

**Inclusive Heathenry: The Use of German Pagan Rhetoric in the Construction of a
Progressive Contemporary Religion**

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Abstract

Germanic Paganism, or Heathenry, is a New Religious Movement (NRM) which first started in the late 1960s and has developed through the following years. Early research focused on the Heathen movement in its violent and racial forms, resulting in an anchoring bias which subsequent scholars of Heathenry are working to move past. In the current moment, Heathenry's dominant form in Canada is "Inclusive Heathenry" which actively embraces and celebrates diversity in participants' race, gender, and sexual orientation. This thesis analyzes the use of rhetoric in the development of Inclusive Heathenry in a North American, but predominantly Canadian, context. Recent scholarship on Heathenry has aimed to focus on tensions surrounding racism and anti-racist efforts. I discuss three such tensions faced by Inclusive practitioners as the movement matures. The first are the ways Inclusive practitioners are forced to navigate the legacy of racism as they construct their practice as a legitimate movement in the category of "religion." The second is how understandings of masculinity are inherent to Heathenry's beginning and ongoing development as practitioners create and enact male-coded "Heathen acts." Now, some Inclusive Heathens are critically analyzing the legacy of gendered ideals as they "queer" the movement into what I suggest is its own unique form of "Queer" Heathenry. The third is the relationship that Heathens, like other contemporary pagans, develop with locations as a "sense of place." I posit that Heathens are encouraged to develop both a "lived-in" and "mythic" sense of place which overlap and merge through Heathen practice. Inclusive Heathenry now shows signs of moving away from the Heathen movement to fall more in line with the progressive politics seen in other forms of contemporary paganism.

Keywords: Asatru, Contemporary Paganism, Critical Religion, Gender, Germanic Neopaganism, Heathenry, New Religious Movements, Paganism, Queerness, Racism, Religion, Sense of Place, White Supremacy

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I would also like to thank my friends, colleagues, Heathens and pagans with whom I hold community. I hope that my research further aids in the efforts to construct a truly Inclusive Heathenry. I thank readers for delving into these pages. I hope that my words prove interesting, insightful, and, dare I say, useful.

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Introduction

Tales of brave Viking adventures and the gods they brought with them have inspired generations. Their character, however, is malleable. For some, Vikings are imagined to be intrepid and bold adventurers who lived pastoral ideals at a time when people of all genders lived as they please with equal societal standing. Others see a whites-only paradise of manly men and feminine women who stand their ground against outside invasion.

Pre-Christian Germanic European myths and legends have inspired culture, music, film, politics, and religious movements. Contemporary Heathenry (“Heathenry”), the broadest term for those New Religious Movements (NRMs) inspired by Norse mythology and pre-Christian practices, is a turbulent and divided Pagan masculinist movement mired with internal disputes. Inclusive Heathens seek to re-orient the movement from racist beginnings into one that actively embraces racial, sexual, and gender diversity. Heathenry can thus serve as a focused case study to observe how the category of “religion” may be used to actively support or counter racist discourse in the public sphere and the growing pains faced by an NRM.

For the past decade, I have been interested in the positive aspects of paganism in North America, such as its reputation for environmental preservation and gender equality. I am both fascinated and troubled by the use of the same concepts to support white supremacy. Although early Heathenry may have focused on a racist agenda, the movement has evolved into a largely progressive form that advocates the celebration of racial, gender and sexual minority groups.

By studying the creation of Heathenry as an NRM being actively built on appeals to the past, critical engagement with questions of identity and ethnic origin become possible. In this thesis, I analyze three areas of tension which have informed Heathen development and shape its struggle for legitimacy: racism, masculinity, and “sense of place.”

Literature Review

Contemporary Heathenry is a recent polytheistic tradition inspired by the practices of pre-Christian Germanic Europe. Growth of the movement is made especially difficult due to Heathenry's lack of homogeneity and regional differences relating to political, economic, and social influences.¹ Heathenry has contested geographic and temporal origin points, no central authority, and a variety of influences which merge and coalesce as they shape the movement.

Some of the works on which I have drawn most heavily in my research are written by, chronologically: Mattias Gardell,² Jennifer Snook,³ Jefferson Calico,⁴ Barbara Jane Davy,⁵ Dominic Alessio and Robert Wallis.⁶ Gardell discusses Germanic Paganism in its racial and violent forms, focusing on the context of the USA. Similarly, Snook and Calico focus on an American setting, but forgo an emphasis on early racism and violence to instead expand on the difficulties faced as Heathenry took a "universalist" turn. Davy is the first to describe "Inclusive" Heathenry as a movement which actively embraces racial, sexual, and gender diversity in its practitioners. Alessio and Wallis, too, discuss Inclusive Heathenry in a worldwide context increasingly shaped by right-wing political opinions and white supremacy.

As a Canadian, I live and experience Heathenry within its unique Canadian context, which has both shaped my experiences as a scholar-practitioner and influenced the topics discussed

¹ Jennifer Snook, *American Heathens: The Politics of Identity in a Pagan Religious Movement* (Temple University Press, 2015), 61, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvrdf42h>.

² Mattias Gardell, *Gods of the Blood: The Pagan Revival and White Separatism* (Duke University Press, 2003), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11vc85p>.

³ Snook, *American Heathens*.

⁴ Jefferson Calico, *Being Viking: Heathenism in Contemporary America*, Contemporary and Historical Paganism (Equinox Publishing, 2018).

⁵ Barbara Jane Davy, *Wyrd Ecology: Heathen Ritual and Gifting Relations*, Oxford Ritual Studies (Oxford University Press, 2025).

⁶ Dominic Alessio and Robert J. Wallis, *Faith, Folk and the Far Right: Racist and Anti-Racist Heathenry and Occultism in Britain* (Manchester University Press Manchester University Press [Imprint], 2025).

throughout this thesis. With the exception of Davy's work, none of the above writers focus on a specifically Canadian setting. The academic study of Heathenry in a specifically Canadian context is sparse, but is being further explored by scholars such as Joshua Harmsworth,⁷ Logan Elson,⁸ as well as Davy.⁹

Joshua Harmsworth writes about Heathenry as one "potential means of developing [both] the 'everyday' self- and world-making."¹⁰ His study focused on groups of Heathen practitioners known as "kindreds" near Ottawa, Toronto and Montreal. He found that Heathens are actively encouraged to embark on a "quest for self" which "entails a reorientation in people's aesthetic sensibility and personal ethical quality."¹¹ Harmsworth frames Heathen identity formation as an ongoing practical engagement rather than a rigid adoption of historical precedents. His work outlines the specific ways Heathens in Canada develop their own subculture and describes what that entails.

Logan Elson focuses on the ritual aspects of the Inclusive Heathen community, Raven's Knoll, outside of Ottawa, Ontario. His aim was to survey "the mental processes and models that underlie the creation of ritual from past and present cultural material."¹² He found that "Heathenry

⁷ Joshua James Harmsworth, "Canadian Heathens and Their Quest for a 'Virtuous' Self" (The University of Edinburgh, 2015).

⁸ Logan Elson, "An Ontario Heathen Community's Cultural Selection Criteria" (M.A., Trent University, 2025).

⁹ Davy, *Wyrd Ecology*; Barbara Jane Davy, "Reconstructing the Procession of Nerthus: A Contemporary Heathen Ritual Offering of Sacrifice," *Pomegranate* 24, no. 1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1558/pome.24259>; Barbara Jane Davy, "Inclusive Heathens Practice Ancestor Veneration, but Not Pride in Ancestry," *Nova Religio* 26, no. 3 (2023): 30–51, <https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2023.26.3.30>; Barbara Jane Davy, "Negotiating Ecological Relations amongst Inclusive Heathens," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 17, no. 4 (2023): 453–75, <https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.24148>.

¹⁰ Harmsworth, "Canadian Heathens and Their Quest for a 'Virtuous' Self," 3.

¹¹ Harmsworth, "Canadian Heathens and Their Quest for a 'Virtuous' Self," 3.

¹² Elson, "An Ontario Heathen Community's Cultural Selection Criteria," 2.

is not defined by ritual practice”;¹³ rather, it “emphasizes adopting pre-Christian Germanic myth into daily life”.¹⁴

Elson also identified five criteria which Inclusive Heathens use to develop rituals: “inclusivity, Lore accuracy (ancient Germanic aesthetics), resonance (feeling right), woo (religious experience), and pragmatism (circumstantial adjustment).”¹⁵ His exploration of how Inclusive Heathen beliefs specifically inform practice yields insight into the practical differences among forms of Heathen ritual. His research is focused on practices of one Inclusive Heathen community, but is nevertheless relevant to scholars of the movement in general.

Of the scholars writing about Canadian Heathenry, Barbara Jane Davy is the most prolific. Aside from her published book *Wyrd Ecology*, she has written about the reconstruction of the pre-Christian Germanic procession of Nerthus,¹⁶ ecological relations amongst Heathen practitioners,¹⁷ and ways which Inclusive Heathens venerate their ancestors in a way that re-orient a practice also maintained by white supremacists.¹⁸ Her research, while centered around members of the same community on which Elson focuses, has wider geographic reach and is more encompassing of the Canadian Inclusive Heathen movement.

Heathen practice varies broadly due to the lack of regulation. It is a de-centralized movement which lacks a central overarching national organization. Instead, Heathens govern themselves and one another at the individual, local, national and international levels. Depending

¹³ Elson, “An Ontario Heathen Community’s Cultural Selection Criteria,” 17.

¹⁴ Jenny Blain, “Heathenry, the Past, and Sacred Sites in Today’s Britain,” in *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Michael F. Strmiska, Religion in Contemporary Cultures (ABC-CLIO, 2005), 191, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9798400686818>; Graham Harvey, *Heathenism: A North European Pagan Tradition*, ed. Paganism Today Graham Harvey and Charlotte Hardman (Thorsons, 1995) as cited in; Elson, “An Ontario Heathen Community’s Cultural Selection Criteria,” 17.

¹⁵ Elson, “An Ontario Heathen Community’s Cultural Selection Criteria,” ii.

¹⁶ Davy, “Reconstructing the Procession of Nerthus.”

¹⁷ Davy, “Negotiating Ecological Relations amongst Inclusive Heathens.”

¹⁸ Davy, “Inclusive Heathens Practice Ancestor Veneration, but Not Pride in Ancestry.”

on how the beginning of their movement is understood, practitioners may trace the historical period they are mimicking to pre-Christian Europe, the Viking Age, or even the advent of British Traditional Wicca in 1950s England.

Taking inspiration from Colin Campbell's 1972 essay, "The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization",¹⁹ Jefferson Calico adopts the term "watershed" to consider the "range of ideas, practices, and movements that flow into and contribute to the formation and diversity of Heathenry."²⁰ Calico identifies multiple tributaries of the Heathen "confluence": Norse myth and culture,²¹ folkish/traditionalist,²² Wicca and witchcraft,²³ and pop culture.²⁴ These ideas flow among movements, generating a degree of syncretism.²⁵

Heathens tend to reject other forms of contemporary paganism and distance themselves from the "pagan" label. Instead, they view Heathenry as a "historically accurate" movement and not a modern invention. Often the concept of what is historically correct, such as whether or not mead and drinking horns were used historically or only in pop culture, is dubious but, nevertheless, becomes accepted in Heathen culture.²⁶ Others take a more creative approach, forgoing the aforementioned "reconstructionist" ideas and following an "organic" method by doing what "feels right."²⁷

In the case of Heathenry, the abundance of groups influenced by different tributaries yields a diversity of perspectives. Calico writes: "by no means can Heathens be appropriately reduced to

¹⁹ Colin Campbell, "The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization," *The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization* 5 (1972): 119–36.

²⁰ Calico, *Being Viking*, 114.

²¹ Calico, *Being Viking*, 138.

²² Calico, *Being Viking*, 141.

²³ Calico, *Being Viking*, 145.

²⁴ Calico, *Being Viking*, 149.

²⁵ Calico, *Being Viking*, 115.

²⁶ Calico, *Being Viking*.

²⁷ Harmsworth, "Canadian Heathens and Their Quest for a 'Virtuous' Self."

a bunch of racist thugs... Their family resemblance involves a shared ritual form, a few worldview beliefs, an aesthetic sense, but most importantly their willingness to accept the Norse tradition as a source of living spiritual values.”²⁸ The Heathen Confederacy of Canada, for the purposes of their organization, define Heathenry as “religious behaviours, values, and beliefs which are modeled upon and associated with those of ancient Germanic Heathens... [such as worshipping] Gods such as Odin, Thor, Freya, etc. who were common to ancient Germanic peoples.”²⁹ The worship of deities, however, like much of Heathen practice, is variable.³⁰

Layout of Thesis

In each of the four chapters of this thesis, I discuss one of the tensions Inclusive Heathens face as they construct their movement as unique and distance themselves from the right-wing political views of other Heathen groups.

The first chapter traces the development of the contemporary Heathen movement and the birth of “Inclusive” Heathenry in a North American, primarily Canadian, context. Some ideas which became core to the contemporary Heathen movement were conceived in the late 1800s by Guido von List (1848-1919) and Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels (1874-1954) and later used by the Nazi party. In this chapter, I focus on how von List’s and von Liebenfels’ ideas were used by the first Heathen organizations founded in the late 1960s and how racial ideals were inherited by “universalist” forms of Heathenry. I then turn to how the early ideals which perpetuated white supremacy embedded in the beginning of the Heathen movement began to be drawn out. I trace

²⁸ Calico, *Being Viking*, 481.

²⁹ Heathen Confederation of Canada, “What Is Heathenry?,” The HCC, 2022, <https://www.heathenconfederation.ca/whatisheathenry>.

³⁰ Davy, *Wyrd Ecology*, 17–18.

the subsequent watershed moments which led to the creation of a specifically Inclusive Heathen movement.

In the second chapter, I move to the first, and perhaps loudest, of three disputes which characterize the Heathen movement: the legacy of racism. In this chapter, I discuss how allegations of racism are navigated by Heathens as they seek to take their place in the category of “religion.” I analyze the methods of three North American organizations by which they construct themselves as religious organizations: The Troth, the Heathen Confederation of Canada (HCC), and Asatru Folk Assembly (AFA). Navigating allegations of racism is a central factor for Inclusive Heathens as they demonstrate their authenticity of belief in a religious landscape.

The third chapter discusses the origin of Heathenry as a masculinist form of contemporary paganism and the legacy of masculine ideals. In contrast to other forms of contemporary paganism, most notably Wicca due to its association with the Goddess movement, Heathenry is portrayed as the most masculine option for religious seekers, and has found increased popularity with men. I turn to the case study of beards as “religious” in the Heathen movement in order to illustrate the gendered nature of the ways Heathens identify themselves and exist as Heathen, or “Heathen acts.” Inclusive Heathens, however, have begun to critically analyze the Heathen movement as a whole, and have begun to “queer” the legacy of gendered ideals as they disassociate from racist forms of Heathenry. Thus, I propose that Inclusive Heathenry is evolving into its own distinct form which I term “Queer” Heathenry.

The fourth, and final, chapter analyzes the relationship Heathens have with geographic locations. Using the framework of a “sense of place”, I discuss how forms of Heathenry develop a sense of place for both a lived-in location and mythic homeland developed from varying interpretations of northern Europe. The “lived-in” and “mythic” senses of place orient Heathen

action in the world and interpretations of the location in which they reside, informing perceptions of themselves and the origins of the Heathen movement. The merged senses of place inform how Heathens order their world and the actions they take to make claims on geographic place.

Chapter 1: How We Got Here

Introduction

Heathenry is the preferred umbrella term by practitioners to refer to spiritualities and cultural movements inspired by the mythology of pre-Christian Germanic Europe.³¹ It is a belief system that those with racist and anti-racist agendas battle over with each vying for ownership. Heathenry's storied history has given rise to a variety of names, identifiers, and offshoots and continues to evolve. In this chapter, I will trace the history of Heathenry since its contemporary revival, explain the major events that brought the current cultural moment, and introduce some of the actors competing for control of the movement.

Heathenry is the most common term among practitioners for “a number of related movements seeking to revive or recreate the religious practices and worldviews of the pre-Christian populace of Northern Europe.”³² Members identify as Heathens, and claim to take inspiration from the mythology, stories, and legends of pre-Christian Germanic Europe for their own experiences. Heathenry is “past-oriented, polytheistic, nature-based, and ancestor venerating and incorporates magical practices... [It] has developed a distinct textual tradition that distinguishes it from other contemporary paganisms.”³³ It often “emphasizes a connection with nature, community, and the worship of Germanic deities.”³⁴

³¹ Murphy Pizza and James R. Lewis, eds., *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, Brill Handbooks on Contemporary Religion 2 (Brill, 2009), 415.

³² Jennifer Snook et al., “Heathens in the United States: The Return to ‘Tribes’ in the Construction of a Peoplehood,” in *Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism, and Modern Paganism*, ed. Kathryn Rountree (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2017), 43, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-56200-5_3.

³³ Jefferson Calico, “22. What Is Heathenry?,” in *Pagan Religions in Five Minutes*, ed. Suzanne Owen and Angela Puca, Religion in 5 Minutes (Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2024), 69.

³⁴ Heathen Confederation of Canada, “Employer’s Guide,” 2024, https://www.heathenconfederation.ca/_files/ugd/cd4da8_b2b42cf08ce44aae8c3f3ab4102c44e5.pdf.

Beginning as a New Religious Movement (NRM) in North America in the 1970s,³⁵ Heathenry has been described by practitioners as a decentralized, non-dogmatic means of viewing the world. It has been referred to as folk religion,³⁶ non-religion,³⁷ and, by some practitioners and scholars, a form of contemporary paganism.³⁸ The “pagan” moniker is contested among Heathens, some of whom prefer to distance themselves from the history, connections to femininity, and perceived lack of credibility the label offers.

The current number of Heathens worldwide is ambiguous, though there is some data to indicate rough numbers. Karl Siegfried conducted a voluntary “Worldwide Heathen Census” in 2013 which had 16,700 Heathen respondents from 98 countries.³⁹ Of these, 805 were Canadian and 7,878 were American. The 2021 Canadian census includes population numbers for five subcategories of “Pagan beliefs and spiritual traditions”, three of which may include Heathenry: 24,615 respondents indicated “Pagan, n.o.s.” (not otherwise specified), 4,475 as “Neopagan”, and 1,960 as “Pagan beliefs and spiritual traditions, n.i.e.” (not included elsewhere).⁴⁰

Heathens have a high degree of variance in terms of theological understandings, who is or is not allowed to practice, and how religious rituals and worldviews should be constructed and performed. Rather than churches, “Heathens seek to build holy spaces like the Norse Pagans did – the *vé* and *hof*.”⁴¹ Rudolf Simek defines *vé* as derived from the term designating Heathen “shrines

³⁵ Calico, *Being Viking*, 335.

³⁶ Sravana Borkatakya-Varma and Aaron Michael Ullrey, *Living Folk Religions* (Routledge, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003257462>.

³⁷ Harmsworth, “Canadian Heathens and Their Quest for a ‘Virtuous’ Self.”

³⁸ Davy, *Wyrd Ecology*.

³⁹ Karl E. H. Siegfried, *Worldwide Heathen Census 2013: Results and Analysis*, January 6, 2014, <https://www.norsemyth.org/2014/01/worldwide-heathen-census-2013-results.html>.

⁴⁰ Statistics Canada, “Table 98-10-0342-01 Religion by Visible Minority and Generation Status: Canada, Provinces and Territories, Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations with Parts,” October 26, 2022, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tb11/en/cv.action?pid=9810034201>.

⁴¹ Calico, *Being Viking*, 42 emphasis original.

and sacred places in the widest sense of the word”,⁴² but some have interpreted this as a specifically designated outdoor space, often enclosed with cord, rope or a fence, and may include wooden poles or idols representing specific gods within.⁴³

Common Heathen rituals, however, include *sumbl*⁴⁴ (pronounced “SUM-bull”), a communal drinking ritual integral for community building,⁴⁵ and *blót*⁴⁶ (pronounced “bloat”), a formal offering ritual fundamental to Heathen life.⁴⁷ These rituals may take place either outside or inside.⁴⁸ Offerings may be given to ancestors, gods, or wights (spirits) individually or communally, informally or formally, through the ritual of *blót*.⁴⁹ Barbara Jane Davy explains the purpose of offerings as a means to foster gift relations with the more-than human world and express gratitude for what they have received from such nonhuman others.⁵⁰

A corpus of text which some Heathens hold as sacred, to varying degrees, is known as the Heathen *Lore*. The *Lore* consists of a collection of literature which varies based on group, but the most foundational texts are the mythological “Prose” and “Poetic Eddas” and pseudo-historic “Sagas of the Icelanders” which serve as primary sources.⁵¹ Historical texts such as Tacitus’ “Germania” and Saxo Grammaticus’ “History of the Danes” are also commonly cited.⁵²

⁴² Rudolf Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology* (D.S. Brewer, 1993), 355.

⁴³ Davy, *Wyrð Ecology*, 202; Calico, *Being Viking*, 37.

⁴⁴ Other common spellings include *sumbel* and *sumble*, reflecting the Old Norse term *sumbl*. For more details, see Calico, *Being Viking*, 47.

⁴⁵ Calico, *Being Viking*, 350.

⁴⁶ “Blót” is adapted from terms meaning “blood” or “sacrifice”. For an extended discussion, see Michael F. Strmiska, “Putting the Blood Back into Blót: The Revival of Animal Sacrifice in Modern Nordic Paganism,” *Pomegranate* 9, no. 2 (2007): 154–89, <https://doi.org/10.1558/pome.v9i2.154>.

⁴⁷ Calico, *Being Viking*, 346–47.

⁴⁸ See Calico, *Being Viking*; Davy, *Wyrð Ecology*; Elson, “An Ontario Heathen Community’s Cultural Selection Criteria.”

⁴⁹ Davy, *Wyrð Ecology*, 6.

⁵⁰ Davy, *Wyrð Ecology*, 1.

⁵¹ Calico, *Being Viking*, 64.

⁵² Calico, *Being Viking*, 67.

For many Heathens, the movement is “not a religion of revelation or imagination, but a religion based on what has been found.”⁵³ Some scholars have therefore been embraced by the Heathen community for their works which aid in uncovering ancient Heathen practice, including the works of H. R. Ellis Davidson,⁵⁴ Paul Bauschatz,⁵⁵ and Stephen Pollington.⁵⁶

Laurel Zwissler notes that “New Age and paganism mutually influence social justice movements, such as feminism; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer rights” but that the emphasis New Age and contemporary paganism place “on individual health and development can also be compatible with consumerism, cultural appropriation, and ethnic nationalisms.”⁵⁷ Indeed, the majority of Heathens are politically left.⁵⁸ There is, however, an increasingly numerous and vocal contingent of extreme right wing (XRW) adherents co-opting Heathen and pagan spaces which Jennifer Snook describes as a frontlash to inclusive spaces and movements.⁵⁹

In order to understand the tensions, hostilities and division amongst Heathen practitioners and groups, one must first understand part of the history of contemporary paganism and the circumstances that led to Heathenry’s creation.

⁵³ Calico, *Being Viking*, 68.

