

Witchy Business: Witchcraft and Economic Transformation in Salem,
Massachusetts

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Contents:

Abstract.....	2
Methodology.....	3
Acknowledgements.....	7
Introduction.....	8
Historical Witchcraft as an Embodied Construction: The Bodily Creation and Condemnation of Witches by others.....	23
Witch Theatre.....	23
Freak Theatre.....	24
Embodiment of Witchcraft in the 1692 Trials.....	28
Modern Witchcraft as an Embodied Practice.....	35
Self Construction and Internal Realms of Embodiment.....	35
Objects and Embodiment.....	38
The Social Ideals of Salem’s Modern Witches.....	41
Covens and Capitalism: Witches and the Economic Transformation of Salem.....	43
Is Witchcraft Feminist?.....	51
Conclusion.....	59
References.....	61

Abstract

Salem, Massachusetts is perhaps best known for the Salem Witch Trials of 1692, in which dozens of residents of Essex county were accused of witchcraft, and nineteen were executed. For several centuries after these tragic events, Salem had little association with the supernatural or the demonic, becoming a prosperous, and later a rather decrepit, trading port. But witches emerged once more in the coastal city during the 1970's, and Witchcraft-oriented businesses have become an essential part of Salem's economy. In the last several decades, the United States has seen a significant growth in the popularity of modern witchcraft, reflected in social media, television, and perhaps above all, the marketplace. My interest is in the tension of modern Witchcraft as a deeply embodied, yet also highly commercialized practice, and the issues presented as these bodies enter the economy both as actors and as objects. This research speaks to implications for the commoditization of spiritual practices more generally, something that could perhaps be explored more explicitly in further projects. Performing archival and ethnographic research focused on historical and modern Salem, respectively, I argue that the two appearances of witches in Salem are tied to periods of economic transformation, but that the witch is treated drastically differently in these two periods as a vessel capable of alleviating economic troubles, first through her eradication, and today through her proliferation.

Methodology

There has not been a large body of anthropological research produced regarding modern Witchcraft practices in the United States, and even less discussing Salem in particular. This research hopes to contribute to the growing scholarship which treats the growth of Witchcraft and Neopaganism as serious, culturally and economically significant movements.

I had originally designed this research to understand the entanglement of feminist ideals and capitalist practice in commercialized Witchcraft in Salem. To complete this project, I had proposed to conduct observations of shops and markets to follow how items were advertised by shop owners, and examined and purchased by patrons. To complement these observations, and prevent the perspective of Salem I present in my thesis from obscuring the experiences of those far more knowledgeable and integrated into the Witchcraft or Wiccan community than I, I also planned to conduct interviews with shop owners. It is essential to amplify the voices of those whose space I, as the researcher, am sharing for a time. However after the first event I attended, a Wiccan solstice ritual, my perspective changed drastically as I realized that witchcraft in Salem is a deeply embodied practice where items are only secondary to one's own innate powers. My interviews with practicing witches in Salem also did not portray witchcraft as a feminist practice, destabilizing my ideas of examining the concept of feminist capitalism. I did not completely do away with my examination of objects, however, as their proliferation contrasts with the body-centered narratives of power I heard from my informants. Nor did I cast aside my plans to think about the commercialization of witchcraft in a feminist context, but rather I integrated the active denial of feminism an intriguing lense in and of itself. Thus while my focus changed, my methods of fieldwork remained largely the same. I attended a Wiccan ritual, a macabre

Christmas market, and visited many of the witchcraft or metaphysical based shops in Salem, conducted observations in museums, as well as held semi-structured interviews with business owners and museum employees. I mainly frequented the shops on Essex street, Salem's main pedestrian drag nestled between historically oriented museums and witchy, neopagan, and metaphysical shops, as well as some horror attractions. I chose this area because my goal was to experience the way that Salem is presented to the average tourist, and so I made sure to visit the most popular attractions. My research also involved significant archival work, as the significance of my findings lies in the similarities and divergences between today's witches and those conjured by panic three hundred and twenty eight years ago, and acknowledging the contexts in which witches arise in different areas of the world.

The nature of my fieldwork combined with my focus on the commercialization of spiritual practice mandated that I participate in the very activities I am analyzing in this work. It was a challenge to balance my roles of both customer and researcher, and this insisted that a portion of my work incorporate auto-ethnography. I often switched between these roles quickly, for instance I received a tarot reading and immediately afterwards interviewed the woman from whom I had received this service. Whether my participants felt obliged to offer me more information because I had paid for a service from them is a serious question, however I found that it was helpful to have taken part in their business in order to find a level of trust and comfort, and to present myself as someone not asking questions as a skeptic of their practice, but as someone who was respectful and truly interested in their lives. As someone with no experience in either ethnography or Witchcraft, it was difficult to connect with participants. I also had my hesitations in terms of participating in a religious event such as the Yule Ritual while not

following, or planning to begin following, the Wiccan faith. While the event was open to the public, and one did not have to follow the religion to participate, I still had a feeling of unease. I found that it was of great importance to be transparent with the officiants and other participants, and to participate fully, enthusiastically, and respectfully, with the goal of experiencing and contributing, rather than solely of gathering information.

I am a white woman researching a phenomenon that largely caters to white women. The witchcraft economy of Salem is catered towards people like me; white, middle class women who do not follow a major religion. My home itself is less than an hour away, and in the same state. In these senses, my work falls into the category of anthropology of the home. My work, then, is a conscious participation in and dialogue with a familiar environment, where the particular activities are unfamiliar yet the surrounding structures are geographically and socioeconomically homelike. Rather than following in the traditional footprints of anthropology and participating in a “search for alterity” (Peirano 1998: 106), I find it is not always necessary to study the “other” to seek out conclusions to our cultural conundrums. At times it may be as important to examine those quite similar to ourselves to see how these divides are created and performed, or in this case, commodified. There are benefits and disadvantages to both modes of research; studying “alterity” must take great caution to not exoticize, to inordinately emphasize difference. An ethnography of the home runs the risk of leaving out important and varied perspectives. The conspicuous absence of a more racially and socioeconomically diverse setting in Salem’s commercial district is significant in and of itself, and thus my discussion of Salem’s economy touches upon the discriminatory mechanisms of capitalism which have both catapulted commercial witchcraft to the fore of the economy, while deepening divides between Salem’s

commercial center and the surrounding city. Thus while my participants were all white women, I in no way intend to suggest that their stories are the only important narratives of Salem. A fascinating further study could focus on the perspectives of those living outside of the witchy commercial center of Salem.

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Introduction

On the winter solstice, I attended a Wiccan Yule ritual in Salem. The event takes place in the back room of a popular metaphysical shop, and as I stand near a large display of tarot cards, waiting to be ushered into the ritual space, I overhear a man in red robes (who later introduced himself as a Wiccan priest) debating with his similarly crimson-robed entourage about whether or not “people would even show up” for the Yule ritual because of other events going on in Salem that same day. His concern for the number of attendees becomes palpable as he makes his way around the store, asking not whether each person was “here for the ritual”, but whether they would be “interested in attending a Yule ritual.” Those who agree are directed to a room in the back of the store; a smoky, dimly lit, wall-to-wall carpeted cube painted dark red like the gowns of the officiants. A few more people trickle in; a man and a woman, two men who seem to know the main priest. We naturally form a circle around the center table, a long, polished wood slab holding statues, antlers, and bowls of salt, water, and dirt. I went in with the goal of understanding the role of material objects in the ritual, but soon realized that the most powerful objects of the ritual are the bodies of the participants ourselves.

The ritual begins with a crash course in how to perform a Wiccan ritual. Looking at anthropological literature on ritual, Davis-Floyd (2003) provides a detailed outline of its elements and purpose, perhaps most centrally that ritual is “a patterned, repetitive, and symbolic enactment of a cultural belief or value; its primary purpose is transformation” (Davis-Floyd 2003: 8). Adler’s (1986) definition of ritual extends Davis-Floyd’s (2003) statement by drawing on her own fieldwork with Neopagan groups, and suggests that their rituals hold the power to create bodily connection, “to end, for a time, our sense of human alienation from each other and

from nature” (Adler 1986: 162). Konvalinka et. al. (2010) biologically quantify Durkheim’s (1995) theory of “collective effervescence” in which he suggests that ritual-goers feed off of and create energy through their bodily proximity and repetitive actions (Konvalinka et. al. 2010: 8514). In their study of a Spanish fire-walking ritual celebrating the summer solstice, the authors found that a physical bond forms both between participants and between participants and observers, evidenced by a mirroring of elevating and lowering heart rates in what the authors call “synchronized arousal” (Konvalinka et. al. 2010: 8515).

While our Yule Ritual has no spectators and no tests of fire, the placement and relationship of our bodies to one another was of paramount importance to the success of the ritual. We are instructed on how to move: only counterclockwise; how to stand: the circle must be male, female, male, female, and we must not break the circle. The lights are turned out, and the priest begins a speech about the darkness of winter. We are asked to close our eyes and meditate on the feeling of coldness seeping into our bones, and how our bodies are thawed by the warmth of the sun god when he returns to herald the spring. At this moment, the attendant priestesses enter the room with lit candles. We are supposed to have our eyes shut, but I open mine for a moment to see our shadows wavering along the opposite wall. The objects on the table are simply adornments to the abilities of the body; we are passed small red books so we know the words to sing, the priest dons the antlers so he can embody the sun god. The circle of participants dances counter clockwise while we chant a Latin verse followed by “blessed be”. The priestesses pass around madeleine cookies and plastic cups of a dark red juice. My best guess is that it is cranberry grape flavor, of which we give half to the gods by putting it in a red glass bowl. The ritual had its moments of confusion; people forgot words, were unsure when to

cross or uncross their arms, and sang horribly out of tune. But as we danced in unison, as the priest called out to the gods hovering beyond the light of the candles, the idiosyncrasies of humanity faded in the face of the overwhelming sense that we were indeed practicing the art of “raising power from one’s own body” (Adler 1986: 62).

Although participation in this ritual was technically free besides the donation of a non-perishable item to a local food pantry, the location of the ceremony itself within an established metaphysical shop encouraged most attendees, including myself, to buy something either on the way in or out. It felt almost like theft not to. One had to physically move through the store to reach the ritual room, and this funnelling of bodies to create the ritual also resulted in an economic benefit for the surrounding business. In this thesis I examine the two waves of witches in Salem, the first in 1692 and the second in the 1970’s, as both arising for economic purposes, but vastly different in their treatment of the witch’s physical body as a vector capable of alleviating economic hardship. My work takes several lenses, perhaps foremost grounded in an economic perspective, drawing from David Harvey’s (2005) work on neoliberalism in order to draw attention to the ways that history, and tragedy, can become commodities, and how economic practices and dogmatic statements of modern day witches are seemingly in conflict in Salem’s neoliberal, service based economy which is at once deeply spiritual and overwhelmingly materialistic. This work is attuned to the connection of some branches of the modern witchcraft movement in feminism, as well as the centrality of issues of gender (in)equality and women’s oppression in the creation and condemnation of ‘witches’ in 1692, and their continued relevance in women’s empowerment in Salem’s economy today. My research also takes a materialist approach, centering the importance of material items, bodies, and other tangible things as filled

with stories and having their own social history and trajectory, following the work Appadurai (1986). In many ways then, this is a work of economic anthropology rooted in and empathetic to the experiences and stories of today's witches, who are the economic fulcrum of Salem. I situate these narratives within larger trends of neoliberalization, and the connection of economic transformation to the social value given to bodies.

