The

# WITCH STUDIES

READER

SOMA CHAUDHURI AND JANE WARD . editors

The Witch Studies Reader



# DUKE

UNIVERSITY PRESS

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To witches everywhere



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### Manifesting Witch Studies

You could say that we are both obsessed with witches, but for quite different reasons; and it is through our vastly different journeys that a vision for a global reader that would reimagine the study of witches, witchcraft, and witch hunts was born. Stories about witches, found in nearly every corner of the world, are by their nature stories about the most basic and profound of human experiences—healing, sex, violence, tragedies, aging, death, and encountering the mystery and magic of the unknown. It is no surprise, then, that witches loom large across the span of our cultural imaginations. Almost everyone is intrigued by the power of witches; their simultaneous allure and danger are now well documented in centuries of folklore and have been popularized on TV and in film, fiction, and social media. In academia, there are anthropological subdisciplines devoted to the study of witches; yet they all too often view their subject through the well-worn gaze of the colonizer or outsider rather than from the perspectives emerging from scholars who are themselves witches and/or embedded in communities of witchcraft practitioners. This reader stems from our longing not just to place witches' voices alongside feminist academic examinations of witchcraft but to make clear that scholars and witches are sometimes the same people. From a decolonial feminist perspective, this overlap makes sense, as witches are keepers of suppressed knowledges, manifesters of new futures, exemplars of praxis, and theorists in their own right. Just as importantly, we envisioned a reader that would trace points of departure and convergence as we followed the witch across the globe, looking for new understandings that upend the white supremacist, colonial, and patriarchal knowledge regimes that have informed many previous writings. And, thus, the global witch studies reader was launched as an effort to call into existence a new interdisciplinary field of feminist witch studies.

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Soma spent more than a decade in the 2000s studying how witchcraft accusations are leveraged to legitimize violence against women. Documenting the rise of witch hunts among some adivasi tea plantation labor communities in northern Bengal, India, she found a complex set of gendered and political-economic factors tied to the colonial roots of the plantation economy that led to women becoming credible targets during witch hunts. Growing up with urban class and caste privileges, Soma imagined tea plantations as sites of luxurious vacations among the lovely tea bushes, sprinkled with sights of tea-leaf pickers with their bamboo baskets and afternoons spent sipping the first flush tea while relaxing on rattan furniture at the planter's bungalow-turned-tourist hotel—perfect for holiday postcards of yesteryear or for selfies in Instagram posts in today's world. This is the popular image promised by the "tea resorts," where city dwellers get to enjoy proximity to nature, have adventures in the forests, and feast on local and colonial era-inspired delicacies. Welcome to the glamour of plantation life, where witches, or dain in the local Sadri language, are erased from the carefully reconstructed pictures.

Instead, Soma's first trip to the field site gave her a glimpse of the oppressive labor, dismal work conditions, and abject poverty that are part of tea plantation life. At the bottom of the plantation class hierarchy are the adivasi, a community of laborers lured to the area with the promise of better lives when the colonial plantations were originally set up almost 150 years ago. Isolated through the oppressive and violent policies that undergird the plantations, today the tea estates are an image of an "ailing industry." While the brown upper-caste planters have replaced the white owners, frequent closure of the plantations, inconsistent wages, starvation, and malnutrition are the material realities that visitors encounter if they ever cross from the paths of the colonial bungalows toward the labor lines, the areas where the workers live. Adivasi women suffer the most due to their intersectional identities (as women, migrant workers, and members of the Indigenous groups occupying the lowest paying jobs in the plantation economy), and they become targets of their community's anger and frustrations. As Soma's 2013 book, Tempest in a Teapot, closely examines, this scapegoating of women takes the form of witch hunts that often end with the women's violent public deaths. Violence against women, both metaphorical and physical, is present everywhere on the plantation, where women are raped, tortured, and murdered, all in the name of being labeled

a *daini*, a wild, evil, sexually perverted, ugly woman who must be controlled and killed to end the community's suffering. Plantation management and the local police have largely ignored these killings as something that the incurable *adivasi* engage in as their favorite pastime. Witch hunts are not good for tourism.

Thus, for Soma, the witch became a symbol of a devastating curse, a stigma that has destroyed many women and their families. It became almost impossible for her to envision an alternative to the label, where the identity of a witch and the practice of witchcraft could be reclaimed through feminist empowerment and healing that is both visible and mainstream. It is important to note here, that in India, there is a small witchy world that not only exists but also is celebrated. Coming from urban, English-language-preferred and privileged backgrounds (artists, performers, writers, and social workers), the members of this community are often the safekeepers of the colonial charm. These witches identify as Wiccans and are led by a self-declared high priestess trained in the West, who gives lessons on Wiccan life and healing in old country clubs and luxury hotels. Speaking in carefully anglicized English accents, dressed in mostly Western clothing, this exclusive group of Indian witches and their followers come with the baggage of homophobia and elitist class exclusiveness;<sup>2</sup> in addition, they are strikingly disconnected from the precarity facing adivasi women accused of witchcraft. Between the emotional overwhelm of studying the extreme violence perpetrated against migrant women laborers accused of witchcraft and the disgust elicited by the anglicized pagan witches, who promised empowered healing through a mix of crystal gazing accompanied by a "healthy" dose of homophobia, Soma was pretty much done with witches.

