

Mapping the Wiccan Ritual Landscape: Circles of Transformation

Nikki Bado-Fralick

Wicca, or Witchcraft,¹ is a religion without a sacred architecture. Its practice unbounded by walls, Wicca claims no temples, church buildings, synagogues, or mosques. There is, however, a sacred landscape within which complex multi-directional movements are made that elicit transformative ritual processes. Like practitioners of other religions, Wiccans (or Witches) may perform simple acts of meditation, prayer, or informal ceremonies at any time and in any place. However, formal group rituals are held in a specially prepared space called “the Circle,”² a place that Witches describe as “between the world of humans and the realms of the Gods.” The casting of the magic Circle—or the construction of sacred space—is an essential step in the performance of major Wiccan religious ritual as well as a fundamental skill that must be mastered by newly initiated Witches. An examination of this crucial element of Wiccan practice will provide insight about the ways in which Wiccans engage religious space and ritual itself as a dynamic and transformative process and perhaps raise questions about the nature of space in general.

The Craft of the Wise

Wicca and other contemporary Pagan religions are relatively new subjects for scholars, and so it may be necessary to provide a brief grounding in Wicca before embarking on a discussion of ritual landscape. Note that it is extremely difficult to make general statements about the Craft because of the diversity of its practices and communities;³ any description I give must not be understood as definitive.

Wiccans frequently describe their practice as a modern-day revival or re-creation of Western polytheistic nature religions whose roots

extend into the indigenous shamanic and religious practices of pre-Christian Europe. Wicca is not a “religion of the book,” but rather one that draws from a variety of oral and written materials and especially from ritual practices. In general, Witches worship both Gods and Goddesses, with the emphasis on the plural, although there are groups that primarily worship the Goddess. The Craft may be practiced by single individuals or in small groups called covens, which have enormous autonomy and vary widely in composition, size, and structure. While there are nationally recognized spokespersons,⁴ no central group of Wiccan leaders or elders is responsible for establishing dogma or standardizing ritual practices.

Of particular relevance to a discussion of religious landscape is the degree to which Wiccan religious worldview foregrounds processes of change and transformation. This is evident both in Wiccan theology and ritual practices. For example, reincarnation is one of the central teachings of the Craft, reflecting an awareness of cycles of change and transformation in the human life as well as in the natural world. In fact, Witches draw many of their theological insights from the ongoing cycles of nature, which are typically celebrated in an annual solar calendar of eight sabbats,⁵ or seasonal holidays, as well as in a monthly lunar cycle that marks the phases of the moon. These solar and lunar cycles form the basis for ritual practices that celebrate and enact the change and transformation of both person and natural world.⁶

A worldview that foregrounds processes and actions over things and states presents a significant departure from the ways in which models of religion, ritual, and—as we shall see—space are often conceived. Scholars construct convenient and overarching categories such as “Christian” or “Buddhist” or “Hindu” in order to try to talk coherently about religion. Unfortunately, in a system that foregrounds objects, these categories of convenience themselves become objectified, mere labels concealing the vast range of practices, actions, and changes of religious people through time. But when emphasis shifts to processes and actions, religion can be perceived as a lived human activity rather than a convenient category. In other words, religion as a “thing” disappears, revealing the actions and expressions of religious people.

This shift also alters the perception of ritual, which is frequently understood as a static and repetitive experience provided by authority and/or tradition and performed for supplicants or on them. Such a perception focuses on a prescriptive, rather than a creative, dimension to religious ritual and contains an embedded sense of tradition as essentially static and authoritative rather than dynamic and adaptive. A worldview that emphasizes movement or change enables ritual to be understood as a living and creative process, rather than as a body of inherited texts that are performed.

Witches are quite consciously focused on the transformative nature of ritual processes and aware of their own creative efforts in bringing about a desired transformation. In fact, much Wiccan ritual activity is devoted to themes of change and transformation, e.g., the transformation of nature from one season to the next, or the process of transforming lay student to initiated clergy (itself usually understood as part of a lifelong process of learning and spiritual growth). Even healing is ritually performed as a process transforming illness to health. It should therefore be no surprise that models of space undergo similar transformation within a Wiccan worldview.

Space: The Problem of Typology

It is customary, following Mircea Eliade, to speak of space as either “sacred” or “profane” (1958). I wish to problematize this distinction on at least two counts. First, since Wicca is a religion oriented towards nature, in some sense “natural” space is also theologically “sacred” space. Even spaces that are deliberately or “artificially” constructed—living rooms, park shelters, spare bedrooms—become potentially “sacred” spaces if the Circle is cast in them. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to speak in terms of a continuum of sacred and profane, with some spaces being “more” sacred—say, Denali National Park or Stonehenge—and others “less” sacred (my garage, for instance).

