

“God Is My Quarantine Buddy”:
Debates in Ritual Practice Among North American Pagans in 2020

by
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ABSTRACT

The past four decades of research in the contemporary paganism faith movement in the United States have focused on the creation of cosmologies based on scholarship, reclamations of heritage, counter-culturalism, and environmentalism. However, the dialogue has changed drastically in recent years due to the rapid and global communication between faith groups through the Internet. This became more apparent when so many had to digitize the entirety of their social lives during the pandemic of 2020. Contemporary paganism in the 21st century has become an amorphous mass of intersectional social issues and individual cosmologies because of the nature of human impact on the surrounding world. This is not just due to the intergenerational mixing of cultures brought on by globalism and a socially conscious attempt to avoid poaching someone else's belief system while celebrating and discovering one's own. Rather, this is a purposeful and ongoing dialogue that highlights how younger generations integrate their social and political values with their faith: personal cosmologies that function alongside a global political community are generally more important than a general cohesive doctrine that is shared by people of multiple disparate socio-political backgrounds.

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Chapter 1:

INTRODUCTION

During the Covid19 Pandemic in 2020, contemporary pagans in North America had to shift their faith group activities to digital and solitary versions, as did all who complied with the health restrictions in place. While I prepared to survey this population, I anticipated that digital versions of group ritual would have been created rather quickly, as creativity in ritual is a hallmark of many pagan denominations. However, I did not anticipate so many to consider themselves as solo practitioners from the get-go. Group activity was only useful in annual holiday settings, such as a solstice, or life events, such as a wedding. Otherwise, these faith groups were mostly used for exchanging material goods, information, and socializing. Upon closer investigation, there was evidence for a generational shift, which I will examine throughout this thesis. While solo practitioners have always existed, group practice has been less useful among contemporary pagans since the advent of the Internet. This is not just because of the ease of the exchange of information, but also due to changes in attitude surrounding the “otherness” of aspects of the pagan community, such as tarot cards, the burning of sage, and having tattoos of pentagrams.

As will be examined in detail, there were some things that were projected results for this study that were disproven. I expected ritual to be altered to accommodate a virtual space, and while this did occur in a few specific cases, in the majority of cases rituals were altered to be practiced alone or dropped for the time being. In this same vein, I had assumed that regular meetings would continue for faith groups, but that they would simply move to a virtual format. In actuality, faith groups changed purpose, in that meetings largely were held only for social reasons, if at all, and therefore there was more freedom to hold them irregularly. Ritual and altar goods, such as materials for incense and herbal tinctures, were something that I had assumed would be exchanged through the mail as opposed to at the large events I had been observing in the past. While some specialty goods continued to be sold online by the same people, overwhelmingly there was an attempt to produce at least some of these consumables from home. Planting herb gardens for tinctures, making candles, these small crafts were taken up by those who found themselves with the free time due to lockdown, and saw it as an extension of their solo practice.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, there has been a small but steadily growing movement within Western Europe and North America to recreate and reclaim the religious ideals of pre-Christian Europe, known variously as neo-paganism, neo-heathenism, or contemporary

paganism. Occasionally these movements have incorporated the supposed traditions of specific peoples, as was surmised from historic research and the archeologic record. Overwhelmingly, the practitioners of the various religions that coalesced from this movement sought to create a personal relationship with the divine through rituals and divine revelation. Another common feature was the close interpersonal bond created within these faith groups, even among solo practitioners with other neo-pagans that they knew. At the turn of the 21st century a new means of communication helped many alternative movements to flourish, including the neo-pagan movement. Roughly 120 years after the first public and semi-public neo-pagan groups began their practice, a worldwide pandemic caused most of the world population to sequester themselves within their homes for part or all of the year 2020. This forced most social activity to move into a digital sphere, as online activity increased in importance. The ritual habits and meetings of these neo-pagans were no different. The following study is a result of the surveys and interviews conducted among contemporary pagans in the United States during the 2020 Covid epidemic, to examine what their ritual and communal practices were before, and how they changed in light of, quarantine measures.

There are two major concepts which are examined within this thesis. The first is the digitization of religion within the context of the 2020 Covid Pandemic. The other is the place of solo practice in relation to group practice within the pagan community, as well as whether solo practice is more prevalent now because it is better suited to a digitally oriented community that is more generally accepting of paganism. Religion, as a whole, has had a rocky journey onto the Internet. Many of the major faith systems worldwide [such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam] have several vocal sects which attempt to keep technology at arm's length, if only because of the perceived proximity to websites that are considered problematic [such as porn sites]. Meanwhile, other major faith systems [such as Hinduism and Buddhism] have been better able to adapt to creating an online presence. This is seen in such spaces as temple websites, visitable for those who work long office hours during major holidays. Where does paganism fall in this conversation, as this is a religious movement that is widely considered to only date back to the turn of the 20th century?

Paganism is not a mainstream religious movement, though it has come into the limelight in recent years. It has usually been examined as a faith system within the context of the pre-Christian religions which it has either mimicked, or sought to emulate or revive in some way. Very often, when paganism comes into the public eye it is because there is a demonstration being done

that involves environmentalism, a solstice celebration, or someone attempting to secure some form of assurance of their freedom to religious practice in relation to a funeral proceeding. However, as can be attested from the data I have gathered in my study, the often daily ritual practice of many pagans is as intimate as it is mundane. These rituals require a varying amount of preparation of materials, travel, and interpersonal relationships. This was, certainly, put to the test during 2020 when so much of daily life had to transfer to the digital sphere, while many people sequestered themselves into their homes. In this thesis, I set out to analyze the data gathered from some forty-six practicing pagans across North America who were in the United States and Canada during the 2020 Covid pandemic.

Solo practice as well as group practice have been a part of pagan religious expression for as long as the religious movement has been around and, indeed, is an evident feature of religious expression in general. However, the group may be considered to be less necessary in more recent years. This is not to say that there has been a lessening of an active community within the pagan world. As can be seen throughout this thesis, while the use of a group is a social comfort for many within paganism, it does not usually fulfill any ritualistic need outside of large events, such as the solstice. Two other reasons for operating in groups early in the 20th century were to facilitate the exchange of ideas and information, as well as to safeguard members against the social stigma of practicing paganism. The Internet has allowed for the instantaneous exchange of information, doing away with this need in most cases. Secrecy is often considered unnecessary due to the relative stigma against open practice of paganism in prior generations versus the more open expression enjoyed in more liberal areas of the global north today. Those who live in more conservative areas may seek out groups to maintain a sense of solidarity, though in this case solo practice may be done due to this social stigma. Groups which regularly meet and have a homogenous doctrine and set of rituals are less likely to be found than a solo practitioner who has a ritual practice that is deeply personal and meaningful to them alone, even if they do connect with others of similar beliefs for large yearly gatherings.

Due to the lack of universality in the quarantine measures taken across North America during the pandemic, there was no need for many pagan groups to make drastic ritual changes that year. Large gatherings that would have occurred were either cancelled, adjusted to fit social distancing guidelines, or conducted as privately observed rituals in the household. As an example, three covens that generally travel across state lines to meet every summer solstice celebrated

amongst themselves, in their home states. A member of one of these covens, who participated in this thesis' survey and lives in Texas, reported that aside from a short video conference for social pleasantries, no contact was made between the three during that event. In contrast, other groups reported creating a digital presence specifically because of the pandemic. The repainting of a cult idol during the pandemic meant that the idol was not going to be able to be presented to receive offerings immediately following the refurbishing. Instead, the idol's caretaker reported that a twelve-hour livestream was set up on YouTube for followers to leave commentary and make donations to a local charity in the idol's name. In both of these examples, different levels of accommodation were considered to be more or less ritualistically necessary. The three covens were able to have their solstice rituals separate from each other, even if they did make the effort to maintain social contacts. The cult idol, which we will examine more closely in Case Study number 2: the Cult of Horace, required an audience interaction in order for the activity to occur at all, and so a digital substitute was provided.

Before moving further, let us define the term "paganism". I think there is a clear case for a variety of practices that are often lumped together into one religious studies category to in fact be multiple groups. This study dealt primarily with Reconstructed Paganism, in other words, belief systems which are based in folk practices and rituals that were prevalent up until monotheistic religions (such as Christianity) became widespread at the turn of the first millennium. These are often associated with specific regional civilizations such as the Roman Empire, the Pharos of Egypt, and the Vikings. When discussing contemporary paganism, these practices often get lumped together with Indigenous practices and syncretic practices, and in fact, this is a sticking point of difference between many groups of contemporary pagans today. Religious practices that are a part of the beliefs of Indigenous communities that have been attempted to be erased in the past and survive today are not pagan traditions. While often conflated with modern pagan practices, I do not believe there was any need to include reclaimed Indigenous practices into this study, as they are a different sphere of religious expression. While individuals with Indigenous heritage might be pagan, that is an exception and not the rule. For example, a member of the Navajo nation moving to New York and practicing their native traditions is not a pagan, as they are maintaining a living culture. By contrast, a person moving from London to New York and practicing Irish Celtic Wiccanism is a pagan, because they are reviving a culture. A common point of debate within the online pagan community today is the origin of rituals and traditions, which

stems from the concern of not wanting to mimic closed practices that are specific to a culture. A closed practice is a ritual or tradition which is set aside for a specific group because they have a special connection to it, usually because they have met specific life event markers within their society. As an important note: there are people with Indigenous heritage who will combine practices from their specific tribe with other practices. That is a separate issue, arguably one which could fall under Syncretic religious traditions. This study does include some who practice syncretic religions, which are religious practices that evolve over time when folk practices graft into a more powerful state religion in order to be passed down. Examples include Vodou, Santeria, and Stregheria. This can occur because of traumatic cultural disruption (such as the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade) or because of a turbulent theological-political climate (such as Tuscany in the Renaissance).

METHODOLOGY

My study consisted of a seven-page survey, which focused largely on short-answer questions and a few multiple-choice questions. The survey itself can be found in the appendix at the end of this paper. The survey was tailored to assess multiple things: to determine the participant's own definitions of ritual and practice, to examine the fluctuations in ritual and practice between generations, to detail the spiritual history of the participant, to detail the social place of religion for the participant, and to get a broad sense of social media use. The study began with 50 participants, and ended with 46 having completed it in full. Efforts were made to secure survey participants from a variety of geographic locations within North America, as the survey began with some two dozen participants who lived in the Northeastern United States and adjacent parts of Canada. As the survey progressed, participants were found in Texas, Ohio, California, Illinois, and the southeastern United States. The entire survey period took place over the course of seven months. While the vast majority of the participants were communicated with through social media or else heard about the project through word of mouth, a few completed the survey through e-mail, two through a speakerphone-recorded phone call, and one filled out a hard copy. The majority of the participants either were active members in a re-enactment or RenFaire group, or had some connection to members who were in such an organization. This study had the advantage of being easy and cost-effective to implement, as all parts of the study were digital and easily disseminated. However, it was difficult to follow-up with existing contacts, who rarely engaged with digital spaces before the pandemic, and it was difficult to cultivate new contacts, who were

wary of divulging such personal information to someone who they were only able to interact with online. As such, nearly all of the participants were recruited through word of mouth by those who had either already taken the survey or who had worked directly with the investigator beforehand.

Eight of the participants were also interviewed in-depth about their experiences. These were experiences related to the organization of ritual events, debate within the community surrounding new practices, the manufacture of materials prepared for ritual use, and funerals. There were six cases of interviews where the participant declined to fill out the survey alongside their interview. As three of these cases were due to barriers preventing the participant from filling out the survey, changes were made so that they instead participated in an audio interview. When examining discussions occurring in publicly accessible social media platforms, those who were moderating the groups or discussions were asked if they wanted to participate in a brief interview wherever possible. Those who assented were the few participants who were not recruited through word of mouth by other survey participants.



One of the many things I wanted to track going into the study was interaction with altar goods, as there was already several existing studies on this topic. New conversations surrounding the ethical acquisition and use of specific materials was a big part of the online pagan community. Indeed, during this study it soon became clear that the creation and use of altar spaces, in fact the very definition of what was and was not a sacred space, was the primary shift in practice within the pagan community during quarantine. As more people sequestered themselves in 2020, members of the SCA decided to take advantage of the forced downtime by completing or taking on new crafting projects for themselves and friends. Within my definition of altar goods, I am including consumables such as candles, herbal tinctures, and incense, which were often the result of home gardening projects. Tools that are used within the sacred spaces, whether repurposed mundane objects or specially made artifacts, are often showcased as **FIGURE 1** projects within the SCA. This penchant for craftsmanship and potential gifting of religious items was taken into consideration when formulating questions for the survey.

LITERATURE REVIEW

When examining how groups of with similar cosmologies interact in a social environment that creates the false sense of anonymity offered by the Internet, there are a few points to consider. Is the group screening its members, or completely open to the public? How is it moderating itself? What sort of rules are in place for the group? Has it organized itself into categories or a schedule (ie tarot readings on Saturdays only, sell/buy posts only on this thread, etc.)? The efficacy of discussion in each group will be affected by these factors, and the social structure can be determined by the literal structure created by the forum itself. While many of the topics discussed in this essay were also noted to be discussed on general social media forums such as Facebook and Tumblr, information was taken from primary sources wherever possible, such as public discussion posts made by an individual account. This was so, whenever possible, that person could be contacted for an interview. The culture of neo-pagan groups had changed rapidly with the advent of the Internet, and the explosion of social media. Not only is it easier to recover information about folk traditions and get ahold of hard-to-find books, but many of the practices which had been popular among contemporary pagans are being identified as specific to indigenous religions. While not all of those practices are closed, people who are from those backgrounds are shedding light on where certain practices come from. Many contemporary pagans are characterized today by an investigation into the origins of ritual practice, and making a conscious effort in finding if a practice is right for them, or if there isn't a similar one they have a deeper connection to. This culture of heritage research brings with it a lot of discussion about happened to each pagan's ancestors to homogenize them into monotheism, which predictably leads to extended discussions about colonization, missionaries, and Christian expansion.

Within the 21st century West, the role of institutional religion is in retreat and the rise of personal spiritualities is clearly observable. (Cusack 2016:40)

In the collection of essays curated by Dawson and Cowan in their book Religion Online, the anonymity of the internet is thought to act as a confessional booth for the individual who actively engages with the space, while simultaneously acting as an encyclopedia of experiences for those who are passively engaging in it. Faith groups that take advantage of these engagements have to create a space in which the faithful can feel comfortable being vulnerable in their expressions of faith, and also be able to easily navigate to it, meaning it is a relatively public location. Moreover, the most successful technology campaigns of any religious movement always have a component off-line to which people are funneled towards after the initial engagement, as

in a televangelist church (Dawson & Cowan 2004:161). One of the most interesting points examined in Dawson & Cowan's collection was the how idea of inter-community dialogue online translates to changes in practice within faith groups. Within the pagan community online, there is often the added barrier created by the stigma of even practicing their faith. Granted, that barrier appeared to be less of an issue among the younger people who were surveyed, as we will see later.

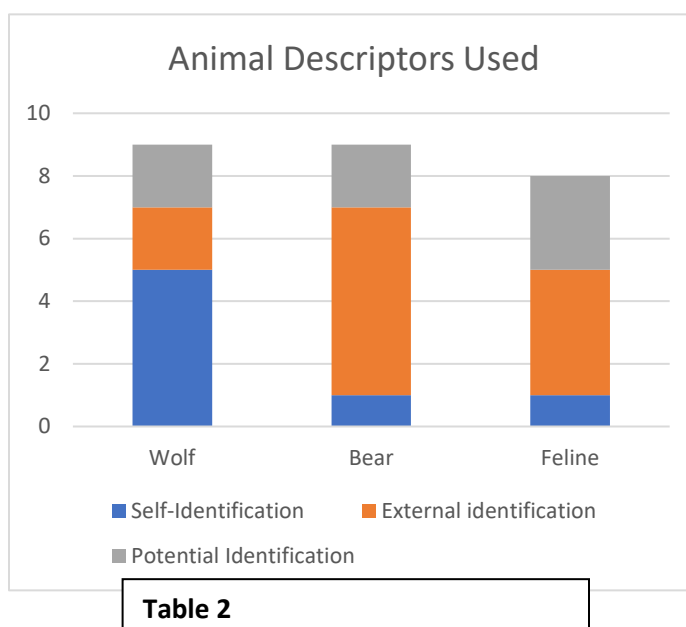
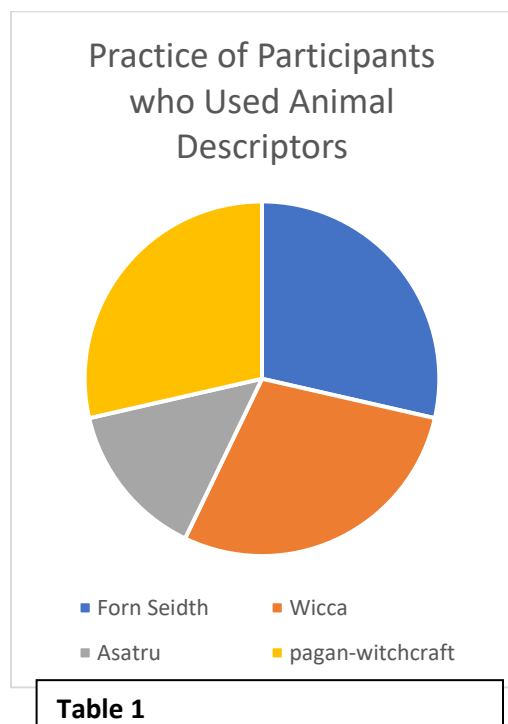
A major contributing factor to the culture and community of contemporary paganism at large is the material aspect. As examined by Dr Sabina Magliocco in her survey of contemporary pagan altar materials during the early years of the Internet, maintaining a ritual space at home requires a set of tools. Having these tools reflect your personal tastes is just as important to them working for you as it is that these tools reflect the tastes of the gods and spirits you are using them to honor (Magliocco, 2001). Sacred material construction, distribution, and inheritance can be traced within the participants of the study. The participants who engaged with sacred material construction mostly did so within the context of the SCA, unless they produced raw materials such as herbs. Four participants who explicitly discussed sacred materials and usually distributed these to other people for use produced tinctures, food, teas, incense, and textiles. In each of these four cases, those who produced materials were of a different faith practice than those who used the materials. While all of the producers were pagan, the materials were used by atheists, Satanists, Christians, Jews, and other pagans from different faith groups.

Paganism is so varied and is so hard to pin down precisely because of how individualized it is as a practice, and how it differs from person to person, even between members of the same faith group. We explored this briefly when looking at the practice of the twelve participants in the study who were devoted to a multiplicity of pagan pantheons. This is evident nowhere more vividly than in the material culture of altar objects. Of those surveyed in this study, eleven maintained altars at home throughout the year, and seven set one up as needed for ritual purposes. There were four survey participants who were unable to maintain an altar in their current living situation, despite a desire to do so. Ten would change the set-up of this altar throughout the year to reflect holidays and changes in seasons, while eight would maintain the same set up. These material goods reflect, not only a tangible manifestation of what is valued and necessary in each person's ritual practice, but a way of measuring how ritual as play factors into each person's practice to a lesser or greater extent.

As Luhrmann examined in her survey into Wiccanism, Persuasions of the Witches' Craft, a key component of intergroup pagan dynamics is ritual play. In constructing ceremony, members of faith groups would take turns writing out monthly rites for the group to enact as the duty was passed to them in turn, allowing for a variety of ritual experiences throughout the year (Luhrmann 1989:58-81). This idea is also a pillar of re-enactment societies in general, and Peter Stromberg illustrated this point more fully in his work Caught in Play. Within the context of ritual, particularly within faith groups that construct their celebrations from scratch, there is a requirement to embrace the absurd in order to fully immerse oneself in the event. The role play necessary within religious festivals is essentially the same as would be required for a video game or to act in a play, but one's level of immersion will dictate the degree to which it impacts you as a participant (Stromberg, 2009:54-57). Many of the survey participants were comfortable with enacting behavior that they acknowledged was strange or even self-contradictory because, within the context of the ritual at hand, it appeared to be profound and correct.

In examining ritual play, no clearer example can be found in the study than that of the animistic hierarchies created among seven pagans across New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Ohio. Of these participants, two were in the same Forn Seidth kindred, one was in a Wiccan coven, one was a Wiccan solo practitioner, one was an Asatru solo practitioner, and two were pagan-witchcraft solo practitioners. These participants spanned across six different social groups that used totemic animal descriptors, ranged in age from 50 to 25 years old. Three out of these seven were raised by parents who had practiced either paganism or a syncretic faith such as Santeria, and a fourth identified an aunt who had semi-openly practiced Wicca when they were growing up. In each of these disparate cases, character traits of people both within and without of that person's circle were described within the context of the traits of an animal. This animal was usually chosen by group consensus when the person first entered the group, and often they were allowed into the group because they were all considered to have the same animalistic traits. Typically, these animals were wolves, bears, or just generally feline descriptors. Those who did not fit into these categories properly were considered somehow unable to completely assimilate into the group. While these groups would occasionally contain members of similar pagan faiths, only rarely would members be a part of the same faith group. More frequently, this would be a social circle of several solo practitioners. In one instance, a person's ability to leave and re-enter a camping tent unnoticed while a group conversation was taking place within it, was identified as evidence for someone

being categorized with feline characteristics. By the same token, that feline categorization was a supporting reason why this person would be able to be trusted with personal information as well as with escorting people home from a party late at night. Wolves were the most common animal identified with among survey participants who used this terminology. While seven participants used this framing method to describe other people and/or themselves, other participants mentioned having a close connection to crows, horses, otters, and more traditionally domestic animals like cats.