But then Jane reached out. Jane, a white American professor of feminist and queer studies, became enchanted with pagan forms of witchcraft in the late 2010s as part of a search for healing and spiritual practices not anchored in white people's racist appropriation of Indigenous and Global South traditions. Driven by a desire to relate differently to the natural world and to her own anxiety—both a lifelong anxiety disorder and a newer sense of existential crisis animated by rising fascism and environmental crisis—she dove into her ancestral records and began studying the seasonal rituals and plant-based medicinal practices that structured life for centuries in the parts of Northern Europe where her ancestors had lived. She learned about the stories, symbols, foods, crafts, and planting and harvesting activities associated with the pagan holidays. She took classes in herbal medicine and

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made teas from the mugwort, yarrow, nettle, and calendula she grew in her backyard. For Jane, this return to ancestral healing was not initially about witchcraft at all; it was an expression of white anti-racist values, a refusal of the kind of sage-burning and mantra-chanting that many white people take up in order to connect with nature or spirit. But she soon discovered that many of the best resources on European paganism and herbalism were produced by women who identified as witches and who understood their work as witchcraft.

Silvia Federici's classic *Caliban and the Witch* provides the historical foundation for the European connection between women's healing or nature-based practices and witchcraft. As women became the scapegoats for the violent clash between feudal land privatization and peasant revolt in medieval Europe, their essential roles in their communities as healers, farmers, land stewards, and public laborers became criminalized through the catch-all accusation of witchcraft. One legacy of the European witch hunts is that, in the Global North, to be a woman who grows her own herbs to use as medicine, or who lives alone in the woods, or who appears to be more connected to animals than humans, is to be perceived as a "witchy" woman. For Jane—living as a white woman settler in the United States and having long been drawn to the nebulous queerness of Hollywood's vengeful crones, wicked stepsisters, and black-clad spinsters—to be a witch carried little risk. Jane hit her mid-forties and embraced her silver hair, dreamed of a house deep in the woods with a potbelly pig as her animal familiar. To be an aging and perverse witch felt, in this context, like a "fuck you" to patriarchy, like a reclaiming of the way the world already viewed queer feminist women. But this defiance was, of course, a chosen identification forged in many kinds of privilege and not an accusation that carried the risks of rape and death that are faced by the adivasi women at the heart of Soma's research. Jane's embrace of witchcraft, as for many white women in the Global North drawn to reconnecting with traditional healing practices, was haunted by histories of horrific violence against women of European descent; but it was also enabled by the colonial, white supremacist, and patriarchal histories that undergird all commodified "freedoms" in the United States.

In 2018, Jane began teaching a course at UC Riverside on gender and witchcraft that had originally been created by her colleague Sherine Hafez. It was this course that led her to pull together, as best she could, a decolonial feminist witchcraft studies syllabus that decentered European-derived paganism and traced the relationship between witchcraft, the transatlan-

tic slave trade, and settler colonial violence across the Global South and North. In sections on witchcraft in the Americas, the course shifted attention away from the white feminist witchcraft practices that have traditionally received ample coverage in the mainstream media and focused instead on Black witches and brujas engaged in African-derived and Indigenous spiritual practices inseparable from healing the violent histories of colonization. The course also included feminist research, like Soma's, on contemporary anti-witch violence, witch camps, and witch-hunting laws in South Asia and Africa, leading the students in the course, mostly women and queer and trans people of color, to ask why they previously had no idea that women accused of witchcraft were currently targets of mass violence. These conversations, along with Jane's Instagram feed filled with high-profile white, Black, and Latinx witches (mostly from the United States)—who commonly referenced historical violence but who never discussed the witch hunts happening in the present—led Jane to reach out to Soma to ask how she made sense of this striking gap in knowledge.

Jane's questions intrigued Soma, who was familiar with some Global North academics' reactions of horror and disbelief toward witch hunts that were still taking place in some parts of the world but who had not been tracking the uptick of witch identification in the United States or its cultural expressions on social media. While the field of anthropology initially popularized the study of witchcraft, the problematic racial undertones by mostly white men academics studying Indigenous communities and their practices had isolated the study of witches to a small field within the discipline. This led to a decline in its academic popularity in recent years, leading perhaps to a false assumption that incidents of witch-hunting were historical problems even as, or perhaps especially as, the popular witchcraft-asfeminist-empowerment trend was again on the rise in the Global North.

