The Devil Is in the Details: The Trouble with Memorialising the Salem Witch Trials

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Introduction

The Salem Witch Trials represent the largest and most lethal witchcraft prosecutions in North American history. Beginning in late February 1692 and continuing until April 1693, the trials resulted in the deaths of at least twenty-five individuals: nineteen were executed by hanging, one was pressed to death, and at least five died in jail due to harsh conditions, including the infant daughter of convicted Sarah Good. In total, between 150 and 200 people, consisting of both men and women, were accused of witchcraft, most were jailed, and many deprived of property and legal rights. Accused persons lived in the town of Salem and Salem Village (now Danvers) and in two dozen other towns in eastern Massachusetts Bay Colony. Nearly fifty people confessed to witchcraft, most to save themselves from immediate trial. In October 1692, Governor William Phips ended the special witchcraft court in Salem and accusations soon abated and eventually stopped and soon the new Superior Court of Judicature began to try the remaining cases and eventually cleared the jails. The outbreak was triggered in part by the strange behaviours of young girls in Salem Village beginning with nine-year-old Elizabeth Parris and eleven-year-old Abigail Williams, whose fits of screaming and contortions were interpreted by the community as supernatural affliction, and who, with other girls such as Ann Putnam Jr. and Elizabeth Hubbard, named neighbours whom they claimed tormented them with invisible forces (Britannica).

Crucially, Puritan New England functioned largely as a theocracy, as laws were heavily based on religious doctrine, and the line between sin and crime was often blurred and the court system operated with a strong emphasis on maintaining moral and religious order. Without specific colony laws, the judges accepted "spectral evidence," which included testimony about dreams and visions. The Puritans believed that physical realities had spiritual causes. For example, if the crop failed, the Devil may have played a role – and Satan could not take the form of an unwilling person – so if anyone claimed to have seen a ghost or spirit in the form of the accused, that person must be a witch. With this worldview, it was not a stretch for Puritans to believe in spectral evidence, which

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was the primary evidence used as proof of guilt during the trials (NELB). Additionally, the General Court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony adopted the following statute in 1641: "If any man or woman be a WITCH, that is, hath or consulteth with a familiar spirit, they shall be put to death. *Exod.* 22. 18. *Levit.* 20. 27. *Deut.* 18. 10. 11." (UChicago Library). Nevertheless, belief in witchcraft was not an idiosyncratic feature of Puritan theology but was believed by virtually everyone at the time – both there in the New World and in the Europe they left behind. Historians generally emphasise that there is no single explanation for the Salem Witch Trials: religious belief, legal permissiveness, stress and sickness, conflicts with Native American tribes, paranoia, social tensions, misogyny, personal disputes and economic anxieties all contributed to an environment in which accusations flourished. Still, the accusation of witchcraft was a crime often lodged against social outsiders within a community, as accused witches tended to be poor marginalised people, often women, who often possessed a troubled or quarrelsome nature, as Baker writes: "To have a Native American slave, a distracted pauper, and a scandalous woman charged with witchcraft meant they had rounded up the "usual suspects"" (Baker 20). However, Salem quickly broke the matter-of-course – first, it was the "usual suspects" then, suddenly, it was anyone and there was little sense to be found: "Two of the men executed in 1692 were suspected wife-beaters. Some of the accused women were viragos, others visible saints. A few were noticeably eccentric, so were some of the afflicted. Some practiced folk magic, yet so did some of the accusers. The whole was briared in confusion" (Roach 5). The fact that even respected members of the community were accused and convicted is one of the key elements that sets Salem apart.

While the events of 1692-93 have been extensively studied by historians, the question of how Salem has chosen to remember – or rather to avoid remembering – the trials in public space has received comparatively less sustained attention. This raises a set of interrelated questions that guide the present analysis: how has Salem memorialised and commemorated the witch trials, and why did it take more than three centuries for a formal memorial to emerge at all? Three hundred years later, however, the Salem Witch Trials would come to signify far more than a seventeenth-century outbreak of fear and judicial excess. By the late twentieth century, Salem had become deeply entangled in the commercial afterlife of its own past, branding itself as "Witch City" and emerging as one of the United States' foremost Halloween destinations. Costumed spectacle and witch-themed tourism transformed the trials into a lucrative cultural resource, even as their historical and moral weight remained unresolved. Evidently, the 1992 tercentenary marked a turning point in Salem's memory politics, as municipal authorities sought to replace long-standing silence and sensationalism with solemn public acknowledgment of historical injustice through the unveiling of the Salem and Danvers memorials. Yet the tercentenary also exposed deep tensions

over how this past should be remembered and by whom. Far from producing a unified narrative, the commemorative initiatives became sites of contestation as the commemorations exposed enduring ethical tensions as the Committee and Salem's contemporary witch community clashed over a burning question - who may define the meaning of "witchcraft," in a public commemorative space?

