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The Empowered 21st century witch: *Wicca* in
popular culture as a social revolution

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INTRODUCTION

*“We are the granddaughters of the
witches you weren’t able to burn.”*

Thawer, Tish. *The Witches of BlackBrook*. Amber Leaf Publishing, 2015.

From computer consultant, photographer, and graphic designer to becoming an overnight icon of what many dare to call a new wave in women’s social and political revolution, the North American writer Tish Thawer, author of *The Witches of BlackBrook* (2015) reached mainstream media with the publication of the book. Her quote “*We are the granddaughters of the witches you weren’t able to burn*” brought once again to light the debate between witchcraft and feminism, or in short, the image of liberated women as omen and mass hysteria. Critics agree that the quote should not be reduced only to banal feminist propaganda and rock and roll-ish merchandaizing. It must be analyzed as a statement that summarizes the social trend of the last decades that aims to deconstruct negative female stereotypes and take a look at the past to understand the present, while embracing ancestral practices such as the *Wicca*, the neopagan religion that bonds with nature and has a strong egalitarian social conscience regarding the gender issue.

The debate of witches and women emerging together now for a reason was discussed by Sollé in a lecture delivered in 2018 at the Chicago Humanities Festival. The American writer introduced her lecture stating that understanding the motive that drove the witch hunt centuries ago can help to illuminate its brutal origins and perhaps even offer release from this cycle of negative stereotypes that is still used by the media.

(Sollée, Kristen. “Witches, Sluts, Feminists”. Chicago Humanities Festival. Nov. 8, 2018. Lecture).

Sollée is the author of books such as *Cat Call: Reclaiming the Feral Feminine (An Untamed History of the Cat Archetype in Myth and Magic* in 2017 and more recently *Witch Hunt: A Traveler’s Guide to the Power and Persecution of the Witch* in 2020, and has become increasingly well-known in popular culture in recent years thanks to her bold statements about female historical and cultural representation. One of the first examples she uses to show how this phenomenon is growing very fast in popular culture —and therefore in mass media— is the Washington Post headline *Before Suspected of Vulnerable women witchcraft. Now witchcraft is a sign of strength*. (Bonos, Lisa. “Analysis | Vulnerable Women Used to Be Suspected of Witchcraft. Now Witchiness Is a Sign of Strength.” The Washington Post, WP Company, 31 Mar. 2019). This is not the only article recently written on the debate and the appropriation of the witch as a symbol for social revolution. From New York Times *Witches Are Having Their Hour* in The Guardian’s *Monsters, men and magic: why feminists turned to witchcraft* in 2019 and Quartz’s *The Resurgence of the Witch as a Symbol of Feminist Empowerment* also in 2019, to Joanne Kostopoulos-Riganello’s *A new age of goddess worship in new wave feminism: witch way forward?* in 2009, and Indie Magazine’s *Witchcraft and Feminism in the Modern Day* in 2018; we find the Internet flooded with articles, essays, books and reviews. To get an idea of the extent of the debate, we just have to google “witchcraft and feminism”, “witches and feminism” or “witch as a symbol of social revolution”. The result is overwhelming. In the blink of an eye, we are given approximately 7,830,000 results.

The purpose of this Undergraduate Dissertation is to analyze how *Wicca* has played and plays a fundamental role in this social and political revolution, whose aim is not only to make the symbol of the witch its own, but also to endow it with a new character to create a more inclusive and intersectional figure. The role of the witch in this new social revolution will be explored by analyzing the icon from its beginnings to the present day by studying its evolution over the decades, which will make us understand its importance in the present world.

1. THE BEGINNING OF THE STORY: From Ancient healers to the *Fornicator.*

To understand the deep connection between the worshipping of the figure of the ancient witch and its role in the current social revolution, we would first have to go back to the first manifestations of the witch in popular culture. As writer and critic Kristen Sollée points out:

“If we want to talk about representations of witches in popular culture over the past five hundred years, we have to really talk about representations of women in popular culture over the past five hundred years”. (Sollée, Kristen. “Witches, Sluts, Feminists”. Chicago Humanities Festival. Nov. 8, 2018. Lecture.).

Anthropological and historical studies show that ancient societies across the whole world have worshipped deities from their origins. When discussing the connection between sorceresses or priestess and the idea of the figure of the “witch” —a

woman who is linked to the pagan and nature—, we find many manifestations in different ancient civilizations such as Hecate (the Greek goddess of magic and astrology), Isis in Egyptian mythology (prominent in funerary practices and magical texts) or the figure of the Aje in Yoruba tradition (which can practice Obeah, Voodoo or Hoodoo). Anthropologists James G. Frazer (1854-1941) and Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917) hypothesized that magic was a forerunner of religion and science, something primitive that could be found in the first manifestations of social groups. (Frazer, James. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. Macmillan Publishers, 1890 and Tylor, Edward B. *Primitive Culture*. London: Murray, 1920).

