

Terminal Project

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“Vinotok: Myth and Community”

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## **Project Description**

The research topic of my terminal project is Vinotok, an autumn equinox festival that takes place annually in the small town of Crested Butte, Colorado. Vinotok is a curious festival in that it wasn't formally begun until the mid-80s, but draws upon older traditions, myths, stories, rituals, and community activities—from the Gunnison Valley it rests in all the way to the European (mostly northern and western) countries the festival creators and participants are descended from. These roots, how they are reclaimed and reworked, and the community involvement in the festival are all elements that became magnified and emphasized during my fieldwork.

As a result of this research, I created a feature-length documentary film, as well as this accompanying written piece. The documentary is to be kept in the Randall V. Mills Folklore Archive here at the University of Oregon, gifted back to community members who were a part of the research, and hosted online (making it more easily accessible for viewing). The goal of this written component of the project is to illuminate folkloric aspects of the festival and examine how those aspects shape and are shaped by the community. I will first present the lines of inquiry, project objectives, and methodology. Then, I will provide a general account of the festival and go on to examine its connections to heritage, spirituality, and folklore scholarship. A reflection on the project as a whole will conclude this work.

## **Lines of Inquiry**

My main lines of inquiry involved the formation of the Vinotok festival and the various roles of the community members engaged in it. The history of Vinotok, how it came to be, how it has evolved into the festival as it is today, and how it might further change in the future were

common routes of discussion in interviews, as were questions about how each individual volunteers their time and energy in order to make the festival what it is. I also inquired into the spiritual and belief connections, or lack thereof, that participants experience with the festival, as well as the often intensely personal impact that Vinotok has had on those involved with it. Through this, I was searching for the embedded meaning the festival has for participants and for the community as a whole; both the meanings that are intentionally supplied through use of symbolism as well as the meanings that arise spontaneously through experience and individual perspectives.

Towards that goal, I found through my fieldwork and many interviews that the cultural symbols present in Vinotok are intentionally drawn from a perceived shared heritage and accompanying concepts of “tradition”, with the goal of creating an event that a majority of the town population can feel connected to regardless of specific ethnicity or religion. At the same time, the festival holds wider meanings for the community that go beyond the bounds of any specific perception of heritage or spirituality, as well as unique impacts on individuals dependent on how they perceive the event and what they experience through it. The roles of the different volunteers involved shaped these meanings and were shaped in turn by individual perceptions of Vinotok and its importance. Thanks to this, while Vinotok is an annual event that makes efforts to include the same events and archetypes each year, it is in truth a festival that is constantly being shaped by the needs and desires of its participants and the community it is embedded in.

### **Project Objectives**

The main objective of this project was the production of the Vinotok documentary—to that end, the bulk of my research time was spent interviewing participants, filming events,

attending volunteer meetings, and so on. Once fieldwork was complete, there came an immense amount of time and effort spent editing the footage and producing the documentary film. The interviews provided a diverse range of information and connections, however, and often contributed towards my secondary goal: pursuing the lines of inquiry outlined above in order to connect the event to wider folklore scholarship in the course of this written component of the project. In a sense, these two project objectives served to complement each other: the documentary does just that, *document* the festival as it existed in a specific time and place, while the written component focuses on a more analytical, academic lens from a folkloric perspective.

## **Methodology**

The bulk of my research relied on participant experience, gathered both through my own participant-observation as well as the experience shared by individuals through in-person interviews. Such experiences were sometimes also shared interpersonally during public group events, and were recorded through my fieldnotes. Whenever possible, my research was recorded with both audio and video, with field notes to supplement; for events or interactions where this was not possible (of which there were few) I simply have fieldnotes. All participants in my research consented to recording and use of their shared experiences according to IRB established standards of obtaining consent in the field.

Thanks to being able to attend the festival – its full repertoire of events, as well as the bulk of the planning and volunteer organization that accompanied it – I was able to gain a wealth of research through my own participant-observation. Participant-observation is usually defined as field research obtained while engaging with the research topic as a non-academic participant might. Through volunteering my time, assisting with set-up and take-down efforts, attending the

events I documented, and speaking with fellow participants as peers, I was able to dive deep into the festival activities and attempt a more comprehensive understanding of what the festival means to participants at all levels of engagement. Being a participant myself also allowed me to be present for less formal events during which experiences and stories were shared, as well as engage with people on an interpersonal level that promoted mutual trust and understanding.

Aside from a preliminary Zoom interview with Marcie Telander in August of 2023, all of my interviews were held in-person and were recorded on video for the documentary (as well as for better record-keeping). Having in-person interviews allowed me to talk to people individually, as well as engage with the spaces that they felt held meaning for them—whether that was their own home, Marcie’s home (known as “Wise Acre” and often commandeered for Vinotok and other community events), or a local nature spot.

The remainder of my fieldwork consisted of video documentation of the public festival events. This of course was critical to the production of the project portion of the terminal project (the documentary) but also served as a source of research for this paper. Then, as now, I felt that each artifact I gathered could serve multiple purposes; that no part of the experience was ever wasted. This is in line with one of my main methodological inspirations (alongside participant-observation): grounded theory.

A term coined and popularized by Barney G. Glaser, grounded theory is “the systematic generation of theory from data acquired by a rigorous research method. Grounded theory is not findings, but rather is an integrated set of conceptual hypotheses.”<sup>1</sup> While most often applied to the sciences, it was my belief that grounded theory had much to offer my own approach to folkloric fieldwork. Rather than setting out with a conclusion or thesis already in mind—a

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<sup>1</sup> Glaser, *Doing Grounded Theory*, 3

hypothesis, if you will—I went into fieldwork endeavoring to be as open as possible. Certainly, I had some lines of inquiry as detailed above, but I attempted to interview others and experience events without imposing upon them any preconceived notions about what this festival did for the community or what it meant to its participants. As Glaser suggests, hypotheses are the end result, not the beginning.

Another aspect of grounded theory that I embraced during my fieldwork was the statement “all is data”, the notion that anything which “may come the researcher's way in his substantive area of research is data for grounded theory.”<sup>2</sup> With this in mind, I refrained from disregarding smaller, more informal, or “unimportant” instances, because if everything is data, all of it comes together to form the whole. This means that coming to conclusions or creating a thesis based on *all* of the data is better than starting out with a theory and leaving out any data—no matter how small—that does not conform. I engaged with this concept in my fieldwork, trying to take in not only the interviews, but all of the informal interactions I had with people, the lives we all lived outside of and around the event, and so on. I tried to go into this fieldwork without anything to prove, but rather with lines of inquiry and an open curiosity, letting the data I collected then lead me to the conclusions and connections I draw throughout this paper.

The final methodological theory that inspired my research methods was reflexive ethnography, as described in Elaine Lawless’s work. Lawless states, “As ethnographers striving to be conscious of our own ideologies, we are obligated to present ourselves in our texts as we are in our work: humans seeking understanding, engaged in dialogue and interpretation with other people who are engaged in dialogue and interpretation seeking meaning.”<sup>3</sup> That understanding of the role of researcher as part of, rather than removed from, the research process

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<sup>2</sup> Glaser, *Doing Grounded Theory*, 8

<sup>3</sup> Lawless, “I Was Afraid”, 302

informed my perspective of myself and my relation to my collaborators while undertaking this project. I endeavored to be integrated into the event rather than studying it from afar; a fellow volunteer in conversation with collaborators, rather than a researcher only engaging when inquiry called for it. It is still an academic inquiry, of course, but one undertaken with the researcher on the same level as the collaborator; and one in which the conclusions and interpretations of events are voiced not only by the researcher, but assessed and reflected upon by the collaborator as well. Lawless herself describes this attempted balance best:

[T]he scholarly voice is most definitely there framing and shaping the material...

I have not relinquished my role as interpreter, as thinker, as objective observer.

But I have given up the notion of scholar voice as privileged voice, the scholar's position as more legitimate... The point is that both [interpretations] should be presented, and that the dialogue between us should be part of the whole picture.<sup>4</sup>

Marcie Telander, my main collaborator, has already discussed with me her desire to see the work, both of the documentary and the written portion, before it is finalized; a desire I am happy to work with and which I have promised to honor. In presenting my main collaborator with the entirety of my work—not only the parts directly quoting her, but any interpretation as well—for feedback, and then considering that feedback when creating the final interpretations and statements present in the work, I am engaging in the sort of dialogue between folk and folklorist that Lawless suggests. I am admittedly not doing this with every collaborator because not all are interested, and the timing and reality of a revision schedule is such that I cannot take this methodology to its full conclusion; all the same, I am appreciative at the opportunity to receive feedback however it comes to me. I already had a variety of feedback given to me from

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<sup>4</sup> Lawless, "I Was Afraid", 312-313

collaborators about various aspects of this work before, during, and after the fieldwork process, which I hope I have undertaken with appropriate respect and consideration. A copy of the documentary will also be given to every collaborator, once it is finished, and I would welcome any feedback from the Vinotok community on my work therein; this, however, will likely not shape the final, “published” research, but is rather an endeavor to give back to the community the research they so graciously gifted to me.

## **Vinotok**

### ***History of Vinotok***

Crested Butte is a small town nestled in the Gunnison Valley, deep in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. In many ways, it is the end of the road. Aside from a small mountain pass leading west, which is only open in the summer, the only road out is the road in: a state highway leading south, to Gunnison. At Gunnison, a marginally larger small town and one of Crested Butte’s few neighbors, one can catch Highway 50, the smaller of the two interstates that cross the state from east to west. The only thing north of Crested Butte—deeper into the mountains—is Mount Crested Butte, the ski resort. Skiing is one of the main tourist draws of Crested Butte, accompanied by hiking, mountain biking, fly fishing, and wildflower viewing. Winter and summer are its eminent tourist seasons—in the fall and the spring (the latter of which is colloquially known as “mud season), there are few tourists around. Even then, the local community is quite vibrant, and the town generally comes across as a cheerful and fun location.

