

W.I.T.C.H. and Witchcraft in Radical Feminist Activism

by

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I explore the ways in which the radical feminist activist group W.I.T.C.H. (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell) uses the figure of the witch to establish a collective identity as a social movement by using the theoretical framework of identity work. I first draw on the existing scholarship surrounding the history of witchcraft, witch persecution, and radical feminism, and I then apply this history in conjunction with identity work theory to analyze the public persona of the recently revived W.I.T.C.H., specifically the group that brought this movement back: W.I.T.C.H. PDX. By looking at the strategies that W.I.T.C.H. employs in their protest, social media presence, website, and interviews, I examine how W.I.T.C.H. has historically and currently built a collective identity despite being a loosely-connected network of local groups.

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## INTRODUCTION

After the election of Donald Trump, the resistance to the platform he ran upon during the 2016 presidential campaign surged. In retaliation to policies which are explicitly racist, sexist, and sometimes dangerous, there has been continued criticism, protest, and activism.<sup>1</sup> One interesting facet of this resistance is the witches who gather monthly upon the full moon to bind the president from doing harm to those he has made targets of violence through his speeches, tweets, and policy.<sup>2</sup>

According to journalist Tara Burton, who spoke with a few of the witches who participate in this monthly ritual, “The spell, a variant on a traditional ‘binding’ spell found in many contemporary neo-pagan and other occult practices, involves channeling energy to limit Trump’s power, ‘so that he may fail utterly/that he may do no harm’ (Practitioners have the option to add, ‘You’re fired.’).”<sup>3</sup> The witches suggest a shorter, orange candle to represent Trump alongside the more traditional black and white candles of the spell, but mention that a baby carrot or Cheetos will suffice. Those who wish to participate in the ritual are welcome to modify it to fit their personal practices.

These witches from all walks of life have come together through Twitter to perform this ritual. Witches organizing under the hashtag #MagicalResistance have performed the monthly spells in their homes by themselves, in local gatherings, and even outside of Trump Tower. They come together because “share a passion for the collective

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<sup>1</sup> Heaney, Michael. "Activism in an Era of Partisan Polarization." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 50, no. 4 (2017): 1000-003.

<sup>2</sup> Burton, Tara Isabella. "Each Month, Thousands of Witches Cast a Spell against Donald Trump." *Vox*. Last modified October 30, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

aspect of their practice, allowing them to channel feelings of powerlessness about the current administration, while reviving a sense of community and ritual many report missing from their daily experience.”<sup>4</sup> During a time with an intensively divisive political climate, these witches have found solidarity in the practicing of their craft and the friendship of their fellow witchcraft practitioners.

Witches have the ability to symbolize myriad things depending on who is interpreting them. Some, such as these witches-turned-activists, view the figure of the witch as a symbol of the power within themselves, and that which has escaped them during the time since the election<sup>5</sup>. To others, she has been a figure of terror, a scapegoat for the ills of society<sup>6</sup>. However, it’s hard not to see the significance the witch in the post-Trump era. Women who gather in groups to conjure and share power, especially in a world where they are actively being stripped of it, is not a coincidental occurrence.

In addition to the gathering of women for the Women’s March<sup>7</sup> and rallies around immigrants’ rights,<sup>8</sup> this resistance also brought about a revival of the feminist activist group W.I.T.C.H., who used the iconography of the witch as a means for attention-grabbing “zap” actions in the late 1960’s. The original W.I.T.C.H. (Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell) was established by a group of radical

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Arsal, Serap Y., and Seda Yavuz. "The Portrait of the ‘Scapegoat Woman’ as Witch." *Synergies Turquie*, no. 7 (2014): 167-78.

<sup>7</sup> Pollitt, Katha. "Women’s Fury Unleashed." *The Nation* 306, no. 3 (2018): 16-19.

<sup>8</sup> Grinberg, Emanuella, and Madison Park. "2nd Day of Protests over Trump's Immigration Policies." CNN. Last modified January 30, 2017.

feminist activists who were the product of multiple splits within the leftist movements of the 60's. Having come from a tradition that emphasized capitalism's role within the oppression of women, as well as the importance of public actions, W.I.T.C.H. activists began their work within New York Radical Women at the Miss America protest. Following the media attention it garnered, W.I.T.C.H. sought to replicate the success of this protest and build upon the momentum it had created. Though W.I.T.C.H. was only active for a few years, and managed to attract the ire of both their feminist cohort and anti-feminists of the time, their costume and protests left their mark within the history of radical feminism.

The new W.I.T.C.H. activists, who have updated the acronym to stand for Women's International Troublemaker Conspiracy from Hell, have forged their own identity and created a uniquely modern approach to their collective activism, while taking on some of the theatrical presentation utilized the W.I.T.C.H. of the second-wave. Spearheaded by activists out of Portland, Oregon, this iteration of W.I.T.C.H. has, like its predecessors, spread across the country, and encouraged activists to come together under the umbrella of W.I.T.C.H., provided that they remain anonymous.

The merging of witchcraft and feminist activism, much like W.I.T.C.H. itself, is not exclusive to this post-Trump era, however. Feminism and witchcraft are entangled in ways that predate the original convergence of W.I.T.C.H, and understanding this relationship is vital to deciphering the ways in which witchcraft and W.I.T.C.H. have both previously and currently worked to fight against patriarchal values. In order to interrogate this relationship further, I am looking at the ways in which W.I.T.C.H., both



past and present, build on the scholarship of other feminist activists, and have utilized the ties between women and witches to form a collective activist identity.

In order to establish a strong history of witchcraft and its relation to the feminist movement, I will first be looking at the written history of witchcraft, particularly as it relates to women, during the European witch trials. These trials were the basis for the inclusion of the witch within the feminist movement, as the out-casted, over-policed, and vilified figure of the witch was one that feminist women saw themselves in as early as the fight for suffrage. This history leads to suffragists' use of the witch as an analogy for how society, and more specifically the church, scapegoated women for the ills of society<sup>9</sup>. Following the claims of suffragists, Wicca as a religion was established and created a new consciousness surrounding the witch and the power which she possessed, rather than the violence that was inflicted upon her. Feminists then utilized this framework of the Wiccan witch to establish their own feminist witchcraft, as well as celebrate the divine feminine in the process.

I will then review the history of the radical feminist group W.I.T.C.H., looking at the actions and methods of the group during their short-lived tenure in the late 60's as well as the current iteration of the group which has surfaced since the election of Trump. To properly chart the formation of this group, it will be necessary to look at the dynamics of group formation and transformation that created and ended them. This will help to contextualize the creation and actions of W.I.T.C.H within and alongside the radical feminist movement, and situate them in contrast to the liberal feminist movement of the

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<sup>9</sup> Gage, Matilda Joslyn. *Woman, Church and State: A Historical Account of the Status of Woman through the Christian Ages: With Reminiscences of Matriarchate*. Nineteenth Century Collections Online (NCCO): Women: Transnational Networks. Chicago: C. H. Kerr, 1893.

time. This information will then be used to determine the ways that W.I.T.C.H. has used the archetype of the witch and the history of witches in their activism, as well as how the witch a symbol is utilized to form the collective identity of the activist group.

In order to address the current iteration of W.I.T.C.H., starting with the formation of W.I.T.C.H. PDX out of Portland, Oregon, it will be necessary to collect data both from available interviews as well as their internet presence, the main form of information dissemination, as these are the primary sources of information regarding the group at this time. The current chapters utilize social media, primarily Twitter and Instagram, to disseminate information relative to current social activism, both within the groups and surrounding issues that W.I.T.C.H. has interest in. In order to paint a picture of the current W.I.T.C.H. covens, I examine these resources for information regarding their relation to the previous movement, their current actions, and the place of witchcraft within their activism. Prior studies have used online presences in novel ways to study social movements' identity work, such as in regards to the vegan<sup>10</sup> and environmental<sup>11</sup> movements, as well as and the contribution of social media to social movements in conflict.<sup>12</sup> Theories of identity work have also been utilized to look at the formation of

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<sup>10</sup> Sneijder, Petra and Hedwig Te Molder. "Normalizing Ideological Food Choice and Eating Practices. Identity Work in Online Discussions on Veganism." *Appetite* 52, no. 3 (2009): 621-30.

