

Université de Montréal

“It’s all a Giant Web”

Syncretism, agency and (re)connection in a contemporary
Pagan community

par

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Abstract

Anthropologists have been examining religious syncretism—the process of combining elements from diverse sources—in religions of the world for decades, but very little attention has been given to one highly syncretic New Religious Movement: contemporary Paganism. Through the narratives of several contemporary Pagans in Montreal, Quebec, I explore how and why practitioners are inspired to make choices to incorporate diverse elements from religious and non-religious sources; recourse to other sources represents an effort to create a deeper, more personally meaningful religious experience. The creativity involved in constructing one's own spiritual practice and belief system is often driven by a desire for (re)connection—to the earth, to one's ancestors, to a community—and a greater sense of personal agency is gained through this process. Being a participant in this community greatly shaped my research experience as well, and I explore my position as an anthropologist at home along side these narratives.

Key words: anthropology; ethnology; syncretism; contemporary Paganism; Wicca; New Religious Movements; agency; religion and modernity; Montreal

Résumé

Les anthropologues ont examiné le syncrétisme religieux, soit l'incorporation d'éléments de sources diverses, au sein des religions du monde depuis plusieurs décennies. Cependant, très peu d'intérêt a été accordé au paganisme contemporain, un Nouveau Mouvement Religieux hautement syncrétique. À travers les récits de plusieurs païens/nes contemporain/es à Montréal, j'examine comment et pourquoi les pratiquants sont inspiré/es à faire le choix d'incorporer divers éléments provenant de sources religieuses et non religieuses. Le recours à des sources différentes reflète l'effort de créer une expérience religieuse plus profonde et personnelle. La créativité impliquée dans la construction d'une pratique spirituelle et d'un système de croyance personnels est souvent conduite par un désir de (re)connexion, que ce soit à la terre, aux ancêtres, ou bien à une communauté. Les acteurs acquièrent un sentiment accru d'agentivité dans ce processus. Ma participation dans cette communauté a influencé mes expériences de recherche; j'examine également ma position en tant qu'anthropologue chez soi.

Mots-clés: anthropologie; ethnologie; syncrétisme; Paganisme contemporain; Wicca; Nouveaux Mouvements Religieux; agentivité; religion et modernité; Montréal

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	iv
Prologue	1
Chapter 1. Planting the seeds: an introduction	3
Religion and modernity	7
<i>Paganism and modernity</i>	11
Why conduct this research?	16
Chapter 2. Coming home: methodologies and autoethnographies	21
Methodology	21
Reflexivity and autoanthropology	27
<i>Becoming one's own informant</i>	28
<i>Experiencing gender</i>	29
<i>Experiencing religion</i>	30
Coming home: an autoethnography.....	32
<i>Locating identity</i>	44
Chapter 3. Roots down, branches up! Paganisms and syncretisms	50
Contemporary Paganism.....	50
<i>Terminology and language</i>	52
<i>Origins and history</i>	53
Under the umbrella: different Paganisms	56
<i>Wicca</i>	57
<i>Reconstructionism</i>	60
<i>Wicca-influenced Paganism</i>	61
<i>Ritual</i>	61
<i>Eclecticism: a problem with terminology</i>	66
Syncretism.....	68
<i>History, definitions, and contemporary applications in anthropology</i>	69
<i>Syncretism or appropriation?</i>	73
Authenticity and the invention of tradition.....	76
Part 2. Weaving the web: syncretism in practice	83
Chapter 4. Syncretism of elements from within contemporary Paganism	87
<i>Miranda: Wiccan-influenced multi-path practitioner</i>	88
<i>Isabelle, the Asatru black sheep</i>	90
<i>Rose: Shamanism=Witchcraft</i>	93
<i>Strega Caroline</i>	97
<i>Sean: the search for divine connection in contemporary life</i>	99
Chapter 5. Syncretism of elements from contemporary Pagan and other religious sources	107

<i>Caroline: IndoPaganism and the search for identity</i>	108
<i>Vivian and the Water Child</i>	109
<i>Tea time with Ruby</i>	112
<i>Miranda and Rose: finding historical and mystical connections</i>	116
<i>Maggie and The Mystery</i>	121
<i>Monique: the call of ancestral deity</i>	125
Chapter 6. Syncretism of elements from contemporary Pagan and non-religious sources	135
<i>Sean: Men's Mysteries</i>	139
<i>Luke: the search for Divine Queerness</i>	143
<i>Vivian: activism as spirituality, spirituality as activism</i>	147
Chapter 7. Tying up loose ends: discussions	156
<i>Syncretism through similitude</i>	158
<i>Syncretism through external quest</i>	160
<i>Syncretism through family heritage</i>	162
<i>Syncretism with non-religious elements</i>	164
Autoethnography revisited.....	166
Implications of this research	169
Bibliography	179
Appendix A: Research introduction letter	187
Appendix B: Preliminary questionnaire	189
Appendix C: Participant profiles	193
Appendix D: The Charge of the Goddess	196
Appendix E: Reclaiming Principles of Unity	197

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Prologue

Field notes
Summer Solstice
June 21st, 2007
Mount Royal, Montreal, QC

*Rising sun, hear us sing
Sea and rock, fire and wing*

The chant that I am to teach to the group at sunrise runs through my head over and over, the whole way up the mountain, like a mantra urging me along the darkened paths.

It was 4:00 in the morning when we met, eight of us, at the Cartier statue at the base of Mount Royal. Most of our group was already familiar with each other, except for a young couple with a baby, friends of one of the regulars in our community. We set off right away, walking briskly up the hill, stepping carefully as we went so as not to trip on a stray rock or root.

We walk in meditative silence. I end up leading the way most of the time, communicating questions, answers and directions with C by using simple hand gestures and facial expressions. In the forest it is dark, but the sky is beginning to lighten and I can see the gray of early dawn through the leaves and branches.

*Rising sun, hear us sing
Sea and rock, fire and wing*

The song plays through my head continuously, on repeat but not in a bothersome way. I am hearing it consciously, allowing it to guide me as it invokes the rising sun and the elements, bringing them into my experience. I think about the sun, about to begin its longest journey of the year across our sky, I think about how it has already made that journey for people on the other side of the world. I also think about how, for those in the southern hemisphere, the sun is on its shortest journey of the year, and how this poses questions about the reality of time and of seasons, which are so different at any given moment to a given person at different points around the globe. We live in a place where our northern hemispheric situation is the norm, to the extent that we forget that the summer solstice doesn't mean the same thing to practitioners in Australia, or much of South America and Africa. We take it for granted that what we are celebrating is the height of summer, the longest day of the year, a day for feeling the energy of the sun, knowing that it will soon begin to wane even as the days continue to get hotter. But, that is our experience; this is what the summer solstice means to us. Does this make it any more or less real?

*Rising sun, hear us sing
Sea and rock, fire and wing*

I also think about the elements, Earth, Air, Fire and Water, being invoked in the song, and how they manifest themselves around me. Recent rains have left the ground moist and soft, little puddles remain in indentations and crevices of rocks. The earth beneath my feet, spongy and inviting, the towering trees that surround me, the squirrels and raccoons that I know are out there but do not see—these all remind me that the earth is alive and that I am a part of that life. I take a deep breath and feel the air enter my lungs, I hear the occasional twitter of a waking bird. And I think of the fire of the sun, just over the horizon, which I cannot yet feel but which I know with more surety than anything else will soon appear.

After a pause to let the others catch up, C takes the lead, as he has a place in mind that is not far along a path at the top of the staircase. We emerge from the thicket of bushes and trees onto a sloped area of smoothed stones. Off to the east, we see the spot that is becoming the brightest orange, where the sun will rise. This location seems perfect, and, still in silence, we nod to each other. I look out over the side of the mountain, across the city, the river, to the distant hills that are beginning to grow pink in anticipation of the sunrise. We spread out; some sit and some stand; all face the east. The sun is about to rise.

*Rising sun, hear us sing
Sea and rock, fire and wing*

And it does. Slowly, like poured honey, the rays spread out across the hills, illuminating the few wispy clouds that dot the sky, turning the world an infinite spectrum of pink to orange.

*Rising sun, hear us sing
Sea and rock, fire and wing*

When the sun is a blazing full circle over the horizon, I begin to sing, quietly at first, but with growing energy. After two or three times through, the tune is picked up by A, who sings with me. The others remain silent, but C begins to beat on his drum softly, the heartbeat of the earth. After a time, we form something resembling a circle, and continue to sing; this is our spontaneous ritual. Rather than cast a circle with our minds and our words, we let the light of the rising sun envelop us into sacred space, our bodies channels for the energy it gives; rather than call the elements with separate invocations to each, we do so with our song, all at once. We are grounded, together, interconnected. The singing reaches a peak and dies down, and we share food. C continues to beat his drum for a while, experimenting with different rhythms. After eating—banana bread, cookies, strawberries—we decide that we are ready to depart, and we pack up and say goodbye, each in our own way, to the space that had served as our ritual spot.

Our walk down the mountain is fairly quick, and not silent as was the way up; we stop from time to time to look at plants or to search for birds high in the treetops that we can hear but not see. The song is still playing in my head, but this time it is less of a mantra and more of a lingering memory of what has passed. We reach the Cartier statue once more, looking quite different this time in the full early-morning sunlight. I feel refreshed and not at all sleepy as we say our good-byes and depart in our various directions.

Chapter 1. Planting the seeds: an introduction

This thesis explores contemporary Paganism as a New Religious Movement, focusing on religious syncretism, the process of combining elements from diverse religious sources. Within the anthropology of religion, many case studies during the last few decades have focused on a variety of examples of religious syncretism, a few of these being African and Brazilian Pentecostalism as a synthesis between indigenous religions of the regions and the Christian doctrine brought by missionaries (Meyer 1994; Mary 2001b, 2005); Buddhism in the various locations in which it is practiced, each in which it significantly differs due to syncretism with other religious systems present in the area (Gellner 1997, 2001); and Hinduism and Islam in India, and how the co-existence of two religions has borne both syncretism between the two and fundamentalist movements striving for “purification” of each (van der Veer 1994). The syncretism examined here is different on some levels, and yet can still be located through many similar avenues, using similar language and approaches. In these pages, I explore the syncretism found almost ubiquitously throughout the contemporary Pagan movement, in most cases as a conscious choice and an act of personal agency.

Contemporary Paganism refers to a movement that is influenced by—and in many cases seeks to revive—pre-Christian beliefs and practices. It is often called an earth-based spirituality, meaning that it is especially focused on the earth and cycles of nature: the phases of the moon, the seasons of the year, and the cycles of life and death and rebirth. As an extremely varied spiritual system that is very much open to individual

interpretation, contemporary Paganism is ripe for syncretic encounters and is often combined with other spiritual and religious systems by groups and individuals alike. Using a combination of participant-observation in the contemporary Pagan community of Montreal, and the stories of ten individuals with whom I conducted in-depth interviews during the spring and summer of 2007, I explore what inspires the choices made by contemporary Pagans to bring together diverse elements from religious and non-religious sources in an effort to create a deeper, more personally meaningful religious experience.

At the time of the Summer Solstice ritual described in the Preface, I was in full swing as a researcher, conducting interviews and writing up field notes, but also as a participant—and often taking a leadership role—in certain facets of the community that I was researching. Having decided to conduct research in a community of which I was a part—at home, so to speak—shaped my experience in innumerable ways, allowing me easier access to certain kinds of information, but posing significant challenges as well. My own experiences have influenced this research in many ways, and in turn this research certainly influenced my experiences and the way that I interact with the community that I have studied. I explore my own role as an “anthropologist at home” (Jackson 1987) in greater depth in Chapter 2.

Further into this introductory chapter, I discuss the bigger picture behind my research, that is, religion in this age of modernity. In particular, I present a brief discussion of the religious changes that occurred in Quebec in the latter half of the twentieth century, followed by a foray into the phenomenon of New Religious Movements, of which

contemporary Paganism is one. Although anthropological studies of religion have for some time now interested themselves in New Religious Movements, contemporary Paganism is one that has, until very recently, been mostly ignored; even today it struggles to find its place in academic and popular acceptance.

In Chapter 2, I discuss the methodology that has guided me through this whole process, as well as my own trajectory and shifting positions, which I explore through the medium of autoethnography. Although my position as an anthropologist at home has been challenging in many ways, by studying something that I am myself a part of, I am allowed access to first-hand experiential information that someone not personally involved would have a much more difficult time attaining. On the other hand, through contextualizing my own experiences, as well as the experiences of others, in an academic framework, I am at once attempting to bring increased validity (in the eyes of academia) to the experiences themselves, and encouraging myself to think critically about my own experiences in a way that I probably would not otherwise. I am also able to contextualize these things in relation to other religious and spiritual practices world-wide, since through my studies I am exposed to scholarship dealing with religious dimensions of alterity. This, also, benefits not only my academic work and my own spiritual practice, but, hopefully, my field as well.

Chapter 3 brings us into the world of contemporary Paganism, and I discuss different traditions, paths and groups that make up this movement, providing information that will be useful as I move into examining the narratives on which my research has focused.

Secondly, I explore many of the theories that have guided my research, starting with those regarding religious syncretism, and moving into notions of authenticity and the “invention of tradition”. There is a rich collection and variety of scholarly works that deal with both of these facets of my research, and I make use of many of them in this chapter.

In Part 2 of this thesis, I plunge into the data itself, exploring the narratives that were shared with me through the interviews that I conducted with several contemporary Pagans in Montreal during the spring and summer of 2007. The three chapters are organized along lines that I drew early in the research so as to facilitate the analysis: Chapter 4 focuses on syncretism between different branches of contemporary paganism; Chapter 5 discusses syncretism between Pagan and other religious sources, and Chapter 6 looks at syncretism between Pagan and non-religious sources, these being primarily gender issues and analysis, and environmental activism. Analyzing these narratives through the framework of religious syncretism, I highlight many instances of conscious hybridization of both religious and non-religious elements into each practitioner’s personal spiritual system. The inspirations behind these integrations are often complex, and through the processes of syncretism, self-identified Pagans reach a place of deeper, more meaningful personal practice, one that is constantly evolving and changing as certain elements are introduced, and others left behind.

Chapter 7 involves a bringing-together of theories, methods and data in a discussion about the connections that can be drawn, the dialogue that emerges between the various participants, and further avenues for research, for each narrative asks far more questions

than it answers. This final chapter also discusses the implications of this research, for the fields of anthropology and Pagan studies, and for contemporary Pagan communities themselves.

Religion and modernity

Alterity is the phenomenological kernel of religion, and insofar as alterity is part of the structure of being-in-the-world, religion is an inevitable feature of human existence
— (Csordas 2004: 163)

What is religion, and why is it so much a part of our experience as humans? Where did it come from, how did it come to be and why is it still a virtually ubiquitous factor in our lives? These questions, and others like them, have been asked by anthropologists, philosophers, psychologists, cognitive scientists, geneticists; indeed, by scholars in virtually every discipline. Religion appears to be an incredibly important part of being human, as it apparently has been for more than 60,000 years (Wade 2006). While I do not attempt to answer such questions, the broader issue of religion, where it comes from and what it means in the world today is of central importance to any study of religion and modernity, including this one. First of all, this research deals with the creative development of religion, of both deliberate and spontaneous processes of bringing together diverse aspects that make up an individual's religious belief and practice. Secondly, the religious system discussed in this thesis, contemporary Paganism, is specific to our modern world in many ways. It has risen in prominence in past decades precisely because of our current reality, because of the symbolism and meaning that

people use to connect concepts of religiosity with their experiences of life, both quotidian and extraordinary. I will explore further how this plays out within Neopaganism shortly.

No discourse on religion and modernity in Quebec would be complete without at least a mention of a pivotal moment in the province's history, referred to as the *Révolution tranquille* or Quiet Revolution, which occurred between 1960 and 1966 and resulted in the rapid secularization of the society. Before this time, the Catholic Church enjoyed a monopoly over many aspects of public and private life, including governmental and educational institutions; within a few years' time, however, the Church was relegated to the religious domain. The change was dramatic and had social repercussions as well: in 1965, 85% of Catholic Québécois reported attending church regularly, but within a few years that number had dropped to less than half (Bibby 1990: 135). Furthermore, only 40% of school children were reportedly receiving religious education by 1975, as opposed to 80% ten years earlier; another ten years later, the number was down to 30% (ibid: 137). Perhaps not surprisingly, the change was strongly felt along age lines, with statistics showing that the younger a person was, the less likely they were to attend services or consider themselves involved in the Church at all (ibid: 136). Throughout all of this, however, religious belief itself did not necessarily disappear. What happened in Quebec was in fact similar to what was happening elsewhere in North America. More and more people ceased regular church attendance, fooling theorists into thinking that the general public was finished with religion, when what they were actually rejecting was not religion in itself, but the hegemony and doctrine of the Church, and more broadly across North America, organized religious institutions.

“Fifty years ago most scholars were convinced that religions definitely belonged to the past and were of interest only to a tiny group of specialists” (Kippenberg 2000: 221). Indeed, many scholars in the social sciences, including the study of religion itself, had written off religion, not considering it useful anymore as a point of research. The belief that science and “rational thinking” was taking over the niche previously held by religion was widespread. However, this did not happen exactly as predicted. What can account for this? According to sociologist William Swatos, “Much misunderstanding of the modern world situation with regard to religion is a function of a conceptualization of religion that is historically narrow, and as a result is dysfunctional when applied to the developments in contemporary socio-cultural systems” (Swatos 1983: 323). Because of this narrow conceptualization of religion, Swatos continues, given, in particular, that it excludes “magic” and “mysticism” from consideration, social theorists were greatly puzzled with the growing phenomenon of New Religious Movements, not quite knowing what to do with it (ibid).

Canadian sociologist Siân Reid would no doubt agree with Swatos. In the introduction to her edited volume about contemporary Paganism, she writes that New Religious Movements have “challenged traditional notions about the nature of the religious economy, the relative importance of the dimensions of religiosity, and the ongoing importance of religion for the individual” (Reid 2006a: 2). Reginald Bibby, another Canadian sociologist of religion,¹ theorizes that the rise of New Religious Movements and religious belonging in non-mainstream contexts is due to the fact that, although

people are disenchanted with organized religion for a variety of reasons, they have not stopped asking spiritual and existential questions, nor have they stopped searching for answers. He says:

There is good reason to believe that a considerable number of Canadians are failing to associate their interest in mystery and meaning with what religion historically has had to offer.... In other words, Canadians are not in the market for churches. They are, however, very much in the market for things religion historically has been about (Bibby 1993: 177, quoted in Reid 2006: 4).

What has religion historically been about? The word “religion” most likely comes from Latin *re-ligare*, to tie or to bind (Harper 2001c; Csordas 2004).² Thus, taken at its broadest sense, religion is about connection, about that which binds together a particular group of people, or, possibly, that which ties humans to divinity—whether that be in the form of external or internal deity or deities, or an animistic, immanent natural world. Instead of this broad sense, however, which can potentially be used to refer to a whole range of ideologies that deal with connections between people and what societies throughout time have considered to be the great mysteries of life, religion has come to refer to a faith-based belief system revolving around the teachings of a transcendental deity or prophet, and ritual practices aimed at venerating that deity or prophet (who may also be seen as one and the same) in the hopes of eventually transcending life itself. This is a much narrower definition of religion than is implied by its etymological origins.

Since the era of modern science, the concept of religion has come to be narrowed even further. Today it represents, for many, especially in the secular, scientific academic world, the complete antithesis of rationality, and therefore of science. This may be due in

part to the hegemony of particular religious systems that are in fact opposed to many scientifically based theories. It may also be due to dominant religions' reliance on the concept of faith, which is a state of believing in something without having any sort of scientifically acceptable, observable evidence. The question of whether or not religion and rationality—and therefore science—can co-exist peacefully, and even be integrated, is rarely addressed, and in instances where it is, such attempts are met by criticism from both scientists and religious groups. I believe that this conflict stems largely, on the part of scientists, from a narrow view of what religion is, and on the part of religious people, from a reaction toward science's hostility and elitism, which is in turn fueled by certain religions' hostility toward science. If religion means that which binds us together, the *ligaments* of society, then it is much, much broader than what is represented by the Abrahamic religions, even broader than what is represented by the whole gamut of “World” religions. While making the case for a broader conception of religion is not necessarily the point of this thesis, I do hope that through the narratives and discussion presented here, readers will come away with an expanded view of what “religion” can mean.

Paganism and modernity

Contemporary Paganism is a religio-spiritual system that aims to re-animate, re-interpret and re-establish beliefs and practices from another era—regardless of where this era can be located along the historical-imaginary continuum—and yet, at the same time, it is very much anchored in modernity in terms of urban life, acceptance and integration of

scientific perspectives, widespread usage of new technologies such as the internet, and the global cultural exchange of ideas and goods.

Studies have shown that the majority of North American contemporary Pagans live in cities (James R. Lewis 1996; Berger et al. 2003), much like North Americans as a whole. While some certainly live in rural areas, on farms and in intentional communities (a small but increasing number), reality for most contemporary Pagans is an urban one, and this seems to have two major—and in some ways paradoxical—impacts on Neopaganism. On the one hand, city living and the perceived imposition of disconnectedness from Nature that this entails (I use a capital N to highlight the somewhat glorified dichotomy of Natural versus non-Natural that is constructed through this point of view) has itself led to the increased desirability of a religious system that is apparently based on the *opposite* of urban life. Therefore, contemporary Paganism is, in a sense, a backlash against decades of migration from rural to urban areas, against the commodities and amenities found in the city, the fast pace of life, the crowds of people, the instant access to grocery stores, movie theaters, dance clubs, shopping malls and other modern luxuries. It is no coincidence that the rise in numbers of earth-based spirituality movements parallels the rise of environmentalist movements. Has “Nature” become popular again because so many people have come to realize that they have been living their lives without giving the natural world a second thought?

On the other hand, however, there has also been a rise in what is known as “urban Paganism” or “urban magic”, among other related names, which attempts to treat the city

as just as valid a site in which to do magic as is a forest, a desert, or the shores of a lake. “Are your totem animals more likely to be found in a high rise?” asks the tag line for an online community, called Urban Pagan, on a popular networking website. “If your ideal wilderness for doing your sacred workings is a concrete one, you may have found your tribe” (Tribe.net 2009). Urban magic can be quite varied: a ritual held in an abandoned warehouse or a train yard, interactive impromptu theater on the subway or in a busy shopping plaza, exploring the energies perceived in different parts of a city, and an unlimited number of Neopagan-related practices that utilize the cityscape and/or aspects of urban life. It is possible that in some cases, the urban Pagan movement is even a backlash itself against the “back to Nature” attitude found in much of contemporary Paganism. While some people may want desperately to reconnect to the rural lands of their ancestors, others see the city as a place that is just as magical as the countryside and resent its being devalued within Nature-oriented spirituality. For many contemporary Pagans, truth can be found in both positions: certain rituals and practices may call for crowds or the cityscape, while others may necessitate being as far as possible from an urban setting.

The Internet has also had a major impact on contemporary Paganism, and has undoubtedly been instrumental in its dramatic increase in numbers and visibility during the past decade. Information that was once available through oral tradition passed on to new generations of coven practitioners, through the often secret writings in a High Priestess’s Book of Shadows,³ and through the few books that were published on Paganism, is now readily available for the world to discover on websites, in online

documents, in chat rooms and discussion forums, through networking sites and virtual communities. While some have bemoaned the loss of secrecy that has inevitably resulted from this information explosion, others have lauded it as the new wave of accessibility that has helped people find contemporary Paganism who might otherwise have spent years not knowing that others in the world held similar beliefs to theirs. Sociologist Douglas Cowan, one of a few scholars who have taken on the study of Neopaganism in the Internet Age, writes,

What modern Paganism on the Internet does demonstrate...is how new information spaces are being colonized by religion and its practitioners, how these spaces provide alternative, hitherto unavailable venues for the performance and instantiation of often marginalized religious identities, and how potential for the electronic evolution in religious traditions such as modern Paganism is supported by the very architecture and philosophy of the World Wide Web (2005: x).

The Internet certainly has played a large role in my own experiences of participating in contemporary Pagan communities as well as having helped my study of them. It was through websites that I discovered some of the first rituals that I attended, through networking sites and email that I first came in contact with the groups that I would become a part of in Montreal, and it was through electronic mailing lists that I started my search for research participants for this study. These new means of communication have certainly changed the face of contemporary Paganism, and most likely of other religious groups as well.

Globalization has undoubtedly been another instrumental force in the evolution and spread of Neopagan traditions. This point is particularly pertinent to this study, because it is largely in tandem with the cultural exchange of ideas and goods, facilitated by

increased global awareness and trade, that elements from non-Western religious systems have made their way into the beliefs and practices of modern Pagans. But can we take a step back, and posit that the rise of contemporary Paganism itself is due largely to the increase in transnational pathways of information exchange? To some extent I believe we can. Chapter 3 of this thesis explores the origins of Neopaganism in much greater depth, but suffice it to say for now that since its conception, practitioners have drawn upon various influences coming from all parts of the world. Opening up to those branches of contemporary Paganism that are less closely tied to Traditional Wicca further increases the possibilities of borrowing and influence from outside sources around the world.

Cultural theorists (such as C. Taylor 1991; M. C. Taylor 1998; Kippenberg 2000) have connected the age of modernity with increased individualism. Several scholars of contemporary Paganism (for example, Bloch 1998; Berger 1999; Pike 2001; Ezzy 2003) have demonstrated that individualism is an important aspect of contemporary Paganism, and see this as further evidence that the Neopagan movement is in fact a religion of modernity. Ezzy (2003) talks about contemporary Pagan practice as a “technology of the self”, borrowing Foucault’s phrase, although he uses it in a narrower sense “to refer to techniques and practices that enable individuals to reflexively manipulate their thoughts, actions, and sense of self” (ibid: 51). Indeed, although there are Pagan communities, covens, circles and other ways whereby contemporary Pagans identify themselves within a group setting, being “solitary”, or practicing on one’s own, is a very common pattern as well. Even within the group setting, there is often an inherent sense of individuality present. Several of the participants in my research, for example, are part of covens or

circles (which are generally seen as less formal and less stable than covens) that include members with diverse belief systems and personal practices. In one case, each time the group met, a different member would organize and lead the ritual for that meeting, and would base it on the tradition or path that they practiced on their own. This meant that one month the group might experience a traditional Wiccan ritual, and the next a shamanic journey. In another case, the group itself appeared to be more homogenized, with set protocol and specific patron deities, but different members were able to propose elements coming from their own practices to be incorporated into the group ritual. Certain rituals thus became highly syncretic due to the diversity of influences from members. Throughout this thesis, and especially in the section that deals with the participants' narratives, other instances of individualistic patterns may surface.

Why conduct this research?

Contemporary Paganism is often cited as the fastest-growing religious system in Canada, and possibly in the United States as well (Kelly 1992; Clifton 2004; Reid 2006a). However rapid its growth, Canadian Pagans are still small in number, and contemporary Paganism has yet to truly break through the radar as some other New Religious Movements have, especially with regards to its portrayal and acceptance in academia.

Religious scholar Michael York writes:

Paganism occupies a particular theological niche. It can be placed into comparison with the other major world religions. The reason why this theological niche has not been generally recognized, however, can be largely attributed to the Judeo-Christian global dominance which has caused a hegemonic exclusion in considering paganism among the full

range of theological speculations. This exclusion also parallels an apparently “natural” human tendency that exalts the spiritually transcendent while dismissing the spiritually immanent. Why this last is so—and so ubiquitously or nearly universally—is something upon which we can here only speculate (York 2000: 4).

I question York’s assertion that the tendency toward the transcendent (the notion that deity is an *external* force, and that the ultimate goal of humankind is to transcend the earth-bound body/realm) is ubiquitous and nearly universal. I would argue instead that it is more of a cultural than “natural” human phenomenon, given the large number of indigenous worldviews that fall on the side of immanence (the notion that deity is an *internal* force, and that the earthly realm and all things that are a part of it, including the body, are themselves sacred),⁴ and the ever-increasing body of practitioners of new immanent spiritualities, including forms of contemporary Paganism. However, I agree very much with York with regards to the Judeo-Christian hegemony that has excluded many other religions of the world from receiving recognition as “World Religions.” Indeed, this point ties into the motivations behind my own research; much of my impetus to conduct this study has been driven by my belief that contemporary Paganism as a New Religious Movement is just as worthy of attention from the social sciences as are other religious movements that have been studied for decades.

Graham Harvey advocates for a greater acceptance of the validity of “insider” research in the domain of religion:

I find the assertion that religious people cannot study their own religions academically foolish. Not only are there plenty of examples of religious people producing critically valuable, scholarly discussions of their own religions, but the claim denigrates the ability of scholars to train and encourage others.... If what I write is recognizable to Pagans as a reasonably accurate reflection of their religion and to scholars as an

interesting contribution to critical reflection seeking understanding of religiosity, then my work is scholarly (Harvey 2004: 246-7).

My belief in the importance of insider research in the field of religion has been another driving force behind this thesis, which is, among other things, an attempt to unite a well-used anthropological concept (religious syncretism) with a mostly-ignored religious system (contemporary Paganism) in hopes of bringing increased validity to the study of this particular religious movement. The concept of insider research has also been an important part of this project because of my own position as an active participant in several facets of the community with which I conducted fieldwork. Although this position has provided me with many challenges, it has also helped me in many ways, largely with regard to the sensitive and personal subject of religious belief and practice. Many people feel uncomfortable talking about their spirituality with someone they see as potentially critical and judgmental; this attitude may not be very surprising given anthropology's track record. My position as an "insider" in this respect, then, allowed me access to information that an "outsider" might not have access to, no matter how culturally sensitive they may be.

While I expand upon the notions of "insider research", anthropology "at home", and "going native" in the following chapter, I would like to end this introductory chapter with a humorous and pertinent anecdote, in which anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup recalls her fieldwork on an Icelandic farm, where she took on the role of milkmaid in order to fit into the daily rhythm of life:

During my first stay, I had actually been responsible for the tending and milking of about thirty cows. It was fun to achieve such basic skills, but

more importantly (perhaps) I also learned about the shift of identity involved in participant observation. As an anthropologist, you cannot easily get a close relationship to thirty relatively stupid cows, but as milkmaid you are bound to take them seriously... It implied differentiated relations to the cows, which I could no longer treat as a category but had to deal with as named individuals (Hastrup 1990: 48).

I am not attempting to draw parallels between Pagans and cows, but what drew me to Hastrup's experience was the way in which she was forced to stop generalizing, considering "cows" as a whole, and start treating each one on their own merits, naming each individually and coming to at least a rudimentary understanding of their individual personalities. This was achieved through her shift in position vis-à-vis the cows: she ceased being solely a beneficiary of their milk and their meat, the human towering above the hierarchical food chain, and began an interaction with them in which she was more of an equal, or even perhaps in a position of inferiority, dependent on the cows' moods and whether or not they would allow her to collect their milk. In a similar vein, we as anthropologists can learn a great deal—not only about our subjects, but about our fields and ourselves as well—when we pause a moment and start listening to the individual voices around us.

¹ It has been interesting to observe that the overwhelming majority of sources for studies of New Religious Movements, including contemporary Paganism, focusing on North America, have been from the field of sociology, rather than anthropology. I take this to be simply because anthropologists have been more likely to look at non-Western religions, or syncretism between Western and non-Western religions. Indeed, very few researchers in the field of Pagan Studies are anthropologists, most coming instead from religious studies, history and sociology.

² Although this is the most-often cited root of the word, there is some dispute, with *re-legere*, meaning to harvest or gather, or to read (from which also comes “lecture”) being the runner-up (Harper 2001c; Csordas 2004).

³ A Book of Shadows is the name generally given to a book used by a practitioner of Wicca that serves as a journal or spell book. In it can be written ritual formulae, recipes for incense or brews, incantations, chants, and accounts of experiences. Books of Shadows can be kept by an individual or by a coven. Some Books of Shadows have been published (or parts of them have been incorporated into instructional books about Neopaganism), and some are secret and revealed only to initiates in particular traditions. Though it originated in a Wiccan context, some people in non-Wiccan traditions also use the term.

⁴ For some examples, ecologist and philosopher David Abram (1996) discusses immanence in the worldviews of particular Native North American and Australian Aboriginal cultures.

Chapter 2. Coming home: methodologies and autoethnographies

My decision to conduct research among contemporary Pagans was a complex and multi-layered one, comprised of shifting academic interests, field availability, as well as my own evolving spiritual path. In this chapter, I first examine the methodological journey that has guided me through this research. I discuss the works of several anthropologists who have advocated self-reflexive anthropology in its various forms, because my own fieldwork would not have been possible had I not been able to explore and analyze my own experiences alongside those of my informants. Finally, I delve into the story of my own trajectory, through the anthropological and spiritual twists and turns that my life has taken during the past several years, leading me to this moment. It is my goal that my own experience, too, can come to be seen as anthropological data, as is advocated by a growing body of anthropologists.

Methodology

When I first embarked on the beginning stages of this project, I knew that I wanted to focus on personal narrative. Years ago as an undergraduate reading “Writing Against Culture” (Abu-Lughod 1991), I felt a deep, instant resonance with the concept of ethnographies of the particular, realizing that focusing on personal stories, “about particular individuals in time and place” (ibid: 153), rather than making generalizations about cultures, was the only way that I could conduct ethical ethnography. Abu-Lughod asks, “Are there ways to write about lives so as to constitute others as less other?” (ibid:

149). This was, perhaps, one of the most important questions in my early anthropological formation, and one of the reasons that I chose to pursue this path.

