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Writing Women's Histories

Perhaps you have noticed that histories that focus on women's stories, as well as those of other marginalized groups, often include the words *lost*, *secret*, or *hidden*. Even the stories of Katharine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson, mathematicians who conducted the calculations necessary to send Apollo spacecraft to the moon is called *Hidden Figures*. And that was only 50 years ago, barely even history at all.

Although the title of my recent essay collection is *The Witch of Eye*, it too is a secret history. It tells some of the lost stories from the European witch trials, which stretched from 13th into the 18th century, and followed settler colonialists across the Atlantic into North and South America. The great majority of the victims of these trials were women. I began researching witch trials when I was writing the poetry collection, *RUE*, which takes as its backbone a sequence of poems about plants historically used for birth control. At one point as I was writing about Queen Anne's Lace, which is referred to in some of the older herbals as used to "provoke the menses," a euphemism for a Plan B type birth control. My writing stalled when I realized I did not know what part of the plant to describe. The root? The leaves? How much would one need to consume? As you know, creative writers need specific imagery—vague euphemisms, clichés, and assumptions won't cut it. But this information proved difficult to discover. Many present-day herbalists who keep blogs chock full of home remedies will only reference this plant's uses in vague ways, in no small part because some states would consider sharing specific directions or recipes grounds for

prosecution. Erasing and even criminalizing women's knowledge has long been as commonplace as erasing their access to safe, reliable medical care, the right to privacy, and access to birth control.

In the end I met a few herbalists who would talk off the record about their use of the seeds of Queen Anne's Lace, though I must tell you that they were divided on whether you take those seeds only after sex or every day, whether it is best to harvest the seeds in spring or in fall, whether it is necessary to chew the seeds thoroughly to release the tannins or enough to gulp them down with water. I will also tell you that one of the herbalists said cheerfully that she conceived her son while using Queen Anne's Lace as her method of birth control. I am very aware of how often and how easily knowledge of how to use safe and reliable birth control can be taken away and I worry my daughter will one day have fewer choices than I have had in my life. In addition to what I have learned from herbalists who shared what they have gleaned from their training, John Riddle has done quite a lot of important work rediscovering the lost history of plant medicines in *Eve's Herbs*.

Before I found John Riddle's scholarship and before I met the herbalists who were glad to speak openly about their attempts to carry forward the memories of the first scientists —midwives, wise wives, herbalists, and healers often developed their hypotheses about plants based on direct observation and an oral tradition that held generations of case studies —before that I remembered learning that many accused witches were midwives. So I looked for transcripts of witch trials, with the idea that I might find details about what plants the midwives had used and how in their confessions. This was my first attempt at a research method I would learn historians call a “sub-altern mode of historiography” wherein the historian turns away from the biographies of the so-called great men of history and instead searches through trash heaps, accountant's ledgers, ship's manifests, trial records, and other artifacts of daily life to discover something of how everyday people lived. Laura de Mello e Souza, a Brazilian historian who writes about the Brazilian women caught up in the crosshairs of the Inquisition thanks to the intersecting brutalities of the witch hunts, the TransAtlantic slave trade, and colonization of the Americas. In *The Devil and the Land*

of the Holy Cross, she wants, she says, to demonstrate how history is more than the stories of great men and their “discoveries.” Using these methods, “it becomes possible,” she says, “to make out faces in the crowd, to extend the historical concept of ‘individual’ in the direction of lower classes.”

However, I did not find any references to plant medicines in the court records. Instead I found a horrific glimpse into the nature of social control and oppression, one that felt entirely too much like our present historical moment. And I found one inspiring and galvanizing portrait of defiance, of resistance, of an indomitable spirit after another.

Maria Gonçalves Cajada’s was a life lived at the margins of her society, in the shadows, but when we look at the trial records from the Portuguese “visitation” to their colony to conduct an inquisition designed to root out practitioners of Judaism from the Brazilian colonies and also to police any notes of resistance from the people forced to live as slaves, we can read her extraordinary words, “If the bishop has a mitre, I have a mitre, and if the bishop preaches from the pulpit, I preach from the cadeira.”