This wasn’t always the case. Before it was a ski town, Crested Butte—like so many others in the mountains of Colorado—was a mining town. In many ways, the coal mine *was* the town. Colorado Fuel and Iron (the company that ran the mine) had a firm hold upon life in



Crested Butte as well. Miners, paid not in cash but in scrip, were beholden to the company store for any provisions. Many of these miners were Slovenian, either immigrants themselves or recent descendants. They brought traditions from the old country with them to the Crested Butte, many of which put down roots and remain to this day.

Marcie Telander is the creator of the 40-year annual Vinotok festival. According to her, however, the story of Vinotok truly begins with these miners—the people that she and others who moved to Crested Butte in the years and decades after the mine closed in 1953 came to know as “the old-timers”.

“Vinotok” means “wine festival” in Slovenian—the time when the new Zinfandel was brought in, and the rest of the previous year’s wine needed drunk—and was originally a community event among the old-timers. They would drink, they would feast, they would dance in the streets, and they would seize the day as the one time a year in which they could revolt against the authority they lived under, if only within the guise of celebration. An effigy, often looking like a high-ranking local member of CF&I (such as the head of the company store or the mine owner), was publicly convicted in a trial, hung, and set on fire. This expression of “folk revolution” struck the newcomers, many of whom were part of the hippie counter-culture movement, as particularly admirable; it’s a refrain that persists in Vinotok to this day.

As the population of Crested Butte shifted, the town came to have two major groups that could often be at odds: the old-timers, and the newcomers, many of whom were hippies and fervent environmentalists, and whose sentiments could often seem anti-mining and thus offensive to those who had spent their lives and careers in Crested Butte’s coal mine. These tensions were brought to a peak when a new mine threatened to come to town—a molybdenum mine. As Marcie shared, “This molybdenum mine that had basically taken over this glorious

mountaintop was threatening to decapitate that mountain, because molybdenum mining is an extremely toxic extractive technological process and it's extremely destructive to valleys that hold the toxic waste, the tailings. It cannot be transformed or biodegraded.”<sup>5</sup> The overt and aggressive protests from the environmentalists made the old-timers uneasy, since they were the latest in many generations of miners. Eventually, however, few could be entirely in favor of the new molybdenum mine, knowing that it could poison the valley they called home well beyond the damage done by coal pilings.

These days, the fight to keep Mt. Emmons safe is heralded by the cry “Save the Red Lady!” One might think that the anthropomorphizing appellation came from the environmentalists, but in actuality, it came from one of the old-timers. Frank Orazem, a leader in the community and one of the old-timers who became part of the efforts to better unite the two groups, came out of the mine one day. Finding himself facing Mt. Emmons while his eyes adjusted from the dark of the mines to the light of the outside world, he suddenly saw, in the iron-red contours of the mountain itself, the silhouette of a woman. This led to the moniker “The Red Lady”, and the mountain has been locally known as such ever since.<sup>6</sup>

The endeavors to save the Red Lady, and by extension Crested Butte as a whole, was only part of the way in which the town became more unified—VinoTok played a large role as well. Working with the old-timers, Marcie Telander endeavored to expand the community festival in ways that would help the newcomers understand the old-timers, and vice-versa.

According to Mark Schweisow, the first official VinoTok event that could be considered to be the

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<sup>5</sup> Marcie Telander, interview, August 11, 2023

<sup>6</sup> Seeing the Red Lady in Mt. Emmons is a bit like managing to see the picture hidden in one of those seeing-eye puzzles. I myself spent days driving around the valley, looking directly at Mt. Emmons multiple times a day, without figuring out how the contours of the mountain made the shape of a woman's profile. Then, one early morning while headed into town, the image suddenly clicked into place. I think the angle of the morning sun has something to do with it, but regardless, seeing the Red Lady is a suitably disarming experience even when you're looking for her.

“new” Vinotok, rather than the old-timer’s celebration, was in 1985; “new” elements began to be included starting much earlier and only increased from there. Storytelling events were the first to be added—from genuine sharing of life experiences to the riotous Liar’s Night—and eventually, elements such as the mumming and the passion play. In more recent memory, the altars have been added, giving the event an optional pilgrimage aspect for those who want to feel more connected to the key elements of Vinotok and how they reflect community experiences and values.

The old-timers themselves may have passed on, but their spirit remains in the valley; and their influence remains in Vinotok, embedded in everything from the yearly Zinfandel production to the burning of the Great Grump.

### *Vinotok Today*

Now, Vinotok is a week-long celebration with an entire calendar of diverse community events. As difficult a task as it may be, this paper will endeavor to give a succinct explanation of an extremely detailed and lengthy festival, especially given that the documentary also provides a descriptive look at each of the events. Even so, the details given here will hopefully be both helpful and important, allowing later connections to scholarship to be both clear and grounded in the context of the festival.

For most, Vinotok begins in mid-September; but for those who are involved in making the festival happen, that work actually begins in mid-August. There are two large “all-cast” meetings that take place before Vinotok that anybody is welcome to come to, whether they be an old hand or a first-time volunteer. At these meetings, volunteer shifts for event set-up and take-down are signed up for, expectations and guidelines for participation are explained and

discussed, and roles such as mummers, maidens, and torchbearers are divvied up. People taking on these roles are assigned to various “wranglers”, a term used for any experienced volunteer who has been put in charge of a certain role-group. They in turn have usually been assigned the role of wrangler because of their own years acting in that role and/or by suggestion of the Vinotok council, which is made up of those who have been working with the festival the longest: Marcie Telander, Molly Murfee, Joe Bob Merritt, and so on. Many of the volunteers most involved in Vinotok are also deeply involved in other areas of the Crested Butte community- they work with or for the town council, the radio station, the local environmental group, the school, or they own their own businesses. The Vinotok “cast” might be a community within a community, but its ties to the wider town are strong and long-standing.

The behavioral guidelines that the wranglers provided to the group at large during these meetings ranged from the serious to the tongue-in-cheek. An amusing sequence of patterned advice-giving during the second volunteer meeting exemplified this range well:

“Ye shall not expect to get something for nothing,” one wrangler stated.

“Ye shall check your email frequently and respond promptly,” said another.

“Ye shall not throw nonsense items into the fire, including ye-self,” Grump Master said.

And, recalling this pattern at the end of the meeting with a perfect blend of the sincere and comic, head Sorceress Molly Murfee declared that, in regards to mandatory attendance at the final clean-up of the week, “if ye is hungover, we don’t care.”

These meetings are long, beginning in the evening and lasting well past sundown, but they are critical to making the event happen; not only that, but they truly illuminate the rooted and ever-growing community of Vinotok participants, many of whom also use the meetings as an opportunity to greet old friends and make new ones. As Joe Bob, the Grump Master, said

during the first all-cast meeting, “This is a time to forge friendships and make things matter again.” The population at these meetings—which must have been over fifty people, at least—is made up of many people from different walks of life, with ages ranging from people likely in their seventies to fresh-faced college students, as well as the occasional child running around. Dogs were even more abundant than children, though their only role at the meeting seemed to be boosting morale.

Fall happens quickly at high altitude—by the time September comes around, it’s as if nature is racing to complete the changing of the seasons in record time. In the Gunnison Valley, one might wake up to find a dusting of snow on the surrounding mountain peaks, highlighting their contours. The colors of fall in the area are typical of a high desert climate: pale yellow-brown grasses contrast with dusty mint scrub brush. This last autumn, wildflowers still lingered in fields and on the sides of roads—there hadn’t been as many hard freezes as usual by that time of year. They dotted the landscape with warm, buttery yellows and clear, bright purples. The trees were beginning to change, dappling the hillsides with gold and creating a contrast to the dark green pines. By Vinotok, gold swept the hillsides and the beauty of the aspens was stunning. Wood piles could be seen next to many houses; in the valley, wood-burning stoves remain common, and as the season grows colder the mild smell of woodsmoke becomes pervasive in the valley towns. Even over the course of the single festival week, trees changed, colors shifted, temperatures dropped—the season moved on with haste.

The first community-wide festival event is the Celebration of the Harvest Mother, which this past year (2023) was held on the Sunday preceding the autumn equinox. According to K.T. Folz, who runs the event, it is a celebration of earth, of the harvest, and of new life. The Harvest Mother, a pregnant woman in the community chosen for the role, is also celebrated and gives a

speech about values she wishes to bring to the festival and the community this year. This event was very bright, happening mid-day as it did, and very public. Dancers processed up Elk Avenue, but the farmer's market and art market were also happening, as they do on Sundays during this time of year, so the crowd was large, mixed, and cheerful overall. There were children of all ages around, and after the celebration, Eva Paul ran a kid-focused event called the "Flight of Dragons". In that, the children were promoted to the rank of "dragon", complete with face paint if they wanted, and given a notebook and a pencil. As a small group, they then went down Elk Avenue together to look at the altars and discuss what they might mean and how they might relate to the children and the community as a whole.

The altars are a relatively newer aspect of the festival, having been developed over the years rather than original to the event, but to many they are a meaningful and critical element of the festival as a whole. Group art pieces created by local volunteers, many of whom also volunteer in other areas of Vinotok, the altars are relatively large (often person-sized, if not person-shaped) installations positioned around town. Most are on Elk Avenue, though there are a few scattered around other important locations around town, and a few outside of town—at a hiking trailhead, for example, or in "the wastelands" out by the old coal pilings. Many of the altars relate to an archetype—the Green Man, the Sorceress, etc.—while others relate more to concepts, like the Legends altar or the Loyalty altar, for example, both of which are built in memoriam of friends and family or pets, respectively, that have passed on. Seeking out the altars is a form of optional pilgrimage that anybody can undertake, alone or with a group, at any point during the week of Vinotok. Each altar is accompanied by an explanation of its theme as well as an activity (of mindfulness or of positive community engagement) to do while there. Anna Fenerty, a lifelong Vinotok participant, said:

[T]he altars was kind of a way to spread out the impact and allow people to visit at their own time, you know, to kind of bring in some of the parts of our town that are not noticed, that are not respected. We bring the wastelands in and the kind of ugly parts of Crested Butte, because even though this is paradise, we come from mining roots and we have scars on our earth and we have big coal piles right outside town.<sup>7</sup>

Following the Celebration of the Harvest Mother are two ceremonies: the Red Tent and the Men's Dedication. The Red Tent is a private women's event, a space to forge bonds with other women in the community, and also a place where an older woman might be inducted into the Wild Women of Wisdom (colloquially known as "the community crones"). Likewise, the Men's Dedication is a private men's event where the men in the community dedicate themselves to serving that community. As these are secret events, and spaces in which people engage with their communities in very emotionally intimate and vulnerable ways, I will not describe them any further than this.