In the Global North, the phenomenal financial success of the *Harry* Potter franchise (a story of young wizards and witches triumphing over evil), the explosion of witchcraft-themed content on TikTok and Instagram, and the ubiquitous witchcraft book display at chain bookstores like Barnes & Noble made unmistakably clear that witchcraft had gone about as mainstream as lattes and yoga. From 2018 to 2020, US-based news outlets like the Guardian, the New York Times, and the Atlantic asked, respectively: "Why are witches so popular?" "Why did everybody become a witch?" and "Why is witchcraft on the rise?" The answer, they all explained, was not only that interest in spirituality and the occult increased during periods of political upheaval and uncertainty—as trust in mainstream institutions

waned—but that witchcraft, in particular, appealed to young feminists during times of patriarchal backlash, symbolizing women's power to change their circumstances using alternative methods (ritual, spellcasting, divination, herbalism, goddess/nature worship). Witchcraft was, again, offering feminist and queer ways of life aimed at using "magical activism" to reimagine political systems, healthcare practices, natural environments, and collective futures.

Unlike the feminist witchcraft movement of the 1980s, Black witches, brujas/brujxs, and queer and trans witches were at the helm of the COVIDera witch resistance, and public hexes on the patriarchy and on white supremacy were among this era's witches' most popular spells. Collective, public performances of witchcraft popped up in a range of contexts: witches convened at Catland Books in New York to place a hex on Brett Kavanaugh in 2018; witches across the United States (acting together as "the Magical Resistance") cast a binding spell against Donald Trump during each waning crescent moon of his presidency; a collective of Mexican feminists protested femicide in 2020 under the name Brujas del Mar, or "Witches of the Sea"; three dozen witches rallied at the state capitol to protest against Michigan Republican Party chair Ron Weiser in 2021; an army of Argentinian witches came together to cast spells to protect the golden boy Messi, the star Argentinian footballer, at the 2022 World Cup Finals.<sup>6</sup> Beginning around 2015, a steady flow of new books about how to practice witchcraft moved from the occult section at the back of the bookstore to prominent displays where the latest how-to guides and tarot decks sat next to essential oil potions and candles for casting assorted spells. Witchcraft also took its place inside queer and feminist movement spaces, with feminist influencers proudly blending identities of feminist, anti-racist, abolitionist, organizer, witch. Tarot and astrology experienced renewed popularity among social justice activists, who reconceptualized them as tools for surviving the steady drumbeat of soul-killing news about state violence, ongoing climate disasters, and the devastating COVID-19 pandemic.

Looking at the resurgence of witchcraft in the United States might lead one to imagine that it is a good time to be a witch or that, finally, "witches are having their hour," to quote another 2019 essay from the *New York Times*. And yet, we must ask whether the commodified embrace of youth-oriented and self-help-driven "witchy vibes" in the Global North has led to a greater respect for aging women or women's labor in Europe and the United States—perhaps the truest test of whether witches in these regions are having their hour. This book arises, then, not only from a need

to address the Global North's erasure of women in the Global South, for whom the label of witch remains dangerous and devastating, but also from a need to illuminate the Global North's continued patriarchal erasure of the crone from public life and its persistent colonial paranoia about magic, spirit possession, and other spiritual practices associated with the Global South. Thus, we envision a reimagining of witch studies as a practice of decolonial feminist theorizing as well as intersectional healing and solidarity that flows multidirectionally, from South to North, and North to South.

### GATHERING THE GLOBAL COVEN: AN INTERSECTIONAL AND DECOLONIAL APPROACH TO WRITING ABOUT WITCHES

Bringing a decolonial feminist lens to witch studies requires that we grapple with the reasons that contemporary witch hunts have been omitted from Global North accounts of witches and witchcraft. It also requires that we trace the connections between the Global North and the Global South, noting the ways that colonial, patriarchal, and white supremacist logics enable the exploitation and control of aging women's bodies, labor, and resources in every corner of the globe—with witchcraft accusations being but one method used to exercise this control of women. Tens of thousands of poor women, Indigenous women, and/or aging women across the Global South in Asia (India, Indonesia, Nepal, and Papua New Guinea) and sub-Saharan Africa (Kenya, Ghana, Tanzania, Cameroon, Uganda, Zambia, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa, Angola, and the Congo) have been murdered for their association—real or imagined—with witchcraft in the past eighty or more years, and this violence is ongoing. As Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck, and Angie Morrill explain in their groundbreaking essay "Decolonizing Feminism," witch hunts, like colonialism and statesanctioned slavery, are often presumed to be located "at an historical point in time away from which our society has progressed."8 Feminist researchers of contemporary witchcraft-related murders upend that presumption, documenting how the forces of patriarchy, global capitalism, and land displacement continue to intersect to make women vulnerable to scapegoating during times of economic crisis.9

Today's witchcraft accusations in the Global South frequently revolve around limited access to, or loss of, scarce resources—land, drinking water, food, adequate sanitation, employment—with women positioned as easy

targets of blame for the profound inequities wrought by settler colonialism and global capital. Widows who own landed property are accused of witchcraft by their relatives. Women elders who accrue financial wealth over the course of their lifetime are targets of jealousy and resentment. Women who are too old to bear children are blamed for being a drain on scarce resources. Women who are farmers or traders are viewed as threats to men who perceive them as competition. Women who are healthy when others fall ill are suspected of malicious supernatural activity. For all these reasons, women have been tortured, shamed, hanged, stoned, cut open, burned, and buried alive in recent decades, while few have been able to seek refuge in precarious shelters. In India alone, it is estimated that more than 25,000 witch-killings occurred between 1987 and 2003, while many more incidents remain unreported. In stark contrast with the feminist reclaiming of witchcraft in the United States and parts of Europe and Latin America, women's repudiation of witchcraft is a matter of life or death in many countries. The differences are staggering.

