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## "I Have My Coven Now": Transgender Experience in the Central Florida Pagan Community

Alison Whitmore  
*University of Central Florida*

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“I HAVE MY COVEN NOW”:  
TRANSGENDER EXPERIENCE IN THE CENTRAL FLORIDA PAGAN COMMUNITY

By

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B.A. Anthropology East Carolina University 2018

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Science  
in the Department of Anthropology  
in the College of Sciences  
at the University of Central Florida  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis analyzes Transgender experience and dynamics in the Pagan community of Central Florida. Religion plays an important role as part of social structure for many people in the United States. It can also be a source of strife and conflict between culture groups and within cultures. In the US, predominant religious traditions stem from monotheistic Abrahamic faiths (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam); however, Wicca, a Neo-Pagan polytheistic religion, is practiced by a small but growing number of people. Based on nearly one year of ethnographic engagement with the Central Florida Wiccan community, this study presents an analysis of participants' experiences in Wicca, especially as it refers to the experiences of Trans Wiccan practitioners and their religious communities. I argue that the theology underlying Pagan religious beliefs and practices, alongside shared experiences of othering and liminality, encourages the maintenance of an open, accepting and encouraging atmosphere towards LGBTQ+, and particularly Trans, Wicca practitioners.

*To all my guides and the people who have given me suggestions and advise throughout  
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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Religion is central to many cultures and often provides societal organization. It can also be found at the center of strife and conflict between different demographics within societies (Stein and Stein 2017). I chose to examine non-dominant religions, such as Paganism which pulls from ancient polytheistic religions. At one point in time, forms of polytheism were dominant to Abrahamic religions. This is visible in the archaeological record throughout the Mediterranean region (Stone 2014). Greece, Italy, and Egypt are iconic examples of polytheistic societies. In modern Western culture Abrahamic traditions, namely Christianity, are dominant to Paganism and other forms of polytheism (Sandstrom 2016). This religious dominance switch has left contemporary Pagans, or Neo-Pagans, on the sidelines of mainstream culture, often marginalizing and stigmatizing individuals for their religious beliefs (Cookson 1997).

These Polytheistic religions, contrary to Abrahamic religions, worshipped gods and goddesses valuing both male and female divinities. This difference between the two drew me to research gender within modern Paganism. In my research for this thesis, I primarily interacted with Wiccan groups in Central Florida. Contemporary Paganism is made up of many groups that all pull practices and deities from ancient religions. For example, Asatru is a modern take on traditional Norse Pagan religion. Wicca is influenced by many different old Pagan religions and modern practices.

### *Wicca in the Contemporary US: Practitioner Perspectives*

In order to study any religion a researcher should examine the beliefs, opinions, and traditions of the practitioners. I will now provide a background on Wicca from practitioners'

books and other written works, concluding this introduction with an overview of applicable scholarly articles on witchcraft and Wicca.

Wiccans and witches began to emerge around the same time in the 1950s, though many claimed a historical family practice (Conway 2001, Chamberlain 2015). The original branch of Wicca is known as the Gardnerian branch, named after its founder Gerald Gardner. Gardner is generally referred to as the “father of Wicca” (Buckland 1986, Cunningham, and Nightingale 2017). Gardner lived in the United Kingdom and was interested in the history of non-traditional religions there. This interest brought him into contact with a group that claimed to be practicing an ancient religion on which he later based much of his work. In the 1950’s Gardner founded the first Gardnerian coven (Gardner 2004). As Gardner’s followers moved to different areas of the United Kingdom or United states, new branches of Wicca were formed. In the present day, there are a multitude of different Wiccan traditions. The four most prominent are: Gardnerian, Alexandrian, Dianic and Eclectic. It is difficult to pinpoint how many covens of each path exist in the United States or around the world due to the secrecy of many practitioners; they are wary of coming out publicly (Cookson 1997). Covens or Circles are individually organized and run without an overseeing body such as a Christian diocese. There is no one person in charge of the entire religion, as with Catholicism’s Pope. .

### *Practitioner’s historical basis*

There was a period of time (typically traced to the 1400s to 1700s), referred to by practitioners as the “Burning Times”, where supposed witches were persecuted, typically burned at the stake, hence the name (Conway 2001, Cunningham 2017). Most Wiccans continue to see that period as an example of how the Christian church views Pagans and non-‘traditional’ practices. As such, a majority of Wiccans continue to practice their faith in private, keeping it a

secret from most people outside of their practice, including family, friends, and their coworkers (Conroy 2001, Chamberlain 2015). This will be referenced in the literature review through academic interpretations of the “Burning Times”.

### *Variations of Wiccan Practices*

There is great variation among Wiccan practices. However, all Wiccan paths exhibit some commonalities. All Wiccan paths share a similar core belief that life is sacred, and they celebrate the divinity of males and females by worshipping a God and Goddess as the manifestations of the universe’s creative forces (Chamberlain 2015).

There are four main branches of Wicca today: Gardnerian, Alexandrian, Dianic, and Eclectic. All have similar core beliefs with slight differences in how they worship or perform rituals. Eclectic is the most diverse of the four as it pulls aspects of the other three, but also aspects of other Pagan religions as well.

### *Wiccan Beliefs*

The Wiccan faith focuses on the idea of the “Wheel of the Year” which was popular in old agricultural communities (Conroy 2001). This concept is tied to the seasons and as such the celebrations, or Sabbats, ensured that the community was planting and harvesting at the correct times. A major part of the mythology around the “Wheel of the Year” is the union of the God and Goddess to ensure a good harvest and the continued prosperity of the community; this is now a central part of the Wiccan faith (Chamberlain 2015). Wicca is a nature religion; the founders and modern practitioners pull from older community traditions to help synchronize their religion with the earth’s seasons to work in harmony with the earth (Conroy 2001, Chamberlain 2015).

While Wicca is often vilified in mainstream and fundamentalist Christianity as devil-worship, this is not accurate; Christian constructs like the Devil are not part of Wiccan beliefs (Buckland 1986, Chamberlain 2015, Conway 2001, Cunningham 2017). A common misconception puts Wicca in opposition to the Christian church; however, they typically do not identify themselves in this way unlike the Satanic church. The Satanic church does claim direct opposition to Christianity, Wicca does not. Wiccans do not see their religion as related to the church, though it came about as an alternative to Christianity. One of the main reasons Wiccans claim they are not directly connected to Christianity is that the Christian God, and other Christian entities, do not exist in Wiccan religion, partially because there is not an equally powerful female deity in the Christian mythos (Chamberlain 2015, Conway 2001).

#### *Wicca from the Academic Viewpoint*

Despite Wicca gaining popularity and followers in the United States, it remains poorly understood by most of Western society and especially other religions. Jo Pearson conducted a study examining how the violent image of the witch portrayed by the media, both in perpetrating violence and being a victim of violence, has played into the new feminist wave of witches and Wiccans (2010). Pearson utilizes feminist theories to examine the construction of a feminist persona around the archetype of the witch and examines how Wiccan groups abhor and distance themselves from the violent image of the witch. The mass portrayal of witches in the media has influenced young women to explore witchcraft even if they have had no actual contact with another witch (Berger and Ezzy 2009). Berger and Ezzy examine how media about witches and Wicca, especially with easily accessible resources online, can help influence and develop the beliefs and personas of these young women. They did not explore how men may become witches. Both these studies show how the focus on witches as powerful forces in media and the

emerging availability of information online and in print bring forward a new wave of people intrigued and interested in becoming witches.

### *Persecution and Discrimination in the Academic Record*

Continuing persecution of witches has a negative effect on Wiccans. Catherine Cookson (1997) describes several instances of anti-witchcraft sentiments causing difficulties for Wiccans. One event took place in June of 1992, when a group of Wiccans residing in Salem, Massachusetts received discrimination perpetrated by a Christian minister who held a “concert” that turned into an anti-witchcraft rally (Cookson 1997, 742-743). Cookson also examines what she terms “private attacks on Wiccans” among which she includes eviction from housing or rented office spaces, being fired from their jobs, and personal attacks or desecrations of sacred locations or meetings. One example pertained to an Oregon Wiccan who began publishing a newsletter about Pagan beliefs and Wicca. Soon after his publication began, the sacred circle of his coven was desecrated and destroyed. The man stopped his publication, not seeing it as a worthy reason to bring harm upon his fellow coven members (Cookson 1997, 745). Outside the US, Titus Hjelm documents persecution of Wiccans in Finland. Hjelm argues that this continuing persecution leads to different ways of legitimizing the Wiccan faith, depending on where the practitioner is and their own situation (Hjelm 2006). Hjelm examines how Wiccans in Finland legitimize their faith by separating it from the image of the satanic witch and from the common belief that Wicca or witchcraft is inspired by the popular Harry Potter franchise; a misconception which is prevalent among people unaware of Wicca or other Pagan traditions. His study shows how different strategies are required by individual Wiccan practitioners to help legitimize their faith to their family and community.

### *Pagan Discrimination in the news*

More recently in the United States, Pauline Hoffman accused St. Bonaventura University, a Catholic University, of religious discrimination. This resulted in a lawsuit against the St. Bonaventure University in 2019 (Avery 2019). Professor Hoffman claimed that after notifying the university that students wanted to interview her about her Wiccan beliefs, her superiors made her sign forms saying she would uphold the Roman Catholic ideals of the university. Her direct superior allegedly verbally responded that if she were Jewish instead of Wiccan she would not have had to sign. She also alleged that they passed her over for a promotion and were pressuring her to resign from her position as a dean because of her religious beliefs (Avery 2019). In March of 2021 Tammy McCoy filed a lawsuit against Panera Bread for religious discrimination (Ove 2021) after she was fired by the company on August 1st 2020 after several months of harassment.

### *Religious Demographics in the United States*

While religious practices in the United States are diverse, Christianity remains the majority religion representing about 73.7% of the total population: 48.9% Protestant, 23% Catholic, and 1.8% Mormon (Newport 2019). Due to their decentralized and often secretive practices, the number of Wicca and other Neo-Pagan practitioners is unknown. Although Wiccans are often discriminated against by other religious groups, there are examples of Wiccan groups thriving in predominantly Christian areas. One such group is the House of Oak Spring which purchased several acres of land in a suburb of Atlanta in 2000 (Smith 2008). Smith's study shows that Wiccans can integrate and function within the community if tolerance can be improved among the non-Wiccan and non-Pagan members of that community. Though the group was initially met with fear and hostility by their neighbors, they eventually became a part of the

community and accepted by the suburb's other residents. Smith explicitly states that this does not mean the non-Wiccan and non-Pagan residents accept Wiccan spirituality, but more they see the value of the Wiccans as neighbors and community members. Smith explains that this acceptance is based on the economic and quality-of-life benefits that residents enjoy due to the continued presence of the House of Oak Spring.

### ***Trans Experiences in the US and the Potential of Wicca***

Trans people in the United States experience bias against them from many different directions, including their families, religious leaders, and employers. A “Trans needs assessment” conducted in 2015 by the Washington DC Trans Coalition found that Trans people are still in need of basic rights already enjoyed by cisgender people (Edelman et al 2015). This study was only open to residents of Washington DC and therefore represents a fraction of the total Transgender population of the United States. In 2015, only 42% of Trans people over 25 in Washington D.C. had attained an associate degree or higher, of which 66% were white Trans people. Over 46% of their respondents made below \$10,000 a year and 36% of their respondents reported unemployment. 1 in 4 of their respondents reported being denied a lease due to their perceived gender, of which Trans-feminine individuals were twice as likely to be denied as Trans-masculine individuals. The authors also reported that 74% of their respondents had been verbally assaulted, 42% were physically assaulted, and 35% reported being sexually assaulted.