I wish to take a moment to discuss the importance of race in this research, and acknowledge that while my observations and interviews involved almost entirely White participants, this is in no way the full picture of Salem today or historically, and neither do the theories and definitions I provide have homogeneous meanings when applied to different circumstances and histories. To elaborate, Stupp (2011) argues that the script of a slave auction became a ritual performance through looking at "genealogy of auctions as performance" and tracing the evolution of "authentic" and "staged" slave sales (Stupp 2011: 62). Here is where the fluidity of the purpose of ritual becomes starkly apparent, as ritual develops in Stupp's (2011) work as an unequivocally sinister transformation, allowing dehumanization rather than oneness, channeling energy into hateful mob mentality rather than creating one great repository of strength as identified by Adler's (1986) discussion of Neopagan ritual. The face of Salem that I experienced was largely White. All but one participant in the Yule ritual were White, as were all of the witches I interviewed. There are certainly witches of color in Salem, but they do not dominate on Essex street as practitioners based in Celtic, Nordic, or Italian traditions do. What, then, is Salem's relationship to issues of race? How does its history of prejudice and slavery fit into the witch trials and today's economy? A full exploration of these worthy questions is beyond the scope of this thesis. It is essential to note, however, that by my experiences in

markets, shops, and interviews, that the economic practice of witchcraft in Salem seems to largely benefit White practitioners, and their White patrons. The economic profile of the city seems a microcosm for the larger discriminatory mechanisms of free market practices, in which the social elite dominate in their socially granted capacity to capitalize on these economic “freedoms”. To illustrate, as of 2017 the Hispanic population of Salem made up 29.3 percent of all people living in poverty, while only forming 17.6 percent of the total population (DATAUSA n.d.). In contrast, the White population of Salem formed 71.8 percent of the total population but only 41.7 percent of those in poverty (DATAUSA n.d.). The disenfranchisement of communities of color in Salem today does not exist in a historical vacuum, although the history of racial violence and slavery in New England is woefully under-discussed. It is poignant to note that the first ship to bring African slaves to New England was a ship from Salem called *Desire*, arriving from Bermuda where slaves had been traded for Indigenous captives from the Pequot war (Manegold 2010: 43). The 1692 trials themselves were deeply entangled with racial prejudice and power dynamics. Schiff (2015) frames the Salem witch panic of 1692 as situated within the widespread fear of Indigenous Peoples, themselves ““Horrid sorcerers and hellish conjurers”” to Puritan minister Cotton Mather (Schiff 2015: 18). Thus Indigenous Peoples were bound up with witches, racial prejudices fostering an explosive environment of fear. It was not uncommon for Indigenous Peoples to be cited as harmful agents in league with the devil, some in Salem reported spectral torment by “...an Indian-like figure” which they tied to acts of witchcraft (Schiff 2015: 51).

Although the joyful solstice celebrations of modern day witches seem a far cry from stringent Puritan lifestyle and hateful accusations, Salem would never have materialized as the

“Witch City” we know today without its association with the infamous witch trials of the seventeenth century. Salem continues to search for balance between its commercial face and tragic blood (Weir 2012), and several witches-cum-business owners whom I spoke with did not see their work as falling into the legacy of the witch trials at all, though I trace the social lineage of the witch as an economic actor in Salem’s current tourism driven economy to her construction as a response to economic uncertainty in the seventeenth century. This thesis does not intend to prove or disprove historical theories on the cause of seventeenth century witchcraft mania in New England, but my fieldwork on the entanglement of body and economy in modern day witchcraft springs off of the theories other scholars have put forth on possible causes of the appearance of Salem’s first ‘witches’. Much has been written, theorized, and performed regarding the Salem witch trials since their grim occurrence lasting over a hallucinatory eight months in 1692. Reasons for the persecution of hundreds of ‘witches’, mostly women, and the executions of nineteen (not including the handful who died in jail), range from an infection of eastern equine encephalitis causing the convulsions and hallucinations of the afflicted (Carlson 1999), to psychological disturbances of the young accusers (Putnam 2004). There have been numerous highly plausible theories put forth by scholars throughout the years, and no definitive answer has been reached. In all likelihood, as in most tragedies, a combination of factors drove the creation and execution of ‘witches’ in colonial North America. Some particularly interesting arguments focus on economic possibilities driving the search for witches. King & Mixon (2010) examine the entanglement of religiosity and economy in seventeenth century Salem, arguing that ministers capitalized on panic to increase their social status and prosperity. During the fear and turmoil of the trials, “there was a market for ministers to sell religious services to members of the

community, and to acquire and maintain market share, a minister needed to be viewed by community members as a righteous and responsible person who was capable of protecting them” (King & Mixon 2010: 682). Oster (2004) posits that witch hunts in Europe and the Colonies occurred during the Little Ice Age lasting from 1645 to 1715 during which crop failures shook local economies, prompting fear and scapegoating in the form of the witch (Oster 2004: 218), a figure who had already been determined in the *Malleus Maleficarum*¹ to be capable of such feats as influencing the weather (Oster 2004: 217). Weather-induced economic woes are again suggested as a potential cause in Miguel’s (2003) more present day study on how famine in rural Tanzania caused by poor or excessive rainfall coincides with the killing of ‘witches’. Miguel supports his theory of witch killing as a result of economic hardship rather than hardship more broadly by looking at two different “shocks” in the community: unusual rainfall and disease outbreaks. He finds that witch killings increased only during rainfall-caused crop failures, which result in economic hardship, and not during disease “which lead[s] neither to lower income nor to witch murders empirically.” (Miguel 2003: 1154).

Drawing on the economic theories of Oster (2004), King & Mixon (2010), and Miguel (2003), this thesis frames the witch panic of 1692 as one driven to some extent by economic fears. The ‘witch’ in 1692 Salem contributed to the economy through her role as a scapegoat, a way for people to manifest their fears into a tangible vessel over which they then held the power of eradication. In Salem today, witches support the economy and through their profusion; numerous witch-owned businesses are clustered in the bustling commercial center of Salem.

¹ Translated as ‘The Hammer of Witches’, the *Malleus Maleficarum* is a treatise written by Heinrich Kramer & Jacob Sprenger and published in 1487 describing the evil doings of witches and methods of their extermination.

There is no evidence, it should be noted, that the persecuted ‘witches’ in 1692 were witches of any sort, an odd contrast with the increasing numbers of quite real witches living and working in Salem today. This fact appears clear to some; one practicing witch in Salem who I spoke with noted the curious juxtaposition: “it’s just so strange that they weren’t witches, those who were executed in 1692, [they] were just ordinary people. So why are there so many *witches* here, you know?”. She did not provide an answer to this intriguing query, but perhaps our interaction did in and of itself. I paid for the broomstick I had made in her shop, and made my way through the throngs of tourists, credit cards in hand, cycling in and out of the dozens of witch-themed and witch-owned shops lining the main drag which, conveniently, is pedestrian only for the ease of shoppers. Simply put, there are so many witches in Salem because they profit from the historical legacy so deeply attached to the very word Salem, and the town of Salem depends on the prosperity of their businesses (Weir 2012).

After a century or so hiatus from public life, the witch has returned and thrived on television screens in shows such as *Bewitched*, in literature including Arthur Miller’s *Crucible*, and most marvelously in the heart of Salem itself more than three hundred years after such acts of extraordinary violence. On my first visit to Salem, I drove several miles behind a neon green “Witch City Cab” painted with a black outline of a witch, complete with her pointed hat, astride a broom. The car was a misfit in the outskirts of Salem, where houses were really quite mundane. The neighborhood reminded me of the town I grew up in; slightly run down but welcoming vinyl sided two-family flats lining a rather unkempt road. No signs of witches here besides the nauseously bright taxi hurdling over potholes. Witch City could perhaps be branded more specifically as the ‘Witch District’, as the two-families give way to the McIntyre historical

district characterized by boxy antique houses with informational plaques, and then to a rather small section densely populated by metaphysical, occult, and witchcraft oriented businesses. Two older women step out of an aura-photography parlour, and the bell-laden door of the Coven's Cottage rings continuously as shoppers emerge, weighed down with bundles of herbs and books on runes. While the draw of the city, as evidenced by the unusual taxi decoration, is the witches of Salem, the city today can more accurately be characterized as an eclectic product of the equally eclectic witchcraft revival movement of the twentieth century.

The witchcraft revival movement which has taken foothold in the the contemporary West has been traced to the works of Gerald Garnder and Margaret Murray in the early to mid twentieth century in England, moving from a "counterculture" movement to a more mainstream practice thanks to the interest of "unconventional spirit seekers" in the 1970's (Lewis 1996: 2-3). In Lewis's (1996) work, practices such as Witchcraft and Wicca are placed under the broader category of Neo-Paganism. Others, such as Eller (1998), disagree, citing irreconcilable differences in values and symbolism between Neopagan paths and Goddess worship, which is often an element of modern Witchcraft practices (Eller 1998: 221). Pike (2005), in her entry for The Encyclopedia of Religion, agrees with Lewis (1996), and defines Neopaganism as encompassing practices such as Druidism, neoshamanism, and the beliefs of "witches or 'Wiccans'"; linked together by an eclectic approach to reconstruction of historical deities and spiritual practices, with practitioners often drawing from multiple pantheons (Pike 2005: 6471). There are certainly distinctly Neopagan practitioners and businesses in Salem today; my wanderings led me to a richly decorated shop celebrating Norse Paganism, others focused on Pagan literature of the Celtic world, and several which pride themselves in offering goods from a

range of traditions. Wicca, the practice I was introduced to in the Yule Ritual, is a religion generally attributed to Gardner, consisting of a coven headed by a priest or priestess and drawing inspiration primarily from Celtic paganism. Coven members worship a male and female deity, and in Gardner's own practice, "met nude in a nine foot circle and raised power from their bodies through dancing and chanting and meditative techniques" (Adler 1986: 62). While many Wiccans live and practice their religion in Salem, there is "a definite difference" between Witchcraft and Wicca, as I was told by a practicing witch. "People get this mixed up a lot. Wicca is a religion that focuses on the wheel of the year. Not all witches practice this religion, so for instance I don't, so I'm a witch but I'm not Wiccan. A lot of people think they're intertwined, and even Wiccans... a lot of Wiccans... Wiccans won't understand how witches won't consider themselves Wiccan", she sounds amused and a tad exasperated. "And it's a little hierarchical too, you know", she adds. Wicca has seen its share of criticism, with many questioning how much of the tradition was indeed pre-Christian as frequently claimed, and how much was completely fabricated by Gardner in the twentieth century (Adler 1986: 63). My qualms are not with the continuity or discontinuity of the practice of Witchcraft or the existence of historically accurate Witchcraft cults, or how much of the practice is "authentic" as opposed to "revivalist" (Adler 1986: 63) and the judgements that follow such statements, but on the importance of the body as an economic actor in the of two waves of witches in Salem.

