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# White gods: Odin as the White male hope

Jeremy Michael Fricke  
*University of Iowa*

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WHITE GODS: ODIN AS THE WHITE MALE HOPE

by

Jeremy Michael Fricke

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Master of Arts  
degree in Religious Studies in the  
Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

May 2018

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Kristy Nabhan-Warren

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Graduate College  
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Jeremy Michael Fricke

has been approved by the Examining Committee for  
the thesis requirement for the Master of Arts degree  
in Religious Studies at the May 2018 graduation.

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He brought war into the world. If you survive in battle, it is with Odin's grace, and if you fall it is because he has betrayed you.

Neil Gaiman  
Norse Mythology

## Abstract

Over the past decade, the undercurrent of interest in the alt-right and white nationalism – the belief that white people need a unified culture and possible statehood – has grown into a movement worthy of serious academic and political interest. The progressive platform rallying against the history of colonialism, the privileges of men, and the supremacy of whites through identity politics has created new problems with its proposed solutions. White, working-class men feel dispossessed in a world where diversity can be defined by “fewer white men.” The working-class feels no privilege in their race or gender, but rather, frustration. What is privilege if not the comfort of wealth? Due to these political changes, whites, and working-class men in particular are searching for new forms of identity to be able to access influence through identity politics themselves while their grasp on demographic power wanes. White nationalism and Odinism – a modern iteration of Viking religion – progressively are becoming some of the few not-exclusively-Christian options for white male identity. While most do not openly advocate for racialized violence, they do not publicly denounce it either, encouraging traditionally masculine ideals of sexuality and warrior culture. This thesis seeks to provide a snapshot of how white, working-class men are involving themselves in identity-making in a multicultural world through ethnographic analyses of white nationalism and Odinism.

## Public Abstract

Over the past decade, the undercurrent of interest in the alt-right and white nationalism – the belief that white people need a unified culture and possible statehood – has grown into a movement worthy of serious academic and political interest. The progressive platform rallying against the history of colonialism, the privileges of men, and the supremacy of whites through identity politics has created new problems with its proposed solutions. White, working-class men feel dispossessed in a world where diversity can be defined by “fewer white men.” The working-class feels no privilege in their race or gender, but rather, frustration. What is privilege if not the comfort of wealth? Due to these political changes, whites, and working-class men in particular are searching for new forms of identity to be able to access influence through identity politics themselves while their grasp on demographic power wanes. White nationalism and Odinism – a modern iteration of Viking religion – progressively are becoming some of the few not-exclusively-Christian options for white male identity. While most do not openly advocate for racialized violence, they do not publicly denounce it either, encouraging traditionally masculine ideals of sexuality and warrior culture. This thesis seeks to provide a snapshot of how white, working-class men are involving themselves in identity-making in a multicultural world through personal interviews with white nationalists and Odinists.

## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	1
Reflexivity and the Anthropology of Religion .....	5
Chapter 1: Why Whiteness Must be Studied as Atypical.....	8
Terms .....	16
Chapter 2: Odinism: a Warrior Religion .....	21
Booze and Boasting.....	21
Finding Odin .....	24
Becoming Einherjar .....	33
Who the Gods Are.....	38
Chapter 3: Odin as the White Male Hope.....	42
Differentiating White Supremacy and White Nationalism .....	42
Fighting for Survival .....	48
Epilogue.....	61
Afterword.....	64
Glossary.....	65
Bibliography .....	66

## Introduction

Over the course of a year, I met with Skald, in his late 20s, and Johannes, in his early 40s, to talk about religion, race, class, and gender. They both see themselves as Odinists, and as white working-class men. They also are (or have been) involved in racist or racialist circles of thought. Throughout this thesis, I use ethnographic means to share and compare their personal experiences, and my various vignettes of their lives are intended remind the reader that while racism should not be justified, it is still a human response. It is my aim with this thesis to contribute material for an area in dire need of source material for both white nationalism and Odinism – both of which have grown in recent years and are often difficult to find as interlocutors. My secondary aim is to complicate the terms of “white privilege” and “white supremacy.”

My analysis is advised not only by the interviews expressed within this thesis, but also through a myriad of scholarship on racism, the working-class, Paganisms, and all forms of Heathenry.<sup>1</sup> Outside of the research specific to this thesis, I have spent the last five years speaking with people who are Odinist, white nationalist, or working-class whites and following social trends within these identities. This thesis is a product of those experiences, interviews, and research.

My first visit was with Skald. As I parked my car in front of his toothpaste-hued home, I saw a pair of large hands spread apart the yellowing blinds. The house was clearly repainted a

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<sup>1</sup> Odinists generally see themselves as Heathen, which is a broad term for Norse Pagan, and Heathens see themselves as Pagans for utilizing concepts and practices attributed to ancient peoples.

few too many times, with paint chipping near the window air conditioner for the living room. I stepped out of the car as the blinds snapped shut. The door opened as his pit bull barked excitedly for this stranger to greet her. Skald wore paint-splattered jeans and a white tank top – insistent that it was a “wife beater”<sup>2</sup> and had a large, unkempt, curly beard. Although only intentional in part, he embodied the stereotype of the white, working-class man – a Viking in a cheap change of clothes. Skald walked up to me with one of his arms out and gave a me a shoulder-to-shoulder side hug, then smiled and asked, “Ready to trigger liberals?”

Skald has a self-described “blunt” personality and imposing figure, standing inches above me (although I am about six feet tall), while being built for manual labor. Skald told his uncle that I was going to ‘hang out’ with him for a while, maybe play some video games or something. Before we ascended the stairs, we had to bypass the perpetual mess that was the kitchen and greet the various birds, gerbils, and the lone hamster happily munching on a kibble. His playful, black, pit bull/Labrador mix jumped on me and tried to lick my face. His son, only about three months old at the time, came with us in his second-hand baby carrier. At the top of the stairs was his bedroom, which was the quietest place in the house, away from the chirping of parakeets and the TV that seemed to only play Maury or the Jerry Springer Show. As he took out a bottle he said, “Thank the gods for ma – and her lady friend.”<sup>3</sup> They care a lot about my kid

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<sup>2</sup> Skald here has adopted a misogynistic attitude toward women in defense of his inexpensive working-class attire. Rather than call it a gender-neutral term like tank-top, he prefers to cater to stereotypes in defense of his own identity. While it is irrelevant to women who may feel uncomfortable around him, his preference for “wife beater” is oriented around more around a defense of his own socioeconomic class and political identity. In many discussions, he makes clear that he envisions himself as a guardian of women – but some would argue that this is just another form of misogyny.

<sup>3</sup> As will be mentioned again later, Skald believes that homosexuality as an act should be protected. His mother is publicly lesbian. He and his mother are both opposed to trans people, though.

and are willing to help out with the (baby) formula. We found out he's lactose intolerant and that shit is expensive."

"The house is about to be condemned," Skald mentioned as he smiled and teased his kid with a stuffed hippo. "I'm not sure what I'm going to do yet man, but I'll figure it out. That's what a good father does. Not like that bitch that wants nothing to do with her own son!" Skald always laughs when he says something that he considers "politically incorrect." "I should have named him what I really wanted to – Aryan. At least his middle name is a play on it – Ayr. She thought it would get our son beat up. I thought it would toughen him up." To be honest, I could not tell if Skald was joking or not – he was laughing, but his delivery was so well put together that I could not help but assume he had thought about it often.

His perpetual on-again off-again relationship with the same woman for the last eight years brought him some of the worst of his life, but also some of the best, like his son. "When I wouldn't let her drink when she was six months pregnant, she started fuckin' hitting her stomach full-force, trying to get back at me by killing my kid. Thankfully, it didn't happen, because if it did, I'd be going to prison again. That's what I mean though, I know women have some shit of their own but do you know how hard it is to get full custody of my kid from her? Like she can take care of kids just 'cause she's a woman?<sup>4</sup> She had her last one taken away, the

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<sup>4</sup> While I will not delve into detail of men's rights activism, Skald would consider himself a supporter of men's rights. He believes that women have legal advantages over men that should be corrected. He is particularly invested in legal issues associated with child custody, workplace safety, and affirmative action in general.

one she had with what's-his-fuck, and it's still ridiculous." He did not believe his sex offender status should be considered worse than her charges of child abuse. <sup>5</sup>

He and Johannes, my second interlocutor, knew that I was studying white, male Heathens and their relationship with current politics. They insisted on giving me advice on what was most important to focus on, but they both mentioned feeling underrepresented. For Skald, it was white, working class men who needed more representation. For Johannes, it was non-Christian European religion and the stories of Germanic peoples that needed to be told.

I originally chose to study white, working-class men because it was close to home. I grew up in a small Nebraskan city dominated by white, working class political conservatives. There were many churches, but few people were publicly religious, either because of the lack of time or the mainline Christian culture of religious privacy. A handful of my own classmates joined the white nationalist movement, due to frustrations with establishment politics and unemployment that they assumed to be caused by the influx of immigrants from Mexico. The widespread and growing economic issues of working class communities, the rise of multiculturalism on the international scene, and perceived loss of political representation from 2008-2016 have undoubtedly influenced the growth of the alt-right, although my own hometown is just one example.

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<sup>5</sup> Skald's frustrations as a single father center around the lack of assistance from his son's mother. All misogyny is interconnected, but in most circumstances, Skald focuses on this specific woman, and her tendency toward child abuse. Generally, family issues are more pronounced in working-class households, and Skald's situations are no exception. This tends to put a high amount of pressure on women in traditional roles. Misogyny, like racism and other forms of bigotry, often starts with a negative experience with an individual from an identity group that the person does not identify with, and the assumptions are held to most people from that identity group moving forward. Misogynists and racists often believe that their views are still true, even with "good examples" from that group, by insisting that those individuals are exceptions to the rule.

## Reflexivity and the Anthropology of Religion

Since childhood, I have received racialized attention for my own racial and phenotypic ambiguity. My parents are white, but my olive skin, onyx eyes and ferociously curly brown hair marked me as different since childhood – assuming in part due to lack of diversity in the rural Midwest. For many of my peers, it was obvious that I was ethnically the same to my friends, to others, they felt it was obvious that I was different. I was often identified as Jewish, Arab, or African American. As with all scholarship, my experiences undoubtedly influence how I perceive and analyze the information gained from research, but what may be most relevant is the possible influence of my appearance on the information I *received* as well. I cannot truly know whether the anti-Semitic past of Johannes crept up when he spoke with me, or whether Skald marked me as a white liberal. These differences in identity are often a cause for racialized and politicized boundary-making, whether by tendency to be combative or collaborative with the other.

The difficulty with self-reflexivity regarding the ethnographer's positionality is that it assumes that my intersectional identities (white, male, middle-class, educated, spiritual but not religious) skews the data I find dramatically. While our identities certainly influence the data we receive as well as our analysis, as ethnographers we can only assume so much of the influence of our intersectional identities on our interlocutors. For some, intersectional identities are more obvious than others. My interlocutors make assumptions about my socioeconomic class, age, political background, regardless of the queues I give, and sometimes cater their responses

based on who they believe I am. With many self-ascribed Odinists, society is seen as a collection of factions fighting for survival (more on survivalism in later pages).

However imperfect, I contextualize and relate the stories of everyday, working-class, white, Heathen men, and attempt to take their stories seriously. Politically, I admit that I disagree with much of my interlocutors' proposed solutions to the problems they face, but the goal of this scholarship is to meet my interlocutors where they find themselves and provide an opportunity for empathetic understanding. In fact, I do find many of their beliefs to be harmful and likely to encourage active discrimination and persecution in society. Writing a sensitive ethnography of individuals who, in certain circumstances, advocate for racism, sexism, or violence is difficult at best. I run the risk of crossing over the line of empathy into the realm of sympathy, but I also could be so critical that it turns racism, sexism, and violence into inhumane activities that cannot be understood.<sup>6</sup> The specific men I study complicate our modern definitions of white supremacy – they are not explicitly advocating for violence or discrimination on the basis of skin color, but they are not antiracists either. They are not part of active hate groups. They would not advocate for genocide. What they are is highly skeptical of the public conversation on power and privilege that considers them at the top of a societal system that they feel disempowered by. Now, they feel stuck in the middle of a war that they see as a war between those who preach “white guilt” and those who preach “white supremacy.”