### ***Trans Discrimination in the news***

In the past several years many anti-Trans bills have been introduced, but the start of 2021 has seen the most bills introduced to date, which include preventing access to medical care and participation in school sports (Holt 2021, Yurcaba 2021). Some of the states to have already passed these bills, which were introduced in 28 states, include Mississippi, Tennessee, and

Arkansas (as of March 29<sup>th</sup>). These bills prevent Trans teens from accessing puberty delaying medications and also ban them from participating in school sports. This legislation has caused a stir on many social media sites, raising questions about LGBTQ rights moving forward. These bills mirror many of the previous bills, which would have required Trans individuals to utilize bathrooms of their birth assigned gender. In this thesis, I argue that Pagans and Trans-people both occupy a liminal place in society, which in some instances may draw them towards one another. Through shared experiences of stigma and othering they create a community for themselves outside of dominant society. In addition to this, I examine if the Trans individuals I worked with feel included and valued within their Pagan group.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This review will examine literature available in multiple disciplines regarding Wicca and Transgender experience. I will begin with Wicca, to set a background for where I am studying Trans experience, then I will examine academic interpretations and research regarding Trans individuals.

### *Wicca*

Archaeological evidence suggests the existence of religions which worshipped both masculine and feminine deities (Stone 2014). In archaic societies this worship seemed egalitarian, meaning that male and female deities were of similar or equal importance.. Examples of this include ancient Greek, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian religions and their pantheons. While these religions are typically considered to belong in the past, Wiccans and other neo-Pagans have attempted to revive these ancient religions. Thanks to popular culture, one of the best-known varieties of contemporary paganism in the United States is Wicca. Wiccans are able to choose their deities from any ancient pantheon they prefer allowing them a more personal connection to the deities.

### *History of Witchcraft and Wicca*

The history of witches and magic in European tradition stretches back centuries. In *The Witch: A History of Fear*, Ronald Hutton firmly places the initial Christian view of witches in a historic context. Though the criminalization of witchcraft did not occur until 1542 in England, fear was still present prior to this and caused widespread paranoia and persecution of people who were considered outsiders of the community, someone they could blame should something bad happen to the community such as a bad harvest (Davis 2017). The last anti-witchcraft law was repealed in 1951 (Hutton 2017).

Returning to the topic of the “Burning Times”, as mentioned in the introduction, Glenn Shuck suggests that contemporary Wiccans organize their “narratives of oppression” through a historical model of the “Burning Times.” He also proposes these narratives seek to surpass questions of victimization and provide Wiccans with a means of resisting pressures and to help create a novel formation of the self and community. Shuck argues that the creative aspects of the Burning Times mythology present idealistic possibilities for the unification of the Wiccan community (2000, 1-3).

Anne Barstow’s book *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts* (1995) examines historical records of witch hunts from the late Middle Ages and Renaissance (1400’s to early 1700’s) for insight into what caused the persecution of witches at the time. The documentation in her book supports a historical basis for the “Burning times” narrative but gives a clearer picture of what individuals were targeted and for what reasons. Barstow found that the wide-spread paranoia regarding ‘witches’ and magic was both economically, religiously, and politically motivated. Economically, Europe was experiencing a period of exponential population growth. In addition, centralized governments and reform-minded churches required scapegoats for the economic difficulties befalling their citizens. At this point, the negative connotations typically associated with heretical demon worship were transferred to witches. Barstow demonstrates that women were more persecuted for witchcraft than men. Seeking to examine violence against women and better understand its causes, Barstow concludes that the primary use of witch hunts was for control of women and their means of self-employment.

Barstow also describes how during the Renaissance, women in smaller villages, typically those further from centralized control, could take up the role of “Wise Women”. These women would find themselves holding positions of power in their communities. As the church and

state's power grew the role of wise woman became much riskier. Wise Women were hounded and harassed by authorities, from churches and the country's government, constantly being accused of different transgressions. This control then tightened, and women were forced into more acceptable roles for patriarchal societies and religions, mainly staying in the house and presiding over family affairs.

### *Witchcraft in Scholarship*

Margaret Murray was one of the first anthropologists to study groups of witches in England. She argued that witches were persecuted by an intolerant church (1921). Her book is still read by Wiccan practitioners and researchers studying Wiccan groups today. However, one of her main assertions, that modern witches are direct descendants of an ancient religion, has been disproven (Hutton 2017). Murray sparked great interest in witches and soon other researchers, including the founder of modern Wiccan religion, Gerald Gardner, began their own studies (Gardner 2004). Later, T. M. Luhrmann studied Wiccan covens and groups of magicians around London in the 1980s. Luhrmann was interested in the persistent superstitious beliefs these groups maintained while most of western society had already discarded them (1989). Despite these studies, witches, witchcraft, and Wicca remain poorly understood and understudied by anthropologists and mainstream US society. Several studies and journalistic accounts document continuing persecution of witches and Pagans, having massive effects on their personal and professional lives (Cookson 1997, Hjelm 2006).

Sociologist Helen Berger authored some of the best-known articles and books that examine contemporary witchcraft. She discusses multiple aspects of witchcraft and becoming a witch in her co-authored book *Teenage Witches: Magical Youth and the Search for the Self* (Berger and Ezzy 2007). Berger and Ezzy argue that most young people who become witches

have no previous strong theological opinions, and that typically ‘recruitment’ occurs through friend networks. Ties to people in their new witch group tend to strengthen, while those to outsiders can lessen (83-85). Berger also published a book examining solitary practitioners versus group practitioners (2019). Berger explores different reasons someone may be solitary including physical isolation, lack of interest in a group, or apparent lack of time to devote to a group. This book also provides census data on the individuals. Berger, along with two other scholars, published *Voices from the Pagan Census: A National Survey of Witches and Neo-Pagans in the United States* (Berger, Leach, and Shaffer 2003). This book provided opinions and estimated demographic information for Pagan populations across the entire United states; not a small feat considering other sources indicating Pagans prefer to stay in hiding.

### ***Studies on Sexuality and Community in Wicca***

Within academic research on Wicca and Pagan communities, a subset of scholars devote attention to the ways in which sexual practices are included in or affect the spiritual aspects of the community.

Sex magic and Wicca have been intertwined since the beginning of the religion due in a large part to Gerald Gardner who saw his movement as a liberation from oppression and required his covens to practice in the nude to signify this liberation (Urban 2008,162-163). Religious scholar Christopher Partridge argues that Neo-Pagan religions contrast significantly with Judeo-Christian gendered and sexual ideologies in which women’s identification with Eve as temptress then identifies women with sins of the flesh and leading men astray with their sinful nature (53-54). Partridge’s commentary on the patriarchal structure of Christianity and its devaluation of the female body is based upon, and supported by, the work of several feminist scholars (Berman 2015, Davary 2008, Pillay 2015, Schalkwyk 2002). In contrast, in Neo-Pagan religions, sex and

sexuality are not stigmatized but are understood as part of nature and, as such, a gift from the God and Goddess. Gardnerian covens also participated in something Gardner termed the Great Rite; a sexual rite performed to signify the union of the God and Goddess at certain times of the year. However, many modern groups do not require nude practice and perform the Great Rite symbolically rather than physically.

The idea of a divine union or marriage is not new, and some have associated the Wiccan Great Rite with the ancient Greek ritual of Hieros Gamos. In an article comparing the Great Rite to Hieros Gamos, Samuel Wagar discusses what he terms the core of the Wiccan religion (2009). In his article *The Wiccan 'Great Rite' - Hieros Gamos in the Modern West*, Wagar argues that the Great Rite is a central part of the Wiccan religion, that sex magic is a large part of its performance, and that Wicca is practiced by a 'clergy'. He notes that Wicca is open to both genders and all sexual interests, but that most often it attracts heterosexual individuals. According to practitioner sources (Chamberlain 2015, Conroy 2001, Cunningham 2014), Sex Magic is not required in most groups, though Wagar's discussion on the union of the God and Goddess being central to the Wiccan faith is still accurate for many Wiccan groups.

Sarah Pike has also researched sexuality in Neo-Pagan religions, especially how the feminist and sexual liberation movements have affected the ideals and practices of many Neo-Pagan groups (2006). These movements have encouraged Neo-Pagans to include sexuality and gender as areas for personal healing and change as well as places where personal growth and Transformation can be most effective. . Pike's book, *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves* (2001), examines Neo-Pagan festivals as community spaces. She notes that these festivals are places for self-expression and discovery in addition to playing a role as community meeting places. At these festivals, Neo-Pagan individuals can dress, or perhaps un-dress, as they see fit and be

completely open about their own beliefs and practices; something typically lacking for them when they are in public in Western society. She notes that these events, and particularly the rituals conducted while in attendance, create space for individuals to experience and examine gender roles and sexuality, thereby allowing masculine and feminine individuals to ‘play’ with different aspects of themselves as individuals. Pike explains that the beliefs and traditions relating to sexual practices caused difficulties for non-binary participants. Since masculinity and femininity are not connected to biological sex, non-binary people could not participate in some of these sexual practices or feel included to the same level as cis-gender participants. Neo-Pagans continue to examine and work through difficulties around sexuality and gender because, according to Pike, they feel that even though the work is difficult, personal change can implement change on a greater societal level. Pike also discusses that Neo-Pagans view sexuality as sacred and as such tend to be more accepting of different sexualities and identities. *Earthly Bodies* does not discuss Trans people, though Pike notes many lesbian or gay individuals, after being disenfranchised by Christian churches, were pleased to find a ‘home’ in Neo-Pagan faiths

Other scholars have found that there appears to be a shared community between some Pagan practitioners and BDSM participants. . Some religious practitioners of the contemporary Pagan movement have embraced spiritual BDSM, or “sacred kink,” as a spiritual discipline relating to their tradition (Mueller 2017). Jo Pearson discusses the connections between Wicca and BDSM dungeons in her article *Inappropriate Sexuality? Sex Magic, S/M and Wicca (or ‘Whipping Harry Potters’ Arse!’)*. Pearson explores the connections or similarities between Wicca and the BDSM dungeon. She finds these similarities come from the work of the founders of modern esotericism including Gerald Gardner, Alex Sanders, and Aleister Crowley (2005). Crowley was a founder of his own religion. He participated in extreme forms of magic and

sexual acts that make most Pagans and BDSM people alike refute his beliefs and practices and refuse to acknowledge him (Urban 2008). Michelle Mueller describes what she terms “sex wars” (debates around pornography, prostitution, and sadomasochism), as salient points of contention among Pagan practitioners (2017). Mueller focuses her research on the Wiccan Rede of “Harm None” which is then juxtaposed against “All acts of pleasure are Her rituals,” a saying popularized by another important figure in the formative years of Wicca, Doreen Valiente in *The Charge of the Goddess* (2017). Pearson bases her argument on how Wicca emerged as a foil to the Christian churches of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century (2005). Pearson argues that Wicca resists societal norms created by a dominantly Christian society by including magic and placing women in positions of power, but also by drawing heavily on BDSM techniques (such as scourging and binding). Pearson claims these techniques are especially prominent in rituals and initiations, even as these techniques have been distilled into symbolic rather than physical forms (p.40). Though a rhetoric of disruptive sexuality is retained in Wicca, the emphasis lies in its symbolic value and ‘dangerous sex’ is largely forbidden (p.40). Pearson observes that Wicca can “not remove itself from two thousand years of Christianity any more than Christianity can rid itself of the thousands of years of Paganism prior to its existence” (p.40). Mueller explores how debates over sexual practices have caused significant strife in the Pagan community. She found that while support for BDSM has become the dominant public perspective in twenty-first-century Paganism, many members who are also second-wave feminists have difficulty settling BDSM within their more conservative feminist theology (2017). Combining Pearson and Mueller’s research, one could say that Wicca still struggles with Christian and societally acceptable ideas when it comes to expression of sexual practices and orientations within the religion. Pearson concludes that there is a middle ground between Christianity’s views of sex and Aleister Crowley’s ‘extreme’ sexual

practices, which in some cases went beyond the safety and liberation of BDSM techniques (p.40). This middle ground can be found in Wicca, and for some women this religion has provided empowerment and freedom.

