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SPELL CHECK: SPIRITUALISM, SHAMANISM,
SORCERY & the REINCARNATION of the
OCCULT in Dark Times

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D_FIN_NG W_TCHCR_FT

Kristen Nelson

Abstract

Witchcraft has long occupied a liminal space between marginalization and power, resistance and repression, mysticism and commodification. As contemporary crises unsettle notions of truth and authority, the figure of the witch resurfaces in political discourse, feminist activism, and digital subcultures. But what does it mean to claim the title of “witch” today? This essay explores witchcraft as an evolving, multifaceted practice—one that resists static definition and instead functions as a verb: an act of making, naming, and resisting. Witchcraft is framed not as a singular entity but as a constellation of actions and beliefs shaped by history, personal experience, and communal heritage. Ritual, divination, and storytelling function as epistemological tools—alternative ways of knowing that challenge rationalist, patriarchal, and colonial structures. Ultimately, this essay invites an open-ended reflection. Rather than seeking rigid definition, what happens when we understand witchcraft as an ongoing cycle of meaning-making within nature, community, and self?

This essay edges towards completion but will never complete because witchcraft resists closure in both definition and action. This essay, this attempt, may offer you *la petit mort* in its old usages—feminine fainting fits (1572) and nervous spasms (1831)—but don't expect a climax or a denouement (Oxford English Dictionary, *Petite Mort*, *n.*). We will end in want and mystery. I want you to know the ending right here at the beginning, because I need you to walk in the dark with me.

Growing up, I would co-read everything with my best friend J. I remember reading *Anne of Green Gables* in the sixth grade (Montgomery 1908). In one scene, Diana does not carry a lantern and tells Anne that she is not afraid of the dark when she is part of the darkness. When we are in a circle of light, we are afraid of what is outside of it. It is the nature of the witch to thrive in the shadows, to live on the outskirts of town, to stay hidden, to stay just out of sight, to hover in the mystery. But in this moment of necro-patriarchal white imperialist and supremacist systems, it no longer serves me to hide, and I do not think it serves you to do so either. Does it serve her or her or them? I'm reaching towards an us here, with you-me-her-they in a circle of darkness. Together, we turn off our lanterns, and we are not afraid of the dark. I'm reaching towards the act of circling. To circle a term, to circle a practice, to circle as a sacred practice of calling in rather than enclosing.

This circling is an invocation. Rather than being consumed by fear or fire, let us attempt to create a dark circle that holds meaning. I'll continue this circling with J, who joined me here a long time ago, as we grew from girls into women.

~

We were in the second grade when my friend J and I first discussed spiritual identity. She told me she was Italian on her mom's side and Jewish on her dad's side. I knew I was Italian on my mom's side, too, and had some Irish and Swedish blood on my father's side. But when J asked about my religion, I didn't have an answer. I had never thought to label my own spiritual beliefs. Religion was something other people had.

I understood the concept of sacredness. My Aunt S and her kids were Jewish. My sister and I spent every year at her Passover seder praying with our cousins, sneaking extra sips of Manischewitz, and wincing when it came time to nibble a piece of horseradish. My pre-school teacher, Miss V, was a fundamentalist Christian and made me feel protected every time she told me that God loved me and that she prayed for me in church every week. A dear friend's mom would often chant Om Mani Padme Hum, the Buddhist prayer for compassion, when she felt her road-rage rising in New York rush hour. I was taught to respect and celebrate other people's spiritual beliefs, but when J asked me what my religion was, I didn't have a word.

When I was three years old, my family broke from the Catholic Church. After my alcoholic father tried to kill my mother, sister, and me with his police-issued service revolver, my mother kicked him out. After the trauma of the shooting, my mother met with the priest of our local parish to ask him what kind of support systems they had in place for her kids—a youth group, counseling, or other community program? His response: “Your bastard children are not welcome in my church. When you figure out how to make amends with your husband, let me know.” It’s miraculous that the priest left that meeting alive. Other than to attend the occasional wedding or funeral, that was the last time my mother set foot in a Catholic Church.

On Christmas Eve, my grandmother would sometimes bundle me up late at night, walk me up the steps of St. Bingo (we called it that because of the giant Bingo sign on the front lawn), and sit with me in the back pew for midnight mass. I loved the pageantry—the candles, the chanting, and the exotic smell of frankincense and myrrh that clung to our winter coats. But that’s all it was to me: pageantry, someone else’s ritual. “Ritual: of or relating to the performance of rites” (Oxford English Dictionary, *Ritual*, *Adj. & n.*). “Rites: a prescribed act or observance in a religious or other solemn ceremony” (Oxford English Dictionary, *Rite*, *n.*). The dictionary does not tell me anything about who owns a ritual or who gets to practice it. If it is my grandmother’s ritual but my mother rejects it can the ritual be mine?

