

Recasting the Bygone Witch

Representations of Lesser-Known Witches in Popular Culture

Edited by

Aíne Norris

Old Dominion University

Mariaelena DiBenigno

William & Mary

Series in Critical Media Studies



VERNON PRESS

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www.vernonpress.com

In the Americas:

Vernon Press
1000 N West Street, Suite 1200,
Wilmington, Delaware 19801
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

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Contents

List of Figures	v
Introduction: The Witch of Pungo	xi
Case studies	1
Chapter One	
“Goddaughter of a witch and sister to a fairy”: Pamela Colman Smith, representation of the woman mystic, and the periodical press in the early twentieth century	3
Marion Tempest Grant	
<i>York University, Toronto, Canada</i>	
Chapter Two	
Professional witch: Sybil Leek and the rise of public witchcraft	27
Candace U. Grissom	
<i>University of North Georgia</i>	
Chapter Three	
The Children and <i>The Wormwood Star</i> : Marjorie Cameron’s reproductive collaborations with the goddess Babalon	49
Sandra Huber	
<i>Concordia University</i>	
Chapter Four	
The Red Heels Affair: Women in politics, modern-day witches?	73
Julija Šuligoj	
<i>University of Ljubljana</i>	
Literary and visual analysis	99
Chapter Five	
Witchy women and subversive sisterhood: From Hogarth’s Harlot to Blake’s <i>Whore of Babylon</i>	101
Debra Bourdeau	
<i>Missouri University of Science and Technology</i>	

Chapter Six	
The complicated craft of <i>The Witch</i>	129
Kara McCabe	
<i>Emerson College</i>	
Chapter Seven	
The work of a witch: flourishing in the queer joy of fulfilling labor in Ellen Galford's <i>The Fires of Bride</i>	151
Corvin Bittner	
<i>University of Augsburg</i>	
Chapter Eight	
'The witched Sycorax': Classrooms as covens for anti-colonial demonology	173
Sara A. Rich	
<i>Rhode Island School of Design</i>	
Popular culture	201
Chapter Nine	
The mechanical witch: Playing the witch	203
Yaochong Joe Yang	
<i>Trent University</i>	
Giovanni Tagliamonte	
<i>Independent Scholar</i>	
Chapter Ten	
"And they were broommates": Sapphic WitchTok and its effects on practice and representation	225
Khirsten Doolan	
<i>Northwestern State University of Louisiana</i>	
Chapter Eleven	
Rotten milk, poisoned bodies: The vibrant matter of the necrotic witch in <i>Hagazussa: A Heathen's Curse</i>	247
Alex Hall	
<i>Women and Gender Studies Institute, University of Toronto</i>	
Conclusion	271
About the Contributors	275
Index	279

List of Figures

Figure 0.1.	Salem witch trials memorial bench for Giles Corey, who was executed by pressing in 1692. Photo by Áine Norris, 2022.	xix
Figure 0.2.	Grace Sherwood statue, Virginia Beach, Virginia. Photo by Áine Norris, 2023.	xxvii
Figure 1.1.	Advertisement for Gelukiezanger, <i>The Green Sheaf</i> , no. 6, 1903. Image courtesy of Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library, Museums and Press.	6
Figure 1.2.	“The Town,” <i>The Green Sheaf</i> , no. 12., 1904.	12
Figure 1.3.	Untitled [Once in a Dream], <i>The Green Sheaf</i> , no 2., 1903. Image courtesy of Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library, Museums and Press.	19
Figure 3.1.	Queen of the Night, Burney Relief, fired clay, 49.5 x 4.8 x 37 cm, Old Babylonian (Southern Iraq), British Museum, London, UK, 19 th century BC–18 th century BC. © Trustees of the British Museum.	52
Figure 3.2.	Marjorie Cameron in the Beaumont desert, circa 1952. Courtesy of the Cameron-Parsons Foundation, Santa Monica.	57
Figure 3.3.	Marjorie Cameron, untitled (peyote vision), ink, paint on paper, 44. 5 x 58 cm, 1955. Courtesy of the Cameron-Parsons Foundation, Santa Monica.	58
Figure 3.4.	Marjorie Cameron and Jack Parsons, <i>Songs for the Witch Woman</i> , ink on paper, 1951–55. Courtesy of the Cameron-Parsons Foundation, Santa Monica.	61
Figure 5.1.	<i>A Harlot's Progress</i> , Plate 3 (William Hogarth, 1732), Metropolitan Museum of Art Open Access.	106
Figure 5.2.	Detail from <i>A Harlot's Progress</i> , Plate 3 (William Hogarth, 1732), Metropolitan Museum of Art Open Access.	107
Figure 5.3.	Detail from <i>A Harlot's Progress</i> , Plate 3 (William Hogarth, 1732), Metropolitan Museum of Art Open Access.	111
Figure 5.4.	Detail from <i>A Harlot's Progress</i> , Plate 3 (William Hogarth, 1732), Metropolitan Museum of Art Open Access.	112
Figure 5.5.	<i>A Harlot's Progress</i> , Plate 1, (William Hogarth, 1732), Metropolitan Museum of Art Open Access.	115
Figure 5.6.	<i>Visitation</i> (Raphael, 1517) {{PD-Art}}.	116

Figure 5.7.	<i>A Harlot's Progress</i> , Plate 5 (William Hogarth, 1732), Metropolitan Museum of Art Open Access.	117
Figure 5.8.	<i>Death of the Virgin</i> (Caravaggio, 1603) {{PD-Art}}.	118
Figure 5.9.	<i>The Annunciation</i> (Johann Christian Schröder, 1690) {{PD-Art}}.	119
Figure 5.10.	<i>A Harlot's Progress</i> , Plate 6 (William Hogarth, 1732), Metropolitan Museum of Art Open Access	120
Figure 5.11.	Detail from <i>A Harlot's Progress</i> , Plate 6 (William Hogarth, 1732), Metropolitan Museum of Art Open Access.	120
Figure 5.12.	Detail from <i>A Harlot's Progress</i> , Plate 6 (William Hogarth, 1732), Metropolitan Museum of Art Open Access.	121
Figure 5.13.	<i>The Whore of Babylon</i> , Object 63, (William Blake, 1809) {{PD-Art}}.	122
Figure 5.14.	<i>Night Thoughts</i> . (William Blake, 1797) {{PD-Art}}.	125
Figure 5.15.	<i>The Harlot and the Giant</i> (William Blake, 1824–1827).	126
Figure 8.1.	Image of Sycorax by Robert Anning Bell, for his decorated edition of <i>The Tempest</i> , published in 1901 by Freemantle & Co. In the book, this figure appears as an illustration in Act I, scene 2, on page 19, opposite an image of Ariel as a water nymph. The artist draws on Prospero's descriptions of her appearance along with Caliban's invocation of bats at her command. Box B433 no. 20, image 34289, Folger Shakespeare Library.	175
Figure 8.2.	Drawing with ink wash of Sycorax by Arthur Rackham for a 1926 illustrated edition of <i>The Tempest</i> published in London by Heineman and New York by Double Day. The image follows Prospero's descriptions of her appearance and powers, and Caliban's reference to her command over insects and toads, as she stands hunchbacked over a scorpion, snail, toad, centipede, and worm, ready to do her allegedly mischievous bidding. Box R122 no. 9, image 34816, Folger Shakespeare Library.	176
Figure 8.3.	One of Ana Mendieta's untitled works from the <i>Silueta</i> series (1977), featuring a woman's form carved into the earth, as a grave, outlined in foliage. Permission to reproduce from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (1992.159).	183
Figure 8.4.	One of Ana Mendieta's untitled works from the <i>Silueta</i> series (1976), featuring a woman's form outlined in flower petals, seeming to have washed	