Having decided to look for a handful of people in Montreal's contemporary Pagan community who would be willing to speak to me at length about their personal spiritual beliefs and practices, I started out in the way that information is most often, and most efficiently, disseminated within this community: electronic mailing lists. Although I had already been involved in certain facets of the Pagan community, there were still hundreds of people who I did not know, and many groups about which I knew nothing. Several e-lists are available in the community, the largest being the CUPS list, with about 350 members,¹ and the second largest being the Montreal Pagan Community E-list, with just under 300 members² (although I would hazard the guess that a large percentage of the members belong to both lists simultaneously, as I did). These, along with a few others (two of which were specifically geared toward the Francophone community³), were the perfect places to start my search. After sending out an email⁴ in which I introduced myself, described my project, and asked for people who would be willing to answer a few preliminary questions about their Pagan practice to contact me, I received 36 replies, and sent out a brief questionnaire to those people.⁵ 27 of the questionnaires were returned to me, the vast majority of which were from Anglophone women (18/27, or 67%). Three were from Francophone women, three from Anglophone men, and another three from Francophone men (11% each).⁶

The purpose of these questionnaires was not to acquire actual research material, but rather to help me identify particular practitioners with whom I would be interested in conducting in-depth interviews. This meant that my selection of research participants was not at all unbiased or neutral, as I hand-picked, from the pool of questionnaires, those whose religious trajectories appeared the richest in terms of religious syncretism.⁷ However, I also attempted to bring some variety into the mix, making sure to include women and men, Francophones and Anglophones, people of different ages, and of different traditions or paths within Neopaganism. Not all of those who filled out the questions felt comfortable being interviewed, and some who had originally said they would talk with me one-on-one proved impossible to connect with when I attempted to contact them to set up an interview, so these factors also influenced the selection of my pool of interviewees. In addition, there were two people whom I interviewed, one woman and one man, both Anglophone, who had not filled out the questions previously. In one case this was due to that fact that the person in question felt more comfortable talking about her Pagan practice than writing about it, and when I approached her about filling out the questionnaire she replied that she would not, but would like to be interviewed instead. The other was someone who had either overlooked my original message on the e-lists, or had decided not to respond to the questions for whatever reason, but was obliging when I asked him specifically if I could interview him. I sought him out when I realized that my pool of men was extremely small, and as he was someone I had interacted with previously in ritual contexts, I thought he would bring an interesting perspective to my research.

For the next stage of the research, I conducted recorded interviews, ranging in time from one to three hours each, with ten people. Of the ten, eight are women. Eight participants were either born in Quebec or have lived here since a young age, the other two being from different Canadian provinces. Three of the women identify as Francophone Québécoise (although one, who is bilingual, chose to do her interview in English); one of the men, also Québécois, is completely bilingual (though he also chose to do the interview in English).⁸ The interviewees range in age from mid-twenties to late fifties, and include people from a variety of Pagan backgrounds.⁹ Unfortunately, this study did not include very much ethnic diversity, with only one participant who is not from a purely Western European-North American background. However, I do not believe that this is necessarily an underrepresentation, as both historically and currently contemporary Paganism in North America is practiced predominantly by people tracing their roots back to Western and Northern Europe (with some smaller groups interested in exploring Eastern European roots (see, for instance, Ivakhiv 2005; Strmiska 2005; Budapest 2007)). The primary reason for this appears to be that Neopaganism focuses on mythology, pantheons, and folklore coming predominantly from Europe, and many people are drawn to religions with which they feel an ethnic or cultural connection (Magliocco 2004: 61).¹⁰ From my own observations, it is rare to see someone who could be identified as non-White at an event in the Montreal Pagan community.

I conducted interviews during the spring and summer of 2007, in most cases traveling to the homes or work places of the participants, at their request, and in a few cases meeting on more neutral ground. In one case, the initial interview had to be ended prematurely

due to time constraints, and so a second interview was scheduled. In a few other cases, I approached the participants at a later date to talk further about points that had been brought up in the main interview. Most of the interviews, however, were completed in one sitting. Two of the Francophone women live together and requested to be interviewed together, though most of their interview consisted of each responding one at a time to my questions, and there was very little conversation between them, so the outcome of this interview was not significantly different from the others, which were all done one-on-one.

Because of my intended focus on the ethnography of the particular, I did not collect extensive socio-demographic information from the participants. I chose, rather, to allow any information that they wished to share with me to come out during the interview itself, which was very open-ended. My decision to base this research on personal narrative, and to listen to what each participant wanted to talk about and to share with me, came from my belief that this type of information would lead to more fruitful discourses of the actual topic at hand; extensive survey questions, while important in certain types of data collection, did not seem to fit with the work that I wanted to do.

The interviews were largely guided cooperatively by myself and the participant. I prepared for each interview by going through the questionnaire that had been filled out by that person prior (except in the two cases in which no questionnaire had been answered), looking for bits of information that I had highlighted as particularly pertinent to the topic of religious syncretism. From there, I made some notes about a few things that I wanted

to ask the participant, which usually consisted of questions aimed at exploring further a particular mention of incorporating elements from different religious or non-religious sources. I also asked all participants to describe (in as much detail as they wished) their own religious trajectory, in what religion, if any, they had been raised, how they came to Paganism, and what traditions or paths they had identified with. The participants, on the other hand, were free to expand on certain points, go off on tangents and tell me whatever they felt was significant, insofar as their understanding of the research question would guide them. I made sure to explain as thoroughly as possible what I was doing and why, and answered their questions about my research to the best of my ability. I found it intriguing to note the differing levels of interest in my research; some respondents asked a lot of questions and were curious about the processes, both my own personal process that had brought me to this point and the process of conducting anthropological research, while some were content to hear only a brief introduction to what I was doing and why I was interested in interviewing them. On the whole, however, contemporary Pagans surveyed in the United States show a higher-than-average level of academic education (Berger et al. 2003: 31), and the majority of my respondents had completed at least an undergraduate university degree. Still, personal experience with academia does not necessarily dictate interest in academically-gearred projects, and since Pagans seem to be a curious bunch I was not surprised at the level of interest in my research and the conversations that were sparked during many of the interviews.

Reflexivity and autoanthropology

Being an active part of the community that I have been studying has taught me a lot about self-positioning and reflexivity, but it has also prompted me to seek out those who advocate an experiential, phenomenological approach to ethnography, as well as the use of autobiography and autoanthropology. The works and words of these scholars have provided me with a discourse rich in substance and meaning, one that I hope to continue in my own words.

My motivation for wanting to contribute to this current of thought is by no means disinterested, because I consider it a powerful political tool as well. In the words of anthropologist Judith Okely, “the notion of autobiography or reflexivity is seen as threatening to the canons of the discipline...because it is an explicit attack on positivism” (Okely 1992: 24). This statement struck me upon first glance with its incredible potency. I have long been fascinated with the concept of anthropology as a tool for activism; in fact, when I first heard the term “activist anthropology” applied to an undergraduate project of mine, I was excited and inspired to learn that that was a known and accepted—at least in certain circles—part of the field. However, as activism often takes the form of a movement against a past that is trying to control the future, I have since come to view anything that breaks with the positivist, objectivist worldview as a sort of activism, and as such, as political. Conducting “insider research” or “anthropology at home”, taking an experiential or phenomenological approach, giving voice to reflexivity and the shifting position of the anthropologist, questioning normative roles—researcher versus subject, insider versus outsider, as well as those based on gender, ethnicity, class and other

constructed divisions of society—are all political moves because they contest what anthropology was about once upon a time. And in time, new ideas will surely contest the tenets of the discipline as it is today, providing tomorrow’s anthropologists with new political tools.

*Becoming one’s own informant*¹¹

British archaeologist and contemporary Pagan scholar Robert Wallis (2000, 2004) writes about conducting “autoarchaeology”, that is, an archaeology of the self. A practitioner of the neo-Shamanism that he himself studies as an academic, Wallis finds this term indispensable, citing a string of anthropologists who have written about such terms as “auto/ethnography” (Reed-Danahay 1997), “auto-anthropology,” being “anthropology carried out in the social context which produced it” (Strathern 1987: 17), and “anthropology at home” (Jackson 1987). This has nothing to do with ethnographers “fabricating” their research, Wallis continues:

Rather, these approaches equip anthropologists with methodologies for approaching one’s own culture ethnographically, an enterprise attesting to the fact that there is now a strong move for ‘insider research’. In justifying insider research and thereby questioning the science envy in branches of anthropology and archaeology that demand scholarly ‘detachment’, autoarchaeology opposes the dualism of the insider–outsider paradigm. An integral methodology is experiential anthropology, in which the nique of participant observation is radically altered, bringing into question not only the notion of ‘going native’, but also the seriousness with which we take the beliefs and practices of our ‘informants’ (Wallis 2000: 253).

This sort of ethnography is not only encouraged among marginalized, minority and fringe groups, but also within mainstream Western culture (Ahmed and Shore 1995). Indeed, anthropologist Deborah Reed-Danahay identifies autoethnography at the intersection of

three increasingly visible genres within anthropology: “native anthropology,” in which anthropologists conduct research on groups to which they belong; “ethnic autobiography,” referring to the personal narratives of members of ethnic minority groups, and “autobiographical ethnography,” in which an ethnographic account includes the anthropologist’s personal experiences as they relate to the field (Reed-Danahay 1997: 2).¹²

Experiencing gender

Interestingly, though perhaps not surprisingly, experiential and reflexive anthropology was originally women’s work; very few men had published experiential fieldwork before the 1980s (Tedlock 1995). In her article on the “sexual division of textual labor,” Barbara Tedlock goes through a long list of anthropologist couples who, in conducting fieldwork together, came out with very different types of publications. In many cases the women collected a substantial amount of data for their husbands, which the men subsequently published as objective research in their ethnographies; the women, on the other hand, wrote about their experiences and interactions with the people of the culture in which they were living, readily acknowledging their subjectivity (ibid). Tedlock describes the frustration of some female anthropologists with the “opportunistic postmodern males” who purported to be doing something new, when they, the women, had already been writing experimentally and experientially for over thirty years (ibid: 272).

Along similar lines, Ruth Behar writes:

[T]he category of the new ethnography [referring to the landmark anthropological volume *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) and the postmodern movement that it spurred on] failed to take into account that throughout the twentieth century women had crossed the border between anthropology and literature—but usually “illegally,” as aliens who had produced work that tended to be viewed in the profession as “confessional” and “popular”.... The *Writing Culture* agenda, conceived in homoerotic terms by male academics for other male academics, provided the official credentials, and the cachet, that women had lacked for crossing the border. Even the personal voice, undermined when used by women, was given the seal of approval in men’s ethnographic accounts, reclassified in more academically favorable terms as “reflexive” or “experimental” (Behar 1995: 4).

Autoethnography has come to hold a significant place within experiential anthropology, and could even be seen as a natural extension of broader reflexivity; if, throughout an ethnography, an anthropologist reflects on her own shifting position, the relationships she has crafted with the people she is studying, and her own experiences and perspectives regarding her fieldwork, she is essentially including her own personal data in the analysis, treating it as fieldwork. Call this experiential, reflexive, popular, postmodern, autobiographical, it is always to some degree or another an anthropology of the self.

Experiencing religion

Wallis makes the claim that neo-Shamanism is a perfect venue for highly experiential research, and echoes Jeanne Favret-Saada’s sentiments that neutral positioning is absurd in highly experiential situations, and that anthropologists must experience what they seek to understand (Favret-Saada 1977).

In the domain of religion, experience is paramount, for the direct experience of religious phenomena is the primary means of transmission, of understanding, of becoming. “In the

practice of modern mystery religions, you are either in, or you are not there at all” writes anthropologist Jone Salomonsen (1999: 9), reflecting on her doctoral research, which she conducted on the Reclaiming Witchcraft Collective of San Francisco, the “parent” organization to one of the groups in Montreal that figure in my own research. Her sentence can be understood on two levels: that of participation by anyone wishing to share in a ritual, and that of a researcher studying that ritual. Salomonsen remarks that in order to conduct her research, she had to take on the role of apprentice, to enter into the religious system as any other seeker might, to participate fully in classes and rituals that allowed her to develop her own insight into what exactly she was researching. Through this, she states, “I also became my own informant” (ibid).

Edith Turner (1994: 72) argues that the anthropologist’s own religious interactions should be treated as valid data, and Goulet and Miller (2007) agree, in reflecting on their fieldwork experiences:

We know firsthand that in our own research activities we gained significant insights and knowledge precisely when we found ourselves, inadvertently, beyond the boundaries of our initial research intentions and proposals. The ecstatic side of our fieldwork was experienced when the single-minded pursuit of data within a clearly defined research agenda was momentarily set aside, and the opportunity to enter deeply into the world of our hosts was embraced. To our surprise, this led to insights and knowledge that redefined the relationships with our hosts, deepened our ability to interact with them in more meaningful ways, and opened the door to epistemological and ontological issues that begged to be addressed. We believe in the importance of reporting and reflecting upon these crucial transformative moments experienced in the field (ibid: 1).

Anthropology’s journey into the postmodern era allowed for many more voices calling for greater participation with and understanding of the Other, as a tool for a deeper kind

of research. But these voices were also decrying the hegemony that automatically comes into play when the anthropologist decides that religious beliefs and practices are not objectively, scientifically, or academically valid, not “true,” or even that they are only *metaphorically* true. Edith and Victor Turner came to realize that through their positivist stance toward the religious beliefs of the Ndembu of Zambia, with whom they were conducting fieldwork, they were denying these people’s equality, their “‘coevalness’, their common humanity” (Turner 1992: 28). Current trends in anthropology toward experiential, phenomenological ways of thinking and of conducting research are taking the field even further into this sense of coevalness, into a deeper meaning of intersubjectivity, and through this the boundaries between researcher and researched are becoming even more blurry. It is in this vein that I conduct my own autoethnography, as I have been not only a participant in the community that I have been studying, but an active organizer and facilitator at certain times as well. Furthermore, I fully acknowledge that my multi-positioning has influenced many aspects of this study itself, and in sharing my own narrative it is my intention to furnish readers with yet another piece of this great puzzle.

Coming home: an autoethnography

I could not find better words to start off this section than those of religious scholar Graham Harvey: “The story of my entry into the field to study Paganisms is a tapestry of different motivations, provocations, invitations, serendipitous events and encounters” (Harvey 2004: 242). Likening this story to a tapestry made up of a plethora of threads, each coming from a different direction, crisscrossing, colors blending and melding,

patterns springing up as if by magic, each thread making its way along its own continuum—this sets a good stage for my own words to weave their way out, to discover what sort of picture they will create in their own time and place.

I first became aware of the contemporary Pagan movement while an undergraduate student at a liberal arts university in Oregon, completing my Bachelor's degree in anthropology and studio art. While visiting a friend in the Chicago area during spring break one year, my friend told me, a bit shyly, not knowing how I would react, that she had heard about a ritual for the Spring Equinox, and was thinking about going to it. The ritual was for women only, and was to take place at a nature sanctuary owned and cared for by a Wiccan Priestess. I had heard the terms "Wicca" and "pagan ritual" before, but I had always dismissed them in my Western secular academic mind that equated all things religious with either reactionary politics or unnecessary frivolity.

The daughter of a biologist, I was raised with Scientific Objectivity occupying that place in my mind and in my life that is occupied, for others, by religious belief. My mother was always more on the spiritual side, and I considered myself open-minded at least, growing up in a small town where many of my friends were from conservative Christian families; I thought of myself as perfectly tolerant and accepting of different beliefs (even if some of their conservative views toward people who were "different" infuriated me), but at the same time, it was my own belief that things such as religion were purely psychological, and their necessity in the modern world only went as far as it kept people happy and gave them something to look forward to after death. Still, as I became more aware of the wars

of the 1980s and 1990s being fought in far-off lands, all too often, it seemed, in the name of religious belief, I began to question even this, and came to view religion as more destructive to the people of the world, as well as to the environment, than it could possibly be beneficial for people's psyches.

An active feminist against war, I watched in horror and dismay as the Bush administration reacted to the events of September 11th, 2001, with even more war, and the way that religion was brought into the picture chilled me further to the idea of taking part in any sort of religious belief system. And although I was protesting the impending war against Iraq alongside Quakers, Unitarians and Methodists, some part of me still saw them as taking part in a religion that was at the root of the problem. For some reason, however, perhaps at first mostly curiosity, I was intrigued by the thought of going to a Wiccan ritual, and asked my friend, a bit gingerly, if I could go along.

This first ritual opened up many new doors to me, both on a personal level and an academic level, not the least being that I felt finally as though my mind was no longer closed to understanding the validity of the religious experience, which, needless to say, has been extremely useful in my training and practice as an anthropologist since that point. On a more personal, spiritual level, however, I felt as though not only my mind, but also my whole self had been opened in immeasurable ways to something that was at once brand new and comfortably familiar.

The sensation of “coming home” is one that has been described by countless people new to contemporary Paganism, and is an experience with which I identify as well. Many researchers have come across this phenomenon, one in particular being Marisol Charbonneau, who, in conducting research with Pagans in Montreal, found that a full 70% of survey respondents identified with the “coming home” feeling of instant belonging when they first began to explore contemporary Paganism (Charbonneau 2008: 69-70).¹³

Sociologist Siân Reid discusses this phenomenon as a counterweight to conversion, another aspect of religion commonly studied by social scientists, although one not often found in the context of contemporary Paganism. Conversion, she says, involves “a fundamental change in the root orientation of a passive self, acted upon by outside forces” (Reid 2002: 54). Practitioners of contemporary Paganism, on the other hand,

do not describe themselves as having become Pagans, as much as they choose to underline that they found expressed in neo-Paganism the essence of what they already understood and believed about themselves and their worlds. The phrase *I felt like I had come home* reflects both the sense of belonging and the sense of relief that many practitioners feel upon finding a community that echoes back to them their often preexisting ideals (ibid: 55).

Graham Harvey as well has examined this phenomenon, coming to the conclusion that

Pagans are people who ‘come home’ in two related senses, neither necessarily taking precedence—chronological or ideological—over the other. First, Pagans come home to themselves, second Pagans come home to a sense of belonging with others or within a tradition (1999: 239).

Indeed, my own experience can be located along very similar lines to those drawn by Reid and Harvey. In that first ritual experience, I had found, for the first time, a

community of spiritual people who had a very different world view than any that I had been exposed to among other religious groups thus far, one that made sense to me and united many different pre-existing facets of my life and my outlook. One for which I didn't feel as though I had to compromise my strongly-held convictions about human rights and environmental justice, but which allowed and even encouraged me to experience the sacredness in the world around me in and of itself. In addition, there was no need to compromise my scientifically-based knowledge of the natural world, only shift my perspective slightly to make room for a larger, more experiential understanding of what was going on around me. My experiences echo those of many others, some of which I will discuss further on, in the narratives that were shared with me by members of this community.

Over the following few years, during most of which I was living in California, I read countless books on the subject of contemporary Paganism—as is common for people newly introduced to the movement, especially those who live in areas where there are not many networking or ritual opportunities, or for those who are somewhat shy in seeking out such opportunities, as I was—and attended a few public rituals that I could get information about. But it wasn't until moving to Montreal in 2005 to begin graduate studies that I found my first “Pagan community,” that is, an open network of people who self-identify with the contemporary Pagan movement and come together on a regular or semi-regular basis for rituals, discussion groups, classes and workshops, and café meet-ups, as well as maintaining a strong internet presence through various group websites and email lists.

At this point, I knew a bit about Wicca, Eclectic Paganism and broader Wiccan-influenced Paganism (I will discuss details and distinctions between these in Chapter 3), mainly because such paths seem to be the most common and easy to find in the public or semi-public sphere. I had read the basics: *Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner* (Cunningham 1988), *The Spiral Dance* (Starhawk 1979), which was both born from and in turn heavily influential to the Goddess movement of the 1970s and 80s, *Drawing Down the Moon* (Adler 1979), the first comprehensive study of contemporary Paganism in America, and several others that followed in similar veins. *The Spiral Dance* in particular had made an impact on me, and I was interested in finding others who were practicing Reclaiming Witchcraft,¹⁴ which was begun by a group of people in the Bay Area, including Starhawk, around the time her book came out.

I was able to get in touch with one contact person, whose information I found on the Reclaiming website,¹⁵ but this woman told me that, unfortunately, there was not much going on with Reclaiming in Montreal at the moment. I was also disappointed to learn that an open women's circle that I had read about online, which met for ritual at every new moon, was no longer active. One group I did find, however, was the Concordia University Pagan Society (CUPS),¹⁶ and the group's website stressed that members did not have to be students at Concordia to participate, so I went to their first meeting of the year, about two weeks after my arrival in Montreal.

I became very active in CUPS, one of the core members, during that first semester. The group was small, with usually between 5 and 8 people present at each meeting, which was held once a week at the Loyola campus of Concordia. We organized two main events during that time period: a ritual in October for Samhain, the Pagan celebration from which Halloween comes, and the annual December Yule Fair, a venue at which local artisans could sell their wares during the holiday shopping season. I greatly enjoyed being part of a group and meeting with like-minded young people, but I soon began to realize that contemporary Paganism was much more varied and vast than I had understood before. Furthermore, I came to realize that what I considered to be Paganism was not necessarily what everyone else considered it to be. Quite simply, my ideas of what a Pagan group should be involved in and where it should spend its energy were not necessarily in line with what other members of this particular Pagan group wanted to do. This was my first experience with the more politically and socially conservative face of Neopaganism, having been exposed to predominantly feminist- and environmentalist-leaning Pagan philosophies thus far. It was these progressive stances toward spirituality that had resonated with me the most, and so I decided that the best course of action was to leave the group, and invest my energy elsewhere.

Around the same time as I was beginning to drift away from CUPS, I came across some people—in a very serendipitous encounter—who were involved in Reclaiming Witchcraft, and who were trying to initiate something, anything—rituals, potluck dinners, meetings, political actions. Attending a gathering in a private residence in early December, 2005, was my first introduction to several of the people who would soon

become a part of my closest community, and in many ways an indication of the direction my life would begin to take.

That winter, I began my studies in the anthropology department at l'Université de Montréal, and, for no particular reason—at first—other than that it was taught by my academic advisor and sounded interesting, I took the seminar *Religion et Modernité*. I had never really considered studying religion, but rather came to the university with the intention of focusing on some aspect of gender issues or women's rights and narratives, perhaps with an emphasis on reproductive rights, one aspect of which had been the topic of my undergraduate thesis.¹⁷ However, not long into the religion seminar, I came across the concept of religious syncretism for the first time, and in reading about it and pondering its processes and applications, I realized that what I was reading sounded a lot like what went on in contemporary Paganism. I set out to look for some references—articles, books, anything that spoke on the subject of syncretism within Neopaganism, but found absolutely nothing. Eventually, I came across an article that discussed the ways in which one woman combined contemporary Goddess worship with her familial practice of Catholicism (Manning 1996). The woman's narrative is used as a springboard of sorts to jump into the question of conversion and how it applies—or does not—in New Religious Movements. The article was illuminating but left me wanting more; it left me wanting to learn more about the different ways in which people who identify with contemporary Paganism incorporate other religious belief systems into their spirituality, and in particular, the reasons and inspirations behind their choices to do so. From the little

experience I had had already with the Montreal Pagan community, I knew that this was a widespread practice, and that the implications for research would be far-reaching.

In my preliminary research, I also became aware of another phenomenon that intrigued me and gave me even more reason to pursue this topic. Although the academic study of contemporary Paganism has been increasing seriously over the course of the last decade, there appears to be a sort of time lag of acceptance within academia of Paganism as a subject of research. The vast majority of scholarship on Wicca and other Paganisms¹⁸ was and still is taken on by academics who consider themselves a part of the Pagan movement in some way; this in itself, while significant, is not entirely surprising. Particularly in light of the discussion about insider research and anthropology at home, earlier in this chapter, it is perhaps the most sound way to carry out research on this subject. However, the problem lies in the fact that Paganism has yet to be taken seriously, as a New Religious Movement worthy of research, by other academic institutions and individuals.

While collecting texts for a project on New Religious Movements, literature scholar Aaron Potter was surprised to come across an abundance of texts criticizing Neopagan identity and practice. “In case after case, academic critics took advantage of the ambiguity of these witches’ self-descriptions and credos in order to impose false categorizations and seemingly willful misinterpretations, facilitating a series of straw-man attacks on their doctrines and culture” (Potter 2001: 65). Some of these criticisms centered around the lack of historical basis for many Neopagan claims of origin, which is still a problem for many in both the academic and contemporary Pagan worlds. Others,

however, dealt with the actual ritual practices, one describing Pagan ritual as “narcissistic rites of self contemplation” (Purkiss 1996: 45). Yet another portrays the “typical witch” as a young girl who self-identifies with Neopaganism “because her status is attractive to her friends but elicits fear in her enemies” (Truzzi 1972: 25, quoted in Potter 2001: 66-67).

This, along with other texts as well as through various academic experiences, led me to conclude that the ways in which contemporary Paganism has been portrayed—by religious scholars and other social scientists, in the media, in popular culture—has stigmatized the movement as a frivolous, passing fad. In addition, its blurred boundaries vis-à-vis the New Age movement has further complicated matters, leading to assumptions that any criticisms leveled against the New Age movement are also applicable to contemporary Paganism. The question of how connected the New Age and Pagan movements are to each other is the subject of much debate and even hostility within Neopaganism, and I am not taking sides or passing judgment either way on this issue. However, this appears to me to factor greatly in the general public’s perception of contemporary Paganism, as the New Age movement is, on the whole, more visible and accessible, and thus more easily noticed by those who are outside of both movements; it is, then, an easier target for criticism, which is often extended to Paganism as well.

All of these realizations further incited me to look deeper into the processes of syncretism that make up a large part of contemporary Paganism on multiple levels, for I believed that if contemporary Pagans could be identified and accepted as being involved in a syncretic

religious system, complete with all the complexities attributed to other religions of the world, the movement could perhaps begin to be taken more seriously by academia, both as a New Religious Movement, and a site for research.

As I was beginning to formulate my plans for my master's research, I was also becoming more and more involved with a small group of people interested in reviving the Reclaiming community in Montreal. One of the most important tenets of Reclaiming Witchcraft is its egalitarian, co-creative focus, which empowers anyone who has an idea to go ahead and do what it takes to realize that idea, whether they have been practicing for ten years or ten days. This differs significantly from other Pagan traditions, many of which are strongly hierarchical, put great emphasis on the difference between teacher and student as well as on initiation, without which a student may not be allowed to practice in certain ways or share certain kinds of information.¹⁹ Sharing, in the form of teaching classes, facilitating workshops and organizing rituals is encouraged in the Reclaiming movement, and in this spirit, I began to co-teach a series of workshops exploring the Elements (Air, Fire, Water, Earth, and Center)²⁰, after having been introduced to the basics of Reclaiming practice and philosophy.

Anthropologist Linda Jencson, in an article about anthropologists who are also practicing contemporary Pagans and Shamans, describes her experience, not unlike that of Salomonsen's, of learning from the community she was studying. However, in her story she is not the only cross-pollinator between anthropology and magic:

The witch who took me under her wing to teach me as an apprentice witch taught me techniques of hypnosis used in vision quests to contact spirits.

She proudly told me that she had learned them in a shamanism workshop from Michael Harner, ...an anthropologist as well as a practitioner of the magical arts.... And in the tradition, I, the anthropologist, within a year of entering the field, went on to teach the same technique to other budding witches (Jencson 1989: 4).

That workshop series on the Elements was the first of several leadership opportunities that I would have during the course of the following few years. I became one of the moderators of the Montreal Reclaiming email list, and, on my own initiative, decided to create an informational website for the community,²¹ which was starting to hold regular gatherings for the first time. Maintaining the website, with the occasional help of a few others, soon became a time-consuming process, but has proved to be a well-used resource for members of the community and for those interested in taking part in Reclaiming activities.

Around the same time as I decided to become active in organizing Reclaiming activities, in the fall of 2006, another woman about my age who had recently moved to Montreal from the Maritimes expressed an interest in organize events as well. She and I teamed up and organized a meeting and visioning for the whole community, which had a surprisingly large attendance of 15 people; some were new to the Pagan scene completely. This gave us a significant jump-start, and over the course of the next few months together we organized and facilitated several events, including large public rituals and several different classes and workshops. We also initiated a monthly song and drum circle at every new moon, and a ritual at every full moon; both have been going strong for more than a year at the time of this writing.

Locating identity

In her text about autoethnography, Reed-Danahay says that “one of the main characteristics of an autoethnographic perspective is that the autoethnographer is a boundary-crosser, and the role can be characterized as that of a dual identity” (1997: 3).

While I certainly identify as a boundary-crosser in this context, I question the use of the word “dual,” for this seems, to me, a simplification, as well as a testament to our society’s obsession with dualism.²² Dual signifies two separate entities, with the implication that there is a clear-cut difference between them, that I would be Researcher or Participant, Anthropologist or Witch, and that although I may traverse the dividing line between the two, the line remains intact. This is not how I have experienced it. Can I not be Researcher and Participant at the same time? When I take up my pen and paper to write field notes, do I cease to be a witch; likewise, when I sing an invocation to the new moon, am I no longer an anthropologist? “My answer to readers who want to know whether I am ‘really’ an insider or an outsider to the Pagan community,” writes Pagan scholar and anthropologist Sabina Magliocco, “is that I am neither and both—that how I look at things depends very much upon context, but contains both anthropological *and* Pagan perspectives at the same time” (2004: 15). Conducting “native anthropology” or “anthropology at home” seems to imply that one is at once the native and the anthropologist, or that one is at home and conducting anthropological fieldwork simultaneously.

The focus on dualism, then, seems to me to be a remnant of the modernist search for and glorification of objectivity, of personal detachment and denial of any biases, positioning or motivations. Even the subsequent move toward shifting positions, with its ties to the linguistic concept of code-switching, often deals with the changing back and forth between two separate identities, languages, ways of speech, and ways of looking at the world, calling into existence the objectivity of separate, bounded positions, languages, and worldviews from which to shift between.

While I resist this binary representation of identity and experience, I still feel that it is important to identify events, encounters and actions that may be *more* anthropological, or *more* Pagan-based, for I certainly have positions and perspectives that change, and those changes are important to note. I agree with Magliocco: “The ethnographic perspective is...about containing within one body multiple, simultaneous frames of reference with which to interpret experience, and being able to shift easily from one to the other” (2004: 15), and I stress her usage of the terms “multiple” and “simultaneous” as key points.

Rather than stick with the dual, bounded categories, and rather than lump all of my diverse perspectives and experiences into one unified *me*, I would prefer to look at identity as a spectrum, although not even a linear one, for the spectrum is repeated with different qualities at each “end,” which is itself, in fact, not really an end at all but the beginning of another spectrum. For example, while participating in a contemporary Pagan ritual, I might choose to locate myself as being more Pagan than anthropologist, for I am first a participant and secondly a researcher in the majority of such

circumstances. But I am still the anthropologist as well, and might choose to write up field notes after the ritual has finished, thus moving along the spectrum to a place where I feel more anthropological than Pagan—but am still able to feel, in retrospect, certain experiences gained during the ritual with enough accuracy to write about them.

At the Pagan side of this spectrum might be found another spectrum of identity within contemporary Paganism, which would have at one end the community-oriented work that I do, the public circles that I organize, the website that I maintain: everything that I do to help provide an open accessible community to those who seek it. At the other end would be my own personal spiritual work, what I do for myself without compromising any of my beliefs to be more accessible to a wider audience. At this end, I do not even really identify within the bounds of contemporary Paganism any longer, but with a wilder, unconventional witchcraft that seeks out the places between worlds, the “hedges,” the liminal spaces, the borders and boundaries of conventional categorizations. In a way, this spectrum comes around full-circle, because here, too, I locate my position as an anthropologist at home, crossing those boundaries written about by Reed-Danahay, Jackson and others, finding myself in the liminal spaces between academia and spirituality, between being a researcher and being a participant. Still, however liminal, these spaces are large enough, with plenty of room in which to move around.

¹ <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/cupagans/>

² http://groups.yahoo.com/group/mtl_pagan_community_elist/

³ Both of the Francophone e-lists appear to have dissolved since I started my research, apparently from lack of activity. On the other hand, there are a few online forums, bringing together Francophone Pagans in Quebec and in France, that continue to be active.

⁴ See Appendix A for the full text of this email.

⁵ See Appendix B for the full text of the questions.

⁶ Because they are from Montreal, many of the respondents are bilingual, but for one reason or another had requested the questions in English or in French; this is the primary measurement of language that I have for those with whom I did not conduct follow-up interviews.

⁷ The focus being on exploring the processes of syncretism, and the motivation behind syncretic choices and identifications, this seemed to make sense. I was not looking for a comparison of more- and less-syncretic Pagans, but to explore in-depth the trajectories of those who identified their practice as incorporating diverse elements, or whose practice I was able to identify as such.

⁸ Charbonneau (2008) discusses the predominance of the English language in the Montreal Pagan community, and notes that English is often the language of necessity—not always choice—for participating in events, finding out information, etc. I have also found that due to a lack of new terminology in French, many actually prefer to conduct ritual in English. The fact that even some who are fluent in both languages chose to be interviewed in English may point to this habituation to talking about Paganism in English. It may also be connected to the fact that I am identified as an Anglophone, and thus they felt that speaking in English would be more comfortable for me, even though I gave them the option of either language, and was prepared to conduct interviews in French as well as in English.

⁹ More detailed profiles of the participants can be found in Appendix C.

¹⁰ With some fascinating and enlightening anecdotes, Magliocco discusses the ways in which some groups have attempted to draw in a more ethnically diverse membership, and the mixed results produced by such actions (Magliocco 2004: 205-237).

¹¹ The title of this section was inspired by Favret-Saada, on conducting ethnography of religious belief: “there is no other solution but to practice it oneself, to become one’s own informant, to penetrate one’s own amnesia, and to try to make explicit what one finds unstable in oneself” (1980: 22). This wording is also used by Salomonsen (1999: 9), quoted below.

¹² See Reed-Danahay (1997: 4-9) also for a comprehensive history of the usage of the term “autoethnography” and related concepts.

¹³ As is not too uncommon in the almost incestual interrelationship between Pagans and Pagan scholars, most of whom are also Pagans, I was among the participants in this research, and Marisol and I even shared a few interviewees between us.

¹⁴ The term Witchcraft is used in many contemporary Pagan contexts, for some as synonymous to Wicca, for some as synonymous to Paganism, and for some as a separate, but overlapping, movement, path or tradition. Within the Reclaiming movement it is used frequently, and practitioners of this path often refer to themselves as Witches. This term is one of the many things that “Reclaiming” seeks to reclaim.