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<sup>6</sup> Kathleen Blee, *Inside Organized Racism: Women in the Hate Movement*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, 8.

In Chapter 1: Why Whiteness Studies Must Exist, I provide an overview of literature on the field of whiteness studies – especially those that intersect directly with religion and masculinity. Through this overview, I hope to help the reader to understand my own approach.

In Chapter 2: Odinism: a Warrior Religion, I look at basic rituals and cultural markers of Odinists through an ethnographic lens. By interweaving intersectional analysis, I explain a few main beliefs and practices of Odinists – especially concepts of afterlife, the *einherjar*, and godliness.

In Chapter 3: Odin as the White Male Hope, I position Odinism and the Odinists I interviewed alongside analysis of the contemporary American political climate. White nationalism is not uncommon among lone Odinists, and with the rising influence of white identity politics, Odinism serves as a keen lens to study this political change.

In the Epilogue, I give some final words on future research and conclude that scholars should consider more nuanced usage of terms like white privilege and white supremacy in academic and public discourse.

## Chapter 1: Why Whiteness Must be Studied as Atypical

As identity politics grows in popularity, especially from the framing of intersectionality, there is a surge of interest in identity politics participation from white men – especially white men from the working class.<sup>7</sup> White working-class men in the United States do not feel that the corporate rich, the politically powerful, or the multitudes of intersectional groups represent them. The grand majority of these men are not supremacists but our academic-laden lexicons – words like “white privilege” and “white male privilege” are limited and are not resonating with a sizeable segment of the white male population in America.<sup>8</sup> In response, working class white men are becoming progressively more involved in alternative religious and political movements, including Nordic Neopaganism and white nationalism. To clarify – this thesis is interested in representing and analyzing the political and religious lives of a select group of working class white men through historical and ethnographic means by focusing on white male Heathens and white identity politics. I look at the lives of two self-described Odinists. Skald, who considers himself a white nationalist and Johannes, a man in his early 40s who was born in communist Yugoslavia (Slovenia today) but has travelled around the world, including Iceland, and lived in the United States for nearly ten years. Johannes does not consider himself white nationalist currently but was once deeply invested in racist ideologies. Echoing some of Sujey

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<sup>7</sup> Multiculturalism i.e. various ethnic, racial, and religious groups practicing different cultures. In other words, if the dominant culture of the United States is racially white, religiously Protestant, ethnically Euro-centric, and culturally middle-class, multiculturalism suggests that the dominant culture is just one option, rather than an ideal.

<sup>8</sup> I would like to clarify that when I use the term “white supremacy” or “supremacists” throughout this thesis (unless otherwise noted) I am not referring to structural racism. I am referring to white supremacy as an intentionally chosen racist ideology that professes being willing to justify violence against nonwhites to hold a certain societal position.

Vega's theoretical framework for *Latino Heartland*, I also contend that "white" is descriptive of not only skin color but also community. White people have a particular experience in American society, and affiliation with whiteness does not always imply normative (i.e. majority) experience.<sup>9</sup> There is a danger in misunderstanding and underestimating the needs of a community when assuming specific examples of white people as normative for all whites, rather than taking many categories of intersectionality into account (gender, socio-economic class, religion, geographic location.) White nationalism is led by wealthy, male, educated ideologues with clear political goals, but the rank-and-file are white working-class men. These working-class men's lives are often oriented around their income, job stability, and ability to secure their role as a provider for their families.

Intersectionality, as coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw,<sup>10</sup> insists that mindfulness of the intersections of identities are absolutely necessary to understand the complex systems of discrimination against the oppressed. Her work analyzes the place of black women as a specific group – moving beyond combining the separate experiences of blacks as a population and women as a population. In this thesis, I am not arguing that all groups are equally oppressed, or even that all groups are oppressed, but that the specific experiences of combining class, race, and gender of white, working-class men help us to understand the relationship they have with feelings of oppression and alt-right politics and religion. As a scholar, I do not believe it is my place to pass judgment on whether these white, working-class men are systematically

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<sup>9</sup> Sujevy Vega, "Preface", in *Latino Heartland: Of Borders and Belonging in the Midwest*, New York: New York University Press, 2015 (Read on Kindle).

<sup>10</sup> Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "The Intersection of Race and Gender", in *Critical Race Theory: the Key Writings that Formed the Movement*, New York: The New Press, 1995, 357.

oppressed within an intersectional framework, but rather to analyze and express the complex motivations reasons they feel as such, and why they feel security in the movements and identities they affiliate with. To do so, I have to take their circumstances, their frustrations, and their identities seriously.

White nationalism is a movement diverse in social class and geographic location – diverse enough to deserve separate studies for the various intersectional identities that are attracted to white nationalism. Real or perceived, white, working-class men feel discriminated against in modern America. They are too poor to fit in hegemonic “white culture,” and too white to be considered *truly* marginalized. Access to self-education and community through the internet has raised these men’s awareness of their own power as a segment of United States society, in part due to the actions of liberal-minded advocates of racial and gender equality. Concepts like white privilege and male privilege have migrated from academic settings to the mainstream, and have unified many white men against what they see as “white guilt” and discriminatory practices. This paper is not concerned with arguing for or against the existence of white privilege, but that we must better integrate class in academic and public discourse concerning issues of power and privilege.

However imperfect, I contextualize and relate the stories of everyday, working-class, white, Heathen men, and attempt to take their stories seriously. Politically, I admit that I disagree with much of my interlocutors’ proposed solutions to the problems they face, but the goal of this scholarship is to meet my interlocutors where they find themselves and provide an opportunity for empathetic understanding. In fact, I do find many of their beliefs to be harmful and likely to encourage active discrimination and persecution in society. Writing a sensitive

ethnography of individuals who, in certain circumstances, advocate for racism, sexism, or violence is difficult at best. I run the risk of crossing over the line of empathy into the realm of sympathy, but I also could be so critical that it turns racism, sexism, and violence into inhumane activities that cannot be understood.<sup>11</sup> The men I study are in-between – they are not white supremacists, but they are not antiracists either. They are not part of active hate groups. They would not advocate for genocide. What they are is highly skeptical of the public conversation on power and privilege that considers them at the top of a societal system that they feel disempowered by. Now, they feel stuck in the middle of a war that they see as a war between those who preach “white guilt” and those who preach “white supremacy.”

Why I write this thesis is so that the academy and public recognize that, while ideological white nationalism and white supremacy are harmful to a multicultural society, they often have different goals, strategies, and tactics – deserving partial separation in academic research interest. White supremacy, for the purposes of this paper is an active, explicit, and embodied anti-nonwhite ideology. Supremacists tend to justify terroristic violence as a justified response to cultural and racial diversity. White nationalism and the alt-right are almost synonymous – according to Richard Spencer who coined the term alt-right.<sup>12</sup> They are populist, right-wing, nationalist movements focused on the power of the individual, and both believe in the superiority of Western culture. Political adherents would disagree on specifics, in particular as to whether white nationalism explicitly requires the belief in a white separatist state in its

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<sup>11</sup> Kathleen Blee, *Inside Organized Racism: Women in the Hate Movement*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, 8.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Spencer, “The Conservative Write” in *Taki’s Magazine*, August 6, 2008.

platform. The primary difference, though, is not an issue of ideology but of representation. White nationalism is always described with “whiteness” as a cultural identity while the alt-right implicitly requires whiteness – standing European or Western “culture,” “democracy,” or “demographics” in place of whiteness. The alt-right is something of an internet-centric Americanized Euro-nationalism, an extreme libertarianism with an interest in authoritarian figures. This dichotomy has recently been problematized, as the two groups who were once separate have worked together on many issues and are conflated from the outside. Although there is an opportunity for future research on the use of labels of identity within these movements, for the purposes of this paper, I will use the terms alt-right and white nationalist interchangeably unless otherwise noted.

Within this paper, I show how feeling deprived of cultural expression lead individuals like Skald and Johannes to alternative religious and political movements like Odinism and white nationalism. Taking this focus can appear to be apologetic due to its commitment to subjective relativism and willingness to take sincere feelings seriously. By focusing on subjective realities, I intend to deemphasize intent for objectivity in favor of understanding the conditions that drive people to act.

Although at times my own interlocutors will refer specifically to their race, class, or gender, most of the time the three modules are not separate, but form one identity: the working-class white man. Often this conglomeration of identities, both from interlocutors and as represented by much of society, is intertwined with conservative or libertarian politics and a

vague, individualistic patriotism.<sup>13</sup> I am also conscious that geographic location, age, and other variables are equally important to the construction of identity, but for the purposes of this thesis, will not be analyzed in the same detail as the other intersectional identities. I chose the three primary categories simply because they are the categories my interlocutors identified themselves with most. In conversation, young age often implied liberalism and geographic location was deemed less important due to the commonality of independent practitioners and the community of the internet.

Ethnography should be the method of choice for less-structured religions like Heathenry. The study of Paganisms has gained tremendously from a variety of ethnographic and personal accounts contextualized in sociological and historical methods, especially the works of Sarah Pike's *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves* and Jennifer Snook's *American Heathens*. The lack of strong structural models, the prevalence of sole practitioners, and the wide-ranging philosophies and theologies make Heathenry (and the alt-right) nearly impossible to study in meaningful ways through traditional methods which often privilege structure and leadership, assuming top-down organization and a linear, progressive history.

Advocacy against male hegemony has become highly influential. Not only has this movement gained more attention in the public, but it has inspired responses such as male involvement in men's rights movements. Many men, especially working-class men, are finding themselves utilizing identity politic approaches to issues in their lives. When men act by the motivations of their gendered social group, it is important to study them as a gendered social

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<sup>13</sup> James V. Catano, *Ragged Dicks: Masculinity, Steel, and the Rhetoric of the Self-Made Man*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001, 2.

group. They, too, experience intersectionality in their own lives. Gender itself is “a public action” whose performance “is effected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame—an aim that cannot be attributed to the subject, but, rather, must be understood to found and consolidate the structure.”<sup>14</sup> For my purposes, gender, although considered a social construct, is assumed to be a given in my own interlocutors’ ideologies – those born with a certain biological structure are also assumed to have inherent social and behavioral affinities. In part, due to this assumption by my own interlocutors, gender norms are non-negotiable and are unable to be removed from themselves as subjects. This thesis focuses on white men that must have their working-class identity taken into account, or their frustrations will be misunderstood.

Recent scholarship has finally begun to take race and gender seriously, but scholars have often understated the influence of socioeconomic class. White, working-class men often stress that their issues have not only been overlooked, but delegitimized because concepts like white privilege and male privilege often underemphasize class privilege. I define class in the vein of Sean McCloud, in that although certainly influenced by income, education, and material wealth, it also is “an identity, rhetorically and symbolically made and unmade through representations.” Class can be ascribed by an outsider or it can be a tool for identity-making, but the specifics of class are often decided through discourse between insiders and outsiders.<sup>15</sup> To my interlocutors, terms like white privilege and male privilege are used by educated white

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<sup>14</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge, 1990, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Sean McCloud, *Divine Hierarchies: Class in American Religion & Religious Studies*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007, 15.

elites to co-opt the discourse, removing their agency as masculine, working-class white men to define themselves.

Intentional studies of whiteness as a racial category have often focused their attentions on political, social, and economic elites while relegating class outside the bounds of racial category. Examining the term, “white trash,” John Hartigan problematizes the separation of race and class arguing that it is important to examine how racial subjects, interests, and identities derive from fundamental cultural dynamics that also shape class and gendered social terrains.<sup>16</sup> To Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, whiteness is often implicitly or explicitly tied to issues of supremacy and racism, racism itself has changed from exclusionary or anti-nonwhite to a pro-white or pride-oriented racism.<sup>17</sup> But I argue that it is still important to avoid conflating these movements completely, because the movements have fragmented and grown, rather than changed.

Donald Trump’s presidential campaign expanded interest in white nationalism to previously culturally moderate Republicans, some Independents, and conservative Democrats. While Trump rarely explicitly advocated for violence against entire racial groups, much of his implicit message was that “real” Americans are white, nationalist, and ultra-capitalist. They are men, or in a male-led household, and they include the factory workers who have not received pay increases for decades.