<sup>11</sup> Ackland, Robert, and Mathieu O'Neil. "Online Collective Identity: The Case of the Environmental Movement." *Social Networks* 33, no. 3 (2011): 177-90.

<sup>12</sup> Gray, Chris Hables. "Social Media in Conflict: Comparing Military and Social-Movement Technocultures." *Cultural Politics* 10, no. 3 (2014): 251-61.

second-wave feminist identities both liberal and radical,<sup>13</sup> as well as identity work among teens who embrace Satanic<sup>14</sup> and witchy identities.

Utilizing this combined information, I conduct an analysis of the place of witchcraft within W.I.T.C.H., both past and present, as well as the way their activism can speak to the relevancy of witchcraft to radical feminist thought and action. This will be done utilizing the theory of identity work<sup>15</sup> to analyze the ways that social movements form their identities based upon their similarities to each other and differences from the opposition. I will examine the ways in which W.I.T.C.H. relates to the historic figure of the witch in order to form a collective identity within separate covens in distinct geographic locations and without a unifying hierarchy or cohesive overarching structure, and how this separates them from the capitalist patriarchy they oppose.

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<sup>13</sup> Roth, Benita. "The Reconstruction of Collective Identity in the Emergence of U.S. White Women's Liberation." In *Identity Work in Social Movements*, edited by Jo Reger, Daniel J. Myers, and Rachel L. Einwohner. *Social Movements, Protest, and Contention* 30. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Fine, Gary Alan, and Jeffrey Victor. "Satanic Tourism: Adolescent Dabblers and Identity Work." *Phi Delta Kappan* 76, no. 1 (1994): 70-72.

<sup>15</sup> Snow, David A., and Catherine Corrigan-Brown. "Collective Identity." In *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, edited by James D. Wright, 174-80. 2nd ed. Elsevier, 2015.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE HISTORY OF WITCHCRAFT AND FEMINISM

Most notably, witches and their craft came under fire during the witch trials. This persecution was an orchestrated effort by the combined forces of the Church and the State. The Bible, which states “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live,”<sup>16</sup> combined with the witch-hunter’s handbook, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, were utilized in the accusation, trial, torture and execution of the supposed witches.<sup>17</sup> While the idea that those accused were actually practitioners of what would be considered modern-day witchcraft is no longer widely believed, this was not the case during these trials, and it cost an estimated 100,000 their lives.

The most noted opinion to the contrary came from Margaret Alice Murray in her 1921 book *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*. To develop her witch-cult hypothesis, Murray operationalized the confessions of accused witches as ethnography and concluded that these women were really part of an ancient, organized religion. She analyzed these confessions for the truth they included and believed that because not all of these confessions were gathered while the subject was under duress, and were often very similar in an age pre-dating mass communication, they must point to an underground witch-cult of sorts and include some common thread of truth. She also believed that the Christian images of Satanic worship were drawn from the images of the horned god of these ancient witchcrafts, and this allowed the persecutors of the witch hunts to draw the

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<sup>16</sup> Ex. 22:18

<sup>17</sup> Llewellyn Barstow, Anne. *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts*. San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1994.

conclusion that witches worshipped Satan. Much of Murray's research has since been discredited, but her process of taking women at their word remains a revolutionary concept. Her idea of this ancient witch-cult has also survived in common understandings of witchcraft as an ancient and natural religion, contributing to its conflation with other non-Christian traditional religions.

Most scholars now agree that those accused of being witches were overwhelmingly Christian, rather than part of some ancient cult or organized religion. This leads to an understanding of the ways in which witches were persecuted that is even more sinister. While there was no solid description of the person who could be described as a witch, "old, unattractive, disliked, and female,"<sup>18</sup> applied to the majority of the victims of the witch trials. This did not exclude children or men from being accused and tried for witchcraft, but it does point to the greater misogyny at work in the ruling forces' definition of who could be a witch. This bias led to eighty percent of those accused of witchcraft being women, and women made up 85% of those killed throughout the history of the witch trials.<sup>19</sup>

The number of witches executed during the course of these trials has been debated, as it is difficult to arrive at an accurate number due to the lack of records available, and the sporadic availability of information when they are.<sup>20</sup> It is now widely accepted among scholars that the number of women executed for witchcraft was less than nine million. According to Barstow's research, it is estimated that 200,000 women were

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<sup>18</sup> Llewellyn Barstow, Anne. *Witchcraze*, 16.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

accused of witchcraft in Europe and that there was an approximate death rate of 50%, which mirrors Voltaire's statement of 100,000 dead following the witch trials.<sup>21</sup> These statistics have been the subject of scholarly debate, and differ wildly from the information that would have been available at the time of W.I.T.C.H.'s formation.<sup>22</sup> This misinformation regarding witchcraft and the witch trials was (and remains) common, but understanding the knowledge base that W.I.T.C.H. would have been working with at their formation is critical to analyzing their activism.

The targeting of women in particular during the witch trials was based in two ruling ideologies of the time: the Christian beliefs of the inherent evil of women and their need to be subjugated by men, as well as the greater fear of women who did not acquiesce to this proscribed role. One way in which the women were thought to be evil was in the realm of sex. With a puritanical understanding of sexual values, any enjoyment of sex by either men or women under the church was considered a sin. According to Barstow, women's sexual fantasies and feelings of sexual guilt may have influenced their willingness to confess to crimes of witchcraft and collusion with the devil. In a society which punished women for their sexual agency, and working in combination with threats of torture and death, even a false confession could end the inquisition and would have been seen as preferable to the continued pain and ridicule.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>22</sup> Ehrenreich, Barbara & Deidre English. *Witches, Midwives, & Nurses*. Feminist Press at CUNY, New York, NY, 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Llewellyn Barstow, Anne. *Witchcraze*, 16.

Another population of women considered to be dangerous were those who engaged in their own work or endeavors, such as healing. Healers were placed in a double-bind within a faith-driven society without an understanding of medicine. Because there was no distinction made between a “good witch” and a “bad witch,” a healer who successfully eased an ailment could be seen as equally guilty as a midwife who delivered a stillborn child.<sup>24</sup> Any outcome could be attributed to consorting with the devil and assigned a malicious intent, regardless of whether this outcome was positive or negative.

The study of medicine and legitimization of physicians within institutions of education did not save the lay healer from witchcraft accusations. Even when medicine was beginning to develop and gain traction in the upper classes of society, lay healers and those who offered remedies were still relegated to the outskirts and now posed a financial threat to the growing populations of educated physicians.<sup>25</sup> Despite evidence that folk medicine was more successful than the practices of these newly trained physicians, who often lacked the practical experience that lay healers brought to the craft, the distrust of common healers was enough to accuse them of witchcraft.

Beginning in the suffrage movement, women identified with the figure of the witch as a figurehead depicting plight of women. In her *Women, Church, and State*,<sup>26</sup> Matilda Joslyn Gage applied the rhetoric of the witch hunts to describe the role of women in patriarchal societies. She argued that women were subjugated by their husbands at the

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<sup>24</sup> Ehrenreich, Barbara & Deidre English. *Witches, Midwives, & Nurses*.

<sup>25</sup> Llewellyn Barstow, Anne. *Witchcraze*.

<sup>26</sup> Gage, Matilda Joslyn. *Woman, Church and State*.

behest of the Christian church through their doctrine. Women were still regarded as dangerously susceptible to sin, and the more ambitious or odd they were, the more likely they were in league with the Devil. Rationalization for the equation of the sinful with womanhood was Eve's original sin in the Garden of Eden. In her criticism of the role that Christianity played in denying women basic human rights, Gage said, "When for witches we read women, we gain a fuller comprehension of the cruelties inflicted by the church upon this portion of humanity."<sup>27</sup>

This understanding of the burden of the witch's history would follow feminists into the second wave. Mary Daly<sup>28</sup>, feminist theologian, advocated for the reclamation of the term witch, claiming that the patriarchy exploited the term in order to scapegoat women that were deemed out of line. The name of the witch brings to mind both the genocide of the witch hunts as well as the rebellious nature of the figure. According to Kathleen Skott-Myhre, author of *Feminist Spirituality under Capitalism*: "The term witch has historically been fraught with genocidal implications as well as holding potential for rebellion premised in the subjugated knowledges and alternative creative potentials of women's ways of knowing."<sup>29</sup> Daly contextualized her understanding of the witch within Murray's concept of the witch as witty, or knowing, and that it is women's knowing that

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Daly wrote extensively on the ways in which the Christian church has weaponized patriarchy to oppress women as a professor at Boston College, which nearly cost her her career at the Jesuit-run institution. She was then notably forced into retirement following controversy over her refusal to allow men into her upper-level Women's Studies courses. For further work and biography, see *The Mary Daly Reader*, edited by Jennifer Rycenga.