¹⁵ <http://www.reclaiming.org>; this is website for the San Francisco Reclaiming community, which is a 501(c)3 not-for-profit religious organization. Although much of its information pertains only to the local community, it also serves as an information center about Reclaiming, as well as a hub for information about Reclaiming communities throughout the world.

¹⁶ Not to be confused with CUUPS, the Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans, a hybrid Unitarian and contemporary Pagan organization.

¹⁷ *Recontextualizing Theories: Intertextuality and Cultural Identities in Media produced by Pro-Choice and Pro-Life Communities in the United States*. Undergraduate thesis by Rosemary Roberts, Department of Anthropology, Willamette University, Salem, OR. May 2003.

¹⁸ Usage of the plural term “Paganisms” is, as far as I understand, attributed to anthropologist Jenny Blain (Blain 2008), but has since been taken on by several other Pagan scholars. Many different forms of that which we call Pagan religion exist, the argument goes, and so to lump them all under one singular “umbrella term” of Paganism is misleading and simplistic.

Another explanation is given in the preface to the edited volume *Researching Paganisms* (one of the first publications to discuss this term outright):

“As a discipline, Pagan studies exists because Paganism lives—...both as a mode of religious expression concealed within other religious traditions and as a self-conscious set of religious traditions themselves. In that sense, it might be more accurate to write ‘Paganisms,’ since Paganism is the farthest thing from monolithic...” (Griffin and Clifton 2004)

This is, however, contested primarily by those who call for greater unity within contemporary Paganism, and see “Paganisms” as divisive, and as missing the commonalities that do exist between different varieties of Paganism. Furthermore, one response is that, although other religions can be extremely diverse, scholars do not generally refer to “Christianities” or “Buddhisms,” but rather to “varieties of Christianity” and “forms of Buddhism,” etc. (Strmiska 2008). Although I see the value in both sides of the debate, I will stick to the singular term, unless wishing to specifically bring up the diversity of the movement by referencing its plural form.

¹⁹ This is not to say that there are no hierarchies at all in Reclaiming, but they are much less explicit and easier to circumvent. Because they are sometimes hard to spot, it is often denied that they exist at all. On the one hand, this denial can at times lead to inequalities and hierarchies cropping up unnoticed, but on the other hand, the conscious intention that the movement be as egalitarian as possible has the effect that exposing inequalities and speaking out against hierarchical systems is perhaps a task more easily taken on than it would be within highly hierarchical groups.

²⁰ The Elements are a very important part of many different contemporary Pagan paths; in some traditions they are four (Earth, Air, Fire and Water) and in some a fifth (Center or Spirit) is added. Whether this fifth is referred to as Center or Spirit (or even both together) is in some cases a matter of tradition, and in other cases a matter of personal preference.

The concept of these elements themselves comes from the precursor, in effect, to that which we now know as the periodic table:

Prior to the advent of contemporary atomic theory, intelligent people examining the world in which they lived observed that all tangible things could be classified as solids (earth), liquids (water), and gasses (air). Sources of heat and light, such as fire and the sun, seemed to constitute a fourth factor (fire), which we might think of as “energy”. When reworded as *solid*, *liquid*, *gas*, and *energy*, this ancient scheme of classification is not really so strange (James R Lewis 2002: 87).

²¹ <http://cosmic-muse.com/reclaiming>

²² For a discussion of this concept, see Starhawk's *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics* (Starhawk 1982: 20-22). In addition, many anthropologists and philosophers have written on this subject.

Chapter 3. Roots down, branches up! Paganisms and syncretisms¹

This chapter explores all of the background material that has been a guiding force throughout the process of this research. I start with an account of contemporary Paganism, its history and diverse beliefs and practices, then move into a discussion of the theoretical aspects of this thesis: religious syncretism, authenticity and the invention of tradition. My inspiration and motivation have come from so many sources, and like the branches of trees in a forest these sources have entangled, cleft, merged and cross-pollinated, constantly reminding me of the evolution and interconnectedness of ideas, cultural systems and power structures. As a healthy tree will be lush and full but not overcrowded, with room to breathe, I aim to present this information as richly as possible without becoming lost in the murky sea of unnecessary detail.

Contemporary Paganism

I am a Pagan. I am part of the whole of nature. The rocks, the animals, the plants, the elements are my relatives. Other humans are my sisters and brothers, whatever their races, colours, ages, nationalities, creeds, or sexual preferences. The earth is my mother and the sky is my father. The sun and moon are my grandparents, and the stars are my ancestors...

I am a Pagan. I celebrate the changing seasons, the turning of the Wheel of the Year with music, feasting, rituals, and celebrations...

I pay attention to the seasons within myself—of beginnings, growth, fruition, harvest, endings, rest, and beginnings again... I acknowledge that the divine is everywhere, in the energy of life...

I attune myself to the four elements of nature—earth, air, fire, water, and to the fifth element, spirit, which is the force that connects all...

I am a Pagan. I hear the cries of Mother Earth. I see the pollution of the air, the soil, the waters... I see spiritual pollution too—selfishness, hatred, greed for money and for power, despair. I sense these things, but I

*sense too a cleansing, healing energy manifesting on the planet... I
endeavour to be a channel for healing and balance.
I am a Pagan.*

(Fox 2006: 25-28)

Contemporary Paganism is often seen as an umbrella term, encompassing diverse practices such as witchcraft, goddess worship, Ceremonial Magick,² Druidism and neo-Shamanism, as well as a number of movements based on the mythologies and magical traditions of ancient cultures such as Norse, Greek, Egyptian and Celtic, among others. The movement itself is extremely diverse, with some considering it an attempted reconstruction of pre-Christian beliefs and practices, and others focusing on creating a new spiritual system that addresses a range of issues and draws upon a range of religious and cultural elements. Contemporary Pagans usually practice some sort of polytheism, the belief in multiple deities; animism, the belief that there is Spirit in all beings and all things; pantheism, the belief that all beings and all things are divine; panentheism, the belief that there is divinity in all beings and all things,³ or a combination of some or all of these at once. While it is often claimed that contemporary Paganism is an “earth-based” spirituality or religion, this is not always the case, as certain groups and individuals within the movement do not see their practice as such.⁴

As a religio-spiritual⁵ movement, contemporary Paganism has been on the rise in Western (primarily English-speaking) cultures since the mid-1900s, gaining momentum in conjunction with the feminist and anti-war movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Several different terms are employed to describe this movement, by practitioners and researchers alike, the most common being contemporary Paganism, Neopaganism, neo-Paganism, or

simply Paganism (or any of these in the plural sense, as I discussed briefly in chapter 2). In my research as well as through reading other texts dealing with contemporary Paganism, I have found that a majority of people identifying with this movement use the shorter “Pagan” as a self-descriptive term; while a handy word, less of a mouthful than “contemporary Paganism”, it can pose problems, as the word has an extensive history itself.

Terminology and language

The word “pagan” originally referred to someone from the countryside, from Latin *paganus*, meaning villager or country-dweller, *pagus* meaning country or rural district. The English word “peasant” is from the same root (Walker 1983; Harper 2001a). This term came to be used by early Christians to denote the rural people who continued to worship “old” gods and goddesses, rather than converting to Christianity as most city-dwellers and the aristocracy had done. The earliest usage of this term appears to be in the early 14th century (Walker 1983), and it continued to be employed to denote practitioners of a wide variety of religions and spiritualities, including indigenous, polytheistic, animistic, and in some cases even all non-Abrahamic religions. The word *pagan* has an extensive history filled with negative stereotypes, many of which can still be found today; furthermore, the differences between the modern movement and actual pre-Christian beliefs and practices, which we will likely never know very much about, are important to acknowledge. For these reasons, I find it useful to make the distinction between *contemporary Paganism* as the modern religio-spiritual movement, and *paganism* as a broader historical term.⁶

In some cases, however, the distinction between *Pagan* and *Neopagan* is not as useful as in others. Conducting research in a bilingual city where many contemporary Pagans speak French as their native language and use it as well to practice their spirituality proved challenging at first for one reason: the French translation, *Néopaganisme* or *Paganisme contemporain*, is rarely used and little known. Rather, Francophone practitioners are more likely to use the term *Wicca*, which poses a problem in translation to English. Wicca, in English, is only one of many branches of contemporary Paganism, and although it is easily the most well-known inside and outside of the movement, many contemporary Pagans do not identify with Wicca; some even identify in opposition to it. From my experiences with research among Francophone contemporary Pagans, had they been Anglophone many would more likely have considered their practice to fall under Eclectic Paganism (which I will discuss in more detail further on) than Wicca. Translation is one of the challenges facing researchers dealing with languages beside their native tongue, or dealing with moving between two or more languages in the course of their research; taking into consideration the personal biases that inevitably occur during translation is an important part of the work. I attempt to represent with integrity the experiences of the people I talk to, while taking into account discrepancies that might arise due to translation.

Origins and history

Finding all of the many roots of the contemporary Pagan movement is a difficult task, perhaps even impossible. As one respondent to a survey by Berger et al. put it, “Pagan is

a term that denotes a variety of spiritual paths and traditions that spring from history *and* mythology” (2003: 89; my emphasis). Much of the history on which contemporary Pagans base their origins relies on folklore, legends, and speculation, and although this has caused critics to try to invalidate the movement altogether, for many within the movement it appears to pose few or no problems.⁷

Margot Adler wrote her version of “The Myth of Wicca,”⁸ which is a summing-up of sorts of the many different versions she had heard from different sources throughout her research into contemporary Paganism:

Witchcraft is a religion that dates back to Paleolithic times, to the worship of the god of the hunt and the goddess of fertility. One can see remnants of it in cave paintings and in the figurines of goddesses that are many thousands of years old. The early religion was universal. The names changed from place to place but the basic deities were the same.

When Christianity came to Europe, its inroads were slow. Kings and nobles were converted first, but many folk continued to worship in both religions. Dwellers in rural areas, the “Pagans” and “Heathens,” kept the old ways. Churches were built on sacred sites of the Old Religion. The names of the festivals were changed but the dates were kept. The old rites continued in folk festivals, and for many centuries Christian policy was one of slow cooperation.

During the times of persecution the Church took the god of the Old Religion and—as is the habit with conquerors—turned him into the Christian devil. The Old Religion was forced underground, its only records set forth, in distorted form, by its enemies. Small families kept the religion alive and, in 1951, after the Witchcraft Laws in England were repealed, it began to surface again (Adler 1979: 45-46).

In her 2001 study of contemporary Pagan festivals as community-building experiences, Pike outlines what she found to be four major sources for the movement in North America: pre-Christian European “folk” traditions, including medicinal herbal knowledge

and rites based around fertility and seasonal changes; Ceremonial Magick, often in connection with alchemy, practiced during the Renaissance by European elite and revived in part by Aleister Crowley, considered to be one of the most influential people in the early contemporary Pagan movement; “nature religions”, which include a variety of earth-based spiritual systems, including Native American traditions and American transcendentalist theories of the early- to mid-nineteenth century; and finally the “1960s counterculture”, which emerged as a protest against the social institutions of the United States at that time (Pike 2001: xiv).

The scholars who have undertaken the difficult task of studying and writing about contemporary Paganism have employed slightly different definitions for the movement and its practitioners, have drawn on different historical and/or mythological origins, and have focused on different aspects of the movement itself. Two of the most common themes explored by academics appear to be the importance of community identity (see Adler 1979; Berger 1999; Pike 2001; Salomonsen 2002a; Magliocco 2004) and the significance of ritual (see Adler 1979; Greenwood 2000; Salomonsen 2002a; Gagnon 2003; Magliocco 2004). Recent years have also seen a growing body of work dealing with the Internet Age and how chat rooms, forums, and email lists have affected the movement (see NightMare 2001; Berger and Ezzy 2004; Cowan 2005). However, the fact that there exists so much diversity within contemporary Paganism and all of its sub-religions and spiritualities, traditions and paths, communities and splinter groups, ensures that no two studies will be carried out in the same way, nor will they necessarily come to the same conclusions.

Under the umbrella: different Paganisms

Paganism is not a single tree, but an entire wood, not an “-ism” but a broad movement. The roots have produced a tree which has seeded many trees which have evolved in different forms (Harvey 1997: 2).

Contemporary Paganism is often described as an “umbrella term,” encompassing many different paths, traditions, cultural- and mythological-based movements, belief systems and ways of practice. A great tree, such as in the above quote, is another term often used. I do, however, have something to add to this vision of Paganism. While much of what we know today as contemporary Paganism has come from this tree, there has also been cross-pollination with other varieties of trees, adding to the complexity of their evolution. This is precisely what this study aims to investigate, that cross-pollination, the hybridization, the syncretism among contemporary Pagan paths, and with influences and elements coming from other varieties of trees.

It would take hundreds of pages to describe in sufficient detail all of the many branches of contemporary Paganism that are practiced today, and indeed, several authors have devoted entire books to this very subject. One of the most well-known and well-referenced, including by me, is Margot Adler’s *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers and other Pagans in America Today*, originally published in 1979. Another, more recent comprehensive guide is Ronald Hutton’s *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*, published in 1999. More information about any particular path, tradition, group or community that is part of the Neopagan

movement can generally be found fairly easily, within the pages of these, and other books, as well as on the internet, as websites have of late become one of the major modes of information dissemination used by Pagans. I wish to take some time, however, to explain some of the more prominent traditions that fall under the category of Wicca and Wiccan-influenced Paganism, especially as the narratives presented in Part 2 of this thesis deal primarily with these paths, and some background information will no doubt be useful.

Wicca

In Old English, *wicce* was the term for a female practitioner of witchcraft, while *wicca* was the male equivalent; from these words the term “witch” is derived (Adler 1979: 11). Adler mentions that a common belief among modern Witches connects these words to the root *wit*, from whence comes the word “wisdom” as well. However, an even more common belief draws on the Indo-European roots *wic* and *weik*, meaning to bend or turn, possibly referring to the act of bending or shifting consciousness and reality (ibid).

The American Heritage dictionary of Indo-European Roots explores many similar-sounding roots, including several different meanings of *weik*, including 1) “clan (social unit above the household)” from which also comes the word “village”; 2) “consecrated, holy... connected with magic and religious notions”; 3) “to be like... likeness, image,” with connections to the word “icon”; 4) “to bend, wind”, from which we get the word “wicker,” a sort of pliant branch, and possibly the word “wand”; and 5) “to fight, conquer,” related to the words “vanquish” and “convince” (American Heritage 2000: 97).

Some of these are likely the roots of *wicca*, *wicce*, and thus “witchcraft,” but the exact evolution of these words is not known.

The term “Wicca” came to be known as the name of the contemporary witchcraft revival movement in the mid-1900s, first publicly used by Gerald Gardner. The name for a practitioner, whether male or female, is now “Wiccan”.⁹ Today, however, the term Wicca is used increasingly to describe a specific part of Neopaganism, rather than the whole movement. As the number of different traditions and paths has grown, even though the majority of them can locate some of their roots in this early Wicca, many have gone on to draw in other cultural and religious influences that have led to an identification as non-Wiccan. Several of the narratives shared in the following chapter demonstrate this in a variety of ways. It is interesting to note that, likely at least in part due to this syncretism-splinter effect, today Wicca is more often considered “religion” than most other subgroups of contemporary Paganism, which are repeatedly referred to as “spirituality.” This may have to do with many branches of Traditional Wicca using set liturgy, and even having churches in some cases.

According to surveys, a slight majority of contemporary Pagans identify as Wiccans (Berger et al. 2003), thus making Wicca the largest subgroup of the Pagan movement. The research I have conducted, as well as my experiences with various contemporary Pagan groups, leads me to draw the same conclusion. In Montreal in particular, similar numbers were found in a survey conducted by Marisol Charbonneau. This survey asked participants to check any and all Pagan traditions or paths with which they identify; the

category receiving the highest number of checks was “Wicca (Gardnerian, Alexandrian, etc.),” with 20 responses, followed by “Witchcraft” and “Shamanism” with 9 and 8 checks respectively (Charbonneau 2008: 61). While most respondents checked multiple categories, it is still noteworthy that the Wicca category gained more than twice what any other single category gained. However, the fact that more than half of those who identified their practice as Wiccan also checked other categories (ibid: 57) is perhaps even more noteworthy, as it speaks to changing, evolving and increasingly syncretic Pagan identities.

Margot Adler, writing in the 1970s, listed the most common subgroups of Wicca as: Dianic (feminist, usually separatist, meaning women-only); Traditionalist¹⁰ (which is itself further divided to identify with the cultures from which practitioners draw their influence, such as “Welsh Traditionalist” and “Greek Traditionalist”); Gardnerian, which was started by Gerald Gardner in England in the 1940s, and brought to the United States in the late 50s; and Alexandrian, started in the 1960s by Englishman Alexander Sanders, who studied the Gardnerian path, but claimed to have been first initiated into a hereditary tradition of Wicca as a child by his grandmother (Adler 1979: 61, 113-20). These latter two are often cited as being the origins of the majority of Wiccan groups in Canada and the United States; in fact, the rise of the contemporary Pagan movement in North America is directly connected with these traditions having been brought across the ocean.

Still, many changes have taken place since the 1970s, and many more paths of Wicca have evolved and asserted themselves; likewise, in other areas, classifications and

boundaries put up between different paths have dissolved. In my research I have found that Gardnerian and Alexandrian Wicca are usually categorized together, along with a few other older traditions, as “Traditional Wicca” or “British Traditional Wicca”, often shortened to “BTW” or “Brit Trad”. British Traditional Wicca is often characterized as highly initiatory, meaning that emphasis is placed on the initiation process, through which adherents gain greater positions of prestige and access to knowledge; through this process hierarchies are established and play a large role in maintaining the appeal and popularity of initiation. Gardnerian Wicca—and thus to a large extent Alexandrian as well—has a liturgy that includes roughly 160 “Craft Laws” and the Charge of the Goddess¹¹ (Adler 1979: 118). Also important aspects of the traditions are “skyklad” rituals, or those conducted in the nude,¹² and the performance of the Great Rite, which symbolizes the union of male and female, of the god and the goddess; this can be performed either through sexual intercourse (between the High Priest and Priestess, or all members of the coven) or through the symbolic act of dipping an athame, or ritual knife, into a chalice.

Reconstructionism

Another modification that I would make to Adler’s categorization deals with the “Traditionalists,” or Reconstructionists. I have found that Reconstructionist movements are not necessarily identifiable directly within the category of Wicca, and often are to be found in a broader definition of contemporary Paganism. Reconstructionist groups are those that attempt to recreate, or reconstruct, specific pre-Christian religions and their practices, or what they believe *could* have been those practices. Some of the more common ancient cultures with which Reconstructionists identify are Norse, Egyptian,

Greek and Celtic, though many others are reconstructed by groups and individuals as well.

Wicca-influenced Paganism

In my experience, both personal and scholarly, most of the activity that goes on in open or public Neopagan communities would fall under the category of Wicca-influenced Paganism; that is, rituals, while not necessarily adhering to traditional Wiccan forms, or performed by a Traditional Wiccan High Priestess and Priest, use a loosely Wiccan structure and often have many elements that were once part of what we now call Traditional Wicca. However, these elements have since been changed, adapted, modified and personalized, depending on individuals, groups, contexts, environments, and all sorts of other situational aspects. Overall, these ritual structures are very similar for the vast majority of Pagan groups; some, such as Reconstructionist, Druidic and Shamanic traditions use a different format. Because of the ubiquity of Wicca-influenced Paganism in North America, most of my own ritual experience has fallen under this category.

Ritual

There are three principal reasons for which contemporary Pagans conduct a ritual: sabbats, esbats, and rites of passage.

There are eight sabbats, or solar holidays, during the year: the summer and winter solstices, the autumn and spring equinoxes, and four “cross-quarter” days, which fall roughly half-way between the previous four: Imbolc or Candlemas around the first of

February, Beltane or May Day around the first of May, Lughnassad or Lammas around the first of August, and Samhain on the last day of October. Beltane and Samhain are often considered to be the most important sabbats, at which the biggest rituals attended by the most people are held. I have heard some people refer to themselves as “Beltane-and-Samhain Pagans” in much the same way as a Christian who does not attend church except for twice a year might say they are a “Christmas-and-Easter Christian”.

Esbats, or lunar holidays, mark the passage of the moon through its cycles. Different groups and traditions put more or less emphasis on esbats in relation to sabbats. The Montreal Reclaiming community, for example, currently holds larger public rituals for the sabbats, and smaller, less-publicized rituals at every full moon. The new moon is celebrated with a song and drum circle, which sometimes draws a large group of participants, and at other times is small. Because the moon’s cycles are often experienced as being reflected in women’s menstrual cycles, esbats are often celebrated intentionally for this reason by women. Before moving to Montreal, I had learned through Internet searches that there was a local women-only group that met for ritual at every new moon. Unfortunately, their meetings ceased shortly before I arrived in Montreal.

Moving through the stages of life is another reason to hold rituals. Rites of passage celebrate birth, the passage from adolescence to adult (such as menarche for girls), marriage, pregnancy and becoming a mother, the passage from adult to elder (often marked, for women, by menopause). These stages of life are often reflected in the image of the “Triple Goddess,” the Maiden, the Mother and the Crone, a trinity similar (to

greater or lesser degrees) to those which are found in many religions throughout the world (Walker 1983: 1018-20).¹³ Men also go through rites of passage as they move through their lives, though perhaps due to the predominance of women in the movement, such rituals are less common. However, there currently appears to be a growing movement to include men's experiences in contemporary Pagan communities to a greater extent. Initiation, into a coven or tradition, by oneself, or at the beginning of any new venture, is another rite of passage.

Other rituals are held for healing, for spell-working, and for any number of purposes, and can be conducted in large groups, small groups, or even alone (someone who does ritual alone primarily is called a solitary practitioner). The majority of all rituals that fall into this Wicca-influenced category do, however, generally follow a particular model:¹⁴

Purification. Done in a number of ways, such as with water, smoke (incense or smudge stick) or sound, this serves different purposes for different people, but can include clearing the space of any unwanted energies and helping participants rid themselves of stress or any negativity that may impede their ritual experience.

Grounding. This is one ritual element that is not present in many traditions, but is important in some, such as in Reclaiming. Usually in the form of a short, guided meditation, grounding leads participants to connect their energy to the earth, the sky, to the ritual space, and to other participants. It also helps participants enter into a different state of consciousness that is relaxed and open.

Creation of sacred space/circle casting. There is an infinite number of ways to cast a circle. In some rituals there is one person who performs the casting, in others everyone participates in this together. The idea is to form a circle (or, in some traditions, a sphere) around the group, to create a “container” for the energy that will be worked with, to keep in what is needed and to keep out what is not wanted.

Invitation to the elements, deities, and other powers or energies. Air, fire, water and earth are called upon, invited or invoked, though different traditions do this in different ways. Some call upon the powers of the elements themselves, others call upon the corresponding directions (east, south, west and north, respectively), and others call upon “guardians” or “elementals,” spirit-forms that represent the elements and/or the directions. A fifth element, center/spirit, is called upon in some traditions as well. Generally, after this, any gods and goddesses, ancestors, spirits or other beings are also invited into the circle. In some traditions, an all-encompassing “Lord and Lady” or “God and Goddess” are called; in others, specific deities are called pertaining to the season, to the purpose of the ritual, or to the personal preference of those involved in the ritual. In some cases, pantheonic deities are not called at all, but perhaps “spirits of the land” or a “spirit of the river,” depending on the geographical location of the ritual, will be invoked instead.

Central action. This is probably the most variable part of the ritual, as it will differ according to the tradition, the group, and the reason for the ritual. Sometimes this part

involves the telling of a story, or a guided meditation. It could consist of all participants sharing their experience of something, or creating a piece of art. Sometimes this part lasts an hour, and sometimes it lasts three minutes. Certain traditions place great importance in having a central action, while others do not even really have a central focus to a ritual.

Raising energy. This is also extremely variable, depending on the group and the motivation for the ritual. In some cases, groups will practice energy raising in private rituals, but leave it out at larger public gatherings. Where raising energy is important, as it generally is in Reclaiming witchcraft, it often consists of singing and dancing, or moving in some way that allows for the energy of the participants, and thus the group as a whole, to build up. It is then either sent off, in what is often known as a “cone of power” to help with a particular goal, retained in the group for a specific purpose, retained in the individuals, fed into the earth (called grounding the energy), or some combination of any of these.

Closing. In this part, deities, spirits, elements, and anything else invited into the circle are thanked for their role in the ritual. The circle is opened, the sacred space is released; just as the casting of the circle and the other actions that start off the ritual have the intention of bringing all participants into a slightly different state of consciousness, the closing is intended to allow participants to return to a state of consciousness that is more suitable for interaction in the world.

A ritual can be as long or as short as those involved would like. The rituals that I have participated in have generally been thirty minutes at the shortest, and three hours at the longest, with roughly one to one and a half hours as the average. Food is often a part of ritual as well, sometimes being eaten in the space between the energy raising and the closing, and sometimes being saved for after the ritual is over. This, like most everything else, depends on the tradition, group, and purpose for the ritual.

Eclecticism: a problem with terminology

An interesting phenomenon that has developed over the course of the last few decades is the expansion of Wicca and other Pagan traditions into a very large subcategory, usually referred to as Eclectic Wicca or the even broader Eclectic Paganism. Often, people who identify their practice with this term, eclectic, do so in conscious opposition to British Traditional Wicca, and other traditions that they see as too dogmatic, strict, liturgical, closed, as well as a variety of other similar concepts. Sometimes, “eclectic” practitioners are so varied that their opposition and rejection of “tradition” is the primary cohesive factor, the one thing they have in common.

The term “eclectic,” however, poses a problem for me, one that has been a major driving force in this research. In a broad religio-spiritual context, this term implies a general amassing of knowledge from different sources, without necessarily being obligated to reconcile incongruence. However, this term has come to mean different things to different people within contemporary Pagan communities, including being viewed as derogatory by many. “Eclectic,” as an adjective, and often as a noun, normally

capitalized when designating an individual (i.e. “She’s an Eclectic”), is generally used to describe this subgroup by differentiating those who fall within this category from those who exclusively follow a certain tradition, path, or belief system that has already been established, may have particular rules or protocol related to it, and is often seen as more rigid in framework. Many self-identify with this label, but many others use it in a pejorative sense.

According to Canadian religious scholar Shelly Rabinovitch, most eclectic Neopagans started off in more formal environments, such as the Alexandrian or Gardnerian traditions, and subsequently moved away from their training, as they felt themselves in need of a more individualized practice. Although Eclectics are often solitary, they sometimes find others with spiritual views similar enough to theirs and form a “mini-tradition” (1997: 86). This could be seen as a form of syncretism, and without actually using the word, Rabinovitch has given an excellent example of one of the ways in which syncretism appears most prominently in contemporary Paganism—indeed, she mentions what I also found to be one of the primary motivating factors behind syncretism: being dissatisfied with one’s current position or practice, and searching for something with a deeper, more personal meaning.

Furthermore, I believe that the usage of the word “syncretic” in place of “eclectic” could potentially alleviate some of the negativity around the concept. From my own observations, research and informal discussions, I have found that people who identify as Eclectic Wiccans or Pagans are often seen by others as shallow, flighty and fickle, going

from path to path, from idea to idea, without actually internalizing the variations they come across. This could be seen as an exaggeration on the critics' part, blowing out of proportion the actual implications of the term "eclectic," that of incorporating diverse elements decontextualized from their original framework. Whether or not there exist practitioners who piece together diverse elements without any understanding of what they are incorporating, as their critics imply, is not the point. By using the term "syncretism," I seek to provide a more accurate and less biased alternative for a word that on one hand has fallen into the realm of derogatory language, and on the other hand, may not have been sufficiently precise to begin with.

I have already discussed another potential advantage for framing Pagan practices in terms of syncretism: the building of a more clarified, structural image of the movement on an academic level. If Neopagans could be identified as being involved in a syncretic religio-spiritual tradition, this might be enough to compel more academics to look closer at what is actually going on, and to draw possible parallels between it and other syncretic movements have received considerable attention in the social science.

Syncretism

The concept of religious syncretism has been explored, defined and redefined in anthropological literature for decades. Through my own work, I have come to understand it as the process through which elements from diverse religious—and at times non-religious—sources are combined and incorporated to create a new religious belief system. Historically, this phenomenon has been studied in a context of syncretism through

coercion and conversion, but it applies also to the intentional choices made by an increasing number of people today; indeed, it is this latter context, that of a more conscious syncretism involving personal agency, that I explore here.

History, definitions, and contemporary applications in anthropology

The study of religious syncretism has enjoyed a significant place within the anthropology of religion, though this place has proven many a time to be rocky ground, rife with ethnocentricity and Judeo-Christian normativity. Traditionally used by anthropologists and theologians alike, syncretism came to be associated with biases against “mixed” or “impure” religions by partisans of, what were to them, “pure” religions. This often referred to “hybrid” or “*métis*” religions created by colonized peoples who, due to the presence of missionaries, were forced to adopt Christian beliefs and practices; simultaneously retaining aspects of their own beliefs and practices, they incorporated one into the other and thus created a new system of religious beliefs and practices. Because of this colonialist past that is anthropology’s legacy, some have called for the complete eradication of the term syncretism, yet others have attempted to reframe it to be more acceptable within today’s anthropological climate (Droogers 1989; Stewart and Shaw 1994a). Two edited volumes that have had significant impact on the field due to their focus on the complexities at work in processes of syncretism are *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Gort et al. 1989) and *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis* (Stewart and Shaw 1994b). The collections include new theoretical discussions about syncretism, and showcase anthropological studies that reveal the agency and power intrinsic in processes of

syncretism, as well as exposing the inherent ethnic, racial and political complexities that are a part of the processes themselves.

Syncretism is a phenomenon that has been happening for as long as people of different religious traditions have been meeting, states theologian Dirk Mulder. Although such encounters are universal, their outcomes have been vastly different. In some cases, outright rejection or even indifference has been the primary sentiment, but often “a process of interpenetration” has occurred, “in which adherents of one religion adopt and assimilate elements from another religious tradition” (Mulder 1989: 203-4). Syncretism at its most basic is therefore nothing new, nor is it anything surprising. Going back into the histories of the world’s major religions, we can easily see evidence of combining, incorporating, adjusting, and modifying as a result of interreligious dialogue. Indeed, according to Stewart and Shaw, there is no reason to identify a tradition or ritual as syncretic in itself, because all religions can be perceived as having a certain amount of syncretism in their histories. In light of this, researchers should rather concentrate on the “processes of religious synthesis and on discourses of syncretism” (Stewart and Shaw 1994a: 7).

Indeed, many aspects and components of these processes and discourses are quite fascinating to look at. One aspect of syncretism, which Droogers highlights, is that new religious practices created through syncretism are often not necessarily defended or propagated as “new religious practices” by those who create and/or practice them, as the syncretism itself may not be intentional. Whether intentional or not, however, syncretism

is often a “practical means of solving existential problems” (Droogers 2005: 465), meaning, in most cases that have already been studied, those problems that arise between the indigenous religion of a group of people and the imposed religion of the colonizers/missionaries. However, as will become apparent in the following chapters, this is also very much applicable to the forms of syncretism found in the contemporary Pagan movement, as many cases involve incorporating an external element in order to solve a problem that arises for a practitioner in a particular tradition or path.

Another important aspect of syncretism, which follows along similar lines, is that the process of syncretization often allows practitioners to take elements of one religion that compliment the other in areas that may be inadequate. In many cases, this is demonstrated by the large number of women who participate in syncretic religions, these new religions allowing them to “withdraw themselves from the control of (usually male) religious specialists of the powers-that-be” (Droogers 2005: 465). Again, this is entirely applicable to the case of contemporary Paganism, in which a high percentage of women are involved—not only as practitioners but also as leaders.¹⁵

Religious scholar Peter Beyer views syncretism as a “mixing of purities”; in other words, to attain syncretism one must start with “pure” religions, and subsequently reach an outcome, which can be seen negatively as “impure”, or positively as “new purities” (Beyer 2005: 420). To illustrate this, Beyer argues that religions such as Buddhism and Islam, which we may tend to think of as “pure” religions themselves subject to various attempts at being syncretized with other religions, are in fact “new purities” of long-ago

interactions between different religious traditions. The question that he poses is, What identifies syncretism, and at what point does a syncretism become its own, new, pure religious form? (ibid: 428). Whether one talks of “new purities” or the complete absence of “pure” religion appears to be an issue of semantics, and only demonstrates the lack of a clear definition of “purity.”

More critical of the term than others, anthropologist André Mary argues for the eradication of its use due to the colonial history of the term as well as the dichotomy (syncretic vs. “pure” religion) that it automatically implies, but at the same time recognizes its necessity as a descriptive term, one which has become an integral part of the anthropology of religion and does not seem to be on its way out (Mary 2001a). I find Thomas Csordas’ argument that “Such critiques do not force us to abandon our concepts; rather, they constrain us to use the concepts more wisely” (2004: 164) to be applicable in this case. Mary describes syncretism, as it has traditionally been employed by anthropologists, as “a fusion of different religions or [a] contamination of one by the other” (2001a: 317). By giving this two-sided definition, Mary references the discrepancy in nuance between the first, more neutral, definition, and the latter, which is marked by the very same dichotomy that has caused so many problems.

So, what are anthropologists studying religious phenomena to do? What are we to actually look at, to examine? Is syncretism something that exists in its own right, and is it the right of an outsider to identify it? Mary argues that “conceiving of mixture, religious or otherwise, is always difficult, and raises a whole series of paradoxes at the outset....

The use of terms relating to syncretism, mixture, or hybridity is often suspected of conceding too much to cultural purism” (2005: 282). When looking at certain case studies, primarily those in which a “primitive” or “pagan” (in the non-Christian, indigenous sense of the word) society was colonized by missionary Christians, the ensuing “hybrid” religion could understandably be conceptualized on a level that would render the label “syncretism” patronizing and ethnocentric. However, this does not always have to be the result, nor is it necessary to assume that employing this terminology implies an attempt to simplify or belittle the religion being examined. Even though “syncretism” may have once been used in a derogatory or culturally myopic manner, it does not have to be used in such a fashion today. If treated carefully, it can be employed in ways that give account of the complexity of the situations and processes that are being subjected to the anthropological gaze. Indeed, it would appear as though this is the only route that remains available for one interested in looking at syncretism in modern contexts: to examine it as a neutral—or even positive—cultural phenomenon, remaining conscious of the narratives that surround it on all sides.