What one should ask when examining the ways contemporary pagans trace their traditions through the historic and archeological record is not “how true is this history?” but rather “why does this narrative matter?” The ways in which contemporary pagans tell stories about themselves, regardless of historical accuracy, point to what we need to focus on in terms of theological discourse. A better understanding of how a religion functions on both a practical and a cosmological level comes from viewing it on its own terms. The occasion that spurred this study allowed for a major shift in dialog. The fact is that so much in-person socialization—which does not have to be verbal and is subject to how it is remembered by participants—moved to a format that forced discussion which was able to be locked in place through the archiving power of the Internet. Small talk was less suited to these spaces, but lengthy theological debate had the potential to flourish.

Dr Ronald Hutton further illustrates this point. The contemporary development of theological debate in general centers around ancient doctrine's utility and relatability in the context of the challenges of modern life. What is the point of searching for the roots of a new solution to a new problem in prior eons, when the problem would not have been an issue up for debate? The average contemporary pagan is less concerned with predicting catastrophic weather in order to safeguard their crops than they are trying to foster more meaningful interpersonal relationships and make clever decisions at work. This occasionally overlaps with the other vocal camp within the pagan community, that of which are seeking a personal and immersive connection with the spiritual. However, there is another element at play. When presenting paganism within the context of general theological discussion, there is a tendency for practitioners to take pains to attempt to justify their presence alongside more popular faith systems by tracing similarities within a long history of similar folk traditions (Harvey 2011, Coates & Emerich 2015, witchofthenorse 2019, houseofcraft 2020, Gibson 2009, Kaplan 1996). The establishment of a timeline is seen by some to level the playing field within debate, and to pre-empt any dismissal by other theologians before the scholar of contemporary paganism can make their point. In other words, the point for searching for the roots of prior solutions is not utilized within pagan communities within the context of the parable, as would be the case with, for example, a Christian examining the Bible. Personal academic achievement is how one proves the worth of one's sect because one has done the research in order to establish the pedigree of one's rituals. Pagan symposiums are a common means of exchanging research and winning converts by showing artefacts and discussing findings. (Harvey 2011, Calico 2013, Cunningham 2004, Coates & Emerich 2015, Gibson 2009, Kaplan 1996)

Creating a spiritual pedigree isn't just an example of seeking legitimacy among peers. The 21st century practices of paganism already mimic the divine-parentage systems that date back to the Late Bronze Age in the form of spiritual patronage (Johnson 2019, Ando 2008, O'Donnell 2015). Spiritual patronage is a mentorship system in which a practitioner is guided through their spiritual growth by a deity, spirit, or an ancestor. Sometimes the practitioner chooses the patron, and sometimes the patron chooses them (Teplin 2017, witchofthenorse 2020, strega_sarracenia 2020). Dr Samuel Johnson, in his examination of the way Origen described the mythologizing of Jesus in his own time, speaks to the ways in which direct divine influence on the lives of larger-than-life figures was a common trope. Whether referring to the divine parentage of the generals of the Trojan War or as perpetuated by the apostles of Jesus, the divine are regularly called upon to

further drive the point home on how much we should pay attention to someone's actions (Johnson 2019). This does create a chicken-egg question of whether divine heritage is awarded to a person who had historic impact or if it is created so that more people notice a person's actions, however, for the purposes of this study let us look at it on a smaller scale. Why do contemporary pagans align themselves to specific deities, and what does the perception of those deities mean for what each pagan wants from their spiritual journey? Often, contemporary paganism is realized as a series of stages, very similar to the regimen of seminars and independent studies one would find in a university setting. One must engage in spiritual coursework, which varies from group to group. Whereas one group of people might consider a particular book or series of works to be integral to understanding their faith, others might think that meditating on the aspects of specific deities is most important. Few, however, think that one can simply begin their practice immediately. Lessons in faith are learned in some manner from others in the community. Shadow work is one of the most common first steps, involving introspective therapy work, and will be addressed more closely below. The community aspect of paganism comes back into play here when we examine later how ancestor spirits can also fulfil this role.

We will see in later sections how theory of practice is actively developing within pagan communities online as issues arise within forums. While there is an element of seniority within these communities—a seniority of experience, not in age—it must be noted that there is a general lack of hierarchy within these debates. In the pagan community at large, there is an effort made to be egalitarian in group activities as much as in theological debate. This has created an environment in which the examination of the *whys* of ritual practice are as important and as commonly discussed as the *hows*. As will be discussed later on, the shift to digital forums helps to facilitate this discussion, as does the way the social media quickly shifted the community from local to global (Harvey 2009, von Schnurbein 2016, Stark 2007, Ivakhiv 2005, Puryear 2006, Magliocco 2004, Lepage 2013).

State Of The Field

When examining the study of contemporary paganism, as well as the history of the movement, there are some key points to keep in mind. Namely, these are religious beliefs being held and created despite and because of secular rationalism. While rational explanations for phenomena exist, there are many people who need a spiritual support system, one that is not provided by the standard organized religion. Whether supplementing an existing religious structure

in order to gain a better experience from it, or creating a new structure entirely, having complex spiritual needs can and should be considered a fundamental part of the human experience. During the course of this study, I found that a topic of discussion trending in the media was the declining numbers of Christians in the United States, where that religious system holds so much influence over political discourse and pop culture despite the decline (Detweiler & Taylor 2003, Holland 2021, Breen 2008, Inglehart 2020, Pew Research Center 2019, Bergler 2012)

One of the pillars of the multiplicity of contemporary pagan practices that arose at the end of the 20th century is the almost Lutheran ideal of having a personal relationship with the divine. Another important facet is a connection with several deities, often with a heavy importance placed on whichever deities are thought to have a connection to a practitioner's ethnic background. This lends itself to being a reclamation movement, where those who had their culture taken away from their grandparents, great-grandparents, and so on, can rediscover and embrace a lost spiritual identity. Those particular movements within the United States include Kemeticism, which is the revival of pre-Christian/pre-Islamic Egyptian practices; Vodou, which is the reclamation of West African belief systems, such as those of the Yoruba, that were preserved by being incorporated into a Christian framework during the trans-Atlantic slave trade; and the general promotion of indigenous practices within the Native American reservations in North America. This movement could be an entire thesis in its own right, however, of those neo-pagans surveyed for this study, only a minority belong to these groups.

Other major forms of neo-paganism include Asatru and Wiccanism. Wicca is one of the more long-running neo-pagan belief systems, and while it combines several indigenous practices and has a wide variety of forms, the core practices focus on a revival of Druidic practices. As such, Wiccans tend to live in Western Europe or be of Western European descent, with a particularly strong movement in the UK, where it originated in the early 20th century. Wicca is an open practice, in that it is not limited to one ethnic group, largely due to it not being rooted in any one belief system. Asatru is a modern iteration of what had been the dominant pre-Christian indigenous Scandinavian practices, as perpetuated by the Norse and Germanic people. In keeping of the spirit of the Norse, who historically incorporated a plethora of ethnic groups into their communities, this practice is open, like Wicca. However, Asatru differs from Wicca in that it adheres to one specific pantheon of deities and folkloric practices. Of those surveyed for this study, a majority belong to these groups.

Reclamation movements and paganism are most often blurred within solo practice, rather than within faith groups. Solo practice is an ubiquitous feature of contemporary paganism. While this rose in popularity during the pandemic, it can be argued that recorded examples of solo practice date back much further in the 20th and 19th centuries than group practice (O'Donnell 2015, Hutton 1999, Kaplan 1996, von Schnurbein 2016, Magliocco 2004). This is largely due to pagan practices being lumped together with Indigenous folk traditions that are tied to the home, particularly in regards to healing remedies and general child-rearing. Such practices, while informed by local cryptozoology and whatever pantheon the practitioner brought with them as they immigrated, are passed down among family members.

I noticed one other trend when reviewing the literature available ahead of my study. There has been little distinction made between folk traditions experiencing a revival among their native peoples, folk traditions which are being revived by the descendants of practitioners after a discontinuation of practice, and new traditions which are created from a combination of found and new practices. Often, all three came under the umbrella term “folk religion” or “paganism” or a similar moniker, despite a wide range of differences. For the purposes of this study, I will be defining practices as each practitioner attempted to, which is one benefit from having a small pool of surveyed subjects. To note: the majority of those surveyed belonged to the second group (folk traditions revived by descendants after a discontinuation of practice), and most others to the third (new traditions created from a combination of found and new practices). With each group there are specific issues regarding heritage and right of practice, as is further explored below.

Chapter 2:

DEMOGRAPHICS

In creating the questions used in this study, existing knowledge of the participants was considered. Though this study was conducted in 2020 and 2021, I had worked with this population beginning in 2008. One of the primary unifying traits of the participants, aside from faith, had been a connection to the Society of Creative Anachronism (SCA), by which I was able to keep in contact with participants, as well as be recommended to other practicing pagans within and without the SCA. Thirty of the survey participants are either currently active members of the SCA or had at one point been members. Some insight to the SCA and the means by which the pagan community utilizes it is, therefore, appropriate.

The SCA had been founded in Berkeley California in May 1966 as a historic reenactment

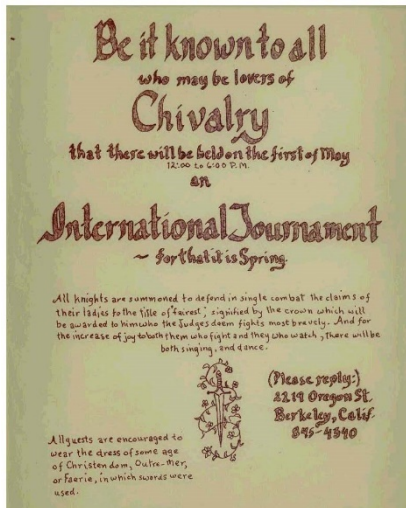


FIGURE 2

society that focused on the Medieval ages. Membership within the SCA spans every age range, and multiple socio-economic backgrounds. The very first event, While the organization initially restricted itself to western Europe, today events will exhibit information and displays on any culture in recorded history up until the year 1600. These displays are, in effect, personally curated history projects, often focused on the member's own genealogical background and interests. The large SCA gatherings themselves take place as camping events, or else incorporate an outdoor element. Clothing, tents, camping equipment, and entertainment

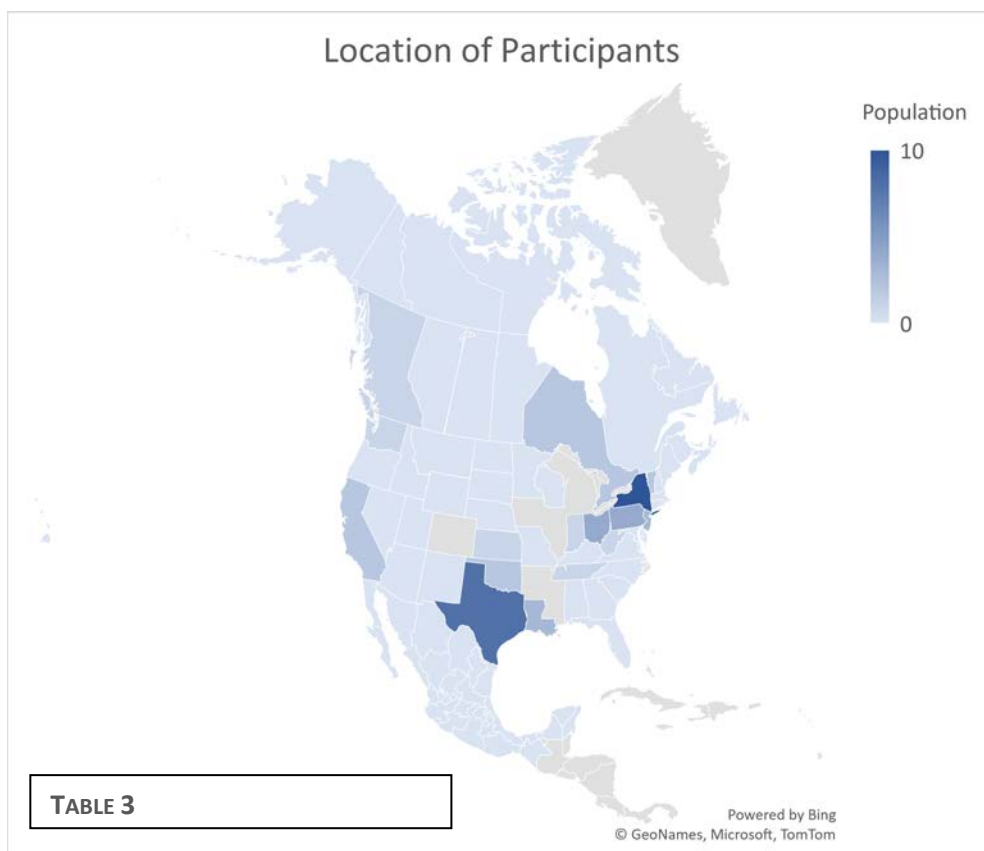
items are made by hand, and often beautifully decorated. This further supports the general environment of the organization where self-sufficiency and preparedness is valued. While this association is not religious or overtly associated with any one religious group, many members either openly practice paganism or ascribe to its philosophies in some way. These were among the variables which were factored into selecting members of the SCA for the initial wave of survey distribution, and for the place where more participants were sought through word of mouth. The preference for incorporating the outdoors into monthly and even weekly activities meant that participants of the surveys were more likely to bring that into their religious life in some way, and that was taken into consideration when formulating the questions used in the survey.

This culture of self-sufficiency and outdoorsness is also reflected in the larger idealized culture of Americana at large, and is considered by many scholars within the Asatru community as the primary reason for why their particular sect has taken such a foothold in the United States. This ideology of communal outdoorsmanship was promoted starting in the 1950s, when the sudden appearance of an American middle class with vacation time. This drew from a combination of this economic boom, the population boom, the National Parks Service, as well as organizations such as the Boy- and Girl- Scouts (Young 2017, Boag 2009, Smith 2003, Heaney 2000) The same impulse to go out into the wilderness and connect with nature on a spiritual level is evident in Asatru rites such as the ritual feast that is the Blut. As will be examined later, homesteading activities such as creating subsistence gardens as sacred spaces also tie into this ideology. Another important parallel is the sense of environmental stewardship, which goes beyond the private space

of the home garden and family camping trips. Inasmuch as it is a manifestation of protecting a sacred space, environmental activism has been a pillar of modern paganism (von Schnurbein 2016, Seigfried 2021, Puryear 2006, Harvey 2009, Barner-Barry 2005, Gibson 2009)

Population Background

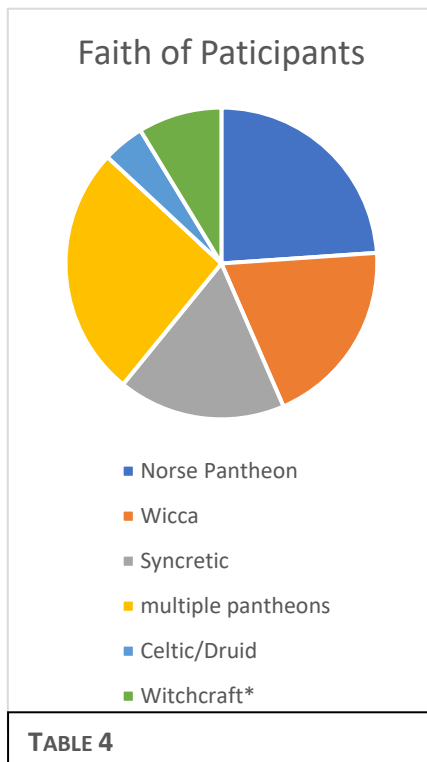
As the scholarship surrounding contemporary paganism has grown, the interconnectivity of pagans has been facilitated by the rise of social media. When the Covid19 pandemic hit the



United States, the social restrictions that were put in place in order to mitigate the spread of disease meant that such utilities as the Internet became vital in order to maintain social and business relationships. For pagan groups, this could potentially have resulted in a complete breakdown of system that relied on in-person rituals and an upkeep of social ties outside of the household, or it could also have meant a shift in practice that digitized rituals, fostered solo practices, and even restructured faith groups to including those who would not normally have been able to have been included due to distance and other obstacles. What was particularly interesting, was that this mass shift to online practice was occurring just as the online theological dialogue was contesting with the social dialogue of who had the right to claim certain ritual practices and why, as outlined in the section below.

My primary concerns with the study were to examine how practitioners were conceiving of the changes to their own practices themselves, and their conscious decision-making. Questions of heritage and personal relationships to ritual objects were also a concern, but less important in the moment than the ways in which each person was adapting to their new, solitary, lifestyle. Though my concerns were initially focused on changes in ritual practice and the role which social media played in such changes, social media is primarily a platform of discussion. As such in my study I found that many of those whom I surveyed became further involved in theological debate rather than attempt to find a way to digitize their ritual practices.

The forty-six people who participated in the survey used in this study come from across North America, with twenty-five coming from the northeastern United States, twelve coming from the southern United States, two from the midwestern United States, four from the West Coast of the United States, and three from eastern Canada. Eleven identify with the Norse pantheon, nine identify as Wicca, eight practice a form of syncretic religion branching off of a monotheistic faith, two identify with the Celtic or Druidic pantheon, four identify with witchcraft as their faith, and twelve practice a form of spiritualism that embraces multiple pagan pantheons. This last group not



only typifies the variability found within the daily rituals of solo practitioners, but the crux of why the term “paganism” must be used to refer to such a wide range of beliefs and philosophies. As will be further explored in the next section, ritual practices that are, in fact, indigenous practices or syncretic practices often get swept into the category of paganism. For six participants of this study, their heritage linked them variably to Indigenous American, Latino, Afro-Caribbean, Roma, and African American communities. Thus, they felt that rituals from these communities had a place within their personal practice. Modern pagan discourse separates practices that are specific to marginalized communities such as indigenous tribes, and general nature worship based on who can claim inclusion through heritage. This is to avoid having a closed practice, something meant to be practiced by one group, from becoming a novelty practice used by people who have no intimate ties to the culture where the practice originated. We will go into this concept in greater depth in the next section. Suffice to

say, the six survey participants who had direct connections to these groups are, categorically, in a grey area. However, they consider themselves to be pagan just as much as they consider their attachment to other communities, and this self-identification is the important factor. Of these six participants, only two identified themselves as having a syncretic practice, with the others choosing to blend folk beliefs with Wicca, Forn Seidh, or witchcraft.

For the eleven survey participants whose practice was focused on the Norse pantheon, nine were Asatru and two were Forn Seidh. While the differences between these two sects largely comes down to specific details of ritual practice as well as ideas surrounding reconstructionism, for the purposes of this thesis it is appropriate to group them together. Those associated with the Norse pantheon are the most likely to encourage group practice as opposed to solo practice, with two survey participants being solo practitioners and nine belonging to a kindred either during 2020 or at some point before then. The majority of these study participants came from the Tri-State area in the United States [six participants], with another four coming from Texas, and one coming from the Midwest. The Tri-State area, for clarification, is New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. There is a common theme in Asatru ritual of including reverence to the gods within mundane activities, especially those focused on hospitality. This may contribute towards more Asatru practitioners having experience in faith groups, as opposed to having a strictly solo practice.

Another group to examine a little closer is the four that identified Witchcraft as the best way to label their faith. For many survey participants, witchcraft was a philosophical outlook, or a means by which to frame ritual, and was the method by which they approached their faith, not the faith itself. All told, twelve participants identified with witchcraft in some form, even though only four of them specified it as the whole of their practice. Three of those four used the phrase “witch, not Wicca” when describing their faith, indicating that there is a clear differentiation in how the two communities see themselves.

Interestingly, there were two participants who, though they called themselves pagan, also described themselves as atheist. There was one who labeled themselves as an atheist as well as a witch by faith. All three of these participants were from the Tri-State area of the United States, and all were between the ages of 35 and 25. In a similar vein, two other participants (between 45 and 30, one from New York and one from Canada) considered themselves both pagan and a Satanist, one explicitly stating that they associate with The Satanic Temple. Two other participants from the 35-25 age group, one from the Tri-State area and one from the West Coast, mentioned coming

to paganism after being dissatisfied with the atheism that they grew up in. This is an interesting contrast to other participants (fourteen participants between 68 and 35) who explicitly mentioned turning to paganism after being dissatisfied with the denomination of Christianity they were raised in. One older participant stated that she “saw [her] parents become something [she] did not like in their Fundamentalism,” which helped inspire her to seek out another faith.

The twelve participants who are devoted to a variety of pantheons should also be examined a little closer, if only because their beliefs typify a trend that is among the most common among the debates in theory in online pagan social media. This trend is very divisive among 21st century pagans, and it boils down to how one attempts to reconstruct a pre-Christian belief system and how adhere to it as it would have been practiced throughout pre-modern history. The crux of the argument is that worshipping both Thor and Isis on the same altar, for example, is neither an invalid way to approach paganism today, nor entirely historically inaccurate for those strict reconstructionists for whom this matters. Not only were localized deities historically adopted from other nearby towns as they intermixed through trade and warfare, but similar enough deities were often assumed to be guises of each other as civilizations explored further afield. The logic behind which deities from which pantheons are revered varies wildly from person to person. Often the gods chosen reflect the aspects that the pagan in question wants to cultivate within themselves, or hold some special meaning to how the person thinks of themselves or their heritage. Ideas of spiritual mentorship and working with multiple pantheons are very common among those who believe that, within paganism, they have the opportunity to create a better version of themselves by tapping into a theory of the supernatural which is not available by other means. One such survey participant, a gender-neutral person from the midwestern United States that was in their mid-30s, sought to better cultivate their “intuition and cunning by following Loki” their “creativity and kindness by following Brigid” as well as taking guidance from nature spirits in general. This participant would have normally focused the bulk of their religious practice outdoors, with meditation breaks taken during solitary walks in nature. With having to work around occasional park closures and the changing restrictions throughout the pandemic, this participant often moved their practice indoors, requiring them to set up a permanent altar for the first time. For many others in the study, an altar was a focal point of their regular ritual, but it was not usually the whole of one’s practice. We will return to this point in depth when we look at the way sacred space was constructed and reconstructed during quarantine.

