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Mother Goddesses and Subversive Witches: Competing Narratives of Gender Essentialism, Heteronormativity, Feminism, and Queerness in Wiccan Theology and Ritual

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Mother Goddesses and Subversive Witches:
Competing Narratives of Gender Essentialism, Heteronormativity, Feminism, and Queerness
in Wiccan Theology and Ritual

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ABSTRACT

Wicca has typically been viewed as an empowering alternative to institutionalized and patriarchal religions, and women especially have been drawn to this religion because of its inclusion of women as goddesses and priestesses. It is also seen as a sex-positive religion, and many LGBTQ+ people embrace Wicca due to its lack of concepts such as sin and shame, especially around sex and sexuality. This research, however, troubles the claim that Wicca is a feminist, woman-friendly, queer-friendly religion. While women are celebrated and valued, I argue that women's positive portrayal as mothers, nurturers, emotional, and intuitive portrays women's nature in a gender essentialist way. My research also explores the consequences and limitations of emphasizing Wicca as a fertility religion, as women's power is theoretically restricted to their potential for motherhood. The resulting heteronormativity and its procreative focus can create an exclusionary environment for gay men and women as well as for transgender and genderfluid or non-binary individuals. For this research, I engaged in ethnographic participant-observation of a local Wiccan coven and conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with Wiccans and Pagans from across the United States and England. In doing so, I was able to gauge Wiccan practitioners' attitudes related to gender and sexuality and explore the ways in which Wiccans are modifying their practices to be more inclusive.

For many people, religion is one way in which they understand their larger purpose in life, mark the passing of time in meaningful ways through rituals and holidays, and situate themselves in a community. For some, however, “mainstream” religions do not meet their needs, or can be perceived as uncaring of, or harmful to, some aspects of their identity. In recent years, the degree of women’s and LGBTQ+ inclusion in mainstream religions has come under scrutiny. As a result, some people have turned away from religion or have sought alternatives. Wicca has been that alternative for some, due to its focus on the Goddess and its inclusion of women as clergy. Wicca has also gained the reputation of being LGBTQ-friendly, as it contains none of the fire and brimstone language of Christianity and other religions that exclude certain populations for their perceived sins and sexual transgressions. In fact, Wicca is a very sex-positive religion, and sexuality is considered sacred. The inclusion of women as divine figures and faith leaders, however, is not by itself enough, and upon closer inspection, Wicca’s claim to be inclusive of queer people is not without its problems.

While women are undoubtedly emphasized positively, this research argues that some of this focus is in fact a form of benevolent sexism, coming out of an essentialist understanding of women’s nature being nurturing, intuitive, and emotional. This research also explores the consequences and limitations of emphasizing Wicca as a fertility religion, as women under this paradigm are valued for the function their uterus fulfills and their capacity for nurturance. In addition, while gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people are often explicitly welcomed and celebrated in Wiccan communities, the heteronormativity, gender essentialism, and (at times) strict gender roles resulting from a religion that worships a divine heterosexual pair in the God and Goddess can create an exclusionary environment.

This research brings a critical feminist perspective to Wiccan theology and ritual practice, and examines claims that portray Wicca as exclusively woman-affirming and inclusive. Wicca can undoubtedly be these things, but it can also be gender essentialist and exclusionary, a perspective which is currently underrepresented in the literature. This research thus fills a gap in the existing literature while also investigating ways in which Wiccans are attempting to modify their practices in order to be more inclusive of all.

AN OVERVIEW OF BASIC WICCAN BELIEFS

Wicca¹ is a new religious movement that came into popularity in the 1950s in England, though its roots go much deeper (Hutton 1999:241; Magliocco 2004:25). Since then, it has spread to other continents, and is currently considered one of the fastest-growing religions in North America (Gordon 2004:31-32; Jensen and Thompson 2008:753), even though an accurate estimate of the total number of adherents does not exist. The 2010 U.S. Census reported 682,000 self-identified Wiccans, but that number may be an underestimation, as other sources suggest numbers of one million or more (Moe, Cates, and Sepulveda 2013:38; The Pluralism Project 2004). Wicca falls under the “umbrella” of modern Pagan² religions claiming to be revivals or reconstructions of ancient pre-Christian practices, or at least inspired by them (Hutton 2015:198). Modern Pagan religions often borrow specifically from elements of historical British, Germanic, Scandinavian, Celtic, Greek, Roman, or Egyptian religion, among others (Hutton 2015:198). While the word “pagan” often has a negative connotation due to a history of it being used

¹ Also known as “Witchcraft,” “The Craft of the Wise,” or simply “The Craft.” The terms “Wicca” and “Witchcraft” are sometimes used interchangeably. While witchcraft, the practice of magick, is a spiritual practice often inseparable from Wiccan religious practice, there are those who identify as Witches and practice magick outside of the Wiccan religion—that is, without following Wiccan ethical code and without recognition of the Wiccan deities. Therefore, I refer to the religion as “Wicca” and the practice of magick as “witchcraft” in the lowercase to distinguish the two in my own writing, although I try to conform to the conventions of other authors in the context of their writings.

² I capitalize terms like “Pagan” and “Witch” when they are being used to describe a contemporary religious identity, just as it is the convention to capitalize “Christian” and “Muslim.” In the lowercase, “pagan” and “witch” refer to the historical usage of those terms.

polemically by the Christian church, modern Pagans (or Neo-Pagans) are reclaiming this word in its original Latin meaning (*paganus*, or “country dweller”) to refer to their new forms of nature religion and Goddess-worship (Anderson and Young 2010:265-266; Adler 2006:xiii). It is important to note that despite some attempts to classify Wicca and Neo-Paganism as “New Age” movements (e.g., Anderson and Young 2010), the majority of Wiccans and Pagans do not identify their religion as such,³ and indeed, draw a sharp distinction between themselves and New Age practitioners (Jensen and Thompson 2008:760-762; Gordon 2004:38; Magliocco 2004:242).

Just as it is difficult to make general statements about Paganism due to its diversity of practices and ritual forms, it is difficult to generalize about Wicca. There is no sacred text in Wicca, no central creed each Wiccan professes to, and no hierarchy or central group of leaders to standardize ritual practices (Magliocco 2004:142-143, 188). Therefore, a great diversity of practices and traditions exist, although Wiccans typically recognize similar ritual styles, ethical systems, and holidays⁴ (Bado-Fralick 2002:45-46). The closest thing to a common creed is the American Council of Witches' "Principles of Wiccan Belief" (Appendix A:I), a document compiled by 73 Witches in 1974 that consists of thirteen statements, which were left purposefully vague so as to capture the full spectrum of beliefs found in Wicca, while not necessarily matching any one Wiccan Tradition (Adler 2006:97-99).

Given Wicca's diversity, categorizing it as a religion and determining what defines it as such has occasionally been controversial. Émile Durkheim, however, one of the founders of sociology as an academic discipline, understood religion as a fundamentally social phenomenon

³ For one thing, Wiccans disapprove of what they see as New Age's tendency to commercialize spirituality by charging exorbitant amounts of money for workshops and teaching sessions, a taboo in Wicca.

⁴ Some ritual styles and holidays are also shared by groups who do not consider themselves Wiccan, e.g., British Traditional Witches, Stregheri, German Braucherei, Feri Witches, etc., but those groups are beyond the scope of this research. In this paper I focus specifically on Wicca.

comprised of symbols and rituals held as sacred within a community (Durkheim 1912:122-123; Appelrouth and Edles 2012:114). Durkheim takes a functionalist view of religion, identifying how practices (not necessarily beliefs or values) can bind people together as a religious community by reaffirming “collective sentiments” (Appelrouth and Edles 2012:114). Although Wicca does not have a formal doctrine, creed, or set of theological principles each practitioner must affirm in order to identify as “Wiccan,” each individual or group engages in meaning-making around a similar set of symbols, and engages in some form of ritual. As such, it is appropriate to define Wicca as a religion, and to define a Wiccan as anyone who identifies as such.

Broadly speaking, however, Wiccans celebrate a year-long cycle of seasonal festivities called Sabbats, of which there are eight in total: two solstices, two equinoxes, and four holidays of pre-Christian Celtic origin that fall in between, as well as monthly lunar observances (White 2015:145; Magliocco 2004:72-73; Yardley 2008:330). Denominations within Wicca are referred to as “Traditions,” which may differ in the names for the deities they honor, ritual style and liturgy, cultural or historical lineage, member structure, and degree of secrecy (Magliocco 2004:69). Among the most popular are “British Traditional Wiccan” Traditions such as Gardnerian and Alexandrian, “feminist Traditions” like Dianic and Reclaiming, Traditions which draw from the lore and mythology of a specific culture (such as Welsh, Saxon, Italian, etc.), and eclectic Traditions, which have a loose structure that encourage borrowing from several sources (Magliocco 2004:73-74).

Wiccans may practice either as individuals (“solitaries”) or with a small group called a coven, which functions as a community with which to perform rituals, a study group, and a spiritual support group (Bado-Fralick 2002:45-46; Moe et al. 2013:40). Wicca is a “religion of

the clergy” in that every initiated Wiccan is considered a priest or priestess, having the spiritual authority to lead rituals for themselves or for others (Moe et al. 2013:40). Covens are independently governed, and leadership usually falls to a High Priestess or High Priest. These are typically Wiccans who have attained a high level of knowledge and experience, and have been initiated into “Third Degree,” the highest level of the Wiccan degree system,⁵ at which point one is recognized as an Elder (Buckland 2001:55). Because each coven stands alone, there exists no overarching hierarchy of leaders in the faith, though Wiccans recognize nationally respected elders, authors, activists and spokespersons whose wisdom is appreciated (Bado-Fralick 2002:46).

Wicca may be considered a Western duotheistic nature religion that honors a God and a Goddess (White 2015:145; see Principle #4 in Appendix A:I). Some categorize Wicca as a polytheistic religion (Adler 2006:22; Bado-Fralick 2002:45), but despite the fact that Wiccans recognize that the Divine can take many *forms*, most Wiccans recognize the primacy of a God and a Goddess above the rest, with other deities subsumed as aspects of either the Divine Feminine or the Divine Masculine (Hutton 2000:6; Aburrow 2014:38). In other words, many Wiccans recognize and work with named deities from specific cultural pantheons, but believe these deities to be different aspects, or “faces” of the greater God and Goddess: all gods are one God, all goddesses are one Goddess.⁶ This is referred to as *soft polytheism*, contrasted with *hard polytheism*, which is the belief that all deities are distinct, independent, and unassimilable entities (Khan 2015). This distinction is an important one, as it has implications for how gender roles in Wicca are understood, as I will discuss later. Other key elements of Wiccan belief are

⁵ Many Wiccan Traditions (but not all) ascribe to some kind of degree system, although what constitutes adequate knowledge at each level and how initiations into the next degree are conducted vary significantly across Traditions.

⁶ Throughout this paper, I capitalize God and Goddess when they refer to these general catch-all deities. Individual named deities are referred to in the lower case.

animism—the belief that all things are imbued with a life energy, and pantheism—the belief that divinity is immanent in the earth and nature, not separate from it (Adler 2006:22).

History and Mythic History

Some accounts credit Gerald Gardner with founding Wicca in the 1950s, although this claim lends itself to much controversy and ambiguity (Aburrow 2014:9).⁷ By Gardner's own account, he joined a pre-existing coven practicing a "Witchcraft" religion tracing its lineage back to antiquity (Aburrow 2014:9; Magliocco 2004:53). The existence of historical religions resembling what is now known as Wicca have been neither proven nor disproven (Aburrow 2014:11-12). The belief in the existence of secret groups that have been practicing the religion of the Witches underground since being forced into hiding during the Inquisition has been perpetuated by people such as Karl Ernst Jarcke (1828), Charles Leland (1899), and Margaret Murray (1921), all of whom were operating on spurious scholarship that has since been discredited (Wood 2001:45; White 2015; Hutton 2015:200). And yet, these writings have been very influential, and continue to have very real effects on gender roles and gendered expectations for men and women. Murray's theories, in particular, shape Wiccan ritual in important and troubling ways.

Trained as an Egyptologist, Murray is today best known for her books *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* (1921, reprinted in 1952 and 1962) and *The God of the Witches* (1933), which claimed that the witches burned in the fifteenth century were secret practitioners of a fertility cult dating back to the Paleolithic and Neolithic periods. These witches supposedly worshipped based on the seasonal cycle of vegetation and venerated a Horned Hunting God, and, as she claimed in later works (*The Divine King in England* (1954)), a Great Mother Goddess of nature

⁷ For a detailed history of the birth of Wicca and Gerald Gardner's influence in shaping the religion, see Hutton 1999 and Magliocco 2004:24-56.

(Wood 2001:45; Hutton 2000:7). While Murray's theories have been discredited in academia, they were perpetuated by Gerald Gardner in his first book, *Witchcraft Today* (1954).⁸ This book was essentially the first text published about Wicca as a religion being practiced in modernity, and is still used as a handbook for many people today. For this reason, Murray's theories continue to shape Wiccan thought as a kind of sacred mythology, or mythic history (Magliocco 2004:44).

Within Wiccan mythic history, two stories rise above all others. Sabina Magliocco, a professor of anthropology and a professional folklorist, labels these stories "Paleolithic Origins" and "The Burning Times" (2004:188). Both of these stories, central to Wiccan theology, have a gendered narrative at the center, but the portrayal of women in each is very different. The first, reminiscent of Murray's work, romanticizes a past in which prehistoric, pre-Christian hunter-gatherer peoples lived together in harmony and celebrated rites in honor of a "Horned God" of the hunt and a Goddess of fertility and potential for motherhood, as well as the changing seasons (Wood 2001:46; White 2015:146; Buckland 2011:2). With the development of agriculture, the God of the hunt became more of a God of nature in general, while the Goddess's importance in ensuring the fertility of the land and a bountiful harvest grew (Buckland 2011:3). Life went on in this way until Christianity arrived on the scene, which transitions into the second mythic story, "The Burning Times." According to this narrative, Christians saw the Horned God as the Devil, and sought to systematically destroy the pagans who practiced the "old ways" through witch hunts and executions (Buckland 2011:5-8). In order to preserve their lives and their religion, the pagans of old disguised their practices in folk traditions and family secrets, where the practice existed in hiding until Gardner went public with his discovery of a coven of witches in 1954 (White 2015:146). Although these stories draw on real historical events, many aspects of these

⁸ Indeed, Murray wrote the Introduction to *Witchcraft Today*.

stories are not factually true. While most Wiccans today realize this, the symbolic and metaphorical nature of the mythic histories nevertheless has a powerful effect on individuals, as well as Wiccans as a group, in constructing their sense of identity (Magliocco 2004:193).

The first mythic narrative suggests a male breadwinner model in which men hunted and women gathered and cared for children, locating women's value in their fertility. Assumptions about this gendered division of labor at the advent of human culture have led to a host of assumptions about innate gender differences, despite what we know about the hard work women do in modern hunter-gatherer cultures. This story sets up the gendered male-female polarity of active-passive, aggressive-nurturing, culture-nature, and killing-birthing that makes up part of Wiccan theology. Given its essentialist message and place in Wiccan identity construction, this narrative has potentially harmful implications, which will be discussed later in this paper.

The second story deals with the figure of the witch, which has also been gendered in Western culture. Michel Foucault, in his book *Madness and Civilization* (1988), describes the figure of the witch as one that stands for the deepest desires of the human psyche, someone with great power who does not fear but freely experiences powerful emotions in a scientific-rational world that seeks to reduce the human experience to only what can be empirically verified (280-82; Shuck 2000:2). The label of "Witch" is thus a reclaimed one among Wiccans of all genders, a way of creating an oppositional identity set apart from the dominant culture (Magliocco 2004:185). By calling themselves Witches, Wiccans validate historically devalued qualities like intuition, emotion, and sexuality (Magliocco 2004:72), and situate themselves as people liberated from institutionalized patriarchal religion (Hutton 2015:202).

Modern Witches claim to descend (either in actuality or metaphorically) from the witches who were burned.⁹ Many Wiccans view their current struggles as religious minorities as reflected in the historical persecution of witches, and see the Burning Times as a “repository of symbols for organizing their contemporary struggle against oppressive forces” (Shuck 2000:1-2). Sharing in these narratives of persecution also creates a sense of common experience and tightens the boundaries of Wiccan communities (Magliocco 2004:187). The fifteenth century witch trials offer a language and a framework for discussing contemporary concerns, especially relating to religious persecution and the oppression of women in a patriarchal society (Shuck 2000:2; Aburrow 2014:37). To many, however, the witch is not a victim but a classic feminist figure. She¹⁰ is a challenge to men’s authority and to gender norms, and very different from the nurturing mother of the previous story. Modern Wiccans are claiming and reclaiming the label of “Witch” in order to construct an identity that is empowering and rejecting of the mainstream (Aburrow 2014:37). They embrace this legacy as one of symbolic importance, and it is a core component of Wicca’s claim to be feminist and anti-patriarchal (Hutton 2015:204; Shuck 2000:1).

Feminism is Fundamental

Wicca became popular in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s among second wave¹¹ feminists, and is often categorized as a “Woman’s Spirituality Movement” (Feraro 2015:308; Aburrow 2014:10, 37; Magliocco 2004:192; Shuler 2012:48). Wicca, unlike many mainstream faiths at the time, granted women liturgical authority as priestesses and healers, and gave women

⁹ A common saying among Wiccans is “We are the granddaughters of the witches you weren’t able to burn,” author unknown.

¹⁰ The historical witch is often portrayed as a woman, although men were also executed during the witch trials and modern Witches may be of any gender.

¹¹ Some scholars (e.g. Springer 2002) have criticized the wave model for being exclusionary to women of color. While the language of “waves” is imperfect, and while I want to be mindful of this criticism, it is nonetheless a familiar and useful model of understanding divisions within the feminist movement.

the opportunity to become powerful and knowledgeable ritualists and leaders in their spiritual communities (Urban 2006:163; Magliocco 2004:71). Even today, many Wiccans cite the feminist aspect of the religion and a dissatisfaction with patriarchal elements of other religions as one of the main reasons influencing their decision to join Wicca,¹² and see feminist activism as central to their spirituality (Oboler 2010:159; Adler 2006:22; Yardley 2008:331; Finley 1991). Wicca also recognizes a Goddess, and places a positive emphasis on women's bodies and sexuality, which is empowering and often perceived as aligning well with the women's rights movement (Urban 2006:163; Shuler 2012:49). In the twentieth anniversary edition of *The Spiral Dance* (1999), one of the most widely-read and influential books that came out of and shaped the Neo-Pagan Goddess Movement in America, author Starhawk (Miriam Simos) explains that mainstream religious characterizations of God as male reinforces a patriarchal system, and that Goddess symbolism intentionally provides a contrasting perspective (1999:32-33).