Syncretism or appropriation?

Yet, there still remains a problem: that not all parties concerned will necessarily view the syncretism of particular elements as positive, or even neutral. Indeed, these issues of syncretism can invoke strong sentiments. For example, an important criticism deals with examining the boundaries between religious syncretism and cultural appropriation, particularly with regards to White Westerners’ interest in and use of indigenous intellectual and material property for their own spiritual practice—or for their own

material gain. While I certainly do not deny that this has happened and continues to happen, and while I believe that it is important to investigate this issue, it is not the focus of my research. All the individuals with whom I have spoken at length regarding the processes of syncretism in their personal practice are quite conscious of these issues and emphasize their desire to treat all religious and spiritual traditions in which they engage with the utmost respect and cultural sensitivity. As one informant told me,

I've read a certain amount of Native approaches... but anything that's not the European cultural tradition, I try to stay away from in my own practice, just because I don't want to be appropriative. So I try to learn about it and I can use it as an example, but I won't work with that because I know that it royally pisses off Native people when the White people show up and trying to take over their cultural possessions, after we took over their land and everything else. [Luke, interview, July 2007]

Another said,

I feel kind of sketchy about drawing on Native spirituality... But I also recognize that Paganism as a whole always is calling on gods that don't belong to you, because most people that are Pagan were either raised Christian or Jewish or something like that, not many people were actually raised Pagan, and don't usually call specifically on gods and goddesses that are directly from their lineage. But I feel weird about the First Nations, taking on their traditions, because it's happened so much, it's been so fake. A lot of people make money off the traditions and religious practices of the Native peoples of North America, and it's just so colonialist... And also I think that there's people in the First Nations community that definitely have a problem with White people appropriating their things, and I'm sure that in the Indo-Canadian or in the Hindu community as well, but in Buddhism I think that they're more open about it, they kind of want people to be Buddhist, or they want people to consider these things, but I don't really have a clear answer to when it's "okay". [Vivian, interview, March 2007]

In an increasingly globalized world, in which the transnational flow of information, knowledge and material goods has far-reaching implications for the dissemination of cultural and religious tradition, questions of cultural appropriation are incredibly complex

and must be looked at from multiple angles, acknowledging multiple points of view.

Religious traditions are no exception, as anthropologist Sabina Magliocco reminds us:

Neo-Pagan cultural borrowing takes place in the context of larger globalizing forces that daily give us new aesthetics and choices in the realm of popular culture: “world” music, fashion, body ornamentation, and ethnic cuisines mix liberally in modern urban, suburban, and virtual landscapes (2004: 7).¹⁶

Magliocco discusses how the perception of what exactly culture is—and how it reacts in relation to us—takes an integral role in discourses of appropriation and borrowing. At first glance, it would appear as though the appropriation of culture necessitates the commodification of culture; that is, in order to have an aspect of culture stolen, there must be something tangible to steal. Ideas, on the other hand, when stolen, still remain with the original individual or culture, no matter what the perpetrator chooses to do with them (Magliocco 2004: 217). This is, however, still a somewhat simplistic view of how culture works, and Magliocco goes on to discuss another view, proposed by Deborah Kapchan (2002), that culture is at once a possessing and possessable entity. “[Spirit] possession requires an alchemical reaction, a transmutation of subtle and dense matter as two different substances encounter and change each other. Culture inhabits us in similar ways. It lives within the confines of our flesh like a second nature” (Kapchan 2002: 4). Magliocco remarks that in the case of appropriation, it is clear that “both Pagans and their critics shift their perceptions of culture as both a possession and a possessing force,” and that neither party is neutral or objective in denouncing—or defending—cultural borrowing (2004: 217).

Authenticity and the invention of tradition

I take 'authenticity' to be a cultural construct of the modern Western world. That it has been a central, though implicit, idea in much anthropological enquiry is a function of a Western ontology rather than of anything in the non-Western cultures we study. Our search for authentic cultural experience—for the unspoiled, pristine, genuine, untouched and traditional—says more about us than about others.

— (Handler 1986: 2).

Numerous scholarly works during the last few decades, from within as well as outside of anthropology, have discussed authenticity and the invention of tradition with regards to religious systems and spiritual beliefs and practices, and often in conjunction with religious syncretism. Not unlike the case of syncretism, these discourses have a divisive and polarizing history, both within the academic community and between academics and non-academics, most notably between ethnographers and indigenous groups. Because authenticity is hotly disputed within the context of contemporary Paganism, and because much of what can be looked at as religious syncretism in this context is in some ways indistinguishable from the invention of tradition, a brief discussion of the histories and contexts surrounding these two concepts is called for.

The first major publication to address tradition invention from a social science point of view was the 1983 edited volume *The Invention of Tradition* by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. “Invented tradition...includes both ‘traditions’ actually invented, constructed and formally instituted and those emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief and dateable period... and establishing themselves with great rapidity” (Hobsbawm 1983: 1). Hobsbawm describes three types of traditions that have been invented since the industrial revolution: those that establish social cohesion within

communities—real or artificial; those that establish or legitimize institutions and power structures; and those that attempt to socialize individuals through the teachings of beliefs and value systems (ibid: 9). Though this perspective focuses on institutions of power and socialization, these categories can easily be modified or expanded to include other forms of social belonging and to be applicable in different frameworks of cultural analysis.

Anthropologist Charles Briggs (1996) writes about some of the problems that have come about from anthropologists and other Western academics' labeling of indigenous religious systems as employing invented aspects, mainly as a result of syncretism with Western religions. In one example, he cites religious historian Sam Gill's argument that "the notion of Mother Earth as a Native American goddess has been created to meet various needs of Americans of European ancestry" (Gill 1987: 106). While his research was perhaps meant to take a progressive, anti-colonialist approach by exposing what he saw as the imposition of Eurocentric ideals onto Native North American culture, it was not received with open arms by Native scholars, who charged him with ignorance of Native beliefs as well as a re-proclamation of White colonial authority over all things non-White (Jaimes and Noriega 1988).

Briggs concludes that it is not the anthropologist's place to judge the authenticity or historicity of what a particular group of people are doing; through asking questions of authority, authenticity and the power relations inherent in invention of tradition discourses, he refuses to distill the issue to a simple question, acknowledging instead that it is much larger and more complex (1996). This appears to echo Stewart and Shaw's

suggestion that we should focus on the processes and discourses of syncretism, rather than simply stating whether or not a group or individual has engaged in religious synthesis (1994b: 7). Briggs also seems to be calling for an exploration of the processes and discourses of the invention of tradition, rather than simple labeling; i.e. “This is authentic; that is invented.”

Anthropologist Allan Hanson points out that “culture” and “tradition” are not the “stable realities handed down intact from generation to generation” that social scientists once thought they were. Moreover, he says that tradition is now more or less understood to be an invention in itself (1989: 890). Traditions are invented for different reasons by different parties. People invent their own traditions to legitimize a position or action; colonialists, missionaries, government officials and others invent traditions for those they wish to control, and then proceed to treat them as if the invention were endogenous; even anthropologists invent traditions for the people they study (*ibid.*)¹⁷ In some cases, groups have adopted ethnographies written about them by anthropologists, and used these works as their own historical account of their traditional culture (Larcom 1982).

James Clifford states that there has been a “shift...from inventions of tradition to traditions of invention” (2000: 102), which indicates a change in the anthropological climate, away from a blame game of sorts, and toward a more critical approach to the invention of tradition on multiple levels, through multiple discourses, allowing for broader comprehension and application. Indeed, Jocelyn Linnekin, another of the handful of anthropologists to have jumped into the controversies of the 1980s and 1990s

surrounding this topic, states that “all traditions—Western and indigenous—are invented, in that they are symbolically constructed in the present and reflect contemporary concerns and purposes rather than a passively inherited legacy” (1991: 447).

There appears to have been fewer articles published on these questions more recently, and newer work seems to have left the polarizing debate behind, to a certain extent. It is more accepted today that culture and tradition are invented on a large scale; moreover, anthropologists may have in addition learned to use slightly more tactful language in asserting their positions. It no longer seems a given that invention equals a lack of authenticity, which is really at the heart of the matter, but rather that complex issues are at play.

Within contemporary Paganism, the issue of tradition invention and authenticity has been a very important factor, and one that has been subject to criticism, from within Pagan circles as well as from academia. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the story of the lineage that lead to contemporary Paganism has been pieced together through a plethora of diverse resources, including folklore and legend, speculation and imagination, and what little historical accounts exist. Issues such as the “Burning Times” claim of nine million victims,¹⁸ the existence of unbroken lines of witches’ covens who practiced in secret for hundreds of years, and the ensuing direct link to actual historical beliefs and practices have long been under the critical glare.

[W]hat is considered “authentic” is a result of how we construe our relationship to the past in light of present concerns. Moreover, all traditions are perpetually in flux as their bearers constantly re-interpret and re-invent them with each individual performance. Revival and

revitalization are part of the process of tradition, even when the result is different from the “original” practice itself. Thus *all* traditions are authentic, and the historicity of a tradition has nothing to do with its efficacy for any given group of people (Magliocco 2000: 5).

Indeed, authenticity proved to be an important issue for many contemporary Pagans, something that is reached through the act of creating meaning. As one of the participants in my research responded,

What is authenticity? I don't know. I feel, though, that if I'm doing the work that we do, in the Pagan community, and we are creating a ritual of our own, and that works for people, then I feel that that is authentic. [Vivian, interview, March 2007]

With this notion of authenticity in mind, let us move on to explore some of the many meanings that these concepts—religious syncretism, authenticity and tradition invention—hold for contemporary Pagans in Montreal today.

¹ The title of this chapter is a reference to grounding, which is done at the beginning of many Pagan rituals and serves to help center and connect the participants to the surrounding environment as well as to each other. While this usually takes anywhere between two and ten minutes, “roots down, branches up!” is the “abridged” version, used tongue-in-cheek for instant grounding. I use it here in reference also to the contents of this chapter, which consist of background information on Paganism and on the theories that have guided my research (roots), and explorations of different thought processes, outcomes, and new directions associated with these themes (branches).

² The spelling *magick*, rather than *magic*, was popularized by Aleister Crowley, a prominent figure in Ceremonial Magick of the early and mid-1900s, to distinguish “the science and art of causing change to occur in conformity with the will” from “stage magic” (Adler 1979: 8; 544). I use it here in conjunction with Ceremonial or “High” Magick only, using the traditional spelling for all other instances. While many contemporary Pagans today employ Crowley’s definition of *magick* or a slight variation thereof (“the art of changing consciousness at will” is a commonly heard definition), they appear to maintain the original spelling *magic* in most cases.

³ Pantheism and panentheism may at first glance seem virtually identical, but there is a major difference that is important to note. The *en* in the latter means that deity (*theos* or *thea*; god or goddess) is *in* everything (*pan*) but they are not one and the same; indeed in this view, divinity, while infusing all of nature, extends beyond it. This is distinguished from pantheism, in which deity *is* everything (or, in other words, “that God and the universe are identical” (Harper 2001b)). A pantheistic worldview is very similar to the concept of immanence, “the awareness [that] the world and everything in it [is] alive, dynamic, interdependent, interacting, and infused with moving energies:… the divine embodied in nature” (Starhawk 1982: 9). This concept is central to some traditions within contemporary Paganism, although not all. Immanence is generally used in opposition to transcendence, in which the concept of deity transcends, or exists outside of, the world. While pantheism is necessarily immanent, panentheism can be seen as both immanent and transcendent, as divinity infuses the world but still exists separately from it.

⁴ In my own experience, I have found that adherents to forms of Ceremonial or High Magick, as well as some British Traditional Wiccans (of which there is much overlap), often do not identify as practitioners of earth-based spirituality, nor do they feel that their spirituality presupposes a profound respect for nature. However, more extensive research is needed to be able to make adequate hypotheses as to whether this is a local or global phenomenon, and as to why this might be the case.

⁵ Some practitioners of contemporary Paganism consider it to be a spirituality, and others a religion. Depending on the context I may use one or the other or even this hybrid form in an attempt to validate both positions.

⁶ In academic writing where the term is used without the prefixes “neo” or “contemporary”, modern practitioners are often differentiated by the use of an upper-case P, whereas the historical term *paganism* remains lowercase. Yet this is all variable, and some use a lower-case p to refer to the contemporary movement as well.

⁷ One such bit of speculative history refers to the “Burning Times,” the period of time during which people were accused of practicing witchcraft, tortured and executed. Nine million victims was the number once spoken of, although current estimates put this as an extreme exaggeration, with between fifty and two hundred thousand as a more likely range (Pavlac 2006). According to Starhawk, considering that many who died in prison, rather than as a direct result of execution, are not counted in the tolls, the number is probably a lot higher than records show (Starhawk 1979: 232). Although once a proponent of the nine million figure, she has since backed down and acknowledged the more likely range, also pointing out that the people killed in conjunction with the “witch hunts” were probably not even Witches as we understand and use the term today (Starhawk 2004: 23-24).

⁸ When her book was written in the late 1970s, the term Wicca was used much more readily to refer to the whole Pagan movement. In more recent years, Wicca has come to mean only one branch of Neopaganism, albeit the largest and most visible.

⁹ While Wicca is etymologically linked to witchcraft, it may be important to note that the two are not synonymous within the contemporary Pagan movement today. Not all Wiccans would identify as Witches, and not all Witches practice Wicca. Likewise, many Pagans do not identify as Witches, and some Witches do not identify with contemporary Paganism, although this would primarily be a testament to the fluidity and experientiality of definitions, as some would argue that anyone practicing witchcraft today is a modern Pagan.

¹⁰ Although Adler uses the term “Traditionalist” in this case, a more commonly-used name for such groups is currently “Reconstructionist”, about which there will be further explanation later in this chapter. To avoid confusion with “Traditional Wicca”, I favor the term “Reconstructionist” over “Traditionalist”.

¹¹ The Charge of the Goddess is most well-known in the form adapted by Doreen Valiente, who was High Priestesse of Gerald Gardner’s coven for a time. Parts of it are taken from the 1899 publication *Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches* by Charles G. Leland. Other parts were adapted into prose from Gardner’s Book of Shadows (Adler 1979: 57-8). For the full text of the Charge, see Appendix D.

¹² While an important part of early British Traditional Wicca, to my knowledge ritual nudity is less practiced today, especially as covens are often more open and visible, with a possibly more transient membership than they once had.

¹³ Others include the Hindu Parvati-Durga-Uma, Irish Ana-Babd-Macha, Greek Hebe-Hera-Hecate. They are also seen in the three Norns of the Norse, the Fates of the Romans. In some cases they are not all three women; early Romans made room for a male god, Jupiter (ousting the Maiden), in a trinity with Juno (the Mother) and Minerva (the Crone). A Father-Mother-Child trinity appears as well in Middle Eastern cultures, and is reflected in the 5th century B.C.E. Babylonian trinity of Shamas (Father/Sun), Sin (Mother/Moon) and Ishtar (Child/Star). Early Greeks modified this with Helios, Selene and Aphrodite. In Egypt, the same trinity is seen in Osiris-Isis-Horus. In our culture today, we can still see remnants of these sacred trinities, although all feminine aspects have since been lost, in the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost (although the Gnostic version recognizes the Holy Ghost as female, and in some areas the familial trinity of God-Mary-Jesus is recognized) (Walker 1983: 1018-9).

¹⁴ The following information is based on my experiences in divers contemporary Pagan communities, and the rituals that I have attended, participated in, organized, and led. Several researchers have also written extensively about Neopagan ritual; see, for instance, Adler (1979), Pike (2001), Gagnon (2003), Magliocco (2004). I provide this information in hopes that readers will gain a greater understanding of what it is that many contemporary Pagans actually do, particularly as the narratives shared in Part 2 of this thesis often discuss or allude to particular rituals and ritual styles.

¹⁵ Various polls have found that between 60% and 75% of people who identified as Pagans are women (Magliocco 2004; CoG 2006).

¹⁶ In this same volume, Magliocco includes an overview of some of the specific criticisms brought by Native Americans against Neopagan appropriation (2004: 215-37); see also Pike (2001).

¹⁷ Hanson gives as example, among other anecdotes, the 1934 ethnography by A.B Deacon entitled *Malekula: A Vanishing People in the New Hebrides*. This book, despite its misinterpretations of the people of what is now Vanuatu, has been used by the people themselves to resolve disputes regarding the region’s traditional culture (Hanson 1989: 890).

¹⁸ Refer back to footnote #7 of this chapter for more information.

Part 2. Weaving the web: syncretism in practice

In order to facilitate my analysis, I decided to examine religious syncretism in contemporary Paganism on three levels: 1) the combination of elements from within contemporary Paganism, 2) from Neopagan and other religious sources, and 3) from Neopagan and non-religious, socio-political or environmental sources. However, these categories are only a convenient framework through which to conceptualize some of the different types of syncretisms that can be observed and experienced within Neopaganism, and are not at all meant to be limiting or bounded, nor are they necessarily reflective of the entire reality lived by practitioners. Moreover, they are in no way mutually exclusive, and practitioners may very well—and indeed, most do—identify their practice as syncretic on two or even all three levels. The following three chapters are organized around passages from the narratives that I collected, illustrating some of the many ways in which contemporary Pagans utilize syncretism as a part of their personal belief system and practice. I have structured the chapters along the lines of these three categories, but, as will become clear, instances, individuals, and their narratives transcend boundaries, and several of the individuals are present in more than one category. In some cases, my preconceived categories and set ways of defining and labeling syncretism turned out to reflect my own academic bias more than the realities of the participants themselves.

As I mentioned in chapter two, I conducted interviews with ten people: eight women and two men. Eight of the ten are either from Quebec or have lived here for most of their lives, while the other two are from different Canadian provinces but currently live in

Montreal. Their ages range from mid-twenties to late-fifties. Most come from Christian families, and all began to identify with contemporary Paganism at a relatively young age, in their teens or twenties. Although some of my interviewees reported having no problem with their given names being used, I decided to use pseudonyms for everybody. In a few cases the participant chose their pseudonym, but for those who did not, I made the decision myself when I began transcribing the interviews.

There is a common saying in contemporary Pagan communities (at least in North America) which amounts to something like this: “Ask ten Pagans what Paganism is, and you’ll get fifteen different answers.” I have certainly found this to be true. Like any religious, spiritual or philosophical system, Neopaganism and all of the paths and traditions that comprise it are full of inconsistencies and paradoxes, diverging opinions, and differences in life-experience. The words of one participant in my research may well contradict those of another, but that is to be expected. Participants may even contradict themselves at different points in the interviews, but that is also to be expected. Contradictions and paradoxes can be found in every belief system, and are inevitable; they create a sort of tension that is often necessary in maintaining equilibrium within a system. Recognizing where certain paradoxes exist allows us to work with them, to go deeper into our own ideas and convictions, and into the tenets that hold up the systems to which we subscribe. Some of the narratives in the following chapters bear this out.

While every case study that is a part of this research is unique, and no two narratives provided me with the same answers, I nevertheless found certain trends, tendencies, and

currents that allowed me to draw parallels and highlight a few key reasons behind the participants' syncretic choices. These are syncretism through similitude, in which practitioners incorporate different elements because of their perceived high level of similarity; syncretism through family heritage, in which practitioners specifically seek out traditions that their ancestors may once have practiced, or that are associated with their ethnic or cultural heritage in any way; and syncretism through external quest, an active search to find something elsewhere that is not found inside the practitioner's previously held spiritual system.

Just as the boundaries of the three categories of syncretism that serve as the framework for this research—and the organizational structure for the ensuing three chapters—are in many cases blurred, so are these categories fluid, and specific instances that I locate in one category may certainly possess elements of another as well. I have taken the words that each participant chose to use to describe her or his syncretic trajectory, and translated them into a language of research, a language that is quite different from that in which these stories were originally shared with me. As is the case in any translation, meaning and nuance is always lost, and a great deal of power resides in the hands of the translator. By making use of large segments of verbatim interview text, as well as by allowing those interviews conducted with Francophone Pagans to remain in French, I have attempted to let as much of this power as possible remain with the participants, but when I pick up the reins to discuss their narratives and categorize their stories, I regain the power of the ethnographer and their lives, or at least their stories, are in my hands. Still, I cannot speak

for these people in any way that is completely “true”; I can only try my best to interpret their words with as much understanding and compassion as possible.

As may be gathered from some of these narratives, personal beliefs often change drastically throughout time, and so the words spoken in an interview in 2007 may no longer hold true for that person in 2009, as I finish up this work, and may be even less true in 2019, if anybody is still reading these words at that point. Indeed, my own beliefs and practices, both with regards to spirituality and to anthropology, have changed significantly since I began this project. There is an almost static extemporaneous quality in a small-scale ethnographic study whose focus was not to chart changes and adaptations over time, but to hone in on particular beliefs and practices of individuals at a given moment. While this could be seen as a limiting factor, this slice of life out of time, this research does in many ways speak to a *particular* time, and is meant to be viewed in terms of the lives of specific people during specific moments. In this “ethnographic present...the practice of fieldwork eliminates both subjectivism and objectivism and posits truth as an intersubjective creation” (Hastrup 1990: 46).

Chapter 4. Syncretism of elements from within contemporary Paganism

Most contemporary Pagans can be said to incorporate elements from multiple paths or traditions into their personal practice; indeed, most paths and traditions have grown out of these same syncretic processes, and new paths are coming into being because of the visions and desires of particular individuals and groups to establish their syncretic practices and share them with others.

After having presented some of my early work relating to this thesis at a local conference on contemporary Paganism in the fall of 2007, a friend and fellow Pagan approached me with the question, “What’s the point? Aren’t all Pagans syncretic, and doesn’t everybody know that already?” We talked for some time, and I came to realize that I had perhaps not adequately asserted my motivation for conducting this research; after my brief presentation, my friend believed that I was merely attempting to point out what seemed to him an obvious fact, a given. When I explained to him that I was starting with that given, and, moving out from there, exploring the inspirations behind syncretic choices—that is, what leads particular individuals to adopt certain practices and beliefs coming from a variety of sources—and what is more, looking at the agency that such choices gives to these individuals, he understood that what I was looking at was, in fact, not obvious, or a given, nor was it something that had been done before.

To Pagans, those syncretic choices that fall under this first category may indeed seem obvious. To non-Pagans, they may seem arbitrary; what’s the big deal if someone

practices two different kinds of Wiccan-influenced Paganism at the same time? It may not be a “big deal” by everyone’s standards, but it is a significant factor in the way that contemporary Pagans live and practice their spirituality and worthy of note *because* it may be so obvious that the underlying syncretism goes largely unnoticed. The result is similar, however, in that it serves to reinforce individuals’ beliefs, add depth to their personal practice, and contribute to the sense of agency that is such an important part of many New Religious Movements.

Miranda: Wiccan-influenced multi-path practitioner

Let us start with one participant who I call Miranda.¹ Miranda is in her mid-thirties, and has lived in Montreal since childhood. She is one of the many whose practices can be identified on all three of the levels that I have put forth in this research; first, however, I am going to discuss one important point that locates her in the first category.

While using a fairly traditional Wiccan ritual structure, Miranda does not identify with Wicca, but more with the Reclaiming and Anderson Feri traditions. She says:

I don’t *call* myself Wiccan because Wicca works with a polarity of God and Goddess, and I don’t find that polarity works for me. Feri Tradition *doesn’t* work with the polarity of God and Goddess, which is what appealed to me when I started learning about it; it works with this gender-ambiguous central deity. [Interview, April 2007]

The Anderson Feri tradition—named after its founder, Victor Anderson—is itself quite syncretic; Miranda describes it as a “manufactured American tradition”, as it brings together elements of Wicca, Native American spirituality, and Celtic and Hawaiian mythology. Reclaiming is a further syncretism in many ways between Wicca² and Feri;

its founders had studied previously in both traditions and there are many recognizable elements from Feri still, as well as a Wiccan-influenced ritual structure. However, one of the main reasons why Miranda is drawn to Reclaiming is because of the departures it has taken from that traditional ritual structure:

A lot of Wicca, I find it less ecstatic and more ceremonial. Reclaiming is definitely an ecstatic tradition, it's celebratory, it celebrates life, it looks to find connection in life. Raising energy is normally done by some ecstatic means, movement, dance, chanting, breathwork. Whereas in a Wiccan coven, the energy raising isn't the same, it's more a concentration-type way of raising energy, or in some circles I've been in, the act of just talking is seen to raise energy, and I find that doesn't work for me. [Interview, April 2007]

The other major drawing point: environmental activism. "I find it very hard to say that I'm practicing an earth-based tradition and then shit all over the earth!" [Interview, June 2007] she told me, with a wry laugh. I will go deeper into the syncretism with various forms of activism in Chapter 6.

Aside from having an extensive personal practice, Miranda also works with a closed circle, which is not structured the same way as a coven, but still consists of several people who meet regularly and hold rituals together. The composition of the circle is diverse, including practitioners of Wicca, neo-Shamanism, New Age spirituality, and a few syncretic Neopagans, like Miranda.

There were four of us originally who started working together, and we started working in the Wiccan ritual format because that is what we were all familiar with, and then when other people came we just kept that format. So that is our ritual structure that we use, but it is not used all the time, because we all take turns leading ritual, and for example, when the person who is more Shamanistic and less Wiccan leads a ritual, that person doesn't always cast a circle and doesn't always call the quarters in the same way. They might use the Shamanic approach of whistling and rattling in the directions. So even though we have this basic structure, it's very loose. We don't work a lot with deity in the group; we have, but we

all have our own personal practices and our own concept of deity that we work with in our own individual practices, so when we come together in ritual we tend to invoke Spirit or the Absolute, or Great Spirit, or the Lord and Lady, God and Goddess, something more generic. By virtue of the fact that different people lead on different occasions, there's definitely exposure to different ritual styles. [Interview, April 2007]

The variety of backgrounds and styles brought to the group, she told me, greatly enriches the experience for all, and when I asked if the different perspectives and ritual styles had ever created conflict in the group, she said no. "For myself, when there's a ritual that just might not resonate with me at that time, it's just, 'Oh well, that didn't work for me, that's fine.'" [Interview, April 2007]

Isabelle, the Asatru black sheep

Isabelle, a quiet woman in her late twenties, is very active in translating Pagan material from English to French, as she remembers that when she first started learning about contemporary Paganism, she was unable to find much in her native language. She also maintains informational websites and on-line forums that attract French-speakers in Quebec and France who are practitioners of various Pagan and occult paths.

Isabelle presents another case of incorporation of elements from different contemporary Pagan traditions, practicing primarily her own syncretism between Wicca and Asatru, or Norse Paganism.

Je les ai découvert [Wicca and Asatru] en même temps, au CEGEP; j'avais un cours d'histoire de l'art, étudiant la mythologie. Un de mes professeurs m'a prêté un livre sur la mythologie greco-romaine, et à la fin du livre il y avait une introduction à la mythologie nordique. J'ai lu un couple de phrases qui à cette époque là ont répondu aux questionnements que j'avais par rapport au christianisme puis à Dieu... Donc à partir de là

j'ai découvert la mythologie nordique, surtout le dieu Odin. Puis en parallèle, j'avais commencé à lire et à étudier la Wicca. Donc je pense que j'ai fait un peu le syncrétisme des deux. [Interview, April 2007]

Because few books were available dealing with Norse Paganism, and fewer still in French, Isabelle began to practice Wiccan ritual in which she called upon strictly Norse deities. After some time, her discovery of runes as a divinatory tool lead her deeper into the realm of Asatru, and within a few years she was able to find more books on the subject and to enrich her practice as more strictly Norse-based.

Today, Isabelle's personal practice consists almost entirely of Asatru-based elements, but feeling called to experiment with other paths and to share her spirituality with other has made her, as she put it, "*un mouton noir*" within the tradition of Asatru.

Il y a peut-être des Asatrus qui sursauteraient de savoir ce que je fais, parce qu'en général les Asatrus sont très conservateurs dans leur pratique, et beaucoup plus dogmatique que les Païens ou les Wiccans. C'est très structuré, très dogmatique si je peux dire ça, assez cérémonial. Par exemple, beaucoup d'Asatrus, c'est inconscient pour eux d'invoquer deux divinités de deux panthéons différents dans le même cercle. C'est presque tabou. Tandis que moi, ça me dérange pas du tout parce que j'ai commencé d'étudier les deux en même temps. J'ai intégré les deux en même temps. Il y a probablement des Asatrus qui me diraient que je suis pas Asatru, mais que je suis plutôt Norse Wicca. Mais je trouve que c'est jouer sur les mots parce que c'est pas quelque chose qui me dérange particulièrement. [Interview, April 2007]

As co-founder of a coven, along with her partner Caroline, and as holding a leadership role within that coven, Isabelle is especially conscious of integrating elements with which the rest of the coven members will feel comfortable. This is the main context in which she brings non-Norse elements into her practice, she says, to accommodate others who have different spiritual practices, beliefs, and knowledge.

C'est sûr que dans ma pratique personnelle quand je suis seule c'est cent pourcent Nordique. J'utilise que des outils Nordiques, que des mots Nordiques, je parle en français ou en anglais, mais j'utilise que des runes, que des symboles Nordiques, je n'invoque que des divinités Nordiques. Si par exemple je me rends à un rituel dans le coven, que je fait un *blot* [a particular Norse ritual with a different structure from Wiccan ritual], là ça me dérange pas d'utiliser des termes ou des symbolismes qui sont pas juste nordiques, pour que les autres puissent se retrouver là-dedans. Quand je suis en groupe ou avec d'autres personnes, ça me dérange pas du tout de faire ce que je fais, même d'invoquer Odin et l'autre invoque Hécate [a goddess from the Greek pantheon], ça me dérange pas du tout. [Interview, April 2007]

Aside from her affinity for Nordic mythology and her interest in Nordic ritual, there are some specific reasons why Isabelle has chosen to work within the framework of Asatru.

Tout ce qui est de la cosmologie ou les grandes lois, je vais chercher dans l'Asatru. Je trouve que dans la Wicca il n'y a pas ça, il n'y a pas de cosmologie Wiccane, il y a la fameuse Loi de Triple Retour,³ sauf que c'est vague, c'est pas précis. Donc à partir du moment où je voulais aller me chercher une cosmologie, une certaine base de croyances, tout ce qu'il y a, la réincarnation, je me suis questionnée est-ce que je prends la simple réincarnation New Age, est-ce que je prends la *karma*, la *dharmā*? L'Asatru me permet d'avoir tout ça. L'Asatru aussi avec les runes me permet d'avoir une symbolique, les symboles que j'utilise que j'ai pas besoin d'aller chercher. Il y a pas ça dans la Wicca. [Interview, April 2007]

What Isabelle says here regarding this openness, or lack of dogma, illustrates a key factor in Wicca and contemporary Paganism, a factor that for many is an asset, for some a hindrance, and yet for others, a challenge. There is so much variation between Wiccan and Pagan paths and traditions that as a whole movement there is very little that can be said to be common mythology or cosmology. This explains why many adherents find themselves drawn to a particular path, or more precisely, to a particular cultural system where they can find a home within the overarching Pagan movement, because it is through these more specific traditions that they are able to discover specific myths,

specific ways of looking at cycles of life and death, and specific ways of conceiving of divinity and of humanity's relationship with the divine.

While the particular cultural tradition that a Pagan or Wiccan chooses to follow is often connected to their heritage, sometimes it is not at all, and sometimes it is only a side-effect, or, as Isabelle puts it, a sort of added bonus. When I asked her if she has Norse roots herself (her flaming red hair gave me an inclination that the answer would be affirmative, or at least not too far-off), she replied:

Germaniques. Mes deux grands-parents paternels sont nés en Suisse, et mon père m'a donné la nationalité quand je suis née, donc je suis Suisse, et les Suisses sont Germaniques entre autres. Ma mère est Irlandaise, sauf que le Celtisme m'a jamais, jamais, jamais intéressé. Je sais pas pourquoi, c'est question d'intérêt tout simplement. J'ai pas choisi l'Asatru parce que j'étais Suisse, mais je dirais qu'à quelque part je suis contente d'honorer une certaine partie de mes ancêtres. J'ai jamais connu mon grand-père paternel, mais c'était un homme qui s'intéressait beaucoup à l'ésotérisme, il m'a passé des choses par mon père, des outils, donc pour moi c'est une façon de le remercier en honorant ses ancêtres. [Interview, April 2007]

Rose: Shamanism=Witchcraft

Rose is a gentle, soft-spoken woman in her late forties who immigrated to Canada from the UK with her family as a child. She has considered herself a Neopagan Witch since her teens, and was initiated into a Wiccan coven in her mid-thirties. She now practices and teaches in a tradition that she calls Celtic Shamanic Wicca, a combination of Celtic lore, traditional Wicca and Core Shamanism.⁴ Although on one level, Celtic Shamanic Wicca could be seen as a syncretism between these three traditions, to Rose nothing

could be more natural than practicing Wicca and Shamanism together, for at their base, she says, they are the same thing.

After studying Wicca, I realized that the basis of Wicca is Shamanism. And you have Core Shamanism in all cultures of the world... Our Shamanism, Wiccan Shamanism, is more Celtic, so I'm also combining Celtic studies with Core Shamanism and very traditional Wicca, so that's how those three things came together. For example, in Wicca, casting a circle and calling the spirits, the elemental powers, making a cone of power, doing healing, channeling the God and Goddess, drawing down the moon or the sun,⁵ it's all Shamanic practice. So really for a Wiccan to deepen their spiritual practice, they have to become a Shaman. That's what happens to them without necessarily knowing it... So I don't really see it as adding other things to my Wicca, I see it as deepening the Wicca that I have. [Interview, April 2007]

Rose came to this realization about the parallels between Shamanism and Wicca through studying many different traditions, and also through examining old Celtic texts, some of the same writings that have led to Celtic Paganism revival movements in Britain and North America during the last sixty years. Old folklore, mythology, Celtic manuscripts—all these, she says, are Shamanic, or at least deal with Shamanic teachings and principles.