Heritage, Religion, And The Right To Claim A Practice

Often there is an uncomfortable topic that must be broached when studying contemporary paganism. Indigenous cultures and their influence on contemporary pagan practices need to be clearly defined, as does the place of such major polytheistic religions as Hinduism and folk beliefs in general. To be clear, in this study the data was measured using the definitions of beliefs that the participants self-identified with. However, when examining the general concept of contemporary paganism, the context of *what is pagan* must account for the heritage of the belief systems being brought to the table. Are we looking at an attempt at recreating a historical practice, such as the group Novum Byzantium, who has been using email lists and Internet forums to host virtual symposiums for two decades? Is this cosmology an organically formed concept of how the practitioner engages with the world around them, a sort of spiritual successor to the philosophies of Gerald B. Gardner and Ram Dass? Crucial to these belief systems is the way in which they were formed. As Ronald Hutton often explored, the pedigree of contemporary paganism does not make it more or less legitimate (Hutton 1999). In forming these belief systems, however, we run into the question of heritage. Did the practitioner become inducted into the belief system through their own personal experiences? Were they brought up into this belief system? Did they discover this in some other way, and adopted it because it made sense to them on a personal level?

We further muddy the waters when we bring up the idea of “heritage” in the discussion of contemporary paganism in any country that had been created through colonization. There is a long



FIGURE 3

and bloody history of indigenous belief systems being eradicated in favor of the beliefs of the colonizing power. There would be a disservice to discount this fact when these same indigenous belief systems inform so much of the style, if not the substance, of the “pagan” practices sometimes adopted by the descendants of the colonizing peoples. With contemporary paganism, one must ask where each practice comes from, and why it is being enacted. This is usually less of an issue with

reconstructionist movements, where there is an effort being made to revive, for example, the Greco-Roman pantheon, which was meant to be a dozen primary gods that worked in tandem with a network of localized deities, gods, and spirits.

Unfortunately, with the idea of heritage also comes ideas of nationalism. Many who were surveyed noted that, as they moved their activities to more anonymous spaces, they had to also contend with those who were co-opting their religion for harmful purposes. Asatru has been one of the more obvious examples of this hijacking, as this religion is based in the beliefs system that had originated among Scandinavian and Germanic peoples. As such, white supremacists are drawn to it, as they assume it is a means by which they can express their ideals.

Several volunteer organizations and social media movements to counter and expose the rise in “faux-satru” groups have been on the rise over the years, including the “Its the ALL-Father, NOT the Some-Father” valknut (figure 1) and the “Witches Against White Supremacy” merchandise campaign (figure 2) to support the charity efforts of [buyfromablackwoman\(dot\)org](http://buyfromablackwoman(dot)org). In fact, many social media campaign efforts to counter white supremacist appropriation of pagan symbols



FIGURE 4

directly tie themselves to charities in order to assist in the variety of social activism efforts (Standing Rock, Black Lives Matter, Flint Michigan, the Border Crisis) that were so prevalent in the United States at the beginning of the 21st century. This link between an awareness of where practices originate from and social activism will be explored more fully later.

When determining the right to claim a practice, especially when that practice straddles the line between an indigenous or folk religion and an attempt at reconstructionism—*would someone with a both Mayan and Irish ancestry living in the United States consider themselves a pagan for trying to explore their religious heritage, for example?*—one must consider the ideas of open and closed practices. An *open practice* generally indicates that anyone who wishes to can gain knowledge about this practice with little to no barriers to entry. *Closed practice* is a term that indicates the rituals, objects, and potentially other parts of this faith system are considered to be an integral part of a specific culture, and not something which can be acquired from outside the community.

Why is this discussion relevant within the context of a study on ritual changes within the context of social media, beyond contextualizing the environment? Because the changes in practice which I found over the course of my study appeared to reflect a definite change in how practitioners viewed their own practice. That change being a conscious movement away from a homogenized groups that drew from a wide variety of sources and towards heritage-specific solo pagan practice.

This does not necessarily mean there was a change in ritual, simply a change in definitions, and a closer examination as to why these practices were being done. The ability to recontextualize what a ritual means, and to choose to keep or discard it, is something that is unique to contemporary paganism. Tradition as a set of ethics, not as a set of ritual practices. This will be explored further when examining the discussions on social media surrounding Shadow Work and *Laus Perennis*.

Suffice to say, there is a noticeable generational shift occurring within discussions surrounding practice in the pagan community. Pagans who have grown up in a post-internet society were more likely to pursue solo practice or to be more critical of the origins of the rituals being practiced around them. This is tied to the perceived importance of open and closed practices, and of removing a ritual from one's practice when discovering that it may be problematic in some way. For example, the practice of using eagle feathers to waft smoke during a group ceremony is extremely similar to closed tribal practices among the Cree and several other North American tribes (Lewis 2018). A faith group not ethnically tied to the Cree that used feathers, especially eagle feathers, in a smoke or smudging ritual would come under harsh criticism from other pagans if they continued to use feathers after making such a connection. This was not just observed in social media forums, but also within the survey pool. Fourteen study participants were between the ages of 68 and 45, twenty-six were between the ages of 45 and 30, and six were between the ages of 30 and 20. Of the oldest fourteen participants, two were solo practitioners, six discussed closed practices as an important topic of discussion, and eleven noted that they met with other pagans regularly in person outside of their faith group. Of the youngest six survey participants, all were solo practitioners, five indicated closed practices were an important topic of discussion, and two met regularly with other from outside of their faith group, their faith group being themselves or, in the case of four participants who had pagan family members, outside of blood relations. The largest group, the twenty-six participants between 45 and 30, included nineteen solo practitioners, fifteen who mentioned closed practices as an important topic of discussion, and three who met in person regularly with other pagans outside of their faith group. Among survey participants over the age of 30, all sought the opportunity to meet with other pagans during solstices when the opportunity arose. This suggests that, aside from holidays, pagans who are newer to the faith are more inclined to do their own thing, seeking out other members of the community only when in need of guidance in their practice. If there has been a greater trend towards ritual being more

closely tailored to the personal ethnic heritage of the individual pagan, rather than ritual catering towards a more ethnically varied group of pagans, this makes sense.

Inter-Group Paganism Before The Internet

As had been briefly touched above, while solo practice has always existed, there is a noticeable generational divide that seems to dictate how likely one is to engage in group practice. Twelve out of fourteen participants between the ages of 68 and 45 were or had been a part of a faith group, seven out of twenty-six participants between the ages of 45 and 30 were or had been a part of a faith group, and none of the participants between the ages of 30 and 20 were a part of a faith group, though one had been raised in an interfaith coven. Is solo practice more prevalent because of shifting attitudes surrounding what is socially acceptable, both in terms of the social stigma of alternative religions as well as the questions of closed and open rituals relate to individuals? Or are faith groups perhaps less convenient as society changes its definitions of social circles in and out of the digital space? These questions might be sparked by internet discourse, even if they are traceable to systematic issues that are far older. But as many of these questions were not widely discussed before the internet, and several members of the study were practicing their faith before the internet, let's examine how the discourse changed.

A significant amount of the current pagan population had been involved with the faith before the Internet. Therefore, understanding how methods of group dynamics and social connections have changed over time is crucial to better examining the generational differences within the contemporary pagan population. As this study is wholly concerned with an exploration of contemporary paganism within the context of social media and the Internet, the ways and means of contemporary paganism as a religious movement up until the advent of social media should be noted in order to give proper context to the change. As noted in such studies as Magliocco's examination of Italian-American Stregheria in the 1980s and 90s, as well as Luhrmann's in-depth review of Wicca and Western Mysteries cults in 1980s England, group activity and the natural world play crucial roles. One participant in the northeastern United States, who blends the Jewish faith she was raised in with a nature-focused syncretic paganism, takes daily walks in which she compliments and directly engages with "each thing on earth." These kind of rituals make space for passively engaging with the natural world in a positive way that makes little demands on a person, as opposed to the active engagement involved in activism. Campaigning to protect the natural world while worshiping divine manifestations of it has been a feature of paganism throughout the

modern era, before the Internet, as we will examine below. Daily absolutions and meditative practice, on the other hand, are supposed to center the individual and connect them to the world at large.

The natural world and humankind's place in it are evident not just in the way contemporary pagan movements synch themselves to solstice events and celebrate changes within the environment, such as growing seasons. They are also exhibited in the fact that many groups incorporate environmentalism into their mission, and campaign for environmental rights publicly as such as group (Dunwich 1991, Gibson 2009, Gottlieb 2017). An initial analysis of Wicca in the mid-20th century United States shows strong influences of both indigenous North American traditions as well as the reconstructed Druidism of Gerald B Gardner. It is important to note that this includes a large amount of general indigenous philosophy as opposed to anything specific, though some closed practices did gain popularity outside of their native cultures, namely, the idea of spirit animals and the use of white sage. Burning sage can be found in Slavic and Mediterranean cultures as well, but the popular belief that this specific sage was somehow more ritually potent, leading to first its commercialization and then its over-farming (Gottlieb 2017, Schiermer 2011, Seigfried 2021). This is a prime example how a closed practice became popularized and now, with the rapid spread of information, it is starting to see a change as people perform the same ritual with an alternative material (Magliocco 2009, Gottlieb 2017, Seigfried 2021, Schiermer 2011). Small social groups would meet regularly in order to enact ritual, often planning events around the lunar calendar. Independently printed magazines and books on philosophy were circulated through an interpersonal network and by mail, and it was through these magazines that national- and international- level conventions were organized. By and large, these were clandestine groups who strove to keep their beliefs out of the public eye (Luhrmann 1989, Hutton 1999, Magliocco 2001). Like many aspects of alternative culture in the mid-20th century, it was less of a monolith and more of a series of localized, highly specific, groups that interacted with each other at a distance. This distance among largely clandestine groups, however, is not the same as the semi-anonymity offered by the Internet today.

When looking at the influence of environmentalism on the theory of contemporary paganism, one has to look at the means by which the natural world is sacralized in ritual and in other actions. Of those who took part in this study, seven engaged in climate-related activism, thirty kept abreast of climate and ecology-related news, and fourteen donated regularly to ecology-

focused charities. Twenty engaged with more than one answer, with thirty-two participants from the study engaging with at least one of these environmentalism outlets. Of these thirty-two participants, five were Wiccan, one was Celtic pagan, one was Romani-pagan, nine were Asatru, twelve were devoted to a multiplicity of pantheons, and four were witches. Of these, eight participants had been practicing their faith before the advent of the Internet. Three survey participants who participated in active environmental campaigning

While we will explore the garden later while looking at how sacred spaces were recontextualized within the home during quarantine, garden witchery and efforts towards creating a self-sustaining household are common themes. These were common topics of discussion on pagan chat rooms and the driving force behind several home projects started during the downtime many people found themselves with during the 2020 pandemic. Among those surveyed, twelve had discussed this online in the past, eight started a project towards self-sustainability at home, five were still using this project as the study concluded, and three had to abandon this project before the study concluded. Of those participants who engaged a sustainability project, three were Wiccan, four were Asatru, and one ascribed to a multiplicity of pantheons. Generally, these projects had to do with making a food-producing garden space, such as a vegetable bed or a greenhouse. Of these twelve participants, three had been practicing their faith before the advent of the Internet.

Identification Through Differentiation

Each participant was asked on their survey to define what “religious activity” was, as well as what a “religious object” was. These answers ranged in specificity, as to be expected, with many participants making direct reference to categories of objects they themselves used in their practice. In some instances, there was room for further investigation to examine the nuances of each participant’s experience. For example, those who were solo practitioners that considered themselves to not be religious were more likely to indicate that religious activity specifically required the involvement of a group. This trend, explicit in the answers given by six participants and implicit in another ten, showed that ritual, spirituality, and religion are not only separate from each other, but all three can exist with or without a cohesive doctrine. The six participants who were explicit in their language regarding group involvement and religious activity clearly indicated having neutral to negative associations with Christianity either in their family history or in their own personal experiences. Frequently these participants indicated that they felt disconnected from

mainstream faith groups or somehow forced to participate against their will. These six participants were all between the ages of 60 and 35, had lived all or part of their lives within the same area of the United States, and while four were the first generation of practicing pagans within their family, the other two indicated that they were the first openly practicing pagans within their family. The ten participants who implicitly framed their definition of religious practice in terms of group involvement were between the ages of 45 and 25, and seven of them were the first openly practicing pagan member of their families, having come from Christian, Atheist, or Jewish backgrounds. Of the other four, one came from a Humanist background, and two were second generation pagans. These ten also had neutral to negative experiences with relatives from more mainstream religions when they were growing up. The phrase “church group” or “faith circle” was used as a point of comparison by multiple participants when defining religious activity, although these were not necessary when it came to their own practice.

Using a specific object for religious reasons to “focus attention and energy” or to “subtly signal to other members of the same faith group” was also a common response. Even beyond the sixteen participants noted above, many from this study indicated a deeply seated need to connect to a higher power, or to experience some form of supernatural presence within their lives that they found to be lacking from other means. However, very few religious objects were shared between participants, even those who belonged to the same or a similar faith group. The one major exception to this was the Mjolnir necklace charm favored by many practitioners of Asatru. Even this, however, was not universal to that faith, as many Asatru favored Frig or Tyr over Thor, and so would wear a runestone or a similar item instead. The “why” behind the significance of any one spiritual object or a ritual didn’t necessarily matter so long as this was not something that was being poached from another cultural practice. When the goal was an emotional or spiritual state, new methods of physicality could be invented and discarded as needed so long as the immediate goal was reached.

Just as members of a group can identify themselves based on similarities with each other, a group can be defined based on what sets them apart from a common “other.” In the case of many participants who were in some way dissatisfied with or disdainful of Christianity within the United States, being able to separate their practices from this culture was very important. Why would Christianity come up again and again in an examination of contemporary pagan practices within the United States? As was to be expected, most surveyed participants practiced a form of syncretic

paganism, which combined philosophies and rites from a variety of monotheistic traditions with folk beliefs and practices from pre-industrial cultures. This was an expected outcome of the study going in, as it has been thoroughly explored by other religious anthropologists who focus on contemporary paganism (Magliocco, Hutton, and Stark, just to name a few). Christian practices are ubiquitous in the United States, and inevitable influence the faith systems which develop within its communities. The identities of witches and pagans in the 21st century United States can only be considered within the context of the Satanic Panic and similar anxiety-driven criticisms of youth culture throughout the 20th century.

...terminological relativism has some validity...many of the people labeled *magicians* in the first three centuries were simply practicing traditional forms of their religious practice... Reimer differentiates good from bad intermediaries, that is, essentially miracle-workers from magicians, on the basis of their conformity to or divergence from the good characteristics [of the dominant faith system] (Labahn & Lietaert-Peerbolte 2007:112-114)

The long historical use of such terms as *witch* and *pagan* as a means of differentiation as well as reclamation reveals the flexibility of the terms. In fact, pagan initially had been a derogatory term used by members of the Roman army to differentiate themselves from civilians and those who lived outside of the city of Rome. *Paganus* was both an outsider and someone of a much lower socio-economic status. Early Christians referred to themselves as soldiers of Christ, *miles Christi*, and to anyone outside of their faith, therefore, as pagans (O'Donnell 2015 pg 159-160; Kraemer 2016 pg 144). This soldier-civilian dichotomy is not an issue immediately relevant to the 21st century use of the term pagan, however. And indeed, once Christianity had government backing within the Roman Empire, it became a term associated more with provinciality rather than complete alienness (O'Donnell 2015 pg 161 Kraemer 2016 pg 144). A focus on the evolution of the relationship between folk traditions and Christian doctrine on the Italian peninsula over the past two millennia presents a prime example of the relationship between state-level monotheism and localized cult practices. Even as a standardized pantheon was worshipped as the state religion at official temples and for general holidays across the empire, localized versions of each deity predated the concept of Rome, and those took precedent. These localized rituals would be acceptable diversions from what was happening at the capitol due how closely each region was being scrutinized. Paganism in relation to the fluctuating definitions of what the “other” was among the residents of the various city-states, regions, and provinces of Italy gives us a wide variety of meaning. Communal participation in religious devotion to a recognizable set of gods

was key. After the rise of Christianity, this continued: local tradition aside, so long as there was a communal observance of something recognizably Christian it was okay, and few would look at the saints of the region too closely. (O'Donnell 2015, Magliocco 2009, Maurizio 1995, Ginzburg 1992)

As having an academic foundation in one's knowledge of their pagan faith is a point of pride among many pagans, particularly those who belong to groups such as the SCA, understanding such things as the origin of the phrase "pagan" is commonplace. It is not, granted, universal. Among those who were surveyed, fifteen participants, who were between the ages of 50 and 25, explicitly mentioned that they believed that having an academic background in the history of one's faith is important to reconstructing it. Twelve participants, who were between the ages of 30 and 20, explicitly mentioned that they believed there was no need to inform one's spiritual practice with historic research. Nineteen participants did not explicitly engage in this topic while answering the survey.

Paganism Within The Context Of Digital Hierarchy Structures

While few of those surveyed and interviewed considered themselves under the same labels or worshipped the same gods, they shared many similarities. Often, participants had a select patron deity they worked with, or adhered to a vague philosophy of naturalism while revering The Spirits in general. When reviewing the participants of the survey, the idea of which gods and spirits each participant deemed it appropriate that they establish a relationship with rarely manifested in a complete classical pantheon. Generally, there would be one or a select few patron deities that the believer would commit themselves to, and only during special holidays would other deities be acknowledged. Patron deities were often, but not exclusively, tied to a person's heritage.

Heritage is a controversial and yet core topic within the contemporary pagan community. Just as some practices are considered open or closed, perceived cultural heritage will inform to what degree a practitioner belongs within what context of a given ritual. While heritage of practice was not something directly addressed by any of the questions in the survey, it was brought up by the participants as they answered questions addressing their relationships to family, community, and social media usage. The prevalence of heritage within online pagan discourse, and the fact that all of the study participants at least occasionally participated in or were present in these spaces, can be pointed to as part of the reasoning behind this. As will be examined in greater depth later,

the globalization of the contemporary pagan community allowed for a critical evaluation of ritual practice as well as opportunities for education and growth.

If you don't know about where the customs you practice come from, figure that out because otherwise it becomes another form of colonization and theft. (Edgar Frias, as interviewed by Joho & Sung 2020)

There were not many rituals that were universal to those who were a part of this study. Sumbels and ritual feasting were among the few universals, as was ancestor communication, body modification, and the aforementioned spiritual mentorship. Body modification was one of the most common themes among those I surveyed. Of those who completed the survey in its entirety, 46% of the participants had some form of body modification with religious significance. These were tattoos which ranged from a single piece covering a few inches of the body (27% of participants) to large mural that covered large portions of their skin (14% of participants). Of the total survey participants, 11% had family or close friends who had similar religious bodily modifications. Two of those surveyed which had religious body modifications had branding as well as tattooing done, both of which practiced Forn Seidth. While this is less common, it is a feature I am personally familiar with, and these two did happen to come from the same kindred where members often elected to get a small brand as a symbol of their faith. The process of branding and tattooing will be examined in greater depth in the section on offerings by ordeal.

Most of these body modifications reinforced ideas of animism, which was another common theme among both those who I surveyed, and most of the examples I had seen when reviewing the existing literature on contemporary paganism. Throughout this study and previous interviews, there was a common trend among contemporary pagans of not only claiming an animal as a sharing characteristics with oneself, but of identifying specific animalistic behaviors in other people, and determining how to interact with groups of people based on these assumptions. This totemic contextualizing of group dynamics as well as animalistic portrayals of the self serves to reinforce modalities of identity already seen in the field of contemporary paganism (Lundin 2018, Wagner 2018, Harvey 2009, Allen 2016, Stromberg 2009, Schwemer 2011, Silverstein 2009, Murray 2007, Magliocco 2004).

Totemic systems within contemporary paganism occasionally cause groups to intersect with other animal-centric online groups. These include parts of the BDSM community [such as pup play or pony shows] and pop-culture religions such as Otherkin [which is associated with the furry community]. However, in comparing these totemic faith systems there are some interesting

highlights that shed light on both. Scholars of online and pop-culture religions believe, for example, that one of the downfalls of the Otherkin faith system has been the fact that its community is entirely online, with little to no opportunity of establishing so-called “meat space” connections (Cusack 2016, houseofcraft 2020, witchofthenorse 2020, Hoover & Clark 2002). Among the contemporary pagan communities, emphasis on ritual and social gatherings in outdoor spaces has helped to prevent this specific hurdle from ever manifesting, and in fact bring many kinds of pagan faith groups together to campaign for environmental issues (Rizou et al 2020, Tavory 2013, Gibson 2009, Harvey 2011). While the restrictions of the pandemic prevented many of these groups from meeting and reinforcing those group bonds, contemporary pagan groups with totemic hierarchies had the advantage over Otherkin faith groups. This being that they had already established their social dynamics in-person and had the reassurance that there was actually a person on the other side of the screen who they could trust and connect with (Cusack 2016, Gibson 2009, Harvey 2011). The bigger hurdle faced by these totemic faith groups in digitizing their practice would not, in fact, be issues of trust and anonymity that are generated by digital spaces. Rather, the global nature of digital spaces meant that the use of totemic hierarchies in faith groups which often had little to no Indigenous membership would be questioned and scrutinized by people who came from those backgrounds (Joho & Sung 2020, Wiederhold 2020, Coats & Emerich 2015, Seigfried 2021).

