Paganism: Promising Promises and Resentful Results

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Paganism is a worldwide phenomenon, though rarely aware of itself as such. That is, paganism is sometimes self-aware: it sometimes labels itself *as* paganism. It is also often implicit, however, an organising logic behind an ostensibly diverse series of practices, beliefs, and attitudes. In its most self-conscious, explicit form, contemporary paganism claims firstness for itself—as the Ur-religion, a variety of indigeneity, and therefore, a generative centre of authentic culture and personal experience. Contemporary paganism's PR says that paganism is a manifestation of the sacred in its pristine, prelapsarian state, which is to say, of culture and personhood, before these were sundered from nature. The identity of the supposed sunderers vary: they include: (1) individual thinkers, like Descartes, who becomes the very evil demon he strove to exorcise; (2) vaguely threatening ideologies, such as "the Cartesian-Newtonian worldview" (Capra 73); and (3) quasi-historical periods, like "the Dark Ages," during which humanity buried its best instincts beneath the rubble of already-rotting European superstition and prejudice. Paganists see such influences as degenerative, in that they engender pernicious varieties of dualism, perhaps even dualism itself. In the pagan salvation narrative, paganism is capable of eschewing both kings and (domesticated) horses in order to put Humpty Dumpty (or Gaia) back together again.

In its most unabashed, religious articulation, paganism is organised around an anti- or emphatically non-Christian centre. There is a standard deconstructive move obviously available at this point: our supposed origin, paganism, is subject to a supplementary logic, whereby an ostensibly self-sufficient idea (paganism) is found to rest on what it considers a mere derivation or parasite, Christianity (See Derrida 17-59). Even the name, "paganism,"

gives us an obvious clue. "Pagan" is a Christian term. The very idea of it requires a refuted Christian centre-point: understanding how this is so, as well as the complex ways in which it disavows its Christocentric nature, is the primary task of this essay. The pagan's acceptance of a Christian self-appellation so that he may reject Christianity threatens him with performative incoherence.(1) Yet there is much for us to explore in the appeal, the structure, and the generative capacity of that incoherence. Paganism is a highly generative cultural field, and there are dangers in simply identifying and dismissing it. Summoning—albeit not citing—Girard, John Milbank has argued that there are reasons for concern with this phenomenon. For him, modern pagan patterns of behaviour have resulted from a reification of primitive ritual in the confused modern culture of the West. For him, these things constitute an ongoing danger:

Ritual violence, sacrificial violence, and violent initiation must *already* constitute to a degree a realm of theatre, and the continuous re-invocation of primitive ritual by theatrical modernity should therefore cease to surprise us—a modern "society of the spectacle" retreats from the pure liturgy of monotheism to a pagan theatricality. And like paganism, it invests its hopes in a controllable economy of violence where this much and no more blood was once shed to appease the gods, now this much and no more simulated violence, or rather as much simulated violence as you like, will appease our "aggressive urges." (*Being Reconciled* 33)This is the elusive end-point of an inquiry like ours: Milbank here contends that as modern society shakes off Christianity, it passes to a state different from, but standing in a new relation to, a new actual paganism. This new paganism shimmers in a modern city of Babel: peripheral at times, evanescent, occasionally dangerous. If we do not share Milbank's fears (test cricket well fits his above description, but few have decried the pagan bloodlust of this sport) we do recognise a need for inquiry, and for interrogation of supposedly apolitical and harmless practices.

There is a need for a limited cultural empiricism which looks at the claims of paganism. Such an empiricism would let us frame the flotsam of discarded, fragmentary and borrowed pieces of culture or faith: mystical miscellany, Shamanism, tantric healing, psychedelic tourism, Hindu face painting, Taoist diets, Indigenous American drumming, and Egyptian belly-dancing. A vast selection of the rites of man or womanhood all jostle for position in a welter of intensity, desire, and the frenzy of market exchange. An Australian Aboriginal friend, drawing attention to this discombobulated syncretism, remarked: "you whitefellas don't know what the f*** you're doing—but it's pretty funny to watch." In this essay, we seek to make sense of some of these things and to understand how they function and offer value to some people today.

We situate our inquiry in the context of work by Eric Gans, and in particular his essay on body piercing ("The Body Sacrificial"). Then we provide a non-encyclopaedic overview of paganism's principal tendencies. We then address the relationship of paganism to the Judaeo-Christian pattern of autocritique, and propose a view of paganism as a variety of

autocritique and cultural counter-practice. This is best done within the context of Girard's work on the dismantling of the violent sacred, principally *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (165-306). This, in turn, leads us to the issue of late twentieth century anthropology and its own searing self-critique. From here, we develop our major claim that it is less the religious practices that reveal the nature of paganism than it is the relations posited both to paganism's array of objects, and to Christianity itself (which make sense of it). To stage this claim, we offer a novel comparative analysis of participant relations to objects in paganism on the one hand, and in the field of kitsch on the other. By so doing, we hope to contribute something both to the analysis of late modern culture in general and to the understanding of the nature of paganism specifically.

