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Grandmother Spider, Did You *Really* Weave the World Wide Web? Postmodern Possibilities for Creation and Destruction in Online Pagan Communities

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There are few religious traditions that embody the discussions and ideals of postmodernity as fully and authentically as Neopaganism (in this paper synonymously referred to as Paganism, following the identification trends in Western countries). The field of religious studies often classifies this group of spiritualities as postmodern due to their "playfulness, [their] pastiche of traditions, [their] holistic worldview, and the emphasis of people being one with the larger natural world, as well as the openness of [their] theology."[1] These religions, which manifest in countless different ways due to the intense focus on individually meaningful spiritual practice necessitating eclectic personal appropriation of beliefs, are known for striving towards a vision of spirituality beyond institutionalization, and promote "the interconnectedness of life, the sacredness of the earth, the reality of the spiritual realm, and the efficacy of magick."[2] Given that Neopaganism is by and large a decentralized and nonhierarchical tradition without national authority or large amounts of economic power for promotion, the Internet has been "an important networking tool for many Witches and Pagans" (Berger and Ezzy, 167) since the early 1990's. Many members of these communities work in the information industry as "computer programmers, systems analysts, or software

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[1] Helen Berger and Douglas Ezzy, "Mass Media and Religious Identity: A Case Study of Young Witches," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48, no. 3 (2009): 503.
[2] Douglas Cowan, "Book Excerpt: The Mists of Cyberhenge: Mapping the Modern Pagan Internet," *The Pomegranate* 7, no. 1 (2005): 59.

developers, or are avid users of computers and the Internet,"[3] and recognize a powerful

relationship between aspects of their spirituality and the social potentiality that computer

technologies provide. Since the beginning of the information age, Neopagans have

recognized how Lyotardian spaces which allow their *petit récits* to testify to difference

and construct new "game rules"[4] can thrive on egalitarian cyberspace and speak to the

possibility of a world that validates an infinite array of social, cultural, and religious

traditions that exist outside of normative metanarratives. However, the utopic visions

which thrive in Pagan rhetoric are continually in tension with their foundations within a

technology that archives and potentially represses and destroys a religious experience that

is meant to be spontaneously and internally practiced outside of a human technology

intended for storing and forwarding information at high speeds.

In the collective principles found in the theology of prominent Pagan traditions,

there exists an innate applicability of computer and information technology to the

implementation of utopic Pagan visions in the construction of Lyotardian game rules that

validate difference. As the popular use of computers expanded in the 1980's, Pagans

began identifying the computer's potential to provide "an unprecedented possibility" for

spiritual networking, "but only if a connection to its consciousness based on a web of

connections and correspondences is achieved."[5] Reflecting the core value within Pagan

theology regarding "all aspects of the universe—visible and invisible—as interrelated,

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[3] Miriam Wallraven, "Apple, Are You Ready to Make Contact? The Esoteric
Understanding of the Computer and the Internet in Postmodern Texts," *European Journal
of English Studies* 15, no. 3 (2011): 240.
[4] Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*
(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
[5] Wallraven, "Apple, Are You Ready to Make Contact?", 242.

interdependent, and interactive,"[6] the desire to tap into a collective network that extends

beyond an individual impersonally interacting with an inanimate machine reveals a

"postmodern paradigm shift in how to conceptualize knowledge, organic views of a 'web

of life' in ecology, an esoteric world view of correspondences and connections, and […]

refers to New age and Neopagan self-images of a movement without hierarchies."[7] This

"paradigm shift" exemplifies Lyotard's broad definition of postmodernism as

"incredulity towards metanarratives"[8] because it is logically inconsistent to adhere to a

belief system that values the interconnectedness of all things while participating in a

metanarrative that privileges some types of connections but marginalizes many others.

Recognizing the interconnectedness of all things reflects how each of us lives at an

intersection of many "clouds of narrative language elements" that compose reality, and

Pagan Internet use "signals a challenge to traditional modes of discursively constructed

knowledge" by "connecting various points of knowledge"[9] that, under oppressive and

exclusive authoritative discourses, may be left fragmented, marginalized, and silenced.

      The theological principles underpinning the construction of Pagan Internet

communities answer Lyotard's call to create structures that forsake totality and value

difference in all of its manifestations. Empirical research on American Neopagan

communities notes that these traditions "represent innovative adaptations to the basic

conditions of human existence in contemporary Western societies"[10] and foster "a

reform-oriented cultural alternative to traditional religions and other new religions,

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[6] Cowan, "The Mists of Cyberhenge," 83.
[7] Wallraven, "Apple, Are You Ready to Make Contact?", 245.
[8] Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiv.
[9] Wallraven, "Apple, Are You Ready to Make Contact?", 245.
[10] Danny L. Jorgensen and Scott E. Russell, "American Neopaganism: The Participants' Social Identities," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 38, no. 3 (1998): 335.

especially those endeavoring to create a totalistic organizational culture."[11] These findings illuminate how the values of Neopagan movements present an ideal framework to enact Lyotard's imperative to dismantle metanarratives and to create new and inclusive attitudes towards reality. Integral to the Neopagan tradition is a reveling in the "jubilation which results from the invention of new rules of the game."[12]