Neo-Pagan and Wiccan theology validates the inherent sanctity of the human body and of sexuality; Wiccans see the erotic as spiritual, a form of worship that is natural and life-affirming (Urban 2006:178; Aburrow 2014:17, 22). Neo-Pagans view sexuality as a sacrament if it is practiced consensually, and Wiccan rituals reflect this erotic, body-affirming theology (Starhawk 1999:33,37). This theology is one that is often perceived to be at odds with the mainstream Christian culture,¹³ which is seen as being anti-body, anti-woman, and constructs sexuality as a temptation to be tamed (Aburrow 2014:47). In Christian thought, the witch was the embodiment of female sexual power and a danger to men; this legacy has been harnessed by modern Witches

¹² Despite Wicca's growing popularity, the majority of people who identify as Wiccan are first generation and find the religion as teenagers or adults (Magliocco 2004:59).

¹³ Gus di Zerega, interviewed by Sabina Magliocco for her book *Witching Culture* says that the Wiccan tendency both by individuals and as a group to define their identity in opposition to Christianity may have been useful in the early years of Neo-Paganism, but is something that Wicca as a movement needs to outgrow (2004:195). See also Statement #10 in Appendix A.

to reclaim feminine and other forbidden power in the face of patriarchy (Pearson 2005:36-37).

As Lynda Warwick writes in her doctoral thesis on feminist empowerment in Wicca, “identifying as a witch is an act of resistance in a culture which is Judeo-Christian, and the process of actively resisting patriarchal cultural norms can lead to growth and empowerment” (1995:127). The witch represents everything that patriarchal societies seek to suppress in women: independence and freedom, wildness and cunning, power, intellect, strength, and sexuality (Aburrow 2014:37).

Because Wicca is woman-affirming and places a great deal of emphasis on the female body and on the Goddess, men are often overlooked in surveys of Wicca (Shuler 2012:48). One ethnographic study reported that the gender breakdown among Pagans in the community under study was 60% women (Magliocco 2004:62). A more recent survey (n=3,305) reported that 72.8% of participants identified as women, with 24% identifying as men and 3.3% as gender non-conforming (Reece 2016:77). Although there are more female-identified Wiccans than men, these data show that there are male-identified (and non-binary) Wiccans as well. It seems obvious that women would be drawn to the theology of empowerment in a religion that sets itself in opposition to a patriarchal culture that privileges men, but men’s interest in Wicca is perhaps less obvious.

It seems that men who become Wiccan are also drawn to its rejection of the mainstream (Adler 2006:129; K and K 2010:4). Men who are troubled by the toxic norms of behavior expected of them in Western culture, or what R.W. Connell termed *hegemonic masculinity*, characterized by the patriarchal impulse to subordinate women, may embrace a religion that presents an alternative model of masculinity (Connell 1995:77; Starhawk 1999:120-121,123; K and K 2010:4). In Wicca, the God is a model of “non-oppressive” masculinity (Warwick

1995:121), or as Starhawk writes, “He does not fit into any of the expected stereotypes, neither those of the ‘macho’ male nor the reverse-images of those who deliberately seek effeminacy” (1999:120). This model of maleness and male power is often seen as preferable to those advocated for in Western society by both men and women.

Despite Wicca’s feminism and the “laudable call” for women’s liberation, however, Hugh B. Urban, professor of religious studies at Ohio State University, notes that Neo-Pagan feminism is marked by areas of “fundamental ambivalence and troubling weakness” (2006:164). He says:

Although it is in one sense empowering for women [to be] spiritual leaders and embodiments of the Goddess, [Neo-Pagan feminism] still remains bound to a highly essentialist and narrow construction of female (and male) gender and sexuality. At the same time that it affirms the sanctity and power of the female body and sexuality, neo-paganism ironically tends to reinforce many of the same old patriarchal stereotypes of male and female gender roles (Urban 2006:164).

Urban goes on to say that within recent years, new forms of gay, bisexual, and transgender Neo-Pagan Traditions have arisen in order to “liberate” practitioners of Wicca from the confining gender stereotypes typical of Wicca in the twentieth century during the peak of the second wave feminist movement (Urban 2006:164). Given that the Traditions themselves reflect this essentialism, these new forms of Wicca are full of contradictory inclusiveness.

GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN WICCAN RITUAL AND THEOLOGY

Traditional Wiccan ritual, with its focus on gender binaries, polarity, and divine duotheism, often serves to set cisgendered¹⁴ heterosexuality as the standard, and constructs and reifies artificial differences between men and women. This focus on heterosexuality, traditional gender roles, and the essentialist male/female gender polarity can be “disturbing” (Lepage 2013:98) to Wiccans who do not fit the mold set forth in ritual, but this is not the only model of

¹⁴ Those whose gender identity corresponds to their assigned sex at birth: that is, the opposite of transgender.

Wicca that exists. New Wiccan practices that are intersectional,¹⁵ queer-affirming, and gender non-essentialist do exist, but they often stand in tension with more traditional forms of Wiccan thought and ritual practices. Just as second and third wave feminism stand in tension with each other in many ways, Wicca's claim to be empowering and accepting at times conflicts with core elements of the religion.

Queer Acceptance

Given the influence of the counterculture of the 1960s, and because sexuality is held as sacred in Wicca, the religion is generally considered more accepting of sexual diversity than other religions (Harper 2010:79,91). Given that Wicca tends to be very sex-positive, Wicca is often seen as empowering and affirming towards "all acts of love and pleasure,"¹⁶ embracing non-heterosexual practices in a way other religions may not. Brandy Smith and Sharon Horne of the University of Memphis tested these "GLBT-affirming behaviors" in Earth-spirited religions, which they defined as "acts that are positive and affirming towards a nonheterosexual identity" such as celebrating coming out celebrations, accepting and recognizing the sexual identity of people in the community, and endorsing their Tradition as gay-affirming (Smith and Horne 2007:241). Overwhelmingly, they found that respondents strongly exhibited these GLBT-affirming behaviors, and declared Earth-spirited faiths like Wicca a "safe haven for individuals who are coming out as GLBT" (Smith and Horne 2007:244).

¹⁵ Intersectionality, a word first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, is an analytic framework used in feminist scholarship to refer to how the various identities one holds (race, gender, sexual orientation, class, ability, etc.) simultaneously inform one's experience in a structural matrix of privilege and oppression within society (Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Cooper 2015.) Colloquially, it is often used to refer to attempts to be aware and accepting of all parts of a person's identity, and making an effort to be aware of the unique struggles people may face as a result of the complex and multifaceted identities they embody.

¹⁶ A phrase commonly used in Wiccan circles, taken from "The Charge of the Goddess," a well-known liturgical poem written by Doreen Valiente in the mid-1950s. The line reads: "Let my worship be within the heart that rejoiceth, for behold: all acts of love and pleasure are my rituals" (Valiente in Farrar and Farrar 1988 [1981]:43).

It is certainly true that LGBTQ+ people are fairly well represented in Pagan Traditions. In surveys of Pagan and Wiccan populations in which sexual orientation is declared, the LGBTQ+ population is consistently represented in significant numbers. In one ethnographic study, only 38% of respondents identified as heterosexual, suggesting that the majority of Wiccans in that particular community fell under the LGBTQ+ umbrella (Magliocco 2004:62). In another sample of roughly 100 Pagan women, 60% identified as bisexual (Harper 2010:84). Even among heterosexual Wiccans, there is a perceived affinity with queer people, a “sense of linked fates...based on a shared marginality [and] shared resistance to the dominant culture” (Neitz 2000:387). This affinity for marginal or subversive forms of sexuality is invoked through reclaiming the figure of the witch, of course, but even the language of being marginalized in the dominant culture is shared by queer people and Wiccans of all sexualities. For example, Wiccans often speak of being “in the broom closet” and of the experience of “coming out” as Wiccan, just as LGBTQ+ people speak of “coming out of the closet” (Reece 2016:88).

Gender Essentialism, Heteronormativity, and Binary Theology

While Wicca and other Pagan religions may superficially affirm LGBTQ+ identities and welcome queer people into their communities, the extent to which Wicca can truly claim to be inclusive is debatable. Rituals and theological teachings often serve to entrench heteronormative, gender essentialist, and even misandrist and transphobic attitudes into Wiccan practice. These problematic practices can even exist within Wiccan communities that affirm alternative sexual orientations, as is the case in Dianic Wicca.

Dianic Wicca

Dianic Wicca, popularized by a woman named Zsuzsanna Budapest¹⁷ in the 1970s, is a Tradition oriented specifically to women, especially lesbian women (Warwick 1995:122; Urban 2006:182). Men are typically excluded from Dianic ritual spaces, and Dianic Wiccans go even further by excluding the God entirely from their worship—Dianics have established a complete Goddess monotheism, something which is controversial in the wider Wiccan community (White 2015:169). While Dianics explain this as offsetting, or making up for, the thousands of years in which patriarchal God-energy had a monopoly on worship, this Goddess-only approach is at odds with other forms of Wicca that recognize both a God *and* a Goddess, both of whom are seen as necessary for creation, and who represent the equality of the sexes at the level of the Divine (Oboler 2010:166-168). While Dianic groups pride themselves on their political activism towards feminist causes and undermining patriarchy, “Dianic” has often become shorthand for misandry and transphobia in some circles of the Pagan community (Oboler 2010:166; White 2015:169).

Dianics have been criticized in recent years for excluding trans women from their woman-only spaces, their argument being that trans women are “not really women”—either they are agents of the patriarchy trying to infiltrate women’s sacred spaces with their male privilege and force them to accommodate to men’s needs, or more simply, that trans women can never experience Women’s Mysteries because they do not menstruate and cannot bear children (Barrett 2012:98-99;101-103). This latter point essentially reduces the experience of womanhood to biology, and indeed, as Dianic Elder and High Priestess Ruth Barrett writes, “in the spiritual practices of the Dianic Tradition, everything begins with the genetic female body...the Dianic

¹⁷ Not all Dianic Wiccan groups claim a connection to Z. Budapest and her views on feminism, womanhood, and transgender individuals (Nevo 2012:87). The Budapestian Dianic Tradition, however, tends to be the loudest and is the most well-known.

Tradition ritualizes the life cycle passages of genetic females through what we call the ‘blood mysteries’ and other female-embodied experiences” (2011:98), of which the most important are birth, menstruation, childbirth, menopause, and death (Barrett 2012:111).

The assumption is that all women have female bodies, and that all female bodies contain a functioning uterus that menstruates and can (and will) become pregnant. Yet women may stop menstruating for various reasons at various points in their lives, not all women can become pregnant or choose to reproduce, and even then, women are not pregnant all the time (Crawley, Foley, and Shehan 2008:13,74; Lorber 1993:570). Some women do not have wombs: trans women, for example, but also cisgender women who have had a hysterectomy. These assumptions are not unique to Dianic Wicca, however, as symbolism related to genitalia and gender essentialism—the idea that men and women are fundamentally different by nature of their biology—is present in many forms in Wicca.

The Triple Goddess

The Triple Goddess, one of the more pervasive contemporary symbols (Appendix A:II) used in Wicca, is one model that places extensive focus on the womb as the defining characteristic of womanhood. It is a conceptual framework for understanding the Goddess as a triad of three distinct forms, or archetypes: Maiden, Mother, and Crone (Warwick 1995:124). Each aspect reflects a distinct way in which women “can realize their potentials in the world” (Warwick 1995:124), but the three aspects are intimately tied to women’s biology and what the uterus is doing. The Maiden is the girl or young woman, sometimes imagined as pre-pubescent, and she represents new beginnings, and the new or waxing moon. The Mother is seen in the glory of the full moon: she has come into her full power by creating life and giving birth, and she is the healer, the nurturer, the mature sexual woman. The Crone, finally, is the old woman past

child-bearing age, the wise and independent woman seen in the waning and dark moon, who knows of the mysteries of death and transformation (Warwick 1995:124; Duckett 2010:140).

While this model provides powerful metaphors and imagery for women, it also suggests that a woman's fullest power comes from being a mother, and that one's womb and assumed procreative sexuality defines the course of a woman's life. As previously mentioned, this is not a model that is inclusive of every woman's experience. Margot Adler, author of the bestselling history of Paganism in America, *Drawing Down the Moon* (2006), also notes that "archetypes are fine until they become stereotypes, whereupon they become repressive and destructive" (11).

Beltane and the Great Rite

Another example of gender stereotypes in Wicca is the "Great Rite," a ritual that represents the sexual union of the God and Goddess, whose love brought forth all of Creation (Wagar 2009:5). While this ritual may be performed literally, it is often symbolically depicted by plunging an athame (a sacred ritual knife) into a chalice (Oboler 2010:170). In group ritual, the phallic and womb-like symbolism is usually enacted by a High Priest and High Priestess (Oboler 2010:170). The Great Rite is perhaps one of Wicca's most sacred rituals, as it represents the most fundamental (pro)creative act in the universe and the power of life itself. Its symbolism is so potent that Wicca has an entire holiday dedicated to the union of the God and Goddess: the Sabbat of Beltane.

Beltane, typically celebrated on May 1st, marks the marriage of the God and Goddess and the end of their courtship phase (Drury 2009:63-67; Starhawk 1999:125). Beltane falls in the point of spring when the plants are green and blooming and crops have begun to grow, so it is the time of year when the fecundity of the God and Goddess is celebrated. Since Wicca celebrates sexuality and sees itself as a revival of ancient fertility religions, it makes sense that the act of

procreation would be viewed in a sacred way. Not all people see themselves reflected in a heterosexual relationship and the reproductive process, however, is the degree to which a heterosexual act and genitalia are ritually and symbolically represented problematic and potentially alienating. Essentialist and old-fashioned expectations of gender roles also come into play at Beltane, and are enacted in the most widely celebrated Beltane tradition: the Maypole.

It is traditional to dance the Maypole at Beltane, a ritual which is saturated with heteronormative and gender essentialist symbolism. Take cultural anthropologist Regina Smith Oboler's description of this ritual, for example:

The raising of the maypole represents the penetration of phallic masculinity into the womb of Mother Earth, and thus the fertility and generative potential of spring. This ritual has historically been enacted by the men of the group, identified with the masculine principle, going away from the circle [ritual space] to seek out and bring back a suitable pole. The women, meanwhile, stay and maintain the circle and either dig a hole in the ground or guard a previously prepared hole. Ultimately, the group of men inserts the pole into the hole, within the circle of women, symbolizing the act of sexual intercourse (Oboler 2010:177).

Men and women, traditionally in alternating fashion, then weave the ribbons of the Maypole together, symbolizing the union of the feminine and masculine energies in making a new whole. This glorifies cisgendered heterosexual intercourse in a sacred context, and one would assume that LGBTQ+ people would need to undergo the "active work of negotiation in order to attune their religiosity with their gender or sexual identity" (Lepage 2013:86). Sexual implications aside, this ritual also prescribes ritual roles based on gender and sex (which are conflated) according to a binary gender system that labels the masculine role as "active," "penetrative" and the feminine role as "passive," "receptive." While this may seem odd for a religion grounded in feminist activism, in fact, the concept of polarity, manifested in the gender binary, is a core theological principle of Wicca.

Polarity

In Wiccan thought, polarity is viewed as a “cosmic circuit,” representing the flow from the positive (male) to the negative (female), and all of the other paired opposites that get mapped onto this binary system (Urban 2006:167-168). It is “opposites attract” at the level of the sacred, and is a big part of why the Great Rite is so important, since the Great Rite represents the polar opposite forces of male and female, positive and negative, active and passive, coming together to form a whole (Urban 2006:168). The importance of polarity prescribes ritual action on the basis of sex and gender because polarity is understood as “the sexual tension between polar opposites...the central mystery of the religion, the source of the creative force in the universe” (Oboler 2010:170). For this reason, when Wicca was first founded in the 1950s, having an interplay of masculine and feminine energy in the ritual circle was a requirement, and that meant having equal numbers of men and women (Oboler 2010:170-171).

Gerald Gardner wrote that the ideal coven was one of thirteen: six (preferably married) heterosexual couples and a leader. This could be either a man or a woman, but would ideally be a young and beautiful¹⁸ High Priestess (Gardner 2004 [1954]:114-115). Gardner considered same-sex couples not only less desirable for working magick,¹⁹ but unnatural and wrong (Gardner 2004 [1954]:75). While modern Gardnerian covens no longer require a coven of the “perfect thirteen,” it is still a requirement that a neophyte be initiated by someone of the “opposite” sex in order to preserve the polarity of the tradition (Oboler 2010:171). Same-sex rituals and Traditions such as Dianic Wicca were very controversial when they first appeared, as many Wiccans

¹⁸ In some Wiccan circles, being young and beautiful is so serious a requirement that aging High Priestesses are told to step down (Gardner 2004 [1954]:114-115; Lady Sheba 1999 [1972]).

¹⁹ Many Wiccans choose to spell it this way so as to distinguish what they consider a spiritual practice from illusory or stage magic.

considered their practice ineffectual and invalid without the presence of sexual polarity (Neitz 2000:380, 386; Adler 2006:218-219).

Although Gardnerian Wicca is no longer the sole Wiccan Tradition, the emphasis on polarity is preserved in Wicca through the duotheistic system of worshipping a God and a Goddess, or, as Adler puts it, “The Great Hetero Couple whose loving Creates the Universe” (2006:366). While a wealth of positive opportunities and images of women exist in Wicca, the model of polarity and of duotheism reifies gender differences and heteronormativity at the level of the Divine; that is, the God-Goddess model perpetuates the idea that there exists some fundamental difference between men’s and women’s qualities and essential natures that is at the heart of Creation itself. The binary gender system is made sacred, which makes the model a difficult one to challenge. The deities themselves get mapped onto this binary categorization system: the God is to the sun as the Goddess is to the moon, with corresponding associations of male to light and day, and female to dark and night (Gardner 2004 [1954]:42; Starhawk 1999:104, 125).²⁰ While in Wiccan theology night and darkness are not bad, it is nonetheless easy to start mapping on all of the other paired opposites in predictable ways: up, white, good, positive, and active are defined as “masculine” qualities, whereas down, black, evil, negative, and passive get assigned “feminine” (Penczak 2014:146; see Appendix A:IV).

As French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss argued, humans have a tendency to group things in pairs of opposites (Rayfield 1971). This is because dualism is the simplest categorization system that exists: things are either/or, one or the other (Crawley et al. 2008:12). A variety of things may be viewed in this way in sets of matched pairs: good/bad, up/down, light/dark, and nature/nurture, for example. While this system of mutually exclusive categories

²⁰ This is reminiscent of Judith Lorber’s classic work on the stratification system implicit in the gender binary, “Night to His Day: The Social Construction of Gender” (1994).

can be useful, it cannot always accurately represent the complexity in the world (Crawley et al. 2008:12). Furthermore, this categorization rarely ends with simple dualism—our binary systems tend to be ranked hierarchically, in which one of the two is not the other’s equal and opposite, but its superior (Crawley et al. 2008:12). This happens in our sex and gender systems as well: male bodies are commonly considered “active” and physically superior to “passive” female bodies, and men’s supposedly more rational mindset is rewarded over women’s perceived emotionality (Crawley et al. 2008:15). Paired opposites like strong/weak, rational/emotional, mind/body, and active/passive are all mapped onto the gender binary, where the more “positive” of the two are considered “masculine” qualities, leaving the less desirable quality the “feminine” one (Butler 1990:12). Indeed, this hierarchical system means that even when men and women do the same activity, men’s work is valued more highly (Lorber 1994:58). All that matters to perpetuate the social division of labor is that men and women’s identical work is perceived differently (Lorber 1994:58).

