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Reflecting on Studying Wicca from within the Academy and the Craft: An Autobiographical Perspective

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I am honored to be invited to reflect on my academic biography and its intersection with Pagan studies, particularly to discuss my experience of the relationship between Pagan studies and Wicca, and to talk about the interactions between scholar and practitioner. This aim for reflexivity is a useful common ground within the wide transdisciplinary field that has come to embody the contemporary study of Paganism (an umbrella term for Pagan religiosity). Such reflexivity allows scrutiny for researcher effects, and rejects the assumption that it is possible to study human behavior and belief as an objective observer, particularly when studying one’s own culture. It attempts to account for the individual researcher, how they affect their research, and how their research affects them. In my case this discussion leads into the insider/outsider debate; the interface of Pagan studies with other fields; and theory and methodology in the study of Paganisms (a specific term emphasizing the diverse religions and ideologies that form Paganism). I will start with a potted biography.

An Academic Biography

British state education in the 1970s was not good. I went to a junior school with four hundred children, no learning objectives, and no

1. Melissa Harrington is a senior visiting lecturer at the University of Cumbria. She teaches research methods and fundamentals of clinical and cognitive behavioral psychology
internal walls. My secondary school was an ex “secondary modern,”
which on the abolition of the grammar-school system had been
deemed “comprehensive,” without changing its staff or limited cur-
riculum. Everything conformed to the intellectual culture of the
lowest academic levels. It didn’t have a sixth form, so at sixteen I
commuted fifteen miles to the nearest one, which neither encour-
aged nor promoted university. I left school to work with horses,
taught English in Spain, and then became a temporary secretary in
London before working my way up in marketing at L’Oreal; this
was an enjoyable environment with excellent benefits, but then I dis-
covered Wicca.

Wicca opened a new intellectual world to me. As a child I read
the Encyclopaedia Britannica from cover to cover and requested the
Larousse Encyclopaedia of Mythology by my ninth birthday, but the
drab utilitarianism of school had extinguished any thought of further
education. Wicca strongly re-awakened this thirst for knowledge,
with new concepts in religion and a path into history, philosophy,
comparative and alternative religion, magic, feminism, ritual, spiri-
tuality, ecology, personal development and psychology. After trying
to balance work and study, I gave up my career with its financial
security and incentives, and applied to Royal Holloway University
to study psychology as I approached my thirtieth birthday.

I enjoyed the cognitive and clinically focused BSc while read-
ing for pleasure in the philosophy, classics, and religious librar-
ies. I intensively explored the magical milieu, including sojourns
in magical communities and initiation into ceremonial and West-
ern Mystery traditions. I did my dissertation on a cognitive model
for magical consciousness and a research project on conversion to
Wicca. I intended to become an occupational psychologist, combin-
ing academic qualifications with prior experience and connections.

However, Professor Peter Clarke, head of the Centre for the Study
of New Religious Movements within the Theology and Religious
Studies department at King’s College, London liked my undergrad-
uate work and invited me to extend my research project into a PhD
supervised by him and Vivianne Crowley, who lectured there on the
psychology of religion. I was delighted to accept and join students on
the MA in the Sociology and Anthropology of Religion, and explore
new religious movements while reading up on gender and feminist
scholarship. I also visited the British Museum, enjoying the reading
rooms of the old British Library, reading widely on anything related to
Wiccan history. I was also in two Enochian groups; district manager,
open-sabbats co-ordinator and media officer for the Pagan Federation
London; running my own coven; secretary and an initiating officer in
Shemesh Lodge OTO; and running the London OTO.

By then I was considering becoming a full-time academic, but life
presented a greater challenge. I was married, thirty-five years old,
and it was time to start a family. We did, and then moved 240 miles
home to Cumbria, also reducing my Pagan/magical commitments
to one coven, generic Thelema, and district manager for the Pagan
Federation North West. Professor Clarke has my gratitude for keep-
ing me on track throughout the two maternity leaves, part-time affil-
iation, and the several suspensions of research that followed, but
nevertheless both he and Vivianne had retired from King’s by the
time I came to do my viva.

