

Spring 5-2017

# Cultural Appropriation in Contemporary Neopaganism and Witchcraft

Kathryn Gottlieb  
*University of Maine*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/honors>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Gottlieb, Kathryn, "Cultural Appropriation in Contemporary Neopaganism and Witchcraft" (2017). *Honors College*. 304.  
<https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/honors/304>

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors College by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact [um.library.technical.services@maine.edu](mailto:um.library.technical.services@maine.edu).

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION IN CONTEMPORARY WITCHCRAFT AND  
NEOPAGANISM

by

Kathryn A. Gottlieb

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors  
(Anthropology and Sociology)

The Honors College

University of Maine

May 2017

Advisory Committee:

Lisa K. Neuman, Associate Professor of Anthropology and Native American  
Studies, Advisor

Sarah Harlan-Haughey, Assistant Professor of English and CLAS Honors  
Preceptor

Nancy Lewis, Instructor, Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies

Darren Ranco, Associate Professor of Anthropology and Chair of Native  
American Programs

Katrina Wynn, Archivist and Humanities Professional

# Abstract

This thesis examines the discourse surrounding cultural appropriation in contemporary witchcraft and neopaganism, particularly online. The aim of this thesis is to look at how cultural appropriation became such a central topic in the witch and neopagan community and to see what can be learned about the community as a whole from this discourse. Definitions, neutralization techniques, and the development of alternative practices and terminologies are all discussed, as well as how cultural appropriation relates to the history of witchcraft as a whole. Seven witch/neopagan members of the popular blogging platform tumblr.com were interviewed for this study to examine how the discourse affected them in their personal lives and spiritual practices. Their experiences are examined in relation to the culture of tumblr as a whole and in the context of the history of modern witchcraft and neopaganism.

# Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Context.....	13
Chapter Two: Cultural Appropriation in Practice.....	35
Chapter Three: Living with Cultural Appropriation .....	53
Chapter Four: Going Forward .....	68
References.....	72
Appendix 1: Methods.....	78
Appendix 2: IRB Approval.....	83
Author's Biography.....	84

## Introduction

The daily experience of a modern witch is quite a bit different, I imagine, from what most people would imagine. I've identified as a witch for about half of my life, but my daily routine looks about the same as everyone else's. I go to school, I spend time with friends, I go grocery shopping, and I waste countless hours on the Internet. One of the websites I frequently visit, called tumblr, has a rather large witchy community. Witches probably make up the majority of the people I follow on the site. I've spent many an evening scrolling through a seemingly endless stream of posts, featuring spell ideas, pictures of crystals and plants, roundups of useful links from around the Internet, and (with increasing regularity) rants long and short about cultural appropriation.

Cultural Appropriation is a term that has been showing up a lot recently, everywhere. A quick Google news search as I write this yields a crop of articles instructing music festival goers on how to not appropriate other cultures during festivals such as Coachella (mental images of hippies wearing cheap fake war bonnets come to mind), a few editorials on the fashion industry (you may have seen the outcry about white runway models multicolored dreadlocks), and a general roundup of celebrities who are often accused of committing cultural appropriation (often featuring the latest selection of selfies of Kardashians and Jenners in cornrows). It's a buzzword, an accusation, and a loaded topic.

In other spheres, however, the issue is actually rather central and constantly debated. In subcultures like mine, that of modern witches and neopagans, it's actually a pretty hot topic of debate.

That may confuse some people at first, but the cultural appropriation issue actually brings to light several of the underlying themes in contemporary witchcraft and neopaganism, such as the general community's relationship with race, ethnicity, culture, and history. By examining the issue of cultural appropriation in witchcraft and neopaganism, we can start to observe several of the underlying themes and tensions in the community, and how they relate to modern politics in general.

## Meet the Witch: The Author's Background and Biases

Since my own experiences will be used as a sort of causal data in this thesis, I feel that I should make a sort of introduction, to help readers keep in mind my various biases.

I've been a witch for about ten years, though not necessarily very active in my practice. I rarely did much to meet other witches, though over the years I've encountered a few other witches in various "normal" situations (one I met at a party thrown by a family member, another was a co-worker). I've been active on the pagan side of tumblr for a year or two. I wasn't terribly experienced with the community before this project, but have spent the last year or so actively observing, researching, and interviewing the witch and pagan communities on tumblr.

Ethnically, I'm white, with enough Jewish on my father's side to justify a yearly Passover celebration and enough Native American on both sides for me to be aware of it. I'd describe my practice as an eclectic, meaning that I pull from a variety of different traditions and sources to create a spiritual and magical practice that is unique to me.

Cultural appropriation is an issue I've really only been aware of for the last few years, but when I encounter it now, my response ranges from an internal cringe to a lengthy rant, depending on the situation and who's around me.

## The Current Study

In this thesis, I will be working with posts from tumblr, a website on which a great deal of this discussion is occurring, as well as a few interviews I conducted with witches from tumblr about the nature of the cultural appropriation debate and the general effect the debate has had on their practice. I will also be examining this debate in its larger historical and cultural context to try to see why cultural appropriation has become such an important topic among this one particular subculture.

My use of tumblr posts as a source of literature has yielded a few unique problems. The first is grammar. Since there isn't any sort of editorial process for tumblr posts, many of the posts have seriously flawed grammar. There's also a lot of Internet slang and abbreviations. In order to avoid having to edit posts too much, I won't be using traditional academic notes like [sic] in tumblr posts. However, if a post's formatting is too broken to work in this thesis, I will alter the formatting slightly.

Also, since I don't always know the gender of the person who is posting an individual tumblr post, I will generally refer to users with the gender neutral pronoun "them." I also asked all of my interviewees what their preferred pronoun would be, and some of them wished to use "them" as well.

For a more detailed explanation of my interviewing process and my decision to use tumblr as a basis for study, please see Appendix 1.

## Clarification of Terminology

In a lot of ways, this will be a very technical discussion. Issues of cultural appropriation revolve around very technical differences and exist on multiple levels. Because of this, I want to clarify what I mean by several of the terms I will be using throughout this thesis before we go any further. Here, we'll be looking at three sets of related words: Cultural Appropriation and Cultural Diffusion; Race, Ethnicity, and Culture; and Witch, Wiccan, and Neopagan.

### Cultural Appropriation and Cultural Diffusion

Cultural appropriation is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as “the act of taking or using things from a culture that is not your own, especially without showing that you understand or respect this culture.” Though it is technically a neutral term, it has a very negative connotation in most modern discourse. Cultural appropriation suggests a number of things: that the person doing the appropriating is in some way more powerful than the group they are appropriating from (for example a white person who is inherently privileged in most of Western society); that the appropriation is done without the consent of the group that is being appropriated from (if an individual is given a piece of cultural material as a gift, it is not generally seen as cultural appropriation); and that the appropriation in some way does harm to the group that is being appropriated from (for example, if the appropriation perpetuates stereotypes). While these three features aren't necessarily part of the technical definition, and may not be present in every case of cultural appropriation, they can generally be seen as markers of cultural appropriation and will be used as the working definition of appropriation for this paper.

Cultural diffusion, for the sake of this thesis, will be seen as the more natural flow of ideas and cultural material across cultures over time. It's distinct from appropriation because it does not involve one group exercising power over another group and also implies more consent. Though one could argue that there aren't many instances where two cultures interact on completely equal footing, as one culture usually has some sort of upper hand, the term diffusion will still stand in as an example of more natural, organic interactions between cultures instead of the more exploitative nature of cultural appropriation.

## Race, Ethnicity, and Culture

Most people know the general difference between race, which is a broad category describing people from large areas, and ethnicity, which tends to describe people from smaller areas. For example, someone's race may be white and their ethnicity Irish. These terms are understandably the center of much debate, particularly since there is no real biological basis for race, they will still be used often throughout this thesis, which examines racial and ethnic politics through the lens of cultural appropriation. Though "ethnicity" can also be used to refer to someone's cultural background, I'll be using it primarily to refer to their genetic (or perceived genetic) background. The term "person of color" (POC) will be used rather often to describe individuals who are not white. The term has become rather popular recently, especially online.

Another important word is "culture," a word that is easy to understand and hard to define. When I use the word culture in this thesis, I will be operating under the definition

that most people generally have in their minds — a general set of practices and worldviews that makes up some distinct group's identity.

I'll generally be using the terms "white" and "Western" interchangeably. In the cultural appropriation debate, there is essentially a dichotomy between the ethnicities and cultures of people of color and Western culture (the preferred term to reference dominant cultural ideas and philosophies which originate in northwestern Europe), or general hegemonic whiteness. Though I acknowledge that the terms are not interchangeable, they are generally rather closely associated and for the purposes of this thesis can generally be used together to indicate one half of the dichotomy.

## Witch, Wiccan, and Neopagan

A witch is anyone who practices witchcraft (sometimes referred to simply as "the Craft"). Witchcraft is hard to define, but here can generally be thought of as any way of trying to manipulate energy in accordance with your will, with the intention of affecting some sort of change. Though historically people have associated witches with Satanism or "devil worship," the majority of modern witches don't even believe in the Christian devil, though there is a small group of people who identify as Satanic witches.

Witchcraft on its own is generally thought of as a secular practice, but is often incorporated into other belief structures. There are Wiccan witches, atheist witches, Christian witches, Jewish witches, and Buddhist witches, for example.

There will be several times throughout this work when I use the term "modern witchcraft," by that, I mean witchcraft since the 1950s. Since "generational" differences between older understandings in modern witchcraft and newer ones will be a recurring

theme in this thesis, I will be referring to the generally newer camp specifically as twenty first century witches, even though there is considerable overlap.

Wicca is a specific religion, created in the 1960s and practiced around the world. The creation of Wicca is generally thought of as the birth of the modern witch and neopagan movement. Much of what exists today in the world of witchcraft and neopaganism can be traced back to Wicca. Though many Wiccans identify as witches — and use “Wiccan” and “witch” interchangeably — there are Wiccans who do not consider themselves witches.

But even more common than a Wiccan not identifying as a witch is a Wiccan treating “witchcraft” as though it was a synonym for “Wicca,” not a reference to a different (albeit similar) practice. This was common practice for a long time and many important books on Wicca and witchcraft use the terms interchangeably (see Starhawk 1979; Adler 1979). However, as we start to chip away at the twenty first century, newer branches of modern witchcraft stray farther from the generally Wiccan origins of modern witchcraft. As a result, a great deal of twenty first century witches do not identify as Wiccans. I’m one of them.

Though most modern witches do not identify as Wiccan or belong to a Wiccan coven, Wicca has been instrumental in the history of modern witchcraft. Many elements of Wiccan practice can be found in the practices of several twenty first century witches, such as the Wheel of the Year, the calendar of the Wiccan faith, which is based around old Irish harvest festivals.

Neopaganism is a religious category. A neopagan is someone who follows a religion that is based off of or inspired by a pre-Christian faith of some sort. There are

several different types of paganism, from paganism based off of modern symbols and pop culture (“pop paganism”) to neopagan religions that do their best to emulate an ancient religion (reconstructionism). Wicca is a type of neopaganism as well. Hundreds of different faiths and spiritualities fall under the title “neopagan.” Pop pagans, reconstructionists, and Wiccans are all neopagans in the same way that Methodists, Baptists, and Catholics are all Christians.

## How Cultural Appropriation Hurts People

Earlier, I described cultural appropriation as exploitative, and explained that for something to be appropriation, it generally has to do some sort of harm. Many people view appropriation as a victimless crime that doesn’t actually damage the communities it takes from. This isn’t the case. There are a variety of ways that appropriation does harm.

One of the primary arguments about cultural appropriation is that it represents a continuation of colonialism. When people appropriate, they are perpetuating old oppressive systems, and exercising their power over people who have traditionally had their power taken away:

**Cultural Appropriation is less about picking cultures that “aren’t yours”, and is more about taking things without permission and utilizing it for your own means simply because you can.** It’s about power imbalances, where (to use an easy example) modern Native Americans are being forced to cut their hair because our dominant, European-influenced culture has deemed it Wrong and Inappropriate. And yet Mr. McWhitey can go and take whatever he wants because he happens to be from the dominant culture? Naw brah, that’s bullshit (thetwistedrope 2016, emphasis theirs).

When someone appropriates, they take advantage of the power they may have in a situation to take cultural materials out of their original context.

Appropriation is often seen as a sort of cultural theft, as a tumblr user explaining the difference between cultural *appreciation* and cultural appropriation shows in the following analogy:

Culture appreciation is when your neighbor hangs out with you and you see them staring at some shoes you're wearing, so you let them try it on for kicks. Turns out, they fit, and they look great in them so you tell your neighbor "aw heck, take 'em"

Culture appropriation is when your neighbor comes into unannounced, and takes your vase with your grandfather's ashes. You try to stop them. "Hey, stop, what are you doing that's mine." "But we're neighbors, and I like this vase." "But that was my grandfathers" "You let me have the shoes before, let me have this" "No it's different, the shoes were a gift." "We could always share the vase what the heck man." "You're telling me we could share my grandfathers ashes." "I mean, it doesn't have to be about your grandfather. We could just dump the ashes. and make it just a vase for us." "Dump my grandfather's ashes. Are you listening to yourself right now." "Listen. I have a grandfather too so I'm entitled to this vase as much as you are." "But it was mine to begin with?!" "Dude chill out its just a vase why are you getting so upset calm down wow" (yurilolita, year unknown).

As yurilolita put it, cultural appropriation shows the considerable amount of entitlement inherent in Western culture, as well as certain underlying assumptions about what is and is not important (in the analogy, the neighbor figured that the urn filled with the narrator's grandfather's ashes was "just a vase"). To appropriate another culture is to show an incredible amount of entitlement (Root 1996: 72). The inherent message of cultural appropriation is that the colonizer gets to decide what is important, what they are allowed to take, and what other people should feel about their taking it. The appropriator has absolute power and derides the person they are appropriating something from for having an opposing opinion. It is a subtle but nonetheless potent display of colonial power — power so deeply ingrained in society that it can be very difficult to even notice when that power is being used.

This power imbalance leads to a variety of issues for the people whose cultures are being appropriated. It damages the integrity of a tradition, because the use and

influence of outsiders can change the way the tradition is perceived or practiced, or it can prevent indigenous craftspeople from profiting from their art (Tsosie 2002 [10]). One common example of the second point is that non-Native artists may be able to profit off of Native motifs and designs while Native artists find themselves competing with non-Natives in production of their own cultural materials. Deborah Root, in her book *Cannibal Culture*, described one such scene: a Native artist in British Columbia walking from one Native-themed shop to another, trying to sell his traditional Northwest prints. He was rejected by every one of the shop owners on the street, who were all white (Root 1996: 67).