These differential qualities are often attributed to the facts of biology, and the conflation of sex and gender. While gender is a part of almost everything we do, presumptions of maleness and femaleness, and what expectations and behavior arise out of those categories, are often taken for granted. While it is fairly well-recognized now that many aspects of gender roles are socially constructed, there is less awareness of the fact that sex is *also* socially constructed, as biology is still believed to cause the “fundamental” gendered differences between men and women (Butler 1990; Crawley et al. 2008:8-9). These differences are thought to reside in physiology: hormones, anatomy, psychology, and evolutionary adaptations that represent real differences between male and female bodies, and are therefore believed to make men and women into different creatures (Crawley et al. 2008:4). Wicca’s place as a nature and fertility religion, and

the insistence on the “natural” polarity of gender and the difference in men and women’s “natures” reflects this biological gender essentialism as well, which leads to a host of problems for women and queer people, and especially trans and non-binary people.

Social organization based on sex difference seems to be “common sense,” a response to the ways in which men and women are “fundamentally” different (West and Zimmerman 1987:127-128). In simple terms, it is assumed that biology (sex) is the cause, and behavior (gender) is the obvious effect; therefore, two sexes produce two genders (Lorber 1993:568). The reality, however, is more complicated. Sex itself does not “naturally” fall into this binary system (Crawley et al. 2008:24-26, 28-29). There are a variety of intersex conditions under which external genitalia may be ambiguous, or in which internal and external genitalia do not “match,” or chromosomal and hormonal sex do not “match” the supposed sex of the genitalia. In these cases, biology is used “quite arbitrarily” in sex assignment (Fausto-Sterling 2000; Lorber 1993:569). In other words, the binary of sex is a social construction. We artificially maintain a system that recognizes two and only two sexes. In fact, human bodies of all sexes are far more similar than they are different, which a dichotomous system of sexing bodies obscures (Crawley et al. 2008:10-11; Lorber 1993:569). Therefore, even though gender is a social behavior, its performance is often cast as an expression of an inherent masculine or feminine nature, emerging from biological bodies (West and Zimmerman 1987:126). Gender is able to shape our lives so powerfully precisely because it is made to feel and appear to be a natural reflection of sex.

This binary categorization reinforces a false dichotomy of gender. If we believe there are two and only two ways of being, then we sort people into categories regardless of the variation that may exist in terms of sex and in terms of mixing and matching sex, sex category, and gender (Crawley et al. 2008:40-42). In believing what we expect to see, we create gender differences at

the same time as we assume them to be innate (Lorber 1994; Crawley et al. 2008:4). When we take for granted that everyday gendered behavior must come from men and women's different biology, then "not biology, but culture, becomes destiny" (Butler 1990:8; Lorber 1993:575).

The dualism of nature and culture, for example, is the topic of Sherry B. Ortner's work "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" (1972). Although Ortner's writing in this piece has been criticized for its sweeping generalizations and culturally universalist approach, Ortner's arguments have parallels in Wiccan thought. She argues that the ubiquitousness of patriarchal societies that subjugate women in relation to men can be explained by the way in which women become identified with "nature," whereas men are identified with "culture" (Ortner 1972:10). She defines culture in the broad sense, as anything created by humankind (such as systems of thought and technology) so as to assert control over the natural world (Ortner 1972:10). If the goal of culture is to be distinct from and superior to nature, then men's control of culture makes them "naturally" dominant over women (Ortner 1972:11-12).

Ortner justifies these associations by discussing how women's biology necessitates that they be the ones who bear children, the ones who menstruate, the ones whose sphere of activity is limited to the home with the domestic chores by virtue of her body's limitations (Ortner 1972:12). Women, ostensibly like all female animals, can create life within their bodies, whereas men's creation is through artificial means (Ortner 1972:16). Therefore, while human women's creation is no different than that of "lower-order" animals, men create through human culture: with tools, with thought (Ortner 1972:16). Men's creativity is thus valued more highly, because it tends to be associated with the things that separate humankind from nature, like law, religion, and art (Ortner 1972:18-19). Women, on the other hand, are relegated to the "species life" of reproduction (Ortner 1972:24). In addition, these latter creations can be "eternal,

transcendent objects” while woman’s creation is only in “perishables”—human beings (Ortner 1972:14). Furthermore, men become elevated over women precisely because their activities, hunting and warfare, destroy the life that women create (Ortner 1972:14).

While in Wiccan thought it is the God who represents the wilderness of untamed nature, this focus on biology, menstruation and motherhood should sound very familiar, and the hunter/mother division remains. Ortner’s description of gender roles is also remarkably similar to the gender roles romantically espoused in the “Paleolithic Origins” mythic history. The Goddess of the fertile land, or “Mother Earth,” is contrasted with the more active God of the Hunt. One informant interviewed by Urban affirmed this troubling gendered dichotomy, explaining that in Wicca “women’s mysteries involve biological function, whereas men’s mysteries involve behavior and social/gender roles” (2006:187-188). Women are represented in the Triple Goddess of menstruation, motherhood, and menopause, whereas men are the hunters, the warriors, and the heroes.

While this model of biological essentialism seems horrifying, it demonstrates that arguments about difference based on biological capability and reproductive roles, as well as dichotomous and polarized ways of thinking, can serve to entrench sexism and male privilege in patriarchal societies. Of course, Ortner realizes that in many societies, women are more than just child-bearers: they too are members of society who contribute to the domain of culture (Ortner 1972:20). Because women are still by nature of their biology the ones who can become pregnant, however, Ortner describes them as having an “intermediate” status between nature and culture (Ortner 1972:20,24). It is this liminality, she argues, that gives rise to the “symbolic ambiguity” that surrounds women (Ortner 1972:26). Women exist at the margins of culture, at the peripheral extremes of polarized ideas: they are simultaneously Madonnas and whores,

subversive witches and mother goddesses (Ortner 1972:26-27). This latter comparison perfectly captures the tension that lies at the heart of Wiccan theology today.

The two mythic sacred stories—“Paleolithic Origins” and “Burning Times” speak to different narratives about women’s place in society, both historic and cultural. Women are either “subversive witches” or “mother goddesses” (Ortner 1972:26-27), and in Wicca, they are both. The narratives are in tension: the story that emphasizes heterosexual fertility and gender essentialist ideals of motherhood and nurturance, and the heretical witch, the queer figure at the margins, the subversive threat to the patriarchy that is celebrated for breaking norms and rigid dogmas. These competing models of womanhood influence Wicca’s feminism and claims of inclusiveness. Sex may be celebrated in Wicca, but whether for its procreative power or for pleasure depends on whether the figure of the mother or of the witch is being emphasized.

Wicca is thought to be a feminist and inclusive religion, a claim that suggests the goal of equality between men and women, but it nevertheless contains practices that reify and sustain ideas of essential difference between men and women, and exclude anyone who is not heterosexual and cisgender. Wiccan claims of inclusiveness are thus contradictory. This research examines these practices in more detail and investigates the attitudes surrounding them. In the sections that follow, I explore the ways in which some Wiccans are modifying their practices in order to be more inclusive.

METHODOLOGY

While Wicca contains the potential to be a religion welcoming to those who feel excluded from mainstream religions such as Christianity, like women, LGBTQ+ people, and non-binary people, in practice, Wiccan rituals and theology can manifest in ways that are problematic and exclusionary. In my research, I sought to find out how (or if) Wiccans perceived and engaged in

these practices, whether they considered Wicca to be a feminist and queer-inclusive religion, and the degree to which they were modifying their practices and rituals to be more inclusive. I also sought the perspective of non-Wiccan Pagan persons in order to get a wider perspective, and because people who feel excluded from a religion (like Wicca) often leave it (Lepage 2013:94).

No one I interviewed conveyed any disgust or hostility for queer people, trans people, or women. However, despite giving lip service to being open and inclusive, what I discovered was a great deal of ambivalence. I found evidence of Wiccans who affirmed traditional gendered practices that are problematic, as well as Wiccans who are adapting their practices to be more open. As such, this research complicates Smith and Horne's (2007) findings that those of Earth-Spirited faiths are affirming to those who identify as LGBT, and builds on Oboler's (2010) study on how gender essentialist practices in Neo-paganism are being negotiated.

Participant-Observation

For this research, I engaged in ethnographic participant-observation fieldwork in an eclectic Wiccan coven located in Central Illinois. The coven meets weekly at a private residence for religious education classes, and holds special gatherings for ritual observances on Sabbats or when the need arises. Attendance at classes varies, and can range anywhere between five to fifteen or more on any given night. Rituals typically attract even larger crowds, sometimes with up to twenty people in attendance. Since the coven is structured in such a way as to provide an introduction to the Wiccan religion for new initiates, the lessons taught there are an important source of information for its members, and may influence their beliefs about gender and sexuality in Wicca. In addition, coven rituals are a space in which gendered attitudes may be put into practice in the form of ritual activities or liturgy. Between the months of November 2016 and March 2017, I attended rituals and took classes with the coven every week. All field notes

from my observations were hand-written, and then transcribed and coded for themes relevant to gender and sexuality.

Interviews

I also conducted 18 semi-structured ethnographic interviews, both face-to-face and via phone or Skype call, with people who identify within the Wiccan and wider Pagan community, although two of the participants I interviewed did not give permission for their responses to be published and have thus been omitted from this paper. Interviews were recorded when permission was given and transcribed later with as much accuracy as possible, although some filler words (um, like) and false starts have been removed for readability. For interviews for which permission to record was not given, I took hand-written notes during the conversation and typed them immediately following the interview. Interview participants represent perspectives from diverse Pagan and Wiccan Traditions, and from across the United States, as well as from England. Interviews spanned the range between 16 and 73 minutes, with most interviews lasting about 45 minutes.

Questions engaged the participants on their understanding of the nature of the Divine and the extent to which they draw on duotheistic models, the metaphor of the Triple Goddess, practice the ritual of the Great Rite or “Drawing Down the Moon,” or celebrate Beltane. These are all theological beliefs and ritual practices that have traditionally drawn upon heteronormative and highly essentialized models of gender, and allowed me to indirectly gauge their attitudes and experiences regarding these practices. I also asked directly about their perceptions of gender roles in the Wiccan and Pagan communities, assumptions about gendered abilities and proclivities, and their sense of how welcoming the Pagan and Wiccan community is to LGBTQ+ and non-binary individuals. In addition, I requested general information about their religious

background, Tradition, and spiritual practice, as well as demographic information from each of the participants, including information about their gender identity, sexual orientation, age, race, occupation, highest level of education attained, and area of residence. To build rapport and in the interest of fairness, I introduced myself at the beginning of each interview and shared some of my own demographic information as a member of the Pagan community with each of the participants.

Reflexive Notes

As an important note, the coven under study and many of the interview participants were known to me prior to the start of the research. I personally identify as a hard polytheist Pagan and as a queer woman, and I am an initiated member of the coven under study. I met many of my interviewees and research participants through the coven, online community groups I am a part of, and at Pagan Spirit Gathering, a popular and nationally-renowned camping festival held over the week of the Summer Solstice each year. I acknowledge that my background has had an impact on this research. Given my insider bias and my fear of being too lenient and forgiving of a community with which I also identify, I fear my impulse may have been to over-correct and come down too critically. I acknowledge that this may shape my analysis and subsequent research findings; however, I believe my background and prior involvement with this community was an advantage in doing this research rather than a problem.

As Wiccans and LGBTQ+ people are still misunderstood minorities in mainstream American society and elsewhere, the people I interviewed may not have been as likely to open up to outsiders about their experiences or problems within the community for fear that they would be judged harshly or that shared information would add to the negative stereotypes that exist about Wicca and Paganism in general. By contrast, I had an existing rapport with the

members of the coven and other Pagan-identified people, which was an asset in gaining permission to observe the coven and in recruiting participants to be interviewed. I also had a greater understanding of the nuances and meanings of Wiccan theology and ritual symbolism which an outsider, having to learn as they go during participant-observation, would not. I am therefore confident that the information shared with me during interviews and the data collected through participant-observation are valuable and honest depictions of the religion as understood by those who practice it.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were drawn via availability sampling from the coven under study, as well as through purposive and snowball sampling, drawing on participants' and my own social networks. I also posted a recruitment message describing the research and inviting interested parties to contact me in several Pagan and Wiccan community groups on Facebook, including groups specifically for LGBTQ+ identified Wiccans and Pagans. These methods were necessary given that Pagans are often afraid of discrimination, and remain for the most part a hidden population (Reece 2016:73). Participants were told the research was investigating "gender roles and sexuality within Wiccan ritual and theology," and that I was interested in learning about people's "personal involvement with, understanding of, and experiences of gender and sexuality in the Wiccan and wider Pagan community." Participants were also told that while questions would focus predominantly on Wiccan practices, I was open to interviewing people from other Pagan paths as well, in order to learn about the perception of Wicca by non-Wiccan people.

Each participant was given an informed consent form outlining the general direction of the research and their role and rights as participants. On the consent form, each participant was given the option to select one of three ways of being identified in the research: pseudonym

selected for them, Craft name²¹ or other name of their own choosing, or legal name. Since Wicca is a minority religion and false stereotypes abound, many Wiccans are still “in the broom closet” at work or around friends and family. The range of options presented to them thus offered those who wanted their identities kept private total confidentiality in the pseudonym, while allowing participants who wanted to be identified by others in the Pagan community or larger research audience the ability to do so.²² Allowing participants the option of selecting a preferred name other than their legal name also created space for those who are in the process of transitioning to affirm their most authentic identity.

Participant Demographics

While this is not a representative sample by any means, I was able to collect rich and interesting data from the interviews, and I believe I got diverse responses. Everyone interviewed in this research is a first-generation Pagan: that is, they were not raised Pagan. About half of the people interviewed identify as Wiccan and are currently practicing their religion, while others provide an “outside” perspective on Wiccan practices. Everyone interviewed identified within the Pagan community, which allowed them to speak to Wiccan practices that tend to predominate in Pagan circles. Even among those who do not currently identify as Wiccan, most revealed in interviews that they got first entered Paganism through Wicca in some form or another. The perspective of people who were once Wiccan but no longer identify as such is thus invaluable when talking about problems of exclusivity in the community.

²¹ A Craft name, also known as a Magickal name, is a name that Pagans may choose to take upon dedication, initiation, or conversion as a way to mark their new religious identity. These names are used in ritual contexts as well as for use in the wider Pagan community.

²² A few of the participants I interviewed are published authors and/or are fairly well-known figures and spokespeople within the Pagan community. Since these people are typically “out” as Pagans and are often respected within the community, I wanted to retain the possibility of identifying them in my research (with their consent, of course.)

All but one of the people I interviewed identify within the LGBTQ+ community. While this may reflect components of my recruitment strategy and indicate a self-selection bias, I also believe that it reflects the high concentration of queer people drawn to Pagan religions (Magliocco 2004:62; Reece 2016:77). While I interviewed people of diverse ages, the racial distribution of my sample is less diverse. This is also reflective of the Pagan community in general, and certainly of the coven with which I did my fieldwork. As other studies have shown, Wicca tends to have special appeal among white people, particularly among those with English, Irish, or other “Anglo” ancestry (Jensen and Thompson 2008:757). This may be in part because traditional Wicca, having been founded in England, is inspired by the mythology and folklore of the British Isles and based on the pre-Christian religions of Western Europe.

Those who consented to be interviewed and included in this research are listed in the following table. Members of the coven are marked with an asterisk.

Name	Tradition	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation	Age and Race	Region
Crystal*	Eclectic Witch	Cisgender Woman	Straight	39 White	Illinois
Gregory*	Eclectic Wicca, Christo-Pagan	Cisgender Man	Gay	44 White	Illinois
Kayla*	Wiccan/Pagan	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual	25 White	Illinois
Lord ShiningStarr*	Eclectic Traditional Wicca	Cisgender Man	Gay	38 White	Illinois
Kathryn*	“Pagan-y”	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual	27 White	Illinois
Brian Paisley	Gardnerian Wicca	Cisgender Man	Gay	45 Mixed Race	Gloucestershire England
Brooke	Eclectic Pagan	Questioning	Bisexual	21 White	Illinois

Tyler	Gardnerian Wicca, Unitarian Universalist	Genderqueer	Queer	24 Bi-racial African American	Tennessee
Gabriel	Wiccan Adventure Tradition	Trans- masculine, Genderqueer	Bisexual	36 White	Illinois
Quill	Druid, Methodist	Trans Man, Eunuch	Asexual, Bisexual, Homoromantic	28 White	Southwest England
Shannon	“Heathen Lite”	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual	37 White	Illinois
Dylan Runestone	Eclectic Pagan	Genderfluid	Demisexual	21 White	Illinois
Eldritch	Stone Circle Wicca, Radical Faeries	Cisgender Man	Gay	55 White	Washington D.C.
Yvonne Aburrow	Gardnerian Wicca	Genderqueer	Bisexual	48 White	Cambridge, England
Debby	Eclectic Wicca	Cisgender Woman	Lesbian	55 White	Maryland
Lupa	Naturalist Pagan	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual	38 White	Oregon

Limitations and Future Research

I was unable to interview any Dianic Wiccans for this research. Given how frequently the Dianic Tradition comes up in conversations about gender and inclusivity in Wicca, the absence of a Dianic perspective creates a major gap in this research. Furthermore, due to this study’s small sample size and purposive recruitment techniques, this research is not generalizable to the Pagan population. It is not even generalizable to one region or community, as in attempting to seek out diverse perspectives, I interviewed people from several regions of the United States as well as from England. I am sure the culture and practice of Wicca varies considerably region to region. The data generated from interviews with coven members and through participant-observation also differs somewhat from attitudes expressed by Neo-pagans in some scholarly works, especially on questions related to feminism. Many Pagan authors and scholarly

ethnographies have been done on large coastal cities, most notably the San Francisco Bay Area, which hosts a large and vibrant Pagan community.²³ Since this research was conducted in Central Illinois, the extent to which the data generated from my fieldwork can be compared to other studies from other communities is limited. It may be, however, that this brings a new perspective to the literature.

Furthermore, several topics came up in the course of doing interviews that, while interesting and important, were beyond the scope of this paper. These topics included racism and white supremacy in Paganism, issues related to consent culture and sexual predators in the Pagan community, ableism, and cultural appropriation. Pertaining to sexuality, there was some mention of the lack of acceptance of asexuality and polyamory in Pagan communities, but I was not able to include a discussion of those identities in this research. Future researchers may choose to explore these topics.