The tenet that Michelle Mueller included in her research, that all acts of love and pleasure belong to the Goddess, is part of contemporary Wiccan theology. Christine Kraemer says that Wiccan covens are accepting of many sexualities and sexual interests considered deviant in mainstream US culture (Kraemer 2012). Kraemer notes that this acceptance has drawn many members of LGBTQ+ communities to the Pagan community and that it has caused a queer Pagan culture to develop. Kraemer describes how Pagans continue to struggle with essentialist notions of gender because the religion was founded by a heterosexual, cis-gendered, white man. Gerald Gardner's opinions and beliefs about gender and sexuality still affect many Wiccan groups today, which causes conflicts within the larger community. Specifically, Trans people have encountered some harassment from more archaic groups (2012). The role of community acceptance is key to understanding the formation of community in Wicca and Neo-Paganism. Helen Berger conducted extensive research into what components are present within Pagan communities in her book, *A Community of Witches* (1999). Berger's book considers the different parts of life that create a close-knit community. She notes that many aspects of life not typically directly part of a religion, like politics or activism, can be a major aspect of the community within a Wiccan group. She also examines how most new members come in through their circle of friends; they may have already been part of the community, if only on the fringe, prior to initiation into the group. In another book, *Solitary Practitioners* (2019), Berger notes that most Pagans, even those who practice alone, have contact with other Pagans on a regular basis either in person or through the internet. She examined different elements of this created community

including, age, gender, and nationality. Berger found that these practitioners successfully create a sense of community through shared experiences of their introduction to the religion, books they have read while researching it, and even their own experiences (p.83). This ability to create community through different shared beliefs, experiences, and locations is not dissimilar to other groups, organizations, or religions. Community strength is based on shared experiences. This means that people who participate in similar activities, sexual practices, reading circles, and religions form communities that may overlap.

### ***Transgender studies***

Trans people are among the most persecuted and vulnerable populations in the United States. Western categorizations of sex and gender are dualistic, yet many people in contemporary society find these categories restrictive. Sex refers to an individual's biological designation and is widely seen as binary, male or female. However, this does not explain or account for the existence of intersex individuals; those born with combinations of chromosomes, sex hormones, or genitals that do not fit the accepted binary structure, which make up approximately 2% of the world population (Blackless et al 2000). Intersex infants usually undergo genital normalizing surgery shortly after birth to make their outward sexual characteristics match the societal norm (Davis and Murphy 2013), though this practice has been met with increased resistance from intersex advocacy organizations (Mendez et al 2018) and has been denounced by the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture (Méndez 2011). Thus, one can argue that although biological sex at first glance appears to be binary, this binary is also complicated by the existence of people who do not fit into male and female categories. Western society has interpreted sex being 'binary' with gender also having to be 'binary', this is the basis for a majority of the difficulties faced by non-binary people in Western society.

In contrast to sex, which is understood as biological, gender, as we see it in Western society, is a combination of social roles and performative expectations associated with a person's perceived sex (Stryker 2017). In Western society, people experience pressure to conform to the social expectation and behaviors associated with their assigned gender. Social pressure to conform, experienced as desires for relationship maintenance and self-preservation, as well as the overwhelming need to actualize an identity that fits within the binary system of sex and gender, illuminate the gender conformity exhibited among Trans people (Koyama and Weasel 2002).

Contrary to Western understandings of gender, anthropologists have documented the existence of alternative gender systems in a multitude of societies (Dickerman and Torres 2019). In India, Hijras, people who are considered neither men nor women, were held as sacred to Bahuchara Mata, and are believed to be able to give blessings and bring good fortune (Nanda 1999). As such, they are integral to Hindu cultural milestones, such as births, weddings, and deaths. However, at the same time, they have been devalued and are treated more as outcasts, often relegated to sex work. Nevertheless, in 2009 the governments of India and Pakistan recognized hijra as a legal third sex (Khaleeli 2014). Native Americans also have a term for their own LGBTQ members, Two Spirit, agreed upon during the 1990 gay-lesbian Native American and First Nation conference. Two Spirit describes individuals who fit some of the following categories: gay or lesbian, traditions in which there are multiple gender categories, Transvestites, Transsexuals, and drag queens. The term was chosen to replace 'berdache' which is considered offensive (Zimman and Hall 2009). Two other examples of third genders, or simply traditional non-binary gender categories, are the Fa'afafine of Samoa and the Muxes of Mexico. The Fa'afafine have long been part of Samoan culture. They are similar to Hijras in that their role is

partially societal and historically religious. Fa'afafine are biologically male individuals who perform female gender roles and duties (Vasey and Vanderlaan 2007). Muxes are Hispanic, South American and Mexican, biologically male individuals who perform female gender roles (Dickerman and Torres 2019). These examples demonstrate that gender does not have to be binary, but is in fact a flexible social construct.

The first records in the United States of an intersex individual date from the 1620s in Virginia, and the first laws against cross-dressing were added into Massachusetts lawbooks in the 1690s (Stryker 2017). However, even with these earlier laws, it was from the 1850s to 1950s that the existence of Trans identity came under mounting social and medical pressure and regulation. Stryker notes that Trans people are perceived as less than human due to their gender expression and are often socially shunned and may be denied such basic needs as housing and employment because of their perceived Trans identity. An example of this inequality is the extremely short life expectancy for Trans women of color, approximately thirty years (Edelman et al 2015). In the US, members of minority groups, such as the Transgender community, often try to oppose or change discriminatory practices and prejudicial attitudes by banding together with other marginalized groups to voice their issues and form organizations to help address their needs. Trans women were leaders in the early fight for gay rights in the US. Stryker analyzes the Compton Cafeteria Riot of 1966 and the Stonewall Riot of 1969 as major turning points in Trans advocacy. The Gay Liberation Front spread quickly and was modeled on radical Third World liberation and anti-imperialist movements. The significant changes observed in the 1970s were due to groups like the Gay Liberation Front in the 1960s. These advocacy groups were mainly based in Gay liberation and activism, however, Trans activism did not gain traction until the 1990s. This has not been a unidirectional story of progress; there was an immense political

backlash, and members of anti-establishment groups often were on the receiving end of police brutality (Stryker 2017).

The 1970s also saw the rise of several anti-Trans groups and medical designations. Some feminists, typically associated with a small sub-set of second-wave feminism, explicitly rejected Trans women, applying a biologically reductionist argument to claim that “real” women had to be born biologically female. This claim essentially cut Trans people off from participation in this part of the feminist movement and laid the foundation for many groups against Trans identifying women and men. In 1973, the same edition of the psychiatric diseases handbook that removed homosexuality as a mental illness added Gender Identity Disorder (GID). GID was controversial among Transgender groups as they, rightly, resented having their identity listed as a psychiatric disorder. The 1990s saw a burst in Transgender activism; not the least among which was the advent of Transgender and third-wave feminist theory, specifically sex-positive feminism. However, some sex-positive feminists saw “Transgender” as a sexual practice rather than a gender identity (Stryker 2017).

### *Queer theory and Anthropology*

Queer theory emerged in the 1990s and focuses on non-normative sexualities. Some of the most prominent theorists are De Lauretis, Butler, Halperin, and Dowson, each of whom were fundamental in the start of queer theory as a field. This branch of critical theory focuses on the idea that sexuality and gender are socially constructed and works to remove social stigma associated with sexualities and gender expressions outside of the social norms. Even though Transgender activism has increased significantly since the 1990s, Trans people are still fighting for their rights and continue to be disowned and marginalized (Jagose 1996).

David Valentine is one of the most prominent queer anthropology researchers, his book *Imagining Transgender: an ethnography of a category* (2007) is still one of the most pivotal works present in Trans anthropological research. Valentine describes Trans people and their struggles, contemporizes queer struggle in general, and historicizes how these issues have come around and are, or are not, being addressed. Valentine notes that language association is extremely important in modern cultures and has been used to associate certain undesirable traits with the words ‘homosexuality’ and ‘Transgender’. He examines how community is built for Trans and homosexual individuals, not dissimilarly to how Berger did with Paganism, and what aspects of community have been the most influential. In his book, he not only discusses his ethnographic research within Trans community, he also discusses Transgender studies and anthropology as a burgeoning field of research. This section gives examples of different aspects, such as medical and sociological fields, that should be included in Trans research from an anthropological point of view. This melding of fields will provide the research conducted with a solid base and a better contextualization of Trans research. Queer anthropology, which appears to have a strong basis in Valentine’s work, is now a growing field (Boellstorff 2007, Walks 2014, Lewin 2016, Boyce, Engebretsen, and Posocco 2018, Dutta, Khan, and Lorway 2019). Don Kulick is an early comer to the field of queer anthropology, having written articles about queer people as early as the 1990s, one of these being on transgender sex workers in Brazil and their gender identities (1997). He discusses how a more in-depth analysis of gendered practices in Brazil, especially those of Trans sex workers could be informative on how gender in Latin America tends to be deeply connected with sexuality. He suggests that sexuality and gender in Latin American societies differ greatly from European societies, especially around men who are ‘not men’. Kulick also wrote an article discussing the roles of Trans sex worker “boyfriends

“(1997). He discusses the difference between Latin American and European roles and claims that the male partners don’t give their partners sexuality, but more a gender identity.

Another important work in queer anthropology is Eric Plemons’ book “The Look of a Woman” (2017). In this book, Plemons examines Facial Feminization Surgery (FFS), an operation that helps feminize Trans women’s facial features, which helps them to associate their gender identity with more than just their genitals and surgical sex reassignment (SSR). Plemons examines how this relatively new surgery affects Trans patients from consultation, to surgery, to recovery. His book is one of the primary and paramount examinations of Trans-Medicine. He discusses the aims of Trans-Medicine as well: especially how FFS changes the kind of sex that SSR aims to change. The work of Kulick, Plemons, and Valentine’s have set the stage and helped usher in the field of queer anthropology, where queer theory can be incorporated into ethnographic studies and meld with them.

### ***Liminality: Separation from dominant society***

The previous section discussed Trans history and activism. One idea present in most of the articles, books, and theories there in is the separation of Trans individuals from their families, workplace culture groups, religious groups, and neighbors. They are repeatedly removed and left out of dominant society groupings, as such they have no place that they ‘belong’. Liminality, as introduced by the anthropologist Victor Turner, relates to rites of passage in other cultures, particularly African and South Pacific groups where he studied (Turner 1967). Turner was known for his work with Liminality, the state of being separated from the group where the individual does not truly belong to the society but is not completely separate either. In the African groups that Turner worked with they would separate boys coming into adulthood, placing them at a different location, with minimal adult supervision. At this place they would

learn, from their supervisors, the rules and requirements of being a man in their society. Once they had finished learning they would be reintegrated into the society as a full adult status male. Some cultures had a version of this for women as well.

Modern interpretations and applications of Liminality have spread from analysis of book atmospheres and characters, to slumber party rituals, to what variety of effect detainment has had on immigrants.