There were four survey participants who had connections to Indigenous North American communities, and incorporated practices from these traditions with paganism in their personal religious expression. These communities included the Cherokee, Apache, and Comanche. Rituals were chosen based on how important they were to each participant, often in light of having been a part of rituals practiced by that person’s family, or a tradition that in some way “felt right.” This undefinable feeling of correctness, both in selecting which rituals to perpetuate, which gods from which pantheons to follow, is a repeated trope of how a 21st century pagan develops their practice over time. The efforts to create a personal practice that combines traditional folk practices with the philosophies of 21st century paganism follows similar methods to syncretic practices that marry folk traditions to Christianity.

Chapter 3:

GENERAL PRACTICE

Divination And Control Over the Unknown

The need to have some sort of reassurance of safety, to know the coming course of events so that one can prepare for it, is a feature of interacting with the supernatural that stretches as far back as recorded history. Oracles often were the means for fulfilling this need, either as a person who had some direct link to the supernatural, or as signs which the knowledgeable could interpret for clients. This tradition can be clearly seen in ancient Greek oracles, medieval Christian anchorites, and the patron-mentorship partnerships which are so prevalent today in contemporary paganism. Women in the contemporary paganism movement have historically been considered to be open to divine perception due to supernatural gender roles, and the lack of divide between different social backgrounds within pagan groups facilitates a similar distribution of knowledge. In the past decade there has been a significant change in the ideas surrounding gender both socially and theologically. This sometimes crosses the line into cultural appropriation rather than heritage reclamation when such identities as two-spirit and bissu come into the conversation.

Let us take a look at the theological heritage being dealt with. Oracular consultations have been a staple of ritual practice for as long as there has been a record of ritual practice. Making an important decision without hidden or special knowledge would be foolhardy: a Macedonian general would agree on this as much as a modern-day stock broker, even if specific definitions would vary. The longstanding dynamic had been that a powerful figure, most likely a man, would seek knowledge from a woman who was used as a mouthpiece by the spirits. Often, the ability to create life through her womb was cited as having some influence on the oracle's ability to speak with the divine (Wood 2003, O'Donnell 2015, de Boer et al 2003) In western Europe, anchorites had been a common means not only of oracular information, but of general theological discourse. Unlike oracles who had connection to localized iterations of deities who operated as a part of a pantheon, anchorites had a connection with a monotheistic faith, Christianity. An anchorite was a woman who lived out her days in an enclosed space within the foundations of a church as a hermit that was in close proximity to the community. They created a space for themselves within theological and political discourse, as opposed to the oracles of the ancient world who were a part of the existing faith structure (Gilchrist 1994, Teplin 2020, Budge 2009, Rosenwein 2000). This role of a community-accessible oracle is so prevalent as to be considered archetypal, in that if it is

not present in the religious structure it will be created over time. Oracles were a common feature of pre-Christian European society until the Roman Empire enforced Christian conversion, at which point laypeople sought out advice from ascetics to the point that anchorites became a feature of churches. When the medieval trappings of the church fell out of fashion, other means of oracular divination opened up to the public. Whether visiting the carnival to consult with the fortune-teller or the more recent televised versions such as immensely popular *Walter Mercado*, an easily accessible guide to the unknown would be created (Magliocco 2004, Stark 2007). Today, tarot readers have a wide digital audience who they can discuss the possibilities of the future with from the comfort of their own rooms.

One of the most prevalent forms of divination within the digital sphere of contemporary paganism has been tarot reading. Facebook groups which promote themselves as a space for contemporary pagans and witches often create a separate space for regular tarot reading by and for members. On TikTok, popular content creators who do tarot will often do a weekly livestream where they do tarot readings for subscribers. Divination rituals which are specific to a cultural practice—such as *Yi Jing* and *Oracle Decks*—are still being disseminated, however they are widely considered to be a less open practice and while they might be on display for the general public, are usually just practiced by those with the relevant cultural background. Modern tarot, by contrast, is a conglomerate of several similar traditions and is beginner-friendly. A deck of cards is easier to transport and work with over the Internet than the accoutrement of other divination practices, such as scrying and interpreting the movements of animals in sacred locations. Tarot reading was a common feature of Wiccan conventions throughout the 20th century as much as it was in 19th century carnivals and 21st century pagan Internet forums. Just as with other ritual practices which were a feature of popular spiritualism, tarot cards are a form of divination that involve drawing blindly from a deck of cards, arranging said cards in a pattern, and interpreting the relationship between the cards drawn. Each card has its own unique illustration, and a wide variety of meanings behind it, which can also be influenced by whether they were facing upside-down or not when revealed. The conversation about what practices are inherently open and which closed practices should be reclaimed has been especially heated with the various forms of divination alone. Tarot cards, however, enjoy a position where they not only are considered to be an open practice, but have a long history of being an art form (Coats & Emerich 2015, Gibson 2009, Estes 1995)

The discussion about how to handle open and closed practices has surged since the advent of social media platforms, where people can not only become exposed to a greater variety of practices but can also be exposed to why certain practices are reserved for one group of people over another (Hylén 2014, Silverstein 2009, Foster 2013, Thompson 2012). Gender identity was one of the demographics that was tracked during this study, as it is also a pillar of conversation within online communities today, both within and without 21st century paganism. Gender identity was an open-ended question on the survey, rather than multiple choice question. Sixteen survey participants identified as cisgender male, eighteen as

Gendered Divine Descriptors

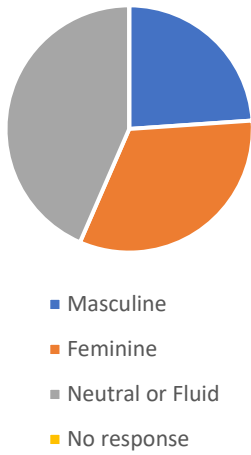


Table 6

cisgender female, four as nonbinary or genderqueer, five as transgender female, and

three as transgender male. The culture of non-binary gender identities is a relatively recent hot-button issue in North America. The question in relation to this study, however, is how gender roles changed within ritual spaces as those rituals have increasingly become tailored to solo practice rather than faith groups. According to those who were surveyed, six explicitly mentioned gendered language within their responses to how they conceived of the supernatural. Five others implied a change in how they perceive their own gender roles while engaging in ritual, three of whom were solo practitioners and two of whom belonged to faith groups.

Gendered Self Descriptors

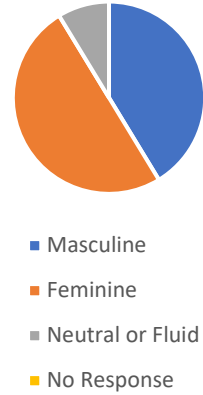
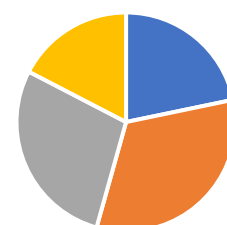


Table 5

Within the discussion of who and is not allowed to perform certain rituals is the idea of gender roles within theology. This has come under scrutiny among the newest members of the faith, as has gender essentialism by younger generations even beyond the context of contemporary paganism and new-age philosophies. That there is a “feminine power” as a central concept of so many pagan faiths begs the question of who gets to decide what the definition of feminine really is. The criticism levied against gender essentialism is that defining a woman by her genitalia is, in so many ways, reducing a woman to a single body part, which circles back to misogyny. As can be seen when comparing Table 5 to Table 7, many who were surveyed actually changed their personal relationship to their gender during ritual performance. This varied from linking certain ritual duties to specific genders, and inhabiting that gender when performing that role, to feeling that they became more attuned to the object(s) of their worship during ritual, and temporarily gained the attributes of the divinity in question, including gender expression. In the first instance, the roles that were so explicitly tied to gender often were also linked to seasonal celebrations, especially those which linked femineity to springtime. Indeed the several survey participants whose faith focused on the sacred aspects of the natural world also explicitly mentioned that they were familiar with ritual roles that were exclusive to female members of their faith. As so many contemporary pagan faiths that claimed to place ritual focus on “feminine power” did, in fact, place this focus on reproductive and regenerative power, the issue is further raised at how infertile and post-menopausal women are left out of this conversation along with the transgender, nonbinary, and intersex members of their faith. (Lundin 2018, Oboler 2010, Lepage 2017, Thompson 2012, Hylén 2014).

One transgender man in his late 20s who participated in the study mentioned how, to overcome this, he “envisioned himself as the instrument of the divine mother earth” when enacting these rituals in his solo practice. This is not dissimilar to how other survey participants discussed gaining the characteristics of the entities they worshiped during prayer. This does not always mean that the participant would

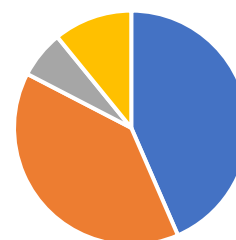
Self Descriptors During Ritual



- Masculine
- Feminine
- Neutral or Fluid
- No Response

Table 7

Specific Divine Descriptors



- Masculine
- Feminine
- Neutral or Fluid
- No Gender

Table 8

classify the experience as a sort of spirit possession. For example, one male Asatru participant who was from the northeastern United States and in their late 30s, would normally set aside time each fall to go apple picking in order to choose specific apples for their altar. While he would do this to supplicate their patron goddess, he also described this as a means of the goddess choosing specific apples through them as they wandered around the orchard. They described the goddess as performing the action of choosing the apples, and walking around the orchard, even though he acknowledges that he is also the one in the orchard, and it is his actions that are pleasing to his patron goddess.

Initially, early 20th century pagan faith groups, such as Ordo Templi Orientis and the Rosicrucian Mysteries, the male-female dynamic was a central tenant of the means by which a group would invoke rites and create cosmological changes. These same groups had enacted rites that borrowed elements from Kemeticism, Hinduism, Kabbalah, Tibetan Buddhism, and a variety of Indigenous American faith systems (Hylén 2014, Crowley *archival materials*). This culture-vulture approach to constructing a faith is the antithesis of how a 21st century contemporary pagan approaches the supernatural as much as their non-spiritual life. The advent of the Internet has allowed for those with a connection to a ritual practice through their heritage to explain why a ritual's deeper meaning should be respected to those who have taken up a practice simply because it is trendy. As discussed earlier, six study participants between the ages of 68 and 45 discussed closed practices as an important topic of discussion, twelve participants between 45 and 30 were explicit on this, and five participants between 30 and 20 indicated closed practices as an important topic. This further supports the idea earlier examined of a generational divide between who does and does not believe that one should be able to connect their ritual practice to their ethnicity.

This shift has levied a wave of criticism at why certain practices are a part of many of the mid-20th century contemporary pagan traditions, causing a re-assessment in what is appropriate for a wider practice. Several groups have disbanded group ritual in favor of becoming a collective of solo practitioners, in which case each is able to better assess what works for them, during which they support each other socially. Other faith groups have dropped ritual practices that they have decided are not a part of their shared heritage. Some have maintained their practices. Gender roles are relative to cultural cosmologies, and this discussion has been in flux as of the writing of this thesis. In general, the increased communication has created a shift in dialogue as well as a rapid increase in membership (Kraemer 2012, Oboler 2010, Harvey 2011, Mueller 2018, Lepage 2017).

Among contemporary pagans today control over the unknown is being sought through a variety of divinatory methods, among them tarot readings, scrying, and meditation guided by patron spirits. Tarot reading remains one of the most accessible and popular forms of divination, both sought out as a service and done by the faithful for themselves. The advent of real-time two-way video communication has opened the door to providing tarot readings to anyone in any location, and a common source of revenue in the gig economy is tarot through online appointments or livestreams. Livestream tarot readings function by having the tarot reader sit in front of a camera and read cards to an audience who participates in a text chat that often appears either next to or overlaid on top of the image of the tarot reader. This text chat is visible to both the audience and the tarot reader. Sometimes, the audience has to pay for access to the stream, sometimes it is open to the public and people digitally send whatever amount of money they want as a tip while the stream is running (often getting a personal thank you during the livestream from the tarot reader, and sometimes triggering a special animation or similar moment). The tarot reader will pull cards either for people in the chat, or just work with the deck and explain the process to the audience. This can last a few minutes to a few hours. While there were sixteen survey participants who mentioned tarot cards as a regular part of their practice, only four had done so in the context of a livestream. Of these four, two had been audience members, one had conducted a few private readings through their livestream, and one had regularly held tarot readings for the general public through her livestream. Those who had been audience members had both gotten readings in a public forum, and also had their own tarot cards which they used privately (The Graveyard Witch 2020, houseofcraft 2019, strega_sarracenia 2020, theglamourwitchla 2020)

What does the prevalence of this kind of activity mean cosmologically? Since tarot cards are often open to interpretation and each reader often develops their own style and relationship with their deck, or decks, meaning that there is a reason why a specific tarot reader might be sought out over another. Moreover, there is a communal aspect to being able to facelessly enter into a chatroom and have the supernatural consulted on your behalf by a tarot reader on the livestream. The one performing the oracular work is the only one who isn't protected by the semi-anonymity provided by the Internet, and the fact that multiple people are there with problems can help lend credence to the enterprise. As with other iterations of Internet-era paganism, there is a level of extreme transparency. Most tarot readers will take pains to explain the many ways each card can be interpreted, and how the different cards drawn change meaning as they interconnect with each

other. This education alongside the divination helps to make tarot reading more accessible while it also establishes the personal abilities and strengths of each tarot reader. Showmanship, of course, is also key. The unknown is now no longer so inaccessible, even if this doesn't change how many people are requesting readings. Even if some people take up tarot cards for themselves after seeing so many livestreams and doing some light Googling, its only human to try and turn to someone with a greater store of knowledge to mediate between the supernatural and ourselves (Joho & Sung 2020, houseofcraft 2019, strega_sarracenia 2020, theglamourwitchla 2020)

Tarot cards are only one means of divination that has survived from past centuries into present day. Other popular forms include scrying, either with water or a mirror and sometimes with the aid of a pendulum. One survey participant in particular, a woman in her 40s from Texas, included scrying as a part of the rituals she performed while engaging in ritual bathing. Keeping a pendulum with other materials at her bathside altar, she would use the surface of her bathwater for scrying after a period of guided meditation. Typically, however, scrying is done overlooking a pool or a shallow plate filled with water. But have there been any new divination practices that developed in this past century, which make use of and exist because of today's technology? In fact, yes. Two of the more common ways people try to gain control over the unknown that relies more completely on technology, are sharing posts that are meant to sway luck in one's favor, and what can most succinctly be called "predictive text divination."

Sharing an image that is supposed to bring luck or a financial windfall to those who perpetuate it has been a staple of the Internet since it was available to the public. Chain emails, posts on Instagram, reminding people when they have "lost The Game," all are examples of this thought process within the context of Internet culture. (Blackmore 1999, Hanganu-Bresch 2017). Passing along a piece of information out of fear of supernatural retribution or out of hope of supernatural recompense predate digital communication, as is evident from such traditions as the cleansing rituals surrounding the play Macbeth (Garber 1997, Macguire and Smith 2012, Burt 2007). Sharing



m-muscle-chan

Y'know I reblogged this a bit ago and was saved from financial probation and getting kicked out of school because of it, just mere months from graduation. Got a call from the financial aid advisor telling me that they made a mistake with filing my account (or some other sort of clerical error) and said that, basically, they owe me money. Welp.

FIGURE 1

information that is supposed to be supernaturally charged often relies on that sharing in order to work, which is the most basic iteration of a viral meme.

One of the most common memes that rely on being shared is the money cat [see figure 5], which is a kind of digital maneki-neko, or a feline image which encourages monetary fortune within Japanese lore (Wargadiredja 2017). The other common form of supernaturally-charged viral memetic exchange is one perpetuated by fear, such as the primary plot mechanic behind horror movies such as *The Ring* and, in fact, the original story that the Ring is based off of inspired this phenomenon to often be referred to as the Ring Phenomenon. This phrase is meant to illustrate specifically how information requires rapid dissemination in order to thrive, and the entirety of its purposed seems to be that dissemination process. To perpetuate itself, a meme that operates using the Ring Phenomenon will prey to the base emotions of those it relies on, often either fear or hope (Lacefield 2010, Blackmore et al 2000). When examining the way this memetic information is structured beyond the knee-jerk fear-response, some form of the supernatural has to be invoked in order to uphold its power, and in order to keep the information passed along to the next person. The belief that somehow something bad or good will happen by performing this action is, at its core, a ritual engaging with an unseen power, whose inner workings are unknown and unknowable (Sperber & Aunger 2000, Wargadiredja 2017, Blackmore et al 2000, Blackmore 1999, Hanganu-Bresch 2017, Lacefield 2010)

Predictive text divination can be considered the inheritor of stichomancy, or divination using apparently random lines from books, which itself can be traced back about as far as the mass-production of books and texts. It seems as if, as long as something has been easily in reach, people have tried to use it to predict the future. Predictive text generation works by suggesting words that you have commonly used in relation to the words you are currently typing when using the keyboard function of your smartphone. This feature has been taken advantage of to create word games, group storytelling exercises, and to generate random phrases for people to ponder over their deeper meaning. The deeper meaning of seemingly random phrases, of course, has a long tradition going back to the earliest divination traditions, most famously the oracles of ancient Greece (O'Donnell 2015). Interpreting and discussing the deeper meanings of these phrases had been an important task for the priests in attendance to an oracle then, and discussions surrounding such contemplations are growing in popularity now. Such message boards, however, are not usually where one goes to seek out interpretation first. While there are some boards dedicated to typing

out these phrases or asking for more experienced people questions and opinions, most are a more egalitarian area. This is where those who have spent time contemplating their phrases alone can come back to discuss what they have learned about themselves and get second opinions (Moinpour 2021, Alexander 2017, Magee 2021)

While only six survey participants explicitly referred to divination as a necessary part of engaging with their faith, nineteen participants indicated that they practiced an activity which is

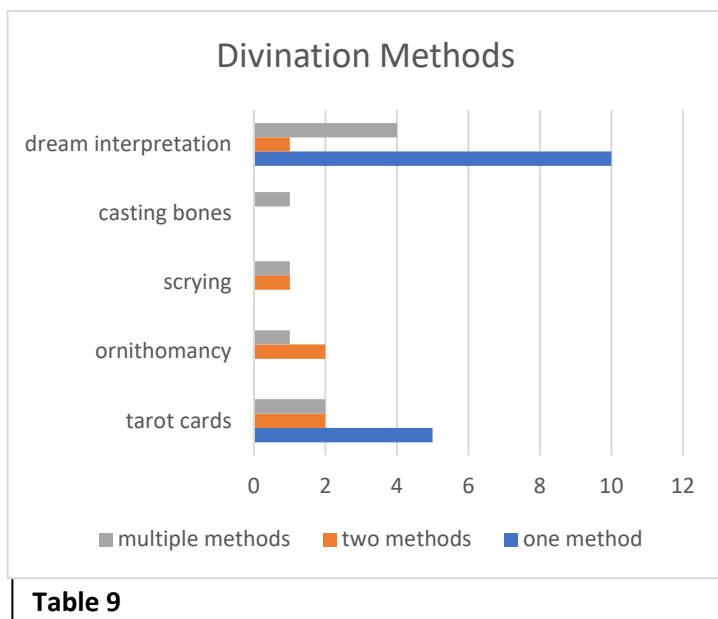


FIGURE 2

typically conducted for the purposes of divination. These activities were tarot cards, tracking the patterns of birds [ornithomancy], scrying, rune stones, casting bones, and dream interpretation. Dream interpretation and tarot cards were among with most common, and very often if a participant had done one of these they were likely to have also done another

form of divination.

There were some instances in which the divination practices employed by the survey participants followed a similar theme to their other practices. For example, two participants who practiced ornithomancy also identified feeling connected to ravens and crows, even though one practiced Asatru and the other Stregheria. Dream interpretation was, unexpectedly, more common a practice than tarot readings, especially among those who only practiced one form of divination. The less common forms of divination, such as casting bones and scrying, were only mentioned by those who also regularly worked with at least one other form of divination. Casting bones was explicitly mentioned as part of the practice of one participant in their 30s who lives in the Northeastern United States, and it is a very specific form of divination that, on one level, works similarly to tarot cards. However, a tarot deck is special in that its artwork strikes a chord with the



person who decides to use it, and therefore becomes a deck that they create a relationship with. These cards each have a set meaning which is somewhat open-ended, and which will be influenced by how the cards are drawn and placed on the table in relation to each other. The bones that are cast also each hold their own meaning that changes and is influenced in relation to their position relative to themselves and each other, but with some key differences. “Casting bones” is a bit of

a misnomer in that it is not only bones that are tossed onto the divining table, but rocks, shells, bottlecaps, etc. Any object can be used which had been deemed to be a suitable stand-in for any concept which the diviner would want to engage in during their divination work. Because casting bones does not have the same hard and fast rules as tarot, however, it is not as common a practice.

Death And Ancestor Worship

The interaction with the supernatural involves ancestor worship as much as divine entities. One of the few universal trends across all of the participants of this survey, was the belief that their ancestors—both those who they had known personally that had died in their lifetime and who had spiritually guided their mentors—were able to lend assistance. The appropriateness and means of initiating contact were the points at which different practices diverged. Of those surveyed, all but two of those who included some form of spiritual mentorship in their practice believed that direct mentorship from their ancestors was not only appropriate, but a reality of their faith. The two outliers, it should be noted, did not think it was outside the realm of possibility, just outside of their personal experience.