And yet, when we approach witches from a global perspective, our attention is also drawn to the many ideas about witches that span cultures and continents. Not disconnected from real-life views about women, folklore about witches offers a window onto the way that different communities imagine women and sex, money, aging, and nature. Some of the commonalities are staggering, too. The wildly specific notion, for instance, that witches are female shapeshifters who appear to men as young, beautiful seductresses until they reveal their hideous, barren, aging, bony, distorted bodies, often part animal and part human, and either devour their male targets or drive them mad, is a theme present in folklore about the aswangs of the Philippines, La Siguanaba of El Salvador, Lamia of ancient Greece, and the churails of India. In another transnational theme, witches are seen as cannibals with a particular taste for children. The witch Baba Yaga, of Russian origin, is but one of many witches who lives in the forest and eats fetuses and children; keeping her in good company are real-life brujas of Mexico who have been accused of sucking the blood of children, 10 the Boo Hag of American folklore who steals the breath and skin of children, and the nineteenth-century German witch, from Grimm's Fairy Tales, who attempts to eat Hansel before his sister Gretel rescues him. Many of these child-eating witches live in the deep, dark woods, like one of Jane's personal favorites, the stick-sculpture-making, child-killing witch from the 1999 film The Blair Witch Project. Yet another global theme is the association of witches with plant- and animal-based magic and the brewing of

powerful potions in cauldrons. The obeah witch of the African diaspora is known to create evil potions in her kettle or pot, as are many witches of European origin, such as the Celtic goddess-hag Cailleach or the witches of Medieval England, their cauldrons made famous by William Shakespeare for boiling "eye of newt and toe of frog" in Macbeth. La Llorona of Mexico, like Bloody Mary of the United States and Hanako-san of Japan, inhabits the space between ghost and witch, striking fear in children with her mournful wailing and vengeance for the pains of womanhood (the loss of children, cheating husbands, the shame of menstruation, surviving abuse). La Llorona, like many witches, roams the night and can be found near fog-shrouded water (in her case, wearing a tattered wedding dress). Bloody Mary and Hanako-san both haunt girls' bathrooms, evoking the terrible rituals of being witnessed in puberty (Jane is thinking here about the deeply formative "plug it up!" locker room scene—somehow one of her queer roots—from the 1976 horror film *Carrie*).

Mapping these similarities casts light on the witch's symbolic function vis-à-vis the gender binary. The very qualities of beauty, fertility, and maternalism that constitute the female side of the mythical gender binary are themselves transient; femininity ultimately shrivels, hardens, and decays. The witch—once goddess and then crone, a youthful beauty morphed into the grotesque hag—is arguably a memento mori, a personified reminder of the inevitability of aging and death. Of course, the hag is not just an old person but an old woman, specifically, whose discernment and infertility pose a threat to heteropatriarchy and the narrow space it reserves for girls and women. Both in folklore and in justifications of real-life witch-killings, the witch is the anti-feminine; she is excess, no longer useful to men, a drain on resources, without beauty or fecundity to contribute in return. In this way, the witch sits at the nexus of gender and horror, her terrifying impact rooted in a kind of hetero-erotic bait-and-switch where youthful femininity is suddenly replaced with embodied cronehood. We see this theme in one of the most frightening scenes in the 1980 Stanley Kubrick film The Shining, in which a young and sexy woman lures Jack Nicholson toward her as she emerges naked from a bathtub, only to transform into a cackling, decaying hag. We see the seductress-hag, again, in the 2015 film The Witch, when an adolescent boy, Caleb, is wandering in the woods and encounters a young woman emerging from a moss-covered, brambly hut wearing a red cloak, showing abundant cleavage and an eager smile. As she leans in to embrace and kiss Caleb, her arm is revealed to be that of an old woman. The horror!

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"Dark magic" witches and vengeful women spirits not only haunt us for gendered reasons but also appear as justifications for, and as punishers of, colonial and white supremacist projects. La Llorona, for instance, is often described as the terrifying ghost of a jealous Indigenous woman who killed the children she bore from a Spanish man after finding him with another woman. In this oft-told version of the tale, La Llorona is akin to La Malinche, a traitor to her people who assists the Spanish in their conquest of the Aztec and Maya empires. But other accounts rewrite this relationship between the Indigenous woman and the colonizer, such as the 2019 Guatemalan film *La Llorona*, in which the weeping woman is crying not with jealousy over a lover, but with rage at the injustice of colonization and the genocide against the Mayan people.