Converging Credulities

We know that pagans stake an originary claim. Less well known is the fact that non-pagans are happy to cite pagans where the latter critique Christianity. On Easter of 2013, the Richard Dawkins "Foundation for Reason & Science" circulated the following image, which appeared on Facebook pages all over the cyber-sphere:

There are no overt requirements (such as, say, being a diligent student of comparative religion) to see where this falls apart. What we witness here is less homology than homonymy, though even that is stretched. Unless inebriated, nobody pronounced "Ishtar" as "Easter"—or at least not until this poster was circulated. Even the etymologies diverge at the source: one is Assyrian/Babylonian and the other Anglo-Saxon. Beyond the linguistic and ethnological absurdities, we witness an intended moral lesson. Here the Christian is supposed to be stunned and scandalised by the revelation that the resurrection is somehow *unrelated to rabbits* (we can imagine forthcoming revelations: perhaps the saviour's birth is only tangentially related to reindeer). In these and other such earnest atheist evangelist texts, the Vatican is construed as antagonist, as hawker *par excellence* of religious credulity (among other things). The rhetorical mode of the claim is peculiar, of more interest than the dubious assertion itself. In terms of our inquiry, it is part of what appears to be a sustained attempt to strip away from Christianity *any* capacity for origination: it is always, in this view, the culturally sickly version of an always prior pagan vim. If we in our turn do treat paganism as a derivative and secondary cultural formation, this is not to deny it the capacity for cultural innovation in its sphere, and perhaps, more widely; it is simply to note that its modern forms, both in name and in nature, occur after—or rather, within—Christian history.[(2)](#)

Methods of Cultural Analysis: Piercing and Paganism

In 2000, Gans made use of the then-emergent World Wide Web to explore the issue of piercing. He opened his essay with this comment:

No one who seeks to understand the underlying unity of all human culture can fail to be struck by the revival of primitive sacrificial practices in our own era. Body piercing is perhaps the most striking of these revivals. From its punk beginnings in the 1970s, piercing has become ubiquitous, together with a family of associated practices of "body modification" ranging from tattooing to castration and other "nullifications" carried out deep in the underground of our culture. (159)To this we would add that a revival does not bring anything like primitive, sacrificial paganism back to life—rather, it is an iteration that creates something new, something decidedly modern, and un-self-aware in its modernity. Paganism is always an alteration/repetition. (If Hegel were present and looked at this phenomenon, he'd likely shout "Aufhebung!"—paganism is both a perpetuation of itself *and* its own negation.)

Gans's suggestion that these fields are hidden in the underground of contemporary culture applies only to its lack of self-awareness. To take a metaphors of London's train system, of underground and overground trains, it might be better to call both piercing and paganism decidedly *over*ground systems: they are in plain view, but little understood; many travel in them, but few know the mechanism.(3)

Gans identifies several features that are relevant also to our own inquiry. To Gans, body modification, 1) is linked to sacrificial rite, 2) negates, 3) revives, and 4) has a dimension which is private. Later, citing Bourdieu and Baudrillard, he adds another characteristic, explaining that behind the pagan impulse is a longing for a society in which production and consumption are reunited (176). Gans structures his inquiry by exploring piercing in terms of its *aesthetic* aspect, its *erotic* aspect, and its *political* aspect.(4) He sees a number of virtues in body piercing and its cultures. He remarks that

Arts of body modification add real information to the world. These anarchically mimetic activities of self-creation are what make the market system function, not just in the obvious sense, by providing opportunities for purveyors of piercing operations and jewelry, but in the deeper one of enriching the unpredictable dialogue among members of society. (174)Like piercing, the practices of paganism offer us real and new anthropologically significant information about "post-Christian" belief systems.

Piercing is often part of the pagan field as well, but paganism raises a variety of issues that go beyond piercing or tattooing. Paganism is replete with half-articulated or at times painfully *over*-articulated beliefs about the nature of the world, and for this reason, we find a somewhat richer cultural field to analyse. These allow an extension of Gans's analysis. Like him, we can use the resources of the internet, as well as of international festivals and gatherings. We are certainly not the first to venture an analysis of this field. There is a searching scholarship we will cite when relevant on paganism from a number of cultural critics. Similarly, there is useful commentary on related fields such as New Age and Gothic practices and what might be called, in deference to the Birmingham School of sociology,

"everyday medievalism." Unfortunately in the place where the richest source of analysis ought to be—Cultural studies—we find preciously little of value. What Cultural studies typically finds in paganism is what it finds everywhere: refutations of Adorno and productive/consumptive "resistance" to hegemonies. In other words, like Narcissus, in the clear waters of paganism, cultural studies sees itself once again.[(5)](#)

What is Paganism?

The dictionary tells us paganism is "any of various religions other than Christianity or Judaism or Islamism." This sounds like a negation, and so it is: most of the time, though, the negation is specifically Christian. In its Latin origins, the descriptor "pagan" referred simply to village folk from the country, who practised folk religion "naïvely" in opposition to the new sophistication of Christianity. That would make pagans in our time advocates of bumpkinism, if not bumpkinists themselves. But this usage has, of course, aged: at least since *Inherit the Wind* (1960 Stanley Kramer film), it is now the *Christian* who is considered the arch-bumpkin.

In our time, as Paganism.com tells us, paganism includes all sorts of things, and indeed, "No offense intended if we left your particular path out" (Paganism.com). Yet one path *is* most decidedly out. In his *Pensées*, Pascal wrote, "Je vois plusieurs religions contraires, et partant toutes fausses, excepté une [I see several contrary religions, and consequently all false, except one]" (202); for pagans, it seems, the opposite injunction holds true: "Having experienced the *e pluribus unum* of Christianity, I look out to see a wealth of religions and other odds and ends before me, and leave aside therefore the one most proximate to me, and cleave instead to all these others in its place."

