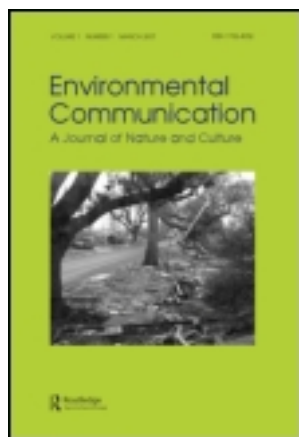


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Magick as an Alternative Symbolic: Enacting Transhuman Dialogs

Julie Kalil Schutten & Richard A. Rogers

This essay examines Neo-Pagan practices of magick and, via Rogers's criteria for a transhuman theory of communication, argues that these practices enact a transhuman dialog that has potential to enhance environmentally sustainable ways of living. Magick helps to re-member immanence in all entities through learning to exercise modes of sensation that have become dormant. Of central importance to the practice of magick is taking eros seriously while expanding awareness beyond the human to the other-than-human. Such sensory experiences and relationships serve to recover the concrete from the dominance of the abstract, eros from the dominance of rationality, the material from the dominance of the ideational, and the natural from the dominance of culture. This essay works to bridge theoretical and practical implications of dialogs with nature by identifying practices that can overcome trained incapacities that block sensual, dialogic relations with the other-than-human world, while also acknowledging limitations in the transformative potential of Neo-Pagan ideologies and practices.

Keywords: Neo-Pagan; Witches; Magick; Environmental Communication; Nature; Eros; Dialog

Starhawk (2004), a Neo-Pagan “leader” and self-identified Witch, explains that

to be a Witch. . . or a Pagan. . . is more than adopting a new set of terms and customs and a wardrobe of flowing gowns. It is to enter a different universe, a world that is alive and dynamic. . . , where everything is always speaking to us, if only we have ears to listen. (p. 7)

Neo-Paganism is an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of earth-based spiritualities, the largest and most well known being Witchcraft or Wicca (Berger,

Julie Kalil Schutten (Ph.D., University of Utah, 2007) is an Assistant Professor and Richard A. Rogers (Ph.D., University of Utah, 1994) is a Professor, both in the School of Communication at Northern Arizona University. Correspondence to: Julie Kalil Schutten, School of Communication, Box 5619, Flagstaff, AZ 86011, USA. Email: julie.schutten@nau.edu

Leach, & Shaffer, 2003). Brought to the United States from Britain, it “was influenced by a number of features of American culture in the 1960s and 1970s including the growing women’s movement, the counterculture, the environmental movement, and American individualism” (Berger et al., 2003, p. 12). Anthropologist Vanessa Sage (2009) resists firm definition due to the heterogeneity of individuals and groups included under the label, but characterize it as eclectic, utopian, and individualistic. Books, magazines, websites, and conferences disseminate the movement’s ideologies and practices, as do groups that offer rituals to the public. The Neo-Pagan movement grew substantially in the second half of the twentieth century, especially in Britain and the U.S. However, the decentralized and often private nature of the movement makes any count of its members difficult, which is further complicated by the movement’s status as a hidden population due to various stigmas, such as those surrounding the term *witch* (Berger et al., 2003).

However, the movement’s significance for environmental communication is not only due to its size and growth, but also because it encompasses earth-based spiritual beliefs and practices that have the potential to promote an environmental ethic and that offer one model for human dialogic engagement with the natural world. For Neo-Pagans, “the earth is believed to be a living organism with energies that can not only be felt, but understood” (Sage, 2009, p. 37). Religious studies scholar Graham Harvey defines Neo-Paganism as “a polytheistic Nature religion [that] is recreating ways of relating to the Earth” (as cited in Sage, p. 34). According to Margot Adler (1986), journalist and self-identified Pagan earth religionist, Neo-Paganism sees “divinity manifest in all the processes of nature” and “views humanity as a functional organ within the greater organism of all Life” (p. 10). Through a re-membering of a more organically-oriented time pre-dating the industrial revolution, science, capitalism, and patriarchal monotheism, Neo-Pagans learn to understand their place in the web of life.¹ Neo-Pagans, of course, cannot go back to this idealized view of history, but they re-member these memories into how they live.

This essay continues the development of a “transhuman, materialist theory of communication” (Rogers, 1998) by exploring the practices of the Neo-Pagan movement, specifically the practice of magick²: the exercising of conscious will in the manipulation of natural materials and symbols, and the attendant fostering of alternative ways of listening to natural entities. In his environmentally-motivated critique of constitutive theories of communication, Rogers called for an alternative theory of discourse that acknowledges the role of nature in communication without resorting to a deterministic view of nature or of human communication. Rogers criticized constitutive theories for positioning nature as a malleable, mute entity infused with meaning and significance only by human symbolic processes. Rogers posed four criteria to guide the development of an alternative theory that posits nature as influential in human communication and sense-making while also acknowledging the powerful role of discourse in constituting human social realities:

- (1) the resurrection of a place for natural forces, traits, and structures in communication theory while avoiding a return to natural determinism; (2) an

affirmation that we humans are embodied creatures embedded in a world that is not entirely our own making; (3) a rehearsal of ways of listening to nondominant voices and nonhuman agents and their inclusion in the production of meaning, policy, and material conditions; (4) the deconstruction of common sense binaries such as subject/object, social/natural, and ideational/material, and a reconstruction of relationships as dialogic: recursive, interdependent, and fluid. (p. 268)

This essay critically examines Neo-Pagan practices of magick to determine their correspondence with Rogers's four criteria and their potential to promote a sustainable ethic. This project also furthers the identification of alternative symbolic practices that question the anti-environmental edifices upon which theories of communication are typically built, bridging the theory, and practice of dialogs with nature. To accomplish these purposes, we briefly review the conversation among environmental communication scholars about nature as a participatory entity and take a closer look at arguments regarding the role of natural forces and entities in human (and other-than-human) communication, sensuality, and the concept of "nature" itself. This is followed by an introduction to basic tenets of Neo-Paganism, a summary of Neo-Pagan discourses about magick, an analysis of Neo-Pagan ritual practices, and a critical discussion of how magick facilitates dialogs with nature.