This article will argue that the 1992 Salem Witch Trials memorials emerged from a long-standing reluctance to publicly confront the trials, marking a municipally sanctioned effort to acknowledge historical injustice through a Puritan-inflected moral framework. Yet the very language that enables this act of remembrance has also provoked contestation as modern witches' protests challenge the memorials' framing of witchcraft as Satanic wickedness and expose a commemorative struggle over meaning, authority, and living religious identity. By examining both the official memorial discourse and the protests mounted by Salem's modern witch community, this study asks not only how the past is represented, but why these representational choices matter. At stake are broader ethical questions concerning historical responsibility, religious tolerance, and the capacity of public memory to accommodate plural and sometimes incompatible understandings of a shared past.

Materials and theory

This project approaches the Salem Witch Trials Memorial as a site of cultural memory in which historical interpretation, moral judgment, and present-day identity intersect. Rather than treating the memorial as a neutral marker of past events, the analysis proceeds from the assumption that commemoration is an active, selective, and contested practice. Memorials do not just preserve history, they also interpret it, translating past violence into present meaning through language, symbolism, and spatial form. In this sense, the Salem memorial offers a particularly revealing case for examining how societies confront dark and shameful chapters of their own history. The theoretical framework draws primarily on scholarship in memory studies, with particular attention to debates concerning historical justice, moral responsibility, and the politics of commemoration, where scholars such as Pierre Nora and Jan Assmann are used. This insight is especially pertinent in the case of Salem, where the trials were not formally memorialised for more than three hundred years. The eventual emergence of the memorials in 1992 must therefore be understood not simply as acts of remembrance, but as responses to long-standing shame and moral unease. Within the field, the Salem case speaks directly to one of the most persistent theoretical questions: should commemoration preserve what was believed then, or should it reflect what we believe now? The 1992 memorials attempt to negotiate this dilemma by adopting a language that is historically

grounded in Puritan moral categories while simultaneously condemning the judicial hysteria that led to the executions. This tension between historical authenticity and present-day ethical commitments lies at the heart of the analysis. The memorial's language seeks legitimacy through fidelity to seventeenth-century belief, yet this very strategy generates conflict when confronted with contemporary religious and spiritual identities that reject the equation of witchcraft with evil or Satanism.

Methodologically, the project employs a qualitative case study approach centred on the 1992 Salem Witch Trials Memorial. While the Danvers Witchcraft Victims' Memorial of the same year is acknowledged and described the analysis focuses primarily on the Salem memorial, as it was here that protest posters were physically placed and public contestation most visibly unfolded. The material analysed consists of three main source types: the memorial inscriptions themselves, two protest posters left by modern witches at the memorial site, and contemporary newspaper coverage documenting public reactions and debates. Each of these sources offers a different perspective on the memorial's meaning and reception. The inscriptions represent the sanctioned, institutional voice of commemoration; the poster constitutes an intervention from outside official authority, and the newspapers mediate between these positions, framing the controversy for a broader public.

The protest posters occupy a particularly important, if methodologically limited, role in the analysis. Although it has been said that multiple posters have been left over time, only two have been attainable. This constrains the empirical basis of the analysis, as a larger number of posters would have strengthened the dataset. Nevertheless, the available posters still serve an important function in addressing the broader research questions. As a material trace of dissent placed directly within the commemorative space, it articulates a counter-memory that challenges the memorial's moral framing. To conceptualise this intervention, the project draws on Jenny Wüstenberg and Yifat Gutman's typology of memory activism, which distinguishes between different modes of engagement with dominant memory regimes. Also, one may reasonably assume that the sentiments expressed in the untraceable posters were at least somewhat similar in fashion to the two analysed. The newspapers, likewise, offer both strengths and limitations. They provide insight into how the controversy was publicly articulated, which voices were amplified, and how the conflict was framed within dominant cultural discourses. At the same time, media sources inevitably filter and simplify complex positions, often privileging conflict over nuance. A central analytical concept throughout the project is that of moral authority: who has the right to define the meaning of "witchcraft" in a public commemorative space? The memorial asserts authority through historical framing and municipal legitimacy: the modern witches challenge this authority by invoking lived religious identity and the persistence of witchcraft as a legitimate spiritual practice.

Crucially, when the term "modern witch" is used in this analysis, it refers to present-day witches and is not meant to claim novelty of their beliefs and practices, many of which draw on traditions understood as ancient rather than new. This clarification is essential, as one of the core points of contention concerns precisely the temporal depth and legitimacy of witchcraft and paganism as a whole (although not all pagans practice witchcraft). Similarly, the terms Satanic and Satanism are used here to describe the Puritan view of witchcraft as a pact with the Devil, both for clarity so readers understand the Devil-related context and because that is the terminology used by Laurie Cabot in her critique – it should not be confused with modern Satanism, whose adherents generally do not worship the Devil. Lastly, the broader significance of this case extends beyond Salem itself as the difficulty of memorialising the witch trials and the conflicts that followed their eventual commemoration illuminates how societies struggle to publicly process histories of injustice. In this sense, the case contributes to wider discussions about how modern societies remember persecution, moral panic, and state-sanctioned violence, and about whose voices are permitted to shape those memories.