Additionally, it was originally my intent to read several Wiccan books and blog posts for their content in order to get a sense of attitudes and changing practices in the Wiccan community. Given that the Wiccan religion is still less visible in American society than other religions, and that many Wiccan practitioners are “solitaries,” books and internet resources are often the main source of information about beliefs and practice for people who cannot find a coven in their area or prefer to practice on their own. These sources are also the first introduction many people have to the faith, something that 12 of the 18 people I interviewed mentioned without prompting. The presentation of gender roles, sexuality, ritual, and theology in these books may therefore be the foundation on which many people build their faith. Because they are so influential, they deserve examining. It was beyond the scope of this research to do a

²³ Jone Salomonsen (2002) and Sabina Magliocco (2004) both did their ethnographies on groups in San Francisco, which is also where Starhawk’s community is located.

detailed content analysis on primary source data, however. A systematic selection of books and blogs to analyze may be a fruitful endeavor for future research.

FINDINGS

The data gathered from my participant-observation and ethnographic interviews revealed a range of perspectives on how gender and sexuality ought to be engaged in Wiccan ritual and theology. While there were examples of innovation and resistance to problematic beliefs and ritual models, these same practices were also affirmed by several of my participants. The overall impression is one of ambivalence and tension within the community over these topics.

The Coven's Teachings

The coven I studied functions as a social group and a religious community, but it is primarily a teaching circle. Meetings are held every Tuesday night at a private residence, and on most nights when there is not a Sabbat being celebrated, classes are held. Evenings start with socializing: most people come early to engage in "Sacred BS," gathering on the porch to share a smoke, or congregating in the living room and dining room to chat and pet one of the four cats running about. Despite being a living space for many of the members (three regular members rent bedrooms there, and the other two residents attend classes sporadically), it is obvious that the living room and dining room are designed for coven use. From the community library of Pagan books available to be borrowed to the row of metal folding chairs lining the dining room and the coven Code of Conduct tacked onto the wall, the spaces are made to accommodate large groups for classes, group exercises, and indoor ritual in the case of inclement weather.

Around 7 o'clock, announcements start, although people are usually still trickling in. Attendance varies: some nights as many as twelve people show up; sometimes it is eight or less. Although there are regular members whose absence is cause for comment, the general

expectation is that people will show up when they can. Many members have children at home and erratic work schedules, so it is understood that coming to class weekly can be difficult, especially as some members do not have a reliable means of transportation. Those who can come find seating in the dining room, either around the table or in chairs along the walls.

Coven leadership technically consists of the Council of Elders, three High Priests and one High Priestess who have attained the Third Degree. Gregory, however, who is also a Regional Coordinator for the internationally renowned Pagan Pride Project, leads announcements, takes attendance, assigns the classes, and often chooses what exercise the group will do each night, although other members can and often do chime in with comments and suggestions during this process. Notably, Gregory usually stands behind the kitchen counter adjacent to the dining room while others are seated in the dining room, conveying the power differential implicit in this body language.

Announcements usually consist of reminders about upcoming Sabbat celebrations, food lists for celebration potlucks, and other non-class coven events which occur on occasion. Homework is also presented at this time: with each lesson taught, an assignment is given for work at home. This could consist of further research, devotional or journal writing related to the lesson topic, further practice with a new magickal technique, or demonstrations with objects brought from home. Gregory keeps track of all of this in the coven's Book of Shadows, a large binder that contains all the lessons and documents in which he records who comes to classes, what lessons they take, and whether they have completed the homework connected to the lesson.

Following announcements and homework, the group does an exercise together. This is sometimes a guided meditation or an affirmations activity. Sometimes it is a drum circle during which the group sings and chants to raise energy, or a spell to help or heal someone in need.

Exercises are not always led by Gregory: oftentimes these are open to the members' talents and expertise. For example, Laura, the coven's sole High Priestess, often leads drum circles and chants, while Crystal, a regular member of the group, recently led the group in a meditation she wrote, illustrating the collaborative and egalitarian nature of the coven. As advertised on the group website,²⁴ the coven believes that "We are ALL students and teachers." Classes at the coven follow the classic Wiccan degree system. First Degree, or Initiate classes, are for new members and are designed to teach them the basics of Wicca: history, central teachings and texts, basic ritual knowledge, while Second Degree classes are more advanced. Upon completion of Second Degree, one is initiated into the High Priesthood, after which there are no more formal lessons to be taught.

While members who are farther along in Second Degree can teach classes they have already passed, the primary teachers each night are the four Council members, those in the High Priesthood: Gregory, Joseph, Laura, and Lord ShiningStarr (or just "Starr," as he is affectionately called by members of the group). In this respect, the coven I studied is fairly unusual: most Wiccan covens have one High Priestess and one High Priest (Aburrow 2014:15). Ultimate authority and responsibility usually falls to a High Priestess, even if there is a High Priest in the group (Gardner 2004 [1954]:92, 114-115; 2004 [1959]:10-11; Lady Sheba 1999 [1972]). While I have not studied other covens, my impression from doing interviews and in reading ethnographic scholarship of other groups is that, compared to other groups, women are underrepresented in the leadership of this group. It is Gregory who most often assumes the active leader role, with support from Starr and Joseph. Laura sometimes has trouble with transportation to the group and rarely takes as active a role as some of the men. This may be due

²⁴ In order to preserve the privacy of the group and its members who wished not to be identified in this research, I have chosen not to mention the name of the coven anywhere in this paper. As such, I am unable to cite the website of the coven here.

to her age (at 27, she is significantly younger than the other members of the Council) or her relative inexperience: Laura is the newest member of the High Priesthood, having been initiated in 2014 and having joined the Council in 2015. Although women in the coven frequently take on active leadership roles by leading classes, given Wicca's reputation as a "Woman's Spirituality Movement," this gender dynamic at the highest levels of coven leadership seems unusual.

For many members of the group, coming to coven classes was the first time they had formally studied Wicca, although a few had previously done research in books or on the Internet. The coven also welcomes new members on a regular basis. As such, I was interested in what this coven had to teach about gender roles in Wicca, either implicitly or explicitly. The most direct teaching on gender roles comes from the lesson on the pentacle, what is probably the most important magickal symbol for Wiccans and witches. Most of the coven members wear some kind of pentacle jewelry: necklaces are the most popular, but rings and earrings are also common. Multiple members also have pentacle tattoos. As such, the lesson is an important one in terms of the authority given to the pentacle's symbolic meaning, and it is rife with heteronormativity and gender essentialism.

The pentacle lesson is part of the Initiate degree, and Gregory most recently taught it to Chris, one of the newest members of the coven. Gregory begins by explaining that the pentacle represents the five elements of earth, air, fire, water, and spirit, and that there is only one right way to assign each of the elements to the points on the star (Appendix A:III). He then goes on to explaining what each of the elements signify, asking Chris to volunteer her guesses along the way.

Earth, Gregory says, everyone agrees is always feminine, as it is round like the womb and gives birth to trees, plants, and all life. Earth also signifies, among other things, healing, stability,

the body, the physical realm, the home, money, and all things mundane and practical. Fire, on the other hand, is “given to the masculine.” He explains that “fire burns upwards, pointing up, so it’s kind of phallic.” It stands for anger, passion, sex, lust, desire, infatuation, transformation, and change. Gregory pauses to highlight the relationship between the placement of Earth and Fire on the pentagram: there is the body (earth), and sex, lust, and pleasure (fire). These two form the base of the pentagram. Above them are Air and Water, which stand for intellect and psychic abilities, respectively: so-called higher qualities that rule over the body and lust. Spirit rules above them all, conquering the more base, primal aspects of existence. Gregory goes on to talk about Air: it is masculine, associated with the east where the sun rises, and is thus associated with sun energy, which is also God energy. Air, he says, stands for the intellect, thinking, knowledge, memorization, and communication. Finally, Water: it is feminine, having to do with the moon and the Goddess, as well as emotion, empathy, dreams, intuition, psychic abilities, and deeper kinds of love (not lust). Arranged this way on the pentagram, there is a vertical and horizontal balance of male and female traits. Spirit, perfectly balanced between the other four points, is both masculine and feminine.

Gregory then talks about how to draw Passive-Invoking and Active-Invoking pentagrams. These are techniques that require a specific order in connecting the points of the star, and connect the female points together and the male points, respectively. Active Invokings, he explains, are for the God or a male deity, and Passive Invokings are for the Goddess or female deities. To help Chris remember this information, he tells her to think of active as meaning masculine, and passive as meaning feminine, or said another way, projective and receptive. He tells her that she can intuit what this last pair is meant to mean. They both laugh: clearly the implication is that in cisgendered heterosexual coitus, the woman is the passive, receptive partner

and the man is the active, projective partner. Gregory, a gay man whose sexual activities presumably do not even reflect this heterosexual pairing, asserts that this designation is not sexist.²⁵ Then he corrects himself and says, “It might be, actually,” but implies that he means no harm by it. Crystal looks up from her homework to chime in: no, it’s not sexist.

This gendered passive-active dichotomy extends beyond the pentacle: as another example, Gregory, like many Wiccans, sets up his deity altar so that the left side is devoted to the Goddess and the right side is devoted to the God. I once asked why this was, and Crystal and Gregory explained it in terms of the designations for the left and right hand. The Goddess gets the left side of the altar because the left hand is the receptive one, the one that senses and receives energy. The God gets the right side because the right hand is the projective one, the hand that sends out energy. They acknowledged that a person whose dominant hand is their left hand may want to switch these around, implying that the masculine God principle must most appropriately be paired with dominance and active, projective energy. These theological conceptions of divine qualities being mapped onto the gender binary have serious implications for Wiccans of all genders. As theorist Peter Berger once said, “cosmology becomes psychology” (cited in Aburrow 2014:115). The metaphors we use influence the way we think. As such, an investigation into how Wiccans understand deity provides some insight into how they understand gender roles.

Understanding the Divine

In the Wiccan and Pagan communities, deities are difficult to talk about. There is no agreement on what the nature of Divine is, and a diverse range of opinions on the matter exists, subsequently leading to a diversity of gendered narratives being embraced in the community. Among the participants I interviewed, about half of whom currently identify Wiccan, and many

²⁵ I am sure this comment was for my benefit.

of whom are in the same coven, the following beliefs about Divinity were endorsed: Goddess monism (the Divine is One and it is Feminine), pantheism (the Universe is God), Gods are archetypes and not objectively real, polytheism (there are many gods), and duotheism (there are two: the God and the Goddess).²⁶ Furthermore, many people articulated combinations of these, the most common pattern being the combination of monism, duotheism, and polytheism. As Gregory explained, “I believe in one great spirit entity that is both masculine and feminine. The [masculine] aspects of that One we call the God, or the feminine aspects of that One we call the Goddess.” Others, like Kat and Starr, took this a step further in explaining how all gods and goddesses from all times and all cultures are manifestations of the Great God and Goddess. Gregory and Kat called this the “giant deity disco ball,” while Debby described it as a vast cut diamond with many facets: each one having a different name, but each a part of the same whole.

This is the model of deity that is often used during group ritual. During the coven celebration of the Sabbat of Imbolc, Gregory led the entire group in the following invocation:

May the powers of the One, the Source of all Creation, omnipotent, eternal; may the Goddess, the Lady of the moon, and the God, Creator of the trees and the sun, God of many names; May the powers of the stars above and the earth below bless this place and this time, and we who are with you.

During this ritual, specific named deities were also called on: Starr invoked Apollo while Laura invited the Irish goddess Brigid to be present. Imbolc is a holiday of pre-Christian Irish origins honoring Brigid, and it is my understanding that in other circles, calling a deity other than Brigid on her holiday would be unusual. I also found myself perplexed during this ritual that Starr would call on Apollo, a Greek god unrelated to this holiday and its associated culture. Since the coven I studied is primarily duotheistic, I understood their desire to call on both a god and a goddess, but if a god was required, why not Lugh, the sun god in the Irish pantheon? It becomes

²⁶ For more on the distinction between these categories, see Aburrow 2004:80-87.

more understandable when viewed through a duotheistic framework: all gods are aspects of the one God, all goddesses are merely different faces of the same Goddess. Under this paradigm, one god is just as good as another.

While this seems to be the most typical way to understand the nature of the Divine in Wicca, most likely because it is frequently the belief discussed in the bestselling “Wiccan 101” books like Scott Cunningham’s *Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner* (2003 [1988]), it is not without its limitations. For one, Gabriel cautions against using the “plug ‘n play” model illustrated above. He argues that individual deities cannot be swapped out indiscriminately. Lugh and Apollo, while both sun gods, are not identical, and come out of distinct cultures with different historical understandings of divinity. Tyler spoke to this as well, saying “I’m really big on wanting to respect the individuality and the uniqueness of each divinity throughout time and space and around the world.” Beyond the need to be sensitive to the cultural component of deity, however, the primary concern expressed by a few of my participants was related to gender. Several of my participants spoke to the fact that condensing one’s understanding of the Divine into a heterosexual couple, whose qualities and attributes are defined by essentialist gender stereotypes, erases the diversity of ways of being in the world, and excludes those who do not see themselves represented in the duotheistic portrayal of the Divine.

For all the ways in which the binary duotheistic system can be problematic, however, many of the people I interviewed argued that it was better than a God-only system, and even a Goddess-only system. This is in line with Wicca’s egalitarian impulse: as Kayla said, “There has to be equality, there has to be a balance.” Debby also espoused this view. Debby considers the egalitarian duotheistic system much better than one that excludes either the God or the Goddess: in her eyes, Christians and Goddess monists like Dianic Wiccans are “guilty of the same crime.”

In interviewing people who embraced the model of duotheism, I got the impression that duotheism is in fact synonymous with gender essentialism. As Gregory explains, “the feminine aspect, or the Great Goddess, is the loving, motherly, nurturing, caring side. [...] Witchcraft comes from her. Where the God would be that fatherly, stern, more harsh, stricter kind of force.” Dylan, a former member of the coven who now identifies as polytheist, said much the same thing, recognizing that in Wiccan thought, the qualities assigned to the God and Goddess were very stereotypical. Dylan described the God as the strong warrior presence, leaving the Goddess to be the calm one who deals with people’s emotions.

In some cases, this gender division is about life and death: in the Wiccan Adventure Tradition based on the monomyths of Joseph Campbell, Gabriel explains, “we teach that the Goddess is everything that is eternal and generative, and that the God is anything that dies and is reborn. So in that case, everything in life is both Goddess and God.” Although Kat is not part of Adventure Tradition, she also described duotheism as the balance between life and death. In every case, it is the Goddess who is assigned life and creation, whereas the God is associated with cycles of death, both in hunting or warfare and in the death of the fields after the harvest. As Debby explained, “They’re equal, but they have different jobs.” Historically speaking, however, we know the “separate but equal” impulse only exacerbates inequality.

This division between creation and destruction is reminiscent of Ortner, and men’s association with hunting and warfare (activities related to death) while women are associated with procreation and nurturance (1972:14). The deification of stereotypical gender essentialist attributions in a duotheistic system is also troubling. Recalling the theoretical background to binary thought patterns, the process of associating valuable characteristics (intellect, strength) with the masculine and undervalued characteristics (emotionality, softness) with the feminine

can lead to the devaluation of women. While Wicca complicates this somewhat by assigning value to the Goddess and these traditionally undervalued qualities, binary typification, the process of labeling certain qualities as typical of men and women, tends to blind us to other ways of “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987; Crawley et al. 2008:13-14). Furthermore, by assigning qualities to the God and Goddess along binary gender essentialist lines, Wiccans reinforce the false belief that certain qualities are “naturally feminine,” while men are biologically inclined to “masculine” traits. This division is limiting and exclusionary to people whose gender performance does not fall into this arbitrary binary categorization system.

Even when it is understood that the gender binary is not helpful or based in reality, the binary system itself is not always necessarily considered the problem. Quill, a trans man, spoke to this:

I understand binaries. I—they're comfortable, you know, and simple. Ones and zeroes, right? It either is something or is not something. And so [pause] when it comes to the God and Goddess I try not to essentialize them too much. I try to sort of say, well what you're really talking about is ones and zeroes, so if you're talking about a characteristic like compassion and you're assigning that to the Goddess and not the God, for whatever reason, then what you're really saying is there's a personality with compassion and there's a personality without compassion. And trying not to tie them up too much with, you know, a bunch of other characteristics, or worse yet, biological features. So it's—when people talk about God and Goddess energy, especially, 'cause I encounter that more often than like, an actual persona, like you get energy, this vague—what we're talking about is a characteristic. [...] And not basing characteristics in biology.

Despite Quill's matter-of-fact tone, this quote reveals some major problems with assigning human traits like sex, gender, and biology to supernatural entities. Given the ubiquity of gender essentialism in binary patterns of thinking, it would be a monumental task to untangle the quality from gender in a duotheistic system. The personalities and attributes of the God and Goddess are defined by their gender.

Given the nature of binary thinking, gendered characteristics are often ascribed to biology based on incorrect beliefs about men's and women's so-called “essential” natures. As Shannon

shared, she once hosted a ritual in which God and Goddess were called by saying “Vagina Vagina Vagina” and “Penis Penis Penis,” “to recognize that there is that feminine and there is that masculine.”²⁷ This is the case even when it is acknowledged that individual deities can transgress the stereotypical gender roles set by the God and Goddess categories. Gregory, for example, after describing the God and Goddess based on an essentialist binary, goes on to say “But that’s just in general. Now you can take individual gods or goddesses, which I think are different manifestations [...] ‘cause clearly the Great Being appeared to many different cultures throughout history. Different societies, in different ways.” Likewise, Crystal acknowledges that while the qualities of the God and Goddess are based on what we define as masculine traits (she names aggression, assertiveness, dependability, intellect) and feminine qualities (passivity, nurturance, emotionality, creation), these gender norms are part of a Western culture. “It depends on the culture,” she says. “There are goddesses that are much more aggressive, assertive even, destructive, and then you have gods that are very nurturing and much more passive.” As Pagan author Christopher Penczak writes, “the gods and goddesses from myth are usually not gender stereotypes” (2003:110), but *the* God and *the* Goddess are.

It may seem contradictory to acknowledge the diversity of personalities that exist among deities while simultaneously trying to assign them to broader categories of God or Goddess based on gender, especially since, as Crystal and Gregory mentioned, female goddesses may embody traits commonly assigned to the “God” category and vice versa. Lupa, a Pagan author and artist, attempts to explain this impulse by looking to Wicca’s relatively recent history. Since Wicca was created to be a fertility religion, she explains, it makes sense to try and draw on

²⁷ Shannon also emphasized that she has done rituals with language open to those who identify as both male and female and neither male nor female.

ancient deities and incorporate them as a way to “bolster both the poetic and mythological elements of the Wiccan mythos” and lend Wicca a sense of legitimacy.

