### Thesis Prospectus 2022-23

**Name: Erin Dixon**  **ID Number: A00395396**

**Email: dixeri16@evergreen.edu**

**Student Final Submission (date):**

**Faculty Reader Approval (date):**

**MES Director Approval (date):**

1. Working title of your thesis[[1]](#endnote-1).

Rooted in place: Cultivating relationships to the land and nature through connecting to earth-based ancestral practices

1. In 250 words or less, summarize the key background information needed to understand your research problem and question.

Northwestern Europeans practice ancestral rituals and traditions that predate Christianity’s influence over the region. Most of these rituals and traditions, often referred to as paganism, were passed down orally and therefore much of the information about their early practice has been lost. The spread of Christianity through the region also diminished the practice of these traditions as Christianity coopted many pagan practices in the hopes of encouraging Europeans to adopt a Christian worldview. From the knowledge that has been preserved about pagan rituals and traditions, we know that although these practices vary from one place to another, they share similarities: connecting people to their ancestors, celebrating the harvests and seasons, and having elements of animism. European Americans who immigrated to the land now known as the United States have mostly left behind the practice of ancestral traditions and rituals that are tied to their European ancestors. However, pockets of European Americans do practice their ancestral traditions. Others continue to learn more about them. My research seeks to understand how connecting to these ancestral rituals and traditions might provide a way for European Americans to form a relationship with their new homelands in the United States and connect to nature along with forming place meaning.

1. State your research question(s).

How does connecting with ancestral earth-based traditions and rituals affect European Americans connection to nature and place and formation of place meaning?

1. Situate your research problem within the relevant literature. What is the theoretical and/or practical framework of your research problem?

Ives et al. (2017) put forward five categories of human-nature connectedness: material, experiential, cognitive, emotional, and philosophical. These categories cover a spectrum of connections from internal to external (Ives et al., 2018). I plan to show that connections to nature formed through learning about and participating in ancestral rituals and traditions encompass all five categories of human-nature connectedness and therefore provide a path to forming relationships with nature.

Meadows (1999) proposed that changes in behavior in a complex system can occur when interventions are applied to certain “leverage points”. Leverage points can be categorized as shallow or deep, with interventions at shallow points being less effective at changing a system than interventions at deep points (Meadows, 1999; Abson et al, 2017). Ives et al. (2018) take the idea of leverage points and apply it to a sustainability context. They determine that “internally-defined connections”, such as emotional responses to nature and philosophical perspectives, will more likely foster a societal shift towards greater sustainability because they “influence the underlying goals and values embodied in a system” (Ives et al., 2018, p. 1393)

Diagram

Description automatically generated

**Fig. 1** Ives et al. (2018) model for system change through connecting people with nature. Interventions at the deep level will bring about greater system change than at the shallow level.

In this research, I will use this model to show how connecting to ancestral practices can be one path to a more sustainable and healthier ecosystem and decreased environmental destruction because it is an intervention that addresses the deep leverage points of an individual’s emotional and philosophical connections to nature.

1. Explain the significance of this research problem. Why is this research important? What are the potential contributions of your work? How might your work advance scholarship?

The authors of *The Nature of Americans National Report* (Kellert, Case, et al., 2017) found that Americans have lost a close connection to nature, while recent polling by the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs found that Americans experience less concern about how climate change impacts them now than they did three years ago (AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 2022). Connecting people to nature and fostering place attachment has the potential to reverse this decrease in concern about the effects of climate change, lead to increased action to mitigate climate change, and improve the current and future health of the earth and its inhabitants (Bratman et al., 2015; Capaldi, Dopko, & Zelenski, 2014; Liu et al., 2022; Pereira & Forster, 2015; Scannell & Gifford, 2013; Zylstra et al., 2014). Studies have shown that connection to nature and place attachment increases the likelihood of pro-environmental behaviors such as recycling, decreasing fossil fuel use, supporting conservation efforts, energy conservation, volunteering with environmental groups and the like ( Geng et al., 2015; Mackay & Schmitt, 2019; Mayer & Franz 2004; Nesbit, Zelenski, & Murphy, 2009; Tonge et al., 2015; Whitburn, Linklater, & Abrahamse, 2020). Therefore, identifying ways to connect people to nature provides a way to begin to grow pro-environmental behaviors among members of society which will hopefully begin to help slow the environmental destruction facing our planet. Although several research projects have examined various environmental education programs and recreational activities that foster a connection to nature (Baird et al, 2022; Barthel et al., 2018; Collado, Staats, & Corraliza, 2013; Kane & Kane 2011; Otto & Pensini, 2017; Whitburn, Linklater, & Milfont, 2018), other pathways for connecting humans to nature have received less attention. My research can advance the scholarship concerning human connection to nature and place attachment through studying one possible way of connecting European Americans to place and nature that has received less attention – through learning about and participating in earth-based ancestral practices and rituals.

