

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

# **Inscribed White Supremacy:**

**Neopagan Tattooing, Identity, and the Circulation of Radicalism**

By

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**Abstract:**

White Supremacist aesthetics are shifting in the twenty-first century as powerful new mythohistorical imaginaries are crystallized in bodily representations. It is worth paying attention to the embodied visages white supremacists are producing at this time, as they challenge, reinforce, and complicate images of whiteness in the contemporary. Using a digital ethnographic approach to track the circulation of new visages and reactionary discourses online can reveal the transnational implications of white supremacist bodily inscription. Paying close attention to discourses of contestation regarding the ‘meaning’ of Norse-themed tattoos and symbols on social media is particularly elucidating in regards to the transformations of historical meaning of ‘Norse’ symbols. My findings point to the construction of a neo-viking chronotope, not simply a costume which one takes on and off but a productive bodily refashioning which enables powerful new visions of what it means to be white in relation to an embodied history. These temporal reconfigurations taking place through bodily inscriptions in the form of tattoos can reveal the production of new mythohistories and political futures which certain white supremacist organizations have invested in, not only ideologically but corporeally. This process effectively reframes historical ‘fact’ and embodied historical relations through bodily inscription and presentation in the present.

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## **Introduction:**

On the sixth of January 2021, the United States Capitol was targeted in an attack which shocked the nation. Members of the insurrectionary assault were parts of various organizations, or parts of loose national networks of white supremacists and reactionaries linked through social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, and various others. These groups and individuals, however, were united by a dissatisfaction with election results, and a general resentment for the incoming President Joe Biden. Many of those who took part in the insurrection have been arrested and brought to trial for various charges ranging from disorderly conduct to assault, one of those being Jacob Chansley.

Better known as QShaman, Chansley has become somewhat of a poster-boy for the entire insurrectionary event, and has been linked to the conspiracy theories of QAnon. Chansley, who stormed the capitol wearing a horned helmet reminiscent of vikings, also sported a nude torso for the event, showing off his various nordic-themed tattoos. The most visible of these tattoos were Mjolnir, the hammer of Thor, the Valknut rune, and the Ygdrassil, the nordic tree of life. To the untrained eye, what first appear as vaguely pagan symbols may seem innocuous compared to something like the Swastika (Birkett 2021). However, therein lies their power, these symbols can communicate a variety of meanings, from an association with Nordic Pagan Revival movements to white supremacist organization to a sort of neo-primitivist orientation (Klesse 1999; Rosenblatt 1997).

Online contestations of the meanings of these symbols are prevalent in the discourse surrounding the insurrectionary event, but have also expanded to a broader geopolitical context. As the Russian-Ukrainian war has come to dominate news cycles for the past year, conversations

surrounding the Azov Battalion and their controversial tattoos and dress have become increasingly prevalent as they relate to the ongoing US material support of the war. The discourse surrounding both the war in Ukraine and also the assault on the US Capitol intersect in surprising ways, and reveal the language ideologies which haunt conversations surrounding political radicalism, esotericism, and their bodily representations. In order to make sense of these symbolic contestations and the ideologies which inform them, a semiotic analysis could lead to more clarity in regards to what the appropriation of these symbols onto various bodies is doing politically.

In the following essay I will use the concept of uptake to discuss dogwhistles and their semiotic implications, as well as how white supremacists seek to appropriate the Norse neopagan symbolic lexicon via bodily inscription to produce new chronotopic representations. I will also discuss the work being done by some in the Norse neopagan community to disrupt the symbolic appropriation of Heathen or Ásatrú symbols via the re-interpretation of Norse myth and the reclamation of symbolic language. This will reveal the ongoing reformulations occurring in the identity of both those who have inscribed these symbols onto their bodies, as well as the ideological commitments of analysts and commentators. Specifically, I hope that this piece serves to expand the ways in which scholars research, write about, and discuss whiteness as white supremacists construct alternate histories and bodily representations across borders.



fig. 1: “A Ukrainian servicemember is seen wearing what appears to be a Black Sun symbol associated with Nazism on the chest of her uniform in this photo published by the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine on February 14.” (O’Connor 2022)

Source: General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine via Newsweek

## Methods:

I begin with an analysis of the Norse neopagan tattoo as dogwhistle in order to explore the semiotic implications of ambiguous bodily representations, as well as how these representations enable white supremacists to covertly and quickly organize in public. I then move on to analyze the utilization and manipulation of historical narrative utilizing Michel-Rolph Trouillot's concept of historicity (1995). I then utilize my ethnographic findings to produce a situational analysis of global white supremacy, outlining critiques of previous scholarship, or the lack thereof, when it comes to conceptualizing and analyzing white supremacy and whiteness as both a global system of domination and an embodied identity. Following that, I analyze how the commodification of Norse neopagan symbols in tattooing has led to a proliferation of ambiguous sign determinations which serve to both enhance the potential to dogwhistle as well as leave the Norse neopagan lexicon open to counter-interpretations and contestations of sign meaning. Utilizing the example of Jacob Chansley and others, I follow with an analysis of how chronotopic constructions in bodily representation serves to alter historical narratives surrounding whiteness and white supremacy. I conclude with a discussion and analysis of the symbolic contestations occurring in the Norse neopagan community, and how these contestations reveals how the strength of the dogwhistle in terms of its ambiguous sign functionality leaves white supremacist attempts at symbolic appropriation open to counter-efforts.

This project's ethnographic data was largely gathered online by surveying the posts of communities over six months. Ranging from websites like Twitter, reddit, and Tumblr, I tracked certain accounts as well as broader communities on forums in order to anonymously document the discourses of contestation regarding the interpretation of Norse symbology and myth. The

use of digital ethnography in this regard was particularly useful in that it allowed me to access the discourse of communities and the thoughts of individuals without having to directly engage with potentially dangerous members of these communities.

Having approached several individuals or organizations for interviews, and being met with either silence or outright refusals to become involved in this research, I shifted my strategy to tracking discourses online as opposed to within any geographically particular subcommunity. This allowed me to expand my ethnographic findings beyond particular localities and towards a broader analysis of international discourses which circulate on the internet. The Norse neopagan community is small, however fairly organized at the local level, with organizations such as Thor's Oaken Kindred in Chicago serving as a primary example of the ways in which these communities often lay claim to entire cities in regards to their influence.

It should also be noted that when I did approach particular communities and individuals for interviews, white supremacy was a delicate subject. There was often a fear among my interlocutors that I was coming into this project with the active goal of painting the entirety of Norse neopaganism as a religion directly linked to white supremacy, and these anxieties are not unwarranted. Organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League, while doing valuable work in tracking and cataloging the lexicon of hate symbols on their online database, also serve as sites for the hegemonic determination of sign functions, without the space or potentially the theoretical interest to point out the contestations which surround many if not all of these symbols.