For Yvonne Aburrow, cited often in this paper, resisting the essentialist gender polarity means distancing herself from duotheism. She says:

One of the reasons I'm a polytheist is because [...] there's lots of different genders, and the deities embody different genders as well, so you can ignore obviously [dramatic booming voice] THE MASCULINE PRINCIPLE and THE FEMININE PRINCIPLE. There's like you know, this god who embodies this type of masculinity and that goddess embodies that type of femininity and [...] that deity over there is genderqueer, and all the other options in between those positions.

Yvonne articulates that, in a duotheistic system, not only are alternative ways of enacting gender made invisible, but gender identities outside of the male-female binary are also ignored. Eldritch, an accomplished ritual leader, explained that he has been transforming the Wiccan understanding in the communities he is a part of by adopting the model of “Masks of the Divine: male, female, both, and neither.” This system “provides a fluidity that is much more accessible to the growing consciousness of spirituality and sexuality today,” he says. “When people come they don’t have to choose if they want to be the boy or the girl. [...] They see themselves reflected in male, female, both, and neither.” This latter point speaks to the fact that, in many cases, Wiccan ritual roles are heavily gendered, specifying separate activities for men and women. This often serves to exclude transgender and non-binary individuals, as will be discussed later.

Another method employed in the process of reinterpreting understandings of the Divine is embracing queer deities, and re-reading mythology with an eye for gender transgressive behavior in order to undermine the taken for granted nature of the heterosexual, cisgendered Divine Couple. In fact, there exists an entire book on working with gods who are “queer” in some way or another, entitled *Hermaphrodeities: The Transgender Spirituality Workbook* by Raven Kaldera (2010). Eldritch affirms that in every pantheon there are gods who do not fit the

cisgender, essentialist God-Goddess mold, that there are always gods who are male, female, both, and neither. “It’s just that some of those stories don’t get brought forward very much [yet] queer people have been around forever,” he explains. “And our gods reflect queerness as well.”

While Brooke appreciates the efforts of the queer Pagan community to find the places in mythology where a “crossing of boundaries” happens, she shared that she finds the process problematic in several ways.

I don't like using modern terms about sexuality to stuff from older society's ancient mythology. I think it's valuable that you can connect to that as a person with those identities but I don't think saying like, Artemis was a lesbian or something like that is very appropriate.

She goes on to say that one of the dangers of doing this is that it makes the queer Pagan community even more vulnerable to being marginalized, as a main problem she sees is limiting them by “trying to assign queer individuals the queer gods.” She explains the thought process behind this:

oh, you are a person that is non-binary or gender-fluid. Here, have Loki and Dionysus, and all [...] these gods that kind of do that thing. Those are for you. Same with different other sexualities, of like, here's the gods that kind of do that thing. Those are for you. Let us deal with the other ones though, like, oh you're gay? Have Dionysus, we'll take Zeus. And I see that happening a lot and that's the trying to give a space but really just kind of putting people in a corner of have this other thing while [others] take the main thing.

As Brooke illustrates, putting queer people in a box and restraining their choices is problematic, and reclaiming queer deity mythology will not lead to wider acceptance of queerness in the Pagan community unless queer people are also embraced in mainstream Paganism.

In doing interviews, it became clear that this is not an unimportant debate. While a few participants, like Gabriel and Brian, shared that they tend not to anthropomorphize deity in order to avoid these problems, it is my impression that many Wiccans were first drawn to the Pagan path because they saw themselves connected to and represented in the Divine. This is certainly something that is at the heart of many of Wicca’s claims of being feminist: unlike mainstream

Abrahamic faiths, Wicca has a Goddess figure. Brooke shared that that was something very powerful to her when she first found Wicca, even though she no longer identifies as Wiccan: the realization of “the Divine figure looks like me.” Yvonne expressed something similar, saying that because Pagan mythology celebrates “the diversity of the human condition, [...] I can choose any deity as a role model.” She went on to explain that she means that not in a moralistic sense, but as a source of inspiration, a figure with whom to identify. Being able to find a reflection of oneself in the Divine is a powerful thing that, when absent or denied to someone, can be incredibly damaging.

Eldritch spoke to the importance of looking to the myth to uncover the untold stories, as perpetuating the God-Goddess duotheism can be very exclusionary. “I see [the deities] being used as dogma that reinforces the gender roles of the society that they’re in,” he explains. “And that’s why we [...] will go in and say who’s in your pantheon? Did you know that Shango cross-dressed? You know, all these stories are actually there.” Dylan also shared their observation that the enforcement of strict gender roles, even though put into practice by real people, is ultimately attributed to the God and Goddess. A popular phrase that I observed in the coven as well as in the wider Wiccan community is “As Above, So Below.” In this context, it implies that the behavior modeled by humans on earth is but a reflection of the Divine, and vice versa: that human behavior creates changes in higher spiritual planes as well, what professor of theology Jone Salomonsen calls “a cosmic mimesis of gendered human reality” (2002:215).

As such, gender roles in the Wiccan community tend to follow the model of deity form embraced. Due the diversity of ways the Divine is understood, gendered expectations vary widely. They can reinforce essentialist and heterosexist stereotypes about men’s and women’s natural roles, but there is simultaneously a “push towards not necessarily being society’s version

of feminine,” as Shannon explains. “I think that Wicca really does push women into more leadership roles, which has been stereotypically a man’s role in religion.” Shannon also speaks to how Wicca can be liberating for men as well: “I think that Wicca [...] allows men to be more emotional, more in touch with their emotions. It allows them to honor women in a way that I don’t think society necessarily lets them.” Brooke and Yvonne, both polytheists, speak to this as well, affirming once again that the multiplicity of deities illustrates the variety of human behavior that is possible.

Drawing Down

The physical association between the gods and humans is made explicitly clear in the ritual practice of “Drawing Down,” in which a deity is invoked into a human and believed to descend and be physically present in that person’s body for a time. “Drawing Down the Moon,” in which it is the Goddess who is “drawn down” was affirmed to be the most “traditional” form of this ritual, but some Traditions have expanded their practice to include a correlate ritual for the God, known as “Drawing Down the Sun.” The language of “Sun” and “Moon,” reminiscent of the polarity wheel (Appendix A:IV) once again reinforces the binary duotheistic system along essentialist lines. This is not limited to the realm of the theoretical: the actual practice of ritual does this as well. In traditional Wiccan groups, such as Gardnerian Wicca, it is taken for granted that the Goddess must be Drawn Down into a woman, and the God must be Drawn Down into a man. Besides the gender essentialism, however, the heteronormative pairing is also present: if a woman is the one who will receive the Goddess, it is typically a man who will facilitate that process, and vice versa: it is expected that a woman would take the lead in invoking the God onto a man.

Tyler, a Gardnerian himself, affirmed that this was the case in their Tradition, although something they disagreed with as a genderqueer person and something they were hoping would change. Many Gardnerians still feel very strongly about this practice, however, and are somewhat hostile to people seeking to change it, something Eldritch witnessed in a class on the Wiccan religion a few years ago:

our teacher [...] brought in a partner who was kinda dyed in the wool Gardnerian Wiccan, and they were going to teach us Drawing Down. And our group, this very eclectic queer group, we're like uhhhh—just because I'm male, just because I'm whatever? So we just decided to pair up in different ways and [...] Drawing Down the Goddess in a man made this other guy's head explode. I mean, he just—he exploded. He couldn't understand it, it's not the way it's supposed to be done, it was so dogmatic and he left our class. He stomped off. He's like what you're doing is heretical to the Wiccan beliefs! You can't do it that way!

This “traditional” perspective, while many people acknowledged as present in the Wiccan community, was not held by anyone I interviewed. The consensus seemed to be that anyone of any gender could Draw Down either the God or Goddess. Some, like Gabriel, justified this by explaining that everyone contains both masculine and feminine aspects: “We are all both Goddess and God. Because we are all that which is eternal and dies and is reborn so [...] we can basically be receptive to that energy.” Others, like Debby, explained it at the level of the Divine: “I mean, we’re talking gods and goddesses here, you know? They can basically do anything they want, can’t they?”

This sentiment was also expressed by the members of the coven I studied. While it is not a practice they do often, and thus not one I was able to observe, everyone I interviewed shared that yes, it had been done in that past and no, they had no rules about who could invoke whom. One of the High Priests of the coven mentioned personally having had the Goddess Drawn Down onto him in the past, an experience he suggests every man should have. Nevertheless, biology is still an important factor in doing this ritual for many. Crystal shared a story about the challenge

one of her friends faced after having a hysterectomy, whose bodily changes affected her ability to perform this ritual: “They actually had to adjust how they do their personal practice because they used to Draw Down into them and say the word womb, and she no longer had one.” The emphasis placed on the womb, and the problems that can arise from that, was also discussed in relationship to the model of the Triple Goddess.

The Triple Goddess

Quite a few people I interviewed regularly draw upon the model of the Triple Goddess in their practice. For some, like Gabriel and Starr, it is a way to celebrate the phases of the moon each month. Others, like Tyler, explained it as a source of inspiration and stressed the beauty of the iconography. Still others, like Debby and Gregory, use the Maiden/Mother/Crone model in a magickal or practical sense. Gregory explains: “The Crone aspect I would call upon for banishing. If I want to use some type of spell for love, fertility, then obviously the Mother form. ‘Cause you wouldn’t call upon an old hag or a virgin who is unexperienced [sic].” Likewise, Debby explains how she calls the Maiden in order to foster growth in her life, or the Mother if needing to work with children.

The Triple Goddess can also be understood as a roadmap for a woman’s “natural” progression through life, in that it is presented as normative, even mandatory. Quill mentioned that the model assumes that the Maiden/Mother/Crone progression is an inevitable sequence, the only path possible for women. Crystal implied this as well, saying she draws upon the Triple Goddess model “generationally” and in how she views her own procession through life, where she is currently in her “Motherhood stage.” Crystal does acknowledge, however, that the Maiden/Mother/Crone model doesn’t apply to everyone, and that one can draw upon different

aspects for different aspects of life: “In my career, I’ve been doing a reboot,” she says. “And so I feel very much like a child.”

Several people emphasized the importance of understanding the Triple Goddess model in a metaphorical sense. As Gabriel explained, this method is supported by the mythology of the Wiccan holiday calendar itself, which charts the cycle of the life and rebirth of gods in relation to the changing seasons: “The Goddess would be Crone by Yule²⁸ but is giving birth to the Sun God at that same time. And we don’t typically have Crones giving birth as humans,” he says. Others echoed the need to break the Triple Goddess out of the life-progression mold, because not everyone progresses through those stages. As Tyler said, “Eldership can happen when you’re a Maiden. And motherhood can happen when you’re a Crone. And death might come really early.”

Moving towards a metaphorical understanding of the Triple Goddess was important to many of the people I interviewed because, as several people noted, in its traditional biological form, it can be quite gender essentialist and limiting. As Lupa explains:

It's a very uterus-centric way to look at womanhood. The Maiden is the woman who has never menstruated yet. It's assumed that she will, someday, when she hits puberty. And then the Mother of course is the woman who has given birth, because, you know, supposedly as soon as you're not a Maiden you're a Mother because you're supposed to start having sex [...] and then you keep being a Mother until you complete menopause, at which point you are a Crone. And not only does that exclude any woman who doesn't have a uterus, or who doesn't menstruate, or who doesn't have kids—like me, for example—but it also basically narrows a woman's purpose down into baby-making. And I've had people try to justify this whole thing by saying oh but fertility takes all kinds of forms, it could be artistic creativity, it can be nurturing other people's children, it can be nurturing projects, blah blah blah [...] again, it's just really narrowing. Women are not just nurturing. [...] we can be aggressive, we can be powerful, we can be assertive. We can be warriors, we can be soldiers, we can be politicians, we can be all kinds of things. We can basically be just about everything that a man can. And so to shrink a woman down into one of three uterus-based pigeonholes that are all about femininity and fertility and why aren't you making babies already? It's pretty obvious that I don't like it.

²⁸ The Winter Solstice, celebrated around December 21st. In the Wiccan sacred calendar, the (Sun) God dies at the end of the harvest season, after which the days get shorter. The Winter Solstice is the longest night of the year, but also the tipping point after which the days begin to lengthen again. Wiccans therefore understand the Winter Solstice as the rebirth of the Sun, but it is also the end of the life cycle for the Goddess, who returns as a Maiden in the Spring (Starhawk 1999:256-257).

Lupa does an excellent job of highlighting the way in which the Triple Goddess model glorifies motherhood as the defining element of being a woman. This assumption is pervasive in the Pagan community and can be really damaging. For instance, Gabriel shared his discomfort with the deification of motherhood:

[what] was really hard for me before I came out as trans was the idea that women should bear children or be happy about, you know, being able to bear children, and to be comfortable and excited about your period. [...] As a closeted trans person that was really really hard to accept. Especially as a transmasculine person, you know, the whole idea of getting pregnant was horrifying to me. So I had trouble with the idea that, you know, women were the creative children rearers and bearers and men had to be the warriors.

Yvonne also shared a story about confronting the glorification of motherhood while at a Pagan event:

there were two fairly well-known Pagan women [...] who were banging on about how wonderful it was to give birth and I was sitting there fuming because I haven't had a child and they were being really triggering. And they were going on about how, you know, oh you're not a real woman until you've experienced childbirth—blech! And then there was one woman in the room who had been raped and had had an abortion, she was really upset. And there was another woman who [...] couldn't have biological children. So both of them were just really upset, and we ended up going off into a corner and I was saying they're talking rubbish! Don't listen to them, don't listen to those horrible people. So yeah, this sort of [whimsical tone] oh mothers are so wonderful! Yeah, you know, let's not oppress mothers, but let's not oppress the rest of us who aren't mothers.

Even mothers, however, can be harmed by this narrative. Crystal, a mother of two and a self-identified cis straight woman, expressed that while Wicca has helped her to feel more strong and confident in her gender, and while she connects very strongly to the feminine aspect of deity because “motherhood has always been a big thing to me,” there are repercussions to defining women by their fertility and ability to create life:

I miscarried between two of the girls. I got pregnant and then miscarried right after I joined the [coven]. And that was very hard for me. And I was early on, so it was just an embryo still. And factually I know this. But it was still devastating. [...] I felt like my body, my feminine body, failed me. [...] I ended up having to get a D&C done, because my body wouldn't eject it. That was much more devastating to me than losing it itself. And it was because I was just [pause] I guess it made me feel a bit like a failure as a female. 'Cause my body wasn't doing what it was supposed to do. It wouldn't eject it. I waited four weeks before I decided to get that D&C, and I was pretty depressed for

several months after that. And it had more to do with identity than the fact that I lost that child. It had more to do with my body not responding the way I thought it was supposed to.

While losing a child is traumatic in and of itself, Crystal's story illustrates that her primary challenge in recovering from that experience was coming to terms with her identity and her so-called "failure" to meet the expectations of a mature woman's role in Wicca. The process of tying a woman's identity to motherhood can thus cause distress in a variety of ways for many different kinds of people, regardless of how positive the impulse to celebrate women for a uniquely female experience may seem. It is precisely this impulse to celebrate motherhood that makes the Triple Goddess model a form of benevolent sexism. The praise and idealization of traditional gender roles while devaluing those who violate them is restrictive and isolating, even if the violation is unintentional, as it was in Crystal's case (Huang et al. 2016:971).

Indeed, it is important to remember that while childbirth is something only a person with a uterus can experience, not every person with a uterus is able to or willing to have children, and not every woman has a uterus. Yvonne emphasizes that while she finds the Triple Goddess model "unhelpful in every way" because it is modeled on the biological phases of a cisgendered woman's life, it is especially harmful for trans women. Since it is this model used to define the "blood mysteries" (Barrett 2012:98) of Dianic Wicca and other woman's only spaces, it can serve as justification for excluding women who don't go through the process of menstruation, motherhood, and menopause. The exclusion of trans women is not an infrequent occurrence, something I will return to.

The Triple Goddess model is also controversial for the way in which it excludes men, violating the implicit egalitarian ethic found in Wicca. As Quill explained, "The first question is always what is the equivalent for non-feminine people? You know, if I don't menstruate, or if I don't have babies, then what phases do I go through that are sort of similar? And I've never

gotten a straight answer.” While gender-neutral phases of renewal/generation/destruction (Quill), youth/adulthood/eldership (Tyler) and new beginnings/fruition/closings (Gregory) have all come up in interviews, the most common analogue for men in the Pagan community seems to be Youth/Warrior/Sage, which, as Lupa points out on her blog, is based more on cultural roles than on biological ones (Lupa 2016). This is reminiscent both of the gender division in Magliocco’s “Paleolithic Origins” mythic narrative and the nature/culture split Ortner discusses: the men are assigned the active roles of hunting and warfare, and are defined by these cultural activities; the women are tied to their biology and the passive nurturing tasks.

Brian Paisley, a scholar of heteronormativity in Wicca, acknowledges that men’s roles are not biologically constructed as women’s are (something which he agrees is sexist), but he is equally frustrated by the efforts to change the “Warrior” phase to “Father.” Brian points out that in his experience, the Youth/Father/Sage model has portrayed the Youth as one who is “wild and free,” sleeping around with whomever, and then depicts Fatherhood (and the implied heterosexual, monogamous marriage that precedes it) as a “civilizing factor” in a man’s expected life progression. He explained that as a gay man, he finds that model offensive as well as patronizing to young people. The Sage phase can also be quite problematic. Eldritch laments what he calls the “misogynistic over-inflated male ego” impulse to be a Sage, or alternatively, a King. He observes that, in the gay community especially, youth is something that is “deified,”²⁹ so Eldritch has made it his goal to implement a “Boy/Daddy³⁰/Troll” model for the gay community in order to remind the community that old age is inevitable. Like the word “Crone” has become, he hopes “Troll” will one day be an honorific.

²⁹ See Slevin 2008.

³⁰ In the gay community, this term does not imply fatherhood but the role of an older man who prefers younger men as sexual partners.

This bit of creativity exemplifies the Wiccan impulse to modify problematic practices, thanks to a religious flexibility, which many participants expressed appreciation for in interviews. For example, Shannon came up with her own Triple Goddess model of Maiden/Shield Maiden/Crone. She explained that while she will never have children, she has always been drawn to the role of the fierce warrior woman, the protectress who “has devoted her life to both swordplay and the community.” While the “Warrior” role is present for men in the Wiccan community, Shannon noted that it is absent for women. The fact that Heathenry contains a strong female model is part of what drew her and her sister out of Wicca and into an alternative Pagan religion.

Brooke also had a non-standard take on the Triple Goddess model, embracing the figure of the Crone as one who shatters the traditional progression of fertility. Whereas the Maiden (who Brooke described as “hot and virginal”) and the Mother both seem bound to essentialist and limiting reproductive roles, the fact that the Crone is valued despite not being young and beautiful or having reproductive capacity makes her a radical feminist figure: “She's the wise old witch living in the woods, and I think that's almost where the divide happens, is you have the fertility aspect of nature, yay, but also, we're a witch religion. [...] And I think she's kind of the remnant of that, of like, the old hag in the woods.” This comment recalls the tension between the “Paleolithic Origins” and “Burning Times” mythic histories, illustrating that Wicca contains multiple models of womanhood: ones that are both bound to a highly essentialist and benevolently sexist celebration of reproductive fertility and motherhood, and the witches and old women that have been historically devalued and labeled gender-transgressive.

