Recasting the Bygone Witch

Representations of Lesser-Known Witches in Popular Culture

Edited by

Aíne Norris

Old Dominion University

Mariaelena DiBenigno

William & Mary

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United States

In the rest of the world:
Vernon Press
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,
Malaga, 29006
Spain

Series in Critical Media Studies

ISBN: 979-8-8819-0440-1

Cover design by Vernon Press. Background image by Pexels via Pixabay.

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To the bygone witches. May your stories prevail.

Introduction
The Witch of Pungo

Atop a modest stone platform, a few yards from a busy intersection in Virginia Beach, Virginia, on the east coast of the United States of America (U.S.A.), stands a statue of a woman. The statue depicts her in a long dress with a shawl around her shoulders and carrying a bundle of rosemary wrapped in fabric. A raccoon stands next to her on its back legs, its paw resting on the folds of her long skirt in a greeting reminiscent of a dog to its owner. This statue honors Grace Sherwood, known colloquially as The Witch of Pungo, the last person convicted of witchcraft in the Commonwealth of Virginia. In the early 1700s, Sherwood was targeted for her property and unconventional lifestyle—familiar accusations in witchcraft trials. Upon her arrest, Sherwood was sentenced to trial by "ducking," a form of torture where an accused witch was deemed innocent if she drowned in a body of water and guilty if she floated or swam. Though Sherwood floated and was convicted, a second trial overturned the verdict, and she was later freed. The statue commemorates the official clearing of her name by former Governor of Virginia, Tim Kaine, in 2006. Sherwood's informal pardon came nearly 300 years after her trial.[1] At face value, the statue is a powerful symbol of public redemption.

However, Sherwood remains perpetually on trial, as her name is invoked night after night in a public reenactment titled *Cry Witch*, produced as an evening program in the nearby history museum, Colonial Williamsburg.[2] Attendees purchase tickets and enter a dimly lit courtroom, where they are assigned a role as jury member or townsperson, listening to actors perform recreated testimony based on surviving historic transcripts of Sherwood's trial. Visitors do not know until they arrive which representation of Sherwood will appear for their entertainment; she might be weepy and remorseful one night and then stubborn and unrepentant the next. At each reenactment, Sherwood's mock trial ends with visitors casting their verdict on her guilt or innocence. After the program is over, the actors provide a brief contextualization of Sherwood's life and trial in a boilerplate statement to delicately protect the artistic interpretation. Despite her posthumous pardon and decades of

[1] "Convicted Witch Pardoned 300 Years after Trial," July 11, 2006, NBC News, https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna13807874.

[2] "Evening Program: Cry Witch," Colonial Williamsburg, 2024, https://www.colonialwilliamsburg.org/events/cry-witch/.

thoughtful scholarship and public history work around the circumstances of her accusations, Sherwood remains doomed to eternal trial as a witch for entertainment, curiosity, and profit, markedly similar to her life in 1698, which became a continual cycle of allegations, trials, and misery.

As Virginians, we were long familiar with Sherwood's story and shared a mutual wariness for her tarnished public image. We realized that The Witch of Pungo is but one example of the continued, purposeful othering of a witchlike figure. From Sherwood's life story, we became captivated by witches or witchlike figures who were lesser-known among public audiences and often relegated to local ghost tours or regional lore. Sherwood's complicated narratives also offer an opportunity to examine the intersection of public history and bygone narratives. Contemporary scholars and consumers alike might glimpse what is possible when narratives are recast for accuracy and respect versus the immense ramifications of continued and deliberate fictionalization. Sherwood's story brought us together and continually serves as the starting point for this collection.

As we write this introduction in 2025, we find evidence of crucial sociohistorical mention of accused witches in headlines around the world, from a proposed resolution in the U.S. state of Maryland to formally exonerate multiple women accused of witchcraft and punished in the seventeenth century[3] to an officially registered Scottish tartan memorializing all who suffered or were persecuted under Scotland's Witchcraft Act from 1563-1736, its dark colors representing the ashes of those burnt in fatal fire.[4] Like Sherwood, accused witches all over the world are the subjects of sustained recognition *and* vindication centuries after their trials. Though some of their stories are instantly recognizable, such as the victims of Salem, Massachusetts, U.S.A., who were first exonerated in 1711, with the last, Elizabeth Johnson, cleared in 2022,[5] many other accused witches are bygone, with their voices and stories lost or revised by time and/or community lore.

