

This text is adapted from a talk given by Dr Amy Whitehead held at Gus Fisher Gallery on Saturday 19 August 2023, in celebration of the exhibition *She could lie on her back and sink*.

Amy R. Whitehead is Senior Lecturer and Anthropologist of Religion at Massey University where she teaches the course: The Anthropology of Ritual, Religion & Witchcraft. Amy gained her PhD in Religious Studies in the UK in 2011 where she did research with Goddess Pagan and Marian devotees in England and Spain. She has published widely about the performance and material cultures of religions over the years. She has an interest in magic and witchcraft, both personally and through an anthropological lens, particularly how they relate to rituals, women, social control, inequality, notions of superstition, and plants (healing and medicinal herbs).

Kia ora katou – a very warm welcome to you all today. This is my first time speaking at Gus Fisher Gallery, or any gallery, for that matter; and it's really great to see such a good turnout of people.

As introduced, my name is Amy Whitehead, and I teach a class called the Anthropology of Ritual, Religion and Witchcraft at Massey University.

I don't actually teach witchcraft, as fun as that would be - I teach *about* witchcraft, both its origins and the current concept of the witch, and that includes thinking about who came to be called witches, and why.

I'm going to begin today with a brief story about how I came to be interested in this subject both personally and academically.

I grew up in the Appalachian Mountains of East Tennessee, so rurally, and I'd always felt connected with my environment – but a definitive moment happened when I was about 18 years old, so it must have been autumn of 1992 (please don't think too much about the math). I'd gone out for an evening walk – it wasn't quite dark, and I remember that the moon wasn't quite full, but it was bright enough, and leaves crunched under my feet as I walked. There was a light breeze that carried with it the smell of burning hickory that had drifted down from some wood stove nearby. The stars were sparkling, my senses were heightened, and the tip of my nose was cold – it almost felt animal-like. And I remember thinking that if were to lay down on my back, that I could be easily be absorbed by that dark, fertile earth – and that that would be perfectly fine. It was a feeling of inexplicable connectedness where the conditions aligned to create this perfect kind of moment, and it was accompanied by a revelation that perhaps this connection meant that I was one of

these women, or witch women, who I'd heard tale of my whole life in the lore of the mountains. You see, it was also an unsettling thought because being raised a Calvinist Protestant in rural Appalachia in the US, and although things were starting to change, the word 'witch' was still damning. But over the years, particularly after leaving home, I found the word to be a nice fit - and it's accompanied me throughout my life in myriad ways.

After visiting the exhibition upstairs, I was reminded of this and other experiences, and how nature, with its associated wildness, earthiness, sexuality, healing and the uses of herbal medicine, have all form elements – and even justifications – for how people, particularly women, have been identified, singled out, and persecuted as witches. It's also clear that nature, as in water and plants, have played muse to the artists whose work is in this exhibition.

So I'm going to explore some of these themes now through what I'll refer to as the **witch complex**.

Now I've called it the witch complex because the word 'witch' can point to all sorts of different phenomena at different points in our history and present, and not only in European societies – and it invites us to think about an assemblage, or cluster, of phenomena, from the pejorative labelling of witches during the European witch craze - to a current reclaiming of the word where it's being transformed – even decolonized – and used as a positive label that has nothing at all to do with Satan and notions of evil, but instead with celebrating wisdom, plant lore, magic, and intuition. And of course we can't leave out the popularity that fictitious witches have been enjoying in films, series, and certain books over the past 20 years or more.

But we do need to keep in mind that the word witch is European in origin, and once taken out of Europe and applied to people in other cultures, it becomes a colonial concept that places a particular Western lens on the social phenomena of non-Europeans – so for example, as Dr Nepia Mahuika points out, the Māori concept of *mākutu* is not the same as European witchcraft. So the point is that the 'witch figure' is *complex*, and really needs to be taken in context.

And so from a traditionally Western perspective, I'm going to try to get to the root of what gets conjured when the word witch is used in popular culture by looking at some of the ways that the figure of the witch is expressed, particularly at Halloween. Now the Halloween witch usually takes one of two different forms. First we have the cackling warty-nosed hag who casts spells, hexes people, and brews cauldrons.

