

the New Age will split into diverse groups and there will be no unity. Furthermore, as soon as the New Age arrives at a formulation of its doctrine (for that matter the expression "doctrine" is abhorrent within New Age thought) it also defines and limits itself. It then becomes a group with specific ideas, ideas which either will no longer be attractive to many, leading to the formation of separate independent groups. It can already be perceived that what is currently called New Age is actually a conglomerate of groups, each of which goes its own way. Thus it is inconceivable that the New Age can be the religion of the future in the usual sense of *religion*. Either the New Age remains as it is, a loose collection of ideas to which various people adhere to a greater or lesser extent or it becomes organized and perhaps becomes a larger group. In the first case, it will dissipate over time and in the second it will become too small to include everything. It then loses its holistic and universalistic character. In short, the prospect may be that in the new Europe the New Age will be a religion, but one that exists alongside many other schools of thought.

Notes

1. As is well-known, "New Age" is not a unity. There is no New Age movement existing as an organization, even less a coherent philosophy. Nonetheless, one can find a number of points held in common by the many groups who see themselves as belonging under the umbrella of New Age.
2. See the title of the book by a leading Dutch New Age channeler "Op weg naar de nieuwe wereldreligie" (on the way to the New World Religion); in f.i. the writings of Creme we can find the same idea: so in "Maitreya's Mission" (London 1986); also in A.A.Bailey "Education in the New Age" (New York 1954, Lucis Trust).
3. This ideas can be found very well expressed in H.P.Blavatsky's "The key to Theosophy" (1889), *passim*.
4. Here the theosophists are referring to the gnostic undercurrent in Western society, the Cathari, alchemy, the legendary Rosacruzians, the Free Masons, etc.
5. F.Capra implicit in "The Tao of Physics" (Boulder, Ca, 1980), "The Turning Point" (London 1983). M.Ferguson in "The Aquarian Conspiracy" (Los Angeles, 1980), ch.10: Spangler in "Revelation" (1976), *passim*.
6. In the writings of Blavatsky *passim*.
7. See f.i. R.Steiner "Von Jesus zu Christus" (Berlin 1912).
8. See f.i. J.Klink "Het onbekende venster" (Baarn 1989).
9. See E.v.Dalen, ed. "Omzien naar een nieuwe tijd" (Delft 1988).
10. Important authors are C.Cumbey, T.Marrs, D.Hunt/T.A.MacMahon. See on this subject J.Hexham "The Evangelical Response to the New Age," in J.R.Lewis/J.Gordon Melton, eds. "Perspectives on the New Age," New York, 1992, p. 152-165.
11. Cumbey, "The Hidden Dangers of the Rainbow," p. 241.
12. So K.Koch in "Christian Counseling and Occultism" (Grand Rapids 1972), "Between Christ and Satan" (Grand Rapids 1961), "Okkultes ABC" (Basel. ??); in the Netherlands W.J.Ouweneel "Het domein van de slang" (Amsterdam, 1978).
13. G.Danneels "Christus of de Waterman" (Mechelen 1990).
14. The "sceptical movement" is organized in the U.S. as "The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal" (CSICOP), with the journal "Skeptical Enquirer." In the Netherlands known as "Stichting Skepsis" with the journal "Skepter."
15. Cf. "New Age, uitdaging voor kerk en theologie," *Gereformeerd Theologisch Tijdschrift* 90 (1990).
16. Douven is compared with M. Fox, author of "Original Blessing" (Santa Fe 1983) and "Creation and Spirituality" (Santa Fe, 1991), but is more theosophically influenced. Douven is very much inspired by G.MacGregor, anglican priest and author of "Reincarnation in Christianity" (Wheaton, Ill., 1978), "Gnosis, a Renaissance in Christian Thought" (idem, 1979), and "The Christening of Karma" (idem, 1984).
17. Apart from that, many of the religious ideals of the Renaissance continued to exist within the more esoteric tradition, such as alchemy, the Free Masons, etc.

Forging Magical Selves: Gendered Bodies and Ritual Fires at Neo-Pagan Festivals

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Hundreds of festival-goers dressed in dark ankle-length capes or gauze gowns, adorned with feathers and jewelry, and holding fluorescent wands, candles, and sparklers process through the festival field toward the bonfire site. Dancers perform around the fire as it is carefully lit, the flames spreading slowly at first and then blazing to the accompaniment of drumming and excited applause. A large group of men and women drumming and playing percussion instruments cluster along one side of the bonfire. The full sound and energetic rhythms generated by this crowd of musicians urges on dancers as they pass. A number of women in colorful middle Eastern costume perform belly dances; other women and men dance in a variety of styles, some taking slow swinging steps, others leaping and bounding closer to the flames.

Such is the scene of a late night fire at a Neo-pagan festival in New York state. Many Neo-pagans read themselves out of family groupings and the religious faiths of their parents, necessitating new definitions of self, kinship, family and religion. Neo-pagan festivals make available the materials for creating new identities. At festivals, self-creation takes place within and alongside group activities: workshops on astrology, tarot cards, mythology, magic, witchcraft, Native American medicine, African drumming, large planned rituals, and late night ritual fires. This colorful and diverse festival terrain offers a multitude of activities and resources for making new identities. One festival organizer sees these gatherings as "a wondrous revival of the old regional fair except that this region is one of the mind."¹ Most of the workshops and rituals focus on self-improvement "technologies" like ritual skills and visualization, and present information about many different religious and mythological systems.²

As Neo-pagan festivals have developed over the past fifteen years, the varied interests and commitments with which people arrive come into conflict with each other, and in this way, the festivals have become a space in which highly personalized religious identities take shape within and against a temporary community. In contrast to expectations of unconstrained self-expression these festivals are actually highly structured settings. While gendered aspects of self-expression are somewhat more fluid than in the world outside these festivals, they nevertheless replicate that world in many ways.