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<sup>16</sup> John Hartigan, *Odd Tribes: Toward a Cultural Analysis of White People*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2005, 9

<sup>17</sup> Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 5-7.

## Terms<sup>18</sup>

Spending time with white, working-class, male Heathens has made a case for the malleability of identity, and a criticism on the effectiveness of strict intersectional labels. My interlocutors had their own preferences of identity. Heathenry was held as an accurate, but vague label, and while some men felt that it was important to appropriate hostile terms of the past, others felt it allowed outsiders to define them. Heathen derives from the word “heath” which is a term for a prairie that is too poor of quality to farm effectively. Heathen has a long history, but it is the most commonly accepted term, as it applies to all Norse Neopagans.

Stephen McNallen, one of the most famous Heathens, coined the term Asatru. He would define Asatru as an ethnic form of Neopaganism, requiring adherents to be able to trace some level of ancestry to Vikings. Asatru comes from Icelandic roots “Asa” which is related to *Aesir* and “tru” which is related to true. Asatruars are “true to the Aesir” or loyal to the Norse/Germanic warrior deities. To some, Asatru focuses too much on the Aesir tribe of deities and ignores the importance of the *Vanir*<sup>19</sup> and the *Jotun*<sup>20</sup> tribes. These disagreements will not be investigated further in the thesis, but should be seen as an example of political disagreement in Heathenry broadly, as the Aesir are associated with the elite class of masculine

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<sup>18</sup> For more concise definitions please see the Glossary.

<sup>19</sup> The Vanir are the rival tribe in Norse literature. Most scholars believe that they once represented the pantheon of the competing tribal alliance, but eventually reached peace with a literal trading of the deities. Freya, a particularly important goddess, was once Vanir.

<sup>20</sup> The Jotun are described as frost giants in Norse literature. Most of the time they are considered villains, although the relationship between the Aesir, the Vanir, and the Jotun is more complex than simple dichotomy. Loki, as an example is half Jotun and half Aesir.

warriors, the Vanir are expressed with traditionally feminine qualities of fertility and farming, and the Jotun are seen as a socially transgressive tribe, often bending gender and sexual norms.

Although scholars often ascribe Odinism to white supremacists, in reality the range of definitions is diverse. Like Christ in Christianity, many Odinists argue that Odinism just centralizes Odin regardless of ideology, and some are willing to overlook connotations of racism in attempt to reclaim the name. To simplify, white supremacist Norse Neopagans are Odinists, but not all Odinists are white supremacists. This causes a lot of conflict in Odinist communities –and Odinists love embodying the Viking warrior through modern conflict.

While Heathenry is intentionally ideologically diverse and unstructured, it may be of some assistance to the reader to create a sort of politico-religious typology. Although all typologies are inaccurate to the individual experience, they can be effective in structuring how we view a social group in its fullness.

For my own use, I will use the term Heathen to denote Norse Neopaganism broadly, Asatru to denote ethnically motivated Heathenry, and Odinism for Odin-centric Heathenry. Since many of these categories overlap, I will often use them interchangeably, but intend to privilege the label that my interlocutors prefer in the context of interviews. Further, descriptions will use terms like racist, racialist, ethnic, or common political leanings such as conservative or libertarian. Racist, for my purposes, will stand in for explicit derogatory or discriminatory attitudes toward nonwhite groups. Racialist will mean an ideology that believes in the existence of inherent positive and negative qualities on the basis of race, but an absence of the belief of legal discrimination or systematic violence. Ethnic will mean a group that

believes that Heathens need to have Viking ancestry, generally European ancestry, but trades modern conceptions of race and whiteness for more specific examples more closely tied to tribalism.

There are a few texts that investigate this middle-ground of racism. Authors willing to investigate the wide spectrum of racism are usually those who utilize intersectionality beyond race and gender into class and religion. For example, John McGreevey's *Parish Boundaries* analyzes the response of white Catholic parishes to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Great Migration of African Americans to the North. McGreevey takes white ethnic groups' concerns seriously, while not apologizing for racism. The Catholics of this period were frustrated and defensive of what they already perceived as a low social status in American ethnic life. While certainly blacks were treated worse in virtually every circumstance, it is also important to admit that certain ethnic groups of Catholics did not enjoy the privileges of wealthier Anglo Protestants.

Mary C. Waters' sociological demographic and ethnographic study of why white groups choose and change their ethnic self-identification (*Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America*) has contributed to questions pertaining to my thesis. Two of my guiding questions raised by this text have been: what forces are influencing my interlocutors to identify so publicly and persistently with their race or nationality? How does class influence this decision?

There has been a handful of scholarship devoted to Heathenry, Asatru, and Odinism, but each come with their strengths and weaknesses. Most notably Jennifer Snook's *American Heathens*, Stefanie von Schnurbein's *Norse Revival*, and Matthias Gardell's *Gods of the Blood*. Although all do use some level of ethnographic methods of research, only Snook focuses on

personal narratives. Von Schnurbein alludes to the European alt-right, but her research focuses on European Heathen history, and Matthias Gardell focuses his research on radical racists. Von Schnurbein has come under fire for overgeneralizing Heathens to be racist while Gardell is accused of being apologetic. In many ways, Jennifer Snook's work has the most in common with my own, but whereas her research interchanges white nationalism, white pride, and white supremacy, this thesis problematizes the perceived homogeneity of these groups, however nuanced of difference that may appear. All three of these texts are important in their own right, but create their own niches in an uncrowded field of study. I see my own work positioned as an addition to Snook's work – whom does not study self-described Odinists or Wotanists, and focuses on Heathens within traditional religious communities.

As such, my thesis can be seen primarily as an addition to Jennifer Snook's work who focuses on Heathenry as a construction of ethnicity. In her chapter "Honoring the Ancestors" in *American Heathens* she describes what she considers a stark contrast between racial and ethnic difference. Racial belonging is purely by blood, while ethnic belonging is primarily symbolic. With ethnicity, there is a claim to blood lineage, but actual physical connection is not as important as cultural symbols. Snook claims that white supremacists focus on race, and while sometimes coding racism in ethnic terms, what white nationalists and white supremacists practice is not ethnicity, but racism.<sup>21</sup> To Snook, white identity implies racism, but German, Scandinavian, and Anglo-Saxon imply ethnicity. While I agree with Snook's analysis that ethnicity is often a cover for racism, it seems also important to recognize that as white

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<sup>21</sup> Jennifer Snook, *American Heathens: the Politics of Identity in a Pagan Religious Movement*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015, 140-155.

Americans progressively lose their connection to Europe, many feel that whiteness is the only accessible ethnicity to them. Skald, for example, while able to name off half-a-dozen nationalities that his ancestors were, but always identifies as white and American. With the rising popularity of intersectionality and identity politics, individuals who feel underrepresented are latching onto identities that they may not have decades ago.

## Chapter 2: Odinism: a Warrior Religion

While many Odinists have traditional communities, many others are independent, practicing alone and sometimes networking through social media. Beliefs and practices dramatically change depending on context – as European Heathenry can sometimes look radically different from American Heathenry, various communities and individuals can have various expressions of their faith. Skald and Johannes, both self-ascribed Odinists who live in the Midwest practice two versions of Heathenry.

### Booze and Boasting

When Skald called me on a cold night in February, I heard a tremor of anger in his voice, although he clearly did not want it to show. He then requested that I come over to talk about Odinism. I stepped into Skald's poorly lit basement, crushing a few stray Fruit Loops dropped by his son – a young toddler. When I had spoken to him last, he mentioned his rocky relationship with the mother of his child, who claimed she wanted nothing to do with their son and was actively filing the paperwork to prove it. "I started drinking again", he said, evidenced by the empty Pabst Blue Ribbons that decorated his stack of survivalist reference books. "But not as much as I used to. Only socially or as part of a *blot*. Gods<sup>22</sup> (sic) I love booze."

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<sup>22</sup> Skald makes a point to emphasize his faith in polytheism by referencing Gods instead of God when in public spaces i.e. "oh my god" becomes "gods".

*Blot* is one of the key rituals in Heathenry, and the most widely practiced, because individuals sometimes perform *blot* without a community. Modern blots are based on ancient sacrificial rituals, where an animal (or sometimes humans) were sacrificed to a specific deity for assistance in a specific material realm.<sup>23</sup> For instance, Heathens generally assume that blessings for war would be provided by Odin or Thor, while traditionally feminine blessings were requested from Freya. Today, Heathens rarely sacrifice animals, and have generally opted to sacrifice beer, mead, or other alcohols that would have been accessible to Vikings.<sup>24</sup>

“For me at least, I feel like the gods don’t care unless I need something and am willing to give them something for it. Our gods are not like yours, they really could not give a shit about humanity. Except maybe Thor, but I’m getting off-track. So I need something, right? Like a few nights ago I needed strength for work, because I was sick. So I call on Odin, and ask for strength, but he is not a god who asks for nothing in return. I know he likes mead, so I take some of my mead, and offer it to Odin first. Technically I sacrifice it by pouring some out, and the idea is that Odin has taken his drink. Since he has accepted my gift, I expect something in return. We have an oath of sorts.”<sup>25</sup>

Although Skald performs blot, Johannes does not without a community. He has been part of communities in different states, but he has had difficulty finding even one Norse Pagan friend to practice with in his city. This is a common issue for small religions, one that should be examined in more detail in postsecular studies. Many Pagans, Odinists included, are “sole practitioners” without any physical community. In response, sole practitioners have gone to the

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<sup>23</sup> Jennifer Snook, *American Heathens: the Politics of Identity in a Pagan Religious Movement*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015, 62-63.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 63.

<sup>25</sup> Skald (pseud.), Interview with the author, December 2017.

internet or just simply practice on their own. Both Skald and Johannes have had physical communities in the past, but now they mostly practice alone and converse online.<sup>26</sup>

*Sumbel*, although can be performed on its own, often follows a blot. After the offering to the gods and/or ancestors, the people present will drink some of the mead and offer praise to their ancestors, deities, or boast of their own accomplishments.<sup>27</sup> *Sumbel* is a celebration, and it is a sociopolitical act more than an explicitly spiritual act. Like a luncheon after a Christian church service, it is a community-building exercise that is connected to spirituality, but has less intentional spirituality. Sole practitioners are quite conscious of the practice of *Sumbel* in communities, and tend to feel left out from a foundational aspect of their religion. Although there is no *Sumbel* (anymore) for my interlocutors, there continues to be boasting.<sup>28</sup>

Boasting has become a masculine practice, legitimated by the *Sumbel* as religious expression. This overcompensatory boasting can spill over into everyday conversation. I will admit that I cannot verify the stories that my interlocutors tell me, but it seems less important than one might expect at face value. They consider these stories important parts of their memory, and are part of the personality they construct. Like all ethnographic interlocutors, Skald and Johannes only tell me what they want to. What they tell me is how they want to be viewed by a researcher, whether it is completely, partially, or not at all true.

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<sup>26</sup> For more information on Heathenry and the Internet, read “Cyber Hofs and Armchair Vikings” in Jennifer Snook’s *American Heathens*.

<sup>27</sup> Jennifer Snook, *American Heathens: the Politics of Identity in a Pagan Religious Movement*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015, 64.

<sup>28</sup> For more information on blot or *Sumbel* in physical communities, see Jennifer Snook’s *American Heathens*.

## Finding Odin

I try to give people the benefit of the doubt. I have been researching Odinism and its connections to racism for a few years, but as I drove up to meet Johannes at his favorite bar I could not help but feel a bit worried. I had only met a handful of self-avowed Odinists, and although they were always a bit boisterous and would make racist jokes, we had some kind of common connection by land or by person. Johannes was the first in a few years that I met outside of my traditional networks. I sincerely considered turning around my truck and making up some kind of excuse as to why I was not able to show up – maybe my wife was sick, or maybe I could not find the bar. What if he was one of the extreme Odinists that I had read about? Was he anti-Semitic? Would he peg me for being Jewish? My idealist ethnographer side won out – he seemed nice enough over the phone. “I’ll be the one with the skullcap,” he texted.