And then of course there's the sexy witch – from observation we learn that Halloween can also serve as an excuse to dawn fishnets.

Now on the surface, all of this may seem like just a bit of fun – so what’s the harm. But as an anthropologist – meaning one who is interested in lifting the lid on taken for granted phenomena – these figures are revealing because both can be considered marginal. The sexy witch is marginal because she’s just not playing by the rules - maybe because she’s harnessed the power of unhinged feminine sexuality, or she’s disobedient; and the hag witch is marginal because she’s no longer sexually viable in patriarchal contexts, or maybe she’s a reminder of the inevitability of death.

In any case, Anthropologists and other academics know that people in Europe’s past strongly believed that witches were real, that they rode broomsticks, did harmful magic and made pacts with the devil – and so we take such accounts seriously.

Significantly, and this gets to the heart of it, anthropologists know that people labelled ‘witches’ tend to be scapegoats for a society’s problems. In fact witchcraft accusations tend to happen at the times when community tensions are high – maybe there’s a moment of social crisis, or perhaps crops have failed, or there’s a pandemic, and people are looking for someone to blame. And as you’ll know, the term witch hunt is alive and well, as we’ve seen in a series of recent societal events both here and abroad.

We can also see this many small scale tribal societies in parts of Africa, Nepal, and Papua New Guinea where they believe that witches really exist and many people, particularly the elderly and children, suffer because of it.

So by looking at witchcraft accusations, we can what societal tensions are being projected onto so called witches. Along these lines, cultures in which witches are considered primarily to be women will tend to exhibit tension between the sexes.¹

So now that we have a bit of underpinning, I’m going to turn to the European witch craze. Kathryn Rountree’s book *Embracing the Witch and the Goddess: Feminist Ritual-Makers in New Zealand*² (particularly Chapters 1-3) features an excellent overview of the historical material of witchcraft and has informed much of the information that follows, as does *The Anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft* by Rebecca Stein and Philip L. Stein (Chapter 10).³

Now the origins of the European witch craze can be found in the Christian Church’s Inquisition of the 12th century that was created to exterminate so called ‘heretics’.

¹ Rebecca Stein and Philip Stien, *The Anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft: Fourth Edition*, 2015.

² Routledge, 2004.

³ Stein and Stein, *Religion, Magic and Witchcraft*, 2015.

All across Europe, the inquisition targeted Cathars, Gnostics, Spiritual Franciscans, Jewish people, homosexuals, lepers, and more – and all of these peoples were burnt at the stake.

Not surprisingly, the property of heretics could be seized even before a trial, so this was a valuable revenue-raiser for the church.

And in the 15th century, the Inquisition turned on so called 'witches' who were just another kind of heretic executed by the Christian Church who had designated other religions as mis-guided, false, and even evil.⁴

So as Christianity moved through Europe the aim was to convert people, and their belief in having access to one absolute truth reduced the Indigenous religions of Europe (which were polytheistic, meaning they had more than one deity), to Devil-worship, and that meant that the old gods and goddesses were redefined as evil and that the spirits of the land, such fairies and other nature spirits were put in the category of children's stories. And as the horned fertility gods that were important in many of the pre-Christian European religions were often represented as a goat, bull or stag, these were seen as especially evil, which played a role in how Christianity imaged their Devil as a goat.

To give you some further context, during the 16th century, European populations were going through bouts of expansion and shrinking due to both growth and people dying of disease. Carolyn Merchant⁵ tells us that there were two dominant metaphors in the 16th century concerning nature – one that tells of a kind, benevolent nurturing Mother earth on whom we all depend, and another tells of domination through the activities of the Scientific Revolution, colonial expansion, and industrialisation (such as mining and assarting – which means clearing a woodland for agriculture). Now the idea of dominion already existed in Christian religions and, as other academics have argued, became one of the greatest justifications for exploiting the earth's resources. To quote Carolyn Merchant: "As long as the earth was considered to be alive and sensitive, it could be considered a breach of human ethical behaviour to carry out destructive acts against it."

