politically dominant in the US, especially in the South (Wallace, Wright, and Hyde 2014; Wuthnow 2014).

Thunor further explained why he felt he could legitimately claim and defend a Heathen path more than an Eclectic one that involved a hodgepodge of cultural appropriation:

Why would tradition, why would this being credible matter to me? I sometimes worry about what people actually think. So, if I’m I just standing around just borrowing from all the world’s religions and hodgepodging it into whatever I want.... I know that that works for some people. And it has worked for me in the past. But I’ve never fully felt comfortable doing it, because I’ve always felt if

somebody sees my doing this, they're just going to say, "What the hell are you doing? You're doing it wrong." And I'm okay with doing it wrong if it's my way, but if it's clearly just some kind of a hodgepodge, that just doesn't feel good enough to me. It doesn't feel cohesive in the way I would like it to. And there's also this added benefit, for whatever it's worth, if confronted by a group of people who think differently, it's kind of comforting to be able to retort with a question of whether they have accepted Baldur as their personal lord and savior, if ya know what I mean.... You have to find something that works for you, something you're comfortable with, and something you're willing to defend when people say, "Hey, you shouldn't be doing that." And a hodgepodge wasn't something I felt I could stand behind.

I can claim this as my heritage or a heritage that was worth it to someone. And it feels right to me. And people actually did this, so back off. It is the kind of stance I could take when threatened. It's not something I really worry about a lot, but if that situation came, I don't feel I could personally defend it as well if it was an amalgamation of stuff, because I wouldn't be able to wrap my head around all of it. I mean, I can barely wrap my head around of what I know of the Norse customs and the Germanic customs and sort of the Scots and Saxon customs. But at least what I do know of forms something that begins to be cohesive. And I think if you've got a system that's working for you, and it feels cohesive enough to you that you can explain it to someone, and say, "This is my way and it's valid." I think that's important.

While making the kinds of ecumenical caveats discussed in the previous chapters that other traditions have their own authenticity and legitimacy, and while stating that Eclecticism worked for him in the past, Thunor offers a thoughtful perspective on why he considers Eclectic Neo-Paganism—and the unrestrained cultural appropriation and *bricolage* that come with it—as problematic for him. He expresses a concern about having the deep cultural knowledge to “do it right” and to “wrap” his “head around” a tradition, and to be able to defend what he considers a legitimate claim to and practice of a tradition to outsiders, which he does not think he could do as well with “an amalgamation of stuff.” I interpret his statements as suggesting that he is not so much concerned about legitimacy *within* the Neo-Pagan community, but with feeling that he has a legitimate religion that he can defend

against potentially hostile Christian criticisms (deduced from his reference to accepting Baldur as one's lord and savior) and efforts at proselytization, and that he believes it would be harder *for him* to defend a “hodgepodge” Eclectic practice rather than an ethnic tradition that he considers more “cohesive.” I believe the “cohesive” quality Thunor describes—as in many Recon traditions—comes from a sense of defined cultural parameters (in his case, Germanic and Scandinavian). Rather than pulling from what can be an overwhelming supply of cultural elements available today (especially via the Internet), Recons like Thunor can focus on reconstructing and adapting beliefs and practices from one specific culture (or, in the case of ADF, “Indo-European” cultures, though this still sets parameters). Furthermore, while the term “valid” can be ambiguous, I interpret his use of it here to mean socially legitimate, rather than authentic. These observations suggest that legitimacy in the wider, mostly Christian American society is important to him, as well as feeling that he has sufficient cultural knowledge to authentically carry out his tradition's practice.

So how does Thunor figure out how to practice Heathenry in such a way that he considers it “cohesive” enough to defend? As discussed in the previous chapters, this is done by relying on scholarship in the process of reconstruction (in the sense of modeling after the ethnohistorical and folk historical past; not recreating *in toto*). When I asked Thunor what gives him this sense of cohesiveness and, using his term, “validity,” he said, “Well, there are many academic books written on studies of digs and studies of customs, expositions of surviving writings, translations.” Mirroring Mathcar's idea of engagement in a collaborative project of reconstruction (discussed in Chapter II), he explained:

It's an ongoing process. I'm sure that this is true of Celtic Reconstruction, as well. They say Heathenry or Ásatrú is a religion with homework. You have to keep digging. And there are some people who do tremendous amounts of specialization,

even further than just picking Heathenry. There are groups that delve into specifically what the Anglo-Saxon tribes did when they were still doing non-Christian things, or the Frisians, or the Gauls, for example. And of course you probably know there are people doing that on the Celtic side, not just the Gauls, but the Irish and the Welsh. But for me, it's enough right now just to try to get a grasp on what there was, and sort of pull the most cohesive pieces from that. So it's not like I'm not doing a bit of a hodgepodge of my one, in truth. But for right now, finding things that work in the context of the surviving lore, the surviving texts, accounts.

Thunor's somewhat jocular reference to being in a tradition with "homework" often came up in my conversations with ethnic Neo-Pagans, especially ADF Druids, Heathens, and Hellenics, but also some of the ethnic Witches. Here he explains not only how scholarship is used to authenticate his Heathen and similar Recon traditions, but also how scholarship is mined by "digging" through the available ethnohistory and folklore in the process of reconstructing ethnic traditions. Despite his expressed desire—or even need—to have a tradition (and related ethnoreligious identity) that is not so much of a "hodgepodge" that he feels he cannot "wrap" his head around it and defend it as a cohesive tradition, Thunor—like most of my other ethnic informants—also offers an honest reflection on how his efforts at helping with the reconstruction of Heathenry for him *is* a kind of *bricolage*, but he sees his work as only "a bit of a hodgepodge," rather than an unrestrained "amalgamation of stuff."

This idea of having a religion "with homework" is something that both Recon and Eclectic Neo-Pagans talk about; the former are usually seen (and usually see themselves) as more serious about scholarship, and the latter tend to focus more on studying magickal practices. The ADF Dedicant Program (DP), for example, requires students to do several book reports summarizing and evaluating books ADF considers seminal (and which they

list on the formal book list students must chose from). Jill, who shared with me her final DP write-up that she submitted to ADF a few years previously, reviewed *A History of Pagan Europe* (Jones and Pennick 1995), *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales* (Ford 2008), and *Being a Pagan: Druids, Wiccans, and Witches Today* (Hopman and Bond (2002 [1996])). In addition to demonstrating how many of these Recon traditions figuratively—and in the case of ADF, literally—require “homework,” Jill’s selection also highlights the *kinds* of sources considered appropriate based on ADF’s folk historical criteria of authenticity: 1) Ellen Hopman’s and Lawrence Bond’s (2002 [1996]) work, a text written by Neo-Pagans that I believe can be considered a useful, though non-scholarly, ethnography of Neo-Pagans (as it offers prominent Neo-Pagan voices through interviews); 2) Patrick Ford’s (2008) scholarly translation and treatment of classical Celtic mythology; and 3) Prudence Jones’ and Nigel Pennick’s (1995) work, a quasi-scholarly text written by Neo-Pagan authors who are not professional academic historians that has been strongly criticized in the academe—including by folklorists—for its weak methodology and unsuccessful substantiation of the arguments offered (Warmind 1996; Wood 1996). Despite such challenges in the academe, *A History of Pagan Europe* (Jones and Pennick 1995) remains is a primary source for notions of “Indo-European” prehistory in ADF. Jill illustrates this connection in her DP review of this text when she proclaims, “This book ranks up there as one of the must reads by any one wanting to know about the Proto-Indo-Europeans! It explains so much about our rituals and why elements are found in them. It also gives a look at each culture, which is handy for those who are not sure about which one they wish to follow. Over all, this book has helped me in many ways to understand our ways.”

Fiona O’Daugherty, who has a master’s degree in mediaeval history from a European program, explained that she was drawn to Irish Reconstructionism because she had a direct experience with the Celtic Goddess Bríd, who she claims appeared to her and told her to seek her out through research (thus a hit-on-the-head narrative). She described the connections between her own ethnoreligious identity and tradition and her scholarship:

I view all of my acts of scholarship as acts of worship. The first instruction that I got from Bríd was to learn, to inform myself, to ground myself in what came before. And I do that through history and archaeology and linguistics, but I also have an allowance for what I call UPG, which is Unsubstantiated Personal Gnosis. In my discussions with my community, and especially other dedicants of Bríd, if we have the same Unsubstantiated Personal Gnosis, then we will change it to SPG, which is Substantiated or Shared Personal Gnosis. And sometimes when we go back and do our research, we’ll see where that comes in through the history or through the archaeology, and at that point we can go, “Okay, well, this is definitely substantiated.” Otherwise it stays a Shared Personal Gnosis. ‘Cause it’s only if we find it in the evidence that we substantiate it. Substantiated Personal Gnosis just becomes historically derived. It may have started in personal gnosis, but once we find the connection in the history, then it becomes history, substantiated history. And I know that is something that’s big in the Irish Reconstructionist movement, to have those delineations. But I guess to get back to scholarship as an act of worship, I’m very interested in what people were thinking then, and they had a more—I don’t want to say more direct or more substantiated or closer connection with the deities, but we are at this stage somehow removed from them in a way that they weren’t back then.

Recon traditions of various stripes often use the UPG/SPG dichotomy Fiona describes when evaluating whether a given belief, symbol, or practice should be considered idiosyncratic or relevant only to the individual who experienced the UPG event (which is an option, though that may incur criticism), or if it is something that should be incorporated as an authenticated element into the broader tradition. We see in these narratives and other examples offered by Thunor, Jill, and Fiona that the scholarship of a particular culture (or group of purportedly related cultures) is thus used by these individuals to give a kind of

focus and perceived authenticity to the development and practice of their respective ethnic traditions. Furthermore, in some cases, as for Fiona, the research *itself* is considered an act of worship and piety. Such folk historical uses (and criteria) of scholarship—as suggested by statements by these Heathen, ADF Druidic, and Irish Recon individuals—also add a sense of legitimacy. This issue is of such central importance in ADF that Sean led a guided discussion with dozens of participants at the 2012 Imbolc retreat specifically on how ADF attains—he believes—both authenticity *and* social legitimacy (especially from non-Neo-Pagans) through the careful study and use of scholarship in reconstruction. In this same talk, ADF notions of UPG and SPG were often discussed in relation to what the participants considered necessary for the authentication and legitimization of their tradition.

ADF offers what appears to be a unique, novel version of the “my people’s way” approach to cultural appropriation by expanding the parameters to include all “Indo-European” cultures. According to the founder of ADF Isaac Bonewits, ancient “Druidism” was a polymorphic religious system held by Bronze Age and then later Iron Age Indo-Europeans. At the founding of ADF in 1983, he set out the parameters of this new kind of Druidism: It would be “a brand new form of Druidism, not just Pan-Celtic, but Pan-European. [By this latter term, I mean to include all of the European branches of the Indo-European culture and language tree]” (Bonewits 1983). In the ADF folk history presented by Bonewits (1984) and based primarily on his interpretations of early to mid-twentieth century linguistics, technologically superior Bronze Age Proto-Indo-European-speaking peoples emerged in the Caucasus region around 4,000 BCE and began spreading across Europe, where “pre-Indo-European” Neolithic peoples lived. These related Indo-European cultures dominated Europe, India, and parts of the Near East, where they

developed “high religions” during the Iron Age, especially in the Celtic world. These religions were “destroyed or driven completely underground” through “the successful genocide campaigns waged against the Druids” by the 7th century CE, leaving only fragments in Wales and Ireland that “seem to have survived in disguise through the institutions of the Celtic Church and of the Bards and Poets” (Bonewits 1984).

The proclaimed goal of ADF is to reconstruct the beliefs and practices of Bronze and Iron Age Indo-European cultures through “solid (but imaginative) scholarship” (Bonewits 1983), while rejecting eighteenth and nineteenth-century Druid Revival antiquarian scholarship. Bonewits suggested, for example, that ADF scholars mine Baltic and Russian folklore, which he believed to be less Christianized, as well as Vedic traditions and Old Irish mythology to help reconstruct their understanding of ancient Indo-European Druidism (Bonewits 1983). As discussed in the previous chapters, ADF beliefs and practices are informed by creative appropriations of both old and current scholarship. ADF’s unique process of reconstruction, for example, has included the development of their particular value and theology of “hard polytheism” (Bonewits 1983; Dangler 2015; see also Corrigan 2015a; 2015b; Serith 2003), the idea of reciprocal *ghosti* relationships with Kindreds as discussed in Chapters III and IV, and the practice of requiring all ADF groves to formally choose an “Indo-European” “hearth culture” and pantheon as their primary focus for all public rituals (such as how Live Oaks had chosen Irish as their hearth culture, and thus exclusively chose Irish deity names like Bríd and Manannán for all major rituals). We also see such ADF uses of scholarship in Mathcar’s explanation of his choice of a white ceremonial robe described in Chapter IV.

When there is a “gap”—as ADF Druids often refer to it—in a grove’s knowledge about beliefs or practices in their chosen “Indo-European” ethnic tradition and lore (such as Irish, Norse, or Greek), ADF adherents are given three options (ranked in descending preference): 1) Dig deeper into their hearth culture’s lore, archaeology, and other sources of ethnohistory to find information to fill the gap; 2) Look to other “Indo-European” cultures, such as Eastern European ones, but also Vedic/Hindu and Persian cultures (as those groups speak Indo-European languages), and tweak that idea or practice to make it fit into their hearth cultural framework; or 3) Fill it in through “imagination, spiritual visions and borrowings from non-Indo-European sources,” but always in full awareness that they are inventing something new, and always documenting the process (Bonewits 1983).

It is always more preferable in ADF’s view to look to one’s own hearth culture first, but it is also seen as perfectly acceptable and *not* as a form of cultural appropriation (or, as Sean called it in his 2012 retreat talk, “misappropriation”) to take an idea, image, or practice from *any* other “Indo-European” culture. While during that retreat talk Sean recognized that living “Indo-European” cultures, such as the modern Irish, may take offense at ADF Druids mining Irish lore, he said he believes that by being diligent in one’s research should mitigate such concerns:

To me, authenticity is feeling free to invent over the holes, in the lore, with caution and scholarship. Caution is very important. Because there are living Celtic traditions. It’s not as if all the Celts or all the Celtic cultures are dead. There are people that live nowadays that don’t wanna be offended. And if you create something using scholarship in caution, then it’s likely not gonna be offensive or misappropriating to the living folks.... Sometimes just being a Pagan is offensive to the living Celtic cultures. But in the sense of using their folklore, their traditions in a way that never really was intended, that’s kind of what we’re trying to avoid with an authentic approach in my personal opinion.

Based on my undergraduate work in Celtic studies and experiences talking with Welsh, Irish, and Breton friends while at Université Rennes 2-Haute Bretagne in the mid-1990s, as well as my later work on interrelationships between modern Celtic groups and Celtic Neo-Pagans (Lowry 2003), I doubt many if any modern Irish, who are typically at least nominally Christian, care much about whether or not American Druids (or Irish Druids for that matter) base their traditions on good scholarship. Anecdotally, as a self-identified Druid studying in Rennes, France, I often talked with a close (Catholic) Welsh friend in my Celtic studies program about these issues. My impression from our conversations is that he thought the modern Welsh found such Cardiac Celts (Bowman 1994, 1996, 2000), who are commonly pilgrims at “Avalon” (Glastonbury Tor), to be tedious at most, but not a real concern, and in no real way related to their own ethno-nationalist identities or agendas; and their general dismissal of such folks seems to have had nothing to do with how historically based their beliefs or practices may or may not have been. In Sean’s view, however, modern Celts and other members of other “Indo-European” cultures *do* care about these issues, which thus necessitates, according to ADF criteria, a concern about diligent scholarship as a source of authenticity, but also efforts to mitigate real or perceived problems living Celts (or Scandinavians or Greeks or other modern European ethnic groups) may have with ADF’s social legitimacy.

Only when the preferred options had been exhausted are ADF folks to look to non-”Indo-European” cultures, such as Native American ones, for information to “fill the gaps.” If they do this, they must be upfront about the origin of the information, that they intentionally modified it to fit into their hearth cultural framework, and that they made a novel construction. In his 2012 Imbolc retreat talk about this process, Sean repeatedly

drove home the point that ADF Druids should only resort to appropriation from non-”Indo-European” cultures if there are no other ways to fill in the gaps, and that those appropriated elements should be modified to fit into one’s own (“Indo-European”) hearth culture’s framework whenever possible:

Never stealing or misappropriating non-Indo-European lore that’s not pertinent to a perceived gap in a hearth culture. So if you’ve got a particular hearth culture and you do use ancient lore—not just Celts, but Norse and Scandinavian stuff, too, and Greek.... If you do have a hearth culture and there are perceived gaps in the lore, stealing from Navajo tradition and injecting that in there, to me, is not as authentic as taking the ideas that make those Navajo traditions and Celticizing them. So everything’s gotta be Celticized in my opinion so that it fits in, so that the cultural complex we’re tryin’ to rebuild is consistent.

Here Sean highlights the idea that ADF deems it unproblematic to freely claim anything from an “Indo-European” culture’s lore. He is also clear that he considers it morally wrong and unethical to “take,” “steal,” or “misappropriate” an element from a “non-Indo-European” culture’s lore *if* 1) it is “not pertinent to a perceived gap” and 2) it is not—for lack of a better term—”Indo-Europeanized.” [Sean says “Celticized” here, but I believe he only used that term because he and his grove have an Irish hearth cultural focus.] Not only is this approach seen as imperative because wanton appropriation from non-”Indo-European” cultures is perceived as morally and ethically problematic (at least by Sean, but my data suggest also by other ADF members), and avoiding it is considered a way to avoid charges of cultural appropriation from marginalized indigenous groups (such as the Diné or Navajo), but it also is considered by adherents to maintain the tradition’s authenticity and integrity by keeping “the cultural complex” one is trying to reconstruct “consistent.” This focus on (European) cultural consistency as part of authentication echoes Thunor’s concerns about Heathenry being “cohesive” and “valid.”

This approach of appropriating Others' cultural elements and reconfiguring them to function in "my people's way" for ethnoreligious practice is not unique to ADF. As described in Chapter III, for example, Azure often appropriates elements of (Louisianan) Voodoo and Hoodoo—mainly material culture as these two traditions are heavily focused on magickal practices—in her ritual *bricolage* when she found what ADF would call "gaps" in Hellenic practice. She specifically needed "something tangible" for magickal work in rituals, but found that "Hellenism doesn't have a whole lot of that. So it's almost like a supplement." Azure puts these Voodoo and Hoodoo elements to distinctly Hellenic purposes; she does not, for example, also invoke Voodoo spirits or sing Voodoo chants, though she might make a *gris-gris* bag filled with herbs and ask Hecate to bless it. This comes back to what Sean suggested about having a *need*—Azure does not need other deities, because she already has strong relationships with specific Greek ones and has plenty of ethnohistorical and folkloric information about them. She does, however, feel a need for tangible materials for magick that she finds lacking in the information (that she can access) on ancient Greek ritual. She said she finds such items aesthetically appealing, and sees her use of Voodoo and Hoodoo elements as a way to respect geographically local culture, but I do not believe aesthetics or honoring local traditions alone are her primary motivations in choosing to appropriate them for her own ethnoreligious practice.

