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Becoming Heathen

In 1997 I was a college-bound army brat, stationed with my family at the Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. One evening, while surfing the net in a tiny bedroom of my parents' home—a cozy white cottage in what the locals referred to as “smurf village”—I stumbled on an article titled “The Pentagram and the Hammer,”¹ a piece written by Pagan insiders that outlines the similarities and differences between Wicca and a Germanic reconstructionist belief system called Ásatrú. Although I had already dabbled in Wicca as a solitary practitioner within the confines of army life overseas, this particular publication was my gateway into Heathendom. In 1979 Margot Adler published “Drawing Down the Moon,” juxtaposing her experience against conventional conversion narratives by describing the adoption of a Pagan identity as a gradual “coming home.”² Since then, scholars have documented the dawning realization of countless adherents, experiences that each mirror this moment of epiphany.³ As many Pagans have said over the years, and many Heathens have said to me since, I had “come home,” and my story has unfolded like that of many others.

The tale of this research, and of my journey toward Heathenry, begins much earlier, and like many such stories, it begins with Wicca. Late in the summer of 1995, my best friend, Sarah, and I opened Scott Cunningham's book *Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner* and, in my basement bedroom, awkwardly performed the scripted ritual to pledge that in a year and a day, the period required to reach the first stage of initiation into Wicca, we would dedicate ourselves to the Wiccan path. Like many tweens, we experimented with various identities. We diverged from the “normal” kids and became interested in what sociologists call “deviant subcultures.”⁴ Our experiment with the subcultural milieu began with heavy-metal music and vampires when we were twelve. Later,

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after consuming reams of heroic fantasy novels, playing Dungeons and Dragons, and finding the Society for Creative Anachronism, I became more genuinely interested in the occult. In the eighth grade I met a socially awkward thirteen-year-old girl named Susanne who claimed to be a witch. Despite her fanciful and often ridiculous assertions regarding her mystical abilities, something about her interests sparked my curiosity. Later, one boring afternoon, while I was leafing through the “R” volume of an old set of encyclopedias, I came upon an illustration of strange-looking symbols called “runes” and their history and use as an Old Norse alphabet. This obscure and magical knowledge fueled my developing sense of difference, and Susanne and I quickly learned how to use these symbols to write notes to each other in class. Despite their boorish misuse as playthings, the runes piqued a deeper interest in Germanic magical and religious practices.

In high school, I worked at the now-abandoned U.S. Army Europe library in Heidelberg, Germany, which stocked a variety of books on witchcraft, from Starhawk’s *The Spiral Dance* (1979) to Israel Regardie’s *The Golden Dawn* (1937). I spent much of my time at this job perched on step stools, lost in the stacks with my nose in a book, my tasks forgotten. Wicca, I had learned, was a religion that focused on magical concepts, nature, the elements, and communion with the Goddess and her Consort—a fundamentally gender-egalitarian religion that exalted the feminine. Modern Wicca began as a reconstructed Pagan mystery religion, introduced in the mid-twentieth century in southern England. It crossed to the United States, flourished there, and then returned to Britain and other parts of the world, transported by feminism and concerns over religious ecology.⁵ It has no central authority, no hierarchy, and many divergent branches, each an offshoot of Gardnerian Wicca, founded by Gerald Gardner in the 1950s. To us, as kids, it meant the practice of a wide variety of cursory spells from how-to books and a new appreciation for nature. We called ourselves witches. We felt extraordinary and empowered to magically shape our own lives, contrary to the heavy control and the Cold War paranoia of barbed-wire fences, armed guards, and military rigidity surrounding us. Our isolation from other actual Wiccans or any alternative communities meant that we lacked a mature understanding of what we were getting into. Many traditional Wiccans consider self-initiation contradictory, but we did not know that at the time. We knew that whatever “it” was, it was exciting, but most importantly, it meant rebelling against the conservative social and religious culture of the military institution we had been a part of since birth. In this military community, the public face of Wicca consisted of disparaging letters to the editor of the *Stars and Stripes*, the tones of which gave a nod to the Satanic Panic ongoing since the 1980s. The basis or motivation for these letters was unclear, but they were timely in that they appeared in the newspaper just as we were developing our new Wiccan identities. These letters and a general public ignorance about alternative religions only increased our determination. I snipped them from the paper and carried them in my wallet as reminders of my social context. In one sense, they were my first connection to real-time

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expressions regarding Paganism. Mostly, however, they reinforced my sense of otherness and alienation. Our newfound religious experimentation gave us a feeling of greater closeness to our natural surroundings and provided us with a spiritual underpinning with which to challenge the conformity of the other kids at school. It was a powerful secret that brought us together and gave us a tangible reason for feeling like aliens.