Concerns for my own safety, as well as those of my interlocutors, also led me in the direction of online ethnography. As a white gay man, I am in a vulnerable position vis a vis white

supremacist violence, and this became more obvious the deeper I dived into the world of Norse neopaganism and white supremacy. The focus on white masculinity has led to a proliferation of concepts surrounding gay men which imagine our existence as a degenerative invasive force, linked to the ongoing discourses which seek to label the entirety of the LGBTQ community as ‘groomers,’ a term which has increasingly been used to link queer identities with pedophilia. This also reveals an aspect of the ideology of white supremacy, and particularly Aryanism, in which those who are white are often the subject of scrutiny in regards to racial purity in alignment with particular identity and performance. White Supremacy becomes, in this regard, about those who are white — their identities, representations, and performances — as well as the vaguely defined other.

As I worked, the strategy of online ethnography revealed more benefits in regards to my research. While Norse pagan communities and their individual members were hesitant to discuss the ways in which their religious traditions are appropriated by white supremacists with me, there was a dearth of ethnographic data waiting to be uncovered online. I posit that this largely stems from the illusion of anonymity which online communities often grant those involved with them, and that posting online can serve as a way to engage in discourses which certain actors might not participate in within the context of the material world (Nissenbaum 2009; Turkle 2017).

This project serves to expand the limits of the ways in which we conduct ethnographic inquiry. Specifically, digital ethnography can allow for marginalized individuals to access spaces and the discourses within them which might be inaccessible in-person due to identifiable characteristics or perceived identities (Hine 2000). As discourse increasingly moves online, it is



important for ethnographers to adapt to the changing social circumstances we conduct our research in, and to also take advantage of the new opportunities for ethnographic inquiry posed to us by the move of socialization onto online platforms.

## **Dogwhistles and Uptakes:**

The importance of dogwhistles in politics is a relatively new development. Described as “coded racial appeals that carefully manipulate hostility towards nonwhites,” dogwhistles have come to prominence following the resurgence of white nationalism in the public sphere of the United States (Haney-López 2014:IX). Typically used to describe verbal speech acts, dogwhistles act in the realm of lexical ambiguity which arises from the underdetermination of the sign-function. These underdetermined signs serve a dual purpose: to those who are familiar with racist ideologies and positions, they effectively communicate racist political positions allowing for covert identification and organization, and to the rest of the unaware population, they serve to obfuscate the communication of the speakers, or in the case of tattoos it might be more apt to describe them as presenters. In another sense, any attempt at revealing the racist rhetoric behind the speech act also serves a metapragmatic purpose for the dogwhistler. It shifts the focus of the conversation from racist political positions to the speech act itself. The conversation moves away from the denotational meaning of the speech act, so important in western language ideologies, and towards not only the speech act itself, but also the speaker. In this sense, dogwhistles are powerful discursive tools for positioning the presenter and listener in unique ways, as they privilege the presenter as the ultimate knower of denotational meaning while the interpreter becomes responsible for what is akin to translation. This process of

translation draws the listener or interpretant away from meaning and towards a semi-conspiratorial mode of knowledge production and validation regarding speaker intentionality.

While typically used to describe verbal speech acts, dogwhistles have increasingly become associated with signs inscribed on the body through tattooing or those placed on clothing, as evidenced by the ever-growing Hate Symbols Database being created by the Anti-Defamation League (Haney-López 2014). These signs range from seemingly innocuous drawings of cartoon frogs, to Norse neopagan symbols associated with both white supremacist organizations and neopagan revivalists. However, my focus here will primarily be on the symbols of Norse neopaganism as they are a hotly contested set of visual dogwhistles which have cropped up in the past decade. The use of Norse neopagan dogwhistles produces ambiguity surrounding political and religious identities, however these signs reflect a certain orientation towards narratives surrounding white bodies and the histories which produce them. From Jacob Chansley to the Azov Battalion, the inscription of Norse symbols onto the body has become a practice for many political actors to covertly communicate political positions to others who share them, while obfuscating the intended meanings to onlookers unfamiliar with the ever-growing corpus of white supremacist symbology.

A useful tool to analyze the process of translating meanings is that of uptake described by Susan Gal and Judith Irvine in their book *Signs of Difference* (2019). Behind the choice to think through tattoos with the semiotic lens, as opposed to the more typical verbal and written communicative analysis, is the contribution that “any phenomenon may be a sign if it is posited to stand for something, in some uptake, from some vantage point;” as tattoos are often interpreted as a sign, semiotic forms of analysis could be useful in thinking through

interpretations of sign-relations of tattoos (Gal and Irvine 2019, 87). Gal & Irvine's summation of the sign-function targets three key points related to the process of tattooing and their ensuing interpretations: standing for something (a representative function), uptake, and vantage point. These three components of the sign function are key to understanding the sign in relation to dog whistles and the communicative obfuscation that grants them power.

Beginning with vantage point or as I will call it, perspective, it is important to point out that the various interpretations of the sign relations of Norse themed tattoos are invariably produced, at least in part, via the perspective of interlocutors. As Gal and Irvine note, "participants conjecture... by turning attention to potential signs," which can lead to the potential explosion of conjectures in relation to sign interpretation (2019, 88). However, one should also consider that participants in social interaction "have differential access to knowledge about how positions are conventionally signaled which allow them to enact various points of view" (Gal and Irvine 2019, 87-88). Herein lies the power of the dogwhistle; speakers, or in this case people who have received white supremacist coded Norse tattoos, have access to more perspectives than the average participant in social interaction. This is an active strategy used in the construction of symbols as dogwhistles, as the secrecy of the sign-relation is the primary concern of many white supremacists who have coded tattoos (Haney-López 2014). This secrecy allows for the maintenance of power, in terms of differentiated access to knowledge, and facilitates covert communications between individuals who share ideological goals. Dogwhistles also allow for rapid organization and communication via non-verbal means, enabling white supremacists to identify each other and to act without formal planning.

The question of how the sign-relation of Norse neopagan symbol as white supremacist dogwhistle is differentiated from that of a neopagan belief orientation uninformed by white supremacy, is answered by the idea that “signs are always hypothesized within social scenes of some kind, which are themselves part of the sociohistorical process” (Gal and Irvine 2019, 90). Take the following example, pictured below in figure 2, of an interaction on Twitter regarding the interpretation of the black sun, a symbol created by the Nazi party. The account which posted the photo called AZ Right Wing Watch, tweets that “nazis are getting bold as hell around here,” clearly stating the connection between the black sun and its historical connections to the Nazi Party. However, the account replying to this tweet, with various Norse runes in their username, states that the black sun is “not inherently a nazi symbol,” followed by the statement that it would be if worn by Ukrainian soldiers who actively claim their white supremacist orientations in relation to the symbols tattooed on their bodies or placed on their clothing. This user then claims that “Ásatrú and our Runes are NOT racist nor is my religion.”

Clearly on display here is the contestation over sign-relations between differently positioned participants in social interaction. The ongoing Ukraine war and the presence of neo-nazis in the Ukrainian military informs one of these interpretations, differentiating between seemingly sincerely-held religious beliefs unaffiliated with a white supremacist orientation and those which come to stand for those views, possibly unaffiliated with any kind of religious perspective.