1. Summarize your study design[[2]](#endnote-2). If applicable, identify the key variables in your study. What is their relationship to each other? For example, which variables are you considering as independent (explanatory) and dependent (response)?

For my research, I will be interviewing members of a group of European-American women who are actively learning about the rituals and traditions of their European ancestors. I have existing relationships with these women because I am also a member of this group. I will explain my research to the group and ask for any volunteers willing to be interviewed. After I have identified those who wish to be interviewed, I will begin to schedule interviews sometime in late February/ early March. I will use semi-structured interviews to inquire about how connecting to ancestral earth-based practices has changed the way they relate to and think about the land where they now live. I will design some interview questions to get the conversation started, but I will also ask follow-up questions tailored to each individual participant based on their answers. I will also create an interview guide that reintroduces me and explains the purpose of the interview. Each interview should be between 30 and 45 minutes long. I hope to interview 10 to 15 people.

1. Describe the data that will be the foundation of your thesis. Will you use existing data, or gather new data (or both)? Describe the process of acquiring or collecting data[[3]](#endnote-3).

I will be gathering new qualitative data through semi-structured interviews. The interviewees will have the option to interview in person or by zoom. For in person interviews, I will meet wherever the interviewee prefers, and I will use a tape recorder to record the interviews with participant consent. For interviews on zoom, I will record the session on zoom with participant consent. As a back-up for either interview method, I will also record the interview using an app on my phone called Otter that both records and transcribes interviews. I plan to use this app to transcribe my interviews, but I am also prepared to transcribe the interviews by hand, if necessary, because of an error with the app. I will also review all interviews transcribed by the Otter app for accuracy.

1. Summarize your methods of data analysis. If applicable, discuss any specific techniques, tests, or approaches that you will use to answer your research question.

I will use the Atlas.ti software to code my transcribed interviews and look for themes that emerge among the interviews. I will also calculate some basic descriptive statistics that will allow me to discuss the frequency of certain themes compared to other themes along with direct quotes from interviewees to illustrate the themes found and provide examples.

1. Address the ethical issues[[4]](#endnote-4) raised by your thesis work. Include issues such as risks to anyone involved in the research, as well as specific people or groups that might benefit from or be harmed by your thesis work, perhaps depending on your results. List any specific reviews you must complete first (e.g., Human Subjects Review or Animal Use Protocol Form).

My research involves interviewing white European-Americans who are participating in Native Kin circles to learn more about earth-based (pagan) rituals and ceremonies of their European ancestors. I am also a participant in the Native Kin circles, so I have already established relationships with the women I will be interviewing. Very minimal risks could result from participation in this research, including possible negative feelings triggered by certain childhood/ young adult memories, thinking about lack of connection to nature, or sadness at being separated from ancestral practices. However, I will strive to ensure that participants’ rights are respected and that they are comfortable throughout the process, including making it clear that they do not need to answer any question and can stop the interview at any time. I will need to complete the Human Subjects Review process before I can begin obtaining interviews.

1. List specific research permits[[5]](#endnote-5) or permissions you need to obtain before you begin collecting data (e.g. landowner permissions, agency permits).

I will need permission from the IRB and consent from my interviewees.

1. Reflect on how your positionality as a researcher could affect your results and how you will account for this in the research process[[6]](#endnote-6).

My research involves interviewing women participating in Native Kin circles to learn more about their European ancestors and their rituals and celebrations. These women all live in Utah and have some connection to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (a.k.a. Mormons) - either as former members of the church (almost all of the women) or currently active members of the church. The majority are white European-American women although some are women of color with European and non-European ancestry. Although women of color with non-European ancestry participate in this group, I am not studying the ancestral practices of their non-European ancestors, however I recognize that my experiences as a white woman with European ancestry will be different than theirs as women of color with European ancestry. This group consists of a wide range of ages.