As is standard in the military, Sarah moved away a year later, and I never saw her again. I continued my exercise in spiritual experimentation by myself, but—as I would hear later from other Heathens—something about Wicca did not fit. It did not feel grounded or authentic enough for me. I was interested only in my Germanic roots, in the gods of my ancestors about whom my mom, a German “foreign national,” as we said overseas, had read me stories at bedtime. Wicca was polytheistic, asserting that all gods and goddesses are manifestations of “the one” great being, like a gem with a thousand facets—a reflection of the monotheism I found baffling. It focused on magic, elements, and spell casting that our sense of the romantic begged us to believe in, but that my skepticism would not allow. Wicca, in its 1990s manifestation as a nature-based Goddess religion, felt very nurturing, soft, and feminine, but my patriarchal military upbringing and my awareness of my Germanicity led to interest in something that I interpreted as more firm, profound, and epic. It was then that I began to identify as Heathen.

My identity and my interest in American Heathenry became more firmly rooted in my consciousness when my family was stationed in Washington, D.C., where I met David and his friend Matt, both of whom were into the black-metal scene. Because of his long hair, black clothing, and combat boots, I sensed a kindred spirit in David, who quickly became a friend and my doorway into the music scene. Black metal, as I learned, was a dark, harsh, fast, and screeching style of music that originated in Scandinavia, and many of the bands that created this genre were intricately connected and involved with aspects of their own native spirituality, referred to in the modern age as Ásatrú. This music was another aspect of my growing Heathen identity, although it was regrettably entangled in the 1990s with the Satanic Panic in Norway (imported from the United States) and an array of anti-Christian church burnings and interband homicide. Many black-metal bands sang about ancient Heathen mythology, culture, Vikings, medieval sagas, and epic battles. Although I was disturbed by the arson, the underlying anti-Christian, pro-Pagan protest spoke to my disenchantment with Judeo-Christian religion. My friends regularly reinforced my Heathen identity as they made reference to the ties between Ásatrú and black metal, referring to a range of my behaviors as “very Heathen” and thereby enforcing and constructing what it meant for me to “do” Heathenry.

Traditionally, research in the sociology of religion has focused disproportionately on empirical studies of American Protestantism and has neglected non-Christian religious experiences and practices.⁶ In the early 2000s, sociologists of religion have turned increasingly to the cultural analysis of religion as it

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is experienced through the sacralization of daily life, analyzing religious cultural tools and symbolic boundaries.⁷ Much of the early literature that focused on new religious movements (NRMs) regarded them as significant only in that they were “symptoms of a broader social malaise.”⁸ These analyses overlooked the complexities involved in the construction of religious identities that NRMs offer to their members. In so doing, the literature on cultural analysis of religion—and my contribution to it—is further revitalizing the field by diverging from traditional approaches and focusing instead on an intersectional investigation of religion as a source of symbolic legitimation. It responds to the scholarly call for more work among sociologists of religion to “proceed with a fundamentally different understanding of the nature of religious authority and religious identity in the late modern world than the one articulated by market and secularization-dominant approaches” while acknowledging that religious identity is always “inherently fluid and intersectional, with boundaries that are actively made and defended (or blurred and changed).”⁹ Social scientists have also researched the many ways in which people’s religious beliefs influence their political worldviews.¹⁰ This book, however, offers insight into how dominant political currents can influence the shape of NRMs—a relationship in reverse—and how this influence plays out through the microinteractions and identity work of movement participants. By the term *political*, which I employ throughout this book, I am referencing a system that moves beyond people’s individual preferences to ideas that tap into larger structures of power and inequality. The feminist rallying cry of the 1960s and 1970s “The personal is political” reflected the idea that people’s personal choices and ideas are influenced by social structural and institutional considerations.¹¹ For second-wave feminists, women’s personal lives were brought into the public arena to challenge massive structural inequalities and gendered oppression. Exclusion and exploitation were not individual acts, but were shared under patriarchy. In 1959 C. Wright Mills articulated the idea that personal attitudes and beliefs often have a structural component, and he distinguished between “personal troubles” and “public issues” as a way of explaining the impact of social, political, and historical context on individual experience.¹² American ideas of meritocracy, for example, undergird the assumption that poverty is a product of laziness rather than being rooted in wider structural obstacles. Put simply, people’s personal ideas often reflect wider systems of oppression and dominance. In this book “the political” refers to concepts that reflect differential opportunities or identities that are part of a broader system of power and the perpetuation of inequalities. I hope that by focusing on these many variables, this project will assist with an intersectional perspective on religion’s role in an ever-changing world.