A central tension in this volume, and in feminist thinking about witches more broadly, is how to make sense of the countless ways that people have understood witches and witchcraft across time and place. There are many paths to the witch. For instance, we can approach the witch primarily as a patriarchal and colonial construction, as a scapegoat used to justify profound theft of land and life, one so entrenched in violent legacies that it/ she must be disavowed or wholly reimagined once and for all. Or we can view the witch as a supernatural force, a sorceress, a goddess, or a healer found in forests and amid dense fogs not because she was placed there by the patriarchal imagination but because this is where the plants and animals live and where her work is done. In another variation on these themes, we can understand the witch as a spectacularly powerful and generative symbol of what men, owning classes, and colonizing nations fear most about women's collective knowledge—of nature, childbirth, healing, sex, and death—a symbol with enduring power to mobilize feminist action and to imagine the future otherwise. We can also offer up the witch as history's best example of misogyny in its most basic form, a testament to the fact that simply being an aging woman, an outspoken woman, a skilled woman, a sexual woman, and so on, has resulted in the most brutal forms of torture and death.

Ultimately, can the label of the witch transition into something that is powerful in a way that not only resists the patriarchal attacks on women but also becomes meaningful for survivors of violence and for women everywhere? Almost a decade and a half ago, Ramani, an *adivasi* woman, was accused by villagers of practicing witchcraft and causing harm to neighborhood children. Ramani survived the horrific witch hunt and later, with the help of local women's groups in her community, became an advocate



FIGURE 1.1 Ramani, a witch-hunt survivor, a nurturer, and a witch, 2005. Photograph by author.

of anti—witch hunt campaigns. An important part of her advocacy lay in retelling stories of how she acquired the label of *daini*, a label that she both disavowed and embraced as a survivor of violence. It is in her role as survivor, protector, activist, and nurturer that Ramani displays her feminist agency at the fullest: devoid of fear from labels and empowered with the knowledge of survival. Ramani uses the label of the witch as a counternarrative during community meetings for anti—witch hunts to stop future violence against community women: "You say I am a witch?! I am a witch. I can eat you, cut you into pieces . . . just test me. See what happens to you if you make one more accusation against another sister." Ramani is always accompanied by another woman, Shamita, at these meetings. Shamita had given Ramani, a single childless woman, shelter after the hunt and employed her to look after Shamita's children. Shamita sometimes brings her now adult children to the meetings as evidence that Ramani is not evil and that her children remained unharmed and well protected under her care.

Ramani is among a small handful of women in India who have embraced the label of witch in defiance, as a form of grassroots protest against patriarchal trauma (evoking many other examples of reclaiming identities rendered abject by the patriarchy, such as *queer*, *fag*, *joto*, *slut*, *whore*, *cunt*,

pussy, and so on). Women in the Global South continue to be harassed, tortured, and killed based simply on accusations (real or perceived) of practicing witchcraft. In this context, in communities where the label "witch" carries the risk of terrible violence, can Indigenous women afford to embrace this identity, let alone re-envision it as a source of empowerment? Inspired by Ramani, this book imagines the spaces of possibility for global solidarities and healing; it offers a multitude of ways in which the label "witch" can be defied, embraced, and reinterpreted using a queer decolonial framework that refuses the racist and colonial legacy of studies in witches and witchcraft.

Ramani's Hex:
I am a witch.
I can eat you, cut you into pieces
just test me.
See what happens to you
if you make one more accusation.

### EPISTEMOLOGIES OF THE SCHOLAR-WITCH

This reader would not be possible if not for the pathbreaking writing of interdisciplinary feminist scholars who have already troubled the boundary between scholarship and spirituality, researcher and practitioner, knowledge and memory. In her foundational book Pedagogies of Crossing, Afro-Caribbean feminist anthropologist M. Jacqui Alexander writes about an experience of writers' block that became "unblocked" only by opening herself up to the haunting presence of her research subject, Kitsimba, an enslaved woman who was captured in Central Africa, survived the Middle Passage, and was then accused of sorcery/witchcraft and put on trial. Alexander describes her attempt to study Kitsimba using conventional research methods; she examined documents in archives but simply could not put words to the page and the project stalled out. Being Trinidadian and raised with Yoruba influence in her family's religious practices, Alexander then met with a Yoruba priestess and explained the problems she was having with the research. The priestess helped Alexander channel the spirit of Kitsimba, who turned out to be a very mischievous, contrary, and playful spirit who had been haunting Alexander, resisting Alexander's "fancy" academic ways of trying to research her. Kitsimba told Alexander that she wanted to be accessed in a different way, a way that allowed her to speak about her experience of the Middle Passage in great detail, and that allowed Alexander to integrate her feminist ways of knowing with the sacred.