The Red Tent and the Men's Dedication are obviously gendered spaces, but those who run the events make it clear that they are endeavoring to engage with modern concepts of gender and be inclusive of everybody in their community regardless of identity. When announcing the events to participants, Marcie was very emphatic that individuals should self-identify their gender, and that they would be welcomed at whichever gender-oriented event they feel is right for them. As there are multiple people in the Vinotok community who identify as trans, and many others who consider themselves to be gender neutral, gender fluid, or other gender identities, this clarification is both functional and important to support an inclusive and

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<sup>7</sup> Anna Fenerty, interview, September 13, 2023

welcoming environment in a festival that can otherwise seem to be built along a gender binary. According to Isabel Russell, who has worked firsthand to help Vinotok stay relevant and welcoming within modern expectations for gender inclusion and diversity:

That is a conversation that Marcie and I have been exploring for the last few years... For the last 40 years, there's been a lot of emphasis on it [Vinotok] being a very matrifocal event, with the men having their roles and the women having their roles. And, you know, for the nineties and early 2000s types of feminism, which was providing a safe space for women in a very patriarchal society that would otherwise give them little power, that was great. But we're stepping into a different time now, and particularly for our generation [Millennials] and for Gen Z, there's so much exploration and so much stepping outside of that box now that we want to offer opportunities for... taking the ideal of embodying the sacred masculine and feminine as a balance between the two instead of a binary self.<sup>8</sup>

On the second day of the festival is an event called Myth, Meaning, and Ritual. The “Mythology” night, as it is often called, is an opportunity for people to come and listen to Marcie, Mark, and others explain the history of Vinotok, the purpose it still serves, and, of course, the mythology of it—the story, archetypes, and mythic elements that thematically imbue the festival with a sense of the fantastical. Mythology took place in the Mallardi Theatre, an old theatre just off of Elk Avenue that used to be the City Hall, established back in 1883. It retains a sense of its former glory in its red carpeted stairs, tall wooden edging, and narrow windows. The Mythology event covered much of the history of Vinotok that was outlined in the previous section of this paper; the audience was relatively small, with about half in regalia (and therefore

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<sup>8</sup> Isabel Russell, interview, September 13, 2023



already likely aware of some of this material, if not all of it) and half in plain clothes, newcomers here to learn more.

The following night was Storytelling, one of the longest running traditions in Vinotok. The Storytelling event is a time and place for established community members to tell their stories. “There are no elders left from that time being born right before the turn from the 19th century into the 20th. So our old-timer storytelling, are what we now call middle-timer's stories. And that's my generation, people who've been here 40 or 50 years and people who really hold down the magic and the mystery and the voice of the people in our community,”<sup>9</sup> said Marcie Telander.

This event, unlike most in the Vinotok line-up, is not necessarily Vinotok-themed; it seems to be both inextricably rooted in Vinotok and yet reaching beyond it. The storytellers often bring tales of their own lives and experiences in Crested Butte that are completely unrelated to Vinotok itself. It's very much a community event, and is well-attended, especially by older townspeople. Traditional Slovenian potica bread is served for free, along with tea or hot cocoa in secondhand mugs provided for use by the museum. The event is held in the Crested Butte Museum, which used to be Tony's Conoco and hardware store, a central location for the old-timers to gather back in the day. Now, it is a modest museum focused on local history, with permanent exhibits on mining, mountain biking, and the town itself. While the storytellers change every year, the spirit of the event is the same: sharing tales of the human and the humorous, grounding people in the place that they call home.

The Village Mum occurs on the fourth evening of the week-long festival. This is a “rogue event” that is not widely advertised and occurs on the private property (front lawns, driveways,

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<sup>9</sup> Marcie Telander, interview, August 11, 2023

and so on) of various community members. As such, this is a quasi-public, quasi-private event that can't involve a large crowd of people. It came about during the COVID years, in which the standard large-scale procession down Elk Avenue wasn't possible, and has continued because of positive feedback from the community. For much of the cast, the village mumming acts as both a dress rehearsal for the procession, mumming, and burning, as well as a way to celebrate the festival on a more intimate scale with long-time residents.

While not necessarily an official festival event, I will take a moment here to describe some relevant aspects of one of the volunteer shifts I undertook as part of my participation in the festival. I signed up to help prepare Kochevar's, the oldest bar in town, for the Liar's Night event. While Liar's Night is held in the late evening, me and a handful of other volunteers showed up at noon to decorate. This decoration was unlike any other venue preparation I have ever engaged with: multiple carloads of young aspens and pine foliage were brought in and unloaded onto the curb. From there, we took the young trees and branches inside the building, where we tied them to the walls with twine. They stood as a facsimile of the forest outside of town, lining an open area we had cleared of tables, chairs, and pool tables. I vividly recall sweeping up leaves left out on the sidewalk in order to scatter them onto the floor inside the bar. This delightful inversion of the human-nature boundary seemed to me (and still does) to be reflective of the way in which the festival as a whole plays with and blurs such boundaries.

Before Liar's Night gets underway, however, there is the Pan Tree ceremony. Like the Red Tent, the Pan Tree is a secret, women-only event that I cannot say much about aside from what is publicly known. During this event, the women of Vinotok go out as a group to a tree that many of them have found and felt a connection to, known as the Pan Tree. There, they determine the Green Man for the coming year. The Green Man embodies the values of masculinity that the

community feels are important, and is the man in the community who best represents those values for any given year. The new Green Man is then announced and crowned later that night at Kochevar's, after Liar's Night gets fully under way.

While the Green Man archetype is rooted in universalist ideals of masculinity and community-defined values, choosing the Green Man is also a very human endeavor. Vinotok as a whole is not only engaging with an intentionally grand mythology, but it is also a festival rooted in the human and the mundane—a blend that often comes to the fore in somewhat humorous ways. For example, the Green Man is a paragon of virtuous masculinity; he is also widely regarded as the man voted sexiest for that year.

“Is he really the sexiest?” I heard a new maiden ask Anna, the maiden wrangler, during one of the volunteer meetings.

“Oh, we get input,” she readily affirmed. “People text me all the time.”

The Green Man's core personality and appeal, however, changes with each year. Mark Schweisow, the first Green Man, spoke on this when I interviewed him:

Being the green man is different for each man that is selected for that. I started doing my Green Man manifestation long before Vinotok at Marcie's women's groups, where she thought it was important to have a nature spirit speak to the ladies. Someone that was dedicated to and rooted to the place that we live. And that came natural to me because I love this place so much. And so my dedication was to the ladies, to the earth, to preserving this community that we live in. And for each man, it's been very different. There are so many manifestations of the Green Man. Sometimes you have a Peter Pan who is a more of a jolly lad. And other times we have men who are very dedicated to the environment or the

specific parts of the community that they really want to focus on, and it's up to the women to decide what they're looking for in the Green Man for the coming year and talk about the different men that might fit that those parameters.<sup>10</sup>

Late on the fifth night of Vinotok, after the Green Man has been secretly chosen at the Pan Tree, festiviarians and public alike gather at Kochevar's, the oldest bar in town. Kochevar's is a relatively small bar, situated near the head of Elk Avenue, and is packed shoulder-to-shoulder for the event. After the lying contest is underway and the crowd is suitably enthusiastic, Molly Murfee announces the new Green Man, and he is crowned with a unique headpiece of his very own. This piece is made of antlers and embedded with twelve small but significant objects that the maidens added. These objects represent something important about their month, something that they wish the Green Man to remember, or simply something they felt was important. An acorn, for example, was added to represent natural potential.

After that, the liar's contest continues, and more and more people step up on the stage and tell their story. The crowd is encouraged to shout "liar!" whenever they feel something is particularly unbelievable (though that bar is rather high). As such, it's a very spirited event.

The following afternoon begins the second-largest Vinotok event spread: Feast and Fair. The fair begins at three o'clock and is a casual affair. A number of booths are set up around the fire temple (the cleared and decorated 4-way parking lot, with a large wooden structure in the middle marking where the Grump will be burned at the end of the festival) and offer various services and activities in return for donations (around \$10, usually) that go to helping the festival run. The main booths involve face painting, rune reading, rune branding, and the most popular one, head wreath making. This is one of Vinotok's most family-friendly events, and there are

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<sup>10</sup> Mark Schweisow, interview, September 11, 2023

inevitably gaggles of children running around wearing head wreaths made of aspen branches and flowers and small rounds of cut pine branded with runes, tied with twine to whatever clothing they might be wearing (regalia or otherwise).

At another booth, a local brewery sells their beer as well as the Vinotok Zinfandel wine, made annually and only sold during the festival. While other booths close down later in the evening, when the feast begins, this one remains open the entire time, for obvious reasons. Patrons must bring their own cups, plates, and silverware to this event, as an environmental gesture; there are more recycling and compost bins than there are trash cans. The food served is as local as possible and bursting with fall flavors; this iteration included sausages, salad, bread with compound butter, julienned zucchini and yellow squash in vinaigrette, potatoes, roasted beets, and apple crisp. The recipes for this delicious spread come solely from the mind of Kat Harrington, one of the head feastivarians.