Mapping the Neopagan Landscape

The relationship between American Heathenry and other Neopaganisms is complex, as I learned in the pre-Google age while perusing the “Metaphysical”

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section of various chain bookstores. What I found was very little information on Heathen practice and a plethora of New Age advice and instruction on astrology, Runology, UFOlogy, tarot, and witchcraft, as well as dozens of hip, up-to-date spell books for the modern dabbler in the occult. Commercialized and targeted to specific audiences, these books symbolize the marketability and self-help mentality of the New Age and the personal and self-driven postmodern spirituality that has come with it. Do you want to become a witch to wow your friends at school? *The Teen Spellbook: Magick for Young Witches*, *Be a Teen Goddess: Magical Charms, Spells and Wiccan Wisdom for the Wild*, and *Silver RavenWolf's Teen Witch: Wicca for a New Generation* will help you with that, complete with the *Teen Witch Kit: Everything You Need to Make Magick!*¹³ Do you need help with your career, finances, or love life? Jen McConnel is there to help you with *Goddess Spells for Busy Girls*.¹⁴ Or, if you need immediate spiritual assistance with your career or workplace, follow the modern trend of knowledge seeking and Google for instant guidance from websites with free spells and rituals written to satisfy your every need. Perhaps you are interested in learning more about the art of candle magick, a practice involving concentration, visualization, and willpower. Google.com's book search lists over 3000 results for "candle magick," including *A Little Book of Candle Magic*, *Mastering Candle Magick: Advanced Spells and Charms for Every Rite*, and *Candle Magic for Beginners: The Simplest Magic You Can Do* or, in 2014, *Candle Magic: Simple Spells for Beginners to Witchcraft*. If you are in a hurry, there is *Wicca Candle Spells: Simple Magic Spells That Work Fast*.¹⁵

Whatever the purpose of these books, one thing is clear: they are aimed at an audience whose spirituality, sense of empowerment, and alienation are intimately intertwined. They speak to those who seek a new approach to religion apart from traditional religious institutions and as readily available as handbooks in the spiritual marketplace. This pattern of interest and involvement in New Age spirituality indicates an increase in religious pluralism, an acceptance of alternative religious views, and a decline in participation in traditional religion.¹⁶ For scholars of NRMs, the variety of explanations for the decline of the power of traditional Christianity in Europe and the United States has been exhausted by decades of debate and microscopic investigation. Max Weber outlined these changes early in the twentieth century, referring to "disenchantment" rather than secularization to highlight their effects not only on the social and organizational level but also on a subjective intellectual level. Disenchantment, he argued, refers to the knowledge that there are no mysterious forces at play; rather, we can "master all things by calculation."¹⁷ Consequently, "the bearing of man has been disenchanted and denuded of its mystical but inwardly genuine plasticity."¹⁸ Later, other scholars echoed Weber's prediction, positing that this "disenchanted world in which we live" is due, in part, to "the decline of the community . . . the increasing fragmentation of modern life, [and] the impact of multicultural and religiously plural societies," along with "creeping rationalization and the influence of scientific worldviews." Together, these have

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“led to a situation in which religion is privatized, far less socially important, and far less plausible than it used to be in premodern communities.”¹⁹ Postmodernism has also undermined our search for metanarratives, particularly those that stress certainty in the world, human emancipation, and social progress. The postmodern condition is one in which everything becomes relative, and quests for overarching myths, narratives, or frameworks of knowledge are easily abandoned. The acceptance of traditional or dominant forms of religiosity is on the wane as modern life has eroded the formerly held belief in ideas about inevitable human progress and a future full of divine significance and purpose.²⁰ More to the point, perhaps, is the declining influence of ascribed identities, which, in the case of religion, leaves people free to pursue personal and individualistic religious concerns.²¹ Weber’s prediction that increased rationalization would lead to the end of religion has not yet been fulfilled. Despite the argument that secularization has changed the pattern of religious life, most contemporary scholars have been reluctant to claim that a decline in traditional religion means that God is dead. Rather, we have traded in the traditional, institutional religion for privatized, personal spirituality.²²

Indeed, it seems that there are no aspects of modernity or postmodernity that cannot be said to have a hand in the birth of the NRMs that I discovered in those bookstores. We have filled much of the resultant black hole with a variety of social networks, subcultures, and other forms of community, a trend that has earned a fair share of attention by religious studies scholars. The growth of new religions is, at least in part, enhanced by the breakdown of religious monopolies and the growth of the spiritual marketplace.²³ New religions are evidence of secularization²⁴ as dominant religions lose their authority and religion undergoes the privatization that leads to spiritual seeking and the development of religious movements like Paganism(s).