Like most any woman who makes demands, Maria Gonçalves Cajada was almost entirely alone in her insistence that the world be fair and also that she be granted a just place in it. I appreciate deeply, almost as a kind of profession of faith, that there is an historical record, documented by Laura de Mello e Souza, of how this woman looked a priest in the eyes, then turned the other way to set three pieces of cheese fermented in her own vaginal fluid on a windowsill to feed the demons. It is a gesture with many layers of meanings which the centuries have distilled to a very lovely note ringing “I am.”

When readers encounter these trial records, it is necessary to read against the grain. Often the only words we have left from these accused women is their confession, which was coerced by torture. Agnes Sampson, known by all of her patients and clients as the Wise Wife of Keith, was famous for the help she could offer women who wanted children, women who didn’t, women in love, and women in pain. When the king decided he wanted to interrogate this “wise wife” personally, she had been shaved bald, tortured

with a rope around her neck for an hour after being pinned to a wall for days by the witches' bridle, which is an iron muzzle with a bit to hold down a woman's tongue. Sampson began at last to speak after her naked body was inspected and a suspicious mark that was said to be the place where the devil put his tongue.

This is almost always the way in witch trials —once the witch knows her mark has been seen, she gives up hope she'll ever slip away from this. She may as well help her inquisitors plan that long walk to the scaffold. Agnes Sampson confessed so rapidly and so much —a dead cat was thrown in the sea, there was some kind of spell involving the “chiefest parte” of a dead man, a black toad hung up by his heels, this peasant woman, that peasant woman —the king said he could hardly believe her.

With one eye on the instruments hanging from the wall of her cell, she took the king aside and “declared unto him the very words which had passed between the King's majesty and his Queen the first night of their marriage.” After that James said he “wondered greatly, and swore by the living God, that he believed all of the devils in Hell could not have discovered the same.” In her torture addled state, she gave up the names of 200 people. I don't fault her for this —it is almost unheard of for the accused to resist the coercion and the torture. But I do marvel when I encounter an accused person who is able to resist such pressure.

Titiba of Salem, for example.

Of all the accused witches, Titiba is the one who seems to have been the most radically transformed from who she actually was into who certain people wanted her to be. Unlike the white people of Salem, whose names, lineages, and racial identities have remained fixed since that time, hers went from Titiba in the trial records to Tituba in the popular culture. She was called “Indian” in court, but imagined in the histories that followed as African, African-American, and Afro-Caribbean. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, in *Giles Corey of the Salem Farms*, fictionalized her into “the daughter of a man all black and

fierce,” while in *The Crucible*, Arthur Miller called into being a reckless storyteller sowing wild fancies in the minds of the village girls.

Glamour, *grammar*, and *grimoire* all share the same root. The Inquisitors imagined in one testimonial after another the transformation from person to demon before their eyes, even as they clung more fiercely to the illusion they held about themselves, that they were not the ones conjuring such nightmares. But of course they were. It was Goodwife Sibley who asked Titiba to perform that old English spell with bread, dirt, and urine to ease the suffering of the poor afflicted child Betty, but that moment glimmered back in court as Titiba’s idea, her spell, her fault. And though she was compelled by the violence of Samuel Parris’s open hand into this line of questions by Constable John Herrick, the dominant narrative that emerged in the historiographies was that her confession was the reason for the craze that followed, that Titiba’s words conjured what we would come to know as the Salem Witch Hunt.

But let’s observe that Titiba never points the finger at anyone else. This is the only thing about the trials in Salem that is actually unusual at all. When asked who was torturing the girls, Sarah Good said it must be the insufferable Sarah Osbourne. Sarah Osbourne said if anything Sarah Good was the bewitched one and anyway she’d had a dream of being pricked by “something like an Indian.” When pressed, Titiba, who was often referred to by her neighbors as “Indian” or “Titiba Indian” named the two already-accused Sarahs, sure—they were already in shackles and accusing each other; what could she do for them? But when asked to name more, she said she could not make out any other names or faces.

