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## Night of the Witch: Alternative Spirituality, Identity and Media

Andreana Tarleton

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# **NIGHT OF THE WITCH: ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITY, IDENTITY AND MEDIA**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

in

The Department of Geography and Anthropology

by  
Andreana Tarleton  
B.A., Louisiana State University, 2018  
May 2020

For: the magical women and femmes who work tirelessly to educate the new, the life learners and the uninitiated

For: the women and femmes who weather the storms of sexism, racism, homophobia and transphobia to argue for their humanity in spiritual spaces

For: the magical girls and femmes who have yet to come

For: the ancestors, without whom none of this would be possible

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis works to understand the relationships witches and conjurors have with the film and television depictions of them. Employing the method of film critique, I argue that the witch stands as a cultural symbol in the US of women and femmes with power, and that their stories serve as lessons to these populations about what it means to be an acceptable woman or femme, while simultaneously creating and perpetuating stereotypes of magic practitioners. Then, using the combination of hashtag ethnography, in-person and video interviewing and internet surveys, I argue that #witchblr and #witchesofcolor, as well as the space of an interview with another practitioner, serves as a counterspace where the counternarratives against oppression, of resistance, and of personal identity work can take place. I connect the language practitioners use to describe themselves and witches and conjurors in film and television to the embracing and distancing marginalized communities engage in when crafting their identities around stereotyped notions of their group, and argue for the need for a simpler, softer, more diverse witchcraft in United States film and television.

## **CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **1.1. On Snakes and Candles: My Involvement in Witchcraft**

I was 11 when I discovered what a witch was. Not in the Harry Potter, magic wands sense, but in the religious meaning of the word. My birthday having passed a few days before, I had decided it was high time I start going on websites meant for teenagers. While scrolling through the Ask Jeeves results for “teen girl websites,” I came across a site dedicated to teaching teens about the Craft. From day one, I was hooked. I spent the following summer writing down all the information I could find on witchcraft, Wicca, and magick.<sup>2</sup> I enrolled myself in a free online course that was meant to take a solitary practitioner through the year and a day of training necessary to become an initiate, and I’ve never turned back since.

As I’ve gotten older, and my craft has evolved along with me, I’ve often reflected on that initial moment of recognition. I was raised Southern Baptist in a small, south Louisiana town, but the religion never seemed quite right to me. It was only once starting on this project that I realized the reason for that was probably because nearly all of the major authorities in my life until that point, from teachers to parental figures, were women. It made no sense to my 11-year-old mind that God should be a man in that context. So, when I discovered that there were people who worshipped a goddess, that was it. I often look at this as the genesis of my feminist inclinations, my first inklings of the way of thinking that I’ve fostered my entire life until this point.

I would be remiss if I ignored the role that films, television and books played in the formation of this identity. While I didn’t learn about religious witchcraft until I was 11, I had been exposed to the concept of magic from an early age. I started reading when I



was five, and by the time I was seven, I was reading through a Harry Potter book every month. I had always been a fan of fantasy works, and that almost always entailed some form of magic being used. Similarly, television shows and movies, such as *Twitches* and *Scooby Doo and the Witch's Ghost*, left an impression on me different from the intended purpose of scaring children. Instead, I found myself enamored with the occult practices I saw in front of me, from the potion brewing of The Hex Girls' lead singer Thorn of the Scooby Doo universe to the spell casting of Marnie from the *Halloweentown* movie franchise.

Around the time I discovered witchcraft, I came across *The Craft*, a 1996 cult movie classic about a coven of four teenage girls who use witchcraft to change their lives. While the film has been critiqued for its perpetuation of white middle class femininity as the desired norm (Moseley 2002), at the time, it represented to me the possibility of a different life for me than the one I had, one where I could have control over myself and have some influence on the way those around me treated me. The same applied to *Charmed* (1998) and *Sabrina, The Teenage Witch* (1996), both television shows I began to watch as an almost religious ritual after my discovery of witchcraft.

Looking back on those days, however, I feel a tinge of sadness that my white counterparts rarely are made to feel. Aside from the *Twitches* films (2005, 2007) and Rochelle from *The Craft* (1996), whose narrative revolves around getting revenge on a racist bully, none of my witchy heroines looked like me. Most witches in American cinema and television shows fit into the same cookie cutter image: white, middle class, conventionally attractive (long straight hair, thin, with perfectly managed wardrobes)

teenage girls or women, or, as I like to say, everything I, as a poor, biracial fat child dealing with the first inklings of a trans identity, could not lay claim to, no matter how much I flat ironed my hair and refused to eat. In fact, while this was not the primary cause of the development of my eating disordered history, it was a major contributing factor. Mainstream film and television had convinced me that the only way to be a real, proper witch was to have the witch look, and what I had to offer was not enough.

It was only when I began to recover from my eating disorder that I began to take into consideration the black culture I had been raised in, but had rejected in order to fit in as the only black kid in my honors classes. This came at the same time as the first inklings of what would become the Black Lives Matter movement was gaining steam online in the activist circles I frequented, sparked by the death of Trayvon Martin in Florida. Having spent the previous six years learning and practicing Wicca and other forms of witchcraft, I decided to search for African magical traditions. Seeing as I was born and raised in South Louisiana, Voodoo seemed the most natural path to seek out.

As when I began researching Wicca, my entertainment interests shifted towards finding movies about voodoo. But I hit a brick wall. Not only was there a lack of real representation of black conjure women in film, but the ones I did happen to come across were either cartoon characters or the primary villains of the story. I began to wonder where the *Halloweentown* for young black girls who wanted to be magical was. Why couldn't our magic be just as whimsical or soft as that of these other, predominantly white characters? Why was our power always directed towards death and revenge, when the religion very much was one of healing and protection from harm? Even today, representation of black witches in film and TV still hinges on the macabre and, while I

am a fan of horror, I would like to be able to see my religion portrayed in a way that doesn't hinge on the overly sensationalized portrayals that harken back to the St. John's Eve descriptions of mid-nineteenth century newspaper articles.

## **1.2. Introduction**

My dissatisfaction is one that is shared by many in the black witch community, many of whom find themselves constantly fielding questions not only about their witchcraft practice, but also questions of their perceptions of films and television shows depicting black witches and conjure women, as well as their identities as witches in the first place. Many online witch spaces, which oftentimes serve as the only sites of community for a spiritual group that lacks formal organization, have made themselves inhospitable to witches of color, either through unapologetic cultural appropriation, covert racism, or a hyper-fixation on European traditions. In response, places of refuge, such as #witchesofcolor, have begun to appear as a safe space for these witches to find solace in each other in a way that their full humanity and the value of their unapologetically black practices are acknowledged.

Both the larger online witch community and its people of color (POC) subcultures have gone under-researched and underrepresented in studies of magical practice in the United States. I have been a member of these online communities for several years, often lurking around on forums, reading blog posts, and sharing them to my own small online following. In these forums, serving as the gathering spaces of the online black witch community, we talk politics, pop culture and magic, oftentimes blending the three into powerful critiques of the colonialist hyper-fixation on Western religious belief and practice, and the perpetuation of whiteness as the presumed norm for female and

femme<sup>3</sup> empowerment. These forums act as powerful counterspaces where the spiritual power of the witch and conjure woman is legitimated in a world where most of its practitioners lack authority.

Here is where my research begins: in the documenting and exploration of the role film and television witches and conjure women play in the negotiations around identity for these two interlocking communities, where history and modern life coincide in young adults' discourse surrounding magic and culture. First, I explore the literature related to the history of witchcraft and conjure in the United States, the development of the film witch, the role of film as folklore in an ever-expanding technological world, and the major topics of concern within the witchcraft and conjure communities of Tumblr (Chapter 1). I then explore the methods I employed in conducting this research, and the ethical considerations I kept in mind while conducting my ethnography (Chapter 2). This is followed by the critical-cultural analysis of the messages disseminated in popular films and television shows containing witches and conjure women, where I introduce the tropes of The Vixen Witch, The Witch Next Door, The Magical Sapphire, The Spiritual Mammy, and The Magical Monster (Chapter 3). I then draw from these tropes to explore the different ways magic practitioners experience the intersectionality of race, sexuality, gender identity and religion, how they perceive public perceptions of them as Satanists, and the narrative identity work they employ in the process of crafting identities through the scope of the film and television tropes that have been disseminated about them (Chapter 4). I conclude by giving examples of the types of media witches and conjurors wish they could see more of, and a further reflection on what the process of conducting this ethnography has meant for me on both a spiritual and community level (Chapter 5).

I situate this thesis at the crossroads of critical ethnography and media studies, drawing heavily from black feminist anthropology, critical/cultural studies, and monstrosity theory. My approach to film and television is heavily influenced by critical/cultural studies, with the goal of understanding the intersections of a history of racist patriarchy and the ways its legacies and continuous reformulations are being negotiated through visual media. This thesis is written with the firm understanding that any attempts to reshape non-European beliefs within Western contexts into acceptable bits of knowledge is violence. In this chapter, I introduce a fundamental background on the history that has influenced both the images of witches and conjure women and the development of the contemporary understandings of who these people are, both within and outside of the subcultures they represent. I situate this thesis within the compendium of past, present and future that is the backbone of witchcraft belief and practice, and at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality and alternative spiritual practice.

### **1.3. Literature Review**

This literature review works to draw connections between the work that has been done in the fields of religious studies, film studies, history, and anthropology in studying the witch as a folkloric image of feminine monstrosity. It also covers a range of non-scholarly works by journalists who have been chronicling the rise of what has been coined the Tumblr witch, as well as some of the discourse that has been unfolding over the years within this particular subculture, including gender essentialism, white supremacist cooptation of the spirituality behind contemporary witchcraft, and the intersections of both. Viewing these works together allows for a wider understanding of

the meaning these discourses have for the practitioners, as both individuals who are living in a country deeply impacted by its history and young people forging the future of the United States.

### **1.3.1. History and the Witch**

The European and early United States witch trials are perhaps the most important historical events for the establishment of the witch as a pop culture image of feminine monstrosity in American film and television, which is the focus of this study. These occurrences have always been heavily connected to politics; the North American iterations of these events were no exception to this. Along with African slaves, those considered to be primary targets for accusation were white women who lived outside of the social norms, such as landowners and the poor (Mahnke 2018). Silvia Federici's work on the time period of both the European and North American witch hunts argues that the trials were associated with the indoctrination of peasants towards the expansion of capitalism, and a restructuring of how men understood the role of women in society (2009: 163-164). Others have focused on the politics of the period, such as the early stages of dissent against the crown in the British colonies, and particularly in the colony of Massachusetts, which would play home to its own trials (Gibson 2006: 86; Mahnke 2018). All of these factors contributed to the witch trials in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692.

During these trials, 156 people were jailed, 19 of whom were hanged (Foreman & Haney 1998). Three of the accused were black slaves: Mary Black, who was sentenced to imprisonment, Old Pharoah, whose fate is unknown, and Candy, who confessed to witchcraft and produced a poppet to prove it, evidencing to some contemporary

historians that she was practicing African or Afro-Caribbean folk traditions (McMillan 1994: 104, 105). The trials ended almost as quickly as they began. Despite the frenzy that had overtaken the village, this particular witch trial occurred at the tail end of the witch craze that had swept across Christendom. The notoriety of these particular trials has become so commonplace in United States folklore that, throughout film and television history, a reference to Salem has often served as the backdrop for stories of witchcraft, even if the story has had nothing to do with Salem or colonial America (Greene 2018: 7). Arguably, this time period is the root of the monstrosity of the witch in contemporary film and television, although the concept of the witch in the United States also has its roots in the European Witch Craze that preceded the trials.

This understanding of the witch as a monster, however, is something that would eventually get turned on its head by a suffragette named Matilda Joselyn Gage, who framed the witch as a symbol of the suffering inflicted on European women by misogynists and the strength of these women to endure despite the ill treatment and suspicion they faced at the hands of the political and religious elite (Corey 2003). This connection with feminism is another branch that heavily influenced the witch of contemporary film and television. In this step, the association with feminine power that had been implicitly associated with the types of women accused in witch trials was made explicit. These two aspects, the witch as equal parts monstrous and powerful, opened the door for the witch to be used by writers in the 1960s and beyond as a conduit for examining femininity and power in an era of women's liberation in some of the decade's most popular, and longest-impacting, television and film (Greene 2018: 114-115).

### 1.3.2. Witches in the World After Feminism

In 1963, Betty Friedan published her now famous *The Feminine Mystique*, which sparked a wave of upper-middle- and middle-class white women protesting to enter the workforce, often at the expense of the black women who worked for them (Daina-Ain & Craven 2016: 13). This is quite possibly the most important event in terms of witch imagery in American cinema. Because of the associations with witches that had been created during the Suffragette movement, the witch became the way that film makers attempted to understand negotiations of women and power. By the late 1970s, this was manifest in many feminist circles as a redirection into a feminist spirituality that centralized goddess worship and a recognition of women as “holy” (Starhawk 1999: 34). This movement, known as Dianic Wicca, was popularized by such figures as Zsuzanna Budapest and Starhawk.

Nearly as soon as feminism became a mainstream political positioning, however, a backlash within both print and video media began (Faludi 2006: 90). Both sides of the feminist debate wielded the imagery of the witch for their own political purposes. On the pro-feminist side, the witch became a safe way to argue for the empowerment of women and their value, as seen in television shows such as *The Addams Family* and *Bewitched*, where the concept of “the witch next door” became synonymous with an idea of women’s power being a welcome, albeit sometimes troubling, part of life (Greene 2018: 114). On the anti-feminist side, the witch became one of a multitude of acceptable monsters towards which to direct misogynistic anger (Faludi 2006: 125). The media quickly turned on feminism and its aims, and by the 1990s, it had succeeded in creating its safer alternative, girl power, which positioned women as being able to have



it all while still performing traditional femininity (Moseley 2002: 419). A similar occurrence happened again in the early 2000s with yet another feminist backlash in media, the inevitable end of it leading to the current feminist and witch/conjure woman renaissance in pop culture. This has created what has become a bit of a yo-yo effect in public perceptions of feminists and feminist theories.

### **1.3.3. The Color of Magic**

Black rootwork/conjure/hoodoo,<sup>3</sup> which will be referred to simply as “conjure” from now on, developed on a slightly different trajectory than witchcraft, and hence has a different meaning in U.S. popular culture, although both sets of practices inhabit spaces of negotiations of power. African spiritual traditions tend to accept the existence of two separate, but linked, magical traditions. On the one hand, a person can direct their spiritual energy, or ashe/aje/ase, towards healing others. On the other hand, that same energy, even without the witch’s knowledge, can be turned into a powerful weapon against one’s enemies, causing catastrophe and death. This belief system was clearly present among the peoples that American slaves were stolen from (Anderson 2005b: 30, 38). However, due to preconceived notions of blackness being related to the Devil, Europeans associated all African spiritual traditions with demonic possession, insisting that Africans were more inclined towards accepting the Devil and his diabolic witchcraft (McMillan 1994: 107). This resulted in centuries of repression and sometimes forced conversion to Christianity, something that only succeeded in forming underground syncretized spiritual traditions such as Voodoo and Abakuá (Anderson 2005b: 27).<sup>4</sup>

In the early part of the 20th century, anthropologists and people of color seeking to preserve slave narratives began to travel around the South; enabled by funds made available by the Works Progress Administration, they sought to present a unified American folklore to the world (Anderson 2005a: 11). Zora Neale Hurston traveled throughout the South collecting “lies”, folk tales and stories passed down between generations in the black community (1935: 8). This led her into the world of conjure, where she became initiated and conveyed her experiences to the rest of the world in her writing (Anderson 2005a: 13). Still, these spiritual practices slowly continued to fade from importance to many in the black community as magic was relegated to the world of fantasy for many in the U.S.

By 1945, the white imagination, propelled by stereotypes about African Traditional Religions (ATRs) and the advent of travel guides describing Vodoun practitioners in Caribbean countries, had developed a horror monster called the zombie based on misinterpreted ATR practices (Colavito 2013). Roughly five years later, Gerald Gardner published *Witchcraft Today*, which sparked the modern Wiccan tradition (Buckland 2001: 202). That these two events occurred at roughly the same time is no coincidence. The white imagination in the West, and the U.S. in particular, was reworking everything about themselves in the wake of the two world wars, and U.S. racial tensions were mounting.

By the time of the Civil Rights Movement, the predominant religion of choice among African Americans in the U.S. was Christianity (Anderson 2005a: 17). The practice of conjure was seen as backwards by most black society, something that only those holding onto the past would do (Anderson 2005a: 18). It wasn't until the 1990s

that an embrace of ATRs would once again gain popularity, due in part to the growing desperation to find a more direct connection with spirit than what traditional religions had to offer, as well as the popularization of “cultural pluralism, postmodernism, and the New Age movement” (Kinzer 2003; Anderson 2005a: 18). With Reagan’s war on drugs, the beginnings of the mass incarceration of primarily black and Latinx people, and neighborhoods that increasingly looked like warzones, many people began to “turn to voodoo because there [was] an increasing desperation in [their] culture for spiritual meaning and direction” (Kinzer 2003).

This shift in appreciation and practice of conjure has continued to grow in popularity among both black and white practitioners, although White involvement has been a major point of contention within the larger practicing community. This shift in the appreciation of conjure grows on the back of the internet and social media, where many black feminists are connecting with each other and expressing their opinions on oppression and hierarchies for relatively large audiences in ways previous generations never could, forging a wide variety of feminisms (Herken 2019). Some of these feminisms have incorporated understandings of spirituality as being integral to political efficacy. Many of the activists in the current moment, particularly the black feminist founders of Black Lives Matter, are practitioners of Ifa<sup>5</sup> or some other form of ATR, and speak openly about the political reasons as to why they were originally drawn to these traditions (Khan-Cullors & Bandele 2018: 151). These major shifts, however, are not handled in film and television in the same ways white witchcraft have been, which can have a profound effect on public perceptions of black women and femmes in general and black practitioners in particular.

#### 1.3.4. Film and Television Influencing Culture

No conversation about the witch or conjure woman/femme in U.S. culture would be complete without a conversation about film. Since its popularization in the early 1900s, film has played an incredibly impactful role in the sociopolitical climate of the U.S., in what Timothy Hill and Heather Yates call “the Hollywood connection” (2018: 3). Popular films and television often act as the catalyst through which the U.S. engages in discourse about what is and is not a part of the nation. Likewise, since the making of large blockbuster films and network television shows with the greatest ability to impact U.S. culture is always preserved for a select few, these films and television shows also serve as an insight into the understandings that elites have of oppressed groups and their liberatory ideologies (Mulligan 2018: 17).

This is all to say that film and television media have an incredible impact on culture because they represent culture in visual form. Since at least the late 1940s, there has been a strain within the study of folklore that has argued for the study of cinema as folklore (Koven, 2003: 177). Storytelling is a fundamental feature of culture and, as we have increasingly become a technological society, this storytelling has been adapted to the medium of film. Through film, we display and discuss the anxieties, cultural upheavals, and moral issues of our time. The only things that separates cinema and television shows from traditional folklore is that these bits of media can be consumed and discussed by millions of people at once. In a world increasingly defined by technological globalism, these media can be seen as forging the folklore of a worldwide generation, for better or for worse. Over 19 million people tuned in to watch the series finale of *Game of Thrones*, a nearly decade-long fantasy saga of love,

betrayal and moral questions that have been argued all over the world in relation to the characters found within the television show's storyline (Patten, 2019; The United States Census, n.d.).

Being that it is also a form of entertainment, these discussions are often carried out through symbols and tropes that are defined, redefined, and contested by each filmmaker who uses them and the people who engage in discourse surrounding them. These symbols have real world effects on the people who view these images and the people who the films are about. For instance, hunting decreased after the release of *Bambi* in 1944, *Fight Club* influenced the creation of real fight clubs, and *The Day After Tomorrow*, a film about New York City suffering an intense polar freeze, increased people's concerns about global warming as a real threat (Englehardt n.d.).

Popular media has a profound effect on our contemporary society, especially in the context of the world of social media, which is heavily saturated with film and television images and discourse surrounding these mediums. In the person of the witch, popular representations have had an influence on how people see women and femmes in power. Over the course of film history, people have used the image of the witch as a stand-in for feminism and general feminine empowerment, for both women and femmes of color and white women. However, this trope is often used to take seriously the concept of white femininity including power in an acceptable way, such as with depictions of Sabrina in the 2018 Netflix adaptation *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018), while it simultaneously represents black feminine power as being inherently dark and harmful to their white counterparts, which can be seen in the biracial character Prudence, who is Sabrina's enemy throughout the show. While these tropes have

started to make a shift from being used by white characters for their own means to one in which their powers are used for revenge, the ties with white pain and death at the hands of powerful black femininity are still prevalent.

### **1.3.5. Culture Influencing Film & Television**

Since the current iteration of the witch and conjure woman as both forces for good and evil is so heavily tied to feminism, there's no denying that the witch as a monster stands at the intersection of the abject horror at the breakdown of gender roles in the U.S., and the simultaneous celebration of those same breakdowns. Monstrosity is tied to the social and political tensions present at the time of the monster's iteration (Cohen 1996: 4). There is a stark contrast between the few witch films created before the publication and wide distribution of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and those produced afterwards. Likewise, there is another iteration that developed in the 1980s in the wake of the Satanic Panic, a time period in which fears of a mass conspiracy of Satanists running a pedophilic satanic ritual abuse ring through day care centers became mainstream (Hughes 2017: 692). The witch soon came to represent the type of woman who would rather enter the workforce and leave the care of her children to others, the type of woman who hated children and/or never wanted to have them. The film industry reflected this sentiment in such films as *The Witches* (1990), which revolves around an international conspiracy to turn children into mice.

The witch as a monster has always represented the monstrous feminine. Since film is so often presented through the lens of men's understandings of women, the representations of women are stand-ins for men's own fears about women (Renegade Cut 2018). As such, the representation of the witch, controlled by men throughout film

history (outside of feminist rebuttals and reformations), has stood as representation of the abject intersections of “the rational and irrational, symbolic and imaginary” (Creed 1993: 76). When white women began entering the workforce en masse, the fear that they would choose not to create life anymore became a predominant focus in many areas of popular media and, hence, the films began to change (Faludi, 1991: xv). When it comes to black women, who are so often presented as not fully human characters in their own right in film, their representations as witches are often one-dimensional, and representative of white men’s fear of both blackness and womanhood. This manifests in some interesting representations of black women in television, such as Marie Laveau’s characterization in *American Horror Story: Coven* (2013) as a baby killer.

If films and television shows can be considered folklore, which I argue they are, they deserve to be studied within the realm of the anthropological, to be studied as visual culture and products that shape and are shaped by the humans who create them. They are no more separate from the scope of anthropology than any other form of art, from dance to pottery. In relegating its study to other areas of the academy, the anthropological lens through which an entire aspect of culture can be viewed is lost, and new insights go along with it. The technological revolutions in the United States have created shifts in how we disseminate ideas about who we are and what we do, but the primary goal of the visual folklore of film and television, the sharing of stories with great moral and practical import, have remained fundamentally the same as their primarily oral ancestors. Writers do not create in a sterile environment. They are shaped and influenced by the world in which they live. In that sense, then, culture informs how films are created from the moment the screenwriter puts pen to paper, and it is the role of the

anthropologist to analyze what influences these creative decisions, and the role of the critical ethnographer to question how those creative decisions are impacting the cultural ways of those they portray.

