

# In the beginning was the witch

*This is a history that is not over.*<sup>1</sup>

In her editorial to the first issue of the French journal *Sorcières* (1975), Xavière Gauthier explained the choice of the journal's title: witches dance, sing, they steal/fly [*elles volent*], and have only historically appeared ugly and wicked because they 'pose a real danger to phallogocentric society'.<sup>2</sup> Crucially, witches were announced to be back and ready to avenge the repression of their predecessors. Marginalised, oppressed and victimised while also representing the repressed underbelly of a post-Enlightenment rationalist and gender-stratified – 'phallogocentric' – order of things, witches emerged as a sorely-needed bridge between social oppression and symbolic repression.

In the same year as the debut of *Sorcières*, Catherine Clément and Hélène Cixous, prominent feminist theorists and activists in the MLF (Mouvement de libération des femmes), published a strangely scholarly book-length manifesto, *La Jeune Née*. In *The Newly Born Woman*, as it was translated eleven years later, Clément singled out the witch as the emblem of an emergent feminist subjectivity, without, however, being blind to its risks: out of the bundle of contradictions, bittersweet transgressions, imposed sufferings and precarious victories with which every culture's imaginary space of otherness is fraught, Clément urged her readers to keep 'the witch's broom, her taking off, her being swept away, her taking flight' (p. 57). In 'The Laugh of the Medusa',<sup>3</sup> Hélène Cixous' manifesto of 'feminine writing' also published that year, it is not specifically the figure of the sorceress that is evoked but the powerful metaphor of the return of the repressed, already underlying the deployments of the witch by Gauthier and Clément. It would appear that, in the mid-seventies, a manifesto was being woven around the figure of the witch. Coincidentally, the book section of the first issue of *Sorcières* contains a review of *The Newly Born Woman* as well as one of a French translation of Virginia Woolf's 1938 book-essay *Three Guineas*.

*The Newly Born Woman* consists of two long essays, one by each contributor, learned but not conventionally academic (partly because sources aren't always quoted but almost ventriloquized), and the edited transcription of a clearly unrehearsed exchange between the two (a challenge that the authors accepted 'incautiously', p. 135, and which becomes rather heated). The sorceress and the hysteric are examined as exemplary figures with feminist potential: victims of misogynist violence, both real and symbolic, 'ambiguous, anti-establishment, and ultimately conservative' (p. 5), because despite challenging and attempting to rewrite the script of femininity they always end up being put in their place. Clément views the hysteric as the inheritor of the witch's legacy in the modern era but points out that neither of them exist anymore except as symbols. For Clément, 'they are old and worn-out figures, awakened only to throw off their shackles' (p. 56).

Both Clément and Cixous (but particularly Clément) are cruel feminist mothers.<sup>4</sup> They argue, they lose their temper, they swear at each other and possibly us. They mine the marginalia of history and psychoanalysis and fearlessly shift through what they find, retaining very little. Clément deflatingly declares herself a pessimist on more than one occasion. All the same, their text possesses almost magical properties: for me, it comes to life each time I revisit it.

'Somewhere every culture has an imaginary zone for what it excludes, and it is that zone we must remember *today*' (emphasis added). Sandra Gilbert uses these words by Catherine Clément as the first of three epigraphs to the introduction to the English edition of *The Newly Born Woman*, 'A Tarantella of Theory'. At the time of Gilbert's writing, that 'today' was eleven years old; at the time of mine it is already forty-five. That is why academic editors weed out terms like 'today' and why the text deviates from formal scholarship. Not so much sloppy as inappropriately incantatory, *The Newly Born Woman* brims with 'nows' and 'todays', terms that Roman Jakobson describes as 'shifters'<sup>5</sup>: shifters include personal pronouns and also terms like 'here/there', 'now/then', 'this/that' which only acquire their full meaning in reference to an extra-textual situation. Shifters belong to language but also poke holes in it, intimating that which lies beyond it. They reach out of the page and grip onto their surroundings. They materialise the text by unmasking the ties between words and bodies.