Feminist scholars like M. Jacqui Alexander, Avery Gordon in *Ghostly Matters*, and Saidiya Hartman in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, are not centrally concerned with witches, but their work has mapped the ways that the collective experience of unfathomable horror and violence produces a collective memory that is deposited everywhere—in the rocks that still surround us, the trees, the ground, the buildings, the photographs. When profound human suffering occurs, we are haunted. The apparatus of the academy cannot detect or integrate the traces of this kind of information about the human experience; but turning our attention to certain figures—the witches, the spirits, the ghosts, the ancestors—is a first step in pushing us (feminist scholars) to grapple with the limits of Enlightenment paradigms and to set aside our "fancy" ways of knowing when they do not actually serve us.

Writing by Indigenous feminist scholars like Robin Wall Kimmerer, of Potawatomi heritage, also inspires the project at hand by describing ways of knowing that are both grounded and sacred and that challenge settlers to inhabit the earth as if we care about it and plan to stay. In Braiding Sweetgrass, Kimmerer describes the settler experience of species loneliness—a kind of melancholy that humans experience when we ignore, or think we are superior to, the plants and animals who inhabited the earth long before us. This human arrogance and ignorance—this failure to become a fully integrated member of the multispecies communities in which we live by knowing about its nonhuman inhabitants—is the lens through which many Native activists have described the destruction and dysfunction of settler ways of life. Witchcraft, often a practice of returning to the ancient healing practices and nature-based knowledge of one's ancestors, is for many practicing witches a set of tools for the care and healing of oneself, one's community—of plants, animals, and humans—and the earth (the soil, the air, the water). Witchcraft requires receptivity to multiple (human and nonhuman) voices, and so too does the academic study of witchcraft. As scholar of Caribbean and Black diaspora studies Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley articulates in *Ezili's Mirrors*—a brilliant book that reads like a love letter to the Haitian Vodou spirits of sexuality, femininity, water, fluidity, and pleasure that go by the name Ezili—to write about spirituality is to "tune into another vocabulary" that is the prism through which gender,

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power, pleasure, and justice are often experienced, and that might hold explanations as powerful and generative as those found in the academy.<sup>11</sup>

*Spell for accessing knowledge:* May we shed our attachments to disciplined ways of knowing and listen with humility

### THE CHAPTERS TO FOLLOW

Taken together, the chapters in this book are in dialogue with, and also radically expand upon, what has been written about witches and witchcraft to date. Some bring us into the lifeworld of the witch as a real person embedded in community and in intimate relationships or as a healer vital to her community's ability to survive the future. Others approach the witch as a formidable cultural and political symbol, as a nimble epistemological position, or as a historical construct imbued with centuries of far-flung, traveling, and comingled ideas about gender, race, and power. As such, the book is organized into six parts that reflect clusters of ideas and overlapping themes in the chapters: part I, "The Colonial Encounter"; part II, "Lineages of Healing"; part III, "Killing the Witch"; part IV, "Art, Aesthetics, and Cultural Production"; part V, "Protest and Reclaiming"; and part VI, "Witch Epistemologies." These are not discrete themes but rather interconnected pathways that lead toward what we hope is a capacious field of anticolonial and feminist witch studies.

The chapters in the book's first part, "The Colonial Encounter," elucidate that we cannot understand the witch outside of the varied feudal and colonial contexts that named her and against which she has struggled to survive. This means that "witchcraft" itself is an unwieldy and fraught concept, one that struggles to capture a vast, locally variable, syncretic, and ever-shifting set of practices anchored in relationships of violence and resistance. One of the intractable tensions in witchcraft studies is that witches are never only subjects but also points of encounter, contested relationships that emerge from spaces of colonial, white supremacist, and patriarchal power and the social transformations they engender.

Illuminating many of these themes, Tushabe wa Tushabe, Patrica Humura, and Ruth Asiimwe argue that colonization and Christianity in Uganda have worked to recast important healing and community-based practices, often centered in sexual pleasure and other gendered intimacies, into a stigmatized "African witchcraft" imaginary so embedded in colonial violence and misinterpretation that the concept itself may not be recuperable. Nathan Snaza's chapter also attends to themes of encounter and misrecognition through a decolonial feminist reading of Maryse Condé's *I, Tituba*. Snaza conceptualizes the witch as a dynamic and relational creation—a concept that emerged in and from points of contact between colonizer and colonized—as well as a means of resisting the colonizer's misrecognition of local practices.

Part I also highlights one of the paradoxes of witchcraft: the local witch (and the patriarchal and white supremacist terror she incites) may be the outcome of the colonial gaze, but she is also a source of healing from the pain caused by this misrecognition. Grounding us in an example of this duality, Shannon Hughes Spence documents the ways that Irish witches use their craft to heal intergenerational trauma wrought by Irish colonization at the hands of England, the Catholic Church, and the Irish state. Similarly focused on decolonial praxis, Apoorvaa Joshi and Ethel Brooks mine the complexities of racialized witchcraft practices declared "closed" to outsiders so as to preserve healing practices threatened by colonization and targeted by the state. They invite us to envision this protective boundary-making as a form of what Chela Sandoval has called "decolonial love."