In his article (2020) Klemens James focuses on the novel Platform (2001) by Michel Houellebecq, James examines the interrelationship between levels of Western social stigmatization and sex tourism in the developing world. This article shows how the novel depicts (primarily female) sex workers and their clients as liminal and interdependent entities. By applying concepts of liminality the article seeks a better understanding of the portrayal of the sex trade in Houellebecq's novel. In her 2017 article Julia Doroszewska examines how ancient classical literature, particularly ancient Greek and Roman literature, uses the suburbs as liminal places, particularly how demonic or evil entities operate on the fringes of towns. Stating that demons are seen as liminal beings and by virtue of their symbolic connection to the outskirts of towns, those outskirts are demonic and liminal. Slumber party 'rituals' (such as Cat Scratch, Bloody Mary, etc) are called into question by Anelise Farise in her 2017 article. She examines how belief is heightened by conditions of liminal space created by a slumber party. Farise explains that young individuals, primarily girls, participate in these games during a slumber party to experience a heightened sense of freedom. Mirian Martinez-Aranda's 2020 article introduces the concept of collective liminality, a shared condition of heightened threat and uncertainty experienced by immigrant detainees and their families, as they wait, caught between two possible outcomes, release into the US or deportation. Martinez-Aranda demonstrates the

broader "collateral consequences" that immigration detention inflicts on detainees' loved ones. She explains that the concept of collective liminality highlights how immigration detention functions as immigrant surveillance, punishment, and exclusion. These articles are all examples of how Liminality is currently being used. Another example is *The Nomads of Mykonos: Performing Liminalities in a 'Queer' Space*, published in *New Directions of Anthropology* number 29 (2008). The author, Pola Bousiou, focuses on a group of transient individuals who travel to and from the island of Mykonos, which in ancient Greek mythology functioned as a liminal place between humanity's world and the world of their gods. She explains the group she studied perform roles of 'work' and 'living' even though they are not from the island and do not live there year-round. They create a liminal place of 'belonging'. This version of liminality utilizes it as a transient coming and going, even if the person comes every year they do not quite qualify as a resident, as such they occupy an odd space of liminality.

Liminality has also been utilized within studies examining Trans experience, Pagan ritual, and liminality in feminist narratives (Crasnow 2020, Booth 2011, Sonnix, Roe, and Roxburgh 2020, Henesy 2019). Sascha Crasnow examined two trans artists and their utilization of hybrid figures from mythology in their art as a representation of their experience of 'belonging but not belonging' (2020). Crasnow examined this seemingly extended period of liminal existence where they neither belong nor don't belong to their societal groups. They note how these artists experiences denote a new idea of liminality, especially how it functions in the modern day, and new notions of hybridity. E. Tristan Booth examines, through *Queer Eye*, how the stability of gay identity contrasts the liminality of Trans identity (2011). This article focused specifically on one episode where the make over recipient was Trans, requiring the show to discuss with it's viewers the topic of Trans identity. It demonstrated the acceptance of

gayness, but not of Trans individuals, showing that Trans identity is still held in a liminal place in society. Trans individuals are kept at a distance and not accepted as part of society, this extended liminal identity is in contrast to the now accepted gay individuals. Megan Henesy looks at the utilization of a popular media figure, Sabrina the teenage witch, and how the character has been reimagined over different decades to represent the liminality of the teenage girl's life (2019). The character Sabrina has been turned into a gothic, feminist icon that walks between her identities and functions to change the world(s) around her through her own liminal position. Liminality has been examined in relation to Pagan ritual, as played with in the article by Sonnix, Roe, and Roxburgh from 2020; their article examines the psychological benefits of Paganism as centered around its rituals and the liminality demonstrated within the ritual phases.

Liminality, as utilized in these articles, has therefore been transformed from Turner's original definition as a temporary state into an extended period. For Trans individuals, as discussed by Crasnow and Booth, experience an indefinite state of liminality, where they have been placed by society. I will later argue that many Pagans also exist in this state of extended liminality.

### ***Transgender studies in Paganism***

Trans identity and its relationship to non-Christian Western religions have been considered by feminist and religious theorists, in addition to social scientists. For example, *Rape Culture, Gender Violence, & Religion: Biblical Perspective* examines the Christian Bible's ongoing relevance in contemporary discussions around rape culture and gender violence (Blyth et al 2018). The authors of this volume attempt to name the multiple forms of gender violence present within the biblical traditions, contesting the erasure of this violence within both the biblical texts themselves and their interpretive traditions. In addition, they consider the complex

connections between biblical gender violence and the perpetuation and validation of rape culture in contemporary culture. Gender violence can be tied to gender norms and gender performativity, a topic that Judith Butler has studied in depth. Her 1988 article *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory* focuses on gender performativity, phenomenology, and feminist theory. The author includes different theories on gender from philosophers and theorists from various fields, though she focuses on how gender performativity works with gender norms (Butler 1988). In the past, Transgender identity has been significantly understudied, except by certain feminist theorists like Butler and Stryker.

Paganism, on the other hand, has been studied by many different fields, though most prominently in anthropology and religious studies (Bado-Fralick 2013, Barstow 1995, Berger 2013, Clark 2016, Cookson 1997, Fennell and Wildman-Hanlon 2017, Hjelm 2006). One article examines the ways in which the modern legal system in a European jurisdiction, in this case England and Wales, has engaged with a counter-cultural minority religious movement, Paganism (Wheeler 2017). The article's authors seek to cast light on the question of what a post-Christian secular state does in practice when its commitment to pluralistic values encounters a group whose self-understanding challenges the norms of both Christianity and secularity. In more modern research conducted in the twenty-first century, Paganism is examined as an alternative to Christianity or analyzed for a continuum of conversion to paganism from one generation to the next (Clark 2016).

A recent study conducted by Lepage examines Transgender identity in Wiccan groups present in Montreal. In *Queerness and Transgender Identity: Negotiations in the Pagan Community of Montreal* (2017), Lepage notes that contemporary paganism portrays gender in a variety of different ways and is very inclusive of sexual diversity. He claims that much of this

phenomenon happens through what Pagans call witchcraft. He examines how witchcraft helps queer and Transgender Pagans take part in the Pagan community. He gives a brief definition of the Pagan movement as found in Montreal and examines how the Montreal traditions of Wicca and Reclaiming Witchcraft develop opposite views on gender. Reclaiming Witchcraft is a movement of feminists trying to reclaim the word witch and modify its social connotations. His research suggests that queer negotiations dealing with gender norms in Wicca, and in society at large, position participants in different ways in regard to religious and magical practices, as well as to the Montreal Pagan community (Lepage 2017).

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

This research is based on nearly one year of ethnographic engagement with the Central Florida Wiccan community. Including 15 hours of participant observation and 11 interviews. The following sections explain my selection criteria for participants, choice of location, research design, methods, data collection and analysis procedures, and a reflexive statement.

### ***Participant Selection***

Participants were selected using two main qualifiers, first that they were Pagan and second, they were active in the Pagan community. Even with these qualifiers I included one impromptu interview with a non-Pagan who chose to participate. A secondary qualifier that I hoped to fulfill was to have a few Trans participants, two elected to participate in the study.

### ***Location***

Pagan communities are present all over the United States. As such there were multiple areas this research could have touched, however based on time constraints and monetary factors I chose to conduct this research in the Central Florida area. Due to the cautious nature of most Pagan individuals, it was important to give my participants a feeling of security and comfort when it came to locations. Having them select the location for their interview permitted them to feel safe and be very comfortable in a familiar setting. As such interview and observation locations were largely chosen by participants, either the individual or by groups, and ranged from Orlando coffee shops to church meeting rooms to Sanford bookstores.

### ***Research Design***

The main focus of this research centered around my initial research question: Does the Pagan community provide a welcoming and inclusive community for Trans individuals? This research question was then supplemented with supporting questions, such as how do they create

this space if it is there? What does the community do to make sure all their participants are safe and feel comfortable?

I took inspiration from Queer anthropology for this study, a large collection of techniques combined to analyze what is present and then provide ways to change the structures of society to be more inclusive of every individual. Data collection methods for this study included participant observation with three local covens and semi-structured interviews with 10 individuals that identify as Wiccan or Pagan, and one non-Pagan individual.

### *Observation*

Participant observation is a hallmark of ethnographic research and allows the researcher to observe and participate with their study group (Dewalt and Dewalt 2011). Observation took place during Coven meetings at the invitation of the Coven and consisted of six events over the Fall and Winter of 2019. My observations primarily focused on rituals and group dynamics between participants. Covens prefer that observers, or “guests” of the Coven, do not take notes during events or rituals and I respected this preference, waiting until after the event when I returned to my car or home to write my observations. I was permitted to attend some general group meetings and potluck events in addition to some Sabbat<sup>1</sup> festivities and rituals. The group leaders only permitted my presence at the events their members felt comfortable having an outsider observe.

### *Interviews*

I conducted 11 interviews by the conclusion of the study. The interviews were semi-structured and most had impromptu questions brought up by interviewees responses to scripted

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<sup>1</sup> Sabbats are the Wiccan holidays associated with turning points in the year. Some groups have different names for them but three examples are Yule, Samhain (Halloween), and May Day or Beltane.

questions. Interviews lasted between 18 and 45 minutes depending on the participants. Interviews took place at coffee shops, metaphysical shops, and over the phone. Some locations permitted me to record interviews (low background noise and easily distinguishable voices), however other areas (not private or noisy) required that I take hand written notes and flesh them out after the interview, one interview took place impromptu and I had no recording devices (electronic or paper), so I did my best to write it from memory after. The interviews consisted primarily of female participants as only three males agreed to be interviewed. The main points of the interviews focused on whether the group provided a safe and openly accepting space for their Trans participants, and how the group/community treated gender in regards to the members.

### ***Sample and Recruitment Methods***

I began recruitment by emailing a group that I had heard about from my advisor at the university. Once I met my initial contact, she began sending emails and ‘introductory’ emails to other group leaders who in turn informed their members of my research. Then participants told other group members or friends about my research, continuing with what is referred to as the ‘snowball technique’ of recruitment.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

Data collection consisted of written material based on participant observation and interview recordings that were later Transcribed. For analysis my data first had all identifiers removed so that no one person or group could be distinguished, providing anonymity to the community and protecting members’ privacy. The data was then run through a coding software, NVivo, prior to analysis. I analyzed my data using a three-step grounded theory approach, looking for emerging themes through three different coding stages. During analysis, the data was

compared to see how the opinions on Trans people and gender roles contrasted between groups in Central Florida area.

***Reflexive Statement***

As a Pagan, I understand that the Pagan community tends to be secretive and unwilling to allow non-Pagans into their circles. This wariness is based on persecution and stigma against non-mainstream religions still present in society today. This understanding and my status as an insider within the larger Pagan community helps open communication with Wiccan groups who may not be comfortable working with a non-Pagan individual studying them (Sherif 2001). However, my affiliation to the Pagan faith may be interpreted by some as bias. I have strived to be detached and ensure that bias did not affect the data I collected for this study or the results.

*Table 1: Participant Demographics*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Gender Identity</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Group Affiliation</b>
<b>George</b>	M	Cisgender	White	Asatru
<b>Oak</b>	M	Cisgender	White	Circle
<b>Hydrangea</b>	F	Cisgender	White	Pagan
<b>Flora</b>	F	Cisgender	White	No Affiliation
<b>Rose</b>	F	Cisgender	White	Non-Pagan
<b>Lilac</b>	F	Cisgender	White	Triangle
<b>Violet</b>	F	Cisgender	White	Triangle
<b>Sage</b>	F	Cisgender	White	Triangle
<b>Plumeria</b>	F	Cisgender	White	Solitary
<b>Carson</b>	M	Transgender	White	Solitary
<b>Autumn</b>	F	Transgender	White	Circle

## CHAPTER FOUR: COMMUNITY

It was a cool Autumn day, for Florida, when I pulled into a parking lot at a large local park. There were already many cars there, the lot was at least three quarters full. I was attending an event called “Pagan Pride” which was suggested by other members of the Pagan community that I had already met. My initial contact, Violet, was on the event planning committee for it. She had said it was a very important part of the community and a national movement. Pagan Pride not only celebrated their pride in being Pagan, but also their LGBTQ+ members.