In a similar way, contentions over the appropriation of shamanism and sweat lodges often came up in conversations with my ethnic informants. When the Irish Druid Brian and I discussed sweat lodges, he said, "I mean we have a record of saunas in Scandinavia. Actual sweat houses in Ireland, we're finding them now. These mud houses that were very much like Indian kivas." For him, Eurocentric Neo-Pagans such as himself should look to

Irish or Scandinavian models if they want to incorporate sweat lodges into their practices, rather than appropriate Native American ones. Based on the rest of our conversation, I believe Brian favored this approach, not necessarily out of respect to Native Americans (although this may have been a factor), but out of a need to be culturally “cohesive” or “consistent” as Thunor and Sean proposed.

The ADF Druid Brigid’s Ember described a conflict she had heard about at a World Conference of Religion event, where Sioux representatives expressed frustration over what they considered Neo-Pagan appropriations:

And about not only Pagan practices in terms of Wicca or Druidry, but also shamanic practices by non-Native Americans. And some of them came down to really legitimate objections to what was cultural appropriation. And you’ve taken everything from us and now you’re taking our spirit, our spiritual practices, our holiest things. Without respect, without asking, without context, without an invitation. This is another rape, culturally speaking.

She then explained how some Heathens and Druids explained to those Sioux representatives that they have their own European traditions of shamanism (such as the *seiðr* tradition described by sociologist Jenny Blain [2002]), something of which those Sioux were—and many other Native Americans seem to be—unaware. This inter-faith conversation, she explained, did lead to some sense of reconciliation between the groups. Brigid’s Ember explained that she individually and as an ADF Druid feels that the best way to handle that risk of cultural appropriation of marginalized ethnic groups, which she considers “another rape,” is to be cautious: “But that whole exchange is one of the first things I think of when I think of that question of cultural appropriation. Well, if it’s a group that’s been abused and disenfranchised, have they issued an invitation? Is this something they’re okay with? And if not, for me, I’m probably gonna walk around it.” She

also brought up how she has a problem with how many Neo-Pagans use Native American drums (or ones modeled after them) without thinking about appropriation—a view that my experience in the community supports. She said she would not use “a reconstructed Navaho drum that isn’t mine to play,” but would instead use an Irish *bodhrán*. For her, it appears that avoiding insensitive cultural appropriation is more of a motivation to finding ways to do what she wishes to do based on her own cultural heritage (or “Indo-European” heritage as ADF frames it), rather than to be culturally “consistent.” These data exemplify how ethnic Neo-Pagans often are concerned about such appropriations, and believe they sidestep it by either negotiating as she suggests, or sticking to their own ethnic background.

Furthermore, Sean’s emphasis that such appropriations *not* be based merely on whim or aesthetic tastes but on a “perceived gap”—and thus a perceived need—*and* that they be reconfigured to fit an “Indo-European” cultural framework both are not-so-subtle criticisms of and reactions to Wiccan and other Eclectic appropriations, which ethnic Recons often find unethical and damaging to a tradition’s integrity (although any such verbalized criticism always came with ecumenical caveats). We see this, for example, in how Snowflake has a book with a list of deities from various cultures to invoke based on whatever magickal working she has in mind as discussed in Chapter IV. Hypothetically, if an Irish-focused ADF Druid wanted to invoke a God of Wind, for example, and she could not find one in Irish lore and ethnohistory, she would then look to other Celtic cultures, then to other “Indo-European” cultures, and only if she *still* could not find such a deity would she look to a non-”Indo-European” culture. If she did the latter, she would ideally Irishize that notion (and likely name) of the deity *and* be upfront to others about how she had come to think of and worship this deity. Unlike in Wicca and many other Eclectic

traditions, this hypothetical Druid—following the values and norms of ADF—could *not* ethically just take any deity from any culture she wanted, nor could she simply proclaim that her God of Wind is some ancient Celtic deity. She would have to be honest that she *thinks* such a deity likely existed, *why* she thinks that, and that she had to come up with her own Irishized version. This theological distinction—which is commonly discussed in the Neo-Pagan community—often comes back to whether one is a “soft” or “hard” polytheist. If one is of the former group, it in no way matters where an image or notion of a Goddess originated or if there is any ethnohistorical basis for that deity, as all Goddesses are seen as faces of one pan-cultural Goddess. If one is of the latter group, these distinctions are of great import, as all Goddesses are seen as distinct, culturally bounded individuals worthy of their own (purportedly) ethnohistorically “right” modes of worship.

So how do we see appropriation play out in ADF practice? Here I briefly discuss a few other salient examples from the data I presented in Chapters 3 and 4, where most of the ADF ritual elements either came directly from Celtic lore and ethnohistory or were novel reconstructions based on folk interpretations of those sources of authenticity. Other elements came from other “Indo-European” cultures, such as HearthWitch’s use of Norse rune stones, which causes no conflict in the ADF framework, as the Norse fall within the “Indo-European” category. Hypothetically speaking, I believe using the Chinese I-Ching divination system, however, could be problematic. It probably would not be outright forbidden, especially if the person chosen to play the role of Seer were not a member of ADF, but it would not be preferable I suspect. [It is important to note, however, that ADF puts no restraints on individuals regarding their private practices. Mark, for example, who is in ADF but had previously been formally trained in Yoruba-influenced Santería, could

freely do Yoruba cowry shell divination at home, but not likely during a public ADF ritual.] The imported Mexican Tecate beer used in the 2013 Imbolc ritual poses an unusual example, but not a particularly problematic one, as beer has ancient roots in Europe.

I did observe, however, examples of appropriation from non-European cultures on ADF altars and in ADF rituals. As in the 2013 Imbolc ritual (Chapter IV), Live Oaks often used white sage bundles for censuring participants during ritual, and Jill had some on her altar (Chapter III). Such uses by ADF Druids of bundles of white sage (*Salvia apiana*), which is indigenous to the Americas and associated with many Native American traditions, is potentially problematic, especially because none of the core Live Oaks members to my knowledge claim Native ancestry or had Native American teachers, and they had not intensively studied any Native American cultures. On the other hand, it is questionable to what degree a cultural group may be seen as having a legitimate claim of ownership of the use of a particular kind of plant. The Native American Church (a syncretism of Native American and Christian traditions), for example, was granted legal use of peyote by the US government through an amendment to the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 in 1994. Tobacco was traditionally used in Native American traditions, and yet it is an important element in more recent traditions, such as Santería. Rastafari religion considers cannabis (which is indigenous to Asia) sacred. Does this mean each of these groups can claim ownership over the use of those plants in ritual? Perhaps. Eurocentric Neo-Pagans have a wide range of choices for herbs to use a purification incense (such as rosemary), but I believe the use of white sage bundles is more a result of convenience—as they are sold by many Neo-Pagan and other vendors, and not—at least in the case of the ADF uses I observed—to give their rituals a sense of Native American spirituality.

Jill's use of incense sticks made in India (Chapter III), however, is framed in a unique way within ADF practice and theology. In light of how ADF considers Vedic/Hindu Indian and Persian cultures as part of the "Indo-European" range of cultures from which ADF Druids are free to appropriate, her use of Indian incense, which was likely motivated by aesthetics and convenience, may be seen as an extension of this expanded notion of culture, and thus it is not—in her (or ADF's) view—a problematic issue of cultural appropriation. We must also consider the fact that the incense appears to have been produced in India, presumably by Indians with the intent of selling it to non-Indians in the US; however, one may still consider Indian manufacturing at exceptionally low labor costs to be an artifact of Western economic hegemony and globalization. Therefore, I contend that Jill's thoughtful inclusion of Indian incense in her explicitly ADF Druidic ritual practice is best understood as a nuanced case of cultural appropriation.

The ADF Druid Brigid's Ember offers another example of how this notion of "Indo-European" boundaries for appropriation can work in practice. While she primarily has an Irish ethnic focus in her own practice, she also has a small shrine to the Hindu God Ganesha, where she keeps a statue of the deity and a small offering dish for incense. Epitomizing how hard polytheism is described in practice, she said she was "introduced to him" by Wiccan and Druid "friends who have great respect for Hindu belief and practice, but also aren't strictly speaking Hindu," and that her "introduction to his mythology" came from an undergraduate class on Hinduism. I asked her how she explained this relationship from an ADF perspective, and she said that "research [has] shown that there is a certain amount of interplay possible when working with almost any Indo-European deity, that there's some form of ritual that will be familiar to almost any Indo-European deity." She

also said that, while they were not “identical,” ancient Indo-European cultures interacted and communicated with each other, and “so it makes a certain amount of sense to me that you would be able to communicate in ritual or in worship or just through a simple offering with deities that, while they may not be in your native pantheon, had some interaction possibly through their believers with believers of the deities in your pantheon.” In other words, not only did information flow among these cultures (a notion with ethnohistorical support), but deities (in the hard polytheism sense) also likely interacted with each other and with each other’s worshippers. Even with this expanded “Indo-European” notion of culture, Brigid’s Ember still makes a point to research Ganesha and traditional ways to worship him in Hinduism. She said she does not simply venerate him however she may wish (as an Eclectic might), because “that strikes me as a little potentially disrespectful to the deity. So when I make an offering to Ganesha, I do it with something that he would be considered in Hinduism to appreciate. I’ll offer him sweets. And I’ll do it with respect for his customs.” Her inclusion of Ganesha worship in her personal practice is not seen as potentially problematic cultural appropriation because it falls within the ADF notion of “Indo-European;” however, she is nonetheless diligent to try to make her worship as authentic as possible, because he is considered a distinct, culturally bound individual deity in the ADF framework of hard polytheism.

Respectful Appropriation

As discussed in Chapter I, Sabina Magliocco (2001, 2004) argues that Neo-Pagans in the US often attempt to frame their movement as analogous to other civil rights and postcolonial indigenous movements by constructing oppositional, marginalized identities as

a strategy of resistance against what they perceive as Christian European colonial dominance. This perspective is evident in my discussions about the Burning Times and the Christianization of Europe in Chapter II, where I offered examples of how many of my ethnic informants—but also Eclectics like Snowflake—are very concerned about and critical of the oppression of indigenous cultures (principally by white Christians). While this concern generally does not seem to play into Eclectic appropriations—as exemplified by Snowflake’s book of deities from diverse cultures from which she draws deities depending on the magickal goal of a given ritual (Chapter II), it is much more of a concern for many of my ethnic informants. As such, these ethnic Neo-Pagans often brought up the idea that cultural appropriation is ethically justified if the person is taught or invited to participate in the practice by a member of the culture of origin in question *or* if the person is “respectful” of the culture of origin in their use of the appropriated element (which generally means having intensively researched both the element and the broad culture in question) *or* both.

My ethnographic data offer several examples of how this idea of “respectful” appropriation takes place. As described in Chapter II, the Heathen Da Troll displays several Native American elements on his altar, especially the shell bowl with tobacco offerings (the cigar) and the use of white buffalo, bear, mouse, and eagle symbols to represent the cardinal directions. These are practices he learned from his Native American teacher, whom he described as kin and a spiritual ancestor. While Da Troll said he does have some undefined Native American ancestry, my impression from our conversation was that he primarily includes these Native American symbols and practices (such as invoking the white buffalo for North) because he inherited that tradition from his Native American teacher. This kind of reasoning explains Da Troll’s use of Native American symbolism,

offers some degree of ethical legitimacy, and helps mitigate charges of cultural appropriation, because he learned these traditions from a Native American practitioner. This justification does not mean, however, that other Native Americans may not challenge his use of such elements.

Brigid's Ember, despite her strong commitment to the ADF tradition that she has been a part of for many years, offered several similar examples of "respecting" a culture of origin as a way to justify appropriation. As discussed above, she considers appropriation "without respect, without asking, without context, without an invitation" to be a kind of cultural "rape." Here we see an implicit justification for using, for example, a Native American ritual element if respect is shown or permission or an invitation is given. At another point in our conversation, she explained:

So I always wanna take care not to dabble in cultural appropriation because I think things are cool. And especially being married to someone who is—although he was raised by an adoptive family—by birth half Eastern Blackfoot, I never wanna be the suburban white chick that goes out into someone else's cornfield and beats a drum because I think Native Americans were so cool. Without bothering to learn anything about them. What they did or why. Or how it works. It wouldn't even be just appropriate. I think it'd be disrespectful to the whole culture.

Later in our conversation, she expanded upon how she is extremely concerned about cultural appropriation from Native American cultures:

It's quite different for someone to invite someone to share their tradition. And white people have helped themselves to so much that legitimately belonged to various Native tribes that I really don't feel comfortable or feel like it's really appropriate. To just help ourselves to their spiritual practices without invitation. But in cases where there has been an invitation offered or a group has said, "Yes, we are comfortable with any respectful seekers learning this, studying it," then I don't see a problem as long as you are keeping the cultural context in mind. And approaching it with respect.

In these statements Brigid's Ember expresses a strong concern about her own white racial identity and privilege in terms of cultural appropriation. She is well aware that her status as a white woman means that she could quite easily participate in what historian Philip Deloria (1998) calls "playing Indian," but she does not wish to do so. She also voices a not-so-veiled criticism of Eclectic tendencies to appropriate practices and material culture from non-European cultures, especially Native American ones, because they think they are "cool," yet without "bothering to learn anything about" the culture of origin and the traditional meanings and uses of the items or practices in question. As discussed in Chapter II regarding Mathcar's views that he and other Recons are working in their own "cultural contexts," she is conscientious about the same kind of cultural consistency Thunor described, whether it concerns a European "hearth culture" or a non-European culture.

Brigid's Ember explained three specific examples of how she herself participates in Native American religious traditions—despite her ADF identity and primary tradition, and how she justifies each in terms of this notion of cultural "respect," including having been given permission or an invitation from someone she considers a legitimate member of the culture of origin. First she explained that she annually participates in sweat lodge practices at the Stones Rising at Four Quarters InterFaith Sanctuary of Earth Religions in Artemas, Pennsylvania. These sweat lodges, she explained, are run by two individuals—one Navajo and the other Sioux. She said, "They have made the choice to open that to people present at the event as long as they come to it respectfully." She then told me how she came to learn how to play the *djembe* drum (an *extremely* common example of appropriation in Neo-Pagan communities, [primarily white] drum circles, and similar groups). She learned to play that kind of drum in a gym class at her predominantly white women's college. While

pointing out that West African cultures have “certainly suffered at the hand of white people,” she said her Senegalese teacher essentially said, “Hey, the more people know our real culture and the less people think of the stereotypes, the less we’ll be stuck in all of awful and traumatic things that have happened between the dominant culture at this college and my culture of origin.” Brigid’s Ember’s statements thus suggest that she perceives her teacher’s explanation and teaching of the drum class as having offered her “an invitation” that justifies her use of the *djembe* drum and absolves her of participating in hegemonic cultural appropriation.

Brigid’s Ember then described why learning Blackfoot shamanism is acceptable to her:

Now I am studying a shamanic path that is honestly more informed by a particular Native American tribe than by my Celtic ancestry. I’m learning that from my husband, who was trained in it by his grandfather, his biological grandfather, who was Eastern Blackfoot. So I sort of feel like I come by that honestly. I didn’t just pick up a book and say, “I’m a suburban white chick, I’m gonna do Native American shamanism.” And I always try and be very careful to approach it with respect. Do I sometimes probably set foot into something that I shouldn’t? Probably. With the best of intentions, I’m sure we all do. But it’s something that I try and be probably more conscious of than I would be if I hadn’t known people in disenfranchised groups.

In all three of these cases, she seeks to justify and give a sense of legitimacy to the incorporation of Native American traditions into her own religious practice (privately speaking; not in Live Oaks rituals). Her participation in (specific) sweat lodges and her use of the *djembe* drum are explained by the fact that members of the cultures of origin invited her to do so. Her inclusion of Blackfoot shamanism is made acceptable to her because her husband is part Blackfoot. and he in turn learned the tradition from his Blackfoot grandfather. On the other hand, Brigid’s Ember also honors Ganesha. She thus offers an

excellent example of how ethnic Neo-Pagans attempt to conscientiously negotiate and consider issues of cultural appropriations of non-European cultures by whites such as herself.

Supranormal Justification

A somewhat rarer justification offered by a few ethnic informants for why they worship or—as it is often phrased—“work with” non-European (or non-“Indo-European”) deities is the idea that deities can claim whomever they wish, and such a claiming is not open to challenge by either the individual claimed *or* by the broader Neo-Pagan community (which I have observed is virtually always the norm). I refer to this process as “supranormal justification” or “deity instigation.” Brigid’s Ember brought this issue up, saying, “I think it’s useful to have room in one’s personal practice for as many deities as show up saying, ‘I want you to work with me. Pay attention to me.’ Which is really, I guess, where I would say the exception would be to where a culture stands on appropriation. I mean, if a deity shows up and says, ‘I want you to do this for me,’ then that carries some weight.” This idea that such a cross-cultural claiming is *possible* was commonly expressed by my ethnic informants, a few of whom said either they were or someone in their ethnic tradition was claimed by a deity or deities outside of their ancestral ethnic focus.

Brigid’s Ember explained that this kind of narrative is generally understood to be beyond challenge in the Neo-Pagan community: “I think in the Pagan world period we all understand, hey, if Quetzalcoatl came to you, more power to you. Who am I to interfere with that?” She then gave me a story about how a friend of hers in New Jersey “works with Coyote, because Coyote showed up and said I don’t care that you’re not [Native

American].” She then jokingly said, “Yeah, I don’t think he respects rules much.” Whether one is a “soft” or “hard” polytheist (or a believer in deities only being Jungian archetypes), the general understanding in the Neo-Pagan community is that the individual alone is the ultimate authority when it comes to deity interactions, especially when instigated by a deity (or an aspect of a deity). Other members of the community simply do not believe that they have the authority to challenge such a narrative. I believe this notion of the self being the ultimate source of authority regarding deities, which seems to be rare among world religions, is based largely on how Neo-Pagan traditions are usually, as described by Magliocco (2004) and others, at least partially experiential, and on how orthopraxy (in the sense of shared rather than prescribed “correct” practices) rather than orthodoxy often unites Neo-Pagan traditions.