Aside from commercial issues, cultural appropriation also challenges and diminishes the power indigenous groups have over their own culture, and it can interfere with the very identity of the people who originally held the cultural practice by perpetuating stereotypes (Tsosie 2002 [10]).

Unfortunately, legal protections against cultural appropriation are pretty minimal, especially when it comes to intangible concepts like culture (Tsosie 2002: [8]). Particularly for Native Americans, being able to control access one's own culture is key for ensuring any sort of cultural survival; however, cultural ownership can be very difficult maintain in a culture such as the United States, where the First Amendment essentially guarantees outsiders access to any culture's language, religion, or folklore (Tsosie 2002: [8]). Though Native American nations may have sovereignty under the law of the United States, since the First Amendment is the law of the land, trying to control access to one's culture would be understood as a violation of outsider's freedom of religion, and therefore unconstitutional (Tsosie 2002: [8]).

This uncomfortable need to balance freedom of expression for outsiders and protection of cultural material for insiders is part of what makes the cultural appropriation debate so difficult. People don't like being told what they can and cannot do, and putting legal restrictions on self-expression is very un-American. So where do we find the balance? There is no good answer. However, even as we search for this answer (that likely doesn't exist), every-day people are hurt by instances of cultural appropriation.

### Roma Costumes and Mixed Messages

There are several examples of cultural appropriation playing out in negative ways for members of the appropriated group. I'll be sharing one that one of my interviewees, who is half Romani, told me about her cousin:

I had a cousin... almost lose his kid because of a weird situation. A man had let his daughter dress up in her 'gypsy' halloween costume to go to the park, at like, age seven or eight. My little cousin saw her and thought he could make friends! His dad, however, was concerned that a child that young was being presented that in a way that culturally said that they were looking to find her a husband. He approached the man, thinking he was Rom and hard on his luck, hoping to make a match with another family so that they would support each other and share together, and said that he wasn't interested in engaging with the little girl, but they would be more than welcome to what extra they had at home. The dad got mad, misunderstood what he meant (i.e.: thought that my cousin was talking about marrying the little girl herself, and not engaging the children, which is what her clothes were saying) called him a pedophile and called the cops.

This story has a lot of the classical elements of cultural appropriation: a significant cultural element (traditional Roma clothing that is used to indicate that a woman is looking for a husband) taken out of context (a little white girl wearing it as a Halloween costume), which results in adverse effects for members of the original culture (the Roma man being accused of being a pedophile).

So as you can see, cultural appropriation has real consequences for people on a day to day basis. It represents a continuation of colonization and colonial thinking. It misuses cultural material in ways that hurt members of the original culture. It is not a silly subject that Social Justice Warriors like to complain about because they have nothing better to do, it is a real and damaging element of oppression.

So why does it happen? In the next section, we'll look at the broader context of cultural appropriation in witchcraft, including the history and demographics of witchcraft, as well as the various reasons why witches, specifically, appropriate from other cultures.

# Chapter One: Contexts

## A History of Witchcraft: Two Narratives

In telling the history of witchcraft, there are two key narratives. The first, which I will be referring to as the Scholarly History of Witchcraft, is the generally accepted academic account of the origins of contemporary witchcraft and paganism. The second, which I'll be referring to as the Poetic History of Witchcraft, is sometimes seen as the origin myth of modern witchcraft. Though some scholars (Stone 1976) have argued for it, from what I've observed of the neopagan community (particularly online), the narrative has started to fall out of fashion.

### The Scholarly History of Witchcraft

Though witchcraft as it would be generally defined today — as the use of one's will to influence one's situation or surroundings — has likely existed for as long as humans have, the roots of modern witchcraft (that is, the actually-referring-to-oneself-as-a-witch sort of witchcraft) are a bit easier to find. Many historians would argue that the modern neopaganism and witchcraft are the descendents of “early modern occultism.” (Pike 2004: 40). Traditions we would currently call “magical” existed alongside Europe's Christianity, particularly among the lower classes and the uneducated. Throughout the eighteenth century, occultist practices like astrology and alchemy persisted even among the intellectual class, but were not given much public attention (Pike 2004: 42). During the nineteenth century, however, interest in the occult rose exponentially. The period between the War of 1812 and the Civil war has been referred

to by historians as “a spiritual hothouse” (Pike 2004: 42). During this time, interest in things like séances, yoga, trance healing, and meditation grew (Pike 2004: 42). Occult groups like the Theosophical Society (which introduced a variety of Eastern concepts like reincarnation and karma) and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (which pulled from ancient Eastern religions, Egyptian mythology, Jewish mysticism, and Renaissance-era alchemy) emerged during the nineteenth century, establishing something of a new, organized western magic system (Pike 2004: 57-59).

Interest in the occult continued with varying levels of intensity throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, though not without quite the same fervor as the in the mid-nineteenth (Pike 2002: 61). By the 1960s, the variety of alternative spiritualities and occultist practices that had sprung up, died, and morphed over the last century or so became what we generally refer to as the “New Age movement” (Pike 2004: 67).

In 1954, Gerald Gardner published a book titled *Witchcraft Today*, in which he claimed to have come into contact with a contemporary coven of witches practicing a pagan religion that had survived several centuries of Christian domination (Noble 2005: 17). He built up a following around his work, leading to the formation of the religion we currently refer to as Wicca.

Wicca continued to grow in popularity throughout the late twentieth century. Various different branches of Wicca developed in the decades following the religion’s inception, such as the Seax Wiccan tradition of Raymond Buckland (Adler 1986: 92). The community, though not initially political, grew more politically minded over time, particularly with politically active authors like Starhawk becoming very relevant in the

late twentieth century (Adler 1986: 456-457) The neopagan community continued to grow, helped by the advent of new forms of communication and technology (Berger 1999: 69).

Few religions were likely so fundamentally influenced by the advent of the Internet as neopaganism. Modern witchcraft and neopaganism came to age amid the information revolution, and are some of the few substantial religions or spiritual practices to emerge after the Enlightenment (Eilberg-Schwartz 1989: 78). These two factors led to the very unique structure of modern witchcraft and neopaganism. Whereas traditionally religions were community based, with one's religion being predetermined by the place in which one was born, the radical individualism of the enlightenment and the information buffet of the Internet have undercut that traditional pattern. An American born into an Italian family a century ago would likely have been born Catholic, would have lived their entire life as a Catholic, and would have died a Catholic. Though such religions stability may still be the norm for most people, it may no longer be considered a given. That person may now be born Catholic, but would experiment with witchcraft in their teens before becoming a devout atheist during college. After, perhaps they would gain an interest in Buddhism, then start studying yogic medicine. Perhaps after a while they would consider themselves simply "spiritual."

The marketplace of religion and religion practices we have today is immense. It would not be possible without first, the Enlightenment establishing firmly in the Western psyche the sacred sovereignty of the individual (Eilberg-Schwartz 1989: 82), and second, advances in information technology making material more readily available. Earlier narratives of witchcraft were decidedly middle-class, with feminist bookshops and

expensive retreats functioning as the centers of modern paganism. It was available only to those who were around. It was born out of cities yearning for the country. It was born out of the desire of the educated and privileged to return to the primitive times of their distant pagan ancestors. It was there for those who could afford the books and the classes, those who had enough time to go to the workshops and those close enough to a city and comfortable enough to go into the shop with a giant pentacle painted on the side.

The democratising effect of the Internet on access to information is almost impossible to express in words. According to the Pew Center, in 2016 only about 13% of American adults did not use the Internet (Anderson 2016).

Access to information on the Craft is becoming increasingly available to a larger amount of people. Innumerable websites exist on witchcraft, providing an endless stream of theory, correspondences (associations between concepts and physical items that witches use to create spells), and pagan mythology. The average Internet user is a quick Google search away from thousands if not millions of spells on any topic imaginable. Whereas before the earlier the Craft was available mostly to those who could afford the material and had ready access to the brick-and-mortar centers of modern witchcraft, now the poorest teenager from the most rural town in the thick of the Bible belt can get to about as much information on the witchcraft as a well-to-do Berkeley student who frequents her local occult shop.

Even more important than simple access to information is the massive online community of witches. Since modern witchcraft is in many ways a religion of individuals, many witches don't personally know any other witches. The Internet has made it considerably easier for like minded minorities to find one another, and witches

and neopagans are in no way exceptions to this rule. According to a 2009-2010 survey of pagans, more than half of respondents spoke with other pagans on a daily basis online, while only about one fifth of respondents spoke with other pagans in person every day (Lewis 2014: 30).

Witchcraft, though a concept as old as society, has become decidedly modern. Contemporary witchcraft can trace its strongest historical roots back really only to the eighteenth century. However, though historians think of modern witchcraft as a brand new phenomenon, many modern witches believe otherwise.

## The Poetic History of Witchcraft and the Burning Times

From the moment I decided to include a chapter on the history of witchcraft, I knew that I had to include the history of the Craft according to some of the founders of modern witchcraft. Though many modern witches — particularly the twenty first century witches — may not believe the story (at least not in its entirety), it is still important for the formation of many witches' identities and has a special location in the subconscious of the Craft's contemporary practitioners, particularly since it is often referenced in the works of popular witch author Silver RavenWolf, whose book *Teen Witch* (1998) has since come under intense scrutiny in the witch/neopagan community for spreading misinformation.

The story, which I will be referring to as the Poetic History of Witchcraft, may not be wholeheartedly believed by the neopagan and witch community as a whole, but many of the feelings that come with the narrative — the legacy of persecution, the feeling

of connection to something ancient — still influence the community. At first, my plan for presenting this was to find a version in a book. Instead, I decided to do some ethnography on myself, a witch who first heard this story about ten years ago. This is the Poetic History of Witchcraft, as I personally would tell it:

*Thousands and thousands of years ago, the people of Europe worshiped an Earth Mother figure, the Goddess. She was a fertility deity, and the people who worshiped her were pacifistic, working closely with the earth's cycles. The ancient cultures were matriarchies, ruled by women and in perfect harmony with the planet.*

*Then, the culture started to change. Warlike, patriarchal tribes who worshiped a male deity (sometimes called the Sky Father) took over and dominated the peaceful, matriarchal cult of the Goddess. Over time, the cult of the Sky Father turned into the patriarchal pagan faiths of the ancient world, and, of course, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.*

*The followers of the Earth Mother, who had existed in a subdued form in the thousands of years between the arrival of the cult of the Sky Father and the emergence of modern monotheism were forced even further underground. The ancient priestesses of the Earth Mother became the herbalists, midwives, and wise women of the villages of Europe. With time, these women started to be actively prosecuted by the dominant patriarchal society. This period of time ranging from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century was called The Burning Times. During this time, up to nine million women were killed for failing to fit into the dominant Christian society.*

*Still, though it was forced further underground than ever before, the faith of the witches persisted. It persisted all the way into the twentieth century. Gerald Gardner, one of the founders of modern witchcraft, was initiated into one such witch cult in the 1950s. Today, thanks to modern laws concerning freedom of religion, contemporary witches can worship the Earth Mother with little fear for their personal safety.*

From a historian's perspective, there appears to be very little solid evidence in support of this narrative (Noble 2005: 6). Many believe it is based primarily on the work of Margaret Murray, an Egyptologist-turned-witchcraft-historian who, in the 1920s, published a series of books on the history of a large, organized underground witchcult, books many believed to have inspired Gardner's works. Her texts are riddled with problems, detailed by Margot Adler in the following way:

The arguments against her are many: that she took as true stories that may have been fabricated under torture [she used a great deal of confessions from witch trials]; that, while she gave good evidence for Pagan survivals in Britain, she did not give evidence

that an *organized* Pagan religion survived, or that this religion was universal, or that covens or sabbats existed before they appeared in the Inquisitors' reports (Adler, 1986, p. 48).

Today, Murray's narrative has largely been rejected by the witch/neopagan community, particularly on the Internet. In fact, referencing "The Burning Times," or Silver RavenWolf is a sure way to have any post on witchcraft discredited or ridiculed in tumblr circles (quidditchcapricious 2014).

That said, there are several different neopagan historians who have made claims about the origins of goddess worship and of ancient matriarchies. Some theories, for example suggest that goddess worship went back as far as 70,000 BCE (Eller 1993 :157). Some archaeologists have found evidence of seemingly matriarchal societies and ancient goddess worshippers (Eller 1993: 159). Whether or not this proves that the people of the distant past belonged to matriarchies, however, is unclear. Trying to explain the societies of prehistoric people is in many ways a game of pure speculation.

What is a little more clear, however, is that many modern witches' and neopagans' understanding of the Burning Times is wrong. The claim that nine million women were murdered during the witch hunts of Europe is likely an overestimation. Academic estimates vary on what the real number is, ranging from around thirty thousand to somewhere in the millions (Eller 1993: 174; Noble 2005: 21).

Still, many witches identify with the Poetic History of Witchcraft the Burning Times as a narrative, either because they are unaware of its likely historical inaccuracy or because they are comfortable with the Burning Times as a sort of historical myth of the Craft. It's not hard to find banners floating round the various Internet haunts of modern

witches saying things like, “we are the grandchildren of the witches you weren’t able to burn.”

## Demographics

So, what does the American neopagan community look like? This can be a rather difficult question to answer, since the neopagan community is so spread out and many members may not openly practice their faith for social or personal reasons. It can be difficult to gather up a large enough group of neopagans to constitute anything like a “sample,” and the few opportunities to do so may lead to samples that aren’t terribly representative. For example, in one attempt to get a feel for the general demographics of the community, Jorgenson and Russell (1996) went to several pagan festivals across the United States, handing out 2,123 questionnaires. They only received 643 of those questionnaires back, attributing what they considered to be a low response rate to the secretive nature of neopagans and the fact that neopagans generally don’t like labels (Jorgenson and Russell 1996: 329).

Doing studies of neopagans through festivals is a pretty common method for researchers. For example, Margot Adler’s book *Drawing Down the Moon* featured a 1985 study she conducted in which she handed out 450 questionnaires at three pagan festivals — one in Massachusetts, one in Wisconsin, and one in Oregon (Adler 1986: 443). Sarah Pike’s study of neopagan communities *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves* (2001) focused on pagan festivals.

While it makes sense that a scholar looking at the neopagan community would go to a festival to study it, a sample based on festivals is inherently skewed and limited. Not

all pagans and witches go to festivals. I, for example, have considered myself a witch for half of my life and have never gone to a pagan festival. To my knowledge, none of the witches and pagans I know personally have attended such an event.

Still, handing out surveys at neopagan festivals generally appears to be the best available method for gauging the neopagan population's demographics, particularly since some of the surveys were done before the Internet became as pervasive as it currently is in the Craft. Since there hasn't been many major surveys of the witch/neopagan community in a while, those handed out at festivals in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s are the best measures we have of the witch/neopagan community's demographics.