Transhuman Theories of Communication

Many environmental communication studies have focused on the importance of naming as the means by which humans make sense of the natural world (e.g. many of the essays in Cantrill & Oravec, 1996). Certainly, as Cantrill and Oravec state, "of our environment, what we say is what we see" (p. 1). Understanding the constitutive view of our environment is the key in furthering sustainable practices due to the lines of actions that follow from representations of the natural world. However, many environmental communication scholars have gone one step further, advocating for the need to incorporate dialog with nature, where nature "counts" as a participant and not merely object in the construction of both symbolic and material reality (e.g. Bullis, 1996; Carbaugh, 1999; Milstein, 2008; Oravec & Clarke, 2004; Rogers, 1998; Schutten, 2008; Sowards, 2006). For example, Carbaugh's work with the Blackfeet discussed listening as a way to "**DWELL-in-the-World**":

As a form of communication conduct, "listening" is a practice, or **Way of DOING** something. Basic beliefs about this action are these: People's actions are part of this interconnected world; People can and should listen to this world; By listening, people can become attuned to this world; Becoming attuned to this is good. (emphasis in original, p. 263)

Carbaugh's study of listening illustrates how human communicative practices require re-tuning in order to hear different voices, the voices of the Other.

Carbaugh's (1999) work provided us with a case of what Rogers (1998) had called for the previous year. Rogers's call for a transhuman, materialist theory of communication is grounded in a critique of constitutive theories of communication. Constitutive theories posit that nature is made meaningful only through human

communication, positioning it as a passive product of human activity. They maintain the culture/nature dualism, with culture being placed in a dominant position. Rogers starts from the assumption that humans are “nature with a concept of nature” (Griffin, 1978, p. 226); while humans create culture, humans and their cultures are also of nature, not separate from and above it. Constitutive theories, in privileging culture, enable “a cultural amnesia regarding our immersion in” and interdependence with natural systems and entities (Rogers, 1998, p. 259). “The reconstruction of a different relationship to the environment in which we live requires radically alternative conceptions of human, nature, material conditions, and discourse” (Rogers, 1998, p. 268). This requires attention to nature’s role in human life, both ideational and material, and to do this “one must know how to listen otherwise than in good form(s) to hear what [nature] says” (Irigaray, as cited in Rogers, 1998, p. 255). As Rogers states, “we need to learn how to listen in the ‘wrong’ ways” (p. 255). The goal is “not to escape symbolism, but to promote and nurture *different* modes of symbolic activity” (Rogers, 1998, p. 268) that embrace both “nature” (the other-than-human) and the natural dimensions of human cultural and communicative existence, a goal that we argue Neo-Pagan practices advance.

An important work that dovetails with Rogers’s (1998) call for alternative forms and understandings of communication is Abram’s (1996) *Spell of the Sensuous*. While Rogers identifies platonic idealism as a primary source of anti-environmental understandings of communication, Abram’s critique of the dominant view of language takes a phenomenological approach and identifies the phonetic alphabet as the culprit, as the source of platonic idealism and the “death of nature” (Merchant, 1980). The alphabet, Abram argues, abstracts communication and meaning from the concrete, embodied aspects of human existence, facilitating the view that truth, knowledge, ideas, and/or spirit exist elsewhere—not in this (material) world, but in some other realm. Human attention shifts to this other realm, derogating the natural, material world as well as the natural, material aspects of human existence. Natural entities, therefore, become lifeless and less-than.

Abram (1996) turns to primary oral cultures (those without a system of writing, especially a phonetic alphabet) to understand an alternative worldview as well as what literate cultures have lost. He identifies the core difference from literate cultures as animism: the belief and perception that natural entities are alive, imbued with spirit, and potential—even inescapable—interlocutors. Abram argues that Westerners have difficulty in grasping the beliefs and perceptions of primary oral cultures because of the Western division of spirit from matter. In oral, animist cultures, spirit *is* matter, just as words and their meanings are never divorced from the material bodies that speak and hear them. Whereas the Western notion of spirit is anthropomorphic and without substance (corresponding to abstract meaning), for animists spirit *is* the material, natural world (both human and other-than-human); there is no “other world,” but only an otherness in *this* world.

Whether Abram (1996) is correct in his identification of the phonetic alphabet as the source of alienation from and objectification of nature, or whether we attribute that to idealism (Rogers, 1998), mechanistic science (Merchant, 1980), patriarchy

(Griffin, 1978), or some other source, a key element in this alienation and objectification is erotophobia: the devaluation or demonization of eros, the sensuous dimension of human existence (Gaard, 1997). Platonic idealism and its descendants devalue the senses as a means to attain truth, dominant Christian theologies identify eros as the source of sin, patriarchy assigns the body (sensuality) to women and the mind to men, and, following Abram, “it is only when a culture shifts its participation to . . . printed letters that the stones fall silent” (p. 131). All in some way deny the value of the senses, which

are the primary way that the earth has of informing our thoughts and guiding our actions. . . . [I]t is only at the scale of our direct, sensory interactions with the land around us that we can appropriately notice and respond to the immediate needs of the living world. (Abram, p. 268)

Another element discussed by Abram (1996) and Rogers (1998) is multiplicity. Sensory experience is inherently multiplicitous because the material world is not singular but radically plural. Embracing the natural world’s multiplicities is necessary to overcome not only determinism, but also the essentializing of nature and the marginalization of sensory experience due to its inherent “inconsistencies.” In *Ecology Without Nature*, Morton (2007) claims that the thing commonly called nature does not exist, “if by nature we mean some thing that is single, independent, and lasting” (pp. 19–20). Noting that “ecological writing keeps insisting that we are ‘embedded’ in nature” (p. 4), Morton argues that “putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman” (p. 5). Indeed, “one of the ideas inhibiting genuinely ecological politics, ethics, philosophy, and art is the idea of nature itself” (p. 14).

Deconstructing hierarchical and anti-environmental dualisms such as ideational/material and culture/nature, listening to and interacting with natural entities, embracing eros, and the recognition and sensation of the multiplicities that constitute nature will become relevant themes as we analyze Neo-Pagan ideologies and practices and explore the potentials of magick as an alternative symbolic.