So the opposing narrative metaphor was created that tells of a need to control the danger that comes from a wild and uncontrollable nature who could render violence, storms, droughts, and general chaos. It's accepted in scholarship now that

⁴ Stein and Stein, *Religion, Magic and Witchcraft*, 2015.

⁵ Carolyn Merchant. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980.

this view of nature is directly reflected in how women were viewed and treated – also as wild creatures, whose sexuality and intuition were dangerous and also needed to be controlled and tamed, so the relationship between attitudes toward nature, and attitudes toward women, is pretty clear.

Now what you see in this image [below] is pure early modern propaganda – and images such as these fuelled the rumours, gossip, fear, and damning narratives that told of how on each Sabbath, witches would sneak out of bed, rubbed themselves with an ointment which enabled them to levitate, and they flew off on animals, fenceposts, pitchforks, bread paddles or broomsticks to meet with fellow witches in caves, cellars or on deserted heaths in woodlands.

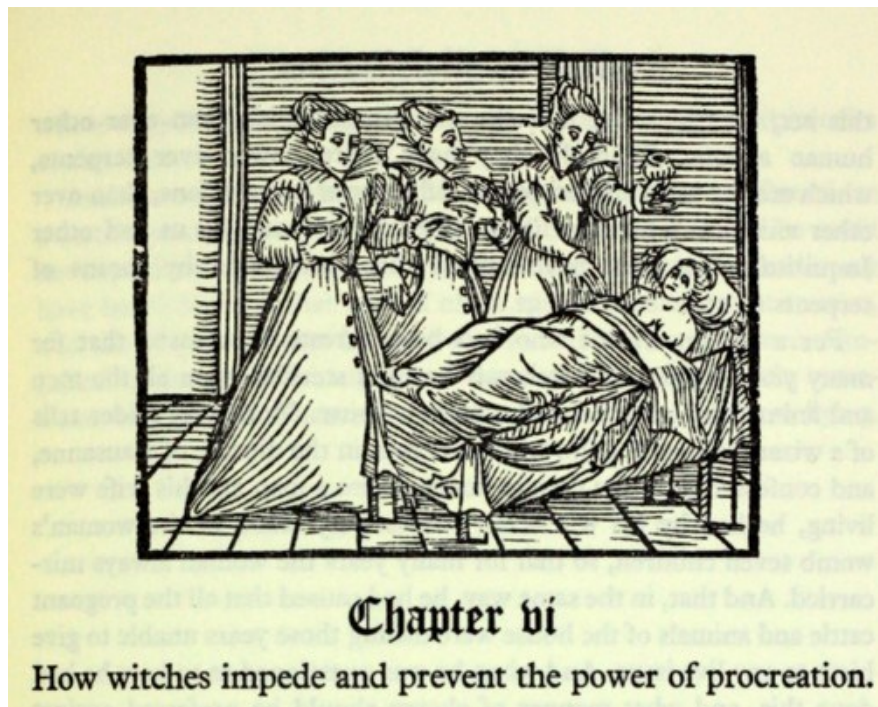


The narrative also told of how new witches were required to kill a young child and bring its body to a subsequent meeting; and that each witch had to renounce Christianity and worship the Devil at the Sabbath by kissing him on the arse. After the ritual was over, there was a feast and orgy. It was said that children's bodies were stolen from good Christian families where they were boiled up and consumed in a parody of the communion feast. And at the end of the night the witches would fly home and slipped back into bed beside their sleeping spouses.

Now most of these ideas were fuelled by a book called the *Malleus Maleficarum*, or the Hammer of Witches. This book was written by a German Catholic clergyman called Heinrich Kramer and published in 1486. Apparently, Kramer had issues. He blamed women for his own lust, and he presented the *Malleus* as a legal theological document, or treatise on witchcraft, where he cited the biblical passage from Exodus, "you shall not permit a sorceress to live." This book outlined all the horrible things that witches do and it was used for witch detection into the 18th century,

although King James the first's version of the witch was a bit different to this. He'd written a pamphlet on *deamonologie* where he advanced the idea of the witch away from misogyny and more into a problem of possession that could affect both men and women. Still, the *Malleus Maleficarum* became **the text** used by the Inquisition to hunt out witches, particularly in England.⁶

Reflecting back on the notion of so-called witches being used as scapegoats for when things go wrong, have a look at the engraving [below] about procreation. People didn't understand that there could be medical problems, so of course they said it must be witchcraft. It gave them an explanation.