Many Neo-pagan groups describe themselves as aggressively non-hierarchical and decentralized; these characteristics allow them to see themselves as offering

an alternative to "mainstream" society. The festivals' cultural patchwork reflects Neo-paganism's "politically correct" self-presentation: inclusivity is stressed, special accommodations are made for minority and marginalized groups, environmental consciousness is emphasized and recycling has long been a part of most festivals. Furthermore, festival-goers expect festivals to reflect their vision of a more egalitarian, less sexist society. Construction of men's and women's identities within this ritual space is coded in varieties of bodily expression. The languages of movement and body decoration reveal that while the work within Neo-pagan festivals involves gender play and gender reversal, transformative effects are more limited than participants anticipate.

Because of its egalitarian focus, Neo-paganism's "other" is authoritarian, hierarchical and power-hungry. However, structures of authority not apparent at first glance become manifest when invisible boundaries within Neo-pagan rituals are transgressed. Passing through and shaping these boundaries involves conflict and negotiation. Costumes, body painting, degrees of nudity and styles of dancing and drumming are all ways of expressing conflict, communicating identity and locating oneself in the community.

Commenting on carnival, Samuel Kinser argues that while social conflict is avoided and expressed by the festival, nevertheless "society coheres through conflict rather than through obedience."³ Neo-pagan festival communities both cohere and fragment through conflicts around the ritual fire. The community becomes aware of its own boundaries and limits as it processes conflicts and tensions. Ironically, the very conflicts over boundaries and personal safety are what assure participants that festival space is safe for self-experimentation. Conflicts over festival fires also reveal the power dynamics repressed, denied and hidden in order to present pagan festivals as an alternative experience of community. Reflecting on his research on Brazilian carnival, Roberto DeMatta writes:

What explains the style of Brazilian carnival is the necessity of inventing a celebration where things that must be forgotten can be forgotten if the celebration is to be experienced as a social utopia. Just as the dream makes reality even more vehement, carnival can only be understood when we discover what it must hide in order to be a celebration of pleasure, sexuality, and laughter.⁴

This emphasis on license, sensual enjoyment and self-expression necessitates that festival-goers "forget" boundaries and rules. They approach the festival as a kind of "vacation" from the outside world. And yet this place apart is not so far away from their everyday lives. While many participants talk about festival as a place where judgments are suspended, alongside this suspension conversations go on about "right" and "wrong" kinds of energy and behavior.

Groups and individuals calling themselves "Pagan" or "Neo-pagan" began naming the first festivals and defining themselves as a movement in the late 1960s. Most Neo-pagans are engaged in a revival and recreation of what they understand to be pre-Christian nature religions. The majority of these festivals are outdoor camping affairs which are held at private campgrounds or state parks and involve anywhere from fifty to a thousand people; approximately sixty

festivals take place across the United States each year. According to a 1991 survey taken at "Pagan Spirit Gathering" in Wisconsin, people travelled from all over the United States, Canada, and several European countries to attend the festival. Some participants only attend one or two festivals every year; while others, mostly merchants or ritual specialists, may visit several different festivals each month. Participants include college students, computer programmers, architects, teachers and secretaries as well as psychics, massage therapists and astrologers; some festival-goers combine one or more of these identities. One long-time festival-goer observes that "there were a wide variety of people there: real hippies, people who had straight jobs and looked normal when they left there and lots of the steps inbetween. It was a celebration of diversity."⁵ In the Pagan Spirit Gathering survey they identified themselves with thirty-two different religious and cultural traditions as varied as Egyptian, Mayan, Greco-Roman, New Age, Native American and Yoruba.⁶

Expectations that new identities can be explored at festivals are based on an understanding that festivals are removed from ordinary time and space. Like anthropologist Victor Turner and other scholars of ritual, Neo-pagans present a dualistic model of ritual and festival as liminal, anti-structural spaces opposed to highly structured everyday society.⁷ Neo-pagans separate the carnivalesque world of festival from everyday life or "mundania." The journey to a festival is to a strange "place apart," a place of license removed from "civilized" society. Folklorist Beverly Stoeltje explains that "in the festival environment principles of reversal, repetition, juxtaposition, condensation, and excess flourish, leading to communication and behavior that contrasts with everyday life."⁸ Festivals are places where play and transformation are encouraged. They are exaggerated like the places in dreams. They are surreal landscapes peopled by colorful and bizarre creatures and extraordinary events, "like a Gypsy circus," according to Julia, a Fine Arts major at a midwestern university.⁹ For Neo-pagans, going to a festival is like travelling to a "more real" world of heightened experience and perception. Says Salome, a college senior who has been involved with Neo-paganism since she was a teenager, "Everything seemed so vivid there. It was like a psychedelic experience. When we came back it was like back in the real world."¹⁰