Ancient societies used magic to explain the origin of the world or nature itself, things that could not be understood unless they were interpreted by spiritual guides or shamans. The presence of women as healers for centuries is therefore unquestionable. In the Western world they were responsible for the health of the community, being the transmitters and connoisseurs of an ancestral popular wisdom that was transmitted from grandmothers to mothers, and mothers to daughters. They learned not only the cultivation and collection of medicinal plants for all kinds of needs, but also the secrets of empirical medicine such as how blood worked in our system, how to assist pregnancies or how to prevent illnesses. Witches and sorceresses, thus, have always been women connected with nature, although their image was distorted by religion, turning them into beings of horror (Farrell).

The first and most famous example of witchcraft found in our collective memory is without any doubt found in the well known Salem Witch Trials of 1693 in colonial Massachusetts, in which more than two hundred people were accused of practicing witchcraft, popularly linked to black magic and ultimately to the cult of the Devil. To

justify the executions, Christianity and the most powerful institutions like the celebrated *Spanish Inquisition* claimed that witchcraft —and any pagan activity— was associated with satanic festivals. The justification that was found was that this practice went against the law of God and, therefore, its —supposedly— practitioners were accused of heresy. All judgments were always supported by witch-hunting manuals such as the famous *Formicarius* (1475) *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487), *Daemonologie* (1597) or *Compendium Maleficarum* (1608). *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487), known as “The Hammer for Witches”, contains explicit explanations about witches’ sexual life and famous bold dictums such as: “*Experience daily proves how loath they are to confess without torture*”, “*Femina from fe minus*”, “*All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable*” which suggests women are the most prone to become witches due to their weak condition and lack of religious faith. (Kramer, Enrique and Sprenger, Jakob. *Malleus Maleficarum*. Unknown publisher, 1487).

Witch-hunts have been proven to be the result not of practices that worshiped the Devil and pagan mysticism, but as some critics point out, the result of collective anxieties. The unmarried pregnant woman or even the Midwife (blamed by the Church as the one who could do the most harm to Catholic faith) could be in danger of becoming a *fallen woman*. This figure that has long existed in western literature has been used by writers, critics and literary scholars and is deeply connected to the idea of a woman fallen from the grace of God that takes us back to Eve, the first sinner. The image of the fallen woman found in cultural representations is closely related to the term that Kristen Sollée refers to as the *Fornicator*. Sollée uses this term to describe the woman prone to being a witch. (Sollée, Kristen. “Witches, Sluts, Feminists”. Chicago Humanities Festival. Nov. 8, 2018. Lecture). Promiscuity, the exploration of the female body, and even shared information were motifs strong enough to accuse women of

witchcraft and put them on trial to find the mark of the Devil: the infamous mole. Nevertheless, there were also even more absurd and wild accusations to blame a woman for being a witch. This example is taken from a testimony of the accusation of the practice of witchcraft on the part of a woman in England.

“If they knew how to swim, therefore they were considered to be witches, since if they knew how to swim it was because the water rejected them.”

(Perez M., Isabel. “Knowledge and Powers”. 2004-2008. Duoda, Women Research Center. University of Barcelona.).

The passing of the centuries and the arrival of artistic, literary and philosophical movements such as *Romanticism* in the 19th century and especially *Modernism* in the first decades of the 20th century together with the anthropological studies of figures such as James G. Frazer (1854-1941) and Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917) on magic as the forerunner of religion and science, brought about a return to the origins of humanity through contact with nature and, sometimes, with the occult. This change in the social, political, cultural and spiritual paradigm allows for a growing interest in the ancient world and its customs, often forgotten, to reappear little by little. This is the time when Gerald Gardner, a retired British official, brought into the world an ancient pagan religion which he called *Wicca*.

2. *WICCA*: Returning to the origins and appropriation of the symbol of the witch as the empowered woman.

Wicca is believed to be a system based on often Celtic pre-Christian traditions originating from Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. This movement promotes free thought and the will of the individual and fosters learning, understanding and respect for the earth and nature.