<sup>29</sup> Skott-Myhre, Kathleen. *Feminist Spirituality under Capitalism: Witches, Fairies, and Nomads*. Concepts for Critical Psychology: Disciplinary Boundaries Re-Thought. New York: Routledge, 2018, 26.



brings this assumption of magic upon them<sup>30</sup>. This is likened to the biblical story of the Fall, which positions woman as the source of original sin because of her consumption and sharing of knowledge. Daly uses this metaphor of Eve's coming into knowledge to liken the second-wave action of consciousness-raising to the ingestion of the forbidden fruit.

Robin Morgan, one of the founding members of W.I.T.C.H., described the place of witchcraft within feminist spirituality so:

And so, while some sisters continue to batter away at the discrimination from within patriarchal religions (those dear uppity nuns, those intrepid women ministers and rabbis and priests), many other women are researching the original matriarchal faiths and philosophies which most anthropologists now agree predated patriarchal ones – and there is an accompanying revival of interest in Wicca, or the Craft of the Wise: witchcraft (as the highly sophisticated and lyrical nature philosophy it is – not the satanic weirdo fringe that the patriarchy would have us believe it is).<sup>31</sup>

She too relates to witchcraft as a knowledge maligned by male supremacy, and presents it as a feminist alternative to traditional male-led religions, such as Catholicism, Judaism, and Christianity. Ideology such as this also valorizes witchcraft as being *the* ancient, matriarchal faith, and capitalizes on understandings of witchcraft such as that which Murray put forth in her witch-cult hypothesis.

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<sup>30</sup> Daly, Mary. *The Mary Daly Reader*. Edited by Jennifer Rycenga. New York: NYU Press, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Morgan, Robin. *Going Too Far: The Personal Chronicle of a Feminist*. 1st ed. New York: Random House, 1977, 11.

Nearly simultaneously with the rise of the second-wave feminist movement, Wicca was gaining popularity in the United States. This movement was being molded by the burgeoning feminist movement and criticism of patriarchal religions, which in turn lead feminists toward the ideology prevalent in Wicca.<sup>32</sup> The practice itself is credited to Gerald B. Gardner, who said that Wicca was shared with him by a friendly coven of witches. Referred to as Gardnerian Wicca, these rituals center around the female Goddess and male God, and the craft is a product of their opposite natures interacting with each other. In these rituals, the Goddess, embodied by the High Priestess, is said to be central, however, in order to perform the rituals, both male and female practitioners are needed. In order to ensure the proper ratio, Gardner encouraged covens where heterosexual couples joined together.

Departing from Gardnerian Wicca's dualism is Dianic Wicca. Zsuzsanna Budapest formed the Susan B Anthony Coven #1 during the 1970's in Los Angeles, which practiced "Dianic Wicca," or a Wicca that was goddess-centered.<sup>33</sup> Dianic Wicca is imbued with strong feminist rhetoric, and centers the destruction of the patriarchy within the craft. These covens were mostly free of men, and when men were allowed to be present, it was only those who would protect the practitioners from other men while they were performing rituals. During these rituals, male participants were required to turn their back on the circle and meditate on their service of the Great Goddess. Budapest, and

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<sup>32</sup> McClure, Amy. "'Becoming a Parent Changes Everything': How Nonbeliever and Pagan Parents Manage Stigma in the U.S. Bible Belt." *Qualitative Sociology* 40, no. 3 (2017): 331-52.

<sup>33</sup> Pearson, Jo. "Resisting Rhetorics of Violence: Women, Witches and Wicca." *Feminist Theology* 18, no. 2 (2010): 141-59.

this coven in particular, worked to promote identification within the goddess outside of witchcraft within feminist circles, regardless of association with a pagan identity.<sup>34</sup>

This image of the Goddess and the witch who worships her often relies heavily on her maternal nature, valorizing this state of being. This reproduces the idea of inherent difference between the genders, and serves to paint women as more natural, as nurturers, and as more peaceful. These views, while more celebrated within a cultural feminist ideology, are rejected by the radical feminist and politico ideology that W.I.T.C.H. embraced. It also creates a false equivalency between biology and womanhood, excluding those who do not conform to traditional standards of female identity. In the quest to depart from patriarchal control, the goddess ends up reproducing it:

However, reviving Goddess-worship is not automatically a simple step forward for feminism. The Goddess as envisaged by modern witchcraft is not the female-authored figure she appears to be, but a male fantasy borrowed from men's writings, and women have not altogether evaded the problems this creates.

Instead, the Goddess has been embraced by women who are attached to some of her most problematic features.<sup>35</sup>

While these initial forms of Wicca stressed a strong tie to gender, and even excluded transgender participants, modern practitioners tend to be more open-minded regarding the roles that gender can play in Wicca.<sup>36</sup> “[I]t is not uncommon for Pagans to

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<sup>34</sup> Grennier, Bobbie. "Sisterhood." Susan B. Anthony Coven. Last modified 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Purkiss, Diane. *The Witch in History Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations*. London; New York: Routledge, 1996, 32.

<sup>36</sup> McClure, Amy. "Becoming a Parent Changes Everything."

disparage what they see as sexism in other religions.”<sup>37</sup> A majority of Pagans surveyed emphasized the equality in the gender of their gods and goddesses, with a smaller number emphasizing goddess worship.

The move towards a craft that is less dependent on traditional gender roles and norms is a slow one, but the shift seems to imply that the rigid essentialism of early Wicca is a relic of the time in which it was conceived, rather than inherent to the practice of the craft itself. Despite this transition, the majority of young witches in a 2007 study did not identify as feminists, despite citing influences from the feminist movement.<sup>38</sup>

This brings us to the purported divide in the ways in which some Wiccans and feminists engage with the role of the witch. Indisputably, the archetype of the witch is one that is imbued with violence: both that which is done to her, and that which she inflicts upon another.<sup>39</sup> Jo Pearson, an academic and Wiccan priestess, critiques Wiccans and feminists as the two groups that she sees engaging with this archetype. While Wiccans choose to engage with the violence the witch does to others, they are perceived as distancing themselves from violence done to witches, whereas feminists focus on the violence done to witches, but ignore the violence inherent in witchcraft. This violence is physical, psychological, patriarchal, silencing, magical, and mimetic, and Pearson uses

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<sup>37</sup> Oboler, Regina Smith. "Negotiating Gender Essentialism in Contemporary Paganism." *Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 12, no. 2 (2011): 159-184.

<sup>38</sup> Berger, Helen, and Douglas Ezzy. *Teenage Witchcraft: Magical Youth and the Search for the Self*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007.

<sup>39</sup> Pearson, Jo. "Resisting Rhetorics of Violence."

these categories to identify the ways in which both Wiccans and feminists cling to certain attributes of the witch's violence, while ignoring others.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the utilization of the witch narrative by feminists for over a century and the rise in popularity of witchcraft and Wicca practices, the figure of the witch still has not shed all of her negative image. When discussing the vilification of Hillary Clinton during the 2016 election, Sollée writes: “[w]hen ‘bitch’ won’t suffice to denigrate a woman, ‘witch’ adds an element of supernatural evil that has no male equivalent in common use.”<sup>41</sup> Though calling a woman a witch today will not get her burned at the stake, the word still carries a certain weight when applied as a pejorative. When a woman is called a witch, it is not a comment on her power or spirituality, but rather an attempt to take her power away.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>41</sup> Sollée, Kristen J. *Witches, Sluts, Feminists: Conjuring the Sex Positive*. Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press, 2017, 57.