According to Roman Kolodziej (the 2022-2023 Green Man), the feast has gone through many different iterations. It began as an all-community potluck, with people bringing whatever dish they wanted to share; as it grew, it became a donation-based potluck, where people would donate ingredients or cooking time and then all feast together; and as it is now, it is a large ticketed event, with ticket revenue paying for the ingredients and the cooking itself provided by volunteers. Likewise, as the event grew, the space it was held in changed: originally it was held at the Two Buttes Senior Center, then it was moved to The Depot (Crested Butte's old train station, which has since been renovated into a public space), then it was held on Elk Avenue itself, and now it is held at "the 4-way" (the public parking lot near the four-way stop in town, behind the visitor's center, also the space where the bonfire is and has been held). This past year, the feast sold out at 4:30 (half an hour before food began to be served), meaning that 400 people

bought tickets for the feast; after the feast wound down a bit, since there was still more food, approximately 75 discounted tickets were sold in addition to that. In a town of about 1,500 people,<sup>11</sup> that's quite the turn out.

As the feasting winds down, the stage, made up of a number of trailer beds lined up together and decorated by volunteers, is lit and the events for the night begin. Throughout the faire and feast many performers take the stage, singing folk songs, playing instruments, or fire dancing, but the more formal annual ceremonies only begin after the sun goes down. Since the documentary includes all of these ceremonies, at least in part, I will refrain from explaining them in detail; rather, I would simply like to note some of the interesting aspects that may not be as evident on film. One such element is the audience—the area immediately in front of the stage was kept clear for the children, many of whom stood, sat, danced, and energetically yelled out phrases like “Burn the Grump!” when encouraged to. It was generally evident that much of the crowd was familiar with Vinotok, at least enough to participate as expected during such call-and-response times. The energy was overall lively and festive, but tended to match what was happening on stage. During the handfasting, for example, which is actually quite an intimate and private exchange happening away from the microphones, the crowd was quiet and respectful. When encouraged to sing or chant, on the other hand, the crowd roared and laughed along. A half-moon hung high in the night sky over the gathering, a symbol of natural balance which felt as if it were welcoming the imminent seasonal equinox.

The final day of Vinotok is by far the grandest. Just before sunset, the entirety of the Vinotok cast and crew assemble to form the procession. Archetypal embodiments and mummers in full regalia, torchbearers in red tunics and maidens in head wreaths, moodmakers on drums

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<sup>11</sup> Anna Fenerty, interview, September 13, 2023

and dancers twirling ribbons, executioners in black robes and the Grump itself in steel and tattered cloth—all are present in full and vibrant color and sound. The procession is a large one, and it only grows larger as it moves slowly down the street and collects more and more of the public as it goes. Everyone nearby is encouraged to join, to become part of the pounding beat of the drums and the movement of the crowd, and many are heard greeting friends and family as they arrive. As the procession continues down Elk Avenue, the mummers often break away to mum within certain restaurants and other venues, before returning to join the crowd dancing in the streets.

There are two casts of mummers, the “main” cast and the “ninja” cast. They perform scripts laying out the narrative framework of Vinotok. These scripts are unique to each cast, albeit with similar themes, mostly because the main cast includes those members embodying the referenced archetypes: Sir Hapless, the Squires, and so on. The ninja cast is a smaller cast that exists to perform the mumming in venues too small to host the larger group. At two locations—Secret Stash (a pizza place that used to be the company store) and the museum (which used to be Tony’s Conoco and hardware store)—both casts perform together. Mummers carry cups with them, as they are paid for their performance in an alcoholic brew or beverage provided by the business hosting the mummers. This is always optional—the established method for refusing a drink as a cast member is to simply hold your hand over the top of your cup as you pass by the Vinotok volunteer in charge of pouring, and water is always available from the “spirit watchers” standing at the door. Mummers are encouraged to alternate between alcohol and water every other location. This is a fun and festive time, certainly, but volunteers are strongly discouraged from getting too drunk, as that could lead to problems for themselves and other participants. The

balance between festivity and safety during Vinotok is of great concern to the leaders of the festival and something that festival volunteers must always keep in mind.

This can also be seen in the formation of the procession itself, which is a “V” shape, the point of which is directed down the street in the direction that the procession is headed. This pattern is closed off by maidens and torchbearers, who create a division between the large, moving crowd and the more vulnerable members of the core cast, such as the pregnant Harvest Mother. Similar safety notes were given to volunteers about the later bonfire. Volunteers more central to the event and more knowledgeable about its process have a duty to be mindful of public behavior and help public participants and spectators stay respectful of the event, the volunteers, and each other. The goal is not to police people in their festivity, but simply to keep people safe, and make sure the event doesn't get out of hand to a point where the community is harmed rather than helped by it. Likewise, volunteers are encouraged to help and look out for each other as well, making sure that everybody in the cast is supported physically, mentally, and emotionally during what is ultimately a very chaotic, if fun, sequence of events.

As the procession makes its way down the last stretch of Elk Avenue to its destination, the fire temple, a sizable crowd is already gathered in front of the stage there. Fire spinners have been entertaining those who are waiting there for the Grump and the rest of the crowd to arrive, and they keep the atmosphere festive as the fire temple swells with the beat of the drums, the chanting of the procession, and the integration of two enormous crowds of people. It certainly feels as if the entire town is here, now, to witness the events to come. Even with such a densely packed throng, space is made in front of the stage for children to stay safe and get front row seats to the passion play and the trial of the Grump.



The passion play tells the story of Vinotok and the archetypes it invokes. It describes the fight between Sir Hapless (representing “technocracy” and progress for the sake of progress) and the Earth Dragon (representing all that is natural); it presents the plight of the Red Lady, who is in danger of being sacrificed for the sake of greed and corruption; and it gives the Grump, who must be sacrificed in her stead, a trial that ultimately ends with the Grump being sentenced to death in the flames. Then comes the part the crowd has been waiting for: the burning of the Grump.

The Grump itself is an immense work of art, in more ways than one. Joe Bob Merritt might be the Grump Master, but creating the Grump is undeniably a group action. Roman Kolodziej donated a great deal of dead Juniper branches from his home to the Grump’s construction this year, which in his own words “look like reaching arms” and add to the overall vision. Knowing it will burn adds to the excitement people feel when helping build the Grump—as an art piece, it is one that will go through change, and that change is both expected and accounted for in the various materials and shapes that go into the final design. Joe Bob Merritt spoke on this matter:

There's been years that the Grump's presence has been a rendering of a type of an emotion. So, see, the emotion of insatiable greed. There's been other years that the Grump has been a bit more literal. There was one year in particular when it was obvious that we were getting overrun with the VRBO real estate complex and housing was becoming scooped up by real estate investment. Corporations and local people were losing housing. So that year we built a small house with a swirling monster near the top of it with the VRBO signage on it. There was one year that Grump had a resemblance to a particular political figure who later

became president. So some years it's more of an emotional expression than other years. It's been quite direct.

I don't see this work any different than everyday life. I will not remain, the Grump will not remain. You know, this is the same. You can't take it with you. When we die, we can't take anything with us, including all of the grievances. You know that aphorism “you can't take it with you”. I think it's more of an inner idea than an outer idea, that most people suffer immensely because of their accumulations of their grumps. Some of the people's most prized possessions are their accounts, the things they hold against themselves and one another. And what I have seen at the end of people's lives is a lot of anxiety around everything that they've held on to, and not so much physical, more so as these nonphysical things. So, you know, I think one of the angles or responsibilities of the Grump Master is to not be concerned with death and be a master of the Grump.<sup>12</sup>

The burning of the Grump feels very ritualistic. A smaller procession, headed by the Grump (which is in turn mobilized by the executioners) and tailed by members of the cast, circles the open wooden structure of fire temple three times. All the while the procession and the crowd chant an eerie variant of the common “oats and corn” tune, reworded to refer to the Grump and its imminent burning. Once maneuvered inside the boundary of the fire temple (a feat of engineering that required the dismantling of part of the temple structure itself) the Grump is doused in kerosene and the grump boxes, holding the many, many grumps the community wishes to burn, are added by the community crones. Then, the torchbearers approach and jointly light the Grump on fire, to the roaring cheer of the crowd. The heat, the press of the people, and the

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<sup>12</sup> Joe Bob Merritt, interview, September 13, 2023

energy are palpable; sparks flicker up into the night sky, reaching for the half-moon high above. The celebration goes late into the night, until the Grump has been reduced to little but embers and scorched, twisted metal.

Numerous people that I talked to, upon hearing that I had attended pre-COVID instances of Vinotok, said something along the lines of, “Oh good! You know how the bonfire used to be, then.” The old ways still feel meaningful to people, at least in terms of the wild purity of a huge bonfire. Even so, the continuous reduction of the bonfires over the decades has been mostly due to safety. More than one story about previous bonfire incidents—everything from people throwing in couches to patio furniture outside of nearby houses getting burned—indicated that the changes in the bonfire were almost always both necessary and relieving for many. As the safety of the bonfire increased, so did the range of community members able to attend (especially those particularly old or young). While the cleansing aspect of a large fire is still an element people desire and find worthwhile, the safety of the festival-goers remains paramount. To a certain extent, a safe celebration—even one “more wild than good”—is more cathartic than a dangerous one. As Marcie herself said when preparing the group for the burning, “Vinotok is the opposite of a drunken brawl... there are directives around it. There is self-management around it... We want to have intention.”

### ***Vinotok and Heritage***

Vinotok is a festival that consciously engages with and embeds popular concepts of heritage and culture. Overall, the festival endeavors to allow and encourage individuals to bring their own indigeneity to this event. While this mostly involves a purposeful integration of European traditions, given the Slovenian roots of the old-timers and the often northern or

western European heritage of a majority of the participants, the festival does not close itself off as an event solely dedicated to European traditions. For example, a local family of ex-pats from the Republic of Guinea have shared drum patterns with the festival drummers, and lead a traditional Guinean harvest dance during the Celebration of the Harvest Mother on the first day of the festival. Likewise, regalia is another arena in which festival participants are encouraged to develop their own clothing styles based on their self-identified heritage and what is comfortable for and meaningful to them, rather than being obligated to dress exactly like other festivalgoers. A few mandatory uniforms, such as the torchbearers, are exceptions to this. In those cases, the uniform regalia is also in part a safety thing, since they are carrying around large flaming torches and ought to be easily recognized.

