

**“YOU’VE GOT TO GROW OR GO”:
INITIATION, PERFORMANCE, AND REALITY TELEVISION**

JASON WINSLADE

Initiation. The chain of Latin roots reaches back to *inire* (to go into, enter upon). We begin at *initium* (an entrance, a beginning) and proceed to *initiare* (to originate, initiate). Our destination is *initiatonem* (participation in secret rites). In this brief etymology, we get a sense of beginnings, of origins, of starting a particular action or event, a chain of events, of tradition, but with a touch of the mysterious, of secrecy. Yet this secrecy implies both speaking and not speaking, since the term *initiation* in phonetics refers to one of the two mandatory aspects of sound production in the human body, the other being articulation. Allow me to articulate. In this context, initiation is the action by which airflow is created through the vocal tract. So it is the act of creating speech, a speaking that at once must be silenced when brought into the realm of ritual initiation, where individuals participate in secret rites, beginning their study of the ineffable, whether it be in the religious, esoteric, or communal sphere. To add a further level, the term initiation is also used in chemistry, indicating a chemical reaction that triggers one or more secondary reactions. So an initiation causes a chain reaction. It creates a process. It does something. Further, it does something through speech. It performs.

Ideally, initiation also transforms. It allows for a deeper negotiation between the known and the unknown, offering a seemingly privileged view of the universe to the worthy candidate. This privileged view is at the heart of Western occultism, in which individuals and groups share secret knowledge about the universe with their initiates. Though it is a pervasive one, initiation is just one operation that constitutes occultism. Furthermore, practices like initiation are basically a network of social actions that individuals perform in order to deepen their connections with their own consciousness, with each other, and with an Other that they perceive as divine. This

interaction with the hidden is a complex one, involving various methods of engagement that are often concerned with the cautious transmission of knowledge and a practiced performance of concealing and revealing. In this piece we view initiation as a performance practice that constructs the performed, occult self. Although we are primarily focusing on initiation within Western esoteric traditions, our rite of passage takes us to the liminal realm of reality television, in order to examine initiation within popular culture.

Our context of modern Western occultism itself is fundamentally a performative operation, and its major moves, in addition to initiation, includes ritual magic, textuality, and representation. Though here we are mainly interested in the initiatory operation, all of these aspects are essentially concerned with and caught up in issues of performance, as formulated by the field of performance studies. Foremost among these issues are an acknowledgement of the constructed nature of most human activity, an emphasis on liminality, and a foregrounding of the body as a site of knowledge.¹ Occultism is concerned with performance in an obvious way, due to the fact that its most pervasive aspects are rituals, ritualized acts (such as divinations), and initiations, in which participants create theatre, often dressing up in elaborate costumes, wielding various props, chanting obscure liturgies, and acting in various roles determined by the rite. However, these rites are meant to be performative in another sense. They are meant to transform individuals' physical and spiritual lives, to "create change," and make things happen through magic. Therefore, they are meant to be performative in the Austinian sense, as well. Historically, occultism has always been inescapably bound to the problematic notion of magic. Even a basic understanding of the concept of magic that anyone might have from children's fairy tales is that to speak a magical spell will make something happen. By this definition, magic *is* performance, because individuals perform intentional acts within a ritualized context. This fairly accurately

describes the performative statement, according to J.L. Austin: the utterance leads to its enactment. Or more specifically, it is the perlocutionary act that “achieves certain effects by saying something”² Accepting magic as efficacious involves the implicit assumption that your statement (spell) will be felicitous. Magical performatives in the form of liturgical phrases and spells are paradigmatic of a broader performative understanding of the universe that occultism employs. This performative view of the universe extends beyond just the practice of ritual to the production of occult texts, identities and representations. However, the act of initiation holds the pattern for all these occult performances.

Initiation became a common anthropological term used by the West to describe so-called “rites of passage” conducted by both the “ancient” and the “primitive” Other, strange tribes existing in other times and spaces. The term was applied equally to research on ancient Greek and Egyptian civilization as well as ethnographies on exotic peoples, like the Trobriand Islanders or the Azande, for instance. In Western civilization’s own ritual creations, initiation was the name of rites associated with the developments of the Enlightenment and late modernity, when esoteric organizations like Freemasonry began to solidify their role in society as a pedagogical training ground for gentleman who wished to penetrate the veils of mystery outside the bounds of mainstream religious experience. The actual rites developed by Freemasonry and later occult societies like the Golden Dawn drew from a mythos based on fantasies of ancient Egyptian, Hebrew, and Greek mystery traditions, as well as seventeenth-century utopian Rosicrucian legends, creating the opportunity for a hybridized Western construction known as the occult initiate. The very notion of initiation and its ritual trappings has a history of pervading popular culture, from the university fraternity system to street gang activity, from conspiracy theory to countless narrative depictions in literature, television and film. Initiation has provided a potent

image for ethnographers immersing themselves in their fieldwork, and indeed, a metaphor for academics being indoctrinated into their fields.³ Finally, it is a particular current of modernity that penetrates beyond the esoteric organization and into the most seemingly exoteric of civic structures and corporate entities, not the least of which is television production.

It is this tendency for initiation as metaphor to overtake experiential analysis that positions it, unsurprisingly, as an entry point to speak about and experience occultism. Initiation is a basic component of Western occultism, a microcosmic part that often stands in for the whole of esoteric practice. It is the esoteric operation that is most familiar to us, either through its depiction in popular culture, as in the exaggerated fraternity initiation in the 1978 film *Animal House* (“thank you sir, may I have another!”), or through our own experiences of joining a new group, such as a sports team, a club or an organization. Whether or not we recognize our experiences as esoteric, spiritual, or transformative, we at least tend to acknowledge the intent behind such rituals: to assert a change in status, from outsider to insider or from a position of lower status to higher status, as in the conferring of an academic degree or a military rank. In fact, this similarity suggests a sort of everyday occultism that persists as part and parcel of our existence as social creatures.⁴

Like the term “magic,” “initiation” is often used metaphorically in social and academic settings, but when practitioners of esoteric tradition invoke it, an actual ritual performance is often the result. But even there, the metaphorical mixes with the practical, and the spiritual, for that matter, in a certain kind of a performative alchemy. Practitioners often do not speak about initiation ceremonies as such, since many swear oaths of secrecy with boundaries that vary depending on which part of the rite is the most hidden. But they do speak of initiation *experiences*, events that conform to a certain kind of narrative in which the individual faces a

challenge and is irrevocably transformed by the ordeal. They speak of changing names, identities, goals and directions in their lives, of becoming a new person. These narratives may be a form of fantasy, in which the individual casts himself as the main character in a Campbellian myth of the hero who is out to slay the dragon, claim kingship or quest for the Holy Grail, as in the Arthurian legends. These stories, in fact, do lend Western initiation rites much of their imagery and ideology, just as more recent heroic stories like J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* or even J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series are also examples of possible initiatory templates based on contemporary mythology. However, the performance of these rites and practices may actually transform the individuals who perform them and even if there is nothing more to the proceedings than fanciful approaches to therapeutic goals, these rites have an impact.

