

Gender and Power in Contemporary Spirituality

Ethnographic Approaches

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To our daughters, who were born while this book was being prepared.

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8 Urban Witchcraft and the Issue of Authority

Victoria Hegner

A journalist friend of mine who knew I was doing research on Neopagan witchcraft in Berlin recently called me on the phone. As she told me, she had talked to the chief editor at the national public radio station about my research topic. Both had decided that this was "interesting stuff", worth doing a radio feature about. I myself was a bit hesitant. The expectations of journalists, researchers, and Neopagan witches themselves regarding how witchcraft and its practitioners should get portrayed to the general "public" might be too complex to make the prospected radio documentary a success. Thinking about it a bit longer, I started to develop fantasies that the 'Neopagan field', which I had finally gained access to with great effort over the last year, would close its gates as a result of such a documentary if some of the witches did not like the ways in which they were presented. Unsure what to do, I asked Luna, one of the witches with whom I had been intensely involved during the last year and who regularly organizes Neopagan rituals for women, what she thought about a documentary on witchcraft in Berlin; she was very excited: "I think that is very important for us. We have to be open. Our message has to be heard. We are not a secret association. I see it as a political task to bring our belief to the public". As my friend and I came to one of the rituals at Luna's place to do the recording, Luna took the lead. She, rather than us, started to tell the women who had gathered there about our project. She asked whether the recording would be acceptable for everybody. It was a delicate issue. For some women—in contrast to Luna—it was important that their practice of witchcraft was not public, as they were afraid of discrimination. Luna was aware of this. That evening she stated passionately, "I hope that all of you here will agree to the recording. But, if not, that is also fine and no documentation will take place. However, it is central that our belief gets to the public. . . . I think everybody would consent to this". She looked around. She had made clear that the recording depended on every woman's agreement, yet her statement left little chance for a veto. The women bowed their heads in acceptance and Luna smiled at us. She had used her authority to ensure that the recording would take place and that the 'message' spread. (Field notes, March 2011)

Since the end of 1980s, Berlin has developed into one of the centers of Neopagan witchcraft within Germany. The number of Neopagan witches in the city seems so high that the Berlin esoteric journal *Body—Spirit—Soul* claimed that the German capital has the "highest concentration of witchies in all of central Europe".¹ Here the term "witch" refers to a wide range of manifestations of Neopagan religiosity/spirituality.² It comprises followers of neo-Germanic groups as well as practitioners of a more specifically feminist spirituality (Goddess spirituality) with a pantheon not bound to a specific locale.³ The unifying idea is the worship of *nature*, which is seen as an immanent expression of the sacred. Within this context, Neopagan witches often claim to follow and thus preserve an "old", pre-Christian religiosity. Their practice and theological outlook, however, appear on the other hand quite new in the sense of modern or postmodern; Neopagan witchcraft is characterized by being highly individualistic, centering on personal needs. Dogmas of practice are wholeheartedly thrown overboard and religious cosmologies are intensely eclectic.⁴ Institutionalized forms of Neopagan witchcraft are thus rare or unstable. The self is taken as the last and only 'authority'. It is the 'internal authority' that always presides over 'external authorities' such as social institutions and conventions.⁵

Within scholarly accounts, the specific structure of internal versus external authority has long been established as one of the characteristics of new religious phenomena.⁶ The ideas of a dichotomous principle of authority and of the dominance of the self point out a significant feature in the development of religion and spirituality in postmodern times. However, this approach often ignores the fact that the self, and thus the internal authority, is in and of itself a product of social configurations and thus the interplay of different external authorities.⁷ Furthermore, by concentrating on the supremacy of the self, studies on new religions and spiritualities hardly take into consideration social structures among new religious practitioners and the ways in which they have been shaped by the exercise of authority. There are only a few exceptions, such as Sarah Pike's studies on Neopagan festivals in the United States. As she shows, Neopagan festivals are envisioned as a place where everybody is equal and free to explore the self. This egalitarian concept and emphasis on the self—the internal authority—however, in fact disguise "old forms of power". Thus, within those camps one finds central decision makers, "secret chiefs"—authorities who are not officially declared as such, but whom nonetheless must be obeyed.⁸

The term authority is not to be mistaken as a code name for coercion. On the contrary, authority as I see it is a social position that can be ascribed to persons as well as social or cultural systems that make people subordinate themselves *without* coercion.⁹

Based on ethnographic field research carried out in 2010–2011 at Luna's apartment and among the Neopagan women witches who gather there, I want to explicate the dynamics of authority that are formative for this group in its spiritual practice as well as its social composition.¹⁰ Since Luna is the

central figure among the women, I particularly focus on her and her spiritual authority: the accepted dominance of her interpretation of Neopagan witchcraft within the group. How does she acquire and exercise this authority? How do the other women grant her spiritual authority and thus also employ their own form of 'power'? How stable is Luna's authority or is her authority supposed to be? As my research made clear, the local cultural context—the city—played a decisive role in shaping Luna's authority, and the particular interplay between the cityscape and the witches will be a key component of the analysis. This essay will thus focus on the ways in which these Berlin witches interact within the wider context of Berlin, exploring how the issue of authority comes into play in these interactions. Here, I draw attention to the modes of choosing and using public ritual sites as a way of empowerment of women. Rituals in this context turn into a public contestation of external authorities—patriarchy in general, and the Berlin local government in particular. Within their highly politicized spiritual practice, Neopagan witches negotiate a fine balance between the authority of the self and the authority outside of it.