## In the beginning there were witches

*[An obsession] is something or someone that always comes back, survives everything, reappears in intervals, and expresses a truth concerning an original state of affairs. It is something or someone that one cannot forget, and yet is impossible to recognise clearly.*<sup>6</sup>

Before these French witches and their allied hysterics, there was W.I.T.C.H.: established in New York on Halloween 1968, W.I.T.C.H., standing for 'Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell', were pioneers of feminist visual activism. In their inaugural action a black-clad coven placed a hex on the New York stock exchange, which was reportedly successful. More of an acrostic than an acronym, the meaning of W.I.T.C.H. changed often and responsively, from 'Women Incensed at Telephone Company Harassment' for a demonstration against the Bell Telephone company,<sup>7</sup> to 'Women Inspired to Tell their Collective History'.<sup>8</sup> Although sometimes credited as precursors to feminist paganism, W.I.T.C.H. tended to approach the required qualifications for being a witch inclusively if not loosely: 'You are a Witch by saying aloud, "I am a Witch" three times, and thinking about that. You are a Witch by being female, untamed, angry, joyous, and immortal.'<sup>9</sup> Regional W.I.T.C.H. covens with intersectional orientations exist to this day.<sup>10</sup>

Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), breaks with the highly theorised elasticity of French feminisms and also the extreme semantic elasticity of W.I.T.C.H., to propose a haunting supplement to Marx's analysis of primitive accumulation. The book, a reprise of an earlier study undertaken with Leopoldina Fortunati and filtered through Federici's first-hand experience of the enforced and accelerated financial 'development' of Nigeria in the service of international markets, is presented by its author as, quite literally, a revenant: buried in a basement in the form of notes, it refuses to be forgotten or ignored. This alchemical sublation of radical and Marxist feminisms through a necessary emphasis on reproductive labour and land privatisation took feminism's witches into strictly materialist ground, where discursive and epistemic developments are always subject to changing socio-economic conditions:

'What ended the witch-hunt [...] was the annihilation of the world of the witches and the imposition of the social discipline that the victorious capitalist system required. In other words, the witch-hunt came to an end, by the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, because the ruling class by this time enjoyed a growing sense of security concerning its power, not because of more enlightened view of the world had emerged.'<sup>11</sup>

susan pui san lok's investigation into the history of witch hunts in the East of England, including her native Essex, springs from a different but possibly related materialism: it unearths ancient stories from the common land beneath our feet and lends them material form, translating history for the senses.

## We are WITCH

*History is always in several places at once.*<sup>12</sup>

susan pui san lok invited six of us, women in the arts (whatever that means) and good friends of hers to join her in recording the voices for the audio work *Seven Sisters*. We met on a cold January morning in excitement and nervousness, co(n)vening at her invitation. Some of us already knew each other, more or less well, not everyone knew everyone. Few of us had found time to rehearse our words, and I for one had no clue how to pronounce many of the sixteenth and seventeenth century English names and locations in the script, to my personal embarrassment and our collective amusement. The script for *Seven Sisters*, written in seven verses and voices, was – we were told – a free adaptation of a chronologically and geographically organised book of historical documentation, *Witch Hunt: The Persecution of Witches in England*, by David and Andrew Pickering.<sup>13</sup> We were each assigned one of seven voices, and each voice narrated the stories of many accused of witchcraft in south-east England between 1560 and 1751. Our voices came together in a chorus of Amys, Annes, Janes, Margarets, Rebeccas, Roses, and susans, a symbolic but temporarily embodied coven. The fates of some of the women and the few men accused of witchcraft are revealed in the script, while others are left inconclusive, probably unrecorded and still unknown or unknowable.

Our edited recording became *Seven Sisters* and co-habited with the video of the same name, which visually evoked the geographical locations that we (mis)pronounced: thick, knobbly tree branches against grey skies conjure memories of popular suggestions of witchcraft and witchiness, captured in the mysterious menace that woodland holds for city-dwellers. From Disney's *Snow White* to *The Blair Witch Project*, woods announce an exit from the tamed familiar into half-forgotten thickets where the world stops making sense and, more disturbingly, begins to make a different kind of non-sense.