The different uptakes of the sign-relation revealed in this

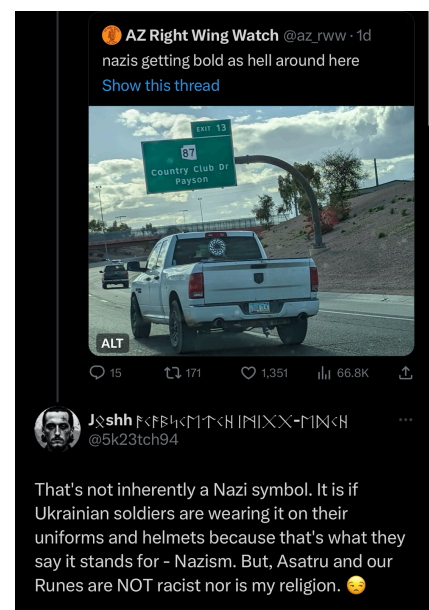


fig. 2

interaction produces a discourse which, instead of discussing the contemporary presence of a symbol associated historically with the Nazi party, shifts attention towards contestation of historical sign-relations. While this truck was seen in Arizona, the discourse surrounding the Ukraine war has leaked into the circulation of knowledge surrounding white supremacist symbols.

In the sense of determining the truth value of a statement, the responder in this situation is wrong. The black sun did not have an affiliation with any pre-Christian European religious tradition and is entirely an invention of the Nazi regime, however, that knowledge is not well known to those outside of academic circles. Truth, in this instance, ceases to be a meaningful sign-relation determinant, and instead sign-relation conjectures are influenced both by ongoing discourses about whiteness, pre-Christian religious traditions, and the rise of white nationalism and neopagan revivals in both the Ukrainian and American context.

If we are to take the responder in good faith, it is not a matter of determining the historical validity of any sign's relation to its historical origin, but a commentary on the present sign-relations which constitute the production of meaning from symbols. This provocation was helpfully addressed by Michel-Rolph Trouillot's concepts of historicity 1 and historicity 2 as outlined in his book *The Silencing of the Past* (1995). Following this analysis, it is time to turn our attention to the relationship between the past and the present in regards to sign-relations and their indeterminate interpretations.

## **Historical Signs and Present Relations:**

The above example displays the ways in which various Norse tattoos being inscribed on the bodies of white supremacists, in relation to a white supremacist political orientation, clearly

have no relation to an actual archaeo-historical reality (“Valknot”; Sandberg 2021). In the case of these symbols “there is no “correct” knowledge to be substituted for false knowledge,” as the vikings left behind practically no written works describing their religious traditions, beliefs, and the relationship of symbols to those traditions and beliefs (Sandberg 2021, 199). For example, the Valknot, as shown on Chansley and members of the Azov Battalion in Ukraine, has no historically ascertained meaning in the denotational sense, and if it once did, this meaning has been lost through the process of christianization. In the context of white supremacy’s incorporation of these symbols, this fact clearly has little to no effect on the internal logics of white supremacist belief construction. Turning to Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s conceptualization of historical production can provide ways to think through the constructed histories which white supremacists rely upon for building connections between white supremacy and Norse symbols.

However, to avoid falling into the trap of historical constructivism, I feel it is important to consider the interface between historicity 1, historical process, and historicity 2, historical narrative (Trouillot 1995, 29). Following Trouillot, white supremacists who inscribe Norse symbols on their bodies “did not exist at the time of the events they claim to remember... their constitution as subjects goes hand in hand with the continuous creation of the past” (1995, 16). As the concept of race did not exist in the viking age, at least not in the same sense which it does in the context of contemporary global white supremacy, the relation between past and present here is not simply a process of remembering, or recovering history. Rather, we should turn our gaze to the particular ways in which white supremacists are attempting to produce a history via their actions in the present.

What becomes evident in the contestations surrounding the historical validity of white supremacy in relation to Norse paganism, an already ill-defined attempt at historical reconstruction of pre-Christian European belief systems, is that the historical validity of the relation between white supremacy and Norse paganism's symbols loses its status as a meaningful determinant of present sign-relations. Far from arguing that facts have become meaningless, as "facts are never meaningless: indeed, they become facts only because they matter in some sense, however minimal," what I argue is that these historical facts are not meaningful to the social and political actors who are inscribing Norse pagan symbols onto their bodies (Trouillot 1995, 29). In other words, "[they] know very well, yet nevertheless," white supremacists utilize the symbols of Norse neopaganism by loading them with indexical values situated to present whiteness and white supremacy as historically validated by their perceived ancestors and their religious traditions (Wedeen 2019, 7). This process of knowing that something is 'wrong,' yet acting as if it is true, speaks to a "fundamental fantasy investment," which white supremacists have incorporated their bodies into, the fantasy being their position as historically linked with groups perceived as vikings in relation to the project of constructing white supremacist histories of which they, and their bodies, are part of (Wedeen 2019, 7).

This is why some authors studying the rise of white nationalism in relation to bodily sign inscription are baffled by the presence of Valknuts and Mjolnirs on white supremacists (Sandberg 2021). The historical facts matter to them, as they rely on these facts to produce a meaningful sense of the past in a historical tradition, however this mindset is aligned with the historical guild's view of the historian whose "role... is to reveal the past, to discover or at least approximate the truth" (Trouillot 1995:5). White supremacists, in this case, are working in the

division between historicity 1 and historicity 2, producing new sign-relations despite the historical ‘facts.’ There is a utilization, whether knowingly or not, of the co-constitutive relation between the two historicities to construct new and meaningful sign-relations and to shape perspectival uptakes.

Far from being determined by past events, “history reveals itself only through the production of specific narratives,” as in the case of white supremacy and Norse neopaganism, there is a clear attempt to utilize the lack of clear archaeological records in order to construct new histories in relation to contemporary context (Trouillot 1995, 25). Whether or not white supremacists knowingly are doing the work of producing new histories related to Norse neopagan symbols, or if they are simply engaging with already constructed sign-relations post-hoc is a matter up for debate. Regardless of their knowledge of the archaeological record, or lack thereof, they are engaging in the work of producing history through contemporary action. The lack of archaeological determinacy in relation to the ‘meaning’ of Norse neopagan symbols would be described by Trouillot as a historical silence, produced in this case from the destruction of pre-Christian belief systems, folk traditions, and rituals in the process of Northern European Christianization (1995). As Trouillot notes, “any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences,” and in this case those silences are being utilized to shape a historical narrative dependent upon white supremacist cosmology, ideology and political orientations which are projected onto an imagined past (Trouillot 1995, 27).

However, it would be a mistake to discount the role which actual historical events play in the construction of white supremacist mythohistories. Particularly, as described by Mattias Gardell in his book *Gods of the Blood* (2003), the links between white supremacy, Nazism and



the occult aspects of Norse neopaganism are evident in the historical record. As I discuss later, the Nazi party was very intent on crafting mythologized histories of the ‘Aryan’ race which fit into their racial ontology, and these mythologized histories often leaned on pre-Christian Norse myth. What is significant in regards to the use of Trouillot’s concept of history is that present day geopolitics, sociality, and ideology reach into the past to change and modify the way we craft bodily representations and think of ourselves in the present. Specifically, bodily inscription serves to place the body at the forefront of the ways in which white supremacist neopagans craft historical narrative, linking their bodies to produced histories through the construction of embodied chronotopes (Bakhtin 1981).