Initiation rituals, as models of occult performance, are highly coded symbolic processes that inculcate new members into the usually secret fold of a practicing group or community. The heart of this ritual process is a performative act of "passing the charge," in which the candidate receives the group's particular tradition through symbols, tools, liturgy or ritual gestures. Though the charge can be an actual statement of responsibility, many practitioners interpret the term as an intangible "energetic" experience, in which the candidate feels the psychophysical energy of his initiators and the numinous force that supposedly works through them. Most importantly, however, the performative that the ritual enacts is one that states that the candidate is indeed initiated. The initiation ritual declares that the status of the new initiate has changed in the eyes of the group and in the perception of the numinous force.⁵ In this sense, the initiation ritual defines occultism as the revealing of occult secrets to the initiate, while at the same time welcoming him into a group that is somehow separate or removed from the exoteric world. This act of simultaneously hiding and revealing is one of the central performative tropes of occultism.

Of course, Western initiation is not a monolithic, unified tradition, but rather a performative mode that wields both symbolic and actual power within the occult world. Despite the fact that as a concept, initiation, like magic, is often used ahistorically and without thought to cultural specificity, it functions as a potent metaphor for the transmission of mysterious knowledge, an occult pedagogy that embodies the particular ideals and philosophies of Western esotericism. Religious scholar Antoine Faivre describes transmission as “an esoteric teaching that can or must be transmitted from master to disciple following a pre-established channel” in which the initiate must be “attached to a tradition considered as an organic and integral ensemble deserving respect.”⁶ This definition hints at initiation’s essential power dynamic, involving an initiate’s association with a “master,” as well as the individual’s connection to a broader community and cultural tradition. The medium for transmission can often be the performance of an actual initiation rite. However, initiation tends to raise questions about authenticity, power, and performance. These questions are particularly salient for the intersection between performance studies and pagan studies, as well as the ways that initiation provides a paradigm for understanding performance.

Passage to Paradigm: Performance Studies, Pagan Studies, and Initiation

In my use of performance studies as a discipline, I follow Jon McKenzie’s characterization of performance studies as “a paradigm of knowledge” in which performance is conceptualized “as the embodied enactment of cultural forces” and as “an ensemble of activities with the potential to uphold societal arrangements or, alternatively, to change people and societies.”⁷ McKenzie also points out that the particular challenge of cultural performance is that of efficacy: performance as an effective agent for change. This very definition of performance borrows from a particularly magical discourse, by way of anthropology, in which practitioners

seek efficacy through the performance of magic and ritual. The change referred to here is analogous to the notorious early twentieth-century occultist Aleister Crowley's dictum that "magic" is "the science and art of causing change to occur in conformity with will."⁸ McKenzie reveals that it is this resistant and transgressive potential for performance that informs the majority of performance studies, while the normalizing function of performance is often ignored by performance studies scholars. Magic and occultism deal with strikingly similar questions, as magical practice can be valorized as a potentially transgressive praxis and critiqued as an almost fascistic method of control.

A salient example of these parallels is that both occultism and performance studies utilize initiation as a key performance model. McKenzie identifies Victor Turner's notion of liminality, an elaboration of Arnold Van Gennep's second stage of initiation, as the primary model for performance studies. McKenzie argues that liminality is so prominent a metaphor within the field of performance studies that he coins a somewhat paradoxical term for it: the liminal-norm. Note McKenzie's very conscious use of the initiation trope when he describes liminal rites as the exemplar for theorizing performance: "Even more than theater, rites of passage have provided Performance Studies a meta-model for its own initiation as a discipline, its passage to paradigm."⁹ In this construct, the university itself is the site for ritual transformation, a trope he borrows from Michel Foucault's essay, "Rituals of Exclusion."¹⁰ McKenzie further reminds us that "cultural performance scholars have also theorized our own activities in terms of liminality, arguing that we operate in the interstices of academia as well as the margins of social structures and seek to reflect upon and transform both the academy and society at large." According to this somewhat romantic view—one that McKenzie critiques—performance studies as a discipline and performance studies scholars are part of a ritualized operation of initiation.

Van Gennep's model, as well as providing a paradigm for performance studies, is an essential tool for understanding Western occultism, not necessarily because it accurately reflects the reality of occultism, but because his theory directly influences the construction of modern occult practice. Van Gennep's universalizing tendency has often been applied uncritically to psychology and mythology, as in the works of Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell. Practitioners have read these works and have in turn applied the model to their practice. Initiations within western occultism, from Freemasonry to witchcraft, tend to display some variation of the three stage initiatory model, which is usually described to the candidate as a dying and rebirth. In my experience as a researcher and practitioner, a vast majority of pagan rites, especially initiations, seem to display at least a passing knowledge of Joseph Campbell's "hero's journey," which features a dying and rising god archetype not unlike James Frazer's myth of the sacrificed god in *The Golden Bough* (1890).¹¹ In turn, several traditions invoke ancient mystery religions like those that Frazer speculated upon as a template for their initiations. For instance, elements of the Golden Dawn's initiatory pattern are based on the myth of Osiris, slain and risen. Also, many Pagan groups utilize the story of Persephone and Hades, the basis for the Eleusinian mysteries of Ancient Greece, as well as the story of the descent of Inanna, a Sumerian tale of death and resurrection.¹²

Since actual practice, or at least speculation on actual practice, influenced academic theories on initiation, which in turn influenced modern practitioners' initiation rituals, a feedback loop is created when academics enter into magical communities and initiate. Ethnographies on such communities tend to apply an initiation paradigm more directly to scholarship and to the initiatory path of the ethnographer. These scholars, operating in the fields of anthropology, sociology, folkloristics, religious studies, and history, among others, have certainly increased the

exposure of Paganism and its practitioners, in particular, in the academic world and popular media. Scholars who choose to write about Pagan communities seem to constantly wrestle with the problem of just how close they should get to the people they are studying. Characteristically, unlike classic anthropology studying the primitive Other, contemporary ethnographers face the challenge of representing others who have much in common with the ethnographer; many subjects are well-educated, white, European-American, and middle class. These ethnographies underline a salient quandary for researchers on Paganism and contemporary magical communities. Building on the classic anthropological dilemma regarding the relationship between the ethnographer and the object of study, these scholars struggle to maintain the distance between their scholarly identity and their role as co-participants in a community not entirely different from themselves.¹³ Significantly, initiation rites often play a major role in ethnographers' relationships with their subjects. Some, like Helen Berger (1999) and Sarah Pike (2001), prefer to remain non-initiates who still support and communicate with the communities they study.¹⁴ Others, like Jane Salomonsen (2002), receive initiations, but assert that "if religious initiation is accepted entirely against one's own beliefs or solely in order to publish secret knowledge, the act is incompatible with the ethics embedded in a method of compassion."¹⁵ This method, therefore, represents a different kind of occultism, distinct from the typical anthropological approach still haunted by colonialism, in which secrets are fetishized for their own sake. The ethnographer's experiences, what she undergoes with her subjects during her study, have now become the unknown occult aspect.