## CHAPTER 3

### W.I.T.C.H. IN THE SECOND WAVE

The radical departure from the liberal feminist movement has been characterized in relation to several key differences: values, past experiences, their point of reference, expectations, and target group relationships.<sup>42</sup> Many of these differences came from the difference in age and networks that between these activists. In particular, these differences were observable in the ways that liberal and radical feminists structured their organization; while liberal feminists embraced an organizational hierarchy within organizations such as the National Organization for Women (NOW), radical women who split from the New Left because of patriarchal hierarchies that had kept them down worked against replicating these hierarchies within their organizations.

Radical feminism grew out of the radical left movements of the time, such as civil rights activists groups and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). These groups are identified under the moniker of the New Left in order to differentiate themselves from previous leftist activism, such as communist movements within the decades prior<sup>43</sup>. The push for radical feminism was led by women who were frustrated with the idea that the oppression of women was just a symptom of capitalism, and that their station within the leftist movement was defined based on traditional gender roles. This contrasted with liberal feminism's goal of equality within the systems that maintained the status quo.

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<sup>42</sup> Freeman, Jo. "A Model for Analyzing the Strategic Options of Social Movement Organizations." In *Waves of Protest: Social Movements Since the Sixties*, edited by Jo Freeman and Victoria Johnson. People, Passions, and Power: Social Movements, Interest Organizations, and the Political Process. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999.

<sup>43</sup> Echols, Alice. *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 1989, 15.

Liberal feminists argued that the family was the source of female oppression in the public domain.

Referring to the roots of the radical feminist movement, historian Alice Echols wrote:

Although it is instructive to locate radical feminism within the feminist tradition, one cannot really comprehend radical feminism unless one situates it within the '60's movements from which it emerged. For while radical feminism was fiercely critical of the Movement's trivialization of women, it was in many respects intellectually and ideologically indebted to it.<sup>44</sup>

The first major effort of radical feminists in the second wave was to repeal the law against abortion. This struggle was imperative to the movement as it was grounded in a woman's right to control her fertility, and therefore her life. Abortion as a primary concern came about through the concept of consciousness-raising, which was vital to understanding women's issues on a collective level, and establishing the importance of women's daily concerns. Discussing the utility of consciousness-raising, writer and journalist Ellen Willis says:

Radical feminists professed a radical skepticism toward existing political theories, directed as they were toward the study of "man," and emphasized "consciousness-raising" – the process of sharing and analyzing our own experience in a group – as the primary method of understanding women's condition. This process, so often misunderstood and disparaged as a form of therapy, uncovered an enormous

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<sup>44</sup> Echols, Alice. *Daring to Be Bad*, 15.

among of information about women's lives and insights into women's oppression, and was the movements most successful organizing tool.<sup>45</sup>

For middle-class white women, “[r]adical feminism did exactly what its opponents accuse it of: it played a key role in subverting traditional values and destabilizing the family.”<sup>46</sup> While this goal was somewhat realized following extensive efforts during the second wave, those who were not a part of this privileged class had a more difficult time realizing this version of the American dream. As to why the movement attracted a mostly white membership, Willis states: “The question of why the radical feminist movement was overwhelmingly white and mostly middle class is complex, but one reason is surely that most black and working-class women could not accept the abstraction of feminist issues from race and class issues, since the latter were so central to their lives.”<sup>47</sup>

Because radical feminism was fed from a diverse grouping of 60's movements, there were many disagreements and fissures within the movement. When W.I.T.C.H. split from New York Radical Women, it was along a longstanding and continually stressed “politico-feminist cleavage.” The politico identity was based within the leftist organizations from which much of the group's membership had emerged, and identified capitalism as the main source of women's oppression.

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<sup>45</sup> Willis, Ellen. *No More Nice Girls : Countercultural Essays*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1992, 121.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.



W.I.T.C.H. was born out of the surge of interest in feminist activism and the New York Radical Women following the Miss America protest. Utilizing the name W.I.T.C.H. serves to reference the outsider status of women throughout history, by invoking the name of the ultimate female transgressor. This also served as a timely ode to the so-called witch-hunts of the House Un-American Activities Committee during their investigation into communism.<sup>48</sup> This investigation was famously allegorized in *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller in 1953, which used the Salem Witch Trials in order to highlight the tense, anxious atmosphere of this time.

According to Robin Morgan, who founded W.I.T.C.H. with other women breaking out of this group, the group was no longer able to hold the consciousness-raising meetings that had defined it up until this point. This led to the necessity to split into smaller groups, though this was coupled with the intention of monthly greater meetings. These smaller groups, however, split along political lines and formed their own organizations.<sup>49</sup> The deciding factor in this split was the Miss America protest. Morgan, along with New York Radical Women, was instrumental in the notorious Miss America protest in 1968.<sup>50</sup> Utilizing her ties to media from her days as a child actress, the protests ended up being organized primarily by Morgan, much to the chagrin of fellow activists. However, these ties ended up elevating the visibility of the protests.

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<sup>48</sup> Bradley, Patricia. *Mass Media and the Shaping of American Feminism, 1963-1975*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004.

<sup>49</sup> Morgan, Robin. *Going Too Far*, 71.

<sup>50</sup> Echols, Alice. *Daring to Be Bad*, 95.

Those who resented her for this control viewed the message of the protest as an attack on the participants rather than the pageant itself, which had been the intended target. By using slogans such as “Up Against the Wall, Miss America”, the ire at a patriarchal system that created impossible, sexist roles for women was shifted onto the backs of the women themselves, blaming them for their participation in the pageant.<sup>51</sup> This would become a recurring theme in the activism of W.I.T.C.H. as well.<sup>52</sup>

In the way, the Miss America protests managed to both put the women’s liberation movement on the map, and further destabilize an already split New York Radical Women.<sup>53</sup> New York Radical Women was already split between two groups: radical feminists and politcos. According to Echols, “The demonstration aggravated tensions between pro-woman radical feminists who felt that the protest conclusively proved the need for continued consciousness raising and politcos who felt that the movement had finally shown what it was capable of in Atlantic City.”<sup>54</sup>

Following the upset of the Miss America protests, and chasing the momentum of the action, Robin Morgan, Florika Remetier, Peggy Dobbins, Judy Duffett, Cynthia Funk, Naomi Jaffe and other activists to make the thirteen needed for a proper coven formed W.I.T.C.H., or the Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell<sup>55</sup>, to satisfy the need for more political action. As Morgan said in her “Take a Memo, Mr. Smith,” they

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

were “not resting on any laurels,”<sup>56</sup> after the success of this protest and the attention it had received. There was a serious frustration stemming from the idea that the endless meetings were no more than that, and that now was the time for action.

The first zap action that W.I.T.C.H. performed together occurred on Halloween 1968.<sup>57</sup> Titled “Up Against the Wall Street,”<sup>58</sup> this action was aimed at criticizing the greedy nature of Wall Street’s capitalism. The witches requested an audience with Satan at the New York Stock Exchange, carrying a faux roasted boars head and singing: “Wall Street, Wall Street/Mightiest Wall of all street/Trick or Treat/The corporate elite/Up against the Wall Street...”<sup>59</sup> Juxtaposed against the well-dressed bankers of the district, the witches appeared dressed in black and wearing hats, embodying the spirit of the witch in appearance and attitude.

Critics of this action, particularly radical feminists, felt that the message of the protest had more to do with fighting capitalism than advancing the rights of women. However, this was just the beginning of their zaps. The inertia of the movement spread quickly following this protest. Members of W.I.T.C.H. took to the streets of New York City, exorcising “girlie burlesque houses.” They placed stickers over ads for diet soda

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<sup>56</sup> Morgan, Robin. *Going Too Far*, 69.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>58</sup> Morgan, Robin. *Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement*. 1st Ed. New York: Random House, 1970.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 556.

and cigarettes, on George Washington, men's rooms, and the doors of known white supremacists.<sup>60</sup>

In February of 1969 at a bridal convention in New York City, W.I.T.C.H. performed one of their most memorable, and problematic, zap actions. They plastered the city with stickers reading: "Confront the Whore-makers at the Bridal Fair," which was a play on the "Confront the Warmakers" slogan of the anti-war movement, and chanted "Here come the slaves/off to their graves."<sup>61</sup> They held an "un-wedding ceremony" while gathered in a circle, wearing black veils. At the end of their demonstration, W.I.T.C.H. members released into the crowd white mice, symbolizing the act of marriage as mindless.<sup>62</sup>

Major critics of this action noted that, by calling the women's fiancé's "whore-makers," they were implying that the women themselves were whores.<sup>63</sup> They also critiqued Morgan in particular for organizing such an action at a bridal fair, because she was married herself. There was also serious concern that bashing marriage was futile without offering women something else. Karla Jay, an academic who was also engaged in feminist activism at the time, commented that: "Marriage might be slavery, but we had to offer a positive alternative before we encouraged women to abandon matrimony."<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Morgan, Robin. *Going Too Far*, 74.