Prior to 1992

Public memory of the Salem Witch Trials has long been marked by discomfort and ambivalence. It has been noted that when the first volume of Charles Wentworth Upham's *Salem Witchcraft* was published in 1860, it rekindled memories that provoked shame rather than enterprise (Weir 186). In shaping regional identity, New Englanders chose to celebrate their Pilgrim ancestors while sidelining the Puritans, whose role in the trials remained a source of moral unease. This discomfort persisted into the late nineteenth century: at the bicentennial of the trials in 1892, critics of a proposed monument argued that the events should be "cast into oblivion" because they brought "shame on Salem and our community" (Baker 289). These reactions reveal a long-standing tension in public memory, in which the witch trials were remembered less as an opportunity for historical reflection than as a troubling episode best left unexamined. Their opposition most likely did not stem from indifference but from a persistent desire to avoid a public reckoning with a morally compromising episode in local history. In this context, the relative lack of official memorialisation was itself a form of institutional amnesia, in which this absence reflected not indifference but a sustained reluctance to publicly confront a past experienced as morally compromising and seen as possibly dividing the community. When a community refuses to commemorate, it often reveals a fear of the ethical and political demands that commemoration might make on the present. Few civic actors wished to place themselves in the position of honouring individuals condemned for crimes now universally understood to have been unfounded, particularly when doing so risked

publicity that could unsettle their community self-image and need to, for a lack of better words, "get over" the trials.

Nonetheless, some private efforts did occur. In 1885, descendants of Rebecca Nurse, one of the most respected and thus shocking victims of the trials, erected a granite obelisk in her memory at the family homestead in what was then Salem Village and is now Danvers. Inscribed with a poem by John Greenleaf Whittier, it was the first memorial in North America to anyone accused in the trials (NEHS). Seven years later, another monument recognised the forty neighbours who had signed a petition in Nurse's defence. Other localised memorials followed: a plaque in Amesbury for Susannah Martin in 1894 and a marker for John Proctor in Peabody in 1902. But these were descendant-driven, privately motivated acts of remembrance that did not inaugurate a systemic, civic culture of memorialisation in the affected area. Moreover, the same dynamic appeared again in 1988, regarding a proposed statue by sculptor Yiannis Stefanakis depicting the Towne sisters (2 of whom were executed and 1 convicted). Although privately funded and advanced without a public design process, the proposal triggered immediate backlash. John Szala, pastor of First Church and chair of the mayor's advisory committee, criticised the rushed approval, saying: "The community is divided as a result" (Driscoll). Many residents feared such a monument would reopen painful history they preferred to keep dormant. Stefanakis himself noted the deep local hesitation in a statement to the New York Times: "I've got a pile of letters from across the country. However, I've received very, very few letters and money from Salem. I don't think they were ready for this despite 300 years," adding that a total of thirteen artists before him had already failed to secure support for any memorial (Driscoll). However, Stefanakis' statue did eventually end up at the Salem Wax Museum. All in all, the pattern here is rather striking, as there seems to be a great national interest that contrasts sharply with local resistance, supporting the argument that the trials functioned as a fascinating cautionary tale for outsiders, but as an unresolved moral burden for residents.

1992 Memorials

Even at the end of the 20th century, the city of Salem remained divided by how to handle its witchcraft heritage, as tensions mounted during and after the tercentenary year. Many of the town's inhabitants considered witch tourism the city's saviour; others believed it was its most predominant issue. Everyone – merchants, Wiccans, fundamentalists, teachers, PTA members, and historians – seemed to have different opinions as to what was and was not appropriate (Baker 295-296). Yet what had long been told as a cautionary tale of hysteria – or seen as the elephant in the room amongst certain residents – was re-cast in 1992 as an opportunity to show civic responsibility by

acknowledging historical injustice and cruelty. The effort was organised by the Salem Witch Trials Tercentenary Committee, a municipal-level committee created by the City of Salem, led by staff from the local Salem Witch Trials Museum, which was established by the Mayor of the City of Salem on April 22, 1986, thus operating under local government authority, not state government. However, the memorial was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (VAI). According to a 1988 City Council document, the Committee was tasked with the following: "endeavour to serve the best interests of the community whilst satisfying the needs of visitors to Salem to further their understanding of the events of 1662" (SWM, 2022). Thus, the tercentenary committee's task is official commemoration in deciding how to publicly remember the trials and in the process, they produce the dominant historical narrative in Salem's commemorative landscape.