Annual journeys to these places are both adventures to the exotic and the far away and to a familiar, home-like, memory-laden place. It seems ironic that Neo-pagans identify the world *outside* of festivals as the real one, because they describe festival experiences as being particularly vivid and significant. For many participants, festivals are a hyper-reality, an ideal way of being with others, and more real than the world of everyday existence. Imagining the journey to festival as a pilgrimage or adventure contributes to the building of a different kind of home or community than is available in the everyday lives of many festival participants. Festival-goers speak of the journey to festival as a journey to a special place, or as one man puts it, a journey to "spiritual homeland." In "Pagan Gatherings—Discovering Spiritual Homeland," John Threlfall describes his first trip to Pagan Spirit Gathering, a festival in southwestern Wisconsin, as a pilgrimage across the country: "I have come to see my journey across America that summer of 1989 as my own Hajj . . . I was drawn forth on a pilgrimage of

my own making, seeking a holy land that, ultimately, I could find only in myself."¹¹

Festivals are also imagined to be "mundane" in the extent to which they represent an invented or discovered "family" or "home" that nurtures new identities. For pagans, the world they represent as being on the fringes of "mainstream" culture often becomes the center of their most meaningful activities.¹² For the second edition of *Drawing Down the Moon*, her landmark study of Neo-paganism, journalist Margot Adler added a section on pagan festivals entitled "Pagan Festivals: The Search for a Culture or a Tribe." Here she gives a brief account of the history of pagan festivals and responds to the question "why did festivals catch on?":

Probably most critical was the fact that outdoor festivals established a sacred time and space—a place apart from the mundane world, where pagans could be themselves and meet other people who, although from a variety of traditions, shared many of the same values. Many festival organizers have told me that the most frequent feedback they receive is the comment, "I never knew there were other people who believe what I believe, let alone several hundred at one place. I never knew that I could come totally out of the closet and be what I am openly." The feeling of being at home among one's true family for the first time is the fundamental reason that festivals have spread throughout the country. As one organizer told me, "It's a trip to the land of faery, where for a couple of days you can exist without worrying about the 'real' world."¹³

The trip is away from home to a magical fairyland as well as toward the home of one's "true" family. Fliers and pamphlets for festivals like "Starwood," "Wild Magick" and "Pagan Spirit Gathering" advertise Neo-pagan festivals as "a Magickal Village," "a global tribal village," "spiritual community," "family," "home." Home thus becomes a place where invented families reside and where people can be themselves in these families.

Festival-goers inhabit festival space in different ways than they inhabit their own homes. Their experience of time changes; they move differently and relate differently to each other. Michael, an architect from the east coast, explains: "Starwood is long enough so that you live there. Your time frame just shifts down and becomes more attuned to the day. You walk slower, act slower . . . There's a sense of just being outside of time . . . You forget that there's an outside world."¹⁴ Many festival participants speak of the festival as a place out of time, but a "home-like" place where participants can be the kind of children they want to be, can play in the ways schools, parents and religions of the outside world deny them. Here, where the rules of everyday interaction are suspended, they imagine finding an ideal community and an ideal self.

Festival, writes a festival organizer, is

an opportunity to step out of our usual model of social interaction. Some of the same things applied, but when you got there they made it clear that as long as you didn't hurt yourself or anybody else, basically whatever you wanted went. Now, when it comes down to it, that's not

true. There were certain things that still held, but it was a lot more open, a lot more free. And even though it wasn't focused, it was providing an atmosphere, a place, a social mechanism by which people could express more of themselves and discover and explore more than they could back home and in their usual motif.¹⁵

For many festival participants being "at home" in festival space means moving and feeling differently about their bodies, and ritual fires are places where this difference is both discovered and expressed. Festival fires begin at sundown or after the evening's formal ritual and on weekend nights are likely to last until sunrise. Many participants in the late night fire seem to share the judgment that drumming is the heartbeat of a festival, while others would add that dancing is equally expressive of the festival experience. The blending of and interaction between these two performed languages generates the ritual ethos of festival fires. Dancing usually starts off slowly and builds in response to the skill and enthusiasm of the drumming. As the evening wears on dancers and observers come and go from the darkness at the edges of the ritual circle. Often a group of slowly swaying "trance dancers" forms the circle closest to the fire, while those moving with more energetic steps circle around them. At times when the beat quickens, a few dancers spontaneously leap and run around the fire, spinning with such speed that they draw out smoke and sparks. Many dancers, who want to dance in place or do not want to be illuminated by the fire, position themselves in the shadows and among the loosely knit outer circle of people standing and watching or talking together in small groups. Some dancers get lost in the drums and movement and forget about the gazes of audience and drummers; some skip after and chase each other or perform with their bodies for the drummers and audience.

This apparent lack of structure and the deluge of images and sounds challenges participants' personal boundaries on a basic psychological level. With their costumed, tattooed, bejeweled and glistening nude dancers, chanting, drummers and other musicians, smoke and flame, festival fires are a sensual feast. These scenes are far-removed from the daily lives of most participants, encouraging participants to find new and different ways of defining themselves. Confusion and uncertainty about self-identity mix with the discovery of hidden selves at festivals and festival fires. Ritual fires seem free of expectations; however, self-expression and self-creation can themselves become a kind of norm. Many festival-goers are reluctant participants at the late night fire, preferring to observe from the sidelines while not feeling entirely comfortable doing so. In pagan magazine *Mezlim's* "Gatherings Issue," Aravah writes,