Quill also had a unique perspective on the Triple Goddess. As a trans man who occasionally identifies as a eunuch given that he has no reproductive capacity, one might expect him to feel excluded from the Triple Goddess model. Quill says, however:

What I like about the Maiden/Mother/Crone model is that there's an implied transition between each of those phases. So it doesn't matter what the phase is. The reality is we can all expect to have been something in the past, be preparing to be something in the future, and be experiencing an identity in the present. And so it universalizes the experience of transition. Which is kind of the defining aspect of being trans, like, I'm a person who went through a transition. [...] So if everyone [...] can relate to the idea of a transition, then so much the better.

This concept of transition is an important one, and is perhaps the driving impulse in the Wiccan community to mark distinctions between shifting identities over time. Debby affirmed that rites of passage are very important to Wiccans. While ritual celebrations of aging and milestones in life are not necessarily bad, many in the Wiccan and Pagan community are struggling with them. Rites of Passage are still, for the most part, heavily segregated by gender, and women's rites of passage rely much more heavily on biology than do men's: they are usually performed at first menses, during pregnancy or after childbirth, and a year after one's last menstrual cycle (Debby).

Debby admits that the transition points for men are a bit more "fuzzy," and may be celebrated quite arbitrarily. Even so, more attention is being given to the ambiguity in women's lives for those who do not fit into the threefold model. At the 2016 Pagan Spirit Gathering, for example, rituals were offered for "Daughters of the Dark Moon [...] past the Motherhood stage of life but who do not yet identify with the Crone stage of life" and "She Who is More than a Maiden but Not Yet a Mother [...] for women who have left childhood far behind, but don't yet have the responsibility of motherhood (literal or metaphoric)" (Lupa 2016). While these rituals are trying to create spaces outside the Triple Goddess model, the use of the word "yet" in both descriptions nevertheless implies that at some point, the progression is expected to unfold.

New models are being created to better serve the needs of all women, however. One such model was created by author and activist Lasara Firefox Allen, and is the topic of her book *Jailbreaking the Goddess: A Radical Revisioning of Feminist Spirituality* (2016). Allen offers “an entirely new system” which she calls “The Five Faces of the Feminal Divine:” Femella, “the primal child,” Potens, “the woman of strength,” Creatrix, “the maker,” Sapientia, “the wise woman, master of her craft,” and Antiqua, “the old woman, the dreamer, the storyteller, the witch at the gate” (2016:8). In making an argument for why this new approach is necessary, Allen writes:

Breaking away from limitations embedded in the hyperfocus on procreative capacity and function modeled by the Maiden, Mother, and Crone trinity, we deconstruct the threads of patriarchal conditioning. We are more than our biology. In the contemporary awareness of—and awakening to—the myriad forms of womanhood, we reweave and refashion our understandings of our divine nature (2016:3).

While this work is an attempt to be more inclusive and intersectional, and a refreshing update to Goddess Spirituality literature since the 1960s and 1970s, much of Wicca is still steeped in older forms of feminist thought. Despite attempts to broaden Wicca beyond mere biological models, much of Wicca remains tightly bound to biology. This is made clear in the practice of the Great Rite and the celebration of Beltane.

The Great Rite and Beltane

The Great Rite, as Gregory and Starr confirmed, is one of the most powerful symbolic parts of the Wiccan religion, expressed through the “joining of the male and the female to create.” This is because, according to Starr, the power of creation is the most powerful force in the universe. It is seen as a celebration of the universe itself, and by extension, all of life and everything in creation: in a play on words, Gregory refers to it as “the Big Bang, literally.” The Great Rite *can* be performed literally, in which the High Priest and High Priestess invoke the God and Goddess and engage in ritual sex, but more commonly the Great Rite is performed

symbolically with the athame and chalice. While Gregory and Starr are both gay men, they see nothing contradictory about celebrating heterosexual intercourse in this way. No matter the gender of the two people performing the ritual, Gregory says, “if they are sharing love and they’re coming together in some type of sexual union, it still has the same symbology as love, you know, two are one.” Likewise, Starr explains “In my partner I see the Divine. Despite the fact that he has a male body, I do see the Goddess in him.” Starr goes on to explain that the Goddess can take any form She wishes to, so it is no problem for him to see the face of the Goddess in his partner. While this sentiment is shared by Penczak in his book *Gay Witchcraft* (2003) (see Appendix A:V), perpetuating divine heterosexuality as normative is nevertheless troubling and limiting.

One way people are trying to move away from the strict heterosexual imagery is by changing the roles and wording of the ritual. While it is traditional for a High Priest to plunge the athame into the chalice held by a High Priestess, saying “As the athame is to the God, so the chalice is to the Goddess” (or some variation thereof), Gabriel mentions that when his coven does the Great Rite, it is the Priest who holds the chalice and the Priestess who wields the athame. Although on its surface this appears to subvert gender norms, this method may also serve to reinforce gender essentialism and heteronormativity by attempting to preserve the gender polarity that requires feminine energy to be “balanced” by masculine energy (see Appendix A:VI).

In Eldritch’s group, they do away with the High Priest/High Priestess model altogether, opting instead for the “Couple in Service,” which can be a pair of any gender. The language of “lover and beloved” is also a popular way to do away with “male and female” script in the liturgy. As Eldritch says, “as gay men but also as queer people, we’re like—you know, anyone

can be top or bottom.” Using the language of lover and beloved is a way to break away from the gender essentialist model that portrays the woman as the passive principle and the man as the active force, which Eldritch says is quite misogynistic.

Brian speaks to the “lover and beloved” model as well, but says “for me that replaces the politics of gender with the politics of penetration in that kind of very Roman way. And I find that awkward.” While he goes on to say that it is less problematic than the binary heterosexual ritual model, it is still “loaded with normative characterizations” in which the active, penetrative principle is seen as male and the passive, penetrated force becomes female. This can be seen in the following excerpt from Penczak’s book:

Magicians...irrespective of their gender...are male. Their symbol is the wand...the male member...because they are that which seeks to penetrate...the mystery...But once they succeed...then they become magick...they become the mystery...become that which is penetrated...They become female. And we become each other...become hermaphrodite as we climb towards the godhead (Alan Moore, cited in Penczak 2003:111, formatting in original).

This excerpt highlights the important phallic symbolism of the wand and athame, both tools meant to direct and project energy and thus considered active, masculine objects. Although a man can also be penetrated and a woman can do the penetrating, arguments such as this oversimplify the variety of sexual acts that exist.

As Yvonne explains, however, “you don’t have to see the athame as a penis.” Male and female are only one set of possible polarities to invoke, she says, and suggests a variety of others, including force/form, spirit/matter, self/other, and introvert/extrovert. Nevertheless, Brian is still wary of the Great Rite as fundamentally a “heterosexual sex ritual,” especially as it is a key part of a Third Degree initiation ritual.

[performing the Great Rite] makes you an Elder in the Tradition, it's all super super super important and there is one option and it's blatantly, glaringly heterosexual and heteronormative. So I haven't gone on to the Third Degree. I have been offered it. I'm not sure what to do with it. Because I think that the initiation rituals in Wicca are such a hot

mess that it would be tremendously difficult to re-write them into not a mess without rewriting them so substantially that they would be almost unrecognizable.

While scholars of Western esotericism describe the importance of the *hieros gamos*, or sacred marriage, in initiation rituals as “loving union with Godhead” (Wagar 2009:1), Brian’s comment illustrates that the gender dynamic at work in the Great Rite can serve to exclude gay Wiccans from the highest echelon, and thus leadership positions, in Wicca.

This comment also challenges Wicca’s ability to be flexible with adapting ritual. As Durkheim’s theory of religion might suggest, if a ritual changes so substantially to the point where members of that religious community fail to recognize it or find meaning in it, it may be that a new religion has formed and broken off from the original community. While changing Wiccan initiation rituals may get around some of the problems related to heteronormativity, it is questionable as to whether the religion would still be considered Wicca. As such, and given the importance in many Wiccan traditions of lineages and the act of initiations being passed down in an unchanging manner, Brian suggests that attempting to reform initiation rituals would likely be met with hostility, but he “absolutely encourage[s] people to experiment.”

Intimately connected to the Great Rite is the Sabbat of Beltane, which Starr describes as “the most powerful of the fertility rites.” Kayla makes this connection explicitly clear, explaining how at Beltane she celebrates her children, the products of her own fertile, creative power. Paradoxically, however, she also lists abstaining from sex as one of the traditions she associates with Beltane, since the fertility magick going on at that time makes conception so likely. There is a growing movement to expand the definition of fertility as celebrated at Beltane to incorporate more than human fertility, however. Lupa, who is in the process of getting her Master Naturalist certification, says we are being too narrow if we call Beltane a fertility festival, because it ignores a large portion of what fertility actually is. She mentions that May 1st is

actually quite late to celebrate fertility, as mating season for many animals has already come and gone by then. She also explains that asexual reproducers like unicellular beings far outnumber sexual reproducers and are a key part of every ecosystem. With this in mind, the insistence of celebrating heterosexual intercourse seems contrived.

Of course, heterosexual and gender essentialist imagery is pervasive around Beltane.

Starr situates it in the story arc of the Wiccan sacred calendar:

In the cycle of the Wheel of the Year, Beltane is the marriage of the Lord and Lady. She woke up at Imbolc, he begins chasing her at Ostara, and at Beltane he catches her, weds her, beds her, and [raises hands in plea to the Goddess] forgive me, rids the house of her, to quote Shakespeare. But Beltane is their marriage. It is the time when they consummate their marriage and they bring fertility to the land.

Aside from the fact that this is not a very positive or agentic portrayal of the Goddess's life cycle, it is extremely heteronormative in its symbolism, of which the most prominent symbol is the maypole. Both Shannon and Kat described the ritual of dancing the maypole as "basically wrapping the magickal condom upon the Lord's penis," acknowledging its phallic symbolism. Gabriel tries to temper this by explaining the idea behind the maypole as one of weaving the two poles of energy, male and female, into a cohesive whole so that they are woven together instead of opposing each other. While this is a nice sentiment, it still reinforces the binary and implies that there are equal but opposite gender forces which must be dealt with.

There are, however, several efforts to "queer" Beltane rituals. One method, described by Yvonne and Shannon, is to open up ritual roles to people of all genders, and resist the urge to always cast a woman in a feminine role and vice versa. Yvonne's group enacted the Robin Hood mythology: she played Robin Hood and her ex-husband played Maid Marian. Likewise, Shannon's group had a woman playing the May King and a man playing the May Queen. This is not the only way to adapt Beltane rituals, however. Quill mentioned that at the last Beltane, he was part of a group of queer people who decided to embrace the fact that Beltane is a binary

ritual. Instead of reinforcing the male/female binary, however, they opened up a space to name the binaries in life that they appreciated, such as salt and pepper, peace and violence, and even pop culture references to Obi-Wan Kenobi and Emperor Palpatine.

Eldritch has perhaps developed the most detailed inclusive Beltane ritual: something he calls “A Maypole for All.” As he explains it:

Most of the time the maypole is so much about fecundity and about fertility [...] that they get a May King and a May Queen and it becomes this like prom queen high school thing that is pretty disgusting to me. And so I tried to find a way to honor people and re-orient the whole service. [...] Some people do the chase with the maypole in the hole [...] where they take the wreath and then all the men go over here with the pole and they're dragging the pole and then the women have [...] got the wreath, and then they're getting chased, and then they finally let themselves be captured by the males and it becomes this great mummers play kind of craziness that's enacted. So I turned that on its ear, and I tried to not use the dualistic thing, like (booming voice) all the men over here to get the pole, and all the women over here. So when I call this gathering, I say those of you that are feeling pole-ish over here, and those of you that are feeling hole-ish over here. Because everybody's got digits and holes and things that are fun for you know, the rites of spring. And trying to totally deconstruct the gender normativity in that and the social roles that we have. [...] And then when it comes to the maypole, instead of a May King and Queen, what I've done is taken the pole and then we start to recognize the different family groupings. So I try to always have a male-male couple, a female-female couple, and then sometimes it's hard to find a traditional straight couple, depending on the gathering, so that, and then some kind of polyglot. So they come together in the middle of the ceremony and they stand with their backs to the pole, and then everybody around [...] they bless all of the different forms of couples. As a morality lesson for people that there's different ways of love, and you could be male-male, you don't have to have a May King and a May Queen to be celebrated. And so it reinforces the different forms. And then for anybody that's birthing a project in the coming year, I ask them to stand forth to say this year I promise that I will start my business doing candles [...] whoever's birthing a project during the year so that we transform Beltane to not just be about, you know, fucky-wucky and making a baby and all that stuff. [...] Some people were like Eldritch, you've gone too far, 'cause you know what they're going to say. They're going to say don't you know about biology? And then [...] we ended up doing a nod to biology. [...] So we've got the hula hoop up on a stick, and a toy ball on a string, and then [...] you get the little white baby socks and fill [them] with unpopped popcorn, and take a long white ribbon and tie it onto the bean bag. And then you ask the kids hey you wanna play a bean bag toss game? [...] And so it becomes this really great bean bag toss with all of these little white bean bags with these very long white tails flying through the air. And I'm like there's your fucking biology. (laughs) We know, egg and sperm. We got that. But we have to transform and represent everyone. And that's why we have a Maypole for All. [...] It just makes more space for the modern Paganism and modern Wicca experience. But it's subversive in and of itself. So I'll probably get flack from people.

Eldritch's model demonstrates that the celebration of fertility at Beltane does not have to imply heterosexual reproduction, it can be broadened to encompass creative pursuits of all kinds, and made to celebrate love more generally. Others go even further in desexualizing Beltane. Debby celebrates Beltane as a time of abundance, a time to share what one has with others. Kat and Dylan simply acknowledge that by Beltane, spring has sprung: as Kat said, "Hey, the weather's nice, let's have a barbeque." Dylan reiterates that one can celebrate the spring and the changing seasons without having to ascribe sexual meaning to it. These all depict attempts to move away from heterocentric models, although whether Wicca can truly be called inclusive is another matter. Interestingly, the area in which there was the greatest range of disagreement about whether Wicca was inclusive to all was on the topic of feminism, and women's and men's roles in a "feminist" religion.

Feminism

Despite the central feminist claims of older literature like *The Spiral Dance* (originally published 1979) and *Drawing Down the Moon* (originally published 1979), both classic texts influential to many Neo-Pagans today, the endorsement of feminism during the interviews I held was much more ambivalent. Only Kat and Kayla unequivocally endorsed Wicca as a feminist religion, and only Gregory and Starr answered the question with an emphatic "no." Everyone else fell somewhere in the middle. This diversity in responses reflects the fact that feminism was understood and defined in a variety of ways by those that I interviewed. Everyone agreed that Wicca has at its core an ethic of egalitarianism and stressed that equality was very important to them, but not everyone I interviewed self-identified as a feminist, and there was disagreement as to whether or not Wicca is living up to its egalitarian ideals in practice.

As Quill acknowledged, Wicca could be considered feminist because it manifested in the midst of the Women's Movement of the mid-twentieth century, and came to define itself as intentionally anti-patriarchal. While he does find the spirit of feminism inherent in the religion, Quill goes on to say that he does not know if it has "lived up to the standards it set for itself." Tyler speaks to this as well, saying that while the spirit of feminism is innate in Wicca, Wiccans in general are "not intentional about being feminist or using a feminist lens to critique our Tradition." Dylan admitted that defining Wicca as feminist is a difficult thing to do: while there are certainly places where women are finding empowerment, there is also very little acceptance of trans and non-binary people, something that Dylan defines as integral to their own identity as a feminist. Yvonne and Lupa argue that this is because Wicca still contains quite a lot of "second wave" feminism, which they view as being more gender essentialist. Many participants who self-identified as feminists placed themselves in the "third wave," which they identified as being more intersectional and inclusive of all identities, and not just about straight white women as previous waves had been. While scholars like Kimberly Springer (2002) believe "intersectional third wave feminism" to be a contradiction in terms given that it "obscures the historical role of race in feminist organizing" (1061) and overlooks Black women's contributions to the feminist movement throughout history, the wave model was useful for participants in how they self-identified and understood themselves in relation to the tensions and disagreements within the feminist movement.

While race is not the primary focus of this research, four of my participants did bring up race during interviews, especially in relation to feminism and the need for Wicca to become more intersectional. As Lupa notes, "Paganism has had to take a long hard look at shortcomings as far as social justice goes," saying that there is still work to be done with regards to racial

diversity in Pagan spaces. While a few Heathen (Northern European Pagan) groups have made overtly racist public statements,³¹ Lupa explains that the problems are also more covert, and that settings where she may feel comfortable as a white woman may not extend to people of color, as there are usually very few Pagans of color in attendance at Pagan festivals and other events. Those who are there, she notes, are often assumed to be practitioners of African diaspora religions like Vodou and Santeria “instead of a quote-unquote European Tradition like Wicca.” This suggests not only that Wiccans are thought to look a certain way (white), but that religious practice is thought to be bound to race and ancestry. Blood right arguments, however, can quickly devolve into white supremacy and policing the boundaries of Traditions to keep them “pure” (Diotima 2008). As Brian mentioned, this can lead to Pagans who are not white being told that the religion is not for them and that they should seek other options, something he has personally witnessed. As Wiccans and Pagans move towards making a conscious effort to be intersectional, making sure they are being inclusive of all beyond identities related to gender and sexual orientation will be key.

Another problem mentioned in interviews was the tendency in some Wiccan Traditions to elevate women over men. In a reversal of the normal hierarchy, even some Wiccan duotheistic Traditions place greater importance on the Goddess than on the God, both because woman’s power to create life is seen as more powerful than that of the created being (the God), and because some Goddess-oriented Wiccans see themselves as making up for the imbalance of the predominant God-oriented religions of modern society (Salomonsen 2002:215). Some people

³¹ The Asatru Folk Assembly (AFA) made quite a stir in August 2016 when Matt Flavel, a member of the AFA Board of Directors, made a public announcement on their official Facebook page reading: “The AFA would like to make it clear that we believe gender is not a social construct, it is a beautiful gift from the holy powers and from our ancestors. The AFA celebrates our feminine ladies, our masculine gentlemen and, above all, our beautiful white children.”

really value this focus on the Divine Feminine, and do not see it as a barrier to being egalitarian.

As Tyler shared,

It's interesting because in Gardnerian Wicca, for a Tradition [that] has been colloquially named after a man [...] Women run our Tradition. And it's great. I love it! [...] my initiator [...] has a big emphasis on talking about the role of the Goddess and the role of the High Priestess and the role of the women-identified folk in our Tradition while also advocating and saying the God needs to be honored and recognized. The High Priest is an essential component to our rituals and is not just an altar boy to do the incense. All of us play a role in circle. I would say that we are most certainly a matriarchal Tradition who is very big on egalitarian practice.