When I got home from school the day that J and I discussed her Jewishness, I asked my mother, “Mom, what are we?”

“We are Pagans, Darling,” my mother responded. “When anyone asks, tell them we’re Pagans.”

My mother winked at me over her shoulder during this revelation. It felt like a secret that I had been let into. Her wink, her playfulness, her self-satisfaction wrapped me in excitement. Oh, how I loved the mystery of a new word. My mom’s salt-and-pepper hair was long and loose down her back. She was cooking something smelling of tomatoes and green herbs in a large soup pot, and she stirred it slowly with a long wooden spoon. And I sat there playing with my new word: Pagan.

I looked it up in our red Merriam-Webster Dictionary. There, in its Bible-thin pages, Pagans were defined as “witches, druids, and goddess worshippers.” I had no idea what a druid was, but we did invoke the word goddess in my house. The word witch tripped me up. I knew of evil witches from *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*, but we didn’t seem anything like them. Was there another kind of witch? Were we witches? J was Jewish, I was Pagan. Was I a witch? I was both intrigued and appalled by this possibility.

In my Italian diasporic household, we lit candles when we wanted to set good intentions for ourselves and others, gave thanks to the Earth for the food we ate, and banged pots and pans on the front stoop every New Year’s Eve to drive away evil spirits. Our home had a Blessed Virgin Mary statue, though her son was nowhere to

be seen. I went to a Wiccan croning ceremony for an elder in my community on her 50th birthday, but my family did not claim the word witch—*strega* in Italian. I was raised knowing that witches were women who could be tortured and murdered because they were assumed to be in league with the devil. I do not ever remember being told this directly, but somehow—maybe transmitted in my blood, maybe influenced by popular culture, or through a series of small assumptions I made while listening in on my elders' conversations—this message was passed down to me. I got the message that to be called a witch is to be cursed.



Who is a witch? Now, I turn to a digital version of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), but I still have an old Merriam-Webster and an OED with its magnifying glass on my bookshelf. I use all the tools at my disposal, as many as I can find, to understand a word. “Witch: a person (in later use typically a woman; see note) who practices witchcraft or magic, especially of a malevolent or harmful nature” (Oxford English Dictionary, *Witch*, *n.*). It is hard to define the term witch because it is based in practice (actions) rather than any particular characteristic or nature. Those practices are verbs. The crafts of the witch, are personal, cultural, and contextually specific.

My interest in defining the term witchcraft is both scholarly and personal. I have a need for a working definition of this term to center my research and a desire to claim the term witch despite the violent history attached to the word that my ancestors dared not claim. Even though certain details of my family lineage are lost to time, I carry their vibrations with me. For example, I was raised overhearing bits and pieces of whispered conversations that in every generation, the youngest daughter of the youngest daughter, at 16 years old, would have to fight to stay alive. When I survived whatever evil befell me because of this family curse, my mother would gift me her cameo. My mother barely survived a car crash. My grandmother barely survived a burst appendix. My great grandmother barely survived being trampled by a horse and buggy. My great-great grandmother barely survived childbirth. When I fell ill with a difficult to diagnose virus just before my sixteenth birthday, my mother explained that it was my turn to fight.

My cameo is a portrait of one of my female ancestors, the first woman in my lineage to survive a near-death experience at 16-years-old. I don't know her name, or how old the cameo is. Her face is carved into a cornelian seashell and set in gold filagree to be worn as a pendant. She wears a tiny diamond necklace. I do not know the details of her life, but I wear her face in the hollow of my throat like my mother and grandmothers did before me.

What I do know about my ancestor who is memorialized in my cameo is that she lived in Benevento, Italy, a rural town in the South near Naples. Benevento has been steeped in rumors and myths about witches since fourth century BCE.¹ By the Middle Ages, it was common knowledge that witches in Benevento held orgiastic sabbaths underneath a walnut tree. In Early Modern Europe those legends intensified and put the lives of women associated with the witches of Benevento in acute danger of torture and murder during the Witch Craze. For example, one of the earliest documented witchcraft trials in Italy was in 1428 when Matteuccia di Francesco, a healer from Ripabianca, Italy was burned as a witch. In the confession that was tortured out of her, she described a demon carrying her “to the walnut tree of Benevento where a very great number of witches and demons were gathered, captained by the great Lucifer” (Mammoli 39). My great grandmother who wore this cameo before me was born and raised in Benevento and had the last name diFrancesco. Matteuccia’s memory is in our dark circle, along with the many thousands of other women who were accused, tried, and murdered as witches in Early Modern Europe and in other places and times throughout human history. While I touch the ancestral cameo at my throat, I wonder what parts of this violent history embellish my understanding of my role in society as a woman today. How has this violent history embellished your understanding?