Magick as an Alternative Symbolic

Tenets of Neo-Paganism

Three tenets of Neo-Paganism that are important for understanding Neo-Pagan magickal practices are animism, immanence, and interconnectedness. First, “animism is used to imply a reality in which all things are imbued with vitality” (Adler, 1986, p. 25). The second tenet, immanence, follows directly from animism. For Neo-Pagans, value and spirit are immanent in all things, both human and other-than-human. Since all things are alive, imbued with spirit, and possessing of inherent value, there is no separation between matter and spirit or human and other-than-human (Sage, 2009). Third, Neo-Paganism, as an earth-based spirituality with connections to ecofeminism, emphasizes the interdependence between all things: humans, nonhuman animals, plants, landscapes, and ecosystems. Often referred to as

“the web of life,” this belief overlaps significantly with many other contemporary environmentalist ideologies.

Neo-Paganism, ecofeminism, and deep ecology share similar belief structures. All place significance on a web of life mentality and “biocentric equality” (Peterson & Peterson, 1996). Deep ecology focuses on self-realization, which encourages a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of life, leading to a paradigm shift where “altruism and morality are superseded by the deep understanding of self-interests as identified with the deep interests of all life” (Bullis, 1996, p. 128), a goal that is shared by ecofeminism and Neo-Paganism. In addition to biocentric equality and self-realization, ecofeminism is “particularly concerned with two damaging dualisms: culture/nature and male/female”; in contrast, “deep ecology and social ecology rely too heavily on patriarchal, modernist discourse that is historically linked to Western dominance” (Bullis, 1996, pp. 126–127). Given Neo-Pagan beliefs in animism, immanent value, and the web of life, a rejection of dominant Western dualisms is central. Of particular importance are rejections of the hierarchical split between spirit and matter, mind and body, divine and mundane, and human and nonhuman.

The core tenets of Neo-Paganism manifest themselves in a variety of specific communicative practices. One set of these practices is magick. To convey a sense of how magick is performed in nonstereotypical ways (i.e. other than those fostered by the media and other mainstream discourses), we turn to the summary by Magliocco (2004) of an experience recounted by Adler (1986):

Adler was working on a communal farm. . .run by a Pagan Family. She and several other volunteers were given the task of collecting dying fish from an evaporating stream bed, loading them into a truck, and taking them back to the farm to use as compost. The group struggled with the task for hours. . .and the slippery fish slopped about, eluding everyone’s grasp. . .the job seemed impossible. Then. . .the group leader suggested the workers imagine themselves as hungry bears that needed to catch the dying fish for their own survival. The volunteers began to think of their hands as great paws; they brought them together to grasp the fish and toss them over their heads into the truck’s bed. Within an hour, the truck was filled with fish. (Magliocco, 2004, p. 101)

Adler writes,

This magic did not involve the supernatural. It involved an understanding of psychological and environmental processes. . ., a knowledge of how emotion and concentration can be directed naturally to effect changes in consciousness that affect the behavior of (in this case) humans and fish. (p. 8)

Discourses about Magick

We begin our analysis of magick as an alternative symbolic by examining how scholars and leaders of the Neo-Pagan movement verbally articulate their understandings of magick and the relationship between humans and nature. While we begin our analysis with human-produced, verbal discourse, in subsequent sections we examine Neo-Pagan *practices* of magick via Rogers’s (1998) criteria for a transhuman theory of communication.

Definitions and potentials of magick. Anthropologist Sabina Magliocco (2004) writes that “magic is central to the practice of Neo-Pagan religions, yet it is part of what makes them seem alien, marginal, and either frightening or ridiculous to outsiders” (p. 99). Mainstream resistance to magick surfaces due to the dominance of the rational over the irrational. However, “belief in magic . . . should not be interpreted as an irrational faith in processes that violate the rules of nature, but as a fundamental way of organizing and understanding the patterns and workings of the cosmos” (Magliocco, 2004, p. 102). Neo-Pagans generally and Witches specifically (with whom the practice of magick is most closely associated) define magick in a variety of ways, but most explain magick as involving conscious will or intention:

Magic is a convenient word for a whole collection of techniques. . . , including the mobilization of confidence, will, and emotion brought about by the recognition of necessity; the use of imaginative faculties, particularly the ability to visualize, in order to begin to understand how other beings function in nature so we can use this knowledge to achieve necessary ends. (Adler, 1986, p. 8)

Adler’s description points to a recurring theme in discussions of magick: its relation to the natural world. For Neo-Pagans, “magic is natural, concerned with connecting natural cycles, and a method of enchantment in an unenchanted world” (Sage, 2009, p. 41). Magick is not understood by Neo-Pagans as supernatural, since animism and immanence question the split between the natural and supernatural that most Westerners take for granted (Adler, 1986; Magliocco, 2004).

In terms of the relationship between humans and other-than-human nature, “Neo-Pagan magic is a self-conscious attempt to revive and re-create a sense of interconnectedness in the world” (Magliocco, 2004, p. 120). Magick is composed of “techniques that lead to an awakened, attentive, attuned sense of being” (Adler, 1986, p. 156). Magick is not only deeply sensual in both technique and effect, but the sensual is central to (re)connecting humans with the other-than-human world. Starhawk (1997) explains that

learning to work magic is mostly a process of learning to think-in-things, to experience concretely as well as to think abstractly. . . . Knowing what is concrete reveals what is intangible: the energy, the process that forms what can be seen. . . . Things reveal, in their forms, in their movements, the processes that shape them, as the rocks reveal in their roundness and their crevices the movements of water. (p. 27)

Magick helps to re-member immanence in all entities through exercising modes of sensation that have become dormant. Starhawk aligns with Abram (1996) in pointing out that abstraction pulls us out of the concrete; abstract symbolic worlds have largely displaced many humans’ ability to experience the earth as expressive:

To be a Witch, to practice magic, we can’t simply honor nature’s cycles in the abstract. We need to know them intimately and understand them in the physical as well as the psychic world. A real relationship with nature is vital for our magical and spiritual development. . . . It is also a vital base for any work we do to heal the earth and transform the social and political systems that are assaulting her daily. (Starhawk, 2004, p. 5)

Immanence also implies animism: “Magic might also be called the art of opening our awareness to the consciousnesses that surround us, the art of conversing in the deeper language that nature speaks” (Starhawk, 2004, p. 11). Those who practice magick “experience the earth as a living being who is aware of and speaking to us all the time” (Starhawk, 2004, p. 216).

