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Between Worlds: Artful Auto/Biography and/as Pagan Healing

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Gender, Sexuality & Women's Studies

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Abstract

This dissertation draws upon the visual and oral life stories of thirteen participants (plus myself) to examine self-identified Pagan women and Pagan gender-variant persons' experiences and memories of trauma and the potential healing power of storytelling. Specially, I use auto/biographical portraiture — framed as a form of self-guided visual life storytelling— to theorize links between embodied life experiences, traumatic experiences, and subjectivity. Geographically participants are located across Canada, United States, and Ireland where Paganism is still a minority religion, but also on the rise. Contemporary Paganism is a new religious movement that includes a plethora of religions and/or spiritual traditions located across diverse cultures and histories. Pagan religions are orthopraxical rather than orthodox; that is, it is shared practices that unite various Pagan religions rather than an official doctrine. However, contemporary Pagan epistemologies commonly encompass holistic paradigms, draw upon variously located vernacular religions and folk knowledges, and include belief in the supernatural beings and/or more-than-human worlds. Participants in this study locate their religiosity across the spectrum of Paganism.

My dissertation situates Pagan healing paradigms and practices within the scope of holistic healing and decolonising trauma scholarship. In this context, auto/biographical portraiture is a form of creative and critical self-inquiry that can function as a medium for self-healing. My study finds that auto/biographical portraiture can be cathartic, empowering and healing, whether used alone or alongside other modalities of healing, including mainstream psychotherapy and/or Pagan healing rituals. For this reason, my findings can be useful for practitioners of conventional trauma discourse in supporting Pagans on their healing journeys. At

the same time, this dissertation adds a feminist and decolonial trauma and violence-informed approach to Pagan practices.

My transdisciplinary approach places my research at the meeting place of arts-based, autoethnographic, feminist and decolonial methodologies and theoretical frameworks which make explicit that trauma and healing experiences are at once an interpersonal experience and a structural phenomenon. Thus, this dissertation makes clear that understanding Pagan persons' experiences of trauma and healing necessitates an attentiveness to the structural roots of trauma, including gender and racial oppression.

Keywords

Arts-Based Research; Pagan Studies; Trauma and Holistic Healing; Feminist Research; Autoethnography.

Summary for Lay Audience

The purpose of this study is to understand self-identified Pagan women and Pagan gender-variant persons' experiences of trauma and the potential healing power of storytelling. More specifically, I am interested in understanding how trauma shapes Pagan women and Pagan gender-variant persons' sense of selfhood. Further, I am interested in understanding Pagan approaches to healing. My study has been guided by the question: what can auto/biographical portraiture tell us about Pagan persons' experiences of trauma and healing? In this context, auto/biographical portraiture is a form of self-focused photography that participants use as a form of visual life storytelling. Theoretically, the term auto/biographical portraiture locates my study within life writing scholarship. In practice, auto/biographical portraiture can be selfies, conceptual self-portraits, documentary style photography or mixed media such as composite art. As an autoethnographic project, my own portraits are examined alongside the portraits of the thirteen people who participated in this study.

Contemporary Paganism is a modern religious movement that includes a range of religions and/or spiritual traditions that are located across diverse cultures and histories. There is no central doctrine in Paganism; instead, religions under this umbrella are connected through shared practices. However, Pagan worldviews and practices are typically holistic, include belief in the supernatural and often draw upon folk belief and traditional knowledge. Thus, Pagan healing paradigms are located under the umbrella of holistic healing. Further, my findings in this study indicate that Pagan persons blend Pagan practices and mainstream Western trauma paradigms as part of their healing strategies.

To examine participants' experiences of trauma and healing, my study uses feminist and decolonial scholarship and practices. Specifically, my study uses an intersectional feminist

framework which recognizes that each person's sense of self and their experiences are shaped by overlapping identities and social locations, including gender, race/ethnicity, religion, economic status and more. Further, my feminist and decolonial approach to trauma acknowledges that individual persons' experiences of trauma occur within specific social and cultural contexts, including ideas and prejudices about gender, race, and religion. All of this comes together to inform how Pagan women and gender-variant persons experience trauma and healing.

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There are so many people who have shared this journey with me that I would like to thank. First and foremost, I offer a heartfelt thank-you to the thirteen people who generously shared their life stories with me for this project Alice, Ashley, Caitlyn, Elizabeth, Jeannette, Lupa, Lauren, Mary Allen, Mayra, Molly, Riley, Sandra, and Sara — you are the heart of this shared story. I am grateful beyond words.

To my many academic mentors, it has been a pleasure to learn from you throughout these years; your ways of thinking about and doing feminist scholarship has inspired me to think more deeply, to ask more questions, and to follow the rabbit holes that inform my own scholarship. In my PhD journey specifically, I am grateful for the guidance of my doctoral committee members Drs. Erica Lawson and Treena Orchard whose thoughtful and provocative questions helped me to see the many layers of my research. Thank you, also, to my candidacy examining committee Drs. WG Pearson and Lina Sunseri, who helped to shape my commitment to decolonial scholarship and storytelling as a feminist praxis. I appreciate the expertise of my defense examining committee: Drs. Erica Lawson, Helen Fielding, Sarah Bassnett, and Jenny Butler. And to my supervisor Dr. KJ (Kim) Verwaayen, honestly, there are many things to say. In particular, your unwavering support, your patience, and your thoughtfulness helped me get through this journey. Thank you for your attention to detail (here's the place that I'd insert a grammatical error or typo if I was that humorous). But mostly, thank you for guiding me down rabbit holes and for pulling me out of them when I fell too deep — I am grateful that you were on this journey with me.

I owe a huge gratitude to Dr. Sonja Boon who inspired this journey in the first place. You sparked my passion for life writing, arts-based research, and feminist theory. I especially want to acknowledge the day I walked into your office and told you that I didn't think I could write an auto/biographical essay; thank you for simply replying "Yes, you can" — and I did. That moment changed my life, not only my academic journey. In fact, looking back, that autofiction essay was the first time that I wrote about witchcraft academically. Studying women's life stories with you also sparked my passion for auto/biographical portraiture, helped me to think more deeply about the stories of the women of Newfoundland and about my relationship to the island. Thank you, for so many things – your mentorship means so much to me.

To the NORAHT team — Dr. Rosemary Nagy, Brenda Quenneville, Elder Donna Debassige, Rebecca Timms, Kathleen Jodouin, and Dr. Lanyan Chen — it was an honour to work with you. Our work together taught me the importance of community-engaged scholarship that makes way for blended epistemologies. But, more importantly, our work helped me to put decolonial and holistic theories into practice and shaped my commitment to trauma and violence-informed research.

The GSWS community has been a big part of my journey. Jami McFarland, I am grateful that we (literally) ran into each other on the way to campus on the first day of class and for all the *good* times that followed. I am especially grateful to Jen Shaw for w(h)ining with me for all these years — need I say more?!

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Preface

“the personal is not only political but spiritual.”
M. Jacqui Alexander (7)

*“Either the well was very deep, or she fell very slowly,
for she had plenty of time as she went down
to look about her and to wonder
what was going to happen next.”*
Lewis Carroll (14)

M. Jacqui Alexander suggests that “there is a tacit understanding that no self-respecting postmodernist would want to align herself (at least in public) with a category such as spirituality, which appears so fixed, so unchanging, so redolent of tradition” and many scholars, she suspects, “have been forced into a spiritual closet” (15). Yet, following the lead of scholars such as Alexander who dare to name themselves as spiritual beings, bringing my spirituality through the academic door is precisely what I aim to do in this dissertation. Admittedly, this was not my intention to begin. But part way through my doctoral degree journey I found myself on the edge of an existential crisis questioning why it was that I had come to academia in the first place and wondering where I belonged — *if I belonged*.

The question of why I chose academia was the easier of the two to answer. Feminist scholar and cultural theorist bell hooks (1994) writes, “I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend — to grasp what was happening in and around me. Most importantly, I wanted the hurt to go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing” (59). Like hooks, I came to my doctoral research hoping to make sense of what “was happening in and around me” (59). It had been this desperation to make sense of what, in many ways, seemed incomprehensible that led me to trauma studies in the first place. Perhaps I was hoping to find healing. But, as hooks

further explains, theory on its own is not intrinsically healing nor liberating — it’s what we do with theory that matters. Ironically, it was only when the course of my PhD journey changed that I came to realize how deeply I had thrown myself into academic work to avoid my own traumatic experiences. In a way, I had allowed academia to become my form of escapism. And it was only then that I came to realize that I had allowed “academic” to become my identity, albeit an identity that was somewhat of a masquerade, partially hidden. However, trauma has a way of returning, belatedly, bringing that which one hides or that which is hidden from us to the surface. In the process of redirecting my research project, I needed to understand why it was that I turned my attention toward certain topics but avoided studying others, like spirituality. In the process, I asked myself: what kind of scholar do I intend to be? Upon reflection, the near existential crisis I experienced was less about my PhD itself, and more about myself, the person pursuing a doctoral degree — the person who wanted to challenge taboos and norms within the structure of academe. What at first felt like an undoing turned out to be an opportunity to find my place in academia. This focus allows me to study the connection between Pagan spirituality and healing that is both at the heart of this project and my own lived experiences as a practicing cisgender Pagan woman.

At its core, the question of belonging is a concern of locatedness. When researchers are asked to locate themselves in their research what is really being asked is: who are you and why do you care about this topic? To be clear, simply caring about a topic is not necessarily enough to warrant studying the lives of others, particularly regarding matters as intimate as trauma. Indeed, my point here is that care/locatedness is at once personal and political. Locatedness, then, is a matter of “naming the place from which one speaks” (Koobak and Thapar-Björkert 48). My choice to turn my attention toward studying Pagan women and Pagan gender variant persons’ experiences of trauma and healing was about naming the place from which I speak, both

as a Pagan and as a scholar. To this point, my scholarship leading up to pursuing my doctoral degree explicitly examined spirituality. In particular, my Master of Gender Studies project examined how women's spiritually-inspired tattoos told their life stories, including experiences of trauma and healing. During my undergraduate degree I wrote an auto-fiction essay on witchcraft for a course on women's life writing, examined Pagan ritual and belief for a folklore course on customs, and studied Newfoundland fairylore and supernatural belief. Indeed, I examined spirituality and belief from various angles through feminist, folklore, and religious studies. Outside of academia I have been a practicing Pagan for more than two decades and have been involved in various in-person and online communities across Canada, United States, and Ireland. In hindsight, although it seemed as though I had initially left the academic study of spirituality behind in pursuit of my doctoral degree, I can recognize now that the topic has played a significant role throughout my scholarship, even if that focus has been indirect at times. It is against this backdrop that my focus on Paganism in this dissertation emerges.

Inspired by daring scholars who work toward unsettling false boundaries between the personal, political, and spiritual, as well as scholarship working across multiple disciplines, my dissertation calls for taking up the spaces in/between. To do so, I embrace contemplative and artful modes of inquiry that open the way for self-reflexive, holistic ways of knowing. On the point of daring to write "academic texts differently," as Nina Lykke (2014) puts it, woven throughout my dissertation are my own auto/biographical portraits.¹ As Daniel P. Barbezat and

¹ This dissertation includes auto/biographical portraits in three ways: 1) Participants' auto/biographical portraits which I theorize in conjunction with their oral narratives that were discussed during semi-structured interviews; 2) As an autoethnographer, I include my own auto/biographical portraits which I theorize in discourse with participants' visual and oral life narratives as part of the academic work of this dissertation; and 3) In the spirit of *thinking with* portraits, I have included my own auto/biographical portraits throughout this dissertation as a way to invite readers into the process of collaborative witnessing. Moreover, this approach is disruptive of conventional academic approaches and, thus, contributes to content, process and meaning of this work in alignment with my commitment to feminist art-based and decolonial scholarship.

Mirabai Bush claim, “mindfulness is both a process (mindful practice) and an outcome (mindful awareness)” (95). In this way, my auto/biographical portraits are a contemplative and artful practice which creates an opening for critical analysis to emerge through multiple ways of knowing. The act of creating my portraits is both a process and an outcome. Thus, this practice allows me to engage trauma discourse through an embodied approach that makes space for multiple, blended ways of knowing. That notwithstanding, I emphasize that at its core autoethnography is political (Spry 2011), precisely because the researcher theorizes their own lived realities in relation to broader social, cultural, and political landscapes. The purpose is to make explicit the interconnectedness between the personal and the political. In this way, autoethnographic discourse is itself a form of testimony. Moreover, trauma discourse makes clear that trauma and healing are political matters because personal experiences are inextricably entwined with social and cultural structures of oppression, as I theorize throughout this dissertation (Dunn 2019). Against this backdrop, it is my hope that my auto/biographical portraits function as a form of interrelated visual text that invites dialogue between myself/participants/audience/readers that itself performs a kind of co-witnessing through our shared encounter. As it is with trauma itself, my portraits are multilayered, polysemic, dialogic, in continual process — and purposefully disruptive.

As I began my own auto/biographical practice, years before I was a doctoral student, I could not have imagined that my photography practice would eventually become integral to my PhD journey. When, years ago, a friend asked me to help her create portraits of herself as part of her healing process I did not predict that our shared experience would plant a seed that would shape this project. When I set the study of spirituality aside at the beginning of my doctoral

studies, I had not anticipated that I would eventually study Paganism. But life, like trauma, and the path of my PhD journey, has a way of coming back around.

At times during this journey, I have felt like Alice in Wonderland falling down the rabbit hole, unsure of where I might land. But eventually I have tumbled out the other end, landing precisely where I was meant to be. That is, where I was meant to be at the time I arrived.



Figure 1 Unnamed, a/b portrait, Gina Snooks. 2021/2022.

*“I invite you to a world where there is no such thing as time...”
Her Name is Alice, Shinedown*

Chapter 1 Thinking About/With Auto/Biographical Portraits

1.1 Introduction

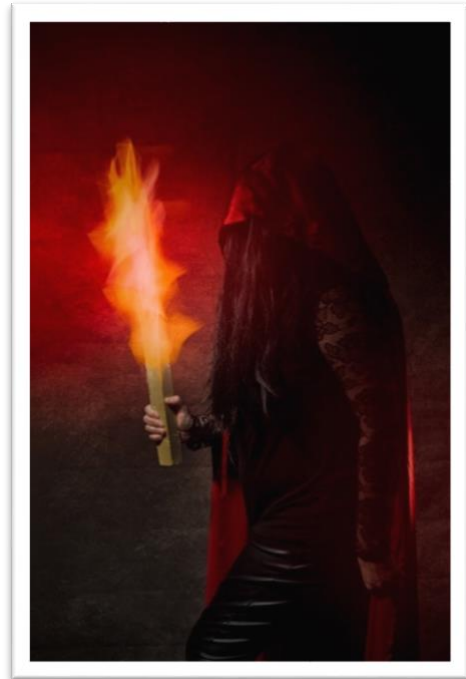


Figure 2 Persephone, a/b portrait, Gina Snooks, March 2022.

*“Creative fantasy is simply another reality”
Shawn McNiff (106)*

Creative expression is at the heart of Pagan spirituality (Magliocco 2001). Not surprisingly, then, creativity is integral to Pagan healing paradigms — and creative artful practices are integral to this dissertation. Located at the meeting place of arts-based research (ABR), life storytelling as feminist praxis (life writing and autoethnography), trauma and holistic healing studies, and Pagan studies, my multimodal doctoral research project uses auto/biographical portraiture — as a

mode of critical and creative inquiry — to examine self-identified Pagan women and Pagan gender-variant persons’ experiences of trauma and healing.²

At its core, arts-based research is a paradigm located at the nexus of art and social sciences that promotes “art making as a way of knowing” (Leavy 4) and as modes for thinking symbolically and metaphorically, thereby opening “up multiplicity in meaning” (Leavy 10). Specifically, my usage of auto/biographical portraiture locates this dissertation under the umbrella of arts-based visual research, which emphasizes that images offer potential for deeper understanding of human experiences through the usage of metaphor, iconography, and analogy (Holm et al. 2019). Arts-based research is a mode of critical inquiry and a catalyst for social transformation. To this point, I align with arts-based researcher Patricia Leavy who posits that ABR is a useful strategy to examine the connections between individual persons’ lived realities and broader social, cultural, and political dimensions and is, therefore, particularly suited for women and gender studies and feminist scholarship (9). Against this backdrop, central to my study is the question: what can auto/biographical portraiture tell us about Pagan persons’ embodied experiences and memories of trauma?

To explore this question, all thirteen participants in this study (plus myself) created at least one auto/biographical portrait to explore their experiences of trauma and healing, which was followed by oral storytelling (semi-structured interviews) in which participants critically

² I recognize that people of all genders experience trauma. That said, gender identity and gender expression can be integral to how one understands their subjectivity, thus differently gendered persons will experience trauma in different ways. Consequently, it is beyond the scope of this project to provide a thorough analysis of the relationship between gender and trauma across all genders. Moreover, the ways in which each person experiences trauma is shaped in and through cultural, social, and political landscapes in which gender privilege is unequally distributed. Thus, gender can be a factor at the core of trauma, such as gender-based violence which is a recurring experience among participants in this study. My choice to focus on the experiences of self-identified Pagan women and Pagan gender-variant persons is informed by my own subjectivity as a cisgender Pagan woman and how that subjectivity shapes my location in Pagan communities. That said, I critique the sex/gender system and make space for gender-variant folks because of that system’s binary hegemony.

reflected on the meaning of their portraits. The term auto/biography — auto (self), bio (life story) and graphy (from the Greek word for writing) — means to write about a life story (Smith and Watson 2001). Auto/biographical portraiture, in my usage, is a medium of visual life storytelling. In the practice of auto/biographical portraiture, photographs are created to explore and/or express an aspect of a person’s life story — their lived reality, their memories, and their sense of self. Following life writing scholarship, I write the term auto/biography with a forward slash between the words auto and biography to denote an interconnectedness between one’s own life stories (autobiography) and the life stories of others (biography) (Chansky 2016; Rak 2005). This theoretical framing allows for a broad interpretation of what constitutes visual life storytelling through photography. Stylistically, auto/biographical portraits can resemble conceptual self-portraits, selfies, documentary style photography and/or composite art because the emphasis is on the visual life story itself and not the product, per se.

To expand, auto/biographical “acts situate the body in some kind of material surface that functions as a theatre of embodied self-representation,” as Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith claim (5). Adding to that, I align with Amelia Jones who argues that

The strategy of self-performance in self-portrait photography has a particular force for women artists, who struggle to articulate themselves as “authors” rather than “objects” of artistic creation.... In picturing themselves photographically, they speak themselves as subjects (creating their own visual narrative or autobiography of sorts) and thus unhinge the age-old tendency to collapse any image of a woman’s body into the status of speechless and dominated object. (69-70)

Notably, Jones is referring to photographers Cindy Sherman and Laura Aguilar who engage in photography as a medium to speak back to the “male” (or patriarchal) gaze as a form of resistance. That notwithstanding, I apply the argument of speaking back through portraiture here because auto/biographical portraiture can be a way for people who have experienced

disempowerment through trauma to speak to their experiences and memories as a form of testimony — which is itself a method of speaking back, speaking up, and speaking for one’s self, rather than being spoken for or spoken over. Thus, it is my contention that auto/biographical portraiture can be a catalyst for personal transformation insofar as creating portraits about one’s own lived experiences and memories of trauma can be cathartic, healing, and empowering (Nuñez 2013; Spence 1995). Theoretically, and experientially in my own practice, I align with photographers and theorists Jo Spence (1995), Rosy Martin (2013), and Cristina Nuñez (2013) in understanding self-focused photography to be a mode of self-guided therapeutic photography.

Further, this dissertation centres on the concept of “collaborative witnessing,” which prominent autoethnographer Carolyn Ellis describes as “a form of relational autoethnography that works to evocatively tell the experiences of others in shared storytelling and conversation” (Holman Jones et al. 18). Collaborative witnessing, then, engages what trauma scholar Kelly Oliver refers to as

The double meaning of *witness* — eyewitness based on first-hand knowledge, on one hand, and *bearing witness* to something beyond recognition that can’t be seen, on the other hand — it is the heart of subjectivity. The tension between eyewitness testimony and bearing witness both positions the subject in finite history and necessitates the infinite response-ability of subjectivity. (16)

In this context, I theorize collaborative witnessing as a mode of inquiry and co-creation of knowledge.

1.2 Relational Research

I ground this study in “relational ethics,” which Carolyn Ellis (2003) argues “requires researchers to act from our hearts and minds, acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others, and take responsibility for actions and their consequences” (3). On this point, to centre participants’

voices, I have woven their life stories throughout this dissertation. By extension, analysis of participants' subjectivity and lived realities occurs across this dissertation. In addition, I respect participants' right to self-determination in naming their identities, social locations and lived realities, whether that means respecting pronouns, chosen names, or the degree to which they disclose or do not disclose their experiences of trauma. This strategy attends to the complexities of human experience, which is precisely the purpose of social research. Moreover, this method helps to frame participants' lived realities within the broader context of trauma discourse. In practice, my strategy aligns with anthropologist Treena Orchard's claim that researchers are ethically bound to be familiar with the lives of participants and specifically to understand "what kinds of issues can be triggering, and how to respond to these situations safely" (7). Indeed, a particular benefit of being a researcher who is personally connected to Pagan communities is my familiarity with issues within the broader Pagan movement – for example, issues of gender, racial, and sexuality politics that may relate to participants' experiences of trauma and healing.

That said, my positionality as a researcher embedded in Paganism necessitates a particular attentiveness to the ways in which researchers' relationships with the persons and topics that they study shape the research process and its findings. Indeed, there are both benefits and risks to doing research within one's own social groups. One benefit is that the researcher's existing embeddedness in communities may mean that people are more likely to participate in their study. However, there is always a risk that research with intimate others can alter relationships in harmful ways, particularly if participants feel misrepresented by researchers, which can result in a sense of betrayal that might be exemplified by the fact that trust existed before the research relationship. I expand up this critique of my insider status in chapter two: *Between Wor(l)ds: Artful Methodologies*.

1.3 Negotiating Disclosure

On the topic of telling, feminist autoethnographer Sonja Boon insists “Just because someone tells you something doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s yours to share. Just because you’ve lived something doesn’t mean that the story is your own. Just because you see something doesn’t mean it’s yours to claim” (244). In this statement, Boon makes clear that there are ethical matters to consider when telling life stories because disclosing experiences can have harmful effects. This is true even when these narratives are autoethnographic because our own experiences are interwoven with the experiences of others. Further, several participants in this study, myself included, have purposefully chosen not to disclose the specific details of the trauma they explore in this study. To this point, it is first important to clarify that I understand trauma to be a wound that is “not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in its very unassimilated nature — the way it was precisely not known in the first instance — returns to haunt the survivor later on,” as trauma scholar Cathy Caruth explains (4; see also: Brown 2018). Trauma, then, is not a single experience or event, but is rather its ongoing effects and *affect*, which are multilayered and in continual process. For this reason, it can be difficult to name trauma because in lived reality all its parts are woven together. On the topic of disclosure, given that trauma is often a relational experience, there are ethical implications involved in naming others in the context of one’s own trauma. I am not implying that people should not name the source of their trauma when it involves others, but that it is not necessary to do so to theorize its effect, if that is what people choose. In fact, silence can itself be a form of resistance and telling can be retraumatizing. Notably, this approach is consistent with my call for participants which explicitly stated that I was interested in studying how experiences of trauma

shape self-identified Pagan women and Pagan gender variant persons' sense of self and their lived realities; thus, participants would not be required to disclose the details of the trauma they have experienced. My position follows decolonial trauma scholar Michael Rothberg, who himself follows trauma scholar Dominick LaCapra, in arguing that "it can be productive to talk about trauma without explicitly naming it" (xiii). However, as Rothberg adds we ought "to think about the relationship between trauma (named or not) and *other* disruptive social forces" (xiii).

1.4 Decolonising Trauma Studies

Contemporary trauma studies emerged as a form of cultural scholarship in the 1990s as a framework to understand and to bear witness to the embodied and material experience of trauma and traumatic histories (Andermahr 500). Drawing upon criticism of deconstructive and psychoanalysis epistemologies and grounded in Holocaust studies, cultural trauma studies (also referred to as simply trauma studies) aimed to understand the cultural, social, and political dimensions that shape the lived experiences of persons who experience trauma (Andermahr 2015; Craps 2015). Theoretically, this approach aimed to "construct an ethical response to forms of human suffering," as Sonja Andermahr writes (500). Andermahr, further, claims that trauma studies intended to "foster cross cultural solidarity" (501), but fails to do so because its rootedness in Eurocentric epistemologies failed to recognize the diversity of human experience. Similarly, Stef Craps argues that trauma studies typically "marginalize and ignore traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority cultures" — including minoritized groups within Western landscapes —and falsely presume that Eurocentric worldviews are universal (2). By contrast, decolonising trauma studies make space for multiple epistemologies while also being

attentive to the ways in which trauma is rooted in structures of oppression such as colonialism and institutional racism (Andermahr 2015). Given that contemporary Paganism is located across diverse cultures and histories and given the diversity of participants' subjectivity and religiosity, this dissertation takes a decolonial approach to theorizing trauma. Moreover, my approach to decolonising trauma studies aligns with scholarship that understands trauma through holistic paradigms — which make clear the interconnectedness between physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual aspects of trauma and healing (Linklater 2014; Dunn 2019; Duran 2006) — and feminist and anti-racist paradigms — that take into consideration how multiple overlapping and interconnecting identities and social locations influence individual experiences (Archer 2021; Brown 2018), as I examine in chapter two.

1.5 Introduction to Participants

To locate participants in this study — Alice, Ashley, Caitlyn, Elizabeth, Jeannette, Lauren, Lupa, Mary Allen, Mayra, Molly, Riley, Sandra, and Sara — here, I give an overview of participants' biographical locations followed by more details provided in chapter four. My extended introduction that follows describes each participant in relation to their religiosity as practicing Pagans. My motivation to introduce participants in two different chapters is twofold. First, by providing this overview of participants' biographical information my strategy attends to the risk of unintentionally identifying participants who have chosen to be deidentified (while also acknowledging, as participants are aware and as they consented, that full anonymity cannot be guaranteed in a small study). Second, by introducing participants more thoroughly in chapter four, *Contemporary Paganism as a Way of Life*, I am locating participants within the Pagan movement, which provides pertinent information about how participants' religiosity informs

their sense of self and their experiences of trauma and healing. This split placement and approach is a purposeful strategy in alignment with my feminist methodologies and political commitments to centre participants' voices throughout this dissertation.

Geographically, participants are located across Canada (six plus myself), the United States (five) and Ireland (two) — personal and familial associations with these landscapes shape participants' social and political relationships with these lands and the more-than-human worlds of these locations differently. Participants range in age from mid-twenties to mid-sixties, two participants self-identify as gender-variant and the other eleven (plus myself) self-identify as cisgender women. Including myself, six participants identify as heterosexual, one participant did not disclose that information, one participant is pansexual, two participants described themselves as queer and bisexual, and another participant identified as bisexual specifically; another participant stated that their sexuality is non-binary and that they are sexually attracted to a person's energy more so than gender and/or sexual identity, and one participant described her sexuality as heteroflexible by which she means that she "passes as heterosexual" although she is not. However, she noted that her ability to pass as heterosexual means she experiences hetero privilege and for this reason she does not identify as queer because she does not feel that she has experienced significant oppression based on her sexuality or perceived sexuality.

Mayra is the only participant who identifies as a person of colour. She specifically identifies as Hispanic to acknowledge that her identity as a first-generation American is shaped by both her father's Guatemalan and her mother's Cuban identities and cultures. Two participants indicated that they have Indigenous ancestry, but do not claim identity as an Indigenous person, and all participants have European ancestry and heritage which shapes their sense of self and their Paganism to various degrees. Twelve participants are first-generation

Pagans (one participant did not disclose that information), however every participant commented that their beliefs and practices are shaped by their familial and/or cultural worldviews, including culturally located folk beliefs and practices about the supernatural and more-than-human worlds. Further, each participant stated that the religion (at least culturally) of their families is Christian, which may be a reflection of the prominence of Christianity in Canada, the United States and Ireland.

All participants have postsecondary education — two hold doctorate degrees, both in psychoanalytical related fields, and four hold master level degrees. Interesting, perhaps as a correlation to their interest in the topic of this research project, six participants work in trauma and healing related fields — three as trauma counsellors and/or psychotherapists and three in healing fields. Further, two participants work in social services fields such as housing and gender-based violence. Thus, in addition to their own experiential knowledge, the majority of participants have postsecondary education and/or professional working knowledge of trauma and/or healing.

Finally, on the topic of dis/ability, two participants identified as a person with disabilities and one person indicated that they experience mental health issues, complex posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety, all of which can be related to their various experiences of trauma and violence. Having said that, several more participants stated that they experience depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder but did not self-identify as a person with disabilities. This distinction, I would argue, points to the importance of framing participants' experiences through the language of their own choosing rather than assuming people with similar identities conceptualize their lived realities in the same manner, which is an important anti-oppressive and feminist strategy. To reiterate, my intersectional feminist analysis recognizes that

although all participants in this study practice Paganism those practices are shaped in and through various other overlapping and interconnected identities, social locations and lived experiences.

1.6 Critical Self-Reflexivity

I ground this dissertation in feminist, decolonial, and anti-oppressive methodologies or what M. Jagger deems socially just research, which focus on social transformation as well as “justice, equality and democracy” (Jagger, vii). This approach emphasizes the necessity of critical self-reflexivity to highlight matters of power and politics and to the ways in which a researcher’s own lived realities shape the discourse (Livholts 2012; Leavy and Harris 2019; Strega and Brown 2015). To this point, feminist scholar Mona Livholts describes critical reflexivity as “a process of thinking about one’s own thinking” (4). To be sure, this process is not a trivial practice of simply listing one’s identities and social locations in relation to the research project, but rather critical self-reflexivity is a critical analysis of one’s locatedness within the scholarship. Hence, critical self-reflexivity necessitates an honest and in-depth examination of how power, privilege and politics operate within those locations because the production of knowledge is always “a political process” (Strega and Brown 9). Moreover, critical reflexivity requires a willingness to acknowledge and respond to the “disruptions, messiness, the unfamiliar and the uncomfortable” aspects of scholarship, as Wanda Pillow asserts (qtd. in Livholts 4). Without this willingness to turn the gaze back onto ourselves, researchers risk reinscribing privilege and power, rather than working to challenge such structures, which is at the heart of feminist, decolonial and anti-oppressive research. To this point, I argue that socially just research paradigms necessitate embracing humility. What I mean by this is that researchers must be humble enough to become

immersed in that “messiness” and in those uncomfortable spaces of which Pillow speaks (qtd. in Livholts 4). Indeed, it is only in doing so that we might be better able to identify when our practices are harmful (even if unintentionally). Then, we must be willing to adjust our practices — this, to me, is integral to socially just research. In the spirit of critical self-reflexivity, in the sections to follow I locate myself within this discourse by first elucidating my way of thinking with and about auto/biographical portraits. Following that I examine one of my own unnamed portraits to place myself within this trauma discourse, both theoretically and experientially. Then, I expand upon my positionality as practicing as a cisgender Pagan within the context of this dissertation.



Figure 3 Unnamed, a/b portrait, Gina Snooks, 2018

1.7 Auto/biographical Portraiture as Performative Thinking

My artwork does not represent a singular and knowable truth, but I am, instead, exploring concepts of truth, trauma, and embodied subjectivity through multidimensional and dynamic lenses. Through these lenses, I understand that subjectivity is partially discursively shaped in and

through structures of power and systems of oppression. At the same time, this dissertation emphasizes that “The self is inexorably embodied” (Jones 1998 34), thus I attend to the material realities of the ongoing effect and affect of trauma. My way of thinking and processing meanders in and through experiences and memories of trauma — often looping back and moving in and out of time — creating a palimpsest of imagery and meaning. Further, I locate my portraits in the *and/or* space wherein meaning is understood to be multiple and wherein the forward slash signifies the interconnectedness between things, ideas and feeling — trauma/healing, self/other, memory/present moment, named/unnamed, and in the space between what can be known/ is unknowable. I argue, then, that throughout my portraits I am *and/or* am not the person I/you see me to be. Theoretically and experientially, my auto/biographical portraits are a poststructuralist (and postmodern art) autoethnographic performance. Following feminist visual culture theorist Amelia Jones (1998), I understand my auto/biographical portraits to be a form of body art that reveal multidimensional stories of embodied subjectivity. Building upon the theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and more, Jones states “social, political, and cultural context is crucial to this analysis of what body art (and, for that matter, what poststructuralism, feminism, and theories of postmodernism) can tell about our current experience of subjectivity” (11) — thereby emphasizing the corporeal materiality of subjectivity that is at once shaped in and through cultural contexts, including its gender, racial and class identifications (13). Thus, while my position works toward destabilizing the notion of a singular universal Truth (capital “T” intentional) to reveal the complexity of human experience, I am also attentive to how those experiences are discursively formed.

As Victoria Pitts writes, “Instead of one truth of the body or of ontology, there are competing truths that are products of time, place, space, geography, and culture (28). Similarly, in her examination of feminist art therapy Susan Joyce explains “The process of exploring one’s selves in the postmodern sense becomes a process that has no final result or settled ending; there is no neat, decisive answer or static moment when we can conclusively define ourselves, for it has always already shifted into new territory” (63). To this point, each of my auto/biographical portraits are purposefully polysemic. In a sense, this strategy responds to the multilayeredness and interconnectedness of trauma. In another way, this method intentionally mimics the belated return of trauma that disrupts and destabilizes the spaces between what can be known and what is unknowable and what is named and what is unnameable, or that which refuses to be named. Importantly, this approach at once recognizes how trauma shapes my sense of self as an ongoing process and emphasizes that personhood is itself an embodied experience (Jones 1998; Watson and Smith 2012).

On this point, several of my portraits are unnamed, which is a term I have chosen rather than the term untitled, to signal that not everything about trauma can or should be named. Building further upon this concept, several of my auto/biographical portraits are concomitantly unnamed and named — Unnamed/[insert title] — which symbolizes that trauma both refuses and demands witnessing. At the same time, this method recognizes that (part of) the meaning of these portraits emerges in the process of creating them and develops further during my ongoing theoretical engagement of thinking with these images. My strategically placed visual narratives symbolize the ways in which trauma is disruptive and the ways in which “the story of trauma is inescapably bound to referential return,” as trauma scholar Cathy Caruth writes (7).

Moreover, my auto/biographical portraits are an intertextual semiotic dialogue wherein meaning is constituted and reconstituted in the process of co-witnessing and co-creating knowledge through the process of collaborative witnessing. Following Ann Cvetkovich who theorizes the concept of *affect* “as a category that encompasses affect, emotion, and feeling, and that includes impulses, desires, and feelings” (4) and Sara Ahmed who claims that “Affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects” (29), my auto/biographical portraiture practice is an integral part of my way of thinking about and through the affect of trauma — both personally, politically, and theoretically. Like the concept of intertextuality itself, my portraits are a series of questions that require engagement with multiple concepts which pose “questions and require[s] one to engage with them rather than forcing one to produce definite answers” (Allen 59). To allow space for the co-creation of knowledge, I do not provide an explanation for all my own auto/biographical portraits included in this dissertation. My invitation to the readers is to engage in the performative act of thinking with these portraits as a method of subversive discourse and as a mode of collaborative witnessing. This sort of creative practice “engages with, and can extend theoretical and philosophical paradigms,” as Estelle Barret articulates (7).

That said, I have chosen not to utilize participants’ portraits in the same manner to avoid inadvertently misrepresenting their narratives which were shared as part of their life story in relation to their oral narratives. Indeed, I would argue that decontextualizing participants’ auto/biographical portraits in this way could be perceived as disassociating participants from their lived realities and memories of trauma and healing. Thus, doing so, would be counter to my participant-centric approach which emphasizes that participants’ lived realities encompass more

than their experiences and narratives of trauma — whereas placing myself in this position does not constitute a form of objectification.

1.5 On Witnessing (Throat) Wounds



Figure 4 Unnamed a/b portrait, Gina Snooks, April 2021.

My understanding of trauma follows Griselda Pollock’s proposal that “we think about trauma, not in terms of event (which we cannot know), but in terms of encounter with its traces that assumes some kind of space and time, and makes some kind of gap as well as a different kind of participating otherness” (4). Auto/biographical portraiture, then, is not a singular confession; rather, it is an attempt to make visible these traces that are often unseen. On this point, while I do not explain all of my portraits in this dissertation as a strategy to ‘speak silence’ and to activate reader engagement/collaborative witnessing without always foreclosing/directing meaning, I do offer a brief analysis of the unnamed portrait above to give some insight as to how it is that I think about and through trauma in my auto/biographical portraiture practice. Two interwoven themes are prominent in my portraits: voice/silence and temporality — this portrait speaks directly to the concept of voice/silence. For context, the wounded throat represents a wounded

throat chakra, which is associated with communication or, as Donna Eden articulates, it is through “the throat chakra that we speak, the most characteristically human form of expression” (156). In this portrait, my throat wounds symbolize that I feel my voice has been ripped from me. Indeed, my inability to speak, at times, is part of my trauma. Thus, I created this auto/biographical portrait to make visible what this experience feels like to me. My intention was to create a portrait that could make my psychological, emotional, and spiritual wounds be seen in a portrait that otherwise looks like me—thereby, highlighting that trauma is a part of who I am, but also that I am more than my experiences of trauma. As Kelly Oliver writes, “While trauma undermines subjectivity and witnessing restores it, the process of witnessing is not reduced to the testimony of trauma. So, too, subjectivity is not reduced to the effect of trauma” (7). Finally, as a performative act of collaborative witnessing, my wounded throat portrait speaks to the recurring themes of voice and visibility and the idea of being unheard and/or unable to speak that emerged in participants’ life stories. My own portrait is, therefore, at once personal and representative of the broader ways in which trauma is experienced.

Importantly, my own trauma is multilayered —often it sits on the edge of my tongue, unspeakable in more than one way, at times it returns to haunt me in unexpected ways, and at times it is that which I cannot know because it is buried in my subconscious and/or is part of the intergenerational and/or historic trauma that I may have unknowingly inherited. Ironically, I can speak to the point that my older brother’s unexpected death when I was thirteen had a profound effect on my life but, nearly thirty-five years later, I cannot know its full impact, because it is a part of me and my subconscious. On the other hand, I know that other parts of my trauma keep me awake some nights and/or make their way into my nightmares, but those stories disappear at the tip of my tongue. To that which I do know, but choose silence, I will say that through my

auto/biographical portraits I explore feelings of grief, pain, shame, fear, helplessness, and disempowerment — some of which is centred around my experience of motherhood and what I believe to be a failure on my part to be a good mother. But to share the details of that trauma would necessitate disclosing stories that are not mine to tell. Thus, it is not a refusal to be vulnerable that shapes my silence, per se, but rather a refusal to make a spectacle of the pain of others.

1.6 Storyteller's Story

To further situate myself in this discourse, my interest in Pagan studies is also a personal matter in that I am a cisgender Pagan woman who has been practicing Paganism for more than twenty years. My PhD journey took place while I was in my forties which places me in the same age range as most of the participants in this study. My own Paganism is shaped by my holistic and animistic worldview and by the culture of Newfoundland and Labrador in which my family histories are rooted, including vernacular belief in the supernatural and folk healing practices. That said, belief operates on a spectrum and can move between total acceptance, humorous incredulity, and rejection (or complete dissociation or denial) (Everett 2009), thus I do not presume that Newfoundland and Labrador vernacular belief is one dimensional. To expand, my heritage is shaped by the cultures of the island of Newfoundland specifically which is itself largely rooted in English and Irish diasporic cultures. Indeed, the erosion of Indigenous knowledges was a strategy by which Newfoundlander identity was constructed.³ To this point, I

³ See, for example, the body of literature collected and edited by Joseph R. Smallwood in *The Book of Newfoundland* which includes six volumes, published between 1937-1967. Smallwood played an instrumental role in negotiated Newfoundland and Labrador's entry into Confederation with Canada in 1949.

locate myself as a settler with primarily English and Irish ancestry. I acknowledge also that my family histories indicate that some of my English ancestors intermarried with Mi'kmaq peoples. That said, I am mindful of Mi'kmaq scholar Bonita Lawrence's critique of "*virtually white*" people who attempt to "boundary cross" in the name of distant Indigenous ancestors to place themselves within Indigenous communities and/or to access sacred Indigenous knowledges (13), thereby reiterating epistemic violence. This complicated location influences my relationship to and with the island of Newfoundland — including its histories and cultures — and informs my commitment to decolonising my spirituality as an ongoing process. Further, I describe my religiosity as feminist Paganism because there can be no separation between my Paganism as a way of life and my commitment to intersectional feminist politics. I also identify as a Witch and devotional polytheist whose practices are primarily Irish goddess centric. In the early 2000s I was initiated into an Irish Reconstruction Druid polytheistic grove in Alberta Canada, that operated from a diasporic perspective. Although I no longer practice with that community its training continues to shape my own practices.⁴ Consistently throughout my years of practice ancestor veneration has been a part of my Pagan worldview. This practice necessitates ongoing analysis of the ways in which my family histories and beliefs are shaped by and embedded in histories of colonization and migration.

I have been involved in various Pagan online and in-person communities across Canada and the United States for more than twenty-years. My primary Pagan community consists of an eclectic, non-hierarchical, group of self-identified Pagan women and gender-variant persons who are part of a private (mostly) online community that I co-founded with one of my sisters in 2010 and that I continue to co-facilitate. Our members are located across Canada, the United States

⁴ Although located under the umbrella of Irish Reconstructionist Druidry, this Grove filtered their belief system through an Irish diasporic lens, particularly Irish Canadian culture.

and Europe. Unquestionably, my ideas about Paganism and my own practices have been shaped by my relationships in this group. This group does not function as a religious circle (coven or grove), per se, but as a community of like-minded persons who share similar but diverse beliefs and practices. Given that membership in this group is by invitation only, membership is tightknit, and the community often provides support for members in various ways, including healing practices. To this point, my decision to invite self-identified Pagan women and Pagan gender-variant persons to participate in this study is shaped in part by my experiences working within this gender-specific community, as I allude to above.

1.8 In Favour of Unruly Discourse

As Jess Moriarty claims “Autoethnographers are unruly” (3), by which she means that autoethnographers often embrace creative and performative approaches to knowledge creation and dissemination. Moreover, my dissertation favours unruly discourse that disrupts the trajectory of conventional academic writing styles and mimics the form of trauma through its repetitiveness and spiralling return, thus performing theoretical disruptions that also loop back and connect. My purposely located auto/biographical portraits achieve this disruption of the traditional essay format to invite an evocative intersubjective dialogue, as explained above. This blended approach is a political act to create subversive discourse (Cvetkovich 2012). In fact, this strategy builds upon autoethnography scholar Norman K. Denzin’s position that “trauma is experienced as repetition; memories, images and emotions will not go away” and therefore the usage of repetition in writing and performing trauma narratives mimics the traumatic experience in a productive manner (5).

Perhaps less obvious, my writing style evokes the symbol of a spiral insofar as my discourse progresses in a cyclical manner that moves outward and returns — never quite landing at the same beginning place, but discursively creating an opening outward by which to engage in and invite critical analysis. This nonlinear method is an epistemological commitment that signifies that knowledge is in continual process, resisting closure, while also inextricably connected to its centre. At the same time, my spiralling discourse symbolically and theoretically further connects my dissertation to the theme of repetition central to trauma discourse. Interestingly, spirals are also common symbols evoked in Paganism. For example, the Reclaiming Witchcraft Tradition evokes the symbolism of the spiral in their aptly named spiral dance, which signifies moving through cyclical time in an act of shared performative storytelling that, simultaneously, functions to raise energy for magical purposes (Reclaiming).⁵ Similarly, deriving their meaning from Jungian archetypes and Jung’s ideas on the collective consciousness, the Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism interprets the spiral as a symbol to mean “a path of growth, transformation and psychological or spiritual journey” (718), which, to me, seems like a fitting symbol of this dissertation.

Attending to what Opsaskwayak Cree Nation Shawn Wilson defines as “relational accountability” (43), I have highlighted the interconnectedness of the literature, methodologies, and theoretical frameworks that underpin my study by weaving the relevant literature into my methodologies and theoretical framework chapter (in absence of a traditional literature review format). An analysis of literature places the scholarship into context with relevant discourse and is, therefore, an important aspect of doing research. My strategy does not disregard the necessity of this practice, but instead attends to relevant literature in a way that aligns with my

⁵ See: <https://www.reclaimingspiraldance.org/history>.

commitment to holistic and relational research paradigms. My unruly discourse is, therefore, a hybrid method that puts into practice multiple ways of knowing, analyzing, and disseminating knowledge.

