

HEATHENRY IN THE UNITED STATES

An Interview with Jennifer Snook



WRSP: When it comes to forms of modern Paganism, Heathenry is smaller and not so well known as Wicca. For the benefit of those readers who may not be familiar with it, could you explain what Heathenry is?

Dr Snook: Heathenry is an umbrella term for the milieu of Germanic Paganisms. It's what some scholars have referred to as a "reconstructionist" Paganism, as practitioners are inspired by the Eddas and Sagas as well as the archaeology, folklore, histories and religious beliefs of the people of pre-Christian Northern Europe. Many Heathens try to approximate "authentic" historical reconstruction, based upon their perception of the beliefs and practices of Old Norse religion, and some prefer to use that material as inspiration for spiritual or ritual innovations. Heathenry has actually grown in the past few years thanks to Marvel's Thor movies, and shows like History Channel's *The Vikings*, which romanticises and cobbles together bits of history and fantasy about ancient Heathens—as well as games like *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*. "Vikings" in the media get people interested in the lore and history and ultimately some of these fans find their way to Heathenry, once they realize that there are people for whom these stories are sacred.

WRSP: In your book *American Heathens: The Politics of Identity in a Pagan Religious Movement* (Temple University Press, 2015), you are quite open about being a practitioner of Heathenry yourself, having been introduced to modern Paganism through Teen Wicca in the mid-1990s. What drew you to this alternative religious practice and how do you feel it has informed your research on the subject?

Dr Snook: Like most Gen-X Heathens, I came through Wicca because it was the most accessible and popular form of Paganism, and it was a hot topic in the 1990s primarily due to how it tapped into the anxieties of people still freaking out from the Satanic Panic of the 1980s and early 1990s. Up until that time, I channeled my deep nerdiness and interest in witchcraft, German myths and legends, and swords and sorcery into Norse-flavored Wicca. Then one day in 1998, I sat down at my computer, dialed into CompuServe, and found an article on the internet called “The Pentagram and The Hammer,” which articulated the differences between Wicca and Heathenry, or “Ásatrú” as it’s sometimes called. I hadn’t heard that there was a particular name, set of practices, and Germanic-history-focused Paganism before, and it struck me as a revelation. It became part of my identity. When I began my work years later, I was pretty clear that it wasn’t just an academic exercise, but that Heathens were the audience for my work. I wanted them to feel seen, and not simply observed. I wanted to do it in a way that would both protect, and challenge, the Heathen community that I was a part of.

WRSP: You earned your PhD from the University of Colorado-Boulder in 2008; how much does *American Heathens* draw upon your PhD research and what led you to conduct this particular project to begin with?

Dr Snook: *American Heathens* hangs upon the skeleton of my dissertation. I started my fieldwork in 2002 when I got to Boulder, but continued fieldwork until 2014 when I turned in my book manuscript. So there are years of fieldwork and interviews included in my book that were not yet completed when I graduated—and a major revising of my theoretical framework, plus the addition of a few new chapters. The entire idea for this project came out of my preexisting interest in contemporary Paganism, my own immersion in it, and the realization that many ethnographers conduct auto-ethnographic work, studying sites in which they are already situated. So I logged onto the internet and found myself a Heathen. We met at a coffee shop and he invited me to join him at a blot (Heathen ritual) with some Boulder/Denver area Heathens—and the research began spontaneously.

Over the years, I realized how I’d really stumbled into something not just intellectually curious about the construction of a new religious movement, but also a microcosm of American hierarchical power dynamics that played itself out in gender, race, identities, and political labeling. When Heathens spoke about how “Heathen” something was, I understood—as a sociologist—that they were producing and sharing in an entire system of meaning around that label. In the field, when I watched American Heathens playing “Viking Games” like “capture the wench,” while chatting with Heathen women about how they imagined themselves as Valkyries or Shield Maidens, I understood that there was a gendered nature to their relationship with Heathenry. The hypermasculine “Viking” stereotype and “warrior” ethos was the other side of the gendered coin, influencing all genders’ performance of Heathenry, and this seemed notable. Right away, I understood that Heathenry also held an appeal to white nationalists at the same time that many anti-racist white people experienced a sacralized connection to Old Norse religion and lore as a marker of ethnic identification. There were so many interesting sociological questions coming out of these rather immediate observations that the project snowballed.

WRSP: How did you find that your work was received, both during your research and after publication? Did you feel that sociologists of religion and scholars in other fields were interested?

American Heathens explored topics like gender and race, and perhaps because of this there have been Folkish Heathens* who have responded negatively to it, regarding it as being too motivated by left-wing thought; how do you respond to that kind of reception?

[* = Folkish Heathenry is a wing of the religion that generally argues that Heathen practice should be restricted to members of a putative Northern European/Germanic/Nordic racial group. Reflecting this racially exclusionary approach, it is typically characterised as being politically right-wing to far-right.]

Dr Snook: During my research people were often very supportive, and often very aloof. Heathenry has no shortage of people saying that they are “doing research,” or “writing a book.” Heathens expect this—they joke about how Heathenry is “the religion with homework,” and so my work wasn’t particularly interesting to them, save a select few. And other scholars have found my work valuable, particularly those interested in new religious movements, subculture, or Heathenry’s link to white nationalism, and there are an increasing number of scholars interested in Heathenry.