Here, Salomonsen is undoubtedly invoking the specter of T.M. Lurhmann, one of the earliest researchers on contemporary Paganism who has become a model for what not to do when studying these communities. Lurhmann's *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft* (1989), though

groundbreaking scholarship, has been roundly condemned by practitioners and scholars alike who have accused her of gaining the trust of her subjects through initiation merely in order to publish a book and acquire tenure. Despite describing some intense personal experiences while training in magical practice, Luhrmann avowedly clings to a now somewhat hoary notion of academic objectivity and constantly attempts to reassure her academic audience with statements like “I am no witch, no wizard, although I have been initiated *as though I were*” (emphasis mine).¹⁶ Ultimately, Luhrmann’s solution to her dilemma of academic objectivity is one of performance. She “performs” as if she was an initiate. And it is this pejorative sense of performance, indicating inauthenticity and dishonesty, that most angered her initiators and magical colleagues, who assumed her interest and her initiations were genuine, even though she had warned them they were being studied.¹⁷ Perhaps the most disturbing issue for Luhrmann’s interlocutors was that her “performance” could be seen as devaluing their own practices, calling into question the authenticity of their own initiation rites, or even the initiation process itself. Or perhaps, if initiation is intended to transform the initiate so that her life takes a new direction, Luhrmann angered her initiators not because her initiations failed, but because they succeeded, just not in the way they intended. The group that Luhrmann actually initiated into was not the British magical scene, but rather the elite secret society of tenured Ivy League academics. I believe that if Luhrmann had been more conscious of this process and had acknowledged it, she might have garnered more sympathy for her actions.

Similarly, historian Ronald Hutton, author of *Triumph of the Moon* (1999), now considered an authoritative text on the history of British witchcraft, is aware of the role of initiation in academia. Defending Luhrmann somewhat, Hutton admits that, despite his Pagan upbringing, the only true initiation he ever received was as an academic: “it is with only a limited

measure of irony that I regard the academy as the greatest mystery religion of the modern Western world, with its imposing shrines, its three degrees of initiation with their gorgeous robes, its long, hidden processes of training, and its claim to place its initiates to some measure in contact with the truths of the universe.”¹⁸ Throughout my own experiences in graduate school I noted similarities to initiation processes, which included internalizing a certain vocabulary and ideology.¹⁹ Accordingly, I tend to acknowledge Grimes’ notion that education is a performance event, a rite of passage; indeed, that “education is our society’s most sustained effort at initiation.”²⁰ It is difficult to study magical and initiatory traditions and not see an initiatic element to higher education. In the case of the ethnographer, the initiation paradigm is even more pronounced as the researcher continuously struggles with her role in the researched community and how far she should adapt to their beliefs and practices. Especially when an actual initiation ritual is involved, ethnographers tend to tell their own stories of initiation, in which personal transformation occurs.

Of course, these rites are continually caught up in performance issues, especially when researchers have taken seriously the experiences of practitioners and their own experiences while in ritual space. Sarah Pike certainly emphasizes bodily knowing when she writes about celebrants at various Pagan festivals who dance around the fires. These dancers use the body as a site for expression, healing, conflict resolution, exploration, and learning. Pike herself writes of her participation in the fire circle as a performance space where she awakens “sensual memories embedded in my body.”²¹ Nikki Bado-Fralick, who writes specifically on Wiccan initiation, laments that when religious studies and folkloristics address ritual performance, “it is removed from its context in the embodied world of ritual praxis. It is duly cleansed of any reference to the transformative power of magic, prayer or other discourse of faith.” According to Bado-Fralick,

these studies emphasize ritual as “disembodied text” rather than as a bodily, visceral experience that “feels real” to the participants. Further, she critiques performance theorists that “tend to secularize ritual and evaluate it as an act of artistry, a moment of religious theater.”²² Theatrical metaphors are inadequate for the study of magical ritual, and especially problematic for practitioners, specifically because of an association with “play-acting”: the notion that the activities are somehow inauthentic (as in the case of an ethnographer like Luhrmann pretending to be an initiate).

Recent attempts by scholars of contemporary Paganism to engage theories of performance have met with resistance from practitioners who see the term “performance” as an implication of pretence. In his essay in *Researching Paganisms*, entitled “Implications for the Performance of Research,” Andy Letcher notes the discomfort practitioners had with the term “performance,” an observation that reaffirms my experience with other practitioners, especially when I attempted to explain what I meant by performance studies. Nevertheless, Letcher, fully utilizing the discourse of performance studies, citing Erving Goffman, Victor Turner, Richard Schechner and Judith Butler, among others, asserts that “[a]s a Pagan insider, performer, and scholar, I believe both that spirits exist and that performance is an insightful category for understanding what I, and others like me, do.”²³ In my experience, I have similarly found that many practitioners often struggle with issues surrounding performance in their ritual work, even when they do not approach them in a scholarly setting, as Letcher and I do.

Bado-Fralick also suggests that performance is still a viable methodology, especially for a practitioner/scholar like herself who can recognize and interpret participant experience, since “analysis of performance implies a close face-to-face knowledge of the speaker and the performative act.”²⁴ Yet, Bado-Fralick is aware of the challenges of using performance as a

category for studying Wiccan ritual. According to her, “like all religions, Wicca has its share of pretenders, those who reveal the double-edge natures of *performance, practice, and play*, and their connections to the theater.” This kind of pretending, this “performance” is a controversial one in Pagan ritual, specifically with the practice of “*aspecting*,” in which a priestess or priest takes on the aspect of a god, goddess or archetype within a ritual setting.²⁵ In this construct, the priestess may speak with the “voice of the Goddess” by offering blessings, challenges, and advice. *Aspecting* also involves heightened language and liturgical speech that some of my magical peers have called “priestess voice.” The practice of *aspecting* is often caught up with issues of ego and authority, especially since it is not an act of possession as such, but, as Viviane Crowley puts it, the priestess “manifesting her own essential nature.”²⁶ When a priestess speaks from this position, her words tend to have more authority, opening the possibility of abusing that authority for personal or political gain.²⁷ However, Starhawk cautions against uncritical acceptance of information received during *aspecting*, further warning that, although *aspecting* “can be an illuminating and mind-altering experience for the person who does it, it’s not always the most empowering form of ritual for everyone else.”²⁸

Thus, Pagan practitioners are highly aware of how “performative” their rituals are and often criticize rites that seem too “showy” or “theatrical.” In my discussions with other practitioners about our shared ritual experiences, these same criteria are often present. Some rituals, and in some cases, particular moments within rituals, would feel genuine, coming from an authentic place and seeming to raise energy in spontaneous and organic ways, while others would feel trite, rehearsed, empty, unfocused, boring, showy, too theatrical, or pretentious. Of course, these assessments are highly individualized and not everyone would agree about what felt “genuine” to them, though some moments have more consensus about their success than

others. To address this issue, Bado-Fralick distinguishes between “*play* in the ludic sense, with its invocation of exuberant spontaneity and dynamic creativity, and *playing or pretending*, which I interpret as a kind of surface appearance without center or real power.” She further recommends that scholars should “examine the criteria by which a religious community determines the authenticity or inauthenticity of its religious performances.” Therefore, authenticity implies “real power.” Initiation particularly invokes questions of power.