Among the participants in my research, Rose was not at all alone in addressing the feeling that many Pagans have of searching for more and more, trying to go deeper and deeper into their spirituality. For many, if not most, this quest manifests itself in the desire to learn about other spiritual practices and beliefs, whether from within the contemporary Pagan movement or from without.

Where do people learn how to do that, how to deepen their Wiccan practice? They can't look within the Wiccan movement, because there's not enough teachers, there's not enough leaders, and there's not enough opportunity for people to deepen their Wiccan practice in a Wiccan setting. So they have to look outside of that at the moment, and part of that is studying Shamanism, and other things like Celtic studies, sacred

scripture, mythology, anthropology, archaeology, all that sort of thing.
[Interview, April 2007]

Still, Rose did not seem to be completely comfortable with the terminology that I was using, particularly with the word “syncretism,” nor did she agree with my preconceived assumption that that was what she was doing with Celtic Shamanic Wicca.

I don't really necessarily feel like we're taking things from all over the world and putting them together to make something new, I think we're going deeper into one thing, and finding connections that were already there. I'll give you an example. Many Wiccans use the idea of the *chakras*, they use images of the *chakras*, which is Hindu—well it's not really Hinduism but it's part of Yoga. Then we discovered in old Celtic writings about the Three Cauldrons, which is another way of looking at the energy centers of the body and moving energy through the body. And it's basically the same thing, just written in a different way. And each cauldron is connected to a different kind of energy, like the energy of creation, the energy of love, the energy of inspiration, so it's a way of moving energy through the body but it's also a way of understanding how energy evolves, and it's very similar to the *chakra* system. [Interview, April 2007]

Rose had already encountered ways of combining diverse spiritualities and practices that, to her, felt “like going to the buffet and taking a little bite of this, and a little bite of that, but never being fulfilled because we never found our focus going forward. We never ended up going anywhere.” [Interview, April 2007] It was when she realized that she had had enough of this that she began forming her own spirituality based on the connections she had found between what seemed to others—including me, at first—to be very different traditions. Divergent they may be, but Rose, ever in search of connection, looks deep to find the common core.

The question of ancestral ties is a very important aspect of Rose's focus on Celtic Shamanism in particular. First of all, as she told me with a laugh, she was born in

Scotland, on Beltane, a major Celtic solar holiday celebrating fertility and growth that is also commonly known as May Day.

My ancestors are all Celtic, all of them, 100%, don't have any mix of anything else. All Celtic. So really, it's *my* spirituality, the Celtic path is my spirituality. Not that people that aren't Celtic can't follow that, because the Celts are a people that migrated all over the world, and people were born into, married into, adopted into Celtic communities so it's not limiting just because somebody's not Celtic. But when you start to practice, do deeper work, you have to connect with your ancestors, with your blood, and you have to find out who you really are because on some level you chose to be born in this life, in this family, for a reason, and part of the reason is ancestral knowledge, so learning ancestral knowledge takes you to where you come from. And if you're Celtic, that's where you come from. I'm not going to become a Native American Shaman, you know, I moved to Canada when I was a child with my family, but I'm not a Native American person. So for me to go and become a Shaman in a Native American tradition to me would not feel right. [Interview, April 2007]

However, she said, part of the Celtic path in which she works and teaches involves honoring the land on which one lives, and thus she does value learning about Mohawk beliefs and practices as a way to connect to the physical land on a deeper level.

But it doesn't mean I'm a Mohawk, my Celtic spirituality is who I am. It's natural. We have people in our coven that are—we have one woman who's of Asian descent, one woman who's black, so they are still following their ancestral spirituality in their solitary work; when they do work with their ancestors, their ancestors aren't Celtic. And they're learning things about their own cultures, but they can still learn a lot from Celtic Shamanic Wicca because it's teaching them to go into themselves. [Interview, April 2007]

Making use of Wicca or other forms of contemporary Paganism as a jumping-off point to discover other cultures, other spiritualities, or other religions—ancestral or otherwise—is an important point that was brought up again and again by most of the people I interviewed. Furthermore, it was generally mentioned in a matter-of-fact fashion, as if it

were expected that Pagans would naturally follow this type of path. Perhaps this is why the friend I mentioned earlier in this chapter asked me, “What’s the point?” Syncretism is often seen as a natural part of being Pagan, and Wiccan to a large extent as well, although the existence of Wiccan traditions that focus strictly on one particular set of beliefs and practices, as well as Reconstructionist groups who focus strictly on the revitalization of one particular culture or ethnic group’s practices, could be exceptions.

Strega Caroline

Caroline is an active woman in her early thirties who co-founded a Francophone coven with her partner, Isabelle. Like Isabelle, she is passionate about providing resources for French-speaking Pagans, and has done a lot of work translating English texts about Paganism into French. I will share a more in-depth look into her religious trajectory in the following chapter, as her primary identification as a Pagan is found through her incorporation of Hindu beliefs and practices. One part of the interview I conducted with her, however, is very pertinent here.

Having Italian roots through a grandmother who she never knew, Caroline was excited to discover the existence of a branch of Paganism coming from Italy. *Stregheria*, meaning “witchcraft” in ancient Italian, generally refers to both ancient Italian Paganism and the more recent contemporary practice, which has many similarities to other European Pagan revival movements. She had been exploring Wicca for quite some time already, but as she says, she had not yet found something with which she could really identify fully.

J'étais très surprise de savoir qu'il y avait une tradition italienne, et j'étais très contente parce que je me cherchais une identité à ce moment là. Je voyais tout le monde autour de moi qui avait une tradition propre, et moi j'en avais pas vraiment. Puis, surtout avec [Isabelle], elle est très très très Nordique, très *Norse*, et en comparaison avec elle j'avais l'impression que j'avais besoin de chercher quelque chose qui me ressemblait. Et quand je suis tombée par hasard sur la Stregheria, j'ai fais Wow! C'est italien, j'ai des racines italiennes, je pourrais peut-être découvrir mes racines italiennes que j'ai jamais eu la chance de découvrir parce que ma grand-mère est morte très tôt. Donc je me suis mise à lire sur ce sujet beaucoup.

Caroline began piecing together a practice that revolved around Stregheria, looking for whatever she could find on the subject, especially everything pertaining to Mediterranean goddesses. In fact, it was through Stregheria that she first explored worship of the Divine Feminine, or Goddess, which has marked her life profoundly since. Through Italian witchcraft, she said, she discovered herself, not only as Mediterranean, but also as a woman.

C'était un voyage extraordinaire pour moi, un voyage spirituel, intellectuel, artistique, tout ça en même temps. J'ai redécouvert le culte des ancêtres qui est très important dans la Stregheria, je dirais même le plus important... La magie italienne est une magie très spécifique qui m'a beaucoup fascinée, et que je pratique encore. Même si la Stregheria fait pas vraiment partie de mon quotidien, la magie italienne fait partie de mon quotidien. C'est comme si je me suis redécouverte à travers la Stregheria. [Interview, April 2007]

Here, as in Rose's case, we see how important family and ethnic heritage is for some practitioners. Caroline has explored many diverse spiritual paths over the years, and indeed there are other traditions to which she devotes more time and energy than to Stregheria. Yet her journey into Stregheria was so profound and rife with personal meaning, and she described it as being an ever-present force in her life, a foundation, even if her more outward practices stem from other aspects of her spirituality.

Sean: the search for divine connection in contemporary life

Sean, one of two male participants in my research, grew up near Quebec City, and moved to Montreal after university. In his late thirties, he is a prominent figure in the local Pagan community and is often involved in organizing public rituals. He is a bit of an anomaly among the people I interviewed in that he had a very positive and influential Catholic upbringing. Sean's family went to church every Sunday until Sean was old enough to attend by himself, at which point the rest of his family stopped and he continued on alone, all the way through school.

I took my religion very seriously, I saw it as a good thing, and I think even now it forms a lot of the basis of what I see as right and wrong, even though a lot what I think is right and just goes against the spirit of the Church. Even when I was a kid, I disagreed with a lot of what the Church said. But I saw that the Church as a body was something separate from the parish that I went to. Because the priests that were there, they never said anything that I found personally offensive. [Interview, September 2007]

However, when he left for university and went in search of a new church in a new town, he came to realize that what he had most appreciated in his home parish was the sense of community that it gave him, and not the beliefs and practices themselves. Becoming somewhat disillusioned with Catholicism after learning more about its history further alienated Sean from the Church, and he decided to give religion a rest for a bit. Yet he still felt drawn to express his spirituality somehow.

When I left university and came to Montreal, I felt this need for spiritual expression, but I couldn't go back to the church because I saw it as corrupt, and I wasn't satisfied with my own personal journey, although I didn't know how to—I needed some kind of vehicle to express myself better, my spiritual needs. And then I started dating this girl who revealed to me that she was Pagan, she was Wiccan. I'd never heard of such a thing. Except for sensationalized quote-unquote documentaries on TV that really made the practitioners look crazy rather than legit. So I'd never been exposed to this and she told me what she believed in and leant me

some books, and I asked the dumbest questions about magic and was just completely ignorant. She was very patient and explained it all to me. And I experienced something that many Pagans refer to when they discover Paganism, a “coming home” sensation. Like this belief system mirrored a lot of conclusions that I’d come to on my own. And it had even more depth to it, so it was something that fit me very well. I liked the balance, the balance of male and female, I liked the fact that everything was connected, I liked the theory that I could influence my environment by manipulating energy, I liked the presence of the Spirit, I liked the fact that deity wasn’t perfect, and that it didn’t have the Good God over here and the Bad God over there, and I found it made a lot of sense to me. [Interview, September 2007]

After spending several years learning on his own, Sean started attending public rituals and other events, and soon began taking on leadership roles himself.

Sean considers himself an eclectic Pagan, meaning, “I like to sample a lot of different cultures” [Interview, September 2007]. Being of Irish descent, however, Sean feels especially close to Celtic Paganism, and the primary deities with whom he works in his personal practice are from Celtic lore.

I’m very proud of my Irish heritage. And [the Celtic pantheon] is one of the first ones I got exposed to. But as an eclectic I’m willing to explore other ones, but right now that’s the one that works for me, and who knows, in ten years I might be completely different, I might find another culture that speaks to me more. [Interview, September 2007]

One topic of conversation in my interview with Sean that was particularly interesting to me hinged around what exactly deity is, whether deity can be created, and what it takes for humans to do so. A recent interest of Sean’s is the prospect of creating a new set of gods and goddesses that are more relevant to contemporary life in North America than are the pantheons of the Greeks, Egyptians, or even the Celts.

How relevant are the gods of an agrarian society in modern day when most of us live in the city and get our food from the grocery store? If I lived on a farm and grew my own crops, or let's say I lived in the city and had a little garden, well then maybe I would find agrarian gods useful and be able to affect my garden very directly. But most people don't have that. They follow these gods and call upon the harvest when they've never grown a single carrot on their own. It seems diluted somehow. And so maybe there would be some benefit to coming up with something that would more directly relate to our everyday experience. So what do we do, do we take the existing gods and mold them to our reality, or do we come up with new gods?...

Let's say I develop a pantheon that I decided to name on my own, there would be the God of Government, the God of Snow, God of Spring, God of Beavers, God of whatever, to represent the realities of living in North America. And let's say that I got a large majority of people saying, Yes, this means something to me! And they were to use this pantheon to express themselves spiritually, who knows what would happen in twenty years! It's an impossible situation, that every Pagan in North America were to drop the other pantheons and use this, imagine how many thousands or hundreds of thousands of Pagans are out there, but if they were all to adhere to the one pantheon, pouring their energy and belief into that pantheon, personally I believe that the divine would branch off and this little pantheon of gods would exist, take shape and respond to the Pagans that believed in it. [Interview, September 2007]

While this does not represent a very classic example of religious syncretism in Neopaganism, I decided to include it in this chapter because it does represent one of the ways in which Pagans find greater meaning and depth by adapting their beliefs and practices. For many, this includes searching out other religious and cultural systems; for some it means re-shaping and changing established belief systems into something more personal and relevant to the practitioner's life. In any case, what it always comes back to is that practitioners will do what they can to keep their spirituality alive, moving, and meaningful. If they come to an end of one path, they will either move in a different direction altogether, or they will seek out aspects from other sources that can be incorporated into the work they are already doing. Bringing in new practices or insights

can, and usually does, enrich their experience, lead them to new knowledge, or elucidate previously-hidden connections between seemingly diverse systems.

This chapter has highlighted various motivations behind the syncretism of different paths within contemporary Paganism. In particular, ancestry has been shown to be a key factor, having a presence in the narratives of Rose, Caroline, and Sean, and while not directly a motivating factor for Isabelle, something that she acknowledges as a positive aspect—if a secondary one—in her practice. This was one motivation that I had been anticipating (and if anything, I was surprised that only a few of the participants credited this as a major factor). From experiences I had had in Pagan communities previously, I had observed that practitioners are often drawn to explore religions and spiritualities associated with their ancestors, whether genealogical or speculative, particularly where there had been a rupture in continuity between their ancestors and their family today. Immigration and leaving a culturally-specific religious practice behind would create such a rupture, as would conversion to a different religious practice at some point in the family history. Searching for one's roots, finding oneself, and self-discovery through ancestral ties are all notions evoked by Pagans when talking about their ancestry-related paths. This perhaps echoes the search for (re)connection with the natural world that drives so many contemporary Pagans to explore nature-based spirituality in the first place. All this searching for connection seems to fit in well with religion's etymological legacy of "reconnection".

Embarking upon a conscious exploration or quest, with the intent to find specific elements of one path that fit in with a practitioner's worldview, and that they may not have found yet in another path, is another motivation that has factored into some of the narratives in this chapter. Miranda's practice based on elements of both Reclaiming and Feri traditions, as well as other Wiccan-inspired traditions, is "conscious" in the sense that she knows precisely what draws her to each, and what prompts her to seek out others. She talked readily about the attractions and pitfalls that she associates with each of these paths, and in what contexts she finds one more applicable than another.

There is an element of similarity in Isabelle's spiritual trajectory as well, in that one of the things that attracted her to Asatru as a specific path was its cosmology, and the fact that it had one, whereas she saw Wicca as being too general and diverse in its collection of beliefs about spiritual matters. Her choice of words when she talks about her decisions in this regard ("...est-ce que je prends la simple réincarnation New Age, est-ce que je prends la *karma*, la *dharma*?") signifies a very conscious search for a belief system with which she can identify, from which she can "take" specific elements; again, the image of connection comes into play, for the search for a cohesive belief system seems to tie into the search for community, for belonging.

Sean's discussion about the possibilities of creating new pantheons based on the modern world and on one's local, geographical, social and technological habitat is, in a way, the epitome of this sort of syncretic motivation: not only is he searching for answers to his cosmological questions, he is exploring the idea of *creating* his own answers. He is not

alone in this either; plenty of contemporary Pagans deify locations, natural objects, and even human-made objects in order to develop their own belief systems and practices around deities that speak to them and their immediate world more strongly than do those from a different time and place. This sort of creativity—and I mean in both the literal sense of making or producing, and the figurative sense of using the imagination to come up with unique and interesting images or ideas—is a major factor in the process of syncretism, for it is a demonstration of personal agency, and a representation of what is meaningful to each individual.

In many cases, the formation of a syncretic Pagan practice starts with an inquisitive mind, develops with an insatiable appetite for new knowledge and experience, and has no end in sight. For some, an active search—perusing books on mythology for something that rings true, attending rituals and services in search of the perfect tradition, spending countless hours navigating spiritual networking websites—is the chosen path. Others feel that they have been found—by a particular deity or pantheon, or a tradition or path that serendipitously came their way, or through interactions with others.

The part of Miranda's syncretic practice that resides fully within contemporary Paganism (for there is another dimension to it that I discuss in the next chapter) is marked by a bit of both seeking and being found: while she seeks out new Pagan paths to compliment her ever-evolving practice, much of her exposure to other beliefs and practices comes from the diversity brought by members of her circle, without which she may not have ever explored certain traditions. Isabelle's discovery of Norse mythology was somewhat

haphazard, but she was already opening to the world of contemporary Paganism, having also become interested in Wicca around the same time. Similarly, Sean was in an open space, having rejected the dogma and practices of the Catholic Church, but needing some aspect of spirituality in his life, when he was first exposed to Wicca. Contemporary Paganism becomes a sort of gateway into greater exploration of spiritualities and religions for many, and it is also often a perpetually-changing, evolving experience, rather than an ultimate goal in and of itself. It is a process, a channel, a conduit, a tool or framework through which to learn and explore, not only within the bounds of Paganism but also reaching beyond. In the next chapter we will discover how a few practitioners have reached beyond Neopaganism and incorporated elements from other religious sources into their Pagan spirituality.

¹ For a brief profile of each participant, see Appendix C.

² In particular, Dianic Wicca, a feminist, Goddess-oriented branch of the tradition started in the United States in the 1970s (Adler 1979).

³ The “Threefold Law” states that anything one does will return to them threefold; thus, any good act will cause one to be rewarded three times over, and any negative act will cause one to be punished three times over. This principle is found in different versions in mythologies throughout the world, including the Hindu and Buddhist conception of *karma*, and the Christian “Golden Rule”, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”.

⁴ Core Shamanism, referring to universal principles that are at the “core” of shamanic traditions all over the world, is a path of study and practice offered through the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, started by anthropologist Michael Harner in the late 1980s. Harner, who, as an anthropologist, studied shamanism in several different cultures, purported to have discovered these core principles during his fieldwork. His discoveries lead him to leave academia and devote his life full-time to exploring and teaching these core shamanic principles outside of any particular cultural context. Workshops in Core Shamanism are currently offered all over North and South America, Europe, and Australia (FSS 2006).

⁵ Drawing down the moon is a ritual that is part of traditional (mainly Gardnerian) Wicca, though the practice has been adapted into many other Neopagan traditions. In its traditional form, a priest invokes the Triple Goddess (The Maiden, Mother and Crone, represented by the moon in its waxing, full and waning phases respectively) into a priestess, so that she may speak with the voice of the Goddess. Drawing down the sun traditionally refers to the same ritual but reversed, where a priestess invokes the God into a priest (Adler 1979: 19-20, 118). In less traditional Wiccan groups, the moon may be invoked into a man and the sun into a woman; likewise a priestess may do the invoking for another priestess, or even for herself.

Chapter 5. Syncretism of elements from contemporary Pagan and other religious sources

This chapter examines the second level of syncretism: that which deals with the incorporation of elements from other religious and cultural traditions into a contemporary Pagan identity and practice. Although this category has the potential for an almost infinite number of syncretisms, some interesting trends can be observed. Notably, Hinduism and Buddhism seem to be very common religions from which Pagans draw beliefs and practices; this phenomenon has gone so far as to be considered by some as a new tradition, known as IndoPaganism, although not necessarily all who incorporate Eastern beliefs and practices into their Pagan spirituality use this term or identify with this label.

In this chapter, I share and discuss narratives detailing the interests and inspirations behind the incorporation of other religions, most notably Eastern traditions. Syncretism from non-Pagan religious sources proved to be the most fruitful line of inquiry in the interviews I conducted. In fact, the vast majority of the participants in my research described in depth aspects of their spiritual practice in ways that allowed me to fit their narratives into this category, and I had to use restraint to not include every last fascinating detail.

Caroline: IndoPaganism and the search for identity

Caroline's religious trajectory has taken her along many different paths and through many different forms of Pagan spirituality, including Stregheria, as discussed in the previous chapter. She described to me her trajectory, which was somewhat unusual in that she was raised in a non-religious family, and later began to seek out her own religious experience; this is a significant divergence from most of the other participants, who were raised in strict Christian families and rejected the religion during their teenage years. As an adolescent and teenager, Caroline explored many religious systems on her own, including Buddhism and Catholicism; in this latter she was particularly drawn to the Virgin Mary, perhaps foreshadowing her subsequent devotion to the Divine Feminine, which is a major part of her personal spirituality today. She was in her early twenties when she discovered contemporary Paganism.

Au départ c'est l'ésotérisme qui m'intéressait depuis très, très jeune. Je me suis toujours intéressée à la spiritualité, aux religions du monde, mais quand je suis tombée sur la Wicca, j'ai eu l'impression de me sentir chez moi, de trouver quelque chose que je cherchais très longtemps, surtout au niveau de l'ouverture d'esprit. C'était important pour moi de trouver une spiritualité qui était ouverte, qui était libre, qui me permettait d'explorer plusieurs choses. [Interview, April 2007]

After several years practicing Wicca, however, she began to feel as though it was not enough.

Avec la Wicca, j'ai l'impression d'avoir fait le tour, et j'avais besoin de plus. J'avais besoin de plus de structure, de plus de profondeur au niveau des croyances plus qu'au niveau des pratiques, parce que les pratiques à moi, c'est les huit sabbats par année, c'est des différents rites de passages que je vais faire, c'est pas mal tous qu'on va voir du Néopaganisme. Mais au niveau croyance j'avais besoin d'aller expérimenter quelque chose de plus complexe, puis l'Hindouisme est arrivé dans ma vie. Donc l'Hindouisme apporte quelque chose qui pour moi manque dans le Néopaganisme...Ça a été pour moi un très grand changement parce que ça a remis en question beaucoup de choses dans ma vie. Ça a été un coup de

foudre, je suis tombée carrément en amour à un point tel que je me suis demandée si je devais pas carrément changer du Paganisme à l'Hindouisme, mais ça a passé rapidement, je me suis rendue compte que j'étais vraiment néopaïenne, et que c'était bien ancré, et j'avais juste besoin d'aller chercher des bases solides dans l'Hindouisme. [Interview, April 2007]

Caroline's case presents an interesting example of syncretism that is informed and enthusiastic, marked by a conscious, even proactive search for deeper meaning and for experiences that will be both challenging and fulfilling. Perhaps this is related to her self-initiated search for religious belonging, as compared to most of the other participants, who had a familial religion imposed on them from a young age.

Vivian and the Water Child

Vivian, a woman in her late twenties, is the most recent transplant in my research, having moved to Montreal from the Maritimes only the year before I interviewed her. She is another who incorporates Eastern religious elements into her contemporary Pagan practice, but in her case, I would like to focus on one particular instance in which she actively sought out an answer to a problem by looking outside of Paganism, after having been unsatisfied with what she found within it.¹

When Vivian was faced with an unplanned and unwanted pregnancy a few years ago, she was unfaltering in her decision to have an abortion, but felt uncomfortable with what she saw as the normative Western expectation that she silently forget and move on. Although legal and generally accepted in North America, abortion is still enshrined in taboo in our society, and thus is often considered off-limits to mainstream support systems. The

expectation that women will remain silent about their experiences with abortion results in women feeling unsupported, left to go through with the procedure quietly and alone, with no network of support outside of select feminist circles. More importantly, women often have no religious or spiritual framework in which to conceptualize the experience, or in which to grieve and heal.² Moreover, this can result in the polarization of feelings associated with abortion, causing women to think that they must be happy *or* sad, must rejoice in their freedom *or* feel remorse and regret at the loss of new life. There is no room for ambivalence, for the mixed emotions that more often characterize such experiences.

Wishing to acknowledge the whole range of emotions, and to bring the religious element into her own experience, Vivian turned to her knowledge of East Asian traditions, which she had previously studied in a university course on religions of China, and which became an important part of her spiritual practice from then on. Through this framework, she explored the *mizuko kuyo*, a Japanese Buddhist ceremony in which women are allowed to acknowledge, grieve for, and heal from miscarriages and abortions.³ The term *kuyo* indicates “ceremony”; *mizuko* literally means “water child”, signifying Buddhist belief in the liquid form of souls (Underwood 1999: 739). This image also evokes blood—menstrual blood, placental blood, the blood that nourishes a growing fetus, and exits with it at birth. Most contemporary Pagans hold the elements of earth, air, fire and water to be highly important, and these elements are often used as metaphors for other aspects of life, especially of the body.⁴ Pagans talk about water that is the blood of the earth, of the Goddess and of the body, celebrating blood that brings both life and death—

be it first blood or last, and likewise celebrating water as the element that nourishes us in life and carries us in death. Vivian herself told me that she has always felt a close connection with the element of water, and so she was able to resonate with this imagery and symbolism, to work with water in her own post-abortion ritual. Incorporating songs about water, and using the physical location of a flowing river near her home, Vivian crafted her own ritual out of elements coming from contemporary Paganism, with which she was familiar, and elements coming from Japanese Buddhist tradition, to create what she needed to acknowledge her emotions and her experience, and to work through it within a spiritual framework that was meaningful to her on a personal level.

This case presents an example of syncretism inspired by an external quest. When one cultural or religious system does not offer answers to a particular question, a person in need will often look elsewhere, and incorporate what she finds into that which she knows. This is exactly what Vivian did. She told me how she searched for abortion-related rituals within a Pagan context, in books and online sources, but did not find adequate information. Indeed, a quick Google search containing the words “pagan”, “abortion”, and “ritual” resulted in far more conservative Catholic websites bemoaning or condemning contemporary Pagans for their liberal ways than actual information on Neopagan ritual for women who have gone through abortions.

When I asked Vivian what drew her to use this particular Japanese tradition, she replied that what she liked about it was simply the fact that they had it, when no one else seemed to, although it helped that she was familiar with other aspects of East Asian traditions and

mythologies, having been drawn to an exploration of them for some time already. Another aspect of *Mizuko Kuyo* that appealed to her was the *Jizo* statues, or stone interpretations of the Bodhisattva of the underworld and protector of children. These statues represent miscarried or aborted fetuses, and serve as sites for women to visit, physical representations where they can pay their respects and honor the souls of the unborn. In a similar fashion, Vivian had her own collection of objects that signified her pregnancy and abortion, which she buried beneath a tree at her ritual site. Like Japanese women, she has gone back to the site to pay her respects to her own unborn, to acknowledge that which has shaped her life in many ways since.

Tea time with Ruby

Ruby is a native of Montreal in her mid-thirties, and an active organizer and teacher in the contemporary Pagan community. As did many others, Ruby came to Neopaganism as a teenager, although through a somewhat unusual route, when the religion teacher in her Catholic high school suggested she look into her Celtic roots and women's spirituality, "to find another way to meet with God" [personal communication, October 2006].

Today, Ruby readily combines elements of East Asian traditions with her contemporary Pagan practice, both in private and in the her coven. The tradition of which she is an initiate is syncretic itself, having a basis in Gardnerian Wicca, but readily drawing on other cultural and religious influences. The various branches of the tradition are found throughout North America, with a few covens in Europe as well. They focus on incorporating different elements, depending on the interests of the coven members. The

particular coven of which Ruby is a part focuses mainly on Celtic traditions, with a slight bit of Germanic or Norse tradition thrown in; their other major influence is East Asian, which Ruby brought into the coven specifically because it was a great interest of hers.

The East Asian influences that I bring in are things like tea meditations, also Buddhist philosophy, a lot of Taoism, and these are more *practices*, not necessarily *religions* per se. There's a lot of understanding of balance, the *yin* and the *yang*, the 5 elements and how they are integrated in life, the physical body, the spiritual realm. So these things I found match really well with Wicca and were so extremely similar that to mix the two wasn't difficult. A lot of the East Asian folk magic tradition, Tibetan Buddhism, is all about talismanic magic, which is something that we practice in Wicca all the time. We create talismans, we empower them, we charge them. In Tibet, if you said "Wicca" they would never understand but when they describe what they go through, the way they contact the divine and empower a talisman, it's almost identical and it's really fascinating, you go, wow, these two types of cultures have never talked to each other, but they have the same type of magic. [Interview, March 2007]

The Chinese tea ceremony is a ritual that Ruby's coven has taken on recently as a regular part of their gatherings, although she herself has been incorporating the ritual into her individual practice for several years. I asked her to describe the ritual to me, as it is performed in the coven:

[We sit] down and we discuss all the elements that are in a particular tea. What it represents magically, spiritually, and whatnot, and then we'll prepare the tea. One of the Chinese tea ceremonies is learning to serve others, so we serve tea to one another, and we drink tea in silence to be aware of the moment, and to take note of every aspect of drinking that tea, from the cup that you have chosen to the tea that you have chosen, to its flavor, to how you feel about drinking in this group. It's an interesting meditation. It takes about an hour to do, but it's just one of the things that we started putting into our coven. And it's a small ceremony, but it's very powerful to learn to serve others and to learn to be served. And there's a whole lot of etiquette involved. You really think about it. How do you feel about so-and-so getting down on their knees, bowing down to the floor in front of you, like a slave or a servant, and serving you tea? And all the honors that go along with that. And vice versa, being the person serving the tea, and showing that great honor. [Interview, March 2007]

Already having an interest in East Asian, especially Chinese, traditions through family ties, Ruby felt as though they were a natural addition to her already-established Wiccan practice; bringing in these Chinese influences meant taking steps to educate herself.

I went in search of people who could teach me. I've been to several different Korean and Chinese Buddhist temples where they do the tea ceremonies, and I've learned through participation there. And also the Japanese tea ceremony, which is very, very different from a Chinese tea ceremony. There was a woman who was doing short lectures on it, and so I went and did a lecture with her, where she taught all the different symbols and aspects in the Japanese tea ceremony. So, it's a personal fascination. I love tea, I have more teas in my house than anybody in the world [laughing]! [Interview, March 2007]

There is another aspect from Eastern traditions that she is beginning to explore as a new avenue to bring into her coven: the *chakras*, or energy centers of the body, coming from Hindu and Buddhist traditions.

The ceremonies I'm looking at are mostly focused on self-development, for every *chakra* represents a type of empowerment, or a type of energy that you have within you, and that energy is blocked by things that happen in your life. For instance, your root *chakra* is all about survival, being grounded and being part of this world, and living, and a type of energy that blocks your connection to that is fear. So, I'm working rituals that will look at each of these *chakras*, and help people think about all the different aspects, what are the things that block your *chakras*? What blocks you from connecting with this energy? How do we deal with it, how do we move through it, how do we cleanse that *chakra* and bring up that power? So, it requires a lot more research, because it's Indian, Buddhist, and I'm trying to find exactly what can be the right balance.

I think it's helpful for what we're doing. Our coven is specifically for training priests and priestesses, and I personally think that you've got to be fully balanced to be able to meet the community's needs, and so this is one of the ways I want to try and incorporate that. And then, I don't see anything like this in any of the Wiccan practices. None of the Wiccan traditions really talk about facing yourself. I mean, one of the criteria is "know thyself" but there's no tools by which you can do so. And so I'm looking at other cultures, and other religious traditions that do have those kinds of things involved.

Like Vivian, who went in search of tools in order to deal with her abortion on a spiritual level, Ruby is looking for tools to help with specific types of personal development that she doesn't find in her own tradition. When I asked why she thought those types of tools were not already a part of the Wiccan religion, she replied that it had to do with Wicca's roots in Ceremonial Magick. There do exist particular rituals aimed at greater self-understanding, she said, but they are very restrictive and wrapped up tightly in the hierarchical initiatory system of the Golden Dawn, and not necessarily accessible to those who might need them, such as the members of her coven.

I think that there are ways that are easier to comprehend, that fit better with our current world, our current society than, you know, the 1800s version of Golden Dawn, extremely ceremonial, restrictive rites. Not all rites need to be restrictive for you to face yourself. [Interview, March 2007]

I asked Ruby to talk about the process of actually incorporating the different elements into the coven practice, and to explain whether it was something that was talked about in terms of syncretism.

We actually specifically sit down when we're going to bring in new elements and go, "What do you guys think about this? How about we try this for a couple of weeks. If this is going to work, great, if this is not going to work, let's evaluate it. Does this fit into our system?" We're very aware that we're bringing in other influences. Some things have worked very well, and some things we just don't have patience for. But that's part of group dynamics as well, learning to compromise. It's an interesting challenge when you're bringing in new elements, what's going to fit with the whole group. What fits with one person may not fit with everyone. And when you're being syncretic with a group, you're trying to find that middle ground where everyone's comfortable with the new influence.

On an individual level, I'm very open... I'm always doing new things, trying new things, getting involved with new research. It's what I do every day. When I'm dealing with a group I always have to take a step back, I can't just incorporate something. I have to find out, are they going to be comfortable with it? What is the energy level of each of the people that are

involved, with their personal interest? Is this going to resonate with them or is it going to jar the group, is it going to upset the group mind? Which is why we sit down and discuss it a bit. Some things work, some things don't. [Interview, March 2007]

In a way that recalls Caroline's narrative, Ruby expresses her desire to learn and incorporate as much as she can. For Ruby, it appears as though the syncretism of external elements into her Wiccan practice is a vital part of her spirituality; indeed this openness is one thing that drew her to contemporary Paganism in the first place. Extending this openness into her coven is a very different process, but important to all involved nonetheless.

Miranda and Rose: finding historical and mystical connections

Two of the participants in my research had a very specific interest in common, and both had a lot to say on the topic. Fascinated with discovering connections between seemingly distinct cultures, Miranda and Rose both have done a significant amount of research on the similarities between Celtic and Vedic cosmology. For Miranda, the Vedic side has been an important part of her personal practice for a very long time, so I first share her narrative about Hinduism in her spirituality, and then bring Rose's narrative into the discussion so as to explore the connections that these two women have found.

In addition to incorporating different traditions from within contemporary Paganism, Miranda also places a great deal of importance on her personal practice that includes many elements from Hinduism. In fact, her case is quite different from the others in this

research in that she started out her spiritual journey with an interest in Hinduism, and only came to contemporary Paganism some time later.

As a child first in Great Britain and then Canada, Miranda was exposed to Hindu culture through her grandmother, who had grown up in India. Her grandmother's house was full of Indian art, statues, playing cards, all sorts of treasures that Miranda loved to play with. After moving to Montreal, she befriended another lover of Indian culture in elementary school, and the two of them would spend hours scheming and dreaming about the travels they would one day take. This childhood fascination later turned into a point of great interest during her teen-age period of religious exploration.