After my mom kicked my father out of the house, she gathered a community of women around her who supported one another. I was raised by this extended chosen family of mommas and aunties in the 1980’s and 1990’s in New York. They were mostly single moms—a combination of non-denominational pagans, lapsed Catholics, and Jews. Some of them had studied Wicca and other new-age religious movements in the 1960’s and 70’s. I was taught by my kin, a community larger than my biological family, to become an empowered, feminist woman. I was taught to pay attention to trees and rocks and plants and weather and prayer. Momma S gifted me my first deck of tarot cards on my fifteenth birthday, which started me on divination’s path. At the same time that I was being introduced to the joy and magic in the divine feminine, I was taught by most literature and popular culture that witches were mostly ugly old women with strange black hats who stuffed children into ovens, melted with water, and tried to harm beautiful young women with spell-work.

As part of my doctoral studies in literature and creative and critical writing at the University of California Santa Cruz, one of my research topics is Witchcraft Studies.

¹ For a more in-depth exploration of the Legend of the Benevento witches see my essay: “Fleshing the Archive of Witches: A Creative/Critical Case Study of Somatic Synecdoche.” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2023, pp. 421–441.

Like many scholars, my lived experience, my passions and my curiosities conjunct at the site of my research. In the library, I look to the feminist theory compendiums and dictionaries, which curiously do not include definitions of witchcraft, but do describe the term witch. In the first dictionary I open, I'm most interested in the reference to Hélène Cixous: "Cixous suggests that witches are model women who operate on the edges of language and culture together with madwomen and hysterics" (Humm 300). This definition implies an understanding of the trauma and violence enacted on women who were historically labeled witches for having female agency. It also gestures towards a history of conflating divination, truth-telling, madness, and evil. I appreciate the brief exploration of the term witch, but if our feminist theory dictionaries do not offer a definition of *witchcraft*, how do we develop a common language with which to discuss it?

Without a satisfying definition of witchcraft, I turned back to the OED, "Witchcraft: Magic or other supernatural practices; (the use of) magical or supernatural powers, esp. for evil purposes or as used by witches. Also: the body of knowledge or subject of study associated with this" (Oxford English Dictionary, *Witchcraft*, *n.*). There is something here: a body, a subject, a power, a purpose. Still, we are wrapping into ourselves in a kind of uncertainty in our attempts to understand the term. My pupils are adjusting in the darkness. Can you see something here, too? This definition is an ouroboros. This definition is an infinity sign.

~

In 1996, I began my freshman year of college at The University of Tampa. K, who lived up the hall of the honors dorm, was a slip of a human—short, skinny, waif-like. She lived with chronic pain and was never without her carved wooden cane. K had a device implanted into her thigh controlled by a remote control that somehow interrupted the nerves that told her she was in too much pain to walk. When she pointed the remote control at her thigh and pressed a button, the lines in her forehead would release, her back would straighten, and then she could walk. Is this magic? Is this witchcraft?

I was 18 and she was 19. After a few weeks of getting to know one another, she confided in me, "Kristen, I'm a witch." Her statement felt out of context to our conversation, and I realized that it took a lot of trust and courage for her to share that detail of her identity with me. I saw a question shimmering in her green eyes, "Are you one, too?"

I was used to this question being asked outright or implied as an invitation to come out to a new friend as queer. I had been dating people with a variety of genders since middle school, and was very comfortable at this point with my queer identity. How-

ever, I had never been offered an invitation to come out as a witch. I told K that I was a pagan, but still wrestled with the title of witch. K helped me select my first pentacle necklace and helped me to see the term “witch” as an acceptable identity for me as a modern woman studying marine science and biology on a STEM scholarship. My new friend, the witch, encouraged me to turn off the lantern, to step into the darkness. At a time in my life when I felt totally out of place, K made me feel accepted. We did not have to talk about the need for secrecy. Still, almost 30 years later, I have an instinct to protect her identity with a letter instead of writing her full name. Just in case.

One of the challenges of defining witchcraft is that it is not stagnant or still. The thinking around witchcraft has shifted and changed from century to century throughout human history. When funneled through different intellectual disciplines, the definitions warp. The clash of folk knowledge, burgeoning scientific thought, and cultural taboos gave early European secular courts permission to murder women. Neighbors accused neighbors knowing their neighbors would be burned to death. Witches were hunted. We think of witch hunts now metaphorically.