The silences of the various Norse pagan symbols tattooed on the bodies of white supremacists are being utilized to construct new historical narratives in “a project linked to an interpretation” (Trouillot 1995, 58). The project of constructing new meanings for symbols, such as the Valknot, is one of establishing “retrospective significance... created by the actors themselves, as a past within their past, or as a future within their present” (Trouillot 1995, 59). This project stretches backwards and forwards in time, utilizing silences to produce new meanings in the present through the interpretation of the past.

## **Situational Analysis of White Supremacy in the 21st**

### **Century:**

How can we make sense of the global nature of white supremacist activity in relation to Norse neopagan revivalism? From the United States capital to the battlefields of the Ukraine-Russia war, the use of Norse neopagan symbols as coded dogwhistles to communicate an

orientation towards neo-Nazism and white supremacy seems to have gone viral and crossed international borders with ease. What may seem to be disparate settings with wildly different contexts are compressed into a singularity, points of tension and identity formation lead to the same outcomes in different conditions which are both shaped around neo-Nazism, white supremacy, and Norse neopagan revivals.

Mattias Gardell, in his book *Gods of the Blood: The Pagan Revival and White Separatism* (2003), argues that the neopagan and neo-nationalist revival is largely a result of the effects of globalization, which have deanchored identities from place and space, imminently compressing globally diverse cultures into points of difference in an increasingly assimilationist context of the “global village” (Gardell 2003, 2). A process which he describes as the production of “different cultures in the world... becoming *subcultures* within the global culture, with all that this suggests in terms of intersecting, flowing, and ambiguous boundaries” (Gardell 2003, 7). However, while globalization has had profound effects on the way people think about their place in the world in relation to culture, language, place, and religion, Gardell argues that the flattening effects of globalization have produced a counter-motion which could be described as a “centrifugal movement toward, ethnic, racial, and religious fragmentation... linked to the centripetal movement of globalization” (Gardell 2003, 6).

Our world has arguably become even more globalized than at the time of Gardell’s writing, not just at the level of economics and politics, but at the personal. A vast majority of people in the United States are now avid-users of social media as a tool for entertainment and news, but also community building (Mossberger et al. 2013; Kendall 2002). Place has been obliterated in regards to what it means to be in a community by these developments, as any trip

to a social media platform wherein neo-Nazis gather, like 4Chan, will show you. Sites such as this one have become meeting points for people from diverse global environments to share ideas, and with the proliferation of social media platforms, those which have become marginal or are otherwise loosely monitored, have become breeding grounds for the formulation of reactionary, socially unacceptable ideological positions (Gardell 2003, 11; Lori 2002). In this sense, “the imagined communities of Aryan revolutionaries transcends existing national borders in a vision of a pan-Aryan transatlantic homeland” (Gardell 2003, 11).

Gardell was profoundly prescient to note that white supremacist Norse neopagans are moving online to share their images and ideas, however the context of this has shifted significantly in the two decades since the publishing of Gardell’s book. Not only do neo-Nazis utilize the internet, and more specifically social media, to form communities and communicate with others who share their vision of a pan-Aryan future, but there is an active utilization of these sites as platforms to spread propaganda and recruit people, typically young white men.

Gardell equates the rise of alternative religious movements with a globalization which “simultaneously pushes secularization and stimulates religious revivalism” in a process which effectively seeks to challenge the hegemonic dominance of market logics and science as the forces which have come to dictate much of contemporary, globalized life (Gardell 2003, 13). Combined with a paganism which has “much to do with roots, identity, and urban man’s romanticized notion of nature and “natural life,”” and what one finds in these movements is a general reaction to and rejection of modernity as a whole (Gardell 2003, 16). Similar to how Rosenblatt (1995) characterized neo-primitive movements in the 1990s, the use of the ‘primitive’ or the rural is used to discuss the issues with modernity, and, arguable, by association, whiteness.

Work is done between historical narrative and historical process which recontextualizes what it means to be ‘primitive.’ Characterized as secular, technologically and scientifically focused, rational, and ruled by market logics, modernity has come to stand for many as a complete and total reversal of what it means to be human. Pagans, as described by Gardell, place focus on “traditions of the past, local communities, and tribalism,” in other words, they look backwards to answer the perceived problems of modern, globalized, and secularized social formations (Gardell 2003, 14).

As shown in figure 3, where one tumblr user has posted a photo of an inscribed stone with text reading “HAIL THE OLD GODS” with the caption “Hail the Old Gods! Hail the Old Ways!” These are common ways for members of the online neopagan community to communicate both their appreciation for the perceived ancient origins of their religious traditions, as well as to validate their beliefs via producing an association with the past. This mirrors the kind of self-styling done by other Norse neopagans as a way to connect their identities, both internal and external, with a perceived ancestral heritage.

However, Gardell’s position goes against my ethnographic findings in some strange ways. While there is an emphasis on the “resacralization of nature,” in many of the Norse neopagan communities I interacted with and surveyed, there is also an explicit rejection of tribalism as it relates to racialized identities. In fact, most of the online Norse neopagan communities I interacted with had direct statements which embraced diversity through inclusive practices. As evidenced by the diversity statement

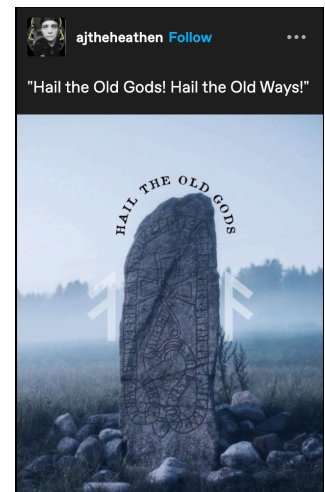


fig. 3

on the website of Thor's Oaken Kindred, an Ásatrú organization based in Chicago. The statement reads as follows:

Our members are kindred by choice and have chosen to embrace each other as family. We are proud of our diversity, and we stand against all discrimination on the basis of race, sex, orientation, identity, origin, ancestry, age, or ability.

However, this does not mean that these kinds of statements are uncontested, as evidenced by the sheer amount of discourse surrounding the contestations of Norse neopagan symbols and myth. What is significant here is that the reasons for the rise of neopagan communities is multiple and in dynamic flux. Each organization has its own precepts, and each individual neopagan has their own ideas about what it means to be a Heathen or practitioner of Ásatrú in the twenty-first century. Arguments, like Gardell's, that seek to pinpoint one particular reason for the rise of neopaganism in the contemporary period fail to understand that there is no monolithic shared goal within the array of subcommunities which have been conceived through years and years of organizing and fragmentation. While we can point to particular shared ideologies within these communities, such as tribalism or the resacralization of nature, it would be a mistake to attribute the rise of Norse neopaganism to any one particular force or reaction.