Appearance wise, the 1992 granite memorial in Salem mentions all victims by name and states their date of death, as well as the cause. The solemn simple design starkly contrasts the commercialised approach to the trials seen throughout much of the tourist-town clad in pointy hats and black cats and therefore the memorial offers a more dignified remembrance of the victims. Twenty benches, representing each of the victims, stretch out from the stone wall with each victim's name and cause and date of death inscribed. However, there has been critique towards the memorial in that it solely commemorates those who were formally executed, since those who died in prison, or who were falsely imprisoned, are not mentioned (Lush 117). When reading the informational sign at the memorial, it becomes clear that the memorial condemns the court system which "failed to protect" the victims, and that the intention is to remind the visitor of "the enduring lessons of human rights" the trials showcase. Additionally, at the centre of the Danvers memorial stands an open granite book bearing the inscription "The Book of Life", which in biblical tradition signifies the register of those destined for salvation. During the witch trials, by contrast, accusers claimed that the condemned had signed the "Devil's book," an act understood as the irrevocable proof of guilt and refusing confession was an attempt to preserve one's standing in the true Book of Life. Yet such refusal often proved fatal, as confession was frequently the only means of escaping execution. The memorial deliberately inverts this logic by carving the victims' names into stone and associating them with the Book of Life, as it symbolically rescinds the charge that once condemned them and thus restores their moral standing. The broken shackles beneath the book extend this gesture.

Yet, the apparent solemnity of the Salem memorial did not settle the question of how the trials ought to be remembered, nor who possessed the authority to define the meaning of "witchcraft" within civic commemoration. Laurie Cabot, who serves as Salem's official witch and

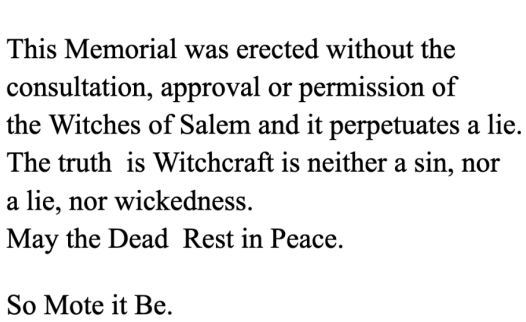
has dedicated her time to trying to dispel the myth that witches are worshippers of Satan through the Witches League of Awareness, has accused local officials of excluding the city's witch population from the tercentenary planning. The approach of the tercentenary prompted Cabot to publicly contest Salem's official commemorative framing of witchcraft: "If we have a million people come through Salem and let them walk out thinking we consort with the devil, isn't that harmful?" (Washington Post). She argued that the memorial, public events, and museum exhibitions equated witchcraft with Satanism, as they failed to acknowledge the craft as it is practiced by her and other contemporary witches. This dispute between Cabot and the Committee can be read less as a quarrel over historical detail than as a struggle over mnemonic authority – who may legitimately intervene in the public narration of the past, and on what grounds? What is contested here is not the fact of the trials, nor the innocence of the executed, but the moral and semantic framework through which "witchcraft" is permitted to appear in civic memory. As historian and committee member Alison D'Amario replies: "Unfortunately the word witchcraft is applied in enough ways so that it is confusing…But part of our mission is to make people understand what the issues were in the 17th century. "(WP). Cabot's counterproposal to recast the trials as a campaign against Satanism rather than witchcraft aims to sever the linguistic link between the executed and contemporary nature-based practitioners. The committee's refusal of this proposal showcases limits within their pluralist approach, for while the committee is willing to acknowledge the victim's wrongful execution, it resists altering the conceptual framework through which those wrongs are narrated. In terms of Cabot, her long-term aim seems not to be the dismantling of the memorial nor the erasure of the historical narrative at play, but inclusion and consideration within it, as she insists on more semantic consideration as the uncontextualised usage of the word "witchcraft," carries contemporary consequences. In Cabot's view: "Visitors to Salem will take away that witches are evil, Devil worshipers and Satanists…It's against our civil rights, bordering on hate crime" (WP). Laurie Cabot's rhetoric at times seems like what Gutman and Wüstenberg calls the warrior mode, since she frames the issue in terms of civil rights violations and moral injustice, implying that the current interpretation is so clearly wrong that hers is the only morally defensible position.

Still, the WLPAs overall long-term goal of acceptance and inclusion fits better with the pluralist mode and the sharpness of Cabot's words seems less about totally overturning the memorial, and seeing no sense in portraying the reality of the past, than about naming the feeling of being misrepresented within it due to its choice of words and lack of care explaining the multi-layered meaning of the word "witchcraft", as it is not common knowledge amongst most people that present-day practitioners of witchcraft are not Devil worshippers. It is also important to note

that Cabot does not speak solely of the Salem memorial but also of other Tercentenary events. The committee, for its part, emphasised the boundaries of their authority. Executive director Linda McConchie replied to Cabot's claim: "I think that kind of comparison is reprehensible and appalling. This committee has not at any time caused or encouraged discrimination against practicing witches … We are not in the business of defining or proselytizing religion" (WP) and rejected the idea that promoting witchcraft as a viable contemporary religion fell within the municipal mandate.