On that first night, while my daughter was dancing joyously around the fire, I sat miserably on a log thinking how much I wanted to dance, too. I was so uptight and afraid. Fear. I've dealt with it a lot since then. Mostly the fear of being myself. The rituals and workshops quite often pulled this out of me in one way or another. I realized I couldn't keep running from myself. I didn't WANT to! Scary as it was, I was ready to start being me, not the person I thought I was expected to be.¹⁶

Men and women who attend festival fires often feel compelled to be someone different from their everyday self. They use the ritual space to explore issues which they bring with them as well as fears which arise during the ritual experience. In the process of self-exploration layers of selves may be peeled off, revealing a central "me." In the same issue of *Mezlim*, Diane Tabor writes, "Ritual dance may also be used to work on personal issues which are too threatening or deeply buried to address in our everyday consciousness. Emotions which have been repressed in the interest of preserving our lives and relationships can be allowed expression and worked through in the safe space created by dance."¹⁷ Festival fires provide an inviting space for self-performance. Performance enables individuals to play with and express different aspects of their identity: magical practices, sexuality, body image, their particular sense of humor, and their feelings about how they fit into the larger Neo-pagan movement.

Festival-goers themselves have different understandings of what this ritual space is for. One ritual participant writes in *The Elven Chronicle*, a Neo-pagan newsletter, about how he uses a festival fire held in a dome-covered circle:

To me the Thunderdome is a place to set aside my personality with all of its wants, needs, desires, etc. and enter into direct contact with Spirit through drumming and dancing. It is a special place. A space to do special things. I have many opportunities to relate through my "personality" and enjoy satisfactions available on that level. Thunderdome is about a different, less frequent type of experience.¹⁸

For this drummer, the late night festival fire furnishes an opportunity to step outside of his everyday personality and to "enter into direct contact with Spirit." While the entire festival experience provides a space away from the patterns of everyday life, late night fires are another step removed from this other life and the personality one wears there. Boundaries at ritual fires are permeable; they allow for both freedom of expression and a sense of safety. Not everyone attends the fire to do transformative ritual work. Some come to "trance dance" or engage in what they call shamanic journeying; others approach the fire to express themselves with a physical freedom impossible in other social contexts, while other late night fire participants may be looking for a party atmosphere, provided by the spectacle of dancing bodies and fire-jumping. People with diverse intentions come and go all night and are disruptive in ways they would never be in a more formal ritual. And yet while the fire is not formally bounded like an organized ritual in which guardians and protective spirits are called on to secure a safe space, it is seen as a safe and sacred space:

Dancing "O"s creates a vortex of energy which acts to keep the space safe. The warding effect is amplified when the dancers are aware and focused on their purpose. I know dedicated magicians who will circle the fire for hours keeping the vortex spinning with their movement and their Wills. It is the raising and maintaining of a temple. It is a sacred act.¹⁹

Ritual fires are thus seen by many festival participants as bounded and protected places, temples constructed by intention, music and dance. But what makes a space "safe" at festivals? From ritual space to personal space, the process of sacralization includes attention to safety and protection. Salome frequently mentioned her concerns about safety during our conversations. She observed that:

Anywhere you go there are always going to be people who are going to try and hurt you. But the idea that you're in a place where there's more safety than elsewhere is a nice thing to know . . . It's been a playground for me to be more assertive on and say, "Listen, get out of my personal space and get out of it now. I don't want you in my personal space unless I invite you in." Most people will leave you alone then and if they don't then I'm not going to deal with them. Sometimes it's good to have a safe environment where you can just go out of control.²⁰

Safety and loss of control seem to be in tension, but the festival fire is a place where contradictory intentions and concerns co-exist. Women do talk about feeling "freer" and less inhibited, about being more comfortable in their bodies, but the guardedness that most women are in the habit of maintaining does not easily fall aside. They are forced to define their own limits. And thus the fire becomes an improvisational space, a theater for self-invention. Participants experiment with both expanding and contracting their personal boundaries. Men and women immerse themselves in the performance of their dance, releasing their bodies in ways unique to the festival setting. Artemis, a librarian, told me dancing is one of the main reasons she goes to festivals. I asked her if there were other places that she enjoyed dancing:

Not with the freedom that I feel at Lothlorien or at any other festival, Rainbow or whatever, just because I know that nothing I do down there is going to be looked down upon. It doesn't matter how I dance, nobody's going to go, "Oh my God," and like look at me like that because when I dance I don't think, I just dance and I move and I know from other people that when I dance it's very obvious and it's very attention-grabbing since it's very outrageous. I have problems dancing in other public arenas like bars. I'm not the kind of person who dances with other people. I dance by myself and that can be a problem when going to bars by yourself as a woman, and I get hassled all the time.²¹

Many women describe the fire as a space in which they can express their sexuality and the pleasure they take in their bodies without having their movements interpreted as sexually inviting. Like other areas of the festival, erotic dance is fraught with tension because of its seeming lack of rules and boundaries. This community-in-the-making does not have a history or tradition of rules of behavior. Within the ritual space of the late night festival fire, men and women must negotiate their own boundaries and find ways to communicate those boundaries to other people.