Brigid’s Ember, who had been in another ADF grove in New Jersey, offered an anecdote that exemplifies this process of deity instigation, but also how it can be handled within the ADF tradition. She explained that a woman in her previous ADF grove “is herself of Indo-European descent, but her primary deity relationships and her private practice is almost exclusively Egyptian, which is not considered Indo-European for ADF purposes.” This previous grovemate contributes to and participated in the grove’s rituals, but usually does not help run them, she said, “because the deities who tap her and say, ‘Run a ritual for me, do a worship for me,’ tend not to be Indo-European.... So it’s not a deciding factor.” In this example, we see the centrality of an “Indo-European” focus in ADF group rituals, but also how an individual—regardless of their ethnic ancestry—may be understood to have been “tapped” by non-“Indo-European” deities, which within ADF are considered distinct beings with agency from a “hard” polytheistic perspective. Furthermore, we see

that ADF allows members to have any cultural focus in their own practice and does not support challenging such claiming narratives, while insisting that those running public rituals feel connected to whatever “Indo-European” deities are associated with the “hearth culture” of a given grove. I only came across one tradition in my fieldwork where members were forbidden to worship another culture’s deities *even* in private practice, and that was a particular Sumerian tradition that insists members keep a Sumerian deity focus in group and private rituals. Even in this *extremely* unusual case, however, a hit-on-the-head narrative would not be challenged in terms of the authenticity of the experience; but if the person felt compelled to do rituals for, say, an Irish Goddess, they would have to leave the Sumerian group while they pursued that deity relationship.

Grim, the Witch with primarily Heathen, Italian, and Celtic ethnic foci, offers a rare personal narrative about being claimed by a deity outside of her usual ethnic parameters. She went to college in Ohio and spent a lot of time with various Native American groups in Ohio and Michigan, in what she called “the Northern Bible Belt.” Through those experiences, she became extremely sensitive to issues of Native American and other marginalized groups’ ideas of identity and cultural appropriation. While Grim said she has Scotch Irish, Norwegian, English, German, Italian, Seneca, and Remnant Band Cherokee ancestry, she was clear that she primarily identifies as Italian because she was mostly raised in an Italian family and community, and because that is “what I pass as look-wise.” She was also clear that she is not a Bureau of Indian Affairs card member, and said, “I’m not a member of any tribe. I never claim to be an Indian.” Despite her strong concerns about appropriation, she admits that she does engage in cultural appropriation in her rather eclectic and syncretic practice, which she justified by stating it is a privilege granted her by

being an American and because all religions are syncretic (a claim that is arguably ethnohistorically accurate).

With this personal context in mind, Grim has a primary relationship the Hindu Goddess Kali and a strong relationship with White Buffalo Woman (along with the Virgin Mary, several chthonic Greco-Roman and Irish Goddess, the Celtic Gods Cernunnos and the Dagda, and the Norse God Odin, among other deities); she does not, however, consider any deity her “patron.” “I don’t practice any Hindu forms of worship. I don’t collect Hindu things,” she explained, “I don’t practice any of Kali’s or any Indian rituals at all.” She has a statue of Kali and a large tattoo of the Goddess on her back to honor her. Grim explained that she first formed a relationship with Kali when she participated in a Goddess circle with other women while she was in a graduate comparative religion program in Michigan. This Goddess circle worked with Kali and several other Dark Goddesses dealing with menstrual rites. There was “no resonance with those Goddesses,” except for Kali.

Later, when Grim was studying comparative religion at university, she met *sadhus* or wandering Hindu monks or yogis involved in or visiting the department, who noted that she “has a lot of *shakti*” or divine feminine power in Hinduism. Grim explained that these Hindu practitioners and scholars noted there was something “different” about her and were curious why she was interested in Kali since she was not Indian, noting that she “always had Kali imagery around.” She recounted that one of these men told her, “If Kali wants to come to America, who are you to say she can’t? It was, like, this affirmation from this dude. And I was just, like, ah.” This narrative suggests that Grim finds her connection to Kali—which began with her Goddess circle experiences—socially legitimized by this affirmation, and any issues of challenges to her right to claim Kali taken care of by this Hindu monk’s

statement. Her relationship was further legitimized in her narrative when, without her knowledge, religion students in the department would leave offerings for her Kali statue. “And this thing just was drawing people,” she said, “So to me, She was real. She was very powerful.”

Grim later said of Kali, “I feel like she’s in me. With all these other things I’m really interested in my ancestry and ethnicity—I don’t feel like any other deity is inside of me. And I can’t explain it. That’s a strong part of me.” Her statements suggest that her sense of connection to Kali is unrelated to her heritage or ethnicity, and that she is well aware of this despite her European ethnic foci in her practice and, as discussed in Chapter II, how important those lines of European heritage are to her sense of identity. Grim thus offers a counter-example of my general argument that what I categorize as “ethnic Witches” does not always mean an exclusive focus on European deities.

The Celtic Heathen Blaidd offered a similar story about a member of her eclectic coven that she frames in relation to her own hit-on-the-head narrative. She said her (non-Indian) friend works with Kali as her primary deity. Blaidd gave her perspective on such an appropriation of Kali, saying, “I don’t see a problem with that. If you really feel that that deity.... I’m telling you, Freyja hit me with a frying pan. It was not a nice thing for her to do, either. She basically gave me a bitch slap and told me, ‘You will pay attention to me, and you will do what I want.’ So, basically, if she feels that’s what Kali did to her, and—’cause it’s not a happy experience—then, yeah.” While Blaidd’s statements show that she considers her friend’s relationship with Kali beyond challenge based on her friend’s deity instigation narrative, which she sees as unquestionable as her own claiming narrative about the Norse Goddess Freyja, she also was adamant—as a hard polytheist—that deities should

nonetheless be worshipped in ways deemed culturally authentic or appropriate in what Mathcar calls their “cultural context.”

Blaidd further explained that if a Goddess “wants your attention, you give her attention. If a deity really wants your attention, then you worship them as that deity. Not like, ‘Oh, Kali, she’s all light and sunshine.’” She continued, “Authentic worship of the deity. Don’t sugarcoat your deities. If your deity is sunshine and light and happiness, then that’s what that deity is. Be true to do your deity and who your deity is.” While Blaidd—like Brigid’s Ember, Grim, and other ethnic informants—allows for this justification of appropriation via deity instigation, regardless of ethnic or ancestral considerations, she also believes that claimed worshippers have a moral duty to research deities and to worship or think about them in authentic ways based on how they are traditionally regarded in their cultures of origin, whether European or non-European. Her statements also offer an implicit criticism of how deities are often treated by soft polytheistic Eclectics, who, as discussed in Chapter IV regarding Snowflake’s list of cross-cultural deities, rarely feel constrained by culturally bounded notions of authenticity.

Ethnic Neo-Pagan Strategies to Address Cultural Appropriation

As others have observed (e.g., Magliocco 2001, 2004; Pizza 2009), Neo-Pagans engage in appropriation from a variety of cultures, an unsurprising fact considering anthropologists and other scholars of religion have long argued that religions are inevitably syncretic to some degree. While such appropriations and reconfigurations of non-European religious elements may be seen as beautiful, creative endeavors to be celebrated—a view often shared by Eclectic practitioners, my research reveals that ethnic

Reconstructionist Neo-Pagans often at least try to be cautious, reflexive, and critical when engaging in such cultural appropriation—particularly when it concerns historically marginalized ethnic or racial groups.

This observation does not, however, mean that the ethnic Neo-Pagans I interviewed and observed do not borrow elements from non-European cultures—indeed, they often *do*; but because of their concerns about maintaining their European ethnic religious tradition's or group's "cultural context" and worries about being complicit in white colonial hegemony, they have developed several strategies to constrain or justify such appropriations. These strategies include (re)constructing and reconfiguring elements they find inspiring in ways they believe correspond to their chosen "cultural context" or—as in the case of ADF—by expanding the folk definition of one's ancestral cultural group to include all "Indo-Europeans" and drawing freely from any of those contemporary cultures ("my people's way"), showing respect for the culture of origin by intensively researching it or by finding a teacher from that cultural group ("respectful appropriation), and offering personal narratives describing hard polytheistic hit-on-the-head or similar experiences that suggest the individual has been given divine sanction if not compulsion to appropriate the non-European religious element ("supranormal justification"), or some combination of these explanations and justifications.

CHAPTER VI

REVALORIZING EUROPEAN ANCESTRY AND WHITENESS

On the other side of the issues of cultural appropriation discussed in the previous chapter are questions of “blood-right” claims (Magliocco 2004), racialized notions of ethnoreligious practices and identities, and racism. Revivalist, nationalist, and often racist ethnic Neo-Pagan traditions based on blood-right claims are prominent in Eastern and Central Europe, as well as Germany and Iceland (Aitamurto 2006; Asprem 2008; Ivakhiv 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Laruelle 2008; Shnirelman 1998, 1999/2000, 2002, 2007; Simpson 2000; Strmiska 2000, 2005a, 2005b, 2007), “where ethnic culture and identity remain important organizing principles of social life and cultural activities, whereas Eclectic Neopaganism with little or no explicit ethnic focus is more prevalent in the British Isles and North America, where ethnic identity has tended to be de-emphasized” (Strmiska 2005a:20). Ethnic Neo-Pagans seeking to restore “authentic” ancient traditions and beliefs often focus their attention on their own ethnic ancestry, which invariably means some degree of ethnic essentialism (Magliocco 2004:54-55). The implication is that in researching ancestry, they often “poach” from romantic nineteenth and early twentieth-century scholarship infused with racist and ethno-nationalist assumptions that may be internalized and embedded in their religious worldviews. This is not surprising, as ethnicity in Europe is often an integral part of nationalism (Erikson 1993), whereas American nationalism typically de-emphasizes overt discourses of ethnicity (Strmiska 2005a:14-18). While American ethnic Neo-Pagans may not have the same intense connection to their current territory as European Neo-Pagans have—nor as the Tigua described by Green (1976) and discussed in Chapter II have, my research reveals that many Heathen, Celtic, Slavic, and ethnic Witch Neo-Pagans do

have similar notions of European ethnic heritage and religious identity (including notions of “folk soul”) as continental European Neo-Pagans and similar concerns about their present society, particularly in terms of social values (especially notions of kinship and tribe) and the ideas of restoring sacredness (especially of the environment and sexuality) as discussed in Chapter II.

Racism and Blood-Right Claims

During our interviews, I asked my informants to tell me their thoughts about charges of racism that some scholars and Neo-Pagans make towards groups within Sabina Magliocco’s (2004) “relativist” category of Neo-Pagans who make some degree of blood-right claims, such as the white-racist Heathens described by Mattias Gardell (2003). Most of my ethnic informants were highly critical of people promoting or expressing such overt racism. Almost all of my Heathen informants, who were generally well aware of the kinds of Heathen (most often Odinist) racism documented by Gardell (2003), were quick to disavow racist views and distance themselves, their traditions, and their religious groups from such forms of (overtly) racist Neo-Paganism. The Heathen Da Troll, for example, said he believes people can more easily connect with the Gods of their ancestry, but also that he thinks anyone should be able to worship any deities they want. “In my opinion, religions that want to keep people out because of their race are probably led by racists anyway,” he explained, “Religion is just a tool to forward their designs.” Such racialized justifications for exclusion were thus not acceptable to him, and more about racist agendas than religion.

Baldur, the Heathen shaman, said, “I’m always very hesitant to interact with pretty much any other Heathens. I always have to feel them out. One, you have to sort of weed out the white supremacists. Because ya never know when they pop up. And I’ve had them pop up, even in my private practice.” Not only is Baldur, who said he is “too liberal for Democrats,” cautious in his interactions with Heathens because he worries they may be white-supremacists and because they tend to have “the conservative Republican kind of mentality,” he is also careful in how he self-identifies within the Neo-Pagan community, so that he is not prejudged to have racist views. He explained, “It’s one of the things I don’t like about Heathenry and Ásatrú. It’s one of the reasons I don’t call myself Ásatrú, is because that’s code for some people. And I’d rather say I’m a Heathen shaman and have ‘em go, ‘Oh, what does that mean?’ And I can explain it. Rather than say, ‘I’m Ásatrú,’ and let them start making assumptions.” Baldur thus identifies socio-political and racial factors in self-identification within the relatively more treacherous religious domain of Heathenry or Ásatrú. He explained that he thinks the perception of Heathenry as racist is due in part to “white guilt”: “That if you are white, and you are trying to learn more about your own history and your own background, then somehow you are automatically racist.” He also explained it as the result of “white supremacists giving bad press. Because they’re the most out there, vocal, that sort of thing. And so for a lot of people, they automatically make that assumption. That, ‘Oh, if you’re white, and you like being white, then you must obviously hate these other groups.’ And it’s a false logic, but some of ‘em go into that.” When I asked Baldur to explain this “false logic,” he said, “For me, it’s that each culture has its own history and its own beauty. And it doesn’t mean any one of ‘em is worse or better. Each culture has its ugliness, as well. The Norse had slaves.” This idea that pride in or

valorization of one's white racial identity and European ancestry is only a racial problem if one presumes racial superiority emerged as a common theme in my data.

The Heathen Erik, who not insignificantly identifies primarily with his Irish ancestry, similarly expressed concerns about the racist elements and reputation of his tradition in particular. "A lot of the Aryan pure-race thing comes into play when you talk about Ásatrú. That some of these hate groups use symbols like Thor's hammer and things like that to represent just disgusting ideas of prejudice and bigotry," he explained, "It makes me almost physically sick because I don't understand how people can be so mean to each other. I just don't get it." Erik argued that such a notion of racial purity is a fiction, saying, "I think purity is in the eye of the beholder, really. Nobody is one hundred percent pure. There is no pure race." Furthermore, he said, "It mars the idea of what Paganism is and what the vast majority of Pagans are striving to achieve." These statements suggest that he is not only critical of such claims to and insinuations on racial exclusivity, but that he also sees them as contrary to ecumenical Neo-Pagan values and efforts.

Erik explained that he is not opposed to groups having a strong ethnic focus, but he had very strong criticisms of groups that make extreme, exclusionary blood-rights claims based on ethnic ancestry:

The other side of that is that they can do it all they want. It's when it infringes on other people's rights and stirs hate in their hearts in this, and in saying, "You can't do this because you're not of Irish heritage." And that's where I draw the line. It should be open to everybody. Anybody who wants to do it. Anybody who feels drawn to that path should be allowed to practice that path. Because that makes you no better than organized religion. It makes you no better than the very people that you're lashing against. It makes you a hypocrite. And it makes you ugly. And it makes everything about what you're trying to achieve ugly, too. I guess, overall, I don't agree with the idea of a pure religion.

He further argued that people have to be free to follow their own religious journey, which might even mean a return to some form of Christianity, and that he would not want to be denied the opportunity to explore a tradition “because I was simply told that I couldn’t do it because of the color of my skin or my heritage. That’s a shame.” Exclusive limits on membership based on ancestry, he said, would mean that members of such a group might be losing out on close friendships with people “just because they have different skin or because they’re not Irish or English or South American or whatever.” Erik’s statements offer a critique of groups that use race or ancestry to limit membership as “infringing” on others’ “rights” to pursue their own religious journeys and to pursue any tradition to which they feel “drawn.” He also draws an analogy with what he sees as a problem of “organized religion” (which I believe is code for Christian churches) being exclusive, something he sees as “ugly” and contrary to the broad goals and values of Neo-Paganism, namely promoting ecumenism and self-determination in freely experiencing one’s individual religious journey. I propose that these values reflect his American cultural background, at least in as much as individual self-determination is arguably an American value. Such exclusive groups, then, are a moral affront to his sense of what Neo-Paganism is all about as a collaborative social project.

Despite his moral dismay that such racially or ethnically exclusive groups exist—*particularly* within his own broadly Heathen tradition, Erik also said that he does not think there is much to be done to change such racist views, and he did not suggest excluding such individuals or groups from the broader Neo-Pagan community. I believe this reluctance to propose such exclusion as part of boundary policing and maintenance is grounded in his same American value of self-determination and religious freedom—that such groups have a

right to their views, even if he finds them racist and morally repugnant. My experiences in the Neo-Pagan community in Texas lead me to suggest that these groups and individuals are not kicked out of the broader community, but they may be chastised, criticized through gossip, or made to feel less welcome in gatherings. I have one concrete example from my fieldwork experience in the Houston Neo-Pagan community of how this process may work. As Education Coordinator for Houston Pagan Pride Day, I was in charge of arranging a series of small workshops about various traditions. When other members of the community found out that we were considering inviting a prominent Heathen in Texas to talk about Heathenry, several—including one Heathen with whom I had a conversation—expressed such strong, vocal concerns about having an individual *reputed* to have associations with what *some* Neo-Pagans consider racist elements in Heathenry represent the tradition in a public, educational context at HPPD that the committee decided not to invite him to run a workshop. He was not, however, prevented from attending, reflecting the openness of such events.

Non-Heathen ethnic informants were also aware of and sensitive to concerns about charges of racism—especially involving Heathenry or Ásatrú—within Neo-Paganism. The ADF Druid Fionnghal told me that at one point that she had considered Heathenry, and that she has had “a connection” with several Norse deities. She said of her choice not to join Ásatrú: “It’s mostly the people. I’m not into hate. Okay. I just am not. I identify more as a Druid, because I want to stay away from those people who do Ásatrú.” She clarified in our conversation that she has “good friends” who are Ásatrú, and that she finds the theology and practice appealing, but that her problem with it “is truly a social thing.” Fionnghal explained:

Some of those people scare me [*laughs*]. Yeah, I've known several of 'em, and they're cool at first, then you start listening to 'em get drunk, and start using racist slurs and stuff, and I was like, I don't think I wanna be a part of this [*laughs*]. Not all Ásatrú are this way. Not all of them, only a few. In fact, I've met some Celts who're this way, too. And it's like, people, we're not doing this just to make ourselves feel better.

She further said that she is “egalitarian” and strongly opposed to people thinking they are better than others, and that she views racism as an extreme manifestation of people wanting to seem better than others. Fionnghal offered an unusual example of how she came to have this opinion. She told me that there used to be a Heathen or Norse-focused ADF grove (based on ADF's “Indo-European” “hearth culture” notions) in Houston that had been but is no longer part of ADF. She explained, “They wanted to keep their practice private. And ADF requires your Druids' group to be open to the public. So they didn't like this idea, and they didn't wanna do that, so.” She did not explicitly say that the motivation for rejecting the core ADF norm of hosting public rituals for all High Days was about racial or ethnic exclusivity, but it can be inferred from the context of that part of the conversation, which was about racism in the Neo-Pagan community.