I do not believe I would have needed that description – his mannerisms had much in common with the other Odinists I had met. He was laughing loudly, saying something about pretty women to the barmates next to him. When he spoke, he kept his forearm parallel to his chest on the table, leaning in to show dominance. If he laughed, he laughed loudly, if he smiled, with all of his teeth – although they were difficult to see under his reddish-brown beard. I stood closer than I probably should have to someone so clearly claiming territory, but when he was done he became serious and we found a quieter area to learn about each other.

As a young child, Johannes would leave his home in small town Slovenia to play in the forests in the foothills of the Alps. It is in these forests, and the museums which held ancient Celtic artifacts where Johannes first “felt Pagan.” His parents were not too religious, in part due

to communist influence before the Yugoslav War in Slovenia, but they all had particular frustrations with Christianity broadly, specifically the Catholic Church.

Johanne's now estranged father was physically abusive to him, his siblings, and his mother. Physical altercations and emotional abuse were a daily recurrence – leading him to run to the forest often. Feeling alone, he found comfort in the stories of his childhood that spoke of the fairies and spirits of the land.

Some of the practices of Celtic Paganism reminded him too much of the Catholic Church, especially its effeminacy. He still respects Celtic Paganism, but was never able to find much meaning from worshipping Brigid and focusing almost exclusively on pacifist action and plant life. He longed for a religious expression that would make him feel spiritually justified in his vigilantism against hypocrisy. Johannes found Heathenry within his Celtic Pagan circle in Slovenia, but practiced it mostly in solitude.

When he joined the military at age 17 to, in his words, “fight Communist fucks,” he did so illegally. Johannes laughs awkwardly if I ask about his early years in the military – but refuses to say any more than “I did some bad shit man!” However, Johannes was eager to say more about the Church and communism; he was angry at the Church for being too complicit in the dominance of communism in Slovenia. In his rebellious teenage years, he says that he snuck into a church when a Catholic priest had left his congregation for a minute. He proceeded to walk to the front and give his own ‘sermon’ about what he considered the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church and stole a candle. When he walked away from the church, he looked at his looted candle and scoffed, because it was not a real candle – but an oil lamp disguised as a candle. “Of course,” he says in his thick Slovenian accent, “a fake candle for a fake church.”

Due to its age, it is rare for Heathens or Odinists to be raised in a Heathen household. It is also quite rare to be brought up in a Pagan household of any kind, and often Odinists feel strong familial connections to their brethren in Odinism, often using terms like “kin,” “brethren,” and “tribe” to denote clear ancestral connection while it cannot always be proven. Johannes did not speak to his father after the abovementioned events, and he rarely speaks to anyone else in his family. He constructed families from the people he met. Although Skald has not broken from his family, both Johannes and Skald were abused in their youth.

Although his path was indirect, Skald eventually found a home in this Norse/Germanic Paganism while in prison. As a child, he was raised by an irreligious mother and a strict Baptist father who was emotionally – and sometimes physically – abusive. The couple divorced when Skald’s mother came out as lesbian, and he chose to stay with her. Raised a conservative, but secularized Christian, it took Skald a few years to warm up to his mother’s sexual identity. He left with her to a new town during high school and had difficulty with high school relationships. Eventually, he met a young lady that accepted him regardless of his boisterousness and size difference – he was 6’4” and 300 pounds. She was a high school freshman, and he was a senior. They dated, and they were public about their relationship – and his girlfriend’s mother approved of their relationship due to his professional aspirations and confidence. After a sudden fight over unrelated issues with her mother, he was charged and sentenced for statutory rape. Although his prison sentence was the minimum, the judge of his case compelled Skald to register as a sex offender for the rest of his life. While Johannes became Odinist through running away, Skald became Odinist through being imprisoned.

For Skald, prison forced him to be self-reflexive and to examine his own identity. Although prison was not the ideal place, it gave him access to religiously diverse groups with required openness to all prisoners, and gave him the opportunity to experience spiritual practices that were mostly foreign to him before. He went to every religious community that would accept him to learn about what they had to offer – although he was always skeptical. Skald spent time with the Christian groups at first, unable to find a denomination that he felt completely comfortable with. What he did learn, about a year into his sentence, was that he could not deal with what he considered the hypocrisy of Christians – especially as it came to sexuality. He did not believe that a benign, loving God could forgive child molesters, nor would this God be frustrated with people who were not heterosexual. When an evangelical minister openly criticized homosexuality, Skald became progressively angrier and angrier until an outburst, “I finally decided to get up and tell him, ‘Since you’re so obsessed with gay people you can fucking suck my dick.’ I walked out and fuckin’ threw the Bible at his feet.” He laughed, then told me he was not allowed to return to that religious group.

What bugged me were the “jailhouse Jesus” guys, they converted to Christianity while they were in there and they were super religious all of a sudden – *those fuckers*. I made fun of them all the fucking time, even when I was Christian. ‘Oh so you think you found Jesus and now you’re a good person huh? You still raped a baby you piece of shit!’ I actually got kicked out of the Baptist study group ‘cause this dude went on and on about he was a better human being through Jesus – but I knew what he was in for. He fuckin’ raped a six-year-old. Finally, I lost my mind, especially when people started agreeing with him.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Skald (pseud.), Interview with the author, February 2017

According to Skald, in prison, there are two groups of people that commit unforgiveable acts. Liars and pedophiles. The extent of Skald's frustration was compounded, considering his crime and those who sexually abuse 'six-year-olds' are considered nearly identical by the legal system. He continues to be considered in the same category with child molesters, being on the same registration with other violent and nonviolent sex criminals.

I got up and I'm like 'Look, man' and everybody stopped talking. Since I was the study group leader at the time they thought I was going to have something profound to say or some shit. I went, 'Look, man, I don't think Jesus much likes you.' I stared into his eyes and said, 'You raped a fucking six-year-old, you sick bastard.' Everybody started to say how his sins were forgiven or whatever, but I was like, 'No, no, no. He raped a six-year-old, you sick *bastards*. If you guys have any delusions that an actual, benign, loving God would think he's anything other than a fucking piece of trash, you are *all* pieces of delusional trash, and you are *all* going to burn in hell – and I can't wait to see it.' The pastor said, 'I think you should leave.' I told him to kill himself and walked out.<sup>30</sup>

Skald was not allowed back to that Bible study either. At this point, Skald questioned Christianity, specifically as to whether it is even possible for a god to advocate for pacifism and justice simultaneously. He began to experiment with alternative spiritualities – but only those that felt most accepting of him. In racially self-segregated prison, white men will usually follow religions that are dominated by white men.

Skald always had a natural affinity for the supernatural: ghosts, gods, and the supernatural influence of ancestors were all part of his life to varying degrees regardless of what tradition he considered himself. Religion was a marker of identity, or a way to structure beliefs and offer practices to correlate with those beliefs. He was close to his grandmother, who

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<sup>30</sup> Skald (pseud.), Interview with the author, February 2017

died shortly before he went to prison and he often felt her presence in his life. Sometimes he would pray to her for strength as one might pray to a saint.

Catholicism was the first tradition he investigated after Protestant Christianity. The importance of the saints and the materiality of rosaries and statuettes attracted him, but one of the most important was their willingness to stand back and let him take his own path. During his interest in Catholicism, he also visited many other traditions, especially Thelema,<sup>31</sup> Wicca, and eventually Asatru. “They didn’t care if I was Heathen or whatever, they were just happy I was there. I still have a lot of respect for them.” But, he could not shake his frustration with absolute forgiveness and stopped practicing Catholicism after only two or three months.

Skald loved Thelema. He still believes in it, although he (and most Thelemites) does not consider it a “religion” because of its complete avoidance of universally applicable rules and “faith.” In fact, Thelema constituted an interfaith group of sorts for Skald. With pagans of many paths, Christians, Jews, Atheists, and Muslims, Thelema accepted many religious paths while offering a unifying belief in magic, occult, and the supernatural. Chaos magic<sup>32</sup> is a particularly important contribution from Thelema to Heathenry, and Neopaganism broadly.

Practicing Wicca for a few months while part of Thelema, Skald felt a deep attraction to the polytheistic pantheon of gods and goddesses. Rather than assuming that the universal

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<sup>31</sup> Thelema was founded by the Englishman Aleister Crowley, in the early 1900s. It is a magical/philosophical practice that is based on the creed: “Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law.” The concept is that a practitioner is able to use their “will” to make physical change in the world around them. In a sense, with hard work and practice, one can literally cast magical spells. Most of the time the magic is made up of conjuring nonhuman figures into a pseudophysical existence. Unscientific lights dimming, temperature changes, sounds, or shared (affective) feelings are all considered evidence for success.

<sup>32</sup> Chaos magic is a magical tradition where adherents understand belief itself to be powerful enough to cause physical or metaphysical changes in the world around them.

structure hinged on a single, infallible, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent God, Wicca taught the world was structured by deities who were imperfect. These deities were subject to similar laws and ethics to humans, and had competing views of justice. There were two concerns that led him away from Wicca, though. First, its tendency toward liberal politics (citation) and secondly, his preference for Germanic deities and interest in historical reconstruction led him to search for whatever religion worked with all of his previous concerns – he found Asatru during internet access time in his prison day. Whereas Wiccans are described as “fluffy, feminine, and froo-froo”<sup>33</sup> by Heathens, Odinism is described as “masculine, powerful, simple, and grounded.”<sup>34</sup> After checking the prison religious group contact list, he found that there was an active Asatru group and began to chat with them.

At first, they would not accept him. By title of crime alone, Skald was in the same category as child molesters, and Asatruars and Odinists generally do not have respect for those who commit sexual crimes against children. As Skald boasted he used his confident charm to explain his interest in Asatru and the specific circumstances of his case and was allowed to start the path to becoming an Asatruar.

It took time, but he had to learn about the faith in the prison library and work actively to gain respect through various ways. Before he took his “oath” he was not entitled to any sort of protection in the yard of the prison from possible aggressors. He could not request the oath

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<sup>33</sup> Jennifer Snook, *American Heathens: the Politics of Identity in a Pagan Religious Movement*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015, 41.

<sup>34</sup> Johannes (pseud.), Interview with author, February 2017.

ceremony, but they would approach him if they felt that he was ready. After about a month, he was offered the opportunity to take the oath, and he did.

During a structured religious time in an activity room, Skald was asked by the leader of the group as to whether he was prepared to take the oaths to the kindred and the gods. “Yes,” he replied, and they stood up. “I pledge my blood and my life to the gods and the kindred.” He had seen the oath ceremony for another Heathen. Then, he was expected to cut his thumb on something sharp – they had stones for ritual that were sharp enough – and wipe the blood on the oath ring. The oath ring for Skald’s group was simply a brass ring around 9 inches in diameter. “Literally every fucking person who has ever been part of that kindred has blood on that thing.” Symbolic of family, the oath ring gives a family to the ancestral religion – a necessary implement with the amount of estranged families for Heathens both within and outside of prison.

Oaths (promises) and honorable dealings are religiously important to Odinists. Honesty is important above all else – one’s word is everything. This applies to the gods and goddesses as well. The importance of oaths is partly because of a basic, overarching belief that no one deserves anything by nature of existing. All people must work hard and give a fair exchange for the things they need. A man who can fend for himself without help is the only one who is worthy of help – and honor.

Many Odinists have no problem with changing how they name the religion that they follow, whether it is Heathenry, Asatru, or Odinism. To prison chaplains, Odinism has stronger

connotations with white supremacy while Asatru is considered ethnic, or at least less concerned with racial superiority.<sup>35</sup> According to Skald, his group was publicly Asatru, but many within the group were interested in white identity activism and politics – some of which went by Odinist, as others were less concerned with titles. Future research into prisons may find interesting discursive strategies among Heathens to protect the privacy of their group with coded white supremacist language, especially while only some of the group is truly “supremacist.” As he became familiar with his peers, he found that they did not mind different labels, as long as they were masculine, Nordic, and Pagan. Asatruar, Odinist, Pagan, Nordic Pagan, Norse Pagan, Germanic Pagan, Wotanist, and Heathen were all used, and all were applicable to any one of the members of the group. Depending on the context, these terms could be used to emphasize certain beliefs – Pagan to get along with wiccans, Odinist for white sociopolitical identity, Asatru or Heathen for religious identity, and Wotanist to imply stricter white – possibly supremacist – connotations.