Given a dominant offline culture whose metanarratives do not allow Neopagan voices to regularly be heard or valued, the creation of a culturally inclusive space online for Neopagans to share their *petit récits* allows this religion with a framework that exemplifies the postmodern pursuit of cherished difference to thrive during the advent of widespread Internet use. Due to the highly individualistic nature of this religion, as well as its emphasis on the decentralization of power, many Neopagans are often solitary practitioners either by choice or for lengthy periods of time as the organization of Neopagan groups is constantly in flux.[13] This means that without the Internet, "few of these participants [on Neopagan web pages] would even know that that these other modern pagan groups existed, let alone have a chance to interact with them. In this way the Internet provides one of the most basic components of conversation: potential and opportunity."[14] Because this religious tradition is often solitary and sometimes lacks a communal space that fosters a culture of Pagan interconnectedness valuing difference and nondominant narratives, creating a network of Pagans who value these ideals, as well as a space for listening to other Pagan voices that often cannot be in communication with one another due to the absence of this communal space, has historically been difficult.

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[11] Ibid., 334.
[12] Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 80.
[13] Jorgensen and Russell, "American Neopaganism," 333.
[14] Cowan, "The Mists of Cyberhenge," 73.

Becoming aware of the "cloud" of diverse Pagan *petit récits* that authoritative modernist discourse silences requires an "epistemological backdrop conducive to the maintenance and reinforcement of modern Pagan constructions of reality."[15] This "backdrop" manifests within egalitarian cyberspace where Pagans can "perpetually flush out the artifice"[16] of totalizing representations of reality that Pagans feel are present in other more traditional Western religions as well as in Western culture at large. However, does this online space actually manifest as a true "virtual reality" where Pagans can deconstruct oppressive metanarratives and uninhibitedly foster universal connections between all things, or does the construction of this space using modern archival processing technology present challenges to this scheme of utopic cultural change?

Applying Jacques Derrida's postmodern theories to the case of early Pagan Internet communities indicates that it may be impossible to construct an inclusive Lyotardian space that fosters the utopic visions within Pagan theology upon archival technology. This Derridian critique reflects a prominent argument in the Pagan community advocating for an emphasis on offline group religious activity: for many Pagans, "the difference between nature (a cool forest glade) and machine (a .jpeg picture of the same glade on a 17-inch monitor)"[17] is irreconcilable, and the blurring of these two categories is sacrilegious. For Pagans that believe "life is lived in the *embodied* encounter,"[18] the manifestations of their religion on the Internet seems stifling and even antithetical to their primarily nature-based, spontaneous spirituality. This unease makes sense in light of the process that memory goes through when "consigned" to an external

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[15] Ibid., 72.
[16] Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 79.
[17] Cowen, "The Mists of Cyberhenge," 62.
[18] Ibid., 68.

archival technology. As Derrida explains, "the archive […] will never be either memory or anamnesis as spontaneous, alive and internal experience. On the contrary: the archive takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory."[19] The "consignation" of Pagan ideology, beliefs, and practices "in an *external place* […] assures the possibility of memorization, of repetition, of reproduction, or of reimpression,"[20] which Derrida believes, by "the logic of repression, indeed the repetition compulsion, remains […] indissociable from the death drive. And thus from destruction."[21] As Pagan experiences are transferred onto external technology from its original internal environment, some Pagans fear that this shift in community building to online spaces will permanently change the way Paganism is practiced and, if Derrida is correct, will potentially repress and destroy the inclusive and nonhierarchical ideals that develop and thrive in the offline practice of Paganism.

Fear of the potential effects of computer networking technology on Pagan practice and ideals lends credence to Derrida's assertion that the way experience is archived is the way that it is lived. Derrida defines 'archival acts' as both "the content of what is to be archived *and* the archive itself, the archivable and the archiving of the archive: the printed and the printing of the impression."[22] Applying this definition to the case of online Pagan community construction, the archival acts include both the computer network that serves as an external substrate where Pagans consign their "epistemological backdrop," as well as the actual interactions, declarations of belief, and religious structure

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[19] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 11.
[20] Ibid., 11.
[21] Ibid., 11-12.
[22] Ibid., 16.

that Pagans inscribe onto this cyberspace. Derrida explains that there is a specific

directional effect whenever an archival act takes place: Rather than the archivable and

archival technology mutually constituting each other with equal intensity, "the technical

structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content

even in its very coming into existence and its relationship to the future. The archivization

process produces as much as record the event."[23] For Pagans that believe in an embodied

experience in nature operating as their primary mode of religious expression, the idea that

their spirituality may someday be represented by a technology which strips the internal,

spontaneous character from their Pagan practice in favor of consigning these practices

onto a rigid external substrate is upsetting. Pagans who are upset by this prospect assert

that "no matter how beautiful the trees on one's desktop wallpaper, the plain fact remains

that those trees provide no shade, shelter no wildlife, and their off-line counterparts still

suffer clearcutting at an alarming rate."[24] The focus on Internet community can also

distract from the Pagan ethical imperative to actively nurture the beings existing in

offline reality. Others claim "there is a sickness at the heart of this whole virtual reality

concept,"[25] and see the focus on Internet community building as a disease that has the

potential to destroy Pagan reverence of the earth and tangible offline spiritual connections

that rests at the core of Pagan theology. The Pagan use of pathological language to

describe the focus on Internet community building resembles Derrida's concept of

"archive fever," which speaks to a "radical finitude" and an infinite "possibility of a