Although some define it as a mystery religion, others say that it is close to the ancient tradition of the Celts thanks to its rites and others prefer to say that it is not a dogma but a philosophy and spiritual way of life. Most of the definitions coincide. *Wicca* is undoubtedly a modern pagan nature-based religion. The origin of the word is believed to be derived from the Old English *wicca* [ˈwit.t͡ʃɑ] and *wicce* [ˈwit.t͡ʃe], the masculine and feminine term for witch, respectively, that was used in Anglo-Saxon England. It is interesting to highlight the origins of this word and, consequently, *Wiccan* (name with which the people who practice this religion identify themselves), since in its use we find the break with the myth of the witch and the return to the origins that is discussed in this Undergraduate dissertation. The scholar of religion Joanne Pearson, author of books such as *Wicca and the Christian Heritage: Ritual, Sex and Magic* (2007), argues that by adopting these terms for modern usage, Wiccans were claiming their connection to the ancient, pre-Christian past, and distancing themselves from the idea of witchcraft, still connected with Satanic practices by the time *Wicca* was born in the first half of the 20th century. (Pearson, Joanne. *Wicca and the Christian Heritage*:

Ritual, Sex and Magic. Routledge, 2007 and Gottlieb, Kathryn. “Cultural Appropriation in Contemporary Neopaganism and Witchcraft”. 2017, University of Maine).

2.1 ORIGINS (1946–1963).

We must not mistake *Wicca* as the first neo-pagan religion in Britain and the Western world despite its popularity. Previously there had been figures throughout Europe who had practiced alchemy and had been in contact with the occult such as John of Nottingham, Roger Bolingbroke, Gerald FitzGerald and more recently Aleister Crowley. We also have to highlight *The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn* more commonly known as the *Golden Dawn* as a precursor to *Wicca*. This secret society was devoted to the study and practice of the occult and paranormal activities during the late 19th and early 20th centuries and had such famous members as H.G. Wells, Bram Stoker or William Butler Yeats.

However, scholars and historians agree that the father of *Wicca*, Gerald Gardner, achieved something greater and more interesting than all these illustrious societies or people who had lived before him did. He managed to endow *Wicca* with anthropological, natural, historical (based on British legends) and spiritual overtones including Eastern mysticism, *Kabbalah*. While creating this, he was also creating an egalitarian community based on the *Wiccan Rede*, a statement that is known to be the base of Wiccan moral system. The word “rede” derives from Middle English meaning “advice” and goes as follows: “eight words the wiccan rede fulfill, an it harm none do what ye will.”¹

¹ It is best known as the “eight words” couplet. The rede was first publicly recorded in a 1964 speech by Doreen Valiente.

Although it has been shown that *Wicca* was actually a modern invention the idea of an ancient lineage and society that knew the secrets of the world appealed to people who, curious, came to the meetings of the first Wiccans where rituals were practiced and the solstices and equinoxes were celebrated. It can be argued that *Wicca* was born as a result of the devastated Britain after the two World Wars, which had led many to loss of hope and religious faith. In an increasingly individualistic, rational and industrialized world, therefore, many people found in this new spirituality a way to connect with what surrounds them and ultimately, with themselves. Gardner founded his first coven which he called *Bricket Wood* and attracted members such as author Doreen Valiente and “Dafo” (Edith Rose Woodford-Grimes), who became High Priestess. We can argue that these two women became a reference for the next generations of witches since they were the first female Wiccans known to the public and who openly practiced their magic.

2.2 APPROPRIATION OF THE SYMBOL OF THE WITCH AS THE EMPOWERED WOMAN.

Contrary to the image that has always existed in popular culture created by religious institutions thoroughly Western civilizations (Chapter 1), witches are not cartoonish creatures who fly on broomsticks in the dark of night while they laugh evilly. Nor do they plot the ruin of humanity and curse your neighbor, nor do not have warty noses (although there will always be exceptions) and wear pointed hats. Instead, they are believed to be wise individuals who have a deep connection to the universe, nature, humanity, their ancestors, and themselves.

It is at this moment that the ancient representations of the sorceress and the healer are brought back and those of the *fornicator* or the *fallen woman* are abandoned.

However, it must be pointed out that following a brief success in popularity, the movement failed to stick with the general public. It was not accepted by everyone in post-war Britain and it received harsh criticism from Christian and atheist groups. It was not until the 1990s that witchcraft took control of the mainstream media and made its place in popular culture. Nevertheless, we can speak of *Wicca* as a first social, gender and spiritual revolution, which has interesting beliefs and rites.