In most cases, dancers who are dancing for the purpose of generating energy for the fire are not interested in getting picked up, but rather in amplifying the collective energy flow. This is a valuable gift and deserves to be appreciated as such. By calling up the kundalini energy, the dancer becomes a channel for his or her own sexual energies. The feeling aroused in the observers may also be used to contribute to the personal and general energy flow.²²

As they become more familiar with this peculiar kind of theater, participants master a language of body and gesture which identifies these boundaries. Although Neo-paganism is often cast as a feminist goddess-centered religion, men as well as women experience changes in body image at festivals. In a letter to *Circle Network News*, a quarterly newsletter published by Wiccan church and "Nature Spirituality resource center" Circle Sanctuary, a festival participant named Godric discusses his first encounter with festival drumming and dancing. At first he felt intimidated by the dancers' grace and remembered a childhood incident in which someone had made him feel ashamed of dancing at a wedding: "For many years, this vague and chilling memory has recurred whenever I've tried or been asked to dance. It turns my feet to stone and my coordination to chaos." Godric describes joining the dancers at Pagan Spirit Gathering as a step toward healing old fears.

I had absorbed enough PSG atmosphere to realize that fear of ridicule had been banished from this place, along with indoor plumbing and telephones. This time I left my drum at my camp. I noticed people with bodies no less clumsy or attractive than mine dancing in the fire circle, and they didn't look ridiculous. They looked beautiful, happy, entranced, and ecstatic. I closed my eyes and slipped into the pattern of the music, trying it on. It welcomed me. I retreated briefly and left clothing and inhibitions under a nearby tree, then joined the dance.

Godric's story echoes other men's accounts of working with body image around the festival fire. Michael, an architect from the East coast, self-consciously makes use of the festival fire to explore body movement and sexuality. "While I was going to these festivals, I was working magically to bring sex into my life, not to specifically get sexual experience, but to find it within myself and to learn to express it." I asked him what changes came about in his life as a result of festival-going: "I dance differently. I look at women differently. I look at their faces; I listen to their voices; I'm not afraid of them anymore. I'm not afraid of myself when I'm around them."²³ For Micheal, festivals in general and the ritual fire in particular made possible expressions of a transformed body and different sexual self.

Expressing one's identity at the fire is not, however, simply a matter of shedding inhibitions in a safe place. Individuals shape the terms of their own performance within a framework of common language, in this case a language of gesture and body-marking. Costumes, nudity and adornment are part of a complex system of coding. People convey with their appearance who they want to be, or at least who they want to be in the festival space. They perform

private identities in a public space which is not however as public as the space outside festival boundaries.

Reflecting on Brazilian carnival, Victor Turner describes costuming as "serious play." It is a Brazilian point of honor that if one is going to wear a costume or fantasia, it must communicate one's most private or intimate fantasy in the most artistic way possible. Repression must be lifted. One might even talk about the aestheticization of the repressed, making the very private public in the mode of beauty.²⁴ I suspect that many festival participants would agree with this observation, although Neo-pagans also approach costuming as an opportunity to express aspects they lack, a self that embodies characteristics they "need." Men and women cross-dress. Or a woman may clothe herself as a virgin bride, belly dancer, earth mother or seductress. I asked Peh, a magician and teacher who has designed and facilitated many festival rituals and workshops, why he didn't dress up for festivals:

I don't costume very well. It's not something that I've been able to develop. It's interesting because they push it so much in ELF, you know, to get your fantasy, to get your persona . . . I was walking around last night looking at all these people in wonderful costumes wondering well, what would I wear, what would I look like? What persona would I take? Would I take a strong leather kind of bondage thing or would I take a more feminine one. Maybe I'm so split between them—I know (laughs), maybe I'm so balanced that I don't need either one.²⁵

Apparent freedom of individual choice is often coupled with awareness of the most acceptable styles. Normlessness prevails on the surface, while hidden norms become apparent at times of conflict and after prolonged observation. Native American jewelry and buckskins, pentagrams and crystals, anything in black or purple, flowery gauze skirts and "ethnic" clothes, leather bodices, boots or other medieval wear borrowed from the dress codes of the Society for Creative Anachronism: all of these are part of a distinctively pagan style. Experimenting with degrees of nudity may constitute a kind of conformity; it may also indicate a newly-discovered acceptance of one's body. Several festival-goers conveyed to me their own sense of discomfort wearing clothes; they felt that nudity, or at least partial nudity was the expectation and that they were being looked down upon for not conforming to the "un-dress code."

Costumes, piercings, tatoos, body-painting, degrees of nudity and styles of dancing and drumming are ways of expressing conflict, communicating identity and locating oneself in the community. Clothing and movement as well as verbal self-description often express festival selves intended to oppose and critique the outside world. Like hidden selves, tattoos and piercings that remain hidden in everyday life are revealed at festivals. Moreover, professional tattoo artists and piercing specialists are present at most large festivals. In "Why We Mark Our Bodies" Tath Zal asserts, "It is the view of many that an unmarked body is an inarticulate form, separated from its social/cultural identity; and, that only when the body acquires the 'marks of civilization' does it begin to communicate and become an active part of the greater social experience."²⁶

Neo-pagan bodies articulate specific cultural and religious identities. Nudity makes visible or at least more striking jewelry, body-painting, tattoos and body-piercings. The popularity of piercings and astrological or mythical tattoos among pagans tends to exert a levelling effect on gender. Common tattoos include the Chinese yin/yang symbol, Celtic knotwork, animals, dragons, unicorns and astrological signs. Tattoo and piercing artists are both male and female and their clientele seem to be evenly split by sex. Tath Zal reports in the *Mezlim* body art issue that women "tend to select small, delicate tattoos," and men "choose larger designs," but in the festival community I have observed the opposite to be true as often as not.²⁷ Festival activities provide an opportunity for the display of and discussion about piercings as well as tattoos. Piercings are growing in popularity, though with the exception of ear piercings, they remain less common than tattoos. Many women and men have one or both nipples pierced; I have also seen lip, nose, navel and genital piercings at festivals.