1.9 Situating My Study

Paganism is not a homogenous religion, but rather is often described as “a family of religious traditions” (Davy 5). The word Pagan is an umbrella term to describe practitioners of various spiritual practices and/or religions located under the scope of New Religious Movements; including, but not limited to, Witchcraft (or Traditional Witchcraft), Wicca, Druidry, Heathenry (Northern European Paganism), reconstructionist religions, and devotional polytheism. Given its diversity, there is no singular doctrine (or holy text); indeed, Paganism is defined by scholars and practitioners as an orthopractic rather than an orthodoxic religion (Magliocco 2004). Thus, what unites practitioners of various religions under the Pagan umbrella is shared practice instead of shared belief (Hoff Kraemer 2012; Beckett 2018). Having said that, contemporary Pagan worldviews commonly encompass holistic paradigms and draw upon a range of diverse folk religions (included pre-Christian and revived Pagan practices), traditional customs, and mythologies across diverse cultures (Davy 2007; Hoff Kraemer 2012; Magliocco 2004). Other common themes include: belief in many gods and goddesses (polytheism), reverence for the earth and nature, experience of divinity as present in the physical world, ritual practices, belief in the supernatural and magic, as well as practices grounded in “relationships with gods, ancestors and other spiritual beings,” as Pagan author and Druid John Beckett writes (2019, 2).⁶ These

⁶ In a larger spiralling outward motion, I examine contemporary Paganism in detail in chapter three *Contemporary Paganism as a Way of Life* and chapter four *The Circle is Cast, but Who’s Allowed In? Inclusion & Diversity in Paganism*.

various beliefs and practices, undoubtedly, inform Pagan persons' sense of self and the ways in which they engage in the world around them.

Rooted in holistic epistemologies, Pagan approaches to trauma and healing recognize the interconnectedness of physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of trauma and healing that shape the lived realities of Pagan persons. Moreover, a common attribute of Paganism is belief in and practice of magic as well as belief in the supernatural and existence of more than human beings, which can influence human reality in either helpful or harmful ways. This background informs Pagan approaches to trauma and healing paradigms. Hegemonic trauma discourse, however, is primarily rooted in biomedical and psychoanalytical paradigms that may not meet the needs of contemporary Pagans whose religious beliefs and practices can seem counterintuitive to Western philosophies (Crowley 2018; Seymour 2005).

In fact, many Pagans are concerned that trauma specialists (counsellors, psychotherapists, and theorists) “will perceive their spiritual practices and any belief in magic or non-ordinary phenomena and states of consciousness as symptomatic of psychological disorder,” as Jungian psychologist and Wiccan High Priestess Vivianne Crowley reports, based on a study conducted on attitudes toward Paganism in Britain (118). Estelle Seymour, likewise, contends that “Western psychological healing is limited and fraught with difficulty for Pagans whose animistic beliefs accept supernatural causes for some illnesses” (236), and for healing, I would add. Indeed, participants in this study shared these concerns. As an example, Jeannette commented that standard intake forms for psychotherapy can be problematic for Pagans because for psychotherapists the question “do you hear voices?” can be an indication of psychosis. But it can mean something different for Pagans for whom claircognizance and other forms of intuitive knowing align with their belief systems. For many Pagans, communication with more-than-

human beings can be experienced as having a thought that is not their own or hearing voices. As Kevin M. Gardner, author of *The Pagan Clergy's Guide for Counselling, Crisis Intervention & Otherworld Traditions* (2014), asserts psychosis occurs when a person is “disconnected from reality” (Gardner 7) but, as my research demonstrates, Pagan worldviews promote that communication with more-than-human beings is real. Ironically, although many Pagans are skeptical of hegemonic trauma praxis, contemporary Paganism has been widely influenced by Jungian discourse. Indeed, many prominent Pagan authors and community leaders were influenced by Jungian theories, including Starhawk, Margot Adler, Vivianne Crowley, and Janet and Stewart Farrar (Waldron and Waldron 2004; Hoff Kraemer 2012). In turn the influence of these authors has shaped the Pagan movement more broadly, including its approaches to self-development, personal empowerment, and healing. Also notable, of the thirteen participants in this study six are educated in conventional trauma discourse, including two participants who have doctorate degrees and practice as psychotherapists. I make this point to acknowledge that Pagan holistic paradigms and conventional trauma discourse are not always positioned as dichotomous epistemologies. To this point, more than half of the participants in this study, myself included, explicitly named psychotherapeutic modalities in addition to Pagan and/or holistic approaches to healing as integral to helping them understand their experiences of trauma and, thus, essential to their healing journey.

It is against this backdrop that I advocate for integrated approaches to healing that blend holistic and mainstream (biomedical and psychoanalytical) paradigms in what Eduardo Duran (Apache, Lakota, Tewa) refers to as “hybrid epistemologies” (14). To be clear, Duran’s usage of this term refers to the blending of Western healing modalities and Indigenous knowledges; however, I use this concept more widely to include a range of folk knowledges and traditions

that are located outside the scope of biomedical and psychoanalytical paradigms. Similarly, Roy Moodley and William West advocate for integrating traditional healing paradigms, by which they mean “vernacular and indigenous forms” (xv), located across diverse cultures and religious practices, and Western psychotherapy. That said, I am not implying that psychotherapists must engage in Pagan practices with Pagan persons who are accessing services. Rather, I contend that psychotherapists who do not acknowledge the validity of Pagan worldviews risk causing further harm to Pagans who are seeking support, because the devaluation of their beliefs and practices and judgement can itself be traumatizing. This approach locates my doctoral research within the fields of holistic healing (Dunn) and decolonising trauma discourse (Linklater 2014; Rothberg 2014). At the same time, grounded in an intersectional feminist framework, my dissertation offers a unique contribution to Pagan studies through its gender specific focus on Pagan experiences of trauma and healing.

1.10 Dissertation Outline

Chapter Two, *Spaces Between Wor(l)ds: Artful Methodologies*, provides the methodological framework for this dissertation. This chapter locates my doctoral research project at the meeting place of arts-based visual research and autoethnography, and outlines the methods by which I collect, analyze, and disseminate data for this study. This chapter makes clear that life storytelling is central to this study. With the understanding that methodological strategies are never “passive” (Strega and Brown 7), my epistemological and stylistic choices function as a purposeful disruption of hegemonic discourse in favour of strategies that make way for scholarship that blends social research and creative practices.

Chapter three, *Contemporary Paganism as a Way of Life*, offers an overview of Paganism as a new religious movement with its roots in diverse folk beliefs and practices. To understand self-identified Pagan women and Pagan gender variant persons' experiences of trauma and healing, it is first necessary to understand the various ways in which Paganism is practiced as a contemporary vernacular religion that is situated within countercultural movements, including feminism. This chapter makes clear the ways in which Pagan beliefs are shaped by folk knowledge located across a spectrum of cultures and histories. Paradoxically, this chapter also acknowledges Paganism's rootedness in Eurocentric mythologies and worldviews. Toward the end of this chapter, I further introduce the participants in this study to locate their life stories within the broader context of Paganism while at the same time highlighting the uniqueness of each participant's religiosity.

Chapter four, *The Circle is Cast, but Who's Allowed In? Inclusion & Diversity in Paganism*, focuses on issues of gender and sexuality politics as well as covert and overt racism within contemporary Paganism. By extension, this chapter attends to matters of cultural appropriation and argues for a move toward decolonising Paganism. This chapter, therefore, acknowledges the ways in which Paganism can perpetuate harms despite its location within anti-oppressive counter hegemonic cultures. To be sure, anti-racist and other social justice critiques must be central to any analysis of Paganism. However, matters of inclusion and diversity in Paganism require a thorough evaluation in their own right. As such, chapters three and four offer a backdrop against which to theorize participants' lived realities including their experiences of trauma and healing.

Chapter five, *Unspeakable Wounds: Auto/Biographical Portraiture and/as Trauma Praxis*, theorizes auto/biographical portraiture as a form of creative and critical inquiry. This

chapter provides an analysis of some of my own and participants' auto/biographical portraits in the context of contemporary trauma discourse. Beginning with an analysis of my auto/biographical portrait entitled *Undoing Time*, I examine auto/biographical portraiture as a medium of self-expression and critical self-analysis. Having created this portrait explicitly for this study, *Undoing Time* is a visual testimony that locates me in this study as both researcher and subject, alongside participants. This analysis provides a segue to examine participants' auto/biographical portraits, which further analyzes the ongoing affect/effect of experiences of trauma. Themes central to this analysis include voice and visibility as well as matters of temporality. In this chapter, I demonstrate that auto/biographical portraiture can function as a catalyst for critical self-inquiry which can be cathartic, empowering, and healing. To be clear, while I promote auto/biographical portraiture as a form of self-healing, I am critical of neoliberal positioning of life storytelling which emphasizes self-transformation and individual responsabilization but neglects to account for the multifaceted ways in which trauma and healing are socially and politically located.

Chapter six *Myth, Magic, and Ritual: The Art of Pagan Holistic Healing*, locates Pagan approaches to healing within the scope of holistic healing and, by extension, within the broader movement to decolonise trauma discourse. At the same time, this chapter attends to the specificity of Pagan practice and beliefs that shape Pagan persons' experiences of trauma and healing, particularly myth, magic, and ritual. Moreover, this chapter examines the relationship between Paganism and psychotherapy trauma discourse. Against this backdrop, I argue for "hybrid epistemologies" (Duran 14) to make space for Pagan perspectives and experiences to operate interconnectedly with mainstream trauma discourse.

Conclusion: Unending: in alignment with my commitment to collaborative witnessing and the act of shared storytelling as a political act, my dissertation concludes with a multivocal visual narrative in which I place participants' and my own auto/biographical portraits into dialogue with trauma discourse — thus, performing a shared visual testimony that functions as a form of collaborative witnessing. Performatively and theoretically, the layering of auto/biographical portraits indicates the multilayeredness of trauma. Woven together these portraits highlight that the personal is political insofar as these visual testimonies tell each participants' story of trauma and healing. At the same time, they make clear that each person's experiences occur in relation to broader social, cultural, and political discourse. Indeed, many participants share similar stories of trauma related to gender oppression that is at once an interpersonal experience and a structural phenomenon. Finally, the technical methods used to create this image — layering photograph on top of photograph and erasing various parts of photographs to reveal what is underneath — works to symbolically show that trauma narratives at once demand to be seen and resist telling (Denzin 2014).

Chapter 2 Spaces Between Wor(l)ds: Artful Methodologies

2.1 Introduction

Located in the spaces between wor(l)ds, artful methodologies provide a meaningful way to get to the heart of what I think matters most in qualitative research — life stories. The term “wor(l)ds,”

as I imagine it, is a play on words that symbolizes my multimodal arts-based, qualitative approach to examining self-identified Pagan women and Pagan gender-variant persons' experiences of trauma and the potential healing power of storytelling — thus life storytelling is central to this dissertation. In particular, my doctoral research project uses auto/biographical portraiture — life storytelling through photography — as a mode of creative and critical inquiry. Central to this dissertation is the concept of “collaborative witnessing,” which is defined by autoethnographer Carolyn Ellis as “a form of relational autoethnography that works to evocatively tell the experiences of others [and one’s self] in shared storytelling and conversation” (Holman Jones et al.18). This form of knowledge sharing functions to co-create knowledge, often for the purpose of social transformation. To this point, my own auto/biographical portraits that are woven throughout this dissertation are an intersubjective dialogue with the ongoing *affect* of trauma — that is, the emotions, feelings, embodied responses, and psychic traces of trauma (Cvetkovivh 2012; Pollock 2012). To emphasize, my hybrid approach exists in the spaces between wor(l)ds where artful practices and qualitative research paradigms not only coexist but are co-constructive in the process of knowledge making and dissemination. Thus, artful life storytelling is not merely an object of analysis in this study, but also the process by which data is collected, and interpreted, as well as the way that knowledge is transmitted through collaborative multimodal storytelling. Because participants' life stories are integral to this research project I have woven elements of their life stories throughout this work (rather than only in analysis chapters). Moreover, this strategy is integral to my way of thinking through relations between Pagan practices, trauma, art, and healing from embodied locations.

My study was guided by three main research questions: 1) How do experiences of trauma affect self-identified Pagan women and/or Pagan gender-variant persons' sense of self and their relationship with their bodies; 2) What effect does auto/biographical portrait-making have on Pagan women and/or Pagan gender-variant persons' sense of self and healing process; and 3) What broader narratives does auto/biographical portraiture reveal about experiences of trauma, healing, and Pagan spirituality? That is to ask: what can auto/biographical portraiture reveal/do in relation to self-identified Pagan women and Pagan gender-variant persons' experiences and memories of trauma, and its ongoing effect and affect?

2.2 Setting the Backdrop

As Alison M. Jaggar writes, “methodology is construed in a broad sense, including reflection not only on techniques for gathering evidence, but also on processes of selecting and designing research projects and publicising their results. Methodological reflections occupy a logical space between method and epistemology” (xi). On this point, my scholarship aligns with Nina Lykke et al. who assert that “writing, method, methodology, ethics, and politics are inextricably linked” (3). Therefore, this chapter includes both my methodological and theoretical frameworks, which are inextricably entwined political choices that ground my scholarship at the nexus of intersectional feminist and decolonial paradigms. Thus, I situate this dissertation under the umbrella of anti-oppressive and socially just praxis. Emerging against this backdrop, my scholarship is intersectional, works toward unsettling and resisting the power and privilege of hegemonic Western paradigms, understands that knowledge is constructed, promotes that knowledge is situated in cultural and social locations, and makes space for multiple ways of

knowing. In this location, my dissertation moves across multiple methodological and theoretical frameworks, thereby eroding epistemological and disciplinary boundaries.

2.3 In Defence of Arts-Based (Artful) Approaches to Feminist Qualitative Research

“Re-membering that how we choose to research —
each choice affects things” (Walsh 8)

Coined in the 1990s by art educator Elliot Eisner, arts-based research (ABR) is an umbrella term that refers to a methodological praxis that encompasses a plethora of research paradigms which blend “creative arts in research contexts,” as prominent ABR scholar Patricia Leavy explains in (4). At its core, ABR is a mode of inquiry in which researchers engage in creating art as a form of analysis (Leavy 4). My usage of ABR is informed by the scholarship of Leavy who asserts that ABR research is evocative and provocative and works toward creating critical consciousness and raising awareness and empathy (10). This approach works to unsettle stereotypes and dominant ideologies through its emphasis on centring the lived realities of persons with first-hand experience and by way of its relationship with creating public scholarship (Leavy 10). Particularly important in my usage, ABR emphasizes that art has “multiple meaning” and can elicit dialogue “based on evoking meaning rather than denoting” definition (Leavy 10), which is precisely my goal through my engagement with and analysis of auto/biographical portraiture as a mode of collaborative witnessing. Indeed, “ABR is characterized to be pluralistic, poststructural, even postparadigmatic, and to represent methodologies that are in a constant process of creation and redefinition” (Holm et al. 311), which makes ABR particularly useful in the context of this interdisciplinary research project. Importantly, my inclusion of auto/biographical portraits

throughout this dissertation invites audience engagement, which is a primary motivation of ABR (Leavy 2019), and, thus, functions as a form of evocative discourse.

My usage of auto/biographical portraiture further locates my doctoral research project under the umbrella of arts-based visual research, which uses images to theorize human experience. Visual arts-based researchers posit that “images in addition to verbal data add an additional dimension and a deeper understanding” (Holm et al. 332). To this point, I argue that auto/biographical portraiture creates an opening for ideas, emotions, feelings and more to emerge through symbolic expression thus allowing for deeper self-reflection and self-expression. Indeed, symbolic expression as a mode of self-reflection and self-healing is a central theme of this dissertation. Specifically, it is my contention that auto/biographical portraits can function as a catalyst for personal transformation insofar as creating portraits about one’s own lived experiences and memories of trauma can be cathartic, healing, and empowering (Nuñez; Spence). Thus, I follow trauma scholar Jill Bennett in a “move away from evaluating art in terms of its capacity to reflect predefined conditions and symptomologies, and to open up the question of what art itself might tell us about the lived experiences and memories of trauma” (2).

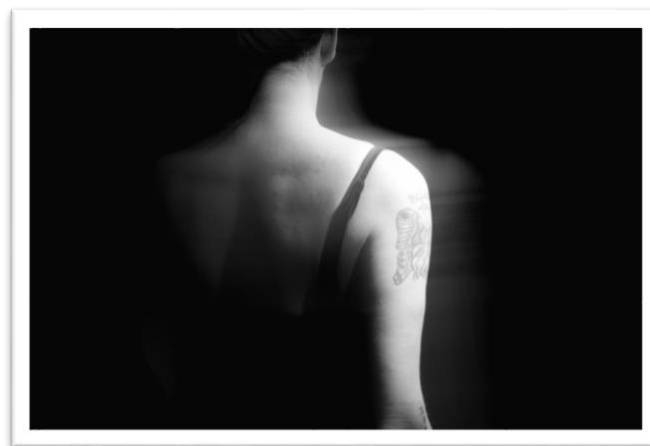


Figure 5 Believe and Hope, a/b portrait, Gina Snooks, 2018.

2.4 Artful Autoethnographies: Performing Life Stories

Autoethnography, as I have previously stated, is at its heart both personal and “inherently political” (Spry 53). To expand, autoethnography is a practice of “reflexively writing the self into and through the ethnographic text —isolating where memory, history, performance intersect” (Denzin 22), thereby giving “meaning” to personal experiences within a sociocultural context (Chang et al. 60; see also: Diversi and Moreira 2018; Holman Jones et al. 2013; Spry 2001; 2011, 2016).

In the *Handbook of Autoethnography* (2013), Stacy Holman Jones et al. name five primary purposes of autoethnography:

- Disrupting norms of research practice and representation,
- Working from insider knowledge,
- Maneuvering through pain, confusion, anger and uncertainty and making life better,
- Breaking silence, (re)claiming voice, and writing to right; and
- Making work accessible. (32-37)

These purposes are foundational to autoethnography and, in different ways and to various degrees, undergird my doctoral scholarship. Not surprisingly, given my focus on trauma, central to my dissertation are the concepts of moving through pain, and breaking silence in order to (re)claim one’s voice.⁷ Further, my analysis of auto/biographical portraiture in its relation to trauma discourse is informed by my own auto/biographical practice in which I explore themes of trauma and subjectivity in practice and in theory, as I elucidate in the preface and introduction of this dissertation.

⁷ And as I have already made clear, I am very much an insider in this study. I discuss my insider positionality in greater detail in the introduction of this dissertation and further in this chapter.

2.5 On Vulnerability, Disclosure and Resistance

Although vulnerability and breaking silence are central to autoethnography it is also important to consider that not all stories can be told, at least not in full or by conventional means. These stories are what Norman K. Denzin refers to as resistance narratives, “an autoethnographic story that resists and demands telling at the same time. It is a story written and performed from a place of pain, a writing self writing a performative I, an I, a self that resists, tells, escapes, feels” (3). Here, Denzin’s claim resonates with classic trauma theory inasmuch, as Caruth argues, the story of trauma is told to give testimony to its “endless impact on a life” (Caruth 7). I propose that such stories are often written between the lines, as the saying goes. That is, they are written in such a way that pain is embedded in the text, but the events that cause pain are not explicated or described. Thus, the after-affect of trauma demands witnessing even as the story of trauma itself often refuses to be revealed. As trauma scholar Dori Laub writes, “it is essential for this narrative that *could not be articulated to be told, to be transmitted, to be heard*” (emphasis in original text) (85).⁸

My invitation to participate in this study stated that participants are not required to replicate scenes depicting trauma, precisely because I am interested in understanding how trauma shapes a persons’ sense of self and their lived realities. As a result, auto/biographical portraits do not replicate scenes of traumatic events. In my analysis, a refusal to disclose details of painful experiences should not be perceived by audiences as a refusal to be vulnerable (a theme in autoethnography, as noted above) (Holman Jones et al.). Rather, I understand resistance

⁸ I expand upon this concept in chapter five *Unspeakable Wounds*.

narratives to be a way by which storytellers (oral and/or visual in the context of this dissertation) perform the narratives of their own experiences in their own way.

Forms of self-representation can minimize the risk of making a spectacle of trauma that largely functions to ascribe narratives of victimization (Hesford 2004), even if the intention is to create awareness about social issues and human rights violations. The problem with narratives of victimization is that they can ascribe an identity to persons who have experienced trauma, but people may not define themselves as victims or survivors. This is not a simple matter of semantics, but rather a matter of self-determination and autonomy. Related to this, narratives of victimization can work to position persons who have experienced trauma as helpless and in need of saving, thus reiterating forms of oppression and marginalization. On this point, Wendy S. Hesford proposes that testimonies — both visual and oral — can at once be “empowering *and* voyeuristic” (124). What this means is that it can be empowering for persons to give testimony — speak their truth — but that audiences may receive those narratives differently. Thus, in this study it is important to be attentive to the complex multidimensional dynamics between testimony and witnessing.

2.6 Regarding Pain

Although autoethnography focuses on personal experiences, including experiences of trauma, “pain is not inherently epistemic,” as Spry explains (2016, 26). Pain can, however, be a “catalyst of knowledge” (Spry 2016, 26). Such knowledge can be a catalyst for healing because it can help people understand how their lives are moulded through a lens of trauma. Further, building on the scholarship of cultural theorist Clifford Geertz, Spry proposes that autoethnographers develop a

“thick description,” which is a way of describing experiences in detail and can include what researchers’ themselves “hear, see, feel, etc.” (2011, 144). The purpose of developing this thick description is to identify “your thoughts, feelings, attitudes, emotions during the event(s) and during the process of critical reflection” (Spry 2011, 144). The point is to develop an “emotional intelligence” (2011, 144) as part of the analytical process. Moreover, the intention is to engage audiences in intellectual discourse that is at once analytical and embodied. This, I would argue, is the power of life storytelling as a political act.

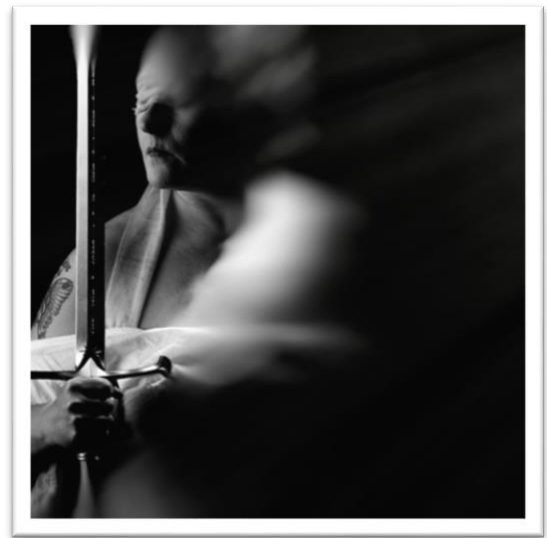


Figure 6 Badb's Scream/July 16th Eve, a/b portrait, Gina Snooks, July 2020.

2.7 Performative and Evocative Autoethnography

Because I conceptualize auto/biographical portraiture to be a form of performance, I locate this dissertation under the umbrella of performative autoethnography. On this topic, co-autoethnographers Marcelo Diversi and Claudio Moreira explain that the roots of performative autoethnography are located in “the poststructuralist movement of the 1980s and 1990s” and it is

a qualitative methodology in which disciplines collide, namely arts, social sciences and humanities (2016, 582). Diversi and Moriera further write that

Within the field of performance studies, autoethnography is situated at the intersections of Third World feminisms, postcolonialism, cultural studies and critical pedagogy. It works to destabilize and subvert the supremacy in the dichotomies of mind and body, theory and practice, personal and political, researcher and subject so pervasive in academic settings. (2016, 582)

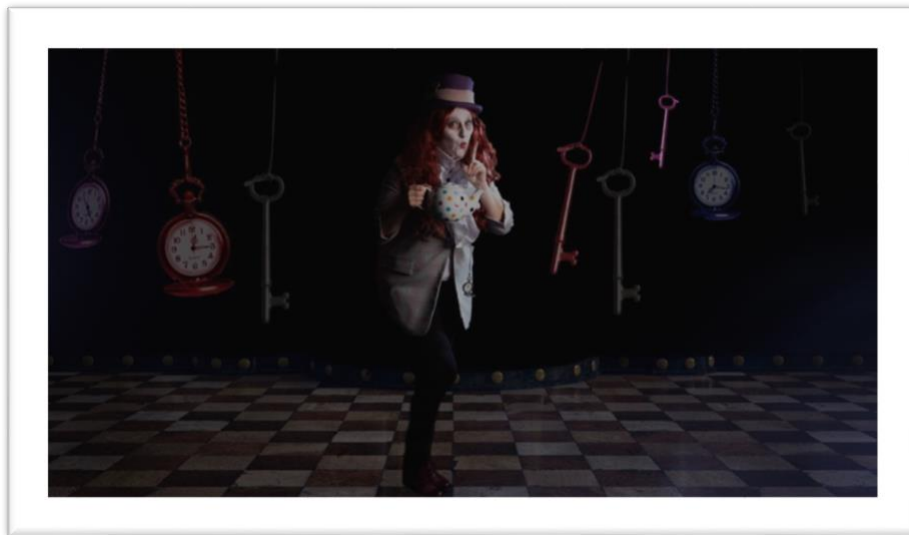


Figure 7 Unnamed, a/b portrait, Gina Snooks, June 2021.

My approach to autoethnographic praxis is performative and evocative. To borrow words from autoethnography pioneers Arthur B. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, evocative autoethnography emphasizes “emotional, vulnerable, and heartfelt writing” (60) – the purpose of which is to elicit visceral responses “to move audiences emotionally in order to engage questions of identity, diversity, racism, sexism, injustice, and human suffering” (Bochner and Ellis 61). In doing so, audiences are called to bear witness to the pain of others in a way that demands an ethical response that moves beyond seemingly empty gestures of sympathy and even genuine notions of empathy toward action, including social transformation.

2.8 Recruitment

Upon ethics approval from the Western University Research Ethics Board, beginning in May 2020 I invited self-identified Pagan women and/or Pagan gender-variant persons over the age of 18 to participate in my study through an electronic poster campaign.⁹ I distributed my poster primarily on the social media website Facebook as well as via email. This strategy was, in part, due the fact that my research project took place during the global COVID-19 pandemic when in-person recruitment (and in-person fieldwork) was not permitted. I distributed my poster primarily across Canada and the United States, and in Europe to a lesser degree. However, the study was not confined to any specific geographical location. On Facebook, I disseminated my poster through my own personal page, in a private group for Pagan women and Pagan gender variant persons that I co-founded over ten years ago and continue to co-facilitate, which has over seventy members. With administrators' permission I also distributed my poster within various public Pagan-focused Facebook groups, including the Pagans Across Canada group which has over three thousand members and Medicine Hat Pagans (Southern Alberta) which has nearly one hundred members. I shared the poster numerous times between May 2020 and May 2021 in several of these spaces to reach a wider audience because Facebook posts can be easily missed especially in groups or on pages with a high volume of daily posts. In addition, my poster was shared by numerous people on their own Facebook pages across Canada and the United States. I also direct messaged fifteen Facebook pages and directly emailed twenty-one Pagan organizations and/or scholars of Paganism. Further, in 2020 I presented a talk on auto/biographical portraiture and healing at the *Land, Sea, Sky* Witchcraft and Art online

⁹ See Appendix A.

conference, where my recruitment poster was shared as part of the welcome package. In my invitation poster, I used the language of self-identification to signal to participants that I acknowledge their right to self-determination with regard to gender identity and gender expression as well as how they define their Paganism. Moreover, I stated that participants will not be required to disclose specific details of their traumatic experiences to emphasize that participants were invited to share their experiences in as much or as little detail as they felt comfortable doing so and I reiterated this at the beginning of each interview. My invitation poster invited participation in this study in one of two ways. The first option involved creating at least one auto/biographical portrait which would be followed by an interview, and the second option was to participate in an interview only. In addition, participants were invited to maintain a reflexive journal. In all, thirteen people participated in the study.¹⁰ All thirteen participants opted to create auto/biographical portraits to tell their life story, however none of the participants opted to maintain a reflexive journal. In the spirit of “writing as a method of inquiry” (Richardson 516), I had hoped that journal writing would offer participants an extra way to critically reflect on their experiences. Regrettably, I failed to ask participants why they did not choose to write reflexively.

2.9 Information Sessions & Interview Process

Because my study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, all interaction with participants took place via Zoom, which is a video conferencing platform, with the exception of Alice with whom I spoke via telephone. With seven participants, I conducted one informational session with

¹⁰ An additional eleven people reached out to inquire about the study and were provided with my Letter of Information and Informed Consent but did not participate.

each participant to explain the parameters and potential risks of my study and to answer any questions people might have about what the study entailed. The remaining participants opted out of the informational session. During these informational sessions I reaffirmed that participants were not asked to disclose details of the trauma that they experienced and/or to create photographs that recreated scenes of trauma experiences. Further, as per my Letter of Informed consent, I explained that participants were asked not to photograph others, but were welcome to use symbolic representations of the ways in which their experiences were shaped by their relationships with others. I also assured participants that artistic and/or technical quality of the portraits was not the main goal. However, I provided advice from my experience as a photographer on technical and/or creative aspects of creating auto/biographical portraits for participants (or potential participants) who inquired. Four participants had submitted their informed consent prior to us meeting for an informational session; consequently, our first meeting functioned as a first interview. One participant, whom I knew prior to this study, participated in three interviews to discuss various experiences of trauma and violence as well as to discuss photographs that I had previously co-created (as her photographer/friend) to explore issues of trauma and healing. A unique point is that Riley and I collaborated, virtually, to co-create her auto/biographical portrait. To do so, Riley explained the photograph she wanted to create and what it represented to her, and I created the photograph which I forwarded to her for approval to ensure it represented her vision.

Following the initial meeting each participant created a minimum of one auto/biographical portrait (submitted to me via Western University's secure server OWL). Participants submitted between 1-9 portraits each for a total of 43 portraits collected during this study. Each participant, then, participated in an in-depth, semi-structured, interview. Interviews

took place between May 2020-May 2021, which were recorded and transcribed. To guide the discussion, I had a list of open-ended questions; however, I encouraged participants to take the lead in a conversational style discussion.¹¹ The length of interviews ranged from under one hour to four hours. In addition, I maintained a field journal in which I wrote extensive notes after each meeting with participants that included my first impressions and initial analysis of participants' life stories.

Participants each received \$30.00 (Canadian funds) in appreciation for their time, which was made possible, in part, because my study received SSHRC funding. The decision to provide cash aligns with my participant-centric approach in that participants are able to decide for themselves how to spend the money whereas with other forms of payment, such as gift certificates, researchers are making choices for participants which can be interpreted as patronizing and disempowering, and less in alignment with my feminist anti-oppressive politics and participant-led approach. To this point, Sandra asked me to donate the \$30.00 to a local animal shelter and Riley asked me to donate the funds to a charity of my choice. To be clear, receipt of the funds was not contingent on completion of the study.

2.10 Data Analysis: Thinking About and with Auto/Biographical Portraiture

Participants' auto/biographical portraits (visual life stories) and semi-structured interviews (oral life storytelling) form the crux of my thematic analysis, which I supplemented with fields notes and follow-up conversations with several participants, to assess commonalities and differences across participants' life stories. The inclusion of my own auto/biographical portraits adds a layer

¹¹ See appendix C.

of complexity insofar as my portraits speak to my experiences of trauma and healing, while at the same time they dialogue with participants' experiences. Further my analysis is shaped by my experiential knowledge as a practicing Pagan, which can be understood as a form of ongoing participant observation as an insider observer. My approach to data analysis was multilayered and included analysis of each person's interviews and their auto/biographical portraits, which function as a form of photo elicitation that seeks to elucidate the story that portraits convey. That is to ask: what feelings, emotions, ideas, concerns, and engagements with the concept of trauma does the auto/biographical portrait evoke, and what might that reveal about participants' experiences of self, their bodies, trauma and healing? My next step was to correlate data to determine commonalities and differences across participants' life stories, which provides the foundation for my thematic analysis.

2.11 Relational Ethics and Being an Insider

As I discussed in the introduction of this dissertation, ethical research necessitates an attentiveness to what autoethnographer Carolyn Ellis calls "relational ethics" (3), which emphasizes the ways in which relationships — both those that predate the research and those that develop during the process — shape and are shaped by the research. As Ellis explains, "Relational ethics recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between the researcher and researched, and the communities in which they live and work" (4) and this approach requires conducting research "from an ethic of care" (25). The matter of attending to deidentification and naming practices is an especially fraught matter insofar as some participants chose to be deidentified and others chose to be identified. Further, some participants created

portraits in which they are identifiable, including portraits in which participants have shown their face. This divergence on its own might be less concerning in a larger study but in one of this small size it increases the risk of unintentionally disclosing participants' identity, particularly since Pagan communities generally can be small and might overlap.¹²

Undoubtedly, careful ethical practices are integral to all forms of research and consideration of risks extends to all participants. However, insider research necessitates extra care because participants may have chosen to participate based on established relationships of trust and/or perceived trust when both research and participants are members of the same community and/or otherwise socially connected. In this study, eight of the thirteen participants were previously known to me in various ways, and I believe it is fair to assume that some responded to my invitation to participate because they know me. Another participant responded to my invitation after I presented at a Pagan conference in which I discussed my own experience as an auto/biographical portraiture maker and shared my recruitment poster. Given that this conference was hosted by a reputable Pagan organization, which itself promotes a sense of community, it is plausible that my presence at this conference suggested that I too am trustworthy and/or part of this community. Another point to consider is that members of the same social and/or religious communities may assume that others in those communities share the same ideas, ethics, and values, which may not be entirely accurate. Thus, people may choose to participate in a study under the false assumption that the researcher shares their way of thinking.

¹² While participants consented with awareness around risks related to anonymity/confidentiality, it is of course the researcher's ongoing responsibility to attend to the implications of same for her subjects. One strategy I used was to provide an overview of participants' biographical and social locations in the introduction of this dissertation and to introduce each participant in chapter three. In doing so there is less chance for readers to make connections that might reveal the identity of participants. Arguably, a simple solution to this dilemma would have been to deidentify all participants. However, feminist social research attends to matters of "breaking silence and speaking out" (Ryan-Flood and Gill 3), therefore it is also important to create space for participants to name themselves and their experiences of trauma, if they choose.

To this point, my role as researcher is to serve as both witness and analyzer of the life stories that participants share with me and in doing so there is always a risk that my interpretation may differ from how participants themselves understand their lived realities and how they wish to see themselves portrayed. Thus, there is always a risk that participants might feel betrayed, misrepresented, or harmed by the way in which their life stories are analyzed and shared, despite my effort to do no harm.

It is inevitable that my established social relationships with some of the participants in this study informs how I theorize their lived realities since I cannot undo my knowledge around parts about their lives that I know outside of this study. However, it is important to draw a distinct line between what was disclosed in the context of this study and what was previously known to ensure that this dissertation reveals only what participants consented to disclose in the parameters of this study. In practice this can necessitate ongoing conversations with participants to ensure that participants consent to what is being revealed. As an example, during our interview Mayra talked at length about the importance of her Hispanic culture and familial traditions to her sense of self and her Paganism (despite that she is a first-generation self-identified Pagan); however, upon reviewing our interview, I noted that she directly named that her father is from Guatemala but did not name her mother's place of birth. Since Mayra is my friend, I know her mother's place of birth, but it was important for me to ask if she intentionally left that information out to avoid unintentionally disclosing information that she might not want shared. (It turned out that the omission was unintentional and not a political choice.) Thus, it was safe for me to describe Mayra as a first-generation Pagan and first-generation American whose Hispanic identity is rooted in her father's Guatemalan and her mother's Cuban cultures and that this background is an integral part of who she is. In doing so, I was able to present a more

holistic narrative of her subjectivity. There were other times throughout this research that it was necessary for me to clarify information with participants as well. Ongoing contact with participants throughout the research process can, therefore, be an important part of an ethic of care, which can be easier to achieve when social relationships are established and ongoing. In terms of trauma research there is always a risk of reopening wounds when reaching out to participants to revisit trauma narratives; however, the potential to cause further harm may be reduced when researchers and participants have established relationships whereas abruptly reaching out to participants who were previously unknown may constitute a form of intrusion.

Finally, in relation to my insider status it is important to be transparent about my previous collaborations with Elizabeth and how that work makes its way into this study. As noted in my prologue and above, part of the inspiration for this project emerges from my collaboration with a friend whom I photographed as part of her healing process. When I put out the invitation to participate in this study that friend, Elizabeth, responded. Since together we had co-created photographs as various stages of her healing process, she felt that participating in this study represented a part of that ongoing and evolving process. Nevertheless, it was necessary to theorize our previous collaboration in the context of this study (after informed consent was received) to ensure that only information disclosed specifically for the purpose of this study was analyzed.

2.12 Feminist Praxis

Feminism is primarily concerned with the “social transformation of gender relations” (Butler 2004, 204). Having said that, feminist discourse recognizes that the ways in which gender is

expressed and experienced does not occur in isolation. On this point, my usage of the term feminism in this dissertation refers to intersectional feminism. Simply stated intersectional feminism is an analytical strategy that understands that gender identity and gendered experiences intersect with and are inseparable from other identities and social locations and that these various identities and social locations inform privilege and oppression in relation to social, cultural, and political structures. The term “intersectionality” was coined by Black theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw to emphasize the ways in which Black women experience structural inequality because they are Black women, not because they are additively Black and women (Crenshaw 1989). What this means is that subjectivity cannot be compartmentalized, but that various identities are interconnected and inseparable. In addition, an intersectional analysis emphasizes that peoples’ experiences are shaped by various overlapping social positions, such as socioeconomic vulnerability or stability and histories of trauma both personally and collectively, to name a few factors.

Specifically, central to my doctoral research project is the notion that feminist discourse demands “that the unseen and the unacknowledged be made visible and heard” (Ryan-Flood and Gill 1); thus, feminist approaches are particularly mindful of creating opportunities for research participants’ stories to be heard. To be clear, when I say that feminist research is concerned with matters of voice and visibility, I am not suggesting that feminist research ‘gives voice’ to marginalized individuals and/or communities. In fact, it is important to acknowledge that people who are marginalized within specific contexts have historically articulated, and continue to voice, their experiences, in various ways, as forms of resistance to dominant discourse. Instead, what feminist research does is provide a platform to amplify those voices in spaces in which they are often made unheard. To say that voices are made unheard means that voices are

purposefully and strategically misrepresented by those in positions of power, whether those power dynamics be rooted in interpersonal relationships or structural phenomenon.

This socially just strategy is in alignment with Susan Strega and Leslie Brown who claim that when choosing a socially just research focus, we must ask ourselves “not only whose story it has the potential to tell, but also whose story it will hide, why, for whom, and with what consequence. Whenever some lives are displayed through research, we must be cognizant that other lives are being protected” (6). What Strega and Brown elucidate is that research processes can potentially create space for underrepresented voices to be heard, or potentially reiterate strategies that silence marginalized voices within the context of dominant discourse. In doing so, strategies can work toward either unsettling or reiterating harmful practices, unequal power dynamics and structures of oppression, sometimes in unintentional ways. Strega and Brown’s claim also highlights that research can hide privileged voices in such a way that allows certain individuals or groups to escape examination, thereby reinforcing unequal power dynamics. It is my contention that an attentiveness to whose stories are being told, by whom and for what purpose and by what means is especially important in trauma discourse because trauma can often involve experiences that are disempowering and dehumanizing that are rooted in systems that promote injustice, including racism and gender inequality (Archer 2021; Brown 2018). For example, hyper-focus on Black, Indigenous, people of colour (BIPOC) communities in terms of research topics can recentre Whiteness and white privilege precisely because the act can position BIPOC communities as other than the dominant demographic.¹³ In other words, such practices

¹³ Some racial justice advocates are critical of the term BIPOC because the language is thought to collapse diverse groups into one monolithic group located in opposition of Whiteness. Further the term people of colour is a reorganization of the racist term coloured people, thus some critics argue that it reiterates rather than addresses dehumanizing language. See: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/road-ahead-why-bipoc-doesn-t-do-it-for-me-tomi-ajele-1.6067753>. Other advocates make similar claims in reference to the term racialized, because it presumes that Whiteness is not socially constructed, thereby Whiteness is positioned as the default. I recognize the limitations

can normalize Whiteness while positioning BIPOC communities as outside of the cultural, social, and political norm. In this sense, the focus is often on examining what is wrong with or what can be improved upon in BIPOC communities, rather than critically analyzing how white privilege is woven throughout the systems and structures that create and maintain inequality.

Critical race and Indigenous scholar Eve Tuck (Unangax̂), similarly, critiques “damage-centred research” (409) arguing that such approaches risk pathologizing communities by centering “damage” and “pain” (413) while ignoring the social and historical contexts in which pain and oppression occur. As Tuck makes clear, well-meaning researchers, whose agenda might be to raise awareness about harms experienced by specific groups of peoples, can actually miss the mark and instead become complicit in reinscribing harmful discourse because these “one-dimensional narratives” (417) create meta narratives of disfunction and pathology. For this reason, Tuck proposes “desire-based research frameworks” that “are concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives” (416). Tuck’s position functions as an invitation to take up the spaces in between consciousness raising discourse that elucidate the structural forces at play in oppression while also emphasizing legacies of resistance and resiliency. Although Tuck is addressing research that focuses on Indigenous and Black peoples specifically, I argue that her argument can be applied to all marginalized communities.

For example, the same risk of pathologizing communities who experience pain can be applied to the ways in which cisheteronormativity marginalizes 2SLGBTQQIA communities. In the context of this dissertation, it is also important to acknowledge how religions that fall outside of the dominant demographic, such as Paganism, are at risk of being further marginalized and

of using these terms and how their usage can work to depoliticize specific social justice movements. This contention is an example of the limitations of language, which itself is dynamic.

pathologized in the context of broader discourse. For example, understanding how Christianity functions as the dominant religion in the West can help researchers understand how Paganism and other minority religions are positioned outside of the cultural, social, and political norm in the west and to understand the everyday effects of these positions. Indeed, creating cultures of religious intolerance is part of the strategy by which hegemonic worldviews are reinscribed and maintained and, by extension, are strategies of oppression. Yet, it is important to acknowledge that minoritized groups are not reducible to their situatedness outside of the parameters of dominant socio-political locations. Indeed, as Michel Foucault stated, “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (95).¹⁴ Thus, it is important to be attentive to counter-hegemonic discourse as well as narratives of resiliency when examining how hegemonic discourse functions as a mode of oppression. For me, Tuck’s critique of “damage-centred research” (409) is reminiscent of Kelly Oliver’s warning that persons’ subjectivity cannot be reduced to the “effect of trauma” (7). Taken together these critiques emphasize the important of theorizing trauma through intersectional feminist and holistic lenses to present testimonies that do not decontextualize or depoliticize trauma and that do not dehumanize persons who have experienced trauma.

2.13 Decolonial Praxis

¹⁴ It is not my intention to conflate distinct experiences of oppression, such as racism and religious intolerance — although the two are often interconnected within the context of colonial practices. Rather, I point out that my research methodologies and commitments are informed by theories of intersectionality. In my chapter *The Circle is Cast* I take up the Pagan movement’s complicity in perpetuating harmful practices, as this is integral, for me, in a project on Paganism as a healing modality.

My usage of decolonial epistemologies follows Chandra Talpade Mohanty whose scholarship is grounded in anti-racist feminism and aims to decolonise hegemonic Western feminist discourse. In *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (2003) Mohanty writes that “Decolonization involves profound transformation of self, community, and governance structures. It can be engaged through active withdrawal of consent and resistance to structures of psychic and social domination” (7).¹⁵ Her position builds upon the ideas of French West Indian philosopher Franz Fanon, who argues that decolonisation necessitates a “whole social structure being changed from the bottom up” (qtd in Mohanty 7). In other words, decolonial strategies work toward decentring hegemonic Western epistemologies and the predominance of Western cultural and social norms. In doing so, decolonial practices unsettle the false presumption that Western thought is superior to non-Western worldviews. To put that differently, because Western thought is located within Eurocentric paradigms, decolonial practices aim to unsettle Eurocentrism as the dominant paradigm by which knowledge and experience are validated. Combined, Fanon and Mohanty highlight the insidious nature of colonialism which permeates the entire cultural and social fabric of many world societies. Indeed, as postcolonial scholar Ania Loomba reminds us, 84.6 per cent of the world (land surface) had been covered in colonies and ex-colonies by the 1930s (2010). Thus, there is very little of the world that has not been impacted by colonialism.

For the purpose of this dissertation, I am interested in the relationship between decolonial praxis and spirituality and/or religion (these words can be used interchangeably by some Pagans, but it is not a general rule that spirituality and religion are one and the same). This is relevant to my study because Paganism is a religion in which many practitioners look to pre-colonized

¹⁵ I use the Canadian/British spelling throughout this dissertation except in direct quotes where American spelling is used.

vernacular mythologies and worldviews as inspiration for contemporary religious practice. In many cases these practices are critically theorized and in alignment with decolonial philosophies. Nevertheless, contemporary Paganism is also implicated in the cultural appropriation of vernacular religions of cultures worldwide. I examine these contentions in greater detail in my chapters *Contemporary Paganism* and *The Circle is Cast* more specifically.

With regard to “decolonizing the divine,” in theory and in practice, I align with Leela Fernandes who argues for transformative politics centred on the interconnection between spirituality and social justice (108). For Fernandes:

a decolonization of the divine necessitates a spiritual practice that includes a willingness to confront all forms of political and socioeconomic injustice, an approach which must be engaged without reverting to the colonizing forms of missionary-based attitudes to social change that have shaped both secular and religious movements. (109)

2.14 Feminist Psychotherapy

Underpinning my analysis of trauma and healing is feminist psychotherapist Bonnie Burstow’s claim that “trauma is inherently political” (1306). Moving beyond pathologizing trauma, Burstow explains that “Trauma is not a disorder but a kind of wound. It is a reaction to profoundly injurious events and situations in the real world, indeed, to a world in which people are routinely wounded” (1302) and, therefore, trauma is a “complex continuum on which we are all located” (1303). That is, trauma is not exclusively experienced as catastrophic, incomprehensible, events and, therefore, “not outside the range of human experience,” as feminist psychotherapist Laura S. Brown articulates (1991, 119). This stance elucidates that trauma is at once personal and culturally, socially and politically located. Indeed, to argue that

trauma is political explicitly builds upon the feminist axiom “the personal is political” (Hanisch 2006).