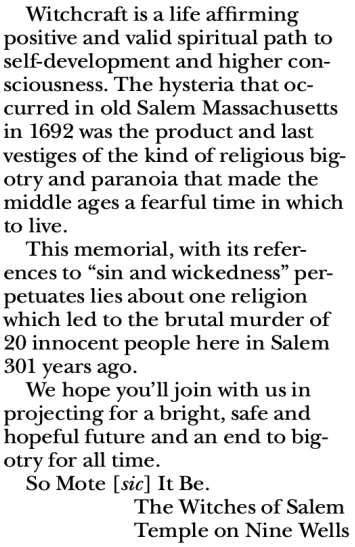
Importantly, the tensions surrounding representation and misrecognition during the tercentenary were not confined to symbolic dispute but unfolded within a broader climate of hostility toward contemporary witches. During the anniversary year, Laurie Cabot reported multiple incidents in which self-identified witches were harassed and threatened by fundamentalists who equated modern witchcraft with Devil worship, prompting reports to local authorities, the state attorney general, and the FBI, according to United Press News (Haskell). These encounters, which included public confrontations and acts of intimidation, were understood by Cabot as part of an organised effort by out-of-state groups who regarded Salem's "Witch City" identity as evidence of ongoing diabolical practice. In this light, these episodes show that the struggle over the meaning of the word "witchcraft" was not merely semantic but tied to genuine vulnerability in the present. The witches' concern that official commemorative language might reinforce harmful associations was thereby grounded in a social reality where such associations could legitimise such discrimination and harassment.

Protest Posters



Transcription of the 1992 protest poster

(Wasserman 1998, 51)



Transcription of the 1993 protest poster

(Wasserman 2003, 3)

These disputes over language, authority, and exclusion did not remain confined to interviews and committee statements, but soon found expression at the memorial site itself in more concrete acts of activism and protest. Above, the text of two protest posters left at the 1992 Salem Memorial from the Witches of Salem is cited. If similar objects of protest have been placed at the Danvers memorial from the same year unfortunately remains uncertain. The posters, which are simply two of multiple left at the sight since its unveiling according to Judith Wasserman, function as temporary counter-monuments, as they challenge the authority of the official memorial and thusly disrupts the hegemonic narrative by asserting an alternative moral paradigm of witchcraft as a legitimate, yet persecuted, faith and practice. None of the posters aspire to permanence, in the same way a memorial does, instead they draw attention to the uncertainty that underlies all acts of remembrance, suggesting that stability of form does not guarantee stability of meaning and that memory itself is always provisional and open to reinterpretation. As James E. Young states, the counter-monument functions as a "skeptical antidote to the illusion that the seeming permanence of stone somehow guarantees the permanence of a memorial idea attached to it" (Young 295). The posters' very fragility draws attention to the provisional nature of memory itself. Its temporary presence emphasises that acts of commemoration are not fixed or final, but contingent, on both who performs them and on how they are received, reinforcing the provisional and negotiable nature of public memory.

Furthermore, the protest posters left at the Salem Witch Trials Memorial in 1992 constitutes a strategic, non-state intervention into public memory, aimed at challenging a dominant mnemonic framework institutionalised through a municipal memorial. Its placement at the memorial site rather than in a private or purely discursive arena signals an explicit claim on civic memory, as it is meant to be seen in direct connection with the memorial by onlookers and visitors. The poster's rhetoric is unambiguous. It rejects the memorial's language of "sin and wickedness," insisting instead that "witchcraft is a life-affirming, positive and valid spiritual path." In doing so, it directly challenges the historical semantics endorsed by the Tercentenary Committee, which framed witchcraft strictly within its 1692 Puritan meaning as a Satanic crime. Significantly, the utterances placed on the memorial are drawn directly from the victims' own words, for instance the usage of the word "wickedness," originates in the courtroom testimony of the accused Mary Bradbury, who declared: "I do plead not guilty. I am wholly innocent of such wickedness." (Historic Ipswich). It is this very quote that is placed on an information sign at the memorial, amongst others, as well as engraved in stone at the entryway. Although the word "sin" does not appear verbatim on the memorial, the protestors' objection appears to concern the message rather than its precise wording. Also, in the context of the trials, the terms wickedness and sin are functionally synonymous. Just like with Cabot, there seems not to be a disagreement over historical detail but over mnemonic authority – who has the right to define what "witchcraft" signifies in public space, and whose moral framework governs commemoration? The 1992 protest poster intensifies this challenge by shifting its focus from interpretive language to commemorative authority itself, declaring that: "This Memorial was erected without the consultation, approval or permission of the Witches of Salem and it perpetuates a lie". It explicitly contests the legitimacy of the memorial's production process, rather than solely its wording and therefore this marks a subtle escalation, as the critique moves from semantic disagreement to an accusation of exclusion – in the same vein as Laurie Cabot's complaints.