### **1.3.6. Contemporary Witchcraft/Conjure**

The 2010s saw a massive resurgence in witch and conjure woman imagery in popular culture and across social media. This has correlated with an upswing in the number of oppressed peoples who have taken on the mantle of the witch in defiance of the United States posturing itself as a white Christian nation. As there has not been much research into these particular groups in this format, I will be largely pulling from internet articles either written by members of these groups or that have been written by outsiders who have noticed that, since 2014, there has been a markedly increased presence on Tumblr of those who practice witchcraft. While these Tumblr communities came into existence prior to that year, their popularity and influence on the culture of the site have grown exponentially in that time frame. In pulling from these recent articles, I hope to get a firmer understanding of what is currently going on in these communities that exist in the quickly evolving world of social media.

#### **1.2.6.1 Tumblr and Witchcraft/Conjure**

The microblogging website Tumblr has become home to thousands, if not tens of thousands, of people identifying as witches and conjurors over the last decade. With the ability to create and share long form posts, images, and other forms of communication, the website offers the ability for people to share large amounts of information, and promotes discourse in a way that other blogging platforms and social media do not offer. The witches congregating on the website very often use the hashtag #witchblr, a



portmanteau of the words “witch” and “tumblr”, to communicate with each other and find more blogs to follow. This activity creates a constant stream of content and information on what’s called the “dashboard”, which is a conglomeration of all of the posts made, in chronological order, by every blog a person is following. The black witches and conjurors on Tumblr, while still potentially using the overarching #witchblr hashtag, have created their own hashtag, called #witchesofcolor, in which they look for other, non-white magic practitioners.

#### **1.3.6.2. Witch Renaissance**

Since 2014, the presence of witches on Tumblr has grown exponentially. This may have to do with the fact that there is currently a witch renaissance happening in film and TV, with older TV shows being rebooted and new films and shows coming out with an emphasis on witches, which has had a noted effect on the number of self-identified witches in the United States (Berger 2009: 503). This has given rise to what’s been referred to as the “Tumblr witch”: a person who has developed a witchcraft aesthetic, constantly reblogging images of crystals and Tarot cards, posting Dada-esque, vaguely feminist witchcraft memes, and not practicing much of anything in real life (Clements 2016). This type of witch is most closely associated with popular culture, as the aesthetic is drawn from popular films such as *The Craft* (1996) and television shows such as *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018).

Likewise, the conjurors are also heavily invested in media representations, although their conversations tend to focus primarily on the ways in which their traditions are being negatively represented in the media. For instance, in early 2019, there was an intense dialogue among the people in the conjure community on Tumblr about a TV

show produced by Netflix for its Colombian branch, *Siempre Bruja (Always A Witch)*. The discourse became a steady critique of the show for its portrayal of a master/slave love story and lack of political awareness (Sutton 2019). In this argument, the general feeling being expressed in relation to this piece is disappointment (there was much excitement about an Afro-Latinx witch TV show before it aired) and anger at their centering of whiteness in the black woman's story (her goal is to get back to her master's son). The differences between witches and conjurors in their relationships to film and television are salient, although there has been little conversation about how these groups talk about film and TV shows in the academy.

#### **1.3.6.3. Race and Witchcraft**

The negotiations surrounding race, gender and witchcraft that are present in the discussion of *Siempre Bruja* are only part of the current conversations within the witchcraft community. There is a large rift within the pagan community at large about the relatively recent phenomena of neonazis and skinheads taking on the mantle of Nordic neopaganism as a part of their racist ideologies (Martyn-Hemphill & Libell 2018). This has renewed an interest in discussing race and racism within the neopagan community, particularly on Tumblr.

At the same time, the current political climate of identity politics has fostered a robust conversation about the cultural appropriation of traditions practiced by people of color by white witches. Among Black practitioners of hoodoo, discourse has, for many years, centered on the recent trend of White witches labeling their practices as hoodoo, and attempting to incorporate Black magical traditions into their craft (stormywitch 2019; witches-ofcolor 2019). Likewise, there is currently a conversation within the conjure

community on Tumblr about whether white people should be allowed into ATRs at all (Bess 2015). This discourse is also rife with references to popular media, such as to *American Horror Story: Coven* (2013), which often represents voodoo and conjure as “dark, dangerous and as a primitive belief system” (O’Reilly 2019: 33).

#### **1.3.6.4. Gender and Sexuality**

This advent of identity politics has also fostered a renegotiation of gender within witchcraft. The Wiccan traditions from which much of neopaganism has been derived hold essentialist views of gender (Oboler 2010: 168). In the current reformulations of what it means to be a gendered person in the world, these practices have been called into question, with many witches arguing that there are other ways to address differences in the types of energy people embody (Oboler 2010: 172-179). For instance, it’s not altogether uncommon to find lesbian covens with no high priest, gay covens with no high priestess, or covens composed of transgender individuals who forego the assignment of gendered positions of hierarchy within their religious groups altogether.

Likewise, the renegotiations also contain a racialized component, as many of the individuals who practice non-European traditions argue that the enforcement of binary gender systems within the craft only works to re-enforce the work of colonizers who forcefully made those they colonized adhere to a binary gender system. This can be seen in the debates on Tumblr around whether men should be allowed to call themselves witches. Which argument is made tends to fall on roughly racialized boundaries, although many White people often side with Black practitioners. Many white Trans exclusionary radical feminists and gender essentialists argue that men and trans people who were assigned male at birth (AMAB) cannot be witches because a witch’s

power is supposed to come from the generative power of the womb, while many people of color and trans inclusive witches argue that magic comes from other sources and that every person has the right to call themselves by the name they wish to be called. Many men prefer to be called witches rather than the alternative, “warlock,” which many consider to be offensive, since the word means “traitor” in Old English.

#### **1.4. Research Question**

It’s easy to get lost in the maze of identities and cultural nuance that exists both within the neopagan community and outside of it. There are so many aspects of their culture that have gone under-researched that I found it difficult initially to narrow down the focus of this project. When I initially formulated the project, I found myself wanting to dive deep into the colonialist history surrounding the genesis of the modern-day witch as a monster. I wanted to develop a compendium of the various iterations of witchcraft that can be found on Tumblr. I also wanted to do a deep analysis of eighty years of witchcraft and conjure films, from 1939 to 2019.

It was only when I sat down to attempt the project that I realized that I had really devised three projects in the course of attempting to make one. So, for the sake of coherency, I narrowed my focus, and then narrowed once more. In terms of history, I’ve pared myself down to focusing specifically on feminist history from 1963 until the present, since 1963 proved to be a turning point in both the popularity and symbolism of the witch, and, by extension, the conjure woman, as feminine monster and feminist hero. In terms of the film analysis, after viewing all 80 years of witchcraft and conjure films, in total 71 films and 15 television shows, I decided to reformulate the analysis from one of minutiae into one of a cultural analysis of the figure of the witch as depicted

in film history, all of which have led to the current moment in popular culture. I then pulled primarily from the films of the last 25 years, as these films are the ones that have the most hold on popular culture in the United States as it pertains to witches.

I was roughly a month into my film watching phase when I watched *Satan's Cheerleaders*, a 1977 film about a hypersexualized high school cheerleading squad that fights a Satanic cult, primarily through the power of a witch who is on the squad. I sat stunned, disgusted at the hyper-sexualization of these teenage girls by not only their male classmates, but also the adult men they interacted with. I was shocked at the shift in characterization, having just watched about 40 years' worth of films and television shows that showed a wider range of feminine characterization despite many of them having clear messages of the right of heteropatriarchal dominance. It was in that moment that I realized that we, the witch community, are in a position where our religious identities are heavily tied to the way the media portrays The Witch as a monster/supernatural being. This was the final breakthrough that allowed me to formulate the three questions I sought to explore in conducting this ethnography. What role do film and television, as cultural productions, play in the identity formation of practitioners? What role do they play in the ways different witches interact with each other on social media platforms? And what role do these images play in the ways these individuals discuss their faiths with outsiders to these traditions?

### **1.5. Considerations**

The witchcraft community, as a spiritual minority, is a fairly closed community in many respects. There are areas of Wicca, a nature-based religion that often employs ritualistic magic in its practice, that are only accessible to those who have been initiated

within the religion. Witchcraft is still a very much maligned practice in the United States, with many opposed to the practice with nearly as much vehemence as their colonial foremothers and forefathers. Many places in the US still have unconstitutional bans on the practice, and many others have only been forced to remove the ordinances and laws in the last 20 years, such as Livingston Parish just outside of Baton Rouge.<sup>6</sup> The unease surrounding their practice being made public is something that I must keep in mind as I conduct this project, as many practitioners will want to remain anonymous because of the stigma they may face otherwise.

There is, however, an even stronger privacy consideration to be made for the practitioners of African Traditional Religions (ATRs). While witchcraft in and of itself is a fairly maligned practice, there has been a general shift towards positivity in perceptions of it in today's culture, particularly among younger people. The same cannot be said about voodoo, Santeria, and the host of other ATRs that are practiced in America today. Many in the broader witchcraft community still look at these practices as inherently dark or dangerous, and those of us who practice them are often perceived, even within the magical community, as having lower morals than our counterparts engaged in decidedly European-based traditions, since practitioners of African-based traditions tend not to be as averse to the concept of cursing as other practitioners. Practitioners of ATRs are even more secretive and closed than followers of neopagan religions, which can be traced to historical and present stigmas the ATR communities face.

In engaging with and writing about both communities, special care must be taken to accurately depict the practitioners the way they are, refraining from sensationalizing their practices in the name of scholarly entertainment. I must also position myself as a

member of both communities, while being an outsider at the same time. Many within the African Traditional Religious community would not consider me to be a real practitioner because I lack an association with a mambo, or spiritual elder, as many would believe you need to be to claim the title. Likewise, my association with African cosmologies in my practice separates me from many others who claim the title witch, since many within that community often heavily associate the word with European-based practices and deities, to the exclusion of other forms of magical knowledge. The witch turned scholar is likewise another degree of separation from my communities, as the simple act of my re-entering the communities in the hierarchical position of a representative of an institution with the power that comes with that positioning places separation between myself and those I wish to communicate with.

## **1.6. The Following Chapters**

In the sections that follow, I will dig into these topics of identity, visual media, and religion. Chapter Two will focus primarily on the methods I used and the ethics I adhered to as I engaged in this ethnography. Following that, Chapter Three will delve deeper into the concepts of the witch and conjure woman as both the representation of the abject horror and celebration of the breakdown of traditional gender norms in American culture, as shown through their various depictions in film and television. Chapter Four will deal primarily with the ways those who identify as witches on a religious level are interacting with these images in their online community on Tumblr, and the effects being portrayed as supernatural (that is, fictional) beings has on their everyday lives. Chapter Five will consist of a summary, and an exploration of further

research that could be conducted in the area of witchcraft and identity in young adults in the United States.

### **1.7. Notes**

1. Magick is the spelling many neopagans adapted to describe their ritual practices, as a way to mark it as separate from stage magic.
2. A femme is defined as a person of queer identity who performs and presents their gender in a feminine way. For more, refer to Gina Tonic (2016) in the Reference section.
3. Rootwork, conjure, and hoodoo are all variations on the same magical traditions. The practices are pretty much the same, but the name changes regionally. This is the tradition of African, Native American and European blended magical traditions most popularly practiced by African Americans. I follow the lead of Denise M. Alvarado, editor of *The Journal of American Rootwork*, in referring to these practices as “conjure”.
4. Abakuá is a secret society developed among Black Cuban men in the 1800s that was inspired by the leopard societies of Old Calabar. They are known for their spirit dancers, known as Nañigo. For more, see Rodriguez, 2014 in the Resources.
5. Ifa is a Yoruban spiritual tradition based in the belief in: a supreme being, Olodumare, who is without gender and who is removed from the world of humanity; orisa, the lesser spirits who have been tasked with watching over humanity; and ancestors, the deceased relatives of individual practitioners and the group as a whole who watch over the practitioner/community, helping to guide them through life. For more, see Ifayemi, n.d. in the Reference section.
6. This was only after a local Wiccan minister sued them in a federal court and the ordinance was struck down as unconstitutional in 2008. For more, see *Gryphon’s Nest Gifts, Inc v Parish of Livingston*.



## **Chapter 2. Methods and Ethics**

In this chapter, I detail the methods I employed in order to conduct this study. Having a background not only in Anthropology, but also in the highly intersectional field of Women's and Gender Studies, my approach to this subject has been heavily influenced by the convergence of history, media critique, and ethnography. As such, my methods can be broken into three primary forms: the reading of historical documents, the critical analysis and synthesis of film and television with cultural theory, and a series of interviews and a survey conducted on Tumblr or with Tumblr users who identify as witches, as well as face-to-face interviews with local witches and conjurors. The survey was published to Tumblr in September of 2019, just as the fall season began and all things witch were about to regain their yearly popularity in television and film. The individuals I ended up interviewing from Tumblr were found through my own account, where I had been amassing a list of over 600 blogs and well over 20 hashtags frequently used by witches and conjurors as a member of the Tumblr witch community since 2015.

### **2.1. Historical Document Analysis**

The current socio-political moment in the United States is firmly rooted in its history. The arguments being meted out in the public are some of the same arguments that have been engaged for decades. At the same time, the symbol of the witch has also shifted in meaning and form since the first era of colonization in this country. From the symbol of demonic attachment in the colonial era to the current image of feminist ideology, the witch has played a formative role in the ways women with power are perceived.

The earliest source of documents related to the historical development of the witch as an American monster is the digitized Witchcraft Collection in the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections available through Cornell University's website. This collection holds original documents related to the Salem witch trials, as well as other trials from that era, that serve as the backdrop for a great deal of witch film and television. This website allowed me to read the first-hand accounts of those who participated in or, in many cases, were the prosecutors in, the trials. I then accessed the Louisiana Digital Library, where I was able to find documents from the 19<sup>th</sup> century related to antebellum and post-emancipation accounts (however sensationalized by the newspapers) of Voodoo practice in the New Orleans area. I was also able to find documents leading up to the Civil Rights Era.

After combing through the archives, I began to search for contemporary research related to both witchcraft and African Traditional Religions. This led me to a wide variety of viewpoints and interpretations of historical events as they relate to the contemporary moment. It was at this point that I decided to incorporate listening to well-researched podcasts as a research practice. I am firmly of the belief that good research is not purely the domain of the academy, and in synthesizing the historical documents, contemporary interpretations, and interviews with scholars in the area one wishes to do work on, a podcast can be another great source for information. One such podcast, *Unobscured* by Aaron Mahnke, was used as a major source for different researchers in the area of the Salem Witch Trials to look into, as well as an approach to the Salem Witch Trials that I had never heard before, diving into the political history of the decade preceding the trials, as well as the traumatic events the colonies experienced during

that decade, which he considered to be as much a part of the moment that resulted in so many deaths and imprisonments as the actual time period from the first accusation to the last suspected witch's release.

I also chose to read neopagan religious texts from the time period from 1960s to the present. As an anthropologist, I believe it's most important to go to the people a researcher wants to know more about in order to get an understanding of their beliefs. As such, I read through a variety of witchcraft books that were fundamental to the popularization of Wicca, and, by extension, neopaganism, in the U.S. These included texts written by the founder of Wicca, Gerald Gardner (1961), and the Bucklands (1974), a family that is often cited as founders of American Wiccan practice and belief. I did the same for ATRs; however, their revival has happened much more recently, with many of the texts having been written in the 90s or afterwards, since this marked one of the first times that people who practice these religions were taken seriously or felt safe enough to write about their practices and beliefs.

Finally, while my film and television analysis focuses on those films and TV shows produced after 1963, I watched films dating back to 1939 in order to get a sense of the history behind the witch as a film trope. This allowed me to form a better sense of how revolutionary the switch was between the 1960s film witch and their ancestors. It also provided me with a history behind the associations between conjure women and evil in films, since all of the films I viewed from this time period depicted the black conjure women as either having power that proved fatal to the white people around her or was able to be manipulated by white people into conducting their own nefarious plots to the detriment of those around them.

## 2.2. Film Analysis and Synthesis

In approaching the film section, I first compiled a list of films and television shows that were either released in the United States or had a considerable enough impact on U.S. popular culture that they have become household names among fans of the genre (such as the *Harry Potter* film franchise [2001-2011]). I did this by using Google to search for films and television series from specific decades, from 1939 to 2019. For the earlier films, I limited myself to only those I could find through YouTube or other free websites, since I wanted to devote my financial resources to accessing the films within my primary target range of films produced after 1963.

After I compiled this list, I began to watch each film in chronological order of when they were released, starting with *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). I chose not to separate the films based on which traditions were being represented because I wanted to experience the evolution of both simultaneously. This allowed me to see the subgenres in the context of each other, rather than as separate entities, as some other studies of these types of films have done (Greene 2018; Martin 2016). Nothing exists in a vacuum, and the ways that magic practitioners were portrayed in these films and television shows are definitely the product of the same sociopolitical space that shaped Hollywood in their respective decades.

As I watched each film, I took detailed notes of a set of traits each witch and/or conjure woman was given by the film makers. I categorized these traits into sight, sound and story. The first set of traits, sight, included anything under the banner of appearance, noting the types of clothing each character wore and the demeanor with which she carried herself. These two factors are often the launching point from which an

audience develops a sense of what a character is supposed to represent. The second set of traits I made note of were sound, taking care to acknowledge the types of music that were associated with the characters' appearance on the screen, since audience associations are often influenced by this element of cinematography. Finally, I took note of the story surrounding the characters. This included looking at the effect the character had on other characters, the amount of agency the character had, and how the character's story ended.

By the end of the film viewing stage, I had developed a general set of categories or tropes for the types of witches and conjure women that were presented in the films I had watched. From there, I further divided the five tropes with the largest populations into two or more subsections, noting where there were combinations of tropes. The productions were not confined to a singular slot, and many of the films and television shows were listed under multiple categories. This was especially true of ensemble shows with almost an entire cast of characters that could be considered witches, such as *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-present) and the *Harry Potter* franchise (2001-2011). In these cases, the individual characters were given slots in the categories and subcategories they fell under. From there, I developed more in-depth descriptors for the subcategories, which I explain in greater detail in the following chapter.

### **2.3. Autoethnography**

At the time of writing, I have been a witch for 14 years, a Tumblr user for 10, and a member of the Tumblr witchcraft community for five. Part of what makes this subject so interesting for me is the opportunity to see how others are perceiving these films and television shows, and to get an understanding of how others are forming interpersonal

relationships with practitioners of other traditions and non-practitioners. All of these questions stem from my own experiences as a member of all of the before-mentioned groups. Witchcraft is a highly self-reflective spiritual practice, one which asks us to be critical of ourselves and our intentions in all that we do. In that same frame, it is also a practice that encourages its adherents to acknowledge how their personal experiences with the world are a part of a bigger picture; that we don't exist in solitude, but rather in communion with everything around us. In a spiritual sense, this is believed to create a better witch; in an academic sense, this led me to autoethnography.

In most areas of my ethnographic research, I depended heavily on the individuals who agreed to work with me on this project, and the information they shared with me. However, in areas where the experiences are highly subjective, or they lack institutional documentation, I incorporated my own experiences as a further, personal testament, while simultaneously attempting to incorporate my own experiences into the theoretical frame through which I was discussing their experiences. While autoethnography is still highly controversial as a research method, it has increasingly gained a dedicated group of researchers dedicated to the theoretical exploration of personal experiences. These works have explored the anger of black women at the injustice of racist sexism (Griffin, 2012), the emotions black women have felt while watching portrayals of black women on television (Boylorn, 2008), the shifting between insider and outsider roles as a White immigrant to Turkey (Hauber-Özer, 2019), how the performance of woman academics on Twitter is responded to (Lauricella, 2018), among others. As a relatively new qualitative research method, there are a multitude of definitions of the practice, from a personal narrative to a way of exploring personal narrative through a rigorous, scientific

lens (Wall, 2008: 39). I chose the latter, incorporating my personal experience as a witch and a member of the Tumblr witchcraft community within wider theoretical explorations of the influence of films and television on personal identity formation.

#### **2.4. Hashtag Ethnography and Digital Methods**

The primary focus of this study is on how witches and conjure women interact with films and television shows that supposedly represent them. In order to do this, ethnography seemed to be the most promising method for gathering information. I knew I wanted to incorporate autoethnography into my research, since I feel there is power in speaking truth to power as part of a marginalized community. My interest in exploring my own relationship to my spirituality is what initially drove me to conduct this ethnography, and to ignore my own experiences in the process would do myself a disservice as both an ethnographer and a witch. Since I had already been a member of this community for a long time, I already knew much of what was being talked about in the hashtags.<sup>1</sup> However, I've never been one of the more popular bloggers; I run my own blog as a way to collect information in one place for personal religious use, a practice sometimes referred to as keeping a digital grimoire,<sup>2</sup> rather than as one designed to educate others or provide services to others in the community. This is the way many of my Tumblr using interviewees said they used their blogs as well.

In order to conduct this ethnography, I engaged in participant observation of three hashtags: #witchblr, #witchesofcolor, and #witchcraft. I spent at least an hour a day watching discourse unfold around different aspects of spiritual life, but paid particular attention to the ways that individuals were referencing witchcraft-related films and television shows in their interactions. I also paid close attention to the ways witches

and conjurors interacted between the two groups, taking note of the different ways individuals referenced or used GIFs from popular witch and conjure films and television shows. Of particular interest were the reply chains that would often evolve around a single post, and the ask function, which allows users to ask questions of other users.

My interactions with other witches have primarily been in the form of in person, personal relationships with other solitary practitioners. As such, I decided to combine hashtag ethnography with more traditional methods of interviewing. While the vast majority of those interviewed for this study were Tumblr users, roughly 26% of the people involved with this project have no connection to Tumblr. Instead, they practice primarily solitarily, only interacting with other people of their spiritual traditions if they happen to know them in person. For the Tumblr participants, most (roughly 74%) were found primarily through cold messaging while searching through hashtags, while the rest were bloggers I had been following on my own account for a few years.

Surprisingly, there were no Asian American respondents and only one person identified as Latinx. While I wish I would have been able to more fully include these populations in the research, they simply weren't responsive to the survey, and the blogs I sent cold messages to, ended up belonging to, with the singular exception, White, Black, and Mixed Native practitioners.

The Tumblr portion of my research site is an unconventional, albeit growing, one. Other ethnographers have begun to understand that there are communities with their own subcultures developing around hashtags on a variety of social media websites, which present their own methodological challenges and advantages for researchers (Bonilla & Rosa 2015). These communities look different depending on the ways that



the social media platforms on which they operate allow communication. For instance, the 280-character limit imposed by Twitter on their users has created a culture of short, quick posts. Tumblr, by contrast, allows individuals to type out a massive amount of information in a singular post, including multiple images to enhance their points. It also allows others to reblog another person's post, meaning that other users can share what's been said by others, with or without their own, sometimes similarly long, comments, all of which link back to the original poster (OP). While Facebook also allows this feature, the culture of Facebook tends to make people shy away from doing this, and many wouldn't want to do so on their personal accounts, since it's the norm to have family members and coworkers as friends on the website, which means they can see anything the person posts, regardless of privacy settings, unless they were to individually block them from every post the person doesn't want them to see. The nature of Tumblr, however, is one of privacy, with most people refusing to put their real names on the website, and very few people ever post a real picture of themselves, despite having run their blog for years. This anonymity is aided by the fact that the only way a person can be sure that they've found another person's Tumblr blog is if that person tells them the URL that their blog can be found under.