It became clear to me throughout my interactions with both modern day witches in Salem and representations of historical witches and trials that the essence of 'witchiness' is identified both by accusers and by witches themselves as tied to the physical body of a witch, rather than solely to her actions upon society. Her ability to perform these actions, rather, is possible because

of the physical condition and traits of her body. Assessment of the appearance, interaction or integration of the witch's body with others are the mode through which the witch is constructed as a social category, whether by others or by herself. The centering of the witch's body in her identity and the performance of her craft positions Witchcraft as a deeply embodied practice, embodiment in the words of Mascia-Lees and Blackwood (2011) describing "...a way of inhabiting the world as well as the source of personhood, self, and subjectivity, and the precondition of intersubjectivity'" (Van Wolputte 2004: 259 as quoted in Mascia-Lees & Blackwood 2011: 29b). Mascia-Lees and Blackwood (2011) note two key insights in the introduction of their edited volume on embodiment: that the body is moulded in conversation with global processes of power such as capitalism and neoliberalism, and that it is inseparable from the "lived experiences" it encounters each day (Mascia-Lees & Blackwood 2011: 29a). The importance of the witch's body to Salem's modern economy, and the transformation of its meaning in the centuries between the witch trials and Witch City, illustrates how forces of economic change such as neoliberal deindustrialization create social meaning for bodies as valuable economic assets which may contest the meaning one finds in one's own existence, regardless of the market activities in which one may participate. Mascia-Lees and Blackwood (2011) establish the connection of the body to the social fabric it inhabits, and it follows that the body's appearance and functions have been identified as visible evidence of its social role. In the case of the Salem witch trials, the concept of embodiment allowed an imaginary evil to in fact become real through the grafting of social fears onto living bodies, creating evidence for the fear of witches through melding vulnerable bodies with religious folklore. As Paxson (1997) clarifies, during the Middle Ages, the witch existed in a state of "literate disbelief", in which "intellectuals

and ecclesiastics tended to dismiss witches and their demonic commerce as imaginary, as part of the world of mere nightmare or fantasy” (Paxson 1997: 483). Thus the witch in the Early Modern period became real as society’s “intellectuals and ecclesiastics” endorsed her reality, if one follows the ideas set forth by King & Mixon (2010), for their own economic benefit off of her corporeal condemnation.

Presenting his work with the Kayapo of Brazil in his chapter in Mascia-Lees (2011) edited volume, Terence Turner identifies a “natural form of the physical body” underlying “the meta-form of the social body constructed by adornments and modifications” (Turner 2011: 299m). In his work, Turner describes how bodies, and specifically one’s skin, show evidence of broken values or taboos, and change depending on their social role; for example in the Kayapo society a child's skin is soft and “permeable” because the child is not yet an independent individual or seen as a separate entity from parents and therefore must receive vital input from their bodies, but becomes more resistant as the child grows older and more self sufficient (Turner 2011: 299m). Turner’s work reveals the body as a place where beliefs and fears are enacted and reified, and where social roles are made legible to those who prescribe them. The witch’s body today is the ultimate tool of her craft; her body has been of paramount importance both to historical accusers and to herself today as a conduit for her power and abilities. A poignant example of the entanglement of bodily reclamation and capitalism in modern day Salem can be found on the website of The Cauldron Black, describing itself as a metaphysical shop:

“YOU are the most powerful aspect of your spiritual work. Your body is the most sacred of all altars. The connection between body, mind, and spirit is the most important ingredient in all your spells and rituals. This series brings to you the skills to become grounded and centered within your physical body in order to empower your magical practice.” (The Cauldron Black, n.d.)

This is an excerpt from their advertisement for a yoga class, asking twenty five dollars for drop-ins and seventy five for a set of five classes. Like the Yule Ritual, the physical presence of attendees is advertised as their source of power, but the shop is also depending on the arrival of these bodies for income. Such an inward looking premise in a city so deeply entrenched in material capitalism seems unusual, as one reveres their own body in and amongst shelves of other objects to which access is granted only for a price. The ‘meta-form’ of the witch’s body, that in which her social role is made visible, has changed with her identity and perception to be more internal, a self-reflective embodiment of genetic legacy and personal power rather than outward appearance as used during trials, which reflects the shift of witch identification from a public spectacle to a personal revelation. Who is given the task of identifying a witch, and how this is done, is reflected in the internal or external identification of her status. This thesis takes the position that rather than seeing the display or commodification of bodies as an inherently malicious activity, the circumstances in which they are offered, for whom and by whom, is of paramount importance. For the witches of modern day Salem, embodiment and the commercialization of this embodiment have largely benefited both themselves and the city of Salem, although this is not always the case.

While the Yule Ritual is an example of a symbiotic relationship between embodiment and economy, and The Cauldron’s yoga classes, while commodifying one’s spiritual relationship to one’s own body, offer growth to the participant and security to the instructor, this is not to say that there are no exploitative economic practices in Salem in which the power of a witch’s body continues to be used for the benefit of others. The witch’s role as the mainstay of Salem’s

economy brings with it the valument of her body, but not necessarily her autonomy. Susan, an older witch and tarot reader with whom I sat down for some time, revealed to me that she:

“came to work here [in Salem] for a gentleman who I had to take to court... Because he called me the C- word. It went all over the internet too, I loved it! He was told he better not do it again! I worked for him. I sat in his window. And he wanted me there because I brought, brought business in... Because I was doing readings. And I would bring... a lot of money. That’s all he was interested in. I didn’t want to be around that. So I decided in 2012 that I would open up my own shop.”

The small table at which we have been sitting as she performed a tarot reading has a view of the street, but is far enough removed from the window so that we are invisible to those walking by. In any case, my back is to the window rather than her face. Susan has clearly put effort into avoiding becoming a display for would-be clients, as she was for the “gentleman”. In contrast, the large, front facing windows of the shop comprising the outer shell of the Yule Ritual serve as stages for tarot readers. Complete with golden curtains behind them, those shopping inside the store cannot see the reading, but the psychics serve as a window display to pedestrians outside, presumably to “bring business in” as was Susan’s experience, echoing Sharp’s (2000) statement that “it is one thing to claim one’s body as one’s own property; it is another entirely for other parties to lay claim to it” (Sharp 2000: 300) The man Susan previously worked for laid claim to her body as a display piece, off of which he profited. Should she have chosen to sit herself in the window of the shop she now owns in order to solicit customers, the balance of agency would shift entirely.

The display of psychics and tarot readers in curtain draped windows lining the main pedestrian drag insists on a brief comparison to Amsterdam’s window prostitution. In the Red Light District’s 300 or so windows populated by sex workers, “she [the sex worker] solicits

customers who are walking by and getting a good look at her.” (Verhoeven & Gestel 2011: 149). Amsterdam is known as a pioneer in legalization of sex work; the profession was legalized in 2000 to “give sex workers more autonomy over their profession, reduce criminal activity and improve their labor conditions” (Cruz & van Iterson nd:np). The sex workers do not own these windows, but rather rent them and are subject to high fees of between ninety and 150 euros for eight hours (Cruz & van Iterson nd:np). These women, like the witches of Salem, have a tense relationship with their places of display. On the one hand, they do draw in customers on which are essential to the sex workers’ business. On the other, the window display is rife with possibility of exploitation from mechanics invisible to the passerby, which draws the golden ideals of autonomy into question. A social worker assisting sex workers in Amsterdam notes how paying rent, tax, and sometimes one’s pimp “leaves you with no money” and can cause sex workers to work extremely long hours which is “exhausting for the body and mind.” (Cruz & van Iterson nd:np). Both Salem and Amsterdam have a tenuous relationship between women-centered industry and exploitation. The dangerous consequences of embodiment combined with lack of autonomy can be an avenue to understand how witches were created historically by those who would gain social or economic capital from their suppression.

Historical witchcraft as an embodied construction: The bodily creation and condemnation of witches by others

Witch Theatre

I had been trying to find a way to write about tarot readings without presenting the readers as performers, and realized that the phrase “performed a reading” was the only string of words I was fishing out of my idiomatic repertoire to describe my interaction with Susan, a tarot reader and business owner on the outskirts of Salem’s commercial center. A theatrical performance where the witch’s body “performs” her role is what one expects to pay for when seeking out her services. The framing of witchcraft as a performance has roots in the theatrical creation of the witch during the Salem witch trials, created by her condemners for the emotional or economic benefit of others. Stacy Schiff (2015), in her description and analysis of the Salem Witch Trials, notes that the “bewitched” young girls, whose rabid behavior and inexplicable convulsions were attributed to witchcraft, were objects of public fascination: “The curious and the well-wishers crowded in, gooseflesh rising on their arms. The howlings and grotesque writhings disturbed. They were riveting.” (Schiff 2015: 22). Describing an event as “riveting” often pertains to a theatrical performance, as one’s reaction to a form of entertainment. Both the ‘witch’ and her ‘victims’ were public spectacles of dark entertainment. Unlike in modern day Salem, there were no local witches. They had to be created, through a body brought to trial a neighbor and hanged a witch, her transformation predetermined in the role forced upon her.

Since “the colony was without theatre, considered a ‘shameful vanity’”, executions and unnatural contortions filled their place (Schiff 2015: 47). Heinemann (1980) discusses the reasoning behind the Puritan opposition to theatre as rooted in the spectacular, attention-grabbing

nature of stage performance, which formed threatening “analogies between dramatic and religious expression in the ritual participation of actor and audience” (Heinemann 1980: 20). The Puritans did not do away with all forms of performance, but modified its societal role. Replacement of theatre with the witchcraft spectacle demanded an equally decadent and ritualesque performance, and in this emotive aspect the difference between witchcraft trials and traditional theatre is rather unclear. Schiff (2015) describes the courtroom scene of the trial of Martha Corey as an all consuming, sensory experience where “in the cramped pews, amid the smudged light and fretful whispers, the writhings and screechings were as terrifying as any sorcery” (Schiff 2015: 86). The dance between the bodies of Corey and the afflicted girls showed a highly choreographed mimicry, her movements setting off visceral reactions to the thrill of the audience. In the final scene, Corey was outperformed by her “victims” and sentenced to death (Schiff 2015: 86). The flourishing of Puritan witch-theatre was enabled by its new social function: reversing the purported depravities of acting. While traditional theatre called forth “whoredom and uncleanness”, the theatrics of a trial generally culminated in what the populace understood the removal of such sinful bodies through imprisonment or execution (Heinemann 1980: 20).