Fionnghal's statements strongly suggest that, for her, the perception—based on both the reputation of Ásatrú and personal experiences with some practitioners—she has of Ásatrúars being racists “into hate” was a factor in her not choosing that path. They also suggest that she has *not* found such a noticeable tendency toward or acceptance of racism in ADF, which is why she chose and is comfortable in ADF. It is worth noting here for context that ADF explicitly does not exclude members based on race or ethnicity. While my impression—based on my fieldwork in Texas—is that the vast majority of members are at least partially if not predominantly of European descent, there was one participant of

African descent at the 2012 ADF Imbolc retreat, and I saw no indication that she was unwelcome. In fact, I asked Mathcar about her presence, and he said no one is excluded based on ancestry (however, he also speculated that, because people often have mixed ancestry, she may well have some European ancestry). On the other hand, I also interviewed Mark at that retreat. Mark, who grew up in the US, is primarily of Mexican heritage and identifies as such. He said he has traced his family back to Spain, but he was very clear that he does not consider that important as a Celtic or even European link to his practices in and identification with ADF, and he said he had experienced no problems being a Mexican American member of that organization.

Guy, the Hellenist, as well as HearthWitch, the ADF Druid and kitchen Witch with Heathen leanings, also had both considered Heathenry but eventually rejected it. “I came across folks who were racist a lot, especially when I was in into Heathenism,” Guy recounted, “And that was very off-putting to me because there’s, like, why is this a big deal? Why is it such a big deal for you that you have Norse, northern Germanic ancestry?” When he had joined a Heathen group, this was a point of concern, because he was only aware of having Scottish, English, French, Spanish, and Native American ancestry, but no German or Norse ancestry. [He had not considered his English ancestry as Germanic, even though Heathens often include Anglo-Saxon heritage within that category.] As part of his participation in that Heathen group, he worked on his family genealogy, and did discover that he has German, Swedish, and Swiss ancestry. “So there is that Germanic connection there,” he explained, “But that was not a big deal for me.” He said that a charge of racism in Heathenry is “a legitimate criticism,” but he extended that concern to Reconstructionist traditions in general: “In many corners of Reconstructionism, that methodology—some

people take it incredibly far. But my response to people who are being criticized and who are guilty of it is this is not the Ren Faire. This is not the Society for Creative Anachronism. We're reconstructing, but we're not re-living. Calm down. It's okay if your ancestors are not actually from Iceland. It's okay." For Guy—who is a Hellenist without Greek ancestry—Recon traditions should be about reconstructing practices and beliefs with a strong cultural focus (which Guy does in his practice), not about racial or ethnic ancestry, and thus he chose to pursue Hellenism rather than Heathenry. He also voiced criticisms of Hellenic groups in Greece of the sort described in Chapter II (see Voulgarakis 2011) that he has read about and interacted with online for their explicit nationalist blood-right claims and exclusionary practices.

HearthWitch made a similar choice for similar reasons. With her relationships with the Norse Gods such as Frigga and Loki, she thought about joining a Heathen group, but decided against it, "because I'm not straight-up Heathen. Like, I honor Ganesha." She also likes Coyote. Aside from her mix of deities (Ganesha is compatible with ADF since Hinduism falls within the "Indo-European" category, though Coyote is not), she also thinks she is not "Viking enough for them. I'm not a hundred percent." Talking about Heathen groups, she explained that they also tend to be too masculine and macho for her. She also said they can be too strict on how things are done, and she likes freedom to do things her own way. HearthWitch's statements indicate that she has several reasons for not joining a Heathen group and instead exploring ADF, two of which were that she felt that her ethnic ancestry—which includes German Jew, Blackfoot, and Crow—and her diverse deity relationships are not "Viking enough" to be welcome in a such a group. Considering the statements of these once-potential members of Heathenry (Fionnghal, Guy, and

HearthWitch), who chose alternative ethnic Neo-Pagan traditions and groups, but also of several self-identified Heathens (Da Troll, Baldur, and Erik), it appears that the racist reputation of Ásatrú causes problems with recruitment and social legitimacy for Ásatrú in particular, but also for Heathenry in general because Ásatrú is a sub-tradition within it.

The Irish Druid Brian offers a more ambiguous perspective on race, ethnicity, and exclusion. He was adamant that he finds white-supremacist Odinists (who, as Gardell [2003] explains, often have supremacist views) unacceptable and does not welcome them in his Irish-centric coven:

It's very important to me, but as a high priest there's only one person I will not let into our group and that is an Odinist. Ásatrú is okay. If you identify as Odinist and strictly Odinist, 99% of the times you are a white supremacist neo-Nazi, because you identify solely with Odin, the war God, and your Valkyries, your women angels. And it's not saying the only way. They're 99% of the time white supremacists. And I don't want white supremacists in our group, because I don't want our group to get a bad name, because we are so ethnically focused that I don't want anybody [to think the group is racist]. I am concerned about that. And that is the only person I will not allow. Even the Meet-Up group that I run—if they identify as Odinist, they do not get in.

In these statements, it does not seem that he necessarily has a moral problem with racist Odinism itself. Rather, he is especially concerned about how the inclusion of white-supremacist Odinists could undermine and put at risk the legitimacy and acceptance in the Neo-Pagan community of the exclusively Irish-focused group and tradition he has formed. Furthermore, including such individuals could scare away potential new members, just like how Fionnghal, Guy, and HearthWitch reconsidered joining Heathen groups or traditions at least partially because of concerns about exclusionary racial or ethnic criteria and racism.

Brian clarified his position regarding what he described as a dichotomy between racial and ethnic equality and supremacy:

I think that's the point from where I cross over from being an equalicist [*sic*], or for equality, to being a supremacist. If I say, "You can't appropriate my culture, because you're not Irish," it's me saying, "My culture is not good enough for you. I'm better than you, and you can't do this because you're not like me." That's the point where somebody becomes a supremacist. And that's the point that they cross the line, because it's not for me to say who can take our culture or beliefs.

Here we see an argument that anyone who considers their ethnic ancestral group superior to rather than of equal value to another ethnic ancestral group would also not be welcome in his group, because they would see their ethnic group as *superior* rather than *equal* to but different from another ethnic group. In that conversation, his wife, Emily, pointed out that she is of English descent, and Brian used that as an example of how his group does not have ethnic ancestral criteria for membership. His statements also suggest that he is not opposed to cultural appropriation (such as a Germanic-descended person participating in his unique Irish tradition), because he believes to do so would suggest ethnic essentialism and notions of supremacy among the group making the charge—thus his coven does not have such restrictions. It is important, however, that in all of those statements, Brian always referenced intra-European ethnic and not inter-racial distinctions.

I asked Brian and Emily about what they would think about a non-white person wanting to or feeling drawn to join their coven. Emily, who has a somewhat more Eclectic perspective, despite being in her husband's tradition, said such an interest could be explained simply by reincarnation. A person of African descent, for example, might feel drawn to a Celtic tradition, in her view, because the person has a Celtic soul or lived a past life as a Celtic person. "We have to remember, too, we have a soul within us," she said, "And just because we have a color or we're a race, that may not have been until this time."

Brian agreed with Emily's argument about reincarnation as a possible explanation for a non-white person feeling drawn to a European ethnic tradition, but he also offered his own response, which was somewhat more complex and problematic:

As a high priest, I have people come to me and they're like, "I'm leaning this way." And they might be of Mexican descent. And what I first tell 'em, I say, "We're very Irish focused. We're very—not Irish focused—European focused. Is there something in your heritage, in your cultural background, maybe?" Santería. Curanderismo. Or even the indigenous beliefs, Azteca, that they might identify with a little bit better than Irish. And we're not necessarily gonna turn them away from our coven, but I think people should follow their ethnic backgrounds when it comes to their religion. So, I'll lean 'em more towards, "Where did your family come from?"

Brian then offered an analogy about a Christian considering leaving Christianity. He said he would first ask them if it is Christianity itself with which they are no longer connecting, or if it is merely their minister; if the latter, he would recommend the person seek another Christian church or denomination, rather than abandon Christianity. He related this analogy to our discussion about race and ethnicity, saying:

And then it's the same thing with the ethnicity. I see so many Hispanic people and black people that identify with the Celtic. I ask them to explain their beliefs. "Why do you identify with Irish?" And they're like, "Well, it's this Pagan... it's this Earth..." I'm like, "Mexico has the same lineage of Pagan Earth-bound [traditions]. And it might be something you might be able to identify with a little bit better."

At this point in the conversation, Emily stressed that such a person may not be "aware that they have their own" tradition, meaning one from their Hispanic heritage (which is somewhat complicated by the fact that a Hispanic person likely could have Celtic ancestry considering Celtiberian prehistory [Alberro 2008]). Brian then told me a story about a Mexican woman he met the day before at the local 2012 Pagan Pride Day event. He recounted that she is a curandera who practices Mexican folk magick, but also identifies

with Celtic Neo-Paganism. “For some reason she identifies also with the Irish,” he said, “I’ve asked her, ‘Do you have Irish heritage?’ She says, ‘No.’” He did not explain the story further, but his question to her about whether she has “Irish heritage” is further evidence that he believes non-whites are best served looking to their “own” ancestral, non-European traditions. Brian later explained, “If an African-descended person, or of Hispanic descent, or an Asian comes to us, I am going to counsel on, ‘Why are you interested in this. Is it because you’re looking for nature-based? Because there are nature-based [traditions] in your own heritage. If it’s because you’re just drawn to it, then you’re drawn to it, and come on in!’”

In these statements, Brian offers an example of how he—like some of the ADF Druid, Heathen, and other ethnic informants with whom I spoke—does in fact racialize his tradition. He explicitly suggests a belief that people should follow traditions of “their” ancestral racial heritage—that it would be best for people of European descent to follow European traditions, and for people of non-Europeans descent to follow their “own” ancestors’ traditions. He does not, however, seem to have the same view when it comes to intra-European ethnic differences. He clearly has no problem with his wife, who identifies as being of English descent, being in his Irish-focused tradition. It is important to note here that, while at one point, Brian began to say his tradition was Irish, but then expanded it to European, he described it as distinctly Irish in focus throughout the rest of our long conversation, such as only invoking Irish deities in group rituals. On the other hand, he also said he might accept anyone—regardless of race—into his Irish-focused coven *if* she has already considered her “own” ethnic group’s nature-based or magickal traditions and still feels drawn to his particular Irish tradition. Brian’s caveat, however, would be that the

person would have to accept and be comfortable with the fact that the coven would always honor Brian's ancestral Irish deities when performing rituals, and the person would have learn his tradition as he has developed it.

When I asked about racism charges later in our conversation, Brian and Emily were adamant that their tradition and ones like it should not be perceived as racist just for being so focused on a European ethnicity. They seemed especially concerned about their tradition having such a reputation. Emily stressed that they want to “clarify that we’re not racist. We’re just respectful of our heritage.” That she included her own ethnic heritage—which she said is English—within her and Brian’s Irish tradition, and Brian’s earlier rephrasing to say their tradition is “European focused” suggest that, despite all of the talk of ethnicity, ideas of European—and thus white racial—identity and heritage are actually important concerns for the couple. Brian specifically talked about his worry about racism charges towards his coven and tradition:

Yeah, this happens a lot to me. A lot of people will consider me [racist], because I’m very ethnically focused. It absolutely pisses me off that I can’t be proud publicly of my European or Irish heritage without somehow [meaning] I’m the bad guy because I’m white. You know what, I’m not white, I’m tan.

Because Brian was working on his master’s graduate studies in anthropology at the time of our interview, we briefly discuss how race is understood to be a social construct and that whiteness is usually described as an unmarked racial category in the social sciences. We also talked about how the social power and privileges of whiteness often makes it a sensitive topic. He agreed on all counts. I then asked for him to tell me more about accusations of racism he has experienced because of his Eurocentric tradition. He explained:

No, what I usually try to do is say, “Look, I’m of one descent. You’re of another

descent. I have my beliefs. You have your beliefs. We're different." Yeah, I have pride in my beliefs, or my heritage, just like you have pride in yours. And I try to say, "This is what I'm talking about. I'm not talking about I'm better than you or anything. I'm just saying I'm different. Just like you're different. And you're no better than me or no worse to me. You're equal to me." It takes a needle right into my spine when somebody calls me that, because I'm like, "No, I'm not."

Brian thus emphasized his perspective that ethnicities and races are "different" but "equal" and all worthy of pride; however, he also implied that he views these categories as essentialized. Throughout this part of our discussion, Emily reaffirmed that Brian was right to be proud. She said, "It's like that gray line between being proud and being racist," suggesting that she sees an undefined—and thus potentially treacherous—distinction between ethnic pride and racism. Emily then drew an analogy with how Catholics and Neo-Pagans have different beliefs and are in different groups, yet they can "get along." "You don't judge someone on something like that. It's the same thing as being proud of your heritage," she explained, "I'm not racist. And it's getting that message out there." She continued, "We should also be proud of where we come from, and not be afraid to voice that. It doesn't mean we're against whatever you are." Despite this talk about equality and difference, neither of them appeared to directly engage with the issues of white social privilege that we were talking around. This ambivalence was highlighted by Brian's attempt to joke about being "tan" rather than white, and when Emily added, "We have a lot of friends of different races."

Brian's ambivalence and what appeared to be frustration about charges of racism emerged when he told me his reaction to what he sees as the social perception that pride in his own whiteness may be deemed racist:

I will admit that, I mean, there are times that I just have disdain for some people,

because they will hold by whiteness against me. I'll go to school and I'll see a black girl wearing a shirt that says, "I love my blackness." If I wore a shirt that said, "I love my whiteness," I would be kicked out of school. And it pisses me off that I can't be proud of it publicly, because of [slavery] a 150 years ago. And it pisses me off. I have this idea for a T-shirt, right? And it would go great with physical anthropologists, and it says—it's for a white guy to wear, "I love my African American heritage." And then have the Australopithecine to Neanderthal tree, 'cause it would piss everyone off.

These statements suggest frustration with feeling accused of white privilege, but also of feeling pressure in society to *not* have pride in his European ancestry and race.

Furthermore, they indicate a sense of resentment that non-white minorities are socially allowed to have pride in *their* racial ancestry, identities and groups, while he is *not*.

Social psychologists Michael Norton and Samuel Sommers (2011) carried out statistical analyses of survey data from white and black Americans to test the hypothesis that whites are increasingly feeling they are the victims of anti-white bias. Controlling for age, gender, and education, they found that the white respondents perceived a pattern of steadily increasing anti-white bias and a correlated decrease in anti-black bias since the 1950s, the belief that anti-white bias was rising more rapidly in the past few years, and that whites increasingly perceive racism as a zero-sum game that they are now losing. They found that black respondents perceived a pattern of decreasing anti-black bias (though less than that perceived by whites), but that there was a negligible increase in anti-white bias. White working and middle-class Americans thus feel wary of overtly identifying with their unmarked racial category, yet increasingly feel they are now losing a zero-sum race game. While I do not mean to draw too strong of a connection between Brian's and Emily's statements and Norton's and Sommer's findings, I do believe these informants are expressing a similar dissatisfaction with the unmarkedness and historically loaded meanings

of their white identities. While I believe most of my ethnic informants share some degree of this frustration and desire to proudly remark their racial identities by way of remarking their European ethnic or “Indo-European” ancestry and identities (for example, in the ways demonstrated in the previous chapters), Brian’s narrative about wanting to make a T-shirt intended to mock the social value ascribed to African American identities and experiences (by reclaiming “African American” in the sense that all *Homo sapiens* originated in Africa) to “piss everyone off” is extreme and suggests a degree of hostility to non-whites, who he believes are privileged because they have social sanction to have racial pride while he does not.

Only one of my ethnic informants—an Ásatrúar whom I call Scaði—made the kind of strict blood-rights claim to her tradition described by Gardell (2003) and Magliocco (2004). This woman explicitly made a biologized and racialized claim about Heathenry being something one is “born” into and that “sings” in one’s blood based on one’s ancestry, as she explained:

I identify as an Ásatrúar. And I don’t think that you can convert into this religion. You’re born into it. Most people who I’ve ever met who were converts never stuck with it. And just about everybody who finds out that they’re Ásatrúar—because they weren’t necessarily raised that way—it’s just we fit this particular mold. The code of honor, the mindset of community and protection and hospitality. Those things that are really core to the tenants of Ásatrúism. You’ve always done that. You just didn’t know what it was called. So somebody comes along and says, “Hey, there’s a religion about that.” And they’re like, “Hey, cool, tell me.” Which is how most of us come along. But I in particular was raised this way. My family’s from Sweden. And hospitality has always been an absolute necessity. The idea of protecting your family, protecting your community has always been very important. And the code of honor and integrity is how I was raised.

These statements suggest that she conflates Scandinavian blood ancestry with Heathen values of honor, community, family, and tribe, with the latter flowing from the former.

Scaði also offers the only instance I encountered of a Heathen claiming a Fam-Trad lineage. She confirmed that she believes she was raised Ásatrú, although my impression is that she was raised with what she considers Scandinavian—and thus Viking—values, which she then retrospectively framed as “Ásatrúar” In her telling of it, Ásatrúariness is thus inherited through a process of intertwined biological and cultural inheritance.

I asked Scaði to clarify her beliefs about Ásatrú being something one remembers about oneself, rather than a case of conversion. She described this process as “discovering that you are Ásatrú.” This idea that one “discovers” that one is Neo-Pagan, I believe, is common, as many describe their initial identification with Neo-Paganism in terms similar to those used by LGBT individuals. Many of my informants, as well as many other Neo-Pagans with whom I have spoken over the past two decades (and myself), often talked about how they had always felt somehow disconnected from their (typically Christian) religion of origin when they were younger, and that they eventually either met a Neo-Pagan or read a book about Neo-Paganism and had a eureka moment of realization that they had always been Neo-Pagan, but had not yet known it. My data, however, suggest that Scaði’s framing of Ásatrú in such sect-specific terms appears to be rare. The majority of my informants talked about how they discovered or realized they were Neo-Pagan, and then explored different traditions—usually Wicca first—until they found one that fit, a process that, for most of my ethnic informants, eventually led them to one tied to their ethnic ancestry. Scaði did not say Ásatrúars “discover” they are Neo-Pagan first, but that they “discover” they are Ásatrú. Contrary to this claim, my data reveal some instances of Heathens who first discovered Wicca or Neo-Paganism in general, and then later found their way to Heathenry. This distinction also relates to a common debate in Neo-Pagan

communities about whether Heathenry (or Ásatrú) is rightly part of Neo-Paganism. I noted, for example, several instances during moments of participant observation when some individuals—most often Heathens—talked about “Pagans and Heathens,” while others described Heathenry as a kind of Neo-Pagan tradition.