This isn't to say that individuals aren't willing to engage in discussion on Tumblr, but that they feel more comfortable doing so if their names and faces are not attached to what they say. A similar phenomenon can be seen on Reddit, a popular forum-based social media platform that only displays a person's chosen username and doesn't even require email verification before making a post. Many users on both platforms feel that this allows them to be more open and honest in their discussions, while simultaneously

having control over what people do and do not know about them. There are several exceptions to this rule, such as when other users doxx (publish private or personal information about someone online) another user who has said something they don't like, but this is something outside of the norm set by the larger Tumblr community. This is also another reason by I decided to use names chosen through a name generator for letters A-N for all participants.

This desire for anonymity created one of the recurring issues in finding individuals in the community who could be involved in the ethnography. Tumblr allows people as young as 14 to create profiles, and there were several people I contacted who ended up being under the age of 18, who therefore couldn't participate. While they often passed along the survey on their own blogs, a lot of time was spent crafting individual messages to these bloggers only to realize they fell outside of the age range for the study. Additionally, there is a small, but present community of older witches and conjurors who use Tumblr, and their ages are not always clear. As a result, I ended up setting up an interview only to realize once I had already started the interview that the person on the other end was in her 50s, well outside of the 18-35 age range set as the population size of the study. The interview served as a reminder for me to check if those who agreed to the study were actually within the parameters I had set as the targeted study population.

Due to the nature of the culture on Tumblr, I ran into several issues in the beginning stages of my ethnographic process that made me question the methods I was employing. I made a new Tumblr account from which to solicit interviews in order to give a more official feel to my work, but was met with a multitude of unanswered requests for

interviews. It was only once I added my picture as the avatar that individuals started responding to me. At this point, a month had passed before I realized that I was being mistaken as a bot. Some people, either trying to promote a business or figure out a way to hack into computers, create special codes that generate multiple Tumblr accounts set to message random profiles using a form of machine learning adapted to filling in URLs or other identifying information to find profiles. These programs are then set to automatically send a predetermined message to every real profile they come across. Most people don't even open such messages, deleting them as soon as they see the generic avatar of the site, since most people upload at least some form of identifying picture as an avatar, even if it's not one of their face. These messages often contain links to download viruses; I had inadvertently associated myself with such activity.

Another change I had to make was adding my own relationship to witchcraft and conjure into the description of the study, in the posts I made every week advertising the survey, the messages I was sending to people I found through the hashtags, and in the static description post linked at the top of the blog. Before adding these descriptions, I had a lot of difficulty finding individuals who were willing to fill out the survey, much less agree to a video/call interview. Once the information was added that I was a practitioner as well, they were more receptive to the idea of talking to me about what many consider to be closed systems, or, at the very least, saw me as someone who knows how their particular practices have been exploited or sensationalized by outsider researchers and journalists in the past and into the present day. This was evidenced in the fact that many of the interviewees I met through Tumblr began to use more witchcraft jargon when describing their practices to me once they learned that I also was a practitioner,

and dropped the formal register they had adopted when they believed I was a non-practicing researcher.

## **2.5. Ethics**

While much can be critiqued about Native anthropology, the truth holds that for many communities, there is a hesitancy to open up to individuals with the privileged status of researcher. This is mitigated a little when that privileged person is someone who is also a member of a group they consider themselves to be a member of, trying to explore their own community instead of an outsider whose intentions are less apparent. Part of why I chose to explore this particular subject is because I realized that not much research had been done on my particular religious community, partly due to the uncertainty surrounding social media in ethnographic work, and partly due to the academic focus on religion tending to focus on IRL (in real life) ritual and physically located belief communities. The Tumblr witchcraft communities manifest uniquely as a 21st century phenomena, drawn together not because of a shared geographical location, but because of the particular social media website they felt drawn to.

That website served not only as an important source of data for me, but also as one of my largest ethical quandaries while conducting this research. Tumblr, being a microblogging social media platform, appears on the surface to lend itself readily to researchers. People largely interact with each other in public ways, either by posting responses to questions as individual blog posts or by having entire conversations through reblogs.<sup>3</sup> However, this only happens with people who are known to be regular users. Any sense of external supervision tends to make users feel as if their privacy is being invaded. So, how is a researcher to approach the study of discourse in an ethical

manner on such a thing as the spiderweb that expands from just one blog post, which can potentially be commented on by thousands of individual bloggers?

This is an ethical dilemma that many have faced since the first ethnographers attempting to do internet research entered the field (Hookway & Snee 2017: 12-13). While some communities may lend themselves readily to being able to attain consent from all people involved, such as small Discord communities<sup>4</sup> or Xbox One groups,<sup>5</sup> Tumblr has millions of individual users, and the witch hashtag alone has thousands of individual posts. Getting informed consent from everyone on the site would be nearly impossible. I decided to go about this by way of citation, by creating citations for the blog entries the same way I would create citations for the knowledge gathered from another academic. Citation works best in this context because, just like any other website on the internet, the posts were made to be consumed and analyzed, as part of a larger conversation of whatever topic the post is about. In my commitment to acknowledging the forms of knowledge production outside of the academy, I felt that citation alongside academics served to place everyone, researcher and community members, on the same level, rather than elevating the status of researcher as the only group whose knowledge is legitimated through citation. I also made the decision not to cite any of the bloggers who were interviewed because I didn't want the chances of their speech styles potentially leading back to their blogs. Multiple interviewees have large followings on the platform, and I wanted to ensure their anonymity by not creating any links to their profiles in the document.

This also led me to the next ethical dilemma I faced when working on this project. Should something that is publicly published onto the internet be considered private?

While most people who use Tumblr make posts with the expectation that at least their followers will read it, posters don't typically tend to think about the fact that anyone with associations with institutions will be paying attention to what we say. In a sense, users expect to be seen by the public, but not analyzed by those with institutional power. I still haven't quite worked out how I feel about this issue, particularly when it comes to attempting to document discourse without disrupting the way it naturally flows by throwing myself, as someone associated with an institution, into the fold. While I am a part of the community with my own, personal stake in the ongoing discussions, I am still someone with the power of a major social institution behind my work. The question of whether it was okay for me to speak on topics others were addressing if it personally affected me or if it was better if I were to remain removed from the discussions often entered my mind when I came across a post I had an opinion on. Would joining in on the conversation now, as I conducted fieldwork, be inauthentic to others, when I rarely gave input before? Eventually, I decided to continue using Tumblr the same way I always have. I continued to lurk, reading posts, liking the ones I agreed with or thought were interesting, and letting others engage in the conversations. This is a way many other users engage with the platform, and is my preferred way of taking in the opinions and knowledge of others.

## **2.6. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I summarized the variety of methods I used in conducting this study. By combining the analysis of historical documents, film analysis and the categorization of different tropes that became apparent from watching 80 years of witch films, and conducting an ethnography primarily through Tumblr hashtags, I hoped to get

a well-rounded view of the historical and cultural context the contemporary witch steps into when they publicly identify themselves as such. I also covered the ethical issues I faced in conducting an ethnography on my own religious community, explored my use of autoethnography as a research method, as well as the issues that come with conducting any type of research with communities based entirely online, and the personal issues I had while doing fieldwork through the internet.

In the following chapter, I present my findings from the large sampling of witchcraft related films and television shows I watched as part of the study. I will give both an explanation of the five most prominent tropes of witches and conjure women presented in US media, as well as the cultural and historical backgrounds on which these tropes are based. I will then compare the two sets of tropes, those of white witches and those of black conjure women, in an attempt to see how these two sets of tropes interact within the context of white supremacy and white feminism.

## **2.7. Notes**

1. A hashtag is represented by the symbol “#” followed by a word. Typing this in a post on most social media platforms typically places the post into a group with similar posts, which can then be followed by individual users. In the case of Tumblr, the hashtag is added at the end of posts, and a user can then follow that hashtag to see others who are using the hashtag to talk about similar topics.

2. A grimoire is a collection of magical practices that have been written down in one place, be it a physical notebook or a digital document, such as a Word document or a blog.

3. Each post made by an individual user can be shared as a post by any number of other bloggers. This is the primary way through which discourse is done on Tumblr. One person makes a post, another presses the reblog button and types a comment underneath the original, and republishes it on their own blog. This makes popular posts a spiderweb of content, with some people never interacting with the original poster, or OP.

4. Discord is a popular social media platform where individuals can make their own private chat rooms. Many witches use them to form small study groups, but it is also used within other large online communities to make smaller subgroups that are dedicated to one aspect, or for small groups of friends who want to be able to have a group chat while gaming, for example.

5. An Xbox One group is a social function within the Xbox gaming console interface that allows a person to find a group of other people who have a similar interest, such as individuals who play a particular game or who happen to be a member of a particular social group. These places are called groups, and are run similarly to an internet forum, where members can post and respond to each other, as well as add each other as friends and play games together through the online function of most games.



## CHAPTER 3. IMAGES OF FEMININE MAGIC IN AMERICAN FILM AND TELEVISION

In this chapter, I detail the five most predominant types of witches and conjure women found in the large sample of films viewed, spanning the decades between 1939 and 2019. While more tropes than this were found, these make up the vast majority of the types of witches and conjure women in film within this time period.<sup>1</sup> Two of these tropes are for characters depicted as white, two are for characters depicted as black, and one is found in both White Witches and Black Conjure Women. With each trope, I pull from both historical and cultural critique to find what each has to say about gender and power. I then compare these five tropes to each other, along with the messages being sent, to argue that these differing representations exist at the nexus of race, gender and power in the imagination of American filmmakers and television creators.

### 3.1. The Vixen

“‘Twould be nice to have lips. Lips to whisper lies... Lips to kiss a man and make him suffer.”

- Jennifer, *I Married A Witch*, 1942

The vixen is a trope found throughout film history. Often, this woman is conventionally attractive (read: slim, symmetrical face, white, and able-bodied) and exists as a person who both the male protagonist and the audience is supposed to lust after. She is given a revealing costume, relative to the time period in which the character was created. Dialogue with this type of character can be implicitly and/or explicitly sexual, and her characterization is one which she irrepressibly seduces any male character she comes into contact with, whatever her intention may be. This trope exists in all genres of film, and rose in popularity in the aftermath of the abolition of the Hays Code.<sup>2</sup> What sets the Vixen Witch apart from her non-Witch counterparts,

however, is that she has the power of magic to aid her in her sexual conquests and sexualized beauty. Therefore, the Vixen Witch exists as a character whose dress and characterization is used to represent her as an object of sexual desire either for other characters, the audience, or both. They are typically associated with a lack of intelligence, although several exceptions to this aspect of the trope exist. There are three primary forms of the Vixen Witch made apparent in the films viewed for this project - The Satanic Vixen, The Unrepentant Vixen, and The Repentant Vixen - each of which holds a different message about those who are feminine, and about what witches are like.

The Satanic Vixen embodies all aspects of the Vixen trope with the added quality that she is closely associated with Devil worship, and/or is explicitly a Satanic witchcraft practitioner. She is more likely to have a darker costume design, with obvious references to the clothing style of the Goth subculture. This includes clothing that is all black, or nearly all black, with leather, lace, ornate silver jewelry and black leather boots as accessories, often with black hair and heavy, dark makeup. In representations of historical versions of this form of the Vixen, the clothing seems more conservative than her contemporary counterparts, although for the time periods being represented, they are every bit as much revealing. An example of this trope would be the witch in the woods from Robert Eggers' 2016 film *The VVitch*. In *The VVitch* (2016), the unnamed witch in the woods exists in the Puritanical world of the film as the agent of Satan sent to commit acts that would drive the main character, Thomasin, a 15-year-old girl, into the arms of Satan. The witch does this first by kidnapping and eating Thomasin's one-year-old brother and, later, by seducing her younger brother, Caleb, and causing him to

fall ill, which drives her family further into believing that Thomasin is the witch. The witch in the woods makes few appearances, but one of her most prominent scenes is the one in which she seduces Caleb. In the Puritan world in which this story is set, women were expected to cover all parts of their bodies, even going so far as to remain clothed when bathing. Figure 3.1 shows a still from the movie, in which it's clearly seen that the Witch in the Woods has a low-cut corset dress, which leaves her breasts exposed in a way that would have been scandalous at the time. Here, she is tossing a flirtatious smile in Caleb's direction, luring him into her home where she will bewitch him, which ultimately leads to his death. What sets her apart from the general Vixen Witch is her close ties to Satan, and practices that could be deemed monstrous. This is why she is also an example of the Monstrous Witch, a trope which is discussed at length below.



Figure 3.1. Still from *The Witch* (2015)

The second iteration of the Vixen trope is the Repentant Vixen, which existed for a short time prior to the primary focus of this study. The primary characteristic that separates her from the other types of Witch Vixen is that her plot revolves around her eventual salvation from her seductress ways, by entering into normative White Femininity through a) achieving a heteronormative marriage and b) willingly forsaking

that which made her a witch in the process, for the sake of maintaining that relationship. Her plot tends to revolve primarily around this journey from tempting and promiscuous to dedicated homemaker and faithful, respectable wife. An example of this version of the trope would be Jennifer (played by Veronica Lake) from the 1943 film *I Married A Witch*. When she comes back to life after being burned as a witch in colonial America, she spends much of her on screen time attempting to seduce an engaged man, first by appearing to him naked and then by magically hopping into his bed. The film culminates, however, in the two getting married, after her magic was stripped away by her father; the two go on to live in a heteronormative household complete with two children. Note that this type of Vixen gets to maintain her sexuality, albeit in a new form, something her opposite, discussed below, does not typically get to experience.

The Repentant Vixen exists in opposition to its later counterpart: The Unrepentant Vixen. While this version of the witch made a few appearances in earlier decades, she became much more prevalent in the 1980s. Her storyline generally tends to follow the same trajectory as the Repentant Vixen in the beginning, but diverges once men become involved. Whereas the Repentant Vixen eventually enters the realm of acceptability, the Unrepentant Vixen remains the symbol of unapproved feminine sexuality. Her storyline tends to revolve around punishment and, in many cases, a process of desexualization as punishment for her lack of modesty. Melisandre of *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) would be the perfect example of this trope. She begins her journey as a seductress, using her body to manipulate the men around her into doing her bidding (Taylor, 2012). However, after convincing Stannis Baratheon, the man who she believed was the one true king of Westeros, to sacrifice his only daughter by fire,

leading to the demoralization of his army and their eventual loss at the hands of their enemy, she recedes from this role (Sapochnik, 2015). This transition is quite literally marked by her removal of her signature necklace, which was actually a glamour she wore to keep herself looking young. When it is revealed that she is truly an extremely old woman, her character no longer exists as a sex symbol. She is now allowed to engage in good acts, but only by the removal of her sexual identity.



Figure 3.2. Still from *Elvira: Mistress of the Dark* (1989)

One major exception exists within this version of the Vixen Witch of note: Elvira (Figure 3.2.). In the 1988 film *Elvira: Mistress of the Dark*, the title character exists as a woman who owns her sexuality not because she is supposedly a sex object, but because she truly enjoys sex. The two are not mutually exclusive, as most Hollywood writing would make it out to be. On the surface level, Elvira would seem to be the pinnacle of the prototypical Vixen Witch: she wears revealing clothing, makes many jokes about sex, and she doesn't hide the fact that she enjoys sex. However, in the vein of the arguments made by sex-positive feminists at the time, she never made her sexuality free for anyone who wanted it. Elvira makes this point in explicit detail at

several moments of the movie, from when she yells at her new boss for sexual harassment, which sparks the main plotline of the movie, to when she punishes the neighborhood boys for watching her undress through her window without her consent. She does all of this while maintaining that she is who she is because she enjoys being sexual and healthily enjoys her own sexuality. When she falls for a local man in the town she moves to after quitting her job, she makes several sexual jokes towards him and tries to use her newly found magic to aid her in getting him to have sex with her. By the end of the film, she's the same person, only made stronger by the fact that she was able to best a family patriarch and maintain her powers.

Her increased strength, self-assuredness and continued sexuality at the end of the film is exactly the reason she is notable within this trope. The Vixen Witch is supposed to exist as a cautionary tale for women who may find themselves wanting to engage with their sexuality in unsanctioned ways, i.e., outside of a heterosexual marriage resulting in children. In the same vein as the Madonna-Whore Dichotomy, based on research by Sigmund Freud in which he argues that "where [some men] love, they do not desire and where they desire they cannot love," (1910: 183) the Vixen Witch stands as everything a woman is not meant to be in U.S. society: powerful and sexually free. This combination is typically what creates the space in which the Vixen Witch exists as a monster, something we will return to later in this chapter. It's no coincidence that power and sexuality would coincide in this trope of the witch, since these two personality traits have been associated with witchcraft since the first witch trials in Europe. In fact, as W. Scott Poole argued, "the Puritan tendency toward witch-hunting reveals the American tendency to desire the monster, indeed to be titillated by it" (2011:

39). This tendency has remained prominent in today's media through the portrayals of the various forms of Vixen punishment that can be seen in more recent films and television, from Nancy in *The Craft* (1996), who is unwillingly committed to a mental institution, to Angelique in *Dark Shadows* (2012), who is burned to death.

### 3.2. The Witch Next Door

"What's the matter? I have to be a witch, I have to be a mortal, I have to be a teenager and I have to be a girl all at the same time. That's what's the matter."

- Sabrina, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, Season 1, Episode 14

If the Vixen Witch is situated as the Whore of the Madonna-Whore dichotomy, the Witch Next Door trope is the Madonna. This trope creates characters who are witches who, through appeals to feminine normativity of their time and place, portray their magic as a matter of cultural difference rather than as a personal defect. These characters tend to exhibit all of the facets of American normative standards (White, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, conventionally attractive, and normatively feminine), with the only character-defining difference from other girls or women being that they happen to have the ability to use magic. These characters are typically written in a way so as to make them completely sympathetic and as relatable as possible to their intended audiences, which are typically girls and women of the same socio-economic status as the characters. While this trope is not one exclusive to the witch subgenre of cinema and television, unique aspects of these characters' lives have the added effects of powers they have yet to fully master, particularly in the cases of the Teen Witch Next Door, who typically is only just discovering her powers and is undergoing training alongside the ups and downs of her otherwise typical teenaged life.

This version of the witch has been a constant since the beginning of what many consider to be the Second Wave of feminism, for reasons discussed below.

The Teen Witch Next Door is often reduced to stereotypes of what girls in their teens are interested in: boys, fashion, appearance, and popularity. This particular trope often incorporates the idea of glamour, the use of magic to manipulate others' perception of what the witch looks like, into their storylines (Moseley 2001: 413). The use of magic surrounding one's appearance, typically while in pursuit of male attention, is a hallmark of the Teen Witch Next Door, even though she typically is conventionally attractive already. By all accounts, she aims to be perfect in every sense of the word, but her magic marks her as outside of the norm no matter how normative the rest of her life may be. In fact, her story often revolves around trying to balance having an immense amount of power thrust upon her while simultaneously trying to be the "normal" teenaged girl she wants to be.

Hayao Miyazaki's 1989 anime film *Kiki's Delivery Service* conveys one of the most popular examples of the Teen Witch, although she is removed from cultural influences that often shape the study population's lives, and, therefore, exists as an example that many U.S. witches find endearing. Kiki is a 13-year-old Japanese witch entering the year of her apprenticeship as a resident witch for the port city of Koriko (Figure 3.3). She offers her services as a delivery girl, her specialty being speedy broomstick delivery. She's awkward, and knows little about how to take care of herself. The audience gets to see her dealing with learning how to master her magic, lose and regain her self-confidence, and navigate friendships in a new town. Without the element of magic, the film would play out as the quintessential coming of age story of a girl



discovering herself in a new place. Adding magic to this story transforms this into a story of a girl discovering that the root of her power comes from within herself.



Figure 3.3. Still from *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989).

This story stands in opposition to the U.S. stories involving the Teen Witch Next Door, since Kiki never has a love interest (although she does have a close male friend), and the bulk of her story revolves around her working and discovering herself outside of relationships and popularity. Most of the Teen Witch Next Door characters in U.S films do this through discovering that popularity and chasing after boys who don't want to have relationships with them are not what life is about, typically after having made those mistakes. Of the witches I talked to, the ones who had seen *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989) talked about it as a good example of what they wish more witch films were like, since Kiki's magic is something that comes from within her and is affected by her other responsibilities and life experiences.

But what happens when the Teen Witch Next Door grows up? After the trials of puberty and discovering who she is, she graduates and steps into her role as the Adult Witch Next Door. Typically, these characters have full control of their powers by the time

the story begins. She holds a normal job, is middle class, has normative style and interests, some form of family and is, by all means, completely normal – except she has the ability to use magic. Her story tends to revolve around the career aspirations allowed in the particular time period in which she was written, and her experiences with relationships, both platonic and romantic. All she desires is to have a normal life but, once again, her magic interferes with this goal, often dragging her into fantastical, albeit terrifying, situations where she is the only person who can save the world (or at the very least, someone she loves).

The most referenced example of the Adult Witch Next Door by those interviewed for the purposes of this project was the 1998 TV show *Charmed*. It follows the lives of the Halliwell sisters, Prue, Piper, Phoebe, and, after Prue's death in season three, Paige. They are known as the Charmed Ones, a trio of the most powerful witches to ever exist, meant to save the world from evil. Each of the women is a "normal" woman living in San Francisco at the turn of the millennium, with their own relationships, careers, and family drama. When they discover their powers, they refuse them, particularly Prue, who just wants to maintain the normalcy she has built up in the wake of being thrust into a parental role after the sisters' father left the family when they were children. Piper, the middle sister, wants desperately to be a chef and Phoebe is free spirited and flighty. All of their desperate attempts at maintaining normalcy are crushed as they slowly become more enmeshed in magical society, encountering dangers and foes at every turn that mark their lives as anything but normal.

This desperate attempt at normalcy stands as an enduring earmark of the Witch Next Door trope, and it serves the purpose of marking the witch as a stand-in for the

Other. The Witch's magic is her one defining characteristic that is different from everyone around her. If she maintains normalcy in every other aspect of her life, she is accepted by the non-magical people she encounters. In this respect, she exists as a regulatory trope within media for those who have a non-normative aspect of their identities. Whether it be race, sexuality, disability, or religion, the Witch Next Door trope serves to tell those of us who inhabit any of these outsider roles that if we make sure to blend in with every other aspect of our identities, then we will be able to live relatively safe lives and will be able to be accepted by "normal" people in society. Any further deviation from the norm, or attempts at forging another role outside of society's accepted pathways for women and femmes, will result in removal of one's humanity as punishment for willfulness. This is why the Adult Witch Next Door personifies the opposition to the Vixen Witch, since the Vixen is supposed to represent to film and television audiences everything a woman is not supposed to do with her body, including engaging in unsanctioned sexuality.

### **3.3. The Magical Sapphire**

"You go back there, and you bring me their heads. All of them! Fiona, her daughter and every witch bitch in that house. You bring me their heads, all of them. Then you burn that place to the ground! You do it, and you do it quick. And I let you live."