Generally, neopagans are overwhelmingly white (Charbonneau 2007: 6). In a 2003 survey of the neopagan/witch community, 90.8% of respondents identified as Caucasian, and 80% identified as Celtic (Charbonneau 2007: 6). According to Jorgensen, in a study done in the 1990s: "89% of those responding to our question about ethnicity indicated that they were white; less than 2%, in each instance, said they were African-American, Native American, or Hispanic; and the remainder responded with some other identity, multiple categories, or they did not reply to this question," (Jorgensen 1999: 331).

So, as the study suggests, the community is rather homogeneous. Though witches "relish the idea that their religion is diverse," from an ethnic standpoint, the community still appears to be dominated by white people (Charbonneau 2007: 6). Whether or not this is changing, we can't quite tell. I haven't been able to find any recent surveys of or measures of the neopagan/witch community, and as I said earlier, the few that we have from years past are often skewed towards those willing and able to attend pagan festivals.

## Witchcraft and Whiteness

When looking at witchcraft through the lens of cultural appropriation, one must keep in mind, then, that to our knowledge the majority of witches are white. Therefore, many modern witches have a different relationship with power structures than their title would suggest.

As an archetype, the witch is almost never seen as a central figure in society. She is an outcast, the strange lady in the strange clothes living on the edge of the village, her broken down hut nestled against the treeline. She's the shadowy figure girls go to when they're carrying a baby they can't keep, or the old woman who slips the lord's wife a vial of poison when the two pass in the marketplace. She subverts old power structures and represents the hidden, resentful power of the oppressed. She poses an ancient and sustained threat to the patriarchy: "Witchcraft, it seems, defeats the masters, while at the same time it is a weapon women can use to bring an end to male power" (Stella 2013: 368).

There is a sense of mysteriousness and power often projected onto oppressed members of society. Speaking about the difference between oppression and power, Native activist John Trudell explained that "Native people may be oppressed, but the traditions have power; white people may be in charge, but Western culture has lost its heart, soul, and life — its power" (Root paraphrasing Trudell 1996: 101). There is power in being oppressed.

However, since the majority of modern witches and neopagans are white, as the section above shows, many modern witches have to reconcile their status as members of

the most privileged race in most societies with their tendency to identify with the oppressed.

There are a few ways in which many witches deal with this cognitive dissonance. One of the primary ways they do this is by strongly identifying with an ancestral group that has some history of oppression. In the modern witch/neopagan community, this is often done by strongly identifying with the Celts.

Contemporary witchcraft has long had a love affair with the very concept of “The Celts.” Though there isn’t much substantial evidence for the existence of a clear, distinct group that would itself identify as “Celtic,” the concept of the Celts looms large in the neopagan imagination (Bernhardt-House 2012: [5]). Four of the modern neopagan holidays (sabbats) have Irish names and are based off of what were believed to be ancient Celtic celebrations (Samhain, Imbolc, Bealtaine, Lughnasadh). Celtic imagery and supposedly Celtic beliefs are commonplace in many forms of modern witchcraft. The reason for this may have less to do with aesthetics and more to do with managing whiteness.

It may be because the Celts are generally thought of as a conquered people. They were conquered, at least partially, by the Romans. Later, the “Celtic countries” (Ireland, Scotland, and Wales) were conquered by the English. The Celtic people are often seen as victims, particularly in the United States, so identifying with them allows a modern white American to identify with a victim narrative, or to at least distance themselves from the oppressor narrative. In her classic book on the history of modern witchcraft, Margot Adler mentions the phenomenon:

Several articles in Notes [a section in the back of the volume] have underscored the idea that there is a nonexploitative European heritage, embodied, one article noted, in

“the old tribal/peasant heritage of Europe (still not absolutely corrupted, even today),” as well as in the philosophies of Rousseau, Voltaire, and others. Many Neo-Pagans are searching in that ‘old tribal/peasant heritage’ for their cultural roots ... After all, as Leo Martello has remarked on many occasions, “If you go back far enough, all of your pre-Judeo-Christian and Moslem ancestors were Pagans” (Adler 1986: 380).

As one writer put it (speaking about British people who connect themselves with the Celts): “The Celts are idealised as a colonized people. Connecting to a Celtic past enables a modern British person to shake off the yoke of the conqueror and identify with the conquered” (Crockford 2010: 147).

Therefore, citing Celtic heritage is a way of negotiating a privileged position in society: *I'm white but that doesn't mean that I'm oppressing anyone — my ancestors were Irish!*

Perhaps beyond that, identifying with a specific, preferably oppressed European ethnic group allows a modern witch to also identify more closely with a specific culture, instead of just being considered yet another white American.

In modern American race politics, white people can sometimes be thought of as completely lacking in an ethnicity (Magliocco 2010: 212). While this attitude entitles white Americans to a considerable amount of privilege, the notion that white people are completely devoid of culture or ethnicity can be rather alienating. In some ways, neopaganism can be seen as a way for white Americans to actively become more ethnic. Instead of being white, identifying as “Irish” or “Celtic” can help them feel as though they are a part of a larger community, of a larger culture. Today, being white can be considered simply boring. Through paganism, many modern white people can reconnect with the culture of their ancestors not only as a way to regain that sense of belonging, but also to feel more interesting and “ethnic.”

Of course, sometimes they also try to make themselves feel more interesting and ethnic by taking material from other cultures.

## Why do witches appropriate?

There are a variety of reasons why a Western witch would wish to use information/ traditions from another culture. I've outlined four below: because appropriation is enjoyable for those who appropriate, because appropriation is a cornerstone of western culture, because it's necessary due to gaps in knowledge on the topic of ancient European paganism, and because it makes practitioners feel more legitimate.

### Because It's Fun

The first explanation I'm offering is at once the most cynical and the most honest. Many people who appropriate other cultures do it simply because they find it enjoyable. They may not feel a particularly deep connection to the culture (but, then again, they may) and they may not feel that anything "called" them to it (except, perhaps, a sense of curiosity or amusement). Still, they want to integrate elements of that culture into their practice. The intention isn't to cause harm, but rather simply to bring joy and amusement to the person who is integrating the elements of that other culture.

Eclecticism is fun because it allows for a great deal of creativity and exploration. Eclecticism means drawing inspiration from wherever you see it.

In *Exploring Your New Self: Cultural Appropriation in Theory and Practice* by Vince Stevens (2012), Stevens explains the benefits of taking on what he calls the

“Explorer Mentality,” which he defines as “simply admitting we weren’t born in the cultural territory we’re interested in, and exploring it in full as we try and make it our own” (Stevens 2012: [1]). In all honesty, he could just have easily titled the list “the battle cry of the eclectic witch,” since his list essentially explains the appeal of working with multiple cultures. I’ve included it in its entirety to show the full range of benefits of eclecticism (benefits for the eclectic, at least). Here are the benefits, according to him:

**Freedom From Pretension:** First, we’re free of pretension — and free from taking others too seriously. If someone claims to truly be master of some great tradition going back thousands of years, we’ll be less likely to take them seriously unless they provide evidence. We’re also not going to be so anxious to claim authority that, down deep, we know we just don’t have. We can stop being our own dictators, enforcing a perfection that doesn’t exist.

**Clarity Of Status:** We’re then free to admit our state — of people trying to explore another culture or cultures. By shifting our identity this way, we’re able to better leverage our skills to our goal--understanding and becoming part of or working with another culture or cultures. Knowing where we are in our quest lets us pursue it better. Our theological maps will have a “You are Here” marker.

**Respect:** We’re likely to be more respectful. We admit we’re not from around here, culture-wise. We’re going to take an inquiring point of view. We’ll know we may screw up. We won’t be cruel or assumptive. We’re in the part of the map marked “Here there be dragons,” and we’ll be ready to politely ask the dragon’s name first if we meet her. This is exceptionally important in living cultures or when adopting parts of an extant culture that it’s no longer using.

**Use What You Got:** We can leverage what we actually do know — be it Jungian psychology that didn’t exist for the Greeks, or knowledge of physiology that few Tantric masters understood. We can look at documents chronicling cultural changes and traditions over centuries. Let’s be honest, quite a few sorcerers and priests would have loved to have had the Internet. In their honor, use the heck out of it. Agrippa would have wanted it that way.

**Freedom To Combine:** If you find gaps in your knowledge, then you’ll know when you’re filling them in yourself. In many cases, you’re just going to have to — but by being honest about it, you can go forth clearly knowing your situation.

**Freedom To Resurrect:** If you’re working with traditions that are no longer practiced by existing cultures, then we can approach the work honestly — admitting you

are bringing back what is gone lets you keep the right mindset than pretending to a continuity or coherence that was never there.

Freedom To Build: We know what we don't have — and that lets us admit we have to build it ourselves. If you want that tradition that lasts forever, make it. Take what you can find and bring it to life.

It's Fun: Frankly, when you can just admit it's an adventure in front of you, you can enjoy your work in cultural appropriation. We don't have to be serious all the time. We don't have to take ourselves that seriously. (Stevens 2012: 2-3)

The reality of neopaganism is that it is enjoyable. Witchcraft is deep and spiritual, moving, life changing, beautiful. And more than that, it's fun.

Because of this attitude of fun and creativity, several witches (myself included) have a strange mixed attitude towards magic that can confuse many people. We mix a reverence for sacred practices with a very irreverent attitude that allows us to interact with a variety of conflicting beliefs without having to afford one importance over the other. This attitude is necessary for the modern eclectic spiritual seeker: everything we weave together has to be flexible because everything we hold to be sacred will break if it can't bend. We need to hold in our brains the belief that the Universe originated with the Big Bang while still having room for notions of gods and "source energy." Notions of eternal anthropomorphic conceptions of deity have to work with a belief in evolution. When we pull from different cultures, bringing everything together into our own practice, we have to admit that everyone is a bit right. In order to do that, we have to admit that everyone is a bit wrong, and in order to do that, we need to have a certain sense of humor about everything. To paraphrase Oscar Wilde, magic is far too important to take seriously.

Eilberg-Schwartz (1989), in his article *Witches of the West: Neopaganism and Goddess Worship as Enlightenment Religions*, argues that modern witchcraft represents a

sort of postmodernist attitude towards spirituality, where no truth is really valued more than any other truth. As we saw earlier with the Poetic History of Witchcraft, whether or not it is true to others is irrelevant to many witches. What matters is that it is true to them (at least in that moment).

The problem, however, comes up when the casual and pragmatic way that witches handle various beliefs and practices rubs up against the protective, conservative attitude several groups have of holding onto the few traditions they have left after the ravages of centuries of colonialism. Though a witch may come to a belief in their own sort of sincere way, that sincerity is not of the same sort as that of the original practitioner, and can (justifiably) be seen as exceptionally disrespectful, even if the witch means no disrespect.

The darker reality of the white neopagan's creative self expression through spirituality is that it is an inherently privileged activity. Treating the religions of the world as if they were a religious buffet there for our pleasure is a colonial way of thinking. It also an attitude that is virtually impossible not to take on if you belong to modern Western society. It is very hard for a white individual who grew up in the United States to let go of the melting pot ideology they were raised with, to think of cultural blending of any sort as anything but *a very, very good thing* because *this is America so everyone shares*. It is even more difficult for a Westerner to let go of that fundamental idea that culture is malleable and shareable because we westerners decided that it was. The old colonial viewpoint is still going strong: *I shared (forced) my cultural practices with (upon) you, so why won't you share (give without any questions) your cultural practices with (to) me?*

In fact, those who dabble in the spiritualities of other people may be even more arrogant about their own superiority than those who believe anyone who isn't a Christian to be a devil-worshipper. By picking up and putting down other people's beliefs as they see fit, taking what they want and leaving the rest, people who dabble in other cultures' spirituality are implying that their opinions are the most valid, and value only exists in the places where they say it does. Further, these spiritual dabblers may also imply (or, if they are not so sensitive, state) that because they are viewing a tradition from a distance, they may have a better feel for it than those who exist wholly within the tradition (and who are, therefore, limited by their localized view of the practice that had been invented by their ancestors and practiced in that locality for time immemorial).

## Because That's what Westerners do

Western culture has come to be so normalized that it occasionally seems as if it does not actually exist, that there is no real Western worldview, it's just the "normal" worldview. Of course, that's not the case. Western culture is, after all, a culture. As a culture, it has ways of dealing with the cultural practices of other people. Western culture has a long tradition of integrating other cultures: the Romans, for example, drew inspiration from the people they conquered. As Louve (2012: [1]) put it: "Western culture dominates in part because of its adaptable inclusion/theft of any ideas it does not already encompass."

In the West, culture is often seen as something that can be absorbed (Romans taking on the architectural style and mythology of the Greeks), mixed (the English adapting French styles of dress), and enforced (the English forcing the Irish to speak their language) whenever necessary. Underlying this tradition of cultural blending, of course,

is an even longer tradition of imperialism and conquest. From an imperial standpoint, the conquered Other is at once both implicitly inferior by virtue of their status as the conquered Other and venerated as a symbol of exoticism and untold riches. Once the conquest is all said and done and the booty is being divvied up, the very culture of the conquered people may become a commodity available for taking — customs, loanwords, and art styles may be loaded onto the conquerors' ships along with the gold, the livestock, and the captives. That said, this cultural material was not always welcome when it arrived on the docks of the conquering nation. For a long time, to take any cultural material back (and, further, to take it *seriously*) wasn't necessarily the norm:

One hundred years ago people in the colonizing nations were taught to fear difference because of the potentially contaminating qualities of other ways of life. Although many Europeans found other cultures interesting and mined these for objects and images considered to be of aesthetic value, this was strictly a minority taste, as most Westerners viewed the world as a source of raw materials and labor rather than of ideas. The British officer who went native was the object of pity and ridicule, which may have been a way of drawing attention away from the reasons for the phenomenon (Root 1996: 68).

With time, however, this attitude gave way to a larger fascination with the wisdom of other cultures. By the 1960s, Westerners who considered their culture to be too heartless and detached from nature were actively seeking out a better alternative, wherever they could find it. They brought with them the Western belief in the portability, malleability, and general availability of culture, an attitude that persists to this day. As a result of that attitude, it can be hard at times for Westerners to understand why other cultures may not wish to share their culture with them. While there are several posts that speak of the importance of sharing culture (ivegotmyphilosophy 2013), there are also several like this one:

Dear White people,  
 CULTURE WAS NOT CREATED TO BE SHARED. Culture was created so that people could find pieces of themselves and so that they could connect to others of that same culture. POC aren't obligated to share their culture with you. It belongs to us. It's ours. We made it. We have all the right to say if you can take part in it or not. WE OWE YOU NOTHING.