Rites and beliefs can vary amongst Wiccans, but most include the participation in rituals throughout the year (purification through stones, objects and herbs). They honor a male god (Horned God) and his counterpart, a female goddess, also known as The Triple Goddess. A full moon and two half-moons represent the Goddess. The three female figures are frequently described as the Maiden, the Mother, and the Old Woman, each of which symbolizes a separate stage in the life cycle of women, connected with the cycles of the moon. Current priestesses in *Wicca* today trace their authority through a lineage of priestesses back to Gardner's coven, an idea connected with the hereditary culture of the ancient healers, who transmitted their knowledge from generation to generation.

The power of language and the word in the Wiccan community achieved to be a key element became increasingly important in future decades. Mead's work discusses the role of the most significant symbol, which is language (1934). Language is a response we make to those around, "our community," and we plan out our responses to others through ideas that emerge internally in our mind and after considering how that response will portray us an individual to the other, we are able to finally make the verbal response (Mead 1934: 180). While language is one of the ways we are able to present ourselves to others, there is also physical presentation of the self. How a person

dresses and behaves also gives immediate symbols to others about how to interpret that individual. (Rogers, Anna S. "Appropriation of the 'Witch' Stigma as White Women's Self Empowerment". Summer 2019. University of South Carolina. P.35-36). This idea that language is a source of knowledge, resistance, power and self expression will be rescued decades later by the witches of the 21st century.

2.3 THE IMPORTANCE OF THE 60S FOR THE FUTURE REVOLUTION.

The arrival of *Wicca* in the United States in the 1960s is crucial to the future importance of the movement and consequently the figure of the witch in mainstream culture in later decades. The 1960s brought about a new spiritual freedom that was experienced in different ways throughout the world. Movements such as the Civil Rights Movement, The Student Movement, The Anti-Vietnam War Movement, Gay Rights Movement, Environmental Movement and The Women's Movement imply a radical *Weltanschauung*, a new personal philosophy of human life and the universe that was far too different compared to the ones in the previous decade.

Various people who helped spread neo-pagan ideas on American land, and it is them to whom we must thank for the popular success of *Wicca* in later decades, since, had it not been for their will to share their burning passion for this "secret philosophy", this religion would have continued hermetically sealed from the world and practiced only in Great Britain. Joseph Bearwalker Wilson founded the *Tradition of 1735*, Sybil Leek, dubbed by the BBC as "Britain's most famous witch", immigrated to California and taught others helping to spread British Wiccan ideas and Yvonne and Gavin Frost established the *Church and School of Wicca* that became in 1972 the first recognized Wiccan church in the country. (Howard, Michael. "Modern Wicca: A History from Gerald Gardner to the Present." Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2010.)

Without a doubt, many scholars and historians consider that the most important subgenre of *Wicca* and the one that has had the most influence in subsequent decades was the *Dianic Wicca*, created by Zsuzsanna Budapest in the United States around the 70s. This movement is believed to have been influenced by the *Wicca* itself and movements of the late 1960s such as The Women's Movement. In 1968 a political group of women formed a protest organization and they sarcastically named themselves *W.I.T.C.H.* ("Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy From Hell"). In an interview for the New York Times, American author Robin Morgan said "*We didn't consider ourselves real witches, but we used the moniker because of what it represented: a powerful woman*". (Bennet, Jessica. "When Did Everybody Become a Witch?". New York Times. Oct. 24, 2018). By doing this, they were somehow continuing with the task of reappropriating the figure of the witch to make it their own as previous Wiccans did, and at the same time they were paving the way for future generations to continue doing the same, specially in the political sphere as it happened in 2010.

Dianic Wicca was born at the right time in the right place and found many followers, growing rapidly in a short time. Its members worshiped Roman goddess Diana, goddess of hunting, animals and the moon, the latest being connected with the image of the woman that had already been used in *Gardnerian Wicca*. Frazer had already studied in *The Golden Bough* (1890) the cult of Diana in ancient cultures.

"From the votive offerings which have been found on the site, it appears that she was conceived of especially as a huntress, and further as blessing men and women with offspring, and granting expectant mothers an easy delivery."
(Frazer, James. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. Macmillan Publishers, 1890).

There is no doubt about the influence that the British anthropologist's studies had not only on *Wicca*, but also on *Dianic Wicca*. It is very interesting to highlight the importance given to the presence of women in this neopagan religion. In Gardener's system and consequently in Budapest's, priority is given to priestesses as community leaders. These priestesses act as a kind of wise women and are the ones who officiate rites that date back to ancient practices such as purification, good luck, or fertility. The connection between Mother Nature, the high priestess, the moon and the woman is undeniable and it is a key element, as it has been already discussed, for generations to come.

