

University of Tartu
Faculty of Arts and Humanities
Institute of Cultural Research

Mikaela Jo Krantz

**THE DIGITAL LANDSCAPE OF FOLK RELIGION: An
ecosemiotic approach to intermedial entanglements for heathen
and pagan folk religious community identities and reconstructed
traditions through US-centered social media cyberspaces**

Master's Thesis

Supervisor: Kristel Kivari, PhD
Research Fellow of Estonian and Comparative Folklore

Tartu 2023

Table of Contents

List of Figures.....	i
Glossary.....	ii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Background & Methodology.....	4
1.1. Contextualizing the communities.....	4
1.2. The United States and the internet.....	8
1.3. The landscape for netnographic research.....	10
1.4. The structure of the platforms.....	12
1.4.1. Discord.....	12
1.4.2. Twitch & YouTube.....	13
1.4.3. Supplemental platforms: Reddit, Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, blogs.....	14
Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework.....	15
2.1. Synthesising James Kapaló & Timo Maran.....	15
2.1.1. In defense of ‘folk religion’.....	16
2.2. The folk religious forest of practice.....	19
Chapter 3: Reconstructing Which Tradition(s).....	26
3.1. Being “inherently political”.....	26
3.2. Latent Christianity & spiritual burnout.....	33
Chapter 4: Community Creativity.....	40
4.1. Local heterogeneity & the feasibility of practice.....	40
4.2. Feedback from the gods.....	43
4.2.1. A scientific method for spirituality.....	45
4.3. Academia in the forest.....	47
Chapter 5: Reconstructionism & Tolerance of Meaning.....	50
5.1. (Re)defining reconstructionism.....	50
5.1.1. Heathens cannibalizing heathens, or rebalancing an ecosystem.....	53
5.2. The tricky business of tolerating meanings in the digital age.....	55
Conclusion.....	58
References.....	61
Resümee.....	65

List of Figures

Figure 1: Subscriber/User Comparison.....	12
Figure 2: Discord Server Layout Example.....	12
Figure 3: <i>Exclusive</i> Immigration Shareable.....	30
Figure 4: <i>Exclusive</i> Diversity Shareable.....	30
Figure 5: <i>Inclusive</i> Recon Shareable.....	56

Glossary

AFA: Asatru Folk Assembly. A US-based religious organization that was founded by Stephen McNallen in 1995. The AFA has a long history, with its origins in McNallen's early 1970s group, the Viking Brotherhood, later renamed Asatru Free Assembly before eventually becoming the Asatru Folk Assembly as it is known by today (AFA 2020).

Broom Closet: The term 'broom closet' comes from those who were participants of the Wiccan tradition and practice. It is a derivative of the metaphorical phrase, used by the gay and queer community back in the 1960s (Chauncey 1995), being stuck "in the closet". The use of the 'broom closet' metaphor has expanded beyond Wicca to include Heathenry and Paganism via a variety of traditions.

The chat, chatters: Those commenting in a chat box during live-streams or otherwise in real-time are called 'chatters', a discourse collectively referred to as 'the chat'.

Eclectic: Describes a form of Paganism or Heathenry which is rooted in one's personal experiences (UPGs) and intuition about one's praxis rather than relying heavily on the historical record and primary source materials.

Egregore: A non-corporeal entity which comes into being through the collective thoughts of a group or groups of people. Once created, it has an autonomous power of efficacy over the world and no master.

Exclusives: The categorical term I use to refer to the ancillary group that is a counterpoint to the main group explored in this thesis. It is based on the group's reliance on an individual's blood lineage to determine whether they are welcome into the group as a fellow heathen/pagan (those who can claim family lines connected to the Indo-European understanding and who have white skin).

Fluffy Bunny: A term used to describe someone who is not critically engaging with their chosen folk religious heritage, but rather someone perceived by *Inclusives* as peddling in pseudoscience, superstition, harmful practices, pseudohistory with an air of bigotry or racism. These include self-promoting New Age Mediums, but the term can also be used to disparage eclectics or other polytheists whose practices are not grounded in history, although the latter use seems to have become rare or outdated (MK-p1.1R 2021; -h9.1R 2022). They are often ridiculed for having no discernment and falling for their own confirmation biases, avoiding true reciprocity with other autonomous beings (like the gods).

Frith: A heathen term which colloquially, nowadays, means good-will among friends/allies.

Hávamál: The *Hávamál*, also known as 'Lessons from the High One' or 'Sayings of the High One' (referring to the Norse god, Óðinn). It is the second poem found in the Codex Regius manuscript from circa 1270, a collection commonly called the *Poetic Edda* (Larrington 1996: xi). The *Hávamál* is one of the fundamental ethical pillars for Norse-aligned heathen sources.

Hearth Cult: The innermost circle of deities for an individual practitioner. These deities are those with whom the practitioner has the closest relationships and/or with whom they work most frequently. This is different for every pagan or heathen, some people do not use this model in their praxis, and, for those using the model, the individual gods may join, leave or be reorganized within a hearth cult over time.

Inclusives: The categorical term I use to refer to the main group explored in this thesis. It is based on the group's openness to all who would like to become part of the group, provided that they do not do or say anything to harm any of the other members.

LARPing, larping: LARPing is the acronym for 'Live-Action Role Playing' in verb-form. Thus, a larper is one who larps. These are often played in a blended world between historical fiction and fantasy, where people can come together in 'meatspace' and act out what they used to only do in video games like The Witcher or Fortnite. The term is, in many contexts, now used as a synonym for a 'poser', something that in folkloristic terms would be seen as akin to "folklorism"/"folklorismus" (see also Moser 1962; Bendix 1988).

Lore: This use of 'lore' extends beyond folk religious online communities. One can see its use in online groups that follow video gamers, follow politics, follow reality TV, and any number of other special interests which generate a digital following. Often asking about what the lore is on this or that communicative unit is a way of asking why is this unit relevant for us, what is the origin of this unit, what is the history between this relevant person and that relevant person, etc. It is, in a sense, esoteric knowledge where the importance of knowing it is more valued by one's ability to then reference it and notice when it's referenced by others more than by its historical accuracy or truth claim.

Lurker: An internet term for those who hang out in the chat rooms and chat boxes without participating much, or at all, like the cyberspace version of a 'wallflower.'

Meatspace: 'Meatspace' is used, colloquially, for life offline and is a common phrase across the internet as an antonym to 'cyberspace.' It was popularized as 1980s cyberpunk dystopian gaming and film lingo.

Moderators ('mods'): A mod is one who monitors chat engagement, who helps settle disputes, makes sure people follow rules of decorum, and has the authority to ban people from the respective community. Their responsibilities are negotiated between the creators of the servers/platforms/channels and thus subject to change from space to space.

Recon: Abbreviation for Reconstructionist.

SPG: 'Shared Personal Gnosis' describes an occurrence of a sensorial, experiential engagement with the divine (either with specific deities or other ethereal entities – land wights, ancestors, etc.) that two or more people have experienced, either from the same event or each experiencing the same thing (from the same deity) at different occurrences that can help to corroborate each gnosis, and strengthen the validity of it being a true engagement with said deity (MK-p6.1R 2022).

Syncretism: A belief system and type of Paganism which is a synthesis, generated by the individual practitioner, of various, historically disparate traditions, beliefs, and practices, which nonetheless, are connected by a perceived unifying theme or thread. Sometimes syncretism is conceived as on a spectrum between reconstructionism (practice with one ancient tradition) and eclecticism (pulling from bits and pieces of a variety of traditions). Sometimes syncretism can be conceived as a subgroup of reconstructionism. And often syncretism can be perceived as synonymous with eclecticism.

Theodism: A sect of Heathenry that practices 'sacral kingship.' This means that rather than a more democratic social structure, Theods practice a rigid hierarchical social structure based upon one's deeds that affect their ranking in their community/tribe (McNamara 2019). Their

tribal ties are based on oaths. Theods were some of the first Heathens to advocate a historically-grounded reconstructed practice.

UPG: ‘Unverified Personal Gnosis’ describes an occurrence of an individual’s own sensorial, experiential engagement with the divine (either with specific deities or other ethereal entities – land wights, ancestors, etc.). Through the UPG/SPG/VPG framework, it is believed that all traditional or historic examples of divine interactions began as UPG (MK-p6.1R 2022).

VPG: Verified Personal Gnosis. This describes an occurrence of a sensorial, experiential engagement with the divine (either with specific deities or other ethereal entities – land wights, ancestors, etc.) that is corroborated by primary or secondary source material be it found in ancient sagas, myths, folklore, poetry or songs, descriptions of events from the works of Snorri Sturluson, Saxo Grammaticus, Herododus, etc. This is what may be, by some, considered historically evidenced tradition, for instance, events in the history of kings of Norway *Heimskringla*, compiled by Snorri Sturluson, or the *Iliad*, attributed to Homer, can be considered VPG (MK-p6.1R 2022¹).

¹ Note on fieldwork citations: final 4 numbers provide the year.

As explained in §1.3 the data is anonymized for the security and comfort of the communities.

Letters correlate to a key encoding the social media platform and identity category or theme. Numbers correlate to either a date or the item’s assigned location in a category’s numbered list depending on the type of data (text, image, etc.).

Introduction

The US is roiling with dissension where it has become harder and harder to trust or understand others and their fallacious ways; where people's identities are at once more significant and more misunderstood. Arguments for tradition and historical precedent flood our media spaces in all facets of our lives, not just religious, for “the border between religion and ideology is frequently blurred...They offer coherent narratives and value systems which provide explanations of whence, how, why and towards what” (Raudvere 2012:114). In my professional life as an actor—whose job is to physicalize narratives and even alter the belief structure and behavior innate within oneself—I’ve always been enthralled by the (religious) belief structures of others and their affinity toward belonging and sense-making through ancestral heritages and traditions. For two of my favorite people, my mother finds meaning in seeking and eventually uncovering archived family history, where she and I have reignited familial ties to our living Swedish cousins and wandered the Norwegian valleys and churchyards where my great grandmother walked before sailing across the ocean at 16 years old. And my beloved uncle, her brother, finds solace and community in the indigenous First Nations’ spirituality, drawn by local Dakota surroundings and friends. But, in my personal life, feeling connected to an ancient and meaningful heritage or belief-tradition remains elusive to me. What processes allow meaning to re-concretize from an individual’s inclination toward historical folk traditions?

Although the focus of this thesis centers on two US-based online folk religious communities, I think the framework of analysis can provide insight for many facets where belief-systems and -traditions both alter and are altered by the “wider social formations in which we all share a stake” (Howard 2013:3). Further, I believe that the chosen ecosemiotic model foregrounds the detailed interplay of ecosystems created in virtual spaces which are just as complex and 3-dimensional as offline community bodies. It also reminds us of our own positional limitations and makes room for deeper opportunities to empathize with the multitude of human-avatars who previously may have only been a pixelated, predictable automaton or a mere shadow of an ‘other’ to box.

Heathen and pagan communities living today—those which have a strong affinity toward pre-Christian, folk religious traditions and beliefs—are subject to the same contemporary circumstances that more widespread, institutional religions are, but what makes the main community in this thesis unique is the sheer diversity of the individual traditions, spiritualities, and folk religions represented in the group. Often religious communities will at

least gather around a similar deity or pantheon, but this group is overgrown with variety while simultaneously retaining a unified cohesion that any orthodoxy would admire. Moreover, they buck many of the stereotypes that broader US society places upon folk religious practitioners and even the reconstructionists of the group do not shy away from the inescapable influences of contemporary tools and contexts. This thesis is an exploration of the phenomenon of when reconstructed, pre-Christian, pre-digital heathen and pagan practices and beliefs are mediated through contemporary technological tools, such as social media platforms, to generate meaning and a sense of belonging within the individuated communities and relational identities for those currently living these folk religious heritages.

Initially, this thesis was to be a comparative work between three online folk religious communities, but I severely over budgeted my page-allowance. I whittled it down to foreground one (the *Inclusives*) and use another (the *Exclusives*) for comparative purposes. As revealed in this thesis, each has more in common than first impressions would have you believe, yet each cloaks themselves adamantly in their difference. There are overlaps of meaning and identity that neither care to admit, instead vying for the same title in the minds of broader US society which parallels much of the dissonance happening in communities all across my home country. What feeds into our collective decisions about irreconcilability? How does our attention to that which becomes meaningful blaze a trail connecting us to a continuum of our religious heritage (chosen either *by* us or *for* us by others)? My research goals with this thesis are summarized thusly: 1) analyzing the phenomenon of the communities' reconstructed heathen/pagan religious practices translated for cyberspace, 2) exploring the discourse on acceptable sinews between contemporary influences and historical source materials in folk religious heritages—i.e. what does it mean to reconstruct, how does the group create a continuity of tradition from the past to the present—and 3) uncovering the negotiations of identity representations and meaning-making among contentious heathen/pagan online communities which pull from similar religious origins.

The thesis consists of 5 chapters. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the broader context and chosen methodology. I focus on netnographic practices and offer descriptions of the social media platforms which scaffold the development of the online communities. Chapter 2 clarifies and defends the theoretical framework which is a synthesis of James Kapaló's 'folk religious field of practice' (2013) and Timo Maran's 5 properties of his 'semiotic model of a forest' (2020). Examples serve to introduce particularities of the communities. Chapter 3 highlights the outer boundaries of the main community where we can observe the interplay between broader societal influences and reactions to *Exclusives* as

Inclusives navigate their own collective identity and the representations thereof beyond their (cyber)space. It is a very porous border. Chapter 4 brings us further into the *Inclusive* environment, focusing on community dynamics and interpersonal creative practice; exploring the conceptions of acceptable innovation and tradition oriented around a common value: Reciprocity; Relationship. Finally, Chapter 5 brings us to the deep recon origins of the various platform groups, nearly all of which were created by reconstructionists. Recons tend to be especially placed as prominent landmarks for the community; influential guides when practitioners become lost or overwhelmed in their spiritual journeys; like keepers of the roots which protect the soil from being washed away in the torrent of contemporary society's turmoil and digitized divarication. Time to put on your hiking boots.

Chapter 1: Background & Methodology

Scholars have gone through iterations on how to label these groups, using terms such as ‘neopaganism,’ ‘contemporary paganism,’ and ‘natural religions’ (Krasskova 2018; Snook 2015; Strmiska 2005; Timothy & Conover 2006; Pike 2004; Jorgensen & Russell 1999). Within the United States, the Pew Research Center, in their Religious Landscape Study, categorizes these communities under “Members of the New Age movement” (Pew 2015). When they attempt to break it down further, they do not separate Pagan from Wiccan. In addition, their latest survey study came from data collected in 2007 and 2014, nearly ten years ago, yet Pew is a frequently sourced information center in American public discourse. For every label academics have chosen to classify this collection of practitioners, many of those being labeled bristle at the imposed classification. It continues to be a struggle for scholars to place such a diverse array under one categorical umbrella. In this thesis, I reevaluate how these labels are discursively delineated; my aim is to clarify why such tension exists, especially as we continue incorporating technological innovations into our everyday lives. The thesis brings into focus an online community of practitioners who, on the surface, have a seemingly random collection of disparate belief systems, traditions, and ontologies; people who may not have coalesced into a community at all in the era before social media, and yet have created for themselves a strongly cohesive, unifying virtual community via the luck (or fate) of their algorithms and their access to various social media platforms. The thesis looks at the shifting religious landscape in the milieu of technological innovations as practice, community cohesion, and meaningful cultural units are negotiated with the greater environment in which they reside in the US; grappling with traditional expressions and future imaginings; of how embodied persons discern their experiences in these religious virtual spaces. As such, the two communities explored in this thesis were created online and interact mainly in virtual space.

1.1. Contextualizing the communities

Contemporary heathen and ‘neopagan’ religious groups have been researched time and again, generating a wealth of articles, monographs, and edited volumes (Krasskova 2018; Snook 2015; Strmiska 2005; Rood 2020; Lesiv 2013; Timothy & Conover 2006; Pike 2004; Mullen 2000; Jorgensen & Russell 1999) with a common criticism being that the scholar overly

generalizes the multifaceted, dynamic group of practitioners. Jennifer Snook looked more closely into the gender, ethnicity, and post-colonialism among American Asatru pagans (2015; see also Rood 2020:85-86), yet Krasskova critiqued Snook's failure to contextualize her work within the larger academic literature on the subject, as well as Snook's positionality of being new to Heathenry when she began her fieldwork. Krasskova has been a practitioner as well as an academic in the field for years, and considered Snook's analysis as lacking in both complexity and nuance (Krasskova 2018:79-80). Michael Strmiska edited a comprehensive volume on neopaganism in 2005 that included research based on his own fieldwork with Asatruar in the US (Strmiska & Sigurvinsson 2005:127). Strmiska stated that due to the sensationalizing that occurred around neo-Nazi or white nationalist pagan groups, it coloured how pagans, more broadly, are viewed today despite this exclusionary type being a definitive minority. The majority of heathens, Norse pagans, and specifically American Asatruar² are, for Strmiska, inclusive, racially and ethnically diverse, and disavow neo-Nazi ideology. Joshua Rood, however, pointed out that Strmiska makes overly broad claims about the US environment, relying too heavily on his own fieldwork that was centered on very few individuals and on the published statements of "organizational leadership" (Rood 2020:84). While scholars have looked into more of the complexities of these groups since that time, the attempt to describe Heathenry and Paganism in any unifying manner still causes strife between practitioners and academics who are new to the community and have control over categorizing the community in the literature. Markus A. Davidsen cautions that practitioners who decide to enter the academic space to correct the record do not seem to realize their own biases that blind them to their own tendency to either essentialize or to exclude those who self-identify with the pagan label or whom previous scholars conclude *do* fall under the academically determined 'pagan' label as a field of research (Davidsen 2014:187).

The communities in which I did fieldwork, for instance, separate themselves entirely from New Age spirituality, seeing the movement (often represented online) as undiscerning, as abandoning critical thinking skills, as arbitrary and, in some cases, dangerous. They hold a particular disdain toward the New Age movement on TikTok. Already we must acknowledge the adjacent agencies (like these online platforms) that affect how these groups are viewed by others, as well as how this alters their relationships among themselves as they try to correct misrepresentations and misunderstandings. Even as the two heathen/pagan groups in this study show drastic differences between their beliefs and practices, both agree that neither are

² Asatru (singular of Asatruar) is a particularly contentious term in the online spaces I research here, not least because of its connection to the AFA (Asatru Folk Assembly).

comfortable with being labeled ‘New Age’ (see §4.b.i). The main group has no problem acknowledging their historical roots in the feminist Wiccan movement of the 1960s (Jorgensen & Russell 1999:326), but they are currently distinct. Yet, Pew continues to combine them under one banner. Wicca is a common ancestor to the New Age movement today, too. Thus New Age and Heathenry are more like distant relatives. The main group does not necessarily have an issue with welcoming New Age individuals into their online space, rather they take issue with broader society lumping them all under the same banner.