In his prescriptive essay on performance studies, “Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics,” Dwight Conquergood asks, “What is the relationship between performance and power? How does performance reproduce, enable, sustain, challenge, subvert, critique, and naturalize ideology? How do performers simultaneously reproduce and resist hegemony? How does performance accommodate and contest domination?”²⁹ Researchers into paganism and magical practice have been asking these questions for quite some time, particularly with regards to initiation. Significantly, questions of power are central to feminist witchcraft’s approach to pagan political action, represented by witch and activist Starhawk, who distinguishes between methods of domination she calls “power over” and individual resistant action she calls “power from within.”³⁰ Power, particularly the formulation of “knowledge is power” is a fundamental factor in debates concerning magic from the Enlightenment onward. Specifically, those in power were thought to have a magical hold on their subjects, and that magic itself was simply an instrument of power. This fear holds today, as Ronald Hutton discovered in his research experiences, among those whose “view of the cosmos and its workings was sufficiently insecure for them both to credit the real efficacy of magic and to feel genuine fear and awe of those who might be able to operate it.”³¹ It is this fear that is at the heart of continued suspicions of witchcraft and enduring conspiracy theories around secret societies like the Freemasons.

However, in approaching initiation, both researchers and practitioners have wondered to what degree initiation rituals subvert or support status quo power dynamics. As Jone Salomonsen reports, the use of initiation in Reclaiming Collective, the feminist witchcraft group co-founded by Starhawk, is a controversial practice among its members. The initiation process, which demands that an initiate temporarily submit her will to that of her initiators, seems to contradict the group's adherence to non-hierarchical frameworks and its attitudes around equal access to knowledge.³² Similarly, Susan Greenwood, building upon ritual theory from Catherine Bell and Jean LaFontaine, attempts to place the initiate in a discursive nexus of power that both uplifts the candidate, potentially transforming her status, and validates and strengthens the position of the initiators.³³ This discursive nexus takes into account the initiate, the initiators, the group she is joining, and the collective histories of all the individuals and groups involved. Understanding what is meant by power is crucial in analyzing initiation as a performative act. Practitioners often talk of "energy" and power being transferred between initiators and initiates, or of raising energy in a rite, but establishing a consistent definition of these terms among practitioners is difficult. In these scenarios, facilitators often see themselves as vessels for divine energy that they draw from nature, the gods and goddesses, or the "universe" and channel for use in the rite. Again, Greenwood discusses how practitioners locate the source of their power and authority in the "otherworld" and how this may lead to unethical behavior justified by invoking the knowledge gained from these otherworldly sources.³⁴ These issues of power and authority are no less important to practitioners than they are to scholars.

In fact, pagan approaches to initiation often represent a significant shift in the application of Western occultism and its rites towards a movement that embraced progressive political ideals, consensus over hierarchy, feminism, and environmentalism. For instance, Starhawk

seems to have mixed views about initiation, acknowledging its importance, but discouraging its use to determine status, she argues that “to link it [initiation] to external rewards would undercut its meaning as a heart-called commitment to the Goddess and community.”³⁵ She emphasizes initiation as a rite of passage that marks “a new stage in personal growth” for the individual.³⁶ Moving away from the impersonal, ceremonial initiations of traditions like Masonry, she emphasizes the interpersonal aspects of such a rite. She instructs her reader to:

Choose the people you want to ask for initiation, and they should be initiated Witches whom you respect and feel close to, who have some sort of knowledge, wisdom, personal power, or qualities you yourself want to have. An initiation creates a strong bond and a karmic tie, so they should be people within your community you feel close to, not strangers or figures you admire from a distance.³⁷

Starhawk’s focus on the individual’s needs and interpersonal relations illustrates a shift in emphasis towards the individual and her experience, while still maintaining some of the ritual trappings of the more patriarchal traditions. Further, Starhawk’s descriptions of particular initiation rites indicate the degree to which such rites are tailored to the individual. Thus, initiations create the potential for the individual to express herself not only in magical ways but also in social and political ways as well.

Initiations also inevitably construct the individual as a performing subject. Even when a rite is not dramatically accompanied by a name change or an intimate welcoming into a community, initiation is a model for both transmission of knowledge and the construction of individual identity. Arthur Versluis has recently argued that in cases where actual initiatory lineages are absent, a fairly common occurrence in the West, literature and art have served as tools of esoteric transmission. In esoteric literature and art, the acts of reading and writing,

creating and interpreting art, are themselves part of the initiation process. In a sense, esoteric literature and art are performative texts that offer the opportunity for active participation on the part of the reader/initiate in the process of gnosis, which Versluis describes as “experiential insight into the nature of the divine as manifested in the individual and in the cosmos.”³⁸

Versluis’ comments provide a basis for understanding initiation not just as an esoteric tradition, but as a continually reconstructed performance. Thus, active participation can apply to reading a text, viewing a work of art, or experiencing a live performance. Just as Versluis studies particular works of literature and art as initiatic, so can performance scholars view particular performances as initiations for the audience.³⁹ However, what happens when initiation becomes the performance? Here, I offer as an example the reality show *Mad Mad House*, which involves a specifically voyeuristic kind of initiatory performance, in which audiences are witness to the initiate’s rite of passage, though in a highly controlled and mediated way. Although this is performance conceived in a more traditional performer/spectator dynamic, the vicarious nature of this performance is highly significant. Initiation generally constructs the individual as a magical being. However, in the case of reality television, the magic of the individual is inevitably the magic of celebrity.

Occult Altar/Natives: The “Reality” of *Mad Mad House*

In the finale of the SciFi Channel’s 2004 reality competition program *Mad Mad House*, the two final contestants were told “the goal will not be to win, but to perform.” The performance in question involved participation in various “rites of passage” and unlike other programs, such as *Survivor*, in which ritual is merely a metonymic frame for competition and combat, the winner was determined by the judges’ assessment of the spiritual, psychological and emotional transformation on the part of the contestants. The difficult irony is that the contestants

were competing for a \$100,000 prize. The contestants were required to “perform” these rites of passage, in a challenge reminiscent of Jon McKenzie’s notion of performance that “challenges, [...] provokes, contests, stakes a claim.”⁴⁰ Thus, the conflicting ethos present in the show’s concept and in the challenge to perform renders *Mad Mad House* a salient example of the complex and ambivalent attitudes towards ritual and initiation in mediatized society. Beginning with early game shows and the more recent phenomena of reality TV, television has always been a medium for the viewing of individual transformation in “real” settings, even if that consists of the transformation from contestant to winner through various challenges. Televised sports particularly fits in this category, as announcers and narrators constantly impose dramatic narratives on athletic competition, and nowhere is this more prevalent than in broadcasts of the Olympics, in which individuals’ stories of achievement are endlessly emphasized, manipulated and celebrated. This unquenchable desire for narrative symmetry certainly must have been a factor when Van Gennep came up with his three-act structure for initiatory ritual.

In this classic anthropological construct, initiates are separated from their community, undergo trials in a liminal state and return to reintegrate with the community, having now achieved a higher, or simply different, status. In these reality shows, the liminal state is undeniably a mediatized one. For instance, the house of *Mad Mad House* or *Big Brother*, or whatever exotic location *Survivor* is visiting, serve as the liminal space in which the drama unfolds. Through the use of both theatricalized performance space and surveilled carceral space, we as viewers are unnaturally privy to the inner happenings of the mediatized initiation process. But then again, much is, of course, still hidden from the unworthy. The notion that reality TV is not truly reality but a constructed, manipulated form is a truism that only reminds us how these shows reveal more about the constructed and manipulated nature of our own reality. As Jeffrey

Sconce argues in his essay, “See You in Hell, Johnny Bravo,” the ambivalence of reality TV “is not between the real and unreal, natural or supernatural; rather, reality TV celebrates the exhilaration of occupying a world where true and untrue, reality and artifice, event and gesture, premediated and postmediated have lost their meaning.”⁴¹ In this boundary-free zone, *Mad Mad House* attempted to create a space for authentic individual transformation by highlighting the performance of self. While competitions minimally played a role in determining the prizewinner, ultimately the contestants were judged by a complex set of performance criteria. Both the contestants and the judges were often acutely aware of how their individual, social, and spiritual performances were being constructed and would be viewed.