3. 2.0 WITCHES: Witches in popular culture as a social revolution.

The 1990s and 2000s mark the arrival of the witch to mainstream culture and, therefore, the acceptance and integration of *Wicca* and its beliefs as part of the new generations of witches.

Opinions are divided as to whether the origins of the image of the contemporary witch are found in the British New Wave, who saw the flourishing of New Romantic, Goth rock and Punk rock bands such as The Damned, Bauhaus, The Sisters of Mercy and Siouxsie and the Banshees. The latter sang lyrics such as "*Following the footsteps / Of a rag doll dance / We are entranced / Spellbound*" (Siouxsie and the Banshees "Spellbound", *Juju*, Polydor Records, 1981.) and had a bewitching dark aesthetic. What is clear is that these bands lead the way to the "dark" side, and to the exploration of the gothic, pagan and in many cases, mystical by many of their fans. This trend for the

macabre grew until in the nineties the terror took over mainstream culture. (Newman, Sabrina. "The Evolution of the Perceptions of the Goth Subculture". Apr. 26, 2018. Johnson & Wales University)

The 1990s saw a golden age when it came to movie releases that won the hearts of goth teens. George Miller's *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987) had become a cult classic, young director Tim Burton had released movies such as *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993) and *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) that featured classic horror actor Vincent Price, and Neil Jordan's *The Vampire Chronicles* (1994) was well received by young audiences. In the middle of this wide range of options, comes what we can call "the boom of the teenage witch."

The year 1996 marks the beginning of this new era for witches, with the release of the American film *The Craft* about four teenage witches who use their powers to get their way. Ten days later, ABC released a modern remake of the television series *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996-2003). This is undoubtedly the most influential series for young women of the moment and it has become a classic. Although there had already been a *Sabrina* series in the 1970s, the Sabrina of the 90s was an even more relatable teenager who struggled with day-to-day problems while learning how to be a witch. The series was successful because it combined elements of popular culture such as cameos by teen pop stars while providing an alternative option for not very "conventional" teenagers. Since then, the appearance of new series and movies has not stopped. The list is endless: *A Discovery of Witches* (2018), *Good Witch* (2015), *Charmed* (1998), *American Horror Story's Coven* (2013-2014), *Witches of East End* (2013), *W.I.T.C.H* (2004-2006), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *Practical Magic*

(1998), *Little Witches* (1996) or *The Love Witch* (2016) are some of the series and movies that in recent decades have become classics in popular culture.

3.1 A NEW WAVE.

We come to the moment when all the previous sections discussed in this Undergraduate dissertation merge into one and have as a result the witch of the 21st century. The role of history, the role of *Wicca* and the arrival of terror and witchcraft to mainstream culture are crucial to understand why this new political and social movement is born with such force and grows so quickly in a short time. In the United States, the country with the highest number of people who identify themselves as followers of *Wicca* or as fans of this practice, studies have been carried out with the purpose of estimating the real number of followers. From 1990 to 2008, Trinity College (Connecticut) conducted three extensive and detailed religious surveys known as the American Religious Identification Surveys, believed to be due to concerns that the popularization of neo-pagan religions could violate the separation between church and religion, endangering religion and politics as a result. The results showed that from 8,000 Wiccans in the 1990s rose to 340,000 practitioners in 2008. Years later, the Pew Research Center in Washington D.C estimated that 0.4% of Americans, or about 1 to 1.5 million people, identify as Wiccan or Pagan suggesting significant community growth.

Wicca had been simply a minor sect or cult of which extravagant groups of society. However, it is in the 21st century when the faith went from being an esoteric cult to becoming a public religion and philosophy, accepted by mainstream audiences and studied by scholars. Instead of reducing witches' history to the occult and Satanism, universities around the world now offer courses on the history and symbolism of witches. Witchcraft and Magic at the University of Oslo, Witchcraft, Crime and Social

Disorder in Early Modern England at Carleton University, Witchcraft and Belief in Scotland, 1563-1736 at the University of Edinburgh and Witchcraft and Possession at the University of Pennsylvania. Witches can be found not only in academic places, but also in movies and series (as it has been already discussed) or in music. Mainstream pop stars like FKA Twigs, Bjork, Azealia Banks, Bat For Lashes, Lorde, and Lana Del Rey are often compared with witches, whether because they cast explicit spells in their songs (about the moon, forests, and wolves), or simply because they have adopted a witchy aesthetic.