The online community that I focus on in this thesis, is made up of a great swath of heathens and pagans who are not representing any official organization yet have collectively generated a (cyber)space for themselves. They describe themselves in more particularized ways as Hellenist, Celtic, Kemetic, Anglo-Saxon, Norse, etc., but there are also witches, syncretists, recons, and the defiantly self-identified “dirty eclectics” (MK-H.HW-02.11 2022).³ This group I have decided to call *Inclusives* from hereafter; a term that reflects their value of welcoming diversity in many contexts and their desire for people to feel included as long as no one is causing harm to others. The majority of members have a connection to Norse traditions. Following Michael Strmiska and Barldur Sigurvinsson’s clarifying structure, I use ‘Norse’ to refer to the pre-Christian religions and cultures which developed in Iceland and Scandinavia (Strmiska & Sigurvinsson 2005:127). Heathen and Norse pagan are here used interchangeably while heathen and pagan will be used together when describing broader dynamics (although in those instances I often default to ‘folk religious groups’ or ‘communities’). The labels and terminology are often contested *between* groups and taken as given *within* a group, so that to easily move into other arenas of analysis, I will consistently defer to each individuals’ chosen identifiers without commentary upon the choice other than clarifying if they are part of the *Inclusives* or the other group (hereafter called *Exclusives*). One underlying consistency is that for the vast majority of heathens, identities are negotiated internally, in part by how they “feel the call, feel the pull, and start walking this new path.”⁴ Though they all speak English, geographically they can, and do, live anywhere in the world with internet access. Being so geographically and so pantheonically disparate, they have found each other over the span of only a few years through algorithmic processes, as they bond in the overlap of experience and identity. It is their personalized algorithms which have

³ Here is our first example of a meaningful cultural unit. In the way that ‘queer’ as a pejorative was commandeered and neutralized by many in the LGBTQ+ community, so too is ‘dirty’ in ‘dirty eclectic’ a reclamation from those who meant it derogatorily. Now, eclectics use it humorously, ironically, or proudly.

⁴ Spoken by a well-respected, long-time *Inclusive* heathen reconstructionist (MK-h1.1R 2021).

coagulated this online community—as is the case for other online folk religious communities—that has made them into a cohesive group.

The supplemental group that will serve as a reflective surface upon which to make clearer analyses is linguistically and geographically similar to the *Inclusives*, but will be referred to as *Exclusives*. The *Exclusives* disown even the Wiccan feminist movement as ever being part of their heritage. Like *Inclusives*, they feel tethered to the pre-Christian origins of their Heathen traditions, but hold a strong connection to their familial heritage origins from the immigrants who arrived by ship in the 19th century and up into the 1920s from places like Sweden, Ireland, Germany, Russia and other Eastern and Northern-European countries.⁵ *Exclusives* feel a sense of diasporic identity, acknowledging and celebrating their familial roots in the Scandinavian and Northern European countries, yet have no need to reclaim nor, for some, to even visit their physical ancestral homeland across the Atlantic, since their blood bears their culture (MK-Tel.Id.10-11 2022). They, instead, indigenize themselves to the natural woodscape of their resident nation-state—the United States of America. They share messages with each other arguing against “the ongoing replacement and attempted genocide of our people [Heritage Americans]” (MK-Tel.Pol.2 2022).

This group is made of those who strongly identify with their white, Indo-European, pagan heritage—they seem to prefer the word ‘pagan’ more often than heathen. In contrast to *Inclusives*, *Exclusives* take the position that each person ought to only form their practice and religious worldview according to their family’s ancestry and no other, since there is a spiritual element to one’s physical bloodline, or lineage, which allows communion with certain deities and not with those from a different ethnic heritage. *Exclusives* are comfortable sharing space and community with neo-Nazi pagans, though they may not all identify as such. Many *Exclusives* promote the work of the AFA, or Asatru Folk Assembly, and its founder Robert McNallen, though not every *Exclusive* with Nordic blood considers themselves part of the Asatru Folkist group. Unitedly, they have a strong sense of Indo-European pride (and often superiority) and share many extreme, politically right-wing ideologies, which often lead them to sharing racist or bigoted ‘memes’ of out-group citizens and admiration for extremist activities that have or are currently taking place around the country and the world. *Exclusives* tend to collectively reflect the stereotype which broader US society imagines of neopagans and heathens (see §3), and which I believe Strmiska was trying to refute in his research.

⁵ A small poll was taken asking: “Americans, what part of Europe is your ethnic background from? Europeans, where are you from?” with no distinction smaller than the national scale. It is interesting to see how the attention to nationalism plays into *Exclusive* identity markers (MK-Tel.Id.13c 2022).

Exclusives have a deep influence on *Inclusives* regarding what religio-cultural, folkloric, and socio-historical units become meaningful and worthy of recycling and re-circulating in their online space. Both groups are aware of each other; of their online presence and influence, with some having direct interactions. As an example of the reciprocal reactivity of these two groups I do not call *Inclusives* ‘neopagans’ because of some community members’ visceral aversion to hearing the prefix ‘neo-,’ which has become so tightly tethered to describing Nazi sympathizers. Moreover, the term ‘neopaganism’ severs and obscures the group’s understanding of their own positionality within the continuum of pre-Christian folk religious traditions and their respective gods (see §2). With that in mind, I use ‘ancients’ to refer to the heathen and pagan believers of the time *before* Christianity spread, using heathen and pagan respective to how current group members self-identify.

1.2. The United States and the internet

My home country, the United States, is struggling with a crisis of identity, which is hardly noticeable in local, offline settings, but becomes especially salient in the national discourse online. Many Americans in the US turn toward tradition and ancestry as a seemingly stable mooring point for identity. Reviewing the history of the study of folklore in the US, Lee Haring and Regina Bendix write that this hope to salvage something from one’s history and heritage has been “fueled by the sense of loss inherent to any modernizing society” (Haring & Bendix 2012:290). This sentiment acknowledges a loss that I find expressed within the communities studied for this thesis, and the question that Haring and Bendix advance for the 1800s remains relevant today:

“Politically, the re-presentation of folklore confirmed one of the gravest of America’s problems. How, in this new land of settlers, could there be a shared culture, which would make for a shared polity?” (Haring & Bendix 2012:290-291).

To this day, the US is grappling with the question of the possibility of a shared polity when our socio-cultural identity teeters, shakily, on the closest imagery of cohesion we’ve more or less agreed to: the great US ‘melting pot.’ Yet, despite this concept being lauded in conversation, in practice it remains unsatisfactory and incompatible for today’s sensibilities, made all the more noticeable by the carefully and conveniently curated virtual communities we can escape to in the world wide web of social media.

The COVID-19 pandemic isolated us further from face-to-face interactions, and, thus aggrieved, we made our online lives—and realities—more real, more concrete; both spatially as well as ideologically. It became easier to find people similar to oneself, and exaggerated language that expressed hate or distrust of the ‘other’ reinforced the cohesion of coeval online spaces, including folk religious cyberspaces. Both groups saw significant participant growth and interactivity within their respective spaces. Where venting frustrations, in small doses and on a smaller scale, helped release damaging pent-up energy, pain, or emotion, more populated social spaces increased the risk of nudging people toward increasingly siloed extremes.⁶

In this digital age, we can often experience ourselves—and the world around us—through the interface of our computer screens and phones where one’s temporality and embodiment still engage with the materiality of what appears immaterial, namely, the virtual. But, what are the negotiations that arise when a *body* that exists in this digital age is inclined to seek out meaning through the reconstruction of an ancient, *pre-digital* religion? What happens when many bodies do so together?

The reconstruction process is not a cerebral activity in the same way that social media is not simply happening ‘online.’ Both are influenced by the emotive, expressive, existential bodies, by the lived experiences of people. It affects how they discern what information is valuable, where their attention goes, or how they act and think as they navigate this globalized, digitized society which is permeated by technological interfaces. The ubiquitousness of technology is one of several threads of a dense concentration of “intertextual engagements” (Frog 2021:163-4; see also Bauman & Briggs 1990:72-78; Bauman 1993:102-103, 110-111, 118)—although the terminology is trending toward ‘intermediality’⁷ rather than merely textual. Nonetheless, these engagements are part of the meaningful, cultural manifestations which make various online communities creative and individuated; both porous and pervasive.

⁶ While this is beyond the focus of this thesis, online extremism has manifested offline from pro-anorexia communities sharing tips to disturbed mass shooters targeting schools, religious centers, or common businesses, both having deadly consequences offline in the US.

⁷ There is a wealth of scholarship on the subject. See Jensen (2016) for a comprehensive collection on intermediality. For mediatization see Hepp, Hjarvard & Lundby (2015).

1.3. *The landscape for netnographic research*

In the virtual world of the web it is deceptively tricky to delineate community boundaries. Virtual spaces may have a semblance of borders, but the humans behind the ethereal avatars pop in and through websites like sprites in a twilight forest. This is an issue unique to netnographic research.

The *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Data* labels netnography as a blending of the terms ‘internet’ and ‘ethnography’ and is a qualitative research method (Kozinets, Dolbec & Earley 2014) which, true to its blended name, often rides the intersections of approaches. Most of my fieldwork and data was compiled from social media platforms, including YouTube, Twitch, Twitter, Reddit, Discord, Facebook, and Telegram, which provided a combination of both “elicited” and “non-elicited” data (Kozinets, Dolbec, & Earley 2014). As such, there is a much larger amount of information that can be compared among and between different platforms. I participated as much as I could, but particularly when it came to platforms like Telegram, my only option was to observe. However, netnography also allows one the ability to slip back in time to see what was happening before my avatar’s arrival. This allows for a richer understanding of the communities’ histories that only science fiction has, as yet, imagined us capable of doing in the physical world.

In the midst of 2019, when the Coronavirus was but a footnote of international news before it began sweeping through the US population, one Norse reconstructionist decided to make a Discord server. I joined about a year later, watching the pandemic halt social and economic momentum. It was not until I began my Master’s studies that I transitioned from merely a community member into a researcher of said community. Thus, although I am deeply intertwined with the *Inclusives*, for clarity, I will consistently use the pronoun, ‘them.’

I did not want to impose any of my own ideological or emotional inclinations that could skew the free exchange and flow of expression and meaningful discourse. Like Linda Dégh, I did not want “to manipulate people to falsify natural behavior; I wanted to see how they behaved without my guidance, how they narrated to each other without interpreting the story for me, how the tale was received by usual listeners... I learned not to interpret from my point of view but to understand specific meanings that individuals create” (Dégh 1995:13). Luckily, netnography allows researchers to observe public spaces of communication without making one’s presence a nervous distraction for people. Of course, there is the loss of that in-person energy which can be felt and reflected upon by a fieldworker in the midst of a physical space. Even so, netnography includes—through technological innovations—more

and more access to those sensorial experiences (at least aurally and visually, for now). The experience of social media platforms, still remains a viscerally felt experience, and by using the platforms that allowed for more participation, I was able to reach out for follow-ups or clarifications and interviews. Doing netnographic research requires that one be invested frequently in corroborating claims or generalizations since there is a higher concentration of traffic from people who are not embedded in the community but merely passing through and there are few context clues to differentiate.

Marginalized and alternative-cultural groups are exceptionally sensitive to the fear of ‘being doxxed’—a common phrase describing when one’s private identifying information, such as home address or birth name, has been made public against one’s wishes. The observed emotional impact of being doxxed is particularly potent for those who frequent the cyber realm. Therefore, based on the 2020 manual, *Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines* (IRE), I take my cue from the “recent conceptions of *relational autonomy*” (on which, see Christman 2004; Westlund 2009; Veltman & Piper 2014; Ess 2014). I have determined that I, as researcher, ought not only value the rights and autonomy of an individual participant, but also acknowledge the social relations to which that individual is tethered and for which I ought provide consideration when determining how to proceed most ethically. Even if the singular individual has ceded their anonymity as a source, the greater community to which they belong has not and, in many cases, is unable to do so, thus leaving the power to make or break trust between researcher and community around the issue of anonymity solely in the hands of the researcher. The level of sensitivity will be at my own discretion having been a member of the main group for three years and being adept at navigating the hyperconnectivity of seemingly separate spaces of the internet (for more on the ambiguity within judgment see IRE 3.0 2020:5-6). No names from data collected are provided without consent, noting that data is anonymized according to general visibility, so the same username (handle, screen name) anonymized in data from discord servers will not be anonymized in the information from a different platform, say, where the person is intentionally making it visible to any and all virtual passersby (e.g. YouTube, Twitter).

Many of the individuals exist in multiple of these spaces, although certainly some are only found in one or two. My data are in the form of transcriptions from video essays, live chats and open-ended interviews, public posts and comments, my own participant observations, as well as a collection of commonly circulated memes, emojis, and shared images and articles. Beginning in earnest in December, 2021, my netnographic database has been gathered and analyzed up to March, 2023.

Figure 1 gives a sense of the influence that the *Inclusives* and *Exclusives* may have online by showing their respective subscriber bases on each platform, noting that these numbers inevitably include many passive or inactive participants. With that said, *Inclusives* are just shy of half that of *Exclusives*, so, despite Strmiska’s claims that supremacists are a minority, their social media networking reach—along with personal anecdotes from *Inclusives*—shows otherwise.

Social Media Platforms	<i>Discord</i>	<i>Twitch</i>	<i>Telegram</i>	<i>Youtube</i>	<i>Facebook</i>
<i>Inclusives</i>	7348	4834		149.89k	1737
<i>Exclusives</i>			1397	376.87k	

Figure 1 Comparing subscriber counts or user members. Even with the number of Youtube channels, the subscriber total for *Inclusives* is not quite half that of *Exclusives*.

1.4. The structure of the platforms

1.4.1. Discord

This platform is one of the most utilized for my fieldwork and was my initial entry point into the main community. The fieldwork includes four discord servers. A discord server can be imagined as an online house. Within this house, you have several (chat)rooms that you can ‘hang out’ in. Figure 2 provides a display of a generic discord server where the list of names preceded by a hashtag (#) is the list of rooms that you can click on and enter. If ‘The Hydration Club’ is the server name, then ‘#tea-drinkers’ is a specific chat room. These are often themed. Many of the servers I frequented for this fieldwork would have a room dedicated to exercise, another for memes/jokes, another for pets/cute animal pics, one for questions around praxis, a book club, a relaxed room and one for more serious conversations. The creators of the server are able to name them however they see fit.

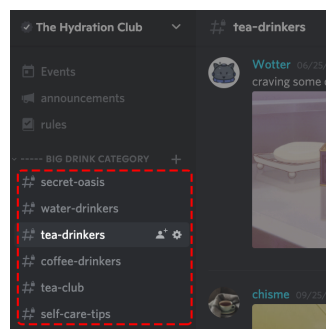


Figure 2 Example of a Discord Server layout (Discord 2022).

Discord is able to host audio and video interactions. One can have public voice calls where people converse with each other while others mute themselves or where one person provides a lecture or performance and others enter automatically muted; a chimera of chat rooms and Zoom calls. There are also virtual bulletin boards, which one may only react to with an emoji (as a way to acknowledge you have read it). These are often named ‘#announcements.’ Once one reacts with the appropriate emoji, other chat rooms may appear and become available to ‘enter.’ If you also donate to creators’ Patreon sites or are in some way paying for a closer proximity to the creator, you may have access to even more spaces and events that remain invisible to those outside of these paywalls.

The data is inherently skewed toward those who are more interactive on the servers versus those who act as ‘lurkers.’ Discord is, in a way, the most private (or, more accurately, intimate) of the publicly accessible spaces. Subsequently, it is the platform which must retain the greatest anonymity protections when illustrating examples throughout the thesis.

Based on relational autonomy, all discord server names are encrypted, even when those within a particular discord server have given me consent to include their username. This protects all the other members in the servers, particularly those with whom I did not interact; who we did not know of each other’s existence. This respects the needed anonymity of minors who frequent these servers, as well as those who are still stuck in the “broom closet” (MK-H.Q-23.12 2021; -H.AN-30.03 2022).

1.4.2. Twitch & YouTube

Where Discord’s public space may be more negotiable, Twitch and YouTube as public spaces are much more definitive. Twitch is a live video feed, initially created so that video gamers could broadcast their video game-play to an audience. It soon attracted all kinds of content creators who broadcast (or ‘stream’) a live feed, which includes a chatbox where audience members and the channel creator may text in real time. People may donate to the channel and different tiers of donations will offer different perks or proximities of access to the creator, at the creator’s discretion. YouTube also provides these options.

One is able to stream their live feed simultaneously on multiple platforms, which creators often do, transmitting to both Twitch and Youtube. By doing so, they are able to watch and respond to both platforms’ ‘chatters.’ Heathen/pagan content creators and influencers have both live-streamed recordings *and* more polished, scripted videos that often

fall into the ‘video-essay’ genre. Assessing the meaningfulness of certain videos or the accuracy of statements made therein is based on how community members have engaged with and reacted to them.

1.4.3. Supplemental platforms: Reddit, Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, blogs

Reddit is heavily text-based like older internet websites. ‘Subreddits’ are the forums of specific topics (the subreddit ‘r/Hellenism’ is a forum about Hellenism) and ‘Reddit threads’ are linked comments that can be accessed via search engines even after the thread has been closed and no more comments can be added. Facebook (recently renamed Meta) is so ubiquitous these days that it does not need much explanation, but it is another platform where groups are created. Some are open and some are invite-only where text discussions happen in the forum format, as well (Reddit and Telegram also have this option). Twitter and Telegram are similar platforms, but are more often accessed using the phone app rather than the desktop format. Like all of these platforms, Twitter and Telegram allow for posts that others may comment on, react to with an emoji, or share and people have back and forth conversations publically through replies to each other. The use of Telegram, while open to anyone, was not the *Inclusives*’ platform of choice, but was for *Exclusives*. Their channel requires one to be a member of their paying community in order to upload an initial post, everyone (those who pay and those who follow freely) are able to like and comment on uploaded posts. Finally, I have included some blog articles and their comments as well, the writers of which all self-identify as pagan/heathen practitioners of some or other tradition. Those included were selected specifically because in the main community interfaces, these articles and threads and channels were ones distinctly being shared, reposted, reacted to, and engaged with among group members. While I have generally avoided official organizations’ websites, opting instead for the discursive, colloquial, lived beliefs and practices in these folk religious online communities, I make rare exceptions when it is sourced or recommended as commonly shared ideas and inspirations among community members.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

2.1. *Synthesising James Kapaló & Timo Maran*

In this thesis, I hope to avoid, if I can, the reductiveness that practitioners see in the scholarship about heathen and pagan groups with which they identify. *Inclusives* bring this up in much of the discourse around trusted historical sources (see §4.b). Even if a thing serves a function within a given phenomenon, it does not mean that we can take that piece out, look at it from every angle, see the hole where it fits, break it up into smaller units, or deduce that this piece used to serve or will continue to serve said function and for each individual. Such an approach flattens the dynamism and holistic nature of groups. In response to the contention discussed in the introduction between practitioners and academics, I hope to revitalize the myriad, interconnected, sometimes discombobulated constellations of influences which filter through our physical beings and actualize as beliefs and behaviors specifically as these groups generate into communities online with virtual rituals, digital offerings, technologically advanced practices, and so on. Rather than seeing a community member as one of many individual pieces which come together in a beautiful technicolored kaleidoscope, a person resembles a sort of series of alchemical reactions that happen across a span of time and we timelines-of-alchemies are what form cultures and communities. By setting aside the mechanistic discursive framing or essentializing a communal identity to make it more comprehensible, I hope to highlight the rich interrelatedness, situatedness, and seemingly inaccessible randomness of people and influences in these unbounded communities that often strive for cohesive unification even within their diversity. Afterall, “behavior is better viewed as a sign of self in practice not as a sign of self in essence” (Holland, Lachicotte Jr., Skinner & Cain 1998:31). Focusing on a field of *practice* iterates that the behavior we enact does not reveal some essential aspect of our nature, but rather it shows us as people who are “actively engaged with their environments” (Holland, Lachicotte Jr., Skinner & Cain 1998:39), and those environments individuate with the inhabitants and competing agencies discussed throughout the following chapters to perhaps reveal new insights for more effective communication among and between diverse groups of people, not just in the online folk religious communities but in “the wider social formations in which we all share a stake” (Howard 2013:3).

