I was once told that one does not really experience the true meaning of Paganism until one attends a festival. Performing ritual outdoors, living on the land, even if temporarily, sharing the experience with large numbers of like minds and bodies, having the freedom to be who you want to be without the usual societal constrictions—these are the foundations of Pagan practice. I still find this statement fascinating today, even after ten years of attending various festivals and gatherings. It is rife with assumptions about how Paganism is restricted and proscribed within contemporary urban life—that practitioners can only truly be “free” or “be themselves” away from these restrictions. For many practitioners of contemporary Paganism, this is certainly the case, even as that fact reifies a certain kind of fantasizing about counter-culture utopia or indulging in romanticization of the pastoral and rural so common in early Victorian formulations of nature religions. Yet, one cannot deny the awesome experience of entering festival space for the first time. The colors, the sounds, the bodies, the feeling that many participants describe as being “welcomed home.” There is something to this confusing mixture that certainly does embody aspects of Paganism itself. Mostly festivals create an elaborate, synaesthetic composition of images, voices, and emotions that bring to life all the convergences, conflicts and diversities of practiced Paganisms, their communities and individuals. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the pervasive festival bonfires that often rage from dusk until dawn while participants dance and drum in a swirl of writhing bodies and intense, sometimes chaotic, rhythms.

A relative latecomer to the festival scene, I have been involved with various aspects of Paganism and ceremonial magick as both a scholar and a practitioner since the early 1990’s, though it was not until 1998, after my PhD coursework in Performance Studies was completed, that I began to attend festivals, not as a scholar but as a member of a particular magickal community in Chicago. However, like so many other ethnographers, I soon realized that festivals are great environments for
research on people, practices, and issues within the various communities. In that first year, I joked that I was the only one I knew who used grant money to buy a tent and go camping. I have only attended festivals at a relatively small variety of sites since then, but my visits to those sites have been frequent and annual. They include both Starwood and Sirius Rising at Brushwood Folklore Center in eastern New York state, Elf Fest, Wild Magick and various smaller gatherings at Lothlorien Nature Sanctuary in southern Indiana, Pagan Spirit Gathering at Wisteria Nature Preserve in southern Ohio, and more recently, various small festivals at a young site, also in southern Indiana, called Our Haven. I have sometimes offered my own workshops at these sites, especially at Starwood, where I have led discussions about magick and popular culture, and about issues surrounding performance, ethnography and scholarship in Pagan Studies. In addition to my own experiences at these sites, I have begun interviewing a wide variety of participants, including landowners, ritualists, drummers, fire tenders, and dancers, as part of an ongoing project which will more than likely expand the range of festivals I will attend in the future.

Though various scholars have done extensive work on the festival as a major element of Pagan culture, I hope to enrich the conversation with some aspects of festival that have remained relatively unexplored and with my own insights and experiences. The groundwork for scholarly examinations of Pagan festival was certainly laid by Sarah Pike in her ethnography, *Earthly Bodies and Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search For Community* (2001). Other scholars who have studied the history of Paganism and particular Pagan communities, like Helen Berger (1999) and Chas Clifton (2006), have emphasized the role that festivals have played in expanding and defining the national Pagan community. In the recent third edition of her classic *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers and other Pagans in America* (2006/1979), Margot Adler devotes an entire section to festivals, unequivocally proclaiming

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1 Sarah Pike’s earlier article, “Forging Magical Selves: Gendered Bodies and Ritual Fires at Neo-Pagan Festivals,” in *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft* (1996), is also an essential addition to her book length work. She has also followed up on some of that work in an article in *Researching Paganisms* (2004) and in her own *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America* (2004). Helen Berger’s *A Community of Witches* (1999) has covered elements of Rites of Spring, one of the longest running Pagan festivals in America, sponsored by Earth Spirit Community in Massachusetts. Chas Clifton has also recently explored some aspects of festival and its role in shaping contemporary Paganism in *Her Hidden Children* (2006).