⁵⁴ See Hilda Roderick Ellis Davidson, *The Lost Beliefs of Northern Europe* (Routledge, 2002), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203408506>; Hilda Roderick Ellis Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess* (Routledge, 2002), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203025550>; Hilda Roderick Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe: Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religions* (Syracuse Univ. Pr, 1988); H. R. Ellis Davidson, *The Road to Hel: A Study of the Conception of the Dead in Old Norse Literature*, Study of the Conception of the Dead in Old Norse Literature (Greenwood Press, 1968).

⁵⁵ See Paul C. Bauschatz, *The Well and the Tree: World and Time in Early Germanic Culture* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1982).

⁵⁶ See Stephen Pollington, “The Mead-Hall Community,” *Journal of Medieval History* 37, no. 1 (2011): 19–33, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jmedhist.2010.12.010>; Calico, *Being Viking*, 67–68.

⁵⁷ Laurel Zwissler, “New Age, Wicca, and Paganism,” in *The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, ed. Hilary Callan (Wiley, 2018), 3, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118924396.wbiea2133>.

⁵⁸ Davy, *Wyrd Ecology*, 15; Harmsworth, “Canadian Heathens and Their Quest for a ‘Virtuous’ Self,” 106; Jennifer Snook, “Reconsidering Heathenry,” *Nova Religio* 16, no. 3 (2013): 54, <https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2013.16.3.52>.

⁵⁹ Jennifer Snook, “The Rise of Inclusive Heathenry: How Movements Respond to Political Currents,” in *Germanic and Slavic Paganisms: Security Threats and Resiliency*, ed. Kaarina Aitamurto and Ross Downing (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2024), 42, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350423947>.

Terminology

Contemporary Heathenry is a relatively young system of beliefs with continually evolving language. Different terms for similar phenomena are employed in varying ways among groups. Jennifer Snook describes her first experiences studying Asatru, defined below, having conflated it with Odinism, a term often used for XRW Heathenry.⁶⁰ Drawn to an Odinism Internet Relay Channel (IRC) in the 1990s for her research, she was met with a suite of questions which eventually focused on whether or not she was white. Expressing her confusion and discomfort, she was ousted from the chat channel.

The term Asatru, meaning “faith in the Æsir” (the chief gods of the Norse pantheon), is used by Joshua Rood to describe the phenomena of “Heathen religion[s].”⁶¹ Modern practitioners and scholars no longer use Asatru as a catch-all term, however, due to the negative associations with the white supremacist group, Asatru Folk Assembly (AFA), and “Heathenry” is preferred.⁶² In this thesis, I will employ the terms Heathen and Heathenry to describe any pre-Christian Germanic religious phenomena, distinguished by the use of ancient (pre-Christian Europe) and contemporary Heathens. The term contemporary pagan will be used to refer to contemporary paganism as an NRM.

Matthew Amster identifies the approaches of “eclectic” and “reconstructionist” as approaches which Modern Heathens use to create their rituals and worldview that exist on two

⁶⁰ *American Heathens*, 140.

⁶¹ Joshua Rood, “Investigations into Asatru: A Critical Historiography,” *AURA - Tidsskrift for Akademiske Studier Av Nyreligiositet* 11, no. 1 (2020): 81–95, <https://doi.org/10.31265/aura.359>.

⁶² Calico, “22. What Is Heathenry?”; Davy, *Wyrð Ecology*; Harmsworth, “Canadian Heathens and Their Quest for a ‘Virtuous’ Self”; Thad Horrell, *Heathenry as a Postcolonial Movement*, 2012; Mathias Nordvig, *Ásatrú for Beginners: A Modern Heathen’s Guide to the Ancient Northern Way* (Callisto Publishing LLC, 2020); Gwendolyn Reece, “Pagan Leaders and Clergy: A Quantitative Exploration,” *Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017): 25–46, <https://doi.org/10.1558/pome.31883>; Snook, *American Heathens*; The Troth, “Our Religion | The Troth | Inclusive Heathenry,” The Troth, 2025, <https://thetroth.org/asatru-our-religion/>.

opposite ends of a spectrum.⁶³ Joshua Harmsworth employs the term “organic”,⁶⁴ which I will use in this chapter. Reconstructionism claims to recreate spiritual experiences of the original Germanic peoples, often citing the Viking Age years of the 8th to 11th centuries.⁶⁵ Accurate reconstruction, however, is muddied by North America’s history of colonialism and white supremacy.⁶⁶ Alternatively, the organic approach is one in which practitioners knowingly take inspiration from the same group of people fixed in time and space, but allow for creative freedom outside of historical documents in terms of praxis (what is done) and doxa (what is believed). Rather than focusing purely on historical accuracy like the reconstructionists, those taking an organic approach to paganism and Heathenry are more consciously syncretic and focus on what works for their personal practice.

An issue facing all forms of contemporary Heathenry and paganism is the idealization of a person’s present when taking inspiration from the past. For contemporary Heathens, ancient Heathens are a mirror whereby viewers situate themselves into history not as it was but how they *wish* it would be, enacting it in the present. Prominent Heathen scholar Diana Paxson writes “we wanted to recreate the Middle Ages ‘not as they were, but as they should have been’.”⁶⁷ What the Middle Ages “should” look like, however, changes based on viewers’ lived experiences, motives, and their own approaches to Heathenry.⁶⁸

⁶³ Matthew H. Amster, “It’s Not Easy Being Apolitical: Reconstruction and Eclecticism in Danish Asatro,” in *Contemporary Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Europe: Colonialist and Nationalist Impulses*, ed. Kathryn Rountree (Berghahn Books, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt9qctm0>.

⁶⁴ Harmsworth, “Canadian Heathens and Their Quest for a ‘Virtuous’ Self.”

⁶⁵ Csete Katona, *Vikings of the Steppe: Scandinavians, Rus’, and the Turkic World (c. 750–1050)* (Routledge, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003037859>.

⁶⁶ Snook, “Reconsidering Heathenry,” 71.

⁶⁷ Diana L. Paxson, “Balancing on the Rainbow Bridge: The Challenge of Inclusive Heathenry,” in *Paganism and Its Discontents: Enduring Problems of Racialized Identity*, ed. Holli S. Emore (Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2020), 69.

⁶⁸ I expand further on the use of constructing a modern tradition based on contemporary understandings of the past in Chapter 2.

As a whole, contemporary paganism looks to pre-Christian Europe like an idyllic form of society. While this view is heavily compartmentalized and operated for different ends, contemporary pagan groups are nevertheless inspired by the past to create what they define as a “better” future. In Heathenry, idealism can often take the form of a “back to the land” approach, including participation in traditional crafts like weaving and spinning, homesteading, and re-enactment in yearning for a pastoral lifestyle.⁶⁹

The attempt to reconstruct the ways of ancient groups spills over into a contemporary Heathen vernacular whereby some Heathens distance themselves from the term “religion” as an anachronism with which ancient Heathens would not be familiar. The Old Norse term *forn siðr*, translated to “the old way”,⁷⁰ is adopted as the name of some Heathen movements in order to distinguish themselves from other branches of paganism in an attempt to be more historically accurate. Heathenry, however, fits within the wider trend of contemporary paganism as a countercultural movement and backlash against Christian norms - one which distills history into a narrative that is both fantastical and modern.

The Beginning of European Heathenry

In this chapter, I draw on existing scholarship to introduce the most prominent actors in the history of Heathenry and describe contemporary Heathenry in the current cultural moment. The background of the tensions faced between racist and anti-racist Heathens is cited in order to illustrate how both groups vie for ownership of the label Heathen.

⁶⁹ Calico, *Being Viking*, 259.

⁷⁰ Mathias Ephraim Nygaard, “The Uses of History in Norwegian Asatru: ‘A Religion with Homework,’” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 37, no. 2 (2022): 318, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2022.2055303>.

Though the seeds for Heathenry were sown earlier, interest in contemporary paganism rose to mainstream cultural prominence with the repeal of the United Kingdom's Witchcraft Act 1735 in 1951 and the subsequent invention of Wicca by Gerald Gardner in 1955.⁷¹ On the heels of the American civil rights movement beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, white people began to seek a sense of place, and looked to ancestral Europe as a place of heritage to construct their own identities.⁷² Proposed by Gardner as the Indigenous religion of the British Isles and Europe, Wicca and other forms of contemporary paganism were constructed as *the* authentic European pre-Christian spiritual identity and a suitable answer for those experiencing a sense of cultural listlessness.

Drawing on the work of Margaret Murray, Gardner agreed with the “witch cult hypothesis” (or “Murray hypothesis” for dissenters) which “posits the existence of a pre-Christian religion that spanned all of Western Europe and survived in secret until at least the eighteenth century.”⁷³ While the theory has been demolished on scholarly grounds because the group of her study never existed,⁷⁴ the theory has not been replaced; and the idea of witches as practitioners of an ancient, pre-Christian religion continues to survive in public imagination. It is in the cultural paradigm of rediscovery rather than the reinvention of such practices that Heathenry was born.

Although its origins are unclear, Jeffrey Kaplan says that “Odinism as it is presently understood”, i.e. as a white supremacist movement inspired by the mythological Germanic god Odin (Wotan), was the first contemporary Heathen group to appear.⁷⁵ During the years of the

⁷¹ Alexandre Duceppe-Lenoir, *Neowicca: Ceremonial Magical Rituals in Contemporary Québec*, 2023.

⁷² Snook, “Reconsidering Heathenry,” 55.

⁷³ Catherine Noble, “From Fact to Fallacy: The Evolution of Margaret Alice Murray’s Witch-Cult,” *The Pomegranate* 7, no. 1 (2005): 6, <https://doi.org/10.1558/pome.7.1.5.65372>.

⁷⁴ Noble, “From Fact to Fallacy,” 24.

⁷⁵ “The Reconstruction of the Ásatrú and Odinist Traditions,” in *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft*, ed. James R. Lewis (State University of New York Press, 1996), 194.

Weimar Republic (1913-1933), the German Youth movement began to make sacrifices to Wotan. Scholars are unsure, however, if these practices were in earnest or “as a lark.”⁷⁶

Similarly, Mattias Gardell proposes that the conceptions for contemporary Heathenry were sown by the Ariosophy movement.⁷⁷ Ariosophy, coined in 1915, is a blend of “theosophical themes of racial redemption, secret knowledge, subterranean cities, hidden masters, lost worlds, and exalted Aryan origins” by “self-anointed Austrian aristocrat” Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels (1874–1954), which combined esoteric knowledge with Völkisch sentiments.⁷⁸ It has become “associated with a racist esoteric form of Heathenry developed by Austrian mystic Guido von List (1848-1919).”⁷⁹ Notably, Dominic Alessio and Robert Wallis stress that ancient Heathens did not conceive of themselves as an exclusivist, exceptionally wise race as von List and racist Heathens propose they were.⁸⁰

While Hitler was consolidating power in Germany, the Australian mystic Alexander Rud Mills, an “unabashed Nazi sympathizer and a believer in a form of racial mysticism”, also “posited the pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon society as the golden age of the British people”⁸¹. Like contemporary pagans and Heathens, Mills was inspired by the past. His most influential work, and perhaps one of the first rather modern Heathen books, was published in 1930 as *The Odinist Religion: Overcoming Jewish Christianity*.⁸² While an obscure figure, Mills has been argued to be “the leading force behind early to mid-twentieth-century attempts ‘to revive Odinism’ in the southern-hemisphere” thanks to his establishment of Odinist groups in Australia, the United

⁷⁶ “The Reconstruction of the Ásatrú and Odinist Traditions,” 194.

⁷⁷ *Gods of the Blood*.

⁷⁸ Gardell, *Gods of the Blood*, 22.

⁷⁹ Alessio and Wallis, *Faith, Folk and the Far Right*, 60.

⁸⁰ Alessio and Wallis, *Faith, Folk and the Far Right*, 60.

⁸¹ Kaplan, “The Reconstruction of the Ásatrú and Odinist Traditions,” 194.

⁸² Kaplan, “The Reconstruction of the Ásatrú and Odinist Traditions,” 194; Alessio and Wallis, *Faith, Folk and the Far Right*, 81.

Kingdom, South Africa and North America, though these groups failed to last.⁸³ He also launched the First Church of Odin in the 1950s “without any apparent success.”⁸⁴ Nevertheless, his ideas would later be foundational for North American Heathenry in its first iterations.

The same Ariosophic ideas were also taken up by Heinrich Himmler, head of the Schutzstaffel (SS) of the Nazi party. Like Mills, Himmler saw Germanic mythology as a stronger, more masculine religious alternative to Christianity, although Adolf Hitler himself was critical of what he termed “neo-pagan” ideas.⁸⁵ Despite Hitler’s skepticism, Nazi interest in pre-Christian Germanic mythology and occultism continued to tie the two concepts together in a knot that is difficult to undo. The ideas proposed by Liebenfels, von List, as well as the occultism popularized by Himmler and Mills linked Nazi ideology with ancient Germanic mythology and rituals in a form of contemporary Heathenry. This early form, however, failed to become a bounded and cohesive movement. It was not until nearly twenty years after the pagan movement began in earnest with the advent of Wicca in the 1970s that Heathenry found staying power.

“Folkish”, “Universalist” and “Inclusive”

First used by Jeffery Kaplan,⁸⁶ the terms “folkish” and “universalist” represent a pattern which other scholars have continued to follow. Folkish Heathens believe that a person must have some element of Germanic ancestry in order to inherit a Heathen faith but may or may not believe in white supremacy.⁸⁷ Alternatively, universalist Heathens see belonging to the faith as purely

⁸³ A. Asbjørn Jøn, “‘Skeggold, Skalmold; Vindold, Vergold’ - Alexander Rud Mills and the Asatru Faith in the New Age,” *Australian Religion Studies Review* 12, no. 1 (1999): 77; Gardell, *Gods of the Blood*.

⁸⁴ Gardell, *Gods of the Blood*, 167.

⁸⁵ Alessio and Wallis, *Faith, Folk and the Far Right*, 72–73.

⁸⁶ “The Reconstruction of the Ásatrú and Odinist Traditions.”

⁸⁷ Snook et al., “Heathens in the United States,” 46.

socioreligious, believing that anyone, regardless of ancestry, race, gender or sexuality, may practice.⁸⁸ Universalist is not used as a self-identifier; rather, it is used as a pejorative term by folkish groups and has been replaced by the “Inclusive Heathenry” identifier.⁸⁹

Barbara Jane Davy continues to draw the distinction between universalist and folkish forms of Heathenry and is the first author to document the use of the term “Inclusive Heathenry” in scholarship.⁹⁰ Inclusive Heathens, such as those on which she focuses in her study of Ontario’s Raven’s Knoll community, generally use the term “Inclusive” to differentiate themselves from folkish and racist practitioners and identify themselves as welcoming of racial, sexual, and gender diversity.⁹¹ While non-racist and racist practitioners distance themselves from one another, their source materials for ritual and doctrine overlap.

Heathenry in North America

Contemporary Heathenry started as a whites-only racist movement but has not remained so. Anti-racist Inclusive Heathens have overcome a significant amount of racist baggage in their continuing battle for control. Rather than a movement of esoteric secrets meant only for a chosen race, Inclusive Heathenry maintains that a practitioner need only be called to – or take an interest in – the gods.⁹² Racist Heathens, however, cling to the Nazi interpretation of Germanic mythology as part of a superior folk soul to which one must have genetic ties. Members of both groups are active and vocal.

⁸⁸ Snook et al., “Heathens in the United States,” 46.

⁸⁹ Davy, *Wyrð Ecology*; Snook, *American Heathens*, 214.

⁹⁰ Davy, *Wyrð Ecology*; Davy, “Inclusive Heathens Practice Ancestor Veneration, but Not Pride in Ancestry,” 30; Snook, *American Heathens*.

⁹¹ Davy, *Wyrð Ecology*, 13.

⁹² Snook, “Reconsidering Heathenry,” 57.

The two earliest North American Heathen organizations were founded in the United States in 1969: Else Christensen's Odinist Fellowship and Stephen McNallen's Viking Brotherhood.⁹³ Mattias Gardell differentiates between these first two organizations' approaches: "Christensen offered a more political and racial interpretation with notable national socialist influences [in Odinism], while McNallen espoused a more religious and 'ethnic' interpretation [in Ásatrú]."⁹⁴ Both organizations, however, had significant ethno-centric overtones.

The Odinist Fellowship was founded by Else Christensen in 1969 and is the oldest contemporary Heathen organization.⁹⁵ Christensen was profoundly influenced by some of the Odinist works written by Alexander Rud Mills⁹⁶ and was quickly able "to establish Odinism as an officially recognized, legitimate religion in the state of Florida."⁹⁷ Constructed as a legitimate movement, she was able to hold services and perform ministry from her home, with a focus on prison inmates.

The Odinist Fellowship died with Christensen in 2005, but her lasting contributions adopted by racist Heathenry include "her identification of Norse Paganism as the 'racial soul' of the Aryan Folk, her Jungian view on the heathen gods and goddesses as race-specific, genetically engraved archetypes, her politics of 'tribal socialism,' and her focus on prison outreach ministries."⁹⁸ "Tribalism" later became an approach to cleverly avoid conversations regarding a practitioner's race while barring non-whites from groups within the contemporary Heathen movement.

⁹³ Gardell, *Gods of the Blood*, 152.

⁹⁴ Gardell, *Gods of the Blood*, 152.

⁹⁵ Gardell, *Gods of the Blood*, 165.

⁹⁶ Gardell, *Gods of the Blood*, 168.

⁹⁷ Gardell, *Gods of the Blood*, 175.

⁹⁸ Mattias Gardell, "Wolf Age Pagans," in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, ed. Murphy Pizza and James R. Lewis, Brill Handbooks on Contemporary Religion 2 (Brill, 2009), 614.

Stephen McNallen is also a significant figure in the racist Heathen movement, in no small part due to the controversies surrounding him. Along with Christensen, he was one of the main drivers of North American Heathenry, specifically racist Heathenry, as the only Heathen option until 1987 when The Ring of Troth (the Troth) was founded by Edred Thorsson (Stephen Flowers) and James Chisholm as a universalist organization.⁹⁹ McNallen's lasting contributions to Heathenry are the embedded concepts of masculinity and the theory of *metagenetics*.

Often cited by racist Heathens, the concept of metagenetics is a theory first proposed by McNallen in an article in 1980, built upon over time until republished in 2006. He proposed that DNA carries not only the encoded physical attributes of a person, but also the spiritual and cultural practices held over a long span of time.¹⁰⁰ It appropriates ideas about Indigenous identity while also reifying the issue of race and whiteness: Germanic peoples have a blood connection to their gods, therefore cultural purity must be maintained in order to preserve this link.¹⁰¹ McNallen does not view himself as a racist and does not espouse racial superiority,¹⁰² but “he does hold to a concept of race and does believe in racial separatism and protectionism” that is generally agreed to be a racist position.¹⁰³ The belief that race and religious practice are connected through DNA proposed as metagenetics is a core element of folkish Heathenry.

Described by Alessio and Wallis as the “thorns in the side” of Inclusive Heathenry,¹⁰⁴ some racist groups are more vocal than others and, unfortunately, were the main drivers of early Heathenry. Focusing on the UK, the thorns they note are the Odinic Rite, Odinist Fellowship, and

⁹⁹ The Troth, “Our Organization,” *The Troth*, 2025, <https://thetroth.org/our-organization/>.

¹⁰⁰ Stephen A. McNallen, *The Philosophy of Metagenetics, Folkism and Beyond* (Asatru Folk Assembly, 2006).

¹⁰¹ Alessio and Wallis, *Faith, Folk and the Far Right*, 89.

¹⁰² Calico, *Being Viking*, 189–90.

¹⁰³ Alessio and Wallis, *Faith, Folk and the Far Right*, 89.

¹⁰⁴ Alessio and Wallis, *Faith, Folk and the Far Right*, 116.

Woden's Folk.¹⁰⁵ The Odinist Fellowship they describe was founded by Ralph "Ingvar" Harrison,¹⁰⁶ and, although it shares its name, it does not seem to have a connection to the Odinist Fellowship founded by Else Christensen in the USA in 1971.¹⁰⁷ Borrowing Alessio and Wallis' term, the "thorns"¹⁰⁸ to Inclusive Heathenry in North America are the AFA and media presence of emboldened XRW political activists who co-opt the same symbols.

In the past, conversations surrounding folkish and universalist Heathenry pertained to the categories of "racist" or "not racist." For the time, this debate was unproductive, because there was neither a binary distinction nor a clear division between racist and non-racist approaches. While folkish Heathens excluded non-whites from their practice, they alleged they were not racist because they were not active proponents of white supremacy. The Troth, one of the two major Heathen organizations in North America, has been derided for not taking a hard enough stance about problems surrounding race, and for allowing membership in both the racist AFA and the Troth simultaneously.¹⁰⁹

Now the tides have shifted, and Inclusive Heathens *must* take an actively anti-racist stance that is enforced by some members.¹¹⁰ However, there has not yet been an overarching Inclusive Heathenry organization that takes such a hardline approach, and activist efforts remain at the local group level. The Troth has, however, updated their website to state that the organization "stands against any use of Germanic religion or religious symbols to advance causes of racism, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, ableism or white supremacy."¹¹¹

¹⁰⁵ Alessio and Wallis, *Faith, Folk and the Far Right*, 115.

¹⁰⁶ Alessio and Wallis, *Faith, Folk and the Far Right*, 122.

¹⁰⁷ Calico, *Being Viking*, 144.

¹⁰⁸ Alessio and Wallis, *Faith, Folk and the Far Right*, 116.

¹⁰⁹ Alessio and Wallis, *Faith, Folk and the Far Right*.

¹¹⁰ Alessio and Wallis, *Faith, Folk and the Far Right*.

¹¹¹ The Troth, "Our Organization."

The Boiling Point: “Declaration 127”

The conversations about folkish vs. universalist Heathenry came to a boiling point in 2016 when the organization Huginn’s Heathen Hof publicly denounced the AFA for their increasing racial and sexually discriminatory rhetoric through the *Declaration 127*.¹¹² In 2017, Stephen McNallen began publicly supporting racist ideas, shifting the AFA from a folkish movement into “a major white supremacist Heathen association originating in the USA but with influence internationally.”¹¹³ Seen below, the original *Declaration 127* has been preserved by The Troth on their website:

The organizations listed below represent a truly diverse set of voices within modern Heathenry. They represent national organizations, resource centers, local kindreds, as well as a plethora of authors and community leaders from every possible branch of our religion and walk of life. These independent organizations have signed this article due to a single shared interest [sic]

To state their complete denunciation of, and disassociation from, the Asatru Folk Assembly.

The Asatru Folk Assembly (hereinafter referred to as the AFA) has a long and well documented history of discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, sexuality, and gender identity. In a recent statement the AFA declared point blank that non-white and LGBT Heathens were not welcome in their tradition. While the undersigned organizations listed here fully recognize the AFA’s right to govern themselves as they see fit, and with full autonomy, we hereby exercise the same right.

We will not promote, associate, or do business with the AFA as an organization so long as they maintain these discriminatory policies.

The AFA’s views do not represent our communities. We hereby declare that we do not condone hatred or discrimination carried out in the name of our religion, and will no longer associate with those who do. We will not grant the tacit approval of silence in the name of frið [keeping good relations], to those who would use our

¹¹² Alessio and Wallis, *Faith, Folk and the Far Right*, 33.

¹¹³ Alessio and Wallis, *Faith, Folk and the Far Right*, xxv.