Under the umbrella term *Neopaganism*, scholars and practitioners alike have captured the myriad modern Pagan faiths into one large container. Most Neopaganisms are exceptionally diverse and inclusive. Many Pagans identify their practice as eclectic and choose not to adopt any single tradition.²⁵ Although the groups sometimes demonstrate extreme differences from one another, their proximity and similar temporal origins have, to a large degree, rendered them inseparable. They are part of the cultic milieu, defining themselves in relation to one another while delving, in many cases, into the same tomes for answers to their origins and practice.²⁶ Many have a specific pantheon of gods and spirits central to their tradition, while others worship any and all gods to whom their particular needs and desires apply. Some are hard polytheists, who believe that each god is an independent, unique individual; others are soft polytheists, who view all gods as manifestations or facets of one central deity. Most Neopaganisms are centered on the cycles of the earth and the workings of animals, plants, and humans and their relationship and interconnectivity with the cosmos.²⁷ Others are more cultural, focusing on ancestors and community building with a less politically inspired ecological focus despite the reverence of the spirits of

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land and place. In the last few decades, ethnic groups around the world have, like Heathens, turned increasingly to a revival of the pre-Christian religious systems of their ancestors. These folk religions vary, however, from the development of romanticized and generic paganisms that focus on, for example, the magical Celticity of practitioners' (often imagined) Celtic forebears to a more politically charged focus on a particular peoplehood. The place of reconstruction also matters greatly to the outcome of a particular pagan project. In Eastern Europe, "the issue of national identity is strongly emphasized while magical practices are de-emphasized." To these communities, "the necessity of a return to pre-Christian national-tribal traditions" is paramount.²⁸

In the United States, Paganisms are many and varied. Even among those Paganisms under the umbrella of "Germanic," the origins, goals, and philosophies of each particular tradition have led to significant schisms and differences. Scholars who study American Heathenry often distinguish between Odinism and Ásatrú, viewing Odinism as a highly politicized right-wing movement and Ásatrú as having greater ideological variance and a closer relationship to the wider Pagan movement.²⁹ Both, however, can be traced back to a variety of overlapping and mutually influencing movements during the early nineteenth century. As a reaction against the industrialization movement and the increasing rationalization of society, the highly emotive Romantic movement espoused folk art, folklore, an idealistic focus on early Germanic culture, and a renewed interest in the natural world. From this, and from the Esotericism prevalent in mid-twentieth-century Europe, grew the Völkisch movement. Born of romantic nationalism, the Völkisch movement championed the affirmation of white identity in opposition to modernity, immigration, multiracialism, liberalism, and multiculturalism. Out of this zeitgeist came the veneration of antiquity, a fantasy of medievalism and romantic epics, and a variety of *Deutschgläubig* (German Faith) movements throughout Europe, including the Germanische Glaubens-Gemeinschaft (1907), the Deutschgläubige Gemeinschaft (1911), and the Germanenorden (1912). During the Third Reich, Jakob Wilhelm Hauer, a professor of religious studies, devised the influential German Faith Movement (*Deutsche Glaubensbewegung*) as a countermovement to replace Christianity with an essentially German folk religion. After the Nazis appropriated Germanic antiquity, however, many of these precursor movements died, but the influence of the Völkisch focus on white identity and the connection, and conflation, of Heathenry with neo-Nazis and white supremacy continued. These movements of revitalization set the stage for a second wave of interest in Germanic antiquity during the countercultural activities of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Situated in the sociopolitical upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s, contemporary Ásatrú developed alongside of, and in response to, other Neopagan NRMs as an outgrowth of the era's New Age spirituality movement, influenced by new waves of feminism, male liberation movements, the civil rights triumphs, and changing racial awareness.³⁰ The new Pagan movements ultimately sought to revive ancient non-Christian and typically polytheistic, pantheistic, or animistic

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belief systems situated in a more political climate than their nineteenth- and twentieth- century precursor movements. Because of a renewed interest in folklore and historical research, some Pagans began to look closely at their Scandinavian, Anglo-Saxon, or Germanic heritage as a foundation for spiritual practice. Partly as a reaction against the New Age, but spirited by the same protest against modernity and similar ameliorating reenchantment processes as the earlier movements, in 1972 and 1973 Heathen organizations developed simultaneously across the globe. In Iceland, the Icelandic government recognized Ásatrúarfélagið (Ásatrú Association), led by farmer-poet Sveinbjörn Beinteinsson, as a religious organization. The recognition came on the heels of a dramatic volcanic eruption that destroyed hundreds of homes and captured the attention of the international media, bringing Iceland, and Ásatrú, to the public's attention worldwide. In 1973, a month after the eruption was declared over, Beinteinsson held the first public outdoor *blót* (ritual) since the conversion to Christianity in 1000 C.E. The next year in England, John Gibbs-Bailey and John Yeowell founded the Committee for the Restoration of the Odinic Rite, which later became the Odinic Rite. In the United States, Danish anarcho-syndicalist Else Christensen (1913–2005) began publishing *The Odinist* newsletter. Christensen's writings influenced the formation of Ásatrú groups in Europe and the United States, with varying levels of attention to her political motivations. Sidestepping Christensen's focus on racial ideology, Stephen McNallen, an active-duty American soldier at the time, produced *The Runestone* and began the Viking Brotherhood, which later morphed into the Ásatrú Free Assembly, the first national Heathen organization in the United States. Yet the circumstances of Heathenry's creation, as a movement influenced by Neo-Volkism, in a country still mired in the struggles of Jim Crow racial ideology made its divorce from racial concerns difficult.