After a significant break to nurture and enjoy my young family,
renovate houses, and to help develop my husband’s business, I
sought relevant academic teaching experience by offering my local
adult education body courses on sociology, psychology, and psy-
chology of religion, wherewith they also offered me extra training in
adult education, which I used as a springboard to became a visiting
lecturer at the University of Cumbria, on postgraduate courses in
cognitive behavioral psychotherapy. This fitted well with my family
commitments and I intend to continue with this work-life balance
while eventually publishing from my PhD, a number of books on
conversion and Wicca, and possibly to re-engage in research on
cognitive and cultural aspects of religious conversion. I would also
like to publish on aspects of the courses I teach at the University of
Cumbria.

I now do ad hoc magic with groups of friends, and enjoy the role
of matriarch to my “downline” in Wicca. I organize conferences for
the Pagan Federation, including academics as speakers. I also am
invited to give international workshops and lectures. So it seems
that a chance meeting with a Tarot reader many years ago has led me
to the role of senior lecturer and consultant Witch.

Pagan Studies

Pagan studies has so far been an umbrella term for the study of
Paganism from many different academic fields, leading to a collab-
orative interdisciplinary research base rather than any one over-
all “monotheory.” This has facilitated building a polyvocal body
of work engaged with multiple forms of religious belonging and
multiple approaches to research of Pagan religion and its place in
the modern world, as outlined in the goals of the Contemporary
Pagan Studies Consultation of the American Academy of Religion.
This was established in 2005 stating a two-fold mission: 1. Foster
the development of new research and new methods in the study of
Paganism 2. Create an environment that helps to foster critical in-
depth evaluation of current research.

Pagan studies started by mapping Paganism as it has developed,
with research also reflecting its demography as it has grown. Wicca,
as the largest path, has had the widest interest, and its constant diver-
sification and denomination means there is much descriptive work
left to be done. Pagans talk about “Wiccanate privilege,” whereby
interest in Wicca overshadows the development of other Paganisms
to the extent that outsiders see Paganism in terms of a generic sort
of Wicca; this can be seen in general accounts from religious stud-
ies.² Pagan studies scholars’ work has helped to build a much more
 nuanced academic understanding of contemporary Paganisms in all
their forms and functions, and is developing a global interest with
research now beginning to take place in the Australia, post-Soviet
states and the Middle East.

Fostering the Development of New Research

Paganism is a religion that is as much an expression of contempo-
rary culture as it is a rebirth of polytheistic mystery religion.³ In
researching Pagans, even if identifying as an “outsider”, researchers
have been studying their own race, culture and class, some of whom
are more educated than the researcher. They are keen to assist, and
to absorb, reflect and critique academic accounts. This has led to
the concept of dialogue with researched communities, and criticism
of the “colonialist” narrative of classical anthropology and of the
“reductionist outsider” stance. It has also led to inter-field discus-

². Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, The Spiritual Revolution (Oxford: Black-
well, 2005).
Spiritualities, Sacrililization, Popular Culture and Occulture (London: Continuum, 2004).
high level of reflexivity, allied to discussion of how best to engage in
the dynamic process of studying evolving religions within our own
culture, and how to apply that to wider research communities.⁴

Fostering the Development of New Methodologies
Studying Paganism’s manifestation of spirituality, religion, ideology
and identity in the twenty-first century is helping to develop appro-
priate methodologies and tools for contemporary religions that can
then be used for studying wider religion.⁵

As an undergraduate psychologist I realized that psychological
conversion literature did not reflect the common Wiccan experi-
ence of an internal shift in “coming home,” but placed more empha-
sis on adopting religion due to outside agency. In my final research
project I created a scale to measure “recognition” as a conversion
motif alongside Lofland and Skonovd’s existing motifs of intellec-
tual, mystical, revivalist, affectional, and coercive conversion, which
I then applied to Wiccans.⁶ The recognition motif scored highest for
all participants as their key conversion motif; I ascribed this to pre-
existing cognitive factors.⁷ In a later assessment of the rise of Pagan-
ism in Britain I have attributed these factors as ones which have led
to a quiet religious revolution with Paganism becoming the largest
“other” religion in Britain today.⁸