*traditions to justify prejudice on the basis of race, nationality, orientation, or gender identity.*¹¹⁴

The *Declaration 127* marks the first time an organization was denounced by the Heathen community at large, and was signed by over 180 organizations in over 20 nations by February 2022.¹¹⁵ Critics of the *Declaration* in its original iteration pointed to the lack of active resistance, guide for behaviour, and advocacy for inclusivity, prompting a revised *Declaration 127 2.0* in March 2021 to address these shortcomings.

The *Declaration* also represents a turning point in the attitude and behaviours of Heathens and the birth of Inclusive Heathenry as its own movement out of universalist Heathenry. No longer were politically left Heathens silent about their views about the problematic aspects of folkish Heathenry but instead took the narrative into their own hands to push for inclusion and celebration of diverse racial, sexual, and gender identities. Politically left adherents began to show increased agency regarding the direction of Heathenry's narrative, pushing back against its history of racism and white supremacy.

Alessio and Wallis propose that now, in times of increased polarization of political beliefs and increased recognition of intersectionality, "race... has become a central issue whether practitioners would like to recognize it or not" and "to be Heathen today is... to be either racist or anti-racist."¹¹⁶ Jennifer Snook agrees, updating her "old categories of 'folkish vs. universalist'¹¹⁷ [which] have morphed into 'white supremacist' versus 'radical inclusivity'."¹¹⁸ *Declaration 127*

¹¹⁴ The Troth, "Declaration 127," *The Troth*, 2025, paras 25-29, <https://thetroth.org/declaration-127/> emphasis original.

¹¹⁵ The Troth, "Declaration 127."

¹¹⁶ Alessio and Wallis, *Faith, Folk and the Far Right*, 34.

¹¹⁷ Snook, *American Heathens*.

¹¹⁸ Snook, "The Rise of Inclusive Heathenry: How Movements Respond to Political Currents," 42.

therefore marked the advent of both Inclusive Heathenry and a hardline stance against anything perceived as racist Heathenry.¹¹⁹

Although racist groups are continually denounced by anti-racist Inclusive Heathen organizations such as The Troth and the Heathen Confederation of Canada, progressive groups are wounded by the thorns of racist Heathenry through continual activities of the AFA and the XRW use of the same symbols portrayed by the media.¹²⁰ The full impacts of the paradigm shift resulting from the second iteration of the *Declaration* are currently unfolding, but efforts have been redoubled to evict racists from Heathenry.

Methodology: Studying Heathenry

Early scholarship focused on Heathenry through the movements of Odinism and Wotanism. Now these are terms most frequently used to refer to Germanic neo-pagan practices in their racist and violent forms.¹²¹ Davy declares that the early focus on racist Heathenry has resulted in an “anchoring bias”, defined as “the tendency of an initial assessment to set an expectation of further assessments to fall within a nearby range”, which she seeks to correct through her work about Inclusive Heathens.¹²²

I argue that although the anchoring bias *is* still present, more recent publications by Jefferson Calico,¹²³ Jennifer Snook,¹²⁴ Dominic Alessio and Robert Wallis continue in Davy’s call

¹¹⁹ Snook, “The Rise of Inclusive Heathenry: How Movements Respond to Political Currents,” 50.

¹²⁰ See Tom Birkett, “US Capitol Riot: The Myths behind the Tattoos Worn by ‘QAnon Shaman’ Jake Angeli,” *The Conversation*, January 11, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.64628/AB.awh39huvr>; Lucy Carter and Michael Workman, “The Subtle Symbols Neo-Nazis May Use to Evade Hate Speech Laws,” *ABC News*, January 23, 2026, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2026-01-24/verify-neo-nazi-symbols-explainer/106258068>.

¹²¹ Gardell, *Gods of the Blood*; Kaplan, “The Reconstruction of the Ásatrú and Odinist Traditions.”

¹²² Davy, *Wyrd Ecology*, 174.

¹²³ Calico, *Being Viking*.

¹²⁴ Snook, “The Rise of Inclusive Heathenry: How Movements Respond to Political Currents.”

to corrective action.¹²⁵ I agree with Davy's assessment that most Heathens do not support white supremacist views,¹²⁶ though I argue that the ways which racist American Heathen groups like the AFA construct themselves as legitimate has been more effective than progressive groups' efforts. Through purchasing churches, appearing in the media (whether viewed positively or negatively), and modelling themselves on Christianity, what scholars identify as the racist vocal minority has a disproportionately loud voice. In Chapter 2, I continue to discuss the ways in which each group constructs itself and its relationship with racism.

Jefferson Calico recommends that future academic studies exploring Heathenry involve a study of influences to reflect "how they contribute to Heathen attitudes regarding modernity, religious pluralism, race, gender and class."¹²⁷ He identifies multiple influences on the Heathen movement: Norse myth and culture,¹²⁸ folkish/traditionalism,¹²⁹ Wicca and witchcraft,¹³⁰ and pop culture.¹³¹ These ideas move among and between approaches to Heathenry, generating a degree of syncretism.¹³²

Chapter 1 Conclusion

Heathenry has now reached a cultural moment in which progressive and extreme right-wing (XRW) ideals have begun to splinter the movement and reduce previous nuances, distilling it to being either racist or anti-racist. Progressive, Inclusive Heathens may now refuse those who

¹²⁵ Alessio and Wallis, *Faith, Folk and the Far Right*.

¹²⁶ Davy, *Wyrd Ecology*, 14.

¹²⁷ Calico, *Being Viking*, 481.

¹²⁸ Calico, *Being Viking*, 138.

¹²⁹ Calico, *Being Viking*, 141.

¹³⁰ Calico, *Being Viking*, 145.

¹³¹ Calico, *Being Viking*, 149.

¹³² Calico, *Being Viking*, 115.

take an apolitical stance as implicitly racist, holding one another accountable to be actively anti-racist through protests, demonstrations, and advocacy online. Inclusive Heathens are in the process of constructing anti-racist activism as a part of their spirituality, while those who are actively racist or perceived as not doing enough to combat racism by their peers are now grouped together.

The idea of what is an acceptable amount of anti-racist action continues to shift as societal political orientations continue to become more polarized. Those who previously stood on the sidelines of racial discussions must now actively take an anti-racist stand lest they be deemed racist and face ejection from the Inclusive Heathen movement. Meanwhile, XRW Heathens do not seem to have the same methods of activism, relying instead on their outspoken racism and gender essentialism to attract or deter prospective members.

The previous identifiers of folkish and tribalist are no longer nuanced. Any element of practice being tied to one's white ethnic heritage is grounds for being considered racist; whether or not one takes an active white supremacist stance like that of the AFA. Inclusive Heathens are forced to either adopt an explicitly anti-racist position or be considered agents of white supremacy. In the next chapter, I will analyze how the rejection of racism affects the narrative of Inclusive Heathenry and Heathen organizations' positioning themselves as religious.

Chapter 2: Navigating Racist Turbulence

Introduction

One way to categorize Heathenry is as a turbulent pagan masculinist movement mired with internal disputes. In Chapter 1, I described Heathenry as “universalist” (open to everyone) and “folkish” (open only to those with a specific heritage). I also outlined the resulting turbulence caused by groups’ differing stances on racial inclusion. Radically inclusive Heathens, however, are now dogged by racist usages of the same literary sources and mythological inspirations as other groups. Thus, I will follow Jennifer Snook’s proposal that Heathenry has now morphed into approaches of either “white supremacist” or “radical inclusivity.”¹³³

The resultant contest for legitimacy and ownership of the Heathen label has been heavily influenced by the surrounding conversation about the allegations of racism by other Heathen groups. The connection “between certain exclusionist ideologies and contemporary Heathenry’s emphasis upon/active celebration of ‘roots’ [is] not an ‘elephant in the room’” but instead “a proverbial ‘fire in the corner’” that is impossible to ignore.¹³⁴

In this chapter, I explore the turbulence caused by the allegations of racism as experienced by three Heathen organizations as they aspire for legitimacy in Canada. First, I identify three Heathen organizations in the Canadian religious landscape and their relationships with racism. Then, I will explore some of the reasons Heathens wish to be recognized as members of a religion, the strategies used to construct a movement as authentic, and how the three selected organizations employ those strategies.

¹³³ Snook, “The Rise of Inclusive Heathenry: How Movements Respond to Political Currents,” 42.

¹³⁴ Harmsworth, “Canadian Heathens and Their Quest for a ‘Virtuous’ Self,” 108.

Heathenry in Canada

The legacy of racism in Germanic-inspired movements is proving nigh impossible to escape. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Inclusive Heathen scholar and previous member of the Troth's board of directors, Diana Paxson, writes about her experience with the Society for Creative Anachronism that they "wanted to recreate the Middle Ages 'not as they were, but as they should have been'."¹³⁵ While she was not writing explicitly about Heathenry, a similar sentiment is found within the movement whereby contemporary interpreters leverage the understanding of pre-Christian, Viking Age Europe to meet their own goals.

In a 2018 interview, one of Barbara Jane Davy's informants, Jade, "identified four lineages of Heathenry in Canada: Ontario and Quebec (Raven's Knoll), BC Heathens, Clearwater [Kindred] in Calgary, and Maritimes/East Coast [Heathens]."¹³⁶ As of 2025, the official websites for the Raven's Knoll¹³⁷ and British Columbia Heathen Freehold¹³⁸ communities were active and up-to-date. The websites and social media pages for the remaining communities: Clearwater Kindred, Maritimes Heathens, and East Coast Heathens, are either no longer active or not publicly accessible.

None of these groups operate on a national scale or show evidence of wanting to amalgamate the regional variants of Heathenry into a single standard of practice. Because of this such limitation, I will explore three organizations which do operate above the regional scale: the Heathen Confederation of Canada (HCC), the Troth, and the Asatru Folk Assembly (AFA).

¹³⁵ Diana L Paxson, "Balancing on the Rainbow Bridge: The Challenge of Inclusive Heathenry," in *Paganism and Its Discontents: Enduring Problems of Racialized Identity*, ed. Holli S. Emore (Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2020), 69.

¹³⁶ Davy, *Wyrd Ecology*, 102.

¹³⁷ Raven's Knoll, "Raven's Knoll," September 9, 2017, <https://ravensknoll.ca/>.

¹³⁸ British Columbia Heathen Freehold, "British Columbia Heathen Freehold," British Columbia Heathen Freehold, March 31, 2025, <https://bcheathenfreehold.wordpress.com/>.

First introduced in Chapter 1, the Troth (inclusive) and AFA (extreme right-wing) are based in the USA and have chapters internationally. The HCC is an inclusive Heathenry organization founded in 2021 as a means to preserve the autonomy of Canadian Heathen groups and to provide them with legal protection.¹³⁹ The founder of the HCC, Erik Lacharity, makes his intentions for the organization clear in an interview with the Pagan news website, *The Wild Hunt*. In an effort to claim the Heathen label only for those with inclusive beliefs, Lacharity stated that “being a part of the HCC is summed up in our unofficial motto ‘if we don’t invest in our own identity, someone else will.’”¹⁴⁰

I propose that the Troth, AFA and HCC can be grouped into two separate approaches whereby they seek to claim the label of Heathen as their own. Both inclusive Heathen organizations, the HCC and Troth, exist primarily online with some in-person events, seeking legitimization through legal positioning and affiliating with branches of the government through policy advocacy. Alternatively, members of the AFA rely primarily on modelling themselves on a generalized Western understanding of a church.

Heathenry as Religion

The understanding of the term religion is often taken-for-granted and “there remains a widespread comfort in not explicitly defining [the] most central term.”¹⁴¹ For the purposes of this chapter, I will follow Naomi Goldenberg’s view of religions as “vestigial states”: “the institutional and cultural remainders of former sovereignties surviving within the jurisdictions of contemporary

¹³⁹ Rachel Mohan and Star Bustamonte, “Inclusive Heathenry in Canada,” *The Wild Hunt*, March 9, 2023, <https://wildhunt.org/2023/03/inclusive-heathenry-in-canada.html>.

¹⁴⁰ Mohan and Bustamonte, “Inclusive Heathenry in Canada.”

¹⁴¹ Aaron W. Hughes and Russell T. McCutcheon, *Religion in 50 Words: A Critical Vocabulary* (Routledge, 2021), 247, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003140184>.

governments.”¹⁴² The Heathen groups described in this chapter aspire to a model of power in which they recreate their understanding of ancient Germanic governing structures under the category of religion.¹⁴³

The privileges afforded to an organization by the category of religion vary and continue to evolve. Perhaps most obviously, a religious designation provides a financial incentive through tax-free status and a form of social and legal legitimacy. While religious organizations are not as privileged in Canada as they are in the USA, a Canadian chapter of a USA-based organization with religious status is considered more legitimate than one which is not.

The category of religion allows a movement to strategically leverage history in order to justify their actions. In the case of Heathenry, an imaginary Viking Age history is leveraged to varying ends. For inclusive Heathens, the idyllic history takes the form of a multicultural reality free of gender norms modelled on genderfluid deities with a spectrum of sexualities. XRW Heathens instead construct the same time period as one with an unadulterated “folk soul.”¹⁴⁴ For them, the same civilization is one of masculine men and feminine women in tune with the Germanic gods who protect their tribes against outside attackers who sought to end their ways of life.¹⁴⁵ Both are forms of governance which contemporary groups seek to recreate.

Heathen groups consider themselves to be part of a minority, despite many of them belonging to a racial societal majority.¹⁴⁶ The position of religious minority is leveraged in different ways by inclusive and XRW Heathens. On behalf of the inclusive HCC, Lacharity wrote a response

¹⁴² Naomi R. Goldenberg, “The Category of Religion in the Technology of Governance: An Argument for Understanding Religions as Vestigial States,” in *Religion as a Category of Governance and Sovereignty* (Brill, 2015), 280, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004290594_013.

¹⁴³ I will eventually make clear that North American groups can have the fantasy of being previous sovereignties.

¹⁴⁴ McNallen, *The Philosophy of Metagenetics, Folkism and Beyond*.

¹⁴⁵ McNallen, *The Philosophy of Metagenetics, Folkism and Beyond*.

¹⁴⁶ Snook, *American Heathens*.

to the Premier of Quebec concerning his proposal to ban public prayer in the province.¹⁴⁷ In his letter, Lacharity argues that the move would “disproportionately affect minority religions in Canada, such as Heathenry” and that the HCC will “stand in solidarity with religious communities who may likewise be affected.”¹⁴⁸ By viewing themselves as in a position of persecution, the HCC paradoxically reaches for power as they aim to recreate their pre-Christian utopia.

XRW Heathens create a similar narrative of repeated historic persecution. For them, the same period of time is at once a model and a warning: true Heathens need to defend what is theirs against outsiders, lest they lose their way of life. The same narrative is now being repeated as a backlash against a contemporary multicultural society, weaving together the belief in a conspiracy of the systematic replacement of white people by visible minorities¹⁴⁹ and belief in an impending race war.¹⁵⁰

The HCC wants Heathens to be able to stand with minorities in a multicultural society; and XRW Heathens believe white people constitute a rapidly shrinking population, but both groups agree that they are a minority. Membership as a form of minority affords a paradoxical form of social privilege through a narrative of persecution.

Heathenry’s Positioning as Legitimate Religion

Aaron Hughes and Russell McCutcheon write that “in claiming antiquity, [contemporary pagans] seek to justify their existence and their causes through, for example, claims to indigeneity

¹⁴⁷ Matthew Lapierre and Verity Stevenson, “Quebec Premier Says He Wants to Stop People from Praying in Public,” *CBC News*, December 6, 2024, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/religion-in-schools-new-law-quebec-1.7403485>.

¹⁴⁸ Erik Lacharity, “Re: Proposed Banning of Public Prayer in Quebec,” December 10, 2024.

¹⁴⁹ David G. Robertson, *Religion and Conspiracy Theories: An Introduction*, Engaging with Religion (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2025), 115.

¹⁵⁰ Robertson, *Religion and Conspiracy Theories*, 97.

and thus authenticity.”¹⁵¹ Through their claim to antiquity, Heathens validate their identity as authentic and attempt to bypass the problem of legitimation faced by new religions.¹⁵² The ways which NRMs, including pagan groups, claim legitimacy and recognition by both a larger society and local governments vary.

The connection to an antique tradition provides insulation against the pejorative use of the term “cult”, often used to cast doubt on NRMs.¹⁵³ Accusing a group of being a cult brings to mind a pop cultural understanding of dangerous forms of behaviour, including “brainwashing” and sexual abuse, and is therefore used to delegitimize a movement.¹⁵⁴ By constructing themselves in strategic ways, Heathens insulate themselves against external charges of cultic behaviour, an accusation which could otherwise lose them societal and governmental privileges. Cult is also a term that can be used pejoratively among NRMs. Inclusive Heathen organizations have not yet employed the term to denounce the AFA, instead focusing on white supremacy as not true to Heathenry.¹⁵⁵

While some religions claim their organizational leadership follows a supernatural authority, most Heathen groups do not. The one notable exception is the AFA which claim that its clergy follow the will of the Æsir, the chief group of Germanic gods.¹⁵⁶

Heathens make legitimacy claims through a suite of appeals, which often rely on alternative histories. Taking inspiration from Teemu Taira, Finish Religious Studies scholar’s “If It’s Not

¹⁵¹ Aaron W. Hughes and Russell T. McCutcheon, *Religion in 50 More Words: A Redescriptive Vocabulary* (Routledge, 2021), 171, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003196631>.

¹⁵² Joseph P. Laycock, *New Religious Movements: The Basics* (Routledge, 2022), 59, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003214212>.

¹⁵³ Laycock, *New Religious Movements*.

¹⁵⁴ Laycock, *New Religious Movements*.

¹⁵⁵ The Troth, “Declaration 127,” 127; “CPDI: Canadian Pagan Declaration on Intolerance,” February 12, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210212012402/http://pagandecclaration.com/>.

¹⁵⁶ Asatru Folk Assembly, “Clergy,” Asatru Folk Assembly, 2025, <https://www.runestone.org/clergy>.

Authentic, It's Not a Religion”, I will discuss four such appeals: historical precedent, traditional cultural and/or family practices, claims to indigeneity, and mimicry of the Christian church structure.¹⁵⁷

Historical Precedent

One common strategy to legitimize minority beliefs is to declare an alternative history. Some Wiccans, for example, claim an unbroken lineage to pre-Roman Britain, relying in no small part on Margaret Murray's proposal that Witchcraft is the indigenous tradition of the British Isles.¹⁵⁸ Whether real or imagined, belief claims can become embedded in both popular and religious culture to aid in legitimizing the movement, like any other religious group.

The narrative of historical precedent in Heathen groups was common in 1990s Sweden.¹⁵⁹ One such group, Svitjods Asa Gille, was founded by Frömund Ansheille who “claimed to be an heir to an over 7000-year-old unbroken line of *Frej*-priests.”¹⁶⁰ One of many movements at the time, Ansheille claimed he had access to preserved secret knowledge thought to have been lost.¹⁶¹ The rediscovery of lost knowledge is a common theme in contemporary pagan and New Age movements as a form of nostalgia whereby the future can be found in both past and current cultural or Indigenous practices.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁷ Teemu Taira, “If It's Not Authentic, It's Not a Religion,” in *Fabricating Authenticity*, ed. Jason W. M. Ellsworth and Andie Alexander, Working with Culture on the Edge, vol. 4 (Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2024), 136–37.

¹⁵⁸ Robertson, *Religion and Conspiracy Theories*, 63.

¹⁵⁹ Fredrik Gregorius, “Modern Heathenism in Sweden: A Case Study in the Creation of a Traditional Religion,” in *Contemporary Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Europe: Colonialist and Nationalist Impulses*, ed. Kathryn Rountree (Berghahn Books, 2015), 69, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/j.ctt9qctm0>.

¹⁶⁰ Gregorius, “Modern Heathenism in Sweden: A Case Study in the Creation of a Traditional Religion,” 69.

¹⁶¹ Gregorius, “Modern Heathenism in Sweden: A Case Study in the Creation of a Traditional Religion.”

¹⁶² Robertson, *Religion and Conspiracy Theories*.

Fredrik Gregorius identifies basic concepts commonly held amongst Heathens about Swedish and Nordic culture.¹⁶³ Paired with an alternative history narrative, a core concept is to “reconnect with their true identity, people should seek [it] in the past – the period before Christianity separated [them] from [their] roots.”¹⁶⁴ The understanding of Heathenry as a historical movement, practiced by idyllic societies which withstood the tests of both time and the Christianization of Europe, adds to its legitimacy.

Traditional Practices

Heathen groups point to contemporary Scandinavian cultural and superstitious practices rooted in folklore as evidence of the survival of pre-Christian beliefs. Gregorius notes that Germanic mythology has “left traces in language, folk traditions and folklore, even if the degree to which... is debated” in contemporary Swedish culture.¹⁶⁵ Sweden and wider Scandinavia serve as a form of holy land which legitimizes the claim that ancient Heathenry has been preserved in the form of folk practice. Heathens worldwide point to the continuation of cultural practices as a throughline which legitimizes the movement through traditional roots.

Examples of the traditions still practiced in Scandinavia include belief in the Swedish “Tomte” and Icelandic “Huldufolk”, or hidden folk. Gregorius describes the Tomte as “a gnome-like creature considered to live around barns and houses”, who are left porridge in the present-day Swedish countryside.¹⁶⁶ In 2014, Icelandic road construction had to be relocated due to the presence of an “elf chapel” boulder lest the elves be disturbed, though it was also located on a

¹⁶³ Gregorius, “Modern Heathenism in Sweden: A Case Study in the Creation of a Traditional Religion,” 74.

¹⁶⁴ Fredrik Gregorius, “Asatrons Framvaxt i Sverige,” in *Modern Asatro: Att Konstruera Etnisk Och Kulturell Identitet* (2009), 116 as cited in Gregorius, “Modern Heathenism in Sweden: A Case Study in the Creation of a Traditional Religion,” 74.

¹⁶⁵ Gregorius, “Modern Heathenism in Sweden: A Case Study in the Creation of a Traditional Religion,” 67.

¹⁶⁶ Gregorius, “Modern Heathenism in Sweden: A Case Study in the Creation of a Traditional Religion,” 67.

“protected area of untouched lava.”¹⁶⁷ These traditions are examples of the cases used as evidence by Heathens worldwide that their beliefs are rooted in cultural traditions and are therefore legitimate.

Indigeneity

Pre-Christian Nordic cultures are often identified with those of Indigenous peoples, believed to “live in greater harmony with nature and have a more authentic experience of the world.”¹⁶⁸ The Heathenry-as-Indigenous identity claim is based on an essentialist view of pre-Christian European cultures with the goal of having greater legal recognition by the government.¹⁶⁹

Heathens, like other movements inspired by pre-Christian European traditions, assume the existence of bounded, distinct, and monolithic religions in the past. Contemporary paganism has claimed the mythology and practices of such groups for themselves. Although the European religious lineage was interrupted by Christianity, contemporary pagan practitioners reconstruct the worship of the same collection of divine beings, and in so doing, claim to be inheritors of an indigenous European custom. Some groups claim that they, like those pre-Christian pagans before them, are indigenous to a region.

Mathias Nygaard relates the combination of a “historical narrative and a grievance-based identity” in Heathen indigenous status claims to a “personal struggle for recognition.”¹⁷⁰ By situating themselves as an Indigenous group, Heathens appeal “to the more or less universal

¹⁶⁷ Emma Jane Kirby, “Why Icelanders Are Wary of Elves Living beneath the Rocks,” Magazine, *BBC News*, June 20, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-27907358>.