Examining the relationship that a 21st century pagan has with their ancestors brings to the fore to what degree we must consider each practice as reconstructionist (taking an approach where ancient faith systems are interpreted from the standpoint of a practitioner with a modern thought system) or orthodox (being one that attempts to function theoretically from the standpoint of those who had constructed the ancient faith systems in question). One of the most currently popular

reconstructionist faith systems in the United States is Asatru, which shares many similarities with the more orthodox Forn Seidth faith system. While there is no overarching doctrine and each kindred will vary in its beliefs and practices, there were noticeable patterns in the sample of those surveyed for this study and among those who were observed to openly declare one or the other faith system within the context of public discourse on social media. Ancestors had a direct link to the living in some way, and strictly had a mentor role. Showing reverence and respect in the form of small offerings and spilling a bit of drink for them when at an event was considered courtesy, but different from worship. Each ancestor spirit was considered to have a distinct personality that the faithful would come to know over time, and often offerings would be tailored to the preferences of each spirit. Ancestor spirits don't have any specific supernatural abilities or jurisdiction. They hold special knowledge which they want to impart, because they are deeply invested in guiding their descendants. The divergence in discourse really seems to occur when examining the links the ancestors have to the living, and how the ancestors are meant to interact with the divine. Are ancestors simply picking random members of similar faith systems to mentor, are spirits only going to work with members of their exact same faith group, or are people linked in mentorship beyond death by an actual shared bloodline? Answers to these questions vary, and all call back to the generally held belief that ancestor spirits are individual people with individual ideas about how they want to cultivate their faith—post-mortem—within future generations (Kaplan 1996, Barner-Barry 2005, Teplin 2017, von Schnurbein 2016, Puryear 2006, Lale 2010)

If the notion that, in death, one becomes a mentor to descendants who follow a similar faith system, then what conclusions can be drawn about how contemporary pagans conceptualize their own forthcoming after-lives, and the importance of passing down their faith traditions? In interviewing one Wiccan survey participant regarding her relationship with her children, who are solo practitioners that don't identify specifically as Wicca, several salient points were brought up. This participant is a woman in her mid-50s, with two children in their early 20s (non-binary practicing pagan) and late teens (male, participates in family rituals but does not practice). Her husband does not personally identify as pagan, but does assist in major rituals in and around the home. There are other members of their family who openly practice paganism, though all are of the participant's generation or younger. In working with her coven and other faith groups in and around the Tri-State area of the United States, this participant has officiated in weddings and memorial services as well as organized seasonal events while also officiating private life-events

rituals for her family. She believed that ancestors were implicitly invited to these events, and it was good practice for them to be explicitly invited to family-focused events. Ancestors are what she defined as members of the community who existed as spirits, as opposed to living people. Just as she held that both kinds of family could be both blood relatives, close friends, and those who otherwise established close bonds with each other, ancestors could form mentorships with the living due to a wide variety of reasons. While she personally had given little thought to her own post-mortem duties, in general she held that spirits would come and help where they were needed because that is simply what family does. While this is by no means a universal view of the afterlife among contemporary pagans, we can consider these concepts in brief. What we appear to have is a working model of an equal relationship of responsibilities between the living and the dead. The living are not required to invite the ancestor spirits or give them offerings, but it is polite to do so, and it appears that they can show up of their own accord. Leaving offerings, according to those surveyed, seems to be the best way to ingratiate yourself to a potential mentor. The ancestors can choose to mentor and impart knowledge to the living as they see fit, and if they want to see their ideals passed on they must do so. Events that enter on the family appear to be especially important for reinforcing these relationships.

Each participant was asked both if they believed that they had attended any pagan or somehow non-traditional funeral services, why they would define those services as such, and what they wanted done with their own remains. In reviewing the responses, there seemed to be three distinct groups in regard to how the participants wanted their remains treated. Twelve survey participants cared very little about their remains at all and considered the funerary arrangements to be a therapeutic experience for the living, rather than a means of facilitating the journey of the dead. Within that camp were those who were fine with having a funeral that adhered to the beliefs of their families rather than their own. Another group of twenty-seven were those who had specific plans for their body that were non-traditional. Five of those surveyed explicitly wanted some form of cremation when dealing with the disposal of the body itself, three of which wanted those ashes to be planted with a tree afterward.

What is interesting to note is that, whether they viewed their funeral as important to plan or not, all who did not explicitly want to be cremated, wanted to forgo chemical preservatives, and sealing caskets. They saw these elements as both pollutants that got in the way of their body decomposing naturally, and as unnecessary expenses to burden a grieving family with. These ideas

are also common features of the Death Positivity movement. This subculture has been gaining traction over the past fifteen years in the United States, both online and through Death Salons, which are small symposiums open to the public where issues surrounding the funerary industry, palliative care, and environmentalism are discussed. (del Real 2020, Zibaite 2020, Ryan 2015, Lofland 2019, Jorgensen-Skakum 2018, Blosser 2013)

Within the wide varieties of cosmologies encompassed by the term *contemporary paganism*, the ideas of spiritual guidance from members of similar faiths who have died was a common thread. Two people who were surveyed talked about receiving guidance from mentors—both the living and the dead—through their dreams. One participant was a woman in her 40s whose beliefs are a syncretic mixture informed by spiritual traditions taught to them on the reservation, tarot divination, and Christian holidays. She stated that “when I am in need of guidance, the spirits I need will guide me through dreams.” Another participant, a woman in her 30s who practiced a paganism informed by both Asatru and Stregheria, communicated with both living friends and family who had passed away through her dreams. This was not a wholly controllable method of contact and went both ways in that sometimes her dreams were interrupted by others suddenly intruding to communicate with her. Guidance from the dead is something which participants of the study anticipated as a possibility from tarot readings, meditation, and other forms of divination, if they anticipated such contact at all. Only eleven mentioned it, aside from the two women who mentioned contact with the dead through dreams. These other mentions included six in relation to shadow work, three in relation to tarot readings, and two in relation to meditation or some form of meditative prayer activity. Another common belief was that the afterlife was either nonexistent or not something the living should be too concerned with. Of those in this survey’s sample, thirty-seven believe in some form of communication between the living and their ancestors, twenty-one do not feel the need to ascribe to a firm philosophy on the afterlife, and eighteen overlap in holding both beliefs simultaneously. As so many contemporary pagan communities are becoming multi-generational, what do these prevalent ideas mean for relationships with death and family memorials on a personal level?

Eight people within the survey pool had attended similar funeral or memorial services at the same location despite only two of them being in the same faith group. Of these eight people, six of varying gender expression were over the age of 40, one was in his mid-30s, and the other was in her late 20s. These services had all taken place at the same lake because they had all been

a part of the same historic society, the aforementioned SCA, and the services had all taken place at one of the annual summer gatherings there due to convenience. In reviewing the survey participants who would have been able to attend these services, there is one common point: military service. Many of those in the SCA who are over the age of 35 had served in the armed forces, and the pagan community of the SCA is no exception. Of those surveyed, twenty-six were over the age of 35 and fourteen of them had served in some capacity with the US army, navy, or air force; all twenty-six had been a member of the SCA at some point. Anecdotal evidence from other members of this historical society indicate that older members were more likely to have been enlisted at some point in their lives. Of those who had pagan memorial services held for them at SCA events, I have been able to verify two who had served in the armed forces (one navy and one army), three who did not, and one who was neither a practicing pagan nor a member of the armed forces. This last memorial service was held in honor of one of the beloved owners of the campground where Pennsic has been historically held passed away by some of the older pagans within the SCA, following the same script as other memorial services held there, though it was more widely attended.

The memorial ritual itself often took place at the height of summer, usually at sunset, in a private ceremony that was not widely advertised. This would be a private event taking place during a very large public festival, and would go unnoticed unless you were a close friend of the deceased. There is an annual two-week camping event called Pennsic that has been held in the midwestern United States for the past fifty years. This event is held by and for members of the nonprofit international historic reenactment group the Society of Creative Anachronism, which has a notably high density of members who openly practice a variety of pagan faiths. The privately-owned campground Pennsic takes place at has a large lake which has purportedly been the site of numerous funeral and memorial ceremonies for this community. These services would either consist of a sumbel concluding with ashes being scattered in the lake, or of a sumbel with a small arrangement of offerings burned in effigy at the edge of the lake. Singing was a common means of beginning and ending these events, and in a few instances, instruments had been employed, including drums, viol de gamba, and bagpipes. At the service held for the campground owner, his having not been a practicing pagan, nondenominational language was used during the sumbel and instead of a sermon or offerings, a favorite comedy sketch of the deceased was recited. Of those surveyed, another twelve had heard of such services being held at Pennsic but had not themselves

attended any. In general, the older members who were surveyed that had ties to both paganism and the SCA would have either attended or been aware of a pagan service occurring at this lake.

Inherited and gifted ritual objects are a common thread within pagan practice, as explored within the work of Luhrmann, Magliocco, and Hutton. (Luhrmann 1989, Magliocco 1994, Magliocco 2001, Hutton 1999) For those who participated in this study, most who had gifted, inherited, or otherwise received ritual objects were also in some way connected to the SCA. This is hardly surprising as craftsmanship is an integral part of that group. Five participants did use materials from someone who was now deceased, and they did associate memories if not the explicit presence of that person when using these objects. These objects included decorated boxes, athame, textiles, and religious pendants. While not everyone used these objects in the context of their altar spaces, those who mentioned receiving the athame, blanket, and one of the boxes, did. An exception was two participants in their 30s, one from the West Coast of the United States and one from Texas, both of whom had been gifted decorated boxes and neither of whom had direct involvement with the SCA. One generally accepted truth among those who were surveyed, is that using material objects connected to the deceased in a ritual context invites those spirits to influence the ritual. Memories of the dead and the spirits of the dead themselves are inextricably linked.

Chapter 4:

SOCIAL MEDIA & SOCIAL RITUAL

Construction Of Space In The Digital Age

One of the expectations going into this study, was that the group ritual aspect was going to move to online platforms such as Zoom or TEAMS. However, while this did occur, a far more common reaction was to switch to a solo practice for ritual activity, and to use digital platforms strictly for sourcing information and socializing, even if it was with the same people with whom the practitioner would normally do ritual work. The ability to use digital platforms in order to conduct ritual activity was acknowledged, but the practice was not explored for a variety of reasons. One survey participant stated that they felt they work best when they can “feel the energy” of those in their faith group directly, and another participant claimed that the “rhythm would be off because of dropped connections and poor Internet.” Therefore, those who were not solo practitioners suspended group ritual activity for the year for the most part. There were a few exceptions. Where possible, groups would meet outside and keep six feet of distance when enacting normal ritual activity. One survey participant did this for three months at the beginning

of quarantine, and four others indicated that they knew of other groups who were enacting such measures.

Ritual practice within the context of quarantine did not mean a restriction to social media for solo practitioners, but rather a re-assessment of what the concept of sacred space could be when attempting to adhere to safe and physically distant practices. All but four of those who completed the survey indicated that they treated the Internet as an information resource rather than a meeting place when it came to spiritual matters, and three of those four only initially attempted to use it to digitize their practices, or else did so for select few rituals. As discussed above, solo practice was simply an easier choice.

There were several who were surveyed that used specific areas around their house as the primary area for ritual work that were also parts of the home that could be considered secular. This was especially true for those who mentored others online by demonstrating techniques and practices in their own home for public consumption. What is especially interesting to note within the context of this study is the ability that people have to broadcast their domestic life onto social media for semi-public consumption. The intended audience is, for the vast majority of those who use social media platforms, people who they know personally, and thus maintaining this public documentation of their private life still is in some way private. It can be digitally accessed by the same people who they would let into their house should they have been in the neighborhood. By the same token, privacy filters can be taken down for the general public to have access, just the same way one can fold their laundry on the front lawn instead of in the privacy of their own home. Privacy is no less of an illusion in the digital age, but creating a public presence in a private space creates hurdles to having a private life at best. When that public presence deals wholly with one's metaphysical work creating privacy is that much more difficult. While this can potentially be a concern for those that produce ritual materials in their home for public consumption, this issue will come more into play later in this essay when we discuss livestreaming and tarot reading.

The kitchen is, for many cultures, thought to be the center of home life. As people were restricted to their homes for varying lengths of time during 2020, the kitchen gained further importance as the home became the only place people could be at. However, for those who use activities within the home to express their faith, the kitchen is a key ritual space. The term "kitchen witch" generally denotes someone who does ritual work within the context of food production, either meant as a compliment to someone's cooking prowess or as a descriptor of someone's

practice. Among those surveyed, four actively use activities in the kitchen in the practice of their faith, and one of those four is among the three who recalled having an older relative that used the kitchen for a similar ritual practice. Often, domestic activities that play a ritualistic role are repetitive, and function in the same way that prayer breads do within Catholic prayer practices. Kneading bread, stirring a pot, and agitating herbs in butter are all repetitive, careful motions, which are a convenient opportunity for a pagan to invoke an ancestor, relevant deity, or patron saint (Ginzburg 1992, Magliocco 2004, Murray 2007). Prayers, good intentions, and other supernatural components can be worked into the mixture along with the physical ingredients. One survey participant also mentioned doing this when knitting, especially when making gifts for friends. Moreover, this central space can be an area of leaving offerings. As will be revisited in the section on offerings and material goods, one participant in particular linked mischievous spirits who were part of domestic activity in general with the kitchen as a central hub for communication and negotiation.

Baked goods have a long history within the Wicca community, especially in terms of baked-good offerings made using bodily fluids, usually referred to as soul-cakes (Conway 2001, Cunningham 2004, Wood & Seefeldt 2010). These fluids generally are related to reproduction and menstruation, and soul-cakes are meant to be used in order to tap into the practitioner's own power when creating offerings for a fertility ritual or a rite which would benefit from such energy. These rites include those associated with new beginnings in both mundane and spiritual life, sexual relationships, and the springtime (Conway 2001, Cunningham 2004, Lewis 1999, Wood & Seefeldt 2010, Dunwich 1991, Pearson 2007). While none of this study's participants personally had experience with soul-cakes, one participant—the one woman who was in their 60s—did personally know of other people who had included soul-cakes in their rituals. As this is a practice mentioned in studies from the late 20th century and not something I personally observed, there is a possibility it might have either fallen out of use or else are a regional practice. Baked goods and foods are a common part of ritual events, falling into one of two categories that are not mutually exclusive: offerings and feasts. These will be discussed further in the offerings section of this essay; however the creation of these materials does allow for a more personal involvement in ritual practices than would be got from purchasing offerings. It is this hands-on element, preparing materials throughout the day and bringing one's practice into mundane activities, that several survey participants (15 of those who had completed the survey in full) noted was a positive re-

affirmation of their faith. None of these participants had a permanent altar within the kitchen space, and six participants indicated setting up a temporary altar in the kitchen space either for a holiday event or specific ritual activity.

The garden has always been a space that is tied to the kitchen, and during quarantine, a rash of articles appeared online to assist those who decided to try their hand at growing vegetables during their increased time at home. Of the four participants who identified the kitchen as their primary ritual space, three of them were among the seven participants that said they did a significant amount of ritual practice outdoors involving plant matter. In practice, this is very similar to “kitchen witchcraft,” in that the physical labor of caring for plants in the garden was a meditative act that channeled the intentions of the practitioner. The plants were largely herbal or vegetable in nature, and grown to be used in teas, food, and other consumables. Two of these participants had an altar within their gardens for ritual work.

Water-based ritual work was another common feature of solo practitioners. In the four instances of surveyed participants who primarily did rituals that focused on water, the bathtub was where most of their ritual work took place during the pandemic. Prior to this, for two of these participants, the bathtub was not the primary ritual space, as they tried to use outdoor bodies of water wherever possible (such as lakes). Ritual bathing, in general, is a different meditative format than what had been discussed above with gardening and cooking. Within the kitchen and the garden, a repetitive, practical task is imbued with ritual meaning and the faith and intentions of the practitioner make the end product somehow special and magical. With ritual bathing, the practitioner themselves are becoming worked on and changed by their environment through meditation, scrubbing, prayer, and the use of religious consumables. These consumables being candles, incense, and a variety of talisman objects.

As will be examined more explicitly in the section on Offerings Made by Ordeal, the procedures and materials necessary for body modification rituals were not impacted by the pandemic, or impacted very little. Rituals that surround offerings made by ordeal are wholly focused on the stress of the participants, whether physical stress or mental stress, and usually have less needs in terms of physical objects and other members of faith groups. The disruption in the general supply chains throughout the pandemic were often more immediately felt by those who needed raw materials. For example, one participant was a Celtic-pagan witch in her late 20s who relied on large amounts of shea butter for the herbal-tincture infused moisturizers she made with

home grown herbs. These moisturizers were among the tinctures, teas, and incense she sold online, and purportedly used by other pagans in their regular ritual practice. For those who engaged in offerings by ordeal, this was not an issue.

Solo Practice And The Rise Of Social Media

Social media helps to facilitate solo practice while allowing for a supportive community at large, and that balance between independence and interdependence flourished particularly well in the environment created by the pandemic in 2020. The social restrictions created by the pandemic fostered increased use of social media as well as a dramatic rise in physical isolation, which allowed for habits learned in order to function with a level of respectability in a social environment to fall into disuse, such as wearing heels or eating at a table instead of on the couch (Wiederhold 2020, Chan et al 2020). Within the context of religious practice, habits need only be retained insofar as they are beneficial or meaningful to the practitioner themselves, not simply due to the trappings of tradition. This allows for a greater degree of personalization, as well as a frank evaluation as to what the practitioner's relationship with the divine is. Solo practitioners were always a feature of alternative religious activity, and in many ways have become an archetype of the perpetuation of folk traditions (Magliocco 2004, Stark 2007, Hutton 1999, Jung 1966)

Within the context of the socio-political debate of who has the right to claim specific practices, as outlined in sections above, solo practitioners set the stage for more flexible dialogue. Given that social media has been a central point of education and information exchange for activism and dialogue on racial and class issues in the United States over the past few years, these topics of conversation can easily permeate into other conversations on the same platforms. As the protests against police brutality in the United States gained traction over the summer in 2020, conversation in Internet forums on multiple platforms examined the subject of how to more equitably handle racial issues in general. Focusing on the discussion among contemporary pagans on the short-video form social media platform TikTok, a variety of methods were used. Popular content creators who were white tried to use their space to direct their audience to what members of the community who were African American, Indigenous American, or Latin American had to say on not only the protests, but such hot topics as the use of palo santo (white sage). In general, BIPOC (a common acronym to denote groups who are black, indigenous, and/or people of color) pagans received support in TikTok forums. Discussion largely focused on either the subject of the protests or pushed back against the "culture vulture" mentality that was typical of early 20th century

contemporary paganism. (Joho & Sung 2020, chris_of_pentacles 2020, houseofcraft 2019, strega_sarracenia 2020, witchofthenorse 2019). *Culture vulture* is typically used in this context as a derogatory term that refers to a practice, whether personal fashion style or religious expression, that takes bits and pieces from a wide range of other cultures without rhyme or reason and, most importantly, without knowing or caring to know the deeper meaning behind the practices being amassed together. Just as those surveyed in this study expunged upon later in this thesis, a close examination of one's heritage and the personal relationship one has with ritual determines its usefulness to you. Contemporary paganism in the 21st century has become an amorphous mass of intersectional social issues and individual cosmologies because of the nature of the multiplicity of ways in which human society is inter-related in terms of its impact on the environment, the dissemination of social narratives in real time, and the mixing of cultures. This is not just due to the intergenerational mixing of cultures brought on by globalism and a socially conscious attempt to avoid poaching someone else's belief system while celebrating and discovering one's own. This is a purposeful and ongoing dialogue that requires faith groups to examine why their rituals hold meaning both within the context of a person as a member of their immediate cultural surroundings, but also because of their own inner processes (Joho & Sung 2020, Wiederhold 2020, Coats & Emerich 2015, Seigfried 2021, Hoover & Clark 2002)

One of the practices which I observed mentioned across social media is shadow work. Especially on social media platforms like TikTok, one would be hard pressed to find experienced members of the community who do not insist that new members devote serious time and energy towards doing shadow work. This practice is a kind of meditation meant to explore what negative energies and upsetting experiences one has been refusing to acknowledge, so they can come to terms with these memories and potentially seek therapy before moving forward in their witchcraft practice. The rationale is that the psyche is an instrument, and the entire instrument is used in every ritual action. Being completely aware of all the cracks and crevices is not only good spiritual upkeep, but also a mark of good mental health, which is a widely promoted trend within the online pagan community. As we will examine in further detail in the section that focuses on WitchTok, this practice of meditation therapy is extremely Jungian (chris_of_pentacles 2020, houseofcraft 2019, strega_sarracenia 2020, theglamourwitchla 2020, witchofthenorse 2019, Joho & Sung 2020).

The roots of shadow work are disputed within the online community. The earliest recorded example of this practice is hard to pin down because some practitioners attribute their hearing of the practice to either older mentors, speaking with spirit guides, or their therapists. Nearly all examinations on the origins of the practice point to Carl Jung in some shape or form if not to some form of personal revelation (witchofthenorse 2019, strega_sarracenia 2020, The Graveyard Witch 2020, Lewis 1999, Wiederhold 2020, Gottlieb 2017). How shadow work functions as a ritual practice itself can be addressed later, but for now it serve as a good example of how solo practitioners are able to influence the flexible dialogue within the larger community. Shadow work is considered to be a good first step on anyone's spiritual journey, regardless of the specifics of what pantheon or rituals one is following, even though shadow work is primarily associated with those who practice witchcraft. Within the context of online discussion boards and video posts on social media sites such as TikTok, the same conversations surrounding shadow work tend to get repeated as members join these pagan communities. As those who engage in shadow work are most often new to the community, there is a great deal of sourcing for information on the subject by people who have few contacts in the group, and who have little idea of where to begin. As such, there is also discussion among more seasoned pagans surrounding best practices, terminology, accessibility, gatekeeping, and forgiving breaches in etiquette that a newcomer simply would not know. Many older members try to take this opportunity to also impress upon new members how to avoid white supremacist groups who use Norse imagery, and why research into responsible materials sourcing and histories behind open and closed ritual practices is so important. Newcomers, for their part, can often be frustrated by the many obstacles they find in their way, and being unable to tell those giving advice in good faith from those who are making fun of them.