Global White Supremacy is a system which is never quite describable in its totality, it is a "non-totalizable" assemblage of various mechanisms, images, ideologies, and actions which have various points of articulation around the world (Zigon 2018, 83). These points of articulation could be redlining in American cities or the shared semiotic systems which identify and incorporate certain symbols into an identifiable lexicon, however these are never quite the thing in itself. What I am attempting to do here is display the global system of white supremacy

through its transnational points of articulation, here shared by both Ukrainian neo-Nazi paramilitaries and also January 6th insurrectionists. This form of analysis allows room for various forms of Norse neopaganism and white supremacy to show their differences while revealing that they are linked through a system of cosmology, history, and politics which has come to take a predominant place in determining global social hierarchies, namely white supremacy.

The ideas surrounding whiteness and Norse neopaganism are structured by mythologized shared histories identified through certain counter-cultural narratives which grant structure to the shared lexicon of images. Which is why identifying the shared points of articulation within the assemblage of global white supremacy is a significant aspect in any attempt at understanding how non-totalizable assemblages are bound together. There is a shared history here which grants structure to these separate points of articulation, which is how you get Ukrainian neo-Nazis and American insurrectionists sharing not only the same symbology, but also the same active participation in white supremacist systems of terror and domination. It would be a mistake to attempt to dictate the reasons for the rise of the neopagan phenomenon, however ethnographers can work to track the links between various ideologies which can serve to reveal part of the bigger picture which is global white supremacy.

## **Commodifying Identity:**

The circulation of images in the forms of bodily inscriptions in order to produce new subjectivities would be incomplete without an analysis of the commodity form which these images take. While a commodity is commonly defined as something which is produced under capitalist economic conditions for exchange, and, importantly, as “an external object, a thing

which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind,” the tattoo-as-commodity challenges these fundamental Marxist notions (Marx 1976, 125). It is both a good and a service in its commoditized form – one pays for both the inscription on the skin as well as the thing inscribed itself, and once acquired, it cannot be exchanged again through typical means. However, in the most bare sense, the tattoo is a commodity by nature of its being “transferred to another, whom it will serve as a use-value, by means of exchange;” the use value here being abstractly defined as its role in the body project or the crafting of a particular embodiment which lends itself to certain subjective predispositions (Marx 1971, 48).

However, a tattoo might share more with Mauss’ (1925) concept of the Gift rather than a commodity. In terms of the affective aspects of the tattooing process as exchange, it is much more than “the drive... of goods for one another, a drive mediated by money and not by sociality,” (Appadurai 1989, 11-12). Tattooing exists as an art form and a commodity to be exchanged, and by virtue of its inscription on the skin and the subjective transformations it imposes or catalyzes are social in nature. Tattooing is not driven solely by money and exchange, but by a desire for sociality, or perhaps better said a desire to enact or encourage certain interpretations of the sign-inscribed body. The tattoo as a communicative form also challenges the strict boundary in Western philosophical tradition between “‘words’ and ‘things,’” as the tattoo is both an object in terms of its existence in reality and a form which communicates for itself – in other words, a sign (Appadurai 1989, 4).

To resolve some of the contradictory or problematic elements of thinking of the tattoo-as-commodity, I would follow along with Arjun Appadurai in his assertion that “things can move in *and* out of the commodity state...” (1989, 13). The tattoo is conceived in the commodity state as

both a good and service designed for exchange, that exchange being monetary for both the artist producing the tattoo as well as the act of bodily inscription itself. However, once the tattoo is inscribed on the body, the distance between commodity and body becomes questionable – the tattoo is quite literally on/in the skin, the act of inscription annihilates the distance between the body and commodity. This, combined with the fact that once placed on the skin the tattoo cannot be removed and exchanged by traditional means, limits the ability for the completed tattoo to be described as commodity, however it opens up questions regarding the social life of the tattoo. This process makes the tattoo an “ex-commodity, things retrieved either temporarily or permanently, from the commodity state and placed in some other state,” the tattoo starts its inceptive journey as a commodity but ends as something else entirely, namely a part of the body.

I would follow here by also making use of Kopytoff and Appadurai’s conceptualization of the life-cycle of a commodity being biographical. In their discussion of the Kula exchange circuit in the Western Pacific, they argue that “valuables acquire very specific biographies as they move from place to place and hand to hand, just as the men who exchange them gain and lose reputation as they acquire, hold, and part with these valuables,” (Appadurai and Kopytoff 1989, 18). I find this concept to be particularly useful in describing the ways in which the Norse neopagan tattoo, treated as a sign, circulates through the world on the body, and through the actions of the bodies they are inscribed on acquire biographical experience which further links the body and the sign inscribed upon it. This process is particularly visible in organization’s such as the Anti-Defamation League, which marks the meaning of particular signs associated with white supremacy through their visibility on certain bodies undertaking certain actions. Through



these actions, the sign is added to a visual-activity register which attributes meaning to the Norse neopagan sign through the activities of the body which it is inscribed upon.

Following Nancy Munn's contribution in analyzing the kula exchange in Gawa, that "although men appear to be the agents of defining shell value, in fact, without shells, men cannot define their own value; in this respect, shells and men are reciprocally agents of each other's value definition." (Munn 1983, 283, as cited in Appadurai and Kopyttoff 1989). This reciprocal relationship between, in Munn's case, the value of men and of shells, is useful to apply to my analysis of the Norse neopagan tattoo and the (usually) men who have these inscribed on their bodies: although men appear to be the agents of defining sign meaning, in fact, without signs, men cannot define their own meaning. The relation between the tattooee and his tattoo is not one of blankly stating the meaning of something, but a processual and biographical exchange of values inscribed onto one another. This is also significant as it means that sign values under contestation are not static, they are processual, shifting, and partial, in the process of being produced through the actions of the bodies they are inscribed upon and the minds which produce meaning for them. This logic is clearly evidenced in the efforts of the Anti-Defamation League to produce their hate symbols database. In doing so, they link the tattoo and tattooee through a biographical exchange of values.

As Sandberg notes, "there is no correct knowledge to be substituted for false knowledge," however his analysis is incomplete (Sandberg 2021). The point is not that there is no historical legitimacy in linking Norse neopagan signs to white supremacy, the point is that white supremacists, through their actions and bodily inscriptions, are effectively working to produce meanings and associations with certain signs to produce a lexicon legible to certain

other actors. However, the indeterminacy of the sign they inscribe on their skins is, in itself, productive – this indeterminacy allows for adjustment in and to particular social fields in which white supremacy is viewed as negative. In a similar way that a misogynist might make a sexist statement and follow up with ‘its just a joke,’ to avoid social derision, the white supremacist can point to their tattoo and say that it represents their culture, their religion, or even *nothing at all*. However, as demonstrated by the efforts of inclusive and anti-fascist Norse neopagan groups, such as Thor’s Oaken Kindred, attempts to produce semiotic relations between the Norse neopagan symbolic lexicon and white supremacy are not uncontested.