Within Gutman and Wüstenberg's typology regarding memory activists, the actors behind the posters occupy the role of resistors rather than victims, as they do not claim genealogical descent from the executed, nor do they ground their authority in direct inherited trauma from the trials themselves. Instead, they position themselves as moral agents intervening against what they perceive as an ongoing injustice – the persistence of stigmatising religious narratives in civic commemoration. Their protest reframes the trials not merely as a historical tragedy but as part of a longer string of religious persecution and dislike, implicitly extending the temporal horizon of the event beyond the 1690s. Moreover, in terms of mode of interaction, the posters collectively somewhat oscillate between pluralist and warrior logics. The 1993 posters closing appeal "a bright,

safe and hopeful future and an end to bigotry for all time" gestures toward pluralism, envisioning a commemorative landscape capacious enough to accommodate alternative spiritual identities. Yet elsewhere, particularly in the 1993 poster, the tone hardens. By declaring that the memorial "perpetuates lies about one religion" and linking its language to "the brutal murder of 20 innocent people," the poster asserts a singular moral truth and frames the memorial's curators as complicit in symbolic violence. This aligns more so with the warrior mode, in which mnemonic struggle is understood as zero-sum and corrective rather than dialogic. Temporally, both posters treat the past as both concluded and unfinished, whilst acknowledging the trials as a historical episode, it insists that the unjustness persists in the present. This dual temporality allows the activists to justify contemporary intervention without collapsing historical difference entirely. The memorial is naturally not accused of repeating the trials, but of sustaining their moral logic, if one will.

Interpreting witchcraft in memory

Furthermore, for Laurie Cabot, the classification of the murdered individuals remains open to interpretation: "Some of those people could have been witches…we'll never know. Christians can't say they weren't witches because they don't know the definition properly; witches can't say they were because we have no hard evidence" (WP). Cabot's position thus resists what one might call historical closure, instead foregrounding epistemic uncertainty as a space for ethical and political intervention. From the perspective of memory studies, this refusal is significant. As Pierre Nora argues in *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, "there are lieux de mémoire, sites of memory, because there are no longer milieux de mémoire, real environments of memory" (Nora 7). Salem functions in precisely this way – the lived experience of the trials is irretrievably lost, leaving only mediated traces that must be interpreted best as possible. Attempts to definitively categorise the accused therefore risk imposing inapposite frameworks onto subjects whose individual beliefs remain fundamentally inaccessible. Consequently, interpretation must rely not on presumed personal belief and opinion, but on the dominant religious and cultural understandings of Puritan Salem. Testimonies describing evil, wickedness, and sin consistently reflect Puritan conceptions of witchcraft as inherently Satanic and they offer little to no insight into how the accused themselves may have understood practices associated with more benign or customary forms of folk healing and nature worship – the type witches such as Cabot practice.

As such, while the records illuminate what witchcraft meant within Puritan ideology, they cannot reliably disclose what these men and women individually believed nor practised outside of what they were accused of and denied. On this point, esteemed Salem Witch Trials Historian Marilynne K. Roach states that: "Many in the general population engaged in fortune-telling and

counter-magic. Considering human nature, some must have at least tried to perform malevolent magic, but there is no proof of it. Nor is there evidence of Witchcraft the religion as it practiced today" (Roach 4). So, even though the church disapproved of such activities, folk magic naturally continued to be practiced in forms of charms, amulets, and traditional remedies for protection or healing. Importantly, these practices were generally not equated with witchcraft and engaging in everyday folk magic seldom resulted in charges of witchcraft (Salem Witch Museum).

It must go without saying that the very concept of witchcraft cannot be considered truly immutable nor uniformly defined, rather, it carries a variety of meanings across different cultures, historical periods, and geographical contexts. Nonetheless, certain elements naturally intersect across these dimensions. Contemporary pagan practices, the vast majority rooted in spiritual enlightenment and a connection to the powers of the natural world, differ fundamentally from the Puritan conception of witchcraft as a pact with the Devil. From this perspective, present-day witches are justified in pointing out that spiritual traditions resembling what is today understood as paganism were historically persecuted as Christianity spread across Europe. This trajectory can be traced from revered figures such as the Vølve in pre-Christian Scandinavia, to the "wise women" of pre-modern Europe, and ultimately to practices of that sort being deemed demonic, illegal, or at the very least reprehensible, by the Christian Church, depending on where and when, which may offer an explanation to why some modern witches might perceive the memorial's language as echoing harmful historical narratives. However, reinterpreting the Salem victims through this spiritualised understanding of witchcraft risks anachronism and historical revisionism.