<sup>62</sup> Bradley, Patricia. *Mass Media and the Shaping of American Feminism, 1963-1975*.

<sup>63</sup> Alice Echols. *Daring to Be Bad*, 97.

<sup>64</sup> Jay, Karla. *Tales of the Lavender Menace: A Memoir of Liberation*. New York: Basic Books, 1999, 38.

In Echols' historical analysis, she remembers: "Radical feminists excoriated W.I.T.C.H. for reinforcing sexist stereotypes and noted with pleasure that the women attending the fair did not respond by scrambling desperately to stand on their chairs but, rather, tried to save the mice."<sup>65</sup> She goes on to add: "What made W.I.T.C.H. especially galling to radical feminists was that it was immediately embraced by the left as embodying the right kind of feminism, one that attacked 'the system' and eschewed consciousness-raising."<sup>66</sup>

In Washington, D.C., W.I.T.C.H. hexed the United Fruit Company in protest of their repressive relationship with the countries they imported their goods from, as well as how they treated their female employees in the United States. Utilizing the clever rhymes common in other actions, they chanted: "Bananas and rifles, sugar and death/War for profit, tarantulas' breath-/United Fruit makes lots of loot/The CIA is in its boot."<sup>67</sup>

In Chicago, W.I.T.C.H. organized a hex on the University of Chicago's Sociology department following the firing of a popular female professor, sending hair and nail clippings to the university. Describing the tactics utilized, W.I.T.C.H. wrote:

Your weapons are theater, satire, explosions, magic, herbs, music, costumes, cameras, masks, chants, stickers, stencils and paint, films, tambourines, bricks, brooms, guns, voodoo dolls, cats, candles, bells, chalk, nail clippings, hand grenades, poison rings, fuses, tape recorders, incense – your own boundless beautiful imagination. Your power comes from your own self as a woman, and it

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<sup>65</sup> Echols, Alice. *Daring to Be Bad*, 98.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>67</sup> Morgan, Robin. *Sisterhood Is Powerful*.

is activated by working in concert with your sisters. The power of the Coven is more than the sum of its individual members, because it is *together*.<sup>68</sup>

In this description it becomes clear that while the physical objects certainly played a part, it was more important that the group had gathered to plan this action.

In February of 1970, the Washington witches crashed a Senate hearing on population control, chanting: “We are witches. We have to come to yell/You population experts/Can go to hell.”<sup>69</sup> They stole microphones and the attention of the room, changing swiftly into their witch garb, and throwing pills at the panel and audience while scolding them with: “[y]ou think you can cure all the world’s ills, by making poor women take your unhealthy pills,”<sup>70</sup> during their skit. Their concern was over the danger of early birth control medications, and designed to draw attention to the overlooked complications that women were suffering from using them.

Though the initial understanding was that W.I.T.C.H. stood for “Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell,” the acronym came to stand for whatever cause was being protested or highlighted at the time. During a Mother’s Day protest, they were the “Women Infuriated at Taking Care of Hoodlums.” Employees of the Traveler’s insurance company took up the name “Women Indentured to Traveler’s Corporate Hell.” When the opposition was Bell Telephone company, they were “Women Incensed at Telephone Company Harassment.” Midwestern W.I.T.C.H. activists organized as

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 540.

<sup>69</sup> Bradley, Patricia. *Mass Media and the Shaping of American Feminism, 1963-1975*, 64.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 64.

“Women’s Independent Taxpayers, Consumers and Homemakers.”<sup>71</sup> The shift in names, meant to allow for flexibility in adapting to zap actions, can also serve as a metaphor for the ways in which the figure of the witch went from being an orchestrator of violence, committing terrorism, to a tamer protestor of capitalism. Diane Purkiss, academic and author of *The Witch in History*, describes this transition as being indicative of, “the extraordinary flexibility of the term ‘witch’ as a signifier within feminist discourse.”<sup>72</sup>

A mainstay of W.I.T.C.H. activism was humor, sometimes to the detriment of the meaning. While this helped attain the level of visibility the activists were aiming for, catchy phrases often obscured or entirely missed the point of the activist projects. For W.I.T.C.H. themselves, the inspiration for their attention-grabbing “zap” actions came from the Youth International Party, or Yippies, who employed these actions to shock rather than educate.<sup>73</sup> This caused backlash from other radical and liberal groups at the time, however, it did not stop them from joining in on W.I.T.C.H. protests: “Although the general wisdom among radical feminists in New York Radical Women was that W.I.T.C.H.’s feminism was rather ‘mealy-mouthed,’ a number of them did occasionally participate in W.I.T.C.H. actions because they too longed for activism.”<sup>74</sup> Despite what they observed as the more problematic actions of W.I.T.C.H., other movement women too desired to make things happen.

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<sup>71</sup> Morgan, Robin. *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, 540.

<sup>72</sup> Purkiss, Diane. *The Witch in History*, 9.

<sup>73</sup> Morgan, Robin. *Going Too Far*.

<sup>74</sup> Echols, Alice. *Daring to Be Bad*, 97.

The criticism W.I.T.C.H. faced did not fall on deaf ears. As Robin Morgan said, reflecting on the activism of W.I.T.C.H.:

We in W.I.T.C.H. always *meant* to do the real research, to read the anthropological, religious, and mythographic studies on the subject – but we never got around to it. We were too busy doing actions. We also meant to have more consciousness-raising meeting – but we were too busy doing actions. We meant to write some papers of theory and analysis – but we were too busy doing actions.<sup>75</sup>

Another aspect of the activism she regretted was not cultivating an atmosphere that took care of their members' needs.<sup>76</sup> Without the strong consciousness-raising base of other groups, it became hard to rally women underneath the W.I.T.C.H. banner in a sustained manner. This eventually led to the groups decline in the early 70's, as the group pulled back from their attention-grabbing activism to do more work more behind-the-scenes. Though their tenure was short, W.I.T.C.H. managed to cement the image of the witch as a radical resister within feminist thought.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 74.



## MANIFESTO

FOR CENTURIES, THE DOMINANT CULTURE HAS PERSECUTED ANYONE WHO DARES TO BE DIFFERENT. THE GENTLE HEALERS, THE MIDWIVES, THE QUEERS, THE LONERS, THE WISE ELDERS, THE PAGANS, THE FOREIGNERS, THE WILD WOMEN. DISSENT IS THREATENING TO THE STATUS QUO, ESPECIALLY WHEN IT'S SHROUDED IN UNFAMILIAR CUSTOMS AND THE MYSTERIOUS SACRED FEMININE. THOSE WHO SEEK TO OPPRESS AND SUPPRESS US HAVE ALWAYS CALLED US 'WITCHES' TO SILENCE US. NOW, WE STEP OUT OF THE SHADOWS, EMBRACING THIS WORD AND ALL IT STANDS FOR.

A WITCH IS A FEARSOME CREATURE, INSPIRING TERROR AND AWE, CHANNELING A PRIMAL, VISCERAL ENERGY IN THE NAME OF PEACE, PROGRESS, JUSTICE AND HARMONY. A WITCH IS A CONDUIT FOR TRANSFORMATION. A WITCH TAPS INTO THE POWER WITHIN AND HARNESSSES THE POWER WITHOUT IN SERVICE OF A BETTER WORLD.

A SINGLE WITCH IS A DANGEROUS OUTLIER. A COVEN IS A FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH. AN INTERNATIONAL CIRCLE OF WITCHES IS UNSTOPPABLE.