Timo Maran's ecosemiotic forest model mitigates the pitfalls of inadvertent reductiveness by highlighting the "unboundedness of the forest. In its entirety, the forest is more complex than any possible description of the forest" (Maran 2020:57). In this thesis, I synthesize James Kapaló's "folk religious field of practice" (Kapaló 2013:3, 5) with Timo Maran's five properties of his ecosemiotic forest model (Maran 2020:53-58) to explore the compatible and contradicting dynamism of these two folk religious groups. Kapaló's framework builds upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu, particularly basing his conception of the field upon Pierre Bourdieu's 2007 definition (Kapaló 2013:11). Kapaló's "folk religious field of practice" (10) is a co-constructed "relational" space (11), hereon reimagined as a folk religious *forest* of practice. The relational space is a multilayered amalgamation co-constructed from inside and outside the community, what Kapaló concretizes as "competing agencies" (3) including, but not limited to the "national, ecclesial, secularising and scholarly" (15).

2.1.1. *In defense of 'folk religion'*

James Kapaló articulated how we generally understand that the terms we use have associative claims and situational ideologies, which he argues is better to recognize than to hide behind a facade of objectivity (9). These "chains of associations" bound to certain terms are inescapable, but are not an irredeemable harm as it "opens up new and perfectly valid" connections to "new scholarly concerns" (*ibid.*). Following this track, I argue that, rather than attempting to avoid the marginalizing dichotomy between official and unofficial religion which is evoked by the chains bound to 'folk', we can conscientiously engage with and lean into these associations. In the present case, these chains actually support my analysis of these online groups.

For instance, I can appreciate the advocacy of Leonard Primiano replacing 'folk' with 'vernacular' (Primiano 1995), but it does not change the inexorable drift that occurs to the terminology we use. 1995 'folk' differs from 2022 'folk' differs from European 'folk' differs from American 'folk.' During the writing of my thesis, Simon Bronner serendipitously published a deft and concise exploration of the tension that has developed between these terms, 'folk' and 'vernacular,' as used in academic scholarship (Bronner 2022), so I will not derail this thesis with my own similar sentiments. Suffice it to say that in 2022/23,

researchers are aware of such past biased minimizations that have happened to these types of communities, but for the groups in this study, it is a significant and defining *part of their story* that directs their actions and reactions in the present. We can look at that term ‘folk’ with that conscientious understanding, and it can aid us in how we decide to approach these communities, knowing that they have, as a part of their history, a forced marginalization by broader society and/or by institutional, or ‘official’ institutions of belief (e.g. the Church). As one *Inclusive* expressed it, the Church ostracized heathens because, “they were basically backwards hicks who still believed in weird things like polytheism.”⁸ A similar insult has been used against other groups commonly identified as ‘folk.’ The 19th century conceptualization of ‘folk’ as the “illiterate in a literate society” (Dundes 1977:2) still holds sway in the US imagination within certain contexts (see §4.b & §4.c). My preference in using Kapaló’s concept, despite the controversy around the term, relies in part on its evocation of a “struggle for legitimacy” (Kapaló 2013:4) that many folk religious groups have undergone—feeling that they exist on the outskirts in many ways. The word ‘folk’ has the ability to evoke the community’s tension between themselves and the array of “competing agencies” (3), one of which is the Church. The marginalization forced upon *Inclusives* is felt not just as a product of their folk religious identity but from their ancillary identities of being LGBTQ+, being a person of color, being neurodivergent, having a chronic illness or disability, being economically vulnerable; identities which, at times, have become ammunition to invalidate their pagan identity—by those with *Exclusive* pagan beliefs—and, also, to invalidate their religion as a religion—by more mainstream, ‘institutional’ religions and agencies. Within both of these online folk religious communities there is a lot of associative potential in the term ‘folk’ that can more vividly inform those who are outside of the community about how and why they have grown into what they have become (see §4.a).

Their beliefs—like the forest/environment surrounding them—are not just personal and private, but “relational” (Kapaló 2013:3). Additionally, it is not just localized, for how do we speak of a ‘local religion’ when the community is entered via the world wide web; a digital space at once both transnational and transcultural, held in the palm of one’s hand? ‘Folk religion’ encompasses both a colloquial, emic use as an identifier among community members *and* the tension Kapaló articulates between “approval and repression” (5) of their religious practices and beliefs within the larger sphere of “competing agencies” (3).

⁸ “[W]eird things like polytheism” meant in a sarcastic manner to impersonate how the Church viewed polytheism rather than their own point of view about their own polytheistic beliefs (MK-H.Q-26.12 2021).

These groups used the word ‘folk’ frequently and I believe it is important to spend a moment on the communities’ own relationships to this term. Folk is an extremely charged word for *Inclusives*, in part because of its associations to the Asatru Folk Assembly (AFA 2020; see also Strmiska & Sigurvinnsson 2005:127). While *Exclusives* echo and actively promote the AFA and Folkism, as a belief system, *Inclusives* enthusiastically and frequently iterate that Folkists can “Folk off,” to the point of creating cultural consumables that say, “No Frith with Folkists” (MK-h1.1R 2021).⁹ The AFA, and by extension Folkism, is considered “spiritual racism” (MK-h1.R1 2021) to *Inclusives*. ‘Folkist’ and ‘Folkism’ are just two drops in an ocean of language tethered to these racialized beliefs (see §2.a.ii). For those beginning their folk religious journey, it becomes a precarious balance one treks between the dogmatic and the erratic and it begins in the language of the company one chooses to keep. *Inclusives* are hyper-vigilant when new people bring the term ‘folk’ into conversation, so weighted it is by ‘Folkist’ bells and (dog) whistles.

Yet, ‘folk’ is also often used by *Inclusives* to speak positively about the particular folk traditions they follow or folk wisdom they seek out (MK-h1.1R 2021; -h1.3R 2021; -h8.1 2021). Both groups can use ‘folk’ to signify a form of ‘grassroots authenticity’¹⁰ (Appadurai 1988:37; Kapaló 2013:7) and ‘folklore’ is *not* automatically synonymous with stories that are false or fictitious. This connection to authenticity and to a ‘people’s’ wisdom is a culmination from the relationship with the land and the living beings with which we all inhabit the world and this resonates with both *Inclusives* and *Exclusives* alike. *Exclusives* have similar feelings of marginalization from broader society and the same competing agencies become obstacles, foes, or antagonists to both groups, but each group’s reactions actualize in vastly antithetical ways as they negotiate their particularized shareable units of identity (see §3).

⁹ Consumables include posters, poems, and other artwork bought and sold in online marketplaces.

¹⁰ Authenticity is a complex term. These groups synonymize it with sincerity or organic. Connected to ‘grassroots,’ it has a bottom-up integrity (as opposed to the top-down institutionalized notions). Authenticity becomes less about what is accurate/truthful to believe and more about what is morally appropriate to believe in. One believes in a continuity which evidences a particular ‘authentic’ identity/ideology/practice *and* that morally one ought to protect said identity/ideology/practice (more on authenticity see Bendix 1988; Bendix 1997).

2.2. *The folk religious forest of practice*

Maran distinguishes five main qualities or properties to describe the unique manifestations of forests: 1) “strong ontological presences,” 2) “tolerance of meaning,” 3) “distributed communication codes,” 4) “local heterogeneity and creativity,” and 5) “surplus of semiotic material” (Maran 2020:53-58). These describe qualities that exist and can manifest (and be discovered) simultaneously; that work in combination and affect one another. For instance, strong ontological presences can also reveal local heterogeneity and creativity, which can also indicate what semiotic material is in play or reflect communication codes in use.

Owing to its impact, I find that the most significant of these qualities is the ‘tolerance of meaning,’ a notion taken from biologist and scholar Jakob von Uexküll (1982:59). It is the forest property which best exemplifies the mutualistic quality of Kapaló’s relationality aspect. Maran states that “meaning-relations are mutual — meanings are not just perceived and interpreted but also attributed and...accepted and carried”, which creates a “reciprocal influence” (Maran 2020:56). All parties involved become both interpreters and carriers of a wealth of meanings. This relational aspect actualizes features of one group and not another, since “every species is in relation to the manifold other inhabitants of the forest” (*ibid.*). Everyone and everything is communicating and communicated (through different codes) and we are constantly—often outside of our awareness—going through our lives existing as carriers of myriad meanings that we embody and express everyday. The tolerance thereof, as Uexküll notes, “has various gradations” from the easily tolerable to the downright fatal (1982:59-60). Maran reminds us that since we, as individuals, are outnumbered by the multitude of other presences in the forest, “the acceptance of, or submission to, meanings tends to outweigh the outbound semiotic activity of the subject[/the individual]” (2020:56). Therefore, the tolerance of meaning, which places one into the role of “meaning-carrier”¹¹ can be more impactful upon an individual, is inevitable and often inescapable, and so cannot but be tolerated (Uexküll 1982:60). Cyber forests (in the form of social media platforms) are able to elicit some of the most clearly delineated manifestations of the multi-layered simultaneity of mutual meaning cycles that we regularly exist in and it does so in such a way as to make them unavoidable. Part of this is due to the 2-dimensionality that screen interfaces offer, including the platforms’ topographical, user-friendly designs, which allow one to come,

¹¹ “[M]eaning-carrier” describes the entity that is being interpreted by an ‘other’ (Uexküll 1982).

literally, face-to-face with these vivid meanings that one carries. It forces into our attention something which is more easily unsensible, in the physical world (see §5.b). The tolerance of meaning property helps us to understand the many ‘whys’ and ‘hows’ individuating through a given virtual platform/environment.

Acknowledging the ‘strong ontological presences’ property maps onto James Kapaló’s concept of “competing agencies” (2013:14) influencing the forests that the folk religious individuals inhabit. Kapaló mentions examples of the national, political, clerical, scholarly, economic or otherwise, and in this thesis I also highlight the technological. For instance, social media platforms were a precondition for actualizing these groups. Each social media platform is an example of Kapaló’s “agentive” (*ibid.*) co-constructor along with presences such as the US federal and state governing bodies, the US constellation of Christian denominations and churches, prominent scholars, popularized video games and films which reimagine and depict deities and magic, and even the pagan deities themselves.

Telegram, “as an environment makes certain interpretations possible, while it constrains others” (Maran 2020:57). It is a strong ontological presence in and of itself, as well as a tool to actualize the myriad other ontological presences like each individual member. Affecting the dimensions and materials of their prayers, their altars, and their practices, these strong ‘agentive’ presences contribute to shaping people’s conceptions of themselves and their deities in their co-constructed worldviews. By using Maran’s forest model I am pushing a bit further than Kapaló to say that not only are these external forces producing an effect, but that they are agential presences; made up, as they are, of human agents acting in heterogeneous and collective ways. Ontologically, this aligns more acutely with how the two groups’ perceive the agential influences upon their (cyber)spaces, in that there is a homogenous conscious intentionality levied upon the manifold social media platforms and their algorithms when a group member calls them to mind. The idea of an egregore is used among both groups as a sincere and reasonable grappling with making sense of a world that includes massive institutions of power, like corporations. Like a forest environment, these agential platform-environments provide “quick and effective feedback to the perceptions, interpretations, and actions” (Maran 2020:57) to its inhabitants. These platforms often have the power to hinder or allow when one can practice, how one can practice, where one can practice, and, as such, lead many to view cyberspaces as *allowing* for finding a sturdy sense of community and belonging and for actualizing a spiritual conviction. Seeking such things in their physical, offline neighborhoods and cities are commonly unfeasible or risky. One

Inclusive wrote how interacting in large groups online is much easier/less anxiety-inducing for them than in “meatspace” (MK-H.Q-23.12 2021). *Inclusives* appreciate the supportive and kind atmosphere of their cyberspace while another remarked upon the conundrum of saying “we should all be here, but us all being here makes everyone nervous about being here” (MK-H.Q-23.12 2021). These egregore-ish ‘forests’ have living, breathing people inhabiting them as well as deities that may choose to engage via digital/virtual means. Each with their own ontologies, neuroses, and *Umwelten* (singular *Umwelt*)—i.e. sensorial or experiential miasma through which a being understands its own piece of reality (Uexküll 1982)—that then interact with and impact upon each other and upon the digital agential environments and algorithms in myriad ways.

These strong ontological presences being, reciprocally, meaning-interpreters and meaning-carriers meet and actualize particularities of a given forest through the property of ‘local heterogeneity and creativity.’ According to Maran, these points where forest inhabitants meet are creative “nodes” that are “distributed unevenly, and they have different qualitative properties” (2020:56). It is important to recognize that what happens in these nodes “cannot be deduced from the surrounding conditions” (*ibid.*). Especially as researchers, we have hopes to assess patterns and, to an extent, we may conclude general trends, but when it comes to the ephemeral, alchemical creations between agents and the places they inhabit, we cannot hope to predict what will be created in the collision—or collaboration—on the local level. Rather, we can attempt to decode the event of what is attended to and what is neglected after the fact in, say, a unit of folklore.

There is a whimsical example of the YouTube environment making possible the local creative interpretation of a “Pagan Bar Crawl” (MK-h1.1R 2021) experience for some *Inclusives*. This ‘Bar Crawl’ node, coordinated among about ten members, would take place on ‘Thor’s day’ (Thursday). Each member would create a video for each of their channels, and then would each premiere their videos on Thor’s day, but in a staggered schedule. This allowed the community—as a temporally synced unit—to metaphorically hop from one video to the next in a marathon of new content, strategically timed to provide a continuous stream of stimuli replete with a live chat in which one may participate and engage with others. This communal dialogue not only brought the group together with a shared event, but also benefited each of the content creators’ channels as it contributed to views and engagement with the content to then boost its promotion in the algorithm; leading to more people seeing it and subscribing to the channel. It generated a unique aspect or quality of the *Inclusive* forest, which the *Exclusive* forest does not possess. Though, true to the quality of a forest, this node

did not last forever, and in due time was overgrown by other nodes of meeting and actualizing meaning in new ways, using new codes.

But, the YouTube algorithm makes or breaks many larger influencers within these communities, doing so swiftly and facelessly. *Exclusives'* relationships to YouTube—and its algorithm—manifests very differently. They feel that there is an intentional drive to 'shadow ban' or silence their ability to reach people by hiding their content from users. One *Exclusive* wrote about how the faceless 'they' "*remove us from all significant social media platforms... [so that we are] shut out from the national conversation and mainstream politics... The second thing they've done is keep people who already hold these views isolated to tiny alternative platform echo chambers or "silos," where they can be bombarded with fake narratives to promote pointless infighting*" (MK-Tel.Int1a-b 2022, original emphasis).

Broadening to other platforms, a small coffee business owner posted about their Twitter account being spammed by "anti-whites" and "the importance of supporting small businesses that serve our folk, in the midst of the rising tide of anti-whitism in the West" (MK-Tel.Pol12a-b 2022). Rather than a "Pagan Bar Crawl", there has been a small boom of independent book publishers (MK-Tel.Res6a-b 2022) among *Exclusives* to share works that are seen as dangerous for the 'establishment.' We see the heterogeneous creativity in the *Exclusives* forest manifest as a strong response to a viscerally felt/experienced, intentional suppression of their ideas and values. These independent publishers and coffee shop owners do not exist among *Inclusives*. Nor does the purposefully cryptic language that *Exclusives* have adapted exist among *Inclusives*. However, this has caused *Inclusives* to become hyper-vigilant about particular language used in their own communities by newcomers. In this way *Inclusives* and *Exclusives* are directly adapting to one another, as well as to the various social media environments. One can see both a vertical and lateral influence within these forests that reveal how strong ontological presences and local heterogeneity and creativity allow for occurrences where if you "take the wrong turn in a forest you will be in danger of getting lost... [one who] is not attentive enough to [one's] surroundings is in danger of being caught and preyed upon" (Maran 2020:57). The digital realm has become not simply a light pastime or information hub. If you enter a (cyber)forest and end up saying the wrong thing or taking a wrong turn, it can swiftly become a rueful or even dangerous experience, bringing us to our next property: 'distributed communication codes.'

Maran highlights the "different physiologies," who use "different communicative means" (55), so that, in some cases, a "referent" (i.e. what a sign conveys (Hall 1997:20)) may only be accessible to an individual based on their capacity to access certain

communication codes, be it through past personal experience or sensorial event beyond the audio-visual limitations of the internet. Similar to a forest, “you will move from partial variations of the semiotic code to new variations” (Maran 2020:56), which reawaken us to how, inescapably, “situatedness...is the case by default, and the neutral position of the observer is a special condition” (*ibid.*). As in the discussions around ‘folk,’ misunderstandings of specific language happened a note-worthy amount of time in *Inclusives* during my fieldwork, made only more noticeable when compared to the utter lack of such interactions I witnessed in *Exclusives*.¹² Such a global outreach with such diverse inhabitants is bound to cause seemingly disproportionate reactions, contentious debate, and sudden bursts of authoritative control when certain words which have been encoded by *Exclusives* are used in the *Inclusive* space, whether in ignorance or not. Confrontations that I have witnessed first-hand involved terms like ‘Asatru,’ ‘Orthodoxy,’ and ‘Innangardr/Utangardr,’ which have felt, to me, very abrasive and reactive (MK-H.Q-01.01 2022; -H.HW-22.03 2023). However, not being a moderator, myself, I have not needed to internalize the intensity for assuring the safety and comradery of the group when a new person enters the grove. This sensorial and learned attention, in a way, becomes a different physiological capacity to receive meanings that others of the community do not or cannot receive.

Fortunately, communication generally works *despite* this variety due to “the partially shared communicational conventions...[of which] every participant uses a partial variation” (Maran 2020:55). Meaning-making flourishes through a variety of mediums (e.g. music, visual memes, texts, videos, emojis, icons) where each community member utilizes the variability of shared conventions to impart meaning creatively which is then decoded and re-coded by others (see §4 & §5). For example, there is one emoji which looks like a bright green rectangle with a cartoonish flame framing it from behind. This image floods the chat feed whenever there is a technical problem with the live-stream. Responding with an emoji is often a sign of agreement or sympathy, and what of the image itself? It is their creative variation on the heathen/pagan trope of sacrificing animals, such as a ram, though, in this case, no actual animals are harmed in the ‘sacrifice’ taking place. Rather the sacrificial ram is, instead, a sacrificial ‘RAM’ (Random Access Memory) stick. Now, it becomes more clear why this particular emoji is used when there is an internet connection problem or audio issue to appease the tech gods (MK-D.Co5 2022).

¹² The factors contributing to this difference are beyond the scope of this thesis, but worth exploring.

The distribution of these communication codes in a forest maps onto virtual environments as well. One's tools of efficacy will change depending on if one is using a phone or a desktop to enter and interact in the (cyber)forest, while their offline environment in that moment can also influence how or whether they receive meaning from the partial codes used. One may go from scrolling through a steady stream of funny memes and satirical gifs into a (cyber)room that holds a solemn space for those mourning the death of a family member or requesting prayer offerings for their loved ones in which one is limited to using react emojis to communicate (e.g. a candle emoji or a bat emoji to express one's willingness to offer to a particular god on their behalf). This environmental limitation within the prayer-request space gives rise to new modes of communication, encoded in whichever emoji one opts to react with. Moreover, clicking from room to room, even through digital platforms that are so topologically predictive and cleanly delineated in front of us, is still experienced in the body akin to how one would wander through a forest. Much like in a physical forest which communicates meanings that may be inaccessible to us yet still permeate our sensory receptors (e.g. from mycelial networks under our feet to the bespeckling of sounds, colors, and aromas), so too, do the distributed codes in online folk religious virtual forests viscerally affect us though we may only partially or not at all understand the meaning being conveyed.