Now it is certainly true that many societies called "pagan" in the past have been unaware, or were relatively unaffected, by the appellation. These societies, however, were only pagan in the sense that Christian societies labelled them as such. About them, we have little or nothing to say, because the worlds they construed lie outside the terms of modernity. The pagans we explore are in a defined sense 1) modern, and 2) Christian, and can only be understood once these two characteristics are understood, counter-intuitive as this claim may initially sound. They comprise a heterogeneous series of social groupings which, even from the outset of modernity, have sought various horizonal breaches—of rationality, of capitalism, of hegemonic social order—and have done so in the name of a deliberately non-Christian spirituality.

Paganism and Romanticism

There are rich theoretical links between paganism and Romanticism. In the marketplace of paganisms, there are many to choose from. One listing of pagan festivals declares that it is a site "Only for Pagan festivals! All fields listed here must be Pagan/Wiccan/Asatru in nature;

not herbal workshops, not psychic fairs, not Renaissance faires, not pirates fests, not camping parties, etc." (faeriefaith.net). For some the first of May might be known as May Day, but to the pagan community it is Beltane, "The Celtic May Day. It begins at moonrise on May Day Eve" (www.thewhitegoddess.com). While some host it offering music and showers and toilet amenities, others offer a richer menu, including "a traditional Walpurgasnacht [sic], sensual May Games (for couples)" as part of a "fundraiser to protect . . . this sanctuary" (annwfnceremonies.weebly.com).

Around the world, bewildering varieties of summer and winter solstice gatherings take place to connect the human tribe with its genesis. Despite the centrality of this event to many varieties of paganism, we find a grab-bag of practices and promises. The Pagan Spirit Gathering in Earlville Illinois, to take but one instance, has run since 1981, and now hosts

Summer solstice rites, a Magical gift circle, a candlelight labyrinth of 1000 candles, Drum circles, Sweatlodge ceremonies, Rites of Passage, plus Women's and Men's rituals. . . . Workshops are given daily on a wide range of Pagan topics. Previous subjects have included Wiccan ways, Goddess spirituality, Celtic Studies, Creative arts, Healing, Shamanism, Chanting, Dancing, Drumming techniques, and various network meetings. (faeriefaith.net).In their effort to describe what they do, the main site for this event explains that it offers:

to create community, celebrate summer solstice, and commune with Nature in a sacred environment. Sponsored by Circle Sanctuary, PSG is open to a long-time practitioners as well as newcomers of a wide range of Nature religion traditions, including Wiccan, Contemporary Pagan, Druidic, Heathen, Celtic, Baltic, Greco-Roman, Isian, Shamanic, Hermetic, Animistic, Egyptian, Native American, Afro-Caribbean, Taoist, Pantheistic, Ecofeminist, and Nature mystic.It is open to almost anyone—anyone, except a Christian believer, or perhaps, an avowed atheist who thrives in the modern world.

Without commenting on the specifics of any of the actual practices or faiths, we can note a straightforwardly structuralist table of binarised traits:

Pagan—affirmed negation	Christian—implied
Gemeinschaft	Gesellschaft
Community music ("Volk")	Passive observer
"ethnic"	"White, unmarked"
Natural	Artificial
Warm	Cold

Tantric and other sex-delay	Instrumental sex, basic
Divine or Mother Feminism	Bureaucratic
Mystical/intuitive	(Ir)rationalist/detached

Not all these traits are observable in every variety of paganism. This does not stop it from having cultural force. We have suggested elsewhere that Romanticism is a "field" in that it is something that despite having diffuse causes itself, nevertheless exerts a powerful magnetic force of its own. Paganism is not even as logically ordered in its practices (let alone its "beliefs") but it too exerts a powerful pull of its own.

The Autocritque

A group of Westerners, academics perhaps, stands in a circle listening to an indigenous ceremony. They cannot understand the words, and perhaps they do not need to. At the end of it, as they stand in silence, they nod quietly, even reverentially, and then carry on as if nothing happened. This is a quintessentially modern, even postmodern, scene. Yet its self-account is entirely traditional—and its premises are an inherently Romantic, if not always sentimental, rendering of an imaginary past.

As we pointed out in our earlier analysis (Fleming and O'Carroll, "Understanding Anti-Americanism") of the American tendency to self-condemnation, cynical motives ascribed by Western commentators to any and all Western practices did not stop the West from actual oppressive behaviours. In that respect, we might accept a fragment of what Deleuze and Guattari colourfully described as the deliberate chaos of capitalism, such that as they said, "The more it breaks down . . . the better it works" (151)—except it is not deliberate. Paganism appears to be a part of the West that seeks to escape its place in Christendom—but in its negations only reinforces its part in a wider ensemble. Still, paganism is potentially a major form of autocritique—even if it only rarely is able to understand itself as such. It works from within Western longings and Christian frameworks to putatively reject both. In its deepest desires, it is a redemptive, healing impulse, a desire to find footing for artifice, a genuine attempt to substitute a kind of community in place of selfish individualism, and perhaps to atone for damage done in the most Christian and Western way possible.