In regards to my response to the criticisms of Folkish Heathens—I generally don’t respond. Sociology as a field is criticised by the right-wing in general, on principle—as are any disciplines whose line of work demands a critical engagement with structures of power and are therefore labeled “left-wing.” These politics bear themselves out daily in the labeling of “liberals,” or “feminists,” or other-such “political opponents” of those on the Right. My work is in the mix—and let’s be clear—the subtitle of my book is “The Politics of Identity...” so the book is situated firmly in sociological literature and self-consciously and explicitly about the impact of political labeling in the process of meaning-making, boundary maintenance and identity construction among Heathens.

WRSP: Back in 2019, you spent some time here in Britain. Did you have much contact with British Heathens and if so, did you note any particular differences between the British and American Heathen communities?

Dr Snook: Yes, I did! I was living in London from August-December of 2019 and during that time had the opportunity to meet and spend some time with the folks of AUK (Ásatrú UK) up in Bedford at an AirBnB weekend-retreat. Then I met back up with a couple of those AUK Heathens in London at their regularly-scheduled pub meet-up. The differences are largely cultural—because UK Heathens were born and live on the land that they imagine their pre-Christian Heathen ancestors inhabited, there is a certain cultural and historical continuity that U.S. Heathens do not have. The Neolithic sites that you and I visited together have deep spiritual significance to Heathens (and other Pagans), because they imagine their pagan forebears at those same sites thousands of years ago. So they have a different relationship to the land and their own history than Americans do. In addition to this big difference, I noticed a lot of similarities. The AUK contains members that have had a lot of experience in The Troth [a U.S.-based Heathen organisation] and others who are similarly inspired, and so much of their ritual form and practice mirrors what I had already seen a thousand times in the U.S. It was very familiar, and the conversations were the same—about the antics of Folkish Heathens in the UK, about anti-racist activism and outreach, in addition to conversations about personal ritual and practice, gods and land spirits. I am friends with many of these people on social media and we are all still in touch, in whatever ephemeral way that people online stay in touch, and they still help me with my work when I have questions.

WRSP: While there had been earlier work by the likes of Mattias Gardell, Jeffrey Kaplan, and Jenny Blain, this had tended to focus on narrow topics such as white nationalist Heathenry or seiðr, and it was really only in the 2010s that we saw the growth of academic publications focusing on what we might call “mainstream” elements of Heathenry. Your work obviously has played a major role in that, followed up by other publications by scholars like Jefferson Calico. This being the case, where do you think the academic study of Heathenry stands at present and what areas do you believe could do with greater academic treatment?

Dr Snook: A lot of scholarship continues to focus on the white supremacy problem in Heathenry, as mass-shooters and insurrectionists in the U.S. appropriate Nordic symbols and the public begins to ask questions and scholars have to answer them. This is unavoidable. I’d like to see an update on my work on the role of social media and popular culture in shaping newcomers to Heathenry, as their discursive online community shapes and influences growth. It would be nice to see a sociological treatment of the political divisions that have widened the chasm between left and right leaning Heathens since Trump’s presidential campaign in 2015. These things matter because new religious movements are realms of meaning that shift with the fluidity of cultural and political change. I think the most useful work on Heathenry will take into account the political roots of the meaning and interpretation of lore or ritual, moving beyond descriptive accounts. Few, if any, scholars have engaged deeply with the increasing popularity and significance of the god Loki to nonbinary and LGBTQ+ Heathens—I would be excited to see that done. And of course there’s a growing gaggle of academic Heathens and Paganisms scholars brainstorming how to recover Heathenry from the clutches of growing white nationalism and white supremacy, and so more public-facing sociology and scholarly outreach is urgent.

WRSP: Are you continuing your research on Heathenry or have you moved on to a different project? Do you have any forthcoming projects that we should be keeping an eye out for?

Dr Snook: I have considered a variety of other field sites, but my presence among Heathens and interaction with other scholars of Paganism keeps me firmly embedded in the thought-world of Heathenry. I have three projects going right now. The first project is an old project, a data set from a questionnaire that I was just wrapping up when we returned back from London and stumbled right into a pandemic that shut down the world—and our College data lab. The analysis of this data is in the works and sure to birth more projects. The second topic is a documentation of the rise of Inclusive Heathenry in the U.S. and Europe in direct response to the increase in right-wing activity. How this branch of Heathenry came about in this political, historical, and cultural moment is another example of how new religious movements are creatures of their time and place. It challenges the image that Heathens are primarily Folkish, right-leaning straight guys—because they get all the media. The third project I’m thinking about is how Heathens imagine Place—as so many of them idealize, make reference to, visit, think about, and find places in Northern Europe sacred, or at least significant, in their imagining of their pre-Christian forebears. This connection between place and identity is not a new field of scholarship, but connecting all of the Heathen pieces to it—about ethnicity, race, ancestry, belonging, peoplehood, sacrality, land—is particularly interesting to me in the American context in which U.S. Heathens do not live on, and were not born on, the lands from which Heathenry comes. As an additional piece to that, I’m curious about how American Heathens conceptualize indigeneity—and not just in the sense that Folkish Heathens have appropriated “indigenous” identity and politics as a shield against political criticism—but in the sense that Heathens conceptualize, honor, and practice intentional ritual to connect with the land spirits and indigenous heritage of the tribal lands upon which they are situated.

Dr Snook, thank you for participating in the WRSP Forum!

This interview is also being made available at the personal blog of the interviewer,

Dr Ethan Doyle White (<http://ethandoylewhite.blogspot.com/>)

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WRSP Interviewer:

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