In our respective scholarship, witches often come in and out of focus. We explore the weird, uncanny, and unknown—often the outer and othered edges of society in the U.S.A. and beyond—and we know we are not the only ones

[3] Alexander Nazaryan, "Witches Are Having a Cultural Moment. Some States Are Taking Up Their Cause," Style, *New York Times*, March 18, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/18/style/maryland-witches.html.

[4] The Scottish Register of Tartans, "Tartan Details - Witches of Scotland," January 2025, https://www.tartanregister.gov.uk/tartanDetails?ref=14651.

[5] Vimal Patel, "Last Conviction in Salem Witch Trials Is Cleared 329 Years Later," U.S., *New York Times*, July 31, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/31/us/elizabeth-johnson-witchcraft-exoneration.html.

with such interests. Witches are everywhere—in artwork, photography, film, politics, museums, novels, social media and film, in legal and historical records, in curricula and music, and their constant popularity as both historical figures and as cultural touchstones reveals much about a society's fears and desires. However, we often see the same stories told repeatedly in the U.S.A.: the aforementioned Salem and the novel-turned-movie, *The Witches of Eastwick*; the biographies of Isobel Gowdie and Aleister Crowley; and television shows like *Bewitched* and *American Horror Story: Coven*. Who or what are we missing in the fog of well-known witches? How do we amplify the forgotten or bygone witch?

To answer these questions, we organized a 2023 Northeast Modern Language Association (NeMLA) panel on lesser-known witches as a means to gauge interest in the topic. We purposely chose the descriptor "bygone" to stress how the witch remains an ancient, gnarled archetype, but many fascinating witches, fictional and otherwise, are unremembered, outdated, and unpreserved. "Bygone" evokes the vanished, faded, and antiquated—sometimes a deliberate descriptor applied to assert gendered dominance. Our call for papers focused on the reclamation of forgotten persons and practices, as well as the recognition that "witches" are frequently appropriated to maintain social power. As the conference approached, we received enough quality interest to justify a second, consecutive panel. It was clear that people had something to say about bygone witches. The 2024 NeMLA experience echoed the initial conference, as did our most recent panels in 2025. Time after time, scholars from myriad disciplines have excitedly shown up to discuss, analyze, and put forward new considerations about witchcraft, past and present. Through these shared, public presentations, we forged new relationships and connected topics together, noting the overlap of biography and theme across an immense, interdisciplinary pool of writing and scholarship about historic and contemporary witchcraft. We noted the usage of *witch* referents and how often they relied on a deep contextual and cultural awareness that signifies and symbolizes the witch and witchcraft over generations. As a result of our engagement with this scholarly collective, we decided to compile the ongoing work to extend and expand our conversations.

In this collection, scholars from diverse fields explore not only the witch referent but also the witch in practice. Where do we see the witch operating in contemporary and historical moments? What does the witch help us understand about gender? Why do we recognize some witches, and why have others fallen into obscurity, suffered from revisionist history, or been denied the spotlight? And if witches really are "having a cultural moment," as asserted by *The New York Times* in March 2025, will this rekindled popularity help ameliorate the witch out of the darkness in our collective memory? How can we

recast and reorient away from stereotypical and inaccurate witch representation? *Recasting the Bygone Witch: Representations of Lesser-Known Witches in Popular Culture* assembles and preserves recent scholarship on individual and collective representations of witches whom we do not know. Yet.

Recasting as methodology

In witchcraft practice and culture, *casting* is often associated with sacred space and ritual. A practitioner or group consecrates a space by casting a sacred circle, a ritualistic means of cleansing negative energy that often invokes the elements, nature, or ancestors for protection. Casting is also associated with spellwork, part of the ritualistic moment in which intention is directed or emitted toward a target or goal. Casting is sacred and charged with intention, even among varied practices or types of witchcraft or spiritualism. More than anything, casting is not taken lightly within the community and typically requires knowledge and experience for a successful ritual.