¹⁶⁸ Gregorius, “Modern Heathenism in Sweden: A Case Study in the Creation of a Traditional Religion,” 74.

¹⁶⁹ Ethan Egert, “Sacred Lands and Labels: How Religious Groups Mobilize Claims of Indigeneity,” paper presented at McGill School of Religious Studies 4th Annual Graduate Conference, May 17, 2025.

¹⁷⁰ Mathias E. Nygaard, “How Norwegian Asatru Meets the Charge of Racism: A Rhetorical Analysis,” *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 35, no. 1 (2022): 54, <https://doi.org/10.18261/njrs.35.1.4>.

recognition that they have been disadvantaged, marginalized and persecuted through history”, including themselves in the ranks of those others who experienced unjustified suffering.¹⁷¹

Christian Church Structure

Lori Beaman writes that “mainstream Christianity sets the tone for the limits of normal religion” in the euro-west.¹⁷² By following the standard set by Christianity, NRMs establish themselves as movements not to be feared. One way to do this is through the construction as a church. The understanding of a church is based on mainstream Christianity and slips into legal precedents and procedures. Organizations in Canada and the USA wishing to have a charitable, tax-free status, must fit a defined set of criteria.

The North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) Canada 2022 categorizes religious organizations as those “establishments primarily engaged in operating religious organizations for religious worship, training or study; administering an organized religion; or promoting religious activities.”¹⁷³ Their definition however, does not define what those “religious” activities specifically entail. I will instead refer to the USA Internal Revenue Service (IRS)’s definition, which is the closest a North American government comes to defining religion.

The IRS details fourteen characteristics of what makes a “church”, in an echo of the structure of Christian churches:

They include: [1] distinct legal existence [2] recognized creed and form of worship [3] definite and distinct ecclesiastical government [4] formal code of doctrine and

¹⁷¹ Nygaard, ““How Norwegian Asatru Meets the Charge of Racism,” 54.

¹⁷² Lori G. Beaman, “Religion and Rights: The Illusion of Freedom and the Reality of Control,” *Culture and Religion* 6, no. 1 (2005): 26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01438300500071190>.

¹⁷³ Statistics Canada Government of Canada, “Display Definitions - NAICS 2022 Version 1.0 - 81311 - Religious Organizations,” August 6, 2024, <https://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p3VD.pl?Function=getVD&TVD=1369825&CVD=1370274&CPV=81311&CS T=27012022&CLV=4&MLV=5&D=1>.

discipline [5] distinct religious history [6] membership not associated with any other church or denomination [7] organization of ordained ministers [8] ordained ministers selected after completing prescribed courses of study [9] literature of its own [10] established places of worship [11] regular congregations [12] regular religious services [13] Sunday schools for the religious instruction of the young [14] schools for the preparation of its ministers.¹⁷⁴

An organization that follows the IRS' definition of a church is, legally, indistinguishable from a Christian organization. Groups who meet these criteria are then able to leverage their legal status for being "religions."

Heathen Organizations' Approaches to Legitimacy

As mentioned in Chapter 1, The Troth and the AFA are the two largest active Heathen umbrella organizations. The Troth does not have any numbers publicly available, while an estimated 730 members of the AFA can be inferred based on a 2025 post on X (formerly Twitter).¹⁷⁵ Both the Troth and AFA are based in the USA but have international presence. Unlike the HCC, both the Troth and AFA have trained clergy available to their members, publicly available ritual outlines, and some form of standard of Heathen beliefs.¹⁷⁶

Jennifer Snook identifies "two separate subcultural spheres engaged in political mobilization, each lobbying for inclusion and exclusion, vying for the right to define the soul of the [Heathen] movement."¹⁷⁷ I will now discuss the approaches to legitimacy that the Troth, HCC,

¹⁷⁴ Internal Revenue Service, "Definition of Church | Internal Revenue Service," March 21, 2025, <https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/churches-religious-organizations/definition-of-church>.

¹⁷⁵ Asatru Folk Assembly [@FolkAsatru], "Thanks to your amazing generosity, we are 80.3% of the way to a paid off Njörðshof! We have \$48,223 left to go! If every member donated \$66 today the hof would be paid off immediately! If you are able, please help us as we race to the finish line! THANK YOU to all who have," Tweet, Twitter, April 1, 2025, <https://x.com/FolkAsatru/status/1907113121778643103>.

¹⁷⁶ Asatru Folk Assembly, "About AFA," 2025, <https://www.runestone.org/about>; The Troth, "Our Religion | The Troth | Inclusive Heathenry."

¹⁷⁷ Snook, "The Rise of Inclusive Heathenry: How Movements Respond to Political Currents," 42.

and AFA employ as Heathen organizations as two opposed factions. The AFA has embraced and is actively stoking the proverbial fire of exclusionist ideologies, while the Troth and HCC are desperately attempting to stamp out its coals.

The Troth

The Troth, founded as the Ring of Troth in 1987, was created as a universalist alternative to the folkish Heathen groups of the time.¹⁷⁸ Members state that “[we are] not a Church. We are a 501c3 Religious Organization. A Church has a set doctrine that a single congregation follows, and we represent too diverse a tradition to qualify as having any one strict set of beliefs.”¹⁷⁹ The focus is instead placed on assisting inclusive Heathens through how-to guides, finding other inclusive practitioners, and cultivating a reputation as academics.¹⁸⁰ Their clergy training program was previously only open to members having been with the organization for at least one year, but now only has “prerequisites from [their] Lore program.”¹⁸¹ Troth clergy, whose services are available to members upon request, are primarily positioned within the United States. There are two members of the Troth clergy outside the United States, however, with one in Denmark and another in Nova Scotia, Canada.

The Troth, an academically rigorous organization that has published its own works from scholars,¹⁸² focuses most strongly on the historical and traditional precedents set for Heathenry. Their members’ claims of authenticity are backed by academic journal articles published about the

¹⁷⁸ The Troth, “Our Organization.”

¹⁷⁹ The Troth, “The Troth | Inclusive Heathenry,” The Troth, 2025, <https://www.thetroth.org>.

¹⁸⁰ The Troth, “Our Organization.”

¹⁸¹ The Troth, “The Troth Clergy Program,” *The Troth*, June 2025, <https://thetroth.org/clergy/>.

¹⁸² The Troth, “Our Organization.”

movement, some of which were written by members themselves.¹⁸³ They form an international organization based in the United States registered as a 501c3 charity in the state of New York.¹⁸⁴ The Troth’s mission is to “build and support a diverse, inclusive, spiritual community that provides education, clergy training, pastoral care, and publications for the many faiths that compose the tapestry of Heathenry.”¹⁸⁵ They are vehemently anti-racist, holding as a tenet the value of courage defined as “anti-racism, active resistance to white supremacy, confronting injustice and bigotry.”¹⁸⁶

Despite their claim that they are not a church, the Troth satisfies parts of the IRS definition of a church. The most notable exclusions are the lack of a recognized creed and form of worship, owing to the commitment to decentralizing Heathenry according to historical precedent. The Troth does host essays about ethics, prayers, and basic principles of Heathenry on their website, but practices are not said to be divinely mandated. There is a formal code of *ethical* doctrine, based in principles of diversity, equity and inclusion as well as “discipline procedures” for those who do not share the same anti-racist views.¹⁸⁷ There is no established place of worship, regular congregation, or religious services.

The Troth does not own property nor appear to have a physical place for worship, though there is a physical mailing list on the website.¹⁸⁸ Outreach is done through social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and a members’ section on the Troth website. The public calendar hosted on

¹⁸³ See Kveldulf Gundarsson, *Teutonic Religion: Folk Beliefs & Practices of the Northern Tradition* (Llewellyn Worldwide Ltd, 1993); Kveldulf Gundarsson, *Our Troth. Vol. One, History and Lore*, 2nd ed. (BookSurge, 2006); Edred Thorsson, *A Book of Troth* (Runa-Raven Press, 2011); Edred Thorsson, *Futhark, a Handbook of Rune Magic* (S. Weiser, 1984); Paxson, “Paganism and Its Discontents.”

¹⁸⁴ Internal Revenue Service, “Tax Exempt Organization Search | Internal Revenue Service,” 2025, <https://apps.irs.gov/app/eos/details/>.

¹⁸⁵ The Troth, “Our Organization.”

¹⁸⁶ The Troth, “Our Organization.”

¹⁸⁷ The Troth, “Bylaws & Policies,” *The Troth*, 2025, <https://thetroth.org/bylaws-policies/>.

¹⁸⁸ The Troth, “Our Organization.”

the official website is relatively sparse;¹⁸⁹ but Instagram posts indicate reoccurring virtual prayer services, conversations on lore, and informative videos about performing ritual.¹⁹⁰ The Troth organized an annual conference, Trothmoot.¹⁹¹ The conference was often held at Camp Norge in Alta, California, USA, but Trothmoot 2024 was held online.¹⁹² Although the reason for the shift online was noted as public health concerns surrounding COVID-19, this move intersects with the expulsion of long-time member and leader, Diana Paxson, referred to previously in Chapter 1.¹⁹³ At the time of writing, it is uncertain whether or not an in-person Trothmoot will be held in 2026.

I propose that the lack of physical presence and stance that they are not a church have dealt a significant blow to the Troth's claim to be a legitimate religion because they do not fit the conventional understanding of a religious organization. Although the IRS classifies the Troth as such, an outside observer looking for what they understand to be religion may be confused by the Troth's approach and structure. Since the Troth is making an ownership claim of Heathenry as a religion against the AFA, being easily identifiable as such is necessary to remain competitive in the religious landscape.

While the Troth does not have to be a church that can be seen as a cogent organization, it has left a void in the social understanding of Heathenry that the AFA has been able to fill as a more conventional church. Appealing more purely to historic and traditional pre-Christian practices foreign to the average person, the Troth's approach to Heathenry has not been as effective at

¹⁸⁹ The Troth, "Events Archive," The Troth, November 2025, <https://thetroth.org/events/>.

¹⁹⁰ The Troth, "The Troth (@thetroth) • Instagram Photos and Videos," Instagram, August 23, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/thetroth/>.

¹⁹¹ "Moot" is here used to mean "festival" or "gathering".

¹⁹² The Troth, "Trothmoot 2024 | 6-9 June," 2025, <https://thetroth.raklet.com/Events/Home/Details/e12a70a1-8e03-4b0a-b5d8-65988a088c73>.

¹⁹³ Piper Perry, "Diana Paxson Removed from the Troth," *The Troth*, May 10, 2024, <https://thetroth.org/official-announcements/diana-paxson-removed-from-the-troth/>.

cementing its social legitimacy and thus its claim to ownership of Heathenry as a movement.

The Heathen Confederation of Canada (HCC)

The Heathen Confederation of Canada is a government-recognized not-for-profit organization founded to represent Heathens in Canada founded in 2021. It had 50 members as of 2023¹⁹⁴ and 11 in 2025.¹⁹⁵ It is not recognized as a religious organization and does not have charitable status. Similar to followers of the Troth, members distance themselves from the conventional role of church, and are instead inspired by their understandings of the historical precedents and traditional practices of Germanic peoples. According to their website, the purpose of the HCC is to be:

a confederation of Heathens in Canada who are committed to promoting a Heathenry in Canada which is inclusive, respectful, and intelligent.

We wish to engage with our membership, other faith communities, all levels of Canadian Government, academia, and law enforcement as well as Indigenous Peoples on matters which concern Heathens in Canada.

We are a nationwide community of like-minded Heathens who wish to associate and express our religiosity together in ways which best represent Heathenry at home and abroad.¹⁹⁶

The HCC is an actively anti-racist organization meant to represent Heathens in Canada but “does not mediate between Heathen groups, train clergy, proselytize or take theological positions.”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ Mohan and Bustamonte, “Inclusive Heathenry in Canada.”

¹⁹⁵ Heathen Confederation of Canada, “HCC AGM Package 2025,” 2025.

¹⁹⁶ Heathen Confederation of Canada, “Our Purpose,” The HCC, 2022, <https://www.heathenconfederation.ca/copy-of-why-germanic-heathenry>.

¹⁹⁷ Heathen Confederation of Canada, “Our Purpose.”

As part of their mandate, the HCC has published an “Employer’s Guide to Heathenry”,¹⁹⁸ a fact sheet about runes,¹⁹⁹ and sent a letter of opposition to the Premier of Quebec in response to a 2024 statement banning prayer in public spaces.²⁰⁰ Its members have also been recognized by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) as an organization with authority on the cultural practices of Heathens concerning death.²⁰¹ The official spokesperson for the HCC, Erik Lacharity, said in an interview that they are “not interested in establishing religious dogmas or homogenizing Heathenry worldwide”, rather, the primary objective is to “best represent Inclusive Heathens across borders.”²⁰²

HCC members do not claim their religion as an Indigenous Canadian tradition, but rather identifying with Indigenous communities to which they have a common sense of connection to the land.²⁰³ They also do not close off the possibility that Heathenry is a religion indigenous to Europe. The HCC affirms belief in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)’s calls to action, specifically those about interfaith dialogue. The organization feels a “responsibility to educate our members on things to consider as they go about their practice on traditional Indigenous lands.”²⁰⁴

The HCC instead defines Heathenry “as religious behaviours, values, and beliefs which are modeled upon and associated with those of ancient Germanic Heathens”²⁰⁵ but also proposes that

¹⁹⁸ Heathen Confederation of Canada, “Employer’s Guide.”

¹⁹⁹ Heathen Confederation of Canada, “Fact Sheet: Runes,” 2025, https://www.heathenconfederation.ca/_files/ugd/cd4da8_9d0dead037ee474f823e57790e3906a6.pdf.

²⁰⁰ Lacharity, “Re: Proposed Banning of Public Prayer in Quebec.”

²⁰¹ Royal Canadian Mounted Police, “Information for Families of Homicide Victims,” Royal Canadian Mounted Police, June 13, 2025, <https://rcmp.ca/en/corporate-information/publications-and-manuals/information-families-homicide-victims>.

²⁰² Mohan and Bustamonte, “Inclusive Heathenry in Canada.”

²⁰³ Heathen Confederation of Canada, “Truth and Reconciliation,” The HCC, 2022, <https://www.heathenconfederation.ca/truthandreconciliation>.

²⁰⁴ Heathen Confederation of Canada, “Truth and Reconciliation.”

²⁰⁵ Heathen Confederation of Canada, “What Is Heathenry?”

“defining Heathenry within the HCC does not diminish or take away from anyone’s identity. Every person living in Canada is free to identify as a Heathen.”²⁰⁶ In an effort to be inclusive, their verbiage may paradoxically open the term to white supremacist membership. Their use of “inclusive” therefore takes on increased importance for defining the Heathen movement as anti-racist.

While the HCC refrains from becoming involved in theological matters, their “Employer’s Guide” lists some key rituals, symbols, and practices in which Heathens are likely to engage, such as *blót* and *sumbl*, along with mention of the seasonal celebrations for Yule, Midsummer, and Winter Nights, but that “there are no universally accepted dates for these seasonal celebrations.”²⁰⁷ The “Employer’s Guide” does not, however, include instructions or a standard of practice for these activities. The excerpt from the RCMP’s *Information for families of homicide victims* defines Heathenry as “a modern religious collective in Canada with their own distinctive culture.”²⁰⁸ The HCC therefore functions as a means of advocating for a decentralized movement, open to everyone with inclusive views, without otherwise standardizing a set of beliefs.

The Asatru Folk Assembly (AFA)

The AFA is the most recent and stable organization founded by Stephen McNallen as a folkish Heathen option in 1994.²⁰⁹ Like the Troth, they are also a registered 501c3 tax-free organization with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS).²¹⁰ The organization positions itself as both

²⁰⁶ Heathen Confederation of Canada, “Why Germanic Heathenry?,” The HCC, 2022, <https://www.heathenconfederation.ca/whygermanicheathenry>.

²⁰⁷ Heathen Confederation of Canada, “Employer’s Guide.”

²⁰⁸ Royal Canadian Mounted Police, “Information for Families of Homicide Victims.”

²⁰⁹ Calico, *Being Viking*, 97.

²¹⁰ Internal Revenue Service, “Tax Exempt Organization Search | Internal Revenue Service.”

a religious institution and one which seeks “the preservation of the Ethnic European Folk and their continued evolution”, clarifying that “by Ethnic European Folk, we mean white people.”²¹¹ They do not call explicitly for the eradication of people of colour, but pose white culture as one which must be preserved, indicating belief in a force that seeks to do the opposite. They have been categorized as a white supremacist organization by the Anti-Defamation League and the Southern Poverty Law Centre, and are widely denounced by many Inclusive Heathen groups.²¹²

As discussed in Chapter 1, the AFA takes a racial form first established by Alexander Rud Mills. A. Asbjørn Jøn writes, “perhaps the most interesting feature of Mills' work is the way in which he blended Asatru elements with both the worship of the Christian god and right-wing politics”, a trend which the AFA continues in their organizational construction after a Christian church despite not venerating the Christian god.²¹³

Following the IRS definition of church, the AFA has a much stronger and intentional positioning to map onto the common understanding of what that entails. The AFA 1) is a distinct legal organization, founded by Stephen McNallen in 1994;²¹⁴ 2) has a statement of religious belief and ritual;²¹⁵ 3) a government of clergy;²¹⁶ 4) a statement of ethics²¹⁷ and rules;²¹⁸ 5) a unique history based on both their founding and references to pre-Christian Germanic Europe; 6) their

²¹¹ Asatru Folk Assembly, “Declaration of Purpose,” Asatru Folk Assembly, 2025, <https://www.runestone.org/declaration>.

²¹² Anti-Defamation League, “Asatru Folk Assembly (AFA) | Center on Extremism,” 2025, <https://extremismterms.adl.org/glossary/asatru-folk-assembly-afa>; Southern Poverty Law Center, “Asatru Folk Assembly,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, 2025, <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/extremist-files/asatru-folk-assembly/>; The Troth, “Declaration 127.”

²¹³ Asbjørn Jøn, “‘Skeggold, Skalmold; Vindold, Vergold’ - Alexander Rud Mills and the Asatru Faith in the New Age,” 77.

²¹⁴ Calico, *Being Viking*, 97.

²¹⁵ Asatru Folk Assembly, “Ásatrú Trúlögmál,” May 11, 2025.

²¹⁶ Asatru Folk Assembly, “Clergy.”

²¹⁷ Asatru Folk Assembly, “Statement of Ethics,” Asatru Folk Assembly, 2025, <https://www.runestone.org/statement>.

²¹⁸ Asatru Folk Assembly, “Law of the Hall,” Asatru Folk Assembly, 2025, <https://www.runestone.org/law>.

own membership application and structure;²¹⁹ 7-8) an organization of their own ordained clergy, or *goðar*;²²⁰ 9) a library of mythology, ritual outlines and previous newsletters²²¹ and an official podcast;²²² 10) five established buildings as places of worship termed *hófs*, each with its own website;²²³ 11-12) a calendar of religious events and services for each *hóf*; 13) a homeschool curriculum²²⁴ and regular youth activity published in their newsletters;²²⁵ and a process to prepare their clergy as *goðar*.²²⁶

The AFA positions itself as religious through the use of historical precedents, traditional practices, claims to Indigeneity and a close mimicry of Christian church structure. Its claim is bolstered by strong social media presence and public appearances, gaining infamy for acts of violence and beliefs in white supremacy.²²⁷

According to their website, “The Asatru Folk Assembly is a church, and as such, we provided [sic] the expected services to the members of our congregation. These services include worship, rites of passage, weddings, funerals, cemeteries, education, and social services.”²²⁸ The phrase “expected services” overlaps with what a member of a euro-west society would most likely expect of a religious organization based on their understanding of a Christian church.

²¹⁹ Asatru Folk Assembly, “Asatru Folk Assembly Membership Services,” accessed November 25, 2025, <https://member.asatrufolkassembly.org/signup>.

²²⁰ Asatru Folk Assembly, “Clergy.”

²²¹ Asatru Folk Assembly, *Library*, 2025, <https://library.runestone.org/library/?v=3e8d115eb4b3>.

²²² Asatru Folk Assembly, “Victory Never Sleeps,” Asatru Folk Assembly, 2025, <https://www.runestone.org/vns>.

²²³ Asatru Folk Assembly, “Hofs,” Asatru Folk Assembly, 2025, <https://www.runestone.org/hofs>.

²²⁴ Asatru Folk Assembly, “Curriculum | Asatru Academy,” Asatru Folk Assembly, 2025, <https://www.runestone.org/academy-curriculum>.

²²⁵ Asatru Folk Assembly, *Library*.

²²⁶ Asatru Folk Assembly, “Clergy.”

²²⁷ Kay Jones Asmelash Leah, “City Approves Conditional Permit to Allow Use of Church Building by a Whites-Only Group,” CNN, December 10, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/12/10/us/minnesota-asatru-folk-assembly-murdock-trnd>; Sigal Samuel, “What To Do When Racists Try To Hijack Your Religion,” *Global, The Atlantic*, November 2, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/11/asatru-heathenry-racism/543864/>; Shane Burley, “Asatru’s Racist Missionary: Stephen McNallen, Defend Europe, and the Weaponization of Folkish Heathery,” Sul Books, September 14, 2017, <https://abeautifulresistance.org/site/2017/09/14/asatrus-racist-missionary-stephen-mcnallen-defend-europe-and-the-weaponization-of-folkish-heathery>.

²²⁸ Asatru Folk Assembly, “Services,” Asatru Folk Assembly, 2025, <https://www.runestone.org/services>.

The AFA, too, relies on referencing historical precedents and cultural practices. AFA members purchase their right to religion through ownership of church buildings while modelling themselves on Christianity. Their beliefs are complete with a statement of ethics²²⁹ and “Laws of the Hall” which look suspiciously like the Christian Decalogue, including rules such as “Honour the Æsir, the Vanir, the Wights, and the Ancestors”, “Abide no strife” and “Envy not”.²³⁰ Unlike the Troth, the AFA is very clear that the organization wishes to standardize Heathen belief and practice and exclude non-white practitioners.

The AFA’s religious leaders use the same term for clergy members as other branches of Heathenry. The term *goðar* (pronounced “GO-thar”) is used as a non-gendered term to refer to members of the priesthood, with *goði* (or *gothi*, pronounced “GO-thee”) as a specifically male term and *gyðja* (or *gythia*, pronounced “GITH-ee-a”) as female. The AFA’s website states, “As ordained clergy, all Asatru Folk Assembly *Goðar* carry weight in most states and regions, have legal rights, and legal recognition for ceremonies performed and services rendered to their community due to the direct support and association with the AFA, which is a recognized religious, non-profit organization.”²³¹

The AFA categorizes all of their leadership positions as varying levels of clergy. The *Allsherjargoði*, “Old Norse for ‘Chieftain of All the People’”, leads the organization.²³² Matthew Flavel took the role of *Allsherjargoði* in 2016 after it was passed to him by McNallen who had previously served in the role since creating the organization.²³³ The AFA’s website implies a divine

²²⁹ Asatru Folk Assembly, “Statement of Ethics.”

²³⁰ Asatru Folk Assembly, “Law of the Hall.”

²³¹ Asatru Folk Assembly, “Clergy.”

²³² Asatru Folk Assembly, “Clergy.”