Now, non-Christian pagans were nothing like any of the things we are seeking to describe. Girard's work on the processes of mimesis and of primitive sacrifice puts paid to any idea of modern paganism being anything like that which it imagines itself as being (Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 170-181, *Evolution and Conversion*, 234-267, "Generative Scapegoating," 73-148). If these societies worked well, "working" involved stabilisation of conflict through brutal and, to our eye at least, arbitrary murder (including in some

societies, of children, such as twins). By modern standards, the process of sacrifice is brutal, unacceptably so. But the Westerners would wish to save this culture from extinction as if it were some species of exotic plant rather than a living and contemporary milieu: to the contrary of its original logic, insisting on certain humane modifications, the sacrifice can go ahead, but loses thereby the significance it originally held. Moreover, by being subjected to Western values, the culture also loses its world-conferring capacity, which is now subordinated to those same Western values. This brings us to the discipline that studies other cultures, the one that has, perhaps more than any other, been racked by self-doubt of a most autocritical variety. Anthropology may have had the capacity to teach these terrible truths had it also had the capacity to sketch historical contexts to its endless fieldwork forays around the world. Instead, though, it has offered a variety of cultural multiplicity that led many to think of Western Christendom as the most deliberately brutal of oppressors. We need to understand anthropology especially when we look in ways *themselves anthropological* at pagan practices, not just to understand the practices, but also, to orient the analysis of participant and observer relations to those practices. For even those who mock them are affected by them.

Anthropology and White Guilt

In the last three decades of the twentieth century, the discipline of anthropology was convulsed by a ferocious series of autocritiques. Perhaps the most poignant of these was the critical self-reflection conducted by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his *Tristes tropiques*. Derrida examines Lévi-Strauss's "writing lesson" in full recognition that Lévi-Strauss is seeking to be self-critical, is seeking to avoid further damage, as he sees it, to the Nambikwara. Commenting on the naivety of Lévi-Strauss's approach to writing, and to his implicit acceptance of the idea that Western style writing itself is exigently evil, Derrida remarks scathingly that the Nambikwara "do not make use of what *we* commonly call writing" (110), even if all of the features that Lévi-Strauss attributes solely to writing were to be found in the tribe's speech.

In accepting Derrida's point that a Western writing script was hardly going to do the damage Lévi-Strauss ascribed to it and that the Nambikwara already had "writing" and hierarchies of subordination of their own, it is still the case that anthropologists were the ones whose disciplinary orientation towards a pristine original culture made them most susceptible to a deep version of the autocritique. For anthropology's task had been to record the ways of other peoples and cultures, often from the point of view of preserving their record, but also, from the point of view of understanding the world of humanity in general.

In the later 1980s, a movement to make anthropology more accountable took an even firmer hold, and a debate broke out between the new reflexive anthropologists and the old school anthropologists like Marshall Sahlins who saw the new upstarts as mere armchair observers with nothing useful to say. Those in the reflexive school took their departure from a

beautifully written introduction by James Clifford to the book *Writing Cultures: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography.* In it, Clifford attacked the impartiality of anthropology by taking on one of its masters, Bronislaw Malinowski, and examining his personal diaries against his scientific anthropology. "Cultures," Clifford wrote, "are not scientific "objects" . . . [culture] and our view of it are produced historically, and are actively contested" (18). As a result, our truths are always "partial" (as he puts it in his title ["Partial Truths"] with both senses intended).

As accurate as the picture may be, as devastative as the literal deconstruction of the master in his own words may seem, this is but another case of the autocritique at work. Its motivation—to care for others, to be responsible indeed for others—is profoundly well-placed, and is to be commended, as indeed is Lévi-Strauss's in his own work. Irrespective of the accuracy or otherwise of their scholarship, what gathers all these writings is an autocritical sense of guilt, of a sense of wrongs having been done that need correcting. This, it bears saying, is one of the finest aspects of Western Judaeo-Christian thought, but it also bears saying that there is nothing exceptionally bad about Western behaviours vis-à-vis the conquering behaviours of any other cultures in history. To the contrary, these autocritical impulses are what are remarkable both in their effect, and in their sustained and ongoing nature. Moreover, if we take the Western self-account of its history as an inventory of cultural dead-ends, military brutalities, and political betrayals, we are in danger of recognising the validity of its lists of empirical claims, but missing the epistemological stance that is the condition of possibility for such history to be written.

If anthropology in the traditional sense affords insights into its own practices via its own critically reflexive practitioners on the one hand, as well as into the structure of the time and space terms of the Western point of view, it is only Generative Anthropology that seems to provide the scope for grasping the peculiarity of the Western autocritique itself. This can now be expressed as follows: Paganism provides a profound series of scenes for Generative Anthropology to explore. Paganism makes crucial and contradictory claims about the West, namely 1) the West is utterly exceptional, and 2) it is also utterly derivative. The first aspect concerns the West's moral culpability and singularity of its bloodlust, corruption, and debasement; the second aspect views its cultural forms (even its science) as inherently parasitic, with even its chief attainments being plagiarised from non-Western sources. This brings us to the view of pagans as both before and beyond the political order.