I was a bit of a rebel in high school, so when I started actually getting more interested in looking at religion, it was definitely the Hindu religion that came up. Some of the concepts that would come up frequently, I guess in common speak things like *karma* or reincarnation, and I remember reading a lot about it when I was a teenager. [Miranda, interview, April 2007]

At the same time, however, she had a friend who was getting into Wicca, and while Miranda herself was mildly interested, it didn't click for her just yet.

She was always asking, "Do you want to come do this spell with me?" and for me it was crap, my interests were more on the science side than the religion side and for me spellwork was just something that was superstitious, not something that really interested me. And I remember her giving me Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance*, and it was just too feminist for me at the time. So I find it really interesting that I use a lot of Reclaiming stuff now!

But when I actually started talking to people about traditional Wicca, and realized that it wasn't the over-the-top feminism, or just the spellcrafting stuff, and that there were some other philosophies to it, I started thinking, well this sounds a lot like what I know of Hinduism, there's a lot of overlap in worldview: the idea of reincarnation, the idea of *karma*, they're not the same exact concepts but there's a lot of overlap. The concept of

gods and goddesses and that they might be all aspects of a One, a Universal One, or maybe they're individual and maybe they're archetypes; it's the same ambiguity with Hinduism. And at the time, I really liked Hindu culture, and I was working with Hinduism and deep ecology at the same time, and trying to figure out a way to work with those in my spiritual practice. And when Wicca came along it was like this perfect fit for all of them. And I was like, oh I wonder if I can take some of these concepts that exist in Hinduism and some of the Hindu deities and not have to do these really complicated Indian rituals, which are totally foreign to me anyway, they don't fit into my lifestyle. So it was a way of marrying the two, which is essentially what I do now. [Miranda, interview, April 2007]

However, she does borrow some ritual practices from Hinduism:

In Wicca normally, if you do offerings for the gods and goddesses you'll do it at the end of ritual, you'll set aside some food, you'll offer it and put it out for the spirits. I'm more likely to do something, because I'm working with Hindu deities, something that's more like a *puja*,⁵ where the food is put out and offered to the deity first, and afterwards it's considered as blessed food and I will receive it as a blessing back. So there are little things like that that I feel like I resonate more with the Hindu side of things than I do with the Wiccan side.

But it's really the deities and the melding of the two philosophies that are the biggies. And little things too, like in India you don't start projects without acknowledging Ganesha and asking for his blessing, things like that I just work in, it's always second nature. For me I don't separate out my secular life from my spiritual life, it just melds in together. [Miranda, interview, April 2007]

Considering that the other Pagans in my study who incorporate aspects from Eastern traditions into their practice began to do so *after* already having established a base in one or more Neopagan traditions (and I would hazard a guess that this is the case for a majority of contemporary Pagans in North America), I found it particularly interesting that Miranda appeared to have taken the opposite route. Being of Celtic ancestry, she told

me that part of it was a rebellion against the Celtic revival, against how “it’s really cool to be Scottish or Irish these days.” But in addition,

The Celtic stuff just didn’t appeal to me. The Irish myths and stories about these gods with names I can’t pronounce that are interpreted this way in this area and that way in that area... It just made my head hurt. I can get my head around the Hindu pantheons, and the Hindu myths, but not the Celtic ones. So every time I tried to do something with them, a part of me felt like I was being pretentious, that it wasn’t me, that I was buying into this whole Celtic revival stuff, and the other part of me was going, oh I don’t get this, were they gods, were they heroes? So I just left it, and I went back to focusing on the Hinduism side of things. [Miranda, interview, April 2007]

However, her interest in the Celtic lore was later ignited when she began to discover its similarities to Hinduism.

A few years ago, I started to think that I wanted to explore more of my Welsh [ancestral] connections. There was a book that I read, and hated, but it made me aware of Cernunnos, which is very similar to Shiva. And there were a few other things that got my wheels turning, and I started looking into that a little bit. I haven’t looked far enough to make any conclusions, except that I did start to see parallels between certain Celtic gods and goddesses and certain Indian ones. For example, Sarasvati and Brighid I find pretty much the same thing, they overlap hugely, Shiva and Cernunnos overlap for me. The idea of Parvati and Anu, as Earth Mother. So I went, oh, ok, I’d like to learn more about this. And then right about the same time, a year or two later I started working with a circle that was using Celtic elements, so I got more exposure to that. I find now that I’m exploring the Celtic stuff, it’s not something which I have totally managed to work into my practice but I’m managing to reconcile it now. So it’s easier to me now to go to a ritual where they invoke Brighid, I just go, ok, right that’s Sarasvati. So it’s easier for me to work in the Celtic system. [Miranda, interview, April 2007]

Rose, on the other hand, has looked into the historical aspects of these similarities, in search of answers.

There’s a theory that the Celts came from the east, and the reason why is because there are so many words that are the same, so many images and so many things are the same. For example, Anu, the Great Mother, is the name of the Celtic Great Mother, and is also the name of the Great Mother in India. The Horned God was originally, before Hinduism became how it

is today, in the old, old, old Vedanta, the Horned God of the animals is Pashupati, and if you see a picture of Pashupati, you're going to see him with animals, and you're going to see him with all the same symbols and all the same images as [in a historical document depicting the Horned God in Celtic tradition]. So the main god of the Celts and the main god of the Vedanta are the same.

Also, if you look at the history of the Druids, it was oral so a lot of it's lost, but the Buddhists had missionaries that went and taught a lot of things to the Druids, so there's a lot of Buddhism in Druid tradition. And Buddhism is an offshoot of Vedanta, so that's another link into Celtic studies. For example, you'll often see if you look at the Dalai Lama, he's often carrying this thing, it's called the diamond-thunderbolt, it's got five points going up and five points going down, and in the middle is a circle. Called the *vajra*. And the *vajra* is a symbol like the pentacle of the five elements and the five mothers, and it means "as above, so below". So this is one of the main symbols of Tibetan Buddhism. But if you look in all kinds of archaeological sites that they found, in Scotland for example, you're going to find the same symbols of the *vajra*. You'll also find the triskel in Buddhism, and you find the triskel in Celtic. There's so many cross-overs, and also linguistically there's so many things that are the same. I studied the Vedanta for a long time, and found so many similarities between the two cultures. [Rose, interview, April 2007]

Rose has brought aspects of Hindu and Vedic practice into the work that she does and the programs that she teaches. In particular, she finds that another offshoot of the Vedanta, Bhakti Yoga, which she says has many similarities with Celtic Christianity, presents a useful framework for devotional practice that can be applied to the work she does in her own tradition.

Miranda does have some reservations; she wonders if by the act of searching so intently for these connections she has been manufacturing them herself to a certain extent, and at the same time ignoring the differences between traditions.

And then there's the whole question of is it correct to work with the two systems? Both from a magical spiritual point of view and from a societal point of views, is it okay to take something which is a living tradition in

India and bring it into a tradition which is not Indian? So I get mixed feelings on that, and the academic in me or the scholar in me, or the anti-fluff-bunny in me goes, oh look at you, you're picking from this and picking from that!

But on the other hand I feel that when I explore these things it deepens my practice in many ways, because it also means that I am exposing myself to different areas and finding more connections, and I really do feel that life and culture and people and humanity and animals and spirits, it's all connected, it's all a giant web, and we often interpret things in the way that fits in best to our upbringing culturally and societally, but what it all boils down to is that it's all the same really... [Miranda, interview, April 2007]

When I began this research with the goal in mind of exploring the inspirations behind syncretic choices that contemporary Pagans make, I was conceiving of this issue in a sort of top-down fashion, that Pagans are making connections and incorporating diverse practices and symbolic structure through the act of bringing them together. It had not really occurred to me that in some cases, the exact opposite could be true, that such connections already existed and Pagans were discovering and exploring them, and creating new spiritual systems out of their discoveries.

Maggie and The Mystery

Maggie is a woman in her late 50s and the oldest participant in my research, having recently retired from her job as a drama teacher. Originally from the Prairies, she has now lived in Montreal for over half of her life, and has also been a teacher in the Reclaiming witchcraft tradition for many years. But her religious trajectory started long ago:

I've always been extremely spiritual since I was born, and way more so than my parents were. We went to church every week, which was pretty common in the 50s, it wasn't quite as odd as it is these days, but my parents were just regular Presbyterian church-going folk; they weren't

Bible-thumping or anything; you'd just go to church and believe in God and that was it. We went to Northern Saskatchewan every summer and since I was about 8 or 9 I'd go to the forest and hang out, stay there for hours alone. I'd go run to the riverbanks when I was upset—we lived in a small city and we lived about 10 minutes away from the riverbank. And some other kids weren't allowed there because there was the odd murder—it wasn't dangerous, but a sort of out-of-the-way place where odd shit happens. But my parents had no fear, which is something I could never figure out. When I was 5 or 6 I was going there alone. I needed to go, I needed to listen to the wind and watch the river. And then, this is family lore, my mom said once when I was really upset she said, "Well do you want to talk about it?" And I was 5 or 6, I said, "No I don't need to talk about it, I talked to God." And my parents didn't know what to do with that; it wasn't like I got it from them. [Interview, April 2007]

Throughout her schooling, Maggie was increasingly religious, active in church and organizing Bible studies. During her university years, however, she became somewhat disillusioned with Christianity, and looked for another spiritual outlet. Interested in meditation, she turned to Buddhism for a while, but at the time it didn't feel completely right to her either. It wasn't until several years later that she began to find some answers.

When I was pregnant, in '82, I got this feeling—and I wasn't Christian really much at all anymore—but I got this thought, what if Jesus were a woman? And a feeling of being connected with women for millions of years down the generations. Amazing feeling that you feel when you're pregnant that there's all this connection happening, this earth connection. So those were two big kind of epiphanies for me, this feeling and the Woman God thing. [Interview, April 2007]

These experiences started Maggie off on a new sort of quest, and she eventually found her way to a workshop with activist and Reclaiming witch, Starhawk. She soon started attending the various Witch Camps in North America, subsequently becoming a teacher in the tradition, facilitating classes both at Witch Camps and at home in Montreal. But Maggie's spirituality is not just about Reclaiming witchcraft, or even contemporary Paganism.

I don't know what the title of what I am is now. Well, I need to meditate, I meditate an hour a day, that's really important to me. I pray at least every day. I believe in praying, even when I don't feel a connection. That's having a daily practice. And the way I pray varies greatly; sometimes I say the Buddhist prayer of "May all beings be happy", or sometimes when I'm really going through valleys, it'll be the Serenity Prayer, from AA, "Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference".⁶ So I borrow a lot from AA, Al Anon tradition. [Interview, April 2007]

Maggie's approach to syncretism is quite unique among the participants of this study. Whereas most others either looked specifically in other religious traditions for elements to bring into their practice, or discovered such elements through an interest in or exploration of particular cultural traditions, Maggie expressed her need to experience new things on her own, in her own way, and then to learn about them after the fact, regardless of what type of tradition she would find them in.

The inner spiritual thing is huge to me, so even if I'm not practicing anything, my inner belief system is very spiritual. I have a trouble with words, but also I'm wary about words. In our culture we go off into words, so people can speak very clearly about something but I can't see the belief inside them. They can talk for hours about their belief system, but I can't see it in them. There is a huge connection between what I teach and what I live, but it's sort of the opposite. What it feels like to me is in my life, whatever I'm living and getting wisdom from, I'll take it into my teaching. So I'm thinking about experiential things to do in classes, but I have to have experienced it first. Not in a game in the studio, but in my life I have to have gone through some sort of understanding, and then I'll try to translate that into some sort of game or experiential thing where people would get their own version. So in that way they're connected, but I have to have lived it out first on my own. [Interview, April 2007]

One example that Maggie shared with me involved her coming across the concept of moving in forms, tracing shapes by walking, dancing, or moving in some way that was repeated and followed a particular pattern. This spoke to her deeply, and after experimenting with it on her own, she discovered that it is a technique used often in the

Sufi tradition. Shortly after, she found a woman who was giving a workshop on the Dances of Universal Peace,⁷ which is largely based on Sufi dances.

I started to want to move in form, because in Reclaiming it's always open dancing, and except for the Spiral Dance we wouldn't even dance holding hands, which I love too. Walking certain patterns is amazing, deep mystical stuff happens. So that [the previous experience she had with walking in forms] gave me the idea, it's nice to do a pattern instead of just whatever. Then this weekend workshop came with the Dance of Universal Peace thing, and I took it and I thought, this is one of the pieces I needed! Because it's bringing the chanting that we have always done and the moving, but it's bringing in moving in forms. Then I started to bring that kind of dancing into my teaching... That all came from the Universal Dances. [Interview, April 2007]

Another aspect of Maggie's spirituality that I found intriguing was the way in which she adapted her practice depending on her location, allowing it to take on different meanings depending on where in the world she was.

Sometimes when I'm traveling and I'm in different temples that are loaded—it's not like when we set up our altars; you go into this place where people have been praying for 500 years, and you can feel it. I feel quite comfortable praying to those gods. I remember in India the Hindu temples that I would go into, I felt very strongly talking to those particular gods and goddesses. But here, now, I wouldn't be praying to them or affected by them. [Interview, April 2007]

When I asked about the main influences in her more regular practice, however, she came to the conclusion that these were Paganism, Buddhism, and her Presbyterian roots, which was a surprising realization for her.

I think my basic belief is that it's all completely there inside, and I think that's why meditation is so important to me. For me one of the biggest challenges is to get really, really down to that quiet place inside, where you might pick up something. I get a lot of tools from Buddhism, from meditation, which is the base of Buddhism. And Pagan stuff, that's another wordless thing that I hardly can even talk about. I think it comes from my wild spirit, that I was drawn to Paganism. And the power of the earth, and that insane sort of scary and hard-to-deal-with ecstatic feeling

that you can get from that. I love that, that your body is the living temple of the Goddess. I feel like I need that sustenance...

And you're helping me see that in each of these things that I'd pretty well thrown out, like Presbyterian, that there's deep spiritual things in those things too, in the things that we've rejected, and the things that have fed us. So it seems like it's all hellfire and brimstone, but I got that essential thing that I'm alone facing my God and it's for me to talk to and me to listen to directly. So that's a pretty cool thing to be given. And then you're thinking for yourself. And it's good to honor tradition too, even if you think you've thrown it away. [Interview, April 2007]

The interview that I conducted with Maggie was unique in several ways. She repeatedly professed to me that she did not often use words to talk about her spirituality, and it was extremely difficult for her to do so. At the same time, however, she told me that having to come up with words was helping her to see her beliefs in a different sort of way, even helping her to realize what different religious systems she did incorporate into her spiritual practice. It appears, however, that these systems are, for Maggie, different means to an end, serving different functions, but leading toward a common goal.

I think I believe in Mystery, I actually do believe in Mystery, because sometimes I'll go to pray and I don't want to say God, I don't want to say Goddess, I don't want to say Higher Power, so I'll get into this intellectual thing and I'll know that I just need to pray! I think it's a big mystery and I don't think we as human beings are ever going to figure it out, and I think all our myths and systems are human ways of giving us a way to understand these unspeakable mysteries. [Interview, April 2007]

Monique: the call of ancestral deity

One of the few cases involving a direct ancestral tie to a non-Western religious identity—and a particularly interesting syncretism at that—comes from Monique, a woman in her mid-thirties. Born in Quebec of Haitian immigrants, Monique grew up in a family that

was very strongly Pentecostal, although they had, once upon a time, been practitioners of Vodou. Since their conversion to Christianity, however, they will not talk about their past experiences, Monique told me.

Part of the conversion is their renunciation of any other type of what they call “false gods”. I had an aunt who when I was a kid was very much into Vodou. And now I try to get information out of her, now she tells me, “Stop talking to me about that devil worshiper’s lore!” And I’m like, “But Auntie, you used to be one of them!” And now she’s totally converted, she’s Pentecostal, so, no I can’t, no nothing, no images, no props, and it’s Jesus Christ and no one else. Which is really surprising, because I’ve heard all the stories about what she used to do to people when she was a Vodou Priestess. [Interview, July 2007]

Monique’s own spiritual trajectory started taking shape as a child, and she reported having had premonitions and prophetic dreams, as well as communication with angels. After a time, however, her premonitions and ability to sense people’s emotions got to be too much, and she blocked it out for years, until her life changed with the death of her father.

After my father passed away, I had this enormous sense of peace that was really puzzling me. I was like, that is way too bizarre for me, because my father was the pillar of my life. He was my rock, my foundation, my everything. And to lose him I would have thought that I would be more devastated, more out of focus, more unbalanced. And I wasn’t. Because even though he was gone, I had a sense that he was still present. The only part of me that was really shaken by that experience was the fact that his physical presence wasn’t there. But I could still feel him around, in situations like, Oh damn, I wish my father would be here and give me advice—and then bam, out of the blue, I hear him talking to me, I hear his advice, I hear what I need.

My first idea was to get in touch with Vodou, but it was a little bit too intense for me, so I decided, well, I have two cultural backgrounds. I have my Haitian cultural background, and I have my Celtic cultural background [through a Scottish great grandfather], so let’s start with that first. It seemed more easy-access, less frightening than Vodou was, so I started with that. [Interview, July 2007]

Her online research of spirits, ghosts and ancestral worship lead her to contemporary witchcraft, and she came upon some listings and events for the local Pagan community. Through talking with a leader in the community, Monique was finally able to get a sense of validation of her experiences. “I was like, finally somebody who gets it! Finally somebody who was able to explain to me what was happening!” [Interview, July 2007]

Soon after, Monique began taking classes through the Crescent Moon School of Magic and Paganism.⁸ Having started in this highly Wiccan—and mostly Anglophone—environment, her trajectory gradually shifted more and more into the Francophone and Goddess-oriented side of Montreal’s Pagan community. She is currently involved in a coven that incorporates the diverse perspectives and interests of its members, including High Magic, Hindu and Buddhist practices. Also drawn toward the Sacred Feminine, she decided to follow in the footsteps of her coven’s High Priestess to become a priestess of the Fellowship of Isis.

After having been involved in the contemporary Pagan milieu for a few years, however, Monique told me that she began to notice signs that the other side of her ancestry, the Haitian Vodou side, was calling to her. She resisted at first, not really wanting to get into it, but, as she put it, it wasn’t really up to her. “There were a lot of times where I was in rituals with others where you could see a certain energy coming through and I could tell it was not one of the Celtic or Greek energies. And I’m like, I think I know who you are.” After a number of synchronistic encounters, she began to listen, but was hesitant to give in completely:

With Vodou deities you can't just go in and say, okay, what do I want to learn? You really have to set your boundaries and say, this is what I'm willing to do so far. Because it's really a partnership. It's really a two-way street relationship. And as much as they're there for you, in return you need to be there for them. You need to nourish them...

So I started incorporating Vodou into my practice. Not all the ceremonies, but mostly the deities. I started working with them just to start to get to know them, each and every one of them. And of course that has the ripple effect, another member of the coven started working with them too! At Beltane we had a ritual, and he decided—he made some sort of offering cream, and he was personifying the Horned God, but making that cream, he put a lot of Vodou energy into it, and that energy transpired into the ritual and everybody was like, what the hell is that? It was really potent energy, everybody was on fire. It wasn't the typical descending of the deities, it was really more primal, coming from within, type of energy. When we work with deities we can sense when they're descending from the heavens and coming; the energies are really different than having the Vodou energies, who are more on our plane, they're more earth creatures, earth deities. [Interview, July 2007]

Monique's case of bringing two different religious systems together is particularly interesting to me because of the ways in which the two appear to interact in a compatible manner. Indeed, some sources would consider Vodou to fall under the category of Paganism, and thus include contemporary Vodou practice in the Neopagan movement. Margot Adler, in her comprehensive study of "Witches, Druids, Goddess Worshippers and Other Pagans in America Today" (1979), puts practitioners of "Voodoo, Santeria... and Native American traditions" (1979: 70, 252-3) into that category of "Other Pagans," and cites a study putting such practitioners at roughly 10% of all contemporary Pagans in America (Bonewits 1976: 10).⁹ I decided to consider Vodou as a "non-Pagan religious source" for the purposes of this study, however, since the Paganism that I am exploring here deals mainly with those branches coming from European traditions. In addition, I felt that, from Monique's narrative, Vodou is something separate for her, something that lends itself to syncretism, but separate nonetheless, coming from a different time and

place, necessitating different practices, and dealing with very different energies, and that to lump it in with other Paganisms would change its personal meaning in my retelling of her story.

Of course, Vodou is very much itself based on syncretic elements. Shortly after beginning her journey into her Vodou roots, Monique had a surprise from her mother:

I went back to my mom and said, talk to me. And she refuses. And it was funny because she came to my store, where I work at [a local occult supply shop], and they have the Christian icons that are made by a particular monastery who specializes in making real icons, with all the gold leaf and everything. And then she saw the one of Notre Dame du Perpétuel Secours, and she said, “Oh, that’s Erzulie!”¹⁰ And that’s how I learned. And I said, “Couldn’t you have told me that many years ago?” She goes, “Oh, we never really talk about these things.” [Interview, July 2007]

That Monique’s mother identified this syncretism between a Vodou *loa* and a Catholic saint even many years after her conversion to Christianity and renunciation of Vodou is significant, and potentially interesting in the study of conversion. How often do those who have converted still seek out parallels, comparisons or similes between their former religious identity and their new faith? Does the fact that Vodou itself is a syncretism between Catholicism and West African religion increase the likelihood of Christian converts continuing to identify these parallels, even while refusing to acknowledge their past beliefs and experiences? These questions are evidently out of the scope of this research, particularly as Monique was the only participant in my research to practice an Afro-Caribbean religion, although a few others mentioned Vodou and Santeria as potential interests of theirs. Indeed, Afro-Caribbean religions appear to hold great mystery and interest for many contemporary Pagans, although all (besides Monique) who

mentioned such an interest in their interviews seemed to feel as though it was somewhat off-limits to them, because of its spiritual intensity, and due to them being North Americans of European descent. For example, Vivian shared this with me:

I picked up a couple of books, one about Haitian Vodou and one about Yoruba/Santeria, and I worked with them but it was probably not necessarily the most appropriate, because I have absolutely no cultural background in that. [Vivian, interview, March 2007]¹¹

Likewise, Sean said:

Although I don't delve much into it, I'm very interested in Vodou. I think it's a very primal, very untamable energy that makes me nervous, but the experiences I've had with it have been very interesting... It's something I approach very, very cautiously. And it's not my culture either. But it is interesting. I experience that kind of energy in controlled environments, but it's not something I would ever practice by myself. [Sean, interview, September 2007]

“Primal”, “untamable”, and “intense” are all words I have heard used to describe Afro-Caribbean religions by contemporary Pagans in multiple contexts, and this representation seems to be part of the allure of these religions. It is interesting to see, however, the reluctance of white North Americans to incorporate them into their Pagan spirituality on account of their ethnic ties, whereas other religious systems, such as Buddhism, do not seem to create the same barriers or tensions.

There are many, many different cultural and religious systems with which contemporary Pagans identify, and in my research I was only able to capture a small sampling, just a fraction of the wide variety of syncretisms that exist. Syncretism between Neopaganism and Christianity (sometimes called Christo-Paganism), for instance, is one that I did not find among the participants in my research, aside from the odd mention of the Virgin

Mary as an aspect of the Goddess, and Maggie's admonition that perhaps her Presbyterian upbringing still has a place in her spiritual life. At first this may seem surprising, for there are certainly practitioners of Christo-Paganism out there. I hypothesize that this is largely a geopolitical manifestation, having direct ties to the bitter history of Christianity in Quebec. A number of the participants in my research, and an even larger number taking into account the Pagans I have spoken with under less formal circumstances, have very negative memories of Christianity, which might discourage them from incorporating its elements into their practice today.¹²

Another major religion found in certain contemporary Pagan communities is Judaism, and in particular, Jewish mysticism, also known as Kabbalism. Kabbalism has a quite long history in contemporary Paganism, and I was surprised that only one of the participants in my study, Sean, expressed interest in exploring this path.¹³ Many of the fin-de-siècle occultists, such as Aleister Crowley, who was a major influence of Gerald Gardner's work and thus of Wiccan-based contemporary Paganism as a whole (Adler 1979: 63-64), were very interested in Kabbalistic practices and based a lot of their spiritual work on Jewish mysticism. Much of Ceremonial Magick, especially that which has its roots in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, still makes use of deeply-integrated aspects of the Kabbalah (Asprem 2007).

As for other major world religions, I have not yet come across a practitioner who incorporated aspects of contemporary Islam into their Paganism, but there are a significant number of Neopagans who utilize poetry, song and dance coming from the

Sufi, or Islamic mysticism, tradition (such as discussed briefly in Maggie's narrative).¹⁴ Considering the number of religions in the world, there are a myriad other avenues for combination, incorporation and syncretism of all kinds. The fluid nature of contemporary Pagan beliefs and practices also makes it highly unlikely that academic research could ever cover all possible avenues of study.

¹ Although I much prefer to use the first-person narrative when possible, the interview from which the following information was gathered was not recorded, unlike the rest of the interviews I conducted. This is due to the fact that this interview, which took place in June of 2007, was somewhat impromptu, and I did not have my digital recorder with me at the time. However, I took detailed notes, and have since shared my interpretation with Vivian to verify its validity.

² Various social scientists, especially in the domain of social work (see, for example, Lodl et al. 1985; Gilbert 2000) have concluded that women would benefit greatly from the inclusion of spiritual and religious perspectives in support groups geared toward helping with the healing process following an abortion or miscarriage.

³ This topic has generated much debate among scholars of Japanese culture, as the *mizuko kuyo* has come to be seen by some as a fad designed to exploit women by using their guilt and fears to coerce them into paying exorbitant prices for the ceremony (see, for example, Hardacre 1997). Others assert that regardless of the institutionalization, popularization, and manipulations the ceremony has seen in the last few decades, women continue to take part in it because it holds deep, intrinsic value as a healing ceremony. One such argument is presented by LaFleur (1992); see also Underwood (1999) and Green (1999) for more perspectives on the debate. In my interview with Vivian, she mentioned that she was aware of conflicts surrounding the ceremony, but our interview focused on her own experiences with the ritual that she created, rather than her analysis of the wider issue.

⁴ A common song that is sometimes used to invoke the elements into a circle illustrates well one of the ways in which the elements are at once metaphors for the body, and the body conceived of in larger, elemental terms:

*Earth my body, water my blood
Air my breath and fire my spirit*
(oral tradition)

Another example commonly used in the Reclaiming and Anderson Feri traditions to cast a circle at the beginning of a ritual, as well as to open the circle at the end, begins thus:

*By the Earth that is her Body
By the Air that is her Breath
By the Fire of her Bright Spirit
And by the Waters of her Living Womb*
(Victor Anderson)

⁵ Sanskrit for honor or worship, *puja* refers to a variety of Hindu rituals used to honor the gods or, in some cases, a guru.

⁶ The Serenity Prayer is generally attributed to Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr, a New York theologian who used it in a sermon in the 1930s. It was soon after adopted into Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12 Step programs as a central part of their spiritual approach. In the decades since, the authorship has been called into question numerous times, as other versions of the prayer have turned up in various parts of the world, attributed to different people from different centuries. The prayer is usually written just as Maggie recited it, but with the addition of “God, grant me...” at the beginning, and sometimes using the first person plural, rather than singular (“grant *us* the serenity...”) (Alcoholics Anonymous 1992).

⁷ Dances of Universal Peace bring together sacred dances from different traditions of the world. This movement, which has spread from its roots in California in the 1960s to many different countries throughout the world (INDUP 2009), was not started as a Neopagan event but does attract a large base of people from within Pagan, New Age and some activist communities.

⁸ The Crescent Moon School, or CMS, is a local privately-owned school in which students can study different practices and beliefs pertaining to contemporary Paganism. It is currently run out of the downtown shop, *Mélange Magique / The Magical Blend*.

⁹ It is, however, unclear whether this number pertains only to the predominantly White Americans who make up the Neopagan movement, or if includes all who practice these traditions, including those whose families have been practicing them for generations. Considering how dated the study is, there might not have been much thought to this distinction at the time.

¹⁰ Erzulie is a *loa*, spirit akin to a goddess or saint, representing love and mothering in the Vodou tradition. Notre Dame du Perpétuel Secours, usually translated as Our Lady of Perpetual Help, is one of titles given to the Virgin Mary, and refers to depictions of her with the infant Jesus on her lap. She is also considered to be the patron saint of Haiti.

¹¹ However, Vivian mentioned at a later point in our interview that her interest in Vodou and Yoruba actually helped her come to terms with some elements of her Catholic upbringing, such as the concept of saints, which she had completely rejected beforehand. [Interview, April 2007]

¹² However, just south of the border, in New England, there is a large community of people who combine contemporary Paganism with Quaker philosophies and practices. I have encountered several such people at Witch Camp in Vermont, and heard through personal communication of many others. In addition, in the United States, I have come across contemporary Pagans who attended United Methodist and American Baptist churches, these being two of the more politically and socially progressive denominations of Protestantism. To what extent their practices are shaped by this fact, however, I do not know. For another anecdote of incorporation of contemporary Paganism and Christianity, though somewhat reversed this time, anthropologist Jone Salomonsen wrote a fascinating account of a Catholic women's spirituality workshop in which the nuns actually used songs, dances and other elements originating from contemporary Pagan rituals, including certain elements specifically coming from the Reclaiming tradition. When asked about their origin, Salomonsen adds with a touch of irony, the nuns replied that "they have been around forever, they are old Catholic traditions" (Salomonsen 2002b: 23).

¹³ This is likely due to the fact that none of the participants in my research were raised in Jewish families. Here in Montreal I do not believe I have come across any practicing Pagans who incorporate aspects of Judaism into their spirituality, but I have met several in south of the border, particularly in Reclaiming communities. They sometimes refer to themselves, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, as "Jewitches".

¹⁴ This is found particularly in Reclaiming communities, in which several common songs sung during ritual are based on the poetry of 13th century Sufi poet Rumi. I also attended a class a few years ago taught by a Reclaiming teacher in which Sufi songs and dances (some of which were also from the Dances of Universal Peace) figured prominently.

Chapter 6. Syncretism of elements from contemporary Pagan and non-religious sources

The third category of syncretism involves the incorporation of non-religious, mainly political elements into spiritual practice, and in this chapter I will explore and discuss some narratives that I have identified that illustrate this type of syncretism.

Although I say non-religious, these elements are very much a part of the individual's spirituality; they become, through syncretism, no less religious than any of the other beliefs and practices explored earlier in this chapter. However, for many people, such issues as feminism, environmental activism, and minority rights have nothing to do with the spiritual realm, and likewise for some contemporary Pagans, spirituality has nothing to do with politics and activism of any sort. Because opinions are often very polarized on this subject, I thought it would be interesting to examine the ways in which those who *do* combine spirituality and political philosophies or activism go about doing it, and what it means to them.

One man explained to me how his incorporation of these two seemingly disparate things, spirituality and activism, serve to create a spiritual system that works precisely because of this syncretism. He told me:

Feminism, environmentalism and other types of activism are part of my Neopagan identity. This seems like a normal result of my beliefs and values... Being an activist justifies my spiritual beliefs, because even if my beliefs are flawed or wrong, I am at least doing something tangible, with visible results. Magic is about doing a ritual for something and then

doing things for this to come true; that's what activism does. And my spiritual beliefs back up my activism, as they further justify it and give me confidence that I am doing the right thing. [Informal interview, September 2006]

This type of incorporation, of magic and activism, is not often traditionally included in discourses on religious syncretism. However, I find that it is not so different from the others discussed in previous chapters, as it is still characterized by drawing together multiple elements from diverse sources to create a cohesive, meaningful personal spiritual system and practice; through this creative process, practitioners gain a sense of agency and purpose much in the same way as they do through incorporating other religious and spiritual elements with which they feel a connection.

The narratives in this chapter that discuss political activism concern primarily practitioners who identify at least in part with the Reclaiming tradition, which is not surprising taking into consideration Reclaiming's roots in progressive political activism.¹ While the act of combining religious belief and practice with politics is not necessarily new, nor is it necessarily specific to Reclaiming, it is also not always associated with the liberal or progressive side of an issue. When calling up images of religiously-based activism, the first pictures that may come to mind are of anti-abortion protesters outside of a clinic, holding signs sporting bible verses and singing hymns, or, as has been even more common in the United States lately, anti-gay marriage activists sweeping up whole congregations in order to mobilize the religious right and center against a growing trend to legalize same-sex marriage in many states. At least in recent North American history, there has been little connection between religion and the *other* side of these issues. Aside

from a few exceptions, most of the more progressive Christian denominations have remained quiet on politically charged topics. Founders of the Reclaiming tradition perhaps saw a need for greater integration between the two; this syncretism comes then out of a desire that is not completely fulfilled by either side alone, in this case, a desire to blend social and political positions with spirituality, to back up activism with a spiritual framework, and perhaps even to revitalize spirituality through action. For some practitioners, the political activism side may be more important, while the spirituality side is the primary draw for others. As one research participant put it, “I don’t do politics because I’m interested in Reclaiming, I do Reclaiming because I’m interested in politics. It helps me see a spiritual side in what I already do” [Luke, interview, July 2007].

As practitioners of what is usually called an earth-based spirituality, it is not surprising that many would turn toward the earth as not only a site on which to work magic, but also a force with which to work magic, toward the healing of the planet and the life forms that inhabit it. As demonstrated by the earlier quote, which talked about activism being a part of one man’s Neopagan identity, the interplay between activism and spirituality is paramount: without activism, his spirituality would not have the same significance in his life, and without spirituality, his activism would not have the same foundation. Likewise, some of the individuals featured in this chapter have crafted similar relationships between contemporary Paganism and political philosophies and activism: these non-religious (at least before they were incorporated) elements have proven to be a major driving force behind their beliefs and practices, and, in turn, their spirituality has been nourished and

expanded by the incorporation of such elements, regardless of which side came first into their lives.