Finally, the 'surplus of semiotic material' property is useful for investigating the concretization of communication codes. This 'surplus' is the stuff of half-forgotten jokes; temperaments, memories, fantasies; bits and bobs of lore. One might only see the mushroom caps of an interaction that brings previously inactive semiotic material back to the attention of inhabitants oblivious to the surplus from which these noticeable caps grow. A dense network of relationships is observable in these cyberforests between the amalgamation of knowledge culled from the vast surplus of semiotic material—what group members in various cyberspaces (both religious and secular) often call 'lore'—and the discrete selections that are distributed through the group in narrative units.¹³ As Maran states, "arbitrariness is rare, occasional, and constrained" (2020:57), but, due to the high multiplicity of these strong ontological presences and their access to a surplus of semiotic material, this 'lore' is, or can be, *seemingly* random from our own situational positioning. We may mistake an act to be motivated by one thing unaware that it actually was sparked by another. "Various signs and texts are used simultaneously, either in support of one another or in contradicting and comparative ways. This overflow of signs... can be remainders of previous semiotic material

¹³ E.g. poetry, prayers, music, gifs, memes, paintings, handicrafts; all posted as pictures to the community chat.

or have a foreign origin,” so that the forest as a semiotic model cannot be “formalized” (57-58). In other words, there are no hard and fast reasons for the shape it takes, yet it is also unlikely to be arbitrary, and analysis must make room for the seemingly random; must allow it to be recognized and critically considered even if its interpretation remains unresolved rather than rendering it invisible.

Chapter 3: Reconstructing Which Tradition(s)

3.1. Being “*inherently political*”

The “inherently political” tethers on Heathenry, Paganism, and folk religions, more broadly, is not a new idea, and I have seen this phrase reiterated explicitly in *Inclusives* and implicitly in *Exclusives* (MK-h5.1 2022; -h14.1Tw 2022; -h11.1WhR 2022; -h1.1R 2021; -H.LS-18.04 2022). Both groups are heavily influenced by this notion given the historical and scholarly sources that argue this very thing as religious practices and beliefs reveal deep ties to the socio-politico-economic environments from which they came (Strmiska 2005; Kapaló 2013; Páll 2021; Schjødt 2021; Johannsen 2019; Gunnell 2015; Lesiv 2013; Price 2012; Davidsen 2012; Jorgensen & Russell 1999; Kallas 1923). An *Inclusive* heathen reconstructionist (‘recon’) content creator reflected that, “you can’t talk about Heathenry without talking about social issues just because of heathen history,” another clarifying that politics is “intertwined with human rights and does influence social issues. Human rights *are* political” (MK-H.LS-18.04 2022; italics show vocal emphasis). Moreover, as a marginalized group living in a democracy, they do not have the luxury to avoid or refrain from socio-political engagements. Part of this concentrated amount of political engagement in these groups is justified by what is found in the historical record of heathen and pagan ancients, accessible to its contemporary practitioners. The ancient heathens’ religious practices were deeply interconnected with the social-political-economic spheres of their time, as highlighted by the role of the *goði*, derived from the word *god* ‘god,’ as a position of integrated political and religious leadership. The *goði* title continues today in both groups for those who are pillars of their community in leading offerings and rituals and who do not hide their advocating for or against various political stances. The addition or replacement of deities that ancient heathens offered to or interacted with were influenced by the geographic, political, and economic environments which made trans-tribal/trans-communal exchanges possible and valuable (Schjødt 2021; Price 2012; Gunnell 2015). As alliances and other relationships developed, deity relations were also exchanged between peoples, building shared or at least compatible religious frameworks. This too has carried over into *Inclusives*, although it is discouraged in *Exclusives*. Just as Scandinavian and Viking Age scholar Neil Price asks fellow scholars to realize the gravitational force of context upon the old written sources and to face directly the question “what exactly are we talking about when we discuss the content of the texts” (Price

2012:15), so too do today's heathen and pagan practitioners face the question of what exactly it is that they are reconstructing.

One long-time *Inclusive* heathen recon stated that, rather than 'religions,' "traditions might be a better term... several independent traditions... that combined with one another, that varied over geography and time and the practice that we're engaging with now is gonna be different than the practice that was engaged with in the past" (MK-h14.1RTw 2022, edited to lexical content). This recon then used the example of thralldom—i.e. being 'thrall,' enslaved by or similarly bound to another person—to concretize his claim: "The heathen societies of the past practiced thralldom. Reviving the religion in whatever way that you're approaching it in a modern practice does not mean that you need to revive thralldom as well" (*ibid.*). He extricated a contextualized religious practice (derived out of a contextualized religion) from the perceived religious-identity itself, *separating* Heathenry as a religious worldview from a particular incompatible tradition with contemporary heathen society that ought no longer have a place in Heathenry today. The question again arises, what, then, is being revived? Some religious core? Only ethically compatible traditional practices? Henry Glassie wrote that tradition is "the creation of the future out of the past. A continuous process situated in the nothingness of the present, linking the vanished with the unknown" (Glassie 1995:395). For many heathens and pagans alike their traditions *and their religions* come to fruition from that same impulse, and for them religion, like tradition, "is a temporal concept" (399)—although rather than the nothingness of the present, it is the unboundedness of the present forest in which one creates.

The selection and interpretation of traditions of the past to resurrect in the present is a participation in the generally agreed upon temporality of folk religious heritage, even for both the *Inclusive* and *Exclusive* reconstructionists who are more prone toward discovering a religious constant in their praxis. It is a normative stance that contemporary Heathenry exists within its own current time and place; its own temporal-forest. There is a responsibility for heathens and pagans to be part of the social/societal discourse for the betterment of the community (or, in the *Inclusives'* case, for all of humanity), threading the past to present on the continuum of the sociopolitical contexts that influence these religions, irrespective of the heterogeneous manifestations as mediated through particular practitioners' spacetime.

The tension between traditional practice, evidenced in historical documentation, and contemporary and technological adaptation is nearly always mediated internally. It is a continual navigation within the confines of a practitioner's embodied experiences where they

acknowledge their place in a particular environment (cyber or otherwise) in the same way that the ancient heathens' religious practices were influenced by, and interconnected with, their *own* relational environment; their own folk religious forest of practice. *Inclusives*, specifically, see their practice as a continuum of a *living* religion. The underlying thread is the co-constructed "contextualization" (Bauman & Briggs 1990:72) of their religion. As in the past, so in the present; even if the actualized creative nodes look different and the semiotic environment is differently perceived and responded to. Current lore becomes discursively tied up in ancient lore. Rituals, scaffolded by what they may gather about rituals from "entextualized" (Bauman & Briggs 1990:74) source material, become an authentic continuation of the rituals of the ancients. Out of this understanding grew the creation and dissemination of *Declaration 127*. This virtual document, posted in 2016 and signed by numerous heathen hearths/tribes/groups, was inspired by stanza 127 of the *Hávamál* that explicitly denounces hatred, discrimination and the AFA organization, proclaiming Heathenry to be an open religion to all.¹⁴ The translation of stanza 127 from which the Declaration comes reads: "When you see misdeeds, speak out against them, and give your enemies no frith" (McLaughlin 2022).

However, the sociopolitical activism inspired in both *Inclusives* and *Exclusives* speak to more similar values than either group may care to acknowledge. The greater US online society has, over the past few years, been generating a kind of 'pick-a-side' culture that has crept into the socio-political sphere and has exacerbated online. As their folk religion becomes more communal through access to the continuing innovations of technology, the communities are able to act as socio-political units, examples of which include creating an online ritual for women's rights when the 2022 Dobbs v. Jackson abortion decision came out, a channel to support Ukraine when Putin's Russia invaded, and providing support and accessibility for various disabled community members.

A well-respected, long-time *Inclusive* recon influencer who organically evokes deference from others in every way except politically was told that according to his 'chat,' he is "not leftist enough" for them, and as such he "will fight with chat very often" in a way that is impassioned and exaggerated, but not without a strong foundation of good faith and love for each other. He added jovially that, "it's like a universal truism that liberals are annoying. All political corners can agree that liberals suck" (MK-H.LS-18.04 2022) and the distaste

¹⁴ A List of organizations that support Declaration 127 are on the Asatru Community website (2016). As of 06 April 2023, the website: <http://www.declaration127.com/> is down, but other online spaces still carry its message.

grows even stronger for ‘enlightened centrists,’ which is used as an ironic moniker to ridicule their fence-sitting stance rather than applaud their aspiration for compromise.¹⁵ An *Inclusive* heathen observed: “These enlightened centrist types, like you said, are probably the biggest issue... ‘cause it lets the Nazis sit around them... you become susceptible to the arguments” (MK-h1.1R 2021, edited to lexical content). ‘Centrist’ became a verb to describe a character from *The Saga of Hrolf Kraki* (14th century: Byock 1998). Svipdag, one of three sons on a heroic quest, “tried to centrist his way” through the narrative, meant as a criticism of his actions and a warning not to be like Svipdag in that respect (MK-H.BC-17.03 2022).

Both groups view liberals and centrists as ‘the worst’ and Capitalism kills people’s ability to live meaningful, value-driven lives. It erases all other values beyond immediate profits. The *Inclusives* group is full of politically self-identified communists (“commies”) (MK-Tr.WR-09.02 2022) and with the high volume of creatives, disillusioned with capitalist ideology who also have constantly marginalized ancillary identities, one’s responsibility to the community is often short-handed as “mutual aid” (Kropotkin 1902), itself an indexical reference within leftist socio-economic, communist-leaning online communities in the US.¹⁶ Many *Exclusives* are Isolationist/Homesteader pagans, the image of which comports with broader US society’s representation of ‘heathen’ or ‘pagan.’ Based on this representation, however, the presumption that *Exclusives* must then value rugged individualism, and thereby capitalism, is erroneous. Indeed, they have their own issues with Capitalism, sharing posts amongst each other like: “The AFP [American Freedom Party] stands against a capitalism that puts corporate profits before our people and our land. These entities must be brought to heel to put the Nation’s interests first!” (MK-Tel.Pol.4a 2022). The same sentiment could have easily come from an *Inclusive* up until putting the nation’s interest first, a phrase distinctly reminiscent of Donald Trump’s Make America Great Again slogans and anti-immigration, isolationist rhetoric, which *Inclusives* fervently oppose.

While both groups rail against Capitalism, Capitalism remains the thriving system in which each community exists. We have seen how *Exclusives* create an insular economic cycle with their coffee companies and independent bookstores (see §2.b). Similarly, since physical shops are no longer necessary in the digital age, *Inclusives* buy and sell artistic renderings of deity idols in the way they imagine them/experience them. Both groups have

¹⁵ Even self-identified enlightened centrists convey an awareness that their position annoys ‘both sides.’

¹⁶ Communism is a heavily contextualized political stance. US self-identified ‘commies’ bear little resemblance to communists within European cultural memories and US citizens who identify others as ‘commies’ have yet another conception in mind. It requires a deeper discussion than this thesis provides, but is worth mentioning.

an autogenous customer base as their own insular economic cycle for heathen/pagan consumables. “It’s heathen to support the community you’re in” (MK-H.LS-18.04 2022), including economically; the value of the collective is heathen.¹⁷

Another battle ground value is that of environmentalism. Many *Exclusives* are quite sore about the political left being connected to environmental activism. The American Freedom Party celebrated Earth Day by calling upon fellow *Exclusives* to take Earth Day back from the left and to recognize “the threats globalism, immigration, and international capitalism pose not just to the entire planet, but specifically to our native [American] soil” (MK-Tel.Pol.4a 2022). And, what of the politically charged issue of diversity? From *Exclusives* a common discourse around diversity is that people ought to dive into their familial roots; that this is what makes the world “truly diverse and like a colorful garden, essentially” (MK-p2.1R 2022). An *Exclusive* pagan influencer, rejecting Universalism, said it was “stripping away all forms of identity for everyone, and it’s inauthentic and it certainly doesn’t appeal to me whatsoever.” She pitied the atheists who have been “severed from their roots” (*ibid.*). *Exclusives* remain dangerously *exclusive* when communicating between themselves (Figures 3 & 4) for, although *Exclusives* and *Inclusives* alike argue for the eradication of a selfish individualism that Modernity has wrought upon the planet (MK-Tel.Id.3a 2022), the *Exclusives*’ collectivist attitudes do not extend beyond one’s own skin color, making it an inauthentic or disingenuous proclamation of collectivist values to *Inclusives*.



Figure 3 From *Exclusives* (MK-Tel.Id12 2022)



Figure 4 From *Exclusives* (MK-Tel.Pol8 2022)

The significant socio-political views that are identified with and adopted by both groups (i.e. diversity, environmentalism, anti-Capitalism), actualize locally as incompatible expressions/practices and opposing political participation. Yet, as far as the average US American is concerned, heathens and pagans are viewed as extremists, Nazis, satanists,

¹⁷ This I find tragically ironic when one considers how many heathens walked the path solo for so long, either from the need to remain in the ‘broom closet’ or because heathen communities were not accessible to them like they are nowadays on the internet. It makes these communities more precious to those who find a home there.

superstitious conspiracy nuts, backwards hicks, grifting¹⁸ New Agers, or some other blight on their sensible, enlightened society. These tropes are a few of the signified meanings that heathens and pagans find themselves being forced to carry and tolerate from broader US society. Much of these tropes reflect parallels in the US historical imaginings of ‘folk’: “what was seen as superstitious behavior was depicted as a component of folkness in many forms of cultural expression” (Mullen 2000:119).

Although both groups have their extremists who are given a space to be expressed and/or validated within their siloed online spaces, we also see that these groups are each fighting against human inertia. They are trying to activate people to care about the destruction of nature, to safeguard myriad human expressivity, to seek deeper meaning than the next consumerist fad, and that the political actions which come from these ideas are a necessary part of their heathen/pagan identities.

The danger to new *Inclusive* practitioners of slipping into the *Exclusive* forest reveals itself in the actionable reactions to environmental stimuli; the efficacious use of curated semiotic material that thrives in the different groups. For two *Inclusives*, a Norse recon, John, and a witch, Jo who has relationships with Norse gods (MK-h1.1R 2021):¹⁹

Jo: [*Exclusives*’ praxis] is number one, not okay in the first place, and number two, completely ahistorical, it doesn’t make any sense, it’s not correct it’s just, it-it’s roleplaying history for how you want it to be to represent the beliefs that you hold that are separate from your religion and then trying to tie it to your religion because you *want* it to be tied rather than whether or not it actually represents your religion.

This initially seemed at odds with John’s earlier comment in the conversation that “if they’re following the Norse Gods, if they’re venerating their ancestors, if they’re, ya know, engaging in reciprocity with the, the land wights and the house wights, that’s. Heathenry. Period, like ya can’t really like, walk away from that.” John’s description, here, aligns with the practices of *Exclusive* recons, even though *Exclusives* harbor beliefs that Jo was taking issue with in her previous statement. However, an integral part of *Inclusives*’ responsibility to their religion, their traditions, and their community is also to actively combat harmful, “ahistorical” and “bigoted” representations of Heathenry and Paganism. *Inclusives* contrast

¹⁸ Online, grifting is not simply using illicit tactics to earn money, but rather a grifter is one who lies to or is insincere with one’s audience (consumer-base) to get them to donate money, but who does not genuinely hold the beliefs they spout.

¹⁹ This dialogue was audiovisual. I have kept some of the idiosyncratic language, although I removed “uhs” from the text. Italics are for vocal emphasis, periods are declarative with a small cesura after.

the heathen/pagan identity and reconstruction with *Exclusives'* behaviors. Jo and John reflect similarly on what they see Christians do in similar circumstances.

Jo: You have some Christians doing bad things and then other Christians will be like, 'Well they're not real Christians' like, okay, that doesn't change that they're using the name of Jesus to do bad. It doesn't matter whether *you* think they're doing it right or that *you* think they're a real Christian...they're using the Bible to hurt people, so why do you get to just dismiss them as not real Christians and then not address the harm they're doing?

John: The easiest way to [disassociate yourself from those doing harm] without doing any work at all, is to just go, 'they're not part of my group' when actually, yes they are...people like Folkists or bigots or racists or whatever Nazis that hang out in these spaces.—Their arguments, that they use, are what we should be addressing...not telling everyone else that 'they're not me.'

To conclude this sample of dialogue with Jo's words, "if a Folkist is the most visible part, if the AFA is the most visible part of Heathenry in the-the global social consciousness well then they *do* represent us."

Inclusives have struggled to budge broader US society away from the heathen stereotype that conflates Nazis with Norse Heathenry. Fortunately, using the technological power of "participatory media" (Howard 2013:82), via Twitter, they need not tolerate it as individual inhabitants of the forest anymore. *Inclusives* now have tools to successfully, as a competing agential unit akin to the egregorean institutions, begin reshaping their reputation in their *own* image. Rolling Stone published an article which originally claimed Mjolnir (Thor's Hammer) was "a symbol of identity among self-proclaimed "heathens" (code for white supremacy-aligned pagans)" (MK-Twt.RSa 2022, screenshot of unamended article) conflating the two labels. *Inclusives* came out in droves, and were able to publically pressure Rolling Stone into amending their erroneous article, which as of May, 2022, reads: "a symbol of identity among modern heathens, and is particularly popular among those aligned with the explicitly white supremacist "neo-Völkisch" or "folkish" movement"" (Kelly 2021).

Of course, the process of recontextualizing the heathen identity is full of wins and losses and while the tolerance of meaning remains a strong quality of each cyberforest, respectively, there is a societal attention toward heathens and pagans which remains largely rigid and inescapable. The ontological presence of Facebook undermines *Inclusives'* efforts, if inadvertently, when it works from an obsolete communication code to comb through a Facebook-sized, transnational surplus of semiotic material. Jeorge (*Inclusive* recon) has been extremely frustrated that Facebook flags posts with the word 'Odin' in it because, from his

point of view, Facebook still associates Odin to Nazism as part of its attempt to crack down on Nazi hate groups (MK-H.LS-18.04 2022).

The associative tropes of heathens and pagans remain vivid and influential, particularly in online spaces. With social media platforms being concentrated outpourings of exaggerated humanity, online *Inclusives* struggle to avoid the visceral experience of broader US society presences yoking them to these digitally concretized negative stereotypes (i.e. that they are dangerous or bigoted) where ‘pick-a-side’ internet culture encourages declaratively labeling everyone around you.