I got out of my car and could already hear the noise of people talking, children playing, and someone playing music. I headed off towards what I figured was the event, a largely populated area with tables set up. As I got closer, I could see the organization of the tables and noticed some shade tents had been set up. There was a section of the event specifically for vendors, local individuals or shops that had purchased a spot to sell their goods. There were homemade knitted or crocheted items, spell bags, potions, spell kits, dream catchers, and many more items that it was difficult to make a list unless you spent at least ten minutes at each of the tables talking to the smiling ‘shop keepers’. Another set of tables played host to a group of children doing different crafts and their observant guides in these activities. As I drew closer several of the adults watched me closely, until I was deemed not a threat and they went back to focusing more on the children. As I walked around, I smelled garlic or some other herb or seasoning on the air and noticed two food trucks had been hired for the event to provide food. There were picnic tables already present in the park, so the event had not set up extra tables for eating. I noticed that separated off from the vending area a bit there were people gathered around some musicians, the source of the music I had heard earlier. Later in the day these musicians were replaced by people acting out stories and plays. In another separated area there were groups

of people participating in and leading workshops and discussions, topics included; Wicca 101, Sound Bath Healing, Spirit Possession and Oracular work, and Tarot 101 (to name a few).

As I walked through the event, I listened to the tone of the people around me, the laughter and smiles on their faces helped reinforce what Violet had told me; the event was important for the community and also told me some other things about the community. I had observed some of these individuals and groups present in other locations, not entirely made up of Pagans or people friendly to Pagans. There had been a wariness in how they talked and few of them had worn any symbols of their faith openly. Here the same people wore pentacles, Thors hammers, and ankhs openly. There was no wariness or hesitation when they interacted with their fellow Pagans. I noticed that when new cars arrived the people closest to the parking area seemed to quiet their conversation and observe the newcomer, when no hostility was perceived, they returned to their almost exuberant discussions. This event not only helped them celebrate their Pagan faith and their LGBTQ identities, but also functioned as a safe community space where the community members did not have to be wary of discussing or showing their faith.

### ***Pagan Pride***

Pagan Pride is a national movement to improve the public image of Paganism, individual groups (like in Orlando) spread it to also celebrating their LGBTQ members. Events are held all around the world on a day near the Autumnal Equinox. In the Orlando Pagan community this event symbolizes community, being together and supporting each other while celebrating their Pagan faiths. The event typically is held at a park in the Orlando area. The planning committee usually consists of individuals from multiple groups in the Central Florida area, usually people based in Orlando. Violet told me they try and make it as inviting as possible by including food trucks and other vendors to encourage members to stay and participate in workshops,

entertainment events, and to observe the closing ritual. The closing ritual is hosted by an Orlando group and rotates between groups. The Orlando Pagan Pride event of 2019 was the 5<sup>th</sup> annual event they had planned, they even created a Facebook page to provide more information and a further reach for their event.

Many of my participants mentioned the event in passing, referring to it as a major event in the community that included all of the Pagan groups in the area. It seemed to them that this was the paramount example of Pagan community, all the different belief systems gathering together and sharing a day with each other. Sharing beliefs, ideas, and experiences. Autumn, a Trans participant I had interviewed, mentioned it in follow up interview I conducted with her.

“Pagan Pride? Yeah, we can talk about it. It’s a big event for the whole community. It’s all about showing Paganism for what it is, just a system of beliefs and not what it’s been made out to be. Lots of groups in the area participate and help organize it, this last year (2020) we did an online version. It was via Facebook and video calls instead of in person...It’s about being proud to be Pagan. Some of the groups that participate also kinda say it’s being proud to be an LGBTQ Pagan, cause that’s kinda where they got the idea. Pride month and all that \*laugh\*. It’s refreshing honestly, you get to interact with the other groups, see or do ritual or performances...it’s just like a day to relax among people who get you...like, you’re not being judged for who you are or what you believe.”

### ***A Community of Support***

The Pagan community in Orlando is a support network for its members and provides them with safe places to express themselves. It makes sense, after conducting this research, that I had to have an introduction to the groups. They are very caring and protective of their members and may not have been as willing to let me observe or interview if I had not been introduced by a trusted community member. The example of Pagan Pride is an annual event, however individual groups provide a safe place to their participants year-round. Outside of individual groups there are community locations that are considered safe spaces scattered around the Central Florida area.

Hydrangea, one of my participants, works at a metaphysical supply and bookstore in the Orlando area. The shop is in an old house which has been modified into a shop. From the outside the shop looks a little run down, the weather in Central Florida has not been kind to the paint or the signs outside. But upon entering the store shoppers are greeted by the scent of incense and the sound of soft meditation music. The shop, unlike so many other bookstores, has a calming effect on those who enter. Hydrangea explained to me that it provides an escape from the world outside, for a few moments those who enter need not hear the noise of traffic or be concerned by the happenings in the regular world. Her store is a place away from this world of constant movement, stress, and noise. It provides an oasis of sorts, a place of rest. In the Pagan community most, if not all, members know about Hydrangea's shop, and many of them frequent it. By no means is it the only metaphysical shop in the community, but it is one of the most well-known inside and outside of the Pagan community. Other permanent locations include coffee shops, restaurants, and other bookstores. Many of these 'safe' locations are owned by well-known members of the community or have several Pagan workers on staff and are tolerant of the community as a whole because of these workers.

George told me that he found his way to Paganism after a stretch of time living as an atheist, due to childhood interactions with the Christian church. He laughingly explained that he had experiences that he couldn't explain in any other way than he was receiving signs and messages.

"I'd become interested in reading about 'ancient' religions, such as druidism, Celtic and Norse beliefs. After a time, I just kept getting connections to the Norse faith, I'd get random emails or messages from friends and acquaintances talking about new discoveries or books about it. Then I had some more odd, harder to explain things, symbols for Pagans or coincidences for more scientifically minded people. I'd been reading about it long enough that I just decided 'might as well investigate modern day beliefs' and that was that. It all fit in with how I viewed the world, and the gods made sure I knew they

were there, little signs...specific animals showing up, people I hadn't talked to in ages connecting with me...everything just started to fit together.”

George's experience of finding Paganism is unique among my participants as he came from atheism, however Hydrangea grew up in the United Kingdom and explained to me that her parents weren't strict about what she did. As such she got to participate in festivals at Stone Henge and other stone circles around the countryside. Later she came to America and created her own group.

“I moved here to meet a boy I'd met...which is a lot crazier back then, we didn't have easy access to the internet to get to know each other as well....It was an adventure. Still here and going strong though!...After moving here I met up with some friends and we kind of met working at the shop, back in 1995 I think is when I started. Eventually my friends and I started a group together not too long after.”

Hydrangea and her friends still have their group, though there may have been some membership changes over the years due to people moving away and new individuals coming in. On the other hand, Autumn, one of my Trans participants found her coven after meeting a member through a mutual interest. Most of the other participants came across Paganism while in college or fresh out of college, either through friends, a religions class, or their own curiosity and the internet. As mentioned by Helen Berger, the internet is an amazing resource when it comes to new converts to Paganism (2007).

George explained to me that his Asatru group utilizes the internet to connect with members and share information about meet ups and events, utilizing the internet to share the community. Violet, my initial contact, told me that her group utilizes the Facebook page for their group to spread information about Paganism and share events with the community and non-Pagans as a whole. Her group practices at a Unitarian Universalist church in the Orlando area, a group that is very tolerant and encouraging of all religious beliefs. Their acceptance of Violet's

Pagan group demonstrates tolerance in the mainstream society for ‘irregular’ beliefs (Cookson 1997, Smith 2008).

The use of accessible internet pages, sites, and forums to share information is an example of community connection, engagement, and creation. Sharing community events on social media helps groups reach individuals who previously wouldn’t have known about the Pagan community in their area. It’s not common for Pagan groups to put flyers up at churches or in grocery store boards, most practitioners are concerned with anti-Pagan sentiments and keep their beliefs more private (Cookson 1997). George and Violet’s groups both are more open with their beliefs, in hopes that their openness will help public opinions about Paganism and Pagan beliefs. Other groups, such as Hydrangeas and Autumn’s are more private. Visitors to Autumn’s coven must first contact the high priest and pass a phone interview to be permitted a single visit. The high priest, Oak, explained this as a precaution when I was on the phone with him. “You sound like a perfectly nice person; I think we can arrange a visit. Sadly, we have to be careful, sometimes we have less pleasant people who would come along and be unpleasant”. Oak did not elaborate on the unpleasantness. Based on other interviews, I took it to mean conversion attempts or anti-Pagan sentiments.

### ***The Other***

“Sometimes groups of Christians will come in and try and convert us, but you can’t get upset or mad at them, not really. They’re just trying to do what they think is best for us based on what they’ve been taught by their religion. It’s not really offensive, for the most part they tend to be nice about it. There’s the odd group that’s more hellfire. Mostly they just don’t understand that our beliefs are as valid as theirs.” - Hydrangea

A common theme in my research was the feeling of separation from non-Pagan communities. Hydrangea highlighted how some Christian individuals and groups choose to attempt conversion of her employees and customers, not understanding that other religions are

valid and not devil worship. She had a very calm and understanding outlook on it, shrugging and telling me they just were doing what they'd been told to do and that they weren't harmful.

Pagans experience stigma associated with their beliefs (Cookson 1997). George, the leader of the Asatru group, explained to me how Asatru is being usurped by white supremacist groups and how this association is problematic.

“Ah, yeah. The white supremacists are a bit difficult to deal with, them using Norse symbols and usurping our beliefs and twisting them doesn't do well for our group or other Norse Pagans. Take the capitol riots in D.C. Several of those people had Norse symbols on them, in jewelry or tattoos. That kind of imagery in the media definitely doesn't help us any, in fact we usually have more people leaving rude comments on Facebook or blogs if that type of thing happens. But it goes back to what I said before, we just make our own inclusive community and they weed themselves out for us.”

George gave an example of how poor portrayals of Pagan symbols can have an effect on all Pagans. In a society that already punishes those who do not follow the dominant beliefs, having someone poorly represent them is highly problematic. This furthers the creation of Pagans as 'othered' individuals, people who are not included in society and have actively been pushed away. Autumn, one of my Trans participants, also deals with judgements made against her on the basis of her identity. She explained to me that when she came out it was soon after she moved to Orlando, her then partner did not have a good reaction to the news.

“It was kinda a rocky time...We didn't have a community, my partner or I. Didn't really have friends or a set place, you know what it's like in a new area. So I finally decided it wasn't just a weird thought or idea, but actually what I was...who I was. So, I told my partner. She got really angry, like...really angry. And she was yelling and screaming at me, hit me a couple times. It was like I was ruining her life...she even pushed me into our glass table...It broke and I've got a scar here (on my leg).”

The change from caring partner, as Autumn had previously described, to violence against Autumn as a Trans woman displays the mentality that has been built around the 'other' or 'abnormal' person in our society. By coming out as Trans Autumn now went against the normal relationship that her previous partner had desired and envisioned with Autumn. This angry

reaction demonstrates the ability to harm the ‘other’ and also that the ex-partner did not expect retaliation for the harm done to Autumn. Autumn was then left alone in a strange area, far away from where she grew up and with few acquaintances. Autumn tried to reassure me after telling me about her ex-partner’s reaction by telling me “I mean it’s okay now, right? I’ve got my coven now. They take care of me and everything is alright. They’re supportive of me.”

Upon being left alone, Autumn found solace in the community at The Arbor, a popular BDSM dungeon. The community there respected her and didn’t turn her away for being Trans. It was through a new friend in this community that she was introduced to her coven.