As organizations and communities associated with heathenry, Ásatrú, and Norse neopaganism in general have spread to online platforms, access to not only the symbols associated with these practices but also the discourses surrounding their meanings and interpretations have become loose. The bodily inscription of these symbols is increasingly removed from their contextual associations as online communities have made it easier to access and participate in the discourse surrounding Norse symbols. The ongoing confusion produced from the contestations of the sign’s denotational meaning, combined with the commodification of these symbols, has destabilized the value associated with the signs as access has become diffuse and widespread. The same tattoo of a Valknut might appear on two different bodies in two different places in the world with different meanings associated with the same symbol, each of which is determined by the body the sign is inscribed upon.

## Icons of Whiteness: Chronotope Construction of the Neo-Viking

When Jacob Chansley stormed the Capitol on January 6th, he did so sporting a nude chest, displaying his various Norse styled tattoos, the Mjolnir, the Valknot, and the Ygdrassil. Two of these symbols have definitive connections to white supremacist organizations, those being the Valknot and Mjolnir, while the Ygdrassil has not been incorporated directly into the project of white supremacist sign-relation construction (“Valknot”; “Mjolnir”; Sandberg 2021). The incorporation of the Ygdrassil onto Chansley’s set of bodily inscriptions points towards the ambiguity of sign-relations.

However, it is also important to consider the other stylistic choices he made in order to construct his image. His beard, the horned and furred helmet he wears, the feather in his hair (or on his ear?) and the very fact that he was shirtless during the events of January 6th all point us to ask what Chansley was doing with this carefully crafted visage. What I argue here is that Chansley is involved in the ongoing production of a neo-viking chronotope via the embodied enregisterment of signs. The process of enregisterment, or “how communicative signs and sets of signs come to index styles, identities, activities, genres, dialects, and other social and communicative practices,” on display here aligns with chronotopic construction as bundles of historical imagery and symbols come to index identities (Johnstone 2016, 1).



fig. 4: Jacob Chansley ‘QShaman’ and other Insurrectionists confront a police officer in the Capitol. Source: Manuel Balce Ceneta/ Associated Press

As described by Mikhail Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), the chronotope is where “spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out and concrete whole” (1981, 84). In other words, the chronotope is where time and space meet and become co-constitutive of spatio-temporal vignettes. While Bakhtin focuses his analysis of the chronotope within literary works, it is clearly applicable to the construction of embodied persona types. Extending Bakhtin’s critical analysis of the literary field to the field of body studies, the construction of embodied chronotopes could be conceived of as part of “body projects: as attempts to construct and maintain a coherent and viable sense of self-identity through attention to the body, and, more particularly, the body’s surface” (Sweetman 1999, 53). As opposed to Baudrillard’s sense of postmodern fashions as “a carnival of signs with no meanings attached,” it is evident that each choice made by Chansley was deliberate, meaningful, and packed with indexical significance (Tseëlon, 1995, 134 as cited in Sweetman 1999, 54).

Far from arguing that Chansley has constructed anything close to what an actual viking of the 8th century CE might look like; what he is doing here is constructing the visage of the viking as it exists in the contemporary imagination of the United States, as informed by a variety of viking themed media forms. In this sense, the chronotope being produced, or one might say invoked, by Chansley has no direct historical reference, but is a crystallization of the co-constitutive nature of historicity 1 and historicity 2, where narrated meets narrative. As Trouillot notes, the historical guild is not the primary force constructing history as recoveries of the past, but that media of all kinds informs the public perception of history as process, or historicity 1 (Trouillot 1995, 21).

I would also argue that Chansley and his ilk make use of performance in order to construct their identities. The importance of self-styling here cannot be overstated, as these actors seek to construct new modes of being through body projects and the incorporation of signs onto the body. This produces what I would describe as the body that speaks for itself, and following Judith Butler's contribution, I would argue that what white supremacist Norse neopagans are seeking to produce "an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*," and that this repetition should be considered as a continuum of speech through the body (Butler 1988, 519). This form of performance also enhances the role which enregisterment plays in the construction of the neoviking visage which Chansley and others have invested in, as signs become linked to bodies which perform actions. All of these factors are linked together and serve to alter the indexical associations and 'meanings' of signs which have become associated with other signs and the actions of the bodies which they are tattooed on.

As Madeline Walsh points out, the presence of the Mjolnir, as amulet to be worn or symbol to be inscribed on one's skin, is more likely to do with its presence in the Marvel cinematic Universe than the Mjolnir as historical symbol of Thor's weapon (Walsh 2020, 65). As a site of formulating the connections between history as the material reality of the past and contemporary contextualization of that history, the body of Chansley has become a site where contemporary sign-relations meet ancient symbols recovered from the archaeological record. He, in effect, is taking part in the production of new chronotopic bodily projects loaded with enregistered white supremacist signs of the Norse neopagan style.

The vision of the Viking as the ideal of (white) masculine embodiment also plays into the production of this chronotopic visage. In the contemporary context wherein many men are

voicing claims that traditional forms of masculine embodiment are under attack, the viking stands as a historical figure constructed in the contemporary as all that is opposed to this supposed attack (Walsh 2020, 66). Vikings are often “portrayed as ruthlessly violent entrepreneurs and politicians, constantly struggling for power, which... is a reflection and commentary on contemporary society against a historical backdrop,” and this analysis clearly points to the intersection where present concerns are seemingly resolved through the invocation and alteration of past personas (Walsh 2020, 66; Ashby 2014). These personae being constructed: white men who are savage, virile, and imbued with masculine prowess in relation to their religious traditions of pre-Christian Europe, defies the bundles of contemporary qualia associated with white men: Christian, civilized, and controlled (Chumley 2017, 53). Utilizing the concept of qualia as they relate to what it means to be a particular type of human reveals the often unspoken indexical values of certain types of selves produced through “institutions and cosmologies,” and in this sense, the shift in qualia associated with whiteness signal shifts in the production of the white self and the ideological mechanisms which enable those productions (Chumley 2017, 53). These shifts, interestingly, are shown to be a reversal of the age-old occident-orient distinction, so important to the racial logics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The qualia which white supremacist heathens are attributing to themselves through their body projects and the rearticulation of their own historical narrative, are exactly those which were and still are attributed to blackness. This reversal poses interesting questions about how whiteness is positioned as existing only in reference to the other through which it verifies its own identity. In other words, whiteness cannot stand on its own as a category, it only exists as *mitsein*, verifiable only through an opposition to supposed difference (Beauvoir 1949). As Jean

and John Comaroff (2008) posit in their study of South African political movements, “the deprecating ethnographic eye... has to bear a good deal of the blame for conjuring up the orient and perpetuating the primitive as its own self-serving phantasm,” however what they fail to note is that whiteness itself is phantasmagorical, contestable, and open to interpretation (Comaroff and Comaroff 2008, xiii). Interpretations of whiteness are unstable and shift when the social conditions of possibility are in place, and what we can see now are the ways in which contemporary whiteness is attempting to find a space for itself which aligns with the political motivations of the actors who value whiteness and seek to preserve it in the face of perceived dissatisfaction and conceptual failure.