The Politics of Paganism

In taking up the politics of paganism, we encounter complexities. We note that while Gans saw few critical-political issues in the case of piercing, we must here express a rather darker tone. Many before us have looked at the genesis of this thought in extremist politics. The idea that paganism has a politics would seem strange to many of its practitioners who are nowadays, if anything, apolitical—or at least whose politics is so nominal and utopian it

amounts to being apolitical. The paradoxes here are not simply resolved, and perhaps are not resolvable.

Since 1945, many have wondered at how a civilised, Christian society like Germany could perpetrate the horrors of Auschwitz. Many who perpetrated it were indeed practising Christians, acting as Hannah Arendt argued, on orders (and by delegation, giving orders) via a logic of the banality of evil. Yet at the centre of the monstrous enterprise, once we get past the mechanics of war and gas chamber, we find a confused picture that includes alongside orthodox Christianity a strongly thematised paganist anti-Christianity. Much of Hitler's regime was overtly and deliberately neo-pagan in its orientation—and to that extent it represents to date the only "successful" attempt at putting neo-paganism into practice on a large scale. A Christian negation of Christianity is, to put it mildly, a complex social text—and the work of reading it is hard.

It is easy to obscure this political history in a world of Druidic festivals and Western shamanism. But the words of the following camp song are suggestive of a need to be cautious of the paganist self-account, and indeed of its anti-Christian history:

We are the happy little Hitler Youth;
We have no need of Christian virtue;
For Adolf Hitler is our intercessor
And our redeemer.
No priest, no evil one
Can keep us
From feeling like Hitler's children.
Not Christ do we follow, but Horst Wessel!
Away with incense and holy water pots.
Singing we follow Hitler's banners;
Only then are we worthy of our ancestors.
I am no Christian and no Catholic.
Baldur von Schirach, take me along."

> Hitler Youth Camp Song (qtd. in Helmreich, p. 267)

The Hitler Youth's camp song is at once a philosophical cry and a pedagogic song for a renewed golden age of paganism. The man named in the song, Horst Wessel, himself composed the Nazi party anthem. Von Schirach, the composer of *this* song, was the Reich Youth Leader.

Nineteenth century pagan-politics also touched philosophy. Much work has been done on the political line joining the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche (*Human All-Too-Human*, the first

link in a chain of spectacular philosophical works that included the *Will to Power* edited and shaped politically by his sister, Elizabeth) and Adolf Hitler. It is not the line drawn by pop commentators on philosophers that interests us here. In nearly all respects, the thought, integrity, and dignity of the great nineteenth century philosopher eclipsed those of the resentful, manipulative, shallow, and sentimental dictator as well as many of the more recent commentators on him. But on one point Hitler and Nietzsche were united: both were vehemently and programmatically paganist; their modernism entailed a particular kind of anti-Christianity, and both endorsed a distinctive variety of pagan festivity.

And Hitler established a unique species of political rally and festivity. "Who was greater, Christ or Hitler?" wondered one nameless orator at a Hitler rally. It's an odd question, given Hitler's attempt to move beyond the Christian paradigm. But therein lies the point:

> Christ had at the time of his death twelve apostles, who, however, did not even remain true to him. Hitler, however, today has a folk of 70 million behind him. We cannot tolerate that another organization is established alongside of us that has a different spirit than ours. We must crush it. National Socialism in all earnestness says: I am the Lord thy God, thou shalt have no other gods before me. . . . Then ours is the kingdom and the power; for we have a strong Wehrmacht, and the glory—for we are again a respected nation, and may God will, in eternity. Heil Hitler!"
>
> Speech given at a German student rally (qtd. in Helmreich, *The German Churches Under Hitler*, p. 201)

All this is *not* just a matter of pagan "philosophy," a matter of mere words overlaying some other kinds of practices. The moral compass of modernity has material dimensions, and consequences. The Nazi attempt to return to pre-Judaic religiosity was physically enacted in attempts to revivify the myths and rituals of the Germanic tribes. Göring recognised the ancient sacred sites and actively pushed re-enacting events like the winter solstice. The edition of the German Farmer's Almanac from 1935 (published by the Ministry of Agriculture) replaced Christian holidays with celebration days for Thor and Wotan). These dates and days are themselves practices; but the ideas are too: when a Nazi sympathiser such as Jung suggested that Nazism *was* the revival of Wotan, we need to examine what this means not just as a textual exercise, but as part of the entire edifice of modernity.

At stake in such texts, we find certain patterns. To start with, there is the now familiar opposition of the pagan and the Christian (as in Nietzsche and Hitler, of course). Judaism and Christianity are viewed by paganists as being "anti-nature" and, as such, as undermining "organic" social order, which is predicated on hierarchy. If paganists today do not all subscribe to such an order, most do not question it. The compatibility of paganism

then, and perhaps now, with any political order is an aspect of the field that merits ongoing attention and care.[(6)](#)

On Kitsch, Cool, and Indigeneity

We turn now to pagan commodity-relations, and do so via a consideration of their participant-stance. We would like you, even as you read these Western words, to solemnly bear witness to pagan prayer.

> I call on you Brighid; in a time of need.
> I ask your assistance and blessing for one who is ailing
> Someone is ill, and she needs your healing light. (Wigington)

A radical need for healing pervades the pagan (and New Age) industry. The pagan's path is one towards connection, and healing. As one site puts it, "a laugh, a hug, even a pat on the back or soothing tone" can make a difference ("Healing"). In this prayer, Patti Wigington invites the reader to deploy a ritual even with the implied consent of a friend, to "ask the goddess (or god) of your tradition to watch over the ailing individual and assist them with healing" (Wigington). The ritual involves candles being lit, and the prayer being said after focusing on the person in question.