“I found the Arbor, a BDSM place, really famous around this area. And figured that had enough community feel, It’s something I’d been into and figured I’d go ahead. Well, they were pretty inclusive and nice. Like, nobody laughed at me or whatever. Didn’t throw me out either. Anyway. I met somebody at the Arbor who was also a member of this group. We talked and became pretty well acquainted. After a while, they knew I was interested in finding a group to practice with, they suggested introducing me to their group leaders.... they were really nice to me. Like super friendly. Didn’t say anything about me being Trans...kinda made it a ‘non-issue’ I guess. It was nice.”

Autumn talked to me about how her coven took her in and made her feel completely accepted and included. She focused on how they didn’t mess up her pronouns, or stumble with them. She was amused by the fact that “They don’t laugh at me when we’re doing a skylad<sup>1</sup> ritual and my male bits waggle around in the breeze”. Her amusement didn’t mask that she appreciated their respect of her and her identity, even if her physical body didn’t yet match her identity.

## CHAPTER FIVE: IDENTITY

### *I am who I am*

Identity consists of many aspects of an individual, their beliefs, gender, sexuality, and experiences all contribute to their Identity. My participants had some similar experiences and similar beliefs, but their identities were very much individual. Though they shared beliefs and community, their experiences growing up and finding Paganism gave them individuality which brings variety to their community. Through their remembered experiences and now shared community, these individuals attempt to create a space where every individual feels welcome and safe.

George spoke to me on how his Asatru group actively works towards creating a community that is inclusive and supportive of all its members., so much so that the problematic few white supremacists don't bother to interfere with the group because they won't be tolerated, and they know it. He noted he may feel more attached to this ideal because of his own experiences as a boy in his mother's religious endeavors.

“I grew up in the south, with my mother taking us from church to church. Usually depended on the male influences in her life. I particularly remember one boyfriend, took us along into the Baptist faith I think it was. Anyway, it happened to be a year when...well not to date myself too much, but when a new Led Zeppelin album came out. I got it, and it had amazing imagery all over the front, the music was amazing too. Well, the next Sunday all three of us went to church. And they were having a burning or whatever they called it, getting rid of things the congregation found and thought of as horrible and wicked. Passing in books, pictures, paintings, and some other things. Well, it got to our row. And out of her purse, my mother pulled my brand new Led Zeppelin album. Up it went, I was shushed and shoved into my seat, and it got smashed and burned. I can accurately trace the period of time I spent as an atheist to that exact moment.”

Hydrangea had quite the opposite childhood from George. She grew up in the U.K. and her parents were very open and free, she could do anything she wanted and they didn't scold her.

Her experiences helped when she created her own group with her friends, with a goal of being just as open and understanding of all members.

“I’m originally from the U.K. And my parents were what they were, protestant I think. But I was mostly allowed to do whatever I preferred. I could run around and do all these amazing festivals and events, there are so many over there (U.K.). I remember going to some events at the circles, Stone Henge and Avebury. When I got here I made a Pagan group with my friends, only seemed natural. Especially working at a metaphysical shop \*laugh\*...Our groups made up of friends, if a new person joined, we’d be as open and welcoming of them because they’d be a new friend, no matter their identity, gender, or background.”

Carson grew up Christian, like many of my other participants, but the beliefs did not resonate with their views of the world. He found Paganism at twelve and began to identify as Trans not long after. He explained how his family is still very much Christian, which also contributes to his secrecy around his religion.

“I’ve identified as Pagan since I was 12. I joined the closed group at 15, and the closed Kemetic Temple in 2010 or 2011. Typically I practice by myself except for a few rituals and events. I grew up Christian with my family. It was always just something they told me I should be doing, what to do and say...I never really believed it or connected to it. It just seemed silly to me. I feel like it didn’t help my gender identity struggle either. It didn’t support how I was feeling so that kinda made it more nonsensical and bothersome to me. I’ve always struggled with gender especially with gender related issues since I was five...especially during when puberty started at ten or eleven. I’ve identified as Trans since I was thirteen. My religion is a really big part of my everyday life and identity. I try to be as open and understanding as possible when it comes to other people’s religions. But most people won’t learn about me or my religion unless we become very close. My family is still very Christian and does not really approve. I currently live with my mom I’m helping her get through her recovery from cancer. I just practice more privately, I’ve learned not to share my beliefs because people will ridicule you or yell that you’re gonna go to hell.”

Carson’s experience is not unique, though other participants had different reactions from their families. Sage’s family, for instance, didn’t seem to mind her choosing to become Pagan.

“I grew up with very loose religious structure, my parents identified as some variety or another of Christian, but we never really went to church or had much religious involvement, definitely didn’t expect me to be involved in it. I’ve been Pagan for fifteen years now. It was more a long journey from starting out with “spirituality” and slowly

becoming Pagan through adopting practices. It's been a while \*laugh\* But about 15 years ago is when I decided to focus in and be more serious about it. Felt more like me.”

I have already discussed a lot of how Autumn came to Paganism, especially her introduction to her group. She also talked with me about her family and aspects of how her previous interactions with religion made her interested in another option.

“We weren't super close honestly, grew up going to church and all that. It wasn't bad, but I just didn't really enjoy it or listen much. We were kids. When I grew up and left I was never really interested in finding a new church. Eventually through some websites and social media, I was introduced to esotericism and metaphysical ideas. That sparked my interest in metaphysical religions, which I later learned I was interested in Paganism. As I've said, it makes me feel more like me...I'm not judged by my religion for who I am now or who I was.”

### ***Ritual and Identity***

Pagans believe in an annual cycle closely tied to the seasons, they call it the Wheel of the Year or the turning of the seasons, which are intricately linked to agricultural societies that Pagan traditions pull their beliefs from. During the year there are eight Sabbats, or Pagan holidays, which include: Yule, Imbolc, Ostara, Beltane, Litha, Lughnasadh, Mabon, and Samhain. There are different names for these Sabbats depending on the tradition a group follows or personal preference, however, these are the most common names for each of them. For my research I observed a few rituals, however I chose to focus on the Mabon ritual that Autumn and Oak's group conducted. Mabon typically celebrates the last harvests and the coming of winter. The Wheel of the Year festivals demonstrate the life, death, and rebirth cycle that Wiccans typically believe in. The earth is reborn every spring to die in the fall.

### ***The Mabon Ritual***

On a warm autumn day, I found myself at a small occult bookstore, possibly built in the late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a house. It was off a little street in a mostly residential area, across from a church. I was greeted by the high priest and high priestess, a husband and wife

duo, of the coven I had come to observe. We exchanged pleasantries and the high priest suggested I go look inside the shop while they were waiting to set up the ritual area. The shop was quaint and there were a few children who were happily talking and browsing through the stones, candles, and other items. After I finished perusing the shop, I returned to the front porch, where two coven members, a man, and a woman, were sitting chatting with each other. One of the children came running out to the woman and asked her for some money so he could go buy a stone. She smiled and laughed, telling him he had already used an allowance advancement for the stones he bought when they first arrived. He seemed disappointed but did not push her and wandered back to the other children. After this exchange more of the coven members began arriving and I focused on the preparation of the ritual space.

The ritual was being held outside, because of the nice weather, on the front lawn of the little shop. The coven was setting up a small canopy tent for shade. The taller members, male or female, were helping with this endeavor as the shorter members had trouble reaching the top to lock the supports in place. They also set up two large folding tables and three small tv tray style tables. In addition to the tables they set up a large grouping of folding chairs around the canopy and tables. Once everything was set up and placed as the high priest and high priestess were directing, they began to decorate the two large tables which had been set end to end to create one large table. They put on two tablecloths, one of dark burgundy red and one of dark green. On top of these they placed a golden runner, some leaves, a large woven basket, two large metal trays full of fruit and vegetables, and then their ritual items at the other end of the table. This included a goddess and god statue, some candles, an offering plate of cakes and juice, a bowl of salt, a bowl of water, an athame, incense, and a pentagram. They decorated the three tv tray tables in similar fashion, with red, green, gold, and leaves. Each of these satellite tables also had a couple

candles and an athame.<sup>3</sup> By the time everything was set up and organized to their preference it seemed the rest of the coven had arrived. A group of maybe twenty-five people now gathered around and were chatting amiably with each other. The high priest, high priestess, priest and priestesses all then put on ritual robes, which seemed to be made of lighter fabric for the regional climate. Once they each had on a robe, and the high priest and high priestess had put on circlets and jewelry made with special stones and decorated with Wiccan symbols, they started to call the group together. I was waved into the circle to participate in their celebration.

The high priest and high priestess dedicated the ritual and had all the participants join hands creating an enormous, if irregular, circle. They then “cast” the circle by calling on the four protectors of the cardinal directions, each associated with a different element, to come watch over their ritual and protect the participants from interference and harm. Once this was done the priest and priestess stepped forward and took the salt-water and burning sage. They walked all around the circle cleansing the space and everyone prior to the ritual. The second priestess went around the circle after it was cleansed gently drawing a pentagram on each participants forehead to protect them, I asked the high priestess after the ritual what it was, and she said it was a blend of essential oils that she put together. Once the circle was cleansed the high priest and high priestess called on their deities, represented by a Celtic god and goddess for this ritual, to come and join them while they thanked the deities for their support and care.

The purpose of this ritual was to thank the mother earth goddess and the fertile wild god for the bountiful earth and providing for their people. The Circle coven did so by taking some surplus, in this case demonstrated by food that the high priest and high priestess bought, having each coven member take a piece, hold it and thank the deities for some blessing they received that year, and then placing it in the woven basket. The high priest said once the ritual was

concluded this offering would be buried to return to the earth. After each participant had placed an offering into the basket the high priest and priestess sang a song. They then blessed cakes and juice<sup>4</sup> and had the priest and a priestess take them around the circle so each participant could share in the blessing. Once everyone had received some of the cakes and juice, the high priest and high priestess thanked their deities for attending. Then they released the cardinal directions protectors, dismissing and thanking them. The final step was to open the circle, which this group did by sinking down into the ground and returning it to the earth.

### *Personal views about Ritual*

Rituals have an inherent sense of not belonging to the mundane world, they aren't something you see in a coffee shop or a grocery store (though some may argue non-religious rituals are included in making coffee, but I digress). They are removed from the regular parts of life and placed in their own special category. Victor Turner would note that they are a liminal phase, betwixt and between the real world and non-existence (Turner 1967). As such, they function outside of societal norms and requirements. Violet explained how rituals work in her group.

“We have rituals with lots of different paths and sometimes do them for the UU, so most of the time they're a bit hodge-podged from different religious groups of Pagans. It all fits together well, somehow. Well, there's a Masculine and Feminine part, obviously those have to be there to honor the god and goddess. But who portrays what is completely up to the individual, we don't mind if a male member wants to portray Demeter, it's his desire to be representative and included that matters. He does the role well and nobody has an issue. If not, we just try and fix it as much as possible.”

Carson, one of my Trans participants, functions more as a solitary even though they are part of two larger groups. He explained to me that religion and identity are intricately linked for him, especially rituals.

“I think that rituals should be as closed and private as possible. They’re very much personal experiences and should be conducted in private to the best of someone’s ability, the fewer people know about it the better. Negativity and negative thoughts can affect spells and rituals adversely. I believe that only gods and goddesses can judge us and building a relationship with them is key to the success or failure of rituals and spells, and other magickal undertakings.”

Autumn ties her sense of identity not only to her own perception of herself, but how the people around her perceive her. I noticed while observing her group that the other members took special care to compliment her clothing choices, something I hadn’t considered previously. Her high priest, Oak, explained that one of the other women noticed it first, how Autumn put a lot of care into her clothing and making sure she presented femininely. “Possible it’s so important because of her not transitioning yet, but we take the time to make sure she knows we notice and care”. Autumn herself talked to me about her rise to becoming a priestess in her group and how it affected her personal identity.