As stated earlier, the individuals executed in 1692 were most likely not practitioners of nature-based pagan belief-systems, nor did they understand themselves as such – and if they were, that is not what they were accused of, at least not technically. Within the Puritan worldview, a "witch" was defined precisely as someone who had entered into a covenant with the Devil – a definition that does not align with contemporary pagans and practitioners and is largely rejected within modern witch communities due to a plethora of misconceptions about this specifically. Collapsing both interpretations of witchcraft into a single moral or spiritual category obscures the historical specificity of the trials and risks projecting present-day, or simply different, identities onto past actors who in all likelihood did not share them. By situating the victims within their Puritan moral universe as innocent people falsely accused of diabolical crime amid collective hysteria the memorial restores their dignity through historical fidelity, representing them as they would *likely* have wished to be remembered. Although the Puritan worldview may appear alien or frankly somewhat inane to more modern, secular sensibilities, it remains the ethical and interpretive framework within which the accused lived, suffered, and died. Consequently, the memorial's

language – particularly its portrayal of witchcraft as "wickedness" - while potentially troubling from a contemporary perspective, reflects the subjective reality of 17th century belief rather than a retrospective moral judgment. As famed philosopher Paul Ricoeur puts it: "The duty of memory is the duty to do justice, through memories, to an other than the self" (Ricouer 89). According to him, there is an ethical obligation to remember and honour the dead in a way that grants them respect. The victims of the Salem Witch Trials were condemned within a framework that defined witchcraft as a Satanic crime, and acknowledging this allows the memorial to restore their historical dignity by representing them as they would have understood themselves, rather than through later reinterpretations and/or differing beliefs. Obviously, it was an active choice by the committee to highlight such phrases in particular, reflecting a deliberate framing of the past that privileges a specific historical and moral narrative. This illustrates the ways in which official commemorations exercise authority over collective memory, selectively emphasising certain interpretations whilst marginalising others. As Pierre Nora has argued, "Memory is life…open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting … History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer" (Nora 8). In this sense, the committee's decisions reveal not only the ethical and interpretive stakes of commemoration, but also the impossibility of accessing the past directly – what is remembered is always mediated and shaped by present concerns.

Jan Assmann further underscores this point, noting that "No memory can preserve the past. What remains is only that which society in each era can reconstruct within its contemporary frame of reference" (Assmann 130). Highlighting that memory is inherently selective and contingent. Naturally, this does not mean that the perspectives of modern society should be ignored. Ideally, commemoration should strike a respectful balance between historical fidelity and contemporary ethical awareness, yet in practice, such equilibrium is difficult to achieve, as it is inherently difficult to please everyone. Public memory is never neutral and it must negotiate between the imperatives of historical accuracy, civic authority, and the moral claims of communities whose identities are shaped by the very histories being memorialised. The choices made by the committee thus illuminate the political nature of memorialisation, where language, framing etc. actively shape both the interpretation of the past and its social consequences in the present.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that for many modern witches in Salem, the Salem Witch Trials Memorial is encountered less as an object of historical interpretation than as a place of moral and emotional reckoning. Margaret McGilvray, a practicing witch and founder of *The Witchery*, an art and performance space in Salem, captures this sensibility when she observes: "When I am at the Witch Trials Memorial, I am not analyzing from a historical perspective. I'm feeling it. And that

is why it is such a powerful memorial. It allows me to feel" (Smithsonian). A similar orientation is articulated by Teri Kalgren, a long-time Salem resident as well as member of the Witches Education League. Although she expresses a desire for more interpretive language at the site, she nonetheless describes the memorial as "beautiful and very solemn to walk through." For Kalgren, the witch trials are not confined to the past but retain an unsettling relevance in the present. "As a witch, I see [the witch trials] as something that could possibly happen again" (Smithsonian).

Salem in popular imagination

It is not only the tourism industry that has moulded Salem's public memory of the witch trials. The city occupies an uneasy position within the broader phenomenon of dark tourism, where the ethical imperative to remember tragedy collides with commercial imperatives to entertain and sell an experience. Salem's annual Haunted Happenings festival, launched in 1982 by the Salem Chamber of Commerce and the Witch Museum as a family-friendly Halloween celebration, has evolved into a month-long event that draws over a million visitors each October and accounts for a significant portion of the city's annual tourism revenue. The festival marketises Salem's association with witchcraft through parades, haunted tours, psychic fairs, costume balls, and theatrics that blend historical motifs with supernatural spectacle. The commercial imagery that saturates Salem's tourism landscape further blurs the boundary between commemoration and caricature. Caricature-witch-imagery with the hooked nose, broomstick, black cat and pointy hat permeates the city's visual culture, appearing not only on souvenir shot glasses and shop windows but also in symbols adopted by civic institutions such as police and fire department insignia, high-school mascots, and even on the city's water tower (Stewart & Stone). The caricatures of pointy hats and black cats also seep over in the historical field, as even museum logos and signage portray such illustrations. This can indeed blur the public and cultural memory of the victims of the trials who were, funnily enough, not fairytale witches riding on broomsticks.