3.2. *Latent Christianity & spiritual burnout*

Dislodging oneself from an imposed contextualized identifier can feel urgently necessary, the intolerability of tolerating these meanings only exacerbated when so immediate and materially visible across one’s screen. But it can also be painful and disorienting when a new practitioner faces the task of disentangling which meaningful identifiers have been imposed upon them and which are genuinely compatible with or even justified by their new folk religious framework. It is an unsettling unknowing that many heathens find themselves in when they work to escape from their previous US-Christian identities in which they were raised. There is a relationship difference between what *Exclusives* generally feel toward Christians and how *Inclusives* generally feel, and this, I have noticed, comes from different conceptions of the Christian religion as another ontological presence in their lives. For *Inclusives*, the desire to get it right, or a fear of doing it wrong coincides, often, with conversations around how to detangle one’s current folk religious praxis from their previous Christian lives—or Catholic or other “book religions” (MK-k1.1R(wr0) 2022). Many US-based members live either in or near what is colloquially called the ‘Bible Belt’—the southeastern region that overlaps the ‘Cotton Belt’ region.²⁰ This close proximity affects the two communities and the way their beliefs and practices manifest, more so than say how Judaism or Islam might if these groups resided in another part of the world. *Inclusives* who were raised in the deep pockets of mainstream Christian communities, like in the Bible Belt, struggle with what they call “latent Christianity”—the residual beliefs, conceptions, feelings and practices of the Christian religion into which they were born (MK-h9.1R 2022; -h15.1R

²⁰ States generally included: VA, NC, SC, GA, FL, AL, NS, LA, AR, TN, MO, OK, KS, TX, NM, AZ, UT.

2022; -X.Q-31.12 2021; -N.D-19.02 2022). Latent Christianity often sends many ‘beginner’ heathens to rely so heavily on archeological, translated and documented historical source material and scholarship to formulate their praxis, that these texts almost become a comforting replacement for ‘the Good book.’²¹ I have seen in their own discourse that it can be frustratingly difficult to separate what traditions and beliefs may be true of their heathen/pagan gods and which are Christianized variations. The implicit bias of that which was written by Christian monks and historiographers can be hard to discern, especially by those ‘baby’ heathens and pagans who are new to the religion, and who have not built a solid relationship with the gods yet (MK-H.Q-26.12 2021; -H.Q-25.12 2021; -N.D-19.02 2022; -p2.1DR 2021; -h15.1R 2022). Latent Christianity is used to imply an unfortunate struggle for those working to de-tether themselves from their imperceptible latent Christianity filter.

Growing up in a Christian household, myself, and experiencing much of my youth in churches in the US Bible Belt, I, too, internalized the default assumption that I was a christian. That rather than *doing* Christianity as a practitioner, one *was* without added effort or study.²² This resonates for others in this community who were also raised in Christian households. One member referred to their leaving the Christian faith as a desire to “learn [rather] than to live in ignorance” and another “used a lot of wishful thinking to explain things away” when in the throes of the Church, but when presented with more information, “the facade broke” and now they take a more scientific approach to things, concluding that there is a lot of “gaslighting in Christianity” (MK-H.Q-26.12 2021).

I am not declaring the truth about Christianity or any one sect of Christianity. Rather, these reflections connote how several Christian upbringings for *Inclusives* felt like a coercion of passivity upon the young congregants and that the act of seeking out and learning, for *Inclusives*, provided more autonomy in their decision to leave the Christian faith and begin a new path in Paganism. You are a Christian awake or asleep, when you lie or tell the truth, if you pray or if you don’t. Referring back to what Jo said about differing pagan practitioners from christian followers, *Inclusives* see self-proclaimed Christian politicians and popularized church leaders enacting harmful and damaging policies—particularly in the Republican-run states of the Bible belt banning women’s reproductive rights, trans healthcare, and books—that directly impact *Inclusive* community members, and they do so in the name of

²¹ The Bible

²² Granted, the one activity required was to accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior

Christian values. When harm like this happens in the name of heathen values, *Inclusives* believe it necessitates action to speak out against such harms otherwise those most visible *will* represent their values. In Heathenry there is such a strong connection to practice, that it is internalized as not just who you are, but then externalized into what you do. Being a *practitioner* involves what one does, how to offer, what to read, the act of researching, the act of divining appropriately, the act of training one's discernment (MK-H.Q-26.12 2021; -H.BC-23.12 2021; -H.Q-12.02 2022; -T.RS-18.02 2022; -N.D-19.02 2022). At the same time, there is a pressure to do the internal work of decoupling yourself from your latent Christian beliefs. "Sometimes the pagan conception of the soul would get confused with the Christian conception of the soul, causing serious distress" (Keltoi 2022a), contributing, in my estimation, to "spiritual burnout"—a curious phase through which struggling heathens might pass for a time (MK-p8.1R 2022; -N.D-19.02 2022). Rather than another holdover concept from their Christian upbringings, spiritual burnout seems unique to Heathenry/Paganism.

To exemplify this phenomenon, I need to begin with an informal level system used in *Inclusives* that correlates to one's heathen identity, the likes of which I do not find in *Exclusives* nor in Christian US-based congregations. Many who consider themselves at the 'advanced' level see the whole level categorization as too rigid and ultimately disempowering based on their observation of seeing a lot of beginners on their pagan journey feel a sense of 'imposter syndrome' when they practice or try to communicate with the gods. Keltoi continued, "speaking as a former Christian, there was a huge focus on faith as the path to knowledge...that little suitcase of latent Christianity kind of followed me, demanding that I be certain of my positions, and I felt the need to live up to that certainty otherwise I was without knowledge" (Keltoi 2022a). These words resonated with many heathens (beginner or otherwise) as others reflected upon their own desperation to find more solid ground in historical sources to supplement their lack for a sturdy, intimate bond with the gods. The level system is used as a convenient shorthand for expressing how one feels about one's own sense of self on their pagan journey. Is one a beginner ("baby heathen" (MK-H.Q-12.02 2022)), intermediate, or advanced?

The reasoning behind where you feel you fall on this level system seems to be less connected to how long you've been on your heathen journey and more about how much reading you've done, how much you've studied the old texts, and how consistent you are with your offerings. There is a sense that you perpetually do not yet know enough. One *Inclusive*

member equated feeling a lack of intimacy in their relationship to their deities with a feeling that they just had not researched enough yet (MK-H.Q-26.12 2021). These expressions concretize why I chose Kapaló's 'folk religious field of practice' as a foundation. It is the practice of one's religion that builds out the reality, validity, or the truth of it for *Inclusive* practitioners—a catchall label they frequently use among themselves. Once unmoored from the dominant (and often dogmatic) assurance of their Christian upbringing, very often, beginner recons worry about how to “get it right” (MK-K1.2R(wr1&2) 2022), whereas advanced recons—light-heartedly referred to as doing Heathenry on ‘hardmode’²³— think more about what they are doing it for, attempting to reorient people back toward building reciprocity, which is itself a unique, individuated development based upon the counterparts involved, be they deity or human. An *Inclusive* Norse heathen wrote about the idea of “invoking yourself” (EmberVoices 2015) in ritual, meaning if you enjoy Pepsi and Doritos, if they help you connect to yourself, to your senses, and you infuse these offerings with genuine meaningfulness, then it is a valid part of your reconstructed practice. The founder of the Kemetic Orthodox Religion, Reverend Tamara L. Suida's blog post has been recommended and passed around multiple times by *Inclusives*. Suida wrote about a past pupil, a beginner, who was attempting to reconstruct a ritual which ended up in him constructing the bread offering out of styrofoam. To Suida, this was an example of the potential pitfall for beginners who focus on the wrong thing to reconstruct; of going through the motions, “the what of it,” without “knowing the why” (Suida 2015). The offering was intended to be eaten to complete the ritual, which takes precedence over how the bread looked according to the hieroglyphic images found in the historical sources. Commonly, the intention holds more weight than something like the historical accuracy of the traditional act, particularly for *Inclusives*. Is one sacrificing with sincerity, with a pure heart, with genuine vulnerability? Are you offering something that is personally meaningful to you or that expresses a facet of who you are? Other long-time recons, having Anglo-saxon, Norse, and Celtic leanings, spoke similarly with the only ‘rule’ being that if you decide to deposit an edible offering outside, to make sure it is not poisonous to any woodland critters or harmful to the earth and surrounding flora (MK-H.Q-26.12 2021).

²³ ‘Hardmode’ refers to choosing a reconstructionist path over a more eclectic path. Doing things on ‘hardmode’ originated in video game culture where one chooses the level of game-play difficulty; yet another technological influence upon *Inclusives*' forest. There are several ‘gamers’ in the community—unsurprising for an online group that uses Twitch to host both sacred rituals *and* non-sacred, hang-out streams.

When asked at which level *Inclusives* felt they were, it brought a wave of people who were perhaps a few months into their practice perhaps 20 years into their practice that all still felt like beginners. There was a bashful quality to many answers; a humility that was conveyed through a disarming, self-deprecating humor (MK-H.Q-12.02 2022). This type of humor permeates much of the *Inclusives*' discourse and it is also something I find unique to the *Inclusive* environment. I think it is a product of the intersecting residualized and discriminated identities that many carry, that sprout from their surplus of semiotic material and are gently dappled throughout all topics of conversation, from the mundane to the sacred. There is solace to be had in the communal act of self-deprecation, generating opportunities for empathizing with and up-lifting others. Disentangling Christian traditions and beliefs from the evidence of ancient Paganism brought a lot of anxiety to some *Inclusive* recons. I did not find such an atmosphere with *Exclusives*.

An *Exclusive* pagan said, "a part of being human is to have a spirituality," and that sadly, "people are really starving for an identity," but for her and her *Exclusive* kinfolk theirs is innate: "we literally share the same DNA with our ancestors" (MK-p2.1R 2022). There is an unquestionable certainty to their reconstructions. That does not mean that no anxiety exists for any one of them, but I would posit that the absence of such a sentiment shows how their identity as pagan comes from the *Exclusives*' understanding that they are born into a physio-spiritual lineage of pagans; that theirs is a blood heritage, a familial tradition that is inescapable (at least less escapable than *Inclusives* may feel about their Heathenry). A correlative effect emerges from this mindset where rather than feeling avoidant-prone and insecure of discerning Christian encodings from their preferred pagan heritages, *Exclusives* can confidently be "skeptical of newer religions" (i.e. Christianity) while feeling much more comfortable "walking alongside their Christian brothers and sisters" (The Ruby Ridge family from Waco, Texas is a favored example) than pagans like *Inclusives* and others who they view as harboring 'Globalist' beliefs (*ibid.*; -Tel.Pol.13a-d 2022).

Imposter syndrome, spiritual burnout, and latent christianity do not appear to be part of *Exclusives*' (cyber)forest, yet even within *Inclusives*, spiritual burnout seems to be more common for self-identified eclectics, syncretists or revivalists than for reconstructionists, which has led at least a few many influential recons to attribute this phenomenon to the overwhelming amount of historical data we have for a vast swath of religious practices and pre-Christian folk traditions (coupled with an utter *lack* of a single comprehensive primary

source) where new pagans will layer on more and more gods to worship, ancestors to venerate, or traditions to follow. This, in turn, created a fairly common trope at least in *Inclusive* circles that pagans, on average, last about five years in their praxis (MK-p9.1R 2022).

To combat this, *Inclusives* remind members that an interaction with the gods does not have to be “this like huge UPG” (MK-h4.1 2022) and both groups emphasize the importance of intention in their practice:

Sarah (*Exclusive* pagan): [scholars] who’re really looking deeply into the *lore* and the resources that we have available to us right now about how our...European pagan ancestors [lived]...with the spiritual practice, it wasn’t, we’re gonna go and do a blót²⁴...we’re gonna do this spiritual, ritual thing. It was like, no, the spirituality, the faith, all of it was literally interwoven and infused in everything...all the time, ya know, down to just like stirring a pot of stew (MK-6h.1Wh 2022, punctuation for vocal rhythm).

Jane (*Inclusive* hellenist/syncretist): doing [a religious practice] can be as simple as praying. I, some days, I only have the energy to pray very quietly, very briefly... I think sometimes people get very caught up in the seriousness, the pomp and circumstance...[but] If you do something small like lighting incense or sitting outside listening to the sound of leaves- I don’t want to say intention is everything because I don’t necessarily believe that as someone who struggles a lot with emotions and intrusive thoughts, but I guess what I would say- commitment. Yeah, I think that’s what it is. Commitment is everything in many ways. If you commit whole-heartedly to lighting incense, and sitting and listening. I think ultimately that will mean more than a half-hearted grand gesture (MK-p8.1 2022, punctuation for vocal rhythm).

Both groups believe building community is part of the heathen/pagan tradition. Both believe in the importance of intention and being attentive to the small everyday ways religious life is intertwined with seemingly mundane activities. Both practice a tradition of offerings to local land wights and belief in the existence of their respective gods. But, how much does the sense of performing Heathenry versus inheriting Heathenry have to do with the confidence in their reconstructions? Without that unquestionable certainty of one’s DNA, *Inclusives* rely more heavily upon a sensorial experience to be attentive to UPG from/with the gods, discerning who enters their hearth-cult. Sensorial experiences constitute a temporal, effervescent quality that an identity tethered to one’s birth-heritage does not possess? How much does this play a part in the prevalence of spiritual burnout and imposter syndrome?

²⁴ Translated as “blood sacrifice” (Zoëga 1910:59).

In a relational environment—similarly to when we use public language—meaning (of a word or other external stimulus) is not solely determined by the intention of the individual or source. There is a continued negotiation with others, where one’s intention becomes necessary, but not sufficient for meaning-creation and meaning-exchange. This is why the qualities of the forest are so important to keep in mind. For *Inclusives*, on one hand the individual creativity of one’s practice is supported as accurately traditional (based on Price’s archeological findings of heterogeneity among others). However, there is the semiotic material of latent Christianity which for many *Inclusives* is not felt as another valid individuation of their traditions or a younger religious heritage which carries influences from older Paganism, but rather Christianity is more like an invasive species, ‘larping’ as or bastardizing Heathenry and therefore must be weeded out from ‘actual’ pagan traditional practices and beliefs. One’s own situated experiences of the forest is grounded in the semiotic surplus we and others engage with. Individuals are touched by and react to many meanings evolved from emotionally charged memory as communication codes open to us while others fall dormant. We react from our own positionality and make sense of it through a shared attention and gentle reinforcement of those in our pack.

Chapter 4: Community Creativity

4.1. *Local heterogeneity & the feasibility of practice*

The decentering and recentering (Bauman & Briggs 1990) of cultural elements is happening all the time in every group in Heathenry, whether online or offline. Both communities understand that historical texts have not only been initially stripped from the living culture(s) from which they came, but, by that very stripping, have also been re-contextualized into those elements deemed worthy of preservation. These sources were initially filtered through the biases of (often Christian) documenters, and continue to be recontextualized every time they are returned to, observed, analyzed, or otherwise ingested through a different witness. Primary sources are differently re-contextualized in each community who cull different semiotic meanings from the records.²⁵

What is unique to *Inclusives* is how their individual backgrounds mesh to collectively re-contextualize archival source material in a way that is not stereotypical for Norse heathen recons in online spaces. Based on the experience of many of the older heathens who have been recons for, on average, about a decade or so, they suggest that many online Norse heathen spaces are easily co-opted by white nationalist, Nazi-types (MK-H.LS-18.04 2021).²⁶ *Inclusives* encourage an inclusive and pluralist atmosphere while simultaneously enforcing a strong defense around themselves in a digital universe that makes such cohesion difficult to maintain. It is a continuous attempt to remain loyal to tradition while celebrating creative contemporary religious expression. Fortunately, there is precedent for unique, localized religious expression.

Commenting upon Johan Callmer's intensive research of burial sites in the 1990s, Neil Price writes that the various barrows "demonstrated the utterly individual nature of funerary rites, not just within and between regions, or from one settlement to the next, but even within discrete communities" (Price 2012:22-23). This individuality of something as significant as funerary rites parallels, and helps bolster, the idea that personalization like that discovered in archeological sources is authenticated tradition, not innately in contradiction to reconstructionism. Nowadays, the internal experience of praxis holds more weight than the

²⁵ For more on textualization see Bauman & Briggs 1990.

²⁶ These labels are used by *Inclusives* to describe those who would include some *Exclusive* members. These *Exclusives* also use these labels for themselves, as well as "heritage Americans" mentioned in §1.a.

externally observable shape of praxis for both groups, but there is a wider margin of acceptable external expression (linguistically²⁷ and performatively) for *Inclusives*.

We currently exist in a world where tools like the internet and activities like crafting, studying, and documenting life are optimized for efficiency, feasibility, and convenience. It is part of the economic atmosphere in which we were raised; tools that can de-stress our lives and allow us to outsource energy expenditure are handy. What I observe is that *Inclusives*—influenced by the US discourse regarding technological progress—enact traditional practices that incorporate tools chosen as a product of necessity since nowadays, “recreating items exactly isn’t at all possible due to differences in materials” (MK-H.Q-12.02 2022). Although Athena is the Goddess of the Loom, it does not mean a Hellenist seamstress must construct and use a traditional loom to offer, venerate, or commune with her Goddess. They may not have access to a loom, but a sewing machine can serve the same purpose, despite the embodied and temporal experience of the act being dramatically different. Non-corporeal technological interfaces, specifically, social media technologies are similarly used to expand the opportunities for innovation in reconstructionism without undermining the qualities of reconstructionism. Current heathen practices are vindicated in utilizing more convenient tools and processes rooted in necessity. With an ideology that these efficacious or convenient tools are a benefit, the importance of a traditional act shifts to an importance of the intention behind said act.

Many of the community members who aren’t able to afford living alone, or who still live with their Christian families, feel it necessary for their safety—and their spiritual autonomy—to hide their alienating heathenness from those around them. Not only are god idols, incense, and offering bowls taboo, but many *Inclusive* heathens have coequal identities previously discussed that are disparaged by their Church-going relatives. One *Inclusives* discussed having a “hide the altar” basket beside their set-up into which they can easily sweep their altar in case their privacy gets violated by an intrusive family member. This inevitably affects what gets placed on that altar to begin with (MK-H.AN-30.03 2022). Interestingly, it parallels what Neil Price wrote regarding burial artifacts found throughout Scandinavia: “‘what needs to be done’ in part decides what objects are required to do it” (Price 2012: 23-24), and what needs to be done—the intention—is communion with the gods made feasible by using non-breakable, soft or plushy objects. Many hide their altars in their closets, make altars out of Altoid tins, or slip 2-dimensional altars into their wallets

²⁷ Linguistically as in the vernacular used in one’s religious practice, as well as one’s identity or one’s UPG.

(MK-H.AN-30.03 2022). Technology and social media apps have created opportunities to make virtual altars on websites like Pinterest, which are protected by personal passwords (MK-p4.1 2021). These innovations are used and validated by other members in *Inclusives* to an extent that some have facilitated the creation of these new variations of altars and practices via online economies for the buying and selling of, for example, more covert and creative deity consumables. For example, many representations of the gender-bending Loki depict them wrapped in the trans flag and referred to by they/them pronouns (MK-Twt.Rep6 2022). Once again, we see the capitalistic influence upon their heterogeneous, localized creativity. *Exclusives* focus on independent publishing houses to create a marketplace for authoritative texts that propagate traditions and practices and *Inclusives* create a marketplace of crafty deity representations to propagate traditions and practices.