Freak Theatre

The conjuring of the witch through public performance should be understood in the context of the theatrical creation of social outcasts more broadly in Early Modern Europe and North America, whose role was to provide entertainment or economic support to those who created them. I have mentioned above, in the example of sex workers in Amsterdam’s red light

district, the fickle line between empowerment through embodiment versus exploitation for those whose bodies are central to their work. A long standing example of commercialized bodily exploitation in North America is the development of freak shows, in which the ‘freak’ was created through performance and imaginary story. Imported, much like witchcraft, from European stages, the beginnings of the freak show can be found at English fairs during the Renaissance in which “human oddities” were displayed for a fee (Bogdan 1988: 25). The taste for creating monsters from the mental and physical differences of fellow humans made its way across the Atlantic by the eighteenth century. Early displays of these ‘oddities’ in the United States were often individual events consisting of one freak and their promoter, with varying levels of equity between freak and manager where “some of these relationships were partnerships in which both the manager and the exhibit profited; others were more one-sided, with the manager exploiting his companion as a meal ticket” (Bogdan 1988: 26). The freak show eventually became institutionalized, moving from “roving entrepreneurs” (Bogdan 1988: 26) to museums, most notably the Barnum Museum (Bogdan 1988: 33), and circuses in the form of sideshows (Bogdan 1988: 40). In the 1800s, theatre was still looked down upon in the United States, causing people to flock to these museums wherein they could find exhibitions of living human oddities, remarkably reminiscent of the role of witch trials as play-like entertainment in a theatre-less Puritan world. This performance, as Bogdan (1988) argues, is the necessary setting for one to become a freak who, like the seventeenth century witch, did not inherently exist, but had to be molded through performance and the attachment of social and monetary value to their body (Bogdan 1988: 25).

The freak was given an imaginary backstory to increase show popularity. Stories were developed by freak promoters to highlight their appearance and performance skills, and generally suggested a distant, mysterious, and often inhuman place of origin (Bogdan 1988: 19). These histories changed based on the current tastes of the public, showing how the freak could be constructed and reconstructed as an object of public consumption. Such was the story of Krao Farini, a woman with hypertrichosis:

“In the 1880’s, when still a child, she started her freak career as ‘Darwin’s Missing Link’ - halfway between human and monkey - in which she was fraudulently presented as having pouches in her mouth, prehensile toes, cartilage in her nose, and other simian features (Hutchinson, Gregory, and Lydekker c. 1895). Although ‘Darwin’s Missing Link’ was part of her presentation all through her life, as she entered her teens she began to be presented as a cultured, intelligent lady who spoke five languages.” (Bogdan 1988: 112)

Krao’s publicity narrative, then, actually had the power to dictate her physical features, or at least how the public perceived them. In a news article published at her death, a subheading of which reads “She Never Complained”, it was reported that she indeed spoke several languages and “knew the literature of many peoples” (The New York Times 1926). Her show presentation became a public truth published outside of the realm of the circus, as a fact of her body rather than of her performance. For a circus freak, the two prove inseparable. “When called upon to travel through city streets”, the reader is told, “she always wore a veil, for she was in terror of curiosity when away from the ‘big top’” (The New York Times 1926). The article also reports Krao requesting that her body be cremated so as to finally put an end to “gawkers”, but her request was overturned for lack of a written document, and a traditional funeral was held (The New York Times 1926).

Today, Bogdan (1988) assures the reader, the freak show of the late nineteenth and early- to mid- twentieth centuries is “barely alive... approaching it’s finale”, brought to its knees by a growing unease with the exhibition of living human beings (Bogdan 1988: 2). A report from 2003 by Robert Smith for NPR’s *All Things Considered* calls the inevitability of Bogdan’s statement into question. “Check it out, check it out, this is the sickest game on the boardwalk, it’s the only game you get to shoot at a live human target!” a New York accent crackles in over Smith’s microphone. Gunfire pitters in the background. Coney Island, Smith informs the listener, is home to a game “just sick and wrong enough to draw every eye on the boardwalk” called “Shoot the Freak”, where for a few dollars anyone can take their turn shooting a paint gun at a freak. This ‘freak’ is an actor named Matthew, who just graduated school and took the gig for some quick money. While he lacks the physical characteristics of those typically chosen for the role of ‘freak’, the concept of the freak is invoked here as an appropriate target for violence. Why shoot the freak? “It relieves a lot of tension”, says one young player; “It’s a sense of power. It’s a power trip”, reports another (Smith 2003: np). The disturbing impulses of the shooters are not a far cry from suggestions for the impulse of witch-hunting in the Early Modern period. Power certainly played a role, most clearly in a gendered context. Some have suggested, such as a presentation in a well-trafficked museum in modern day Salem, that the young accusers felt bored and powerless, and took out these feelings in a deadly game of pretend. The changing role of the public in the freak show, from freak-observer to freak-hunter, is not so much a development, but a devolvement, an activity inching closer to the treatment of deviant bodies in the Salem Witch Trials than the extinguishment of exploitative human entertainment.

Embodiment of Witchcraft in the 1692 Trials:

The 'witch' was moulded as an actor in the 1692 trials through the casting of her body in a mythical narrative similar in its malleable nature and audience-pleasing content to those of freaks. Orchestrated by, in this case, judges in place of freak promoters, the Salem witchcraft 'confessions' thrilled the audience. "Over and over again, the record shows the examiners almost frantically trying to draw a confession from the lips of a person whose guilt they clearly do not doubt but against whom they recognize they do not yet have a legal case" (Boyer & Nissenbaum 1974: 11-12). This sort of forced confession, and the acceptance of stories with all of their wild elements is the result of "the attempt to fit this ancient crime into a rational intellectual framework" (Boyer & Nissenbaum 1974: 11). "A yellow bird accompanied her visitor. He appeared as two red cats, an oversize[sic] black one, a black dog, a hog. If she served him, she could have the yellow bird... He visited four times, threatening to slice off her head if she mentioned him" (Schiff 2015: 54). So unwound the story of Tituba, a slave from the Caribbean working in the household of one of the afflicted girls. Her narrative was "spellbinding", the details she provided "vivid and sensational, lurid and hairbrained" (Schiff 2015: 54). The logistical feasibility of her confession in terms of dates and places was far inferior to its cathartic value, miraculously soothing the afflicted girls with tales of wild flights and strange animals (Schiff 2015: 54-55). The Salem witch did not have far to travel for a proper setting for an exotic tale, simply into the darkness beyond the town border or above the rooftops, where the "devilish savage" and "rabid black hog" awaited the wayward colonial (Schiff 2015: 7-8). Tales such as Tituba's featured meetings with the Devil, an activity which was connected by examiners to the appearance and functions of the witch's body. In this way, 'evidence' on the exterior of the

witch's body was used to cement her theatrical role in the demonic narrative constructed around her. What can be characterized as 'fake' or 'imaginary' is called into question when a story becomes entrenched in social folklore, and takes on bodily consequences such as exploitation and execution. Paxson (1997) argues that "the reality of witchcraft [in the *Malleus Maleficarum*] is secured by the reality of the demonic contract - a contract insisted upon dogmatically, we may suggest, precisely because it is the one thing... that is *never* actually witnessed" (Greenblatt 1964: 113, as quoted in Paxson 1997: 484). The featuring of a demonic contract in the public condemnations of witches shows the centrality of an elaborate, imaginary backstory to the social reifying of the witch, where her body becomes the link between the corporeal and an unholy myth.

Evidence for the reality of the Demonic contract was found on the witch's body. Her unseemly associations with the Devil produced a visible "seal on the human body", often on the breasts or genitals, caused by "biting, scratching, or painfully licking their bodies, provoking an injury that had permanent effects" (Davies and Matteoni 2017: 17). Thus as the embodiment of this myth, the body of the 'witch' was demonized by her audience to fit the theatrical role they wished it to play, the marks on or ageing of her body cast as evidence of her malevolence, and as reason for her destruction. Outlined on historical records and pamphlets,

"The body of a stereotypical witch was thought to bear physical traits of their criminality: some through birth, such as sharp prominent noses and squinted eyes; some characteristics engendered through age, such as gobber tooth and hunched back... an old woman, whose body ceased being cleansed through the menstrual process, became herself diseased and contagious." (Davies and Matteoni 2017: 15).

The reproductive functions of a woman's body, as well as her outward appearance, were criteria used to determine whether or not she was a witch. Bodily decay and imbalance were cited as the source of her powers, sickening her mind and allowing the Devil's influence. Grevitz (2000) describes the biological infiltration of the Devil into the body of a witch: "...[medical] practitioners imbued with the corpuscular and iatromechanical perspectives of the last half of the seventeenth century spoke of the devil insinuating himself into 'the constitution of the animal spirits, heterogeneous atoms of little bodies'" (Grevitz 2000: 11, quoting from Thomas Willis 1681: 48-49). The ageing female body was cast as a grotesque display of her corruptibility and inherent misdesign (Davis-Floyd 2003: 53). Her contagion was a societal menace, and thus her suppression a public responsibility.

The embodied creation of the historical witch is shown again through her presentation as a consumer of bodies, as well as an object of consumption herself. Her theatrical creation as a social category and the attribution of malevolent qualities to her physical attributes culminated in a harmful body "...that needed to be abused and destroyed" in order to rid society of her threat (Davies & Matteoni 2017: 17). One way that the witch was shown to be harmful was through complex biological theories of her body as requiring energy from other beings in order to gain and maintain its power. It was reported that she was a "stealer of life force", drinking the blood of babies and youth in order to maintain her vitality, which she lacked because her own blood had been stolen by the Devil and continually drained by familiar spirits (Davies & Matteoni 2017: 19). In a cycle of real and imagined vampirism centered on the witch's body, her blood was used in turn by those believing themselves to be cursed by her. Because bewitchment "established a physical and spiritual relationship to the victim's body", one had to break this

one-way energy drain which often “manifested itself in brutal physical assault” of the witch with the goal of drawing her blood in turn (Davies & Matteoni 2017: 19). The practice is described by an anonymous chronicler of the capture and execution of a witch in England: “..led, perhaps by that general opinion, that fetching Blood of the Witch takes a way her power of doing any harm, he gave her a little cut over the hand and fetching blood of her... it wrankled and swell’d extreamly [sic]” (Anonymous 1674: 3). The ultimate violence dealt to the witch was her execution. Nineteen witches were executed in Salem in 1692. These executions were public spectacles, reportedly “A great number of spectators had been present” at the gallows on August nineteenth of that year, when five were hanged (Francis 2005: 139).