One theme very present in this chapter is gender. Gender and sexual identification and orientation often figure significantly in a person's spirituality, whether in a positive, affirming way or as a source of negativity, shame and struggle coming from the self, from others, or from the tenets of the religious system itself; often from all three. Especially for those who have faced gender- or sexuality-based discrimination in religious groups in the past, there is often an element of overt activism present in the choice to incorporate positive aspects of gender and sexuality into their current spirituality. This often serves a similar function as do other syncretisms of non-religious elements: through the act of incorporation into a spiritual practice, the individual's gender or sexual identity—as well as their analysis of the politics surrounding these issues—becomes both a spiritual resource and a tool through which to express spirituality. This issue is fascinating to me, and the depth and breadth of possibilities for study could warrant an entire thesis on its own. For now, however, I must be content to allow the issue to come out in the limited number of narratives in which it played a major role.

While I am one who tends to view everything as potentially political, believing that any action one takes—shopping, traveling, going to a religious service, even gardening—can and often does have political motivations, whether or not these motivations are a conscious part of one's analysis, not all of the participants in my research necessarily shared the same sentiment. In a few cases the non-religious elements being incorporated

into spirituality were not discussed as overtly political phenomena by the practitioners themselves, but were rather presented in broader terms. Still, this is all very relative, as what may seem apolitical to one person could be viewed as extremely political to another and vice-versa; it depends largely on one's definition of and experience with the term "political". Thus I hope that readers will draw their own conclusions about the extent to which these narratives are political, make use of political philosophies and actions, and carry political motivations.

Sean: Men's Mysteries

Just as exploring the Sacred Feminine is a very important part of contemporary Paganism for many women and men alike, the Sacred Masculine is likewise important for some, though anecdotal experience tells me that this is the case primarily for men, and that there are fewer women interested in this path than there are men who focus on Goddess-oriented spirituality. A common reason for this that I have heard, mostly from women but from some men as well, is that masculinity has been sacred and worshiped for so long, through patriarchal God-the-Father-based religions and male-dominated societies, that a Goddess-oriented spirituality, one that reveres femininity and womanhood in all its forms, is a necessary backlash. Even traditions such as Wicca that put a lot of emphasis on having balance between masculine and feminine aspects often appear to revere the Goddess as a primary deity, and in much mythology she is the mother of the God and came before him. There appears to be a growing interest in reclaiming the Sacred Masculine within contemporary Paganism, as the movement develops and expands and becomes more well-known and more widely accessible; this is also, perhaps, because a

number of men who have long been involved in Goddess-oriented spirituality are starting to crave recognition as men in a female-dominated spiritual system.

For Sean, the apparent lack of interest in male-oriented Paganism is a sore point, particularly in light of the way that maleness is portrayed in our society.

A lot of male attributes are discouraged in mainstream thought, you know. The macho man is ridiculed now, there's so much out there in the news about men being violent, about rape, murder, pedophilia, abuse, corruption, abuse of power, a lot of those stories are about men abusing their masculine traits. How many positive role models are there out there? Not many that aren't rife with scandal at some point! ... And how are men supposed to feel good about themselves when everything in the media portrays them as monsters, sexual perversions, and if they're not doing that, they're gonna, because they're men and they're slaves to their base emotion of machismo, or to their sexual appetite. [Interview, September 2007]

After a couple of negative experiences with individuals in the Pagan community who did not feel that there was a place for masculinity or worship of a male god in contemporary Paganism, Sean started talking to people about it, and started thinking about taking matters into his own hands.

When I talk to men about being male in Pagan spirituality, a lot of men don't know what to do. They know how to embrace the Goddess and that's good. But they don't know how to be men when women are around, because they're taught to be emotional and sensitive and these are all very feminine aspects. And they're very important, but they're not encouraged to be strong, to be leaders, to be warriors, to be themselves. And they feel themselves being crushed. And when they go to men's circles, they don't know how to act. And when men try to form their own circles, and I've had it said to me, "It's wrong of you to have a men-only circle. Because it's wrong for men to exclude women." And I say, "Well there are women-only circles," and they say, "Well that's different. Because women have realities that apply only to women, but men don't." I said, "Don't you even hear what you're saying?" ... And so in my community work I try to find venues where Pagan men can come together and talk about what it is to be men, to be masculine, to be responsible masculine, to have

that be a positive thing. Strong men, nurturing men. And not have it revert to beating your chest and all the stereotypes that go with that. And allow men to feel comfortable with themselves and who they want to be in a Pagan context, because there's not a lot of venues for that out there. [Interview, September 2007]

Religious Studies scholar and practicing Wiccan Melissa Harrington is one of only a few scholars I am aware of who specifically examines men in contemporary Paganism.² Just this fact says a lot about gender dynamics in Neopaganism and about academic researchers' interest in it as primarily a women's religious system. Drawing from her research with male Wiccans in England, Harrington came to the conclusion that this emphasis certainly causes some tension:

Wicca has often been called "Goddess Religion", because it venerates the divine feminine. My respondents were happy to see Wicca as a "Goddess Religion" in that it does revere the Goddess, but unhappy to see it defined solely as such, since in practice adherents worship the Goddess on equal terms with the God (Harrington 2002: 30).

Harrington believes that a "crisis in masculinity" (2002: 46) has taken place, due to a number of factors including the loss of cultural or religious coming-of-age rituals for adolescent males, the lack of traditional family structures, and, as Sean expressed as well, a lack of positive male role-models. Harrington's research brought her to the conclusion that although Wiccan men do not necessarily feel oppressed in a predominantly female religion, they do feel that their role is underestimated and underrepresented by those outside of Wicca.

In Sean's experience, this seems to hold true to a certain extent, although he talked about being faced with bias from within Wicca as well. Also present in his discussion is a

certain amount of confusion that he says men face about their identity and the roles available to them within the spirituality.

I'd been doing research on putting together a warrior circle or a men's circle, to explore what it meant to be a male Pagan, and I said, you know, I find it strange that I had to go through a lot of books to find out! I should know, I'm a man! [Interview, September 2007]

Harrington believes, however, that Wicca has also to a large extent helped male practitioners to heal from this crisis of masculinity:

Wiccan men rediscover and reclaim their masculinity by embodying a very masculine God, at the same time as cherishing the feminine principle. In their rites they act out psychodramas of traditionally the masculine roles of Young God, Young King, Old God, Old King, Warrior, and Protector whilst celebrating the life journey from boy to old age, death and beyond... The core of the empowerment is not in the structure of Wicca or the fact that Wicca is mainly peopled by women, it is in the mystery of the invocation of the Divine. It is when men are invoked as the God, and embody the divine masculine; and when they invoke the Goddess, the essence of the divine female, in a sustained and deep personal moment of adoration and veneration, that they feel most deeply empowered and take that empowerment with them into their every day lives. (Harrington 2002: 45-6).

Harrington's study concerns British men, and it is possible that male Canadian Pagans hold different viewpoints and have lived different experiences, but many of the points brought up in Harrington's study are certainly reflected in Sean's narrative. However, I would argue that the issue of men in contemporary Paganism is in fact much larger and more complicated than either of these analyses portray. A whole new avenue is opened up—one that straddles men's and women's identities and roles and exists at the same time as a separate category—when we consider the question of other gender identities and sexual orientations, as there exists an enormous amount of diversity in definitions of

and experiences surrounding masculinity and femininity, and what it means to be a man or a woman or both or neither.

Luke: the search for Divine Queerness

Luke is a genderqueer, cisgendered gay man in his mid-twenties.³ Luke's identity is a key element in his spirituality, and it has guided his religious trajectory to a large extent. Having grown up in the United Church of Canada, he began questioning his religious beliefs as a teenager, around the same time as he started questioning his sexual orientation, and eventually stopped going to church with his family. He told me that this caused far greater friction with his father, who was very religious, than did his announcement that he was gay.

It was in CEGEP that Luke came across a copy of *The Spiral Dance*, and his interest in Neopaganism was piqued. He eventually came into contact with other Pagans, and started going to events in the broader Pagan community of Montreal. However, as he became more knowledgeable about Wicca, he began to grow uncomfortable, as he had with Christianity, with its approach to queer people.

One of the things that was significant about Wicca was that it was very focused on duality and gender duality, and seeing the various dualities as representations of the Divine Male and the Divine Female. And I became more and more uncomfortable with this, at first on a mild conceptual level, then later with how many of the people who had Wiccan-like practice styles were putting this into practice. One event that really crystallized it for me was—I was at Kaleidoscope,⁴ and it was really cool, I really enjoyed the gathering, but one thing that happened during the gathering was that they had this thing of Women's and Men's Mysteries. And the Men's Mystery was that they were doing a series of competitions, not serious; they were fun competitions, but they were still competitions.

Things like swimming across the pond, running, and mock-combat. And at the end the man who did the best in these competitions would be proclaimed the King in a ceremony. And it just turned me completely off. And I remember thinking, I obviously am not experiencing maleness in the same way as these people. At the same time I was also just beginning to identify as genderqueer, so that didn't help. At one point I was walking along with some friends of mine, and somebody came up and said, "Hey, how come you're not taking part in the Men's Mystery? Don't you want to be King?" And I said, "Look, I'm already a Queen!" And they left me alone after that. [Interview, July 2007]

After more incidents, exploring and questioning, Luke came to realize that while the environment of Wiccan-based contemporary Paganism was accepting enough of diversity, it simply was not "set up" for people who had conceptions of gender identity that were outside of the norm.

So I started to look for other spiritual options, and I turned back to *The Spiral Dance*. And it was funny, in the first edition [published in 1979], it didn't really question gender much at all, I mean it questions gender roles, it has wonderful possibilities of new gender roles, but it doesn't really question the existence of two genders or the fixed assignment of two genders, and it only touches briefly on queer people. And it talks a lot about the inner male and the inner female that all people have. In later editions, in the endnotes, she really revised her conception of that, which I felt was very interesting... a sort of new way of looking at gender and the inner life as a function of gender, and dualities representing or not representing gender. And I started to look at that, and I started to practice in ways that focused on queerness because that's always been very religiously important to me. It wasn't just that I wanted to feel something that spoke to me, it was also that I wanted something that saw queerness as being sacred, which to me it is... And so I started to practice in different ways that might approach that. [Interview, July 2007]

Luke began integrating conceptions, ideas and theories of queerness into his practice, and in doing so, created a personal spiritual system in which queerness became incorporated and recognized as sacred. Through this new way of practicing, he also became more involved in the Reclaiming tradition, and subsequently discovered and began attending

gatherings of Radical Faeries, groups of primarily gay, bisexual, and trans men whose practice is strongly connected with Reclaiming and Feri traditions. The biggest draw of these gatherings for Luke was the community feeling:

The idea of not just a spiritual community but any kind of alternative community really organized around gay life—I realized that this sense of community is what I was missing in men’s groups and men’s mysteries. I didn’t need *men’s* that, I needed *gay men’s* that. And specifically a gay men’s that that is really open to, celebrates the different ways that one can feel when one is feeling like a man, the many different things that that can mean. [Interview, July 2007]

Just as with other elements that contemporary Pagans bring into their practice, queerness for Luke is something sacred, something deeply personal and deeply spiritual. In much of our contemporary culture, issues dealing with sexual and gender orientation and identification have not really been given a place in religious and spiritual domains, save conservative churches’ denunciation of homosexuality, or debates regarding the rights of gay ministers. In many religious settings, anything outside of strict heterosexuality and cisgender identification is taboo or a “sin”; even groups that profess to be open to all people can all too easily fall back on normative heterosexual duality paradigms, as in Luke’s experiences with Wicca.

There has been slightly more research examining homosexual and bisexual practitioners (though I am not aware of any research dealing specifically with transgender or transsexual Pagans) and their relationship to contemporary Paganism than there has been dealing with men as a whole, which is an interesting reversal, one that perhaps speaks to the fact that, like for women, there are more avenues open to the queer population than there are in most other religious and spiritual traditions. Also significant is the

observable trend that most research specifically examining male or queer Neopagans is very new, from within the last few years, and consists almost entirely of masters and doctoral theses.

Two such studies report that gay and bisexual men are the most alienated population in Wiccan communities, more so than straight men and much more so than lesbian or bisexual women. “Women who love other women,” argues Harper-Bisso, “are the ultimate or extreme manifestation of [the Divine]—as the Goddess is whole unto Herself, so lesbian and bisexual women do not ‘need’ a masculine counterpart to be complete” (2005: 248, quoted in Sloan 2008). Men, on the other hand, who are often seen as the embodiment of the God, “[are] consort[s] of the Goddess and [are] defined in relation to the feminine. In this sense, gay males, while socially accepted, are spiritually undercut by Wiccan theology” (Sloan 2008: 76).

Those contemporary Pagan traditions that draw more queer-identified people, such as Reclaiming, Feri and the Radical Faeries, often work with a conception of divinity that is much less based on gender, and especially much less based on gender polarity, as we heard briefly from Miranda back in Chapter 4. One example of this would be the Queer God, who is a manifestation of the divine often invoked in Radical Faerie rituals. The Queer God has become an important part of Luke’s spirituality:

I’d always sort of had this image of queerness as something sacred. Before then I just worked with individual gods who were said to have been queer in some way: Artemis, the eternal virgin huntress, Brigid the smith woman. But I started working with the Queer God, and that was interesting. There was a bit of history that I wasn’t aware of, apparently some Radical Faeries aren’t comfortable with the Queer God because

they've traditionally invoked the Goddess and they believe that the Queer God is an attempt to remove female influence, but that's not how I see it at all... in fact I don't think the Queer God is male all the time. [Interview, July 2007]

This flexibility is something seen all across the board in contemporary Pagan communities; the meanings attached to particular deities will often be quite varying among different traditions, covens, groups, and individuals. Luke's perception of Artemis and Brighid as queer, for example, would probably be a point of contention for many practitioners who celebrate these deities as fully female goddesses and may never have conceived of them as queer in any way. Being open to new interpretations, modifications, and different points of view is, however, directly linked to the syncretic spirit of Neopaganism that keeps the movement growing and evolving across time and place.

Vivian: activism as spirituality, spirituality as activism

Vivian's trajectory through contemporary Paganism has also been marked by discoveries and realizations about the ways in which gender and sexuality is viewed; in addition, environmentalism and ecofeminism have had a strong impact on her spirituality. I will talk here about how both of these have informed her identification as a contemporary Pagan.

Vivian was brought up first in the Catholic Church, but her family subsequently moved to the United Church after her mother decided that she disagreed too much with the Catholic Church's politics. Vivian discovered Wicca as a teenager, but had to practice in secret for a few years.

I had to do a research paper when I was 16, and I decided I wanted to do it on witchcraft, so I looked it up on the internet and came up with all this Wicca stuff, and I was like, Wow, that's so cool, that's what I've always believed! My parents were kind of like "Whatever" at first, but then I started buying all these books. Over a few years I think I bought like 50 books, whatever was in the bookstore on Paganism or magic, I read all this crazy stuff. And my parents weren't that happy with it. It was kind of weird because I didn't want to go to church anymore but I was forced to go every single week, even more so because then it was important, because I didn't want to be Christian anymore, and this wasn't cool...

Eventually my parents started being okay with me being Pagan. Partially because as soon as I took a religion class [in University] I started winning all the arguments with my mom. That's probably why I majored in Religious Studies, because it was such a huge issue growing up, religion and freedom of religion. [Interview, April 2007]

Vivian's first exposure to other Pagans was through the Wiccan Church of Canada, a British Traditional group based in Ontario. She soon moved into a more eclectic community in the Maritimes, but one that was still very Wiccan-based. As she began to develop different ideas about gender and sexuality, she came to realize that she did not fully agree with the Wiccan position.

I haven't met any Pagans who are homophobic, but I have met a few people who think that you have to have male and female energy to work magic, and these are generally Trad [Traditional Wiccan] people. They don't think there's anything wrong with homosexuality, but they also don't think that it works in ritual. Trads often think that the most divine power is between a man and a woman. The symbol for the Wiccan Church of Canada [WCC] is an image of a stylized cup and blade doing the great rite, and it wasn't until I met [a lesbian Pagan couple] that I realized how alienating that was. After that I didn't want to identify myself with that anymore, and I did a ritual in which I put all of my WCC memorabilia away, and after that I started getting into Reclaiming more. [Interview, August 2007]

When I asked her about how the Reclaiming tradition in particular has influenced or informed her own identity, she replied,

I think there's more of an openness toward queer identity and sexuality, but it's hard to say. It probably gives me better gender models, because the gender roles are more open and fluid, I don't have to be threatened by identifying as female, I don't have to be pigeonholed. It also makes me frustrated about conversations on gender in the rest of the [Pagan] community. But I can say, that is *that* kind of Paganism, but I have a community that has a gender discourse that I identify with more, so I don't feel as alienated by the others. I can identify *away* from all that. [Interview, August 2007]

Vivian believes that the more open attitude of Reclaiming with regards to queerness is directly related to the activist element in the movement, as social activism is likely to bring in a greater number of queer-identifying people. This intersection appears to be a crucial one, as almost everyone I spoke with who is involved in the Reclaiming tradition came to it either through searching for a queer-friendly spirituality, or because of its roots in social or environmental activism.

The environmental factor is also a major part of Vivian's spirituality, one that informed her from an early age and remained a formative factor in diverse aspects of her life.

When I was a kid my mom would take me to protests in the stroller, so there was that social action, social justice element to things. I can't really identify when I started getting interested in the environment, but I became vegetarian when I was 16, but not necessarily for those specific reasons, but as it evolved, as I evolved in my late teens, I became more interested in environmentalism, and I also became Pagan when I was 16. So it all sort of evolved together.

When I was 13 or 12, I was always afraid of nuclear war. It was always this thing, even though it was kind of over, because people say it was over in the 80s, when people were afraid of that sort of thing. But I still thought about it a lot. Then I read *Dreaming the Dark* (Starhawk 1982) when I was 19 or 20. That really got me thinking more about it, because it starts off about nuclear war, and the fear that everything is going to be destroyed. And I think that that was super formative. And I was reading a lot of Starhawk, and then when I was 21 I went to the FTAA protest in Quebec

City, where they had the Living River, and Starhawk was there. It was such an incredible experience, I can't even talk about it. And that sort of brought everything together, and from that point on in my work [with a University Pagan group] we started doing more environmental action and actions for peace and things like that. [Interview, April 2007]

While writing her undergraduate thesis, which looked at the ecofeminism movement through the discourses of spiritual authors Starhawk and Joanna Macy (a Buddhist and deep ecologist⁵), Vivian was able to explore her own perception of the intersections between spirituality and the environment, and what it meant to have an ecofeminist Pagan practice.

I remember one time wandering around in the park, you know that song, "Earth my body, Water my blood, Air my breath, and Fire my spirit"? Well I thought about changing it to Our, like Earth is Our body, Water is Our blood, and directing it out to all the life forms around, like, this is all us, you know what I mean? Like we are all part of this. I was thinking that I could just sing and be in myself, but to open it up to everything around me and just be like "Earth our body", I just opened it up to everything, invited everything else into me. And it's just a very simple change, a simple switch. [Interview, April 2007]

After participating in the protests against the FTAA (Free Trade Area of the Americas) summit in Quebec City in 2001, which was a real turning point for her both as spiritual and as an activist, Vivian began incorporating issues of ecological awareness and environmental justice into the work in which she was involved as a Pagan.

[In a ritual at a Pagan gathering] we talked about how we are part of the Earth, and how we've come to see ourselves as separate. That was the main theme of that ritual. Also in our main ritual we talked about the elements, we had people representing the animals say something about, Air is whatever, and then a person wearing a suit coat and a tie being like, I'm going to do this and this and this, and take the air, and I'm going to sell it to you! And that part turned out to be pretty funny, but it was awesome. And we burned the suit coat after. [Interview, April 2007]

The use of drama, humor and parody is very common in political activism, and appears to be quite common in politically-gearred Pagan ritual as well. “Upsetting the accepted order of life has been the immortal mission of fools, clowns, jesters, and comedians across time and space” (Kulkarni 2004: 2). The subversive tactic of using parody to challenge bodies of power is indeed timeless, and is not relegated to one single culture. Studies of parody as political action have taken on a wide scope within anthropology (see, for a few examples among many, Bakhtin 1984; Lancaster 1988; Nash 2001). Anthropologist David Graeber, in his studies of anarchist groups and social movements, has even observed this specific phenomenon in a familiar context:

It’s even more clearly present among Pagan anarchist groups like Reclaiming, who since the anti-nuclear movement of the ‘80s, have specialized in conducting what often seem like extravagant satires of pagan rituals that they nonetheless insist are real rituals which are really effective—even, that represent what they see as the deepest possible spiritual truths about the world. (2007: 15-16)

During my own experiences in various Pagan communities, I have also come across this type of humor in ritual, and it seems exceptionally present in the Reclaiming tradition, as well as in groups closely linked to Reclaiming, such as the Radical Faeries. Rituals like the one that Vivian described are not uncommon, especially in more activist-oriented communities, as individual Reclaiming communities are quite varied and reflect the interests, experiences and skills of the members of each community.

In my interview with Maggie, the element of activism in ritual was also brought up, although Maggie had a different sort of relationship with the concept of activism as did

Vivian. Recounting her first experience with contemporary Paganism, a workshop given by Starhawk in the 1980s, she said:

We did a trance where you go to a magical place, and it was connecting to the earth, and that's where the political activism comes in, it's that real feeling of connection to the earth and its suffering, because we were down there and we could feel the effects of acid rain, we could see it in the trees. So it was that being in nature and also connecting to the pain of it, which I don't think I had ever done before. I was in nature but it was only like finding my thoughts, whereas this was really connecting to the pain of the earth. And there was no dogma involved, that you *have* to be politically active, or you *must* do this. Because I would have run a million miles away. In the '60s there was always the, you know, these left-wing groups and these "let's change the system" things. I would go to meetings and argue with them because in those days it was always the girls who would have to take the notes and the men were tripping like crazy; it was stuff I believed in but I watched these power trips. It became just a power trip. It wasn't about fighting the system, it was about being the guy who's leading. [Maggie, Interview, April 2007]

Although it was not discussed very in-depth during the interviews, the women I spoke with who are involved in the Francophone coven also have a link to activism that is somewhat connected with their spiritual practice. One of them explained to me that being involved in some sort of volunteer work with an organization geared at helping people, animals, or the environment is something of a criteria for membership in the coven. At times, they volunteer as a group for a specific event or cause, but each of them is independently responsible for helping others outside of the coven setting in whatever way they choose. However, despite this coven policy, none of them talked about incorporating activism into their actual spiritual practice, nor did they mention bringing in any non-religious elements—whether political or not—at all. Their volunteer work seemed to be conceived of as more of a service to the community for the sake of serving the community, rather than due to ties with the spiritual work they did as coven practitioners.

Whether this demonstrates a trend that could be seen among other groups of Francophone Neopagans, is particular to this coven, or is a purely individual phenomenon is impossible to say at this point, but could certainly warrant further study.

There is a wide range of possibilities for the incorporation of non-religious elements into a religious or spiritual practice; some instances are extremely difficult to pinpoint and may slip by unnoticed. Likewise, some may be so ingrained that we may question whether there is any syncretism present at all. Holistic healers, for example, utilize both spiritual and medicinal techniques; could this be considered a syncretism between two worlds? Or is it, rather, a return to a way of healing practiced by our ancestors and by their ancestors, only separated in recent centuries? Is the rediscovery of connections and re-incorporation of previously tied beliefs or practices a form of syncretism, or is it not that at all, as Rose believes in regard to her incorporation of Shamanism and Wicca, discussed in Chapter 4? None of the participants in this study mentioned healing arts as a syncretic aspect of their practice drawing in non-religious elements; all those who mentioned healing at all did so in the context of syncretism with Eastern spiritual systems, bringing up techniques such as *reiki* and *chakra* healing, and these were framed as incorporations of other religious elements rather than non-religious ones. Like so many other interesting finds that have come about through this research, this one raises far more questions than it answers, especially about Western perceptions of Eastern spirituality and practices. Perhaps some direction can be found in what Isabelle had to say during her interview about her occasional practice of *reiki*: “Le *reiki* j’ai trouvé que

c'était accessible parce que oui c'est asiatique, mais c'est quand même très occidentalisé”
[Interview, April 2007].

In these three chapters I have attempted to present many different experiences, anecdotes, and thought-provoking narratives that suggest the depth and breadth of possibilities for syncretism within the contemporary Pagan movement. Because there is a significant amount of diversity among the participants in my research, many different avenues open up for analysis. Yet several common themes run like threads through many of the narratives, connecting the participants in an invisible web of experientiality, highlighting the subtleties and intersubjectivities that so often mark religious belief and practice. Through these stories, I have been able to glean morsels and relics, follow along a web of avenues and intersections, watch the threads of a tapestry weave themselves together in patterns—some predictable, some not. Or has the weaving, in fact, been solely by my own hand? In the final chapter, I will pick up some of these threads, following them to see where they may lead.

¹ To help illustrate this, I have included the text of the Reclaiming Principles of Unity, which express the core values of the movement, in Appendix E. The Principles of Unity were written collectively in 1997 during a Reclaiming organizational retreat.

² Harrington states, “no studies have yet been done specifically on Men and Paganism or Witchcraft, nor do I know of any academic books that cover this” (2002: 28). In my searching, I came across a reference to one master’s thesis on the subject (R. Smith 2006), and informal mentions to a few others, so it is unclear to me how many similar studies have been done. The number is small at any rate, and all are very recent.

³ The terms “queer”, “genderqueer” and “cisgender” are used here as they were used by my research participants. “Queer” is considered a positive and affirming designation for any and all people who do not identify with strict heterosexuality or heteronormative roles. It comprises many different gender and sexual orientations and identities. “Genderqueer” is more specific, referring to someone who does not perceive their gender identity to fit into the socially accepted or “normative” idea of what that gender should be, or who identifies somewhere in the middle of a gender identity spectrum. “Cisgender” is a term that has come into usage as a response to the word transgender, and means someone who feels comfortable living socially in their biological sex, or in other words, non-transgender. Because personal identification and representation thereof in studies such as this one is a very sensitive subject, I asked Luke specifically how he would like to be referred to in this thesis, and these are the terms he chose. [Personal communication, August 2008]

⁴ Kaleidoscope is a pan-Pagan festival that takes place at a campground in Ontario every summer for a week, and is well-attended by Montrealers. At Kaleidoscope one will find workshops and classes, rituals, vendors, food, and all-night drumming and dancing around a central fire.

⁵ “Deep ecology” is a term coined by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in the 1970s to describe a whole philosophy and movement based on the tenet that ecological awareness and environmentalism are important because of the inherent value of the environment and of the earth itself, rather than being important for the benefit of humans. This opposing yet far more widespread movement—that we should care about the state of the planet for reasons of our own health and happiness—he calls “shallow ecology” (Weber 1999).

Chapter 7. Tying up loose ends: discussions

There is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study.
—(J.Z. Smith 1982, quoted in Kippenberg 2000: 222)

While this final chapter serves as a conclusion to this thesis, I do not wish to call it a conclusion, for there are very few conclusions that can actually be made from this body of research. Rather, it is a weaving-together of all of the information that has thus far been presented, and though I may tie up many loose ends, there remain many, many threads winding their way off into the distance, avenues for further investigation that may never be fully explored. In addition, the word “conclusion” implies possessing enough knowledge that definitive statements, even generalizations, can be made. As this study has focused on the narratives of individuals, rather than overarching trends in the contemporary Pagan movement, there would be little merit in attempting to make such conclusions.

So many different ways of organizing and analyzing data have presented themselves as possibilities throughout the process of this project. Should I attempt to quantify all of this information, to attach numbers and labels to the narratives these people shared with me? Should I compare and contrast their stories, looking at the similarities and differences between them? Should I discuss the details of the spiritual practices of ten people in terms of their own words, as isolated cases, or with a focus on finding dialogue between different participants? Each of these options are, I believe, called for to some degree.

In the end, very little of the data that I collected could actually be quantified at all, for it consists primarily of stories. The work of comparing and contrasting has its place, but this dichotomous concept can quickly become overly limiting, not leaving room for the subtle complexities that do not fit neatly into one side or the other. Back in Chapter 2, I talked about the concept of ethnographies of the particular (Abu-Lughod 1991), and how this term has acted as a primary guiding methodology for me throughout the years. In keeping with this, I have attempted to focus on individual narratives as much as possible, giving each one the time and space it needed to be expressed fully, viewing each on its own merit. However, since many participants brought up information that seemed to compliment, contradict, or otherwise interact with the words of others whom I interviewed, the possibilities for drawing connections and creating dialogue become almost endless. Some of this dialogic potential has already found its way into the discussions around the narratives in the preceding three chapters, but there are certainly more possibilities that will become part of this final chapter.

The primary goal of this research has been to explore the reasons individuals give for syncretic choices, to discover why a practitioner decides to bring a particular element into their Pagan-based belief system or religious practice. Early on in my preliminary research, it became clear that syncretism in contemporary Paganism was a given, that, to some extent or another, most everyone was doing it. Simply identifying Neopaganism as syncretic became less important and even less interesting, and as I mentioned in Chapter 3, Stewart and Shaw (1994a: 7) caution against this type of conclusion. Thus, deeper

questions regarding *what* and *why* began to surface. In the introduction to Part 2 of this thesis, I set out a loose framework for analyzing the motivations and inspirations behind the syncretisms present in these narratives. Though extremely difficult to categorize in any quantifiable sense, being able to highlight some similarities between certain individuals' stories and examine consistencies in the ways that they have brought external elements into their contemporary Pagan practice has proved a fruitful way to look at the bigger picture, while at the same time not losing sight of the particular.

Syncretism through similitude

One of the three categories I proposed is syncretism through similitude, in which practitioners incorporate different elements because of their perceived high level of similarity. A clear example of this was demonstrated in the section about Rose and Miranda, who both (and independently of each other) have a fascination for the connections between Wicca and Hinduism; Rose's views on the roots of Wicca in Shamanism also fall into this category. In addition, Ruby remarked on similarities between Wicca and Buddhism and Taoism, certain elements in common being one of the primary draws for her to Eastern spiritual systems.

Exploring the similarities between different religio-spiritual systems can lead to very different conclusions. One potential avenue of discovery deals with forms of ancient cultural exchange that are perhaps more comprehensive and complex than what we once thought, such as in the idea that there were Buddhist missionaries in the British Isles who

influenced the Celtic peoples there, a theory that Rose has spent time researching and documenting.

Another avenue that came up in some of the interviews I conducted involves notions of universality and interconnectedness, the idea that all religions are on some level coming from the same place. This avenue itself forks here, with one path going off toward conceptions of a conscious, guiding Supreme Deity and the other heading toward Universal Consciousness or un-guided Oneness, the belief that all things are connected, but neither controlled nor guided by a deity. The former generally follows that the different religions of the world are only diverse because of peoples' evolving cultures, and that at its base every religion's God, Goddess, Creator or Spirit refers to the same entity (the All Gods are One God theory). The latter connotes very similar ideas, but the Oneness behind everything is not guided or necessarily conscious in and of itself. Either way, discovering similarities between different religious systems suggests, according to this ideology, that practitioners have tapped into the same source, and that the practice, element or cosmological component in question has some inherent truth to it since it has been accessed by multiple belief systems.¹ Rose's assertion that she is "finding connections that were already there" between Wicca and Shamanism is a perfect example of this, as is Miranda's statement that "it's all connected...and we often interpret things in the way that fits in best to our upbringing culturally and societally, but what it all boils down to is that it's all the same really."

Syncretism through external quest

Several participants recounted instances where they have felt that their Neopagan foundation was not enough, or that it did not contain the tools they required to fill a specific spiritual need. I decided to refer to this as syncretism through external quest, for in most cases practitioners searched deliberately outside of Neopaganism for new elements to compliment their already existing belief system or spiritual practice. The narrative that first inspired this category was Vivian's story about her post-abortion ritual, and how she incorporated elements of Japanese Buddhist tradition and folk religion where she felt contemporary Pagan tradition left empty holes. Through this process of syncretism and creation, she was able to piece together a ritual that was deeply meaningful to her and helped her get through a difficult time, but that also has remained a part of her ideology and personal cosmology, figuring into multiple aspects of her spirituality.

Caroline and Isabelle both brought up pieces of their experience that can be located in this category as well. Isabelle was able to find in Norse Paganism a specific cosmology that she felt was lacking from Wicca; this lack had brought up many questions for her about what beliefs to adopt along with her new-found Pagan spirituality, and she seemed to feel the need for more guidance. Discovering Asatru allowed her to adopt more specific beliefs and practices than she had been able to find within the broader Wiccan framework. Caroline reveals a similar outlook when she says "l'Hindouisme apporte quelque chose qui pour moi manque dans le Néopaganisme." Although she was so drawn to Hinduism, rather than leave her Neopagan practice all together, she decided to

incorporate the two. In this way, Neopaganism became a sort of foundational religio-spiritual system that allowed her to explore other sources as well and bring new elements into the mix; indeed, if it were not for this important openness, she may not have been so drawn to contemporary Paganism in the first place.

The fact that this point came up repeatedly in interviews suggests two possible, and not at all mutually exclusive, factors behind this type of syncretism. On one hand, perhaps contemporary Paganism is lacking in some substance necessary to provide a holistic religious experience for its adherents; on the other hand, perhaps it attracts those who are interested in a variety of paths and who are already open to the possibility of finding divinity through a variety of equally “true” religious avenues. In some cases, the former is clearly present; Isabelle’s sentiments about the lack of a cohesive Wiccan cosmology and Caroline’s feeling of needing more are examples. Rose’s assertion that a practitioner must look outside of Wicca to deepen their practice follows along these same lines. Most of the participants in this research have shown evidence of the second possible factor as well; contemporary Paganism becomes one of these “true” paths, the one with which they most readily identify their spirituality, but in practice they remain open to learning and experiencing diversity.

Caroline seems to reinforce this second possibility. Speaking about her combination of Wicca and Hinduism, she said, “C’est un équilibre entre les mystères orientaux et occidentaux, et pour moi c’est important d’avoir cet équilibre.” Many practitioners of contemporary Pagan—especially Wiccan—paths express a need to feel a balance

between God and Goddess or male and female energies, but the importance of experiencing a balance between Eastern and Western Mysteries is not something I had ever heard expressed before. It would be an interesting avenue to explore further, to find out if this is, in fact, a common feeling among people who combine Eastern and Western religious or spiritual systems, even if not an often articulated one.