When I asked Scaði to explain how ancestry relates to her view of discovering one is Ásatrú, she said it relates “very, very strongly.” She then offered an insightful theological and eschatological narrative to explain that connection:

One of the reasons why you say you’re never converted to Ásatrú—you just find out that you always were—is the way that we believe the soul exists is as multiple pieces. There’s your family soul that goes through each generation, and that is the part of you that is always Ásatrú. So, when you were born, there was already a Heathen soul in you. And then the other parts of your soul are your intellect, your wit, your personal honor, the energy from the land, and everything that becomes part of the matrix, the conglomeration, that makes your soul. And when you pass on, those pieces feed into that ancestral soul that goes onto the next generation. So we’ve got this continuity.

I asked her if that means that Heathenry always goes from parent to child. Using what seems like biological phrasing, she said, “It can skip.” She then explained the belief in her tradition that if someone does not have children, her “ancestral soul doesn’t pass onto another person,” but instead it “feeds the land for a little while” as a land wight spirit. Later in our conversation, I asked her about her young son. She said she will teach him her tradition, but also about other religions, and “allow him to make his decision. Whether or not the blood sings in him remains to be seen.” She further explained this notion of Heathen blood “singing,” saying, “I think it is a fairly common phrase. I don’t know who coined it, though. But, yeah, the blood sings in you if you have Heathen blood. It tends to boil brightly, and you discover that you’ve always been Heathen.”

Taken together, Scaði's statements reveal a belief in blood ancestry as the source of one's Heathen connection that is somewhat more nuanced than how it is described in Gardell's (2003) work. At least for her, a racialized sense of ethnicity (including ethnic values and deities) *may* be passed along biologically, but it is not a given that it has or will. Essentially, she describes this set of beliefs as being somewhat analogous to red-headedness: if one is a red-head, it came through one's biological ancestry; *however*, just because one has red-headed ancestors does not mean that it will continue through the lineage. In Scaði's paradigm, if someone is drawn to Heathenry *and sticks with it*, it is because that person inherited a Scandinavian or Germanic Volk-soul; but a person may have Scandinavian or Germanic ancestry and *not* have inherited that Volk-soul. In other words, it is a biologized package of ethnicity, religion, and soul, but it can "skip" a generation or more. I speculate that this somewhat flexible notion of the relationship between ancestry and identification with a specific religious tradition may be necessary for two reasons. First, Neo-Pagans tend to be especially cautious about "pushing" religions onto their children (which most see as problematic, as they often felt pressure themselves to follow their natal religions). Secondly, Heathens surely observe that not all children of Heathens remain Heathen, and so that lack of Heathen identification must be explained.

Blood Memory and European Diaspora

In her quest to understand her own perceived religious connection to the Celtic past, Macha—who claims an Irish Traveler Witch identity and tradition—shared her thoughts about what she calls "blood memory" and how it connects her religion to her ethnic heritage. When asked why she was drawn to Irish and other Celtic deities, her first

response was to ask me if I had read Carl Jung, who some believe argued living Germanic peoples carry Germanic tribal Gods and ancestors within them as a kind of spiritual inheritance of a *völkisch* collective unconscious, an idea that is a central belief for the white-racist Wotansvolk Heathens described by Gardell (2003:210-212). While not all modern scholars agree with this interpretation of Jung's writings, Gardell argues that his mystical experiences "led Jung to believe in a spiritual heritage, the collective soul of the ancestors, which he later termed the *collective unconscious* (2003:210; original emphasis). Whether or not Jung himself believed in a literal Germanic Volk-soul, what is most important here is that some of my informants *do* have such an interpretation, which they consider when thinking about and explaining their own ethnoreligious traditions and identities. After referencing Jung, Macha explained her connection with Celtic Neo-Paganism:

Because of my Irish background. I'm an American, so there's some French and what else in there, but everything has come down to mostly Gaelic peoples, definitely European. Much as there [were] family stories that turned out to be false... there is no legendary all-American where of course we have a sixteenth Indian. We're not. We're not at all Native American. We're not at all from any other continents that I know of, other than Europe.

Her European ancestry is evidently a crucial anchor for her identity, as is dispelling the common assumption that white Americans always have some Native American ancestry.

Macha further explained her understanding of blood memory:

Blood memory to me means why certain things ring true with you. Some people will immediately explain it as reincarnation. And I do think that some people maybe have had a wider blood memory, especially if you do have African or Asian or something else mixed, you've got a wider view of the world in your blood, being symbolic meaning for your DNA, your physical construction, and what's been passed down through it. So I'm using that in a very symbolic way when I say blood. But it becomes a spiritual thing that is part of your physical makeup. That's why those things ring true to you and you feel them, recognize them. Either something you have seen everyday and it just seems natural and normal versus the things you

kind of reject. Or the things that you've never seen and the first time that you see it or hear it or taste it you go, "Huh." It's because, somewhere back there, there is a part of you that is made up with that. I think that that's the physical partner to collective unconscious.

That's why I think it's easier to practice within things that are contained in your blood memory. Not that you can't [follow a] Buddhist or Native American path. A Native American path is convenient here because we're in America. But there are some things that are gonna be harder for a Caucasian to do if at all. Partly because of their access to the traditions, and who will share them with them truly versus reading some cockamamie stuff in a book. But also because just the ease of it. We ambulate better on two legs because we evolved this way. You can try to ambulate on four legs, but you're not gonna move anywhere as fast, just because it's not part of your physicality. They would have easier access to those traditions that are part of their [heritage].

Later in our conversation, she further explained how this notion of blood memory relates to ethnic aesthetics:

I know we've talked about "blood memories" some. It's a bit politically incorrect maybe, but its sort of like some of the stereotypes are right at least partly. But it's centuries of subconscious signals and behaviors that teach it too. We often love the familiar simply because it's familiar. I think that's part of the aesthetic draw of a heritage-based spirituality. I feel like I am going home when I practice. I'm truly an American mutt. Irish, French, a bit of Scots and Dane and German. I have seen my ancestors on a few occasions. They are happy with my path. That was a huge thing, learning that, knowing that.

After offering this thoughtful narrative explaining why some people are drawn to—and in her opinion—are best suited to one culture's religious tradition over another, she clarified that she meant both in terms of blood lineage and cultural heritage (in the sense of learning traditions and values passed on culturally through that blood lineage). "I had to figure out why. What I was doing," she said, "And so that's the best explanation I have thus far. Everything's a work in progress." Her last statement is important in that it reveals that she sees her beliefs about why she is so drawn to her Irish ancestry and reconstructed

ethnoreligious tradition—including her notion of blood memory—as not being set in stone. As described in the previous chapters, Macha, like most of my ethnic informants, is keenly interested in scholarly research as a source of information about her ancestry and ethnoreligious beliefs and practices. I interviewed her in April of 2011, and we soon thereafter became Facebook “friends” (as well as close personal friends). In April of 2014, she tagged me in a Facebook post that she suggested supports this notion of blood memory. Her post linked to a *Mind Unleashed* (2014) article that discussed research by biologists Brian Dias and Kerry Ressler (2014). Dias and Ressler found that when mice learn to associate behavioral sensitivities with specific odors because of traumatic or stressful experiences, they genetically pass those sensitivities on to their offspring. Whether or not scientists would argue that such biological research supports or legitimizes this idea of blood memory, it seems that Macha believes it does.

Drawing from this racialized blood memory paradigm, Macha then critiqued the idea of Christianity being a good religious option for European-descended people; however, she also recognized the potential problem of applying this paradigm to Neo-Pagans:

I think that’s the basis for the disconnect. Without saying that another religion is wrong, it never made sense to me to be following a Levant Middle Eastern religion that has absolutely nothing to do with me. That it’s superimposed culturally. I say that we all are sorta schizophrenic because of that. It doesn’t match with Americans, American Christians. Because it’s out of place. That same argument can be made about us. It is such a dangerous web. Because it is out of place, it’s out of time.

Here we see an implied reference to the sorts of problems with modernity in the contemporary US discussed in Chapter II, but Macha frames them as the result of white Americans identifying with Christianity as a Levantine religion, rather than identifying with

the Gods of their own pre-Christian European ancestry. When I asked her whether her Celtic ancestry would matter more than which continent she lived on, she explained, “No, but I think it makes sense, because then we should all be practicing Ghost Dance. It should follow you, which is why it should be easier if your people are a Levant people to be [Christian]. So if you are Middle Eastern then it would make more sense culturally, blood memory-wise.” Like those of my ethnic informants, these statements suggest that Macha conflates notions of cultural and blood ancestry, and offers an explanation for why she thinks whites should not be drawn to Native American practices like the Ghost Dance (and thus not commit cultural appropriation), but also that her connection to the practices and deities of her ethnic ancestors operates within the framework of European diaspora. At a later point in our conversation, Macha talked about how local (Native American) deities were important, “but in the way that Gods travel with their people, they are here, too. I feel like wind blows and water flows and earth moves, and all of that moves with spirit, too. Bríd can touch my face with an East Texas wind.” The Celtic Heathen Blaidd similarly told me, “There’re certain places that there is going to be a tie to the land, but I think deities go where their people are.”

This notion of being part of a European ethnic or racial diaspora—which in much of the literature relates only to those of Jewish, African, and other non-European groups—came up repeatedly when I asked ethnic informants about whether they have considered going on pilgrimages. They frequently brought up family immigration narratives—often going back several generations—throughout our conversations. For example, the Scottish-focused Druid Singing Dragon (who also connects with Antinous, a deified ethnohistorical

Greek man through a hit-on-the-head narrative) explained his desire to go on pilgrimage to Scotland:

I'm sure it has to do with my ancestry because I come from a very long line of Scots on both sides of my family. A little Irish and Dutch thrown in for flavoring. But I've always been drawn to the Scots. I've always been drawn to Scotland. I've always wanted to go there. It's just something about Scotland. It's like my ancestor homeland, and someday I want to go back.

Singing Dragon explicitly draws a connection between his ancestry and his view of Scotland as a special ethnic homeland. He also offers an important example of how one ethnic lineage often takes precedence over others among ethnic Neo-Pagans of mixed European ethnicities (which my data suggest is usually the case). Not only does he refer to Scotland as his ancestral homeland, but he also frames his desire to go there as wanting “to go back,” though he has never been to Scotland. I believe his statements imply a sense of identity as someone who is part of an ethnic diaspora, and who feels deeply connected to the land of his Scottish ancestors.

The Irish-focused ADF Druid Mathcar similarly framed his connection to Irish culture and the ADF idea of “Indo-European” ancestry as one of immigration and diaspora, saying, “It’s the context I live in. And, well, I can much more easily relate to my own family, my own ethnicity, my own nationality, the story of their immigration, because that’s the biggest story to me of all. As an American our story is that of immigrants.” Mathcar talked about how he sees his family history as not only about Irish immigrants to America, but also of “Indo-European” and “Proto-Indo-European” migrant ancestors in Europe. He made this statement in the context of describing the ease he felt in re-mooring himself through his own ancestors and ethnicity, but also of the connection he draws to America’s

history of immigration. The ADF Druid Jill similarly described her desire to visit Ireland and Wales, saying, “Part of me feels like when I go, it’s going to be like going home, like I’m living somewhere that wasn’t supposed to be my home, even though it’s home,” suggesting a strong sense of “home” tied to ethnic ancestry, but also a sense of the US being her home. Despite never having been to those places, she also said, “Anywhere I went, Ireland and Wales were there in part of me.”

Like Macha, the Irish Druid Brian talked about his connection to an Irish tradition and Irish roots in terms that were both biologized and diasporic. When I asked him to explain his tradition despite living in Texas, he said, “I am an Irishman exiled from my lands, and hence the things that don’t quite fit here just have to be symbolic of differed meanings.” He further explained how he makes those Irish connections in Texas:

This is a hard one. Probably something that I have not really put that much thought in, how I connect with the Gods in that they’re Irish and I’m here [in Texas]. We’ve broadcast ourselves across the world. And we’ve taken our beliefs with us. And just because we’re away from our homeland, our motherland doesn’t mean that they don’t hear us. They’re within us, so the seasons might not be the same, because it’s not necessarily about the seasons so much. It is, but it isn’t. Especially identifying with the Gods. They’re within us. A Jew leaves Jerusalem, he’s still Jewish. He doesn’t suddenly leave Israel and Jehovah can’t hear him no more [*sic*]. He doesn’t have to follow kosher law. He doesn’t suddenly grow his foreskin back.

Just because I’m not longer, my family’s no longer in Ireland doesn’t make me any less Irish. I do literally feel like an exiled Irishman, because we were sent over here on a prison ship before they found Australia. I mean, the Gods are within us. The seasons, you can suddenly feel a little more at home doing it. I can close my eyes at Winter Solstice, at Samhain, I can close my eyes and I can see snow-covered fields. At Beltane, I can close my eyes and I can see off in the distance, on all the fields the fires being lit. Because we’re not physically there doesn’t mean we can’t travel there during those times, so that’s what I do. Here in Texas, I transplant myself back to my roots. Call it astral projection, call it whatever, intuition. When I’m practicing, I’m home. And no matter where I am in the world, I’m home.

There is much to unpack in these statements. Brian connects his family's narrative of immigration and his identity as an "exiled Irishman," and he describes Ireland as his "motherland" and his "home," although he said he has not been to the Emerald Isle. In this sense, then, he identifies as part of an Irish diaspora. He also describes how he spiritually connects to the seasons of that motherland through ritual. Furthermore, Brian explains how his Gods are "within us," thus suggesting a notion of Gods being "in the blood" as described by Gardell (2003) regarding white-racist and ethnic Ásatrúars alike. And, like Macha, his narrative invokes an analogy with the Jewish diaspora, which I believe is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it helps frame his experience as one that he considers to be of *legitimate* diaspora by talking about his connection to Ireland being akin to how Jews connect to Israel as a diasporic community. In light of the traditional—and still current—understanding that ethnic Jews perceive Jewishness as a biologized (and thus racialized) matter of blood ancestry (Glenn 2002), a notion that usually includes a sense of ethnic connection to both the ethnic Jewish deity, but also to the Levant, Brian's choice of analogy also frames his sense of Irish identity *and* his connection to Irish deities and traditions as being the result of Irishness being just another biologized ethnicity, which in turn points back to his idea that each ethnic group is merely "different" but "equal." His statements also relate to Macha's suggestion that Levantine Americans could be Christian without becoming "schizophrenic," but that Euro-Americans would be better off if they followed the Gods and religious traditions of "their" ancestral peoples.

Aside from Macha, the only other ethnic informant who explicitly talked about blood memory was the Heathen Da Troll. He said, "I do believe a person can connect more with Gods that were worshipped by their ancestors. Kind of that racial memory

thing. I think that if you want to pursue the Gods of my ancestors, be you black, red, yellow or green, I will help you as long as you need help. I would certainly never deny someone because of race. I am, however, a mix of many nationalities and backgrounds.” At another point in our conversation, I asked him why he chose to mainly focus on Heathenry, and he said, “Because of ancestry. I kind of like the stories of Odin and Thor a little bit better.” As discussed in Chapter II, Da Troll is mostly of Scottish, German, and English ancestry. He previously had explored Celtic spirituality, but had felt more connected to Heathenry. He then further explained his view of blood memory, saying “I mean, of course, you have to have things that wake things up inside of you. It’s not like I’m going to remember my ancestors used to do this; boom I can do it, ya know.” In other words, blood memory does not provide specific cultural information, but it makes certain customs and values—as many ethnic informants phrased it—“resonate,” or as Macha said, “ring true to you” and “seem natural.” He explained his connection both with the God Thor and Heathen virtues in such terms: “Cause it seems right. It’s not something that I have to research or something”. He said he got the blood memory idea from his brother, who is also Neo-Pagan, and that his brother had explained it to him as, “You already know the way you’re supposed to be.” “I guess the virtues are already ingrained in you,” Da Troll said, “You already know the way you really should be acting. You know what you should be doing.” One of my goals of this research was to examine how Neo-Pagans with mixed European ancestry come to choose one ethnic tradition over another. For Da Troll, it appears that he considers blood memory to have been *one* factor, in that he believes it made Heathen myths, deities, and values “resonate” more with him than Celtic ones.

As discussed in the previous chapters, Da Troll explained his use of both Heathen and Native American elements on his altar by saying that he is mainly of Celtic and Germanic ancestry, but he also said, “I have a fair good bit of Native American blood in me. That’s why I think that I can use Native American spirituality.” While Gardell (2003) primarily discusses how white-racist and ethnic Ásatrúars use such biologized and racialized notions of ethnic ancestry to justify their choice of tradition, Da Troll highlights how it can simultaneously explain the draw to one primary ethnic focus *and* why one feels drawn to another ethnic tradition. In Da Troll’s narrative, he uses the notion of blood memory to explain why he feels drawn to Heathenry (while clearly stating that he would support anyone practicing Heathenry regardless of their ancestry) *and* why he connects to a Native American tradition and spiritual beings. Furthermore, his narrative about mixed blood memories also helps him avoid possible charges of cultural appropriation. In this sense, his use of blood memory is not unlike Mathcar’s implied use of it to explain why an African American woman at the 2012 Imbolc retreat might feel drawn to ADF, saying that she likely also has some European ancestry. My impression from our conversations, however, was that Mathcar did not know this woman well, nor her ancestry, and so he seems to have been ascribing mixed ancestry as one *possible* justification for her draw to ADF.

While some of my ethnic informants explicitly referenced blood memory or similar explanations for why they believe they and others choose specific ethnic Neo-Pagan traditions and identities, most either only implied such notions—usually in terms of blood ancestry making a certain tradition fit more easily and naturally, or, as discussed in Chapter V, they sought a tradition that emphasized blood ancestors and that they felt they could legitimately claim because of their ethnic ancestry, such as Thunor’s explanations in my

discussion about cultural appropriation. Thunor also implied blood memory when he talked about how he felt that German came easily to him *because* of his ancestry. The Irish Reconstructionist Fiona offers an example of how blood memory may be implied. She never referred specifically to blood memory, but she did connect her ethnoreligious identity and tradition to ideas of blood ancestry, saying:

My ancestry is heavily Irish, Scottish, British, French, German, so there's a lot of that kind of Celtic background, but as I was raised, it was always first pride of Irish ancestry. And so I think that informs a great deal of my ancestor worship in going to that Celtic line. But I honor, not just ancestors of my blood, but also ancestors of my spirit, and so others who have followed in the same spiritual path before me.

When asked if she saw a connection between her ancestry and the experience she reported of the Celtic Goddess Brigid or Bríd appearing to and claiming her, she said, “Yeah, I think that it is possible, just for the amount of Celtic ancestry that I’ve got. Having that kind of tie, that interest in my ancestry, could have made me more open to her making a connection.” She also said that, while her father had little knowledge of his family history, her last name is clearly Irish. However undocumented it may be, notions of Irish ancestry are an important part of her identification with Irish culture, history, and modern Irish Reconstructionism. Her statements suggest an implied notion of blood memory, as her statements describe her blood ancestry as making her more receptive to Irish deities initiating contact (as she offered a powerful hit-on-the-head narrative about Bríd), but she does not suggest that she believes that her bloodline *determined* her which tradition and ethnic pantheon she identifies with like Scaði’s statements do about her connection with Heathenry. This interpretation is further supported by her inclusion of “ancestors of spirit”

(as fictive ancestors are typically called in the Neo-Pagan community) in her ancestor worship.