Throughout the essay, I experiment with a style of representation that is inspired by one that Sabina Magliocco developed in her work on Neopaganism in the United States. Each chapter of her book *Witching Culture* opens with a paragraph in which she relates her own spiritual experience. It is visually separated from more interpretive passages by a different font. I work with two different typefaces as well. The text in italic typeface is meant to give insight into how I myself move within the field. Furthermore, it provides a space to listen more extensively to the protagonists' voices. The passages in the other typeface depict a more analytical text. Through this style of representation, I try to relativize 'ethnographic authority' and make transparent the fact that, in describing the phenomenon of witchcraft in Berlin, I am constructing the latter according to my own sociocultural positioning within the field.¹¹

'OLD WISDOM' IN THE CITY

It is a sunny day at the end of April. Ingeborg and I are sitting together at her balcony . . . We know each other from an Ostara ritual at Luna's. Ostara—Spring Equinox—is one of the eight Sabbaths that witches observe during the year.¹² On this day, they celebrate the prosperity of life. Winter is over. Every living organism is supposed to grow and to procreate. Ingeborg had heard that I am doing a study on urban witchcraft and had invited me to her home. She had enthusiastically approached me, explaining that she would love to tell me how she came to be interested in "all that stuff" and what witchcraft means to her, how a witch's home actually looks, and other interesting things. Now

that we are sitting together, Ingeborg is all churned up inside. She tells me that she talked to Luna as she would like to attend the retreat for Beltane. For almost 10 years Luna has arranged ritual gatherings in the countryside. However, Luna told her: This year, she can't go. Ingeborg feels hurt—deeply hurt. "I wanted to join the retreat . . . so badly". "But last year [at the retreat]", she continues, "I had a lot of prob— . . . Well, whenever I am with Luna, all my neuroses come out. I have a friend who always says: 'You are under Luna's thumb'. Whatever . . . I never used to talk about intensive and intimate things, but with Luna, I can't hide anything. . . . it is unbelievable. Luna changed my—my life has changed deeply through her. That is a beautiful experience and yet so painful . . . I don't know whether you read the email-newsletters that she writes regularly. Last time, she wrote about the green man. I really internalized the magic of it—the joy and the glory of it. At least I thought so and I thought: Well, maybe I can come to the retreat. And what did Luna say? 'Ingeborg, it would be better if you . . . don't come along'. Well, she noted how much it hurt me and right away she added: 'Ingeborg, this does not mean a rejection of you as a person. You are a precious person. But, you are not ready yet'. I was furious at first. She wrote me an email afterwards asking me stupid things, organizational stuff for our next ritual. I thought: Why the hell is she asking me these things? She knew exactly how much she hurt me. So she wrote this helpless email. This is crazy. Well, I calmed down. Now things are fine. I have undergone a personal transformation through this experience. It is the sort of transformation that she [Luna] always talks about". (Field notes, April 26, 2011)

Since 1997 Luna has called herself a witch. She has opened a center called the "Lion's Moon" for the celebration of "Old Wisdom", located in the former West Berlin. There she offers her spiritual healing abilities to interested women. She treats light physical as well as psychological problems. In addition, she organizes the eight Neopagan festivals of the year. Furthermore, she regularly invites women to perform moon rituals and to celebrate the Great Goddess.¹³ For Samhain and Beltane she organizes a retreat into the countryside near Berlin. These trips are only for "spiritually experienced women", as Luna says, since there "you will meet your inner dark side. Some are not yet spiritually ready for it".¹⁴ The cast of the group changes constantly. There are some core attendees, but even they do not come regularly.

As open and dynamic as the group is, Luna's position is not. She always takes the lead. Hence, she designs and conducts the rituals. She decides who can join the retreat and who cannot. In addition, she is the owner of the space where most of the rituals are performed: a three-bedroom apartment that is used exclusively for spiritual gatherings. Luna herself lives three stories above it. Last but not least she chooses the ritual sites outside of the

apartment and in the 'public' sphere. Hence, she is the central decision maker within the gathering group and is openly acknowledged as such. She is the 'official' and not the 'secret chief' of the group. People trust her and deliberately subordinate themselves to this organizational structure. The women who gather at Luna's place experience the rituals as a kind of service. In the hustle and bustle of the everyday Berlin life, caught between their professional work, family routines and other highly individualized commitments, they don't find the time to immerse themselves as wholeheartedly into Neopagan witchcraft as does Luna. All of the women call themselves witches. However, the term is often one among several spiritual identifications. As Gudrun, who is now in her sixties and one of the core attendees, says: "I am a witch now and then. . . . I am witch when I am at Luna's" (interview, May 2010). Gudrun, for example, is also interested in Hare Krishna and a regular at the monks' place of worship as well. Since she likes "spiritual singing", she additionally attends church whenever the "spiritual singing class" takes place. She is thankful for Luna's regular e-mail newsletters. They remind her of the moon rituals and the Neopagan high holidays, which she would otherwise forget in her busy calendar. Those newsletters—or moon-letters, as Luna calls them—do not only include the dates for the rituals at Luna's place. They also include explanations of the religious/spiritual meaning of the ritual as well as directives for the ritual's dress code. Sometimes Luna makes suggestions for "spiritual preparation"—that is, memorizing and thinking about a specific saying that she created and that will be used during the ritual. Luna also writes about the Great Goddess in general in those letters. She includes news on political events or natural catastrophes like the accident at the Fukushima nuclear power plant in March 2011, interpreting them within the framework of Goddess spirituality. For her, the accident was the "price" we had to pay for our irresponsible behavior towards "mother earth". "However", she concluded, "we can all gather our wits and celebrate the living, wild, and old wisdom and the magic of the full moon, our Great Goddess. We thus raise our voices and free our female bodies. We no longer follow our dominant father figure. . . . We know what we do and we know whom and what we support through our consumerist behavior" (e-mail newsletter, March 21, 2011). Those newsletters often read like transcripts of free-flowing thoughts, sometimes without commas and dots. Once the women come together at Luna's place, they are usually dressed as the newsletter suggested and are often spiritually well prepared, having learned Luna's ritual sayings and absorbed her latest thoughts on the Great Goddess.