While initially promising, this proposed continuum actually leads to my second problem with Eliade’s distinction: I can find nothing that is *inherently* either sacred or profane. As Jonathan Z. Smith (1978)

puts it, these are “situational or relational categories,” not ontologically given ones. Space has no ontological status independent of its relation to human activity. However, a typology of space implies a static and substantive view that divides space into discreet, objective units, each of which may be assigned an ontological status independent of its relation to human activity. In other words, framing the issue of space in either sacred or profane terms is approaching the question the wrong way around.

Moving from ontology to activity, the Wiccan religious landscape is revealed as fluid and ever shifting, replete with themes of “becoming” and transformation. Space may assume either sacred or mundane status at any given moment in the ritual process, its boundaries shifting according to the perspectives and activities of the participants. Throughout this article, I will use the terms “sacred” and “mundane” advisedly, not as ontological states or “kinds” of space, but to describe the activities of Witches and their relationships to the spaces with which they are engaged during ritual practices. For example, I will use “sacred space” to refer to activities connected with the Witches’ magic Circle. By focusing on *activities in* rather than *ontologies of* space, I also hope to illustrate the importance of so-called mundane space and activities in the overarching ritual process.

The varied contours of Wiccan religious space play an enormously important role in the transformative process of rituals such as initiation. During the initiation rite, the transformation of person from student or dedicant to Witch or priest/ess is intimately and dramatically keyed to the creation of the magic Circle and its powers as transformed space. Spatial and personal transformation are thus dynamically interrelated and interdependent. It is therefore particularly appropriate that we examine the contours of Wiccan religious space within the context of initiation, one of the most fundamentally transformative experiences for a practitioner of the Craft.

The Sacred Landscape

I choose the words “sacred landscape” to describe the Wiccan ritual space in an attempt to evoke the concept of something that is at once both “natural” and yet “man-made,” or perhaps somewhere in-between a

“found” or natural environment and a deliberately created one. Witches may cast the magic Circle indoors or—more ideally for a “nature religion”—outdoors, in any space large enough to accommodate all attendees and one that affords a certain degree of privacy, transforming that particular and bounded space into “sacred territory.” When the ritual is over, Witches “unmake” the Circle, now marking the space for mundane use. Since the Circle is a “created” space even when cast outdoors, I find the term sacred “landscape” preferable to sacred “geography” because landscaping suggests the act of altering existing natural features through efforts of human will and creativity.

Unfortunately, what is not fully captured by the word “landscape” is the temporal and spatial fluidity of Wiccan ritual space. Temporally, the Circle exists only for the duration of the particular ritual event. Witches cast the Circle, dedicate it to a particular purpose or rite, perform the rite, and take down the Circle. A perfectly ordinary or mundane living room becomes—for the duration of the ritual—a sacred Circle, and then returns to being a living room once again. Moreover, no Circle is ever quite “the same” Circle, much like no artistic performance is ever quite the same performance. A Witch may cast the Circle in the same place, using the same ritual tools, the same pattern of Circle casting, the same invocations, a hundred times. Yet every Circle casting, and every ritual performance, is unique.

Spatially, the Circle is quite portable: Witches cast Circles almost anywhere that it is practical to do so. What I find interesting is that the space within the Circle itself is understood as being “shifted” to a place that Witches describe as “between the world of humans and the realms of the Gods.” By this, Wiccans mean that the Circle occupies a unique space that is neither entirely “mundane” nor “otherworldly”; the Circle is located *in*, but not *of* this world. Witches cast the Circle to be “a fit place for the Gods to enter” and to commune with Their worshippers, but they do not imagine themselves “transported” to the realms of the Gods, however that may be constructed theologically by a particular group.

The edge or circumference of the Circle marks a boundary between worlds that requires different actions and even a different personality on the part of the Witch. This is reflected in behavior within the magic Circle and in the intentional invocation of an individual’s “Craft

personality.” When a Witch crosses the boundary and steps into the Circle, she leaves behind her worries, anxieties, the everyday cares of life, and the hassles of that day. Turning her attention instead to the work that must be done in the Circle, the Witch transforms herself into her Craft personality, a persona that reflects her sacred identity and is indicated by the usage of her Craft name within the Circle. In some respects, the process of donning a Craft personality is similar to an actor “getting into character” before a performance. But unlike actors, who often wear roles that are not attractive or desirable to them, the magical personality reflected in the Craft name articulates what the Witch feels to be the most sacred, authentic, and desirable parts of her being. The Witch’s personal transformation—from the mundane self to the sacred self and back again—is performed every time the Circle is cast.