- Marie Laveau, *American Horror Story: Coven* (2013)

The Witch Next Door tends to portray femmes with power as approachable and just like everyone else. There doesn't seem to be an equivalent when it comes to individuals who practice African-based magical traditions in film. Instead, most of the examples of African-based magic in film lie in the horror genre, with only two notable exceptions: *Eve's Bayou* (1997) and *Daughters of the Dust* (1992). These two films

were written and directed by black women and portray the African-derived practices as existing within the gray zone of spiritual practice, with some choosing to practice in ways that can cause harm to others and some choosing to use their spiritual talents for healing and helping those around them. Otherwise, most of the portrayals of voodoo practitioners tend to frame the practices as either inherently harmful or as something that exists solely for the benefit of other, typically White, characters.

The most common trope specific to the conjure woman is the Magical Sapphire. This is a woman who finds herself, through no fault of her own, in a circumstance in which someone she cares about has been harmed. Typically, those who have done the harming are White in these stories. The woman in question then calls on her family traditions of rootwork and conjure in order to get revenge on those who have wronged her, typically leading to multiple deaths and gruesome punishments for everyone who is caught in the crossfire. The punishments range from growing to the size of a giant in order to cause shipwrecks (*Pirates of the Caribbean* [2006]) to zombie attacks against teenaged girls who did not personally wrong against her (*American Horror Story: Coven* [2013]). No matter where she goes, her grief is matched with unbridled violence and wreckage. There is no other response to the wrongdoing than anger, no matter what cause. There is no range offered to these characters in terms of their emotional response to pain; they can only lash out at those who have caused the pain with the calculated coolness associated with serial killers.

This is a magical form of the Sapphire trope found throughout U.S. media for centuries. The Sapphire exists as the image of the “mad black woman,” sassy, angry, and willing to fight anyone at a moment’s notice. The origins of this trope lie in the

1800s during the post-Reconstruction era, where depictions of the Black home often contained examples of inept Black men ruled over by their angry, matriarchal wives (Pilgrim, 2008). This trope has evolved into Black women as angry with the world, and ready to harm anyone who slightly wrongs her in whatever way she possibly can (Pilgrim, 2008). She is often depicted in a sexualized manner as well, particularly after the rise of Blaxploitation films in the 1970s that combined the Jezebel trope (a hypersexual black woman) with the Sapphire to create a legion of hypersexualized female characters whose sole purpose was to seek revenge on men, particularly White men, who had wronged them (Pilgrim, 2008). She would often do this through a series of sexual manipulations and violent retributions, typically graphically shown on the screen.

Sugar Hill is such a character, found in the 1974 blaxploitation film of the same name. After her boyfriend is killed by a racist organized crime group, Sugar Hill goes home to her Mambo grandmother and calls on Baron Samedi<sup>3</sup> to seek revenge on the men who committed the murder. The rest of the film consists of nothing more than torture porn as Hill murders every member of the mob while a loosely defined plot has Hill manipulate the mob boss, Morgan, into thinking she is attracted to him. The film ends with his death, and his racist wife, Celeste, who Hill had already beaten in a fist fight, is abducted and taken to be Baron Samedi's third (White) wife. At no point is the magic performed on screen associated with Hill's attempt to cope with the suffering caused by the loss of her lover. Instead, it's merely a tool for violent, hate-filled revenge. She combines the powerful magic she has under her control with the sexual attraction the crime boss has for her into a performance of aggressive violence.



Figure 3.4. Still from *American Horror Story: Coven* (2013).

More recently, *American Horror Story: Coven* (2013) presented its own Magical Sapphire in the person of one of the most well-known New Orleans Voodoo Queens, Marie Laveau. In the show, she was given immortality by Papa Legba.<sup>4</sup> Each of her storylines revolves around seeking revenge on white people who have committed horrible acts against those she loves and cares about. In the 1960s, she raised Civil War soldiers as zombies and commanded them to kill their descendants after they lynched the son of one of the workers in her hair salon because he was desegregating a school. Another of her sub-plots revolves around getting revenge on Madame Delphine LaLaurie who, in the show, brought Laveau's lover into her chamber of horrors and turned him into a minotaur by suffocating him inside the head of a bull after her daughter attempted to have sex with him. In retribution, Laveau killed the entire LaLaurie family, except for Delphine, by hanging, and sentenced Delphine to eternal life

buried in a wooden box in her own courtyard, never to be reunited with her family (something that is undone by Laveau's enemy, Fiona Goode, the leader of the white coven).

Perhaps her largest fight is, throughout the season, with the White witches of New Orleans, who break a truce that had been established in the early 1900s because of a desire for more power. She sends first her lover, the Minotaur, who she brought back from the dead with the bull's head as his own, then an army of zombies, to the house that serves as a training ground for the next generation of witches. Every action she makes throughout the course of the series, up until she and Fiona Goode, the head of the White witch faction in the city, make a truce so they can fight the White man witch hunter and CEO of a multinational corporation, is dedicated to getting revenge on the White women who got their powers from black women and promptly started to behave as if they had gained the powers all on their own.

This image of Marie Laveau varies greatly from the real-life figure. While Marie is portrayed as a fully black woman in the show, she was actually a part of Creole society, which held a different position in the New Orleans social order than free blacks (Ward, 2004a: 9-10). She was also a devoted Catholic who practiced a syncretized magical tradition based around the saints, rather than outright worshipping the deity Papa Legba, who she is portrayed as having a pact with in the television show (Ward, 2004b: 21). Since she did not know how to write, however, the real knowledge she had to share, and the true story of her life, died with her in 1881 (Long, 2020). What we do know has often been tainted by the sensationalism of writers such as Robert Tallant, who compiled interviews with people who knew her and wrote an account of her life

credited as being the foundation of the legends of who she is today (Long, 2020). Combined with the fear-mongering accounts of New Orleans Voodoo ceremonies as naked throngs of people whipped into a frenzy from her magical abilities, the propaganda about Laveau, derived from the fear of a woman of color having not only power but authority in an American city, has been materialized into a folklore figure who continues to manifest in visual media (Long, 2020).

These stories weave an image of black femme magical practice as something that is inherently dangerous to White people, particularly if it is associated with explicitly African traditions of magic. In films, both *Sugar Hill* and *Marie Laveau* use their powers for nothing but harm, never engaging in the more common uses of ritual: healing and protection from harm. This follows the trajectory of portrayals of Black magic throughout the history of media portrayals of African traditions, particularly that of the newspaper reporting from the 1800s about public Voodoo (and similarly, though differently named, African-based magic traditions and spiritualities) that lay the foundation for much of the film and TV depictions of Voodoo and other African-based magic rituals. Much of this reporting focused in on the dangers these rituals posed to “proper” White society, since many White women would attend them and interact socially with Black men, as well as moral signaling about the breakdown of societal norms surrounding gender, sexuality, and power (Gordon, 2012: 769). The reporting on these rituals formed the fertile soil from which film depictions would sprout. Hypersexuality and harm to White people who come into contact with it, be it socially or physically in terms of the heavy-handed implications of potential for sexual assault, fill



these accounts and extend to the films. The taking of Celeste by Baron Samedi in *Sugar Hill* is in a direct lineage of these types of depictions of ATRs.

### **3.4. The Spiritual Mammy<sup>6</sup>**

“And they all knew what they wanted/ What they wanted me to do/ I told ‘em what they needed/ Just like I be tellin’ you.”

- Mama Odie, *Princess and the Frog* (2009)

Much like with the White witch tropes discussed above, Black magic practitioners are often depicted in terms of a dichotomy. Where White witch tropes tend to focus in on norms surrounding sexuality, the Black witch tropes seem to focus in on the proper use of one’s power and energy. The Magical Sapphire stands as an example of how black women are not supposed to react when wronged by men, especially White men. They are not supposed to use their inner power to get revenge on those who seek harm for her, but instead should come together in socially sanctioned ways to seek change. The Spiritual Mammy stands as an accepted way for Black women and femmes to use their inner power for the benefit of those around them and only in the role of a helper. Without that helper status, she runs the risk of being interpreted as a Magical Sapphire.

The Spiritual Mammy exists solely to serve the main characters of the film, be they White or Black, and tend to be old black women who have achieved the status of Mambo (or Mama in a few instances), a high priestess of Voodoo. She tends to be kind, and wants nothing more than to help the strangers who show up on her doorstep with their personal life problems for nothing in return. The Mammy has been an enduring trope in film and television for black women and femmes. They serve as nothing but support, and typically are considered to be unattractive in whatever that means at the time (typically dark skinned, overweight, maintaining Black hair textures, and generally

not abiding by Western beauty norms). They live to serve those around them. Obviously, this trope began during slavery as a justification for keeping black people enslaved: the jolly maid who loves to serve the White family that owns her. Free from slavery, this trope stands alongside the Magical Negro trope of an old black man in some sort of service field who magically holds the key piece of advice for the White main characters in films to form a continuum of Black people whose entire existences in these film universes revolve around service to those who rank higher than them on the social ladder.



Figure 3.5. Still from *Princess and the Frog* (2009)

Mama Odie from Disney's *Princess and the Frog* (2009), as much as I love her, is one such character. She's short, old, overweight, and completely foregoes any attempts to satisfy Western beauty standards. She's sassy and tells the people who come to her what they need, and provides them with just the right piece of advice to get their lives on track. Her magic is not her own, and she uses it only in aid of others. In fact, she has no scenes on her own, as she is a secondary character in the story. Her

existence in the film is solely associated with her acts of service to the non-magic practicing characters in the film.

Not all aspects of the Mammy trope always transfer over in the case of the Spiritual Mammy, though. In the 2005 film *Venom*, this role is carried out by a young, conventionally attractive black woman named CeCe who guides the White protagonists through their ordeals when a suitcase containing the bad spirits her Mambo grandmother removed from men's bodies reanimates the father of one of the White protagonists after he dies. While CeCe is the only character with the knowledge of how to defeat the zombie, the film makes her functionally useless on her own. Only the White protagonists have the will power to follow through on the knowledge she gives them, while she is paralyzed with fear. Cece's role exists solely to provide the information they need, to take one of them on as a student long enough to let them do the action, and to eventually die once her role as an educator reaches its end.

While on the surface, this trope may seem like a relief from the others discussed here and found in Appendix A, there is something more insidious about the framing of black femme power as only existing for the service of others, that they must never seek revenge or retribution for the pains inflicted upon them. I represent the Spiritual Mammy and Magical Sapphire in opposition to each other because there were few instances in the films I watched where femme magic practitioners are presented as multifaceted beings. This isn't something unique to the witch or conjure woman, but something feminist film theorists have been critiquing for decades about films made in the U.S. To deny a multifaceted existence is to deny a right to full humanity, and to do that renders those being represented as deserving of being stripped of that right as well. Once that

violence is done, it's far easier to look at these groups, witches and conjure women specifically and sexually nonconformist women and femmes with power more generally, as an unwanted Other residing within the nation, creating a trope which is contained in some of the most popular films and television shows of those viewed for the purposes of this study: The Monster.

### **3.5. The Monster**

"I'm your older sister, Hilda. It's my Satan-given right to kill you as many times as I please."  
- Zelda Spellman, *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018)

By and large, the most common depiction of a witch involves monstrosity, in both personality and appearance.<sup>7</sup> Monstrosity occurs as a cultural phenomenon; it is a projection of the fears and desires of a society. With witches, this fear/desire tension tends to manifest itself as adding deformities to an otherwise conventionally attractive body or by associating truly horrific actions with an otherwise attractive person. Both forms of the Monster Witch tend to engage in the behavior associated with the Vixen Witch, and many may produce a façade capable of convincing those around her that she is, in fact, a Witch Next Door, up until she engages in her acts of monstrosity, either through bodily transformation or by revealing her true intentions.

The Inhuman Monster Witch typically exists as a combination of an attractive body with features that force her into the Uncanny Valley, that space of being just not right in the way that causes many people to feel uneasy. Generally, most of the films viewed that contained this trope tended to involve disfiguring the witch's face and/or body in some way, either by making her appear older in the face than in the rest of her body, or by adding certain features that tend to be quite phallic in appearance where her

nose and mouth should be (which will be discussed below). In doing so, they make her simultaneously desired, as she tends to be conventionally attractive in body, and feared, since her face denotes either an age which is deemed to be nonsexual or by invoking phallic imagery on a feminine body.



Figure 3.6. Still from *The Witches* (1990)

A clear example of this type of witch trope can be found in *The Witches* (1990). This film, based on the Roald Dahl novel of the same title, tells the story of 8-year-old Luke Eveshim, whose grandmother warns him that witches are everywhere, masquerading as respectable women, but secretly want to destroy all children because they hate the way they smell. When his grandmother's health declines, the two go on a trip to an old English hotel. There, a witch's convention is taking place, where the Grand High Witch reveals her plan to turn all children in the world into mice. When it's discovered that Luke has been eavesdropping on the entire speech, the witches capture him and turn him into a mouse.

One of the most memorable scenes from the film (Figure 3.6) involves the big reveal that the women are witches. They peel their skin off to reveal that, underneath

the skin suit they wear, they are really these feminine creatures with no hair, overexaggerated noses and extremely long fingers, their bodies deformed through their decisions to become witches masquerading as women. This seems to be a running theme with the Inhuman Monster Witch: a combination of masculinity and femininity fabricated in a way designed to make her look terrifying to those who would find her attractive in her other form.



Figure 3.7. Still from *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018)

When the body is not transformed, it's her actions that lead to the Witch being transformed into a Monster. One of the most referenced television shows by those interviewed for this study was *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-current); although nearly all of the interviewees were quick to distance themselves from the way the witches in the show practiced their magic, the key defining feature that sets these witches apart is their monstrous behavior. In this show, which is an adaptation of the Archie Horror comic series of the same name (2014), the witches get their power from Satan, who they refer to as The Dark Lord. They engage in cannibalism, ritual

sacrifices, yearly orgies in the woods, and various types of more negatively aligned magics, such as necromancy and spells that lead to mortal suffering.

The opening quote of this section involves one such action taken by one of Sabrina's aunts, Zelda. Zelda tends to represent the old guard of thought within The Church of Night, the patriarchal coven that her family, the Spellmans, is a part of. In the episode, "The Dark Baptism," in which this quote appears, Zelda had killed Hilda with a hammer because she was encouraging Sabrina to do things that could lead to her not becoming a member of their coven. Hilda was resurrected due to being buried in magical soil, and when she confronted Zelda about killing her, this was Zelda's response. Prior to this action, Zelda appeared only as a strict caregiver to Sabrina, but the way she killed Hilda, and the reasoning given for it, turn her into the Human Monster Witch. Throughout the series, Hilda is presented as the more caring of the two sisters, and it's no coincidence that she is the one eventually excommunicated from the Church of Night.

Monsters have always existed as creatures at the edge of propriety, because "[t]he monstrous body [...] always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again" (Cohen, 1996: 4). Obvious allusions to gender nonconformity have been found throughout most of the films viewed, be it through body modifications due to an allegiance with Satan or through the personality changes that gear the witches more towards behaviors traditionally coded as masculine, such as a knack for violence and a disinterest in parenting, focusing on blind ambition, or acts of dominance. While some feminist film theorists, such as Barbara Creed, argue that the addition of these masculine traits to

women's bodies and minds indicates male film and television creators' fear of being emasculated or castrated (1993: 87), I take this as an expression of revulsion towards transness and gender nonconformity. *The Witches* is a perfect example of an instance where this performative destruction of the gender nonconforming takes place. Lucas's grandmother warns him that these witches look like every other woman, but that he should never be deceived, because they intend to do him great harm. They transform by literally taking off their woman suit, revealing themselves to be creatures with long noses and fingers, phallic symbols to be sure (see Figure 3.6). The plot can be boiled down to a group of witches tricking an entire, respectable establishment into believing that they are women. The ending results in a public revelation of their true forms, a reaction of total disgust towards them from the rest of the adult patrons, and their ultimate destruction at the hands of the little boy they attempted to destroy. The physically monstrous witch, standing in for trans women, then, are only suitable for destruction and public ridicule.

A far more sinister meaning is then revealed, when, viewed through the lens of transness, these women "trick" men into having sex with them. It's usually in the course of having sex, or after the fact, that their true bodies are revealed, which results in responses of great revulsion from the men who previously found them attractive. This narrative follows the popular film and television narrative about transgender women who seek to deceive heterosexual men into having sex with them (heavily implying that this is the only reason someone would be gender nonconforming or transgender). This trope has been cited in multiple instances of aggression towards transgender women when heterosexual men discover that the woman they are attracted to is transgender as a



justification, an argument that is still admissible in court in the majority of the U.S. (The LGBT Bar, N.d.).

Numerous transfeminist scholars have written of their experience living as trans\*<sup>1</sup> individuals as existing in the realm of the monstrous in the U.S., and how that monstrosity is both the anchor of their anger and a wellspring of power they can use for their own liberation. As Susan Striker stated in “My Words to Victor Frankenstein”, “like the monster’s as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist” (1994: 238). Likewise, this same sentiment is expressed by transmasculine scholar Sonny Nordmarken when he says that “the capacity to evoke terror is a certain kind of power. I seek to claim that power through claiming monstrousness in myself” (2013: 40). Can the monstrous witch, then, be seen as the oppressor’s misunderstandings of the rage of the oppressed? I would argue it should be read as the misgivings powerful people have when the oppressed finally give way to the overwhelming weight of oppression, a weight no one of the oppressed class can ever fully escape in a society ruled by those determined to oppress them.

This misinterpretation of rage is found throughout the monstrous conjure women’s stories I watched. Much like the White Witch, the Monstrous Conjure Woman stands at the edge of propriety exactly because they are both powerless and powerful, forced into a position with little to no political power, yet wielding far more metaphysical power than anyone can imagine, using that power to seek revenge on those who have wronged them and people like them. This is where the horror derives from, and perhaps the reason why such magic practitioners seem to be so beloved by the Black witches

who watch their stories unfold on television and film. The Monstrous Conjure Woman engages in acts that would arguably be considered taboo in mainstream American culture, but does so to help herself or her fellow Black Americans when dealing with oppression.

The most cited Conjure Woman of the black witches I interviewed was the television character Marie Laveau in *American Horror Story: Coven* (2013). Most often cited for the fact that she wasn't willing to be trampled on by any (white) person who came to attack her, she represents a heroine for the Black witches who watched her story unfold. For me, her character had always stood in a gray area between amazing character creation and a stellar performance from Angela Bassett, and a reiteration of pop culture voodoo tropes aiding in the further demonization of African-derived spiritual traditions. Sometimes, she's spiteful and petty for no reason, especially when it comes to the White witches she interacts with. But this seems to be one of the main reasons why people like her, especially when it comes to her interactions with Fiona Goode, the Supreme of the White witch coven in New Orleans, who isn't shy about her distaste for black people who don't abide by her standards of respectability, as evidenced by her contempt for Laveau's practice of African-derived magic, rather than the use of the kind of magic she employs herself. The two are framed in constant opposition, very clearly marking a difference between black and white feminists which can only be solved if Black feminists forgive the well-meaning White witches for their racism so they can fight the real enemy: corporate elite White men.

Where the two versions, split by race, depart is in the Inhuman Monster depictions of the Conjure Woman. Aspects of African culture in combination with her

magical practice in general mark her automatically as a racial Other, removing her from the full possibility of humanity and relegating her to an area of monstrosity. Sometimes, she isn't even human at all. In *The Skeleton Key* (2005), the Conjure Woman is a disembodied spirit living inside the stolen body of a white woman. In the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise (2003-present), Calypso is a sea goddess trapped in the body of a mortal woman, capable of growing to a gigantic size and overturning entire ships. Both of these depictions depend on the idea of black women desiring the white body, both to become and to be sexually intimate with it, while also seeking to harm those same bodies. Their power comes from the fact that they are inherently something other than human, with none of the other black characters in these two films actively asserting their own agency.

Ta-Nehisi Coates argues that oppressors often project their own actions onto the minds and actions of the oppressed, framing them as the ones to be feared when given access to power, when it is in fact those who are oppressing that are already doing what they fear most being done to them (2012). The monstrous Conjure Woman stands as a reflection of this tendency. Both of the films discussed above were written, directed and produced by White teams interpreting the motivations and behaviors of black women as magic practitioners. This is so common with the films I was able to find that it was sufficiently notable that when I found two films written and directed by black women, I felt the need to mark them separately from the other films. These two films, *Eve's Bayou* (1997) and *Daughters of the Dust* (1992), defy categorization for the Conjure Women depicted, as they exist as simultaneously caring, terrifying, mystical and fixtures of the community. While *Eve's Bayou* (1997) depicts Madame Renard as a little frightening to

the child protagonist, she is still part of the community and is a fixture at the town market where she offers fortune telling services to the town folk. She never does anything the protagonist, Eve, hasn't asked her to do, regardless of the outcomes it has for her when it comes to fruition. The failing is presented as more Eve's lack of consideration of what her actions might cause than the hoodoo that was done on her behalf.

### **3.6. Discussion**

The Vixen Witch, The Witch Next Door, The Magical Sapphire, The Spiritual Mammy and the Magical Monster all exist at the nexus of race, gender and power. The Vixen Witch can only be redeemed if she relinquishes her power and sexuality to a cisgender man and enters into a heteronormative marriage. The Witch Next Door is given access to privileges only when she conforms to society's expectations in every single aspect of her life that isn't magical. The Vixen Witch and the Witch Next Door stand as symbols of the conditions placed on White middle-class cisgender women if they are to be granted access to near personhood, a slipper placed on the neck instead of a steel-toed boot (although the foot is never actually lifted). Deviance from these two rules indicates a necessity of punishment in order to maintain the status quo, as can be seen in the punishments meted out to the Unrepentant and Satanic Vixen Witch toposes.

The Magical Sapphire must give up her anger at being mistreated and attacked by everyone around her. The Spiritual Mammy only exists to prop up the lives of those around her, never giving much thought about the quality of her own life. The Magical Sapphire and the Spiritual Mammy tropes work in conjunction to guide black women towards a respectability that places the feelings and emotions of those around her,

including those who would or actively do harm her, above her own emotional wellbeing in order to be considered eligible for human engagement. Stepping outside of this self-sacrificing role leads to treatment as if she was not and never could be human, and as deserving of the discrimination and violence inflicted upon her.

The Magical Monster stands as the conjoining point between the four other tropes, as a creature that should not have power, who is wielding it for her own benefit, the symbol of everything no woman or femme-aligned individual should do or be. She is the feminine embracing aspects of personality that are typically reserved for those aligned to masculinity within the heteronormative worldview. The transgression of gender norms marks her as desexualized, and stands as a reminder that to transgress some gender norms is to threaten the entire construct of gender all together. While this isn't something bad, as it tends to create room for people to express themselves as they see fit in the cis-heteronormative framework, it does threaten the fabric of society as it is known, and thus is treated as a figure of horror, both in film and in real life.

As was discussed in the introduction, these tropes do not exist merely as their film and television characters. Media has a powerful hold on the ways people interact with others, especially if their only exposure to them is through the media they consume. My ultimate goal in this research has been to better understand the relationships the rest of my magic practicing community has with the media purporting to represent them. As a religious minority, most people in the US are only exposed to witches through films and television shows, and if these tropes are the most commonly found in many of the most popular ones, how does that affect how people interact with witches and conjurors? And if the Witch and Conjure Woman stand as the film

representations of the crossroads between race, gender and power, how do members of already marginalized groups see these films influencing their interactions with others who are not part of their traditions? These are the answers I sought out when I began to interview other witches and conjurors about their experiences with magical media.