In the next few years, differing ideas about how to approach racial exclusivity and whether to allow white supremacists membership caused a schism, and the Ásatrú Free Assembly splintered into the Ásatrú Alliance and the Ring of Troth, now known simply as The Troth—a history thoroughly outlined in Matthias Gardell's book *Gods of the Blood*.³¹ In 1994 McNallen revived the Ásatrú Free Assembly, now known as the Ásatrú Folk Assembly (AFA). Other organizations came and went, each with its particular sociopolitical leanings or preferred practices.³² Many still adhered to Völkisch ideologies, preferring racial politics and exclusivity over other aspects of faith. White supremacists, neo-Nazis, and Aryan prison gangs co-opted the movement to pursue their own political agendas, using Heathenry in the same manner as the Nazi Party—as a platform for the fantasy of a “pure,” epic, heroic, and ultimately dying race, threatened on all sides by the nonwhite “other,” which was leading to the degradation of traditional morals and values. Other groups purposely and vehemently positioned themselves against such ideologies, focusing instead on the apolitical reenchantment born of scholarship, spirituality, and the fantasy epic. The distinct Heathen groups that emerged were Ásatrú, Theodism, Fyrn Sede, Odinism or Wotanism,

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and Irminism. These groups vary in their region of ancient origin in northern Europe, in their structure, and often in their sociopolitical leanings. The followers of these faith systems came to call them “Heathenry,” a term used to demarcate them from other Neopagan religions whose sources are more modern. In the United States, however, much of Germanic Paganism came to be known generically as Ásatrú. Ásatrú is an Icelandic translation of the Danish word *Asetro*. It means “belief in the Aesir,” the gods of Germanic tribal peoples, among whom Thor, Odin, Freyja, Freyr, Frigg, Tyr, and Heimdall are the most popular. In Iceland, it is the largest non-Christian religion. In this book I prefer the term *Heathen* to describe all these groups because it is inclusive of all varieties of Germanic paganism.

Although Heathens revere the forces of nature, Heathenism is not a nature religion in the usual sense of the term. Heathens and other historically based reconstructionist groups are dissatisfied with the term *Neopagan* and differ markedly from their Neopagan peers. Reconstructionist Paganisms go to great lengths to stress their independent roots. Germanic, Celtic, Hellenic, Egyptian, Slavic, Baltic, and other Paganisms often avoid association with the term *Neopagan*, arguing that not only has it been co-opted by Wiccans, in particular, as synonymous with their faith, but also *Neo* implies that the faith is new and modern. *Modern* implies inauthentic, made-up, and New Agey, along with other politically charged assumptions, such as effeminate or liberal. Instead, reconstructionists claim ownership over their faith tradition as an “indigenous” ethnic right passed down by their forebears. Ideologically, Neopaganism is decidedly individualistic, allowing for free interpretation and invention and engaging in cultural appropriation, or “cultural strip mining,”³³ a practice that reconstructionists typically find irritating. American Heathenry, in contrast, is ethnocentric, paying close attention to historical research and the written lore of northern Europe and drawing strict boundaries of authenticity around what beliefs and practices can be considered legitimately Heathen. Based on the tribal models of ancient peoples, Heathenry remains incredibly diverse and decentralized, often lacking even a sense of oneness with other adherents who identify as Heathen.

American Heathenry 101

Ten years after my first experiences with Heathenry in the flesh, I stood outside a campground dining facility, a log cabin on a concrete slab, waiting my turn to be called inside for a seat at the solemn ritual of *High Sumbel*. It was surprisingly swampy and warm for a summer evening on my visit to this northern state, less of a contrast from the Mississippi weather I had left behind than I had hoped. Nearby me were dozens of members of local and regional Heathen groups that were already bonded to one another in familiarity and friendship. I was an interloper—the Heathen-turned-researcher stranger—watching them chatter as they clustered around one another in kindred groups. Each participant wore a pendant, sometimes many, variants of Thor’s hammer in bronze, silver, or