The theme of magick involving a kind of conversation with nature is central to magick’s potential vis-à-vis environmentalism as well as transhuman communication. Starhawk (2004) writes,

Instead of closing our eyes to meditate, we need to open our eyes and observe. Unless our spiritual practice is grounded in a real connection to the natural world, we run the risk of simply manipulating our own internal imagery and missing the real communication taking place all around us. But when we come into all our senses, we can know the Goddess *not just as symbol but as the physical reality of the living earth.* (italics added; p. 11)

Starhawk repeatedly uses communication terms to describe the awakening of the senses that comes from paying attention to the concrete and the other-than-human: “We need the discipline of magic. . .to hear and understand what the earth is saying to us” (p. 11). Put another way, “when we practice magic we are always making connections, moving energy, identifying with other forms of being” (Starhawk, 1997, p. 13).

Of central importance to the practice of magick is a new (or “re-awakened”) form of sensory experience, one which takes eros seriously while expanding awareness beyond the human to the other-than-human. Such sensory experiences and relationships serve to recover the concrete from the dominance of the abstract, eros from the dominance of rationality, the material from the dominance of the ideational, and the natural from the dominance of culture. Other-than-human entities are embraced as full co-participants, decentering the human world and expanding the value and range of human erotic/sensory experience. This focus on eros and inclusion of other-than-human entities as meaningful interlocutors provides a starting point for Rogers’s (1998) call “to learn how to listen [to nature] in the ‘wrong’ ways” (p. 255).

Ritual Practices

In this section, we move from discourses about magick to the practice of magick. While magick can be practiced individually, as well as incidentally during the course of everyday life, it is also done in the context of group rituals. The descriptions of Neo-Pagan ritual and magick presented below are based on the first author’s multi-year fieldwork with Neo-Pagan communities and both authors’ participant-observation in a variety of Neo-Pagan rituals. While the practice of magick is not limited to the ritual “basics” we describe below, such ritual practices are central insofar as they provide participants with tools for developing an increased sensitivity to natural entities and processes as well the connections between nature and human existence. As Magliocco (2004) argues, ritual is “the practical expression of the magical worldview” (p. 126).

Magick, in other words, is a set of communicative practices that works to perform the central tenets of Neo-Pagan beliefs. While statements by Neo-Pagan leaders and practitioners are important for indicating *what* they believe they are doing, an analysis of the magickal practices themselves is necessary in identifying *how* this is carried out as well as critically analyzing the practices to identify their potentials and limitations. Therefore, following a brief review of some commonly-used ritual components, we organize our analysis of these practices according to Rogers's (1998) four criteria for a transhuman theory of communication.

Many Neo-Pagan rituals begin with the invocation of the elements and the directions, and are later closed with the "release" of the directions. Each of the four elements is invoked along with the meanings associated with it: intellect (air), will/passion (fire), emotions (water), and body (earth). This often involves the manipulation of representative manifestations of the elements. For example, smudging (the burning of herbs such as sage and the ritualistic "bathing" or "cleansing" of each participant in the smoke) can manifest both air and fire. For water and earth, a small amount of earth (e.g., salt or cinders) may be mixed with water and sprinkled on each participant. The invocation of the elements often calls attention to the concrete and/or the local, such as specific water sources, plants, and minerals.

In terms of invoking the directions (or "quarters"), altars including manifestations or representations of each direction are sometimes placed on the appropriate sides of the ritual space; the symbols of each direction may be, for example, candles or cloths of the corresponding color: yellow (east), red (south), blue or black (west), and white or green (north). The directions are typically invoked beginning with the direction of the rising sun, east, followed by south, west, and north, and near the end of the ritual are released in reverse order. When each direction is invoked or released, participants face that direction.

Through natural cycles and symbolism, the elements and directions are linked to each other as well as to the seasons. Air is associated with the east and spring: birth and beginnings. Fire is associated with the south and summer: warmth and passion. Water is associated with the west and autumn: fading and closures. Earth is associated with north and winter: cold and death. The directions and seasons are presented as circular, not linear: each is necessary for the next to occur, such as the death and dormancy of winter preceding the rebirth of spring. Each is different but equally valued, which extends to the human dimensions associated with each element and direction: intellect, will, emotion, and body.

Specific nonhuman animals, plants, minerals, water, and other elements of the other-than-human world are often used, symbolically and/or materially, in the context of ritual and magick. For example, participants are provided with an apple, which they cut open horizontally to reveal the shape of the pentacle outlined by the seeds in the center of the apple. In addition to providing an opportunity to reflect on Christianity's demonization of the pentacle³ and to reclaim this powerful Pagan symbol, the apple's natural symbolism also represents the fusion of magick and nature, the divine and the mundane. In one ritual we observed, the seeds were

removed from the apple and invested with intention by each participant before being returned to the earth.

Rituals often follow a general pattern of invoking the elements, casting the circle, and calling the directions, followed by other thematic activities, then opening the circle and releasing the directions. The thematic activities are often related to the sabbat being observed or to the current season, phase of the moon, or a specific goddess. These goddesses (and sometimes gods) are often characterizations of aspects of the natural world, with “nature” being understood as including human cultures. Often, a central ritual involving magick will be undertaken or participants will engage in some form of “spell casting” (which may or may not be labeled as such). These thematic activities can also be driven by other circumstances, such as environmental issues. For example, to raise awareness about climate change and water scarcity, participants each bring water from their home or their region, contribute this water to a central container, and then use the water to drench a fire, releasing steam into the air, and illustrating the cycle of nature.