The self-identified Druid Singing Dragon, an older man who just started identifying with and exploring Neo-Paganism a few years before I met him in 2011, often described his connection to Druidry and Celtic Neo-Pagan spirituality in terms of implied notions of blood memory as Macha had described it. When I asked him why he felt drawn to Celtic music, for example, he said, “I don’t know. It must be my ancestry. It’s just something about it. The tone, the words, everything. I can’t put a finger on it and say this is what it is. It’s just a feeling.” When I asked how long he had had that feeling, he said, “For years. As long as I can remember but it has only been really, realistically since I took my first step onto that path that I’ve actually been aware of it. Now I’ve always liked Scottish music and especially bagpipes. But I’m more in tune with all of the Celtic kind of music now. I guess it’s just because of my ancestry. I don’t know.”

Singing Dragon’s interest in his Scottish heritage intertwines deeply with his sense of Texan ancestry. He said of his interest in history and his family’s genealogy:

That’s how I know I’m a seventh generation native Texan of Scottish ancestry, because I’ve traced it back that far. I only haven’t been able to find out how we got from Scotland and Ireland, but I know that we came from there. But having that connection helps me understand more about who I am and why I feel so drawn to the Scots and the Celts, because it’s part of me, it’s part of who I am. But all of this that I’m learning how to do is so that I can understand why I do it. Why do I feel so drawn to it? It’s like a magnet, I feel it. It’s part of me.

Being both a native seventh-generation Texan *and* of Scottish descent are clearly crucial aspects of and important anchors for his identity. His ethnic heritage is not only part of who he is, but also a primary factor in his draw to Celtic Neo-Paganism. He believes much

of who he is comes from his Scottish ancestry, and so he feels he needs to find out more about his ancestry in order to find out more about who he is. He expanded on the centrality of these two foundational aspects of his identity and how they offer him a re-anchoring sense of pride, saying, “I’m a native Texan and I’m proud of it, but I am of Scottish ancestry. I am what I call a Scottish Texan.” Singing Dragon then explained that his chosen email address references both his Texan and Scottish heritage, which offers an example of how such Neo-pagans may re-mark their social identities in distinctly ethnic ways through modern social media.

Later in our conversation, Singing Dragon wrapped his Texan and Scottish heritages, his sense of Scotland as an ethnic homeland, his new gay identity [at the time of our interview, he had just started embracing his gay identity and was about to come out to his wife and seek a divorce], and his draw to Celtic Druidry into a layered package of self. He brought up the idea of Scotland—where he has never traveled—as an ethnic homeland and his desire to go there on pilgrimage, saying, “I mean, yeah, I’m Texan and I’m proud of it, but if I were to ever leave the United States of Texas as they say, and go to another country, it would be Scotland. If I could ever get there.” He continued:

For me, it’s something that I can say, this is me. You wanna know what makes me tick? This is what it is right here. I’m newly gay. I am from a long line of Texan and Scottish ancestry. And that’s what I’m made up of. This is what I can relate to. This is what I can sink my teeth into, and learn more about it and understand more about it and learn. It’s like you’re on the path, and you got different crossroads that eventually lead back to the same path.

Singing Dragon has not only merged his ethnic Scottish identity and his native Texan identity—both based on his ancestry—into one hybridized sense of self, but he has also merged these elements with his newly found gay and Neo-Pagan identities. He realized that

he is gay *and* that he is Neo-Pagan at around the same time, and he often referred to his ethnoreligious path as “Gay Druidry” during our interview and at many other times when we talked at CMA festivals and at other Neo-Pagan gatherings. I believe all of these elements—being Texan, of Scottish descent, gay, and a Celtic Neo-Pagan—are inextricably embedded within each other, and that together they form a primary anchor for him to re-moor himself in a world of meaning.

Singing Dragon explained that he felt “nudged” by his immigrant Celtic ancestors towards Druidry “because of my ancestry and knowing they had to be Pagans and Druids, especially in Scotland, they had to be Druids.” It is not clear in this statement if he thus means that he thinks his recent Scottish ancestors were self-identified “Druids,” but it is clear that he feels drawn to Celtic Druidry because of a sense of blood memory, but also possibly because he feels his pre-Christian Scottish ancestors are actively guiding him towards that specific ethnoreligious path. “I don’t know if I’ll wind up Druid or not,” he said, “I just know I’m being sorta gently nudged to kinda get back and understanding and do more Druid stuff, maybe more Druid rituals.” Like most of my informants and other Neo-Pagans I spoke with in the field, Singing Dragon here frames his religious journey as being more about a process than about having reached a destination, and he offers reasons for why he finds himself at the part of his journey he is currently experiencing.

In his discussion of why he felt drawn to and what he gets out of Druidry, Singing Dragon also touched upon a particularly poignant dilemma many of my ethnic informants described. As discussed in this and the previous chapters, notions of and values associated with blood kin are usually central to ethnic Neo-Pagans and their traditions; however, many of my informants described strained if not severed relationships with their blood relatives,

including their parents, the very family members through whom they inherited their blood lineages that are often so important in identifying with and choosing a specific ethnic form of Neo-Paganism. Tragically, many informants told me stories about how their family relationships were injured *because* they claimed a Neo-Pagan identity. Rejection by family for choosing Neo-Paganism has been explored by others, such as psychologists Roxana Wales (1994) and Ann Wilson (2005); however, I believe this particular dilemma—being part of an ethnoreligious tradition that deeply cares about blood ancestors and kin, while experiencing or risking rejection by one’s own parents and other blood kin for choosing such a religious tradition—requires more attention.

When I asked Singing Dragon to tell me more about how he feels his ancestry and family connect him to Druidry, he explained that he is not close to much of his living family of origin:

Well, because I am involved in a very dysfunctional family, and kind of grown up that way, I really didn’t have any family to relate to. And now my family is my two kids that are grown. They’re my family. They know I’m Druid Pagan. They know I’m gay. They don’t care, my Pagan brothers and my Gods. They are what I call my family. My blood family, I have no connection with them, they’re gone.

He thus describes having “dysfunctional” relationships with his living family of origin, despite valuing and resacralizing kinship and ethnic ancestors. He reconciles this dilemma, however, through the kinds of relationships with more distant ancestral kin offered by his Druidic path. Singing Dragon explained how Druidry makes such a resolution possible: “Well, I think because it’s my way to connect, to find out what happened before the family became dysfunctional.” Reconnecting with his ancient Scottish ancestors gives him an anchoring connection to blood kin without the disconnect he has with his immediate family

of origin. This ethnoreligious anchor also helps him weather the modern challenges he faces by considering his deities kin (which, as described in the previous chapters, is common among ethnic Neo-Pagans) and by forming resacralized fictive kin relationships with other gay Neo-Pagan men (including myself, whom he often calls his “brother”).

The Heathen shaman Baldur offered another personal narrative that elucidates this notion of blood memory. He told me a story about how he was in a mixed shamanic group. One member would drum a trance-inducing rhythm, while the others would go on individual shamanic “journeys” that lasted about 15 minutes. A complex tapestry of notions of blood memory and land spirits emerged from his narrative:

My shamanic journeys are very, very Norse. Another friend of mine, his shamanic journeys are very, very Celtic, because he’s Irish. And then someone else, they had a very weird journey... and it was very Native American. And they’re kinda new, and they’re tryin’ to understand what that meant. And my friend explained it very well. He said, “There is spirits of blood and there’s spirits of land. Myself and my friend, we’re very much tied to the spirits of the blood, of our ancestors, of the culture that we came from. You probably had a journey of the land. ‘Cause this is Native American land that we’re living on. There were Native American shamans in the feathers and... maybe right where we’re all sitting now. This was shamanic... their land. You might be tapping into the spirits of the land. Whereas, for whatever reason, we’re tapping into the spirits of our blood.”

And that’s why when I have a shamanic journey, when I go in the Underworld, it’s always like tundra. It’s always... there’s grass, and there’s always patchy snow. And there’s always this weird blue light of kinda like a Full Moon in winter time. Because I’m tapping into the spirits of the North. I grew up in South Texas. I’ve seen snow four or five times my entire life. But when I do a journey, that’s what I see. Because I’m tied to the journey of the Norse.

In this story, Baldur explains why he and his friend of Irish heritage each experienced their shamanic journeys as taking place in ethnic ancestral lands, even though—at least for Baldur (I cannot speak for his Irish friend)—he had never physically been to Scandinavia, which implies some notion of blood memory connecting him to such an environment.

Furthermore, he emphasizes how he has only experienced snow a few times in his life, yet his journeys are always in what he perceives to be the tundra environment of his Germanic ancestors, and thus of his ancestral homeland. It is worth noting, though, that he said his known ancestors came from Czechoslovakia and Germany, and neither of these regions have tundra, suggesting he conflates his Slavic and Germanic ancestry with the ancient Norse. These statements indicate some notion of blood memory, but they do not suggest an exclusionary blood-rights claim. Indeed, Baldur's story about the new member who perceived a Native American experience reveals that he does not believe that one's blood ancestry or memory necessarily *determines* one's shamanic journey experience (and, by inference, with which tradition one connects), but the belief that spirits of the land can also play a role. These spirits are homogenized as "Native American," seemingly romanticized based on the reference to shamans with feathers, and ascribed to some sort of cultural, spiritual imprint left by the real or perceived practices of pre-Columbian shamans at that place.

The Irish and Welsh-focused ADF Druid Jill offers another kind of nuanced narrative that suggests some sort of blood memory idea, while in some ways de-emphasizing blood ancestry. She explained that she had "always" felt drawn to Irish culture, saying, "When I was in Church of Christ, the Irish songs were the ones I loved the most." When she first found Neo-Paganism, she started in Wicca and felt most drawn to Irish deities. Then she explored Witta, an Irish-focused variant of Wicca. She then found ADF Druidry and continued to focus on Irish deities and lore in her practice, including forming a relationship with her Irish patron Goddess, Clíodhna (described in Chapter III)

and then incorporating Welsh deities and lore after she read the mediaeval collection of Welsh mythology, the *Mabinogion*.

Jill explained that she was adopted at birth and that she never connected with her English last name or adoptive lineage. She made contact with her birthmother when she was 30 years old, a few years before our interview and well after she had joined ADF. She asked her birthmother about her “bloodline” and found out that her birthmother is of Irish-German descent and that her birthfather is of Irish descent. When she discovered these lines of ethnic heritage, she responded, “And I’m like, well, hello. That’s cool. That’s where I want to go. Even though I’ve never been to Ireland, I’ve never been to Wales.” She also said Ireland and Wales were “part of me since I can remember.” Her statements here, as well as those described earlier about how she anticipates that going to Ireland and Wales will “be like going home,” suggest a kind of post hoc use of blood memory to explain why she had “always” felt drawn to Irish lore, deities, and culture.

The notion of a blood connection also came to light when I asked Jill about the relationship between her ancestry and her Celtic focus in tradition. She explained, “I follow my true bloodline is Irish. German, I’ve never felt a tie to German. Never.” I asked her why she felt more connected to the Celtic side of her ancestry. “I don’t know. But through looking at some of it, I’m starting to think maybe it’s not a true half and half. That it might be more like three-fourths and a fourth, maybe, or two-thirds and a third, but more heavy on the Irish side.” Jill thus explains her attraction to Celtic deities and traditions over Germanic ones by way of blood percentage: she has more Irish blood ancestry than German, and thus has “always” been drawn to Celtic culture. This focus on blood ancestry

is all the more evident considering her adoptive family was described as being of English descent, and so cultural inheritance does not seem to have been a factor in her view.

With this implication of blood memory as an explanation for choosing one ethnic Neo-Pagan focus over another, I asked Jill to explain her draw to incorporating Welsh deities and lore into her personal ADF practice, which she has carried so far as to make Welsh-focused adaptations of ADF rituals for herself. She offered an interesting explanation grounded in her reading of Celtic ethnohistory in addition to blood memory: “I fell in love with Wales, and then I learned about more of the history and the trade back and forth between Ireland and Wales, and the marriage back and forth. So, there might be some bloodline back there that was Wales in me. I don’t know. I’m one of those ones that I don’t really care. It’s what I’m drawn to.” She first suggests that she may have Welsh ancestry due to inter-Celtic mixing in her ancestral past (which is an ethnohistorical possibility), but then de-emphasizes the issue of “bloodlines” by framing her interest in Welsh culture as something she is merely “drawn to.” This kind of inconsistency or hedging regarding the importance of ethnic heritage in choosing an ethnic-focused tradition often emerged from my data, which I believe reveals that many such individuals are either unsure of its role as a factor, or are wary of making too strong of an ethnic claim for fear of seeming overly ethnocentric or racist.

Jill explained that when she first found out that she had Celtic “somewhere in the bloodline,” she first thought it was merely coincidental to her longtime interest in and focus on Celtic deities and lore. “But now I’m starting to realize the more and more people I’ve talked to, how many people that’s what they get drawn to of whatever their bloodline really is,” she said, “And they may never know it, and then one day find it out in older age, like

me.” Jill described her thoughts on how the process of connecting with a tradition may or may not relate to one’s ethnic ancestry:

So when we get drawn to the Pagan path, particularly, we always go to some sort of culture that we feel at home in. And so there’s a couple routes that people take. Some people look at their own ancestry, and say, “This is what I’m going to follow.” Some of us don’t know that right away, and so we go to what calls and feels home to us at first, and then later find out, hey, it really is part of our bloodwork [*sic*]. Then there’s some that know what their bloodlines are, and they still don’t feel at home with them, and go toward another one. So there are three different pulls. And mine just happened to be the one where I found my home, and I found it in ADF, and I found my culture in ADF. And then I found that my bloodline matched that which I was following. And even when I wasn’t in ADF and I was in Wicca, it was the Celtic Gods.

Here Jill offers a narrative describing how she believes one *may* be drawn to a certain ethnic focus based on one’s “bloodline” without necessarily *knowing* one’s ethnic ancestry at the time, which she identifies as what drew her to Celtic deities and traditions and to ADF, which she considers her “culture” and her spiritual “home.” This idea echoes the notion of blood memory described by Macha and Da Troll. She also proposes that some may intentionally choose a tradition based on their ancestry, as exemplified by how the Heathen Thunor looked to his own ethnic heritage when seeking a tradition that included ancestor worship.

Jill’s statements also suggest that some individuals may simply not connect with a tradition tied to their ethnic ancestry. Both of the Hellenics whom I interviewed—Azure and Guy—said cultural heritage and encounters with Greek deities were their main draws. Guy said he has no Greek ancestry; for him, the connection came through cultural heritage due to the Greek influences in American culture. Azure said she is half German, a quarter Greek, a quarter Italian, and has “a smidge of Navajo thrown in there.” She told me that

she is aware that some Neo-Pagans think one's genes play a role, and so I asked her about racial or blood memory possibly being a factor for her. She said it *might* be a factor, but she did not seem to think it was for her: "Because I'm half German, you would think I would be more towards the Germanic stuff, right? But, not so much. And even Strega [Italian Witchcraft], or something with Italy, but it's always been Greek. So I'm not sure." This last statement is in contrast to Jill's reasoning that she is more drawn to Celtic traditions and deities than to Germanic ones because she believes she has more Celtic ancestry.

Blaidh, the Celtic Heathen, similarly expressed ambivalence about considering her own ethnic ancestry as being particularly relevant to her syncretized focus on Celtic and Heathen deities and practices. When I asked her whether her ancestry mattered, she explained, "I know what I'm doing is right." I ask where she thinks that certainty that what she's doing is right comes from, and she said, "I guess there's gotta be somethin' there. I don't know. It could be blood. I really don't know. There could be a connection in there. I don't know. There might be some spiritual connection there to it." At another point in our conversation, she explained, "I am pretty much a mutt when it comes to my ethnic heritage, and it turns out all but one of my deities has at least some tie-ins with my ethnic heritage so it just kinda worked out that way. They choose me."

Blaidh then explained that she sometimes does certain practices, and later finds out through research that the Celts or Norse had such practices, an explanation that is similar to Fiona's description of Substantiated Personal Gnosis. "I just kind of instinctively did it that way, and sometimes you just go off instinct then it turns out the instinct was the way it was," she said. She continued, telling me that some of her great-grandparents were Eastern European, which she felt connects her to Europe. She then, however, returned to the idea

of “gut instinct”: “It’s like my intuition telling me, this is the right thing to do, this is what you need to be doing. And I feel that that’s a part of it. My ethnicity is a part of that.” Later, she added, “I don’t know if it has to do with my cultural heritage or my being who I am that made it turn out this way. I will say that I am proud of the people I come from.” Her statements suggest that her ancestry—which she described as “Celtic, Dutch-Scandinavian, Germanic, and Slavic”—*may* be perceived as a factor in her choice of Celtic and Heathen traditions. She clearly is proud of her ancestors, and her reference to “instinct” and “intuition” seem to point to an implied notion of blood memory.

Ethnic Ancestry and Deity Instigation Narratives

One option that the ADF Druid Jill did not include in her narrative explaining how people may come to identify with a certain ethnic path is to have a hit-on-the-head experience or divine omen. Jill herself first has her story of an Irish Goddess, Clíodhna, claiming her as described in Chapter III. For example, the Irish Reconstructionist Fiona shared such a narrative regarding her claiming by the Irish Goddess, Bríd, which occurred when she almost died in a car wreck as a child:

I look up and there’s Bríd. And She didn’t give me her name but she said, “Look, you’ve been barking up this Christianity tree, and it’s not done you any lick of good and you know it. That’s because you’re mine.” And she said, “You have work to do. Go back down there. And your first instruction: find me. Find out who I am.” And so my next memory is waking up with my knee pinned underneath the suburban, and I’ve knocked a tooth out and got blood all over everywhere. And it was right when they had put me on a stretcher to take me to Starflight that I knew that there was something spiritually significant right at that moment. I didn’t know what it was, but I knew that it was there. And it was over the next week as I was professing what was happening to me that I really started to get a sense of the gravity of what I had experience.

So I'd spent the next few years in research I guess I'd call it, and it's always been, everything's been based on research to find out who she was. And I came to her finally. And I was like, "I know this is it." And she was like, "Yep that's it. So alright. Next moving on. Start preparing yourself. You will be my priestess." And so for years I have been studying everything I can to prepare myself.... And that's how I got, I guess, wrapped up with Bríd. I am hers.