An internal conflict within whiteness is occurring in which some, at least those racist heathens which I have surveyed, are seeking to, in a sense, orientalize themselves. In this sense, Western conceptions of blackness and the primitive have enabled “certain aspects of the West’s understanding of itself create a space in which an imagined primitive can come to be a vehicle for thinking about alternative social orders,” (Rosenblatt 1997, 290). However, while Rosenblatt’s original argument was that “the primitive often seems to be used as a way to imagine a different social order” often one which challenges industrial capitalist social orders, it should also be noted that neoprimitivism can serve to revive a kind of racial tribalism associated with the imaginary viking constructed through popular media interpretations and representations of history (1997, 295).

It is important to note here that this fractalization of white identity is not something new; while whiteness is often spoken about as a monolithic cultural force that is reflected in reality by its enforcers, whiteness has often been contested throughout its own historical genesis.

While many ethnographers use the term whiteness or “the culture of European capitalism, of western modernity,” in ways that should make it obvious to what these refer to, I would challenge these umbrella terms (Comaroff and Comaroff 2008, 4). Whiteness to an Appalachian coal miner is going to be conceptually much different than what whiteness is to a wall street executive, and these differentiations matter as they contest the very foundations of global white supremacy. Just as “in the face of it, some black Africans have succumbed, some have resisted, some have tried to recast its intrusive forms in their own image,” white neopagans in the United States and abroad are doing the same work (Comaroff and Comaroff 2008, 4).

In a reddit post a user shared this message regarding their feelings of ambiguity and tension when seeking to identify with their Scandinavian heritage:

I'm American with over 60% Scandinavian heritage, so I feel deeply connected to those roots. I primarily work with 3 greek deities, but do want to look more into Norse paganism. I did a meditation one day on psychedelic mushrooms and connected with a swedish ancestor who worshipped Thor and Sif. I've added them to my practice to worship a little before that but struggle with other aspects of paganism. I want to feel prideful, not in white supremacy, but in my nordic ancestry and paganism but I can't help but feel ashamed due to the white supremacists. I want to wear mjolnir jewelry but know the racists have taken that and other symbols like runes so now many people just assume those symbols are racist and I don't want to make anybody uncomfortable by wearing them.

This posts author clearly feels the tension between their identity, both racial and religious, and the associations which both of those connected aspects have with white supremacy. They say that they want to feel proud of their heritage without associating that pride with white supremacy, and



that this tension produces a sense of being robbed of their identity through white supremacist appropriation.

Being born into the dominant role in a system of global white supremacy does not mean that one unquestioningly accepts whiteness as part of their identity, and if they do, that whiteness means the same thing to every white person who is indoctrinated at birth into its system of signification. As I have shown, the systems of qualia and signification which grant whiteness its meaning are contested from within, as well as from without. What I would call for here, is for anthropologists and ethnographers to consider the need for critical whiteness studies. Whiteness is often understood as a powerful cultural force which serves to oppress and reinforce imperialist-capitalist domination of the global south, which it is, however, it is important to consider that whiteness is also something which people identify with, and that these two meanings are not one in the same even if they are linked (Comaroff and Comaroff 2008) .

Whiteness as an experience of identity as opposed to whiteness as an experience of oppressive, colonizing force, are not the same thing, and we need an anthropological literature which can parse out the differential and dynamic nature of the term to both better understand the embodied experience of whiteness, as well as whiteness as cultural force. All too often, categories like whiteness or the vaguely defined 'West' are taken for granted and utilized in analysis without thought for the ways in which these signs are dynamic, shifting, and contested. The reorientation of these qualia signal a significant shift in the embodied understandings of self which male white supremacists work to undo, modify, and reproduce at the level of the incorporation of signs onto the bodies.

I would argue that whiteness should be considered as dynamic and shifting, as well as partial and incomplete. Whiteness should be imagined less as a monolithic identity prescribed to certain people with certain phenotypical characteristics, but a spectrum of bodily presentations which can be activated by certain actors in order to produce certain kinds of identities. Or, in other words, we should imagine whiteness as a background which is less a “determinant of social activity and more as providing a framework for such activity—that is, as constituting the possibility of meaning,” however, the structure of whiteness is expansive, dynamic, and multiple in terms of bodily representation (Rosenblatt 1997, 289). Phenomenologically, I would extend Butler’s (1988) analysis of gender performativity to apply also to racialized representations. What we see white supremacist neopagans doing is constructing “an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts,” in order to produce not only new subjectivities but also communicate political, religious, social, and racial orientations (Butler 1988, 519; Muñoz 2015; Dyer 1996).

However, these performative constructions of Norse neopagan bodily presentations are in a space of indeterminacy, they are not always legible and different audiences with different perspectives will read bodies differently. The space of indeterminacy wherein white supremacists operate to appropriate symbols and covertly communicate their political ideologies is also, as I will demonstrate later, a space of contestation where anti-fascist neopagans can work to reclaim the symbolic lexicon of Norse neopaganism. The post author above claimed that they felt anxiety around their desire to feel “prideful, not in white supremacy, but in [their] Nordic ancestry and paganism,” and in doing so avoid public demonstrations of faith. However others, as I will discuss later, have taken it upon themselves to rework and undo the work white supremacists have done in their biographical value exchanges with Norse neopagan symbols.

In this sense, we should see, along with gender, whiteness as something which must be “understood as constituted and, hence, capable of being constituted differently,” the tattoos of racist heathens allows for particular kinds of constitutive acts which must not be repeated, because are inscribed upon the skin (Butler 1988, 520). The tattoo, while constantly communicating, is also constantly constituting – its presence on the skin speaks outwards as well as inward. However, it should also be noted that, while whiteness is constituted through performative acts, it is also “compelled by social sanction and taboo... its very character as performative resides the possibility of contesting its reified status” (Butler 1988, 520). White supremacist Norse neopagans who inscribe their religious imagery onto their skin, should then be imagined as working in the space of performance in order to challenge the bodily representations which are common to whiteness, and through doing so, challenging the dominant paradigms of both representation and the constitution of the white self.

Perhaps, following this logic, we should also view the self-styled body as not only something which is constituted through performative acts, but also as “materiality that bears meaning,” or in other words, a sign (Butler 1988, 521). The skin is “not only... the boundary of the individual as a biological and psychological entity but as the frontier of the social self as well” and this is a frontier which both communicates meaning to the social world, but also serves as the basis for a subjective constitution which is partial and processual (Turner 2012, 486). The skin “becomes the symbolic stage upon which the drama of socialization is enacted, and bodily adornments... become the language through which it is expressed,” and in the sense of Norse neopagan tattooing, we should regard the linguistic aspect of that statement as quite literal (Turner 2012, 486).

Just as Terence Turner (2012) once found that “a man of sense should regard dress with a mixture of contempt and attentiveness... and thus [maintain] his appearance in a way compatible with ‘those he lives with...’” Norse neopagans utilize the social skin to define themselves, through performance, in new ways which simultaneously challenge and reinforce white representations and the indexical values which can be read through their self-styling (Turner 2012, 487).