To this point, Brown explains that feminist psychotherapy emerged alongside the women’s movement and its consciousness-raising groups which brought awareness to the fact that personal experiences are political. As Brown explains, the feminist consciousness-raising movement brought “awareness that one’s maltreatment is not due to individual deficits but to membership in a group that has been unfairly subordinated and that society and should give equal power and value to all” (2018, 13). In doing so, feminist trauma discourse also makes explicit that up until the 1960s most of what had been written about women’s experiences of trauma and healing had been “distorted by sexist and at times overtly misogynist biases inherent in the mental health professions” (Brown 2018, 13), thus prior to feminist, decolonial, and anti-racist interventions trauma theories and practices themselves were actually harmful to women, gender variant and 2SLGBTQQA (Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans* Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual) persons because their life experiences differ from the Eurocentric, androcentric cisheteronormative identity upon which psychotherapy was modelled at that time.¹⁶

Building upon this, Brown addresses the matter of insidious trauma or microaggressions, (which she says are the same thing) writing that

In the lives of many individuals who experience marginalization, devaluation, or disempowerment due to their membership in groups that are, or have been targeted for oppression and disclination, daily existence is frequently replete with reminders of the potential for danger and the absence of safety linked by patriarchal norms and values to aspects of many individuals’ identities. (2018, 82-83)

¹⁶ Because Two-Spirit is a specifically Indigenous term, placing “2S” at the front of this acronym aligns with decolonising practices.

Moreover, Brown asserts that everyday experiences of sexism, racism, homophobia, classism, and other forms of oppression “create a relatively small but ever-present pull of energy toward a survival level of consciousness” (2018, 82) which can affect the person in numerous ways such as physical side effects, including fatigue. The insidious nature of trauma means that interpersonal and structural violence often go unnoticed by society at large, or at least by those whose identities fit the dominant mould. As such the effects of microaggressions are often trivialized and structural violence is normalized within the scope of broader discourse.¹⁷

2.15 Anti-Racist Psychotherapy

Anti-racist therapist David Archer posits that the goal of anti-racist therapy is to attend to the mind, body and spirit of those affected by racism, which he names as a “socially constructed sickness” (5). Archer, further, explains that anti-racist psychotherapy is grounded in critical race theory which he states has six primary tenets:

- Racism is ordinary,
- Racism serves a purpose,
- Race is a social construction,
- Intersectionality,
- Unique voice of color. (40)

As this list implies, healing racism necessitates an attentiveness to the social and systemic structures in which racism is socially situated. Archer also insists that anti-racist psychotherapy requires addressing the ongoing legacies of White supremacy; this includes the ongoing impact

¹⁷ The statement “it was just a joke,” often used as a defense when the joker is called-out on making inappropriate comments, is just one example of how microaggressions are trivialized.

of settler colonialism and slavery on Turtle Island. At the same time, anti-racist psychotherapy attends to the unique experiences of various racialized people and groups.

2.16 Holistic Healing

The usage of holistic healing theories is on the rise in Canada, according to Peter. A Dunn, editor of *Holistic Healing: Theories, Practices, and Social Change* (2019); indeed, more than 70 percent of Canadians have used “alternative health care” (4) and in the United States the figure is 38 percent (4). Holistic approaches are premised on the concept of holism, a term that is etymologically rooted in the Greek word *holos* which means whole, all or entire (Dunn 2019). While the concept of holism can be traced back centuries, including in specific Indigenous knowledges and concepts of relational healing, the English word was coined in 1925 by philosopher Jan Christian Smuts to refer to “a philosophical idea that emphasizes the whole system, rather than specific unconnected events or phenomena” (Dunn 2019). As Dunn explains, “in the West, holism usually focuses on the interrelations of at least four elements: physical, mental, emotional, spiritual” but that some Indigenous cultures conceptualize holism in a more complex way that can include “elements of time and space: past and present, and future, and the four elements (North, East, South, and West)” (13).

Dunn argues that holistic healing creates “possibilities for self-healing” (25). In this way, holistic approaches can function as a catalyst for “personal growth, healing, and transformation at both the individual and community levels,” as Dunn writes (26). In this paradigm, healing is understood as a journey moving-toward holistic well-being and not merely “recovery from” traumatic events as Rupert Ross writes (272), and as participants in this study elucidated. For Indigenous scholar Renee Linklater (Rainy River First Nation), trauma and healing are entwined

with the concept of resiliency, which she defines as the “ability to withstand trauma and turmoil and to be able to proceed with living and engaging in a productive life” (25). To be sure, what constitutes “a productive life” is both personal and relative to each person’s lived realities. It is important to emphasize that the concept of a productive life, here, is not rooted in neoliberal ideologies by which measurements of success are connected to how well one contributes to the economy and emphasizes individual responsibility (Altamirano-Jimnez 2013), including of health and wellness.

To expand on the definition of holistic healing, this paradigm is not a singular concept but rather a paradigm in which common principles emerge including connection, which Dunn explains highlights the interconnectedness between “micro, mezzo, and macro” dimensions (10) and wholeness which, to restate, focuses on the whole of a system as interconnected and interdependent (12). Moreover, the concepts of balance and harmony are integral to holistic healing; for example, mind/body/spirit balance and harmony are interconnected aspects of personhood as opposed to the Cartesian mind and body split. Dunn also notes that transformation and social change, reciprocity/mutuality and linkages/integration are common principles of holistic healing.

2.17 Chapter Summary

In the spirit of unruly discourse, this dissertation weaves together an examination of the methodological and theoretical frameworks, and relevant literature, informing my doctoral research project — thus highlighting the interdisciplinary core of my scholarship. Specifically, my research intertwines arts-based research and performative autoethnography through the

practice of auto/biographical portraiture, which constitutes a form of creative and critical life storytelling. Central to this discourse is a mode of relational autoethnography that Carolyn Ellis defines as “collaborative witnessing” through the practice of shared and engaged storytelling (Holman et al. 18). Thus, in this chapter, I have elucidated the important role that giving testimony and bearing witness plays towards understanding experiences and memories of trauma and healing. Theoretically and in practice, feminist and decolonial paradigms undergird my study — thereby providing the guiding framework in which my research is located. Emerging against this methodological and theoretical backdrop, in the chapters to follow I attend to the question at the heart of my study — that is to ask: what can auto/biographical portraiture reveal about self-identified Pagan women and Pagan gender-variant persons’ experiences and memories of trauma, and what might that reveal about the ongoing effect and affect of trauma? To this point, in the next chapter, I examine contemporary Paganism to theorize how participants’ religiosity might shape their sense of self and their approaches to trauma and healing praxis. In doing so, the next chapter locates participants’ lived experiences of Paganism at the centre of this discourse.

Chapter 3 Contemporary Paganism as a Way of Life



Figure 8 The Hermit, a/b portrait, Gina Snooks, 2020.

“I believe in the supernatural,
but I cannot demonstrate its existence.”
Michael York (1)

3.1 Introduction

Religious studies and Pagan scholar Graham Harvey proposes that “the purpose of the academic Study of Religion is to understand what happens as people live out their religions or spiritualities” (xv). In this chapter, I weave this notion into an intersectional feminist analysis of the theology and practice of contemporary Paganism, which provides a framework to understand participants’ religiosity. My analysis is informed by “vernacular religious theory,” which folklorist Leonard Norman Primiano defines as “an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the religious lives of individuals with special attention to the process of religious belief, the verbal, behavioural, and material expressions of religious belief, and the ultimate object of religious belief” (44). Primiano defines vernacular religion as a “religion as it is lived: as humans encounter, understand, interpret and practice it” (Primiano 44). The term vernacular refers to localized knowledges and practices “created by and for people in everyday contexts” rather than institutional knowledge such as that created for people by governments, educational establishments, and other institutions of social and political power (Sims and Stephens 6). Notably, Primiano uses the term vernacular religion because he argues that the term folk religion has pejorative connotations, which is a valid concern. However, I use the terms vernacular religion and folk religion throughout this dissertation to mean the same thing. My usage of the term folk religion also aligns with how Pagans themselves use the term folk (i.e., folk belief, folk magic, folk knowledge and so forth).

The purpose of this chapter is to locate participants’ religiosity within the Pagan movement to understand how Pagan beliefs and practices inform their lived realities. Theoretically and experientially, I align with Irene Lara and Elisa Facio who define spirituality as “a conscious, self-reflexive way of life and a way of relating to others, to ourselves and to S/spirit in a manner that honours all of life as an interconnected web” (4). Spirituality is not

merely about one's relationship with divinity — however one conceives of divinity (a god/s, goddess/es, Creator or s/Spirit) — because religion and/or spirituality shape one's personal beliefs, experiences and actions. In turn, religion influences the ways in which one interacts with the world. Thus, religion can also shape the way one dresses, the foods one chooses to eat, what one believes will happen after death, how one uses resources and treats the natural world and more (Bowman). In other words, religion affects how “everyday life is conducted and constructed,” as religious studies scholar Marion Bowman explains (286). It is for this reason that I understand contemporary Paganism to be a way of life. Importantly, aligning with a particular religion or spirituality (or no religion) can be an integral part of how one understands their sense of self, which is expressed “through the stories we tell about ourselves and our lives” as Pagan scholar Síân Reid writes (7). My examination of Paganism, in this chapter, offers a segue into my analysis of how participants' experiences of trauma and healing are shaped by Paganism in the chapters to follow. To do so, I provide a brief examination of contemporary Paganism followed by an overview of religiosity under the Pagan umbrella. The next section considers Paganism as a folk revival. Related to this, I offer a brief examination of how being in relationship with ancestors influences Pagan religiosity. Then I examine the significant influence feminist spirituality has had on witchcraft. Finally, although I have purposefully woven participants' life stories throughout this dissertation, in this chapter I also group participants' narratives together to demonstrate both the diversities and commonalities of Pagan religiosity as practiced by diverse people under the shared umbrella of Pagan community.¹⁸

3.2 What is Contemporary Paganism?

¹⁸ For an overview of participants' biographical and social locations see the introduction of this dissertation.

Participant Sara says “Pagans are a group of people who refuse to agree on any point of theology or how to define themselves, but nonetheless hangout together and throw parties” and “if you ask ten Pagans what it means, you’ll get thirteen different answers.” Sara is speaking humorously, but this statement affirms what I demonstrate throughout this chapter which is that Pagans are a diverse group of people with a range of beliefs and practices. On this point, Paganism is an orthopractic movement rather than an orthodoxic religion (Magliocco 2004; Hoff Kraemer 2012; Beckett 2018). Thus, there is no codified or agreed upon set of beliefs and practices by which to define Paganism (Harvey 2011). Instead, Paganism is a contemporary “religious and philosophical movement” (Adler 3), that weaves together folklore, the occult, mysticism, esoteric philosophy, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Romanticism, anthropology, psychology, as well as fantasy and science fiction (Reid 2006; Magliocco 2004; Adler 1986). Despite that Paganism encompasses a range of religions that are located across diverse cultures and histories, Pagan worldviews are typically holistic, earth-based, animistic, polytheistic, and typically embrace pluralism (Harvey 2011; Hoff Kraemer 2012; Davy 2007).¹⁹ Further, belief in the supernatural, trust in personal gnosis as a source of spiritual knowledge, magical practices and ritual performance are central to contemporary Paganism (York 2003; Hoff Kraemer 2012;

¹⁹ Some traditions under the Pagan umbrella include Traditional Witchcraft, Wicca, Druidry, Ásatrú or Heathenry (Northern European Paganism that has its roots in Norse mythologies), Goddess Spirituality, reconstructionism such as Irish, Greek, Egyptian or Norse reconstructionism, devotional polytheism, Afro-Caribbean traditions such as Voodoo, Afro-Cuban traditions such as La Regla Lucumi (often referred to as Santería and/or simply Lucumi) and various folk religions; and to further obscure the meaning there are hundreds, maybe thousands, of subgroups within each of these traditions (Hoff Kraemer 2012; Adler 1986; Dorsey 2020). Beckett (2018) also counts Hellenists, Thelemites, shamans, seers and chaos magicians as well as kitchen Witches — folks who use simple or “natural magic” that draws upon folk belief and custom (Harvey 98) — and tree huggers, among those who are Pagans. To further complicate the definition of Paganism, many Pagans embrace religious syncretism or eclectic Paganism, thus blending different (and sometimes contradictory) beliefs and practices. As an example of religious syncretism, Lucumi blends elements of African diasporic religions and Catholicism. In this tradition praying to the Orishas — who are supernatural entities of the Yoruba religion and/or religions that are syncretized religions such as La Regla Lucumi — is not in conflict with praying to the Christian God or to Catholic saints, despite that Catholicism promotes the premise that there is only one true God and that the Orishas are divine beings in their own right. Similarly, Pagan practitioners might blend aspects of Lucumi traditions and elements of contemporary Paganism.

Harvey 2011). Notably, many facets of Paganism are influenced by traditional witchcraft, which blends esoteric elements with traditional knowledge, and laid the foundation for the emergence of Wicca as a new religious movement (Magliocco 2004; Doyle 2018).

3.3 Religiosity Under the Pagan Umbrella.

As popular Pagan writer and Druid John Beckett writes “Choosing a religion is about identifying with a sacred story” (56). In other words, religion is a mythos that provides a foundation by which to give meaning to human experiences. To choose a Pagan religion is, therefore, to choose to make sense of human experience through the mythologies of that religion within the context of specific cultural and historical dimensions. In Paganism there is a strong emphasis on the self insofar as personal gnosis (also commonly referred to as unverified personal gnosis or UPG) and experiential knowledge are central to Pagan theology and practice (Hoff Kraemer 2012; Beckett 2018). At the same time, the concept of relationality is central to Pagan religions (Beckett 2018; O’Brien 2020). Notably, in Paganism the self is inextricably entwined with the world(s) in which one is embedded. Therefore, relationality and ethical responsibility to others is a primary concern for many Pagans; this includes both human beings and more-than-human beings and their worlds. The interplay between self-awareness and relationality can account for the prominence of healing practices in Paganism, which not only focus on individual healing but also collective healing and can involve healing for or by more-than-human beings and healing for the natural world. In this sense, focus on selfhood is not driven by neoliberal ideologies, but rather is attentive to the ways that personal experiences and one’s sense of self are shaped in and through structures of power and oppression. Indeed, with its rootedness in countercultural movements, political activism is prominent in Paganism and Pagans often incorporate magic and ritual

performance as forms of resistance and social transformation (Hughes 2018; Salisbury 2019). To this point, Beckett contends that there are four distinct, yet often overlapping common aspects of Paganism: nature, the gods, community, and the self (36) — these attributes are at the core of how Pagan persons live their religiosity.

Briefly stated, nature-centred Paganism can be nontheistic or theistic, and includes the concept of animism which is the idea that all things or “all things in nature” have a spirit or soul (Hoff Kraemer xii), or as Harvey states “everything that exists lives” (164). This form of Paganism is directly linked to environmentalism and, therefore, attends to being in relationship with the lands. God-centric Paganism focuses on building and maintaining relationships with the gods or deity (to use a non-specific gender term) and more-than-human beings, including spirits and ancestors (Beckett 42).²⁰ This can involve devotional practices such as worship, making offerings, prayers (speaking to deity, ancestors and more) and meditation (which can include listening to and/or paying attention to how more-than-human beings communicate with individuals).

Community-centred Paganism focuses on commitment to community service and leadership. An example is the role of priestx in serving their community in a spiritual capacity, which might overlap with god-centric if the person is performing the role of priestx for a particularly deity.²¹ Notably, there is no institution that functions as a Pagan theological education centre, like a seminary. In one of the few books addressing Pagan priesthood, *A Practical Guide to Pagan Priesthood: Community Leadership and Vocation* (2019), Lora O’Brien writes

In the context of Paganism, a priest is a person who honors a deity or deities; performs religious ceremonies, rites, and duties; and administers sacraments — that

²⁰ In popular discourse the term gods is often used as a gender neutral term.

²¹ I use the term priestx as a gender-neutral term in the same way that the terms folx and latinx are used.

is, anything of sacred significance. The priest may or may not be ordained or initiated within a particular tradition, and they may or may not hold the relevant legal status in their home country or state. (4)²²

What O'Brien's statement makes clear is that the role of a priestx comes with a great deal of responsibility both to the gods and to the communities that they serve to perform that role ethically. One participant in this study, Elizabeth, explicitly critiqued the lack of formal training for Pagan clergy indicating that the absence of structure can lead to lack of accountability, thus implying that there is risk for Pagan leaders to cause harm to their communities due to lack of education, lack of experience, and possibly to intentional abuse of their leadership roles. In Elizabeth's own words, "If you end up in a leadership position maybe you should consider at least consider doing some informal training in things like counselling." I agree with Elizabeth on this matter, although I recognize that these risks are not unique to Paganism. In fact, the risk for religious leaders to misuse their position is evident in all religious communities, even when institutionalized training is in place.

The concept of self-centered Paganism necessitates a nuanced analysis to distinguish its usage from the term's egocentric or neoliberal connotations, which are contradictory to holistic worldviews. Rather, the construct in this context is conceptualized through three related facets. First, self-centered Paganism acknowledges personal gnosis and experiential knowledge as valid forms of spiritual intelligence, as explained above. Second, self-centered Paganism focuses on self-development and personal growth as well as personal sovereignty.²³ As Beckett explains, self-centered Paganism means doing the work to make "yourself stronger, wiser, more compassionate and more magical so that you can be of greater service to the world" (45). On one

²² O'Brien uses the term priest as a gender-neutral word.

²³ The concepts of personal development and personal sovereignty are integral to the participants' experiences of trauma and healing as I examine in chapter six.

hand, personal development, can refer to practices such as working toward healing through the usage of integrated practices. On the other hand, it can refer to developing spiritual practices such as practicing magic, performing ritual, or developing psychic abilities. Third, Beckett asserts that self-centered Paganism “means to find the divine in yourself” (45). Self-centered Paganism, therefore, emphasizes self-awareness and lived experience, and understands unverified personal gnosis to be a valid form of spiritual knowledge. In this way, self-centered Paganism draws upon mysticism which Reid explains “is taken to be a sense of direct, unmediated connection with the divine, however conceived. People connect to this mystical and celebratory impulse through a variety of meditative, ritual, mythological, creative, and magical processes” (3). Further, unverified personal gnosis and experiential knowledge can be gained in a variety of ways such as through dreams, trance, divination, and encounters with the more-than-human world (Beckett 2019), which accounts for the emphasis on honing spiritual practices as part of self-development.

However, discernment should be applied to unverified personal gnosis for several reasons. First, some experiences that appear to be and/or are interpreted as supernatural can, in fact, be explained through non-supernatural logic. Secondly, some more-than-human beings can be deceitful and may appear to humans in such a way that disguises their true nature or identity, thus not every encounter with the supernatural is as it seems (Beckett 2019), and not every encounter with the supernatural is positive. Third, there is potential that human beings can misinterpret their own experiences, which can potentially be dangerous for themselves or others. This is not to imply that people do not understand their own experiences but that to err is human as the saying goes. Finally, most maliciously, some people might use their own UPG to exercise power over others. For example, if a person holds high status in a Pagan community and is well

respected then it is likely that their UPG is also well respected — however there is potential for community leaders to abuse their positions and in this case their own UPG could be used to support their own malicious behaviour. For these reasons, the more critical analysis an individual applies to their own experiences the more likely it will be that they are able to discern genuine mystical experiences from those that can be explained by mundane logic and thus the safer their encounters with the more-than-human world, as well as humans, will be.



Figure 9 Dream World/Inner Child, a/b portrait, Gina Snooks, April 2021

3.4 Contemporary Paganism: A Folk Revival

The centrality of folk knowledge and practice in Paganism cannot be understated. On this note, based on extensive ethnographic research on Paganism in North America, folklorist and Pagan scholar Sabina Magliocco concludes that Pagans

draw from many different cultures and historical traditions, from European folk customs to the religions of Classic antiquity, ancient Egypt, the Celts, and the Norse, occasionally mixing in material appropriated from Native American or Afro-Caribbean traditions. Material from these sources is used for a variety of purposes: to create a link to the historical past, imagined as a more spiritually authentic time; as a symbol of Euro-American ethnic identity and affiliation, to help bring about altered states of consciousness and activate the autonomous imagination; and to create a satisfying oppositional culture where such experiences and aesthetics are valued. (7)

She also notes that Pagans' usage of folk magic incorporates "the borrowing of narrative motifs, songs, rhymes, and elements from calendar customs and festivals" (7). Thus, as Magliocco claims Paganism is an important folklore revival.

To this point the term folklore was coined by William Thoms in 1846 and refers to the "informal and unofficial" cultural knowledge of a group (McNeill 4). Through the lens of folklore studies, a folk group is a group of two or more people who share "an unofficial culture" (McNeill 4). Simply stated, folk groups can be based on shared interests, ethnicity, nationhood, or any group that "generates a shared cultural understanding," as folklorist Lynne S. McNeill explains (4). In the context of contemporary Paganism, a small group such as a coven constitutes a folk group while at the same time entire Pagan communities are folk groups, which are located within specific localized and national groups. McNeill organizes folklore under four categories: the things we say, the things we do, the things we make, and the things we believe. To expand, the things we say includes stories — such as folktales, myths, and legends — songs, proverbs, jokes, riddles, slang and more (McNeill 2013). The things we do includes customary practices such as calendar customs and rites of passage (McNeill 2013). The things we make includes all forms of material culture and objects that are connected to folk culture (McNeill 2013). Finally, the things we believe can include legends and ideas about the supernatural as commonly thought, but it can also include ideas about religion and belief systems (McNeill 2013). According to McNeill, folklore studies provides two explanations for belief in the supernatural: "*the cultural*

source hypothesis and the experiential source hypothesis” (57, emphasis original). In other words, we believe certain things to be true because our culture promotes it to be true or we believe things to be true because we have ourselves experienced it. It is also important to acknowledge that folklore is dynamic and evolves within living cultures. Consequently, Pagan beliefs and practices that are rooted in folklore are not monolithic and the ways in which Pagans engage with folk knowledge can change over time.

To put Paganism as a folk revival into the context of this study, all thirteen participants indicated that their Pagan practices incorporate beliefs and practices that have been handed down intergenerationally as well as culturally located folk knowledge including folk magic, folk medicine, and belief in the more-than-human world. Jeannette, for example, learned to read tea leaves from her Scottish grandmother, thus her divination practice is a family practice. Mayra learned graveyard etiquette from her Guatemalan father who taught her to announce her presence at a grave to let the spirit know that she had come to visit; as this practice demonstrates, Mayra’s belief in the more-than-human world is shared with her father, and customs on how to interact with the dead are part of her living culture. Similarly, Sara explained that part of faer Pagan worldview is rooted in southern Appalachian culture which is accepting of a magical worldview.²⁴ On this point, Sara described that it is not uncommon for folks to have visions of others who are near death, which in the South is referred to as “being called.” To be clear, I am not suggesting participants in this study have inherited witchcraft lineages from their ancestors; rather, I am demonstrating how practices and beliefs held by Pagans are sometimes rooted in traditional folk knowledges in which they themselves are culturally located.

²⁴ Sara’s nonbinary pronouns are faer/faerself.

In my own experience, the practice of folk magic and healing as well as engagement with the supernatural are common within my family (and Newfoundland folklore more broadly). Some examples include “seeing” ghosts or spirits as well as experiences with the Old Hag phenomenon, claircognitive and other forms of psychic knowing, and prophetic dreaming.²⁵ In terms of folk healing, my grandfather could put away warts (which is Newfoundland vernacular language to say he could make warts disappear without the usage of biomedical intervention. In fact, no one knows how he did it because he did not pass on that knowledge) and my great-Uncle was known to charm teeth. That is, he was able to heal toothaches by what I now understand to be a form of sympathetic magic or “imaginative magic” (Moodley and West xviii). As a final example, one of my earliest memories is of my grandmother’s usage of folk medicine. Specifically, when I was around four years old, she applied a bread poultice to an open wound on my foot to stave off infection because I had punctured the foot by jumping on a rusty nail. I cannot be sure that her homeopathic approach prevented infection, but I know that no conventional medical intervention was required.

These various examples of familial and cultural knowledge provided by participants, alongside my own, highlight the interplay between culture as a source of knowledge and experiential knowledge, that in turn shapes contemporary Pagan worldviews and practices. Further, these examples demonstrate that some of the ideas and practices that participants now associate with Paganism are rooted in familial and cultural folklore, despite that all the participants in this study identify as first-generation Pagans (including myself). My point is that,

²⁵ The Old Hag phenomenon or curse of the Old Hag is a nightmarish-like experience that has been described as an old and terrifying figure who sits on a person while they sleep. By some accounts if a person does not wake, while the Old Hag is holding them down, they will die. This phenomenon is also understood as a form of sleep paralysis. See *That Terror That Comes in the Night: An Experience-Centred Study of Supernatural Assault Traditions*, by folklorist David J. Hufford (1982) for an in-depth investigation of the Old Hag in Newfoundland folklore.

while Paganism is a “folk revival” (Magliocco 2004) and draws on the knowledges of distant ancestors (Beckett 2018), it is important to acknowledge that for some Pagans their beliefs and practices are also rooted in uninterrupted living folk traditions and personal experience.

Similarly, based on her ethnographic research on Pagan festivals, religious studies scholar Sarah M. Pike indicates that, for Pagans, “childhood experiences play a central role in who they are now” (157). While this statement is true for most adults, Pike’s point is that some Pagans practice Paganism specifically because the beliefs and practices common within Pagan religions align with their lived realities and their cultural identities. Nevertheless, it is also important to acknowledge that memory is not a mirror of the past, but rather “an interpretation of a past that can never be fully recovered” (Watson and Smith 9). Therefore, how one perceives the past and how that past impacts the present is mediated through one’s own embodied subjectivity that is itself mediated through social and political histories.

3.5 The Old Ways/ New Ways

The Old Ways is a common term used by Pagans to describe Paganism, thereby connecting contemporary Pagan theology and practices to the Paganism of the past. The word pagan has its roots in the Latin word *paganus* (singular) or *paganii* (plural) which pejoratively referred to “people of the land, as opposed to people of the book,” as Pagan scholar Barbara Jane Davy writes (6). According to Davy, “the book” refers to the Christian Bible or the Islamic Qur’an, and thus links the term Pagan to pre-Christian/pre-Islamic/pre-colonized peoples. Self-identified Pagan practitioner and religious scholar Michael York further unpacks the etymology of the term explaining that the word Pagan has several root meanings, including “as a Roman reference to the “countryside” as well as “people of place” (Chuvin qtd. in York) who maintained “their local

traditions” (6). Thus, in its original context, Pagan referred to people who were connected to the lands and who maintained their own vernacular knowledges, rather than being converted to the ways of colonizers. Emerging from these definitions, some scholars and Pagan practitioners define contemporary Paganism as religious movement that draws upon, reclaims, or is rooted in Indigenous ways or pre-Christian spiritualities (Hoff Kraemer 2012). Framing contemporary Paganism therefore tangentially links the movement to land-based spirituality (or nature/earth-based spirituality).

One issue that Michael York (2003) illuminates is that the term Pagan is often associated explicitly with pre-Christian European traditions. York’s observation is important for two reasons: first, non-Europeans or descendants of non-Europeans may not align with the term Pagan because the Eurocentric mythos does not align with their worldview and lived experience of spirituality. Secondly, if the term Pagan is associated with European pre-Christian/pre-colonised traditions then the term can function to recentre Eurocentric epistemologies rather than create an opening for more inclusive and diverse Pagan practices. In doing so, Eurocentric-focused Paganism risks reiterating colonial violence, epistemic violence, racism, and other forms of oppression, including cultural appropriation.

Notably, the erasure of Indigenous and localized knowledges was and continues to be a central strategy of cultural genocide and epistemic violence that is at the core of colonialism, which is often enacted by dominating religions and political regimes. By contrast, I argue that reclaiming, reviving and/or reconstructing Pagan beliefs and practices is a decolonising strategy — even as I am attentive to issues with appropriation and exclusion. This location necessitates an attentiveness to how both the terms Pagan and Indigenous are used in contemporary Pagan discourse. The term Indigenous, and indigeneity itself, is a political matter (Wilson 2008);

therefore, reclaiming or reconstructing spiritualities rooted in Indigenous cultures is always a political matter tied to colonialism, imperialism, and sovereignty. On the one hand, this is because the erosion of Indigenous knowledges is a tactical strategy of colonialism and imperialism, thus a threat to Indigenous sovereignty. On the other hand, Indigenous knowledges are land-based and, therefore, Indigenous spirituality must be contextualized in relationship to specific lands and the cultural and political histories of those lands, including the ways in which colonialism and state defined borders have disrupted Nation territories. Given participants' various locations across Turtle Island (Canada and the United States) and Éire (Ireland), I focus this discussion on these geopolitical landscapes.

Many Pagans' usage of the term Indigenous knowledges or Indigenous spirituality stems from a basic definition of the term to mean original peoples, local people, or peoples native to place. In this way, the term Indigenous spirituality is used widely in reference to reclaimed or reconstructed spiritualities connected to specific lands and cultures and/or spiritualities and that are rooted in particular folk knowledges. That said, the United Nations indicates that "Indigenous peoples are inheritors and practitioners of unique cultures and ways of relating to people and environment. They have retained social, cultural, economic and political characteristics that are distinct from those of the dominant societies in which they live."²⁶ In this way, the term Indigenous peoples is politicized and is directly related to Indigenous identity and matters such as land rights and nation sovereignty — and thus is not synonymous with terms such as vernacular knowledge or folk belief.

As an example in the context of Irish Pagan spirituality, popular Irish Pagan author and educator Lora O'Brien refers to herself as a "modern Draoí (Druid) – a practitioner and priest of

²⁶See: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/about-us.html#:~:text=Indigenous%20peoples%20are%20inheritors%20and,societies%20in%20which%20they%20live.>

indigenous Irish magic and spirituality” (2021, n.p.), which means pre-Christian Irish polytheism.²⁷ For O’Brien these practices are rooted in reconstructing and reclaiming the Irish spirituality of her ancestors that predates Christianity in Ireland. At the same time, O’Brien is vocal about locating those practices within context of the social, cultural, and political dimensions of contemporary Irish lived reality, including matters of oppression stemming from colonization. O’Brien’s approach to Paganism is a form of reconstructionist polytheism which uses a range of sources such as folklore, anthropology, archaeology, and historical records “to reconstruct ancient belief and practice” in modern context (Daimler 2015, 3). In her commitment to reclaim Irish knowledges and practices that were eroded as a result of colonialism, O’Brien has politicized her spirituality. Consequently, this approach is a form of decolonising Irish spirituality. Notably, O’Brien is an influential contemporary Pagan writer and educator in terms of Irish Pagan spirituality, which is not only practiced in Ireland but is also popular in North America. Thus, her choice to define her spirituality as indigenous Irish spirituality can have a significant impact on how others approach this topic. Conversely, folklorist and scholar of Irish Paganism Jenny Butler problematizes the term indigenous Irish spirituality. For Butler, defining Irish indigeneity and Irish spirituality are complex matters given Ireland’s long history of colonization and the integration of Anglo-Irish identities, histories, and cultures (179). She further points out that little is known about the pre-Christian Irish world and that much of what is known about Irish deities and spiritual practices is filtered through the lens of Christian worldviews. Indigenizing contemporary Paganism necessitates a critical analysis of the folklore, mythologies, and histories to consider the social and political dimensions that influence how those resources were constructed in the first place.

²⁷ See: <https://loraobrien.ie/about-lora-obrien/>

On Turtle Island the term Indigenous refers to the first peoples of this landscape and it carries particular political meanings. In Canada, specifically, Indigenous peoples include First Nations peoples, status Indians (which is a government issued designation), Métis, Inuit and Innu peoples which include a wide range of nations with unique histories and cultures. In this context, indigeneity is not only tied to land in a broad way but also involves being connected to particular communities and nations. Thus, Indigenous spirituality is rooted in the traditional knowledges of specific peoples in the context of living cultures. In this manner, the term Indigenous cannot simply be applied to revived or reclaimed knowledge rooted in any culture. As these examples demonstrate, the usage of the term Indigenous in relationship to contemporary Paganism is fraught. It is not my intention here to make judgements on who can or cannot use the term Indigenous and by what measures. Instead, I draw attention to politics surrounding the term and its usage.

The term shaman or neo-shaman is also contentious among Pagans because etymologically the term is rooted in the language of the Tungus peoples of Siberia but in contemporary Paganism the term is widely applied to practices in which the practitioner mediates between the human world and the more-than-human (spirit) world (Harvey 2011). To be clear, I am not suggesting that Indigenous communities who use the term shamanism to describe culturally rooted healing practices are appropriating its usage. Instead, discord over the term shaman is premised on the critique of core shamanism which assumes shamanic practices are universal – and thus performs an erasure of specific Indigenous knowledges and the political and historical context in which those knowledges are rooted. In doing so, such an erasure constitutes epistemic colonial violence and risks creating a problematic opening for cultural appropriation.



Figure 10 Hope, a/b portrait, Gina Snooks, July 2020.

On the topic of relationality, O'Brien indicates that central to Irish Paganism is the concept of *Coibhneas Cóir*, which means “being in ‘right relationship’ with the Gods and Ungods (our ancestors, Aos Sí, heroes and warriors...and all the rest, and the sovereign spirit of Ireland herself” (qtd. in Daimler, *Forward*). I would argue this includes being in right relationship with the first peoples of the lands, their ancestors, and spirits of place. To this point, epistemologically the concept of *Coibhneas Cóir* is similar to what translates into English as “all our relations” which Oneida Nation of the Thames Turtle Nation scholar Lina Sunseri explains is a traditional teaching shared among many diverse Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island that promotes “spiritual and sacred connectedness” (95). Thus, central to Indigenous ways of knowing is the matter of interconnectedness, which is premised on “principles of respect, reciprocity, and obligation” as Nathalie Kermoal (Breton) and Isabel Alatmirano-Jiménez (Zapotec from Oaxaco, Mexico) elucidate (8). To be clear, by drawing parallels between the Irish concept of *Coibhneas Cóir* and the practice of honouring “all our relations” common among Turtle Island Indigenous peoples, my intention is not to conflate distinct localized knowledges,

nor do I intend to uproot Indigenous knowledges from the cultures to which they belong. Rather, I demonstrate that epistemological commonalities do exist across diverse cultures which is important to bear in mind when theorizing how contemporary Paganism draws upon and reclaims Indigenous knowledges of various cultures because what constitutes cultural appreciation, reclaiming pre-Christian/pre-colonized knowledges and cultural appropriation can, at times, be blurry and misunderstood.

3.6 Ancestor Veneration

Another practice common among Pagans that is shared by numerous participants in this study is ancestor veneration. In the context of Pagan religiosity, ancestor veneration is any practice intended to honour one's ancestors, which can be secular and/or magical. Many Pagans adhere to the notion shared by many cultures that memory, including traumatic memories, can be passed on through generations — what science refers to as epigenetics (Duran 2006; Foor 2017). Thus, ancestral healing — that is healing the wounds inherited from ancestors — can be an important part of Pagans' healing practices. Moreover, Pagans consider ancestors to be part of the more-than-human world which can impact human lives in helpful or harmful ways, consequently ancestors can aid in healing as well. For many Pagans honouring the ancestors includes mundane practices such as learning the cultures and histories of our ancestors, including ancestors' folk belief and practices which are then blended with contemporary beliefs and practices.

Relationships with ancestors and their histories, however, require an attentiveness to the ways in which ancestors as individuals and the cultures of which they are a part of have caused harm to others. In North America specifically, this would mean understanding how we are each implicated in the ongoing legacies of settler colonialism and transnational slavery, albeit in

different ways. For those of us whose ancestors were colonisers, this necessitates a commitment to working toward addressing those harmful legacies in alignment with commitment to personal, political, and spiritual practices. Understandably, for people whose ancestors were both colonisers and colonised peoples these relationships can be especially complex. I theorize decolonising Paganism in more detail in the next chapter.



Figure 11 Haunted, a/b portrait, Gina Snooks, January 2019.

3.7 Witchcraft and/as Feminist Praxis: ?

The subtitle of this section elucidates the relationship between feminist spirituality and witchcraft while as the same time leaves room to question and critique its practices that may themselves reiterate harmful oppressions. Locating Witchcraft this way is important because in North America and Europe the Pagan movement is significantly influenced by Witchcraft (Magliocco 2004). Indeed, it is notable that of the thirteen participants in this study, half (plus me) identify as

being a Witch. It is for this reason that I examine Witchcraft more thoroughly in this chapter than other facets of Paganism.

In Europe, the Witchcraft movement has its roots in British Traditional Witch or British Wicca or what later became widely known as Gardnerian Witchcraft or Gardnerian Wicca, because of the significant role that Gerald B. Gardner played in influencing the movement. Importantly, although Gardner claimed to have revived an ancient religion from practicing Witches it is more accurate to say that he developed a new religion inspired by folklore (primarily European folklore) and the occult (Hutton 2019). In the United States Victor and Cora Anderson, founders of the Feri Witchcraft Tradition, played an important role. As Feri initiate and author T. Thorn Coyle explains, by the time that Gardner began to publish on Witchcraft in the 1950s spiritual practices blending Witchcraft, folk magic and root doctoring were happening in America (2). Each of these traditions of Witchcraft are foundational in making way for contemporary Witchcraft, and Paganism more broadly. That said, since the 1960s Paganism has been widely influenced by feminist movement, consciousness-raising groups, and the environmental movement (Sollée 2017; Klassen 2009; Reid 2004; Hoff Kraemer 2012). To this point, Pagan scholar Graham Harvey claims that “feminism has affected all Pagan traditions in one way or another” (83).

According to cultural theorist and anti-racist scholar bell hooks, consciousness-raising groups provide women with a space to “uncover and openly reveal the depths of their wounds” and to make explicit connections between personal experiences and the social, cultural, and political dimensions at the roots of sexism, oppression, and exploitation (8). It is within this meeting place where overlapping countercultural movements met that Paganism became entwined with feminism, thereby positioning itself as a religious movement with gender politics

and social justice at its heart. To further elucidate, the feminist spirituality movement itself was inspired by feminists who recognized mainstream religions, such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, to not only be “sexist, but racist, imperialist, ethnocentric, and heterosexist,” according to feminist theologians Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ (2). To this point, Johanna H. Stuckley claims that feminists in the 1970s who had rejected Christianity and Judaism but were looking for a way to express their spirituality, and feminists who had not previously aligned with particular religions “found a ready-made religion that they could connect to: Wicca or Witchcraft” (183).

On this topic, Glenda Anne Tibe Bonifacio claims that “the Goddess is both a concept and a practice, [and] this imagery invites exploration into its history and manifestation across cultures” and, when situated within the feminist movement, reclaiming “goddess imagery is a critical tool to empower women’s lives” (130) — because imagery and symbolism play an important role in shaping cultural ethos (Christ 1982). Therefore, reimagining patriarchal religious symbolism offers a way for persons of all genders to reshape narrowly constructed ideas about gender roles and identity that underpin gender-based inequality and structural oppression. In turn, reimagining symbols can be an important part of altering the cultural ethos and can work toward unsettling systems of power and injustice. Indeed, Pagan author, Spirit Worker, Priest and medium Lou Florez makes the bold claim that “if it were not for the insidious nature of sexism, patriarchy, hierarchy and misogyny, the reclamation of the goddess would not have been necessary” (Florez 35).

That notwithstanding, Witchcraft, Paganism and feminism are each contextually located and neither movement is immune to problematic exclusionary politics. Moreover, religion and culture are co-constituted. Therefore, the culture and historical context in which a religion is

located, including subcultures and specific communities, will shape the degree to which a religion is either empowering or oppressive for its members. Thus, some individuals can find empowerment and spiritual fulfilment within religious institutions whose doctrines and official practices are harmful and oppressive. However, religion can be used as the tool of oppression where the foundation of the religion itself may not be inherently oppressive because it is embedded in cultures that are themselves sexist, racist, homophobic, transphobic, and so forth. It is, therefore, important to acknowledge that religious institutions can hold significant power within specific cultures and societies and challenging those institutions can be dangerous for some people. Thus, for some people, the oppressive practices of the institution cannot be separated from the religion, whether such ideologies affect practitioners personally. By locating Paganism in general in relation to Witchcraft in this way, this dissertation promotes that Paganism can be empowering for some people, as it is for participants in this study. At the same time, because Paganism is culturally located, I am attentive to the ways in which this religious movement itself can reiterate harms, which I theorize in the next chapter.

Emerging against this backdrop, I offer three ways to understand Witchcraft in its contemporary iteration through the lens of modern Witches. First, following influential Witch, author, and activist Starhawk, a Witch is “one whose life is infused with magic” (32). And Witchcraft is a way of life that promotes that the Goddess is “immanent in the world and in all forms of life, including human beings” (Starhawk 22). Second, Coyle claims that in its current iteration Feri Witchcraft

has a queer nature. There is a sense of walking the edges and in-between spaces, of being all genders and holding possibilities within oneself — one can be human and fey, male and female, fragile soul and divine essence, all at the same time. In looking upon our multiplicity, we find wholeness. (4)

Finally, in the words of author Pam Grossman, “the problem with witches is that they have *always* been difficult to define” (15). Nevertheless, paraphrasing historian Ronald Hutton, Grossman gives four common meanings of the word witch: “someone who uses magic for malevolent means; any person who uses magic at all (whether good, bad, or neutral); a follower of nature-based Paganism, such as Wicca; and a figure of transgressive female power” (15). As this brief discussion illustrates, Witchcraft is a religious movement that is inextricably entwined with feminist politics and, therefore, gender, sexuality, and racial politics are integral to Witchcraft (and Paganism more broadly), regardless of whether individual practitioners are attentive to these matters.²⁸

For several participants in this study feminism is an integral part of their Paganism. For example, Lauren left the Catholic faith of their family because its gender politics were oppressive to their own sense of self and lived reality as a genderqueer person. For Lauren, Paganism offered a spiritual path that aligned with their feminist politics, thus providing a sense of belonging for them that was absent in Catholicism. For Mary Allen feminism is a core part of how she understands her sense of self and how she lives her life. For her the word Witch is a feminist word that represents personal empowerment. Alice also spoke explicitly about the interconnectedness of feminism and Paganism for her. Specifically, that she had viewed religion as being oppressive toward women until she began to read about feminist theology that offered a bridge into Paganism by way of reading *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* by Starhawk, which was first published in 1979. What is interesting is that Alice has only identified as a Pagan for several years, thereby suggesting that the *Spiral Dance* remains an influential text for some feminist Pagans despite that its binary language can now be

²⁸ In my next chapter on Inclusion and Diversity I critique some of the ways in which Paganism has reiterated harmful ideas and practices pertaining to gender, sexuality, and race.

critiqued as essentialist and exclusionary. To this point, rewording texts that use gender binary language can be an act of resistance in the same way that reimagining patriarchal iconography is. In doing so, changing language offers a way to create more inclusivity in Witchcraft and Paganism. The statement above by Reclaiming Witchcraft priestess Isisanya Moon is a prime example of how Witchcraft traditions continue to adjust their practices and language because Reclaiming is the tradition that Starhawk cofounded around the time that *Spiral Dance* was released (Moon 2020).

3.8 Merry Meet: Meeting the Participants

The term Pagan is contentious among scholars and practitioners alike. Given the complexities of defining the term Pagan, I follow Beckett (2018) in saying that a Pagan is someone who says that they are a Pagan and if you do not call yourself a Pagan, I will not call you one either. This point is not a superficial matter of semantics but indicates the importance of respecting participants' right to self-determination and self-representation. In other words, I am not the Pagan identity police, nor do I intend to place judgement on participants' self-understanding and self-representation of what Pagan spirituality means to them personally. It is for this reason that my recruitment strategy invited persons who self-identify as Pagan, which is intentionally vague/open. In doing so, my study attracted people for whom the word Pagan holds some kind of personal meaning, albeit in different ways.²⁹ I will, however, offer the caveat that naming is a complicated matter and that self-identification can be problematic. For example, self-identifying as a member of specific cultural or religious groups can be problematic as is evident when people

²⁹ Admittedly, the term "self-identified Pagan" may have been a hindrance to recruiting people whose religions fall under the Pagan umbrella but who may not self-identify as Pagan.

with no direct involvement in ethnic communities locate themselves within those cultures, particularly when they position themselves as experts of cultural knowledge and practices. On the topic of naming, participants in this study are located across the wide spectrum of belief and practice in Paganism. Thus, to further locate participants in this study in what follows I offer an introduction to each participant in terms of their religiosity.

Alice did not state if she locates her religiosity under a specific Pagan umbrella. However, she did indicate that Paganism is an integral aspect of her sense of self which is, further, shaped by her feminism and her Northeastern European heritage. Thus, I would describe Alice as a feminist Pagan. She did, however, comment directly on her usage of both magic and ritual performance as part of her Pagan practices. Specifically, she explained that magic played a role in her healing process and that she uses makeup as a magical tool for personal empowerment. Alice also indicated that ancestor veneration is an integral part of her Paganism.