Ingeborg always arrives first. She welcomes the women at the door. "Ciao, Bella, you look awesome", she likes to call out, and then effusively hugs whomever is at the door. Newcomers are shown around. Ingeborg explains the 'usual procedures' (which door to use in order to enter the ritual room; when Luna will arrive; where to get tea and cookies). For a while the women sit together in the dining room, chatting. Once Luna comes down from her apartment, she briefly says hello and then goes straight to the altar room, the

actual location of the ritual, and sits down. Once you hear a Chinese gong, everything is ready. The women follow Luna eagerly into the room.

Authority as a Performative Act

In this context Luna's spiritual authority can be read as a *performative act*. 'Performative act'—as I use the term here—includes a rather abstract-reflective level of representation—that is, something written or said—as well as forms of representation through more immediate bodily experience and practice. These forms of representation are hardly distinguishable from one another and often coincide. In this context, they serve to produce a certain normativity and thus to suggest, mold and give reassurance of a specific self-understanding.¹⁵

The performative act of establishing Luna's spiritual authority begins long before the actual get-together at her place and does not only include the regular e-mail newsletter. It comprises as well the way in which Luna develops and presents her biography via the Internet. Her spirituality is the central topic of her resume posted on her webpage. Against a background picture of a rising sun at the Pacific coast, she describes central events and phases in her life, elaborating on her "near-death experience". In 1996 she had a car accident. She writes:

I experienced a near-death experience with severe injuries through a car accident. I left my body. An endlessly loving maternal power revealed the source of life to me. During the following years: intensive body work, discovery and development of Daoistic healing exercises. Access to the archetype of the Great Mother.¹⁶

Although here Luna describes her spirituality in terms of a painful initiation process, her being a witch is in part also hereditary. As one reads on the Internet, her grandmother passed the craft on to her and "thus a lot of responsibility". What follows in her resume is an extensive list of the spiritual training that Luna completed in order to learn how to use her craft. The list is remarkable, since it contains the names of people who are well-known figures within the German context of Neopaganism, Goddess spirituality and Western Buddhism.

Women who come to her place the first time often read Luna's CV beforehand. It gives them an idea of Luna's spiritual skills and abilities, and thus serves to motivate them to join the ritual. Once they sit down in the dining hall for the very first time, they convey the sort of social unease that is usual when meeting people for the first time. However, it is not so much this behavior that sets them apart from the core attendees and those who are 'fairly new', meaning those who have come two or three times to the gatherings already. Rather, their distinguishing characteristic is the way in which they abide by the suggested dress code for the ritual. What becomes clear

to me: the longer you are 'with Luna' the closer you follow her directives and yet the more creative you are in interpreting those directives. Hence, newcomers seldom follow completely Luna's suggestion of the color to wear, whereas core attendees strictly do. Yet, only the core attendees also bring attractive accessories such as scarves, hair ornaments, and jewelry. These witches practice the rules so often that they begin to play with them—complying with their limits yet at the same time constantly pushing against them. Hence, Ingeborg, for example, once wore a necklace with a lavalier that depicted a rainbow. She complied with the rule to wear pastel colors. Yet the lavalier was a symbol of the Angel Light Healers, a group that Luna deeply despises—something that Ingeborg surely knew.

It might be Luna's CV that originally motivates women to come. However, it is during the ritual performance itself that Luna's authority unfolds.

The performative character of the ritual and thus Luna's authority in this context encompasses all of the bodily senses. The performative act itself can be roughly divided into three parts.

The ritual begins as soon as the women step through the apartment's door and thus out of their daily routine and into something that exists outside of it. Here they are supposed to get into the right 'spiritual mood'; they can literally *smell* it. One can detect the incenses that are burned and the tea that has been prepared. These smells intermingle with an aroma of decay and mustiness. This is an old apartment, and Luna has left all of her aunt's old furniture in the flat. Her beloved relative had lived there for more than twenty years before moving away in 2000. In a way, in the ritual space you smell *her* and thus Luna's ancestor. Since the worship of predecessors is central in practicing Neopagan witchcraft, the apartment conveys a corresponding 'spirit'. And it is once again Luna's biography that is central and thus authoritative. The women *hear* as well music in the background. Sometimes Luna puts on chants by Starhawk or some kind of meditative music. Occasionally, Ingeborg is drumming. Finally, the women *see* the ritual room. The place is plunged into a dim, bluish light. Objects that symbolize the four cardinal points lie in the room's center. The room thus conveys both a cozy and at the same time exclusive atmosphere. One can almost feel that some things that go on behind these doors will remain secret, known only to the women who gather here. The ritual experience is made tactile as well, through the fur that is spread out on the floor in the dining hall as well as in the ritual room. You feel the warmth and softness of the fur through your feet under the table in the dining hall. In the ritual room women lie or sit down on the fur and experience its comfort. Finally, the group immediately experiences the *taste* of the ritual—through the tea that is offered. The latter is made of herbs grown in the apartment's backyard. Luna had explained the particular 'energies' of the herbs in her newsletters beforehand. Those 'energies' will be used during the ritual.