## **Contesting the Signs of Whiteness:**

It should be noted that while white nationalists and racist heathens are actively working to redefine the meanings of Norse pagan symbols, anti-racist and inclusive Norse pagans are also doing similar work. In my research, I found a particularly useful example in an online post which reads as follows:

No Frith For Fascists  
 There is no frith for fascist ilk,  
 Be it nationalist, cop, or terf,  
 No love can they hold,  
 Soft and sleek as silk  
 As they commit to their own unworth

Forsaken by Freyja; every one  
 A dishonest, abusive coward.  
 No sanctuary for them  
 No joy or compassion  
 As her wrath they have foolishly conjured.

By creed of skhadi, their lives forfeit,  
 Stripped of warmth, light, and vigor  
 Endless their anguish

No mercy nor respite  
Her vengeance, an endless Winter.

Hunted by Fenrir with bloodlust and fury,  
Their doom ever inevitable.  
No quarter given  
No peace nor amnesty  
As the black wolf devours the intolerable.

There is no frith for fascist kind  
No hope for them, enjoyed.  
No future given  
No refuge to find.

This particular statement, stylized as a poem, uses Norse myth and the figures within in order to make an antifascist statement. Particularly, the author made this in an effort to construct a religious interpretation of Norse tradition as explicitly antifascist and antiracist. The work being done here is valuable, as the antiracist Norse neopagan community is attempting to hegemonize and control the meanings of signs in order to produce a religious tradition which can be used to communicate explicitly antifascist political messages.

This post reveals that sign contestations in the Norse neopagan community go both ways. While fascists attempt to fix the meaning of symbols onto their bodies and define those signs in a reciprocal relationship between the actions of their bodies and the signs inscribed upon them, antifascist neopagans also seek to modify and produce new religious interpretations with messages of explicit anti-fascism.

These efforts seek to make use of the ambiguity of Ásatrú religious



fig. 5: Profile photo found on [tumblr.com](https://www.tumblr.com)

traditions in order to fight against the rise of fascist heathens which concerns many in the community. They also disrupt the ability for fascists to recognize each other in public, and reverses the effect of the ambiguous nature of Norse neopagan symbols turned dogwhistle. What was once a strength of the far right appropriation of Norse neopagan symbols has become a weakness as antifascist neopagans seek to produce their own interpretations of myth and symbols.

This is what led to a congregation of inclusive, anti-fascist Asatru practitioners to meet and attempt to “make Ásatrú theology ‘racist-proof,’” (Samuel 2017). At the international Ásatrú conference Frith Forge, Karl Seigfried, a professor and goði (priest) of an inclusive Ásatrú group in Chicago explicitly stated that “he wants people to write original theological essays... to expand and enrich Ásatrú theology so that it tackles many contemporary issues, demonstrating its wide-ranging relevance” (Samuel 2017). Another tumblr user under the name ‘notthesomefather’ also crafted a poem similar to the one above, addressing the queer community through the lens of Ásatrú mythology and the alteration of the valknut to make it rainbow colored with the following poem:

Remember today and always that your gods love you.

Remember today and always that Odin and Loki know and share your truth.

Remember today and always that Thor and Freyja battle by your side.

Remember today and always that Tyr fights for your justice and rights.

Remember today and always that Lofn celebrates your joy.

Remember today and always that your gods love you, that you have nothing to apologize for,

that you’re not alone, and that we will prevail against evil and cowardice.

These explicit rejections of racism combined with the use of mythological references positions Ásatrú as an inclusive religious tradition which actively rejects fascism as theologically incompatible with the beliefs of Ásatrú practitioners. This conference, in collaboration with organizations such as Vikings Against Racism, a Swedish based anti-fascist association which seeks to repel the fascist appropriation of the symbols of Ásatrú, are working to counter the symbolic appropriations of organizations such as the fascist Nordic Resistance Movement, which uses the Tyr rune as their symbol. These contestations are about more than just the fate of Ásatrú and other Norse neopagan revivalist movements, they are spaces wherein the politics of whiteness and the historical narratives embedded in those politics are under contestation, all through various attempts from all sides to appropriate symbols, co-opt religious imagery and text, and craft a religious tradition which embraces or explicitly rejects racism, fascism, and reactionary political ideology.



fig. 6: Flag of the Nordic Resistance Movement

The work of the Anti-Defamation League is also important in regards to this ongoing conversation. In their attempts to produce a database of hate symbols, the League is also attempting to constrain the lexical ambiguity of Norse symbols, however their work might be doing more harm than good. The League is an organization which, clearly, is not involved in the internal debates and theological alterations taking place in Ásatrú and other Norse revivalism movements, however they are working to define certain symbols as connected to fascist organizations. The position of the League as a respected political organization could actually make the work being done by antifascist, antiracist, and inclusive heathens more difficult, as they

work to expand their hate symbols database and link Ásatrú and Norse revivalism to white supremacy and fascism.

## **Conclusion:**

The incorporation of Norse symbols onto white supremacist bodies clearly displays the many semiotic principles at play in the production of new personas for white men to take up, speak and act through, or in another word: embody. These reorientations and reformulations of the body and self produced through the inscription of Norse symbols onto the body signal broader shifts in the historical narrative which white men are choosing to take up and act through. These new orientations enable certain political, ideological, and historical orientations which would be impossible through traditional conceptualizations of white masculinity, and enable these social actors to effectively produce new narratives about the past as they alter their bodies. These bodily alterations and the trends they follow are worth the attention of analysts of semiotics and embodiment who are concerned with white supremacy. However, I have also shown that the lexical ambiguity which white supremacists seek to leverage in regards to the production of dogwhistles can be utilized by anti-fascist actors. This analysis demonstrates that semiotics can be utilized to better understand the conflicts which permeate the sociopolitical and ideological landscape of an increasingly globalized world; conflicts which have material consequences for marginalized people.

I have shown how certain orientations to the body and bodily inscriptions produce, reproduce, and reify certain masculine white supremacist orientations to the past and the present, and presents a unique challenge in terms of deradicalization. However, it is also important to note that the Norse pagan community is actively working through what it means to be not only



an Ásatrú or Heathen, but also what it means to be white. These shifts could serve to reopen new possibilities for embodied belief systems which can not only be resistant to white supremacist indoctrination and appropriation, but also to reframe histories of whiteness and potentially reframe white supremacy as an invasive force rather than as a foundation for identity.

Still though, we are left with troubling questions about how one becomes deradicalized when bodies, minds, personalities, or for lack of a better term, *selves* are all being crafted to fit into newly produced historical narratives surrounding whiteness, paganism, and masculinity. The linguistic battles surrounding the appropriation of symbols from the Norse neopagan lexicon should not be viewed solely as a niche community working to revitalize centuries old religious traditions, but also as a battleground wherein whiteness in relation to history is being redefined and reformulated.

While revealing that historically white supremacy had very little if anything to do with Norse paganism should, from a particular point of view, destabilize the facade of lies which white supremacist cosmologies and mythohistories are built upon, it is important to consider that historical 'truth' cannot be the only weapon in the arsenal of deradicalization work. Norse neopagan actors and adherents will have to work to make their religion nazi-proof, and in a sense, remake their religious beliefs into something which can serve as a marker of identity while working through the problematic histories associated with that very identity.

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