Ashley follows an eclectic path that incorporates elements of various spiritual traditions, including aspects of Paganism. Due to her interest in plant medicine, healing crystals, essential oil, reflexology and her worldview, others assumed that she was Pagan, or Wiccan more specifically, but for Ashley her interest in these healing modalities and her belief in fairies predates her knowledge of Paganism. However, once she was introduced to the term Pagan, the concept resonated with her because Pagan ways of being aligned with her existing ideas and practices. In her own words it felt like “coming home,” which is a concept commonly stated by Pagans, including other participants in this study. Nevertheless, Ashley is not fond of placing labels on her spirituality because it is such an integral part of who she is that it is hard to define. Ashley describes her sense of self through a holistic paradigm and spoke of the importance of honouring nature in her worldview.

Caitlyn intentionally uses the term Pagan to describe her spirituality because the broadness of the term means that she can apply it to her continuously evolving spiritual practices. In her own words, “I tend to use the term Pagan broadly.... I just sort of like that Pagan as an umbrella term doesn’t really have a lot of restrictions. Right, and so it can change and grow as I change and grow. And I don’t have a box to put myself in.” Caitlyn explained she is the first in her family to identify as a Pagan, but she learned some of her practices from her mother and that having conversations about topics such as dream interpretation and past life experiences was common in her childhood household. In fact, both Caitlyn and her brother have memories of their past lives. Caitlyn noted that most of her spiritual communication happens in dreams, thus dreaming is an important pathway to her experiential knowledge and UPG. Caitlyn also spoke about making offerings to specific deities thus indicating that her Paganism is informed by polytheism to some degree.

Elizabeth began to practice Paganism when she was a teenager and has meandered through various iterations of Paganism over the course of more than two decades. Her study of religion is both personal and scholastic as she holds a Master of Arts in Religious Studies and her thesis examined *The Fourth Way* from an insider’s perspective, which she says is an occult practice but not a religion. Reflexively, Elizabeth explained that her ongoing spiritual journey is grounded in mysticism and that she now describes herself as an omnist, rather than as a Pagan, which is someone who believes “that all beliefs are valid,” as she puts it. Thought of differently, omnism is the belief that all religions can hold some truth, that truth can be found in all theology and, therefore, no one religion holds the absolute *Truth*. That is to say, no one religion is superior to another. For example, omnism promotes that monotheism is not inherently a more valid belief than polytheism and that Christianity is not superior to Paganism or vice versa. To be clear, this

is not to suggest that omnists take an uncritical approach to religiosity. To claim that all religions have value is not to imply that one should ignore the multitude of ways in which religion functions as a tool of oppression and is mobilised in a political sense. In other words, an omnist approach does not promote that one can use their religion to rationalise causing harm toward others in the name of that religion. This perspective is similar to the concept of plurality which means that no single religion or “spiritual path can be right for everyone because people have different spiritual needs,” as Hoff-Kraemer explains (xiii) and which, she further posits, is a main characteristic of Paganism. Interestingly, despite that Elizabeth does not explicitly identify as Pagan (religiously) she states that she is Pagan culturally.

Jeanette has been practicing divination and Paganism for fifty years and has trained in both the Gardnerian and Alexandrian traditions of Wicca, although she describes the witchcraft tradition in which she trained as a “hybrid” approach that blends tenets of Gardnerian tradition with the traditions developed by Richard James, the high priest of the coven she was involved with at the time. James, along with his wife Tamara James, founded the Wiccan Church of Canada in Toronto in 1979 for the purpose of creating public access to Wiccan religion in the area.³⁰ According to Lynna Landstreet, the Wiccan Church of Canada formed its own tradition — the Odyssean Tradition — that drew inspiration from coven members’ backgrounds in “Gardnerian, Alexandrian, Continental” Witchcraft but also included the Church’s own style of teaching and practice (2014, n.p.).³¹ This point of hybridism is important because later when Jeannette led public rituals in Houston, Texas she was met with criticism from members of the Gardnerian community there who insisted that her initiation into an eclectic tradition meant that

³⁰ See The Wiccan Church of Canada (WCC) for more details on the history of WCC at <http://www.wiccanada.ca/history.html>.

³¹ For more information see: <https://web.archive.org/web/20150510202327/http://www.wcc.on.ca/history.html>.

she was not an initiated Gardnerian Witch and, therefore, could not claim to be performing Gardnerian rituals. However, from Jeannette’s perspective the ritual content was readily available in published books — that is to say, not secret (which seems to be partially what the group had been implying) — and her training with the Wiccan Church of Canada qualified her to lead public rituals.

To reiterate, training and/or initiation within particular Pagan traditions is informed by the guiding principles and practices of that tradition but there is no single creed or sacred text by which the entire Pagan movement is defined. As an example, many Wicca traditions promote the principle of the Wiccan Rede, which includes some variation of the phrase “An’ it harm none, do what ye will” (Doyle White 2015), but this principle is an ethical guideline or philosophy rather than an official rule of the entire religion.³² Politics around identity inclusion and exclusion, as she experienced in Houston, are part of the reason that Jeannette no longer identifies as Wiccan. Having said that, Jeannette finds the term Pagan somewhat limiting because of the stereotypes associated with the word; folks who have a lot of crystals and a lot of books, whereas she describes her own approach as much simpler. To be clear, I did not interpret Jeannette’s comment to suggest she was demeaning the usage of crystals and knowledge gained from books; instead, she was demonstrating how her own practices differ and have become more simplified over time. Somewhat jokingly, Jeannette calls herself a “minimalist Witch,” because she no longer performs rituals or follows the structures. For Jeannette, her Paganism is in the way she

³² For more on the history of the Wiccan Rede of “An it harm none, do what ye will” see Ethan Doyle White’s article “‘An it Harm None, Do What Ye Will’: A Historical Analysis of the Wiccan Rede.” *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* Winter 2015, pp. 142-171. In this article, Doyle traces the usage of the term to early Wiccan pioneers such as Doreen Valiente and Gerald Gardner. Doyle White further elucidates inspiration for the Rede may have come from occultist Aleister Crowley’s Thelemic aphorism “do what thou wilt” (160).

breathes, acts, stands, and engages in her everyday world. In other words, being a Witch is who she is in a holistic sense — a way of living and being.

Lupa has been practicing Paganism for several decades and reverence for nature has been a consistent part of that practice; however, other aspects of her practice have shifted. At the start of her Pagan journey, she ascribed to what she referred to as “generic Wicca flavoured neo-Paganism.” Beyond that Lupa made her way to chaos magic which was her segue into trying to create her own “neo-Shamanic path,” which is a personal practice grounded in nature-based aspects of Paganism and ecopsychology. Having said that, Lupa is also critical of the terms neo-Shaman or Shaman and the cultural appropriation of Indigenous knowledges.

Lauren is a Witch whose feminism is intertwined with their spirituality, and nature-based practices are also important for them. Lauren explained that they felt like an outsider in the Catholic religion that they had grown up in, precisely because Catholicism is oppressive for queer folks. Lauren further elucidated that they had “felt very shamed” for being queer in the Catholic community but that being a practicing Witch and Pagan helped them to discover their queer identity and, in Lauren’s own words, “helped me kinda come into my own” as a queer person. Thus, for Lauren, Paganism and Witchcraft have been pathways to empowerment. Lauren also commented that the inclusion of “both the male and female entity” in Paganism and Witchcraft is part of what attracted them to this religion in the first place because this duality differs from the androcentrism and patriarchy of Catholicism. I emphasize this point to demonstrate that the binary concept of god(s) and goddess(es) in Paganism (particularly in Wiccan ritual practice) is not automatically oppressive or exclusionary for genderqueer persons, as Lauren makes clear with regard to their own experiences.³³

³³ Nor more so than Paganism is inherently inclusive of gender-variant persons’ experiences, as I examine in the next chapter.

Mary Allen calls herself a Witch because, for her, claiming the word is an act of reclaiming power – “it’s a very feminist, powerful, mysterious” term, she says. Moreover, Mary Allen explicitly uses the term Witch as a political act because at least one of her ancestors was persecuted in the Salem Witch hunts and, for this reason, she understands her usage of the term to be an act of reclaiming these histories. For Mary Allen, the term Witch describes her spiritual framework that is informed by her political commitment to feminism and the women’s rights movement. In this sense, the word Witch represents personal sovereignty and one’s right to self-determination and autonomy — “a witch is a woman who owns her power,” Mary Allen claims. Further, Mary Allen’s practice is rooted in reverence for nature whereas theism (emphasis on gods/goddesses/deity) is not central to her spirituality. In addition, building and maintaining relationships with her ancestors in the spirit world is becoming increasingly important to Mary Allen’s spiritual practice.

Mayra has identified as a practicing Pagan since 1991 and describes herself as a devotional polytheist, Witch, seer, and healer. Her devotional practices include Norse, Greek and Irish pantheons as well as the Orishas of the Lucumí traditions which are part of her Hispanic heritage. Mayra adheres to “hard” polytheism which means that she believes that the gods/goddesses are unique agentic beings each with their own identities, personalities, attributes, histories (located within specific cultural contexts), as well as their own agendas that may differ from human beings’ motivations. These points are important to consider with regard to how Pagans conceive of their relationships with deity (rather than submission to deity, which is common in Christianity and Islam, for example). To suggest that Pagans, typically, consider their interactions with deity as being in a relationship is not to imply that Pagans view themselves as equals to gods/goddess — gods/goddesses are to be revered and honoured; indeed, this is the

premise of devotion. What it does mean is that many Pagans, including Mayra and myself, acknowledge that devotees are sovereign beings with agency and choice when it comes to devotional practices and service to the gods/goddesses.

Molly identified as a Catholic until she was in her mid-twenties but explained that she didn't agree with all of Catholicism's teaching, and she wanted more focus on feminine spirituality in her life. Her introduction to goddess-focused spirituality was through Starhawk's book *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Goddess* (1979). After several decades of practice, Molly's spirituality is somewhat eclectic in that she draws upon various traditions. She is both Pagan and omnist. For Molly, honouring her ancestors plays a role in her Pagan practices. For example, during Samhain Molly and her family perform ritual to honour their ancestors as well as visit graveyards.

Riley is one of the two Irish women who participated in this study and her Irish identity plays a central role in her spirituality. Riley described her spirituality as nature-based and grounded Irish or Celtic Shamanism, even as she grapples with using the term Shaman because it is not an Irish word, and she acknowledges that its usage in the context of contemporary Paganism is contentious. Riley is also trained in contemporary Druidry, which is a tradition with roots in Irish culture. However, she explained that Druidry does not delve into healing practices as deeply as shamanism does, which is an integral part of her spirituality. According to Sandra Ingerman, who has written extensively on the topic of shamanism, a shaman is a healer who "deals with the spiritual aspects of illness" and she explains that "a shaman diagnoses and treats illnesses, divines information, communicates and interacts with the spirit world, and occasionally acts as a psychopomp, that is, a person who helps souls cross over to the other world" (1). The basic concept of shamanism is that physical, emotional, mental, and psychological aspects of

personhood are interconnected and, therefore, trauma and healing must be framed through this holistic paradigm. For Riley, Irish shamanism is a land-based (nature-based) practice in which spirit is part of “everything,” including the earth, sky, the natural world, and even human beings. Her shamanic practice includes belief in spirit allies (otherworldly allies such as animal guides, ancestors, spirits of place, and so forth) who can interact with and affect the lives of living human beings. For her, divinity is not rooted in the concept of a male god and/or a female goddess, but rather in her belief that Spirit is both male and female, and neither at the same time. In her own words, “everything is imbued with the lifeforce essence of Spirit or Spiorad as we say in Irish Gaelic.”³⁴

Sandra did not name a specific branch of Paganism that she follows. However, she spoke extensively about energy and performing rituals. For example, she discussed masculine and feminine energies that she worked with in ritual to heal from trauma connected to an intimate partnership and noted that the ritual was intended to disentangle their energies. Further she described the ritual as functioning similarly as a soul retrieval inasmuch as it “helped bring that energy back” to herself. Sandra’s reflection on her spiritual connection with Manannán Mac Lir as a god whom she “was continuing to build trust with” and whom she “consulted with” implies that she holds a polytheistic worldview which assumes that gods are agentic noncorporeal entities³⁵. She also described a scenario in which she witnessed Manannán Mac Lir “came in to” the body of another person. Although Sandra did not explicitly define this term, her discussion indicates that she had witnessed a form of possession by the spirit of Manannán Mac Lir. The term possession often holds negative connotations; however, Lilith Dorsey simply describes

³⁴ I discuss the contentiousness of the term Shaman in more detail in the next chapter on matters of inclusion and exclusion in Paganism.

³⁵ According to Irish mythology Manannán Mac Lir is a god of the sea.

possession as “a state of in-between, of liminality, the borderline or veil, if it were, that separates the world” (qtd. in Farrar and Bone 64).³⁶

Sara commented that southern culture and faer Appalachian heritage is an integral part of faer identity and religiosity. For Sara, growing up in a Baptist home and being involved in the Baptist church faerself is not in contradiction to the usage of southern folk magic common in the south. Notably Sara uses the term south to mean a cultural group and not only as a geographical location. Sara is an initiate of the Faery Witchcraft Tradition, which is an alternative spelling for Feri Witchcraft Tradition that for Sara holds political connotations that align with her feminist politics.

As I discuss in this chapter and more thoroughly in the introduction of this dissertation, my own religious experience has been grounded in Paganism for more than twenty years. Like Caitlyn, I appreciate the umbrella term Pagan insomuch as it allows me to locate my spirituality within a broader religious movement in a way that is not static or prescriptive. I also use the term Witch and, much like Mary Allen, this word holds political connotations for me because my spirituality is inseparable from my feminism. In my usage, Witchcraft is a religion informed by Newfoundland (island specific) folk ways, which is itself a culture significantly shaped by Eurocentric traditional knowledges, and my Paganism is shaped by Irish Reconstructionism and the mythologies rooted in those traditions.

3.9 Chapter Summary

³⁶ Lilith Dorsey states that she is trained in “many magical traditions, including Celtic, Afro-Caribbean, and Native American spirituality” (see: *Orishas, Goddesses and Voodoo Queens*. Weiser Books, 2020).

My intersectional feminist analysis of contemporary Pagan theology and practice in this chapter has demonstrated that Paganism is a new religious movement rooted in vernacular religions and folk practices, located across diverse cultures and histories. In this positionality, contemporary Paganism is understood as an umbrella term under which a plethora of loosely connected religions are located. Given this diversity it has been beyond the scope of this chapter to provide an in-depth analysis of each dimension of Paganism. Instead, I have connected the threads of these religions to highlight common themes and attributes. To this point, contemporary Pagan religions share holistic paradigms that emphasize interconnectedness and relationality while at the same time recognizing the veracity of personal gnosis and experiential knowledge. Commonly, Pagan religiosity is influenced by belief in the supernatural and belief in magic. Undoubtedly, these beliefs and practices are factors in how Pagans understand their sense of self and their experiences of trauma and, therefore, shape approaches to healing. Finally, given the significant influence of feminism, gender, sexuality, and racial politics are integral to contemporary Pagan discourse. To this point, in the next chapter I expand upon this discussion in a more thorough examination of matters of inclusion and diversity.

Chapter 4 The Circle is Cast, but Who's Allowed In? Inclusion & Diversity in Paganism



Figure 12 Death (tarot), a/b portrait, Gina Snooks, 2022.

4.1 Introduction

In many contemporary Pagan traditions the circle is a prominent symbol. For example, in many magical traditions a circle is cast to demarcate sacred space during acts of magic and ritual performance. Further, many Pagan traditions use the term circle as a reference to sacred communities in place of terms such as coven or grove and others might refer to ritual space as circle space. To be within a circle, then, symbolizes being in sacred and safe space. Having said that, the term safe space is a bit of a misnomer in that safety cannot be guaranteed, including in Pagan communities that are committed to social justice movements such as feminism and anti-racism, and actively work toward deconstructing systems of oppression. For this reason, I prefer the term safer space to acknowledge that physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual safety

is a priority while also acknowledging that communities cannot guarantee the full safety of their participants. In this chapter I attend to matters of inclusion and diversity within the contemporary Pagan movement, particularly gender and sexuality politics, racism, and finally toward a decolonising Paganism, which necessitates theorizing issues of cultural appropriation and ethically rooted practices. Underpinning my analysis is an awareness that the Pagan movement, as I examine it, operates within the broader context of Western cultures. Thus, even as Paganism is a countercultural religious movement it risks mirroring and reiterating oppressions common in broader society.

This chapter contributes to ongoing critical dialogue among practicing Pagans (and non-Pagan allies) in naming and resisting ways in which Pagan communities, and individuals within them, can reiterate harmful and traumatic behaviours through practices of gate-keeping and exclusion. Such conversations are important because, as Christine Hoff Kraemer and Yvonne Aburrow write in the introduction to their anthology *Pagan Consent Culture: Building Communities of Empathy & Autonomy* (2015),

There is a tendency among Pagans to think that we are immune to the problems of the wider society — because Pagans are exceptionally ethical; or because the high priestesses are very wise and intuitive and filter out rapists and abusers from our midst; or because our counterculture status has bound us together into a family, and we would never hurt each other. These stories are myths, and not the sacred kind.... We are no different than the wider society in which we find ourselves immersed. (iii)

Speaking to the issue of racism in Pagan communities, priestess and advocate for diversity and multiculturalism in Pagan communities Crystal Blanton (2015) asserts harms toward members of Pagan communities are no less harmful if the community at large does not recognize the injustice and oppression. Following this logic, I would argue that to create more inclusive and diverse Pagan circles necessitates naming when harms have been done and working together as interconnected communities toward creating safer practices under the Pagan umbrella. To do so,

it is necessary to name the ways in which privilege and power go unnamed because one of the ways in which privilege and power operate is that those who have it do not recognize the problem (hooks 2015).

This kind of work requires critical thinking, deep listening and a willingness to reinvent new ways of being in community, which at times can require reimagining practices that were once considered revolutionary when contemporary Paganism was emerging as a countercultural religious movement. In a practical manner, on the one hand, creating safer spaces means challenging, and calling out communities and practices that exclude folks based on gender, race and/or other identities and social locations as well as addressing issues of abuse. On the other hand, it can mean crafting places intended only for BIPOC, gender and other minority persons, precisely because common spaces are not entirely safe for people who are marginalized in, and by, the broader Pagan community (Blanton 2015). What is important to emphasize is that addressing oppression and marginalization within Pagan communities necessitates an attentiveness to both overt harms as well as forms of microaggressions that often go unexamined but are no less traumatic. Importantly, to manifest social change within the Pagan community, it is crucial to amplify the voices of people whose experiences are underrepresented in hegemonic discourse. To amplify voices requires that those with power and privilege make space for different ways of knowing and to recognize that different people may disseminate knowledge in different ways. In other words, it is not only a matter of making space for marginalized people on mainstream platforms but also recognizing that the platform itself may be the issue, and that marginalized people are agentic actors in the mobilisation of knowledge. To be clear, I do not discount the important role that allies perform in addressing oppression and I do not imply that people who experience harms ought to bear the burden of creating social transformation. Instead,

I promote anti-oppressive approaches which recognize that persons with lived experience of trauma and violence are the experts in identifying the needs of their communities.

For organizational clarity I have divided this chapter thematically by first addressing matters of gender politics, then racism, and finally I attend to matters of decolonising Paganism, including in relation to issues of cultural appropriation. Having said that, I recognize that categorizing oppression in Pagan communities in this way is antithetical to my commitment to intersectional anti-oppressive and holistic approaches which highlight that a person's experiences of trauma are shaped by multiple interconnected and inseparable elements, including multiple identities, social locations and lived experiences (Dunn 2019). Indeed, as I indicate above, holistic approaches emphasize theorizing the whole, interconnected, story of trauma and healing. Moreover, it is not my intention to reiterate hierarchies of oppression by highlighting specific forms of oppression, while not attending in detail to others (such as classism or ableism). Admittedly, this chapter offers only a brief examination of what is a complex topic.

Addressing oppression within Pagan communities is a process that necessitates ongoing critical self-reflection, both for Pagans as individual practitioners and as members of Pagan communities. On that note, my critique of the Pagan movement and its leaders, teachers, and activists is not intended to erase the meaningful and often revolutionary work of people who led the way for contemporary Paganism; nor does my analysis of prominent figures in the movement mean that I necessarily align with their politics and ideological perspectives. Instead, I locate this analysis within generative discourse committed to moving Paganism forward in practice — in less harmful and in more inclusive and diverse ways — in alignment with its countercultural and inclusive roots; to do so, it is necessary to attend to the whole story. It is my hope that this

conversation be taken in the spirit of doing better once we know better, to borrow from Maya Angelou's profound words.

4.2 Gender Politics in Contemporary Paganism

To understand how gender politics shape contemporary Paganism, it is important to first return to the questions: what is gender and why does it matter? To claim that gender is symbolically expressed attends to Judith Butler's claim that gender is something we *do*. In other words, gender is performed through "corporeal signs and other discursive means" (2006, 185) — which is the idea central to Butler's theory of gender performativity. What this means is that gender is enacted through socially located gender norms and assumptions, behaviours and so forth that are reiterated through gestures and rituals that are themselves regulated through hegemonic discourse and can be socially policed through violence. At its core, gender performativity theory intends to disrupt theories of gender essentialism which contend that gender is biologically determined. Theorizing gender as a socially constructed phenomenon is important because it elucidates that gender oppression is socially and politically situated rather than the "natural" result of gender difference. Looking back at the first edition of *Gender Trouble*, Butler states: "The text also sought to undermine any and all efforts to wield a discourse of truth to delegitimize minority gendered and sexual practices" (2006, viii) — in this way, *Gender Trouble* was intended to perform a kind of resistance to cisheteronormativity, and the violence it perpetuates, and instead to make way for multiple ways of understanding and experiencing gender. However, if gender is theorized as merely socially constructed, then the theory itself performs an erasure of embodied and felt subjectivity, which is itself a form of violence. To be

clear, this is not to claim that subjectivity is not a material experience. Indeed, as Butler writes in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (2011), “This is not say that the materiality of bodies is simply and only a linguistic effect which is reducible to a set of signifiers. Such a distinction overlooks the materiality of the signifier itself” (6) — in other words, the materiality of the body itself.³⁷ Instead, Butler was also arguing that the material reality of subjectivity is also shaped in and through socially constructed phenomena. Responding to criticism of their theories, Butler later highlights that one of the issues with social constructionism theory is that it has the potential to position gender as a fabricated (made-up) experience — *not real* in any material sense. However, gendered subjectivity is very much an embodied and felt reality. In fact, Butler themselves acknowledges that many peoples’ sense of self is intrinsically connected to their sense of gender and that (in arguing that gender is a performance) they “did not mean to argue that gender is fluid and changeable (mine certainly is not). I only meant to say that we should all have greater freedoms to define and pursue our lives without pathologization, de-realization, harassment, threats of violence, violence, and criminalization” (qtd. in Williams).³⁸ My point, then, is that gender is at once an embodied and felt subjectivity and a socially constructed phenomenon; and that these intertwined dimensions shape the material lived realities of peoples’ lives. Understanding this threshold location, I argue, is the key to theorizing gender

³⁷ In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler argues against the theory of “linguistic monism, whereby everything is only and always language” (xv); instead, Butler knows that bodies are material but argues that “there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body” (xix)

³⁸ See full citation in Williams: “*Gender Trouble* was written about 24 years ago, and at that time I did not think well enough about trans issues. Some trans people thought that in claiming that gender is performative that I was saying that it is all a fiction, and that a person’s felt sense of gender was therefore ‘unreal.’ That was never my intention. I sought to expand our sense of what gender realities could be. But I think I needed to pay more attention to what people feel, how the primary experience of the body is registered, and the quite urgent and legitimate demand to have those aspects of sex recognized and supported.” https://www.transadvocate.com/gender-performance-the-transadvocate-interviews-judith-butler_n_13652.htm.

inequality and oppression, including gender-based violence, as it occurs in Pagan communities as a microcosm of Western society.

Returning to the notion that the contemporary Pagan movement has its roots in the meeting place between the witchcraft revival and the countercultural feminist movement of the 1960s and early 70s elucidates the interplay between gender and sexuality politics and Paganism (Klassen 2009, Hoff. Kraemer 2012).³⁹ Since both feminism and Paganism are umbrella terms that encompass diverse ideas and practices, gender politics in contemporary Paganism is an ongoing and contentious matter and these divergent positions, in turn, shape politics of inclusion and diversity. Emerging from this, I theorize gender politics in Paganism through two examples — first, I consider the issue of women-only spaces, and then the matter of gender polarity, particularly in Wiccan ritual.⁴⁰ In the context of my dissertation, the topic of women-only spaces warrants discussion because women-only spaces can be safe spaces that promote empowerment and healing for many women (Barrett 2000; Harris 2005). By contrast, women-only spaces themselves can perform an act of violence toward some women, as is evident in the exclusion of transwomen from women-only rituals as I examine below. Similarly, practices in Paganism that embrace gender polarity are often rooted in gender essentialist theories of what constitutes masculinity and what constitutes femininity as binary concepts, which can reenforce harmful heteronormative gender norms while at the same time perform an erasure of queerness and gender-variant identities.

³⁹ See chapter three for a more detailed discussion.

⁴⁰ Christine Hoff Kraemer (2012) offers a good discussion of the controversy of Radical Faerie gatherings which first emerged in the late 1970s as male gay-identified spaces only, but which have since grown to include queer-identified Pagans as well. Hoff Kraemer addresses ways in which the original gatherings were thought by some to be safe spaces for male gay Pagans but were later critiqued as being founded upon gender essentialist ideologies when contentions arose pertaining to the inclusion of queer people more broadly. Her discussion makes clear that matters of gender essentialism are not solely located in the realm of Budapestian Dianic Witchcraft and women-only spaces. See: “Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Paganism.” *Religion Compass*, vol 6/8, 2012, pp. 390-401.

The radical feminist Witch Z. Budapest has played a prominent role in shaping gender politics in Paganism since at least the 1970s when she first founded Budapestian Dianic Witchcraft (or Dianic Wicca). Indeed, her practice of creating women-only spaces was once thought to be revolutionary in terms of creating safer spaces for women to experience their spirituality because for many women mainstream patriarchal religions felt unsafe and oppressive. However, these same women-only practices are now widely criticized by gender-variant Pagans and their allies because Z. Budapest's ritual circles explicitly exclude transwomen. To be clear, I do not align with Budapest's essentialist politics; however, I discuss her legacy here to demonstrate the complex, and often contradictory, gender politics at play in contemporary Paganism.

The radical feminist politics at the core of Budapestian Dianic Witchcraft are grounded in a gender essentialism framework which erroneously promotes that gender is a binary biological determination that is universal and "natural." Yet, radical feminist politics also recognizes that gender norms and gendered experiences are shaped within specific cultural, sociohistorical, and political landscapes in alignment with patriarchy. Thus, Budapestian Dianic Witchcraft, which Budapest indicates is feminist Witchcraft, acknowledges that women's oppression is rooted in patriarchy while it also promotes women's empowerment through biological essentialism, or what Budapest refers to as "women's mysteries," as indicated in the title of her book *The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries* published in 1979. For this reason, in the 2007 revision of the book, Budapest states that men can be part of the feminist movement and can participate in Dianic workshops, but "Dianic circles are still for women only" (xvii). Yet, as the example from PantheaCon 2011 demonstrates wherein transwomen were excluded from participating in a ritual led by Z. Budapest, in Budapestian Dianic Witchcraft "women only" (vxi) means ciswomen

only, and that ideology is not only exclusionary but harmful for women-identified persons whose gender identity or gender expression does not conform to hegemonic ideas about gender, especially transwomen. Indeed, it is both oppressive and dangerous because it further isolates transwomen who already experience higher rates of violence and gender-based inequality. Consequently, many conference attendees and the Pagan community at large have responded in solidarity with transwomen. As Hoff Kraemer (2012) illuminates, the matter of trans persons' rights at public festivals such as PantheaCon adds to the ongoing critical analysis of gender in relation to Paganism more broadly. In doing so, these dialogues create an opening by which to understand trans persons' experiences and the need to create safer gender inclusive spaces in public venues as well as to create trans explicit spaces for trans folks (Hoff Kraemer 2012). Moreover, the controversy over inclusivity at PantheaCon 2011 stirred the pot of an ongoing discourse around matters of inclusion and exclusion in the Pagan community and raised questions about how to address issues when community leaders have promoted, or are perceived to promote, problematic ideas and behaviours such as those that are racist, sexist, bigoted, illegal, abusive, and violate peoples' human rights, et cetera (Schulz 2012)⁴¹ – and what happens when such leaders are considered elders in the community? I do not have the answers to these questions, nor can I speak for the Pagan community at large; however, I wish to point out that such debates are ongoing.

That Budapestian Dianic Witchcraft emerged in the 1970s during the second wave of feminism is relevant to this discussion because feminist politics of that era highlighted that women's experiences were not only personal — embodied lived realities —but also political in the sense that women's oppression is inextricably entwined with cultural and political

⁴¹ See: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/agora/2012/02/overview-of-the-pantheacon-gender-debate/>.

dimensions. Indeed, the feminist axiom “the personal is political” emerged during this era. One of the major agendas of radical feminism in the 1970s was to address violence against women as a cultural phenomenon because VAW was prevalent, but it was generally believed to be an interpersonal issue rather than an issue embedded in Western culture. It is not surprising to me, then, that *The Holy Book of Women’s Mysteries* (1979) includes a spell “To Hex a Rapist” (35). Budapest reflects on this topic in an essay published in 2015 wherein she describes the events leading up to creating the spell to hex a rapist and her involvement in a grassroots movement called the “Anti-Rape Squad” (180). The mandate of the “Anti-Rape Squad” (180) was to provide education about rape culture which included organizing the first Take Back the Night march in Los Angeles as well as a campaign to provide safe rides for women who might be at risk, such as when walking alone at night. As Budapest reflects, in the 1970s there was much less awareness about rape culture and the feminist movement in general. In this sense Budapest’s radical feminist politics that informed her style of Witchcraft can be thought of as revolutionary insomuch as it directly addressed violence against women and other systemic forms of oppression. Located within this framework, the women-only policies of Budapestian Dianic Witchcraft were intended to create safer spaces for women to participate in their religion in ways that were not available to them in mainstream patriarchal-focused religions. However, ironically, when women only spaces exclude transwomen such politics reiterate cisheteronormativity, thereby actually perpetuating gender inequality.

To be clear, I use the term Budapestian Dianic Witchcraft to emphasize that not all Dianic Witchcraft traditions align with Z. Budapest’s trans exclusive radical feminist (TERF) politics. On this topic, in her essay entitled “Twenty years in the Dianic Tradition,” long-time Dianic Witch Rhiah Nevo makes clear that Budapestian Dianic Witchcraft is not the only Dianic

tradition, even if it is most widely known, and that not all Dianic traditions understand womanhood as being biologically determined. Instead, Nevo elucidates that “woman” is not a singular concept and that different women experience womanhood in different ways, even as some women may unite under the same self-descriptor of “woman” through various shared experiences. In her own words, “‘Woman’ is not a monolithic, all-inclusive term, but rather a self-descriptor that must be claimed to have any meaningful currency. Anyone who self-identifies as a woman is asserting that she has something meaningful in common with other self-identified women” (89). As Nevo’s position elucidates, women-centric Witchcraft traditions are not inherently transphobic. Nevo’s reflection also illuminates that there is still a place in Paganism for circles that are women-centric and that emphasize feminist spirituality as a mode of religious practice. The issue, then, is not with the notion of women only circles in and of themselves but rather the politics by which inclusion in and exclusion from these circles is determined, particularly if these circles are performing public rituals and training or if such groups perform acts of priesthood to the Pagan community more broadly.

The question must be asked: which women and whose experiences specifically are included in this revolution? Indeed, the second wave of feminism is promoted on the premise of sisterhood — the notion that women’s oppression is a shared experience — however the movement is rightfully critiqued as promoting a narrow understanding of and representation of women’s experiences. BIPOC scholars and activists, in particular, argue that this notion of sisterhood was premised on the experiences of white women, especially middle-class, often well-educated, white women and, thus, did not and does not make space for women whose identity and social locations differ from that mould. The issue with this type of politic is two-fold; firstly, it performs an erasure and silencing of BIPOC women’s experiences and secondly, in doing so, it

positions white feminism as the authority of BIPOC folks' lived realities. As such, these practices are counterintuitive to feminist spirituality which promotes gender equality and empowerment.

Returning to the relationship between the second wave of feminism and women's spirituality, religious studies scholar Chris Klassen points out that feminists of the era were concerned with the ways in which "patriarchal religious structures" provided little room for women to act with authority as agentic beings (2-3) but feminist spirituality, Paganism and Goddess Worship (which overlap but are not one in the same) provided an opportunity for women to shape their own religious experiences. As Klassen writes, "For these women it was revolutionary to think of God as She or shift to Goddess imagery and language. It was revolutionary to incorporate women's experiences in ritual processes" (3).⁴² Reflecting on the women's spirituality movement rooted in second wave feminism, Vicki Noble writes that the "mass exodus of middle class women from organized religion in America was a radical event that has never been given the attention it deserves" (1), even as she acknowledges that

We can understand now, in hindsight, the power of white privilege and the many ways that the movement did not (could not) speak to most women of colour at the time.... While much insightful analysis and valuable critique has come forth to deconstruct the issue over the years, the importance of such a spontaneous and radical uprising of women should not be thrown out altogether. (2)

I include Noble's statement here to reiterate that in order for a religious movement to work toward inclusion, diversity, and equality its members must be willing to critically reflect on the ways in which the movement itself causes harm (including unintended harm). Moreover, there must be a willingness on the part of practitioners to do better. Indeed, it is possible to

⁴² See: "Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, and Political Reflections" by Carol Christ in *The Politics of Women's Spirituality: Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power Within the Feminist Movement* (1982) edited by Charlene Spretnak.

acknowledge the revolutionary practices of early Witches, Goddess worshipers and Pagans while simultaneously demanding more anti-racist, anti-oppressive and gender inclusive approaches within these religions.

In addition to Z. Budapest, feminist Witch Starhawk played a significant role in shaping the feminist Witchcraft and Goddess spirituality movement, particularly by way of her book *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* which was first published in 1979. Indeed, Alice, Sara and Molly (participants in this study) commented that the *Spiral Dance* had a significant influence on them in the beginning of their Pagan journey. As well as training with Z. Budapest in the 1970s, Starhawk trained with Feri Witchcraft founders Victor and Cora Anderson and is herself a founder of the Reclaiming Witchcraft tradition (along with Diane Baker). As Reclaiming priestess, teacher and initiate Isisanya Moon describes, Reclaiming Witchcraft emerged from a blending of Goddess-based spirituality, feminism, Feri Witchcraft which emphasizes “personal work and explorations of power” (9), and activism and politics. Although its beginnings are shaped by 1970s politics and the Goddess movement in which it emerged, Reclaiming Witchcraft understands itself to be a tradition that is in continual flux and which honours diversity in practice as well as in the identities and social locations of its members as is outlined in the *Principles of Unity and Belief* (POU) that explain the values of the tradition (Moon 2020). More specifically, the POU states that Reclaiming welcomes “all genders, all gender histories, all races, all ages and sexual orientations and all those differences of life situation, background, and ability that increase our diversity” (Moon 12) and Moon asserts that Reclaiming’s “feminism includes a radical analysis of power, seeing all systems of oppression as interrelated, rooted in structures of domination and control” (12). In other words, Reclaiming operates from an intersectional and anti-oppressive paradigm.

My point in discussing the core values of the Reclaiming Witchcraft Tradition and Nevo's reflection on her involvement in the Dianic tradition is to reiterate that feminist Witchcraft is a diverse movement within which there are many different traditions as well as many solitary practitioners whose ideologies and practices are varied and diverse. Further, I emphasize that feminist Witchcraft is an evolving movement in which practitioners' politics often align with and/or function as a form of resistance to the political agendas of their time. Put differently, my intention has been to make clear that Budapestian Dianic Witchcraft is only a small example of feminist Witchcraft and that many feminist witches are vehemently opposed to the TERF (trans exclusive radical feminist) ideologies promoted by Z. Budapest and the branch of Witchcraft that bears her name. I think it should go without saying that there are many different ways to be a witch and that feminism is not a monolithic movement; however, given Budapest's association with feminist Witchcraft, it is necessary to unpack that relationship here in order to separate Budapestian feminist Witchcraft from the movement at large, while also acknowledging its influence.

In their popular book, *A Witches Bible: The Complete Witches' Handbook* (2019) first published in 1981, renowned Wiccan authors and teachers Janet and Stewart Farrar write that

Wicca is both a religion and a Craft — aspects of which Margaret Murray has distinguished as “ritual witchcraft” and “operative witchcraft”. As a religion — like any other religion, its purpose is to put the individual and the group in harmony with the Divine creative principle of the Cosmos, and its manifestations, at all levels. As a Craft, its purpose is to achieve practical ends by psychic means, for good, useful and healing purposes. In both aspects, the distinguishing characteristics of Wicca are in its Nature-based attitude, its small-group autonomy with no gulf between priesthood and ‘congregation’, and its philosophy of creativity at all levels, from Goddess and God to Priestess and Priest. (12)

What is evident in this statement is the emphasis on dualism that is central to Wiccan theology.

In Wicca the concept of dualism is performed through the gendered roles of priest and priestess

who are representatives of God and Goddess, thus symbolizing balance and equality. This positionality, however, raises the question as to whether these roles work toward destabilizing androcentrism in religion or inadvertently reenforce gender essentialism and cisheteronormativity, thereby reinscribing patriarchal ideas about gender identity and gender roles, especially for folks whose gender and sexual identities and gender expression do not conform to cisheteronormativity. These questions are important to consider because the revitalization of goddess worship (through Paganism at large, Witchcraft and Goddess Spirituality) has been revolutionary in terms of offering folks of all genders a place in religion outside of the androcentric patriarchal institutions that dominate Western religions. And I would emphasize that creating these inclusive spaces is particularly important for people who do not feel safe or welcome in such religious communities, which may be the religion of their birth families.

Seemingly pre-empting similar inquiries, the Farrars make the argument that this dichotomy is not about biologically determined presumptions of gender, but rather “psychic *gender*” so that each person performs a magical role as “two poles” (17; original emphasis), regardless of their gender identity. Specifically, they write

Our coven is organized on the customary Gardnerian/Alexandrian lines; namely it is based on the polarity of psychic femaleness and maleness. It constitutes, as far as possible, of ‘working partnerships’, each of one female and one male witch. Working partners may be a married couple, lovers, friends, a brother and sister, parent and child; it does not matter whether or not their relationship is a sexual one. What matters is their psychic gender, so that in magical working they are two poles of a battery. The senior working partnership is, of course, that of the High Priestess and High Priest. She is *prima inter pares*, first among equals; the High Priest is her complementary equal (otherwise the battery would have no power), but she is the leader of the coven and he the “Prince Consort”. (17)

Having said that, the Farrars do not explicitly explain what constitutes “psychic *gender*” (17) in their understanding. Consequently, I can only assume that they mean to imply that the roles of high priestess and high priest in Wiccan ritual are not performed based on the ritualists’ gender identity assigned at birth (an assumption based on essentialist ideas about biological sex), or more to the point cisgender identity. However, the language in this passage reiterates cisgender subjectivity. Given that the Farrars’ ideas are influenced by Jungian discourse (Hoff Kraemer 2012), it is likely that they follow C.G. Jung’s theory which states that the psyche constitutes both conscious and unconscious aspects and includes a person’s reality shaped inside and outside of the mind (Rowland 2002).⁴³ From this perspective, it is conceivable to assume that the theological dualism inherent in Wiccan can work toward decentering androcentrism in religion, thereby creating more inclusivity.

The experience of Jeannette, a cisgender woman in this study, with an Alexandrian Tradition in Boston, supports this stance. As she explained, that particular coven was run by a man and woman (who were also a romantic couple) and the rest of the coven members were women.⁴⁴ Consequently, the one man typically enacted the role of priest in rituals – that is, until he decided that he did not want to be solely responsible for performing that role and other, women-identified, members of the coven began to perform the role of priest as well. Referring to the Farrars, Jeannette explained that the role of priest was about channelling masculine energy which is not exclusive to male-identified persons. For Jeannette, taking on the role of priest in these rituals provided an opportunity for her to experience masculinity in a positive and “safe”

⁴³ See chapter six for my analysis on Jungian psychotherapy and its influence on the contemporary Pagan movement.

⁴⁴ I recognize that positioning the term woman in relation to the term female here is problematic inasmuch as it risks collapsing these identities into a single experience and does not acknowledge that the experience of being a woman and the experience of being female occur across a spectrum. However, I use the term “woman” because that is the term Jeannette used and I hope that the limitations of writing within a language that is itself embedded in and informed by the structure of cisheteronormativity are clear here.

way. In my interpretation, what Jeannette means by this is that performing the role of priest in ritual provided a way for her to experience masculinity in such a way that does not reiterate toxic masculinity or frame masculinity as a singular concept defined by gender essentialism. In her own words, “That was very empowering which, in turn, helped with my own healing.” To be clear, I do not contest what Jeannette knows to be true of her own healing experiences. Indeed, I recognize that subverting hegemonic gender roles can be empowering and liberating for folks who have experienced gender oppression.

That notwithstanding, it is important to be critical of the ways in which Pagan practices which emphasize gender polarity risk perpetuating the misconception that gender is a binary and, thus, risk reiterating heteronormativity (Johnston 2015).⁴⁵ This concept is premised on the idea of dualism, which consists of two elements that are distinct. In the case of gender polarity, it is two modes of gender that are positioned as dichotomous principles —man/male/masculine versus woman/female/feminine. The obvious issue with this framework is the erasure of gender-variant identities and lived realities. Indeed, I question what is to be gained by claiming masculine traits and, moreover, what constitutes masculinity. As Western history demonstrates, the man/woman binary is hierarchized in such a way that maleness is privileged, and woman is deemed subordinate to man. By extension, characteristics deemed to be masculine are privileged over characteristics deemed to be feminine. From this perspective, the concept of “psychic *gender*” (Farrar and Farrar 17) does little to destabilize male privilege if gender in this sense remains a dichotomy because it does not attend to the ways in which male privilege operates systemically.

⁴⁵ For resources on inclusive Wicca practices see: <http://www.inclusivewicca.org/p/blog-page.html>.

Enfys J. Book (2020), a queer magician, takes up this topic in their blog post “‘Masculine’ vs. ‘feminine’ energy: Why is this still a thing?” arguing that positioning energy as either masculine or feminine reinforces harmful gender stereotypes. In their own words:

As someone Assigned Female At Birth (AFAB) and whose gender identity is wibbly-wobbly but leaning toward “femme,” I am downright *insulted* that “feminine” is defined as “passive and receptive.” Not to put too fine a point on it, but this stereotype reinforces rape culture. The idea that masculinity means “taking action” while femininity means “receiving whatever is done *to* them” is a patriarchal relic best left in the gutter.” (n.p)

As a cisgender woman, I am equally insulted by these stereotypes. Moreover, I share Books’ concern that such tropes underpin rape culture, and that traditional binary language can be alienating for gender variant persons.

To be clear, my critique of women-only spaces and gender polarized practices in contemporary Paganism is not intended to devalue the experiences of Pagans who have found these practices to be meaningful. Indeed, in my own experiences and in my observation of others’ experiences, these settings can be empowering and can promote healing. Since gender identity is a significant factor through which one’s sense of self emerges and is expressed, gender specific practices can be an important part of how people experience their religiosity and their experiences of healing and trauma. Rather, what I have highlighted throughout this section is the need to approach such practices critically in order to examine how women-only spaces and gender polarized rituals fit within the broader discourse of gender oppression. Women-only spaces and spaces designed for gender-variant persons respectfully can offer a safer place for folks who do not feel safe because of their gender identity in mainstream circles. Alternatively, the same spaces can cause harm to folks who are purposefully left out because their gender identity does not conform to biologically determined notions of gender or if their gender expression does not conform to hegemonic ideologies about gender performance. How gender

specific spaces are constructed, by whom, and for what purpose must, therefore, be at the core of Pagan activism to minimize harms with communities. Admittedly, I am less generous in my analysis of gender polarity in Paganism and I would welcome a shift toward more inclusive practices that do not reiterate the misconception that gender is a binary, or reinscribe heteronormativity and patriarchy.



Figure 13 This is Resistance, a/b portrait, Gina Snooks, October 2018⁴⁶

4.3 Racism in Paganism

⁴⁶ I created this a/b portrait in response to a movement on social media in which people replaced their profile photographs with a black screen as a gesture of support for people who have experienced gender-based violence. However, the gesture was controversial inasmuch as others argued that the black screen performed an erasure of women from the internet, which functioned to further silence women. Further, some critiques argued that the gesture was arm-chair activism and did little to address the actual issue. My intention in creating this portrait was to demonstrate that there is no single face of activism. I offer this explanation (although I do not explain most of my portraits in this dissertation) as an example of how a/b portraiture functions as a form of dialogue and co-witnessing.