A degree of secrecy or confidentiality about the Craft, particular rituals, and ritual participants is expected and even demanded by oath. When the Witch unmakes the sacred space or leaves the Circle, she also leaves behind the details of the rite and keeps confidential the identities of her fellow practitioners. “What happens in the Circle stays in the Circle” is a common saying among those Witches who view their practice as a private and esoteric path. This expectation of confidentiality naturally constrains scholars who, like myself, are also practitioners of the Craft. For this reason, my description of ritual is bounded both by personal oaths as a priestess and by the guidelines of ethical fieldwork practices. Thus, in the discussion that follows I will not disclose the identities of ritual participants, specific details as to ritual gesture and posture, and exact wording of specific ritual narratives. However, the ritual I describe will be quite close in spirit and structure to ones practiced by my own group and others familiar to me. With this limitation in mind, I turn now to a brief description of an initiation ritual to illustrate the transformative processes of both space and individual.

Shifting Perspectives/Shifting Space

The Witches will perform this initiation ritual at night at a farm in the country. Weather permitting, the coven will hold the ceremony

outdoors. There are both theological and practical reasons for holding the initiation ritual outdoors rather than inside the Witch's home. Wiccan theology foregrounds Nature as a "member" of the spiritual community whose presence at the rite is made apparent and engaged by the worshippers through outdoor ritual praxis. There are also practical reasons for holding the initiation outdoors: initiations take up a *lot* of space, and no one in the group has a house large enough for all the necessary activities.

The ritual is framed by an event that takes place in the kitchen, where the Witches gather to prepare. The dedicant arrives—early, much to everyone's amazement—and finds the coven in the kitchen waiting for her. Almost immediately, the Witches start to tease her about arriving so early and kid her about the "ordeals" ahead, dropping elaborate hints about "what's in store for you now." The dedicant is unable to respond fully to the teasing because she has been instructed to spend the day in silent meditation. Such joking or teasing serves the dual and rather contradictory purpose of both relieving tension and heightening it.⁷

It is now close to sunset. The dedicant robes before being taken out back to the pond on the edge of the farm, which is away from the house and also far enough from the ritual site to prevent her from clearly seeing or hearing any of the preparations. She is instructed to sit on the ground and meditate on the path she has chosen, with a candle flame as her only light. She will be safely "out of the way" until the coven is ready for her.

At the Circle area, which is set back in a far field and surrounded by a grove of thick-standing trees for privacy, the Witches set up the altar in the north with appropriate ritual equipment, a vase of flowers, and the wine and the cakes. The four directions—north, east, south, and west—have already been plotted as accurately as possible with a compass and then marked by specially blessed candles.⁸ Satisfied that they are ready, the Witches gather in the Circle around the central fire pit, where they do a quick and silent meditation to "ground and center" themselves before the ritual. At this point, the individual Witches begin to change over into their sacred or magical personas, indicated by the usage of their Craft names, and begin to cast the Circle.

Casting a Circle is not taken lightly; it is a skill demanding a competent and demonstrable level of somatic practice. The Witch must be totally in tune with each element of the casting process so that casting the Circle becomes almost transparent, “second nature,” a deeply embedded part of her sense of self as Witch and priestess. The casting of the Circle and the basic ritual structure may be outlined as follows:

- Construct the Circle
 - Cut the Circle (Fire)
 - Invoke Air
 - Invoke Earth and Water
 - Invoke the Watchtowers
 - State the purpose of the rite
 - Invoke the Gods
- Conduct work of specific ritual
- Share cakes and wine
- Complete any other ritual work
- Deconstruct the Circle
 - Bid the Gods farewell
 - Bid the Watchtowers farewell
- Break the Circle

In casting the Circle, the Witch literally “cuts” the space out of mundane space by walking the circumference of the Circle, using the ritual sword or athame to mark the Circle’s boundary. Never used to cut anything physical, both ritual sword and athame are tools of the element fire, and so it is fire that marks the initial separation of sacred space from the everyday. This symbolic marking by fire is followed by an invocation of the air element: incense is wafted along the circumference of the Circle. Earth and water are invoked simultaneously in the same manner; the water contains salt, a symbol of earth, and has therefore been consecrated and blessed as both elements.

The four Guardians of the Watchtowers, who rule over the four directions, are invoked next through physical gesture, prayer, and intonation. They are spirit beings, referred to as “Ancient and Mighty Ones,” who guard each direction and rule over the corresponding element. In this coven’s tradition, the direction north is associated

with the element earth, east with air, south with fire, and west with water. The Guardians of the Watchtowers are called upon to witness the activities of the ritual and to guard the participants of the Circle from harm. They are especially important figures in ritual initiation, as they are key facilitators in the transformative process that changes a dedicant into a priest or priestess of the Craft. Just as the Watchtowers are invoked, so, too, are they released or dismissed at the end of the Circle. The statement of the rite's purpose completes the casting of the Circle. The Witches are now ready to invoke the Gods into the Circle by means of physical gesture, prayer, and chant.