However, without a doubt one of the fundamental places where the *Wicca* has risen up in the past decade is the Internet. Until then, Wiccans could only communicate locally and learn from books in an isolated environment. The arrival of the Internet allowed followers from all corners of the world to create web pages, blogs, upload videos on YouTube and ultimately, use the platform as a place to make their ideas known. In this way, users who may not have had access to Wiccan history and practices due to their cultural and social background, are able to read and learn about the history of the neopagan religion and decide which branch they prefer to be a part of: *Gardnerian Wicca*, *Tradition of 1735* or *Dianic Wicca*. Historian Brooks Alexander, author of such works as *Witchcraft Goes Mainstream* (2004), argued that it is a form of “minority empowerment”. The presence of *Wicca* on the Internet broke down physical barriers and found —as the first followers from the 50s found— a new way of spirituality and sense of community.

Although the image of the witch had already been reconstructed by the first Wiccans and later by the new Wiccan trends of the 60s, it is in the 21st century when the appropriation of the symbol really takes place, seeking to give it a new character to

create a figure more inclusive and intersectional. The idea of inclusivity has been key in this new generation of witches. In her 2019 article for Quartz, *The Resurgence of the Witch as a Symbol of Feminist Empowerment* Italian journalist Sofia Quaglia quotes Gore's ideas and discusses inclusivity of the witch in this new movement.

“Activists and progressive social media influencers are actively working to dispel the dichotomy between the good witch and the bad witch, which is often reflected by different beauty standards, in which ugly equals evil (think Wizard of Oz). Powerful women are all colors, shapes, and sizes—but never monstrously green. The same goes for the false binary between black magic and white magic, which is “fundamentally racist,” says Gore.” (Quaglia, Sophia. “The Resurgence of the Witch as a Symbol of Feminist Empowerment”. Quartz. Oct. 31, 2019).

Many agree that the ideas of *Wicca* have gained support in recent years thanks to including, for example, ethnic minority women who until then had been alienated from the movement.

Together with *Wicca's* ideas of the high priestess as the ancient healer and anthropological Diana's ideas as the moon goddess and fertility rites, this new generation gives the witch a “facelift” once again and includes elements of their own time. Traditionally, witchcraft, and *Wicca*, were founded on principles of feminism, activism for equality, and environmentalism (Ezzy 2009, Griffin 1995). The majority of people who identify themselves as Wiccans do not always focus on these principles, but instead they focus on advocating that their witchcraft was positive and safe and was all about self improvement through self-empowerment. The new witch of the 21st century is not just an archetypal witch, but has different dimensions. She can feel connected to her healer ancestors, whom she reads and respects together with being a child of her

time. This means that the contemporary witch has maybe embraced the teachings of the first Wiccans who advocate contact and respect for nature. She is perhaps interested in botany and reads Alexander Von Humbolt sitting in a park or garden to feel in touch with the world around her.

In their 2018 article for Quartz *The Explosive Growth of Witches, Wiccans and Pagans in the Us*, Sangeeta Singh-Kurtz & Dan Kopf discuss the ideas conveyed in the figure of the new witch in connection with Mother Nature and spirituality:

“The mainstreaming of mysticism makes sense when you consider how it overlaps with the interests of the millennial women. As Wicker noted, witchcraft is the perfect religion for liberal millennials who are already involved in yoga and meditation, mindfulness, and new-age spirituality. With that foundation, they might show up for pagan holidays or new moon gatherings, or begin to explore the more serious spiritual concepts at the root of these practices.” (Singh-Kurtz, Sangeeta & Kopf, Dan. “*The Explosive Growth of Witches, Wiccans and Pagans in the Us*. Quartz. Oct. 4, 2018).

In addition to being in contact with Mother Nature, these new generations have also appropriated the symbol of the witch in a more political way, to counteract sexist and often aggressive attitudes on the part of conservative parties. Self-identified witches feel empowerment through the ability to control their own bodies. The 60s generation had already done the same, and so had Doreen Valiente and Safo, who resisted patriarchal conventions. In some cases, controlling their bodies refers to feminist politics, such as the right to have a legal abortion, which is not surprising to find from self-identified witches who advocate for feminist political rights and view that advocating as crucial to their self-described witch identity. (Rogers, Anna S.

“Appropriation of the ‘Witch’ Stigma as White Women’s Self Empowerment”.
Summer 2019. University of South Carolina. P 47.)

This brings us to the current social revolution that was born in the United States but has quickly spread to the rest of the Western world.