	up on a beach. Permission to reproduce from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (1992.177).	184
Figure 8.5.	Spread from the zine “Whispers of the Witch,” titled “Who Is She?” uses a version of the Bell drawing (see Fig. 1) and lines from Shakespeare’s <i>The Tempest</i> and Césaire’s <i>Une tempête</i> to present Sycorax as the witch whom her nemesis, Prospero, describes. Zine with collage and highlighter. Reproduced with permission; courtesy of Noelle Briggs, 2020.	184
Figure 8.6.	Spread from the zine “Whispers of the Witch,” titled “Magic or Medicine?” builds on Warner’s Sycorax to explore how settler colonialism attempted to use an artificial division between magic and medicine to demonize Indigenous healing arts. Zine with collage and highlighter. Reproduced with permission; courtesy of Noelle Briggs, 2020.	187
Figure 8.7.	<i>Sycorax the Natural Healer</i> . Acrylic painting. Reproduced with permission; courtesy of Kylee Zawacki, 2022.	188
Figure 8.8.	<i>The Unsilencing of Sycorax</i> . Acrylic painting. Reproduced with permission; courtesy of Arin Wells, 2022.	189
Figure 8.9.	Collage identifying Sycorax within the narratives of historical colonized women. Collage on paper. Reproduced with permission; courtesy of Baylei Lezaun, 2023.	190
Figure 8.10.	<i>Sycorax’s Emancipation</i> , and details. The struck-through title represents the student’s own process of self-correction, as she moved from passive to active voice to better represent emancipatory processes. Collage on canvas board with beads. Reproduced with permission; courtesy of Rhoslyn Owens, 2022.	192

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 century³ 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 Kramer⁷ and *Daemonologie*⁸ by King James I of England.⁹ These two texts are cited countless 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, cisgenderopatriarchal 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.

Index

A

Abracadabra (video game), 209
Abraham, Amelia, 242
activism, xvi, xx, xxi, xxiv, xxv, 1, 3, 13, 22, 79, 183, 185, 232
Adler, Margot, *Drawing Down the Moon* (book), xxi
affect theory, 250
Africa, 66, 174, 175, 227
Age of Aquarius, 28
Ahmed, Sara, 247, 250, 257, 266
All of Them Witches (documentary), 42
altar, 56, 158, 229, 236, 242
American Horror Story: Coven (television), xiii
Anger, Kenneth, 62, 64
Anger, Kenneth, *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (film), 61, 63
Anne, Frankie, 232, 233, 235, 242
anthropology, xxvi, 33
anti-colonial, xxvi, 179, 196
anti-queer legislation, 227
anti-witchcraft, 271
apocalypse, 49, 50, 51, 59, 62, 66, 69, 125, 249, 264
Appalachian Mountains, xix
artificial intelligence, 52, 64, 65, 244
Asia, 34, 66, 143
astrology, 27, 28, 38, 40, 47, 160, 238
Augusta, Aurelia, 228
Austin, J. L., 210, 211
Australia, 76, 78, 126
Austria, 248, 251, 261
Azuma, Hiroki, 209

B

Babalon Rising (podcast), 52
Bach, Johann Sebastian, 3, 15
Backe, Hans-Joachim, 216
Baker, Emerson, xv
baptism, 134, 135, 136, 174, 183
Baqueiro, Mariel, 251, 263, 264
Barbauld, Anna, *Lessons for Children* (book), 12
Barthes, Roland, 209
BBC, 33, 37, 230
Beethoven, Ludwig van, 5, 15, 20
 “Sonata Pathetique”, 20
 Symphony no. 5 in C minor, 20
Bennett, Jane, 247, 249, 257, 258, 262, 267, 268
Berger, Helen A., 229, 235
Berry, Jonathan, xv
Besson, Luc, *León: The Professional* (film), 270
Bethesda Game Studios, 203
Bewitched (television), xiii
Bible, xvii, 121, 132, 144, 164, 227, 272
 Abraham, 110
 Daniel, 125
 Deuteronomy, 271
 Exodus, 136, 271
 Mark, 144
 Micah, 271
 Moses, 136, 144
 Old Testament, 104
 Psalms, 144
 Revelation, 59, 60, 63, 122, 123, 124
Bicycle Thieves (film), 259
Biller, Anna, *The Love Witch* (film), 259, 270

birth, 58, 68, 155, 156, 159, 252, 256, 265, 266

Bittner, Corvin, xxvi

Black, 7, 104, 185, 186, 187, 196

Black Lives Matter, 184, 232, 243

Blake, William, xxv, 17, 101, 102, 103, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 127

Jerusalem (book), 121

Night Thoughts (illustrated poem), 125

prophetic works, 121

Songs of Experience (book), 121

Songs of Innocence (book), 121

The Book of Urizen (book), 121

The Four Zoas (book), 121

The Harlot and the Giant (painting), 126

The Whore of Babylon (painting), 101, 102, 122, 123, 127

Whore of Babylon, xxv, 51, 101, 102, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 127

Blavatsky, Helena, 32

Theosophical Movement, 32

Blazblue (video game series), 217, 218, 220

Blazblue Centralfiction (video game), 203, 205, 212, 213, 217

Alucard, Rachel, 218

Nine The Phantom, 203, 217, 218, 219, 220, 221

Platinum The Trinity, 218

Bodin, Jean, 137

Bogost, Ian, 203, 207, 208, 209, 212, 222

Unit Operations (book), 208

Boleyn, Anne, 78

Bordeaux-Seeger, Sammie, 191

Botticelli, Sandro, 117

Bourdeau, Debra, xxv

Brabin, Tracy, 81

Bracelin, J. L., 34

Bratušek, Alenka, 84, 85, 86, 87

Braun, Johanna, 231

Bridewell Prison, 105

Briggs, Noelle, 131, 186, 187, 188

Briggs, Robin, 131

Brigid, Saint, 154

British Isles, xvi, xvii, 153, 160

Great Britain, 5, 8, 9, 14, 22, 23, 34, 46, 81, 103

British Museum, 52, 109

Brittany, 14

Bromham, A.A., 129

Brook, Peter, 176

Bruja, 184

Buckland, Raymond, 43

Buddhist, 32

Bulgaria, 76

Bunny, 235

Burr, George Lincoln, 33

Butler, Alison, 8

Butler, Judith, 80

Butler, Samuel, 109

C

Caldeira, Sofia P., 242

California, 49, 54, 55, 64, 78

Beaumont, 49, 50, 57, 58, 62, 63, 66

Hollywood, 40, 50, 58, 69

Los Angeles, 37, 49, 53, 55

Pasadena, 68

Cameron, Marjorie, xxv, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70

Candida, 60, 65, 66

eugenics, 51, 66, 67

Goddess Babalon, 49, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 69, 70

John Whiteside (Jack) Parsons, 53, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 68, 69