With Love,  
 Annoyed WOC  
 (dearwhitefriends 2017)

“We owe you nothing.” That, I think, is one of the key parts of that post. Often when people write about Western culture appropriating other cultures, they speak about the general sense of entitlement inherent in such an action (Root 1996: 72). That entitlement is born of centuries of conquest, as I showed above. That doesn't mean it's right. Just because someone thinks they should have something doesn't mean that they have any real right to it, after all.

However, even when modern neopagans understand that cultural appropriation is wrong and wish to eliminate all appropriative elements from their practice, they have difficulty doing so.

Why? Because of the third primary reason why witches appropriate in the first place: they have to.

## Because They Have To

It's impossible to perfectly replicate the practices of an ancient people, especially those of illiterate societies. In many cases, the only information on ancient pagan religions and cultures comes from Christian writers (Pole 2012: [1]). A reconstructionist must, therefore, modernize the religion in order to practice it in any way (Laurie 2012: [3]). In the process of this rebuilding, it's virtually impossible to not borrow from other

pagan cultures. Unfortunately, since there are no “living” pagan cultures in Europe outside of neopaganism, the only way to find pagan cultural material is to look to other, non-European cultures for guidance. That’s why so many modern neopagan “Celtic” practices are suspiciously similar to those of Native Americans, of Buddhists, of Hindus. Neopagans have to work with the information that is available to them, and unfortunately very little of the available information is European in origin.

This brings us to the fourth reason. Due to this information deficit, witches and neopagans have to look elsewhere to find the type of cultural material they want. Because of the idea that any religious material that is invented is illegitimate, many witches have to pull from other cultural sources to feel that their practice is authentic.

## Because Otherwise they Won’t Feel Legitimate

There is a notion in Western culture that a religion has to be old to be legitimate. When it is clear when a religion began, questions about that religion’s validity spring up (Harvey, 2011, p. 172). Newer religions are often seen either as silly fads or alarming cults:

In terms of a religious practice, the “truthfulness” of its history is raised, and if the origin can be clearly demonstrated to be human then it is less likely to be seen as a “real” religion. This means that new religions can often be condemned as “cults” or derided as “fakes,” while older, more established religions are granted authenticity. (Crockford 2010: 140)

Modern witchcraft and contemporary religions like Wicca, then, have to contend with this attitude. How do they make a religion that seems to be rather new look legitimate? The answer, for some, is simple: make it look older. Wicca is unique in that it is one of the few (and perhaps the only) religion whose members simultaneously claim to be

practicing the oldest and the newest religion in the world. What makes it even more unique is that they are both in a sense right. Witchcraft, as I said earlier, has existed for time immemorial, and many elements of modern Wicca and witchcraft are derived from older practices, such as folk magic from various cultures. Another way witches actively make their practice “older” is by integrating elements of already ancient cultures: many modern witches integrate the Indian concept of chakras, for example, as well as Buddhist meditation techniques. Many integrate elements of Native American spirituality: the medicine wheel, spirit animals, and cleansing with white sage or Palo Santo. Ancient deities from pantheons all over the world find a new home in the household altars of modern witches: Aphrodite statues can be found by bathtubs, small shrines to Brigid are nestled in the corner of kitchens between the spice cabinet and the paper towels. In this way, contemporary witches can add a little legitimacy to their own practices.

Older, more “traditional” spiritualities that have long been considered simple and primitive by the Western world have a particular appeal to Westerners with a New Age or neopagan bent, since they are in many ways perceived to be more “authentic” than the other spiritual offerings of the modern world (Harvey 2011: 106; Jenkins 2004: 11). Those who are turned off by the dogma of Christianity or the bleak absolutism of atheism may find themselves more at home in the faiths of the exotic other or of the ancient past: “Pagans are like anthropologists in being inspired to study others by the belief that doing so leads to self-understanding” (Harvey 2011: 184). Pagans and witches by their very nature tend to identify with the “other,” so it stands to reason that they would wish to emulate those who are already cast in that role. Or, at least, they may find themselves at home in their perceptions of those faiths. Pagans, though generally educated, are just as

capable as falling into the trap of “Noble Savage” stereotypes as anyone else (Harvey 2011: 220).

Many modern witches may have difficulty finding a sense of legitimate spirituality in the culture in which they live because modern Western society is, to borrow the phrase from Weber, disenchanted. To find any sort of real magic, one must look elsewhere.

So, now that we know why cultural appropriation is seen as a social problem and why it still exists in modern witchcraft, let’s now examine some of the more practical elements of the discussion: What can be appropriated, from whom it can be appropriated, and who gets to decide what is and is not cultural appropriation?

# Chapter Two: Cultural Appropriation in Practice

## What can be appropriated (and what can't)?

One of the biggest issues when looking into cultural appropriation on a spiritual level is the fact that many of the things being appropriated are not physical objects or symbols, which can be easy to point at as appropriation. Interestingly enough, many of the debates surrounding cultural appropriation in the neopagan/witch communities have more to do with immaterial concepts rather than physical items or even symbols. In this section, I will be examining some of the items, beliefs, and phrases that are often discussed when speaking about cultural appropriation.

### Items and Visual Symbols

Cultural appropriation of physical items doesn't actually come up particularly often in the neopagan/witch side of tumblr. However, there are a few physical items that are often brought up on the cultural appropriation side of neopagan tumblr. One example is dreamcatchers. There are several posts floating around in which people ask if they're allowed to have a dream catcher if they aren't Native. From what I've seen, the general consensus is that it's okay for non-natives to own a dreamcatcher if they buy it from or are given one by a Native American (reverseracism 2016; neurowonderful 2016; thetwistedrope nd). In this case, the general message is more economic in nature, more about making sure that whatever profits come from Native American heritage or crafts

goes to Native communities. Oh the whole, tumblr users are encouraged to buy crafts from Natives or to use other crafts in place of a dreamcatcher, such as witches' ladders (pieces of twine with stones, feathers, sticks, and other items knotted into it, generally used for protection) or wreaths featuring magical associations to get the desired effect (filipinawitch 2015).

Sometimes, even spell ingredients are considered appropriable. For example, one tumblr user wrote that the practice of making and using black salt (which is often made by mixing ash with salt) belongs to Hoodoo practitioners, and so it shouldn't be used by other magical practitioners (eclecticspells 2016).

## Can you appropriate beliefs?

One of the problems with arguments about cultural appropriation is that appropriation is inherently stealing. But how does one steal a concept? How do you steal a belief? It is possible (theoretically) for every human being alive to believe in the same thing; belief is not a finite resource.

So how can a belief be appropriated?

In her article, "It's in the blood... Or is it?" author Diotima (2012) makes the argument that it isn't really possible to truly steal a belief and questions whether any culture can actually lay claim to ownership of a belief. Even if you believed it "first," does having something first mean that you have sole possession of it, particularly for something as infinitely replicable as a belief? And how can you even prove that your people were the first to believe in something? Some beliefs, images, themes, are more universally human than culturally specific (Diotima 2012: [3]).

### Example: “Karma’s a Bitch”

One of the most common “loan concepts” in western culture is that of karma. Generally, in the West it is understood as a sort of equal energy exchange caused by one’s actions. When someone does something bad, they generate “bad karma,” which will come back to them in the form of misfortune. When something bad happens to someone, but it was apparent that they “earned” it due to their own actions in the past, someone may say “karma’s a bitch.”

However, this is not how the concept of karma works in Hinduism. In Hinduism, karma is hard to describe specifically, but it usually refers to a type of energy one builds up in their life (good or bad) which then affects that person’s later lives (Olivelle 2009).

So the Western and Hindu conceptions of karma are slightly different, which has led to a certain amount of controversy over whether or not using the term “karma” is cultural appropriation, since the Western conceptualization takes the original concept out of its context and apparently is a “bastardization” of a sacred Hindu concept.

However, might it be possible that the Western conceptualization has its own legitimacy? Though it may not be the original Indian conceptualization of karma, it’s been generally understood and believed in in the West for some time, likely being introduced to the West through the Theosophical Society in the nineteenth century, and so has become a part of western culture (Pike 2004: 57). In response, some may reply that the problem isn’t so much some idea of cosmic reciprocity — a notion that exists in several cultures — as it is the fact that Westerners refer to a concept that isn’t precisely karma as “karma,” I would argue that karma is a loan word that is used in English to

describe a specific idea. Western karma is different from Hindu karma, and I believe that both have their own sort of legitimacy.

## Terms and Phrases

In some cases, it is not the practice or the imagery so much as the word used that makes something cultural appropriation. This can be seen clearly in some of the most commonly discussed instances of cultural appropriation, such as the use of the term smudging by a non-Native to describe the practice of cleaning something with smoke, often smoke from white sage or Palo Santo. As countless blogs on tumblr argue, it isn't the idea of cleansing something energetically with smoke that is the problem — that idea exists in several different cultures — but the use of the word smudging. The argument is that the word smudging refers to a specific, elaborate ritual exclusive to Native Americans, and so the term is unavailable to outsiders. People are instead encouraged to either call their own practice of cleansing things with smoke “smoke cleansing” or “censing” (eclecticwitcheryafoot 2017). The witch community of tumblr has pretty much completely embraced that change in terminology, and it is slowly making its way out into the larger neopagan and New Age communities.

Unfortunately, however, the switch from one term to another is not always so simple, and a replacement word isn't always so easy to find. To explain this problem, I'll use as an example another common word associated with Native American culture: spirit animal. Spirit animals are generally regarded as an exclusively Native American thing. Several posts adamantly state that non-natives should never use the term “spirit animal” and alternatives like “familiar” and “patronus” (a Harry Potter reference) are suggested.

However, some witches don't think either term is really acceptable. See, for instance, tumblr user Caly's explanation:

One of my biggest problems with "is it appropriation or not" is one of the big ones: spirit animal/animal spirit  
 I get that these are utterly sacred to Native Americans and that non-Natives absolutely should not use the term  
 However, there's a similar idea in some hereditary witchcraft families, that there are animal spirits that are attached to and protect or guide certain families  
 They're referred to as *ainmhithe spiorad*, which translated, just means animal spirit or spirit animal. Which means when I'm trying to talk about it without being appropriative I can't actually translate the words, because the minute I do, it's called appropriation  
 And I get why, but no matter how much I love Harry Potter, patronus doesn't work as a substitution.  
 1) it makes it come across as fictional 2) patronuses in Harry Potter are personal, not for an entire family, 3) and are representations of the people, not actually spirits. (Caly)

As Caly explained, the issue wasn't so much that she was unwilling to find another term to use, or that she was trying to emulate Native cultures, it was just that there aren't many good alternatives available. Still, however, the use of the term "spirit animal" by a non-Native is highly contestable, as evidenced by tumblr user sofriel's post in response to another user claiming that the term "spirit animal" originates in the New Age community so it isn't appropriative:

No. Noooooooooooooooooo. No. God, I would like to make a rule where non-Natives are not allowed to make any sort of statements on the appropriateness or non-appropriateness of "spirit animals" ever again.

Fact 1: I am Native. So-called "spirit animals" are part of my spiritual tradition, which is Metis-Anishinaabe. They're usually called by the Anishinaabe word, which I am not putting on the Internet, or "spirit/dream helpers" in English. Natives in fact are not, gasp, homogeneous, and omg some of us have different spiritual traditions than others! (look, I can do the obnoxious patronizing voice too!) And so just because you point to three Native people from cultures that don't have such a tradition doesn't mean that it doesn't exist! This tradition is a VERY sacred one, and thanks to colonization it is being forgotten in huge amounts, to the extent that most young Natives don't even really know much about it—a situation exacerbated by the popular appropriation of "spirit animals."

Fact 2: Yes, people around the world have and had similar traditions of spirit helpers, who are frequently animals. HOWEVER, the concept of spirit animals in popular culture came from anthropologists' descriptions of Native American religions (see Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*). It doesn't matter if the ancient Celts had similar practices, because spirit animals are associated in the popular imagination with Natives, not Celts. I and other Natives regularly get asked, "Can you tell me what my spirit animal is?" Irish people, for instance, do not. And "it's not Native, it's New Age" my ass. Where the hell do you think the New Agers got it from? They got it from anthropology textbooks and from the hippies who went to the reservations in the 60s seeking Noble Savage enlightenment.

Fact 3: The fact that spirit animals in popular culture are a bastardized form of Native traditions does not mean they are not appropriative or harmful. Why? Because the popular idea of it comes to supersede the original meaning, infantilizing our traditions. Non-Natives start to think that they understand our traditions, and that they are primitive, rather than actually consulting and trying to understand. This gets bad when those non-Natives are the ones with control over our legal ability to practice our religion. Non-Native appropriation of the sweatlodge incorrectly done and causing death, for example, has resulted in greater restrictions on Native sweatlodges, because the non-Native interpretation was assumed to be representative.

Fact 4: Appropriation is a part of Native oppression, not a decoy issue, good lord. This attitude of popular ownership of Native traditions causes people to deny Natives the right to practice our religion, which is tied to the colonization and denial of access to our landbase since our practices are often linked to specific places, which is tied to the situation on reservations. It's tied to the psychological state of our people, because you try growing up with having everyone making an utter mockery of your religion and see how your self-esteem comes out.

And yeah, I will also say, if calling out appropriation is the only thing you're doing to help Native people, if you are just shouting "Don't wear headdresses!" and don't actually get why it's a problem, then yes, you're kinda failing as an ally. But appropriation is part of the violence being done to indigenous people.

You did get one thing right though, we are sick of your bullshit. Very, very sick of it. (sofriel 2013)

So, as sofriel put it, the issue isn't so much etymology as what people generally mean by "spirit animal" and what such assumptions and attitudes mean to Native Americans living today. Whether or not "spirit animal" is originally and unquestionably a Native American term that refers solely in all instances to a Native American concept is irrelevant. When someone hears "spirit animal," they think of Native Americans, not ancient Celts. The word is now and has for a long time been associated with the Native Americans, so when someone refers to their "spirit animal," those listening know (or,

perhaps more accurately, assume) that the person is referring to a Native American construct, practice, or belief. As Sofriel explained, this creates problems for Native Americans, since it can cheapen and change their practices in the eyes of the general public. When a non-native refers to their “spirit animal,” they are taking cultural material out of its original context and applying their own interpretation, while also doing damage to the perception of the practice. It fits the very definition of cultural appropriation.

However, there is still the problem of what non-native should call a similar concept if such a concept has a place in their practice. The two most commonly suggested alternatives have pretty significant problems. “Familiar” traditionally is used to refer to a living animal that is in some way bound to a magical practitioner. Several modern witches have living pets they refer to as their familiars, so it exists as a separate concept. Patronus, on the other hand, has recent and clearly fictional origins, coming from a popular series of children’s books from the late 90s and early 2000s. For a community that is constantly fighting for legitimacy and trying to explain its belief in magic to the larger community, referring to an element of one’s own practice using a term from a fantasy series is counterproductive.