These violent events were the result of larger societal turmoil in Salem, centering around economic rivalries, Boyer and Nissenbaum (1974) argue. The witchcraft accusations were part of a factional conflict connected to the economic trajectories of Salem Village, modern day Danvers, and Salem Town, modern day Salem (Boyer & Nissenbaum 1974: 86-87). The economy of Salem Village was agriculturally based, while Salem Town had transitioned into a prosperous mercantile center. Along with Boston, Salem Town was one of “...the colony’s two ‘ports of entry’ through which all imports and exports had to pass.” (Boyer & Nissenbaum 1974: 86). The town amassed wealth through its newfound status, and average estate size increased from below average to a third larger than average in comparison to the rest of the county by 1681, although it was only only ten percent of the population which held sixty-two percent of wealth by 1681 (Boyer & Nissenbaum 1974: 86). The authors note that farmers in the Village struggled in an increasingly globalizing economy, as “...the rise of an internationally oriented merchant class, connected by ties of marriage and mutual interest, spawned a style of life and a

sensibility decidedly alien to the pre-capitalist patterns of village existence” (Boyer & Nissenbaum 1974: 88). Basing their argument in geographic analysis of a map showing Salem Village and the locations of accused witches, their supporters, and their accusers, the authors point out that the majority of ‘witches’ and their defenders were in the east, while accusers were generally found in the west (Boyer & Nissenbaum 1974: 35). However after the first twelve accusations, the vast majority of ‘witches’ were found outside of the village, resulting in a map that does not cover all of the accusations, but suggests that the accusations, at least in their beginnings, stemmed from conflict within the village (Boyer & Nissenbaum 1974: 33). The east side of the village had the best land, and was closest to roads and waterways by which farmers could bring their goods to the Salem Town either for consumption or export, which the authors tie to internal factionalism within the village, as sentiments towards the town varied from good terms to deeply resentful (Boyer & Nissenbaum 1974: 94). Some felt that the town’s prosperity “rendered it less and less responsive to the problems of the farmer.” (Boyer & Nissenbaum 1974: 91). Farmers in the village had seen their average 250 acre landholding in 1660 fall to about 120 acres by 1700, at the same time as the rich in Salem Town enjoyed the expansion of their estates (Boyer & Nissenbaum 1974: 94).

The deep seated resentment between the town and village, and between factions within the village, devolved into witch hunts as parties found themselves “unable to relieve their frustrations politically” and resorted to “treating those who threatened them not as a political opposition but as an aggregate of morally defective individuals” (Boyer & Nissenbaum 1974: 109). Creating witches as scapegoats was, Boyer & Nissenbaum (1974) argue, a reaction to economic transformation and the restructuring of social values which accompanied it:

“But what confronted Salem Village...was not a handful (or even a large handful) of ‘deviants.’ It was a group of people who were on the advancing edge of profound historical change. If from one angle they were diverging from an accepted norm of behavior, from another angle their values represented the ‘norm’ of the future. In an age about to pass, the assertion of *private will* posed the direst possible threat to the stability of the community; in the age about to arrive, it would form a central pillar on which that stability rested.” (Boyer & Nissenbaum 1974: 109)

The witch panic of 1692, in this light, was propelled by the rise of a capitalist economy which disenfranchised some and granted inordinate power to others, with the witch as a pawn in a larger conflict of economic transformation in which social bonds and values were in flux. In the context of Boyer & Nissenbaum’s (1974) arguments for an economic origin of ‘witches’ in 1692, the influx of witches to Salem in the 1970’s becomes significant as it corresponds to another period of economic transformation: the spread of free market neoliberalism and the rise of the service economy. Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as “...a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.” (Harvey 2005: 2). The witch in today’s neoliberal state is inversely constructed from her 1692 shadow. She controls her own existence, formed by her own “private will”, if you will, creating a stark contrast to the accused witches of 1692 whose identity was formed by a community wide contagion of fear which curdled to bloodlust. This is beginning to sound like high praise for neoliberal capitalism. Perhaps this is because for the witches I spoke with, they had found joy, stability, and a larger social purpose in their professions, and had the ability to profit from their “individual entrepreneurial freedoms”. But they are the success stories of Salem’s modern day economy: the

homeless man sleeping in a doorway while shoppers glide by, the poster inside the women's room in the gritty town mall offering assistance to youth in need, the man in the center strip of the main road holding a cardboard sign offering a blessing in exchange for help are only the most readily visible exceptions to the flaky glamour of late capitalism.

Modern Witchcraft as an Embodied Practice

Self Construction and Internal Realms of Embodiment

The framing of a witch's body as the manifestation of her powers was used by historical accusers as reason for her corporeal destruction. Today, witchcraft is a similarly embodied practice, but the evidence of her social role, while still deeply entrenched in her biological being, is legible to herself rather than an external display, and similarly used for her own economic benefit rather than her destruction for the benefit of others. Adler (1986) beautifully describes the introspective, embodied practice of magick² in modern witchcraft: "... 'magic' becomes the development of techniques that allow communication with the hidden portions of the self, and with the hidden portion of all other islands in this 'psychic sea'" (Adler 1986: 160). The modern day witches I interacted with described their bodies as a conduit for energy transfer, similar to the body of the historical witch as she was said to give and take energy through the medium of blood. However the role of the witch today as a conduit is an identity which she defines for herself, with benevolent purpose and positive moral attributions. One being from which the modern witch draws energy into her body is her ancestors. Susan described to me the importance of the body of her ancestor Giorgio, a man burned at the stake in 1600 for his heretical scientific beliefs, in defining her practice today: "And we respect the dead. That is a thing that is paramount. Respect your ancestors. 'Cause they are part of you. Look at this skin [on her hand]. It's part of Giorgio who was burned." Respecting ancestors means caring for one's own body as the vessel in which they live on. Susan's understanding of her skin as simultaneously that of her

² Although sources I consulted such as Adler (1986) use the spelling 'magic', I use the version 'magick', a spelling I frequently encountered in book titles and shop names in Salem. 'Magic' refers to stage acts such as by a magician, while 'magick' constitutes "the science and art of causing change to occur in conformity to the will" rather than by trickery (Crowley 1973: *Magick Without Tears*, 27)

ancestor is not something I would have known from looking at her, unlike a townspeople's sharp eye for witch-identifiers such as Devil's mark. It is something that she has chosen to reveal to me. The boundaries between Susan's practice and the deeds of her ancestors was as blurred as their bodily limits in our interview. I asked her to tell me about her spiritual practice, and she replied with an incredibly detailed family history beginning with a Fatimid general in the tenth century who conducted a bloodless takeover of North Africa, and ending with her grandmother's work as a midwife in New York. She never actually told me about her own practice; it was implied that her ancestors' stories would tell me all I needed to know about her, that they define who she is today.

Susan's magically enabled, historically linked body has the ability to connect not only with her own ancestors but with mine as well, as I learned during my tarot reading. She asked me to shuffle the deck, and laid out the well used cards, softly frayed along their edges, in rows almost tumbling over the edge of the table. "Who is William? And Jamie?" She shouts in her impossibly thick Boston accent, deftly picking and reorganizing the worn cards. At times I struggle to identify the names she lists; my role in the reading is far more active than I expected, and I feel that it is my responsibility to make the reading a success. I will admit I entered Susan's shop knowing next to nothing about tarot; I suppose in my naïve mind I gave far too much agency to the cards themselves, underestimating the physical toll of the performance on the reader herself. The cardstock rectangles were simply the charade set through which Susan communicated with the energies I had brought for her to decode. I had chosen, and expected to pay a full seventy five dollars for, a half hour reading, but she spoke so loudly and gestured so

emphatically that, while as enthusiastic as ever, her voice grew hoarse and I sensed she was tiring. I was quite relieved when she stopped just short of fifteen minutes.

Besides ancestors, modern day witches also link Gods and Goddesses to their bodies as a source of energy. This was perhaps most evident to me during the Wiccan Yule ritual. The lead priest and an assistant priestess channel the energies of the Wiccan God and Goddess through themselves as they act out the unification of the divine male and female. The priest drives a knife into a goblet of juice, and they kiss. Thus the power of the ritual comes not only from creating energy, but by drawing divine energy into one's body; the human form is not an endless well of energy. I am reminded of some wisdom a woman offered at a panel I attended some days earlier about how to emphasize self care in witchcraft practice: "the human body sucks as a battery, it's better as a conduit", she said. Gods and Goddesses are not only invoked in group settings, although a walk about Salem gives off the feel that organized Wiccan groups and covens take up the most airspace, with posters for events and coven openings plastered on windows and telephone poles and open events introducing newcomers like myself to the values of group practices of magick.

Self described "solitary witch" Marie also identifies deities as a source of power in her personal practice. We sat together in the back room of her shop where she performs tarot readings for clients. Marie owns her own business, and I feel terribly guilty when she locks the front door of her shop because she is the only employee and can't help customers from the reading room where she said she would prefer to be interviewed. I express my concern and Marie just shrugs. It's slow in January anyways, she says. I ask whether she sees witchcraft as a feminist practice, and she thinks for a few long seconds before responding:

“You know I used to, for myself. I can’t speak for other witches, but it was... tied in with... empowering myself through established deities... female deities, and knowing that you know, if I can tap into that energy, I’d strengthen myself. And it was always female deities. But I don’t necessarily do that now, it’s more about just relating to the spirit realm, and the unseen realm and other realms, I don’t really have a God or a Goddess. But it was at one time, just now it’s shifted a little bit for me. It’s neutral, I guess you could say. So if I wanted to channel female energy, I might tap into- believe it or not, Mary.” She points to a bust portrait of the Virgin Mary hanging on the wall behind her. “Or you know, somebody like that, if I wanted to tap into male energy, I might go for Pan or someone like that. But usually, I don’t, it’s just me.”

I notice that her reading space is even more secluded than Susan’s; there are no windows, the only light comes from real tealight candles, which were already lit when we went in, their flames reflecting off of the crystals carefully laid out on the table.