Although Skald is conscious of the religions that have influenced him, the borders are unclear – and he has no problem with that. Not all Odinists feel comfortable with taking a label that is not for Heathenry though, like Skald for Thelema. In prison, most of his Odinist friends felt deep discomfort over the “Jewishness” of Thelema and its willingness to be open to non-whites.

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<sup>35</sup> Out of five prison chaplains called by phone in Iowa, Illinois, and Nebraska, four of them mentioned this without my own asking. Chaplains called between October 2016 and January 2017. They also mentioned that any explicit white supremacy would not be accommodated in prison, because it would change their organizational category to a gang rather than a religion.

The use of ironic, hypermasculine ‘trolling’ – like Skald’s previously mentioned attempt to provoke the Salvation Army minister, is a common theme throughout white nationalist rhetoric,<sup>36</sup> especially when coupled with the performed masculinity of sexual violence and intimidation. Although white nationalists are religiously diverse, they tend to be less Christian-centric than their establishment conservative counterparts. In part, the reason is evident in Skald’s conversations with Christian Bible groups and ministers: Christians are not standing for individual freedoms in a way that white nationalists believe Jesus himself would have been. Viewing him as a loving pacifist devoted to carrying out justice through love, my interlocutors see the person of Jesus as a respectable, but effeminate religious icon. Skald believes that Jesus was an idealist, not a realist. Skald would like to see a world in perfect harmony, but thinks Christianity is used as justification to oppress individual liberties and keep people from fighting back. “Odin,” he says, “would probably kick Jesus’ ass.” Not every Odinst was once Christian, but many of their beliefs are constructed as opposed to how they see Christianity. To Skald, Christians should be pacifists or they should change religions.

### Becoming Einherjar

While afterlife is not the most important aspect of religious belief in Heathenry broadly, many Heathens still enjoy debating its existence and expression, and my interlocutors feel that

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<sup>36</sup> Whitney Philips, *This is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015.

it is easier to just have a response to those coming to proselytize to them. Especially considering their acknowledgement of the hegemony of Christianity in the West, Skald and Johannes clearly were prepared to respond to Christian oriented questions concerning what comes after this life.

I do believe in an afterlife although I'm not sure what it looks like – I hope that it looks like Valhalla. I basically believe that the afterlife will look how you believe it will. For Christians, their afterlife will be like heaven. For Heathens, it will be Valhalla, etcetera, etcetera. But, at the same time I really like the thought that particularly terrible fuckers get punished somehow. I don't think you can have justice without punishment.<sup>37</sup>

Johannes, too felt that what one *believed* would happen to them would occur. To Johannes and Skald, Christian hell literally and metaphysically exists for Christians – if one believes their sin deserves hell, they are punished as such. To both of these working-class men, the superiority of Odinism was that it is affirming of human nature and white, masculine identity in this life.

“There's a few places Heathens can go after we die. There's basically a place for people who are decent human beings but die of natural causes, it's boring there but not bad. There's also a hell of sorts for those who break oaths or steal. Then there's Valhalla. Valhalla is basically a place where you drink, fight, and fuck forever. When you die through honorable combat, you become an *einherjar*<sup>38</sup> and are chosen by Freya or Odin. Each day is full of fighting, and each night is spent at the mead hall.”<sup>39</sup>

To go to Valhalla, Odinists generally believe you need the abovementioned circumstances – you must have died as an “honorable warrior”. To strict Odinists, combat

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<sup>37</sup> Skald (pseud.), Interview with the author, March 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Einherjar are represented in radically different ways depending on the individual, but most often are represented as an immortal warrior, chosen by either Freya (goddess of love, fertility, magic, and war) or Odin to fight in the armies of the Aesir after dying an honorable death.

<sup>39</sup> Skald (pseud.), Interview with the author, December 2017.

generally must be of the physical sort, and against an equal. Being murdered is not considered an honorable enough death for Valhalla, but murdering someone in cold blood yourself is actively dishonorable and worthy of the worst station both in the afterlife and in the memory of those who survive.

There are certainly many exceptions, Heathens argue over who gets to be in Valhalla. For some, a Heathen “fighting” cancer and dying is equally fighting – and equally honorable – to soldiers in the army dying in battle or firefighters dying saving civilians from a burning building.<sup>40</sup> To others, especially white nationalist Odinists, those who die due to illness do not deserve the highest station because of their “weakness.” Only the strong can be *einherjar*.

Johannes once had a similar view – he is in the process of moving away from combativeness and worshipping physical strength. After receiving his wake-up call from his family and friends, he worked on reinterpreting each individual belief he held from Odinism in the context of love. Although Johannes does not know about theosophy, many of his new understandings - especially of the concept of the *einherjar* – is likely influenced from theosophical beliefs about universality and a lost, primitive, Indo-European religion.

To Johannes, the first mistake Odinists have made is forgetting about the importance of Freya. As previously mentioned, Odinists believe that when one dies, both Freya and Odin come to judge your worthiness. Most Odinists write off Freya as being a goddess just for women, but

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<sup>40</sup> Jennifer Snook, *American Heathens: the Politics of Identity in a Pagan Religious Movement*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015, 102.

other than hypermasculinity and sexism, there is no reason to completely ignore Freya.<sup>41</sup> As Freya is equally important for access to Valhalla and “promotion” to *einherjar* status, Johannes argues that Odinists should take a hard look at what she stands for. As a goddess of fertility, magic, and caretaking – she privileges some level of kindness over bloodthirst. To Johannes, Freya would choose her *einherjar* in a way different from Odin. Being a fantastic father, husband, and friend might be the warrior she desires.

Since traditionally an *einherjar* is viewed as a bloodthirsty warrior of Odin, Johannes had to reinterpret *einherjar* itself. To my surprise, Johannes echoed a familiar concept from the Mahayana Buddhist school of thought:

Some people might believe that you have to die bloody – if that’s your thing I don’t fault you for that, but it doesn’t work for me. I tried it for over a decade and it only caused problems. I believe that when Freya comes – maybe Odin too – you have an option. You can either go to Valhalla, or you can choose to stay to help the earth build virtues so they can become *einherjar* when they die. If you are really powerful and virtuous you can maybe live forever here.<sup>42</sup>

Like the Mahayana Bodhisattva’s vow to deny enlightenment until all humans achieve liberation, the *einherjar* is interpreted in Johannes lens as a pre-Germanic concept with reflections in other traditions. To Johannes, *einherjar* has a universal application, a Bodhisattva of sorts, with a focus on Odinic virtues of honesty, honor, and family. Although Odinists rarely proselytize by a traditional standard – to openly advocate for someone to switch to their religion – they do often believe in becoming community role models and mentors:

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<sup>41</sup>On this note, Johannes, and many Heathens who lean in favor of his argument also believe that women have the ability to have a closer relationship to Freya than men do.

<sup>42</sup> Johannes (pseud.), Interview with the author, March 2017.

As I see it you have two options for “fighting” for Freya’s favor. One is protest. To be honest, I am no liberal, but I do see a point to some protesting. Sometimes people become whiny babies though, and I for one try to keep to myself. The second option, which is the one I prefer, is to be an important part of your community. Help your neighbors when they are struggling. Be ready to fight, physically if you have to, against terrible people. Take care of those you are responsible for. Maybe Odinists wouldn’t get such a bad name if they were feeding their neighbors.<sup>43</sup>

White nationalist Odinist Skald believes in helping out his community first, in his own words, “regardless of race,” although he sees difference in values and language as exempt from the perceived community, and his town is over 99% white or Latino. He has recently been voted into a Vice-Chair position for his county’s Libertarian party and has used the position to increase community engagement. While Libertarians are often known for a *laissez-faire* and survival-of-the-fittest attitude about business, Skald has advocated for assisting struggling small businesses with micro-loans and advisory boards. He also has suggested that the Libertarian Party of his county sell merchandise rather than request donations to show the benefits of capitalism – then use the profits to provide scholarships for trade skills that society needs. To Skald, these strategies are completely in-line with both Odinism and white nationalism, as they utilize concepts like capitalism from “Western culture” and do not benefit foreigners.

These activities have nothing to do with Valhalla though, and the afterlife is much less important than the material life and the morals they have in the present. Since life after death is not so important, life before death is more so, making survival itself religious. The practice of everyday life and its spiritual justification gives much more meaning than following a prescription of dogmatic rules to reach an eternal Christian-oriented heaven. Christian heaven

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<sup>43</sup> Johannes (pseud.), Interview with the author, February 2017.

is often discussed in relation to Valhalla – my interlocutors think heaven takes away all personality and excitement out of life and puts you in an eternal prison where you must worship the Christian God.

The deities of Norse Paganism do not want to be worshipped per se, but respected, honored, and sacrificed to. They expect adherents to have confidence and bravado and willingness to act when no one else will. To some extent, the deities expect their humans to worship themselves. Skald and Johannes believe that Odinists themselves can become gods through the concept of the einherjar.

#### Who the Gods Are

Skald sees Odin as a representation of what the natural world is – something to be replicated. Masculinity, warrior-ethic, and to some extent, social and traditional Darwinism. Odin is a strong figure who uses his power to dominate what he can, but is willing to give respect to “equals”.

To Johannes, though, his relationship with Odin is “complicated”, he would rarely ask for any type of intercession from Odin anymore:

I know I don't deal with Odin directly anymore. I believe he's the Allfather, the most powerful force in the world, but this world is chaotic. You don't want to fuck with the god that represents the nature of the world when you believe that. When you ask him for health, he might give you a pile of shit in your front yard to move by hand. “That hard work will keep you in shape!” He keeps his oaths but he also likes to fuck with people.

But what exactly *is* Odin? Like most theological beliefs of Odinists, there are debates. These beliefs are held dearly by Heathens of all persuasions, but they range dramatically, from literal and traditional theories, to magical theories borrowed from alternative spiritualities and paganisms, as well as racial and ethnic theories. Sarah Pike's work with Neopagans echoes much of the sentiment I have found among Odinists specifically – with a few caveats. Many Odinists, too, delve deeply into research – spending time with Odinists and other Pagans would show that many look at other religions for a comparative theology of sorts. They often use these comparisons to try to figure out what they believe were likely beliefs of their ancestors or the Vikings.

The most common interpretation is that the gods are real in a traditional sense – eight of the nine worlds are real, but metaphysical realms, and the 9<sup>th</sup> (Midgard) is Earth. The gods and goddesses exist in a sense traditional to Abrahamic religions – they are real and agential, but spiritual beings who have existed longer than humans.

Some Heathens prefer a philosophical interpretation, whereas the lore, the gods, and the worlds are simply stories that were used to create a culture and instill certain values in ancient Viking societies. Philosophical Heathens believe that the ancient Norse peoples were worldly, and that the majority would not have been religiously invested in lore. Gods become archetypes of sorts, often of ideas like wealth, fertility, or war. <sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Jennifer Snook, *American Heathens: the Politics of Identity in a Pagan Religious Movement*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015, 6-7.

For many Pagans, and even for Odinists – there is no problem with modifying religious beliefs from time to time. In fact, it in part derives from responding to how they often perceive organized Abrahamic religions, which they see as holding onto ancient dogma.

There is a growing movement of Odinists, Asatruars, and Heathens in a theological direction highly influenced by recent magical and literary movements – especially Thelemic chaos magic and its concepts circulated through Neil Gaiman’s *American Gods*. Skald and Johannes both believe in a form of chaos magic – although Johannes believed it came from his own pondering.

Simply put, chaos magic is a philosophical/magical belief that belief *itself* is what gives power to things. Since the world is an illusion of sorts, that illusion can be changed by individual – or sometimes more powerfully – collective will. Every individual who believes in chaos magic has certain stipulations or exceptions to this belief, but in the end, the believer becomes the “god of the gods,”<sup>45</sup> since the gods are created by the believer.

To give an example of how this belief can have nuance, Skald believes that there is one Odin, who acts on his own accord through symbol. It is irrelevant whether Odin is “real” because if he was, Odin would not care about humans. The symbol of Odin as a Viking warrior-king, survivalist, magician, and lover is as real and agential as the god himself would be.