TOGETHER, WE ARE W.I.T.C.H. (WITCHES' INTERNATIONAL TROUBLEMAKER CONSPIRACY FROM HELL), REVIVING THE SPIRIT AND INTENTIONS OF THE 1960S ORGANIZATION OF THE SAME NAME. WE AIM TO USE OUR POWER TO FIGHT INJUSTICE IN ALL ITS INTERSECTIONAL FORMS, AND HELP DISMANTLE THE WHITE SUPREMACIST PATRIARCHAL SYSTEM THAT PERPETRATES IT. THE NEW GENERATION OF W.I.T.C.H. CONJURES OUR COLLECTIVE RAGE, JOY, GRIEF, STRENGTH, DETERMINATION AND FEROCITY INTO A FORCE FOR CHANGE.

WE WILL NOT CONFORM. WE WILL NOT OBEY. WE WILL NOT BE SILENT.

## CHAPTER 4

### W.I.T.C.H. PRESENT

In November of 2016, following the election of Donald Trump to presidency, the second iteration of W.I.T.C.H. came together in Portland, Oregon. The Portland group, stylized as W.I.T.C.H. PDX, positioned themselves as the beginning of a larger movement based around small, local groups based on location. Talking about their decision to form this activist group, they say:

A few of us have been kicking this idea around for years, and the election just galvanized us into action. Within days, we had our first meeting, started working on our costumes and grabbed a domain name. The time to do this was yesterday, but we're working hard to catch up. Apparently there was a trickle of articles published in various outlets last fall about the original W.I.T.C.H. that we didn't even notice at the time. Clearly people were ready for this group to reemerge.<sup>77</sup>

They keep a running website that details their manifesto (Fig. 1), who they are, a self-published e-zine, and instructions on how to form a local chapter as well as rules for association with W.I.T.C.H. PDX.

The instructions on the website list that a new chapter should claim a social media handle that includes within it both W.I.T.C.H. and the name of their respective neighborhood or city, and should ideally be no more no more than thirty in size. If groups become too large, they are encouraged to close new memberships and encourage activists to start a new group. Priority for starting new chapters is given to marginalized

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<sup>77</sup> "W.I.T.C.H. PDX: Portland Brings Back The Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell." Haute Macabre. Last modified January 27, 2017.

populations in order to encourage a diverse activist base, and W.I.T.C.H. PDX states that ideally, “[w]e would love it if priority in starting and organizing chapters were given to people of color and queer & trans people.”<sup>78</sup>

In addition to being a part of their intersectional feminist platform, this is presumably also a strong act towards differentiating themselves the gender essentialism that often presents itself in literature regarding witchcraft. To further accomplish this, W.I.T.C.H. states that their values are as follows: anti-racism, anti-fascism, anti-patriarchy, indigenous rights, gender self-determination, women’s liberation, trans liberation, anti-rape-culture, reproductive rights, sex worker support, LGBTQIA rights, environmental protection, religious freedom, immigrant rights, anti-war, anti-capitalism, disability justice, privacy rights, and worker’s rights.”<sup>79</sup>

While they utilized the name and uniform of the previous W.I.T.C.H. activists, the new W.I.T.C.H. covens have a wider and more defined platform than their predecessors, which they acknowledge:

We pick back up the mantle of our forebears and adapt their purpose and spirit to the modern era. For us, that means retaining their desire to dismantle the patriarchy and fight for justice using the symbol and innate power of the witch, while being inclusive to all genders and centering intersectionality and anti-oppression as our core values.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> W.I.T.C.H. - Witches' International Troublemaker Conspiracy From Hell. Last modified 2018.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

This is not just evident in the strong effort to combat gender essentialism, but also to center the issues of people of color within their activism, which is not always true of the larger, more liberal feminist movement<sup>81</sup>. They make clear mentions of the activist group Black Lives Matter within their website, and emphasize the necessity of diverse membership within covens.<sup>82</sup>

Since the start of W.I.T.C.H. PDX, many other social media handles have shown up representing local W.I.T.C.H. chapters. These include: Boston, Olympia, San Diego, New York, Phoenix, Lansing, MI, Los Angeles, Ft. Lauderdale, Austin, Paris, France, Juarez, Mexico, and many more as time progresses. Many of these chapters, though not directly associated with W.I.T.C.H. PDX, have organized their own protests, and promote similar issues and actions through their social media presences.

In their activism, W.I.T.C.H. groups have the freedom of a loose association with each other, which allows them to tackle the issues of their platform at the local, state and national level. They have participated in national actions such as the Women's March, but also organize smaller local protests within their covens based around where they determine there is local need. This local activism allows W.I.T.C.H. the opportunity to identify local concerns, as well as collaborate on the local level with activists who are already working on these issues.<sup>83</sup> Addressing the benefit of their location and localized activism, W.I.T.C.H. PDX states:

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<sup>81</sup> Biru, Bethel. "Women's March Unified Us, but Movement Falls Short of Intersectionality." *University Wire* (Carlsbad), January 31, 2018.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Marshall, Ann. "Organizing Across the Divide: Local Feminist Activism, Everyday Life, and the Election of Women to Public Office." *Social Science Quarterly* 83, no. 3 (2002): 707-725.

The Pacific Northwest has long been a hotbed of activism and radical thought, but also of racism. We're so close, geographically, to the birthplace of the Riot Grrrl movement, plus Portland has a vibrant queer community that's ahead of the curve in many ways on gender and other forms of social justice. But our city has a history of marginalizing and displacing people of color and Oregon as a whole has a violently racist past and a large population of white supremacists. There are a lot of things to work on right here. We're hoping to help effect change in our own community and inspire people to do the same nationwide.<sup>84</sup>

The content of the chapters' social media profiles varies. Often, they highlight current events, either in unique images or images reposted or retweeted from other activist groups. In addition to these, they highlight the chapter's involvement in actions local to the group, and encourage participation in other movements' activism. One example of this comes from the Instagram account of W.I.T.C.H. Lansing. It reads, "Want to hex a white supremacist? We do. Richard Spencer will be at the MSU livestock pavilion March 5th, from 4:30-6:30 PM. We know you'd love to give him a hex filled welcome."<sup>85</sup>

By leveraging the power of small, intimate groups of activists in a manner that mirrors the witch's coven, members are also able to form stronger ties to each other, which aids in retaining membership<sup>86</sup>. It creates ease in gathering and prevents members

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<sup>84</sup> "W.I.T.C.H. PDX." Haute Macabre.

<sup>85</sup> W.I.T.C.H. Lansing. Instagram update. January 28, 2018.

<sup>86</sup> Hurwitz, Heather McKee, and Verta Taylor. "Women's Cultures and Social Movements in Global Contexts." *Sociology Compass* 6, no. 10 (2012): 808-822.

from being lost in the crowd of a larger movement. This small group manner also fosters a stronger sense of belonging among individual members in a way that a larger group setting cannot<sup>87</sup>. The small group model allows the opportunity for members to take care of one another in the way that Morgan lamented her prior W.I.T.C.H. movement had missed the mark on during their earlier days.<sup>88</sup>

David A. Snow and Doug McAdam describe collective identity as a pivotal concept in social movement study.<sup>89</sup> In order to form a cohesive group and establish themselves as a united and separate entity opposed to their target, a collective identity must be established among a social movement's membership. Identity is both a central and problematic concept within movements, as the "we" of the movement's membership does not always exist in direct contradiction to the "they" of those opposed to the movement's goals, or those who have yet to be converted to the movement. This can make it difficult to arrive at a consensus in terms of group identity formation.

Despite these difficulties, in order to frame a coherent social movement identity, sameness and difference must be established in reference to targets, opponents and each other. Establishing these unique and homogenous identities is a process that consumes both time and resources, and can alienate memberships, causing fissures in the movement. This construction is both strategic and external; external identity is constructed with care, paying attention to the perceptions of the outside audiences, and

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<sup>87</sup> Lim, Chaeyoon. "Social Networks and Political Participation: How Do Networks Matter?" *Social Forces* 87, no. 2 (2009): 961-82.

<sup>88</sup> Morgan, Robin. *Going Too Far*.