I explored this process in my PhD and ascribed such conversion
to a process of “schematic integration,” whereby a religion fits with
previously constructed cognitive schema or templates. I have real-
ized since that this “recognition” is a description of the process of
cognitive consistency, the opposite of cognitive dissonance, which
engenders that feeling of homecoming. I think this could be applied
to young Muslims converting to extremist Islamic groups, as a more

⁴. Graham Harvey, “Pagan Studies or the Study of Paganisms? A Case Study
in the Study of Religions,” in Researching Paganisms, ed. Jenny Blain, Douglas Ezzy,
and Graham Harvey (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2004), 241–55.
⁵. Michael York, The Emerging Network, A Sociology of the New Age and Neo-
Pagan Movements (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995); Jone Salomonsen,
Enchanted Feminism. Ritual, Gender and Divinity among the Reclaiming Witches of San
Francisco (London: Routledge, 2002).
⁶. John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, “Conversion Motifs,” Journal for the Sci-
uni.marburg.de/religionswissenschaft/journal/diskus/harrington.html
⁸. Melissa Harrington, “The Popularity of Paganism: Making Sense of the
Census,” BSA Sociology of Religion Study Group, Study Day 2013: “Making Sense of the
useful model for understanding Western jihadism than the current “grooming” hypothesis favored by the media, which leans towards “brainwashing” theory discredited by sociologists such as Eileen Barker. Looking at schema theory and conversion I see that “hate-preachers” provide a revivalist element to jihadist conversion, but the problem of Britons supporting Daesh is arguably far more deeply seated in the generation who have grown up in an adopted country during the Bush/Blair years.

Going Native in Reverse: An Initiatory Process

Becoming Wiccan was an integral part of my becoming an academic. Jo Pearson developed the term “going native in reverse,” and I find it apt for my experience, though without the negative connotations that are implicit in the original anthropological concept. I would like to build upon Pearson’s discussion and say that this was a result of a successful initiation into the Academy. Academia has degrees of initiation, each with its own liminalities and learning processes, ordeals, expectations, rituals, and robes that define one’s status and experience. Their achievement implies and ensures increasing levels of enculturation. I found the viva voce and trial by critic to be greater ordeals than any esoteric initiation. I see my own determination to stay involved as proof that once one has invested so much energy and belief into something one is likely to value it, identify with it, and believe in its ideology, culture and norms.

Interpretative Drift

This is similar to Tania Luhrmann’s (process of “interpretive drift,”, which I find viable as a descriptor of enculturation but problematical in its suggestion of cognitive dissonance as a causative force in the adoption of magical belief systems. I think she describes a general process of organizational socialization that is not sufficient to explain magical beliefs, particularly as many people join magical societies because they have already had magical/mystical experience.

As I worked magic with many of the people Luhrmann did, I know there are various accounts of magical belief systems that she was exposed to but did not include in her write-up. This may have been a conscious choice as they didn’t fit with her theory, or unconscious avoidance due to the “cognitive contamination” of the over-arching plausibility structure of the academic rite of passage which was the key driving force in her magical training.\footnote{Peter Berger, A Far Glory: The Quest for Faith in an Age of Credulity (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).}

In psychology one would not set out to prove rather than test a hypothesis, as Luhrmann does, nor ignore a prevalent narrative such as “coming home” to magical communitas, which is resonant with cognitive consistency rather than its opposite cognitive dissonance, to which Luhrmann attributes magical affiliation. From a psychological research framework, her study is a single case study of Luhrmann, rather than her environment. It is the story of one girl’s struggle with cognitive dissonance created by her research parameters, rather than an impartial examination of belief adoption, such as Eileen Barker’s The Making of a Moonie.\footnote{Eileen Barker, The Making of a Moonie (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984).}