To Johannes, “the gods are as real as I need them to be.” If he needs Freya to directly intervene in his life, he will request it. If he needs a role model for a certain situation, he looks at Odin or Tyr. Sometimes Loki is a human, sometimes he is a dog, sometimes he is a deity.

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<sup>45</sup> Skald (pseud.), Interview with the author, December 2016.

They can all be symbols in one circumstance, and active, agential gods in another. If one believes it to be true, it becomes so, if you believe it to be false, it becomes false – like the previous beliefs mentioned about the afterlife in the section titled “Becoming Einherjar.” These white, working-class men can become gods.

In the next chapter, I continue to focus on Johannes and Skald, but through the lens of how certain life experiences have led to differences in ideologies concerning race and racism. I start Chapter 2: “Odin as the White Male Hope” by providing an overview of white nationalism and supremacy, and certain societal concerns that may be influencing their growth. I demonstrate the complexity of white frustration through connections and disagreements with white supremacists and then return to the state of the current political climate, including Donald Trump’s election.

### Chapter 3: Odin as the White Male Hope

*"We must secure the existence of our people and a future for White children."*<sup>46</sup>

– David Lane,<sup>47</sup> *Odinist and white supremacist (Quote known as the 14 words)*

*"We can't restore our civilization with somebody else's babies...we need our birth rates up."*<sup>48</sup>

– Congressman Steve King, IA

*"I don't understand why it's so bad to have people like (Steve) King and (David) Duke defending our peoples' livelihood, I just want to be proud of my heritage!"*<sup>49</sup>

– Skald

Frustrations of white men continue to rise beyond religious affiliation, into interest in political affiliations,<sup>50</sup> and Skald and Johannes have their own investments into politics as white working men. Neither of them identify as white supremacists, although Skald speaks with them, and Johannes has been in community with supremacists in some of his past communities.

#### Differentiating White Supremacy and White Nationalism

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<sup>46</sup> Leonard Zeskind, *Blood and Politics: the History of the White Nationalist Movement from the Margins to the Mainstream*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009, 489

<sup>47</sup> David Lane was a white supremacist involved in the organized terrorist group "The Order." The Order was involved with various bank heists and the murder of the confrontational liberal Jewish radio personality Alan Berg in Denver 1984. The high profile of this murder was a major contribution to the downfall of organized white supremacist terrorist groups such as the Order in the 80s and 90s.

<sup>48</sup> Theodore Schleifer, "King doubles down on controversial 'babies' tweet," CNN, March 14, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/03/13/politics/steve-king-babies-tweet-cnntv/>

<sup>49</sup> Skald (pseud.), Interview with the author, February 2017.

<sup>50</sup> Peter Holley and Sarah Larimer, "How America's dying white supremacist movement is seizing on Donald Trump's appeal," The Washington Post, February 29, 2016.

When white supremacists and white nationalists are conflated and confused, social justice advocates reduce their own power to understand the similarities *and* differences between the two groups in their underlying frustrations and goals. The purpose of this chapter is primarily to explain both the fundamentals and the attraction of white nationalism, and show how Odinism often can overlap with far-right political movements, showing that feeling deprived of identity often leads everyday people to extreme beliefs and actions. I study the alt-right and white nationalism through the eyes of two Odinists, Skald and Johannes, who have different relationships with the political environment surrounding them – but to begin, I will give a brief overview of white nationalism and related movements.

White supremacy, white nationalism, and white pride are undoubtedly overlapping movements, but white nationalism and white pride have the greatest following – often, I would argue, the alt-right and white nationalists are not always conscious of their own ideological affiliation with the movement, while white pride and supremacy is intentional. White nationalists are conscious of these concerns, and often use different labels depending on the political circumstances.

It is important to note that many supporters of the alt-right, like Milo Yiannopolous,<sup>51</sup> do not publicly support “white nationalism” due to their persistence for an exact definition on matters pertaining to race – not to mention white supremacists’ willingness to identify with

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<sup>51</sup> Milo Yiannopolous, media personality and provocateur, has applauded white nationalist icons for their “politically incorrect” sentiments, but has never claimed to be part of white nationalism. He attempts to stay ambivalent when asked about his association with the alt-right.

white nationalism. Although undoubtedly there are differences among those who are willing to identify as a group separate from another, such as white nationalism versus the alt-right, many of these differences are minor and make little difference on the substantial fears of people of color. While the differences can be minor, they do exist – and they should be studied. These are public identities, and many Americans identify as each of these in public, among friends, or through the veil of the internet. White supremacists are willing to take an identity that brings with it the history of racist violence associated with supremacy. White nationalists are unwilling to accept open advocacy of violence, but are still willing to defend continental racial segregation. Someone who identifies as part of the alt-right movement knows full-well that describing identity with whiteness associates their movement with supremacy to the public.<sup>52</sup> Most of this chapter will interchange the alt-right and white nationalism, but that it simply because my interlocutors often change the names of their identities, whether due to social pressure or self-perception.

Although white nationalism shares much with the American Christian nationalism of the past few decades, it does have cultural and political differences. White nationalists tend to disagree with foreign aid for all countries, including Israel. They also have stronger communities on online forums, blogs, and social media than their Christian-oriented ideological brethren.<sup>53</sup> But one topic that is often misconstrued by the public is white nationalist attitudes regarding sexuality and gender.

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<sup>52</sup> John Hartigan, *Odd Tribes: Toward a Cultural Analysis of White People*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2005, 2

<sup>53</sup> Although an imperfect representation, interest in white nationalism is hundreds of times more popularly searched on Google based on Google Trends of March 2016 to March 2017. A quick overview of Facebook groups (April 2017) also shows that the amount of interest in explicitly white nationalist organizations is much higher, but splintered than explicitly Christian nationalist groups.

Skald is representative of many white nationalist and alt-right attitudes on sexuality – his mother identifies herself as lesbian, coming out before Skald was in his teens. Although his own family background was working-class Republican, after a few years, the news was accepted by the family. As a white nationalist, he found fellow conservatives that agreed with freedom to marry. White nationalists generally believe that sexuality should be left in the bedroom rather than in policy. This “leave it in the bedroom” mentality does create some negative attitudes toward genderqueer people in public, deeming homosexuality not ideal, but nonetheless “natural”. White supremacists, on the other hand, have historically been highly anti-gay and anti-lesbian,<sup>54</sup> associating their identities with communism, anti-reproductivism, and “the Jews.”<sup>55</sup>

To white nationalists, while sexuality is not necessarily tied to sex, they argue that gender expression is fundamentally tied to sex. To Skald, homosexuality is considered not ideal only because it does not produce white children – but he does not believe it is a choice of their own. Odinists tend to be politically diverse on the topic of the ethics of sexuality, but male Odinists often hypersexualize women. People working outside their imposed gender norms are considered somewhat transgressive to the community. Johannes and Skald both perform hypermasculinity through explicit and public sexualization of women in certain contexts, like Johannes does at his favorite bar.

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<sup>54</sup> Anti-gay/anti-lesbian sentiment also is associated with Christian Nationalism.

<sup>55</sup> Betty A. Dobratz and Stephanie L. Shanks-Meile, *“White Power, White Pride!” The White Separatist Movement in the United States*, Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2000, 129.

Johannes loved the bar set out near the edge of town. It was clean, but loud. We were given the last available table, and as we sat down he appeared to be instantly impatient. Since it was so busy, he talked and talked about what he had recently read on the internet – archaeology in Africa, disgust in “the media,” and his son’s birthday coming up soon. “Can I see the list?” he asked the waitress when she finally arrived to our table. He had already known what he wanted to order before he asked for the menu – a dark lager crafted less than 30 miles from where we were sitting. Johannes loved this community and wanted to support it – not to mention dark beers gave the appearance of manliness. She brought one, he took a sip, and said “Ah, that’s what daddy needed!” laughing boisterously at me. As the waitress walked away he stared for a moment at her posterior – “That’s—that’s the other thing daddy needed!” He laughed for a few seconds at his own chauvinism then forced seriousness for professional performance.

Sometimes, Skald also seems to overperform his masculinity – particularly when I question him about how work is going. He often makes off-the-cuff sexual comments about women he saw while working, and even when he is unemployed, he considers himself “working hard to provide.” His son needs him to provide resources, although Skald will sometimes mention the material assistance he receives from his mother and friends. He always offers paying people back, although his circumstances never allow for it to be repaid in any way but helping his friends out with labor – painting, mowing, and lifting things.

When I had spoken to Skald in February of 2017, he was fired from that job due to a more intensive background check. They wanted to buy his contract from the staffing agency,

but he had a misdemeanor relating to intimidating his on-and-off again girlfriend's intermittent boyfriend. Skald was fired instead of receiving the promotion that was promised him.

Skald continues to have employment difficulties after his two-year prison sentence. Having a felony compounds these difficulties tremendously – according to a 2015 New York Times/CBS News/Kaiser Family Foundation Poll, over 1/3 of nonworking men ages 25-54 have criminal records.<sup>56</sup> Colleges and landlords often completely block felons from even applying, especially those on sex offender registries. The more communities these men are blocked from, the more likely they are to seek alternative communities that share in their frustrations, such as ultra-racist communities, and social media has increased access to these.

Johannes has never been incarcerated, so he has never been influenced by felony status in hiring. He does admit that he has committed various forms of vandalism and assault, just never caught for them. His wife has been concerned that since they moved to the United States he has been hanging out with ex-convict Odinists almost exclusively, although there are few other options in the Midwest.

As Americans have become more educated, many of the jobs that only required a high school diploma ten years ago now require a college diploma. Job creation in modern America tends to privilege those who are already privileged. Between 2007 and 2010, the United States lost nearly 7.5 million jobs designed for people with less than a Bachelor's degree. From 2010 to

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<sup>56</sup> Binyamin Appelbaum, "Out of Trouble but Criminal Records Keep Men Out of Work," New York Times, February 28, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/01/business/out-of-trouble-but-criminal-records-keep-men-out-of-work.html>

2016, only 80,000 new jobs were created for those with no college.<sup>57</sup> Undoubtedly, the failure of job creation for the working class has been a more widespread issue among minority groups, considering less than 20% of black men and less than 15% of Hispanic men between 25 and 29 have Bachelor's degrees. Although a full 30% or higher of the white male population between 25 and 29 have their Bachelor's degree, the overall population of working-class, white, no-college-degree men is higher than those who are not white.<sup>58</sup> This means that, regardless of the fact that poverty and lack of education affects nonwhite groups to a greater extent per capita, the white population has more political power by population when it comes to the associated issues.

### Fighting for Survival

A fundamental component of many Odinists' worldview is that no one is *truly* equal. Advocacy for equality based on one's humanity alone is despised. Equity and merit above all else – hard work and community value is everything. Most Odinists believe that the community should do something for those who struggle, but they cannot beg, and they must be working as hard as they can to contribute. Often, it seems that these attitudes are selectively applied to immigrants and minorities in the vein of implicit white nationalism. A veteran who broke his arm is worthy of honor and support, but a middle-aged black man barely making it by is not

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<sup>57</sup> Tami Luhby, "College grads are getting nearly all the jobs," CNNMoney, Accessed March 22, 2017, <http://money.cnn.com/2016/06/30/news/economy/college-grads-jobs/>

<sup>58</sup> Ryan, Camille L., and Kurt Bauman. "Educational attainment in the United States: 2015." *Current Population Reports* 20 (2016).

considered worthy of assistance – mostly refer to begging as justification for not wanting to assist black men. While he never mentioned it, he does not seem to envision a veteran being black.

Much of Johanne’s adult life was characterized by his willingness to openly provoke people. Johannes felt that this was his duty as a trained military police officer – to shut down hostile situations through one of three options (and he had to choose quickly based on the situation). Either he could provoke the individual to fight him instead, intimidate them, or calm them down. Provocation and intimidation are deeply connected. Although Johannes is self-conscious about his size, he certainly appears intimidating with this shaved head, muscular build, and carved beard, he is not particularly wide or tall. Intimidation, he says, is ideal because it can get through to more hostile people than a calming demeanor can.