Syncretism through family heritage

A few of the people I interviewed seemed to be very influenced by their own cultural, ethnic, and familial heritage in their spirituality, and thus I decided to highlight this as another category that inspires syncretic choices.

Perhaps the most obvious in this case is Monique, whose Haitian and Celtic ancestors are both very reflexively represented in her current practice as a contemporary Pagan. When Monique went searching for answers after the death of her father, she looked at the two sides of her familial heritage: “I have my Haitian cultural background, and I have my Celtic cultural background, so let’s start with that first. It seemed more easy-access, less frightening than Vodou was.” Later, however, she started bringing the Vodou side into her practice, although very cautiously. While Monique, as part of a coven, explores other areas of contemporary Paganism both on her own and within the group, her primary influences have stemmed from her two ethnic backgrounds.

Rose was the other participant who most clearly articulated a connection between personal practice and ancestral heritage. Her Celtic practice is important to her largely

because of her Celtic roots, and she believes that it is also important for everybody to follow in this way: “You have to connect with your ancestors, with your blood, and you have to find out who you really are.” Although not her primary spirituality, Caroline talked about her exploration of Stregheria, Italian witchcraft, as being enormously influential to her because of her Italian roots, even feeling as though she had rediscovered herself through her ventures into the Mediterranean traditions. Sean mentioned briefly his interest in exploring the religious systems connected with his Celtic cultural background, but he also discussed how he enjoys departing from his ancestral confines and exploring other systems as well.

I was somewhat surprised that syncretism inspired by family heritage was a major factor for only a few people, as I had expected it to figure more prominently. When I was first developing this project, it seemed to me a highly probable factor in syncretic spiritual practice. It turned out to be a factor, certainly, but in fewer cases than I had anticipated. There was another potential source of inspiration that I had thought would play a role that turned out not to be present at all: the world of dreams, imagination, fantasy. Not one of the participants in this research discussed elements that they had incorporated into their contemporary Pagan practice specifically because of having dreamed of them first. Why did I anticipate this particular inspiration? Probably because it was a part of my own experience at one time.

Several years ago when I was very new to the world of Neopaganism, I had an extremely vivid dream involving the Egyptian goddess Isis, and for a few years after that I was very

interested in Egyptian Paganism, the Egyptian pantheon, and Isis in particular, invoking her in the rituals I conducted on my own, reading books about her, exploring all the aspects of her that were a part of her lore. In time, I felt more drawn to focus on other things in my practice, but that dream has always stuck in my mind as highly influential. I am sure that there are others out there who have explored spiritual elements in their waking life that first came to them in dreams; in fact I have talked to people informally for whom this was the case. It raises the question of whether it just so happened that the ten people I decided to interview had not had experiences like this, or whether they had but chose not to talk about them. In some cases, dreams can be pushed into the background, almost forgotten, and what remains is the waking experiences that stemmed from them.

Syncretism with non-religious elements

One point that may stand out is that the three previous categories are mostly applicable to the participants whose practice involves syncretism between religio-spiritual traditions, Pagan or otherwise. For those whose practice involves examining issues of gender or environmental activism, the inspirations and motivations behind their syncretic choices seem less clear, or at least more difficult to pinpoint. Why do activists bring their spiritual beliefs and practices into their activism? Why do Pagans bring their beliefs about justice in the world into their spirituality? What is the connection between these seemingly disparate things? As we heard by more than one research participant, the two in fact compliment each other and back each other up to a large extent, bringing both simultaneously into a sphere of greater meaning. This greater meaning, in turn, is

translated into a sense of agency, wherein practitioners are at once more fulfilled by and become more proactive about both their activism and their spiritual beliefs and practices.

In this sense, motivations behind syncretism with activism, identity, and other politically-based elements are really quite similar to those between different religio-spiritual traditions, though it may be more difficult to fit these motivations into the same categories that were created to analyze the other cases. Indeed, the narratives presented in Chapter 6 did not discuss much in the way of family ties with political activism, or finding deep-seated similarities between gender identity and contemporary Paganism. In fact, those who went in search of particular traditions within Neopaganism that had an outlook on gender- and sexuality-related issues that fit better with theirs seem to have followed the exact opposite path from those who went in search of external elements to bring into their Pagan-based belief system. Luke's statement that he is interested in the Reclaiming tradition because of its political ideologies, rather than being involved in politics because of his involvement in Reclaiming, is a good example of how this process can manifest. Vivian's experience of becoming disillusioned with Traditional Wicca in part due to its endemic heteronormativity, and subsequently finding herself drawn to Reclaiming largely because of its gender analysis and political stance that fit more with her own, follows in this vein as well. I would suggest, then, that syncretism between political ideologies and activism and a contemporary Pagan practice stem from a desire to experience the spiritual in a way that adds to, compliments and reinforces the political.

As for Sean's discussion on the role of men in contemporary Paganism, although he does not frame his position as overtly political, his process appears to be similar to syncretic processes that are more explicitly within the political realm. His discourse of the Sacred Masculine is, as is Luke's Sacred Queerness, a quest for acceptance and compassion, but it is also marked by an active stance, a sense of purpose and agency. He is not completely satisfied with what he is experiencing in Pagan communities around him, so he takes matters into his own hands in an attempt to at once better understand the situation and create what he wants to see.

There is a saying that circulates in Neopagan rituals, songs, books and by word of mouth: "Be the change you want to see in the world." This adage may sound familiar; it was articulated and popularized by Mahatma Gandhi. Dear to many contemporary Pagans, it encapsulates the spirit of agency that draws so many people to this religio-spiritual system, and continues to feed their practice even as their beliefs evolve and shift over time.

Autoethnography revisited

Throughout the process of conducting the fieldwork for this project, I had many expectations and preconceived notions about what kinds of inspirational factors would figure more prominently than others. As I mentioned earlier, it surprised me that only a few people seemed to put great importance in following the traditions of their ancestors. In wondering where this expectation had come from, I began to examine my own beliefs and practices, and realized that this is not at all a strong factor in my own personal

experience with contemporary Paganism. While much of the public work that I have been involved in has focused around the Celtic pantheon, neither Celtic Wicca nor Druidry have ever been a formal part of my personal practice, though many of my ancestors come from all throughout the lands once populated by these people. On the other side, my Scandinavian roots might have drawn me to follow the Asatru path, but while it is something that interests me peripherally, I have never felt a particular pull in that direction either. In my own practice, I feel much more drawn to exploring the places where I am, connecting with the sacredness around me, and do not currently work with any particular pantheon or conception of deity at all. In this sense, I suppose that my beliefs and practices are somewhat less syncretic than those of my research participants because I do not draw on many specific elements coming from Pagan or other religious sources at all; perhaps this has contributed to my interest in exploring these questions in the first place. While an insider in many ways, especially in the eyes of the academic world, given that I participate in the community I study, am active in the rituals about which I take field notes, and am acquainted or even close friends with some of those I interviewed, within the community itself I often feel like more of an outsider.

I wrote a lot about “native” and “insider” anthropology in Chapter 2 of this thesis, and now as I write this final chapter I feel even more drawn to a discussion of anthropology on the edge, straddling two worlds with the anthropologist being at once an insider and an outsider in both. The difference is only slight, but in the months that have passed since I began this writing process, my perspective has shifted and evolved in many ways as my experiences have changed. I have become less involved in the Montreal Pagan

community than I was before, which includes being less involved in the Reclaiming group. This has been largely due to a conscious effort to spend more time working on this thesis and less time organizing rituals, but also because my interests have shifted somewhat away from the work that we had been doing. There have been many changes to the Reclaiming community itself as well, with a few instrumental and active participants leaving and many new people coming in, and due to the co-creative nature of the Reclaiming tradition, new ideas, energies and ways of practicing have dramatically changed many aspects of the group dynamics and the rituals and other events it holds.

Although it was not necessarily a conscious effort, distancing myself from my research subject has been beneficial during the final stages of this project. At this moment, I feel like less of an advocate and more of an observer, a storyteller, yet still active in the story, a weaver laying out the yarns in all of their different colors, attempting to fit them together in a coherent fashion. Being active in the community was in many ways advantageous during the fieldwork stage: knowing about the processes behind ritual planning, because I was one of the people planning the rituals; getting to know participants in the community through a framework of creativity and magic, rather than strictly through a researcher-subject relationship; bringing my own perspectives, knowledge and experiences into my understanding of others' experiences—all of this and more contributed in a very positive way to the work that I was able to accomplish. However, I found my involvement and closeness to the community became more challenging as I began to write. How much of this was due to the direct link between my involvement and my research, and how much was due to other changing factors in my

life at the same time, I do not really know. I have journeyed through shifting perspectives on Paganism and anthropology, on spirituality and academia, attempted to dodge existential crises that came flying my way, teetered on the borders between the worlds that intersect in this project, afraid of falling off the edge and landing fully in one or another. Now as I near the end, I can look back and see the ups and downs, like a hilly landscape stretching off into the distance to one side of me; to the other side I see, for the first time in a long time, the wide open plains of possibility.

Implications of this research

As I have mentioned already on a few occasions, one of my main motivations behind conducting this research and writing this thesis was a desire to help bring contemporary Paganism further into the academic light as a New Religious Movement worthy of study and analysis from the social sciences. I am not the only person with such a mission; since I began this project many other graduate theses examining various aspects of Neopaganism have been completed, and there are probably more and more each year. In several cases, when searching the internet for articles or books that might contain some information useful to a particular issue I was writing about at the time, the references that came up pointed to masters theses and doctoral dissertations that had appeared within the past few years. It is exciting to imagine my work as yet one more part of a huge network of research projects that are highlighting different aspects of contemporary Paganism and demonstrating its pertinence as a religio-spiritual movement in today's world.

A couple of years ago, I attended the Canadian National Pagan Conference (also called Gaia Gathering), an annual conference bringing together Neopagans and scholars of Neopaganism, to present my research ideas and some of my preliminary findings. After giving my talk, I had lunch with another of the conference's presenters, a woman who was doing her doctoral research on Pagan families. She told me that she thought the work that I was doing was significant because it reached a larger audience than just Pagan studies scholars, and that by making use of the concept of religious syncretism, I was demonstrating that contemporary Paganism can be an interesting and fruitful avenue of study, even by those who are not necessarily a part of the movement. Too many others, she said, had conducted research that was only interesting to other Pagans, and that had no applicability in the larger academic fields of anthropology, sociology, or religious studies. I had not thought about the implications of my research in such a conscious light before that point, and her observation held a lot of significance for me because I do believe in making connections and bringing people from different worlds together, but hadn't fully realized that I could potentially do just that.

Conducting research that straddles Pagan studies and the anthropology of religion is my attempt to promote dialog between the two fields. On the one hand, I believe that Pagan studies can benefit from the inclusion of the concept of religious syncretism in its repertoire, and also from ethnographies of particular voices within Neopaganism, which bring to light some of the many complexities and nuances in the movement. On the other hand, I believe that anthropology, and in particular the anthropology of religion, can benefit from the inclusion of contemporary Paganism as a New Religious Movement; it

has been growing and evolving for quite some time but has only recently begun to be noticed. As a religio-spiritual movement so strongly tied to a past so ancient as to border on the imaginary, and yet so rooted in modernity at the same time, the study of contemporary Paganism has so much potential for exploration and much to offer the academic community.

Aside from religious syncretism, there are many other commonly-referenced concepts in the anthropology of religion that could be studied in Neopagan communities. Conversion, for instance, takes on a new meaning in a religio-spiritual movement that is so fluid, non-dogmatic, and has few opportunities for institutionalized rupture from a former belief system and rebirth into a new one; initiation may be planned and carried out completely on one's own, or may as well not be done at all, depending on the tradition or path a practitioner is entering or exploring. Conceptions of faith and the role it plays in practitioners' perception of the world may also take on new meanings, as there is so much variation in religious belief among contemporary Pagans, some of whom have very little that could be considered "religious belief" at all. Pilgrimage is another topic present in the study of religion that has hardly been tapped in terms of contemporary Paganism, and not one that easily comes to mind as being applicable; however, the British Isles, for instance, are full of sites purported to be sacred to the Ancient Celtic peoples, and religious tourism to such places is becoming more and more frequent, especially by North American practitioners.

As I have already argued, Neopaganism is ripe for inclusion in studies of religion and modernity, with all of its balancing acts of ancient history versus modern realities, urban versus rural, Nature versus Technology, oral culture versus the Internet age. Furthermore, here in Quebec, where research into the religious sector so often hinges on linguistic and cultural differences, as well as the Quiet Revolution and local religious histories, studies of contemporary Paganism could potentially focus much more on examining these points than I have in this study. Finally, the role of religion in environmental and social justice movements appears to be a new hot topic in studies of religion; as I have demonstrated here to a limited extent, Neopaganism presents a comprehensive case study of ways in which religion and spirituality can be incorporated into progressive political ideologies and vice versa—as well as the arguments against such types of inclusion.

These are but a few examples of the potential for further exploration in the contemporary Pagan movement. Some of these avenues have been examined to a certain extent already; some have not at all to my knowledge. The possibilities are almost endless, just as they are for study in any other religious or spiritual system.

I ask myself if this study has the potential for any reverberations outside of academia, in contemporary Pagan communities themselves, and I hope that the answer is affirmative. There appears to be a great deal of disharmony between Pagan circles and groups, from what I gather by reading messages posted to electronic mailing lists, and from talking to people in the local community. Much of this disharmony takes the form of prejudice against others because of their perceived lack of authenticity, based on their own personal

beliefs and practices, or those of the tradition or path with which they identify. Many of the syncretisms highlighted in this thesis, in fact, are common sources of conflict. The question of whether or not progressive political viewpoints and activism have a place in contemporary Paganism is one big issue that I have observed surfacing again and again in the Montreal Pagan community and beyond. As Sean discussed in his narrative, he has run into a lot of problems with regard to the roles of men and male deity in the movement. Even the fact of incorporating elements from other religious traditions can be and often is a source of conflict, which may seem strange in light of the fact that this is a very widespread practice.

Sociologist Siân Reid documented many instances of inter-Pagan conflict in her study on what she calls “Witch wars.” In one example, she discusses how the term “Wicca” itself is a major source of conflict in Canadian Neopagan communities, since different people use it to refer to different things: Gardnerian and other British Traditional groups often consider it to refer solely to Traditional Wicca, whereas it is used by most others in the movement (and often in popular culture) to refer to “eclectic” Wiccans and Wiccan-influenced Neopagans as well. “Language touching on authenticity (what is a ‘real’ witch), legitimacy (what is a ‘real’ initiation), and authority (who is qualified to do what, and on what basis) tends to be particularly contested, and it is on these issues that most ‘witch wars’ hinge” (Reid 2006b: 223).

One particularly interesting point that Reid brings up is the discrepancy between people’s perception of a peaceful, harmonious movement and its reality, which includes a lot more

discord and prejudice. She says most people new to contemporary Paganism are surprised and even shocked at the level of conflict in Pagan communities, because their first exposure to Neopaganism came through reading books that made it out to be like one big idyllic family, an ecumenical community in which divergent opinions are always honored and inter-group collaboration is an opportunity for respectful sharing (2006b: 226-7). This was precisely my experience when I moved to Montreal and entered into a real “community” for the first time, having become acquainted with contemporary Paganism predominantly through books up to that point. The conflicts that I observed (and even participated in, in the beginning) were a major reason why I ended up leaving the group that I had gotten involved with upon my arrival, beginning my search instead for a group that had an outlook more similar to my own.

It is impossible to say where all of the problems that plague contemporary Pagan communities stem from, nor is it likely that anybody will ever come up with a perfect solution. Many of the conflicts that I have witnessed seem to be rooted in the very thing that makes Neopaganism so desirable a spiritual system to such a large number of people: its diversity in terms of beliefs, practices, and worldviews, and its openness, at least on a theoretical level, to difference. As with any system that has the potential to become highly personalized, many people come to feel a sense of ownership and pride with regard to the path or tradition that they are a part of, and will defend it to the death if anybody attacks its tenets. At the same time, they look at what other people are doing, and, seeing how different it is from their own approach, come to view it as less authentic. This is the same story as can be found in religions all over the world.

While I do not pretend to have the answers or to be capable of making a difference on a large scale, I hope that by highlighting some of the inspirations behind Pagan' syncretic choices, and the agency with which practitioners act throughout this process, I am contributing to an increased awareness and understanding between traditions, paths, groups, communities, and individuals. I also hope, as I have mentioned previously, that by bringing the concept of a syncretic practice into the Pagan vocabulary, individuals who identify with multiple branches of Neopaganism, or with other religious traditions, or even those who bring non-religious elements into their practice, will be more often viewed as complex, multi-faceted actors, in search of deeper meaning.

I began this final chapter with a somewhat provocative quote. Many things about this quote caught my attention, not in the least the fact that it calls into question the very existence of religion as an entity unto itself, even unto the people for whom it is a reality, leaving the onus of creativity on the researchers ourselves.

The concept of creativity has been a recurring theme throughout this thesis, especially with regard to the ways in which practitioners create their own spiritual systems through processes of syncretism. Many of the ways that they go about this can be termed creative as well, not only in the literal sense but in the figurative sense of making use of the imagination, of lived experiences, of knowledge and of an exploratory spirit to come up with solutions to problems or dilemmas that may arise in a person's spiritual worldview. By piecing together different elements that are each meaningful in their own way, a

practitioner creates a system that, in sum, becomes even more meaningful than were its individual parts.

In much this same way, the scholar brings together bits and pieces of narrative, experience, understanding, observation and emotion, weaving a tapestry out of these filaments of so many different colors; they may seem disjointed and strange, even arbitrary on their own, but as they are being woven together patterns begin to emerge and, eventually, a beautiful and complex picture is formed. In this sense, yes, religion is created by the hand of the scholar, who is a weaver of words and images, experiences lived and experiences gleaned from others.

However, I also believe that religion is a process created by the hand of the practitioner, and I do not wish to strip actors of their agency, especially as I have highlighted that agency throughout this thesis. Contemporary Pagans are in a constant process of creation, weaving their own webs and tapestries, searching for that (re)connection implied in the very word *religion*. Through acts of syncretism, they throw themselves into a co-creative dance echoed by the words of this song:

*Strand by strand, hand over hand
Thread by thread we weave our web²*

¹ This viewpoint is intimately related to the idea of the collective unconscious, coined and popularized by psychologist Carl Jung. In fact, many of Jung's theories have been influential in contemporary Pagan ideologies. This can be seen especially in the shift away from previous assertions of the historicity behind Neopagans' claims of authenticity, toward a broader definition of both authenticity and history. For example, Margot Adler writes, "the universal Old Religion may not have existed geographically, but it existed in the Jungian sense that people were tapping a common source" (1979: 88).

² The descant to a song often sung at Reclaiming gatherings, attributed to Pandora, Starhawk and Rose May Dance. See Appendix D for the full lyrics.

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Appendix A: Research introduction letter

Original letters to e-lists regarding my research, in English and French (below)

2 October, 2006

Dear Witches, Pagans, Neopagans, Shamans, etc.,

My name is Rosemary, and I am a graduate student in Anthropology at Université de Montréal, starting research for my Master's thesis. Some of you know me already, as I am also involved in various facets of the Montreal Pagan community. The topic of my research is religious syncretism in the Neopagan movement, or, how individuals and groups combine various elements from different Pagan and Neopagan traditions, from other spiritual or religious traditions, and from non-religious, socio-political traditions into their own belief system and spiritual practice.

In order to get a general idea about the different syncretisms that are present here in Montreal, I have created a series of questions relating to self-identification within the Neopagan community. I hope to use the data I collect from these questions as a starting point to locate individuals with whom I can communicate more in-depth over the course of the next several months. If you are interested in responding to some questions (it should take anywhere between 5 and 30 minutes, depending on how detailed you want to get!), please email me back and I will send you the form. Please also specify if you would prefer to have the questions in French or in English.

Please note that although I am contacting you through Neopaganism-gearred e-lists, any of you who identify with a religion or spirituality other than Neopaganism, Paganism, Witchcraft, etc., but are still in some way connected to the community, are more than welcome to participate.

Thank you, and please feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

Rosemary Roberts
Département d'anthropologie
Université de Montréal

Cher(e)s Sorcier(e)s, Païen(ne)s, Néopaïen(ne)s, Chaman(ne)s, etc.,

Je m'appelle Rosemary, et je suis en 2ème cycle au département d'anthropologie à l'Université de Montréal, où je commence mes recherches pour mon mémoire de maîtrise. Quelques un(e)s d'entre vous me connaissez déjà, car je m'implique aussi dans plusieurs voies de la communauté Païenne de Montréal. Mon sujet de recherche est le syncrétisme religieux chez les Néopaïens, ou, comment les individus et les groupes mélangent des aspects divers des différentes traditions Païennes et Néopaïennes, des autres traditions spirituelles et religieuses, et des traditions non religieuses socio-politiques pour créer leur propre système des croyances et pratiques spirituelles.

Pour avoir une idée générale des différentes voies syncrétistes qui se présentent ici à Montréal, j'ai créé une série de questions qui se lient à l'identification de soi dans la communauté Néopaïenne. J'espère utiliser les données des questions en tant que point de départ pour localiser quelques individus avec qui je pourrais communiquer plus en détail pendant les mois à venir. Si vous êtes intéressé(e)s de répondre à mes questions (ceci prendrait entre 5 et 30 minutes, en fonction du niveau de détail que vous voulez me donner!), écrivez-moi un courriel et je vous les enverrai. Merci de me dire aussi si vous préférez avoir les questions en français ou en anglais.

Veillez noter que bien que je vous écris sur des groupes électroniques Néopaïens, si vous vous identifiez avec une religion ou spiritualité autre que le Néopaganisme, Paganisme, Sorcellerie, etc., mais vous êtes d'une certaine manière lié à la communauté, je vous encourage à participer de toute façon.

Merci beaucoup, et n'hésitez pas à m'écrire si vous avez des questions.

Rosemary Roberts
Département d'anthropologie
Université de Montréal

Appendix B: Preliminary questionnaire

Preliminary Questionnaire, English

Neopagan self-identification questions

Name:

Age:

Location:

Occupation:

Contact information (email and/or phone, for follow-up):

*Please answer as extensively as you can. This information is for preliminary research purposes only, and will be kept **strictly confidential**. If I decide to use this or any other personal information for my research project, I will assign you a pseudonym in order to keep your identity private. If you feel uncomfortable even with this, please let me know and I will gladly work something out with you. If the information you provide fits in with my research, I may contact you for further conversation or interviews.*

Note: I realize that different people use different terms, such as Pagan, Neopagan, neo-Pagan, Contemporary Pagan, etc. To differentiate between the contemporary spiritual movement and the many other uses of the word “pagan” throughout history, I use the term Neopagan consistently. If you *do not* identify with this term, please explain in question #1.

1. With what Neopagan path(s) or tradition(s) do you identify yourself, if any?

2. With what religion or spiritual system (if any) were you raised?
 - 2a. Do you still retain elements of this in your current belief system and/or spiritual practice? If so, in what ways?

3. At what point in your life did you start identifying with Neopaganism, and what led you to this identification?

4. Is there a particular ancient culture that you feel connected with or drawn to? (i.e. Egyptian, Norse, Greek, Celtic, etc.)
 - 4a. In what ways do you incorporate this into your belief system and/or spiritual practice?

5. Aside from what you have already answered, are there any other religious or spiritual beliefs that you incorporate into your belief system and/or spiritual practice?

6. Are there any *non-religious or spiritual beliefs* that you incorporate into your identity as a Neopagan? (i.e. political activism, feminism, environmentalism, etc.)

7. Do you work with a coven or another group, and if so, is it based on a shared identification among members? (i.e. based on the Egyptian pantheon, on peace activism, etc.)

Thank you for completing these questions! Please email it back to me at [email address]. If you would prefer to print it out and mail it, let me know and I will send you my address.

Preliminary Questionnaire, French

Questions sur l'identité Néopaïenne

Nom :

Age :

Ville :

Profession :

Contact (adresse courriel et/ou numéro de téléphone) :

*Veillez fournir autant de détails que vous le pouvez. Cette information est pour la recherche préliminaire seulement, et sera **complètement confidentielle**. Si je décide de l'utiliser, où d'autres informations personnelles pour mon étude, je vous donnerai un pseudonyme pour garder votre identité secrète. Si même cela vous pose un problème, veuillez me le signaler et on pourra s'arranger. Si l'information que vous me fournissez convient à ma recherche, je vous contacterais pour des entretiens plus détaillés.*

Note : Je me rends compte que différentes personnes utilisent des termes différents, tels que Païen, Néopaïen, Païen Contemporain, etc. Pour différencier entre le mouvement spirituel contemporain et les diverses utilisations du mot « païen » à travers l'histoire, j'emploie le terme « Néopaïen » régulièrement. Si vous ne vous identifiez pas avec ce terme-là, veuillez expliquer pourquoi dans la question #1.

1. À quelle(s) voie(s) ou tradition(s) Néopaïenne(s), si c'est le cas, vous identifiez-vous?

2. Dans quelle religion ou système spirituel, si c'est le cas, avez-vous été élevé?

2a. En gardez-vous toujours des éléments dans votre système de croyances et/ou pratique spirituelle actuelle? Si oui, de quelle façon?

3. À quel point dans votre vie avez-vous commencé à vous identifier avec le Néopaganisme, et qu'est-ce qui vous a amené à cette identification?

4. Y a-t-il une culture ancienne particulière avec laquelle vous vous sentez lié? (c.f. égyptienne, nordique, grecque, celtique, etc.)

4a. De quelle façon l'incorporez-vous dans votre système de croyances et/ou pratique spirituelle?

5. En dehors de ce que vous avez déjà dit, existe-t-il d'autres croyances religieuses ou spirituelles que vous incorporez dans votre système de croyances et/ou pratique spirituelle?

6. Y a-t-il des *éléments non religieux ou spirituels* que vous incorporez dans votre identité Néopaïenne? (c.f. l'activisme politique, le féminisme, l'environnementalisme, etc.)

7. Travaillez-vous avec un coven ou un autre groupe, et si oui, est-ce qu'il est basé sur une identification partagée parmi les membres? (c.f. basé sur le panthéon égyptien, sur le pacifisme, etc.)

Merci d'avoir complété ces questions! Veuillez me l'envoyer à [adresse courriel] Si vous préférez l'imprimer et l'envoyer par la poste, dites-le moi et je vous donnerai mon adresse.

Appendix C: Participant profiles

Caroline

Caroline is an active woman of thirty who co-founded a French-speaking coven with her partner, Isabelle, a few years ago. While her day job is in commerce, she spends time helping to further the resources available to Francophone Pagans, and has translated a variety of texts from English into French for monolingual Francophones and those who prefer to practice in their native language. Caroline is a practitioner of Indo-Paganism, a new tradition that combines Wiccan and Hindu beliefs and practices. She also incorporates elements from other sources into her personal practice, including the Egyptian pantheon and Stregheria, Italian Paganism, which she discovered exploring her Italian roots.

Isabelle

Isabelle is a quiet woman in her late twenties who works as a receptionist. Like her partner, Caroline, she is very active in translating Pagan materials from English into French. Committed to asserting a strong internet presence in the Francophone Pagan community, she has designed and maintains several information websites and online forums that attract French-speakers in Quebec and in France. She practices her own blend of Asatru (Norse Paganism) and Wicca, the Eastern healing art Reiki, and also incorporates some other elements from Buddhist and Hindu traditions.

Luke

Luke, in his mid-twenties, identifies as a genderqueer, cisgendered gay man, and considers this to be an important part of his spirituality. He is active in the Reclaiming tradition and the Radical Faerie movement, which consists predominantly of gay, bisexual, trans and otherwise queer men. He grew up in the United Church of Canada, and, like many others, discovered contemporary Paganism as a teenager. He is very active in local politics.

Maggie

Maggie is the oldest of the participants in my research, in her late fifties. She has been a

teacher in the Reclaiming tradition for many years, as well as a long-time teacher of theater and drama. Originally from the Prairies, she has lived in Montreal for over half of her life now. She practices various forms of meditation, and is influenced by Buddhism, as well as by her childhood religious teachings in the Presbyterian Church.

Miranda

Miranda is a writer in her mid-thirties who has lived in Montreal for most of her life, having immigrated from the UK as a child. She is a self-described Wiccan-influenced practitioner of diverse Pagan paths, including Reclaiming and Feri, and incorporates many elements of Hinduism into her spiritual system. She considers environmentalism and social justice to be important parts of her spirituality, as well as her identity in general.

Monique

Monique is a woman in her mid-thirties who works as a receptionist. The daughter of Haitian immigrants, she was always discouraged by her Pentecostal family to look into her Voudou roots, even though she knew well enough that before moving to Canada, many members of her family had been practitioners themselves. After practicing Celtic Wicca for several years, paying tribute to another branch of her heritage, she recently started delving into the religion of her Haitian roots.

Rose

A gentle, soft-spoken woman in her late forties, Rose immigrated to Canada from the UK with her family as a child. She has considered herself a Neopagan Witch since her teens, and is also a practitioner of Core Shamanism, which she combined with Celtic Wicca to form the tradition that she currently practices. She works as a nurse, and teaches extensively out of a Wiccan center that she helped to form.

Ruby

Ruby is a native of Montreal in her mid-thirties who is very active in the contemporary Pagan community. She is the leader of a coven working in a tradition that incorporates Gardnerian Wicca, Celtic and Norse mythology, although her own branch also brings in elements stemming from East Asian traditions. She teaches classes on Wicca, and

manages a store.

Sean

Sean, the other male participant in my research, grew up Catholic near Quebec City and moved to Montreal after finishing University. In his late thirties, he is a prominent figure in the Pagan community, often involved in organizing public rituals. He is committed to exploring the Sacred Masculine and Men's Mysteries in his personal practice, and is also interested in the Kabbalah, or Jewish Mysticism.

Vivian

Vivian is a woman in her late twenties who works with community and youth organizations. Originally from the Maritimes, she moved to Montreal the year before I interviewed her, making her the most recent transplant of all my research participants. She has been a practicing Pagan since her teenage years, having rejected the Catholic and United Churches in which she was raised. She incorporates diverse practices, particularly coming from Buddhism, into her personal spiritual system. Many forms of activism are very much a part of her spirituality and identity as well.

Appendix D: The Charge of the Goddess

Written by Doreen Valiente¹

Listen to the words of the Great Mother, who of old was also called Artemis, Astarte, Dione, Melusine, Aphrodite, Cerridwen, Diana, Arianrhod, Brigid, and by many other names:

“Whenever you have need of any thing, once in the month, and better it be when the moon is full, you shall assemble in some secret place and adore the spirit of Me who is Queen of all the Wise. You shall be free from slavery, and as a sign that you be free, you shall be naked in your rites. Sing, feast, dance, make music and love, all in My presence, for Mine is the ecstasy of the spirit, and Mine also is joy on earth. For My law is love unto all beings. Mine is the secret that opens upon the door of youth, and mine is the cup of wine of life that is the Cauldron of Ceridwen that is the holy grail of immortality. I give the knowledge of the spirit eternal and beyond death I give peace and freedom and reunion with those that have gone before. Nor do I demand aught of sacrifice, for behold, I am the mother of all things, and My love is poured upon the earth.”

Hear ye the words of the Star Goddess, the dust of whose feet are the hosts of heaven, whose body encircles the universe:

“I who am the beauty of the green earth and the white moon among the stars and the mysteries of the waters, I call upon your soul to arise and come unto me. For I am the soul of nature that gives life to the universe. From Me all things proceed and unto Me they must return. Let My worship be in the heart that rejoices, for behold—all acts of love and pleasure are My rituals. Let there be beauty and strength, power and compassion, honor and humility, mirth and reverence within you. And you who seek to know Me, know that the seeking and yearning will avail you not, unless you know the Mystery: for if that which you seek, you find not within yourself, you will never find it without. For behold, I have been with you from the beginning, and I am that which is attained at the end of desire.”

¹ There are so many slight variations on this text, and I found it impossible to find one that was considered the “original” Valiente version, likely because Valiente herself wrote several versions and since then many more have adapted it to fit their own traditions, groups, or individual practices. This particular rendition was adapted by Starhawk, and appears in her book *The Spiral Dance* (1979: 102-3).

Appendix E: Reclaiming Principles of Unity

Written collectively by attendees at the Reclaiming Collective Annual Retreat (Reclaiming 1997).

The values of the Reclaiming tradition stem from our understanding that the earth is alive and all of life is sacred and interconnected. We see the Goddess as immanent in the earth's cycles of birth, growth, death, decay and regeneration. Our practice arises from a deep, spiritual commitment to the earth, to healing and to the linking of magic with political action.

Each of us embodies the divine. Our ultimate spiritual authority is within, and we need no other person to interpret the sacred to us. We foster the questioning attitude, and honor intellectual, spiritual and creative freedom.

We are an evolving, dynamic tradition and proudly call ourselves Witches. Honoring both Goddess and God, we work with female and male images of divinity, always remembering that their essence is a mystery which goes beyond form. Our community rituals are participatory and ecstatic, celebrating the cycles of the seasons and our lives, and raising energy for personal, collective and earth healing.

We know that everyone can do the life-changing, world-renewing work of magic, the art of changing consciousness at will. We strive to teach and practice in ways that foster personal and collective empowerment, to model shared power and to open leadership roles to all. We make decisions by consensus, and balance individual autonomy with social responsibility.

Our tradition honors the wild, and calls for service to the earth and the community. We value peace and practice non-violence, in keeping with the Rede, "Harm none, and do what you will." We work for all forms of justice: environmental, social, political, racial, gender and economic. Our feminism includes a radical analysis of power, seeing all systems of oppression as interrelated, rooted in structures of domination and control.

We welcome all genders, all races, all ages and sexual orientations and all those differences of life situation, background, and ability that increase our diversity. We strive to make our public rituals and events accessible and safe. We try to balance the need to be justly compensated for our labor with our commitment to make our work available to people of all economic levels.

All living beings are worthy of respect. All are supported by the sacred elements of air, fire, water and earth. We work to create and sustain communities and cultures that embody our values, that can help to heal the wounds of the earth and her peoples, and that can sustain us and nurture future generations.