We see Neo-Pagan ritual and magick as viable, alternative, oppositional practices related to environmental concerns and as illustrative of an alternative view of communication in which nature plays an active role. We therefore explore the alignments between the transhuman theory of communication called for by Rogers (1998) and Neo-Pagan magick and ritual practices in order to demonstrate the potential value of magick for environmental sustainability.

Rogers’s (1998) first criterion involves “the resurrection of a place for natural forces, traits, and structures in communication theory while avoiding a return to natural determinism” (p. 268). Neo-Pagan magick is based on an affirmation that other-than-human entities (“nature”) exert a profound influence on humans, not only because the aim of Neo-Paganism “is to sever the boundaries between nature and culture to realize that human beings are nature” (Sage, 2009, p. 46), but also to foster a mutually interactive relationship.

Various aspects of Neo-Pagan ritual and magickal practices can be understood as fostering communication with the other-than-human. On one level, there is the belief that the seasons, lunar phases, animals, plants, and other natural beings and processes have something to tell us. By paying attention to these other-than-human elements, such as through the invocation of the directions and elements described above, practitioners can learn about the extrahuman world and their position in it. Such attention constitutes a form of listening, including interpretation of the “messages” offered. Such listening can also lead to active engagement with the larger world with which humans are interdependent. For example, investing seeds with conscious intention and returning them to the soil constitutes not merely listening, but a symbolic and material engagement with the other-than-human. Listening to and engaging these natural elements (and/or symbols thereof) is at the very least an acknowledgment of their existence and operation. In Neo-Pagan terms, conscious, directed energy is being put into the world, which, given the principle of interdependence, cannot not have some kind of influence.

From a Neo-Pagan framework, everything done as part of magick and ritual (and for that matter, any nonmagickal act) has the potential to affect a variety of entities, many of which we may not even know. This is one reason why the element of intention or conscious will is central to magickal practice: magick involves careful attention to what kind of influence one is putting into the world. This manifests another trait of dialogic interaction, which involves not only a two-way flow but also acting with recognition of the other. As Rogers (1998) states, “a dialogic approach...acknowledges the interdependency of the entities involved in the sense that each is affected by the other, that each may come to know itself through interaction with the other, and that the boundaries between them are permeable” (p. 265).

In these acts of listening and engagement, nature is not seen as determined or deterministic. That is, the exercise of magick is not simply to listen to and understand what is there, but to become an active participant, directing one’s intentions in conscious ways to achieve particular ends, be those ecocentric (e.g. healing the planet), anthropocentric (e.g. encouraging peace among peoples), or egocentric (e.g. improving one’s own physical health or spiritual well-being).⁴ At the same time, these acts do not presume that humans are in control of, and hence above, nature. By listening to and engaging with the other-than-human, one can bring about change, but only by attending to the principles of nature (and magick) and respecting the entities involved. For example, an act of magick designed to achieve dominance over another entity is understood as instrumentally and ethically problematic: instrumentally problematic because the principle of interdependence suggests that the dominating energy will come back to the spell caster in some form (Starhawk, 1999) and ethically problematic because the principle of immanence calls for each entity to be treated as having intrinsic, not merely instrumental, value.

Neo-Pagan treatises and practices do not treat nature as a fixed force governing human actions and determining one’s fate, but neither do they position nature as a malleable entity to be controlled for particular purposes. Based on interdependence and the recognition that humans are part of nature, magick presumes a both/and, not either/or, relationship. That is, nature influences humans, and humans inevitably influence nature—both are part of the larger web of life. From the human side, this can sound instrumental and may even be conceived this way by practitioners—that is, as the use of natural elements and knowledge of natural processes to achieve what may be egocentric or anthropocentric ends. Many definitions of magick, including some we presented earlier, appear to embody such instrumentalism in their emphasis on conscious will and achieving certain ends. Although some practitioners conceive of magick as instrumental in an ego- or anthropocentric way, it is important to note that others do not (e.g. Starhawk, 1999). However, even if conceived instrumentally, the underlying principles and practices are dialogic in the sense that there is reciprocal influence and that such influences are not deterministic; whatever the outcomes, they are mutually constituted by both human and extrahuman entities and actions. Furthermore, the use of magick, even if conceived in instrumental terms, requires sustained attention to and awareness of the other-than-human. Nevertheless, if magick is viewed instrumentally and is used for egocentric and anthropocentric

ends—and based on our observations we grant that such uses do indeed occur—this would tend to reduce its potential as an alternative understanding of and relationship to the natural world.

There is another significant way Neo-Pagan beliefs, discourses, and magickal practices may contradict Rogers' (1998) first criterion for transhuman communication. A necessary corollary to not conceiving of nature as either determined or deterministic is a rejection of the idealizing, singularizing, and essentializing of nature (Rogers). As Morton (2007) argues, in much ecological writing and similar discourses (including, we argue, much Neo-Pagan discourse) "nature is set up as a transcendental, unified, independent category" (p. 13). Morton rightly criticizes much ecological literature as grounded in a utopian longing for a unified, harmonious relationship between humans and other-than-humans. Nature is essentialized and singularized—as a nurturing mother, the Goddess who gave birth to everything, a womb to which we can return, and a cure for the subject/object split. This essentialism is closely connected to the primitivism that Morton identifies in much ecological writing, wherein both nature and indigenous cultures (who are seen as "one" with nature by means of their spirituality) are idealized as the cure for Western culture's alienation from nature and authentic spirituality.

On the one hand, Neo-Pagan discourse perpetuates the reification and singularizing of nature as an entity through the attribution of a plan or intention to "nature" or "the universe," through the tendency to conflate *nature* and *The Goddess*, and other tropes and statements. However, when examining the practice of ritual and magick, the situation is more complex. Nature is composed of distinct entities (or spirits) as embodied in the elements, directions, seasons, animals and plants, and astronomical entities. The engagement with not only The Goddess but of a whole range of goddesses (e.g. Gaia, Ceridwin, Hestia, and Oshun) and other spirits, each of which is taken to represent certain traits, elements, animals, seasons, etcetera, complicates an oversimplified accusation of essentialism. For Neo-Pagans, there is good and bad in all. Each goddess, for example, represents certain traits and qualities, which may be a mix of things seen positively and negatively. In the nondualistic frame that Neo-Pagans work toward, binaries such as good/evil, order/chaos, and life/death are problematized, making any simplistic idealization of nature questionable. While the attribution of intent and planning does occur, some of the underlying practices and principles question the notion of a single transcendent entity called "nature." At most, there are various elements that work together as parts of a greater whole, and all parts in the whole influence each other. While this view of nature as fundamentally multiple may be the implication of some forms of Neo-Pagan practice and ideology, by no means do we suggest that all Neo-Pagans would agree with this characterization.