In a more immediate sense of heritage, there is the impact Vinotok has had on multi-generational Crested Butte families. By now, there are multiple generations of Crested Butte citizens that grew up with Vinotok and are as familiar with the festival as they are with any other town-wide events. Of this group, a notable subsection is made up of individuals who were harvest babies themselves, their mothers given the role of Harvest Mother while pregnant with them. Harvest Baby or otherwise, a number of highly involved Vinotok volunteers, especially those in or around their twenties, identify Vinotok as a striking influence in their childhoods and on into their current lives. The impact of Vinotok on community members can also be seen in the public, beyond the volunteer group. For example, the final mumming site for this last year was the museum, within which a local couple was hosting their wedding reception. Vinotok is so important to this couple and their loved ones that they wished it to be a part of one of the most important ceremonies of their lives. These sorts of things reveal the deep roots and significance the festival holds for much of the community.

Anna Fenerty, whose brother was a Harvest Baby born during Vinotok and who herself has been a part of Vinotok for much of her life, stated in her interview that “those bonds you create remain with you for years. You know, there's people I knew when I was 16 who are maidens who took me under their wing, who whenever I see them they give me a hug, they call me the squire.”<sup>13</sup>

Just as Vinotok’s relationship to heritage is fluid and local, it is also unique to this festival and this valley. Many from out of town, or even out of state, have experienced Vinotok and wanted to bring the festival to their own communities; Marcie Telander is against this transplantation of Vinotok, not because she doesn’t wish for other communities to have what Crested Butte has, but because other communities are not Crested Butte. Rather, Marcie’s goal to help others use the elements and spirit of Vinotok to build their *own* “grassroots festival” in their unique communities. To this end, she is working with the Colorado Cultural Institute (CCI) to host apprenticeships, in which those wishing to create an event like Vinotok in their own towns can come and experience the festival for themselves, learning about its aims and structure while developing an event that fits their own community. The impact of Vinotok does not solely lie in its events and archetypes, it is in the ways that those events and archetypes connect to the community’s diverse heritage. When developing a festival for a community, the point is to look at the community’s heritage, the community’s values and goals, to find the elements that will speak best to people there and bring them to the focus through a festival that is made by and for the people that live in a unique place. Every place has its own history, its own story, as do the people that live there. Marcie’s wish is for others to create events that are fitting and fruitful for the specific heritage and community populations that are celebrating them: to build traditions

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<sup>13</sup> Anna Fenerty, interview, September 13, 2023

that are not applied on top of a community but built within it, engaged with the community they serve.

As Marcie states, “One thing I know, and I hope anyone who's experiencing this documentary, every community, no matter where you are, has genius just waiting to come through. You have all the people and all the skills and all the art forms and all the crafts to create your own festival, your own celebration of who you are, to exalt the place in which you live no matter where it is.”<sup>14</sup>

### *Vinotok and Spirituality*

Similar to heritage, Vinotok’s relationship to spirituality lies mostly within the individual participants, while being supported by elements of the festival as a whole. One does not need to believe or have a certain spirituality in order to attend or even be part of the festival, but festival participants are expected to approach the event and overall festival process with connection and respect. Making fun of the way in which an individual interprets various aspects of the festival, such as the altars or the archetypes, is not tolerated. Likewise, positing that one spiritual or religious interpretation is more “true” or canonical than another is strongly discouraged. While this is a ludic event, and a secular one, many individuals do approach it with a great deal of spiritual engagement, and those that don’t are asked to be respectful of those that do. This, for many, is what makes the festival “real” and separates it from, for example, the Colorado Renaissance Festival. The Renaissance Festival is “fake” in many ways, from the playful anachronisms to the integration of modern pop culture elements, and that’s the fun of it; Vinotok, while on the surface perhaps seeming to involve many of the same aesthetics, is fun for entirely

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<sup>14</sup> Marcie Telander, interview, September 19, 2023

different reasons as far as its participants are concerned. First, it is locally embedded, while the Renaissance Festival presents itself as a location and time distanced from our current one. Second, Vinotok involves regalia made with intention, acknowledgement of heritage, and locally sourced materials, while the Renaissance festival involves costumes put together mostly for fun and a sense of fantasy. And third, Vinotok holds spiritual weight for many, while the Renaissance Festival is wholly for popular entertainment. Isabel Russel explains:

[A]t this point it's, I mean, the closest thing that I and my family have to religion and it means a lot... through Vinotok, I really felt like I was able to kind of come home and bring my own, find my own spirituality. Growing up, my family would always say like, "the forest is our church" or something like that. And it became a lot more true when I started getting more involved in Vinotok. And these days I describe myself as pagan and I love reading and learning about a lot of the old Druidic traditions and Norse mythology and old Slavic mythologies and Russian and Native American. And it just feels like it blends a lot of those very ancient Earth based traditions into something that resonates a lot with me as an Earth worshiper.<sup>15</sup>

One of the other things that struck me during the volunteer events, where straightforward realism and efficiency met and mingled with the values and beliefs that people were bringing to the festival, was how everybody was engaging with the festival's spiritual and ritualesque elements in their own individual ways. Many of the terms, phrases, and concepts used to describe and explain Vinotok during the volunteer meetings *seemed* Neopagan on the surface, and I have had more than one person outside of the community assume Neopaganism to be the focal aspect

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<sup>15</sup> Isabel Russell, interview, September 13, 2023

of this festival. The more I talked to people within the community, however, the more it seemed like these concepts were being used as wide, general impressions free of any distinct spirituality. Various volunteers were identifying with these concepts through lenses of activism, indigeneity, history, folklore, psychology, psychotherapy, physical therapy, Reiki, and just about everything under the pagan umbrella, including Wicca. For some, these concepts and archetypes were deeply spiritual and laden with meaning; for others, they were entirely free from any sort of spiritual belief and were simply fun or “felt right”. As Jo Ellipsis said:

I feel like it's a lot more than that [a pagan festival]. I feel like putting that label on it kind of shuts people off from really seeing what it is, because they already have this idea in their head like, it's like Renaissance Faire where it's not. If you don't come out of it with that preconceived notion, you can actually see that it's a little bit deeper. And it's a lot more than pagan cultures, because I don't feel like it's a culturally based festival. It's more of a community based festival with, you know, pulling in different cultures.<sup>16</sup>

This spectrum of belief and engagement remained consistently diverse throughout the festival events, without one end being privileged over another by volunteers, participants, or spectators. This is to a large degree intentional—Marcie is nothing if not academic about the elements she is evoking. As she told me, “[I]t's part of the religious function of every human to want to have something to worship, something that offers relief from fear and anxiety. When life gets difficult, that brings forth celebration and rituals of transformation and the need to be witnessed and to be shared and share with others as they're going through their own rites of passage.”<sup>17</sup> Many who have never heard Marcie speak on the topic, however, still arrive at a

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<sup>16</sup> Jo Ellipsis, interview, August 18, 2023

<sup>17</sup> Marcie Telander, interview, September 19, 2023



similar way of thinking. The festival seems to provide for people only as much spiritual weight as they themselves put into it.

### **Scholarship**

Although I admittedly have less opportunity to apply a scholarly framework in a terminal project than I would in a proper thesis, I have approached the folkloric aspects of this festival through the lens of previous work on festival. Those aspects include festival and its role in society; the carnivalesque; ritual and the ritualesque; liminality and rites of passage; material culture; and connections to other contemporary festivals.

It would be prudent to first examine some broad festival frameworks and the ways in which festivals related to, reflect, and impact societies. For this, I looked to the works of Sabina Magliocco. While Magliocco's Sardinian experiences are themselves far from Vinotok at times, some of her broader festival statements are important and hold truths of the role of festival that are applicable in a generalist sense. Firstly, Magliocco emphasizes the folkloric nature of festival in her work, particularly the aspect of change, which she claims is "intrinsic to the nature of folklore"<sup>18</sup>. Festivals, no matter when, where, or by whom they are celebrated, are never repeated in exactly the same pattern each time. Change, big or small, is inherent to the celebration of festivals.

Vinotok is no exception. The festival underwent a drastic transformation between the original celebration of the old-timers and the current iteration; not only that, but the festival is constantly evolving. Time after time, participants I talked to mentioned the changes made to Vinotok over the years. "Before COVID", "during COVID", and "after COVID" were common

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<sup>18</sup> Magliocco, "The Two Madonnas", 5

time markers; “the bonfire used to be much bigger” was a consistent theme, this truth passed along to me by almost everybody I talked to, though the time they meant by “used to be” ranged anywhere from 2019 to 1985. The bonfire has gone from something huge enough to throw a couch in (which, I heard, somebody did) that you couldn’t even approach for hours for risk of getting burned, to what it is today, which is a still large but much more reasonably sized and well-bordered bonfire surrounded by four smaller cauldron fires.

Sometimes, these changes are intentional. Vinotok leaders are consistently looking to make the event safer, more meaningful, and pleasant for everybody involved. Downsizing the bonfire, working with community organizations, adding events, making space for children, and trying to keep the event from being promoted outside of the valley are all changes that have been implemented with planning and conscious decision-making. Other changes happened naturally, or are simply the result of the passage of time and human nature: roles change, volunteers join or step aside, local businesses come and go, people move in and out of the valley, and the Grump is always made anew each year.

In both “Coordinates of Power and Performance” and “The Two Madonnas”, Magliocco emphasizes the relationship between festivals and the societies they are embedded in: “[W]e can expect festivals to embody—and even dramatize, in some cases—existing social and political conflicts in the community... Because festivals symbolically display and enact a society’s values, that may serve as an accurate barometer of the way in which a community perceives itself and the way it wishes to present itself to outsiders.”<sup>19</sup> Nothing in Vinotok represents this concept better than the Great Grump. While other aspects of the festival are certainly engaged with sociocultural norms and values, the Grump is an overt, dramatized representation of the

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<sup>19</sup> Magliocco, “The Two Madonnas”, 4-5

conflicts and issues plaguing the community. Whether the Grump is more symbolic (a mouth of knives lashing out with words that cut and divide) or painfully obvious (Donald Trump himself, with little orange hands and fourfold faces of rage) it is always a clear assertion of a conflict within the community that the community does not need nor want. The Grump not only going up in flames, but being indicted, put on trial, and found guilty, is a full and cathartic yearly ritual which allows the community to come together to address and resolve the problematic sociocultural divides within it.