His racist attitudes were originally adopted as a way to provoke and intimidate and to make up for his size – starting out against other nationalities of Eastern Europeans. Johannes still believes racist language and racist actions actually have an important role in provocation and intimidation “to protect animals, women, and children”<sup>59</sup> regardless of races involved. Although at first he says it was only in situations of serious hostility, he progressively found himself in situations where he felt in danger when he truly was not. He was openly racist toward Jewish and black people due to his own fears, without incitement.

White supremacist ideals of a hero willing to fight for their race pop up particularly in white supremacist Odinist David Lane’s writings, personified as the Viking warrior – a racist

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<sup>59</sup> Johannes (pseud.), Interview with the author, January 2017

ideal for the age of diversity. To David Lane, ZOG<sup>60</sup> is the enemy, and the lone Viking protecting “his white woman” is the hero. From within, white supremacy is rarely characterized in an offensive state, but rather defensively, protecting what they believe is rightfully theirs through (pre-emptive) violence. White nationalists on the other hand, generally do not believe pre-emptive violence can be justified. This is particularly significant because white supremacists and white nationalists themselves will often agree on the difference between themselves on these points.

Odinists also idealize the Viking warrior, seeing them as the embodiments of great equalization. Like the gladiators of old,<sup>61</sup> Vikings could be criminals, poor, or marginalized, but with honor and bravery they could fight and become successful. The myriad of academic scholarship attempting to reconstruct Viking ethics has not confirmed this attitude of Viking society – believing in the redemption of criminals and poor through Viking – but it is plausible to Odinists.

As the embodiment of the Viking warrior, Johannes provoked his own friends, his wife’s friends, and complete strangers. When his wife had enough, she demanded that he go to a counselor to sort these issues out. Faced with his marital life falling to divorce, he did seek outside assistance and began to reform his racism. To both Skald and Johannes, racism was defined as a malicious verbal or physical act, intentionally perpetrated by an individual against

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<sup>60</sup> ZOG/Zionist Occupied Government – Many white supremacists believe that Jews are strategically located in places of power such as governments, but also media and other corporations, and that they are actively trying to destroy the white race. Modern white supremacists and nationalists often cite World War II and the Holocaust as why Jews would be justified in retaliation.

<sup>61</sup> L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008, 52.

someone purely based on their skin color or national origin. This racism is considered fundamentally different from structural racism oft-cited by academics and political progressives.<sup>62</sup> To both, structural racism was a non-issue, because individuals in Odinism (and libertarian or white nationalist politics) are only bound to protect themselves and their families.

To Skald and Johannes, racialism and racism are fundamentally different. Although both believe in a form of racialism, that is, in certain inherent qualities based on race, they argue that while racism says one group is superior to another, they believe that humans are not deserving of negative consequences based on race alone. This particularity is actually common throughout the alt-right, and even conservatism broadly. Although one could certainly argue that this is just racism hidden, it is important to delineate the difference between someone who is publicly, privately, or not willing to admit to particular racist thoughts. In fact, Johannes argues that while there is only one humanity, genetic diversity throughout the world is important and interesting to learn about.

Skald often argues that as an American nationalist, he must defend diversity – as racial diversity has always been in existence in America. He delineates a simple difference between race and culture to separate racism from nationalism – race is skin color, based on genetic ancestry, while culture is how one acts. In different words, he believes that one can “transcend” their race to be part of a homogenous “American culture.” But for academics and people of color, assuming certain negative, stereotypical “cultural” qualities on groups based on skin color *is* a form of racism, even if one believes it is a tendency rather than a rule.

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<sup>62</sup> Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., ed. Paula S. Rothenberg, 181.

Citing prison as a microcosm of American society, he stresses that African-Americans use Ebonics to “mutilate the English language” and that they were “fuckin idiots with their pants sagging.” He explains himself by saying:

Where we stressed individualism, learning, and knowledge, they (black prisoners) seemed to shun it. That was a big cultural divide. It wasn’t really their skin color – because there were a few black guys that preferred to hang out with us and no one in our group had a problem with that. Their skin color didn’t mean anything, it was how that culture acted.<sup>63</sup>

The carryover of racist gangs into prison certainly contributes to some of this racism. It is doubtful that the group that he spoke of had any kinder attitude toward his group, although I do not have access to his groupmates, nor the rival groups in prison. Prison chaplains often cite racial segregation as a pervading issue, and racial harassment as a serious concern among most prisoners.<sup>64</sup>

This (over)specificity of language is also often applied to neo-Nazism. I asked Skald what he thought of the public calling white nationalists neo-Nazis, and in reply, he said, “I don’t believe in National Socialist policies, so no, I’m not a Nazi.” He laughed, then continued, “I might be a tad fascist, but I’m not a Nazi.” Criticizing purist social Darwinism, Skald paints a picture as to why he believes in pseudo-authoritarianism, backed by representatives.

I have come to a point in my observation of the world that people are just way too stupid to govern themselves. Without a government, 80% of these retards would die within a week. If you don’t have a mildly authoritarian figure at the top, it’s all fucked. A lot of white nationalists like to say “the strong will survive.” Wrong! 80% versus 20%. If you put a tarantula on an ant hill, guess what, those ants are going to wreck that tarantula. That is why purist democracies should not exist – the blithering morons of the

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<sup>63</sup> Skald (pseud.), Interview with the author, December 2016.

<sup>64</sup> Anonymous prison chaplains in Iowa and Nebraska, Interviews by phone, December 2016.

masses will kill the strong and intelligent. That's why a republic exists – so we can keep the libtard mob from dominating.<sup>65</sup>

Echoing white supremacists, but with alternative language (leaving out ZOG), Skald believes “the Jews” have justification in seeking revenge on white people after the Holocaust. In Skald’s worldview, “the media,” including newspapers, mainstream television, and educational textbooks are mostly created by Jews to hide the worldwide revolution against whites.<sup>66</sup> In response, I reiterated, “So you know that, firstly, Jews do not own all the media outlets, and you feel that the corporate media are the problem, so why is your frustration with Jews rather than corporate elites?”

That’s what makes me different from a goose-steppin’ Nazi. It’s obvious that elites are doing some fucked up shit, but you have to ask yourself – what would our world be like *without* puppet-masters pulling the strings? Would we even have a society? It hearkens back to what I said earlier – we’re a bunch of lemmings and without forms of authoritarianism this world would be chaos.<sup>67</sup>

Skald, willing to defend corporate elites over Jews, has not always held this anti-Semitic point of view, in fact moments later he reiterated that “your everyday Jewish guy” was no problem for him. When he hears the term “Jewish” or “Jew” in discourse, he automatically relates it to Israeli politics and to the politically and economically powerful American elites that he believes deride his simple identity of “white working male.”

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<sup>65</sup> Skald (pseud.), Interview with the author, December 2016

<sup>66</sup> This was a particularly common theme in David Duke’s campaign in the early 1990s. For more information, read “The Duke Campaign(s) and the Louisiana Electorate” in Leonard Zeskind, *Blood and Politics: the History of the White Nationalist Movement from the Margins to the Mainstream*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009

<sup>67</sup> Skald (pseud.), Interview with the author, December 2016.

There is no way to teach people to stop racism except to teach everyone that it does not matter what race you are, it's the content of your character. Not "hate whitey" not "look at all the bad stuff white people have done." Teaching about why people hate each other, whether it's by race or whatever else, may be able to get rid of hatred in the first place. Racism is a conditioned response – you have to be taught to hate somebody else based on the color of their skin. My kid would play with a black kid just the same as any other kid.<sup>68</sup>

Conscious of racism as a conditioned response, Skald implies here that overemphasizing identity politics and intersectionality in the classroom leads to bigotry. One could make this argument, but his own feelings of deprivation lead him to tribalism and white nationalism rather than attempting to embody his own suggestions.

As whiteness in America has been often the blank slate to "other" groups of people, white nationalists have had to clarify a culture. As previously mentioned, an official language – namely English – is considered necessary for this vague, white culture to "survive." The second, "racial purity." Echoing and stretching statistics oft-cited by white nationalists and white supremacists (with various numerical discrepancies), Skald believes that "white people will be extinct in 200 years if there is no change." Of course, while race certainly has material consequences for peoples' lives, it is a social construct – whiteness has always been defined as "not other" via the one-drop rule.<sup>69</sup>

To white nationalist Odinst Skald, white people, and especially white men, are dealt a lesser hand both in social discourse and legal rights, citing the popular discourse of white/male privilege on social media, the disparity in criminal convictions between men and women, and

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<sup>68</sup> Skald (pseud.), Interview with the author, March 2017

<sup>69</sup> The one-drop rule is a legal principle of racial classification based on hypodescent. The basic concept is still used to this day in America for legal designations of race. Hypodescent is the belief that mixed race people are automatically considered the "lower race," by legal standards, regardless of how they personally identify.

the existence of racial and gendered affirmative action as proof for his claims. Concepts like white privilege and male privilege are often generalized to a national or global stage, forsaking the issues of class and local diversity that give nuance to structural privilege.

Some of these frustrations are shared by liberal antiracists, too. John McWhorter, liberal rabble-rouser and Columbia University professor of linguistics and American studies argues that affirmative action should be modified to be based on class rather than on ethnicity or race. Surprisingly enough, both Skald and John McWhorter agree that race-based affirmative action contributes to racism and overlooks individuals who need the most assistance by underemphasizing merit and economic class.<sup>70</sup>

When white conservative groups see that identity politics gives power in a multicultural society, they are also willing to utilize identity politics for their own gain. Both Johannes and Skald feel that white men are dealt a lesser hand than “liberals are willing to admit.” Skald, who is having more social and financial difficulty than Johannes feels that unified, concerted action on behalf of working-class white men is absolutely necessary to achieve any sort of equality in the United States. Making less than \$14,000 a year and being a single parent, while seeing politicians assume whites are middle or upper class has been frustrating for Skald. He sees affirmative action and racially based scholarships for people of color while he scrapes by, and is enraged when modern civil rights movements like Black Lives Matter demand legislative change for resolving continued discrimination against blacks, because he feels that they already are receiving advantages that he is not. This is only compounded by conservative news associating

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<sup>70</sup> John McWhorter, “Actually, Scalia had a point,” CNN, December 13, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/12/13/opinions/mcwhorter-antonin-scalia-affirmative-action/>

Black Lives Matter with violence against small business. It was easy to find faith in the nationalism espoused by Donald Trump, combined with Milo Yiannopolous' "anti-politically correct" rhetoric.

Donald Trump isn't perfect. Even I fuckin' know that. I wouldn't call him a white nationalist, but he is the first truly nationalist President. I'm not exactly sure what Trump's long-term agenda is but I don't really care. He's so cocky and selfish that he has to fulfill his promises. I like that about him.<sup>71</sup>

Skald viciously defends David Duke and Congressman Steve King for "defending their people and their culture" on social media through expletive laced status updates and comment-trolling on left-leaning news sites. Johannes has committed to do everything he can to avoid politics on social media, keeping his friends list to a minimum and actively drowning out political talk with sharing and conversation about recent archaeological finds and Heathen poetry that he had written.

Although he cannot vote due to felon status, Skald was an early Donald Trump supporter, finding a bit of himself in the presidential candidate for the Republican Party. Arrogant, brash, and anti-authoritarian, Donald Trump appeared as a powerful, but imperfect nationalist candidate. Nationalist and anti-immigrant, of course, are nearly synonymous.<sup>72</sup> Johannes admitted that in the past he would have applauded Donald Trump's anti-communist and white/Western identity tendencies, he was bothered by Trump's empty promises and authoritarianism at this point in his life. Describing himself as anti-political/anti-politician, "but I

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<sup>71</sup> Skald (pseud.), Interview with the author, December 2016.

<sup>72</sup> Leonard Zeskind, *Blood and Politics: the History of the White Nationalist Movement from the Margins to the Mainstream*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009, 527.

am no liberal,” he says. Johannes did not vote, although he would have preferred Gary Johnson to win the 2016 election, and despised Hillary Clinton “most.”