The problem for some witches, then, is trying to balance concerns about cultural appropriation with a desire for an accurate word for an element of their own practice. Unlike the smudging debate, there isn’t an easy replacement: “smudge” was a special, specific term referring to a specific practice from a specific group of cultures; “smoke cleanse” is a literal term describing the process. “Spirit Animal” is the easiest available phrase for such a concept in many situations, and most people have a general idea of what it means. While the general consensus is that the term “spirit animal” is

appropriate, finding an appropriate replacement is not easy. Many practitioners, then, may use the term “spirit animal” personally and just never mention that such a term is incorporated in their own practice.

## Who can be appropriated from (and who can't)?

### Open and Closed Cultures

One of the primary distinctions used to determine whether or not something is appropriable is whether it comes from an “open” or “closed” religion. As the name implies, open religions are available to everyone who wishes to practice them, while one must be born or initiated into a closed religion. Generally, the religions of pre-Christian Europe are considered completely open, as is modern witchcraft, which requires no official “conversion” (Lewis 2014: 25).

While the categories are generally accepted, there are some debates about whether or not the “open” cultures are really that open, with one of the most virulent debates surrounding Norse paganism, particularly Asatrú.

In Asatrú, a type of Northern European neopaganism, there is a divide between Universalists, who believe that anyone who wants to practice the faith can, and the Folkish, who believe that Asatrú should be practiced by those of Northern European heritage (Pole 2012: [3]).

As is the case with a lot of arguments on tumblr, there are more posts decrying the apparently rampant racism in Asatrú than there are racially exclusive posts about Asatru.

For example, a quick search for the Asatrú tag quickly yields such posts as “Sorry not sorry to say this but there are no nazis in Valhalla” (dystopian-boobpocalypse 2017)

That said, such responses do exist. For example:

I’m confused by all these posts about “saying no to racist paganism” - How is it racist to recognize that germanic historical beliefs belong to a specific ethnic group - germanics? If you aren’t germanic, you have your own ethnicity, and with it a history and a paganism native to YOUR ethnicity. You will find your beliefs and abilities to be much stronger when your religion resonates directly with your ancestral blood. There’s no need and no sense for you to practice the religion of another tribe, you’re robbing yourself of your own heritage, and us of ours (brunhildeofvinland 2015).

The language in the above post brings up a parallel that’s pretty much impossible to ignore. “Folkish” practitioners of Norse paganism are in many ways saying the same thing as many witches and neopagans of color: this is our ethnic heritage, you have your own, go find it.

Why, then, is it considered problematic — even racist — for practitioners of European paganism to insist that their faith belongs to their people and should not be practiced by outsiders, but normal — even proper — for a Native American to express a similar sentiment?

The short answer is that the idea just makes more sense in the context of modern racial politics. The slightly longer (but still inadequate) answer is that the current double standard exists to counter a larger, more powerful double standard that has existed for centuries. Western Christian culture dominates the world, either directly or indirectly. For centuries, the faiths, cultures, and identities of billions of people were suppressed. Nowadays, little of many traditional religions are left. What remains is (understandably) closely guarded by the remaining members of whatever culture the tradition belonged to. The protective attitude of today’s tradition bearers may then have less to do with any

strict notions of ethnic purity (though they certainly exist) than a certain fundamental lack of trust with the West. Such trust may never come back (if it was there to begin with), but even if it does, it will take a very long time.

Next we will be looking at a question that isn't addressed very often in the cultural appropriation debate: is it possible to appropriate the spirituality of dead cultures?

## Can You appropriate Dead Cultures?

Who owns dead cultures?

Most people's first response would likely be the living descendants of those people, or those who live on the land those gods were once associated with. However, an interesting point made by one author is that it may be difficult to determine whether or not "a modern Christian culture 'owns' a discarded Pagan past" (Laurie, 2012: [2]). Can the modern Irish, for example, lay a true claim or assert absolute ownership over its ancient pagan practices, many of which have either been absorbed or eliminated by Christianity? If they aren't actively practicing Irish paganism, can they really consider themselves tradition bearers? Or does that not even matter, because so much of Irish paganism is lost that there isn't much of a tradition to bear? If no one really owns it, is it possible that European paganism can be owned by anyone?

Perhaps, though it may not be fair to place European paganism firmly into a sort of cultural public domain. Just because a culture is "dead," doesn't mean that it can't be disrespected, or even stolen from. The culture of the ancient Irish, some may argue, is

still vulnerable to “cultural thief-charlatans [who] live off of other people’s cultural wealth” (Bernhardt-House 2012: [6]).

However, who are the the victims of that theft? The souls of the dead? Is cultural appropriation of a dead culture then comparable to the desecration of a temple or the robbing of a grave? Had the ancient Irish seen the ways in which “Irish paganism” exists and has been reconstructed today, would they be offended?

Had European paganism survived the last few thousand years or had Christianity never come to Europe at all, modern paganism would no doubt have changed substantially to adapt to larger cultural shifts. For example, in light of modern racial attitudes, the paganism of modern Europe may have been completely open to outsiders. We will never really know.

As it stands, the current attitude that I’ve generally observed is that living victims are more important than any hypothetical past victims, and that the founders of a spirituality no longer own it once they die. Religion changes as people do, so the older version of a faith can’t really be seen as more legitimate than a newer version.

## Who gets to decide?

Generally, the consensus is that members of a culture get to decide what is and is not cultural appropriation. That only makes sense, but in practice, that isn’t always the case. For example, earlier in this thesis I mentioned that I read that black salt is considered appropriable because it originated in Hoodoo. However, I’ve only found a single post that clearly says so , and that post wasn’t written by someone who practices Hoodoo. Another post, speaking about the fact that it’s easy to avoid appropriating

Hoodoo said that “there is more than one tradition in the world with poppets, with oils, black salt, ancestors, Saints, crossroads and coffin nails” (saltandsoot, 2016).

This brings up a rather big reoccurring problem in the cultural appropriation debate: the fact that anyone can call something cultural appropriation and that may well lead to it being considered off limits for everyone but those born into the tradition... who may themselves not consider it appropriative.

There are a variety of examples of tumblr users from cultures all over the world saying that elements of their culture that are generally considered appropriable aren't. For example, a Cree person arguing that dream catchers aren't cultural appropriation (thetwisedrope nd), or a Mexican saying that celebrating the Day of the Dead isn't cultural appropriation (culturalappropriation, 2014).

Generally, there is more consensus on who can't decide what is and is not cultural appropriation (outsiders, particularly white outsiders) than there is agreement about who specifically gets to make the call, with it often simply turning into a distinction between white people and people of color:

PSA: Anglo Witches do not get to decide what falls under “cultural appropriation”

If a POC or Witch of Color tells you something is not okay do not:

1. Make them prove it, you have google use it
  2. Tone police them, it isn't our job to comfort you or “be polite” when you are wrong {also oppression is really rude so if you think about it maybe just come correct frfr}
  3. Bring up pseudo spiritual bullshit to try and trivialize a relevant discussion on this issue in the witchy community
- (awkward-rooster, 2016).

What's noticeable is that the poster created a clear white versus person of color dichotomy. While the implication that the person of color is part of the culture the white

person is appropriating, that isn't always the case. For example, Mvskoke Creek tumblr user thecuriousviolet, who is a particularly central resource on the cultural appropriation side of the neopagan/witch side of tumblr, made a post called a "A Brief Guide to Open and Closed Religions and Cultures," in which they included a list of religions that are closed to outsiders (thecuriousviolet 2016). Included in that list was Shintoism, the traditional spirituality of Japan. However, many people who practice Shinto say that it is absolutely open to outsiders, and doesn't even require initiation (culturalapprop-vs-ruleofcool 2015; floating-bridge-of-heaven 2016).

Where does this leave the question of who really gets to decide what is and is not cultural appropriation, or even who does or does not get to engage in certain spiritual practices? As you can see, there is no clear answers.

Still, there needs to be some sort of system. Generally people say that one should either have the "blood" of a culture (their ancestors were members of the original culture... for example a black woman living in New York whose grandmother practiced Hoodoo) or belong to that culture (they grew up around the culture even if they don't have ancestors in that culture... for example a white woman living in southern Appalachia who learns Hoodoo from some local Rootworkers). Some have tried to reconcile the two:

It all boils down to culture. Someone (a "Native") with the "correct blood" who has "turned their backs on their people's ancestral tradition" is going to have more of a right - even over an "earnest and dedicated White person" ... - simply because they can more easily access the culture (antsnaidhm 2015). They bring up a point that can be lost pretty easily in the blood vs. culture debate: blood and culture are linked. They aren't the same, but they are linked. As antsnaidhm put it, someone with the right "blood" would have an easier time entering into the culture and

learning the culture's ways. While culture may, in this case seem more important, blood is so inextricably linked to it that it can be very difficult to separate the two. It's therefore very difficult to come to any sort of conclusion about who should be allowed to access certain cultures and who shouldn't.

Of course, that doesn't mean that people don't try.

## Ethnic Policing

There is generally a belief that people will be most naturally attracted to the faith of their ancestors, above that of the faith of other peoples: "No matter how obscured, the traditions of the past speak to people in the present - usually descendants, but not always" (Barrette 2012: [2]). Whether or not this is true, I'm not entirely sure. However, there appears to be an underlying belief that one needs a certain type of blood to practice a certain type of religion. However, the underlying assumption is inherently flawed because a) there is no evidence for any sort of "religious gene" carrying a specific set of spiritual beliefs down through generations and b) if there was, then all Europeans, many Africans, and most Native Americans would be genetically predisposed to be Christian, since the last several generations of those races have been heavily Christianized (Diotima 2012: [1]).

However, all of this isn't to say that there is no legitimacy to the idea that there is a certain sort of cultural inheritance within ethnic groups. Just as we assume a child is entitled to inherit their parents' assets, we also assume that people born into a culture are entitled to that culture. The problems happen when decisions have to be made about who

is entitled to what, what sort of ethnic background an individual has to have in order to be available to inherit something, and who gets to make those decisions.

There is a general notion in modern paganism that one has to have a “legitimate claim to all of his or her ancestral religions” (Barrette 2012: [2]). But what exactly is a legitimate claim? Who gets to decide what makes a claim legitimate?

As you may imagine at this point, there are several very vocal opinions about that.

Here’s one view:

So cultural appropriation is kind of a big topic going around the community so I just thought I’d just -

LISTEN, IF YOU ARE A WHITE WITCH AND YOU ARE PRACTICING A CLOSED RELIGION OR A CULTURAL RELIGION YOU ARE NOT APART OF THEN KINDLY FUCK OFF.

PLEASE DONT BE LIKE “OH, BUT IM 2% \_\_\_” or “MY GREAT GREAT GREAT GREAT GRANDMOTHER WAS HALF \_\_\_ SO THEREFORE I AM PART OF THIS CULTURE”

Or “WE’RE ALL MIXED SO IT SHOULDN’T MATTER”

NO THATS NOT HOW IT WORKS. AND IF YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND WHY IT DOESN’T WORK LIKE THAT THEN KINDLY PAY ATTENTION IN SCIENCE CLASS

Now if you’re white and was brought up in a certain culture then it’s fine. If you’re white but only your dad was from this certain culture then it’s fine. If it’s something thats closely a part of your life and you’re at least ¼ then by all means go on ahead.

BUT I SWEAR TO THE GLORIFUL GODS IF YOU DO ^^ THEN GO SOMEWHERE. STOP TRYING TO FIND A LOOP HOLE IN EVERYTHING JUST SO YOU CAN BE ENTITLED TO IT, YOU’VE BEEN ENTITLED TO EVERY THING.

AT LEAST LET THE MINORITIES THEIR CULTURE LIKE OH MY GODS -

Thank you very much

(Lilmswitch, 2017 formatting altered)

What I found interesting there was that the user actually assigned a numerical value to how “much” one person has to belong to a specific ethnic/cultural group to participate in that culture: ¼ (at least). Where did that value even come from? In some ways, it makes sense. For someone to be ¼ something, they would have to have a grandparent from that

particular ethnic group. Having a grandparent from that group may suggest that an individual learned some of the culture's practices directly from a member of said culture.

However, that is not necessarily the case:

There is more to membership in a culture than ancestry. Having a Chinese great-grandfather doesn't necessarily mean that you have a better understanding of Ch'an Buddhism than someone whose great-grandfather came from Albuquerque by way of Tulsa.... To pretend otherwise is to attribute a dangerous power to blood and genetics. It reaffirms the idea of race as destiny: it suggests that maybe there was something to those Jim Crow-era "one drop" rules after all, that the seed of the Other can crop up even after generations of dilution (Filan 2012: [5]).

As Filan put it towards the end of the passage, one potential problem coming from the determining how much "blood" from a specific ethnic group someone has to have to be connected to put an uncomfortable emphasis on genetics, given modern racial politics, the history of eugenics, and the fact that there is no scientific basis for race. But the cultural side of the argument can be a little troubling too.

So what else is there to base any sort of rule system about who can and cannot access certain cultures? How much they know about the culture? Whether or not they were raised in the culture? Such a decision is generally made on a group-by-group basis. However, that doesn't stop people from trying to develop some sort of universal standard for group ownership. Which, in turn, leads to the argument about who actually has the authority to make decisions about cultural group membership.

Like so many other arguments in the cultural appropriation debate, the one about who should be allowed to decide what is and is not cultural appropriation and what does or does not count as group membership is pretty much never ending.

Which brings us to our next question: when does this whole argument go too far?

## When does the argument go too far?

Tumblr as a website often earns the disdain of the larger society for its oversensitivity and vicious debates. The #cultural appropriation tag on tumblr is a place with a massive variety of opinions, including a few parodies of the cultural appropriation issue:

Tumblr be like:

Friendly reminder that the intake of oxygen was a common practice in many Native American cultures so breathing is cultural appropriation you problematic shitlord :)))

(proudblackconservative December 2016)

The cultural appropriation debate is so fierce and generates so much anger that to many it appears almost as its own witch hunt, in which those with opinions that deviate even slightly from the “accepted” opinion are persecuted into silence or even off the website. After spending hundreds of hours combing through the cultural appropriation side of tumblr, I can’t help but wonder if the whole argument has gone too far, or has gone off message.

One issue I’ve noticed is that there are times when it appears like some tumblr users just don’t want culture to mix at all, which isn’t healthy or possible. Other tumblr users have made similar observations:

The thing I don’t get about cultural appropriation is how people mistake diffusion for appropriation. Like, cultures spread because people communicate. They mix with other cultures and become something different and new that anyone can enjoy, because that’s what’s happened since civilization began and that’s what will continue happening.