Magliocco also frames festival as a form of “social play”, invoking the concept of Geertz’s “deep play” in the process. Both phrases suggest a play different from that of, say, a casual board game between friends. “[T]he kind of play characteristic of festival is not idle or meaningless, but rather laden with symbolic meaning and significance... Festive play allows people to experiment with the components of their culture and try out new patterns.”<sup>20</sup> Festive play invites people to interact with each other differently, to do and say things they might not normally, all under the broad and sheltering umbrella of entertainment and revelry. With this in mind, it only makes sense that this ludic element of festival leads directly to symbolic inversion: the temporary reversal of everyday norms of behavior. In festivals around the world, symbolic inversion can be seen in the use of masks and costumes, excessive drinking and feasting, ribald behavior, parading in the streets, and so on. In Vinotok in particular, the regalia of the volunteers and crowd alike mask and transform the participants; alcohol flows freely and an enormous feast takes up an entire afternoon; sexual themes run rife through jokes and songs; and the streets close to vehicle traffic as they are overtaken by drums and dancers. Each of these behaviors is something not normally allowed in the standard norms of the day-to-day; the people and the

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<sup>20</sup> Magliocco, “The Two Madonnas”, 9-10

environment transform as the world is turned upside-down. Which, of course, cannot help but indicate the presence of the carnivalesque.

One cannot possibly discuss festival without discussing the closely related ideas of “carnival” and “the carnivalesque”. An enormous amount of current discussion on these concepts rest upon the work of Mikhail Bakhtin; his name is practically synonymous with the terms. Bakhtin’s conception of carnival is multifold and based in European traditions. A summary of his work on the subject would take far longer than allotted here, but certain elements of his conception directly apply: for him, carnival is a time of the world turned upside-down, an alternate reality confined in the time and space of the festival within which hierarchies are suspended. Themes of fertility, life and death, and transition (thresholds) are inevitably intertwined with carnival. Vicki Ann Cremona gives an excellent summary in her work “Carnival and Power”:

Carnival, like other social practices, is subject to the operations of power. While people are exaggerating their actions, transforming their appearance, making fun of their fellows, and lampooning the powers that be, they are also playing with power. Power is not only situated at the higher echelons of political and social administration, but also permeates all levels of the social system and influences all areas of social action. To wield power means to retain control. Carnival, which is originally intended to shake off, albeit for a short period of time, the shackles of power imposed from above, is not simply a moment of innocent fun, recreation and collective participation. Through the celebration of Carnival, the underlying

seriousness of what is expressed can be transposed to a level that may be apprehended by all within the 'safe' dimension of revelry and enjoyment.<sup>21</sup>

If that is carnival then, of course, the carnivalesque is that which *feels* like carnival, but isn't—the carnival-adjacent, the imitator or descendent of carnival, the remix and reordering of disparate carnival elements. The strongest parallel to carnival itself, in my opinion, is the “original” Vinotok of the old-timers: as they lived within a strictly hierarchical society, toiling under the shadow of a mining company that kept them in its tight grip, their festival held all the markers of power described in Cremona's description can be plainly seen. The effigy they burned was of that very authority, a single individual, rather than anything conceptual. When speaking on the old-timer's Vinotok, Marcie Telander said, “it was very similar to times when everything was turned upside down and the ruling class had to be ruled by the people. And it was brief, maybe a couple of days, maybe a week long. However, in this community it was a great tradition—the folk revolution.”<sup>22</sup>

The “new” Vinotok, on the other hand, maintains these roots but, lacking the indomitable authority of the mining company, shifts into the carnivalesque instead. The authorities it speaks out against are the more diffuse, symbolic, and unreachable follies of capitalism, “technocracy”, and progress at the expense of environment. Vinotok as it is now is still revelry and revolution, but the structures it overturns and criticizes are not necessarily the day-to-day authorities and social structures within the small town. Instead, that criticism is aimed at the much larger authorities and norms affecting a wider area of reach—the town, the state, the country, and potentially any human being grappling with the consequences of life in the Anthropocene.

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<sup>21</sup> Cremona, “Carnival and Power”, 5

<sup>22</sup> Marcie Telander, interview, August 11, 2023

Still, there is a lot of “upside-down” going on in today’s Vinotok, even if it’s not quite the hierarchical overturning that Bakhtin envisioned. Vinotok reframes societal norms and expectations, and the festival’s position within the community as an annual event full of revelry and organized chaos reflects this. As with similar carnivalesque events, those who participate still return to a more normal life in the small community after Vinotok ends.

Carnavalesque is also intrinsically tied to the ritualesque, just as carnival is never entirely bereft of ritual. Jack Santino covers them all in his aptly titled work “From Carnavalesque to Ritualesque”. The definitions he sets out for all four terms are both helpful and applicable. According to Santino, “carnival refers to celebrations of great abandon, social inversion, public excess, sensuality, and the temporary establishment of an alternate society, one free of or even in opposition to the norm... Ritual, conversely, in its true sense of “sacred ceremony,” is about constructing and reinforcing social categories, even if those categories represent a minority position or a marginalized group.”<sup>23</sup> The “-esque” versions of each term are, as discussed above, situations in which the feel and purpose of carnival or ritual is invoked, while still remaining somewhat adjacent or marginal to the thing itself. Santino compares these concepts with full understanding of their connections and overlaps:

The distinction between ritual and festival (carnival has been called the festival par excellence; Falassi 2004, 71), then, is blurred and porous. Sometimes an event is distinctly one or the other. Often it is a little bit of both... However, we can develop a way of viewing symbolic public events as partaking more or less in the carnivalesque and/or the ritualesque. Thus, we can get past the absolutism and essentialism of assuming or assigning a single type of communication according

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<sup>23</sup> Santino, “From Carnavalesque to Ritualesque”

to genre: for example, if it is ritual (understood as such by the participants), it is sacred; therefore, it is perceived as sacred by the participants in all its aspects (see MacAloon 1984). Most events will have elements of the ritualesque along with the carnivalesque, and the latter does not negate the former. The two are not antithetical, and the genre frames are multivocal. In the ongoing spontaneity of real-time enactments, public performances can signify many things at once.”<sup>24</sup>

The entirety of the Vinotok festival is, as I see it, both carnivalesque and ritualesque. Many of the elements—dancing in the streets, the burning of the Grump, turning the inside of a bar into a natural space and making an outdoor space a dining hall—smack of carnival. Meanwhile, there are ritualized aspects as well: the created mythology coming forth in the passion play, for example, along with the trial that the Grump never wins. On top of that, many participants find some or all parts of the festival sacred, in whatever way they express their spirituality or religion. That individuality nudges the event towards the carnivalesque and ritualesque, those marginal areas where there is not necessarily some great authority or central belief system governing the sociocultural space within which the festival happens.

The concept of the ritualesque fits Vinotok for other reasons as well. Santino states that, in contrast to carnival, which allows participants to “let off steam” solely within the boundaries of the festival, “Ritualesque events aim for change beyond the “time out of time” of the event itself.”<sup>25</sup> While the original Vinotok of the old-timers may have been a textbook steam valve festival, allowing for social upheaval and revelry only to then return to an authoritarian structure and strict social hierarchy after the fact, the new event seeks to break past those boundaries. Certainly, the excess and wildness of Vinotok is not currently a year-round experience for the

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<sup>24</sup> Santino, “From Carnivalesque to Ritualesque”

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

community; but the overt environmentalism, social criticism, and renewed sense of community is something that Vinotok participants carry with them well beyond the confines of the festival.

But what is this “time out of time” that Santino mentions? It is of course a reference to the work of Victor and Edith Turner, key figures in ritual and festival studies, who are perhaps best known for distinguishing the term “liminality” as it pertains to festival and rites of passage. “Liminality is better regarded as a process than a state. The liminal process has three major aspects or components... (1) the communication of *sacra*, the Latin word for sacred things—we would speak of symbolic objects and actions ... (2) the encouragement of ludic recombination... (3) the fostering of *communitas*, a direct, spontaneous, and egalitarian mode of social relationship, as against hierarchical relationships among occupants of structural status-roles.”<sup>26</sup> “*Sacra*” can be seen in Vinotok through the myths and rituals invoked, both old and new, but all of which hold symbolic meaning to participants and audience. Many of the myths and mythic archetypes included in the passion play, for example, are considered sacred by a number of the participants and audience; they speak to the cycles of the seasons, to nature and the order of the natural world. “Ludic recombination” is fairly straightforward, and is plainly seen in festival events, from the outrageous tales of Liar’s Night to the playful mummers and their songs. “*Communitas*” in turn can be seen in the tight-knit community created by the volunteers (who often form closer bonds during the event than they do beyond it) as well as the way in which Vinotok removes hierarchical relationships among the wider participants, relegating everybody to simply a dancer in the street or a face crowded around the bonfire—part of a group, yet not bound by the social norms of the regular world.

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<sup>26</sup> Turner, “Celebration”, 202



Liminality is often tied to rites of passage, and while the annual festival itself isn't necessarily a rite of passage, it certainly includes them. The Red Tent and the Men's Dedication, for example, both act as initiation rituals for members of the community: women of a certain age are ceremonially invited into the Wild Women of Wisdom, and younger or newer men in the community can pledge themselves to upholding core values. The squires, by process of accepting the role and fulfilling its duties throughout the week, move from being mere youths on the fringes of Vinotok to being fully part of the adult festivarian community. These initiations are often intentional and intensive, personal and communal, and they happen fully within the liminal space of the festival itself.