### 3.7. Notes

1. For a full chart of the different types of witches found, complete with definitions of the trope (or subtrope) and each film watched that fell into each category, see Appendix A.
2. The Hays Code was a moral code imposed upon Hollywood films that restricted sexuality, among other topics; almost all films produced in the United States had to follow this code from 1934 until 1968, when William Hays, its creator, stepped down from his post.
3. Baron Samedi is the loa (a minor God of the Voodoo mythos) associated with death, and leader of the Ghede, the branch of loa associated with death and the worship of ancestors. He is typically associated with keeping corpses from turning into zombies and protecting the living from hexes. However, in his film representations, he tends to be associated with causing death and creating zombies, while maintaining his indulgent personality.
4. Many consider the *AHS: Coven* version of Papa Legba to actually be based on Baron Samedi given the name of the loa responsible for ensuring that only those dedicated to the loa become possessed by the loa during ritual.
5. The capitalized “Black” versus the lowercase “black” is used to denote the difference between African American traditional magic and the general understanding of the phrase “black magic” as that which is evil, and associated with causing harm. This remains one of the most pertinent debates in the magic community between Black and White practitioners, as many Black practitioners consider the phrase “black magic” to be based in racist interpretations of African traditions.
6. The name for this particular trope comes from one of my interviewees, when describing the types of roles Black magic practitioners are given in American films and television.
7. Monstrosity here is defined as an existence that is both within and outside of contemporary society, residing in the uncanny valley which creates the abject space of what is simultaneously desired and feared.

## **CHAPTER 4. ETHNOGRAPHY OF MAGICAL FILM AND IDENTITY**

In the previous chapter, I discussed the various types of witches found in the 88 films and television show episodes I watched for the purposes of this study. In this chapter, I will discuss the conversations the witches and conjurors I interviewed and surveyed had about these representations and the interactions they have with others. First, I will discuss the ways they see media interacting with race, gender and sexuality in terms of how people perceive them as witches and conjurors. Then, I will discuss the overarching themes found throughout the conversations and interviews about the associations made between Satan and Satanism and magic in both media and discourse between themselves and non-practitioners. Finally, I will discuss the ways the witches and conjurors interviewed are using different films and television shows to engage in narrative identity work around what it means to be a witch and conjuror.

### **4.1. The Interviewees and Survey Respondents**

This is, admittedly, a small research population, made up of 14 people in total. There were seven survey respondents and seven interviewees. The population with which I conducted this ethnography was composed of 11 Tumblr witches/conjurors and three members from the magic practicing community in Baton Rouge and New Orleans. The ethnic composition of the group was seven white/Euro-American people, four Black/African American people, two mixed heritage Native American people, and one Mexican person. The majority of participants, eight, identified as cisgender women, with two identifying as genderfluid, and one person each of cisgender men, agender folks, genderqueer folks and those who identified as nonbinary. Finally, exactly half of all of

the respondents identified as bisexual. The other half was split between four pansexuals, two people who identify as queer, and a lesbian.

The spiritual practices of the magic practitioners varied widely between both the survey respondents and interviewees. The largest of portion of the interviewees and survey respondents either referred to themselves as eclectic witches, meaning their practices are pulled from a variety of sources and they have no singular, pre-ordained path in their spirituality, or “pagan”. One survey respondent, Hana, identified as a member of A Druid Fellowship (ADF) and as a spirit worker. Another survey respondent, Iris, referred to themselves as an eclectic polytheist who derives their practices from “greek, egyptian, native america, mesoamerican, and jewish cultures and faith.” Only one interviewee, a local male witch identified as Cole, made any reference to Wicca when discussing their practice, and he only referenced it as being near what he practices, but stopped at identifying as a Wiccan. There were two witches, Belle and Gwen, who identified themselves as incorporating Christian theology into their witchcraft, but neither identified as purely Christian witches. Likewise, there were two diabolic witches, one interviewee and one survey respondent. Ada, a local interviewee, considers herself to be an atheistic satanic witch who derives her magical energy from chaos. Kirsten, a survey respondent, is a theistic Luciferian who worships the gods Lucifer, Loki and Set. Four interviewees, Darcie, Elif, Fern, and Neave, identified themselves as rootworkers or hoodoo practitioners. Two of them, Elif and Fern, also referred to themselves as tarot witches, and one, Neave, who was mixed-heritage African American and Native American, identified as a shaman who also incorporated aspects of hoodoo into their spiritual work.



## 4.2. Compounding Identities

For many, the practice of magic has existed for generations as a tool for discovering one's power in a society that refuses it to them. Power is something every person has, whether they lack legitimized authority or not, maybe even particularly so, as anthropologist James Brain argues (1989: 193). There is a reason many of those accused of witchcraft were women, poor and/or people of color in American history (Mahnke, 2018; McMillan, 1994: 105-106), and a reason why all of the people I happened to come across, both on Tumblr and offline, were a member of at least one marginalized group outside of being a religious minority. In fact, most of the practitioners I had a chance to speak to or who filled out the surveys were members of at least three different marginalized groups. As Brain argued, where chances for legitimate authority in a society is stripped away, individual power is often the greatest, especially as it relates to one's spiritual practices (1989: 193). In turning away from religions that emphasize powerlessness in the face of the divine to ones in which the internal spiritual power of the individual, known as *ashe/ase* to many conjurors and the will to many witches, is acknowledged, people are seeking individual power in a world where they conceive of themselves as having none.

This quest for individual power is heightened during periods of uncertainty and prolonged stress, which, arguably, the 2010s were. The decade began with several large-scale political revolutions and protest movements that only grew in magnitude and frequency as the decade wore on, from the Occupy Wall Street movement and Arab Spring of 2011 to the Black Lives Matter movement, Women's March, and large-scale protests around the US and the world following the election of Donald Trump and the

UK's decision to leave the European Union, both national votes which further divided their respective countries. Income inequality continues to deepen, leaving a vast majority of people living paycheck to paycheck. On a worldwide scale, authoritarian political leaders have taken root, acts of terrorism are reported nearly daily on the news, and climate change threatens the entire planet. All of these things, regardless of political leanings, have created an atmosphere in which many people feel they cannot breathe, let alone have any authority over what is done. Therefore, many have turned to spiritual practices where they have greater individual power.

I consider the contemporary practice of magic in the U.S. to be a revitalization movement, defined by anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace as a “deliberate and organized [attempt] by some members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture by rapid acceptance of a pattern of multiple innovations” (1970: 336). Journalists have reported that spiritual practices that were once seen as fringe are now so popular that therapists are having to learn Tarot and astrology because so many of their clients use them to talk about their lives (Yar, 2018). There has been, in recent years, a shift in thinking surrounding how people should live their lives, and this has manifested in a palpable change in how younger people approach developing their identities. While some argue that this shift is a response to neoliberal notions of personal branding for success in the labor market, I perceive this as being largely attributable to wider access to information and a growing acceptance of people's differences, particularly online where each group can form their own communities free of the restrictions of geographic location. Following this shift, instead of following the religion of their parents, many

young people now feel empowered to find the spiritual path that feels right for them, and for many, witchcraft is that spiritual path.

This is why I believe there has been a Witch Renaissance in film and television. On one hand, the increased interest in magical practice has begun to influence the types of material that are gaining traction in popular culture. This can either be because studios are trying to cash in on the trends, or because viewership is leaning more into the magical. On the other hand, society is once again dealing with the idea of what it means to be feminine and powerful. Just like was done in the 1960s with *Bewitched* (1964), film and television creators are using the trope of the witch to write fiction based around the concept of powerful femininity. As Christianity is holding less traction in society, the opportunity to engage with concepts of good Satanists, such as Aunt Hilda from *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-present) or the documentary *Hail Satan?* (2019) produced by The Satanic Temple has arisen. Film and television have very recently been able to contend with the gray nature of religious morality. Since these iterations are so new, however, the large-scale effects of this type of media are yet to fully be seen.

#### **4.2.1. Ethnicity and Magical Practice**

When I first became involved with the witchcraft area of Tumblr in 2012, it was inhabited predominantly by white practitioners having conversations about European-based belief systems and traditions of magic that stemmed mostly from Wicca. There was a concerted effort to distinguish the community from Satanists, and many practitioners used the same rhetoric that was deployed against them during the Satanic Panic of the 1980s. That rhetoric has shifted in more recent years to conversations

about what it means to be a religious minority in America, although a strain of anti-Satanism is still found in many popular Witch gathering places on the internet.

It was only around 2015, with the rise of Black identity politics, that particularly Black witches began making their voices heard more often on the site. Many of the Black practitioners I talked to created their blogs pertaining to their spiritual practices in 2015, which is also the year I created mine. Fern and Elif marked 2017 as the year they began noticing more black witches on Tumblr. All of the black Tumblr users described being placed into a role of teacher in witch spaces without purposefully taking on that role. While this is not something unique to the black witch experience, since many people of color are often placed into positions of having to educate White people about topics surrounding race, the distinguishing factor of the Black witch includes a process that is almost a mythologization of the Black hoodoo practitioner. Somewhat akin to the trope described in the previous chapter of the Spiritual Mammy, many White practitioners, both on Tumblr and outside of it, approach Black practitioners as people who have otherworldly knowledge, with the assumption that they are there to offer advice and guide them on their own spiritual paths.

This is true not just of Voodoo and hoodoo, but for those involved in other traditionally closed spiritual practices as well, such as Native American spirituality. The witches of color were very vocal about thinking it was cultural appropriation for White people to practice either hoodoo or Native American spiritual traditions, although that didn't stop them from receiving messages and asks about it on a regular basis. Even when they had answered the question publicly on their blogs, many White practitioners wouldn't bother to read their blog to get their answers, instead choosing to have them

engage in the emotional labor of producing an answer tailored to themselves. This is a practice many people of color have spoken publicly about in terms of educating White people about race, particularly the emotional toll and energy being asked of people of color on that front (Real Talk: WOC & Allies, 2017; Eddo-Lodge, 2017). Eventually, many of the witches of color that I talked to stopped answering those questions, with one of them saying that she eventually just pinned a post about the subject to the top of her blog and washed her hands of it all.

Ethnicity in the witchcraft community was a tough subject for many of those interviewed for different reasons. For the people of color involved with this ethnography, each of them had at least one story in which they had a negative interaction with someone because of the combination of their ethnicity and spiritual practices. Many of them felt like they were in positions in which they had to educate others, both within the practicing community and outside of it, about racism and cultural appropriation, as well as correcting misguided ideas about what it meant to be a person of color practicing witchcraft and non-European magical traditions. Particularly of importance was the association between the word “black” and types of magic designed to harm those it’s targeting. Many black practitioners refuse to use the phrase “black magic” to describe the practices of hexing and cursing, with many arguing that the term originates in racism (Williams, 2018; Barber, 2017).

Regardless of the topic, the Black and Native people I talked to and surveyed, seven in total, were happy to discuss the ways they saw ethnicity influencing their interactions with other practitioners. The same could be said of many of the White practitioners, who made up the remaining eight participants, but only to a point; those

who responded to the survey, primarily those practitioners who use Tumblr, were quick to acknowledge that White practitioners shouldn't practice the closed traditions of people of color. From my personal experience, the general consensus among practitioners of color on Tumblr is that people practicing magical traditions developed by an ethnic group they do not belong to is cultural appropriation, since, the argument goes, indigenous religious practices have always been attacked during the process of colonization.

Most of the White people involved in this project felt heavily connected to their practices through ethnic lineage, though, and engaged in magical practices based in the part of Europe their families originate from. Part of what draws many people to contemporary witchcraft is the idea of returning to a time before technology, a nostalgia for a way of life none of the practitioners interviewed have been able to live. Much of the witchy artwork and mood boards passed around witchblr evoke images of nature and a lifestyle devoid of the comforts of contemporary Western life. There is a whimsical, carefree association with this way of life, involving the idea that things would be simpler if only they could return to the spiritual traditions and, by extension, lifestyles of the original worshippers of the "Old Gods" as they are called. For some White practitioners, this can develop into White Nationalism and Eurocentrism.

The area in which White witches were the most uncomfortable, however, was in how they are perceived as White people who practice magic. Most were quick to say that their race had no negative effects on how people perceived them as witches. None of them had stories to share in which their identities as White people played a center role in how people interacted with them as witches. Most of them said that this was

probably because they are what the media portrays witches to be, and that it's pretty much assumed that, when someone is practicing magic, they look like them. One White survey respondent, Maize, argued that "white privilege extends into making it easier for people to accept [her] religious believes (sic) as opposed to POC of the same religion." Other White survey respondents extended this sentiment into being portrayed in the media as the norm for a witch, such as when Gwen said her "[v]ery pale, French skin and naturally dark, Spanish hair and eyes probably made it easy for people to expect [she] was a witch," which she further elaborated later as being because "[r]arely do you see depictions of anyone other than white as witches."

The local White interviewees, however, were more willing to engage in practices that have traditionally associated with people of color. Cole said that, while he does not practice hoodoo now, since "[t]hat's not my culture, that's not something I was raised knowing how to do," he suggested that, as he develops into a stronger witch, he might "branch into it." In subsequent conversations outside of our interviews, Ada has said that she incorporates aspects of multiple spiritual traditions, no matter where they come from, in her brand of magic, including hoodoo and Native American traditions. She offered to make me a batch of goofer dust, a magical combination of graveyard dirt and other debris typically used in cursing others. While many of the Tumblr hoodoo practitioners would take offense to this, there remains a historical fact that White people have been involved in the practice of Voodoo in Louisiana in particular at least since the 1800s, during the St. John's Eve celebrations that so terrified White male journalists who feared White women and Black men becoming engaged socially (Gordon 2012: 769).

Historian Kodi Roberts argues that the view of Voodoo as specifically African American is derived from a notion of culture as being static by nature (2015: 8). He argues that the only reason Voodoo is still considered to be distinctively African American is “largely because of racialized perceptions of cultures that treat them as if they were insular or distinct” (6). However, culture is neither stagnant or insular. Especially in the context of multicultural locations such as the United States, culture has always permeated between ethnic groups. Describing Voodoo, especially in the context of Louisiana, as a purely African American phenomenon denies the complexity of racial identity and the contributions to the practice of Voodoo that have been proliferated by its non-Black practitioners.

It has taken me a long time to come to terms with my own beliefs as a practitioner about White involvement with the traditions. While I understand the desire to forge a distinctively African spirituality and to protect it from appropriation, I also can't deny that I own multiple books and an Orisha tarot deck (combining both African and European divination traditions) created by White practitioners of Voodoo and other African-based spiritual traditions. I know the traditions have historically been used as resistance against White supremacy, but that these traditions have also evolved over time. I think the issue most POC with this stance have with White practitioners of Voodoo is that there has been a long history within the US of White people appropriating Black culture without engaging in the work required to be anti-racist. A popular saying online is that America loves Black culture but not Black people (Davies 2019; White 2018; Jackson 2018). In this instance, a spiritual practice that is portrayed in the media as being particular to Black people is being adopted at an ever-increasing



rate by White people who are seen as cultured for practicing it, but for Black practitioners, they are still treated as scary when doing it.

#### **4.2.2. Sexuality and Magical Practice**

Sexuality is a major factor in the personalities of many of the witches in the films and TV shows watched for this study. Many of the Vixen Witches were portrayed as having a queer identity, although many of these representations perpetuated ideas about non-monosexual orientations as being hypersexual in nature, or as an extension of their association with evil. Where they did not have a queer identity, they engaged in sexual practices that fell outside of normalized sexual practices, such as having multiple partners or dressing in a sexualized fashion, and engaging in sexually provocative behaviors. As was discussed above, this particular trope stands as the witch iteration of the Madonna/Whore dichotomy that has been found throughout Western culture for centuries, and which is still a prevalent factor in the ways feminine individuals are perceived today.

I didn't realize until I was coding the interviews that every single one of the people I ended up meeting on Tumblr, as well as all of the people I ended up meeting offline, identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, or queer. While this was not an anticipated finding, it does raise questions about queer identity and alternative spirituality that could be the focus of further study. I was raised in a devoutly Christian household, something I share with many of the people I interviewed. I often felt that the spirituality of my Baptist family excluded me because of my sexual orientation and trans identity. This sentiment that was never explicitly voiced by the people I interviewed and surveyed, but was referenced in how many of the practitioners involved in the

ethnography often said they felt that their spiritualities and sexualities were more in tune now that they were witches. Darcie said:

I definitely think that my spirituality is more accepting of my sexuality, or is more, it aligns better with... Like I said, the two align better than when I was practicing other forms of religion that are more closely mainstream religions, like, you know, when I was Baptist. You know? I feel like my sexuality and spirituality align better now. Like, they definitely... There's more space for me to express with things, or express my sexuality within my religion, or within my spirituality more, *because it's less oriented within all these restrictions of what you can and can't do.* (emphasis mine)

Herein lies one of the most prominent aspects of sexuality within the practice of magical spiritualities. Darcie feels free to express their sexuality within their spirituality in a way they could not when they were Baptist because there is less internal regulation of what is considered the “right” way to engage in sexuality. Darcie is a rootworker who pulls from Afrocentric traditions, traditions that have always had sexuality as part of their ritual, as many of the loa, who possess ritual attendants, have highly flirtatious and sexual personalities. There is no shame surrounding sex, especially within younger practitioners who also tend to have influences of neopaganism in their practices due to its popularity in magical communities.

Most of the practitioners gave stories of non-practitioners making assumptions about their sexualities and religious affiliations that are based in Evangelical Christian dogma about sexuality. One of the most frequent assumptions the people I interviewed reported non-practitioners making about them is that becoming a magic practitioner caused them to not be heterosexual. As Cole described it, many people assume that leaving Christianity opened them to the influences of the Devil, a subject I will discuss in detail below. The theory is that once they’ve opened themselves to the Devil, then temptations towards non-normative sexuality became overwhelming, leading to a queer

identity. The respondents often laughed as they told me this, shaking off the idea.

Nonheteronormative sexuality has been heavily associated with the Devil throughout the last few centuries, especially in the Evangelical South. Ada said that:

My mamaw. My mom's mom. Um, she believes... She goes to a church of which they believe that gay people, bisexual people and their supporters should be lynched, stoned to death and burnt at the stake.

While this position would be considered extreme for most, it is a theme that has spilled into film and television, since up until the very recent past, such as in the reboot of *Charmed* (2018), where most queer coded witch characters were also more attuned to harmful magical practices, as a further indication of how far they have devolved into their deviancy, rather than their sexuality simply being another facet of their identities.

The other most popular theory about sexuality and magical practice the practitioners often came across was that their sexualities caused them to leave the church and seek out Satan instead. Here, the assumption isn't that their sexuality was caused by an outside, evil force, but rather that it instead made them more susceptible to it. Because they exist outside heteronormativity, they have been labeled as naturally more deviant, and therefore susceptible to the Devil's beguiling ways. Cole, who practices elemental, protection and healing magic, said that he often likes to reply to this assumption with, "[O]ne, didn't turn to Satan. Two, go fuck yourself." He hadn't cursed before telling his response to the assumption that he's pansexual because he's a witch. He laughed it off, but his body language shifted from open positioning to a more closed off stance as he sat in front of me.

Most of the practitioners I interviewed see their queer sexualities as opportunities to be able to practice a more diverse array of magic, especially sex magic. I wasn't

particularly clear that I was talking about sexual orientation in the first few interviews I conducted when I asked them about the role their sexuality played in their spiritual practices, and most of them understood me to be asking the role of sexual activity in their spiritual practices. The bisexual, pansexual and queer interviewees all said that they didn't feel restricted if they found spells written by others that needed sex with a person of a particular gender. Ada, the Satanic witch I interviewed, said that it made sex magic more "fun". I would argue this belief stems from the lack of restrictions on sexuality that are often seen in most neopagan forms of spirituality. In most of the neopagan traditions that contemporary Witchcraft is derived from, sexuality is not only accepted and encouraged, but is given a divine nature. The Wiccan Wheel of the Year tells the story of a God and Goddess in a never-ending love story of birth, death and rebirth following the seasons of the year. While not every witch follows Wicca, the belief of sexuality as sacred or, at the very least, nothing to be ashamed of, is definitely the norm in the community.

In general, for the witches and conjurors I interviewed, it didn't seem like their spirituality caused any particular anxieties related to their sexuality. One respondent, Darcie, a bisexual ancestral rootworker, said that they feel like their spirituality and sexuality are more in alignment now than the two facets of their identity were when they were Baptist. The others who denied leaving the Church because of their sexual orientation often had negative associations between Christianity and queer identities. For them, their spirituality affirmed them in a way they did not receive affirmation in Christianity. For those who were never raised in the Church, but instead were raised

either as witches or followers of ATRs/Native faith traditions, the associations between Christianity and queer identity were also negative.

#### **4.2.3. Gender and Witch Identity**

One of the touchiest subjects surrounding identity right now in the witchcraft community is gender. In the earliest days of the witchcraft revival of the 1950s, gender roles were clearly defined within the popularized traditions. Gerald Gardner, the founder of Wicca, separated the world into men and women, each with their own essentialized roles and energy associations, defined through the representations of the God and Goddess they worshipped (Gardner, 1961). In defining what a High Priestess of a coven should be, he argued that she should be defined by “her youth and beauty, her sweetness and kindness, her wisdom and Justice, her humility and generosity” and that, as she ages, she should “retire gracefully in favour of a younger woman” (Gardner, 1961). Meanwhile, the High Priest is held to no such obligation.

These gender roles were contested almost as soon as they were published. In the 1970s, a branch of Wicca called Dianic Wicca (also called feminist Wicca) was founded, in which only cisgender women were allowed to be initiated and practice (1980: 3). Zsuzanna Budapest, a prominent early writer in the tradition, argued that “the real enemy [in regards to feminism] is the internalized and externalized policing tool that keeps us in fear and psychic clutter” (1980: 3). While not as overtly political as Budapest, Starhawk, another prominent Dianic Wiccan writer, also mirrored this sentiment of cisgender women needing divinity that looked like them in order to cast off the shackles of patriarchy. These two were very formative in the post-*Feminine Mystique* era feminist witchcraft development, and both engaged in gender

essentializing rhetoric about men and women's "true" natures, a subject that is still being debated and contested throughout the witchcraft community.

Most of the interviewees and survey respondents did not see gender as being a defining characteristic of witchcraft, although they all had heard of that line of thinking within the community. For the cisgender women who participated in the study, while they often found comfort in having feminine deities and felt freer to exist as a woman in their chosen spiritual faiths, they did not see it as a prerequisite for actually being a witch. Many of them made references to TERFs (Transgender Exclusionary Radical Feminists) when talking about the types of witches who subscribe to that type of thinking about the origins of magic. They aren't far off, since Budapest caused an uproar in recent years for refusing entry to trans women at a women's only event at a pagan convention (Kenny, 2018). The overwhelming outlook on the gender essentialist view of magical practice is that it's held by a small but vocal subset of the community that those I interviewed wished to distance themselves from.