The somewhat odd injunction to perform in this setting makes perfect sense when you consider the contradictory context of reality TV on the SciFi channel. Airing in the Spring of 2004 on the basic cable network, *Mad Mad House* offered a new twist on reality shows like *Survivor* and *Big Brother*, by testing the contestants on their religious and cultural tolerance. The difference on this program was in its power dynamic. Eschewing the ostensible communal politics of both *Survivor* and *Big Brother*, contestants in this program did not vote each other off.⁴² Instead, they were judged by the five so-called “Alts,” practitioners of various “alternative” lifestyles who shared the house with the contestants and who presumably orchestrated the daily activities, *Survivor*-esque immunity challenges, and the various rituals. (The show referred to these ritualized activities as showcases.) *Mad Mad House*’s version of the Tribal Council began with a session in the Deliberation room, in which the immune contestant was offered the opportunity to opine on his or her fellow contestants. This discussion culminated in an Elimination Ceremony, in which each of the Alts placed an exotic-looking tribal necklace around the neck of the contestant they wish to eliminate. The placing of the necklace was usually

accompanied by an explanation or pithy comment from the Alts in a liturgical style highly reminiscent of speech patterns and tones used by celebrants in Pagan ritual. This continued until the contestant with the most necklaces was eliminated, with the immune contestant determining the outcome of a tie which, incidentally, rarely happened.

The five Alts were Fiona the Witch, Ta’Shia the Voodoo Priestess, Don the Vampire, Art the Modern Primitive and Avocado the Naturist. The use of just the first names and their “Alt” title was prominent in the show’s promotional materials and title sequence, in which their heads were placed paper doll-like (in South Park fashion) on small drawn bodies in cartoonish settings accompanied by equally cartoonish sound effects. For instance, a bubbling cauldron sound and a witch cackle accompanied Fiona’s brief scene. Further, these constructed characters exist as iconic figures in such settings as the Deliberation Room, where their gaudily painted portraits also feature prominently in the title sequence. These touches unapologetically fetishize and exoticize these characters and their “alternative” beliefs, perhaps to present them as more of a challenge to the mainstream contestants, who were predominantly young, white, upper middle class, and, if they had any religious affiliation, Christian.⁴³

Each one of the Alts could be the centerpiece of a paper on performance practices. The witch, Fiona Horne, was probably the best known outside of the show, since she had a career as an Australian rock star in the band Def FX and she has translated that sense of the performative into a series of popular books on witchcraft and Wicca.⁴⁴ Her books are somewhat unique for that niche market, because they promote a much sexier image for witchcraft: they usually have Horne, who has posed nude for several Playboy pictorials, scantily clad and draped across the cover. On the show, she often wore provocative outfits and worked an image that strongly promoted sexually liberated femininity that was not afraid to look fashionable. Don the vampire

seemed most concerned with affectation, sleeping in a coffin and dressing the part complete with cape, long nails, and Marilyn Manson-like contact lenses. Yet he seemed to often be the voice of reason, speaking his mind most directly and having no patience for “drama.” Ta’Shia performed the priestess by giving out wisdom in ritualized language, and she often used her religious affiliation to bring up racial and cultural issues. For instance her initiation rite for the final contestants involved shackles, which she attributed to the slave ships that carried her people to America. The aptly named Art, a tattoo-covered gentle giant and cancer survivor who performed suspension rituals in which his body was pierced by hooks, seemed to be the most down to earth. Avocado was a bit harder to read. He was promoted as a nudist. His contests and showcases often involved nudity, yet he actually had an impressive wardrobe. In the outside world, he is also known as somewhat of an evangelist for raw foods living, and more than once he brought this to the table on the show. His role seemed to be that of a wise buddy, but like most of the Alts, he would often dole out advice in stylized language—sometimes going into raw foods/meditation seminar mode.

Merely by casting these “Alts” as characters on a reality show, the SciFi channel stirred up issues of representation, since each of the individual Alts were called upon to represent an entire religion or practice as an “alternative” lifestyle. One such controversy involved Ta’Shia’s participation in the show. A Philadelphia organization, the National African Religion Congress Inc., filed an unsuccessful suit against Universal Studios, claiming that Ta’Shia was an Ifa priestess, not a Voodoo priestess, and that the “voodoo trial” on the show misrepresented Voodoo practices and promoted negative stereotypes. However, the network defended itself, pointing out that the show never claimed to represent authentic Voodoo practices and that the founder of the Congress had been approached for the show and turned it down (Slobodzian). Of

course, presenting Ifa as the same as Voodoo is a typical colonial move that implies all Afro-Caribbean religions are the same. Similarly, Wiccan practitioners criticized Horne's participation in the show, claiming that she represented Wicca as a "lifestyle" rather than a religion.⁴⁵ Horne has defended herself, claiming that the editing of the show did not reflect the highly ritualized atmosphere that she and the others created, which included daily meditations, yoga, rituals, divinations and other similar activities.⁴⁶ For instance, in her comments on the third episode, Horne describes a particular ritual for the women in which they honored the Goddess and their own femininity.⁴⁷ However, the editors chose to broadcast only the more salacious aspects of the rite, including a moment where the women massage each other with facial mud while the men voyeuristically watch from a distance. In another scene, Fiona harshly criticizes one of the contestants for speaking out of turn. However, the editors chose not to include the part of the scene where quiet and focused ritual space had been established and thus presents Horne as needlessly bitchy and self-centered.⁴⁸

The show's producers' had the goal of creating an entertaining television program and, as you would expect, they emphasized the drama and conflict through leading interview questions and manipulative editing. The Alts, however, seemed genuinely interested and committed to guiding these people through their personal and spiritual development. For instance, Fiona, in a journal she kept on her website, felt "that the divine hand of fate had guided us to be there together We were being guided to grow from knowing each other and to evolve. So it became much more than a game—and it became clear that the winner is going to take away something worth a lot more than the prize money."⁴⁹ To this end, the show presented various instances in which Alts took particular contestants "under their wing" in order to advise and challenge them in personal ways that were often not directly related to the game. The process in

which Alts would choose a different roommate for each night facilitated such interaction. In some cases, the show presented the positive nature of the Alts' influence. For instance, Ta'Shia encouraged and aided the contestant Jamie to leave her job as an exotic dancer and work up a business plan for her dream of opening up a gymnastics center for children. A counter example was the seemingly close relationship between Fiona and the contestant Eric, who was often presented as a manipulative and somewhat slimy wolf in lamb's clothing, and who claimed in one of his interviews to be Fiona's "puppet master." In her journals, Fiona displays much affection for Eric, and even after seeing his comments she claims that he genuinely went through some positive changes while in the house (for instance, he quit drinking).⁵⁰