“Really, it’s just the Priests and Priestesses who are kinda gendered...that and like the Athame and cup for the great rite...I became a priestess earlier last year. It was a long discussion between Oak, me, and his wife (the high priestess). I kinda explained that I wanted more responsibility in the group, which they totally agreed and thought wasn’t a bad idea. I also explained that being recognized as a priestess felt like a major step in my own self-identity, like....self-validation...\*laugh\* I mean, as far as being more responsible in the group I wanted to be more intricately involved and have ...well, more responsibility. The self-identity thing...Well, I just felt like it would help validate my identity to my own mind a bit. Which honestly it did, seeing everyone agree and being titled feminine...it’s difficult to explain but it helped. It made me realize that the doubts I had, little nit pick things about appearance, weren’t a problem for my friends or community...it helped.”

### *This is my Religion*

Each of my participants discussed their previous religions, if any, and their current choice of Paganism. These are the three categories that I found as factors when it came to their choice to switch from one belief system to another: Conversion, Worldview, and Freedom.

#### *Conversion*

Ten of my participants converted from Christianity to Paganism. Sage, the eleventh, grew up with parent's who practiced Christianity, but said that they never really made her practice with them. Of converts, two were Catholic, and the others simply said it was some variety of Christianity. Sage's coworkers, at the time of her finding Paganism were not particularly supportive, even if her husband and Parents were.

“I've been Pagan for fifteen years now, bless my husband for putting up with all my eccentricities. He supports it all the way, even if he's more towards the atheist side of things. At the time I got serious lots of my coworkers at the time would laugh at me and ridicule my 'superstitious' beliefs, but hey...they believe in some invisible dude in the sky. How often does he actively intervene in their lives in ways they can without a doubt pin to him? It seems odd to laugh at my beliefs. Most of the Christians I know are nice and good people...but some of them get on my nerves trying to convert me or preaching at me, I don't feel like it.”

Most of my participants, especially those in the group that practice at the UU church were very open about their opinions on other religions when I observed them. They mingled with the UU members and all of them seemed to be fine talking and working together, cleaning up after a shared post service meal. Based on that observation and some comments, especially Sage's comment, I think that the interactions between Pagans and Christians are based completely in how they treat each other. If there is mutual trust and respect, like at the UU then the interactions are kind and respectful. If not, like Sage experienced with her co-workers, then it may leave a lasting bad impression on the person receiving the disrespectful and rude comments.

## *Worldview*

George, Plumeria, and Carson all chose to convert to Paganism because it better matched their world views. All of them had similar opinions that the Christian church didn't seem to reflect the people of the modern world or the need to connect with the earth. Carson did not connect to the Christian church his parents had him attend, he said the people there did not make him feel comfortable and that his gender identity did not match with what he was being told.

“I'd say my major issues were definitely with how the pastors at my parents church always made denouncements of what was my identity. Homosexuality is a sin, Trans individuals are of the devil...It did not help improve my personal identity or my relationship with religion. I won't discuss my groups, because they are closed. But I always feel appreciated, understood, and respected for who I am.”

Plumeria is a solitary practitioner who changed from Catholicism during college. She discussed with me her preference of Paganism over Catholicism because of her church growing up, her own opinions about how divinity should be, and her preferences when it comes to religion.

“I'm not gonna lie, growing up Catholic I have a lot of what I've heard called 'Catholic guilt' by some friends. You know...where you feel guilty about doing certain things? Drinking, sex, all that. But for me, I just feel guilty about if I miss an offering for my gods or feel like I've upset them. The church I grew up in was very much all about controlling the people who went there and making them need to come back, I don't think that's good or representative of all of those churches, but definitely that one. I found that I didn't believe in a single benevolent god who would let people be shamed for what he gave them or would let innocent people die for no good reason. At least the Pagan gods, in reality not the mythological versions, are very honest about it: it isn't their responsibility to baby sit humans, they help if you ask and if you actually put in the effort necessary. I guess I just prefer that to someone claiming they love everyone equally and then seeming to play favorites.”

George grew up Christian, as mentioned before, he shared with me his displeasure at people using it as a way to blame all things they don't like or consider bad on another entity rather than taking responsibility.

“I've known some people who use the 'devil' as a sort of scapegoat, like my mother. I don't accept it, at some point you've got to accept that you've had some influence over your experiences in the world. You are the one who makes decisions and does the thing.

It's not the guy sitting in some fire pit below the Earth. You can have someone give you a suggestion, but it's completely up to you if you take that suggestion or not. I guess that's one of the reasons I became an atheist for so long, I knew that it wasn't god who hated Led Zeppelin, but my mom and her boyfriend. She made that choice and I lived with it. I didn't want to give up my own agency to another person, human or not. \*laugh\* guess it's also why I eventually came to Asatru. You are the one behind your actions, like I said a deity or someone may give a suggestion, but you make the choice."

### *Freedom*

Another factor was a feeling of freedom associated with the Pagan community, a lack of judgement and control over individual's choices and lives. Flora was very fervent with her commentary on the lack of judgement of her personal decisions, especially in regards to raising her daughter.

"The community as a whole is not judgey, they let people make their own choices and don't judge them. I really appreciate that they are supportive of individuals lifestyles and decisions. I can raise my daughter how I see fit and nobody tells me "you're doing this wrong or that wrong". It's refreshing and not as constricting as when my parents were raising me in their religion."

Her sentiment on not being judged seems to be reflected by other participants, Violet is also raising her daughter in the Pagan community with the support of her husband. I saw her at several events, usually helping her parents or other members of her parent's group.

"It's not our job to bring her into a religion, I'd like her to choose for herself later on. But I also don't want to leave her home alone, especially when she was younger. So, she just chose to keep coming along now, I don't make her participate in anything she doesn't want to do and she is willing to help out with bringing things in from the car or helping me organize events."

Hydrangea and Sage both were pleased by their ability to do what they wanted and not have to worry about someone, like a priest or church, tell them what they did was not acceptable or wrong. The individuality of Pagan faiths permits many to tailor their practice to their available time, resources, and energy.

### ***Trouble in 'Paradise'***

An outsider, based solely on what I have written so far, may imagine that the Orlando Pagan community is a virtual Paradise for all its members. Everyone is accepting and accepted, however it would seem this "Paradise" does have some darker corners which I was not permitted to observe. Violet introduced me to five groups, one never responded to my attempts to contact them, another responded until they learned that my research was examining Trans experience in the community. I hadn't thought much of it, until talking with Autumn. She had recently been raised to the level of priestess within her group. As a courtesy groups in Central Florida share this information with other groups, simply letting them all keep abreast of who is at what level. Apparently, one group leader responded to the news with a single word "Really?" and has not contacted them since.

"Yeah, we do send an email out. It's just so everyone keeps abreast of the other group's leaders or priests. Honestly, there was one who reacted...not well. Like, we sent out the email and his reaction was just "Really?" and we haven't heard from him since. \*shrug\* It made us feel that he had an issue with it, like with me being allowed to become a priestess."

This example displays a side I was not permitted to observe because the group refused to participate, however it displays that even within Paganism there are individuals and groups that stigmatize and other Trans individuals because of their identities. Even though Pagans experience the same bias against their identities, it seems that some people still seek to raise themselves in the eyes of society above other 'undesirable' groups. Similarly to how some Feminist and Gay activists shun Trans individuals and certain 'types' of gay individuals (Stryker 2017).

## CHAPTER SIX: VULNERABILITY

### *Vandals in the Night*

Vandalism can be an issue in urban areas, people graffiti shop walls or windows, rarely there is break ins or thefts. Some may argue that these are done with malicious intent, however Hydrangea has different opinions on this when it occurs at her shop. In the time I have known about her location there have been three occurrences of vandalism and at least one break in. The break in did not consist of someone stealing, but rather breaking items in the shop and causing disorganization and destruction.

“I think overall the Pagan community tries to be as inclusive of everyone as possible. The different group leaders do a lot of planning for the big group events, like Pagans in the Park and Pagan Pride, to make sure it is as open and inclusive of all spiritualities and individuals possible. I’d like to think that anyone and everyone who participates feels included, especially people who have trouble fitting with the non-Pagan community.

Al: Can you elaborate?

\*thoughtful pause\* I think it’s just I know there is difficulty fitting into the community as a whole when you don’t fit their standard. Especially here (the U.S.), there’s a lean towards certain things being the norm, like being Christian or being Straight, and if you don’t fit that...it’s just harder.

Al: How do you think that affects the community?

Well, it makes us stronger...more close knit. When you have to search and find where you belong you don’t want to give it up. Not really. And it makes you more inclined to helping other people fit and feel welcome there too. Our community tends to be more supportive... When the store gets vandalized, it does happen, everybody really bands together and they always come in and buy something after, like some show of solidarity.

Al: Wow, that’s crazy. Is it out of some upset or anger at the store or?

Oh, you never know. I think it’s just out of something in their own life they’re struggling with or angry at. They don’t know how to process or handle it and just take it out where they feel it will be more acceptable. It’s just how it is, if they did it somewhere else they’d be more in trouble...here, because we’re kind of the ‘odd balls’, it’s okay. We had a break in last summer, right after we opened back up. They didn’t take anything, just broke some stuff and pulled things off shelves, out of place. Of course, 2020 was a bad

year for everyone and there were a lot of horribly sad people and people who were affected disproportionately. You can't be mad at them, it was only things after all."

Though Hydrangea herself reacted calmly and rationally to these attacks of her store, it was clear to see by her voice and lack of eye contact that the events did bother her. It reminded me of the Cookson article (1997), where a Wiccan circle was destroyed. Pagans are placed as an "other" in society, as Hydrangea noted they're the oddballs, making it okay to perpetrate certain things against them and not be reprimanded.

### ***The "Look Outs"***

Something that did catch my attention during my study, was the presence of what I term "look outs", people at each event or in some cases interview, who watched new arrivals or passersby to ensure the rest of their group was safe. During my interview with Autumn, conducted inside a metaphysical shop prior to a ritual conducted by her coven, we were interrupted three or four times by other coven members. Some of whom stayed nearby with each other talking, but kept their eyes on Autumn and I. It felt, as the outsider and interviewer, like I was being observed to make sure I was not bothering or causing Autumn any discomfort.

The same type of thing occurred during Pagan Pride, I observed that the people closest to the parking lot become the "look outs" whenever a new car arrived. Those closer to the children would condense in around them, checking in on the crafts, but keeping their attention on the new car and it's inhabitants. Vendors closer to the car park would also keep a watchful eye. All until they either recognized the individuals, or another member of the community gave a cry of welcome, signaling that the person was known to them. The same protectiveness surrounded children at group events that happened in more public locations. All the adults in the group would ensure that the children stayed within the larger protection of the group, they didn't let them stray to the edge of the gathering or go alone anywhere outside of the group.

### *Left in the cold*

Many Trans and Pagan individuals receive less than warm reactions from family, friends, partners, coworkers, and landlords (Cookson 1997, Stryker 2017). Most did not mention them or mentioned them only in passing. Others, like Autumn, did not say much about their families. Some of my participants did discuss the reactions of their families, such as George, Violet, and Carson.

George was not very interested in discussing his family outside of the discussion of his mother breaking his Led Zeppelin album. He didn't see the use in discussing it much as she was not in the picture anymore and his selected family of his wife and friends were much more supportive of his beliefs. He didn't mention what his job had to say about his religion, if anything. He was very open and clear about his beliefs to them and anyone who asks. "Not being clear and honest is as good as deceiving about it".