While technology is not seen as inherently harmful and should be a tool to serve humans, in both groups, for *Exclusives*, any perceived movement toward transhumanism is reacted to in the same way they react to transgender individuals: it is an ideology that must be fought against to retain a perceived natural order that makes sacred the untainted, traditionally birthed human form (MK-h11.1WhR 2022; -h12.1WhR 2022). As opposed to genetic lineage providing continuity to the past, *Inclusive* recons feel the connective thread from past to present via the timeless gods and by celebrating the global human impulse to build strong relationships; to build frith; to build reciprocity with said gods (MK-p1.1R 2021). *Exclusives* do not endorse these veneration of Loki, that it is incompatible with reconstructionism, nor do they engage in cyber rituals and prayers. *Inclusives*, on the other hand, use virtual ritual, veneration, and prayer as feasible opportunities for participation that attempt to mitigate the pragmatic, contemporary limitations upon a heathen practice. These are valid versions of reconstruction because the intention comports with the reconstructionist mindset that incorporates a conscientiousness of feasibility to participate in a practice. Fortunately, *Inclusives* are communicating with gods that have the ability to understand all of the varied communication codes with which one chooses to engage. The ability to perform an historically accurate blót, “blood sacrifice” (Zoëga 1910:59), within the inescapable situatedness of contemporary US society is rather restricted. The limitations, both practical and sentimental,²⁸ on sacrificing a horse (MK-H.LS-18.04 2022) re-centers what sacrifice could mean for a timeless god and receiver of the offering.

²⁸ Sentimental in the sense that we have a different relationship to horses than the ancients did.

4.2. *Feedback from the gods*

In the relational forest of practice, practitioners are additionally responding to feedback from the gods. Their contemporary personalizations both shape and are shaped by how the relationship with the deity feels through physiological contact with the deity. Whether the meaningful rendition of their ritual is accepted comes from that intimate, personal experience of their relationship to said deity.

“I know people who are more set on what a Medieval Christian monk recorded about their gods than they are about what they and the people around them actually experience of those gods... Yes, studying our gods is important, and I’m as fascinated by the history as the next academic geek, but when it comes to having a relationship, which is more important, interacting with the other person, or knowing facts about them? [*sic*]” (EmberVoices 2015).

There are some disagreements about one’s accessibility to the gods. To *Inclusive* recons, *Exclusives* are fallaciously limiting the power of the gods, arguing how small *Exclusive* pagans must think the deities are if the gods can only commune with those who have the right DNA (MK-p1.1R 2021). They find it offensive to the gods themselves and see it as worthy of ridicule to undermine the awesome agency of the gods.

Inclusives may ask for prayers by fellow community members with a caveat to not pray for support from certain deities that they do not have a good relationship with. One may have a bad relationship with a god that another feels intense affinity for, thus the common US condolence of ‘I’ll pray for you’ expresses more of an obliviousness that consent was not given rather than sympathy for those struggling. It also reveals the very visceral experience of the strong ontological presences of the gods who engage with humans. *Inclusives* have discussed experiences with gods and deities whom they had contentious interactions with and now avoid. Praying for another practitioner without knowing the practitioner’s relationship with the deity being prayed to not only impedes upon the relational dynamic between practitioner and deity, but undermines the reciprocity between the two human practitioners involved.

The acceptance of a reconstructed practice comes from the personal, embodied experience of the god’s personalized feedback, although it is possible that another god answers instead. The practitioner must be receptive to whatever response they perceive. *Inclusive* heathens generally rely on some personal form of communication with one hellenist saying “the thing that makes me feel the closest [to the gods] is art” (MK-p5.1R 2022). This

sentiment is echoed through *Inclusives* so deeply that there are online events dedicated to sharing any and all art that honors one's patron deities (MK-H.AN-30.03 2022). Other events are created to share stories of their UPGs. These events not only strengthen the bonds between practitioners and gods, but also the bonds between themselves. As one Hellenist expressed it, "community *is* the point," going on to say that the tradition she reconstructs was a "community religion" (MK-p8.1R 2022). The communal rituals provide a scaffold where one may practice their traditions, but do so with a community, as hodgepodge as it is. To many, it is preferable to not having ritual at all or having to perform what one can of ritual, alone. It is why online communal rituals begin by inviting those who follow a different traditional ritual practice to substitute their own deity of choice or offering of choice as they follow along. Those who do not have the ability to provide an offering are covered by the offering which is given during the live-streamed ritual. Even within the reconstruction of ritual, there is an awareness, a conscientious effort, to make space and to make time for others to participate in whatever capacity they can. The limitations of one's socio-geographic-economic-religio-temporal circumstances are taken into consideration when planning ritual nights to make it most feasible for all. Unlike a physical ritual event, where all have generally similar sights, smells, senses, each individual's senses are experiencing something unique to how that person is practicing/participating in the ritual. Perhaps it is not a reconstruction in terms of materials, location, or language, but it is reconstructing a value of community, the veneration of the offeree, and the intention of why they have gathered.

They provide opportunities to corroborate UPGs, and, at times, even create SPGs. The recent overturning of *Roe v. Wade* inspired an online ritual calling upon Tyr, Thor, Nott ('Night'), and Hel to help protect and support people's rights (MK-h10.1R 2022). The *god̄i* leading the ritual had purchased a fire-resistant glass bowl into which he eventually burned a rune inscribed wooden offering, and as they all sat in meditation after the final prayer had been said, the bowl shattered with a small, quick *pop.* Immediately the entire chat zipped by in a rush of excitement and shock, along with affirming commentary that the gods had accepted their offers; that the community had been heard. The fire-resistant glass, the timing, and the lack of damage done to anything beyond the bowl inclined the *god̄i* to acknowledge it as a sign but not without the caveat that we should always be skeptical of our own desire for confirmation.

4.2.1. A scientific method for spirituality

Patrick Mullen, building on the work of Richard Bauman, iterates that “There have been two primary intellectual traditions that have influenced the construction of ‘folkness’ and attitudes toward folk belief from the 18th century to the present—scientific rationalism and romanticism” (Mullen 2000:120). This influence still affects these groups today. *Inclusives* seek to dismantle the latter filter around their folk beliefs (MK-HW-22.03 2023; -H.Q-23.12 2022) as they employ the former to legitimize them.

It is a mistake of Romanticism to dramatize and heighten every piece of folklore, myth, poetry, ritual, forgetting that the mundane was just as much a part of life for the ancients as the sacred, and that documenting, archiving, and textualizing does not suddenly erase the truth of this plurality. *Inclusives* feel this is commonly overlooked by New Agers as well as certain *Exclusives*. Regarding the influence of Rationalism, *Inclusives* are raised in a culture that values the STEM²⁹ fields and higher education more generally, they are the kind of people with an innate skepticism toward simply following the crowd, and they have a drive to combat the negative stereotype that believing in magic comes with. All of these feed into looking at their own experiences and their folk religious practices in a rational and scientific manner and encourage their fellow practitioners to do so as well. In fact, it is not necessarily sacreligious to test the gods; to question if the message they are receiving is the message the god is trying to give them, or if there was even a message at all. *Inclusive* recon, John, explained that “it’s kind of okay to say ‘prove it’ to the Norse deities... they kind of like a little bit of a challenge, sometimes... I wouldn’t push that, but it comes with the reciprocity thing where sometimes it’s okay to ask” (MK-h1.1R 2021, edited to lexical content). Not only does this show the importance they have toward critical thinking and the influence of higher education agencies, but it also reveals once again the acknowledgement of the ‘other’ (in this case the deity) having their own motivations, communications, and desires; their own autonomy.

A common mantra found in *Inclusives* is “mundane over magical” (MK-H.Q-01.01 2022), as a way to remind members not to believe every little serendipitous moment as a message or a sign without being thoughtful about it. Unscrupulous inclinations are found in ‘fluffy bunnies’ and religious people who act in the name of their god based on their personal

²⁹ STEM: Science, Technology, Engineering, & Mathematics.

feelings about morality. They will often use jokes to convey the flaws wishful thinking as this *Inclusive* heathen recon example shows: “I saw birb. Is omen? [*sic*]” (MK-Twt.Rat1 2022). The misspellings and reductive grammar signals the satirical nature of the comment, implying the reductive and overly credulous assumptions being parodied. It is a reminder to be rational about meaning-making in a world so full of semiotic material and so full of engaging communication-decoding processes; to acknowledge the multiple, simultaneous meanings among which one must discriminate to hypothesize some truth of the matter.

Inclusives value supporting their claims by explicitly labeling what is and is not UPG. It is good etiquette to not invalidate or dismiss one’s UPG as untrue or wrong. Everyone is entitled to their own personal relationship with the gods and we see a rich tolerance of meaning among people who work with the same god in different ways due in part to the understanding that different people require different communication codes to reach the gods. Yet, one should disclose whether, say, their conceptions of Hel come from a dream they had with her or a scholarly source. While the UPG concept promotes an equalizing legitimacy between contemporary gnosés and historical sources, it also begins the process of corroborating evidence among *Inclusives* that strengthens SPGs. SPGs from the community can be compared to scholars and other heathen/pagan influencers from outside the community who boast a scholarly expertise. Misalignments between *Inclusive* SPGs and conceptualizations averred by self-proclaimed experts outside the group generate a strong skepticism toward the expert’s claims, leading *Inclusives* to criticize and problematize the expert’s arguments. This happened with an independent scholar, Daniel McCoy who, from many *Inclusives*’ points of view, misinterprets the goddess, Freya, as “famous for her fondness of love, fertility, beauty, and fine material possessions... she’s considered to be something of the “party girl” of the Aesir” (McCoy 2019). Not only did one *Inclusive* pick up on undertones of misogyny in his writing, but others criticize that McCoy completely ignores Freya’s strength and associations to war (e.g. that half of those slain in battle she receives into Fólkvangr³⁰). UPGs and SPGs among the group describe Freya as a “badass and a fighter” with one *Inclusive* confessing that they had not yet heeded her “poking” because she intimidates them and another adding that UPG with her is “intense” (MK-HW-22.03 2023).

³⁰ The field or meadow where Freya received the slain. Mentioned in the poem *Grímnismál*.

4.3. *Academia in the forest*

A folk religion like Heathenry “doesn’t have, ya know, a *core* religious text that can, it can point to say this is what’s right and wrong like the Islam and the Bible have” (MK-h11.1WhR 2022, italics for vocal emphasis). Part of the impulse that *Exclusives* have for independent book publishers is a hope to “establish a religious standard for our people rooted in the traditions found in our lore... rebuilding a truly authentic system... to offer an orthopraxy” (MK-Tel.Res.6b 2022). Conversely, *Inclusives* joke about their lack of a single comprehensive source, focusing their actions on dismantling disinformation rather than consolidating an authoritative corpus. In part, this is for the sake of encouraging a dialectic scholarly tradition and to welcome a diversity of ontologies, beliefs systems and traditions among their members. Orthopraxy would be detrimental to the local creativity that thrives.

For instance, when considering stanzas 2, 3, and 4 of the *Hávamál*, *Inclusive* Norse heathens highlight the act of hospitality toward strangers, even those who come to your doorstep hastily and without warning (MK-h1.1R 2021; -h10.1R 2022; -h15.1R 2022; -H.HW-22.03 2023). The actions presented in the text, mulled over through *Inclusive* communication codes, champion generous hospitality and attentive openness toward strangers. For *Inclusives*, these stanzas evidence the refutation of boundaries that have been propagated by the Innangardr/Utangardr concept—an emic term based on Old Norse used to represent ingroup/outgroup. Many *Inclusives* commented how those words were harmful, hateful, and erroneously used by Theods and Folkists, and have never felt right in their practice (MK-H.HW-22.03 2023).

Inclusive: yeah as far as i can tell theyre only from some icelandic law codes and not anything legitimate in cosmology or religious beliefs, though they are often misportrayed as such... like not only are the terms a dumb dynamic to apply to religious (if you follow the logic a stranger in need would be utangard and unworthy of attention or help, which goes against like, all heathen hospitality and community beliefs) but theyve been grossly misinterpreted and modernly implemented in a way that they just were not used historically [*sic*].

Exclusives disagree and use the dichotomy to discern moral responsibilities in both human and deity bonds (MK-h7.1WhR 2022). Just as *Inclusives* rely on the *Hávamál* to support inclusion from a historical perspective/as reconstructionist, so too do *Exclusives* come armed with Icelandic law codes evidencing a dichotomy in deity bonds. *Exclusives* also argue that a lack of archeological evidence that Loki had a cult following or that Loki was ever worshiped

prove *Inclusive* Lokeans are wrong to praise Loki, much less to view Loki as a queer icon (MK-h7.1WhR 2022), and that they are actively besmirching the heathen identity. Importantly for *Inclusives*, Terry Gunnell writes that, “in recent years, numerous scholars have been arguing that the idea that of any *set body* of ‘Old Norse religious’ beliefs, myths and rituals ever having existed over a wide area of space and time (similar to those known in Christianity or Islam) should be abandoned [*sic*]” (Gunnell 2015:56). Yet, as mentioned, *Exclusive* members are working toward publishing a curated corpus of authoritative literature for a core orthopraxy in the here and now. Catherina Raudvere’s insight concerning the medieval Icelandic poem *Völuspá*³¹ holds up for folk communities online today: “the value of what is conceived as ancient (*forn*) is not so much the chronological age as such, but the bonds and the continuity that provide a sense of coherence in the world and in history” (Raudvere 2012:114-115). We do not experience progressions of time or historical context as chronologically or objectively as we might hope, but as Raudvere notes, it is the sense of coherence via their *bonds* which aid in heathens discerning a cogent continuity for their reconstructionism.

Both groups feel the importance that reconstructionism *mean* something beyond simply self-identification as a recon, but if so, then the tolerance of meaning quality must be constrained by the practitioners where the reinforcement of certain semiotic material and the neglect/decay of others continuously reshapes one’s attention to discern religious experience. This points to how identifiers (i.e. being recon) are relational rather than discrete and absolute. Perhaps this is why John (*Inclusive* recon) said that recons were dying out. He noted that while ‘recon’ *means* something, he immediately pointed out that “there’s a myriad different ways that they did it in the past” (MK-h15.1R 2022). *Inclusives* will politely accept one’s self-identification as a recon until they make an uncommon claim about their particular religious tradition *as* a recon, in which case sources will be requested or they are asked to disclose that the claim they made was a personal UPG or other personal argument not rooted in historical standing. This is how *Inclusives* strive for a standard in reconstructionism outside of self-identification without becoming too dogmatic, instead urging people be overt about how or why they claim what they claim about their praxis. “You just have to be honest and say it’s not revealed knowledge when it’s not” (*Inclusive* heathen recon, MK-H.LS-18.04 2022). Providing sources is valued not only to combat misinformation about Heathenry and

³¹ Another important text for heathens and pagans today.

Paganism, but because so many independent authors in the field of Heathenry and Paganism (and witchcraft/magic) obfuscate what they use to support their claims, and *Inclusives* take this issue very seriously. “Researching is part of honoring the gods” (*Inclusive* member, MK-p5.1 2022), but due to the danger of stumbling down an alt-right, neo-Nazi algorithmic pipeline, there is a heightened vigilance and initial skepticism around non-contextualized claims being tossed around the internet. Recons, especially, feel obligated “to dive into history, archeology, anthropology...” (MK-h15.1R 2022) and warn beginner practitioners with useful rules of thumb such as assuming most independent heathen authorship in the 1980s “was basically all Neo Nazis and Diana Paxson” (MK-H.Q-01.01 2022). Even so, I find it highly representative of *Inclusives*, and a testament to their common underlying value, that for all the researching that goes on in this community, the most shared article is a piece on health and wellbeing, explaining “Spoon Theory” (Miserandino 2003), which provides a language to help explain and validate one’s own emotional and physical limitations dealing with chronic or mental illnesses or other disabilities. Taking care of yourself is your first priority because taking care of yourself allows you to take care of your community.

Chapter 5: Reconstructionism & Tolerance of Meaning

5.1. (Re)defining reconstructionism

Inclusive reconstructionists are in a continuous negotiation between tradition and innovation. Both groups' self-identified recons hold primary sources, archeological finds, and academic scholarship in high regard for evidencing their reconstructionist credibility. Even so, the self-identity argument that *Inclusives* advocate for in so many areas of life, does not stop John from averring that “recons are dying out because there are a lot of people who *say* that they're recons and then they do stuff that's not really recon and that's *fine*—[but] recon *means* something” (MK-h15.1R 2022).

A generally accepted understanding of a reconstructionist for *Inclusives* is a practitioner who recreates religious expressions as closely as possible to any primary source materials available. However, there are, likely, nearly as many shades of reconstructionism as there are heathens and pagans on the whole. Clearly distinguishing what it means to be a reconstructionist even within a singular group, like *Inclusives*, can become moot in a slippery way. A recon, is a questionable—and questioned—identity under specific circumstances, but it is generally an identifier that is gestured at in such vague ways within colloquial discourse that it allows for the word to slip under the radar of scrutiny, camouflaged in its ambiguity and protected by the common courtesy not to scrutinize self-identifications (whether that be gender identity, chosen tradition(s)/religion(s), sexual orientation, type of practice, etc.; you are what you say you are in *Inclusives*). Thus, ‘reconstructionism’ is left assumed to be clear and uncontested. But, there is surprisingly more subjectivity to the ‘recon’ identity than one may think. One reason for this is that *Inclusive* recons are, as noted before, not tethered together by any one particular religious pantheon, but rather make up a selection of deity worshipers and practitioners. With such variation in the expression of practice, rooted as they are in different traditions, it is not so easy to point to a common performance of reconstructionism. Many will define their preferred identifying label—whether it be ‘heathen’ or ‘recon’ or ‘Norse pagan’—in *contrast* to those who call themselves ‘eclectic’ or ‘syncretic’ in both external expressions and internal ideological differences. However, there are Norse heathen recons who hold the identity, unquestioned, and yet have incorporated “worshipping gods [from] other pantheons” (MK-H.Q-02.09 2022) into their practice. This actually is found to be compatible (for *Inclusives*) because, for instance, the Roman Goddess, Fortuna,

can be worshiped in a heathen context. It is not ‘eclectic’ because the Norse recons are “still constructing and venerating in a historical[ly heathen] context” (*ibid.*). Within *Inclusive* reconstructionism, the structure may itself change from individual to individual, but it is still possible to pick up a common thread which connects the recons of the present to the heathens and pagans of the past.

For the purposes of this thesis, I drew upon the definition which garners the most consensus among *Inclusives* while also remaining the least contentious for *Exclusives*. A well respected member of *Inclusives* described a ‘recon’ as one who believes that the best way to kindle a relationship with the gods is to reconstruct the methods through which the ancients did. One can infer, based on historical source materials, that these rituals were indeed successful for creating deep connections to the god(s); that the god(s) responded well to these ritual forms in the past, and thus, following the blueprints of the ancients seems to be the best path for the heathens of today to cultivate similarly close relationships to the gods and other entities—such as the local land wights or the ancestors (MK-h2.1R 2021). This is seen as the rational hypothesis and scientifically reasonable place to start.

The seed of reconstruction; the fundamental quality that exists in nearly every creative node of reconstruction for *Inclusives* to build *Relationship*. It is the communal basis of their traditions; of their religions-in-practice, which influences how they decide what to pull from the past and what to innovate using the present. We see, in *Inclusives*, manifestations of this praxis are seen in their engagements with the gods, with each other and with those beyond the ethereal boundaries of *Inclusives*. There is an expression I heard multiple times in *Inclusives*, that: “heathens grow out of the ground” (MK-h1.1R 2021). Certainly, this connotes the deep ties they have to the environment (including the local land wights and water nymphs), but also that they do not come fully-formed or after a singular rite of passage, but must learn and evolve their practice through the act of living rather than a more top-down, institutionally instructed guidance, even the gods cannot force without one’s consent. But, part of the rich soil that nourishes *Inclusives* as they grow together is this value of relationship in all they do.