Donald Trump’s 2016 election can be attributed to the voter interest among non-college whites, and the discrepancy between men and women. With a 39-point difference in favor of Donald Trump, non-college/working-class whites turned out for his message supporting the white working class – one of the first candidates to nod to “white issues.”<sup>73</sup> Men broadly voted with a 12-point difference in favor of Donald Trump.<sup>74</sup>

Johannes also has a working-class job, but, putting off having children, being in a dual-income marriage, and never being imprisoned has helped him to keep financially afloat. He is in a greater socioeconomic position of privilege than Skald, which has given Johannes a greater opportunity to choose his own definitions of identity. While Johannes has been involved in racist movements in the past, he has begun moving away from racist expressions after experiencing patience and dialogue with his family and friends.

In response to these feelings of deprivation, white working-class men are becoming interested in white nationalism, believing that these issues are racially oriented. They believe that they are on the receiving end of legislated discrimination, particularly through affirmative action and lack of legal response to undocumented immigrants. Although rhetorically “illegal immigration” is invoked most often by mainstream conservative groups, white nationalist

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<sup>73</sup> Alec Tyson and Shiva Maniam, “Behind Trump’s victory: Divisions by race, gender, education,” Pew Research Center, November 9, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/behind-trumps-victory-divisions-by-race-gender-education/>

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

racism targets Muslim immigrants, and Black and Jewish natives most. In a conference in 2002 David Duke and Sam Dickson – both self-avowed white nationalists,<sup>75</sup> redefined the goals of white nationalism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century: “Our race needs a homeland where we can be by ourselves,” unpopulated by Muslims, Jews, and those he called “Negroes.” He also mentions “others” but no other groups by name. To Dickson, liberals, specifically white liberals, are the primary opposition to this goal.<sup>76</sup> Today, white nationalism has co-opted liberal structured identity politics to further their goals.

“White supremacy and white privilege are two sides of the same coin. Both argue that white people are superior to other races. I don’t believe that – people should get paid for what they work for. You have a bunch of fuckin’ idiots supporting violent terrorism in white supremacy, and although I do feel like you have to understand their plight, they are sheep. It does not help the cause of white people to be stupid like that. But, these fuckin’ white liberals talking about white privilege with their rich friends, sipping on some damn lattés, saying I don’t work for the shit-all that I have. They preach white guilt, and tell me that I do not deserve the amount of money I make for making insulation for a fucking living, just because I’m a white guy.”<sup>77</sup>

The use of white privilege, while beneficial to certain modes of academic analysis, has contributed to a perceived homogenous white identity. Phoebe Maltz Bovy, author of *The Perils of Privilege* argues that many aspects of privilege theory solidify racial hierarchies rather than flatten them – encouraging racism rather than eliminating it.<sup>78</sup> As identity politics has become massively popularized for political revolution among minority groups who view their

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<sup>75</sup> Generally, Duke and Dickson have advocated for “nonviolent” means to political revolution.

<sup>76</sup> Leonard Zeskind, *Blood and Politics: the History of the White Nationalist Movement from the Margins to the Mainstream*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009, 540-541.

<sup>77</sup> Skald (pseud.), Interview with the author, December 2016.

<sup>78</sup> Phoebe Maltz Bovy, *The Perils of Privilege: Why Injustice Can’t be Solved by Accusing Others of Advantage*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2017.

intersectional identities in need of liberation, many whites have also felt a need of liberation, whether due to financial and economic issues, cultural changes, or other forms of deprivation. Leonard Zeskind, author of *Blood and Politics: The History of The White Nationalist Movement from the Margins to the Mainstream* shows how the 2002 political prophesies of educated attorney and white nationalist Sam Dickson are important to review. He believed that public polls were not a strong indicator of sincerely held beliefs. While surveys showed that whites support diversity, they were still willing to pay ludicrously high prices to avoid multiracial neighborhoods – assuming criminality among minorities. To Dickson, racial egalitarianism would only last as long as the economy, and when enough WWII veterans died so that society would start to forget the rise of Hitler. Based on Zeskind’s own research, white nationalists would strengthen their use of the internet and utilize past white supremacist strategies to continue the struggle for a political, economic, and racial state for whites.<sup>79</sup>

Although Zeskind was certainly on the right track – at the time of publication of his book (2009) he underestimated the extent and willingness of white nationalists to soften their stance on certain sincerely held liberal topics like homosexuality and explicit racialism to have broader appeal. Nor did he count on white nationalism to become the grassroots movement it is today.

In 1997, Betty Dobratz, scholar of white separatist movements, claimed that while some white separatists were involved in the movement due to racist resentment, others were politically or economically disenfranchised. We will not reduce the amount of people in this movement by considering them “bad” and “extreme.” In fact, politically, if we would not

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<sup>79</sup> Leonard Zeskind, *Blood and Politics: the History of the White Nationalist Movement from the Margins to the Mainstream*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009, 539-542.

resolve issues of political, social, and economic inequality – even among whites, white separatists will gain progressively broader and more mainstream support.<sup>80</sup> The severe alienation and dehumanization of people that we have considered “extreme” has actually given them more power. In an article demonstratively titled “How America’s dying white supremacist movement is seizing on Donald Trump’s appeal,” Peter Holley and Sarah Larimer made the severe mistake of not only assuming that white supremacy was dying, but that the only ideology of racialized, anti-immigrant whites were supremacists. In their own research, they found that Stormfront – a white identity political website with followers ranging from supremacists, nationalists, the alt-right, and others – had to upgrade their servers in late 2015 to handle the new interest in white nationalism inspired from Donald Trump’s campaign.<sup>81</sup> Their disbelief in the power of white identity politics has encouraged the public to underestimate the white nationalist message – especially to working poor whites. The severe dehumanization of racists only serves the growth of racism.

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<sup>80</sup> Betty A. Dobratz and Stephanie L. Shanks-Meile, *“White Power, White Pride!” The White Separatist Movement in the United States*, Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2000, 293.

<sup>81</sup> Peter Holley and Sarah Larimer, “How America’s dying white supremacist movement is seizing on Donald Trump’s appeal,” *The Washington Post*, February 29, 2016.

## Epilogue

Johannes and Skald are more “normal” than I may represent them throughout this thesis. Johannes reads many books, not just books on Odinism, but novels – and has read Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or* in two different languages. He loves his son more than anything and reads him stories of Thor’s battles with the frost giants when there is a lightning storm – encouraging his son to feel empowered by the storm rather than fear it. Every time he visits his favorite bar he orders “three beef swords (kebabs) and an ocean of fries.” He flirts with the waitress and makes jokes – some racist, some not.

Skald, too loves his son – by chance both Johannes and Skald’s sons are around the age of two. He plays in Warhammer 40k tournaments. He is a hard worker, someone who appreciates science, and loves his extended family. He even supports his antiracist friends – but not without an argument.

They are everyday people looking for an identity in a multicultural, intersectional, identity-driven world. Skald and Johannes are parents, friends, brothers, and neighbors, trying to discern how to survive in a world that they feel is often against them for the race and gender they were born as.

When I began this research, I expected white nationalist Odinists to be intimidating and willing to justify violence against minorities. While Odinism and white nationalism view the ideal man as a masculine protector – a defender of children, they have often – but not always – adhered themselves to racist beliefs as a defensive measure for themselves. Embodiments of the white working man, of the Viking warrior, and of the nationalist patriot intersect in

interesting ways within the context of Odinism. With few exceptions, “the ethnographic turn” in religious studies has avoided humanizing those considered extreme in public and academic discourse, but ethnographies of Odinism can give insight to the human side of racism, of anger, and of superiority complexes that could give tools that help reduce hate crimes and open discrimination.

There are a few areas of research that are being severely understudied in Odinism, Heathenry, and Paganism broadly that I would like to pursue with further in the future. The way Heathens cultivate values in children is one research interest of mine. As Heathenry matures into a stable religious movement, more children are brought up in homes where stories of Odin and Thor are told. Heathen ideas are circulated through a wide array of cultural media – from TV shows and movies like *Vikings* and Marvel’s *Thor*, non-Heathen religious texts, novels like *American Gods*, self-publications, and ancient Norse texts. Sometimes – certainly not always – read alongside political ideologues, these texts circulate certain theological and ontological beliefs that potentially lead to dramatic practical changes in political or everyday goals for better or worse. The use of symbol and the belief in the “real” power of symbol – whether it be the swastika or a rune, both symbols are often used by Odinists – is also under-researched. There is a powerful undercurrent of Odinists trying to claim and reclaim these symbols either as white supremacist or as universal humanist symbols. There is also opportunity deeper research to be done on the influence of economics on the growth of Heathenry’s many faces. Women, also, have been ignored in studies of racialized and ethnic forms of Heathenry, in part due to the population skew.

Studying Odinism and white nationalism raises concerns over discourse regarding white privilege and supremacy. Without the nuance of class, left-leaning academics and activists may inadvertently contribute to the racial and gendered hierarchical structures that they seek to flatten. Suggesting white men are in a single, privileged category (in this example) often forces the least privileged of these to seek protection and affirmation of this identity – an identity imposed on them from the outside but with participation from within<sup>82</sup> – through the few political and religious organizations that are willing to clearly and publicly affirm their intersectional identities.

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<sup>82</sup> Sean McCloud, *Divine Hierarchies: Class in American Religion & Religious Studies*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007, 15.

## Afterword

In the months after completing this thesis, many events have occurred that have raised the public's consciousness of white supremacy, the alt-right, white nationalism, neo-Nazism, fascism, and all the left-leaning counter-movements associated with them. While this thesis would never be completed if I continued to attempt to analyze these major events and add them as they occurred, it seems important to reiterate one of the greatest dangers.

Unintentionally, those who stand against racism could promote a unified front of racists by continuing to approach racism with a single method. Call outs and hostility toward racism is important to fight ideologues, but an average person with some inclinations toward racism may need simple compassion. For decades, the racist right has not been able to unify, as the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia should make clear. My own fear after completing this research is that those against racism could be contributing to a larger, more unified group of racists by forcing them to choose between two sides that they dislike. Most people will choose what they feel protects them. In Scott Atran's study of the appeal of Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and Hamas, he finds that the American discourse on Islam has forced many to choose between their religious community, and a foreign power that threatens their community.<sup>83</sup> The choice is obvious when they feel in danger. Like in response to terrorism by Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and the Taliban, Americans must make decisions in their discourse that will influence the way white, working-class men affiliate themselves.

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<sup>83</sup> Scott Atran, *Talking to the Enemy: Faith, Brotherhood, and the (Un)Making of Terrorists*, New York: Ecco (HarperCollins Publishers), 450-454.

## Glossary

**Aesir** – One of the three main tribes in Norse literature. They are the most famous deities, and tend to be the main characters of most stories associated with the Norse, like Thor, Odin, and Frigg. They are usually associated with wealth, power, and war.

**Ásatrú** – Literally “true to the Aesir” in Old Norse. Often a synonym for Norse/Germanic Heathenry (as opposed to Slavic or other ethnic Heathenries).

**Ethnicity** – A cultural group centered around a geographic area. While sometimes code for racial group, ethnicity and ethnic will generally focus on cultural norms in the context of this thesis unless otherwise noted.

**Heathenry (sometimes Heathenism)** – A collection of religious movements related to Paganism. Heathenry is usually defined as an ethnically specific i.e. “Norse” or “Germanic.” In most cases, Heathenry is related to the Viking-age, and attempts to reconstruct tribal beliefs. Someone who follows Heathenry is called a Heathen.

**Jötnar (sometimes Jötun)** – One of the three main tribes in Norse literature. Technically frost giants, but are often the direct rivals of the Aesir. Loki is the most famous from this tribe.

**Odinism** – In the American context, Odinism is a form of Heathenry that focuses on whiteness and usually prefers Odin as a white male role model. Odinism is often white supremacist, but takes different forms within white pride movements. Odinism is the popular term for Heathenry (including non-racist Heathenry) in Europe, which complicates the community’s relationship with racism in the United States.

**Vanir** – One of the three main tribes in Norse literature. Their deities tend to be associated with agriculture, fertility, nature, and peasant work. The most famous from this tribe are Frey and Freya, because they eventually joined the Aesir.

**White Nationalism** – The belief that “white culture” should be the dominant culture in the nation one lives. Some suggest that white people as a racial group need a nation-state for protection.

**White Supremacy** – An ideology that believes in the superiority of white people on the basis of blood. While similar to white nationalism, white supremacists do not believe that whites and non-whites can co-exist.

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