Tree trunks and branches emerge as a visual and material motif in A COVEN A GROVE A STAND, lok's exhibition at Firstsite, Colchester in 2019, and were affirmed in a group walk led by the artist from Manningtree to Mistley, exploring some of the locations of witch persecution in Essex.<sup>14</sup> The walk concluded with a visit to 'Old Knobbly', an oak tree said to be 800 years old and to have provided sanctuary to victims of witch persecution in its cavernous trunk. 3D scans of this ancient oak, a tree with transcultural and transhistorical spiritualist associations,<sup>15</sup> were adapted into the recycled cardboard intersecting pieces of *Sister O Sister*, a strange tree-like structure half-suspended from the ceiling. This work evokes/invokes 'Old Knobbly' as well as a sister tree in East Somerton, known as the 'Witch's Wooden Leg', another ancient oak said to have sprung from the leg of a woman buried alive as a witch, a tree which subsequently destroyed the church that had condemned her. One tree/witch/sister leads to another in uncontrollable, disorderly, rhizomatic chains of association that become alliances: this tree which (witch) is not one.<sup>16</sup> *Sister O Sister* calls to mind both branches and roots, suggesting that their distinction has vanished through the passage of time or some other, demonic, force: topsy turvy, upside down, inside out, both at once.

A COVEN A GROVE A STAND unsettles history, rather than supplementing it or (shudder) illustrating it: it recollects witch trials but also stages a coven of women with witchy potential if not yet practice; it rivets personal stories of unbelonging and trouble-making into the land, awakening their vibrancy through time; it commemorates those accused and often punished for witchcraft while putting anachronism to work and provoking resistance to oppression in the present. For me, it also summons the witches of my feminist education: they are Legion and only some of their voices made it into this text.

Sisterhood is magic,<sup>17</sup> because it persists while the odds are systemically stacked against it (patriarchy always, but also competition imposed by neoliberalism; dearth of time and emotional resources to invest in each other and our communities because of our at-least-double shifts). lok's work may or may not evoke my feminist witches to others; but it does articulate and cultivate a specifically feminist obsession with them: we refuse to let them be forgotten and together we plot their uncanny returns.

# Witch, Witches, WITCH

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1. Catherine Clément, in Catherine Clément and Hélène Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman*, translated by Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 6. 2. *Xavière Gauthier*, 'Sorcières: Les femmes vivent', in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtrion (eds.), *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (Brighton: Harvester, 1981), pp. 199–203. 3. Cixous, H. (1976), 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, pp. 875–893. 4. *Cruel Mothers* is the title of a sound installation in A COVEN A GROVE A STAND which loops versions of the folk song *Cruel Mother*. 5. Jakobson, Roman. 1957, 'Shifters, verbal categories, and the Russian verb', in Selected *Writings*, vol. II, *Word and Language*, The Hague: Mouton, 1971, p. 132. 6. Georges Didl-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, translated by Harvey Mendelsohn (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), p. 13. 7. Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, 2006), p. 181. 8. Susan Brownmiller, *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution* (New York: The Dial Press, 1999), p. 49. 9. Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, p. 208. 10. <https://www.witchboston.org/about-libcom.org/files/Callban%20and%20the%20Witch.pdf>. 11. <https://www.witchboston.org/about-libcom.org/files/Callban%20and%20the%20Witch.pdf>. 12. Cixous in *The Newly Born Woman*, p. 160. 13. David and Andrew Picken, *Witch Hunt: The Persecution of Witches in England* (Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2013). 14. <https://newgeography.com/artists/susan-pui-san-lok/>. 15. See George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 3rd edition (London: Macmillan, 1976) and Pamela Stewart and Andrew Strathern, *Ritual: Key Concepts in Religion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014). The rustling of oak leaves was said to bear messages from the gods to be interpreted by the priestesses at the Dodona oracle. 16. I am here evoking the paradoxical polysemy of Lucie Irigaray's 'Ce sexe qui n'en est un' [This Sex Which is Not One], namely it's not really a sex, and it's also not just one], which suggests that the failure and refusal of femininity to play the symmetrical opposite to masculinity is connected to femininity's own radical multiplicity. 17. A riff on Sarah Jaffe, 'All Organising is Magic', Verso Blog, 25 October 2019, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4465-all-organizing-is-magic> (accessed: 9 March 2020). Since writing these words I discovered that *Sisterhood is the Strongest Magic* is also the subtitle of a spinoff book series by Erica David from Disney's *Frozen* media franchise.