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pewter. Mjollnir, as Thor's hammer is called, is the primary symbol worn by most American Heathens to indicate group belonging. Heathens wear their symbols in the open, often remarking that colleagues, family, or other outsiders interpret the symbol as a sailor's anchor—hardly a threatening icon in the popular imagination. To many Heathens, it symbolizes strength, perseverance, and protection—a tool with which the god Thor defended humans and gods alike from the baleful forces of frost giants and other enemies of Asgard. Nearby, a group of women dressed in shawls, long skirts, and handmade cotton shifts exchanged stories, laughing and chattering in the shadow of the shelter's floodlight. Some nearby men wore tunics or bits and pieces of reenactor's garb, each waiting in the dark to be called in. To a certain degree, I was reminded of the aesthetic of a Renaissance fair, but the occasion felt more reverent and significant. It was similar to my other experiences among Heathens, although this time no one was wearing chain mail. Inside the hall, members of the Twelve Lakes Kindred,³⁴ the group hosting this annual event, milled about, arranging the tables to seat themselves at the front of the hall and their guests in one long row down the length of the room. On each table they placed a crisp white tablecloth, a floral centerpiece, bowls of snacks, and pitchers of water.

Once the Twelve Lakes members concluded setting up, their *Thule*, a law-speaker—in charge of clarifying and maintaining protocol and the taking and keeping of oaths—stepped outside to call us in from the dark. Dressed in a Viking-style tunic with decorative trim, he called our names. Waiting guests enter the hall by order of rank—a reflection of their significance in friendship and obligation to the hosts. He called each kindred, who entered together, punctuated by couples and an individual here and there. Mostly, those individuals present were unaffiliated—guests, merely—and stayed outside to straggle until last, to sit at the end of the table, symbolically marginalized. I was fortunate enough to be a guest of the women-in-shawls, a high-status group in this area. We got seated toward the front of the room. Inside, the space once used by summer campers and Boy Scouts had been transformed into a chieftain's *hof*. On the stone wall above the long table reserved for the hosts hung a variety of brightly colored kindred banners of those groups in attendance. Sewn as quilts or painted onto fabric, the symbols, runic writing, and images of animals, weaponry, or other iconography reflected a scene of medieval heraldry. The largest quilt, central on the wall, was that of the host, an intricate work of Twelve Lake's motto in runes surrounding a large central bindrune,³⁵ the symbol of their group. On the table beneath, drinking horns of mead, a honey-wine symbolic to Heathens for its historical importance to Germanic peoples and its role as an elixir of poetry and inspiration. On a small wooden podium, other odds and ends awaited their purpose in the night's ritual. Once we were ushered in and our hands were washed in scented water and dried on clean white cloths, we took our assigned places. Hans, the chieftain, stood, his embroidery-trimmed tunic belted at the waist, and welcomed us to the hall. Beside him, Thordis, his wife, in her reconstructed Viking apron gown, took up a large drinking horn of

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mead to approach each group's leader in welcome. Heathens derive the practice of drinking from a horn from the lore and historical scholarship. In the Icelandic epic poem *Lokrur*, for example, the god Thor drank heartily from a horn that, unbeknownst to him, contained the vast sea. Historically, the Viking and medieval Scandinavian elite used drinking horns during ritual functions, while those of lower status drank primarily from bowls. Fulfilling the duty of Valkyrie for the ritual, Thordis had the sacred obligation to pass the horn among the speakers, a practice preserved in *Beowulf*, in which Queen Wealhtheow presents a cup to the visiting Danes.³⁶ As we watched, Thordis exchanged words of friendship and, with others, words of encouragement or welcome. Down the row of tables she walked, speaking to kindred leaders, each in turn. To the Three Oaks Kindred,³⁷ a local group with whom the men in her kindred had quarreled, she offered tearful words of reconciliation for past grievances, suggesting that although the men might have injured friendships, the women were here to repair them. The solemn moment moved many in the hall to tears or, at the sight of such emotion, awkward fidgeting. When Three Oaks Kindred accepted the apology, Hans and the rest of the Twelve Lakes Kindred thumped the high table with their fists—a Heathen applause, taken up by the hall's guests to great vibration. I could feel the thunderous pounding from my heels to my teeth, a powerful expression of support and camaraderie. The rest of the ritual involved each participant sharing words of thanks, blessing, encouragement, or prayer with the horn in hand before passing it back to Thordis. Most thanked the host out of ritual obligation before sharing poems and songs about gods and ancestors, offering gifts to one another or to the hosts, and toasting friends, friendship, and community. The ritual lasted into the early hours of the morning. At this time, we brought to bear the sociopolitical purpose of this ritual among the ancient Germanic tribes and among the current Heathens present there. Now, as then, the ritual of *Sumbel* is a game of politicking, of socializing, cementing bonds of peace and friendship and forming new relationships—all under the weight of public scrutiny. To many there, what is spoken over the horn passes into the Urd's well, where the Norns sit and weave the destiny of all humankind. The words spoken into the well affect our *wyrd*, the interconnected web of obligation. The words said there transcended the profane, enveloping us all in feelings of goodwill—an expression of Émile Durkheim's "collective effervescence."³⁸ This, and many experiences before and after, offered insight into the power of local community, the Heathen perspective, and its anachronistic aesthetic.