²³³ Calico, *Being Viking*, 97.

mandate, claiming that the most important role of the *Allsherjargoði* is to “implement the will of the Æsir to the best of his ability.”²³⁴ Neither the HCC nor The Troth make this claim.

Rather than push for a decentralized standard of Heathenry which is the approach of the Troth and HCC, the AFA defines Heathen doctrine and practice more clearly, showing less openness to creative freedom in ritual and practice. AFA *goðar* provide divine intercession and have legal recognition to perform ceremonies in a move which preserves their organizational power, rather than putting it into the hands of the laity like the HCC and Troth.

Jefferson Calico discusses the disadvantages contemporary pagans face by not having access to property, especially in America. He says, “lack of ownership, lack of a place and [lack of] a relationship to the American landscape through property ownership often led to these religious groups being treated as suspicious and as not authentically belonging to America society. Property ownership is a significant aspect of social belonging in America.”²³⁵ Unlike many other pagan groups, the AFA cements their construction as a religious organization through their purchase of property.

Infusing their own understanding of Heathenry into their land claims, an AFA ritual to open their third *hóf*, Baldurshof, included a ritual by which members bled onto the soil surrounding their church in a literal, ritualized form of “blood and soil” ideology.²³⁶ Their most recent and fifth *hóf*, Freyshof, was dedicated in an event on December 6th, 2025, and is located in Austintown, Ohio.²³⁷

²³⁴ Asatru Folk Assembly, “Clergy.”

²³⁵ Jefferson Calico, “Land, Property, Asatru,” *Pomegranate* 24, no. 2 (2024): 211, <https://doi.org/10.1558/pome.21903>.

²³⁶ Felix Allen, “Inside ‘whites Only’ Church That Uses Nazi Symbols & Blood Rituals,” *The Sun*, January 26, 2021, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/13855768/whites-only-church-afa-nazi-symbols-blood-rituals-minnesota/>.

²³⁷ Asatru Folk Assembly [@FolkAsatru], “Freyshof Dedication 12/6/25 #Freyr #Frey #afa #asatru #ásatrú #asatrufolkassembly #austintown #freyshof <https://t.co/WDDSH3CnBL>,” Tweet, Twitter, December 9, 2025, <https://x.com/FolkAsatru/status/1998479670912958698>.

The AFA has been more involved in public appearances than the Troth and HCC. In 1998, McNallen performed a public ritual to claim the remains of a man found in America dated to 9,000 years prior, known as the Kennewick Man, as an ethnic European ancestor he believed to have worshipped the Germanic gods.²³⁸ The remains were found not to belong to an ethnic European and McNallen's attempt to claim them were unsuccessful, but the belief continues in right-wing circles.²³⁹ The ritual is representative of McNallen's approach to tying together ethnicity, spirituality, and European indigeneity, regardless of its factual validity, that then persists in public imagination as a constructed reality. The AFA's approach to religion is one in which members of society are appealed to more directly, rather than relying purely on formal governmental regulations.

The HCC Meets the Troth: A Coalition of Inclusive Heathens

On September 8th, 2025, there was a meeting between the President of the Troth and the HCC National Council. The first of a proposed series of biannual meetings, it saw the formation of a coalition between two Inclusive Heathen legislative bodies. Their international pact asserts that "The HCC has the responsibility, authority and jurisdiction to represent inclusive Heathenry in Canada where such representation does not take a theological position, specifically on matters of Clergy";²⁴⁰ and thus implicitly defers any theological authority to The Troth.

Following the meeting, it was agreed that "Both the HCC (Canada) and the Troth (USA; International) recognize each other as the national organizations representing inclusive Heathens

²³⁸ Calico, *Being Viking*, 173–74.

²³⁹ Calico, *Being Viking*, 173–74.

²⁴⁰ Erik Lacharity, "Troth - HCC Engagement," September 18, 2025.

within their national boundaries.”²⁴¹ While the alliance seemingly limits the amount of control the Troth has over Canadian Heathenry, it is also a form of delegation. The HCC is now, officially, sharing the workload of answering questions from employers and governments. The coalition between the two organizations is a step towards pushing the AFA out of international conversations about Heathenry and grants the HCC the authority of the Troth.

At the same meeting, it was stated that “The Troth is confident in the HCC’s capacity to fulfill its responsibilities outside the theological sphere - specifically with regards [sic] to inclusive Heathen representation, countering hateful forms of Heathenry, liaising with any and all Canadian officials.”²⁴² The HCC has been positioned as an influential group whose authority in Canada is recognized by the largest Inclusive Heathen organization in North America.

The HCC is positioning itself to be a point of contact for all levels of Canadian government and employers to advocate for the rights of Inclusive Heathens. It is recognized at the federal level through its aforementioned document with the RCMP. Through the same document, the HCC has declared that Heathenry has a central organizing principle of “kinship bonds” between practitioners that may or may not be related by blood.²⁴³ The coalition with the Troth allows the HCC to work more closely with, and gain authority from, a legally sanctioned religious organization without needing to become one itself.

As stated by the HCC, anyone who self-identifies as Heathen, regardless of personal practice and beliefs, is eligible for the liaising and protective services the HCC offers.²⁴⁴ These include religious accommodations in the workplace and the ability to use public spaces for rituals

²⁴¹ Lacharity, “Troth - HCC Engagement.”

²⁴² Lacharity, “Troth - HCC Engagement.”

²⁴³ Royal Canadian Mounted Police, “Information for Families of Homicide Victims.”

²⁴⁴ Heathen Confederation of Canada, “Why Germanic Heathenry?”

and prayer.²⁴⁵ The HCC may not prescribe how spiritual activities must be performed, but does add a legislative authority for anyone seeking to perform them. Although the HCC is not a religious organization per se, it has invented a novel solution for practitioners as a decentralized spiritual practice that is afforded legal standing.

Goldenberg states that “being a religion permits a group to survive and cohere within a fully functioning state and perhaps to exert significant influence upon practices of governance and institutions under state control.”²⁴⁶ The HCC, bolstered by its connection to the Troth, aims to exert its influence on the Government of Canada.

Approaches to Legitimacy

Both inclusive and extreme right-wing (XRW) Heathens are contesting their legitimacy against one another in a battle to claim sole ownership of the Heathen label. Inclusive Heathenry is failing in the claim to Heathenry due to the necessity of adding the term inclusive, implying that the original umbrella of Heathenry is not inclusive.

In their bids for legitimacy, the HCC relies primarily on the power of the Canadian government, the Troth on their legal status as a religious organization and tradition as academics, and the AFA on being recognized as a conventional church. The AFA’s organization maps most clearly onto the euro-west understanding of church, while inclusive Heathen organizations lambast them as a non-representative racist group seeking to standardize an amorphous tradition. The HCC and the Troth are more abstract in their assertions of the Heathen movement as religion, modelling it off their perceived understanding of pre-Christian history.

²⁴⁵ Heathen Confederation of Canada, “Our Purpose.”

²⁴⁶ Goldenberg, “The Category of Religion in the Technology of Governance,” 286.

A distinct form of inclusive Heathenry, driven by groups such as the Troth and HCC, is seceding from the original Heathen movement. Both have their origins in the understanding of pre-Christian Germanic mythology, as outlined in Chapter 1, but employ those understandings of the structure a religion should take in different ways. Now, anti-racist Heathens increasingly use the identifier of inclusive to avoid association with racist organizations and pivot the trajectory of the movement.

Chapter 2 Conclusion

Inclusive Heathenry is becoming its own religious movement with a unique organizational structure as evidenced by the approaches to Heathenry of the HCC and Troth. Inclusive Heathenry continues to move away from the umbrella term Heathenry, which may serve as a point for Inclusive Heathens to reconstruct the worship of Germanic gods without racist affiliation.

The Troth states that “understanding our history is important, but we are not obligated to recreate the past.”²⁴⁷ Its organizational structure reflects understandings of history as members move away from past understandings of what a religious organization should be and establish Inclusive Heathenry as its own cultural movement to eclipse its predecessor. At the same time, the HCC is working with federal governments to publish material to legitimize the movement in Canada while, like the Troth, referencing historical precedent and cultural practices and constructing itself as a religious minority.

XRW Heathenry seeks to construct itself as a legitimate and conventional church based heavily on a euro-west societal understanding of what religion should look like. Inclusive Heathens, however, tend to be more decentralized and to reject the assumed model of religion,

²⁴⁷ The Troth, “History,” *The Troth*, 2025, <https://thetroth.org/resources/history/>.

preferring the more historic approach of pre-Christian peoples. In the next chapter, I explore how understandings of gender informed the beginnings of Heathenry and the turbulence now experienced as the movement evolves and shifts away from its masculinist origins.

Chapter 3: Manhood as Demonstrated in “Heathen Acts”

Introduction

The selected targeting and subsequent scrubbing of any racist residue in the Heathen movement has provided an opening for Inclusive Heathens to deconstruct all aspects of Heathenry and disassociate from racist practice. I will now turn to how Inclusive Heathens critically analyze the reconstruction of pre-Christian Germanic attitudes towards gender. Having been conceived as a backlash against the female-dominated paganisms of the time and as truer to history, Heathenry has embedded ideals of Viking warriors as the pinnacle of pre-Christian Germanic (Norse) character into the movement itself. Masculine ideas appear in Heathen expectations of other practitioners, such as how to perform their religiosity correctly, and are evident in the male-dominant demographics of the movement. Now, Inclusive Heathens are critically analyzing the movement’s relationship with gender, including the common subcultural ideals previously understood as Heathen imperatives.

I will then discuss how an understanding of masculinity was incorporated into the Heathen movement at its formation. I will begin by discussing contemporary Heathenry as a masculinist response to other contemporary pagan movements and the resultant effects of incorporating gendered ideals into Heathenry itself under the category of religion. I will discuss how contemporary Heathens have developed their own unique “Heathen acts” as part of the movement’s subculture, based on the performance of masculinity. I cite the case study of beards as a form of religious observance for Heathens, the use of literature known as the *Lore*, and end with a discussion on how Inclusive Heathenry is becoming increasingly “queered.” Currently, Inclusive Heathens are beginning to create a unique form of queer Heathenry through critical analyses of gender, masculine ideals, and gender essentialism.

The Relationship Between Heathenry and Gender

“Judeo-Christian” religion is often identified by Heathens as oppressive to women and femme-identified people with Heathenry viewed as empowering; however the Heathen movement’s relationship with gender is quite complex.²⁴⁸ As discussed in Chapter 1, Heathenry was created in a cultural moment when the contemporary Pagan revival was dominated by Goddess-oriented movements and 1970s feminism.²⁴⁹ While there is much written about feminist paganism,²⁵⁰ there is less discussion on how gendered ideals have shaped Heathenry as a masculinist pagan movement in response to the Goddess movement.

Heathenry incorporated ideals of masculinity from ideas about the Viking warrior when it was first developed in the 1970s, which has become embedded in the movement as Heathens developed their own subculture. Jennifer Snook writes that, “from the 1970s into the early years of the twenty-first century, Heathen expressions of gender were highly patriarchal and masculine-centric and were modeled on an interpretation of historical arrangements” which placed men as providers “and women as workers, also responsible for the upkeep of children and the home.”²⁵¹

As explored in Chapter 1, one of the first “Heathen” organizations was the Viking Brotherhood founded by Stephen McNallen.²⁵² He believed that “[the Vikings] had all the intensity and courage”, i.e. conventional male ideals which were later incorporated into the Odinic Rite’s

²⁴⁸ Joshua Marcus Cragle, *Contemporary Germanic/Norse Paganism and Recent Survey Data*, 2017, 83.

²⁴⁹ Snook, *American Heathens*.

²⁵⁰ See Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon* (Penguin, 2006); Barbara Jane Davy, *Introduction to Pagan Studies*, The Pagan Studies Series (AltaMira Press, 2007); Pizza and Lewis, *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*; Michael F. Strmiska, “Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives,” in *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Michael Strmiska, Religion in Contemporary Cultures (ABC-CLIO, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.5040/9798400686818>; Naomi R. Goldenberg, *Changing of the Gods : Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions* (Beacon Press, 1979); Carol P. Christ, “Why Women Need the Goddess,” in *Women’s Studies in Religion*, ed. Kate Bagley and Kathleen McIntosh (Routledge, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315662244-18>.

²⁵¹ Jennifer Snook, *American Heathens: The Politics of Identity in a Pagan Religious Movement* (Temple University Press, 2015), 113, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvrdf42h>.

²⁵² Gardell, *Gods of the Blood*, 152.

Nine Noble Virtues of “Industriousness, Hospitality, Honour, Truth, Courage, Fidelity, Discipline, Self-Reliance, and Perseverance.”²⁵³ Heathenry is young enough that some of the original founders of the movement are still alive and active. Although the Viking Brotherhood was short-lived and now exists as the Asatru Folk Assembly (AFA), a throughline exists in McNallen, who is very much involved in the Heathen movement.²⁵⁴

Heathens tend to specifically disdain Christianity as the destroyer of ancient European Paganism, and other forms of contemporary paganism for their conscious eclecticism.²⁵⁵ Heathenry is viewed as distinct from the contemporary pagan category due to its use of archaeological evidence as opposed to other traditions’ “eclectic” use of sources.²⁵⁶

Although there is no throughline between ancient Heathenry and contemporary Heathenry, as explored in Chapter 2, Heathens construct a narrative that the movement is based solely on historical practice and therefore more legitimate than their contemporary pagan counterparts. For Heathens, what is historically based is to be embraced, while any movements that are conscious of their contemporary status are to be avoided, such as Wicca. What is thought to be a Viking Age understanding of masculinity, therefore, becomes more difficult to deconstruct or remove due to its understanding as historically accurate.

Wicca is the primary example which Heathens hold in their sights and portray as an inferior, gynocentric movement, even for those aware that Wicca played an active role in the formation of

²⁵³ Jenny Blain and Robert J. Wallis, “Heathenry,” in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, ed. Murphy Pizza and James R. Lewis, Brill Handbooks on Contemporary Religion 2 (Brill, 2009), 424; Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, 274.

²⁵⁴ See McNallen’s social media campaigns as described by Jefferson Calico, “Performing ‘American Völkisch,’” in *Paganism and Its Discontents: Enduring Problems of Racialized Identity*, ed. Holli S. Emore and Jonathan M. Leader (Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2020).

²⁵⁵ Calico, *Being Viking*, 37.

²⁵⁶ Alessio and Wallis, *Faith, Folk and the Far Right*, 23.

Heathenry.²⁵⁷ All non-Heathen forms of contemporary paganism, such as Wicca and eclectic witchcraft, coalesce into a group of “Others” derided by Heathens for their “fluffy bunny”²⁵⁸ approach and portrayed as “flaky, girly, unfounded metaphysical hogwash.”²⁵⁹ Heathenry, in contrast, is viewed by its adherents as a grounded, fact-based and historically accurate religious movement. The view of Heathenry as separate from, rather than a part of, the broader Pagan movement also results in a gendering of the varying paganisms themselves. Masculine Heathenry takes its place as superior to feminine Wicca.

Heathens spend “much of their energy dissociating from (and mocking) Neopaganism as a category”,²⁶⁰ having the implicit effect of prioritizing masculinity over femininity. It is an attitude that overlays stereotypical Western approaches to masculine and feminine gender performance: Heathenry is viewed as strong, logical, and built on intelligence, whereas Wicca is viewed as passive, emotional, and fictional. As Inclusive Heathens build momentum in deconstructing barriers to their movement, they are beginning to focus on the masculinity inherent to Heathenry as a whole. The subcultural standards of performing Heathenry correctly, however, have much overlap with stereotypical male behaviour.

As one of Jennifer Snook’s interviewees recalls, “Ásatrú [or Heathenry] when it first came out, I think, because of the whole Viking mentality, was male-dominated... I think that Ásatrú was probably a natural counterbalance to the Goddess-orientated [paganisms] and very top-heavy Wicca that was so predominant during that time.”²⁶¹ Wicca has worked to create a place for women through its worship of a goddess and, although hetero and cisnormative, has a theological

²⁵⁷ Snook, *American Heathens*, 119.

²⁵⁸ Calico, *Being Viking*, 100, 232.

²⁵⁹ Snook, *American Heathens*, 118.

²⁶⁰ Snook, *American Heathens*, 43.

²⁶¹ Snook, *American Heathens*, 118.

understanding of the “Triple Goddess” separated into maiden, mother, and crone.²⁶² Wicca does not yet have a similar form of masculine appeal.

Heathenry aims to be more appealing to men specifically, drawing heavy inspiration from the Viking warrior ethos. While the image of the Viking is malleable,²⁶³ its political usages, including that of the Heathen movement, often employ them as a symbol of masculinity, resistance, and violence.²⁶⁴ The virtue of stereotypical Viking warrior masculinity has become ingrained in the Heathen movement.

The majority of contemporary pagans are women, with Wicca having the highest female population and Heathenry having the highest male population.²⁶⁵ The demographics of Heathenry, although shifting, reflect its masculine ideals. Egil Asprem noted in 2008 that the American Heathen scene was predominantly male while Wiccan covens were predominantly female, a phenomenon which led groups from either movement to “hook up” in order to find romantic partners.²⁶⁶

Data about the gender identity of Heathens appears to show a trend in which more women have become involved in the movement over time. Helen Berger notes a shift in Heathen demographics between her 2003 and 2019 surveys, moving from 65% male and 35% female to 50.8% female and 47.8% male, with the remainder identifying as other genders.²⁶⁷ Berger wrote in 2019 that “[Heathenry] has modified its masculine focus to at least some extent—particularly

²⁶² Calico, *Being Viking*, 53–54.

²⁶³ Roderick Dale, “From Barbarian to Brand: The Vikings as a Marketing Tool,” in *The Vikings Reimagined*, ed. Tom Birkett and Roderick Dale (De Gruyter, 2019), 223, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501513886-013>.

²⁶⁴ Julia Håkansson, “Political Uses of the Viking Age,” in *Viking Heritage and History in Europe*, ed. Sara Ellis Nilsson and Stefan Nyzell (Routledge, 2024), 215, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003111115-17>.

²⁶⁵ Helen A. Berger, *Solitary Pagans: Contemporary Witches, Wiccans, and Others Who Practice Alone* (University of South Carolina Press, 2019), 36, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv7r41wn>.

²⁶⁶ Egil Asprem, “Heathens up North: Politics, Polemics and Contemporary Norse Paganism in Norway,” *Pomegranate* 10, no. 1 (2008): 66, <https://doi.org/10.1558/pome.v10i1.41>.

²⁶⁷ Berger, *Solitary Pagans*, 21.

in their online message—and has therefore been able to attract more women to its numbers.”²⁶⁸ Davy’s 2017 survey indicates, however, that male Heathen practitioners continue to outnumber females by approximately 2 to 1; a difference she notes “may be due to [Davy’s survey] reaching a broader political spread of Heathens.”²⁶⁹

The extreme right-wing (XRW) Asatru Folk Assembly (AFA) continue in their belief that “gender is not a social construct, it is a beautiful gift from the holy powers and from our ancestors” in a pattern consistent across right-wing groups.²⁷⁰ Heathen masculinity and gender understandings are not immune to scrutiny, however, with Inclusive Heathens placing masculinity under a microscope. Diana Paxson’s sentiment noted in the previous chapters to “[recreate] the Middle Ages ‘not as they were, but as they should have been’” opens the door to critical conversations about Heathenry’s emphasis on masculinity, especially in Inclusive Heathen circles.²⁷¹

Reconstructing Heathen Masculinities

According to Carol Clover, the pre-Christian Germanic world is one “in which ‘masculinity’ always has a plus value, even (or perhaps especially) when it is enacted by a woman.”²⁷² Masculinity, as the only gendered performance of value in the pre-Christian Germanic world, filters into the Heathen movement as a facsimile of the ancient Heathen worldview.

²⁶⁸ Berger, *Solitary Pagans*, 37.

²⁶⁹ Davy, *Wyrd Ecology*, 201.

²⁷⁰ Calico, *Being Viking*, 208.

²⁷¹ Diana L Paxson, “Balancing on the Rainbow Bridge: The Challenge of Inclusive Heathenry,” in *Paganism and Its Discontents: Enduring Problems of Racialized Identity*, ed. Holli S. Emore (Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2020), 69.

²⁷² Carol J. Clover, “Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe,” *Speculum* (New York, USA) 68, no. 2 (1993): 372, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2864557>.

Jennifer Snook discusses Heathenry as an evolution of the mythopoetic men's movement,²⁷³ in which men attempt "to recover a 'lost' masculinity through retreats, rituals, male-empowerment workshops [and] a revival of the image of 'the male warrior'."²⁷⁴ While discourse surrounding "real Heathen men" was declining for a time, the masculine gendering of Heathenry has "become more popular as political attitudes in the United States shift ever rightward."²⁷⁵ For many Heathens who yearn to be warriors, a phallogocentric view militarizes spirituality at the expense of the maturation of their community.²⁷⁶ Those who emphasize masculinity not only continue a trend of misogynist behaviour, but deny Heathenry the opportunity to develop other aspirational identities.

Snook continues that "Viking society was a very phallic culture" in which femininity and effeminacy in men were highly disfavored and treated with strict social sanctions.²⁷⁷ For the Old Norse, men were "under the constant threat of becoming weak or effeminate" and at risk of being termed *ergi*, denoting "unmanliness or effeminate behaviour."²⁷⁸ The same culture, however, is prized by Heathens and placed into the category of religion.

The concept of reconstructing a religion, or re-creating a worldview that previously existed but does not have a throughline to the contemporary moment, also proves problematic due to the lack of agreed-upon criteria considered to constitute authentic Heathen religion. As Jenny Blain and Robert Wallis write, "reconstructionist Heathens... pay close attention to archaeological, literary and historic sources, keep in touch with current academic thought, and recognise that their

²⁷³ See Elizabeth Walker Mechling and Jay Mechling, "The Jung and the Restless: The Mythopoetic Men's Movement," *Southern Communication Journal* 59, no. 2 (1994): 97–111, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10417949409372929>.

²⁷⁴ Snook, *American Heathens*, 116.

²⁷⁵ Snook, *American Heathens*, 117.

²⁷⁶ Snook, *American Heathens*, 117.

²⁷⁷ Snook, *American Heathens*, 114.

²⁷⁸ Snook, *American Heathens*, 114.

religion is in the present and for the present, inspired by the past but not the same as in the past.”²⁷⁹

Heathenry does not have any form of authority to judge whether or not the reconstruction is accurate, leaving the decision to groups and individuals.²⁸⁰

What is included as part of Heathen reconstruction varies, but commonly includes agreement about the deities and beings worshipped and/or held in reverence, the style of worship and rituals utilized, and some form of pre-Christian Germanic *weltanschauung*. The source materials, lens of the viewer and breadth of reconstruction efforts are all variable. Potentially included as historically accurate in reconstruction efforts are “Viking Age manhood acts”, regardless of whether or not ancient Heathens believed in them as a form of divine mandate, that contemporary practitioners interpret as religious. Some Heathen men therefore consider the wearing of a beard as a religious praxis, placing a masculine physical ideal into the category of religion.

In his work on the Icelandic Sagas and men’s relation to society, Gareth Evans proposes a theory of “multiple masculinities.”²⁸¹ According to his theory, “all masculinities that do not live up to the hegemonic ideal are subordinated to it, and therefore viewed as inferior... but [are] nevertheless regarded as masculine.”²⁸² The hegemonic ideal itself is unattainable.