The second part of the ritual starts once the women enter the ritual room. The senses are sharpened. Women are encouraged to close their eyes. Inge-

borg shuts the doors. Luna casts the circle, meaning that she invokes the 'spirits' of the earth, air, water and fire, and she calls upon the Goddess. The structure of the ritual is always the same. First, the women experience an abstract-reflexive discussion of the ritual's meaning, as the talking stick makes the round. Luna gives the formula for speech. She starts. The gathering women say something when the talking stick is passed to them. It is a scenic-mimetic repetition of Luna's phrase. They use this phrase and thus literally incorporate Luna's words. Yet they insert their individual words into the phrase and thus mold the latter into something of their own. Under Luna's directives they all start to sing, dance, rattle and create different sounds after the talking round. They take great joy in doing so. These movements and sounds are supposed to verbally and bodily mark and foster personal as well collective transformation. In dancing through the room, the group follows Luna's advice yet the women move, sing and sound in different ways. Here the group's social structure becomes obvious. Newcomers often feel a bit uneasy about dancing around. They closely watch Luna. In a form of mimicry, they reproduce her movements. Out of a moment of insecurity, a situation of great synchronicity of movements among them and with Luna develops. Core attendees in contrast seem to be well versed in this form of dancing, singing and rattling to the extent that they constantly improvise on Luna's directives, playing with them in a highly creative way. They jump, laugh and find their own rhythms. Yet they always move within the limits of the rules so that the ritual never threatens to 'fall apart'. Finally, the women lie down for a guided meditation by Luna. This part of the ritual comes gradually to an end with some yoga exercises followed by jointly uncasting the 'circle'. Luna leaves the room first. That is the signal that the other women should leave as well.

The third part of the ritual can be described as the process of slowly stepping back into the daily routine. All of the women gather in the dining hall and have a "witch soup"—Luna cooks the potage according to her own recipe. It is a "magic soup", meaning that all of the ingredients are supposed to bring about a transformation. Women eat the soup and chat about their families, the ways in which they use tarot, as well as about their last visit to the hairdresser. Slowly they start to leave, waving good-bye to each other. By the time everybody has left, Luna has been in her apartment upstairs for a long time. Ingeborg cleans up the table and locks the apartment. She is always the last to leave.

During the ritual, women submitted to Luna's role as the one who takes the lead. They followed her rules and thus produced her spiritual authority. They experienced this authority bodily and thus deliberately. Ingeborg, occupying the role of an assistant to Luna, clearly emphasizes Luna's authority. Her person is a central part of this particular performative act. However, it is important to note that Ingeborg, as well as the other women in the ritual, appears not only *submissive* to Luna's authority. Since they produce her authority, giving it to her, they at the same time themselves appear *powerful*.

There is always the possibility that the women would not agree to certain things, and that they as a result might no longer attend. Luna's authority is clearly not stable. In particular Ingeborg, as her assistant and thus the closest to her, likes to challenge it. Sometimes she openly questions Luna's spiritual authority. She holds a particular power in her ability to do so. Here, the way in which Ingeborg became Luna's assistant is significant. As Ingeborg describes it, it happened on a day that they both went shopping. Luna suddenly became totally helpless. She felt sick and started to vomit. Ingeborg took the lead and drove her home. She stayed half a day until Luna got better. As Ingeborg says, they both sensed that Luna had the "shamanic disease". A sickness of diverse symptoms, this affliction is interpreted as a decisive moment within a shaman's initiation process.¹⁷ Thus in a situation where Luna placed herself under Ingeborg's care, giving her the authority to decide what to do, Luna's spiritual authority in fact became manifest. Ingeborg's significance in testifying to Luna's initiation process, and thus her spiritual authority, gives her, again, the capacity to challenge the latter not only in subtle ways but also sometimes quite openly. Hence, Ingeborg sometimes subverts the dress-code instructions radically, wearing, for example, a white outfit instead of the prescribed black one. Ingeborg even criticized Luna in front of everybody during a ritual for her way of guiding meditations. Luna did not want to debate the issue at the time. However, later she called Ingeborg over the phone, discussed the situation, and renegotiated her spiritual authority with one of her most important witnesses. However, now and then even Ingeborg seems to 'overstep' her comparatively broadly set limits. Luna at those moments puts Ingeborg in her 'place' and dramatically confirms her own spiritual authority (e.g., excluding Ingeborg from the retreat).