Around the fire men's and women's bodies are mixed together in groups of drummers and dancers. While at most fires women still make up the majority of the dancers, men are often present in almost equal numbers. Male dancers may be nude as well, or more often, wear a skirt or cloth wrapped around their waists. At a distance the partially nude bodies with their skirts flowing are almost indistinguishable by sex, men moving as gracefully and sensually as women. Many men wear loose flowing skirts, caftans or brightly colored clothes wrapped around their waists. Putting on clothing marked as female is an ambiguous statement in the festival setting; like nudity it is a rejection of "mundane" style and an assertion of difference, but it doesn't necessarily signal a change in gender or sexual identity. Salome says she likes to see "all the guys running around in skirts. It's nice because they don't have to worry about being called fag. Heterosexual and homosexual men dress in the same type of outfits and it's really nice for people to be able to get in touch with that feminine side of themselves."²⁸

British cultural studies scholar Paul Willis describes clothing and decor with which groups of hippies and biker boys protest "normality." An important element of their lifestyle was body and decor: "The most direct expression of their nature was in their appearance and their bodily movement."²⁹ At pagan festivals costumes, rituals and identities are pieced together from multiple sources. These products of festival liminality are seen to be critical and oppositional comments on the world outside festival space. Here it may be helpful to distinguish between the "liminal" and the "liminoid" as Victor Turner does in his later writings.³⁰ Liminality, argues Turner, has subversive potential because of its ludic or playful nature. "In liminality people 'play' with the elements of the familiar and defamiliarize them. Novelty emerges from unprecedented combinations of familiar elements."³¹

However, while the liminal gives rise to new symbols and paradigms, Turner claims these feed back into central social structures. The "liminoid" is more effectively subversive because it allows for sustained transformation of individuals and concrete social change. Turner characterizes the liminoid ritual forms of post-industrial society as individualistic and "voluntary"; he opposes these to collective, tribal compulsory rituals. Thus Turner creates a binary opposition between two kinds of societies, conveying the impression that tribal

rites are static, rites in post-industrial society progressive: "The tribal liminal . . . can never be much more than a subversive flicker. It is put into the service of normaliveness almost as soon as it appears."³² I would argue that the opposite is as possible. Neo-pagans also pose an opposition—between festival and mundane worlds—the one subversive and playful, the other maintaining the status quo. The outcome of liminoid experience is not any more likely to be a "progressive" challenge to the status quo or effective social change.

Both liminal and liminoid forms occur within Neo-pagan festivals and may be present within the same ritual. For instance, ritual fires, while supposedly the most free-form of all festival activities, actually contain structures which replicate gender roles of the outside society. For instance men tend to be the more aggressive dancers and drummers, dominating the ritual space and taking more risks such as jumping over the fire, while women dance more slowly and sensuously. But both men and women tell stories of self-transformation that involve dancing around the fire. In these stories, issues of conflict and points of contention emerge and make the boundary between festival and mundane worlds difficult to distinguish.

While vehemently defending themselves against misconceptions of their gatherings, Neo-pagans nevertheless maintain the dualistic worldview of their attackers. Attempts to be nonsexist and egalitarian are evident, but coexist with gender dichotomies. Festival-goers imagine themselves to be constructing boundaries and roles which have little in common with the views of suspicious neighbors and hostile Christians. But, in the process of making a festival community, there is much talk of "us" versus "them."

Marginality and outsiderhood seem to hold a romantic attractiveness to Neo-pagans. Nevertheless, within Neo-paganism there are a range of positionings vis-a-vis the dominant culture; some feel more a part of it than others. Thus an uneasy dynamic develops: pagans gather at festivals to share a common experience, yet while there they encounter the differences between them. Writes Frank Manning in the introduction to *The Celebration of Society: Perspectives on Contemporary Cultural Performance*, "Just as celebration reverses and violates ordinary reality, it also replicates and upholds it. There is a radical contrast within celebration, not just between celebration and the everyday world."³³

Neo-pagans contrast their festival experiences to life in the outside world, but conflicts over boundaries and safety issues emerge within the festival itself. Creating "safe space," for example, involves boundaries, limits and rules, all of which are approached ambivalently in the permissive festival atmosphere. Individuals make their own boundaries, but personal safety is also a community issue. Because many festivals have dealt with an occasional incident of sexual harassment, festival organizers have attempted to create guidelines for behavior. In the Spring 1992 *Elven Chronicle*, Ms. Manners' column entitled "Do Me, Do Me, Do Me, Good Touching" confronts the issue of bodily boundaries:

Let me begin by saying everyone is capable of both experiencing and pressing sexual harassment and rape. While most people would agree that women don't want to be raped, the question of how a woman could possibly rape or sexually harass a man is still up for grabs, so to speak . . . Sexual come-ons, rude flirting and pressing sex can be suffered by

both men and women. Just how do you know when someone doesn't like what you're doing? How do you know when your flirting is "bad touch?" One easy way to tell is if the person says, "Stop," "No thank you, I'm not interested," or "Get your hands off me." It is less easy to tell if the person tries to be "polite" and just avoid you. You might misunderstand and think they are playing hard to get. When in doubt ask, "Excuse me, but I've been flirting with you. Have you enjoyed it?" They only have to say "Yes" or "No." It might be embarrassing if they say no, but it is better than getting kicked out of the festival for sexual harassment.