When considering the framework for this collection, we continually came back to the notion and practice of casting, both in the aforementioned practice and as a means to record, reconstruct, and reclaim. Many of the bygone figures represented in this collection have been erased by history, collective memory, public perception, storytelling, or other means of human-centered transformation. By *recasting* their narratives, we assemble the tradition and representation of lesser-known witches, approaching how their lives and stories endured and might inform scholarship, practice, and preservation. We specifically sought portrayals of bygone and lesser-known witches, knowing that their stories and the ways they are shared are overshadowed by well-known narratives. Our focus was not to create a new hierarchy of preservation, but to add to the larger witch compendium, shining a light on unconventionality and obscurity in literature, television, film, music, history, popular culture, and lore.

Through this collection's discussion and examination, we recast the narratives and bind them together as steadfast manifestations of social power and endurance. The bygone witch may not always be addressed as such, nor does she always show up in a black hat, but her power lingers and shapes our public and popular history. Hers is a story worth telling.

Collection scope and associated scholarship

There is no shortage of literature regarding witchcraft or examples of witches in popular culture. Many present-day conversations about witches and witchcraft are provoked from places of knowledge-seeking, community, and a sustained effort to correct stereotypical depictions of a complex collective that is concurrently deeply historical and trailblazingly contemporary. Witches

remain a prevalent topic among academic and nonacademic audiences. For example, when examining the MLA International Bibliography and WorldCat databases for nonfiction monographs and edited collections published between the years 2000 and 2023, a search using the queries "witch AND witchcraft AND witches" produced results in the thousands. Predominantly, results are confined by geography, culture, and time period and in many cases, single-authored or containing analysis limited to one methodology. For example, many results are place-based studies featuring Salem, such as *Before Salem: Witch Hunting in the Connecticut River Valley, 1647-1663*. Other analyses also remain bound by specific cultural references, with titles like *Witchcraft and Adolescence in American Popular Culture: Teen Witches*. Finally, time period remains a primary method for analysis, with titles such as *The Appearance of Witchcraft: Print and Visual Culture in Sixteenth-Century Europe*.[6]

Myriad scholars and practitioners carefully laid the foundation on which our collection rests, their explorations of witchcraft serving as historic guides and frameworks to further propel breakaway conversations of the bygone witch. Like witchcraft as a practice, this collection is communal, both in development and content and when considering its place within an established canon used by scholars, students, practitioners, and anyone curious about witchcraft.

We sought to create an interdisciplinary and multifaceted collection to explore new connections and new constructions of the bygone witch, while simultaneously analyzing the power of the label *witch* as both a self-appointed status with multitudes of practice and community layers, as well as a nonconsensual designation historically used to demean or endanger. In this

[6] Complementary academic titles include John Demos, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Jonathan Berry and Owen Davies, eds., *Palgrave Advances in Witchcraft Historiography*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Emerson Baker, *A Storm of Witchcraft: The Salem Trials and the American Experience,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Ronald Hutton, *The Witch: A History of Fear, from Ancient Times to the Present*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017); *Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic* book series (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008-2025); *New Perspectives on Witchcraft, Magic and Demonology,* series (New York: Routledge, 2001). Complementary popular titles include Silvia Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*, (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2018); Pam Grossman, *Waking the Witch: Reflections on Women, Magic, and Power*, (New York: Gallery Books, 2020); Malcolm Gaskill, *The Ruin of All Witches: Life and Death in the New World*, (New York: Knopf, 2022); Monica Chollet, *In Defense of Witches: The Legacy of the Witch Hunts and Why Women Are Still on Trial*, trans. Sophie R. Lewis, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2022); Allyson Shaw, *Ashes and Stones: A Journey Through Scotland in Search of Women Hunted as Witches*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2023); and Brydie Kosmina, *Feminist Afterlives of the Witch: Popular Culture, Memory, Activism*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2023).

endeavor, there are many contexts at work within this collection: social, racial, cultural, national, political, and historical. By uniting these diverse chapters in one title, we strive to encourage innovative links among scholars doing similar work with different tools. We also immediately recognized how the year 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic affected several of these essays; many authors chose to confront social and racial trauma in their choice of community engagement, pedagogical method, and commitment to access and activism. The assembled texts, scholarship, public histories, and other artifacts serve as guideposts in our pursuit of the bygone witch, with scholars working in interdisciplinary dimensions worldwide.