Whereas the Alts presented stable, if non-mainstream, identities, the contestants were called upon to be more adaptable and somewhat more "postmodern" in their challenge to take up and try on alternative ways of living and seeing the world. At first, contestants, or "guests," as they were called, mostly refused to participate in the rituals, as happened with Ta'Shia's voodoo rite that was featured in the first episode, but when they realized they would be judged based on this participation, they put on their best game face and had a go. For instance, Loana, a young Korean-American woman presented as shy, prudish, and devoutly Christian, was often confronted by the Alts, especially Fiona, for her lack of participation in the rites; even she eventually surrendered to the ritual process. In another showcase, Fiona presented a Wiccan rite in which she tells the contestants to write down their deepest fears and then, to the contestants' surprise, reads them aloud and asks each person to claim their fear and then commit it to the cauldron fire. This is when Kelly, the young Republican, emotionally presented her fear that no one liked her through fits of crying and screaming. In her brief stay in the house, Kelly was constantly and justifiably criticized for her overly dramatic tendencies, and in an early indication

of the performance values of the show, a fellow contestant accused her of pretending shock at Art's piercings. Kelly, whose interests, according to the show's official site, unsurprisingly, were politics and "attending live theater," was eliminated at the end of the second episode—most likely because her performances are the most obvious.⁵¹

Many of the other guests defined themselves and were defined by their sense of performance. The two finalists, for instance, were intriguing case studies in performance styles. The runner-up, Nichole from Malibu, was at constant pains to prove the authenticity of her feelings and experiences due to accusations by other guests. In her blog, Ta'Shia notes how fitting it was that Nichole, seemingly persecuted for her charm, won the witch challenge, which consisted of answering questions about eliminated guests while standing noosed in a gallows.⁵² The program presented her as an attractive and chatty American Idol wanna-be with dreams of a singing career. Though she was ultimately vindicated in the Alts eyes, the other guests rightly picked up on Nichole's constant willingness to please and keen awareness of social performance. (The official site lists "people-watching" as one of her interests.) Ironically, however, two of her main accusers were the aforementioned Eric and Noel, the guests who were presented as the most double-sided in their performances. They were noted for doing one thing in the house and then boldly stating in their interviews that they were, indeed, just pretending. On the other hand, the show presented the winner, Jamie, as mostly a background character who never stands out in the trial challenges or seems to have a strong personality, until the narrative brings her to the fore in the final challenges. Though Ta'Shia points out that she puts on a false face in her career as an exotic dancer, Jamie seems much less flashy and conscious of performance than Nichole. She often downplays her considerable physical attributes and displays a more muted attitude.

In fact, the game takes an intriguing turn when the Alts realize that they must shift their previous criteria for judging because the contestants may be just pretending. Fiona decides that she will invoke “the dark goddess” to intentionally test the guests’ performances. In her journal, she displays her own performance sense, writing: “When I decided to intentionally create some chaos, I had it to do it in a ‘hyper real’ and somewhat exaggerated way—essentially because this was a world within a world—an ultra condensed environment of life’s excitement and joy, but also its fears, confusions and disappointments. I had to push buttons and provoke people for the slightest thing—I had to behave in a way that is not my nature.”⁵³ In a similar statement on performances, Ta’Shia, who often used the mantra “you’ve got to grow or go,” tellingly adds in her blog that “we are watching them like hawks, even when they don’t think we’re looking. We’re looking, listening, divining and conjuring—spiritually and psychically processing that which we observe. And we’re sharing notes! By any means necessary, we will flush out those who think they can play us. This is not a dress rehearsal—this is reality!”⁵⁴

But the reality that is happening in this reality show is a highly ritualized one. Reality competition programs, or “gamedocs” as many critics call them, are often predicated on ritualized action, particularly in the actual competitions. Contestants for *Survivor*, for instance, often compete for immunity through vaguely exoticized games, which are meant to evoke the indigenous culture that inhabits the location where the show is being filmed (like Borneo or the Australian outback). Each episode culminates in a “tribal council,” where contestants cast votes to eliminate other contestants in a setting replete with torches and native-looking iconography. Most often, however, these attempts at authenticity seem more like summer camp where youth are made to adopt “tribal” identities and encouraged to achieve the status of “warrior.” Yet, even this white Indian playacting speaks to a significant gap in Euro-American initiatory traditions.

People in the modern mediatized world still long for these rites of passage and create their own when society doesn't provide them. The results are often negative, such as gang activity and hazing incidents.⁵⁵ Grimes argues that "unattended, a major life passage can become a yawning abyss, draining off psychic energy, engendering social confusion, and twisting the course of the life that follows it."⁵⁶ Reality television often attends to these life passages for us, from the awful televised wedding of *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire* to the more surface transformations of personal style shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* or BBC's *What Not To Wear*. While shows like *Survivor* or *Big Brother* attempt to simulate a communal dynamic, like *Mad Mad House*, they result in a competition, telling us that this is what community is really about. More recent shows like BBC's *Faking It* or *Morgan Spurlock's 30 Days* take a more positive route by transforming their subjects based on immersion experiences, in which a person creates a new identity and trade, but without the gamedoc framework. In essence, we love to watch real people change in front of our eyes.⁵⁷

Mad Mad House takes all this a step further by turning the ritualization of gamedocs into actual ritual. Every episode had a main ritual showcase provided by one of the Alts, in addition to lesser rituals, like Fiona's goddess ritual or Art's ritual for Jamie's navel piercing. Other smaller rites were everywhere, such as group meditation, and ritualized personal moments between the Alts, or between the Alts and the guests (i.e., meals, divinations, greetings and ritual mantras). However, it was the showcases that were the most staged for the camera. Fiona's initial Wiccan rite, for instance, eschewed the usual ritual circle for a more performer/audience aesthetic. Fiona, who wore a revealing white dress with the cleavage area shaped like a pentacle, struck dramatic poses on a raised stage wielding a large sword and cauldron, while the guests watched on a lower level, ascending the stage when they were called on to claim their

confessions and, well, perform.⁵⁸ Therefore, it is no surprise, that the culmination of the series would be rites of passage for the final two contestants. Grimes claims that “rites of passage are culturally stylized crises that reinforce a society’s belief that the phases of a cycle are real and natural.”⁵⁹ Thus, the entire notion of rites of passage are predicated on constructing the real through the hyper-real. These rites of passage, of course, were tailored specifically to the trappings of each of the Alts’ practices—sleeping in a coffin for Don, dragging around chains and cattle bones for Art, eating a harsh raw food meal for Avocado, isolated and silent meditation for Fiona, and a series of tasks while blindfolded and shackled for Ta’Shia. On the surface, these challenges amounted to a kind of pseudo-spiritual *Fear Factor*. However, it is the Alts’ attitudes and language that elevate the activities to a more sacred performance. For instance, in her blog, Ta’Shia seems to describe performance not just for the Alts or the television audience, but for something higher: “What the Guests don’t realize is that they’re not just dealing with us, the human Alts; they’re dealing with the deities that watch over us and the forces of nature that protect us. What we don’t see, the powers know.”⁶⁰ Here, she refers to the use of divination to determine the authenticity of the guests’ experiences, because, for the Alts, sacred and authentic performance, performance for the Gods, is the only performance that matters.