As a researcher, I am both an insider and an outsider to those in the group I am researching. I share some of the same identities as those in the group – I am a white European woman, a former member of the Mormon church, and a participant in the Native Kin circles; however, I am an outsider because I do not live in Utah. I would also be considered an outsider to those who are still active in the Mormon church. Although I am intimately familiar with the doctrine and culture of the Mormon church, I have never lived in an area that is predominantly Mormon like Utah. Also, members of the church who live outside of Utah often have stereotypes about Mormons who do live in Utah. As a researcher, I need to make sure that I do not let these stereotypes influence how I perceive the experience of the women I am interviewing who are Mormons or ex-Mormons living in Utah. On the other hand, because I am ex-Mormon and am therefore familiar with the Mormon church, some women may assume that I know things about their experience that I do not know because I have never lived in Utah. I also might have difficulty getting active members of the church to feel comfortable speaking to me and being honest about their experiences. Some active members of the Mormon church do not feel comfortable interacting with those who have left the church, or if they do interact with those who have left, they feel the need to always present the church in a positive light and therefore might not be honest about their experiences. I am hoping this will not be a problem and there are a few reasons why I think it might not be. First, since the vast majority of the women at these events are ex-Mormon, the fact that the women who are active members of the church come to these meetings indicate that they are comfortable interacting with those who have left the church. Second, I have heard the active members present at these events express displeasure about some of the doctrines and policies of the church even though they know most of us are ex-Mormon. However, I plan to reassure anyone who agrees to be interviewed that I respect their beliefs, whatever they may be, and understand how sacred and important spiritual beliefs are to those who hold them as I have experienced those feelings myself. I will also encourage all those I interview to explain any experiences pertaining to the Mormon church or living in Utah as though they were explaining it to someone who is not and never has been Mormon or lived in Utah. I hope that this will help to prevent assumptions about their experiences or my understanding of those experiences.

1. Provide at least a rough estimate of the costs associated with conducting your research, if any.  Provide details about each budget item so that the breakdown of the final cost is clear.

Atlas.ti software for data analysis - $51.00 for semester use

Digital voice recorder - $35.00

Otter.ai subscription - $34.00 for 2 months

Round trip airline ticket to Utah for interviews - $300

5 nights hotel - $750 ($150/night)

Car rental - $500

Food - $30/ day - $150

Total - $1,820

1. Provide a detailed working outline of your thesis.
2. Introduction
3. Literature Review
4. Ritual Theory
5. Rituals make things sacred.
6. Rituals foster the formation of bonds with the places where they are performed.
7. Spiritual Ecology
8. Pagan practices of Northwestern Europe
9. Communal rituals and celebrations that get people outside into nature.
10. Animism
11. Nature connection, place attachment, and place meaning
12. The five categories of nature connection – experiential, material, cognitive, emotional, and philosophical.
13. How we form place attachment and place meaning.
14. The difference between nature and place.
15. How nature connection and place attachment impact pro-environmental behaviors.
16. Intersection of nature connection, place attachment and meaning, and pagan earth-based practices
17. Methods
18. Interview process
19. Methods of analysis
20. Results
21. Themes identified from analysis of interview data.
22. Quotes from interviews that exemplify the topics identified.
23. Discussion
24. Conclusion
25. Provide a specific work plan and a timeline for each of the major tasks in the work plan. Be as realistic and specific as you can at this point, including the deadlines for Spring quarter.

December 2022 – Complete form for Human Subjects Review. I have already completed the training needed as part of the review process this past summer when I did interview research with Dr. Hazboun.

Winter Quarter – I will be focused on my literature review. I plan to complete one section every 1-2 weeks and begin writing up my methods section towards the end of the quarter. I will also be traveling to Utah for the next Native Kin circle the weekend of 2/4 - 2/5/2023. In mid to late February I will begin reaching out to participants who have agreed to be interviewed to set up interview times.

Mid-March 2023 – I will be traveling to Utah for the final Native Kin Circle and to perform interviews.

Mid-March to April 1, 2023 – Analysis of interview data - both identifying themes and quotes to use - and write up of analysis methods.

April 1 – April 14, 2023 – Write Results, Discussion, and Conclusion section of thesis.

April 14 – Turn in first draft of thesis to reader.

Spring quarter Week 3-5 – Revise draft of thesis based on reader feedback.

Spring quarter end of Week 5 – Turn in request to present thesis research.

Spring quarter Week 6-8 – Work on thesis presentation and any last revisions to thesis.

Spring quarter Week 8-9 – Thesis presentation

Spring quarter Week 9 – Turn in final draft of thesis to reader.

Spring quarter Week 9 – June 9, 2023 – Make final revisions to thesis and format for binding.

June 9, 2023 – Turn in final version of thesis.

1. Who (if anyone), beyond your MES thesis reader, will support your thesis (in or outside of Evergreen)? Be specific about who they are and in what capacity they will support your thesis. If you are working with an outside agency or expert, be specific about their expectations for your data analysis or publication of results.

No one besides my thesis reader will be supporting me for my thesis research.