As Crystal Blanton, priestess, activist, and author writes,

Just because harm may not be intentional, it does not make it less harmful. When we ignore that the problem exists, we are not eradicating the issue, we are perpetuating it. Listening to the energy, the stories, the concerns, and needs of those who feel marginalized in this community, by this community, would be a powerful place to start (19).

I begin this section with Blanton's statement to emphasize that theorizing and challenging racism in contemporary Pagan communities requires an attentiveness to both explicit forms of racism as well as more subtle microaggressions that may be unintentional and/or may go unquestioned but are no less traumatic. Blanton, further, argues that microaggressions toward people of colour are common but widely ignored within Pagan communities under the pretense that Pagans would not intentionally exclude practitioners based on their race. She further states that such experiences can "reinforce and retrigger transgenerational trauma of the racism, violence, and harm done [to] generations in the past and in the present" (17).

Indeed, feminist trauma theorist Laura S. Brown reminds us that insidious trauma or "Microaggressions represent almost daily reminders of the threat of violence that underlies bias" (2018, 82) and that "Everyday racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, ableism and so on create a relatively small but ever-present pull of energy toward survival level consciousness, the reminder that someone, somewhere, is trying to make you and people like you less welcome on the planet" (2018, 82). By quoting Brown at length, I reiterate that trauma is not solely the result of experiencing catastrophic, unimaginable, events but that trauma also emerges in the first-hand experience of and/or in the witnessing of violence and oppression that has been normalized within certain cultures and societies — and in what are everyday occurrences for some folks.

On the one hand, attending to racism means challenging and calling out communities and practices that exclude people based on gender, race and/or other identities and social locations.

However, on the other hand, creating safer spaces can mean crafting places intended only for BIPOC and gender minority people, precisely because common spaces are not entirely safe for people who are marginalized in, and by, the broader Pagan community. On the topic of race, Blanton, Ellwood and Williams make clear that the “Eurocentric foundation” of contemporary Paganism does not always “feel safe for people of colour, or those who want to support the increasing diversity with the growing community” (9). On this topic, Xochiquetzal Duti Odinsdottir writes

All those voices and experiences deserve a space they can carve out and call their own to feel *safe in*, not just from the rest of a ‘con or gathering, but for themselves. It’s not about self-segregating, it’s about self-care. When I am asked if I would be okay with someone making space in a Pagan gathering that was ‘whites only’ and how that would affect me, I honestly don’t have an answer because the majority of the population at a Pagan event tends toward white, so why do you need another room where there’s a whole conference/space/gathering area where you can see each other? (170)

What Blanton et al. and Odinsdottir point to here is that “Whiteness” is normalized in Paganism broadly speaking. Briefly put, Whiteness is the social structure that positions White identity and white Eurocentric cultures as the default, thereby upholding white privilege and providing a foundation for white supremacy. It is important to acknowledge that Whiteness is woven within the fabric of North American and European societies and, therefore, can go unrecognized. In this manner, Whiteness functions to further perpetuate racism, including implicit (unconscious) biases toward BIPOC persons. The prevalence of Whiteness as normative not only marginalizes the identities and experiences of BIPOC persons but it places them at risk of experiencing racism, whether implicitly or explicitly within Pagan communities. Indeed, examples of racism in Pagan communities range from microaggressions and unconscious biases to blatant racism (Blanton 2015). For many BIPOC people such experiences of racism are at the core of matters of

inclusion and exclusion in Pagan communities. For example, Blanton, who identifies as having both African and European ancestry, retells an experience of being denied membership in a Heathen (Ásatrú) group because she is a woman of colour and not of “European descent” (17). However, Blanton contested the decision because she is of European descent, and she was then told she could not join because she was not of “primary European descent” (17). Presumably this assumption was based on the colour of her skin given that the group did not provide a logical explanation as to how European descent was measured in this context, thus leading Blanton to conclude that although she did not qualify, her son would “because of his sandy hair and blue eyes” (17).

This example is important because, while not all Heathen groups are racist white supremacists, many Heathen communities have come under scrutiny for racist practices. Moreover, Heathenry can be misappropriated as a weapon of white supremacy. This point is addressed in an article in *The Atlantic* (online newspaper) titled “What To Do When Racists Try To Hijack Your Religion” (2017) wherein author Sigal Samuel interviews Icelandic Ásatrú high priest Hilmar Hilmarsson who argues that the appropriation of pre-Christian Norse religion and symbolism has been ongoing in Canada, the United States, Sweden and Germany by white supremacists “for years” (n.p.), but that does not mean that Ásatrú is inherently racist or promotes white supremacy.⁴⁷ As an example, in January of 2021 Jake Angeli, known as the QAnon Shaman displaying Norse symbols — a Mjölnir (commonly known as Thor’s Hammer or the hammer of Thor), Yggdrasil (the Tree of Life) and a valknut (knot of the slain) — tattooed on his chest took part in a violent attack on the U.S. Capitol (Kelly n.p).⁴⁸ As the ADL (Anti-

⁴⁷ For more information see: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/11/asatru-heathenry-racism/543864/>.

⁴⁸ It is Angeli’s association with QAnon, a group that is known to promote conspiracy theories, hatred, racism, and far-right extremist values, that links his usage of Norse mythology to racism and white supremacy.

Defamatory League) states, “the Thor’s Hammer symbol has been appropriated by neo-Nazis and other white supremacists, especially those who practice racist or white supremacist versions of neo-Norse beliefs under the guise of Odinism or Wotanism. White supremacists will often create racist versions of the Thor’s Hammer, incorporating swastikas or other hate symbols into the decoration” (ADL n.p.). To be clear, it is not only Mjölfnir that has been appropriated by racists; indeed, the swastika is itself an ancient symbol associated with Hinduism and Buddhism that was appropriated by Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Regime and misused as a hate symbol to promote white supremacy (ADL n.p.). To reiterate, in the proper context the Mjölfnir, Yggdrasil and the valknut are symbols sacred in Norse mythology.

As Luke Babb addresses in an article in the *Wild Hunt Pagan News and Perspectives*, Heathen practitioners in the United States immediately responded by distancing themselves and their religion from the perpetrator. Moreover, that Babb states that their immediate response to hearing the news was that they were “unspeakably tired” implies that the Heathen community spends a significant amount of effort distancing themselves from racist white supremacists who appropriate Ásatrú and its symbolism to promote hate.

Nevertheless, Ryan Smith, a practicing Heathen and founding member of Heathens United Against Racism, further takes up the topic of “Racism, Heathenry, and Frith” (2015) as the title of his essay suggests. In this essay, Smith directly addresses the issue of racism through a critique of the Asatru Folk Assembly (AFA) which was at the centre of an online controversy in 2013 in which various prominent Pagan bloggers and authors, including John Beckett and Morpheus Ravenna, spoke out against the AFA for its racist practices. As these brief examples demonstrate, the issue of racism in Heathen communities is a complicated matter that requires nuanced analysis — not all Heathens (people who practice Ásatrú) promote racism and White

supremacy, but some do, and to complicate the matter further, some groups and individuals who are not aligned with Heathenry, per se, appropriate Heathen symbolism to promote racism.

To further unpack the matter of racism in Paganism, it is important to consider ways in which racism is perpetuated in less explicit ways in more common microaggressions that BIPOC people experience in Pagan communities — for example, when assumptions are made at Pagan events that a BIPOC person is an employee of the venue rather than a participant in the event (Blanton, 2015, Coyle 2015). “From strange, questioning looks when someone walks into a circle, to asking a Hispanic practitioner if she was the maid at a Pagan event, all of these types of interactions happen within our community,” as Blanton writes (16). Likewise, microaggressions occur when comments are made suggesting that a BIPOC Pagan might want to or should honour Egyptian gods or their “own ancestors in an African tradition” (Blanton 17), rather than European, presumably white gods and white ancestors. Such attitudes reinforce racism and can create unsafe spaces for BIPOC Pagans (Blanton 2015).

Such microaggressions are forms of implicit racism and violence toward BIPOC Pagans that simultaneously reflect the degree to which Whiteness is normalized within and reiterated through the contemporary Pagan movement, particularly in North America and Europe. These are among the reasons that BIPOC Pagans may not feel safe in Pagan communities at large and are, therefore, the reason why intentionally creating safer spaces is necessary if Paganism is going to live up to its reputation as an inclusive religion that welcomes diversity and advocates for equality. To be clear, this is not to posit that the Pagan community at large purposefully excludes BIPOC folks from participation. Rather, as Coyle states “There are people who feel excluded from our rituals, gatherings and conversations not out of malice, but because we just don’t notice there isn’t a place set for them at the table” (176) and as Blanton asserts “When we

ask ourselves why there are not more Black people, or other ethnic minority practitioners, involved in the greater Pagan community, we have to be willing to explore these very issues in-depth” (14).

4.4 Toward a Decolonised Paganism

Theorizing matters of inclusion and exclusion in Paganism also necessitates a critical analysis of how Paganism is complicit in epistemic violence through the erasure and theft of Indigenous knowledges. In this matter there are two points that require attention: being in right relationship with the land and its more-than-human inhabitants and the misuse of sacred objects and practices by folks who are not part of the living traditions in which these objects and practices are located. As I argued in the previous chapter, Paganism requires that Pagans be in right relationship with the lands upon which they live and practice their religion. Indeed, independent scholar Lisa A. McLoughlin argues that Pagans’ identity depends on it. However, these relationships are complicated when Pagans are uninvited guests on unceded Indigenous territories, as is often the case in North America. Meanwhile, for settlers, their cultural and ancestral knowledges are rooted in the mythologies of lands located elsewhere — lands from which their ancestors were displaced, sometimes forcefully and at other times due to various forms of oppression, and lands upon which they themselves may have never set foot. Settlers’ history with Turtle Island, then, is not the same as it is for its Indigenous peoples, but neither are their histories the same “as our ancestors with their ancestral lands” (McLoughlin 1). To further complicate the matter Oneida Nation of the Thames Turtle Nation scholar Lina Sunseri reminds us that identity is a complex matter and that national identities “are fluid and socially constructed” and “never complete” (29).

Sunseri makes this point to elucidate that the distinction between coloniser/colonised and insider/outsider are not necessarily neatly organized dichotomies in the context of settler colonialism on Turtle Island.

Further related to the topic of decolonising Paganism, Pegi Eyers postulates that one of the reasons that settlers gravitate toward and appropriate Indigenous knowledges (IK), particularly Indigenous spirituality, is that they are disconnected from their own (European) Indigenous knowledges (EIK) and earth-connected cultures that centre around concepts such as animism and ecomysticism. Hence she claims that settlers need to acknowledge their own loss of culture that has led to their collective and individual dysfunction and examine how this loss is at the root of their “spiritual hunger” and “yearning for holistic earth-connected community” (48). Her stance aligns with Eduardo Duran’s (Apache, Lakota, Tewa) claim that the process of colonisation “affects human beings at a deep soul level” (14) and that many non-Indigenous peoples (of Turtle Island) may want to decolonise from the “collective consumer colonization that has been imposed upon them” (14) and which is ongoing. To this point, Anishnaabe Elder and Traditional teacher James Dumont advises that “Everyone needs to get back to their own IK” (qtd. in Eyers 17). Following this logic, Eyers argues that Paganism offers a meaningful way for settlers to live in alignment with earth-based spirituality through the reclamation of their own ancestors’ Indigenous knowledges and that returning to these knowledges is a necessary part of the process of decolonisation. Thus, Paganism can be a way of living more harmoniously with the lands, the gods, ancestors, and other more-than-human beings. In reference to Gaul Indigenous knowledges, Anne Ferlat, similarly, postulates that reclaiming European Indigenous spiritualities through decolonial paradigms might “offer a route for healing both the collective and personal traumas resulting from waves of acculturation” (2-3) brought about by long

histories of aggressive acculturation, colonialism, cultural exchange, migration and forced relocation.

In alignment with these scholars and Elder Dumont, I contend that a decolonial approach to Paganism and a reclaiming of vernacular spiritualities rooted in one's histories and cultures can provide a meaningful way to reconnect with earth-based holistic epistemologies and that these practices can be part of the process by which human beings can begin to heal our collective soul wound. Nevertheless, this is not to imply that Pagan practices need not be examined and called out when they are themselves oppressive. Elucidating this point, Evers also critiques Pagan practices that appropriate Indigenous knowledges by borrowing, blending, and creating new practices based on Indigenous sacred knowledges such as "aspects of vision quests, healing modalities and purification rituals from First Nations as diverse as the Lakota, Navajo and Cree. This artificial combining of cultural elements reinforces false ideologies and romanticizes stereotypes, and does nothing to strengthen actual First Nation communities and their recovery of nationhood, ancestral lands or cultural traditions" (157).

While Evers promotes Paganism rooted in European Indigenous Knowledges as an alternative to North American Pagans participating in practices that appropriate the Turtle Island Indigenous peoples, Scott Lauria Morgensen is more critical. In fact, he argues that "despite the perception that adopting European neo-paganism keeps white members of settler societies from appropriating Native culture, neo-paganism itself is reinvented by them to gain a relationship to Native land and culture that does not feel like the conquest that they know they inherit" (116).

Underpinning these critiques of Pagan appropriation of Indigenous knowledges is the understanding that White privilege means that many White people feel entitled to access the sacred knowledges of cultures to which they do not belong, under the false assumption that all

sacred knowledge is open. This is so, despite that not all Pagans identify as White, because Pagan culture is largely (White) Eurocentric and many of the founders of the contemporary Pagan movement were White people who pieced together sacred knowledges from various diverse cultures. Indeed, part of the process of decolonising contemporary Paganism is to untangle this information as to avoid repeating such forms of cultural theft. What is clear, then, is that unpacking Pagans' relationship with land (any lands) is a complicated matter that must also address matters of Indigenous sovereignty and Indigenous land rights. Moreover, being in right relationship with land encompasses being in right relationship with people. Consequently, Pagans' relationship with land cannot be disentangled from the broader landscape of settler colonialism which is the structure by which Indigenous sovereignty has been eroded.

To the point of the misuse of sacred objects and ceremonies one of the most widely appropriated practices is that of smudging, which is a purification ceremony performed by smoking sacred herbs often referred to as medicines by Indigenous peoples. To be clear, many cultures worldwide use smoke to physically and energetically cleanse; hence, it is not the usage of smoke per se that is problematic. Rather the problem is when plants and medicines that are sacred to specific peoples are used out of context by people who have not been properly trained in that tradition mimic those rituals, or worse when these practices are commercialized. The usage of white sage is a prime example of this sort of misuse which has led to an over harvesting of the plant. Another example is the performance of sweat lodge ceremonies (under that exact name) again by practitioners who are not trained, nor given permission, by elders or spiritual leaders in the Indigenous communities in which these practices originate. These practices are an act of cultural theft, but safety is also an issue when this ceremony is performed by untrained people, as is evident in fact that two people died at a retreat hosted by James Arthur Ray in

Sedona Arizona (CBC 2011). As these brief examples demonstrate, Paganism can be complicit in the cultural appropriation of Indigenous knowledge and, in doing so, is complicit in the ongoing marginalization of Indigenous peoples.

Although, in this section, I have drawn attention to some of the issues within Paganism regarding racism, sexism, and cultural appropriation, it is also important to acknowledge that there has long been resistance to such practices by the Pagan community itself. Indeed, there is an ongoing movement toward making Paganism more inclusive and toward decolonising Paganism. On the topic of decolonising spirituality scholar Leela Fernandes writes “a decolonization of the divine necessitates a spiritual practice that includes a willingness to confront all forms of political and socioeconomic injustice...” (109), which requires a critical analysis of and willingness to address the myriad ways that spiritual traditions are decontextualized from the cultural political and historical landscapes in which they are located. The problem, Fernandes argues, is that such an approach is based on “a form of spiritual appropriation that is void of social responsibility” (109). Although she is referring to the appropriation of Asian Indian spirituality, her argument is applicable in relation to Paganism as well. My point is that to decolonise Paganism, Pagans must be willing not only to name oppressive practices within the religion, but also to commit to repairing harms done to others in the name of Paganism.

On the topic of decolonising Irish polytheism, the Irish Pagan School offers a course called “Decolonising Your Druidry & Spiritual Practice: The roots of Druidic Religion & how to ensure your modern practice is authentic and respectful” in which Lora O’Brien unpacks the history of the modern Druid movement and advocates for spiritual practices that are rooted in the

mythologies and living culture of Ireland.⁴⁹ Notably, O'Brien does not propose that Indigenous Irish spirituality is for Irish natives and/or the Irish diasporic community only. Instead, O'Brien posits that anyone can practice pre-colonised Irish spirituality so long as the practice is not taken out of context of the living Irish culture and its histories. She does promote learning from Irish practitioners, such as herself, as well as non-Irish practitioners who are immersed in the culture, histories, and folklore of Ireland (such as American writer Morgan Daimler). From this perspective, Indigenous Irish polytheism is not a closed religion, but respectful engagement is required. O'Brien's approach here aligns with Elder Dumont's advice that everyone ought to reclaim their own Indigenous knowledges. Yet it should also be recognized that "The Gods were your Gods because they were the ones you honoured, the ones you prayed to and offered to, not because you passed some litmus test of color or ancestry. The culture was your culture because it was what you lived, valued, and passed on," as Daimler succinctly puts it (2015, 69). In fact, in the context of Irish Paganism and reconstruction pre-colonised Irish Polytheism, Daimler is critical when cultural belonging and intention to preserve ancestral knowledges become a form of cultural "possession" (2015, 68), an act that excludes some folks from participation while permitting participation by others.

As these examples demonstrate, what constitutes closed religions versus open religions and cultural appropriation versus cultural appreciation is not a straightforward matter. By extension, who is permitted to participate in specific cultural traditions and who is excluded from participation is a complicated matter that is deeply entwined with both historical and

⁴⁹ This course is no longer offered by IPS under this title. However, they currently advertise a course called "No, You're Not a Celtic Shaman: Decolonising your 'Celtic' Paganism and moving toward Right Relationship with native Irish spiritual traditions." See: <https://irishpaganschool.com/p/celtic-shaman>.

contemporary context of unequal power relations and matters of resiliency and, therefore, must work toward autonomy and self-determination for marginalized groups.

4.5 Chapter Summary

Suffice it to say, then, unpacking and addressing gender oppression, racism and other harmful practices within Paganism requires nuanced analysis and must be an ongoing process and it is one that requires ongoing self-reflection at both individual and communal levels. In doing so, it is integral to understand that these issues do not operate in isolation of the broader cultural, social, and political landscapes. Moreover, it is essential to recognize that these landscapes are in constant flux. Indeed, as with all culture phenomenon, Paganism is a dynamic and emergent movement. To work toward inclusion and diversity in Paganism it is necessary for Pagans to name various forms of harm occurring within Pagan communities and to examine the multifaceted and interconnected dimensions at play in creating spaces that may not feel safe for all Pagans, particularly folks who are marginalized due to their gender identity, race/ethnicity or other identities or social locations. Moreover, for Pagans to heal from harms perpetuated including in and through their religious communities, healing strategies must be located with Pagan paradigms that make space for Pagan epistemologies and blended approaches.

Chapter 5 (Un)Speakable Wounds: Auto/Biographical Portraiture and/as Trauma Discourse

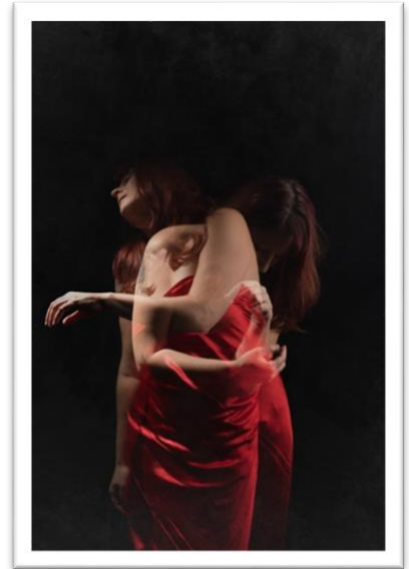


Figure 14 Possession, a/b portrait, Gina Snooks, 2018.

“...if psychoanalysis is the ‘talking cure’
the photography could conceivably
be the ‘seeing’ cure”
Jo Spence (150)

5.1 Introduction

Theoretically and artistically, my interest in auto/biographical portraiture emerges at the overlapping location of auto/biography and trauma discourse and photography as an artful performance of self in what feminist photographer and cultural critic Jo Spence deemed a “theatre of self” (156). As I have articulated earlier in this project, auto/biographical portraiture is, for me, a creative and critical mode of self-inquiry and self-expression in both theory and in practice. In this manner, I align with Spence who contends that photography focused on the self

allows us to “speak to ourselves about something that can be ‘unspeakable’ and ‘unrepresentable’” (160). Photography, in this way, is a performative medium through which to understand the lived and embodied experience of human reality. Against this backdrop, this chapter conceptualizes auto/biographical portraiture as a performance of the *(un)speakable* — in other words, trauma. My way of thinking about (and doing) auto/biographical portraiture is informed by both trauma art and performance art discourse.⁵⁰ On the point of trauma art, I align with trauma art scholar Jill Bennett (2005) who explains that trauma art discourse moves “away from evaluating art in terms of its capacity to reflect predefined conditions and symptomologies, and to open up the question of what art itself might tell us about the lived experience and memory of trauma” (2). It is through this lens that I engage with auto/biographical portraiture as a medium by which to understand the affect of trauma. That is, I theorize the encounters, traces, emotions, feelings, and the stickiness of trauma (Seigworth and Gregg 2010; Pollock 2013; Cvetkovich 2012; and Ahmed 2010).

In this chapter, I engage with the auto/biographical portraits of participants in this study as both an articulation of trauma and the process of healing — and the making of portraits themselves as a process that is healing. In doing so, this chapter demonstrates the complex (im)possibility of self-representation. To elucidate, auto/biographical portraiture offers a medium for people to *speak* to themselves/for themselves/about themselves. Importantly, as I have maintained throughout this dissertation, this process can be cathartic, empowering and, ultimately, healing for people who have experienced trauma, disempowerment, and oppression (Nuñez 2013; Spence 1995). However, in relation to trauma there is a complex dynamic “between knowing and not knowing,” as trauma Scholar Cathy Caruth posits (3). Thus, the

⁵⁰ My auto/biographical portraiture practice emerged intuitively which led me to trauma art and performance art discourse to theorize the portraits that I was creating.

stories we tell to, for, and about ourselves may not reveal all that there is to know about one's own experiences of trauma and their ongoing effect and affect. In other words, these stories defy witness (Caruth 5). Witnessing, too, is a complicated matter insofar as what (and who) is being witnessed is an act of interpretation mediated through the viewer's own lens.

In her critical analysis of performative art and theatre, building upon the theories of trauma scholars Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra, Nicola Shaughnessy asserts that

It is generally acknowledged that trauma involves an event which is beyond representation as an experience that is not fully registered at the moment of impact and which affects the mind and body of the victim. It is suggested, nonetheless, that contemporary forms of theatre and art have the potential to engage in dialogue with trauma through sensorial, embodied and somaesthetic experience. (60)

My understanding of auto/biographical portraiture and/as a form of trauma praxis aligns with this way of thinking. As such, in the context of this study, I understand auto/biographical portraiture to be performative dialogues with and about trauma. Moreover, my discourse is indebted to auto/biographical theories which name five key components of the auto/biographical act: these are: memory, experience, identity, embodiment, and agency (Watson and Smith 9-10). Against this theoretical backdrop, I argue that auto/biographical portraiture is a meaningful way to explore aspects of selfhood that may be rooted in difficult and/or traumatic experiences. Auto/biographical portraiture is, therefore, both a theoretical and theatrical mode of critical self-reflection.

To form the theoretical backdrop for my analysis of participants' auto/biographical portraits and/as trauma praxis, in the first part of this chapter I situate auto/biographical portraiture within three overlapping frameworks: these are: auto/biographical portraiture as a form of testimony, auto/biographical portraiture as self-guided therapeutic photography, and auto/biographical portraiture as an engaged performance. Although distinct in some ways, I tie

these frameworks together under the concept of shared storytelling and in the act. In each of these three iterations, I align with art therapist Shaun McNiff who posits that talking with (or thinking with) trauma art allows for deeper meaning to surface in artwork. This process, he explains, is like the “free-association techniques of early psychoanalysis, which enabled ‘unconscious’ expressions to circumvent the ‘conscious mind’” (106). This way of thinking with art, rather than about art, stresses that meaning is dynamic, intersubjective, and multilayered. The second part of this chapter more thoroughly examines participants’ auto/biographical portraits to consider what these portraits reveal about self-identified Pagan women and Pagan gender-variant persons’ experiences of trauma and healing. As a way into this analysis, I examine my own auto/biographical portrait titled *Undoing Time*. In doing so, I further locate my position as an auto/biographical portrait-maker and as a cisgender Pagan woman who has experienced trauma and healing into dialogue with participants in this study. Further my strategy invites readers/viewers to engage in collaborative acts of witnessing of their own in relation to my auto/biographical portrait.

5.2 (Un)Speakable Self

In my analysis (and in my own practice), auto/biographical portrait-making is a form of self-guided therapeutic photography (Spence 1995; Martin 2013; Nuñez 2013). In this manner, the creation of photographs offers an opening to explore trauma through the usage of symbolism that can access the subconscious in ways that language on its own cannot (Spence 1995) and “to prompt cathartic release in that they are able to work with gut feelings without the interception of the intellect,” as Spence and Martin write (176), thus providing a way to understand the

embodied experience of trauma. For Spence and Martin this process can work toward making the “unconscious conscious” in what they deem to be an act of “unconsciousness-raising” (166). In doing so, the process functions as a medium to reveal that which may be hidden or repressed — to “unfreeze...what has previously been resisted and repressed” in the words of Spence and Martin (177). To this point, psychoanalysis is generally understood as the talking cure because the process allows one to speak into consciousness that which was previously unconscious and/or to name what has been unnamed/unnameable. By this logic, therapeutic photography is the “seeing cure” because the process can make visible that which was previously hidden (Spence 150). Further, self-focused photography is a medium to symbolically express that which is known about trauma and its affect, but what is difficult to put into words.⁵¹ In this way, auto/biographical portraiture allows the maker to express trauma through symbols and gestures and to express one’s feelings and emotions about trauma. In turn, this process can be cathartic, empowering, and healing precisely because the process makes space to speak to/with/about trauma in ways that words cannot. At the same time, this claim necessitates recognizing that trauma may not always reveal itself and, thus, cannot be assimilated into consciousness. In this interplay between self-exploration and self-expression auto/biographical portraiture becomes the site where what is known and what is unknown/unknowable meet — thus the site of (im)possible self-representation.

For Spence, self-focused photography emerges at the intersection of “self-therapy and personal documentation,” which can make auto/biographical portraiture both a method of self-healing and a form of visual testimony (Dennett 2009, 10). In this sense, she understood

⁵¹ I use the term self-focused here rather than auto/biographical portraiture to avoid ascribing terminology to Spence and Martin’s work that they did not use. However, I understand their work to be auto/biographical in the sense that I use the term.

photography as tool that could allow “anyone to speak for themselves” (Dennett 2011, 223-224).

Aligning with this point, Sara explains

when I create something part of the impulse is that I'm taking control of the narrative — I'm not allowing you [the viewer] to impose your perceptions of me on me...I'm taking control of how people perceive me. But I'm doing it in a way that ideally is fun for everybody. I'm not just asserting controlling the narrative in a negative way, manipulative way, like it's manipulative. I'm very conscious of how I choose how things look and how people receive it. That's part of the technical skill of being a creative person. But I'm doing it simultaneously to assert control over my own image.



Figure 15 Untitled, a/b portrait, Sara, 2020.

Sara is referring to the auto/biographical portrait that fae created for this study in which fae turns faer face toward the camera.⁵² This gesture is significant because Sara has a prominent scar that fae received from being kicked in the face by a horse at the age of eight; thus, this scar has been a part of how others see Sara since fae was a child. Although the scar is faded now, Sara says fae purposely makes it visible in this portrait by turning to the camera and not wearing make-up to conceal it. Sara’s claim that this gesture is a way to control faer narrative indicates a sense of

⁵² Sara’s gender-neutral pronouns are fae/faer/faerself.

agency in determining what others can see and know about Sara. I agree with faer stance that what portrait-makers choose to make visible shapes how audiences perceive the narrative of the photograph — and thus constitutes speaking for themselves. Indeed, in some ways this has been my own experience. However, my perspective diverges from Sara’s in that I do not believe that shaping a narrative is the same thing as being in control of it in terms of how it is received by others. Indeed, reception involves an aspect of interpretation which is filtered through each viewer’s own theoretical and experiential knowledge. To this point, I interpret Sara’s turn toward the camera to invite engagement with the audience/reader which functions as a dialogue about trauma and healing. To be clear, it is my stance that this tension between Sara’s view that faer is in control of faer own story and the fact that faer story will be interpreted by viewers is not a contradiction, *per se*.

5.3 Telling the Self: Auto/Biographical Portraiture as Testimony

To further theorize auto/biographical portraiture as a method of speaking for one’s self, I understand auto/biographical portraiture to be a form of visual testimony of trauma. This point is integral to my analysis because trauma is a wound that changes who we are — trauma changes “the structure of the self” (Herman 56) and can compromise persons’ “sense of agency” (Oliver 7). Thus, speaking for oneself — testifying to one’s experience — can restore a sense of agency (Oliver 2001). Thought of differently, telling one’s own stories can be empowering. Having said that, to position auto/biographical portraiture as an agentic act necessitates an attentiveness to the complex ways in which agency is formed in and through mediated surfaces. At the same time, Caruth’s claim that trauma “defies and demands our witness” highlights that while we may speak

to parts of our trauma there remain parts that are obscured, and thus what we can know about trauma and its ongoing effect and affect is only partial (5).

In the context of this dissertation, auto/biographical portraiture moves beyond the “neoliberal life narrative” which Leigh Gilmore critiques as a genre in which the “I” of the text overcomes some form of trauma thereby transforming personal “disadvantage into value” (89), which services some individualizing purpose. Neoliberal narratives allow recipients of trauma narratives to feel good because “trauma is survived” (Oliver 117). The problem with this stance is that it performs an erasure of the systemic and political dimensions of trauma. Moreover, positioning trauma as an event that is survivable neglects to recognize the “endless impact” (Caruth 7) of trauma on the lived realities of those who have experienced it. Indeed, that trauma is, by its very nature, bound to return — to “haunt” (Caruth 4) means that neoliberal interpretations of trauma life stories risk assuming that people who fail to survive trauma/be ‘resilient’ are themselves responsible for that failure. Consequently, neoliberal life narratives do little to challenge the social, cultural, and political landscapes in which trauma occurs. Indeed, the term unconscious raising used by Spence and Martin is related to the act of consciousness-raising thereby making the personal (in self-focused photography) political. On this point, as feminist, anti-racist and decolonial trauma discourse insists, and as I have addressed earlier, trauma is inherently political (Brown 2018; Archer 2021; Dunn 2019). Theorizing visual life storytelling at the site of feminist auto/biographical discourse positions auto/biographical portraiture as political, even as in practice creating portraits is cathartic, empowering and healing on a personal level, as I theorize throughout this chapter.

5.4 Performing the Self

Further, in my understanding, auto/biographical portraiture is a method of performance art that necessitates thinking with photographs as forms of dialogue wherein meaning is co-created in the exchange between creator and witness. To emphasize, my claim that the meaning of portraits is co-created through creator/spectator interaction does not contradict my stance that portrait-makers' narrate their own life stories; rather, this point demonstrates that the "theatre of the self" (156) is not an unmediated space but that spectators' role as witnesses informs what can be known about the performing self. Thus, both the auto/biographical portrait-maker and the viewer of portraits shape the meaning of portraits through both personal and cultural interpretations of symbols and signs. In this way, auto/biographical portraiture can be a provocative medium to inspire social transformation because audiences can be "moved to empathize through witnessing what is often unspeakable," as Shaughnessy states (48), which in turn can be a catalyst for action insofar as audiences can be inspired to do something about the pain and injustice they witness.

Griselda Pollock posits "Given the difficulty of trauma ... we can approach its implications for studies of art through five defining features: perpetual presentness, permanent absence, irrepresentability, belatedness and transmissibility" (2) — these ideas underpin my own analysis in this chapter. What I especially appreciate about Pollock's position is that it makes clear the inherent contradiction of trauma. Specifically, her position that trauma is always present but at the same time always absent highlights that the ongoing effect and affect of trauma can inhabit our lived realities even when trauma itself is unknowable. Against this backdrop, in what follows, I analyze the usage of auto/biographical portraiture as a mode of symbolic expression which, I contend, creates an opening for both the portrait-maker and audiences to understand Pagan persons' experiences and memories of trauma and healing. In turn, this process can

function as a catalyst for personal and/or social transformation. As a way into this analysis, I first examine my own auto/biographical portrait titled *Undoing Time*. In doing so, I further locate my position as an auto/biographical portrait-maker and as a cisgender Pagan woman who has experienced trauma and healing into dialogue with participants in this study. Moreover, my examination of *Undoing Time* situates my analysis of auto/biographical portraiture within the nexus of critical holistic theory and psychoanalytical trauma discourse, thereby offering a theoretical framework for this chapter. Throughout this chapter, I emphasize the complex interplay between curating one's "theatre of self" (Spence 156) as a site for self-empowerment and agency and auto/biographical portraiture being a process by which parts of the self themselves become known in the act of making and thinking and/or talking with trauma art. Central to this discussion, then, are three key themes: trauma and temporality, speaking to/performing the "unspeakable" (Spence 156), and auto/biographical portraiture as an act of collaborative witnessing.

"Wounds are openings to soulful expression"
Shaun McNiff (126)

5.5 Undoing Time: Trauma and Temporality as a Palimpsest Performance

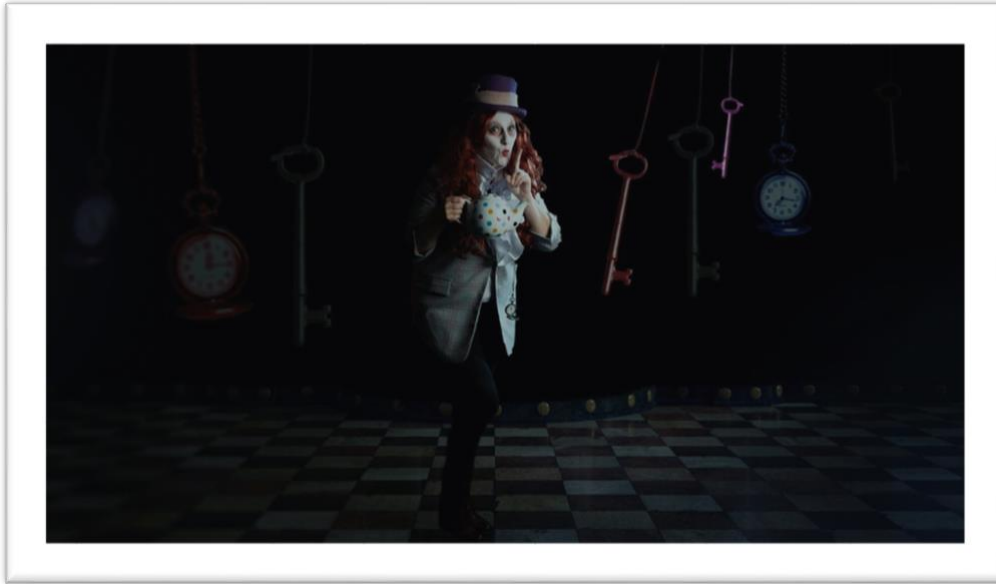


Figure 16 *Unnamed/Undoing Time, a/b Portrait*, Gina Snooks, 2021/2022.

In psychoanalytically-informed trauma theory, trauma is a wound that creates a “gap in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world,” as trauma scholar Cathy Caruth writes (3) — thus trauma is bound to repeat itself. Consequently, trauma is not locatable in a specific event, *per se*, but is rather the way traces of its encounter return belatedly and uninvited to haunt us, to possess and inhabit us (Caruth 4; Pollock 4). To this point, Pollock reminds us that

It is not possible to predict the manner in which the traumatic will emerge, invited or uninvited, pursued or escaped, through an artistic practice. Some seek to touch it; others cannot help but be reclaimed by it. It is never known in advance what it will do even when seemingly contained in a form of image, narrative or words. (xxiii)

And, as Bennett writes, trauma art “often touches us, but it does not necessarily communicate the ‘secret’ of personal experience” (7). Following this logic, my auto/biographical portrait *Undoing Time* (formerly *Unnamed* as it appears in chapter two) is a kind of performance of my own trauma that at once demands to be seen, thus giving voice to what I deem “unspeakable” (Spence 160), while at the same time refuses to give up its secrets. At its heart, *Undoing Time* speaks to

the temporality of trauma. Theoretically and artistically *Undoing Time* is a multilayered text in which I explore how my sense of self emerges in and through multidimensional trauma, that moves in and out of time, both revealing and concealing traces of myself and my life stories. For this reason, I understand *Undoing Time* to be a palimpsestic performance. To this point, creating this portrait was an attempt to control the narrative of my own experience that has, in essence, remained outside of my possession. Nevertheless, thinking with my portrait in this way has created a space for me to feel my way through the trauma and to reflect on its perpetual absence/presence. In this way, my portrait *Undoing Time* attends to the “irrepresentability” of trauma and instead engages with its affects (Pollock 4).

In this *Alice in Wonderland*- (1865) inspired auto/biographical portrait I stand in the centre of a checkerboard floor dressed as the (Mad) Hatter, holding a polka dot teapot, and performing a silence/silencing gesture by holding one finger to my mouth, though it does not actually touch my mouth. Although it was not my intention, this gesture might also be interpreted as a pause indicating that there is more to the story. Whether interpreted as a symbol of intentional silence or as pause, my gesture implies that not all there is to say about my experiences has been revealed. Thus, this gesture indicates that there is a silence around trauma and a speaking of that trauma at the same time. Various colour keys, which have multiple meanings, and pocket watches, which are set to different times which symbolises the concept of time, hang in the background. In Western thought time moves in a linear manner — past, present, future —however, trauma disrupts this concept through its spiralling motion. I have purposely blurred the time on two clocks to emphasize the specific time on the clock that is readable, which is set to the birth date of my only child. Thus, the clock symbolises my son and the birth of my identity as a mother and how that relationship informs my sense of self. Further,

by drawing attention to my identity as a mother I am commenting on what I perceive to be my failure to perform the role of the “good mother” and how that failure has influenced my son’s life as well. As such, the strategically placed clock allows me to speak to some parts of myself that I do not put into words in this dissertation because my trauma story is not solely my own to disclose. Without explanation, however, the significance of marking this specific time would not be understood by most viewers; thus it is only in giving this written account that I am partially revealing my secrets. Indeed, in this dissertation, the act of collaborative witnessing involves the co-creation of meaning intersemiotically through an engagement with both auto/biographical portraits and dialogue that emerges in interviews. To further analyze my portrait in the context of psychoanalytical trauma discourse I posit that the gesture of blurring the time on the two other clocks can be read to signify that “Psychic trauma knows no time” (2), as Griselda Pollock writes.

In my placement of the dangling keys, it is my intention to raise questions about what might be locked or hidden — that is to ask: what mysteries do the keys hold? Conversely, keys can unlock mysteries and reveal that which has been previously hidden. Theoretically, then, the keys in this image can speak to the complexity between what is known and what cannot be known in the context of trauma stories (Caruth 2016) or what can be recognized and what is “beyond recognition,” to borrow words from Kelly Oliver (2001), because those memories are locked away in subconscious realms. To be clear, to state that we cannot know trauma is not to imply that we cannot associate our own trauma with specific experiences; rather, this unknowability refers to the “unassimilated” essence of trauma (Caruth 4). Interestingly, when I created the image, I believed the differently coloured keys were entirely an aesthetic choice; however, in my analysis of this portrait (that is, in thinking with this portrait) I assigned greater

meaning to this difference. Specifically, I came to theorize the various colours and sizes of the keys as representative of different elements of trauma. For example, trauma can be rooted in somatic, psychological, emotional, and/or spiritual dimensions and, simultaneously, trauma can have lasting somatic, psychological, emotional, and/or spiritual effects (Brown 2018; Herman 1997; Linklater 2014). To that point, as Pollock reminds us, we might understand trauma as

a shadow without a form we do not know. Yet its work produces affects such as melancholia, anxiety, depression, and in some cases flashbacks crack the continuity and logic of time with moments of literal intensity, witness to permanent presentness unassimilated into temporal and syntactical memories on which we build our personalities. (3)

Simply put, trauma shapes our sense of self and our lived realities.

To theorize the variously coloured keys from a different angle, in creating this portrait I initially fixated on the notion that I had failed to be a good mother; however, the bigger narrative is more complex than I had made space for. Here my own actions remind me of how trauma — shame, guilt, and fear — can overshadow *positive* thoughts and experiences, thus spotlighting only *negative* experiences (as I have determined these various experiences to be). In a sense, by fixating on my perceived failure to be a good mother I had created a myopic image of myself that is inaccurate and incomplete. However, thinking about the variously coloured keys as different parts of my life story necessitates acknowledging that my experiences of motherhood are more complex than a single narrative. In this way, the multicoloured keys also signify examples of how I have also been a *good mother* or a good enough mother. Thus, unlike the checkerboard floor upon which I stand, my lived experience cannot be neatly boxed into binary categories. To think of this experience differently, I would say that I was stuck in a particular moment in which I had deemed myself not good enough. To evoke the symbolism of the keys, I was locked in multidimensional time and place, which signifies the perpetual presentness/permanent absence of

trauma. Key symbolism evokes “the tension between seeking and finding, restricting and releasing, withholding and giving, prohibiting and admitting,” according to *The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism* (562). Building upon this, reflecting on my usage of keys in this portrait raises more questions about what is being hidden and what is being revealed — both purposefully and unconsciously. As I examine more thoroughly in chapter six, Mayra also uses key symbolism in one of her auto/biographical portraits to theorize her experiences of trauma; however, for her, keys represent choice. To borrow this motif, my usage of keys represents what I choose to believe about myself and/or the stories I tell myself, about myself. In this manner, unlike Sara who created an image of faerself that was empowering, the narrative I had created about myself was testimony to the disempowering narratives about motherhood that I was assigning to myself. In doing so, I had bought into problematic cultural narratives about good mothers versus bad mothers. However, in thinking with my portrait a deeper understanding of my sense of self emerged that became part of my narrative of healing.

To further talk with/think with this portrait, it appears as though I am physically moving from the shadow toward the light, which can signify that I am moving toward healing. To be clear, at the time that I created the portrait this dichotomy between what is seen and what is unseen was an aesthetic choice — shadowy portraits is an artistic preference for me. However, in thinking with this work, I wonder if my artistic choices are shaped by an unconscious desire to make visible that which is hidden or to hide that which is seen, while at the same time functioning as catalyst for healing. Interestingly, this question arose when I placed my own auto/biographical portraits into dialogue with those of participants in this study who purposefully explore the tensions between light and shadow as visual metaphors for trauma and healing, as I examine in sections below. That said, I do purposely use light and shadow as metaphors for

trauma in other auto/biographical portraits I have created, including some of the monochrome photographs I include in this study.

Importantly, the concept of the shadow is prevalent in psychoanalytical trauma discourse. According to psychoanalyst Carl G. Jung, “The Shadow personifies everything that the subject refuses to acknowledge about himself [sic] and yet is always thrusting itself upon him directly or indirectly...for instance, inferior traits of character and other incompatible tendencies” (qtd. in Wang 205). As a caveat, the notion of “inferior traits” in this application is problematic inasmuch as it implies that there is something wrong with people who have experienced trauma. Consequently, the phrase “inferior traits” pathologizes and depoliticizes trauma rather than linking trauma responses to the root of traumatic experiences. Instead, I theorize these traits as struggles and/or attributes that emerge from lived experiences. In this manner I align with art therapist Shaun McNiff who explains

The shadows of creative expression manifest themselves in fears, bad memories, negative thoughts, rigid controls, and a general inability to trust and believe in what we do. They are the scars Shelly Winters described, as well as personal pain still raw, things about us and others we do not like or have not accepted, and ways of acting that have been problematic and apt to interfere with our relationships with others. (128)

McNiff, further, explains that the shadow is not necessarily negative but something that is “unseen, unappreciated, or maybe suppressed” (131). Against this backdrop, emerging from the shadow signifies moving away from the ways trauma impacts the lived realities of those who have experienced it, and toward healing. Another way to think of this gesture is that moving out of the shadow and toward the light can be interpreted as a move to bring the unconscious into awareness, which is the purpose of doing shadow work. To this point, in its function as a mode of self-guided therapeutic photography, auto/biographical portraits are a medium for self-guided

shadow work. *Undoing Time*, then, is as much a narrative about healing as it is a testimony of trauma that “knows no time” (Pollock 2).

Further, I think of my portrait *Undoing Time* as an example that talking with auto/biographical portraits offers a way to access parts of oneself that are hidden, bubbling under the surface, purposely ignored, or temporarily forgotten. To this point, during my analysis of this portrait I recalled the memorial poem that my family placed in our local newspaper to commemorate the first anniversary of my older brother’s death, which stated

They say that time heals everything,
But I know it isn’t so,
Because it hurts as much today as it did one year ago
(Author unknown)

Twenty years later my family placed the same poem in the newspaper with the last line changed to reflect the passing of time. Unquestionably, this poem can be repeated over and over again because time itself does not heal trauma — or at least time does not erase trauma — if it did, I would not be thinking about this poem nearly thirty-five years later. Nevertheless, it was somewhat surprising to me that the old wound of losing my brother when I was in my early teens would rise to the surface while I was theorizing the concept of time. Thus, reiterating, for me, that trauma knows no time while also suggesting that the full impact of trauma is unknowable. I share this narrative to demonstrate that seemingly unrelated traumatic events are not unconnected in terms of how trauma operates in the lived realities and memories of people who experience trauma, precisely because trauma is not the event, per se. Rather the trauma is the traces of the effect and affect of experiences which are ongoing and inextricably interconnected.