The book's second part, "Lineages of Healing," traces the lineages that have kept witchcraft alive despite centuries of efforts to destroy witches and their knowledge. In folklore, witches often live and enact their magic in isolation, but the lived experience of witchcraft practitioners is one of deep embeddedness in communities where healing traditions are passed down through generations, most often from older women to girls, and where community members rely on traditional and feminized methods of care and healing. The chapters in this part document that witchcraft is not only a practice but a lineage—a blended, co-created, multigenerational bricolage of ideas and methods for care and healing when dominant systems (capitalism, Western medicine, organized religion, science) fail us—as they do.

In her chapter on Black witches and manifestation, Marcelitte Failla develops the concept of spiritual co-creation to give name to shared beliefs—informed by Black feminist and Africana religious philosophies—that blend a structural critique of capitalism with an investment in the healing and well-being of Black women and femmes. Extending our attention to the blending of different cosmologies, Brandy Renee McCann examines the multigenerational role of the granny witch of Appalachia. The granny

witch is a healer and keeper of cultural knowledge who blends magic with Christianity and a position that McCann herself is intended to inhabit as she ages. In a chapter on justice-centered tarot, Krystal Cleary theorizes tarot produced by feminists of color as a survival and healing tool that contributes to the sustainability of movement work and that stirs the revolutionary imagination toward other possible futures. Turning to the queerness of witchcraft, Simon Clay and Emma Quilty illuminate the way that witches offer queer rituals to their communities that dissolve the boundary between the sacred and the obscene: sexual rites, altered states of consciousness (induced by plants, chanting, drumming, breathwork), ecstatic dance, BDSM as a spiritual practice, and more. And, building on themes of gender and healing, Eric Steinhart traces the influence of witchcraft enacted by the Deitsch, or Pennsylvania Germans, on Anglo-American witchcraft, with particular attention to relative salience of gender in Deitsch lore, symbolism, and rituals.

Another theme of part II is that the relational nature of witchcraft is often marked by homosocial intimacies among women that resist the heteronormative organization of women's lives. Drawing on interviews with Turkish fortune tellers and witches, Ayça Kurtoğlu distinguishes between the relational intimacy forged among women in private fortune-telling spaces and the political utility of the figure of the witch in protest spaces, both of which gesture to a "third space" of women's resistance to men's control of the public sphere. Morena Tatari looks to Italian women's engagement with the homosocial world of fortune-telling, wherein women are initiated into the practice by other women, provide their services to women clients, and create tight-knit networks with other women practitioners that offer a buffer against the stigma associated with supernatural belief.

Chapters in part III, "Killing the Witch," make the strong case that when we shift our analysis of witchcraft from the Global North to the Global South, we recognize witch hunts not as a medieval tragedy but as an ongoing, contemporary crisis. This part lays to rest, we hope, the singular and sometimes even romanticized feminist association of witch hunts with early modern Europe. Govind Kelkar and Dev Nathan offer a transnational theory of the three conditions that give rise to witch-killings across time and place: the devaluation of women's knowledge and labor, widely held cultural beliefs in the human use of supernatural powers to cause harm, and active economic and technological transformations that reorganize systems of production and accumulation. In her essay on witchkillings in Tanzania, Amy Nichols-Belo challenges white supremacist notions about African "occult" violence by spotlighting the resemblance between witch-killings and secular forms of mob violence. Helen Macdonald examines why and how laws designed to end witch-hunting in Central India, like the Chhattisgarh Witchcraft Atrocities Prevention Act, have brought only partial justice for the women accused of witchcraft. Shashank Shekhar Sinha demonstrates that witch hunts in India can be understood only through the lens of multiple and intersecting regional, spatial, ethnic, and economic conflicts and through the lens of patriarchal dynamics. And Adrianna L. Ernstberger shows us that previous efforts to develop a field of witch studies have resulted in an erasure of witches and witchcraft histories from the Global South; her chapter offers a step-by-step guide to teaching a truly global, decolonial course on witch hunts.

Part IV, "Art, Aesthetics, and Cultural Production," refocuses our lens on the witch as both a cultural worker and a film/television trope. Here the authors not only attend to the witch as an archetype widely taken up in performance to engage themes of haunting, revenge, rage, magic, and femme monstrosity; they also illuminate what it means for a sight or sound to bewitch us. Examining the career of the provocative Mexican drag queen Mista Boo, Isabel Machado maps the intersections between performance art and witchcraft, revealing anew that gender performances are their own form of ritualized magic. D Ferret considers the sonic world of the "doom metal" band Divide and Dissolve as a site from which to listen beyond the Anthropocene and to tune in to the sonic geology of the Occultcene. Extending this part's engagement with bewitching music, Shelina Brown investigates the witchy women musicians of 1960s rock counterculture, highlighting this period as the origin of many contemporary witch aesthetics and musical forms.