Some of the “acceptable” male gender identities identified by Stephen McNallen of the AFA are “Thors-man”, more physical, and “Bragis-man”, more artistic. The examples are two distinct forms of masculinity in the Heathen movement showing that some form of multiple

²⁷⁹ Blain and Wallis, “Heathenry,” 600.

²⁸⁰ Snook et al., “Heathens in the United States.”

²⁸¹ Gareth Lloyd Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*, Oxford English Monographs (Oxford University Press, 2019), 17.

²⁸² Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*, 17.

masculinities exist even in one of the most socially conservative Heathen groups.²⁸³ As a whole, however, Heathens have been slow to adopt more complex forms of gender.²⁸⁴

Heathenry places emphasis on the ideal of Viking warrior, especially for men. Heathens put their beliefs about warrior masculinity into practice, as evidenced by the disproportionate number of members in policing and the military.²⁸⁵ The masculine modalities in the Heathen movement, though they may change based on group,²⁸⁶ are also based on understandings of the Vikings collected through pop culture,²⁸⁷ practitioner's understandings of pre-Christian Germanic Europe, and, later, academic publications, and signal a "correct" way for Heathens to act.

Heathen "Manhood Acts"

Douglas Schrock and Michael Schwalbe write that "the process of learning how to signify a masculine self in situationally appropriate ways continues throughout life."²⁸⁸ Similar to the understanding of multiple masculinities, citations of varying forms of a masculine self are based on occupation. There are variations among manual labour, professional jobs, and military performances of manhood in which men must "learn to signify masculine selves in ways that accord with the organization's culture and gender politics."²⁸⁹ The larger Heathen movement has spawned an overall subculture in which there is a correct way to be a Heathen.

²⁸³ Calico, *Being Viking*, 409.

²⁸⁴ Calico, *Being Viking*, 409.

²⁸⁵ Cragle, *Contemporary Germanic/Norse Paganism and Recent Survey Data*, 93–94.

²⁸⁶ See Davy, *Wyrð Ecology*, especially case studies on Vindisir Kindred and Raven's Knoll Heathen communities.

²⁸⁷ For example, the Society for Creative Anachronism and renaissance fair subcultures influenced the development of Heathen ritual clothing, or "garb". See Calico, *Being Viking*, 23.

²⁸⁸ Douglas Schrock and Michael Schwalbe, "Men, Masculinity, and Manhood Acts," *Annual Review of Sociology* 35, no. 1 (2009): 283, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-070308-115933>.

²⁸⁹ Schrock and Schwalbe, "Men, Masculinity, and Manhood Acts," 283.

In his book on “manhood acts”, Michael Schwalbe explains manhood acts as “interactional rituals that produce the cultural objects we call men.”²⁹⁰ Schwalbe writes that manhood acts are not only claims to membership in the privileged gender group, but also claims to character. While it is difficult to pinpoint acts that are de facto masculine, there are some actions expected from Heathens.

Jefferson Calico notes that “there remains quite a bit of social currency around the idealized Viking male: bold, assertive, and rugged.”²⁹¹ To be Heathen is to be male coded, with the movement encouraging “forthright and unabashed in-your-face masculinities from [all] genders.”²⁹² Viking warrior manhood acts are therefore ideal Heathen characteristics regardless of a person’s gender. In order to be credited as a male, a man must put on a convincing manhood act.²⁹³ In order to be credited as a Heathen, a Heathen must put on a convincing Heathen act.

Adequate performance of Heathen acts “requires mastering a set of conventional signifying practices through which the identity ‘man’ is established and upheld in interaction.”²⁹⁴ Heathenry, inspired by a pre-Christian Germanic worldview, has developed its own set of acts in which members of all genders measure one another. Common ways to perform Heathenry for all genders are the masculine-coded feats of physical strength,²⁹⁵ the ability to consume large amounts of alcohol,²⁹⁶ and the wearing of beards for men.

²⁹⁰ Michael Schwalbe, *Manhood Acts: Gender and the Practices of Domination* (Paradigm publishers, 2014), 56.

²⁹¹ Calico, *Being Viking*, 408.

²⁹² Snook, *American Heathens*, 120.

²⁹³ Schwalbe, *Manhood Acts*, 57.

²⁹⁴ Schrock and Schwalbe, “Men, Masculinity, and Manhood Acts.”

²⁹⁵ See the “Steal the Wench” game described in Jefferson Calico, *Being Viking: Heathenism in Contemporary America*, *Contemporary and Historical Paganism* (Equinox Publishing, 2018), 224–25.

²⁹⁶ Simon Trafford, “Alcohol Consumption, Masculinity, and the Modern Viking,” in *Viking Heritage and History in Europe*, by Sara Ellis Nilsson and Stefan Nyzell (Routledge, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003111115-10>.

Beards as Heathen Act

In 2018, Sgt. 1st Class Benjamin Hopper became the first member of the USA military to cite his Heathen identity as reason for exemption from a policy that soldiers must be clean-shaven.²⁹⁷ Although the total numbers of Heathen USA soldiers is unknown, “Nordic Pagans” were mentioned specifically by USA Secretary of War Pete Hegseth in an address which discussed new military policies such as the limit on religious and medical beard waivers.²⁹⁸ Sgt. 1st Class Hopper’s evidence, cited by others who followed him in their bids for beard exemptions, is largely based on understandings of masculinity in the Heathen *Lore*. The *Lore* consists of pre-Christian Germanic history, poems, and stories, such as the “Prose” and “Poetic Eddas” and “Sagas of the Icelanders”, and others including academic articles that are often treated as a form of religious authority.²⁹⁹ Much of the writings were recorded in the 12th and 13th centuries after being passed down through an oral tradition in unknown years of origin.³⁰⁰ Some recount history from hundreds of years earlier.³⁰¹

²⁹⁷ Associated Press and Leah Simpson, “Soldier Is First Allowed to Serve with Beard Because of Pagan Beliefs,” Daily Mail, December 31, 2019, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7838811/Pagan-soldier-34-serve-beard-beliefs-say-sacred-masculine.html>; Jimmy McCloskey, “Soldier Is First Ever to Be Allowed to Serve with Beard Because of His Pagan Beliefs,” News, *Metro*, December 30, 2019, <https://metro.co.uk/2019/12/30/soldier-first-ever-allowed-serve-beard-pagan-beliefs-11977741/>; Associated Press, “Nevada Guard Soldier Receives OK to Sport Norse Pagan Beard,” Reno Gazette Journal, December 30, 2019, <https://www.rgj.com/story/news/2019/12/30/nevada-guard-soldier-receives-ok-sport-norse-pagan-beard/2775905001/>; Jeff Schogol, “By the Hammer of Thor! A Nevada National Guard Soldier Can Now Rock a Norse Beard,” *Task & Purpose*, December 30, 2019, <https://taskandpurpose.com/news/norse-soldier-beard/>.

²⁹⁸ Peter Suci, “Hegseth Has Said No Beards, Will Limit Religious and Medical Waivers,” *Forbes*, October 4, 2025, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/petersuci/2025/10/04/hegseth-has-said-no-beards-will-limit-religious-and-medical-waivers/>.

²⁹⁹ Calico, *Being Viking*, 64.

³⁰⁰ Calico, *Being Viking*, 64; Bernt Ø. Thorvaldsen, “The Dating of Eddic Poetry,” in *A Handbook to Eddic Poetry*, ed. Carolyne Larrington et al. (Cambridge University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316471685.005>.

³⁰¹ Calico, “22. What Is Heathenry?,” 69.

The Heathen pro-beard argument relies on a literal interpretation of the Heathen corpus, similar to literalist approaches to the Judeo-Christian Bible.³⁰² Perhaps this practice is due to 45% of Heathens having a Christian background³⁰³ or because of the common view of Christianity as the prototypical form of religion.³⁰⁴ Some Heathens take a mythological literalist approach to the *Lore* in which the text becomes an ultimate authority in the place of a priest or pope. As Heathenry is decentralized, each individual has the capacity to be their own ultimate authority about religious matters. The lack of central authority can prove problematic in many legal contexts that cite religious belief; but the amorphous nature of Heathen doctrine is an asset for those who cite their personal understandings of Viking Age masculine ideals as a religious mandate.

There are some groups who cite pre-Christian Germanic stories and laws as evidence for the religious Heathen beard, although most of the discourse occurs through social media like Facebook, YouTube, and Reddit.³⁰⁵ Despite the lack of central dogma and the download of religious authority to individuals on social media, some Heathen organizations offer the closest facsimile to standardized religious practice that practitioners will socially allow. Of the organizations discussed in the previous chapter, official statements about beards as religious observance have been made by The Troth and the AFA. Neither organization considers beards

³⁰² See R. A. McGee, “Beard Waiver Letter,” November 15, 2020, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xaFnTXHaB5KZZmYUdcYDBVNJ6Fcz5VaiTxGyqFFQUhc>.

³⁰³ Cragle, *Contemporary Germanic/Norse Paganism and Recent Survey Data*, 95.

³⁰⁴ Trevor Stack et al., eds., *Religion as a Category of Governance and Sovereignty*, vol. 3, Supplements to Method & Theory in the Study of Religion (Brill, 2015), 101.

³⁰⁵ See WondererOfficial, “Beards and Our Faith,” Reddit, October 22, 2024, https://www.reddit.com/r/heathenry/comments/1g9msk1/beards_and_our_faith/; Terrible-Guitar-8136, “I’m a Norse Pagan with a Beard Waiver. Ask Me Anything,” Reddit, August 7, 2024, https://www.reddit.com/r/AirForce/comments/1ema09o/im_a_norse_pagan_with_a_beard_waiver_ask_me/; East Dimension 7003, “Skegg,” Reddit, August 3, 2023, <https://www.reddit.com/r/NorsePaganism/comments/15hbi2n/skegg/>.

necessary for men to be considered Heathen; nor are beards seen as a necessary performance of masculinity.³⁰⁶

An article published by The Troth in 2023 states that Heathens are not required to grow a beard as an observance of their membership in the movement.³⁰⁷ The organization further decided that beards are not a “universal religious requirement”, nor are they “universally seen as a symbol of our religion” or a “[universal] symbol of masculinity and manliness.³⁰⁸ As of June 13, 2025, The Troth will “not sign or endorse any religious accommodation for beards or beard waivers.”³⁰⁹ The same opinion is shared by other Heathen organizations taking theological positions such as the Open Halls Project, now inactive, which advocated for Heathens in the USA military,³¹⁰ and Asatru UK.³¹¹ The AFA, criticized for their now-infamous Facebook post celebrating their “masculine men and feminine ladies”,³¹² said they “[do] not recognize any such religious imperative requiring [male members] to wear beards” while continuing to support gender essentialism.³¹³

The organization responsible for Sgt. Hopper’s beard waiver, Norskk, and its parent Forn Siðr Official, are men’s-only Heathen organizations which have been criticized for their right-wing leanings.³¹⁴ Forn Siðr is named after the Old Norse term which comes closest to “religion”,

³⁰⁶ The Troth, “Beards in Norse Paganism | Required or Not?,” *The Troth*, May 30, 2023, <https://thetroth.org/resource/beards-norse-paganism/>; Terence P. Ward, “Heathen Obtains Permission to Grow Beard in Military - News, Paganism, U.S.,” *The Wild Hunt*, May 9, 2018, <https://wildhunt.org/2018/05/heathen-obtains-permission-to-grow-beard-in-military.html>.

³⁰⁷ The Troth, “Beards in Norse Paganism | Required or Not?”

³⁰⁸ The Troth, “Beards in Norse Paganism | Required or Not?”

³⁰⁹ The Troth, “The Troth Updates Policy on Religious Accommodations,” *The Troth*, June 14, 2025, <https://thetroth.org/official-announcements/troth-updates-policy-religious-accommodations-beards/>.

³¹⁰ Josh Heath, *Beards – A Clarification | Open Halls Project*, April 26, 2017, <https://www.openhalls.org/beards-a-clarification/>.

³¹¹ Asatru UK, “Frequently Asked Questions,” Asatru UK, 2025, <https://www.asatruuk.org/faqs>.

³¹² Calico, *Being Viking*, 410.

³¹³ Ward, “Heathen Obtains Permission to Grow Beard in Military - News, Paganism, U.S.”

³¹⁴ Ward, “Heathen Obtains Permission to Grow Beard in Military - News, Paganism, U.S.”

translating to “old ways.”³¹⁵ There are a suite of other unrelated “Forn Siðr” organizations throughout Scandinavia that do not seem to have the same requirements.³¹⁶ In order to receive a beard waiver from Forn Siðr Official, applicants must complete a paid course and have an active “silver tier” membership as a demonstration of sincerity of belief, which puts a price on the ability to perform a Viking Age manhood act in a setting in which beards may be otherwise unpermitted.³¹⁷

In a document that argues for evidence of the historic Heathen beard, Forn Siðr Official obscures the names of texts with Old Norse terms, such as “Konungsbók Eddukvæða” instead of its common name, “The Poetic Edda”, alongside a slew of passages and phrases from the Lore.³¹⁸ Similar arguments and Lore excerpts are repeated by Heathen men through social media and publicly available exemption letters such as the one written by self-declared goði, or Heathen priest, R. A. McGee (Gothi Grimwulff).³¹⁹ Arguments for beards as a Heathen symbol most commonly cite the following as evidence: Njál’s Saga in the Sagas of the Icelanders, the *Guta lag* (laws of the Gottlanders), and the meaning of the Icelandic word *drengr*.³²⁰

Njál’s Saga is the most popular evidence supporting religious Heathen beards because of the frequent mention of beards as a cultural norm. The text recounts the tale of the eponymous Njál Þorgeirsson and his companion Gunnar Hámundarson: the former unable to grow a beard, the

³¹⁵ Amster, “It’s Not Easy Being Apolitical: Reconstruction and Eclecticism in Danish Asatro,” 44.

³¹⁶ See <https://www.fornsidr.dk/>, <https://samfundetfornsed.se/>, <https://forn-sed.no/>

³¹⁷ NORSKK®, “Beards,” NORSKK®, accessed January 25, 2026, <https://www.norskk.com/beards>.

³¹⁸ Forn Siðr ® (Official), “Skegg: The Norse Beard,” n.d.

³¹⁹ See McGee, “Beard Waiver Letter”; Gothi Grimwulff, *Heathen Beards in the Workplace*, 2021, 8:23, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4DBLrOPz58A>; Terrible-Guitar-8136, “I’m a Norse Pagan with a Beard Waiver. Ask Me Anything.”; The Troth, “Beards in Norse Paganism | Required or Not?”

³²⁰ See McGee, “Beard Waiver Letter”; Gothi Grimwulff, *Heathen Beards in the Workplace*; Terrible-Guitar-8136, “I’m a Norse Pagan with a Beard Waiver. Ask Me Anything.”; The Troth, “Beards in Norse Paganism | Required or Not?”

latter described as “big and strong and an excellent fighter.”³²¹ Oren Falk notes that “for the Norse, the notional presence of facial hair unequivocally indexed manliness.”³²² Njál’s absence of a beard becomes a mark of his otherness and diminished manhood.³²³

Referencing Evans’ work on “multiple masculinities”,³²⁴ Meg Morrow writes that “despite [Njál’s] inability to look the part and perform certain kinds of actions that are inherently masculine, he is often able to control the outcomes of more ‘manly’ men [through significant religious and legal knowledge].”³²⁵ Religion, as an amorphous construct, permits contemporary Heathens to incorporate their understanding of Germanic manhood acts into their movement. Using the same sources as pro-beard arguments, any number of interpretations can be drawn. For example, rather than portraying Njál as less masculine due to his lack of beard, his extensive religious and legal knowledge could instead be drawn as a contemporary Heathen form of manhood act. The common pop-cultural understanding of Vikings as big, strong, hirsute warriors, however, acts as a major draw for men to Heathenry who continue to reify this idealization within the movement. Contemporary Heathens mandating beards as a requirement of men take a position similar to Njál’s antagonists.

The *Guta lag* is a legal record from the island of Gotland written after the Christianization of the region between the 12th and 14th centuries.³²⁶ When the laws were created, the Kingdom of

³²¹ Meg Morrow, “Disabled Masculinity: Njál’s Beardlessness in the Changing Religious Landscape of Medieval Iceland,” *Mirator* 20, no. 2 (2021): 23.

³²² Oren Falk, “Beardless Wonders: ’gaman Vas Soxu (the Sex Was Great),” in *Verbal Encounters: Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse Studies for Roberta Frank*, by Antonina Harbus and Russell Poole (University of Toronto Press, 2004), 235, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ottawa/detail.action?docID=4672223>.

³²³ Morrow, “Disabled Masculinity: Njál’s Beardlessness in the Changing Religious Landscape of Medieval Iceland,” 23.

³²⁴ Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*, 17.

³²⁵ Morrow, “Disabled Masculinity: Njál’s Beardlessness in the Changing Religious Landscape of Medieval Iceland,” 36.

³²⁶ Christine Peel, ed., *Guta Lag: The Law of the Gotlanders*, Viking Society for Northern Research Text Series, 18 [i.e.19] (Viking Society for Northern Research, Univ. College London, 2009), xxxvi.

Sweden had “no central administration... [and] each province had its own assembly, law and legal system.”³²⁷ There is scholarly debate as to whether the *Guta lag* is a theoretical idea proposed by a priest, a record of the law at a certain date, or a formally accepted and applied set of rules.³²⁸

There are three mentions of beards in the *Guta lag*. One is a reference to an area of the face between “beard and brow”; and the other two are fines for physical assault.³²⁹ Punishments are in the form of fines for pulling a man’s beard, which “is subject to the same fines as other hair pulling”,³³⁰ and non-verbal insults such as “making a minor attack on a man’s beard or hair” and “throwing ale in someone’s face.”³³¹ There is no record of why such actions were punishable by law, but pro-beard contemporary Heathens interpret them as attacks on one’s manhood. Even if the grounds for these laws were understood as religious in the sense of a divine mandate, they are unlikely to reflect pagan beliefs as the laws were recorded by a Christian priest after the Christianization of Europe.³³² The laws do, however, indicate a cultural norm and manhood act which has now been revived.

Heathen beard proponents focus on a warrior culture, which McGee proposes as the status of *drengr*, “akin to the warrior status of both Samurai as well as Knights.”³³³ In a clear display of mythological literalism, he writes, “as you can see from examples in our lore and teachings (equivalent to scriptures)... we see a clear requirement of Drengr to grow and maintain a healthy beard.”³³⁴ As of this writing, there are no academic sources which corroborate such a claim.

³²⁷ Peel, *Guta Lag*, vii.

³²⁸ Christine Peel, ed., *Guta Lag: The Law of the Gotlanders*, Viking Society for Northern Research Text Series, 18 [i.e.19] (Viking Society for Northern Research, Univ. College London, 2009), xxii–xxiii

³²⁹ Peel, *Guta Lag*, 22.

³³⁰ Peel, *Guta Lag*, 25.

³³¹ Peel, *Guta Lag*, 111.

³³² The Troth, “Beards in Norse Paganism | Required or Not?”

³³³ McGee, “Beard Waiver Letter.”

³³⁴ McGee, “Beard Waiver Letter.”

Instead, Lauren Goetting writes that “the term *drengr* in East Norse Viking-Age... connoted a “brave, youthful man... informed by notions of ‘honor’ and ‘uprightness’... [and] refer[s] to personal character.”³³⁵

Similarly, Frank Stewart translates the related term *drengr goðr* to mean “fine young man”, a masculine identifier for any person with a strong sense of honour, regardless of gender or biological sex.³³⁶ The term references a particular male ideal, determined solely by the inner value of a person – specifically, their status as honourable.³³⁷ Regardless, the category of *drengr* is molded and repurposed to suit contemporary Heathen acts.

There are two problematic assumptions with interpreting the *Lore* as literal which impacts both the performance of Heathen acts and the Heathen movement. The first is that the surviving pre-Christian Germanic texts are or were believed to be divinely inspired and that the information contained within constitutes a form of divine mandate. Second, as mentioned in the previous chapters, is the assumption of a bounded object consisting of a unified, orthopraxic, orthodox, and monolithic tradition that spanned all of Germanic Europe. Pre-Christian Germanic praxis and beliefs were not uniform; dominant stories and rituals changed between regions.³³⁸

There is no evidence that beards were ever believed to be divinely mandated; but there is textual evidence that beards were seen as a cultural norm for men reflected in their gods. There also existed, however, a multiplicity of masculinities, with no man encompassing the hegemonic ideal. Heathenry, as a decentralized contemporary religion, is fertile ground to create any narrative

³³⁵ Lauren Goetting, “Pegn and Drengr in the Viking Age,” *Scandinavian Studies* (Champaign) 78, no. 4 (2006): 401, 215678676, ProQuest One Literature.

³³⁶ Frank Henderson Stewart, *Honor* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994), 154.

³³⁷ Stewart, *Honor*, 107, 154.

³³⁸ Jennifer Snook, *American Heathens: The Politics of Identity in a Pagan Religious Movement* (Temple University Press, 2015), 12, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvrd42h>; Kathryn Rountree, “Neo-Paganism, Animism, and Kinship with Nature,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27, no. 2 (2012): 317, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2012.675746>.

declaring correct masculine and Heathen behaviour. Beards represent a larger trend for Heathens whereby ancient gender roles and ideology are incorporated into a core aspect of a contemporary movement. Now, Inclusive Heathenry is beginning to change in response to practitioners interrogation of the movement's relationship with gender.

Queer Heathenry

Inclusive efforts to engage with the remnants of racism within the movement have encouraged other forms of reflexive thinking and the deconstruction of other problematic aspects of Heathenry, such as the masculinity inherent to Heathen acts. Inclusive Heathens aim to reduce the barriers to adapt the movement for modern practice while they purge it of any remnants of racist baggage. They are also now taking a critical look at conceptions of gender. It follows that the masculine-centric ethos and acts of the pre-Christian Germanic peoples “considered the pinnacle of good character... that today's society might consider masculine acts of violence or pride”³³⁹ reconstructed into contemporary Heathenry at its formation are subjected to the same analysis as racism.

As Heathenry ages, the masculine Heathen ideals of the 1970s are no longer serving its inclusive adherents. The Nine Noble Virtues, for example, originally proposed as a form of Heathen ethics, are now being avoided by Inclusive Heathens due to their tenuous connection to Germanic mythology and strong ties to the white supremacist organization, the Odinic Rite (OR).³⁴⁰ Moving away from the virtues of “Industriousness, Hospitality, Honour, Truth, Courage,

³³⁹ Snook, *American Heathens*, 113.

³⁴⁰ Ethan Doyle White, “Northern Gods for Northern Folk: Racial Identity and Right-Wing Ideology among Britain's Folkish Heathens,” *Journal of Religion in Europe* 10, no. 3 (2017): 252, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18748929-01003001>.

Fidelity, Discipline, Self-Reliance, and Perseverance”³⁴¹ is not simply a push against ideology from a racist organization, but is also a deconstruction of the original ideas now identified as ahistorical “White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP)” values embedded in the Heathen movement.³⁴² As Inclusive Heathens began to deconstruct what was originally thought to be a “historically accurate” system, they continued to critically engage with the other tenets of the movement and reached a post-reconstruction, queering, stage with gender roles at the forefront.