After the Gods have been invoked, the dedicant is brought back to the Circle to face the challenge of Death (played by one of the Witches) and the ordeals of initiation. In a hard and stern voice Death delivers the warning that without two passwords—"perfect love" and "perfect trust"—the dedicant may not enter. She answers with the two passwords and is dealt a symbolic death stroke with the sword. Among other things, this action signifies the death of her old way of life and her previous status as a dedicant. She is then immediately blindfolded and loosely bound so that she can walk without falling. Witches call this state "neither bound nor free," and they feel it symbolizes the human condition quite nicely. From a scholarly perspective, this state neatly illustrates the candidate's liminal state: neither "bound" nor "free," neither merely dedicant nor yet an initiate, neither wholly in the mundane world nor yet in the realm of the Gods.

At this point, the dedicant is led (or rather propelled) counterclockwise around the outside of the Circle. It is now time for her mundane self to be "unmade" and purified by each element represented by the Watchtowers. At each quarter she is stopped by the Witch who represents the Guardian of that watchtower and challenged about where she comes from, where she is going, what her intentions are, and so forth. These are all formal questions with formal answers. Each Guardian denies the dedicant entrance to the Circle from that quarter, demanding that she first be purified and consecrated by the corresponding element. The Guardian delivers a stern warning that, if it finds her unworthy of initiation, its element will destroy her. For example, the earth will "open up and swallow her" should the Guardian of the North find her an unworthy candidate.

Since the earth does *not* open up and swallow the dedicant, the Witch representing that Guardian administers the purification of its element and passes the dedicant to the next quarter. The Guardians perform each elemental purification on the body of the blinded and bound dedicant, engaging an appropriate bodily sense. For example, the Guardian of the North may demand purification through the element of taste, and a few grains of salt may be placed on the dedicant's tongue. Or East may demand purification through the element of smell, and incense may be wafted under the candidate's nostrils. The dedicant passes successfully by each challenge around the whole of the Circle until she arrives again at the beginning.

Finally, the dedicant learns a third password and is "reborn" into the Circle. One of the Witches announces that she has passed the ordeal of initiation and asks her if she has chosen a new name. The dedicant gives her Craft name while someone removes her blindfold and unties her bonds. Another Witch leads her, now moving clockwise, to each of the Guardians of the Watchtowers and announces her as a newly made priestess and Witch. One by one, each of the Guardians presents the new initiate with a gift, something symbolic of its element, to signify its blessing and approval. These gifts, perhaps a feather from East, a candle from South, and so forth, will become parts of the new Witch's collection of magical tools, which she may utilize in future workings with the elemental beings.

After this, the anxiety and tension of the "ordeal of the initiation" immediately deflate and the coven settles down to share reflections and refreshments before it is time to unmake or "deconstruct" the Circle. After the ritual work is completed, the Witches unmake the Circle, beginning with a proper farewell to the Gods. The coven thanks and bids farewell to all of the spirits or entities who have been asked to witness and participate in the rite, including the Guardians of the Watchtowers, who are thanked in turn. The Witch who bids farewell to the Guardian of the last quarter walks purposefully "over the line," thus formally breaking the Circle and returning the space to its former mundane status and place. The rite is over.

The Witches then return to the house and congregate, once again, in the kitchen. Now it is time to celebrate—participants bring out the wine and cheese, bread, vegetables, fruit they have brought. Everyone

sits or stands around in the kitchen, sharing food and drink, warmth and companionship, laughing and talking about the ritual. The Witches ask the new priestess many questions about her experiences during various parts of the ritual and share stories about their own or others' initiations. While this is not part of the ceremony proper, the Witches nevertheless consider this period of sharing and eating a necessary and important part of the ritual occasion.

Actions and Transformations in the Ritual Landscape

The Wiccan initiation ritual presents a number of potentially intriguing angles of inquiry.⁹ However, I shall address only two dimensions of the ritual experience. First, I shall discuss the activities that take place in three primary areas: the house, especially the kitchen; the edge of the pond where the dedicant is placed to await the rite; and the site of the Circle located in the woods at the edge of the farm. The Witches use each space symbolically and deliberately, beginning with the usage of the house as "mundane territory." Second, I shall examine the processes of transformation that are at work both in the creation of the magic Circle and the initiation of the dedicant.