“Witch Hunt: 2. depreciative. A campaign of persecution by a group or person in a position of power against a person or group considered to be undesirable by virtue of their views or activities; a campaign to identify and persecute particular members of a group, organization, or society. Frequently, a prepositional phrase introduced by against, indicating the target of the persecution, e.g. ‘a witch hunt against suspected communists’” (Oxford English Dictionary, *Witch Hunt*, n.).

Even though the term witch hunt may be metaphorical, to be treated like a witch can be quite literal. Just as it was in history, so it is during our present time: women can be hunted, arrested, raped, maimed, ostracized, and murdered in horrific ways—all as a way to punish them for their agency or potential agency.

Let us take a moment in our dark circle to imagine a woman alive. Imagine her living body filled with blood and muscles and desires and dreams. Now imagine what happens when she is reduced from woman to witch. Imagine her struggle to stay covered as she is forcibly stripped, her skin bared to daylight—the cellulite on the back of her thighs exposed, her nipples hard from the cool air, her cesarean scar a smile under her belly button, her hands marked by the work of decades, her eyes filled with fear, her mouth filled with prayers. Imagine her dragged and tied to a wooden stake, one just like the beams that frame our houses and that framed her house. In that house she cooked food for herself and for her children. She is tied above a pile of sticks and leaves that catch quickly when set aflame. I am sorry for asking you to watch this with me as our pupils dilate in the fire light, but I don’t think we should look away.

She can still call out as the skin melts off of her legs. Her desires and dreams begin to burn along with her body. Perhaps she planned to paint a basket of cherries this afternoon, or maybe she secretly wished to cross the ocean on a boat. Now, she is surrounded by neighbors, past lovers, and those she called friend, as her intestines, heart, lungs, and liver ignite. Her muscles contract from the heat of the fire and her joints flex; her body tries to hunch over but she is restricted by the ropes that have not yet burned. She dies and she burns until every part of her is reduced to ash and chunks of bone. We can see that burning is not an easy death.

It is hard for me to swallow that a magical woman with foreknowledge would allow herself to die this way. If such foreknowledge was admitted, it was left out of the transcripts, along with so much else that is left out of the archive: her dreams, her desires, her personhood, sometimes even her name. This version of the witch has a right to be known and mourned. It must be noted: she is burned for engaging in witchcraft, and yet there is no definition of witchcraft in the trial documents either.

I practice magic, spellwork, and divination, therefore I want to claim the title of witch. It *feels* like the most accurate word in English for who I am, and it offers a nod to my ancestral practices. This word attaches me to a lineage of women who have been engaged in these practices throughout history. However, I also am resistant and I shrink from that word. My mind resists because I do not have a comprehensive, satisfying definition of the term witchcraft to understand the crafts of the witch. My heart resists because of my fear of the fire. If it is impossible for me to achieve a complete definition, we can at least deepen our understanding together.



Walking up to the UCSC library, I pass a herd of deer on the edge of the redwoods. This morning, they don't run. They are a small group of fawns and does—the buck with his velvet-covered antler buds who tends to be wary around me is absent. This morning, I am close enough to hear the fawns and does chew. Here on the edge of the forest, we live with deer, wild turkey, ravens, and coyotes as our neighbors. Their breath blends with the mist that cloaks us all. I take a few breaths with my non-human animal kin and keep walking.

When I take this path to the library, I often think of Gloria Anzaldúa and many other women I admire as artists, thinkers, and scholars who walked under these redwoods. Anzaldúa's grandmother was a curandera, a folk healer in Spanish and Latin American traditions, who passed on her traditions to her granddaughter. Although she didn't claim the title of curandera, a personal friend wrote of Anzaldúa that she once said, "I am a curandera of words." (Conner 145). I like the idea of witchcraft as words and of being a witch of words. Language is a powerful magic tool. I look down at the

snakeskin bracelet I wear. This bracelet was gifted to me by another woman who walked under these redwoods, who received it as a gift from her friend's grandmother, a curandera who made the bracelet. Is this witchcraft?