Rogers's (1998) second criterion is "an affirmation that we humans are embodied creatures embedded in a world that is not entirely our own making" (p. 268). The Neo-Pagan principles of interconnectedness and immanence challenge the view that humans are separate from nature, as well as the idea that humans should control nature in a dominating, nondialogic manner. An examination of Neo-Pagan practices

illustrates how these principles are enacted, specifically through highlighting human embeddedness in an other-than-human world and by the fostering and valuing of sensual experience.

At a basic level, the invocation of the elements and calling of the directions provide structures of belief and practice that encourage a reconnection with the natural world from which Westerners in particular have been alienated: to think about where the sun rises, the significance of the seasons, the minerals that characterize local landscapes, and water sources, to name a few. Such ritualized practices of magick encourage participants to pay attention to their concrete, material life-world, to dimensions of the natural environments they inhabit. In a life-world in which air conditioning, tap water, and fruits and vegetables shipped in from around the world block awareness *of* and sensitivity *to* natural environments and cycles, such simple acts of re-cognition can be powerful means for consciously and bodily reconnecting to the other-than-human world. For example, it is not uncommon for participants, while setting up the ritual space, to pause to think about where each direction is located in the space they currently occupy. In the increasingly manufactured, compartmentalized, and abstracted spaces that many Westerners inhabit, simple acts such as identifying the directions of the rising and setting sun serve as guides for paying attention to mundane processes and where the participants stand (literally) in relation to those.

As noted above, the directions are invoked in a circular, concrete manner, moving from the east (the direction of the rising sun, and hence beginnings), to the south, west, and north. The significance of this circular pattern is highlighted when compared to the dominant Western orientation to the directions. Based on graphic maps constituted on an abstract plane of illusory uniformity, many Westerners relate to the directions in the order of north (up), south (down), east (right), and west (left). This up-down-right-left pattern is based on a two-dimensional linearity that turns concrete directions (e.g. east and west as the directions of the rising and setting sun, north and south as the relative paths of the sun during its annual cycle) into abstractions (e.g. 90° on a compass or map). This system is based on a Cartesian grid as well as a “god’s eye view”—an abstract subject position that stands above the concrete, embodied life-world, further promoting human alienation from that world.

Turning from spatial to temporal orientations, while some Neo-Pagan rituals may occur on an abstract schedule (e.g. the third Wednesday of each month), others are timed in relation with natural cycles such as the seasons and the phases of the moon. The sabbats, the major rituals of the Neo-Pagan year, are positioned not in terms of human events (e.g. the birth of Christ) but in relation to the seasons, specifically the solstices, equinoxes, and the four points in between those events, resulting in a cycle of eight sabbats approximately six weeks apart: Yule (winter solstice, replaced by Christmas), Imbolc (replaced by Groundhog Day), Ostara (spring equinox), Beltane (replaced by May Day), Litha (summer solstice), Lughnasad, Mabon (fall equinox), and Samhain (replaced by Halloween and All Saints Day). Each sabbat has meanings connected to the significance of its position on the wheel of the year: the cycle of the

seasons, of light and dark, of fertility, growth, harvest, and decay. In contrast to many modern, Western holidays, each sabbat directs the attention of participants to the cycles of nature and the natural/spiritual significance thereof.

Neo-Pagan magickal practice highlights one of the central means by which human embeddedness is both evident and enacted: eros. In highlighting the sensual nature of humans, the sensual relationships that exist between humans and other-than-humans, the concreteness of sensual experience and relationships, and the value of eros (alongside, rather than subordinated to, abstract thought and meaning), human embeddedness in nature becomes inescapable, and is manifested materially in Neo-Pagan ritual through the enveloping of the ritual in the elements, directions, and other natural elements and processes. The ritualistic use of natural phenomena and objects—the sun, moon, seasons, animals, plants, rocks, spirals—as well as symbolic representations thereof develops a deeper awareness of the natural world and of the interconnections between its parts. Various sensations—the pattern visible in the center of an apple, the smell of burning sage, the light of a candle, the wetness and coolness of water—are used to enable an attention not only to nature in the abstract, but also in the concrete, highlighting the inescapability and power of eros in human life and spirituality as well as its necessary centrality in relations between humans and other-than-humans. Magick works, sometimes intentionally, to overcome the trained incapacities of modern literates, incapacities that are central to the objectification, exploitation, and destruction of the natural world.

Rogers's (1998) third criterion is “a rehearsal of ways of listening to nondominant voices and nonhuman agents and their inclusion in the production of meaning, policy, and material conditions” (p. 268). This criterion points to the most direct implication of the practice of magick: without the willingness and ability to “listen in the wrong ways”—that is, to listen to nature as a dialogic interlocutor—there is no magick. Magick also involves “speaking to” nature but the intention behind magick will go nowhere without an ability to listen and take seriously what one hears when participating in ritual and at other times in one's life. Neo-Pagan magick and ritual provide tools that enable Westerners to hear what nature is saying and to “talk back” in forms other than renunciation or command.