Core attendees seem to take a kind of joy in challenging Luna's spiritual authority as well, although in less obvious ways. For example, Luna is strict about serving only organic food at the rituals. For Luna, the consumption of organic food represents a strong part of a 'holistic life' and therefore of her spirituality. Core attendees love to bring along homemade sweets that are shared among the women. Ingeborg or Luna always asks whether the women used organic ingredients and they are always reassured that this is so. Yet, when Ingeborg or Luna leaves for the kitchen, the women like to smile complicitously within the round, sometimes laughingly rolling their eyes. Those gestures make clear that, despite all their honesty, the women might not have told the truth, and that we all will eat 'unknowingly' conventional, nonorganic food. To a certain extent, Ingeborg and Luna seem to know about the potential misinformation. However, they never verbalize their doubts, instead continuing to play along with the 'game'. Luna submits to the women's word at the moment of questioning. In doing so, her spiritual authority might have been challenged, yet it is confirmed at the same moment. We might not eat organic food, but we do pretend to do so.

Another time, Luna enthusiastically described her "spiritual revelation" that her stuffed animals had a soul and seemed to contain different spirits.

She went on, saying that a friend of hers reported a conversation with one of those spirits. The spirit had told him that her stuffed animal had a relationship with his stuffed animal in "another sphere". Still listening to the story, Michaela, one of the core attendees, slowly turned her head to the side. In a gesture unseen by Luna and directed towards the other women, she intensely tapped her forehead. This sounded "too wacko" to Michaela. She did not verbalize her thoughts. However, it clearly pushed the limits of Luna's spiritual authority. Luna risked losing the latter. The provocative gesture, as well as the complicit reactions of the other women (slowly bowing their heads, softly giggling) did not go unnoticed. The situation had such a strong impact that she refrained from telling those stories again. In this sense she complied—this time—with Michaela's as well as other women's spiritual understanding—in order to maintain her authority.

The City

As a performative act, Luna's spiritual authority is an issue of negotiation and thus always dynamic and instable. Taking the wider context into consideration, it is particularly dynamic in a city such as Berlin, where the variety of practitioners and offers of new religions is so big that even "insiders"—new religious practitioners themselves—seem to have lost an "overview".¹⁸ Activists such as Luna have to *compete* for spiritual authority. It is certainly not an exclusive authority that Luna strives for. On the contrary, she welcomes the fact that people have multiple spiritual authorities that they follow. For her, this multiplicity reflects the city's definitional character of cultural and social variety and openness—a principle that corresponds with her own values. In this context, she draws particularly on the idea of the city as a multicultural locale with a large population of migrants. As she explains, so many religions and their different traditions arrived in the city via migrants, finding a 'home' in Berlin, that one is almost forced to use them—coerced to submit to these various authorities. "They came with the people. We . . . have to use those spirits and deities. Some of them are very powerful", she once explained to me.

In order to understand this specific situation, within which there is a strong emphasis on *not* having a singular authority, but rather multiple authorities that give shape to a group or individual, the sociologist Matthew Wood suggests the term 'non-formativeness', thus moving away from a dichotomist model of authority (inner versus outer). 'Non-formativeness' as he sees it in his study on New Age movements and the issue of neoliberalism and authority is a central characteristic of new religious practices. He explains that 'non-formativeness' is a tendency, and has to be understood in relational terms. Hence, ". . . churchly, denominational, sectarian and cultic forms of religion have strong tendencies towards formativeness, although multiple authorities are found within them and within the lives of their adherents. In other words, there exists across the religious field a

formative-non-formative tension . . . Where this tension tends to the former, clearly identifiable religious traditions, groups and subjectivities emerge, but where it tends towards the latter, traditions, groups and subjectivities cannot be easily identified".¹⁹ All of the women at Luna's identified themselves as witches and all saw themselves as part of the group. However, this identification appears situational. "I am a witch when I am at Luna's", Gudrun said. It is one among many other identities. Here, the non-formative character stands out, mirrored in the ever-changing cast of the group itself.

Luna's spiritual self-allocation tends at first sight to be more formative, although she as well submits to various authorities within her spirituality and outside of herself. Hence, she follows concepts and practices of Western Buddhism or, for example, she interprets 'existence' according to ideas of North American Indian shamanism and mythology. In this context, it should be mentioned that she completely rejects Christianity as an expression of patriarchy. As she likes to say, The church is *the enemy*. On the other hand, she accepts and draws on some forms of Christian religion as well. Hence, when my friend and I made our recordings for the radio feature, we met Luna's husband, Lars. He works as a physicist. As a natural scientist he has in some ways a different approach to the idea of 'existence' from Luna, the witch. As Luna told us, some people find them an unlikely couple. Curious, we asked him how a physicist and a witch would meet and marry. We received an unexpected answer:

Well, we had a Catholic wedding, although I had been evangelically baptized, and Luna had not been baptized at all. . . . Out of her own accord she went to the Catholic Church. For her it was the way the Catholic wedding ritual is put on stage and how it goes. That's why we had a Catholic wedding. I mean, they [the church] really do set up the ritual in a beautiful way—with a bit of incense and chants. (Interview, March 2011)

Luna and her husband deliberately submitted to the forms, structures and contents of a Catholic ritual; she even underwent baptism. They took these religious actions as authoritative. However, it must be emphasized that only certain such actions were thus recognized. As Luna told me, "We had our own singers who did the chants. Lars' friends waved the incenses. We did not say: Till death do us part, but: blablabla. It was a great happening". As she explicated to me over the phone, most important for her, when deciding on a Catholic wedding, was—as she called it—its spiritual *seriousness* (interview, May 17, 2011).²⁰