Songs for the Witch Woman (book), 69

The Book of Babalon or Liber 49 (book), 56

psychic pregnancy, 50, 53, 54, 55, 63, 68

sex ritual, 49, 50
Songs for the Witch Woman (book), 60
The Children, 49, 50, 51, 54, 61, 66, 69
Union of Opposites, 66
Wormwood Star, 49, 50, 51, 54, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 69
Campbell, Lady Archibald, 15
Canada, 6, 184, 227
cannibalism, 254, 265, 266
capitalism, xxvi, 28, 45, 54, 99, 146, 151, 152, 153, 154, 158, 168, 169, 194
Caravaggio, 118
 Death of the Virgin (painting), 118
Carpenter, Edward, 18
Carr, Frances, 129
casting (magical), xi, xiv, 42, 195, 218, 220, 254
 sacred circle, xiv
Catholicism, xvi, 153, 166, 251, 256, 261
Cavendish, Richard, 43
Celtic, 5, 15, 18, 35, 153, 154, 162
Césaire, Aimé, 173, 177, 179, 180, 181, 187
 Une tempête (play), 173, 177, 179, 182, 187
 Caliban, 173, 179, 180, 181
 Prospero, 173, 179, 180
 Sycorax, 180, 181
Chicana, 179
Chilling Adventures of Sabrina (television), 43, 45
Chollet, Monica, xv
Cholst, Rachel, 236, 238
Chopin, Kate, *Awakening, The* (book), 9
Christianity, xvii, 33, 79, 101, 112, 115, 119, 136, 144, 154, 155, 158, 181, 185, 241, 251, 271, 272
Annunciation, 117, 124
Elizabeth, 115
Gabriel, 117, 124
Jesus, 115, 117, 123
John the Baptist, 115
Virgin Mary, 115, 117
Visitation, 115
Zechariah, 115
Chun, Wendy, 210, 211
Circe, 121
cisgender, 153, 227, 242
Civil Rights Movement (American), 54
classroom, xx, xxvi, 173, 174, 178, 195, 196
Cleopatra, 78
Clinton, Bill, 43
Clinton, Hillary, 73, 78
Coastal Carolina University, 197
Cockin, Katherine, 13
Cohen, Ethan, *No Country for Old Men* (film), 270
Cohen, Joel, *No Country for Old Men* (film), 270
Cold War, The, 58
Cole, Devon, 241, 243
collective memory, xiii, xiv, xvii, xxiv, 163
Colman Smith, Pamela, xxv, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22
 “Duet” (music picture), 22
 A Broad Sheet (magazine), 6
 Annancy Stories (collection), 14
 Chim Chim Stories (collection), 14
 Gelukiezanger, 6
 Green Sheaf Press, 6, 11
 Green Sheaf School of Hand-Colouring, 6
music pictures, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21
 Quod Tibi id Aliis, 16
 The Green Sheaf (magazine), 6, 7, 11, 12, 13, 19, 20
colonialism, xviii, 158, 175, 177, 178, 180, 181, 182, 185, 188, 191, 192, 193, 197
communism, 83
community, xii, xiv, xv, xvi, xviii, xxi, xxiii, xxiv, xxvi, 10, 28, 30, 31,

32, 41, 43, 45, 46, 67, 133, 151, 156, 158, 160, 161, 169, 170, 177, 217, 219, 225, 226, 229, 230, 231, 232, 233, 234, 235, 236, 237, 238, 240, 242, 243, 244, 251, 256, 271, 272

confirmation, 136

content analysis, 102

counterculture, xxi, 69

coven, xxiv, xxvi, 31, 32, 43, 49, 50, 66, 120, 129, 130, 133, 135, 145, 154, 157, 173, 177, 178, 182, 185, 196, 197, 226, 239, 241, 243

COVID-19, xvi, 177, 228, 229, 233, 236, 237, 243, 244

Cowman, Krista, 76, 81

Craftsman, The (magazine), 4, 20

Craig, Edith, 10

Craig, Edward Gordon, 15

Creed, Barbara, 264, 265

Crnović, Deja, 76

Crowley, Aleister, xiii, xxiv, 33, 34, 37, 50, 59, 60, 62, 63, 69

Lesser Key of Solomon (book), 34

Moonchild (book), 34

Ordo Templi Orientis, 34, 55, 59, 63

The Book of the Law (book), 34

Thelema, 34, 53, 59

True Will, 34

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly, 220

Cuba, 183

cultural studies, 233

Cunningham, Scott, 43, 142

cyberspace, xxi

D

d'Eyck, Barthélemy, 117

Daly, Mary, 182, 185

Dante, 121, 126

Davies, Owen, xv

daVinci, Leonardo, 117

Davis, Erik, 230

Davis, Lucy, 43

de Champaigne, Philippe, 117

De Ridder, Sander, 242

Debussy, Claude, 3, 5, 17

Dee, John, 59, 60, 62

Deep South, 178

Deery, Caroline, 239

Delmonaco, Daniel, 228

demons, 132, 159, 160, 178, 181

demonic, 173, 178, 181, 227, 241, 242

demonology, xxvi, 140, 161

diabolophilia, 178

Demos, John, xv

Denisoff, Dennis, 8, 20

Denmark, 79

Dennis, John, 79

Denny, Frances, xxii

Deren, Maya, 63

Devil, the, xvi, 130, 131, 132, 145, 146, 174, 185, 196, 272

DeVos, Marielle, 76, 80

Dianic, 35

Dickson White, Andrew, 33

digital games, 207, 209, 215, 218

Dimech, Alkistis, 52

discourse analysis, 77, 131

divination, 3, 6, 159, 160, 161, 271

Dixon, Joy, 9

Dolmetsch, Arnold, 17

domesticity, 83, 84, 130, 133, 135, 153, 168

Doolan, Khirsten, xxvi

doxing, 243

Dragon Age: Origins (video game), 205

Druidic, 35

Druks, Renate, 64

ducking, xi, 272, 273

Dumb and Dumber (film), 259

Dungeon & Fighter (game series), 212, 213, 214, 215, 216, 217, 221

Dungeon Fighter Online (computer game), 203, 205, 214

E

Eco, Umberto, *On Ugliness* (book), 163
ecology, 182, 220, 221, 249, 253, 254, 255, 261, 262, 263, 264, 268
Edwardian, 3, 5, 13
Egypt, 33, 34, 50
Ehrenreich, Barbara and English, Deirdre, *Witches, Midwives and Nurses* (book), 156, 159
emoji, 238
England, xvi, 18, 28, 32, 102, 111, 125
Burley, 37, 46
Burslem, 29, 30
Cornwall, 22
Exeter, 22
Gorseland, 23
London, 8, 10, 11, 12, 15, 22, 23, 36, 52, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 113, 121, 176
Drury Lane, 104, 109, 110
New Forest, 28, 32
Sneyd, 30
Staffordshire, 28
Suffolk, 114
England, New, xviii
Ereshkigal, 51
Erickson, Robert, 113
eroticism, xxvi, 54, 60, 110, 152, 156, 165, 249, 252, 253, 254, 255
esoteric, 3, 5, 7, 8, 14, 22, 23, 32, 39, 52, 65, 214, 247, 259
Western esotericism, 7, 32
essentialism, 248
gender essentialism, 53
ethnography, 53
Europe, xv, 9, 32, 33, 61, 66, 74, 76, 86, 111, 121, 151, 152, 160, 163, 169, 175, 178, 193, 241
exaptative approach, 206
Ezzy, Douglas, 229, 235