Now women weren't only targeted because they were regarded as sources of evil who inspired lust in men; in particular, the church was concerned about village healers and midwives. You see, during the Middle Ages, there had been an attempt to take away the practice of healing from women and it had become illegal to heal without having studied at a university, and of course women weren't permitted into universities.⁷

So, any woman who healed could be defined as a witch, and the women who'd been performing these healings for their communities were suddenly vulnerable to accusations of devil worship.

⁶ Stein and Stein, 2015.

⁷ Rountree, *Embracing the Witch*, 2004.

And maybe some of them did use forms of magic and divination. Perhaps they read tea leaves, but they were also experts in herbal remedies, in midwifery, in bone-setting, in dentistry, and even counselling.⁸ They would have used the Hawthorn, ginger, and elder plants found in Ann Shelton's images upstairs. But not all witches, or wise women were assumed harmful; and the term witch doctor was used in England before it became associated with Africa. Perhaps they were made suspect because they dealt in that border-like liminal space between life and death, or because, as artist Shelton's work reveals, their knowledge of plants and fungi was seen as a threat to the newly establishing social, religious and economic orders in the late Middle Ages, or early modern Europe.

Interestingly, women who had outlived their husbands were particularly suspect because they lived independently and as inheritors of property which the church was keen to get. These women were typically single, widows, poor and yes, marginal. They were vulnerable with no 'male protector', or the only obstacle to a male heir inheriting property. It's also been suggested that many of them were elderly women who were unable to bear children and therefore 'no longer useful'.⁹

So on the whole, people accused of witchcraft have been interpreted by historians as victims – as scapegoats for community hostilities and tensions, as victims of misogyny and, most importantly, as victims of labelling.

So if we think back to the Halloween types, you'll see the problem with the image of the hag-witch – it turns out to parallel very closely the image that was common several hundred years ago in Europe during the witch-hunts; and when women's nature and sexuality was feared, controlled. We could even argue that the sexy Halloween witch figure might both mock and play into the distorted pervy fantasies of Inquisitors.

The tangible reality of witch hunts and trials can be seen in objects on display in museums. This image [right] is a witch's iron collar that's on display in the National Museums of Scotland.



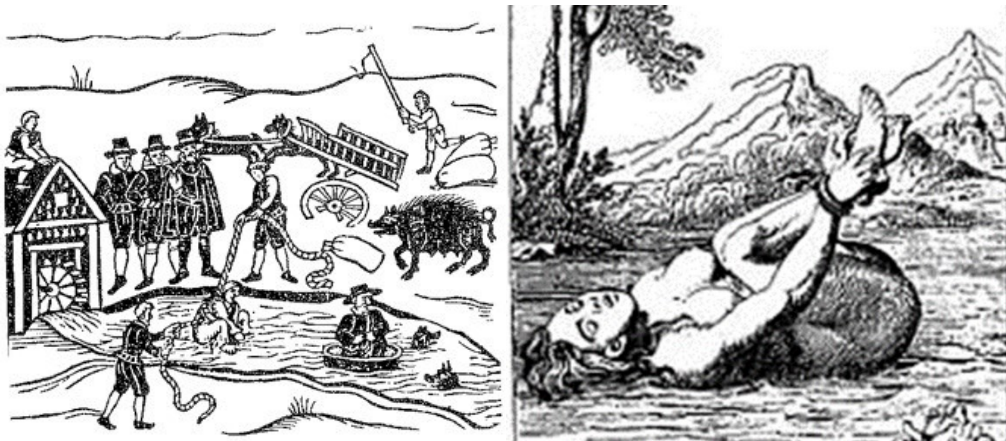
⁸ Rountree, *Embracing the Witch*, 2004.

⁹ Stein and Stein, 2015.

Overall, evidence suggests that between 40 and 60 thousand people were killed during Europe's witch craze. And it's estimated that roughly between 80 and 85% of people executed during the witch hunts in Britain were women. On the European continent it was more like 95%.