This criterion not only points to the need to listen to the other-than-human, but to treat them as agents, as active participants in the construction of meaning. Ritual forms and structures, for example, are adapted to the local, reflecting not only a sense of place, but an active engagement with place. As Starhawk (2004) writes,

Our fire ritual and rain return ritual are relatively young—we created them less than ten years ago. They don't correspond to the equinoxes or the major Celtic feasts or the indigenous Pomo ceremonies of this land. Yet in some ways they represent the most ancient tradition of ritual and ceremony there is: *they are the rituals the land told us to do* [italics added]. (p. 4)

Radical constructivists can certainly argue that the land told Starhawk's group nothing—that what they imagined the land to have told them is nothing more than a (human) symbolic construct. We do not deny that this is a possibility, but an a priori

assumption that the other-than-human is passive and malleable, infused with meaning only by human agency, is at the core of the operation of anthropocentrism and the objectification of nature in constitutive theories of discourse (Rogers, 1998). If we are to take the practices of not only Neo-Pagans but also Native Americans (e.g. Carbaugh, 1999) and oral/indigenous cultures around the world (e.g. Abram, 1996) seriously, granting the emic at least equal value to the etic, then we must at least temporarily bracket the constitutive theories dominant in communication studies and related disciplines.

Rogers's (1998) fourth criterion is "the deconstruction of common sense binaries such as subject/object, social/natural, and ideational/material, and a reconstruction of relationships as dialogic: recursive, interdependent, and fluid" (p. 268). Certainly the beliefs of Neo-Paganism fit with this criterion; however, this deconstruction and reconstruction can also be seen in Neo-Pagan practice. In enacting the view that humans *are* nature and that the other-than-human world is composed of living entities possessing spirit, Neo-Pagans consciously open themselves to the influence of natural entities (often called "spirits" or "goddesses," but often overtly grounded in the natural/material)—they enter into exchange that is recursive, interdependent, and open to change. This change can occur, among other ways, through magick. The ideational, the symbolic, and the material are intertwined in these practices, suggesting the possibility of a genuine deconstruction and reconstruction.

Starhawk's (1997) characterization of magic as involving "learning how to think-in-things" (p. 27) is central not only to the valuing of eros, but also to the deconstruction of hierarchical dualisms. Sensual experiences and extrahuman entities/processes are not only to be symbolically represented and thought about (i.e., treated as objects); they become means by which to think and symbolize, fusing the concrete and abstract, eros and cognition, the material and the symbolic, and the natural and the cultural. In contrast to the essentializing and singularizing of nature in some Neo-Pagan discourse (discussed above), the erotic and concrete/material foundations of magickal practice ultimately lead to a rejection of notions of purity that abound in contemporary environmental discourse and practice, such as in definitions and protections of "wilderness." As Sage (2009) argues,

Many Pagans, in feeling a direct connection to nature, and using that connection to find meaning in their lives, ask us to question the boundaries between nature and culture and to take responsibility for our lives on this planet. Pagans attempt to fulfill Cronon's environmentalist plea to consider that our homes—where we live, and who we are—are also part of nature. (p. 48)

Criticisms: Primitivism & Commodification

In this section we acknowledge and reflect on some of the less-than-emancipatory elements of Neo-Pagan ideologies and practices. As McKerrow (1989) argues, critics must not only engage in the critique of domination, which focuses on "the discourse of power which creates and sustains the social practices which control the dominated" (p. 92), but must also enact the critique of freedom: "one of

never-ending skepticism, hence permanent criticism” based on the premise that “the new social relations which emerge from a reaction to a critique are themselves simply new forms of power” (p. 96). Therefore, in this section we address the primitivism embedded in Neo-Pagan ideology as well as the question of commodification.

The Neo-Pagan characterization of their beliefs and practices as a recovery of the “old ways” (i.e. pre-Christian and/or pre-industrial) and the attendant idealization of past/other cultures raises the concern that Neo-Paganism articulates with primitivism, the belief that “primitive” cultures possess the cure for what ails Western civilization—in this case, alienation from nature. Similarly, Morton (2007) has criticized Abram’s (1996) analysis of animist cultures as well as much ecological writing in general as primitivist. Primitivism is problematic for at least two reasons. First, even though it positively values cultures labeled as primitive, it does so by essentializing them. Second, primitivism is motivated by the interests of the colonizing/dominating culture, not the colonized. In many environmentalist discourses, both nature and indigenous cultures are positioned as compensatory resources for soothing the alienations of Westerners; indeed, in these discourses nature and animist cultures are conflated insofar as animist cultures are idealized precisely for their lack of separation from nature. In addition to essentializing nature and “primitive” cultures, both are also at times idealized as harmonious and nurturing.

However, as Magliocco (2004) writes, “most well-read Pagans and Witches realize the symbolic nature of their origin stories, and no longer accept them as fact. Yet these stories. . .have a powerful effect on individuals, even when they understand their metaphorical nature” (p. 193). Some sectors of the movement also demonstrate an awareness of the problems involved in idealizing primitive others, be they Native Americans or the Celts of ancient Europe. Starhawk (2004), for example, writes that “indigenous cultures have also hunted animals to extinction and turned fertile land to deserts. I don’t want to romanticize other cultures, but I do think it is important to learn from them” (p. 10). Abram’s (1996) idealization of animist cultures may be primitivist, but it is also an exploration of valid alternatives driven by a desire to address environmental crises. In other words, neither Neo-Pagan magick nor the revitalization of animism discussed by Abram is a literal “going back” to long-lost ways of life, though they are often seen that way by critics and practitioners (Sage, 2009). Many Neo-Pagan ideologies and practices may be motivated by primitivism, but they are also efforts to reconstruct the meaning of nature, to alter human/nature relations, and to learn to engage in sustainable practices. Concerns over primitivism, valid as they may be, can also lead to paralysis and thereby serve to maintain the status quo. Therefore, while the critique of freedom (McKerrow, 1989) must remain operant, it is also valid to see in primitivist practices a utopian longing that can lead to positive social action (Torgovnick, 1996).

Neo-Paganism, vulnerable as it is to being labeled as “New Age,” can also be subject to the criticisms of New Age practices as individualistic and thoroughly commodified (Sage, 2009). While Neo-Paganism’s environmental ethic at least implicitly criticizes the edifices on which consumer capitalism is built, it is difficult to escape the irony

that at least as much of the ritual/magickal gear of many Neo-Pagans comes from Asia by way of the local “New Age” store as it does from respectful and sustainable harvesting of the bounty of local landscapes. These products are sought after not only for their “genuine” or “spiritual” value, but also (or even only) for their fetishized, commodified meanings.