F

Farr, Florence, 8
Faunus, 35
Faxneld, Per, 9
Federici, Silvia, xv, 151, 152, 153, 154, 158, 159, 161, 169, 220
Caliban and the Witch (book), 151, 152, 169
Feigelfeld, Lukas, 247, 248, 249, 251, 252, 253, 258, 264, 270
femininity, 9, 21, 33, 53, 65, 75, 80, 84, 85, 86, 101, 112, 127, 135, 164, 168, 249, 254, 256, 259
divine feminine, 65
domestic, 84
feminine identity, 21
feminine power, 167, 169
monstrous feminine, 265
feminism, 9, 10, 11, 21, 22, 23, 28, 52, 54, 77, 152, 155, 157, 159, 164, 165, 170, 182, 183, 185, 247, 248, 249, 250, 255, 256, 262, 264, 268
anti-feminist, 241
Black feminism, xxiii
ecofeminism, 247, 250, 254, 255
mystical, 4, 7, 10, 19, 20, 21
Second Wave, 38, 157
theory, 77, 247, 262
W.I.T.C.H. (group), xxi, 157
xenofeminist, 52
Laboria Cuboniks, 52
Fielding, Henry, 104
Fireworks (film), 259
Fisher, Mark, 193
Floyd, George, 232
folklore, xvii, 6, 11, 14, 15, 21, 35, 154, 161, 252
Fontaine, Tina, 196, 197
France, 6, 31, 127
Frascas, Gonzalo, 222
Frazier, James George, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 33
Freyersmuth, Gundolf, 206
Friesen, Ryan Curtis, 130

G

Gaelic, 153, 167
 Gage, Matilda Joslyn, 79
 Galford, Ellen, xxvi, 151
The Fires of Bride (book), xxvi, 151, 154, 159, 169, 170
 Cailleach, 152, 154, 155, 158, 159, 162, 165, 166, 167, 168, 169
 Convent of Saint Bride, 152, 154, 155, 157, 164, 169
 gospel of Bride, 156
 labor, 153
 Sisters of Bride, 155, 156, 158, 160, 165, 168
 Galloway, Alexander, 206, 210, 211, 216
 game studies, xxvi, 204, 205, 206, 207, 216, 222
 Garcia, Amanda Yates, xxii
 Garcia-Blanco, Iñaki, 76, 86
 Gardner, Gerald, xxiv, 34, 35, 43, 56, 61, 62
 Cone of Power, 34
 Father of Wicca, 34
High Magic's Aid (book), 34
 New Forest Coven, 34
Witchcraft Today (book), 34
 Garland, Alex, *Ex Machina* (film), 64
 Ava, 64, 65, 66
 Garrett, Julia M., 227
 Gaskill, Malcolm, xv
 gay, 43
 Gay, John, *Trivia* (poem), 109
 gender, xiii, xxiii, 9, 10, 20, 43, 53, 75, 76, 77, 80, 83, 84, 87, 130, 133, 154, 185, 205, 215, 227, 242, 248, 249, 259, 260
 assault, 80
 bias, 73, 75, 88
 coverage, 85
 discrimination, 77
 equality, 8, 73, 74, 75, 94
 expectations, 13, 158
 genderfluid, 232, 237
 identity, 226
 inequality, 11
 non-conforming, 10
 norms, 99
 parity, 74
 performance, 80, 81
 roles, 9, 12, 13, 73, 74, 85, 94
 studies, xxiii
 violence, 99, 241
 Generation X, 42, 43
 Generation Z, 238
 genetics, 54
 German Academy of Film and Television, 251
 Germany, 79
 Gillard, Julia, 78
 Ginsberg, Allen, 62
Howl (poem), 62
 Gladue, Cindy, 196, 197
 Godec, Jelka, 91, 95
 Golob, Robert, 82, 88
 Gonson, John, 124
Good Witch (television), 45
 Google, 244
 Gordon, Avery F., xxiv
 Gorfinkel, Elena, 247, 250, 259, 260, 261
 gothic, 166, 251
 Gowdie, Isobel, xiii
 Grant, John, 126
 Grant, Marion Tempest, xxv
 Greer, Mary K., 8
 Grey, Peter, 52, 53, 59
The Red Goddess (book), 51, 52, 60
 Grieg, Edvard, 17
 Grimmasi, Raven, 43
 grimoire, 218
 Grissom, Candace Ursula, xxv
 Grossman, Pam, xv, xxii
Waking the Witch: Reflections on Women, Magic, and Power (book), xxi
Witch Wave, The (podcast), xxii
 grounded theory, 228
 Guberman, Josh, 228

Guilty Gear Strive (video game), 218

H

Hagazussa: A Heathen's Curse (film), xxvi, 247, 248, 249, 251, 252, 253, 256, 258, 259, 260, 261, 262, 263, 264, 265, 267, 268, 270
Cwen, Aleksandra, 248
female grotesque, 249
Martini, Claudia, 251
Peter, Celina, 251
Halfhide, Charlie, 236, 239, 240, 241
Halfyard, Kurt, 263
Hall, Alex, xxvi
Halloween, 64, 78, 89, 205, 217
Handley-Byrne, Keavy, xxiii
Haraway, Donna, 250
Haritaworn, Jin, 67
Harjo, Joy, 192
Harrington, Curtis, 50, 61, 63, 64
 The Wormwood Star (film), 51, 61, 63
Harvey, A. D., *Sex in Georgian England*, 114
healer, xxii, xxviii, 42, 160, 189, 191, 257, 273
Heavyrunner, Ashley Loring, 196
Hecate, 129, 130, 131, 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 139, 144, 145, 146, 147, 148
Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, 8, 16, 34
Herms, George, 58
Herstik, Gaby, 52
heteronormative, 13, 53, 153, 154, 158, 227, 254, 268
heterosexuality, 54, 62, 67, 158, 205, 226, 233, 235, 242, 260, 261
hexing, 157, 178, 231, 235, 271
Hill, Gabrielle L'Hirondelle, 68
Hindu, 32
Hispanic, 185, 196
Hitler, Adolf, 34