What Luhrmann finds in herself, she projects onto her respondents, creating a cognitive model based on her own dissonant cognitions, initiated “as if” she was a Witch but never participating in ritual or communitas within the same cognitive space. It is interesting to wonder what Luhrmann would have written had she done her research ten years later, in a different institution, using something other than anthropology, or if supervised by any of the senior scholars who write reflexively in Researching Paganisms, which discusses these issues in depth. What stands out in Luhrmann’s study is her very honest account of her struggle, an early independent attempt at the reflexivity that has come to typify Pagan studies, from within an institution with an extremely conservative academic ethos. Persuasions of the Witches’ Craft has thus come to be a litmus test in insider/outsider debate related to studying Paganisms, and it is only due to Luhrmann’s honesty in providing this data about her own struggle that so many subsequent scholars have been able to use the book to determine their own stance.

If interpretive drift is a robust theory it should be applicable to other accounts of coming into magical belief/practice, but so far this does not seem to be the case. Equally if the theory is robust it
could be applicable to other forms of initiation and enculturation. One might then expect cognitive dissonance to be part of my own journey from “irrational” Wicca into rational academia. However I found no cognitive dissonance from my initiation into academia, in contrast it offered me tools to understand and continue my own spiritual journey.

Knowledge Transfer and Exchange, Reflexivity and Reactivity

Most Pagans want to learn more about Paganism. The successes of Vivianne Crowley’s Jungian analysis of Wicca and of Ronald Hutton’s academic histories illustrate this. It is interesting to note that the textual emphasis of academia could lead to the assumption Hutton’s work was not popular among Pagans, as three Pagan critiques of Hutton led to a response from him and articles by Peg Aloi and Caroline Tully. However Ronald Hutton is the invited keynote speaker at many Pagan conferences. The Doreen Valiente Trust and Centre for Pagan Studies have put on special “Days for” celebrating the contribution and life of founders of Wicca. These have so far included Doreen Valiente, Gerald Gardner, Patricia Crowther, and Ronald Hutton. There could not be a much higher accolade from the community than this.

I speak at Pagan conferences, where academic contributions are warmly received. This has the dual benefit of providing a knowledgeable audience who can offer specific constructive feedback, and bringing academic tools into the Paganism. I see this as a valuable process of basic knowledge transfer and exchange. Knowledge transfer is usually seen in terms of business or industry uptake and application rather than religion, but it may be relevant in this domain. It takes research out of the ivory tower and into an applied capacity. This concept of course opens into a debate about reactivity, how can researchers achieve an open dialogue but not affect or contaminate their own data, which is a key discussion point in Pagan Studies. Clear research methodologies, conscious reflexivity and collaboration seem to be the best way to negotiate this. Lowell Livezey’s epilogue in Arweck and Stringer discusses the formalized

sharing procedures used by the Religion in Urban America Program
that do not confer veto or control, but enable critical evaluation by
the researched community.\(^\text{14}\) This research program also creates re-
search teams of people who are of diverse gender, race, and religions
to work together.

Other concepts that are highlighted in literature on “knowledge
transfer,” which are relevant to Pagan studies, are knowledge as
power: what is the knowledge, where is it located/embedded, how
can it be shared, what are the ethics of how it is shared, who has
the knowledge, and how do they share it? This is already discussed
in Pagan studies, but could be usefully allied with extant theory
from this area of social science, particularly in terms of how knowl-
edge as power is seen and transmitted in Paganism, and how the
academy interacts with, treats, and portrays practitioners, and the
knowledge they share.

\section*{A View from “Inside”}

When discussing the insider/outside debate I recommend Kim
Knott’s discussion of the evolution of different approaches, and
their positive and negative effects.\(^\text{15}\) Ann Taves provides eloquent
reflection, and Arweck and Stringer a multidisciplinary perspective.