As a unit of analysis, Heathenry is decidedly complex. It is in every way subcultural, but it is also a religion, a category that is itself challenging to define. Like other scholars whose work on religion requires clarification, I work under the understanding that Heathenry, like other religious groups, is a cultural system. According to Clifford Geertz, religion can best be understood as "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that

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the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”³⁹ Indeed, Heathenry provides such a conception to its adherents and is simultaneously spiritual and cultural. As a cultural system, it provides for its adherents ethnic identification—a system of meaning tied to heritage, place, and daily practices with historical significance.

Although the origin of the “old way” is lost in antiquity, at its peak, it covered all of northern Europe. It was more than a religion; it was a custom involving political, social, and cultural beliefs and practices, a complex blending of the sacred and profane. It was not called a “religion” by the people who practiced it; it was just “the Way.” Specific practices and beliefs varied across family and tribal groups and across time and space. Much like today, there was no central authority, no dogma, and no assumption by its practitioners that it was the only way. In various forms, across various tribes, Germanic belief and practice changed after forcible conversion to Christianity. In 1000 C.E. Iceland was peacefully converted to Christianity, and a Heathen king ruled Sweden until 1085 C.E. Conversion-era Scandinavian law codes prohibited “Pagan” behaviors, indicating that there, in fact, Pagan practice was commonplace enough to warrant punishment and control. Although Christianity brought with it a formalization of nations and religious practice unknown before, the old way was maintained through customs and folkways in everyday life.⁴⁰ It was at least another hundred years before Christian monks in Iceland recorded tales of their Heathen forebears, known to us as the Icelandic sagas, told through a Christian lens, the stripping away of which proves arduous for modern Heathens. In addition to the sagas, Heathens draw heavily from the *Poetic Edda*, a collection of ancient Icelandic poetry detailing Germanic cosmology, the experiences and philosophies of the gods, and the end of the world, and the *Prose Edda*, which illuminates many of these same stories. Although some Heathens take these texts at face value, many more consume them with a critical and analytic eye, paying close attention to the material evidence unearthed by archaeology, reading academic journals and scholarly news sites, and interpreting various linguistic evidence to piece together contemporary understandings of the realities of Germanic belief.

With the success of Marvel’s *Thor* movies, released beginning in 2013, popular culture was awash with increased interest in Norse mythology. Fans of the gods as portrayed in the films spawned a new generation of pseudo-pagans across the Internet. Before this focus on the might and adventure of the comic-book universe, actual Heathens had been working on defining their customs since the 1970s. The project of reviving ancient beliefs and customs and adapting them to the modern world is central to what it means to do any form of reconstructionist Paganism. From ancient Egyptian worship to Hellenic and Celtic reconstructionism, the project of reviving ancient faith is a process of discovery and world construction, an ongoing and self-conscious effort to unearth ancient concepts and practices and adapt them to a postmodern context. The reconstructionist project is an exercise in desocialization—redefining familiar concepts and introducing alien ones that, to ancient Heathens, were common sense. Specifi-

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cally, Heathens often reference *Landvaettir* (land spirits) of the forest, earth, and streams, often represented as trolls, gnomes, elves, and fairies, give offerings to them, and invoke them. To some Heathens, interaction with the *Landvaettir* is the bulk of daily ritual, more than interaction with the gods, which may occur only during special rituals or occasions. Despite such spiritual ecology, Heathens are not necessarily green activists or spectacular environmental stewards. Their relationship with nature in many ways reflects the de facto daily practice, resource usage, waste production, and energy consumption of the average person for whom nature has little spiritual significance.

In addition to land spirits, the Germanic deities include a variety of beings concerned with the cycles of nature and natural phenomena, such as thunder (Thor), fertility and the harvest (Freyr, Sif), and the sea (Njord), and another group of gods affiliated with human capacities and reactions, such as love (Freyja), wisdom, and war and justice (Odin, Tyr). To most Heathens, the gods are complex and imperfect. Some Heathens understand them to be real, present, and distinct individuals. To others, they are abstract representations of fundamental needs, not necessarily “real” in the sense that they have the capacity to materialize or interact with us. To some, the Germanic gods are part of a pantheon of deities; to others, the idea of a pantheon is historically questionable, a construction of the Christian Snorri Sturluson’s attempt to unify locally specific folk beliefs to create a Norse equivalent of the Greek myths. Some Heathens maintain an agnostic approach to the existence of the gods, focusing their humanistic energies instead on the sociocultural aspects of American Heathenry. Unlike the Ásatrúarfélagið, Iceland’s state-recognized Heathen organization, American Heathens have no central authority. There are national Heathen organizations, but there is no obligation to join them. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Heathen kindreds spread out across the country, ranging from family groups with a handful of members to large tribes with dozens of members. Each of these groups is autonomous and maintains its own particular philosophical and political beliefs, goals, ritual structure, and customs (often called *thew* or *sidu*). Although the landscape of American Heathenry is diverse and diffuse, my research has identified many common patterns and problems, beliefs and values.