Sometimes 100s of people were killed in one day, including girls as young as 12 years old.¹⁰ On the continent, witches were burnt whereas in England and Scotland they were hanged.

These images [below] depict the swimming test, or ordeal by water, that's reflected in the exhibition's title 'She could lie on her back and sink'.



Veena Patel from the University of Leicester tells us that the rationale behind the sink or swim ordeal was that the purity of water as an element used in the rites for baptism would reject those who had turned to the Devil, thereby turning their back on God. Before the witch craze, in the 11th and 12th centuries, the method was also used for crimes such as homicide and adultery.

But the ordeal by water usually involved tying the suspect's wrists to their ankles and then throwing the individual into a body of water with ropes attached. Contrary to popular belief, Patel says if the suspect sank, they were presumed innocent and hauled up, and it wasn't common for them to perish unless by accident. Should the suspect float, this was taken as confirmation of their allegiance to the Devil. So the premise of this ordeal was to provoke direct intervention from God in determining the guilt or innocence of the accused, and the result was seen as a revelation of God's judgement. It's even suggested that some of the accused requested the swimming test so that they could clear their name. This reminds me of Jayne Parker's work *The Whirlpool* (1997) where the submerged movements of the dancer echo the watery graves of women forcibly drowned through witch hunts.

¹⁰ Stein and Stein, 2015.

It should be noted that the swimming test was never embraced completely by what they called 'learned authorities' – and it was used mainly by witch hunters as an alternative for identifying witches. The last (official) witch-killing was at the end of the 1700s.

Now, in 2021, three centuries after the Witchcraft Act was repealed, campaigners in the Witches of Scotland group have managed to win pardons and official apologies for the estimated 3,837 people – 84% of whom were women – tried as witches, of which two-thirds were executed.¹¹

The campaign secured the support of ex Scottish prime minister Nicola Sturgeon's administration to clear the names of those accused, and although I've not addressed the witch trials of Salem directly here today, I thought it pertinent to acknowledge the Salem Witchcraft Victim's memorial that was built in 1992.

But it sure ain't over, according to Lucy Worsley who tells us that the prejudices that led to witch-hunts hundreds of years ago have not disappeared and women are still on the receiving end of men's anger.

She wrote in the Radio Times: "[Although] we like to think we're better than the people who hunted witches, witch-hunting still happens in some parts of the world today." Worsley remarks about how the prejudices that led to witch-hunts in the 16th and 17th centuries continue to exist and women, especially outspoken ones, were still targeted by men.

Worsley might have been referring to how witch hunting is still a major practice, especially in developing countries such as Nigeria, Congo and Malawi. All over, 'innocent people' are scapegoated and bear the blame for the death of family or community members, poverty, losses of jobs, inability to make children or find a partner, poor harvest, accident, and sickness such as dementia. An estimated 80-90% of people in African Nations believe that witches exist (to do harm), with the majority of the accused being women but also including children.

There are different forms of what we might identify in some way within the witch complex in societies all over the world from Mexico, Japan, India and Saudi Arabia to Africa, North, Central and South America, and Oceania, and beyond. Some of these cultures and societies, but not all, were influenced by European notion of the witch, and the Inquisition even found its way to the colonies of North and South America – although it's been noted that people were less likely to be murdered on

¹¹ The Guardian, 2021. "Women executed 300 years ago as witches in Scotland set to receive pardons" <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/dec/19/executed-witches-scotland-pardons-witchcraft-act>

witchcraft charges in the colonies because European populations were low and labour was needed.

But the figure of the witch exists today in Latin America where there are curanderas, which are different to brujas, although a curandera might be a bruja, or witch – and not in a reclaimed female empowerment kind of way. In different African societies such as Zimbabwe there are different names for different roles – so a diviner or healer might be called a *sangoma*, not a witch, which is the word for a spiteful person who harms others. Diviners don't do that. So we need to consider nuances when we handle certain terms, especially powerful ones like 'witch' which is used pejoratively in these Latin American and African societies.