Starr mentioned, however, that while the tradition of having a High Priestess in charge of the coven with a High Priest supporting her is not uncommon in Wicca, he disagrees with that model. "I feel that the High Priest and Priestess should be equal in all decision making," he explained, going on to say that this egalitarian value is why the coven decided to create a Council to lead the group rather than having one or two individuals making all the decisions. As previously mentioned however, the Council consists of three gay men and Laura, who identified her sexuality as unknown.

Many participants saw the emphasis on the Goddess over the God as problematic, and evidence either for or against Wicca's claim to be feminist, depending on their understanding of what feminism is. Shannon, who identifies as a feminist, says,

I think there is this push in a lot of Wiccan Traditions to only worship the Goddess and that feminine is better than anything, and I don't really see that as equality. I see that as honoring one over the other. I don't think that the vast majority of Wiccans behave that way, but I think there is a group that does. And unfortunately I think that--to me that makes all of Wicca kind of--not suspect, but not as good as it probably should, 'cause Wicca's a pretty great faith. But yeah, that can be very off-putting for a lot of people.

For Shannon, who defines feminism as gender equality, Wiccans who elevate the Goddess over the God and women over men (like Dianic Wiccans, who are not explicitly named here but who are hinted at) are detracting from Wicca's feminist tradition. Debby agrees that the lack of gender equality is problematic, but takes this as evidence *for* classifying Wicca as a feminist

religion. Interestingly enough, Debby identified herself as a feminist, defining feminism as “the strangely bizarre idea that women are people. Period.” Yet when asked if she considered Wicca a feminist religion, she puzzlingly replied:

Not necessarily. I mean, the Dianics will tell you something else. (laughs) And that's fine. But you know [...] what they did was (mocking deep voice) well this is a feminist religion now and no boys allowed, you know, the she-woman man-haters club or whatever.

Many of the men (notably Starr, Gregory, and Eldritch) echoed this attitude, defining feminism as either pertaining to women’s dominance or “all that is not masculine” (Starr), indicating a belief that feminism is a concern restricted to feminine things on which men are unable to comment. While they went on to explain that men and women are considered equal in Wicca, espousing what I would consider feminist values, they themselves do not identify as feminists and do not endorse Wicca as a feminist religion, or mentioned that it could be “at its worst” (Eldritch).

Even when groups are not explicit in honoring the Goddess to the exclusion of the God, a few people highlighted that Wicca tends to draw many women, and women are the majority in many spaces. As Starr shares,

One of the biggest goals in my practices was to open up a world to males who wished to practice the Wiccan religion because of the stereotypical female aspect of the Wiccan religion. It's like NO. Men can practice Wicca too, this is how it's done. When you go into a bookstore of your choice, there are very few Wiccan authors who are male as opposed to the ones who are female.

This response is perplexing, given that in one of the coven classes in Initiate degree on “Classic Wiccan Readings,” six of the eight selections considered by the group to be authoritative are written by men. While my experience in bookstores has actually been the opposite—that male authors outnumber the books written by women—other people shared the sentiment that women tend to predominate in Wiccan spaces. Brooke, for example, said:

In the circles I have currently run in [...] it is rare to see a male in these spaces, and sometimes we aren't sure what to do if a male is in the space. Especially if he comes off as straight. Like, I feel like queer men get a bit more of a pass but I think straight men especially have gotten a lot of raised eyebrows.

Gregory also acknowledges that many women and gay men are drawn to Wicca because there is a Goddess, and Wicca allows “the empowering of the feminine,” but dislikes when the God is overlooked. These comments are interesting, however, for that fact that they equate gay men with women. While it is true that I was unable to find any straight men to interview in this research, previous scholarship has criticized the impulse to equate gay male sexuality with femininity, as it often functions as a contrast to “real” masculinity—that is, to be a real man is to not be a woman or be gay, devaluing both of these identities simultaneously (Jensen 2010:99).

One person I interviewed is particularly incensed by the tendency to equate gay men with femininity. He wished not to be identified with the following comments, but shares:

I've known gay men who forget that they're gay men. And I usually use the term gay men or gay male to remind gay men that they're male. [Some have said] that queer men are a third gender. And I am part of the group that kind of rails against that. I'm like fuck that. You know, men are men. Men are dogs. (laughs) They have testosterone poisoning and they go too far and so I really despise it when gay men consider themselves followers of the Goddess and forget that they're male. [...] I'm really worried that gay men don't embrace being male. Because they've had a lot of bad experiences with maybe other men. And sometimes abusive experiences. And so they run to women and to the Goddess for their spirituality and they don't find [...] strength in gay male community. And so when Wicca as a Goddess religion—and people are all about the Goddess and the moon phases and all of that, I'm like—but you're male! And at the same time I'm very sensitive of pushing against the gender norms and the gender roles for male because that's changing too. And so there's a huge struggle for both the men and women to find out who they are. [...] I really—I hurt and feel a bit of sadness when men don't have enough male models to embrace as well. And I think Wicca can expand to do that. But it needs to spend more time doing that. It's been—and I don't mean women having it in a negative way, it just feels skewed, that men haven't found a lot of that.

Although embracing the Divine Feminine has been identified by others as a solution for men in rejecting forms of toxic masculinity, which devalue both femininity and queerness (Aburrow 2014:14,39; Penczak 2003:63,67), this statement is notable for the way in which it reinforces the notion that people can only identify with a deity that is thought to “match” their assigned sex and

gender. This thought pattern establishes another set of strict gender norms even as it rejects others, and may function to restrict the options open to queer people who are already seen as transgressing the gender norms set by the society at large.

Queer Acceptance

Wiccan practices exist in many forms, from those still beholden to models entrenched in gender essentialism and heteronormativity to queer-friendly adaptations. While Wicca as whole makes claims of being queer-friendly and egalitarian, I asked those I interviewed what their impression was. Is Wicca inclusive of the LGBTQ+ community? While some, like Starr, answered unequivocally yes, the question gave many pause. As was the case with feminism, most answered with a nuanced “it depends,” as they could see examples of both in Wicca. As Tyler mentioned, each coven is autonomous and independently governed, so the degree of inclusiveness can vary tremendously from group to group. Yvonne agrees, sharing her perspective that “it’s about 50/50 that there’s some covens that are still doing that everybody must stand boy-girl-boy-girl in circle³² [...] and then there are other people who have gone yeah, we must make this more inclusive.” Ultimately, Yvonne thinks that the “general drift” of Wicca is towards being inclusive. Although Yvonne is an advocate for “Inclusive Wicca,” she made it clear that she does not consider “Inclusive Wicca” to be a separate Tradition. “I think the best of Wicca *is* inclusive,” she says. Gabriel agrees, saying that while Wiccan practices can be exclusionary, he does not see that impulse as inherent to the Wiccan religion.

Crystal and Brian, on the other hand, take the opposite approach. Brian shared that he had noticed that people who were bringing attention to the issues and problematic practices in Wicca were often told that the religion wasn’t for them, and that they should seek other options. In a

³² A reference to Gerald Gardner and other early Wiccan claims that in order for the magickal polarity of the ritual circle to balance, there must be an equal number of men and woman evenly distributed throughout the circle (Gardner 2004 [1954]:114-115).

similar vein, Crystal mentioned that while Wicca can be made to be inclusive, its basic structure is an exclusionary one. Wiccans may identify as being inclusive, she says,

But if you look at its surface and the way it's looked at popularly, and the way it's initially taught, it's very much women do this, men do this. And I can see--largely queer people being attracted to that because it's more equitable. And I don't blame them. They see both being represented. But when you look at it, you've got these two, there's still two differing things. They come together and they work together, that's great, but it's still very heteronormative in that respect.

She goes on to say that while the coven is very eclectic and working around exclusionary tendencies, Wicca in general is “pretty heteronormative.” Brian, who recently finished his doctoral thesis work on this subject, even went so far as to say that “Wicca constitutes the worship of heterosexuality.” While he acknowledges that this is a modern phenomenon because heterosexuality itself is a modern concept, Wicca deifies heterosexuality and makes it difficult to be inclusive of anything else, although he encourages people to try to adapt and change the problematic practices.

Shannon, who left Wicca in part because she did not feel that it was inclusive, mentioned that while Wicca has gotten more inclusive in the past fifteen years, there are still many problems that unintentionally exclude people. She also sees a divide in how the “L, G, and B” identities are accommodated and how trans people are treated: “I know, in speaking with my sister who is trans, she did not at any point in time feel welcome in any Wiccan community. She went to Heathenism almost immediately because it seemed more accepting,” Shannon said.

In recent years the issue of trans inclusivity has been a major controversy in the Wiccan community, especially following an incident at PantheaCon³³ in 2011, which four participants mentioned during interviews. The incident pertained to a women's only Dianic ritual that was being put on by Z. Budapest, during which a trans woman who wished to participate was turned

³³ A popular Pagan conference in California.

away. Lupa highlighted this event as being “a big turning point [...] as far as awareness goes.” Tyler also described this event as having had “a humongous effect in Gardnerian Wicca too. It affected all of Pagandom, I would say across the world. In the sense of people were like oh, we need to consider this now.” In the wake of this event, Tyler mentioned that not only were old Traditions and ritual forms changed and new Traditions and rituals created, but some people having an initiation lineage descending from Z. Budapest renounced their lineages as a result of her actions. Gregory and Debby mentioned similar instances happening at Pagan Spirit Gathering, another large Pagan festival. “Wicca [...] has a really hard time with the idea that a transgendered [sic] person can worship with them,” Shannon says. “I know my sister. She had as many feminine experiences as I did, so the fact that they would not welcome her is really hard for me. And was horrific, horrific for her.”

Gabriel also mentioned that since coming out as a trans person, he has stayed away from many Pagan community events for fear of being discriminated against, although both PantheaCon and Pagan Spirit Gathering have adapted their inclusiveness policies following such events. Moreover, Lupa mentioned that PantheaCon has hosted several “gender-bending rituals” in recent years. As Dylan mentions, however, there is more acceptance for trans men and trans women who identify within the gender binary than there is for non-binary people. While large events like PantheaCon and Pagan Spirit Gathering have since clarified that “women’s rituals” and “men’s rituals” are open to all people who identify as men and women, there is little or no accommodation for gender-variant and non-binary individuals. Eldritch also spoke to this, highlighting the general lack of acceptance as his motivation for including the “both and neither” categories in his rituals.

Dylan, a former member of the coven I studied who identifies as genderfluid, spoke about a specific instance in which they felt excluded from a Wiccan ritual as a result of their gender identity. During the coven's Samhain³⁴ celebration, there was a moment when everyone was asked to participate in a group dance: men going in one direction and women in the other, weaving in and out. Dylan mentioned that their experience with this ritual was very negative:

I was not aware that this was going to happen before, and [...] I was standing there for one or two minutes before that part began being like, where do I go? Because I—especially that day I was like I don't feel either right now, I don't feel comfortable with either. It was distressing to me, and in the end I decided [...] okay, people are just going to expect this, I might as well. Just to avoid awkward conversations I didn't really want to have that night. [...] It was [...] that one moment [of] I have to make a choice and I don't really want to make this choice right now.

In order to not draw attention to themselves, Dylan had to undergo the distressing process of misgendering themselves and going along with a role in which they did not feel comfortable. Dylan mentioned that the coven seemed very inclusive up to that point, especially as several of the leaders openly identify as gay. As Lupa explains, however, while people in the Pagan community aspire to be more inclusive of trans people than people in the general population are, it is not uncommon for Pagans to give lip service to being inclusive without actually changing anything:

in reality they've still got a lot of phobias they haven't actually dealt with and they end up being well, you know, I like trans people but they should keep their own sacred spaces and things like that. So I think we're good at doing the whole lip service—I think we're getting better at actually walking our talk. It's not easy, and it's involved a lot of discussions and arguments and growing pains, but at least we're trying. Which is more than what a lot of religions can say.

³⁴ One of the eight Sabbats celebrated in the Wiccan sacred calendar. Samhain (pronounced *Sow-in*) is Beltane's opposite: it is celebrated six months later on October 31st, and recognizes the last harvest and end of the fertile period. Together, Beltane and Samhain, celebrations of life and death, are considered the holiest days in the Wiccan sacred calendar (Farrar and Farrar 1988 [1981]:80).

Dylan did acknowledge that they believed the coven would not have actively discriminated against them had people in the group known how they identified, but by default the coven's practices were exclusionary to non-binary people:

I personally think it's because the issue has never really been brought up with that coven. I never made it obvious. I never stated that I was genderfluid. [...] If conversations like this happened I think that there would be a place. [...]. It's like, oh we actually have somebody or some people who do identify this way, maybe we can rethink some things.

Quill expressed a similar sentiment, explaining that while Wicca does not actively discriminate, "it's tradition, and people have a hard time defying tradition. [...] The main reason it comes up is because it's the only language that's been around for a long time." Tyler, who is in the process of earning his Master of Divinity degree and plans to eventually seek ordination in the Unitarian Universalist religion, speaks to this as well:

While our Traditions might not be orthodox in belief, we are orthopraxic in action. [...] Speaking theologically, there are no issues [...] being a queer-identified person in any Pagan Traditions. It's this weird cultural ritual hang-up that we have, which I think is really fascinating that theologically it's no issue but like, we just don't know how to put you here or where to put you here depending on sexual orientation or gender identity. [...] whereas everybody else, queer and trans folk show up, they're part of ritual but theologically it just doesn't work out. For us we have the exact opposite issue. [...] So that's really something we need to work on. [...] It just comes down to an issue of creativity.

Yvonne agrees: while many groups are still doing heterocentric things, she says the issue is not intentional bigotry, but tradition. "Some of them are doing it because [it's what they were brought up with, [...] and they just can't—they don't understand that it's excluding some people," she says. It is also her impression that people in the UK are more inclusive than people in the US, which she believes is "partly the diaspora effect:" "because Wicca was exported from here to there, people have gone oh this is the tradition, we must stick to it. Whereas here it's like, we kind of own it [...] so we can fiddle with it."

One theological point that came up in several interviews related to ways of making ritual more inclusive to everyone was the idea that everyone contains both masculine and feminine aspects within them, sometimes called the anima and animus, terms borrowed from psychoanalyst Carl Jung. According to Gregory, Kayla, and Kat, because everyone contains a piece of the so-called “opposite” gender, anyone can call upon either the Goddess or the God, or perform the role of a High Priest or Priestess. As Yvonne suggests in her book, the goal of some Wiccan practices (such as the Great Rite) may be aimed at reconciling the two at the level of the sacred to achieve the “Divine Androgyne:” a “synthesis of the masculine and feminine principles within the soul” (Aburrow 2014:86). Gabriel adds that in Adventure Tradition, it is understood that while one’s physical body may display a certain gender, one’s gender on the spiritual, or “astral” plane, may be entirely different, thus allowing anyone of any gender to do anything they want to in the circle. While this allows for a certain flexibility and permits Wiccan practitioners to step outside of the traditional gender roles based on biological assumptions, it nevertheless reifies certain qualities as “masculine” and others as “feminine,” which also reinforces the binary understanding of two sexes and two genders.

One could raise the question of why these qualities need be assigned a gender at all if it is understood that everyone has the capacity for them. Starhawk, as a renowned and influential author and activist in the Pagan community, provides a model for this. While in the 1979 version of *The Spiral Dance*, a classic text in Goddess Spirituality, she affirms the binary, gender essentialist, heteronormative strategies employed in Wicca, in her notes in the ten and twentieth anniversary editions of her book, she admits her thinking has since evolved away from binaries:

I am no longer so sure that there is a ‘feminine side’ to a man’s nature or a ‘masculine side’ to a woman’s nature. Today I find it more useful to think of the whole range of human possibilities [...] as available to us all, not divided by gender, either outer or inner (Starhawk 1999:232).

Lupa also mentioned her desire for the Pagan community as a whole to embrace the gray areas and resist the urge to put everything in categories. She speaks to the need to embrace spectrums and continuums rather than pigeonholes, and that while the Pagan community has made progress in embracing a variety of sexual orientations, the understanding of gender is lagging behind: “I’ve never felt unsafe as a queer person in the Pagan community,” Lupa says. “That’s always been accepted. But to ask people to think of the Divine outside of the male-female duality, that’s taken a little bit more time for people to really accept.”

Brooke also admits that Paganism “tries to paint itself as much more open than it is,” and that despite the fact that many people have had positive experiences, “it doesn’t vary that much.” Interestingly, three participants described their experiences as queer people in Wicca as “lucky,” implying that while they have always felt accepted and welcomed, they realize that experience is abnormal. As Lupa points out in her case, however, it is still easier to be openly bisexual in the Pagan community than it is in society at large, although she did report feeling objectified while at Pagan festival events on occasion, something facilitated by Paganism’s sex positivity. This paradox is the topic of anthropologist Susan Harper’s doctoral dissertation, in which she writes that there is a “dance between sexual freedom and sexual objectification at work when it comes to female bisexuality within the NeoPagan community” (2010:80). While some of the women she interviewed found their bisexuality was a way of breaking away from the binary gender polarity advocated for in Wicca, or of embodying both masculine and feminine qualities in their sexuality, this positive impulse is tempered by the “fetishization of the hot bi Pagan babe” (Harper 2010:90, 94). This high representation of bisexual people in the Pagan community shows through in my sample as well: of the 16 people I interviewed, half of them identified as bisexual. Almost all of those who identified as such are women.

At least as far as bisexuality goes, there is a fine line between the acceptance and idealization of bisexuality, the latter of which has been used to oppress Pagan women of other sexualities as being of a lower spiritual state (Harper 2010:96-97). Similarly, queer identities have also been glorified as superior to heterosexuality. As Penczak writes, “homosexual energy is turned towards inner, magical, and shamanic practices while heterosexual energy is directed outward for the creation of children” (2003:25). This argument is also made by Christian de la Huerta, founder of Q-Spirit, who suggests that queer people are naturally more spiritual because they are intermediaries between male and female, and material and spiritual worlds (Tom Moon 2005, cited in Aburrow 2014:75). While this may be a positive portrayal of an otherwise marginalized identity, this representation is its own form of problematic essentialism.

While many problems were discussed in interviews, the overall tone of most conversations was a hopeful one as people spoke to progress in the religion. Tyler emphasized that Gardnerians are aware of the problems and having conversations about how to change them, and that there is a long tradition of Wiccans pushing back against heteronormativity in the United States. Quill also noted that the spirit of Wicca is still “a radical movement [...] ready to challenge ideas of normalcy and mainstream acceptance.” Gregory and Starr spoke to this as well, having seen Wicca adapt to accept and welcome gay people within the last few decades.