Resistance to this "kitchified" mode of remembrance has surfaced repeatedly. At the dedication of the contested Bewitched statue, which depicts the main character Elizabeth from the TV-series of the same name riding a broomstick in front of a crescent moon, an activist unfurled a banner reading "SHAME" from a nearby building, while another protestor was arrested for shouting during the ceremony. Another demonstrator, Richard Sorell, carried a sign asking, "Elizabeth Who? Is She from Salem?", protesting the content of the memorial. He claimed that his free speech rights had been violated as he was forced across the street whilst supporters were allowed to stay by the statue (FDD). An additional sign read: "Is there no limit to the schlock and

hype?". Thus, this is another instance of grassroot intervention in Salem and such interventions are best understood not as vandalism or disorder, but as acts of memory activism. In 2006, the same statue was defaced with red paint. Drawing on Gutman and Wüstenberg's typology, these figures can be read as resistors: non-state actors who intervene in public memory to oppose commemorative forms they perceive as an inappropriate or harmful commemorative message. In reference to said statue, historian Richard Trask articulated this unease succinctly when he observed that "an enlightened society should choose to remember and respect past tragedies rather than purposefully or ignorantly make light of them" (Weir 180). His remark gestures toward a broader anxiety that runs beneath Salem's tourist economy – that spectacle and caricatures are undeniably too prominent in the town and that due to this the public memory regarding the witch trials risks losing sight of the individuals whose lives were brutally curtailed.

Lastly, it is not only the tourism of the town itself that has contributed to this contortion. Popular culture has significantly influenced contemporary memory of the Salem Witch Trials. Well-known films and fictional narratives set in Salem, such as the Halloween classic *Hocus Pocus* (1993) or the horror television series *Salem* (2014-2017), often favour sensationalised and anachronistic portrayals of witches, emphasising actual supernatural power over historical accuracy. In this process this figure has been transformed in collective memory into an archetype of a woman endowed with formidable power, often framed as threatening, subversive or silly rather than the actual individuals who were persecuted in 1692. As a result, the figure of the "Salem Witch" in public memory is frequently shaped less by the lived realities of the trials than by recurring fictional tropes. For most, engagement with Salem occurs primarily through film and literature rather than historical sources or documentaries, leading clichéd representations of the victims to dominate collective understanding, while more nuanced and factual interpretations remain comparatively in the shadows.

Conclusion

In conclusion, The Salem Witch Trials Memorial represents the culmination of over three centuries of selective remembrance, silence, and moral reckoning. By commemorating those executed during the trials within the moral and spiritual framework of 17th century Puritanism, the memorial explicitly situates the accused within the subjective moral universe of the Puritan Christians who lived through the trials, and representing this worldview is crucial to understanding how the accused were perceived, prosecuted, and ultimately executed. The memorial reclaims their moral and historical dignity by reflecting the very ethical logic that condemned them. In doing so, the memorial restores a measure of justice through memory, acknowledging the suffering and

innocence of those falsely accused while retaining fidelity to the period's belief system. Yet the memorial simultaneously exposes the inherent tensions of public memory. For modern witches in Salem, who practice spiritual and nature-based forms of witchcraft, the memorial's language can appear exclusionary or even harmful, perpetuating centuries-old stereotypes that equate witchcraft with evil. By asserting the legitimacy of living pagan identities within Salem's commemorative landscape, these interventions challenge dominant religious and historical narratives and highlight the ongoing negotiation over mnemonic authority. Protest posters, public statements, and activism by members of the contemporary witch community signal that commemoration is never neutral; rather, it is an ongoing contest over meaning, interpretation, and inclusion. These interventions make visible the ethical and political stakes of remembering the past.

The 1992 tercentenary and its memorialisation efforts also reveal the long-standing struggle of Salem itself to confront this dark chapter of its history, as the community historically preferred to foreground Pilgrim heritage over the memory of their Puritan ancestors, often treating the trials as a source of shame to be avoided rather than confronted. The eventual emergence of a municipal memorial thus represents both an acknowledgment of historical injustice and an attempt to reconcile the community's past with its contemporary identity, marking a shift from avoidance and commercialised spectacle toward solemn public commemoration, even though broomsticks and cauldrons are still to be seen everywhere in Witch City. Ultimately, the Salem Witch Trials Memorial does more than mark the tragic deaths of the accused as it is in this tension between seventeenth-century Puritan belief, modern ethical sensibilities, and the claims of living communities that Salem's public memory finds its most enduring significance.

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