As I begin to circle back from whence we came, I'd like to draw again on Dr Nepia Mahuika's own words about makutu because I am tauhiwi and it's not my space. In his point that the Māori concept of mākutu is not the same as European witchcraft, he tells us that black magic and witchcraft are English terms, and to align this with the way Māori understand people who practice that sort of spirituality, to think of them as witches is a little bit off. He says: "like most other Māori whānau I grew up with stories about mākutu...it wasn't something that was taboo or odd."¹²

But there is a reclaiming, even a decolonizing, of the word witch that's going on that's wresting control away from the damning Christian connotations of the word and transforming it into something positive and empowering. The beautiful essay by Delilah Pārore-Southon available as part of the exhibition titled 'Musing on Matakite: a Case for the Indigenous Witch' reflects this decolonising process by telling us that the Indigenous witch hasn't changed, as she was never considered a 'witch' [in the pejorative] - she was just a wahine, a child of Papatuanuku. In this context, matakite and wairua are nurtured.

These qualities are similarly nurtured by modern pagans and wiccans – these people don't tend to entertain ideas about black magic. In fact, they don't address Satan at all – he's completely sidestepped. And although there's a variety of different types of contemporary pagan from wiccans, neo-shamans, druids, animists, heathens, and Goddess worshippers, a common feature is that they're nature-centric and tend to ritualise and celebrate the seasonal cycles and their relationships to nature. These groups, and there are a lot of them both here in Aotearoa and abroad, can also be

¹² RNZ, 2020. "Dr Nepia Mahuika explains makutu and its history"

<https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/afternoons/audio/2018733149/dr-nepia-mahuika-explains-makutu-and-its-history>

quite eclectic and because they are, at their core, practicing a critique of Christianity – which means that they tend to reject the patriarchy.

In fact, more pagan and earth traditions are emerging, and their numbers are growing. We could call it a 'turn toward the earth' and away from notions of transcendence, and I like to read this as a religious response to the ecological crisis.

Thinking now about the present and toward the future, the witch as a concept or framework is providing an important space for the reclamation of knowledge. It provides a creative space where relationships with nature, communities, and ourselves are encouraged and celebrated, and in some ways it coaxes us out from behind our own walls and gives us permission to be our weird, witchy selves, which is reflected in Louie Zalk-Neale's installation *Beyond your tadpole stage // Your spinal cord dissolves* (2023) that signals the tensions of emergence. What I see growing out of this alchemical process is that past abuses and murder of those labelled witches is the lead that's being transformed into gold, and just at the right time.

As an anthropologist and scholar of ritual and religion, most aspects of the exhibition upstairs reflect what I think of as a zeitgeist of our time. Art, such as we see here, as well as contemporary Pagans ritual creativity, is being used in animistic, embodied ways that are beginning to direct our human attention toward the other-than-human vegetable kingdom. My own work is concerned with the social and ritual lives of plants – and with plants as healers. This vegetal turn in scholarship is captured by both Ann Shelton's and Tai Shani's work, both of whom consider how past knowledge may propose alternate solutions.

I've chosen this final image from Ann Shelton's work, *We thank you for the gift to decide the fate of man from birth (Apple)*, to illustrate the transformative phase in which we find ourselves, culturally and otherwise. The title of the image refers to the apple and its symbolic reconfiguration by Christianity as a representation of sin and evil. Interestingly, when you split an apple down the middle, it reveals a pentagram at its core, and the pentagram is a widely used religious symbol associated with contemporary Witchcraft.



Ann Shelton, *We thank you for the gift to decide the fate of man from birth (Apple)*, 2022-ongoing. Courtesy of the artist and Two Rooms, Auckland; Denny Gallery, New York and Bartley and Company Art, Wellington.

Q&A

On the harassment of women in the present day:

A lot of the reason why witches were persecuted was due to their difference being seen as a threat to power, which at the time was the Christian patriarchy. And that sentiment has carried on today, not only with women but with other marginalised identities such as the LGBTQI+ community and people of colour.

On the origins of the term 'magic' and if its meaning has changed over time:

Just like how the witch is a nuanced term, so too is magic. Especially with the influence of things like magicians and early childhood media, I feel like our ideas of magic tend to take shape on a more personal note. I could even ask you the same question you asked me – how would you define magic? Has magic changed for you since then?