The contemporary pagan community is recognized as being more accepting than the general public of queer sexualities and identities.³⁴³ Although Heathenry had been consciously distancing itself from other forms of contemporary paganism since its founding and some contingents continue to do so, Inclusive Heathenry’s anti-racist stance and efforts have moved it more in line with other paganisms while drawing more members of the queer community.³⁴⁴

The subsequent increase in queer Heathens has begun to articulate a distinctly queer Heathen spirituality. Queer theory draws connections between sexuality, bodily sex, and gender, and offers “analytical tools for thinking through complex dynamics of power, embodiment, fixity and lack thereof, the normative and its demons.”³⁴⁵ Queer theory is therefore a useful toolbox to study the newfound fluidity of gendered ideals within the Heathen movement.

³⁴¹ Blain and Wallis, “Heathenry,” 424.

³⁴² Snook, *American Heathens*, 71.

³⁴³ Christine Hoff Kraemer, “Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Paganism,” *Religion Compass* 6, no. 8 (2012): 390, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2012.00367.x>.

³⁴⁴ See The Troth, “Bylaws & Policies”; Mohan and Bustamonte, “Inclusive Heathenry in Canada”; Davy, *Wyrd Ecology*; Snook, “The Rise of Inclusive Heathenry: How Movements Respond to Political Currents”; British Columbia Heathen Freehold, “British Columbia Heathen Freehold”; Piper Perry, “LGBTQIA Pride: A Cornerstone of Inclusive Heathenry | The Troth,” *The Troth*, June 26, 2023, <https://thetroth.org/position-statement/lgbtqia-pride-a-cornerstone-of-inclusive-heathenry/>.

³⁴⁵ Melissa M. Wilcox, *Queer Religiosities: An Introduction to Queer and Transgender Studies in Religion* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 5.

Conservative factions of Heathenry are now returning to the masculine-centric ethos while Inclusive Heathens drift away. “Today’s Heathenry bears little resemblance to the Heathenry of decades past,” Snook wrote in 2024 as explanation of the challenges Inclusive Heathens face in the socio-political climate after the first Trump presidency.³⁴⁶ Facing an increasingly emboldened contingent of white supremacist XRW Heathens, Inclusive Heathens must set themselves apart through attempts at reorienting the public narrative on Heathenry. Dismantling outdated forms of gender within the Heathen movement is one way of both combatting XRW Heathens and distinguishing Inclusive Heathenry as a separate, cohesive movement.

Heathens cite the idea “We are our deeds” to explain how practitioners are judged by their community and descendants, emphasizing “right action.”³⁴⁷ The understanding of the Heathen concept of right action was seen in the Declaration 127 as discussed in the previous chapter, but also through a social media campaign targeting misogyny in the movement.

Masculine ideals within the Heathen movement came to a head in 2017 with the rise of the social media hashtag on Facebook, #HavamalWitches, referencing stanza 83 of the “Havamal”, an oft-cited poem in the “Poetic Edda”.³⁴⁸ The stanza states “the speech of a maiden should no man trust[,] nor the words which a woman says,” and is given as an example of the inherent sexism written in the Heathen *Lore*.³⁴⁹

The hashtag originated among Canadian Inclusive Heathens of the Raven’s Knoll community and was oriented towards sexist behaviour experienced online by Heathen women and

³⁴⁶ Snook, “The Rise of Inclusive Heathenry: How Movements Respond to Political Currents,” 45.

³⁴⁷ Snook, *American Heathens*, 70.

³⁴⁸ Jade Pichette, “#HavamalWitches: We Are the Witches the Havamal Warns You About,” *Spiral Nature Magazine*, August 2, 2017, <https://www.spiralnature.com/spirituality/witches-the-havamal-warns-about/>.

³⁴⁹ Pichette, “#HavamalWitches.”

femme-identifying³⁵⁰ folk.³⁵¹ In a blog post recounting their³⁵² experiences, Jade Pichette wrote that “sexism, although not intrinsically Heathen, is something that Heathen women have to survive within many of our communities.”³⁵³ The hashtag’s impacts and virality were felt internationally across Canada, the USA, UK, Italy, Norway, New Zealand, Sweden and Denmark.³⁵⁴

One of the progenitors of the #HavamalHeathens movement, Pichette recounts they were told “you even pissed off the AFA,” signifying that the hashtag bled through the staunch divide between anti-racist and racist Heathen practice.³⁵⁵ While the hashtag itself does not seem to have had lasting power on social media platforms, the initiative sparked a broader conversation on gender norms and expectations within the entire Heathen movement.

Pichette, who also spearheaded the Canadian Declaration on Intolerance and amplified the Declaration 127 discussed in Chapter 2, is identified as *gythia* of the queer-celebratory form of Inclusive Heathenry in Vindisir Kindred.³⁵⁶ Barbara Jane Davy’s work on Vindisir Kindred in London, ON and the Raven’s Knoll Heathen community based out of a Heathen-owned campground near Ottawa, Ontario, suggests they have a higher proportion of women, femme-identified and nonbinary people in their leadership and membership than other Heathen groups.³⁵⁷ Davy notes that the Heathens of these communities “include people of various sexual orientations

³⁵⁰ “Femme” meaning “feminine” presenting in a traditional sense.

³⁵¹ Davy, *Wyrđ Ecology*, 16.

³⁵² Jade’s pronouns as a nonbinary femme identified person are they/them. See Davy, *Wyrđ Ecology*, 204.

³⁵³ Pichette, “#HavamalWitches.”

³⁵⁴ Dodie Graham McKay, “#HavamalWitches Hashtag Earns Applause and Backlash - Canada, News, Paganism,” *The Wild Hunt*, July 20, 2017, <https://wildhunt.org/2017/07/havamalwitches-hashtag-earns-applause-and-backlash.html>.

³⁵⁵ Pichette, “#HavamalWitches.”

³⁵⁶ Davy, *Wyrđ Ecology*, 200.

³⁵⁷ Davy, *Wyrđ Ecology*, 35–36.

and gender identities, some of whom serve in prominent leadership positions, such as Vindisir gythia Jade Pichette, who is a nonbinary femme.”³⁵⁸

Critically viewing how the different genders are treated within the Heathen movement requires a reflexive lens, and conversations on what is or is not acceptable in terms of gender treatment and enactment go deeper than online discourse. The acceptable forms of gender performance and manhood acts can be traced to the beginning of the Heathen movement and within the societal norms Heathens seek to recreate.

Embedding the conceptions of acceptable masculine and feminine performances into the Heathen movement was a backlash to the conditions that spawned it. The way for #HavamalWitches was not only paved: it was inevitable. Now, anti-racist, Inclusive Heathenry appears to be moving toward a new form of Queer Heathenry in which gender roles are becoming increasingly rejected and reoriented. Now that Heathen performance is being reconstituted away from the original masculine ideals in Heathen acts, there is potential for a new unique subculture to develop.

Chapter 3 Conclusion

As Heathen practitioners mature, they are critically analyzing the movement and causing it to evolve. Practitioners are now forced to take a stance on racism, either a racist or anti-racist approach. As part of deconstructing any remnants of racist practice, Inclusive Heathens now critically analyze each element of the movement to reduce any remaining barriers to practice for racial, gender, and sexual minorities. Inclusive Heathens are actively working to make the movement welcoming and appealing to potential practitioners, no matter their background.

³⁵⁸ Davy, *Wyrd Ecology*, 13.

Inclusive Heathenry is now sitting in an interesting, yet precarious position in which adherents continually critique what is seen as negative in the Heathen movement as a whole. The firm adherence to historical accuracy and gatekeeping behaviour is shifting. Now, Inclusive Heathens are instead scrubbing away racist residue and critically analyzing parts of the Heathen worldview previously taken for granted, such as the religiosity of beards.

#HavamalWitches opened the conversation about reducing misogyny in the Heathen community and its ripples are felt worldwide. Critically analyzing the role of gender, especially masculinity, in Heathenry has pushed the conversation in a socially progressive direction. It is also important, however, for Inclusive Heathens to recognize all gendered acts as social constructs to avoid continued gender essentialism and reification of gender norms. In the next chapter, I will discuss how Heathen conceptions of “place” affect Heathens’ sense of connection to the physical world.

Chapter 4: Constructing Senses of Place

Introduction

Many religious movements have both a location and story of origin which become real to their followers in various ways. The relationship with ritual, racism, gender, and rejection of normalcy in contemporary Heathenry is actively linked to an understanding of place and nostalgia – an idyllic construction of the northern European Viking Age through a sense of place in its relation to history.

“Sense of place” is a concept used to explain the feelings, attitudes, and behaviour one has towards a geographical location which inform the culture in an area. Heathens, like many followers of other contemporary pagan movements, develop a relationship with the land on which they live through their practice. Thus, Heathens develop a conventional sense of place in lived-in locations bolstered by an encouraged relationship with nature, but also a second sense of place based on an interpretation of the Viking Age and their perceived relationship to it.

Similar to other paganisms, the concept of nature, and therefore physical geography, play a central organizing theme in Heathenry.³⁵⁹ For many adherents, northern Europe is treated as sacred as ancestral homeland and originating point of Heathen gods and traditions.³⁶⁰ The countries of Iceland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, and Germany are the setting of the vast majority of Heathen *Lore* and often thought of as a geographic link between the gods and the land.³⁶¹ The second sense of place to discuss, therefore, is the one Heathens construct to view themselves as

³⁵⁹ Calico, *Being Viking*, 430.

³⁶⁰ Calico, *Being Viking*, 430; Alessio and Wallis, *Faith, Folk and the Far Right*, 38.

³⁶¹ Mathias Nygaard, “Symbol and Ritual in Contemporary Norwegian Asatru,” *Nova Religio* 26, no. 2 (2022): 54, <https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2022.26.2.49>.

belonging to northern Europe in addition to, or replacement of, that of belonging to their lived-in locales.

Heathens prescribe their culture onto place. A feedback loop is created in which a mythic sense of place is projected on an idealized understanding of real-world northern Europe. The imagined northern Europe thus informs Heathen culture. Both racist and Inclusive Heathens treat the Viking Age as a mythic homeland that, to varying degrees, is inscribed on lived-in places through narrative and ritual that claim the land.

As an overwhelmingly white group, many Heathens lack a sense of belonging to a place and “suffer from the normalcy and rootlessness of their racial category.”³⁶² Heathenry addresses the subsequently shallow racial identity by rooting members to a mythic ancestral homeland in a way that feels authentic, constructing a sense of place to address feelings of rootlessness. Because there is no centralized doctrine for Heathens, a mythic sense of place is neither mandated nor uniform. It is nevertheless developed and encouraged through the idea of connection to a distant homeland.

A sense of place rooting practitioners to an imagined form of northern Europe connects Heathens to a perceived point of origin in Germanic paganism that informs their identity. In this chapter I discuss the ways contemporary Heathens construct both a “lived-in” (geographic) and “mythic” sense of place that informs practitioners’ actions and constructed identities.

³⁶² Snook et al., “Heathens in the United States,” 47.

Sense of Place

Sense of place is an idea used in a variety of social sciences including geography, psychology, sociology, and anthropology.³⁶³ It is an admittedly vague concept which multiple scholars have attempted to define. At its simplest, “sense of place” is “the perception of meaning associated with a site”³⁶⁴ and connected to “social and cultural variables, such as ethnic and religious background.”³⁶⁵ It is developed through the experience of and in a location, but forms of “experience” vary from living within a specific location to through stories and images. A sense of place exists solely in the beholder’s senses and mind and becomes real to that person, informing culture.³⁶⁶

For Shmuel Shamai, sense of place consists of the “feelings, attitudes, and behaviour towards a place which varies from person to person, and from one scale to another... consist[ing] of knowledge, belonging, attachment, and commitment to a place.”³⁶⁷ Some scholars emphasize a “personal involvement” of living in a specific location to develop a sense of that place.³⁶⁸ The idea of place, however, is becoming “more and more independent of location”³⁶⁹ as sense of place becomes broadened outside of a lived-in location to “the sense of belonging, community and communality... less directly dependent on location than has been the case traditionally.”³⁷⁰

³⁶³ Christopher Boyko, “Sense of Place,” in *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research* (Springer, Cham, 2023), 6319, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-17299-1_2650.

³⁶⁴ Suzanne Elizabeth Bott, “The Development of Psychometric Scales to Measure Sense of Place,” in *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses* (Ph.D., Colorado State University, 2000), 304594267, p. iii, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global Closed Collection.

³⁶⁵ Shmuel Shamai and Zinaida Ilatov, “Measuring Sense of Place: Methodological Aspects,” *Tijdschrift Voor Economische En Sociale Geografie* 96, no. 5 (2005): 467, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9663.2005.00479.x>.

³⁶⁶ Shmuel Shamai, “Sense of Place: An Empirical Measurement,” *Geoforum* 22, no. 3 (1991): 354, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0016-7185\(91\)90017-K](https://doi.org/10.1016/0016-7185(91)90017-K).

³⁶⁷ Shamai, “Sense of Place,” 354.

³⁶⁸ Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, Research in Planning and Design ; 1 (Pion, 1976), 29.

³⁶⁹ John A. Agnew et al., “Agnew, J.A. 1987: Place and Politics: The Geographical Mediation of State and Society,” *Progress in Human Geography* (London) 27, no. 5 (2003): 606, <https://doi.org/10.1191/0309132503ph451xx>.

³⁷⁰ Agnew et al., “Agnew, J.A. 1987: Place and Politics: The Geographical Mediation of State and Society,” 606.

Robin Datel and Dennis Dingemans relate sense of place to “the complex bundle of meanings, symbols and qualities that a person or group associates (consciously and unconsciously) with a particular locality or region.”³⁷¹ Through symbols and associations, a sense of place then develops into a standard of who belongs and who is “Other.” Referencing Robert Sack’s work on power relations,³⁷² Gillian Rose writes that “those who belong to a particular place are distinguished from those who do not; and while the latter may be excluded from that place, the former are expected to conform to its conventions.”³⁷³

In addition to a lived-in sense of place, Heathens are also encouraged to develop a sense of place in a second way; what I am calling a mythic sense of place. Interpreting sense of place as the association of meaning with a geographic site having its own symbols, I define the mythic sense of place as the perceived connection to a mythic homeland. A mythic sense of place is mediated through the Heathen subculture, based on personal understandings of Heathenry’s roots in northern Europe, religious practice, and interpretations of Heathen *Lore*, comprised of pre-Christian Germanic history, poems, and stories.³⁷⁴ The Viking Age, therefore, becomes an imagined “place”.

The Viking Age as a “Place”

The population of North America was pre-disposed to feeling connected to Germanic and Scandinavian cultures through immigration, direct and indirect contact.³⁷⁵ Those in North America

³⁷¹ Robin E. Datel and Dennis J. Dingemans, “Environmental Perception, Historic Preservation and Sense of Place,” in *Environmental Perception and Behavior: An Inventory and Prospect*, ed. Thomas F. Saarinen et al. (University of Chicago, 1984), 135; as cited in Boyko, “Sense of Place,” 6319.

³⁷² RD Sack, “Sack, R.D. 1986: Human Territoriality: Its Theory and History. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Author’s Response,” *Progress in Human Geography* (London) 24, no. 1 (2000): 96–99.

³⁷³ Gillian Rose, “Place and Identity: A Sense of Place,” in *A Place in the World? : Places, Cultures and Globalization*, ed. Doreen Massey (Milton Keynes : Open University ; New York : Oxford University Press, 1995), 100.

³⁷⁴ Calico, *Being Viking*, 64.

³⁷⁵ Calico, *Being Viking*, 5.

heard stories and myths about the Norse gods, evidenced by the “cultural receptivity [to] the Norse god Thor”, “an icon of American pop culture in the early 1960s as a character in the Marvel comic book series.”³⁷⁶ A connection to northern Europe was therefore not created in a vacuum. The increased receptivity formed from mythological stories and a pop cultural understanding of Vikings and Norse mythology set the stage for a heightened sense of place to northern Europe as a mythological homeland.

The geographies comprising Heathen identity formation often are not separated into distinct countries but instead refer to a mythic unified form. The Heathen gods themselves are highly enculturated in the imagined geographies.³⁷⁷ Stefanie von Schnurbein traces the Heathen unification of myths and religion having connection to land to Johann Gottfried Herder and Jacob Grimm, who concluded that “the proximity between German and Scandinavian languages implied similarities of mythologies... an organic unity of landscape, climate, nature, language, culture, poetry, and mythology.”³⁷⁸

Contemporary pagans are now “revising history and remapping space based on their own inclinations.”³⁷⁹ Anne-Marie Gallagher, a pagan scholar-practitioner, wonders if “getting our history and occasionally our geography wrong is part of constructing a Pagan identity.”³⁸⁰ She discusses the confusion of the contemporary pagan term “Celtic”, which is subsequently conflated

³⁷⁶ Calico, *Being Viking*, 5.

³⁷⁷ Calico, *Being Viking*, 288.

³⁷⁸ Stefanie von Schnurbein, “Tales of Reconstruction. Intertwining Germanic Neo-Paganism and Old Norse Scholarship,” *Critical Research on Religion* 3, no. 2 (2015): 153, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050303214567671>.

³⁷⁹ Réka Szilárdi, “Ancient Gods - New Ages: Lessons from Hungarian Paganism,” *Pomegranate* 11, no. 1 (2009): 44–57, 44139058, <https://doi.org/10.1558/pome.v11i1.44>; as cited in Robert A. Saunders, “Pagan Places: Towards a Religiogeography of Neopaganism,” *Progress in Human Geography* 37, no. 6 (2013): 797, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132512473868>.

³⁸⁰ Anne-Marie Gallagher, “Weaving a Tangled Web? Pagan Ethics and Issues of History, ‘Race’ and Ethnicity in Pagan Identity,” *Pomegranate* 10, no. Winter (1999): 23, <https://doi.org/10.1558/pome.v13i10.19>.

with “British”, “Welsh”, and “Gaelic” in a disregard of cultural and historical specificity.³⁸¹ Consequently, an imaginary “Celtic” nation is formed.³⁸² An imagined geographic nation combines with nostalgia in which the past is treated as a foreign country, which Robert Saunders terms “religiogeography.”³⁸³ For Heathens, “the Viking Age” and “northern Europe” constitute a bounded, idyllic homeland and sovereign nation.

Some reconstructionist Heathens take a more factual historical approach to religiogeography and interpret academic articles specifying a time period and originating country, such as Iceland, Norway, or Germany.³⁸⁴ Others, however, have an imagined understanding of the Viking Age as a time period and location conceived through the lens of shared whiteness, conflating all of pre-Christian Germanic Europe into a single object. When cultural specificity breaks down, practitioners construct connection to a mythic homeland with a further imagined religiogeography.³⁸⁵

For many North American Heathens, “pre-Christian Germanic Europe” or “Viking Age Scandinavia” is imagined as their movement’s place of origin. In a reversal of perceived Christian attitudes by which many pagans feel subjugated, paganism is constructed as “natural” with all other religious movements seen as aberrant.³⁸⁶ Ancient, mythic spaces such as “the ‘proto-Indo-European hearth’, the ‘Celtic realm’, and pre-Christian Europe” are privileged.³⁸⁷ The imagined

³⁸¹ Gallagher, “Weaving a Tangled Web? Pagan Ethics and Issues of History, ‘Race’ and Ethnicity in Pagan Identity,” 21.

³⁸² Gallagher, “Weaving a Tangled Web? Pagan Ethics and Issues of History, ‘Race’ and Ethnicity in Pagan Identity,” 21.

³⁸³ Saunders, “Pagan Places,” 797.

³⁸⁴ See Gundarsson, *Our Troth. Vol. One, History and Lore*; Bil Linzie, *Reconstructionism’s Role in Modern Heathenry*, July 13, 2007.

³⁸⁵ Saunders, “Pagan Places,” 796.

³⁸⁶ Saunders, “Pagan Places,” 797.

³⁸⁷ Saunders, “Pagan Places,” 797.

origin of the Heathen movement is subsequently reconstituted in whatever is the practitioner's present location.

A Lived-In Sense of Place

Jennifer Snook writes that “to be correctly and authentically Heathen... the pursuit of a deep understanding of the ancients’ worldview is paramount.”³⁸⁸ The ancient worldview is seen as one which does not distinguish among religion, work, home, and politics.³⁸⁹ Likewise, contemporary practitioners are encouraged not to treat religion as outside of other arenas of their identity in their lived location.

For Heathens and other contemporary pagans, an understanding of the “land” becomes an ultimate symbol of faith.³⁹⁰ Barbara Jane Davy writes, for example, about the Inclusive Heathens of the Raven’s Knoll community who incorporate Indigenous territorial acknowledgments to further a symbiosis with the land and honour a connection to place.³⁹¹ The Heathen approach to land is a combination of a lived-in and mythic sense of place. The bond between practitioners and geographic space is one which “more closely resembles the links between territoriality and spirituality that characterize East Asian faiths... and the indigenous religions of the Americas, sub-Saharan Africa, and Oceania.”³⁹²

For those in the pagan movement, rites are most frequently held outside as the “closest context to the sacred”, encouraging practitioners to develop a heightened relationship with their geographic setting.³⁹³ Thus Heathens, whether individually or as a group, often perform common

³⁸⁸ Snook, *American Heathens*, 52.

³⁸⁹ Snook, *American Heathens*, 52–53.

³⁹⁰ Saunders, “Pagan Places,” 792.

³⁹¹ Davy, *Wyrd Ecology*, 96.

³⁹² Saunders, “Pagan Places,” 792.

³⁹³ Calico, *Being Viking*, 468.

rituals such as offerings, *blót*, and *sumbl* outdoors.³⁹⁴ Offerings can be made to deities as well as beings with whom they share land, *landvættir*, and/or house wights (spirits).³⁹⁵ The gift-giving relationship developed through offerings and other ritual activities are understood to be one in which practitioners give to local spirits and deities so that they may receive blessings in turn as a form of gift from the geographical place itself.³⁹⁶ Heathens consciously build a relationship with other entities on the land through ritual, such as spirits and deities, developing a strong lived-in sense of place.³⁹⁷

Heathens, like other contemporary pagans, develop a lived-in and mythic sense of place based on both physical geography and the imagined origins of their movement. The setting of “northern Europe” developed through a perceived geographic connection to Heathenry’s roots combines the historical and the fantastical. The present-day reality of Scandinavia is often idealized or ignored completely if it does not line up with a Heathen ideal. As I demonstrate further in this chapter, Heathens instead inscribe their own understanding of a place onto the desired landscape, both local and distant, to impose what they see as truly Heathen into the world.

A Heathen Mythic Sense of Place

Contemporary Heathens do not necessarily generate a connection to place through living on the land that they feel a kinship with, however. All forms of Heathenry have some form of idealization of Germanic and northern Europe because that is where the practices and mythology they draw upon originated.³⁹⁸ It may not necessarily be believed that Germanic mythology has

³⁹⁴ Calico, “22. What Is Heathenry?,” 69.

³⁹⁵ J. Blain, *Wights and Ancestors: Heathenry in a Living Landscape: With Other Selected Essays on Place, Wights, Consciousness and Ancestors* (Prydein Press, 2016), 23 as cited in; Davy, *Wyrd Ecology*, 140.

³⁹⁶ Strmiska, “Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives,” 40.

³⁹⁷ Davy, *Wyrd Ecology*, 96.

³⁹⁸ White, “Northern Gods for Northern Folk,” 242.

carved its way into the rocks and plants of its originating countries, but a lived-in place is treated as such.