1. Provide the 5 most important references you have used to identify the specific questions and context of your topic, help with issues of research design and analysis, and/or provide a basis for interpretation. Annotate these references with notes on how they relate to/will be helpful for your thesis. For any other sources cited in your prospectus in other answers, provide a complete bibliographic citation here as well.
2. **Abson, D. J., Fischer, J., Leventon, J., Newig, J., Schomerus, T., Vilsmaier, U., von Wehrden, H., Abernethy, P., Ives, C. D., Jager, N. W., & Lang, D. J. (2017). Leverage points for sustainability transformation. *Ambio*, *46*(1), 30–39.** [**https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-016-0800-y**](https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-016-0800-y)

This article draws on ideas from Donella Meadows about influencing the behavior of systems through “leverage points” and applies it to sustainability science. The authors argue that many sustainability interventions are not transformational in a way that leads to systemic change. They propose that research in the sustainability sciences should focus on the three types of leverage that might lead to “transformational sustainability interventions” – reconnecting people to nature, restructuring institutions, and rethinking how knowledge is created and used in sustainability sciences. I included this paper because it provides a good overview of systems theory and leverage points along with providing another possible theoretical framework for my research. I trust this article because it was published in a peer-reviewed journal published by the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences and is in the top 5% of journals according to its impact factor.

1. **Ives, C.D., Abson, D.J., von Wehrden, H., Dorninger, C., Klaniecki, K., & Fischer, J*.* (2018). Reconnecting with nature for sustainability. *Sustain Science 13*(1), 1389–1397.** [**https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-018-0542-9**](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-018-0542-9)

This article, like the one above, discusses system theory and leverage points. The authors use a review of existing literature to develop a conceptual framework to direct future research on the connection between humans and nature. They identify five types of connection to nature: material, experiential, cognitive, emotional, and philosophical. The authors believe that this research is important because reconnecting humans with nature has the potential to help solve the current environmental crisis. I included this article because it discusses the theoretical framework I would like to use for my research. I trust this article because it was published in a peer-reviewed journal with an impact factor that places it within the top 5% of journals.

1. **Koven, M. (2014). Interviewing: Practice, ideology, genre, and intertextuality. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, *43*(1), 499-520.** [**http://www.jstor.com/stable/43049588**](http://www.jstor.com/stable/43049588)

This article is a review of interviewing as a method of data collection. The author goes into detail about what constitutes an interview, different methods of interviewing, how participants’ unique characteristics can affect the interview process, and some areas of critique. I have included this paper because I want to use interviews as my method of data collection, and this gives a good overview of the scholarship about interviewing. This article also includes a robust bibliography that I will find useful as I look to read more about the interviewing process and best practices. I trust this as a source because the paper was published in a peer-reviewed annual review journal with an impact factor that ranks near the top of its subject category. It is also written by a current professor at a state university who has authored many peer reviewed articles, several of which have been cited extensively.

1. **Mickey, S. (2020). Spiritual ecology: On the way to ecological existentialism. *Religions*, *11*(11), 580.** [**https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11110580**](https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11110580)

This article provides an overview of the theory of spiritual ecology and how spirituality can be used to either draw people closer to nature or to lead them to the destruction of nature. I want to learn more about this theory because the ancestral practices that I am studying are often referred to as paganism and are often thought of as a form of spirituality. I’m interested in how spirituality intersects with forming a connection to nature. I trust this source because it was published in a peer-reviewed Q1 journal and was written by an author that has a PhD and teaches at an accredited university.

1. **Zylstra, M. J., Knight, A. T., Esler, K. J., & Le Grange, L. L. (2014). Connectedness as a core conservation concern: An interdisciplinary review of theory and a call for practice. *Springer Science Reviews*, *2*(1), 119-143.** [**https://doi.org/10.1007/s40362-014-0021-3**](https://doi.org/10.1007/s40362-014-0021-3)

This article provides a thorough review of the literature about human “connectedness with nature” (CWN). It discusses the definitions of terms used in this area of scholarship, the theory behind why humans are disconnected from nature, the conceptual dimensions of CWN, how CWN can be measured, and strategies to foster CWN. This literature review will be immensely helpful for me since this is the main theoretical framework I want to use for my research. I trust this article because it was published in a peer-reviewed journal by Springer which is a well-respected publisher of journals.

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1. You are not locked into this title; we want you to identify the main point or topic of your thesis. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. You might discuss selection of case studies, sampling methods, experimental design, and/or specific hypotheses you will test. You should also address any specialized knowledge or skills that are necessary to complete the research. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. If you are planning to use existing data, explain the specific source, contact information, arrangement with collaborating agencies, and expectations about use of data and final products of your research. If you are planning to gather new data, describe specific methods, time, place, and equipment that will be required. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. If you’re not sure where to start, consult a ‘Code of Ethics’ or other similar document from an academic society in an applicable field of study. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. If you are collecting ANY samples or data, even observational data, on public lands (city, county, state and/or federal) it is your responsibility to find out the permit requirements BEFORE you collect data. Conducting research with tribal members/on tribal lands will have different and additional requirements. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Your *positionality as a researcher* refers to the fact that one’s “…beliefs, values systems, and moral stances are as fundamentally present and inseparable from the research process as [one]’s physical, virtual, or metaphorical presence when facilitating, participating and/or leading the research project…” (The Weingarten Blog 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)