A historic basis

Movements and scholarship around witchcraft were often bundled chronologically to organize the immense ground covered within this collection. Like other scholars in the field, the dates 1486 and 1597 are two concrete points in our timeline, marking the publications of *Malleus Maleficarum*, or *The Hammer of Witches*, by Heinrich Kramer[7] and *Daemonologie*[8] by King James I of England.[9] These two texts are cited countlessly as the cradles of witch hysteria—first in the British Isles during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and then influencing a similar movement across the Atlantic Ocean in Salem. *Malleus Maleficarum*, despite generating division within the Roman Catholic Church, served as an early manual for prosecuting witchcraft using torture tactics, laying the groundwork to establish the existence of witchcraft and outlining the ways in which witches are lured by the Devil to do his bidding, ultimately ending with suggested methods to evoke confessions from the accused. *Malleus Maleficarum* is often paired theoretically with *Daemonologie* as explanatory frameworks for subsequent centuries of witch hunting and death centered around allegations of magic, witchcraft, and necromancy. We reference these texts not only as demonstrations of the power given to witch hunting in the British Isles, but as manifestations of dangerous, enduring power that influenced generations of witchcraft fear, lore, and persecution. When considering James I's text, for example, it is not enough to read it as a standalone treatise against witchcraft, but as a doctrine with a profound ripple effect that directly influenced witch-hunting manuals, procedures, and trials, many of which resulted in gruesome public executions. It also demonstrates witchcraft's profound conceptual hold upon British society, with *Daemonologie*

[7] Heinrich Godfrey Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. Montague Summers, (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2011).

[8] Donald Tyson, *The Demonology of King James I: Includes the Original Text of Daemonologie and News from Scotland*, 1. ed., 1. Print, (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn, 2011).

[9] King James VI of Scotland from 1567 and James I of England from 1603.

produced and published more than a decade before the first King James Version of the Christian Bible.[10] Many witchcraft scholars link these two formative texts as conduits for witch hysteria, including British historian Suzannah Lipscomb, whose 2015 documentary series *Witch Hunt: A Century of Murder* not only discusses the importance of Kramer and James I on witch hysteria in the British Isles,[11] but traces their influence on architects of similar tortures, such as Matthew Hopkins, Witch-Finder General, who cited the King's work in *The Discovery of Witches*.[12] Hopkins was directly involved in the torture, trials, and deaths of 300 people,[13] using the texts that came before him as approvals and manuals supporting his methods. For this collection, we examine the collective power of these texts in contemporary conversation alongside scholarship like Lipscomb's for a victim-focused, accessible approach. We wanted to pair history with heart.

This overview does not assert that Kramer and King James I are the most important historic considerations for witchcraft scholarship but, for the purposes of this collection on the bygone witch, their work is undoubtedly influential and wide-reaching in influence and can be found both directly and indirectly throughout the work of the scholars in the following pages, often as men employ *witch* as a means to other or control sociocultural conventions. Finally, make no mistake: though their work trickles down throughout history into folklore, dogma, and sociopolitical treatment of persons accused of witchcraft, this collection was primarily influenced and shaped not by the words of Kramer or King James I, but by scholars who dare to expose these historic texts as dangerous, misogynistic, and enduring in their attacks against social outsiders, particularly women. To truly recast the bygone witch, scholars must set these historic texts aflame using long-awaited contextualization and truth.

Early America

Like others, we are not immune to the allure of Salem and its place in America's historic collective memory, or to the writings that came just before the famous witch hysteria, such as Cotton Mather's *Memorable Providences, Relating to*

[10] "1611 Publication of the *King James Bible* | Christian History Magazine," *Christian History Institute,* https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/publication-of-kjb.

[11] *Suzannah Lipscomb* (blog), "Witch-Hunt: A Century of Murder," July 6, 2023, https://suzannahlipscomb.com/television/presenter/witch-hunt-a-century-of-murder/.

[12] Matthew Hopkins, "The Discovery of Witches," Project Gutenberg, 2004, https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/14015/pg14015-images.html.

[13] Ellen Castelow, "Matthew Hopkins, Witch-Finder General," Historic UK, https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/Matthew-Hopkins-WitchFinder-General/.