One happening in particular that stood out to me during the course of this study on the topic of gender essentialism in the Craft was the discourse surrounding a new book by Lisa Lister titled *Witch: Unleashed. Untamed. Unapologetic.* (2019). The discussion started on Twitter, when a person wrote a thread describing how Lister used gender essentializing language throughout the book as a warning to transgender witches who may be triggered into a state of gender dysphoria over the language used. This thread was screenshotted and spread throughout the different social media platforms (I've seen it on Twitter, Tumblr and Facebook). Two main factions formed around this issue. On one hand, some bloggers argued that those who have vaginas

should be allowed to practice magic that empowers them for having one, since society already tells them that they are disgusting parts of their anatomy and make them inferior. On the other hand, others argued that this only serves to boil women down to their bodies and abilities to have children, which is, arguably, one of the facets of patriarchy in and of itself.

For the transgender and gender nonconforming practitioners I interviewed and surveyed, most of them were aggressively against the idea that magic originates in having a vagina and uterus, arguing that the idea was both transmisogynistic and racist. This argument rests on the idea that Western gender notions have not traditionally been the same around the world, and that they only spread due to colonization.

Anthropologist Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí argues that contemporary feminist research operating from this stance forces a Western bio-logic of gender and sex onto groups of people, such as pre-Colonial Yorubans who, she argues, never had a hierarchical system of gender before Western colonization (1997: 448). One survey respondent, Iris, a nonbinary person, said that, “people say because im not a woman i cant be a witch, and that nonbinary people arent real. im a witch and i dont have a gender and my body is female. fight me.” Once again, as in the subject of race, there is gatekeeping of who gets to be a part of the group. While, in the instance of race, it’s a marginalized group (African Americans) denying entrance to a group with power (White Americans), in this instance of gender it’s one marginalized group (cisgender women) further marginalizing another marginalized group (transgender individuals).



Figure 4.1. “Soy Bruja” Art by AsgArt.

In a 2017 ethnographic study of the Montreal witchcraft community, Martin Lepage found that many transgender and gender nonconforming individuals actively work against gender essentialist ideology in magic, and use witchcraft as a way of affirming themselves. He argued that magic is approached through three different, yet interconnected, lenses: as a means of transforming the self, of healing the self and others of psychological and spiritual pain, and a means of shifting how one sees their place in the world and how the world interacts with them (614-615). To a transgender person, this can often manifest as engaging in rituals that affirm their gender, or doing a protection charm for themselves when they leave their homes so they feel safer when going out in public.

For cisgender men and AMAB (assigned male at birth) nonbinary practitioners, they are often told that they cannot call themselves witches because of this same line of thought. This topic is currently being debated very heavily in the witchcraft community in particular, and has spread from Tumblr into offline communities. Many would argue that



a male magic practitioner should call themselves a “warlock,” but as Cole argued in his interview:

it's a whole thing where men don't practice witchcraft, men can't practice witchcraft, and I don't agree with it. I don't like that whole ideology. And people are, "Oh, no, you're a dude. You're a warlock." I was like, "No, I'm not a warlock." Warlocks, traditionally, are not nice people. They're not, like, great practitioners. They're, they're very much on the darker side of things, and I'm a very much a light worker. And I subscribe to the idea of witch. I'm not walking around in a starry hat with a wand, so I'm not really a wizard. I'm not some old decaying man in a tower reading books all day. No, I'm a real life human being who studies magic and practices it. Therefore, making me a mi- a witch. A mitch. No, we're not doing that.

In general, portrayals of male witches in film and media have been negative until recently, with characters such as Ambrose Spellman in *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-present). And yet, even though the portrayal is more positive, the magical practices the character engages in are still diabolic in nature, which Cole sees as the direct opposite of his spiritual orientation.

There have also been several popular Tumblr posts where male witches have argued for their right to call themselves a witch. The picture displayed in Figure 4.1., from Latinx artist Asgart (formerly known as Asgard), is one such post. This image was originally posted on the artist's Facebook page and, with more than 15000 shares, is his most viral piece (AsgArt 2019). Due to its viral nature, this piece has appeared on multiple social networking sites, from Pinterest to Tumblr, where it has been posted by multiple bloggers, with or without a link to the original artist save for his signature on the piece. This made it extremely difficult for me to track down its origin, especially considering the original blog I found it on has since been deactivated. There were several commenters on his Instagram who were upset that the people were “stealing”

his art. In honor of the online tradition of sharing art by giving credit to the artist, I've included a citation and reference to his artist page on Facebook in the references under AsgArt.

At this point, the piece has become a meme with a life of its own. In this particular image, AsgArt makes the argument that boys are capable of being soft and mindful in the same way girls are assumed to be in order to practice witchcraft, which can be seen in the soft glow surrounding him, the faint blush on the boy's cheeks, and an expression of concentrated serenity on his face. For many, the practice of magic is designed to blend traits and behaviors that have been traditionally codified as "masculine" and "feminine" in the West, to form a complete whole, however gender essentialist rhetoric that was built into Wicca in its beginnings has led to rhetoric of AMAB individuals being naturally emotionally harder than those assigned female at birth (AFAB). This piece argues against that rhetoric.

#### **4.3. The Question of Satan**

Another major factor of the public's perception of witches is that we all worship Satan and practice magic intended to harm those we come into contact with. The associations between witchcraft and devil worship have remained alive in United States culture since the 1600s, and this stereotype remains extremely influential in the world of film and television. One of the most popular current witch television shows is *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018), which revolves around a family of witches who belong to a satanic coven called The Church of Night. While this association is true for a small fraction of the larger witchcraft community, it is simply untrue for the vast majority of witches. Of the 14 people involved in this study, only two, Ada and Kirsten, consider

themselves to be diabolic witches, both of whom we will return to shortly for a more in depth look at their beliefs and how they perceive the media's role in public understandings of Satanic witchcraft practices. Two others, Belle and Gwen, consider themselves to be some form of Christian witch.

The rest of those involved consider themselves to be practicing a form of spirituality completely unconnected to the Christian Devil. Most described their brand of magic as either ancestral practices or some form of neopaganism. Gwen stated that, "It's a little aggravating to constantly be asked if I worship the devil when I can't even say for certainty they exist." This is a sentiment I've seen across not only Tumblr but throughout online witch spaces I've been active on in the last 14 years. When I was first joining the community, there was a much more vocal opposition to these associations. Today, however, Satanic witches are finding a more welcoming home in the wider witchcraft community, which has begun to embrace the diversity of the practicing community where it didn't before.

#### **4.3.1. Non-European Magical Traditions and Satan**

Particularly angered by accusations of doing evil are those who practice non-European magical traditions. African and Native American spiritual traditions have been codified as demonic for centuries (McMillan, 1994; Cave, 1992). In contemporary films and television shows, Voodoo is portrayed negatively, although many, such as *American Horror Story: Coven* (2013), seem to represent the violence associated with the practice as being the result of oppression (O'Reilly, 2019: 36). Regardless of the recent shifts in the paradigm surrounding violence in association with non-European

magical traditions, the connection is still made, continuing to mark these traditions as intrinsically violent. Belle, for instance, said that:

Um, there's already, like, this negative connotation with anything that isn't Christianity. Um, and I feel like the fact that I am black doesn't really help, because you're already, anything that isn't Christianity is already demonized, and, you know, especially if you're black, um, you get, sometimes that Voodoo and hoodoo is viewed as so evil and dark and, you know, the Devil's work, and this, that and the third. So, I feel like, you know, both those things combined, me being black and me practicing something other just kind of doubles, um, how people see that.

Belle doesn't even consider herself to be a practitioner of conjure, but by nature of her being black, she is often assumed to practice it, which she attributes to media portrayals of Black magic practitioners as primarily practicing Voodoo or hoodoo. Since this label has been ascribed to her by others, and with it comes the stereotypes associated with Voodoo and Devil worship, she has to live with the assumptions people make about Voodoo practitioners. While conjure has always been a practice through which a person may seek revenge on those who have wronged them, that is not the focal point of the practice. To its practitioners, these practices have primarily served as a form of ethnomedicine and a tool for overcoming obstacles.

In the case of Native spirituality and religions, the accusations of devil worship is often tempered by what Adrienne Keene calls on her blog *Native Appropriations*, the “mystical-connected-to-nature-shamans” (2016), which, much like *The Spiritual Mammy*, appear to impart wisdom and prophecy to the (typically) White main characters of the films and television shows they appear in, before disappearing, never being seen again; e.g., the character Adawehi in the fourth season of *Outlander* (2018), who offers the protagonist, Claire, spiritual wisdom before disappearing from the story, only to reappear an episode later as a scalp (Bolt, 2018; Di Novi, 2018). One survey

respondant, Iris, a person of mixed-ethnicity who practices an eclectic array of magical traditions, noted that, “natives are seen as spiritual shaman all the time,” and that this was always the assumption about them, as they are part-Native American.<sup>3</sup> Since they practice a wide variety of traditions, this was a point of contention for them. On the other hand, when they are not being asked if they are a shaman, Iris said, “everyone thinks i worship the devil.” They correlate this directly with the Satanic nature of most magic practitioners in film and television shows.

In fact, most of the people I interviewed and surveyed cited film and television as a major reason people tend to hold negative ideas about magic practitioners. In the case of Iris, they held the belief that superstitions popularized by films, such as *Friday the 13th* (1980), contribute to what people believe about the real world. It has been well documented that fictional media has an impact on the ways people approach certain topics (Mutz & Nir, 2010; Mulligan & Habel, 2011; Glas & Taylor, 2018). For instance, Jeffrey Glas and Benjamin Taylor conducted a study in which one group of study participants were shown the film *300* (2007), a film that romantically portrays the traits of “unquestioning obedience to authority,” “conformity to Spartan code” and sympathy for characters who are “unflinchingly committed to the glorification of their home city-state” (2018: 257). To another group, they showed *V for Vendetta* (2005), a film about a revolutionary figure in a fascist dictatorship that is the future of London, who espouses the values of human dignity, individuality, art and free thinking. As a control, they showed a buddy cop film, *21 Jump Street* (2012) to a third group (2018: 257). As they both suspected, those who were surveyed after being randomly assigned to view *300* were more inclined towards authoritarian views than those who were assigned to *V for*

*Vendetta* (2018: 267). Other research has shown that these shifts in beliefs can be seen to endure at least a week after viewing the media (Adkins & Castle, 2014: 1238). Some have argued that this is caused by the fact that people approach fictional films and television shows without the guard that they normally would when viewing a piece of media with an explicitly political purpose, such as a political ad or presidential debate (Yates & Hill, 2018: 3).

With this in mind, the political messages being disseminated in the films about witches and conjurors, and women/femmes and people of color more generally, can have a powerful effect on those not involved in the practice, especially if they are not aware of the political messages being disseminated through fiction. In terms of ATRs, this can manifest as a distrust of those who practice them as either violent, hypersexual, or dangerous. In terms of Native practitioners, they are relegated to the background, never having full stories of their own magical practices unless it's for the creation of some monster or another. My POC interviewees and survey respondents stated that they were often met with fear when people found out that they practiced magic, even if the people eventually were accepting and affirming.

One of the black witches, Elif, was so afraid of what another magic practitioner would say if he found out she practiced hoodoo that she simply told him she was a witch with no further descriptions of her practice. She said that:

One person. Um, he owns a crystal shop, uh, down the street from me, at my local mall, and he is so sweet. He's so, but you can tell from face value that he's very love and light, um, very Wiccan even if he's not Wiccan. Um, just very calm and sweet energy and just so sweet. Um, but when I was talking to him, I made sure that I was, I just said that I was a witch, that I didn't say that I was a hoodoo practitioner. Um, because, of course, I didn't know how he was going to take that or if he even knew what that was, or understood

the implications of what I was saying when I said I was a hoodoo practitioner. So I just said, "Oh, I'm a witch."

Since she felt that there was no way she could be sure of his knowledge of hoodoo or other African American magical traditions outside of general cultural misperceptions that have been proliferated by film and television media, she decided to mask her practices under the wider umbrella of witch rather than being 100% honest about her practices. Since the association between hoodoo and negativity is so heavy handed in the media, this hiding is an act of self-preservation against potential micro- and macroaggressions oriented towards her ethnic heritage.

This masking of one's true practices is also something practitioners of color tended to do in our interviews before they found out my own brand of magic. Prior to finding out I was an afro-witch myself, Fern described themselves as generally spiritual. About 20 minutes into the conversation, Fern turned the camera to their hands lighting incense before showing me the full altar. At that point I turned my own camera to show them my altar, which has a painting of Erzulie Dantor, a fierce mother loa, hanging above it. After they noticed the painting and the section dedicated to ancestor offerings, they began to speak more deeply about their rootwork practices. They now knew that I was also a practitioner, and that they could talk about their identity without fear of judgment.

#### **4.3.2. Dispelling Myths Surrounding Actual Satanism**

This is not to say that all magic practitioners stay away from the diabolic.<sup>3</sup> Within the witchcraft community on Tumblr and offline, there is a relatively small, yet notable, population of individuals who practice this particular branch of magic, often described as the Left-Hand Path. It manifests in four similar, but distinct, forms. The two primary

branches of satanic practice are Luciferianism and Satanism. Luciferianism is a distinct understanding of Lucifer as the definition of his name, “light-bringer,” as the spark of human ingenuity that questions our existence and the nature of the universe. Those who practice under this moniker understand Lucifer as an adversary to blind faith and the champion of science, reason, and intellectualism. Luciferians believe true power comes through self-exploration and the wisdom gained through that journey, and engage in magic designed for the purpose of increasing occult knowledge and spiritual fortitude (Ford, 2007: 8). They come in two forms: those who believe in an actual deity named Lucifer, known as Theistic Luciferians, and those who see him more as a literary figure to emulate one’s life after, known as Atheistic Luciferians. As a group, Luciferians largely tend to eschew the version of Lucifer popularized in the Christian mythos. Atheistic Luciferians see engaging in the actual worship of a deity as a form of self-subjugation. In fact, the founder of Luciferianism, Michael W. Ford, describes the practice as “weak” and describes the willing subjugation of oneself to a deity as “self-degrading” (Ford, 2007: 10).

Satanism, on the other hand, tends to revolve around the idea of Satan reframed as the eternal rebel representing “pride, independence, individuality, knowledge, achievement, thinking for oneself, and exploring the unknown and forbidden realm” (Vera & Pwyll, 2005). The two primary forms this takes is the same as with Luciferianism. Theistic Satanism worships a deity that manifests as the adversary in major dogmatic religions; these worshipers seek to become enlightened about the truth beneath the darkness that many find unsettling (Vera & Pwyll, 2005). Atheistic Satanists, on the other hand, tend view the Adversary Satan as the literary embodiment



of anti-establishment rebellion. They tend to see the blind acceptance of religion as irrational, and, depending on which sect one belongs to, may engage in legal battles against religious oppression (Campaigns, n.d.). The Church of Satan, the oldest of the two most popular branches of Satanism, believes in the reality of magic, while The Satanic Temple, established in 2013, believes that engaging in magical ritual is a powerful tool for making a political point and for gearing one's mind towards a goal, but nothing more. There are, however, exceptions to these general rules (What is the Difference Between the Satanic Temple and the Church of Satan? N.d.).

When I sat down for a face-to-face interview with a local Satanic witch, Ada, I already knew all of the above from years of personal study. What I was really interested in understanding was how she understood media to factor into how people perceive those under the banner of the satanic. Ada is an Atheistic Satanic witch who practices everything from curses to energy healing, pulling from a variety of magical traditions to form her own personal brand of magic. She describes her particular practice as:

[...C]haos. And learning to live with that chaos, and using the basis of your animal instincts to listen to them and, in order to get whatever the hell you want, you listen to your instincts. You stop listening to your heart, you stop living, listening to your human mind, and you get whatever you want. You're always in the right place at the right time.

What I found throughout the course of our conversation was that she was just like every other witch when it came to public perception, only she had the added effect of actually practicing under the label most people fear when they think of witchcraft. The confluence between Satan and witchcraft has become such a staple in media that, when people find out about her practicing, they already rightly assume that she is involved in satanic magic. However, this comes with a plethora of assumptions about

her practices that have been popularized in films and television shows, which she has to combat when she comes across people with no knowledge on the subject.

In the following excerpt from our transcript, Ada describes how people have interacted with her in the past in relation to her. While I was trying to get answers related to her experiences as a White Satanic witch, her responses focused primarily on people's reactions to her as a diabolic witch:

Interviewer (I): Have you had any experiences that has to deal with specifically you as a white person practicing your religion, like people talking to you in a certain way or anything like that?

Ada (A): Oh, yes. I have had people assume that I'm the devil's daughter. I was actually called demon child for most of my life. Um, even before I started researching satanism. I was a Christian for a very, very long time, and to hear these things really put me down until, one day, I just learned to stop caring. And then the freedom came after that.

I: Have people ever made any assumptions about you because you're white and a satanist?

A: Yes.

I: What's that like?

A: Um, they assume that I sacrifice animals, babies. Um, that I'm a serial killer. I have been, uh, called out as a serial killer or an assassin in middle school.

Ada is describing some pretty common horror tropes related to diabolic witchcraft that been spread over the decades of film and television. An interesting thing I noticed here is that she adopted the label of Satanic after she had been labeled that way her entire childhood. I see this as embracing the labels that have been ascribed to her, something we will discuss in the next section. Another stereotype that came out in this exchange is the idea that Satanists pose a risk to children, which has been a major cultural point

since the 1980s Satanic Panic, a period of time where a conspiracy theory that “circles of Satanists, pedophiles, and pornographers, who owned and operated suburban daycare centers, were seducing, abducting, molesting, and sometimes murdering the nation’s children” (Hughes 2017: 692).

None of these stereotypes actually apply to her. In fact, Ada prepared a jar of blood wine for me, which is a brew of herbs she devised herself to take the place of blood in older magic rituals which call for it. While she practices magic that can harm, which she proudly helps other witches learn how to properly do, she ensures that she only uses that magic on those who are actively harming her or others she cares about. This runs opposite to the approach to cursing most satanic witches in film and television tend to have, as they will often hurt the most undeserving people out of individualized hatred or in service to Satan.

Ada sees the media’s portrayal of Satanic witches as the primary locus of her issues with the general public as a Satanic witch. She also sees mainstream American media as being decidedly rooted in Christian values and morality, describing them as “pretty Christian, and [...] pretty small minded.” Regardless, however, she enjoys watching a few films that revolve around witchcraft. She described herself as, “More of a Nancy than a Hermione.” Here, she was referencing the 1996 film *The Craft*’s primary villain, Nancy, who seeks to use magic for her own benefit and does whatever she wants to do, and Hermione of the *Harry Potter* franchise, who is portrayed as a smart, capable, caring person who puts everyone else’s needs before her own. Regardless of how much she enjoyed these films, however, Ada still found them disappointing. She said her favorite TV depiction of a satanic witch was in *Supernatural* (2005-2020), but

she would still have them not worship the actual Satan if she were to change anything in order to make it more in tune with the way satanic witchcraft actually tends to be practiced, rather than focusing on the form of satanic practice that has the smallest number of practitioners just for sensationalism.

Kirsten identified herself as a left-hand path, theistic Luciferian witch who worships Lucifer/Loki/Set, a combination frequently cited by Left-Hand Path practitioners as unified symbols across cultures of the more negative manifestations of divinity. When describing how discussing films and television shows that depict her religion with non-practitioners, she chose words such as “angry,” “bitter,” “nervous” and “uncomfortable” to describe her emotions. She sees Hollywood as perpetuating bad practices that lead to a lot of new magic practitioners engaging in practices that can be harmful, which the community then has to unpack before someone hurts themselves or others, either physically, emotionally or spiritually. She feels that it’s time for Hollywood to make a shift away from maligning the witchcraft community in general, and the Satanic community in particular, but feels that “people (in general) aren’t interested in the truth – only ‘fashion shows.’”

#### **4.4. Narrative Identity Work**

The desire for less sensationalism is one overarching theme that became apparent throughout this ethnography. While the practitioners mostly enjoy watching the magical adventures of their TV and film counterparts, few of them are satisfied with how magic practitioners are portrayed in the media they consume, especially when it came to portrayals of non-normative sexualities, gender presentations and people of color. Iris said that, when they talk to other witches about witch film, they often talk about how

“witchcraft is portrayed as a evil teen girl thing” and how they “want to see more magic men, magic women, magic people that are powerful and regal.” Most of all, though, a majority of them see connections between how they’re treated once people find out about their spiritual practices and the way these practices are portrayed in film and television. When they discuss these portrayals with others, both other magic practitioners of differing traditions and non-practitioners, they use the media characters and their practices as a reference point in the process of engaging in narrative identity work, by either embracing them as examples of what their own spiritual practices are like, or by distancing themselves from the characters and their practices.

Narrative identity work, originally called identity talk by David A. Snow and Leon Anderson, refers to a “range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities congruent with and supportive of the self-concept” (1987: 1348). Originally used to describe the practices homeless individuals engage in as a way of understanding themselves positively in a world rife with stereotypes about their group, the concept has been applied to women parolees (Opsal, 2011), survivors of domestic violence (Leisenring, 2011), infertile women in India (Riessman, 2000), and formerly incarcerated youth (Case & Hunter: 2014), among others. These activities may include language use, physical presentation, or a combination of both.

There are two primary ways in which individuals and groups may engage in narrative identity work: distancing and embracing. In terms of distancing, group members may physically remove themselves from or avoid roles and institutions stereotypically associated with their group, or refrain from interacting with other members of their group in order to present themselves as outside the scope of the

stereotypical. Distancing may also be accomplished by complicating the stereotypes others hold about them. Embracing works in the opposite direction: group members accept the negative stereotypes about their group and allow them to work in their favor. For instance, sexual assault survivors may leverage the label of victim in order to prove they were not responsible or to get a desired response from others (Leisenring, 2011). It may also involve gravitating towards defining themselves according to other groups they are members of, rather than the stigmatized identity, such as mothers on parole labeling themselves as mothers first before calling themselves parolees (Opsal, 2011).

This work takes on an interpersonal dimension when conducted within a counterspace, defined as a space where two or more members of a marginalized group meet and engage in conversation and activities meant to challenge ideas of their group being deficient in some way and that fosters community between them (Case & Hunter, 2014: 909). In these spaces, marginalized groups develop three kinds of counternarratives around their identities as marginalized persons: of “oppression,” “resistance,” and “reimagined personal narrative” (Case & Hunter, 2014: 909). The oppression narrative affirms the historical, social and/or political marginalization of the group; resistance marks this oppression as something that can be fought against, and this leads to an attempt by group members to create a new picture of themselves in an affirming light despite their marginalized status (Case & Hunter, 2014: 909).

The #witchblr and #witchesofcolor communities on Tumblr, as well as the communion between two or more witches offline, can be seen as counterspaces in which these counternarratives are engaged. Shared stories of the historical and contemporary suppression of non-Christian identity in the U.S., be it European magical

traditions, Native Spiritual traditions, or ATRs, abound, comprising the narrative of oppression. The Tumblr witch and conjuror communities, the creators of their own counternarratives, resist the stereotypes and marginalization in mainstream media by crafting their own identities and maintaining a steady dialogue between themselves and with the larger Tumblr community about the differences between film and TV magic and the kind they practice.

They also engage in magical activism by engaging in mass bindings of political figures representing Christian theocratic rule, such as was documented recently by Julia C. Fine in the #MagicResistance movement that started as a 2016 mass hex of Donald Trump and other conservative politicians (2019: 2). Fine conducted her study by interviewing members of the #MagicResistance movement on both Twitter and Facebook, and found that, because they weren't tied to the normative forms of conversation between themselves and their political opponents, they were free to employ the use of the register of "American witchcraft ritual speech" in order to engage in political discourse (2019: 2). Since the witches involved do not see the magic as having the ability to remove Trump from office, but rather as an activity based in finding "catharsis and empowerment," the #MagicResistance represents a counterspace in which the witches in question are forming their own narrative of overcoming political oppression in the form of magic (Fine, 2019: 3).