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[23] Ibid., 17.
[24] Cowan, "The Mists of Cyberhenge," 68.
[25] Ibid., 68.

forgetfulness that does not limit itself to repression."[26] Pagans that object to such an intense focus on building Internet communities feel that something essential to the practice of their religion may be lost when taken out of the embodied, spontaneous, and internal realm of experience.

Given the postmodern arguments for and against Internet social networking technologies as a tool for Pagan community building from the early 1990's to the late 2000's, what evidence exists suggesting the fruition of either the utopic possibilities regarding these cyberspace connections or the destructive expectations of the more conservative Pagans? Empirical research on the rates of participation within Pagan forums, egroups, and blogs (common forms of early social networking spaces) reveals how, starting in the mid-2000's, "the exponential growth in inquisitive inquiring and the growth in new members are slowing. In contrast, community networking remains robust and is becoming a more significant part of the overall activity of Witches [a group comprising a large proportion of the Neopagan community] on the Internet."[27] This trend shows how many of these Internet spaces are still "living networks" but are transitioning "from initial rapid growth to a more sedate pattern of growth."[28] This deceleration of Internet participation may primarily be due to the migration of teenagers, who made up a sizeable proportion of the Neopagan community of the 1990's, from these more antiquated networking spaces to more modern social media websites like Facebook and Twitter.[29] Rapid changes in social networking technologies throughout the 2000's led to

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[26] Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 19.
[27] Berger and Ezzy, "Witchcraft: Changing Patterns of Participation in the Early Twenty-First Century," *The Pomegranate* 11, no. 2 (2009): 171.
[28] Ibid., 171.
[29] Ibid., 171.

Internet communities previously expected to serve as gateways into a postmodernist and Lyotardian cultural utopia within the Neopagan community falling short of these hopes, even though they served as thriving hubs of communication after their period of explosive growth. The robust, if shifting, rates and forms of Pagan participation in Internet communities also demonstrates that the community building efforts of the 1990's and 2000's did not serve to completely dismantle the ideals and practices of Neopaganism at large, but continue to inform the most contemporary manifestations of Pagan online communities existing in different formats on social media, which remain currently unexamined and under-theorized in the discipline of religious studies.

Through the application of postmodern theory to the Pagan use of social networking technologies in the early 1990's to the late 2000's for Internet community building, the complex debate weighing newfound liberation from a totalizing dominant culture against preserving the spontaneous, embodied offline experience that many Pagans view as essential to their religious expression illuminates the tension that plagues communities when the demands of a postmodern era necessitate creative upheaval to achieve an egalitarian and diverse culture. Revealing the processes by which communities whose foundational principles value difference and diversity exploit technological tools as praxis in the face of unprecedented levels of connection can aid scholars in understanding how the practice of religion transforms in a postmodern information age. Studying how spirituality can flourish in less structured and egalitarian spaces is especially important in the larger field of Pagan studies, which has a strong "overemphasis on established, communal, and elite forms of Paganism" that marginalizes

the "loosely organized, solitaire, and/or popular forms"[30] of Pagansim that flourished on

the Internet spaces of the 1990's and served as huge producers of Pagan art, literature,

and culture that affects both the practice and perceptions of Pagansim today. Due to the

rampant essentializing of what constitutes a Pagan belief system, practice, and identity

within Pagan studies, "solitaire, Internet-based, and/or popular forms of Paganism are

almost always excluded from study [because] they combine Pagan ideas and practices

with those of other traditions, thereby challenging normative notions of what counts as

authentic Paganism and what does not."[31] This exclusion of more popular and less elite

forms of Paganism from academic study is extremely problematic because this period

connected many marginalized voices within the Pagan community, and allowed for an

unprecedented amount of creative innovation in regards to Pagan identity construction

and cultural production. To exclude and devalue this space in favor of constructing

essentialized categories of what constitutes "proper" Paganism is to produce inaccurate

scholarship imbued with the values of an authoritative dominant discourse that serves to

perpetuate the marginalization of an already silenced form of Paganism. To combat the

essentializing of dominant discourse, within religious studies at large as well as Pagan

studies, requires a sound methodology that implements theory in order to understand the

processes by which a diverse array of religious expression manifests itself, even if these

expressions do not ostensibly seem normative or neatly classifiable. Implementing this

inclusive methodology is one effective way to answer the postmodern call to "wage a war

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[30] Markus Altena Davidsen, "Review Essay: What is Wrong with Pagan Studies?",
Method and Theory in the Study of Religion 24 (2012):188.
[31] Ibid., 189.

on totality"[32] and to produce scholarship that strives to understand the complex,

multifaceted, and diverse world of religious expression.

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[32] Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 82.

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