<sup>89</sup> Reger, Jo, Daniel J. Myers, and Rachel L. Einwohner. *Identity Work in Social Movements: Social Movements, Protest and Contention*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

once it is constructed, group members must reconcile this new collective identity with their own personal identity. This is not a singular process, however; group identity is a process of constant negotiation, and is formed through the actions of the members, with a solid identity being the goal of this struggle. This collective identity is central to the ability of a group to participate in collective action, and must be combined with a sense of embeddedness from members in order to mobilize.<sup>90</sup>

In the radical feminist movement, the establishing of a collective identity came about in the recognition and criticism of the sexism faced within the New Left movement. As described by Benita Roth, professor of sociology and women's studies, in "The Reconstruction of Collective Identity in the Emergence of the U.S. White Women's Liberation," because of the dismissive and often hostile nature of the movement's reaction to women's claims regarding their status, there arose the need for a separate women's movement.<sup>91</sup> The struggle to establish a collective identity among these women was obvious in the continued negotiation and splintering that occurred following the split from the greater male-led Left. This involved discussions of the role of men in women's oppression, separation from the previous movement networks as the radical feminist movement took hold, and changing the focus of the effort from changing the minds of Leftist men to women as a whole.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Snow, David A., and Catherine Corrigall-Brown. "Collective Identity."

<sup>91</sup> Roth, Benita. "The Reconstruction of Collective Identity in the Emergence of U.S. White Women's Liberation." In *Identity Work in Social Movements*, edited by Jo Reger, Daniel J. Myers, and Rachel L. Einwohner. Social Movements, Protest, and Contention 30. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

In women-created cultures, feminist identities are given room to flourish. While these spaces have a history of being formed from women who have been excluded from the greater conversation, and sometimes out of necessity in sexist spaces, they allow women to establish a collective feminist identity, as well as create and grow solidarity that can last through hostile political environments.<sup>93</sup> This is particularly evident in the radical feminist movement of the second wave, and a useful concept for the creation and sustaining of a movement in the current political climate.

These women-centered cultures, particularly those which center around goddess worship or witchcraft, have also fostered what has been referred to as cultural or spiritual feminism.<sup>94</sup> Where radical feminism is focused on identifying establishing an identity around activism, cultural and spiritual feminism both work to cultivate first and foremost an identity around which women can then create these cultures. The emphasis within these identities is not on activism, but rather on individual and collective empowerment, and in some cases, spiritual fulfillment. While spiritual feminism is usually conflated with cultural feminism, and they both celebrate what are seen as essential experiences of womanhood, the presence of a strong drive towards religious fulfillment, within witchcraft or other religions, is used to differentiate the two.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Hurwitz, Heather McKee, and Verta Taylor. "Women's Cultures and Social Movements in Global Contexts."

<sup>94</sup> Griffin, Wendy. "Webs of Women: Feminist Spiritualities." In *Witchcraft and Magic: Contemporary North America*, edited by Berger, Helen A. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005.

<sup>95</sup> Zwissler, Laurel. "Witches' Tears: Spiritual Feminism, Epistemology, and Witch Hunt Horror Stories." *Pomegranate* 18, no. 2 (2016): 176-204.



Building upon the previous identity work done by these feminists, the current iteration of W.I.T.C.H. is working to further establish themselves in regard both the identity of the prior feminist movements, including the original W.I.T.C.H. activists, and the policies of Trump's presidency. While W.I.T.C.H. mobilizes the figure of the witch as a unifying identity, they deploy this identity as an activist one in order to further their platform of social change<sup>96</sup>. This identity differentiates the collective identity of W.I.T.C.H. from that of a Wiccan coven or cultural feminist gathering, which sees the collective identity of being witches as a spiritual end goal.

W.I.T.C.H. discourages newly established groups from hurrying towards public action. In their directions given to newly formed groups, the W.I.T.C.H. PDX website advises: "There's no need to rush. Think everything through. Keep educating yourselves, take inevitable criticism from fellow activists gracefully, examine your privileges and listen to those who don't have the same privileges. Grow and learn. Support each other. It's ok to be imperfect. We will all make mistakes. Commit to improvement. We're still learning, too."<sup>97</sup>

This is first done by clearly stating their platform on a stand-alone website, rather than on social media, where it may get lost in the buzz. Underneath this platform, there is a strong disclaimer: "We disavow any individuals or covens claiming the name of 'W.I.T.C.H.' and failing to uphold these values."<sup>98</sup> This allows the group, which as an

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<sup>96</sup> Bernstein, Mary. "Celebration and Suppression: The Strategic Uses of Identity by the Lesbian and Gay Movement." *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 3 (1997): 531-565.

<sup>97</sup> W.I.T.C.H. - Witches' International Troublemaker Conspiracy from Hell.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

anonymous entity may otherwise struggle to differentiate themselves from other movements, to disavow those who tout ideas they do not ascribe to. The disclaimer continues with: “Anyone publicly claiming to be one of us is not one of us – we are anonymous.”<sup>99</sup> In order to both further protect their anonymity and collective identity, those individuals who might attempt to align themselves with the movement erroneously are able to be quickly distanced the instant that they chose to name themselves.

The covens organized under the name W.I.T.C.H. recruit membership through their social media presences, both on Twitter and Instagram. This is also how they publicize protests they are attending (when these events are publicized), as well as share information about causes they support. These posts are reaffirmed through likes and comments on Instagram, or retweets and replies on Twitter,<sup>100</sup> respectively. Both platforms also offer direct messaging, or private messaging, through which one can correspond directly with users.

The format of Instagram displays a photograph with a caption posted by the original user, and then allows for a continued conversation below the image which followers can build upon. In looking at the Instagram posts made recently by W.I.T.C.H. PDX, there are a variety of topics covered in only several rows. Despite the different problems identified, all of these posts contribute to a factor of the holistic W.I.T.C.H. identity.

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Thomas, Briggs, Hart, and Kerrigan. "Understanding Social Media and Identity Work in Young People Transitioning to University." *Computers in Human Behavior* 76 (2017): 541-53.

The most recent post is an image of a smoldering burnt offering, held by a black-gloved hand, over a splattering of flower petals. The message underneath says that they are celebrating Ostara, a Neo-pagan holiday celebrating the coming of spring<sup>101</sup>. Next, to celebrate International Women's Day, W.I.T.C.H. shared an image of several cartoon women of various ages and ethnicities, along with a message regarding intersectionality and paying special attention to immigrants' rights, Black Lives Matter, disability rights, and environmental justice<sup>102</sup>. The final photo in the first row is of Phylcia Mitchell, a transwoman of color who was murdered in Cleveland Ohio, in recognition of the #sayhername campaign<sup>103</sup>. These posts follow the identity set forth within the groups' values closely, and this is the norm for W.I.T.C.H. social media postings.

W.I.T.C.H. members utilize the identity of the witch in order to unite feminist activists. In their manifesto, they frame the use of a witch identity as a reclamation of the term as used to persecute those who did not conform. One way in which this identity is reclaimed is through highlighting the violence inherent in the figure of the witch. Jo Pearson, in her piece "Resisting Rhetorics of Violence: Women, Witches and Wicca," discusses the ways that Wiccans and feminists identify with the violence inherent in the image of the W.I.T.C.H.<sup>104</sup> These roughly break down into the violence that the witch commits on another, the source of her power in which Wiccans are said to imbue her with, and the violence that is committed towards her, which feminists are said to identify

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<sup>101</sup> W.I.T.C.H. PDX. Instagram update. March 20, 2018

<sup>102</sup> W.I.T.C.H. PDX. Instagram update. March 8, 2018

<sup>103</sup> W.I.T.C.H. PDX. Instagram update. March 6, 2018

<sup>104</sup> Pearson, Jo. "Resisting Rhetorics of Violence."

with. Because members of W.I.T.C.H. utilize a mix of Wiccan ideas in their activism, it makes sense that there would be evidence of their engagement with both types of violence.