These spaces, #witchblr, #witchesofcolor and #MagicResistance, allow the magic practitioners to reimagine themselves as members of their groups through the aforementioned distancing or embracing found in narrative identity work in regards to film and television representations of witches, conjurors and magical practices. All of

these examples of activities done through the spaces of #witchblr and #witchesofcolor, as well as other witch-created hashtags, when taken together, tell a story of individuals, as a group, developing an alternative view of themselves outside of the normative stereotypes about their practices, beliefs, and personality traits.

My interviewees for this ethnography most commonly engaged in distancing when discussing the ways they interact with film and television depictions of magic practitioners. The hypersexuality associated with the Vixen Witch trope was one of the most common stereotypes they were quick to distance themselves from. When addressing hypersexuality, practitioners tended to engage in behaviors such as flippancy or laughter, or they used distancing language to mark themselves as separate from that stereotype. Elif, a spiritualist hoodoo practitioner, flippantly said that:

[P]eople outside the community think I'm just some sexually active witch. [...] I have sex with everybody, I use sex in my magic all the time, um, and I'm just a free spirit, but, like, sexually. Whatever that means.

She went on to say that this judgment about her was funny because she considers herself to be extremely monogamous, drawing parallels between Vixen behavior and those who are non-monogamous.

Non-monogamy among witches doesn't necessarily mean hyper-sexuality, though. Fern, a pansexual polyamorous witch who practices African traditions, distanced themselves from the hyper-sexualization ascribed to witches in film and television. Since their relationship orientation is already seen as hypersexual in nature, they made sure to describe the ethical differences between the sexuality of film and television witches and their own form of non-monogamy, polyamory, by placing an emphasis on love rather than sex:



You can have, like, varying levels of, like, love for different people. So, you can literally be platonic as fuck with somebody and live with them, and, like, basically be married to them, and then you can have a separate sexual relationship with somebody but not be friends with them. [...] And then with one of the poly people, I ended up, like, being my significant other, so I'm like... Now we're both poly and, like, it's, like, crazy. *Not in a we're like, we're fucking everybody*, but it's like the rules are just different. (emphasis mine)

While Fern generally spoke quickly, they sped up their language when they realized their words could be taken to mean they were hypersexual. They immediately felt the need to correct their speech to align more with their vision of their relationship dynamics by distancing themselves from the hypersexual stereotype ascribed to non-monogamous people.

The primary stereotype the participants were quick to distance themselves from, however, was devil worship. This was even the case with Ada, the only Satanic witch who became involved with the study, as she marked herself as separate from the types of Satanic witches who literally worship a deity named Satan. Sometimes the practitioners I spoke with made a clear, firm statement that magic is not satanic, or that most practitioners don't believe in the Christian Satan, therefore denying any form of connection between magic and Satan. Other times, the practitioners would accept and acknowledge that there are Satanic witches, but that diabolism was not a part of their own practices. These word choices and statements mark them as not taking on the roles ascribed to them by mainstream U.S. culture, therefore removing the stigma of devil worship associated with magical practice in their personal narrative of their identities.

Further distancing themselves, the participants often engaged in the second form of distancing, troubling the stereotypes about them, especially when talking about their

identities as practitioners. In this case, they often used examples associated with The Witch Next Door trope discussed in Chapter Three to define themselves and their practice. For instance, one participant, Elif, described her practice in terms of *Spirited Away*, a 2002 film from Hayao Miyazaki (who also created *Kiki's Delivery Service*) about a girl who is transported into the spirit world and must fight to maintain her identity in order to rescue her parents, who have been transformed into pigs. This witch sees her magical practice as involving the spirit world, and she uses the imagery from *Spirited Away*, the aesthetic and emotional feeling she gets from it, as an example of what her practice is like, distancing herself from the horror examples of what witchcraft tends to be portrayed as. *Spirited Away* is a whimsical film, as most of Miyazaki's work is, and her choosing that film to exemplify her practice, rather than *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989), marks her practice as outside of even the most benign stereotypes about witches, since the parts of the film that she recognizes herself in have nothing to do with witchcraft itself.

Another example of this is when Ada, the satanic witch, explained that what drew her to magic in the first place was that "[t]he witches had power and they were so independent and femme fatales, that it was very seductive in a way." In her description of these characters, she uses words "power" and "independent" to describe witches who are typically considered to be negative, such as when she refers to herself as Nancy from *The Craft* (1996), rather than focusing on the negative associations typically found in descriptions of them. She also uses images of non-witches to describe herself as a witch. For instance, she likes the Marvel Cinematic Universe because she likens her magic to superpowers, particularly those of the character Loki in the *Thor* films, as well

as the character Deadpool. Both of these characters can be defined as antiheroes,<sup>4</sup> which she finds to be most in line with how she sees herself.

Other participants engaged in embracing behaviors as a way of defining themselves in relation to magic practitioners in film and television shows. For instance, many of the conjurors I interviewed embraced the characters who could be defined as the Magical Sapphire. *AHS: Coven's* (2013) Marie Laveau was a favorite among this crowd. They saw her violence as being righteous, an acceptable response to racist violence and antagonism that was constantly being thrown her way. They embraced that their practices have been used throughout history as a defense mechanism against oppression. As Fern stated in their interview, African American magical traditions were used to cause harm because people “were tired of getting raped.” By embracing this element of conjure, they incorporate the strength of resistance narratives of their ancestors into their understanding of their spiritual tradition.

Interestingly, though, Fern also does not fully like the characterization of Marie Laveau in *AHS:Coven*, (2013) and makes attempts to distance herself from those depictions. They described their emotions when watching the show as:

Like, I mean, like, have you ever seen that meme that's, like, that black dude that's, like, a football player, and he's like, “They had us in the first half, I'm not gonna lie”? Like, that was honestly...Ryan Murphy, he's, he's trash, like, at writing [...] He's never been that great, especially writing black characters, but even in *Coven*, like, there was a lot of *good* representation. Like, Angela *Bassett* when she with that *snake*. Like, that was a *good* scene. That was, that was good.

Um, even, but even then, it was too [...] I call it spookify. Like, they spookify black magic a lot, and I mean black magic as in black magic but also Black people doing magic. They make it scary [...] (emphasis Fern's)

In this instance, Fern is engaging in both embracing and distancing behavior. The scene they are describing with the snake is from episode four, “Fearful Pranks Ensnare,” when she gets revenge on those who lynched her employee’s son, described in the previous chapter. The scene is simple, not overly dramatic in how it’s portraying her going about her magic. She sits alone in a room with only a drummer to keep her company during the ritual. The horror comes from the effect of her magic, but the magic is not sensationalized. This is the kind of scene featuring Laveau, and by extension the portrayal of conjure, that Fern identifies with and embraces. However, towards the end of the season, however, Laveau’s practices become more demonized, with her magic and immortality being attributed to her literally killing babies every year for Papa Legba. This is the representation of conjure they distance themselves from as being offensive. The football player meme they referenced is a common response people make online to something that looks good on the surface but is actually terrible, as a way of expressing their feeling of having been deceived.

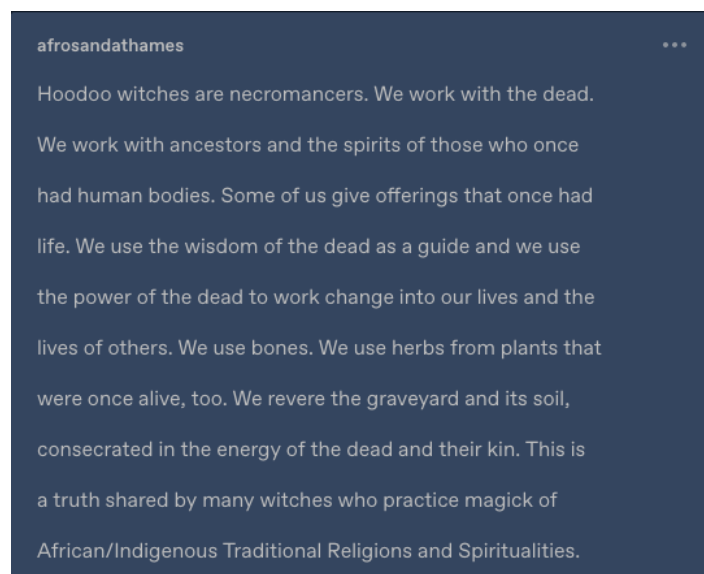


Figure 4.2. Screenshot of Tumblr post

Another example of a combination of embracing and distancing behavior on Tumblr can be found in Figure 4.2. While some practitioners of ATRs prefer to distance themselves from the images of the practice found in film and television media, this particular Tumblr user embraces the death aspects of Hoodoo practice and presents them in literal language. What we do *is* considered to be necromancy in the European interpretation of ancestor work. If it were done by a person of European descent, it would be called necromancy by most within the witchcraft community. It would be very easy to ignore the nature of ancestor veneration as being death magic, but for this user, there is pride in acknowledging her ancestral practices for what they are. From my own experience, working with the dead and with the energy surrounding death tends to be a practice that is either outright shunned or shied away from by the wider witchcraft community. Discussions surrounding the practice tend to deploy language meant to intimidate potential practitioners of this kind of magic into never attempting it out of fear that they will do it wrong and end up haunted or worse.

Tumblr user afrosandathames (2020), the author of the post, offers a different approach to working with the dead, while still embracing the nature of death spiritual work. Death is not to be avoided in hoodoo, but to be celebrated and incorporated into everyday spiritual practice. However, even in her embracing of a maligned practice within the wider witchcraft community, she uses distancing tactics to shift perceptions of working with death by troubling the perceptions of the belief system. For instance, she describes graveyard dirt as being “consecrated in the energy of the dead and their kin,” which is a shift from the general cultural beliefs of places of the dead being tainted by death. Instead, coming into contact with death has made that ground sacred, which is

why it is used in hoodoo ritual. She also describes offerings of dead things (be they animal or plant) as things that “once had life,” rather than describing them as dead. This shows that while she is embracing death magic employed by hoodoo, she is still using euphemisms to dissociate herself and her practices from the stereotype of animal sacrifice. She places the emphasis on the fact that they were once alive, not that they are dead when they are being offered to the ancestors or spirits. Disconnecting the two puts the emphasis on life rather than death in a post where she is arguing that death is integral to the practice of hoodoo.

Later in the post, she says that “[hoodoo witches] use bones.” Tumblr has a long, complicated past with the use of bones in magic. In December of 2015, in what has come to be known on Tumblr as Boneghazi, a practitioner of death magic named Ender Darling made a post on Facebook, which is now only preserved in screenshots, detailing how they traveled to a New Orleans area “poor man’s graveyard” where they often found bits of human bone that washed up after it rained. Further in the post, they offered to ship bone fragments to anyone who asked, so long as they reimbursed them for the shipping costs. Almost immediately following that post from Darling, a Tumblr user made a call out post on the website calling them a grave robber. This sparked a torrent of people both in and out of the witchcraft community weighing in on the topic of grave robbing. Eventually, the story gained a life of its own. Practitioners began making posts explaining that the stealing bones from people’s graves wasn’t just illegal but could invite negative energy into your life, while many non-practitioners took to making memes out of the entire situation.

It was eventually revealed that the practitioner is a person of color, and the story began to fold into wider discussions of indigenous religious practices, much like what afrosandathames does in Figure 4.2. In arguing that hoodoo witches use bones, afrosandathames is claiming a stake in the bone discourse that is still brought up on Tumblr to this day, four years since it happened. In making this claim, by extension, she is arguing that what Darling did was a religious act, and one that many other hoodoo practitioners engage in, but are less vocal about. Here, she is engaging in embracing behavior once again, saying there is nothing wrong with using bones, as they have been used in hoodoo for centuries for conducting powerful magic and as potent offerings to ancestors and spirits, who are themselves the spirits of dead relatives and powerful cultural figures.

Most of the practitioners, though, chose to engage in either distancing or embracing on a particular topic, but not both, depending on what suited their needs. What was chosen to distance from or embrace was, again, highly individualistic. This was a constant across all demographics. My respondents included two participants of mixed Native descent, Neave and Iris; Iris chose to distance themselves from the label of Shaman and the images of what a Shaman is that can be found in film and television, while Neave described themselves as a shaman and fully embraced that label as part of their identity. Some conjure practitioners embraced the character of Marie Laveau crafted by the creators of *American Horror Story: Coven* (2013), while others saw the creative liberties they took with the life of a crafty, intelligent, spiritual icon as furthering stereotypes about African magical traditions as being dark or dangerous. The examples work as an example of how narrative identity work is something engaged in on the

personal level, but that, in counterspaces, such as those provided by Tumblr or an interview with another practitioner, a space for the expression of counternarratives for the purpose of preserving positive self-image can be realized.

#### **4.5. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I describe the varying ways ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender intersect in the lives of the magic practitioners involved with this ethnography. In terms of ethnicity, both white practitioners and practitioners of color saw their ethnic heritage as playing a major role in their spiritual practices. However, the practitioners of color were more likely to experience harassment or fear misunderstandings about their practices from other magic practitioners because of racist stereotypes about their form of magic. In terms of sexuality, the queer practitioners held no anxiety about their sexuality in regards to their spirituality, but it is often assumed that they are witches because of their sexual orientation, or vice versa, which they deny. The queer participants see their sexualities as being able to make their practices more fun or less restrictive, since they can do any form of sex magic if they choose. In terms of gender, discourse in the practicing community at the time of this ethnography revolved around who had the right to call themselves witches. While the witches involved in this study did not hold the belief that only cisgender women have the right to call themselves witches, they knew of the argument, and dismissed it as transphobic, misogynistic and racist. The genderqueer participants and the male witch, as well as the rest of the participants, described witch as a gender-neutral term that could legitimately be employed by any practitioner who chose to use it.



I then spent some time discussing the representation of satanic witchcraft. I discussed the four primary ways the diabolic is incorporated into the practice of witchcraft: theistic Luciferianism, atheistic Luciferianism, theistic Satanism, atheistic Satanism. I then focused on a local Satanic witch, Ada, and how she defined her practice. She is a chaos magician who engages in practices that range from healing to cursing. She sees Satanic witches as maligned by Christian-majority mainstream media, and worked to dissociate herself from the negative stereotypes about Satanic witches found in the media. I also explored how this view is also held by Kirsten, the Luciferian survey respondent.

Finally, I introduced the concepts of narrative identity work and counterspaces. I defined #witchblr and #witchesofcolor, as well as the interview space between two practitioners, as counterspaces where the narratives of oppression, resistance, and reimagined personal narratives reside and are able to continuously take place. I then described the acts of distancing and embracing the standard magic practitioner narratives found in media that the participants engaged in during our interviews or in their survey responses. I closed by acknowledging that these behaviors were never determined by group membership, but were practiced on an individual basis within the space of the counternarratives created in tandem with other practitioners, either in the space of the hashtag or the interview.

#### **4.6. Notes**

1. The term trans\* is used as an umbrella term for all individuals who fall outside of the gender binary. Transgender individuals fall under this umbrella, as well as those with nonbinary genders.

2. This particular respondent made no reference to any tribal affiliations. I am following their direction, as they referred to themselves as “Native”.

3. Diabolic here, as is often used in the practicing community, is defined as magical practices that either involve or are centered around Satan, Lucifer, or various demons, such as those found in the Ars Goetia of The Lesser Key of Solomon.

4. An antihero is a heroic character who lacks traits typically associated with a hero. In the case of Loki, he is a trickster character based on the Norse God of the same name. He starts the series as a villain and slowly redeems himself through heroic acts for his family, but never takes on the righteousness and care typically associated with heroism. Deadpool is a character who is snarky, sarcastic, and crude. He does what is right, but has no moral code against killing, like other heroes do, and often purposefully avoids other heroes.

## Chapter 5. Discussion and Conclusion

In this chapter, I discuss the ways witches and conjurors envision a better way for representation in film and television media, based on their favorite representations of witches and conjure women in these forms of media. I then give a brief summary of Chapters 1-4 before considering further directions for this research and final conclusions.

### 5.1. Film and Television Futures

I closed each interview by asking the practitioners who their favorite witch or conjure woman in film or TV was. Most of the time, I could see their faces light up after having spent quite a bit of time discussing some quite serious topics about their identity. Not surprisingly, most of the practitioners picked characters who could be considered Witch Next Door types. These magic practitioners included: the Demons from *Supernatural* (2005-2020), Kiki from *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989), Gillian Owens from *Practical Magic* (1997), Grandma Aggie from *Halloweentown* (1998), Marie Laveau from *American Horror Story: Coven* (2013), Sabrina, Ambrose and Prudence from *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-), and Alphonse Elric from *Fullmetal Alchemist* (2003).

While each of the participants enjoyed these characters for different reasons, most found them to align with their personalities or moral codes in some way. Belle likes the “fiery” and “spirited” character Gillian Owens from *Practical Magic* (1997) because she embodies the kind of energy she wants to manifest in her own life. Cole likes Grandma Aggie from *Halloweentown* (1998) because she teaches, through her catchphrase, that “Being normal is vastly overrated.” Through her, he gains a feeling

“that I don't have to conform, telling me that I can live my own life, have everything I want just by giving it to myself. And not to be mean and evil. Like, Grandma Aggie is just my heart.” The fans of Ambrose Spellman and Prudence Blackwood from *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-present) and Marie Laveau from *American Horror Story: Coven* (2013-2014) like the fact that they are unapologetically themselves, and aren't afraid to curse someone if they cross them, a kind of energy they either embody themselves or find admirable in others.

However, as I've stated above, this doesn't mean that those I interviewed are completely enamored with every aspect of their favorite magical characters or the way they practice magic. Only one of the witches, Belle, was completely fine with the way her favorite witch, Gillian Owens of *Practical Magic* (1997), practiced magic, and that may have to do with the approach taken by the artistic designers of the film to make their magic an understated, cause and effect form of magic instead of the kind found in *Harry Potter* (2001-2011) or *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-present). Here, the magic is implied to work because we see the effects, but most of the magic being done is never seen to automatically work, except for the final scene where Gillian's ex-boyfriend is exorcised from her body.

Most of the witches and conjure women would prefer to see more witches and conjurors on television and in film to reflect the subtle type of magic, since it's the most accurate in terms of how they see their spiritual practices. None of them thinks they can shoot flames from their fingertips. They all view magic as putting one's will out into the universe, manipulating invisible forces and eventually, through enough manipulation, the desired result ensues. It's a spiritual practice first and foremost. As Belle said when

describing *Practical Magic* (1997), they're women who just happen to be witches. That's what witchcraft and conjure mean to practitioners. Their entire identities are not completely invested in the fact that they practice witchcraft. It's one thread in the larger spiderweb that makes up who they see themselves as.

## **5.2. Further Research**

This thesis has explored only a small portion of what makes the Tumblr witchcraft and conjure communities so distinct in terms of their identities as witches and the ways they interact with media about them. There were several topics that I was only able to skim the surface of for the purposes of maintaining the overall goal of the research intact. These areas need to be explored in greater detail in order to more fully understand how witches and conjurors are framing their identities in the U.S.

One of the most prominent aspects of witch identity that I came across while searching for participants was the way they describe their craft. There is a saying that when you've met one witch, you've met one witch. Since witchcraft is so highly individualistic, rather than depending on dogma or a central religious text, there have always been people who profess in different areas of spell work. There is a popular Tumblr post that keeps getting longer each time I see it that lists the different types of witches the original poster has found on the site. These can range from the relatively large group of green witches, who predominantly practice herbal magic, to literary witches, who channel the energy of specific fictional characters when they do spells. It would be helpful if a larger study cataloging the different subcategories witches consider themselves to belong to could be done.

Additionally, I was only able to contact two diabolic witches while I was conducting this research. Since there is such a stigma, even within the witchcraft community, towards those who practice diabolic magic, I would like to dig deeper into this community to see their particular stance on satanic witchcraft in the media. This community is more stigmatized than the non-Satanic witches, and their input on the way media contributes to the stigmatization of minority religious groups would be an invaluable contribution to the field. What happens when even other witches don't like to acknowledge your practices? What role does the media play in how these witches are treated? What narrative identity work do they engage in that allows them to see themselves positively in a world that sees them as the very definition of evil?

Finally, I would like to dig deeper into the split of how comfortable White witches were when talking about ethnicity versus how uncomfortable they were with talking about race. While it is well-documented that White people in the US have a difficult time talking about race, it takes on a particularly interesting dynamic when their spiritual practices are based completely in their ethnic heritage. How do they reconcile the two aspects of themselves? Why are they willing to talk about ethnic heritage practices but not race? What causes them to even split the two aspects of themselves in the first place, when the people of color involved in the study were more likely to use the two categories of identity interchangeably?

### **5.3. Conclusion**

In this thesis, I examine the intersections of identity, media, and alternative spirituality, primarily through the counterspace of Tumblr's #witchblr and #witchesofcolor communities. I began by explaining my personal connection to witchcraft and films as a

13-year practicing witch of color and long-time member of the Tumblr community. I then explored the historical background of witchcraft in the US, how film and television portray witches and influence public opinion about them, and the current state of the witchcraft community in the United States, with a particular emphasis on the topics that were salient in discourse on Tumblr during the time of my fieldwork. Chapter Two discussed the methods of historical document analysis, film critique, participant observation, narrative interviewing and online survey employed while engaging with this research. I then explored the ethical considerations of interacting with marginalized communities as a researcher with institutional ties, and what it means to be an anthropologist studying my own community.

Chapter Three explored the five most common witch and conjure woman tropes found in the 71 films and 15 television shows I viewed for the purposes of this study. I argued that the Witch Next Door and the Vixen Witch represented the two sides of the Madonna-Whore Dichotomy that has been found in Western thought for centuries, and that both serve as cautionary tales for women and femmes with non-normative identities and personalities. I then argued that the Magical Sapphire and the Spiritual Mammy tropes served as examples of how black women and femmes should respond to misogynoir.<sup>1</sup> I then argued that all four of these tropes, as well as the rest detailed in Appendix A, can be seen as subsections of the final trope: The Monstrous Witch, who serves as a warning of the punishment of violence and the stripping away of humanity for those who transgress gendered norms, especially if that involves physical transgressions, such as in the case of transfeminine individuals.

I began Chapter Four by explaining that witchcraft often overlaps with other marginalized identities, and how I see the modern witchcraft movement as a revitalization event. I then explored how ethnicity, sexual orientation and sexuality, and gender intersect with the identity of witch and/or conjuror. Following that, I explored the diabolic in relation to contemporary witchcraft, and focused in on what Ada, the Satanic Witch who participated in this study, had to say about satanic witchcraft in the media. Finally, I identified #witchblr and #witchesofcolor on Tumblr, as well as interview spaces between two practitioners, as counterspaces, and explored the ways the magic practitioners I interviewed and surveyed engaged in narrative identity work within the context of these counterspaces as it relates to stereotypes in film and television. In this chapter, I explored the participants' desires for future media that represents them as people who just happen to be magic practitioners, rather than being characters whose entire identities are wrapped up in their magic. Finally, I offer future directions for this research, including a taxonomy of witch types, deeper exploration of how Satanic witches interact with the tropes about their form of witchcraft, and the divide between ethnicity and race in the minds of White magic practitioners.