American Heathenry in Scholarship and the Media

The early and intimate relationship between Germanic Paganisms and racism has influenced the media’s perceptions of Heathenry. It is a catchy and controversial theme, prompting even the *New York Times* to refer to Ásatrú as a racist religion that promotes violence to maintain superiority over the “mud people.”⁴¹ Consequently, Heathenry’s relationship to questions of race and racism continues to dog adherents. The white supremacist presence in American Heathenry has attracted the attention of the Southern Poverty Law Center, which helps track and prosecute cases involving hate groups and white supremacists. At least two such cases brought Ásatrú public attention: the 1984 case of convicted felon,

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white supremacist, and self-proclaimed Wotanist David Lane and, more recently, the 2013 case of Evan Ebel, a right-wing Heathen who jumped parole to murder Colorado chief of prisons Tom Clements in his home. In reaction, The Troth released a statement to the media in an attempt to counter the claim that Ásatrú is a race-based religion. For the first time since the Kennewick man fiasco,⁴² when Stephen McNallen of the Ásatrú Folk Assembly fought with Indian tribes for the right to claim the remains of a prehistoric “ancestor,” Ásatrú entered the national discourse.

Because of these ongoing ties to white nationalism, previous research has focused overwhelmingly on a fringe element within American Heathenry for whom whiteness is central to the question of who gets to be Heathen. This has led to a range of interpretations by academics, watchdog groups, and hate groups alike, perpetuating the stereotype of American Heathens as racist and focusing on Heathens’ connections to white supremacist organizations and racial ideologies, a critique shared by Michael Strmiska and Baldur A. Sigurvinsson in their work on Heathenry in 2005.⁴³ Apart from this focus on race and other isms, self-published manuscripts by Heathenry’s lay community are on the rise, providing subjective glimpses into the how-tos and wherefores of Heathenry as a lifestyle. Studies conducted by academia, however, are significantly sparse. In fact, academia has produced only one peer-reviewed publication on American Heathenry, from the field of anthropology, that provides a window into the apolitical religious and spiritual lives of Heathen practitioners. In 2001, anthropologist Jenny Blain published the results of her ethnographic study of *Seidhr* practitioners in the modern Heathen community, titled *Nine Worlds of Seid-magic*.⁴⁴ In her ethnographic work, she discusses the reconstruction of *Seidhr*, pre-Christian oracular shamanism, a practice involving trance-induced journeying of one’s soul into the underworld and, at other times, performances of visions and interactions with deities or deceased ancestors. Despite the fact that Blain’s work is perhaps the only positive illustration of Heathenry produced by academia, its focus is decidedly singular.

Aside from the focus on Heathenry as a racist movement, other scandals among Heathens have attracted the attention of the media as a sideshow, a spectacle of discredited weirdos in garb. Although many Heathens are public about their religious identification, wearing a hammer openly—a safe practice in most instances because of its obscurity in comparison with the Wiccan pentacle—many Heathens choose to keep their faith private. Indeed, Neopagans in general tend to remain closeted during their first years of participation, although this trend seems to be changing as public tolerance of alternative lifestyles grows. Yet the news is awash with reports of Pagans of all faith traditions losing their jobs or custody of their children or experiencing difficulty with the law upon revealing their religious status. In 2013, two stories made headlines when two prominent Heathens ran into trouble with the law. In one, New York City councilman Dan Halloran, the first aetheling or king of a Theodish Aett in New England, was charged with heading a bribery scheme to rig the mayor’s race. Earlier arti-

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cles had focused on Halloran's religious affiliation—The *Queens Tribune* ran a piece titled “Pagan ‘King’ Has Council GOP Nod.”⁴⁵ The *New York Times* cited Halloran's religion as a “point of contention,”⁴⁶ while the *Village Voice* asked, “Grand Ol’ Pagan: What Does the Republican ‘Heathen’ Running for New York’s City Council Actually Believe?”⁴⁷ His downfall in 2013 created shockwaves throughout the Heathen blogosphere and on social media. In another high-profile case, Kansas City Police Department veteran Mark Stinson was fired from his job, accused of stealing tens of thousands of dollars from his elderly mother. Local news reports made sure to note that Stinson was a “Heathen religion chieftain,”⁴⁸ although his status as a disgraced cop stole the headlines. In both cases, Heathenry was scrutinized as a sideshow and used to discredit the men and add to their public shaming, to the ire of Heathens around the country.