We see this in the use of “hexes” within W.I.T.C.H. activism. W.I.T.C.H. PDX highlights these hexes on their social media, even filming some of their rituals and uploading videos to share on social media.<sup>105</sup> These hexes blend elements of witchcraft with protest seamlessly, ritualizing the resistance. The original W.I.T.C.H. used this language as well to describe their actions, which were often accompanied by cleverly chanted spells or props, such as hair or nail clippings.<sup>106</sup> These clever slogans appear in W.I.T.C.H. PDX on their protest signs as well, painted with phrases such as “Thou Shalt Not Suffer the Patriarchy to Live,”<sup>107</sup> a play on the Bible verse “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live,”<sup>108</sup> condemning witches.

An interesting conflict exists within the use of the witch in formulating a social movement identity. There is a strong trend towards individuality within Wicca and witchcraft practice,<sup>109</sup> which seems to contrast with the goals of a social movement in creating a collective identity. However, this conflict is leveraged within the W.I.T.C.H. movement in unique ways beyond a singular empowerment narrative. On the social

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<sup>105</sup> W.I.T.C.H. - Witches' International Troublemaker Conspiracy From Hell.

<sup>106</sup> Morgan, Robin. *Going Too Far*.

<sup>107</sup> Sollée, Kristen J. *Witches, Sluts, Feminists*.

<sup>108</sup> Ex. 22:18

<sup>109</sup> Berger, Helen, and Douglas Ezzy. "Mass Media and Religious Identity: A Case Study of Young Witches." *The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48, no. 3 (2009): 501-514.

media accounts of the W.I.T.C.H. groups, there are images and textual references to both the singular witch as well as the coven. Rather than keeping focus on the individual witch, though, W.I.T.C.H. has organized the collective aspect of witchcraft by organizing their membership into covens. This appears within W.I.T.C.H. activism in the form of the smaller coven model, named of course after the witch's coven of Wicca and witchcraft. While these covens do not publish membership numbers, it is encouraged that they stay small in order to foster a sense of closeness among them,<sup>110</sup> and split into smaller geographically-based groups if they become too large. This community encourages both a stronger feeling of belongingness as well as eases communication in planning local actions.

Anonymity is another way that W.I.T.C.H. pushes back against the individualistic culture of witchcraft. For a couple of reasons, one of which is safety,<sup>111</sup> when appearing publicly as W.I.T.C.H., either during protests or online, activists remain entirely anonymous. In an age of increasing targeting of activists, this safety is crucial to protecting members.<sup>112</sup> This makes it appear, at surface value, that identity is both everything and nothing to W.I.T.C.H.'s membership. While there is no public recognition of personal oppressions or positionality, issues pertaining to marginalized identities comprise many of the causes that W.I.T.C.H. champions.

This is explained by W.I.T.C.H. PDX as follows:

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<sup>110</sup> W.I.T.C.H. - Witches' International Troublemaker Conspiracy From Hell.

<sup>111</sup> Strunin, Sarah, and Dylan Tupper Rupert. "Is Witchcraft Having a Moment? Practicing Witches of the Pacific Northwest Weigh In." Spark Public. Last modified October 30, 2017.

<sup>112</sup> Kopfstein, Janus. "Social Movements Need Anonymity, but Corporations Are Taking It Away." *Al Jazeera America*, July 1, 2015.

For us, being anonymous is first and foremost a powerful symbol of inclusivity, because many people can imagine themselves among us, and see in us a long ancestral line of witches and powerful women throughout history. We believe a witch really can be just about anyone. We understand that the oppression of any group contributes to the oppression of all, and the mystery associated with our anonymity is also a rejection of patriarchal categorization and control.<sup>113</sup>

In this way, the use of this anonymity provides a unifying force to equalize the identities of the group members, as well as to ensure that no one identity is being centered within the actions taken by the coven. Instead of using this to downplay the oppression faced by marginalized populations, this decentralization serves to elevate the interconnected nature of these identities and oppressions and W.I.T.C.H. aims to tackle all of these issues equally.

This time around, W.I.T.C.H. PDX has established a strong precedent for the utilization of witch identity within the movement. In laying out a clearly defined platform and guidelines for new chapters, they have carved out a blueprint for their membership's collective identity as well as demonstrated ways in which it can be utilized in protest. They have also left room for distinct chapters to engage with the figure of the witch within their own demonstrations. While this will not prevent the entirety of the struggles collective social movements experience with identity, there is now a stronger framework for the ways in which W.I.T.C.H. chapters can come together and utilize this identity for social change.

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<sup>113</sup> "W.I.T.C.H. PDX." Haute Macabre.

## CONCLUSION

In the foreword to Alice Echols's book *Daring to Be Bad*, Ellen Willis writes: “[Radical feminism’s] mistakes and failures are typically used not to learn from its flaws but to dismiss its whole project.”<sup>114</sup> Rather than dismiss differences and discrepancies between the original W.I.T.C.H. and current activist needs, W.I.T.C.H. PDX has found a way to utilize their distinct style and message within their activism without compromising the needs of the new movement. This revival of W.I.T.C.H.’s attention-grabbing brand of activism has been updated by W.I.T.C.H. PDX in a unique way to the social media age. By combining internet communities with on-the-ground protests and action, W.I.T.C.H. has found a way to take advantage of social media’s best aspects, mainly, connectivity, and merge it with the necessity of in-person organizing. While not all of the original W.I.T.C.H.’s ideas have remained timeless, it’s clear that the frustration with inaction felt among radical feminists during the second wave has lived on through generations of feminists.

W.I.T.C.H. PDX has established their difference from the W.I.T.C.H. of the second wave in a way that is similar to the ways in which radical feminists and W.I.T.C.H. utilized the New Left to form their own identities. By presenting themselves as descended from W.I.T.C.H., they take on parts of this previous collective identity, while also discarding parts that do not align with their values. They have also weaponized the figure of the witch, utilizing her as a figurehead around which to establish an active group identity based in fighting oppression, differentiating themselves from the cultural

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<sup>114</sup> Ellen Willis, foreword to *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975*, by Alice Echols. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 1989. Pg vii.

feminist movement. They protect this strong activist identity by draw strong boundaries around themselves in relation to any who might seek to weaken it with their strongly worded manifesto and declaration that those who do not uphold it are not endorsed as part of their membership.<sup>115</sup> W.I.T.C.H. present also emphasizes the necessity of a tight-knit group of local activists plugged into a larger movement, working to solidify connects in a way that their predecessor did not manage to perfect. The activism of W.I.T.C.H. PDX, in this way, ties their movement and the modern feminist movement to the work of previous activists, as well as the history of the figure of the witch.

The academic and cultural understanding of witchcraft's origins may be more nuanced than they were during the tenure of the original W.I.T.C.H., but the witch remains a potent representation of both the punishment for resisting the oppressive norm as well as the power of collective resistance. W.I.T.C.H. uses the image of the witch as a unifying figure around which to build their collective identity. By making themselves in the image of the witch, they are able to create a salient identity that not only their active membership, but other like-minded activists can rally around, given that they also embrace the values of the group. In creating an anonymous membership, W.I.T.C.H. does not seek to homogenize the identities of individual activists, but rather unite them around both their shared oppression and collective power, through recognizing the intersectional nature of their identities.

Limiting this study was the absence of direct contact with members of W.I.T.C.H. themselves. In order to continue the story of W.I.T.C.H. and their relationship to the greater feminist movement and witchcraft, future studies working with the group

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<sup>115</sup> W.I.T.C.H. - Witches' International Troublemaker Conspiracy From Hell.



themselves would be vital<sup>116</sup>. Their insight into both the founding and intergroup dynamics of their organization as well as their personal identification with the prior group would be incredibly valuable to the study of their collective identity formation, and a necessary component to expanding this research.

The collective identity of the witch is not exclusive to radical feminism or W.I.T.C.H. activists. A new generation of witches is organized under the term, for both personal practice<sup>117</sup> and its activist potential. As long as witches continue to gather to bind Trump from doing harm and protest inequality, the figure of the witch will be a relevant figure within feminist thought. Through this figure, this new generation is claiming power not only for themselves, but for all those disenfranchised by the Trump administration's policies.

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<sup>116</sup> I made efforts to contact members of the current W.I.T.C.H. activists groups through their Instagram and Twitter accounts during the course of the project, however, I was unable to schedule interviews with them within a timely manner.

<sup>117</sup> Sollée, Kristen J. *Witches, Sluts, Feminists*.

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