Eldritch mentioned seeing “pockets of conservatism [...] falling away” in the Pagan community, and that the communities that have been thriving are the ones where people are loosening, expanding, and being more flexible. “The fertility rites and the heteronormativity are the things that hold Wicca back,” he says. “There’s more to be explored.” Ultimately, Tyler argues that religious reformers have existed throughout history, and that “there’s a certain point where sometimes we gotta get excommunicated.” If the Tradition resists change, Tyler says he

is “cool with” being labeled a heretic if that is what it takes. “We’re doing a disservice to the ancestors of our Tradition” he says, in language bespeaking the importance of lineage. “We are doing a disservice to the descendants who will receive our traditions long after we have been forgotten to not truly interrogate our current practices.”

CONCLUSION

Religion, as a social activity, is an important aspect of life for many people and can be a source of solace, strength, and comfort. For Wicca, as a religion advocating for the empowerment of groups whose identities have historically been oppressed by a patriarchal society, it is especially important that marginalized people feel welcome and included in the religion. One of the perennial draws to Wicca is the importance of personal connection to the sacred, and the ability to see oneself modeled in the Divine. In Wicca, however, deity forms are being used not only to empower but also to reinforce oppression. As a result, it is too simplistic to conclude that Wicca is woman-affirming, feminist, and inclusive of queer people. While it *can* be all of those things, and some people are working to ensure that it is, the reality of practice for other Wiccans is one of contradictions and ambivalence.

Despite Wicca’s history of feminism and advocating for women’s liberation, Wicca can nevertheless function to idealize roles that reinforce patriarchal gender norms and focus on the biological reproductive capacity of bodies, suggesting that biology is not only destiny, but divine. Wicca can serve to glorify (and indeed, deify) motherhood, excluding women who do not or cannot conform to a restrictive but proscribed gender role. It can also perpetuate the sanctity of heterosexual ritual imagery in practices such as the Great Rite and the maypole, which engage heavily in binary symbolism relying on gender essentialist stereotypes about masculine and feminine qualities. While Wiccans claim to honor both equally, affirming a core egalitarian ethic,

this tendency serves to reify harmful and limiting stereotypes originating in the very patriarchy Wiccans claim to set themselves against. It also creates a space in which those who may be seen as transgressing the boundaries of the binary—namely, transgender and non-binary people are excluded. This follows the familiar pattern of the larger society in which lesbian, gay, and to some extent bisexual-identified people have won greater acceptance than transgender and non-binary people, though the bisexual community in Wicca faces unique struggles as well.

While the spirit of Wicca may differ from that of its practice, this is changing. As a New Religious Movement not yet a century old, Wicca has at its core a value of agitating the status quo and inverting norms so as to create social change, and that impulse is certainly alive and well today (Finley 1991). One may yet hope that Wiccans will keep the tradition of the feminist witch living by the edge of the woods, at the margins of society, providing inspiration for resistance and defiance of oppressive patriarchal norms, and showing that women do not have to be passive, nurturing mothers in order to be valuable.

Appendix A: Wiccan Teachings

I. The American Council of Witches' "Principles of Wiccan Belief" (1974)

Introduction:

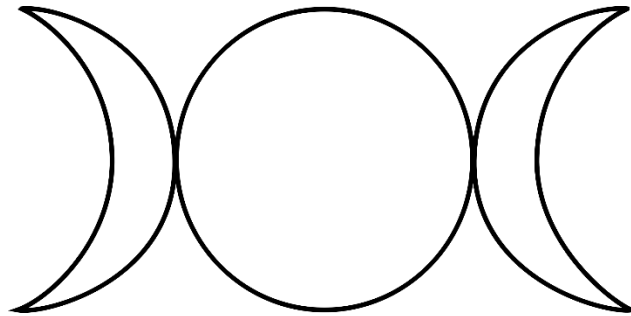
In seeking to be inclusive, we do not wish to open ourselves to the destruction of our group by those on self-serving power trips, or to philosophies and practices contradictory to those principles. In seeking to exclude those whose ways are contradictory to ours, we do not want to deny participation with us to any who are sincerely interested in our knowledge and beliefs, regardless of race, color, sex, age, national or cultural origins, or sexual preference.

Principles of the Wiccan Belief:

1. We practice rites to attune ourselves with the natural rhythm of life forces marked by the phases of the Moon and the seasonal Quarters and Cross Quarters.
2. We recognize that our intelligence gives us a unique responsibility towards our environment. We seek to live in harmony with Nature, in ecological balance offering fulfillment to life and consciousness within an evolutionary concept.
3. We acknowledge a depth of power far greater than that is apparent to the average person. Because it is far greater than ordinary it is sometimes called "supernatural", but we see it as lying within that which is naturally potential to all.
4. We conceive of the Creative Power in the universe as manifesting through polarity-as masculine and feminine-and that this same Creative Power lies in all people, and functions through the interaction of the masculine and feminine. We value neither above the other, knowing each to be supportive of the other. We value sex as pleasure, as the symbol and embodiment of life, and as one of the sources of energies used in magickal practice and religious worship.
5. We recognize both outer and inner, or psychological, worlds -- sometimes known as the Spiritual World, the Collective Unconscious, Inner Planes, etc. -- and we see in the interaction of these two dimensions the basis for paranormal phenomena and magickal exercises. We neglect neither dimension for the other, seeing both as necessary for our fulfillment.
6. We do not recognize any authoritarian hierarchy, but do honor those who teach, respect those who share their greater knowledge and wisdom, and acknowledge those who have courageously given of themselves in leadership.
7. We see religion, magick and wisdom-in-living as being united in the way one views the world and lives within it -- a world view and philosophy of life which we identify as Witchcraft, the Wiccan Way.
8. Calling oneself "Witch" does not make a Witch -- but neither does heredity itself, nor the collecting of titles, degrees and initiations. A Witch seeks to control the forces within her/himself that make life possible in order to live wisely and well without harm to others and in harmony with Nature.
9. We believe in the affirmation and fulfillment of life in a continuation of evolution and development of consciousness, that gives meaning to the Universe we know, and our personal role within it.
10. Our only animosity towards Christianity, or toward any other religion or philosophy of life, is to the extent that its institutions have claimed to be "the only way," and have sought to deny freedom to others and to suppress other ways of religious practice and belief.
11. As American Witches, we are not threatened by debates on the history of the Craft, the origins of various terms, the origins of various aspects of different Traditions. We are concerned with our present and our future.
12. We do not accept the concept of absolute evil, nor do we worship any entity known as "Satan" or "the Devil", as defined by Christian Tradition. We do not seek power through the suffering of others, nor do we accept that personal benefit can be derived only by denial to another.
13. We believe that we should seek within Nature that which is contributory to our health and well-being.

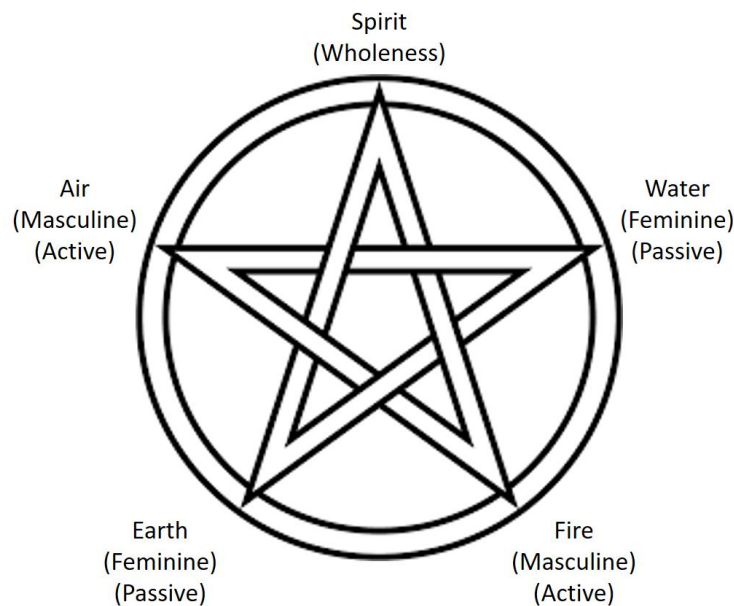
Adapted from ReligiousTolerance.org, "Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance." Retrieved November 1, 2016. (http://www.religioustolerance.org/wic_stat1.htm).

II. The Triple Goddess Symbol



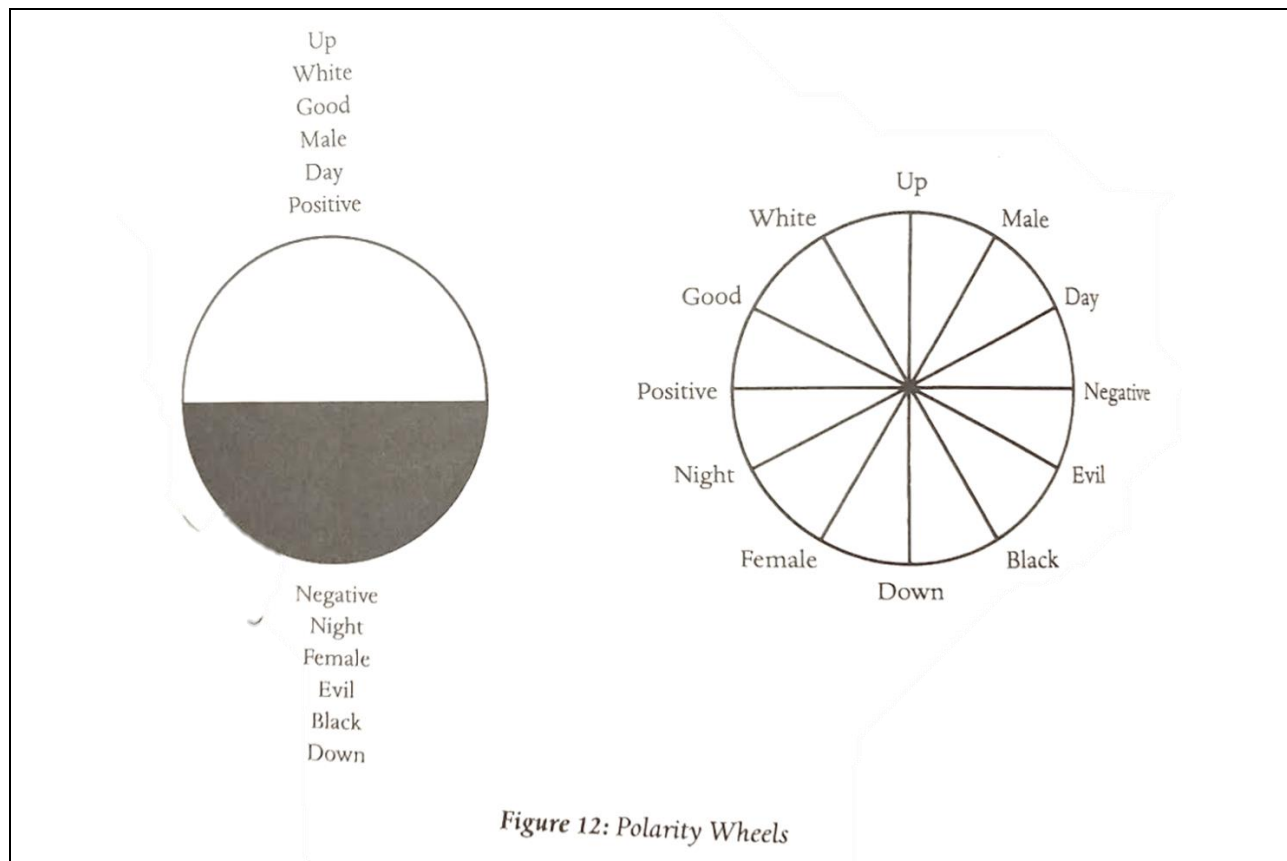
The Triple Goddess symbol represents the Maiden, Mother, and Crone as the Waxing, Full, and Waning Moon, respectively.

III. The Pentacle



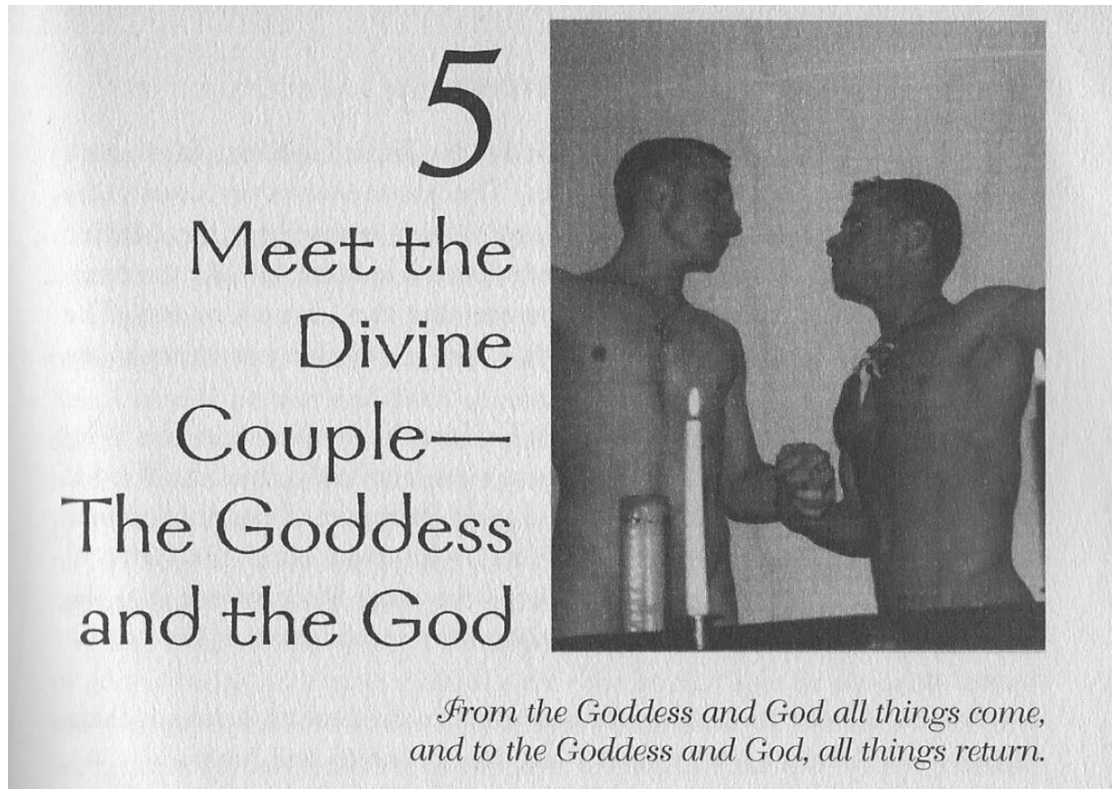
The Pentacle, a symbol of the Wiccan faith, as it is taught at the coven I studied. The elements are arranged in such a way as to create the balance of masculine and feminine elements around the circle. The attributes of each of the elements are assigned in very gender essentialist ways. Earth represents healing, the home, and the body. The earth is round like the womb, and gives birth to all. Fire is its correlate: anger, passion, sex, lust, willpower, transformation, change. Fire burns upright, and is thus phallic. Air is also masculine and associated with sun energy, the intellect, knowledge, and communication. Water is feminine, and associated with moon energy, emotionality, intuition, and love.

IV. Polarity Wheels



Penczak, Christopher. 2014 [2002]. Pp. 146 in *The Inner Temple of Witchcraft: Magick, Meditation and Psychic Development*. Woodbury: Llewellyn Publications.

V. Heteronormativity in Wiccan Duotheism



Penczak, Christopher. 2003. Pp.63 in *Gay Witchcraft: Empowering the Tribe*. York Beach, ME: Red Wheel/Weiser.

Although this image comes from a book written by a gay man for other gay Pagans and depicts a homosexual couple, the author seems bound to the traditional duotheistic model of God and Goddess. This normative heterosexuality is perpetuated even in cases when a practitioner's lifestyle, sexuality, and/or gender identity does not resemble the model set by the heterosexual divine couple.

VI. Gender Essentialism and the Great Rite

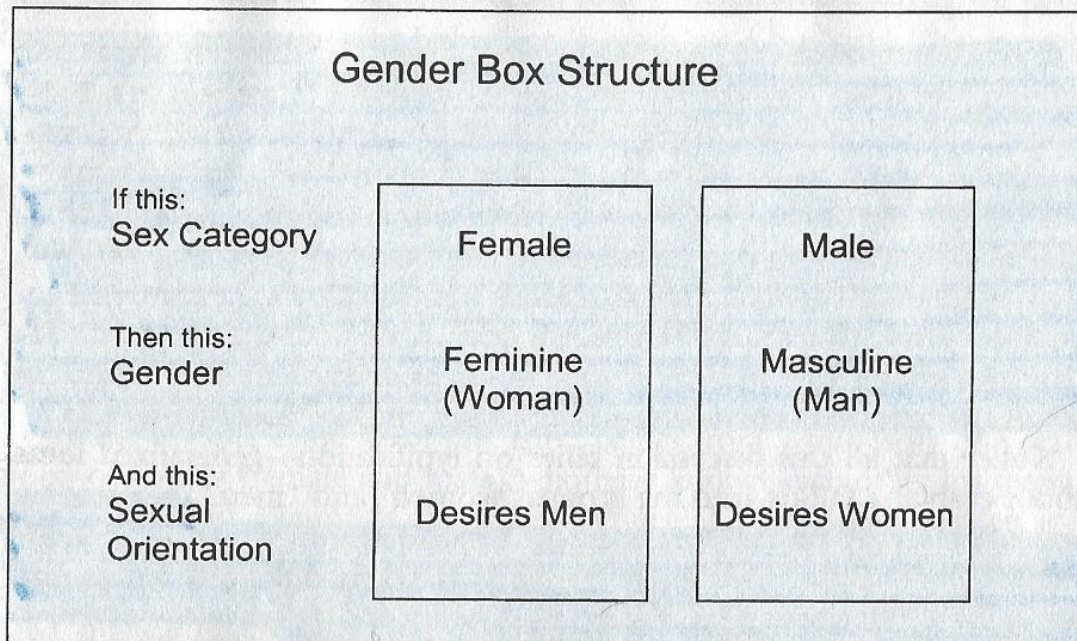


Farrar, Janet and Stewart Farrar. 1984. Pp. 180, Photograph #7 in *The Witches Way*. Custer, WA: Phoenix Publishing.

Caption reads: “In blessing the wine, the woman holds the active symbol, the athame, because hers is the positive polarity on the inner planes.” Although some participants I interviewed endorsed the method of having women wielding traditionally “masculine” tools and vice versa as a way of subverting sexist and gender essentialism ritual roles, this approach can actually serve to reinforce the heteronormativity and essentialism in Wiccan ritual, as it assumes that women’s “passive” energy must be balanced by “active” masculine energy.

Appendix B: Gender Theory

Figure 1.1. Gender Box Structure. Binary gender messages in the social world tell us to typify each person as either “female” or “male” and apply assumptions about bodies, gender, and sexual orientation.



Crawley, Sara L., Lara J. Foley, and Constance L. Shehan. 2008. Pp.16 in *Gendering Bodies*. Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

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