\textit{Researching Paganisms} gives a detailed Pagan specific view, as does
Barbara Davy’s \textit{Introduction to Pagan Studies}.\(^\text{16}\)

\textit{Researching Paganisms} has various detailed accounts of how
Pagan scholars negotiate the boundaries within and between Pagan-
ism and the academy. How one negotiates walking between these
worlds is ultimately due to each setting their own criteria and ethics
in conjunction with academic ethos. I ask, as in practical magic, “to
what end?” This encompasses such questions as “Why would I do
that work, who will it benefit, who might it hurt, what could be the
result, what do I hope to gain from it, what problems might it create,
can it be a success, and what is the best way to go about it?” I try

\begin{thebibliography}{100}
\item \(^\text{14}\) Lowell W. Livezey, “Epilogue: The Ethnographer and the Quests for Mean-
ing,” in \textit{Theorizing Faith: The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Ritual}, ed. Eliza-
beth Arwick and Martin D. Stringer (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press,
\item \(^\text{15}\) Kim Knott, “Insider/Outsider Perspectives,” in \textit{The Routledge Companion to
\item \(^\text{16}\) Barbara Jane Davy, \textit{Introduction to Pagan Studies} (Lanham, Md.: AltaMira
Press, 2007).
\end{thebibliography}
to observe boundaries that practitioners expect academics to preserve while using academic practice to elicit or convey information that is useful to both communities. This question is not dissimilar to that posed by Ann Taves: “What we are trying to make?” She suggests shifting self reflexively between detachment and engagement, using the metaphor of researcher role rather than researcher place. This resonates with the discussions in Researching Paganisms.17

However, even if we follow Taves’ recommendation to shift into role rather than place, we can still affected by the roles we choose and thus affect our research. It is easier to control for academic bias and researcher effects with research methodologies than it is to control for overzealous application of such controls due to personal insecurity as an insider, which I now think is a common feature of both mine and Luhrmann’s research. Jo Pearson once bemoaned to me her criteria, set by herself, as to what she can and cannot research within Wicca. I now wonder if my concern to create valid research in my own limited studies, to stand up to judgment, has been to the detriment of what I could have contributed to the bigger picture.

When I did my undergraduate project on conversion to Wicca, it was as a training exercise to create a psychological research tool within the overall framework of a quantitative experiment. I sent the questionnaire to a set of respondents that could easily be replicated, from a popular, then well-published, gathering. Anyone of any religion or background could replicate my study. I carried on in my PhD with the same ethos, using snowballing from an open source and standardized qualitative interviews, so the work could be tested, replicated, or used in a meta-analysis of similar studies within or between religions. I never used my personal contacts, though they were those of a key gatekeeper and I was using them at the time to help journalists, authors, academics, and seekers. Instead I created careful studies that had my elderly Witch friends somewhat amused, and Doreen Valiente gave me her press cuttings in case they would help. On reflection it is possible that all the time and effort I have spent engaged in academia has directly contributed to a loss rather than a gain in knowledge about Paganism, as I could have preserved so much knowledge, wisdom and information from Gardner’s high priestesses, instead of setting up studies of A.N. Other Wiccan group that could be replicated by A.N. Other researcher.

Porous Boundaries Between In and Outside

Pagan scholars use various terms to describe joint insidership of the academy and Paganism, and how they site themselves within both. Neither category is solely exclusive, with many levels of in/outsidership in both. I see a constant interaction of academia and Paganism that is invisible to Pagans, and raises ethical questions about covert research. One Witchfest International I spoke at included three eminent professors in the audience. The last people at the Pagan Federation fortieth anniversary conference in London, apart from myself and the after-party organizer with whom I was staying, were two Scandinavian academics. This raises the old joke “How many Witches does it take to change a light bulb?” with the answer “None—the anthropologist will do it.”