During my study, I interviewed one woman in particular on the subject of how pagans source information from each other. This woman was a Canadian witch in their 30s who helped to run several online forums, and practiced witchcraft and tarot. They spoke with me about how the open resource nature of the community is a double edged sword in many ways, not the least of which being how to distinguish if someone is being genuine. Shadow work is a long, difficult, and to a beginner an often frustratingly boring journey if you don't see the point in the exercise. Moreover, this and a few other participants confided, many young people seek out witchcraft, satanism, and pagan faiths in an effort to feel a sense of power as much as to explore alternative methods of belief. In these cases, what they may actually want is instant supernatural gratification

in their problems. Still others might simply be sorting through these sites to take screenshots to ridicule in other social media forums. In any case, the larger pagan community finds itself needing to maintain a balancing act with newcomers. Is this someone who is genuinely seeking information, but does not know how to properly frame it, or who they should even be directing their questions to? Is this someone who just wants to curse an ex-boyfriend and has decided to come to the first website a hasty web search will take them to? Is this someone who is looking for people to make fun of? When running these witchcraft forums, this interviewee was careful to moderate discussion in such a way as to keep discussion positive and constructive. In the case of shadow work, making sure that the reasons why it was being done were explained patiently and positively each and every time was actually a lot of work. This is because the same exact questions were being asked over and over for months, by new people every time, who would not have any reason to know why everyone would be angry or exasperated when they responded. Creating and updating pinned posts to direct newcomers to, holding Q&A seminars, and having 101 sessions helped to alleviate some of this.

One group which has had the most public uphill battle within its community's dialogue in recent years is Nordic paganism, and Asatru in particular. White supremacist groups have co-opted many symbols that are associated with the Vikings and with the modern-day Asatru religion, such as the valknut, various runes, and Mjolnir or Thor's hammer. These groups will make a special effort to exclude and endanger queer and BIPOC members of the pagan community. Efforts to combat this have ranged from warning newcomers to paganism of the language white supremacist groups use, to social media campaigns highlighting the queer and multi-racial aspects of Viking culture we know of from the historic record. (Kaplan 1996, Seigfried 2021, von Schnurbein 2016)

Case One: Witchtok

One of the social media platforms which rose to prominence during the pandemic was TikTok, a platform which allowed for short-form videos to be shared. The majority of content was to demonstrate dance moves, special talents, and commentary on pop culture events. These could be edited, filtered, and synced to popular songs and layered with sound effects. Often, people would wear elaborate costumes or create dramatic lighting. Niche areas within TikTok arose, calling themselves after their interest groups, such as FarmTok and GayTok. One of the more active communities was WitchTok, and this group achieved some minor fame over 2020 when one teenaged member claimed that she was going to hex the moon. While that claim itself was met

with a variety of responses, the incident sparked a dialog within the pagan and witch community across social media in general: how does a recording on the Internet function in terms of the cosmology of spell work, and is there a way to use this tool properly?

Perpetual prayer as a concept in and of itself is addressed in the section below. Within WitchTok, the issue at hand was that there were people who were recording themselves doing ritual work, whether the visual aspect, the auditory aspect, or both elements. This ritual work might be casting a spell, a hex, or it could even be a part of their regular devotions that they were putting on display for their followers. The context varied. A few witches made these recordings as tutorials while many others made these with the intent of casting a spell of encouragement or protection to bless whoever happened to see it as they scrolled through the videos on their feed. There were a few, however, who were recording themselves in the act of putting curses on someone who was not the viewer and it was this last group that sparked the discourse within the community. By casting a spell or making an incantation, you are putting your intentions out into the universe. Attempting to make a purposeful change within the fabric of the supernatural is expected to have a ripple effect. Since that change was available online, many witches argued that it was re-cast again and again. The argument was that this would amplify those ripples into waves, or at the very least create a change that will not easily be stopped or reversed. As most witches believe that any change one makes on a supernatural level will affect the one who cast the spell in equal or greater measure, this could be disastrous to a new witch. Of the various places in social media where pagans proclaim their faith, WitchTok particularly has been growing as a learning and demonstration platform. This means that the spells most often seen on WitchTok consist of simple cause and effect changes or exercises in technique. The debate on perpetuity, then, is aimed at those who are showcasing for a viewing audience such things as establishing boundaries, conversing with supernatural entities, and especially curses.

As mentioned in the section above on solo practice, shadow work is a common topic brought up among solo practitioners on social media platforms seeking more specific information from more experienced members of the pagan community. This practice almost always is tied to witchcraft, however, it also will be discussed in relation to Asatru and Stregheria, among other faiths. Shadow work requires the practitioner to do some very personal and intense self-reflection, often under the guidance of a supernatural entity such as a patron goddess or an ancestor's spirit, for regular intervals when they are first starting out in their practice. This is openly described as

hard, emotional labor. If the practitioner had experienced any sort of intense traumas in their life—emotional or sexual abuse, hard drugs, military experience—they are strongly encouraged by the community at large to seek professional therapy at this stage. There are, in fact, resources promoted in spaces such as WitchTok for specifically Jungian talk-therapy services to guide those having especially rough shadow work.

Why is such a thorough examination of the darkest crevasses of the self a requirement for the 21st century witch? This modern-day spirit journey, done for a few minutes of meditation a day, every day, for months at a time, is the spiritual construction period meant to fine tune the instrument that is going to be making supernatural changes to the interconnected world around them. In other words: the doctrine widely accepted in communities today is that a witch works with their entire body and their entire psyche to enact change. The outcome will be affected by deeply held trauma, and they need to understand all variables before they attempt to make any variables. There is a scientific thought process to the way the 21st century witch approaches the supernatural, and interestingly, while the methods differ it looks remarkably the same as it always has. In the 3rd millennium BC, the scholars of Mesopotamia spent long years of study memorizing the means by which the movements of planets, animals, and weather patterns foretold the future of the kingdom (Koch 2011, Schwemer 2011). There is nothing, therefore, that should surprise us in the way that shadow work functions within the practices discussed by witches on 21st century social media.

When considering how shadow work functions as a foundation of technique in 21st century witchcraft, it is easier to step back and examine the practice as a whole. Witchcraft can be a philosophy as much as it can be a religion, which is why its practices go hand in hand with so many other religious beliefs. At the core of witchcraft as a philosophy, is the belief of using your own power to get tasks done. This is realized both through knowledge of the natural as well as the supernatural and allows witchcraft to compete with the self-help movements that often exist in the same places online. Mental health and ideas of self-care are just common topics of discussion among young witches on TikTok but were prevalent themes throughout the pandemic across multiple platforms. Among survey participants, four explicitly mentioned regular use of a therapist, and ten mentioned regularly making efforts towards addressing their own mental health needs in other ways. These included ritualistic and non-ritualistic methods, such as journaling, checking in with specific friends, meditation, preparing aromatic tea to pour out for a deity, and

setting aside time away from commitments. While not all participants talked how they specifically addressed their own mental health, all participants were asked to assess their current views of the world as well as their general emotional state. The openness of participants to this discussion topic makes sense within the context of pro-mental-health and pro-self-help that is so dominant both within online spaces and among younger generations. The fourteen participants mentioned above were between the ages of 45 and 20, indicating that this might be a generational attitude.

Perpetual Prayer in the Digital Age

For as long as there has been institutionalized expressions of faith, there have been manifestations of faith that are meant to be eternal in nature. Temple flames that are kept lit continuously are noted in Livy, Tacitus, and the Torah. Armies of members of the cloth who pray in shifts to ensure a continuous litany of communication with the divine are a feature of medieval Christian monasteries as well as specific ritual periods for contemporary Jews (Brown 2014, Rosenwein 2000). One of the big debates that I observed on WitchTok was concerned with this idea of perpetuity, and how the use of the Internet creates a perpetual motion machine. The debate might have been sparked by the outrage over some practitioners setting “perma-hexes” in motion, however these were not the only instances of the perpetual prayer function being put into use. General blessings for luck, money, and general protection were more common than hexes. A cursory scroll through my own feed, curated with only the hashtag #witchtok to narrow the relativity of the content, revealed a decent sample. The first twenty posts were showing either a tarot reading or an announcement of a livestream for a tarot reading (three posts), a blessed candle that was lit in order to give a specific or a general blessing to whomever is scrolling past (eight posts), a member of the community participating in a meme or comedy sketch (five posts), providing information regarding ethically sourcing herbs (one post), reacting to posts on practice made by other members of the community (two posts), and finally, an instructional video on how to carve and bless a candle (one post). If we examine these few videos as a starting point, a few things are particularly important to notice. The candle videos, often only a few seconds long, were very simple. Most showed a candle in an altar setting with words superimposed over them, messages such as “may you receive light and love” or “may good energy come back to you” and similar general, positive messaging. Three of the videos showed a candle on their own, separate from an altar setting, and four included the candle being lit in the video. They all included music, none included sounds of prayer or voice over. These are the most ubiquitous posts on WitchTok

and, while they are generally not the focus of the discussion about whether or not spell work should be done over an app, they are the simplest form of spell work, even if they are usually positive or protective. If one could play a video on loop endlessly, access it at any time at whim, or potentially have it playing on any number of devices anywhere in the world at any given time, who could truly judge when the ritual was finished? (houseofcraft 2019, witchofthenorse 2019, strega_sarracenia 2020, theglamourwitchla 2020, chris_of_pentacles 2020)

Upon interviewing a Canadian witch in her 30s who moderated a resource forum for other witches and pagans, several points were raised. Firstly, the idea of incorporating technology into ritual is not the issue in this conversation. She gave specific examples where people would use photographs to direct a curse or a blessing towards, and how that technique has been around for about as long as cheap photography had been. Secondly, those who had been using her forum had been doing the bulk of their practice offline, and the trend was to post very little ritual in digital spaces. Altars that were not in use and individual objects would regularly be photographed and shown off in relevant discussions. However, the publication of short-form blessings like the lit candle videos on TikTok were both not common on other social media platforms like Facebook, and were usually created by younger witches, estimated to be under the age of 30. While this moderator believed that people would use whatever wide variety of technologies they had at their disposal, “it was more ingrained in the older crowd to do the work with physical materials in private,” instead of in the public sphere. In general, it was agreed, if something is widely available to the public, there is probably a means to use it within a religious context.

As was discussed previously with shadow work, one of the most common doctrines of witchcraft among current online discourse is that your psychological state will have a direct impact on what you are creating. Among those who were surveyed, in fact, were those who expressed ideas of how mentorship from spirits and gods were meant to assist in gaining an ability to either control emotional states or tap into the variety of moods that come with being human. Setting a perpetual spell in motion when in a raw or uncontrolled emotional state is seen as exceptionally volatile, following this logic. The debate seen in online forums largely is centered around how much or how little of each process should be shown in how-to videos to avoid this problem, as well as whether things like hexes and sour jars have a place in the digital community at all. The other side of the debate, of course, focused on the sentience behind the intent. The recording was not the person who cast the spell, in the same way that a picture was just an image of a person.

One could use the photograph as a stand-in for a ritual just as one could use a voice recording, but these are still further removed from the physical person and, while convenient, are not going to be as potent or as powerful. (The Graveyard Witch 2020, chris_of_pentacles 2020, houseofcraft 2019, witchofthenorse 2019)

Within Christian tradition, perpetual prayer most often takes the form of *laus perennis*, which is based in the accumulative power of prayer. This was a feature of some groups within the Eastern Orthodox Church in the 5th Century BC and was a primary function of such monastic groups as the Akoimatoi. In Switzerland and France between the 6th and 9th Centuries this monastic system was implemented by multiple churches, such as St Maurice's Abbey and the Basilica of St Denis. As will be discussed in greater detail in the section on offerings of ordeal, gifts made to supernatural entities in order to show devotion rarely have to be physical objects or even specific prayers. Often the act of enduring an event in order for other members of the faith to benefit is an offering in and of itself, and the logistical and communal effort behind ensuring that a litany of prayer is being recited at all times is an excellent way to do that. The Akoimatoi in particular were known for their austerity as well as their uninterrupted service, and would work in shifts so that at any given time prayer was underway (Parker 1993, Dyer 2008, Master 2010, Gribmont 2014)

As much as there is a case to be made for spells, prayers, and hexes on TikTok to have a theoretical link to *laus perennis*, none have been given an explicit link by those who are creating this content. From an anthropological perspective, it is simply useful to examine an established cosmological structure alongside an emerging one. If the power of intent has such primacy in this issue, then the problem of accumulated force is going to be just as much of a discussion topic. Accumulated force was a part of the theory behind *laus perennis*, but in this modern iteration we are seeing a difference in which the intent behind the initiating action is integral to the faith in question. The point of *laus perennis* was to establish a continual offering by ordeal to the Christian god on behalf of the Eastern Orthodox faith community as a whole. The videos being debated on TikTok among the witch and heathen communities, however, are a wide range of offerings and are often for a much broader audience: anyone who happens to see it.

Chapter 5:

QUARANTINE, ISOLATION & RITUAL

Case Two: Cult Of Horace

This case study is meant to examine the theoretical workings of a set ritual practice that is separate from a wider cosmology. Unlike the other expressions of faith examined through this paper, followers of the Cult of Horace present a unique opportunity to see where the play-acting



FIGURE 3

within ritual develops and how tradition and rumor influence each other. Where would the exact line be drawn between ritual practice done to appease deity that commands a portion of the general cosmological structure, and the actions taken out of superstitious habit, separate from an overarching cosmology? Habits and rituals made by the non-religious to try and alter the outcome of sporting events, job opportunities, and relationships might seem strange, but they are a regular part of life. These mundane problems are also concerns which a religious person might instead take to their place of worship, and pray for intervention (Hutson 2008, Maranise 2013, Teplin 2021, Stromberg 2009). Of those who were surveyed for this study, four were members of the of the Cult of Horace, and five others were familiar with the cult. This cult is centered around a roughly 36-inch wooden statue of a clown, painted in an Americana art style. The figure holds an unknown object to their chest with their left hand and raises up a short knife in their right hand. The unknown object “has been considered alternatively to be either a seltzer bottle or a megaphone” (Teplin 2021). Horace, known alternatively as Horus, is owned by a man who purchased the statue while at the annual historical re-enactment event known as Pennsic, which is attended by a sizeable contemporary pagan population. Soon after purchasing the statue and installing it in a makeshift shrine near to where he was camping, some friends stole Horace as a prank. Over the next few days, the kidnappers suffered from injuries from malfunctioning power tools, several wasp attacks, and becoming injured and subsequently trapped in a port-a-potty. During this time the weather also turned extremely bad, with storms “picking up and throwing aside community tents” (Teplin 2021). When Horace was returned to his initial shrine, the storms reportedly stopped, and his kidnappers attempted to placate the clown statue with shots of rum, necklaces of beads and flowers, and left lipstick marks on his feet. These remain popular offerings to Horace. Among these initial kidnappers are a small faction of people who

believe some power originates in Horace, but they do not want anything to do with him or it and avoid interacting with the wooden statue as far as they are able (Teplin 2021).

The man who owns Horace and sets him up at events does not claim to worship him, nor does he claim to speak for the deity, or to have control over his actions. He facilitates Horace's movement to and from the events he was already planning to be at, repairs him when the weather takes its toll, and allows for devotees to have their space. He describes Horace as a sort of "monkey's paw" which you have to be very specific about asking things from, and he has once or twice asked for improved weather. However, he had learned that this might create extremes, and he is among several people that have blamed a heat waves on Horace. There are good stories, too. One woman who had seen Horace yearly and occasionally left offerings decided, in light of a year of misfortune, to purposefully declare Horace to be in charge of her fate. Within a year, she reported that

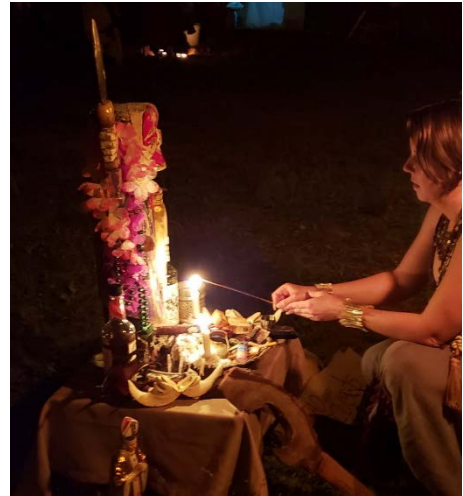


FIGURE 4

her health had significantly improved and she got a promotion at work, and thus decided to become a devotee outright. Offerings to Horace often take the form of alcohol, small trinkets, and cigarettes, but there have been occasions where condoms and drug paraphernalia have been found. While the majority of those who interact with the cult leave yearly offerings for Horace at a summer event they all travel to, three surveyed members leave multiple offerings for him throughout the year, while two others attempt to physically give the wooden clown a wide berth and act "respectfully distant." (Teplin 2021)

While many leave offerings for Horace as yearly tradition when they see him at the annual event he was purchased at, there are plenty who make a point of leaving offerings to Horace at several points throughout the year. Those who leave offerings for Horace regularly do so for a variety of reasons. Some do so out of fear of inciting his wrath, as this is a highlight of his origins. Others do so out of thanks, as they have had good things happen to them since leaving offerings and hope to continue the trend. Others still simply do so because they like the idea of Horace, and what he represents. Among those who were surveyed for this study, one young man who personally identifies as a Christian with "non-orthodox habits" likes to leave offerings for Horace when he happens to be nearby because he likes to encourage a spirit that "puts back out to the universe what

it was dealt. A shot of booze turns into a little good luck later, and a kidnapping results in wasps” (Teplin 2021). This attitude further illustrates one key point: no one who leaves offerings for Horace worships Horace at a private altar, or makes space for Horace outside of a context where the statue is physically present. The Cult of Horace is a far-reaching one, with its fewer than one hundred members scattered from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to Sydney, Australia. However, rites are localized: these few cult members travel regularly to the same annual events that Horace appears at, and therefore they have the opportunity to interact with him and his legend. It is especially interesting to note here that this boundary of influence Horace is believed to have, is not only finite, but is thought to travel with him. (Luhrman 1989, Stromberg 2009, Galanter 1990)

At what point does a legend take on a life of its own? When you kidnap the rival school’s mascot before a big game, as is tradition? When you teach your kids to rub a statue’s nose for good luck? What about those who see a “repost this picture for money” image on social media and repost it, just in case? Where else does that impulse manifest, if not in such places as the offering tray at the feet of Horace? Superstition, however, turns into cult activity when the risks of not completing the rituals result in dire consequences. This is either due to lack of reward (i.e. I can’t afford rent if I don’t do this) or to avoid punishment (i.e. I will be horribly injured if I don’t do this). Nearly all of those who leave offerings for Horace and pass on his stories to their children can explain each manifestation of the “Wrath of Horace” in terms of science and cause-and-effect. The general consensus, however, is that too many coincidences happening at once shouldn’t be ignored. Might as well leave an offering; you wouldn’t want that clown god to send wasps after you, now would you? Better safe than sorry. There is more at play than simply a running gag among friends, however, as there are people who genuinely believe they can risk bodily harm by crossing Horace. The building of ritual requires its own internal logic as much as it does repetition. Cult activity in the modern era, whether those which are powered by an enigmatic human or a strange object, all share the assumption that there is something beyond the sight and control of the viewer. This faith in a cause-effect relationship sparks these ritualistic habits, no matter what level someone claims to be in on the joke (Galanter 1990, Hutson 2008, Maranise 2013, Bell 2009, Stromberg 2009, Luhrman 1989) Horace’s owner put it simply and put it best: “there are so many religions...I am a pagan...I believe that there are gods and spirits who each have their own jurisdictions, whether or not I pray to them. I respect a god in his own house” (Teplin 2021).

In *The Selfish Gene*, Richard Dawkins examined the idea of memes as an exercise in

memory and story transmission, where only the parts of the message deemed important, memorable, otherwise unique survived transmission (Blackmore 1999). This is widely held to be the birth of the idea of memetics. When examining how religious memes are shared online, we must first assess how the memetic information fits into preexisting religious structure. Does this meme help contextualize and explain theory or dogma with metaphor or a pop culture reference? Does this meme create a basic ritual, in which a supernatural transaction is invoked? Earlier we discussed the Ring Phenomenon in relation to luck and divination. Within the context of the Cult of Horace, we have the benefit of being able to examine both positive and negative iterations of the Ring Phenomenon within the growth patterns of the same cult.

Absurd as it may seem to imagine the seamless web of culture being disaggregated and transmitted between minds by gene-like replication, even some sociologists and philosophers have become captivated by the metaphor.
Steven Rose, biologist, Open University (Blackmore 1999:185)

As noted in the above section on *laus perennis*, the idea of prayers in perpetuity are re-entering the discussion of means of accessing and influencing the divine with the rise of the Internet. Because of the social restrictions put in place during the Covid19 pandemic, the usual fanfare accompanying the repair and repainting of Horace was not able to occur as planned. Under normal circumstances, when Horace was sufficiently weathered or damaged, he would be stripped of his paint, mended with wood fill and epoxy, then painted anew. At the next public event Horace's owner is able to attend, Horace would then be publicly presented to receive offerings. There is little ritual involved, however those who are a part of the cult like to be kept aware of the progress of the repairs. To accommodate this, a livestream was arranged through YouTube, advertised on Facebook, email chains, and through word of mouth, so that Horace could be adored as soon as the paint was dry. Of course, if Horace is thought to only have localized influence, and his rites are only applicable to anyone who happens to be near him in order to leave offerings, what does this digital presence mean for the future of the Cult of Horace? During the study, when the owner of the statue of Horace was being interviewed, there were a little over a hundred views on the video. Twenty more have been logged since then. The video itself has little to no motion: it is focused on the newly painted statue, which is surrounded by a lit candle and a small plate with a few trinkets. A few larger items are added around the statue by an offscreen hand, the trinkets are displayed to the camera, and the hand retreats until it returns to relight the spent candle. The twelve hour video is accompanied by the chat log that had been running alongside it when the stream was

live. In it, followers were commenting and actively making donations in the form of money to a food bank charity that benefited the town where they normally would all have convened that time of year (House of Bread and Circuses 2020). There is little being asked of a new cult member, and the humorous nature of the origin of the cult facilitates easy transmission of information about it. The benefits appear to far out-weigh these costs. Moreover, it is a fertile environment for building social bonds through a shared tradition of ritual- and story-building (Hutson 2008, Bell 2009, Maranise 2013, Galanter 1990).