The historian Elaine Breslaw is my primary source on the life of Titiba, and the way she tells it, there is powerful resistance in Titiba’s description of the nameless and faceless members of a coven, dressed in the fine clothes of well-to-do people. Breslaw proposes a new history that explains how a group of people came to have the idea that there is no such thing as witches. Her story goes like this: When a person like Titiba who is not supposed to know how, masters the system and turns it against those who

would master her, the ruling class suddenly and conveniently realizes nothing they have believed makes sense anymore.

This is what it means to read against the grain: to look at an archival text and to ask what secrets the inquisitors might have hidden about themselves and their motivations in their line of questions? What lost truths are buried in the unspoken words of an accused woman's confession? What radical transformation of a whole society was made possible when a woman figured out that if you name the rich instead of another marginalized person like yourself, the wealthy and powerful will be so distracted by their clamoring attempts to destroy each other that you might just make it out alive with your integrity intact. You might just create so much chaos and confusion that the governor is compelled to issue a general pardon and there is never another witch hunt like it again.

Since I myself am not a historian, I am not prepared to tell you what languages to study, what archaic forms of cursive to master, which archives to visit, or what trash heaps just beyond the city limits to excavate in order to conduct these methods of historiography I so admire. Instead I wish to suggest that creative writers can draw upon this work by historians as part of endeavors to understand what makes the violences and erasures of our present moment possible, even thinkable. And to suggest that creative writers are uniquely well-equipped to draw on these examples from the past and repurpose them as guides to help us imagine a different kind of future.

Every once in awhile the trial records will be like those from Salem, where the transcripts are quite detailed and seem to be close to verbatim accounts of what was said in the court room. More often, though, the trial records followed the convention in those centuries of offering a third person summary of testimonies, a summary that was written down after the fact. You will almost never see a quote from the accused woman, never hear her say "I." You must instead imagine her voice. And of course very often the records will be incomplete, moth-bitten, mouse-ravaged bit of water-stained papers that somehow avoided

several centuries' worth of purging. When trying to make sense of such incomplete and corrupted documents, it may help to look around at your present moment and ask yourself who you see in circumstances most like those the accused. I encourage you to remember that while levers of power remain much the same from one century to the next, who gets scapegoated is always in flux.

Agnes Waterhouse, age 64 in the year 1566, was an impoverished woman who had a white cat named Sathan that spoke in a strange hollow voice and would do anything for a drop of blood. She had him kill her pig to prove what he could do, and then had him kill the cows and geese of her neighbors, with whom she had quarreled; neighbors themselves, with whom she had quarreled; her husband, with whom she had quarreled.

Government officials tortured her, of course, to wring out this weird confession, but they wouldn't necessarily have had to. There is ample research to suggest that a little menace, a little kindness, the promise of approval from someone in authority —this is enough, even today, to make people very confused about what they know to be true.

Her daughter Joan, for instance, was induced to confess she had seen her mother turn that cat into a toad. Why turn your demon cat into a demon toad? You might as well ask why a police officer would kill a person for selling cigarettes or taking out a wallet or carrying a cell phone, living in her apartment, or opening his own front door. The child went on to admit she sold her own soul to that selfsame toad so she could get a bit of bread and cheese from the neighbor girl, Agnes Brown.

Of course the tribunal believed this testimony. People *knew* the devil to be real, and his magic, his witches, his familiars, his blood spells and poison. Their whole lives they knew the devil was coming for them. This century is not so different. Consider the mug shot and some blurry footage from a gas station calling into being that archetype of white America's inquisitions. The officer will say in the deposition that he was "like some sort of superhuman beast bulking up to run through the shots." That's the only way

such tribunals can imagine a now-dead Black teenager. “Like a demon.” The mostly white jurors will nod like people who know, and then they will acquit.