5.6 (Un)Veiling Trauma

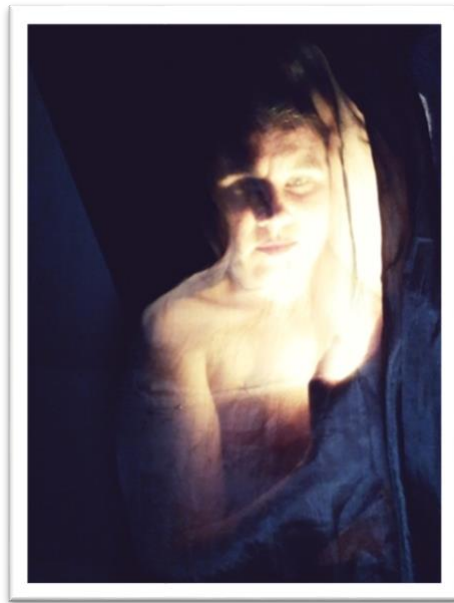


Figure 17 Untitled, a/b portrait, Caitlyn, 2020.

To explore and to express how experiencing intimate partner abuse has shaped her sense of self, Caitlyn has evoked the symbolism of the veil, as depicted above. To create this portrait Caitlyn covered herself with a semi-translucent veil and shone a light through the veil in way that shows that she is under the veil. That she is partially obscured represents the trauma she experienced, and its ongoing effect on her sense of self, and that she is partially visible represents healing. As she explained, her intention was to “have the light be seen through the veil. And then illuminating me in such a way that it was obvious that there was a person under there” – and she explained that looking directly at the camera was also significant because it represents facing her trauma and healing. In her own words,

facing that experience head on was absolutely the best thing that I could’ve done for my healing. I think if I had tried to circumnavigate the truth of what happened, circumnavigate the way I felt about it or the way it made me feel, I don’t think I would have healed in the same way. I wanted it to be — the direct gaze [to be] neutral because I didn’t want to express any grief. I didn’t want to express any

happiness. I didn't want to express fear because in that time that I was healing it was all of those things. And sometimes all at once and sometimes nothing for a while. You know, numbness — numbness is a feeling, numb is a valid emotion... I hope that I found a way to show that there was someone who was re-finding a brightness about themselves and a light about themselves. Even though this veil — these experiences — were still laid over me, it wasn't holding me down and it wasn't dehumanizing me.

As Caitlyn highlights, grief, fear, and numbness are responses to having experienced gender-based violence. And the effect of these experience alters one's sense of self indefinitely and trauma does not go away: "You always have it. It's always a memory," as Caitlyn articulates, but the way trauma affects you can change. As Caitlyn stated, "I definitely can't unlive it, but I'm not going to keep living it," thus highlighting the ongoing presentness of trauma. At the same time, Caitlyn makes clear that she has chosen to work toward healing by facing her trauma, as both her portrait and her words testify. Thus, she (re)claims an aspect of autonomy in terms of how her experiences of trauma shape her sense of self.

Caitlyn's usage of the veil as a signifier of trauma and healing is notable given its varied associations with concepts such as hiding/concealing and, by contrast, to unveil means to make visible what was once hidden (The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism 2010). To this point, The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism write

Psyche paradoxically veils, and unveils, itself in the enigmatic and sometimes archaic images that shape our dreams, fantasies, and even our perceptions. What at first seems hidden, impenetrable, is, as if a portion of the veil were lifted, revealed in flashes of insight. Synchronicities that coincidentally conjure inner and outer worlds are showing of our inherent and veiled soul stuff and its participation in the *unus mundus* [meaning one world in Latin]. Conscious relationship to the unconscious is a process that unfolds in the sensed presence of potent, hidden forces and in glimpsed meanings that lead to self-knowledge, or more dramatic renderings of what obscures the unknown self. (530)

Through this lens, Caitlyn’s veil circles back to the dichotomy “between knowing and not knowing” that is central to psychoanalytical trauma discourse (Caruth 3). For me, this tension invites questions about what might remain unknown and/or unknowable and what could be (further) revealed through Caitlyn’s ongoing journey toward healing.

5.7 Toward Nirvana



Figure 18 a/b portraits, Molly, 2020.

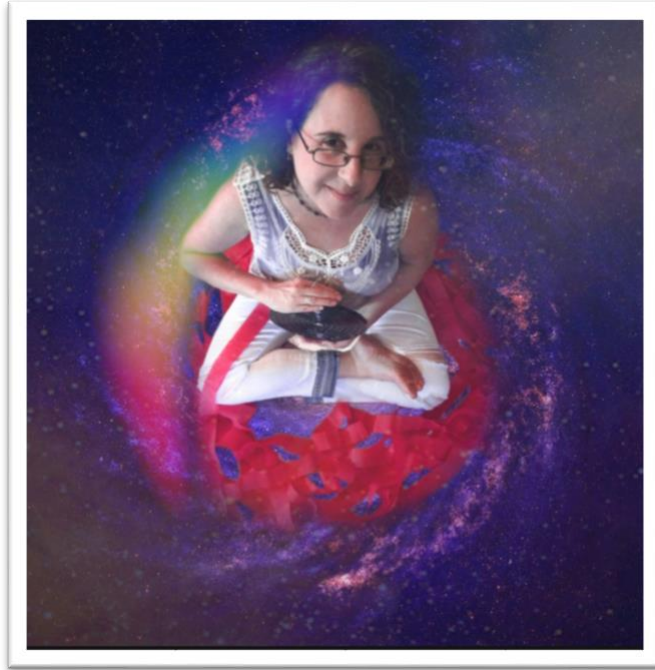


Figure 19 Nirvana, a/b portrait, Molly, 2020

Molly also plays with the concept of light as a metaphor for healing which she demonstrates throughout the four auto/biographical portraits that she created for this study. Notably, Molly provides a visual narrative of what the process of healing looks like for her by offering a sequence of portraits that become brighter as she moves toward her final portrait which she titled *Nirvana*. In fact, the first three of these portraits are the same photograph that has been edited in different ways to progressively add light to the image. In my role as witness, I find this progress to be an evocative display of how she is simultaneously the same person and not the same person in each portrait, and at each stage of her healing.⁵³ Interestingly, Molly was one of two participants to title their portraits, thereby suggesting that her titles also play an important role in telling her story.

⁵³ I have combined the first three of Molly's portraits into one image to demonstrate this sequence; however, I have not altered the portraits.

Molly is one of the participants in this study who explicitly chose not to name her trauma beyond stating that it occurred when she was a child and is related to sexuality, which is represented in her usage of red ribbons to symbolise, as she articulated, the womb and menstrual blood. In the first portrait, titled *In the Beginning*, the only part that is in colour is the ribbon, thus Molly is drawing attention to the trauma. To put that into context, Molly explained that it was through Paganism that she came to understand her trauma, which turned out to be a piece of the puzzle that allowed her to better understand herself. Molly explained that Paganism provided her with an openness toward modalities such as meditation, journeying, energy healing, understanding the chakra system, and yoga.⁵⁴ None of these practices are explicitly Pagan but when combined with her spirituality these integrated modalities allowed Molly to understand her trauma and to move toward healing. On this point, Molly reflected that through these contemplative and somatic practices she came to recognize that she had buried childhood trauma in her subconsciousness so that she did not know that it was there. However, when the trauma entered her conscious knowing she was able to piece together how the trauma had influenced her sense of self and how she interacted with the world all along. Being able to recognize the trauma helped her to make sense of her own “quirks” as she put it. Initially the newly recognizable trauma was something that she focused on — “it was all I could focus on” she remarked — until she was able to begin healing. Following this description, I would argue that Molly’s trauma had returned to “haunt” her (Caruth 3). However, as Molly began to heal the trauma had less of a presence; in her own words,

you find the light within you. It starts to shine out more. The trauma is still there — but your light is — it’s more important or it’s bigger than the trauma. It’s shining

⁵⁴ I examine participants’ usage of Pagan healing modalities in chapter six and located this dissertation under the umbrella of holistic healing in the introduction and in chapter two.

forth despite the trauma. And then at the end, fingers crossed, you get to nirvana or this feeling of blissful knowledge of the self... [the trauma] doesn't go away. It's not like it's gone. It's not like it disappears. It's there but it's more like it's been brought into yourself so that it's a part of you but it's not the whole of you.

Notably, in the progression of her portraits, the depth of the red colour of the ribbon representing trauma does not fade, per se, but it becomes less noticeable because the light and the colour representing Molly and healing are brighter. In this way, Molly's usage of the metaphor of light to represent healing aligns with Caitlyn's usage (examined above), which denotes healing and feeling lighter than the heaviness associated with being immersed in trauma. The final portrait, *Nirvana*, is a vibrant portrait in which Molly is in the centre of bright colours that seem to be swirling around her thereby providing the impression that she is located at the centre of the universe. In this portrait the red ribbon that represents trauma is present but barely noticeable because the whole portrait consists of vibrant colours that, for me, exude a sense of spirited energy. Combined, Molly's portraits weave a narrative about how trauma moves through time. Specifically, *In the Beginning* speaks to the belated return of trauma that had been repressed, thus unknowable. In its initial return the trauma became a central focus in her life which speaks to the way in which trauma possesses us and/or can consume us. However, as she begins to heal there is a *Glimmer* of light that starts to draw attention away from the trauma which gets brighter in *Lightstroke* until finally she reaches *Nirvana* —which is a place of “hope and joyfulness and opportunity, possibility for the future like happiness,” as she describes it.

5.8 (Un)Naming Trauma

Molly's emphasis on telling her story of healing and explicitly choosing not to name her trauma demonstrates the importance of making space for people to be able to tell their own stories in their own ways. Indeed, the right to choose is central to feminist epistemologies which recognize that for some people naming their trauma can be empowering and for others choosing silence can be powerful (Ryan-Flood and Gill 2010). Further, this approach is at the core of feminist trauma and violence-informed strategies which aim to avoid causing further harm by supporting persons' right to self-determination and human dignity, which includes being able to name one's own experiences of trauma in their own way (Quenneville et al. 2020a; Nagy et al. 2020). In addition, trauma and violence-informed strategies recognize that people experience trauma in different ways and that their pathways to healing can differ, even as trauma is at once political and structural (Quenneville et al. 2020b).

To this point, Caitlyn stated, "I do not see myself as an abuse victim or survivor"; instead, she defines herself "as a recipient of abuse." For Caitlyn, this language puts the responsibility of the abuse onto her ex-partner, rather on Caitlyn herself. To this point, addressing misinformation and stigma about abuse, Caitlyn asserted that if you "make yourself a victim, people ask: why didn't you just leave? And if you call yourself a survivor then they think you got beaten up every day," which was not her experience. In fact, the abuse that she experienced was not physical but rather verbal, psychological, and emotional. In her usage of the term "recipient of abuse" Caitlyn is making a conscious effort to control the narrative of her own experience, rather than having others' ideas about what constitutes an abusive relationship to be ascribed to her lived reality. Jeannette holds similar ideas about terminology used to define experiences of abuse. In her words, "I don't see myself as a victim" and she explained that letting go of the term victim enabled her to recognize that she had some power over situations,

thereby implying that the term victim is disempowering. Jeannette was also critical of the term survivor because people can get stuck at “the survivor stage” and not move beyond that, as she proposed. Her point is that the term Survivor — capital “S”— can become an identity however survivor lower-case “s” means that she is someone who experienced abuse. Therefore, the term Survivor defines the person and survivor defines an experience, both of which can shape a person’s sense of self but can have different implications. For Jeannette, moving beyond the idea of survivor as an identity is the path of empowerment.

5.9 (Un)Seen Trauma: “Trauma is like an Onion”

A common theme that emerges throughout participants’ life stories is that there are many interconnected layers to trauma, and as such I think of trauma as a palimpsestic text. Thinking of trauma in this way necessitates an attentiveness to the ways in which various experiences of trauma meld together to form a compound effect that travels through time. To this point, both Molly and Jeannette used the analogy of an onion to describe the multilayeredness of trauma and healing — that is, once you peel back a layer, there is another layer underneath. Commenting on her various experiences of trauma Jeannette explained

the stories are very old — they’re never going to go away totally. And, so, it’s recognizing that. It’s why I love Charles DeLint’s *The Onion Girl* so much because it’s a novel about peeling away the layers of an onion and then you get a new layer and that story shows up again in a new way. So, it’s learning to deal with it from that angle, that perspective and it’s learning to embrace the process. And acknowledging that past, but no longer dragging it behind you. Beyond what you need to continue to — and healing is a lifelong thing.

In my analysis, the palimpsestic text — or the onion — metaphor highlights the complicated ways in which the effect and affect of trauma are at once seen and unseen. To this point, some of

the stories that Jeannette refers to in the above quote date back to her childhood and, as she explains, continue to impact her sense of self in different ways. In particular, Jeannette's stories demonstrate a complex desire to at once be seen and to be unseen in ways that are directly related to overlapping experiences of trauma and healing.

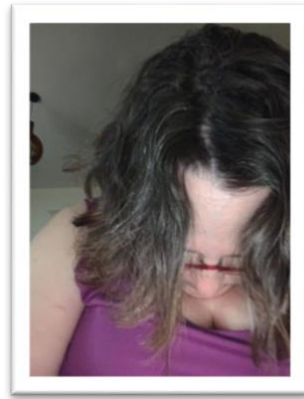


Figure 20 Untitled, a/b portrait, Jeannette, 2021.

Referring to the above portrait in which she is looking down as a way to testify to her experience, thus facing away from the gaze of the camera and audience, Jeannette describes that she felt “invisible” as a child. Specifically, she explained that because her twin brother had cerebral palsy he received more attention from their parents, which led to her feeling “invisible.” As she described it, “I got so used to being in the background, being invisible, and it took years for friends of mine who were photographers to get me to look at the camera and not shut my eyes when the picture was taken.” Thus, allowing herself to be seen was an important part of her healing process. Interestingly, she also credits her involvement in performing public rituals with the Wiccan Church of Canada as being integral to allowing herself to be seen. In her words, “I had to step up and allow myself to be seen as a priestess,” of a minority religion in the 1970s when Paganism was less known, and that took strength, she says. To put that differently, her involvement in Witchcraft helped Jeannette to feel empowered and, by extension, helped to heal the various ways in which she had been disempowered as a child.

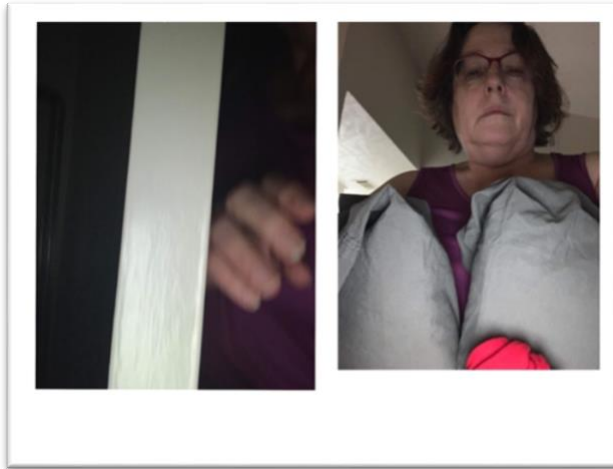


Figure 21 Untitled, a/b portraits, Jeannette, 2021⁵⁵

Conversely, other layers of Jeannette’s trauma are related to experiences in which she was seen in ways that she did not want to be, as she explores in the two above interconnected portraits. In the portrait on the left Jeannette reaches a hand through a doorway to represent abuse she experienced as a child in which the perpetrator would take her by the hand and lead her to the basement. In Jeannette’s own words, in the portrait the hand coming out of the “dark” is a “symbol of someone coming to take away my power and self-determination.” Interestingly, in 2018, I created a similar portrait with an extended hand reaching out of darkness toward the camera to signify the way in which trauma reaches across time.

⁵⁵ Jeannette submitted these portraits as individual files; however, I have combined them here to show their interconnectedness (and for ease of formatting).



Figure 22 Reaching, a/b portrait, Gina Snooks, 2018.

In my portrait, the outreached hand simultaneously symbolized the belated return of trauma and that trauma haunts in an ongoing way. It may be that Jeannette’s hand can also symbolize how the abuse she experienced as a child continues to affect her. In fact, this perspective leads directly to her next portrait in which she uses pillows to represent putting on body weight which she associated with the abuse. She explained that as a child she believed that if she put on weight the abuse would stop and that she would be “left alone.” Her reasoning implies that Jeannette is attempting to protect herself by altering her physical appearance. In doing so, Jeannette was attempting to exercise some control over her experiences and of her body, thereby demonstrating some sense of agency. Nevertheless, this coping mechanism led to Jeannette having issues with her body image that continue to adversely shape how she sees herself, despite that the abuse occurred decades ago. In her own words “the biggest struggle I’m having right now is my weight and [she recognizes] that it goes back to the abuse” because the wife of the person who abused her was “heavy.” In this way, what began as a strategy to protect herself eventually added another layer to way that trauma affected her sense of self.

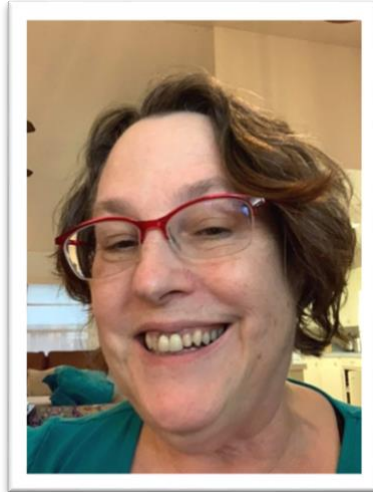


Figure 23 Untitled, a/b portrait, Jeannette, 2021

Pointedly, in her final portrait, Jeannette is smiling into the camera, therefore allowing herself to be seen or perhaps demanding to be visible. This gesture speaks to the complex tensions between wanting to be seen and wanting to hide that underpin Jeannette’s stories of trauma and healing. Moreover, in my view, that Jeannette is facing the camera speaks to resiliency and resistance — she is still here, she is present, she demands to be recognized.

5.10 Embodied Selves

Lauren and Elizabeth also created auto/biographical portraits that speak to the ways in which experiencing sexualized violence affected their sense of self and their relationship with their bodies. Interestingly, each participant created portraits in which they are nude or partially nude to demonstrate that part of their healing involved reclaiming their bodies for themselves.

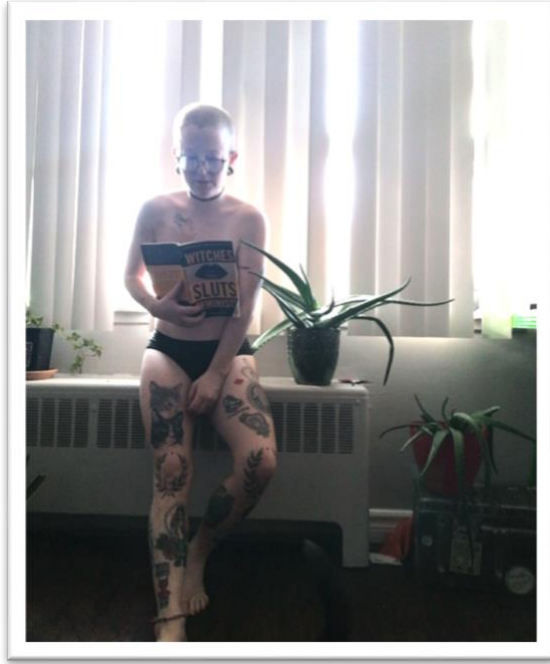


Figure 24 Witchcraft, a/b portrait, Lauren, 2021.

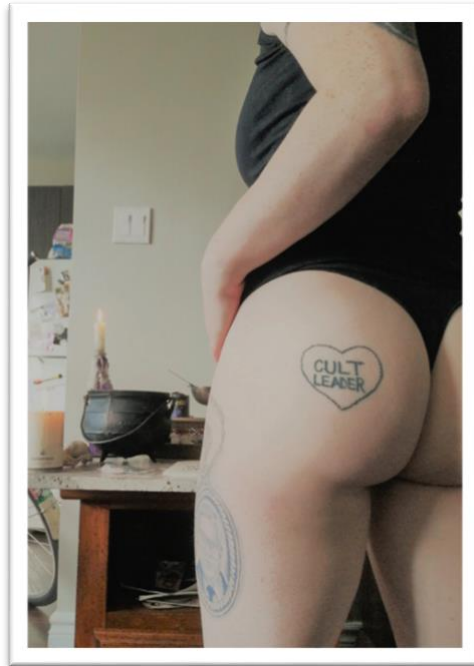


Figure 25 Cult Leader, a/b portrait, Lauren, 2021.

To this point, Lauren created two auto/biographical portraits for this study which both symbolize that their Witchcraft practice plays a role in healing trauma related to their body. In their own words, “After instances of sexualized violence, I felt like my body was not my own and I felt ashamed...I couldn’t look in the mirror” and they stated that through Catholicism (the religion they grew up in) they were taught to feel shame about their body. However, through their Witchcraft practice they were “working through [that] shame.” Thus, for Lauren, Witchcraft is empowering and plays a role in their healing. In the first portrait above Lauren is holding a book titled *Witches, Sluts, Feminists: Conjuring the Sex Positive* by Kristen J. Sollée (2017) to partially conceal their mostly naked body. Lauren does not meet the gaze of the camera but is looking into the book, suggesting that there is something important in there. For Lauren, the book correlates with their “cult leader” tattoo (seen in the second portrait), because the tattoo is a humorous commentary on pejorative ideas about witches and the misconception that Witchcraft is a cult. Although Lauren did not elucidate on that point, the book analyzes the witch as a concept that represents empowerment, resistance to patriarchy, and liberation (particularly sexual liberation). In this sense, the witch can be a powerful symbol for people healing from traumas that are rooted in structural oppression and social control such as sexualized violence, sexual harassment, and other forms of gender-based violence.

Reflecting on their portraits, Lauren stated that creating these images of themselves partially nude was an act of “reclaiming [their] body and [their] space” because they had never created portraits like this before. In this way, Lauren was working to change the narrative they held about their own body as a matter of shame and abuse, thereby reclaiming a more positive relationship with their body and toward repairing their sense of self. By reclaiming their body as their own, Lauren is disrupting the way in which the trauma of sexualized violence and shame

about their body has occupied their sense of self. For Lauren their Witchcraft practice is an integral part their healing journey and self-empowerment, which is why they created one portrait of themselves standing beside their altar which shows a cauldron and a candle. The cauldron is particularly interesting in terms of its function as a container of bubbling potions given that trauma discourse evokes the concept of bubbling as a metaphor for trauma. In this way, for me, Lauren's cauldron evokes questions about what might be bubbling in terms of their trauma, what might be hidden/unknowable and what might be bubbling to the surface as they "work through" their trauma, as they stated.

In addition, drawing upon mythologies across various cultures Barbara G. Walker correlates the cauldron as a symbol of transformation, regeneration, and reincarnation, which is in alignment with the way in that Lauren has chosen nudity as a symbol that they are reclaiming their body for themselves — thus transforming the societal narrative of shame that has been written upon their body, particularly through the Catholic church. On the topic of language, Sollée writes

If language can be used to suppress dissent against arbitrary and abusive authority — and to name and vilify outsiders — then perverting and reclaiming language can be used to challenge those very systems of oppression. You can't take words out of the mouths of oppressors, but you can subvert the intended meaning... Writing and uttering contested words can be a tool to subvert patriarchal rule. It is as much a political act as it is a radical ritual: a spell. Feminist magic, if you will. (84-85)

When thought of this in way, I propose that Lauren's auto/biographical portraits — forms of visual life storytelling — can be understood as a radical act of feminist magic.



Figure 26 Light and Shadow, a/b portrait, Elizabeth, 2014⁵⁶

Elizabeth's participation in this study differs from that of other participants in that the portraits she created for this study were made as part of an ongoing dialogue with portraits that I helped her to co-create in 2014 as part of her process to heal from sexualized violence. Similar to Lauren's approach, in the portrait above Elizabeth played with a veil and her guitars to imply nudity without fully exposing herself to the camera, thereby choosing for herself how her body could be seen by others (while also understanding that when she shared those portraits, she could not control how others received them). In fact, reclaiming one's own body and/or the way in which one presents themselves to the world can be an act of empowerment for people who have experienced sexualized violence, precisely because these forms of violence involve having control of one's body taken away. Interestingly, although Elizabeth created these portraits for

⁵⁶ Although I photographed this portrait of Elizabeth, I refer to it as an auto/biographical portrait because it tells her story.

herself, when she shared them on her social media the portraits became conversation starters that allowed her to engage in shared storytelling about sexualized violence and its ongoing effects.

Commenting on that session in 2014, Elizabeth reflected that at the time she had been struggling with the aftermath of a lifetime of experiences of abuse and disempowerment and that she wanted to create the portraits to feel some sense of empowerment in her life – because she did not feel in control at that time for a multitude of reasons, both directly and indirectly related to the assault. Her inspiration to ask me to support her emerged from multiple spaces; first, she had previously created portraits with a photographer in such a way that made her feel empowered and helped to heal her poor body image which was undoubtedly connected to her past traumas. Second, she was familiar with the work that I was doing in my own self-portraits (what I refer to in this dissertation as auto/biographical portraits) to explore my feelings, emotions and subjectivity that were rooted in my own difficult and traumatic experiences. I would suggest also that an element of trust based on our existing friendship was also a contributing factor for her to choose me to be her photographer. Reflecting on the process of creating portraits together she said

Slowly, one step at a time, there was an incremental change as I became more comfortable in my own skin. And there were a lot of tears and there were [sic] a lot of sort of hysterical laughter around the tears. And the release and that shift from fear to playfulness. And even as we were doing it there was some recognition within me that this was going to be a touchstone moment. It wasn't going to be how I suddenly felt for the rest of my life, but it showed me that it was possible again.

In this reflection Elizabeth is referring to both the experience of creating portraits that night and the effect and affect of that process. As she makes clear, creating portraits to explore her pain, fear and experiences of trauma had been intentional, cathartic, and empowering, which was an integral part of her ongoing healing journey. Moreover, working through (or with) her trauma

in this way allowed her to access parts of herself that, at the time, she had not been able or willing to put into words. Nevertheless, she was able to engage in an embodied dialogue with the affect of her trauma. That is, by engaging with her emotions, feelings of disempowerment, her fears, and anxieties, as well as her joy and laughter she was able to connect with and visually express how experiencing trauma had influenced her sense of self in an embodied manner that did not require her to name those experiences or to verbally describe those experiences in that moment. To return to terminology used by Jo Spence, creating these portraits allowed Elizabeth to speak to and to engage with the “unspeakable” (156). At the same time, Elizabeth explored various parts of her sense of self; for example, her Scottish heritage is an integral part of her identity, thus by draping herself in her family tartan during this session she was able to connect to her family histories, her ancestors, and her heritage as a source of strength, despite that some of those familial histories play a role in her experiences of trauma. Likewise, music plays an important role in her life, as such by singing — sometimes through tears and sometimes through laughter — as well as playing and posing with her guitars Elizabeth was able to tell parts of her life story that are not solely rooted in trauma.

My role as witness to Elizabeth’s process that evening in 2014 was also multifold insofar as I was at once her photographer and her friend who helped to create a safer space for her to explore and to express her experiences. Moreover, we created these portraits as part of Pagan healing ritual, thereby connecting the photography session to Elizabeth’s spirituality.⁵⁷ In this manner, the portraits we created in that session are a form of sacred art and an act of magic — a spell, that is, “a symbolic act done in an altered state of consciousness in order to cause a desired change” (Starhawk qtd. in Sollée 85). Explicitly linking magic and feminist politics Starhawk

⁵⁷ See chapter six for my examination of ritual as a Pagan healing modality.

proposed that magic is “the art of evoking power-from-within and using it to transform ourselves, our communities, our culture, using it to resist the destruction that those who wield power-over are bringing upon the world” (qtd. in Hughes 39). Conceptualized through this lens, auto/biographical portraiture is a powerful medium by which to evoke both personal and social transformation.

Importantly, although only Elizabeth and I were physically present, our shared Pagan community held space energetically during the ritual and provided emotional support before and after the ritual. In other words, together a community of women and nonbinary persons collectively joined in bearing witness to Elizabeth’s testimony and to witness her healing and resiliency. Along those lines, I would emphasize that both Elizabeth and I have always referred to the portraits that we created in that session as a collaborative process of co-creation because, although I operated the camera, the direction of the session was led by Elizabeth. As previously mentioned, the portraits that Elizabeth and I co-created in 2014 as part of her healing ritual are explicitly connected to the portraits she made in 2021 for this study in which she explores the overlapping ways that trauma shapes her sense of self and her relationship with her body.

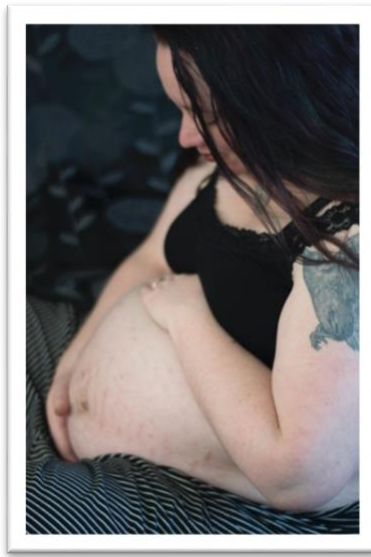


Figure 27 Untitled Maternity, a/b portrait, Elizabeth, 2020

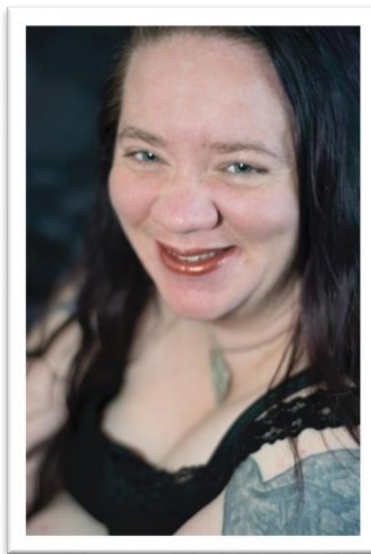


Figure 28 Untitled Maternity, a/b portrait, Elizabeth, 2020.

When I put forth my invitation to participate in this study in 2020, Elizabeth was one of the first people to respond. At the time, she was pregnant with her first child and had intended to create auto/biographical portraits to symbolize how that new experience had changed her sense of self and her relationship with her body in a positive way. However, during her pregnancy she

developed health concerns that necessitated medical surveillance in a way that she had not anticipated, thereby altering her birthing plan. The medical intervention, or more so the medical professional's approach, left Elizabeth feeling disempowered and that she was not in control of her own body, which triggered memories of her past traumas around body image and abuses. Consequently, the portraits she created for this study spoke to both her joy of becoming a mother but also to her old wounds. To expand on this, in the first of her portraits, depicted above, Elizabeth is cradling her pregnant stomach, thus cradling her unborn child, in a loving manner that suggests that she is protecting the child. To this point, Elizabeth explained that the medical complications she was facing took away her choice of having a home birth and her "bodily autonomy," and she wanted to "protect" her unborn daughter from the patriarchal ideologies underpinning the health care system that deem women incapable of making choices for themselves and their own bodies. Further, reflecting upon her own experiences of sexualized violence, sexual harassment, bullying and various forms of disempowerment, Elizabeth noted "I can't protect her from everything" but she wants to do what she can to create a safe world for her daughter. In this sense, the visual gesture of cradling her unborn daughter represents Elizabeth's fear that her daughter will be harmed, not only in terms of the circumstances surrounding her birth, but also as a girl/woman in a world that devalues, dehumanizes, and harms women-identified folk because of their gender. Thus, Elizabeth's desire to protect her daughter is also an act of resistance toward systems and structures of gender oppression.

At the same time, that Elizabeth is smiling into the camera in the next portrait also represents her happiness because she is about to become a mother, which is something that she wanted for some time. Thus, her visual story demonstrates the complex ways in which her sense of self and lived realities are shaped by trauma, but that trauma is not the single factor in shaping

her sense of self. Importantly, the trajectory of Elizabeth’s visual and oral testimony shared over the course of several years, points to the complex interplay between trauma and healing, both of which slip in and out of time in unpredictable ways, thereby demonstrating that time itself does not heal everything. Rather, time can alter the effect and the affect of trauma, but also trauma can return belatedly to haunt and possess us (Caruth 2016; Pollcok 2013), as I have repeatedly emphasized throughout this dissertation.

5.11 The Art of Testimony & Collaborative Witnessing

“the account of the self always remains
at least a partial fiction.”
Tamar Tembeck (88)

Building upon the concept of collaborative witnessing, throughout this dissertation I have engaged with auto/biographical portraiture as both a form of visual testimony and as a form of witnessing that necessarily involves an engagement with memory. But as Watson and Smith argue, “narrated memory is an interpretation of a past that can never be fully recovered” (9).

Thus, as Watson and Smith write

In textual and visual regimes autobiographical acts are inescapably material and embodied. They cannot be understood as individualist acts of a sovereign subject, whole and entire unto itself. And the representation produced cannot be taken as a guarantee of a “true self,” authentic, coherent, and fixed. The autobiographical is a performative site of self-referentiality where the psychic formations of subjectivity and culturally coded identities intersect and “interface” one another. (11)

This disruption between knowing and not knowing complicates the politics of testimony and witnessing insofar as to who and/or what is deemed to be ‘believable’ experiences of trauma.

Trauma scholar Dori Laub addresses this contention specifically in the articulation of trauma in his analysis of Holocaust survivor testimonies. In reference to one survivor of Auschwitz who testified to seeing four chimneys on fire during an act of Jewish resistance where in fact there was only one chimney, Laub contests historians' claim that her testimony is inaccurate "and therefore should [in their view] be discredited in its entirety because she proved herself to be an unreliable witness," as Kelly Oliver recounts (1). In this scenario, historians were looking for empirically verifiable details to prove the testimony to be truthful, and they were looking for a comprehensible account. Psychoanalysts, however, were listening for what the testimony might reveal about what survivors had witnessed, which may have been an incomprehensible experience (Laub 1992; Oliver 2001). Theorizing testimony and witnessing in this way necessitates listening not for facts that can be reproduced and replicated, but rather for the account of an experience (Laub 1992). To elucidate, Laub writes

She was testifying not simply to empirical historical facts, but to the very secret of survival and resistance of extermination. The historians could not hear, I thought, the way in which her silence was itself a part of her testimony, an essential part of the historical truth she was precisely bearing witness to. She saw four chimneys blowing up in Auschwitz: she saw, in other words, the unimaginable taking place right in front of her own eyes. And she came to the unbelievability, precisely, of what she had eyewitnessed — this bursting open of the very frame of Auschwitz. The historians' testifying to the fact that only one chimney was blown up at Auschwitz, as well as the betrayal of the Polish underground, does not break that framework. (61)

What Laub argues is that the truthfulness of the woman's testimony cannot be discredited because she testifies to the truthfulness of her experience, which is not the same thing as giving a verifiable account of events that cannot be known and requires a different reception than that of historians to recognize. Whether one chimney or four were blown up, the truth of her narrative is that she witnessed an uprising that was in many ways incomprehensible.

In *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives* (2017), Leigh Gilmore offers a similar critique arguing that “women’s witness is discredited by a host of means meant to *taint* it: to contaminate by doubt, stigmatize through association with gender and race, and dishonour through shame, such that not only the testimony, but the person herself is smeared” (2). To Gilmore’s claim I add that the same tactics are used to discredit the veracity of gender-variant persons’ lived realities as well. Such strategies are aimed at denying people the right to speak to their own experiences of trauma and oppression; thus, speaking for oneself can be empowering and can, indeed, function as a form of resistance. In the context of this dissertation, which is concerned with the ongoing effect and affect of trauma, auto/biographical portraiture provides a platform for participants to tell their own stories about their lived realities and memories of trauma and healing. Importantly, receiving testimony in this manner is significantly different than an attempt to comprehend — make believable — experiences that may be beyond comprehension.

5.12 Collaborative Witnessing in Practice

In an experiential manner, the act of collaborative witnessing emerges through the co-creation of auto/biographical portraits, and their meaning, throughout this dissertation. For example, the portraits that Elizabeth and I co-created in 2014 are a form of collaborative witnessing that she built upon in the auto/biographical portraits she created for this study, thereby creating a multidimensional visual testimony. In the portraits she created to speak to her experiences of pregnancy, and in anticipation of becoming a mother for the first time, Elizabeth enlisted the assistance of her intimate partner who is the father of her child, thus his role in helping her to

create those photographs functions as a form of collaborative witnessing theoretically and practically. In a practical sense, he is operating the camera in the same way that I did in the portraits created in 2014 and, in doing so, he performs the role of collaborative witness to Elizabeth’s testimony. Moreover, because he is Elizabeth’s partner and the father of their child, he shares part of her story. Similarly, both Molly and Mary Allen had their daughters assist in the creation of their portraits and Ashley created a portrait in which her hand and her daughter’s hand formed a heart. Thus, Elizabeth, Molly, Mary Allen and Ashley each engaged in the act of shared storytelling during the creation of their portraits, regardless of whether their co-creators had knowledge of the trauma each participant was speaking to through their visual testimonies. As Molly eloquently stated, “in healing sometimes you do need help.”

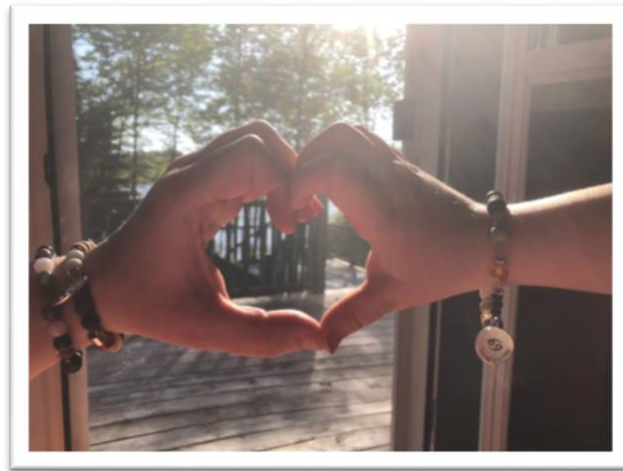


Figure 29 Untitled, a/b portrait, Ashley, 2021

In a similar way, I collaborated with Riley to create her portrait, despite that we never met in person. To elaborate, Riley described that she was riding her pedal bike on a busy city street when she was involved in an accident. Riley recounted seeing a supernatural being who seemed to stop the flow of time around her and, in doing so, may have saved her life because she

was able to get out of the way of traffic. Consequently, the physical harm she experienced was minimized. Riley wanted to create a portrait of the being whom she describes as an old druid connected to the area in Dublin Ireland in which the accident occurred. However, she also wanted the creation of the portrait to be a collaborative effort; consequently, I created the image based on her story. In this sense, the portrait can be understood as a form of multimodal shared storytelling.



Figure 30 The Druid, collaborative a/b portrait, Riley & Gina, 2020.

5.13 Chapter Summary

Throughout this chapter I have evoked the usage of disruptive (dare I say unruly) language — (Un)doing, (un)veiling, (un)seen — to symbolically emphasize the complexities and contradictions of trauma and healing. As my analysis of auto/biographical portrait titled *(Un)doing Time* demonstrates, experiencing trauma can feel like being stuck in time. At the same

time, trauma moves in and out of time in a disruptive and haunting manner that upsets the idea that trauma and healing occur in a linear manner. Indeed, that trauma moves in this way demonstrates that trauma does not know any limits of time (Pollock 2013). The idea of unveiling trauma, as discussed in relation to Caitlyn's auto/biographical portrait, makes clear that trauma remains present but that its effect and affect can change over time. In my usage of the term (un)seen I attend to the complicated ways in which experiences of trauma and healing emerge in the spaces between visibility and invisibility and wanting to be seen/recognized and wanting to be unseen.

Conceptualized as a "theatre of self" (Spence 156), auto/biographical portraiture can be a powerful medium for self-exploration and self-expression which can be a meaningful tool toward self-healing. As Cristina Nuñez asserts, "facing the camera" provides an opening for "deep non-verbal dialogue" (97), which can be a catalyst for healing precisely because the auto/biographical portrait-maker can explore and express that which cannot be spoken. This process can prompt a cathartic release that can be empowering, which trauma scholar Judith Herman (1997) claims is necessary for healing. In its capacity to prompt healing, auto/biographical portraiture is a mode of self-guided therapeutic photography that can be used alone, in community and in sacred space as well as used alongside other forms of therapeutic support.

To this point, both Caitlyn and Elizabeth, explained that the process of creating auto/biographical portraits was empowering and healing. Caitlyn specifically indicated that having the opportunity to "talk about it [her trauma and healing process] and to be creative about it" and to share some of her experiences means that that participating in this study is part of her healing journey. Elizabeth, similarly, described the process of creating auto/biographical portraits as healing because she was able to narrate her own story, which was empowering, as I

examined above. In a similar way, reflecting on the process of creating her auto/biographical portraits, Molly elucidated the process itself was a therapeutic experience. To the point of art as a form of self-examination and self-expression, Molly commented that an artistic approach “takes the pressure off of the personalization of it [trauma]. It allows you to step back and to be a bit more objective and to step back and say, well how would I want to express this in colour? How do I want to express this in shape and sound...words?” Molly’s description of her approach to creating auto/biographical portraits aligns with that of Jo Spence (1995) who posited that self-focused photography is therapeutic precisely because it allows creators to explore the depths of their conscious awareness and subconscious through symbolism. In doing so the creator performs a kind of “self-dialogue” as Terry Dennett argues (2011). In other words, auto/biographical portraiture creates an opening for people to speak to themselves and about themselves and to others. In doing so, portrait-making can be a way for people to speak to the truth — and to the affect — of their own experiences, in their own ways.

Chapter 6 Myth, Magic & Ritual: The Art of Pagan Holistic Healing

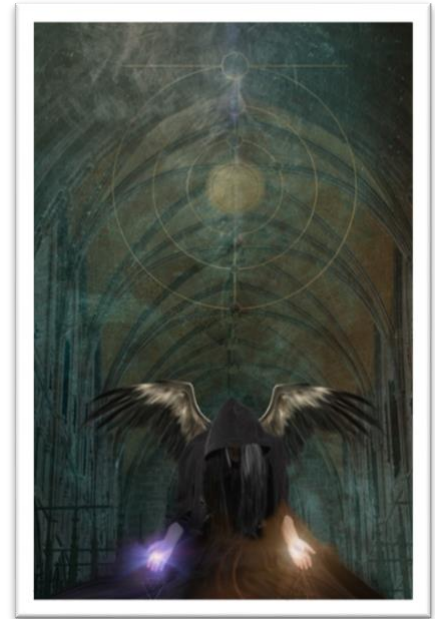


Figure 31 Temperance (tarot), a/b portrait, Gina Snooks, 2021.

“Art is, like magic, the science of
manipulating symbols, words, or images
to achieve changes in consciousness”
Alan Moore (qtd. in Elizabeth 7)

6.1 Introduction

Myth, magic, and ritual are at the core of Pagan practices (Hoff Kraemer 2012; Magliocco 2004; Starhawk 1999). Not surprisingly, then, myth, magic, and ritual are central to Pagans’ approaches to healing and personal development. Informed by folklore discourse and Jungian psychoanalysis, in this chapter I analyze myth, magic, and ritual — in relation to auto/biographical portraiture — as pathways toward healing and personal empowerment. Related

to this, I posit that auto/biographical portraiture functions as a form of shadow work insofar as the process provides an opening for portrait makers to creatively and symbolically explore aspects of selfhood that may be rooted in traumatic and/or difficult experiences. This process of self-analysis can be achieved in multiple ways. In one way, portrait makers can express experiences and memories of trauma to communicate their life stories through their own lens — to speak for themselves (Martin 2013; Jones 2012). In another way, auto/biographical portraiture can be a meaningful way to symbolically make visible the *affect* of trauma — that is, the feelings, ideas, emotions and so forth that are attached to trauma (Cvetkovich 2012; Ahmed 2010). In my analysis and my own experiential knowledge these approaches are often comingled. Moreover, for Pagans, auto/biographical portraiture can be incorporated into and/or performed as a mode of magic and/or ritual, as I examined in chapter five in relation to Elizabeth’s experience of making portraits as part of a healing ritual.