Hocking, Clint, 204
Hogarth, William, xxv, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 109, 111, 112, 114, 115, 117, 119, 120, 121, 122, 124, 125, 127
A Harlot's Progress (engraving series), 101, 102, 103, 104, 106, 107, 109, 111, 112, 115, 117, 120, 121, 122, 127
brothels, 114
Charteris, Colonel, 104, 105, 115
Dalton, James, 105, 114
Gourlay, John, 104
Hackabout, Moll, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114, 115, 117, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 126, 127
evidence of witchcraft, 107, 108, 109, 111, 112
masquerade, 108, 109, 110
A Rake's Progress (painting series), 104
Cruelty in Perfection (engraving series), 102
Marriage a la Mode (painting series), 104
Nancy Hackabout, 109
realism, 121
Hogmanay, 164, 165, 168
Hogwarts Legacy (RPG), 218
homophobia, 241
hoodoo, xix
hooks, bell, 182
Hooper, Tobe, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (film), 270
Hopkins, Matthew, xvii
 The Discovery of Witches (book), xvii
Horniman, Annie, 8
horror, 59, 247, 249, 250, 251, 253, 254, 262, 263, 264, 265, 266, 268
folk, 248, 263
slow, 263, 264
Horus, 50, 55, 59
Housman, Clemence, 11

Housman, Laurence, 11
 Hubbard, L. Ron, 56, 59, 62, 63, 65
Babalon Working (series of rites),
 56, 59, 63
 Huizinga, Johan, 207
 Huneker, James, 17
 Hutchings, Mark, 129
 Hutchison, Alice L., 50, 57, 58, 64
 Hutton, Ronald, xv, 55, 132
The Witch: a History of Fear, from Ancient Times to the Present (book), 132

I

Ibáñez, Gabe, 64
Automata (film), 64
 Cleo, 64, 66
 Ibroscheva, Elza, 76
 iconography, 101, 102, 103, 107, 115, 119, 121, 122, 127
 identity, xx, xxii, xxxii, xxiv, xxvi, 3, 4, 7, 8, 10, 14, 23, 35, 75, 93, 115, 187, 206, 227, 233, 234, 235, 236, 237
 Inanna, 51, 60
 incubus, 134, 135
 India, 34, 179
 Indian, xviii, 6, 67, 191
 Indigenous, 54, 66, 67, 68, 155, 160, 184, 185, 186, 187, 188, 191, 194, 196, 197, 235
 Cherokee, 191
 Dakota, 54
 Lakota, 54, 191
 Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, 184
 Nakota, 55
 Waccamaw, 197
 Women's Alliance of South Carolina, 197
 Intihar, Anja, 92
 Iowa, 56
 Iraq, 52
 Ireland, 14, 15, 153
 Ireland, Amy, 52, 64

Ireland, John, 102
 Isbister, Katherine, 206
 Ishtar, 60
 Israel, 136, 144

J

Jamaica, 6, 7, 13, 14, 15
 James I, King, xvi, xvii, xx, 129, 131, 132, 148
Daemonologie (book), xvi
 James, Edward, 50
 James, William, 18
 Jarman, Derek, 177
 Javornik, Jana, 93
 Jeffreys, Debra, xxii
 Joan of Arc, 78
 Johnson, Elizabeth, xii
 Johnson, Mary, 197
 Jones, Claire, 230

K

Kaine, Tim, xi
 Kansa, Spencer, 53, 60, 66
Cameron: Songs for the Witch Woman (exhibit), 53
 Kapitaniak, Pierre, 130
 Kaplan, Stuart, 23
 Karen & the Sorrows, 238
Kaysera Stops Pretty Places, 196, 197
 Kelley, Edward, 59, 60, 62
 kinship, 38, 49, 51, 53, 54, 55, 63, 65, 67, 153, 165, 226, 255, 256, 268
 Kittredge, George Lynman, 112
 Klakočar Zupančič, Urška, xxv, 73, 75, 77, 79, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92
Red Heels Affair, 73, 75, 77, 90, 93
 Kohr, Amanda, 236, 241, 243
 Kosmina, Brydie, xv
 Kramer, Heinrich, xvi, xvii, 179
Malleus Maleficarum (book), xvi, 137, 179
 Kresal, Katarina, 84, 85, 86

Kristeva, Julia, 264
Krysmanski, Bernd, 110
Kubrick, Stanley, 62
 2001: A Space Odyssey (film), 62
 A Clockwork Orange (film), 270
Kurosawa, Akira, 63

L

language
 operative, 211
 programming, 210, 211, 212
Lara, Irene, 173, 182, 183, 185
 Bruja positionality, 179, 183, 184
Lawrence of Arabia. *See* Lawrence, Thomas Edward
Lawrence, Thomas Edward, 33
Leek, Sybil, xxv, 27, 28, 35, 45, 46
 A Shop in the High Street (book), 36, 40
 Astrology and Love: How to Be a Better Lover (book), 39
 Book of Herbs (book), 39
 Cast Your Own Spell (book), 39
 Craft of the Wise (book), 28
 Diary of a Witch (book), 28, 31, 33, 37, 38, 39, 40
 ESP: The Magic Within You (book), 39
 Fortune Telling (book), 40
 Herbs: Medicine and Mysticism (book), 39
 Horsa Coven, 29, 35
 How to be Your Own Astrologer (book), 38
 Joseph Booth, 30
 Leigh, Molly, 29, 30, 31, 32, 46
 Moon Signs (book), 40
 move to Florida, 37
 Mr. Hotfoot Jackson, 31, 37, 38
 My Life in Astrology (book), 39, 40
 Night Voyagers: You and Your Dreams (book), 39, 40
 old religion, 28, 35, 46

professional witchcraft, 28, 29, 32, 33, 37, 39, 44
public witchcraft, xxv, 35, 38, 40, 45
 Reincarnation: The Second Chance (book), 32, 39, 40
Sarah Booth, 30
six tenets, 28, 35, 36, 46
St. John's Church, 30
 Star Speak: Your Body Language from the Stars (book), 39
 Telepathy: The Respectable Phenomenon (book), 39
 The Astrological Cookbook (book), 39
 The Astrological Guide to Beauty (book), 39
 The Astrological Guide to Financial Success (book), 38
 The Astrological Guide to Successful Everyday Living (book), 38
 The Complete Art of Witchcraft (book), 35, 36, 38, 40, 41, 43
 "The Place of the Homosexual in Witchcraft" (chapter), 43
 The Jackdaw and the Witch: A True Fable (book), 38, 40
 The Story of Faith Healing (book), 39
 Thomas Spencer, 30
 Wolfa Coven, 27
 Zodiac of Love (book), 39
Lepage, Martin, xxiii
lesbian, 154, 158, 226, 233
 Lesbian Masterdoc, 233, 235, 237
Lewis, Sophie, xv, 54, 67, 68, 255, 256, 260, 265
Lezaun, Baylei, 191, 192
LGBTQIA+, xxiii, 43, 45, 237, 238, 240, 271
Liberalna demokracija Slovenije.
 See Liberal Democracy of Slovenia
Lichtenberg, Georg, 102, 108, 111
Lippi, Filippo, 117
Lipscomb, Suzannah, xvii

Liszt, Franz, 17
 Littlewater, Terrence Lily, 197
 Littlewood, Roland, 134
 Ljubljana, 79
 Lorde, Audre, 182, 184, 186
 Sister Outsider (book), 184
Lost Magic (video game), 218
 Louisiana, 239
 Lowenthal-Tsing, Anna, 220