Hedging Your Bets: Luck, Chance, and Spiritual Jurisdictions

The ancient Romans had a relationship with the divine that would be considered incredibly strange by modern standards. The gods each had their own specific sphere of influence, and would show their favor based on special signs and omens. Aside from festivals and holidays where it was expected, giving offerings to a god was an exchange, one which was meant to bring direct and tangible benefits to the devotee. In practice, this meant that not receiving any benefits from devoting themselves to one particular god would mean switching allegiances to a deity who would be more cooperative. This is how several historians theorize cults for religions from neighboring regions initially found their way into the Roman Empire (O'Donnell 2015, Ando 2008, Wood 2003, Stark 2007, Lambek 2008). One could go so far as to claim that the Roman community viewed their relationship with the gods as a business transaction more than an act of devotion to a powerful divine being. It would be a stretch to assume that an explicit knowledge of the theological discourse of the Roman Empire informs contemporary paganism, however parallels can be drawn.

As twelve survey participants were devoted to a selection of deities from across multiple pantheons, I examined them in particular when confronting the idea of how a 21st century pagan would navigate between spiritual jurisdictions. For the most part, there is a tendency for pagans who don't adhere to a specific pantheon to redouble their efforts in the same jurisdiction. By this, I mean that they will pick deities that all share similar attributes or influence the same aspects of life. For example, someone who primarily worships Tyr as a god of learning and justice, might also decide to worship Athena as a goddess of wisdom and justice. As these are both war gods that were considered to embody the diplomatic aspects of government, they overlap. I did not find any pagan who sought to construct a complete and balanced pantheon that embraced every aspect, though during big rituals they would often make a general offering for "all of the gods."

One survey participant in particular, who was in his 30s from the east coast of the United States, evenly split his practice between the Egyptian goddess Bast and the Celtic god Cernnunos. While he had close connections to a Wiccan faith group, the bulk of his practice was done alone in his home, and he described it as a balancing act between the two deities. While most participants explained how they tailored one altar to suit their needs, he maintained a separate altar for each deity, keeping them at equal height next to each other and using them simultaneously. As was touched upon in the section on offerings made by ordeal, the act of planning and executing this spiritual balancing act in and of itself is an act of devotion. While this participant is primarily a kitchen witch—which had been explored above—neither of these deities are particularly associated with his work there, though Bast has some connection as a protector of the household, and this participant practices kitchen witchcraft in the tradition of earlier family members' practices. As such, he does navigate his interactions with the divine as he deems appropriate. For example, Cernnunos' altar is decorated according to the changing seasons but Bast's is not, which is reasonable as Cernnunos is a god of hunting and the forest. Both altars, however, are attended to with candles, incense, and homemade essential oils.

If one has decided to contend with spirits and deities which have strict parameters on influence, then worshipping the gods who you will be the most likely to interact with in your day-to-day life simply makes sense. This is the same political strategy seen in other religions with a plurality of deities, such as Hinduism. While there are festivals and life events which are under the purview of one god over another, appealing to an auspicious combination of gods is what will assure the best outcome in any given situation. Knowledge of these specific areas of influence are a necessary component of navigating spiritual as well as daily life, as well as the proper etiquette and offerings for each god. These spaces come with their own experts, which can be found to varying degrees of availability at relevant temples and, as Hinduism and the primarily-Hindu country India has become more technologically advanced over the last century, these temples and spiritual experts have advanced to suit the needs of the faithful. Indeed, Hinduism has already easily sacralized the virtual space in the creation of websites built as a virtual iteration of the temple space for those who wish to visit a temple while having to be physically at a work desk. This “desktop deity culture,” as Mallapragada aptly refers to it, illustrates the practical use of the modern definition of space, in which personal and public can exist simultaneously, both on- and off-line (Mallapragada 2010, Axelrod & Fuerch 1996, Masilamani-Meyer 2004, Cohen 1998,

Lambek 2008, Harper 1959) While the most immediate difference between a major world religion such as Hinduism and a more nebulous faith system such as contemporary paganism is its structure as opposed to extreme variation from participant to participant, these systems of divine negotiation are still worth noting. Most contemporary paganism movements have taken root where monotheistic cultures are dominant, and the fact that systems of negotiation between deities has to be learned anew is not surprising. These same negotiations are necessities that exist to disparate yet similarly technologically modernized groups—one which had an unbroken few thousand years of system development and another which has less than two centuries in its current iteration—has only resulted in the same few negotiation strategies. These appear to be: virtual consultations/divinations, virtual memorials/sacred spaces, virtual offerings at physical spaces, virtual instructions/media used at physical spaces, physical offerings mailed to distant sacred spaces accessed virtually, physical consultations/divinations, and physical memorials/sacred spaces. While there is undoubtedly crossover in practice between these seven, they are the forms of practice I have seen re-occurring the most (Brown 2014, Rosenwein 2000, Dawson & Cowan 2004, Teplin 2017, O'Donnell 2015, Mallapragada 2010, Axelrod & Fuerch 1996, Masilamani-Meyer 2004, Cohen 1998, Lambek 2008, Harper 1959)

On a much smaller scale, one survey participant was interviewed regarding their belief in the relationship between the fae and lost objects. The fae, or fairies, were responsible for repeated instances of clumsiness in the kitchen and the theft of objects, especially shiny or particularly odd objects. An offering would be left to appease the fairies to get the object back and to restore general



FIGURE 5

order, usually in the form of sweets on a small dish put in a corner or behind objects. These offerings would be discarded in the garden after a few days. Two other survey participants noted a belief in fairy activity, both strongly against encouraging fairies to interact with their property. One interviewee was encouraging stray cats to live on their property to ward against fairy activity, citing specifically that “a

one-eyed Maine coon is the best defense, if I could only get one.” When asked about the origin of these ideas linking domestic spaces, missing objects, clumsiness, and mild danger, all three noted either being told about it from an older relative or not remembering who, as a child, told them

these specific things. The link between cats and fairies was agreed upon by all three. The one survey participant who was attempting to negotiate with fairies directly was allergic to cats and noted that in general he did not mind fairies on his property.

SPIRITUAL PARAPHENALIA

Offerings and Material Concerns

One of the in-depth interviews concerned homebrewing and ritual offerings of alcohol. The man who was interviewed was also a gothe, someone with a leadership position within his group. The religion in question was Asatru, which I considered apt: in the United States in particular, the trend has been to associate heavy drinking with reverence of the Norse pantheon (von Schnurbein 2016, Kaplan 1996, Calico 2013, Puryear 2006). This association stems purely from contemporary cultural perceptions in the united states of what Viking culture had been, rather than any archeological record. The demonstration of these ideas continue by practitioners despite a parallel trend of many coming to Asatru from a place of scholarship of Viking culture (von Schnurbein 2016, Kaplan 1996, Ivakhiv 2005). The homebrew offerings were integrated into two different rituals that were regularly a part of meetings within that kindred's celebrations: the sumbel and the blut. The gothe was the primary brewmaster for his kindred, though it was merely incidental that he held both of these positions, and not a requirement. Normally, he would invite whomever wanted to assist him in making mead and beer whether or not they were a part of his faith group, however during the pandemic only a few members of his kindred assisted him. When selecting what would be used for an offering, the emphasis was on quality rather than any specific ritual process that had occurred during the brewing process, and the brewing process was treated more as a general meditation activity for him personally than a part of his religious duties.

A sumbel is not necessarily a religious ritual. Rather, it is a format of making a toast which can be used for secular or religious purposes, though I have most often observed it among Asatru groups for religious and quasi-religious gatherings. Participants will stand in a circle with a drink to pass around, usually about a liter of alcohol already poured into a special vessel such as a drinking horn. This vessel will be passed around the circle three times as each member either toasts and drinks or toasts and pours out a small measure of liquid, with each pass corresponding to a different type of toast. Usually, these three passes are first a toast to a patron or companion, a toast to someone who has passed away, and a promise or commitment to the assembled group. During

the quarantines that took place during the pandemic, this was the ritual that I found to have the most variation within its continued use. Because the sumbel had always been readily able to be used in a secular or a religious context, I have found it used for a wide variety of reasons among different groups, from a Forn Seidth kindred to Eagle Scouts at a summer camp. Some ways in which the sumbel had been adapted during the pandemic for safe use included everyone having their own cup with their own liquid instead of passing a cup around, everyone standing six feet apart outside instead of close together, a Zoom meeting in which people stood in their backyards or public parks with cups or bottles of water, and a text message chain where people posted picture of themselves pouring out liquid from a cup along with a chant-based text message.

Unlike a sumbel, a blut is specific to Asatru and adjacent pagan practices. It is a large group meal that is marked at the beginning and end by religious ritual, and the preparation of the main dish is often ritualized in some way. As such, offerings of the food and drink that are going to be a part of the meal enjoyed by the group not only have religious significance, but their treatment is special and must be done with reverence. A blut is different from similar feast-ritual celebrations such as the Judaic Passover because it is a formula rather than a specific holiday. Normally kindreds will have a blut with the turning of the seasons and have the menu, and therefore the offerings, reflect the seasonal changes being celebrated by the event (Ivakhiv 2005, Allen 2016, Kaplan 1996).

During the pandemic, the blut had to change for two reasons. For many kindreds, social restrictions meant that it wasn't practical for members to pod with each other, and so physical proximity for a meal—let alone ritually preparing it together—was just not feasible. Another major hurdle was due to the issues with food supply chains during 2020. Even though the blut is a celebration of seasonal foods, contemporary pagans are largely reliant on grocery stores just like anyone else in the United States. Food supplies were available in fits and starts as outbreaks alternatively affected processing plants, farms, and trucking depots (Rizou et al 2020, Luckstead et al 2021, Minor et al 2020). In creating the offerings and menu for a blut, a kindred's ability to source materials directly from a farm or a co-op, or to become that farm or co-op, had often been a long-term goal even before the pandemic (Kaplan 1996, Jenkins 2017, Calico 2013). The priority for kindreds during the pandemic had to now be to bring responsible and pandemic-minded food sourcing to contemporary ritual feasts, not just to attempt to source food from farmer's markets and backyard garden plots. The ten survey participants who had incorporated the blut into their

usual practice before the pandemic usually had already attempted to create a garden plot for themselves at some point before 2020, and by the time the fall of 2020 had come all ten of them had garden plots, alongside four others who had been considering doing so beforehand.

There were several participants in the survey who grew vegetable and herbal components of the offerings they made regularly at their altars, whether or not this was in the context of a blut. While most of these identified as the aforementioned “kitchen witch,” not all did. However, everyone who linked food-producing domestic activities such as baking, cooking, or held a regular feast-ritual, noted that they had at least attempted to make their garden a sacred space in the past, if they did not do so at present. The one possible exception to this was a survey participant who used their ornamental garden as a means of discarding fae offerings while also citing the kitchen as the hub of supernatural negotiations as much as a space of semi-spiritual food production. Just as the kitchen was examined above as a sacred space due to the ritual nature of activities there, the gardening is readily sacralized. While this isn’t strictly limited to a garden meant to produce food, that is a layer often brought into the discussion. Those in this study who associated garden spaces with the sacred drew most of their inspirations from the regenerative properties of nature, citing reasons such as seeing the progress of growth in plant life, the meditative nature of repetitive labor, and the ability to connect with the planet on a personal level by working in a garden. Surprisingly, there was no sense that an offering grown by the practitioner was somehow more worthy than an offering that was store bought. Rather, a more common pattern was that the act of creating materials to be used, and using the materials as offerings were two separate activities that were ritualistic and sacred in different capacities.

Body Modification & Offerings Made By Ordeal

Material goods are only one means by which one can engage with the divine. Ritual offerings are made by ordeal just as frequently as physical ones. While the pandemic caused the majority of practices and ritual spaces to undergo a restructuring in order to comply with new safety measures, offerings made by ordeal were more intimate by their very nature, and thus saw little change. Much the same way that solo practitioners saw little difference in their practice before and during the pandemic, rituals involving offerings by ordeal also saw little to no alteration. An ordeal offering is one that is a physical activity that is strenuous, painful, or distasteful in some way. This can include physical labor, emotional labor, enduring extreme temperature changes, and BDSM. The shadow work that had been examined when looking at the WitchTok case often falls

under the category of an offering by ordeal by virtue of it being extreme emotional labor, as well as it being faith work done alongside a specific spirit or deity. However, trials by ordeal and rituals of ordeal tend to be a part of the group dynamics of faith groups as well as a more intimate expression of trust between partners. The key component of this being a stressful activity undertaken willingly is what makes it an ordeal, and that stress itself is the affirmation of faith. An ordeal was a common element of performance within the seasonal rituals of the Western Mysteries and Gardnerian Wicca covens which were so prolific in England in the mid 20th century, and even in secular contexts it remains a feature of affirming bonds and trust today everywhere from leather-clad romantic partners to frat houses (Luhrmann 1989, Wound & Maximus et al 2020, Harrington 2016, Crowley et al *archive material*, Ryan et al 2012, Teplin 2017)

As had been touched upon briefly, rituals involving offerings made by ordeal were not overly interrupted by the pandemic, while other ritual processes had to be altered in order to deal with disruptions to the supply chain. Material concerns were often not a concern in these rituals, or could easily be replaced. Whereas candles might be extremely important to one person's ritual, whether in color, burn time, and fragrance, for someone who simply needed the hot wax to inflict pain, another object could be sourced. These rituals were focused on the subject of stress, and the endurance capabilities of the faithful, who were undertaking tasks both physical and mental to show their devotion. One participant reflected how, in particular, this was an intimate part of their relationship with their romantic partner as well, as the two of them were both involved in these events. Moreover, for this participant, this was a means by which they were able to better take control of their own physical disability. In setting the parameters of the physical challenge, which their romantic partner would oversee and facilitate, success by any degree was seen as a devotional act celebrating their faith, their relationship, and their own body's capabilities.

As has been explored extensively by spirituality and sexual health educator Lee Harrington, there are a variety of ways that one can engage in expressions of faith by ordeal. Shadow work is certainly one of them, as discussed above in the WitchTok case. Very often, especially within the context of sexual ordeal and physically painful ordeal, the event is meant to be therapeutic. Throughout my research, I found very little evidence of situations where the ordeal was forced upon anyone, and in fact it was the job of the one who was undergoing the stress to plan the event inasmuch as they felt capable. The few exceptions I found were in secular situations where a submissive person wanted a Dom to arrange a set of sensations or emotions for them, which they

did not feel they were experienced enough to gather the materials and personnel for (Wound & Maxiums et al 2020, Harrington et al 2016, Harrington et al 2015).

With the increase of solo practice, trial by ordeal is a means by which several surveyed participants indicated that they were able to explore their faith in a more intimate way. Group practice often utilizes offerings by ordeal in one of two ways. Either individual members go through an ordeal in order to demonstrate progression within their own faith, or an ordeal is enacted as a demonstration for the group with varying levels of participation, much like ritual theatre. Solo practice is its own ritual theatre, in which the audience can only be on the supernatural plane (Luhrman 1989, Magliocco 2009).

One surveyed participant in particular noted that they and their partner use BDSM and pain as an intimate means of faith affirmation. This was not a new practice in light of the general quarantine, and this couple was among those who was isolated for the entirety of the pandemic. BDSM is often used as a means of regaining control over stress and re-contextualizing painful or traumatic situations in order to process them on one's own terms (Harrington 2016, Wound & Maximus et al 2017, Estes 1995, Goodman 1988). It is a common feature, moreover, of several BDSM practices to create a fugue state for the purposes of a natural body high, extreme physical feats, meditation, and pleasure. The use of fugue states for extreme physical feats is a common feature of a multiplicity of other more public systems, whether it be the public demonstrations of a faith healer or a sideshow performance. (Covington 2009, Lee 1958, Court 2010, Coons 1993, Pietkiewicz et al 2010, Huiying 2011, Goodman 1988) While the faith exhibitionism of snake handling and firewalking might look similar in practice to the side show demonstrations of the same actions, it is important to be cognizant of both the motivation of the players involved as well as the cosmology surrounding the actions at play. The reasons why a person might attempt to enter into a fugue state will be influenced by what supernatural (or innately spiritual) systems they ascribe to, whether this is a part of their faith, their intimate relationship with a partner, or a demonstration of their own mind-over-matter abilities. When examining these concepts in terms of offerings made by ordeal among contemporary pagans who use BDSM as an expression of faith, the more involved preparation behind the ordeal is usually the most apt thing to consider, and the extreme nature of the ordeal is sometimes a second factor. BDSM scenes will require an extensive amount of preparation, planning, and both mental and physical safety considerations. When this is being done in the context of an act of faith, the necessary planning allows for much more elaborate

spiritual ritual to be explored. This includes the addition of music, oils, suspension rigs, and a myriad of tools, during which time participants are simultaneously an object within the ritual, and an active participant of the ritual process (Harrington 2016, Wound & Maximus 2020)

Body modification can fall into the category of offering by ordeal. The majority of those who were surveyed had body modifications which had spiritual significance to them, which were generally tattoos, and two were associated with a Forn Seidth kindred that practiced branding. The tattoos which I examined during my study often involved totemic imagery, in that animals that the surveyed participant somehow identified with were either the subject of the tattoo or incorporated into a wider design. The animals employed by those surveyed included wolves (seven participants), cats (four participants), wild boar (three participants), bears (two participants), stags (one participant), the phoenix (one participant), and horses (one participant). Other images were also common, such as the triskele and the Eye of Horus [not associated with the aforementioned Cult of Horace]. Totemic animism is a common feature of western contemporary paganism, as has been examined in previous sections, which is also under scrutiny by those in the pagan community who are descended from heritages that feature totemism, as has also been discussed. To be clear: the virtual debate surrounding body modifications rarely includes tattoos as a category within the rocky grounds of appropriation, simply specific subjects matters and art styles. Wolves, one of the more popular choices, are a common point of contention. They are among the symbols co-opted by hate groups, linked to the folklore of non-totemic Nordic faith systems, as well as being integral to many Indigenous American totemic systems (Wagner 2018, Clifton 2006, Allen 2016, Cusack 2016, Gibson 2009). Animal-themed body modifications aside, there are a number of symbols which were common among similar faith groups in order to signal adherence to a faith, much in the same way one would choose to wear a piece of jewelry with a faith symbol. These included the triskele, the mother goddess, the volknut, the pentagram, Mjolnir, a variety of runes, the hannunvaakuna, and a variety of veves. Most of these symbols are exclusive to a religious practice, and some, such as the mother goddess symbol, have a wide variety of forms and can really only be indicated as such by the one who has the body modification. There was little pattern in the decisions being made about the placement of these tattoos, and nearly all were done at a professional tattoo parlor. The process of the modification itself was not a ritualized one. Rather, this was a means of identification, differentiation, and, for many, a faith affirmation whenever they happened to look at it.

The brandings done were a much simpler affair, even though they were much more heavily ritualized. While several people mentioned that they knew of someone who had undergone a similar ritual, or had heard of it, these two were the only ones who I had encountered first-hand that took part in the survey. Both belonged to the same faith group. The branding was a closed practice, and the mark itself was a simple image of lines. The selection of the image was a deeply personal choice by each member of this group, and the actual ritual of creating and using the branding irons on the skin were done in private using home-made tools. More importantly, the healing process itself was a time of quiet reflection as much as it was several weeks of wound care (Teplin 2017). Wound care is a unique subset of the ordeal ritual that allows for aspects of the ritual to continue on long after the ritual itself has taken place. In any major ordeal, the body and the mind both have a set recovery time that needs to occur, which will often force the practitioner to set aside time for reflection as they attend to this recovery period (Harrington 2016, Luhrman 1989, Teplin 2017, den Brave et al 2014, Wound & Maximus 2020). Wound care becomes an even more of a concern among solo practitioners organizing their own ordeal ritual during a global pandemic, when questions of hygiene are at the forefront of conversation in every topic.

Chapter 6:

CONCLUSIONS

While the shift away from in-person ritual practices to online and more overtly solo work was expected, there were several surprising outcomes from this study. The Internet was treated more of a resource guide than as a space for ritual interaction within the contemporary pagan community. However, that does not mean there was no noticeable change in use. The open-discourse nature of the evolving theology surrounding contemporary paganism meant that, with more practitioners spending more time online, there was an increase in discussion surrounding practices, hereditary craft, cultural appropriation, and what it does mean when ritual work lives on the Internet. As these questions arose, the isolation of varying lengths of quarantine measures meant that contemporary pagans needed to recontextualize their faith practices in other ways. In a faith practice that relied on local community due to a lack of a wider organizational structure, what changes had to be made to ritual to create a solo practice? And for those who were now unable to easily go and enact ritual in a physical spot, how would one recontextualize sacred space in a faith system that prioritized establishing a connection with the natural world? The solution for many of

the study's participants was to build that out into the domestic spaces they occupied while quarantined: the kitchen, the garden, the bedroom, and other spaces.