Fiona grew up in the Reorganized Church of Latter Day Saints tradition of those Mormons from Missouri who did not migrate with Brigham Young to Utah. Despite her RLDS religious upbringing, she described how her encounter with Bríd (before she knew who the Goddess was) led her eventually not only to Neo-Paganism, but specifically to Irish Reconstructionism, as well as (at least in part) to her scholarly interests in the mediaeval Celtic world.

The Celtic Heathen Blaidd said she likes non-Celtic and non-Germanic deities, such as Kali and Pan, but she said she never feels drawn to worship them. Rather, she offered narratives about spiritual experiences in which she was claimed by the Welsh God Gwyn ap Nudd and the Norse Goddess Freyja. Her story about encountering her patron deity (to whom she is now a dedicated priestess), Gwyn, the Welsh God of the Underworld, is similar in many ways to Fiona's hit-on-the-head narrative, except hers came in dreams:

I started having dreams about him pretty early on. I was still really connected to the Cernunnos. Like, the different ones. And I've always felt drawn toward hunter deities and woodland deities. I grew up in the country. I grew up in a hunting family. I've always felt drawn to nature. Well, Gwyn, I didn't know who he was at first when I encountered him. So, basically, he shot me with an arrow [*laughs*] in my dreams. And I turned into a hound, and I was actually running with his hounds.

Blaidd had begun her Neo-Pagan journey in Celtic Reconstructionism, but had also begun exploring Heathenry when these experiences began. When I asked her about her (hard polytheistic) relationship with Gwyn, she said:

Basically, he's my predominant deity. He's always first. He's first in my heart. I call him my Anwell, my Beloved. It's Welsh for beloved. And I'm learning a little bit of Welsh here and there. I have Celtic ancestry. We come from all over that area, though, so there's no pinning it down. I definitely don't have Scotch Irish, but everything else. I just identify with the Welsh a lot more. So, that's what I ended up with. I don't know. It just kinda happened.

In these statements, we can see a combination of both Celtic ancestry *and* a narrative of being claimed by a Celtic deity used to explain Blaidd's Celtic focus in her syncretized Celtic Heathen practice and her relationship with Gwynn ap Nudd, both of which are deeply intertwined.

Blaidd also worships the Norse Vanir deities (as opposed to the more commonly worshipped Æsir). Of all the Heathens I spoke with, she and Baldur were the only ones who principally identified with the more fertility-centered and agricultural Vanir than with the more warlike Æsir. She explained how the Celtic and Norse aspects of her religious life operate, saying, "My spiritual morals come more from the Heathen, but my spiritual love comes more from, I guess, the Celtic. I mean, it blends really well together." She also said she has Germanic ancestry and that she is a European "mutt." In addition to the Celtic, Norse, and Slavic deities with whom she has relationships and worships (especially the Slavic Goddess Mokosh and the Irish Goddess Macha), the Vanir Goddess of fertility Freyja has become particularly important to her. "Yes, I have a patron God. Gwynn ap Nudd is my God," she explains, "And I suppose Freyja is becoming one of my patron Goddesses. She seems to be coming more and more a part of my everyday [life]." In typical hard polytheistic fashion, her claiming narrative describes how Freyja initiated contact and has pursued a relationship with her, despite Blaidd's initial resistance: "I ran away from her for so long. I've never been really girly. I was a horrible tomboy. I've

become girly because of her. But, yeah, I have a connection with Freyja that I never thought I'd have. And I realize that she's a warrior Goddess, but she's so girly [*laughs*]. And I wasn't expecting that, 'cause when I think of a Freyja's woman, I think really beautiful." She then explained that she has seen women worshippers of Freyja, and that she thinks they are very beautiful and beautifully dressed women, that that is what she expects women connected to Freyja to be like, and that she has had a hard time seeing herself that way. She explained, "So, basically, she hit me in the head with a frying pan, and said, 'You will pay attention to me. And it will be like this [*laughs*].'"

Blaid's hit-on-the-head claiming narrative does not seem to be her way of explaining her draw to Heathenry in general (rather, the Nine Noble Virtues appear to be her primary draw), but it *is* used to explain her strong connection with this particular Norse deity, Freyja. This narrative also helps strengthen her tie with Heathen tradition, which is somewhat tenuous, as she is not in a Heathen group, but is in a fairly eclectic traditional Wiccan coven. "I'm a Heathen that practices Witchcraft, which to some is kind of not good," she explained, pointing to how that situation can present challenges. She does, however, insert Heathen elements into rituals with that coven. She led her first Heathen *blót* ritual (see Strmiska 2007), for example, during Calan Mai (the Welsh May Day) with her coven and others who used to be in the coven, which she said demonstrated her "Heathenry aspect." Furthermore, performing this Heathen ritual to celebrate the Welsh festival of Calan Mai highlights her own fusion of Celtic and Norse elements.

Loki offers a similar combination of blood ancestry and deity instigation to explain his draw to Heathenry. At the time of our interview in April of 2011, he had been Neo-Pagan for almost thirteen years, and he explained his journey thusly:

When I first started studying Paganism, started doin' my own research, the first books I picked up were just general Wicca Paganism books. And they were always mentioning the Greek and Roman Gods and stuff like that. And I'm like, okay, I like 'em, and I like the mythologies, but they just don't call to me. So I just continued research. And I know my family is from southern England. That gives me the Celtic and the Anglo-Saxon bloodlines. And I've got German and Dutch blood in me, so it gives me the Germanic bloodlines. I'm like, let me start looking into that. So I started out first looking into the Celtic and Druid path, and then started working a little bit with Norse.

And then about a year ago, at the last Beltane festival, somebody... back then, I still considered myself an eclectic Pagan with Celtic and Norse influence. I wasn't exactly Ásatrú, but I has started studying more and more about Ásatrú. And [I] walked to the revel fire and there's a guy standing there. Never met him. He just looks at me and goes, "You're Loki." I'm like, huh, what? And he said, "You look like my picture of Loki." I'm like, okay. I'll take that. And I'm like, I guess somebody somewhere is trying to tell me somethin'. And then about a month after the last Beltane festival, I was standing in my backyard talkin' on my cell phone to a friend, and happened to look up in the sky, and right directly above me was a cloud shaped like a Thor's hammer. I'm like, okay, if that's not a sign from the Gods then I'm blind. So I'm like, okay, somebody is definitely tellin' me that I'm headed in the right direction and Ásatrú is the path that I need to involve myself with. And that was about a year ago, so that's the way I've been headed ever since then.

I then asked Loki to elaborate on how he sees his blood ancestry relating to his current path, and he explained:

I think it's a strong influence on my path, because I followed it back. And I'm like, okay, the Greek Gods, I like 'em, I like their mythologies, but they're not calling to me. The Roman Gods, they're not calling to me. The Egyptian Gods, they're not calling to me. The Celtic Gods, they called to me, but they weren't quite strong enough. The Norse Gods, they really called to me. And, like I said, it's just a progression, 'cause I can trace my bloodline back to southern England all the way through the mid-1000's. And so that's a strong Celtic and Anglo-Saxon influence right there. And that's the Gods that have called to me.

Loki's narrative reveals several intertwined elements that he describes as important factors that led him to his current tradition. Like most Neo-Pagans I have known (and like myself), he first encountered Neo-Paganism by way of Wicca, which appears to be the most

common route, most likely due to the larger Wiccan population and abundance of books written on it relative to other traditions. He did not, however, feel that the Greco-Roman and Egyptian deities popular in Wicca “called” to him, so he sought to find which pantheon best connected with him. To do this, he looked to his family’s ancestral “blood,” and determined that his mixed European lineages “give” him Celtic and several Germanic “bloodlines.” While still identifying as Eclectic, he looked to Celtic traditions and deities, but found the call of the Celtic Gods was not “quite strong enough,” though he did incorporate some Celtic elements into his practice at the time, along with some Germanic ones. Then he had two experiences in the previous year that appear to have been pivotal: an unknown man at a Beltane festival said he looked like the Norse God Loki, and soon thereafter he saw a cloud in the form of Thor’s hammer (a primary symbols of Ásatrú and Heathenry in general). He interprets both of these events as omens that the Gods wanted him to follow an Ásatrú path, which he described by saying, “It feels like I’m home.” Loki explained that he more recently has begun to look more towards his Anglo-Saxon heritage, and feels that he has been “drifting to the Anglo-Saxon names” or cognates of the Norse deities; for example, he said he now honors Woden rather than Odin.

Loki’s narratives reveal how notions of ethnic ancestry (which may be as broad as Germanic—or even “Indo-European” in ADF Druidry—or as narrow as Anglo-Saxon) and experiences perceived as divine omens or instances of being “called” by specific pantheons can equally be crucial factors for some Neo-Pagans when determining which ethnoreligious tradition best aligns with and helps re-anchor their identities. They also exemplify how ethnic Neo-Pagans may choose from among their European ethnic heritages when they have mixed ancestry (which seems to be the case for most if not all of my informants, and

many white Americans in general). These statements also reveal how such religious journeys are often perceived and experienced by individuals as on-going processes that may have unexpected twists and turns. Indeed, most of my informants emphasized that they felt at home in their current traditions, and that those traditions served their needs at the moment, but that they may well end up changing down the road.

Ethnic Outliers

While European ancestry in general and specific European ethnic lineages in many cases, ancestor veneration, and hard polytheistic relationships with deities—or some combination thereof—were often central elements in the stories my ethnic informants shared, it is important to note that—to my surprise—these were *not* important factors for a very small minority of my ethnic informants. I spoke with one woman in a Welsh-focused Wiccan coven, for example, who felt no particular connection to Welsh culture or ancestors, but just so happened to have become involved with a Welsh-focused coven.

Another individual, Sam, practices the Arthurian Druidic tradition invented by Douglas Monroe and described in *The 21 Lessons of Merlyn: A Study in Druid Magic and Lore* (1993) and *The Lost Books of Merlyn: Druid Magic from the Age of Arthur* (1998). Sam was Baptist until he was 16, when he decided to explore other forms of Protestantism, but he felt no connection and said he “could not find a home.” Then he looked into other world religions, including Islam, which he rejected because of its similarities to Christianity. He liked the ideals and practices of Buddhism, “but it wasn’t screaming out for me,” he said. Then he looked at Neo-Paganism, starting with Wicca, but “nothing matched up.” He then found *The 21 Lessons of Merlyn*, “and a lot of the ideals and the philosophies rang very true”

to how his father raised him he explained. This was especially the case with taking responsibility for oneself, a value he found in Monroe's tradition:

In Druidry, I'm permitted to anything I want to, so long as I'm willing to assume responsibility for it. That rang so true to me. It made sense. It just took what my father had taught me about own up for what you do, and put it in a religious context. It was so real to me. It made it so accessible and approachable. Druidry, as far as a magickal tradition and a nature tradition is very, very intuitive, and that made Druidry intuitive for me, because it was what I was raised to believe. Assume responsibility for your actions. Own up.

Sam was attracted to a tradition because of the values his father taught him, yet he had been rejected by his Christian father for identifying with Neo-Paganism. As previously discussed in this chapter, my data suggest this kind of dilemma of caring deeply about kinship as part of one's ethnoreligious tradition, while risking or experiencing alienation from living (usually Christian) kin is not unusual. Sam later went to a local PNO event, where met his "Druid teacher," who prepared him for initiation into Monroe's tradition for about a year. He was initiated "into the Druid clergy" in 1998.

Celtic Reconstructionists tend to view Monroe's tradition as inauthentic based on their folk historical notions of authenticity, because Monroe—much like the founder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Joseph Smith—claims to have privileged access to an ancient Druidic manuscript, the "Book of Pheryllt," upon which he asserts he based his tradition. While some ADF Druids appear to like Monroe's books—for example, Jill said she found *The 21 Lessons of Merlyn* inspiring, many do not. Monroe's tradition came up in Sean's authenticity discussion at the 2012 ADF Imbolc retreat, where it was roundly challenged for its lack of ethnohistorical substantiation based on the folk historical criteria ADF espouses (described in Chapter II). Isaac Bonewits (2006), the founder of ADF, and

other popular ADF authors and bloggers (e.g., Serith 2000 and Beckett 2012) have also strongly criticized the tradition as an inauthentic form of Druidry (but not *necessarily* an inauthentic form of Neo-Paganism).

Unlike most of my ethnic informants, Sam was not interested in historical research, which explains why Monroe's tradition was acceptable to him. He said he likes to read about the Celtic past, but he does not think it impacts his practice much. He looks to Celtic mythology and lore "as examples of how to live a good life, and how to function in reality in the real world and whatnot." He further explained:

[Celtic myths,] they're antiquated, but you can extrapolate good ideas from them. But I don't use that for my religious practice, because my religion's a living religion, although it's very weak. But it's evolved so far beyond anything that was written down in the past that it's irrelevant now. I mean, for the most part. Because what matters is the practice today. I can't help the modern people today with a whole lot of the stories that aren't necessarily up to par with today's standards. We're a tradition of storytellers, and I tell stories in modern contexts to make them accessible and understandable for the practitioner.

For Sam, folklore and ethnohistory are only useful as sources of lessons that may help him and those he seeks to help. This tradition thus offers him a system of values by which he re-anchors himself in the face of modern challenges, regardless of charges of inauthenticity.

When I asked about his views about Celtic culture and mythology, he explained:

Well, I'm a Druid, and Druids come out of Celtic lands. That's the most indicative thing I have of how my ancestors and practitioners of my religion had lived is to look at their mythology. It's not very directly accessible for me to read the *Bhagavad Gita* to see how the Celts lived. I mean, that's Indian. So I try to go with what is most directly accessible. I enjoy the mythology more. It's just personal preference, too.

I believe his reference to "my ancestors" here refers to the ancestors of his tradition, rather than of his blood or adoptive lineages. Sam's lack of ethnic focus—despite identifying as a

“Druid”—is highlighted by his use of Biblical stories “to teach Druid lessons.” He said he prefers reading Celtic mythology if he is going to read mythology, but he re-emphasized, “It’s just a personal choice.”

When I asked Sam about the importance of ethnic or blood ancestry, he told me his father was adopted. He explained, “I reject my biological heritage from my dad’s paternal side. And I assume the heritage of my adoptive grandfather.” His adoptive grandfather’s ancestry was Welsh, and they came to America in the seventeenth century. He said he is interested in his adoptive Welsh lineage, but that he felt any connection to ethnohistorical Welsh Druids was “lost after several centuries of disconnected worship and conversion to Christianity.” I interpret his earlier contrast with the *Bhagavad Gita* and Celtic mythology to indicate that he prefers the latter because it is more culturally accessible, not because he particularly bases his connection to Monroe’s Druidry on his tenuous sense of adoptive Celtic ethnicity.

When it comes to ancestor relationships, Sam only includes his adoptive grandfather, whom he knew in life, and he finds it hard to connect with more distant (blood or adoptive) ancestors. “You have to build a rapport with them, as though they were alive, and it’s much more difficult and it’s harder to do [if you did not know them]” he explained. He knew his grandfather, and so that rapport was based on those experiences. He said he believes he knows the advice his grandfather would give, and so he imagines what he would say, which Sam sees as a form of reassuring communication. Unlike the kinds of crucial ancestor relationships described in the previous chapters by most of my ethnic informants, ethnic ancestors and ancestry do not appear to be of great import in Sam’s ethnoreligious life or in choosing a tradition.

Sam's deity relationships are equally ambivalent when it comes to ethnicity. Arawn, the Welsh God of the Underworld (Annwfn), and Pan, the Greek God of nature and male sexuality, are his primary deities. He explained that he is drawn to Arawn because of his Otherworld associations and his reputation for acting honorably. "And that rang very true to me," he said, "I liked that. It meant a lot to me." He likes Arawn's ethics in the lore, cares about the idea of being his servant, and is drawn to eschatology and helping people through death and dying. As for Pan, Sam said he sees him as a country God of "sex and reverie. That's fun," and that he is a protective deity or wild nature. "He's a guardian spirit. That rings very true to me, too," he explained, "I like that he's guardian, and that I can be part of that. That kind of pulls me into Pan even more." "Sex and death. Those are the two that I'm drawn to the most," he said, "And I think that probably feeds into the Druidic idea of certain life lessons to learn. Maybe that's why they were put in my path, 'cause I have lessons to learn from the worship of those two Gods." After recognizing that not all Druids agree with him, he told me he believes all deities "are nothing but a different face of the same God. It's just another aspect that he—or she—chooses to put on for whatever reason is within their divine desire. It's all the same thing. It's just a different face." In other words, he is a soft polytheist, unlike most of my ethnic informants, including the ADF Druids.

Sam's theological divergence with more Reconstructionist-leaning ethnic Neo-Pagans, his little interest in and concern for ancestors beyond his one grandfather, his lack of deep connection with or draw to his ethnic blood ancestry, and his general disinterest in ethnohistorical or even folk historical authentication all reveal—in contrast to my initial predictions—that individuals *may* identify with a tradition that has at least some degree of

ethnic underpinning for reasons other than those I expected (although I believe re-anchoring of identity is still a motivation in Sam's case). Sam self-identifies as a "Druid," a term with a distinctly Celtic origin and one that continues to carry Celtic meanings in the Neo-Pagan community, without having great concern about those factors. As I have aspired to demonstrate in this and the preceding chapters, however, my data suggest that the overwhelming majority of my ethnic informants usually care deeply about most or all of those elements, and were drawn to a specific ethnic tradition, such as ADF Druidry, Heathenry, Hellenism, and ethnic forms of Witchcraft because of them.

Middle Paths?

Racism Versus Ethnic Pride and the Revalorization of European Ancestry

A prominent feature of ethnic Neo-Pagan efforts to forge what I term a "middle path" (a notion similar to Mattias Gardell's [2003] idea of "ethnic *Ásatrú*" in many ways, except that I locate middle paths as lying between overt white-supremacist racism and cultural appropriation, rather than only in relation to the former) is the idea that these overwhelmingly white individuals are trying to find ways in modern American society to say that their own European ethnic ancestry, ancestors, and identities—as discussed in various ways in the previous chapters—matter as much as those of racial and ethnic minorities, but to do so in ways that are not perceived by the practitioners—and ideally by others in US society—as racist. This is a challenging goal for ethnic Neo-Pagans, because the value of European ethnicities has largely disappeared as those identities were merged during the construction of whiteness (Roediger 1999 [1991], 2005; cf. Bonnett 1998; Kaufmann 2006), to the point that they are now often seen as uninteresting and "diluted" (Waters 1990:152),

and because overtly referencing and giving value to the unmarked white racial social category would call attention to the very privilege that whiteness bestows *because* of its unmarkedness (Franks 2001:7; Lipsitz 1995, 1998:1; Nelson 2008; Wilkins 2008). Sociologist Amy Wilkins argues that this very unmarkedness also renders whiteness “boring and unhip” (2008:248), and social psychologist Cheryl Franks observes that its normative, “invisible” quality makes whites feel that their racial identity is “just there but nothing that really defines me” (2001:7). In response to this devaluation, I believe that ethnic Neo-Pagans are attempting to forge middle paths that allow them to mitigate cultural appropriation—which, as described in Chapter V, they often find problematic, while simultaneously working to revalorize their European racial and ethnic identities, so they may serve as meaningful anchors of identity in our globalized modern world.