Markus Davidsen writes emphatically against insider research, but has spent time in the Pagan milieu, with Wiccan gatekeepers assisting him, including promoting and attending (and thereby endorsing) a symposium on Paganism run by him.\(^{18}\) He was given insider privileges, which he has never acknowledged. These gatekeepers were astonished to read his attack on academic Wiccans, and see it as a manifestation of him being more of a Pagan outsider than an impartial outsider looking at Paganism (pers comm).

Inside, Outside and Upside Down

Understandably there are Witches in academia who are not “out.” However, I struggled with a paper a neophyte initiate wrote that is complicated by their claim to be a complete outsider. The group they joined has demanded the community accepts its neophytes on equal terms with others’ first degrees, and thus I dispute their avowed outsidership. They may have taken a Luhrmann-oath, “as if” they were an initiate, but it still gives them full access to the community. Does their personal statement that they are an outsider mean I can “out” them in the interest of critical evaluation? Or am I bound by my own oaths to protect their identity? I feel that that this inverts the ethics, principles and practice of research. If the dichotomous insider/outside paradigm has caused this behaviour it is proof that it is inappropriate for Pagan studies.

Questionable “Critical Analysis” and its Negative Effect

Some of the arguments against insider research seem to seek “power over,” rather than share “power with.” They presume that the outsider is right just because they are a (rational, pure, unbiased knowledgeable) outsider, as opposed to an (irrational, contaminated, biased naive native) insider, even if the insiders are established researchers and the outsider is a novice academic. Davidsen and Leon van Gulik both published “critical analyses” that appear to be driven by personal assumptions and emotions and whichaimed to strengthen claims of personal detachment and reason. I have already commented on Davidsen in notes put on academia.edu for discussion at the Pagan Studies session at the American Academy of Religion 2013, which forms the draft of a future paper, and to which any constructive criticism is welcome.19

The tone and nature of Van Gulik’s article reflect a misunderstanding during his field work. He assumed a request to not attend a workshop was due to the intention of blocking his “outsider” research, rather than about attendees not having given permission, nor expecting, their personal experience of bereavement to be used as research data. This raises the question as to how much academics respect the consent of the community studied, and how much they assume from having once completed forms for their university ethics committee. This feeds back into my earlier discussion about the relationship between academia and Wicca. Who has the authority to demand what? Why should an academic, particularly a self identified outsider to the community, assume that the purposes of their personal project should take priority over the individual and group purposes of practitioners? His paper also raises the issue of how a researcher responds to others who say “no.” There will always be disappointments, and moments when research participants are not able to offer academics what they desire. This brings us back to the applicability of the concept Graham Harvey has developed of “guesthood,”20 with its recommendation of a mutual effort of respect, care, and a genuine attempt to understand.

19. Available at www.academia.edu/5163312/Academia_edu_davidsen.
Looking Forward

We live in very interesting times and are privileged to be working in a fascinating field. I am grateful to both Paganism and academia for enriching my life and giving me incredible tools for looking at the world around me and my place within it; these have led to my interest in much wider debate, in politics, policy and global humanity. I left school to try to make it as a show-jumper, looking at the world from between a horse’s ears. I never thought I’d become a Witch, let alone a university lecturer, much less be invited to contribute to an edition like this. For me it is a journey that continues, and I know not where that will take me. I do not solely identify as a Wiccan—my life is wider than that—and it is only part of my identity and religious path; however, it is the one thing that everyone, from my neighbors to the academy, seems to want to hear about. I think the study of contemporary Pagan Witchcraft has only just scraped the surface of what it could be, and that academia can work in a very effective dialogue with scholars and practitioners. I hope that as Pagan studies progresses it will continue to strive for honesty and reflexivity, with all Pagans out of the broom closet, as their human right, and part of a wider ranging scholarly necessity. What I do know is that as Pagan studies grows it will continue to provide a vital view of contemporary religion, community, identity, and belief, and remain at the forefront of developing new resources for studying humanity and its dilemmas, drives and dreams in the twenty-first century; and I am be proud to be a part of this.

Bibliography