As open and situational as Luna's relationship towards a multiple set of spiritual authorities is, it is also in many ways quite inflexible and strict, particularly towards the field of new religions. There she makes a clear distinction between *legitimate* new religious practices—those that have authority—and *illegitimate* ones—those that don't. Indeed, when we first met she

was explicit about the fact that one must be wary of "weirdoes" such as the Angel Light Healers, and stay away from them (interview, September 2010). Drawing the line between legitimate and illegitimate forms of new religious practices is a constitutive element of her authority. Here she takes up a central discourse on new religions in general that questions the legitimacy of the latter, locating them at the societal margins. This discourse—as an expression of power relations—is decisive for the whole field of new religions in the urban context of Berlin. It constitutes the field's 'boundaries'. They become extremely dynamic and temporary, maintaining their sociocultural significance in defining new religious self-understandings.²¹

Because of this, whenever I mentioned my research topic to new religious practitioners outside of witchcraft, they would, like Luna, respond by drawing a line between legitimate and illegitimate spiritual practices, then elaborating on the legitimacy of witchcraft. As I visited one of the ten esoteric stores in Berlin and mentioned witchcraft, for example, the owner made me aware that:

. . . everyone should do as it pleases her or him. When young girls come in and ask for Neopagan witchcraft, I send them over to Heidi's witch shop. However, I am afraid of witches. That is because of the Burning Times. Our body saved those memories. I learned that those women were innocent. Still, and it's not only me who thinks so, I don't feel comfortable with this kind of spiritual practice. (Field notes, May 2010)

Again, one of the representatives in the *house of shamans* remarked, when I asked him about witchcraft in Berlin, "This is solely manipulation. For example, love magic. This is solely manipulation. It follows the logic: you get something, so you have to give something" (field notes, May 2010).

The discourse on legitimate versus illegitimate new religious practices, and thus on who does and does not possess spiritual authority, is deeply intertwined with the specific urban context and its variety and density of new religious offers, as well as its highly individualized urban dwellers who make use of those offers. The concrete geographic-cultural locality matters. It matters particularly when new religious practices and thus also witchcraft become political and challenge external authority.

A FINE BALANCE

For Luna rituals have one primary goal—to empower women and free them of patriarchal patterns of thought. Here she mainly draws on ideas of the American witch and Neopagan activist Starhawk as well as of the German witch Luisa Francia. Starhawk, like Francia, represents a branch of witchcraft that is radically socialist and feminist. Starhawk's understanding of authority and—closely related—of power clearly follow the distinction

between an external versus internal authority.²² According to her spiritual thinking, the “autonomous self”—the “power from within”—has almost dissolved through patriarchal oppression. Women have had to suffer the most. Their inner “old wisdom”—the “craft” of the wise women (the “witches”)—could survive only in secret, transmitted by a few. “Craft” is “the art of sensing and shaping the subtle, unseen forces that flow through the world”.²³ The idea of magic is central. Magic “opens the gate between the conscious and unconscious”.²⁴ In Starhawk’s thinking, magic is highly political. As she wrote, it is the art “of evoking power-from-within and using it to transform ourselves, our community, our culture, using it to resist the destruction that those who wield power are bringing upon the world”.²⁵ Luna echoes this idea when she writes in one of her regular moon-letters:

The . . . full moon makes us think of our old power. It stimulates us to connect to women worldwide in order to dream anew a loving world . . . As we confront reality we notice how patriarchal and capitalist structures shaped us. We see the oppression and rape of our female power . . . the rough nights (“Rauhnächte”) are the time for female inner power, the time of freedom, the time of truth. We name the evil and thus we ward it off. We name the oppressors, the rapists of our mother earth and thus we ward them off. We name the murderers of our daughter’s and son’s souls and thus we ward them off. We name the institutions and power relations which consume us and thus we ward them off. We name our inner destroyer and thus we ward him off. (E-mail newsletter, December 2009)

As clear-cut as the distinction between women’s internal authority and patriarchal external authority might appear in her writing, the distinction blurs as soon as the group performs rituals for empowerment and enters and thus produces urban public space. Most of the ritual locations are designed as sites of withdrawal from the hustle and bustle of city life and as a retreat into *nature*. Luna’s favorite location is situated along the lake *Krumme Lanke*. This is an area she used to play in as a child. However, this retreat into *nature* is far from complete. The ritual site is a communal and city-sanctioned swimming area. City dwellers come here in order to ‘get away’, relax and to leap into the lake. In this sense it is deeply urban. The space, with its people, specific landscape and administrative category (“official swimming area”), decisively shapes the ritual. Hence, particularly during the summer, Luna and the group often have curious bystanders. Sometimes they interact. People ask about the ritual or make some comments and receive replies. In a way, the witches have to share *their* (sacred) site of worship. However, they hope that their perception of the space will acquire as much recognition as other, mainstream public conceptions of it. Hence, the group became more active in their quest to transform the place into a formal ritual site for witches—not by using their “power from within” but by trying to communicate with city offi-

cial. By writing a letter to the Berlin senate, they confronted outwardly social structures of power, moving within them and using them to gain *spiritual power within and a space for women witches*. Hence, while their feminist spiritual agenda might inspire them to try to transform external authority, it did not require that they seek to abolish it. As ambivalent as this power might be, the witches acknowledge it as a legitimate and effective force with which they are deeply intertwined. In other words, they construct a ‘fine balance’ between external and internal authority.