It seems to be easier for some people to understand the role of stereotype threat and implicit bias in the judicial system when I say the wrongful imprisonment and execution happened to a little old white lady, gullible and confused, possibly suffering from dementia, named Agnes. As she stood at the gallows awaiting the rope, Agnes Waterhouse pleaded with the authorities, Reverend Thomas Cole, Sir John Fortescue, Sir Gilbert Gerard, the queen’s attorney, and John Southcote, justice of the queen’s bench. (When writing the secret histories of women, I recommend you also write the secret histories of the great men too. That is to say, I recommend you use active verbs to name the men and describe exactly what they did.) She begged their forgiveness and the forgiveness of God. She swore she’d never stopped praying, but only used Latin because that wretched cat forbade her to pray in English. She swore before the mob of people that even when she’d been stripped by the devil of her right to speak, as the devil might do to any of them, still she’d kept trying, she’d never stopped trying, to find a way to live honorably within this system of God’s laws and men’s. And then Reverend Thomas Cole, Sir John Fortescue, Sir Gilbert Gerard, the queen’s attorney, and John Southcote, justice of the queen’s bench, executed her anyway.

Though my heart is with Agnes Waterhouse, my favorite of the accused witches are those who had no use for men’s laws or their god’s, and quite frankly no fucks left to give.

So I’d like to tell you a bit about Medea, a mythic witch, who fits neatly into this category, alongside women who we know existed, like Isobel Gowdie, who cursed and threatened the powerful men who feared her influence over the impoverished peasantry of her corner of Scotland, and Agnes Naismith, who put a dying woman’s curse on the descendants of every citizen in the town of Paisley who came out to watch her executed for no reason at all. I’d also suggest that myths and fairy tales are another source for lost, hidden, and secret histories. Here too you will sometimes need to read against the grain as those

stories come to us through the editorial gaze of condescending anthropologists, skeptical scholars, and goddess-help-us-all the Walt Disney company. But remember how often the fairy tales, the folklore, the bedtime stories are passed down by mothers, who have a great deal of power to shape the meaning of the story.

I read the picture book version of *Jason and the Argonauts* to my daughter on a day when she was shaken by a boy as he told her to “Shut up, Bossy.” She thought a tale of adventure would make her feel better. Much about motherhood is a challenge, but among its comforts is how I get to read so many things I never knew before and never knew I needed. For example, I didn’t know *Jason and the Argonauts* is really *The Witch Medea Gets Your Golden Fleece for You, You Fucking Incompetent*.

On the night of her escape with Jason and her father’s fleece, Medea chopped up her brother and strew the parts of him around the forest so their father would be stopped by grief and the duty to gather the pieces of his son back up. I can’t read this scene without wondering what that brother did to her, what her father did. The book says Hera cursed her to love Jason. But how many times have I read the word *seduced* when what happened was *raped*? Read *loved* but understood *imprisoned*? I think a *curse from Hera* meant *escape from an abusive situation by any means necessary*.

She is so young, this daughter of mine —does she even remember the boy in last year’s grade who wouldn’t stop kissing her? Elbows, the tip of her ponytail, small nuisances to make her cry with fury that she couldn’t make him stop.

Beyond the sea came many more adventures resolved by Medea’s magic. She showed some daughters a spell whereby she turned an old ram into a young one after dropping it in her boiling cauldron. Do we believe the daughters when they say they only wanted to restore their father’s youth? They swore before his boiled corpse they thought surely it would work. Personally, I think of this chapter as Medea’s “Spell for a Good Cover Story Which She’ll Give to Any Woman Who Asks.”

It's true I pretty much never believe a white man assaulted by a woman didn't have it coming. "What did you do?" I ask such a man as I have so often been asked. "It takes two to fight," I parrot. Maybe he should have walked away and hidden in a bathroom stall to cry like the rest of us. When my daughter asked the teacher to make that boy stop kissing her, the teacher said it was sweet, he had a crush. That was when I told my daughter she should push this child as hard as she could and tell him to kiss the dirt instead. But already she was too afraid.