Woven throughout my analysis in this chapter are questions about belief. That is to ask: how do Pagan belief systems inform Pagan healing modalities? Through this analysis, I advocate for “hybrid epistemologies” (Duran 14) that blend Pagan beliefs and practices with conventional psychoanalytical trauma discourse in terms of addressing psychic trauma. My position is attentive to the fact many Pagans are concerned that trauma specialists may perceive their religious beliefs and practices to be indicative of mental health issues or as a sign of psychosis (Crowley 2018; Seymour 2005), which is a concern shared by some of the participants in this study. At the same time, most participants indicated that conventional psychotherapeutic modalities were part of their healing process. To this point, Mayra explicitly described going to therapy as “the greatest gift” she had given herself and that she incorporated some of the strategies she learned in therapy into her spiritual practices. Similarly, in reference to what she

described as a “nervous breakdown” triggered by past traumas, Jeannette credits her spirituality as integral to helping her move quickly from intense crisis mode toward healing. Specifically, she named tools such as meditation, energy work, and support from her Pagan community, in combination with professional therapeutic care. In fact, from her perspective, therapy was helpful precisely because the approaches were similar to the tools she had honed as part of her spiritual practices. And Lauren stated

therapy's really great, and I go to therapy, which is great. But having these self-taught tools is really reaffirming to me — that I can do this thing, I can heal. You know, like with therapy, but I can do things on my own that are going to help towards me becoming like a rebalanced individual.

On the other side of the coin, Alice is among the participants who have training and professional experience in psychoanalytical trauma discourse and uses ritual and magic as part of her own healing strategies. Her positionality at this meeting place further supports my stance that hegemonic trauma discourse and Pagan modalities are not inherently counterintuitive. Rather, in Alice’s words, hegemonic trauma discourse and holistic healing paradigms are “two sides of the same coin.” That said, she expressed that trauma specialists operating exclusively under the “Western science” modality can be “narrow minded” about nonconventional healing practices. In particular, she noted that the profession can be judgemental about nonconventional practices such as ancestor work or the usage of crystals. Alice’s insider perspective aligns with concerns expressed by participants which indicate that there remains a need to make space for more diverse approaches to trauma and healing within conventional frameworks.

As I maintain throughout this dissertation, Pagan epistemologies are holistic and, therefore, Pagans’ approaches to trauma and healing are also located within holistic

frameworks.⁵⁸ Thus, this chapter locates Pagan healing paradigms under the umbrella of critical holistic healing, which promotes holistic healing paradigms while at the same time is attentive to the ways that trauma and healing operate with structures of power, privilege, and oppression within society at large. Broadly speaking, holistic paradigms are premised on the concepts of holism and interconnectedness, which emphasize “understanding the whole system, rather than specific unconnected events or phenomenon,” as Peter Dunn explains (7). In this way, trauma and healing are understood to include physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual dimensions that are interwoven, and some Indigenous holistic frameworks include multidimensional concepts of “time and space” (Dunn 13). Similarly, Maria Tighe and Jenny Butler contend that the central aim of holistic modalities is “the re-integration of mind and body” which challenges Cartesian ways of thinking that separate mind and body (417). Importantly, many different approaches to healing are located under the holistic healing umbrella, including storytelling, ceremonies, art practices, energy balancing, meditation, nutritional therapies, colour therapy, past life regression and visualization to name but a few, all of which can be used as alternatives “to talk therapy or combined with it” (Dunn 5; see also Tighe and Butler).

My critical approach to holistic healing attends to the general critique of what is commonly referred to as “fluffy bunny” ideologies which are frequently associated with Pagan and/or New Age practices which assume that trauma and suffering are part of a spiritual lesson or “failure to think positively,” as religious studies scholar Graham Harvey writes (213). This uncritical mindset, I argue, not only fails to account for the multitude ways in which social factors create trauma but is also a form of victim blaming. Although some Pagans and/or New Age

⁵⁸ See chapters three and four for my discussion on contemporary Paganism.

practitioners adhere to this line of thinking, many people are critical of this attitude. In fact, as Harvey asserts,

most Pagans have no difficulty in recognising the wrongness and harm of abuse and rape. They do not attempt to give them meaning or learn from them, but do face their darkness and attempt to find healing, hope and life. Sometimes this requires the expression of anger and fear as well as facing the dark self-loathing and pain of being a survivor. (202)

Given that overwhelmingly Pagans do not ascribe to the “fluffy bunny” mentality, I argue that defining Pagan spiritual practices in this manner demeans Pagan epistemologies, including the usage of magic and ritual as valuable healing modalities. To emphasize, the term ‘fluffy bunny’ is problematic insofar as its usage performs a kind of epistemic attack on the veracity of Pagan (and/or New Age) ontologies, and thus is a form of discursive othering that aims to delegitimize Pagan knowledges. By extension, this language works toward positioning Western psychoanalytical and biomedical modalities as superior, thereby bolstering Pagans’ concerns that their beliefs and practices will not be taken seriously by trauma specialists.

Specifically, within the scope of holistic healing, I consider auto/biographical portraiture to be a medium of expressive art, which allows “individuals to communicate and heal without using spoken word,” as Nancy Riedel Bowers and Olena Helen Darewych explain (189).⁵⁹ Related to this, symbolic expression and symbolic interpretation play a central role in both Pagans’ approaches to self-exploration and personal empowerment as well as in psychotherapy,

⁵⁹ In contrast to this statement, Riedel Bowers and Darewych do include art forms that use words in their examination of expressive arts; for example, creative writing. Moreover, scriptotherapy (a form of therapeutic writing) and bibliotherapy (which involves therapeutic storytelling and/or reading) are two approaches that engage the written word as a mode of expression intended to be therapeutic. In addition, expressive art forms include visual storytelling (which is how I conceptualize auto/biographical portraiture), art, music, dance, sand play, drama, play, dance, and other forms of movement, creative writing as well as ritual and other forms of ceremony, and various mixed methods approaches (Ridel Bowers and Darewych 2019).

which can account for the fact that these holistic Pagan approaches and psychoanalysis can work together for Pagans.

Given the significant influence of Jungian discourse on psychoanalytical trauma praxis as well as its influence on contemporary Paganism, in this chapter, I critique Jungian ideas to tease out what can be useful to my intersectional feminist analysis of trauma. At the same time, I remain attentive to Jung's problematic tropes that reiterate oppression, including sexism and racism. Against this backdrop, in the second part of this chapter I analyze participants' auto/biographical portraits to consider what these visual life stories can tell about participants' individual and shared experiences of trauma and healing. This chapter, therefore, works alongside chapter five to offer an understanding of self-identified Pagan women and Pagan gender-variant persons' experiences of trauma and healing. Importantly, in Pagan practice, myth, magic, and ritual are often woven together and this interconnectedness is evident in the auto/biographical life stories shared by participants in this study.

6.2 Once Upon a Time: Situating Mythologies

Theories of myths include multiple related approaches (Dundas 1984). For example, in one way myth is theorized as culturally located sacred narratives (Bascom 1984) and on the other hand myth is theorized as universal psychological motifs (Jung 1984), and Pagans take up both approaches in their practices. On the point of the former, Alan Dundas explains that "A myth is a sacred narrative explaining how the world and man [sic] came to be in their present form" (1). Taking Dundas' definition as a starting point, from a contemporary Pagan perspective, mythology is a sacred narrative that explains how the world(s), human beings, and more-than-

human beings came to be in their present form. Likewise, religious studies scholar William G. Doty explains that “*myths provide symbolic representations of cultural priorities, beliefs and prejudices*” (18, emphasis original). Myths are “*language that does something, namely legitimizing and establishing the social realities that form real life*” (Doty 19, emphasis original). Put differently, as with all forms of folklore, mythologies function as a medium of cultural knowledge. In this sense, mythology provides a way to analyze social structures and to make sense of human experiences (Larrington 1992). Thus, myths can play a crucial role in determining how folks conceptualize experiences of trauma and the approaches they take toward healing.

In theorizing myths as *sacred stories* it is important to bear in mind that mythologies are believed to be true, take place in a world prior to our world or in another world, are set in the remote past (but can also be ongoing and/or cyclical) and the characters are non-human (Bascom 11). In this context since these sacred stories are believed to be true the characters and places that appear in myths are also believed to be real. Thus, deities and other more-than-human beings are understood as beings in their own right who can have influence in the human world and who can aid or harm humans. This approach to mythology informs religious theology and, therefore, influences what people believe about the gods and other more-than-human beings and so forth. Polytheistic Pagan theologies, for example, posit that there are many gods (of different genders). For hard polytheists these beings are real and agentic beings and therefore act of their own accord, as I examine below in relation to Mayra’s life story. Notably, in this approach mythologies are culturally located and, by extension, beliefs about the gods and other more-than-human beings and their worlds are shaped within specific cultural ethos. It is important to recognize these diversities in order to avoid collapsing the beliefs, practice, and the lived realities

of diverse people into monolithic narratives about human experiences. Related to this, myths can inspire Pagan beliefs and practices in diverse ways – such as when Pagans draw upon mythologies to overcome “adversity or trauma” and/or as inspiration for personal empowerment (Hoff Kraemer 49). Thus, by studying myths Pagans can connect patterns that are reflected in their own lives (Corak 2020).

From a psychological perspective the study of myth provides a key to understanding the human psyche, that is, both the conscious and unconscious aspects of the mind (Rowland 2002), as rooted in Jungian archetypal psychology. Whether understood as sacred stories or through the lens of archetypal psychology, mythologies can be at the root of inequality and injustice because they provide the foundation for what constitutes social norms and expectations as well as hierarchies of social and political power. Consequently, mythologies can also function as a repository for oppressive ideologies, including sexism, xenophobia, racism, homophobia, ableism and so forth; in this manner, myths can perpetuate harms. Alternatively, myths can function as a form of resistance to oppression such as when religious mythologies are reimagined to include the lived realities of marginalized peoples (Christ 1982).⁶⁰ To this point, Witch and religious studies scholar Christine Hoff Kraemer reminds us that, in their usage of mythology as a tool for personal empowerment, feminist Paganism draws upon goddess mythologies and folks “are encouraged to bring the virtues of various goddesses into their lives by telling their stories, honoring them in worship, and imitating their strengths” (49). In terms of Pagan healing, mythologies make their way into participants’ auto/biographical stories through various lenses, including myth, magic, and ritual — albeit in different ways, as I examine below.

⁶⁰ To this point, in chapter four I analyze how reimagining imagery and language in patriarchal religions to make space for goddess imagery and mythologies played an important role in the feminist spirituality and goddess movements that influence contemporary Paganism.

6.3 Jungian Archetypal Psychology and Paganism

“Fantasy is an amazing witches’ cauldron”
C.G. Jung (qtd. in Capobianco 3)

The ideas of Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) have had a significant influence on Western psychology, healing, and wellness models (Rowland 2002) and have also directly impacted contemporary Paganism (Hoff Kraemer 2012; Waldron and Waldron 2004). Specifically, Pagans’ usage of Jungian archetypal psychoanalysis, active imagination (or creative imagination), the concept of the shadow (particularly shadow work) and dream interpretation are important in relation to Pagan psychospiritual approaches to healing and critical self-reflection, which I expand upon below.⁶¹ Despite its significant influence on psychoanalytical discourse, feminist and anti-racist critiques of Jung highlight issues of racism and misogyny underpinning his theories (Rowland 2002). Thus, taking both the issues of Jungian discourse and its usefulness into consideration, my position on Jung follows theorists in asking what feminist and anti-racist approaches to Jungian psychology can provide as a starting point to understand human experience while also being attentive to these concerns.⁶²

To offer a brief background, Jung referred to his approach as “Analytical Psychology” to distinguish his theories from the method of psychotherapy practiced by his former mentor Sigmund Freud (Rowland 11). Thus, the terms analytical psychology, archetypal psychology and

⁶¹ Although Jungian theories (as well as Freudian theories) are fundamental to Western trauma discourse, it is imperative to recognize that these theories have been reshaped within the context of contemporary praxis, particularly by feminist, anti-racist, decolonial praxis (Archer 2021; Rowland 2002, Dunn 2019), as I address in the introduction of this dissertation.

⁶² For a more thorough feminist critique of Jung see: *Jung: A Feminist Revision* (2002) by Susan Rowland and “Archetypes and Gender: Goddesses, Warriors, and Psychological Health,” by Carolyn Zerbe Enns. For more on anti-racist psychotherapy see *Anti-Racist Psychotherapy: Confronting Systemic Racism and Healing Racial Trauma* (2021) by David Archer.

Jungian theory used in this chapter are all linked to the theories of Carl Jung. For feminist Jungian scholar Susan Rowland, a distinguishing factor between Jungian and Freudian psychotherapy is that Jung did not regard “unconscious fantasies as definitely pathological” or necessarily rooted in repressed sexual trauma (16; see also Crowley 1998). This is not to imply that pathology was never identified as a determining factor in Jung’s analysis. Jungian psychologist and Wiccan high priestess Vivianne Crowley contends that divergent views on spirituality were the crux of the final fracture between Jung and Freud (1998, 15). In particular, Freud leaned toward atheism and was skeptical of occult knowledge; however, what “Freud meant by the ‘occultism’ was everything dear to Jung’s heart — philosophy, religion and mysticism” (Crowley 1998, 15). Rowlands, likewise, claims that “Jung’s work was driven by the need to come to terms with religion” (3).⁶³ Given the religious undertones of Jung’s work it is not surprising that his theories would make their way into new religious movements regarding matters of self-healing, personal empowerment, and spiritual growth.

Rowland writes that “Jungian theory is a theory of psyche and culture, *and* a therapeutic methodology” (28; emphasis original); thus, she alludes to the relationship between reflecting upon myths and healing. Further, in her analysis of Jungian theory, Rowland explains that, for “Jung, all reality, all that the human being experiences, feels, learns, encounters, both inside and outside the mind, is psychic” and that in this context the term “‘psyche’ stands for all mental concerns and operations; it includes both conscious and unconscious effects upon the perceiving mind” (29). Although all experience is filtered through the mind (the psyche), according to Jung, it does not imply that experiences exist only in the mind or that one’s experiences are not real in

⁶³ For example, Jung’s doctoral thesis examined Spiritualism, and in Rowland’s analysis Jung’s involvement in the Spiritualist movement and participation in séances early in his career suggests that he gave at least some credence to the existence of the supernatural. In addition, he later wrote about the relationship between psychology and the occult (Jung 1977).

a tangible and material sense. As Rowlands asserts, in Jungian analytical psychology “archetypes are psychosomatic” and the body is “connected to spirit through archetypes” (35).

On the topic of myth in Jungian theory, Rowland explains

‘Myth’ is used in a dual sense in Jung’s writings: as evidence of the unknowable unconscious in individual personal myth *and* as evidence of the unconscious in cultures (mythologies, including Christianity). In denoting religious and supernatural stories, myths supply an atmosphere of the superior and unruly power of the unconscious. In the form of the established mythologies, myths are the repository of the unconscious culture over time. Jung theorizes the myths he encounters to be the stories of human subjection to unconscious forces. Such narratives and stories then provide tools with which to structure his theory. (28)

Importantly, archetypes can simultaneously reflect personal experiences that are culturally and historically located (Rowland 2002). In Jung’s own words archetypes symbolize common motifs or characteristics associated with “myth, esoteric teachings, and fairytale” and, further, he explains, “myths are first and foremost psychic phenomena that reveal the nature of the soul” (6). Critics of Jung, however, emphasize that human experience is not universal, but rather is shaped in and through social structures and political forces (Rowland 2002; Enns 1994). Indeed, that trauma and healing is at once personal and political is the crux of intersectional feminist and anti-racist psychotherapy (Rowlands 2002; Archer 2021). Critiquing Jung directly, Carolyn Zerbe Enns argues that Jung promoted “gender biases” and “dualistic thinking” that presumed that masculinity was superior to femininity (128). In turn, this way of thinking presumes that cis-men are superior to ciswomen and performs an erasure of gender nonconforming identities and lived experiences. With regard to racism, as Alan G. Vaughan argues, “The spirit of the times and practices of racism coloured Jung’s views, attitudes, and theories about African Americans, just as colonialism coloured his attitudes toward Africa and Africans” (320). Following this logic, it

is my contention that Pagans' usage of Jungian ideas must be attentive to these sexist and racist undertones to reframe Jungian psychotherapy to be more inclusive.

In terms of Paganism, Jungian archetypal psychology informs some Pagans' concept of deity and, by extension, plays a factor in how Pagans interpret myths, conduct ritual, and perform their religiosity. As Hoff-Kraemer (2012) explains, the style of Wicca practiced by influential Wiccan teachers and writers Stewart and Janet Farrar was significantly shaped by Jungian psychology. To this point, Hoff Kraemer writes that the Farrars

explain that archetypes are created from human thought-forms, yet they give access to something that is beyond the human. The Farrars' position on whether the named gods have independent life is complex. They speak of invoking the Goddess "as Isis" or "as Aradia," suggesting that these thought-forms are like costumes that the Goddess takes on and off. They also explain that the more energy is put into these thought-forms, the more independent life they gain. (32)

This approach supports the belief that all gods are one god held by some Pagans. Further, this archetypal approach can be useful in a monistic approach which does not ascribe to belief in personal deities but belief in the concept of "oneness and interdependence as experienced in ritual and meditation" (Hoff Kraemer 29). In Rowland's interpretation,

Jung's archetypes are gods and goddess because they are the most active powers in the formation of the human subject who constantly affect her encounters with the outer world. Like gods (or goddesses), archetypes make the person by representing themselves in the person's life (though mental images). (32)

I provide these various quotes at length to demonstrate the myriad ways in which archetypal psychology informs Pagan ideas about mythology and the nature of the gods, and as a gateway to theorize how it is possible to apply these perspectives in Pagan healing paradigms.

In this context, I align with Hoff Kraemer who asserts that archetypes can be a useful tool for personal and spiritual exploration and development, as well as “political liberation” (Hoff Kraemer 28).

Jungian psychology also shapes Paganisms’ emphasis on shadow work. To this point, according to Jung, and as I articulate in chapter five, “The Shadow personifies everything that the subject refuses to acknowledge about himself [sic] and yet is always thrusting itself upon him directly or indirectly” (qtd. in Wang 205). On the topic of shadow work, Chaos Witch and author Kelly-Ann Maddox suggests that making “a piece of art” can be a way “to explore your shadow” (227).⁶⁴ Indeed, theoretically and experientially I understand auto/biographical portraiture to be a form of shadow work, precisely because the process allows portrait makers to explore aspects of selfhood that may be rooted in difficult experiences.

The concept of active imagination is described as a strategy that uses “waking fantasy and mental imagery” to work with the unconscious and to explore the archetypes (Greer qtd. in Nichols 386). To this point, tarot is widely used by Pagans as an analytical tool for self-exploration and self-empowerment. This approach is based on the premise that the seeker can learn a great deal about themselves by interpreting motifs present in the cards through meditation, active imagination exercises and by exploring the mythology and symbolism of the cards (Wang 2021, Nichols 2019). On this topic, Wang implies that the tarot symbolism offers a gateway to understanding “the root causes of the human condition” (4).

As this brief examination of the connection between psychotherapy and Paganism demonstrates, Carl Gustav Jung, undoubtedly, has left a significant mark. It is therefore important to acknowledge the wide usage of Jungian analytical psychology in Pagan approaches

⁶⁴ Maddox also names ritual performance, the use of tarot, working with a therapist and journaling as methods for shadow work.

to trauma and healing, including the blending of holistic approaches and psychotherapy. Nevertheless, as Pagans move toward decolonising Paganism to more anti-oppressive practices, it is imperative to also recognize the harms that Jungian sexist and racist ideologies have caused to ensure that Pagan trauma discourse does not reiterate those harms.

6.4 Magic as a Healing Praxis

For contemporary Pagans, belief in and the practice of magic is an integral part of religiosity (Harvey 2011; Hoff Kramer 2012). That raises the question: what is magic? One common theory of magic comes from occultist Aleister Crowley who claims that “Magick is the Science and Art of causing change to occur in conformity with Will” (qtd. in Harvey 85). Occultist, ceremonial magician, and author Dion Fortune, similarly, defines magic as “the art and science of changing consciousness according to the Will” (qtd. in Harvey). In other words, magic is a tool for transformation that has two purposes: “to change things or situations” and to “change the practitioner” as Pagan scholar Graham Harvey asserts (85). It is no wonder, then, that magical practices play an important role in Pagan healing paradigms. Magic can be performed through a wide range of practices, including candle magic, as Mary Allen demonstrates in an auto/biographical portrait that she created for this study. Further, Alice offers example through her usage of glamour magic as a part of her healing strategy. Some other forms of magic include spell casting, potion making, herbal magic, gem magic, ritual magic, sigil magic, which is a form of symbol magic that operates on the premise that symbols hold power (Lyons 2019), various forms of folk magic, and more. As this list suggests there are many ways to do magic. On this point, I align with folklorist Sabina Magliocco (2001) who argues “Because creativity and

artistry involve transformation, these processes become analogous and equivalent to magical acts: the artist is by definition a magician” and therefore “all art is sacred” (7). Following this logic, I argue that auto/biographical portraiture is a magical practice, whether portraits are created in magical space or not.

6.5 Between the Worlds: The Art of Sacred Theatre

The term ritual applies to a wide range of religious ceremonies, observances, and practices. Given the diversity of Paganism, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide an in-depth analysis of Pagan ritual practices across a broad range of traditions. Instead, in what follows, I provide an analysis of Pagan ritual as a healing modality that is inevitably shaped by diverse theories and practices. In general, contemporary Pagan ritual structure is a composite model built upon elements of Gardnerian Witchcraft and ceremonial magic; it also draws upon ritual studies in academic discourse (such as religious studies, anthropology and folklore), living folk traditions and reclaimed folk knowledges, popular psychology (drawing directly or indirectly from Jungian archetypal theories) and popular culture, which is in addition to ritual participants’ own intuition and imagination, experiential knowledge, and unverified personal gnosis (UPG) (Magliocco 2004; Doyle White 2016). Moreover, feminist theologians, feminist ritual specialists and feminist Pagans contribute a reimagining of hegemonic discourse situated in patriarchal androcentric worldviews to make space for women and gender variant persons’ life stories and their lived realities, as well as a reimagining of hegemonic masculinity.

At its core, ritual is a form of artistic expression (Magliocco 2004). The purpose of ritual is to alter consciousness, as one participant in this study, Alice, explained. Folklorist Sabina

Magliocco similarly posits that “the goal of ritual is to alter consciousness so participants can come into contact with other ways of perceiving the universe and their place in it. I call this state “religious ecstasy” and the stream of imagery it stimulates the “ecstatic imagination” (Magliocco 2009, 225). Moreover, as Jeannette (who coincidentally is a former theatre student) stated, ritual is sacred theatre. On that note, oral storytelling and/or visual storytelling, including the use of photography and other modes of visual art, dancing singing, drumming and other forms of expressive art are regularly incorporated into Pagan ritual. In addition, the ritual performance might include costumes, props, sets, lighting and sound effects and other embellishments to enhance the theatrical effect. Beyond entertainment, such theatrics function to help ritual participants to achieve an altered state of consciousness. Additionally, these various modes of artistic expression provide a way to symbolically explore and express Pagan ideologies and beliefs that are embedded in the myths and stories central to these performances.

Despite the diversity in Pagan theology (as discussed in chapter two), a tripartite ritual structure built upon the composite model discussed above is common across Pagan practices. The purpose of this tripartite formula in Pagan ritual is to create a liminal space — a space and time *between worlds* as Pagans often say— in which participants experience an altered state of consciousness. In a way, this common structure reflects the significant influence that Wicca has had on the Pagan movement overall. This is evident in the common practice of casting a circle to create an energetic boundary in which to perform the core of the ritual. However, the tripartite formula itself is typical in religious ceremony broadly speaking. To this point, this formulaic structure was first identified in 1909 by French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep and was later made popular in discourse through the scholarship of anthropologist Victor Turner in *The Ritual Process* (1969) (Magliocco 2004). According to Magliocco, van Gennep interpreted the three-

part ritual formula as “separation from the everyday world, testing, and reintegration” (139) — an interwoven beginning, middle and end. To expand, the first phase of a ritual is intended to either create or symbolize a separation from ordinary experience, which Magliocco compares to entering a sanctuary.

In Paganism this phase usually involves creating a sacred space (the most common way of which is to cast a circle), thus demarcating an energetic and/or physical boundary or container in which the core part of the ritual takes place. The process might also involve energetic cleansing (through the usage of smoke, water, breathwork, meditation, sound, et cetera). From a psychological perspective these acts help set a particular mindset necessary to be present in the moment which is integral to attaining an altered state of consciousness. These precursory acts are often followed by invoking or inviting deity, ancestors, or other more-than-human allies including elemental spirits to be present during the ritual. It is in this middle phase that the “work” of the ritual is performed (Magliocco 139). In a healing ritual, for example, it would be during this phase that the acts intended to create healing would be performed. Although van Genep described this as the “testing” part, Magliocco describes the core of the ritual as the “transformative part of the ritual” (139), thus making clear that transformation is at the heart of Pagan ritual. If practices such as magic, prayer, making offerings, trance work, creative visualization or guided journeying, energy healing and so forth are included in the ritual design these acts occur within the middle part of the ritual. The final phase of the ritual is designed to reintegrate participants back to ordinary consciousness. In Magliocco’s words,

The tripartite structure of rituals serves several purposes in Neo-Pagan culture. Its clear beginning and ending provide a container for ecstatic ritual practices, marking them as framed experiences during which participants feel free to suspend disbelief and become absorbed in the activities. The frame itself is important because it prepares participants for what follows and furnishes a transition to everyday reality when the ritual has ended. A lack of framing can be disastrous. (141)

That said, the concept of suspending belief necessitates further discussion because belief and practice are interconnected. Indeed, Pagan rituals are performed precisely because participants hold particular beliefs and ideas about the nature of reality. In my analysis, the notion of suspending belief as Magliocco uses it here does not suggest that one must suspend belief of reality to perform ritual but speaks to the concept of existing between worlds — that is, simultaneously in multiple realities — during the ritual.

Pagan Rituals centre around a specific sacred narrative, theme, life event or intention that is symbolically expressed through artistic expression. It is in this context that Pagans draw upon motifs in mythology, folklore, archetypal psychology, and popular culture as inspiration for sacred performance. In addition to calendar customs, Pagans perform ritual to mark life events such as baby naming ceremonies (called a Wiccaning in Wicca), intimate partner unions (often called a handfasting) or endings, or death rites, and initiations into particular Pagan traditions. Another reason Pagans perform ritual is as a catalyst for personal or social transformation, as noted above. Magliocco (2004) categorizes Pagan ritual under three groups: life-cycle rites, year-cycle rites, and rites of crisis, which would include healing rituals. As Magliocco explains, rites of crisis are the most “magical” rituals precisely because “While Witches and Pagans are perfectly aware that the wheel of the year will turn without them and that individuals will undergo life transitions minus magical help, rites of crisis employ operative magic to have an effect in the material world” (136).

6.6 Pagan Healing Rituals

Situated within the ritual framework described above, Pagan healing rituals focus on transforming the way in which trauma influences a person's sense of self and their lived realities. Thus, Pagan healing rituals work toward restoring a sense of wholeness, balance, and harmony to the life of persons who have experienced trauma. If at its core trauma is a matter of experiencing intense disempowerment then healing is a journey of becoming empowered or restoring a sense of personal power (Herman 1997). The concepts of transformation and personal empowerment are central to Pagan holistic healing modalities, particularly ritual performance. On the topic of women-only healing rituals within the goddess spirituality movement, Janet L. Jacobs (1990) postulates that "There are significant parallels between the form of the ritual and the process of feminist psychotherapy. In a much more condensed form [than long-term therapy], the ritual takes the celebrant through stages of awareness, acknowledgement, anger, and self-empowerment, all of which help her to move from denial to acceptance to control over her victimization" (Jacobs 44). Healing, in this context is a mode of empowerment (Jacobs 1990) — and this logic applies to Pagan healing ritual as well. In this example, Jacobs analyzes a ritual entitled "Take Back the Night" (but makes no reference to the Take Back the Night Movement), which focused on women-identified persons' experiences of gender-based violence.⁶⁵ Similarly, on the topic of feminist ritual, Diann L. Neu (1995) contends that

An important component of both feminist therapy and feminist ritual is assisting women to recognize that they are their own experts, that their lives have meaning, and that "the personal is political." My observation is that women gain therapeutic strength from feminist spiritual support groups, indeed that feminist rituals enhance women's mental health by increasing their balance and strength, energy and comfort. (186)

⁶⁵ See: Jacobs, Janet L. "Women, Ritual, and Power." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* 11.2/3 (1990): 39-44.

In these examples, Jacobs and Neu are concerned with the experiences of women-identified persons in the context of group ritual. However, these correlations can be made in Pagan healing rituals in general. That is, healing rituals can be utilized by people of all genders, and it is not necessary to perform ritual in group settings.

*“Witchcraft is all about power,
imagined or real”*
Barbara Rieti (3)

6.7 Magic and Ritual: The Art of Transformation

The way in which rituals are performed varies significantly depending on the focus of the ritual; however, ritual always involves some form of symbolic expression intended to manifest “psychological and interpersonal changes” in persons’ lived realities (Yardley 334). Located under the umbrella of holistic healing, both magic and ritual are tools for healing. More specifically, in this dissertation, participants used magic and ritual as modes of self-healing as several participants testify to. To this point, in what follows I examine the auto/biographical portraits created by Mary Allen, Alice and Sandra who each testify to experiences of trauma rooted in interpersonal trauma. Although each woman’s experiences are unique, their visual and oral life stories elicit the shared experience that trauma alters one’s sense of self. Consequently, their magic and ritual performances focus on restoring their sense of self as autonomous beings.



Figure 32 *Untitled a/b portrait, Mary Allen, 2020.*

Mary Allen, a feminist Witch, created this auto/biographical portrait to show how she uses candle magic during a ritual as part of her healing process. In this manner, the above portrait which shows a candle burning down, represents a previous ritual in which Mary Allen had performed candle magic to disconnect herself from her former workplace where she experienced lateral violence and bullying involving attacks on her credibility as a respected professional in her field. In this way, her portrait is a form of testimony to the violence she experienced. At the same time, creating this portrait functions as ritual in its own way, thereby adding an additional layer to her experience of healing. Speaking to her experience of lateral violence, Mary Allen explained that the experience was profoundly disempowering; in her own words: “it really destroyed me. It was really devastating, absolutely *devastating*” [emphasis hers]. Expanding on this, Mary Allen indicated that how she understood her identity was at the crux of the trauma because the bullying focused on demeaning her confidence and her credibility. Thus, in the initial ritual, she performed candle magic to distance herself from the trauma as a purposeful act to restore her sense of self, which necessitated dissociating her identity from the toxic work

environment in a psychic sense. For Mary Allen, disentangling herself from her former workplace in this way was required for her to move forward in her life.

For the first ritual, Mary Allen used the concept of sympathetic magic to burn away the threads that bound her to her former workplace and the trauma it created. Crowley defines sympathetic magic as a practice in which one item symbolizes something else. As Crowley articulates, “the visual image acts as a ‘homing device’ to direct energy to the right recipient” (153). To do so, Mary Allen bound two candles together with twine — one to represent herself and the other to represent the former workplace and the trauma. Bundling the candles together symbolized being tied to the toxic environment and, therefore, being tied to the trauma. Then she lit the candles and allowed the flame to burn away the twine connecting the candles to symbolize separating herself from the place. For Mary Allen, burning away the threads that connected the candles symbolized a new beginning in which she was no longer bound to her past. Thus, her act of magic was aimed toward transforming and repairing the damage to her self-confidence and self-esteem that trauma had created, which was an important part of her healing journey. Mary Allen explained that she interpreted the way that the two candles burned down differently as a sign that she was separating her sense of self from the workplace and that she was moving forward in good way, because the candle representing her former workplace blew out quickly and the candle representing herself continued to burn. In particular, she stated when the candle she used to represent herself continued to burn she interpreted that as a sign that “everything’s gonna be okay” and that she did not have to fear what the future held for her regarding her career.

Although Mary Allen created the above portrait as a form of testimony to her experience of trauma and healing, creating the portrait itself was a form of healing because the process

offered an opportunity to further express and explore her path toward healing — indeed, healing is often ongoing process. To this point, Mary Allen explained that she used an orange candle in the recreation rather than white and black candles as she did originally because the way in which the traumatic experience affected her had shifted; thus, the orange colour represents a different kind of energy. As she explained, in this portrait the colour orange represents that she is “happier” than she had been when she performed the ritual originally, thereby signalling that she was healing from the interpersonal violence she had experienced. Interestingly, Mary Allen associated the colour orange with the yogic solar plexus or third chakra, which energy healer Donna Eden explains “is the force that maintains your individual identity. Your personal ego — your sense of who you are and who you are not” (152), although Eden indicates that the colour of the solar plexus chakra is yellow. Nevertheless, from this perspective, Mary Allen’s usage of the colour orange can signify that she is moving toward repairing the harm done to her sense of self because of the workplace attacks on her integrity. Based on Mary Allen’s explanation, I interpret her auto/biographical portrait to symbolize the ongoingness of healing as a multilayered experience, which is seen in the way that the orbs of light emerge from the candle in a multilayered and outreaching manner. In this way, the visual effect of the burning orange candle connects to Mary Allen’s interpretation of the white candle that she used to represent herself in her previous ritual insofar as she understood that the way the candle continued to burn — give off light — was a sign that she was going to be okay.



Figure 33 Untitled a/b portrait, Alice 2020.

Alice’s auto/biographical portrait of her hands offers another example of how performing magic can aid in healing. Alice explained that she performed a banishing work, including spell casting, to help her break a severe nail-biting habit which she developed as child that began as an anxious practice. Importantly, Alice stated that she now understands that her nail-biting habit was a trauma response. Although she did not provide a detailed description of what that spellwork entailed, Alice commented that her magical work included visualizing her hands being healed and working with “the emotions in the body,” in ways that are similar to hypnosis techniques used in psychotherapy. That said, as the term implies, banishing work in a magical sense typically means to perform magic to get rid of something — in this case, to rid herself of a harmful habit. In addition, Alice mentioned that her healing strategies involved doing work to heal her inner child, which is logical given that her habit goes back to her childhood trauma.

It is plausible that Alice began this habit as either a method of self-soothing or to enact control over her circumstances, yet in the long run its effect was harmful to her sense of self. To

this point, Alice explained that as a child she did not wear rings because she did not want to draw attention to her hands, which indicates an element of shame associated with the habit. Indeed, it is not uncommon to attempt to hide the things about ourselves that we are ashamed of. In her words “I would never want anybody to see them because it was just a reminder [that] my hands don’t look pretty.” However, in the auto/biographical portrait that she made for this study she is wearing several rings that hold meaning for her. For example, one ring was a gift that her grandfather made for her, and another was her father’s wedding ring, whose death by suicide shaped her childhood trauma. Specifically, Alice talked about how her father’s death was a source of shame for her family. That said, she emphasized that the ring does not represent trauma for her. Another ring was a gift from an aunt that connects Alice to her culture, which is an important aspect in shaping Alice’s sense of self. And the three final rings she bought from Witches, which can signify her spirituality. Importantly, Alice’s choice to wear these specific rings provides a visual narrative of the interconnectedness between family, culture, and spirituality that shape Alice’s sense of self and her holistic approaches to healing.

By purposely drawing attention to her hands and her healthy nails, in this auto/biographical portrait, Alice is demonstrating that she is healing from the self-harming practice she developed as a child. Moreover, in my role as collaborative witness, I understand the way in which Alice has drawn attention to her hands and rings in this portrait to symbolically reveal what she had previously hidden — that is, both her trauma and her response to trauma (excessive nail biting). In addition to wanting to highlight her growing nails, the specific rings Alice chose for this portrait link her to her past insofar as three of the rings come from her family — thus symbolizing that the past and the present are connected in a cyclical manner. In this way, Alice is purposefully carrying parts of her past with her that shape her sense of self in a positive

way and at the same time releasing parts of her past that she wishes to move on from. To this point of healing being an ongoing process, Alice stated that after the banishing work she continued to use visualization techniques, which she described as spellwork, to reinforce her intention to heal her sore hands — seeing them “healthy and strong,” as she put it. Alice asserts that it was a combination of magical work, psychotherapy and “willpower” that helped her overcome her nail-biting habit. This demonstrates that integrating practices rooted in her Paganism along with mainstream trauma practices was an effective route toward healing for her.

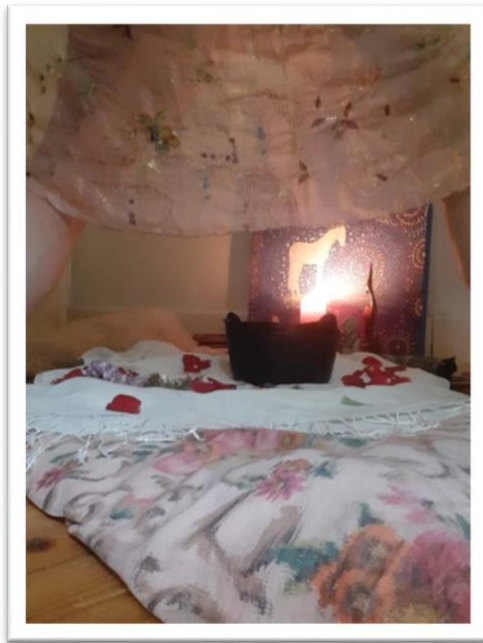


Figure 34 Untitled, a/b portrait, Sandra, 2020.

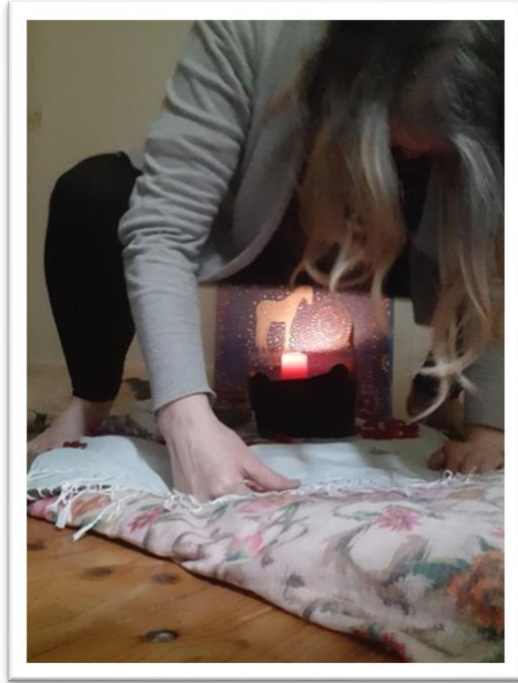


Figure 35 Untitled, a/b portrait, Sandra, 2020.

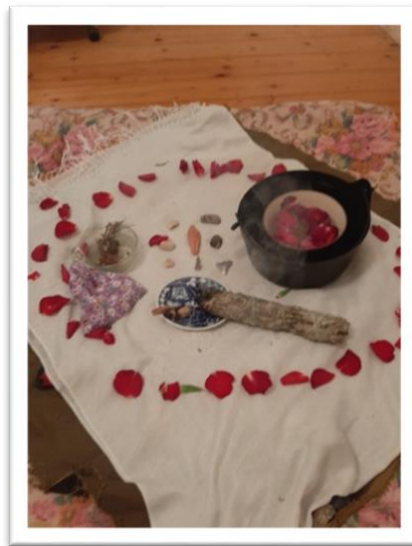


Figure 36 Untitled, a/b portrait, Sandra, 2020.

Sandra spoke in detail about energy and how energy can affect us. Related to this, Sandra created eight portraits (some of the same scene from different angles) to show a ritual that she had performed to separate her energy from a man that she had been in a relationship with, which she referred to as a sexual cord cutting ritual. She described him as a “magical person” with whom she had a “deep soul connection.” At the same time, she reflected that they both came into the relationship with their own trauma that included “the energy of being rejected” and abandoned from previous intimate relationships that ultimately affected their relationship. Importantly, although the portraits she shared here represent a specific ritual, the process is connected to other rituals and methods of healing that are part of her healing journey. This ritual, specifically, was intended to separate her energy from his in what she described as “like a soul retrieval [that] really helped bring that energy back to me.” In the ritual, Sandra described she used different stones to symbolize herself and her ex-partner which she used to focus her energy and intention of healing for each of them. To manifest this healing, she visualized her feminine energy leaving him and his masculine energy leaving her to separate their entwined energy, which can further be understood as a way to reclaim her own power and/or her sense of self as an agentic being apart from the relationship that had dissolved.⁶⁶

To expand, the way that Sandra is visualizing energy in this context is not merely a symbolic gesture but is grounded in the principles of energy healing, which is a form of holistic healing that she performed within ritual space. On the topic of energy healing, Cindi Dale writes, “Our energetic fields respond to trauma and healing energies. They also react to emotions and

⁶⁶ In my earlier examination of masculine and feminine energy in ritual performance (see chapter four) I argued that this duality risks reiterating cisheteronormativity, thereby performing an erasure of queerness, when applied in a broad sense. Here, Sandra is describing feminine energy and masculine energy in the relation to her own sense of self (feminine) and her former partner (masculine) which is a specific context.

love; when two people interrelate, their fields blur and merge” (7). The concept of energetic psychic cords is another way to describe the energetic connection between people and/or places, objects, et cetera (Dale 2011). In this theory, when the energetic cords that connect people are harmful, energy healing can release those bonds.

As witness to Sandra’s ritual (through her auto/biographical portraits), what stands out to me is her usage of colour, specifically her emphasis on red, pink, and purple which are colours I associate with love, passion, healing, and the higher self. Specifically on the topic of the colour pink, Dale states that “pink equates to love” (97), thus working with the colour pink in cord work signifies sending energy back “to the other person with care and concern” (97). The symbolic connection between the colour pink and love can also be applied to self-love, thus Sandra’s ritual performance can be understood as an act of self-love or self-care. To be clear, my usage of the term self-care moves beyond neoliberal ideologies of individualism which “undermines all forms of care and caring that do not serve its agenda of profit extraction for the few” (The Care Collective 10). By contrast, in my usage, the term self-care is simply a matter of being attentive to one’s own well-being — physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. As author and Wiccan High Priestess Arin Murphy-Hiscock asserts, “The point of self-care isn’t just about giving yourself a break. It’s about becoming skilled at identifying your needs by listening to your mind, body, and spirit” (10) — thus, self-care can mean performing magic, rituals and/or energy work as modes of healing and it can also mean seeking psychoanalytical counselling, if that is what is required, as other participants in this study have stated. Importantly, as The Care Collective explains, the concept of care has been devalued largely due “to its association with women [and] the feminine” (3), hence self-care and caring for others is a political act that can be a form of resistance to neoliberalism and patriarchy. In this way, Sandra’s ritual to reclaim her

feminine energy and to disentangle her energy from that of her former partner is a radical act of self-care that I interpret as a feminist act of resistance.

The way in which Sandra performed her ritual to disentangle her own energy from that of her former partner is similar to how Mary Allen performed candle magic to disentangle herself from her former workplace and how Alice performed a banishing ritual to rid herself of her nail-biting habit that began as a trauma response. As these examples demonstrate, each participant used magic and ritual as methods of self-healing and self-empowerment, thereby taking an active role in their own healing processes, which can be empowering. At the same time, each of these participants' acts of self-healing function as shared stories about the effectiveness of and the importance of Pagan-centric practices for Pagan persons on their healing journeys.

6.8 Keeping Her Keys: The Supernatural and Healing



Figure 37 Untitled a/b portrait, Mayra, 2020.

Mayra is a devotional hard polytheist and healer who has been a practicing Pagan since the early 1990s. I also know her to be a well-respected seer and empath — for her, the supernatural world is real. For Mayra, being a seer and an empath is an integral part of her sense of self and her life stories, including her stories about trauma and healing. For this study, Mayra created two auto/biographical portraits to symbolize her connectedness with the supernatural: the first portrait (above) is symbolic of her relationship with the Greek goddess Hekate and the second (below) is symbolic of Mayra’s connection to the Irish goddess Badb/the Morrigan, both of whom play a role in her spirituality and healing journey.

For context, Mayra’s interaction with the supernatural world began when she was a child. In particular, she described knowing that there were “shadows and stuff” under her bed that she described as real entities that were scary and felt threatening. Further, she explained that she had “very vivid dreams” and that at times she did not know if she was awake or asleep when these experiences occurred. Reflecting upon her childhood, Mayra noted that her father also had encounters with spirits who visited him in waking state or half-awake states as well as in his dreams. However, when Mayra was young, he did not validate her encounters with the supernatural (it isn’t uncommon for parents to assume that what their children describe in this way is based in their imagination. Alternatively, it is plausible that her father did not speak of his own encounters with the supernatural as a way to protect her from how others might perceive her experiences). In addition, Mayra described herself as a “highly sensitive” [empathic] child who strongly felt others’ emotions, particularly strong feelings such as fear, anger, and frustration, which she said was difficult for a child to process. Because she did not understand these unsettling experiences and did not have the tools to cope with them, Mayra tried to “block them.”

However, because it was difficult to sleep, she developed chronic insomnia that lasted until her late 20s, which “made school very difficult,” she explained. Her father did speak more openly about supernatural matters when Mayra was a teenager, and ultimately taught her a great deal about dealing with these beings. Nevertheless, Mayra believes that her experiences along with the insomnia “led to depression and probably some anxiety.” Thus, her early encounters with the supernatural and lack of knowledge about her empathic nature had tangible psychosomatic effects on her life and her well-being.

When Mayra was around seventeen or eighteen, she encountered Paganism, specifically British Traditional Witchcraft or Wicca with Gardnerian influences. It was through her involvement in Witchcraft that she learned that she “did not have to be a victim of circumstance.” This statement implies that through Witchcraft Mayra was able to empower herself. Specifically, she said her spirituality gives her more tools to understand trauma and healing. To elucidate, she explained

It gives me more tools to work with, in the same respect that when I went to therapy, I gained tools. I learned how to do certain things... In the same way that my magical toolkit gives me tools...I speak two languages. That gives me more words. If I don't know a word in English, maybe there's a better one in Spanish. It gives me more understanding.