In addition to the creation of fetishized meanings, commodification also blocks an awareness of the conditions and relations of production, an awareness that should be central to the exercising of conscious will that is central to the practice of magick. For example, more than a few Neo-Pagan practitioners rely on their local “New Age” store (or even a “health food” chain store) for the procurement of bundles of sage and other herbs for use in smudging. These bundles may not come with information as to the nature and location of their harvesting, and if provided it may not be accurate. In contrast, a trip to the countryside to harvest local herbs may in some cases be more environmentally sustainable and would certainly offer the potential for a more direct rather than alienated relationship to the ecosystems and plants that produce the herbs. Therefore, as with most of the goods offered in the postmodern marketplace, it is important to acknowledge that at least some of the items used by Neo-Pagans in the practice of magick are products of systems that are environmentally unsustainable and economically exploitative. But their function as commodities does not exhaust their potentials; these commodities are used to enact alternative worldviews, symbolics, and identities, challenging the logic of the dominant system (de Certeau, 1984).

As with their origin stories and the primitivism involved in the idealization of other cultures, some Neo-Pagans are aware of the contradictions and complexities involved in the commodities they use. For example, much Neo-Pagan ritual involves the use of fire to light candles, incense, herbs, and other items. Rarely does anyone break out flint and straw to start a fire for this purpose. Matches are used, as are lighters. On more than one occasion, and in the context of more than one group, we have heard participants request “the ritual Bic” with an ironic tone or chuckle as they prepare to light a candle or sage bundle. The tone of this utterance makes clear some degree of awareness of the contradictions involved in the use of a mass-manufactured, plastic, disposable butane lighter. Certainly this was not the “old way” of lighting a candle, and hence the “authenticity” of the ritual act is always contingent. In addition, the lighter is not an environmentally sustainable product, and therefore the much-professed desire to “save the earth” is called into question. Neo-Pagan communities and individual practitioners make varying efforts at purity in their rituals, be that in terms of authenticity and/or sustainability. But almost all do so with some sense of irony and, hopefully, self-implication—helpful stances given the impossibility of pure forms of resistance. After all, everything is sacred. . .even a Bic lighter.

Embracing Eros as an Alternative Discourse

Discussing the need for an alternative discourse in order to respond to the environmental crisis, Bullis (1996) writes,

Treating the environment as an issue within a dominant discourse is inadequate because the dominant discourse inherently perpetuates the environmental destruction responsible for the current crisis. Instead, alternative discourses not grounded in the current dominant discourse are essential for adequate transformation. (p. 123)

The Neo-Pagan practice of magick is one example of an alternative discourse that counters dominant modes of thinking that block cyclical understandings of nature and the interconnectedness of all life. Importantly, this is not simply alternative content presented in traditional form (e.g. a manifesto presented rhetorically in the form of a book or speech). Instead, magick constitutes an alternative symbolic, one that departs radically from both anti-environmental and many pro-environmental discourses in terms of form, content, and symbolic materials. Magick does this by refusing to conform to established ways of understanding the world in favor of re-membering alternative ways of knowing. Magick encourages a divine and erotic connection to place, bridging the gap between the intellectual and the sensual, the symbolic and the material.

As Adler (1986) writes, “the spells, the chants, the dances are props. These things are not *magic*. The magic is the art (or science) of using the props” (p. 153). Magick is a radically alternative rhetorical form, one that not only takes nature as its subject matter but as the ground of its modes of symbolization. Significantly, magick is not something people do, separate from nature, merely in order to influence something “out there”—be it human or other-than-human. Instead, magick represents the interaction of the human and other-than-human, of culture and nature, in a potentially nonhierarchical form. Magick is an effort to enact communicative relations between humans and the natural world, relationships that breakdown the dominance of abstraction as well as the separation of humans from the rest of nature.

The practice of magick is of course not the only way that Westerners and other literates can retrain their ability to listen to and speak with the natural world, but it is one example of how to begin this re-membering. Magick is the manipulation of symbols but not the literate, abstract, dominant symbolic that communication scholar often discuss. Our argument is that the primary rhetorical activity of the Neo-Pagan movement is magick. Understanding, believing in, and using magick threatens mainstream hegemonic thinking in that it encourages humans to see themselves as interconnected with the earth rather than furthering a “deep desire to deny our existence as embodied beings, as flesh” (Rogers, 1998, p. 255). The practice of magick holds the potential to re-member immanence in all entities by taking the senses seriously and expanding awareness beyond the human to the other-than-human. Neo-Pagan ritual practices provide participants with knowledge and practices for developing an increased sensitivity to the natural world as well the connections between nature and human existence. Taking these practices seriously offers the opportunity to challenge not only dominant modes of relating to nature, but to expand the scope of communication theory to embrace the other-than-human.

At the same time, following McKerrow (1989), we acknowledge limitations embedded in Neo-Pagan practices that limit their resistive and transformative

potential, particularly essentialism, primitivism, and commodification. Our argument is not that Neo-Pagan magick is a perfect example of a dialogic, nonhierarchical, noninstrumental relationship with the other-than-human—indeed, we believe that there probably are none that match the ideal. We do, however, argue that Neo-Pagan practices hold substantial potential for the cultivation of a sustainable environmental ethic and provide a useful illustration of the kinds of practices that are consistent with a transhuman, “green” theory of communication, one that actively includes the natural as part of the communication process, deconstructs the symbolic (ideational)/material dualism, and fosters a sense of the interconnection between culture and nature, human and other-than-human.

Notes

- [1] We use *re-membling* to illustrate that this is not about going back to a utopia where humans lived in harmonious union with the other-than-human. Emphasis on the *re* implies repetition, a reconnection of history (real or imagined) with the present moment that is continually updated, re-membered.
- [2] Following some Neo-Pagans, we use *magick* rather than *magic* to distinguish the practice from the sleight-of-hand and Harry Potter types of magic that permeate the public imagination.
- [3] The pentacle is representative of earth, air, fire, water, and spirit.
- [4] Given the principle of interdependence, Neo-Pagan beliefs challenge any absolute separation between egocentric, anthropocentric, and ecocentric actions and motives.

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