At stake is a scene of sorts, and to evoke it, we take it up in relation to kitsch. When we do so, we notice something remarkable: despite many obvious reasons for attraction, few intellectuals avow such attraction or membership. This is despite the fact it comports surprisingly well with what many intellectuals value. Few, however, apart perhaps from Lyotard in *Just Gaming* (pp. 9-41), claim explicit allegiance to it. We believe the reason for this reticence is more aesthetic than ethical or epistemological: what prevents humanities academics, even Cultural studies academics, from widely publicly avowing their pagan status is that they see it not so much as wrong but as *tasteless*. A group who would otherwise feel comfortable with the semiotic rehabilitation of indigenous and folk traditions, with attacks on Western decadence, association with the "counter-culture," with a dissociation from Judeo-Christian decay, and so on, cannot become pagans because it is far too *kitsch*. Paganism would be palatable if it were not so embarrassing.

We can sketch a comparison of the fields of kitsch and of paganism for what each says about the other. Each field requires a distinctive relationship of its participants to its fetish-objects—and how those who partake in it are viewed from outside. We begin with some ideas Gans has proposed on kitsch itself. For Gans, kitsch is less pop culture than middlebrow culture—that is, what we identify as what *someone else* mistakes for high culture. In our view, the peculiarity of kitsch is not so much its tastelessness—which is far more widespread—but that people, somehow mysteriously, aren't *offended* by it (Eric Gans,

"A Rembrandt in an Elevator" Chronicle XCII). In this purview, kitsch is failed high culture; it signals a certain kind of transcendence, although that signal will end up looking more like a flashing Sacred Heart of Jesus decal than the Sistine Chapel.(7) Kitsch promises the aesthetic distance of high culture and delivers mawkish sentiment.

For us, however, kitsch is not just a label of aesthetic designation (as the fact that the same aesthetic object can be cool suggests), but rather, it is primarily a designation of spectatorial distance. This is a kind of double scene, for it concerns not only the objects and those who are fixated on them, but also, the scenic quality of kitsch-observation itself. The sophisticate only looks at the object for a moment before then fixing his or her gaze on those embarrassing people who are looking at the object; "kitsch" refers to those who receive pleasure from such aesthetics more than the aesthetics itself. As such, people in the know reject not simply the kitsch object, but laugh or wince at those who get pleasure from it. Kitsch is also that object—after Adorno and Benjamin—that signifies the "cheapness" of the market, the rejection of the auratic and singular qualities of the art object.

Kitsch *per se* cannot be made cool, and so the modern humanities academic, a sort of Cool Hunter *in extremis*, cannot be seen with it. S/he will not get into the nightclub if kitsch is there, too. At least, not without spectatorial ironisation; kitsch can be transubstantiated, bread made body, by transforming it into *camp*: camp is kitsch viewed with inverted commas: the distance that the fan of kitsch-as-kitsch cannot attain. Jeff Koons, that *reductio ad absurdum* of pop art, has built a career out of making the garish *more* garish by making it bigger, while making our contemplation of it all the more cool by inserting that distance. Kitsch becomes anti-kitsch through a knowing wink delivered by someone, someone in the know to another in the same scene-observing-scene.

How does paganism relate to this? The difficulty is that paganism is a form of kitsch that cannot be made camp because its sacred objects resist desacralisation. A drag queen can hang a picture of Jesus ironically, but he or she cannot do the same with a dream catcher or an inukshuk. There are many cultural features that determine this asymmetry, but we'll mention only one here, the relation of camp—and paganism—to indigeneity. Modern paganism unfailingly defers to a kind of ethnic firstness, or indigeneity. This gives the pagan consumer two product lines to select from: the first allows for identification with an ethnic other (to play didgeridoo and then go on holiday to pay for sweating), the second allows for identification with a kind of white firstness, so we have contemporary druids, wiccans, Romuva-nians (Lithuania), Asatru-ians (Nordic), and assorted European practitioners of "cunning-craft" (like witchcraft).

What identification with indigeneity (or firstness) entails is a bypassing of the kinds of exemplary violence with which the modern West—and the pre-modern Christian West—is now associated. To be a pagan is to assert "Don't blame me—despite appearances, I'm not really white anyway. Deep down, I'm a rasta—and it's so much me that it forces itself out of

my body, popping from the top of my head, in the form of these dreadlocks." Alternatively, it is to assert "Ah yes, I am white—but my cultural allegiances are indigenous, like you; I represent that road not taken, the road of the peaceful druid."