Heathens, like transients and tourists to other locations, develop a cursory understanding of place.³⁹⁹ Although they often do not experience the geographic locations which inspire their mythological understanding of the originating area of their movement, practitioners develop complex relationship with a perceived place of origin as a mythic sense of place. Unlike studies of the sense of place found in digital worlds whose visits can be mediated through a screen,⁴⁰⁰ the North American Heathen concept of a Viking Age world cannot necessarily be visited. Heathens are instead informed by an idea of ancestral homeland.

In her writings about the American Heathen context, Jennifer Snook states that the racial group of “white” bears the “privilege of normalcy and ‘default’ Americanness” but does not extend past an otherwise superficial racial belonging, relied upon for celebrations the likes of St. Patrick’s Day and Oktoberfest.⁴⁰¹ The mythic sense of place developed by Heathens is a means of finding rootedness beyond the shallow belonging found in culturally constructed “whiteness.”

It is important to note that both the mythic sense of place developed by Heathens and “blood and soil” ideologies are responses to rootlessness, arising “when belonging becomes contested and identity becomes complicated – when people begin to wonder where and who they are.”⁴⁰² A mythic sense of place is not the same as blood and soil ideologies, however, which hold that “ethnicities emerge from the earth itself” and “suggest that the land... inscribes itself into the very

³⁹⁹ Robert Hay, “Sense of Place in Developmental Context,” *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 18, no. 1 (1998): 9, <https://doi.org/10.1006/jevp.1997.0060>.

⁴⁰⁰ See Katrina Paola Banas Alvarez, “MMOG Players’ Sense of Place in Virtual Worlds” (Nanyang Technological University, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.32657/10356/154528>.

⁴⁰¹ Snook et al., “Heathens in the United States,” 47.

⁴⁰² Calico, “Land, Property, Asatru,” 199.

bones and souls of the people, weaving a story of belonging, of a natural, organic, and inseparable connection to a place.”⁴⁰³

Yi-Fu Tuan describes belief systems rooted in a place like ancient Heathenry, as opposed to those having omnipresent and omniscient deities, as “religions of the local type.” Such movements “[have deities which] have no power beyond the vicinity of their particular abodes; they reward and protect their own people but are harmful to strangers; they belong to a hierarchy of beings that extends from the living members of a family... to ancestors and spirits of dead heroes.”⁴⁰⁴ Contemporary Heathens expand the sphere of influence for “local deities” while continuing the belief that they originated from and are rooted in an idealized form of northern Europe. Rootlessness is thus solved and Heathens are grounded in their local surroundings through a connection to a mythologized past.

Religions of the local type also “encourage in their devotees a strong sense of the past, of lineage and continuity in place.”⁴⁰⁵ Contemporary pagans combine the attachment to place in their local landscape with the imagined mythic homeland in an effort to turn to the “land” in lieu of a sacred text or religious artifacts.⁴⁰⁶ A mythologized form of northern Europe read about in the *Lore* and a mythic sense of place subsequently become real to the practitioner.

The veneration of local deities found in pre-Christian belief systems, rather than a universal deity, bind a people to a place.⁴⁰⁷ Heathens therefore develop a mythic sense of place linking them to northern Europe regardless of whether or not they have ever travelled there. Some Heathen groups take an exclusionary approach to their feeling of connection to northern Europe, such as

⁴⁰³ Calico, “Land, Property, Asatru,” 198–99.

⁴⁰⁴ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place : The Perspective of Experience* (University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 152–53.

⁴⁰⁵ Tuan, *Space and Place : The Perspective of Experience*, 153.

⁴⁰⁶ Saunders, “Pagan Places,” 792.

⁴⁰⁷ Tuan, *Space and Place : The Perspective of Experience*, 152.

Stephen McNallen's concept of metagenetics in which religious and cultural experiences in a locale are inscribed on a person's DNA, and is therefore restricted to specific groups.⁴⁰⁸

Racist forms of Heathenry use boundaries inscribed onto space to determine who belongs and who does not. Non-exclusionary, Inclusive groups may be welcoming to all, but still inscribe their interpretation of Heathen culture onto the land. Culture is inscribed both physically, such as through the construction of shrines and symbols,⁴⁰⁹ and socially through ritual and designation of property as belonging to a specific group.⁴¹⁰

A sense of connection to a mythic homeland is further created by Heathens through subcultural activities such as storytelling and rituals. Lectures and stories about "ancient Germanic history, geography, and culture... offer insight into the conditions, philosophies, and cultural practices of the people they perceive as their pagan forebears."⁴¹¹ Reconstructionist Heathens in particular aim to piece together their movement in "what they view as its most authentic form, unadulterated by modern influence and interpretation."⁴¹² They connect themselves to characters such as the affectionately named "Herman the German", in a reinvention of the Battle of Teutoburg Forest which "allowed [their] folkway to survive" and be carried to a new continent.⁴¹³

Jennifer Snook recounts an experience at a Heathen history where the presenter recounts Arminius (Hermann) of the Cherusci's routing of the Roman forces. The lecturer was following a pattern established from the sixteenth century onwards, whereby "nationalists fashioned the Germanic leader into an icon to help them forge unity in the face of such perceived enemies as the

⁴⁰⁸ Calico, *Being Viking*, 183.

⁴⁰⁹ See Elson, "An Ontario Heathen Community's Cultural Selection Criteria," 65, 91–92, 96, 98–99; Davy, *Wyrð Ecology*, 33, 118–29.

⁴¹⁰ Calico, "Land, Property, Asatru."

⁴¹¹ Snook, *American Heathens*, 48.

⁴¹² Snook, *American Heathens*, 49.

⁴¹³ Snook, *American Heathens*, 48.

Vatican, the French, and the Jews.”⁴¹⁴ The story of Herman the German is also used by contemporary Heathens to reconstruct a historical “truth.”⁴¹⁵ Heathens engage in contemporary myth making through communal lectures and engagement with literature to better understand and engage with their ancestral forebears, developing a connection to their imagined homeland.

Similarly, ritual behaviour encourages and strengthens the development of a mythic sense of place.⁴¹⁶ The practices of *sumbl* and *blót* not only heighten a lived-in sense of place but a sense of connection to a mythic homeland. Similar to experiencing stories like Herman the German’s, contemporary Heathens are connected to their forebears through performing rituals their ancestors are understood to have practiced. Heathens believe that they are repeating the actions of their pre-Christian Germanic ancestors, a venerated group, in a contemporary context which repeats and re-creates ancestral practice.⁴¹⁷ Placing Heathen actions into the “authentic” Viking Age category of “the way things were done”⁴¹⁸ rather than “religion” situates Heathens in both their lived and imagined contexts simultaneously.

Each Heathen ritual enactment, whether *blót*, *sumbl*, offerings or another form, also develops a sense of connection to the land from which the rites are understood to be from, northern Europe. While creating a relationship and sense of place with lived land, a link is formed to an ancestral homeland through ritual. Heathens create connection to both local and faraway imagined places, each reinforcing one another in a positive feedback loop. As practitioners reenact ritual imagined to be ancient, they develop a stronger sense of place in their lived locations while also

⁴¹⁴ Snook, *American Heathens*, 48.

⁴¹⁵ Snook, *American Heathens*, 49.

⁴¹⁶ Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 29.

⁴¹⁷ See Davy, “Inclusive Heathens Practice Ancestor Veneration, but Not Pride in Ancestry.”

⁴¹⁸ Snook, *American Heathens*, 53.

reifying their connection and sense of belonging to an ancestral homeland, further informing ritual practice.

Constructed Belonging to “the Land”

Heathens seek to correct their displaced sense of place and root themselves through belonging in the movement and recreation of a mythic Viking Age practice in their own locales. Gallagher poses the question about developed pagan religiogeographies: “what might the consequences of [pagan historical and geographical] myth-building be?”⁴¹⁹ The answer lies in the multiple approaches Heathens take to realizing a sense of place and rootedness. Through conflating senses of their local place with that of a distant ancestral homeland, Heathens both knowingly and unknowingly connect themselves to two places which they subsequently seek to make into one. Contemporary Heathens construct Indigeneity and claims to land through two different, but related, approaches: “blood and soil” ideology and strategies to create cultural place attachment.

I will employ the terms “Indigenous” and “indigenous” as outlined by Graham Harvey: “Indigenous” refers to those peoples and nations which have a historical continuity and distinct presence from other sectors of society; “indigenous” is instead an origin point.⁴²⁰ A peoples’ belonging as Indigenous is created “through accumulated knowledge and practice of living in a land and being in relationship with its geography, ecosystems, and living processes over time.”⁴²¹

Traditional North American Indigenous approaches to land are about living *with* the land rather than as an imposition on it.⁴²² Some contemporary pagans use their connection to a location

⁴¹⁹ Gallagher, “Weaving a Tangled Web? Pagan Ethics and Issues of History, ‘Race’ and Ethnicity in Pagan Identity,” 21.

⁴²⁰ Graham Harvey, “Introduction: Indigenizing Movements in Europe,” *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 9, no. 2 (2019): 169, <https://doi.org/10.1558/ijsnr.37619>.

⁴²¹ Calico, “Land, Property, Asatru,” 199.

⁴²² Calico, “Land, Property, Asatru,” 199.

to imagine themselves to be Indigenous Europeans and practitioners of a revived ancient religion,⁴²³ but instead impose a sense of belonging onto the land.

Blood and soil ideologies are based on the pseudo-scientific assertion that place and religious practice are encoded in a group's "racial soul" and/or DNA,⁴²⁴ popularized by the Nazi party and employed by racist groups such as the Asatru Folk Assembly (AFA).⁴²⁵ The desire to be Indigenous is part of Heathenry's appeal along with the discovery of rootedness and a firm sense of place.⁴²⁶ Constructed Indigeneity is a strategy used by both racist and Inclusive Heathens.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the Asatru Folk Assembly (AFA)'s approach can be illustrated by the Kennewick Man as a strategy employed to prove Heathens belong to North America as Indigenous inhabitants. The establishment of Heathens as Indigenous is a merging of lived-in and mythic senses of place that inscribes a pseudo-historic form of northern European culture onto the social and physical landscape.

Although the connection proposed by Stephen McNallen in 1998 between pre-Christian Germanic religion and the 9,000-year-old Kennewick Man discovered in North America was debunked,⁴²⁷ narratives portraying "white" people as the true inheritors of the continent persist. In the case of contemporary pagans, a continuity of place considered to be necessary for Indigenous groups of peoples has been interrupted due to Christianization.⁴²⁸ Arguments for Heathens as Indigenous are based on the supposition of a reconstructed ancient religious tradition, indigenous

⁴²³ Snook et al., "Heathens in the United States," 48–49.

⁴²⁴ Alessio and Wallis, *Faith, Folk and the Far Right*, 81.

⁴²⁵ See McNallen, *The Philosophy of Metagenetics, Folkism and Beyond*.

⁴²⁶ Davy, *Wyrd Ecology*, 96.

⁴²⁷ Calico, *Being Viking*, 173–75.

⁴²⁸ Suzanne Owen, "Is Druidry Indigenous? The Politics of Pagan Indigeneity Discourse," *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 9, no. 2 (2019): 235–47, <https://doi.org/10.1558/ijnsr.37622>.

to a place in northern Europe, as religious descendants and rightful inheritors of a place.⁴²⁹ Whether it is proposed as Indigeneity to northern Europe or North America, an internal mythic sense of place is once again externally inscribed onto a place.

The Kennewick Man example is not the only strategy to argue for the externalization of a mythic sense of place through Heathen indigeneity. Jefferson Calico identifies four “folkish” strategies Heathens use to inscribe their internal sense of culture onto a place.⁴³⁰ They are the “Vinland” rhetorical strategy, the strategic use of an Icelandic term for North America; the ethnostate political strategy, “a dream of establishing a racially pure, whites-only zone”; the land-spirit relational strategy in which a connection is forged with mystical nature spirits; and land-taking ritual strategy in which the perimeter of an area is walked by practitioners carrying fire, such as a lit torch.⁴³¹ I will discuss more extensively the land-spirit relational and Vinland strategies as the most obvious combinations of fostering lived-in and mythic senses of place.

Perhaps most notable for the land-spirit relational strategy approach shared by racist and Inclusive Heathens, Kveldulf Gundarsson discusses the migration of “wights from ancestral lands... to newly settled lands.”⁴³² In his point of view, spirits of the land are believed to have been brought with immigrants to their new place of worship. Gundarsson writes that “[spirits] are quite likely to have fared by ship to the New World... and since much of Vinland is [sic] not heavily settled... they are likely to have found good homes.” Colonization can therefore be retroactively

⁴²⁹ Lee Gilmore, “Pagan and Indigenous Communities in Interreligious Contexts: Interrogating Identity, Power, and Authenticity,” *Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 20, no. 2 (2018): 179–207, <https://doi.org/10.1558/pome.32588>; Owen, “Is Druidry Indigenous?”; Bjørn Ola Tafjord, “Romantic Indigenizing of New Religions in Contemporary Europe Critical Methodological Remarks,” *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 9, no. 2 (2019): 303–27, <https://doi.org/10.1558/ijnsr.37626>.

⁴³⁰ Calico, “Land, Property, Asatru,” 200–204.

⁴³¹ Calico, “Land, Property, Asatru,” 201–3.

⁴³² Kveldulf Gundarsson, *Elves, Wights, and Trolls* (iUniverse, 2007), 23.

seen to have taken place on both geographic and ideational levels, whereby immigrants from northern Europe make their mark on the physical and spiritual landscape.

The land-spirit relational strategy which marks a physical landscape as spiritual, like the land-taking ritual strategy, is not inherently racist and also practiced by Inclusive Heathens.⁴³³ The concept of bringing spirits from an ancestral homeland to a new one, however, lends further credence to the mythic sense of place. If one believes that spirits of place are literally brought to a new landscape, it is a slippery slope from the belief one should live well with other Indigenous spirits and peoples to believing Heathens have the right to colonize North America or are an Indigenous group themselves.

Both the land-spirit relational and land-taking ritual strategies are a means to impose an internal sense of place on a physical landscape and combine the lived-in sense of place with a mythic sense of place. The personal view of Heathen subculture and sense of place are moved from the invisible and internal to an external and visible display of ownership. Both of the aforementioned strategies may be inscribed on a place through ritual offerings or the establishment of shrines. The next approach, the “Vinland” rhetorical strategy, is instead a strategy employing the intentional use of language used to justify a living history.

The term “Vinland” is inherited from surviving medieval texts and thought to have been used by the Vikings to refer to the land south and southwest of Greenland.⁴³⁴ The use of the term Vinland is combined with the established ancient Viking presence at L’Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, Canada, and bolsters Heathen claims to ownership of North America.⁴³⁵

⁴³³ Calico, “Land, Property, Asatru,” 201–3.

⁴³⁴ Christopher Crocker, “What We Talk about When We Talk about Vinland: History, Whiteness, Indigenous Erasure, and the Early Norse Presence in Newfoundland,” *Canadian Journal of History* 55, nos. 1–2 (2020): 92, <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjh-2019-0028>.

⁴³⁵ Crocker, “What We Talk about When We Talk about Vinland.”

Credibility of these claims is further validated by the recognition of L’Anse aux Meadows as a UNESCO World Heritage site.⁴³⁶

L’Anse aux Meadows is a tourist attraction and the only known North American “archaeological site containing artifacts that are universally accepted as evidence of a... [Viking] presence.”⁴³⁷ Radiometric carbon-14 dating has confirmed Viking presence in 1021 CE.⁴³⁸ The amount of time that the Vikings spent at the settlement was “probably a matter of years rather than decades”,⁴³⁹ though recent evidence has shown that the Vikings may have been present for up to 200 years.⁴⁴⁰ If this is the case, presence was likely not continuous.⁴⁴¹ The existence and presence of North American Indigenous peoples, however, proven to live in the same area, is obfuscated and subsequently erased by narratives of northern Europeans claiming the land, or claims to the land.⁴⁴²

The Vinland rhetorical strategy reconceptualizes North America as a place which belongs to the Vikings and is used as evidence for Heathens to identify themselves as rightful inheritors of North America or as an Indigenous population.⁴⁴³ Their sense of place developed as a lived-in area is merged with the same sense of place for an ancestral homeland, making Vinland fertile ground to recreate a mythic Viking golden Age in the present.

⁴³⁶ Paul M. Ledger et al., “New Horizons at L’Anse Aux Meadows,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116, no. 31 (2019): 15341, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1907986116>.

⁴³⁷ Crocker, “What We Talk about When We Talk about Vínland,” 92.

⁴³⁸ Margot Kuitens et al., “Evidence for European Presence in the Americas in Ad 1021,” *Nature* 601, no. 7893 (2022): 388–91, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-021-03972-8>.

⁴³⁹ Birgitta Wallace, “The Norse in Newfoundland: L’Anse Aux Meadows and Vinland,” *Newfoundland Studies* 19, no. 1 (2003): 25, Érudit.

⁴⁴⁰ Ledger et al., “New Horizons at L’Anse Aux Meadows”; as cited in Crocker, “What We Talk about When We Talk about Vínland,” 92.

⁴⁴¹ Ledger et al., “New Horizons at L’Anse Aux Meadows”; as cited in Crocker, “What We Talk about When We Talk about Vínland,” 92.

⁴⁴² Crocker, “What We Talk about When We Talk about Vínland,” 95.

⁴⁴³ Calico, “Land, Property, Asatru,” 200.

Chapter 4 Conclusion

A sense of identity is constructed for all forms of contemporary paganism based on belonging to an idealized nation in the form of a mythic homeland outside of geography and history. Of this group, Heathens are more likely to use a blend of historical and literary sources to establish their sense of belonging to place as members of such mythic nations. A “lived-in” sense of place is developed from the direct experience of living and performing ritual in a geographic place, while the “mythic” sense of place is created through experiencing a mythic homeland through ritual and stories. Heathens inscribe their culture onto a place through imagining themselves as inheritors of an ancient custom from a specific geographic place which they have rightly brought to a new one.

Both the lived-in and mythic senses of place are blended through methods that construct Heathens as rightfully belonging in whatever setting they find themselves, such as ritual and rhetorical strategies. The same approaches of merging lived-in and mythic senses of place are used by both racist and Inclusive Heathen groups: either to claim that North America belongs to them, or that they belong to the continent.

Conclusion

Contemporary Heathenry is a dynamic new movement facing growing pains as it evolves into maturity. The support or opposition of racist discourse takes a central place in the development of the movement as practitioners struggle for both religious legitimacy and sole ownership of the “Heathen” label. Through this process, some Heathen organizations, groups and practitioners cling more strongly to “recreating” the past while others are more consciously inspired by history to create the future. Practitioners are drawn to the lack of central authority, doctrine, and holy text in Heathenry which allows for more creative freedom in their ritual and practice. Unfortunately, this also complicates the development of any Heathen standards as practitioners draw on their own linguistic, historical and personal sources. Thus, individual Heathens govern one another on the personal, regional, national, and international levels.

Inclusive Heathenry’s loudest disagreements have been about social activism and progressive politics; conversations are about race, gender and sexuality rather than theology or personal praxis. The relationship that members have with racism, sexuality and gender continues to shape attitudes within the Inclusive Heathen movement and constitute the primary criteria used to enforce the inclusion or expulsion of members. I have explored three poles of Heathenry as a contemporary pagan movement as it navigates classification as “religious”: racism, masculinity, and the relationship with history and place.

Due to its history of racist usage and current polarization of political beliefs, Heathenry has now been distilled to a racist and anti-racist form. Anti-racist, Inclusive Heathens have begun to shift back in line with the larger contemporary pagan movement’s progressive politics, although practitioners are still predominantly white. In the process of deconstructing racism in Heathenry, all aspects of the movement are now subject to analysis. Those ideals which may cause unintended

harm or prove a barrier to inclusive practice, such as the prizing of “Viking Age” masculinity and colonialist approaches to land, are now placed in the spotlight.

The approaches to legitimacy in response to allegations of racism were analyzed of three different Heathen organizations: The Troth, The Heathen Confederation of Canada (HCC), and the Asatru Folk Assembly (AFA). The self-declared anti-racist organizations, The Troth and the HCC, rely primarily on legal positioning and coalitions with governments in their bid for ownership of the Heathen label, eschewing terms like “church” and “religion”. Both organizations take the position that they are not churches in an effort to be more historically accurate and respect the decentralized nature of Heathenry. Alternatively, the largest organized racist Heathen group, the AFA, actively embraces its exclusionary practices and construction as a religious movement which mirrors Christianity. The AFA has its own clergy, clearly delineated beliefs, practice and doctrine, and has recently dedicated its fifth church, or *hóf*, in the USA.

In response to allegations of misogyny and racism, Inclusive Heathens redoubled their celebration of diversity in an effort to distance themselves from white supremacist groups. In so doing, they have begun to develop a unique form of Queer Heathenry. Heathenry is still considered the most masculine contemporary pagan movement, as evidenced by the disproportionately high number of male practitioners, but its relationship with gender is in flux. The veneration of stereotypically masculine values and the fantastical Viking warrior ethos embedded into Heathenry in the 1970s continues to be idolized, but is now being drawn out. The debate on Heathen beards for men as a religious requirement illustrates how ancient conventions of gender are placed under the category of “religious”, treated as a form of divine mandate, and leveraged for privileges previously held primarily by visible minority groups.

A focus on reconstruction and historical accuracy complicates the legacy of gendered ideals for Inclusive Heathens as the pre-Christian Germanic world assigned “masculinity” a plus value. Common ways to perform Heathenry which constitute “Heathen acts” for all genders are physical strength, ability to consume large amounts of alcohol, and the wearing of beards for men. There were, however, multiple understandings of masculinity in the Viking Age, providing evidence for those focused on reconstruction to alter understandings of what social conventions must be upheld as Heathens.

Like other contemporary pagan movements, physical geography continues to play a central organizing role in Heathenry as practitioners attempt to orient themselves towards nature. Heathens develop a “lived-in” sense of place for the location in which they reside, and a “mythic” sense of place for an imaginary ancient Heathen sovereign nation. Practitioners no longer suffer the shallowness of “white” as their racial category; but are instead rooted to a mythological Heathen place of origin in a way that feels authentic. Some Heathens rely on selectively chosen historical evidence to imagine themselves as Indigenous to a place, often North America or Europe, either to claim it for themselves or to justify belonging in their current location.

Inclusive Heathenry’s primary concern since 2016’s *Declaration 127* has been to sever ties from those practitioners deemed racist or otherwise problematic. Inclusive Heathenry now faces declining membership, however, and the loudest conversations continue to be about terms and activism. If Inclusive Heathenry is to continue its claim as the dominant form of Heathenry as previously mentioned in the Introduction (page 12), I recommend practitioners find a unifier other than progressive political action with unclear requirements, such as more opportunities to practice in-person, priesthood training programs and shared ritual frameworks.

In this thesis, I have focused in new ways on patterns in Heathen practice through pre-existing literature. I recommend further research into uniquely Inclusive Heathen recruitment and retention of members. I also recommend further inquiry into how Heathens imagine themselves as indigenous and the evolution of Queer Heathenry outside of southern Ontario.

The legacy of racism found in Heathenry's turbulent beginnings cannot, and should not, be forgotten. Viewing history as fluid rather than static will further understanding about how Heathenry has developed, and the ways it continues to do so. Diversity is Inclusive Heathenry's strength. Understanding the impacts racism had on the early days of the movement is imperative for situating current Inclusive Heathen practice and building a unified future for diverse practitioners.

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