Ms. Manners' column was written in response to an incident of sexual harassment at a festival. A female festival participant complained to one of the festival organizers about a male festival-goer who would not leave her alone. This organizer attempted to resolve the problem by bringing the two people together for a discussion. The man claimed that the woman, Angela, had attacked *him* and she refused to further discuss the matter. She complained to other members of the festival community that the organizers did not adequately respond to her charges. Some of Angela's female friends boycotted the next festival, protesting that they felt the atmosphere was not supportive of their safety. One festival participant pointed out that Angela could have approached the incident in a way more conducive to pagan egalitarianism. She might, he suggested, have gathered together a group of women to confront the man in question, rather than choosing as she did to complain to an authority figure—one of the festival organizers.³⁴ Though alternative ways of resolving conflict are available in this setting, the habitual turn to authority is not easily broken. This incident reveals assumptions about power and authority that are inconsistent with the egalitarian image the festival community presents.³⁵

The late night festival fire may be a space open to improvisation and largely free of organization and structure, yet its very lack of definition often leads to conflicts which reveal the hidden structures of strategy operating in this community. An article in *The Elven Chronicle* suggests that drinking parties and sexual activities should take place elsewhere. People are asked in the festival literature not to bring bottles into the ritual space or throw cigarette butts in the fire. Likewise, at Pagan Spirit Gathering, several announcements about the abuse of the ritual space were made at daily "village meetings." One of the most evident conflicts is between some festival-goers who want to use the space for late night parties and those who want to keep it a sacred space for ritual work. *The Elven Chronicle's* "Miss Manners" covers festival etiquette and identifies issues which have caused tension at past festivals. Ms. Manners questions behavior at the late night festival fire:

Third shift, as we understand it, is ritual space where the drum's voices are mingled with the ritualists' heartbeats in a trance inducing mixture of beats, silence, sweat, smiles and rhythmic community chants designed to intertwine with the quiet magic of the angels' drumming. . . . Ms. Manners must ask the question: do these lovely angels really want to come to an atmosphere of: loud, show-off blasts on congas; drying wet

sox (etc); cooking hot dogs over the ritual fire (unless it is Friday) . . . overt sexual grabbing; drinking songs; exaltations of how late it is and isn't it great to be part of third shift; getting falling down drunk; suggesting women have no right to drum and should let the MEN do it; and lover's quarrels. Are these really conducive to keeping the community trance energy?

For many festival participants, music and nude dancing signify a celebratory atmosphere where "anything goes," while for other late night drummers and dancers, the festival fire is a sacred space in which self-transformation occurs. As festival communities attempt to resolve these differences, they engage in a process of self-definition. They decide which activities are acceptable to the community as a whole and which are not.

Conflict makes possible new definitions of self and community. More than simply allowing their "real selves" to come out, festival-goers work on transforming the selves they bring to the festival with them. The fluidity of individual identity in festival culture makes possible experimentation with multiple selves. Yet this Neo-pagan understanding of the self is in some sense illusory. Certainly festival-goers experience transformative moments, but they tend to downplay the existence of community tensions and ongoing personal struggles. The selves who emerge here are not uncorrupted by the world outside the festival; they bring it with them. Traumas from the past are shared, childhood fantasies are played out. Neo-pagan festivals exist in a dynamic network of meaning that is both discursive and experiential. Neo-pagans are highly self-reflective: they engage in a constant commentary on their own actions. Individuals and communities give meaning to the identities expressed in ritual by gossiping, complaining, protesting and sharing stories of their sensual, bodily experience. Conversations about behavior, sexuality, identity and spirituality occur before, during and after rituals, in small group meetings, in newsletters and in nationally distributed Neo-pagan periodicals.

Neo-pagan festivals produce stories which comment on and construct community and individual identities. Story-telling provides a means for both reflecting on and constructing the sensual and bodily experience of ritual fires. The Neo-pagan approach to ritual exemplifies Victor Turner's notions of "flow" and "reflexivity": "A performance is a dialectic of 'flow,' that is, spontaneous movement in which action and awareness are one, and 'reflexivity,' in which the central meanings, values and goals of a culture are seen 'in action,' as they shape and explain behavior." This dialectic is visibly played out at the festival fire in the relationship between bodily experience and discourse, and the movement of dancers and onlookers from performance to observation.

At a Neo-pagan festival in midsummer I was standing in the dark outer circle of the festival fire when I was approached by someone I had interviewed that morning. This black hooded man from an army base in Maine pointed out to me a friend of his who had worked as an exotic dancer. He remarked that she had been feeling very inhibited about taking off her clothes at the festival, and in particular while dancing around the fire. She had explained to him that she wanted to learn how to dance for herself instead of for an audience. Her desire to replace the sense of herself as a performer for the male gaze with less self-

conscious movement was realized by the end of the festival. He came up to me later to ask that I watch her dance, that I notice how she seemed to be lost in her own movement without awareness of herself as a body observed. By then she had removed all her clothes and joined the other nude and half nude dancers closest to the fire. However, she remained a female body displayed before an audience and a woman dancing for her own pleasure. She made use of the fire to reshape her past and experiment with a new kind of self. Her black-shrouded friend used this opportunity to create a story about her movement between different identities, a story which highlighted for me both the possibilities and limitations of this festival community.