Objects and Embodiment

The glittering objects adorning Marie’s reading room are captivating, and enticing to the customer, but they themselves are not magickal. The modern day Salem witch embodies the tools of the craft; she herself is an object of reverence, and of magick. Adler (1986) provides a provoking take on magick as a real, sensory phenomenon deeply rooted in the body and bodily experiences. Doreen Valiente, a witch from England quoted by Adler (1986), locates magic in “the power of the mind itself”, and finds that “the mind... is the greatest instrument of magic.” (Adler 1986: 155). Magick, in this modern understanding, is a process of the body; it is not “supernatural” but draws power from the senses and the “ordinary potentiality of consciousness” (Adler 1986: 155). Objects, sensory experiences, dancing and ritual all serve to affect one’s consciousness, supportive but subordinate to the innate potentiality of the human mind. Such

practice of using the whole body to access recesses of the mind is neither new nor exclusive to witches; magick, if defined as an expanding of consciousness, has been a practice of humanity for millennia (Adler 1986: 155). This magick is distinct from the supernatural conjurings of 1692, it is drawn from the body for the body to succeed in its habitat. Adler (1986) cites an example of Australian Aborigines' ability to sense "where a herd of game was grazing though it grazed beyond the horizon; knew when a storm was approaching; and knew where water was - though it lay some 10 feet below the surface... by using the five senses to their full capacity" (Dianic Grove training material of the Covenstead of Morigana in Dallas, Texas, Lesson No. 1, as cited in Adler 1986: 156). To doubt the existence of such sensory magic, Adler argues, is "absurd" (Adler 1986: 157). In agreement with Adler's (1986) work, my work with witches in Salem found that not only is the magick of the modern day witch embodied, but the body itself is magick.

I was worried that Susan might be offended when I asked about the importance of objects to witchcraft. It feels like a loaded question, asking someone who makes their living from selling 'magickal' items whether these items are actually important in the practice of magick, all while surrounded by beautiful orbs, images, stones, and tarot decks which held meaning for her. Susan was unruffled by my question. "They're focus, they're focus. They're to focus your mind. But it's *you* that are the focus. You are the star... you are a wand, your arm up is the wand." She points her arm to the ceiling, her heavy bracelets clanking against each other. "Your arms to the heavens are a chalice... The sword is an arm going out and giving it a point on it! Okay?" Her arm shoots out to the left. "You are *all* the things of that- of the craft." I asked Marie the same question, and she revealed to me objects as a kind of indulgence, as

providing assistance but not to be used as a crutch, and ultimately unnecessary in the shadow of one's bodily magic.

“I think that objects are an extension of your power. So, all of the power comes from you, you don't need *anything*, you've got *everything*, and in fact if you step outside... you've got all the elements. You've got the sun, fire, you've got the earth, you've got air, your breath... and water is within you even if you're not near water. So you don't need the chalice for water, but they are wonderful extensions of your power, they *really* are! And picking up a really good solid athame, or or you know, a good solid sword is... there's something really empowering about that. Ultimately you don't need it. But it definitely can help, it can definitely help with focus. Objects help with focus, and focus is really important. *Nothing* works if you can't focus and shift your awareness; no spell is gonna work, so if it helps you, [if] an object helps you focus or channel, then beautiful. But hopefully you've come to a place where you don't need anything, so that if you're in the desert you can do your magic if you need to.”

The ultimate practice of Witchcraft, as revealed by Susan and Marie, is one which is centered within one's body, using one's own biology and psychological abilities in a sensory practice of magic. Yet these supposedly unnecessary objects proliferate in Salem, in the very shops of the witches who subordinate them to a more bodily practice, not to mention that presenting these items to visitors as important enough to buy is what supports their livelihood. I first met Marie because of the objects she offered in her shop. I came in to make a small broom; her three year old shop is focused on crafting, although she began by “selling everything that everybody else was selling, like cauldrons and candles and pentacles and chalices”, switching to a more hands-on experience because:

“When you put your own energy into something, I think it has more meaning for sure. But that's not to say you can't buy a cauldron from India and actually, you know, put meaning into that as well. But, you know, it *seems* to me that it has more meaning to make your own, yeah. People get really empowered by it. Some people weep.”

Clearly objects are important and powerful actors in modern witchcraft practice. It seems strange that these objects are downplayed to a potential customer, but this trend of presenting the economic side of witchcraft as unimportant in comparison to a witch's charitable works arose in several instances during my time in Salem.

The Social Ideals of Salem's Modern Witches

For Marie, her Witchcraft business grew out of the connection of modern Witchcraft to charity and care for others' wellbeing. She recounted to me the story of how she landed in Salem and decided to open her shop:

“When my son was in eighth grade, um... one of his friends... when my son was in seventh grade I'm sorry, one of his friends committed suicide. And it was very very tragic in the community, and I couldn't figure out a way to...” She pauses and inhales sharply, “...to work through it. And to help my son... and so I thought of doing a fundraiser for suicide prevention. So I took a tarot deck, and just out of curiosity I spread it out and I picked a card, and I got the star card.”

She picks a card out of the tarot deck lying on the table between us. She must not have pulled the star card this time, as she slides it back into the deck without remark.

“And, the star card in tarot, is healing and hope for the future, inspiration, light at the end of the tunnel, and I was like ‘oh my *god* that is, that's unbelievable’, you know? And the whole chill factor. So I decided to do a performance around... around that theme, of hope and hanging in there, and light coming in, you know, ‘hang in there, don't kill yourself please’. So we did this in Salem, even though we were [living] on the South Shore, because we figured it would be well received...”

Because of the impressive turnout at the charity event, she decided to stay. Several times during my broom making session, people came into Marie's shop asking for directions to other

businesses, and each time she cheerfully pointed them to their destination. While Marie's charitable works and business model seemed harmonious, others took a harsher perspective on the capitalistic aspect of witchcraft.

I asked Susan for her definition of a witch.

“Wisdom, integrity, truth, courage, and honor! W- I- T- C- H! That's witch! And if you've not got the wisdom or the truth or the courage and the honor you can just call yourself a lamp post! Anybody who would use that word witch to bill money out of people or tell you you're cursed or anything like that, they're cursed.” Susan speaks as though she had dealt with such ‘witches’ before. She emphasizes her own selfless impulses, framing profit-driven witchcraft as a practice only of scheming, morally inferior ‘witches’. It is odd coming from a woman who quoted me seventy five dollars for a tarot reading, and makes a living from selling her magickal services and objects. “I send people all over the city,” she assures me. “If I can't do a reading I send them to Pyramid Books, I say ‘go see this one, go see that.’ Because *I know who I am. Within my soul.* Somebody said to me: ‘You're sending them over there bla bla bla bla?’ ‘Yeah! Yes! Why not?’ If I haven't got certain herbs, go see Coven's Cottage, go see Artemisia go see this one go see... Why not? What am I gonna lose? People are gonna remember that [Susan] was not a bad miserable person!”

This symbiotic relationship only works, though, if people are also sent her way. Not only does Susan emphasize her willingness to provide business to other shops, but the amount that she gives for free in her own store.

“We have teddy bears. Little kids come by and we give them teddy bears. To give is to live and to live is to give. They don't have to buy anything in this store, we'll still give them a teddy bear!...And as far as having a shop, and making business, we give more things away in this shop than anything!” She laughs. “I could care less! They're only things. What matters is the soul. The Egyptians had it right. They pointed to the heart. The heart was the seat of the soul. And the soul dwells in that heart. And if we can make it come through to everyone, what a world this would be. We need that! We need it.”

Susan frames goodness as coming through the explicit rejection of capital accumulation, the very reason that witches have become an object of value in Salem (Weir 2012). As I conclude our interview, I pull out my wallet to pay Susan for the tarot reading she had performed for me earlier. “No, I don’t want that”, she waves away my cash as if it disgusts her. “I want you to donate that Saint Jude’s.” Somehow, the rejection of materiality in favor of helping humanity, a selflessness which seems to almost border on self destruction, is an effective business model for Salem’s modern day witches.

Covens and Capitalism: Witches and the Economic Transformation of Salem

It felt at once odd and completely expected to see a bronze statue of Samantha Stephens in the center of the commercial district of Salem. A fictional witch played by Elizabeth Montgomery in the show “Bewitched”, she was known for twitching her nose when performing magick. Apparently it is customary for visitors to touch the nose of the statue, and it does seem significantly more polished than the rest of her. I walked past her quickly, but noticed that people were taking pictures with her even on a freezing, overcast Thursday in January. I saw very few people on Essex street, which on weekends is crowded even in the off season. Instead, I saw trucks of beer being delivered to pubs, boxes of witchy goods dropped off outside shops and psychic parlours. Weekdays in the winter are the off season of the off season in the cyclical business of witchcraft. According to Salem’s tourism website, Salem’s ‘Haunted Happenings’, their “month long celebration of Halloween and fall in New England” boasts over half a million visitors in recent years (DestinationSalem, n.d.). Marie hosts shows from June to October in which she explores “the phases of the moon as they relate to the human journey”, as this is when most visitors come to Salem. And yet there sits Samantha all throughout the year, perched precariously on her broom, paying no heed to the brutal gales that batter the New England waterfront.

Weir (2012) begins and ends his piece exploring the economic transformation of Salem with his thoughts on this very statue, arguing that:

“...Samantha Stephens embodies the economic transformation of Salem. She has displaced the symbol that came before her: the blue collar worker. That worker, of course, had supplanted the seafarers and merchants who had dethroned the seventeenth-century yeomen who had been so quick to blame witches for the social and economic turmoil in their world” (Weir 2012: 205).

The image of witch trial victims, while forming the historical basis for this “the past as commodity” in the “sensationalized staging of the Salem Drama” find no such obvious reverence (Weir 2012: 182). Indeed, I stumbled upon the victims’ memorial on accident; an elegant brick laid square off to the side of the Old Burying Ground cemetery, the bodily presence of the victims is abstracted into stone benches jutting out from low, shrub-covered walls which shield it from the sidewalk. Residents today are divided over the visual and geographical centering of witches created by the entertainment industry, such as Samantha Stephens, for the purpose of celebrating the economic triumph of the witch rather than to commemorate historical violence. The unveiling of Samantha was greeted with a banner reading “SHAME” and the arrest of a vocal protestor displeased with the instatement of the statue in Salem’s center (Weir 2012: 180). Weir (2012) questions the point of downplaying the role that shows such as *Bewitched* had in the revitalization of Salem’s economy, stating that “Ultimately, Samantha Stephens helped rescue Salem from a devastating twentieth-century demon: deindustrialization” (Weir 2012: 179).