Kitchen Witches

Before the dedicant arrives, the Witches use the kitchen as a kind of "staging area" to begin preparing for the rite. At the most practical level, this is where the Witches attend to the last-minute details necessary for the successful performance of the ritual. They divide up the parts of the ceremony, deciding who is to play which role. The Witches also make sure that the ritual equipment is ready to be taken to the Circle area: candles, incense, flowers for the altar, the ritual tools, and whatever else will be needed.

More importantly, the kitchen's familiar and cozy setting reinforces a sense of solidarity and community among the ritual participants. This is an anxious time for them; the coven itself is about to be transformed by the addition of a new member. How will the group change as a result? The kitchen provides an intimate and comforting space in which to share thoughts, feelings, and occasional laughter while sipping tea or

nibbling cookies. These activities help the Witches prepare emotionally and psychologically for the ritual they are about to perform.

When the dedicant arrives, she, too, participates in the kitchen activities. But she does so to a limited extent, both because she is not yet officially part of the group and because she is constrained by silence. Both her silence and the ritual teasing reinforce the sense of liminality that surrounds person and event. The dedicant is neither completely an outsider—because she has already undertaken a lengthy learning process¹⁰—nor yet completely an insider. The joking is calculated to reinforce the ambiguity of the event that is about to take place; the dedicant will begin to wonder just how much talk about the “ordeals of initiation” is real and how much is exaggeration. The joking is also designed to make the dedicant question just how well she knows the people who are about to initiate her. This uncertainty frames the moment when the dedicant meets her “death” at the edge of the circle.

Preparatory activities in the kitchen may be contrasted profitably with those that take place there after the ritual. Here the former dedicant, now a newly made Witch, is at the center of attention. All of the Witches get a chance to show their interest in her reaction to the ritual, and she gets the opportunity to provide important feedback on their performance. This allows the Witches to see if the “ordeals” had their intended effect. It also encourages the new Witch to reflect about the rite itself, to think through these and other questions that will enable her to sort out the threads of the experience. The time that the Witches spend in the kitchen “telling old war stories”—in other words, sharing stories about their own or others’ initiations—enables the new priestess to compare her own experience with those of others and helps deepen and solidify a sense of community and celebration.

Although not directly part of the ceremony, the activities that take place in the house both before and after the ritual are considered important parts of the total experience. To simply term this space “profane” in an ontological sense misses its religious significance and its relevance to the effectiveness of the overall ritual process.

Sitting by the Pond

The first spatial movement in the initiation ritual is the placement of the dedicant at the edge of the pond, away from both the house and

the ritual Circle. Her location here is again both practical and symbolically meaningful. Practically, placing her at the pond gets her “safely out of the way” as the Witches complete their preparations for the ceremony. Symbolically, her placement at the pond reinforces her own state of liminality—separate and different from those in the mundane world, but not yet an initiate. Here she is literally and metaphorically removed from the mundane world represented by the house and the kitchen, but not yet included in the sacred world created by the Witches’ Circle. Her placement at the pond intensifies the liminality of her position as dedicant: she is neither outsider nor initiate. At the edge of the pond, the dedicant awaits the initiation that will transform her and fully incorporate her into the Wiccan religious community.

In terms of Van Gennep’s tripartite model of initiation ([1909] 1960), the dedicant’s placement at the edge of the pond might be seen as a movement of “separation.” However, from the perspective of *where* she is placed—in Nature—the dedicant is not really removed from community, but rather placed in intimate contact with a very important part of the Wiccan community—Nature Herself. In this sense, initiation will not *bring* her into community with Nature so much as it will awaken her to the community *that is already there* through the experiences of what I call the “body-in-practice.” The idea of somatic communion with Nature is an important theological lesson for the Witch. Every breeze, every star, every cricket or croak of a frog reinforces the sense of communion between person and Nature, made present in and through the senses of the body, resonating in harmony with the presence of Nature. This is one of the “essential lessons” of the Craft, and it is vital that the dedicant learn this lesson, not just intellectually or even emotionally, but somatically, with and through her body.¹¹

Thus, in this particular spatial placement, both “mundane” and “sacred” or theologically significant meanings emerge from the same space; boundaries shift fluidly according to the perspectives of the participants. For the Witches, placing the dedicant at the edge of the pond to meditate is fully as much a matter of getting her out of the way as it is having her learn about communing with Nature. From the dedicant’s perspective, the space is neither quite “here” nor “there” in

terms of sacrality. Finally, from the perspective of Nature—considered to be a member of the spiritual community—the dedicant is already fully enclosed in that most revered space of all: Nature Herself.