Notes

1. J. Perry Damaru, "A Gathering Primer" in *Mezlim* 3:2, 1992, p. 3.
2. Most of the large festivals include a diverse range of workshops. The Starwood 1992 program listed the following: "Ancient Goddesses," "Animal Spirit Circle," "Basic Psychic Skills," "Beginning Ritual Drumming," "Chant Sharing," "Creating Your Own Goddess," "Druid Songs and Chants," "Healing Circle," "Hypnosis," "Living Your Myth," "Magic, Music and Sacred Massage," "Nature Spirit Magic," "Tibetan Time Travel," "The Way of the Orisha," "Sweat Lodge" and 85 other workshops.
3. *Representations* 13, Winter 1986, pp. 1-41.
4. Roberto DeMatta, "Carnaval, Informality, and Magic: A Point of View From Brazil" in E. M. Bruner ed., *Text, Play and Story: The Construction and Reconstruction of Self and Society* (American Ethnological Association, 1984) pp. 230-246.
5. Michael, personal correspondence 6/9/92.
6. The "Pagan Spirit Gathering, 1991 Tribal Survey Results" lists the following responses to the question, "What is your Pagan Path?": Eclectic Wiccan, Eclectic (blends many paths), Celtic Traditional Wiccan, Wiccan Shamanism, Native American Shamanism, Goddess Spirituality, Nature Mystic/Gaian/Eco-Pagan, Druidic/Keltria, New Age, Family Tradition (old style) Witchcraft, Multi-cultural Shamanism, Unitarian Universalist Pagan, Egyptian/Hermetic, Alexandrian Wiccan, Discordian, Gardnerian Wiccan, Druidic, Pantheism, Buddhist, Animism, Radical Fairy, Mayan, Hindu/Yoga, Taoist, Dianic/Feminist Witchcraft, Norse/Schadinavian, Lithuanian/Baltic, Assyrian/Babylonian/Summerian [sic], Yorban [sic], Jewish Pagan, Greco-Roman, and Germanic/Teutonic. "Pagan Spirit Gathering 1992 Village Guide" (Mt. Horeb, WI).
7. In *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1974). Turner contrasts flexible, egalitarian liminal events to the stratified, normal world (200-201). Neo-pagans explore a similar contrast in their own literature about festivals.
8. In Richard Bauman, *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments: A Communications-Centered Handbook* (Oxford and London: Oxford University Press, 1992) pp. 268.
9. Personal conversation, 5/92.
10. Personal interview, 7/93.
11. *Circle Network News* issue on pagan gatherings (Summer 1992).
12. Classic sociological studies of sectarian movements such as Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Gloucester, Mass.: P. Smith, 1988) have located them as "opposed" to the "world" in the same ways that many Neo-pagans imagine festivals apart from "mundania." Scholars of new religious movements likewise neglect to recognize the coexistence of apparently contradictory place-meanings. In *Countercultures: The Promise and Peril of a World Turned Upside-Down* (New York: The Free Press, 1982), J. Milton Yinger argues that new religious movements demonstrate two trends: "one branch adapting

in some measure to the world around it while another pushes strongly against the dominant norms" (p. 247).

13. Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986) p. 424.
14. Personal correspondence from Michael, 6/9/92.
15. Personal interview with Peter, 10/92.
16. "The First Festival" in *Mezlim* 4:2, Beltane 1993, pp. 41-45.
17. *Mezlim* "Gatherings Issue," p. 14.
18. *The Elven Chronicle*, Summer 1991 (Bloomington, IN).
19. Diane Tabor in *Mezlim* "Gatherings Issue," pp. 13-14.
20. Personal interview, 7/93. Salome put her drug experience in the context of recent literature by Terence McKenna and others about shamanic techniques using psychedelics.
21. Personal interview, 5/92.
22. Tabor, p. 13.
23. Personal correspondence, 6/92. I sent Michael a letter containing some follow-up questions to our initial interview and he responded by mailing me a tape in which he elaborated on his original comments. I initiated our conversation by asking why he came to festivals and what he took away from them when he returned home. He then talked frankly and at length about how his experiences at festivals had enabled him to change the ways in which he related to his body.
24. Turner, *Carnaval in Rio: Dionysian Drama in an Industrializing Society*, in Frank Manning, ed., *The Celebration of Society: Perspectives on Contemporary Cultural Performances* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Press, 1983) p. 123. Turner's essay furthermore suggests that license and the expression of "the repressed" are made possible by the highly structured planning that precedes the actual *carnaval*. While much planning precedes pagan festivals as well, the relationship between structure and anti-structure is more parallel than linear; boundary enforcement and boundaryless may take place simultaneously.
25. Personal interview, 8/92.
26. Tath Zal, "Why We Mark our Bodies" in *Mezlim*, "Magickal Body Art Issue" p. 12.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
28. Personal interview, 7/93.
29. Paul Willis, *Profane Culture* (London: Routledge, 1978) p. 95. Also see Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: the Meaning of Style* (New York: Methuen, 1979) and *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988).
30. See especially Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982).
31. Turner, p. 27.
32. *From Ritual to Theatre*, p. 45.
33. (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Press, 1983) p. 21.
34. At a festival in New York state this kind of approach was used when a man was harassing women in the women's shower.
35. My account of the story is based on interviews with this festival organizer, Peh, and friends of the woman, Rachel and Jason (Summer 1992). I did not interview the couple involved with the incident.