Salem arrived at the desolate door of deindustrialization in the early nineteenth century after flirting with several avenues of profit. In the hundred years or so following the Salem Witch Trials, merchants were the main players in Salem’s economy. As Weir (2012) notes, “...the sin most associated with Salem from the 1700’s to 1815 was privateering, not witchcraft” (Weir 2012: 184). Salem eventually lost its prominence as a trade port by about 1845, as ships had been repurposed for wars and trade lost to embargos (Weir 2012: 184). The legacy of the witch trials was still associated with shame, not money, and in any case, New England had only a small tourism industry. But in what Weir (2012) calls “Industrial Witchcraft”, Salem joined

Massachusetts towns such as Lowell in capitalizing on the industrial revolution, and gained prominence as a center for factory production. In 1850, factories in Essex county employed more workers than any other county in the state (Weir 2012: 187). Salem's role in the industrial boom lasted into the early twentieth century, in which it was "neither a literary nor a witch city... it was an industrial city, and a rather grimy one at that" (Weir 2012: 188). In a rather abrupt disaster predicting the deindustrialization to come, manufacturing in Salem was pushed into decline beginning with a 1914 fire which ruined a significant portion of factories and homes, and any rebound was stymied by the Great Depression (Weir 2012: 190-191). This remarkably un-witchy history recalled its brushes with magick only when witches themselves returned, rebranded as Salem's saviors.

Witchcraft gradually made its way to the center of Salem's economy, with the opening of attractions such as the Pioneer Village's 'living history museum' in 1930, the Old Witch Jail in 1935, and the Witch House in 1944 being the first historically minded, tourist-oriented locations to open up shop (Weir 2012: 193). Oddly enough, the Pioneer Village living history museum looked quite dead under a layer of January snow on the day of its supposed solstice celebration event; closed to the public and locked behind a high wooden fence. Peeking through the gaps between the posts, I saw tarps and plastic trash cans, racoon prints circling a green porta potty. Weir (2012) concurs with Lewis (1996) in identifying 1970 as the magical date where modern Witchcraft and Neopagan movements became serious, widespread cultural phenomena. For Salem, the new wave of self-made witches commercialized history, as "countercultural explorations of alternative spirituality and the rebirth of feminism contributed to new takes on Salem's past" (Weir 2012: 194). The arrival of Laurie Cabot in 1971, the "Official Witch of

Salem”, and treated in Weir’s (2012) and Adler’s (1986) work as a sort of messiah, opened the floodgates for the arrival of thousands of Wiccans and other Neopagans who opened their own stores in Salem (Weir 2012: 194). By 1980 a third of workers in Salem worked in “retail, sales, and services” (Weir 2012: 195). In 2002, the city pulled in over four hundred million dollars in retail, and has expanded beyond just tourism derived from interest in Witchcraft to “fright tourism” more generally, featuring ghosts and macabre figures not traditionally associated with the Witch Trials (Weir 2012: 196). The continued debate over the public display of an economic truth shows that many in Salem see commercialization and commemoration as antithetical. Perhaps this discomfort with commercial witchcraft in Salem is reflected in the emphasis that modern day witches place on charity and rejection of money. Witches in Salem today are economic actors, and yet loathe to present themselves that way. But not all witches see their businesses as connected to the historical legacy of the trials, either. I asked Marie how her work connected to the history of Salem:

“Really I don’t focus on the historical aspect of Salem, but the people who come in are here, usually for that, for um, for usually a number of reasons. But a lot of them will come, like, from the Witch Museum, where you do get the history, to here, and where they just get to *make* something, you know? And so for them it might be significant, the history versus the modern day witches and witchcraft, uhm, but it doesn’t play a big part in my, my store per se.”

There is a tension between the spiritual doctrines of witchcraft as a bodily, internal practice in which objects are unnecessary, and the importance of selling witchy items to the livelihoods of Salem’s business oriented witches. Such conflict seems unavoidable in Salem’s current economy, as the ideals of spiritual practice and the rivalries of businesses are in many

ways incompatible. Marie shed some light on the social climate between witchcraft oriented businesses in Salem:

“I’ve seen people fight, I’ve seen businesses say ‘if you’ve worked there, you cannot work here’... There seems to be one camp, and then another camp, and if you’re with that one camp you can’t be with this camp as well. So that’s happened. There’s definitely conflict, but there’s conflict everywhere. But the market is so saturated, that I understand the fear... that business owners sometimes get wrapped up in, like, ‘Oh my god, if someone steals my idea, how’s my business gonna do?’ You know?”

Salem no less than other commercial centers under neoliberal reign have cultivated an inordinate focus on individualism, and “competition - between individuals, between firms, between territorial entities...- is held to be a primary virtue.” (Harvey 2005: 65). It is not uncommon for witches in Salem to take each other to court, as Susan did with her misogynistic former boss. In 2011, a witch physically assaulted another business owner who owned a shop across the street from her (Manganis 2012: n.p).

Injustice and violence are brought not only to living bodies under the reign of late capitalism, but to the deceased as well. On a gray afternoon three days before Christmas, I followed handwritten signs for an “oddities” Christmas market through the wide, pedestrian-only street in the commercial center of Salem, Massachusetts. I was expecting an outdoor flea market style event, but to my surprise I found myself at the Old Town Hall, doors thrown open to reveal the first stand dominating the entryway. While anticipating a traditional spread of Christmas trinkets would perhaps be a misguided reason to shop in Witch City, this table depicts Christmas in Salem as an undeniably macabre event. The shelves are stacked precariously above my head with human skulls of various sizes, assortments of tinted jars, old papers, an unidentifiable shriveled body part in a glass container, and many rusted metal

medical instruments. It feels like looking into the refuse pile of a disreputable nineteenth century operating room. A casually dressed man interrupts my perusing. “Are you a collector?” He asks. “If you are looking to expand your collection of medical oddities... Well, you’re in the right place.” I tell him that I am not, and wonder at the possibility of someone like me collecting things like this, disturbed at the idea of owning part of another person’s body. “Collector” rang with a prestigious air, as though had I said yes I would have been ushered into some sort of inner circle of people who collect other people. A number of other vendors at the market also had human bones for sale, and it indeed seemed to draw in visitors as stands with bones tended to be busier than those without. A woman holds a human femur partially wrapped in brown paper and twine. “This is the best birthday present *ever!*”, she exclaims. Children play with human ribs which they have taken out of a basket where they are labeled for just fifteen dollars. Human skulls, on the other hand, are marked as costing upwards of three thousand dollars.



Left: A child looks through anatomical diagrams behind a basket of human ribs at the Oddities Market
 Right: Various human bones for sale at the Oddities Market

I cannot help but consider how antithetical this hawking of human body parts is to the narratives of Susan and Marie, who stressed the importance of respect for the dead in their practices. How does a dead body become a desirable “odddity?” Why have they turned up in Witch City? Here is made plain the transformative ability of capitalism, its darkly magical power to make anything, and anyone, into a commodity. Appadurai (1986) defines commodities as “objects of economic value” which he elaborates by drawing on Simmel’s (1907, trans. 1978) work which noted that value is not fixed or inherent, but “is a judgement made about them by subjects” (Appadurai 1986: 3). It is the exchange of objects which makes the economic object valuable, as Appadurai (1986) notes that there must be a sacrifice, money, for example, to allow the gain of a material object, and therefore “...the economic object does not have an absolute value as a result of demand for it, but the demand, as the basis of real or imagined exchange, endows the object with value” (Appadurai 1986: 4). While in fact legal³, the modern day bone trade is one where the destitute serve the powerful. India, for example, exports a remarkable number of human bones and has for at least a century, “follow[ing] a route from remote Indian villages to the world’s most distinguished medical schools” (Carney 2007: np) While this trade was outlawed in 1985 because of the “concern that people were being murdered for them [their bones]” (Hugo 2016), the flow of bones, while reduced in volume, continued illegally (Carney 2007: np). It is possible that a number of the bones in the Christmas market have similar origins; Many of the skulls have trepanation holes, and are indeed relics of medical examination which may have been circulating since before the ban, or have arrived on the black market since then.

³ So long as the bones were not found lying outside, and were not taken from Native American graves (Hugo 2016: n.p.)

Is Witchcraft Feminist?

Throughout this paper I have been referring to witches collectively as ‘she’. That choice was made based on the reclamation of the word ‘witch’ as a feminist act. And perhaps it is the wrong choice, as it contradicts the opinions of my informants below, and for that I apologize. There are certainly witches who do not identify as women. But some of the narratives from my informants, and observations made at tourist attractions, revealed to me that the connection of witchcraft to the feminine as a tool of oppression remains a salient and unsolved issue, and one that some institutions continue to capitalize on. Whether witchcraft should be a practice available primarily, or even only, for women has found itself the subject of debate among several feminist scholars. In her research on the modern witchcraft movement in New Zealand, Rountree (1997) asks why women seek to identify as a figure whose mythological origin was “...a misogynistic invention and that the brutal process of witch-labelling led, in Europe, to three centuries of gynocide”, arguing that witchcraft and goddess worship are now woven together in a way through which the “‘ordinary’ woman” finds divinity and magick within herself (Rountree 1997: 211). The images of the goddess and the witch, Rountree (1997) argues, are not “normal” manifestations of femininity conventionally available to (mortal) women, and thus accessing such archetypes offers long sought power in a patriarchal society, and allows women to “...reclaim[] aspects of themselves to which they have been denied legitimate access” (Rountree 1997: 212). Adler (1986) offers a similar perspective: “In a society that has traditionally oppressed women there are few positive images of female power...if for thousands of years the image of woman has been tainted, we must either go back to when untainted images of women exist or create new images from within ourselves” (Adler 1986: 183). The image of the witch in

Salem today takes the form of a woman, and she is powerful, both spiritually and economically: The witch on Salem's Witch City taxis is shown with anatomically female features; witches reading tarot in window booths were women, Samantha Stevens perches gracefully on the moon. The whole feel of Salem is quite reclamatory, with women, in my observations, running the majority of the businesses and taking pride in an identity which would have seen them hanged three centuries ago. Thus my use of 'she' is an homage to the work of the women who have reclaimed a word thrown against them, and made it of economic use, and recognizes the work still to be done in the way that witches, and therefore women, are presented in Salem's tourist institutions.

While there are certainly many witches entrenched in feminist and goddess movements who see witchcraft as a feminist practice, the witches I spoke to did not share that experience, or had chosen to change their perspective for issues of inclusivity. Susan laughed wholeheartedly when I asked her whether she thought witchcraft was a feminist practice. "*No!*" She shouted at me. I felt as though I was being reprimanded for holding some outlandish belief. "I see it as all-ist! *Everyone*. What is witchcraft? The believing in nature, that if we tap into that divine force, we can do anything! To believe in oneself. To have that will." She does not connect her modern practice to the legacy of the Salem witch trials, but rather as a universal, eternal, indiscriminating call of humanity. From the rest of our interview, though, it was clear that Susan drew some connection between witchcraft and feminism, as vehemently as she may have denied it. We got to discussing the man she took to court for calling her "the C-word", the same man who had her sit in his window to draw in customers for her readings off of which he profited. "He thought he could... he thinks he could [sic] push women around. I got news for him. You

know I'm an X chromosome. Buddy you're a Y chromosome, you're missing a leg." We both laugh. "Alright, look at that!" She stands up from her chair and crosses her arms into an X shape, her fingertips resting on the glass table. "Two feet on the ground." She lifts one hand back up off of the table, "and the Y is hanging there with one leg missing!... My grandmother told me that. The men- so here's your Y, and the men need you to hold themselves up! We carry life. *We carry life* and that is the *big* thing." Susan presents the female body as genetically superior to the male body. She suggests something inherently powerful about female genetics and reproductive capability, and that her exploitation by the man she worked for was about gender as much as greed. She also presents the historical violence against witches as a highly gendered issue: "And witches years ago were burned and the first thing they did in the torture chamber was tear the breasts off of women. Oh yes, it was terrible! Go after the reproductive part of women." Yet by her own account, witchcraft is not feminist, as much as her own stories suggest otherwise, and she is not alone in this opinion.