These problematic criteria created some strong tensions among both the Alts and the guests. For instance, the oldest contestant, Bonnie, was eliminated about halfway through the show because the Alts had determined that she had achieved her transformation early and was only helping the less committed guests along. Because of factors like these, the elimination ceremonies were often emotional affairs, as the Alts did not seem to think of it as elimination from a game, but rather the release of an initiate after she has completed her initiation. If the

show had been a more high profile ratings giant like *Survivor*, part of the reintegration rite, Van Genep's third stage, would inevitably be the televised interview afterwards, in which the contestant would be transformed into a full blown media figure (in lieu of this, the SciFi Channel ran exit interviews on their website). The show certainly constructed the final sequence of rites of passage undergone by Nichole the singer and Jamie the exotic dancer as a dramatic come-from-behind for Jamie, who had previously been unimpressive in the competitions and had not really distinguished herself in the Alts' eyes. The Alts ultimately chose Jamie over Nichole because they felt that Nichole had already started at a higher level and that Jamie actually underwent more significant changes.

Mad Mad House initiates for our viewing pleasure, making real the initiatory metaphors of reality TV. Of course, this initiation is not unproblematic for actual practitioners because performance is privileged over practice as the only means for achieving experience. According to Grimes, "ritual practice is the activity of cultivating extraordinary ordinariness...so practice ought to precede performance."⁶¹ Of course, ostensibly the show was not about creating converts, but, for the Alts, their wish was to aid the guests in shifting their view of the world and consciousness, even if briefly. When the SciFi channel website interviewed Art, he claimed that the show was his *own* rite of passage since it helped him claim his own voice and identity.⁶² On her website, Fiona Horne also refers to her experiences on the show as "a real Rite of Passage for me, and a time where not only my practical experience of the Craft [referring to witchcraft] enhanced but also my psychic and esoteric experience."⁶³ So the show functions as initiation on several levels. We watch this process and perhaps we go through the same vicariously, or perhaps we just experience a *jouissance* from the drama. Or perhaps neither of these, since the show's low ratings ensured it would not return the following season, despite its avid fan

following, which is evidenced by the copious amounts of feedback sent to the site.⁶⁴ I hesitate to uncritically suggest that reality TV constructs these initiatory narratives to present individuals to the virtual viewing community in the same way that initiates are presented to their tribal or neotribal communities. However, I am fascinated by how shows like *Mad Mad House* underline a ritual tendency that seems to have reemerged in contemporary culture, if indeed it ever went away. The fact that the show at least attempted, however misguided and fetishized, to address the spiritual lives of contestants made it unique and worth viewing. I personally found it interesting because the internal conflicts, especially between the Alts, mirrored many of my experiences working with magical communities as a practitioner. Finally, even if the show was not a pure representation of these alternative lifestyles—and, given the gamedoc format, how could it be?—it did raise important questions about the construction and performance of spiritual identity, not to mention the ambivalence of the challenge to perform and the problems of assessing its authenticity. In this case, the authentic performance of ritual rites of passage ultimately does pay off for the winner who performs and transforms successfully. Thus, initiation serves as a way to showcase identity as a performed rite of passage, and when that initiation is televised, that rite of passage is the creation of celebrity—even when that celebrity is short lived.

ENDNOTES

¹ Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 191.

² J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1975), 121.

³ Ronald Grimes, *Marrying and Burying: Rites of Passage in a Man's Life* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 47.

⁴ Even the most mundane groups in American society can have a ritualistic, occult-like element. In a class on occultism, one of my students related how her induction to the National

Honors Society was accompanied by ritual robes and lighting of candles, which represented leadership.

⁵ Depending on their personal beliefs, or the accepted language of the group, practitioners refer to that numinous force as God, the gods, the Goddess, the Divine or simply, the universe.

⁶ Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Godwin, New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 14-5.

⁷ Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 8, 30.

⁸ Aleister Crowley, *Magick in Theory and Practice* (1929; Reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1976), xii.

⁹ McKenzie, 37.

¹⁰ McKenzie explains: “the very same rituals which performance scholars have long cited in theorizing the efficacy of performance, Foucault cites to explain the university’s normative function within contemporary society” (51). He refers to Sylvève Lotringer, ed., *Foucault Live: Interviews, 1966-84* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), 66.

¹¹ I have studied and practiced in various magical communities, including groups identifying as Wiccan, Golden Dawn-oriented or Hermetic, for close to fifteen years. These groups have been primarily based in Ohio, Michigan and the Chicago area, in addition to various Pagan festivals in the Midwest and New York State. I have received my own Wiccan and Hermetic initiations, in 1997 and 2000, respectively. Also, for a brief discussion of Campbell’s contribution to theories of myth and ritual, see Catherine. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 16.

¹² Though not specifically for initiations, several groups I studied used these particular myths as ritual dramas that served as an initiatory current for open, public rituals. Barbara Jane Davy also discusses the use of the Persephone and Inanna myths in *Introduction to Pagan Studies* (99-100).

¹³ These works include (but are certainly not limited to) T.M. Luhrmann's *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (1989), Helen Berger's *A Community of Witches: Contemporary Neo-Paganism and Witchcraft in the United States* (1999), Susan Greenwood's *Magic, Witchcraft and the Otherworld: An Anthropology* (2000), Sarah M. Pike's *Earthly Bodies and Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community* (2001), Jone Salomonsen's *Enchanted Feminism: The Reclaiming Witches of San Francisco* (2002), Sabina Magliocco's *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America* (2004), and Nikki Bado-Fralick's *Coming to the Edge of the Circle: A Wiccan Initiation Ritual* (2005). Ronald Hutton's *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Pagan Witchcraft* (1999), although a historical text, is also significant for the ways that he addresses these issues. Additionally, *Researching Paganisms* (edited by Jenny Blain, Douglas Ezzy and Graham Harvey, 2004) is an entire anthology addressing the role of the ethnographer in researching contemporary paganism. These ethnographers describe varying levels of their personal involvement in the groups they studied. Some, like Luhrmann, Greenwood, and Salomonsen mention their own initiations as part of this engagement. However, of all the aforementioned book-length studies, Bado-Fralick is the only scholar who self-identifies as Pagan (specifically Wiccan) from the outset. Many more ethnographic works on various magical communities are constantly being produced and published, due to the current popularity of what is now known as Pagan Studies.

¹⁴ In Pike's case, this is facilitated by the fact that she studies Pagans at large festivals where insider/outsider boundaries are much more porous than what would be the case with a typical coven or circle.

¹⁵ Jone Salomonsen, *Enchanted Feminism: The Reclaiming Witches of San Francisco* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 18.

¹⁶ T.M. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 18.

¹⁷ Luhrmann admits she was "was rather relieved when people forgot what I had so carefully told them" about her researcher identity (17). Ronald Hutton, assessing the situation with Luhrmann's own research subjects, claims "What to her appeared to be forgetfulness on the part of others appeared to many of those people – as I was made aware by them – to be a genuine change of heart on her part" (*Witches* 263).

¹⁸ Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 270.

¹⁹ This evokes Luhrmann's controversial notion of "interpretive drift," the "slow, often unacknowledged shift in someone's manner of interpreting events as they become involved with a particular activity" (312). Primarily, she uses this concept both to explain her assimilation into these groups and to theorize how an individual might take on the seemingly irrational beliefs associated with contemporary witchcraft. Ultimately, however, "interpretive drift" can apply to any area of specialized knowledge or practice.

²⁰ Grimes, Ronald, *Marrying and Burying: Rites of Passage in a Man's Life* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 45.