To illustrate, we will, again, use one of the primary sources cited for heathen ethics, the *Hávamál*. There has been a plethora of translations, so from a selection of eight (Temple of Our Heathen Gods 2007), we will compare stanza 43. We see a discrepancy between whether one ought never be a friend to the friend of your enemy or never be a friend to the enemy of your friend. *Inclusive* recons vernacularly disseminate this one: “Be a friend to your friend and also to his friend, but never be a friend to the enemy of your friend” (MK-h1.1R

2021). In other words, their value resides not on the preservation of self, per se, but on the self in relation to and in support of those around them with whom they've built friendships and partnerships. This is not an insignificant distinction. It is how they legitimize and strengthen each other, facilitating both the structural integrity of their space and the diverse identities of its members.

Spending time in this community, I noticed that when a round of appreciation for each other was triggered in conversation, this common underscoring value for relationship and reciprocity came paired with a grievance that it was so rare to find in other heathen forests. In the vast overwhelm of heathen virtual spaces this community is one of only two places on the internet that are safe (MK-H.HW-22.03 2023). One long-time heathen expressed in an exasperated voice that “we’re always wary of new people who pop up on the scene because everybody’s bad, just, everybody’s bad and it just sucks so much. Everybody’s a racist or a bigot or whatnot and it just sucks” (MK-H.LS-18.04 2022).³² Despite there being recons in *Exclusives* as well, highly influential *Inclusive* recons would still not consider them as truly following a heathen tradition because of the intentions in their praxis and their prejudices toward others. In a semiotic forest, where meaning-exchange is relational, identity for *Inclusives* often becomes clarified only through contrast. First as a contrast to one’s previous life as a Christian and/or as influenced by the Christianity that affects US social roles and enacted policies, and second, as a contrast to those who adopt many of the same pre-Christian folk religious labels, but hold bigoted, ahistorical beliefs. It is this latter contrast which emboldens their call to action for reclaiming the name ‘heathen’ and directing how they would prefer it be perceived by broader society.

From an *Inclusives* point of view, the *Exclusives*’ intentions for reconstruction do not come from reciprocity and mutual respect but from exclusionism and supremacy—two identifiers which some *Exclusives* proudly accept. In *Inclusives*, it was recons who first began and continue to help build an ever larger, ever more diverse collection of folk religious practitioners that is, simultaneously, strongly cohesive, protective, and structured. This structure is partly due to the technological formatting and controls that social media platforms allow for, but it also seems largely due to their history of forced marginalization even from their own recon peer groups and that “struggle for legitimacy” (Kapaló 2013:4) that all ‘folk

³² I had caught him at a time of stress. Later, he said that most of the time, when someone says something that could be a neo-Nazi dog whistle, they just don’t realize and have never had push-back on it before. But, it occurs frequently, creating an exhausting vigilance that is carried in the entire body of the community.

religions' experience. The types of exclusionary or stuffy, 'holier-than-thou' recons,³³ with whom several *Inclusive* recons had interacted for over a decade of their spiritual journeys (MK-h2.1R 2021), are banned the moment they insult, invalidate, or otherwise harm other community members. The creators and mods make sure of it.

5.1.1. *Heathens cannibalizing heathens, or rebalancing an ecosystem*

Two *Inclusive* heathen recons reflected upon the sort of elitist type of atmosphere around heathen recons online (MK-H.LS-18.04 2022):

Joerge: About 10 years ago, I literally could not spell anything and was made fun of so badly, I made sure to spell everything so perfectly. Saying I'm heathen online is like saying [chuckle] I'm in danger. I'm so glad that Heathenry has become less of a toxic place over time.

Josh: Lord, it's still toxic as fuck.

Joerge: We are just so cannibalistic as a people and it's so unfortunate... I think a lot of recons just get too stuck in the seriousness of things.

Josh: Hard agree. I got dog-piled for being just a total fool for not knowing my way around the sources, for the things that I asked. And I was like this shit needs to change. The response should have been, here's the answer to the question and here's the source. I just got shat on.

Joerge: ...People will be like, you don't know all the sources for all the things?! What do you mean you don't dream in Old Norse?! It has improved because sources have become accessible, back in the day people would just hoard their sources and not share them at all.³⁴

This shared history—and continued current environment—is part of why the *Inclusive* (cyber)forest takes the shape that it does. *Inclusive* reconstructionists have created an inclusive, pluralistic environment—not just pluralistic in its membership, but in the simultaneity of multiple meanings, multiple points of engagement. They encourage the expansiveness of accessibility to folk religious traditions and the welcoming of the multiplicity of meaning found in those traditions.

However, antibodies are still required to allow the flourishing of just diversity, and *Inclusives*, while they bemoan the gatekeeping stuffiness of other regions of the forest, must also realize the underlying impulse of survival. Skeptical of authoritarian institutional bodies and 'strong man' cultish behavior, distrusting of the black box of algorithms, inspired to protect and promote a currently delicate democracy, compelled to participate in

³³ Recons like Theods or Folkists (MK-h2.1R 2021; -H.HW-22.03 2023).

³⁴ Punctuation to convey vocal intonation.

evidence-based advocacy culture, and hypervigilant to providing a safe space for those historically marginalized by broader society, *Inclusives* act upon a need to ‘cannibalize’ before something like neo-Nazism or New Age “fluffy bunny” (Keltoi 2022b) metastasizes into a terminal cancer or invasive takeover. A drawing of one server’s moderator was shared as an appreciation for all his work in the community. Beside his image, a cartoon speech bubble: “We don’t take too kindly to folks who don’t take too kindly to folk ‘round here...[sic]” (MK-YT.Tol1 2022). ‘Folk,’ here, is not tethered to Folkists, rather it conveys a communication code that evokes keeping the peace in the lawless American Wild West.

During the writing of this thesis, there has already been a huge schism which severed nearly half of the largest creators of the main discord servers and channels involved in this study. Even so, not all members are aware of the schism or they do not know what the circumstances were which caused the rift, one being that one influential Anglo-Saxon recon began believing that by worshiping and working with Loki, Lokeans were inadvertently bringing on the coming of Ragnarök. Many have made a choice which influencer to stand behind based on who they trusted more or who they had built a stronger relationship with (another machination of the pick-a-side culture where support of one creator is incompatible with support of another). This schism occurred after I had concluded gathering fieldwork data, but it reinforces the applicability of the semiotic forest model in that these (cyber)forests are “autopoietic entities” (Maran 2020:55) the dynamics of which “are not based on any fixed or hierarchical control system, but result from the abundance of living matter in forests as well as the local regulatory feedback cycles between various species” (*ibid.*).

The ‘tolerance of meaning’ is a large aspect of the seemingly-autonomous, broader internet culture influencing folk religious forests of practice. Subsequently, the contentious manifestation of communities as meaning-carriers, where communities concede—willingly or unwillingly—to meaning-qualities attributed to them, often overshadow the meaning attributing that the individual subjects do. As Maran suggests, “the acceptance of, or submission to, meanings tends to outweigh the outbound semiotic activity of the subject” (56).

5.2. *The tricky business of tolerating meanings in the digital age*

Writing about “pre-Christian religions of the North”, Schjødt states:

“when dealing with primary religions, including that of Scandinavia, there was no possibility for any such thing as a shared dogmatic text...telling about how this or that god should be perceived. Instead we are, as mentioned, dealing with traditions in all parts of society... According to our sources, there was no ideal that everybody should think in the same way about the various gods and their exploits at certain times. And because the notion of belief was not important, neither were the variants within belief. As mentioned, as long as the local community took part in the rituals and did what they were supposed to do in that sphere, we must assume that nobody cared about what they “believed”” (Schjødt 2021:90-91; see also Gunnell 2015:56).

This sounds a lot like how *Inclusive* recons practice today, and, indeed, does bolster their aspiration to such accepted variation, being academically supported and defensible reconstructed Heathenry. However, it belies an expansive tolerance of meaning when *Inclusive* discourse in the (cyber)forest idealizes belief pluralism but invalidates or constrains certain beliefs or certain values even if ritual *practices* align. What one believes has a greater impact upon the individuals of both internet groups.

Social Media platforms and the ubiquitousness of virtual interfacing make it even more difficult to tolerate meanings placed upon us or our identifiers when one is visually (and thus, viscerally) confronted with bearing the role of meaning-carrier for an overwhelming amount of other people. The ethereal, insensible meanings which we walk through unaware everyday become crystalized and experienced in the ever-recorded and archived digital realm of the internet. The tolerance of meaning property highlights, according to Maran, a gentle criticism of anthropocentrism that humans hold over the flora and fauna with which we live;³⁵ of our entitlement to correct the record. Certainly, prey can fight back against a predator who demands that the prey means food, but these engagements always demand a compromise on the part of the unwilling meaning-carrier, which our human egos sometimes struggle to accept. Walking through our offline lives, we are often oblivious to the various meanings placed upon us by others. However, the more virtual we become the more words and other digital means of communication become violating and impact us at this overwhelmingly pointed, visceral level, the less we are able to tolerate multiple meanings, as meaning-carriers for others. The less tolerant we are to being meaning-carriers for others, the more it becomes

³⁵ Based on email exchanges with Maran.

a threat to be fought against, and in the quickness of becoming an involuntary carrier, the more regimented, formalized, and protective a (cyber)forest becomes.

At the same time, *Inclusive* recons embrace their own inescapable context—often with self-deprecating humor and view (to an extent) meaning pluralism as a boon to building relationships. In Figure 5, the Mjolnir on the left is one of many old relics found in Scandinavia sold online as Mjolnir artifacts. On the right is The Heathen Honeybun’s cheekily reconstructed pendent of said relic, interpreting its triangles as pizza slices. The Heathen Honeybun is simultaneously poking fun at a common habit to presuppose contemporary understandings onto those from the past and also sharing a sincere creative act to strengthen their personalized relationship to Thor with their love of pizza. Honeybun’s tweet epitomizes the semiotic forest properties in action. An *Inclusive* recon, acting as an individual, autonomous presence, sharing a contemporary internet-cultural communication of both sincerity *and* commentary upon said sincerity; caricaturing the very identity she wears; poking fun at a religious art piece that she also feels proud of. It is the sacred infusing the mundane aspects of one’s life (and vice versa). Note the various influential agencies (technological, scholarly, social, digital, and also her *Inclusive* community’s reaction toward other recon communities). All is expressed in distributed communication codes (sharing the form of comedy codes *Inclusives* use, forms of foods one prefers, specific Twitter formatting and textual rhythm, etc.). The codes layer to convey reflections of her own ontological presence, one of her gods, and the *Inclusive* recon diaspora, while she is pulling several elements from the surplus of semiotic material that she has access to through her engagements with those mentioned above and her personal disposition and experiences.

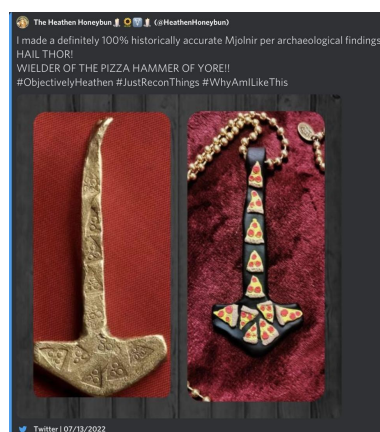


Figure 5 “I made a definitely 100% historically accurate Mjolnir per archeological findings. HAIL THOR! WIELDER OF THE PIZZA HAMMER OF YORE!! #ObjectivelyHeathen #JustReconThings #WhyAmILikeThis” (MK-Rep.Twt7 2022)

All of these pieces alchemize within her and with this she actualizes the creative phenomenon of a tweet, exemplifying local heterogeneity and creativity. There are recons who would disparage this tweet as ‘larping,’ which leads to the final and most significant property.

Tolerance of meaning describes not only how she expressed a simultaneity of meanings within her action, but also how others on Twitter, seeing this tweet, receive a variety of other meanings where the tweet becomes a meaning-carrier for those who come across it while remaining non-existent for those inhabiting a different positionality. Their own situatedness, particularly their own algorithm, does not bring this tweet to their attention. In fact, it was chance that I noticed it in the (cyber)forest where perhaps had I logged on a few minutes later, it would not have popped up on my computer screen. This tweet *is* a folk religious practice and *shares* a folk religious practice that reveals an aspect of her version of reconstruction, self-referentially, at a particular moment in time.

Conclusion

The structure of this thesis was my attempt to parallel how one approaches a forest to explore, making one's way deeper and deeper in. It began from a broad vantage point, to take note of trends within a technology-dependent, US societal environment. As we progress further, it tapers into folk religious historical, political, and ecclesiastic impacts taking note of responses to the various influential systems before further localizing to community dynamics and creative practices spun from the synthesized interplay between these agential influences. Finally, we enter into the deep layer of recon dynamics and how the recons who first created the *Inclusive* environment sowed a core value that permeates the forest of practice to this day. Throughout the exploration, it was important to still retain the flexibility to weave back out of or fold onto the various layers, and even so, one thesis cannot cover the complexity of the system. However, I hope that all the various tendrils of meaning expressed by the communities convey the ever-regenerative, unbounded, relational experience that wandering these woods evokes so as to map out a kind of composite sketch of the forest.

So many practitioners of folk religions used to spend years as solo practitioners, walking their spiritual journey alone, scavenging for whatever entextualized source material they could find. With the popularization of social media, providing access to virtual communities, those individuated beliefs, values, and practices pour into the eternal stream of intermedial engagements, where other folk religious practitioners talk to and text each other, ask questions, compare notes, corroborate UPGs, all while the trajectories of each member's chosen traditions remain autonomously decided, yet reciprocally affected. Rather than reducing each group to essential component parts, I wanted to look at various facets which not only impact upon each other, but are also alchemized through many different individuals that reflect one another and contrast against each other through particular qualities: Maran's semiotic forest model properties. Guided by each of these (often in combination), we can draw pathways of understanding where and how and why folk religious relational spaces grow and change in the practice of reconstructing pagan and heathen traditions. Rather than cataloging identities, we can pay attention to how identities are understood, utilized, or contested by communities under various circumstances, within various chronotopes, in relation to various agential influences as the manifestations that occur source from the same pre-Christian folk religious heritages and historical records.

Ecologist, Jill Silver, said that when studying the mossy old-growth forests of the US, she thinks about "how every tiny microbe build into a web of intersection and interaction that

support each other and live off each other and create a system” (PBS Digital Studios 2023). The folk religious forests discussed in this thesis are, in a way, one old growth forest, stretching back thousands of years, growing, interlacing and decaying as new organisms are brought into being, carrying with them their own ontology, their own ways of communicating and decoding meaning. Through a localized creativity, they aid in changing the trajectory of the forest, some of which has gone cyber. Delineations become difficult to detect and it bleeds into itself an ouroboros of new and old, sacred and mundane, sincere and facetious, expansive tolerance and restrictive. This ambiguity occurred to such a degree that I was initially labeling each of the two communities with unassociated single letters rather than using the *Inclusive/Exclusive* dichotomy, since there is noticeable overlap where neither group cares to acknowledge. Both groups feel the other is twisting their religion for ill, and both participate in forms of gatekeeping as well as proselytizing. The two groups vie for who is the true meaning-carrier of *heathen*; for who ought to be considered, by broader society, the real representatives of Paganism/Heathenry. Additionally, there is an underlying desire, a need, that the communities have in common: to not be categorized or boxed in; to not be reductively compartmentalized or forced to carry meanings that others have assumed of them. I acknowledge that my eventual choice of labels can seem overly dichotomous, but sometimes the “chains of associations” (Kapaló 2013:9) that offer efficient meaning-making to language is necessary to solve the problem of reviewers confusing which group is which.

When we think of the practice of ‘reconstruction,’ we necessarily ask what *exactly* is being reconstructed. Which aspect is the focal point; what seeds are being chosen to replant the past within the present, and what are the implications? Can we confidently say it is the observable action that is the reconstructed tradition? Perhaps it is the underlying intention that reveals the continuity. Or is it the process through which a practice comes to fruition that establishes the heathen context defining reconstruction? Through my research, I believe the answer changes within each situation and for each individual, based on how the practitioner shifts their attention to what becomes meaningful for them in a relational and fully embodied manner. From a practitioner’s point of view, two practices that appear categorically alike may be incompatibly different. Likewise, practices that compositionally look vastly different may categorically be the same. No one in these spaces wants to be seen as capricious or inconsistent in their critical reasoning and historical grounding of their faith, and frankly, I do not perceive thoughtless flippancy in their choices (not to be conflated with creative whimsy, which is charmingly prevalent in *Inclusives*). Yet even in virtual space, Maran’s forest model

properties are viscerally experienced and, wrapped in our sensorial experiences, aid significantly in reinforcing our beliefs, our motivations, our decisions. Reconstruction and embodied experience is a tightly entangled knot that can feel distinct and vouchsafed; entitled to be a matter of fact, reflecting history as opposed to memory.

What then, if any, can we say of a unifying constant connecting past to present and practitioner to practitioner? In my research, aspiration toward Reciprocity certainly rose to become a common thread that provided this strongly cohesive folk community a much sought after continuity amidst the amalgam of pagan and heathen digital diasporas. Rather than viewing recons as those attempting to reconstruct practices as accurately as they can to ancestral traditions from the historical record, there is for *Inclusives*, an underlying intention to it, which focuses on the relations to the gods—and by extension the community—one is striving for. The more that relationship strengthens the more creative and innovative *Inclusive* recon practices look from the outside as the relationship to their deities continues to evolve over time. No one's relationships remain stagnant while those involved live. As new recons begin their path, they are still directed toward the root source material, and from that sprouts newly formed, individuated relations with new communication codes, new constraints on feasibility, new personalized offerings and, inevitably, more contentious debate on who carries the true recon identity.

While researching these groups, I found myself fascinated by the dialectic relationship between the tolerance of meaning property and a concept out of neuroscience, the “regime of shared attention,” which plots how cultures reinforce prediction models of social norms and responses within its individuals (Ramstead, Veissière & Kirmayer 2016). The tension between these two named ideas are worth a deeper dive, which I was unable to provide in the scope of this thesis. It is also a lingering question of just how strong an influence the COVID-19 pandemic was upon *Inclusives*' preoccupation with relationship and community. *Inclusives* have been holding community rituals and seeking guidance on building relations with more deities, ancestors, and others for far longer than a few years, but the pandemic brought with it a mass migration—into all sorts of virtual spaces—of those feeling unmoored in the tragedy and seeking company in a suddenly isolated world. While this thesis focused on revealing a complex system of relational meaning-making, each facet, each influence, could become its own area for further study. There is a vast underbelly of data that I collected, which simply could not fit into one master's thesis, and much had to be left, regrettably, on the cutting room floor. I encourage those interested to pick up one of the many threads which remain in these chapters and pay attention to where it leads you.