And yet...people somehow think it’s okay to “police” culture? Like, for example, because a person’s white, they suddenly can’t enjoy eating Mexican food? I just don’t understand. It’s not like a culture is going to be destroyed just because a little bit of that culture mixes with another one and someone from a completely different culture from both likes it and wants to try it.

There’s a line between cultural appropriation and diffusion. It’s not even a fine line- it’s pretty easy to tell which is which. But people still want to separate cultures like

the last few hundred years of mixing and blending haven't happened. My question is, why?

(this-is-true-tinge 2016)

Yes. Why? Off the top of my head, of course, I can think of a few reasons: because for all that we like to pretend that cultural blending is universally good, it has had disastrous effects for some people. For others, there may be a hope to return to their own “true” heritage before it became tainted with other cultures, since we tend to elevate “purer” cultures for being more legitimate than those “mixed” cultures (for example, the fact that people think of America as having no culture but observe the rich and apparently purer cultures of India, Scotland, or Japan).

Either way, cultural blending is a fact of the human race, and it always has been so. So is cultural appropriation. Cultures stick to each other. Though there are of course differences in power dynamics, cultural mixing is still inevitable wherever multiple cultures are found. To oppose cultural blending — even blending where a dominant culture absorbs cultural elements from a less dominant culture — is to fight a losing battle against the very nature of culture. Very few cultures have ever existed in a vacuum, and the few that may immediately come to mind (like an Amazonian tribe that hasn't yet made contact with the outside world) likely originated as part of another culture.

So how are modern witches dealing with this debate? In the next section, we'll be looking at the various strategies witches and neopagans are employing to deal with the issue.

# Chapter Three: Living With Cultural Appropriation

## Consequences for Appropriating

Cultural appropriation as a concept is not illegal. If anything, someone's right to practice the religion of another culture is protected under the First Amendment.

There are, however, social consequences, at least on tumblr, for cultural appropriation. Shaming posts about appropriation are pretty common. For example: "reblog if you think non-native people who make spirit animal jokes are shitty" (punkrock-witch 2017). Or posts like this:

Dear White People,  
Please stop wearing the bindi and the sari like it's the latest fashion. It has meaning, and regardless of how cool you think Indian culture is, it's not for you.

Sincerely,

A local Indian Pal

P.S. If you continue to do this after this post, you get -5000 points for being appropriative and racist (dearwhitefriends 2017).

-5000 points is a pretty good way to look at it. Generally, cultural appropriation is met with gentle reminders, all out shaming, or something inbetween. Fortunately, I'd say that most people who use the website and go on the more pagan parts of it don't want to hurt anyone. That may be optimistic on my part, but I believe most people follow the same pattern I did: they start going on the "witchy side of tumblr" with little previous knowledge of witchcraft, they start reading posts about cultural appropriation, they feel

guilty and aren't quite sure what to feel, but slowly their perception changes and they start to understand that cultural appropriation actually hurts people, and come to avoid it in the future. That may be an optimistic outlook on my part, but I do believe that it is safe to say that much more of the community is against cultural appropriation than is unaware of it or for it.

In a lot of ways, tumblr itself has been a significant resource for spreading information about cultural appropriation in the witch/neopagan communities. In fact, three of my interviewees said that they were introduced to the topic of cultural appropriation through tumblr before they even got into witchcraft. "Tumblr," user smokeandblueroses observed, "is where issues that people didn't know were issues come to light and breed."

Books written for witches, however, rarely seem to mention cultural appropriation. I can't remember any of the various books on witchcraft or paganism I picked up for my personal practice over the years mentioning the issue. Conversely, many of the more academic books I've come across while researching this thesis talked about cultural appropriation (Harvey 1997: 176; Eller 1993: 67; Pike 2001: 123; Pike 2004: 165). It seems that appropriation is discussed in books *about* witches, but not in books *for* witches. Why, I'm not precisely sure. Fortunately, the witches of tumblr do discuss the issue often, and are met with a host of justifications for cultural appropriation, some of which, I'll be examining now.

## Justifications for Cultural Appropriation

We've established how and why cultural appropriation happens. Now, we're going to look at the ways that people who are accused of cultural appropriation either justify or neutralize the charge. There are a variety of ways that people do this: they may cite a small blood connection they may have to the culture; they may claim that they belonged to that culture in a past life or that the gods of that culture called to them; they may suggest that their interest in it is what is keeping the culture alive, or that no one truly owns the culture; or, they may just not tell anyone, hoping that if no one notices they won't have to deal with the general sense of shame that accompanies cultural appropriation.

### “No One Owns It, So Everyone Does”

Since there is little available written evidence of European paganism, there is a great deal of speculation about what the practices of ancient European pagans actually were. Often people will justify their borrowings by arguing that they're operating off of a universal belief structure that existed for all pagans in the past. One example of this is the concept of “core shamanism.” Core shamanism is essentially the idea that shamanism can be reduced down to a series of non-culturally specific practices, beliefs, and positions in society that are accessible to anyone who wishes to be a shaman (Johnson 1995: 172). Behind it is the assumption that all “traditional” pagan societies are generally believed to have a shaman like figure, so it would only stand to reason that ancient European societies would have shamans as well. This sort of idea is a tantalising one, one that

could be connected to the Jungian idea of the collective unconscious, which suggests that all people hold in their mind certain archetypes, which are represented in innumerable forms all over the world (Eller 1993: 78).

People who are accused of appropriating the term shaman may then point to the concept of core shamanism in their defense. If people have everywhere have been practicing shamanism forever, then it can't possibly be appropriation. Generally, this type of argument isn't given much weight. Much like the "spirit animal" debate, whether or not the concept is European has little to do with the use of the word. "Shaman" has non-European connotations and is used to describe a variety of indigenous traditional figures. Tumblr user thegreenwolf wrote an excellent post about the issue with finding a new term for "shaman," narrating all the conflicting voices that appear in the conversation:

–That's not what shamans do! You actually need to know what indigenous shamans do, so find out more about them.

–Actually, don't find out about indigenous non-European traditions if you're not part of them because they're not yours to use. Look to your European ancestors' traditions instead.

–Don't look to your European ancestors' traditions because you're an American, not German/Celtic/Slavic/etc. in culture. Create your own traditions.

–Wait! Stop creating your own shamanic tradition from your own cultural perspective! You're appropriating by looking at general concepts from other cultures and you can't do that! Go make something of your own without any inspiration from any other culture.

–You're creating a tradition from scratch? How n00bish. Quit pretending and go find out what real shamans do.

–Don't call yourself a shaman. Call yourself a witch. Except that's not really what witches do.

–Actually, call yourself a druid. Druids are European, right? And they like trees, too!

–Or here, how about this other non-shaman term whose commonly understood connotation really doesn't quite fit what you do and may still piss someone off? (thegreenwolf 2012).

While this is an amusing and, from what I've seen, accurate depiction of the kinds of circles people are spun in while trying to find a better word to refer to a specific practice, it's also an interesting look at the process through which a lot of eclectic witches examine a cultural feature, boil it down to its most basic parts, and then rebuild it to suit their own sense of morality, cosmology, and aesthetics.

While this is a very personal process, people tend to justify it by trying to attach their own understanding of a certain practice or concept to a culture. A personal favorite culture for this process is — you guessed it — the Celts.

### The Dreadlock-Wearing, Chakra-Working, Sex-Worshipping, Totem-Bearing, Witchcraft-Loving, Vegetarian-Leaning, Prius-Driving, Peyote-Drinking Celts

The process is simple to observe but a little bit more complicated to explain. Essentially, a person observes a cultural feature they enjoy — a certain type of ceremony, a way of interacting with a certain plant, a broad life philosophy or concept — and wishes to practice it on her own. However, she knows that it will be considered appropriate if she adopts that practice the way she's observing it. So, she tries to interact with it in a different way, using different techniques or a different look. Since she likely won't feel comfortable adopting that practice in her own way (and, as I argued earlier, people need to feel that their practices are old and connected to a certain group of people to be legitimate), she'll likely wish to attribute the practice to part of her ancestry. She may argue that the Celts likely had this same process, since they likely lived in a way similar to the group she would otherwise be appropriating from. There may also be a vague historical reference to the Celts doing a vaguely similar thing. Since she can argue

that her ancestors may have practiced what she is currently trying to practice, she can argue that she isn't appropriating. While this process is often done by well-intentioned people who simply wish to be able to practice something from another culture without having to feel guilty about it, it can be hard not to feel a little cynical about the process.

Essentially, what can be seen with a lot of Celtic projections is the desire on the part of Westerners to have a sort of European People of Color — a white ancestor on which to project one's modern views in order to legitimize any potentially appropriative issues.

This attitude has even been projected on modern Ireland. For example, one author mentioned a time when he told someone he used to live in Ireland, and the person replied, "Oh, the Irish people are so spiritual" (Bernhardt-House, 2012: [4]). In another telling event, when the same author told a relative that he was studying in Ireland, she asked, "So, when you complete your process in Ireland, will you be a Celtic shaman?" (Bernhardt-House, 2012: [4]) Though most people would roll their eyes at the idea of a "Celtic shaman," there are people who perform what they call Celtic shamanism, likely for the reasons I described above (Crockford 2010: 143).

"The Celts" are used as a vague and vaguely historical group on which to project a variety of cultural practices. For example, a popular response to the argument that white people wearing dreadlocks is cultural appropriation is to claim that the Celts had dreadlocks, so modern white people should be able to do so as well. This idea is often dismissed by many, including some modern Celts: "PSA: As a real life Scottish person please stop using the argument that Celtic peoples had dreadlocks when talking about the cultural appropriation of dreadlocks. We didn't. Ever. Please don't lie about my culture in

order to validate your racism” (Easol 2016). Though some people may listen to those writing about that common belief, it is still generally believed that the ancient Celts and Vikings had dreadlocks (many actors in films portraying people from such cultures are bearing such locks).

It’s pretty much impossible to prove whether or not the Celts believed, did, or wore certain things. However, it is also virtually impossible to *disprove* that they did. Therefore, the Celts are a convenient vague ancestor on which a white person can project a variety of beliefs and practices without much historical evidence.

## Finding Affinity

One primary tactic people use to justify cultural appropriation is to claim that they have some connection to the culture they are appropriating from. In this section, I’ll be looking at three different ways people have done this: claiming they have a small amount of “blood” from the culture they appear to be appropriating from, claiming that the gods or spirits of that culture chose them, and claiming that they belonged to said culture in a past life.

### “My Great-Great-Great-Great Grandmother was a Cherokee Princess”

A common stereotype of cultural appropriators is that they tend to emphasize some small part of themselves that may be considered ethnic, leading to derisive jokes about people who claim that their “great-great-great-great grandmother was a Cherokee Princess.” The hope of people who make such claims is apparently that if they can prove

that they have even a little bit of the “right” blood, then they’ll be accepted into the culture, so they draw attention to that small part of their heritage (Magliocco 2010: 225). However, as we saw earlier in the case of tumblr’s ethnic policing, these people are often considered appropriators anyway because they are for all intents and purposes white. As a result, I haven’t found many examples of tumblr users who emphasize a small amount of, say, Native American blood to justify actively practicing elements of a culture many would claim they don’t belong to. Instead, it appears more common for 21st century witches to consciously decide *not* to work with a culture to which they are only slightly connected. For example, one of my interviewees explained that she has a little bit of Native ancestry on her mother’s side and considered integrating it into her practice, but decided against it because she “didn’t feel it would be right to do.” I’ve made a similar decision myself. Though I know I have a little bit of Native “blood” on both sides of my family, I have no interest in pursuing Native spirituality because it wouldn’t feel right for me personally. I’m not sure if that is the result of my morality, personal taste, fear of appropriating, or some combination of the three. Whatever the origin, the general attitude (at least on tumblr) appears to be better safe than sorry — it’s best, many believe, to simply leave some cultures alone.

### “The Gods Told Me I’m a Cherokee Princess”

Some individuals claim that they did not so much choose the spirituality of a different ethnic group so much as the deities of that ethnic group chose them (Pole 2012: [5]). To some, it seems not only a compelling argument, but also an almost urgent call to spiritual action:

Understandably upset by what amounts to theological thievery, some indigenous traditions have declared that people should follow the tradition they were born to - and have no right to anyone else's. There are two problems with this approach: 1) it tramples freedom of religion as badly as cultural misappropriation does. 2) The gods don't seem any more inclined to follow it than humans

Sometimes people do feel an affinity to practice - or even a clerical vocation for - a faith other than the one(s) belonging to their (known) ancestors. It is generally not prudent to thwart a strong spiritual attraction. That typically leads to miserable humans, irate deities, or both. The question for the community, and especially its leaders, therefore centers on how to identify a valid affinity or vocation and how to accommodate respectful appropriation (Barrette 2012:[2]).

As Barrette sees it, when one is called on by a spiritual force, they should be compelled to answer, whatever their ethnicity. Others have even gone so far as to theorize why a god or goddess may choose to "call" on a person: they may have served the god in a past life, they may require the individual's "particular talents," or they may wish for the individual to learn something that is only available in one culture (Cummer 2012: [2]).

This then begs the question of whether or not the gods care about the ethnicity of those who work with them, or whether they become personally invested in the lives of individuals, no matter their heritage.

Tumblr user thetwistedrope (2016) argues that it's fundamentally wrong to place the perceived opinions of a deity (whose existence is debatable) over that of oppressed people's (whose existence is certain and suffering very real):

The biggest thing I want to reinforce about all of this, however, is that people are inherently more important than non-physical beings. Non-physical beings can't be proven to exist 10000%. They just can't. But you know who can be prove to exist? Physical humans and beings that live here on this ~~punishment orb~~ planet with you. And honestly, anyone with any logic should be able to understand that we should be more vested in protecting the actual beings on this planet, you know, the ones we can prove that exist, than worrying about a spirit that *might* be from a Closed Culture coming to call (if they come to call at all). (thetwistedrope 2016, formatting theirs)

When an argument such as the “the gods chose me!” one comes up, one is reminded of the strange nature of the cultural appropriation debate. It juxtaposes the dry nature of intellectual property rights and the urgency and anger inherent in any social justice movement with the airy and impossible to prove religious and spiritual beliefs of a variety of people. Arguments about which race a certain deity may favor will spring up, not as part of a holy war between two factions, which is the traditional bloody route, but instead as a vague and philosophical argument cut short by the brutal reality of ethnic oppression. Even more extreme than the gods’ favor argument, however, is the one surrounding another affinity finding technique: the (supposed) belief that one belonged to a different ethnic group in a previous life.

