

Jennifer Snook, *American Heathens: The Politics of Identity in a Pagan Religious Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015), ix + 221 pp. \$94.50 (cloth) \$29.95 (paper) \$29.95 (ebook).

American Heathens is an informative, engaging, and well-written text by American sociologist and Heathen practitioner Jennifer Snook. Unlike most scholar-practitioner works, it is not an anthropological study of a specific group of people in a particular place, but a sociological inquiry into American Heathenry as a whole. It is a valuable contribution adding to the landscape of Pagan studies, different from ethnographies focused on particular communities. She does a good job at conveying the spectrum of diversity of attitudes and orientations, but a detailed picture of the practice of American Heathens is not her aim. She focuses on identity politics, giving special attention to the contentious issue of race and ethnicity, with some discussion of gender politics. Overall it is quite a good book, and is well-grounded in the sociological literature.

Snook displays admirable honesty and integrity in indicating that although she set out to disprove Jeffrey Kaplan and Mattias Gardell's accounts of racist Heathenry in the United States, she was reluctantly forced to admit she found extensive racism. She attributes this largely to the American cultural milieu of a shift to the right from the 1980s onward, with roots in the 1970s in a backlash against the economic slowdown following the postwar boom, reacting to the counter cultural movements of feminism, and the civil rights movement. Snook argues that most Heathens in America are not preoccupied with race, but does not supply statistics. Social scientists might like to see a more quantified analysis of how racist American Heathens are, including a breakdown of geographical distribution, gender, and age disparities. How much does racist Heathenry correspond to the overt politics of practitioners or other factors, and how different are the numbers from the general American populace? Her research is qualitative, but for the purpose of investigating how racist American Heathens are, some quantitative analysis might have been illuminating.

Readers will need to glean Snook's methodology from various parts of the book rather than from an explicit summary at the outset. She mentions early on that the book is based on "twelve years of observation" (viii), but does not say where, when, and how. Methodology

sections may be unfashionable but are useful, even if condensed to just a few paragraphs in the introduction. Since Snook is writing as an insider, relating her methodology to those discussed in 2004's *Researching Paganisms* would have been of interest. Did she see herself as more akin to Jone Salomonsen, who strived to maintain critical distance while being a sympathetic observer (what Salomonsen calls the method of compassion), or a participant observer (a more ethnographic or anthropological role than Snook took on, I think). She seems in the end to claim the role of a more detached observer (as is idealized in sociology) despite her insider status, which is perhaps unique in the growing collection of studies on Paganism.

Snook describes American Heathenry as a form of Paganism that appears to be much more community-minded than other forms of Paganism, which is sociologically interesting particularly in the ongoing dynamic between more folkish versus more universalist oriented practitioners in Heathenry. The description she gives of kindreds affiliated into a larger collective, in which the local kindred is free to develop whatever sort of community they like, while the larger collective declines to comment on the politics of local kindreds and maintains a more open sort of cosmopolitan feeling is intriguing. Her study illustrates some potential benefits of developing close-knit community, but also highlights potential conflicts with the ideal of multicultural tolerance often assumed as a necessary characteristic of modern cosmopolitan society. Snook gives the impression that a number of Heathens come to it from a perceived lack of real community in Wicca, though this may be simply part of identity construction through othering.

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