The scenes of popular culture, kitsch, and paganism are thrown into sharp relief by the James Cameron film, *Avatar.* This film offered an astonishingly detailed and beautiful image of an imaginary off-world pristine indigenous lifeworld—which a brutal West, with its flying metal machines and missiles, then proceeds to destroy. A "good" Westerner fields suspicious natives to help overthrow the re-enacted invaders, and to right and rewrite a colonial history in a fantasy of "good" aliens and evil earthly colonisers. The essential peacefulness of the aliens is depicted in ways that would befit any paganist guilt-vision: the white hero is redeemed by betraying his own invasion force and siding with the victims of exploitation, and those he joins share with him an immanentist-essentialist faith system that allows him to rediscover his own cosmic place in the universe. What makes the scene sickeningly guilt-ridden rather than comically kitsch, however, is the attachment of the narrative to the real stories of colonisation and histories of peoples whose realities are charged with an ethical load that kitsch simply cannot bear—even if the lovely huge-eyed aliens and fairy lights would not be out of place in a plastic dolphin shop. The evocation of such harsh realities of course fails as anything other than under-thought entertainment because unlike Hollywood, intercultural realities are rather more complex than a redemption fantasy of this kind can suggest. (Further, the anti-colonialist impulse behind movies like *Avatar* is often revealing of an ever deeper kind of colonial impulse, wherein the white hero—who has seen the goodness of indigenous culture and is able to adopt it and internalise it so easily—is the one who ultimately saves that culture from destruction and suddenly assumes the position of leader! The white person, in other words, shows the indigenous person how to be indigenous.)

The Cameron-esque redemptive impulse is deeply problematic, of course. In some of their contortions—looking at the chivalric impulse of the modern intellectual to rescue an other and in so doing rescue him or herself (Fleming and O'Carroll, "Notes on Generative Anthropology")—the modern intellectual follows the same path as the pagan, although with more cool and far greater obliqueness and prolixity. Indigeneity cannot be made camp because of contemporary interdictions which prevent semiotic recoding; so now paganism is left as intellectually and politically appealing for a wide range of "sophisticated" people, at the same time as it cannot be explicitly endorsed by them because it is so aesthetically naïf.

Coda: Humanism and Plantism

We have offered an interlaced variety of commentary based directly on the work of Eric Gans and René Girard. At the most basic level, without Generative Anthropology, it would not be possible to frame paganism and kitsch scenically—in relation to mimetically conceived cultures of margins and centre; we'd not be able to offer a certain reading of

indigeneity in terms of romanticism. Girard's work, in its analysis of mimesis, was perhaps latently scenic, but Gans brought this element to light in a way that Girard himself never did.(8) More directly, Girard allows us to grasp the logic of the *Christianisme déplacé* of white, Western "paganism," and the sources of its moral critique. (See Fleming, *René Girard*, 147-9.) The fact that is possible to offer a Girardian analysis without repeatedly citing his name, and without a barrage of conceptual neologisms, suggests that this now is a field sufficiently well established such that it no longer needs—in this venue at least—ongoing explication and explanation.

Even so, there is value in pointing out that its subtlety can lead people not to see it at work at all. With psychoanalytic theories (for instance, and by contrast), the complexity in analysis invariably comes in the form of comprehending the theories themselves; after attending to Lacan's theory of the "symbolic" one scarcely has enough energy left to make a cup of tea, let alone analyse social relations. Another tradition, that of anti-psychiatry, as evinced by Félix Guattari, is wonderfully, indeed comically, symptomatic of the labours involved:

We can clearly see that there is no bi-univocal correspondence between linear signifying links or archi-writing, depending on the author, and this multireferential, multi-dimensional machinic catalysis. The symmetry of scale, the transversality, the pathic non-discursive character of their expansion: all these dimensions remove us from the logic of the excluded middle and reinforce us in our dismissal of the ontological binarism we criticised previously. (Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, p. 50)"We can clearly see…" *Clearly!* (And we note here Guattari's deliciously ironic "dismissal" of "binarism." He is obviously the kind of non-binary thinker who thinks it advisable to opt for non-binarism over binarism. Perhaps all Cretans are binarists.)

With both Girard and Gans, the parsimony of theoretical modelling means that the complexity of analysis must come in through the level of historical and philosophical nuance involved in *actually looking at the world*. The extraordinary weight and/or baroque beauty of many theoretical models in the humanities means that one can just drop them anywhere and the analysis will be done for you, whether or not it illuminates anything other than the theory itself.

It is regularly lamented that the humanities are in some state of "crisis" and that funding is being pulled away at an alarming rate. But what has been most tragic about this is that the people often calling loudest about this crisis have themselves forged whole careers on undermining the humanities. One of Minnesota University Press's more recent book series is called "Posthumanities." The Posthumanities is the home of posthumanism. And "posthumanism"—in the words of one of its most well-known exponents—removes "the human and Homo sapiens from any particularly privileged position in relation to matters of meaning, information, and cognition" (Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* xii). What a

removal—not only the human, but *Homo Sapiens* too! The word "privileged" here is signal, in the sense that it captures both an epistemological and an ethical position—the posthumanist is not just keen to see differently, but—like a good parent—wants to revoke certain "privileges." Shorn of its ethical pose, posthumanism is in many ways still the playing out of one of the main currents of radical structuralism, perhaps best sampled in the high drama denouement of Michel Foucault's *Les Mots et les choses*:

L'homme est une invention dont l'archéologie de notre pensée montre aisément la date récente. Et peut-être la fin prochaine. Si ces dispositions venaient à disparaître comme elles sont apparues . . . alors on peut bien parier que l'homme s'effacerait, comme à la limite de la mer un visage de sable. [That man is an invention of recent date is something that the archeology of our thought easily shows. And it may be nearing its end. If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared . . . then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn on the sand at the edge of the sea'] 398.But where shall we stop? No sooner had the most recent spate of posthumanist thought emerged that it appeared that *this* face, too—and perhaps now faces-in-general—may also become a victim of tides. The newest form of posthumanism might be called postposthumanism. It *might*—but it's not; it's usually called "Plant Studies." Titles in the Minnesota UP series mentioned above include: *Plants Have So Much to Teach Us, All We Have to do is Ask*; *Inanimation: Theories of Inorganic Life*; and *Insect Media*. Where once talk of "posthumanism" implied addressing non-human animal life, posthumanism itself has been criticised for privileging animal life over vegetation. It is not a one-off: Brill's series "Critical Plant Studies" hopes to fill a perceived gap in philosophy.(9) It was inaugurated by Michael Marder's *Plant Life*, which explored "the potential of vegetation to resist the logic of totalization and to exceed the narrow confines of instrumentality" (surprise, surprise!). As with such revolutionary work, the indications so far are that horticulturalists, botanists and hobby-gardeners don't care even slightly. Not that this stops the enthusiasts. Witness the program for a session at a recent conference:

Still, what *is* good about Plant Studies and Thing Studies (when Thing Studies eventually becomes a thing in itself) is that they actually foreground a kind of anthropology, indeed one which they themselves are forced to thematise. And where the ostensible focus of Plant Studies is ontological, its real impetus is ethical (which is also true of GA). In this universe, animals and plants are to be *welcomed back*, as if reality were some grand cosmic party to which some guests (plants and animals) were not invited and that we should invite them forthwith. But although anthropological and ethical themes are foregrounded in these kinds of work, their bases are rarely justified. It is assumed that welcoming animals back into the fold will ensure that they get a better go of things. But there's no such guarantee. The Australian-South African writer, J. M. Coetzee, wrote in *The Sydney Morning Herald* that:

The campaign of human beings for animal rights is curious in one respect: the creatures on

whose behalf human beings are acting are unaware of what their benefactors are up to and, if they succeed, are unlikely to thank them. There is even a sense in which animals do not know what is wrong—they do certainly not know what is wrong in the same way that humans do. Thus, however close the well-meaning benefactor may feel to animals, the animal rights campaign remains a human project from beginning to end. ("Exposing the Beast")Coetzee's point is as obvious as it is rarely stated. He points to a cultural pattern, a social pattern, and of course, an anthropology which deserves explication. With the work of Girard and Gans, we could hardly be in better hands.

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Notes

1. Just as those who invoke "secularism" to vanquish Christian thought don't realise that they are smuggling in theology, paganism packs its very own Trojan Horse. (back)

2. Yet, to concede something to the implicit historiography of paganism—as well as to thinkers such as Michel Serres—truly originary moments of human culture are few. The scene of human cultural genesis concerns the movement from animal to human, something that occurred once, or perhaps many times, when a group of proto-humans were gathered around an appetitively attractive object with no one of the member of the group able to assert immediate dominance. As all hands reached out, a common moment of realisation occurred when by grunt or sign, the attempt to seize it was replaced by a deferral of violence, an aborted gesture of appropriation which is coeval with and equivalent to the first sign. (back)

3. To be sure, piercings are often partially concealed, as in the tongue which can be kept behind the doors of the mouth, or the navel, or the genitals or other parts of the body which are hidden behind clothes. (back)

4. These are useful headings, though the erotic aspect in our view is better understood in terms of corporeality, especially Romantic desires for bodily agonistics and physical experience ranging from breathing techniques to physical rituals. (back)

5. One example here is Sabina Magliocco's *Witching Culture*: *Folklore and Neopaganism in America*, a study of Wiccan and pagan communities in the US, in which she sees—all too predictably —"resistance culture" that engages in "textual poaching" (Magliocco 23-56). All acts of this culture she sees are, almost by definition, stupefyingly fantastic (n.b., Magliocco herself is a pagan). (back)

6. At its most grim it could be contended that paganism takes its deepest sense from the attempt to move beyond Christianity. In this regard, the task becomes simply a matter of overcoming oneself by exterminating others. As Steiner puts it, "By killing the Jews, Western culture would eradicate those who had "invented" God. . . . The holocaust is a

reflex, the more complete for being long-inhibited, of natural sensory consciousness, of instinctual polytheistic and animist needs. (back)

7. Indeed the aesthetic impoverishment of religion is a topic we can't consider, but we need at some point to think how we went from Dante and Bach to stickers that say "Honk if you love Jesus!" and bad music on acoustic guitars. (back)

8. "The scenic" is implicit in Gans's work from *The Origin of Language* on, but what this approach amounts to—especially in the context of contemporary philosophy—is taken up in *The Scenic Imagination*. (back)

9. Of course, on the horizon now are those for whom a focus on biotic life is itself missing the point, and we should instead be doing "alien phenomenology", to explore "what it's like to be a thing." (Here we'd want to point out that the objectification of aliens is something we find ethically distasteful, even if they themselves engage in cruel probing practices.) Ian Bogost, who is both a professor of literature, media and communication and the programmer of hit games such as "Fatworld" and "Cruel 2 B Kind," wants us to consider how things like *chilies* and *cotton* (his examples) "interact with, perceive, and experience one another." We await the emergence of funding for something called *Thing Studies*. (back)