References

- Appadurai, A. (1988). "Putting Hierarchy in Its Place". *Cultural Anthropology*, 3 (1), pp. 36–49.
- Asatru Folk Assembly. (2020). "Declaration of Purpose". *Asatru Folk Assembly*. Available at: <https://www.runestone.org/>. [Accessed: 2 November 2022].
- Asatru Community. (2016). "Declaration 127". *The Asatru Community* [online]. Available at: <https://www.theasatrucommunity.org/post/2016/09/05/declaration-127>. [Accessed 6 April 2023].
- Bauman, R. & Briggs, C.L. (1990). "Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life". *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 19. Annual Reviews, pp. 59-88.
- Bauman, R. (1993). "The Nationalization and Internationalization of Folklore: The Case of Schoolcraft's "Gitshee Gauzinee."" *Western Folklore*, 52 (2/4), pp. 247-269. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1500089>
- Bendix, R. (1988). "Folklorism: The Challenge of a Concept". *International Folklore Review*, 6.
- Bendix, R. (1997). "Departures and Revisions: Toward a Volkskunde Without Canon". In *Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 159-187.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. R. Nice (trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bronner, S.J. (2022). "Inspirational Insights: The Problematic Vernacular". *Journal of Ethnology and Folklore*, 16 (2), pp. 1-15. DOI: 10.2478/jef-2022-0010.
- Byock, J. (1998). "Introduction". *The Saga of Hrolf Kraki*. Penguin Classics Edition. J. Byock (trans.). London: Penguin Group.
- Chauncey, G. (1995). *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Cultura, and the Making of the Gay World, 1890-1940*. New York: BasicBooks.
- Christman, J. (2004). "Relational Autonomy, Liberal Individualism, and the Social Constitution of Selves". *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, 117 (1/2), pp. 143-164.
- Davidson, M.A. (2012). "What is Wrong with Pagan Studies?". *Method and Theory in The Study of Religion*, 24. Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, pp. 183-199. DOI: 10.1163/157006812X634881
- Dégh, L. (1995). "Introduction: What Can Gyula Ortutay and the Budapest School Offer to Contemporary Students of Narrative?". *Narratives in Society: A Performer-Centered Study of Narration*. L. K. Adams (ed.). Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, pp. 7-29.
- Discord. (2022). "Text Channels & Text Chat In Voice Channels". kynthia (ed.). *Discord* [online]. Available at: <https://support.discord.com/hc/en-us/articles/4412085582359-Text-Channels-Text-Chat-In-Voice-Channels>. [Accessed: 12 December 2022]
- Dundes, A. (1977). "Who are the Folk?". *Frontiers of Folklore*. 1st edn. W. R. Bascom (ed.). New York: Routledge. ISBN: 9780429050756.
- EmberVoices. (2015). "Reblog: Reconstruction, Revival, and Styrofoam Cake Syndrome". *Ember Voices* [blog]. Available at: <https://embervoices.wordpress.com/2015/03/16/reblog-reconstruction-revival-and-styrofoam-cake-syndrome/> [Accessed: 18 June 2022].
- Ess, C. (2014). "Selfhood, moral agency, and the good life in mediatized worlds? Perspectives from Medium Theory and philosophy". *Mediatization of Communication*

- (*Handbook of Communication Science*, 21). Knut Lundby (ed.). Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, pp. 617-640.
- Franzke, A.S., Bechmann, A., Zimmer, M., Ess, C., & the Association of Internet Researchers. (2020). *Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0 [IRE 3.0]*. Available at: <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics.pdf>. [Accessed 2 Nov. 2022].
- Frog. (2021). "Mythic Discourse Analysis". *Folklore and Old Norse Mythology*. Frog and Joonas Ahola (eds.). Helsinki, Finland: Kalevalaseura with Folklore Fellow's Comm., pp. 161-212.
- Glassie, H. (1995). "Tradition". *The Journal of American Folklore*, 108 (430), pp. 395-412. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/541653>.
- Gunnell, T. (2015). "Pantheon? What Pantheon? Concepts of a Family of Gods in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religions". *Scripta Islandica*, 66, pp. 55-76.
- Hall, S. (1997). "The Work of Representation". *RepresentatHeppion: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. S. Hall (ed.). SAGE Publications Ltd., pp. 15-35.
- Holland, D., Lachicotte Jr., W., Skinner, D. & Cain, C. (1998). "A Practice Theory of Self and Identity". *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, pp. 19-46.
- Haring, L. & Bendix, R. (2012). "Folklore Studies in the United States". *A Companion to Folklore*. 4th edn. R.F. Bendix & G. Hasan-Rokem (eds.). Blackwell Publishing Ltd., pp. 286-304.
- Hepp, A., Hjarvard, S., & Lundby, K. (2015). "Mediatization: theorizing the interplay between media, culture and society". *Media, Culture & Society*, 37 (2). SAGE Publications Ltd., pp. 314-324.
- Howard, R.G. (2013). "Vernacular Authority: Critically Engaging 'Tradition'". *Tradition in the Twenty-First Century*. Trevor J. Blank & Robert Glenn Howard (eds.). University Press of Colorado & Utah State University Press.
- Jensen, K.B. (2016). "Intermediality". *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy*. K.B. Jensen, E.W. Rothenbuhler, J.D. Pooley and R.T. Craig(eds.). John Wiley & Sons, Inc., pp. 1-12. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118766804.wbiect170>.
- Johannsen, D. (2019). "Vis-knut: Marginality in Folklore and Folk Religion". *Marginality, Media, and Mutations of Religious Authority in the History of Christianity*. L. Feldt & J. N. Bremmer (eds.). Peeters: Leuven-Paris-Bristol, CT.
- Jorgensen, D.L. & Russell, S.E. (1999). "American Neopaganism: The Participants' Social Identities". *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 38 (3), pp. 325-338. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1387755>.
- Kallas, O. Th. (1923). "Estonian Folklore". *Folklore*, 34(2), pp. 101-116. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1256622>.
- Kapaló, J. (2013). "Folk Religion in Discourse and Practice". *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics*, 7 (1), pp. 3-18. University of Tartu, Estonian National Museum, & Estonian Literary Museum. ISSN 1736-6518 [print].
- Kelly, K. (2021). 'Is the 'QAnon Shaman' From the MAGA Capitol Riot Covered in Neo-Nazi Imagery?'. *Rolling Stone* [online under (Sub)culture]. Available at: <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/qanon-shaman-maga-capitol-riot-rune-pagan-imagery-tattoo-1111344/>. [Accessed: 20 October 2022].
- Keltoi, O. (2022a). *The Heathen Image of the Multi-Part Soul*. YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PmQb8qZk-qg>. [Accessed: 19 February 2022].
- Keltoi, O. (2022b). *Can We KNOW the Gods Exist?*. YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzxFxCxJ9Y>. [Accessed: 8 June 2022].

- Kozinets, R., Dolbec, P., & Earley, A. (2014). "Netnographic analysis: Understanding culture through social media data". *SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data* [online]. SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446282243>.
- Krantz, M. (2023). *MK* [Fieldnotes and Transcripts] (raw data from 2021-2023).
- Krasskova, G. (2018). "Review – American Heathens: The Politics of Identity in a Pagan Religious Movement". *Walking the Worlds*, 4 (2), pp. 79-88.
- Kropotkin, P. (1902). *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*. New York: McClure Phillips & Co.
- Larrington, C. (1996). *The Poetic Edda*. (trans.) Carolyne Larrington. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lesiv, M. (2013). "'Living with Honour': Modern Western Paganism". *The Return of Ancestral Gods: Modern Ukrainian Paganism As an Alternative Vision for a Nation*. McGill-Queen's University Press. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.utlib.ut.ee/lib/tartu-ebooks/reader.action?docID=3332636&ppg=31>. [Accessed: 10 June 2022].
- Maran, T. (2020). *Ecosemiotics: The Study of Signs in Changing Ecologies (Elements in Environmental Humanities)*. L. Westling, S. Iovino, and T. Maran (eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 53-58.
- McCoy, D. (2019). "Freya". *Norse Mythology for Smart People* [online]. Available at: <https://norse-mythology.org/gods-and-creatures/the-vanir-gods-and-goddesses/freya/>. [Accessed: 26 July 2023].
- McLaughlin, K. (2022). "hávamál 127". *Unplugged Pagan* [online]. Available at: <https://unplugged-pagan.com/2022/04/14/havamal-127/>. [Accessed: 14 March 2023].
- McNamara, B. (2019). *What is Theodism and why does it matter now?*. Facebook [Hearthstone Theod post]. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/HearthstoneTheod/posts/what-is-theodism-and-why-does-it-matter-now-so-i-have-been-theodish-for-the-bette/1321988467925912/>. [Accessed: 13 February 2023].
- Miserandino, C. (2003). "The Spoon Theory". *But You Don't Look Sick* [blog]. Available at: <https://butyoudontlooksick.com/articles/written-by-christine/the-spoon-theory/>. [Accessed: 1 March 2023].
- Moser, H. (1962). Vom Folklorismus in unserer Zeit. *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde*, 58, pp. 177-209.
- Mullen, P.B. (2000). "Belief and the American Folk". *Journal of American Folklore*, 113 (448), pp. 119-143. American Folklore Society. <https://www.jstor.com/stable/541285>.
- PBS Digital Studios. (2023). *You Aren't Paying Enough Attention to Moss*. [Untold Earth series]. YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VVeBSKK88Ig>. [Accessed: 31 July 2023].
- Pew Research Center. (2015). "Religious Landscape Study." Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (12 May 2015) <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/>.
- Pike, S. (2004). *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Price, N. (2012). "Mythic Acts: Material Narratives of the Dead in Viking Age Scandinavia". *More than Mythology: Narratives, Ritual Practices and Regional Distribution in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religions*. Catharina Raudvere & Jens Peter Schjødt (eds.). Sweden: Nordic Academic Press, pp. 13-46.
- Päll, L. (2021). "The Role of Place-lore in Environmental Conflict Discourse: The Case of Paluküla Sacred Hill in Estonia". *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics*, 15 (2), pp. 198-220. DOI: 10.2478/jef-2021-0024.

- Raudvere, C. (2012). "Fictive Rituals in Völuspá: Mythological Narration between Agency and Structure in the Representation of Reality". *More than Mythology: Narratives, Ritual Practices and Regional Distribution in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religions*. Catharina Raudvere & Jens Peter Schjødt (eds.). Sweden: Nordic Academic Press, pp. 97-117.
- Ramstead, M.J.D, Veissière S.P.L., & Kirmayer, L.J. (2016). "Cultural Affordances: Scaffolding Local Worlds Through Shared Intentionality and Regimes of Attention". *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7:1090. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01090.
- Schjødt, J.P. (2021). "Pre-Christian Religions of the North as Folklore, with Special Reference of the Notion of 'Pantheon'". *Folklore and Old Norse Mythology*. Frog and J. Ahola (eds.). Helsinki, Finland: Kalevalaseura with Folklore Fellow's Comm., pp. 85-104.
- Snook, J. (2015). *American Heathens: The Politics of Identity in a Pagan Religious Movement*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Strmiska, M. (2005). "Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives". *Modern Paganism in World Cultures*. M. Strmiska (ed.). Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, pp. 1-54.
- Strmiska, M. & Sigurvinnson, B.A. (2005). "Asatru: Nordic Paganism in Iceland and America". *Modern Paganism in World Cultures*. M. Strmiska (ed.). Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, pp. 127-180.
- Suida, T.L. (2015). 'Reconstruction, Revival, and Styrofoam Cake Syndrome'. *Kemet Today*. Available at: <http://polytheist.com/kemet-today/2015/03/10/reconstruction-revival-and-styrofoam-cake-syndrome/>. [Accessed: 18 June 2022]
- Temple of Our Heathen Gods. (2007). *Temple of Our Heathen Gods Resource Website*. Available at: <https://bookspublicdomain.com/havamal/website-OUT/stanza43.html>. [Accessed 19 July 2022].
- Timothy, D. & Conover, P.J. (2006). "Nature Religion, self-spirituality and New Age tourism". *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys*. 1st edn. D. Timothy & D. Olsen (eds.). London: Routledge, pp. 139-155.
- Uexküll, J.v. (1982). "The Theory of Meaning". *Semiotica*, 42 (1), pp. 25-79. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1515/semi.1982.42.1.25>. [Accessed: 23 Feb 2022].
- Veltman, A. & Piper, M. (2014). "Introduction". *Autonomy, Oppression and Gender*. A. Veltman & M. Piper (eds.). Oxford: OUP, pp. 1-11.
- Westlund, A. (2009). "Rethinking Relational Autonomy". *Hypatia*, 24 (4:Fall), pp. 26-49.
- Zoëga, G.T. (1910). *A concise dictionary of Old Icelandic*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Resüme

Rahvausund digimaailmas: maausukogukondade identiteediotsingud ja rekonstrueeritud traditsioonid USA-keskses sotsiaalmeedias. Okosemiootiline analüüs

Tehnoloogiaajastu mõjutab paljusid tänapäevaseid traditsioone ja religioosseid liikumisi. Sellega kohanevad ka eelkristlikule rahvausundile tuginevad kogukonnad. Magistritöö käsitleb nähtust, kus väljaspool digimaailma eksisteerinud paganlikud praktikad ja tõekspidamised leiavad oma väljenduse ja kasutuse kaasaegsete tehnoloogiliste vahendite kaudu ning kujundavad sotsiaalmeediaplattformidel üksikule kasutajale identiteetiloova kristliku kultuuri välise kogukonna.

Uurijad on arutlenud, kuidas nähtust nimetada. Jäädud on uuspaganluse, kaasaegse paganluse ja loodususundi terminite juurde. (Krasskova 2018; Snook 2015; Strmiska 2005; Timothy & Conover 2006; Pike 2004; Jorgensen & Russell 1999). Iga termini taga on kindel uuritud kogukond, kes ei pruugi aga omistatud nimetusega rahul olla, sestap jätkub ka diskussioon erinevatele nähtustele sobiva katusermini leidmiseks. Magistritöös analüüsin, kuidas digitaalne maailm neid identiteete ja traditsioonilisi praktikaid diskursiivselt nihutab ja kohandab. Selgitan, miks eksisteerivad pinged igapäevaste praktikate kohandamisel tehnoloogilise innovatsiooniga.

Töö keskendub veebikogukonnale, kes järgivad religioossete praktikate, usundisüsteemide, erinevate ontoloogiatega ja traditsioonide pealtnäha üsna suvalist segu; inimestele, kes on kujunenud kogukonnaks üksnes virtuaalmaailmas. Samas on need inimesed loonud endale õnneliku või õnnetu virtuaalse juhuse ning algoritmide ja sotsiaalmeediaplattformide võimaluste toel sidusa, ühtlustatud ja ühtehoidva kogukonna. Töö vaatleb kahte online-gruppi ning arutleb, kuidas usundiline maastik kohandub digitaalsega kehaliste praktikate virtuaalsetes väljendustes, kogukonnaloomises ja -hoidmises kõnetades reaalelulist konteksti USAs, sealseid traditsioone ja tulevikuväljavaateid.

Peamine vaatlusalune grupp tegutseb Discordi, YouTube'i, Twitchi, Twitteri ja nendega seotud blogide ja foorumite keskkonnas. Teine analüüsitud grupp, kes moodustab põhigrupile justkui peegli või vastanduva alternatiivi, kasutab lisaks eelnevale Telegrami ja Odysee keskkondi. Detsembrist 2021. kuni märtsini 2023. kogusin analüüsimaterjali videote, vestluste ja avatud intervjuude, postituste, kommentaaride ja osalusvaatluse dokumenteerimise käigus. Lisaks sõnalisele materjalile talletasin meeme, pilte ja artikleid.

Töö ülesehitus sai alguse laiematest märkmete tegemisest USA-keskses tehnoloogilises keskkonnas. Töö käigus on uurimisfookus täpsustunud ning keskendunud sellele, kuidas konkreetne olemuselt rekonstruktsionistlik virtuaalkogukond kasutab võrdlevat vaadet ajaloolistele traditsioonidele. Samas soovisin säilitada virtuaalmaailmale omast nõtket liikumist erinevate tasandite ja seoste vahel. Ometigi ei luba töö maht katta kõiki aspekte selles komplekses süsteemis. Siiski loodan, et töö annab edasi kogukonda peamiselt kooshoidvat avatud, suhetele rajanevaid tähendusi ja kogemusi. Analüüsidest lähtun James Kapaló teoreetilisest raamistikust, mis näeb rahvausundit kui inimestevahelistes suhetes loodud ja säilitatud praktikat. (Kapaló 2013:10-11).

Töö struktuur järgib semiootilise metsa mudelit, kirjeldades esmalt USA peamisi tehnoloogiatrende, seejärel annab ülevaate erinevatest kaasaegset rahvausundi konteksti kujundavatest ajaloolistest, poliitilistest ning kiriklikest mõjutajatest. Seejärel käsitlen kogukonda loovaid praktikaid, mis kasutavad eelnevast võrsuvaid mõjutusi eelkristliku rahvausundi taasloomiseks dünaamilises tehnoloogiakeskkonnas.

Kasutades terminit “rekonstruktsionistlik”, suunab töö küsima, mida täpsemalt rekonstrueeritakse. Millest lähtutakse, kui tegevustik kantakse minevikust üle tänapäeva? On see tegu või püüdlus, soov, protsess? Minu vaatlus kinnitab, et vastastikusus, inimestevaheline side on see, mis hoiab koos rekonstrueeritud järjepidevust paganlike maausutavade ja digitaalsete kogukondade vahel.

Selle asemel, et analüüsi käigus eristada traditsiooni kujundavaid üksikosi, vaatlen neid aspekte, mis mõjutavad teineteist ning mille kokkusulutamisel tekib üksikute kasutajate vahel aruteluruum. Seda vaadeldes kasutan Timo Marani semiootilise metsa mudelit, mille tunnuslikeks omadusteks on 1.) ontoloogiliste tõsiasjade vääramatus, 2.) tähenduste paindlikkus ja kohandumisvõime, 3.) kommunikatsioonikoodide muutumine vastavalt keskkonnale, 4.) kohalikud tingimused, mis määratlevad loovust ja mitmekesisust, 5.) märgilise materjali üleküllus, mis tähendab, et paralleelsed tähendussüsteemid eksisteerivad, põimuvad, jäetakse kõrvale või mõtestatakse ümber. (Maran 2020:53-58). Sellest analüüsiraamistikust lähtudes võib rekonstruktsionistlikes uuspaganlusgruppides näha neid erinevaid tunnuseid paralleelselt eksisteerimas, mis kujundavadki vastastiksuhtlusel baseeruva usundilise keskkonna. Erinevate identiteetide kirjeldamise asemel on töös vaatluse all see, kuidas identiteeti mõtestatakse, väljendatakse ja vaidlustatakse lähtudes erinevatest eelkristlikest ajastutest ja traditsioonidest.

Non-exclusive licence to reproduce the thesis and make the thesis public

I, _____ Mikaela Jo Krantz _____,
(*author's name*)

1. grant the University of Tartu a free permit (non-exclusive licence) to

reproduce, for the purpose of preservation, including for adding to the DSpace digital archives until the expiry of the term of copyright, my thesis

_____ **THE DIGITAL LANDSCAPE OF FOLK RELIGION: An ecosemiotic approach to intermedial entanglements for heathen and pagan folk religious identities and reconstructed traditions** _____
(*title of thesis*)

supervised by _____ Kristel Kivari _____.
(*supervisor's name*)

2. I grant the University of Tartu a permit to make the thesis specified in point 1 available to the public via the web environment of the University of Tartu, including via the DSpace digital archives, under the Creative Commons licence CC BY NC ND 4.0, which allows, by giving appropriate credit to the author, to reproduce, distribute the work and communicate it to the public, and prohibits the creation of derivative works and any commercial use of the work until the expiry of the term of copyright.
3. I am aware of the fact that the author retains the rights specified in points 1 and 2.
4. I confirm that granting the non-exclusive licence does not infringe other persons' intellectual property rights or rights arising from the personal data protection legislation.



08/08/2023

(*author's name*)
(*dd/mm/yyyy*)