3.2 WICCA IN POPULAR CULTURE AS A SOCIAL REVOLUTION.

The 2010s have seen events such as the return of ultra-conservative and racist policies, the refugee crisis, sexual scandals by high-ranking public figures, and endless misfortunes that are intolerable for some and unforgivable for others. In this increasingly aggressive world where “fake news” —a concept that has become the *otto* of the Trump administration— a certain terminology has become key in the way speeches and accounts are crafted in the socio-political sphere and social spheres.

The growing interest in both *logos* and *lingua* within the *Wicca* community could be connected to studies on the power of words in magical power by anthropologists at the beginning of the century such as Frazer or Malinowski and decades later Tambiah. Frazer’s vocabulary and categorization reflect the intellectualist stance in their attention to how magical ideas work and in the effort to identify the principles organizing magic. Malinowski took up this issue in his 1935 *Coral Gardens and Their Magic*, observing that the power of magic was related to the power of all language, as humans speak about and to some degree control their world through language. This argument was elaborated by Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, exploring a similarity in human beliefs about the power of words and concepts of magical power. For Tambiah (1968), magic is better understood as a form of performance than as ill-informed science. Like language in other performative contexts, such as theater, oratory,

and religion broadly, the language of magic is not like the language of everyday life. It is likely to have specialized vocabulary —perhaps archaic or foreign, perhaps secret—and specialized forms such as incantations, spells, prayers, or chants. The ability to perform such language effectively is part of the role of the magician, however she or he is identified in the culture. (Moro, Pamela. *Witchcraft, Sorcery, and Magic* Willamette University, United States. Sept. 29, 2017).

One of the areas where the use of words and language by the Wiccan community is having the biggest impact is in the Northamerican political and social arena. Two clear examples of the presence of witches in these areas are the Me Too movement and the vocabulary used to refer to women in North American politics.

Me Too Movement (often expressed as #MeToo on the Internet) was founded in 2006 but became mainstream in 2017. This movement had lived in the shadow until in 2017 high-profile actresses began to talk about experiences of sexual harassment in the film industry at the hands of Harvey Weinstein, owner of *Miramax*, one of the most important film production companies. Actresses and female directors and workers began to tell their stories within the film and television industry and things did not stop there. This movement peacefully invited the use of the word as a form of expression, which led women from all backgrounds who had experienced gender violence and sexual harassment to tell their stories on the Internet. The response was immediate and what is interesting is that it was not only limited to the female sphere. Soon actors and directors and in short, people from all genders and backgrounds joined the cause as allies and used their platforms to make female voices visible, helping this way to garner hundreds of thousands of messages of help and hope in a short time. Nevertheless,

although the movement sought to be pacifist, the President himself used the term “witch hunt” to refer (only, ironically) to women who proclaimed themselves as part of it.

This is not the only exception of the use of “witch vocabulary” in North American politics. In the 2016 election, Hillary Clinton was called a witch because she was plotting to destroy US democracy and ultimately, freedom. The Guardian recalls that experience in the article “From Circe to Clinton: why powerful women are cast as witches”.

“During the 2016 US presidential election, American social media was flooded with images of Hillary Clinton wearing a black hat and riding a broom, or else cackling with green skin. Her opponents named her The Wicked Witch of the Left, claimed they had sources testifying that she smelled of sulphur, and took particular delight in depictions of her being melted.” (Miller, Madelaine. “From Circe to Clinton: why powerful women are cast as witches.” The Guardian. Apr. 7, 2018).

Years later, history repeats itself. Deputies in the United States Congress such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez have been branded as witches by the conservative opposition, thus using the ancient and medieval term that seeks to categorize women from the political and social spheres into having a pointy warty nose and carrying a broom. However, authors, journalists and critics (both male and female) have not been discouraged by these attitudes, but have instead used the symbol of the witch to fight back by means of, once again, *words* and *language*.

In *The Witch Hunt & Hillary Clinton* (2018) Trevor Church provides “a harrowing portrait of America - a country that publicly crucified a woman on November 8th, 2016”, while he studies “*The psychology, sociology, and anthropology behind the forces that worked endlessly to prevent one woman from taking office.*” The

title of the New York Times column *“The Witches Are Coming”* was used by Lindy West to write about, not about witchcraft, but misogyny in the #MeToo era. There are also other examples such as *“Revolutionary Witchcraft”* by Sarah Lyons in which the story is discussed and a “practice of politically motivated magic” is suggested.