Another of Medea's clever deeds was to feed raw meat to the Witch of the Woods and her hounds so the Argonauts could pass safely. The men ran in terror past the crone crouched and devouring, her face blood-stained with gluttony, while our sorceress lingered to say goodbye with affection to a woman we realize is her friend and sister in the craft. If any moment in this story can be made real, I want this friendship with the woman who will grow up to become Baba Yaga in her house of sweets to be the one.

There was a boy my mother encouraged me to hit. Years passed before he forced me to the edge of my own courage. It's true what the principal said to me in the office after sending him back to class, that he was smaller than the other boys and treated by them with cruelty. It is also true that when my mother was asked to pay for the glasses I broke in a bloody smear across his face she said the only part of this that made her sorry was that it had taken me so long.

She'd promised me and I think she really believed that one good fight would be enough, but I had to hit him again a year later. And then came another boy and others after that. On the day my daughter shed those hot tears, I had been in an important meeting. There is not much about it that I can tell you. I will say only that my HR rep began by noting he thought at first I was one of the undergraduates. I was 36, had a child, a PhD and four books to my name. Shall I tell you how long my skirt was or how demurely my hair pulled back? Because I checked these things before and after, as this life has taught me to do. The man chuckled like it was some kind of compliment to call a grown woman "cute" in front of the

university's Threat Assessment Team and that giant binder of Title IX policies at the center of the table. The hour ended in bitterness and resentment on all sides.

What does a child who pushed another child deserve? Not a bloody nose and the taste of his own tears. But it seems sometimes the world only gives us everything, or nothing.

You will never get me to believe Medea killed her children and showed their corpses to cheating Jason just to make him grieve. I don't care how many times you put Euripides on a stage. I don't believe it in part because Medea isn't real so I don't have to, but also because there are many versions of the story, some recorded and some lost in the mist of a long oral tradition, each its own work of art or propaganda for whichever city state in whatever geopolitical crisis a writer found themselves in. There were times and places when Medea's story had no end at all, just island after island. Sometimes she is powerful, sometimes angry, often happy, fighting maybe or victorious or eating a hunk of meat with her sister beside a warm fire crackling forth ephemeral constellations, a hibiscus flower in her hair like a girl, a sword at her waist like a queen. For as many nights as the children can stay awake to listen.

Rhiannon was a fairy queen, also wrongly accused of eating her child. She fell asleep and woke smeared in the blood and surrounded by the bones of a dog. For this she was turned into a horse. Sometimes literally, sometimes the story goes that she was punished for seven years at the gate of her castle wearing, like a horse, a bridle and bit, until her son, freed by the Horse Lord from captivity at last returned home, where he was recognized instantly by his mother.

She is best known, though, for having brought into this world the Alder Rhiannon, those three magical birds who sing so beautifully they not only send the living to sleep but also raise the dead. When I imagine that song, it is always in the key of my grandmother humming a little made-up tune as she holds my newborn sister in her arms.

That grandmother's memory is nearly gone now. She does not remember my name, but she says to me when I call, "Well, I don't know who you are, but I do know that I love you." And then she says, because she is 94 and ailing, "I remember we used to do a lot of things and I want you to know I had a good life." She didn't start a war, invent a weapon, amass a fortune, or colonize a nation. She just taught me that when you don't know the words to a song you should just sing something like "la la la de da da" to whatever the melody is.

I'll share one last bit of advice I learned from writing the secret history of witches. The definition of a spell is: "Words that make something happen." Some of the words these women said made their inquisitors become afraid or feel ashamed or wonder if they really knew so much as they thought they did. Because I'm a writer and this is a craft essay, I'll end with a tiny spell of my own. My grandmother's name, which I'd like to see remembered instead of lost or hidden or secreted away, is Margaret Hornung Nuernberger.