Carson was clear that their family was not supportive of their beliefs and seemingly only semi-supportive of their identity. In a discussion outside of an interview he seemed very much disinterested in discussing their opinions, he commented that his mother usually went to sleep with her bible. Violet discussed how she was raising her daughter alongside her religion, but not bringing her into it. She did not talk about her family aside from having been raised Catholic. She, and several other participants, brushed over the subject of family if they mentioned it at all. Based on the examples from the literature review my participants, outside of Autumn, have not had the worst reactions to their faiths or identities. Though most have still experienced bad reactions from coworkers, families, and partners. My understanding from discussions while visiting groups is that even within Pagan groups Trans individuals may not come out, at least initially, and if they do come out to the group, that does not mean they are comfortable with

outsiders. This reluctance is directly associated with the stigmatization associated with being Trans (Stryker 2017).

George's experience with his mother did influence how he runs his own group, he wanted to make sure that all his members were as valued and appreciated as possible.

“Our group does strive to be a safe place. We don't have any trans members, I can't as much speak to that as such. But we do strive to be an inclusive and safe location for all our members. Wherever we meet or have our events, we make sure all our members are comfortable and okay being there. I know some of them have experienced difficulty in other aspects of their lives, so we want to be one place they can be comfortable.

AI: Can you tell me more about that?

We've got some LGBTQ folks, their families haven't been the most supportive and a couple of them don't have contact there anymore. So we kinda do our best to fill in a bit, at least for the extended family feel. We also have some inter racial couples, again not as supported by their older family members, so we make sure whenever they're in our meetings, group get together, whatever, that they feel supported and normal.”

George noted that this open acceptance and striving for inclusion also helped weed out the – phobics as he termed them (white supremacists, racists, etc). He was very proud that they (the – phobics) would just leave events, after an outburst against the members.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION

Trans people are among the most stigmatized people in US society, as evidenced by their reduced life expectancy and higher likelihood of experiencing housing and job insecurity. Based on Autumn's experience and the Washington D.C. survey (Edelman et al 2015), Trans individuals are also at a higher risk of domestic violence and physical attacks. There has been and continues to be a certain amount of stigma associated with Paganism, including Wicca. As discussed in the literature review, Pagans experience job and housing insecurity based on this stigma. Their families can and do disown them for their belief systems. These difficulties are also faced by Trans individuals. In my research I discovered three main factors in the Central Florida Pagan community: Community, Identity, and Vulnerability. These themes were then connected through shared experiences of individuals, especially experiences of stigma and othering because of their identities.

### *Separation from Society*

The othering of Trans people and Wiccans can and does turn into lack of protections and open cruelty or inappropriate behavior against the 'other' (Last 2012): in the case of Autumn at the time of her coming out as Trans, her partner became enraged and left Autumn with a permanent scar. Othering, or 'Us versus Them' mentality, creates an 'other' that is not associated with the main group or dominant group, who is then acceptable to place blame on or to allow to be treated horribly. This violent reaction to learning about a partner's change of identity can be traced to the stigma against people in relationships with a Trans person and against Trans people in general. The attacks against Hydrangea's shop seem to be based in part on the othering Pagans experience, those perpetrating the vandalism don't fear repercussions for their actions.

Stigma places a person, or group of people, in disgust or disgrace because they do not exactly fit what dominant society expects of them. Stigma can be associated with religious beliefs, scientific discoveries (such as evolution and gravity when first discovered), hair texture or color, skin pigmentation, mode of dress, piercings, and tattoos, to name a few. Trans individuals are stigmatized for their perceived inability to represent societies gender binary requirements. They, and other LGBTQ individuals, are stigmatized and looked down on for identifying the way they do. The othering of the Trans body is so ingrained in Western culture that Autumn's partner could not handle the change from 'normal/acceptable' to 'other' and they reacted violently (Hutton 2017, Edelman et al 2015). Other culture groups and societies have had third gender categories for centuries (Dickerman and Torres 2019, Dutta, Khan, and Lorway 2019, Nanda 1999, Vasey and VanderLaan 2007). Pagan individuals are stigmatized based on their religious beliefs, mainly because dominant society has been focused on monotheism for centuries. Therefore, any gods that Pagans worship are either figments of their imagination, or devils. In addition, Pagans also have stigma associated with their belief in magick and forces of nature to create magick, often they are associated as off shoots of popular franchises (such as Lord of the Rings or Harry Potter).

### ***The liminal phase***

This combination of othering and stigma forces both Trans and Pagan individuals out of society, they are not 'acceptable' and therefore should not be associated with or supported by those desiring to fit in. This separation places them into a liminal state of being, their 'liminal phase' as Victor Turner would call it (Turner 1967 ~~Bigger 2009~~). Liminality, as introduced by the anthropologist Victor Turner, relates to rites of passage in other cultures, particularly African and South Pacific groups where he studied. This liminal space, as discussed in the literature

review, was a literal separation from their community, where teens would learn adult knowledge (survival tactics, group rules, etc.), and then be reincorporated into their society as a full adult member. This shared liminal experience would create a sense of camaraderie among the different age groups and ensure the survival of the society.

The groups this research focuses on, Trans people and Pagans, do not quite belong to the dominant culture, because dominant culture has rejected them for their beliefs and identities. They are forced into a metaphorical liminal space by the refusal of the dominant society groups to accept them as full-fledged members and equals. 'Metaphorical' because both Trans individuals and Pagans still are expected to serve within society. They have to have jobs and be contributing members, but are often either ridiculed and attacked, or simply ignored by other members of society.

The entrance into the liminal stage came in different ways to my participants. Sage received comments from her coworkers stating that she was a devil worshipper and needed to find God. Autumn was abandoned by her partner in a strange place where she had no friends and did not belong to the community. Carson who was having a crisis around their gender identity found a lack of support from the Christian church that their family attended and lack of understanding in their home. Hydrangea outright stated that the Pagan community is seen as 'oddballs' by the rest of society, a reason why vandals don't feel concerned about repercussions. George's Mother and her reaction to his Led Zepplin album marked the beginning of his liminal phase.

While in this liminal phase each of my participants found their way to Paganism, some later than others in George's case. He first spent time as an atheist prior to his curiosity and certain 'signs' as he termed them drew him to Norse Paganism. Carson discovered Paganism by

joining a group near their home, soon after that they settled into their identity as Trans. Sage, who had been ridiculed by her coworkers, found support for her interests in Paganism from her atheist husband and shortly after created her own group. Violet, who was raised Catholic, converted in her mid-twenties and found her group soon after that. Autumn found a sense of community at the Arbor and later found her place in her coven.

### *Trans Pagans*

The intersectionality of Trans Pagan practitioners seems to culminate in feeling very othered and abandoned. Individuals able to find a liminal community of Pagans that accepts and supports them seems to help begin the healing process from their trauma, in so much as they now have a safe place that they can feel accepted. Autumn began to heal after joining her group, coming to realize her sense of Identity and understand it while the other members supported and encouraged her. Carson seems to have found a similar anchoring place in their group and religion, where they found their identity as Trans.

### *Togetherness*

Their shared experiences then bring Trans and Pagan individuals together into a liminal community. Trans individuals experience stigma and othering because of their gender identities, Pagans experience them because of their beliefs. All my participants experienced conversion from a previous faith, Christianity, to Paganism. The mutual understanding of this experience, doing research online or through books and meeting people who already practice Paganism, is something all of them have in common. Experiences like those Sage had with her coworkers also seemed to be common among individuals. Feelings of separation from family and from previous friends were also common.

Participants shared similar beliefs, especially around identity within the religion. “It doesn’t matter what someone is, but what they identify as.” as Violet stated. My participants shared opinions about deities, how the relationship between individuals and the divine worked summed up by Carson “Only gods can judge us...it's (ritual) like building a relationship with them”. They share not only respect for their religion and deities, but for other members of their group and community. Each individual is valued in the community and respected within their groups. From my observations and interactions during this study with the Pagan community in Central Florida, at least the groups which allowed me to work with them, the community seemed interested in supporting all their members to be successful and feel fulfilled within the group and in their own personal lives. The Pagan belief in worshipping both the masculine and feminine, provides a solid basis for acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals, especially Trans members (Lepage 2019). The presence of hermaphroditic and Transgender deities, such as Dionysus, Hermaphroditus, and at times Loki, sets a precedent for their acceptance and support within most Pagan religions. The individual groups are responsible for how supportive and welcoming they are.

### ***“End of the Liminal Phase”***

Their shared liminal space permits them to identify as they do and still experience societal interactions with other members of their liminal community. I do not believe that these individuals or groups have truly been reincorporated into the dominant society. There is still a feeling of ‘otherness’ to them and still stigma associated with them. Within the last three years there have been at least two lawsuits based on discrimination against Pagan employees (Avery 2019, Ove 2021). The year 2021 has been one of the most anti-Trans legislation years over the

last several years (Holt 2021, Yurcaba 2021). As such these individuals remain on the edge of society, not reincorporated as full members.

Instead, they have created their own community, thus bringing an end to their indefinite stay in the liminal phase. Their shared experiences draw them together to create these communities. The newly founded community allows all members to feel recognized, supported, and safe. It provides a link back to society, if not reintegration at least the possibility of connection.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

This research provides an insight into the Central Florida area's Pagan community, even if just a snapshot of three groups. Within these groups I was able to see their opinions and ideology around the inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals. I also was permitted the opportunity to interview and talk to two Trans Pagans, getting their experiences and observations. I observed a warmth and care towards their LGBTQ+ members and active interest in protecting them from others with less inclusive views. I have argued that Pagans and Trans-people both occupy a liminal place in society, which draws them towards one another.

I have shown how shared experiences of stigma and othering place Trans individuals and Pagans into a shared liminal space, where they have been excluded from full participation in dominant society. They are still expected to contribute to society, but not truly participate in societal events or roles. Autumn and Carson were left on the fringe of society, both found a new place to belong and feel supported and understood. The Pagan groups I studied also experienced difficulties with family members and communities but found solace and companionship with other practitioners. Through their shared understanding of each other's experiences and traumatic events they created a community to end their liminal journey. This community is supportive of their identities. The community also provides each member with a support group to get through traumatic experiences and get past the stigma and othering they have experienced.

The research conducted for this thesis is only the tip of the iceberg, as it were, for how stigmatized and othered individuals can find each other and create within a liminal space their own community and culture. If I had more time, I would prefer to have included more groups in my study and have had more participants, however based on the overall size of the Pagan

community in Orlando I can say this was a good initial sampling. If someone were to continue this line of research, those would be my two suggestions: more time and more participants. It was a pleasure working with the Orlando Pagan community and their gentle attitudes of inclusion and openness, at least for another Pagan, were refreshing and encouraging. I hope to continue researching both the Pagan community, Transgender experiences, the idea of liminal communities, and other marginalized and stigmatized groups.

**APPENDIX: IRB APPROVAL FOR HUMAN STUDIES RESEARCH**



UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

**Institutional Review Board**

FWA00000351  
IRB00001138

Office of Research  
12201 Research Parkway  
Orlando, FL 32826-3246

**EXEMPTION DETERMINATION**

May 6, 2019

Dear Alison Whitmore:

On 5/6/2019, the IRB determined the following submission to be human subjects research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:	Initial Study, Exempt Category
Title:	Transgender identity: A look from the Central Florida Wiccan Community
Investigator:	Alison Whitmore
IRB ID:	STUDY00000431
Funding:	None
Grant ID:	None

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made, and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request so that IRB records will be accurate.

If you have any questions, please contact the UCF IRB at 407-823-2901 or [irb@ucf.edu](mailto:irb@ucf.edu). Please include your project title and IRB number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

Kamille Chaparro  
Designated Reviewer

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