#### “I Was a Cherokee Princess in a Past Life”

For some witches who can find no direct blood connection, a less direct path is occasionally used: claiming that they belonged to a particular ethnic group in a past life (Magliocco 2004: 225). Often, such a claim is quickly dismissed by tumblr users and is rarely seen as allowing any sort of way to connect oneself to an ethnic group to which they do not currently belong.

In response to a tumblr user claiming that they were a member of the Romani people in a past life, blogger Caly (one of my interviewees) explained how, according to the Roma beliefs, that was impossible: “Romani believe in reincarnation as well, but the *actual Romani* belief is that once you are born Romani, you are always reincarnated as a Romani. If you had a Romani soul, you would be Romani. That is an actual religious belief” (calyhex 2015).

This belief isn't exclusive to the Romani. For example, some practitioners of Astarú believe that a person's soul is bound to their family line (Poole 2012). Here we see one of the most interesting dimensions of the cultural appropriation debate: we have some very personally held, postmodernist type beliefs brushing up (often uncomfortably) against more traditional, long held beliefs.

### “The Culture Needs Us to Survive”

To me, perhaps the most irritating argument is that many of the world's ancient traditions are dying out (or, perhaps, already dead), therefore the only way for them to survive is through the study and appropriation of white people (Root 1996: 75). Some proponents of this view push it even further:

Ken Carey, the white author of the New Age best-seller *The Return of the Bird Tribes*, suggests in an interview that computer-literate white people are the most appropriate heirs to the Native spiritual traditions because of the poverty of the reservations has “debased” the culture and made it unworthy of the spiritual traditions that have always been part of Native community life (Root 1996: 93).

When first I read that passage, I wasn't quite sure which aspect of it I should first give my attention to: the idea that you have to be educated and literate to be the proper heir to an oral tradition; the implication (and I'm using implication generously, he certainly more than implies it) that white people are the most evolved and intelligent kind of people and so should tend to the worthy cultural accidents of the planet's lesser peoples; or stupefyingly arrogant belief that one has to be wealthy to be spiritual.

There were times while working on this thesis when I got tired of the ferocity and anger that always seems to be present when people write about culture appropriation. There have been times when I felt that people were taking the argument so far. There

were times when I wasn't even sure why people were angry. Occasionally, however, I encounter passages like this, and the vitriol starts to make a great deal of sense.

There are some valid points in the general argument, of course. One thinks of situations like when there's only one person in the world who still speaks some language, and can really only get the language to survive if an anthropologist learns it and writes it into a dictionary. There are situations, I'd like to think, where white people aren't simply a swarm of cultural locusts, devouring everything in their path and leaving a hellscape of polluted rivers and Starbucks in their wake. However, a white man claiming that he knows more about a tribe's traditions than the elders do because the elder's view is localized and therefore narrow-minded, whereas he has the outsider's perspective and has "read some books on Native religion" is not an example of such a situation (Root 1996: 94).

## “That Which They Don't Know Won't Hurt Them” (Unless It Does)

After the last few arguments, this last one will seem downright boring, but it's also (I'm guessing, since it's impossible to know for sure) one of the more common methods of avoiding cultural appropriation: just not telling anyone. Here's how popular YouTube witch and blogger Joanna DeVoe explained the idea in a podcast she released on spiritual cherry picking:

My spirituality is not a democracy. It's all about me and my connection to spirits, or the divine, or God, or however you want to look at it ... Everybody that I am interacting with is completely authentic and sincere in what they are doing, and I don't

think it's for anybody else from the outside looking in to say if they're "authentic" or being "sincere" or if they're "disrespecting someone else's tradition," I don't think you can disrespect someone else's tradition unless of course you're like spray painting their temple or abusing people or being a bigot, but in terms of me practicing my personal path, there's nothing I can do in the privacy of my home, or out in the forest, where I'm all alone, that is disrespectful to you, as a traditionalist, someone who practices an established tradition (Joanna DeVoe 2013).

It's almost like a riddle: if a white lady smudges her sweat lodge while wearing a bindi and calling on Ganesh, but no one's there to see it, should we still be offended?

Theoretically, yes, but there are some people who may argue that she isn't really doing any harm.

For example, tumblr user [storiesandconjure](#) (2014) made an interesting point, stating essentially that what really makes something cultural appropriation is when a dominant voice establishes itself as the authority on another culture's practice.

Essentially, they explained that no one can control what you do at home, and that the cultural appropriation isn't really about people's personal practices. What matters more is who is seen as the authority on a particular tradition. They argued that the problem is that since white people's opinions are often valued more than those of people of color, they begin to dominate the publishing industry, and minimize the presence of people who were the original practitioners. They suggested that white people simply make more room for the original practitioners in the various practices. The appropriation, then, isn't so much in someone's home practice as it is in white people dominating the general dialogue and possibly even looking down on more of the "native" practices.

Similarly, in an article about avoiding cultural appropriation while still integrating other faiths into your practice, Rihannon Louve emphasizes the importance of education in avoiding cultural appropriation. She gives the follow instructions to someone who is

not Hindu but works with chakras: “understand and acknowledge the differences between the way you use them and they [sic.] way they are used in the faith they came from, before you write or teach about them or perform a chakra-centered ritual with others or for the public” (Louve 2016: [5]). The implied understanding there was that using chakras isn’t cultural appropriation until you “go public” with it.

However, though there may not be immediate social consequences for someone if they practice something that would generally be considered appropriative in private, several spiritualities have beliefs that there are negative repercussions if a ritual is not performed in the proper way. For example, it is commonly believed in many Native American cultures that if a ritual is performed improperly or at the wrong time, it “can have profound and negative consequences” (Tsosie 2002: [11]). Therefore, even something practiced entirely in secret can be seen as harmful.

There are a variety of neutralization techniques when it comes to cultural appropriation, and most of them are severely flawed. But what about witches who want to avoid cultural appropriation all together?

## Avoiding Cultural Appropriation

### Pop Paganism

Perhaps one of the most interesting components of modern witchcraft is the incorporation of figures or ideas from pop culture into spells and rituals. This practice is often referred to as “pop paganism.”

Essentially, pop paganism is based on the idea that the gods and goddesses of old are representations of larger, more or less universal archetypes. Those archetypes are still expressed today in figures from pop culture. So, instead of working with a deity representing a specific archetype or energy, a magical practitioner could instead work with a pop culture figure. It's generally seen as a great way to avoid cultural appropriation since pop culture isn't generally seen as "sacred" by the larger community and so is generally available to everyone who wants to work with it.

For white Americans, it also has the added appeal of being one of the few cultures that modern America can claim any sort of ownership of. For many modern white American pagans, who may feel culturally orphaned, working with the symbols from their own culture — TV characters, superheroes, cartoon characters — can bring a sense of belonging and familiarity that is considerably harder to find when trying to emulate another culture or revive the traditions of one's ancient ancestors.

It's becoming increasingly popular online, since it's a fun and creative way to explore one's spirituality with little fear of being criticized for cultural appropriation.

Two of my interviewees practiced pop paganism. Oona uses anime characters from Studio Ghibli as a sort of personal pantheon. Orriculum's blog features a wide variety of pop culture spells with subjects ranging from the Harry Potter universe to Florence + the Machine songs to Pokémon.

As interviewee Oona put it: "I'm not stealing the beliefs of another culture to which I don't belong. I'm recycling modern American culture's themes and archetypes."

Though pop paganism may seem silly to some (it can be a little surprising to see an action figure or a Pez dispenser on a witch's altar right next to, say, a bird skull or a

carefully designed arrangement of crystals), the appeal of pop paganism is great and becoming greater, especially as the neopagan community becomes more culturally sensitive and looks for safer avenues for exploration and creation.

## Chapter Four: Going Forward

### Allyship

*“None of us are responsible for the actions of our ancestors. We are, however, partially responsible for the results of those actions which affect life today”* (Barrette, 2012: [3]).

As white people, as witches who are white, it can be hard to decide what to own, what to take responsibility for. It can be tempting and easy to simply say that things are different now, that I never owned slaves or killed anyone, so I’m innocent. But it’s not that easy.

There have been several times over the course of researching this thesis when I wanted to walk away from the issue, when I was on a blog where the charges against white people were too harsh, too cutting, too much. I wanted to get up from my computer and walk away, walk away from the very issue of race. But even as I thought about doing that, I realized that to do so would be to commit another, more modern crime against people of color.

As a white person, I can walk away from my race. I can go for the rest of my life riding on my privilege and pretending that race is no longer an issue. I can exist in my own little bubble and not worry about that problem. To do so, however, would be to shirk my responsibility as a privileged person.

A black woman cannot walk away from her race. She can't go a day without being affected by her blackness in some way. She can't pretend that race doesn't exist. She can't say that it isn't an issue. She lives in a society where she is considered "ethnic," and she has to live with the consequences of being racialized everyday.

I may not be responsible for the atrocities that led to the world's current racial climate, but I benefit from them. I was born into a world that spent the last few hundred years making life easier for lighter skinned people, for English speakers, for Westerners. I'm a white American, I have to thank the colonization of the Americas — one of the largest, cruelest, longest-running crimes against humanity to ever occur on this planet — for my very existence. I benefit from thousands of privileges, big and small. To be aware of that and to do nothing *would* be to commit a modern atrocity.

As the quote at the beginning of this section said, white people today may not be personally responsible for every crime committed by our biological or cultural ancestors, but we are responsible for cleaning up the mess. As privileged people, we have the power to affect change in our society, and it is our duty as thinking, caring citizens to ensure that we do.

To do this can mean a lot of things, from voting for the right things to shopping in certain places more than others to showing up to protests, to signing petitions to simply listening to people who do not enjoy your privilege without feeling attacked. It can also mean caring about issues like cultural appropriation, which may seem minor to the dominant society but can lead to devastating consequences for those not in power. It means paying attention, and knowing that when a person of color says that something is an issue, it may actually be an issue.

There's a common phrase in the New Age-metaphysical-self development community: holding space. What it means to hold space for someone is to essentially give them room to work through their issues and be present and supportive without smothering them. Allowing them to be angry and miserable without asking them why. Letting them exist without judging them for their actions or trying to impose your own beliefs on them.

It's my belief that white witches (meaning witches who are white) are currently in a place where they should hold space for witches of color. There's a healing process going on in that part of the witch/neopagan community that needs room to progress. When witches appropriate from those cultures, they intrude on the space needed to heal, to regrow traditions that had been banned for centuries, to rediscover ancient beliefs and crafts. A key element of allyship when it comes to cultural appropriation is simply getting out of the way. It has nothing to do with whether or not the white witch's practice is legitimate and more to do with witches of color simply requiring room to heal cultural wounds.

## Conclusion

Though neopaganism and witchcraft may seem to be very easy-going, casual practices on the surface, they represent a variety of cultural issues. In mixing the old and the new, they create innumerable tensions that modern practitioners have to navigate. Old ideas about ethnic religions and blood purity must rub up against new attitudes of racial equality. Traditional attitudes towards the land face up against modern

environmentalism. Ancient myths must sit beside scientific narratives. Old notions of gender are being rewritten by modern feminism. Cultural information that has spent thousands of years tied to the land is now bandied about in a world where information can be spread across the globe in nanoseconds. Tribal thinking has to find a way to make sense in a global world. The “default” race of people are actively trying to become more ethnic while the world as a whole is trying to become colorblind. People are looking to long-dead ancestors to solve colonial problems that would have been unthinkable in those ancestors. The ancient is becoming the postmodern.

When observed closely, even the smallest facet of society can display the various factors surrounding it. I’ve spent this thesis discussing a single argument going on in a single small subculture, and have focused primarily on a single website. Yet the argument sheds light on a variety of issues both within the witch and neopagan communities and in society as a whole. The argument has been centuries in the making, but is currently at a crossroads. Racial tensions and sensitivities are high and things can’t continue as they always have. Old crimes are finally coming to light and the colonial mindset is starting to die away.

I’m not so optimistic to think that things will ever be quite “right” after colonialism, too much has been destroyed that can’t be recovered. However, I do feel that we are moving (painfully, slowly) in the right direction.

## References

Anderson, M., & Perrin, A. (2016, September 07). 13% of Americans don't use the Internet. Who are they? 2016, September 07. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/09/07/some-americans-dont-use-the-Internet-who-are-they/>

Antsnaidhm. Tumblr Post. 2015. <http://answersfromvanaheim.tumblr.com/post/135057363987/how-to-honor-the-gods-of-place-without-being-an>

Awkward-rooster. Tumblr Post. 2016. <http://awkward-rooster.tumblr.com/post/151806531952/psa-anglo-witches-do-not-get-to-decide-what-falls>

Barrette, Elizabeth. "Braiding Pagans Cultural Etiquette in a Multicultural World." *Talking About the Elephant: An Anthology of Neopagan Perspectives on Cultural Appropriation*. Edited by Lupa, Megalithica Books. 2012.

Bernhardt-House, Phillip A. "None May Enter Without Art or Deeds of Heroism': Going Hungry or Whole Hog with Celtic Cultures." *Talking About the Elephant: An Anthology of Neopagan Perspectives on Cultural Appropriation*. Edited by Lupa, Megalithica Books. 2012.

Blain, Jenny. "Sites, Texts, Context and Inscriptions of Meaning: Investigating Pagan 'Authenticities' in a Text-Based Society." *The Pomegranate*. 6 (2004): 231-252.

Brunhildeofvinland. Tumblr Post. 2015. <http://brunhildeofvinland.tumblr.com/post/132776712215/stealing-heathenism>

Calyhex. Tumblr Post. 2015. <http://calyhex.tumblr.com/post/120387981173/as-a-half-romani-there-is-no-way-to-use-the-word>

Charbonneau, Marisol. "The Melting Cauldron: Ethnicity, Diversity, and Identity in a Contemporary Pagan Subculture." *The Pomegranate*. 9 (2007): 5-21.

Crockford, Suzannah. "Shamanisms and the Authenticity of Religious Experience." *The Pomegranate*. 12 (2010): 139-159.

Culturalappropriation-vs-ruleofcool. Tumblr Post. 2015. <https://culturalappropriation-vs-ruleofcool.tumblr.com/post/133093723971/shinto-101>

Culturalappropriation. Tumblr Post. 2014. <http://culturalappropriationon.tumblr.com/post/74019924078/day-of-the-dead>

Cummer, Veronica. "Those Whom the Gods Call." *Talking About the Elephant: An Anthology of Neopagan Perspectives on Cultural Appropriation*. Edited by Lupa, Megalithica Books. 2012.

DeVoe, Joanna. "Hippie Witch: The Spiritual Cherry Picker." Audio Podcast. 2013.

Dearwhitefriends. Tumblr Post. 2017. <http://dearwhitefriends.tumblr.com/post/157087146397/dear-white-people>

Diotima. "It's in the Blood... Or Is It?" *Talking About the Elephant: An Anthology of Neopagan Perspectives on Cultural Appropriation*. Edited by Lupa, Megalithica Books. 2012.