#### **5.4. Opening the Circle<sup>2</sup>**

I began this journey of understanding how my community interacts with witch and conjure woman in film and television shows almost a year ago. I find it poetic that this project has taken me on a journey similar to the one I took 13 years ago, when I first discovered witchcraft, that marked me as an initiate. Once again, I've found myself engaging with the practice of magic for a year, this time combining my secular and



spiritual interests, in the process of becoming an initiate in a different area of my life. As with every cycle, much has changed, yet much has remained the same.

I assumed going into this project that I would find myself wanting to stop watching witch-related films and television shows, that I would eventually run my interest in the witchy subgenre dry. But when season three of *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* was announced, I was just as excited as I always have been. Even though I find myself cringing when I watch some of these films and television shows, I can't stop myself from searching out new ones to add to my ever-increasing Netflix backlog. I, like many of the participants I interviewed for this study, need to see myself represented in some way, even if it's not completely accurate or makes no claim to attempt to be so. This is also the reason why I buy witch-related products and clothing: I feel affirmed by them. I own two coffee mugs with sayings related to witchcraft on them, and I keep them next to my desk at all times. They remind me of the joy I feel when I practice my spirituality, and the community of others out there who wake up every day, put on their proverbial witch hat and greet the day with a resolve to be themselves in a world that sees their spirituality as dark or even a little bit twisted.

Even through the severe burnout I developed during the time when I was conducting my fieldwork, I felt a communion with other magic practitioners in a way that I never have before. Every time I sat down to conduct an interview, or combed through #witchblr, #witchcraft and #witchesofcolor, I was entering into affirming counterspaces. I came away from each conversation with another practitioner with a renewed sense that my community is filled with people who unapologetically are who they are, and that we aren't afraid to shout it from the rooftops. We aren't afraid to critique films and television

shows that portray us negatively, and will fight tooth and nail to ensure that baby witches<sup>3</sup> know that the spiritual practices they find hope and peace with are not evil, no matter what stereotypes have been created and proliferated through popular culture. To quote Nancy from *The Craft* (1996), “We are the weirdos, Mister.” And we are so proud of that.

## **5.5. Endnotes**

1. Misogynoir, a term coined by queer black feminist Moya Bailey, describes misogyny specifically directed at black women and femmes.
2. In ceremonial witchcraft, a ritual is typically begun by creating a circle of energy around the ritual space in order to protect the practitioner from unwanted spiritual influences or spirits. At the end of the ritual, they then “open the circle” to let spirits and participants know that the ritual is complete.
3. A baby witch is anyone who is new to the practice of witchcraft. This doesn’t refer to physical age, but to the amount of time spent in the Craft.

## **Appendix A: Witch and Conjure Woman Tropes**

This list is comprised of all of the films and television shows watched, along with year of release, separated into the categories in which the characters found in the film or television show fall. A short description is given of each category and sub-category. Some films and television shows fall within more than one category.

### **Witch Tropes**

#### **Monstrous Witch**

Witches who, either through physicality or action, have been stripped of their humanity, being placed into the realm of the truly monstrous.

#### **Nonhuman Creature**

Witches whose physicality is exaggerated or otherwise manipulated to portray them as physically inhuman, marking their practices as outside of the realm of the human

Sleeping Beauty (1959)  
The Beastmaster (1982)  
Deadtime Stories (1986)  
The Little Mermaid (1989)  
The Witches (1990)  
Supernatural (2005-present)  
Season of the Witch (2011)  
Penny Dreadful (2014)

#### **Inhumane Actions**

Witches whose physicality remains human, but who commits blatantly antisocial acts, which places them into the realm of the human-not-human, and marking them as an aberration to the standardized notions of womanhood

The Wizard of Oz (1939)  
Burned at the Stake (1982)  
Pumpkinhead (1988)  
The Witches (1990)  
The Blair Witch Project (1999)  
Hocus Pocus (1993)  
The Brothers Grimm (2005)  
Once Upon A Time (2011)  
AHS: Coven (2013)  
Mary and the Witch's Flower (2018)  
The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina (2018)

## **Vixen**

A witch whose dress or characterization is used to turn her into an object of sexual desire for either other characters, the audience, or both; typically associated with a lack of intelligence, although several exceptions to this aspect exist

### **Satanic Vixen**

A hypersexualized witch whose Satanic associations/magic are a major part of her characterization; may or may not be sexually involved with other Satanic magic practitioners or Satan himself.

Mark of the Witch (1970)  
Satan's Cheerleaders (1977)  
Sleepy Hollow (1999)  
Salem (2014)  
The Witch (2015)  
The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina (2018)

### **Repentant Vixen**

A hypersexualized witch who, typically through entering a heteronormative marriage, changes her ways and conforms to traditional femininity, adopting conservative dress and manner

I Married A Witch (1942)  
Bell, Book and Candle (1958)

### **Unrepentant Vixen**

A hypersexualized witch who remains this way throughout the story arc; typically portrayed as a villain or minor antagonist for the main character

The Naked Witch (1961)  
The Witches of Eastwick (1987)  
Elvira: Mistress of the Dark (1988)  
Hocus Pocus (1993)  
The Craft (1996)  
Dark Shadows (2012)  
Game of Thrones (2012)  
Beautiful Creatures (2013)  
AHS: Coven (2013)  
The Love Witch (2016)

## **The Secret Society**

An entire, hidden group of magic practitioners who may or may not interact with the non-magic practicing world

### **Institutional Satanic Order**

A group of satanic witches who operate and recruit primarily through the front of an important social institution, with the primary institution being private schools

Daughters of Satan (1972)  
Satan's School for Girls (1973)  
Suspiria (1977)  
Inferno (1980)  
Suspiria (2018)  
The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina (2018)

### **Unaffiliated Satanic Order**

A group of satanic witches who operate outside of institutions, who develop organically through interest in the occult, typically by a group of friends developing their interest, as well as any followers they have converted along the way to form a full coven

The Seventh Victim (1943)  
Rosemary's Baby (1968)  
Satan's Cheerleaders (1977)  
Witchcraft (1988)  
The Lords of Salem (2012)  
Hereditary (2018)

## **The Society Next Door**

A society of magically gifted individuals who have developed a society similar in every way to American society, except for the use of magic; typically consists of a governmental body, normative families, and values related to the culture of the people they live among

Bewitched (1968)  
Halloweentown (1998)  
Harry Potter series (2001-2011)  
Twitches (2005)  
Bewitched (2005)  
Beautiful Creatures (2013)  
AHS: Coven (2013)  
Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them (2016)

Legacies (2018)  
The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina (2018)

### **Witch Next Door**

A witch who, through appeals to normativity of the time and place they live; portrays the magic as a cultural difference, rather than a defect

#### **Teen Witch Next Door**

A teen witch who focuses on all things stereotypically associated with teen girlhood (shopping, boys, appearance, popular girls), who exists at the edge of normativity, but who, because of her magic, is not able to fully reach that level of normal, but is nonetheless treated like any other quirky girl

Teen Witch (1989)  
Sabrina, the Teenage Witch (1996)  
The Craft (1996)

#### **Adult Witch Next Door**

An adult woman, typically in her 20s or early 30s, who has magical powers, but is otherwise normatively attractive, with normative interests and abilities, whose only quirk is her magic.

Bewitched (1964)  
The Addams Family (1964)  
The Witches of Eastwick (1987)  
Charmed (1998)  
Practical Magic (1998)  
Into the Woods (2014)  
The Good Witch (2015)  
Charmed (2018)  
Good Omens (2019)

### **Innocent Witch**

A witch who, either through disability or age, is portrayed to be completely innocent, with no faults; infantilized, if not an actual child

Eyes of Fire (1983)  
Kiki's Delivery Service (1998)  
The Crucible (1996)  
Mary and the Witch's Flower (2018)

## **Pagan Priestess**

Leads a coven of magic practitioners who engage in polytheistic worship of the “old gods” and practice ritualistic magic

Shoeflies (1963)  
Cry of the Banshee (1970)  
Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (2005)  
Brave (2012)

## **Magical Idiots**

A witch who, through her lack of foresight, unwittingly aligns herself with dark forces; has no concept of the world outside of her own suburban bubble; differs from the witch next door in that she causes destruction of those around her for her own gain

Supernatural (2005-present)

## **Conjure Woman Tropes**

### **Monster**

A conjure woman who, either through action or nature, exists outside of the realm of the human; the most prominent portrayal of a conjure woman in the films viewed

### **Inhuman Creature**

A conjure woman who exists as some form of creature, be it supranatural or as a racialized inhuman creature; often is being used by White characters for their own bidding, although some exist as their own agents

King of the Zombies (1941)  
I Eat Your Skin (1964)  
The Skeleton Key (2005)  
Pirates of the Caribbean (2006)  
American Horror Story: Coven (2013)

### **Inhumane Action**

A conjure woman who, through antisocial acts and behaviors, is removed from the general understanding of what it means to be a normalized person

The Skeleton Key (2005)  
American Horror Story: Coven (2013)

### **Spiritual Infants**

Conjure women who have massive amounts of power, but, through power imbalances, lack agency in how that power is used or manifests

King of the Zombies (1941)  
House on Skull Mountain (1974)  
Eve's Bayou (1997)  
Siempre Bruja (2019)

### **Tricked White Woman/Man**

A white woman who, through contact with the racialized other, destroys herself through practicing hoodoo/rootwork/conjure; typically learns these practices from close (implied sexual) relationships with the racialized other

Night of the Eagle (1962)  
The Skeleton Key (2005)

### **Magical Sapphire**

A conjure woman whose story revolves around using her powers/practices to get revenge on, typically, White antagonizers who have enacted some form of violence against her or someone she loves

Sugar Hill (1974)  
Tales from the Hood (1995)  
Eve's Bayou (1997)  
Pirates of the Caribbean (2006)  
AHS: Coven (2013)

### **Spiritual Mammy**

A conjure woman, typically older in age, who exists solely to help the protagonists of the story learn something about themselves; typically has no real story of her own, with exceptions; akin to the Magical Negro film trope

Daughters of the Dust (1991)  
Venom (2005)  
Princess and the Frog (2009)  
Queen Sugar (2016)  
The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina (2018)



## APPENDIX B. IRB Approval Letter

### ACTION ON EXEMPTION APPROVAL REQUEST



**To:** Andreana Tarleton  
Geography and Anthropology

**From:** Dennis Landin  
Chair, Institutional Review Board

**Date:** August 14, 2019

**Re:** IRB# E11799

**Title:** Alternative Religious Practice, Tumblr, and Visual Media

Institutional Review Board  
Dr. Dennis Landin, Chair  
130 David Boyd Hall  
Baton Rouge, LA 70803  
P: 225.578.8692  
F: 225.578.5983  
[irb@lsu.edu](mailto:irb@lsu.edu)  
[lsu.edu/research](http://lsu.edu/research)

**New Protocol/Modification/Continuation:** New Protocol

**Review Date:** 8/14/2019

**Approved** X **Disapproved** \_\_\_\_\_

**Approval Date:** 8/14/2019 **Approval Expiration Date:** 8/13/2022

**Exemption Category/Paragraph:** 2b

**Signed Consent Waived?:** Yes for Skype interviews and the survey; No for in person interviews

**Re-review frequency:** (three years unless otherwise stated)

**LSU Proposal Number** (if applicable):

**By:** Dennis Landin, Chairman

### PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING –

#### Continuing approval is **CONDITIONAL** on:

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU's Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects\*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
7. Notification of the IRB of a serious compliance failure.
8. **SPECIAL NOTE: When emailing more than one recipient, make sure you use bcc. Approvals will automatically be closed by the IRB on the expiration date unless the PI requests a continuation.**

\* All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at <http://www.lsu.edu/irb>

## APPENDIX C. Survey

This section contains the survey distributed on Tumblr.

### Alternative Religions, Visual Media, and Identity

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#### Start of Block: SURVEY INSTRUCTION

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#### Start of Block: Informed Consent

Info

Welcome to the research study!

Study Title: Alternative Religions, Visual Media and Identity

Description: This study seeks to understand how Tumblr users who identify as members of alternative faiths negotiate their identities on the site through conversations around film and television depictions of practitioners of their faiths. This survey is part of a larger historical and film analysis of these portrayals. The survey will be open for about two months, from the beginning of September 2019 until November 2, 2019.

Risks: There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study.

Benefits: You will receive no direct benefits from your participation in this study. However, your responses will allow the researcher to gain a better understanding of how young adults who identify as practitioners of alternative spiritual traditions are using Tumblr to negotiate their identities in a media saturated world. Additionally, it will offer the researcher a better understanding of how young adults are using the internet as a site of discourse about their identities and social groups they belong to (such as race, gender, gender expression, sexuality, religion, class, etc), through conversations about the media.

Investigators: The following investigators will be available for questions about this study, M-F 12:30 p.m.-5:00 p.m., central time:

Andreana Tarleton, 225-288-1612 or atarle5@lsu.edu, and Dr. Joyce Jackson, 225-578-6078 or jjackso@lsu.edu.

Performance Site: Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

Number of Subjects: 100

Subject Inclusion: American Tumblr users aged 18-35 who identify as members of alternative faiths. In order to participate, you must meet both the inclusion and exclusion criteria. No individuals under the age of 18 are permitted to participate in this study.

Right to Refuse: You may refuse to answer any question for any reason. You will not be penalized for doing so.

Privacy: Results of the study will be used in the master's thesis of Andreana Tarleton as part of the requirements of receiving the MA in Anthropology from LSU. No names or identifying information will be included in this publication from any survey participants. Survey responses

will be stored on Qualtrics, which does not collect any identifying information, such as legal names, IP addresses, or email addresses.

You may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigators. If you have questions about subjects' rights or other concerns, you can contact Dennis Landin, Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692, [irb@lsu.edu](mailto:irb@lsu.edu), or [www.lsu.edu/research](http://www.lsu.edu/research).

Q1 Which category below best describes your age?

- ☐ 17 and under (1)
- ☐ 18 - 20 (2)
- ☐ 21-29 (3)
- ☐ 30-35 (4)
- ☐ 36-40 (5)
- ☐ 41-50 (6)
- ☐ 50-59 (7)
- ☐ 60 and over (8)

*Skip To: Q11 If Which category below best describes your age? = 17 and under*

*Skip To: Q11 If Which category below best describes your age? = 36-40*

*Skip To: Q11 If Which category below best describes your age? = 41-50*

*Skip To: Q11 If Which category below best describes your age? = 50-59*

*Skip To: Q11 If Which category below best describes your age? = 60 and over*

Q51 Are you a United States citizen?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

*Skip To: Q11 If Are you a United States citizen? = No*

Q2 I have read the above information and understand what the study entails.

☐ Agree (1)

☐ Disagree (2)

*Skip To: Q11 If I have read the above information and understand what the study entails. = Disagree*

Q3 I agree to participate in this study, and know that I may leave the survey at any time, without penalty.

☐ Agree (1)

☐ Disagree (2)

*Skip To: Q11 If I agree to participate in this study, and know that I may leave the survey at any time, without p... = Disagree*

Info 2

The researcher would like to gather some demographic information. You may skip any question you don't feel comfortable answering.

Q4 What is your gender identity?

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Q5 What is your sexual orientation?

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Q6 What is your ethnicity?

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Info 3

**The researcher would now like to collect some information about your religious beliefs and how they may or may not interact with Tumblr and film and television.**

Q7 How would you describe your personal faith practices?

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Q8 What role does Tumblr play in your spiritual journey or practice?

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Q9 Do you think movies or TV shows have any impact on how you practice your religion?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Maybe (3)

*Skip To: Q11 If Do you think movies or TV shows have any impact on how you practice your religion? = No*

Q10 If yes, how would you say movies or TV shows impact your religious practices?

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Q11 Have you viewed any films or television shows depicting your religion, or a characterization of your religious views (mythologized versions included)?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

*Skip To: Info 4 If Have you viewed any films or television shows depicting your religion, or a characterization of y... = No*

*Display This Question:*

*If Have you viewed any films or television shows depicting your religion, or a characterization of y... = Yes*

Q14 How do you feel your religion is portrayed in film and television?

- ☐ Very Positive (1)
- ☐ Positive (2)
- ☐ Neither positive or negative (3)
- ☐ Negative (4)
- ☐ Very negative (5)

Q15 When viewing these depictions, how does it make you feel?

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Info 4

**The researcher would now like to discuss your religion and the film and television media depicting it, as it may relate to your Tumblr use and interactions with other users.**

Q25 Have you ever engaged in conversations on Tumblr about your religious practices and/or film and television representations of people of your faith?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

*Skip To: End of Survey If Have you ever engaged in conversations on Tumblr about your religious practices and/or film and t... = No*

*Skip To: Q26 If Have you ever engaged in conversations on Tumblr about your religious practices and/or film and t... = Yes*

Q26 Have your conversations been with other members of your faith group?

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

*Skip To: Q29 If Have your conversations been with other members of your faith group? = Yes*

*Skip To: Q27 If Have your conversations been with other members of your faith group? = No*

Q29 What have these conversations mostly consisted of? How did you discuss these characters and movies/television shows with the other members of your group?

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Q27 Have you had conversations with people who are not a part of your faith group?

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

*Skip To: Q28 If Have you had conversations with people who are not a part of your faith group? = Yes*

Q28 What have these conversations mostly consisted of? How did you discuss these characters and movies/television shows with the nonmembers of your faith group?

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Q33 Please choose the response that accurately describes your feelings as you discuss these film and television representations with **members of your own faith**.

	Clearly describes my feelings (1)	Mostly describes my feelings (2)	Moderately describes my feelings (3)	Slightly describes my feelings (4)	Does not describe my feelings (5)
Angry					
Ashamed					
Bitter					
Bored					
Comfortable					
Content					
Depressed					
Disdain					
Eager					
Embarrassed					
Excited					
Frustrated					
Furious					
Happy					
Hopeful					
Hurt					
Inadequate					
Insecure					
Inspired					
Irritated					
Loving					
Miserable					
Motivated					
Nervous					
Proud					
Resentful					
Sad					
Satisfied					
Self-Conscious					
Silly					
Tense					
Uncomfortable					
Worthless					



Q34 Please choose the response that accurately describes your feelings as you discuss these film and television representations with **nonmembers of your faith**.

	Clearly describes my feelings (1)	Mostly describes my feelings (2)	Moderately describes my feelings (3)	Slightly describes my feelings (4)	Does not describe my feelings (5)
Angry					
Ashamed					
Bitter					
Bored					
Comfortable					
Content					
Depressed					
Disdain					
Eager					
Embarrassed					
Excited					
Frustrated					
Furious					
Happy					
Hopeful					
Hurt					
Inadequate					
Insecure					
Inspired					
Irritated					
Loving					
Miserable					
Motivated					
Nervous					
Proud					
Resentful					
Sad					
Satisfied					
Self-Conscious					
Silly					
Tense					
Uncomfortable					
Worthless					

Q31 Based on your interactions with others on Tumblr, what role do you think film and television plays in how people perceive people of your faith group?

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Q35 What role, if any, do you think your race or ethnicity plays in how you are perceived as a member of your faith group?

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Q36 Do you believe film and television representations of people of both your race/ethnicity and faith group has an impact on how other people of your faith group perceive you?

- ☐ Definitely yes (1)
- ☐ Probably yes (2)
- ☐ Might or might not (3)
- ☐ Probably not (4)
- ☐ Definitely not (5)

*Display This Question:*

*If Do you believe film and television representations of people of both your race/ethnicity and faith... = Definitely yes*

*Or Do you believe film and television representations of people of both your race/ethnicity and faith... = Probably yes*

Q37 How so?

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Q38 Do you believe film and television depictions of people of your race/ethnicity and faith group have had an impact on how nonmembers of your faith perceive you?

- ☐ Definitely yes (1)
- ☐ Probably yes (2)
- ☐ Might or might not (3)
- ☐ Probably not (4)
- ☐ Definitely not (5)

*Display This Question:*

*If Do you believe film and television depictions of people of your race/ethnicity and faith group ha... =  
Definitely yes*

*Or Do you believe film and television depictions of people of your race/ethnicity and faith group ha... =  
Probably yes*

Q39 How so?

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Q40 What role, if any, do you believe your gender identity plays in how people perceive you as a member of your faith group?

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Q41 Do you believe film and television representations of people of both your gender identity and faith group has an impact on how other people of your faith group perceive you?

- ☐ Definitely yes (1)
- ☐ Probably yes (2)
- ☐ Might or might not (3)
- ☐ Probably not (4)
- ☐ Definitely not (5)

*Display This Question:*

*If Do you believe film and television representations of people of both your gender identity and fai... =  
Definitely yes*

*Or Do you believe film and television representations of people of both your gender identity and fai... =  
Probably yes*

Q42 How so?

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Q43 Do you believe film and television representations of people of both your gender identity and faith group has an impact on how nonmembers of your faith group perceive you?

- ☐ Definitely yes (1)
- ☐ Probably yes (2)
- ☐ Might or might not (3)
- ☐ Probably not (4)
- ☐ Definitely not (5)

Display This Question:

*If Do you believe film and television representations of people of both your gender identity and fai... = Definitely yes*

*Or Do you believe film and television representations of people of both your gender identity and fai... = Probably yes*

Q44 How so?

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Q46 What role, if any, do you believe your sexuality plays in how people perceive you as a member of your faith group?

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Q47 Do you believe film and television representations of people of both your sexuality and faith group has an impact on how other people of your faith group perceive you?

- ☐ Definitely yes (1)
- ☐ Probably yes (2)
- ☐ Might or might not (3)
- ☐ Probably not (4)
- ☐ Definitely not (5)

*Display This Question:*

*If Do you believe film and television representations of people of both your sexuality and faith gro... =  
Definitely yes*

*Or Do you believe film and television representations of people of both your sexuality and faith gro... =  
Probably yes*

Q48 How so?

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Q49 Do you believe film and television representations of people of both your sexuality and faith group has an impact on how nonmembers of your faith group perceive you?

- ☐ Definitely yes (1)
- ☐ Probably yes (2)
- ☐ Might or might not (3)
- ☐ Probably not (4)
- ☐ Definitely not (5)

*Display This Question:*

*If Do you believe film and television representations of people of both your sexuality and faith gro... = Definitely yes*

*Or Do you believe film and television representations of people of both your sexuality and faith gro... = Probably yes*

Q50 How so?

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*Display This Question:*

*If Which category below best describes your age? = 17 and under*

*Or Which category below best describes your age? = 36-40*

*Or Which category below best describes your age? = 41-50*

*Or Which category below best describes your age? = 50-59*

*Or Which category below best describes your age? = 60 and over*

*Or I have read the above information and understand what the study entails. = Disagree*

*Or I agree to participate in this study, and know that I may leave the survey at any time, without p... = Disagree*

Q11 Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. Unfortunately, you do not meet the minimum requirements for participation. Thank you for your time.

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## **Vita**

Andreana Tarleton is a Baton Rouge-based anthropologist, witch and writer. I studied Women's and Gender Studies at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, LA, where I received my Bachelor of Arts in May, 2018. I immediately enrolled in the Master's in Anthropology at Louisiana State University in August of 2018, and I hope to receive my master's in May 2020. In addition to being a researcher, I am also a fantasy novelist working on my first manuscript. I plan to continue research into the witchcraft community after the completion of this degree.