Witchcrafts and Possessions of 1689 that set the stage for the trials, stating first that settlers not only had to fear "the Wigwams of Indians, where the Pagan Powaws [sic] often raise their masters in the shapes of Bears and Snakes and Fires," but also evil spirits, devils, and witches in the houses of Christians. In addition to its blatant colonialism, Mather's text, published a few years before the Salem trials, demonstrates the sustained fear of witchcraft infiltrating households in New England through its families and its workers, and also details tortures appropriate to test the accused.[14] Thus, we continually find ourselves both drawn to Salem and also consciously working against its borders to ensure a balanced approach to witchcraft in America and beyond. Though Salem's witch hysteria is not a chapter focus within this collection, its legacy is a constant thread and the ways in which Salem works to make amends for its past while celebrating its present are exemplary, offering hope and precedent for many of the bygone stories within these pages. Countless texts and collections about Salem are available for study or entertainment, but it is the city's contemporary contributions to public history that were most moving when planning this collection, as we found ourselves listing landmarks alongside literature. Contemporarily, Salem engages in abiding community projects to make public amends and ensure its victims are not bygone today or tomorrow. In a shady spot on Liberty Street is a simple memorial flanked by low stone benches, each bearing the name of a victim, their means of execution, and death date, with a stone tablet etched with court transcripts at the entrance. The monument was dedicated in 1992 by Elie Wiesel, who stated, "We still have our Salems."[15] The benches are often marked with flowers, stones, and coins, with visitors slowly walking the memorial's winding path to read each name. A similar memorial was dedicated in 2017 at Proctor's Ledge in Salem, the purported place where 19 innocent people were hanged.[16] These memorials and their accompanying public apologies were foundational to our early discussions of the bygone witch (see figure. 0.1).

[14] "Cotton Mather's Memorable Providences, Relating to Witchcrafts and Possessions (1689)," http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/salem/ASA_MATH.HTM.

[15] "Witch Trials Memorial," Salem Witch Museum, https://salemwitchmuseum.com/locations/witch-trials-memorial/.

[16] "Proctor's Ledge Memorial," Salem Witch Museum, https://salemwitchmuseum.com/locations/proctors-ledge-memorial/.

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About the Contributors

Corvin Bittner is working on their Ph.D. project in New English Literatures and Cultural Studies at the University of Augsburg, where they also completed their BA and MA. In their Ph.D. project with the working title "Stealing Time, Making Time: Queer Temporality and Time Travel in Contemporary Literature" they endeavor an intersectional queer reading of time travel narratives by and about women and queer people that challenge the chrononormative view of time as progressive and linear. Such a reading seeks to investigate how the natural phenomenon of time passing is socially constructed to uphold a white supremacist, capitalist, cisheteropatriarchal system.

Debra Bourdeau is Vice Provost of Online Learning and Educational Innovation and Associate Teaching Professor of English and Technical Communication at Missouri University of Science and Technology. She earned a Ph.D. in English at the University of Georgia where she specialized in 17th- and 18th-century British literature with a concentration on William Blake. Her current work focuses on narrative elements in 18th- and 19th-century engraving series, specifically those by William Hogarth. She is co-editor of On Second Thought: Updating the Eighteenth-Century Text. Debra has also served as the principal investigator for a National Science Foundation grant that blends STEM technical knowledge with humanities habits of mind to produce graduates who are deep critical thinkers and creative problem solvers.

Khirsten L. Doolan is currently an assistant professor at Northwestern State University of Louisiana in the Department of English, Languages, and Cultural Studies. They received their Ph.D. from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette in Literary and Cultural Studies where much of their work centered southern queerness and queer kinships. Their research interests are an extension of that work, focusing primarily on queer kinships and acts of queer creation from a smaller community level up to literary canons through a wide array of both traditional and digital medias. Currently, their research focuses on the act of queer creation as acts of survival, sanctuary, and optimism amid an increasingly hostile sociopolitical climate. Their latest publications embody this research in a myriad of ways, such as within viral digital aesthetics and queer pop culture.

Marion Tempest Grant (she/her) is a Ph.D. candidate in the Communications and Culture program at York University in Toronto, Canada. Her research explores British handicraft guilds, women's work, and the Arts and Crafts movement. Her broader interests include art history, women's history, digital humanities, visual culture, and the periodical press.