To round out discussion of standard festival concepts and their application, we must now turn to material culture. Vinotok is rife with material intention—most everything, from the Great Grump itself to the head wreaths adorning the audience, is handmade with natural and/or upcycled materials. Buying things new is strongly discouraged, especially for the regalia worn by participants. As much as possible, materials for the many festival elements are obtained out in nature in ways that will not hurt the ecosystem or upset the balance of things: branches are gathered from a variety of trees while out on a hike, fur and bones are obtained while hunting or from dead animals found along the roads. There is quite a community network that has developed to swap skirts, shirts, feathers, furs, bones, face paint, and other accoutrement amongst those who have gathered extra over the years and those who may be new or may be seeking a certain look. Seasoned festivarians often put together regalia for every day of Vinotok, rather than a single outfit for all the events in the week. The "look" of most regalia is northwestern European, evoking ideas of medieval times or even earlier, depending upon the individual's heritage, desires, and ability to procure elements. As Dorson says in his chapter

“Material Components in Celebration”, “Another theme that binds together these celebrations is their ritual re-creation of a legendary past. Costumes especially recapture days of yore.”<sup>27</sup>

Vinotok participants might take umbrage with his use of the term “costumes”, however. “[W]e call costumes regalia because we're not acting roles,” said Marcie Telander. “We are becoming and being.”<sup>28</sup> This could certainly be read as an attempt to distinguish Vinotok, with all its earnest attempts at creating something meaningful for its community, from events such as the Colorado Renaissance Festival, in which the artificial engagement of fantasy reigns supreme. The Renaissance Festival is not real, and knows it’s not real—that’s the fun of it. Vinotok, conversely, engages with myth and fiction in order to evoke something genuine for its participants; it takes itself very seriously, despite all the ludic trappings of carnival.

The altars are a good example of this. Constructed annually by volunteers, many of them artists, the altars are an aspect of Vinotok’s material culture saturated with meaning and symbolism. The Legends altar, for example, honors those in the community who have passed on. According to Martha Keene, this year’s creator of the Legends altar:

A lot of people make offerings at the Legends altar. We obviously have friends and families that are on that altar. And sometimes people leave a picture of someone they would like included on the altar. So it is one that I watched as I set it up. People go and just take a moment and have a moment of silence and you can just see them. They get to see the picture of their friend who was there, whether it was a ski patrolman or a young kid or a grandfather or whatever it was, and watched them take a moment. And it's become an extremely special altar.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Dorson, “Material Components in Celebration”, 55

<sup>28</sup> Marcie Telander, interview, August 11, 2023

<sup>29</sup> Martha Keene, interview, September 13, 2023

Scholarship on festivals is not limited to discussion and application of generalist theory, of course; many contemporary festival scholars have discussed the unique natures, struggles, and folkloric expressions of other modern American festivals. Many of these works speak to similar aspects of Vinotok and important considerations when approaching festivals as community-centric expressions of folklore. For example, Stoeltje and Bauman discuss an ongoing event in Luling, Texas: “The Watermelon Thump is not of great antiquity—it was first celebrated in 1954—but it is rooted in community and the seasonal cycle. It is, in fact, a first-fruits celebration, held on the last weekend in June when the first watermelons come in, and it is fashioned out of the same set of universal festival building blocks and transformations that people everywhere have used to construct their festivals.”<sup>30</sup> This is a good contemporary example of festival as cultural performance, relatively new in age but constructed from much older elements, and thus subject to academic folkloric inquiry. Vinotok intersects with such inquiry in similar ways.

Likewise, there are striking parallels between Vinotok and Winter Carnival in McCall, Idaho, studied by Lisa Gabbert, as well as illuminating differences. Most of these parallels are a result of the struggles these communities are facing, and the resulting context that the festivals take place in and are reacting to. In McCall, “[t]he entire region is replete with the discourse of crisis that comes with the restructuring of capital as it has transformed from logging town into elite resort.”<sup>31</sup> Change logging to mining and make the resort a ski resort, and this is Crested Butte. According to Martha Keene, whom I interviewed in the oldest miner’s bar still in Crested Butte:

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<sup>30</sup> Stoeltje and Bauman, “Community Festival and the Enactment of Modernity”, 160

<sup>31</sup> Gabbert, “Situating the Local by Inventing the Global”, 261

It's a tough town to live in. We have a lot of housing shortages, we're facing a lot of the problems that a lot of small towns have. That's why Vinotok is really important, because not only does our community come together and go a little crazy and let loose, it allows us to come together and honor each other and see each other and remind each other that our town has a real community. We are not for sale... it's tough, when resort towns grow and build and get bigger and you see housing getting bought up and turned into short term rentals and such. And you see your neighbors disappear because they can't afford it anymore.<sup>32</sup>

These communities are going through similar crises, but that discourse is resulting in different reactions and conclusions because of the contrasting nature and inception of the events. Winter Carnival, according to Gabbert, has a number of problems that are common to tourist productions, including not enough volunteers, prevalent burn out, and a community that's ambivalent to the event and the tourists it draws in. The town's chamber of commerce claims the event is economically beneficial, but most locals dislike the crowds and many local businesses claim they don't actually make any money from it. As Gabbert writes, "Residents breathe a sigh of relief when it is over."<sup>33</sup> These tourist-driven motivations and negative local reactions are things that Vinotok actively tries to *avoid*- Crested Butte is no stranger to tourism, its economic necessity and its many pitfalls. By happening in the fall, the "off-season" for the area, Vinotok is engineered to be for locals and by locals, and they want to keep it that way. While Vinotok endeavors not to exclude those that may have traveled and found themselves in town for the event, they intentionally don't market it either. Volunteers are asked to not post about it on social media, at least not until it's over. Word of mouth, a more limited and "natural" way of discussing

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<sup>32</sup> Martha Keene, interview, September 13, 2023

<sup>33</sup> Gabbert, "Situating the Local by Inventing the Global", 260

the event and inviting friends and family, is welcome, but the sort of publicity that would, and has in the past, drawn more crowds than the small town can handle is discouraged.

Despite the parallels between McCall and Crested Butte, the two festivals differ greatly in their intention and spirit, as well as how they engage with and negotiate with the issues facing the communities they are embedded in. While Winter Carnival fully leans into the tourist appeal, arguably at the expense of the local community, Vinotok actively pushes away its own tourist appeal, often openly criticizing the community issues caused by the reality of being a resort town. For example, both towns suffer from the following effect of resort development outlined by Gabbert: “people who work or live near resort areas often not only cannot afford the resort's luxuries, but also cannot afford to own property, so workers are bussed in from other counties or else live in resort-owned or subsidized housing. The result can be the creation of significant economic discrepancies between visitors and locals, as well as a transformation in the character of the location.”<sup>34</sup> While Winter Carnival endeavors to draw in tourist income to boost the economy, Vinotok is a site of local resistance, openly criticizing the issue: in 2019, the Great Grump was built to look like a tiny house, with the letters “V”, “R”, “B”, and “O” on each of its four walls. Looming over it stood a great monster holding a sign saying “FOR SALE”. When that Grump went up in flames, the sign burned away. The metal left behind, glowing red-hot from the bonfire, simply said, “SOLD”.

Another modern festival that must be addressed is Burning Man. There are a number of connections between Vinotok and Burning Man beyond the academic. A not-insignificant number of participants in one festival have participated in the other, and the culmination in a burning effigy has caused many to compare the two, even earning Vinotok the moniker “Little

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<sup>34</sup> Gabbert, “Situating the Local by Inventing the Global”, 262

Burning Man”. Most Vinotok festiversians take some umbrage with this name, especially given that many believe Burning Man itself was *inspired by* Vinotok and not the other way around. A story I heard from more than one source says that one of the Burning Man creators used to live in Crested Butte, and brought elements from Vinotok with him to the desert experience. While I cannot confirm or deny the veracity of this legend, it makes clear the assumed connection between the two events, as well as the position that Crested Butte locals take in considering their own, much smaller event to be in no way inferior to or a weak imitation of the much larger and better known festival; especially given that Vinotok originated earlier than Burning Man did.

The connections between the two can be found in smaller details as well. In this past Vinotok, for example, the Elders and Ancestors altar was originally created by local Crested Butte artists Carson West and Kyle Anderson as an art piece and installation for Burning Man. The hourglass central to the piece was timed to twenty-four hours, built in Crested Butte and then driven to the site of Burning Man. Once the sand ran out, the artist and his companions had arrived in the desert, and the art piece was installed in the Burning Man camp they were a part of. Then, upon its return to Crested Butte, the piece was repurposed into a Vinotok altar.

In terms of scholarship, however, comparisons between the two festivals can prove fruitful as well. Gilmore’s work on Burning Man provides a number of similarities between the events. Burning Man has a strict policy against vending and commodification. Aside from ice and coffee (the sales of which benefit local community organizations) and the entrance fee (which helps pay for the immense event itself) it sells nothing—no products, and no corporate sponsorship whatsoever.<sup>35</sup> This is similar to Vinotok, which sells nothing aside from entrance fees to events, which help pay for materials and space rentals, and feast tickets, which of course

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<sup>35</sup> Gilmore, “Embers, Dust, and Ashes”, 160-161

pay for the food. Seasonal Vinotok wine is also sold by the bottle, but that is essentially also a fundraising item for a volunteer-run, non-profit event. A visitor can't buy t-shirts with the logo, there are no tables with people selling "costumes" or souvenirs. The anti-commercialism belief/spirit runs strong through the participants of both of these events. Even the way that participants see the act of burning is the same—as a release of burdens, the inclusion of a personal sacrifice they want to burn, and to watch the old, the heavy, the painful go up in flames.<sup>36</sup>

There are notable differences, however. Burning Man is a pilgrimage to a different place entirely, where one is encouraged to transform. As such, the return to the mundane is much more pointed, and any continued transformation or connection with the festival community must be a conscious decision. In Vinotok, the town itself transforms: the place, the people, the wasteland, and the community. The return to the mundane is not heading home, but instead transforming that home back to its normal state. It's no wonder, then, that participants of Vinotok—especially the volunteers—feel that they naturally carry the festival with them year-round. It puts in roots, blooming annually, but is never truly gone. The community that exists during Vinotok is the same community that lives in Crested Butte during its tourist seasons, during mud season, on every day that is not Vinotok. Vinotok's social and communal meaning is thus much more pointed, more grounded, and more self-aware. This is not better or worse—it is simply different, because the context is different, and the community is not cyclically gathered and disseminated but rather continuously shaped and reshaped.