Marie brought up the intersection of witchcraft and feminism in her description of the "Moon Witch" show she hosts in her shop. She personifies the phases of the moon,

"But we call it - this is interesting- instead of maiden mother crone, I've been using the words seeker, sage- no, seeker... oh my god I can't believe I can't remember this." She repeats quietly to herself, "Seeker, sage, and uh there was another one, I can't believe this. I wanted to leave gender out of it... Seer! Oh my god. The full moon is the seer. So the seeker is the waxing moon, so we'll have someone come out and do a performance piece for the waxing moon. And we play music while they do it. The seer is the full moon. And then the sage is the waning moon. Okay? But a lot of people are like 'Why are you leaving gender out? Why aren't you using maiden, mother and crone?' And I was like 'Well, I want to be more inclusive. I want everybody to feel welcome, I don't want people to view this as just a feminist show, or just for women. Because we all have these qualities, and what is gender? Everything is flexible, and all of that wonderful stuff. So, I left out gender. And I get a reaction from that. It's like, 'The seeker,

the seer, the sage, what?’ like, yeah, you know? It feels right for me to do that right now. I was very much into maiden mother and crone for a long time, but now I want to... just sort of open up to leaving it open, you know. Gender-wise.”

She makes a compelling case for inclusion of less strictly gendered terms in witchcraft. I can’t help but notice how much more ingrained the phrase “maiden, mother, crone” was in Marie’s mind than her new mantra “seeker, seer, sage”. I have to wonder, though, is her change not at least in part to make her shows accessible to more customers? Is it more radical to throw gender binaries out entirely? Or to refocus witchcraft as feminine empowerment, reversing its historical condemnation of the feminine?

The complex relationship of witchcraft to feminism should be decided by the practitioners themselves. While Susan and Marie do not see witchcraft as feminist per se, they in their practices emphasize women’s empowerment. In their practices, witchcraft is gendered or ungendered (or unconsciously gendered) as part of a greater good: for the purpose of including gender fluid folks, for the recognition of an inherent potential for kindness and magick in all beings. The Salem institution with the poorest relationship to gender is unfortunately one with perhaps the greatest reach. The Salem Witch Museum offers an unmistakably gendered and deeply unsettling presentation of the witch trials. The presentation of the ‘witch’ in the Salem Witch Museum is less about witches and more about demonizing women, although it is never clarified that the victims of the trials were not in fact witches. While the entry hall has large plaques dispelling ‘witchcraft myths’ such as the ergot theory⁴, reminding visitors that witches in New England were never burned at the stake, and providing information on the process of

⁴ An explanation for the witch hunting of 1692 put forth by Linnda Caporael in 1976, suggesting that the consumption of rye spoiled by the ergot fungus caused hallucinations.

“swimming a witch”⁵, the biggest myth of them all, that actual witches were executed in 1692, is glaringly unaddressed. Perhaps as the fulcrum of the commercial witchcraft center, that fact would be a bit of a killjoy for witch-seeking tourists. Judging by a peek at my twelve dollar ticket, the museum is in fact the gateway to a myriad of other witchy commercial experiences. Apparently, presenting this ticket at a number of businesses in Salem will take between ten and twenty percent off of my purchase. There are also vouchers for five dollars off of readings. There are even some discounts for places outside of Salem.

I am interrupted from my scrutiny of the ticket as the horde of us waiting in the entry hall are ushered into a large, nearly pitch black showroom where we fumble around looking for stools or benches. As my eyes adjust to the low lighting I begin to make out figures above us, about twenty feet up, tucked into recesses in the walls. I did not expect a quote from Francis (2005) that while “Satan may be masculine, . . . the embodiment of all the actual evil committed in the world is female” to fit as seamlessly into the style of presentation at a modern museum on Witchcraft as it did with the actual procedures of the trials (Francis 2005: 136). Some old-timey horror music begins playing, and a man’s voice processed to sound equally vintage begins describing witchcraft as the first religion, consisting of a pact with the devil, and tells us that witches are evil women. The upper left corner of the room is illuminated in deep crimson light, revealing a slightly over life size devil that looks as though it may be made out of paper machê. “Do you believe in witches?” The narrator thunders as the Devil’s glowing red eyes peer disdainfully down at us. “Your ancestors did.” I was expecting him to clarify that this was the

⁵ According to the panel, a way of identifying a witch from an innocent, in which the accused was thrown into a body of water with their arms and legs tied together. A witch was expected to float, while an innocent would supposedly sink.

historical view of witches, but he never does, leaving it unclear whether this is the myth of the witch or the actual mechanics of Witchcraft. Some people laugh, and I too feel the second hand embarrassment for such an outdated and exaggerated performance. His voice and the music are highly dramatic, and I see now why the usher warned us that young children may be frightened. The frightening part, though, is not so much the actual story, but the choice of ambiance which constructs the witch as a disturbed, demonic presence.

The red light on the devil becomes blue and moves left to reveal the first doll-like diorama showing Ann Putnam, one of the young girls with strange physical symptoms who accused others of bewitching her. The lives of Puritan women are described as offering “little amusement”, causing young girls such as Ann to become “restless and resentful.” Some of her proclivity to ill humor is attributed to her “embittered” mother, a woman who saw the loss of multiple children and turned to the family’s slave, Tituba, to contact the dead so she might speak to them. As well as presenting women as unsuited for the hardship and simplicity of Puritan life in the colonies, Tituba, a black woman from the Caribbean, is presented as “the start of it all.” The next diorama in which she is shown “playing witch” with the young Putnam girls is lit in red, as the Devil was, drawing a deeply disturbing parallel between Tituba’s race and the Demonic. Later in the presentation, she is illuminated again in red in her jail cell. Every other cell was blue. As the light progresses through the dioramas, we reach a lone, rugged looking John Proctor, and the narrator softens his violent tone. “A few men stood out as heroes”, the audience is assured. John’s refusal to accept his accusation or the existence of Witchcraft is proudly described, as are his valiant efforts to free his pregnant wife. John Proctor himself is granted the opportunity to speak about his martyrdom, as opposed to the women in the

presentation who are either silent, their tales told for them by the male narrator, or pain our ears with unintelligible screeching or cries of “Witch! Witch!”. It was the most vulnerable female victims who were featured, such as Rebecca Nurse, a deaf and elderly woman. By this performance, it seems that no women protested their fate, making the contrast with the presentation of men even more stark. Giles Corey, the one victim who was pressed to death⁶, gives his infamous call for “more weight” as a golden light beams down upon the stones, and Tituba languishes silently in jail to his right. Corey’s accusation against his own wife is mentioned only in passing, as the narrator moves on to describe him as “staunch and steadfast”. The next scene is the hanging of Reverend Burroughs, who recites a prayer for us to prove his innocence but is executed regardless. Granting only men the power of coherent speech, and the blatantly racist lighting choices show a theatrical performance of the witch trials continuing to construct a harmful narrative in bodies, paper-machê though they may be, displayed for profit and popular amusement.

And amusement it is indeed meant to be. In speaking with a staff member at the Salem Witch Museum, she told me about the intended tone of the presentation. “The idea is to give an immersive experience, that could kind of get people in the mindset of the seventeenth century, and looking into the seventeenth century without having any artifacts from the seventeenth century to show them.” Perhaps that mission has been effective, one very much feels that they are the audience of a trial. But the issue is that we are never removed from that mindset. “We also, you know, want people to have a fun experience, well fun is probably the wrong word, but we want people to have an *entertaining* experience,” she adds. The witch, in the Salem Witch

⁶ As shown in the Salem Witch Museum, pressing entailed wooden planks being laid over Corey’s body, and stones piled on top until he perished from the weight.

Museum, is an object created once again for entertainment and profit, and people flock to see her. Even in the off season, the performance was packed. The show is an attempt to fortify the tenuous spell binding the witch's imagined past to the present in the minds of Salem's tourists. Like the theatrical performance of the actual witch trials, the witch is quite literally constructed for her role, utterly malleable, without agency, and without voice, contradicting the empowering self construction and business running of real witches in Salem. As the backbone of Salem's existence, they deserve far better.

Conclusion

The appearances of witches in Salem correspond to two periods of drastic economic transformation. In 1692, the witch was constructed by society as a scapegoat for social and economic turmoil, while in the 1970's she emerged as an autonomous being, powerful in her self-construction. She appears as a liminal being in these periods of transformation, once a victim of uncertainty but now thriving in the service based economy of late capitalism, a mediator between seen and unseen realms in both her spiritual practice and economic savvy. However, the neoliberal economy in which modern day witches in Salem are entrenched presents challenges. How can Salem display and capitalize on its history of violence in a way that is sensitive to gender, race, and the reality of these people's experiences? How can the spiritual ideals of modern witches negotiate with the competition and inequality in a neoliberal economy? The witches I spoke to emphasized their charitable works over the business models which provide their livelihood, showing a discomfort with witchcraft as an economic practice.

Salem's larger attractions such as museums pose their own conundrums. Commercial experiences travel beyond the bounds of the event itself and become part of the way witchcraft is perceived. The Salem Witch Museum has given itself the rather odd purpose of drawing customers to witches practices, but at the same time trivializing them. Had I been tempted to brush off the presentation of witchcraft at the Salem Witch Museum as unfortunate but harmless, a walk outside showed me how disturbing the effects of such careless presentation can be. I wandered through the Old Burying Point Cemetery, adjacent to the Museum, which holds the graves of two judges in the trials, John Hawthorne and Bartholomew Gedry. There are no 'witches' here, but I am confronted with a group who is doing their best to rectify that fact. Two

men and one woman in probably their late twenties, whom I recognize as fellow audience members at the show, are trying to juggle both a selfie stick and an impromptu witch trial. “Look! A witch! A witch!” Shouts one of the men, making eye contact with me as if he wants me to join the fun. He films as the other man shoves up the woman’s sleeves, looking for something on her skin. Her laughter echoes harshly through the cold air.

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