²¹ Pike, Sarah M. *Earthly Bodies and Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search For Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 189.

²² Bado-Fralick, Nikki. *Coming to the Edge of the Circle: A Wiccan Initiation Ritual* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 8.

²³ Letcher, Andy, "Bardism and the Performance of Paganism: Implications for the Performance of Research," in *Researching Paganisms* (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2004), 31.

²⁴ Bado-Fralick, 19.

²⁵ Through interviews and conversations I have observed that practitioners do note similarities between aspecting and shamanic trance possession or Spiritualist channeling, but they tend to claim a unique position for what they do (for instance, claiming that they do not "lose themselves" to the degree that, say, a Voodoo cheval does). A good deal of this is based on assumptions and misunderstandings of these practices.

²⁶ Greenwood, Susan. *Magic, Witchcraft and the Otherworld: An Anthropology*. (Oxford: Berg, 2000).

²⁷ Magliocco, Sabina. *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 175.

²⁸ Starhawk (Miriam Simos), *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*, 20th anniversary ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), 273.

²⁹ Conquergood, Dwight. "Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics," *Communication Monographs* 58 (1991): 190.

³⁰ Starhawk (Miriam Simos). *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics*, new edition (London: Mandala/Unwin Paperbacks, 1990), 13.

³¹ Ronald Hutton, *Witches, Druids and King Arthur* (London: Hambledon and London, 2003), 276.

³² Jone Salomonsen, *Enchanted Feminism: The Reclaiming Witches of San Francisco* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 49.

³³ Greenwood, Susan, *Magic, Witchcraft and the Otherworld: An Anthropology*. (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 146.

³⁴ Greenwood, 180.

³⁵ *ibid.*, 276.

³⁶ *ibid.*, 50.

³⁷ *ibid.*, 242.

³⁸ Versluis, Arthur, *Restoring Paradise: Western Esotericism, Literature, Art, and Consciousness* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), 1.

³⁹ I have already attempted this kind of analysis of a live performance with a Chicago production called *The Edwardian Mysteries*, an interactive piece in which the performers “invoke” historical figures from various occult movements, such as Aleister Crowley and Helena Blavatsky, and initiate audience members into a fictional secret society. See Susan Kattwinkel, ed. *Audience Participation: Essays on Inclusion in Performance* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003).

⁴⁰ McKenzie, 32.

⁴¹ Jeffrey Sconce, “See You in Hell, Johnny Bravo,” in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 265.

⁴² One exception to this rule was a particularly telling episode in which contestants were told that they would vote off a member. They did so and then were told that this decision would not

count, as only the “Alts” had this power. The judges explained to the viewing audience that their strategy was to expose the weakness of alliances.

⁴³ There was one African-American contestant, but, like the horror movie cliché, he was the first to go.

⁴⁴ Besides her writing, Horne also has an active career in various media, including a radio show, various talk shows, scuba diving on nature shows, consulting on television programs and films (like *Charmed* and the recent remake of the *Wicker Man*), and she is apparently working with television producers on a sitcom based on her witchcraft practice.

⁴⁵ Barbara Jane Davy, *Introduction to Pagan Studies* (New York: Alta Mira Press, 2007), 197.

⁴⁶ Personal conversation, May 18, 2006. Horne has also claimed that she turned down the offer to appear in *Mad Mad House* three times because she was concerned that the producers would not treat Witchcraft respectfully. From her comments, Horne implies that the show was originally even more exploitative, though she does not go into details (Horne 182).

⁴⁷ Fiona Horne, “Mad Mad House: Fiona’s Report ‘Behind the Scenes’ Episode Three,” <http://www.fionahorne.com/mmh/ep3.htm>.

⁴⁸ Fiona Horne, “Mad Mad House: Fiona’s Report ‘Behind the Scenes’ Finale,” <http://www.fionahorne.com/mmh/finale.htm>.

⁴⁹ Fiona Horne, “Mad Mad House: Fiona’s Report ‘Behind the Scenes’ Episode Three,” <http://www.fionahorne.com/mmh/ep3.htm>.

⁵⁰ Fiona Horne, “Mad Mad House: Fiona’s Report ‘Behind the Scenes’ Episode Five,” <http://www.fionahorne.com/mmh/ep5.htm>. In fact, despite Eric’s disparaging comments on the show, his friendship with Fiona continued long after the show wrapped and they were still socializing when I met Ms. Horne in Boston in 2006, where I delivered this paper for the

“Charming and Crafty” conference on Magic and Popular Culture. I also met Eric, who had dropped by to visit her.

⁵¹ Unfortunately, SciFi.com has since deleted their official *Mad Mad House* site.

⁵² Iya Ta’Shia, “Fiona Takes the Guests to the Gallows,” comment posted April 27, 2004, [http://homepage/mac.com/kia/magickk/tashia8.html](http://homepage.mac.com/kia/magickk/tashia8.html). Ta’Shia’s blogs were on the official show website, which has since been deleted by SciFi.com. However, a fan has reproduced the blogs on her own site.

⁵³ Fiona Horne, “Mad Mad House: Fiona’s Report ‘Behind the Scenes’ Episode Four,” <http://www.fionahorne.com/mmh/ep4.htm>.

⁵⁴ Iya Ta’Shia, “Wiccan Trial Flushes Phonies,” comment posted March 12, 2004, <http://homepage/mac.com/kia/magickk/tashia2.html>.

⁵⁵ Hazing incidents are perennially in the news. In 2003, one particular incident at Glenbrook North, a Chicago suburban school, was particularly striking. Twelve Senior girls at the high school were charged with misdemeanor battery for subjecting junior classmates to beatings and dumping buckets of mud, paint, feces, garbage and animal parts on them (http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/05/20/national/main_554773.shtml). Oddly enough, being covered with buckets of animal entrails was part of the “Voodoo Trial” on *Mad Mad House*.

⁵⁶ Ronald Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 5.

⁵⁷ The SciFi Channel’s latest “reality” offerings are *Who Wants to Be a Superhero*, in which contestants transform themselves into their own image of a comic book hero, and another show in which contestants test their psychic abilities against the experts.

⁵⁸ Through a conversation with Ms. Horne, I learned that she had attempted to perform this ritual in a circle, like a traditional Wiccan rite, but the producers insisted on this kind of proscenium staging to aid in filming.

⁵⁹ Grimes, 196.

⁶⁰ Iya Ta'Shia, "Noel: Cold-Busted by Loana," comment posted April 20, 2004, <http://homepage/mac.com/kia/magickk/tashia7.html>.

⁶¹ Grimes, 217.

⁶² "*Mad Mad House* chat with Modern Primitive Art Aguirre," SciFi.com, <http://www.scifi.com/transcripts/2004/aaguirre3.1.html>.

⁶³ Fiona Horne. "Special Announcements," <http://www.fionahorne.com> (March 2004).

⁶⁴ To this date, three years after its airing, there has never been any announcement of the show's release on DVD, leaving fans who want to own the show to search for various traded or pirated forms online. Interestingly, while the show was still airing, Pagan icon Oberon Zell, of the Church of All Worlds, related to me that the network was interested in having him on the second season as a "Wizard." Unfortunately, this did not come to pass as the show was canceled. I cannot help but think this was a missed opportunity, as Zell is certainly one of the most interesting and performance-conscious individuals in the Pagan movement.

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