At the Circle's Edge

The ceremony itself takes place away from the house, at the far edge of the farm, and is surrounded by a thicket of woods. In terms of practical goals, the ritual takes place away from everyday distractions and potential disruptions, and the woods provide the privacy necessary for the ritual activities. Symbolic placement of the Circle in the “wildness” of the woods reveals its religious liminality. While it is tempting to consider this area of the farm an “automatically sacred” space, it is important to realize that the area has no innate or ontological value as a thing in itself. Its location outdoors in Nature gives it a certain theological value for Wiccans, who hold Nature in reverence, but even an outdoor Circle *has to be created* in order to become the Witches’ magic Circle. In other words, it is again the *actions* of the participants that make the space “sacred” in the sense that it becomes a place that can be used for religious ritual. In fact, the magic Circle as such is a “place” that can be arrived at only through a process of deliberate and practiced transformation of space.

The deliberate structuring of space occurs in much the same way when an initiation cannot be performed outdoors. In this case, areas of the house are marked instead. My own initiation took place in a very large Victorian house in a small Ohio town. For the pre-ritual meditation, I was placed in an unused room downstairs well away from the ritual area and provided only a candle for light. I could not hear any of the preparatory ritual activities except for a distant hum and an occasional creaking floorboard. In this case space was used vertically—the downstairs was marked as being closer to the mundane world and the upstairs as closer to the realm of the Gods.¹²

I shall now turn to the second item on my agenda, an examination of some actions and transformative processes that are at work both in changing “mundane” into “sacred” space and dedicant into Witch and priestess.

Changing Space, Changing Person

At this point in the ritual process, the casting of the magic Circle, or the creation of the “sacred space,” comes before anything else can be done. The Circle is deliberately and ritually marked off from the surrounding area, a physical version of “metanarrative markers” (Babcock 1977) that bracket particular kinds of speech from the surrounding talk. Circle construction may be understood as a form of “metaspatial” marking, setting aside a particular kind of space—here ritual or sacred space—from the surrounding space. In Mary Hufford’s terms, Circle construction would constitute “a contextualizing or framing practice that draws attention to the double grounding of an *extraordinary world opened up within the ordinary*” (1995:532, emphasis mine). In this case, the Witches literally “cut” the Circle “out” of ordinary or mundane space with the ritual sword, creating an extraordinary place that stands between the worlds of humans and the realms of the Gods. Casting the Circle is therefore the literal articulation of a metaphysical realm in which Wiccan religious activity takes place.

When cast by a skilled individual, this space becomes an intersubjective field in which the Gods and those persons who have developed the body-in-practice may actually engage *one another* in shared subjectivity or “consubjectivity” (see Csordas 1993; Daniel 1984; Merleau-Ponty 1962; Schutz 1970; and Schwartz-Salant 1987).¹³ In other words, the Circle is the place wherein human beings and Gods mutually interact and effect change in one another. The consecrated Circle is therefore particularly significant in initiation as a rite of change and transformation.

In Wiccan initiation ritual, the transformation of person is keyed to the transformation of space: both processes begin with the use of the sword. In Circle casting, Witches use the sword—the tool representing the element of fire—to separate the sacred space from its ordinary location. In initiation, the Witch who personifies Death wields the sword in a symbolic “death blow” that separates the dedicant from her ordinary life. This separation from the ordinary marks both space and person as a site of transformation.

In a very real sense, the transformation processes of both space and person are mutually interdependent and dynamically related. The transformation of space depends upon the presence of initiated and skillful Witches who can cast the Circle; the transformation of person depends upon the existence of the Circle, as its elemental Guardians perform the actions necessary to change the dedicant into Witch and priestess. Just as each element is invoked to purify and consecrate the Circle, so, too, does the dedicant undergo purification and consecration by the elements. In the process of transforming space, the Witches banish all negativity and invoke the blessing and guarding spirits of the elemental beings. In the process of transforming person, the Witches “unmake” the dedicant, “banishing” old ways of perceiving reality through the purification of her bodily senses—which are themselves keyed to the directions and the elements of the Circle.

The Witches finish casting the Circle by announcing the purpose of the rite and asking the Gods to enter the fully consecrated Circle. At the end of the purification process, the dedicant is given a new name that expresses her sacred identity and is blessed by the Guardians, becoming a fully consecrated member of the community. Just as the Gods’ entrance into the Circle marks it as “transformed space,” the initiate’s new name marks her as “transformed person.”