While this summarizes the scholarship I have engaged with in this work, it is worth noting that this is by no means the only scholarship which has been applied to Vinotok.

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<sup>36</sup> Gilmore, "Embers, Dust, and Ashes", 163

Throughout my fieldwork, I had many people involved with the festival suggest the works of academics, artists, and others, suggesting that I would find connections in these works to Vinotok, my research, and the core concepts behind the festival. For example, Isabel Russell referenced Robin Kimmerer's book *Braiding Sweetgrass*<sup>37</sup> as a great influence on the way in which she uses Vinotok to foster and engage with concepts of place-based indigeneity. Joe Bob Merritt, the builder of the Grump, was inspired by the work and philosophy of Martín Prechtel<sup>38</sup>, who sees art as conversation with the Divine.

Marcie Telander, the creator of Vinotok, shared with me a number of works she has gathered throughout the last 40 years. All but two of these were written after she co-created Vinotok—there were no academic examples or guides extant at the time she was designing Vinotok's initial events, which she did solely through the guidance and oral narratives of the old-timers. Now, however, she feels there are works which may help explain her goals for this annual event and its healing and ceremonial roots, and her intentions when initially gathering and implementing Vinotok's many ritualistic and mythic elements. Many of these works are academic, reflecting her own background in anthropology and as an eco-psychotherapist. According to her, the following is a casual selective bibliography that can give an idea of where Vinotok's original archetypes and stories were drawn from.

Concepts of embodied theology are expanded by the work of Christ and Plaskow<sup>39</sup>. Ecker's principles of a matriarchal aesthetic<sup>40</sup>, and the works building off of hers<sup>41</sup>, deepen Vinotok's original horizontal governance process and the matriarchal structure and elements of

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<sup>37</sup> Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*

<sup>38</sup> For example, his school "The Flowering Mountain", described on his website.

<sup>39</sup> Notably *Goddess and God in the World*.

<sup>40</sup> Ecker, *Feminist Aesthetics*

<sup>41</sup> Göttner-Abendroth, *The Dancing Goddess*



the Divine Feminine present in the festival. Likewise, the concept of the Divine Masculine, and Dionysian elements tied to the Green Man and his associated events, are reflected in the works of Datlow and Windling<sup>42</sup> and Strand<sup>43</sup>. Elements of Norse mythology and tradition, including the reading of runes, are further explained in Paxson<sup>44</sup> and Thorsson<sup>45</sup>; Ehrenreich provides broader historical cultural lenses on ecstasy, ritual, and dance<sup>46</sup> as seen in the Vinotok celebrations.

Overall, the body of work Marcie supplied me with blends anthropology, folklore, and mythology, and illuminates many of the academic and popular inspirations behind key symbolic elements in Vinotok.

## Reflection

This project, as with any undertaking, had its own unique strengths and weaknesses. The creation of a documentary was a challenge quite different from the challenges of ethnographic fieldwork and the creation of this paper; as such, I learned quite a bit about the documentary-making process alongside the ethnographic process. If I'm most cognizant of anything, here at the end of this work, it is that I have yet to truly get across the depth of lived experience that went into these artefacts. When I read through my field notes in search of pithy quotes or important elements, I am reminded all over again of how a work such as this can only scratch the surface of my experience, never mind anybody else's. Even the documentary—vibrant in color, sound, and movement—offers only a stolen glimpse of a week spent living, breathing, and

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<sup>42</sup> Datlow and Windling, *The Green Man*

<sup>43</sup> Strand, *The Flowering Wand*

<sup>44</sup> Paxson, *Taking Up the Runes*

<sup>45</sup> Thorsson, *Futhark*

<sup>46</sup> Ehrenreich, *Dancing in the Streets*

connecting with an event now long since passed. It is my hope that this glimpse is still useful in preserving and presenting impactful elements of the festival.

The documentary is, I feel, an approachable end result of my research, but it came with no small number of challenges. Fieldwork and filming were a constant balancing act for the duration of Vinotok. For example, Kochevar's—the oldest bar in Crested Butte—is a location laden with history and local importance. From a folkloric perspective, such a location seems like a great atmosphere in which to meet and interview people in; however, Kochevar's was just an absolutely lousy place to film. The bar is dark, cramped, and loud, and while I filmed an interview and multiple events there, the footage is so subpar on both an audio and visual front that I wound up discarding most of it.

Working with technology is never free of strife, of course, no matter how prepared one endeavors to be. A number of technological failures happened in the process of filming, whether I realized those mistakes at the time or months later while putting together the documentary. My interview of Roman, the outgoing Green Man, wound up having no sound at all; my camera died in the middle of my interview with Joe Bob Merritt, the Grump Master, resulting in lost footage we couldn't recall after I had taken the time to set up the camera once more with my backup battery; there were constant quality concerns with filming in dim interior spaces or outdoor spaces at night; the camera failed to record one of the largest mumming events, due to an unnoticed user error; and, most recently, I experienced the pain of putting the entire edited documentary together and then finding it nearly impossible to export in a way that reflects the careful editing I spent months fine-tuning. These challenges were not insurmountable, but they were for the most part unexpected, cropping up even when I endeavored to be prepared for any

eventuality. Filming during the festival had a physical impact on me as well—my shoulders felt like steel cords after carrying and holding up the cameras and other equipment for a full week.

Similar to that, it was difficult to balance my technology needs with my busy participation and filming schedule. A quote from my field notes on the last day of the festival reads: “Some people have enough time to stop for hours in one location and capture the perfect footage. I don’t. I shoot b-roll shots for about 15 seconds and stay for not much longer than that. There’s just too much to shoot and do and too little time.” That constant pressure forced me to make quick decisions at any given moment, ones that I hoped I would not regret later during the editing process; for the most part, this ended up fine, but the imperfections of such a rushed but lengthy event linger in the final product regardless.

This pressure, however, also resulted in some memorable experiences. For example, towards the end of the festival week I needed to stay for an hour or so at a local coffee shop to charge my camera’s batteries and move footage from the camera’s SD card onto my computer, so that I had both battery charge and space to film the important events to come. All of the outlets at the coffee shop were full and there wasn’t a single table open, but a kind stranger offered me a seat at his table, and another offered an outlet she had been using. The kindness of strangers quite literally made this project possible; to me, this simple occurrence reflects the wider, generous community I encountered in the valley.

This project brought its own joys as well. Showcasing the vibrant sights and sounds that would otherwise be so difficult to capture on paper is one of the largest strengths of choosing a documentary format. I feel that I was able to share a final product with my audience that comes closer to the full experience of Vinotok; not only that, but the documentary quite literally documents the festival and its participants as they existed in this past year, archiving these events

and traditions for any future audience to see, hear, and hopefully, understand. Likewise, the interviews provided so many interesting perspectives and thoughts from people willing to open up to me about different aspects of the festival and how it impacts their own lives. Overall, it felt like the documentary was both a creative and tangible way to involve myself in this research and the community. I learned a great deal of valuable filmography skills as well as undertaking my first large-scale ethnographic research project. Despite the challenges of this project, I have no regrets about the selection of my subject, my decision about the format of this terminal project, or the results, however imperfect.

I also learned a great deal about Vinotok; although, not all of it was new. Coming into this research, I myself was by no means a complete outsider to this event and the surrounding community. Before matriculating at the University of Oregon, I lived for four years in Gunnison, Crested Butte's slightly larger neighbor in the valley. Well before applying for the graduate program at UO, I attended the Vinotok passion plays and Grump burnings in 2018 and 2019. As such, I found myself to be both emic and etic to this research—emic because I was already familiar with the event and the wider valley community, and etic because of a newly developed academic lens and not knowing any of the interviewees personally prior to the documentary work. I feel that this blend worked well for me. The prior knowledge and understanding I brought helped ease my integration into the Vinotok community, as it was easier for people to both trust my motivations and understand my intentions once they knew that I was a former community member. However, I felt that my newly acquired academic background encouraged a depth of inquiry I had not brought to the event before, and allowed me to really dig into some core elements that I had previously taken for granted or not known of at all. In the end, I can only really speak with any honesty to the impact this research had on myself. I learned so much, not

just about the festival, but also about my own research goals, the inquiries and interactions I find most rewarding. Even so, hopefully this project will also positively impact the community, by providing documentation of a festival that so many of them hold dear.

As former Earth Dragon Eva Paul and I were discussing all of the hard work and effort the Vinotok volunteers undertake in order to make the festival happen, as well as endeavor to make the festival one that is both inclusive of and understood by the wider Crested Butte community, she said, “people don't see that part of it. People don't see how much we have committed to it, and really what goes into it. So I think I'm really excited that you're doing this.”<sup>47</sup> To many I spoke to, this documentary represented a way to share what they found worthwhile and fulfilling about a festival that to others—even in their own community—may seem frivolous, strange, or difficult to engage with. It is my hope that the documentary might rise to this occasion in some fashion, even if only to showcase the passion and welcoming spirit that the participants bring to the festival.

Being one of those participants myself, and not solely a researcher, this fieldwork allowed me to apply both emotional investment as well as academic application to what might otherwise be simple interactions. A light conversation between myself and another volunteer on a walk through town, a story of past festivals told while setting up for an event, jokes made during volunteer meetings—all of these small experiences added up to a meaningful understanding of the way in which the festival shapes and is shaped by its participants. This method of participant-observation served me well during this project, and I would choose to do it again at any given opportunity. By the final clean-up, I was receiving hugs from people that were strangers to me a week ago, but now felt like close friends. The connection and sense of

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<sup>47</sup> Eva Paul, interview, September 11, 2023

community that I (and all of us) felt were certainly tightly forged through so much time spent working together.

Overall, this experience was a positive one, and I learned a great deal across many areas. Researching such an interesting event and meeting so many welcoming people was an experience I will not soon forget. I remain hopeful that the documentary will be an artefact that the community appreciates—as the result of my work and theirs—and can value for many years to come.

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