M

MacDonald, M. Irwin, 4, 6, 13, 18
 "The Fairy Faith", 4, 13, 14, 15,
 18, 20
 MacGregor Mathers, Samuel
 Liddell, 33
 Greater Key of Solomon (book),
 34
 Macheath, Captain, 113
 mage, 203, 213, 215, 216, 217, 221
 magic, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 42, 43, 49,
 50, 51, 52, 53, 55, 56, 65, 147,
 148, 152, 153, 159, 160, 161, 162,
 166, 167, 178, 187, 188, 195, 203,
 204, 210, 211, 212, 213, 215, 216,
 217, 218, 220, 221, 222, 226, 233,
 249, 257, 262, 263, 264, 265, 266,
 268
 ancestral, 180
 black, 35, 37, 107, 110, 175
 circles, 207, 208
 collaborative, 167
 collective, 164
 herbal, 140
 high, 160
 high and low, 160
 low, 160
 white, 28, 31, 35, 37, 42, 175
 magick. *See* magic
 maleficium, 112, 129, 136, 139, 147
malleus maleficarum (phrase),
 179
 Mangina, Joseph, 123
 Mankiller, Wilma, 191
MapleStory (video game), 214

Marxism, 54
 Maryland, xii
 masculinity, 80, 84, 102, 135, 167,
 181, 187, 259, 261
 Massively Multiplayer Online
 games (MMO), 213
 maternal, 84, 191, 249, 252, 253,
 254, 258, 260, 265
 maternity, 201, 249, 252, 253, 256
 Mather, Cotton, *Memorable*
 Providences, Relating to
 Witchcrafts and Possessions
 (book), xviii
 Mathison, Paul, 62
 matriarchy, 157, 256
 Maximoff, Wanda, 64, 66
 May, Theresa, 78, 81
 McCabe, Kara, xxvi
 McCarthy, Joseph, 63
 McCarthy, Lauren, 233, 236
 McDougal III, Serie, xxiv
 McGonigal, Jane, 206
 McSherry, Lisa, *Virtual Pagan*
 (book), xxi
 Medea, 121
 media studies, 53, 209
 Mendieta, Ana, 183, 184, 196, 197
 Silueta (series), 183, 184
 Merkel, Angela, 73, 79
 #MeToo, 43, 184
 Middleton, Thomas, xxvi, 129, 130
 The Witch (play), xxvi, 129, 130,
 131, 133, 137, 146, 147, 148
 midwifery, xx, 31, 42, 156, 158, 159,
 160, 273
 millennial, 238
 Miller, Chris, 233, 234, 236
 Miller, Courtney, 237
 Miller, George, *Mad Max: Fury*
 Road (film), 270
 Milton, 121
 misogyny, xvii, 73, 74, 75, 92, 151,
 152, 161, 163, 165, 169, 182, 256
 monstrous, 176, 214, 248, 249, 253,
 256, 264, 265
 Moore, Scott O., *The Witch of*
 Pungo: Grace Sherwood in

Virginia History and Legend
(book), xx

Morrison, Mark S., 8
Morrison, Toni, xxiv
motherhood, 12, 43, 191, 253, 256,
265
Muddy Waters, 62
Murray, Margaret, *The Witch Cult
in Western Europe* (book), 33
museums, xi, xiii, 45, 49
Myal, 14
mysticism, 3, 10, 13, 14, 17, 162,
167, 249, 258, 264
mystic, 3, 10, 14, 15, 17, 19
mystical, xxv, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 13, 14,
17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 28, 143

N

narrative research, 228
Nash, Belinda, *A Place in Time:
The Age of the Witch of Pungo*
(book), xx
Nastro, Anthony, 194, 195, 196
Nazi Germany, 66
Neapolitanus, Johannes Baptista,
137, 141, 143, 144
necromancy, xvi, 160
necrosis, xxvi, 247, 249, 250, 251,
252, 253, 254, 255, 258, 259, 260,
261, 264, 265, 266, 268
Netflix, 43
Neuberg, Victor, 60, 62
new materialist theory, 249
New York, xiii, 17, 37, 79, 157, 184
Ngai, Sianne, 247, 250, 265, 266
Nicotine, Cleopatra Semaganis,
196, 197
Nin, Anaïs, 61
Norris, Aíne, xix, xxvii
Northeast Modern Language
Association, xiii
Novak, Ljudmila, 84, 86, 87

O

O'Connor, Elizabeth Foley, 11, 21
O'Keeffe, Georgia, 17
Obeah, 13, 14
occult, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 14, 28, 33,
34, 35, 36, 38, 39, 40, 42, 45, 51,
55, 56, 65, 69, 107, 121, 127, 159,
234, 247, 248, 255, 259, 260
Occult Review (magazine), 15
O'Hear, Anthony and O'Hear,
Natasha, 123, 124
Oklahoma, 168
ordination, 136
Ouija, 159
Owens, Rhoslyn, 193, 194

P

Pagan, xxi, xxiii, xxiv, 29, 41, 44,
157, 168, 205, 241, 251, 256, 258,
261, 262, 271
Big Name Pagans, 42
Neo-Pagan, xxi, 209
Palestine, 232, 243
Pallavicino, Ferrante, Whores
Rhetorick (book), 113
palmistry, 159
Pandžič, Azra, 93
parapsychology, 33, 39
Parsons, Melinda Boyd, 7, 22, 23
patriarchy, xxvi, 4, 9, 13, 21, 65, 67,
73, 74, 75, 79, 80, 82, 92, 94, 112,
113, 127, 135, 148, 151, 152, 154,
155, 158, 162, 163, 164, 168, 169,
170, 174, 177, 178, 182, 226, 241,
248, 256, 261
postpatriarchal, 173, 181
Paulson, Ronald, 102, 108, 110,
111, 115, 117
Pearse, Alfred, 11
pedagogy, xxv, 186, 196
engaged, 182
Peel, Elizabeth, 54, 65
Peele, Jordan, *Get Out* (film), 270
Peirse, Alison, 248