Dystopian-boobpocalypse. Tumblr Post. 2017. <http://dystopian-boobpocalypse.tumblr.com/post/156252425247/sorry-not-sorry-to-say-this-but-there-are-no-nazis>

Easol. Tumblr Post. 2016. <http://easol.tumblr.com/post/138832454612/psa-as-a-real-life-scottish-person-please-stop>

Eclecticwitcheryafoot. Tumblr post. 2017. <http://eclecticwitcheryafoot.tumblr.com/post/158565876595/no-random-girl-on-facebook-smudging-isnt-a>

Eclecticspells. Tumblr Post. 2016. <http://eclecticspells.tumblr.com/post/141299941178/black-salt>

Eilberg-Schwartz, Howard. "Witches of the West: Neopaganism and Goddess Worship as Enlightenment Religions." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*. 5 (1989): 77-95.

Eller, Cynthia. *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America*. New York: Crossroad. 1993.

Filan, Kenaz. "Ain't Nothing Like the Real Thing, Baby... Cultural Appropriation and the Myth of Authenticity." *Talking About the Elephant: An Anthology of Neopagan Perspectives on Cultural Appropriation*. Edited by Lupa, Megalithica Books. 2012.

Filipinawitch. Tumblr Post. 2015.

<http://filipinawitch.tumblr.com/post/129814478596/do-you-know-of-any-alternatives-to-a-dream>

Floating-bridge-of-heaven. Tumblr Post. 2016. <http://floating-bridge-of-heaven.tumblr.com/post/142364929008/is-it-cultural-appropriation-for-white-people-to>

Harvey, Graham. *Contemporary Paganism*. New York: New York University Press. 1997.

Ivakhiv, Adrian. "Nature and Ethnicity in East European Paganism: An Environmental Ethic of the Religious Right?" *The Pomegranate* 7 (2005): 194-225.

Ivegotmyphilosophy. Tumblr Post. 2013.

<http://ivegotmyphilosophy.tumblr.com/post/60710191025/lets-talk-about-cultural-appropriation>

Jenkins, P. *Dream Catchers : How Mainstream America Discovered Native Spirituality*. Cary: Oxford University Press. 2004.

Johnson, Paul C. "Shamanism from Ecuador to Chicago: A Case Study in New Age Ritual Appropriation." *Religion* 25 (1995): 163-178.

Jorgensen, Danny L & Scott E. Russell. "American Neopaganism: The Participants' Social Identities." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 38 (1999): 325-338.

Kinane, Karolyn. "Intuiting the Past: New Age and Neopagan Medievalisms." *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception*. 3 (2013): 225-248.

Magliocco, Sabina, and Project Muse. 2004;2010;2011;. *Witching culture: Folklore and neo-paganism in america*. Philadelphia, Pa: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Laurie, Erynn Rowan. "Dead Religions, Living Cultures: The Reconstructionist Research and Visionary Blues." *Talking About the Elephant: An Anthology of Neopagan Perspectives on Cultural Appropriation*. Edited by Lupa, Megalithica Books. 2012.

Lewis, James R. "Becoming a Virtual Pagan: 'Conversion' or Identity Construction?" *The Pomegranate*. 16 (2014):24-34.

Lilmswitch. Tumblr Post. 2017. <http://lilmswitch.tumblr.com/post/157840706487/just-something-that-irritates-me>

Louve, Rhiannon. "Cultural Appropriation and Interfaith Inclusion: Contrast and Comparison." *Talking About the Elephant: An Anthology of Neopagan Perspectives on Cultural Appropriation*. Edited by Lupa, Megalithica Books. 2012.

Marsinlibra. Tumblr Post. 2017. <http://marsinlibra.tumblr.com/post/157898685823/if-anyone-is-going-to-win-the-most-oppressed>

Neurowonderful. Tumblr Post. 2016. <http://neurowonderful.tumblr.com/post/140579273271/so-a-family-friend-who-is-native-american-took-me>

Noble, Catherine. "From Fact to Fallacy: The Evolution of Margaret Alice Murray's Witch-Cult." *The Pomegranate*. 7 (2005): 5-26.

Olivelle, Patrick. Encyclopedia Britannica. Digital Edition. "Karma." Encyclopedia Britannica, 2009. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/karma> (accessed April 17, 2017).

Pike, Sarah M. *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2001.

Pike, Sarah M. *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2004.

Pole, Larisa. "Cultural Appropriation in the Neopagan Community: An Ásatrú Perspective." *Talking About the Elephant: An Anthology of Neopagan Perspectives on Cultural Appropriation*. Edited by Lupa, Megalithica Books. 2012.

Proudblackconservative. Tumblr Post. 2016.

<https://proudblackconservative.tumblr.com/post/154651478094/tumblr-be-like>

Quidditchcapricious. Tumblr Post. 2014.

<http://quidditchcapricious.tumblr.com/post/53882492913/my-rant-on-silver-ravenwolf-and-the-burning-times>

RavenWolf, Silver. *Teen Witch: Wicca for a New Generation*. Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Publications. 1998.

Reverseracism. Tumblr Post. 2016.

<http://reverseracism.tumblr.com/post/123589395863/is-having-a-dream-catcher-in-your-room-cultural>

Schnurbien, Stefanie v. "Shamanism in the Old Norse Tradition: A Theory between Ideological Camps." *History of Religions*. 43 (2004): 116-138.

Sofreil. Tumblr Post. 2013.

<http://aquariusmoonrising.tumblr.com/post/58763812891/why-you-shouldnt-use-the-term-spirit-animal>

Stella, Federico. "Historiography and New Religious Movements." *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception*. 3 (2013): 265-283.

Storiesandconjure. Tumblr Post. 2014. Retrieved from

<http://magickalnoir.tumblr.com/post/56720190149/authentic-hoodoo-and-vooodoo>

Thecuriousviolet. Tumblr Post. 2016.

<http://thecuriousviolet.tumblr.com/post/154177825307/a-brief-guide-to-open-and-closed-religions-and>

Thegreenwolf. Tumblr Post. 2012.

<http://thegreenwolf.tumblr.com/post/20552126933/this-is-what-frustration-looks-lia>

Thetwistedrope. Tumblr Post. 2016.

<http://thetwistedrope.tumblr.com/post/149400030842/unpopular-opinion-about-cultural-appropriation-in>

Thetwistedrope. Tumblr Post. <http://thetwistedrope.tumblr.com/post/145178987445/do-you-know-of-any-alternatives-to-a-dream>

This-is-true-criinge. Tumblr Post. 2016. <http://this-is-true-criinge.tumblr.com/post/154659019232/the-thing-i-dont-get-about-cultural-appropriation>

Yurilolita. Tumblr Post. <http://yurilolita.tumblr.com/post/156002580768/bornabitch-alltheday sandnights>

# Appendix 1: Methods

## Why Tumblr?

Since modern witchcraft is in many ways a religion of individuals, many witches don't personally know any other witches. The Internet has made it considerably easier for like minded minorities to find one another, and witches and neopagans are in no way exceptions to this rule. According to a 2009-2010 survey of pagans, more than half of respondents spoke with other pagans on a daily basis online, while about one fifth of respondents spoke with other pagans in person every day (Lewis 2014: 30).

One website where a great deal of communication in the neopagan community occurs is tumblr, the website through which I conducted my research. Tumblr as a website can be rather difficult to explain. It's often described as a "micro-blogging" platform, because the website operates through a proliferation of blogs where users either post their own original content or simply "reblog" the content of others. Reblogging is a mechanic of tumblr in which one user shares a post from another blog, with credit given both to the blog where they found it and the blog where the post originated. This format is beneficial for spreading information. Since posts are constantly coming up again and again, information reaches a broad range of users in the neopagan community of tumblr. Also, since tumblr users can message each other, the website is also a place where witches can meet one another and have personal discussions, creating a sense of community.

Another benefit that tumblr has as a website for witches over other social media outlets such as facebook is that it allows for considerable anonymity. Users can create multiple blogs without anyone knowing they belong to the same person and there is no need anywhere for someone to use their real name. Since there is no connection to the “real world,” like there is with facebook, witches can safely post about witchcraft with little fear of their posts being traced back to them personally. This is particularly important for witches who, for whatever reason, cannot practice witchcraft openly in many if not all spheres of their life (referred from here on as “secret witches”).

These reasons, and the website’s tendency to attract members of a specific, witch-friendly demographic (which I will examine later in this thesis), make tumblr an excellent place to do research on many twenty first century witches, particularly younger witches and those who are newer to the craft.

## The Interviewing Process

The original intent of my interviewing process was to see the effect that the cultural appropriation debate had on the practices of various tumblr users. At first, my intention was to interview fifteen to twenty witches and neopagans who had tumblr accounts. I tried to keep my focus to American tumblr users but wasn’t terribly strict about it. If a tumblr user’s bio said that they were from a different country, I usually wouldn’t message them. If there was no country mentioned, I would usually try to contact them.

My recruitment standards were rather relaxed from the start and relaxed further as time went on. Generally, I was looking for people who appeared to include some sort of cultural material in their practice, whether that material was pop culture related or from older cultures. I also generally looked to see if they had been active recently on their blog. I wanted to speak both with people who wrote about cultural appropriation actively and those who rarely talked about it. I wanted to talk to people who didn't usually speak actively on their blog about cultural appropriation because I wanted to use the interview process to see how cultural appropriation affected the practices of witches and neopagans for whom it wasn't a terribly central issue.

I followed virtually every witch or neopagan themed blog on tumblr I could find and sent private messages to thirty-six users asking if they would be interested in conducting an interview. Some people ignored me, others said they weren't interested, and a handful said they were interested but would either stop messaging me while I was trying to set up an interview time with them or would simply not be available at the time of the interview. In the end, I was able to conduct seven interviews.

Interviewees were given the consent form for the project pretty much immediately after showing interest in the interview. Since the interview process was Internet-based, the university's review board waived the requirement for written consent unless the interviewees wished to use their real names in the interview. None of the interviewees wished to do that, so they only needed to provide me with "verbal" consent over the messaging system we were communicating through. All but one of the interviews were either conducted through Skype's instant messaging system or tumblr's messaging system. One interviewee had me send her the questions in an email, then she emailed me

the answers. The interviews usually took two to three hours, primarily because they were written rather than spoken.

The interviews all started with the same five questions: Do you consent to participating in this interview? Do you consent to me taking notes and saving a transcript of this interview (transcripts will be destroyed by August 2017)? What should I call you in the thesis? What pronoun should I use for you in the thesis? How would you personally describe your ethnicity?

The last one was probably the most uncomfortable for me to ask, but all the interviewees appeared comfortable answering the question. Every interviewee was white, majority white, or half white but white passing. This was not intentional on my part though I will admit that there may have been some bias on my part in who I asked. I may have unconsciously favored white bloggers because I'm white myself. The sampling process wasn't scientific or random, so my own biases likely affected it.

After the initial questions, I asked the interviewees general questions about their practice:

- Where do you get your information?
- How were you introduced to witchcraft and neopaganism?
- What cultures do you integrate into your practice?
- Where did you first learn about cultural appropriation?
- Are there certain practices you avoid because you consider them appropriative?

As I mentioned above, my focus was more on how this debate affected their practice than anything else, since it was unlikely that they would make a public post about how this debate affected them personally.

The interviews were included into the thesis like any other sort of data. Since the sample wasn't particularly large, their answers can't really be considered generalizable. It was, however, a valuable source of personal opinions on the issues I touch on in the thesis, observations from long-time witches and tumblr users, and anecdotes on how these issues have affected people in day to day life. The interviews were not the centerpiece of the thesis, as I had thought they would be when I began the process, but they were still valuable.

# Appendix 2: IRB Approval

**(KEEP THIS PAGE AS ONE PAGE – DO NOT CHANGE MARGINS/FONTS!!!!!!!!!!)**

## APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL OF RESEARCH WITH HUMAN SUBJECTS Protection of Human Subjects Review Board, 418 Corbett Hall, 581-1498

(Type inside gray areas)

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Kathryn Gottlieb

EMAIL: kathryn.gottlieb@maine.edu TELEPHONE: 207-217-1968

CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):

FACULTY SPONSOR (Required if PI is a student): Lisa Neuman

TITLE OF PROJECT: Cultural Appropriation in Contemporary American Witchcraft and Neo-Paganism

START DATE: 12/2/16 ~~October 2016~~ PI DEPARTMENT: Anthropology/ Sociology

MAILING ADDRESS: 455 Back River Rd, Boothbay, ME 04537

FUNDING AGENCY (if any):

STATUS OF PI:

FACULTY/STAFF/GRADUATE/UNDERGRADUATE

- If PI is a student, is this research to be performed:
 

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	for an honors thesis/senior thesis/capstone?	<input type="checkbox"/>	for a master's thesis?
<input type="checkbox"/>	for a doctoral dissertation?	<input type="checkbox"/>	for a course project?
<input type="checkbox"/>	other (specify)		
- Does this application modify a previously approved project? N (Y/N). If yes, please give assigned number (if known) of previously approved project:
- Is an expedited review requested? N (Y/N).

Submitting the application indicates the principal investigator's agreement to abide by the responsibilities outlined in [Section I.E. of the Policies and Procedures for the Protection of Human Subjects](#).

Faculty Sponsors are responsible for oversight of research conducted by their students. The Faculty Sponsor ensures that he/she has read the application and that the conduct of such research will be in accordance with the University of Maine's Policies and Procedures for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research. **REMINDER:** if the principal investigator is an undergraduate student, the Faculty Sponsor MUST submit the application to the IRB.

**Email complete application to Gayle Jones (gayle.jones@umit.maine.edu)**

\*\*\*\*\*

**FOR IRB USE ONLY** Application #2016-10-08 Date received 10/12/16 Review (F/E): E  
Expedited Category: I.1.3.g.

### ACTION TAKEN:

- Judged Exempt; category Modifications required? Accepted (date)
- Approved as submitted. Date of next review: by Degree of Risk:
- Approved pending modifications. Date of next review: by 12/1/17 Degree of Risk: minimal  
Modifications accepted (date): 12/2/16
- Not approved (see attached statement)
- Judged not research with human subjects

FINAL APPROVAL TO BEGIN

12/02/2016

Date

04/2016

## Author's Biography

Kathryn Gottlieb was born in Portland, Maine on August 7, 1995. She grew up in Boothbay, Maine and graduated from Boothbay Region High School in 2013. She double majored in Anthropology and Sociology. She is a member of Phi Beta Kappa and spent the spring semester of her junior year in Ireland. Upon graduation, Kathryn plans to return to Boothbay and enter the workforce.