One interesting difference between transformation of space and transformation of person emerges from this comparison. At the end of the ritual, the Circle space is unmade, “broken,” or opened. Witches, on the other hand, do not become “unmade” at the end of the ritual, although they generally stop using their Craft names at the end of the rite. The Witches do return to more mundane activities, such as those found in the cozy confines of the kitchen. Eating, drinking, talking, singing, laughing, sharing—all of these activities provide a gentle transition to the world of ordinary life and more “mundane” personas. But the return to the kitchen, this final circular movement, adds an element of closure to the rite, while reinforcing and extending the feelings that the Witches share in the Circle. Her transformation complete, the new Witch is warmly welcomed as an intimate and important part of the coven—a place of practice and a place of “perfect love” and “perfect trust.”

Conclusion: Breaking Circles

What can Witches tell scholars about space and spatiality? This brief exploration into the dynamics of the Wiccan ritual landscape provides scholars with insight into the various ways in which humans imagine and use the space that surrounds them. Counter to many of our scholarly assumptions about spatiality in religion, we find that spaces—"nature," "kitchen," "pond," "woods," "house"—are not objective ontological categories that contain some inherently sacred or profane value. Like many of our scholarly categories, the terms "sacred" and "profane" frequently conceal as much as they reveal about the world around us. An ontological category of sacred or profane space often tells us little about the inhabitants of that space—human or deity—and even less about the activities being performed there.

Spaces change their status according to the activities being performed in them. As we have seen above, the Wiccan religious landscape is notably fluid. Particular spaces may assume either "sacred" or "mundane" status at any given moment in the ritual process, and may change or shift in status according to the perspectives and activities of the participants. Spaces therefore have no ontological value independent of their relation to human activity. Spatiality is a relational category, arising in the actions of people who engage spaces.

This means that space, as Witches understand it, is not static, but rather dynamic and processual. Foregrounding actions and processes over states and objects enables us to see the ways in which people both transform and are transformed by space in religious ritual. This is particularly evident in Wiccan initiation ritual, in which space is transformed through the purifying process of Circle casting and person is transformed through the purifying process of journeying around the Circle. Spatiality as process enables us to understand the ongoing and ever-changing relationships between person, behavior, and environment that occur during the performance of religious rituals. In other words, study of the dynamic *process* of spatiality within the Wiccan religious landscape may give us insights into how space is used within other religious worldviews and enable us to capture those moments when humans, gods, and spaces intersect.

Notes

1. In this paper, I will use the terms Wicca, Witchcraft, the Craft, and the Old Religion interchangeably. I will also use Witch, Wiccan, priest, or priestess interchangeably to refer to the practitioners of Wicca. Note that Wicca as practiced by the groups in my study is a religion of initiated clergy. There are therefore no "lay Witches." Like the terms "Hindu," "Moslem," or "Christian," the term "Witch" is also capitalized to refer to a practitioner of the Wiccan religion.

2. Witches use the term "circle" in a variety of ways. It may mean the actual ritual space, a rite or a ceremony that is being held in such space, or the coven itself. I will capitalize "circle" whenever it is used in one of these particular ways.

3. For more information about the larger world of contemporary Pagan practices, see especially Adler [1979] 1986, Crowley 1989, Farrar 1981, Harvey and Hardman 1995, and Starhawk 1979.

4. See Adler [1979] 1986 or Harvey and Hardman 1995 for information about national spokespersons.

5. For information on the eight sabbats, see Farrar and Farrar 1984 or Campanelli 1992.

6. See Bado-Fralick 1998 for an example of how cycles of human and natural change are celebrated and enacted in sabbat ritual.

7. Bill Ellis's article "The Camp Mock-Ordeal: Theater as Life" (1981) suggests a particularly appropriate model for understanding this moment of the Wiccan ritual initiation process. He focuses on the performances of "mock ordeals" that take place in children's camps and the resulting feelings of community that he sees as the goals of such performances. His exploration of the liminality or ambiguity of the event—scary but not scary, real but not real—approaches nicely the tone of Wiccan "ordeals" of initiation.

8. Although beyond the scope of the present essay, it may be profitable to compare Wiccan Circle orientation with religions that practice a similar demarcation of space. For example, Sioux and Navajo religions make explicit use of four/six directions and elements. One particularly interesting study of Navajo space that also includes discussion of Navajo worldview as "process oriented" is Pinxten, Van Dooren, and Harvey 1983. Mails [1978] 1998 provides an equally informative view of the process of the Sioux Sun Dance.

9. I explore a number of dimensions to ritual in my manuscript "Coming to the Edge of the Circle: A Wiccan Initiation Ritual" that I will not include in this essay. For instance, Wiccan initiation presents a significant departure from the tripartite structure so familiar in the scholarship since Van Gennep ([1909] 1960). For more information about this and other dimensions of Wiccan ritual practice, see Bado-Fralick 2000.