As this statement demonstrates, multiple ways of knowing and blended healing modalities are not contradictory for Mayra, but rather work together to support her holistic worldview.

Importantly, Mayra understands healing to be “work” — “you can't just pray everything away,” she says. This statement highlights that even with spiritual tools and supernatural assistance, healing from psychic wounds necessitates actively working toward personal transformation.

On this topic, as a polytheistic Pagan who perceives deity as noncorporeal beings (that is, not as archetypes), Mayra explained that her portrait represents her relationship with Hekate and

the role that relationship played in her healing. Mayra created a black and white portrait with her hand placed over a bowl that would normally sit on her altars (presumably as an offering bowl), and she is grasping a hand-full of keys which are “spilling everywhere” as she says — creating an evocative polysemic narrative. In Greek mythology, keys are one of Hekate’s symbols (as are crossroads). Indeed, Hekate is known as the Key Keeper (Weber 2021). Hekate’s keys symbolically link to the past and represent unlocking mysteries (Weber 2021). Thinking of these keys in relation to trauma discourse these keys can represent parts of ourselves that are locked in the past or in our subconscious, including repressed memories and emotions rooted in traumatic experiences. Alternatively, keys can be the device used to unlock the past and its mysteries.

For Mayra, these keys represent choice, and the portrait is purposefully monochrome to symbolize those choices are not always straightforward. Moreover, the portrait represents a traumatic time in her life when her marriage had dissolved and she was living alone in a dangerous neighbourhood, feeling overwhelmed and uncertain of the future. Mayra explained that she did not want the experiences of trauma to make her bitter; rather, she could choose how the experiences shaped her sense of self, despite the harm that trauma caused. That is not to suggest that she has control over everything that happens in her life and/or that the choices she makes are not complicated by matters beyond her choosing, but rather that she has the autonomy to choose how to respond to difficult situations. In her own words:

I got to decide who I wanted to be and how I want to be. And that I could learn from the experiences and that I could take and gain something from the experiences I was having. Versus having them make me into something.... I don’t choose what happens to me, necessarily. I don’t choose how other people behave. I choose how I behave. And so that moment sitting on the floor with tears in my eyes, I promised that I wasn’t going — that I didn’t want to shut people out. And that I wasn’t going to let it change me into something I didn’t want to be. I didn’t want to interfere with being able to love. Being able to exchange with people, being able to trust people. I could do it with discernment. It was an open [here Mayra interrupts herself to redirect her thoughts]—you don’t have to throw the doors open. I could peek through the peep

hole, but I didn't have to deadbolt everything all the time. And in those moments...we go back to my devotional practices. There [were] definitely influences from the gods that I had a connection with. I felt them very close to me. It was — I would lay in bed, and I would feel Hekate stroking my hair. But she was also the one that would crouch down next to me and tell me to get up. It was her voice telling me get up. Again, get up again. Again, you'll get up one more time, and then another and another. And it was that push — like I was terrified. I didn't know...I didn't have any money. I didn't have any resources. I didn't know what the heck was going to happen. I was in a bad, financially in a bad place. And I lived in a really bad neighbourhood. And I don't know what I'm going to do. Like my faith alone isn't going to do this, my faith will give me strength, but it's not going to pay the bills. And it's not getting me out of this shithole. I don't know how I'm going to do it, but I'm going to do it, but I don't know. And it was, well, steps.

I quote Mayra at length here because she addresses several important factors in terms of understanding the experience of trauma and healing through a Pagan-centric lens. First, this example demonstrates how Mayra utilized both psychotherapeutic modalities and Pagan practices to shape a healing strategy that makes space for multiple epistemologies simultaneously. Second, for Mayra, Hekate's presence was discernable and tangible — not an archetypal form. What is important here is that Hekate's presence provided support and her actions (stroking Mayra's hair) demonstrated care and concern at a time when Mayra was alone and feeling vulnerable due to her living situation. Simultaneously, the goddesses' repeated insistence to get up motivated Mayra to take action; first, by making the choice to get up off the floor in the immediate crisis. Second by making choices that would benefit her wellbeing in the long run (taking the steps required to secure safer living accommodations and choosing not to become bitter, for example). Related to this, Mayra's encounter with this supernatural being elucidates that even when under distress people are agentic actors with the capacity to make choices that best support their needs at that time — while at the same time recognizing that choice is a complicated matter, as Mayra pointed out.

6.9 Towards Personal Sovereignty: Journey with Baddb

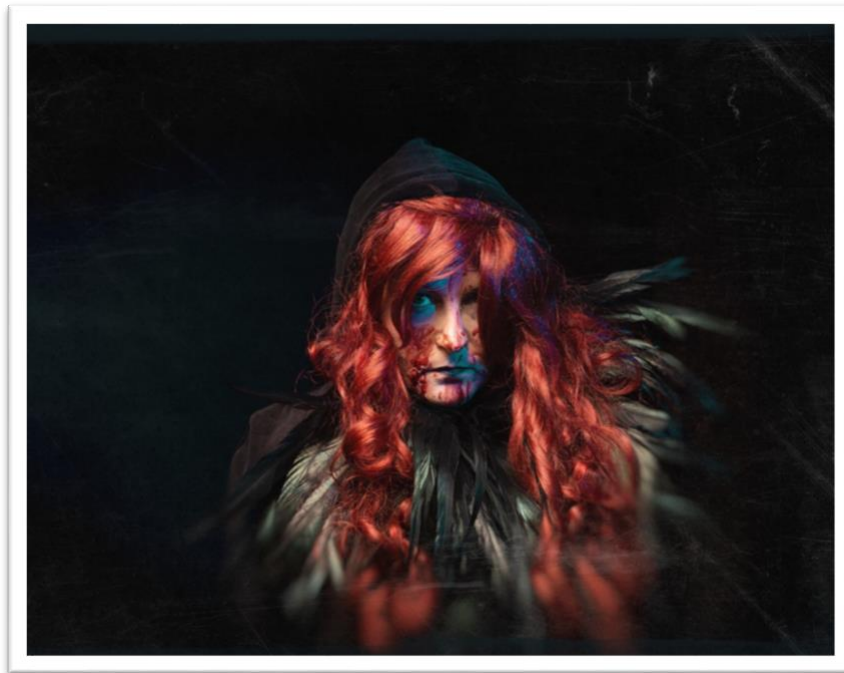


Figure 38 "The Red Mouthed", a/b portrait, Gina Snooks, November 2020.

Personal sovereignty is a matter of being in “our own power,” as priestess of the Daoine Maithe (Aos Sidhe), Witch and Pagan author Morgan Daimler claims (2020, 20). To reiterate, given that trauma is typically defined as a disempowering experience (Herman 1997), being in one’s power is an integral part of moving toward healing. According to Daimler, the Irish goddess the Morrigan can help folks to find their own “sense of sovereignty” and to “embrace our own autonomy” — in other words, the Morrigan can help us to be in our own power as sovereign beings. That is, as sovereign beings whose lived realities are shaped in and through cultural, social, and political landscapes that are historically located. Aligning with Daimler, I argue that the concept of personal sovereignty is at the core of healing. Against this backdrop, here I offer my own auto/biographical portrait titled “The Red-Mouthed” and Mayra’s portrait that depicts the many faces of the Morrigan to theorize personal sovereignty in relation to healing.

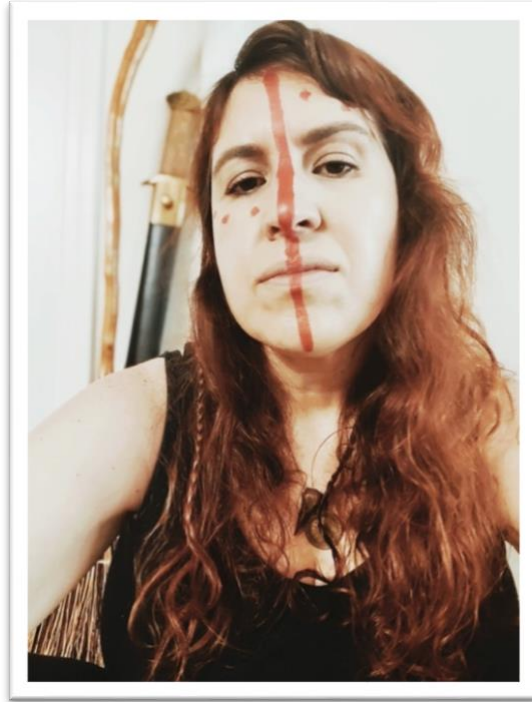


Figure 39 Untitled, a/b portrait, the many faces of The Morrigan, Mayra, 2020.

It is worth noting that in Irish mythology the Morrigan is a complicated figure. While the Morrigan can refer to a specific goddess named the Morrigan, it is also possible that the Morrigan is a title which means Great Queen; there is also evidence of a plural usage of the term — the Morrigans — which includes the Morrigan, Badb, and Macha. Alternatively, the Morrigans are said to be the Morrigan, Badb and Nemain (Butler 2021) In Irish mythology, the Morrigan’s stories are multifaceted, complex, and sometimes contradictory. That said the Morrigan is commonly associated with sovereignty, battle, the slain, death, prophesy, magic, and the Otherworld (Butler 2021; Daimler 2020; 2014; Ravenna 2015; Beckett 2012). In mythology, the Morrigan’s association with sovereignty was connected to the land and was tied to specific regions, tribes, and peoples (Butler 2021; Daimler 2020; 2014). However, many modern devotees to the Morrigan also connect this goddess or trio of goddesses to matters of personal

sovereignty (Daimler 2020; Beckett 2012). To this point, Mayra’s auto/biographical portrait simultaneously symbolizes Badb and the many faces of the Morrigan whereas mine represents Badb specifically.

On the topic of personal sovereignty, I further align with Irish Pagan School (IPS) co-founder Jon O’Sullivan who posits that personal sovereignty refers to persons’ “right to be sovereigns of our own existence. We have the right to declare who and how we are in our existence...that is personal sovereignty.”⁶⁷ Theorized this way, personal sovereignty is a matter of autonomy and self-determination insofar as it promotes that people have the capacity and the right to make choices that are best for themselves, even within difficult situations as I have argued throughout this dissertation. At the same time, Paganisms’ focus on relationality emphasizes that the choices we make do impact others; thus, we have an ethical responsibility toward others. It is the former matter that is at the centre of this discussion here in honouring participants’ life stories.

The title of my auto/biographical portrait draws upon Irish mythology in which Badb is referred to as the red-mouthed as well as a variety of epithets including Badb Catha, which means Battle Crow. On the one hand this portrait is a form of devotional art in honour of Badb. On the other hand, it is symbolic testimony. As Witch and Pagan author Courtney Weber explains “The red-mouth description may have symbolized the speaking of prophecies about death. And Badb’s association with red could have also speaking truth to power” (2019, 53), which for me meant speaking my own truth as a sovereign being. This act was important for me because much of my own trauma is rooted in a sense that I had no *voice* — I had not been able to speak up during difficult times or to name my own truth, which haunts me to the core of my

⁶⁷ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FVSrRY38bjA> on the Irish Pagan School YouTube channel for more information on O’Sullivan’s discussion on personal sovereignty in relation to the Morrigan.

being. In a way, I felt like I had been silenced or had allowed myself to be silenced by others which, in combination with other factors, often led me to associate guilt with the core of my trauma. To this point, I use the gory make-up to make visible the wounds of trauma that are typically hidden (as I have done in other portraits including my portrait of the throat wound as seen in chapter one). Like many people, I have tried to hide or deny the way in which trauma affects my sense of self. As a result, sometimes it feels as though I am rotting from the inside out from carrying the trauma within me. Exploring these wounds through auto/biographical portraiture allows me to explore these experiences without having to verbalize them. In other words, I am creating a visual and embodied testimony of my own truth — and that is empowering.

Part of my healing process was to do the critical reflection work — on my own (including through my auto/biographical portraiture practice), with my spiritual community, and with my psychotherapist — to determine what that truth is, for me. I now understand that process as an act of becoming sovereign. As a process of critical self-reflection and self-expression my auto/biographical process functioned as a medium by which to understand how trauma had affected my sense of self, and how those traces took root in the everydayness of my lived experiences. In the process of creating portraits over the span of several years the act itself was cathartic, empowering and healing. Just as both trauma and healing are multilayered and ongoing, the meaning of my portraits is in continual flux.

The matter of personal sovereignty is integral to Mayra's healing journey. In her portrait in honour of Badb and/or the Morrigan in her many faces, Mayra has adorned her face in red paint to symbolize that she is wearing the face of the Morrigan. This gesture is both an act of devotion and a testimony insofar as Mayra is speaking to her own truth — telling her own stories

— stories of trauma, but also her stories of resilience. As Mayra explained, she was a curious child who talked a lot and her older siblings often told her to “shut up” and, while perhaps they did not mean any harm, eventually Mayra did stop voicing her opinion in a way that she recognizes now was unhealthy. She also recalled that early in her Pagan practices she lacked self-esteem and didn’t believe in herself in terms of magical practices. But, in time, she discovered that her power lies in her voice and in her words, both as a ritualist and as a seer. As she explained it, she doesn’t have a loud speaking voice but in ritual and when she is acting as a medium for more-than-human beings her voice “rings out” — and through her spiritual practices she began to speak her own truth more clearly and doing so was part of her healing journey. Thus, speaking her truth was an act of self-determination and personal sovereignty — being in her own power.

As Weber writes “The Morrigan needs us to acknowledge and embrace our true identity. It may be a painful journey, to be sure, but it will result in us earning the gift we need for ourselves” (179). Although not in reference to the Morrigan or Badb specifically, the concept of speaking one’s own truth in relation to trauma and healing is woven throughout the life stories shared by participants in this study. In this sense, auto/biographical portraiture functions as a mode of testimony and as a way for portrait-makers to tell their own stories in their own ways, which is itself an act of self-determination and personal sovereignty.

6.10 Is it (Just) Hocus Pocus?: On Matters of Discernment

Throughout this chapter, I have argued for a move toward “hybrid epistemologies” (Duran 14), which make way for Pagan paradigms alongside mainstream trauma discourse such as

psychoanalysis. In doing so, I have advocated for the veracity and validity of Pagan epistemologies. Nevertheless, I would be remiss if I did not also attend to some of the critiques of this blended approach. To this point, it is important for both Pagan practitioners and trauma specialists to be able to apply discernment to Pagans' experiences. Specifically, it is necessary that trauma specialists are able to discern between experiences that are grounded in Pagan epistemologies and those that are rooted in psychological issues. Related to this, psychotherapists and other trauma service providers must attend to service users' right to self-determination and autonomy in terms of defining their own experiences — which is, admittedly, complicated when people are in crisis mode and/or experiencing severe psychological distress. Therapists, however, should not automatically assume that Pagans' experiences fit the criteria of mental illness, especially given the unassimilable nature of trauma that I address in chapter five. Indeed, as Mayra's encounter with Hekate (discussed above) testifies to, hearing the voice of and/or feeling the presence of more-than-human beings is part of her process of healing.

In a similar manner, Pagan communities can risk causing harm to people they aim to support if healing ceremonies and practices are led by persons without knowledge of trauma discourse and how trauma can resurface in unanticipated ways — this could entail being familiar with psychoanalytically-informed trauma discourse and specifically intersectional feminist and anti-racist psychotherapy as well as critical holistic theories and decolonial praxis. To be clear, it is not my claim that Pagan healing ceremonies must be led by persons with professional psychoanalytical expertise. In fact, throughout this dissertation I have argued that, among other things, auto/biographical portraiture can be a form of self-guided healing. Instead, my position is attentive to the fact that trauma and violence are prevalent in Western society and, therefore, careful consideration must be given to practices to avoid causing further harm by triggering

and/or retraumatizing persons who participate in community events. In practice, this might include actions such as offering content warnings for events that might include triggering content, cultivating a culture of consent, and ensuring that Pagan communities addressing trauma in practices such as healing rituals and spiritual counselling are prepared with the knowledge and capacity to support folks in all aspects — physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual. Thus, it is essential that healers understand the limits of their own knowledge. Community-based healing strategies and the peer support of like-minded folks can be meaningful experiences, but it is also necessary to recognize when a person might require other support.

6.11 Chapter Summary

Central to this chapter is the notion that myth, magic, and ritual are at the core of Pagan healing paradigms. In doing so, I locate Pagan healing strategies under the umbrella of holistic healing. By extension, I argue for a move toward the usage of “hybrid epistemologies” (Duran 14) in trauma praxis to make space for multiple and complementary discourse that can attend to the needs of Pagans more fully than psychoanalytical trauma discourse can on its own. To this point, my examination of Jungian discourse highlights the risks of applying these theories to an analysis of Pagan women and Pagan gender-variant persons’ experiences of trauma and healing — particularly regarding the sexist and racist undertones of Jungian theories. That said, I am also attentive to the way in which Jungian ideas and practices have significantly shaped contemporary Paganism in useful ways. Thus, I promote intentional feminist and anti-racist approaches to psychotherapy. Importantly, my examination of participants’ oral and visual life stories in this chapter demonstrates that healing is a move toward empowerment. In that way, the concept of personal sovereignty is at the core of healing. In all, my dissertation is attentive to the fact that trauma is at once personal and political (Brown 2018). Consequently, I have argued for person-

centric approaches to trauma and healing practices that focus on individual persons' unique subjectivities and lived experiences — including religiosity. At the same time, my intersectional approach makes clear that the ways in which each person experiences trauma and healing are shaped in and through socially, culturally, and politically constructed systems of oppression and marginalization that make some people more vulnerable to experiences of trauma while other people experience more privilege within those very same structures. To understand and attend to self-identified Pagan women and Pagan gender-variant persons' experiences of trauma and healing it is, therefore, necessary to theorize how the personal, political, spiritual meet in this context. In doing so, Pagan-centric blending modalities can offer a meaningful way to support Pagans' healing journeys.

Conclusion: Unending

7.1 Introduction

Throughout this arts-based study I have engaged in the process of thinking with auto/biographical portraits as a mode of creative and critical inquiry and as a means of collaborative witnessing to theorize Pagan women and Pagan gender-variant persons' experiences of trauma and healing. Central to this study has been the question of what auto/biographical portraiture reveals about how trauma shapes Pagan persons' sense of self. Further, I have worked to understand how Pagan epistemologies inform Pagan healing modalities. The visual (auto/biographical portraits) and oral life stories (semi-structured interviews) shared by the thirteen participants in this study form the core of this project. Further, as an autoethnographer, some of my own auto/biographical portraits are included as part of the data. And, to add a layer of creative inquiry, throughout this dissertation I have included

additional portraits as a form of dialogue between myself/participants/audience/readers that acts as a medium for co-witnessing.

Emerging against this backdrop, throughout this dissertation I have argued for “hybrid epistemologies” (Duran 14); specifically, in the form of blending Pagan healing paradigms and mainstream Western trauma discourse. In doing so, I have demonstrated the need to legitimize Pagan ways of knowing within the scope of hegemonic trauma discourse to create more inclusive supports for Pagan persons who are healing. Aligning with Pagan literature, my study has found that Pagans incorporate myth, magic, and ritual as well as other forms of folk knowledge in their self-guided healing practices. However, many Pagans remain cautious about sharing their belief systems and practices with trauma specialists out of fear that their experiences will be misrepresented as signs of mental illness. At the same time, more than half of the participants in this study engaged in psychotherapeutic practices, thus Pagans are themselves blending healing modalities.

At the same time, this small study is attentive to the fact that Paganism is itself a diverse movement that encompasses a range of loosely connected religions with assorted beliefs and practices. Despite that Paganism is a movement with many different paths, creativity and symbolic expression is at the heart of Paganism in general. This makes auto/biographical portraiture a relevant medium by which to explore and to express the interplay between subjectivity, religiosity, and healing. Indeed, my research shows that auto/biographical portraiture offers a platform from which participants are able to speak their own stories — to as much or as little detail as they choose. For this reason, auto/biographical portraiture can be cathartic, empowering, and healing, as articulated by some of the participants in this study.

7.2 Plot Twists: On Challenges & Limitations

In theory and in practice, the concept of storytelling is central to my doctoral research project. And, stories, according to Terry Tafoya, “go in circles. They don’t go in straight lines” (qtd. in Wilson 6). I would say that stories go in spirals, and sometimes over bumps, and down rabbit holes, but never in straight lines. On that point, true to the nature of stories, my doctoral research project did not go in a straight line — but challenges and limitations are part of the story.

In particular, on 11 March 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global pandemic due to the spread of the coronavirus COVID-19. Two months later, in May, the Western University Research Ethics Board granted approval to conduct this study, with the understanding that my proposed project would be altered to align with COVID-19 restrictions and safety protocols. In essence, my doctoral research project was launched and conducted during a time when the world was in a health crisis. This crisis, undoubtedly, affected my project inasmuch as institutional, provincial, federal, and international health advisories and restrictions necessitated that my research did not include physical contact in any way and that travel was not an option, as I had originally intended. Previous to the pandemic announcement I had anticipated that I would conduct some interviews via Zoom or telephone. But I had also planned to travel to parts of Canada and the United States to meet with some participants in person, in part, because my invitation to participate in this study included an option that, in the spirit, of collaborative witnessing, would have allowed me to photograph participants based on a concept that they had created. Also, given the focus of this research I originally anticipated that some participants would prefer to conduct their interviews in-person. Given the restrictions mentioned above, this

approach was no longer an option. Thus, it was necessary for participants to create their own photographs (except for Riley with whom I collaborated to create a composite portrait).

Further, I was unable to facilitate an in-person art installation as I had planned and as approved by Western's research ethics board. This installation would have included participants' portraits displayed alongside selected quotes from their interviews that explained how their portraits represent their experiences of trauma and healing. Thus, this aspect of my doctoral project would have invited collaborative witnessing with a wider audience and would have functioned as a way to disseminate knowledge about Pagan persons' experiences of trauma and healing in public discourse, which is in alignment with ABR strategies. When it became clear that the art installation could not take place in person, I chose to cancel the installation rather than to move it to an online platform because I had concerns about being able to monitor audience responses in an online platform. Specifically, given the degree to which feminist scholars and artists are "trolled" publicly, I felt I could not provide a "safe" space for participants to share their experiences in an online platform. To be clear, I acknowledge that no space can be entirely safe in this context, particularly given that I cannot predict how audiences will receive participants' life stories, nor can I ensure that wounds will not rise to the surface for participants at any time during this study. However, it is my responsibility to mitigate the risks of harm.

Beyond technical issues, though, it is important to point out that experiencing a global pandemic is itself a traumatic experience — the effects of which are immediate and will have long lasting impact on people's physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual well-being. In fact, I would suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has put many people into survival mode or crisis mode. This crisis mode can be particularly difficult for people who have previously experienced trauma because experiencing a crisis can feel like one's life is out of their control

(and indeed it might be). In short, I wonder what effect conducting this study during a global pandemic had on my ability to recruit participants and on the design of this study.

One of the biggest challenges that I faced in this study was recruiting Pagans from across diverse identities and social locations, specifically BIPOC folks. In her essay, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” (2007), Black lesbian scholar and poet Audre Lorde convincingly argues that broad calls for participation are a “cop-out” (113). What she means by this is that broad calls provide a way for academics (particularly white feminists in the context of her argument) to evade taking responsibility for intentionally making space for underrepresented communities in academia under the guise that an open call for participants is inclusive and invites responses from diverse communities. The problem with such an approach is that underrepresented communities who historically have been purposely excluded from such spaces may not be responsive to open calls. Hence, Lorde argues that open calls are superficial attempts at inclusivity and that academia must intentionally invite participation from underrepresented communities. With this in mind, I purposely sent my invitation poster to BIPOC and 2SLGBTQQA Pagan groups and individual public figures. However, it is also important to point out that this strategy could be received as an attempt to make a spectacle of BIPOC and/or queer trauma — particularly given my positionality as a white cisheterosexual researcher — and/or to create an unfair expectation/burden on BIPOC and/or queer folk to represent their communities, precisely because these communities are underrepresented in the broader discourse.

Natalie Clark takes up this point in reference to violence against Indigenous girls arguing that “we need to suspend the ongoing creation of Western stories of damage and harm” (54). Her point is salient because such strategies recentre colonial narratives that are embedded in white

supremacy and Eurocentrism while simultaneously erasing Indigenous narratives of resistance and resiliency. Her position aligns with Eve Tuck's stance on "damage-centered research" (2009, 409) as I examined in chapter two. Admittedly, there is no way to know how individuals or specific communities might have received my invitation to participate in this study. I do, however, believe that it is important to acknowledge that either approach can be perceived as problematic. For this reason, I chose to reach out to specific communities once and, when I received little response to my invitation, I took that silence as a sign of response and did not attempt to directly contact the groups again. To this point, only one participant in this study identifies as a person of colour and she is one of the participants that I knew before starting this project; therefore, I can assume that my attempt to ensure diverse and varied inclusion of BIPOC people specifically was unsuccessful.

Further, given the small sample size of this study in comparison to the Pagan community at large it is not possible to generalize about Pagan persons' experiences of trauma and healing solely based on this study. Nevertheless, that participants in this study offered in-depth reflections on their own life experiences does provide a significant foundation for further research. Moreover, given my choice to invite self-identified Pagan women and Pagan gender-variant persons to participate in this study means that the voices and experiences of male-identified persons is absent from this study. Finally, the diversity of Paganism practiced by participants in this study is both a benefit and a limitation in terms of what this dissertation can reveal about how Pagan folks' religiosity shapes their experience of trauma and healing. On the one hand, this diversity offers helpful insight into Pagan healing paradigms broadly speaking but on the other hand the diversity means that this study only offers an overview of how people located in specific Pagan traditions experience and theorize trauma and healing. Although each

of these limitations must be recognized in the context of this study, I also recognize that these limitations, and the challenges noted above, offer opportunities for further research.

7.3 Un/Ending Invitation

In the spirit of the spiral symbol imparted upon this dissertation, here I circle around to ask once again: what can auto/biographical portraiture tell us about self-identified Pagan women and Pagan gender-variant persons' embodied experiences and memories of trauma and healing? And, in the spirit of unruly discourse, I leave this shared auto/biographical portrait as an invitation for collaborative witnessing. The life stories of participants in this study form a web of knowledge and experience that are simultaneously distinct and interconnected. Thus, the slash forward between auto and biography denotes shared stories across and despite difference.

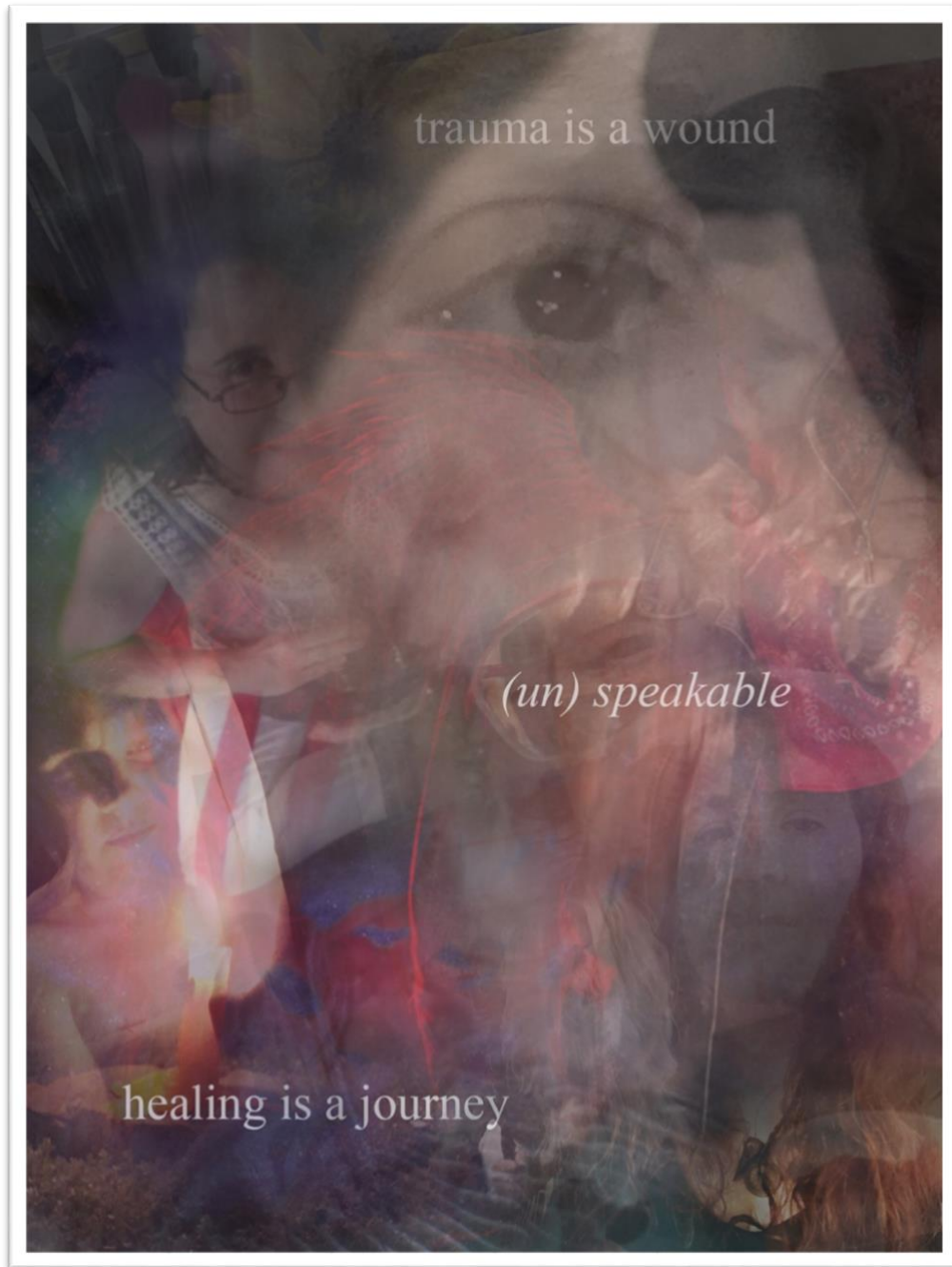


Figure 40 Unending, a compilation of a/b portraits created for this study & facilitated by Gina Snooks, 2022.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Invitation to Participate

Appendix C

Invitation to Participate to Pagan Women and/or Pagan Gender Variant Persons to Participate in Research on Trauma and Healing

Are you a self-identified Pagan woman and/or Pagan gender variant person who has experienced trauma and healing and would like to share your story?

I [Gina Snooks] am inviting Pagan women and/or Pagan gender variant persons (over the age of 18) to participate in my doctoral research project on trauma and healing. My study draws upon my experiences as a photographer who has used photography with women to explore difficult and/or traumatic experiences and healing. My interest in this topic emerges from my own position as a Pagan woman and my connection to various Pagan communities in Canada and online. Further, this study builds upon my academic background that focuses on life stories, spirituality and trauma studies. This study will take place primarily in Alberta and Newfoundland, Canada and Florida, United States but is open to participants in various geographical locations.



Participants will not be asked to disclose specific details of the trauma you have experienced. If participants do not wish to be identified every effort will be made to protect your identity; however, anonymity cannot be guaranteed due to the fact that community members are often known to one another. All potential participants who believe that they meet the criteria are invited to apply for this study. Participants will not be asked to "prove" how you meet the criteria of this project; rather I trust participants to determine for themselves if you meet the criteria. Participants are not expected to create photographs that graphically depict their experiences of trauma, but rather to create auto/biographical portraits that reflect how such experiences have impacted their lives. Indeed, self-portraits do not need to reveal faces if participants choose. Photography skills and/or advanced equipment is not required.

Participation in this study is voluntary and requires creating a minimum of one photograph (you are welcome to create more than one), which you may choose to make on your own or with my assistance as a photographer, and participating in one interview. Alternatively, participants can choose to participate in the interview process only. Once accepted into this study and in consideration for your time, you will receive \$30 (Canadian) cash or cheque or gift certificate of your choice. If you choose to create your photograph(s) with my assistance you will receive a digital file of one photograph. For more information about this study or to volunteer please contact:

Gina Snooks, PhD Candidate

Supervisor: Dr. Kim Verwaayen

Department of Women's Studies
and Feminist Research

Department of Women's Studies
and Feminist Research



Appendix B: Letter of Information and Consent



Letter of Information and Consent

Title: Artful Autoethnography and Holistic Healing as Decolonial Praxis

Principal Researchers

Dr. Kim Verwaayen
Associate Professor
Department of Women's Studies and Feminist Research
Western University, London, ON, Canada

Gina Snooks,
PhD Candidate
Department of Women's Studies and Feminist Research
Western University, London, ON, Canada

Invitation to Participate: You are invited to participate in a research project about Pagan women and/or Pagan gender variant persons' experiences of trauma and healing entitled "Artful Autoethnography and Holistic Healing as Decolonial Praxis" conducted by PhD Candidate Gina Snooks. Once accepted into this study and in recognition of your participation in this research you will receive \$30.00 cash, cheque or gift certificate of your choice and if you choose to create your portrait(s) with my assistance you will receive a digital file of one portrait.

My doctoral research draws upon my experience as a photographer who has worked with women to explore subjectivity, trauma and healing through the use of photography. This study also emerges from my own position as a practicing Pagan woman and my involvement in Pagan communities across Canada and online. Further, this study builds upon my academic background that focuses on the life stories and spirituality as well as trauma studies.

This study uses a multimode approach to storytelling through visual (auto/biographical photography) and oral (interviews) means to examine Pagan women and/or Pagan gender variant persons' experiences of trauma and healing. My doctoral research is situated within feminist and decolonial practices. In particular, my research is rooted in the premise that sharing aspects of one's lived realities through storytelling can be empowering, cathartic and healing for some people who have experienced trauma because stories help us to make sense of the effects of trauma. You do not require advanced photography skills and/or advanced equipment to participate in this study because the emphasis is on the stories that your photographs reveal not the technical quality of the images. If you do not have access to a camera one will be provided for you.

Purpose of Study: Situated within the broader context of storytelling as a decolonising practice, I am interested in what storytelling might reveal about Pagan women and/or Pagan gender

variant persons' experiences of trauma and healing. The purpose of this study is to learn how experiences of trauma affect Pagan women and/or Pagan gender variant persons' senses of self. By extension, I am interested in how auto/biographical storytelling can facilitate self-healing. As such, participants are not required to disclose the specific details of the trauma they have experienced. Moreover, participants are not expected to create photographs that graphically depict their experiences of trauma, but rather to create auto/biographical portraits that reflect how such experiences have impacted their lives. Indeed, self-portraits do not need to reveal faces if participants choose. Further, I am interested in what participants' auto/biographical portraits and narratives might reveal about what Pagan spirituality and holistic healing practices in the context of decolonising trauma practices more broadly.

Confidentiality: If you do not wish to be identified in this study a pseudonym will be assigned, and every effort will be made to protect your identity. Thus, you will be referred to by this pseudonym for all public presentations of this research; including: publications. That said, anonymity cannot be guaranteed because Pagan communities are often small and tight-knit and personal stories as well as auto/biographical portraits may reveal elements of one's identity. Direct quotes from the information gathered from you may be used in the circulation of the results of this study; a pseudonym will be used if you do not wish to be identified.

I will maintain confidentiality to the best of my ability throughout this research and in future publications and presentations. Thus, if you do not wish to be identified, all correspondence that could potentially identify you as a research participant will be assigned a pseudonym. A list connecting your name to the pseudonym will be stored separately from all interview material and photographs and will be accessible to myself and Dr. Kim Verwaayen. Representatives of Western University's Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research. Further, all material pertaining to this research will be kept securely by me, on an encrypted and password protected personal computer and on OWL, a secure system hosted by Western University, for a minimum of seven years. When the data is no longer required I will dispose of all research materials that could identify the participants; this means I will erase all electronic files and destroy interview notes by shredding. Data collected for this study may be used in future publications and public presentations by Gina Snooks. If you have chosen to be identified by a pseudonym you will only be referred to by that pseudonym in future publications. Information that could potentially link you to your pseudonym will not be shared beyond this research team and potentially representatives of Western University's Non-Medical Research Ethics Board. Information collected for this study may be deposited in the Archives and Research Collections Centre at Western University; if you do not wish to be identified in this study a pseudonym will be used. De-identified information may be used in publications in open access journals.

Potential Risks and Harms: Discussing trauma can be distressing and may involve cultural and political sensitivities. Engagement in this project may raise upsetting cultural, emotional or spiritual concerns for you. Further, it is possible that participants may experience some level of discomfort or may become anxious or upset during the research process while revisiting memories bound to their lived experiences. If this occurs during the interview process I will be prepared to stop the interview and/or reschedule. Additionally, if participants become distressed during the interview I will direct them to the nearest crisis support centre:

Assaulted Women's Helpline/Fem'Aide (Canada)

1-866-863-0511

24/7 crisis hotline offering counselling, emotional support, information and referrals in over 200 languages.

The National Domestic Violence Hotline (United States)

1-800- 799-SAFE (7233)

1-800-787-3224 (TTY)

And I will have local crisis support resources as relevant.

Time Commitment: You will be asked to participate in one interview and one photo session. The interview will require approximately 30-60 minutes and will be in person. Participants can choose to create their own portraits or work collaboratively with me (as the photographer) to create photographs that reflect their experiences. Please photograph only yourself for the purpose of this study. However, you may include symbolic representations of others in your photographs. In the interview we will discuss the portrait-making process and the stories created through these images. Participants will be invited, but not required, to record their reflections in a journal that will be given to the researcher to be used as data. Portrait-making sessions will require approximately an additional 60 minutes. With your permission, interviews will be audio-recorded. If you do not agree to allow audio-recording of your interview I will take hand-written notes. It is possible that you will be asked to participate in follow-up questions via video call (Zoom or Skype for Business etc.) or telephone. Further, participants will be invited to participate in an art installation which will include their auto/biographical photographs and personal narratives. I anticipate that this installation will take place at a multimedia art studio in Mount Pearl, Newfoundland and Labrador; however, this location is subject to change. Participants who wish to participate in the art installation will not be required to attend. Participants' self-portraits will be publicly displayed as printed photographs, which I will provide to the studio for the purpose of this installation. Once the installation has ended, all materials will be returned to me and will stored and, eventually, destroyed as per Western University protocols. You will be considered a participant in this research project until the completion of the project unless you choose to withdraw.

Location of Research: Data collection for this study, including interviewing, making portraits and the public presentation of photographs will take place primarily in Alberta and Newfoundland, Canada as well as Florida, United States but may also include participants from other areas. Every effort will be made to secure the confidentiality (if desired) of the participants and the physical safety of all parties. Participants may be asked to meet the researcher at a local community centre, conference room or a mutually agreed upon location.

Withdrawal from Study: Should you wish to withdraw from this study you may do so up to one month after you have completed your interview. After one month, information gathered for this research can be made public, such as in public presentations, journal articles (including open access journals), public dissertation defense, et cetera. Therefore, consent cannot be withdrawn

since it is beyond my ability to retract the information. In the event that you wish to withdraw, research material referring to you and your life story will be destroyed; including interview notes, audio recordings and photographs. You may withdraw from this study by contacting Gina Snooks or Dr. Kim Verwaayen. You will not be asked to explain your decision to withdraw from this study.

Questions: Should you wish to clarify matters pertaining to your participation in this research or the project generally you are welcome to contact the Researcher: Gina Snooks or Dr. Kim Verwaayen.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Human Research Ethics. This office oversees the ethical conduct of research studies and is not part of the study team. Everything that you discuss will be kept confidential.

Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself? What terminology do you use to describe your spirituality?
2. What does the term Pagan mean?
3. What does it mean to you to be Pagan? How does Paganism inform your sense of self?
4. How does being Pagan shape your life experiences?
5. How does your spirituality influence how you understand and/or approach trauma & healing?
6. Is ancestor veneration, ritual and/or ceremony part of your spiritual practice? If so, how does that relate to your experiences of trauma and healing?
7. Can you tell me about your auto/biographical portraits? What is the story or stories they tell?
8. How does your portrait(s) represent your healing journey?
9. Can you share your process of making these auto/biographical portraits?
 - a. Did you begin the process with a specific idea that you wished to communicate or a specific emotion?
 - b. Was there something specific you wanted audiences to know?
 - c. Did making these portraits allow you to express ideas, beliefs or emotions in a way that you have not been able to express through other mediums? For example, things that you may not feel safe or comfortable speaking about openly? If so, can you speak about that experience?
10. Has your sense of self been impacted by this process, including as a Pagan person? If so, can you speak about that?
11. How do your auto/biographical portraits represent how trauma has affected your life?
12. Why was it important to you to share these stories?
13. What role does your spirituality play in your healing process?
14. Do each of your portraits represent a different theme or aspect of your life or do you consider each portrait to be a part of the overall life story you are sharing?
15. What do you hope audiences learn from your life story?
16. What is the overall message of your portraits?
17. What might your portraits communicate about women's and/or gender-variant persons' experiences of trauma broadly speaking?
18. Was the process of making these portraits and sharing your story healing for you in any way? If so, can you share a bit about that?
19. Is there anything more that you would like to share?

Curriculum Vitae

Gina Snooks

Education:

- 2022 **PhD**
Department of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies
The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
Supervisor: K.J. (Kim) Verwaayen
- 2015 **Master of Gender Studies**
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada
Co-supervisors: Sonja Boon and Jennifer Dyer
- 2013 **Bachelor of Arts**
Women's Studies and Folklore
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada

Honours and Awards:

- 2017-2020 SSHRC Doctoral Fellowship; Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).
- 2016-2017 Ontario Graduate Scholarships (OGS); Department of Women's Studies and Feminist Research, University of Western Ontario.
- 2015-2016 Ontario Graduate Scholarships (OGS); Department of Women's Studies and Feminist Research, University of Western Ontario.
- 2014 Joseph Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship-Master's, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

Related Work Experience:

Teaching

- 2020-2021 Per Course Instructor
Introduction to Gender Studies
Department of Gender Studies
Memorial University of Newfoundland
- 2017 Per Course Instructor
Storytelling for Change: The Art of Decolonial Feminist Praxis

Department of Women's Studies and Feminist Research
University of Western Ontario

Research

- 2016-2020 Doctoral Research Assistant
Northeastern Ontario Research Alliance on Human Trafficking
(NORAHT)
Supervisor: Rosemary Nagy
Department of Gender, Equality & Social Justice
Nipissing University
<https://noraht.nipissingu.ca/>
- 2014-2015 Research Assistant
Supervisor: Sonja Boon
Department of Gender Studies
Memorial University of Newfoundland

Publications:

- Snooks, Gina, Nagy, Rosemary, Timms, Rebecca, Debassige, Donna, Jodouin, Kathleen, Quenneville Brenda and Lanyan Chen. "Blending Feminist, Indigenous, and Participatory Action Research Methodologies: Critical Reflections from the Northeastern Ontario Research Alliance on Human Trafficking." *Feminist Formations* vol. 33 no. 2, 2021, pp. 160-184.
- Nagy, Rosemary, Snooks, Gina, Quenneville, Brenda, Chen, Lanyan, Wiggins, Sydnee, Debassige, Donna, Jodouin, Kathleen and Rebecca Timms. "Human Trafficking in Northeastern Ontario: Collaborative Responses." *First Peoples Child & Family Review* vol. 15 no. 2, 2020, pp. 80-104. <https://fpcfr.com/index.php/FPCFR/article/view/405>
- Snooks, Gina and Sonja Boon. "Salt Fish and Molasses: Unsettling the Palate Between Two Continents." *European Journal of Life Writing* vol. 6, 2017, pp. 218-241.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5463/ejlw.6.213>.
- Snooks, Gina, "IABAGraduate Student and New Scholar Forum: Trauma, Testimony, and the Art of Therapeutic Portraiture." *What's Next? The Futures of Auto/Biography Studies*, a special issue of *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* vol. 32, no. 2, 2017, pp. 98-400.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2017.1289337>.
- Snooks, Gina. "Enshrined in Flesh: Tattoos and Contemporary Women's Spirituality." *The Tattoo Project: Commemorative Tattoos, Visual Culture, and the Digital Archive*. Edited by Deborah Davidson, 2016, pp. 125-131.

Community Engagement:

- 2021 Negotiating (Newfound) Land-Based Creative and Spiritual Practices on Unceded Territory, with Emma Croll-Baehre. Witch Institute Conference, presented by Kingston University. Decolonial Praxis in Personal Spiritual Practice. Online Conference.
- 2020 “Portraits of Self and/as Life Writing Praxis.” Teaching Life Writing: a conference on nonfiction and pedagogy. University of Alberta. Online Conference.
- 2020 The Girl with the Red Kite: The Art of Healing Through Self-Portraiture. Art & Witchcraft Online Conference hosted by Land, Sea, Sky Travel. Webinar.
- 2020 Dirty Witches: Getting Dirty with Witchcraft. Online Conference Land hosted by Sea and Sky Travel. Webinar
- 2019 Trauma-Informed Approaches to Human Trafficking. Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children, Learning Network. Co-presented with Brenda Quenneville MSW, RSW on behalf of the Northeastern Ontario Research Alliance on Human Trafficking. Webinar.