Candace Ursula Grissom is an Adjunct Instructor of English at the University of North Georgia. She holds a Ph.D. in English from Middle Tennessee State University, an MFA in Creative Writing from Sewanee: The University of the South, and a JD in Law from Samford University. She is the author of *Fitzgerald & Hemingway on Film: A Critical Study of the Adaptations 1924-2013* from McFarland Press among many other publications and conference presentations.

Alex Hall is a Ph.D. student at the Women and Gender Studies Institute at the University of Toronto. She is the creator of Lezzie Borden (@lezzie_borden), an Instagram archive dedicated to queer women in horror. With a background in cinema studies, her interdisciplinary, theoretical research concentrates on the relationship between (counter) archives, horror studies, and the aesthetics around monstrosity and the queer female body in moving image art. Other research interests include critical race studies, glitch aesthetics, death studies, and feminist ecomedia. She has work in *Monstrum*, and *Somatechnics,* and forthcoming in *Mai: Feminism & Visual Culture*, and the edited collection *Weird Sisters*.

Sandra Huber is a writer, researcher, and educator. She teaches in Interdisciplinary Studies and Art Education at Concordia University and holds a Ph.D. in Interdisciplinary Humanities. Her work focuses on night knowledges, such as witchcraft, sleep, spirits, and scent, across and between the areas of feminist material culture, pedagogy, ritual, performance, poetics, and contemporary art. sandrahuber.com.

Kara McCabe teaches in the Honors Program at Emerson College. She earned her Ph.D. from Tufts University where she studied the dramatization of witchcraft in early modern theater. Her current work is focused on the depiction of occult epistemologies and the material culture that accompanies their practice. Kara's current book project, Staged Magic, re-examines representations of English witchcraft trials in the 16th and early 17th centuries through both "scientific" texts and stage dramas by writers such as Reginald Scot and Thomas Middleton.

Sara A. Rich comes from a lengthy (and lengthening) line of "Rich witches and Rich bitches" and is a proud citizen of the Waccamaw Indian People. She is formerly Assistant Professor of Honors and Interdisciplinary Studies at Coastal Carolina University and is currently Associate Professor of Theory and History of Art and Design at the Rhode Island School of Design. Sara is a maritime archaeologist, art historian, artist, and author of speculative fiction, whose recent scholarship includes essays in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, *Heritage*, and *Contemporary Philosophy for Maritime Archaeology* (which she also co-edited). Her most recent books include *Mushroom* (in the Bloomsbury

series, Object Lessons), *Shipwreck Hauntography: Underwater Ruins and the Uncanny* (in the Amsterdam University Press series, Maritime Humanities, 1400-1800), and *Closer to Dust* (Punctum). She lives with two big dogs, a black cat, and a philosopher in a little blue house in the swamp.

Julija Šuligoj is a Ph.D. candidate in Humanities and Social Sciences - Historiography at the University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Arts. In her Ph.D. thesis, she delves deeper into the topic of Slovenian female mountaineers, a subject she also explored in her master's thesis. Her focus is on gender roles within the context of this elite sport. Women's history, gender history, and 20th-century history are her preferred areas of study. She is also interested in other topics, such as the history of education for people with visual impairments in Slovenia. She publishes in various academic journals and popular science newsletters, addressing mountaineering topics, including in *Planinski vestnik*.

Yaochong Joe Yang holds a Ph.D from Trent University. His research concerns apocalypse and ideology in gaming, specifically on a structural level. His latest research concerns the deployment of game logics in noninteractive narratives.

Giovanni Tagliamonte is a Game Designer and Software Developer with a Master's Degree from the Cologne University of Applied Sciences. His research interests lie in the ways culture and history shape media and reflect back onto the spaces we live in. He is currently working on a mystery adventure game Fey: Distant Daydream.

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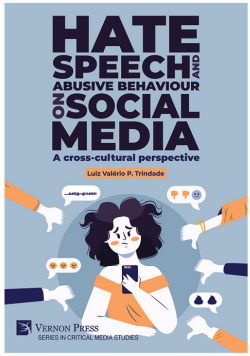

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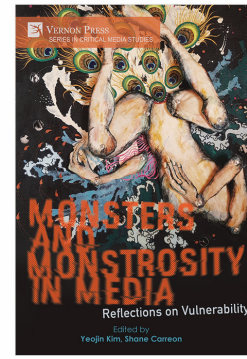

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