Pelosi, Nancy, 79
 Pendle, George, 62
 Petherbridge, Deanna, 121, 122
Witches and Wicked Bodies
 (exhibition), 121
 Petrovsky, Tanja, 256
 Phillip the Fair, 127
 Phillips, Amanda, 206
Pictures in Music (article), 13, 14,
 17, 20
 Pócs, Éva, 139
 poison, 63, 142, 144, 158, 216, 253,
 254, 257
 political science, 79
 politics, 232, 242
 democracy, 74, 77, 82, 83, 89
 gender, 1, 130
 governance, 94
 House of Commons, 81, 113
 movements, 99
 National Assembly, 73, 75, 82, 83,
 90, 91, 93
 National Council, 82
 Parliament, 81, 82, 84, 86, 89, 91,
 92
 Prime Minister, 79, 82, 86, 87
 Speaker of the House, United
 States, 79
 Westminster, 81
 White House, The (American), 40
 women in, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78,
 86, 94
 pop culture, xiv, xxii, xxv, xxvi,
 xxvii, 1, 5, 33, 43, 44, 45, 52, 69,
 130, 151, 201, 205, 210, 222, 232,
 240, 241, 248, 273
 postcolonial, 173, 181, 182, 185,
 196
 Potts, Thomas, 131, 137
The Examination and Evidence...
 (book), 137
The Wonderfull Discoverie of
Witches in the Covntie of
Lancaster (book), 131, 137, 139
 Sowerbutts, 137, 138, 139, 140
 Walshman, 137, 138
 pregnancy, 51, 105, 115, 135, 256,
 265
 Pride, 240, 241, 243
 psychic, 14, 16, 17, 18, 32, 36, 39,
 40, 42, 249, 251, 254, 255, 258,
 262
 psychosis, 248
 Puar, Jasbir, 260, 261
 public history, xii, xviii
 Pučko, Tanja Lesničar, 92
 Pudney, Eric, *Scepticism and Belief*
in English Witchcraft Drama,
1538-1681 (book), 130
 Puig de la Bellacasa, Maria, 250
 Puwar, Nirmal, 76, 81

Q

Quaker, 109, 112, 114
 qualitative research, 77, 228
 quantitative research, 228
 queer, xxiii, xxvi, 10, 13, 43, 46, 53,
 62, 67, 151, 152, 153, 154, 155,
 156, 158, 163, 164, 165, 169, 206,
 210, 225, 226, 227, 228, 230, 231,
 235, 237, 238, 239, 240, 241, 242,
 243, 244, 247, 249, 253, 254, 257,
 259, 260, 261, 264, 267, 268
 ecologies, 247
 genderqueer, xxiii, 53
 horror, 248, 254
 theory, xxiii, 206
 Quennell, Peter, 102, 105, 108, 110

R

Rackham, Arthur, *The Tempest*
 (play), 176
 Raicheva-Stover, Maria, 76
 Ransome, Arthur, 8, 15
 rape, 255, 256, 259, 265
 revenge, 259
 Raphael, *Visitation* (painting), 116
 Reagan, Ronald, 40
 rhetoric, xxi, xxiv, 83, 103, 207, 258
 anti-witchcraft, 271, 272

procedural, 207, 209
visual, 102, 103
Rich, Sara A., xxvi
Riggs, Damien W., 54, 65
ritual, xiv, 33, 34, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 61, 62, 63, 66, 67, 68, 134, 145, 156, 184, 207, 208, 232, 234, 236, 243, 259
Ritual of the Moon (video game), 210
Rose, Karen, xxii
Rosicrucianism, 14
Rowland, Christopher, 125
Ruberg, Bonnie, 206
Rubio, Marco, 231
Rusak, Rotem, 226, 239

S

Sabbat, 139
Sabbath, 132, 195, 227
Sabrina the Teenage Witch (television), 43
Sacheverell, Henry, 113
sadomasochism, 110, 114
Salem, xii, xiii, xv, xvi, xvii, xviii, xix, xxii, 205
Corey, Giles, xix
Liberty Street monument, xviii
Proctor's Ledge, xviii
Salen, Katie, 207, 213, 222
Sandilands, Catriona, 254
Santería, 183
Sapphic, xxvi, 151, 225, 237, 238
Satan. *See Devil, the*
Satanic, 251, 253, 254, 271
Satanism, 247
Schelling, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph, 18
Schröder, Johann Christian, *The Annunciation* (painting), 119
Scot, Reginald, 129, 132, 136, 137, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144, 146
The Discoverie of Witchcraft (book), 129, 136, 141, 142, 146, 148

flying ointment, 136, 141, 142
Scotland, xii, 14, 121, 147, 152, 153, 164, 168, 169
Aberdeen, 169
Anstruther, 169
Glasgow, 164, 169
Ullapool, 169
semiotics, 54, 203, 205, 209, 212, 215
sex magick, 34, 49, 50, 52, 53, 55, 56, 66
sexism, xxvii, 80, 85, 87, 91, 92
Sixon, Sophie, 252
sexual assault, 241
sexuality, 38, 43, 53, 68, 99, 102, 113, 159, 205, 226, 227, 242, 248, 254, 259
Shakespeare, William, 31, 129, 130, 146, 147, 173, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178, 179, 181, 187, 190, 191
Blackfriars, 130
Folger Shakespeare Library, 175, 176
Macbeth (play), xxvi, 129, 130, 146, 147, 148
Weird Sisters, 129, 130, 147, 148, 175
The Tempest (play), 173, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178, 182, 187, 191
Ariel, 174, 175
Caliban, 173, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178, 191
Miranda, 193
Prospero, 173, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178, 187, 191, 193
Setebos, 175
Scorax, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178, 179, 181, 182, 183, 184, 185, 186, 187, 196, 197
Sharpe, John, 208, 212, 252
Shaw, Allyson, xv
Sheldon, Rebekah, 54, 62
Sherwood, Grace, xi, xii, xx, xxviii, 272, 273
Cry Witch (program), xi
Old Donation Church, xx
statue, xxvii, xxviii

Witchduck, xx
 Shesgreen, Sean, 102, 106, 107, 110, 111
 Shvarts, Aliza, 68
 Sidhe, 15
 Šimenko, Suzana Lep, 92
 simulation, 203, 205, 207, 208, 209, 222
 sisterhood, 99, 102, 107, 120, 217
 Sitwell, Edith, 33
Sky Fox (video game), 209
 Slovenia, xxv, 73, 75, 76, 79, 82, 83, 84, 85, 87, 89, 90, 91, 92
 Gibanje Svoboda [Freedom Movement], 75, 82
 Liberal Democracy of Slovenia, 85
 New Slovenia Christian Democratic Party, 84
 Slovenian Democratic Party, 86
 Vida Tomšič, 83
 Slovenska demokratska stranka.
 See Slovenian Democratic Party
 Smith, Theodore, 22
 Smosh, 237
 smudging, xxviii, 235
 social media, xiii, xxi, xxvi, 28, 44, 52, 77, 78, 201, 225, 226, 228, 229, 230, 231, 240, 242, 244, 271, 273
 go viral, 37, 237
 hashtag, 228, 229, 230, 234, 236, 242, 243
 Instagram, 52, 237
 RedNote, 231
 shadow banning, 228, 242
 TikTok, xxvi, 225, 226, 227, 228, 229, 230, 231, 232, 233, 234, 235, 236, 237, 238, 239, 240, 242, 243, 244
 ban, 225, 229, 230, 231
 cottagecore, 230, 238
 dark academia, 68, 238
 For You Page (FYP), 229, 233, 234, 239, 242
 goblincore, 238