Over the last decade, I have noticed a proliferation of young women identifying themselves as witches on social media. There are innumerable memes on Instagram that offer visual and humorous definitions of witchcraft. One is a photograph of the actress Judy Dench. She has a satisfied smile on her face, and across the bottom of the photo is written: "My life is just trees now. Trees and champagne." Instagram user @wichual_and_craft interprets this photo, labeling it with the caption, "When people think witchcraft is 'evil' but it's actually all just honouring nature and treating yourself good" (Lockard, 2021). I have always been very private about my practice, but these brave young women post spells in reels, live stream their card readings, and share locations for meet-ups. Yes, there is a kind of performativity to their online presence that is inherent to all social media posts, but this does not make their presence or their magic any less potent. Critics say that #witchesofinstagram and WitchTok are a new-age wellness fad that will fade with time or a harmful appropriation of "real" witches (Petter, 2024). I believe that these young women have helped us reach a critical mass, too large and unwieldy to ever be silenced. They have modeled bravery for me. In fact, they gave me the courage to spread the word when my friend S and I started Four Queens, an online Divinatory Poetics platform, in 2020.

Rather than minimizing these witches and their crafts as a passing fad, let us interrogate the trend. Why is the desire to practice witchcraft on the rise? In what way does witchcraft offer an alternative to Judeo-Christian ontologies of spiritual practice and what makes those alternatives compelling today? This movement is a new kind of Witch Craze, is it not? Not the kind that burns women, but the kind that empowers women. I am thinking here of all of the times in the last decade that I've walked under signs at protests attempting to keep abortion legal that say, "We are the granddaughters of the witches you couldn't burn."² It feels powerful to walk with hundreds of other women under this banner—a power fed by the resistance, rebellion, and survival held in those words. Our breath and our chants combine to create a powerful choral spell of resistance. What if witchcraft is also learning how to more deeply embrace this community power by observing our non-human animal kin? The deer who herd together to keep one another safe, the does who relax into trust only with time and care.

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² This slogan was paraphrased from the 2015 Tish Thawer novel *The Witches of BlackBrook*, which is about three sisters who flee the Salem witch-trials by traveling through time.

In many traditions, including Catholicism, you need to name a demon in order to exorcise it from a body and defeat it. I do not think much of demons, but I believe in the power of naming in relation to inheritance, souls, and kinship. I've been hesitant to name the women in my life who practice witchcraft or are curious about witchcraft, because I am afraid of the violence they may endure as a result. I have been wary of naming myself a witch for the same reasons. In my research, I am reminded again and again to be afraid of a burning pyre. Born from the violent legacies that surrounded my female ancestors in Italy, I carry fear in my blood—a fear shaped by the food they cooked, fed to their daughters, and that, in time, nourished me.

Next to my fear, there is a longing. It arises in my chest, under the cameo I wear. A longing to claim something that feels lost in my lineage—rituals that were rejected by my great-grandmothers, feared by my grandmother, celebrated by my mother, and are central to me. I am always searching for the most accurate word. A perfect word shimmers, a perfect word is magic.

Recently, I was at my friend A's house. She was hosting a gathering just after the confluence of Samhain/Halloween/All Saint's Day/Dia de Los Muertos and asked her guests to bring poetry about grief to share. I arrived early and helped in the kitchen. As we put together one platter after another laden with local watermelon, French cheese, Italian sausage, homemade guacamole, dark chocolate-dipped figs, and more, she introduced me to another woman in her kitchen: "This is Kristen, she is a PhD student, a writer, and a witch." I was caught off guard by A labeling me a witch *in public*. Why did I feel an instinctual reaction to immediately obfuscate my spiritual practices? Because, despite my understanding of magic I am afraid of a burning pyre. The other women simply said, "Oh" with a look of surprise, and then after one excruciating beat, "It's nice to meet you."

Later that day, we formed a circle in A's living room, and I asked her to help me choose a poem to read from my book, *the length of this gap*—a book that deals with the gathering's theme, grief. To determine the poem, we used bibliomancy, an ancient tool of divination, and then when this piqued other guests' curiosity, I taught them how to use bibliomancy to engage with secular texts. This is another example of the power of language and a witchcraft of words. A few weeks before this gathering, I had pulled cards for A from the same tarot deck I was gifted on my fifteenth birthday. A year before that, I gave her a salve for her birthday that I made out of creosote, lavender, calendula, olive oil, and beeswax that my friend J first taught me to make years ago in Tucson. (This friend J is not my childhood friend J, it is just that our circle is getting bigger than the alphabet.) It made sense that A nounced me a witch, as she experienced my witching. My friend did not out me, my actions did. And now, my writing has done the same. I have become unveiled by these pages, previously white now filled with black ink.

There will be no closure here, no enclosure. Please feel free to pick up a lantern or linger in the darkness a while longer. This dark circle holds power and we can always return to it, but for now we go our separate ways. As I step forward, I hold this sentence in my palm like a talisman: Witchcraft is a noun circled by verbs.

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