The site at the *Krumme Lanke* is still not recognized as a ritual place by the local government. Luna and the women will not push any further the process of its possible recognition. As much as they claim their right to publicly and thus officially practice the worship of the Goddess, official recognition is still a ‘double-edge sword’ since it would partially remove the ‘secretiveness’ of the worship and thus its exclusivity as well as its subversive character. A constitutive element for the witches’ self-understanding would thus be missing.

SUMMARY

Victoria: The radio feature will be aired at 4:30pm. Luna, I want to say that its style is very journalistic—sometimes humorous. I hope you don’t get the wrong impression. We had to pick up and play with some clichés of the witch in order to get people to listen. I am a bit afraid that you might not find yourself represented in the way that you wanted to.

Luna: Don’t worry, I know the mainstream’s mentality and I know that journalists have to comply with it. I am sure that things are fine. The message will be spread.

Within the social scientists’ debates over new religious practices, it has become an established paradigm that one of *the* characteristics of new forms of religion is the dominance of the inner self. It is the ultimate authority that always presides over external authorities. However, this approach towards new religions/spiritualities reproduces the internal discourse of new religions on power itself without moving beyond it. It fails to consider the fact that the ‘inner self’ is itself a product of external authority. Furthermore, it leaves out the fact that ‘authorities outside the self’ are highly formative for the social structures among the new religious practitioners themselves. In order to broaden this analytic lens, I suggest the idea of authority as a performative act. Through the ethnographic deep description of a group of Neopagan witches in Berlin, I traced the ways in which Luna acquires spiritual authority among them—a social position that is ascribed to her and that people subordinate themselves to without coercion. The advantage of a ‘performative approach’ is that it reveals that authority is to a great extent established through bodily experience where all senses come into play. Furthermore, it

becomes obvious that the women who submit to Luna's authority are not themselves powerless. On the contrary, since they give and thus produce Luna's authority, they appear powerful. Luna's authority, rather than being stable, is constantly (re)negotiated, challenged and dynamic.

By taking up Matthew Wood's ideas on the 'non-formativeness' of new religions, I showed that Neopagan witches' religious practice are 'non-formative' in the sense that they tend to follow multiple (spiritual) authorities. At this point, I broaden Wood's approach by adding the dimension of geographic-cultural locality. I argue that even in the age of "geographically deterritorialized" realities such as in the Internet, locality matters. The fact that Neopagan witches in Berlin can easily choose among a variety of spiritual authorities is closely linked to the specifically dense and historically emergent structure of new religions within the city.

I want to note here that particularly the production of the radio feature made obvious the fact that different authorities come into play in shaping my own research on and representation of Neopagan witches. I tried to negotiate between them—the journalist's expectations, Neopagans' interests and my own academic goals and principles. Those external authorities no longer functioned on the level of *deliberate* subordination. On the contrary, they clearly operated on the principle of *coercion*. I had to submit to them, although I sometimes did not want to.

Hence, Neopagan witches formulated strict expectations for the documentary. For them, it was imperative that we portray Neopaganism as a religion that was much older than Christianity. This was a way to claim via a "long history" their right of recognition as a legitimate religious practice.

My journalist friend and I tried to meet their request. However, while editing the gathered material, her expertise on audio productions and my academic principles collided dramatically. Thus, she radically reformulated the spoken text that I had written. As she explained to me during a heated debate, I had to leave behind 'my' academic style of representation. It did not produce "clear statements" that were easy to grasp. She reminded me that we were supposed to produce an *infotainment*. People should get information and at the same time feel entertained. My writing style obviously did not meet these requirements.

The dilemma of being caught between different expectations during the production of legitimate forms of ethnographic representations is prominently analyzed in the essay collection *When They Read What We Write*.²⁶ Here, cultural anthropologists draw upon the "writing culture" debate, scrutinizing ethnographic authority on representation of moments when the "natives talk back".²⁷ Furthermore, they show how it is that journalistic (mis)representations of ethnographic studies challenge the relationship between researchers and natives.²⁸ Some of the contributors suggest that there should be a dialogue between the researcher and the "field" on ways of publishing ethnographic descriptions.²⁹ In producing the radio feature, I closely followed this idea. Before the documentary was aired, I made cop-

ies of it and distributed it among the witches. Some of them had strongly insisted on this step. Surprisingly, there was hardly any comment on the final product. Whenever I inquired about Luna's and others' opinions of it, and problematized the documentary, they admitted that they had not yet listened to it. The "dialogic principle" ultimately turned out to be a *burden* for the latter.³⁰ Natives *did not want* to talk back. One of the reasons for this might be simply trust. The way in which we gathered material made Neopagan witches feel that we acknowledged their authority over the data that they had provided. They did not worry about misrepresentation. Additionally, the radio feature gave rather general insights into Neopagan witchcraft. Neopagan witches knew beforehand that we would not touch on controversial issues such as the level of heteronormativity within Neopaganism. Hence, the radio feature might not have appeared inspiring to them, and as a result they did not listen.

Although the feature did not foster dialogue between us and the witches, it did stimulate the media's interest. On the basis of our documentary, journalists called Luna and asked for further information. Ultimately Luna was invited to a talk show of a national public TV channel. As an expert, she was asked to explain her beliefs to the German public.³¹

Luna's wish was fulfilled: the 'message' was spread.