10. Note that "dedicant" and even "Witch" are not so much static states of being as they are moments along a process. The dedicant has already undergone a (sometimes) lengthy process of education and practice in order to get to the point of initiation. After initiation, the Witch is expected to continue learning and growing, to continue the process of transformation, throughout the rest of her life.

11. This idea of the “body-in-practice” is developed more fully in Bado-Fralick 2000. Body-in-practice is the notion that becoming a Witch is as much a somatic learning process as an intellectual one. The analogy that I develop is that learning how to be a Witch is as embodied a process as learning how to drive a car.

12. This particular ordering of space should not imply a vertical hierarchy in which “up” is more closely associated with “sacred.” In my own home many years later, my coven cast its circles in the basement, where there was sufficient room.

13. “Consubjectivity” is to me an exciting concept that seems to describe those moments, such as invocations, when Witch and deity are acting together. Stronger than an intersubjective field, which is by now a common term in ethnographic folklore studies, the term “consubjectivity” describes a space in which the Gods may manifest and both Gods and humans meet and interact as *one* through ritual praxis. In other words, humans and Gods “share” subjectivity.

References Cited

- Adler, Margot. 1986 [1979]. *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today*. Boston: Beacon Press. Cited pages are from the original edition. New York: Viking Press.
- Babcock, Barbara. 1977. The Story in the Story: Metanarration in Folk Narrative. In *Verbal Art as Performance*, ed. Richard Bauman, 61–80. Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press.
- Bado-Fralick, Nikki. 1998. A Turning on the Wheel of Life: Wiccan Rites of Death. *Folklore Forum* 29(1):3–22.
- _____. 2000. “Coming to the Edge of the Circle: A Wiccan Initiation Ritual.” Ph.D. dissertation, The Ohio State University. UMI #9971510.
- Campanelli, Pauline. 1992. *Ancient Ways: Reclaiming Pagan Traditions*. St. Paul, Minn.: Llewellyn.
- Crowley, Vivianne. 1989. *Wicca: The Old Religion in the New Age*. Northamptonshire, Eng.: Aquarian Press.
- Csordas, Thomas. 1993. Somatic Modes of Attention. *Cultural Anthropology* 8:135–56.
- Daniel, E. Valentine. 1984. The Pulse as an Icon in Siddha Medicine. *Contributions to Asian Studies* 18:115–26.
- Driver, Tom F. 1991. *The Magic of Ritual*. San Francisco: Harper.
- Eliade, Mircea. 1958. *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth*. Trans. Willard Trask. New York: Harper and Row.

- Ellis, Bill. 1981. The Camp Mock-Ordeal: Theater as Life. *Journal of American Folklore* 94:486–505.
- Farrar, Janet, and Stewart Farrar. 1981. *Eight Sabbats for Witches*. London: Robert Hale.
- Harvey, Graham, and Charlotte Hardman. 1995. *Paganism Today: Wiccans, Druids, the Goddess and Ancient Earth Traditions for the Twenty-First Century*. London: Thorsons.
- Hufford, Mary. 1995. Context. In *Common Ground: Keywords for the Study of Expressive Culture*, ed. Burt Feintuch. Special issue of *Journal of American Folklore* 108:528–49.
- Jennings, Ted. 1982. On Ritual Knowledge. In *Readings in Ritual Studies*, ed. Grimes. 324–34. First published in *Journal of Religion* 62(2):111–27.
- Lewis, James R., ed. 1996. *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft*. Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press.
- Lincoln, Bruce. 1981. *Emerging from the Chrysalis: Studies in Rituals of Women's Initiation*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1962. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. C. Smith. London: Routledge.
- Mails, Thomas E. [1978] 1998. *Sundancing: The Great Sioux Piercing Ritual*. Tulsa and San Francisco: Council Oak Books.
- Parkin, David. 1992. Ritual as Spatial Direction and Bodily Division. In *Understanding Rituals*, ed. Daniel de Coppet, 11–25. London: Routledge.
- Pinxten, Rik, Ingrid Van Dooren, and Frank Harvey. 1983. *The Anthropology of Space: Explorations into the Natural World and Semantics of the Navajo*. Philadelphia: University Pennsylvania Press.
- Schutz, Alfred. 1970. *On Phenomenology and Social Relation*. Ed. Helmut R. Wagner. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Schwartz-Salant, Nathan. 1987. The Dead Self in Borderline Personality Disorders. In *Pathologies of the Modern Self*, ed. David M. Levin, 114–62. New York: New York University Press.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 1978. *Map is Not Territory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Starhawk [Miriam Simos]. 1979. *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*. San Francisco: Harper and Row.

Turner, Victor. 1969. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

Van Gennep, Arnold. [1909] 1960. *The Rites of Passage*. Trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.