I have seen this dilemma about revalorizing whiteness and European ancestry played out many times when discussing race in the introduction to anthropology courses I teach. I find that my non-white students—particularly Hispanic and African American ones—are often culturally equipped to articulate their understandings about their own racial identities and white privilege, and appear comfortable, confident, and proud doing so. My white students, on the other hand, are usually quite able to recognize and talk about white privilege and racism against non-whites, but they seem to struggle and to be uncomfortable talking about their own white racial identities. I suspect my white students often react this way because they are conscious of their own exposed privilege, and because they believe to express pride in their whiteness in any way incurs the risk of being wrongly perceived as white-supremacists (which I believe they wish to avoid), and because they have not been enculturated to have what Franks calls a “positive White identity” (2001:7).

My data suggest that my ethnic Neo-Pagan informants—to varying degrees—are attempting to forge a middle path between being (and being perceived as) racist white supremacists and having a racial identity that they perceive as devoid of all value, and that they are doing so by reconfiguring, revaluing, reclaiming, and remarking European ethnic-specific identities (in most cases), “Indo-European” identities (in the case of ADF), or, in some cases, both kinds of identities depending on the context. As I often say in my “elevator pitch” of this project, it is the difference between saying, “I’m proud of my white heritage” and “I’m proud to of my Irish heritage.” In the contemporary US, the former will likely be interpreted by whites and non-whites alike—rightly or wrongly—as meaning that the speaker is proud of her racial privilege and that she believes her race is superior; the latter (while it inevitably does reference back to whiteness) has at least the *potential* to be interpreted as meaning that the speaker is proud of her ethnic heritage without *necessarily* implying she believe her ethnic heritage (and attached identity) is superior to any other, just that it is “different,” a perspective exemplified by the Irish Druid Brian’s comments about ethnic “equality.”

Gardell (2003) found that ethnic Heathens almost always base their spirituality, values, and ethos on the premise of ethnic blood rights for people of northern European ancestry, or what Ásatrúar writer Stephen McNallen termed “metagenetics” (Gardell 2003:269-270; contra Kaplan 1997:80), wherein one’s religious identity and tradition are presumed to flow from one’s blood ancestry. My data suggest that “Indo-European,” Celtic, Slavic, Hellenic, and other ethnic Neo-Pagans, in addition to Heathens, may perceive their traditions and identities as resulting from their ethnic blood ancestry, including by way of “blood memory,” but also—as in the case of Hellenism—by way of notions of European

cultural memory and heritage. In this scenario, ideas of European ethnic groups, “bloodlines,” and ancestry continue to be conflated into racialized whiteness, though in novel resacralized ways. My ethnographic data reveal that several ethnic Neo-Pagan traditions in addition to ethnic Ásatrú represent perhaps less contentious but nonetheless problematic middle path strategies that allow them to reconfigure and revalorize their white identities in new ways through the reconstruction of ethnic-based identities and traditions.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION



Figure 42: “White History Month” sign (after Epstein 2015b)

On March 4, 2015, while I was writing up my research, Rick Epstein (2015b) reported that a controversial sign appeared on a storefront window in Flemington, New Jersey. The sign (Figure 42), which read, “Celebrate your white heritage in March, White History Month,” had been posted by Jim Boggess, the white owner of Jimbo’s Deli. Bhakti Curtis, who is of black and white bi-racial descent, objected to the sign as racist, because he believed it was “mocking Black History Month” (Epstein 2015b). Curtis asked the owner to remove it and was denied. Curtis filed a complaint with the local police, who determined that the sign was not racist. While Boggess removed the sign by the next day and apologized to Curtis, who accepted his apology (Epstein 2015a), this story led immediately to a firestorm of heated discourses on the original news website (Epstein 2015a) and on social media, such as Facebook, about race, racism, and usually unmarked white privilege. I believe this story and the public response to it get at the heart of what many of my predominantly working and middle-class white informants in Texas are wrestling with as

they try to revalorize and resacralize European ancestors (be they ancestors of blood or of tradition) in the still racially charged landscape of the contemporary US.

Epstein reported that Boggess agreed with the police assessment that his “White History Month” sign was not racist or insulting and that he was merely “exercising his right of free expression” (2015b). Boggess is reported as having defended his sign and its message, stating, “No matter what you are—Muslim, Jewish, black, white, gay, straight—you should be proud of what you are. I shouldn’t have to feel bad about being white.” He further said that the only racial discrimination happening was due to those who took exception at his sign “because I’m white” (Epstein 2015b). Boggess is reported as saying “that while other groups have their own celebrations, I just want to be included. Why is this such a big deal? I don’t get it” (Epstein 2015b), and, “I love everybody and everybody should celebrate what they are” (Epstein 2015a). The next day the sign had been taken down. However, based on the second report (Epstein 2015a), it seems that Boggess remained mystified as to why his sign was so controversial and why it was considered by some to be racist. “I never meant it to be a black/white thing. I only meant it to be a white thing,” he said (Epstein 2015a). He apparently thought the controversy was merely because some had “twisted the meaning” of his sign (Epstein 2015a).

I posted a news article about this controversy on Facebook on March 10, 2015, along with a statement that I support things like Black History Month that celebrate the representations, experiences, and voices of marginalized groups. I also explained that I saw no need for Boggess’s assertion, because, as I said, “*Every* month is ‘White History Month.’” My post—which reflected my frustration at the moment—almost immediately led to a heated debate among myself, one of my ethnic Neo-Pagan informants (whom I call John

here due to the sensitive nature of this conversation), and a few other friends. After I laid out in further detail why I considered the sign and its message to essentially be an effort to reinforce white privilege, John responded, “So, since some white straight men were privileged growing up, those of us who fought and scraped for every inch are undeserving of a month? Because of our race, wieners and love of women? Sounds like discrimination.”

I responded to John’s comment by asking if he meant he wanted a celebration of hard work, in which case we already have Labor Day, but I would support a month celebrating such labor; I did not, however, see how that related to a purported need to celebrate “White History Month.” John responded:

Does anyone need a month? No, no one needs a month. So what you are essentially saying is white, vagina-loving men are undeserving. You can’t use logic to cut only one way. If a black vagina-loving woman is deserving, then so is a brown, wiener-loving man. And so is an Asian wiener-loving woman. Either we are all deserving, or no one is deserving. Racism is racism. Discrimination is discrimination. It is like when you say you are only intolerant of intolerant people.

At this point in the Facebook conversation, I expanded on my opinions about white privilege and how I believe we celebrate white history every week of every year in the US. I then questioned how—given the usual focus on whites in American history—were whites being discriminated against by challenging the sign and its message. I also asked what John meant by “deserving” in his statements. “Ok let’s stick to straight color. If you want equality, everyone must be equal. If you do not treat everyone as equal, then not one person is deserving of equality,” John replied, “Saying ‘white people had it good.’ And then discriminating against them because of it makes a person no better than white who held the black man down by the neck. Discrimination is discrimination.” Another conversation

participant then argued that he agreed we do not need a month celebrating “White History,” but that he also did not believe “being exclusionary is absolutely wrong.” John responded, saying, “I am the opposite. I don’t believe in exclusion. I think you shouldn’t be able to discriminate for race, color, or sexuality.” The conversation continued for a bit, and John ended his participation by saying, “I honestly see no way towards total equality as long as people keep highlighting the differences.”

I have laid out this online conversation in detail because I believe the controversy that emerged around the original “White History Month” sign and the ensuing heated discussion I had with one of my ethnic informants about the sign and its message highlight the core dilemma with which my ethnic Neo-Pagan informants are wrestling regarding the perceived devaluation of their white identities and European heritage. I also believe it offers some of the contours of the broader, racially charged social atmosphere in which they are (re)constructing ideas of whiteness and European ancestors, ancestral values, and ritual practices in their ethnoreligious traditions, along with the folk histories they employ to authenticate and legitimize those identities and traditions.

I do not mean to suggest that all of my ethnic informants would agree with the idea of having a “White History Month” celebration in the US (though I am confident at least a few would to some degree). I do believe, however, that Boggess’s pleas for every group—including whites—to be “proud” of “what they are,” his desire to “be included” and to not “feel bad about being white,” and his inability to understand why his sign might be found offensive other than out of racist bias against him because he is white, and John’s appeals to every group being “equal” and ending discrimination and racism by no longer “highlighting the differences” (at least of racial minorities, as he seemed okay with the “White History

Month” sign) point to a sense of frustration among some white Americans, who feel that non-whites are unfairly allowed to publically and proudly mark and anchor their identities in their racial heritage without facing strong social opprobrium, while whites are not.

Ethnic Neo-Pagan Middle Paths

My ethnographic data suggest that many if not all of my ethnic informants are—to varying degrees—aware of and concerned about engaging in cultural appropriation, and many expressed strong criticisms of what they perceive as colonial disrespect towards indigenous cultures. On the other hand, almost all of them emphatically criticized racism and racists, opposed racism of any kind in the Neo-Pagan community (often using the kinds of white-racist Heathenry described by Gardell [2003] as an example of what they find offensive), and said or implied that they do not consider themselves or their ethnic traditions racist. My analysis demonstrates how most of these individuals—who mostly have liberal or libertarian sociopolitical attitudes about these issues—simultaneously work within traditions to which they feel they have a legitimate ancestral ethnic claim, while attempting to navigate the potentially treacherous waters between cultural appropriation and racism.

With varying degrees of success, these individuals forge middle paths by making racialized if not racist claims couched in terms of ethnic ancestry, and—in contrast to the kinds of Wiccans and other Eclectics discussed by Magliocco (2004) and other scholars of Neo-Paganism—by trying in diverse ways to be judicious and conscientious when appropriating and justifying the appropriation of Others’ cultural elements as part of their ethnoreligious practice. Heathens, Druids, Hellenists, ethnic Witches, and other ethnic

Neo-Pagans do not always succeed in avoiding cultural appropriation or charges of racism. The Irish Druid Brian, for example, suggested that his Irish-centric coven and he himself had been charged with racism by some in the Neo-Pagan community.

The majority of my informants, however, do appear to have found useful strategies that minimize the risks of charges of racism and cultural appropriation and justify limited cultural appropriation in their processes of ritual and theological *bricolage*, while offering a sense of authenticity that is meaningful to adherents and a sense of legitimacy (at least within their larger Neo-Pagan social contexts). Such middle path strategies re-enchant these individuals' experienced social and physical worlds, and help these predominantly white, working and middle-class Americans re-embed their identities in a post-traditional, increasingly globalized and ethnically, racially, and religiously diverse modern Western world through the development and marking of European ethnoreligious foci that revalorize and resacralize their ethnic blood or cultural ancestors and their erstwhile uninteresting refashioned white identities without incurring—in most cases—charges of white racism.

Alternative Ethnic Neo-Pagan Modernities?

Giovanna Del Negro (2004:51-59) discusses how recent social theorists offer a range of ideas about modernity; however they are largely united in their rejection of evolutionary or “convergence theory” models, in which “modernization” equates to Westernization (or Americanization) through the blessings of technological and Enlightenment-based changes in social attitudes and values (democratization, the idea of individual rights, and the dominance of reason, and, as discussed elsewhere, capitalistic consumption and a focus on individualism). Recent scholars, she argues, highlight how

these theories incorrectly assume that modernity inevitably comes in only one homogenizing form, and that indigenous peoples have no agency in determining how it affects them; rather, recent social theory posits that modernity takes multiple forms, that it is mediated by local cultures, and that it is driven and shaped by not only technology, but also local history, culture, and religion.

Del Negro (2004) references cultural geographer Michael John Watts, who argues, “The realm of ‘tradition’ and ‘custom’ offers much of the symbolic material around which local communities, interested groups, and classes rework and refashion the modernizations of capitalist transformation” (1992:15). Within this framework, she discusses other arguments that have been proffered about how non-Western peoples can and do resist such homogenization by modifying the shape of local modernities with agency. These scholars contend that “viewing modernity as part of a homogenous historical period with an underlying set of social structural features neglects the fact that modernity is lived in different ways by different peoples with different cultures and histories,” and that social researchers “must take into account how historically situated actors map out the differing meanings of social change in various cultural contexts” (Del Negro 2004:52).

Del Negro relates her fieldwork to this contemporary theoretical perspective of multiple modernities by treating modernization “as the outcome of both structural forces and the contingent efforts of situated actors” (2004:52-53). Through the use of anthropologist Milton Singer’s (1972) notion of “cultural performance,” she “examines the complex, polyphonic discourses through which actors of various social positions reflect upon and debate the meanings of the very modernity they themselves are creating” (2004:53). By focusing on the daily lived experiences of the Sassani, her population of

study, she reveals “the symbolic resources and expressive forms people use to question, negotiate, and fashion modernity in both everyday conversation and mundane social practices” (2004:53), and argues that her work “reveals how the premodern and modern exist together, not only in material conditions but in philosophy and outlook” (2004:53). Within this theoretical discussion, Del Negro states that her goal is “not so much... ‘giving of voice’ to the voiceless victims of modernity—for Sassani are anything but quiet—but... offering an ethnographic microphone for capturing the rich conversations that emerge in Sassano cultural performance” (2004:54). Her data, she argues, suggest that if there is a generally agreed upon notion of modernity in Sasso, “it is that, while modernity has its problems, it is to be embraced and ultimately redeemed through aesthetic fulfillment” (2004:54).

I do not believe that Del Negro means to suggest that alternative modernities—be they the localized version of modernity emerging in Nepal as described by Mark Liechty (2003) or any other current variations of modernity—are only united in their modernness in that they are taking place in the present (or, more specifically, in the early twenty-first century). These alternative manifestations of modernity still generally share certain defining characteristics. Social scientists Anthony Giddens and Christopher Pierson, for example, identify the following as primary qualities of modernity: “(1) a certain set of attitudes towards the world, the idea of the world as open to transformation, by human intervention; (2) a complex of economic institutions, especially industrial production and a market economy; (3) a certain range of political institutions, including the nation-state and mass democracy” (1998:94). In addition, Del Negro describes modernity as a general phenomenon as being “manifested as rapid social change, urbanization, and mass culture”

(2004:45), the latter of which includes mass media, which now would also include recent forms of near-instantaneous social media, such as Facebook and Twitter. While various forms of modernity share these broad characteristics, the discourse about multiple modernities suggests that modernity is not homogenous, and that it may be manifested, experienced, and reconfigured in different, alternative ways by different cultural groups.

This theoretical perspective as discussed by Del Negro (2004) bears strongly on my research. Are Neo-Pagan individuals and communities producing “alternative modernities” within the US (and thus arguably within the very culture that was seen as being *the* mould of Western modernization)? Are they resisting modernity altogether? Or are some doing the former, and others the latter? Sabina Magliocco (2004) makes a similar argument as Del Negro, leading me to believe that the American Neo-Pagans with whom I engaged in my ethnographic fieldwork are not resisting modernity *per se* (or at least that not all of them are), but they *are* resisting the very assumption that there can only be one kind of modernity, one that they find at least partially concerning or even hostile. I believe my research shows how ethnic Neo-Pagans in Texas are intentionally reframing alternative ways to experience, incorporate, mediate upon, negotiate, and at times resist the dominant paradigm of modernity as historically promoted in contemporary American society in the construction of one or more alternative modernities.

My data suggest that the assertions and negotiations of what it *means* to be a “modern Druid,” “modern Heathen,” and so forth reveal how these individuals are working collaboratively to create not necessarily a single ethnic Neo-Pagan modernity, but a constellation of related ethnic Neo-Pagan modernities that share certain values, attitudes, and ideas of the past and ethnic ancestors, while accepting that they live in the modern US,

where they still buy clothes made in China from Wal-Mart within a capitalist society and drive cars to work, but also grow gardens, buy organic foods, volunteer to clean local rivers, and honor ancient deities, nature spirits, family, and blood and cultural ancestors through ethnic-focused rituals and practices in their everyday lives. My research suggests that ethnic Neo-Pagans in Texas and presumably elsewhere in the US are “redeeming” modernity not only through the use of certain aesthetic elements, but also by imbuing it with a sense of sacredness that is deeply grounded in notions of resacralized and revalorized nature and European heritage and ancestors.

Conclusions and Broader Significance

This research critically challenges claims that Eurocentric Neo-Pagans in the United States are drawn to ethnic traditions for aesthetic reasons alone, and that religious authenticity and legitimacy are not important factors in choosing to self-identify with or reject certain traditions. It also contributes to the growing discourse of emergent religious phenomena by including a wider range of ethnic Neo-Pagan traditions than has often been examined in the literature. In particular, it adds American Druid and other non-Heathen ethnic Neo-Pagan voices and representations for consideration in discussions of this growing new religious movement in both the academe and popular culture. By expanding the scope of research into ethnic Neo-Paganism, my hope is that this research enriches our understanding of how individuals negotiate alternative religious identities, while encouraging a re-evaluation of assertions that white Americans seeking to modify their racial identities are left with no option but to appropriate exotic Others.

More broadly speaking, the research presented here contributes to our understanding of how members of new religious movements find ways to negotiate their alternative religious identities within the socially conservative “Bible-Belt” and in relation to their own regionally informed identities. Furthermore, it informs scholarly and public discussions of working and middle-class white American notions of the past and ancestral heritage by shedding light on novel reconfigurations of ancestry and ancestors within the broader American religious landscape. The recent success of ancestry-focused elements in popular culture, such as Ancestry.com and the TV program *Who Do You Think You Are?* on TLC (which is supported in part by Ancestry.com), where the audience accompanies (mostly white) celebrities on their genealogical adventures, suggests that white Americans are increasingly interested in finding out more about their European ancestors and heritage. It appears that white Americans are trying to find novel ways to reconnect with their European ancestors and ancestral pasts to help ground them in an increasingly frantic modern world, and American ethnic Neo-Pagans have found one way to do so in a profoundly meaningful way, albeit one that involves a religious practice (ancestor worship) that is unavailable in most Christian traditions. The research presented here reveals one of many possible kinds of novel paths individuals may follow as they experience, creatively navigate, and seek to re-anchor themselves amidst an increasingly multiethnic and religiously plural society where the authenticity, legitimacy, and meaning of one’s ethnic and religious identity are in question.

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