NOTES

1. Haidrun Schäfer, "Kreativ oder reaktiv?" *Körper, Geist, Seele*, February 2010, 31–33.
2. See also Fedele and Trulsson in this volume.
3. Stefanie von Schnurbein, *Religion als Kulturkritik: Neugermanisches Heidentum im 20. Jahrhundert* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1992); Barbara Bötsch, *Leben mit der großen Göttin: Biografien, Glaubensweisen, Hintergründe zur Göttinreligion in Deutschland* (Regensburg: Lipa, 2005); Britta Rensing, "Der Glaube an die große Göttin und den Gott: Theologische, rituelle und ethische Merkmale der Wicca-Religion, unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Lyrik englischsprachiger Wicca-Anhänger" (PhD diss., University of Jena, 2006).
4. Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 415.
5. Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).
6. For one of the earliest conceptualizations of "new religions" see Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society* (New York: Macmillan, 1967). I take up Gordon Melton's rather broad definition of new religions. Accordingly, the 'lowest common possible' of new religions is the rejection of dogmas within their religious practices; Gordon Melton, "Toward a Definition of New Religion," *Nova Religio* 8 (2004): 73–87. I use the word 'religion' and 'spirituality' synonymously. In so doing, I avoid the hierarchical schema that those words imply.
7. I follow Foucault's notion of power as a "complex strategic situation within a particular society", where economic conditions, social systems and

- educational institutions bring about subjects that internalize specific power relations. Michel Foucault, *Sexualität und Wahrheit*, vol. 1, *Der Wille zum Wissen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983), 113f; Michael Ruoff, *Foucault-Lexikon* (Paderborn: Fink, 2007), 150.
8. Sarah Pike, *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 43.
 9. The notion of authority comes close to Weber's concept of charisma: Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Studienausgabe* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1976), 140; See as well Stefan Rademacher, "Makler": Akteure der Esoterik-Kultur als Einflussfaktoren auf neue religiöse Gemeinschaften," in *Fluide Religion*, ed. Dorothea Lüddeckens and Rafael Walther (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2010), 119–148.
 10. Throughout the article I use pseudonyms for the people I met in the 'field'.
 11. Sabina Magliocco, *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neopaganism in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 17.
 12. Those festivals are *Yule*: December 21; *Imbolc*: February 1; *Ostara*: March 21; *Beltane*: April 30; *Litha*: June 21; *Lammas*: August 2; *Mabon*: September 21; *Samhain*: October 31. Neopagans celebrate the yearly change of seasons as a symbol of the endless circle of life—birth, death, re-birth. See Gerald B. Gardner, *Witchcraft Today* (London: Rider, 1954); Gerald B. Gardner, *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (London: Aquarian Press, 1959).
 13. I use the word 'ritual' in the way that Neopagan witches do. Accordingly, it is an event that stands out of the 'everyday life routine' and brings about some form of individual and collective transformation. For an introduction into ritual theory see Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
 14. If not otherwise indicated, I quote from my field notes from 2010–2011 in the following passages.
 15. For a detailed discussion on definitions of 'performative act', see Christoph Wulf and Jörg Zirfas, "Die performative Bildung von Gemeinschaften: Zur Hervorbringung des Sozialen in Ritualen und Ritualisierungen," in *Theorien des Performativen*, ed. Erika Fischer-Lichte and Christoph Wulf (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2001), 93–116. The authors provide an instructive summary on ritual theories as well as performance theories.
 16. "Löwenmond", accessed March 18, 2012, <http://www.loewenmond.de>.
 17. Anzori Barkalaja, "Shamanism as Information Design," in *Shamanism in the Interdisciplinary Context*, ed. Art Leete and R. Paul Firnhaber (Boca Raton, FL: Brown Walker Press, 2004), 21–55.
 18. Nils Grübel and Stefan Rademacher, eds., *Religion in Berlin: Ein Handbuch* (Berlin: Weissensee-Verlag, 2003), 600.
 19. Matthew Wood, *Possession, Power and the New Age: Ambiguities of Authority in Neoliberal Societies* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 71.
 20. On the power of tradition among Goddess worshippers in Glastonbury see Trulsson's illuminating analysis in this volume.
 21. For the concept of the 'religious field', see Pierre Bourdieu, "Genese und Struktur des religiösen Feldes," in *Religion*, ed. Franz Schultheis and Stephan Egger (Konstanz: UVK-Verlagsgesellschaft, 2009), 30–90.
 22. Starhawk is one of the leading figures in *Reclaiming*, a particular branch of Neopagan witchcraft which emerged from the United States (San Francisco) at the end of the 1970s. For a study on Reclaiming's theology see Jone Salomonsen, *Enchanted Feminism* (London: Routledge, 2001).
 23. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Religion of the Great Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 27.
 24. *Ibid.*, 123.

25. Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982).
26. Caroline B. Brettell, ed., *When They Read What We Write: The Politics of Ethnography* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1993).
27. *Ibid.*, 9–14.
28. Ofra Greenberg, "When They Read What the Papers Say We Wrote," in *When They Read What We Write: The Politics of Ethnography*, ed. Caroline B. Brettell (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey), 107–118.
29. Richard P. Horwitz, "Just Stories of Ethnographic Authority," in *When They Read What We Write: The Politics of Ethnography*, ed. Caroline B. Brettell (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey), 132–143.
30. I want to thank Regina Bendix for the comment on the dialogic principle as a possible *burden* for the field.
31. Griseldis Wenner and Axel Bulthaupt, *Unter uns. Geschichten aus dem Leben* (TV talkshow), produced by Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk, aired October 21, 2011 (private recording).