Nell Scovell, creator of the successful 90s TV series *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, regarding the appropriation of the image of the witch as a symbol of social and political revolution, pointed out that not all women sought to become witches to practice spells. To him *“women have embraced the ‘witch’ label because these days, so many women feel powerless that it’s fun to think about flinging Bill Barr into a wall with the flick of a finger.”* Barr, speaking of which, stated that *“There’s a witches Brew of violent groups on both sides”* in an interview for Fox News in 2020 to refer to the political opposition and protests against the conservative government. (Bar, Bill. Interview. *Fox News*. Jun. 7, 2020. Television).

4. CONCLUSION. ABRACADABRA: A social revolution.

*“The witch is undoubtedly the magical woman,
the liberated woman, and the persecuted woman,
but she can also be everywoman.”*

Sollee, Kristen J. *Witches, Sluts, Feminists: Conjuring the Sex Positive*. Threel Media, 2017.

Over the centuries, the image of the witch has taken different forms. In the ancient world governed by the laws of magic and *logos*, the high priestess was in charge of performing fertility rites, curing the sick and attending childbirth by making use of

knowledge of botany and biology that she had inherited. With the change of the paradigm and the arrival of religion, the healer acquired a new pagan and therefore forbidden tonality that put the political and social security of an ultra-religious society at risk. In a world ruled by a terrible and righteous God, anything outside the norm had to be controlled and, ultimately, punished. That is why the wayward or estranged woman from society was often dubbed the fallen woman or as the author Kristen Sollée calls her, the “fornicator”, which was nothing more than the result of patriarchal collective anxiety and fear of “the other” or the “indomitable”.

With the passing of time and the resurgence of new spiritualities that sought to recover the folkloric, mythological and pagan past, the figure of the witch changed radically again at the beginning of the 20th century. The image of the high priestess re-emerged within mystical societies throughout the country that had a special interest in the pagan past of pre-Christian and pre-industrial Europe. *Wicca* served as the first social revolution in regards to the reappropriation of the image of the witch as a symbol of power and knowledge. Subsequent generations from the mystics 60 and the new age 80 to the teenage goth of the 90 found interest in this new religion and adapted it each according to their own interests and needs, although they always did it with an activist social intention.

The witch of the 21st century is a liberated, intuitive woman who wants to change the world through the connection with nature and the use of language. It allows her to freely express her ideas and bring interesting discussions to the table, in response to accusations and attacks.

“What’s occurring now [...] is that many female artists are using occult images, ritual gestures, and witch iconography to not only connect to the

divine, but to continue to make space for themselves. They're utilizing herbs, candles, ceremonial garb, and goddess imagery, and mashing it up with digital treatments and modern technology. As such, they're turning themselves into witches: women who create things and shift perception, who trust their intuition, and who have the power to change the world. Their work is spiritual and political at the same time." (Sollee, Kristen J. *Witches, Sluts, Feminists: Conjuring the Sex Positive*. Threel Media, 2017).

Thus, a political and social revolution has endorsed the symbol of the witch more strongly than ever. The image of the witch is now inclusive because it belongs to all those who wish to adopt it: women from all social classes and backgrounds, races and ages; members of the LGTBI community who have seen their rights debunked by conservative politics, and even men who wish to explore and analyze the role of both the witch and Wiccan in the society, while taking part at the same time of the phenomenon. Deborah Hyde, British folklorist, cultural anthropologist and editor-in-chief of *The Skeptic* argues that "*It makes sense that contemporary society appreciates the symbol of the witch, because there's flexibility and empowerment in what the witch represents.*" (Quaglia, Sophia. "The Resurgence Of The Witch As A Symbol of Feminist Empowerment." *The New York Times*. Oct, 31 2019). In brief, the influence of *Wicca* has many different faces, colors, sizes, and shapes. For some older women, it has become a spiritual philosophy that might allow them to explore the world around them by connecting with nature. For the youngest, it might be a way of expressing their art through music and aesthetics. For others, on the other hand it could be a way to find a place in a respectful and inclusive community and for others, perhaps oppressed, it might be a symbol that allows them to find their power in a patriarchal and conservative society.

In the words of author Pam Grossman “*The witch is powerful because she doesn’t get power from other people, instead taps into her own power.*” (Quaglia, Sophia. “The Resurgence Of The Witch As A Symbol of Feminist Empowerment.” The New York Times. Oct. 31, 2019). Conclusively, *Wicca* has managed to have this impressive importance in popular culture in the last decade because, as many scholars and critics believe, this neo-pagan religion gives rise to “self-expression” as a way to better understand the world the witch is a part of as well as her own. Despite the different ways of living and experiencing *Wicca* nowadays, what all these approaches have in common is that they seek to claim the image of the witch as a symbol of political and social resistance, and to find the strength and power of one’s own voice.

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