QueerTok, 229, 230, 233, 237, 238, 239, 242, 243
 QueerWitchTok, 228, 230, 233, 240, 242
 WitchesforBLM, 233
 WitchTok, xxi, xxvi, 225, 227, 228, 229, 230, 231, 232, 233, 234, 235, 236, 237, 238, 239, 241, 242, 243, 244
 Tumblr, 234
 Twitter, 77, 78, 86, 88
 Vine, 225
 X, 77, 88, 91, 92
 socialism, 58, 83
 Solis, Marie, 255
 South America, 175
 spellwork, xiv, 201, 220, 259
 spiritualism, 14, 32, 183
 St. John, Christopher, 10
 Starhawk, 42
 The Spiral Dance (book), xxi
 Stone, Kara, 210
 storytelling, xiv, xxii, 1, 6, 38, 69
 Stravinsky, Igor, 22
 Strong, Gordon, 8
 student projects, 174, 178, 185
 suffrage, 1, 4, 8, 9, 10, 11, 79, 82
 Suffrage Atelier, 10, 11, 13
 Šuligoj, Julija, xxv
 Sullivan, Shannon, xxiv
 Sun Ra, *Spaceship Lullaby* (album), 62
 Süngü, Ertuğrul, 205
 supernatural, xxv, xxvi, 3, 5, 9, 13, 14, 15, 17, 19, 20, 21, 59, 181, 248, 251, 252, 255
 synesthesia, 3, 4, 8, 15, 20, 21
 Szachowicz-Sempruch, Justyna, 9

T

Tagliamonte, Giovanni, xxvi
 TallBear, Kim, 54, 55, 66, 67
 tarot, 3, 4, 6, 10, 16, 229, 236, 238, 271
 Rider-Waite-Smith, 3, 6

Waite, Arthur E., 16
tartan, xii
Taylor, T. L., 219
Tchaikovsky, Pyotr Ilyich, 17
Tembo, Kwasu D., 253, 254
Terry, Ellen, 15
Thacker, Eugene, 263
The Amazing World of Kreskin (television), 40
The Craft (movie), 43, 236
The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (game), 203, 204, 212
 hagravens, 203, 204
The Silver Bullet and Other American Witch Stories (book), xix
The Strand (magazine), 13, 16
The Texas Chain Saw Massacre (film), 259
The Witch of Pungo. *See* Sherwood, Grace
The Witches of Eastwick (film), xiii
The Wizard of Oz (film), 79
Thorning-Schmidt, Helle, 79
Thrift, Nigel, 250, 262, 265, 268
To Tell the Truth (television), 40
Todorov, Tzvetan, 252
Torrey, E.F., 111
Tosenberger, Catherine, 233
Traditional Ecological Knowledge, 187
transgender, xxiii, 43
Trouillot, Michel-Rolph, xxiv
Trump, Donald, 229, 231
Turner, Brock, 241

U

Uglow, Jenny, 102, 106, 107, 110, 113
undead, 173, 180
United Kingdom, 36, 52, 76, 81, 121
United States of America, xi, xvii, xxiii, 6, 14, 17, 29, 32, 36, 37, 38, 40, 44, 49, 57, 66, 76, 78, 79,

80, 152, 157, 182, 227, 229, 230, 231, 232

V

Valiente, Doreen, 34
Van Bauwel, Sofia, 242
van Raalte, Georgia, 65, 70
Vance, John G., 18
Vezjak, Boris, 89
Victorian, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 20
video games, xxvi, 203, 204, 205, 207
 design, 203, 205, 206, 210, 213
 mass multiplayer online role-playing, 205
 mechanics, xxvi, 201, 204, 205, 206, 207, 209, 210, 212, 213, 215, 217, 218, 221
 rulesets, 207, 208
Vietnam War, 28, 38
violence, xxvi, xxvii, 92, 151, 152, 161, 169, 184, 190, 191, 197, 252, 256, 261
Virginia, xi, xii, xix, xx, 231
 Carroll County, xx
 Colonial Williamsburg, xi, xx
 Virginia Beach, xi, xxvii
 Wise County, xx
virginity, 53, 85, 117, 135
voodoo, xxiv, 271

W

W.I.T.C.H. (song), 241, 243
Wahl-Jorgensen, Karin, 76, 86
Walcott, Derek, 194, 195
Walker, Thomas, *The Quaker's Opera* (opera), 109
Wallraven, Miriam, 5, 9
Wanda Vision (film), 64
 Hahn, Kathryn, 64
 Kirby, Jack, 64
 Lee, Stan, 64
 Olsen, Elizabeth, 64
 Shakman, Matt, 64

Warner, Marina, 173, 177, 181, 191
Indigo (book), 173, 177, 181, 182, 187, 188, 191
 Ariel, 181
 Everard, 181, 189
 Prospero, 181
 Scyrorax, 173, 181, 189, 191, 195

Warner, Mark, 231

Watson, Richard, *An Apology for the Bible* (book), 124

Watterson, Tess, 205

Wells, Arin, 190

Wells, H. G., 33

Wentz, W. Y. Evans, 18

White, Manon Hedenborg, 53, 56, 60
The Eloquent Blood (book), 53

Wicca, xxii, 34, 35, 44, 53, 56, 209, 234, 241, 271
Charge of the Goddess, 34
Wiccan Rede, 34

Wiesel, Elie, xviii

Wigington, Patti, 36

Wild Hunt (video game), 205

Wild Hunt, The (website), 271

Williams, Alberta, 196, 197

Willis, Deborah, 133

Wilson, Shawn, xxiv

Wind, Barry, 109

Wirsching, Thea, 7, 8

witch
 baby, 232, 234, 235, 244
 broom riding, 74, 78, 215
 cackle, 78
 elder, 235, 236, 243
 familiars, 111
 flight, 131, 133, 137, 139, 140, 141, 142

witch hunting, xvi, 73, 80, 84, 90, 151, 152, 153, 154, 156, 157, 158, 159, 161, 163, 164, 169, 182, 227

Witch of Burslem. *See* Leigh, Molly

Witch of Pungo. *See* Sherwood, Grace

witchcraft
 accusations, xxi, 79, 272, 273
 bans, 34
 public, xxi, 45
 studies, xxii, xxiii, 68, 129, 131, 178
 trials, xi, xviii, xix, 111, 140, 141, 163, 205, 227, 236, 243, 272

Witch-Finder General. *See* Hopkins, Matthew

Witchhaven (video game), 209

wizard, 227

women of color, 184, 186, 190, 191

Women's Coronation Procession, 9

women's studies, 173, 182

World War II, 36, 56

World Wide Web, 234

WPA Life Histories and Writers' Project, xix

Y

Yang, Yaochong Joe, xxvi

Yeats, William Butler, 8, 15, 18

YouTube, 37, 228, 237, 239

Yugoslavia, 82, 83

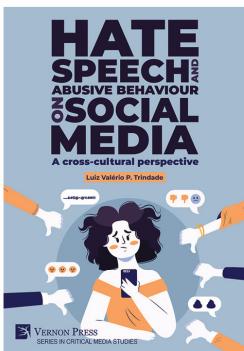
Z

Zawacki, Kylee, 188, 189

Zimmerman, Eric, 207, 213, 222



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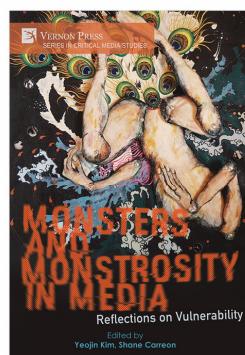
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