Part IV also critically explores popular representations of the witch, with particular emphasis on the ways these representations simultaneously threaten and entrance audiences. Saira Chhibber considers the *churail*'s representation in Bollywood film, tracing her evolution from Hindu cautionary figure to righteous freedom fighter. Maria Amir offers an incisive reading of Pakistan's television series *Churails*, drawing attention to the enduring nexus of feminist rage, revenge, and the witch's coven in the popular imagination. In their genealogy of witch representation in Global North popular culture, Jaime Hartless and Gabriella V. Smith identify new themes within the trope of the monstrous feminine, including the millennial feminist claim that witches are "born this way" and later, by

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contrast, "the bad bitch witch" who embodies the more agentic politics of Gen Z. Taking the cult classic *Hocus Pocus* as her case study, Anna Rogel uncovers the power of the "funny witch," a figure both alluring and repulsive and who, despite her cannibalism, inspires delight among audiences.

Part V, "Protest and Reclaiming," argues for the liberatory potential of witchcraft rituals and political solidarities formed under the broad and ever-shifting identity category of the witch. No discussion of "witch politics" would be complete without an analysis of the anonymous activist group W.I.T.C.H. (founded in the 1960s as the Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell), and Carolyn Chernoff offers precisely this analysis in her chapter on the group's revolutionary aesthetics, documenting the ways that twenty-first-century W.I.T.C.H. members deploy social media and the monstrous femme to disseminate confrontational graphic art. Taking a deep dive into the absurdist tactics of the Vermont-based grassroots organization Feminists Against Bullshit, Tina Escaja and Laurie Essig pay homage to the performative power of the witch, along with the hysteric and the failed mother, in feminist street protest. Mapping the relationship between grief and witchcraft-inspired protest, Jacquelyn Marie Shannon takes their experience as a student at the Catland Witch School to investigate how purification and protection rites created opportunities for action in response to loss and despair during the global COVID-19 pandemic. In an autobiographical essay, Bernadette Barton reclaims the centrality of pagan rituals to many of the taken-for-granted traditions of interconnectedness in American daily life, arguing for greater reverence for everyday magic and its liberatory potential.

Part VI, "Witch Epistemologies," invites us to view witchcraft as an epistemological project, one engaged in imagining the future differently: brewing, cultivating, transforming, manifesting, concocting, invoking, and otherwise taking action to bring new forms of consciousness into being. In a spellbinding essay about witchcraft in the academy, Ruth Charnock and Karen Schaller model how to build a witch's ritual archive and materialize an epistemology of the witch. Margaretha Haughwout and Oliver Kellhammer look to the resilience of ruderal ecologies, plants species that grow in spaces of disturbance and ruin, to conjure a witchcraft manifesto aimed at harnessing the power to thrive in "the wastelands of capitalism." Nicole Trigg takes feminist performance art engaged with possession and haunting as her point of departure for excavating the multiple, the unknowable, and unnameable. Mary Jo Neitz and Marion S. Goldman call upon scholars of religion to take magic-based spiritual practices more seriously, especially

in light of the growing appeal of magical practices (astrology, tarot) during a time of ostensibly increased secularization. Bringing this part, and the book itself, to a galvanizing close, Katie Von Wald and AP Pierce blend Black feminist thought and queer theory to develop the concept of resistive witchcrafting as a relation that connects bodies through pleasure and care and that resists the mainstream consumerism of "witchy" self-identity and commodified magic.

May each word to follow be an offering to the infinite altar that holds our collective brilliance, the place where every witch's heartbreak wail and freedom spell has claimed its little corner, there, waiting, for the next witches to carry on the work

#### NOTES

- The upper caste/class gaze views the adivasi with racist prejudice; and adivasi women are fetishized as sexual commodities. Adivasi women's dance performances are a big tourist attraction. In popular Bollywood and regional films, adivasi women's bodies are treated as spaces of lust, while the men are emasculated, portrayed with childlike simplistic characteristics.
- "A Response to Wiccan Ipsita Roy Chakraverti."
- By the way, Jane's wife, Kat, comes from a long line of lesbians. Her great aunt, now in her eighties, refers to gay people as "the enchanted."
- Even when she was young, Jane found the pretty, youthful witches from Charmed (1998-2006) and Sabrina the Teenage Witch (1996-2003) simply not hardcore enough.
- Neil Armstrong, "Coven Ready: From Instagram to TV, Why Are Witches So Popular?," Guardian, September 15, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com /tv-and-radio/2018/sep/15/witches-occult-dramas-tv-chilling-adventures -of-sabrina-strange-angel; Jessica Bennet, "Why Did Everybody Become a Witch?," New York Times, October 24, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019 /10/24/books/peak-witch.html; Bianca Bosker, "Why Witchcraft Is on the Rise," Atlantic, March 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive /2020/03/witchcraft-juliet-diaz/605518/.
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- 7 Laura Holson, "Witches Are Having Their Hour," New York Times, October 11, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/11/style/pam-grossman-witch-feminism.html.
- 8 Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill, "Decolonizing Feminism."
- 9 Chaudhuri, Witches; Federici, "Caliban."
- 10 Fabrega and Nutini, "Witchcraft-Explained Childhood Tragedies."
- 11 See Omise'eke Tinsley, Ezili's Mirrors, 4.

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