What was a surprising thing was how many practicing pagans didn't consider themselves to be religious. Regular ritualistic activity and a spiritual outlook weren't considered by the participants to be universal indicators for being religious, as informing their lives with a spiritual outlook was different. An examination of specific answers participants gave to their definitions of religious practice and ritual revealed how heavily the participants considered the influence of the puritanical brand of monotheism that has developed in the United States. While the "us vs them" dichotomy is an element to the way both extremist Christians in the country and those around them identify, that small religious movement lives in the minds so clearly of a significant enough of many that it changes how broader concepts such as "religion" are defined.

Homogenization among contemporary pagan groups within the United States appears to have briefly occurred due to the rise of the Internet and the connections being made through reenactment groups and the RenFaire circuit. However, the rise of the Internet has also allowed for people to better understand the legitimacy of their claim to specific practices, and this homogeneity appears to be fading as quickly as it appeared. This is a trend that will be best assessed by a future study some years hence, however we can examine the discussion as it stands at present. Heavily influenced by the activism within the United States as it is by the increased engagement allowed by quarantine, the conversations online often center around the nuances of open and closed practices. Mental health is another big concern, as evidenced by the attitudes towards practices such as shadow work, and even the emotional states being considered when casting spells that might live in perpetually looping video platforms.

The mainstream perception of any given movement is, of necessity, going to be delayed some years behind the developments of the movement itself. That is simply the nature of the speed of information, even in the age of information. However, the turning point in the conversation surrounding the general nature of contemporary paganism can be tracked more easily as recent generations of pagans favor open debate on theory on the public stage. Solo practice might lead to a greater variety in ritual form, but the increased use of social media as a general theological forum is set to yield an open window into these changes for religious anthropologists, even after quarantine.

Further Questions

The rise and fall of the homogenization of practice within the contemporary pagan community merits further study. This is something I was not able to fully focus on with this project, however I believe there is evidence of this shift having recently taken place within the contemporary pagan community as the option of pursuing paganism itself became a more widespread idea. Now that the conversation is turning more towards heritage of practice and giving space to indigenous rights, contemporary paganism is likely to look much less homogenized in the future. These ideas of cultural heritage, religious practice, and colonial reparations should be examined closely while they are topics of conversation within the United States.

There is another very important issue to be explored by social scientists who are interested in contemporary paganism and the Internet. As touched upon in the sections dealing with heritage, white supremacy has been using Asatru and general pagan movements as a vehicle to spread messages of hate and intolerance. While there is a concerted effort within the Asatru communities to combat this, such co-opting of religious imagery should be documented and further studied as it happens in real time. The subtle changes in how groups signal to each other, and which symbols have their meanings changed, highlighted, or corrupted to suit the ever-changing dialogue. Activist groups online are especially wary of how their spaces are infiltrated from other communities that are hotbeds of white supremacy, such as the far right-wing social media app Parler, and certain parts of the expansive forum and research website Reddit.

As has been mentioned at several points in this essay, one cannot discuss religious developments within the United States without discussing the impact of Christianity. What is of particular interest, is the long list of legal protections that have been amassed for religious groups by Christian activists within the United States that can be employed by contemporary pagan faith groups. Recently, non-Christian faith groups have used these laws to maintain protections for women and minorities such as the case with the Church of Satan publicly making ground for abortion rights (Villarreal 2020). As contemporary paganism becomes a more ubiquitous practice, it is only a matter of time before groups in the United States will seek some form of public recognition, as they already have in countries such as Greece and Iceland (McMahon 2015, Hellenismos 2017). The United States military already recognizes certain expressions of Wicca and Asatru faiths (Schulz 2017).

Wider Applications

The use of memetic information as shorthand for social communication can be seen in regards to any subject when a social media platform is in use as a communication tool. Memes are in many ways a resurgence of the Dadaist movement, however the social, political, and pop culture knowledge required to understand the humor conveyed in a specific set of still images often has far more “horsepower” than simple absurdism. Within the context of religion, memes have the ability to create a humorous dialogue between practitioners using shared supernatural beliefs as the framework, and indeed can spark a meaningful theological dialogue. A more complex extension of memes, shitposting, is more interesting to us in this regard. Shitposting often is more hyper-focused and will curate its own niche by creating an enormous amount of single-subject content rapidly, and by self-monikering. For example, a person who wanted to specifically create a community to discuss and circulate memes about the University of Houston might create a space called Coogposting, after the school’s mascot, the cougar. This is similar to how niches in TikTok are named, as discussed above. Those who engage with a shitposting platform are expected to also hyper-focus on the central content while also furthering the dialog, often leading to the creation of lore, fan fiction, and conspiracy theories. These are treated with a varying degree of seriousness, which can be gaged based on the comments made OOC (meaning either “out of character” or “out of chat”) and through the activity of the moderators.

Within the context of religious activity, especially with contemporary paganism and ritual practice, shitposting creates a new kind of religious play that is communal, interactive, and does not take itself too seriously. All of this allows for growth, recalling Wittgenstein: “a serious and good philosophical work could be written consisting entirely of jokes” (Dribble 2004) as well as observations from Luhrmann’s study that it was important for practitioners to be able to embrace the ridiculous in order to be comfortable fully exploring the possibilities of ritual (Luhrmann 1989). Further work being done in how virtual communities develop and enhance the conversation within contemporary pagan communities must keep in mind the changing conversation surrounding social systems built on totemic animism and hereditary lines of practice.

Specific questions from this study which could be more widely explored involve the relationship between contemporary pagans, ancestor worship, and ideas of the afterlife. The funerary industry has been experiencing a well-documented period of upheaval and restructure over the past decade (Jorgensen 2018, Zibaite 2020, del Real 2020, Lofland 2019). As the ideas of

embalming chemicals and cemeteries come under scrutiny, contemporary pagans are also assessing what the idea of a memorial should be within a faith that has an extremely interactive relationship with the dead, in many ways more so than with any divine spirits. What good is a grave when you're able to talk with your ancestors by means that aren't dependent on location? More to the point, contemporary pagans are staunch in their support of environmental protections and want to adhere to those principals even in death. This means avoiding typical burial practices when it is so common for a buried body to be preserved in some way that will later release damaging chemicals into the groundwater. This often goes hand-in-hand with the attempts of the Death Positive Movement to create a more personal end of life experience, which can include bringing rituals such as the wake back into the private home.

Another interesting facet of contemporary paganism uncovered by this study is the newest iteration of *laus perennis* among 21st century witches. Religions in the west, by and large, have done very little to engage with the technological advances whereby so many of the faithful live their lives, both in terms of business and pleasure. A space is made sacred by the intentions with which we engage with it, and there is nothing to prevent any faith system from creating dedicated sacred spaces using the virtual platforms available to the general public. Should the Catholic church perhaps take a page out of the playbook being used by the desktop accessible Hindu temples and the looping spells of WitchTok? Is the future of tithing embedded in hashtags?

Research questions from this study can be further pursued in several directions, especially considering the increasing engagement displayed by contemporary pagans with the theoretical structure of their own faith systems. Ancestor worship raises its own niche within the Death Positivity Movement, the looping video formats of social media bring new questions to how accumulative intent functions, and the neo-Dadaist movement that is meme culture brings new and exciting ways to engage with theological philosophy. Contemporary paganism is by no means a monolith. However, during quarantine, many diverse members of similar faith systems found themselves united in isolation as well as in a journey of theological discovery.

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APPENDIX

Glossary Of Terms

Anchorite – an ascetic, usually a woman, who has taken a vow of seclusion while remaining within the bounds of a church building; this entails having their room sealed up around them, with three windows to allow them to have access to food and hear mass while they remain in contemplation and prayer for life

Asatru – an adherence to pre-Christian Germanic and Scandinavian belief systems, with influences from Christianity and scholarship-based recreation varying from kindred to kindred

BDSM – this acronym can stand for several related things, but most commonly refers to bondage domination and sado-masochism; within the context of

BIPOC – a common acronym that stands for Black, Indigenous, and/or People of Color

Blut / Blot – Asatru/Forn Seidh - a highly ritualized feast to honor the gods and ancestors, often reflective of the cycle of the growing seasons

Casting Bones – a means of divination involving tossing a collection of objects that the diviner has assigned meaning to, and discerning the answer to the question put to the object based on how the objects have been arranged in the tossing

Closed Practice – a ritual, series of rituals, object, or symbol which is only to be interacted with by those who have a connection to the practice through heritage or indoctrination

Culture Vulture - a derogatory term that refers to a practice that takes bits and pieces from a wide range of other cultures without rhyme or reason and, most importantly, without knowing or caring to know the deeper meaning behind the practices being amassed together

Death Positivity Movement – a philosophical and social movement based in the idea that, as death is a live event which many in the West feel they are far too removed from, greater efforts need to be made to create living wills, talk frankly about improving palliative care, and the environmental impacts of the chemicals so commonly used to prepare bodies for burial

Death Salons - small symposiums and/or lecture series which are open to the public where issues surrounding the funerary industry, palliative care, and environmentalism are discussed

Divination – a means of seeking hidden knowledge through observation of that which are thought to be manipulated by supernatural events, this can include physical things, dreams, or a connection had to the spirits by special people (such as oracles or ghosts)

FaceBook – a social media platform in which images, videos, text, and more can be posted, exchanged, and interacted with in real-time

Feed / Social Media Feed – the initial content, refreshed in real time, from sources selected by the user of any given platform, whether a news site, a series of newsletters, informative widgets added to one's browser or email, or a social media platform; in many ways the internet's answer to the print magazine or newspaper

Forn Seid / Forn Seidth - an extremely orthodox and strict adherence to pre-Christian Scandinavian belief systems, with influences from the Sami people and scholarship-based recreation varying from kindred to kindred

The Game – a popular schoolyard game in the late 1990s and early 2000s wherein “you were always playing, even if you didn’t know it” and “you were never allowed to stop playing” and, most importantly “if you remembered you were playing, you immediately lost, and had to loudly inform everyone around you that you Lost the Game,” which would then set off a chain reaction of everyone around you losing the game and resetting the cycle of play

Garden Witch / Green Witch – often a compliment or a self-prescribed moniker, someone who ascribes to Wicca or a similar faith who uses the garden or a similar natural setting in order to physically occupy oneself while enacting ritual, often incorporating the outcome of the activity into the intent of the ritual

Hashtag / Hash-Tag / # - a use for the pound (#) symbol on social media platforms that creates a means of filtering content on a feed by grouping it together, for purposes of activism, entertainment, information indexing, and general social engagement

Heathen – often a self-prescribed moniker in the context of this paper; someone who reveres the ancestors and tries to emulate the religion and lifestyle that they believed their predecessors had followed, often in a nebulous sense

Kitchen Witch – often a compliment or a self-prescribed moniker, someone who ascribes to Wicca or a similar faith who uses the kitchen and domestic activities to physically occupy oneself while enacting ritual, often incorporating the outcome of the activity into the intent of the ritual

Laus Perennis – a Latin phrase referring to a perpetual prayer system in which choirs sing or chant in shifts so that the incantations happen continuously without break

Livestream / Stream – an often multi-hour event where a live video is broadcast for an audience to interact with while information is present or entertainment is provided; a common format for regional academic organizations and e-sport players

Maneki-Neko – a Japanese good luck figure (招き猫, lit. 'beckoning cat') thought to bring wealth to those who display it, especially if it is displayed within a shop facing toward the door or a window in order to greet customers

Meat Space – a sometimes joking term referring to the actual, physical world aspects of a group or community whose members have almost the entirety of their lives online

Meme – an image, series of images, phrase, or physical action, which communicates a complex set of information to the viewer based on a juxtaposition of social commentary, pop culture references, and other memes

Monkey’s Paw – a term used to describe a magical item that will both grant wishes and punish the user for experimenting with fate, derived from the supernatural short story by W W Jacobs and popularized by subsequent movie adaptations

Moot – a regular gathering of a faith group, often followers of Asatru, in order to discuss secular matters, arrange festivals, and settle grievances

Open Practice – a ritual, series of rituals, object, or symbol which is only to be interacted with by the public at large, whether for the purposes of education or by the nature of the celebration

Oracle – either someone who is able to communicate with the divine by innate or ritual means, or a physical manifestation which can be used in divination

Ornithomancy – a means of divination that tracks the flight and habits of birds

Pagan – often a self-prescribed moniker in the context of this paper; someone whose beliefs purposefully steer away from the monotheistic belief structures which are typical of the 21st century global north

Patron – The mentorship of a person's spiritual practice and education, often in the context of prolonged ritual meditation, is under the guiding hand of a patron in several sects; these patrons can be other members of the faith group, those from outside the faith group, relatives, ancestor spirits, or gods. Depending on the sect, a practitioner may have multiple patrons or cycle through several during their education.

Pennsic – An annual camping event held by and for members of the international historic reenactment group the Society of Creative Anachronism (SCA), which has a notably high density of members who openly practice a variety of pagan faiths, located on a privately owned campground in western Pennsylvania ten minutes from the Ohio border

Pod / Quarantine Pod / Social Pod – A popular means of maintaining social ties during the 2020 pandemic: a small group of people would agree to quarantine together even though they lived in separate places, seeing no one outside the pod and being extremely strict in their hygiene and physical distance measures. This is to ensure a variety of safe places for social activity for the group in order to prevent boredom and retain some sense of normalcy.

Quarantine Buddy – a person who is a living companion for the duration of quarantine, and might, in fact, be the only other social interaction had for the duration of quarantine

The Ring Phenomenon – based on the early 1990s horror mystery novel by Koji Suzuki, the various movie and comic book adaptations of *Ringu* all share a common feature: a piece of deadly information will not bring supernatural harm to those who come in contact with it if more people are exposed to that information.

Ritual Bathing – a ritualistic means of prayer or meditation which are meant to revitalize the practitioner with the aid of water, hygienic materials, and talismans

Santeria – a syncretic belief system which evolved as a means to continue the folk beliefs and religions of enslaved people by using Christian mythologies and saints as stand-ins when passing on oral traditions, with varying degrees of influence from African, Indigenous American, and Christian belief systems; most often found within the southern United States

Shadow Work – a therapeutic practice particular to 21st century witchcraft that is considered a fundamental part of the practice: a thorough and harsh examination of the self, the ego, and past traumas in order to have a better handle on the energy they are putting into their work

Shit Posting – a means of memetic discourse that is hyper-focused and typified by massive amounts of rapidly generated content, a wide variety of which furthers the discussion of the chosen topic by examining specific points to extreme depth and making connections to popular culture and current events

Solo Practice – A pagan, heathen, or a follower of a similar faith practice who does not do ritual activity within a group setting; in theory this does not exclude them from choosing to participate as a guest in the ritual practices of friends and other members of the community at large, yet a solo practitioner often is such by choice

Sumbel – a ritual that can be either secular or used within a religious context, often associated with heathenry and Asatru, yet exclusive to neither; this is when a bottle, large mug, or horn of alcohol (wine, mead, or beer) is passed around a circle of gathered people as they take turns toasting and sipping from the shared drink, sometimes pouring a libation out

Strega / Stregheria – a syncretic belief system which evolved as a means to continue folk beliefs and traditions of peasant and rural peoples that were strongly informed by both Catholicism and herbal healing traditions; most often found in or connected to Italy and nearby Mediterranean and Alpine regions

Syncretism – the layering of a set of beliefs, often folk traditions, under another belief system—often one of a colonizing or imperialistic force—in order to preserve the folk beliefs and oral traditions

Tarot – a popular divination technique that relies on the interpretation of a deck of illustrated cards

TEAMs – an online platform meant for scheduling, text communication, and video conferencing

TikTok – a social media platform which relies on presenting the user with shortform video content that is curated based on the user’s search history; content is created by others who use the platform

Tumblr – a social media platform which relies on presenting the user with short mostly text-based content generated by other users, curated based on search history; these can be added to by other members of the platform, creating chains of dialog

YouTube – a platform in which video content can be disseminated, and where viewers can interact with each other and the creators in a rudimentary forum format

Wicca – a modern iteration of druidic practices, common to western Europe and north America, which gained popularity in the mid-20th century and can trace its current practices to the revival of naturalism and Rosicrucian spiritualism that occurred at the end of the 19th century

Witch – often a self-prescribed moniker in the context of this paper; someone who uses their own innate ability to alter the course of events around them through belief, prayer, the use of incantation, plant matter, or by deciphering signs from higher powers

WitchTok – a portmanteau of “witchcraft” and “TikTok” designating the section of the TikTok platform where information related to witchcraft is discussed

Zoom – a video conference platform used to relace meetings for work, school, and social activities

Informed Consent Waiver for Survey

By signing below, I confirm that I have read and signed the consent form that accompanies this survey

Signature

Date

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION:

1. How old are you?
2. How do you identify in terms of gender?
3. What is your racial background?
4. Where do you currently live, and have you always lived there?
5. Is there a religious group you identify with? Alternatively, how would you label your spiritual practice?
6. Is this the same spiritual practice you had growing up?
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
7. If not, why and how did you convert?
8. How close do your current spiritual beliefs align with that of your parents?
9. Is there a holiday or religious ritual from when you were growing up that still holds meaning to you now? Do you keep up this tradition?
10. Were there any traditions or religious practices that had been important to your grandparents that you had noticed your parents declining to maintain?

GENERAL INFORMATION:

11. Is there an activity you try to do weekly or daily (morning coffee, weekly yoga, attending religious service, etc.)? What is it, and how/why did you start doing it?
12. Before Covid19, have you ever forgotten or skipped this habit after you had made it a part of your regular routine? How did skipping affect your day/week?
13. With many people in quarantine/lockdown, have you altered this activity, or changed when/how you do it?
14. Are you yourself in any form of quarantine? For how long?
15. Would you consider the activity from question 11 to be crucial to your mood, spiritual well being, mental state, or general outlook on life? How so?
16. How would you describe your general outlook on life today?
17. Are there any meditative/repetitive/physical activities which you do in order to de-stress that you do not consider spiritual?
18. Have you been able to do these activities from question 17 over the past few months? Has your mood been helped or affected in any way?
19. Are there any group activities which you partake in to de-stress?
20. Have you been able to change these activities in light of social distancing and quarantine so as to still partake in them? How so?

21. Do you think these group activities are as effective in combating your own personal stress now that they are changed, or are they in some way less helpful?
22. Do you consider yourself to be religious?
- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
23. What is your definition of a religious activity?
24. What is your definition of a personal religious object?
25. Have you been present at any burial rites or memorial services which you would either describe as non-traditional or pagan? What in particular made you define the event this way?
26. Would you want your current religious practices to impact your own future burial or funeral arrangements? How so?

SOCIAL MEDIA INFORMATION:

27. How often do you use social media, or other internet forums in which you can interact with other people? Please indicate one
- ☐ Very often, multiple times an hour
 - ☐ Often, a few times a day
 - ☐ Several times a week
 - ☐ Never or almost never
28. Has your use of social media increased noticeably due to quarantine and/or lockdown regulations? Please indicate one
- ☐ It has increased very noticeably
 - ☐ It has increased slightly
 - ☐ It has stayed the same
 - ☐ It has decreased slightly
 - ☐ It has decreased significantly
29. Do you keep your religious activities separate from your general social media use? Please indicate one
- ☐ Yes, I keep a series of entirely separate accounts just for topics regarding my beliefs/philosophies
 - ☐ No, I use a single online presence for everything
 - ☐ No, but I do keep my professional online presence separate from my personal and faith-based activity
30. Compared to before quarantine, how often do you use social media specifically to communicate with other members of similar belief systems (whether or not they are a part of a faith group with you)?
- ☐ I use social media far more often to communicate with the other pagans/kindred members/etc that I would normally meet with regularly
 - ☐ I use social media about the same amount for activities related to my belief system
 - ☐ I use social media far more often to communicate with other members of my faith, even beyond the circle/coven/kindred I would have normally met with
 - ☐ I use social media far less to communicate with others of my faith
 - ☐ I have switched to a solitary practice

QUARANTINE INFORMATION

31. Are you able to visit or be in contact with people you associate with your typical place of worship or spiritual space today, virtually or otherwise?
32. Have you moved any religious or spiritual activity to a virtual platform in order to comply with the current social restrictions? If so, which platform?
33. If you have moved the majority of your spiritual or philosophical interactions to an online platform, do you interact with people from outside your usual group there, in real-time or otherwise?
34. If you have moved any spiritual activity to a digital platform, what are some ways in which you have changed your practices?
35. If you have not moved your spiritual activity to a digital platform, and you are complying with social restrictions, what are some ways in which you have changed your practice?

PERSONAL PRACTICE

36. Are there any physical object that you consider to be important to your practice?
37. Do you maintain a private altar in your home, or a religious figure displayed? Can you describe it, and how do you interact with it on a regular basis?
38. Is the way that you interact with your altar or religious objects different during holidays?
39. Do you have any objects that you carry with you on your person that hold religious or spiritual significance to you? How did you acquire them?

SPIRITUAL PARAPHENALIA/CONSUMEABLES

40. Is there anything that you purchase regularly to help with your practice that you associate with your altar, such as candles, incense, teas, or oils?
41. Do you use religious paraphernalia (candles, incense, a religious book, special table cloth, special ornament, etc.)? If so, please describe an example.
42. Is there any paraphernalia that you had inherited or had been made for you? If so, please describe it.
43. Do you use or make religious consumables that are used by you or other members of your religious community (communion wafer, tea, perfume, baked goods, marijuana, etc.)?
44. If not, do you personally know the person who provides the religious consumables that you use?
45. If you make them, how long have you been making these products? Do you grow some or all of the ingredients yourself?

BODILY MODIFICATION

46. Have you gotten a tattoo or other body modification that holds religious or spiritual significance for you?
47. Does anyone else in your family or religious group have a similar body modification?